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Exquisite Corpses: Markedness, Gender, and Death in Video Games

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes gendered death animations in video games and the way games thematize death to remarginalize marked characters, including women. This project combines Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's work on the human subjection to death and Georges Bataille's characterization of sacrifice to explore how death in games stages markedness. Markedness articulates how a culture treats normative identities as unproblematic while marking non-normative identities as deviant.

Chapter One characterizes play as a form of death-deferral, which culminates in the spectacle of player-character death. I argue that death in games can facilitate what Hegel calls tarrying with death, embracing our subjection to mortality. I examine marked and unmarked player-character death to explain how deaths endorse values like resilience. However laudable those values are, they often rely on sexist assumptions and imagery that crucially limit games' potential to encourage tarrying with death. **Chapter Two** uses Bataille's concept of sacrifice to frame the relationship between the player as a sacrificer and the player-character as a victim. Applying Bataille's model of sacrifice to explicitly feminine player-characters shows how games continue to characterize feminine-coded vulnerability, suffering, and death as aesthetic spectacles. I examine the iconic player-character Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* as a "sacrificial woman" whose marked deaths reflect mainstream game cultures' lingering tendency to see women through the lens of the 'damsel in distress,' who must be rescued from sacrifice. Even when those women are player-characters, traces of the damsel mark and undercut their agency. **Chapter Three** examines the sex-specific depiction of sacrifice in dad games, a genre that uses heroic

fatherhood and self-sacrifice to mark the previously unmarked. Dad games draw attention to qualities like whiteness and masculinity—which typically go unmarked—to present them as under threat and in need of defence. However, this defence uses images of feminine-coded suffering to express and allay anxieties about the perceived passing of patriarchal power. Ultimately, this treatment reflects online harassment campaigns like Gamergate's staging of women's real-life suffering to silence progressive and alternative voices in games. Gamergate's performative sadism is another expression of how mainstream game cultures articulate masculine anxiety through feminine-coded suffering.

Keywords: game studies, death, gender, player-character, *Super Mario Bros.*, *Dark Souls*, *Tomb Raider*, *Bioshock*, damsel in distress, sacrifice, dad games, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Georges Bataille

Summary for a Lay Audience

This dissertation is about how player-controlled characters die in video games. These deaths reinforce gender stereotypes and remarginalize groups already treated poorly in games. These groups include women, people of colour, and anyone who does not match the 'standard' player, who is white, male, heterosexual, and cisgender (meaning one's gender matches the identity assigned to them at birth). Some scholars say death in games is uninteresting or misleads impressionable players into thinking death is not real. I look at iconic, commercially successful games that assume a binary view of gender that characterizes people as only male or female. Games often present deaths differently for male and female player-characters. Historically, most player-characters have been male. Recently, many games allow the player to choose whether the player-character is male or female. However, the same games usually treat these player-characters as male by default. Those characters' deaths have a broad emotional range: they can be funny or sad or frightening. Exclusively female player-characters are much rarer. They often die in ways that display their pain, as if the player would enjoy seeing them suffer. That presentation often extends from exclusively female player-characters to important female non-player-characters who are controlled by the game, rather than the player. I look at games in which the male player-character is also a father to a non-player-character daughter. I compare how games present the father and daughter's pain and death. Fathers' deaths often characterize them as stoic and strong. Daughters' deaths theatrically display feminine pain. These 'dad games' use death to reinforce normative stereotypes that non-mainstream game makers and critics have started to challenge.

It might seem obvious that video games have a serious problem with sexism. However, examining how this sexism works in death animations and game narratives helps show how game creators can change these harmful patterns. I believe that games can help players explore thoughts and feelings about death. However, game creators, particularly those in the game industry, cannot realize the potential to facilitate tarrying with death until we understand persistent problems with how the industry presents death in games and explore less harmful alternatives.

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Introduction: Approaching Death in Games

> To philosophize is to learn to die.
>
> —Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*

0.1 Context

The player-characters[1] we control in video games[2] die over and over. In contrast,
depending on religious beliefs, many human beings expect to die only once. Video game
death is both real and unreal, both imagined and experienced: it happens to the in-game
player-character and the player outside the game. An onscreen postcard in the platform[3]
game *Celeste* reads, "Be proud of your Death Count! The more you die, the more you're
learning. Keep going!" At one level, these deaths belong to the player-character
Madeline, who dies when she misses a jump and touches an environmental hazard.
Simultaneously, the "you" of the phrase "[t]he more you die" is the player herself,
inhabiting the role of the player-character. She not only observes the death onscreen; she
acts it out, experiences it through play.

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[1] I define the player-character as a video game character controlled by the player, differentiated from non-player-characters who are controlled by the game. Early work on the topic like Bob Rehak's "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar," Martti Lahti's "As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games," and T.L. Taylor's "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds" largely does not differentiate between the avatar and the player-character. Adrienne Shaw draws on work by Rune Klevjer, Ragnhild Tronstad, and Zach Waggoner to claim that "[a] digital game avatar is the visual, digital embodiment of the player in the game-world. The term avatar cannot be applied to all game characters, however, since it implies self-representation…[player-characters] are entities unto themselves that players then control" (*Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Player Culture* 102).
[2] Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (80). What differentiates the video game is that its system relies on hardware like a screen and software like the programming that encodes the game.
[3] There are many game genres and subgenres, with competing definitions and overlapping elements. The platform genre, often considered a subgenre of the action game, typically features floating platforms and obstacles that the player-character must navigate by jumping and climbing. Hitting objects can result in the immediate loss of a life. *Super Mario Bros.* is one example of an iconic platform game.

In our daily lives, death defies meaning because it cannot be experienced directly.

However, representations of death shape how we think about our mortality and how we

live our lives. Because games are an interactive medium in which players inhabit the

roles of mortal player-characters, games are uniquely situated to help players explore

thoughts and feelings about death. However, many games characterize death and its

significance very narrowly. The interactive nature of video games combined with the

imaginative power of play can make death in games both meaningful and instructive. In

Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,[4] Johan Huizinga claims that in

play, "the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down" (25). Play is a

transformative act that allows me, as a player, to identify with the heroic Italian plumber

Mario as I play *Super Mario Bros.*, even as I sit on my couch. I am both him and myself

because play lets me believe I am. Huizinga claims that play "proceed[s] with the utmost

seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at

least, completely abolishes that troublesome 'only' feeling" that persists when we fail to

believe in our play (8). When Mario dies, I am both actor and audience: I identify with

him and imagine death through this play-acting. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg

Gadamer quotes Huizinga's claim about the dissolving distinction between belief and

pretense then adds the gloss, "[h]ere the primacy of play over the consciousness of the

player is fundamentally acknowledged" (105). Gadamer clarifies Huizinga's

characterization of play as taking on a role that overwhelms one's identity rather than a

nebulous combination of belief and pretense. However, both interpretations indicate how

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[4] As noted by Hector Rodriguez, the "modern study of play can be traced back to the publication of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's ground-breaking study *Homo Ludens*" ("The Playful and the Serious: An Approximation to Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*"). Huizinga remains influential in game studies today.

play relies on belief. Huizinga describes how play merges the player's own everyday identity with the roles she takes on. Normally, I am Meghan Adams, but in play, I might also be a shark as I chase my nephews who pretend to be fish. At that moment, I am both, and so are they. Gadamer emphasizes how play overwhelms the player as if during this theoretical game of chase, my nephews sometimes get caught up in their roles as fish and forget that they are 'only' playing, and feel genuine fear.[5] Huizinga and Gadamer's shared assertion that play can allow the player to take on an identity and believe in it describes how I can experience Mario's death. My investment in play and my identification with the player-character differentiates its death from the death of a film character. I am not merely a spectator. Play's overwhelming power means, even only if in transcendent, transformative moments, I am the character whose death I act out.

Most scholarship that addresses death in games dismisses it as meaningless or even harmful.[6] I assert that how death and markers of difference intersect reveals deep anxieties about the white, heterosexual masculinity that has so long defined the typical player-character. Simply put, white, heterosexual, and male player-characters die differently than player-characters whose race, gender and sexuality signify otherness. In both our daily lives and in the games we play, we must acknowledge that while everyone dies, the circumstances of those deaths differ based on privilege. Individuals reflect on death in personal contexts, and one person's gender, race, and socioeconomic privilege can mean the difference between a dignified, mostly pain-free passing and an agonizing

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[5] Anyone who has been involved in a rowdy game of make-believe, especially with children, and has found themselves or their charges 'caught up' in play has experienced what Gadamer describes.
[6] As I will explain, there are critics who explore alternate interpretations of death in games, but it is essential to understand that they are a minority, opposing long-held, popular beliefs.

death compounded by financial stress. The topic of death requires that we acknowledge the real differences that determine how we die. This project investigates how marked and unmarked deaths in games reflect and reinforce marginalization.[7] *Celeste*'s onscreen postcard associates death with learning. Every time a player-character dies, the player has not failed but instead discovered another of the "10,000 ways that don't work" in the quotation attributed to Thomas Edison.[8] More broadly, every death in games implicitly teaches *something*, ranging from the minutiae of in-game strategy to death's philosophical significance and, inextricably, life's value.

Despite its many implications, death in games is often described as uninteresting because it is dull or repetitive: critics point out the frequency with which the ball in *Pong* hits the edge of the screen, or Mario loses a life. The claim that death is meaningless has dogged game studies since Espen Aarseth's influential *Cybertext: New Perspectives in Ergodic Literature* in 1997.[9] While early criticism of death in games claims it harms the

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[7] I draw from Wayne Brekhus' definition of markedness as "the ways the 'social mind' actively perceives one side of a contrast while ignoring the other side as epistemologically unproblematic" ("Social Marking and the Mental Coloring of Identity: Sexual Identity Construction and Maintenance in the United States" 500). The normative frequently goes unmarked, while qualities considered deviant are articulated as such and consequently interrogated, like how 'mankind' stands in for all humanity but 'womankind' signals a smaller group ("A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus" 35). I should note that this project is indebted to critics who examine markedness in games, including Kishonna L. Gray, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, and Soraya Murray.

[8] There is no evidence behind the frequent attribution of this quotation to Edison. The likeliest source is J.L. Elkhorne's article "Edison—The Fabulous Drone" in the March 1967 edition of *73 Magazine*.

[9] Aarseth briefly refers to player-character death while explaining text-based games. He writes that "[o]nce an action has been identified, the program changes the database and displays a message about the outcome, until the player quits the game, wins or 'dies' and must start again" (*Cybertext* 100). His disinterest is typical of early game studies critics. Janet Murray describes a hypothetical game about suicide and writes "[t]he suicide occurs in 'real' time. The reader would have both enacted and witnessed the decision" (177). Despite this acknowledgement that play involves action and observation, Murray never suggests that the reader (or player) experiences the death. Gary Westfahl's groundbreaking work on *Super Mario Bros.* is contemporary with Aarseth and Murray's work, but has received less attention.

medium's aspirations to art and may harm players,[10] more recent publications

characterize it as a form of terror management[11] or explore how it represents the

difficulty of processing trauma and loss.[12] My project acknowledges that death in games

is important but also asserts that death in games reflects what Janine Fron, Tracy

Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Celia Pearce term "hegemonic play," namely "the

way in which the digital game industry has influenced the global culture of play in much

the same way that hegemonic nations, such as the British Empire or post-WWII America,

have, in their times of influence, dominated global culture" (1). One especially important

aspect of that dominance is what Raewyn Connell calls hegemonic masculinities, which

are the ways of expressing masculinity that are the most privileged in a particular cultural

context.[13] White, heterosexual, cisgender masculinity's hegemonic status in games

determines that protagonists who embody that ideal die a much broader range of deaths

than those who do not fit that standard. I assert that explicitly female protagonists and

important female non-player-characters in Triple-A,[14] action-adventure roleplaying

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[10] See Kate Bevan, Jason Tocci, and Brandon Sheffield, as well as Lisbeth Klastrup's "What Makes *World of Warcraft* a World?: A Note on Death and Dying" 143-166). Like Marcel O'Gorman's "Angels in Digital Armor: Technoculture and Terror Management," Simon Parkin's *Death By Video Game: Tales of Obsession from the Virtual Frontline* frames players dying after marathon gaming sessions as a grim rejoinder to how "[v]ideo games soften reality's bite by giving us the reassurance that there's always another go: the extra life, the time extend, the 'continue' (255).

[11] Marcel O'Gorman and Jason Hawreliak use games as an example of Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski's terror management theory (TMT). TMT draws from Ernest Becker's assertion that culture is a symbolic effort to deny death. Death terrorizes us because we recognize its inevitability. We manage our terror by building self-esteem through cultural practices. For more, see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski's *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*.

[12] Proponents include Jane McGonigal, J.P. Grant, Emily Flynn-Jones, Sabine Harrer, and Tobi Smethurst.

[13] Raewyn Connell's initial work on hegemonic masculinity in *Masculinities* has since been refined through her later work with James W. Messerschmidt, particularly "Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the Concept."

[14] As a category, Triple-A describes critically and commercially successful video games made by large, well-funded companies. Many games in this category incorporate conventions of first-person shooters and third-person action-adventure games. A key element of Triple-A games is their prestige: they are often held up as examples of 'games as art,' in contrast to the popular conception that games lack artistic merit.

games,[15] die sexualized, exploitative deaths. While the philosophical canon often describes death as a universal experience, death in games often reinforces the marginalization of marked identities.

Representations of player-character death often reflect mainstream game cultures' increasing fraught state[16] amid challenges to and defences of hegemonic play. The online harassment campaign known as Gamergate marks a watershed moment in the struggle for diversity in games. Beginning with blog posts in which Eron Gjoni accused his former partner Zoe Quinn of trading sex for coverage of the game *Depression Quest*, Gamergate became a hotly debated movement focused on attacking women and non-binary people in games, especially designers and critics (Mortensen 788-9). Described by Katharine Cross as a "furious, crowd-sourced prosecution of perceived feminist 'corruption,'" ("We Will Force Gaming to be Free: On GamerGate and the Licence to Inflict Suffering"), Gamergate is a reactionary movement fueled by anxiety about efforts to diversify games. The face of hegemonic play is the largely unmarked player and player-character in games: a white, heterosexual, cisgender man. In contrast to how this figure usually goes unmarked, dad games use fatherhood to mark hegemonic masculinity and present it as under threat. I assert that Gamergate's reactionary rhetoric embodies the same anxiety, and like many dad games, uses the spectacle of feminine suffering to reassert hegemonic masculinity.

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[15] The action-adventure genre combines the action game's combat and physically oriented challenges with the puzzle-solving found in adventure games. Role-playing games emphasize the player's inhabiting a role within a fictional setting. An action-adventure roleplaying game includes all these qualities.
[16] There is not just one monolithic mainstream game culture. Instead, participants in game cultures interact in many different contexts.

This project addresses broader critical camps on death in games. A great deal of research focuses on how players can exert violence in games,[17] but fewer critics consider how players are subject to violence. Some early mimesis-minded critics claim that death in games has little connection to real-life death, and as a result, such death is uninteresting at best and dangerous at worst.[18] Critics in this camp interpret player-character death as merely a metaphor for failure. This assertion ignores death in games' symbolic value and how players react to their player-characters' death. These critics largely ignore that a player's identity may differ from the protagonist's, leading to different degrees of identification with the player-character and their death. For example, a female player may respond differently to Lara Croft's detailed, sexualized death in *Tomb Raider*[19] and its underlying messages about feminine beauty and disposability. The female player already taught by the media that her attractiveness to the male gaze determines the value of her life and death might see herself in Lara's death, with all her potential reduced to a beautiful corpse. Every player-character death can reflect harmful stereotypes or empowering messages that suggest what a life is worth.

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[17] Media concerns about video game violence have flared up since outcry over the arcade game *Death Race* in which the driver could run over pedestrian 'gremlins.' For more, see Carly Kocurek's "The Agony and the Exidy: A History of Video Game Violence and the Legacy of *Death Race*" and *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*. Many studies including, but not limited to work by Chris Ferguson, Stephanie M. Rueda, Amanda M. Cruz, Diana E. Ferguson, Stacey Fritz, and Shawn M. Smith; Ferguson and C.K. Olson; and Tobias Greitmeyer and Dirk O. Mügge question the assertion that violent games cause violent behaviour.

[18] Jesper Juul, Greg Esplin, Bevan, Tocci, Jeffrey Douglas and J.P. Grant all link verisimilitude with importance. Fabian Schäfer asserts that in games like the multiplayer first-person shooter *Counter-Strike* "[d]eath is much more *real* because it is irreversible (at least for the duration of a single round)" (123).

[19] *Tomb Raider* is a popular third-person action-adventure game series, first released in 1996. The game shows the player-character from behind in a third-person perspective. First-person perspectives are also common, especially in the shooter genre. Shooter games focus almost entirely on combat. However, games often include a range of genre elements. For example, *Tomb Raider* is sometimes identified as a third-person shooter game as well as an action-adventure game.

A second, overlapping group includes critics who assert that player-character death is an outdated game mechanic,[20] like Jesper Juul, Kate Bevan, Jason Tocci, Brandon Sheffield, and Klastrup ("What Makes *World of Warcraft* a World?" 143-166). These critics assert that death is an outmoded metaphor, a relic of the arcade age that no longer makes sense in games played on the home console. This claim frequently depends on key assumptions that illuminate how death in games has often gone dismissed in criticism. One assumption is that player-character death interrupts play and inhibits the "flow" state of full absorption and enjoyment in an activity described by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* as the optimal state in which to complete a task. Game design and criticism often prize flow as a hallmark of a well-made game.[21] The second assumption shared by these critics is that death in games also interrupts narrative flow.[22] Finally, critics like Bevan and Tocci assume that because player-character death is routine or boring, it impairs the player's interest in the game. None of these claims reflect my experience: while player-character death can be frustrating, it can also be a horrifying loss or a transcendent sacrifice. Many games incorporate death into the narrative, like the action-adventure game *Heavy Rain*.[23] By the

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[20] Game mechanics are important actions the player can take. In "Defining Game Mechanics," Miguel Sicart notes how mechanics like running, climbing, or shooting are all "methods for agency within the game world, actions the player can take within the space of possibility created by the rules." Salen and Zimmerman explain that core mechanics are essential actions that the player performs repeatedly and constitute much of the play experience (316-7).

[21] Critics like Lana Polansky assert that game design values flow too much, which leads game cultures to undervalue and discourage designers who interrupt flow to make games that are "provocative, challenging, emotionally dissonant" ("Against Flow").

[22] For more, see James Newman ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame;" *Videogames*; *Playing with Videogames*) and Alexander Galloway "(*Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*). In contrast, Barry Atkins asserts that game design anticipates death and incorporates it into gameplay (239).

[23] *Heavy Rain* depicts an overarching mystery surrounding a serial murderer. The game features branching narratives based on player actions, including the player-character deaths discussed above.

game's ending, all four player-characters can be dead. Instead of necessitating a restart, the narrative incorporates those deaths into the game's plot. The *Souls* series takes this incorporation a step further by using death as a core mechanic in the narrative: the player-character is cursed to resurrect after dying.[24]

Critics like Jeffrey Douglas, Marcel O'Gorman and Jason Hawreliak draw from mimesis-minded criticism to identify player-character death as a form of ritual mastery over mortality. Douglas identifies the ritual as a version of Sigmund Freud's *fort-da* game in which a child manages loss by repeatedly throwing away a ball (92-3). O'Gorman and Hawreliak characterize video games as a form of death denial, the drive to leave legacies behind us that Ernest Becker claims drives human culture.[25] However, many responses to player-character death deal with the unmarked player, namely the white, middle-class, non-disabled, cisgender, heterosexual teenage boy conjured by the word "gamer" even though player populations are quite diverse.[26] Critics who describe playing as mastery over death sometimes focus on the unmarked player at the cost of inattention to alternate player identities or experiences of death in games.[27] There are few considerations of how

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[24] The *Souls* series is a critically acclaimed franchise that includes *Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls 2*, *Bloodborne*, and *Dark Souls 3*.

[25] See Becker's *The Denial of Death* for his claim that human civilization largely results from efforts to ward off our mortality through symbolic means. For more on Becker read through the lens of terror management theory in game studies, see O'Gorman and Hawreliak ("The Greatest Victory: Ernest Becker, Lara Croft & Death in *Tomb Raider;*" *Heroism, Gaming, and the Rhetoric of Immortality*). Flynn-Jones refers to Becker and Freud (*Death Smiles: A Study of the Function, Nature, and Experience of Player-Character Death*; "Don't Forget to Die: A Software Update is Available for the Death Drive").

[26] While anyone can play games, "gamer" is a hotly contested, complex identity. I use the word "player" instead but recognize that the term is often implicitly synonymous with "gamer."

[27] As noted by Souvik Mukherjee, studies of death in games rarely acknowledge non-Christian religious beliefs ("Remembering How You Died: Memory, Death, and Temporality in Video Games").

a player's gender, sexuality, race, health, or age might change how they react to

marginalized player-characters and non-player-characters dying.

I am increasingly dissatisfied with the unmarked, standard identities stamped on both the

players and player-characters whose deaths traditionally receive critical attention. The

white, heterosexual, cisgender man whom Anastasia Salter and Bridgett Blodgett contend

is "the default avatar"[28] is not just the imagined player base to which the game industry

caters (73), but also receives a great deal of attention in critical work on death in games.[29]

I am not the universal player held up in many of these conversations about death in

games, and neither are many players I know. Our identities differ from the

impressionable young white male teens that media coverage suggests games will mislead.

Nevertheless, even in an industry in which player-characters lack diversity, there is a

wide variety of deaths. These range from the singularly horrifying accidental shooting of

a non-player-character's mother in *Fallout 3*[30] to the frustrating spectacle of my player-

character repeatedly dying in the same trap in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot. These deaths

do more than just deny my mortality. What about player-character death makes me throw

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[28] Salter and Blodgett use the term "avatar" here to refer to the player-character. For some critics, like Frans Mäyrä in his *An Introduction to Game Studies*, the terms are largely synonymous, but, following Rune Klevjer, I define the avatar much more broadly than the player-character (217). An avatar is a proxy for a user, such as an icon in a messaging application or the top hat in the board game *Monopoly*.
[29] There is abundant research on gamer identity as a social identity and a marketing category. I use Adrienne Shaw's definition of the "hardcore gamer" as the most privileged type of gamer, who is usually assumed to be white, male, cisgender, and American ("On Not Becoming Gamers"). This definition is not always accurate, but the Triple-A game industry caters to this group. Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Grieg de Peuter describe this process as reciprocal, as the industry and its expected consumer base "circle around each other in a mating dance of mutual provocation and enticement" (*Digital Play* 196).
[30] In *Fallout 3*, the player-character escapes from an underground bunker to explore a post-apocalyptic Washington D.C. As my character tried to escape the Vault, my childhood bully begged me to help his mother, who was being attacked by radioactive cockroaches. I accidentally shot her. Her screams and the roaches' attacks as I struggled with the controls left me so disturbed that I turned off the console. I did not play the game for months. This accidental murder is one of my formative experiences of death in games.

my controller across the room in anger or horrify me enough that I will avoid a game? What about player-character death reflects racist and sexist stereotypes? More recently, many researchers interrogate conventional assumptions about death in games. These critics ask how players can meditate on mortality or process feelings of loss. Gary Westfahl's early insights reappear in work by Barry Atkins ("Killing Time: Time Past, Time Present and Time Future in *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*"), Jonathan Boulter ("Virtual Bodies, or Cyborgs are People Too" and *Parables of the Posthuman: Digital Realities, Gaming, and the Player Experience*), Klastrup ("Why Death Matters"), Helen W. Kennedy and Seth Giddings ("Little Jesuses and Fuck-Off Robots: On Aesthetics, Cybernetics, and Not Being Very Good at *Lego Star Wars*"), and Emily Flynn-Jones (*Death Smiles*; "Don't Forget to Die").[31] Westfahl and Atkins both assert that death in games can be powerfully symbolic. Boulter argues that the qualities that other critics use to dismiss death in games—its frequency, its ephemerality—are precisely what make play such a profound vehicle for meditations on death ("Virtual Bodies" 64). Kennedy and Giddings, as well as Flynn-Jones claim that death in games can cause complex and contradictory feelings in players. These critics encourage designers and players to explore player-character death's rich emotional, conceptual, and practical potential.

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[31] Klastrup's work spans two critical camps: her "What Makes *World of Warcraft* a World: A Note on Death and Dying" characterizes death in games as uninteresting, especially compared to player reactions to deaths of community members. "Why Death Matters," published in the same year, asserts that death in games is a rich topic. Juul has a similar change of heart regarding whether games can effectively incorporate suicide between publishing *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* and *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. He remains skeptical of death in games, however, still seeing it as a metaphor for failure. In contrast, Esplin, Tocci, and Schäfer ask whether death in games can enable personal meditations on death but find that, at least at the time of writing, this enabling seems not yet possible.

Critics like Sabine Harrer ("From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames Beyond Death as Failure," *Games and Bereavement*) and Tobi Smethurst ("Playing Dead in Video Games: Trauma in *Limbo*") take up that challenge and examine games' ability to help players confront and process loss and trauma. Critics like Bo Ruberg ("Permalife: Video Games and the Queerness of Living") and Amanda D. Phillips ("Shooting to Kill: Headshots, Twitch Reflexes, and the Mechropolitics of Video Games") apply Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, the social "power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" ("Necropolitics" 11) to game worlds.[32] In addition to these scholars, Tadhg Kelly and Jane McGonigal both assert that death is an essential part of gameplay, one that can change players' lives for the better. I believe we must acknowledge that death in games is neither innately good nor bad, but rather a powerfully persuasive force. While games like *Passage*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* explicitly encourage players to consider death through play,[33] even games that deal with death incidentally still send messages about death and mortality. Markers of difference like gender determine how player-characters and significant non-player-characters die. Men's deaths often express power, whereas

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[32] Mbembe's concept of necropolitics speaks to Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, which describes the myriad ways nation-states control the lives of their inhabitants (140). Mbembe's necropolitics interrogates not just literal death, but social death and other forms of subjugation. I came to Mbembe's work late in this project and I am indebted to scholars like Ruberg and Phillips for their work in this area.
[33] In *Passage*, the player-character ages as he walks across a screen. He may encounter a woman and walk with her. Eventually, she turns into a tombstone. The player-character may continue walking alone or simply wait until he too turns into a tombstone. The game is a brief meditation on the transience of life and human relationships. *That Dragon, Cancer* depicts the designers' loss of their young son to leukemia. It is a painful, empathic game that claims love transcends death. In *A Mortician's Tale*, a young mortician navigates her job at a small funeral home that is bought out by a large corporation. The game explores Caitlin Doughty's "death positivity" movement, which encourages the demystification of death so individuals can ask questions and make environmentally friendly, ethical end-of-life plans. All three of these games explore death powerfully, while being radically different from each other.

women's deaths display weakness. Moreover, the imaginative power that play exerts over identity means that players act out purported feminine weakness and men's supposed strength.[34] Ultimately, player-character death is not an artifact, a bad imitation, or a misguided lesson. Instead, such death is a rich, complex experience that reveals the underlying structures of power that reinforce hegemonic play.

0.2 Relevance, Methodology, and Scope

This project analyzes key game texts that use both player-character death and the deaths of important non-player-characters to reinforce hegemonic masculinity's status in mainstream game cultures. I interpret games and my gameplay on my home computer and gaming consoles. My analysis draws from my identity as a white, queer, non-binary disabled player. I combine feminist game studies criticism and work by Continental philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Georges Bataille to show how death in games reifies stereotypes about gender.

Play makes us vulnerable, and death-oriented game mechanics can highlight that vulnerability. In-game health, for example, represents a quantifiable, finite amount of vitality possessed by a character. The meter's existence suggests that it can be emptied: the character's health bar represents life as a finite resource subject to depletion. Entering these game worlds requires being subject to how they represent mortality: the player accepts risking player-character death as a cost of playing the game. This subjection can appear unexpectedly. An infamous example is the 1998 assassination of Richard

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[34] We must not overestimate the value of crossplay, in which a player's gender does not match that of the player-character. Crossplay's subversive possibilities are significantly curtailed by the structures of power and stereotypes that largely define mainstream game cultures.

Garriott's online persona, Lord British. Garriott is the co-creator of the early massively

multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG)[35] *Ultima Online*.[36] Garriott's efforts to

make Lord British difficult to kill in *Ultima* games only made players try harder.[37] In

Ultima Online, Garriott's privileged status meant that he was able to make his character

invulnerable. However, two serendipitous events—Garriott forgetting to reset his

invulnerability before an in-game speech and a player stealing and using a fire scroll—

led to Lord British's death during a beta test.[38] Lord British was supposed to be

invulnerable, but his existence was contingent on systems that contained the seeds of his

death.[39] Being in a game world means being subject to its rules—being fundamentally at

its systems' mercy—in ways that can surprise even developers.

Whether player-character death works as intended or not, it sends messages and, as I will

argue, establishes the limits of what kinds of deaths are possible for player-characters

based on gender and markedness more broadly. I assert that the death animations of male

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[35] A massively multiplayer online role-playing game allows an international player community to share a game world. *World of Warcraft* is an iconic MMORPG in which players choose one of two factions (the orc-led Horde or the human-dominated Alliance) and battle in Azeroth. First published in 2004, *World of Warcraft* continues to release new content.

[36] The *Ultima* series' fantasy role-playing games remains known as "an innovative model for early computer role-playing games" (Black 114). Largely centred around the player-character, "The Avatar," most games in the series invoke classic fantasy tropes and includes the powerful non-player-character Lord British, who is effectively Garriott's in-game avatar. In offline *Ultima* games, Lord British is a non-player-character controlled by the game. During the assassination in *Ultima Online*, however, Garriott was playing as Lord British.

[37] The famous assassination led to the so-called "Lord British Postulate" that states "If it exists as a living creature in an MMORPG, someone, somewhere will try to kill it" (Folmar 16). It would be superficial to shrug off the postulate as just proof that players are perversely aggressive. Instead, the postulate sheds light on how players understand that vulnerability is often the cost of existence in games.

[38] Beta testing is one of the last stages of software development, in which select users try the product prior to public release. Beta testing allows players to give developers feedback without risking fully launching a game before it is ready.

[39] In a *Reddit* Ask Me Anything thread years later, Garriott noted that at the time he was as surprised as anyone else by his sudden death ("I am Richard 'Lord British' Garriott, Creator of the Ultima franchise and Creative Director for Shroud of the Avatar. AMA").

(and assumed-to-be male) player-characters vary from heroic to humorous. Exclusively

female player-characters' deaths consistently characterize them as passive aesthetic

objects whose suffering and death are offered up for the player's enjoyment. My point

here is not merely that death in games is often sexist, but rather that its sexism reflects

and attempts to soothe anxiety about the ever-changing role of gender in mainstream

game cultures. Whether gender goes unmarked or highlighted, death in games often

reifies patriarchal values. Games that ignore gender often present white, heterosexual,

cisgender masculinity as neutral and unmarked. All other identities exist in contrast to

this normative masculinity. Mainstream game cultures are extremely sensitive to

deviations from their unmarked standards.[40] That sensitivity informs the degree to which

death in games can betray an anxiety about mainstream game cultures' increasing

diversity and enact curative, norm-enforcing spectacles.

My first chapter uses Hegel's concept of tarrying with death to explain how play sends

messages about death. While play can cultivate a player's sense of mortality and

encourage independent reflection on the topic, play can also send more authoritative

messages, including those enacted through procedural rhetoric.[41] For example, iconic

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[40] Part of my rationale for using markedness as a frame for understanding death in games comes from being so self-consciously a marked participant in mainstream game cultures since childhood. This project focuses largely on gendered markedness because of my positionality, but I want to be clear that gender is just one aspect of markedness that has received much more attention in game studies than equally important aspects like race and class. Scholars like Gray and Murray have done invaluable work in this area.

[41] Ian Bogost states that games are uniquely situated to express values because of their reliance on systems. His concept of "procedural rhetoric" is "a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (*Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* 3). Put simply, the way that systems like rules and mechanics structure a game presents arguments. A useful example is Italian design collective MolleIndustria's semi-abstract management game *To Build A Better Mousetrap*. In the game, the player controls a factory. To win the game, the player must adopt cutthroat capitalist and authoritarian tactics, including jailing jobless rioters. By defining success so narrowly and only allowing the player repressive tactics, the game presents the argument that capitalism cannot be ethical. Essentially, the game's structure makes its point.

death animations in *Super Mario Bros.*, *Dark Souls*, and *Tomb Raider* endorse the value

of resilience. However, the underlying assumptions upon which that endorsement

depends have a fundamentally sexist vision of death. I use Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

Hegel's work on death to illustrate how play cultivates a sense of player mortality. Hegel

might seem ill-suited to the subject of video games, but the way he frames death's

fundamental importance in our daily lives grounds my project. I take two key concepts

from Hegel's Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: his characterization of death as

"the ultimate Master" and his injunction to tarry with death to cultivate our sense of

mortality.[42] Hegel's work on death, including its reliance on maleness as an unmarked

norm, provides important context for Alexandre Kojève's characterization of Man as "a

death...more or less deferred" (44).[43] I apply Kojève's work to the player-character, who

is often constructed according to similarly unmarked norms. Critics have not applied

Hegel's work to death in games: I use his work to articulate how stereotypes about

gender reinforce themselves by shaping player-character death.

While the first chapter discusses the *Tomb Raider* series, the second chapter more fully

explores how the series demonstrates games' preoccupation with feminine suffering's

aesthetic value. Drawing on Boulter's application of Georges Bataille's "thinking on the

violence of the sacrament" to the deathmatch ("Virtual Bodies" 60),[44] I use Bataille's

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[42] Key critics of Hegel I use in this chapter include Alexandre Kojève, Françoise Dastur, and Sean Ireton.
[43] I should note that Kojève's commentary on Hegel also synthesizes work by Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger. I focus on Kojève's connection to Hegel.
[44] A deathmatch is a gameplay mode common in first-person shooters in which multiple players face off. The deathmatch is distinct from the battle royale because the former usually incorporates player-characters resurrecting after dying, while the latter does not. The winner of a deathmatch is the one who accumulates the most kills, while the winner of a battle royale is usually the last player left alive.

characterization of human sacrifice to frame the relationship between the player as a

sacrificer and the player-character as a victim. In Chapter One, the player-character is a

vehicle the player could use to tarry with death. However, the player's access to tarrying

is limited by how games uncritically perpetuate standards of markedness. Applying

Bataille's model of sacrifice to explicitly feminine player-characters shows how

established the spectacle of feminine-coded vulnerability, suffering, and death is in video

games. Historically, most women in games have been non-player-character damsels in

distress rescued by a heroic, male player-character. This ubiquitous plot device continues

to shape women's treatment as aesthetic objects rather than people in mainstream game

cultures, even when female characters are ostensibly protagonists. I interpret Lara Croft's

deaths as sacrificial scenes. While her deaths have always been aesthetic spectacles and

crucially understood as such,[45] the 2013 reboot *Tomb Raider* is explicitly *about* sacrifice.

The game's tepid critiques regarding sacrificing women, combined with its vivid

depictions of women's suffering, illuminate the narrow limits of how women can exist in

Triple-A games and mainstream game cultures.

Chapter Three applies this sacrificial model to the dad game, a subgenre in which the

previously unmarked norm of the white, male player-character is explicitly marked

through heroic fatherhood to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity's primacy. I focus on the

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[45] There is abundant content that acknowledges the cultural capital of Lara's death animations, from the British sitcom *Spaced* to developer commentary throughout the series' history.

Bioshock series, but also examine other dad games, including *The Last of Us*,[46]

Dishonored, *The Walking Dead: Season One*, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. Daughters'

vulnerable, suffering bodies are objects upon which male anxiety is displaced and

patriarchal legacies continue. At the same time, the father's heroic death promises that

patriarchal power can survive individual men's deaths. This chapter synthesizes the

marked identity and spectacular deaths discussed in Chapter One with Chapter Two's

exploration of how sacrifice models how death in games produces meaning. In dad

games, spectacular, appropriately masculine death self-consciously reasserts hegemonic

masculinity, which its supporters increasingly perceive as under threat. As noted by

Soraya Murray, unmarkedness is perceived incorrectly as "unthinking or oblivious in its

usage" (108).[47] Instead, cultural contexts betray a fixation on unmarked qualities that is

most visible in the treatment of the marked as deviant. The recent proliferation of dad

games and how they mark the previously unmarked white, heterosexual, cisgender male

player-character react to the perception that unmarked privilege is under threat. Even as

dad games use fatherhood to articulate hegemonic masculinity's perceived passing, they

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[46] I look only at *The Last of Us* and the *Left Behind* DLC. *The Last of Us 2*, released in 2020, features Ellie as a co-protagonist along with another woman named Abby. Early in the game, Abby kills Joel, the first game's chief protagonist and Ellie's father figure, to avenge her father's death. Afterward, Ellie pursues Abby, hoping to avenge Joel. The game's use of two female protagonists, one of whom is gay, is laudable. Even though each women's need to avenge her father leads her to make violent choices, the game emphasizes the evils of revenge, rather than questioning paternal legacies. Furthermore, as Maddy Meyers notes, "Naughty Dog makes its queer woman protagonist act just as violent and self-involved as the legions of grizzled straight-white-dude video game protagonists who have preceded her" ("*The Last of Us Part 2* Review: We're Better than This"). Putting Ellie in this role is not innately revolutionary. However, the harassment aimed at the game's developers and voice actors for the game's perceived feminist leanings illustrates the ongoing hostility to efforts to diversify games (Gach "*Last of Us 2* Developer Condemns Online Harassment of People Who Worked on the Game").
[47] Murray draws from Richard Dyer, who in turn refers to bell hooks' identification of the tendency of white individuals to respond angrily to being identified as having a race. hooks writes, "[t]hey have a deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness,' even as their actions reflect the primacy of whiteness as a sign informing who they are and how they think" (167).

nevertheless exhibit how the sexualized spectacle of feminine death reinforces the deeply entrenched, misogynistic treatment of women as aesthetic objects in games. In contrast, masculine death has a much broader range of affect, even as hegemonic masculinity radically forecloses men's emotional expressiveness and capacity to tarry with death.

I use Bataille's work on sacrifice in the second and third chapters because he bases his characterization of death on Hegel's model of being fundamentally subject to death and applies that characterization to embodied, gendered subjects. Where Hegel often refers to the rhetorical figure 'Man,' Bataille's interest in the erotically charged, violently sundered body acknowledges gendered difference. While Bataille draws on a binary model of gender, he opens space to discuss gendered depictions of death.[48] Whereas most of Chapter One's examples depict unmarked death, the sacrificial deaths in Chapters Two and Three mark gender stereotypes. Of the three central examples in Chapter One, *Super Mario Bros.* features an explicitly male player-character who dies an unmarked death. While the player-character in *Dark Souls* can be male or female, the game industry's reliance on the male-as-norm means that its deaths are similarly unmarked. In contrast, *Tomb Raider* and dad games feature explicitly gendered, marked death in a deeply fraught context. While games have always had female players, the unmarked white, heterosexual male protagonist's dominance was largely unchallenged in gaming's early decades. In recent years, the online harassment campaign Gamergate has responded with reactionary anger to increasing feminist criticism and efforts to diversify games.

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[48] Key critics who inform my reading of Bataille include Suzanne Guerlac, Judith Surkis, Carolyn Dean, Elisabeth Arnould, Benjamin Noys, Paul Hegarty, and Amy M. Hollywood. Boulter's application of Bataille's work to game studies is another important point of reference for these two chapters.

Explicitly gendered deaths in games express fundamentally similar anxieties about that hegemony's decay to perform its resurgence.

0.3 Conclusion

Ultimately, this dissertation explores how player-character death makes meaning and questions whom that meaning serves and whom it silences. Pushing back against the assertion that death in games is meaningless, this dissertation examines how player-character death produces meaning in an increasingly fraught cultural context. The unmarked subject in games has long been a white, heterosexual man, and its continued primacy means that unmarked death still abounds in games. In contrast, challenges to the ubiquity of the white, heterosexual male protagonist by fans, developers and critics generate massive fallout, largely manifesting as harassment aimed at women in games. I assert that marked player-character death reifies white heterosexual masculinity and expresses deep anxiety about the rise (both real and perceived) of the female protagonist and, even more worryingly, the female player. The female player-character's eroticized death and the heroic legacies of the dying male protagonist are corrective gestures aimed at returning games to an imagined past. *Celeste*'s cheery postcard is both a sign of hope and a warning. The game it comes from does not sexualize its female player-character when she dies: it is a possible path ahead for more equitable death in games. Nevertheless, as the message reminds us, "[t]he more you die, the more you're learning." It is essential to interrogate what exactly death in games tries to teach and what assumptions underlie those lessons.

Chapter 1

1   Playing Dead: Player-Character Markedness and Death Animations

1.1   Introduction: Death and Difference

This project's Introduction questions what death in games teaches players. Without

dismissing player-character death as repetitive and meaningless, or making alarmist

assertions about how it misleads impressionable players, I acknowledge that death in

games can be powerfully persuasive and that its messages matter. Death in games sends

many possible messages from the often-cited importance of resilience to reinforcing tired

stereotypes about gender or race.[49] I assert that player-characters whose identities mark

them as aberrant, particularly in terms of gender, die in ways that further marginalize

them. This chapter uses Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's work on death for two key

reasons. Firstly, Hegel's injunction to tarry with death provides a useful model for how

play might help players reflect on their vulnerability to death both in the game and in life

more broadly. Gameplay is often fundamentally about managing vulnerability. Examples

from a range of game genres, including the *Souls* series, *World of Warcraft*, and *Fallout

3*, show that death's centrality to games appears not only in explicit references but also in

design elements that highlight death's constant possibility. Secondly, I use Hegel's

characterization of death as a central element of life to look at how death defines the

player-character. I use Alexandre Kojève's description of Man as "a death [...] more or

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[49] Westfahl states that deaths in *Super Mario Bros.* teach the value of resilience (214). The idea that games are useful is a common defense in response to criticism that characterizes games as wasteful or harmful. Like Westfahl, many advocates for games like Jane McGonigal assert that games promote resilience.

less deferred" (44) to look at the tension inherent in the player-character whose deathliness can be uncomfortably obvious. I look at efforts to manage that tension in early first-person shooter games[50] like *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*. I intensify my analysis by examining "corpse protagonists," undead player-characters in the *Souls* series and *Planescape Torment,* whose zombielike appearance highlights the player-character's fundamentally death-oriented nature. These games foreground their player-characters' orientation toward death visually, narratively, and through core game mechanics.[51]

I use Hegel's work on death as a foundation for further feminist analysis of death and difference later in the chapter. Hegel's work and that of critics like Kojève reflect how many philosophical traditions treat death as an equalizing force divorced from markedness.[52] Similarly, video games often implicitly and explicitly define death as a universal human experience. However, in both cases, the supposedly all-encompassing standard is just an unmarked one, which is so thoroughly associated with the normative that it goes largely undiscussed. The two unmarked categories at play in this chapter even reflect each other: Hegel's Man could easily be mainstream game cultures' unmarked player. Much like how the term mankind is treated as generically human, while womankind describes only a subset of humanity, the Man that often stands in for the

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[50] The first-person shooter genre features first-person perspective combat focused on guns and other weapons. The genre is extremely popular and has received a great deal of media attention.

[51] Game mechanics are in-game actions that players take and the systems that control those actions. For example, mechanics in a platform game include running and jumping. Core mechanics are the most important of these in-game actions and often define the game's essence.

[52] The unmarked is a largely invisible norm that is almost never subject to the same attention and interrogation that the marked receives. One example is how white identity is often seen as not raced. Soraya Murray, drawing from Richard Dyer's work on how whiteness goes unmarked, notes "[t]he nonparticular status of white identity as normal or universal" (108). Whiteness carries the immense power of being 'just' normal in contrast to other, supposedly lesser deviations from that norm.

human race in philosophy, including Hegel's, suggests that being male is humanity's normative state while being female is an aberration. The rich history of feminist criticism in philosophy includes the recognition that whiteness, heterosexuality, and being cisgender are usually normative in the Eurocentric philosophical canon. Typically, the same qualities go unmarked in mainstream game cultures, in addition to constituting most player-characters. The normative privilege exhibited by unmarked player-characters' deaths shows how games present maleness as neutral and allow men to have a wider range of deaths compared to women. Women's marked death exhibits a much narrower scope of possibilities, largely reduced to theatrical vulnerability and suffering.

This chapter turns from analyzing how the unmarked category defines death in Hegelian philosophy and games to consider the lessons taught by three key death animations from *Super Mario Bros.*, *Dark Souls*, and *Tomb Raider.* I apply Ian Bogost's concept of "procedural rhetoric" to show how player-character death makes arguments, particularly endorsing the importance of resilience and an underlying assumption that in-game success is equally available to all players. The unspoken beliefs upon which the endorsements depend lend insight into how death in games reinforces hegemonic masculinity.[53] Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt define hegemonic masculinity as the "currently most honored way of being a man" in a particular cultural context, which requires "all other men to position themselves in relation to it" as part of the legitimation of "the global subordination of women to men" (832). Mainstream game

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[53] The term hegemonic masculinity draws from Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, in which ideologies that support the ruling class define a culture's 'common sense' values. While Connell does some initial work on hegemonic masculinity in *Masculinities*, I draw from her subsequent work with Messerschmidt, especially "Hegemonic Masculinities: Rethinking the Concept."

cultures are specific contexts that largely share the same hegemonic masculinity—prizing whiteness, heterosexuality, and being cisgender, in addition to militarizing masculinity and limiting emotions in men.[54] I assert that the lessons taught by normatively masculine player-characters' deaths reinforce their unmarkedness. At the same time, female player-characters' deaths and other marked deaths emphasize not merely their difference but also their subordinate status.

Play shapes what we have the capacity to imagine, what we perceive as possible, let alone likely. As discussed in the Introduction, distinctively different games like *Passage*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, and *A Mortician's Tale* enable personal reflection on death. These games make arguments that rely on underlying assumptions. Consider how *A Mortician's Tale* endorses the death positivity movement: the game prizes personal agency and characterizes capitalism, particularly industry restrictions for funeral homes, as inhibiting that agency. In contrast to independent productions like *A Mortician's Tale*, the Triple-A[55] games industry is a massive system in which unmarked and marked deaths have a cumulative, pernicious effect. They reveal how misogyny in mainstream game cultures reduces women's value to the aesthetic pleasure provided by their suffering.

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[54] For more on hegemonic masculinity in games, see Mia Consalvo's "The Monsters Next Door: Media Constructions of Boys and Masculinity," Gerald Voorhees and Alexandra Orlando's "Performing Neoliberal Masculinity: Reconfiguring Hegemonic Masculinity in Professional Gaming," and Rebecca Waldie's *"It was just a prank, Han!": Wendibros, Girlfriend Woes, and Gender Politics in* Until Dawn. For more on militarizing masculinity in games, see Gregory Blackburn's "Army Men: Militarized Masculinity in *Call of Duty*." Derek A. Burrill's *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, and Culture* provides a helpful broader overview of masculinity in games.

[55] As noted earlier, Triple-A describes critically, commercially successful games made by large companies.

1.2 Digging into Death with Hegel

Hegel's framing of death offers a useful model for how mortality defines the player-character. Hegel's characterizes the human as essentially male, which limits the model, but even that problem provides insight into a similarly unmarked category, namely the "hardcore gamer." Before proceeding, I want to explain Hegel's characterization of death and its importance to life. In Hegel's *Preface* to *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* itself, Hegel defines death as both a physiological reality and a concept that, if contemplated, may allow a person to live what he calls a fully human life. Hegel aligns the human with Spirit, a concept not easily definable but associated with self-consciousness, and with the self considered within its surroundings; living a fully human life requires that the individual considers both his existence and its inevitable cessation.[56] Hegel's two characterizations of death—death as physiological process and death as concept—affect each other, for the degree of our vulnerability to death, including factors such as health and access to medical care, unavoidably colours how people think about death. Katharine Loevy notes that Hegel explains "what natural death entails for the living, [but] we see in these later sections of the *Phenomenology* that what matters in the human encounter with death is how our confrontations with natural death may or may not constitute our relationship to human life more generally" (59). Loevy claims that in Hegel's philosophy, death defines the relationship between the individual

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[56] Modern feminist Hegelian criticism begins with Simone de Beauvoir's use of the master-slave dialectic in *The Second Sex*. Many feminist critiques of Hegel, like Luce Irigaray's "The Eternal Irony of the Community," focus on his references to the complementary role of the sexes. These responses range from Carla Lonzi's instruction to "spit on Hegel" ("Let's Spit on Hegel") to Nadine Changfoot's claim that the Hegelian subject resists gender codification ("Feminist Standpoint Theory, Hegel and the Dialectical Self").

and the community. What is most relevant here is the idea that how we think about death defines how we think about our own lives and the lives of others. In light of that idea, I assert that games can simulate Hegel's characterization of a fully human life lived in conscious proximity to death. Emily Flynn-Jones describes how this operates when she observes, "[a]s a player, I am constantly playing with the possibility of death" ("Don't Forget to Die" 50): death permeates daily life and gameplay. I acknowledge that permeation to show how games shape systems of meaning through their characterizations of death.

How games present death can be misleading at first glance. For example, critics like Bevan and O'Gorman cite multiple lives in games as evidence that death in games is cheaply valued. Ironically, the fact that a game may offer a player multiple lives highlights life's scarcity: when I play the classic platform game *Super Mario Bros.*, I have three lives, three chances to fail before play pauses. Initially, the fact that there are multiple lives seems to minimize the dread of death: critics like Bevan, O'Gorman, and Tocci believe so. Simultaneously, the limited number of lives—the pressure they add to play, the way they visibly count down on the screen as the player nears a Game Over— draws attention to the dread that powers my play. The number highlights the player's vulnerability and our constant proximity to death in the game as well as in life. The highlighting's cumulative effect is what interests me, much like how Jonathan Boulter characterizes play as melancholic because it repeats acts of mourning and creates a melancholic effect over time ("Virtual Bodies" 63).

When play repeatedly draws attention to death's constant potential, the player can be more attuned to death as an abstract concept and a possible, even unavoidable, outcome.

