

## Stay Close to Me: Performing Paternal Masculinity in Videogames

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### ABSTRACT

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This essay examines discourses of violent protective masculine behavior in the videogames *Heavy Rain*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Last of Us* within the context of active player performance. These three popular and critically acclaimed games allow the player to perform the role of a father whose actions as a paternal figure most often manifest as violence in the name of love and protection. Interrogating this identity of fatherhood as distinct from other kinds of violent masculinity often seen in videogames, this essay finds evidence of a crisis of paternal masculinity resulting from the dissonance between traditional paternalistic values and modern postcolonial understandings that paternalism is problematic, and more for the sake of masculine self-affirmation than the well-being of the child. *Heavy Rain* encourages the player's performance of a relatively straightforward violent masculinity for the sake of protecting one's child. *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* nearly avoid the problematic nature of paternalism by setting the action in apocalyptic settings where violence can be envisioned as a necessity, but ultimately anxieties of the place of paternalism in modern society leak through in the games' judgment of the necessity and morality of the player's violent performance. Pulling from performance studies, this essay considers how the player's performative experience in these games is integral to their discourses on paternal masculinity.

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### KEYWORDS

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fatherhood, game studies, *Heavy Rain*, heroic protection discourse, *The Last of Us*, masculinity, paternalism, paternal masculinity, performance, videogames, violence, *The Walking Dead*

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*“How far will you go to save someone you love?”*

—Quantic Dream, *Heavy Rain*

This is the tagline for the 2010 videogame *Heavy Rain*. It’s a crucial part of the game’s marketing scheme, and it’s asked in the game itself. You play Ethan Mars, a father whose son is kidnapped by a serial killer. The game asks you to prove your love. By the discourse of the game, you prove your paternal love with the masculine activity often seen in videogames: violence.

The predominance of violent, hypermasculine wish-fulfillment fantasies in videogames is a given. Scholar or layman, gamer or not, the first image many people visualize when they hear “videogame” is a generic war or crime game that revels in letting the player use and prove their power through (often homicidal) violence. As with most forms of violence, the murder and mayhem performed by the player of these games is identifiably masculine. Derek A. Burrill in *Die Tryin’* includes videogames’ hyperviolent masculine behavior as a key part of what he calls a “boyhood” masculinity in the medium. These games of boyhood masculinity serve as wish-fulfillment fantasies where the player proves his manhood through violence without repercussions (80). In these games, hyperviolence against others is the mode of performance.

The concept of *player performance* is what sets the medium apart from other narrative forms. The active inclusion of the player within the experience of playing a game is a fundamental factor for scholars and critics to include in game studies, but the community is still struggling to identify the ideal tools to analyze this aspect of gaming. I believe invaluable tools for analyzing the player experience can be adapted from another academic area: performance studies. Referring to the particular ways in which videogames require input and interaction from their audience, Alexander Galloway describes videogames as an “action-based medium,” saying that when considered in their most essential parts, “games are actions” (2-3). Richard Schechner, considered the father of performance studies, defines performance in the same way: “Performances are actions” (1). I envision videogames as a heavily performative medium where the player performs the

role of a character. Likewise, feminist scholars have been examining gender roles as performative since Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in 1990; since its publication, it has become common to see gender identities as constructions of many performances rather than fixed essential characteristics. The inherent performativity of gender makes the performative medium of videogames a potentially fruitful site for exploring contemporary notions of gender. Activating that potential is the breadth of identifiably masculine content in the medium, almost always performed through violent action. To highlight the performative experience of playing these games (and following the example of several videogame scholars, including Burrill), I employ the second-person point of view to describe the player's actions in the game. By referring to the player's actions with the second-person "you" and the character's other actions with the third-person "he," the distinction between performative and non-performative moments in the game is made clear.

In order to understand how player-performed violence is celebrated in videogames, I turn to our society's pervasive "heroic protection discourse," a term recently coined by sociologists Caroline Dryden, Kathy Doherty, and Paula Nicolson. "Heroic protection discourse" serves to "normalise a form of masculine identity that combines physical strength and aggression with the motivation to use physical force in the service of protecting others" (194). In typical discourses of heroism, violence and protection are two sides of the same coin. For example, the notion that a cowboy commits violence against Indians in order to protect his family erases ethical concerns over his violent deeds, opening the door to their glorification. By placing violence in the context of protection, narratives serve to conceptualize violence as productive rather than destructive.

