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Rescripting Father-Daughter Dynamics: New Masculinities and Relational Possibilities in Post-Apocalyptic Video Games

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**RESCRIPTING FATHER-DAUGHTER DYNAMICS: NEW MASCULINITIES AND
RELATIONAL POSSIBILITIES IN POST-APOCALYPTIC VIDEO GAMES**

by

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B.A. May 2015, Regent University

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ABSTRACT

RESCRIPTING FATHER-DAUGHTER DYNAMICS: NEW MASCULINITIES AND RELATIONAL POSSIBILITIES IN POST-APOCALYPTIC VIDEO GAMES

Sarah Mortazavi Brooks
Old Dominion University, 2021
Director: Dr. Alison Reed

The Last of Us and *The Walking Dead* video games deploy father-daughter relationship pairings between their main characters in ways that disrupt the hegemonic patriarchal understandings of those very roles, though in different ways. *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* utilize paternal mentorship in ways that subvert patriarchal ideology's established patterns for gendered behavior through role-switching and alternative models of masculine care respectively. Where video games too often still cater to an audience that is heterosexual, white, and male, these games feature narratives that challenge the heteropatriarchal messaging common to this medium. *The Last of Us* does this by disrupting the gender binary of man as strong/protector and woman as weak/protected while *The Walking Dead* presents players with methods of masculine and/or fatherly behavior that can best be understood as alternative. Additionally, in a medium where Black men are either egregiously misrepresented or distinctly absent, *The Walking Dead* puts caring, sensitive Black fatherhood front and center.

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I dedicate this thesis to my Samuel. Without you, it's all a waste of time.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The world of the “zombie apocalypse” is a world steeped in violence, where life-altering decisions must be made in a matter of seconds. At any given moment, lives hang in the balance. The idea of finding family and connection amidst such brutal circumstances may seem surprising, even impossible. But it is a necessity. Against the zombie apocalypse narrative’s backdrop of inhumanity, characters continue to find reasons to keep fighting to survive, to retain their humanity. To me, it is this paradoxical idealism that gives the genre its power. Two such stories of forging bonds of found-family in the midst of a world torn apart by a “zombifying” pandemic also share a strikingly similar dynamic between their main characters, that of a father-figure and daughter-figure struggling against seemingly insurmountable obstacles to protect one another. They also both happen to be video games.

Father-daughter relationship pairings, biological or surrogate, have become a noticeably prevalent trend in video games within the last ten years. To the point that I, as a feminist game scholar, now find this phenomenon impossible to ignore. Consider Booker and Elizabeth of *Bioshock Infinite*, Corvo and Emily of *Dishonored 2*, Geralt and Ciri of *The Witcher 3*, to name only a few examples. The initial question that kept returning to my mind as I traced this fairly common and repeating pattern in popular video games was, “Why this particular relationship dynamic?” In utilizing a father-daughter character dynamic, what messages, if any, are video game developers attempting to convey to players? What commentary are they offering? Is it as some scholars believe, that this “dadification” of video games is merely a response to game creators growing older, becoming fathers, and musing on what their newfound role means? (Godfrey and Hamad; Stang; Voorhees). Or are developers simply re-branding the

hypermasculine aggression that used to be commonplace if not expected in most high-profile, triple-A production video games into a more “acceptable” form of masculinized violence, violence enacted in the name of fatherly protection?

Throughout my research it became clear that while some video games were using this paternalistic dynamic in ways that upheld a sexist and racist status-quo, two extremely well-received, high-profile games utilized the father-daughter relationship between their main characters in powerful ways. It is no coincidence, I argue, that both games are also set in a post-apocalyptic, zombie-infested setting where the characters must overcome brutal, inhumane circumstances in order to survive. This thesis project will primarily explore the portrayal of surrogate father-daughter relationship pairings in two critically acclaimed, post-apocalyptic video games: Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us* and Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* game. Of particular interest to me are the ways this relationship designation serves to disrupt patriarchal ideology as it understands and defines gender roles (*The Last of Us*), or normative patterns of masculine and, especially, fatherly behavior (*The Walking Dead*). In my discussion of *The Walking Dead* in particular, I will highlight and unpack the significance of Lee and Clementine’s identities as African Americans in a form of media where Black characters are either conspicuously absent, killed, or portrayed in a racist, caricaturistic light. With specific focus being paid to Lee’s portrayal of Black fatherhood, I will explore the ways *The Walking Dead* game creates openings for players to practice alternative patterns of masculine (and male caregiving) behavior than what they may have been previously conditioned (through media and other forms of societal messaging) to accept as standard or desirable. The new possibilities presented by this healthy representation are made all the more significant by Lee’s identity as a Black man, thus making *The Walking Dead* game worthy of scholarly examination through both

a feminist and a critical race theoretical lens. While both games initially appear to establish paternalistic relationship dynamics (an older man assumes guardianship of a vulnerable young girl in a post-apocalyptic setting), each game strikingly employs this relationship pairing in ways that confound the established narratives for gender roles.

The Last of Us culminates in an instance of role-switching: when Joel, the protagonist and “father-figure,” is incapacitated and near death, Ellie, the previously unplayable “daughter-figure” and deuteragonist must fight to defend him from brutal opposition. In this chapter of the game, Ellie more than capably assumes what was previously a paternal, masculinized protector role, while Joel is now the vulnerable charge in need of protection. In this instance, the lines between protector and protected are blurred and the established roles are inverted. Ultimately, Ellie emerges a strong, active, capable individual no longer in need of Joel’s protection. I believe this instance of role-switching powerfully disrupts traditional understandings of gender roles and challenges societal limitations surrounding gendered behavior in a way that is worthy of scholarly feminist consideration.

In *The Walking Dead* game, Lee takes on guardianship of a young girl named Clementine in the midst of a zombie pandemic. Throughout the game’s harrowing circumstances, Lee and Clementine’s relationship is consistently characterized by a softness and gentleness that stands in sharp contrast to the brutality of the world around them. It is particularly significant that Lee and Clementine’s relationship is arguably the healthiest of any video game featuring this father-daughter dynamic, disrupting gendered expectations for paternal behavior; the nature of their relationship is made that much more powerful representationally by the fact that Lee and Clementine are African American. Lee stands as not only an exemplary representation of Black fatherhood in a medium sorely lacking such examples due to racist stereotyping, but he also

gives players an opportunity, in assuming his perspective, to practice (i.e., play out) alternative models of masculinity and paternal care than what is typical to video games in general and society more broadly.

Finally, both games use father-daughter relationship pairings to disrupt the hegemonic patriarchal understandings of those very roles, though in different ways. *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* utilize paternal mentorship in ways that subvert patriarchal ideology's established patterns for gendered behavior through role-switching and alternative models of masculine care respectively. Where video games too often still cater to an audience that is heterosexual, white, and male, these games feature narratives that challenge the heteropatriarchal messaging common to this medium. *The Last of Us* does this by disrupting the gender binary of male as strong/protector and female as weak/protected while *The Walking Dead* presents players with methods of masculine and/or paternal behavior that are, unfortunately, rare. Additionally, in a medium where Black men are either egregiously misrepresented or distinctly absent, *The Walking Dead* puts caring, sensitive Black fatherhood front and center. The major acclaim of these games shows that these sorts of representations are long overdue. Though it is difficult to say whether they signal a shift in the industry itself, I believe they will at least open doors for other games with varied, dynamic, and "subversive" protagonists. Finally, it is my hope that this discussion creates space for further exploration of the relationship between and across representation, player identification, and the broadening of perspectives surrounding racial and gender identity. Representations that work to subvert (in the ludic sense) or even negate racist and misogynistic societal messaging surrounding gendered expectations for behavior, particularly those representations that foster player identification, namely the assumption of roles

they would otherwise have no access to, carry potential for the formation of new possibilities in the ways we approach gender and race in our lived experiences.

Primary Sources

What follows is a brief description of my primary sources, the games themselves. *The Last of Us*, developed by NaughtyDog game developers and released in June of 2013, is a third-person shooter, action-adventure video game. The game is set in a post-apocalyptic United States that has been ravaged by the zombie-like victims of a spore-based viral pandemic. Combat is notably violent, challenging, and fast-paced though players have the option to utilize stealth. Players primarily assume the perspective of Joel, a hardened survivalist and smuggler, who slowly acquires an arsenal of various firearms and melee weapons as the game's story progresses. However, during the "Winter" portion of the game as well as the DLC (downloadable content) titled *Left Behind* (released February 2014), players assume the role of Ellie, the fourteen-year-old girl traveling alongside Joel. Throughout "Winter" and *Left Behind*, players are given deeper insight into Ellie's background, identity (it is revealed she is attracted to women), and overall perspective.

The Walking Dead game (initially titled *Season 1*), developed and released by Telltale Games in April 2012, is an episodic, point-and-click adventure game that places heavy emphasis on player decisions. These decisions, often timed, have reverberating effects throughout the game's narrative. The choices players make as Lee (the game's protagonist), sometimes in a matter of seconds, determine how non-player characters view and treat Lee or even who will live or die. The most important relationship in *The Walking Dead* game is between Lee and Clementine, the adorable eight-year-old girl Lee assumes guardianship over at the beginning of the game. Though the game is also set amidst an apocalyptic zombie outbreak, the game is

significantly less focused on violence. There are timed instances in which players must react quickly enough for Lee to fire a gun or wield a melee weapon (nearly always in defense of Clementine or himself) but, overall, the game places the most emphasis on its story, specifically on character interactions and decision-making.

I accessed and played both games on the Playstation 4 console. I have played through *The Last of Us* roughly eight times, *The Walking Dead* game twice. I also played *The Last of Us Part II*, the eagerly awaited and polarizing sequel (released June 2020), once. I have not played any of *The Walking Dead* game's additional seasons.

Literature Review

Feminist scholars have written a great deal on the father-daughter relationship pairing in varying forms of media, particularly cinema. Sarah Godfrey and Hannah Hamad connect this re-emergence of “protective paternalism” across media platforms to American culture’s “renewed valorization of traditional manliness” in response to the September 11th terrorist attacks (157). They write, “Since 9/11, the U.S. has witnessed a pronounced resurgence in a gendered sociopolitical rhetoric of protective paternalism, which has since inflected the representational discourse of popular film and television” (157). The employment of the “protective paternalism” trope, Godfrey and Hamad assert, “celebrates the return of formerly outmoded masculine traits of protectionism and violent vigilantism” while it simultaneously attempts to justify such violent, aggressive, hypermasculinized behavior by reconfiguring it “through the prism of fatherhood in order to retain its appeal and resonance” (157;170). Godfrey and Hamad suggest that such patterns are symptomatic of the “cyclical process of gender discourse” in which white heterosexual male hegemony attempts to reassert itself, usually in response to a significant historical event (158-159). Scholars understand such “recuperative strategies” as ideological

tools that function to strengthen and maintain the dominant power structures of society (Godfrey and Hamad 159; Carter 374). Some feminist scholars are critical of media portrayals of hypermasculine paternalism as more or less expressions of masculine insecurity in response to feelings of powerlessness and/or cultural shifts, but find the trope especially (and understandably) problematic when it centers a (protector) father and (protected) daughter dynamic.

Apart from making room for the reassertion of faulty, outmoded expressions of (hyper)masculinity, where this trope can be especially troubling to feminist critics is when it relies on female helplessness and dependence to highlight or reaffirm masculine strength. Citing the work of Iris Young, Godfrey and Hamad note the way “the role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience” (170). These depictions of masculinity are often “inherently regressive, not only because of the ways in which they refer back to and often explicitly celebrate forms of masculinity that had become outmoded and frequently vilified in postfeminist culture, but because in so doing they rearticulate and reinvest in female powerlessness” (170). The tension, then, and the potential for toxicity lies with this trope’s tendency to disempower the female in order to return power to the male, typically through the woman’s (daughter-figure’s) incompetency and need for rescue. But what do feminist scholars make of this relationship dynamic specifically pertaining to video games?

