Playing with Patriarchy: Fatherhood in *BioShock: Infinite*, *The Last of Us*, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*

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ABSTRACT

A number of prominent digital games have in recent years featured fathers as protagonists. The ideological implications of those games' different representations of fatherhood and masculinity appear as important axes of investigation into the roles digital games can play in contemporary ideological discourse. Through a close comparative analysis and reading of *BioShock: Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013), and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015), this paper examines the narrative, representational, and procedural elements which frame fatherhood in these three popular games. Relying upon the foundations of procedural rhetoric and the concept of hegemonic masculinities, this paper focuses on three key themes: paternal violence, anti-fathers, and exceptional daughters. The different ways these themes are represented in the three games highlights how they respectively reinforce, restore, and challenge notions of patriarchal authority, the role of the father, and contemporary gender ideologies.

Keywords

Fatherhood, paternity, masculinity, ideology, hegemony, procedural, close reading

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a number of prominent games have featured male protagonists who are largely defined by their roles as fathers. With approaches as varied as the comedy of *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (Young Horses 2014) or the darkness of *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010) or *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012) and its sequel, these games explore the narrative implications of fatherhood while at the same time proceduralizing paternity. The increased visibility of games featuring fathers as protagonists has been seen as a trend by some in the enthusiast press, described under the term of "daddening" (Totilo 2010) or "dadification" (Joho 2014). The prevalence of such games invites an enquiry into what they communicate about gender ideology and more specifically ideologies of fatherhood, as well as the methods they employ to do so. This paper takes three popular examples of such games, *BioShock: Infinite* (Irrational Games 2013), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015), and performs a comparative close reading of the ways in which they use procedural, representational, and narrative parameters to engage with notions of paternity. A number of similarities between the games invites and forms the basis for such a comparison.

All three games were large-budget, bestselling games in their respective years of release (ESA 2014, 11, ESA 2016, 11). Despite the games being in different genres (respectively, first person shooter, action-adventure, and roleplaying game), similarities in their procedural modes create opportunities for contrast and comparison. Each of the games feature a sole or primary male protagonist, each one a white, middle-aged, professional practitioner of violence. The games also feature a daughter for each father, who is represented and more or less actively involved in the player's progression through the game. That daughter's absence or presence serves as the foundation of the paternal relationship, which in all three games is at least initially indirect. While the male protagonists, respectively Booker DeWitt, Joel, and Geralt of Rivia, take on paternal roles, in all but one instance they are not the biological fathers of the female characters – Elizabeth, Ellie, and Ciri – that become daughter surrogates. Even in *BioShock: Infinite*, the very late revelation of Booker's biological paternity allows him to grow into his role as a surrogate father throughout the game.

From these similarities, three themes appear as particularly significant in the way that these games articulate ideologies of fatherhood. Firstly, fatherhood and violence are deeply entwined on procedural and narrative levels in these games, and violence seems to be not only the means by which fatherhood is claimed and retained, but also as the primary means by which fathers and daughters relate to one another. This violence is contextualized and rationalized in these games through the depiction of what I have chosen to call "anti-fathers", models of flawed hegemonic masculinity and paternity that let the protagonist fathers define their own approaches to paternity in opposition to them. Finally, the fact that the three daughters in these games are exceptional in one way or another serves to further refine the models of paternity presented by these fathers, and expose the importance of patriarchal tendencies not just in how the protagonists define themselves, but also in how they interact with their surrogate daughters.

These themes are largely presented through narrative and representational elements, from the specifics of each father-daughter relationship, how they come to be, and how they evolve through the game, to the ways in which textual and visual elements participate in the games' engagement with concepts of fatherhood. In addition to the narrative and representational elements which constitute these themes, the way they are enacted procedurally will be understood according to Ian Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric, understood as "the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular" (Bogost 2010, 3). By representing numerous aspects of the father-daughter relationship through specific game processes, all three games communicate a certain ideology of fatherhood in the way that the protagonists and, by extension, the player in control of them interact with the familial bond that arises through play. Notions of patriarchal power and hegemonic masculinity as articulated by R.W. Connell are further useful concepts to consider in analyzing the masculinities and conceptions of fatherhood that these games convey.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND FATHERHOOD
In the second edition of *Masculinities*, R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). This concept has been critiqued extensively and from a number of approaches (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, Garlick 2016), and was reformulated by Connell herself, notably to have a broader scope on a variety of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). This initial

definition remains important to consider in games where the player's agency, and therefore considerable control over the game world that they are afforded, is conflated with the relations of power between father and child. The use of the term hegemony calls back to Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. For Gramsci, hegemony is the array of cultural and social systems that enable the ruling classes to maintain the supremacy of their ideology and thereby remain in power (1992, 137). Hegemonic masculinity, in turn, became understood as "the pattern of practice (…) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Key to the concept is the hierarchy of certain types of masculinity over other, marginalized masculinities, of which homosexuality is a notable example (Connell 2005, 78). In their reformulation of the concept, Connell and Messerschmidt pay close attention to the fact that hegemonic masculinities are often multiple, geographically located, but also historically protean and often detached from the realities of life for men living under hegemonic terms: "Hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (2005, 838). These "exemplars of masculinity", Connell and Messerschmidt argue, have a symbolic authority that stands in for hegemonic masculinity, even though the ideal they represent cannot be lived up to (2005, 846).

The relationship between hegemonic masculinities and fatherhood is a complicated one. In one case study of young, unemployed men, in *Masculinities*, Connell notes that fatherhood is both feared because of the commitment it implies, and desired if the child is a boy (Connell 108). In a content analysis of contemporary US parenting magazines, Schmitz found that men remain represented as secondary parents, primarily taking on the role of breadwinner, detached from the realities of parenting through masculine norms of emotional and physical detachment (Schmitz 2016, 12). Discussing US cinema of the early 21st century, Hannah Hamad argues on the other hand that, with its universalizing discourse of masculinity, postfeminist fatherhood is the new hegemonic masculinity (2014, 1). Furthermore, "patriarchy" retains its primary definition as "the rule of the father, including the rule of older men over younger men and of fathers over daughters, as well as husbands over wives" (Ehrenreich 1995, 284). This paper will attempt to negotiate this complex relationship between fatherhood and hegemonic masculinities. While the two cannot be conflated, the importance of the power dynamics at the intersection between these concepts will be examined in the light of the three games.