In the cases of hyperviolent boyhood masculinity in videogames described by Burrill, the primary focus is on violence, and the notion of protection is often an afterthought. The player proves his manhood by displaying his power, and is not particularly concerned with responsibilities to protect. But Burrill published *Die Tryin'* in 2008. Since then, a new kind of masculinity in games has emerged that contextualizes the

player's violent actions with discourses of protection. I call this identity of protective videogame manhood "paternal masculinity."

The paternal masculinity in recent videogames is quite literal. An article on *Wired* online by Andrew Groen, "Dawn of the Dad: Fathers are the New Videogame Superhero" (2012), declares this a growing trend. He describes the traditional masculine videogame hero thus: "A broad-shouldered, brick-fisted, angry-looking space marine thunders across the battlefield, bullets screaming from his machine gun as he stares down his monstrous, fascist foes without fear or pity." This hyperviolent depiction of videogame characters could have come straight out of Burrill's description of boyhood masculinity in *Die Tryin'*. To Groen, recent games starring fathers are a dramatic departure from this generic formula. Indeed, the masculinity depicted in these games is less focused on murderous rampage as a means of proving one's strength, and more as a means of proving one's love. Paternal masculinity treats heroic protection discourse religiously, framing violence as a necessity to protect one's family. Fatherhood, constantly performed and proved by subjects in the context of their relationships with children, is a distinct identity that requires its own analysis.

Paternal masculinity is, of course, related to paternalism, a key concept in postcolonial theory. While heroic protection discourse pervades our culture, painting violent protective behavior as a positive force, postcolonialism has revealed the ways in which paternalism (and thus paternal masculinity) is morally problematic, as paternal figures often repress the very people they aim to protect. A colonizing power is painted as a protector who must defend the colonized, but the colonizer is actually the one who benefits, both through material exploitation and a self-affirming status as a positive force. Likewise, we can see that paternal masculinity is more for the sake of the paternal figure's self-affirmation than for the sake of the child-figure, giving men a way to define themselves as crucial to society.

As postcolonial critique has entered the general consciousness of society, the glorification of paternal power has become more difficult to swallow. I argue that it is this dissonance between traditional paternalistic values and knowledge of paternalism as

problematic that characterizes “masculinity in crisis,” a concept that has emerged to explain the questionable place of masculine energies and values in modern society. When men feel the need to prove their identity through violence but are aware of the moral questionability of that paternal behavior, their sense of self is placed in peril.

This essay, then, explores paternal masculinity and its state of crisis by examining specific videogames where the player takes on the role of a father. My primary examples will be Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain*, Telltale Games’s *The Walking Dead*, and Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us*. All three games wrestle with the player and main character’s need to prove his love in the violent manner glorified by heroic protection discourse. In order to serve as paternal wish-fulfillment fantasies, these games’ narratives work to avoid direct confrontation with the morally problematic nature of paternalism. In *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*, this is accomplished by setting the narrative at the site of the apocalypse, where modernity crumbles and these men’s violent behavior to protect their children can be valorized. But anxieties of the place of paternal masculinity leak through these apocalyptic narratives, suggesting that while players wish to escape to a world where traditionally celebrated visions of ideal masculinity can be enjoyed, they cannot avoid questioning the value of paternal violence.

## **HEAVY RAIN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR IDEAL PATERNAL MASCULINITY**

*Heavy Rain* is the first released of these father-games and the most representative and unapologetic example of the paternal masculinity performed within them, so I will begin my analysis there. Before reaching the need for violent manhood-proving that I introduced at the start of this essay, *Heavy Rain* opens in an idyllic suburban home. You play Ethan, an architect, husband, and father. You learn the controls of the game as you guide Ethan through his morning routine and play with his sons Jason and Shaun in the backyard. When you are able to do something, a command appears on the screen in the image of a button on the controller or a direction to move the right-side control stick, such as pressing “X” repeatedly to lift Jason and Shaun with Ethan’s “big muscles,” as his sons

shout in joy (Quantic Dream). In time-sensitive situations, you must press several buttons in sequence, such as when you lead Ethan through a playful sword-fighting match with Jason, pressing the correct buttons to attack or parry. Through the performance of these physical actions, Ethan's life is framed as a vision of ideal fatherhood.