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Flynn-Jones describes "constantly playing with the possibility of death" as an intimate interaction between the individual and the death she imagines for herself ("Don't Forget to Die" 50). When I play the action roleplaying game *Dark Souls*, I am haunted by my player-character's curious mortality. In contrast to conventional death mechanics, the game does not invite me to load a save file or restart from a checkpoint when I die.[57] Instead, because my player-character has been cursed to resurrect after every death, she reappears at a bonfire.[58] Rather than being a return to life, this mechanic emphasizes the constant pressure of death's proximity that defines a *Souls* game. Death's omnipresence is exhausting. Like Hegel's human subject, the player-character labours under the dread of death: similarly to how Dastur claims death simultaneously produces individuality and limits potential (72), the player's exposure to death highlights her individuality, her way of being in this game world. Moreover, death in games provides illusory relief from the anticipation of death both inside and outside the game. Atkins writes, "[g]ame death must always be imminent, always be possible, always be round the next corner […] that imminent presence of death might even offer its own spectacular pleasure as we view the impossible event of our own demise" (249-50). When my player-character collapses in *Dark Souls*, I feel some small release of the tension I carry with me as a knowingly

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[57] In contrast to the arcade model, in which players pay for a limited number of retries on a public machine, games on home computers and consoles use save files. Saving preserves a player's progress through the game, including player-character information such as experience and abilities, items, and game objectives. Some games also use checkpoints, which are in-game locations where the player-character will reappear (or in game terminology, respawn). Many games use both: *Dark Souls* saves player progress and uses bonfires as respawn points. What makes the bonfire distinct is that the game's narrative acknowledges it and the merciless return to the bonfire characterizes the game's bleak sensibilities.

[58] The bonfire is an important mechanic in the series. Every time the player-character dies, they reappear at the last bonfire they visited. Bonfires allow players to replenish health, spend currency on upgrades including leveling up and upgrading equipment, and instantly transport to other bonfires. The return to the fire refreshes your health-restoring Estus Flasks but also revives all defeated enemies.

mortal person. The 'impossible' moment of seeing myself die is a momentary relief, stolen by the return to the bonfire and anxious anticipation of the next death. By foregrounding the player-character's resurrection as a curse, *Dark Souls* draws attention to how many games rely on this dread of death and its temporary release. This rhythm can feel agonizingly intimate.

This intimacy with death does not merely thrill; instead, playing with death can cultivate one's sense of mortality. In the *Preface*, Hegel argues that "[t]he life of the Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. [Spirit] wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself" (19). He explains that for a life to rise above mere animal vitality, an individual must embrace awareness of death, even if it is devastating.[59] That disarray caused by acknowledging death is the key to self-understanding. However, it is not human nature to be aware of mortality constantly. Therefore, the effort to consciously endure the fear of death is a lifelong project that we return to until life ends.

For Hegel, "utter dismemberment" refers to the complete devastation of being aware of our unavoidable subjection to death; what he calls "the life of the Spirit" is a life in which the self is torturously aware of its mortality.[60] Simon Critchley explains that what "Hegel calls the Life of the Spirit (*das Leben des Geistes*) is this magical power (*Zauberkraft*) to live through the negative, to produce experience out of a labor of negation.… Thus, the

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[59] The individual to whom Hegel refers is male. Beginning with section 1.5, this chapter explores the male-as-norm problem, including de Beauvoir's criticism of Hegel on the subject.
[60] Achille Mbembe emphasizes the importance of risk in Hegel's formulation and notes how the very real danger of death faced by people subjugated by systems of power attempts to efface, rather than confirm their humanity ("Necropolitics" 14).

Subject produces itself through a relation with death; the Life of the Spirit endures death and maintains itself in death" (53). Like Dastur, Critchley emphasizes that in Hegel's philosophy, dismemberment paradoxically produces the subject.

My reading considers dismemberment[61] in two senses, namely the metaphorical and the literal. Hegel's state of dismemberment is largely metaphorical: the self's dismemberment results from knowing oneself to be partial and mortal. However, the literal sense of dismemberment is also relevant, particularly as applied in Georges Bataille's work.[62] For Bataille, the state of dismemberment resembles more closely the typical meaning of the word: to live in a state of dismemberment is to feel like a violated body. Hegel's state of dismemberment occurs in play more generally: the player-character moves in a world largely defined by the possibility of death. In contrast, the moment of a player-character's death more closely resembles Bataille's physical sense of dismemberment. Player-character death can be a moment of visceral dismemberment, a violent spectacle erupting within play. This spectacle does not merely delight. It also sends messages.

Before addressing those messages, I want to examine the spectacle itself. This spectacle of dismemberment is literal in the case of "gibs" deaths, characterized by Aurelio Reis as "bloody chunks and body parts, so called 'gibs' (or giblets)" (264). Gibs deaths provide a visceral reminder of the body's fragility and transfigure Hegel's broader sense of ruin in

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[61] Later chapters will address dismemberment read through the lens of sacrifice, but for now, the essence of Hegel's sense of dismemberment is the choice to live consciously and painfully amidst the threat of death. Player-character death is a form of Bataille's dismemberment—often literally—in which the opportunity to tarry with death culminates in spectacular fashion.

[62] I address Bataille further in Chapter Two and Three.

spiritual dismemberment and Bataille's physical rupture. Simultaneously, gibs deaths, like ragdoll physics deaths, can be ridiculous: I have vivid memories of watching my brother and his friends play multiplayer mode[63] in the first-person shooter *Turok 2: Seeds of Evil*.[64] The game features a weapon called a "cerebral bore," which launches a projectile that bores into the target's head, producing large sprays of blood before exploding. The high-pitched sound of the bore and the splattering sound reinforce the gibs death's characteristic gore.[65] Gibs deaths are extreme: they frequently operate at the level of parody. However, there is a broad range of player-character deaths: the moment need not be gory to be a spectacle.

If the moment of death—spectacular and gory or understated and bloodless—is Bataille's sense of dismemberment writ large, then the bulk of play, the effort to stave off death, is dismemberment in Hegel's sense. Managing that vulnerability prolongs play. *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), provides an example of how much onscreen information monitors risk and violence (Figure 1).

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[63] In contrast to single-player, in which one player typically plays against the game's enemies or environment, sometimes called "PvE," multiplayer modes allow multiple players to compete with each other ("player versus player or PvP" mode) or collaborate.

[64] In the 1997 release, *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, the player-character is Tal'Set, an Indigenous, time-traveling warrior who has inherited the mantle of "Turok, Son of Stone." *Turok 2: Seeds of Evil* is a similar game, but also includes multiplayer modes in which players can compete against each other.

[65] Similarly, Amanda D. Phillips analyzes the gory spectacle of the headshot, in which an in-game's character's head explodes from being shot, in "Shooting to Kill: Twitch Reflexes, and the Mechropolitics of Video Games."

Figure 1. Screenshot taken by author of *World of Warcraft Classic*, Blizzard, 2019.

The screen shows my player-character's health and magic points in the upper left corner,

as well as the health of the enemy I have selected. Non-player characters' names are

colour-coded by whether they are friendly (green), neutral (yellow), or hostile (red). This

colour-coding immediately indicates whether the non-player character can damage or kill

my player-character. Similarly, other components of the *WoW* heads-up display (HUD)[66]

are concerned with alerting the player to risk, including showing incoming attacks that

may be interrupted and making the margins of the screen glow red when the player-

character is close to dying. These signifiers are reminders of vulnerability, even while a

character is unharmed. The game repeatedly reminds the player that play means being

concerned with death, of being dismembered in the Hegelian sense.

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[66] The heads-up display (HUD) is a transparent overlay onscreen that displays relevant information. It might include the health bar, information about resources like ammunition, and a miniature map to help players locate objectives, as it does in the image above.

One term that Hegel uses for this imaginative work of being with death is "*verweilen*," which is often translated as "tarrying." By granting us symbolic access to our mortality, player-character death could allow us to follow the Hegelian injunction in the *Phenomenology* of "looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it" (19). There is an essential ambiguity in the act of tarrying. To tarry connotes delay.[67] This sense of a deferred exit suggests liminality: one who tarries is perhaps neither quite here nor gone, neither fully present nor absent. Hegel does not refer to playfulness in the *Phenomenology*. However, I believe that play has a similar ambiguity to tarrying. The player lost within play is simultaneously present and absent. As noted previously, both Huizinga and Gadamer characterize play as a movement in which the player is lost, overtaken by the experience of play, neither fully present nor absent. It is an activity marked by ambiguity. The much-praised concept of flow is this attentive ambiguity in action: Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's coining of the term "flow" describes a state in which someone seems absorbed in a task. That absorption is both an intense focus and an absence from the space outside play. I assert play might be a way of tarrying, of abiding. Kojève writes that tarrying "is this 'abiding' with death that *real-izes* Negativity and inserts it into the natural World in the form human *being*" (46).[68] According to Kojève, tarrying with death can make death as real as it can ever be to the living mind. Even more importantly, the "form human being" to which Kojève refers has a clear analogue in the

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[67] Consider how in Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat" one says to the other, "O let us be married! too long we have tarried" (line 14). Here the word suggests a pleasant dalliance.
[68] Brent Adkins asserts that the Negative is a constitutive lack (an absence of something, and it is that absence that defines us) that we try to overcome (6). In Hegelian criticism more broadly, the Negative is understood as that which is opposed to something, like the response to an idea that elevates it into a better form. For Kojève, the Negative is the power of negation, which he describes as acts of opposition and undoing that incorporate death as an essential component of language.

player-character, whom the player inhabits in order to tarry with death. I assert that the choice to approach death by playful means using the player-character could be a method of tarrying with death, of experiencing Hegelian dismemberment. The player-character's death, which is that tarrying's Bataillean culmination, temporarily releases the anxious tension caused by our conscious proximity to death. However, before analyzing that moment of player-character death in the latter half of this chapter, I will explicate the links between tarrying and play.

For the moment, let us assume that tarrying is equally accessible to every player. Instead of defeating death, the player tarries with it. A player who tarries with death does not attempt to master it, but to abide with it. This seeming lack of a struggle appears to ignore how Hegel characterizes death as "the absolute Lord" and the ultimate master of humanity (117). However, the struggle does not occur because the tarrying player accepts this subjection. Playing is submission, not merely to the rules of play, but to play itself. The loss of the player in play is similar to Hegel's description of the self being overcome by awareness of death in which "the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness" (117). Hegel characterizes this lostness as the prerequisite to the life of the Spirit.

I contend that tarrying with death through play allows imaginative access to trembling in the face of death. In this way, play helps the player approach consciousness of death and the self. Dastur writes that "attainment of humanity as such is possible only through confrontation with death, that 'absolute master,'" and that "this implies precisely the human being's ability to raise itself above mere animal life, to put its entire being at risk

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in order to achieve consciousness of itself as a free being" (25). Dastur claims that one

becomes human by confronting death. Similarly, play allows the player to claim an

identity within a game, one subject to the game's rules. All entrances into a game-world

resemble a kind of being born into the game. The beginning of *Fallout 3* styles character

creation as a natal experience. The opening sequence widens from a close-up of a radio in

which an incandescent bulb flickers into brightness. The shot draws back further to reveal

a burned-out bus in an apocalyptic landscape. After briefly summarizing the series'

backstory, the narration links birth and mortality by telling the player, "It is here you

were born. It is here you will die." The screen cuts to black, accompanied by the sound of

a heartbeat. Light floods the scene, dappled with a bloody film as a newborn—the player-

character—screams. A man soon revealed to be the player's father begins the character

creation process by asking, "Are you a boy or a girl?" This question assumes a binary of

view of gender, and its place as the first question in the character creation process

implicitly indicates that the choice of one of the two possible answers is the most

fundamental aspect of a player-character's identity. This player-character is born into the

world, and subsequent steps in the creation process take place as the player-character

grows up. At each pause in the character creation process, the player learns more about

the rules of the world, from the quantification of Luck as an attribute alongside Strength,

Perception, Endurance, and others, to a binary view of gender.[69] Boulter identifies the

source of player fascination with this character creation session as its "explicitly

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[69] Despite its prominent placement in the character creation process, gender does not largely change gameplay in *Fallout 3*, with one exception. Gender determines whether the player-character can choose to the Lady Killer or Black Widow perk: each perk provides a small damage bonus against and special dialogue options with the opposite sex. The Black Widow perk is slightly more useful, given the higher ratio of male to female enemies.

allegor[izing] the idea that to begin a game is to be born into a new world," though he

notes that "not all games begin with literalizing the birth metaphor" (*Parables* 21).

Fallout 3's birth allegory literalizes what other game beginnings make implicit. Entry

into the game means becoming subject to its rules and tarrying with its visions of death.

Some linguistic context provides insight into tarrying's ambiguity. What A. V. Miller

translates as "tarrying" is "*verweilen*" in the original text of the *Preface*. Sean Ireton

offers alternative interpretations, such as "linger[ing] or abid[ing]," but notes that "[a]ll of

these idioms are alternative ways of articulating what one might call a *cultivation* of

death. To cultivate death means neither to deny it nor to embrace it completely. […] This

perhaps can be best described as a continual reckoning with the possibility of death" (49-

50). For Ireton, *verweilen* suggests a state of *being with* something (influenced by another

important word from Hegel's original text, *Aufheben*).[70] Ireton's use of 'linger' and

'abide' mirror both J. B. Baillie's earlier translation ("dwelling") and Pinkard's later

translation ("lingering"). Baillie's, Ireton's, and Pinkard's translations of "*verweilen*" all

emphasize the self's intimate proximity to death. All the *Phenomenology's* major

translators, Miller included, see the self and death as companions rather than enemies,

even as Hegel characterizes death as the ultimate master. Ireton's sense of "reckoning"

incorporates both senses; I argue that this reckoning might occur if players dwell with the

possibility of death in the intimacy of the game world.

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[70] *Aufheben* is a term Hegel uses that has seemingly contradictory meanings, both to negate and to preserve. Ireton notes that literally, *aufheben* means "to lift up" (45). Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung* is that process of synthesis by which, for an example, an idea and its negation—the process of examining and finding flaws—resolve into higher understanding

Tarrying in the face of death means to maintain a state of Hegelian dismemberment in which one's self and body are revealed not to be an inviolate perfect whole but rather partial, incomplete aspects of ourselves, subject to the threat of death. My sense of tarrying does not aim to refute the criticism that play is a symbolic mastery of death. Instead, tarrying in the face of death affirms Seth Giddings and Helen W. Kennedy's belief that player-character death contains aspects of both mastery and submission. Flynn-Jones draws from Giddings and Kennedy's claim that *Doom* creator John Romero's ability to play *Pac-Man* blindfolded is the result of being trained by the game and being "mastered" by it (19). The common interpretation of skilled gameplay as mastery overlooks how skill often depends on subjection. To excel at *Dark Souls*, I must practice movements like dodging and keeping my shield ready to block. I have committed hours trying to be a better *Dark Souls* player, but my number of hours logged still pales in comparison to other players I know. Practically, players spend that time entering the game and agreeing implicitly to abide by its rules, including the player-character's mortal vulnerability. That subjection—that embrace of sometimes-punishing vulnerability—is a necessary step to learning to excel at the game. Success requires this proximity to death.

Translations of Dastur provide a vivid phrasing: she calls tarrying an attempt to "make" or, as in the second of two examples, "[let] death be" (30, 53). 'Making death be' requires some subterfuge, however. Hegel writes that in death, the self "does not return into consciousness; consciousness does not survive the renunciation, is not *in and for itself*, but merely passes over into its unreconciled opposite" (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 308). Death eliminates the being that dies. Death can be anticipated or meditated upon, but the

self cannot experience it directly. Instead, the death of the player-character allows the player to simulate "mak[ing] death be." To articulate this process, we must consider how death defines the player-character.

1.3 "I am Death Incarnate!": The Player-Character as Death Deferred

Wolfenstein 3D begins with a question that allies skill with a sense of being like death. Its difficulty settings depend on the player's answer to the question: "How tough are you?" (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot taken by author of *Wolfenstein 3D*, id Software, 1993.

The answers for easier settings are infantilizing ("Can I play, Daddy?") or submissive ("Don't hurt me"), accompanied by images of the player-character wearing a bonnet and sucking a soother in the first instance and looking fearful in the second. The second-hardest setting answers with machismo, "Bring 'em on!" However, the answer I find most compelling is the one that represents the hardest setting, in which the player answers, "I am Death incarnate!" The set-up of the question and answer, complete with

illustration, is silly posturing. However, it also offers a way of conceiving of the player-character as, in *Wolfenstein 3D*'s phrasing, death incarnate.

There is some serendipity at work here. Kojève writes that Man[71] is "in his human and speaking existence, only a *death*: [a death] more or less deferred, and conscious of itself" (44). In Kojève's estimation, Man is death incarnate. What does it mean to use play not merely to "make death be" but to "be" death? Deferral is essential here. Like Kojève's Man, the player-character's continued existence depends on deferring death. Even if the on-screen meter registers full health, its presence signals that the player-character is subject to injury and death. To play the game means that the player must both stave off death for the moment and acknowledge its inevitability. I should clarify that a player-character need not be guaranteed to die for a game to have this sense of deferral. Game design relies on the skillful manipulation of player optimism for deferral to seem possible. Atkins writes that arcade machines must "[offer] enough information to the player so that they [believe] that next time they [will] overcome the challenge and be able to sustain their period of play" (246). Play promises deferral, even in moments of failure.

In-game mechanics like health bars acknowledge that play defers death. As discussed, the structures that allow the player-character's continued existence are often health metaphors. Like Kojève's Man, the player-character is a death deferred, a death-in-waiting. Visual elements like numbers indicate how close the player-character is to dying.

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[71] While Kojève's interpretations of Hegel are widely cited, they contain additions to Hegel's work. Kojève imagines material, historical conditions for the master-slave dialectic, heavily influenced by Karl Marx's work. Similarly, Kojève's Man is socioeconomically and historically situated to a greater degree than Hegel's Man.

The health meter both represents how the player-character's existence depends on deferral and reduces vitality to points on a scale. The famous action-adventure roleplaying series *The Legend of Zelda* series has used iconic hearts to represent player-character health since the series' beginning. Once the red hearts empty, the player-character Link dies. Variations on this system exist across video game genres, including role-playing games, action-adventure games, platform games, and first-person shooter games.[72]

The health bar is such a common mechanic that it has many variations, like the Synchronization bar in the action-adventure stealth series *Assassin's Creed*,[73] in which injuries to the player-character reflect deviations from the historical events that the player-character re-enacts. With too low a Synchronization level, the game ends. Similarly, the Confidence Meter in the legal-themed adventure game series *Ace Attorney* shrinks in response to mistakes made while questioning witnesses. A fully depleted bar causes a guilty verdict for the player-character's client. These variations measure the maximum number of errors allowed before the player dies or otherwise fails. However, the characterization of health as a depletable resource draws attention to how play requires vulnerability. The average player-character's vitality might also include remaining lives, which are essentially full units of health. When that health is entirely depleted, the game prompts the player to restart from a checkpoint, load a saved game, or

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[72] A player-character's presence often heralds death. Compare the genres listed above with a puzzle game with no player-character. Player-characters that lack measurable health tend to appear in puzzle adventure games like *Day of the Tentacle* and "walking simulators" like *Gone Home* that focus on exploration rather than combat. Usually, if a player-character exists in the game world, it can be injured, and upon receiving enough injury to deplete hearts, life points, or other indications of vitality, it can die.
[73] Stealth games include avoiding direct combat in favour of infiltrating spaces and using surprise attacks.

stop playing altogether.[74] Health meters literalize the degree to which a player-character

must be subject to death to exist in the game: playing, like living, is a process of deferring

death.[75]

This deferral is a conscious effort on the player's part. However, too much emphasis on

deferral can make play feel oppressive. The essential problem here is the degree to which

the player is aware of their player-character's mortality. Kojève writes that on a

phenomenological level, "Man 'appears' as a being who is always conscious of his death,

[who] often freely accepts it, and, aware of what he is doing, sometimes inflicts it on

himself" (37).[76] I assert that Man's consciousness of his mortality resembles the player

controlling a player-character. A general awareness of mortality is not precisely the same

as tarrying with death. However, acceptance of mortal vulnerability is part of the contract

of play: to play, we frequently take on the burden of highly visible health indicators. We

acknowledge subjection as the cost of in-game existence. These representations of the

player-character's proximity to death range from the visual meters discussed above to

auditory cues such as an alarm that sounds if the player-character is about to die or the

sound of the player-character's breathing growing heavier as their injuries accumulate.

The popular early first-person shooter *Doom* features multiple auditory and visual cues.

The player-character grunts and bellows with pain when injured. A portrait of the player-

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[74] As noted by Atkins, many games incorporate death in such a way that the game is not so much interrupted as it transitions to another aspect of play: combat may be interrupted but the game continues (239).

[75] Cheating can make a vulnerable player-character effectively immortal but does so by fundamentally altering a game's rules. For more, see Consalvo's *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*.

[76] Kojève refers to suicide here. I do not theorize player-character death as a kind of suicide. For more on suicide in games, see Juul's *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* and *The Art of Failure*, as well as J.P. Grant's "Life After Death."

character changes according to his remaining health: as he nears death, his face is increasingly injured. Additionally, the game displays the player-character's remaining health in large red numerals (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Screenshot taken by author of *Doom*, id Software, 1993.

The face of the "Doomguy" is the central image in the heads-up display and appears just below the weapon currently equipped, which is a typical focal point in gameplay. *Doom*'s heads-up display uses the face to highlight the player-character's vulnerability. At full health, the face appears uninjured and confidently arches one eyebrow at a time, as if scanning the game's landscape. The face looks increasingly injured as the health percentage decreases. This visual cue is not merely a warning sign but an exhortation to stave off death a little longer. *Doom* is a hugely influential game, but its use of the face as a status indicator is not as widespread as the other genre conventions it codifies. *Doom* lays bare, perhaps too bare, what the many games that follow it only allow to be implicit, namely that to play games like these is to see the player-character's proximity to death

prominently displayed, whether on the HUD or indicated by other cues in the game. This display makes the centrality of death to play an explicit issue for the player: their key aim in play is to defer death, but in doing so, a sense of death becomes omnipresent.

Like Kojève's Man, who often freely accepts his death, the player chooses to play within the parameters of the game, which may require the player-character to be mortal. When I choose to play *Demon's Souls*, I accept the rules that determine how my player-character can frequently die. Kojève's Man dies once, but the fact that the player repeatedly experiences player-character death does not render this death unimportant or unrelated to human mortality. In fact, player-character death's repetition enables its persuasive power, as well as the ritualistic fascination explored in Chapter Two and Three's examinations of sacrifice and gender.

1.4 "The Skull Beneath the Skin": Corpse Protagonists

Many games use the deferral of death as play's central goal. The player tarries in proximity to death, and sometimes that tarrying culminates in dismemberment. The game's plot and themes may vary, but the player's immediate task remains constant. However, some games embrace death-deferral at a narrative, as well as a mechanical level by making the player-character undead. In the roleplaying game *Planescape Torment*, the action roleplaying game *Demon's Souls* and its sequels *Dark Souls*, *Dark*

Souls 2, *Bloodborne*, and *Dark Souls 3*, corpse-like protagonists[77] literalize Kojève's

reading of man as his own death incarnate. These games each feature a corpse protagonist

that, like Kojève's Man, is "[a] death that lives a human life" (46). I assert that the

characterization of deathliness as a core component of player-character identity more

broadly erases the realities of difference. My interpretation draws from Angela Ndalianis'

characterization of the player as a necromancer. She writes that in play, "[w]e don't just

'interact,' we actually undergo a state that's akin to entering someone else's skin and, in

the process, we *animate* previously inanimate matter…When it comes down to it, the

avatar and the modern variation of the zombie aren't all that different" (45). Ndalianis'

characterization of the player and player-character relationship frames the player as a

possessing force that controls the in-game body.

Planescape Torment's corpse protagonist literalizes Ndalianis' description of the player-

character and shows how the game models death as the untouchable heart of play:

funerary trappings define the player-character and his world, but death itself eludes him.

The scarred, pale, corpse-like protagonist begins the game in a mortuary, waking up on a

stone table with no memory. A floating skull named Mort informs him that he has come

back from death and that he has done so many, many times. Called "The Nameless One,"

the protagonist resurrects at the cost of his memories and the life of another who dies in

his place. What this immortality entails is a recurring near-death experience, with no

hope of a final rest. The game models play as an impossible arc toward death. The

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[77] Other examples of corpse protagonists include Sir Daniel Fortesque in the *MediEvil* series and the eponymous *Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse*. There are several multiplayer games with variations on the 'zombie mode,' which allows players to control zombies and attack other players. These include the *Left 4 Dead* series, *Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare*, and *Dying Light*.

Nameless One wants to solve the mystery of his current condition, and, later, to die without resurrecting. He then pursues a permanent death by chasing a non-player character who embodies his mortality. In the game's canon ending,[78] he convinces his mortality (called The Transcendent One) to unite with him, and he enters a hellish afterlife modelled on an unending war. The Nameless One tarries with death as he pursues his mortality, but even his 'final' end is just another continuation of his tarrying. Steeped in funerary trappings and gothic sensibilities, the game presents death-deferral as an unavoidable burden. This burden unites not merely The Nameless One and the Transcendent One but also makes explicit that all players and player-characters share this labour in games more broadly. The game paints all players as fundamentally similar, united by their shared mortality. Death erases difference just as The Nameless One's scars obfuscate the details of his body, and his deaths threaten the details of his memory.

Dark Souls also characterizes death as a universalizing force. Its player-character, called The Chosen Undead, is similarly corpselike and housed in a sepulchral prison, but in *Dark Souls*, being fundamentally death-oriented is a kind of pandemic. In *Dark Souls*, the player-character first appears in the Undead Asylum, a prison in which the Undead[79] wait to go mad.[80] Even after escaping, The Chosen Undead finds a decaying world populated with other Undead. Online play increases that sense of being surrounded by the shades of other player-characters. These spectres range from brief impressions of movement that

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[78] In this case, the canon ending is the one considered to be an official part of the game's narrative.
[79] In the game, the word "Undead" is both a singular and plural noun. The word is rarely used as an adjective but rather as a mass identity (as in "the Undead") that has absorbed the player-character's individual identity.
[80] Undead who have fully given themselves over to their curse are called "Hollow Undead." The player-character cannot speak with them but can only interact with them as hostile non-player characters.

suggest how other player-characters died to potential invasions by hostile players called Black Phantoms. Deathliness is inescapable even as a final death remains elusive. Normally, The Chosen Undead resembles an animated corpse. However, an item called Humanity can change the player-character's appearance and increase in-game attributes like health and stamina. This change of appearance does not return the player-character to life, however. After another death, their humanity recedes, showing the Undead face underneath. Their deathly nature can be obscured but never changed: paraphrasing T. S. Eliot, like Webster, we see "the skull beneath the skin" ("Whispers of Immortality" line 2). Death is always present under the surface, always just beyond the task of deferral, and the reappearance of the player-character's Undead form reminds the player of their constant arc towards and inability to truly experience death.

Both *Planescape Torment* and *Dark Souls* begin in grave-like locations intended to isolate the dead from the living, but which ultimately cannot contain them. Death produces their identity and defines the core of their purpose in the world, much as it does for Kojève's Man. In both games, player-character deathliness ostensibly strips away identity by degrees for *Planescape Torment*'s amnesiac protagonist and The Chosen Undead of *Dark Souls*. At a literal level, death obscures individual details like facial features, transforming them into the distorted, waxy face of a corpse. At a metaphorical level, death erases difference and unites its players under this macabre mass identity. Nevertheless, their orientation toward death defines their narratives and goals. These games make literal truth out of death's centrality to player-character identity more broadly. As I have mentioned, death-deferral is often a player-character's main goal. In these examples, deathly imagery defines the player-character at both a mechanical and

narrative level, even as death itself remains elusive. Deathliness strips away memory but constitutes essential identity to produce player-characters who, like Hegel's Man, are defined by death, and, like Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's Man, are death incarnate. When player-characters like *Wolfenstein 3D*'s announce themselves as death incarnate, the claim reveals how death is gameplay's untouchable core. Death is not exterior to gameplay, but a constitutive part of it.

Similarly to how death strips these player-characters of individual identity, both games and philosophy often use death to make grand, sweeping statements that minimize important details. *Planescape Torment*'s focus on death frames its central question, "What Can Change the Nature of Man?" At one level, this question is a profound philosophical inquiry. However, at another, it is a rhetorical move that substitutes "Man" for humanity and minimizes the fact that humanity is not solely male. The question embodies Simone de Beauvoir's observation that "humanity is male" (xxii). Furthermore, its gendered rhetoric resembles many discussions of death, including some of the philosophical work I have discussed here. In fairness, much of what Hegel and Kojève (and subsequent critics) say about death is true for a mortal subject regardless of its identity. However, mortality's universality should not be used to deny the importance of particularity and difference. Player-character death's persuasiveness frequently draws on assumptions about the universal human experience that frame white, heterosexual masculinity as neutral and natural, and sometimes mark deviations from that standard with especially violent deaths. Before further articulating the relationship between death and difference in gaming, I want to shift this chapter's focus to examine the persuasive power of death in games. Building on the previous section's articulation of death in

games' symbolic richness and philosophical resonance, I will examine how player-character death endorses key values but also reinforces harmful stereotypes.

1.5   Iconic Deaths: *Super Mario Bros.* and *Dark Souls*

What lessons do players bring back from attempts to tarry with death more broadly and specific moments of Bataillean dismemberment in which the player-character dies?[81] The question of what players learn from games prompts moral panics as well as impassioned defences. What they learn about death is a perennial source of worry.[82] Westfahl acknowledges the concern that critics might see exposing young players to symbolic death as "psychologically damaging" (213). However, he goes on to assert that Mario's many deaths teach positive values like resilience, decisiveness, and altruism. More recent game advocates like McGonigal continue this line of argument by emphasizing that games teach players how to persevere through difficulty. Like Westfahl and McGonigal, I argue that games endorse values, but it is essential to acknowledge that these values are not purely good or bad. To examine unmarked death in games, I will look at two famous death animations, one from *Super Mario Bros.* and one from *Dark Souls*. I analyze each at three levels, namely the practical design purposes the death serves, the values it promotes, and its broader philosophical ramifications. These examples contextualize how marked death marginalizes some player-characters.

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[81] In this project's Introduction, I quote the game *Celeste*, which tells the player, "The more you die, the more you're learning." The player learns how to play the game more effectively through trial and error. However, death in games is not just instructive in terms of gameplay, but also makes implicit arguments.
[82] For more on moral panics and video games, see Carly Kocurek's "The Agony and the Exidy" and Patrick M. Markey and Christopher J. Ferguson's *Moral Combat: Why the War on Violent Video Games is Wrong*.

Before proceeding further, some context is necessary. The first of these death scenes

comes from the *Super Mario* series. It is hard to overstate *Super Mario*'s importance to

the games industry and player cultures since the first appearance of Jumpman (Mario's

initial incarnation) in the arcade game *Donkey Kong* in 1981. Mario has since appeared in

hundreds of games, and his death's visual and auditory elements are nearly as famous as

his iconic mustache and hat. *Super Mario Bros*., the second in the series, is a platform

game focused on timing and agility. The game features numerous enemies and

environmental traps, and Mario can die when he contacts either. Mario can kill enemies

by jumping on them or running into them when invincible, but if he merely runs into

them normally, he dies. This version of Mario effectively has a single unit of health; if he

runs into an enemy, he dies immediately (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Screenshot taken by author from ProsafiaGaming's "Evolution of Mario Deaths
and Game Over Screens (1981 – 2017)." youtube.com/watch?v=rRJLlMqBemc. (0:38)

Upon making contact with an enemy, Mario turns to face the player with comically

splayed limbs, then he rises upward and drops down to the so-called "Death Sound," also

known as the "Power Down" theme (Schartmann 97).[83] Notably, Mario does not stop at the ground; instead, he drops below the edge of the screen. If Mario has no lives left, the "Game Over" theme plays, and the screen reads "Game Over" in pixelated white font against a black background. This screen changes to the game's menu, inviting the player to restart the game. This pattern—the turn to face the player, the rise of Mario's body, and the fall through the screen, accompanied by the iconic music composed by Koji Kondo, as well as the variation when Mario is out of lives—remains largely consistent in 2D platform versions of *Super Mario* games. Later 3D versions incorporate the fall through the bottom of the screen. Put simply, the specific visuals and sounds of Mario's death are ingrained in mainstream game cultures. Some players have been playing Mario and watching him die over nearly forty years.

The conventions of representing death in visual media shape what players expect from and how they interpret death scenes in games. Mario's death scene is recognizable because of its iconic status in game cultures, but also because it both draws from and violates these conventions. Lisbeth Klastrup notes that "[t]he prototypical death experience" in games, particularly its staging of when the body "drops dead," uses "cultural conventions from the real world in the *depiction* of death. Grounding the staging of death in a corporeal experience may help inform the emotional identification with an imagined 'real' death experience" ("Why Death Matters"). At first, Mario's deaths

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[83] Due to the home console's technological limits, this animation does not give Mario's face much detail. However, in the arcade release *Mario Bros.*, Mario's death animation shows his mouth open in surprise, adding to his death's comic tone. Most games released after *Super Mario Bros.* include similar details, such as drops of sweat or Mario's warble of distress. Generally, as technology improves, Mario's comic distress becomes increasingly detailed, but not more realistic.

resemble the player's expectations, which draw from a lifetime of exposure to other visual media in which the crumpled, falling body symbolizes death. Klastrup argues that this recognizable image helps the player invest emotionally in the death onscreen. However, Mario's death (and its many imitators) subverts this convention. Instead, Mario's body first rises and then falls through the bottom of the screen; this motion differs from conventional depictions of death across media.

While Mario's death includes enough conventional elements to be recognizable as a death scene, it also contains unexpected movements that make his death distinct. A core component to Mario's death is its capacity to encourage the player to return to play and its framing of the return to play as an expression of resilience. The rise and fall, as well as the musical cues, all try to motivate the player to keep playing. The encouragement inherent in Mario's death is one solution to what Andrew Rollings and Ernst Adams describe as the "balance problem" presented by player-character death: the moment must be punitive enough that the player thinks death has a cost, but this "disincentive" must be "appropriately proportional to the likelihood of their dying" (525). Rollings and Adams see the balance poised between the cost of death and how often the player might die. Another way of framing the same core concern—that of balanced game design—is that player-character death must be somewhat punitive, but not so much that the player gives up in frustration. In the case of Mario, his deaths involve little punishment, and the game focuses much more on encouraging further play through cheerful visuals and musical cues.

Mario rises upon touching an enemy, falls through the screen, and then, most importantly, rises again when he returns to gameplay. Playing *Super Mario* involves

navigating the game by running, jumping, and falling. Death is not 'only' a fall, but also one action among many, another gesture in the dance of play. That this particular set of steps ends with a new beginning means that Mario's movement through space visually reinforces how the game frames failure as an opportunity for the player to take another turn in the dance of resilience and play. Mario's death endorses resilience by encouraging the player to try again.

 Mario's iconic musical themes reinforce this encouragement aurally. Andrew Schartmann notes in a description of the "Power Down" theme and the "Game Over" theme that the former is "a brief excerpt from the 'Overworld' tune that recalls the playful bounce of Level 1-1. When Mario has no lives left, the 'Game Over' ditty that follows begins with the familiar three notes of the 'Overworld' theme" ("The Genius of *Super Mario Bros.* 'Game Over' Theme"). Both "Power Down" and "Game Over" exhibit the cheerfulness of the game's "Overworld" theme, and Schartmann notes that when "Power Down" and "Game Over" play in succession, "these themes sound like the beginning of a new 'Overworld' loop…Kondo combats the psychology of defeat with a subtle reminder of where we began and where we can begin again." The "Overworld" loop's presence in the death animation encourages the player to associate death with the return to play.

Mario's death presents this encouragement with a sense of humour. A conversation from "Iwata Asks," a series of interviews with Nintendo employees by Nintendo President Satoru Iwata, is instructive. Mahito Yokota, a frequent collaborator with Kondo, links the visual and the musical when he says, "Kondo-san said earlier that we try not to use any sounds that will really make players feel bad […] [Mario] flips up in a comical way"

("Super Mario All Stars: Music Follows Function"). In Yokota's retelling, Mario's death uses visual and musical cues to amuse the player, even as they face defeat and temper death's 'balance' problem with humour and encouragement.[84]

This practical design choice also endorses values like resilience. Westfahl claims that *Super Mario Bros.* "offers two messages: it endorses altruism, helping people in distress; and it recommends risk taking" (218). If we assume for the moment that Westfahl is correct, I believe that a key remaining question is how games endorse values. At one level, Mario's death sends a message about the importance of trying again. At another, playing Mario exhibits the resilience the game endorses. Ian Bogost terms this process "procedural rhetoric," which he defines as "a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created" (3). For Bogost, the processes are almost exclusively ludic—that is to say, they include the system of rules that govern game mechanics, as well as the actions themselves.[85] For me, the processes are not merely rule-based but incorporate structural elements such as narrative, characterization, and even music and dialogue. These processes can be extremely persuasive: not only do they structure the player's experience, what becomes possible in the space of the game, but also a player may be required to act out the game's message to win. When I play ruthlessly to acquire properties in *Monopoly*, I embody

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[84] Humour frequently turns up in unmarked player-character death scenes. From the parodic explosion of a gibs death to the cheery folly of Mario's rise and fall, game deaths need not be inherently serious to invoke Hegel and Bataille's respective senses of dismemberment.

[85] As noted by Erik Champion, Michael Mateas and Janet Murray's discussions of procedural storytelling precede Bogost (36). Bogost draws on Murray's idea of procedural authority from *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Murray writes that "the procedural nature" of digital storytelling can "capture experience as a series of interrelated actions," which allows authors to "structure the participation of the interactor into a repertoire of expressive gestures" (274).

capitalist values by putting them into practice. Procedural rhetoric does not suspend

players' critical thinking. Whether I find playing *Monopoly* an indictment or an

endorsement of capitalism depends on several factors ranging from my politics to my

history with the game. However, the player's role in acting out values remains stirring

and persuasive. The player does not merely observe this message, but participates in it,

becoming part of the systems that produce the argument. Miguel Sicart's "Against

Procedurality" offers an important critique that procedural rhetoric seems to discount

how play is innately active and creative, rather than passive and receptive. He asserts that

"[t]he meaning of a game, its essence, is not determined by the rules, but by the way

players engage with those rules, by the way players *play*. The *meaning* of games, them

[sic], is played, not proceduraly [sic] generated." While I agree, I think that play's

creativity is part of its persuasiveness: the player enters the argument, engages with it,

and acts it out. Even if the player ultimately disagrees, they have a level of intimacy with

the argument that encourages thoughtful reflection rather than simple rejection.

I combine Westfahl's acknowledgement of the concern about what death in games

'teaches' players with Bogost's concept of procedural rhetoric to assert that death in

games can be a uniquely persuasive experience. Giddings and Kennedy identify "the

well-managed death in video games" as a source of pleasure and humour (34), but proper

management of a death scene can heighten its persuasiveness. In the case of *Super Mario

Bros.*, part of what makes the game's endorsement of resilience so powerful is the fact

that player-character death is the medium through which the game delivers that message.

In-game death is a uniquely powerful means of enacting procedural rhetoric; critics like

Bevan and Parkin, who worry that players will 'learn' misleading lessons about the

importance of death correctly intuit that death in games takes weight from its connection to our mortality. However, they ignore that death in games sends messages at several levels and that these messages themselves deserve close examination.[86] Enacting procedural rhetoric through player-character death works best when it draws on the singularly frightening nature of death. That horror underlies even a seemingly humorous player-character death: Mario's pratfalls in death are also descents into an unseen abyss.

As I have said, Mario's deaths serve a practical design need and embody, and, following Bogost, even use the player to stress the importance of resilience. However, Mario's deaths also endorse values at a more abstract level, namely by reflecting broader philosophical concerns and belief systems. For example, Westfahl notes that Mario's multiple lives, deaths, and rebirths "dramatically present and enact a philosophy not unlike the ancient Hindu and Buddhist systems of reincarnation" (215).[87] Something as simple as a pixelated character falling accompanied by a few notes of music uses the player to embody messages, ranging from an encouragement to keep playing to a broader endorsement of resilience, to modelling aspects of particular philosophies. *Super Mario* continues to be an iconic franchise; other games, especially platformers, have widely imitated Mario's death scenes.

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[86] When Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum suggest that "[f]rom notions of fairness to deep-seated ideas about the human condition, games provide a compelling arena where humans play out their beliefs and ideas" (3), they encapsulate two key levels at which games send messages, namely the practical and the philosophical, and implicitly indicate that the ways games endorse values are a rich subject of study.

[87] Westfahl's use of the word ancient is unfortunate. I assume he intends to note the long, ongoing history of these traditions, but his phrasing implicitly emphasizes that history, rather than the fact that both Hinduism and Buddhism are widely practiced today. Most critical interpretations of player-character death do not refer to religion, but most that do tend to refer to Christianity, like Kevin Recher's work. Souvik Mukherjee notes the significant inattention to non-Christian philosophical frameworks or religions in discussions of death in games ("Remembering How You Died" 1).

At first, Mario's death scene might seem utterly unlike The Chosen Undead's. The games

have distinct genres, aesthetic inspirations, and death mechanics. However, the deaths in

these two games (and the respective series they represent) send similar messages. Both

games value resilience and test that resilience through a high level of difficulty that can

be surmounted by player skill. However, both games also encourage the player to return

to play. My experience of playing *Dark Souls* is tense with the awareness my player-

character, called The Chosen Undead, might die at any moment. Survival depends much

more on player skill than character level: to excel in the game, the player must make

careful use of dodging and rolling, as well as shields. Death in the game occurs against

the backdrop of a foreboding, beautiful gothic world that dwarfs the player.

There are multiple ways to die in *Dark Souls*,[88] but death in combat is the most iconic.

Several things happen simultaneously or in quick succession. I approach an enemy with

my shield raised and aim an initial blow. If my timing is off or I do not block in time, an

enemy strikes me: if my health is low enough, the health bar empties and my player-

character stumbles and falls to the ground. The often-extended boss fight might have a

stirring, operatic score, whereas an encounter with a common enemy might be

accompanied solely by the sound of the struggle. Auditory effects that accompany death

in *Dark Souls* contrast with Mario's upbeat, short musical sequences. The closest point of

comparison between the two is Mario's death jingle and *Dark Souls*' own "death sound."

The latter is difficult to describe: it sounds a bit like an orchestral depiction of a vault

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[88] In addition to death in combat in which an enemy (or another player-character invading from their own game) lands enough hits to empty the player-character's health bar, other ways to die include falling off a high precipice, receiving a status effect like Poison or Curse that builds up over time and kills the player-character if the status effect bar fills before a cure item is used, and environmental traps.

door closing, like an echo of the more sharply delineated, powerful sound effect that

accompanies menu selections.[89] The world around The Chosen Undead's body loses

colour, the body itself disappears, and the enemy continues on its predetermined path.

Rather than leading into a reprise of a jaunty theme, this "death sound," combined with

its visual context, emphasizes the player-character's failure in an uncaring world.

A dark banner superimposes itself over the screen as the chord sounds, with the words

"You Died" in red typeface (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Screenshot taken by author from Tyrannicon's "Dark Souls Death Montage!"
youtube.com/watch?v=XtH2UlrdZn0. (2:07)

The stark words overlay a now-grey world, and the red is as eye-catching as a splash of

blood. I want to pause here to note that the "You Died" banner is hugely iconic for the

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[89] An in-game menu is often an important part of the game's user interface. While the main menu is the screen that greets the player when the game begins, and typically lists important options such as loading or creating a save file, the in-game menu is much more amorphous. It may be extremely simple or as complex as a collection of interfaces that allow players to access in-game inventories, character customization, and some of the screens available through the main menu.

series,[90] but it is still a type of Game Over screen that tells the player that their play session has been interrupted.[91] However, this screen's message is 'said' in a very different tone from Mario's Game Over: "You Died" is accusative, and pitiless, whereas Mario's Game Over is cheeky and teasing. After the appearance of the banner, *Dark Souls* switches to a loading screen that features items or lore from the game before the player-character reappears at the last bonfire visited.[92] In contrast to Mario's cartoonish bounce and fall beyond the bottom of the screen, the player-character's disappearance in *Dark Souls* leaves the banner behind to remind the player of their failure. While both bodies become invisible before the return to play, each paired disappearance and reappearance have distinct tones. Only after the loading screen and the return to the bonfire does The Chosen Undead slowly rise from a kneeling position as if exhausted. The player-character must get up regardless of how tired they seem: the rise is a fated one, a curse under which the protagonist must labour. Notably, the player-character rises intending to return to its bloodstain. Upon death, the player-character loses all accumulated in-game currency called Souls unless the player-character can return to their bloodstain and touch it to reabsorb them. Often called a "corpse run," the mechanic immediately incentivizes the player to return to the site of death, which reinforces the game's characterization of death as a return to play. However, where Mario's gentle, funny death is a cheerful return, *Dark Souls*' is a desperate effort to recoup losses. The

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[90] This is so much the case that Keza MacDonald and Jason Killingsworth's anthology of essays about the series is titled *You Died: The* Dark Souls *Companion*.

[91] The use of the word "interrupted" here is slightly fraught. There have been robust assertions in favour of the idea that death interrupts play by James Newman and Alexander Galloway, as well as against it by Atkins and Flynn-Jones.

[92] The use of in-game lore to provide a point of interest on a loading screen is widespread.

values endorsed by both games have different senses of urgency and, in *Dark Souls*, a creeping possibility that repetition is a kind of curse. Mario returns to play unharmed, while The Chosen Undead always rises from the bonfire in their corpselike, Undead form, even if they died in Human form. Death strips away the illusion of life, further characterizing the return to play as a curse in contrast to Mario's eternally energetic return to play. Despite those differences in tone, however, death in *Dark Souls'* and Mario centralize repetition to encourage the player to keep playing.

Like Mario's rise and fall, the gestures made by the revived player-character are a kind of reversal of the blow that killed them. The Chosen Undead rises again in a world of colour, animated by the bonfire, in sharp contrast to the greying world that surrounds its fallen corpse. In both games, player-character death renews both the opportunity to play and the game world (including the enemies that populate it). *Super Mario Bros.* and *Dark Souls* share these fundamental reversals of movement and revitalization of game space that highlight death as a return to play. As discussed, this return to play addresses the balance problem identified by Rollings and Adams (525): using positive encouragement to soften the blow of player-character death and motivate the player to keep playing is a fundamental design principle. However, these deaths perform distinct ways of encouraging the return to play and, as a result, endorse different values at increasingly abstract levels. Again, referring to designer aims provides some insight into how death operates here. Keza MacDonald writes that "the core idea at the heart of *Dark Souls'* design [is] death as education," noting particularly that "[e]very death presents an

opportunity for reflection and improvement" (187).[93] Westfahl observes a similar

principle in *Super Mario Bros.*: death is an opportunity to note what went wrong and

consider strategies that might extend Mario's survival next time (216). MacDonald's

explanation echoes Westfahl and Klastrup: the 'balancing act' of player-character death

uses punishment to encourage players to learn.

However, what death teaches in both games depends on the assumption that success in

games is equally accessible to every player. *Dark Souls*' director Hidetaka Miyazaki's

own words show some of the games' accompanying messages: MacDonald quotes him as

saying, "[t]he main concept behind the death system is trial-and-error. The difficulty is

high, but always achievable. Everyone can achieve without all that much technique—all

you need to do is learn, from your deaths, how to overcome the difficulties" (188).

Hidetaka's claim about how death in *Dark Souls* teaches carries assumptions that colour

the values endorsed by the game. The use of the word "everyone" assumes that every

player has the same amount of leisure time to play and learn, as well as the senses and the

manual dexterity required to play *Dark Souls*. That is inaccurate: organizations like the

AbleGamers Foundation exist to address the fact that gameplay can be inaccessible to

some players.[94] Miyazaki's words convey a high-minded certainty that player success—

[93] Other games make this explicit connection between death and learning, such as the platform game *Celeste*. The game announces, "[t]he more you die, the more you're learning." Like *Dark Souls*, *Celeste* is famously a difficult game, but in contrast, *Celeste* includes an accessibility option called Assist Mode. Allegra Frank notes that Assist Mode allows players to alter key game attributes like "becoming invincible, extending the all-important air dash ability and slowing the whole game down in 10 percent intervals" ("*Celeste* is Hard, But Its Creators are Smart About Difficulty").

[94] AbleGamers advocates for increased accessibility in game and controller design. Notably, FromSoftware's latest game, *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* has prompted debate on accessibility in games. This discussion includes AbleGamers President Steve Spohn's explanation that games need not be easy, but they do need to offer different options for players who, as Spohn puts it, need "to have the options to make the game playable" (@stephenspohn twitter.com/stevenspohn/status/1114214474460946433?lang=en).

specifically, the ability to defer player-character death while advancing through the game—is equally available to everyone through sheer effort. That value may seem laudable, but it ignores the realities of difference and the fact that culturally, the *Souls* games often appeal to "hardcore gamers": a designation that Shaw reminds us is largely gendered as male and normatively able. Miyazaki's "everyone" refers to only part of the player population.

Miyazaki adds to this vision of accessibility that "you can even learn something from somebody else's death" (187), expressing a utilitarian understanding of death in games. In contrast to dismissals of player-character death as an impediment to creative design, the game orients itself around death. One example of this orientation at a mechanical level is the system in which players can touch the bloodstains left by other players to see ghostly representations of how they died. The game makes player-character death leave visible traces that can be used fruitfully by other players. This innovative, creative centralization of death to gameplay contributes to Miyazaki's characterization of the game as accessible through sheer effort and trial and error. The game uses death to make that argument, enacting Bogost's idea of procedural rhetoric. Miyazaki notes, "[t]he game design is intended to be such that you don't feel frustration, but instead feel understanding—the urge to try again" (193). Fundamentally, *Dark Souls* shares *Super Mario Bros.*' use of death to conflate effort with resilience and the promise of success. While the games' values align, there is a clear difference between the two games (and the franchises they represent) in terms of tone. In *Dark Souls,* a foreboding, melancholy feeling builds up over a player's many returns to the bonfire. Resilience is at least as much a curse as it is a blessing, in contrast to *Super Mario Bros.*' cheerful endorsement.