In the context of digital games, the procedural acts of playing as a father can be seen to work in tandem with the patterns of practice which form the basis for the elaboration and persistence of hegemonic masculinities and patriarchal ideologies. Digital game characters, especially ones whose masculinity is a key component of their representation, can also play the part of those exemplars that hegemonic masculinities hold up as ideals. In "Daddy Issues: Constructions of Fatherhood in The Last of Us and BioShock Infinite", Gerald Voorhees's excellent close reading of those two games also relies upon Connell's articulation of hegemonic masculinity, as well as procedural rhetoric. Voorhees builds upon game studies' forays into representations of masculinity in digital games, including what Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter term 'militarized masculinity' (2003) or Bell, Taylor, and Kampe's exploration of hypermasculinity and how it is challenged in relation to fatherhood in Telltale Studio's *The Walking Dead* (2015). Voorhees argues that while *BioShock: Infinite* reaffirms patriarchal domination, *The Last of Us* troubles and even potentially challenges patriarchal authority.

While this paper engages with similar material and theory, the exploration of the three themes of paternal violence, anti-fathers, and exceptional daughters leads to a different conclusion with regards to *The Last of Us*. While the representational, narrative, and procedural elements of *BioShock: Infinite* all serve to reinforce a hegemonic, patriarchal authority that the player, through Booker, reinstates by displacing a failed patriarch, key elements in *The Last of Us*, and particularly its conclusion, do not so much disrupt as restore patriarchal authority. Even that disruption seems moderate by comparison with *The Witcher 3*, which I will argue presents the biggest challenge to hegemonic and patriarchal authority of the three games.

VIOLENT FATHERHOOD

The first thing that must be observed when examining the three male protagonists of these games is that they are primarily characterized by their capacity for violence. This is in part a genre convention; one is hard pressed to find examples of mainstream, non-violent first person shooters, action-adventure games, or even roleplaying games, reliant as these genres are upon one form of violence or another[1]. The prevalence of violence in digital games has long been established and quantified (Dietz 1998, Williams et al. 2009, Heintz-Knowles et al. 2001, Smith et al 2003). In this regard, the three games nevertheless lie on the upper end of the spectrum of digital game violence, having all received M (ESRB) and 18 (PEGI) ratings, in part due to what is termed respectively "extreme violence" and "intense violence". Booker deWitt in *BioShock: Infinite*, *The Witcher 3*'s Geralt of Rivia, and Joel in *The Last of Us* are professional agents of violence from the start of their respective games. As Voorhees notes in relation to *BioShock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us*, not only do these fathers excel at violence, but the valorization of this violence as a core, defining elements of their identity is not without recalling the primary tenets of hegemonic or militarized masculinity (Voorhees 2016).

Booker is in this regard perhaps the most hyper-violent of the three, not only in the way that his violence is expressed in the game, but also through his background. While *BioShock: Infinite* only briefly addresses his past as a member of the Pinkerton's Detective Agency, renowned for their violence in the brutal strike-breaking they were paid to perform during the late 19th century (Jeffreys-Jones 1972, 236, Weiss 92, 1986), his service record as a former member of the 7th Cavalry Regiment is also particularly noteworthy. As a member of that unit, his participation in the even more brutal massacre of Native Americans at the Battle of Wounded Knee in 1890 features prominently as one of the game's most objectionable levels, the racist theme-park of the "Hall of Heroes" (Vance 2015). The first person perspective afforded by the game furthermore offers the player an even more visceral experience of the brutal hand-to-hand combat attacks where Booker uses a hand-held, whirring grappling hook to snap necks and tear open skulls.

Geralt is also a practitioner of professional violence as one of a few remaining Witchers, monster hunters in the equivalent of tradesman's guilds, specially trained and possessed of certain super-human traits acquired at the cost of empathy and the stunting of their emotional range. Witchers are paid to rid locales of monstrous dangers, threats, and curses, but the game takes great pains to highlight situations where a violent solution is either undesirable or unachievable. Ultimately, the choice remains in the player's hand as to how violently their version of Geralt behaves, but even at the most destructive end of that spectrum, Geralt is most likely to employ violence in defensive situations, and even then the game offers a wide range of interactions with the rest of the world that neither require nor can be resolved through the application of violence, quite unlike *BioShock:*

Infinite. Notably, aside from the introductory sequence of the game where Geralt trains with Ciri, his practice of violence is in pursuit of her, or assistance to her goals.

Of the three characters, Joel stands out by not starting out with violence as a constitutive part of his life. A single father, he works as a carpenter in the lead-up to the fungal Cordyceps brain infection epidemic that results in the general downfall of American (if not human) civilization in the twenty years that separate that introductory section from the main sections of the game. That his life in the intervening years led to the development of considerable violence and that, as a smuggler, he is led to act violently towards other humans as well as mindless "infected", brings him to the level of the other two protagonists as a professional practitioner of violence. It is, however, in that brief segment of comparative non-violence that the seeds for much of *The Last of Us*'s father-daughter relationship are sown. Fleeing his home in the company of his daughter Sarah and brother Tommy, Joel arrives at a military checkpoint, where a soldier shoots both him and his daughter. While Joel survives thanks to his brother's intervention, Sarah dies, an important step in Joel's further development as a character and his relationship with Ellie. From a simple "shipment" that Joel needs to escort out of the Boston Quarantine Zone to a surrogate daughter, much of the relationship between these two characters is developed in the shadow of Sarah's absence and her death, both remaining unspoken for a considerable part of the game.