But then you come to the Mall sequence. Ethan's wife asks him to watch Jason while she tries shoes on Shaun. He is placed in a traditional masculine fatherly role - the watcher, the protector. And at this role, he fails. Jason wanders off, and you must lead Ethan around the Mall, trying to find him, being prompted to press "X" to shout "Jason!" When you finally find him outside the mall across the street, Jason crosses in front of an oncoming car. Ethan attempts to jump and save Jason, but it is to no avail. The idyllic, sunny life of the game's start ends with Jason's death, and all because you and Ethan failed at performing as a protective father.

From this moment on, the game takes place in a more urban environment, gloomy and rainy. Two years after Jason's death, divorced Ethan picks Shaun up from school. The depressing atmosphere is everywhere, in Ethan and Shaun's voices and animations and in the rainy environment. You drive home to Ethan's apartment, tasked with leading Shaun through his evening routine, keeping to the schedule on a chalkboard in the kitchen. You must feed Shaun a snack, help him with his homework, make him dinner, and make sure he gets to bed on time. Since you are theoretically new to the game's controls and the new environment, sticking exactly to the schedule is challenging, and it is very likely that you will "fail" at this task. Send Shaun to bed a bit early to be safe, and he will shout that he hates you and run up to his room. Send him to bed too late, and he will perform poorly in school in the morning and get in trouble. Even if you manage to take care of Shaun in the best ways possible, Ethan's family life is a far cry from how it was before: Shaun asks Ethan why he looks so sad all the time, and is answered "I just need some time," even though it has already been two years since Jason's death.

**Figure A: *Heavy Rain*: In the first game sequence after Jason's death, Ethan drives Shaun to his apartment. Image found on publisher's official website.**



And even if you manage to perform well as a father in the next sequence at the park (earning some relieving laughs and smiles from Shaun), Shaun says, “Sometimes I wish everything could just be the way it was before” (Quantic Dream). No matter how well you perform at these mundane actions of fatherhood, you fail to bring happiness back to the family and reclaim Ethan’s identity as a good father.

The traditional masculine values touted by heroic protection discourse become the keys to redeeming Ethan as a father and a man. While Shaun rides on the carousel at the park, Ethan has a blackout, regaining consciousness hours later far from the park. You run back to the park, and just as in the mall sequence with Jason, all you can do is run around and shout “Shaun!” until you find Shaun’s abandoned backpack, and Ethan collapses sobbing in the street. Shaun has been kidnapped by a serial killer known as the Origami Killer. It is here that *Heavy Rain* poses the question: “How far will you go to save someone you love?” (Quantic Dream). Ethan finds this message in a box he receives from the killer, along with instructions on five “trials” he must pass to prove his love and save Shaun. The killer’s trials give Ethan a chance to prove his fatherhood in the traditional style of masculinity: the majority of the trials revolve around player-performed violence, either against others or against Ethan himself.

It is important to note that for some time, Ethan and the rest of the world believe that he is suffering from multiple personalities, and that he himself is the origami killer. He confesses: “I think my other self is testing me, testing my love for Shaun. He wants to know if I love my son enough to save him” (Quantic Dream). While it turns out Ethan is not the killer, this belief serves as a plot device for Ethan’s need to save Shaun himself: the police and society at large believe him guilty, so they will hinder his efforts to save Shaun if he asks for help. This also suggests that Ethan’s mission is about his own desire to prove his love, not about the selfless desire to have his son be safe. Even he believes he is capable of putting his own son in danger just to prove he can save him.