1.6 Gender and Markedness in Games

In games, death is a chance to learn, but the question of what exactly death teaches is complex. Tarrying with death in *Super Mario Bros.* and the *Souls* series seems to teach players to value and to practice resilience. That endorsement does not exist in a vacuum. Underlying the lesson that resilience is important is the assumption that resilience is equally accessible to everyone. That broad claim makes no room for difference among players and is characteristic of mainstream game cultures' tendency to market itself and its implicit arguments to the unmarked category of the gamer. The population represented by the word 'everyone' becomes very small. I assert that in the *Souls* games' pervading sense of common mortality makes a similar rhetorical flourish. The series cultivates a sense of mortal vulnerability that reinforces the seemingly universal status of mainstream gaming's unmarked categories and, as I will explain, differentiates between unmarked, normative death, and marked, aberrant death. For now, I will explain how the *Souls* series' thematic emphasis on shared mortality rhetorically positions its players as members of gaming's unmarked categories, regardless of their real identity.

To play the *Souls* series is to be haunted by the deaths of others. As I play these games, I see ghostly impressions of other players. Activating another player's bloodstain, for example, shows how that player died, but some shades appear unbidden. These visions are moments of community and connection that are nonetheless strained and spectral. At one level, these ghosts offer strategic value by showing me fatal errors made by other players. However, they also add to the game's characterization of players as members of a fragmented community haunted by death's oppressive presence. Much like how Loevy sees death as a communal experience in Hegel's work (59), the ghostly visions in the

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Souls series unite players by their shared vulnerability to invasion and sudden death, their arduous, impossible task of deferring death.[95] Online players can see the bloodstains and messages left by other players, but they can also make more direct contact that highlights their collective vulnerability. If I am online while in Body or Human form,[96] I may summon the spirits of other players to help with boss battles. However, being online in Body form also means that my game may be invaded by another player who will attempt to hunt me down and kill me. When I play offline, I will see fewer messages, fewer ghosts, and can only summon or be invaded by non-player-characters. Access to other players is a double-edged sword: in boss battles, summoned players are more useful than non-player-characters, but invading players are as dangerous as their summoned counterparts are useful. This heightened sense of risk and reward contextualizes the *Souls* games' thematic emphasis on conscious vulnerability, particularly because online play is often declared to be the 'true *Souls* series experience.' Dia Lacina writes that "*Demon's Souls*, and the games that follow encourage players' extensive use of pro-social and antisocial mechanics and systems to expand upon and engage with the games' cosmologies and thematic elements" ("Going Hollow: The Importance of Playing Online in *Souls* Games").[97] To play the *Souls* series is to enter a tense, complex community of

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[95] As a largely solitary player, I found the *Souls* series' inclusion of the death of others, as well as vulnerability to invasion by other players, unnerving enough that I preferred to play offline.

[96] Beginning with *Demon's Souls*, the players in the *Souls* series typically have the option of choosing between two kinds of play. In Soul or Undead form (the phrasing varies between installments), the player-character appears dead and cannot summon or be invaded by other players. In Body or Human form, the player-character appears alive and can summon or be invaded. Playing in Body or Human form requires online access. For clarity's sake, I typically refer to online and offline play in the main text of this chapter.

[97] This claim is subject to debate but the *Souls* series consistently lionizes difficulty, which suggests that Lacina is correct. In response to being characterized as a sadist because of *Dark Souls'* difficulty, Miyazaki responds, "I'm more masochistic. […] I wanted somebody to bring out a really sadistic game, but I ended up having to make it myself" ("*Dark Souls'* grand vision").

death. The series' over-arching sense of the common experience of mortality, read in the context of the series' focus on success as a result of sheer effort, characterizes the difficulty of playing *Souls* games as a kind of shared struggle in which, despite the differences between online and offline play, each player is equally vulnerable and locked in the effort required by the series. That rhetorical move characterizes players as fundamentally alike. Similarly, the monument in Majula, *Dark Souls 2*'s hub world, the central location from which the player can access other in-game areas, lists the global number of deaths in *Dark Souls 2* if the game is online. Offline, the monument's plaque lists the number of times the player has died in the game. The contrast between the monument's online and offline display equates individual and communal mortality: they receive the same solemn memorialization. The spectral, fraught community of the *Souls* games is at once a uniting vision and a reflection of mainstream game cultures' habit of imagining all players as if they are the same.

The imagined player tends to resemble mainstream game cultures' unmarked categories. In short, an unmarked category is often treated as being neutral or universal and implicitly marks anything outside that category as othered or unusual.[98] Susie Scott notes that "[v]alue judgements may be built into these contrast pairs, when the marked category is denoted as deviant and subordinate compared to the dominance and assumed neutrality

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[98] Wayne Brekhus notes that the concept of markedness originates in linguistics, particularly Nikolaj Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson's work on phoneme pairs ("A Sociology of the Unmarked" 34). Phonemes are distinct sounds that distinguish one word from another, such as the 'p' and 'b' sound that distinguish "pat" from "bat." Brekhus writes "[t]he distinction between marked and unmarked elements is as heuristically valuable analyzing social contrasts as it is for looking at linguistic ones" (35). Brekhus' sociocultural application of the unmarked helps distinguish the unmarked categories that dominate both imagined players and the ranks of player-characters from the identities that deviate from those standards.

of the unmarked" (6). As noted earlier, in the use of the word "Man" for humanity, being

male goes unmarked, while femaleness is marked as a deviation from that norm. Critics

like Patricia J. Mills acknowledge de Beauvoir's use of Hegelian criticism to articulate

the position of woman as aberrant Other in contrast to men in *The Second Sex* (2).[99] The

rhetorical positioning of maleness as normative (often called androcentrism)[100] under

patriarchy is an important concept in feminist criticism: what society deems normal,

natural, or neutral is powerful. Cultures often treat their unmarked categories as all three.

In video games, the unmarked category is approximately the same as the imagined player

that makes up the "gamer" marketing demographic, namely a white, cisgender,

heterosexual man between roughly between sixteen to thirty-five years old.[101] This

demographic does not include all players. Instead, it is an imagined category to which the

mainstream games industry caters. All other identities are "deviant and subordinate"

(Scott 6). Despite industry research's claims women make up roughly half of players,[102]

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[99] There is a long history of critical analyses of the 'male as norm' perspective. De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is hugely important, as is work by Luce Irigaray and Dale Spender. Notably, both T. L. Taylor (in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*) and Adrienne Shaw (in "On Not Becoming Gamers") rework de Beauvoir's famous phrase that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267) to show the constructed nature of gamer identity.

[100] Charlotte Perkins Gilman introduces the concept of androcentrism in *The Man-Made World, or, Our Androcentric Culture*. The book receives no direct citation in *The Second Sex*.

[101] The gamer category has received a great deal of critical attention and its definition varies. I draw from Shaw's characterization of "the constructed norm of 'hardcore,' white, heterosexual, cisgendered male players within the U.S. context" ("On Not Becoming Gamers"). Hardcore players are often brought up in contrast to casual players, a group that increasing tends to mark female players who enjoy mobile games. For more, see Shira Chess' *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*, and Chess and Chris Paul's "The End of Casual: Long Live Casual."

[102] The Entertainment Software Industry's "2019 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry" report claims that 46% of players are women. Much of the research on player demographics is market-oriented, which presents its own potential problems. Ultimately, as noted by Shaw, focusing on marketing demographics can obscure the importance of acknowledging that marginalized players' "play practices and representation in all types of games is important regardless of whether they are gamers or not" ("On Not Becoming Gamers").

femininity remains marked in mainstream game cultures, particularly in online social spaces.[103] Consider the stubborn myth of the "fake geek girl" who only pretends to like games to court male attention. This myth results from the assumption that 'real' players are men. Even if this myth is not taken literally, white, heterosexual, cisgender masculinity's cultural dominance in games shapes how welcoming mainstream game cultures are to players who deviate from this unmarked standard.

Markedness is intersectional. Coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw,[104] intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding the overlapping social categorizations (including race, gender, and class) that determine how individuals experience overlapping systems of discrimination. Crenshaw argues that attempts to account for oppression according to only a single axis, such as gender, fail to acknowledge how social categories and systems of oppression interact. Such single-axis analysis further marginalizes groups whose identity involves these overlapping categories. Crenshaw focuses on Black women, but applications of intersectionality today recognize that every person belongs to overlapping social categories. For example, I am a white, middle-class, queer, genderqueer (and assigned female at birth or AFAB), disabled, fat person. Rather than merely adding up to a total amount of privilege, these categories and attendant systems of privilege interact to produce my positionality, the

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[103] As noted by Whitney Phillips, internet subcultures like the "chan culture" named after the popular message-board 4chan have powerfully shaped online popular culture (1). This influence includes tired stereotypes about women popular in geek culture, like the "fake geek girl."

[104] Crenshaw originally coined the term to combat the marginalization of Black women that results from single-axis analysis in feminist theory and antiracist politics, which fails to consider how social categories interact. Crenshaw writes that "[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (140). Intersectional analysis must be understood in the context of its history as a tool to better understand the oppression of Black women.

social context of my experience of and outlook on the world. Understood intersectionally, markedness in game cultures results from the many ways a player or player-character is similar or dissimilar to the gamer category, and how those categories interact. For example, Lara Croft's gender marks her. However, her whiteness, youth, upper-class accent, wealth, level of physical ability, and long-standing sexualization in advertising are normative, and even when marked, these qualities usually uphold the norms they contrast. Understood in the fuller context of her intersectional context, hers is a largely subordinate femininity.

David J. Leonard's challenge that game scholars "must push our analysis to look at how virtual identities intersect and infect one another, moving beyond simple statistical invoking of race or gender" remains essential today (85).[105] It is in light of this challenge that I acknowledge my focus on how gender is marked or unmarked in games. However, I hope to do so with the understanding that gender in games does not exist in isolation. I argue that in mainstream game cultures, the broader denigration of marked identities extends to representations of player-character death and the deaths of important non-player-characters. Before addressing marked death, however, I will fully unpack how mainstream game cultures' unmarked categories often reflect "gamer" identity: masculinity is frequently unmarked, as are whiteness, heterosexuality, and being cisgender. Mario and The Chosen Undead's deaths are unmarked. Both examples

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[105] There is excellent intersectional work in game studies, like Kishonna L. Gray's *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* and Soraya Murray's *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender, and Space*. However, it would be disingenuous to ignore that historically game studies has been slow to acknowledge and analyze difference, and that white feminist criticism constitutes much of the established work on identity in games. I recognize that this project perpetuates some of these problems, due to its focus on white femininity and fatherhood in games.

contrast sharply with Lara Croft's deaths in *Tomb Raider*. Her femininity has always

powered the spectacle of her death. Before analyzing Lara's deaths, I will explain why

the deaths in *Super Mario* and *Dark Souls* are largely unmarked.

Mario shares many of the qualities found in the imagined player, the 'gamer' to whom

the mainstream game industry largely markets itself. He is white and male, and

heteronormativity decrees that his series-long romance with Princess Peach defines him

as explicitly heterosexual and implicitly cisgender.[106] Similarly, the core element of his

mission in *Super Mario* (and many of its sequels) is to rescue a helpless woman for a

romantic reward. As noted by Sharon R. Sherman, Mia Consalvo, and Anita Sarkeesian,

the imperative to 'rescue the princess' propels countless game narratives and is drawn

from longstanding patterns in mythology and folklore.[107] Mario is immediately

recognizable as a player-character not only because of his brand's popularity, but also

because he embodies a set of characteristics common in player-characters: whiteness,

masculinity, explicit heterosexuality, and implicit cisgender status. Mario is one of the

faces of a standard so common that it is frequently assumed to be normal, natural, and

neutral.

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[106] Notably, being cisgender's implicit unmarkedness in the *Super Mario* series contrasts with how the *Super Mario Bros.* guidebook describes Birdo with the phrase, "[h]e thinks he is a girl" (27). None of the other characters need be identified as cisgender because that status goes assumed. For more on Birdo's gender, see Adams' "Bye, Bye, Birdo: Heroic Androgyny and Villainous Gender Variance."

[107] See Sherman's "Perils of the Princess," Consalvo's "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances," Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women* series, Shaw's "Circles, Charmed, and Magic: Queering Game Studies," and Adams' "Renegade Sexuality: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in the *Mass Effect* Series" for more detail. A related phenomenon is the "Women in Refrigerators" trope named by Gail Simone, in which a female character dies or is seriously injured in order to propel the character development of a male lead ("Women in Refrigerators").

The Chosen Undead is also largely unmarked, but for very different reasons. While the

game allows the player to create a female player-character, the choice is essentially

cosmetic. Gender appears to have no bearing on the series' gameplay. There is a mild

visual difference in terms of player-character facial features and body shape. However,

both in-game armour and the zombie-like face of a visibly Undead player-character

obfuscate that difference. Similarly, player-character grunts of pain differ slightly based

on gender, but there is no substantive effect on gameplay due to gender selection.[108] The

Souls series' treatment of gender as interchangeable is perhaps best exemplified by the

coffin in *Dark Souls 2*, into which a player-character may enter to switch their gender

between male and female an unlimited number of times. This treatment of gender as

purely cosmetic is an improvement compared to a complete inability to play as a female

character, which has been a long-standing problem in games.

However, we must understand this treatment in the context of how frequently maleness

goes assumed in games. It is not merely that only player-characters with developed

backstories are typically male: women are nearly as rare even in supporting roles. Dmitri

Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory note that in games released

in the United States from March 2005 to February 2006, "the split [in the total population

of all game characters] is 81.24/18.76 percent male/female" (827).[109] Recent results for

player-characters are even starker. Using the game releases profiled at the Electronic

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[108] While there has been fan speculation that gender determines the size of a player-character's hitbox (the area on their body that detects the collisions that indicate damage), in the *Souls* series, hitbox dimensions result from height, which is not dependent on gender (Lance McDonald, personal communication).
[109] In the weighted data, which focuses on games purchased rather than games released, the split is an even starker "85.23/14.77" (827). Women are extremely rare in games, not merely as protagonists, but even as supporting characters. This massive imbalance supports the characterization of masculinity as normative.

Entertainment Expo (E3) in 2019 as a representative sample of Triple-A games, Carolyn

Petit and Sarkeesian note that female player-characters account for 5% of protagonists,

while male player-characters constitute 21% ("Gender Breakdown of Games Featured at

E3 2019").[110] It is important to note that, like *Dark Souls*, 66% of games at E3 2019

include the ability to choose the gender of the player-character. However, another

important piece of context is that games in which gender is a cosmetic difference often

exhibit signs of treating the player-character as male by default. Errors in pronouns and

gendered pronouns often betray this problem.[111] While this lack of difference based on

the gender of the player-character might appear to be gender-neutral, it actually makes a

masculine-coded body the invisible standard.

Masculinity's unmarkedness in games can be as overt as pronoun errors or the infamous

animation of a female Commander Shepard exposing her underwear by sitting wide-

legged while wearing a short, tight dress in *Mass Effect 2*.[112] However, it can also be

much more subtle. Jenn Frank recalls her experience of playing *Fallout 3* as a bullied

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[110] Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* examines how complicated representation is in games. Greater diversity of representation in games does not in itself equal progress. Instead, the quality and character of that representation are hugely important.

[111] As noted by Alanah Pearce in a video for IGN's Youtube channel, despite the fact that the player-character can be male or female in *Far Cry 5*, the player-character is frequently hailed by masculine-coded nouns (like man and bro); she adds that while terms like 'dude' are sometimes used as if they are gender-neutral, "it stands out when characters will call [the player-character] by those names and call other female characters by more feminine names" ("OPINION: Playing as a Girl in *Far Cry 5* is Really Weird").

[112] In *Mass Effect 2*, the movement animations for a male Shepard were produced first and reproduced for a female Shepard, which resulted in the incongruous scene mentioned above. Anna Borynec and Evgeniya Kuznetsova note that while the reproduction of a male Shepard's animations in a female Shepard was largely celebrated by fans, it seems extremely likely that had the female Shepard been animated first and then her animations used on a male Shepard, the reaction would have likely been negative ("When Gender Neutral Means Male"). It is not merely that masculine-coded gestures are unmarked, while feminine-coded ones are aberrant, but also that masculinity in women is frequently treated as empowering, while femininity in men is embarrassing.

female player-character, stating that "I just cannot shake the feeling that [the bully] *thinks* he is shouting at a guy. It's as if his every pronoun has been shifted from 'he' to 'she,' carefully rerecorded for my personal edification, and yet it is glaringly obvious that the game's 'You!' was never intended *for me*" ("Video Game Feminist of the Year: or, When 'You' is a Girl"). Frank describes the game's treatment of her female player-character as implicitly male as a kind of gender dysphoria. Her identity does not seem to match how the game sees her, and in turn, she begins to look for moments of mismatch, performing a paranoid reading of the game. This suspicion is fundamentally similar to Pearce's description of her experience of playing *Far Cry 5*. Because of other moments of being hailed as male, she thinks she hears non-player-characters referring to her character using male pronouns. However, she also wonders whether she is mishearing because of the accents portrayed in the game. Playing a female player-character in this context becomes an act of paranoia, of distrusting what you think you see and hear because you anticipate moments of dysphoria enforced by the game. Being put in this paranoid position impairs players' likelihood to experience flow and to internalize values endorsed by moments of procedural rhetoric: a player who feels gaslit by the game she plays learns that the game's messages are not for her.

Dark Souls largely does not feature these moments of dysphoria. However, put in the context of the game industry's tendency to treat maleness as assumed, *Dark Souls*' deaths, like those in *Super Mario*, are essentially unmarked by gender. These deaths contrast with those of player-characters who are explicitly female (by which I mean player-characters with developed backstories who can only be female, rather than customizable player-characters whose gender can be selected). This contrast is

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particularly clear in the post-2013 reboots of the *Tomb Raider* series. In the *Tomb Raider*

series, Lara's gender deviates from the unmarked norm reinforced by Mario and The

Chosen Undead. Her death reflects that deviation. The differences between how Lara dies

and how Mario and The Chosen Undead die are not merely a function of technological

sophistication, genre, or tone. Published in 1985 and limited by the technical

specifications of the Nintendo Entertainment System, *Super Mario Bros.* is a platform

game: its tone is cheerful, and its death scenes are similarly lighthearted, at least at the

surface. *Dark Souls* might seem like a closer point of comparison to *Tomb Raider*. Both

games are action-adventure role-playing games with dark themes and Mature ratings

from the Entertainment Software Rating Board.[113] However, the basis for comparison

between these three deaths is not pure similarity, but rather that Mario, The Chosen

Undead, and Lara all die iconic deaths. Each example belongs to a franchise with

staggering commercial and critical success. What makes *Tomb Raider* distinct is Lara's

gender: unlike male player-characters or gender-selectable player-characters the games

treat as male, she is undeniably, unavoidably female. Historically, her deaths have been

sexualized in ways seldom found in unmarked deaths like Mario's hapless pratfalls and

The Chosen Undead's melancholy collapses.

Some context is essential here because Lara's deaths have always been tacitly

acknowledged as pleasurable, even during the first game's development. Character

designer Toby Gard notes that he designed Lara to inspire protective feelings in players.

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[113] For context, the ESRB's ratings range from E (for everyone, regardless of age), E10+ (for all players over ten years of age), T (for players in their teens and above), M (for players seventeen and above), and AO (Adults over eighteen only) ("Ratings Guide").

However, during testing, in his words, some players "just loved killing her," and that part of the appeal of killing Lara stemmed from exerting power over a strikingly lifelike character designed to seem tough ("Playing a Female Character").[114] There is a plethora of writing on the pleasures of killing Lara Croft, written about virtually every installment in the series, in addition to references to killing Lara in other pieces of pop culture like the British comedy *Spaced*.[115] My point here is not that killing Lara is pleasurable because she is female, but rather that the series frames her death as enjoyable and that framing has grown increasingly sexualized as the franchise has aged.

Nevertheless, even writing that acknowledges the pleasure of killing Lara sometimes ignores her gender. Atkins writes in an otherwise groundbreaking claim that player-character death can be pleasurable that "we are often offered the spectacle of our own demise as if it were a gift or reward, as anyone who has seen the death animations of Lara Croft or the Master Chief would attest" (247). Atkins' lack of distinction between how Lara Croft dies and how Master Chief dies ignores the fundamental differences between them: Lara belongs to a marked category while the Master Chief belongs to an unmarked one, and their deaths reflect their respective status. Like the *Souls* series, both Master Chief's *Halo* series and *Tomb Raider* have historically used ragdoll physics to animate death scenes. Ragdoll animations are humorous: dead bodies flail with little weight or stiffness. But where Master Chief usually dies with an undignified grunt or bellow, he

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[114] Gard notes that Lara's toughness follows a similar tradition as The Man With No Name in Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* ("Playing a Female Character").
[115] See Duncan Fyfe's "Killing Lara Croft," Alexander Kriss' "Killing Lara Croft," Caitlin PenzeyMoog's "Killing Lara Croft Isn't as Fun as It Used to Be," and Debbie Timminz' "*Tomb Raider* Deaths Are A Bit Weird" for examples.

does so while encased in his iconic armour, which includes a full-face helmet and reflective visor. Master Chief's deaths are literally obscured by his armour's opacity and bulky shape, while Lara's famously curvaceous body is only partially covered by her trademark skin-tight costume. Her body is visible in a way Master Chief's is not, and the indignities she experiences have a sexualized element absent from Master Chief's or Mario's pratfalls. While death animations in the original *Tomb Raider* lack the reboots' detail and length, Lara's ragdoll collapses still highlight her bodily dimensions as she makes a sexualized whine. Lara dies differently than Master Chief, Mario, and The Chosen Undead: her death sends different messages and has different underlying assumptions. Both the surface message and its attendant assumptions draw on the aesthetic value of women's deaths long before the grotesque detail evident in later *Tomb Raider* games.

In the reboots, when the player fails a quick-time event or is killed by a specific enemy, the resulting death animation is often lushly detailed. [116] Lara can be mauled by animals, crushed by rocks, or fall off a cliff. The longest animations display Lara's body from the initial death blow to her weakening struggles and eventual stillness. Her body is often impaled, presented as if by a close camera shot focused on her expressive face. Even less gruesomely intimate animations still portray her in a sexualized manner (Figure 6).

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[116] As noted by Tim Rogers, a quick time event is "an event in a game where the player must press a button to perform a cinematic action that can otherwise not be performed in that game in an ordinary context" ("Full Reactive Eyes Entertainment: Incorporating Quick Time Events Into Gameplay") Quick time events often depend heavily on a player's reaction time and can be both frustrating and challenging. Lara's most bombastic death scenes typically result from failed quick time events.

Figure 6. Screenshot taken by author from *Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics, 2013.

In this shot, Lara has died from being shot by arrows while trying to escape captivity. Because her hands are tied behind her back, her back arches as she writhes on the ground. This posture draws attention to her breasts, as light reflects off her chest and abdomen.[117] The camera watches her struggles weaken and stop. Unlike Mario and The Chosen Undead, Lara's body does not disappear. It remains the shot's central focus until the loading screen appears.

In games, blood and gore are not exclusive to women's deaths, but the animations often differ between marked and unmarked player-characters. In the *Dead Space* series,[118]

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[117] Combined with her being pierced by arrows, her contorted body and sexualized air, Lara's appearance recalls depictions of Saint Sebastian, who Charles Darwent notes has been portrayed since the Renaissance as "a paragon of male beauty, his toned body, prettily stuck with arrows, exposed to our gaze" ("Arrows of Desire: How Did St. Sebastian Become an Enduring Homo-erotic Icon?"). Both Lara and Saint Sebastian are beautifully penetrated and held up as erotic subjects to be consumed by the viewer.

[118] *Dead Space* is a successful third-person action horror game. Action horror pits player-characters against frightening enemies in a horror-inspired setting, like a zombie virus outbreak. In *Dead Space*, player-character Isaac Clarke explores a derelict spacecraft while battling mutated corpses called Necromorphs.

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player-character Isaac Clarke also dies in grotesque, detailed animations: superficially,

his deaths more closely resemble Lara's than Mario or The Chosen Undead's deaths.

Even with their similarities, important differences remain that sensationalize and

sexualize Lara's deaths in comparison. Isaac's deaths are undeniably spectacular. Diane

Carr notes that Isaac "rarely just dies. His deaths often trigger short cut-scenes that

elaborate on his demise, depicting drawn-out death throes, and providing gory details of

the Necromorphs' monstrous appetites" ("Ability, Disability, and *Dead Space*"). Both

Isaac's and Lara's deaths differ from the standard ragdoll collapse in superficially similar

ways. However, the type of pleasure each spectacle offers is distinctly different.

Christopher Williams argues that Isaac's deaths are genre-appropriate while Lara's are

not ("With Great Vulnerability Comes Great Brutality: The Evisceration of Lara Croft").

Deaths in horror games are often vivid and grotesque, but, as Williams notes, the

rebooted *Tomb Raider* is not a horror game. Instead, it is an action-adventure game with

deaths that seem ripped from a separate game genre. In contrast, *Dead Space* is an action

horror game with genre-appropriate deaths. The biggest difference between Lara's and

Isaac's deaths is their sense of intimacy. As noted by Carr, "Isaac's suit is a prosthetic

that enables his survival, and thus his visibility, at the same time that it renders his actual

body invisible" ("Ability, Disability, and *Dead Space*"). The player might see his

exposed spine after enemies rip off his head, but never Isaac's skin or his face. Instead,

Isaac is armoured like Master Chief: his suit is an exoskeleton. His body's invisibility

forestalls the invasive intimacy found in Lara's deaths. An abstract mask lit by blue

horizontal, parallel lines hides his eyes, which contrasts with the camera's tendency to seek out Lara's wide, fearful eyes as she dies after a failed quick time event.[119]

Part of that contrasting sense of intimacy is that Isaac often dies facing away from the player. Lara's deaths shift from the usual third-person perspective to a second-person perspective. Additionally, each scenes' sound design is distinct. While death scenes in early *Tomb Raider* games feature a brief, sexualized whine, the reboots' death scenes include extended, anguished vocalizations. Lara's screams convey her pain and horror, in stark contrast to how Isaac's noises are generally much quieter than the Necromorphs' growls and roars. Arguably the sheer amount of gore in Isaac's deaths makes them almost funny, while the precise detail of Lara's deaths—her weakening struggles, her wide eyes, her screams—make these scenes so much more horribly intimate. Because the death animations are unskippable, the player watches Lara die every time. Watching Lara die reinforces that her death is an opportunity for the game to present a spectacle of beautiful female suffering. Lara's death scenes are fundamentally different from unmarked death scenes like Isaac's, and the death scenes in *Super Mario Bros.* and *Dark Souls*. Lara's death scenes present female suffering and death as both grotesque and beautiful. The values presented by the game endorse the pleasure of viewing female beauty, suffering and death. *Tomb Raider* may or may not offer much commentary on resilience—except perhaps to use Lara's grisly death as a strange combination of punishment and reward—but the game communicates its values using spectacular, marked death.

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[119] In *Dead Space 2*, there is a frightening scene in which the player must insert a needle into Isaac's eye while his entire face is exposed. However, this is a unique scene. We look into Isaac's eyes for one specific in-game challenge. We look into Lara's suffering eyes so many times it defies counting.

Lara and other exclusively female player-characters often die similarly marked deaths,

and the lessons their deaths teach rely on fundamentally sexist ways of seeing women. As

I have said, Lara is in rare company. Few exclusively female player-characters lead

iconic, long-running game franchises.[120] Perhaps the closest point of comparison might

be Samus Aran from the action platform series *Metroid*. Samus is a physically strong,

capable female player-character. She shares another quality with Lara: in many *Metroid*

games, Samus's deaths are sexualized. In *Super Metroid*, *Metroid Fusion*, *Metroid: Zero*

Mission, *Metroid: Other M* and *Metroid: Samus Returns*, Samus' armour explodes or

evaporates upon death, leaving her in her underwear in earlier games or her skin-tight

'zero suit' in later games (Figure 7).
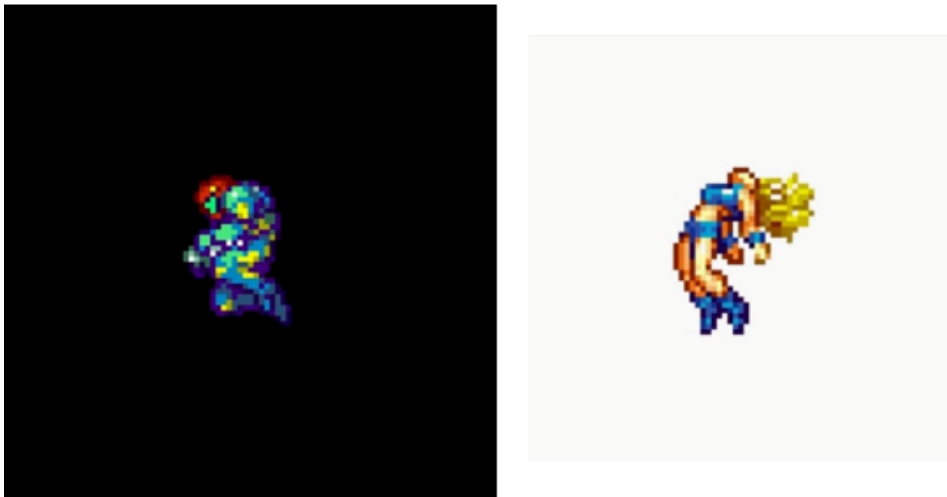
Figure 7. Two frames from Samus' death animation in *Metroid Fusion* from Nintendo Unity's "Evolution of Samus's Deaths and Game Over Screens (1986 – 2016)." youtube.com/watch?v=NwfaCLaDWO4. (0:48, 0:50)

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[120] At a stretch, Ms. Pac-Man might satisfy the criteria. Less famous examples include Shantae the half-genie, who has starred in five platform games. Another example, Clementine from *The Walking Dead* series has co-starred in two games and been the sole player-character in two others. With that said, Shantae's or Clementine's respective statuses are nowhere near the same as that of Lara Croft and Samus Aran. Partially this is a function of time: many better-known exclusively female player-characters are recent creations, like *Portal*'s protagonist Chell, who first appeared in 2007. Historically, female characters in games with a comparable level of fame as Lara or Samus have been non-player-characters (like Zelda, in most of her appearances in *The Legend of Zelda* series), a supporting member of an ensemble, primarily male cast (like Tifa from *Final Fantasy VII*), or a co-protagonist with a male player-character (like Jill Valentine in *Resident Evil*, who is the sole protagonist in *Resident Evil 3*).

These two frames show Samus in her armour and after her armour explodes. Like Lara's

death by arrows, her back is tightly arched, which draws attention to her breasts, long

legs, and, in Samus' case, her suddenly luxuriant blonde hair. There is no logical reason

for her armour to disappear when she dies, revealing her long hair and shapely body

(gendered signifiers that the armour usually hides) except as a form of sexualization.

The reveal of Samus' body as she dies has roots in the trope of clothing damage, which is

another way in which games sexualize the death or injury of female characters. Clothing

damage occurs when a character's costume functions as a kind of health bar. A character

loses clothing as they take on more damage. Earlier in this chapter, I claim that the full

health bar inevitably calls to mind the possibility of it emptying. In games with clothing

damage, the covered female form inevitably suggests the enticing prospect of nudity.

Women in fighting game series like *Bloody Roar* and the more recent action-adventure

game series *Akiba's Trip*[121] are dressed to be uncovered before a presumed-to-be-male

audience. This anticipation might seem like the *DOOM* space marine's increasingly

damaged face as he nears death. However, it would be facetious to ignore the gendered,

sexualized nature of clothing damage, which is a type of fanservice that overwhelmingly

happens to female rather than male characters.

Lara Croft and Samus Aran are both known for their physical strength and athletic

prowess, but their deaths have more in common with a fainting, sexualized damsel than a

hero. If, as I have said, player-character death often encourages resilience, the pleasure of

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[121] Fanservice is content intended to please its audience and is not necessarily sexual. However, a great deal of fanservice is sexual, ranging from shower scenes to revealing costumes. Clothing damage occurs most often in Japanese fighting games.

seeing Samus and Lara sexualized is part of what supposedly encourages the player to keep playing. Their bodies—their exposed, shapely, vulnerable bodies—incentivize the to return to play, softening the sting of failure as the game encourages the player to try again. Games often present the heroine's body as a reward. The advertising for *Tomb Raider* games has famously included sexualized imagery, particularly after the first game's success: later advertising included "an aggressive marketing push exploiting Lara's sex appeal […] artists who used a higher-quality Lara model for cutscenes were now asked to render her for magazine spreads: Lara in a bikini, in a leopard-print dress, [….] naked and clutching a pillow to her chest" (Fyfe "Killing Lara Croft").[122] Similarly, the reveal of Samus' body is the traditional means by which to measure success in *Metroid* games. Depending on how quickly the player finishes the original *Metroid*, more of her body is visible at the end. Finishing the game under an hour shows Samus only in a pink bikini. A variation on this set-up exists in most *Metroid* games, including the 2017 release *Metroid: Samus Returns*. While the reveal of Samus' gender is superficially empowering, the use of her body as a reward undercuts that empowerment.

With that said, Samus' deaths are not sexualized with the same consistency as Lara's. However, their shared sexualization points to an important distinction: the visual nature of female player-character death is fundamentally different from male player-character death. Where the Doomguy's gruesomely injured face is a warning to avoid death, the *Tomb Raider* reboots sometimes keep Lara's face pristinely beautiful, even as she writhes

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[122] I have a vivid childhood memory of reading one of my brother's many gaming magazines and finding a centerfold of Lara Croft. I was young enough that I did not fully understand why it was there. The image stayed with me as I matured and continued to read gaming magazines with the increasing understanding that the magazines' presumed audience included my brother, but not me.

in agony. Lara's face is the canvas upon which her pain is displayed. I assert that the strong correlation between feminine death and beautiful suffering in games relates to the medium's historical treatment of women. Typically, women have often appeared as non-player-characters rather than player-characters, and the need to rescue women in danger is a common plot device.[123] This overwhelming historical context shapes designer and player expectations regarding how women look in games, even when these women are player-characters. Consumer expectations and game culture norms feed into and reinforce each other; together, they shape how female player-characters appear and how they die.

Despite being characterized as strong and capable, Lara and Samus have always laboured under the gaming industry's limited ability to imagine ways of being women. So too with death in games. There is a limit to which deaths seem imaginable for women. For deaths designed for explicitly female player-characters, that limit is the legacy of the damsel in distress and the princess rescue arc. It is not that Lara or Samus' deaths do not, in their own way, reinforce lessons about resilience and encourage the return to play. However, the way their deaths teach those lessons is distinct from the far wider scope of how iconic male player-characters die. For male player-characters and player-characters treated as male by default, death can be ignoble or heroic, comedic or serious. The deaths of iconic female player-characters have much less variety, largely allowed only to be sexualized and beautiful.

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[123] As noted earlier, Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory's 'virtual census' of characters in games sold between March 2005 to February 2006 shows that 81.24% were male, compared to 18.76% female (827). Rather than noting the balance of male to female player-characters, the study addresses all characters in a game. Women are few and far between in games and those that do appear are largely objects to rescue.

What does it mean, then, if I attempt to tarry with death using a player-character whose positionality more closely reflects how I feel seen by the world when this means dying beautiful deaths, deaths intended to please someone other than me? Am I capable of tarrying with death in games at all, given my marked difference from mainstream game cultures' unmarked standards? The constraint of how designers imagine female death imposes limits on my imagination, too, on my ability to play with the possibility of death. I learn that according to the norms of mainstream game cultures, the most important thing about my death (and, implicitly, my life) is its aesthetic value. Theoretically, I can tarry with death using Mario as well as Lara Croft. However, the wide variety of deaths I play indicate that 'normal' death is not for me. I become complicit in the remarginalization of bodies that look like mine.

1.7   Conclusion: Upsetting 'The Great Equalizer'

This chapter recontextualizes Hegel's work on death to assert that gameplay is frequently death-oriented. Close readings of key death scenes in *Super Mario Bros*, *Dark Souls*, and *Tomb Raider* articulate the rhetorical power of death in games and the problems presented by the assumptions underlying seemingly anodyne endorsements, like promoting resilience. Death in games is no more equal than death in society more broadly, which is often falsely described as being the same for everyone. Much of the Eurocentric philosophical canon treats death as an equalizing force that erases privilege. That characterization permeates representations of death in art and literature, from the

medieval Dance of Death to the journals of Susanna Moodie.[124] Philosophers and

scholars have challenged the false assertion that because everyone dies, everyone must

die the same way.[125] However, this critical re-evaluation of death is not yet widespread in

popular culture, mainstream game cultures, or influential game design philosophies.

Marked player-characters' death animations often remarginalize those identities.

However, even for players whose identities lie closer to the assumed norm, hegemonic

masculinity limits how death in games might enable Hegelian tarrying with death. The

normative white, heterosexual, cisgender male player-character is a narrow vision of

what it means to be and die as a 'real' man. According to Connell and Messerschmidt,

subordinate masculinities are secondary to hegemonic ones (832). However, among

them, there will be degrees of privilege. Hegemonic and upper-tier subordinate

masculinities often resemble the values expressed by the heroic and military

achievements that Ernest Becker describes in his work on death denial. Marcel

O'Gorman and Jason Hawreliak have both noted how mainstream game cultures exhibit

similar values and orient their readings of games as a form of death denial through this

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[124] The dance of death is a common medieval allegory that depicts everyone, regardless of station, united by being equally mortal and subject to being summoned into the dance that signifies dying. Deborah Carr cites Susanna Moodie's characterization of death as "the great leveller" in *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* 78) as an example of how "theologians, poets, and scholars" have made "eloquent claims about the inevitability and universality of death, [but] it is not an egalitarian transition. At what age and of what causes a person dies are tightly tied to social, economic, and geographic (dis)advantages over the life course" (198).

[125] Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death*, which looks at the funeral home industry, is an important forerunner in research on death and inequality. For more, see David A. Ansell's *The Death Gap: How Inequality Kills*, Deborah Carr's *Golden Years?: Social Inequality in Later Life*, and *Unequal Before Death*, edited by Christine Staudt and Marcelline Block. For a broader understanding of the importance of acknowledging how difference shapes death, see Caitlin Doughty's *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & And Other Lessons from the Crematory* and *From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death*. Mbembe's "Necropolitics" and *Necropolitics* explore unequal subjection to different forms of death, including physical, social, and civil death.

lens of military masculinity. I assert that part of why Ernest Becker's death denial theory

resonates so much with scholars like O'Gorman and Hawreliak is because mainstream

game cultures reflect the hierarchy of masculine achievement that underlies Becker's

characterization of culture as death denial.[126]

In contrast, scholars and designers who embrace the troubling, complex nature of death in

games include many women and non-binary people, such as Flynn-Jones, Sabine Harrer,

Tobi Smethurst and Gabby DaRienzo. While this claim might seem like an essentializing

binary, it is worth noting that most of the death positivity movement's leaders and its

adherents are women.[127] Sarah Chavez, the executive director of the Order of the Good

Death, notes in an interview with Paisley Gilmour that women and non-binary people's

leadership in the death positivity movement is not a result of their being naturally

oriented towards caretaking, including end of life care. She says that instead, because of

experiences with systemic and domestic violence, "[w]e cannot be unconcerned with

death – that privilege is not ours" ("Why Women are Leading the Death Positive

Movement"). Chavez characterizes this leadership as a result of lifelong subordination

and familiarity with the threat of suffering and violence, experienced most intensely by

transgender women, women of colour, and transgender women of colour most of all.

Considering our understanding that tarrying with death entails submission, Chavez's

comment suggests that marginalization means being well-practiced in tarrying with

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[126] Becker's *The Denial of Death* highlights heroism as method of trying to achieve immortality. As noted by O'Gorman and Hawreliak, the prevalence of heroism in games makes Becker's work a compelling lens through which to understand death in games. However, that appeal deserves critical consideration.
[127] As noted in the Introduction, the death positivity movement aims to destigmatize curiosity and honest discussions about death, including end of life care and funeral arrangements. The Order of the Good Death, founded by mortician Caitlin Doughty, is the organized arm of the death positivity movement.

death. Hegel describes death as "the absolute Lord" of the living, regardless of their

social status or their place in his parable of the Lord and Bondsman (117).[128] The

Bondsman's terror of death makes him much better able to understand his unavoidable

subjection to mortality. In contrast, the Lord has not had that confrontation or the

resulting understanding. He is, therefore, much more like Becker's death-denying men

trained by a deathphobic, patriarchal culture to see achievement as a means of mastering

death. While fundamentally different,[129] the Bondsman's understanding of death might be

closer to the experience of women and non-binary people in the death positivity

movement due to their lived experience of marginalization and fear.

Often, mainstream game cultures depict submission to death through women's bodies.

The following chapter asserts that the continuing legacy of the damsel in distress in

games in the treatment as women as aesthetic objects is powerfully present in how female

characters and player-characters are subject to violence and death. Part of this legacy

draws from the normative construction of player-characters as white men. At the same

time, alternate identities have largely been relegated to non-player-characters if they are

present at all. This divide is not merely a matter of relative importance to the narrative or

agency in the game-world, but personhood. As noted by Anastasia Salter and Bridget

Blodgett, "if marginalized characters are primarily presented as villains, sidekicks, or

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[128] Hegel's discussion of the Lord and Bondsman in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is one of his most widely cited concepts. The conflict between two beings that gives rise to each's self-consciousness through recognition by the other unavoidably becomes a struggle to the death. The Lord, who does not fear death, defeats the Bondsman, and consequently cannot receive completely mutual recognition due to the Bondsman's unequal status.

[129] The Bondsman is a character in Hegel's purposefully abstract parable, rather than a real, historically situated person, which means we should approach comparisons to real-world marginalization carefully. For example, Mbembe uses Hegel's work on death without reference to the Lordship and Bondsman in "Necropolitics" and *Necropolitics*, possibly for this very reason.

absent, the white male hero is the only character who gets to be embodied as a person"

(73). Mainstream game cultures privilege the humanity of the anticipated player by

defining the player-character by his adherence to hegemonic standards of masculinity

defined as white, heterosexual, and cisgender. In this context, the immersive quality of

games combines with the sense that you—the player—are the only 'real' person in the

game. This powerful sense of personhood interacts with the long-running presentation of

women as non-player-characters, decorations, and objects. In a commentary on the

#MeToo movement in game cultures,[130] Laurie Penny writes that "[f]or a small but

vicious and dedicated sector of gamers, the humanity of women has long been an

insulting proposition. […] a significant cluster of men who make and design games has

fallen into the habit of treating women like nonplayer characters, expendable and

replaceable" ("Gaming's #MeToo Moment and the Tyranny of Male Fragility"). Penny

does not explicitly link the historical treatment of women as non-player-characters with

misogyny and sexual harassment. However, understood in the context of Salter and

Blodgett's assertion that gameplay norms privilege the humanity of white men, the

phenomenon Penny describes partially results from that privilege. Many aspects of

mainstream game cultures tacitly teach that women are not people quite the same way

that men are.

This pernicious characterization of women as objects rather than agents becomes most

obvious through comparing the treatment of player characters that are exclusively female

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[130] In 2006, activist Tarana Burke coined the phrase "Me Too" as shorthand for having experienced sexual violence. The phrase earned widespread attention in 2017 and a movement by the same name works to destigmatize surviving sexual assault.

to the treatment of player-characters whose gender is selectable. Games often treat gender-selectable player-characters as male by default, and thereby in the same normative position as the exclusively male player-character. Their relationship with the game world and their in-game deaths are both unmarked. Exclusively female player-characters have their marked femaleness reflected in all their experiences, including their deaths. They relate to death in a fundamentally different way, which illuminates the claim at the heart of this project: both marked and unmarked deaths perpetuate sexism in mainstream game cultures and radically foreclose the otherwise promising potential of games to encourage tarrying with death.

Chapter 2

2 Torture Victims and Tomb Raiders: Feminine Suffering and Sacrifice

2.1 Introduction: Sacrificing the Other

In this chapter, I supplement Chapter One's examination of marked and unmarked death

in games by looking specifically at how women's suffering and deaths in the *Tomb*

Raider series are not merely moments of dismemberment, but acts of sacrifice.[131] I

examine sacrifice in games using Georges Bataille's work in "The Notion of

Expenditure," "Sacrifices," and "The Sacred" in *Visions of Excess*, "Critical Dictionary"

entries originally published in *Documents* magazine and collected in *Encyclopædia*

Acephalica, "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel," and "Sacrifice, the Festival and the

Principles of the Sacred World" in *The Bataille Reader*, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" in

Hegel and Continental Philosophy, *Inner Experience*, and *Erotism*.[132] The previous

chapter examines iconic player-character deaths in light of their markedness or

unmarkedness and asserts that exclusively female player-characters' deaths reflect how

games have historically marginalized and relegated women to non-player-character roles.

This chapter uses Bataille's work to characterize the marked deaths of female characters

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[131] An earlier version of part of this chapter appears as "Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*."

[132] I want to contextualize my choice to use Bataille by pointing out Bataille's own admission in "Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel" that "I imagine that my life – or, better yet, its aborting, the open wound that is my life – constitutes all by itself the refutation of Hegel's closed system" (296). Despite this claim of opposition, critics from Jacques Derrida to Benjamin Noys agree that Bataille is in constant danger of falling prey to Hegel's dialectic, a method of argument that incorporates opposing claims into its system. Noys notes the difficulty of escaping Hegel's dialectic because "its power [lies] in the extent to which it admit[s] [opposing arguments] into philosophy rather than rejecting them" (7). Bataille risks his response being another step in Hegel's system. Bataille tries to avoid this trap by sidestepping a simple refutation in favour of embracing themes of excess and possibility, of laughing at what one takes deadly seriously. I proceed while keeping in mind the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of avoiding the Hegelian trap.

as a form of ritual sacrifice that reduces women's worth to the aesthetic value of their

suffering. I begin this chapter by contextualizing the concepts of sacrifice and the sacred

in Bataille's work. I use the heroic figure Bataille calls the "me that dies" ("Sacrifices"

132) to look at unmarked death in games like the original *Super Mario Bros*. Bataille's

"me that dies" recalls stereotypical interpretations of player-characters as death-denying

fantasies. In contrast, a later concept in Bataille's work on how identity becomes shared

among participants in sacrifice contextualizes how games like *Dragon Age: Origins*, and

Nier use sacrifice to reify unmarked death in games. Moving onto the subject of marked

death, I will show how the visual tradition of the damsel in distress continues to shape

how exclusively female player-characters die. In contrast to the agency exhibited by

unmarked player-characters, these markedly female player-characters are "sacrificial

women," whose limited agency makes them resemble the feminine-coded victim central

to Bataille's model of sacrifice.[133] Then, using examples from both the *Tomb Raider*

series' early history and recent reboots, including *Tomb Raider* and *Rise of the Tomb

Raider*, I articulate how feminine sacrifice in games centralizes the aesthetic and sexual

appeal of women's suffering and death. This chapter closes by examining the cultural

anxieties that underlie feminine-coded sacrifice in preparation for Chapter Three's

exploration of how heroic, markedly masculine death expresses and symbolically soothes

anxiety about changing demographics in mainstream game cultures.

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[133] The damsel in distress and the sacrificial woman are not exactly analogous. The damsel in distress is a
stock non-player-character with specific visual cues including hyper-feminine signifiers and visible
restraints. The sacrificial woman is a more complex category that includes player-characters and non-player
characters whose suffering draws on the aesthetic tradition of the damsel. I use the term "sacrificial
woman" for the characters who embody characteristically "feminine sacrifice." The two terms are linked,
but not exactly analogous, and I bring them up to be questioned, not endorsed.

This chapter interprets player-character death as a form of ritual sacrifice. The primary philosophical ground for this chapter's reading of sacrifice is the work of French theorist Georges Bataille. There is precedent for my use of Bataille here. Boulter reads the deathmatch as a "technological critique of the idea of sacred violence," that Bataille often mythologizes ("Virtual Bodies" 64). In contrast, the deathmatch seems to parody that mythology because it features selves "dying and not dying endlessly." Where Boulter uses the repetition of violence in games to frame play as melancholic, I use Bataille's characterization of the sacrificial victim to shed light on the gendered, sexualized spectacle of the *Tomb Raider* franchise's depiction of feminine distress and death.[134] While Bataille's reading of sacrifice draws from an oversimplified, binary model of gender,[135] he at least addresses gender, whereas—as discussed in the previous chapter— Hegel refers to a supposedly universal subject that is nonetheless male. I apply Bataille considering de Beauvoir's observation that the seemingly universal subject is often inherently gendered. She writes that woman is "the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (26).[136] This chapter transitions from Chapter One's claim that markedly female player-characters have a narrow range of possible deaths to use Bataille's characterization of sacrifice as a lens through which to understand the primarily aesthetic value of women's suffering and death in mainstream game cultures. Here, I identify the pleasures and pitfalls of the spectacle of feminine-

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[134] This chapter does not address the 2018 release *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*.

[135] Particularly in *Erotism*, Bataille consistently aligns masculinity with agency and exerting violence, and femininity with a lack of agency and passively receiving violence. He grounds these roles in a decidedly heteronormative understanding of sex.

[136] Even de Beauvoir's critique of the masculine universal subject in both Hegel's work and the world more broadly oversimplifies gender and pays little attention to markedness based on race and class.

coded sacrifice. This analysis prefaces Chapter Three's examination of dad games, in which prominent sacrificial girls, the majority of which are non-player-characters and daughters, display fundamentally similar victimhood. In contrast, the self-sacrificing father uses his specific brand of paternal heroism to mark his masculinity, rather than let it continue to go unmarked.

2.2   The Heart of The Matter: Defining Sacrifice

Bataille provides many evocative definitions for the concept of sacrifice: no one definition supersedes the others.[137] However, some recurring elements include destroying an object or person, destabilizing systems of meaning, and forcing intimacy in which the sacrificer and sacrificed become dis-individuated. Bataille often describes this scene as occurring between a male sacrificer and feminine-coded victim and likens it to heterosexual sex. Sacrifice is a spectacle in which the drama of destruction and the rending of meaning plays out through victim, sacrificer, and audience. However, as I will explain in greater detail later, that violence is not equally distributed between the participants.