A significant contrast is drawn, then, between the violence Joel deploys to safeguard and protect Ellie, and upon which the growing attachment between the two characters is built, and the circumstances leading to the death of his biological daughter. The contrast between this prologue and the rest of the game is stark in both narrative and mechanical terms. Playing as Joel, with Sarah in his arms, the player is powerless to alter the course of the cinematic in which the soldier shoots the two of them, fatally wounding Sarah. This restriction of player agency is combined with Joel's trusting and passive attitude to authority, which this encounter clearly alters. When contrasted with the ending of *The Last of Us*, where Joel shoots his way through a medical facility in order to recover and "rescue" Ellie, it appears that Joel's initial failure in fatherhood is his comparative lack of violence, or his refusal and incapacity to commit to preventative violence. In this context, the professionalization of Joel's violence and the considerable degree to which he relies upon it during the rest of the game is one of the means by which he attempts to atone for his initial failures as a father. This violence is also, as it is in the other two games, a defining characteristic of that surrogate father-daughter relationship.

Indeed, without the interceding factor of violence, it appears unlikely these father/daughter relationships would exist, let alone have a chance to develop. Leaving aside the numerous instances in all three games where violence is leveraged in the pursuit or protection of these relationships, the symbolic moments of first encounters between fathers and daughters in the three games are specifically framed around violence. *The Witcher 3* begins with an initially playful training encounter, featuring Geralt and a far younger Ciri, but this sets a tone between two characters whose connection is in no small part tied to their shared experience and practice of violence. Booker first falls into Elizabeth's quarters, only for her to start throwing books at him, a considerably lesser degree of violence to the one he deployed before his arrival in her tower against the Columbia police. Upon first catching a glimpse of Joel, Ellie likewise approaches him with a blade drawn, aiming to stab first and ask questions later.

In light of the tone set by these first encounters, it would appear that the violence displayed by these surrogate daughters might in fact be their first and most important point of connection with even more violent fathers. In that case, the greater capacities for violence displayed by the daughters in latter passages of the games could be seen less as traits acquired through contact with their father-figures, but rather something developed and heightened through their experience with them. For the fathers, the deployment of this violence serves to bring them closer to the position of patriarch. It also reaffirms their masculinity in a cultural context where fatherhood is still seen as antithetical to hegemonic masculinity, with parenting continuing to be depicted in popular discourse as an essentially feminine role (Burrill 2008, 28, Schmitz 2016, 12, Wall & Arnold 2007, 521). Furthermore, the professionalization of the violence of all three fathers can be seen as an affirmation of the perceived primary role of father as breadwinner in the parenting relationship (Schmitz 2016, 12, Wall & Arnold 2007, 523). Through the practice of at least nominally paid violence, these characters therefore appear to tend towards forms of fatherhood that seek to reconcile both violent, hegemonic masculinity and the traditional breadwinning role assigned to fathers in contemporary ideologies of gender roles, making up for the potentially feminine attributes of the latter with an excess of the former.

ANTI-FATHERS

The prevalence of this violence in the father-daughter relationship is rendered all the more striking by the presence of anti-paternal figures in these three games. These characters, while not necessarily immediately antipathic or antagonistic, come to represent a different type of fatherhood from that displayed by the protagonists towards their surrogate daughters, and one that is, in contrast, almost exclusively negative. The presence of these anti-fathers appears to serve a variety of purposes within these games' representations of paternity. Foremost among these is to define acceptable or positive models of paternity, in opposition to the warped, flawed, or otherwise extreme models of patriarchal behaviour that they display. These negative models in turn participate in the establishment and definition of the protagonists' own approaches to these concepts. As Connell notes, applying the concept of hegemony to the discussion of masculinities in part implies that dominant forms of masculinity can change and be displaced, replaced with a new hegemony (77). Fundamentally, these representations of negative extremes of paternity help to define what kind of father the player character is not, and can allow for the establishment of new, different hegemonies. The anti-fathers in these games are not just villains. The paternal qualities they display are as essential to their characterization as it is to the protagonists' of these games, and therefore must be closely considered.

Significantly, extreme violence is one of the defining traits of these anti-fathers, which draws immediate connections to the practice of professional violence by the protagonists, and the important roles it plays in defining and framing father-daughter relationships in these games. However, in the case of these anti-fathers, their violence is represented as going far beyond what the protagonist is capable of, particularly as this violence is exercised against the anti-father's own family. By contrast, the protagonist-father's violence is almost exclusively directed outside of the limited familial circle at anything that might threaten or imperil that circle, such as the police and soldiers of *BioShock: Infinite*, the Hunters in *The Last of Us*, or the White Hunt in *The Witcher 3*. One further notable material and ideological difference between anti-fathers and the protagonists is their positioning relative to society and communities. Indeed, all three anti-father figures are leaders of communities, veritable patriarchs within the patriarchal societies that they inhabit. By comparison, the three protagonist fathers are characterized in large part by their isolation from society. Booker and Geralt are both detectives, of a kind, and their

separation from the rest of society is heightened, in the former's case by being a newcomer to Columbia, and for the latter by no longer being quite human. Witchers are as reviled as they are necessary in Geralt's world, and they occupy a liminal position as a result. Joel likewise, as a smuggler, former hunter, and neither a figure of authority or a rebel Firefly, cuts a rather solitary survivalist figure. The opposition between fathers as leaders of communities and fathers as initially solitary individuals is one of the primary means by which these games draw distinctions between the positive fatherhood of the protagonists versus the aberrant fatherhood of the anti-fathers.

In *The Witcher 3*, the anti-father is the Bloody Baron, whose name has more to do with a misunderstanding than with particularly bloodthirsty behavior. He is revealed to be a drunk and a domestic abuser, whose abuse contributes at least in part to his wife's miscarriage, and to his own adult daughter's estrangement from him. Zachary Hale Comstock, the religious and political leader of the floating city of Columbia, is presented through most of *BioShock: Infinite* as Elizabeth's real father. As the game unfolds, this relationship is revealed to be more complex, though he did raise her as his own. He is also revealed to have murdered his wife, and the discriminatory, autocratic violence of his political and religious agenda is on display everywhere during the player's exploration of Columbia. Comstock's isolation of Elizabeth in a locked tower, and subsequent pursuit of her through heavily armed proxies is also a further display of Comstock's material, patriarchal violence against his daughter.