Ethan’s readiness to perform violence is showcased in the trials, particularly in the third trial, where he is asked to cut off a finger from his hand on camera. After combing the room for instruments to use (options include pliers, a hatchet, and a saw), you must perform the correct button maneuvers to remove Ethan’s pinky finger. You walk Ethan through the whole process, from lifting and cutting/chopping with the instrument to calming him down and regulating his breathing. His nervousness and anxiety are presented as physical obstacles to overcome on the way to his manhood-proving self-mutilation, and the pain he undergoes out of the love for his son is displayed prominently by the game’s camerawork. Across the first three trials, Ethan gets so battered and hurt that your ability to control him is compromised. His animations and voice acting show off his limping and grunting, and before long you find Ethan moving more slowly and erratically as his cracked ribs, electrocuted flesh, and maimed hand become incredibly apparent. Ethan proves his love by fighting past physical barriers and enacting self-violence. In the fifth trial, this commitment to perform violence against himself is brought to its obvious conclusion: the ultimate sacrifice. Ethan is presented with a bottle of supposed poison and told that he will die in one hour if he drinks it, just enough time to save Shaun. The message is quite clear: if you endure physical pain and give up your life to save your child, you are a good father.

The fourth trial, however, steps away from self-sacrifice and highlights the masculine behavior seen so often in videogames: homicide with a gun. Ethan is given an address and is asked to murder someone he has never met before. When you arrive, you learn that the

man is a father himself, as he shows you a picture of his two daughters and pleads for his life. In order to succeed at this trial to prove his manhood and love for his son, Ethan must commit murder against another father, tossing aside morality and social responsibility. Heroic protection discourse is fully at work within the narrative, encouraging you to perform violence against both Ethan and others in order to prove Ethan's paternal masculinity.

Whether or not you succeed in saving Shaun is determined by your performance in these trials. If you fail to save him, you are punished with one of the game's three tragic endings. These endings vary due to decisions and other successful or failed performances by the player, but in all of them Ethan failed to save Shaun, and in all three he commits suicide. The tragic ending with Madison (a potential love interest) is the most explicit about Ethan's failure as a father. The two of them are standing before Shaun's grave. Madison attempts to cheer him up, telling him they'll move far away, he'll get a new job as an architect and they'll start a family together. But because of his failures as a father, he can't accept that. He says, "How can I forget that my two sons died because of me? I loved them more than anything in the world. But I couldn't protect them" (Quantic Dream). He pulls out a gun and shoots himself in front of Shaun's grave. Ethan's identity as a father who is capable of protecting his children trumps his identity as an architect or a romantic partner. He sees life as pointless because he failed to succeed as a paternal figure.

If you and Ethan do succeed as a father, proving capable of performing violence against Ethan and others in order to save Shaun, you are rewarded with a happy ending. In order to achieve the most positive ending where the ideal family life is restored, Ethan needs to save Shaun himself. That ideal ending features Ethan showing Shaun into a nice apartment. Shaun takes his hand and says, "It doesn't matter where we live, as long as we're together." Ethan responds, "I will never let anyone or anything separate us again" (Quantic Dream). Ethan's happy denouement fades out with Ethan and Shaun chasing each other around the apartment, laughing joyfully. In the case of both failure and success, the game sets you up to perform a vision of fatherhood where love is proven through violence and

sacrifice. Ultimately, the role of the protector is everything, and paternal masculinity is the bridge to an idyllic family life.

## CELEBRATING PATERNALISM AT THE APOCALYPSE

While *Heavy Rain* skirted around the moral issues of paternalism by presenting the rest of society as a hindrance rather than a tool to save his son, other father-oriented games take this a step further. They escape the question of paternal masculinity in modern society by dismantling society itself, plunging the world into the apocalypse. In both *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*, a zombie-like infection tears apart the foundations of society, establishing a setting where traditional paternal masculinity can emerge as a necessity.

In April 2012, Telltale Games released the first of five episodes of *The Walking Dead*. Like Robert Kirkman's comic book series of the same name, *The Walking Dead* is set at the site of a zombie apocalypse. As is often the case with videogame adaptations, it departs from its source material, following different characters and an original plot. In *The Walking Dead*, the end of the world is a fresh start for the main character, where the violent protective behavior that was condemned in civilized society is now celebrated.