Sarah Stang is a feminist scholar whose work also deals with video games that utilize father-daughter relationship dynamics, and whose work I engage with considerably throughout this project. I place my work in respectful conversation with Stang’s and seek to extend our discussion of this topic by highlighting those places where I see this relationship dynamic being

used in ways that are disruptive to patriarchal ideology and compelling to a feminist framework. To continue, Stang writes that this relationship dynamic is often merely deployed as a reimagining of the damsel-in-distress trope into a “familial melodrama” (163). She takes issue with games that appear to use this character pairing only to give players the opportunity to “act out a fantasy of heroic fatherhood” (163). “The daughter-figures seem to exist for the pleasure of the assumed male player,” Stang writes, arguing that “by centralizing the father-figure as active and the daughter-figure as passive, these games are clearly catering to what developers assume is a male audience” (163). This critique does not extend, however, to Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* game, which Stang praises for showcasing a masculinity that is anything but hyper. She praises Lee and Clementine’s character portrayals and the ways their relationship stands in sharp contrast to other games featuring a similar pairing. Stang writes, “The protagonist of *The Walking Dead* is not presented as a hyper-masculine or violent man, and his relationship with Clementine is compassionate and caring. Many players experience real feelings of protectiveness and concern for Clementine, as well as guilt for making choices which frighten or upset her” (166). The work of Bell et al agrees; they write, “*The Walking Dead* rewards a fatherhood rooted in non-violence, nurture, and self-sacrifice — gendered characteristics that are commonly categorized as feminine, yet are essential for a father to raise an emotionally and behaviorally healthy child.” Strikingly, they also suggest the game does not contain the disempowering messaging other games (and other forms of media) featuring the same dynamic easily fall into. Bell et al write, “Lee does not simply act as a protector/savior for a ‘damsel in distress’; rather, the game asks you to choose how to prepare Clementine for a world without you in it.” The fatherhood *The Walking Dead* centers is not rooted in masculine strength dependent on feminine weakness, but rather it is defined by acts of mutual care and relational self-empowerment. This

care players act out through Lee range from cutting Clementine's hair, teaching her how to shoot a gun, to merely consoling her when she is upset (Bell et al). These moments of compassion and nurturance give players the opportunity to consider expressions of masculinity that reconfigure the fatherly role to be less about protectionism and more about caregiving.

Bell et al also suggest that, in featuring a “non-normative protagonist and a game world that disrupts expectations of player agency commonly found in zombie games, Telltale has created an environment that allows (or compels) players to explore enactments of masculinity not normally associated with mainstream gaming cultures.” Much of their work examines the ways *The Walking Dead's* portrayal of an alternative, or “non-normative” masculinity gives players the opportunity to play through and critically reflect on constructions of masculinity that differ from what players have come to expect as normal and acceptable in games (especially games featuring African American characters). This creates space for players to “find pleasure in performances of masculinity that are significantly less ‘hyper,’ less rooted in violence, mastery and domination, than those offered by the games” they might usually play (Bell et al). While much of the existing feminist discourse surrounding *The Walking Dead* game was positive, the conversations about *The Last of Us* were considerably more complicated.

Feminist scholars' have admittedly polarized opinions surrounding the main characters of *The Last of Us*, father-figure Joel and daughter-figure Ellie. Where some see elements of female empowerment, others argue that Ellie's character is denied agency as an active participant of the game's narrative. For instance, Lindsey Joyce writes, “Ellie's character is denied a strong voice, denied opportunities to control her own safety and to protect herself from harm.” Joyce is referring to the fact that Ellie is not given a gun until the “Pittsburgh” level of the game, about a quarter of the way through the story. Lindsey Joyce also writes, “*The Last of Us* offers a

poignant critique of gender in games precisely by employing gender tropes that limit character development and narrative cohesion. Despite narrative occurrences that should enable character growth, the game continues to perpetuate gender stereotypes.” Where some feminist game scholars point out limitations placed on Ellie’s character, such as Joel’s initial refusal to give her a gun, some argue for Ellie’s growth throughout the game as well as her capability as a partner and counterpart to Joel. Perreault et al, for instance, write that *The Last of Us* subverts established narrative structures for games featuring similar relationship pairings in that Ellie invokes her “inherent and learned skills” to become more independent, ultimately developing into a protagonist and narrator in her own right. Gerald Voorhees argues that *The Last of Us* “advances a construct of fatherhood that is paternal but not patriarchal and is thus less bound up in the pathologies of hegemonic masculinity and less toxic to a feminist, social-justice framework.” Voorhees even characterizes Joel and Ellie’s relationship as what he refers to as “paternal egalitarianism;” though there are elements of paternalistic mentorship Ellie is, by the game’s end, an equal and capable partner. The discourse surrounding *The Last of Us* is mixed; feminist critics have valid concerns about the game’s violence and, especially, the game’s ending. However, I found a significant silence in the literature regarding Ellie and Joel’s role shift, which I see as possessing the potential to be subversive. There were little, if any, discussions of Ellie’s promotion to protagonist and narrator in the game’s “Winter” chapter or the *Left Behind* downloadable content. Similarly, few scholars, if any, acknowledged the significance of Lee’s identity as a Black man in a media genre where a protagonist of color is still, sadly, quite rare.

Methodology

In undertaking this research, I pulled a great deal from existing feminist video game scholarship and feminist media scholarship more broadly. I consulted the work of Laura Mulvey, prominent feminist media scholar and originator of the concept of “the male gaze” in film, and Helene Shugart, whose work deals with feminist appropriation/co-optation of previously masculinized tools and spaces in film. Though both scholars’ discourse involves cinema, the concepts discussed can easily be applied to video games and other forms of media. I utilized a feminist lens throughout the project that is intersectional, which is to say that my research is informed by an awareness of the ways racial and gendered oppression compound and interlock¹ in the lived experiences of men and women of color. However, I realize it is not enough to be merely cognizant of these differences in lived experience; it must inform the very research I am doing. It must shape the trajectory of the project, whose voices I consult and why. Because a feminism that is not intersectional² is myopic and tone-deaf; it is not a feminism for everyone. Much of my discussion, especially pertaining to *The Walking Dead* chapter where gendered expectations surrounding Black masculinity are closely examined, is informed by the work of Black feminist scholars, among them bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. For my discussion of *The Walking Dead* game in particular, I situated my analysis of Lee and Clementine as characters against a greater backdrop of societal and systemic racism, which influences and informs the existing norms for representations of Black men, the Black family unit, as well as Black girlhood.

¹ See the Combahee River Collective’s Statement on Black Feminism

² Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams

Much of the literature surrounding these games (and other games featuring a similar pairing), lacked attention to the generative possibilities I saw. Of the feminist criticism I came across examining *The Last of Us*, none contained the focus on the game's climactic instance of role-switching that my project centers. Most of the existing scholarship surrounding Lee and Clementine does not directly acknowledge the significance of their racial identities and the potential ramifications of such representation, especially in terms of player identification. It is Clementine and Lee's very identities as a loving, dynamic portrayal of Black family that creates space for players to imagine new possibilities for what Black masculinity, manhood, and male-care-giving can, should, and *does* look like. This instance of loving (found) fatherhood invites players to consider (and actively assume) alternative forms of masculinity more broadly, ones that are less "hyper," less rooted in violence and aggression.

At first glance, perhaps these games seem similar to their contemporaries, deploying a dynamic of paternalistic mentorship between their main characters that merely upholds patriarchy's ideological standards for gendered behavior. However, upon closer examination, both *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* game are utilizing this particular dynamic in ways that uniquely challenge traditional (white, heterosexual) patriarchal understandings of gender roles, gendered behavior, and (in the case of *The Walking Dead* game) Black masculinity more broadly and Black fatherhood in particular. Where other scholarship surrounding these games primarily found instances of (valid) critique, I use these theoretical tools to see new possibilities. What *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* are doing with gender roles (in the case of the former) and with the intersection of race and gender (the latter) matters.

Overview of Chapters

The first chapter of this thesis project is titled “Re-Presenting Black Masculinities and (Social) Fatherhood in *The Walking Dead* Game.” The chapter begins with a section that briefly gestures toward racial horror, as I feel the game (perhaps unwittingly) contains powerful elements of the genre. I also highlight the elements of Lee and Clementine’s relationship that I (in agreement with other feminist scholars) see as alternative (as opposed to hypermasculine), rooted in gentleness and the fostering of physical, emotional, and spiritual growth, not just physical protection. Referencing the Moynihan Report, I discuss the pathologization of Black families and, particularly, Black fatherhood and the ways these views propagate false beliefs about Black fathers and Black masculinity that are then reinforced through media in varying forms (including video games). I also highlight the significance of Clementine’s retained innocence as well as her role as moral compass throughout the game’s morality/decision-making mechanic. Finally, I end with my own analysis of the game based on my experience, rooted in some of the existing discourse surrounding the game. This portion deals closely with player identification and the ways in which, in spite of its instability, it can function to subvert racist and patriarchal constructions of masculinity by giving players opportunities to “play out” (witness, express, practice) alternative performances of masculinity, specifically masculine caregiving.

The following chapter is called “Rescripting Gender Dynamics Through Role Reversal in *The Last of Us*.” I begin by describing the game’s plot in detail with specific focus on the instance of role-reversal that occurs in the “Winter” segment of the game. I also examine some significant milestones of Joel and Ellie’s partnership where I see potential for feminine empowerment with, again, close attention being paid to the significance of the in-game role-

switching. I then engage with some of the existing feminist discourse surrounding *The Last of Us* and add my own voice to the conversation, highlighting where I feel Ellie's centrality to the narrative and competency as Joel's partner/counterpart and equal are being overlooked.

The chapter deals with the feminist significance of Ellie stepping into the previously masculinized (by the game's own logic/previously established dynamic) role of "protector." A section is also devoted to detailing the final "boss fight" of the "Winter" portion of the game in which Ellie faces off against David, an antagonist that serves multiple significant functions. David is positioned as a foil to Joel, something of an antithetical father-figure, whose sexualization of Ellie functions to negate the male gaze (Mulvey). In other words, David's designation as antagonist subtextually discourages players from objectifying Ellie. Finally, I discuss the significance of Ellie's identity as a queer woman in a video game genre typically expected to cater to a heterosexual male audience.

Finally, I close with a brief epilogue that makes a surprising connection between both games' themes. Each game utilizes a father-daughter relationship dynamic in ways that disrupt heteropatriarchal white supremacy's toxic ideological constructions of masculinity and race; yet, curiously, each game also ends with the father-figure's death. I briefly discuss the significance I see in this deployment of the "death of the father" trope and then follow with final remaining questions concerning this topic that I feel warrant further exploration.

The (Invisible) Racialized Legacy of Zombies

Being that this project explores two stories both set against the backdrop of different iterations of "the zombie apocalypse," I felt it necessary to acknowledge the lesser-known origins of the zombie myth. Our cultural fixation on zombies and the zombie apocalypse is certainly not limited to the video game world, evidenced by the widespread critical acclaim of

films like *28 Days Later*, *Zombieland*, *Train to Busan* as well as the popular television show *The Walking Dead* (based on the graphic novel series of the same name, as is the game). To name a few more: *Shaun of the Dead*, *World War Z*, *Life After Beth*, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, *The Dead Don't Die*. And that is by no means an exhaustive list. If additional proof is needed of our cultural obsession with zombies, look no further than the Center for Disease Control's website which features resources on "zombie preparedness." Yet, as thoroughly absorbed as zombies might be into the United States' cultural zeitgeist, there is shockingly little acknowledgement of their historic and tragic origins.