While perhaps less obvious, the character that serves in this capacity of anti-father in *The Last of Us* is David, the leader of a community encountered by Ellie, deprived of Joel's presence due to a life-threatening injury he suffered previously. Though initially allies of convenience, it is swiftly revealed that the community David heads is not only a group of hunters – the name given to survivors who prey on other humans for their survival – that previously attacked Ellie and Joel, but also a community of cannibals. David's capture of Ellie and his attempts to cannibalize and kill her can be understood in the framework of anti-fatherhood. David's warm, paternalistic, and empathetic demeanor towards Ellie helps to create a greater contrast when the full extent of his inhumanity is revealed. Furthermore, his leadership of a community which, not unlike Comstock's Columbia, operates through a set of social rules that at first appear to superficially resemble those of a normative group, becomes even more abhorrent when it is revealed to be warped and inhuman even by the standards of post-apocalyptic civilization. That David also appears at the point where Joel is incapacitated and Ellie must survive for the both of them further increases his threat and justifies his placement within this grouping of anti-fathers.

Aside from the many similarities shared by these antagonistic, negative paternal figures, a closer look at player interactions with them and the parameters of these interactions presents a range in the procedural methods of abjection employed to make these characters antithetical to the more positive versions of fatherhood that these games attempt to present through their protagonists.

At first glance, Zachary Hale Comstock seems a very traditional patriarchal archetype, the model of a certain form of patriarchal hegemonic masculinity where the brutality of his conduct towards Elizabeth makes no doubt as to his distance from the caretaking aspects of parenting. However, his double identity and the lies he tells make him a fraud, and therefore put into question his positioning relative to the patriarchal role he is made to embody. Indeed, Comstock was born Booker deWitt – an alternate Booker who chose to become a born-again, devoutly patriotic and fiercely bigoted politician rather than a

Pinkerton agent. Crossing realities, an infertile Comstock bought the infant Elizabeth – then known as Anna deWitt – from her drunk detective of a father, then abducted her when deWitt had a change of heart. Unwilling to reveal the details of his methods for acquiring this child, Comstock murdered his wife, Lady Annabelle Comstock, after she grew suspicious of Elizabeth, believing her to be her husband's bastard. Comstock further employed his wife's murder for political gain, demonizing the revolutionary group Vox Populi, and established Elizabeth as his designated heir. Stemming from the revelations provided to him through the tears in reality caused by Elizabeth's abduction, Columbia's Prophet aimed to raise Elizabeth in his image, and to make her the instrument of his politico-religious wrath upon "the Sodom Below", an expression encompassing the United States from which Columbia seceded, as well as the rest of the world.

This rather convoluted narrative presents a number of interesting points if one is to consider that Comstock serves as an anti-father. Comstock is quite a stereotypically patriarchal figure, his iconography depicting him with the full beard and white hair that one could associate with representations of the Judeo-Christian God, such as in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (see figure 1).
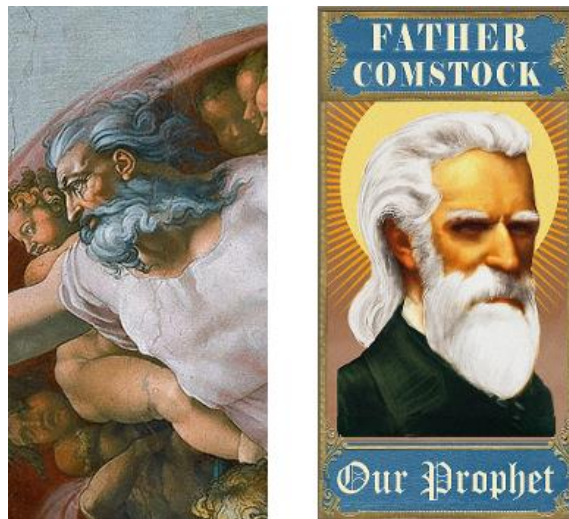

Figure 1: God in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* and propaganda poster depicting Zachary Comstock

Comstock is also never physically seen nor interacted with until the very end of the game, at the point of his brutal death at the hands of the player's Booker deWitt. His autocratic rule over the city of Columbia and his conduct towards the women in his life are very strongly associated with a paternalistically caring tone. A large part of the challenges the player must overcome during the course of the game are corollaries of Comstock's patriarchal authority. Its arguable deconstruction is a key narrative point in the broader context of the game, yet it is unclear how successfully the game achieves this deconstruction. Rather than a God-inspired Prophet, he is revealed to rely on science and "reality tears" to acquire his prophetic insights, fundamentally relying upon the key themes of authority and rationality which Connell describes as being both linked to hegemonic masculinity and "key themes in the legitimation of patriarchy" (Connell 2005, 90). His wife's murder and the initial abduction of Elizabeth further erode the façade of integrity built around him, as does the revelation that he, like the player, was once Booker

deWitt. Yet, this violence against his wife seems little more than a further confirmation of his espousal of misogynistic patriarchal views.

The revelation that Booker and Comstock are alternate versions of one another could lead to an important turning point, the challenging of the negative, authoritarian patriarchy that Comstock embodies. After all, the violence that the player's Booker deploys in his efforts to recover Elizabeth are mirrored and opposed by equivalent or even greater force by Comstock, the alternate or anti-Booker. While retaining the representation of Comstock as an anti-father to Booker's flawed, yet ultimately redeemed father, this connection between the two characters could lead to a critical awareness of the slender differences between positive and negative models of fatherhood. I would argue, however, that the network of alternate realities underpinning the game's universe undermines this moment of potential critical insight. By placing the choices which resulted in the separation of Booker and Comstock personas far back in time, and out of the player's hands, as well as removing all agency when it comes to the game's conclusion, *BioShock: Infinite* essentializes the difference between the two personas in a way that sets them too far apart, rather than drawing critical connections between the two. This distance is even more pronounced due to Comstock's physical absence for much of the game, only seen from a distance through proclamations, effigies, and propaganda. Combined with the procedural parameters of Booker's relationship to Elizabeth, discussed below, this weak narrative configuration undermines the potential for critical effect of the proximity between father and anti-father, and leads the game to reinforce, rather than subvert or challenge, patriarchal modes.