In *The Walking Dead*, you play Lee Everett, an African-American ex-history professor in Georgia who begins the game about to serve a life sentence in prison for killing a man who was sleeping with his wife. Handcuffed in the backseat of a police car, you are immobilized and confined, capable of only looking around the car and out the window and responding to the officer's questions about your guilt. When a figure walks into the road, the officer turns to avoid it, crashing in the process. You crawl out of the police car to freedom, unlocking and removing your handcuffs before killing the zombie-infected police officer in self-defense. Lee's ability to perform violence had ruined his life in the regular world, but that same degree of violence saves his life at the apocalypse. Soon, you find Clementine, an eight-year-old girl who needs your protection. Her babysitter was killed by "walkers" while her parents have been on vacation, and she has taken refuge in her treehouse. You, as Lee, become her guardian for the rest of the game, performing violence to keep her safe.

*The Walking Dead* is considered part of the “Graphic Adventure” genre, characterized by its mode of performance. You point and click on objects in the environment to interact with them. During violent confrontations, the mode of performance is similar to *Heavy Rain*: you must react quickly, clicking on your opponent at the right time or pressing the right key or button quickly enough. Arguably, the primary mode of performance in *The Walking Dead* is the dialogue system. Very frequently in the game, Lee engages in conversation with one or more characters. You are prompted to choose nearly everything Lee says, typically receiving four options that all present Lee in a different light. The dialogue system lends itself to understanding through J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory detailed in *How to Do Things With Words*, which highlights the performative nature of language. Your dialogue choices are typically not descriptive, but performative. Lee, as a man and the guardian of Clementine, is given many opportunities to speak and be heard. By performing many speech-acts throughout the game, you help define who Lee Everett is, painting a picture of Lee as the ideal father figure.

Within this dialogue system, Lee’s background of violence comes to the fore, and the usefulness of his violent action is made explicit. Carla, a survivor who joins your group, recognizes Lee from the news. Confronting him about the truth, she says, “Maybe you’re a murderer, but I don’t really care. That’s a skill that might come in handy” (Telltale Games). The apocalypse enhances the effect of heroic protection discourse beyond its potentiality in an organized society.

The game specifically reinforces this imperative of using violent action to protect Clementine, participating in the same violent protective discourse as *Heavy Rain*. In the drug store in the game’s first episode, Clementine is attacked by a walker. Here, the player is capable of failing to save Clementine without getting a “Game Over” screen, as Carla succeeds in saving her. As with Ethan with saving his son, it is important for Lee to save Clementine, not just for her to be safe by another person’s actions. Succeed, and you are notified by text, “Clementine will remember you protected her.” Fail, and you are told, “Clementine will remember you didn’t save her,” and speaking with her later, she seems

emotionally hurt (Telltale Games). In order for you and Lee to make for a good father, you must be capable of protecting Clementine.

*The Last of Us* makes this need to perform protective violence as a father even more apparent. Released in 2013, *The Last of Us* centers on the relationship between adult Joel and teenager Ellie and their attempts to survive together in a world overrun by a zombie-like infection. While you occasionally play as Ellie, you predominantly control Joel throughout the game. The goal is for Joel to deliver Ellie to the Fireflies, an organization that may be able to study her immunity to the apocalyptic infection and create a vaccine for the rest of the survivors.

Inarguably, the primary mode of performance in *The Last of Us* is violence. You spend some time exploring abandoned areas looking for supplies and moving obstacles in your environment to progress through an area, but violent confrontation is the main thing you perform, usually with guns. There are cut-scenes of the game where Joel and Ellie's relationship as father-figure and daughter-figure blossoms, but you are only watching here, not performing. When you participate, you as Joel are constantly performing violence to protect Ellie.