The concept of zombies first originated as a myth circulated by enslaved Haitians between the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Worked quite literally to death by the French, enslaved Haitians believed that dying would return them back to "*lan guinée*," their African homeland. But this afterlife would be denied to slaves who took their own lives, who would instead be cursed to continue working for eternity, "an undead slave at once denied their own bodies and yet trapped inside them—a soulless zombie" (Mariani). The zombie mythos emerged from a place of such pain and injustice, from a sense of powerlessness so immense that enslaved Haitians doubted even death's capacity to escape it. Yet, as Mike Mariani notes, "In the hundreds of years since, the zombie myth has been widely appropriated by American pop culture in a way that whitewashes its origins—and turns the undead into a platform for escapist fantasy." The myths' roots—historical and tragic as they are—have been ignored and erased, then replaced instead by a zombie horror figure left vague enough to serve as a stand-in for virtually any and all American anxieties.

The American "zombie industrial complex," as Mariani calls it, whitewashes and erases zombies' historically racialized legacy. Instead zombies have been used to embody and articulate

any number of collective American fears, from unease surrounding materialism and “capitalism, the Vietnam War, nuclear fear, even the tension surrounding the civil-rights movement” (Mariani) with virtually zero recognition of the zombie figure’s actual roots. To mindlessly consume as well as continue to create work in this genre without acknowledging the true origins of the zombie mythos is cultural erasure that dishonors the memory of the enslaved people whose psychic pain created it long ago.

The #Gamergate Controversy & Why the Work We Do Matters

It seems inappropriate to engage in any level of feminist video game criticism without at least briefly addressing the current state of gaming culture. Despite the fact that adult women are now the largest demographic in the gaming industry (Romano), video game culture as a whole has been slow to accept this change. This is evident through the types of stories most commercially successful video games tell, the characters they choose to feature (still mostly straight, white, and able-bodied), as well as the still often sexist images and branding used to market these games (Consalvo). Gamers are people of all genders, sexual identities, races, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, yet the demographic that is the most accustomed to being catered to, who gets to see themselves represented and their perspective centered is that of the straight, white man. And should feminist critics speak out against the industry’s misogyny, that particular demographic is known to push back.

The push back I am referring to is the “internet culture war” (Dewey) known as the Gamergate Controversy, which can perhaps best be understood less as a singular event and more as intermittent rumblings of discontent from those who would prefer to keep “traditional” games the way they have been the last two decades, that is, prioritizing and catering to the white, straight, and cisgender man demographic. The first instance of “Gamergate” occurred back in

2014, when feminist video game developers and critics, among them Anita Sarkeesian of the popular website “Feminist Frequency,” were victims of harassment (and death threats) by angry, anti-feminist, and misogynistic gamers on social media platforms such as Twitter. The “#Gamergate” hashtag began trending once Breitbart, a far-right news source, characterized the attacks as “feminist bullies tearing the video game industry apart” (Dewey). It is necessary to understand that the #Gamergate controversy is not apolitical in nature; it is an attempt to keep women and gender nonconforming people in their place and silence those who dare to speak out. Sarah Stang writes of this gate-keeping as symptomatic of other false beliefs about women and video game culture: “These toxic practices exist as barriers which deter women from entering video game design and demonstrate that there is a belief in ‘gamer’ culture that women do not belong in the industry, that games should not be made for women, and that women do not seriously play games (or play serious games)” (163). Unfortunately, #Gamergate, or at least the climate that fostered it, is not disappearing any time soon.

This is why the work we do as race-conscious feminist game scholars matters. It is not enough to merely be conscious of gendered inequality in the gaming industry, but to document and combat it. As Lisa Nakamura writes, “Awareness isn’t enough. It’s our job as feminist scholars, teachers, writers, and gamers to document, analyze, and theorize the white patriarchy that is so vigorously resurgent in games while never forgetting who profits here.” Mia Consalvo argues powerfully for feminist scholars’ responsibility in the at-times hostile cultural climate of gaming:

So what can feminist media studies offer? How can scholars interested in video games and gamer culture as well as the equal treatment of women in this space make a contribution? I believe this is an opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of research

and particularly how it can help to give us a firm foundation on which to stand in order to shed light on the persistence of particular issues, point to historical solutions for overcoming similar difficulties, and thereby push for a more welcoming kind of game culture for everyone — not simply girls and women players.

Feminist video game scholarship matters because women have always existed in gaming spaces. It is nothing new, but we are only just now starting to see a shift in gaming subculture and the growing pains that accompany such shifts. Yet, we are here. We aren't going anywhere. And we will continue to demand more from the video game industry because we care about games as an art form that holds the potential to tell stories just as powerfully as any other narrative form. Not the same story repeated again and again that prioritizes one perspective to the exclusion and omission of all others, but stories as vibrant, varied, and dynamic as gamers themselves.

CHAPTER II

RE-PRESENTING BLACK MASCULINITIES AND (SOCIAL) FATHERHOOD IN *THE WALKING DEAD GAME*

The reality is this. Patriarchal families are not safe, constructive places for the development of identities and kinship ties free of the crippling weight of domination. Patriarchy is about domination.

—bell hooks, *Killing Rage*

While the prevalence of the father-daughter relationship dynamic in many video games within the last decade certainly warrants further discussion and analysis in and of itself, there is one game, one pair of father and daughter protagonists, deserving of particular focus and attention: Lee and Clementine of *The Walking Dead* game, a man and young girl, both African American, fighting to survive an apocalyptic zombie pandemic. In this chapter, I analyze and attend closely to the dynamics of their relationship, paying specific consideration to Lee's approach to (found) fatherhood in light of existing discourse (or lack thereof) surrounding Black fatherhood. I also examine Lee's acts of fatherly care towards Clementine in contrast to established patterns of (hyper)masculine behavior more generally and, specifically, fatherly behavior traditionally portrayed in video games. I ultimately make the claim that Lee's approach to fatherhood is more functional than what is viewed as culturally expected or typical precisely because he does not operate within those expectations; Lee and Clementine's relationship is characterized by care, gentleness, and ultimately what bell hooks theorized as an "ethic of love" (*Outlaw Culture* 243). Finally, I will argue, in agreement with recent studies, that depictions of healthy fatherhood such as Lee of *The Walking Dead* present players with representations of masculinity that serve to offer models of alternative masculine behavior that disrupt toxic models

of hypermasculinity embedded in the dominant (patriarchal) culture and upheld through the majority of video games. Similarly, Lee's identity as both a sensitive and caring (found) father and a Black man provides players with a long-overdue representation of Black fatherhood rooted in reality, not racist stereotyping, that simultaneously showcases a relationship designation that has long existed within the Black community but has largely been ignored as it differs from "traditional" (namely, white/eurocentric and patriarchal) understandings of paternal relationships; that is, the role of "social fatherhood" in Black kinship networks, a term I will unpack in greater detail in a future section.

The Walking Dead game (Telltale, 2012) centers Lee Everett, an African American man and former university professor in the United States' South convicted by the state for alleged murder. Lee is being transported to prison when an apocalyptic zombie outbreak inadvertently orchestrates his escape via car crash. Injured, Lee seeks help in a nearby house and happens upon Clementine, an eight-year-old African American girl who saves his life by handing him a hammer with which to fend off her reanimated and now murderous babysitter. When it is revealed that Clementine's parents are missing, Lee immediately assumes a protective role towards Clementine, promising to help her find her mother and father. Throughout *The Walking Dead*, Lee and Clementine navigate the chaos of an unraveling society as a zombifying pandemic sweeps the country. Strikingly, zombies represent the least of Lee's problems as much of the gameplay focuses on making difficult moral decisions (sometimes in a matter of seconds) that influence future events, interactions with other characters, and, most importantly, Clementine. As feminist video game scholar Sarah Stang explains:

...the central focus of gameplay is not violent action but instead making difficult survival decisions, managing interpersonal relationships, and mediating conflicts. As Lee

encounters other survivors and attempts to keep the group intact, the player is forced to make decisions about Lee's behaviour, which in turn influence how others behave, who survives and who does not, and what kind of a role model he is for Clementine. (166)

Telltale Games' choice to feature an African American man in a video game that does not foreground violent, hypermasculine behavior is, frankly, a refreshing choice. Lee and Clementine's relationship is one defined by care, nurturance, and softness, traits that are not ideologically constructed by patriarchy to be considered masculine. Yet, *The Walking Dead* subverts representation norms for Black masculinity as well as Black fatherhood through Lee's portrayal. In their study entitled "Of Headshots and Hugs," Bell et al writes, "*The Walking Dead* rewards a fatherhood rooted in non-violence, nurture, and self-sacrifice — gendered characteristics that are commonly categorized as feminine, yet are essential for a father to raise an emotionally and behaviorally healthy child." I would even argue that the game (perhaps inadvertently) offers critiques of racist societal attitudes through some of Lee's interactions with non-player characters. As I explore in the next section, I believe *The Walking Dead* game contains compelling instances of the "racial horror" genre. Though I cannot speak directly to the creators' intentions, some of the game's writing betrays a societal commentary made all the more meaningful by the fact that it may not have been conscious or deliberate.

***The Walking Dead* Game, *Night of the Living Dead*, and Racial Horror**

The 1968 horror film *Night of the Living Dead* is iconic for many reasons, perhaps most of all because it virtually spawned the "zombie apocalypse" genre as we know it today. Yet, it cannot escape notice that the heroic male lead, Ben, was played by a Black man by the name of Duane Jones. Such a casting move was unheard of at this time and is still fairly rare in mainstream film today, horror or otherwise. Ben is calm, level-headed, and brave, never

hesitating to take charge in even the most unthinkable of situations. Enterprising and capable, Ben is often seen fighting off undead adversaries with nothing more than a tire iron. Yet, ultimately, for all of his quick-thinking and steadiness, none of it is enough to save him. Ben dies not at the hands of the zombies he went through hell to prevail against, but by men who, in search of survivors, automatically perceive him as threatening and shoot him without a moment's hesitation. I believe that *Night of the Living Dead* is one of cinema's first instances of racial horror and that Ben is a predecessor to Lee in many ways. When I use the term "racial horror," I am referring to the motif in film and other forms of media (though it also exists in literature), particularly within the horror genre, that features racism and white supremacy as the primary villain. Audiences are presented with a person-of-color protagonist to root for and then watch with helpless dread as the hero tries to outwit the monstrous "bogey man" of racism. Horror films like the critically acclaimed *Get Out* (2017) and, most recently, HBO's hit television series *Lovecraft Country* (2020) both feature this concept to startling effect. In racial horror, the story's heroes and, by extension, the audience are kept in near-constant terror. No one is safe and *no one* is safe; virtually any person the hero meets could embody the evil "monster" of white supremacy. Through this trope, audiences spectate, from a safe distance, the very real, lived fear people of color carry with them their entire lives existing under systems of oppression and white supremacy.