As discussed earlier, in *The Last of Us*, David is, at least initially, presented as a rather friendly paternal figure. As we learn more about him, the similarities between his and Joel's backgrounds become very striking. In the aftermath of his daughter Sarah's death, Joel, much like David, participated in a hunter gang. The game hints at the murder, torture, and other exactions that Joel took part in. Joel's capacity to improvise and create weapons, including Molotov cocktails and nail-bombs, is another hallmark of his skill and experience as a survivalist, but also of his talent at dealing lethal harm to living targets, be they infected or not. Likewise, David's initially fatherly approach to Ellie is reminiscent of the bond that eventually develops between her and Joel. Despite these similarities, however, *The Last of Us* seems loathe to draw more overt connections between David and Joel. The two never directly interact, with Joel being catatonic for the duration of Ellie's experience with him, and they are only ever collocated when Joel stops Ellie as she ferociously hacks at David's corpse with his machete. The dialogue in this scene is quite striking and significant:

> David: You think you know me? Huh? Well, let me tell you somethin'. You have no idea what I'm capable of.
> <Ellie grabs the blade and stabs David repeatedly. Joel arrives, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her off the corpse.>
> Joel: Ellie! Stop. Stop.
> Ellie: No! Don't fucking touch me!
> Joel: Sshh. Sshh.
> Ellie: No!
> Joel: It's okay. It's me. It's me. It's me. Look. Look. It's me.
> Ellie: He tried to -
> Joel: Oh, baby girl...It's okay. It's okay. (Naughty Dog 2013)

David's claim that Ellie does not know what he is capable of must be read in the light of Joel's own past, and his continued capacity for violence. When Joel repeatedly insists "it's me", a further attempt to soothe and reassure Ellie, it is also a tacit admission that the man Ellie just killed was him, or a dark reflection of him. This scene can be seen to foreshadow Joel's violent patriarchal tendencies as they express themselves in the final sequences of the game. Notably, this killing of the anti-father by Ellie, rather than Joel himself, is accompanied immediately by Joel fully assuming the mantle of fatherhood once again. By calling Ellie "baby girl", he echoes the way he spoke to his daughter in the game's opening. This very deliberate echo marks an important milestone in the game for Joel and Ellie's relationship. It is however once more an indication that violence is the consecrating factor in their surrogate parental bond, as Joel only fully embraces Ellie and verbally acknowledges her as a daughter when she has brutally killed a man. With that acknowledgement, the threat of anti-fatherhood posed by David is not only hacked to pieces, but also further driven back by the harkening of Joel's words back to a more normative version of fatherhood that he seems to espouse anew. This obfuscation unfortunately does away with the complexity in modes of fatherhood implied in the very close proximity between Joel and David, and foreshadows the restoration of patriarchy that the game's ending accomplishes.

In *The Witcher 3*, the characterization of the Bloody Baron, who serves as the anti-father in many of the same ways as Comstock and David, is far more contrasted. Processes of both identification and abjection make him a far more complex anti-father than the ones we have discussed thus far. The local warlord, named Phillip Strenger, is encountered by Geralt in the course of his search for his surrogate daughter Ciri. The player's interactions with Strenger are therefore contextualized within the framework of a paternal dynamic from the start. As the first major obstacle that Geralt encounters in his search, the Bloody Baron is all the more significant as a cipher through which the player learns more about Ciri herself, but also about Geralt and about a form of fatherhood that Geralt can challenge or define himself in opposition to.

A soldier by trade, Phillip Strenger acquired his moniker not for being particularly bloodthirsty, but rather from leading an attack on a dye factory which ended in peasants mistaking the red water of their river for blood. Despite this, the Baron's rule over the poor marshland of Velen appears to be a brutal, opportunistic one. His characterization as a brutal warlord is quite starkly contrasted with his portly, ageing appearance and gregarious, if gruff, personality. Predisposed as he appears to be in assisting Geralt find Ciri, he only accepts to do so in exchange for Geralt's assistance in his own familial quest, namely, an investigation into the disappearance of his wife Anna and daughter Tamara. This entwining of two paternal quests, Geralt's and Strenger's, results in the efficient deployment of the processes of abjection and identification that link and contrast the two characters' fatherhood.

As the reward for the progression of the investigation into his missing family, the Baron describes to Geralt how he first encountered Ciri, her stay in his fortified hold, and her destination after leaving the Baron's company. These stories are presented as flashbacks, and continue the work of presenting the Phillip Strenger as a genial host, genuinely respectful towards his young female guest, who treats her with courtesy and even, potentially, fatherly concern. In the game's quest journal, the poet and narrator Dandelion's description of the relationship between Ciri and the Baron makes this even more explicit: "The baron treated Ciri like a daughter - no, better - for slaughtering a boar is sadly a delight few fathers think to share with their daughters." These potentially self-

serving second-hand accounts are validated through the use of Ciri's perspective during the flashbacks, and the respect and sense of gratitude she expresses towards the Baron when Geralt and she discuss the matter later in the game.

In his interactions with Ciri, the Baron is therefore identified as having a number of positive traits. His good relations with Ciri, and clear concern for her well-being serve to facilitate the juxtaposition of his personality and character traits alongside Geralt, who shares the same concerns to an even greater degree. However, Geralt soon uncovers that Strenger's wife and daughter both fled from their home because of the Baron's alcoholism, volatile temper, and the regularity of his violent domestic abuse towards his wife. In the last instance of this abuse, a violent fight between Phillip and Anna at first appears to have led to her miscarriage of their unborn child. It later emerges that the miscarriage was caused by a trio of powerful witches with whom Anna had made a pact to rid her of the Baron's child, unwanted by her. The relationship between the Baron and his wife is a complex one, a once loving marriage tested by war and his long absences in service to it, her infidelity, his murder of her lover, and escalating violence and resentment between the two spouses. Despite appearing to be a doting father to his grown daughter Tamara, his abuse of her mother led to his daughter's alienation from him.