What Bataille means by the destruction inherent in sacrifice is not just physical violence, but also a more broadly destructive gesture. Sacrifice destroys its object, but more

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[137] A trait shared by Hegel and Bataille is that their key ideas exist in relation to each other: it becomes difficult to define terms in isolation. However, some inelegant work is needed to have conceptual handholds on these ideas. As is typical of Bataille, a term's definition can be intimately connected, partially dependent on, and even in conflict with other terms. Bataille returns to ideas like sacrifice throughout his career. For more on this interplay, see Joseph Libertson's "Proximity and the Word: Blanchot and Bataille" and Jacques Derrida's *From Restricted to General Economy*.

importantly, it destroys the everyday systems of meaning that treat the object as an object. Bataille argues that "the destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice destroys an object's real ties of subordination" ("Sacrifice, The Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World" 210). The 'thing' destroyed in the victim is their status as an object, and the context that determines that status. Bataille voices the sacrificer's declaration: "I withdraw you, victim, from the world in which you were and could only be reduced to the condition of a thing, having a meaning that was foreign to your intimate nature. I call you back to the *intimacy* of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is" (210). According to Bataille, sacrifice makes the victim divine, recalling them from the mundane, radically disconnected world in which they have been reduced to an object. Furthermore, sacrifice transforms the world itself, turning weak social ties and isolation into profound connection and continuity.

This claim, however, calls to mind key ethical questions, inspired by Achille Mbembe's interrogation of necropolitics, the power to "dictate who may live and who must die" ("Necropolitics" 11).[138] What right does the sacrificer have to dictate that the victim must trade their social subjugation for physical death? What if the victim is unwilling and would rather remain a living object—even one treated as socially or civilly dead—than suffer the transformation into a dead divinity? Characterizing sacrifice as a corrective act

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[138] As noted earlier, this project is indebted to Amanda D. Phillips and Bo Ruberg for applying Mbembe's concept of necropolitics to games in their respective work. Mbembe's work examines how Hegel and Bataille's understandings of death relate to state power over life and death and I only wish I had become aware of his work earlier.

that makes the victim divine and thereby serves a higher purpose conveniently ignores sacrifice's practical realities and human cost: the victim must suffer and die to produce a state of continuity and connection that the everyday world lacks. How games present the gender-specific right to choose or refuse to be sacrificed is a key issue explored later in this chapter and Chapter Three. However, Bataille is not interested in the ethical dimensions of sacrifice. Instead, he is concerned with sacrifice's effects, particularly on meaning. Bataille specifies that the essence of sacrifice is that what is sacrificed is supposed to escape the workaday reality, noting that "what is important is to leave a world of real things" ("Sacrifice, The Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World" 213). Sacrifice disrupts our illusion of a fully systematized, coherent society: sacrifice is meant to rend, but its most important target is the everyday systems of meaning that keep us from truly connecting with others.

Bataille claims that this destruction takes place in a state of radical continuity in contrast to everyday isolation. To understand sacrifice, one must understand Bataille's idea of continuity and discontinuity. Ordinarily, human beings live in proximity to one other but are fundamentally disconnected from each other. Bataille writes, "[e]ach being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. […] Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity" (*Erotism* 12). Transgression is the primary means of achieving continuity, of making connections where before there was merely proximity.

The sacrificer and sacrificed experience transgressions of their bodily autonomy and individual identity. This transgression occurs literally for the victim and metaphorically for the sacrificer. Bataille observes, "[t]he individual identifies with the victim in the

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sudden movement that restores it to immanence (to intimacy), but the assimilation that is linked to the return to immanence is nonetheless based on the fact that the victim is the thing, just as the sacrificer is the individual" ("Sacrifice, The Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World" 214). What Bataille means at a basic level is that the sacrificer identifies with the victim, even as he treats the victim as an object. His identification with the victim cannot be reciprocated because "the victim can neither understand nor reply. Sacrifice essentially turns its back on real relations" (211). The primary relations between the participants in sacrifice are the imaginary identifications held by the sacrificer and another party to the sacrifice, the audience. In Bataille's reading, the victim can neither understand her situation nor speak back to the people performing the sacrifice: all the victim can do is suffer until she dies.

I write "she" because Bataille typically categorizes the sacrificer as masculine and the victim as feminine. In later work, he describes heterosexual sex using the lens of sacrifice, writing that "the female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer, both during the consummation losing themselves in the continuity established by the first destructive act. This comparison [between sex and sacrifice] is partially invalidated by the slight degree of destruction involved" (*Erotism* 18). That the comparison is, as Bataille says, imperfect does not remove the strong ties between heterosexual sex and sacrifice in his work. The transgression of bodily autonomy in sexual contact or violent death (or both!) is the core of both acts.

Violence's centrality to sacrifice in the sense of boundaries being forcibly transgressed reflects Bataille's claim that "under the form of defilement, the world (or rather the general imagery) of death is at the base of eroticism" ("Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" 197).

In Bataille's philosophy, intimacy is itself violence that unavoidably brings death to mind. Bataille frequently uses the language of intimacy and eroticism when describing victims, such as his characterization of the "seductive" Chinese torture victim in *Inner Experience*, whom Bataille professes to love (120). Desire, intimacy, and violence bleed into each other in sacrifice: desire is in itself is a form of violence characterized by what Bataille calls the "anguish of desire" (*Erotism* 19). This violence (or destruction, in Bataille's preferred phrasing) inherent in physical intimacy has degrees of intensity. Imagine at one end of the scale, close physical proximity between naked bodies,[139] and further on, physical touch that does not transgress bodily boundaries. Near the scale's far end, there are active transgressions of those boundaries as in the penetration of one partner by another via bodily orifices (such as the mouth, vagina, or anus). In sacrifice, this penetration extends a step further. Rather than being limited to transgression via channels in the body, the sacrificer can wound the body, like piercing the victim's skin and cracking her ribs apart, as he does in Bataille's imaginings of the ceremonial extraction of a victim's heart.[140] At this level of intimate dismemberment, the sacrificer does not merely transgress the body's existing boundaries but creates wounds as a more fundamental way to penetrate and ultimately destroy the victim.[141]

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[139] Even in nudity, Bataille see the spectre of violent death, noting that "[s]tripping naked is seen [. . .] if not as a simulacrum of the act of killing, at least as an equivalent shorn of gravity" (*Erotism* 18).

[140] Bataille describes this ceremony in *The Accursed Share* (50). The image of a human sacrifice including the ritual removal of the heart reappears in Bataille's writing. The Chinese torture victim is also an important image in Bataille's work, but that victim's historical, photographically preserved character is distinct from this more mythopoetical ideal of sacrifice. We cannot ignore the victim's racial and cultural othering in these examples, however. Bataille's victim is always marked, whether by race, culture, or gender.

[141] An appropriate analogy would be that with enough holes in a house's structure, the entire building collapses. Eventually, enough wounds in a living body will make it a ruined corpse. In both cases, we can recognize the original structure in the wreck, but the structure has been fundamentally compromised.

Understanding that sacrifice is a form of extreme intimacy matters because the sacrificer uses this violence to cultivate another kind of intimacy. This second attempted intimacy is not with the victim, but with death itself. The sacrificer uses the victim's pain to imagine he is the sacrificed and that he shares in her death. The sacrificer imagines himself in the skin of the victim metaphorically while he enters that skin literally.[142] Increasing from physical nearness, to touch, to sexual penetration, to injurious penetration, his identification with her is the culmination of their intimacy. His misreading is an effort to come closer to death: this may be an attempt to tarry with death, but it is a morally reprehensible one. That excessive, unbearable intimacy that transgresses bodily boundaries is an act of sympathetic magic. Like bringing in evergreen boughs in winter to guarantee spring, the sacrificer acts out his desired proximity to death on a physical object, the victim.

2.3   From "The Me That Dies" to Sacrifice's Array of Identity

I posit that the player experiences player-character death in games, much like how the sacrificer attempts to cultivate closeness with death by sacrificing his victim. By this, I mean that we play-act the moment of death repeatedly and attempt to experience death via the proxy of our in-game player-character. This sacrifice is unavoidably gendered, like Bataille's characterization of victimhood as feminine. Before addressing gender in sacrifice, I will refer to some key claims made in the Introduction and previous chapter.

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[142] This occurs concretely in *The Accursed Share*'s description of ritual sacrifice; there, Bataille describes how in one case of human sacrifice, "[t]he dead person was flayed and the priest then clothed himself in this bloody skin" (51).

As outlined in the Introduction, claims that player-character death misrepresents human mortality abound in game scholarship.[143] I argue, however, that though death cannot be experienced directly,[144] death remains conceivable and approachable through representations, including video gameplay. These representations will never be accurate. Nevertheless, just because Mario's death in *Super Mario Bros.* does not literally kill me does not mean that Mario's death has no connection to how I understand my mortality. Instead, I perform and observe Mario's mortality as I play. In doing so, I attempt to understand my own mortality better, much like the sacrificer performs sacrifice to attempt to experience his death through the proxy of the victim. Player-character death, like sacrifice, is an attempt to approach death imaginatively.

This attempt requires that player consciousness survives each instance of player-character death. Using Mario as an example, when he dies, I survive. I watch him die and restart the game. Player consciousness survives the process of player-character death. This survival contrasts sharply with Hegel, Bataille, and Dastur's shared characterization of death as unavailable to conscious experience. Some game mechanics even refer to the continuation of player consciousness, like *Dark Soul*'s use of the phrase "YOU DIED." I must survive the player-character's death to read this news: there must be a "you" that knows you died. Similarly, "Game Over" is a message that assumes a living player

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[143] I believe that these claims stem from the long-standing uncertainty whether death can be represented in any medium and share an emphasis on how player-character death differs from death rather than how they might resemble each other. As Bataille claims in *Inner Experience*, "[i]f I myself were dead, if I myself had been destroyed, my anguish would not have gone further than the knife . . . it was necessary that another die before me" (194). The one who dies in our stead is our victim.

[144] In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel articulates the key problem with representing death, namely that it is unavailable to consciousness (308). Françoise Dastur rephrases the nature of death slightly differently from Hegel, suggesting "nothing can be verified by death, because, as negation of any datum whatsoever, it does away with self-consciousness itself" (27).

survives the dead player-character. Hegel and his critics assume that nothing of the self survives death. In contrast, player-character death assumes that the player survives.[145]

I argue that the player observing player-character death literalizes Bataille's claim that "[i]n order for Man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be" ("Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" 194). Bataille identifies ritual sacrifice as the way man can watch himself die, and I would like to suggest that player-character death is a sacrifice. My death is unavailable to my experience, but Mario's death can be repeatedly played through, viewed, and explored. I can imagine dying by using Mario or any player-character subject to death. I can perform a similar commingling of identity as the sacrificer does in sacrifice.

Before articulating this array of identity further, I want to introduce a concept from Bataille's early work in "Sacrifices," which introduces a useful initial model for articulating player-character death. "[T]he me that dies" provides a useful contrast to Bataille's later, more thoroughly sketched out concept of how identity is shared in sacrifice. Bataille identifies "the me that dies," which is not one's everyday sense of self, but rather a vision of the self revealed in the face of death. Bataille specifies that "this revelation of the *me* that dies is not given each time simple death is revealed to dread. It supposes the imperative completion and sovereignty of being at the moment it is projected into the unreal time of death" (132). "[T]he me that dies" is a radical sense of

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[145] The requirement that the player exists to see the words "YOU DIED" is sometimes read as proof that player-character death is disconnected from real death. Greg Esplin opens an essay on player-character death's unreality with the phrase "I am dead" ("On Video Game Death: On the Possibility of 'Extra Life'").

the possibility of one's own death normally inaccessible to the self. I consider "the me that dies" an introductory way of seeing death through my player-characters. Death transforms Mario into "the me that dies" in the Mushroom Kingdom. Writhing in pain, Lara Croft is "the me that dies" in *Tomb Raider*. While their degrees of markedness differ, both player-characters are the vehicles of my attempts to imagine the unimaginable. Bataille describes "the me" as a transcendent, godlike figure in its intensity and scope, that "attains the rending subversion of the god that dies" (132).[146] Similarly, criticism that interprets video games as power fantasies and sometimes ignores degrees of markedness often paints player-characters with a similarly heroic, godlike brush. Notably, the player-characters described this way are often largely unmarked. Both "the me that dies" and the sacrificial victim are projections on the horizon of death. Still, the sacrificial victim is ultimately a more useful model for the player-character because victimhood emphasizes markedness, vulnerability, and multiplicity, in contrast to the unmarked, often hegemonic heroism most often featured in Triple-A games. Moreover, the complex array of identification that Bataille addresses in sacrifice is more useful for our consideration of the ethics of markedness and victimhood in games, as discussed later in this chapter and Chapter Three. However, I bring up this earlier concept to draw attention to the benefits of articulating the player-character in a nuanced way, especially when it so often goes undertheorized in popular media despite the substantial work on the subject in game studies.

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[146] Bataille did not carry forward this idea in his later writing. However, "the me that dies" is still a useful concept for introducing the player-character as an object of sacrifice and understanding the enduring mischaracterization of player-characters as only vehicles for power fantasies. The relationship between players and player-characters must be understood as nuanced and complex.

In ritual sacrifice, the one performing the sacrifice identifies with the sacrificial object, much like the player does with the player-character. Both play at death. Bataille argues that this identification is a "subterfuge" in which "the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so he dies in seeing himself die, and even, in a certain way, by his own will, one in spirit with the sacrificial weapon" ("Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice" 195). Essential to this subterfuge is the plurality of the sacrificer's (or player's) identification. In sacrifice, identity becomes plural, shared among the key elements of sacrifice. The sacrificer imagines he becomes the victim and the weapon; the audience imagines they are sacrificer, sacrificed, and weapon.[147]

Partially, this subterfuge succeeds because the sacrificer and audience imagine that they occupy all these positions at once in a radical, reciprocal continuity. Similarly, the player imagines herself occupying multiple roles in her player-character's death. Already identifying with the player-character, she is also an audience to its death. The role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins* acts out this split identification in several of the game's potential endings. The player-character, a Grey Warden charged with protecting the kingdom of Ferelden against the encroaching armies of the orc-like Darkspawn, is presented with a quandary: to fulfill their charge, a Grey Warden traditionally kills the dragon leading the Darkspawn armies, and in doing so takes in the soul of the dragon, so both dragon and Grey Warden permanently die. The player-character is expected to take

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[147] In *Erotism*, Bataille writes, "[t]he victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals [. . .] what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one" (22). In experiencing that continuity, the audience lays claim to the victim's identity, even as sacrifice obliterates the victim. Typically, Bataille focuses on the sacrificer, but in *Erotism*, the audience also receives some in-depth analysis.

part in a sacrifice like the one Bataille describes and becomes both killer and killed, weapon and wound.

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, sacrificial identity's plurality is particularly apparent when the player-character takes in the dragon's soul and sacrifices herself to destroy it. As in Bataille's description of ritual sacrifice, the Grey Warden is sacrificer, sacrificed, and sacrificial weapon in this instance. After spending many hours investing in my Grey Warden, designing her features, levelling her up, shaping her skills, navigating her friendships and romantic relationships, and making decisions through her that shape the world of Thedas, this decision is agonizing: how can I sacrifice this character in whom I spend dozens of hours living? This character is also a me—a me that lives. The decision is impossible: I seek out an alternative in which she could live but find she can only live at a personal cost. Her survival requires further subterfuge and substitution: unless I allow a witch to impregnate herself with the dragon's soul or let my character's lover sacrifice himself in her stead, she must die. In posing this difficult question of whether or not to sacrifice the character, the game performs a corrective action: in typical sacrifice, Bataille asserts that the shared identity of sacrificer and audience is a genuine moment of radical continuity, a deeper truth typically obscured by a workaday capitalist reality. The practical reality of the victim's suffering makes it difficult for me to agree: the projection of identity on the part of the sacrificer and the audience rings false to me. However, in *Dragon Age: Origins*, the game makes that identification accurate. I note this not to claim that the game addresses Bataille intentionally, but rather that the game dramatizes the identification and suffering of the sacrificer and audience as genuine. This dramatization encourages the player to believe in her play at sacrifice by facing real regret and pain. In

doing so, the game inadvertently points out how central belief is to both acts of sacrifice and play more broadly. As noted before, Johan Huizinga identifies how "[i]n play as we conceive it the distinction between belief and make-believe breaks down" (25). This lack of distinction between belief and pretense is fundamentally like the player's identification with the dying player-character, as well as Bataille's description of the sacrificer's transgression and continuity with the object of sacrifice and the sacrificial weapon. While play, sacrifice, and player-character death are not strictly identical, they share barriers breaking down and identity commingling. However, games depict willing and unwilling sacrifice very differently: women's unwilling sacrifices go largely unquestioned, while the willing self-sacrifice of male player-characters and those treated like men by default is an opportunity for heroism. This distinction might seem obvious, but the constructions of gender and agency that lead up to these vastly different scenes of sacrifice shed light on not just the historical treatment of women as marked others in games, but its ongoing effects in mainstream game cultures.

Similarly, in a potential ending of the action-roleplaying game *Nier*,[148] the game attempts to leverage the player's personal sacrifice to deepen emotional investment in the game and, importantly, lionize masculine self-sacrifice. The opportunity to self-sacrifice only comes after playing through the game at least three times, thereby requiring the player to demonstrate his skill and dedication to mastering the game. I will freely admit that I have never done this myself: I am no hardcore gamer. This requirement frames self-sacrifice as an opportunity that must be earned by demonstrating one's worth according to a

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[148] There are two versions of the game, the worldwide release *Nier: Gestalt* and the Japan-only release *Nier: Replicant*. This chapter addresses the former.

hegemonic ideal. If the properly hardcore player chooses to sacrifice the player-character, the player's save file is deleted, and a subsequent game file cannot be started unless the new player-character's name differs from the one sacrificed. There must be no direct evidence in the game that the player-character ever existed, other than the prohibition that keeps his name from appearing again. His enforced absence and the player's memory are his only lasting memorials. In both games, the decision to sacrifice the player-character is intended to have powerful ramifications for the player. The agony of these two instances of in-game sacrifice leverages how powerful the player's investment in the player-character can be and offers potential insight into Bataille's conception of the sacrifice: the sacrificer and audience feel real anguish even if they do not really die in the place of the victim. I do not die to defeat the dragon in *Dragon Age: Origins,* but I feel that pain vicariously through my player-character: I imagine my death as the sacrificer imagines his through his victim. Another player does not sacrifice himself in *Nier* so the non-player-character Kainé can live but may feel genuine distress at allowing his player-character to be erased.

In both *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Nier*, the player-character is essentially unmarked by gender. I mean this in the same sense discussed in Chapter One, that player-characters whose gender is a matter of choice (as it is in *Dragon Age*) or whose gender is automatically male (as it is in *Nier*) are often treated as unmarked, as supposedly neutral but practically male by default, in contrast to exclusively female player-characters. In the case of *Dragon Age*, the player-character's gender only changes who can father the child meant to absorb the dragon's soul, in a specific ending: little changes otherwise. Cases of sacrifice in which the player-character's gender is unmarked much more closely resemble

the masculine sacrifice examined in Chapter Three, which is largely active and heroic. However, in cases in which the sacrificial object is explicitly female, their role in sacrifice is much more often passive and sexualized.

2.4   "The Most Poetical Topic in the World": Women in Peril

In the *Tomb Raider* series, scenes of feminine sacrifice occur both literally in the narrative and metaphorically in play constructed by the game's paratexts, including advertising and box illustrations.[149] Before delving deeper into *Tomb Raider*, I want to establish some important context regarding the damsel in distress trope, which closely resembles Bataille's sacrificial victim. I assert that the marked death of explicitly female player-characters draws from games' long-running damsel in distress trope. In turn, that trope draws from the long history of images of beautiful women in peril, dying, or dead in the arts. Mythology, literature, music, and visual arts all have their iconic depictions of women in peril and women who have succumbed to peril and died: Edgar Allan Poe calls "the death […] of a beautiful woman" "unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world" (19).[150] Video game depictions of women draw from this history, even when the women in question are player-characters rather than non-player-characters. There is still a bit of the inert doll who requires outside agency to move in female player-characters like

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[149] A paratext is material associated with the publication or presentation of a text other than the very text itself, which ranges from editorial content like introductions to even a book's front cover. In the case of a video game, paratexts might include advertising, box art, developer commentary, official strategy guides, advertising, and tie-in content like comic books.

[150] For more on the history of beautiful dead women in Eurocentric art, see Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*. Images of women in pain and images of dead women are distinct, but both are united by the aestheticization of women's vulnerability.

Lara Croft: even when they are ostensibly active subjects, the game still foregrounds their

passivity and dependence on the presumed to be male player. Ironically, non-player-

characters often move on their own, while player-characters, regardless of gender, require

player intervention. However, the moving non-player-character and the inert doll are

united by their unreality and their lack of true personhood. As noted in Chapter One,

Penny highlights the connection between "the habit of treating women like nonplayer

characters, expendable and replaceable" with the tendency to see "the humanity of

women" as "an insulting proposition" ("Gaming's #MeToo Movement and the Tyranny

of Male Fragility"). One image captures this unfolding history of how seeing women as

passive, aesthetic objects may lead to a diminished sense of women's humanity. Consider

how Gustave Doré's *Andromeda* depicts its damsel in distress (Figure 8). [151]

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[151] I should note this chapter's indebtedness to Anita Sarkeesian, including her use of an image of Carle van
Loo's *Perseus and Andromeda* in "Damsels in Distress Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games."

Figure 8. Gustave Doré's *Andromeda*. upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b6/.

The painting depicts a myth in which the hero Perseus rescues the princess Andromeda

from the monster Cetus. Most depictions show a moment when Andromeda is chained to

rocks and on the cusp of being rescued by Perseus. Doré's painting depicts her as nude,

helpless, and restrained by chains. From the lower left-hand corner of the image, the

monster Cetus approaches. Perseus is absent, and it appears that Andromeda is about to

die. Her hair shadows her face, while the light catches her pale body in contrast to the

dark background, revealed in a three-quarter profile perspective. The painting's emphasis

on her nude, bound body as she awaits rescue or death is typical of Andromeda's

appearances in art. However, the high degree of erotic potential in most depictions of

Andromeda is not just a result of her nakedness. This potential derives from not only

Andromeda's nudity and chains but also her peril and the potential staging of her

sacrifice to the monster, ending with the display of her beautiful corpse. Her beauty is the

beauty of Bataille's victim when he describes "the palpable and intentional excitement of

sacrifice" as "sacred horror: the richest and most agonizing experience" ("Hegel, Death

and Sacrifice" 196). Part of the erotic appeal of Andromeda on the rocks is the prospect

of her sacrifice continuing uninterrupted by the arrival of the hero. In many depictions of

Andromeda, Cetus and Perseus are present, but Perseus is usually in the background.

Even if Perseus is closer to the foreground, Andromeda's beautiful suffering is

consistently the painting's main feature both in terms of spatial composition and lighting.

Notably, in Doré's painting, Perseus is completely absent, while the waves crashing at

Andromeda's feet emphasize Cetus' encroaching threat as the monster approaches from

the lower-left corner. In both Doré's painting and the depiction of the damsel more

broadly, the possibility that Andromeda will be devoured, rather than rescued, is charged

with both erotic and horrific appeal. The spectator anticipates the perverse pleasure of

seeing her killed. Here, as in Bataille's vision of sexuality and defilement, "death is at the

base of eroticism" ("Hegel, Death and Sacrifice" 197).

Scenes like Andromeda's exist in virtually every art form. Richard Dyer describes the

damsel in distress in film as a source of specific, sadistic pleasure: she is "a woman who

is trapped, a woman without resources to help herself. […] And the pleasure we are

supposed to get from seeing these sequences is that of seeing a woman in peril. We're

supposed to get off on her vulnerability, her hysteria, her terror" (*The Matter of Images:*

Essays on Representations 105). Historically, video games have relied on similarly

spectacular displays of feminine passivity and suffering.[152] The narrative device in which

a hero must rescue a female romantic object from the possession of a monster or a villain

is extremely common.[153] Like Andromeda, the digital damsel helplessly awaits rescue by

a hero who claims her as a romantic conquest. As noted by Mia Consalvo, the common

video game trope of the damsel in need of rescue hails back to early, iconic examples like

the character first called Lady and then Pauline in Nintendo's classic arcade platform

game, *Donkey Kong* (172). Consider the game's first level (Figure 9).
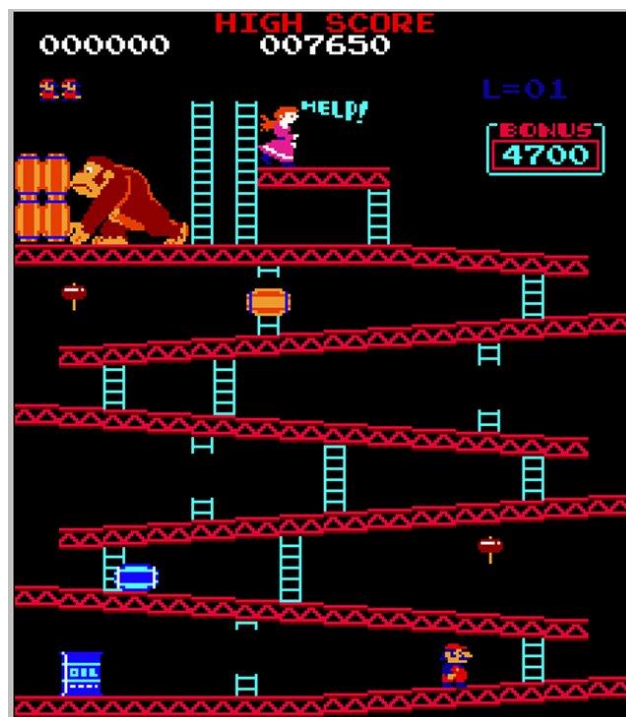
Figure 9. Juster, Scott. "Donkey Kong." experience points.net/2010/02/braids-allusive-appeal.html.

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[152] The damsel in distress is almost always a non-player-character, while the sacrificial woman may or may not be a player-character. As noted earlier, the damsel in distress trope has shaped game conventions so thoroughly that games may frame even female player-characters like damsels in distress.
[153] For further analysis, see Susan R. Sherman's "Perils of the Princess: Gender and Genre in Video Games," Consalvo's "Hot Dates and Fairy Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games," and Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women*. Other sources include Shaw's "Circles, Charmed, and Magic: Queering Game Studies," Meghan Blythe Adams' "Renegade Sex: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Circles in *Mass Effect*," and Adams and Nathan Rambukkana's "'Why Do I Have to Make a Choice? Maybe the Three of Us Could…Uh…': Non-Monogamy in Videogame Narratives."

At the top of the stage, Pauline shouts for help as Donkey Kong sends down barrels.
Pauline's pink dress, long hair, and thin frame highlight her femininity and vulnerability,
especially in contrast with the muscular ape that is about twice Pauline's height and
width. The visual juxtaposition of woman and ape, as well as the text of her shout,
reinforce that the game is not merely about challenging players' skill and timing. Instead,
Donkey Kong stages the hero's journey to rescue a woman threatened by a monster. The
player must control Jumpman, avoid rolling barrels, and maneuver him up the girders to
rescue Pauline from the monstrous ape that has kidnapped her.

I argue that the rescue arc initiated by the kidnap of these romantic interests presents both
the pleasures of preparing the sacrifice and of ultimately averting it. This arc presents
players with the spectacle of seeing Andromeda chained naked to the rock and thereby
enjoying the scopophilic pleasure of observing her in her bound state (Mulvey 67).[154]
Dyer notes that when watching cinematic damsels in distress, particularly those viewed
as if through the eyes of the killer stalking her, "[t]he camera puts us in the position of the
rapist, but the plot puts us reassuringly back in the position of the saviour" (*The Matter of
Images: Essays on Representations* 106). Games function slightly differently: while the
plot is still what propels the player into heroism, the player acts that role out, which is
distinct from Dyer's description of the twin roles of rapist and saviour as different forms

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[154] The psychoanalytic interpretation of scopophilia, the pleasure of looking and exerting that pleasure in
such a way that objectifies what one watches, originates with Sigmund Freud rather than Laura Mulvey, but
her use of the gendered scopophilia of the male gaze is highly relevant here. For more on the use of Mulvey
to positively connect Bataille's theories of eroticism to feminist critique, see Chris Vanderwees'
"Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze: Feminism and Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye.*"

of watching.[155] After enjoying this privileged, perverse perspective, a player can transition to acting out a heroic rescue.[156] The endangered sacrificial woman in video games offers both the pleasure of looking at her peril and the opportunity for heroism. I assert that by playing the game, the player participates in the damsel's endangerment as much as her heroic rescue. These dual pleasures of Bataille's sacred horror and the heroic exertion of agency appear across game genres and periods. Not all players embrace these pleasures. Nonetheless, the consistent staging of feminine sacrifice as a site of pleasurable spectacle reverberates in mainstream game cultures.

2.5 Digging Up *Tomb Raider*

In *Tomb Raider*, the game offers additional pleasures that make good on the awful possibility of the sacrifice continuing uninterrupted. Instead of only staging peril and rescue, the game also depicts the sacrificial woman's suffering and death. Nevertheless, the ways in which the game presents its pleasures are not as simple as a single plot point or a cutscene. Instead, the game abounds with images of sacrifice and women's suffering. This saturation includes both the narrative's cursory critiques of the trope of female sacrifice, as well as the spectacle of women's suffering in Lara's death animations. I unpack these critiques by analyzing two key non-player-characters, namely Lara's friend

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[155] I am indebted to Soraya Murray for her use of Dyer to interrogate white womanhood in peril in the *Tomb Raider* reboots in *On Videogames: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender, and Space*.
[156] The player's ability to play the hero, which can entail the choice to let Lara die, implicitly reframes the viewing of her suffering as a necessary prelude to rescuing her.

Sam and the priestess Hoshi.[157] Then, I will look at the game's thematic engagement with the sacrificial woman in the animations in which Lara's peril ends in death rather than survival. Ultimately, Sam and Hoshi's characters offer tepid criticism of the damsel in distress trope that is consistently undercut by the game's preoccupation with feminine suffering, including player-character Lara's.

Understanding sacrifice's significance in *Tomb Raider* requires knowledge of the game's backstory. In the game, the spirit of the ancient Sun Queen Himiko, ruler of the island of Yamatai, was transferred from body to body through ritual female sacrifice. However, the ritual's interruption many years before the events of the game trapped the Sun Queen's spirit in the corpse of the most recent sacrifice. Since then, the Sun Queen's spirit has caused storms around Yamatai, trapping survivors, who eventually formed the cult that kidnaps Lara's friend Sam. The bulk of the game's narrative is taken up by Lara's efforts to rescue Sam before the cult sacrifices her to become the Sun Queen's new host. In contrast to Sam, Hoshi is a long-dead princess who committed suicide after realizing she was intended to be Himiko's next host.

It might be tempting to characterize the game's depiction of violence against women as a critique of gendered violence like the traditional damsel in distress narrative. The game portrays both Sam and Hoshi sympathetically, and the shrines full of bones, body parts, and art depicting dead women that appear all over the island are clearly intended to

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[157] While Sam's story occurs alongside the game's plot, the game reveals Hoshi's fate through documents found by Lara. When seeing Sam, we share Dyer's twinned perspectives of rapist and rescuer. For Hoshi, we watch Lara textually interpret ancient diaries. While Sam's suffering is more immediately vivid and graphic, Hoshi's narration allows her to express more of her internal thoughts. Ironically, the long-dead damsel Hoshi has more agency and authority than the modern damsel Sam.

horrify. In this reading, Lara's violence is a form of gender parity: after all, the Sun Queen's all-male cult is characterized by its violence against women, and Lara brutally kills its members throughout the game. However, we can see the cracks in this apparent subversion of the trope. While Sam and Hoshi are largely typical damsels in the game's narrative, Lara's sacrificial role is more thematic and expressed through gameplay and death animations. I will discuss each character in turn and how they retread or insufficiently resist the damsel in distress trope that the game seemingly rejects.

 In Sam's case, she neatly plays the role of damsel in distress. The cult considers her a prime candidate to be Himiko's new host because Sam is Himiko's descendent. Sam is kidnapped three separate times in the game,[158] and Lara's explicit mission is to save her from the cult. In a nod to the damsel trope, Lara and Sam's relationship has some romantic overtones, including Lara carrying a white dress-wearing Sam bridal-style at the end of the game. In short, Sam is not particularly different from the early incarnations of Princess Peach. She is a female romantic object the heroic player-character must repeatedly save from peril. The game acknowledges Sam's status as a damsel, which might appear to critique the trope. Instead, Sam's beautiful victimhood is the core of her characterization. When Sam argues with her captor Mathias that she does not want to be sacrificed, he responds, "This is not about what you want. It's about what you are." He refers here to her bloodline, but his pronouncement could just as easily be about Sam's

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[158] After surviving the wreck of the Endurance, Lara and Sam are briefly reunited before Sam is kidnapped by villain Mathias. After Sam is set to be burned at the stake, Lara attempts unsuccessfully to rescue her. However, the fire mysteriously burns out, prompting Mathias to declare Sam the "key" the cult has been seeking. Sam is taken away, but Lara rescues her. However, the two are soon separated again. After another reunion, Sam is kidnapped again. Lara rescues Sam again at the end of the game.

gender, her lack of agency, and her status as another sacrificial woman in media and video games. The fact that a villain makes this statement does not constitute a critique, especially when the game makes no other effort to disagree with Sam's status as an object (a "what") rather than an active desiring subject ("a who"). She is only seemingly an improvement on Bataille's mute, bewildered victim: her ability to speak back to her captor has no bearing on her predicament.[159]

Similarly, although it is tempting to try to salvage Sam's characterization by focusing on the queer possibilities of her relationship with Lara, the game is not as forward-thinking as it appears to be at first glance. The game's subtext is certainly sometimes heavy-handed: when Lara rescues a white-robed and flower-crowned Sam in the game's denouement, Sam says, "You saved me, I knew you would." Implicitly, this statement carries with it the same determinism as Mathias' pronouncement: Sam's status as victim and object of rescue is foreordained. Lara then bridal-carries Sam to the boat on which they and a few other survivors will escape the island. The moment is strongly reminiscent of a wedding and, by extension, the promised romantic reward inherent in the damsel in distress trope. This evocation occurs even as the game does not acknowledge a romance between Lara and Sam. Lead writer Rhianna Pratchett notes that because of the tropes' heteronormativity, "It was interesting that with a female [protagonist] like Lara rescuing a female, people sort of projected that there was more going on to that relationship" (LeJacq "*Tomb Raider* Writer Rhianna Pratchett on Why Every Kill Can't Be the First and Why She Hoped to Make Lara Croft Gay"). The relationship's romantic subtext

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[159] As noted by Sarkeesian in "Damsel in Distress: Part 2 Tropes vs. Women in Video Games," 'sassy' damsels in distress are common; however, their defiance rarely has any bearing on their circumstances.

certainly encourages this projection, even as the game fails to confirm it at the level of text. On one level, this reading challenges the heterosexual rescue arc: the possibility of both rescuer and rescued being queer women seems like a powerful subversion of the trope. This reading also potentially integrates (we might say, *domesticates*) a threat to heteronormativity in the form of a strong, non-romantic female friendship back into a heteronormative framework that does not openly acknowledge queer identity or desire.

Furthermore, Lara's rescuing Sam casts them as white saviour and damsel of colour. Lara's suffering tempers her into a more agential figure, while Sam's produces no changes in her. Lara's whiteness, one of the unmarked parts of her identity, broadens the scope of ways she can be in the world. In contrast, Sam is at best, unchanged, and, at worst, even more of a victim. Paratexts, like the *Tomb Raider* comic, show that Sam has been possessed by her ancestor Himiko and she ends up in jail after assaulting a man (Pratchett 135). Sam's fits of violence consistently signify Himiko's influence, and her suffering develops Lara's character rather than her own.[160] Ultimately, the game's consistent narrative and thematic emphasis on women in peril undercut the game's positive potential. This queer potential is no more a substantive critique of the damsel trope than Matthias refuting Sam's claim to personhood when the game characterizes her as a damsel, one whose passivity mirrors Bataille's uncomprehending, mute victim. In both cases, the game gestures at critical engagement without any follow-through.

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[160] Later in the comic series, Lara uses a special artifact to expel Himiko from Sam's body and chooses to never see her again (Tamaki 140). Like so many sacrificial women, Sam primarily functions in the narrative to give her hero—in this case, Lara—a reason to brood.

In contrast to Sam, whose kidnappings occur in real-time, the character Hoshi appears to be a historical example of the sacrificial woman.[161] Despite being chosen as a Priestess of the Sun, educated, and groomed to succeed the Queen, Hoshi grows increasingly unnerved. The Queen not only treats her like a passive object but specifically a toy to be played with: "[l]ike a doll, she always keeps [Hoshi] close to her, brushing [Hoshi's] hair, dressing [Hoshi] in her favorite clothes." Hoshi is aware of the doll-like passivity typical of the damsel being forced upon her and asserts her agency in response. Ironically, Hoshi rebels against being treated like a doll in a way that Lara never can.[162] Realizing she is being groomed to be the Sun Queen's next host body (rather than her heir), Hoshi commits suicide during the ritual. She traps the Sun Queen's spirit in her dying body, in her own words, "[f]or the sake of Yamatai, and all the priestesses that would follow me." As a result of Hoshi's sacrifice, Queen Himiko spends centuries in Hoshi's corpse, using her power to trap shipwrecked survivors on the island, build her cult, and try to find another viable candidate for possession. Conscious of her role as a female object of sacrifice in a cycle that shows no end in sight, Hoshi resists by committing suicide. However, in the immediate aftermath, other characters interpret her resistance through the lens of the passivity expected from the damsel. In another of *Tomb Raider*'s Ancient

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[161] The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the ten Ancient Scrolls that describe events prior to and immediately after Hoshi's suicide. There are fifty-four collectible documents that Lara can discover in the game, many of them offering insight into the game's events, as well as character motivations. The documents include voice-overs, which makes Hoshi a damsel who says more than "Help!" That difference does not save her, however, and further entrenches her as a damsel who wrenches some agency from her pitiful circumstances but can only do so by killing herself.

[162] Many of the tutorials in the early *Tomb Raider* games have Lara directly address the player and describe how to control her. The difference between saying "Press X to make me jump" and "Press X to jump" may seem subtle, but the former characterizes the player-character as a puppet, while the latter casts the player-character as a role the player takes on. Soraya Murray notes that even in the 2013 reboot, "the player is then cast not truly as Lara, but as an omniscient invisible entity who must protect the endangered Lara from an assortment of possible deaths" (135).

Documents, one of the Sun Queen's military officers writes, "[t]he priestess [Hoshi] knew only death could save her and took her own life." Even his phrasing is of two minds regarding Hoshi's agency: he first characterizes Hoshi as a passive object saved by death as if death could ride in on a horse to save the princess, and then describes her at the grammatical level as an active subject. Even in the wake of such a radical act, a contemporary historical voice struggles to define Hoshi as an actor directing her own fate. I argue that more broadly, the damsel trope implicitly encourages the audience to see women as non-player-characters, similarly to how the Sun Queen's use of her priestesses as passive vessels shapes how others in the court view their capacity to exert agency. In both cases, women's subordination becomes a norm over time and foreshortens the scope of agency attributed to them.

A powerful norm limits what challenges to it are imaginable. Consider Pauli Murray, a civil rights activist and then-law student in the United States whose 1944 proposal that segregation should be challenged as a violation of the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments was met with laughter from her classmates. As noted by Murray's biographer Rosalind Rosenberg, "[a]t a time when litigators believed that the most they could achieve was to make segregated facilities more equal, her proposal seemed radical, even reckless" (4). Murray challenged the limits of what remedies to a harmful norm seemed possible. *Tomb Raider*'s characterization of Hoshi's suicide as a form of agency demonstrates its own set of limits. Suicide is the only way she can challenge her subordination. This characterization is troubling on its own merits, but particularly in a context in which feminine suffering's primary importance is its aesthetic value. In *Tomb Raider*, self-harm is the only expression of agency possible for female characters other

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than the hero Lara. Hoshi disrupts her sacrifice, but she still must die to stage that resistance. Hoshi literalizes the melding of identity between sacrificer and victim that Bataille sees in sacrifice, making Lara (in her own way another sacrificial object) a member of Hoshi's audience.[163] Hoshi is nominally more empowered than Bataille's passive victim who "can neither understand nor reply" ("Sacrifice, The Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World" 213). Sam and Hoshi perceive and comment on their respective predicaments, but their suffering remains the primary use to which the game puts them. Even though Hoshi's suffering is unseen, the voiceover provides auditory evidence of her growing unease and despair, and Lara reacts with distress. As in the paintings of Andromeda in which she, the victim, is always in the foreground, the key element of the game's composition is still women's suffering offered up as an aesthetic pleasure for the viewer's consumption.

Hoshi's attempt to become an active participant in self-sacrifice rather than a passive object causes the rest of the game's bloody backstory. This context includes the deaths of many other women whose mutilated bodies and body parts decorate shrines around the island and the deaths of most of Lara's coworkers on the expedition. Beyond the obviously troubling implications of positioning self-harm as a form of resistance when the game foregrounds that self-harm's aesthetic value, *Tomb Raider* also shows resistance to be only debatably effective. Hoshi alters the cycle of violence without escaping it.

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[163] Lara is less a typical member of the audience than another sacrificial woman, waiting her turn on the altar. The presence of the player, as another individual who is both audience and participant in sacrifice, only makes this array of identities even more complex. In the interest of clarity, I focus primarily on the relationships between characters in *Tomb Raider* as well as their potential relationships with the imagined population of players anticipated by the series, and with me, as a player who falls outside that population.

Though she dies in part to save other women from her fate, arguably, even more women die on Yamatai than would have had the cycle continued normally. Neither Sam nor Hoshi successfully escapes being sacrificial women: Hoshi's agency does more harm than good, and Sam relies on Lara and implicitly, the player who controls Lara, to save her. The game offers critiques of and tepid variations on the damsel in distress trope without substantiating that critique.

Part of the problem posed by the game's attempts to critique the damsel in distress trope lies in a disjunct between the game's occasional narrative criticisms and its visual presentation. The former mildly critiques what the latter endorses, namely the scopophilic pleasure of looking at women in distress.[164] A typical Triple-A video game results from many artists collaborating, which can make identifying authorial intent difficult. Nevertheless, Pratchett and Susan O'Connor's script sometimes offers the beginnings of a critique, only for later plot elements and dialogue to undercut that critique. For example, Mathias' characterization of Sam as a damsel reads like a critique. However, Sam's later breathless comment to Lara about knowing Lara would save her seems to align with Mathias' claim rather than oppose it. Lara's death animations provide some of the most powerful examples of this undercutting. To articulate this further, I will look closely at how the franchise has historically presented Lara as a beautiful plaything.

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[164] Critics often focus on what Clint Hocking calls ludonarrative dissonance, the conflict between the narrative indicated by the game's plot and the narrative presented by its ludic elements like gameplay ("Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*"). *Tomb Raider*'s conflicting messages about women's suffering is not simply ludonarrative dissonance, but instead showcases how truly messy a game's messaging can be.

2.6 Gameplay: Lara on the Rocks (…And Mauled by a Wolf and Impaled on a Branch…)

Lara differs from Sam, Hoshi and the many female corpses found burned in shrines around the island in two obvious ways: she is a player-character rather than a non-player-character, and she is never a candidate for sacrifice to the Sun Queen. However, Lara is still a sacrificial woman. At some level, Lara is aware of this: in the menu through which the player accesses the Ancient Documents, a heading for one of Hoshi's Ancient Scrolls reads, "I feel as though I am following her path." The "I" of the sentence is Lara herself, who, like Hoshi, is another sacrificial woman. The centrality of Lara's suffering to the game makes her a metaphorical offering to the continuing dominance of that trope. This interpretation might seem unlikely at first: after her first shaky forays into violence, Lara becomes extremely proficient at killing. Historically, Lara has been a capable adventurer. However, her capacity for violence is not necessarily a sign of real agency. Lara is complicated. Since her first appearance in the original *Tomb Raider*, she remains the subject of intense analysis that frequently focuses on whether or not Lara is sexist.[165] Famously, Aarseth claims that "when I play, I don't even see [Lara's] body, but see through it and past it" ("Genre Trouble, Narrativism, and the Art of Simulation" 48). This claim has received substantial criticism, including Elizabeth Sandifer's interpretation that "Aarseth is also looking through and past the vast cultural paratext surrounding Lara Croft, which makes it clear that many players do not" (12). Even as Lara seemingly

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[165] Academic engagement with Lara's potential feminist and anti-feminist implications traces back to early references in Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins' *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. For a meta-analysis of the academic discussion of Lara Croft, see Esther MacCallum-Stewart's "Take That, Bitches! Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives." For an overview of popular criticism, see Joseph Bernstein's descriptively titled "Two Decades of Breathtakingly Sexist Writing About *Tomb Raider.*"

differs from Sam and Hoshi, the *Tomb Raider* franchise has a history of framing her more like a puppet controlled by the player rather than as a role the player identifies with and occupies. Text on the back of a Playstation copy of *Tomb Raider III* invites the player to "join Lara," "help Lara," or "follow Lara": advertising and other paratexts expected the player to control her from the outside rather than identify with her (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Shenske. "The back of a case of *Tomb Raider 3*." thecoverproject.net/ view.php?cover_id=12345.

It is impossible to divorce the box's descriptions of Lara from its images of her: alongside pictures of Lara crouching, leaping, and showing large cleavage, Lara receives ambivalent descriptions that characterize her as both active and passive. Like Sam and Hoshi, this Lara is both an object to be consumed and an active subject. This ambivalence includes the text on the box that calls her "our kind of action hero" with the actual text extending beneath a silhouette of Lara's shapely body as if to point toward the frankly

ridiculous amount of cleavage another image of Lara sports beyond it. Implicitly, "[o]ur kind of hero" is a sexually appealing one, but specifically one made to work in tandem with the player: the text consistently invites the player to participate in the game by joining and helping Lara. Her action implicitly depends on the player's intervention. She is never an identity that the player can take on: the player is her partner, not Lara herself.

Discussions of the relationship between the player and player-character usually acknowledge that relationship is a combination of identification with and control of a player-character. In that respect, Lara is no different, but the franchise's advertising consistently emphasizes her as a character separate from the player. Similarly, advertising for games with iconic player-characters often highlight the chance to play *with* those characters as a point of appeal for a game. What is important is how the opportunity to 'play' with Lara has overtones of explicit sexuality and implicit control that are absent from advertising featuring male player-characters.

This characterization of the player's relationship with Lara has a long history in the franchise. Luke Plunkett notes that this characterization also appears in Gard's commentary on player responses to Lara during testing for the first *Tomb Raider* game. Plunkett writes, "[e]erily, Gard brings up the notion of players 'protecting' Lara, something that raised a lot of eyebrows earlier this year when the current *Tomb Raider*'s executive producer said something almost identical" ("Gamers 'Really Loved' Killing Lara Croft, Because She was a 'Strong' Character"). Plunkett refers here to executive producer Ron Rosenberg's explanation that "[w]hen people play Lara, they don't really project themselves into the character. […] They're more like 'I want to protect her.' There's this sort of dynamic of 'I'm going to this adventure with her and trying to protect

her'" (Schreier "You'll 'Want To Protect' The New, Less Curvy Lara Croft"). In Rosenberg's estimation, Lara is a doll to be played with, rather than a role the player takes on. Despite the promotion of Lara as a charge rather than a role, many players do identify with Lara. Esther MacCallum-Stewart's meta-analysis of the critical discussion surrounding Lara is also an impassioned defence of the character's complexity that emphasizes the degree to which many marked players have identified with Lara from the very beginning. MacCallum-Stewart adds that Lara is not simply sexist or not sexist, and neither are the players who enjoy her. For example, fan complaints about Sam's damsel status express frustration with her limited characterization, but some of those very complaints contain an intense strand of juvenile misogyny. It sometimes becomes difficult to differentiate between language that criticizes misogyny in the game and language that is simply misogynistic in complaints about Sam. Shamus Young describes Sam as "our damsel in distress in this game. Not only does she fit the trope, but she's also a clueless, spineless, whimpering burden. […] Sam is a wet sack of a character, a burden to be dragged around" ("Lara's Damsel in Distress"). Young's complaint is accurate, but his language recalls schoolyard taunts thrown at girls. Discussions surrounding Lara frequently risk falling into the trap discussed by MacCallum-Stewart and Bernstein: even well-meaning attempts to discuss Lara risk retreading both overt and subtle sexism.

This complex context is essential when Lara's status as a sacrificial woman vulnerable to sexual assault is presented as a selling point of the game. Rosenberg's pre-release claim that Lara would face sexual assault in the 2013 reboot drew intense criticism, eventually leading to developer Crystal Dynamics' strenuous denial (Schreier "Tomb Raider Creators Say 'Rape' Is Not A Word In Their Vocabulary"). Nevertheless, the scene that

Rosenberg used as an example of the sexual threats Lara faces remains in the game. In the sequence, the cultist Vladimir speaks Russian as he menaces a bound Lara. He strokes her bare arm and traces it down to touch her hip. His invasiveness, including leaning his face into her neck, reads as a sexual threat, especially since fan translations note that his dialogue calls her pretty and says Lara reminds him of his sister ("Vladimir"). The game substantiates Rosenberg's attempt to sell a more vulnerable version of Lara. The reboot draws attention to her youth and defenselessness, and the culmination of her appeal in spectacular suffering. In earlier *Tomb Raider* games, however, Lara is a confident, well-established adventurer (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Crash4563. "The front cover of the original *Tomb Raider*." destructoid.com/ blogs/Crash4563/history-of-3d-games-519914.phtml.