Protecting Ellie from violence with your own violence is placed firmly in the game's mechanics, as is protecting Clementine in *The Walking Dead*. As in most games, you receive a "Game Over" screen if you fail in a violent confrontation and the main character (Lee or Joel) dies. If this happens, you restart from the most recent checkpoint. In these games, there is an additional lose/reset condition: if the daughter-figure (Clementine or Ellie) dies. The games constantly put the life of the daughter-figure on the line, and your story as the paternal figure is defined specifically by your ability to protect her. In *The Walking Dead*, this manifests as many specifically scripted moments where Clementine is attacked by a zombie, bandit, or other dangerous entity, and you as the player need to press the right buttons in the right sequence to save her. In *The Last of Us*, Ellie is capable of being attacked and killed in any fight sequence, as enemies will rush to kill her if you fail to defend her.

**Figure B:** *The Last of Us*: Joel protects Ellie.  
Image found on publisher's official website.



If Clementine or Ellie is killed, you are presented with a graphic representation of agonizing screams and painful death. In both situations, paternal masculinity is all about protecting the daughter. The paternal figure must succeed at performing violent behavior to protect his daughter for the story to continue.

## **PATERNALISM AS UNSUSTAINABLE AND MORALLY PROBLEMATIC**

It may seem that the heroic protection discourse touted by these games is absolute. But in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*, clear anxieties arise about the sustainability and morality of the violent action that characterizes paternal masculinity. Despite the fact that these games set their narratives at the apocalypse, they cannot fully escape the problematic nature of paternalism that has been identified by postcolonial theory. In both games, your performance of violent protective behavior escalates and climaxes at the end of the game – but both games encourage you to question your violent actions and, by proxy, the place of paternal masculinity in the world.

In order to understand how a game can have you perform violent behavior but also critique that behavior, we must revisit a common question in narrative: is the representation of behavior necessarily approval of that behavior? In film and other passive narrative mediums, the audience is said to “identify” with the main character. This identification may

lead the audience to approve of that character's behavior – this place of identification is the reason violence performed by an antagonist in a film will rarely be as railed against by the media as much as violence performed by a protagonist. The fact that the *protagonist* performs the violence is what makes it seem glorified. Yet identification with a character does not *necessarily* mean that the audience is expected to approve of that behavior. There are many instances where the protagonist of a narrative's actions are specifically called into question or portrayed in a negative light. But when it comes to a performative medium like videogames, the question needs to be revisited. When the action or behavior is actually done by the audience, is the audience's experience different? The degree to which the public reacts with such negativity to player-performed violence in videogames implies that the public certainly thinks so. The player is not just watching this action performed, but performing the action his or herself.

But even the degree to which the player tends to get behind the actions performed by him or her and the main character has its limits. The game *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) makes this incredibly explicit, as it forces you to commit violence in order to continue the story, and then by the end of the game directly condemns the violence you have performed. While not quite as extreme as *The Line's* condemnation of player behavior, *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* also present violent paternal behavior as a necessity, but eventually push the player to question whether or not they have done the right thing.

The games do this in part by questioning the sustainability and necessity of paternally masculine violent behavior. In *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*, Lee and Joel aim to be the sole protectors of their daughter-figures, sheltering Clementine and Ellie from learning to protect themselves. Joel is stubbornly opposed to Ellie's fighting, despite her clear capability to defend herself throughout the game. The fact that both men are hesitant to let their daughter-figures learn to fight reveals the self-perpetuating nature of paternalism. Obviously, both Clementine and Ellie would be better off if they had the tools to defend themselves in case of danger. But this self-sufficiency on the part of the men's wards would put their status as protectors in peril. Ultimately, they can't escape from the

fact that the girls need to defend themselves. When Clementine is put in extreme danger because she's defenseless and other characters articulate the importance of self-defense, Lee agrees to show her how to shoot a gun. After Ellie repeatedly shows her value by defending herself and Joel, he slowly relents from his scolding of her actions.