The resolution of this familial crisis can end in either tragedy or bittersweet reconciliation, and Anna Strenger's character is a rich and complex female figure in her own right, whose part in this non-negligible section of the game's narrative would warrant more in-depth examination[2]. One specific section of play during this quest-chain bears particular relevance to the Baron's role as a father, and presents an opportunity that the two other games do not – an opportunity for the anti-father to atone. During the course of Geralt's investigation, the fate of the unborn child, miscarried by Anna Strenger, rises to the fore as both a part of that tragic family history and a component of the supernatural world that witchers must interact with on a professional basis. The stillborn child was not granted a full burial or named by her father after he recovered her corpse, circumstances that led it to become a supernatural creature – a botchling, described in the game's bestiary as follows:

> "Born of dead, unwanted babies discarded without a proper burial, their appearance is that of a partially-decayed fetus, their unformed flesh twisted with hate, fear and malice. (...) A botchling's curse can be lifted by transforming it into a lubberkin – a guardian spirit of the hearth that watches over the family it never knew in the house it never could call home."

Geralt comes to see the botchling as an opportunity to find Anna and Tamara, either by procuring its assistance as a lubberkin, or killing it and using its blood in a ritual. The latter option is far less interesting than the first, denying the Baron an opportunity for some measure of redemption. In order to lift the botchling's curse, however, the father must carry the monstrous creature from its unmarked grave to the threshold of the family home, give it a name, and bury it there. This leads to a remarkable sequence in which the Baron carries his monstrous child at arm's length, while Geralt escorts him, soothes the monster with magic, and defeats the wraiths that would disrupt the ritual. Upon successful completion of that short but hazardous walk, an emotionally charged cut-scene depicts the ritual where, thanks to his expertise as a witcher, Geralt instructs the far more patriarchal Phillip Strenger in how to acknowledge and apologize to the child in whose untimely death he played at least some part: "Forgive me, you who came but who I did not embrace. I name thee Dea and embrace thee as my daughter."

This scene does not absolve the Bloody Baron of his violence. However, if this option is chosen by the player, it enables Phillip Strenger to confront and be confronted by the consequences of his actions and behaviour. In terms of narrative structure, the decision to kill or transform the monster that Dea had become has little bearing on the ultimate outcome of the Strenger family storyline. Nevertheless, it provides players with a chance to see another, softer, and perhaps more caring side to the Baron who, as a character, hovers between antipathic and sympathetic at every turn. It also displays a means of interaction between the protagonist father and the anti-father that is not purely violent or antagonistic. By encouraging and accompanying the Baron through the expiatory process of the ritual, Geralt not only appears the better father of the two by contrast, he also displays his capacity for resolving even intimate and familial situations such as this one without necessarily resorting to violence. This inherently poses a challenge both to conceptions of the caretaking nature of fatherhood as antithetical to masculinity, and to the hegemonic masculinity that the Baron represents as a violently patriarchal leader.

Whereas the anti-fathers present in both *BioShock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us* meet a violent end, in *The Witcher 3* this can be averted. Like them, the Baron is the patriarch at the head of a community, and like them his relationship to his family is deeply flawed. Unlike them, however, his interaction with the protagonist is not purely antagonistic, his villainy is contrasted and provided depth, and at the conclusion of the narrative thread that includes him, his fate seems far more a consequence of his life and story than it is at the mercy of the player's choices. Whether the Baron reunites with his family or hangs himself in despair at the death of his wife, Geralt's involvement is tangential in that final fate, the player's choices only leaning upon scales that have already been considerably weighted by Phillip Strenger's pre-existing history.

EXCEPTIONAL DAUGHTERS

While anti-fathers play an important role in defining the models of paternity that the protagonist-fathers embody in all three games, the daughters for whom these men become fathers are also worth analyzing in detail. Notably, all three of the primary daughter characters are exceptional in some way that marks them not only as unique, but also as outsiders, not unlike their solitary fathers. Ciri is not only Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, biological daughter of the Emperor of Nilfgaard, she is also a Child of the Elder Blood, a rare and powerful genetic trait that enables her to travel through time and space. Ellie has an immunity to the Cordyceps fungus, having been bitten but showing no signs of infection, thereby holding the promise for a potential cure. Elizabeth, not unlike Ciri, has the ability to open tears in reality, to move from one part of the multiverse to the next, or bring things from one to the other. These innate or intrinsic qualities are also combined with more or less acquired skills and talents, all of which serve a narrative purpose and, to a lesser extent, a procedural one.

BioShock: Infinite features the most utilitarian of relationships between the protagonist and their daughter. The effects of Elizabeth's presence can be seen all around the floating city of Columbia, in the form of unstable tears in reality. The way her powers are applied as she accompanies the player through the game is in a purely utilitarian way, however, in stark contrast with the omnipresence and potential of her abilities. Elizabeth functions primarily to enable the protagonist's combat ability, able as she is to make certain elements of a level appear at the player's request, such as a barrel of weapons, or a turret. Parts of the world in *BioShock: Infinite* are behind locked doors, and while the player as Booker is the one to interact with these obstacles, it is only to order Elizabeth to unlock them. Likewise, during combat sequences, Elizabeth will support the player by

occasionally throwing them ammunition for their weapon or health packs. As many have noted, this service to the father and his commandments fundamentally supports Booker's patriarchal positioning in that relationship (Joho 2014, Voorhees 2016). Elizabeth's subordination to Booker is further emphasized by her inability to progress the story in her own right. Having fled some ways from Booker after first witnessing his capacity for violence, Elizabeth finds herself struggling and incapable to push the lever of a gondola car which must be ridden to progress in the level. While the player's action is once again necessary here for progression, the comparative disempowerment of Elizabeth in that mundane situation contrasts sharply with the scale of her powers.