George Romero, director of *Night of the Living Dead*, claimed to have given Ben's role to a Black actor not out of any conscious move to critique societal racism, but simply because Duane Jones gave the best audition ("Interview: George Romero"). Still, much can be made of the film's tragic ending. Whether Romero was conscious of the racialized undertones of Ben's senseless murder or not, the film's final antagonistic force was not the mindless, flesh-

consuming undead but a racist society. I feel it necessary to include this brief examination of *Night of the Living Dead's* legacy, as a predecessor to the zombie apocalypse horror genre, yes, but most especially as one of the earliest instances (however unwittingly) of racial horror. I include this discussion because of the staggering similarities the film bears to *The Walking Dead* game; after all, both center educated Black men as their heroic leads, and both feature the creative decision, unconsciously or not, to position the *real* horror of racism against the backdrop of the fantastical horror of a zombie apocalypse.

Last, I wish to very briefly examine Lee's depicted experiences in simply navigating the world as a Black man in *The Walking Dead*. What was most striking to me as a player very early on in the game was the sense of fear, the distinct vulnerability I felt, not just in assuming the perspective of a man trying to survive in a zombie apocalypse, but the perspective of a Black man in the southern United States. Lee is viewed by default with suspicion by most characters in-game despite being a caring, gentle, and educated man. I felt a unique tension as I navigated timed conversations with characters who approached Lee with hostility even when entirely unprovoked. I felt very real distress as Lee to select the right dialogue option to defuse interactions such as, for example, deciding whether or not to disclose Lee's status as an attempted convict to strangers already eyeing him with automatic suspicion. While I cannot speak to Telltale's intentions as far as commentary on societal and institutional racism, the choice to juxtapose the lived, constant fear of a Black man maneuvering a culture hostile to his very existence alongside the fear of surviving a zombie pandemic is certainly a striking one. The creative decision to make Lee a history professor of an educated, middle class background is also ideologically loaded, especially when taking into consideration that Lee is in police custody when the game first begins. Lee's class background seems to be, simultaneously, an attempt to

code him as non-threatening while also breaking from established representation patterns for Black men, who are often relegated to working-class and/or violent character portrayals. Still, what does the decision to criminalize Lee say of the developers' intentions or unconscious biases? Is it an attempt at societal critique that even Lee's class and educational background do not exempt him from being criminalized by racist society? This depiction of what bell hooks calls the "psychic pain," (377) the oppressive, simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility Black people are made to feel daily under the white supremacist gaze of a racist society, are part of what makes Lee such a powerful example of Black representation. As hooks writes in her essay "Eating the Other": "Mutual recognition of racism, its impact both on those who are dominated and those who dominate, is the only standpoint that makes possible an encounter between races that is not based on denial and fantasy" (371). *The Walking Dead* acknowledges the realities of racism through Lee's in-game interactions, offering players limited insight into the lived experiences of Black individuals maneuvering a hostile, racist culture.

Lee and Clementine: A Dynamic of Care

Lee embodies many traits that differ from a patriarchal understanding of masculinity; and it is precisely this aspect of Lee that makes him such a compelling protagonist and loving father-figure to Clementine. *The Walking Dead* game is "primarily about fatherhood and survival" (Bell et al); Lee and Clementine's relationship undoubtedly contains mentorship. Lee shows her how to fire a gun, for example. But mentorship is not by any means the defining facet of their relationship. Their dynamic is most of all characterized by care, gentleness, and emotional vulnerability. Lee does his best to nurture Clementine through acts of caregiving. For example, "Lee cuts her hair, teaches her how to shoot a gun, gives her food, consoles her when upset, and bandages her when wounded, [*The Walking Dead* presents] moments of compassion and

caretaking that players have to act out in order to advance in the game” (Bell et al). Countless scenes in the game provide players with the option to be emotionally vulnerable with Clementine, to comfort her when she is frightened, or offer her hope in spite of their difficult circumstances. *The Walking Dead* also features a timed decision-making system that influences the game’s events. Some in-game decisions are given particular weight when players are shown messages at the top of the screen like “Clementine will remember that” or “Clementine witnessed what you did.” The player’s future decisions are influenced, at times, by Clementine’s reactions to their choices. As Sarah Stang writes, “Clementine functions as a motivating factor and emotional centerpiece, as well as a moral compass for the player, as she reacts negatively to anger and violence” (166–167). Similarly, it is understood that player choices play a part in shaping Clementine’s worldview and influencing the type of person she will become. Stang continues, “Choices do not matter on a grand scale in *The Walking Dead* – Lee will never save the world from its fate – however, the player’s choices do influence how Clementine sees Lee, and, as an extension, how she sees the world” (Stang 167). Players, through Lee, are presented with opportunities to show Clementine the importance of retaining dignity and kindness in inhumane situations.

Player reactions to Lee and Clementine’s relationship dynamic have been overwhelmingly positive. Studies like the one led by Bell et al suggest that player perspectives begin to shift when they are presented with models of alternative masculine behavior like the one Lee’s character provides. Players of *The Walking Dead* game are given the opportunity to play “through and critically reflect on constructions of masculinity that fall outside of their normal experiences with games (especially games featuring African American characters)” (Bell et al). This allows players the, sadly rare, chance to “find pleasure in performances of masculinity that

are significantly less ‘hyper,’ less rooted in violence, mastery and domination, than those offered by the games” they might usually play (Bell et al). The notion that players given the opportunity to perform or play out expressions of alternative (not toxic or hyper) masculinities might begin to shift their own perspectives regarding masculine behavior is highly compelling. Further, Lee’s nuanced, layered portrayal provides players with a representation of Black manhood and fatherhood that defies and problematizes much of the existing portrayals of Black men (as well as the Black family unit) shaped by racist, white supremacist, and patriarchal ideology and parroted/reinforced through media in all forms.

The Moynihan Report: Pathologizing Black Fatherhood

In my discussion of Lee as a complex, dynamic depiction of an African American father, it is critical to deconstruct the societal beliefs surrounding Black fatherhood, some of the sources of such beliefs, as well as how those beliefs go on to be affirmed through representations in media. However, it is not enough to merely understand the root causes of representational norms surrounding Black fatherhood and the societal beliefs they stem from; we must also understand how those representations function to enforce and strengthen white supremacist power structures while working to continue the disenfranchisement of people of color.

I cannot begin to discuss the pathologization of the Black family unit, and Black fatherhood in particular, without mentioning the infamous Moynihan Report. The report decries the “breakdown” of the Black family, pointing to statistics such as an increase in unwed Black mothers and a decline in the rate of marriage among Black couples without directly interrogating the root causes of such conditions. Namely, that many Black men *want* to be present and loving husbands and fathers but are prevented from fulfilling those roles due to societal and systemic racism that can take many forms, such as the hyper-policing of the Black community. As Connor

and White establish in “Fatherhood in Contemporary Black America: An Invisible Presence,” many Black “fathers did the best they could to be good fathers before they were derailed and sometimes even crushed by impossible burdens” (6). However, it is critical to acknowledge that forcing patriarchy on Black men is not the answer—addressing systemic racism is. bell hooks writes of this prescriptive patriarchy in *Killing Rage*, “Regrettably, I find myself continually restating in essays about feminism and blackness that one of the major barriers impeding our capacity as black people to collectively challenge sexism and sexist oppression is the continued equation of black liberation with the development of black patriarchy” (63). Much of the damage done by the Moynihan Report largely lies in its insistence that Black men were failing to assert themselves as patriarchal heads of their households when patriarchy is not the answer, merely another form of oppression.

Revoltingly patronizing, the Moynihan Report is permeated with racist and misogynistic sentiments about the perceived corruption and downfall of the Black family unit. bell hooks writes that the report blames the disempowerment of black men on the existence of “a black matriarchy” and suggests “that black women should be more subordinate if black men were to assume their rightful place as patriarchs” (hooks *Salvation* 136). Moynihan writes that racist society was especially damaging to Black men as opposed to Black women. Such submission, he asserts, should already come naturally to Black women, but was detrimental to Black men’s sense of manhood and masculine identity:

When Jim Crow made its appearance towards the end of the 19th century, it may be speculated that it was the Negro male who was most humiliated thereby; the male was more likely to use public facilities, which rapidly became segregated once the process began, and just as important, segregation, and the submissiveness it exacts, is surely more

destructive to the male than to the female personality. Keeping the Negro “in his place” can be translated as keeping the Negro male in his place: the female was not a threat to anyone. Unquestionably, these events worked against the emergence of a strong father figure. (Moynihan)

In short, Black communities were not adhering to the traditional patriarchal gender roles white supremacy demanded of them and, as a result, according to Moynihan, their family unit was eroding. An increasing number of Black children were born out of wedlock, more and more Black women worked or were, unthinkable, the heads of their own households. Moynihan laments, reeking of racist condescension:

Because in general terms Negro families have the largest number of children and the lowest incomes, many Negro fathers literally cannot support their families. Because the father is either not present, is unemployed, or makes such a low wage, the Negro woman goes to work. Fifty-six percent of Negro women, age 25 to 64, are in the work force, against 42 percent of white women. This dependence on the mother’s income undermines the position of the father and deprives the children of the kind of attention, particularly in school matters, which is now a standard feature of middle-class upbringing.

According to Moynihan, it was the degradation and loss of traditional “family values” that “emasculated” Black men and this, not the institutional racism engrained into the very marrow of our country’s bones, not the hyper-policing and disproportionate criminalization Black men suffer at the hands of a racist and corrupt system, is why Black fathers were ostensibly not fulfilling their roles as men and fathers. But what the Moynihan Report is ultimately, falsely, suggesting is that “properly” realized patriarchy would solve this problem. Though published over fifty years ago, the Moynihan Report’s sentiments continue to linger, shaping faulty and

racist belief systems about the African American family as well as African American men. While these beliefs are undoubtedly insidious, it is critical to understand how they are also self-perpetuating. As Hattery and Smith assert, “beliefs around race and crime are so powerful that they create perceptions about African Americans and crime that significantly influence the behavior of whites reporting crime, identifying suspects, and in the case of police officers, engaging in racial profiling” (125). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “The challenge lies in disrupting Eurocentric scripts of Black masculinity” (156) such as the rhetoric the Moynihan Report presents. Though *The Walking Dead*’s portrayal of Lee certainly does work to disrupt such false societal notions of Blackness, it is necessary to acknowledge the shortcomings of his characterization, namely the way the game’s opening still frames Lee as (at least potentially) a criminal. Had *The Walking Dead*’s developers taken the time to more thoughtfully consider what racist, damaging beliefs such a narrative decision upholds, Lee’s portrayal would stand as an even more powerful instance of sorely-needed representation of Black manhood and fatherhood.

***The Walking Dead* Game and Social Fatherhood**

Given the history of racist pathologization surrounding Black fatherhood, *The Walking Dead* game’s representation of Lee as a father figure “breaks away from unfounded stereotypes around Black fathering, and offers a more accurate (and positive) reflection of its contemporary constructions” (Bell et al). Additionally, Lee fulfills the role of what Michael Connor and Joseph White (citing Rebekah Coley) refer to as “social fatherhood,” defined as:

Men who assume some or all of the roles fathers are expected to perform in a child’s life whether or not they are the biological fathers. As a more inclusive term, social fatherhood encompasses both biological fathers and father-figures, men who are not biological

fathers but who provide a significant degree of nurturance, moral and ethical guidance, companionship, emotional support, and financial responsibility in the lives of children (3)

Most discussions of Black fatherhood blatantly ignore both the cultural nuances within Black communities as well as the contributions of both biological and social fatherhood therein (7).

Lee, as a social father to Clementine, provides physical and emotional care for her without hesitation. The functionality of their relationship dynamic is an excellent representation of Black fatherhood, too often overlooked in itself in discourse of this kind, and also social fatherhood, a relationship dynamic that has always existed within Black culture (3). In assuming the role of social father to Clementine, Lee broadens players' limited understandings/definitions of what constitutes fatherhood to include nonbiological father-figures who provide care, "ethical guidance, nurture, and emotional support" (Bell et al). Lee, though fictional, nevertheless highlights the need for societal reconfiguration of the role of father, to define them as caregivers rather than providers.