On this cover, Lara's expression is cool, even blank, as she looks out at the viewer. She has a high forehead, arched brows, high cheekbones, and full lips, which are all hallmarks of Eurocentric beauty standards. Her body language is open and confident. Her body's

exaggerated proportions, tight clothing, and smooth skin all highlight her sex appeal. She

has a gun in each hand, both of which project beyond the black borders of the cover as if

she could step out into the real world. The title font and the hieroglyphics in the

background recall classic adventure fiction and film series like the *Indiana Jones*

franchise. The T rating suggests some adult-oriented themes, but not any extreme

content. Lara appears to be a beautiful, competent woman with a capacity for violence.

Lara exudes confidence in virtually every cross-media appearance before the 2013

reboot.[166] After the reboot's announcement, however, some of Lara's iconic elements

change to suggest a much greater sense of vulnerability (Figure 12).
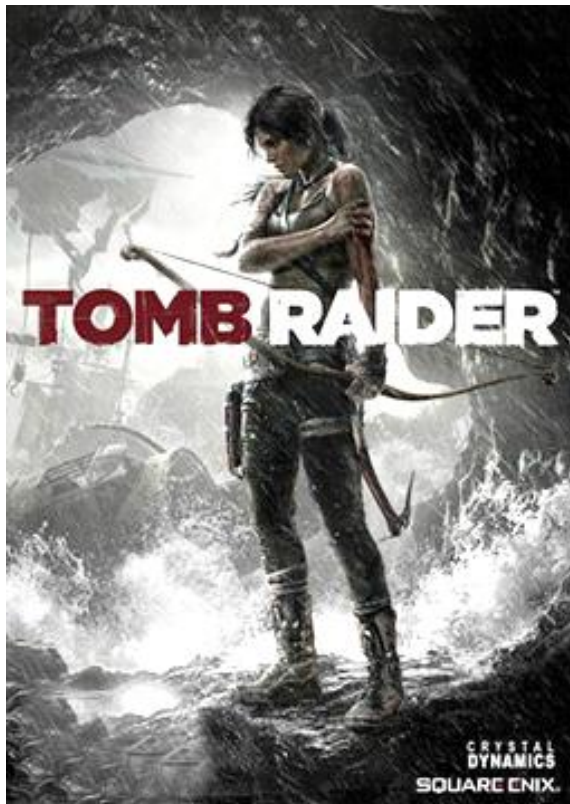
Figure 12. Calamity-Ace. "*Tomb Raider* cover art." wikipedia.org/wiki/File:
TombRaider2013.jpg.

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[166] The opening sequence of the original *Tomb Raider* establishes Lara's skill, fame, and casual confidence. We see her on the front of *Adventurer* magazine, defeating Bigfoot, and when a client tempts her with money, she responds coolly, "I only play for sport." This Lara seeks the thrill of conquest for its own sake, in sharp contrast to the idealistic, vulnerable Lara in the 2013 reboot.

In contrast to the other cover, this Lara is completely contained by the frame, making her look small, even as she remains the focus of the image. Her expression is doubtful as she looks down and away from the viewer. Her body language, particularly her hand gripping her other upper arm, suggests defensiveness, uncertainty, and exposure to the elements. Gone is the bombastic, eerily smooth-skinned figure wearing tight but otherwise nondescript clothing. Instead, this Lara is slim, absolutely covered in grime, wearing a more detailed and realistic version of her iconic tank top, paired with practical clothing like long pants and boots. Her hand and leg are both bandaged, indicating she has already been injured. Instead of being armed with twin guns, she has much less powerful and technologically sophisticated weapons, namely a bow and a climbing axe. This Lara has been reduced to sheer, bloody survival. Where the other cover suggests high adventure, this cover's crashing waves and scratched title font emphasize encroaching danger. The M rating indicates more explicit content than the original *Tomb Raider*. Lara's bombastic sex appeal and confidence are scaled back hugely, leaving her looking, above all else, vulnerable. She looks, in short, much more like Doré's Andromeda than earlier incarnations of herself.

In this game, Lara is a young archeologist at the beginning of her career with virtually no experience with violence. Dialogue references to her age and her fearful reactions to danger early in the game emphasize her youth and inexperience. As noted by Soraya Murray, "[p]articularly during the first portion of the game, many of the missions focus on Lara as unprepared, overwhelmed and in serious jeopardy" (133). Though she gains skill and confidence as the game progresses, this Lara is far more disturbed by violence than previous incarnations of the character. Rather than being a devil-may-care

adventurer, this Lara is a young woman thrown into a horrific scenario that she struggles

to survive. The game delivers Rosenberg's promise of Lara's new vulnerability, which he

explicitly positioned as a source of her appeal (Schreier "You'll 'Want To Protect' the

New, Less Curvy Lara Croft").

 In the wake of Lara's changes, the greater emphasis on her suffering leads to an

increased sense of the player's involvement in that pain—not as a fellow victim, but

rather as her sacrificer—once the player can control her. This Lara's suffering is not

merely sexualized. The game leverages her beautiful suffering for drama. Instead of

occurring in response merely to player errors, her suffering is a key element in the game

from the very start. The game's opening cinematic foregrounds Lara's capacity to suffer

as she nearly drowns in a shipwreck. Upon reaching land, she cries for help and shivers in

the rain before being knocked out. She wakes being dragged across the floor of a cave

decorated with human bones. She is strung up from the ceiling, dangling alongside

bagged corpses. Only then do I gain control of her, as if the game has handed me Lara's

reins. The first thing I must do to free her is to set her on fire. Once the sack in which she

is trapped is burnt enough that she can struggle free, she falls, impaled on a piece of rebar

that I have to then pull out of her in a quick time event. My first act is to make her suffer,

but that suffering is implicitly necessary: practically, it enables her escape and the rest of

the game. Literally and figuratively, my play depends on her pain.

Similarly, Lara does not only suffer when I fail quick time events. Even as I complete

them, she screams and struggles. Unfortunately, her suffering does not stop here in the

hands of a player given to failing quick time events. Over the first half-hour that I play,

Lara gets crushed by a boulder four times as I struggle with the controls, mauled by a

wolf when I fail to aim my bow, and then mauled by a different wolf. I lurch from horror

to horror against a soundtrack of Lara's screams and moans. Rather than being her

protector, I feel as if I am playing a survival horror game in which my poor gameplay is

complicit with Lara's grisly deaths.[167] These deaths' brutality lies not just in the variety

that keeps them from becoming rote, but also in their realistic visuals and audio. Consider

the following image of Lara being impaled by a branch (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Screenshot taken by author from *Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics, 2013.

In the surrounding quick time event, Lara tumbles through the air after falling from above

a waterfall. She struggles to activate a parachute as I try to manipulate the controls. She

hits a tree and blood splashes on the screen, even as the event continues. I fail to hit the

correct button on the controller, and suddenly, a branch impales her through the chest:

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[167] Theoretically, a skilled player might not see Lara's detailed death animations quite so frequently. However, the game's preoccupation with women's suffering makes these deaths an important part of the game's aesthetic.

she frantically struggles as the camera focuses on her horrified, strangely luminous face. The sound and visuals convey the moment of her initial injury, her cries of panic and pain as she struggles to free herself, and her final slump forward. In other sequences like the one in which a pipe impales her through her neck and jaw, we watch each step in the process of her death as her chest heaves and her lips quiver, frequently in close shots of her face and torso as her struggles weaken and cease. Not every death scene is quite so extreme, but there is a consistent pattern. As noted by Alexander Kriss, "Croft's deaths are intimate in their specificity: they are graphic, often slow, occasionally humiliating, and the camera always lingers just a half-second longer than we anticipate" ("Killing Lara Croft"). This intimacy is that of the sacrificer and victim. Failing to protect Lara from the many, many dangers of the island presents the player with her spectacular deaths.

The following game, *Rise of the Tomb Raider,* has fewer explicit narrative and thematic connections to female sacrifice. Nevertheless, Lara's death scenes remain both graphically detailed and invasive. Her added experience and capability do not exempt her from being offered up to the player to kill or save. The game's reduced thematic resonance with the idea of the sacrificial woman results from both plot and characters. Lara's adventure is primarily to locate a lost city that her father failed to find, along with a fabled artifact found there. In sharp contrast to the previous game's emphasis on rescuing Sam from being sacrificed, this game is concerned primarily with inheritance. Despite this, the sequel continues the reboot's treatment of Lara's deaths, which are violent and varied: during the game, she can be impaled on spikes, mauled by a bear, stabbed in the throat, and drowned, among several other potential ends. As in the first

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game, the death scenes often continue as Lara's dying spasms taper off and cease. The scenes' intense technical detail and content are similar across the two games. The greatest contrast between the first and second games' respective death scenes is that in the second game, there are slightly fewer incidences of Lara being impaled, especially through the throat, and fewer instances in which Lara's face is the focus of the shot. These changes seem to deemphasize the sexual connotations of Lara's body being penetrated. Overall, the difference between the two games' death animations is small. Despite Lara's character evolution, her deaths retain their sacrificial framing.

I argue that the gruesome death animations common to the *Tomb Raider* series, and in the post-2013 reboots, in particular, offer a higher-intensity version of the sacrificial woman erotically chained to a rock and left for the monster. *Tomb Raider* uses the quick time event as the moment of peril, heightened by the tension of player attempts to press the correct buttons or, in contrast, fail on purpose to see different death scenes. The scenes depict our digital Andromeda not just chained up, but vividly killed in a spectacle offered up to the player. Like Bataille's sacrificer and audience, the player is observer, participant, and imagined subject in these scenes, not just controlling her but also participating in her death, even when it is unintentional.

I have argued previously that the game and its paratexts encourage the player not to identify with Lara, but rather to focus on controlling her. The player may enact Lara's exciting endangerment with two thrilling outcomes, namely her potential heroic rescue or grisly death. The game invites the player not to identify with Lara, but to occupy her place like the sacrificer does his victim. Rather than being a genuine moment of empathy,

this occupation is a self-serving, temporary projection.[168] The game facilitates the

player's vicarious thrill of being victim, saviour, and sacrificer all at once: this

multiplicity helps make Lara's deaths so visceral. Occupying Lara's place in moments of

sacrifice does not guarantee that a player will identify with her more generally. Instead,

the moment of sacrifice is self-centeredness posing as transcendence, one that depends on

the victim's suffering. Inadvertently, it is the act of playing Lara that points to the

emptiness of imagining oneself in the place of the victim. I say this not to claim that all

players will approach Lara's deaths the same way, but rather highlight that the text offers

up this experience to each player.

Similarly, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*'s post-credits scene also presents Lara as a figure

imbued with vulnerability, positioned to be saved or sacrificed by the player. Lara

interrogates Ana, the woman who appears to have betrayed Lara's father. Ana begins to

explain the mysterious circumstances of his death, but a sniper kills her. Ana's sudden

death robs Lara of the answers Ana could have provided. The shot cuts to a perspective

looking through the sniper's scope as the sniper reports the kill. He asks what should be

done with "Croft." A mysterious voice instructs the sniper not to shoot, saying "No. Not

yet" as the scope's crosshairs remain aimed at Lara's confused face (Figure 14).

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[168] In "Stop Expecting Games to Build Empathy," Julie Muncy critiques the phenomenon of "empathy games." A particularly important area of critique challenges the idea that playing as a character based on a certain group identity increases empathy toward that group. For more on the history of the 'empathy debate' and designer response, see Teddy Pozo's "Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft."

Figure 14. Screenshot taken by author from *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Crystal Dynamics, 2015.

This typical post-credits scene, meant to present a hook for an upcoming sequel, depicts Lara in danger with her death only deferred, not prevented. The shot invites the player to solve the mystery of Lara's father's death and save her or condemn her to a shadowy threat that literally has her in its sights: the sniper's scope circles her face in the final shot. Notably, the scope further blurs the distinctions between hero and sacrificer by putting the player in the position of the sniper. The game resembles Dyer's observation that in cinematic depictions of damsels, "[t]he camera puts us in the position of the rapist, but the plot puts us reassuringly back in the position of the saviour" (*The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* 106). We look through the scope sharing the perspective of Lara's would-be killer, and once again, Lara is a distressed object whose fate depends on our intervention or inaction. The game assumes that the unmarked player will identify with Lara only to the extent that the sacrificer imagines being in his victim's

place. Even after the events of the two games, she remains a sacrificial offering to the player's vicarious pleasure.

Like Bataille's sacrificer, the unmarked player can imagine he experiences Lara's suffering. This vicarious experience lays bare how belief—that central element of play—can excuse troubling ethical questions about sadism in play. Like the sacrificer, the player can excuse the violence of Lara's deaths by imagining that he shares her pain. This belief allows a kind of ethical sidestepping: Bataille insists that "the sadistic instinct" plays no part in his fascination with the victim, implicitly because he has a share in that suffering (*Inner Experience* 120). I assert that this belief in shared pain cannot excuse what does amount to sadism, even when the victim is a collection of pixels rather than a living, human victim. The centrality of belief to both play and sacrifice helps normalize the game's implicit characterization of women's suffering as beautiful.

2.7   Torture Victims and Tomb Raiders

While the problems presented by the projection of identity in sacrifice are useful for analyzing the sacrificial woman, it is another moment in Bataille's work that I want to bring into this analysis. Bataille's meditation on photographs of the Chinese torture victim offers additional insights into how *Tomb Raider* reduces feminine suffering to its aesthetic value. Bataille's loving description of the victim's "hair standing on end, hideous, hagard, [sic] striped with blood, beautiful as a wasp," recalls Lara's death scenes (119). Bataille sees beauty in the violence enacted on the victim's body, which is overpoweringly hideous and beautiful. Consider the possibility that the image of the male

torture victim is fundamentally similar to the dying woman in gameplay, particularly in the *Tomb Raider* reboots. The Chinese torture victim in *Inner Experience* embodies qualities that Bataille typically ascribes to desirable women and sacrificial victims, stating, "[t]he young and seductive Chinese man of whom I have spoken, left to the work of the executioner—I loved him with a love in which the sadistic instinct played no part" (120).[169] To some extent, whether Bataille believes this love is sadistic is beside the point. Whether or not Bataille enjoys the victim's markedly feminine-coded suffering and imagines he shares in that suffering, he reduces that pain's significance to what sensations arise in him, the unmarked viewer. He objectifies the victim for aesthetic reasons.

I argue that Bataille's meditations on the Chinese torture victim fundamentally resemble the act of viewing the suffering and death of sacrificial women. In many game genres, death animations deliver varying degrees of sacrifice's violent pseudo-intimacy. The death scenes in *Tomb Raider* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* present the activity of viewing the sacrificial victim as an ethical problem as surely as does Bataille's meditation on the Chinese torture victim. Stephen S. Bush asserts that Bataille "raises difficult ethical questions" regarding "our cruel fascination with suffering," noting Bataille is "cognizant of our attraction to violence, indeed, our attraction to morally horrible events more generally" ("Sharing in What Death Reveals: *Breaking the Waves* with Bataille). Bataille raises the question of sadism in his response to the Chinese torture victim to deny it.

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[169] Race is clearly an issue here. Bataille aligns the feminine and the exotic in the body of the Chinese torture victim. For more on Bataille and suffering, racialized bodies, see Albert Stabler's "Punishment in Effigy: An Aesthetics of Torment versus a Pedagogy of Pain," and Joseph Winter's "Rac(e)ing From Death: Baldwin, Bataille, and the Anguish of the Racialized Human."

However, as Bush notes, much of Bataille's work champions the acknowledgement that what is taboo is often deeply attractive. Like Bataille, the game series mistakes proximity and prurient interest in a marked other for real, reciprocal intimacy. Lara's capacity to suffer for the player is announced almost immediately in *Tomb Raider* and emphasized as the game progresses. The cavalcade of horrors as the game opens, from Lara's near-drowning to her capture contextualize my first act as a player, which is to set her on fire. I feel as if to progress, I save Lara from one cinematic injury only to catapult her to another, sometimes repeated in quick succession until I learn how to avoid that death. Once I learn to avoid one grisly death, I face the next. I cannot help but wonder whether Lara's suffering is meant to lessen or deepen my enjoyment of the game.

Some players celebrate the sadistic pleasure, rather than sympathy in some reactions to the death animations in *Tomb Raider*. One common way to consume these deaths outside of gameplay is the 'death montage' in which users edit the footage of the player-character's many potential deaths to show these deaths in sequence. There are death montages for every *Tomb Raider* game.[170] Many viewers explicitly endorse the sadistic interest that Bataille and the game's developers deny. Consider the now-deleted *Tomb Raider* death scene compilation video on YouTube, "Tomb Raider All Death Scenes / Violent Deaths Compilation 18+," which in 2018 had over 6,250,000 views. The video's existence is less interesting than its comment section, which included statements showing an enthusiastic appreciation of the sexualized violence with varying degrees of

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[170] Simply put, a death montage collects all the death scenes or animations from a piece of media and presents them in sequence. While the majority that I have seen draw from video games, horror film franchises such as *Saw* also feature in the results. In the case of montages from video games, the deaths depicted may not only be those of a player-character, but also include any deaths shown onscreen.

misogynistic humour (from "I fap [i.e. masturbate] to this" to "I hate this Bitch, and that's why I love this video"), fewer comments showing distaste ("Ugh, very disturbing"), and surprisingly robust debate regarding the merits of video game violence. Several commenters make variations on the joke that the audio track sounds like pornography because of Lara's screams and sighs. Statements of enthusiastic, sexual appreciation of the video may be more in jest, though some commenters specifically indicate they are entirely serious. The sheer volume of these positive comments indicates that the erotic worth of the video is, to some extent, assumed. Commenters may proclaim enjoyment or judge those who do, but they implicitly take the montage's eroticism for granted.[171] Unlike Bataille, many of these commenters celebrate sadistic pleasure as the video's primary value.

Death montage videos exist for many video games, but the ones most-watched primarily come from the survival horror genre.[172] Part of what distinguishes *Tomb Raider*'s death montages is that historically the series has not been part of the survival horror genre. However, in the *Tomb Raider* reboots, Lara's feminine subject position constitutes a kind of horror that transcends genre conventions. However, the montages that tend to have sexually prurient comments are the ones that feature female player-characters. A related

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[171] Similarly, in a video in which television host Conan O'Brien plays the game, he repeatedly proclaims he is "perving out." At one point, he passes the controller to his cohost and says, "You drive for a little bit. I'm just gonna perv out. Her pants are tight" ("Conan O'Brien Reviews 'Tomb Raider'- Clueless Gamer – CONAN on TBS").
[172] Survival horror games typically feature player-characters with strictly limited health and weapons, who are often better-served by avoiding combat than facing monstrous enemies directly. One famous survival horror series is *Silent Hill*, in which vulnerable player-characters traverse treacherous, unreal locations. What counts as true survival horror is sometimes contested by fans and critics. Some franchises like the *Resident Evil* series emphasize action elements like combat, sometimes to the point that entries in the series are described as action horror, rather than survival horror.

phenomenon is the ryona video, which depicts violence against women, particularly in

anime and video games. Searching for *Tomb Raider* death montages on YouTube will

also lead to ryona videos due to the website's efforts to provide personalized content

based on user activity. Many ryona videos depict female game characters being injured,

defeated, and killed, especially in fighting and horror games. These scenes often include

sexualized poses, scanty clothing, and camera shots that focus on sexualized body parts

like the breasts and genitals: they are inarguably sexual. A channel dedicated to

sexualized injuries, as well as game over and defeat scenes featuring women from

fighting games (sometimes slowed down, repeated, or extended) on YouTube, called

Ryona Planet, has over 17,000 subscribers. At the time of this writing, the channel's

most-watched video is a supercut of Princess Peach being struck in *Super Smash Bros* for

the Wii U, which has been viewed 3 million times since its posting in 2016.[173] The

gendered nature of ryona offers insight into the frequent correlation between death

montages featuring female characters and sexually explicit comments: users assume that

the primary appeal of women's deaths in games is more broadly aesthetic and, more

specifically, sexual. In a sense, it is common knowledge that their suffering is uniquely

appealing.[174]

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[173] There are ryona videos on Youtube with much higher views, but most of them feature cartoon characters.

[174] For example, as of June 2020, one of the most-viewed extant video game death montages on YouTube is calloftreyarch's "The Last of Us Remastered: Full Death Montage (18+) PS4" with 6.2 million views. Though main player-character Joel accounts for most deaths in the montage, the thumbnail image for the video shows female character Ellie's face covered in blood as she screams. Her pain is the 'face' of the video, presenting a kind of false advertising when the content largely focuses on Joel.

Regardless of whether the viewers derive erotic pleasure from the video, witnessing these death scenes begs an ethical question of what it means to try to encounter death through the representation. Noys describes Bataille's analysis of legendary child-murderer Gilles de Rais, and he summarizes Bataille's characterization of de Rais by writing, "[f]or Rais this effect of terror is secondary to the desire to encounter death" (71). Whether de Rais enjoyed himself or not is moot: his intent is less important than his actions. I bring this up not to gratuitously compare game players to a famous murderer and pedophile, but to consider how play can be a way of trying to encounter death through the extremity found in scenes of violence. We cannot ignore that this exposure depends on violence exerted on another, even the imaginary other, as in the case of Lara Croft.

Still, let us consider that underneath the obvious misogyny, this video, the many others like it, and the deaths they record might serve the same purpose Bataille attributes to the pain of the Chinese torture victim, to "ruin in me that which is opposed to ruin" (*Inner Experience* 120).[175] Why does the ruin experienced by Bataille's sacrificer and voyeuristic players matter? Bataille characterizes the female participant in heterosexual sex as a kind of victim subject to violent intimacy enacted upon her by the male participant. Bataille is fascinated by the ruin which ends up being psychologically self-directed in the act of sex and sacrifice. However, the victim is subject to literal injury.

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[175] Contextually we can understand that Bataille uses the photographs to approximate a firsthand experience of being devastated, of being rent by pain and excess that defy understanding. Bataille is well-aware that this is insufficient, but because moments of experience that defy human understanding are so central to his work the search for such glimpses often reappear in his writing.

Bataille is fascinated by the image of the victim but uninterested in her inner experience. The spectacle's effect on the sacrificer and the audience is what interests him. Bush claims, "[t]he psychic laceration that [Bataille] undergoes in response to the photographs destroys, for a moment, his survival as discrete object and allows for consciousness of his continuity with the Chinese man, and indeed, with all humanity and with all the world." However, we can reframe the sacrifice by considering the experience of the marked victim, like Lara Croft and other women who feature in death montages and ryona videos. Bataille's sense of intimacy reinforces the centralization of the sacrificer rather than the victim. Bataille often writes about intimacy, describing its violent intensity and its transgression of personal boundaries. Milo Sweedler argues that "sacrifice only merits the name, according to Bataille, to the extent that such intimacy is established" (160). However, intimacy is very rarely truly reciprocal in Bataille's work. It is the intimacy of observing images of the Chinese torture victim and looking at Lara's suffering on the screen. The voyeur only imagines intimacy: his victim is revealed in detail—stripped of clothes, skin, and humanity—but the voyeur does not reveal himself to the victim.

Bataille offers the Chinese torture victim nothing but his love; the sacrificer offers the victim nothing but his identification with her. He offers the victim something of no value to her. The Chinese torture victim cannot care about his image being stared at by Bataille. Lara Croft is unaware of her many death montages on YouTube. There can be no reciprocity between sacrificer and victim here, whether separated by the intermediary of the image or not. Bataille characterizes the sacrificer's identification with the victim as the destruction of the sacrificer's identity in which he suffers as she does. The comparison cannot stand. Our risk—even our risk of death—means nothing to our victim.

This misreading of intimacy is all too easy to achieve in player-character death. On one

level, the death scenes in *Tomb Raider* seem deeply intimate because of the violence

depicted in detailed close-ups. Game death scenes in which we look out from the dying

player-character's eyes or watch from a third-person perspective as the player-character's

corpse slowly crumples to the ground attempt to stage radical closeness. The *Tomb

Raider* scenes are that attempted intimacy made much more intense: the proximity, the

spectacle, the lingering camera, and the fact that the erotic is so close to the surface here

all contribute to a radically different death scene than the ones commonly available to

male player-characters and player-characters treated as male. Lara's marked deaths

attempt to present intimacy in a way that Mario's many deaths across his franchise

simply do not. However, they do so by highlighting her otherness, her marked femininity,

and like Bataille, they mistake one-sided transgression and proximity for reciprocal

intimacy.

When I play Lara and lose too much health or fail a quick-time event, I regret the error,

even as the game presents a cinematic spectacle of her death for my assumed

enjoyment.[176] As a feminine-presenting non-binary person, seeing Lara's deaths offered

up to me as a spectacle helps me understand that I am not the player for whom the game

is designed. All I see is a suffering female body that confirms that marked bodies like

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[176] I am reminded of Chapter One's analysis of Barry Atkins equating the deaths of Master Chief in *Halo* and Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (247). Atkins' phrasing is not malicious, but it reveals a broader inattention to how difference changes death in games. In *Tomb Raider*, Lara's deaths are sexualized spectacles rather than humorous pratfalls because the scope of how women's deaths can be presented is so much narrower than the kinds of deaths available to unmarked player-characters. This chapter contextualizes this statement: I show how in contrast to the broader scope of masculine characters, feminine-coded bodies are primarily valued in aesthetic terms and that valuation extends to their death scenes.

mine are primarily important for their suffering's aesthetic value. Lara and the other female characters who appear in ryona videos appear to be a class of perfect victims whose interiority is not merely uninteresting but wholly absent. They are victims as empty vessels, created to be a focal point for the sacrificer's imagination. However, the use of fictional victims is not harmless. The endurance of the sacrificial woman in games and its legacy in even some modern-day female player-characters continues to contribute to a chilly climate for women, non-binary people, and other marked identities in games.

2.8   Conclusion: Using Play to Return to the Slaughterhouse

The attractions and pitfalls of sacrifice are doubly important in a modernity that Bataille diagnoses as disconnected from death. Bataille claims that society has denied a key human impulse by trying to remove death from public life, particularly by relegating it to isolated spaces like hospitals and slaughterhouses. To provide context for what makes sacrifice attractive in games, as well as more broadly, we need to consider a twofold diagnosis made by Bataille. He claims that the effort to represent death is a fundamental human impulse, but one we have strayed from in a modernity in which death is scrubbed from everyday life. "In our time," he writes, "the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a plague-ridden ship" ("Slaughterhouse" 73).

 Bataille characterizes modern society by its relegation of death to isolated spaces instead of being integrated into everyday life. The example he uses is the slaughter of animals for food. Modern people "vegetate as far as possible from the slaughterhouse, to exile themselves, out of propriety, to a flabby world in which nothing fearful remains and in

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which, subject to the ineradicable obsession of shame, they are reduced to eating cheese"
(73). The key idea here is that in modern society, we try to insulate ourselves from death
and minimize its presence in our daily lives by isolating scenes of death to industrialized
spaces like slaughterhouses and hospitals. However, that insulation contradicts a basic
human impulse to try to understand death. Bataille fails to account for how that exile
results from privilege, however. The slaughterhouse requires workers who do not have
the privilege of quarantine.[177] Similarly, as noted at the end of the previous chapter, the
ability to ignore death is a privilege, one denied to vulnerable populations like racialized
people and transgender women, especially transgender women of colour.

This chapter considers the possibility that for the often privileged and unmarked
populations to which the game industry markets itself, gameplay might be a metaphorical
effort to get back to the slaughterhouse and the death it contains through play. The
examples of in-game sacrifice addressed here highlight game death's tendency toward
spectacle: these elements enact a return to violence as sacred and push against the modern
taboos that isolate us from death. I frame this claim in light of Noys' response to Bataille
that "exile from the slaughterhouse does not put an end to the violence but transforms it
from something sacred to a technical activity from which we can hide ourselves" (24). In
light of Bataille's contrast of the slaughterhouse with the nostalgic imagining of a more
grounded reaction to death, we can consider the following possibility. Like many

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[177] Writing this in June 2020 during a quarantine aimed at minimizing the spread of the novel coronavirus
has been a lesson in how quarantine is a function of privilege. As Ian Mosby and Sarah Rotz note, some of
the most vulnerable workers in North America work in meat processing, and plants in the industry have
seen outbreak after outbreak of coronavirus in worker populations ("Opinion: As meat plants shut down,
COVID-19 reveals the extreme concentration of our food supply").

representations of death, gameplay is an effort to get back to the slaughterhouse using technology as a bridge rather than a barrier.

Nevertheless, if games like *Tomb Raider* can help players feel more connected to death, the implicit and explicit messages its deaths send matter. More specifically, the messages sent in *Tomb Raider* demonstrate that death is gendered, that the exiled may approach death using the suffering and death of marked bodies. The deaths of women minimize their humanity, reducing them to the aesthetic value of their suffering. In contrast, the deaths of men assert male agency. Lara's erotic spasms are wildly different from the heroic stoicism with which grizzled helmsman Grim, capable mentor Roth and computer geek Alex all sacrifice themselves to save Lara in the 2013 reboot. Their deaths are choices made to protect Lara: they are admirable, rather than erotic. They are the player protecting Lara. In sharp contrast to Lara's vivid death animations, these masculine death scenes feature Lara's anguished reactions, rather than a sustained focus on the men's dying moments. They retain their dignity. Her suffering, not theirs, remains the main object of player consumption. This framing suggests that the game and its designers do not expect the player to enjoy these deaths, perhaps because Grim, Roth, and Alex all fulfill the same protective, masculine role with which the game's advertising expects players to identify. Like the sacrificer in Bataille's vision, the player's desire to experience destruction only goes so far. Turning the deaths of these men into pleasurable spectacles would truly put the sacrificer in the victim's place. Instead, their deaths occur offscreen, as the sacrificer imagines himself through the more appealing vehicle of Lara's beautiful suffering.

Another possible interpretation is that the game values these men's deaths as little as those of the many male enemies Lara kills.[178] However, the seriousness with which these deaths are presented suggests the opposite. Each man's death is an assertion of his agency that overrides Lara's wishes with his choice to die in her place. Moreover, their deaths model the implicitly masculine protective drive that the series' paratexts have long invited the presumed-male player to enact by playing *Tomb Raider*. Grim defies his captors even as Lara agrees to relinquish her weapons to save his life. He refuses to allow her to surrender and chooses to fight to the death as she watches in horror.

Similarly, Roth dies to protect Lara, but his death is much more explicitly parental: the scene slows down as he cradles Lara to protect her from a thrown axe. When she tells him that she cannot go on without him, Roth tells her to rely on her relationship with her father, when he says, "You're a Croft." Afterwards, the other survivors commemorate his death with a funeral pyre: in contrast to the many burned corpses of nameless women left on the island, Roth's solemn, heroic memorial signals how his agency extends beyond his death. In contrast to how Roth's death is the culmination of his fatherly care for Lara, geeky technician Alex dies to reclaim his masculinity. Before dying in a massive explosion that he sets off to save Lara, he says, somewhat ruefully, "I finally got to impress you," and receives a kiss on the cheek. Each man has a heroically staged moment of self-sacrifice, but each death is largely unseen, as the scene shifts to Lara's anguished

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[178] It is important to acknowledge that many male non-player-characters die during the game, killed by Lara and the player. However, it would be intellectually lazy to simply write off the body count as misandrist or equivalent to the game's preoccupation with female suffering. Many popular game genres including first - person shooters as well as action and adventure games treat enemies as innately disposable. *Tomb Raider*'s treatment of the many human (almost exclusively male) enemies dispatched by Lara has much more to do with admittedly problematic genre conventions than misandry.

cries and screams as she is unable to intervene. Where her many deaths are a spectacle of her suffering, these men's deaths are expressions of stoic masculinity understood and expressed through feminine distress.

Bataille writes that "sacrifice is nothing other than the production of sacred things" ("The Notion of Expenditure" 120). I argue that the sacrifice of women in games reaffirms the trope's importance in game history and culture.[179] The trope's stature strengthens not only every time Bowser kidnaps Princess Peach, but also every time Lara's struggles diminish after being impaled on a pipe. What unites these seemingly different scenes is how they reproduce the historical popularity and the enduring legacy of the visual spectacle of feminine-coded pain and death in games. Across platforms and genres, these female characters are not just sacrificed to Bowser or the Sun Queen, but to the trope itself. The damsel in distress lingers in the sexualized deaths of exclusively female player-characters and shows how marked death reifies norms in mainstream game cultures.

This chapter begins by applying Bataille's concept of sacrifice to player-character death. Particularly, he characterizes the sacrificer as active and masculine and the victim as passive and feminine. The sacrificer's projection of his identity on the victim contextualizes unmarked deaths in games. Depictions of sacrifice in games sometimes stage this projection as genuine, but the player's self-sacrifice much more closely resembles the sacrificer's masculine agency. In contrast, markedly feminine characters' deaths draw from the visual tradition of the damsel in distress, who closely resembles

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[179] Riffs on and subversions of the trope certainly occur, but they are piecemeal.

Bataille's imagined victim. I use Bataille's work to contextualize my close analysis of what I call "the sacrificial woman," whose legacy in games begins with non-player-character damsels in distress and endures today in exclusively female player-characters. Drawing on *Tomb Raider* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, I analyze the depiction of feminine-coded suffering and death through non-player-characters like Sam and Hoshi, as well as iconic player-character Lara.

While Lara might seem like an unlikely sacrificial woman, the franchise's history has long included paratextual elements that construct her reliance on the (assumed to be male) player's intervention. In the rebooted *Tomb Raider*, this construction becomes powerfully present in the game. Lara's capacity to suffer, and the presumed aesthetic appeal of that suffering, are more prominent than ever. I bring in Bataille's meditation on the suffering Chinese torture victim to contextualize Lara's graphic death scenes and the consumption of them through death montages on YouTube. In the context of viewer response to these compilations, Lara's suffering refutes Bataille's insistence that his appreciation for the suffering of the Chinese torture victim is not grounded in sadism. We cannot ignore the unique aesthetic appeal of women's suffering and deaths and the historical context of suffering women as plot devices in games when we look at the markedly female player-characters' deaths. Bataille insists that the effort to connect to death is a fundamental human activity, but one frustrated by modernity's isolation of death to spaces like slaughterhouses and hospitals. I assert in this chapter that the spectacle of feminine suffering in games is an attempt to helped privileged, unmarked exiles return to the slaughterhouse. The return builds on implicit messages about death, including that the worth of women lies in the aesthetic, erotic value of their suffering and

demise. While Bataille's criticism might seem disconnected from the game industry, they both treat victimhood as the ultimate expression of femininity. If feminine-coded individuals in games and mainstream game cultures often die like eroticized victims of sacrifice, how might masculine-coded characters die? Chapter Three builds on this chapter's readings of sacrifice in player-character death to answer these questions and to explore in greater detail the contrast between feminine and masculine, and marked and unmarked sacrifice in games and the cultural anxieties that lie underneath.

Chapter 3

3 Like Father, Like Daughter: Sacrifice, Fatherhood, and Hegemonic Masculinity

3.1 "Are You as Good as My Daddy, Mister?": The "Daddening" of Video Games

In this chapter, I use Georges Bataille's analysis of eroticism and sacrifice to examine the

dad game subgenre,[180] in which male player-characters rescue their adopted daughters in

the game's climax and often die in the game's denouement. However, the father's death

is not a pseudo-feminist retelling of the heterosexual rescue arc discussed in previous

chapters. Instead, his death acknowledges anxiety about the changing role of gender in

mainstream game cultures to reassert hegemonic masculinity in response to that

anxiety.[181] The father never becomes the sacrificial woman discussed in Chapter Two.

Instead, his daughter takes on that role: she is Bataille's uncomprehending victim, an

object that sacrifice is enacted upon, in sharp contrast to how her father exhibits agency

through heroism and self-sacrifice. I draw from Bataille's model of eroticism to show

how the daughter's suffering is a displaced expression of the father's fear and horror in

the face of not merely his own death, but also the unavoidable impermanence of the

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[180] Stephen Totilo's "The Daddening of Video Games" is one of the first discussions of the subgenre. Totilo writes that dad games indicate that "fatherhood is mostly about caring for someone who is fairly helpless." Since Totilo's identification of "the daddening," critics have read dad games quite critically. A non-exhaustive list includes Leigh Alexander, Mattie Brice, Maddy Meyers, Jess Joho, Cameron Wade, Keith Stuart, Carolyn Petit, Gerald Voorhees, Sarah Stang, and Shannon Lawlor, as well as Kristina Bell, Nick Taylor, and Chris Kampe. All these critics analyze the dad game subgenre from different approaches, but they all frame the dad game as an expression of masculine agency, often at the expense of feminine agency.

[181] As discussed in previous chapters, hegemonic masculinity includes the interpretations of masculinity most privileged in a specific cultural context. As noted by Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, hegemonic masculinity is not "normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men [may] enact it. But it [is] certainly normative. It embodie[s] the currently most honored way of being a man" (832). In mainstream game cultures, hegemonic masculinity typically includes violent agency and aggression, a diminished scope of emotions, and possessing power over women.

hegemonic masculinity he represents. Framing hegemonic masculinity as under threat and in need of defence, dad games take the unusual tactic of marking and therefore drawing attention to masculinity, rather than allowing it to retain its usual unmarked privilege. The dad game subgenre uses the lens of heroic fatherhood to explicitly acknowledge masculinity in a way fundamentally different from how most games blithely perpetuate hegemonic masculinity. Dad games stage the defeat of death using the daughter as both the embodiment of encroaching feminine representation and agency in mainstream game cultures and the vessel in which the patriarch's legacy can continue. Her subordination to the survival of hegemonic masculinity rehabilitates her marked otherness into what Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt call "emphasized femininity," which upholds rather than threatens hegemonic masculinity (848).[182] Dad games' use of the daughter contextualizes how the damsel tradition continues to shape markedly feminine-coded deaths. The father's death, however, lends insight into the construction of markedly masculine death. Though the claim might seem paradoxical, the father's death is a gesture of victory rather than defeat. His death reasserts the power of patriarchy to outlast the death of individual men and implicitly signals that the hegemonic masculinity so long prized in mainstream game cultures will outlive efforts to diversify games.

I assert here that the father's death resembles Bataille's sacrificer's fantasy of taking his victim's place while nevertheless retaining his individuality. While Bataille characterizes

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[182] Connell and Messerschmidt define emphasized femininity as privileged over other femininities, but never equivalent to hegemonic masculinity. For my purposes, the most important aspect of emphasized femininity is the degree to which its privilege relies on its usefulness to hegemonic masculinity.

this identification with the victim's death as genuine, I have argued that the fundamental

power imbalance between sacrificer and sacrificed makes this identification a troubling

fantasy. Nevertheless, this fantasy becomes imaginatively possible as the player takes on

the role of the heroic father. The sacrificer's vicarious pleasure expresses anxieties about

gender in games, particularly the perceived passing of hegemonic masculinity. I

investigate the following father-daughter pairs: Jack and the Little Sisters in *Bioshock*,

Subject Delta and Eleanor in *Bioshock 2*, Lee and Clementine in *The Walking Dead:*

Season One, Corvo and Emily in *Dishonored*, Joel and Ellie in *The Last of Us*, Booker

and Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite*, and Geralt and Ciri in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.[183]

While I pay particular attention to the *Bioshock* series, many of these examples depict the

father's death as a heroic spectacle that contrasts with the objectifying display of the

sacrificial woman and the broader range of death typically available to unmarked male

player-characters. The death of the father is a display of power, not weakness, claiming

victory against the imagined threats of increasing diversity in mainstream game cultures

and the spectre of mortality. However, this markedly masculine death depends upon a

preparatory spectacle of feminine suffering and uses rescued—rather than dead—women

to secure legacies of male power.

Understanding the father's heroic death requires first explaining how the more

conventional trope of feminine sacrifice applies to the daughter. The father must rescue

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[183] Wade notes that games like *God of War*, *Splinter Cell: Conviction*, *Watch Dogs*, *Silent Hill*, *Final Fight*, *Max Payne*, and *Prototype 2* include fathers and daughters ("Fatherhood in Games: Maintaining the Status Quo or Small Step Forward?"). These games do not feature in the critical discourse on dad games because they lack the developed father-daughter relationship that distinguishes dad games from games that simply involve fathers.

his daughter from literal or metaphorical sacrifices. Instead of a hero rescuing his princess in the classic heterosexual rescue arc, the father initially has a financial motive for rescuing the girl he eventually claims as a daughter.[184] The daughter allows emotional investment similar to the protective desire discussed in Chapter Two, using the *Tomb Raider* executive producer Ron Rosenberg's description of how players do not identify with Lara, but want to "protect her" (Schreier "You'll 'Want To Protect' The New, Less Curvy Lara Croft"). Rosenberg's imagined player is implicitly male. Similarly, the frameworks that surround dad games' design, publishing, and marketing anticipate players who resemble what Adrienne Shaw calls the "constructed norm" modelled after "'hardcore,' white, heterosexual, cisgendered male players within the U.S. context" ("On Not Becoming Gamers").[185] In short, Rosenberg anticipates the unmarked player discussed in Chapters One and Two. Similarly to how Rosenberg assumes that players will enjoy protecting Lara, and in doing so, implicitly assumes that these players conform to the constructed norm of a hardcore player, dad games enable the player to take on a protector role. The difference between these two offerings is that Rosenberg positions the player's role as Lara's protector as external to the game, whereas dad games explicitly acknowledge and incorporate that role into both narrative and gameplay.[186] Typically, the

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[184] Jack and Delta gain in-game resources for locating Little Sisters. Joel and Booker are hired to transport the girls they eventually claim as daughters. Geralt may accept or refuse financial compensation for finding Ciri. Corvo is the Royal Protector to the Empress slain in the game and his motivations for rescuing Emily combine his official duties and the fact he is likely Emily's biological father. Of all the fathers in this chapter, Lee is the only one who rescues Clementine without any economic motivation.

[185] This chapter emphasizes "gamer identity" as a consumer category and uses work by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Grieg de Peuter, as well as Shaw. As Shaw points out, "gamer as an identity category has become an invested position describing more than just a person who plays digital games. It requires investment, both social and economic, in the medium" ("On Not Becoming Gamers").

[186] I distinguish between the choices made by the player-character (often dictated by the game's programming) and choices made by the player.

dad game's central goal is to rescue and protect the daughter from being sacrificed.[187]

Often the game sets the daughter up as a sacrificial object who must die for the greater good. An alternate parent figure endorses the necessity of this sacrifice, while the father objects. While the father eventually rescues the daughter, the tropes associated with the damsel in distress are on full display. Many dad games feature a dramatic abduction, a vivid display of the daughter's helplessness and suffering, and a final confrontation with another would-be parent. I argue that the suffering and rescue of the daughter, combined with the alternate parent's defeat, legitimizes how these games perform paternal agency. The alternate parent provides a villain for the heroic father to defeat but also shows how parental authority can be misused. Thus, the father's victory over them lionizes the necessity of parental authority in the right father's hand. Near *Bioshock*'s beginning, an in-game advertisement poses a question that each dad game prompts the player to answer. As player-character Jack approaches the first Gatherer's Garden vending machine,[188] a girlish voice says, "My daddy's smarter than Einstein, stronger than Hercules, and lights a fire with a snap of his fingers! Are you as good as my daddy, mister? Not if you don't visit the Gatherer's Garden, you aren't!" At one level, this taunt is advertising copy, but it also poses the central question of whether the player can lay claim to being a better father than someone else. Every game discussed in this chapter implicitly asks this question.

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[187] The daughters often have names that incorporate "El" or "Em:" these two sounds resemble the French "*elle*" and "*femme*." Daughters' names include Eleanor, Elizabeth, Ellie, Emily, and Clementine. Their names' emphasis on these syllables indicate that their girlishness is their primary characterization: they are young women who need to be protected by an older man with whom the expected player identifies. The daughters' names are so similar that it can be confusing to discuss them without careful enunciation.

[188] *Bioshock* takes place in the underwater city of Rapture, in which the player can find themed vending machines, such as "El Ammo Bandito" which sells ammunition for weapons like pistols. The "Gatherer's Garden" sells resources and upgrades for non-conventional abilities known in the game as "Plasmids."

The pinnacle of fatherhood in these games occurs when the father rescues his daughter. However, the prolonged scene of the daughter's vulnerability and suffering is not merely a prologue to the rescue. Instead, these spectacles show how dad games apply sacrifice differently to men than women. While women are subjected to suffering and being sacrificed, men heroically self-sacrifice or die in the game's denouement.[189] The disjunction between feminine and masculine death reifies masculine power over women, even when superficially, women become more central to the narrative. Women are offerings sacrificed to emphasize their submission, while men die to assert not merely their own authority, but also the legitimacy of patriarchy more broadly.

3.2   Daddy's Girl: Charm, Beauty, and Spectacles of Erotic Endangerment

Often the father-daughter relationship and the surrounding narrative draw heavily from the damsel in distress trope discussed in Chapter Two. The game industry's history of positioning women as objects to rescue and possess unavoidably colours how games present female player-characters today. Even though player-characters like Lara are ostensibly main characters with whom the player might identify, their gendered otherness leads designers to characterize them as sacrificial women rather than rescuing heroes. The damsel tradition bleeds into these player-characters, even as designers have tried to make them 'strong' by assigning them qualities prized by hegemonic masculinity like

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[189] The fact that player-characters tend to be male, while non-player-characters may be male or female, contributes to why men are far more likely to appear to have agency in a game. This imbalance is part of the problem.

emotional stoniness and physical strength.[190] However, the details of this sacrifice

illustrate the instrumental use of women's suffering in mainstream game cultures: games

often objectify female player-characters in much the same manner as Georges Bataille's

beautiful, non-verbal victim of human sacrifice, for a perceived community benefit.

In the case of the dad game, the player-character is male, but what distinguishes him from

the typical player-character is that his gender is marked. His fatherhood foregrounds his

masculinity, and his extreme acts of parenting further highlight his superiority. The father

in a dad game is not merely a good parent. Instead, he is an *uber*-parent who commits

superhuman acts to protect his daughter. This marking of the previously unmarked

reasserts hegemonic masculinity in mainstream game cultures. Historically, dad games

have proliferated alongside the growth of criticism drawing attention to game cultures'

problems with sexism and other intersectional forms of oppression. The dad game

inadvertently expresses unease about the changing role of gender and sheds light on the

vociferous opposition to that change in Gamergate.[191] It is not simply that dad games

appear after Gamergate or assert the same rhetoric.[192] Instead, these games reassert

masculinity in response to similar cultural upheavals and unease in mainstream game

cultures that predate Gamergate and continue today.

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[190] For more details on Toby Gard's desire to make Lara a strong character, see Johnny Davis' "Toby Gard: Let the Battle Begin" and *Critical Path*'s interview with Gard, "Playing a Female Player."
[191] As noted in the Introduction, Gamergate is an online harassment campaign largely targeted at women and non-binary people in games.
[192] Many designers, like *The Last of Us*' director Neil Druckmann express a desire to create heroic female characters who go beyond the traditional damsel in distress (Joho "The Daddification of Games, Round Two"). Designers' good intentions and the degree to which they consider their work successful show how ingrained these traditions are.

This corrective foregrounding of heroic masculinity requires a damsel for the hero to rescue. Her abduction and recovery are timeless plot devices by which the hero asserts his masculinity. In the dad game, the relationship between hero and damsel is ostensibly familial (whether by blood relation or adoption) rather than romantic. Despite this, traces of the damsel's sexual objectification persist in the daughter. Critics like Joho, Voorhees, Stang, and Lawlor all note that the heroic fatherly rescue often retains uncomfortably romantic overtones. The tension inherent in the eroticism of the daughter at least partially characterizes fatherhood as control of the daughter as a resource. While her value may not be sexualized, it is almost always connected to her sex: the more a game draws on tropes of the damsel in distress, the more prurient the father's control over her sex-specific value seems. This troubling characterization of fatherhood is particularly apparent with *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is a desirable object from the game's beginning. Player-character Booker DeWitt begins the game tasked with kidnapping Elizabeth from the flying city of Columbia. One of Booker's—and implicitly, the player's—only pieces of instruction, found nailed to a lighthouse door in the game's confusing opening scene,[193] reads "BRING US THE GIRL AND WIPE AWAY THE DEBT. THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE." Blood from corpses inside the building stains the message, which identifies Elizabeth as a package to be delivered and contextualizes nearby evidence that failure will have deadly consequences. The game defines her by Booker's need to acquire her.

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[193] The game begins with Booker sitting a rowboat while a man and a woman argue. Their dialogue only makes sense later in the game, while the instruction "Bring us the girl and wipe away the debt" appears straightforward. The damsel in distress plot's well-established history adds to how readily reasonable and actionable a player is likely to find the two orders.

She is not merely desirable in an acquisitive sense. Voorhees notes how Elizabeth's portrayal "betrays her function as an object of the male gaze," particularly through her increasingly sexualized clothing ("Daddy Issues: Constructions of Fatherhood in *The Last of Us* and *Bioshock Infinite*"). Three important versions of Elizabeth illustrate this function. In her first appearance, she is wide-eyed in her innocent, girlish outfit, and she nearly glows in Columbia's sunlight (Figure 15).

Figure 15. Screenshot taken by author of Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite*, Irrational Games, 2013.

Elizabeth begins the game wearing a slim-fitting but otherwise modest white blouse with a blue, gold-edged collar and blue-edged cuffs. She also wears a blue neckerchief, and a long blue, partially pleated skirt:[194] the outfit, combined with Elizabeth's bubbly, naïve

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[194] Elizabeth's outfit resembles a nineteenth century schoolgirl's uniform. While she does not closely resemble the stock figure known as the "sexy schoolgirl," her outfit emphasizes her youth and innocence while indirectly reminding viewers that cultures often fetishize both of those qualities in girls and women. The medium shade of blue that accents her uniform reinforces her ingénue status.

demeanour, frequently prompts comparisons between Elizabeth and Disney princesses.[195]

However, Elizabeth alters her appearance drastically after stabbing the rebel leader Daisy

Fitzroy. With her initial outfit covered in blood, Elizabeth combines her corset with

pieces from her now-deceased adoptive mother's wardrobe (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Screenshot taken by author of Elizabeth's second outfit in *Bioshock Infinite*, Irrational Games, 2013.