Elizabeth is only comparatively empowered after the destruction of the siphon built by Comstock to keep her powers in check. Coming to understand her powers and the reality of multiple universes, and faced with Booker's request to "smother [Comstock] in the crib", she brings Booker back to the key juncture of the baptism that Comstock embraced, and from which Booker fled. With the help of a number of numerous Elizabeths from other dimensions, she drowns Booker, thereby putting an end to that forking path. Her repeated queries as to whether Booker really desires this outcome, combined with the player's inability to affect the cut-scene in which the protagonist is drowned, lessens the effect of this final act, however. By murdering a willing Booker, Elizabeth clearly learned the lessons of her father in the application of violence as a means to an end. The limited and largely utilitarian role she played for the bulk of the game, subordinate to both Booker and Comstock, overshadows this narrative arc, however. By relying and utilizing her exceptional talents in limited ways to further the violent first-person combat that constitutes the core of the game, the player's experience as Booker is therefore founded upon a highly patriarchal relationship, one all too similar to the more overt and oppressive version of that same utilitarian patriarchy practiced by Comstock.

In *The Witcher 3*, variations in the type of power, game systems, and the narrative particularities of the relationship between Geralt and Ciri result in quite a different experience of fatherhood for the player, while retaining a focus upon the exceptional nature of the daughter's abilities. As the game unfolds, a strong contrast is drawn between Ciri's innate, if somewhat untamed, talents and her acquired skills, largely taught by Geralt. Both of these make her exceptional in the game world, and provide her with a considerable level of agency, especially in contrast to other characters in the game who, due to circumstances of gender, race, or class, find themselves either actively oppressed or limited in the potential that they can achieve. While Ciri is a noblewoman by birth, she eschews the trappings, behaviour, and expectations of such a role. The innate, genetic powers of her Elder Blood force her to rid herself of these trappings, as she flees from the Wild Hunt that pursues her to use these powers for their own benefit. However, the Elder Blood is also what enables her to distance herself from her circumstances, and to resist returning to the limited and limiting role of female aristocrat.

Both sets of skills, innate and acquired, are actively experienced by the player during the sequences where Ciri becomes playable for brief moments, most of them flashbacks. Rather than relying purely on cut-scenes, these brief sequences of play are both familiar and distinct when compared to playing as Geralt. In combat, Ciri's swordplay is equivalent to Geralt's with many of the associated complexities removed, such as changing weapons, different attack speeds, applying oils, or drinking potions. The manifestation of Ciri's Elder Blood, however, results in her ability to "Blink", a fast teleportation across the battlefield, as well as the ability to deliver a series of devastating series of attacks using the ability to travel through time and space. While the similarities

between Ciri and Geralt's modes of combat are enough that these sequences remain in the same genre and the combat is more than superficially similar, the differences serve to better define Ciri as making up with raw power what she lacks in skill and experience at being a witcher, and vice-versa. Compared to fighting as Geralt, the Ciri sequences are easier, establishing Ciri as being more powerful than her surrogate father at the violence that not only defines him but is also a core part of their father-daughter relationship.

Furthermore, throughout the game's narrative Ciri is shown to have her own agenda, one she pursues independently of Geralt and the player. The lack of information and understanding of Ciri's goals, her whereabouts, and the purpose of her actions is as puzzling to Geralt as it is to the player, establishing her as a distinct individual who exists separately from her surrogate father. The distance that this establishes between the player's perspective and Ciri's decisions provides a degree of unknowability to her motivations and personality, even as more of her story becomes known. This is particularly significant in the game's multiple endings. Choices and decisions made by the player as Geralt on how to interact with Ciri, whether to be a caring father or a far more mercenary figure, impact her ability to face the final danger which she must confront alone. Just before facing the White Frost, an entropic threat spanning many worlds and threatening to destroy all life, she tells Geralt the following: "What can you know about saving the world, silly? You're but a witcher. This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it." (CD Projekt RED 2015)

Unlike the final act of *BioShock: Infinite*, multiple player choices influence what outcome results from her confrontation with the White Frost, ranging from Ciri's failure and death, to her becoming a witcher, or leaving Geralt's side to become the new Empress of Nilfgaard. While in both games, the daughter is the one who performs that final choice, influenced at least in part by their father's actions and wishes, the different balance of power in the relationship between Geralt and Ciri, the unknowability associated with her personality and motivations, and the emphasis upon her story being both distinct from and more important than Geralt's, combine to create a more equitable balance of power in their father-daughter relationship, and one that does not conform to a patriarchal mold. While Geralt demonstrates throughout the game paternal feelings towards Ciri, and can, at best, prove himself to be either caring and a mentor, or at worst a mercenary, distant paternal figure, his fatherhood does less to control or define his surrogate daughter than it does to guide her as she walks her own path. While a negligent Geralt will create an unhappy Ciri, who will perish when facing her final challenge, a more loving father who respects her independence will allow her to realize her full potential. Despite in many ways paying tribute to certain traits of hegemonic masculinity through its protagonist, *The Witcher 3* closes with the clear establishment of the limitations of patriarchal power which, in turn, seem to be for the best. As such, it is the only one of the three games where patriarchal authority is neither reinforced nor restored, but rather challenged, with a possible opening on an alternative mode of fatherhood and paternal masculinity.

Halfway between the two, *The Last of Us* displays elements of both approaches in representing both the exceptional quality of Ellie's immunity and how that affects the father-daughter relationship between Joel and her. Unlike Elizabeth and Ciri, and in keeping with the tone and comparative realism of *The Last of Us*, Ellie's youth and the passive advantage of her gift means that it plays a role in driving the narrative, and far less in affecting the gameplay. When the player controls Joel with Ellie in tow, she can spot enemies, and like Elizabeth supply him with ammunition and medical kits. As Gerald Voorhees notes, the fact that the player does not need to actively protect or even

care about the location and activities of their female companion in *BioShock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us* means that they are "not a subject of the player's attention or care" (Voorhees 2016). The fact that the player does not need to pay procedural care to their companion, even when the narrative invites them to, creates a dissonance that only further underlines the patriarchal tendencies involved in that relationship. The winter season features a playable Ellie, and her skills and abilities are contrasted with Joel's. She retains much of his lethality in how she tackles her hostile environment, armed primarily with bow and knife, but without his brute force or ability to craft improvised weapons. While Joyce makes the valid observation that Ellie's possession of a weapon remains domestic, as it is in defense of Joel (Joyce 2014), procedurally the differences in the efficiency of play and lethality in combat of the two characters are minimal.