In her essay "Love as the Practice of Freedom," bell hooks writes that "to choose love is to go against the prevailing values of the [dominant] culture." *The Walking Dead*, through Lee and Clementine's relationship dynamic of physical and emotional care, embodies what hooks refers to in the same essay as "an ethic of love": a love that seeks to nurture the physical as well as spiritual growth of others. In a culture engulfed and titillated by violence, *The Walking Dead* game chooses to tell a story of love, of found and chosen family. Not of survival by any means necessary, but by retaining one's compassion, humanity, and hope; and passing those values on to a vulnerable young girl who needed your help. *The Walking Dead's* decision to prioritize morality over violence is strikingly counterculture. Bell et al writes, "In creating both a non-normative protagonist and a game world that disrupts expectations of player agency commonly

found in zombie games, Telltale has created an environment that allows (or compels) players to explore enactments of masculinity not normally associated with mainstream gaming cultures.” Through Lee’s portrayal, *The Walking Dead* disrupts previously established patterns of shallow, faulty, or even harmful representations of Black masculinity. The game offers alternative expressions of Black manhood where previously there were either toxic, caricaturistic representations or simply none at all. Similarly, *The Walking Dead* presents alternate constructions of Black fatherhood, specifically social fatherhood, that expand previously-held understandings of fathering within the Black community.

The Significance of Clementine’s Innocence

Sudanese-American novelist Kola Boof writes, “The black woman is the most unprotected, unloved woman on earth... She is the only flower on earth that grows unwatered” (Turner). This tragic sentiment speaks to the layered and interlocking forms of injustice suffered by African American women specifically and it starts as early as girlhood. In his article entitled “The Criminalization of Black Girlhood” John Turner writes, “For centuries, black girls and women have been criminalized, dehumanized, hypersexualized, degraded, objectified and stereotyped. From a young age, black girls are viewed as threats and often face criminalization in the very place where they should be getting an education: school.” Black young girls growing up in a racist, oppressive society are not given the opportunity to be girls at all. They are forced, through different societal factors, to grow up long before their time. Turner continues, “Beginning as young as 5 years old, black girls are more likely to be viewed as behaving and seeming older than their actual ages, seen as more knowledgeable on sexual topics and are more likely to take on adult roles than what is usually expected from girls in their age groups.” Aside from this hypersexualization and age compression, Black girls are more likely to be

characterized as angry or aggressive. Seven times more likely to be suspended and three times more likely to be referred to juvenile court than their white peers (Turner), black girls are often perceived by default as having behavioral problems.

At the time of this piece's writing (February 2021), a 9-year-old African American girl in Rochester, New York, was handcuffed and pepper sprayed by police responding to a call placed by her family, who indicated that she was in mental distress and needed help. Instead of receiving understanding, she was met with brutal force. In an article for *NPR*, Senator Samra Brouk said of the incident: "At a time when this young girl was in the middle of a crisis, away from her parents, instead of being comforted, spoken to as a child, she was treated violently and pepper-sprayed in the face" (Booker). According to the same article, one of the officers repeatedly screamed at the young girl, "You're acting like a child!" To which the girl screamed back, "I *am* a child!" (Booker). This example acutely illustrates my point. Young Black girls are not permitted by racist, white supremacist U.S. society (and those systems put in place to uphold it) to simply be little girls, to be seen as children. These unjust and inhumane double standards rob black girls of their childhoods.

This is why the significance of Clementine's character cannot be overlooked. Just eight years old when she meets Lee, Clementine is a sweet, innocent, and vulnerable young Black girl. Throughout the game, she is allowed to remain a little girl. She is never forced to grow up or harden herself against the harsh realities of the world she and Lee find themselves in; through it all, Clementine is allowed to retain her childhood. She is worthy of Lee's (and the player's) protection. In light of the unjust societal pressures placed on young Black girls to prematurely forfeit their girlhoods, *The Walking Dead's* emphasis on Clementine's innocence is no small act. It should not be a progressive choice, but it is.

Clementine's light, her innocence, are worth preserving. Her uncorrupted morality guides Lee, and players by extension, to make ethical choices in difficult, unthinkable situations. According to Derek Sakai, lead art director for *The Walking Dead* game, "Clementine is meant to represent innocence and purity." Sakai continues, "She embodies the main character's desire to protect and preserve what is good about humanity" (Wallace). At times, Clementine functions as Lee's moral compass, and as such her innocence guides him to retain his kindness, his humanity. I would even argue that, through Clementine, the game rewards empathy and compassion. Sarah Stang writes that Lee and Clementine's relationship is rooted in compassion and caring, she notes "Many players experience real feelings of protectiveness and concern for Clementine, as well as guilt for making choices which frighten or upset her" (Stang 166). There is actual data that indicates that Clementine's presence in a scene influences the choices players make (Wallace), encouraging them to practice a degree of kindness and gentleness they otherwise might not have. Clementine's character simultaneously resists the layered and interlocking oppressions that attempt to steal Black little girls' childhoods while also, in encouraging and rewarding players' softness, creates space for players to assume performances of masculinity rooted in gentleness and compassion instead of violence and aggression.

Conclusion: The Power of Player Identification

Finally, I will conclude with a brief analysis of my own gameplay experiences with *The Walking Dead*, centering the most compelling aspect of my experience, that is, identification with Lee. There were certain in-game moments where I felt myself embody Lee's perspective, more than I have with any other video game of this genre. This identification did not occur throughout the entirety of gameplay, but rather seemed to be constantly in flux. There were moments I felt strong awareness of my status as a player controlling Lee as an avatar, while, in

other instances, I experienced very real, powerful affective responses that coincided with Lee's emotional states in-game. Notably, I am not the only such player to have this experience while playing *The Walking Dead* game. In their study exploring player affiliative states in *The Walking Dead*, Bell et al. observe that many players experience "a fluid movement between different affiliative states: at some points they spoke as if they were Lee, projecting themselves into a given scenario or even explaining what Lee was thinking at the moment. In other instances they described Lee and themselves as wholly distinctive entities." To me, the instability of this player identification/affiliation does not negate its potentially empowering possibilities.

There is undeniable power in representation, to be sure, but I also see immense potential in player identification. Though an oscillating, fluid state of affiliation, those moments where players (and myself) were able to glimpse the world through Lee's eyes hold potential for new avenues of empathy and understanding that extend beyond the reach of conventional forms of representation. This concept seems especially compelling when considered alongside existing feminist scholarship observing the relationship between player experience and the imagining of new (alternative) expressions of masculinity, "less rooted in violence, mastery and domination" (Bell et al). Assuming Lee's perspective creates space for players to not only imagine, but participate in and actively assume a masculinity that departs from a patriarchal model of manhood.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* game features a fatherhood that challenges faulty, toxic, and unfounded beliefs surrounding Black masculinity, fatherhood, and family informed and upheld by white supremacy and patriarchy. The game's main characters, father-figure Lee and daughter-figure Clementine, share a relationship defined by compassion, empathy, and nurturance, traits not ideologically constructed by patriarchy to be understood as "typical" characteristics of

fatherhood. In centering a father-daughter relationship dynamic that defies a masculinity expressed through violent aggression, instead championing a fatherhood rooted in care, *The Walking Dead* conveys an undeniably counterculture and subversive message. Finally, Lee's depiction of loving and dynamic Black fatherhood (though imperfect) provides players, at long last, with a portrayal of Black family grounded in reality, not racist caricaturization.

CHAPTER III

RESCRIPTING GENDER DYNAMICS THROUGH ROLE REVERSAL IN *THE LAST OF US*

Women are powerful and dangerous.

—Audre Lorde

The Last of Us opens on the night before the end of the world. Joel, a single father, lives peacefully with his preteen daughter, Sarah, in rural Texas. At the start of the game, players assume Sarah's perspective after she is roused by an unsettling phone call in the middle of the night. Players navigate a dark house in search of Joel, witnessing the first reverberations of societal collapse (a news reporter on television warning viewers of a mysterious virus gets cut off by an explosion Sarah then sees through a window a few miles away). When Joel finally appears, he's forced to shoot a neighbor who's aggressively charging them (and growling bestially); he and Sarah then attempt to flee the city alongside Joel's brother, Tommy. Players are given control of Joel just after Tommy's truck is struck by an out-of-control vehicle. Sarah's leg was broken in the crash and Joel must carry her as Tommy helps them navigate the crowded chaos of downtown Austin. It becomes abundantly clear that the virus mentioned turns those infected by it mindlessly violent, and it's spreading. Dodging crazed "Infected," Joel manages to escort Sarah to the outer limits of the city only to be intercepted by a lone soldier of the US military who, upon seeking guidance from his superiors via radio, is instructed to gun down the duo to prevent potential spread of the infection. Sarah, cradled in Joel's arms, absorbs the brunt of the soldier's bullets despite Joel's attempts to shield her. Just before the soldier fatally shoots Joel, Tommy, who was separated from Joel and Sarah in the chaos, appears and shoots down the

soldier. The beginning portion of the game ends with Joel embracing Sarah as she succumbs to her wounds, weeping in visceral despair.

After a brief transition sequence in which players are caught up on the current state of the world through snippets of audio (newscasters describing the breakdown of society, the establishment of martial law and hyper-policed “quarantine zones,” and, most importantly, a broadcast introducing “the Fireflies,” a revolutionary faction seeking to unseat the current government), players resume control of Joel. As Joel, players navigate post-pandemic Boston, evading threats from a violent militaristic regime and Infected alike. Twenty years have passed since the loss of Joel’s daughter and, in that time, he has built a reputation for himself as a ruthless (and feared) smuggler and mercenary willing to do whatever it takes to survive in his brutal world. Joel, alongside his partner Tess, is tasked with escorting Ellie, an orphaned 14-year-old girl, to a rendezvous point outside Boston for the leader of the Fireflies. As one might expect, things go awry; the Fireflies meant to intercept Ellie are already dead when the group arrives and Tess dies tragically soon after. It is revealed that Ellie is mysteriously immune to the virus that has debilitated humanity and the Fireflies believe she might be the key to developing a vaccine; in light of this, Joel begrudgingly agrees to escort Ellie to a known Firefly outpost on the other side of the country. Joel and Ellie are initially wary of one another, but as they overcome various threats and obstacles, they begin to develop a partnership based on trust and confidence in each other’s capabilities.

By the “Fall” portion of the game, the pair arrive at the Fireflies’ abandoned base of operations, the remains of a university in Colorado. While searching for clues in the university’s science lab as to where the Fireflies might now be found, Joel and Ellie are attacked unprovoked by a group of mysterious men with guns. As they attempt to fight their way out of the situation,

Joel is pushed from the second floor of the building and impaled on exposed rebar, nearly killing him. Ellie helps Joel to his feet and players, with blurring vision and drastically limited movement, struggle to follow her to the exit. In the final cutscene of the chapter, Joel collapses as the pair flee on horseback, pale and very obviously near death. Ellie stands over him urging him to get up with the exclamation, “You’ve gotta tell me what to do!” The pattern laid in place throughout the game thus far has been Joel occupying a paternal, protector/guardian role over Ellie. Though by this point of the game, Ellie has begun to come into her own capabilities somewhat, (playing a more active, integral role in combat, for example) players have not been made to question the established dynamic of Joel as the protector and Ellie as the protected. That is, until the close of “Fall,” when the game’s strong, solid, and unquestionably capable protagonist lies bleeding and unresponsive on the ground. It now falls to Ellie, the protected, to ensure the pair’s safety and Joel’s survival. The situation has changed, the roles have reversed. It begins to snow softly. Winter is here and Ellie must act.