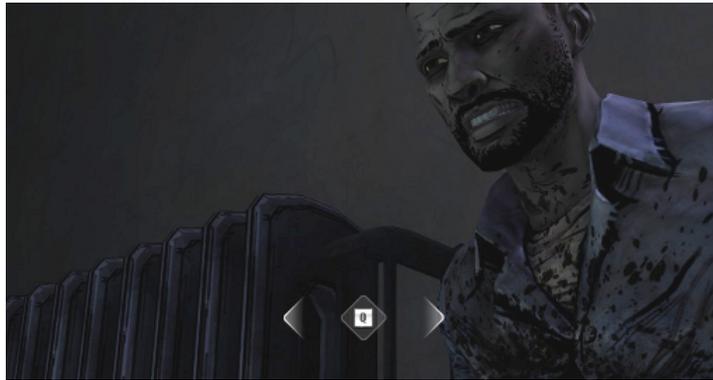
The unsustainability of paternal protection is emphasized in both games by showcasing the fragility of the male body. The place of the man as the only one capable of enacting protective violence is only possible if the man is always there to be the protector. In *The Last of Us*, after Joel has started to realize he shouldn't shelter Ellie from her ability to defend herself, he falls from the second floor of a building and is impaled on a pipe. In the following sequence, you play an injured Joel, walking around and defending yourself and Ellie with increasing difficulty, until you eventually collapse. For the first time in the game, you now control Ellie, who proves herself capable of bringing Joel to safety. For some time, she takes on the traditionally paternal role: she defends Joel from danger and provides for him, hunting for food and acquiring antibiotics to save him.

Ellie's self-sufficiency is emphasized shortly afterwards, after she is taken by a group of bandits. With the antibiotics Ellie gave him, Joel has recovered enough to move, so you regain control of Joel on his mission to save the "Damsel in Distress." The trope of the damsel in videogames is detailed by media critic Anita Sarkeesian in her video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, where she aptly points out that female characters are often used as props, put in danger so that the player-controlled male character can prove his manhood by saving her. *The Last of Us* certainly has you perform this manhood-test by pushing the limits of your injured body to reach and save Ellie, but the game ultimately reveals the excess of this masculine performance: by the time Joel reaches Ellie, she (controlled by you) kills her attacker herself.

In *The Walking Dead* the fragility of the male body is revealed when Lee is bitten and infected. Like Joel and Ethan, Lee must save the child in distress. Clementine has been kidnapped, and he must push the limits of his body in order to save her. Ultimately, you succeed, and near the end of the game you fight through a sea of zombies to reach Clementine, and with her help, kill her attacker. But in one of the game's final chapters

titled “Stay Close to Me,” while trying to lead Clementine back through the thousands of zombies, Lee passes out. Clementine pulls him to safety into an abandoned store, and Lee reveals that he’s been bitten. His time is running out. In the final sequence of the game, Lee’s body has weakened to the point that he can’t move; he regresses to his immobile state at the game’s start. You use the game’s usual means of pushing Lee’s body to perform feats of strength (as illustrated in Figure C), but for the first time, it is impossible to succeed.

**Figure C: *The Walking Dead*: You are prompted to press “Q” repeatedly for Lee to stand up, but the infection has left his body too weak. Image taken by author as a screenshot in-game.**



The fragility of Lee’s body has left him incapable of performing as the violent protector. Instead, you talk Clementine through the process of dealing with a zombie in the next room, as your final moment of accepting that you can no longer serve as her protective paternal figure. Inevitably, she has to take care of herself.

*The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* also reveal the ways in which violent paternal masculinity is morally problematic. In each game, you as the player controlling the father-figure enact violence in the name of protecting your child-figure, and by the game’s end you are encouraged to question the morality of this activity. In *The Walking Dead* this is most often presented in the context of decisions that you as the player make, where the lives of other characters are in your hands. Often, characters will challenge the morality of your actions no matter what decision you make. But the actions that are most criticized are

the ones where you choose the more violent option. The most representative example of this is when you must decide the fate of Ben, a teenager who is considered dead weight by much of the group, but who Clementine sees as a friend. After learning that Ben (with good intentions) lied to the group in a way that caused many people to die, most of the group turns against him. As there is only so much room in the boat that the group intends to take, Kenny - another father - votes that the group leaves him behind. Soon after the discussion, the group is in danger, and Lee ends up catching Ben as he falls from a ledge with walkers all below him. Knowing the group is against him, Ben asks you to let him fall. You are given a short amount of time to make a decision. Since there is only so much room on the boat and Ben's presence could rip the group apart, the most obvious option for the violent protector of Clementine is to let him fall. If this is your decision, Clementine asks Lee why he did it, and can hardly look at him in disappointment. Clearly the player's actions are not always celebrated. Here, decision-making moments involving violence are used specifically to make the player question his actions. Unlike *Heavy Rain*, *The Walking Dead* presents not only an anxiety about being able to physically protect one's child, but also puts that in dialogue with the morality of the actions that one performs in the name of protection.