Elizabeth cuts her smooth shoulder-length hair to a ragged bob with uneven bangs. The

rough cut emphasizes her face's sharp angles, distinctly different from how the previous

haircut softly frames her face's heart shape. Her change of outfit is no less dramatic. She

removes her bloodied blouse to reveal her corset.[196] She puts on a floor-length dark blue

skirt and matching bolero jacket which, as noted by Voorhees, combines with her corset

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[195] Alexander calls her "a Disney princess who flicks coins at me" ("Now is the Best Time: A Critique of *Bioshock Infinite*"). In gaming webcomic *Penny Arcade*, a character asks, "So, in Bioshock Infinite, Elizabeth is Belle, right? From Beauty and the Beast?" in a comic titled "La Fille et L'Oiseau."
[196] As noted by the blog *How Many Princesses*, Elizabeth's visible corset is a historical inaccuracy. While some of the game's anachronisms are clearly intentional, it is less clear here. Ultimately, the corset emphasizes Elizabeth's curves and makes her breasts more prominent.

to frame her suddenly ample cleavage. This offscreen transformation introduces what

lead animator Shawn Robertson calls the second of "the two Elizabeths": this one is a

powerful, embittered young woman whose outfit and demeanour contrast sharply with

her initial appearance ("Creating *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth"). This Elizabeth

accompanies the player through the bulk of the game, in which Columbia's initial warm

colour palette transforms into cooler, starker contrasts once combat begins. Similarly, her

palette shifts from innocent creams and blues to deep navy blues, harsh whites, and sickly

greys. In the subsequent downloadable content (DLC),[197] *Bioshock Infinite: Burial at*

Sea, a third Elizabeth appears: the next step in her transformation is even more starkly

sexual, especially when understood as a version of her first outfit (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Screenshot taken by author of Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite: Burial at Sea,*
Episode One, Irrational Games, 2013.

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[197] DLC for a game can range from alternate costumes to additional gameplay, usually at an added cost.
Bioshock Infinite: Burial at Sea is essentially a miniature sequel to *Bioshock Infinite*. It ends at the same
point in time that the original *Bioshock* begins, closing the circle of the series' timeline.

This Elizabeth's costume reimagines her first outfit as a tight-fitting, *film noir*-influenced dress.[198] Her colour palette shifts, exchanging not merely her brown hair for a near-black shade, but also switching the hues of her clothing from creamy whites and medium blues to a stark white and a navy so dark that it looks black. Similarly to how Elizabeth's initial outfit matches the warmer hues of her environment, this colour palette is colder even than the second Elizabeth's, tending toward bluish-whites that emphasize Rapture's chilly undersea setting and Elizabeth's pallor. Her new design tightens her first outfit's white blouse and removes the blue scarf, drawing attention to the fabric straining over her breasts. Her original A-line skirt, which allows for more freedom of movement, becomes a tight pencil skirt. Her make-up is also much more dramatic than in any previous incarnations, including heavy eyeshadow and red lips. This Elizabeth's *noir* influences extend to her characterization: she is a classic *femme fatale* who begins the plot by hiring an alternate-universe version of Booker to find a girl in Rapture.[199] Fitting her *noir* influences, she is both cynical and seductive. Her ability to distract a shopkeeper by flirting helps Booker achieve an early in-game objective. Joho notes how a moment of gameplay in which villain Sander Cohen forces Elizabeth to waltz with Booker (an alternate universe's version of her biological father) characterizes their dynamic as

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[198] These genre influences extend to her bone structure: this Elizabeth's brows are distinctly S-shaped compared to her initially more softly rounded ones, thus emphasizing her hollow cheeks. In a Reddit thread, *Bioshock* series creator Ken Levine notes that this Elizabeth is explicitly modeled on actresses like Lana Turner and Rita Hayworth ("We are Ken Levine (@iglevine) and Andres Gonzalez from Irrational Games. Ask Us Anything"). It is worth acknowledging that the rare instances in which we see Booker he looks the same. He does not change to reflect the game's tone like Elizabeth does. Her malleability reflects the daughter's use as a site of displacement, as discussed further in section 3.4 of this chapter.
[199] While depictions of morally ambiguous and evil women obviously predate *film noir*, the initial visit from a mysterious, seductive *femme fatale* is a common opening plot device in a *noir* narrative. The fact that Elizabeth hires Booker to find a girl, mirroring his initial task in *Bioshock Infinite*, is typical of the franchise's frequent echoing of key plot elements. For more on the *femme fatale*, see Julie Grossman's *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir*: *Ready for Her Close-Up*.

"inappropriately sexual, obviously loveless, and unavoidably jaded" ("The Dadification of Videogames"). Like Elizabeth's progression from schoolgirl to femme fatale, the increasingly incestuous undertones of Booker and Elizabeth's relationship shows the tension inherent in using a daughter as a damsel. So many popular tropes, including the damsel, define women according to their sexual appeal. However, the idea of a father's gaze lingering on his daughter's sexual appeal is disquieting. Sometimes a dad game is unable to let go of that lens of sexual objectification even as it defines fatherhood as the exertion of control over a daughter's sex-based value. In *Bioshock Infinite*, that discomfiting combination of the prurient and the paternal results in discomfort that sheds light on the limited scope of ways of being available to women in games and how much of the value of female player-characters results from their perceived sexual attractiveness.

Before elaborating further on the centrality of sexualization to that limited scope, I will clarify some important technical context for the daughter's characterization. Elizabeth's increasingly sexualized appearance is part of a broader strategy to counteract the player annoyance often associated with companion non-player-characters. Most of the daughters are effectively companion non-player-characters (NPCs) who accompany the player throughout long stretches of the game. Leigh Alexander notes that "[p]rotection and rescue missions, or situations wherein one needs to get a partner NPC to behave in a certain way, are historically frustrating, even loathsome" often due to the limits of artificial intelligence ("Be My Valentine: The Top 5 Video Game Romances"). An iconic, famously frustrating example is Natalya from *GoldenEye 007*,[200] who frequently

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[200] Released in 1997, *GoldenEye 007* is an influential first-person shooter and a significant commercial success. Despite these achievements, the levels that require protecting Natalya are extremely frustrating.

walks into enemy fire and gets stuck in doorways. Companion non-player-characters can disrupt a seamless gameplay experience, and mainstream game cultures tend to be deeply skeptical of them.[201] When a companion non-player-character is a woman, femininity's markedness relative to unmarked masculinity in mainstream game cultures seems to bring gender into the situation, as if it was previously absent. Common complaints about companion non-player-characters being useless, stupid, and annoying typically result from AI limitations. However, damsels in distress often receive similar complaints, coded with sexist disdain. Remember how Shamus Young describes Sam in *Tomb Raider* as "a clueless, spineless, whimpering burden. [...] Sam is a wet sack of a character, a burden to be dragged around" ("Lara's Damsel in Distress"). Young could be describing the archetypal escort mission. While none of these descriptors are explicitly gendered, they reflect a particularly childish kind of misogyny that sees girls as stupid and useless.

Elizabeth and the other daughters exist in this gendered context: they have typically been designed to avoid common pitfalls of the companion non-player-character and the escort mission. The daughter must be somewhat realistic and unlikely to disrupt the player's experience. Even more importantly, her appeal to the player illuminates how aesthetics are the fundamental frame through which games often understand women. This quality of appeal might seem nebulous or subjective. However, designers working on Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* emphasize that she has been carefully designed to attract the player's interest and emotional investment. Examining the rhetoric used by *Bioshock Infinite*

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[201] Faltin Karlsen notes how in escort missions in *World of Warcraft*, "the NPC will normally move painfully slowly in order to draw attention to every available monster before the destination is reached" ("A World of Excesses: Online Games and Excessive Playing"). Russ Pitts captures common sentiment by titling an article "Escort Missions Suck."

developers shows how they construct this idea of what will attract the player to a female

companion non-player-characters. Analyses of the design process assert that the most

important goal is to make Elizabeth, as in the words of series creator Ken Levine, "the

emotional center of the game" ("Creating Elizabeth: The Women that Brought Her to

Life"). However, many technical pitfalls can endanger that emotional investment, from

unnatural movement due to limited AI or intrusiveness that prompts players to, in the

words of animation director Shawn Robertson, "be annoyed every time [Elizabeth] has to

communicate with [them]" ("Creating *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth"). This enjoyment

relies both on the absence of a glaring error that marks Elizabeth as unreal or too

intrusive, but also requires positive qualities like emotional expressiveness and usefulness

in gameplay. Robertson notes that as the team explored whether to use motion-capture or

animation for Elizabeth's facial expressions,[202] they gave her increasingly exaggerated

proportions in key animation to maximize her expressions' readability.[203]

Even though developer commentary prioritizes Elizabeth's emotional appeal, relevant

critical commentary overwhelmingly focuses on her beauty and charm. A likely

explanation is that physical beauty is often visual shorthand for desirability. Given the

entrenched treatment of women in games as aesthetic objects, it is unsurprising that dad

games conflate aesthetic and emotional appeal. However, critics often highlight the

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[202] Motion-capture technology tracks the movements of live actors and maps those movements onto three-dimensional models. Animation may attempt to mimic real movements but does not have the one-to-one mapping that characterizes motion capture.

[203] "Creating Elizabeth: The Women that Brought Her to Life" cites real-life women who inspired Elizabeth's creation, including a facial motion capture actress that Robertson, in a separate source, notes is not actually used for the final version of the character ("Creating *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth"). The former video seems to use the real-life women involved in Elizabeth's creation to frame her origins as implicitly feminist, in contrast to the unrealistic, misogynist presentation of women in games historically.

attractiveness and charisma of other daughters in the context of their junior status:

Meyers notes how daughters in dad games "are not your best friend, nor are they your

equal in combat. These women are your daughters […] Who could ask for someone more

beautiful, more charming, or more capable?" ("Bad Dads vs. Hyper Mode: The Father-

Daughter Bond in Videogames"). Meyers links the daughter's subordination to her

aesthetic appeal and her usefulness. In contrast to designer commentary that emphasizes

making Elizabeth a "partner" for the player, dad games make the daughter a subordinate

helper, whose aesthetic appeal and ability to shore up the father's masculinity are more

important than any illusion of equality. In short, the daughter exhibits emphasized

femininity that takes its privilege from the degree to which it upholds hegemonic

masculinity. Crucially, daughters' designs illuminate how dad games often mistake

emphasized femininity for gender equality. In his 2014 Game Developer's Conference

talk, "Bringing *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth to Life: An AI Development Postmortem,"

lead programmer John Abercrombie claims, "We want the player and companion to be

partners." Even considering the inherent difficulty of simulating equality between a

player and non-player-character, this 'partnership' much more closely resembles ongoing

concerns about the gendering of AI assistants. Specifically, AI assistants reinforce

stereotypes of women as "docile and eager-to-please helpers, available at the touch of a

button or with a blunt voice command...The assistant holds no power of agency beyond

what the commander asks of it" (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural

Organization 104).[204] While there are unavoidable challenges in creating the illusion of

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[204] For more on gendered AI and stereotypes, see "The Adverse Effects of Feminized Digital Assistants" in the UNESCO Report *"I'd Blush if I Could": Closing Gender Divides in Digital Skills Through Education.*

humanity in non-player-characters, daughters in dad games possess a subordinate emphasized femininity that plays into well-worn stereotypes about how the presence of women in games requires justification, whereas men's unmarked presence requires none.

Part of that inequality springs from how these games often present the daughter with the positive qualities of a damsel, such as beauty and implied sexual availability without the historically attendant flaws such as being burdensome. That beauty draws from what I call "damsel aesthetics," the attributes that make a damsel valuable. Across a range of examples, a significant part of gameplay involves looking for or at daughters: they are beautiful damsels in need of guidance from or rescue by their heroic fathers. While most daughters are meant to be both aesthetically and emotionally appealing,[205] two cases show how beauty is a primary requirement for the damsel daughter. In addition to Elizabeth, another famous daughter is Ellie from *The Last of Us*. In a world ravaged by a zombie virus, Ellie has grown up supervised by the paramilitary Fireflies. The same group hires player-character Joel to deliver a 'package' that turns out to be Ellie. Unbeknownst to Joel or the player, Ellie contains the key to treating the virus. Like Elizabeth, Ellie has a special power that makes possessing her strategically important, and both girls are famously lifelike and charming. Both daughters are slim brunettes with

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[205] There are three age categories for daughters that are defined by characterization rather than chronological age. The youngest category includes Clementine in *The Walking Dead: Season One*, and Emily in *Dishonored*, who are eight and ten years old, respectively. Their charm is closely tied to their innocence, youth, and affection for the father. The Little Sisters in *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2* seem slightly younger because of their baby-doll dresses and childish affect, though they typically range between five and ten years of age. The middle tier includes fourteen-year old Ellie in *The Last of Us* and Eleanor in *Bioshock 2*, who appear at the ages of eight and eighteen. These daughters are often charming because of their resilience and humour. They are more mature than members of the previous tier but are not yet physically or emotionally mature. The oldest category of daughters includes seventeen-year-old Elizabeth and twenty-one-year-old Ciri in *The Witcher 3*. These daughters are beautiful, physically mature women, but they are not yet emotionally mature.

pale, dewy skin, and wide, expressive eyes. While Ellie lacks Elizabeth's increasingly

foregrounded sex appeal, she is inarguably pretty, according to Eurocentric beauty

standards.[206] Like Elizabeth, Ellie initially appears naïve and trusting and grows

increasingly jaded. A key difference between the two is that Ellie is not generally

sexualized: her appeal draws from her mix of beauty, childish humour, and her attempts

to project maturity and toughness.

Nevertheless, like the other daughters, the most obvious attributes Elizabeth and Ellie

share are their visual beauty and personal charm, combined with their usefulness to the

player. In addition to not exhibiting the historical issues that plague companion non-

player-characters, these daughters provide useful resources and abilities. I argue that

these daughters' aesthetic appeal and practical utility effectively apologize for their

presence: they are more like Apple's AI assistant Siri than Princess Peach in *Super Mario

Bros*. However, their pleasant helpfulness reflects the same subordinate femininity. In

Bioshock Infinite, Elizabeth offers the player resources, including ammunition and health

aids. Additionally, the player can tell Elizabeth to activate "tears" in reality to alter level

environments to the player's advantage. Tellingly, though Elizabeth ostensibly possesses

these powers, the player controls. Austin Walker explains that in terms of game-play,

Elizabeth "doesn't exist. She doesn't pick locks–she is a lockpick. She doesn't summon

in friendly turrets or crates of rocket launchers–*you do.* She is a tool that you use and then

fold up and put in your pocket when you don't need her" ("This is Not an Agent:

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[206] Eurocentric beauty standards do not merely prize particular features, but rather frame beauty as a concept through a lens of whiteness. Dia Sekayi's "Aesthetic Resistance to Cultural Influence: The Impact of Eurocentric Beauty Standard on Black College Women" provides an excellent review of how research on beauty has historically neglected non-white populations.

Bioshock Infinite's Elizabeth Problem"). Not only is Elizabeth beautiful, but also, she is immensely useful. She cannot attract enemy attention or die by friendly fire. This purposeful emphasis on Elizabeth's multi-faceted appeal to the player underlines that she is not an equal partner, but rather a useful subordinate. I am swayed by Walker's compelling read of Elizabeth as a piece of equipment. However, I believe that the game characterizes Elizabeth's more as a junior partner than a complete non-entity. However, that not-quite fully human quality and the game's reflection of the societal demand that women's existence must be justified underlie this pretty surface.

Similarly, in *The Last of Us,* Ellie is designed to be usually ignored by enemies during combat:[207] she can inconvenience the player to initiate a quick time event, but for the most part, she is useful. Ellie can call out enemy locations, stun enemies to allow Joel to attack them, and attack enemies who have cornered Joel. However, he remains the main character in all but one of the game's sections. In comparison to Elizabeth, Ellie is not so explicitly an item that Joel uses. However, both daughters are designed to be visually and emotionally attractive as well as useful during gameplay. Their appeal is not solely aesthetic. Critics like Megan Farokhmanesh note how designers often cite usefulness as part of an effort to avoid players reading the daughters as damsels ("How Naughty Dog Created a Partner, Not a Burden, With Ellie in *The Last of Us*"). However, each game's emphasis on the daughter's beauty and charm draws attention to the requirement that this

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[207] There are instances in which Ellie must be rescued, but as noted by Farokhmanesh, these remaining incidents are "drastically scaled back" compared to earlier designs "to keep her from being a burden" ("How Naughty Dog Created a Partner, Not a Burden, With Ellie in *The Last of Us*") Farokhmanesh argues that these design changes make Ellie a true partner to Joel within the limits of non-player-characters. I assert that details like her age and inexperience keep this from being completely true.

new damsel must be visually appealing, even if the hero's interest in her is supposed to be familial rather than romantic.

Every daughter but the Little Sisters are conventionally pretty.[208] Even the Little Sisters transform back into sweet little girls if the player-character Jack saves them, inextricably linking rescue with beauty restored. Moreover, the transformation suggests not merely that feminine beauty requires masculine control, but also that feminine beauty flourishes under benevolent patriarchal authority. In *Bioshock*'s positive ending earned by rescuing every Little Sister, the grown Little Sisters' beautiful, manicured hands reach out to Jack's aged hand as he dies. The daughter who functions as the player's damsel must be pretty or at least revealed to be pretty if the hero decides she is worth saving. Her aesthetic appeal is not only influenced by the historical depiction of the damsel but also indicates her worth to the player. The daughter is designed to appeal to the player, even when in distress.

The daughter's damsel aesthetics, however, are not limited to her beauty and charm: like the sexualized death animations of explicitly female player-characters discussed in Chapters One and Two, the dad game reifies the damsel's use as a source of beautiful suffering. Many commentaries on dad games refer either implicitly or explicitly to Laura Mulvey's writing on scopophilic pleasure in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."[209]

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[208] Ciri has a thin facial scar on an otherwise conventionally beautiful face. She remains a slim, white woman with striking green eyes and full lips. Her scar resembles one of Geralt's. Unsurprisingly, her scar is much less prominent than his, lest she stray too far from Eurocentric beauty standards. Of all the daughters, only Clementine is a person of colour, though she is very light-skinned.

[209] Stuart, Voorhees, and Stang all refer to scopophilia directly. Without directly citing Mulvey, Meyers focuses on the charisma and beauty of the daughters and emphasizes the erotic pleasure of looking, especially as a form of control ("Bad Dads Vs. Hyper Mode"). Meyers certainly addresses the key elements of scopophilia, even if she does not use the term itself.

Namely, these critics refer to Mulvey's application of "scopophilia" (the pleasure of looking) as it exists in cinema, in which the "male gaze" describes how film constructs the audience in the position of heterosexual masculinity, with a heteronormative sexual interest in women. I argue that this pleasure of looking at the daughter is fundamentally similar to looking at the victim in Bataille's descriptions of sacrifice in "Sacrifice, the Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World," *Inner Experience*, and *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. The game offers the pleasure of looking at the endangered daughter-as-victim even as the player takes on the role of rescuing father. Like the player in *Tomb Raider* and Richard Dyer's interpretation of the male gaze discussed in Chapter Two, the father both prepares the sacrifice and ultimately averts it. The daughter's feminine victimhood is another justification for her presence. Meyers argues, "Elizabeth and Ellie both seem defined by your ability to watch over them, specifically by watching them and listening to them; they have the dialogue, the charisma, and the beauty" ("Bad Dads vs. Hyper Mode"). The daughter is appealing both in the sense that she is conventionally beautiful and personally charming. The game assumes that she is what the player will enjoy looking at in both cutscenes and during regular gameplay. The game conflates beauty with being worthy of love, and her distress heightens both attributes. I argue that the daughter's suffering is a central element of her appeal. Dad games often sexualize the daughter's distress along a sliding scale of her age: teenagers like Ellie and Elizabeth face a greater degree of sexualized violence while younger daughters like the Little Sisters, Clementine, and Emily are subject to threats of violence with a minimal sexual

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element.[210] As previously discussed, these daughters often function as companion non-player-characters who can be present during combat but are incapable of being harmed during game-play, outside of specific circumstances.[211] In contrast, several daughters feature in sequences depicting their suffering. However, as noted by Meyers, these scenes are "barely even your fault" ("Bad Dads vs. Hyper Mode"). Cinematically presented scenes of violence or distress emphasize the daughters' vulnerability and allow for the display of a beautiful girl (or girlish woman) in pain and distress while striking a delicate balance between players' pleasure and guilt.

Despite this focus on feminine suffering, threats of rape are rare in dad games, with the notable exception of *The Last of Us*. However, *The Last of Us*' reluctance to explicitly refer to rape contextualizes how the erotic underlies feminine suffering in dad games more broadly. A key example is the Winter section of the game. Because Joel is too injured to move, the player controls Ellie. A group of cannibals kidnap her after receiving explicit instructions from their leader David to capture her alive. David tells Ellie she is "special" and caresses her hand, indicating his sexual interest in her. Other cannibals in David's group refer to Ellie as his "new pet," further insinuating that David is a habitual child abuser, and his community tolerates it. In the final confrontation with David, he

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[210] This difference tracks with the three rough age categories noted earlier: the youngest category is never directly sexualized, and the middle category's sexualization is framed as wrong. The oldest category is much more freely sexualized. Notably, Ciri in *The Witcher 3* has a more complex relationship with sexual violence. The game downplays a key plot thread from the books, namely that members of the elven nobility want to use Ciri as part of a special breeding program. Primarily, the game presents the pursuit of Ciri as a desire to use her power, rather than to coerce her into a forced pregnancy. Despite the consistent characterization of the daughter's body as a sex-specific resource, games are uncomfortable addressing the implications of that characterization.

[211] Some daughters like the Little Sisters, Ellie, and Clementine can be threatened by enemies in specific instances. In both cases, the game manages the daughter's risk and capacity to annoy the player by making these instances situation-specific, effectively variations of the quick time event.

stalks Ellie through a burning restaurant. It is not clear whether he intends to sexually

assault and then kill her or just kill her immediately. His dialogue does not clarify the

situation: as he stalks her, he promises that if she gives up, he will "be quick." Once Ellie

sneaks up behind David to stab him three separate times, the two struggle and collapse:

this moment is not immediately charged with a sexual threat because both lose

consciousness. Then, the game switches to Joel's perspective as the player guides him

through the cannibals' camp. After that sequence, the game returns to Ellie's perspective

as she wakes up. She tries to crawl away as David kicks, taunts and eventually begins to

choke her. While all of Ellie's scenes in the Winter section emphasize her vulnerability

without Joel,[212] this sequence is especially laden with sexual menace. In other scenes in

which he threatens Ellie, a cell door separates them physically. Furthermore, Ellie

momentarily pretends to comply with David's insinuations that he will protect her if she

submits to his sexual advances, but then she breaks his finger. In the restaurant, there is

no physical barrier or opportunity to deceive that mitigates the threat David represents: he

climbs on top of a prone Ellie, who is lying face-down on the floor. He could easily rape

her in this position. Even as he turns her over to face him, and begins choking her, the

scene remains uncomfortably sexually charged. She struggles as David presses down on

her. The camera's focus on Ellie's face as the player tries to direct her to grab a weapon

is especially striking because it highlights her terrified, desperate expression. As in

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[212] Ellie is defiant and capable, but the camera's wide shots emphasize her small stature in the snow-obscured camp. Her bravado and skill do not overpower the sense of vulnerability in this sequence: Ellie's reduced weapons and lack of access to Joel's crafting reinforces this diminished capacity in gameplay. This reduction of abilities is typical of the sections in which the player temporarily controls the daughter. In addition to these shorter sequences, several dad games have sequels in the daughter is a protagonist or co-protagonist.

Chapter One's comparison of Lara's bare face to Isaac's hidden one, Ellie's face is on

display even as the player controls her. If the player successfully grabs the machete, Ellie

kills David with it before the game switches to a cinematic scene in which Joel arrives

and pulls her away.

The possible death animations in this scene are consistent with the rest of the game, save

one important outlier. Death animations in *The Last of Us* vary in intensity. Deaths by

shooting or stabbing are the least dramatic: the player-character falls to the ground.

Deaths by zombie attack are usually gorier: the most-common elements of these include a

bloody bite to the neck while the player-character shuts their eyes and screams. Notably,

the player-character may or may not face the screen or have their eyes open during death

animations.[213] There are a few exceptions involving unusual quick time events, such as

the "bloater" zombie who appears poised to rip Joel's head open, or the animation of an

enemy trying to force Joel's throat down onto a large glass shard. For the most part,

however, the death animations in *The Last of Us* do not linger on the process of dying:

they show the fatal injury and cut away.[214] The largest exception to this rule occurs

during the sequence in which David chokes Ellie on the floor. If the player fails to grab a

machete in time, David chokes Ellie to death (Figure 18).

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[213] This contrasts sharply with the focus on Lara's wide, expressive eyes common to the death animations in *Tomb Raider* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider*.

[214] Kevin Wong claims that the short length of the death animations and their cutaways are more dramatic and upsetting because the game leaves the immediate aftermath to the player's imagination ("*The Last of Us* Has the Most Horrifying Death Scenes"). I argue that the game's resistance to cut away from Ellie being choked to death is equally horrific in the context of mainstream game cultures' historical use of feminine suffering as a plot device.

Figure 18. David chokes Ellie to death. Screenshot taken by author from calloftreyarch's "The Last of Us Remastered: Full Death Montage (18+) PS4." youtube.com/watch?v= 5o5xw9-EvTg&t=. (20:24)

Uncharacteristically for the game, the camera continues to focus on Ellie's face as her eyes roll back in her head. Her expression goes blank, and eventually, she stops moving. This scene is perhaps the most uncomfortably intimate, sustained death animation in the entire game, despite its relative lack of gore. Like some of the deaths in *Tomb Raider* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* discussed in the previous chapter, this animation focuses on Ellie's gaze as it transitions from frightened and desperate to empty in death. This lingering look centralizes Ellie's suffering in a way that is inextricable from games' historical use of feminine suffering as a spectacle. Most deaths in *The Last of Us* lack that gaze shared between player-character and player, making even the gory deaths less horribly, invasively intimate than this unrelenting spectacle.

That this death does not include an explicitly sexual element reflects the game's reluctance to say the word "rape" aloud, even as David's gestures, including touch, and dialogue indicate his sexual interest in Ellie. When Joel pulls Ellie away from hacking at

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David's corpse with a machete, Ellie begins to say, "He tried to-" but does not finish the

sentence. The game can show David menacing her sexually and allow the player to

control Ellie as she tries to escape him but cannot allow Ellie to say the word "rape."

Depicting the rape would not be an improvement, but its absence is part of a larger

pattern of silence surrounding the sexual element of feminine suffering in games. [215] This

silence is all the more obvious given the audiovisual intensity of these scenes. In the final

moment of the Winter section, Joel comforts Ellie, and the dialogue fades out, even

though the conversation seems to continue. The only audio playing is the musical theme

from the earlier scene in which Joel's daughter dies. Marlene, the resistance leader who

initially hires Joel to transport Ellie, is the sole character who says the word "rape" aloud.

Late in the game, Marlene tries to reason with Joel to allow Ellie's surgery to continue

even though it will kill her. She argues that Ellie will only die later, inevitably killed by

zombies, adding, "That is if she isn't raped and murdered first." The character's

willingness to say the word is characteristic of Marlene's frankness and genuine belief in

the rightness of her cause. Given the real-life violence faced by women of colour, it is

perversely fitting that a singularly frank character, who is also the only prominent woman

of colour in the game, is the only character for whom rape is not unspeakable. Tellingly,

Joel kills Marlene shortly after she makes this comment—even though Ellie has already

been sexually threatened and nearly killed, thus implying that Marlene may be correct.

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[215] In a commentary on the scene by director Neil Druckmann, Joel's voice actor Troy Baker, and Ellie's voice actor Ashley Johnson, the only explicit use of the word "rape" occurs when Johnson refers to David as "rapey and molesty" ("The *Last Of Us Remastered* Developer's Commentary w/ Troy Baker, Ashley Johnson & Neil Druckmann"). Rhetorically, Johnson's use of *-y* as a suffix for both words softens their stark meaning: as noted by Michael Adams, the application of a *-y* suffix to unexpected words can convey a sense of whimsy (55). David literally plans to molest and rape Ellie, but even in the commentary, the word "rape" does not appear without being defanged. This mirrors the in-game reluctance to name rape directly.

Like her willingness to sacrifice Ellie, Marlene's ability to name sexual violence appears cynical but realistic. Despite this tacit acknowledgement that Marlene may be right, Joel is ultimately unable to accept her warning or her argument: killing her repudiates both.

The game's reluctance to name sexual assault is fundamentally similar to the word rape being "a word that is not in our vocabulary," according to *Tomb Raider* developer Crystal Dynamics (Schreier "*Tomb Raider* Creators say 'Rape' Is Not A Word In Their Vocabulary").[216] As in *Tomb Raider*, the game refuses to openly acknowledge sexualized suffering even though it is treated as a key moment of character development. The problem is not merely a straightforward double standard, though it is accurate to note that sexual violence against men virtually never propels male character development. Instead, the unwillingness to name rape understood in the historical context of the aesthetic value of feminine suffering in game cultures underlines the perniciousness of how games consistently tie together the erotic and the violent in women's bodies. In game cultures, women's bodies recontextualize Bataille's assertion that the "fascination" of violence and death "is the dominant element in eroticism" (*Erotism* 13). I argue that, on one level, the instrumental use of women's bodies as effectively made to suffer seems to resemble Bataille's claim. Simultaneously, in games, women's bodies are always *a priori* seen through the lens of their aesthetic and ultimately erotic appeal: the erotic precedes the violent. The aura of the damsel unavoidably colours the suffering of virtually any woman in games: "damsel aesthetics" is thus not merely an aesthetic category, but rather a lens through which all spectacles of feminine suffering in games must be understood.

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[216] This quotation from Crystal Dynamics appears in response to Jason Schreier's earlier article "You'll 'Want To Protect' The New, Less Curvy Lara Croft" and the ensuing controversy.

Underneath that spectacle, however, lies not merely women's sexual appeal but also their utility as reproductive subjects.

3.3 Operating Theatre: The Medicalized Spectacle of Feminine Suffering

Dad games often use the visual language of medical care and abuse to elevate scenes of distress into rituals of sacrifice. Many of the white daughters in these games have been the subject of extensive scientific study and conditioning, often because of special abilities reliant on their sex. Conditioning and care combine to emphasize how these medically coded, often torturous preparations lead up to a dramatic scene of sacrifice in which the father must choose the daughter's fate. I will examine how medicalized feminine suffering in the *Bioshock* series and *The Last of Us* is a contemporary retelling of the traditional damsel chained to a rock to await a monster. The spectacle of rescue excuses the necessity of the scene and legitimizes the hero's ownership of the damsel. However, that ownership extends to her reproductive ability. These medicalized scenes' medicalization create a gynecological spectacle that characterizes white girlhood as a precious resource the father must protect and control.[217]

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[217] I should note the wretched irony of using gynecological imagery to characterize white femininity as a precious—ultimately reproductive—resource given how J. Marion Sims, sometimes called the father of modern gynecology, performed his experiments on enslaved Black women. Deirdre Cooper Owens links a sense of supposedly protective fatherhood with gynecology when discussing Sims, writing that "[g]ynecology helped enhance this protective role" for elite southern white men who "viewed their role as not only the protectors of women, but as 'fathers,'" to their slaves (39). Cooper Owens add that this 'protective' fatherhood essentially amounted to securing Black women's ability to give birth to more slaves. While dad games implicitly prioritize white fertility, they still reflect gynecology's historical ties with enabling women's fertility specifically as controlled by white men. For more, see Deirdre Cooper Owens' *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*. Additionally, I should note this section's indebtedness to Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." Rubin's ground-breaking commentary underlies a great deal of the feminist criticism of Bataille discussed here.

Before discussing how dad games implicitly prize white girlhood, I will address how scenes of medicalized torture emphasize the sex-based worth of the daughter-as-resource. In all three *Bioshock* games, medical transformations turn younger daughters like the Little Sisters into economic resources subject to the player's paternal authority. If the player saves or sacrifices the Little Sisters shows whether he is a loving adoptive father or a mercenary one. Either way, this reveals the Little Sisters' purpose is ultimately economic: the player exerts paternal authority to 'spend' the Little Sisters as he sees fit. In the undersea city of Rapture, a substance called ADAM allows citizens to use special powers called Plasmids. Plasmid-based abilities range from creating fire to controlling machinery. Overuse of Plasmids drives the user insane; maddened citizens called Splicers roam the now-ruined city and attack the player-character. The first source of ADAM is an undersea slug that produces it in small quantities. However, if the slug is implanted in a host body, much more ADAM can be produced. Little Sisters, girls between the ages of five and ten whom Rapture scientists have kidnapped and experimented on, now carry the sea slug in their bodies both produce ADAM and harvest it from the bodies of dead Splicers. The existence of the Little Sisters in the series is a set-up for a binary moral choice. The Little Sisters' ability to produce and recycle ADAM makes them desirable not only to Splicers but also to the player-character, who may choose to sacrifice or save the Little Sisters in *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2*. There has been extensive criticism on

moral choices in *Bioshock*,[218] but what I find most important is how the games leverage feminine suffering to power that morality system.

While the game implicitly codes the sacrifice of the Little Sisters as immoral, the instrumental use of their suffering provides an alternate read of Bataille's characterization of the woman as an object of exchange, in the form of the prostitute, the "*fille perdue*" ("The Notion of Expenditure" 180). Taken literally, the phrase translates to 'lost girl.' While the phrase primarily refers to lost in the sense of being "morally" wayward, she has also literally gone astray. The Little Sisters and the majority of the other daughters are effectively 'lost' at some point to set up their rescue by the father, who can redirect them toward their proper place in life.

While the Little Sisters are generally not eroticized, they do function in a sex-specific economic sense. They function similarly to how Suzanne Guerlac characterizes Bataille's use of the *fille perdue* as an expression of how a "[w]oman is at the center of eroticism […] because of her status as object of exchange" (100). The Little Sisters are resource gatherers and, ultimately, containers for ADAM. Unlike some of the daughters whose medicalized suffering is depicted in vivid detail as it occurs, evidence indirectly alludes to the Little Sisters' experiences. These documents detail the kidnapping, experimentation, and conditioning of the Little Sisters and consistently emphasize their economic necessity. There are audio recordings from a range of Rapture citizens,

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[218] See Jessica Aldred and Brian Greenspan's "A Man Chooses, A Slave Obeys: *Bioshock* and the Dystopian Logic of Convergence," Christina Legler's "*Bioshock Infinite* and the Illusion of Choice in Gaming," Chelsea Stark's "Morality and the Illusion of Choice in *Bioshock Infinite*," Stefan Schubert's "Objectivism, Narrative Agency, and the Politics of Choice in the Video Game *BioShock*," and David Sims' "How *Bioshock* Mocked Video-Game Morality."

including scientists involved in the process like the cruel Dr. Suchong and the conflicted Dr. Tenenbaum, as well as bereft parents. Finding these recordings throughout the game turns the player-character into a detective, uncovering a horrible crime. The spectacle of the Little Sisters with their dirty baby-doll dresses and glowing yellow eyes is clearly intended to horrify; similarly, the slow drip of evidence narrated in tones that convey Suchong's callousness or a parent's despair paint a fuller picture of the girls' medical-coded suffering. I argue that the largely indirect evidence of the Little Sisters' pain emphasize their status as objects of exchange and attempt to de-emphasize the sex-based nature of their value. However, the game clearly states that attempts to use boys to gather ADAM have failed. Only girls can successfully contain the sea slug that processes ADAM. The sex-specific nature of their value is undeniable. In Bataille's writing, the adult woman as an object of exchange contains both economic and sexual significance: crucially, her economic worth depends on her sexual value. Age determines to what degree each daughter's worth has an explicitly sexual basis in dad games. In contrast to older daughters, whose suffering foregrounds their value's sexual nature, the Little Sisters' economic value mostly depends on their sex, not their sexuality. However, despite the Little Sisters' youth, that sexual charge reappears in unexpected and worrying ways.

The moral choice centred on the Little Sisters is a theatre of sacrifice somewhat distanced from the sexual charge identified by Bataille. Despite this distancing, the father's potential disposal of the daughter still reduces her to an object of exchange subject to his will and sexual possession. The game's language describing the relationship between the Little Sisters and their Big Daddy protectors prefigures the eerie hint of incest in

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Bioshock Infinite. The player must defeat a Big Daddy to take its place in "The Pair Bond

mechanism," in which pheromones lead the Big Daddy to protect a Little Sister. The

game's pseudo-scientific basis for this game mechanic[219] sits uneasily with the real-world

application of the term "pair-bond," which typically refers to mating pairs in animal

species. This divergent use of the term also draws attention to the series' tendency to

confuse sexual and familial ties between men and women. Upon defeating a Little

Sister's Big Daddy, the player gains rightful possession of her and may take one of two

actions, as seen in the image below (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Screenshot taken by the author of the player's options when faced with a
Little Sister in *Bioshock*, Irrational Games, 2007.

The player-character may 'harvest' the Little Sister for her ADAM or 'rescue' her. In

both cases, the accompanying animation expresses masculine power over frail femininity.

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[219] As noted in previous chapters, a game mechanic is an action the player can repeatedly take in a game. A
core mechanic refers to an action or set of actions that define gameplay because of their ubiquity in play.
The need to defeat a Big Daddy to take his Little Sister is a prominent game mechanic, as is the choice
whether to harvest or rescue the Little Sisters.

The Little Sister struggles and tries to resist but cannot overpower the player. She is small and ugly in the player-character's hands: she is a grotesque parody of a cute little girl in her grimy pink dress, with pale skin and lamp-like yellow eyes.[220] Holding the Little Sister puts the player in the position of the sacrificer, with his weak, feminine victim helpless in his hands. Whatever his choice, his authority over her is indisputable. There is a mild economic advantage to harvesting the Little Sister, but ultimately the choices yield fundamentally similar results.[221] The Little Sisters are resources disposed of by the player, either as their rescuer or their harvester. In both cases, the player proves himself superior to the other parents who might have authority over the Little Sister, like the parents who fail to protect her from Rapture's scientists and the Big Daddy who fails to keep possession of her. The player earns paternal authority over the daughter-as-resource.

In *Bioshock 2*, the teenage Eleanor's medicalized suffering is more directly on display than that of her sisters, and her rescue also further legitimates the player's control over her. The player-character is Subject Delta, an early prototype of the Big Daddies faced in the first game. Delta is forcibly separated from his Little Sister Eleanor in the game's prologue and spends much of the game searching for her years later. Like Jack in the

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[220] If the player-character rescues the Little Sister using a Plasmid that undoes the conditioning and mutations, she still struggles and says "No, no, no," in a slightly distorted tone. After going limp in the player-character's hands, she appears as a normal little girl, and thanks you before climbing into a vent to safety. If the player-character harvests the Little Sister, the screen cuts from her struggles to a muddy green pattern, accompanied by the sound of heartbeats before the green fades to show the player-character holding the slug that has been forcibly removed from the child's body. In both choices, the Little Sister's struggles are unnerving; her initial uncanny appearance does not completely soften the implicit horror of holding a struggling little girl while she desperately tries to get away. In this respect, the horror of sacrifice is nearly indistinguishable from rescue.

[221] Series creator Levine admits that his original intention to make the harvesting option much more economically viable than the rescue option was refused by the game's publishers (Friedman "Bioshock Bungled Its Best Chance to Make Play Meaningful"). This censoring illustrates how Triple-A game production involves many authorial voices.

previous game, Delta discovers a trail of evidence documenting experimentation on the

Little Sisters more broadly and Eleanor in particular. Eleanor herself has been subjected

to experimentation both through the process of being made into a Little Sister and by her

mother, Dr. Sophia Lamb, in hopes of creating "the perfect Utopian." After taking

Eleanor from Delta at the beginning of the game, Dr. Lamb continues to experiment on

her. Late in the game, Delta tracks Eleanor to a quarantined room that, in the context of

the surrounding prison hospital, is a nightmarish combination of medical and domestic

imagery (Figure 20).[222]

Figure 20. Screenshot taken by author as Delta reaches out helplessly while Dr. Lamb
smothers Eleanor in *Bioshock 2*, Irrational Games, 2010.

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[222] The level's design contributes to its medicalized horror. Persephone is the name of the secret psychiatric
prison hospital run by Dr. Lamb. As Delta progresses through this underworld toward where Eleanor is
being held, he sees the wrecked building, including upset gurneys and spilled patient files. Delta wades
through the physical evidence of torture disguised as treatment, priming player expectations to see Eleanor
as another imprisoned patient. In a twist on the Persephone myth typical of the games' justification of
fatherly authority, Eleanor is imprisoned by her mother and must be rescued by an older male figure.

Initially, Eleanor lies unconscious dressed in a white nightgown on a bed, complete with an oversized teddy bear at the bed's foot. Multiple bright screens surround her, projecting harsh light like the lamps of an operating room. Eleanor is supposedly eighteen years old, but she appears much younger, small against the bed: the tableau emphasizes her helplessness in a life in which the medical and the domestic become hopelessly entangled as her mother experiments on her. Her mother is an unfit parent who misuses the daughter-as-resource. Delta must prove himself the superior parent and put Eleanor to better use. Despite progressing through decontamination chambers and getting slowly closer to Eleanor, Delta (and the player) can only watch as Dr. Lamb smothers Eleanor with a pillow. Eleanor struggles feebly, but she is too weak to overpower her mother.[223] Eleanor survives because Dr. Lamb only smothers her long enough to break the pair bond between Delta and Eleanor and guarantee that Delta will soon die.[224] Eleanor's distress recalls the medical torture that creates a Little Sister: early in the game, she begs you to demonstrate your protective capacity to help her because her mother is "accelerating [her] treatments." When Eleanor briefly dies, the medical torture that has defined her life transforms into something nearly sacred: the white gown, the harsh light of the screens, and the bed become instruments in the spectacle of feminine sacrifice. Eleanor's hospital

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[223] For more on the mother in *Bioshock*, see "Big Daddies and Monstrous Mommies: *Bioshock*'s Maternal Abjection, Absence, and Annihilation" by John Vanderhoef and Matthew Thomas Payne. Other fathers who compete for control of daughters range from the bestial Big Daddy to the Machiavellian Comstock. Mothers in *Bioshock* are monstrous or absent: "the franchise's systematic abjectification of its female characters and their relationships with their children is so thoroughgoing that the maternal has no seeming recourse other than to either transform into something horrific or disappear completely" (69-70). For more, see Carly Smith's "Gaming's Mom Problem: Why Do We Refuse to Feature Moms in Games?"

[224] Little Sisters and Big Daddies are conditioned so that if the Little Sister dies the Big Daddy dies soon after. The process of conditioning the Big Daddies receives much less coverage than the production of the Little Sisters: this is yet another instance in which feminine pain features much more than masculine pain. For more on the daughter as the site of emotional displacement, see section 3.4.

room is not merely an operating theatre, but a stage for the drama of her suffering. Compared to the Little Sisters, Eleanor's suffering appears more directly: the game's visual language of medical equipment and procedures, and discussion of experimentation elevates Eleanor's temporary death into a ritual sacrifice.

Notably, Eleanor's girlish nightgown further underlines her characterization as a victim on the cusp of womanhood. In the context of Eleanor's status as a tortured experiment, her flimsy, childish clothes emphasize her vulnerability. Similarly, in *Erotism*, Bataille describes the undressing of the victim as a stage in their removal from everyday reality, writing "[i]n sacrifice, the victim is divested not only of clothes but of life (or is destroyed in some way if it is an inanimate object)" (22). Alexander Irwin describes how Bataille "directly equates sexual intercourse with the act of sacrifice. Undressing the sexual partner (*la mise à nu*) is a simulation or partial equivalent of sacrificial killing (*la mise à mort*)" (118). The setting of each scene is the same for Bataille: the woman being undressed is part of the preparation for the ritual sacrifice. In comparison to the Little Sisters, Eleanor's suffering and half-dressed victimhood are much more visually prominent. Even as her mother surrounds Eleanor with childish imagery—the nightgown, the teddy bear—her increased age and her comparatively mature voice in Delta's mind unavoidably recall her sexual maturity. Where the Little Sisters are coded as economically valuable because of their sex-specific capacity to host the sea slug that produces ADAM, Eleanor's value lies in her revolutionary potential, which is similarly coded as being contained in her body. Her increased age makes her a victim whose sexual maturity is implicitly part of the spectacle of her sacrifice, unlike the Little Sisters. The game treats Eleanor both as a little girl and a young woman. This ambivalence

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uncomfortably prefigures *Bioshock Infinite*'s fetishization of girlish youth and innocence not merely as sexually appealing, but a kind of blank slate that masculine authority must transform. Similarly, *Bioshock 2*'s emphasis on overt visual spectacle and the game's ambivalent characterization of Eleanor's age reoccurs in Elizabeth, the daughter whose suffering and sexuality are most visible in the *Bioshock* series.

In contrast to *Bioshock 2*'s Eleanor, *Bioshock Infinite*'s Elizabeth seems to be unequivocally mature enough to sexualize. Her desirability permeates the game. I argue that this emphasis on Elizabeth's damsel aesthetics conflates her capacity to attract emotional investment with her physical beauty and is a key reason why she is even more vividly subject to invasive medical study and experimentation. *Bioshock* and *Bioshock 2* describe the suffering of the Little Sisters through largely second-hand accounts, and show Eleanor's temporary death, respectively. The third game takes a step further by presenting not just evidence of Elizabeth's medicalized torture, just the torture itself. I assert that the key difference is the game's emphasis on Elizabeth's erotic appeal, which transfigures her victimhood into an overtly sexual spectacle. *Bioshock Infinite* demonstrates what its predecessors imply—rescuing *la fille perdue* earns the player-character the right to control her sexual value, to use her as an object of exchange.

Like the Little Sisters and Eleanor, Elizabeth is the subject of intensive study and experimentation. Before meeting Elizabeth, Booker journeys through the Tower that houses her. At first, he sees records of Elizabeth's growth in documentation that only refers to her as "The Specimen;" the evidence of her treatment as a dangerous experiment contrasts dull growth charts with large, dire warning signs. Like the evidence of the Little Sisters' conditioning, these pieces of evidence are secondary, sometimes archival. In

contrast, Booker also sees a displayed sample of Elizabeth's first menses. Booker

progresses from documentation to direct evidence taken from Elizabeth's body, in

preparation for seeing her suffering firsthand. Similarly to how the Little Sisters'

femaleness is the mysterious key to their ability to produce ADAM, Elizabeth's sex is an

inextricable part of what makes her a special candidate for sacrifice. Like the Little

Sisters and Eleanor, as well as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s Ciri and *The Last of Us*' Ellie,

her body contains something precious that will be put to use, even if that use requires her

suffering or death. Similarly, the records confirm that Elizabeth's power grows

exponentially at the onset of her menstruation, further aligning her special powers with

her gender. Gender is inextricable from what makes the Little Sisters, Eleanor, and

Elizabeth special: in the *Bioshock* series, white girlhood is a special resource that society

will misuse unless the father controls it instead.

As the eldest and most obviously sexualized of *Bioshock*'s daughters, Elizabeth's torture

is similarly explicit. However, this sensationalist presentation is not merely for aesthetic

value. Instead, Elizabeth's suffering characterizes the villain Zachary Comstock as a

father improperly managing the daughter-as-resource. In contrast, Booker's authority

over Elizabeth is legitimized superficially by love and substantively by violence. In

contrast to the brief but affecting scene of Eleanor being smothered, in *Bioshock Infinite*,

the sounds of Elizabeth's torture continue throughout an entire level set in the Comstock

House Rehabilitation Center. Booker must rescue Elizabeth from an ongoing procedure.

As he progresses through the level and kills enemies in surgical garb, he can hear her

anguished screams. In later sections of the level, Booker overhears different versions of

Elizabeth tortured in alternate past timelines. She begs for mercy and eventually submits,

shouting, "I'll be your daughter" to an unseen Comstock. Elizabeth acquiesces to

Comstock's orders, coerced into accepting her status as an object of exchange.

Comstock's coercive authoritarian fatherhood contrasts with Booker, whose heroic rescue

of Elizabeth legitimates his authority over her. Bataille's vision of women as resources

remains realized here, despite its superficially gentler set-dressing.

The tenderness on display after the Rehabilitation Center rescue contrasts with the intense

violence that precedes it, as waves of enemies converge on the player.[225] After rescuing

Elizabeth from a medical torture chamber, Booker removes the large-gauge needle of a

syringe that has been inserted deep into her back. The removal of the needle prompts

another scream. She shudders in pain as he slides the object out of her. In the context of

their ambiguous relationship, the scene reads as uncomfortably sexual. In contrast to the

removal of the slug from the Little Sister in the first two *Bioshock* games, here the player

directly sees the father remove a phallic object from the daughter. This removal is visible

because the game does not hesitate to sexualize Elizabeth. Her age justifies the most

traditional treatment of Elizabeth as a damsel, which frames her as an object of desire

even as designers may have tried to make her an equal partner for Booker. It is extremely

difficult to escape mainstream game cultures' narrow range of ways for women to exist,

itself partially the legacy of the damsel trope's historical prominence in games. The

game's tendency to sexualize Elizabeth becomes even more obvious as Booker adjusts

Elizabeth's corset (Figure 21).

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[225] Alexander writes "[a]ll sentiments but tension, tedium, dissipate in the onslaught. I am desperate for the sharp violin note that tells me [combat is] over. I will hear that note countless times, and feel nothing but mechanical, empty relief" ("Now is the Best Time"). This dullness in the game's few moments of quiet only makes the tender scene between Booker and Elizabeth even more uncanny, and strangely unmoving.

Figure 21. Screenshot taken by author of Elizabeth shuddering after Booker removes the needle in *Bioshock Infinite*, Irrational Games, 2013.