The “Fall” chapter is aptly named; fall signals a death of sorts as leaves wither and nature goes dormant, mirrored by Joel’s seeming “death” in-game. Following the tense and bloody close to the “Fall” chapter in which players are left wondering whether Joel even survived his injuries, players now assume Ellie’s perspective as she shifts from previously-unplayable deuteragonist to the role of protagonist and narrator. With Joel incapacitated and “dormant” for most of the “Winter” chapter, players are finally given the opportunity to move through the game-world as Ellie. Initially, players might be surprised at this change in point-of-view. Throughout *The Last of Us* thus far, the main objective has been for Joel to protect Ellie. Until this shift, Joel had assumed something of a paternal role, both guarding Ellie against and mentoring her in the brutal, violent realities of life in their post-apocalyptic world. However, this

relationship dynamic of father- and daughter-figure, protector and protected, is disrupted and inverted in the game's "Winter" chapter. It is eventually revealed that Joel is alive but critically injured and the player, as Ellie, must now assume the role of protector.

That this instance of role reversal is the crux, the heart, of the game's narrative is significant, particularly within the sphere of feminist video game criticism. Neil Druckmann, creative director and head writer for *The Last of Us*, said in the game's behind-the-scenes commentary that the story was "constructed around this moment where the roles flip, where now it's Ellie that has to protect Joel and essentially bring him back to life" (*The Last of Us*). While I will examine many aspects of Joel and Ellie's relationship dynamic throughout this chapter, this moment of role reversal will receive my closest attention as I believe it merits feminist consideration. Ultimately, I will argue that *The Last of Us*, specifically Ellie and Joel's role reversal, sends a contextual message of female empowerment and egalitarianism. Throughout "Winter," Ellie, though having occupied the role of the protected throughout the game, more than capably assumes the formerly paternalized role of the protector. That Ellie, the daughter-figure, so seamlessly and naturally fills what was previously a masculinized space as her father-figure's equal in more or less every way is both empowering and worthy of feminist analysis, especially when considering patriarchal ideology's established expectations for gendered behavior and/or gender roles. With focus on the ways the game, and Joel and Ellie's relationship in particular, has been previously examined by other feminist critics and in foregrounding the role-shift that occurs in the "Winter" chapter of the game, I hope to add new insight to the feminist criticism surrounding *The Last of Us*. In what follows, I engage with some of the existing feminist discourse surrounding Ellie and Joel's relationship dynamic.

Feminist Co-optation & the Centrality of Ellie's Role

Some feminist scholars see *The Last of Us* and games with similar father-daughter relationship pairings as inherently disempowering to women, merely a reimagining of “the damsel-in-distress trope into a familial melodrama, while still following the familiar video game narrative structure in which the player is invited to identify with a male who uses violence to fight monstrous beings to save a victimized female” (Stang 164). Conversely, some see *The Last of Us* as a co-optation or conscious subversion of the “damsel-in-distress” dynamic. Erika Curtis argues in her dissertation titled *In the Game of Patriarchy: The Damsel in Distress Narrative in Video Games* that *The Last of Us* challenges the damsel-in-distress motif in several ways:

There are numerous ways in which this game flips and complicates the damsel in distress narrative. Although Joel's visual representation is highly masculine as he is a large, strong and rugged man, he finds himself just as vulnerable as Ellie in many situations. The two characters share the role of protagonist and player-character, and in both the main game and the expansion Joel is in distress and must rely on Ellie to save him. (Curtis 46)

In her exploration of the film *Shame* as a feminist appropriation of the classic Western genre, Helene Shugart writes that in order to successfully challenge the established narrative norms of hegemonic masculinity, (such as the damsel-in-distress trope) the dominant male character must be disempowered in some way (80). Following this logic, *The Last of Us* challenges the notion of hegemonic masculinity by incapacitating Joel throughout most of the “Winter” chapter and empowering Ellie to act independently. Ellie Gibson, writing for EuroGamer, argues this point further, “The game sets her up as a damsel in distress but then subverts the whole concept. Ellie is perfectly capable of saving herself—not to mention Joel.” Where Lindsey Joyce writes that “Ellie’s character is denied a strong voice, denied opportunities to control her own safety and to

protect herself from harm,” others disagree, arguing that Ellie’s role is anything but subordinate. Gibson writes, “At numerous points in the game, [Ellie] is the one in charge. She is the protector.” Some critics argue against the designation of Ellie as Joel’s equal, even making what was to me the surprising claim that she slows him down. In an article for GameSpot, Carolyn Petit writes:

Ellie sometimes gets Joel out of a jam. She also sometimes gets him into jams, and regularly slows him down—something you're reminded of each time you have to help her cross water. Ellie, like all the women in the game, is important less in and of herself and more because of the impact that she has on Joel's life. It's because of the meaning she takes on for him that he feels compelled to make the decisions that give the ending its power.

I found Petit’s claim that Ellie slows Joel down interesting, as it could not be further from my own played experience with the game. During combat, Ellie has saved me (as Joel) *numerous* times. There have been countless instances where an enemy I was not aware of rushes towards me only to be stopped just in time by Ellie and her switchblade. To say that Ellie merely “gets Joel out of jams” downplays her skill and dismisses the importance of her role. Speaking from (played) experience, Joel would never have survived the game without Ellie by his side and to relegate her to the role of sidekick diminishes her centrality.

A Polarizing Decision

Some of the discourse surrounding *The Last of Us* was heavily critical, which I was admittedly surprised by as it contrasted so strongly from my own takeaways from the game. Many feminist critics responded negatively to Joel and Ellie’s relationship, claiming Ellie was characterized as passive and submissive to Joel’s authority (Joyce; Petit). For example, Sarah

Stang critiques the fact that Joel's opportunity for "paternal redemption" at the end of the game "occurs at the expense of Ellie's agency" (169). She writes:

Ellie believes that her immunity can lead to a cure for the fungus that has decimated humanity, and the Fireflies agree. When Joel discovers that Ellie would not survive the surgery that the Fireflies had planned for her, he abducts her from the hospital and flees with her, gunning down those in his way. Although Joel could not save his own daughter, in saving Ellie, Joel redeems his paternal masculinity. However, Joel made the decision to rescue Ellie against her will, as she had already decided to sacrifice herself to save humanity. (Stang 169)

While it is true that the Fireflies believed Ellie's immunity presented, at the expense of her life, the possibility of a cure, I disagree with Stang's assertion that Ellie had already made the decision to sacrifice herself to save mankind. By the time Joel and Ellie reach the Fireflies' headquarters, Ellie is unconscious and not breathing, having nearly drowned. Joel is in the middle of performing chest compressions when a Firefly patrol commands him to identify himself; when he refuses to stop resuscitating her, the guard knocks him out. When Joel awakens, he is told that Ellie is being prepped for surgery, but we have no knowledge of what exactly transpired. We are never shown whether or not Ellie was fully informed of what would happen to her and, in full knowledge of the cost, made the decision to give up her life.

Multiple critics expressed disapproval of Joel's refusal to sacrifice Ellie at the end of the game (Stang; Myers). While Joel's decision could be seen as selfish, it is certainly complicated. In their final conversation of the game, Ellie expresses her survivor's guilt to Joel and admits that, after having everyone close to her die, she's "still waiting for her turn" (*The Last of Us*). The concept of the "greater good" aside, hearing a fourteen-year-old girl confess that she feels

she deserves death would give anyone pause. Stang writes, “Rather than preparing Ellie to survive in the world on her own terms, Joel teaches Ellie to survive as he has – through extreme violence and mistrust of others – which is perhaps why Ellie seems to question whether survival is even worth it at all” (171). While I understand the anger surrounding Joel’s choice, I am simultaneously unable to justify and unwilling to condemn his decision to prevent Ellie’s sacrifice. The significant thing about Joel’s choice was that it was not a choice at all. Players are not given a say in whether Joel lets Ellie die in exchange for a vaccine or not; his actions are scripted. When it came down to saving the world or saving Ellie, Joel did the complete antithesis of virtually every biblical account I can recall. He chose not to risk the person he loved for a hypothetical cure for all of humanity. Joel refused to make the noble and holy decision. While many players were outraged by that, I can only look upon Joel’s choice as deeply complicated and human.

Joel and Ellie’s Dynamic: Paternalism or Partnership?

While Joel does come to regard Ellie as his capable equal, I recognize that he does not initially view her as such. Early in the game, Joel refuses to let Ellie carry a gun, telling her to leave the combat to him. While many critics rightfully took issue with this, I read Joel’s hesitancy as protectiveness. Ellie is only fourteen, after all. It would make sense for Joel, a former father, to want to preserve her innocence in their violent surroundings. But it becomes abundantly clear that shielding Ellie from the brutalities of their world is an impossible task, especially once the pair reaches Pittsburgh, a third of the way through the game. After getting separated from Ellie in a derelict hotel populated by “hunters,” marauders who kill and loot the corpses of anyone unfortunate enough to wander into Pittsburgh, Joel is nearly drowned by an exceptionally strong hunter. The event is scripted. No matter how hard the player fights, it is

Ellie who ends up saving Joel by picking up a pistol and shooting the hunter just in time. At first, Ellie is exhilarated; this is her first time taking a life. “Man, I shot the hell out of that guy, didn’t I?” she exclaims. “You sure did,” Joel tells her, his voice betraying a hint of pride. But once the reality of what she’s just done hits her, Ellie admits to Joel that she feels sick, and it’s only then that he scolds her for using a gun. This results in one of Joel and Ellie’s first arguments. While it is clear that Joel is grateful and even initially proud that Ellie saved his life, the realization that he had a hand in her loss of innocence and initiation into the harsh, violent world he’s known for the past 20 years causes him to lash out in misdirected guilt. Ellie expresses frustration at Joel’s refusal to acknowledge her as a capable partner worthy of the responsibility of wielding a weapon. Not long after, the two reconcile on a fire escape outside of the hotel. Joel shows Ellie how to handle a rifle and, in his own way, thanks Ellie for saving him. When Joel jumps down into what is, in my own play experience, a very challenging fight, Ellie provides invaluable cover fire. As she takes out hunters from above, Joel whispers, “Good job, Ellie.” Once the fight is finally over, a cutscene begins in which Ellie, face full of apprehension, asks Joel, “How’d I do?” Joel nods, acknowledging her capability. He then hands her a 9-millimeter pistol. This scene is, arguably, where Joel and Ellie’s dynamic of mutual respect is initially established.

After that scene, Ellie features much more prominently during combat. Where before she would merely throw bricks at enemies to give Joel an advantage or occasionally down an enemy with her switchblade, Ellie develops into an even more invaluable ally. Following one instance in Pittsburgh where she downs two hunters in quick succession, she whispers excitedly, “Joel, did you *see* me just now?!” Joel chuckles, obviously impressed, and tells her not to let it go to her head. In this way, “Ellie is an ‘actor’ as much as Joel is, rather than an ‘object’ to be saved or protected” (Curtis 48). Despite her youth and initial inexperience, Ellie is far from a burden. The

events in Pittsburgh establish her as Joel's capable partner in combat situations, and she continues to hold her own throughout the game. Perreault et al, in their article "Depictions of Female Protagonists in Digital Games," write that Ellie, in coming into her own and "invoking [her] inherent and learned skills" transitions from merely an ally to a protagonist and narrator (Perreault 856). Similarly, Gerald Voorhees argues that Ellie and Joel's relationship is rooted in what he terms "paternal egalitarianism." He further claims that *The Last of Us* "refigures the paternal role in ways that trouble the touchstones of traditional patriarchy" (Voorhees). Though I am unsure whether "paternal egalitarianism" is completely achievable, I am inclined to agree. While Joel and Ellie's relationship dynamic may initially be characterized as paternalistic, I believe it transforms as the game's narrative progresses and, ultimately, rescripts the game's established gender dynamic. Ellie's capability only grows as the game progresses, culminating in the instance of role-switching in "Winter" where Ellie fully assumes the role of protagonist.