This pushback against violent protective behavior comes to a head at the game's climax, when you confront Clementine's kidnapper. The conversation is procedurally generated. The kidnapper acts as an audience and critic of your performance of masculinity throughout the game, challenging not just your physical ability to take care of Clementine, but also the morality of your violent actions. For example, if you decided to let Ben die, or if you let a woman be killed slowly by walkers rather than putting her out of her misery in order to buy more time to gather supplies to take care of Clementine, the kidnapper points out the villainy of these actions. When confronted, you can choose to defend or admit fault in your performance, but regardless the man is relentless in his criticism, saying: "I know how to be a dad, you know. She wouldn't be exposed to what she has been with you" (Telltale Games).

The moment of moral questioning in *The Last of Us* also occurs at the game's climax. You as Joel have finally managed to bring Ellie to the Fireflies. In a cut scene, Joel speaks with Marlene, a mother-figure for Ellie and leader of the Fireflies, who appeared earlier in the game. She reveals that the surgery to reverse-engineer a vaccine will end Ellie's life. Marlene wishes there was another option, but makes the decision that needs to be made in order to save the world. Joel, however - without any decision made from the player - decides that since Ellie is the only thing he cares about in the world, he needs to save her, even though it will condemn all of humanity. At the end of the cut scene, Marlene leaves a guard to lead Joel out of the Firefly base. Joel kills the guard and decides he will stop at nothing to keep Ellie. You must go through the entire building, killing all of the Firefly members as you get closer and closer to the operating room. The humanity of your victims is clearly emphasized; one of the men shouts in horror that you killed his friend, giving a name to these people you are shooting. You arrive at the operating room, and the doctor implores you to stop. But the game gives you no choice but to shoot and kill him in order to continue with the narrative. Soon after this, Marlene confronts Joel again, trying to convince him to stop. She says, "It's what she'd want... and you know it" (Naughty Dog). Joel doesn't have an argument to face this assertion. He says nothing, shoots Marlene, and walks out, condemning the world for his own selfish need to have Ellie in his life.

The moment of killing the doctor - something the player needs to perform in order to finish the game - is when you are quite likely to question the actions you have performed. Joel is performing the same paternal masculinity made possible by heroic protection discourse as Ethan in *Heavy Rain*. He puts his identity as a father before his responsibility to the human race, despite his knowledge that Ellie would likely sacrifice herself for the sake of the world.

Both *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us* give you the opportunity to perform paternal masculinity, proving your love for your daughter-figure and your manhood through violence. Yet, the tradition of paternalism being celebrated through heroic protection discourse is no longer as structurally sound as it once appeared. The games express a degree of postcolonial understanding that the place of the paternal figure as a

hero is fraught with difficulty. In the end, you are encouraged to question the morality of your need to cling to a paternal identity.

In the cycle of videogames including *Heavy Rain*, *The Walking Dead*, and *The Last of Us*, the player's performance of violence to protect a child takes center stage. At certain times, especially in *Heavy Rain*, these actions are celebrated. The games set up a situation where violence is the only means to perform one's identity as a father. But when dealing with masculinity, we cannot always escape its state of crisis due to the problematic nature of paternalism.

The medium of videogames is frequently derided as escapist due to the player's ability to perform the role of their fantasies, but in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*, we see the very games that provide the stage for this violent performance throwing the player's actions into question. At what point do these moments of pushback illuminate the danger of violent masculine behavior for the average player? Clearly, this analysis of the player experience of paternal masculinity in games is not exhaustive. But by examining this medium as a stage for performance, we come closer to understanding the relationship between the players' actions and the messages they take when they walk away from the screen.

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