The moment mistakes invasiveness for intimacy: where several sections of the game have shown the evidence of Elizabeth's torture, displayed her suffering aurally but not visually, or showed her in brief glimpses during combat, this moment occurs immediately after Elizabeth's rescue.[226] Booker tightens Elizabeth's undergarment while the camera focuses on her exposed, bruised back, shoulders, and neck. She shudders and whimpers with the pain. Because this is a rare scene in which the player can see Elizabeth, but not her hyper-expressive face, there is even more pressure on her body language, cries of pain, and dialogue to convey her distress. The puncture wound left by the needle is frequently centred in the frame, ringed by deep bruising. When I play this scene, I have

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[226] In a moment that underlines Walker's characterization of Elizabeth as a tool Booker uses, the rescue technically ends with Booker turning off the machine that saps Elizabeth's powers. She summons a tornado through a tear and kills the remaining enemies in the area. Tellingly, they beg Booker by name to turn the machine back on, rather than beg Elizabeth for mercy. The game's logic understands that fundamentally Booker is the one in control of Elizabeth, as he is virtually from the instant he meets her.

the sense that the wound is looking at me.[227] The moment feels obscene as if I am looking inside her like Bataille's sacrificer violating his victim. As noted by Joho, Meyers, and Voorhees, the game's efforts to make Elizabeth as appealing as possible shape the player's perception of Elizabeth; in this scene, what we look at is Elizabeth's wound, and by extension, her woundedness and vulnerability. Booker's intimate touch—he is adjusting her undergarment—is intended to signal his status as Elizabeth's 'proper' father. However, the game's consistent focus on Elizabeth's erotic appeal emphasizes the fundamentally quasi-incestuous nature of treating the daughter as a damsel, an object of exchange with a value determined by her sexual appeal. *Bioshock Infinite* shows how difficult it can be to escape well-tread patterns in the characterization of women, despite designer intentions.

The intimate portrayal of Elizabeth's torture contrasts with the medicalized violence faced by Ellie in *The Last of Us*. *Bioshock Infinite*'s display of caring fatherhood rests uneasily alongside the sexualization of Elizabeth. In contrast, *The Last of Us* manages, for the most part, to avoid emphasizing Ellie's sexual value. However, the game's attempts to deemphasize Ellie's sex end up illuminating the dad game's consistent emphasis on the value of specifically white girlhood. Joel's final shoot-out with the Fireflies occurs as he rescues Ellie, who is unconscious in a hospital gown. Where Elizabeth's medicalized torture emphasizes anguished sexuality, Ellie's preparation for

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[227] This sense of being looked at by a wound is certainly uncomfortable for me, but other players may react differently. Notably, some players might find the wound reminiscent of the reticule (or crosshairs) that indicates where a weapon is aimed in many first-person shooters, including *Bioshock Infinite*.

surgery highlights her youth and vulnerability.[228] The player directs Joel's rampage

through the facility as he kills Firefly soldiers and medical personnel until he finds Ellie

unconscious. Like Eleanor, her small, unconscious body in a thin white gown, surrounded

by the tools and harsh lights of an operating room, foregrounds her vulnerability, rather

than her woundedness. She seems even smaller in Joel's arms. Eleanor, Elizabeth, and

Ellie's states of undress emphasize that they are being prepared for sacrifice. However,

each sacrifice's characterization differs depending on the degree to which the game

associates the daughter's special power with her sex. The Fireflies plan to harvest Ellie's

immunity from her brain, rather than any part of her body stereotypically associated with

menstruation, like the uterus. Unlike the Little Sisters, Eleanor, and Elizabeth, Ellie's

special immunity to the zombie virus is not explicitly a result of her sex. Before the

events of the game, zombies attack and bite both Ellie and her female best friend (and

love interest) Riley, but only Riley succumbs to the infection. The most obvious

difference between Ellie and Riley is race: Ellie is white, and Riley is Black.[229] This

detail might seem innocuous but understood in the context of how daughters with special

abilities or lineage are consistently white, having the most obvious difference between

Ellie and Riley be race implicitly characterizes white girlhood as special.

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[228] The hospital gown's lack of an exterior opening increases its resemblance to a nightgown. Combining Ellie's appearance with Joel repeatedly calling her "baby girl" results in an incongruous scene. If not for the fact that he is killing everyone else in sight, he might be the father putting his daughter to bed that he is at the very beginning of the game. As noted by Soraya Murray, "baby girl" is the term of endearment Joel uses for his daughter Sarah in that opening scene (118).

[229] When referring to Black and white identity, I capitalize the former but not the latter. There is abundant discussion on this topic, but I defer to Lori L. Tharps, who writes "Black should always be written with a capital B. We are indeed a people, a race, a tribe. It's only correct" ("The Case for Black with a Capital B"). I do not capitalize white in recognition of its unmarkedness and to avoid associating myself with the capitalization of white by white supremacists. For more on this topic, see L.D. Burnett's "To 'B' or Not to 'B:' On Capitalizing the Word Black."

I say this not to accuse these games of intentional racism, but rather to note consistently

problematic implications about race in dad games. The Little Sisters in *Bioshock* are the

only ones able to recycle ADAM. In *Bioshock 2*, Eleanor has all the powers of a Big

Sister, a Little Sister who has been warped by her exposure to ADAM. However,

Eleanor's abilities are much more powerful than the average Big Sister, and she displays

none of their mental instability. Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* and Ciri in *The Witcher 3:*

Wild Hunt can both alter reality. In *Dishonored*, Emily's royal blood and right to the

throne is also a power contained in her body. The only daughter among those discussed in

this chapter who does not have any special powers is Clementine in *The Walking Dead:*

Season One, who is also the only girl of colour among the daughters. As noted above,

understood as a larger pattern, dad games consistently link white girlhood with having a

special power subject to fatherly disposal.

White girlhood is most obviously a precious resource in the *Bioshock* series. Without

paternal intervention, society will use that resource selfishly. Rapture effectively 'runs'

on the system powered by the Little Sisters, Eleanor is the focus of a cult that worships

her as the "Lamb" that will transform society, and Comstock plans to use Elizabeth, also

often referred to as the "Lamb," to wage war on the world below Columbia.[230] In each

case, the 'power' of white girlhood must be put to proper use by the right father, lest

lesser parents misuse it. The medicalization of these daughters' suffering combines with

the sex-specific nature of their powers to emphasize their gynecological significance.

This reproductive focus mirrors white supremacy's obsession with the need to "control

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[230] The Lamb's whiteness and associations with Christ, as well as Christian ideals of purity and innocence is consistent with the *Bioshock* series' heavy-handed use of metaphor.

white women's bodies, ensuring that they only love and have children with white men"

(Leão "Understanding the Rage of White Male Supremacy"). White supremacist rhetoric

is often patriarchal and explicitly identifies sexual control of the daughter as the

responsibility of the father, who will eventually pass her to another white man.[231] Her

status as an object of exchange in white supremacy is worryingly similar to the roles

played by daughters like Elizabeth and Ellie. These roles emphasize the fundamentally

quasi-incestuous nature of the father treating the daughter as a resource based on her

ability to bear white children.[232] It is the unmarked quality of whiteness, her perceived

emptiness, and the daughter's ability to perpetuate a white father's legacy that is the base

of her value.

Some context is necessary to understand how dad games reflect a specific kind of white,

masculine anxiety. Murray makes a persuasive argument that in *The Last of Us*, Joel and

Ellie are "iterations of desperate whiteness set against ruin and abolished social

structures" (119). Many dad games have postapocalyptic settings, in which, as Lawlor

notes, "[t]hese paternal figures become essential in both a literal and an ideological

sense" (30). While the ruined world more obviously represents whiteness in crisis in *The

Last of Us*, the game's similarities with *Bioshock Infinite* help contextualize that game's

anxiety about white masculinity. Both games feature a militant woman of colour who

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[231] See Katerina Deliovsky's *White Femininity: Race, Gender and Power* for more on 'sexual loyalty' and race. For more on white women's contributions to white supremacy, see Elizabeth Gillespie McRae's *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*.
[232] Notably, Geralt's daughter Ciri is part of a centuries-long breeding program. In the original *Witcher* novels, her biological father intends to impregnate her, though he does not follow through with this plan. The game downplays this aspect of the source material but does acknowledge a different character trying to use Ciri for breeding purposes. Her reproductive ability remains part of her fundamental value.

must die because her revolutionary aims threaten the father/daughter pair. In Ellie's case, Joel must kill Marlene, the leader of the paramilitary Fireflies, in order to protect Ellie.[233] In Elizabeth's case, Daisy Fitzroy, the leader of the Vox Populi, first tries to kill Booker and then threatens the son of the white industrialist Jeremiah Fink.[234] Elizabeth kills Daisy with a pair of scissors and becomes so spattered with blood that she must make the symbolic costume change discussed earlier. In both games, the deaths of politically active women of colour secure the survival of white children. However, the daughter is an especially important vessel. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae describes white women's bodies as the "landscape on which the policing of racial intermixing often [takes] place" (25). Even as Gillespie argues that white women are active, rather than passive participants in white supremacy, the word landscape resonates with these games' characterizations of daughters as containers—whether for a special power or their fathers' legacies—as otherwise empty vessels that secure something precious inside. The white daughter is not merely a victim on an altar. She is the altar itself. She is a stage.

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[233] In a less obvious case in which the death of a woman of colour becomes necessary, Riley's death helps prove that Ellie is special. Ellie tells Joel that both were infected and waited to die together, but only Ellie survived. Marlene and Riley are the only two prominent women of colour in *The Last of Us* and its DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, and they both die to develop white characters.

[234] In the *Bioshock Infinite: Burial at Sea* DLC, Elizabeth discovers that Fitzroy never intended to kill the child. Specifically, the interdimensional travellers called the Lutece twins inform Fitzroy that she must goad Elizabeth into killing her for the greater good. The DLC's characterization of Daisy as self-sacrificing martyr rather than angry Black woman seems to respond to the criticism the game received over treating Fitzroy's Black liberation movement as equally violent as Comstock's white supremacy. For more on *Bioshock Infinite*'s depiction of race, see Soha El-Sabaawi's "The Girl Without a Land," Tevis Thompson's "On Videogame Reviews," and Ed Smith's "The Politics of *Bioshock Infinite* are All the Worse When Revisited in an Election Year."

3.4 At Death's Door: The Daughter as the Site of Displacement

The daughter is not merely the site upon which these games perform racial anxiety. She expresses her father's insufficiently masculine emotions, including his fear of death. Several of the fathers in these games imagine their mortality through their daughters' suffering and then realize that mortality by dying after successfully rescuing them. This use of the daughter's feminine-coded body as a vessel for men's displaced feelings and fears about mortality sheds light on how the game anticipates unmarked players, namely white men expected to conform to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Feminist interpretations of Bataille's characterization of women as the site of men's self-loss are especially useful here because they provide an analogous model for how damsel daughters function as sites of displacement in dad games. Judith Surkis writes:

> For Bataille, the woman, as the marker of difference, becomes the site upon which transgression appears. This is where the gendered erotic object comes into play. Bataille's eroticism posits a distance and difference between partners in order to permit the presentation of an image or "evidence" of transgression. The masculine partner in physical eroticism has difficulty sensing transgression within himself. (21)

Surkis writes the above while articulating a lack of feminine agency in Bataille's theory. However, bridging Surkis' criticism and accounts of markedness in game cultures show how the marked other in games stages the unmarked player-character's development. Crucially, this staging anticipates an unmarked player, for whom the deviance of the marked allows the distance that permits transgression. Chapter One contrasts the deaths

of marked and unmarked player-characters, and Chapter Two examines how markedly

feminine, suffering player-characters stage self-loss and other transgressive experiences

for a constructed audience, the unmarked player. The complex, interrelated systems of

development, production, advertising, and sales of a game collectively 'expect' a

particular type of player,[235] one who is simultaneously a member of the target marketing

demographic for the game *and* who frequently belongs to the unmarked categories in

gaming discussed in detail in Chapter One. As I have said, the unmarked player in Triple-

A games[236] tends to resemble the "constructed norm" of "'hardcore,' white, heterosexual,

cisgendered male players within the U.S. context" (Shaw "On Not Becoming Gamers").

Dad games and the systems that produce them expect players not only to resemble that

unmarked norm but also to share the anxieties about masculinity that these games

express. Anxiety—the father's and the assumed-player's—about the limits placed on that

authority by mortality play out through the daughter's suffering. The daughter is the

evidence of death, which the player can see by assuming the father's perspective.

Ultimately as the player exerts fatherly influence over the daughterly object, rescuing or

sacrificing her—or sometimes both—the player occupies the position of the

discontinuous subject seeking his mortality in the suffering and death of others because

he cannot see it in himself. The father's death, when it occurs, does not undo the

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[235] Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter refer to the engagement of the industry with its expected player base as "a process in which commodity form and consumer subjectivity circle around each other in a mating dance of mutual provocation and enticement" (196). Each side anticipates and tries to appeal to the other, creating a narrow, self-sustaining vision of who games are 'for' and what appeals to that audience.
[236] All the dad games discussed here are Triple-A games except *The Walking Dead*: its development company Telltale Games was comparatively small and was initially known for producing clever, puzzle-oriented adventure games. *The Walking Dead*'s emphasis on dialogue choices and use of scripted quick-time events for combat still make it distinct from the other dad games discussed here.

daughter's suffering or objectification, but literalizes the sacrificer's vicarious identification with his victim.

The daughter's suffering is not merely ornamental. Instead, her vulnerability, dramatic brushes with kidnapping and torture, and the omnipresent threat of death allow the father and the expected player to stage anxiety about death. This use of the daughter's distress reflects Bataille's idea of discontinuity. In the Introduction to *Erotism*, Bataille describes reproduction and death as examples of how beings are fundamentally disconnected from each other. He writes of the latter example, "[i]f you die, it is not my death. You and I are *discontinuous* beings" (12). However, he adds that when the fact of our discontinuity is so baldly stated, he cannot help feeling that the statement is "not the whole truth of the matter. […] It is my intention to suggest that for us, discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being" (13). Both an instant of radical sharing through bodily penetration in sexual reproduction and the fact of our shared mortality are pathways to continuity in that they are means of connecting with others, or at least of feeling connected. The player may imagine connection at the moment Booker pulls the needle out of Elizabeth's back. Certainly, the scene's attempted emotional weight suggests continuity. However, the father's ability to reach into the daughter in the *Bioshock* series, whether to pull the sea slug out of the Little Sister, enter Eleanor's body and see out of her eyes, or pull out the giant needle and see into Elizabeth's wound is a gesture of dominance, not connection. We can understand this dominance in light of Benjamin Noys' claim that in Bataille's work, sex is a means of connection because sex "is an experience of the loss or dissolution of the boundaries of our body. This loss of the boundary of the body is an act of violence [...] and in this loss of discontinuity it

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prefigures death" (83). In both sex and death, the means to continuity is the revelation of the body's vulnerability to violence, enacted on the feminine-coded body by a domineering man. Surkis follows Suzanne Guerlac and other key feminist critics of Bataille[237] by foregrounding the maleness of "the 'discontinuous subject'" who attempts "to transgress the limits of individual existence by leaping or falling into the realm of continuity or limitless being in order to access the zone of death" (18). In Bataille's work, the masculine subject and the sacrificer imagine they access continuity by seeing violence wrought upon a marked feminine body. Heroic fathers act fundamentally like sacrificers by using the damsel daughter as a victim whose suffering transforms his discontinuity.

Part of the context for this use of the daughter lies in her expressiveness, which contrasts with the father's frequent lack of affect. Much like how the feminine object can be the site of masculine self-loss, the daughter's marked feminine otherness allows her to express and reflect emotions that hegemonic masculinity and game conventions largely limit in men. Even accounting for the fact that a first-person perspective leaves the player-character largely unseen, the opacity of fathers like Jack, Delta, and Corvo is reinforced by being 'silent protagonists' who never speak.[238] Their expressiveness is

[237] Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous critique how philosophy centers male perspectives. They address Bataille, often through a lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Later critics like Guerlac, Carolyn Dean, Surkis, and Amy M. Hollywood draw on Irigaray and Cixous to critique Bataille. Guerlac in particular draws from how Cixous situates Bataille in connection with a Hegelian tradition of recognition in which "there is no place for the other, for an equal other, for a whole and living woman" (Cixous and Clement 205).

[238] The silent protagonist is not canonically mute in the game's lore, but never speaks in the game. Christopher Gile's article "Let's Talk About How Weird the Silent Protagonist Is" provides a useful introduction to this convention and the commonly held idea that the silent protagonist is easier for the player to identify with than a character with voiced dialogue. The silent protagonist is typically an unmarked player-character whose identity is treated as neutral when it is, in fact, usually highly specific. The silent protagonist is nearly always a white man who is explicitly heterosexual, implicitly cisgender and thereby ranks high in the hierarchies prized by hegemonic masculinity.

limited to grunts of pain, which largely signal in-game damage rather than emotion. The only first-person father who speaks is Booker, but he tends to express anger or confusion. The exceptions to this rule occur during his few moments of intimacy with Elizabeth in which his capacity for affection or fear is displaced onto her. In the game's opening credits, a feminine voice (one we later recognize as Elizabeth's) asks, "Booker, are you afraid of God?" and a masculine voice responds, "No, but I'm afraid of you." As Booker admits fear, his voice is calm and measured, while Elizabeth's is hushed and strained. He admits fear, but she performs it. This contrast begins a pattern of emotional displacement that lasts throughout the game and operates according to the same logic as the development team's repeated emphasis that Elizabeth is the game's emotional centre.[239] In light of this displacement, I argue that Elizabeth is the emotional centre of the game to the extent that she expresses Booker's emotions rather than her own. She is the site upon which men's emotions—both Booker's and that of the unmarked player expected by the game—can safely be expressed without violating patriarchal norms.

Third-person perspective fathers like Joel and Geralt are both more expressive and more thoroughly characterized than the bulk of the first-person fathers. However, both are largely taciturn, grizzled men whose humour is similarly gruff and whose feelings are largely implied. Like Booker, Joel and Geralt primarily express anger and frustration and largely reserve their tenderness for their daughters.[240] Lee is a major exception because

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[239] See Levine in "Creating Elizabeth," as well as Robertson's and Abercrombie's respective GDC talks.
[240] I should note that these games' emphasis on combat as a key part of gameplay is partially responsible for this limited emotional palette. The words a player-character says in combat can be part of his characterization, but they are limited by combat's affective context. For example, Geralt is one of the more emotionally expressive fathers in this chapter. He has a wry intelligence and sense of humour, but a significant amount of game-time is spent listening to him repeat aggressive combat dialogue.

his deeply felt and broad range of emotions includes fear and horror. He is the father

whose face is most often fully visible on-screen, rather than obscured by a first- or third-

person perspective. However, Lee is exceptional for several reasons, including his race:

he is the only father discussed in this chapter who is not white. As a result, he is a marked

Other used as a safe vehicle for the emotions of the unmarked player.[241]

Other than Lee, the majority of these fathers are nearly indistinguishable from the ranks

of inexpressive white male player-characters in games.[242] What distinguishes them is

their fatherhood itself, which makes space for their emotional connection to their

daughters. The daughter, like the damsel before her, is the safest site for men's emotional

expression. Displacing the father's feelings onto her keeps him from insufficiently

adhering to the hegemonic masculinity characteristic of mainstream game cultures. It is

not merely the daughter's expression of emotion that I assert is an essential part of her

function in the game—it is her distress. Traditionally, games that rely on the heterosexual

rescue arc trot out the damsel, either literally or metaphorically, as a periodic reminder of

the game's stakes. In *Bioshock 2*, Eleanor contacts Subject Delta periodically to

encourage him, express her affection, and entreat him to save her. However, many iconic

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[241] Bell, Taylor, and Kampe's "Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in *The Walking Dead*" further explores this use of racially marked player-characters. They draw on a tradition of analyzing identity tourism and technology, including Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* and Lisa Nakamura's "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet." Specific applications of this tradition to gameplay include Bob Rehak's "Playing at Being" and Shaw's "Rethinking Game Studies: A Case Study Approach to Video Game Play and Identification."
[242] There is abundant commentary on the dominance of the white, straight male player-character. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, is an important early collection of gender-based research in video games. David Leonard's "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' it Real: The Importance of Race and Gender-Based Game Studies" remains an extremely timely argument for intersectional research on player-characters. Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge* is a more contemporary example, one to which this project is deeply indebted.

daughters like Elizabeth and Ellie are present during most of the game. The recurring

reminder of a largely absent imperilled princess can have diminishing emotional returns.

In contrast, building emotional investment in the daughter over hours of play before

staging her sudden absence has much higher stakes. This structure makes the damsel

daughter's distress more compelling. Not only is the player more likely to care about her

than a stock damsel character, but also the player's more authentic emotional reaction to

the daughter's kidnapping makes her comparatively much more overt distress a more

appropriate stage for that reaction. It is the transition from daughterly presence to absence

that creates a crisis point, a moment of extremity that uses the spectacle of feminine

suffering as a stage for masculine feeling. This use of the daughter reflects Surkis' claim

that "images of women's self-loss" are "instrumental to the enactment of masculine self-

loss" in Bataille's philosophy (20).[243] An inherently gendered power imbalance allows

the male partner to use the female partner in order to see himself as subject to death.

Bataille's account of the feminized object of sacrifice sheds light on how dad games

objectify the daughter and the cultural anxieties underlying that objectification. In the dad

game, the potential loss of the daughter, often expressed in the trappings of sacrifice, is

the theatre through which masculine death can be staged and ultimately mastered. In

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[243] Surkis is not alone here: critics including Guerlac, Hollywood, and Sean P. Conolly agree that women function as sites of men's performance in Bataille's work. Hollywood draws on Guerlac's commentary on *Erotism* to claim that "[t]he erotic object, according to Bataille, is the female prostitute, a living object through whom the 'fiction of death' is enacted for the male reader and writer" (293). Paul Hegarty writes that in Bataille's fiction, women "have a privileged relationship to death and the erotic, which at times veers on making them the mean to his end, his ending, his death, little and otherwise," but cautions against ignoring the greater context of Bataille's work, particularly his focus on the economies surrounding death (184-5). While I think Hegarty's call for context is important, I argue that eroticism and sacrifice must be understood not merely as extreme acts, but as experiences in relation to human suffering. However, I am not making an Andrea Dworkin-style critique calling Bataille's work inherently harmful to women. Instead, I use Bataille's work to illuminate the complex ways sexism dictates the daughter's function in the dad game subgenre.

Bioshock Infinite, the level in which Booker overhears Elizabeth being tortured foregrounds her pain, but there is no corresponding difference in his affect. Booker's grim progress, made through hyper-aggressive combat, is the same as it has always been. Nearly all the expressiveness in this section is limited to Elizabeth's suffering, except for the fearful technicians who beg Booker to stop Elizabeth once she is free. Booker's lack of affect is typical: fathers like Jack, Delta, and Corvo do not express much emotion during the daughter's kidnapping scene if there is one, or in the resulting rescue mission. This inexpressiveness conforms to their characterization as silent protagonists. However, that very convention displays hegemonic masculinity's characterization of most emotions as insufficiently masculine. Following this limited emotional scope, the fathers who do express some feelings, like Booker and Joel, tend to pivot back primarily to anger, and a lesser extent to sadness, as if to balance out their rare expressions of inappropriate emotions like fear.

Lee and Geralt deviate from game cultures' standards of hegemonic masculinity. As discussed earlier, Lee's otherness effectively excuses his broader range of emotions. Geralt's case is complex in a different way: Ciri functions not as the voice of his emotions but as an object onto which his appropriately paternal feelings can be safely aimed. Geralt expresses emotions like fear, but only within specific, allowable contexts that inevitably focus on Ciri. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* shows how placing emotional expression in the daughter preserves the father's masculinity, even for fathers with a broader range of emotions. After chasing hints at Ciri's location, Geralt eventually tracks her to a mystical island. The scene is initially parodic rather than dramatic. This pivot to humour is another way of insulating Geralt and the player from his fears about Ciri. The

sequence parodies Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, complete with several

film references. Geralt arrives at a cabin full of dwarves,[244] and he must rescue three

missing dwarves to return the group to its original seven members.[245] The extended joke

contrasts with the reveal that Ciri is in the cabin and appears dead. The cutscene's

complete lack of humour and near-silence underline how devastated Geralt is by the sight

of Ciri's body. He clutches and rocks her like a child. Only then does the magical firefly

that led him to the island unexpectedly revive Ciri, and her bright green eyes open as she

returns the embrace. The scene shows Geralt's depth of feeling while reflecting important

rules about the properly masculine expression of emotion. Geralt's body language can

convey sadness, but he cannot be heard crying. This silence contrasts with how often

Geralt vocally expresses feelings like anger: the performance of those feelings is much

less restricted because, in a gaming context, anger is supposedly a proper, even typically

masculine, emotion.[246] After a tongue-in-cheek set-up that reflects the game's profane,

twisted fairy-tale world, the scene itself is entirely earnest.[247] Geralt's belief that Ciri is

dead robs him of his intimidating physical presence and calm confidence, and reduces

him, however temporarily, to a grieving parent ineffectually cradling a dead child. It is

the weakest he ever appears in the series.[248] It is a testament to the game's broader range

of allowable emotions that the scene unfolds as it does, but Geralt remains subject to

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[244] While the film uses the plural "dwarfs," the game uses "dwarves." I defer to the game's use here.
[245] The game makes more Disney jokes with characters who resemble Sneezy, Dopey, and Sleepy.
[246] For more on anger and masculinity in a game context, see Salter and *Blodgett's Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*.
[247] It is worth noting that the references to *Snow White* place Geralt in the role of the rescuing prince who marries her, which sits somewhat uneasily with his being Ciri's adopted father. The game is much better at avoiding the damsel daughter's quasi-incestuous implications than *Bioshock Infinite*.
[248] Even in response to her death in another ending, Geralt stoically prepares for a violent death. His grimly determined, suicidal attack on a horde of monsters contrasts with his being utterly at a loss in the cabin.

inflexible rules about how a man can display emotions. The range might be broader, but the limits are just as sharply enforced, and still require some displacement.

Daughters suffer and sometimes die to create a safe, limited context in which masculine emotions can safely be expressed. Additionally, fathers stage a confrontation with death through them. Of the examples discussed in this chapter, every father is threatened with the daughter's death. Her survival depends entirely on the father's actions.[249] I apply Bataille's work on the displacement of men's self-loss onto women to highlight that these games use female suffering to express and ultimately overcome moments of masculine weakness. Feminist criticism of Bataille's work sheds light on the formation of the daughter as a character through her status as a sacrificial object. Surkis notes that masculine self-loss depends on how the feminine partner "must be always already dissolved as a continuous being: her loss initiates his fall into continuity. In the meantime, the masculine partner is only 'relatively dissolved,' [...] his experience of continuity [is] predicated on her prior and total self-loss" (20). At a meta-textual level, the player participates in the preparation of the sacrifice of the daughter even as, for the most part, they ultimately avert it. Even though I am a marked player, when I play these fathers, I participate in the process of preparing the daughter for sacrifice up to the final moment in which I save her. I step into the role of the unmarked player who is supposed to identify closely with the father and see in the daughter's dissolution a safely displaced reflection of my own weakness and mortality. Consider the sacrifice of the daughter in light of the previous chapter's work on the spectacle of Lara's deaths in *Tomb Raider*.

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[249] The Little Sisters, Emily, and Ciri can die as a direct result of player decisions without ending the game.

The daughter functions much like Lara in that she is the focal point through which the father and the player can attempt to experience suffering, the threat of death, and attendant feelings of sadness, fear, and horror. Carolyn Dean explains that in the symbolic spectacle of sacrifice, "participants transcend themselves by identifying with the sacrificial victim. They experience an essentially vicarious death […] that can be experienced only through an imaginary identification with the victim" (229). The player uses the in-game character to access the pleasures and frustrations of play. Similarly, the player in the role of the father identifies with the girl—even while acting as her protector and her possessor—in order to experience sacrifice through her.

3.5 Father Knows Best: Paternal Influence in Games

The common plot twist that the father dies at the end of the dad game appears to be the vicarious identification of the sacrificer and the audience with the victim. However, this scene is more complex than a case of stolen identity, or a demonstration of how sex differentiates sacrifice. We know that a feminine victim is a passive object readied for sacrifice, while fathers die purposefully, typically either self-sacrificing or dying in the game's denouement, satisfied his legacy is secure.[250] For the most part, if the father dies, his influence outlives him in the daughter's body and the world state.[251] Just as how the

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[250] There are two key exceptions to this rule, Lee and Geralt. Lee dies fundamentally uncertain about Clementine's future, but the game demonstrates his impact on her. As discussed, their deviations result from Lee's marked status and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s unusually nuanced understanding of fatherhood.
[251] The term "world state" refers to a set of results in a game that has multiple possible endings, with different configurations of results. The world state is the full sum of all the decisions made in one playthrough and can range from which characters survive to the state of international politics. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* has 36 possible world states.

daughter's role as a site of displacement allows fathers to indirectly express insufficiently masculine emotions, including the fear of death, her role as the guarantee of fatherly legacy allays anxiety about hegemonic masculinity's impermanence. There, the daughter is a safety valve; here, she is insurance.

Most dad games feature a decision-based mechanic in which the father's choices powerfully influence both the game's world state and his daughter's personality.[252] The choices might include whether to kill or spare an enemy, whether to lie or tell the truth, and whether to cause chaos or enforce order. It is important to note that player choices having worldwide consequences is a well-established mechanic in roleplaying games. That player choices have significant consequences increases the sense that players are agents in the game world. Making these choices part of a binary moral system that equates minimal violence with good and extreme violence with evil entrenches the importance of these choices at the philosophical level, as well. Additionally, this mechanic increases replay value by limiting the player's experience of a specific chain of consequences per playthrough. All of this is to say that these games' shared emphasis on player choice is not particularly unusual. Where these games differ, however, is how these choices determine the daughter's personality and values.

The *Bioshock* series consistently uses fatherhood as a way of attaining and ensuring the survival of patriarchal authority. Daughters are markers of success, the evidence of

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[252] In addition to the criticism that explores choice in *Bioshock*, there are texts that explicitly interpret fatherhood as the sum of player choice. See Bell, Taylor, and Kampe's "Of Headshots and Hugs: Challenging Hypermasculinity through *The Walking Dead* Play," and Stang's "Big Daddies and Broken Men: Father-Daughter Relationships in Video Games."

fatherhood. In *Bioshock*, the game frames fatherhood as a reward offered for the best

performance of responsible masculinity that is authoritative without being rapacious. The

game's two possible endings contrast world-changing violence with domestic happiness,

so there is little opportunity to show how Jack shapes his daughters. However, their scant

characterization highlights how daughters function as possessions, whether as receptacles

for fatherly legacy or merely objects necessary for a character to be a father. Harvesting

the Little Sisters who gather the resource ADAM in the undersea city of Rapture results

in Jack leading Splicers to capture a nuclear submarine and effectively declare war on the

world above the ocean's surface. In contrast, rescuing the Little Sisters reframes the

game's denouement as the loving send-off of a beloved patriarch. The voice-over even

refers to his family as a "reward" he has earned through his virtuous choices and

sacrifices. The Little Sisters are less developed daughter figures and more ways of

keeping score. They are props that stage Jack's fatherhood. The game's treatment of the

family as a reward reflects how Jack evolves from his characterization as a son early in

the game: he is repeatedly referred to as 'son' by his guide Atlas and eventually revealed

to be the genetically modified son of Andrew Ryan, Rapture's founder.[253] Jack's

rhetorical and literal characterization as a son explicitly allows him to wrest fatherhood

from unworthy wielders of patriarchal authority. By the game's final boss fight, Jack has

transformed into a Big Daddy. Atlas, now revealed to be the gangster Frank Fontaine,

also transforms, using so much ADAM that he turns into a hulking monster. Atlas

declares himself to be another of Jack's fathers, describing how he has manipulated

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[253] Other Rapture denizens take part in Jack's creation. This group includes Andrew Ryan's mistress, Jasmine Jolene, who sells the fertilized embryo that produces Jack, as well as the scientists Dr. Yi Suchong and Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum. This array of parents further emphasizes his role as a son.

everything from Jack's gestation to his false memories, adding, "If you don't call that a family, I don't know what is." Immediately after this announcement, the Little Sisters attack Atlas: the attack signals that they are a new family for Jack, bound by loyalty rather than manipulation. At first, this moment seems to make a riposte to Atlas' characterization of family as subordination. However, this framing is undercut by the fact that the Little Sisters attack Atlas even if Jack has harvested every Little Sister encountered so far. The moment only underlines that they are in-game resources and props to complete a domestic scene that rehabilitates hegemonic masculinity.

Bioshock 2 is not a quest for fatherhood, but rather an exploration of how proper control of the daughter can secure fatherly legacies. In contrast to Jack's journey, I immediately understand that I am playing a Big Daddy at the beginning of *Bioshock 2*.[254] The Big Daddy is a frightening enemy from the first game: I recognize that as I walk, I produce its heavy tread. A diving helmet defines my field of vision, similar to Jack's perspective after his transformation in the first game. Moreover, the second game stresses my role as a father. A Little Sister hails me as "Daddy;" this contrasts with the Big Daddies from the first game whose Little Sisters refer to them as "Mr. B." or "Mr. Bubbles." Even among these massive, paternal monsters, I am a superior father.[255] Gameplay reflects this *ur*-fatherhood. Like Jack in the first game, Delta has to fight and defeat other Big Daddies in order to take their Little Sisters, as well as fight a greater-scope villain who is another

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[254] A frightening enemy from the first *Bioshock*, the Big Daddy is a behemoth in a diving suit. Simultaneously pitiable and terrifying because of its devotion to its Little Sister and its staggering combat prowess, the Big Daddy is often hailed as a cornerstone of *Bioshock*'s worldbuilding and gameplay.
[255] In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, Geralt's love for Ciri makes him her 'real' father, in contrast to her ruthless biological father. This variation is typical of *The Witcher 3*'s slightly more nuanced depiction of fatherhood.

alternate parent; Atlas for Jack and Dr. Lamb for Delta. Jack and Delta are the 'correct'

parents for these children, much like how the father often has to fight and defeat alternate

parents who also wish to control the daughter. This assertion of ultimate parenthood by

killing the alternate parent occurs in all three *Bioshock* games, *The Last of Us*, and *The

Walking Dead*.

To further emphasize my role from the very beginning of *Bioshock 2*, the Little Sister

raises a Big Daddy doll and says, "Look, Daddy. It's you." Soon after, I see myself in a

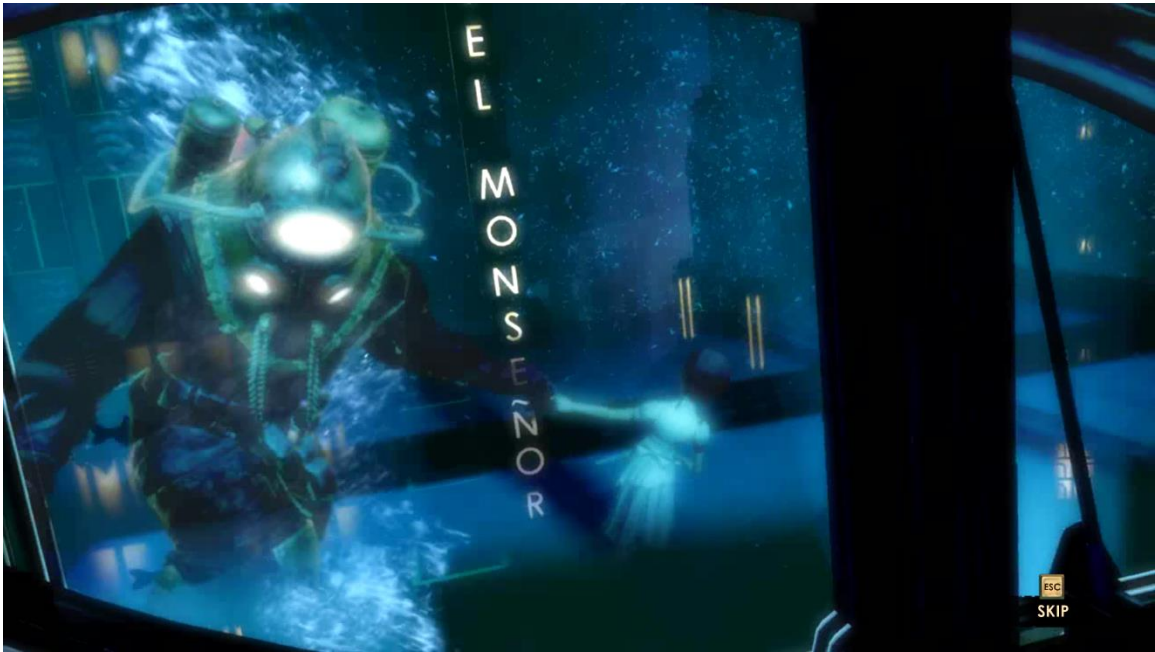reflection: a hulking figure led by a tiny girl (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Screenshot taken by author of Subject Delta and Eleanor in *Bioshock 2*,
Irrational Games, 2010.

I dwarf the Little Sister, even as she leads me along; we are father and daughter stretched to the point of parody.[256] I eventually learn I am "Subject Delta," a prototype of the Big Daddies. Like Jack, Delta can choose whether to rescue or harvest the Little Sisters. This choice, as well as my treatment of key enemies, influence my surrogate daughter Eleanor's personality and her plans at the end of the game. Notably, Delta can kill innumerable enemies during combat: the only characters whose deaths matter are members of Sophia Lamb's cultish Family. Rescuing Little Sisters and sparing key members of the Family will make Eleanor compassionate, whereas harvesting Little Sisters and killing particular characters will make her ruthless and vengeful. This clear causal relationship positions in-game actions as a kind of child-rearing by modelling behaviour. My preferred playstyle defines my daughter's personality and values, as well as the world she inherits. It is not possible to be a pacifist dad in any of these games because violence is unavoidable. It is possible to choose what kind of violence I want to see reflected in the world, often literally borne in my daughter's body.

The reduction of fatherly legacy to a choice between kinds of violence is not merely a function of game conventions,[257] but also a regressive vision of how patriarchal power can survive. There is abundant critical commentary on this common mechanic in which

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[256] Continuing the game's efforts to tell the player that they are a Big Daddy, even the name of the hotel seen through the window is "Hotel Monseñor." The shot's framing cuts off the first three letters of the word Hotel, thus showing Delta alongside the phrase "El Monseñor," the Spanish version of "Monsignor" (a form of address for some Catholic clergymen). Members of the clergy addressed this way are above the rank of priests, who are often addressed as "Father." The hotel's name thereby suggests that the player is superior to a father in both the familial and religious sense. This interpretation may seem laboured, but it is typical of the *Bioshock* series' somewhat heavy-handed approach to symbolism.
[257] It is, however, important to recognize the historical importance of violence to games more broadly and the first-person shooter and roleplaying genres specifically. This is not a moral failing, but an important piece of context when looking at the limits that game conventions often place on masculinity and agency.

player-character behaviour and tenor of violence determine daughter personality.[258] In addition to the first two *Bioshock* games, *The Walking Dead: Season One*, *Dishonored*, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* all show a clear correlation between the player-character's choices along an axis of altruism versus pragmatism and who his daughter turns out to be. Lee, a survivor of the zombie apocalypse in *The Walking Dead*, rescues and protects the little girl Clementine. Whether I choose to make Lee model altruistic or selfish behaviour determines how Clementine responds to his infection at the end of the game. If Lee does not verbally direct Clementine to kill or abandon him, she will choose, but her choice is nevertheless based on Lee's previous behaviour. Clementine must leave Lee; even without meaning to, the player chooses how this will happen. However, what I find especially important about how player choices determine daughter personality is how dad games so frequently treat violence as equivalent to parenting. Even as many of these fathers care for their daughters in emotionally charged cutscenes, these short scenes are typically not part of the system of choices that determine a game's world state and the daughter's personality. Most of the actions that decide these results largely revolve around combat or other violent core game mechanics. In *The Walking Dead: Season One*, most gameplay consists of selecting one of the multiple options presented by the game rather than featuring the real-time combat[259] common to the other games discussed in this chapter. However, Lee's decisions still often involve how to apply violence, rather than

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[258] Authors include Voorhees, Stang, and Lawlor as well as Bell, Taylor, and Kampe.

[259] Real-time combat contrasts with turn-based combat. While turn-based combat pauses to give players time to choose an action before combat continues with characters acting in sequence, real-time combat has no such built-in interruptions. Notably, *The Walking Dead* uses elements of both real-time and turn-based combat to structure Lee's choices. There is often a timer that will run out if Lee does not decide in time. If the timer runs out, Lee will do nothing. The timer adds tension to Lee's decisions, making the choices feel more like sudden, desperate blows in combat than the result of measured reflection.

whether to apply it all: failing to react in time often means failing to strike a blow and risking a violent game over. However, even as Lee can make decisions regarding Clementine, these potential moments of care are a small portion of the acts that determine her behaviour at the end of the game.[260]

In contrast, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* shows less anxiety about masculinity and more genuine interest in what acts constitute fatherhood by using moments of parental care, rather than degrees of player violence, to determine the daughter's personality. Geralt's choice of whether to be playful and loving or stern and authoritarian with Ciri gives players a clear choice between 'parenting styles.' However, most dad games turn parenting into a result of choices that often have very little directly to do with the daughter. Instead, the daughter is as much a reflection of playstyle as the world state is. For example, in *Dishonored*, Corvo's actions in the game radically change Emily's personality and the nature of her reign as empress provided she survives the course of the game. Emily's survival, like her personality, depends on whether I play my Corvo by murdering characters indiscriminately and causing general panic, which in turn raises the game's chaos level, or by using stealth and non-lethal methods of dealing with targets, which lowers the chaos level. Emily's reign is either a golden age of renewal or a dark age of repressive rule. How Corvo interacts with Emily is wholly unimportant. My preferred style of stealthy movement and non-lethal takedowns results in a caring, kind Emily, even though some of my methods of dealing with key assassination targets often

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[260] Bell, Taylor, and Kampe argue persuasively in "Of Headshots and Hugs" that comparatively, Lee models a much more care-based fatherhood than his contemporaries. I agree, but practically speaking, the decisions that guide Clementine are primarily composed of his actions outside these moments of care.

leave them living torturous lives. I cannot be non-violent, but I can choose the tenor of

violence I enact upon Corvo's enemies, which is, in turn, reproduced in the world and

Emily.[261] In *Dishonored*, *The Walking Dead: Season One*, *Bioshock*, and *Bioshock 2*

playstyle *is* parenting, and a shared emphasis on combat means that, by and large,

parenting is violence. The player's violence shapes the daughter as it does the state of the

world. She is not merely the site of the father's self-loss, but the vessel of his legacy.

Notably, in the dad games that do not allow the player to make decisions that shape the

story, namely *Bioshock Infinite* and *The Last of Us*, both fathers are explicitly

characterized as violent, morally compromised leads who show tenderness only to the

daughter. Unsurprisingly, games without much player input into character personality

have more thoroughly developed player-characters. However, the personality that Booker

and Joel effectively share is only barely more expressive than that of the standard silent

protagonist. Notably, moments of fatherly tenderness largely occur in cutscenes after

sequences like Elizabeth being tortured or David assaulting Ellie. I assert that after the

daughter has functioned as an object upon which the father's vulnerability is safely

displaced, he can afford to momentarily express paternal tenderness before returning to

his regular gruff countenance. This displacement of emotion onto her creates a safe space

in which he can express a lesser emotion (kindness) without truly deviating from the

standard set by hegemonic masculinity. Notably, both men are failed fathers who have

previously lost a daughter. Booker sells the baby Anna (who grows up to be Elizabeth)

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[261] This reproduction extends to Emily's drawings of Corvo: he will either be drawn as a gallant protector
or nightmarish one, but this dark persona remains fundamentally protective of Emily. My choices do not
obviously change the nature of our relationship, but rather Emily herself.

before the events of *Bioshock Infinite,* and Joel's biological daughter dies at the very beginning of *The Last of Us*. These losses inform their jaded, casually violent characterizations and position their new daughters as potential sources of redemption. However, neither man changes: the second daughter is a pressure relief valve, not a source of transformation. She allows his performance of normativity. Again and again, the daughter is the site upon which the father can stage self-loss or express vulnerability because she is the marked Other, all the while knowing she will carry forward not his weakness but his legacy.

In rare cases, player choice might lead to the daughter's death, which curtails her ability to carry the father's legacy. There are two essential points here. One is that the survival of the daughter, and thus the continuation of the father's agency through her, is a reward for modelling judiciously violent masculinity. The player's choice between kinds of violence consistently shows that indiscriminate violence endangers one's legacy, while selectively applied violence guarantees it. This valuation of one style of violence does not challenge hegemonic masculinity. Instead, it legitimizes hegemonic masculinity as proper and just by sheer contrast,[262] enforced by narrative resolution. However, allowing players to choose whether the daughter lives or dies often coincides with her minimal characterization. Taken together, this life-or-death approach to her use as a reflection of player choice, and her lack of emotional complexity, only further highlight how marked characters are often objects used to develop the subjectivity of unmarked agents like the

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[262] Connell and Messerschmidt note that "the hierarchy of masculinities is a pattern of hegemony [...] Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities" (846). The dad game's preference for a particular tenor of violence is ultimately a tool of legitimation.

player-character. Jack, Delta, Corvo, Geralt and Joel choose whether their daughters live or die.[263] However, in most of these examples, the daughter is barely a character. In the original *Bioshock*, all of the Little Sisters function as interchangeable members of a group of daughters that Jack can choose to free or sacrifice. When I play *Bioshock*, I save my Little Sisters, thus creating an extended family of girls for Jack to bring to the surface. I could just as easily harvest them. Their fate entirely depends on my choice, and one Little Sister is indistinguishable from another.

Bioshock 2 depicts a slight variation: while Delta never determines whether or not his primary daughter Eleanor dies, he does decide the fate of the Little Sisters, who function as secondary daughters. Eleanor has the privilege of being more thoroughly characterized, more like Delta to the extent that she reflects his personality, while the Little Sisters are a way of keeping score. Similarly, in *Dishonored*, if Corvo causes overt violence and mayhem, he risks Emily's death during a confrontation at the end of the game. She can fall from a high walkway. A low-chaos play-through guarantees that she will survive: the walkway confrontation never occurs. Instead, Corvo can simply rescue her from an isolated room in a brothel. In all these examples, the supposed drama of the daughter's death or survival reflects the extent to which she is not a person, not the way her father is. Because of her markedness, she lacks the father's privilege of just "being human" in Dyer's phrasing (*White: Essays on Race and Culture* 46). Jack, Delta, and Corvo may not always knowingly choose whether their daughters live or die. However, their actions exhibit each game's disinterest in the daughter's characterization beyond her

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[263] Jack, Delta, Corvo, and Geralt's choices are made through gameplay and determined by the player, whereas Joel always chooses to save Ellie near the conclusion of *The Last of Us*.

use for the father: she is simultaneously a safe site of displacement, a mirror, and a guarantee of agency. All these uses reveal the intense anxiety exhibited by most dad games. Moreover, the use of violence as the source of that direction re-inscribes the tired message that violence is a central element of masculinity, and by extension, fatherhood.

3.6   Game Over, Dad: Death and Marked Fatherhood

Superhuman acts of fatherhood root these fathers' heroism in their adherence to the standards of hegemonic masculinity, particularly when rescuing the daughter from an alternate parent. In this section, I compare two examples, Joel and Lee, whose expressions of hegemonic masculinity, as well as their death animations, differ based on their respective degrees of markedness. I then take a broader look at death animations in dad games to show how unmarked player-characters typically have less demonstrative deaths, with a reduced display of suffering compared to marked fathers. The deaths of the latter more closely resemble the daughter's spectacular suffering. I unpack these animations because they are straightforward examples of reinforcing the divide between markedness and unmarkedness. Their straightforwardness contrasts with the fathers' prolonged death scenes at the end of these games, which express far more complex and pernicious anxieties about gender and the survival of hegemonic masculinity.

Joel is a normative example of hegemonic masculinity. He is white, working-class, and male, as well as implicitly heterosexual and cisgender.[264] He expresses his masculinity through his judicious application of violence. *The Last of Us* does not present Joel as

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[264] Heteronormativity and cisnormativity, the practices that treat heterosexuality and cisgenderedness as the default, make many player-characters implicitly heterosexual and cisgender unless the game directly indicates otherwise.

wholly unproblematic. However, the morally compromised, violent antihero is a standard

player-character, especially among fathers in games. Joel's expression of hegemonic

masculinity is not itself presented as problematic. In a key sequence, Joel must first fight

off an assailant, only to fall onto a piece of rebar on the floor below. Ellie tries to help,

asking, "What do you want me to do?" Joel gruffly responds, "Move!" He pushes Ellie

aside, protecting her as he shoots enemies. All the while, he is impaled by a piece of rebar

through his lower abdomen (Figure 23).

Figure 23. Joel shoots enemies while impaled. Screenshot taken by author from dansg08's "The Last of Us - The Movie (Marathon Edition) - All Cutscenes/Story With Gameplay (HD)." youtube.com/watch?v=ZkLPKd-Vs8. (4:29:15)

Joel's unceremonious pushing Ellie aside underlines his gruff protectiveness: her

attempts at care are secondary to his mission to defend her, even as his movements

aggravate the wound through his gut. He cannot succumb to the wound until he has dealt

with the enemies that threaten Ellie. Multiple fight sequences follow,[265] punctuated by

Joel's agonizingly slow shuffle. When I play Joel, I perform this fantasy of the inhuman

father, the masculine version of the anecdote in which a mother lifts a car off of her

trapped child. In this fantasy, however, rather than femininized hysterical strength, this

father is powered by sheer masculine grit. His paternal role foregrounds his masculinity.

This sequence provides an opportunity to contrast the *uber*-father's performance of

masculinity in extremity with an iconic female player-character's similar injury. Notably,

at the beginning of *Tomb Raider*, Lara also falls on a piece of rebar just after being forced

to set herself on fire.[266] As discussed in Chapter Two, her reaction to being impaled and

pushing the piece of metal out are framed very differently than Joel's injury, both in

terms of player interactivity and demeanour. The player must remove the rebar in a gory,

detailed quick-time event typical of *Tomb Raider*. Shortly after, additional quick-time

events decide whether Lara escapes a crazed man attacking her with an axe and whether

she avoids a deadly cave-in. In contrast, immediately Joel's injury, his quick-time events

focus on shooting enemies while Ellie assists. Instead of grimly plodding forward like

Joel, Lara moans, screams, and cries as she tries to escape a cave decorated with corpses.