"Winter" Role Shift

As gestured to previously, Joel and Ellie's established power dynamic is inverted in the "Winter" chapter of the game. Players assume Ellie's perspective and are tasked with ensuring Joel's safety. Armed with little more than her wits and her switchblade, Ellie must draw dangerous men away from an incapacitated Joel. This segment of the game is noteworthy for the sheer vulnerability players are made to feel. Ellie is not the grizzled survivalist players have grown accustomed to controlling, armed with ultra-modified or scoped weapons and, if players decided to pick it up, of all things, a flame-thrower. Ellie is instead equipped with her pistol, a scope-less rifle, and her signature switchblade; the range of her listening skill, which the player can utilize to pick up enemies' footsteps and plan combat accordingly, is also significantly more limited than Joel's. The entire chapter takes place around an abandoned mountain lodge in the

middle of a blizzard that significantly reduces players' visibility (more observant players may notice Ellie's teeth chattering). Ellie is eventually captured by the vicious men who attacked her and Joel at the end of "Fall." She comes to discover that her attackers are cannibalistic and that their leader, David, whom she previously negotiated a trade with in order to secure antibiotics for Joel, carries a twisted, pedophilic infatuation for her. After cunningly escaping her captors, players are armed with only Ellie's switchblade. Not since the very beginning of the game have players felt this vulnerable and, even then, vision, listening, and combat options were not this limited.

One might argue that the exposedness and vulnerability players are made to feel, combined with the intense resource scarcity of this portion of gameplay, serve to highlight the gap in Ellie and Joel's capabilities, negating their status as equals. It could not be more the opposite. Ellie faces harrowing circumstances completely alone, armed with almost nothing, and overcomes. Her struggle culminates in a boss fight with a scorned and now-murderous David, an event I will unpack in an upcoming section. Concurrently, players resume control of a just-recovered Joel and carve a bloody path through David's men to rescue Ellie. But Ellie does not need saving.

By the time Joel arrives, David is already dead by Ellie's hand. The "Winter" sequence of *The Last of Us* challenges the notion of father-figure (or, even simply, man) as protector by depicting Ellie as more than capable of doing the protecting, of herself as well as Joel. Up against vast, intimidating opposition, Ellie defends herself and her father-figure deftly, brutally, and in such a way that disrupts their previously established power dynamic. Voorhees writes of this role shift, "There is no gulf between the capacities of the father and the daughter and so passage from identification with one to the other is fluid." To pull from Shugart, Joel,

functioning as an icon of hegemonic masculinity, in being “disempowered,” cedes control to Ellie. But this loss of control, in disrupting the masculinist hegemonic narrative, shows that male characters can be confident in the capabilities of their female counterparts; Joel can trust Ellie with both a gun and his life. As Voorhees writes, “The model of fatherhood that emerges from the interplay of the procedural, narrative, and visual components of the game is one that is capable of growing to respect a daughter’s agency, to not only protect but be protected, and to value how the other experiences the world differently” (Voorhees). In Ellie’s seamless occupation of a role previously filled by the masculinist lead protagonist and father-figure, *The Last of Us* reconfigures and challenges the traditional role of feminine characters in video games.

Some, like Lindsey Joyce, take issue with the fact that Ellie seemingly only takes up arms for Joel’s sake:

Following Joel’s injury, Ellie does use a bow and arrow without male supervision, but even in this instance, her possession of a weapon is more domestic than protective and is still used in the service of a male. She uses the weapon to procure food so that Joel will recover. The game thus perpetuates gender tropes by projecting Joel as the dominant and protective alpha male while Ellie, even when armed and dangerous, is armed and dangerous in the service of a male.

Joyce has a point; Ellie is, after all, only empowered to take on the “protector” role once Joel is gravely injured. However, I feel that classifying Ellie’s weapon usage as “domestic” trivializes it; it downplays the strength she exhibits both in the presumed weeks off-screen in which she fights alone to keep Joel and herself alive and the in-game hardships she skillfully prevails over throughout the course of the “Winter” chapter. Similarly, Joyce’s analysis minimizes the events players navigate as Ellie in *Left Behind*, a stand-alone DLC (downloadable content) which

centers Ellie as the sole protagonist and, apart from flashbacks of Ellie's past, primarily details the obstacles she faced in the immediate aftermath of Joel's injury. Ellie does a lot more than hunt deer with a bow and arrow. She stabs dangerous Infected enemies in their eyes, sneaks up on unsuspecting Clickers (arguably one of the most dangerous and terrifying enemies in the game) and adult, armed men, subduing them with only her switchblade. Voorhees, conversely, sees Ellie's capability as empowering both for her, that she is more than able as daughter-figure and woman, to take on the protector role as well as for Joel, that he, as a man and surrogate father, can allow himself to be protected:

While it is certainly not unproblematic that Ellie's display of strength, capability, and loyalty is undertaken in the service of her father, this game as a fable of fatherhood suggests that fathers should have confidence in the actions of their daughter figures.

When Joel is incapacitated, Ellie saves his life. Ellie's strength helps Joel to recover, to heal and to become whole again. In losing power to Ellie, there is nothing to fear and everything to gain.

Through the inversion of Joel and Ellie's roles, the "Winter" portion of *The Last of Us* stands apart as an instance of empowerment that serves to rupture not only the game's previously-established power dynamic but traditional patriarchal understandings of gendered behavior as well. However, the game's role-switching event is by no means the only aspect worthy of feminist consideration.

Ellie's Queerness: Sexuality ≠ Hypersexualization

Many elements of Joel and Ellie's relationship dynamic merit consideration from a feminist perspective, but one that I feel is especially deserving of analysis is Ellie's designation as non-sexualized equal, "paternal charge and partner" (Voorhees) to Joel. In his 2013 keynote

speech for the Toronto chapter of the International Game Developers' Association, Neil Druckmann expressed how important it was to him that Ellie not be sexualized, "While working on *The Last of Us* [...] I wanted to create one of the coolest, non-sexualized female protagonists, and I felt like with *The Last of Us* there was an opportunity to change the industry" (Druckmann). It is perhaps somewhat saddening that a game that made the conscious decision not to sexualize a fourteen-year-old girl is considered "revolutionary." Yet, bearing in mind other forms of media that feature a similar relationship pairing (the action film *Leon* comes to mind, in which a thirteen-year-old Natalie Portman portrays the sexually precocious, Lolita-esque charge of an older male assassin), as well as the established patterns for female representation in video games that predate *The Last of Us* (consider, for example, *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth, whose coming-of-age/loss of innocence coincides with a revealing outfit change that heavily appeals to a heterosexual male gaze), Ellie's non-sexualization is significant as well as refreshing. Female players are able to look at Ellie and see a representation of themselves, not positioned as an object of the male player's sexual desire, but simply as a fully capable (and fully clothed), complex person. Erika Curtis writes, "The Last of Us denies an assumed heterosexual male gaze altogether, as the game provides a playable character that female players can identify with and makes the only unfolding romantic relationship in the game to be between two young girls" (48). The romantic relationship Curtis refers to is that of Ellie and her best friend, Riley. In *Left Behind*, it is revealed through flashbacks that Ellie is attracted to women. Ellie harbored romantic feelings for Riley before she contracted the cordyceps virus, forcing Ellie to kill her in self-defense after Riley "turned" into a mindless Infected. Revealing Ellie's sexuality was groundbreaking on multiple fronts, of course, but I found special significance in that the game does not conflate being non-sexualized with being non-sexual; Ellie experiences attraction but it

is not deployed in any way that is intended to service a masculinist gaze or narrative. While Ellie is a dynamic, multifaceted character, nothing about her was designed to cater to the male gaze.

David: The Antithetical Father-Figure

The choice not to hypersexualize Ellie is particularly highlighted in the “Winter” chapter of the game through the presence of the antagonist David. This “temporary sexualization of Ellie [...] is strongly coded as wrong” (Voorhees). Voorhees observes, “Ellie is the object of David’s erotic desire, but the game positions the player in disgust of this desire by making David a very difficult point of identification (for instance, David and his men are cannibals and his inhumanity is repeatedly communicated through both images and dialog).” Through Ellie’s sexualization by David, as an antagonist, *The Last of Us* sends the contextual message that the sexual objectification of Ellie is wrong. Interestingly, David also serves as something of a character foil for Joel, appearing (at least at first) trustworthy and charismatic where Joel is initially ruthless and taciturn. Both men appear to be the same age but perceive Ellie in staggeringly different lights; and the wrongness of one serves to highlight the healthiness of the other. Where David looks upon Ellie with lust, Joel and Ellie’s relationship is characterized by mentorship and mutual respect, care, and protection.

The “Winter” chapter culminates in a final boss fight with a now-mentally unhinged David. Ellie must utilize stealth to successfully attack David with her knife. With each successive hit she strikes, David’s movements become increasingly more erratic; if he spots Ellie, she is either shot on sight or struck down with his machete. As the fight progresses, it becomes clear that David intended to rape Ellie (unnerving comments like “run, little rabbit, run!” and “you have no idea what I’m capable of!” hold sexually predatory undertones). This cements David’s status as a corrupt, antithetical father-figure that stands in stark opposition to

Joel's character. Yet it is very much worth noting that it is not Joel who kills David. Upon re-assuming Joel's perspective, the game leads players to believe it will be Joel that rescues Ellie from David, playing into the familiar damsel-in-distress trope. But by the time Joel rushes to Ellie's aid, she has already won her struggle with David, killing him with his own machete. Still, Joel offers emotional support, grounding Ellie after her trauma and assuring her that she's safe with him before leading her away.

Conclusion: It's a Start

That Joel and Ellie's relationship dynamic in *The Last of Us* culminates in role switching is especially significant from a feminist perspective as it challenges the default, patriarchal notion of men as the protectors and women as the protected. Some rightfully criticize *The Last of Us* for still being a male-centered game as it features a white, male protagonist. In an article for *The Guardian*, Keith Stuart discusses the limitations of the female representation in *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* game. Citing Laura Mulvey's revolutionary work on the cinematic male gaze, he writes:

But here's the problem - if that is the right word: it's all about men. In her landmark essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey posited that mainstream cinema almost always adopts the viewpoint of a male protagonist – and through this phallocentric lens, female characters are invariably objectified and exploited. Mulvey's recourse to Freudian and Lacanian theory has been critiqued and questioned in the intervening 35 years, but we can certainly see her central thesis at play in video games – where often the spectator/gamer quite literally takes the viewpoint of the male lead through a first-person camera. And though we're given fleeting control over characters like Ellie and Clementine, they are mostly facilitators, reflecting the

experiences and needs of the male lead. People who argue that *The Last of Us* is as much Ellie's story as Joel's might be correct in a pure narrative context, but in terms of identification and raw experience, we're with Joel all the way.

I am inclined to agree with Stuart when he says that players are made to identify with Joel.

Procedurally and ludically, the game is about Joel and his perspective (though much can be made of the fact that the game utilizes the third-person perspective, not first). Part of the reason the role-switching in “Winter” is so significant is because it is jarring. Players who have grown accustomed to occupying Joel’s identity as a physically strong, masculine character with a wide array of guns and melee weapons at his disposal will find that, with Ellie, they must modify how they approach the game. Suddenly, players feel more vulnerable and, in awareness of Ellie’s relative fragility (which I equate less with her gender and more with the fact that she’s barely in her teens), the rules of the game change. When players are granted control of Joel once again, they most likely feel relief. Finally, they are physically strong again, finally they can feel just a little bit safer navigating the world. Yet I argue that even Stuart’s point about players more easily identifying with Joel carries feminist significance. Male players that would have previously never had cause to think about female vulnerability or innate male privilege are forced to grapple with it when they experience the differences of Joel and Ellie’s portions of the game.

Even with Ellie at a relative disadvantage, she still “endures and survives” (*The Last of Us*). I would even argue that *The Last of Us* works within the accepted, traditional framework for games like it in order to convey nontraditional, counterhegemonic messages about female strength. Though it cannot yet be decidedly determined whether *The Last of Us* signals a turning point in the video game industry, I believe it is nevertheless an exceptional example of female representation and empowerment. There are, of course, many areas that warrant further feminist

discussion. As previously stated, it came to light in *Left Behind* that Ellie is attracted to women. In the long-awaited sequel, *The Last of Us Part II*, set five years after the events of the first game, Ellie presents as noticeably more butch. The game features Ellie as the main protagonist, a position formerly filled by Joel, and it merits discussion that Ellie, in occupying a previously masculinized role, has herself become more masculine-presenting. Why must femininity automatically be positioned in opposition to physical strength? The decision to make Ellie more butch plays into, at least on some level, the binary of masculinity as physically strong and dominant and femininity as weak and vulnerable. Additionally, I believe more nuanced, feminist analysis is needed surrounding Ellie's denied agency at the close of *The Last of Us*. Joel's choice is a selfish yet understandable one and, as it was clearly written to be difficult, complex, and morally grey, more feminist scholars should be willing to grapple with it in less than totalizing terms.

Though the relationship dynamic of father- and daughter-figure has become quite prevalent in video games of late, none feature the element of role reversal that *The Last of Us* does. Still, the father-daughter (biological or surrogate) relationship dynamic has been featured not only in *The Last of Us* but in numerous recent video games (Booker and Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite*, Lee and Clementine in *The Walking Dead* game, Corvo and Emily in *Dishonored 2* are only a few examples), to the point where one might wonder what exactly developers' intentions are in continually centering this character pairing. Could the presence of these relationships in more and more video games be signaling a shift in the established patterns for female representation in games? *The Last of Us* challenges traditional gender roles and representations of female strength through Ellie and Joel's relationship, but it is yet uncertain whether more games are following its example. Still, there is arguably cause for optimism. And

in the case of *The Last of Us*, it is evident that this relationship dynamic has been deployed in ways that challenge patriarchal assumptions surrounding gendered roles and behavior. That much is clear from the moment Ellie steps on-screen, switchblade in hand.

CHAPTER IV

EPILOGUE

A father is as much a verb as a mother.

—Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or
a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*

Jacques Derrida opens his *Specters of Marx* with the line, “I would like to learn to live finally.” He then muses on the strangeness, the impossibility, of living being something that can be taught. The “magisterial locution” of teaching someone how to live, Derrida writes, is “one that goes most often from father to son, master to disciple, or master to slave.” In a feminist response to Derrida, Nancy Holland ponders the place of the daughter in this paradigm. She ultimately concludes, “A father cannot teach a daughter how to live; he can only teach her the limits within which she must live” (Holland 65). I find powerful truth in Holland’s words. The role of “father” has for far too long been conflated with “patriarch.” In a culture of misogyny, the father is expected not to teach his daughter how to be a person, but rather, how to be a woman within a patriarchal society. Which raises a question: Is there a place for fatherhood post-patriarchy and/or within a feminist ideological framework?

The (Feminist) Issue of Fatherhood

In her article “Fathering is a Feminist Issue,” Louise Silverstein writes of the need to reconfigure the concept of fatherhood to emphasize nurturing, not merely the providing of resources (3). Silverstein asserts that redefining fathers as nurturers “has the power to change the cultural construction of masculinity into something less coercive and oppressive for both women and men. The redefinition of fathering is thus an essential step in the continuing feminist transformation of patriarchal culture” (31). The transformation of fatherhood from defunct,

outmoded patriarchal constructions of/expectations placed on the paternal role to a fatherhood that centers care and empathy benefits everyone, most of all men.

Silverstein writes that, in affirming men's capacity to nurture, a "new masculinity" begins to take root, a masculinity that places "intimacy and attachment at the center of masculine gender role socialization" (31). Defining characteristics such as empathy, emotional expressivity, and self-awareness as "central to the new masculinity *requires* that fathering be redefined to emphasize intimacy, care, and connection" (30; emphasis original). This reconfiguration of fatherhood creates space to imagine new masculine possibilities. The designations of "masculine" and "feminine" are, after all, "relational social constructions" (Silverstein 30); the metamorphosis of these socially constructed roles to better mirror what bell hooks theorized as a "love ethic," that is, "love as the will to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth, revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility" (*All About Love* 136) carries with it undoubtedly transformative possibilities.

Conclusions

As this project draws to a close, I wish to highlight, in agreement with Silverstein, the necessity to achieve a balanced, nuanced perspective on the function of fatherhood. Attempts to over-emphasize the role of fathers on children's development have too often been used as a tool of patriarchy to dismiss the contributions of (or outright attack) alternative family models such as, for example, single mother-headed households (Silverstein 6). The intention of this project was not to discuss fathers/father-figures as something obligatory that, without, renders a kinship network/familial unit lacking or incomplete. As bell hooks writes, "Communities sustain life—not nuclear families, or the 'couple,' and certainly not the rugged individualist. There is no better place to learn the art of loving than in community" (*All About Love* 129). Rather, the purpose of

my discussion was to highlight the ways father-daughter relationship pairings were being utilized in ways that were potentially disruptive to a patriarchal understanding of gender roles, expressions/models of masculinity, and, in the case of *The Walking Dead* game, racist, unfounded stereotypes surrounding Black fatherhood.

Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* initially establishes a paternalistic dynamic in which a father-figure is the designated "protector" and the daughter-figure the "protected" only to disrupt and invert that very dichotomy. Upon closer analysis, this instance of role-reversal (alongside many other aspects of Joel and Ellie's partnership) contains empowering messages about feminine capability and strength that confound patriarchal understandings of gender. These threads of empowerment function to challenge and disrupt previously-held gender binaries of man (father) as protector and active agent and woman (daughter) as protected and passive object.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* game also employs a strikingly similar relationship dynamic to convey messages that serve to problematize and challenge patriarchal and racist ideologically constructed expectations surrounding masculinity, fatherhood, and Black fatherhood in particular. Though an imperfect portrayal, in giving players the opportunity to witness and assume an enactment of manhood and male caregiving characterized by softness and empathy as opposed to merely brute strength, physical protection, and/or the providing of resources, *The Walking Dead* game presents players with alternative forms of masculinity than what they may have previously been led to expect from video games. And there is power in representations of this kind. In having players identify with/assume the perspective of Lee, a Black man, *The Walking Dead* game creates openings for players to broaden their own perspectives. Through Lee, players are given (at long last) a dynamic, nuanced, and thoughtful portrayal of a caring, gentle, loving Black father; representation that has been sorely needed for some time (in video

games as well as all other forms of media) and serves to combat racist, false beliefs surrounding Black fathering in society more broadly.

Further Questions: Death of the Father(s) [Spoilers Ahead]

It merits consideration that both *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* game facilitate the death of the father-figure characters in order for the daughter-figures to fully step into the role of protagonist and assume the narrative as their own. In the case of *The Last of Us*, Joel is violently incapacitated and near death when Ellie assumes the role of main character and narrator. There is doubt for a considerable period throughout the opening play sequence of “Winter” as to whether or not Joel survived the altercation at the close of “Fall.” I see significance in the fact that Joel and Ellie could not merely switch roles just for a change in perspective, but rather Joel’s status as the protagonist was forcibly taken from him via violence. Yet it is not even Joel’s near-death, incapacitated status that draws my full curiosity but instead his actual death in the early stages of *The Last of Us Part II*, the game’s sequel set five years in the future. Ellie witnesses Joel’s murder at the hands of former Firefly agents who know the role Joel played in preventing Ellie from being sacrificed for a cure to the virus that crippled society. The group tortures and kills Joel in vengeance, as Ellie watches powerlessly, and it is this event that propels the plot of *Part II* forward. Ellie fully steps into the role of protagonist in violent pursuit of Joel’s killers.

Similarly, Clementine witnesses Lee’s death at the close of *The Walking Dead*. Lee is bitten early in the final chapter of the game and slowly begins to “turn” (succumb to the “zombifying” infection). Depending on players’ choices, Clementine either shoots Lee herself to spare him the fate of reanimating or she flees, leaving him to turn. Either way, Lee’s death signals a (tragic) passing over of the narrative to Clementine. The game has always been about Clementine, caring for her and keeping her safe, but it is only after Lee’s death that it becomes

her story. The next three seasons of *The Walking Dead* game feature Clementine as the lead protagonist. Again, this only came to be after the violent killing of the father-figure. Is there a feminist significance to this? Must we (brutally) kill the father so that the daughter may rise? Or is that merely what video game developers believe it takes in a game genre already so given to violence?

Another question presents itself: What became of all the mothers in these games and others like it? The father-daughter relationship is featured as the key dynamic in games like *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*. Yet, it is significant that a mother-daughter dynamic is far less common in high-profile video games of this variety. A closer investigation into this conspicuous absence of motherhood in game narratives, in conversation with the existing feminist discourse on the topic, seems worthwhile.

The purpose of this thesis project was to explore the ways two critically-acclaimed, post-apocalyptic video games utilize a common relationship dynamic in ways that are potentially subversive and/or disruptive to the dominant culture's racist, heteropatriarchal constructions of gender roles and gendered behavior more broadly and video game representation norms more specifically. *The Last of Us*, while initially establishing a dynamic of paternalistic mentorship between the two main characters, flips the script in the climactic "Winter" portion of the game. Joel and Ellie's previous dynamic that, by the game's own logic, designates the masculine character (father-figure) as the strong "protector" and the feminine character (daughter-figure) as vulnerable "protected," is inverted in such a way that ruptures that very binary. The role-switching instance, alongside many other aspects of Joel and Ellie's partnership, function to effectively challenge traditional (patriarchal) approaches to gendered roles and expectations for gendered behavior.

The Walking Dead game similarly deploys a father-daughter relationship pairing in ways that are progressive, empowering, and disruptive to a patriarchal understanding of masculinity and fatherhood. Further, Lee's dynamic portrayal of loving, gentle, Black fatherhood defies racist and false representative patterns for Black men, particularly Black fathers. Such portrayals, informed by insidious white supremacist rhetoric embedded within society and reinforced through many video games and other forms of media, are challenged and negated through Lee and Clementine's relationship in *The Walking Dead* game. Both games, therefore, are read as significant to a feminist framework. Though neither games' featuring of this dynamic is completely faultless, I felt it critical to call out the threads I saw connecting the two works. Where it is has become all too common for video games to feature hollow, one-dimensional portrayals of women and/or people of color, or to simply not feature them at all, it is my humble hope that these games signal a shift in the video game industry and culture, which has for too long been fraught with ingrained misogyny and racism.

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