Whereas many of the playable Ciri sections were told as flashbacks through third parties, there is no such sense of distance in the player's experience of Ellie. While this could contribute to fleshing out the father-daughter relationship from her angle, the catatonic state in which Joel finds himself for the start of that chapter means that his absence plays a far more important role in defining her experience than his presence does. As discussed previously, it is significant that the game's anti-father, David, appears in this chapter. Despite the development of Ellie's survival skills, her narrow escape from death at the hands of a cannibal and subsequent emotional breakdown in Joel's arms is used to emphasize the full realization of their father-daughter relationship, rather than as a strong marker of Ellie as a capable survivor.

This becomes particularly evident in the game's final chapter, as Joel and Ellie reach Salt Lake City, where they find the Firefly militia they were seeking. Joel discovers that, for the development of the vaccine to the Cordyceps infection, Ellie must die. Unwilling to let that happen, Joel shoots his way through the Fireflies in order to rescue an unconscious Ellie. Upon driving away from Salt Lake City, Joel lies to Ellie, telling her that the Fireflies have stopped looking for a cure: "Turns out, there's a whole lot more like you, Ellie. People that are immune. It's dozens, actually. Ain't done a damn bit of good neither" (Naughty Dog 2013). In light of Joel's behaviour and his extraordinary capacity for violence, the fact that he dismisses Ellie's exceptional qualities is revealing of patriarchal brutality. Without regard for what Ellie might have wanted, let alone the good of the broader human species and civilization, Joel enforces a unilateral decision out of what appears to be both selfishness and parental protectiveness towards Ellie. While Voorhees does mention that Joel ultimately robs Ellie of the "chance to make the most significant choice in the game" (20016), this seems more a qualifier of a game that is otherwise open to representing a more open kind of masculinity, than a marker for the game's clear restoration of patriarchal power. In saving her, Joel denies Ellie the near-Messianic role that was thrust upon her by her immunity, while at the same time enforcing his authority as her father. Even though the game's final segment of play, where the player controls Ellie, and the final cut-scene show Ellie's own doubts about Joel's version of events, his commitment to the lie ends the game on a bitter note. Sympathetic and understandable as Joel's choice might be, that final decision and the lies that appear to cement the father-daughter relationship wrests any notion of agency or control that Ellie might have had. Concluding in this fashion, the game restores the patriarchal order that was disrupted in the opening section, with the death of Joel's daughter Sarah. While the zombie outbreak might not have been stopped, and the best chance for it being cured has been dashed by Joel's choice, he has resumed his patriarchal position, the dishonesty upon which he bases his authority extending the violence upon which this new father-daughter bond was based into the realm of psychological violence.

CONCLUSION

The close representational, narrative, and procedural reading of these three games demonstrates that, despite many surface similarities, they explore the ideologies of fatherhood, masculinity, and patriarchy in different ways. While *BioShock: Infinite* is the most overt in challenging a patriarchal authority over the course of its narratives, the relationship between Booker and Elizabeth appears as the one most symptomatic of hegemonic masculinity, and the procedural systems through which the two characters interacts clearly sets the father as the all-powerful authority over a subservient and obedient daughter. Through this relationship, the game reinforces the patriarchy by displacing the locus of authority from the failed patriarch Comstock to his double, Booker. *The Last of Us* offers a more contrasted version of fatherhood as Joel struggles to regain it through the copious application of violence. However, the brutally patriarchal way in which that relationship is both established and maintained at the end of the game undermines any possibility that Joel and Ellie's relationship could be read as a deconstruction or challenge of hegemonic masculinity as it applies to fatherhood. Instead, Joel successfully restores the patriarchal authority that was taken from him at game's start by his inability to act violently in order to protect it. Alone in not having the daughter be a direct companion of the protagonist-father, *The Witcher 3* succeeds in both depicting a version of fatherhood that conforms in many ways to the traits desired by hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time fundamentally challenging patriarchal control and authority. In the depiction of the Bloody Baron as a failed and vulnerable patriarch that must and can be taught to be more caring, and of Ciri as an independent, unknowable young woman whose story is much bigger and more important than that of her surrogate father's, *The Witcher 3* appears as the most direct challenge to contemporary ideologies of paternity. Privileging guidance over control, influence over authority, the game promotes a more caring and less authoritative version of fatherhood that retains all of the overemphasized attributes of masculinity that Geralt embodies.

Much more could be said about these games beyond the three themes explored in this paper, from the complex representation of mother figures, to the fact that, from the war torn swamps of Velen to Columbia by way of Joel and Ellie's present, all three games take place in dystopias, and a comprehensive survey of representations of parenthood in games would be a welcome addition to the field. What emerges from these close comparative readings, however, is the considerable gap that can exist between one game's conservative, patriarchal depiction of fatherhood, and a more open, positive representation as a result of small but significant representational and procedural differences. As more digital games engage with familial ties and gender ideologies, both narratively and procedurally, the importance of better understanding the complex interaction that these games have with contemporary discourses on masculinity and fatherhood grows. Through deeper enquiry into the material practices through which ideology is rehearsed and sustained, notably through playing games, comes the possibility of influencing future games and game designers away from uncritical representations of concepts like fatherhood and patriarchal authority, or at the very least deepen the discourse through which such games can be critiqued.

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ENDNOTES

1 A roleplaying game like *Undertale* (Fox 2015) stands out in its particular use of violence, particularly the possibility of non-violence as a method of successfully advancing in the game. Nevertheless, violent conflict remains a possibility in the game, disincentivized as it may be. One can further distinguish it from *The Witcher 3* by its development as an independent game.

2 Of particular note and interest is her service as a grandmother figure to the Crones of Crookback Bog who provoked her miscarriage. In that role, she fosters the abandoned children that are led to the Witches' abode, and whom they cannibalize.

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