Where Joel's shuffle forward is only punctuated with brief glimpses of his face, Lara's

terrified expression features prominently throughout her post-rebar sequence. The

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[265] Ellie is not helpless: she kills enemies and helps Joel, even as he pushes her away and insists he is fine. However, Joel remains the primary player-character. Only after he collapses and falls unconscious does the Winter sequence begin, the only part of the game in which the player controls Ellie. Like Ciri, Clementine, Emily, and Elizabeth, Ellie is only available once the father has been killed or incapacitated. As noted earlier in this chapter, she only has some of Joel's abilities, another common element of the sequences or sequels in which the player controls the daughter.
[266] Cameron Kunzelman connects the two scenes in his blog post, "On *The Last of Us*," but does not discuss their similarities in detail.

contrast between these two episodes is not merely a function of genre. Instead, both sequences mark the player-character's gender through spectacle, but to drastically different ends. Joel's displays his gruff masculinity and fatherly drive to protect in the face of injury, whereas Lara's emphasizes her vulnerability and pain.

In *The Walking Dead: Season One*, Lee's grim discharge of his paternal duties demonstrates less suffering than Lara, but more than Joel. Lee's markedness must be understood intersectionally; it is not merely that he retains a degree of normative masculinity that his adoptive fatherhood highlights, but his race marks as othered. Instead, many aspects of Lee's character, including his gender, race, class, and level of education, interact to produce his markedness. In contrast to Joel, who Soraya Murray notes is the heartland archetype of a white working-class father who has lost a daughter to the apocalypse and has been forced by circumstance to work as a smuggler (100), Lee is a childless professor. He begins the game being transported to prison after being convicted of murdering his wife's lover, a state Senator. He relates to the pre-apocalyptic class system, legal system, and even parenthood, as well as the post-apocalyptic necessity of morally dubious choices, differently than Joel, whom Murray characterizes as a victim of the "repeated trauma narrative of declining white masculinity" (103). Lee is a much less easily recognizable character, whose relation to hegemonic masculinity is far more convoluted than Joel's. Lee exhibits similarly superhuman fatherhood, but he does so with a far wider range of affect. Where Joel reacts to injuries with dull groans, Lee's wide eyes express terror and misery. Similarly to how the death animations from *Tomb Raider* and *Dead Space* were ultimately differentiated by gender rather than genre in Chapter One, Lee's expressive suffering is not merely a function of genre. While *The Walking*

Dead: Season One incorporates more of the desperate tension of survival horror than *The Last of Us*, it is Lee's suffering, racialized body that constitutes part of that tension. Like Lara in *Tomb Raider*, whose being female is part of what constitutes the horror of her experience, Lee's being Black is part of the horror of his.[267] At the end of *The Walking Dead: Season One*, Lee manages to keep from succumbing to a zombie bite until he has rescued Clementine from two different sets of alternate parents. First, he confronts a man driven mad by the loss of his family and then keeps Clementine from running toward her mother and father, who have turned into zombies. Moving Lee in these sequences is superficially similar to controlling Joel after his rebar injury because both men move much more slowly and hesitantly than they normally do: trying to direct them in a desperate situation is frustrating and tense. However, there are two key differences between the two sequences. Firstly, as already noted, Lee is more visibly in pain than Joel. His worry about Clementine simultaneously keeps him going and deeply frightens him. Joel is similarly driven by his need to protect Ellie but will pass out before he acknowledges the seriousness of his injury. Secondly, any player familiar with the mythology of the game will know Lee cannot survive the bite. Unlike Joel, he can only follow his rush of superhuman endurance with death. The father is often the implacable man bent on weathering any injury in pursuit of his daughter. As noted by Lawlor,

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[267] This claim is clearly subject to critique, but I am intrigued by the idea that a white-dominated industry that sees the experience of being Black or female as innately horrific is implicitly understands its own complicity with the structural racism, sexism, and other inequalities that can make those subject positions challenging. So much of the regressive commentary typical of movements like Gamergate flatly denies any such inequality, but the industry has leveraged exactly that to construct horror for its largely white and male target demographic.

playing these men feels akin to acting out the role of Liam Neeson as a former CIA

operative rescuing his daughter from traffickers in the film *Taken* and its sequels (29).

This superhuman tenacity in the face of injury sharply contrasts with the conventional,

largely unmarked in-game death animations that occur in gameplay, which can range

from merely undignified to genuinely horrific. In contrast to their pursuit of the daughters

and rare instances of debilitating injury, fathers' death animations might play many times

during a game. It is essential to understand that games, especially Triple-A games, can

have extensive amounts of both mandatory and optional content.[268] This abundance can

result in surprisingly long play times that will vary widely from player to player.[269] All

this is to say that a player may watch the player-character die many times. These scenes

form part of their characterization. I contrast how death animations present markedness

much more simplistically than the dramatic, plot-mandated deaths of fathers at the end of

these games, which express intense and complex anxiety about the perceived decline of

white masculinity. The latter scenes are the final punctuation of these games' use of

fatherhood to mark masculinity as a category under threat.

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[268] There is abundant research on player types and motivations. In "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDS," Richard Bartle explains his iconic player taxonomy. These types include the "Achiever," who prizes accessing all of a game's content, such as earning every achievement, and the "Explorer," who explores a game's spaces and secrets. While these categories are subject to criticism, such as Nick Yee's "Motivations of Play in MMORPGs," the Achiever type is a useful label for the players who will spend more time playing than is necessary to finish the game.

[269] Personally, I completed *The Walking Dead: Season One* in twelve hours, while I have played roughly eighty hours of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* without exhausting the game's content. Depending on the platform through which a game is played, the amount of play time logged may be limited to the time recorded on specific save files or the total amount of time the game's software has been active. The latter tends to provide a more accurate account of play time including time spent 'dying and retrying.'

Before comparing these two kinds of deaths, it is important to unpack how death

animations compare among themselves. Whether triggered by a failed quick-time event

or an empty health meter, most of the death animations discussed here use a first- or

third-person perspective to simulate a quick collapse to the ground.[270] Player-characters

whose identities are largely unmarked die less horrifically than those who are marked,

even if we account for genre. Jack in *Bioshock* and Corvo in *Dishonored* are white, silent

male protagonists.[271] Historically, silent protagonists in games have exhibited unmarked

identities and further normalized that unmarkedness because of the assumption that "the

main character [is] something of a blank slate" to facilitate the player's identification

(Gile "Let's Talk About How Weird the Silent Protagonist Is"). As discussed earlier, that

slate is not so blank: often, the silent protagonist is explicitly white, heterosexual, and

male. As noted by Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, designers mistakenly identify

these characteristics as neutral because "in gaming, straight white male is the default" and

its unmarkedness "allows the assumptions of white male identity as telegraphed in games

to become invisible. The default becomes normal, unmarked, and thus difficult to

challenge or contest" (73).[272] The silent protagonist is extremely stoic: his vocalizations

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[270] Usually, death animations are not acknowledged within a game's narrative. The *Bioshock* series is a notable exception. In the first two *Bioshock* games, Jack and Delta are immediately resurrected by in-game machines called Vita-Chambers (unless that option has been turned off in the game's settings). In *Bioshock Infinite*, Elizabeth injects Booker with medicine and pulls him back to his feet every time he falls in combat. In this third case, it is Elizabeth's wide eyes and pained or determined expressions that dominate the screen. Continuing these games' use of women and girls to explore masculine vulnerability, the horror of Booker's near-death is expressed through Elizabeth's reactions, while Booker is characteristically stoic.
[271] Subject Delta in *Bioshock 2* is never seen outside of his armor, and there has been no official confirmation of his race. However, it is the very unmarkedness of whiteness in mainstream game cultures that suggests that Delta is white; whiteness has the privilege of being able to go unspoken. Additionally, the extreme whiteness of major characters in the series overall make it likely that Delta is white.
[272] Salter and Blodgett do not explicitly refer to the silent protagonist, but their logic resembles how Gile can acknowledge that "just because [silent protagonists] don't have speaking lines doesn't mean they don't have personalities and character traits" without the corresponding acknowledgement that these protagonists are almost always white men ("Let's Talk About How Weird the Silent Protagonist Is").

are limited to grunts of effort or pain. Corvo's death animations are correspondingly perfunctory. They occur quickly and with little variety, similar to the death animations in the first two *Bioshock* games, which also feature silent male protagonists. The first-person perspective screen reddens and slumps forward as if looking out from the player-character's eyes as he falls to the ground.

Similarly, although Geralt in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is a comparatively expressive, voiced protagonist, he is also white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male. His death animations are like Corvo's but presented in a third-person perspective. Though Joel is a similarly unmarked player-character, his animations are longer, gorier and sometimes tailored to particular instances. If he fails a quick-time event, he may have his throat ripped out or have his exposed throat forced onto a large glass shard. In combat, Joel's deaths are often much more perfunctory: he may simply groan and sprawl on the ground. Even in Joel's gorier deaths, the presentation betrays how he is afforded more dignity than racially marked player-characters like Lee. The camera cuts away without showing Joel's death. His facial expressions, when visible, show grim determination or anger rather than fear. His eyes are often closed, which reduces the scene's intimacy further. Even considering the game's survival horror influences, Joel's deaths are sometimes dramatic but never exploitative. In contrast, Lee's deaths are the longest and the most

cinematic of these death scenes. Additionally, Lee's death scenes range more widely in terms of gore, duration, and intimacy (Figure 24).

Figure 24. A zombie attacks Lee. Screenshot taken by the author from SpottinGames' "The Walking Dead All Season One Death Scenes HD." youtube.com/watch?v= FujvypqSW y0. (7:48)

In this example, a zombie attacks Lee if he takes too long to look around the side of a car. The camera watches him struggle, his eyes wide and his face contorted by horror as the sound of the zombie ripping into his neck intensifies. In the same scene, failures at other points can result in other deaths, including Lee being knocked to the ground while a zombie tears into his intestines and pulls them out. In some sequences, this death is presented in a first-person perspective, as Lee looks down to see a zombie digging into his intestines, in sharp contrast to a first-person perspective death so quotidian as the fall to the ground seen in the *Bioshock* series. Each death in *The Walking Dead* is specific to each potential point of failure and sometimes includes final shots of Lee's corpse. Genre conventions of horror suggest that the gorier death scenes created for Joel and Lee

conform to the zombie apocalypse themes present in their games. [273] However, it would

be disingenuous to ignore that Lee, the sole father who is also a man of colour and thus

marked by his race, has the most detailed, varied, and violent death scenes. Of all of the

dad game death animations under discussion, his most closely resemble Lara Croft's in

Tomb Raider. Both games respond to failed quick-time events by depicting the death of

the marked player-character in prolonged, detailed scenes. Out of the fathers, Lee's death

animations feel the most upsetting and exploitative: they portray detailed, cinematic

violence performed upon a body othered by race. Fathers whose identities usually go

unmarked do not suffer like Lara and Lee: instead, the body of the daughter is more

likely to appear in spectacles of suffering. These fathers' in-game deaths are fairly

conventional. The clear differences between these cases provide an important contrast to

the more complex play of anxieties expressed through the final deaths of fathers, which

summon the spectres of otherness specifically to banish them.

3.7 Founding Fathers: Noble Deaths and the Reassertion of Hegemonic Masculinity

Regardless of how these games characterize their death animations, the father's final,

plot-mandated death at the end of the game is typically dignified and noble, even for

marked fathers like Lee. The heroic father's noble death is a complicated assertion of

patriarchal power. His death performs the sacrificer's identification with the victim

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[273] It is also worth noting, as Lawlor does, that most dad games take place in apocalyptic conditions to emphasize the necessity of reinstating patriarchal authority (29).

described by Bataille: he takes her place but with a dignity and self-awareness denied to feminine victims. His pain rarely has the same exploitative overtones that characterize the daughter's suffering: unlike Bataille's Chinese torture victim, the father is not made beautiful by suffering. Where death animations highlight Lee's racial otherness compared to the other fathers, the late-game death scenes tend to close ranks and emphasize gender difference over any other conventional marked categories. The father's self-sacrifice marks the previously unmarked to claim hegemonic masculinity is under threat. The game stages the defeat of that threat by framing heterosexual, cisgender masculinity as a category, rather than allowing these qualities to remain unmarked.

While many critics identify the dad game's reliance on the damsel in distress trope and note how the daughter becomes a passive vessel for the father's legacy, no one has yet articulated how the father's death reifies patriarchal power. The father's death does not depict patriarchy's passing. Instead, it acknowledges the perceived threat of that passing and shows how patriarchy survives the deaths of individual men. These games cast hegemonic masculinity as under threat, both in the broader world and in game cultures. At the same time, these spectacles of heroic death attempt to soothe this anxiety with the promise that the father's choices do matter and that while death may be inevitable, his performance of fatherly influence will extend beyond it. The father's death at the end of many of these games dramatizes the relationship between sacrificer and victim. Where the traditional damsel in distress trope puts the player in the role of the sacrificer, dad games partially illustrate Bataille's claim that "the one who sacrifices is himself affected by the blow which he strikes—he succumbs and loses himself with his victim" (*Inner Experience* 153). Bataille's archetypal victim serves the same purpose as the female

object of exchange by providing a stage for masculine self-loss and displaced emotion. Dad games implicitly endorse sacrifice's conflation of femininity and victimhood to better contrast them with masculine, powerful deaths that reassert hegemonic masculinity's power in mainstream game cultures.

The father often dies after rescuing his daughter. He interrupts the sacrifice because he cannot accept the necessity of her death. This sacrifice often promises to make the daughter into a saviour who will protect or change the world. Virtually none of the fathers in this chapter accept the daughter's death. However altruistic this rescue might seem, the father fights not for his daughter's freedom, but for the right to control her and the special power contained in her body. He fights for the power to guarantee his legacy through her. The father's death emphasizes his subjectivity and his influence: he is a whole person who determines his own fate in a way the sacrificial victim never can. Bataille explains that the victim "can neither understand nor reply" to the sacrificer's complex inner monologue ("Sacrifice, the Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World" 211). In contrast, the father's death demonstrates his personhood and secures his legacy rather than ending it. As noted above, the father's choices determine both his daughter's personality and the game's world state. This legacy of choice ensures not only that the daughter lives on after the father but also that her emphasized femininity carries on his way of being in the world: she extends the father's agency beyond his lifespan.

 The father's death stages the surrender of his agency to acknowledge anxiety about the perceived passing of hegemonic masculinity and, through such acknowledgement, overcome it. Voorhees notes Booker's "reluctant permission" to let several Elizabeths drown him at the end of *Bioshock Infinite* ("Daddy Issues: Constructions of Fatherhood

in *The Last of Us* and *Bioshock Infinite*"). This ambivalence is typical of Bataille's vision of sacrifice; as Surkis writes, "[t]he experience of death in eroticism is, by definition, always only proximate - simultaneously rupturing and maintaining the limits of individual existence" (19). The father's death stages that rupture to correct it. *The Walking Dead: Season One*, *Dishonored*, all three *Bioshock* games, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* all feature the daughter playing a role in the death of the father. Her involvement in her father's death might seem like a grim exercise of personal agency. However, these games' shared vision of daughters participating in the death of their fathers is more complex. In order to draw attention to the problem of masculinity under threat, these games mark the previously unmarked, making (for the most part) generic white heterosexual male protagonists into dying saviours whose values outlive them. "Look, Daddy, it's you," says Eleanor at the beginning of *Bioshock 2*; these games frame their player-characters as fathers specifically to mark their masculinity with the patriarch's power and prestige. The daughter presiding over her father's death only appears to represent a burgeoning feminist hegemony. Instead, her participation confirms her allegiance to the father's legacy, reasserting hegemonic masculinity in the face of its supposed passing.

 The *Bioshock* series features a darkening vision of the daughter's involvement in her father's death. All three games feature male protagonists who can achieve fatherhood through acts of self-sacrifice that culminate in their deaths at the end of each game. Each game is more anxious than the last: Jack's adopted Little Sisters are merely present at his deathbed, while Eleanor is weaponized to kill Delta in *Bioshock 2*, and many Elizabeths forcibly drown Booker at the end of *Bioshock Infinite*. The daughter's increasing agency

across these games makes masculinity seem ever more increasingly under threat and

correspondingly in need of reassertion.[274]

If the protagonist Jack takes on the mantle of the self-sacrificing father, as he does in one

of *Bioshock's* two endings,[275] he dies surrounded by his daughters. This ending is a

montage of the Little Sisters' lives, including close-ups of their hands accepting a

diploma, a wedding band, and taking the hand of a child. Eventually, the cinematic shows

several feminine-coded hands touching a wrinkled, emaciated hand recognizable as

Jack's because of the chain tattoo on his wrist (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Screenshot taken by author as the Little Sisters comfort Jack in *Bioshock*,
Irrational Games, 2007.

The Little Sisters' hands in the final shot wear jewelry like slim wristwatches and

wedding bands: the hands themselves are pale, slim, and manicured. As noted by Jessica

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[274] I should note that I do not address the DLC *The Den of Minerva* or *Burial at Sea* in this section.
[275] In another ending, Jack implicitly declares war on the surface world by stealing a nuclear submarine.

Aldred and Brian Greenspan, the montage of their hands establishes these now-adult Little Sisters as explicitly white and implicitly educated, heterosexual, motherly, and upper-middle-class.[276] Their femininity is what Connell and Messerschmidt call "emphasized femininity," which is privileged above other forms of femininity, but crucially subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (848). This construction of an extremely normative future, in which his daughters' femininity upholds his hegemonic masculinity, makes Jack's death a triumphal scene in which Dr. Tenenbaum narrates, "And in the end, what was your reward? You never said, but I think I know—a family" (*Bioshock*). Jack's self-sacrificing fatherhood earns him a legacy as the patriarch of an extended family. Finishing the game with this ending is satisfying: the lab-grown child of many awful parents becomes a loving father. In contrast to the scenes that follow, this death is a vision of proper fatherhood at rest: the daughters are reassuring evidence of Jack's achievements. However, understood through the lens of the endings that follow, Jack's death acknowledges a feminine presence that grows increasingly sinister and less comfortably subordinate to hegemonic masculinity as the series progresses.

Even *Bioshock 2*'s most positive ending is much less certain than *Bioshock*'s domestic fantasy. Where the previous game presents either the threat of nuclear war or the reward of familial continuity, *Bioshock 2*'s endings always center Eleanor's relationship with her father's legacy, even as she is the unwitting instrument of his death. Dr. Lamb will

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[276] Aldred and Greenspan read Jack as the "benevolent patriarch" who leads the Little Sisters "through a montage of compulsorily heterosexual life rituals that incrementally bind them to patriarchy itself, until they at last join together on [the] avatar's deathbed in a perverse femtopia that misrecognizes itself as a bourgeois nuclear family" (486). Aldred and Greenspan call the scene "retrograde." While they use the term "femtopia," they do so irreverently. The scene packs in decades of performative, normative domesticity as the reward for the player being a good father.

always temporarily stop Eleanor's heartbeat to kill Delta. In contrast, the player's choices determine the manner of his death, the world that survives him, and Eleanor's personality. Player choices whether to rescue or harvest the Little Sisters and whether to kill or spare Delta's enemies determine which ending occurs.[277] In the darkest ending, Eleanor holds Delta down to forcibly extract his essence using a large needle (the same one used to harvest ADAM from the corpses of Splicers). He helplessly tries to push her away, but he cannot resist. She watches a stormy ocean, dotted by corpses rising from Rapture. In the best ending, Eleanor extracts Delta's essence lovingly and peers into the water to see her reflection surrounded by the Little Sisters rescued by Delta. In both the best and worst ending, Delta's legacy continues: as Eleanor extracts his essence, the game 's first-person perspective shifts to looking out of her eyes rather than Delta's. This shift shows his continuing presence in her body. He lives on in her as the game reflects his choices in everything from the voice-over to the weather. However, even the best ending of Bioshock 2 is less ambiguously triumphant than the original Bioshock's best ending (Figure 26).

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[277] I should note that whether Eleanor kills or saves her mother is another variation in the possible endings, determined by whether Delta spares or punishes his enemies.

Figure 26. Screenshot taken by author of Delta's perspective looking out from Eleanor's eyes in the 'good' ending in *Bioshock 2*, Irrational Games, 2010.

This scene is fundamentally different from Jack's death in the first game: it is not the culmination of fatherhood, attended by the daughters' emphasized femininity. Instead, Delta succumbs to Dr. Lamb's use of Eleanor as a weapon against him, and the water reflects a hopeful Eleanor and the possibility represented by her Little Sisters, who are, in turn, still just little girls rather than grown women. This reflection is far less distorted than it is in the ending in which Eleanor looks over a sea of corpses. However, the overall shift of possible endings from *Bioshock 1* to *Bioshock 2* shows possibilities rather than guarantees, hopes rather than earned rewards. Compared to the last game's most positive ending, this one frames Eleanor and the Little Sisters as more whole beings compared to the presentation of Jack's daughters solely through their hands. Even as Delta's legacy guides them, the world in which Eleanor and the Little Sisters arrive is no domestic idyll.

The game's third possible ending emphasizes the importance of legacy by seeing Delta refuse to bequeath it. Inconsistent choices in the game allow Delta to choose whether

Eleanor may or may not extract his essence. I argue that this is the least certain of the

three endings. Delta's choices have shaped Eleanor, but this ending is the only one in

which Delta will not live on through her: the camera fixedly looks out from his

perspective. The scene equates Delta's refusal to let Eleanor extract his essence as the

choice to die without any legacy. Eleanor's voice-over is heartbroken, full of grief and

rejection. Where the 'dark' ending is a sinister triumph for the now-evil Eleanor, and the

'good' ending suggests the possibility of a hopeful future, in this ending, Eleanor mourns.

She mourns not just Delta's death, but his refusal to live on in her: she narrates, "You

chose to die instead of having me follow you." Delta's denial of his legacy and refusal to

live on in Eleanor results in the game's saddest ending, in which Eleanor describes

herself as free but mourns that freedom as the loss of her relationship with her father and

any sense of purpose. Yet the player has not given Eleanor her freedom: she remains the

sum of her father's decisions, even if the last of these decisions is to reject her.

Bioshock Infinite is a brutal finale that recontextualizes the daughter's increasingly active

role in the father's death, as well as the uncertainty of legacies in the series' first two

games. Booker always dies at the end of *Bioshock Infinite*,[278] drowned in a river by

alternate versions of Elizabeth. He looks up through the water to see their distorted faces

as they hold him under the surface (Figure 27).

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[278] Unlike the first two games, *Bioshock Infinite* repeatedly emphasizes how pointless its few proffered choices are: for example, Booker can choose whether Elizabeth's necklace features an image of a bird or a cage. A pair of interdimensional travelers note it on a slate that shows each choice has been made dozens of times before in other iterations of Booker's journey.

Figure 27. Screenshot taken by author of the Elizabeths' distorted faces as Booker drowns in *Bioshock Infinite*, Irrational Games, 2013.

Before pushing Booker under the surface of the water, the Elizabeths call for his death in a disorienting chorus: they sometimes speak individually or as a group. However, as Booker looks up from the below the water's surface, the Elizabeths are sombre rather than vengeful: combining their sad expressions with the water's distortions recalls the reflection of Eleanor and the Little Sisters in *Bioshock 2*. However, these daughters are much more distorted. Instead of achieving the patriarchal conformity of Jack's daughters or representing the possibilities of Delta's, they represent every way in which Booker's legacy has gone wrong across many universes. Their presence is correspondingly dark: they are not sinister, but they are implacable in their sad insistence that Booker must die so that none of them will ever exist. This scene reconsiders the role of legacy, making itself an elegy for the hegemonic masculinity that seemingly dies with Booker. It is tempting to say that this scene reckons with the toxic elements of patriarchal legacies. Alexander captures the sense of inevitability in Booker's death as it contrasts with Jack's

death. She describes how "the grown little sisters all [reach] for [Jack's] hand, accompanying you as you pass on into the quiet death of old age," while "*Infinite* ends with the grown-up ideas smothering their creator, because there's no other way they can live" ("Now is the Best Time"). Alexander does not directly refer to patriarchy here, but I believe her description captures the series' darkening vision of fatherhood and shrinking scope of possibility in the face of death. The theatre of fatherly death transforms from Jack to Delta and culminates most powerfully in Booker's drowning. However, the scene is less a reconsideration of the worth of patriarchal legacies than a meditation on whether anything can follow in patriarchy's wake. After the credits, the final scene shows Booker in the office he returns to in flashbacks throughout the game, opening the door to his daughter's nursery. Tellingly, the game does not show whether the child is present: there is no guarantee of Booker performing fatherhood "better" this time. Across the *Bioshock* series, the daughter is ever more present, ever more active in her father's death; the perceived passing of patriarchal power seems more likely and more existentially worrying.

Bioshock is hardly the only series that depicts masculine sacrifice as the culmination of a lifelong role, significant not just to one's daughters, but to the world; and in Booker's case, to every possible world. Over and over in dad games, fatherly sacrifice is a singular and hugely significant act, in worlds in which feminine suffering is practically quotidian. Even in games in which the daughter has a significant role in her father's death, the manner of her participation is a result of her father's choices. Despite other laudable deviations from the typical dad game, *The Walking Dead: Season One* faithfully depicts the father's decisions determining how his daughter participates in his death. Late in the

game, Lee is bitten by a zombie. He can amputate his bitten arm or ignore it before rescuing Clementine from a man who has been speaking to her over short-wave radio. Lee's pain and fear are a fundamental part of this sequence of events: he and the player both know that even the amputation is no guarantee he will not succumb to the infection. The man who has taken Clementine taunts Lee about previous player-controlled decisions and claims Lee, and by extension, the player is not a worthy guardian for Clementine. After the rescue, a zombie appears but does not attack Lee; because the zombies ignore each other, the encounter confirms that the infection is spreading throughout Lee's system. He soon realizes he will succumb and must get Clementine to go on without him. A dramatic scene occurs in which a dying Lee struggles to leave Clementine with good advice to give her the best chance to survive without him. The player determines what Lee says to Clementine, but however the scene is played, the conversation is tragic. No matter the player's input, Lee insists that Clementine must leave him: the player's final decision in the game is whether to tell Clementine to shoot and kill him or leave him to turn into a zombie. If he does not instruct her quickly enough, she will choose what to do based on his actions in the game so far. Even when Clementine appears to make an autonomous choice, it is just a reflection of Lee's influence. In contrast to *Bioshock*'s evolving anxiety about masculine legacies, *The Walking Dead* presents Lee's final efforts to guide Clementine as tender parenting and implicitly endorses how Lee's choices determine Clementine's actions.

As discussed earlier, player choices play a role in determining whether or not Emily survives *Dishonored*. In a low-chaos playthrough, the game always ends with Emily alive. In a high-chaos play-through, the game may end with Emily dead. These same

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choices determine her response to the player-character Corvo's eventual death in the game's conclusion. After a low-chaos playthrough, the narrator explains that Emily enters mourning, and she will "lay your body down in her mother's great tomb, because you were more to her than Royal Protector." A low-chaos play-through guarantees that Corvo will be mourned as a father, and implicitly recognized as a legitimate member of the family. Her reaction to his death is much less clear after a high-chaos playthrough, in which, if she survives, "she will remember that you were there." Unlike the other fathers mentioned here, Corvo's choices decide not the manner of his death but his memorial. Both Lee and Corvo's choices dictate the roles their daughters play in their deaths, in Lee's case, and mourning in Corvo's case.

It might be tempting to interpret the death of the father as Bataille's vision of sacrifice in *Erotism* but with a degree of identification with the victim so extreme that the father literally takes the victim's place. In this reading, Jack, Subject Delta, Booker and Lee do not merely identify with the sacrificial victim; they become the victim. Their daughters' involvement in their deaths suggests these fathers become emasculated victims: they do not merely die in their daughters' place but also at their hands. However, this reading fails to understand how fatherly agency directs these deaths, how dad games never humiliate and objectify them like feminine victims. The staging of the daughter's involvement in the father's death, combined with her characterization as the vessel for her father's legacy, soothes anxiety about the perceived passing of hegemonic masculinity. The death of the father is not the end of his agency but the final seal of ensuring that his legacy outlives him.

3.8 Conclusion: Sacrifice and Meaning

The father's death both expresses and soothes anxieties about masculinity. However, dad games use sacrifice not to "produce" the sacred, as Bataille maintains in "The Notion of Expenditure," but to try to give an earthly power imbalance the ineffable allure of the sacred. The father's death enacts the perceived 'death' of hegemonic masculinity only to stage its resurrection. Superficially, this scene resembles Bataille's sacrificer trying to restore his victim to a radical continuity in "Sacrifice, the Festival, and the Principles of the Sacred World." The key difference between Bataille's vision of sacrifice, and the death of the father in dad games, is that the former destroys systems of meaning, whereas the latter enforces them. Patriarchal power survives the deaths of individual men. The trappings of the sacred, and the allure of eroticism and death attempt to legitimate hegemonic masculinity, to try to elevate it beyond the world of reason. However, hegemonic masculinity is not sacred: it is a worldly expression of sexism and privilege. The father's death is an insidious assertion of power that doubles down on the damsel daughter's objectification. Like laughter, eroticism, and poetry, Bataille characterizes sacrifice as resistant to being incorporated into systems of meaning.[279] However, dad games use the logic of sacrifice to reinforce the hegemonic masculinity that is so often central to game cultures. Part of what makes this application of sacrificial logic so tragic is that it is often unwitting. Creators like Levine, Druckmann, and the many developers behind dad games and their respective daughters express a desire to create inspiring,

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[279] Throughout his work, Bataille frequently links laughter, poetry, desire, and sacrifice as forms of excess that expose the limits of meaning. His fascination with these concepts comes up again and again, from his work in *Inner Experience* on Hegel's inability to assimilate them into a system of knowledge (111) to the importance of luxury and waste to societal stability in *The Accursed Share*.

strong female characters.[280] Yet many of these games portray the daughters'

subordination to patriarchal authority, partially because of the radically limited scope of

ways of being that are imaginable for women in games.

This chapter has built on the efforts of Chapter Two to explore feminine-coded sacrifice

in games by looking at how the logic of sacrifice reifies hegemonic masculinity in dad

games. The father's mission to prove his superiority over other parents relies on the

spectacle of the daughter's kidnapping, but not merely to add dramatic tension or the

thrill of sexualized suffering. Instead, the father's unmanly emotions, like fear and horror

in the face of death, are displaced onto the daughter. This displacement emphasizes the

father as the true bearer of paternal authority, even as hegemonic masculinity sharply

limits his emotional range. Ultimately, this chapter asserts that dad games co-opt tropes

of sacrifice to codify masculine power in the face of impermanence, particularly as

understood by mainstream game cultures that see themselves threatened by marked

others. The construction of masculine death in dad games commits some of the errors

ascribed to death in games by critics like Kate Bevan and Simon Parkin. These games

often depict legacies that survive death. However, rather than simply misrepresenting

death, these games attempt to enshrine masculine power in the face of death by using

young women as vessels for paternal agency.

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[280] This is particularly apparent in "Creating Elizabeth: The Women that Brought Her to Life" and the commentary on *The Last of Us* by Neil Druckmann, Troy Baker, and Ashley Jones.

4 Game Over?: Some Conclusions

4.1 Gamergate as Attempted Slaughterhouse

Mainstream game cultures sacrifice women in many ways, whether through eroticized death animations, daughters suffering in dad games, or the default plot device of the woman in peril. The misogynist online hate movement Gamergate[281] is another public performance of this ritual sacrifice. As discussed earlier, Gamergate notoriously harasses many prominent women and non-binary people in games, including (though certainly not limited to) Leigh Alexander, Mattie Brice, Maddy Meyers, Anita Sarkeesian, Zoe Quinn, and Brianna Wu (Cross "We Will Force Gaming to be Free").[282] These critics and developers represent the threat of increasingly diverse game cultures: attacks on them attempt to silence progressive and alternative voices in mainstream game cultures and to return to an imagined past in which games solely belonged to white men.[283] Gamergate does not merely reflect mainstream game cultures' preoccupation with feminine distress but also attempts to sacrifice real women for concrete ends. The death threats, rape

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[281] Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw note that Gamergate's lack of "structure or coherent leadership" makes it difficult to define its members ("A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity" 210). However, the similarities between Gamergate and today's alt-right are, as Matt Lees writes, "huge, startling, and in no way a coincidence" ("What GamerGate Should Have Taught Us About the 'Alt-Right'"). There is abundant commentary on Gamergate and the coalition of "white ethnonationalist, fascist, misogynistic, and anti-intellectual communities" that constitute the alt-right (Massanari 1). See Kristin M. Bezio's "Ctrl-Alt-Del: Gamergate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt Right," Jordan Etherington's *Ideological Parallels Between Gamergate and White Supremacy: A Thematic Content Analysis*, and Bridget M. Blodgett's "Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged."

[282] For more on the violent harassment targeted at women in game spaces, see Kishonna L. Gray, Bertan Buyukozturk and Zachary G. Hill's "Blurred Boundaries: Using Gamergate to Examine 'Real' and Symbolic Violence Against Women in Contemporary Gaming Culture."

[283] The ranks of players have always included women, people of colour, and other marginalized voices, but the diversity of game producers and critics and the quality of in-game representation have improved.

threats, doxing,[284] and harassment aimed at Alexander, Brice, Meyers, Sarkeesian, Quinn, Wu, and many others are explicitly public performances meant to intimidate all insufficiently docile women and non-binary people in games.[285] Gamergate seems to stage feminine-coded suffering as an antidote to a fundamentally similar position to Georges Bataille's modern society reduced to "vegetate as far as possible from the slaughterhouse, to exile themselves, out of propriety, to a flabby world in which nothing fearful remains" ("Critical Dictionary" 73). One antidote to this privileged exile is to meditate on images of violence like Bataille's Chinese torture victim (*Inner Experience* 120). Like Bataille, Gamergate instrumentalizes suffering to escape a supposedly flabby, inauthentic modernity and connect with an idealized past. Unlike Bataille, Gamergate participants are not content to reflect on images of suffering, like the YouTube death montages discussed in Chapter Two. Instead, Gamergate stages sacrifice through public attacks on victims, especially as planned and reported on the KotakuInAction subreddit and sites like 4chan and 8chan.[286]

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[284] Doxing is the research and release of personal, not easily accessible information belonging to a person or organization. The details released range from birth dates to banking information and the results can be life-altering. The doxing of Gamergate targets is part of the harassment and stalking they face. For more, see David M. Douglas' "Doxing: A Conceptual Analysis."

[285] Unlike many of my colleagues, I was mostly ignored by Gamergate, except for my participation in a "fishbowl" discussion at the 2014 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) Conference. Gamergate participants accessed rough notes from the discussion, which quickly became the centre of a conspiracy theory accusing the United States' Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency of funding DiGRA to destroy video games. This sounds ridiculous, but many individuals even tangentially involved in DiGRA (largely women) weathered significant harassment. A friend warned me that my name appeared in a Gamergate YouTube video, which frightened me. Nothing came of the mention, luckily. For more, see Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw's "A Conspiracy or Fishes," and the follow-up, "We Are All Fishes Now: DiGRA, Feminism, and GamerGate."

[286] While the KotakuInAction subreddit remains extant, the migration of the 'heart' of Gamergate from 4chan to 8chan is significant. As noted by Timothy McLaughlin, the famously permissive message board and internet culture hub 4chan eventually banned discussions of Gamergate ("The Weird, Dark History of 8chan"). The movement relocated to 8chan, welcomed by founder Frederick Brennan with the promise of virtually unrestricted free speech. Today, Brennan describes it as "a receptive audience for domestic terrorists" (Harwell "Three Mass Shootings Began This Year with Hateful Screeds on 8chan").

These attacks are not only public—they are performative. In *Crash Override*, Quinn notes Gamergate's collective theatrical sadism, recollecting "lengthy discussions about how to drive me to suicide and the merits of raping me versus torturing me first and raping me afterwards" (18).[287] Gamergate continues to be a public performance of sadism and the instrumentalizing of feminine-coded suffering. Gamergate and similarly crowd-sourced alt-right violence are not just acts of aggression, but also spectacular attempts to self-soothe cultural anxiety sparked by the marked other.

This performance is an effort not to tarry with impermanence but to master it. At its heart, Gamergate is an effort to deny game cultures' innate mutability, which reflects participants' mortality. Here, sacrificing women does not rend meaning as it does in Bataille's ritual sacrifice; instead, it tries desperately to shore up that meaning. Gamergate is a form of terror management, the impulse described by Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, and Tom Pyszczynski as an effort to deny death by embracing cultural beliefs ("The Causes and Consequences of a Need for Self-Esteem: A Terror Management Theory" 207).[288] However, Gamergate does not merely reflect Marcel O'Gorman and Jason Hawreliak's assertions that gaming is a form of death denial. Instead, Gamergate's floundering efforts attempt to reassert cultural primacy but spectacularly backfire. When Gamergate proclaims that normative masculinity's rightful

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[287] While Gamergate came to a head in 2014, the public spectacle of harassing women out of games (and possibly to suicide) preceded the campaign. In 2007, designer Kathy Sierra received such extreme harassment she withdrew from public life (Sandoval "The End of Kindness: Weev and the Cult of the Angry Young Man."). In 2012, Sarkeesian's efforts to produce educational videos on tropes in games, the first three of which were a close look at the damsel in distress, garnered coordinated harassment.
[288] Terror management theory (TMT) draws from Ernest Becker's assertion that that much of human culture is the result of efforts to deny the reality of death, either by imagining a comforting afterlife or by leaving a legacy that survives us. For more, see Greenberg, Solomon, and Pyszczynski's *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*.

privilege requires defence—privilege conferred by its unmarked status—this very assertion is a form of demarcation. Such a reassertion unwittingly calls out normative masculinity. Conventionally, whatever category claims normativity is reluctant to unpack difference. Drawing on the work of bell hooks and Hazel Carby on white investment in the refusal to 'see race,' Richard Dyer states that "[i]t has become common for those marginalised by culture to acknowledge the situation from which they speak, but those who occupy positions of cultural hegemony blithely carry on as if what they say is neutral and unsituated – human not raced" (*White: Essays on Race and Culture* 41). Claiming that normative masculinity is under attack means that this "norm" can no longer go unspoken. Gamergate's attempt to defend its own aggrieved white masculinity requires the unusual step of having to recognize itself, and admit itself to be a norm, rather than 'blithely carry on,' in Dyer's words, secure in its power. Dyer writes that "[t]he point of looking at whiteness is to dislodge it from its centrality and authority, not to reinstate it (and much less, to make a show of reinstating it, when, like male power, it doesn't actually need reinstating)" (*White* 47). Gamergate performs reinstatement, marking the previously unmarked to show it is under attack and needs defending. However, even as it styles itself as a defender of normative masculinity, Gamergate's preferred medium remains the curative spectacle of feminine-coded pain. This attempt to return to the slaughterhouse is, in its own way, an attempt "to make death be," in the words of Françoise Dastur (30). And yet, the death performed by Gamergate is not its own. The nostalgic vision of hegemonic masculinity that Gamergate attempts to reclaim through feminine-coded suffering never existed. The movement's inability to face its own

impermanence bars the way. They cannot imagine being subject to violence; they can only play at slaughter.

4.2   Deadly Serious: Next Steps for Research and Community Engagement

This project deals with illustrative examples in which the damsel's residual victimhood persists in exclusively female player-characters and important non-player-characters. However, its findings have a broader significance. Understanding how degrees of markedness increase how objectifying death is in Triple-A games is not merely a matter of cataloguing sexism. Instead, this project calls attention to the opportunities presented by the state of death in games, particularly for players, designers, industry decisionmakers, and death positivity advocates.[289] These groups overlap, and their complex interrelations and intra-relations should not be oversimplified.

In developing this thesis, I hope to provide the groundwork for further study. There are two key directions for continued work in this subject, namely to understand the current harm done by marginalizing depictions of death in games and to explore the potential for death in games to do good. One important next step would be a broader, quantitative study of death animations in games by genre. Further study might entail: providing a large sample of death animations with attention paid to the degree of spectacle and

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[289] Led by mortician and author Caitlin Doughty, the death positivity movement works to destigmatize curiosity about death, encourage individuals to explore thoughts and feelings about death, and lessen the environmental cost of common funeral practices.

violence involved, as well as each player-character's markers of difference including

race, gender, and class; as well as consideration of each game's thematic and narrative

characterization of death to provide essential context for the animations.[290] This project's

breadth, combined with the nuanced understanding of marked death produced by my

dissertation, would provide useful data for stakeholders, including players, developers,

and industry officials, ranging from executive decisionmakers to consultants. A broader

data sample would help generate actionable, genre-specific suggestions for improvement

beyond the basic principles of a) acknowledging existing biases regarding marked

characters when designing death animations and using death as an important narrative

element, b) reducing sexualized elements like clothing damage and voyeuristic camera

work in death animations for explicitly female characters, and c) recognizing that when

deaths in games further marginalize marked groups, it entrenches mainstream game

cultures' hostility towards those groups.

This type of data would help advocacy groups that address marginalizing representations

in the game industry. Often, research and rhetoric frame players as passive consumers

rather than active participants in their production. However, the semi-successful

masquerade of Gamergate as a consumer revolt shows how easily a consumer base's

voice can be hijacked.[291] Advocacy groups like I Need Diverse Games and AnyKey are

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[290] Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, particularly as Phillips applies it to game worlds, would be a useful guiding theory for this study. I believe that Mbembe's work will be increasingly prominent in game studies as critics continue to explore the problems and possibilities presented by death in games.
[291] Efforts to style Gamergate as a grassroots consumer movement concerned with ethics in game journalism had some successes, like Intel's temporary removal of advertising from the website *Gamasutra* after complaints from Gamergate (Braithwaite 7).

uniquely able to encourage genuine grassroots demands for higher industry standards.[292]

These organizations use criticism and scholarship as cornerstones of advocacy aimed at

both game producers and game cultures. Their partnerships show how activism can use

scholarship to educate and motivate players to demand better, enable content consultants

to identify how death shapes marginalization,[293] and convince industry leaders from

executives to game designers that this is a problem worth correcting. The spectacle of

feminine-coded death, in contrast to the broader range of masculine death, shows how

failing to interrogate unmarkedness continues to shape marginalization in games.

Producing quantitative data on intersectional marginalization and mobilizing that data

through community engagement and advocacy would continue this project's examination

of death in games in hopes of changing how it operates.

I do not aim merely to shame game producers into doing better. The legacy of the damsel

in distress impairs even well-intentioned efforts to design complex, exclusively female

player-characters like Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* and companion non-player-characters

like Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite*. Both simple inattention to death in games and overt

dismissal of its importance perpetuate marginalization. In a 1913 *Harper's Weekly*

article, United States Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis advocates for government

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[292] I Need Diverse Games sponsors attendance costs for gaming conferences, promotes marginalized game developers, and presents at conventions. AnyKey diversifies the ranks of competitive gamers, enables meaningful involvement of marginalized players, and promotes equity among players, announcers, and other participants. As is typical of player advocacy groups, both involve designers, critics, and scholars.
[293] Diversity consultants largely work at the level of human resources to address the lack of diversity in industry employees and leadership, which causes a chilling effect on company culture and products. Content consultants advise on the games themselves and accompanying media like advertising. Both types of consultants are often overworked and undervalued. While my findings are aimed at content consultants, it would be naïve to expect them to simply add death to the long lists of issues in games. However, spreading awareness and actionable suggestions for improvement makes the inclusion of death in these conversations much more likely.

transparency by claiming that "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants" (10). Similarly, the information produced both by this dissertation and any follow-up research would enable designers to recognize the misogyny that underlies the narrow confines of how an exclusively female player-character can die, and of how death acts as a marginalizing force more broadly.

Another direction for new research would be to facilitate collaboration between game designers and death positivity advocates to promote using games to tarry with death and explore which mechanics and genres are best equipped to facilitate tarrying.[294] Games like Jason Rohrer's *Passage*, Numinous Games' *That Dragon, Cancer*, and LaundryBear's *A Mortician's Tale* are three short, powerful, independent games that encourage meditation on the brevity of life, the death of one's child, and how death negativity shapes the funeral industry, respectively. These games successfully frame play as an opportunity to explore thoughts and feelings about death.[295] One potential next step for this research would be to partner with a local death positivity organization and an equity-minded community game association like Toronto's Dames Making Games (DMG) to host a combination "Death Café" and game jam. Death Cafés are small-scale death positive events that encourage participants to discuss concerns like end of life care

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[294] Not every game is equally well-positioned to provide these opportunities. Genre conventions and player expectations can limit a game's usefulness here: some players do not want to tarry with death or reflect on mortality, or at least not always. Consider the infamous example of Silicon Knights' *Too Human*, in which an overly long death animation specifically intended to provoke player reflection instead prompted annoyance (Adams "Spectacular Mortality: Intersections of Punitive and Educational Player-Death").

[295] Gamification, the application of game design and mechanics to real-life issues, is not a panacea. Simply applying the logic of games to death positivity guarantees nothing. However, using game creation as a medium through which to explore death positivity and generate new work on the topic are worthy goals.

and funeral planning.[296] Game jams are self-contained events in which participants

collaborate to make games: the point of a jam is not necessarily to produce complete

games but to enable learning through experimentation, encourage collaboration, and

when hosted by groups like DMG, to enable game makers from communities

underrepresented in the industry. Combining the two into a "death jam" with follow-up

community involvement would mobilize the results of my research and create concrete

outcomes for this work.

4.3   Quit or Restart?: Final Thoughts

Too often, mainstream game cultures falsely represent the unmarked as apolitical and

misrepresent recognition of markedness as an unnecessary injection of politics into the

'pure' world of games. Epic Games CEO Tim Sweeney, during his 2020 keynote at the

D.I.C.E Summit, claims that "[t]here's no reason to drag divisive topics like [politics]

into gaming at all" (MacLeod "Epic Boss' Confusing Comments About Games and

Politics Don't Add Up").[297] While Sweeney refers to politics more broadly rather than

death specifically, his refusal to acknowledge the innately political nature of games

specifically frames the normative as neutral. By framing the marked as political, in

contrast to the supposedly apolitical unmarked, Sweeney typifies the willful blindness

that perpetuates both explicitly and implicitly sexist constructions of death in games.

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[296] Games designed to encourage such discussions include *The Death Deck*, *Morbid Curiosity*, and *Elephant in the Room*.
[297] The Design, Innovate, Create, Entertain D.I.C.E Summit is an annual event put on by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences, a non-profit that advocates for the video game industry.

This reification of unmarked privilege and marked marginalization occurs at many levels, including the industry's depiction of player-character death. This rhetoric's harm can be subtle or overwhelming, as evidenced by how Gamergate weaponizes markedness against women and non-binary people. Death in games is inherently political. Particularly, both death animations and plot-mandated deaths often endorse masculinity as neutral but sensationalize women's otherness through sexualization and sacrifice. Yet, to paraphrase Françoise Dastur, there are other ways to 'make death be' in games. The first step is to recognize how death in games operates now. Only when death in games is less of a marginalizing force can we thoughtfully construct alternatives and broaden the accessibility of using play to tarry with death.

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                      Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
                      Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship
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                      Western Graduate Research Scholarship
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Related Work Experience

Teaching Assistant
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Teaching Assistant
Ontario College of Art and Design
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Instructor
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Publications:

"Renegade Sexualities: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in the *Mass Effect* Series." *Loading…: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, vol. 9, no. 14, 2015, pp. 40-54

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Invited Talks

"Bye, Bye, Birdo: Heroic Androgyny and Villainous Gender Variance," presented March 2016 at the Institute for Research on Digital Learning at York University, Toronto, ON

Conference Papers

"Endless Slides in Cyberspace: Tensions Between Space and Place in *Portal*," presented at the McGill University Graduate English Association Annual Conference "A Matter of Place: Space in Text and Context" at McGill University, February 2010, Montreal, QC

"The Elephant's Child: Repetition, Lineage, and Change in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," presented at the 2010 New Narratives Conference, May 2010, at the University of Toronto, Toronto, ON

"Take Me to Your Breeder": Undermining the Queer in Bioware's *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*", presented at the 2012 Annual Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English Conference, May 2012 at the University of Waterloo, Kitchener-Waterloo, ON

"Interpellation After the Apocalypse: Communication, Community and Identity in *Journey*," presented at the 2013 Annual Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, June 2013 at the University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C.

"Cute But Gorey: Collectible Deaths, Completionism and Achieving Failure in *Long Live the Queen*," presented at the 2014 Annual Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, June 2014 at Brock University, St-Catherines, ON

"You Cannot Conquer: Playing Subject to Time in *Skyrim* and *Dark Souls*," presented at the 2014 Annual Digital Games Research Association Conference, August 2014 at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT

"'Why do I have to make a choice? Maybe the three of us could…uh…': Non-Monogamy and Normative Sexuality in Video Game Narratives and Practices," co-presented with Professor Nathan Rambukkana (Wilfrid Laurier University) at the 2015 Annual Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, June 2015, at The University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON

"Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*," presented at the 2015 History of Gender in Games Annual Symposium, June 2015 at the Grande Bibliothèque, Montreal, QC

"Bye, Bye, Birdo: Heroic Androgyny and Villainous Gender Variance," presented at the 2016 Canadian Communication Association Conference, June 2016, at the University of Calgary, Calgary, AB

"'The Production of Sacred Things': Gender, Sacrifice, and Agency in Tomb Raider and Bioshock" at the 2016 "Refiguring Innovation in Games" Conference, October 2018, at Concordia University, Montreal, QC

"What's In Your Head?: The Player-Character as Corpse in *Planescape Torment* and *Dark Souls*," presented at the 2017 Annual Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, July 2017, at Ryerson University, Toronto, ON

"Are You as Good as My Daddy, Mister?: The Self-Sacrificing Father in Games Culture" at the 2017 "Refiguring Innovation in Games" Conference, October 2017, in Edmonton, AB

"Waist Away: Gender and Fat (In)Visibility in the Heroes of *Overwatch*" at the 2018 Annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, March 2018, Toronto, ON

"Pater Omnipotens: The Father as Saviour in Games Culture" at the 2018 Annual Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, May 2018, at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina, SK

"Compromising Positions: Performing Queerness in Academic Publishing" at the 2018 Queerness in Games Conference, September 2018, at Concordia University, Montreal, QC

"Danse Macabre: Playing in the Tomb in *Planescape Torment* and the *Souls* Series" at the 2019 Annual Canadian Game Studies Association Conference, June 2019, at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC