

Not Your Average Hero: Trauma, Fatherhood, and Complex Masculinities in Video Games

Callie Lisee

The University of Michigan

## Abstract

Recent major video game releases have presented players with male protagonists who do not conform to traditional masculine ideologies. They are emotional, they are damaged, and they are struggling to be the fathers their children deserve. This project looks at this trend through a case study of four different video games; *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, *God of War*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. What major themes appear within these games? What do the games say about masculinity? What do they construct as ‘bad’ versus ‘good’ masculinities? Four major themes that appear consistently across the games are discussed in a detailed content analysis. These themes include the prevalence of fatherhood, both as the protagonist in relation to their father and in relation to their child, the portrayal of emotional and sensitive masculinities, the way these games handle topics like abuse, trauma and mental illness, and the ways in which women are presented. The ways in which these new masculinities are contrasted with older toxic masculinities as preferable is examined. A brief look at the reception and sociocultural context of the games’ releases are also considered.

*Keywords:* masculinity, video games, fatherhood, trauma, abuse, emotion, masculinities, gender

## Introduction

In May of 2015, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* was released<sup>1</sup>. The latest in a popular franchise, the game dealt with the series' main character Geralt of Rivia in his search for his missing adopted daughter, Ciri<sup>2</sup>. Nearly two years later, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* was released in March of 2017<sup>3</sup>, and followed the series' protagonist Link as he journeyed through a country brought to ruin by an enemy he had failed to defeat, and struggled to prove himself worthy of saving it<sup>4</sup>. April of 2018 saw the release of *God of War*<sup>5</sup>, in which the series' hero Kratos took his young son on a long journey to fulfill his late wife's final request of spreading her ashes<sup>6</sup>. Six months later in October of 2018, *Red Dead Redemption II* dropped<sup>7</sup> and allowed players to follow the stories of Arthur Morgan, terminally ill outlaw trying to survive in a world that no longer welcomes outlaws, and John Marston who, in the wake of Arthur's death, tried to put his family before his life of crime and struggled with connecting with his young son<sup>8</sup>.

These four games are all third-person role-playing action-adventure games. They come from vastly different series with different plots, settings, character, and genres. Yet each one of them involves characters and narratives that deal with very intense, personal struggles – abuse, trauma, societal pressure and expectations, grief, parenthood. These are not the hardened gunslingers and swordsmen of old; they may be stoic and they may be rugged, but these men are also working through their own emotional and mental roadblocks, putting their pride away for

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<sup>1</sup> (CD Projekt, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> (CD Projekt, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> (Nintendo, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> (Nintendo, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

<sup>6</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

<sup>7</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

<sup>8</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

the betterment of their loved ones, learning to be better than their fathers, and fighting to teach their sons to be better than they are. And they are not alone; while these four games exemplify this sudden trend in video game heroes, there are an ever-growing number of other examples, both on the indie circuit and the Triple A market. *The Last of Us*<sup>9</sup> is a famous example and its highly anticipated sequel has been slated for release in May of 2020<sup>10</sup> - and there are more to come. These games are being played, celebrated, and adored by fans and critics alike, and they are not stopping. This shift is not isolated to a few games; it has become a trend. For a medium like video games, which has long been held up as the epitome of negative, violent, harmful media<sup>11</sup>, this is something to take note of...especially in terms of the represented masculinity.

This project aims to look at this trend through a content analysis of these four games – *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *The Witcher 3*, *Breath of the Wild*, and *God of War*. They have been selected in part because these themes are so present in them, but also because of their popularity – each and every one of these games exploded onto console and pc, snatched up award after award, won Game of the Year, and has been raved about from fans and critics alike. These are games that don't just exist – they are games that people *play*. The messages within these games, therefore, are of note – what are the major themes? What do they say about masculinity? How do they interact with these themes, and what comments do these games make about what constitutes *good/proper* masculinities over *bad/improper* ones?

Very little research has gone into looking at the general representations of male protagonists in video games; research often focuses on minority groups like women who are often portrayed poorly – women especially are often oversexualized, trivialized, stereotyped, and

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<sup>9</sup> (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> (Espineli, Plagge, & Watts, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> (Romano, 2019).

rendered props in a male protagonists' story. More research has been done to imply that representations of men are the opposite of those unflattering images - as of writing this thesis, I can find no study available to me that looks specifically at representations of masculinity through male characters in video games.

Other research shows that whatever video games *do* do, they enforce traditional masculine ideology in players. In a study by Blackburn<sup>12</sup>, both boys and girls scored higher on a survey of belief in masculine norms after playing video games containing violence. Some research has been done into the trend this thesis examines, though not in such an all-encompassing way; fatherhood is the theme most current research is focused on to the exclusion of all else. Shannon Lawlor looks at father-daughter relationships in recent video games including *Bioshock* and *The Last of Us* and the masculinity constructed in relation to that bond<sup>13</sup>, and Ewan Kirkland takes a deep look at the fragile and flawed masculinity present in the *Silent Hill* games<sup>14</sup>. The games this project analyzes have received similar attention in both academic and pop-culture fields as well. Stephen Totilo dubbed the new parenthood angle – specific to male video game characters, as seems to be the norm for this trend – as “the Daddening of video games” and discussed how these themes are appearing in games from *Silent Hill* to *Bioshock* to *Heavy Rain* to *Fable*<sup>15</sup>. The YouTube channel *Just Write*[identify] published a video essay discussing this Daddening in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and *The Last of US*, pointing out how integral fatherhood is to the games' narratives<sup>16</sup>. L Bertrand has done a comparative content analysis of *The Last of Us*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and *Bioshock Infinite* of their respective

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<sup>12</sup> (Blackburn and Scharrer, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> (Lawlor, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> (Kirkland, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> (Totilo, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> (Just Write, 2019)

versions of fatherhood and masculinity, and Elizabeth Rossbach looked specifically at how *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* utilizes care and codependency to combat the “terms of violence and/or mastery”<sup>17</sup> that video games so often rely upon – including through Geralt’s relationship with his adopted daughter Ciri. Finally, Steven Conway did a deep dive into the *God of War* franchise and how the latest 2018 release serves to act as a reflection upon the violent and toxic masculinity Kratos exhibited in its predecessors<sup>18</sup>.

Most of this research, and most of the academic attention, has gone to games that feature father-son relationships, focused on the parenthood aspect and games in which the protagonist connects with their child. As of yet there is next to nothing about relationships like those modeled in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, where both John Marston and Arthur Morgan slowly realize their adoptive father Dutch has been using and manipulating them, culminating in Dutch’s attempted murder of both of them. Or in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, in which Princess Zelda is explicitly shown to struggle beneath her father’s demanding expectations and how he treats her as nothing more than a tool, or where we are told that Link faced similar traumas. Mental illness and suffering are spoken of *in tandem* with parenthood, especially in regards to *God of War*, but it is framed by the game itself as part of the child-rearing process and not its own independent theme.

This project will look at the evolving and complicated masculinities presented in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *God of War*, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* through a comparative content analysis, in order to fully examine the messages these games are sending. I have approached these games with a heavy focus on their narratives and as

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<sup>17</sup> (Rossbach, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> (Conway, 2019).

such remain mostly interested in the main storylines of each; side quests that directly relate have been included as part of the analysis but for the sake of time and clarity, not every individual side-quest could be. I gathered data by playing each game individually and supplementing those I was unable to finish with footage available on Youtube (without commentary) as well as copious research into alternate branching paths for those games that heavily feature them. I will identify specific themes that appear within these games and discuss them across games as well as individually. I will briefly look at the context of their release; the major social and cultural events occurring at or near the time of their release, especially in the spheres of gaming and masculinity. I will look at the reception of these games briefly as well. I will then compare the games content and approaches, to see how this trend is at work outside of a single example. Finally, I will offer a few hypotheses about why this change has both (1) occurred, and (2) occurred so prominently.

## **On the Organizational Structure**

To reduce confusion each game is discussed individually below. A brief explanation of the game, a rundown of its reception, and then a relevant plot summary will start each section, with a detailed analysis of the themes within the games following. For time and workload reasons, not every side-quest or piece of optional content has been taken into consideration, and the summaries may not be perfect reflections of the game content; instead they will discuss the plot details most important to the ensuing discussion.

A brief discussion of these overarching themes and the messages they send will come first, so that readers can see where these games intersect and work together to promote their messages.

In playing, watching, reading, and taking notes on these games, four major themes surfaced across the board. While these four themes are not at all exhaustive and there are many more details and aspects to work through in each game, they have been selected for their salience and prevalence. Others cannot be considered here for time and workload related constraints, but these four are not alone.

### **Fatherhood**

One major reoccurring source of anxiety in these games, and one that has been mentioned by players and critics is parenthood. What makes a good father and how to *be* a good father are key questions these games answer, but they also answer more personal, individualistic questions; how to best move past prior abuse, how to break the cycle of abuse, how to ensure one's children don't repeat the same mistakes their fathers have, how to best protect one's child, how to best *love* one's child. While some games like *God of War* or *The Witcher 3* delve much more deeply



into these themes, they are present in all of them. These paternal relationships appear in two categories throughout the games; that of the character as a child in relation to their father, and that of the character as a parent in relation to their child.

### **Child-Parent**

Child-parent relationships tend to take a backburner as far as these games go; they are most often present in the background or interrogated only in relation to how they've affected the parent-child dynamic that is more heavily focused on; *Red Dead Redemption 2* is the exception. This dynamic centers on the protagonist dealing with the failings of his own father (or fathers) and the unresolved traumas, uncertainties, and conflicts he is left to hash out on his own. In *Breath of the Wild* and *God of War*, the failed father is absent and so no catharsis is had between him and his child. *Red Dead Redemption 2* also denies that catharsis, though the protagonists both confront their father over his abuse. *The Witcher 3* is alone in that its protagonist has already moved on from his hardships with his father, but the protagonist is faced with his father's failures in the resentment of his brothers-in-arms even if he has moved past it. These examples serve to show players the lasting impact poor fathering has on their children, and that one does not simply grow out of it – four of the five protagonists are adult men who come to realize they have been harmed or only come to acknowledge their harm during the course of their game, well into their adult lives. It also presents another message, in offering something of a learning template for these protagonists in their relationships with their own children.

### **Parent-Child**

Every game in this study with the exception of *Breath of the Wild* sets a father as its protagonist and deals heavily with the relationship he has with his children. *The Witcher 3* is the

only game to have that child be a daughter; the rest feature sons. Each game starts with the relationship being rocky or non-existent, and in a way begins with that as a failure; the fathers are forced to confront *why* their children are so distant and directly work to fix those problems as they do. Most games force the player to fix their relationship to some degree, locking quests or further progress if the player is unwilling to speak to their child – or in the case of *The Witcher 3*, punish both the player and the protagonist for being a terrible father. Players are then shown a very forgiving picture of good fatherhood; good fathers may fail but they work to rectify their mistakes and to make it up to their children. Good fathers acknowledge their mistakes and take responsibility for them.

More behaviors associated with good fatherhood includes communicating with their children about everything from their own insecurities and feelings to asking how their children feel, taking their children's concerns seriously and even when disagreeing or not understanding still standing by their child's side in support. Good fathers are also teachers in a literal sense; while these prior lessons may be implicitly imparted onto their children or the player, they are also directly charged with educating their children in their own trades – monster hunting, warfare, ranching, and so on. The good father then imparts his own wisdom to his child, without the need for his child to endure the hardships he has to learn those lessons. Good fathers explicitly do this in many of the games so that their children can live better, safer, happier lives than their fathers have; they want their children to be better and do better.

Bad fathers do the opposite; they refuse to take responsibility or do so only when it is convenient for them, refuse to communicate with their children, refuse to acknowledge their failures, put responsibility on their children to handle the emotional needs of their relationship, and do not support their children. Bad fathers lose sight of what it is to teach their children and

fail to impart their knowledge. Bad fathers do not seek to provide a better life for their children – or worse, actively seek to keep their child stagnant and dependent upon them.

### **Emotionality and Sensitive Masculinities**

The second major theme is the presentation of masculinity itself; these protagonists depict highly emotionally intelligent and emotive forms of masculinity at odds with traditional stoic depictions. They feel things, they talk about the things they feel, and they act on the things they feel. These games help to impart the message to players that men – good men, at least – do not hide or shy away from their emotions. This translates to physicality as well; even the most reserved protagonist must show his affection to his loved ones, and often this includes hugging, holding hands, touching, or kissing their partners or children. Grief, sorrow, rage, and pain are treated in a similar way, though there are differences. *God of War* explicitly acknowledges different ways of grieving as all appropriate and no less heartfelt. *The Witcher 3* blatantly says that its protagonists' inability to weep is a bad thing, and if the player receives the band ending suicidal behavior is treated not as a weakness but rather a desperate act of a broken man. While rage often leads to unchecked violence, violence for the sake of violence or disproportionate reactions are bad. Justice and retribution are both appropriate expressions of anger and violence, and never is an undeserving victim a target of a good man – especially his children.

Similarly, men acknowledge their weaknesses and do not apologize for them. If they do not know what to do, they seek help. If they need support, they seek it out. These are heroes who cannot succeed or survive without the help of others; in fact, to *be* a hero, they *must* rely on others.

### **Abuse, Trauma, Mental Health**

The way these games approach fatherhood and sensitive masculinities say a lot about how they choose to deal with abuse, trauma, and mental health. Given how prevalent the stigma against these are in traditional masculinities, I feel that it is important to address how the games treat these topics specifically. Much of this analysis draws on points made in the later sections, but there are separate representations distinct to these topics that must also be addressed.

Not once are the protagonists of these games framed as weak or as pathetic for the abuse or trauma they have endured. They may face individual characters who disparage or mock them for their hardships, but those individuals are marked firmly as bad or wrong, and even in instances where the protagonist may buy into that kind of messaging, the game itself does not. The protagonists are never shown as at fault for their abuse, or inherently weak for being subjected to it. *The Witcher 3* is particularly careful not to frame the human experimentation and forced training its protagonist suffered as justified or good given its end result – a superhuman warrior. In *Breath of the Wild*, which has perhaps the most punishing take, blaming its protagonist for the success of the game's antagonist, those characters that firmly believe it apologize and repent to the protagonist himself by the end of the game.

Men who have suffered traumatizing events are treated in a similar fashion. All of the games in this study feature protagonists who at some point or another struggle to cope with what they have been through and with what they have done. Some protagonists cope poorly and spiral into negative or self-harming behavior; this is not framed as them being weak. Their loved ones still love them, and their status as hero figures is not diminished for it; instead the games frame

this as tragic, as something to grieve and regret. Those protagonists who utilize healthier coping mechanisms are not given effortless or perfect recovery stories either; they are required to make those healthier choices again and again. Recovery requires work and dedication, and those protagonists must put that in if they expect to benefit from it.

Players are then confronted with a depiction at odds with traditional masculinity stereotypes; these men are not emotionless, they do not ignore their mental health, they are not weak for suffering, and they are not completely autonomous and independent beings. Healthy, happy, *good men* are those who acknowledge and work through their emotions even if they dislike them. They recognize and take action to care for their own mental health. They understand that they are not failures for having suffered or for continuing to suffer, and they need support systems in place in order to succeed. Players see men treating mental health not as an inconvenience or a lesser need, but rather a very important priority and key to these heroes' successes.

### **On Gender: What About the Women?**

I want to take a moment here to stress that these new models of masculinity are not built from scratch. They are mutations, changes in the prior representations these video games have utilized – after all, these specific examples come from *series*. These new models have grown out of the toxicity video game masculinities are so renowned for having – and so they still contain problematic content. There is no perfect man/father/hero, save perhaps in the idea that a perfect man/father/hero is always *trying* and *changing*. A very specific example of this, and something

that came about very strongly in most of these games, is the way these games approach their female characters.

Many of the older, traditional models of masculinity depend upon the denigration of women. To some extent, women are lesser. They are the damsels-in-distress, they are sex objects, and they are plot devices – and they *must* be to feed the traditional hero. The models presented in these games, for the most part, by producing healthier and stronger heroes *must also present their women* as healthier and stronger. As such masculinities that inherently depend upon the inferiority of women are not present in these games or have been reworked as to be less vitriolic than their past iterations. So; the women in these games are often strong, capable, and just as powerful if not moreso than their male counterparts – even if they may be styled as an exception to the rule.

### **Final Notes:**

At different times the protagonist and players relationship will be addressed; these are all open-world role-playing games, and while the characters one assumes control of are therefore fleshed out individuals with their own motives and backstories, their actions rely upon the choices and understandings of the player. This is why these games are so noteworthy in their approach to masculinity; these games reward those players that pick up on and emulate the ‘good’ version of masculinity visible in them and, likewise, punish those that emulate the ‘bad’ version. It quite literally educates and reinforces its own messaging; therefore, at times the protagonist will be referred to as (protagonist name)/player – most often to indicate those same choices that the player may or may not make in their own playthrough of the game.

Finally, replayability has no bearing on this. Players who fail to achieve the ‘good’ endings of these games often replay, restart, or redo portions or the entirety of the game in order to get those ‘good’ endings. If they have already succeeded, they often do the same to see what the ‘bad’ endings entail. These endings are labelled ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for a reason, whether through explicit developer titling or through players’ own understandings of the games. Therefore, whether or not a player achieves that perfect playthrough and gets the best ending, they are still exposed to and required to comprehend the games’ presentation of masculinity and messaging. If anything, replayability reinforces their understanding.

### **The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**

*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is the third in the *Witcher* video game series, based off a popular book series of the same name. Its plot deals explicitly with the father-daughter relationship between the protagonist and his adopted daughter, and its various endings are entirely dependent upon whether the player/protagonist understands what the game says is a good father/man. It has been selected for this study because of those themes, and also because it is older than the other games in the study – yet it has not once dropped from the cultural conscious and remains salient in discussions about these topics today.

As a series, the video games follow the adventures of Geralt of Rivia. He is a Witcher; mercenaries that have been trained and mutated since childhood to become professional monster-killers for higher and unparalleled warriors. They are fabled as emotionless and soulless, men who do nothing without profit and do not interfere in the petty politics that ravage the Continent. By the time of *Wild Hunt*, Geralt and his kin are struggling to survive in a Continent that has begun revolt against magic and all those who use it. Sorceresses are being burned and slaughtered, Geralt is looked down upon as a monster by most of those he meets, and the monsters he hunts show no signs of slowing down their attacks. Geralt's adopted daughter Cirilla, also known as Ciri, is the biological daughter of Emperor Emhyr var Emreis of the Nilfgaardian Empire. Emhyr has launched a full-scale invasion of every other country on the Continent in an imperialist bid to bring civilization and culture to the barbaric masses. Ciri is a descendant of a powerful bloodline and possessor of the Elder Blood, which grants her incredible magical powers.

Unlike the other games in this study, *Wild Hunt* expects the player to know about past game content. If the player/Geralt selects dialogue choices at odds with his behavior or attitudes



in other games, characters will comment on it. Saved data from the previous *Witcher* game, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* can actually be imported in, which will change certain quest outcomes and interactions based on players' choices in those previous games.

Like the other games in this study, *Wild Hunt* enjoyed an incredible reception upon release. It received multiple Game of the Year awards<sup>19</sup>, is considered one of the greatest video games of all time<sup>20</sup>, and is the thirty-ninth best-selling video game of all time<sup>21</sup>. It has been re-released for various systems and received two award-winning DLCs post launch, *Blood and Wine* and *Hearts of Stone*, though for the purposes of this study the DLCs will not be looked at. Rated M for mature audiences by the Entertainment Software Rating Board<sup>22</sup>, *Wild Hunt* was aimed at an older, grittier audience. It was released in 2015, amidst the Syrian Refugee Crisis and global fear over terrorist attacks. It also released just after Gamergate, but before the #MeToo movement that the other games in this study were released after; these political and social concerns have likely impacted the game's representations.

## Summary

*Wild Hunt* opens on Geralt of Rivia and his fellow Witcher Vesemir as the two search for Yennefer of Vengerberg, Geralt's ex-lover and longtime ally, all while Geralt deals with increasingly dark and cryptic dreams of Ciri in danger or dying. Yen finds Geralt herself and brings him to Emhyr, who has heard rumors that his daughter has returned to the Continent and wants to hire Geralt – and has hired Yen – to find her, as those rumors indicate that the powerful

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<sup>19</sup> (Leack, 2016)

<sup>20</sup> (P.C. Gamer, 2019)

<sup>21</sup> (Wikipedia, 2020)

<sup>22</sup> (ESRB, 2020)

and otherworldly Wild Hunt are hunting Ciri. Geralt accepts in order to keep his daughter safe and begins tracking her down on his own. He follows three leads across the war-torn Continent.

Ciri had been rumored to get into a confrontation with some witches in the woods. Upon investigating Geralt finds an old friend, Keira Metz, who had been contacted by a mysterious elf who claimed to be aiding Ciri. While he does not find the elf, he does follow Ciri's trail to a derelict orphanage run by a madwoman named Anna, who serves entities known as the Crones. The Crones offer him information on Ciri in exchange for helping a nearby village, which was under attack by a spirit previously cursed and imprisoned by the Crones. If Geralt kills the spirit, the Crones devour the orphans in Anna's care and Anna later lives; if he frees it, it rescues the children but slaughters the local village in revenge and Anna later dies. The Crones reveal that they had attempted to sell Ciri to the Wild Hunt and take a limb or two as compensation for their troubles, but she had escaped. Geralt swears to return someday to kill them but leaves them alive.

An injured Ciri had been given refuge by a local warlord, Philip Strenger, who similarly makes a deal with Geralt. His wife and daughter are missing, and if Geralt will not find them, Strenger will not tell him about Ciri. Geralt discovers that the two had fled Strenger's violent wrath; he had been violently abusive to and controlling of his family, and the two had fled after Strenger beat his wife so badly she miscarried. The miscarried baby's ghost has returned as a monster, and Geralt must either kill it or try to put it to rest, turning it into a benevolent spirit that will lead him to her mother and sister. This forces Strenger to face what he has done to those he loves, and Geralt may entertain Strenger's excuses or call him out. Eventually Geralt finds out that Strenger's daughter joined an anti-magic cult to escape, and Strenger's wife turned to the Crones when she realized she was yet again pregnant. Unable to bear the thought of carrying her husband's child, she traded a year of her service away to end her pregnancy and be rid of him –

and the Crones accepted, though their end was carried out cruelly. Geralt realizes that Strenger's wife is Anna, the woman he'd met at the orphanage, and Strenger tells him that Ciri was traveling to Novigrad before marching to save his wife from the Crones' influence. If Geralt killed the spirit, they find her raving mad and Strenger forsakes his duty as Baron to care for and try to cure her. If he freed the spirit, Anna has been turned into a water hag in punishment and dies, and Strenger commits suicide.

Geralt follows Ciri's trail to the city of Novigrad, where she asked his old friend Dandelion for help. He reunites with a whole host of his friends and former allies while in the city, including another ex-lover, Triss Merigold. Unfortunately, the trail runs cold, and Geralt travels to the islands of Skellige to meet with Yennefer, who has one last rumor to chase. While there Geralt meets with Crach an Craite, an old family friend of Ciri's who enlists Geralt's aid in protecting his two children in their bids to become king of the Isles, especially his daughter who has broken tradition to challenge for the throne. Whichever child Geralt chooses to support eventually earns the crown.

Yennefer and Geralt together manage to discover that Ciri once again escaped the Wild Hunt thanks to a mysterious elf, and that a cursed creature Uma may be their final chance of finding her. Luckily, Geralt had met the creature at Strenger's fortress and goes to retrieve it. He then meets Yen at the Witcher's ancient home of Kaer Morhen, where Yennefer and Vesemir break the curse and reveal Uma to be Ciri's elven ally, a sage named Avallac'h. He tells Geralt where Ciri is, but warns that the moment he retrieves her the Wild Hunt will attack; and so they decide to prepare Kaer Morhen for a stand against them.

Geralt enlists the help of his allies – some of which refuse, like Emhyr, and others who accept, like the an Craites. Geralt then goes to retrieve Ciri, who he finds cold and lifeless. Geralt

thinks her dead, until she returns to life – yet another spell to hide her from the Wild Hunt. She reveals that the Hunt is after her in order to conquer the Continent, as their home world is dying beneath the onslaught of the White Frost; a deadly cold that lurks between worlds and will, eventually, consume every world in existence. Because of her Elder Blood Ciri is capable of both moving between worlds without trouble and fighting off the White Frost, and with her the Wild Hunt could then move its people to the Continent and avoid a slow death.

Upon their return to Kaer Morhen, Ciri is reunited with her adoptive family and friends, and no sooner is a strategy formed than the Wild Hunt attacks. Depending on who Geralt has recruited, there may be more deaths and more fighting to do in the battle, but if he recruits everyone he can Vesemir is the only life lost, killed by Eredin's general Imlerith while trying to save Ciri from capture. Ciri is so distraught she unleashes her Elder Blood powers and repels the Wild Hunt, but her lack of control nearly kills her allies in the process. Avallac'h stops her and, while they lay Vesemir to rest, makes plans to hide her away again. Ciri refuses and decides to face the Wild Hunt one final time, kill their leader Eredin, and return to her own life as she pleases. The group decides to call the Hunt to an abandoned island in Skellige and make appropriate preparations there. Before heading to Skellige Ciri takes Geralt to assassinate Imlerith by sneaking into a celebration venerating the Crones. Geralt faces down Imlerith and ends him, while Ciri kills two of the Crones; the third escapes and steals Vesemir's Witcher pendant from Ciri. Geralt and Avallac'h infiltrate the Wild Hunt's home world to turn Eredin's political allies on him and succeed.

During their final battle, Ciri defeats Eredin's last remaining general and Geralt kills Eredin, though not before Eredin tells him Avallac'h has betrayed him and taken Ciri. Distraught and terrified for their daughter, Geralt and Yennefer race to find her, and Geralt is forced to go

on alone. Avallac'h has not betrayed them, as it turns out, but is instead helping Ciri face the White Frost itself – without stopping it, their world and countless others will never be safe.

Geralt has the option to either support the choice she has made or to undermine it; that coupled with his prior interactions with Ciri dictates which of the three endings the player receives. Ciri either dies and a grieving Geralt goes on a suicide mission to kill the Crone that stole Vesemir – and now Ciri's – pendant, or she lives and either fakes her death and trains with her father to become a Witcher or chooses to leave her Witcher training behind and return to Nilfgaard as its rightful heir.

## Analysis

### **Fatherhood: Child-Father**

Geralt's parental trauma takes a backseat in *Wild Hunt* compared to the other games, though he's not without his own fair share of trouble. What little players see of his relationship with his own father-figure, senior Witcher Vesemir, is companionable and trusting – they are equals and treat each other as such, bowing to the others' greater knowledge or skill when necessary. Ciri, in fact, calls Vesemir *uncle* rather than *grandfather*. Yet Vesemir was also the Witcher in charge of Geralt's – and his brothers-in-arms Lambert and Eskel's – training as children. Witchers took children sold or abandoned to them, forced them to undergo grueling training and torturous trials in which most of those children died – and then performed experimentation on them to grant them super-human capabilities. These experiments also rendered them sterile; to continue to exist, Witchers *must* continue turning children. Vesemir is

then responsible for their change into Witchers, into something inhuman and hated by the rest of the world, and for forever marking them as something other and dangerous.

While Geralt is not particularly enthused by this past and has, effectively, come to the decision with Vesemir, Eskel and Lambert to let Witchers die out with them, he does not hold it against Vesemir. Lambert, on the other hand, has a frank conversation with Geralt and to Geralt's surprise expresses that he still resents Vesemir for subjecting them to that torment, for the deaths of the other trainees. Geralt can't remember those lost boys' names, but Lambert does – and, unlike Geralt, Lambert also remembers his biological father, who was an abusive drunk who sold him to the Witchers to feed his habit.

### **Parent-Child**

Ciri is absent for the majority of *Wild Hunt*. What players see of Geralt's relationship with her is primarily implied through the other fathers and their relationships with their children that Geralt meets on his search. The Bloody Baron, Philip Strenger, who is so consumed with his need to control his daughter that he does not care if he hurts her and Crache an Craite, learns to support his daughter as she challenges her brother for the throne of Skellige, are the most salient examples. Geralt becomes immersed in their conflicts and gets to speak not just to the fathers, but their daughters as well. He learns what mistakes these men have made, and how their daughters feel or act as a result. Emhyr is another father with whom he encounters; Emhyr claims rights to Ciri because he is her biological father, and seems to think of her as she was last he saw her; he venerates a portrait of a very young Ciri clearly upset to be dressed in an elaborate gown and insists he knows his own daughter. He calls her Cirilla instead of by her preferred nickname and does not seem to comprehend that she may disagree with his plans for her.

By the time Geralt reunites with Ciri, he (and the player) know what makes a healthy, happy father-daughter relationship. His interactions with Ciri are then shaped by player choices, but have a profound impact on her fate and the ending of the game – and entirely dependent upon the examples of good fatherhood.

Upon her reunification with her family, Ciri is struggling. Not only is she being hunted by a madman who wants to use her to slaughter and enslave her whole world, but her own allies seek to use her powers for their own gain; even Yennefer, her adoptive mother and longtime lover of Geralt, has plans for her – plans that have never involved so much as asking her opinion. She has been burdened with this manipulation since childhood, and she may have been a child when Geralt saw her last – but when she returns, she is a woman and demands to be seen as the autonomous and independent being she is. Ciri encapsulates this best in her own words; before she faces her final battle against the White Frost, she tells Geralt “This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish it.”<sup>23</sup> And, if Geralt has learned from those around him and respects her, he steps aside and lets her into the spotlight – because it *is* Ciri’s story; the game is about *her* saving the world, and Geralt has to recognize that. He is not the main character; he is a *supporting* character. This is the same realization Kratos comes to, though with much less angst, at the end of *God of War* – his journey with Atreus was foretold, not as another notch in the belt of the Ghost of Sparta, but as the first in the belt of Atreus, Loki, son of Laufey and Kratos, god and giant and mortal all in one.

If Geralt undermines Ciri, refuses to let her speak for herself or take action on her own, if he dismisses her worries and concerns, if he imposes his own authority over her, he ruins their

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<sup>23</sup> (CD Projekt, 2015)

relationship and the game does not get a ‘good’ ending. In order to not lose Ciri, Geralt must overcome his own worries and protectiveness over her, accept her as an adult, and encourage her to stand on her own.

*Wild Hunt* then frames a good father as a man who puts the needs of his child before his own – sacrificing his need for control, for example, so that she can exercise some power over her own future. He supports her and believes in her, even if she intends to do something dangerous or go someplace out of his reach. He does not take his anger and frustration out on his child, and he does not speak down to her. He treats her as not just an adult, but an equal, and respects her opinions and decisions. He is willing to lay his life down to defend her, and her enemies are his own, *as are her allies* – the player/Geralt can choose to be rather rude to several of Ciri’s allies, if he wants to anger her.

*Wild Hunt* is the only game in the study that features a father-daughter relationship; Arthur, John, and Kratos all have sons. Ciri is significantly older than her male counterparts as well, and thus the game focuses more on her autonomy and independence than it does with the sons of other games; even when Ciri follows in Geralt’s footsteps, she does so differently – a female Witcher, an unmutated Witcher. Perhaps by virtue of her gender, Ciri is more incapable of becoming her father than her male counterparts; this is compounded when the player gains control of her. She is the only child who is playable, even if in a limited capacity through flashbacks to her journey throughout the Continent or, after she reunites with Geralt, various battles. Her final battle, however, against the White Frost is not playable – and is not, in fact, even a cutscene. She faces her destiny alone and unaided, save for her memories of Geralt’s actions. It is not his story, after all, and so Ciri’s adventure is one he is not privy to.



## Emotionality and Sensitive Masculinities

*The Witcher 3* steps into a world where Geralt is already both beloved as a hero and reviled as a monster, and Geralt cares only when others' prejudices interfere with his journey. The player/Geralt becomes embroiled in political plots and rebel movements because old friends and allies need his aide, or to protect Ciri – not because he takes a stance on the politics, or backs one leader over another. Witchers are renowned for their self-serving nature; they work for coin and coin alone, and Geralt has the option to extort more coin from everyone who hires him if he so chooses. He is to be a neutral and unbiased force; and yet he does take sides, if only for those he cares about or owes.

That owing is a large reason *why* Geralt gets involved in situations in the first place; in *Witcher 3*, good men *always* pay their debts. Geralt is in a constant give-and-take with his allies and even though he aides his friends unconditionally – catching Priscilla's attacker at Dandelion's behest, for example – they all still couch it in terms of *favor* and *owing*. The *Brothers-in-Arms* side-quests exemplify these interactions; Geralt must recruit allies to help fight the Wild Hunt at Kaer Morhen. Many of those he can ask refuse him aide for one reason or another, but those that do offer him help do so after he's already done something for them. Kiera Metz will not show up if Geralt does not help her with Fyke Island. Triss will appear only if Geralt completes her subplot and helps smuggle the mages remaining in Novigrad to safety. Roche and Ves will appear only if Geralt helps Roche rescue and lecture Ves, and so on. Zoltan only needs to be asked, but by that point the player/Geralt has already helped him as part of the main question; and Ermion is an old family friend of Ciri's. They repay what they owe Geralt by facing the Wild Hunt in battle, just as he repays what he owes them for their help in completing their various quests.

Yet Geralt is also inclined to help people; he may have been forced into the life of a Witcher and may take it seriously, but even without player input he chooses to help more often than he actively chooses to abandon or fleece others. For all his image as a traditionally masculine figure, Geralt explicitly describes himself as wanting to help people and is described by others as being kind and helpful. Almost every quest has an ending that mitigates the amount of blood spilled, and Geralt does not enjoy unnecessary killing. He sympathizes with the hunter in White Orchard, cast out for loving another man – says they are the same, for being hated and shunned from wider society. Geralt similarly protects non-humans and mages from unjust treatment in the various side-quests throughout the game; even the monsters he has been hired to hunt, if they prove innocent. A good man/hero, in *Wild Hunt*, is then dedicated to helping others. He is selfless, and he fights injustice – or at the very least disapproves of it.

A good man/father/hero is also emotive in *The Witcher 3*, just like in *God of War* and *Breath of the Wild*. Even if players gets the bad ending with Ciri, Geralt's time with her is peppered with intimacy; they hug and hold each other, share jokes and laugh together. The better Geralt is at respecting and loving his daughter, the more the two bond and the better the game's ending. Geralt's romantic relationships follow a similar trajectory; he can only win over Triss or Yennefer by recognizing, supporting, and understanding their emotional needs, and communicating his own in turn even at cost to himself. Geralt *needs* to be emotionally competent enough to handle the emotions of others – and his, when he can.

Geralt has no issue expressing his joy or relief or love; he *does* however suffer when it comes to expressing his grief, rage, and sorrow. When Vesemir dies, Geralt tells Ciri “I don't

know how to cry”<sup>24</sup> – and he doesn’t. He is incapable of crying over Vesemir’s body or at his pyre; just as he is incapable of crying over Ciri if she dies. Instead, Geralt spirals into a suicidal rage and hunts down the last surviving Crone in order to retrieve the pendant she stole from Ciri; once Vesemir’s, then Ciri’s. The Crone calls him out on this; he is seeking his own death by attacking her alone in the swamp she rules. He refuses the aide of a werewolf who leads him to the Crone and grows furious when that same werewolf joins the fray in order to help him. When he kills the Crone, Geralt then tears her home apart to find Ciri’s medallion – and then collapses, clutching it close, *unable to cry* while a whole horde of monsters descend out of the swamp. This Geralt, blinded by his pain and unable or unwilling to find a proper outlet for it, is a sad, tragic figure. He is a broken man, a failed hero, and no longer a father. This is, then, not the path to travel. To be a good man/father/hero, one *must* allow oneself to feel and express emotion, even if that emotion is negative.

*The Witcher 3* is also much more cynical in its presentation of Geralt’s masculinity, regardless of the path the player takes or the ending the player gets – *it’s not enough*. There are things at work on the Continent well above Geralt’s ability to fix, and he is not some perfect, omniscient hero. Quests like *A Towerful of Mice* or *The Whispering Hillock* have tremendous consequences for innocents not involved in the quest’s conflict. If Geralt chooses to help the Tree Spirit in *The Whispering Hillock* and send it to save the orphans from being devoured by the Crones, the Tree Spirit takes its vengeance on the local town Geralt just helped and slaughters its inhabitants. The Bloody Baron’s wife is also cursed and dies, leading to the Baron committing suicide. If, in *A Towerful of Mice*, Geralt chooses to believe Annabelle and bring her bones to her ex-lover, he unleashes a plague spirit upon the country and sickness ravages its way

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<sup>24</sup> (CD Projekt, 2015)

across the country. The alternatives to both quests still lead in death; Geralt must let the children be eaten, and Geralt must bring Annabelle's ex-lover to her spirit, which kills him. If, in *Reason of State*, Geralt chooses to save his friends' life and stop Dijkstra from killing them, Nilfgaard takes the north; if he sides with Dijkstra and allows his friends to die, Dijkstra leads the North to independence – and if Geralt does not do the quest and Radovid is never assassinated, Radovid repels Nilfgaard but continues his 'cleansing' of the North by slaughtering every magical being, non-human, or 'close enough' figure he can find.

Whether Geralt interferes or not, or no matter how he interferes in these situations, the consequences have incredible impact on the Continent and its people. It does not matter how noble or honorable Geralt is, or how benevolent his intentions are – *he cannot save everyone*. He might just make the situation *worse* in attempting to do the right thing. When Geralt involves himself in the wartime politics of the Continent, he *cannot* put his friends lives first if he wants to best help the common people of the Continent even if that would be the right thing to do by his own moral compass. Geralt is just one man; the solutions he can offer are individualistic and therefore insufficient for fixing the massive social and cultural problems the Continent faces.

Yet the game does not necessarily say *no* individual could fix everything; just that Geralt cannot. If Ciri both lives and chooses to return to Nilfgaard as its rightful heir, she goes with the express intent of changing the nation and ending its more violent and problematic policies...and she succeeds. Unlike Geralt, she is not an outsider. She has both the weight of her power, status, and wealth *and* her privilege, as a non-mutated human. People do not fear her, they do not try to kill her for existing, they do not advocate for her death like they do Geralt. She is capable of working within the system, whereas he is not; and this route is closed to her should she choose to become a Witcher.

### **Abuse, Trauma, and Mental Health**

Abuse comes in to play in *The Witcher 3* only as a lesson to Geralt, an example of what *not* to do in his relationship with Ciri – though his childhood has been fraught with similar tragedies, Geralt mentions it only in passing to other Witchers and the game does not focus on it. No character exemplifies this better than Philip Strenger. He had been a soldier, became an alcoholic, and when he returned from war turned his rage on Anna. She tried to leave him with their daughter, and he murdered her lover and childhood friend in front of her before taking them both back – and when Geralt enters the picture, the two have tried to flee again. The Baron tries to justify his actions to Geralt, and Geralt can be sympathetic – or refuse to hear the Baron’s excuses and call him out on being a terrible person. Ciri’s father is another salient example in his disregard for Ciri’s personhood, though she is not subjected to his abuse unless Geralt offers to take her to speak with him. Like with Strenger, Geralt can tell Emhyr he’s a terrible father – though only in the ending in which Ciri becomes a Witcher and Geralt helps her fake her death.

This turns back to the game’s endings; Geralt can become an unhealthy father if he *doesn’t* take those examples of bad parenting to heart. He’s seen these fathers struggle to connect with or protect their own daughters and seen the missteps they’ve made. He’s seen how it all plays out – and it’s left to him not to enact that pattern again. Geralt, if he chooses poorly with Ciri, serves to reinforce the messages she gets from Emhyr and those who wish to use her for their own ends. He speaks down to her, ignores her, and makes decisions for her. By this point Geralt has already seen Strenger to whatever poor facsimile of redemption the man can earn, and Emhyr is hopeless as far as change is concerned; bad fathers do not get a second chance – and neither does he, because if he chooses poorly Ciri dies. This need for control and paternal

authority, things so often tied to traditional masculinity, are badges not of honor but of failure. Proper fathers learn to let them go in order to better provide for their children; and this is a choice Geralt must make repeatedly. He has many more chances to ruin his relationship with his daughter than he does chances to make it right. Good parenting is difficult, it is stressful, and it is a *series* of choices. Letting Ciri take the reins of her own fate once is not enough to prove to her that Geralt thinks of her as an adult, and only doing so once is not enough to make up for every time Geralt fails her.

Finally, if Ciri dies, Geralt's grief drives him to attempt suicide. He hunts down the last living Crone in her own lands without any backup, all to recover the Witcher pendant Ciri took from Vesemir's funeral pyre. A werewolf Geralt meets before facing the Crone recognizes this and insists on aiding him; as does the Crone, who mocks him for it to her last breath. The final scene in this ending is that of Geralt, hunched over his daughter's amulet as the Crone's creatures swarm out of the swamp and surround him – a veritable army of monsters he must face. The end game summary Dandelion gives informs the players that Geralt survived, but the game itself treats this ending very seriously and solemnly; this is a Geralt that has lost the most important thing in his life. Even good men/heroes/fathers can and do suffer from mental illness. Even good men/heroes/fathers are overwhelmed and do not know how to cope. But Geralt is no less of a man for it, *Wild Hunt* says.

### **On Gender: What About the Women?**

It's no real surprise that *Wild Hunt* has such strong and powerful female characters given that Ciri is the primary focus of the story; Geralt couldn't be a good father if he was dismissing

his daughter because of her sex or degrading her adoptive mother in front of her. Yet it also avoids tropes of powerful women being masculine; *Wild Hunt* is full of women who obtain power and do not inherently lose their femininity.

Yennefer, Triss, and Ciri are never presented as “one of the boys” or as anything other than *people*. Yennefer is one of the most powerful sorceresses in the Continent; so is Triss. Ciri possesses the Elder Blood and powers beyond the very world in which they live – and is also the first female Witcher, so long as she lives at the end of the game. Geralt is an expert when it comes to monsters, and they bow to his greater knowledge in that regard – but he is the first to ask them for help or advice when he steps outside of his wheelhouse. There are sexist remarks and powerful men who deride those three women – and the other sorceresses encountered throughout the game – but they are always presented as crude and wrong. The women may be manipulating things, but so are the men – and Geralt trusts Yennefer, he trusts Cirilla, and he trusts Triss. The only powerful women within the game to be solely negatively viewed are the Crones and Brina, widow of the late King Bran of Skellige. For Brina, that is less because of her status as a woman and more because she disregards her people’s traditions and wants to overthrow their form of government to instate her son as monarch. The Crones are not human and are cannibals; their evil comes from their perversion and not from their gender.

Even with the game’s heavy presence of romance, Yennefer and Triss are not degraded into sexual objects or simple partners. They are Geralt’s equals, and if he wishes to earn their love he will treat them as such. In fact, if Geralt tries to romance *both* women at the same time, it blows up in his face. Triss and Yennefer tell him they’ve decided to have a threesome, and when Geralt shows up they convince him to strip – and then chain him to the bed and leave him there. Dandelion comes to Geralt’s rescue in the morning, with the added bonus of some mocking.

Neither woman's romance option is available after this; Geralt mistreated them and he pays for it.



## The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild

*The Legend of Zelda* is one of the most famous video game series in existence and incredibly long running; currently with over twenty games in its mainline series' and a variety of spin-offs<sup>25</sup>. No other games will be looked at for the purpose of this thesis, though the main mechanics of the series will be discussed as part of *Breath of the Wild*'s messaging comes from how it differs from its predecessors in those tropes. Most of the games feature the relationship between three main characters; the Hero Link, the Princess Zelda, and the series' main antagonist Ganon. The typical formula involves Link saving the country of Hyrule, rescuing Zelda, and then the two of them facing Ganon in an epic showdown that ends in their victory. The games often start with Ganon already in power or beginning to rise, and act as an origin story of sorts for Link. The characters are then reincarnated for the next game, and so on. There are exceptions to this rule, but for the purposes of the thesis, this is what we are interested in.

The *Zelda* games have almost universally been family-friendly, with a few outliers like *Majora's Mask* and *Twilight Princess* notorious for their darker themes; *Breath of the Wild* joins those two in engaging in more adult themes while still being rated E for everyone ages ten and older<sup>26</sup>. *Breath of the Wild* is interesting in that it picks up in the middle of the journey – Link has already failed, Hyrule has already fallen, and Zelda is the one holding back the apocalyptic force that is Calamity Ganon. The story is non-linear, and players have unprecedented freedom to explore quite literally every inch of the map – which is also the biggest the series has ever seen<sup>27</sup>. Link is also, unusually, explicitly partnered with other heroes, called Champions – he and Zelda quite literally tried to build an army to fight Calamity Ganon, when in every other game

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<sup>25</sup> (List of the Legend of Zelda games, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> (ESRB, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> (Harding, 2017)

the battle has come down to them as individuals possibly with outside help from other individuals. The characters' approach to the return of Calamity Ganon is also different; rather than waiting for a hero to appear, they are actively preparing to fight Calamity Ganon.

Functionally, *Breath of the Wild* is radically different as well. It's still a role-playing game, still played in third person and still an action-adventure fantasy. Yet it takes open world to a whole new level; as before mentioned, the map is massive. Almost everything is interactable, the quests are non-linear, and players can do just about anything they set their mind to.

*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* was released in 2017 to wild praise from fans and critics alike. As of this project, *Breath of the Wild* has won a whole host of awards, including multiple Game of the Year<sup>28</sup> awards. As of December 2019, it's sold more than 16.34 million copies<sup>29</sup>, making it the best-selling *Zelda* game of all time<sup>30</sup> and is the forty-fifth bestselling video game ever<sup>31</sup>. It began development in 2012, pre-Gamergate, but was released after Gamergate had hit its stride and in the midst of the #MeToo movement – major cultural and social upheavals that have effectively destabilized traditional gender norms.

## Summary

*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* follows the series' protagonist Link as he wakes from a hundred-year slumber with no memories to find the land of Hyrule in ruins and is charged with rescuing the Princess Zelda whom he has sworn to serve. Having failed to stop the entity

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<sup>28</sup> (Makuch, 2018a)

<sup>29</sup> (Nintendo, 2019)

<sup>30</sup> (Nintendo Life, 2019)

<sup>31</sup> (Wikipedia, 2020)

known as Calamity Ganon from laying waste to Hyrule and slaughtering their allies, Princess Zelda chose to confront the beast alone and hold it back long enough for Link to recover from his own critical injuries within an ancient shrine; upon his waking, she charges him with saving Hyrule once more.

Link begins the game as her powers are fading and strikes out across the remnants of his home to rescue her and defeat the Calamity once and for all. The game is not linear, and players can actually skip most of the plot and head directly for the final boss fight if they so choose, but in terms of actual narrative, Link has a whole list of feats he must accomplish first. He must prove his worth to the Master Sword, a holy relic capable of injuring the Calamity, in order to wield it again. He must also rescue four Divine Beasts, monoliths of ancient technology built specifically to weaken the Calamity and offer him support in his fight. Each Divine Beast was piloted by a Champion, all of whom were slaughtered in the Calamity's attack and whose spirits linger within their respective Beasts – and will continue to until Link defeats their killer.

Along the way Link confronts the grieving families and people these heroes have left behind and face those who knew him before his failure. He also recovers some memories of his time with Princess Zelda and learns of their strained relationship and the trauma and stress they both endured as well as the bonds they shared with the other Champions. At the end of the game, Princess Zelda is free to explore Hyrule once more, the Calamity is defeated, and, if players have successfully freed all of the Divine Beasts, the spirits of Zelda's father and the former Champions may finally rest. Link ends the game choosing to go with Zelda as she declares her intent to restore Hyrule to its former glory.

## Fatherhood

### Child-Parent

Link is childless in *Breath of the Wild* and so fatherhood appears primarily as a theme in Link and Zelda's relationships to their respective fathers. While Link is the protagonist, the game's narrative is primarily dedicated to telling Zelda's story – and so while Zelda and her father's strained relationship is addressed directly, Link's is mentioned only in passing by other characters. Link's father was a knight of some renown and Zelda insinuates that Link's wielding of the Master Sword was fated given who his father is; yet Link also spent a great deal of his childhood in the Zora's Domain, where he formed a close relationship with their Princess Mipha and King Dorephan. Mipha becomes a Champion specifically to support Link and, after Link wakes, he discovers that she intended to propose to him.

Zelda's father was much more present in her life, though all the more overbearing for it. After her mother passed when Zelda was young, Zelda was left with no one to teach her how to access or harness the holy power that is her birthright. Zelda's father is so consumed by his mission to get things right this time, to defeat the Calamity once and for all, that he pushes Zelda into a non-stop cycle of training and grows increasingly desperate when Zelda fails to manifest her powers. Her inability to conjure this power is, according to Rhoam, a personal failing of Zelda's regardless of the circumstances – her mother was the only person capable of teaching her. Her status as the fabled princess is public knowledge – and between that pressure and her father's vicious disappointment, by the time the Calamity returns Zelda thinks of herself just as poorly as her father does. She's been banned from researching alternative methods of fighting the Calamity, despite her keen interest in science and technology, as Rhoam considers it a waste of time. Link is forcibly assigned as her personal bodyguard because of his status as a hero

despite Zelda's protests, and though the two of them slowly begin a tentative friendship in the face of their respective situations, Zelda grows increasingly disillusioned with her destiny; if her father doesn't believe in her, if she's already incompetent, why would the goddess she draws her power from believe in her either?

Rhoam's journal, found in the ruins of Hyrule Castle, discusses his own thoughts on the matter. He believes his constant talk about her destiny and duty has made Zelda strong, as evidenced by her lack of tears at her mother's funeral. Even when he acknowledges his pain, he does not have time to deal with it and, therefore, neither does she; "I must act as a king, not a father."<sup>32</sup>, he writes. Rhoam only reconsiders when, after ten years of failure, Zelda is facing her last chance to awaken her power – he decides he'll be kind to her upon her return.... just as the Calamity strikes. It's a decision made too late.

*Red Dead Redemption* allows its protagonists to achieve a kind of catharsis with their father in the form of a final confrontation. Neither Link nor Zelda get that option in *Breath of the Wild*; by the time Link wakes their fathers are long dead, and through Rhoam appears as a ghost to beg Link to save his daughter, he does not speak to Zelda. Link's amnesia compounds this; he does not remember the father who left him.

*Breath of the Wild* then follows *Wild Hunt*'s footsteps in defining good fatherhood as the opposite of its own examples; a good father would have allowed his daughter the space to grieve her mother's untimely death and support his child's emotional needs in such a high-stress situation. A good father would not have told his daughter he was a failure, would not have made her believe she was so broken the goddess herself had forsaken her. A good father would have

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<sup>32</sup> (Nintendo, 2017)

listened to her, would have given her the option to make her own decisions – and would have respected those choices. A good father would do more than simply pass his trade and legacy on to his son. A good father would see their child as something more than a tool, more than a soldier. More, even, than their destiny.

### **Emotionality and Sensitive Masculinities**

*Breath of the Wild* conflates the good man/father of the other games with that of a good hero; Link's journey is to prove himself worthy of the title. This is no simple journey either, considering Link starts the game as a complete and abject failure of a hero – *Breath of the Wild* is more about defining what a good man/father/hero is *not* than what it *is* in this aspect.

Before the Calamity's attack and Hyrule's fall, Link trained, fought, and trained some more – paralleling Zelda's cycle of studies and ceremonies. After being chosen by the Master Sword as the fabled Hero he was given two jobs; to defeat the Calamity, and to protect Princess Zelda. His initial failure of both is, at the start, something that defines him as a *bad* hero. By the time Link defeats Calamity Ganon again, however, he has changed, and turned that failure into a different defining moment. He *tried again*. Link didn't let a catastrophic loss stop him or give up at the thought of facing the Calamity a second time. He instead learned from his past mistakes, and *that* is what makes him a *good* hero.

Zelda records in her journal that, prior to his defeat, Link stopped speaking because “he feels it necessary to stay strong and silently bear any burden.”<sup>33</sup> He believes a hero should stand alone, independent and without help. He should have no need of support and should be able to

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<sup>33</sup> (Nintendo, 2017)

handle everything that comes his way single-handedly. When Link faces the Calamity down that second time and succeeds, however, he succeeds *because* he does not bear the weight of saving Hyrule alone. He's told time and time again that it is his responsibility, that he is the only one who can do it – and yet he reaches out to the families and people of the Champions who fell. He restores the Champion's spirits and gains both their blessings and the might of their respective Divine Beasts. He makes friends and allies who help him as they are able, giving him powerful weapons and armors to support his fight against the Calamity. He gains people who have his back, who believe in him, and who wish him the best. Some of these are people who know of his past failure and support him regardless; a good hero has a support network, has allies, has people behind him.

Through this gathering of friends, Link also learns to have confidence in his own abilities and faith that he will win. He learns to share his burdens with others as best he can; and in doing so becomes the hero Hyrule needs. He is also markedly more emotive after his return; he poses for goofy pictures and jumps when surprised and delights or mops over cooking experiments and, most notably, he talks. Much like Kratos in *God of War*, Link succeeds in part because he does not shy away from his emotions.

There is also a strong theme of sacrifice associated with this positive hero figure – and not just with Link. Both he and Zelda lose a tremendous amount to the Calamity and in the name of defeating it...but those losses are not enough. They must also *sacrifice*, give up something willingly that is not taken from them. For Zelda, this is her life. When she goes to face the Calamity on her own, she does not expect to survive. She does not expect to see Link again, only hold back the tide of destruction long enough for him to return and end it. By going forward with her assault alone she proves herself every bit the fabled Princess she was meant to be. Link, too,

must be willing to die, but more importantly he must be willing to *suffer*. To prove himself worthy of facing the Calamity again, Link must retrieve the Master Sword – an artifact he wielded before his defeat. After his defeat, however, the sword rejects him as its true master; he is weak and unworthy. It refuses him by draining his health to the point of collapse. His progress in freeing the Champions' spirits and rescuing the Divine Beasts have no impact on his worthiness. Only when players have upgraded his health enough that he can take thirteen full hearts (the game's measurement of health) of damage is he able to pull the sword from its pedestal. To be a hero, then, Link must *hurt*. He must suffer willingly more than what he has already lost, and he must be able to survive that pain, even if he's not expected to suffer alone.

### **Abuse, Trauma, and Mental Health**

*Breath of the Wild*, as a *Legend of Zelda* game, deals with a cycle of trauma like what we will see later in *God of War*. Instead of centering on familial lines, however, *Breath of the Wild* focuses on the series' cycle of rebirth. Link and Zelda are reborn and/or their powers passed down from one generation to the next for each game (the specifics differ game to game). The Zelda we see in *Breath of the Wild* explicitly says that her power is passed from mother to daughter, and something inherent to her bloodline. Link is marked by his ability to wield the Master Sword, and Ganon is often explicitly known and named throughout the series – he rarely *dies* like Zelda and Link do but is often simply imprisoned and contained until he eventually breaks free again.

Most *Zelda* games treat this inevitable rebirth as a given; a fabled hero will rise to save the day with the aid of a magical princess when the time is right and Hyrule's need is greatest.



Zelda's father, King Rhoam, chooses a more active path. He seeks to prepare *all* Hyrule for the Calamity's return and present an army fit to destroy it – with Link and Zelda there to deliver the final blow. They are both children then and teenagers when Calamity Ganon attacks; and both have the responsibility to save all Hyrule and slay the greatest evil their world has ever known forced onto their shoulders as children. This is not of their choosing; it is forced upon them. Each cycle before them, each hero and each princess and each iteration of Ganon, have fought and died and trapped each other in an effort to finally break that same cycle, failed, and passed the torch down to the next. *Breath of the Wild* ends with, presumably, the Calamity's final defeat – it is dead or imprisoned for the rest of eternity, the cycle broken and Hyrule free, *truly* free, once more. Link and Zelda *literally* end that cycle of conflict, violence, and bloodshed with the aid of their allies.

Link and Zelda also deal with a great deal of trauma from those expectations; Zelda, who grows increasingly convinced that she is cursed by the goddess herself because she cannot manifest her holy power, and Link, who cuts even his closest friends out of his life so as not to trouble them with his ills. They are failures, or waiting failures, and neither handle this in healthy ways – Zelda by lashing out at Link, Link by withdrawing more and more. It is only once the two come together that they begin, slowly, opening up to each other and addressing their problems – and then the Calamity attacks, Link is injured, and Zelda sacrifices herself to hold it back. Link's amnesia frees him from his past struggles, but even that does not free him from dealing with them – the Zora live long lives, and Mipha's family still lives and still remembers who he is. Muzu, advisor to the Zora King, detests Link and blames him for Mipha's death. This is a hatred Link must confront if he is to free the Divine Beast Vah Ruta. The Rito Champion Revali viewed Link with a similar disdain before his death, and only admits his respect once

Link has freed his spirit. Link *must* face the things that troubled him in his past, and the new anxieties that have cropped up with his future circumstances. Only by doing so is he able to move past them and finally face Calamity Ganon.

With that said, Link's second time around is substantially less stressful to him than his first attempt, as evidenced by his muteness. Link does talk after his return, though unlike other characters his dialogue is not voiced. Most of Hyrule's inhabitants do not recognize him or believe he is who he is, and though he still must handle the Zora's disdain, many simply consider him a descendant of the past hero or a kindly swordsman. Not every eye that turns to him is critical and demanding. His improvement then comes, in part, from his removal from that toxic environment.

Through these aspects, *Breath of the Wild* directly challenges the self-sufficient model traditional masculinities espouse. A good hero cannot be a one-man army, nor can he be expected to be. Social and cultural expectations of manhood can be just as damaging as an abusive father; by expecting Link to hold his emotions and needs inward, he hurts himself and stunts his potential. Good heroes' treasure and maintain close friendships, seek help when they need it, and if need be should remove themselves from toxic people and environments.

### **On Gender: What About the Women?**

Zelda is a powerhouse. After Link's defeat, she single-handedly holds back a force of pure malice and pure hatred; the two are an even draw. When Link finally confronts Calamity Ganon, Zelda's power fails for the first, and only, time – and yet she still has the power to summon the Bow of Light so that Link can attack the Calamity's final form, and the power to pin

the beast down so that he can deliver the final blow. She hid the Master Sword where the Calamity would never find it and knew where to send Link so that he could heal from his injuries and rise again to fight by her side. She left trustworthy allies in the care of messages and resources for him when he woke and used her magic to speak to him when necessary even while battling the Calamity, and when the Calamity is defeated her first decision is to raise Hyrule from its ashes once more.

Despite this, she is framed as a victim. She was *trapped*. She was *imprisoned*. You are begged by her father's ghost to *free* her, and you are asked by those of her allies who still live – and the Champion's ghosts - to *save* her. *Both* Link and Zelda are needed to finally defeat Calamity Ganon, and yet the language used to describe their situation frames Zelda as weaker and more vulnerable. The other female characters in the game do not receive this treatment; The Gerudo Chief Riju may endure a few jokes cracked about her age, but she rides into battle with Vah Naboris with Link by herself, and the Gerudo Champion Urbosa was a powerful fighter who wielded lightning at her fingertips. The Zora Champion Mipha was a renowned healer and beloved by her people, but she was also ferociously skilled with a trident. The Sheikah researcher Purah is an ancient woman trapped in the body of a child, and though she acts childishly her intellect is sharp as ever. The Sheikah leader Impa is similarly respected, despite her own advanced age.

Given the series' history of having the various incarnations of Link rescue the various incarnations of Zelda, this is likely a series-wide struggle; but the fact remains that Zelda is still singularly pointed out as a victim *in spite of* the fact it was *she* who trapped the Calamity in the ruins of Hyrule Castle; not the other way around.

## God of War (2018)

While the 2018 *God of War* can be played independently of its predecessors, knowing the context of the prior games is necessary in interpreting the full extent of the narrative. With eight prior games ranging from mobile to console releases, *God of War*'s Kratos has a long and storied history. Initially tricked into murdering his wife and young daughter by then God of War, Ares, Kratos is cursed to wear their ashes on his skin and swears vengeance. This path leads to Ares' death and Kratos' ascension to the new God of War, as well as the discovery that Zeus is Kratos' father. Kratos kills Zeus and much of the Greek pantheon as they use and manipulate him, an act that leads to the destruction of Greece itself. By the time *God of War (2018)* rolls around, Kratos has left all that behind him and fled the ruins of Greece and his past.

*God of War* is rated M by the ESRB<sup>34</sup> – it is not a family friendly game by any means, no matter how wholesome its main plot is. It has enjoyed critical acclaim and adoration from fans – those new to the series and longtime players alike – and beat out *Red Dead Redemption 2* for Game of the Year in 2018<sup>35</sup>. As of May 2019, it has sold over 10 million copies, marking it a spectacular success for Sony<sup>36</sup>. Since its release it has been (lovingly, mockingly) dubbed *Dad of Boy* by fans<sup>37</sup> and heralded as a great triumph both independently and for the *God of War* series. The year of its release saw major social and cultural upheaval; it came out amid Trump's contentious presidency, amid the 'Time's Up' and #MeToo fervor, as well as growing conversations around racial inequality in the United States of America. These are all moments in which tenets of traditional masculinity have been overturned, challenged, and defended. Whereas

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<sup>34</sup> (ESRB, 2020)

<sup>35</sup> (Makuch, 2018b)

<sup>36</sup> (Bankhurst, 2019)

<sup>37</sup> (Dad of Boy, 2019)

those more traditional masculinities may have offered clear-cut rules and frameworks for men to navigate, their upheaval hasn't introduced a similar kind of framework by which to use; the anxieties this produces likely flavored *God of War's* take on masculinity in some fashion.

## Summary

The 2018 *God of War* follows the journey of Kratos, Ghost of Sparta and titular Greek God of War, and his son Atreus as they journey to fulfill the last request of his late wife Faye and spread her ashes from the highest peak in the Nine Realms of Norse mythology. Kratos' distant relationship with his son is immediately apparent in his decision to wait until Atreus is older and better trained to make the trek, but a sudden attack from a mysterious man forces them to begin their journey and flee their home.

Armed with the bow Faye had carved for Atreus and the axe she'd left to Kratos, the pair fight their way through obstacle after obstacle to reach the mountain and befriend a cast of interesting characters along the way; Brok and Sindri, two dwarven brothers whom together forged Faye's axe; the mysterious witch Freya who somehow knows of Kratos' godhood; and the World Serpent Jörmungandr.

Upon reaching the summit, the father and son find their mysterious attacker and two strange companions interrogating a figure imprisoned within a tree as to their whereabouts. They learn that that these men are Norse gods – Baldur, brother to Thor, and Thor's sons Magni and Modi – and have been tasked with hunting the two down. Kratos assumes this is because of him and the past he left behind. The imprisoned man, however, refuses to assist them and the hunters leave. Kratos and Atreus reveal themselves after their departure and learn that the imprisoned

man is Mimir, once ambassador to the gods, and the smartest man alive. They explain to him their quest and he regretfully informs them that they are not, in fact, on the highest peak in the Nine Realms. The mountain they are looking for is located in Jötunheim, Realm of the Giants – but Jötunheim has been missing for ages, ever since Odin went to war with the Giants and slaughtered them. Luckily for the pair, Mimir knows a secret way in, if Kratos will free him. This entails severing Mimir's head from his body and getting a witch to revive him. Frustrated but unwilling to compromise Faye's last wish, Kratos agrees and the now-three set off for Freya's hut.

Upon revival Mimir accidentally outs Freya as a god, which enrages Kratos and they leave after an argument – Freya and Mimir both insist Kratos tell Atreus about his godhood, Kratos refuses. The group continues on, leaving Freya behind. They face down Magni and Modi in battle, during which Kratos kills Magni and forces Modi to flee. Later on, Modi ambushes them and wounds Kratos, prompting Atreus to channel his own divine power and fall fatally ill. Under Mimir's guidance, Kratos rushes him to Freya who informs him that Atreus is sick because he is ignorant of what he is; believing himself to be mortal, not knowing the truth of his being, is literally killing him. Kratos is horrified, blames himself, and sets out to gather ingredients for a remedy. This requires him to travel back to his home and literally unbury his past, uncovering the Blades of Chaos he used in prior games and confronting an image of the Greek goddess Athena.

Mimir realizes who and what exactly Kratos is when the two travel to Helheim, Realm of the Dead, and Kratos sees a vision of his father Zeus. Kratos refuses to discuss it, and they return to Freya so that she may heal Atreus. Immediately after leaving with his now-healed son, Kratos tells Atreus of his godhood, much to his son's delight.

Atreus grows increasingly brash, prideful, and aggressive with the knowledge of his newfound power, eventually murdering a wounded Modi and then challenging Baldur to a fight right when Atreus and Kratos have finally opened a secret path to Jötunheim and the end of their journey is literally in sight. An enraged Atreus shoots his father when Kratos tries to stop the fight, and Baldur destroys the gate and kidnaps Atreus. The subsequent chase ends in with Kratos rescuing his son but landing stranded in Helheim. Kratos confronts Atreus' behavior and the two learn that Baldur is Freya's son, and that she blessed him with invulnerability at the cost of never feeling anything again. Resentful, angry, and betrayed, Baldur wants nothing more than Freya's death. Kratos and Atreus escape Helheim, though the Realm shows them both visions of Kratos' past and greatly upset the warrior.

Before they can lament their failure too long, they find an old mural with a hidden message – another way to Jötunheim, one that will restore it to the Nine Realms proper with the use of Mimir's eye, which was stolen by Odin. Mimir directs them to recover it, and when they realize the eye is within the World Serpent's stomach, the three acquire Jörmungandr's aide in retrieving it. Baldur attacks them after they've obtained the eye, and Kratos attempts to speak with the man and get him to renounce his revenge. Freya intervenes and tries to stop the two from fighting, and the battle devolves into absolute chaos. Baldur attempts to attack Atreus and accidentally cut himself on an arrowhead Sindri had given the boy made of mistletoe; this breaks his mother's spell and elated by the feeling of pain, Baldur throws himself back into the battle. Freya offers her life to Baldur so that he might find happiness, but Kratos pulls the man off his mother and kills him before Baldur can kill her. Freya is furious and swears revenge, threatening to tell Atreus exactly what his father has done, and Kratos cuts her off by confessing his sins to Atreus. She leaves, and Kratos, Mimir, and Atreus once again head to Jötunheim.

Mimir stays behind with Brok and Sindri, and the father and son make the last leg of their journey together. While on their way to the mountain's peak they find a Giant temple covered in murals and discover that Faye was a Giant – one of the last Giants, who defended her people and stayed behind when Jötunheim left the Nine Realms. They discover that their journey was foretold and realize that Faye intentionally sent them to Jötunheim to find the truth...and that Baldur and his nephews were then hunting *Faye*, not knowing she was dead, *not* Kratos. Despite the implications, Atreus and Kratos both reaffirm their love and trust for Faye and, knowing she never would have hurt them, the two finish their journey and spread her ashes. Finally, they return home.

## **Fatherhood**

### **Child-Parent**

*God of War* features an abusive child-father relationship, though Kratos deliberately spends as little time dwelling on his relationship with Zeus as possible. Instead, Kratos is terrified that he will make the same mistakes, that he is inherently an evil being by nature of his shared blood – and shared divinity – with Zeus and is *ashamed* to have slain his father. Prior games delved more intimately into the tragedy of their relationship, in which Zeus is responsible for attempting to murder Kratos, and indirectly for the death of Kratos' wife and daughter – but *God of War* instead focuses on Kratos' fears of how that will affect his relationship with his own son. He desperately fears that Atreus will uncover his past and judge him for it and goes to incredible lengths to hide this from his son despite Mimir and Freya begging him to reconsider. Kratos only recants and tells Atreus when Atreus' life is put in danger as a result.



This speaks to a very specific kind of anxiety over cycles of abuse, which will be touched on later on. Kratos cares very little for how Zeus' actions have affected him; instead he fears how they may affect his child. They are related, after all, and if Zeus could be such a bad father to his own flesh-and-blood, what's to stop Kratos from following the same path? Kratos seems to view it as inevitable, in part due to his godhood and in part due to his relation to Zeus. For Kratos, that fear is not just anxiety speaking – it's fact, and it isn't until the end of the game that Kratos feels comfortable declaring that he and Atreus will be different and find a healthier path.

### **Parent-Child**

*God of War* is entirely about Kratos working out his relationship with his son and their shared grief after Faye's death. The game begins with the father and son distant and uncertain of each other, and Kratos steps in as a cold, hard, authoritative figure. He calls Atreus *boy* – in fact, the player learns Atreus' name first through menus and quest logs, *not* from Kratos. He berates Atreus for not wanting to kill an animal, lectures him for not – in Kratos' eyes – wielding his weapon properly and eventually takes his son's bow away. He refuses to let Atreus carry Faye's ashes, and refuses to embark on their journey with him. In a time where his son is grieving half of his family, Kratos falls into a hyper-masculine and hyper-traditional role – and the game makes it very clear that it's not going to work. Atreus is, predictably, angry and resentful over this, especially as Kratos was not around all that much for Atreus' childhood – it was Faye who taught him to hunt, who taught him to shoot, who taught him to read and to use magic, who tended to him when he fell ill. Kratos and Atreus do not know how to communicate with each other, or how to understand each other; and so much of the game is about Kratos and Atreus learning to do so. This necessitates Kratos putting aside his more stoic tendencies.

This focus on communication is unique out of the games in this study; while John has trouble connecting with his son in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, it never reaches the same level or focus that Kratos and Atreus do. It is also never resolved as totally – Kratos and Atreus *work* for their relationship; it is an ongoing and ever-changing thing that the both of them address despite their initial discomfort with doing so. The first time Atreus clearly challenges Kratos on his cold treatment – “I said the only time you care to talk to me is when you need me to translate for you!”<sup>38</sup> – the two back down the moment Faye is mentioned. A short time later, however, during another argument, Kratos chooses to directly address a lingering conflict between the two; he was accidentally sucked into a pillar of magical light in Alfheim, leaving Atreus to find for himself for hours at minimum. Atreus was upset after, clearly thinking Kratos had abandoned him and, more importantly, that Kratos *wants* to abandon him. “You do not know my ways. I know it has not been easy. In the light...I felt only moments pass. If that is some comfort to you.”<sup>39</sup> It’s a stilted attempt at consoling his son, but Kratos makes an effort and takes the initiative to make the first move.

This becomes something of a pattern as the game progresses. Kratos hides his godhood – and therefore Atreus’ – from his son until he realizes it is causing Atreus harm. As soon as Atreus is healed and the two are alone, Kratos then confesses to prevent his son from suffering further. When Atreus becomes cruel and cocky and puts his pride above his own safety after learning of his godhood, Kratos does not coddle him but rather confronts him directly – “*I am your father and you, boy, are not yourself...you will honor your mother and abandon this path you have chosen.*”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

<sup>39</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

<sup>40</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

For Kratos, then, parenthood is about communication. While there's a certain level of authority and command Kratos holds over Atreus, by the end of the game Kratos has learned to be honest and upfront with his son, to trust him and work *with* him, and their relationship is all the better for it. The controlling and angry Kratos the game starts with is not only ineffective at parenting, but a *bad* parent – and only by growing past that does Kratos become a good father. Just like the games we've already discussed; good fathers communicate with their sons. For *God of War* specifically, good fathers must confront their traumas – and not keep their families in the dark. Kratos has already told Faye about his past before the game begins, and he and Atreus only heal together as a family when he tells Atreus of his past. For a character so deeply concerned over repeating mistakes of the past, this is absolutely necessary for Kratos' relationship with his son *and* his own growth.

### **Emotionality and Sensitive Masculinities**

After Baldur's first attack in *God of War*, a bloodied and injured Kratos limps back to what remains of his family's home where Atreus is hiding beneath the floorboards. As he struggles out of the remains of their battlefield, he speaks – not to any companion, but to his dead wife. His brusque treatment of his son, his words reveal, stem from his fear that Atreus is not capable of defending himself. If Atreus isn't willing to strike a killing blow first, he'll die. "He is not ready," Kratos says, "*and neither am I.*"<sup>41</sup>

This moment is, emotionally, one of the most important in the game. It vocalizes Kratos' emotions and reveals him as not the unchanged, stoic figure in the wake of his beloved's death,

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<sup>41</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

but as a man grieving and rudderless without her guidance. It contextualizes his treatment of his son, their distance – and sets Kratos up as a hero willing and able to learn and grow.

Kratos is not ashamed of his feelings, and actively acknowledges and works through them throughout the game. Every single issue addressed in his and Atreus' relationship follows a pattern; The issue being presented, Kratos realizing there is an issue, and then Kratos addressing it as quickly as possible. Those Alfheim examples again come to the fore; Kratos realizes Atreus feels he is unwanted, that Kratos would willingly abandon him, and reassures his son awkwardly, if sincerely. When Atreus accuses Kratos of not carrying about Faye, "Do not mistake my silence for lack of grief"<sup>42</sup> is Kratos' response. The two communicate and learn to understand one another. Kratos refuses to address his past and his godhood – and that, therefore, Atreus is also a god – up until they cause tangible harm to his son. He then immediately confesses and explains, albeit briefly, about who and what he is. He tries to hide his murder of Zeus from Atreus near the end of the game, but Helheim forces the two of them to see visions of that very death – and it is Atreus' turn to reach out to his father, when he waves off Kratos' attempt to explain and moves on.

The growth Kratos undergoes serves as a model of masculinity to his son and to the player; Atreus learns how to responsibly handle conflict, miscommunication, his own emotions, and so on. Kratos is not ashamed of his emotions, and so Atreus never learns to be either. Kratos also never shames *Atreus* for handling his emotions in different ways; that discussion about grief includes Kratos validating both his own method of grieving and his son's. The only shame Kratos and Atreus *ever* show, or are expected to show, are for their own actions – Kratos for the

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<sup>42</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

blood he has shed in his past, Atreus for his prideful endangering of their entire quest near the end of the game; not for how they feel. Actions speak louder than words, to a good man. Kratos stresses personal responsibility to his son – whatever actions one takes, even wrong, must not be forgotten. Kratos is a spectacularly violent individual – his combat power moves include ripping opponents apart with his bare hands – yet he stresses to Atreus that violence is only acceptable when necessary, that he is teaching his son to kill only in self-defense. Men who let their anger, hate, or vengeance consume them are weak. They are not prepared for battle, and they are unworthy. Good men are men who temper their rage, who stay their blades, and who take no action without understanding the consequences.

### **Abuse, Trauma, and Mental Health**

*“You hate the gods, all gods. It’s no accident that includes yourself. And it includes your boy, don’t you see that? He feels that.”*<sup>43</sup>. These are words Mimir says to Kratos while the two rush back to Freya with components necessary to save Atreus’ life. Kratos unquestionably thinks of himself as a monster; and to him, he is therefore incapable of being a good husband, a good father – a good teacher too, as Athena notes. That self-hatred manifests itself in his aggressive attempts to avoid his past with Atreus and the over-the-top front he puts on at the start of the game. He doesn’t even begin to be happy with himself until he’s come clean to Atreus and the two stand ready to finally spread Faye’s ashes, when he unwraps his arms and bares his scars to the world. This self-love is hard-fought for and absolutely essential for the exact reason Mimir

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<sup>43</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

gave him; part of himself is within his son, and Kratos cannot possibly hate his son, even if he despises himself.

Kratos' personal struggles still primarily revolve around his shame and angst over his past. The trauma he endured, trauma that has left such a long-lasting and deep impact on his psyche that he fears his son will inherit it, is something he comes to grip with by opening up to Atreus. Atreus learns that his father is from Greece, not Midgard, and that he is a god from a different pantheon; he learns that his father has killed many, and not just those that deserve to die. He learns that Kratos killed Zeus; and *sees* how, that Kratos threw his blades down in favor of killing Zeus with his bare hands. These things are clearly painful for Kratos to speak of, especially with Atreus so eager to learn more about his father that he presses him time and time again. Yet for all that pain, the more Kratos opens up to Atreus, the easier it becomes. He begins mentioning his homeland in conversations, or stories he heard when he was younger – things Atreus is desperate to hear of, because that is a side of his father he has never seen before. The first time Kratos speaks in major detail about his past is a moment of healing and connection with Atreus; they've spread Faye's ashes and are returning to Midgard, and Kratos tells Atreus of the soldier he was named after. In finally opening himself up and willingly bearing his soul to his son, Kratos lets go of the shame and pain that has silenced him for so long and let the trauma of his past rest. He's finally overcome his own demons, so to speak, and can now stand as a fully realized good man/father/hero for it.

Atreus, too, has learned how to properly deal with his father's trauma; when Atreus learns about what happened with Zeus, he quietly cuts his father off and does not push Kratos to speak of it – not something he would have done earlier in the game, when he hurtles question after question at Kratos at the earliest opportunity. In fact, when they reach the peak on which

they will spread Faye's ashes, Atreus interrupts Kratos' musing on his past – because Kratos' past is no longer important. It no longer has the weight and terror behind it that it did at the start of the game, and it no longer defines who Kratos is in Atreus' eyes. Silencing his father is Atreus' way of letting his father know he can let it go, and that that trauma no longer has a hold on him.

Kratos' fear that Atreus will inherit his same struggles is a profound one, and this generational trauma is something that *God of War* really puts in the spotlight throughout its narrative. Kratos has not yet seen a healthy parental relationship between gods. The god Týr, whose footsteps he and Atreus follow to find Jötunheim, is the first truly *good* god that Kratos can look to as an example – and Týr was a god of war, too. Freya and Baldur's relationship serves as a tragic breaking of this cycle, when Kratos intervenes. Freya had the best of intentions when she cast that protection spell upon Baldur, but she refused to take his will into account and thus cursed him. Baldur refused to see his mother's side and refuses, despite Kratos' urgings, to abandon his path of revenge. And Freya refuses to harm her son; if her death will bring him happiness she will gladly die at his hand. Kratos *knows* this will not help – he's lived it. Freya is the closest he's come to meeting a *good* god – and so he snaps Baldur's neck.

*“Is this what it is to be a god? Is this how it ends? Sons killing their mothers, their fathers?”*<sup>44</sup>, Atreus demands. *“We will be the gods we choose to be, not those who have been. Who I was is not who you will be. We must be better.”*<sup>45</sup> Kratos replies, and in that he reaffirms that the cycle can be broken, and that their breaking of it will not be so tragic. They've their bond, their love and trust between them. And they've the knowledge of Týr to guide them; a god

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<sup>44</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

<sup>45</sup> (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2018)

who was selfless and wise and *good*, to give them hope that they are not bound to this cycle. They know what could come, and the two of them, knowledgeable and prepared, are ready to make the decisions necessary to make *their* story different.

The murals Atreus uncovers in the Giant's temple at the end of the game, of course, bring this point forward again. The last image, an image Atreus does not see but Kratos does, is of Kratos lying prone, perhaps dead, and Atreus cradling his father's body. The picture is uncertain and indistinct, its meaning up for debate – but Kratos turns his back on it and follows his son out of the temple; he will not let that fear consume him again.

### **On Gender: What About the Women?**

*God of War* masterfully manages to avoid turning Faye into a plot device, while still having her death be the motivating factor in the game. She may be dead, but she is felt throughout the entirety of *God of War* as a tangible and real character. Without her there to guide him, Kratos is lost. Without her there to care for him, Atreus is lost. And so they follow her instructions down to the letter.

The game's opening scene depicts Kratos chopping down trees marked with a glowing sigil, to be used on Faye's funeral pyre. Later we learn that Faye hand-marked these trees and instructed Kratos to use those and only those that she'd marked for her pyre; and that some of these trees were part of a magical barrier Faye had put up to protect their home from outsiders. Kratos chopping down those trees is what allows Baldur into the wood, and what sends Kratos and Atreus off on their quest long before Kratos thinks Atreus is ready for it. Kratos assumes that Baldur is hunting him, and as such never questions or asks Magni, Modi, or Baldur who they are



looking for or why they are looking for them – to him, it is obvious. Yet, if the journey is Atreus' rather than Kratos, the hunt is also Faye's rather than Kratos' – he is neither the hero nor the prey in this story; he is only husband and father to those who are or will be great.

Faye was also Kratos' *hero*; she is his example of what he could be, what he *should* be, and what *good* even is. She was a warrior, like him – but a warrior who fought for the safety of others, who put her life on the line to protect those in need. Kratos wields her axe in her memory, and the biggest fight he has with Atreus is when Atreus insults her for being mortal. Brock and Sindri hold a similar reverence for her and threaten Kratos for merely possessing her axe until he tells them of Faye's fate.

When Atreus and Kratos stumble across the Giant's temple and discover that Faye was Laufey the Just, one of the last of the Giants and the warrior who stood against Odin's rampage, they also discover that the Giants had foretold the journey Atreus and Kratos had embarked upon. Atreus, whom the Giants called Loki, had been prophesized. Like Kratos, then, Faye had a long and storied history steeped in violence and tragedy – when Atreus and Kratos arrive on Jötunheim, the Giants are all dead – that she could not come clean with. So, she sent her husband and her son to spread her ashes from the Nine Realms' highest peak, trusting in both them and their love for her that they would see it through to the end and actually seek Jötunheim out, so that they might learn the truth.

Even dead, Faye has faced the same struggle Kratos did; how to come clean about her past to her loved ones. Kratos and Atreus didn't even know she wasn't mortal. Given Kratos' history of manipulation and lies with the Greek pantheon, his reaction to this discovery is especially noteworthy. Upon realizing the extent and meaning of what Faye has done, Atreus and Kratos choose to accept this. They *know* she loved them, that she cared for them, that she wanted

only the best for them. And they both *love* her; she is mother, hero, and beloved to them. So – they have faith in her, that she did not intend to hurt them or manipulate them. The prophecy, then, does not matter, does not change what they know is true. They put Faye to rest, and finally know her truth.

## Red Dead Redemption 2

*Red Dead Redemption 2* is both a sequel and a prequel. While it was released after the first two games, it is set before the events of *Red Dead Redemption*, something that makes the game all the more bittersweet for longtime fans but is not in any way necessary for newcomers to the franchise to enjoy the game. Set in an alternate Wild West-esque setting, *RDR2* is an action-adventure western following two members of the Van der Linde gang, Arthur Morgan (for the majority of the game) and John Marston, who is the protagonist of *Red Dead Redemption* alongside his son Jack.

*RDR2* was released to universal acclaim. It had the second biggest launch of any entertainment media<sup>46</sup>, not just video games, and also won its own assortment of Game of the Year awards<sup>47</sup>. It is the sixteenth best-selling video game of all time<sup>48</sup> and as of February 2020 has sold over 29 million copies<sup>49</sup>. Like *God of War*, it was released in the same cultural moment of 2018, with the #MeToo movement, ‘Time’s Up’, and heightened racial tensions.

## Summary

The game opens on the Van der Linde gang fleeing a veritable army of Pinkertons after a job gone disastrously wrong. Some members are dead or captured and those left are injured and without resources. Arthur Morgan is a senior member of the gang and an adoptive son of the gang’s leader Dutch Van der Linde. Dutch turns to Arthur as a reliable, loyal force in the midst

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<sup>46</sup> (Wood, 2018)

<sup>47</sup> (RockstarGames, 2019)

<sup>48</sup> (Wikipedia, 2020)

<sup>49</sup> (Makuch, 2020)

of their current uncertainty and Arthur delivers. He finds them shelter and rescues an injured John Marston from a pack of hungry wolves despite Arthur's dislike of the man, and later helps to rescue Sadie Adler from the O'Driscoll gang, who later joins the Van der Linde gang as a member. Dutch overhears an O'Driscoll plot to rob a train and decides to steal the target; with that success under their belt the gang sets up camp near the town of Valentine. There, Dutch begins plotting.

To escape their bounty and the Pinkertons, the gang needs money and resources – they can't afford to find a new start somewhere else without them, but these things are all in short supply in the rapidly industrializing west. While working to get the gang cash, Arthur attempts to collect debt from the Downes family, which ends in him beating the sickly Mr. Downes bloody in front of his wife and child. Shortly afterwards a Pinkerton detective catches up to Arthur and offers him amnesty for Dutch's head; Dutch seems surprised that Arthur didn't take the deal when Arthur reports it.

The owner of the train they robbed, Leviticus Cornwall, hunts them down in Valentine with a group of Pinkertons he hired to kill them, and the gang flees Valentine for safer sanctuary near the town of Rhodes. There Dutch and Arthur's other adoptive father Hosea begin a long con involving a family feud, which backfires spectacularly as the gang ends up being used and manipulated by the two families involved. John Marston's son Jack is kidnapped, and a young gang member Sean is slain. The gang is forced to relocate again to an abandoned plantation and becomes involved with a crime lord in the city of Saint Denis in order to get Jack back.

Arthur grows increasingly uneasy with Dutch's decisions as they grow more reckless and more violent – things Dutch has taught Arthur to avoid at all costs. They rescue Jack successfully, and Dutch decides to follow a lead given to him by the crime lord, which turns out

to be a set-up. Furious, Dutch takes the gang to kidnap and then murder him, and then decides to rob the Saint Denis bank – which also turns out to be a set-up. John and Abigail are captured, Hosea and a member named Lenny are killed, a member named Charles ends up missing, and Dutch, Arthur, Javier, and Micah end up stranded on an island in the throes of a civil war after their escape goes disastrously wrong.

Arthur finally confronts Dutch's behavior and is dismissed; Dutch believes John betrayed the gang and at the same time, Arthur begins showing signs of failing health. When they make it back to the mainland, the gang has gone deep into hiding with Sadie at their head. Abigail has been rescued but John is imprisoned and awaiting his execution, and no sooner are the rest of the members reunited than they need to flee from the Pinkertons again. Dutch refuses to help save John, so Sadie and Arthur retrieve him, infuriating Dutch. Arthur collapses and is diagnosed with tuberculosis, which he got earlier in the game from Mr. Downes. With nothing to lose, Arthur begins to throw all he has into keeping the gang members safe and atoning for his past sins. At the same time, Dutch grows closer and closer to Micah and more dismissive and angrier with the rest of the gang.

Dutch's girlfriend is killed after she claims she betrayed Dutch to the Pinkertons by the gang. Dutch intervenes in a local spat with the US Military and a nearby Native American tribe, engineering a full-on war and leaving Arthur to die in the aftermath. Arthur survives, though the tribe chief's son is killed, and Arthur then corners John and tells him to leave with Abigail and Jack – the Van der Linde gang is no longer safe. Dutch decides to commit one last great robbery before the gang can flee for safety, refuses Arthur's pleas to let the women go, and begins working with friends of Micah.

Gang members begin to flee, to Arthur's relief. While the heist is successful, John goes missing and Dutch claims John died in the crossfire. Upon returning to camp, they find that the Pinkertons have kidnapped Abigail and are on their trail. Arthur leaves to rescue Abigail and discovers that Micah is working with the Pinkertons; upon his return to camp he confronts Dutch and Micah with the truth. In the midst of their argument an injured John appears, furious that Dutch had intentionally left him to die – and then the Pinkertons descend upon them. John and Arthur escape and Arthur is given two choices; to go back for the gang's money or to help John escape. Regardless of the choice, John escapes and Arthur faces Micah and Dutch alone; he is killed and both men leave.

The rest of the game follows John and his family a few years later, as John struggles to go straight. He gets a job as a ranch hand, but after intervening in a local gang fight, Abigail and Jack leave him. John in turn works to save up enough money to start his own ranch, reunites with two members of the gang that survived – Uncle and Charles – and begins building a proper home for his family. Sadie hires him to help with bounty hunting, and reveals she is tracking Micah down and will come to John when she finds where he is. Abigail and Jack return, as does Sadie with news of Micah's whereabouts.

Together John, Sadie, and Charles ride to kill the traitor. Charles and Sadie are injured, but John manages to find and confront Micah. Mid-battle Sadie is captured by Micah, and then Dutch appears – working with Micah again, after everything that had happened. John pleads with Dutch to see reason, to realize that Arthur was right, and that Micah was the rat all along, as Micah orders Dutch to kill John and Sadie. Dutch ends up shooting Micah, leaving an opening for John to take advantage of and kill him – but then leaves. With his business concluded, the trio return to John's ranch, where he marries Abigail and settles down. The game's credits showcase

surviving members of the gang – those that sided with Arthur or left before Dutch’s final job – living peaceful, happy lives...but also show Pinkertons hunting John down and watching his ranch from afar; this leads directly into *Red Dead Redemption*.

## **Fatherhood**

### **Child-Parent**

Arthur Morgan’s character arc is comprised largely of his slow realization that Dutch is not the protective, benevolent father figure Arthur has been led to believe he is. This is especially difficult for Arthur as he believes himself to be an objectively terrible person; the Van der Linde gang historically followed Dutch’s philosophical outlook on good and evil, right and wrong – and when Dutch begins crossing those lines he himself has drawn in the sand, the checks meant to keep Arthur in place vanish. Arthur has, after all, put his faith and trust in Dutch – that Dutch would know better, guide him, teach him, *protect him*. As Dutch fails, Arthur must then struggle not only with his own sense of morality, to take responsibility for his own actions, but to confront his own complacency in Dutch’s growing evil and to realize that his father has led him astray. John is removed from this struggle, and while the game does make explicit that John was raised similarly – though not quite so intimately – as Arthur, John is more concerned with his relationship to his son than to his pseudo-father figure.

Dutch is a bad father because he uses his children. He manipulates them and gaslights them and punishes them by withholding his favor when he thinks they’ve disobeyed him. He puts them in danger to satisfy his own ego, and eventually goes so far as to try to kill them for daring to speak out against him. Dutch is selfish and egotistical, and he is not a good father. It

isn't his criminality – Hosea is also an outlaw, yet he serves as a positive and loving figure for Arthur – but rather his disregard for his children's well-being and his actions that prove him a poor father.

Both Arthur and John have a moment of catharsis with Dutch, where they independently confront him and beg for the man they knew to come back to them. For Arthur, this is Dutch choosing to leave him to die rather than finishing him off himself. For John, this is Dutch shooting Micah and leaving him and Sadie alive. Though it ends in tragedy and grief for the both of them, it allows them to put their relationship with Dutch to rest and to move on. John returns to his family and his ranch, and Arthur watches the sun rise one last time.

### **Parent-Child**

John and Arthur both face the opposite problem that *The Witcher 3* faces; rather than being too involved in their sons' lives, they are too *absent*. For most of *RDR2*, Arthur holds a deep-seated animosity towards John, which he explains as anger at John's brief abandonment of the gang – and more importantly, his young son Jack. When *RDR2* starts, John has only recently rejoined them and re-entered his son's life after at minimum a year of absence. This is particularly upsetting for Arthur, who near the end of the game explains that he, too had had a son – a son he'd walked out on, visiting only briefly and only when it was convenient for him. Due to his absence, he wasn't around when robbers attacked his son or his son's mother, and when Arthur next came around it was to find them both dead and buried. He regrets his absence, and both pushes John to be better and resents him for making the same mistake as a result. To



Arthur, being a good father requires taking responsibility for your child and being there for them, even at cost to oneself.

John comes to realize this, too, especially after Jack is kidnapped mid-game. He, Arthur and Dutch team up to rescue Jack and, after, John reintegrates himself into Jack's and Abigail's lives with the intent to be a family again. He stops running from his responsibilities and steps up to the plate. After Arthur dies and the three of them escape, John still struggles with this – he finds he can't stop being an outlaw, can't stop trying to be a hero, even when it hurts his family. For John, this is a question of morality; what the right thing to do is. He chases off a gang harassing a local ranch and outs himself as a gunslinger literal hours after promising Abigail he'd try to find a normal life *because* they were threatening and harassing innocent people. He takes bounty jobs with Sadie to stop criminals and earn money, and eventually rides with her and Charles to go kill Micah despite Abigail begging him not to in order to honor the lives and friends he lost to Micah's machinations.

Yet he also gets a legal job; saves up enough and applies for a legal loan; builds a ranch with his bare hands and purchases livestock and asks Abigail to legally marry him and begins a whole new life. John *tries* to do better, to be better, for his family while balancing obligations he feels he owes to their old life. The ranch is a solution in that it separates him from the temptation of interfering in others' lives.

After Jack's kidnapping, Abigail stops asking Arthur to spend time with Jack because John no longer needs to be prodded into doing so and is willing to be the father figure Jack needs, a role Arthur had been hesitant to fill because it was John's to handle. After Arthur's death, John reaches out and attempts to bond with his son despite them both being vastly different people – Jack enjoys literature, panics at the site of death, has no interest in being a

tough gunslinger like his father. And John does not belittle this or talk down to his son for it; he encourages and supports Jack's interests, and explicitly tells Jack that Jack is already doing better than he ever did. To John, being a good father is being supportive and being present.

Here again we see good fathers as supportive, affectionate, and communicative. To be a good father, John must provide for his family in a safe and legal manner and not put them at risk. John tells Jack he's proud of him not in spite of but because of their differences. John is also very explicit in his reasoning for this; he's nothing but an outlaw in a world that has no use for men like him any longer. Jack has avoided that path, has the whole world open to him, and can grow into the kind of man who could *thrive* in an industrialized west full of cities and trains and increasingly fantastical inventions. A good father then paves the way for his son to succeed in ways he never could, encourages his son to be more successful than he ever was, and supports his son in being happier and more stable than he ever could be.

### **Emotionality and Sensitive Masculinities**

Like Kratos', Arthur's narrative also carries deep depictions of shame. By the end of the game when he learns he only has a short time left to live, Arthur begins desperately to try and make amends for his sins. He's spent the entire game denying and arguing with anyone and everyone who calls him a good man – grateful strangers and rescued loved ones alike – and yet only when he actively begins trying to do the right thing does Arthur's response change to "*Sometimes, maybe.*"<sup>50</sup> This personal moral reckoning comes with serious consequences for the game's story - at the same time Arthur is trying to atone for Mr. Downes' death by helping his

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<sup>50</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

widow escape a life of prostitution and her son escape an abusive mine, Arthur begins to stand his ground against Dutch. Some of his sins, then, were standing by and turning the other cheek for so long while Dutch brought ruin to his family – and he cannot leave that conflict unresolved when he’s been an enabler thus far into the game.

Before Arthur falls ill, Dutch *was* his moral compass; it was Dutch who gave the Van der Linde gang noble ideals and rules, imparted all manner of life lessons meant to make them different and better than a common outlaw. These were things Dutch was supposed to abide by; so of course he would *never* order a gang member, a *family* member, to go against them. By trying to alleviate his shame and guilt, Arthur is necessarily forced to reckon with his adoptive father’s hypocritical behavior. Arthur no longer has a future to worry about, no longer sees any value in personal gain when he can’t make use of what he takes anyway; what he concerns himself with is the well-being of others. It’s why he begs Dutch to let the gang go before he gets them killed, it’s why he helps Rain Falls try to mitigate his son’s thirst for war and eventually rides into a full-blown battle to save Eagle Flies, it’s why he is so desperate to help Mrs. Downes and her son and give John and Abigail and Jack a chance to be free. Arthur may have been a man before this, but to be a good man, Arthur *must* do all he can to protect others, to take responsibility for himself, and to stop letting his loyalty blind him.

Arthur is also seen as reliable, trustworthy, and powerful by the Van der Linde gang as a whole; they look to him for guidance, for help, for protection. If they have a problem, they come to him to solve it. If they have a dangerous mission, they come to him to ride with them. Arthur’s approval means a lot to the gang, and he is so dedicated to protecting *them* that he betrays Dutch to keep them safe.

John inherits these lessons and adds his own. After Arthur's death, John becomes a good father to Jack; he supports his son's interests and reassures his son that he's proud of him. Even when Abigail and Jack leave him, John throws himself behind bettering himself. He needs to provide for them to be a good man, a good father. He needs to give them a proper future free of the trials that an outlaw life brings, and, by the measure of *Red Dead Redemption 2*, he does. He offers his home to Sadie and Charles and Uncle to provide for those he loves and cares about. He rides out to kill Micah, too, to be a good man – to honor Arthur's sacrifice and the deaths of Lenny and Sean and Hosea and Molly and Mrs. Grimshaw and every other gang member they lost. John does not leave that chapter of his life unfinished; with Micah dead, he sets his past behind him and fully commits to the future he's built for his wife and son on their ranch – and so a good man leaves nothing unfinished, either.

### **Abuse, Trauma, and Mental Health**

Dutch is the textbook definition of an abuser, and his relationship with Arthur is about the creeping rise of his abuse and Arthur's slow realization that Dutch no longer cares for him. One of Dutch's favorite sayings is to "have faith"<sup>51</sup> in him, and as the game progresses it becomes clear what Dutch means is *stop questioning me* and *obey*. He invokes this phrase whenever his plans are questioned, even innocently, and accuses Arthur of having no faith more and more vehemently as their relationship deteriorates. He gaslights Arthur – and the rest of the gang – through this; any question or concern about his plans are no longer made in good faith; they are an attack and a direct challenge to his authority and Dutch treats them as such. Arthur, of course,

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<sup>51</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

backs down – he hadn't meant to insinuate that Dutch was an incompetent leader...and so Dutch gets away with it.

Arthur was raised by Dutch and Hosea, and while he is rather blunt about their relationship, Dutch is anything but. He calls Arthur son, brother, partner – constructs whatever relationship-based narrative he needs to get Arthur to do what he wants at that moment. If that's paternal authority, he reminds Arthur how much like a son he is to him. If Dutch needs Arthur to feel included, empowered – they're suddenly brothers or partners-in-crime. Arthur is important to Dutch only so long as he does not question, does as he is told, and remains useful.

When their bank heist in Saint Denis goes south and Arthur, Dutch, and a few other members of their gang end up stranded in Guarma, Arthur is finally presented with evidence of Dutch's callousness that he cannot turn away from. "Are you gonna strangle me next?"<sup>52</sup>, he asks, after Dutch kills a woman. She was going to betray them, is Dutch's defense. "It was in her eyes, in the way she was leading us!"<sup>53</sup> he finally snaps; and by the time they return to the rest of the gang, Arthur is no longer one of Dutch's faithful. Arthur's killed for Dutch, saved for Dutch, given every drop of blood and sweat, every coin and every bullet, for Dutch. Arthur has, as before mentioned, used Dutch as his own moral compass; and Arthur comes to terms with this in a much more forgiving way than one would expect, in his conversations with Charles and John – he does not believe that Dutch was *always* a manipulative, abusive man. Charles says he thinks Dutch "descended into the kind of man he told us never to be"<sup>54</sup>, beneath the pressure of a dying

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<sup>52</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

<sup>53</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

<sup>54</sup> (Rockstar Studios, 2018)

west and the rise of industrialization and civilization. Dutch's desperation to provide for his gang and obsession with the next job, the next heist, is what he lost himself to.

Arthur's choice to confront Dutch is also indicative of the abuse he's seen; his ex-lover Mary still lives beneath her own abusive father's thumb and refuses to leave him – they are blood, after all. Her father puts her little brother at risk, and still Mary defends him – and with Arthur so deeply concerned over the rest of the gang's survival, he knows he can't stagnate like she has.

*Red Dead Redemption 2* does more than simply show that Arthur isn't at fault for the abuse he goes through. It presents the slow creep of red flags and concerning behavior to its players. It shows them how painful it can be to speak up when someone you love goes too far, when you realize that you do not matter, that they have lied. It shows how easy it is to explain away and rationalize concerns when they begin cropping up, and that sometimes there is no fixing – or saving – an abuser. Dutch flees Arthur's broken, dying body just as he flees from John and Sadie. He is a coward; he did not refrain from killing them because he still loved them or because he was still a noble man – he did it because he was put in a position to pull the trigger himself. There is a reason his shot at Micah was not fatal, and John was forced to unload into Micah's body. No matter how powerful or what great things an abuser does – he is still weak, and he is still a coward. This peels back the veneer of paternal authority Dutch uses, and that traditional masculinities front – a good father/man/hero is one who takes criticisms, who is questioned, and who explains himself to his friends and allies. A good father/man/hero is not absolute, nor is he the final authority. Only abusers are.

**On Gender: What About the Women?**

*Red Dead Redemption 2* exemplifies the idea that strong and capable women are the exception rather than the rule through two things; Sadie Adler's character, and the prevalence of suffragettes in the background of the game. Arthur is painted as vehemently anti-racist, but his encounters with those fighting for women's rights are much less dramatic. In one mission, he helps guard a march for women's suffrage in the town of Rhodes, and after Arthur writes about how much fun he had doing so in his journal. He does not feel particularly strongly one way or the other about women earning their liberties and can choose to donate to or ignore individual suffragettes throughout the rest of the game with no consequence. He takes this same amused kind of approach to Sadie Adler once she begins asserting herself. Micah, Arthur, and Dutch rescue Sadie after the O'Driscoll gang kills her husbands. She joins up with them out of necessity and spends much of the early game quiet and grieving.

This changes when the gang moves to Rhodes, and Arthur intervenes in a fight between her and Pearson. She's no longer quite so grief-stricken and wants to earn her keep. She was given cooking duty as a result, and she's furious over it. She and her husband were equals, and when she explains this to Arthur he does little more than chuckle and decide to take her into town with him to cool off. She changes out of her dress and into pants in the town, Arthur makes a crack about it, and then she shoots down an entire mob of Lemoyne Raiders that attempt to rob the pair of them on their way back to camp. This marks a turning point in her character; she's now assertive and quickly becomes a much bigger part of the story. Arthur and the gang still treat her with some amusement up until they return from Guarma and find that Sadie has relocated and protected the gang's vulnerable members in their absence. She and Arthur rescue John together, and she immediately sides with Arthur over Dutch. Sadie and Arthur rescue

Abigail from Agent Milton, and after Arthur's death Sadie becomes a renowned bounty hunter and tracks down Micah.

She's strong, capable, and *absolutely* powerful – yet she's also exceptional. None of the other Van der Linde women gun-sling like the men to earn money, and none of the other women stepped up in the same way – though they've all killed to protect the gang before. Arthur even stops thinking of her as a woman by the time everything falls apart; when he begs Dutch to let the gang's women go before the gang robs an army train, he lists them off by name...and Sadie's name is not mentioned. He's confident in her ability to fend for herself and knows just how capable she is; but she's also lost her femininity by taking up gunslinging.



## Conclusion

The themes this study has discussed – fatherhood, emotion, trauma and gender – come together to create a more positive masculine ideal. Good men/fathers/heroes are strong, capable, and powerful. They are every inch the male power-fantasy more traditional models are; yet they have shed the toxicity that lingers in the specifics of those older models. The male characters embrace their emotions rather than shun them, they seek help and companionship rather than carrying their burden alone. They are honest and upfront with their children and understanding and sensitive to their children's needs. They are not authoritative or domineering over others, though they may and often do possess some kind of authority over others. They do not abuse their positions or their abilities for personal gain. They accept their failures and own up to their mistakes, and they are not afraid to try again. Women are their equals, not an object of desire or a motivation or entirely helpless. These models have not, I stress again, replaced traditional masculinities. They did not spring into existence with no relation to older models, and they do not exist with no relation to older models. These protagonists have evolved, their models of masculinity shifting and changing with the times and their own experiences, and have shed some of the more toxic traits traditional masculinities carry.

This project was bound by time and resource constraints, and as such it may have understated the immense popularity of these games; outside of mere rankings and numbers, fans continue to advocate for, make content for, and discuss them years after their release. These games were chosen, in part, because of that popularity and how active and outspoken their fans are. Due to the time and resource constraints, this was limited to a brief description of major awards, rankings, and/or copies sold. I would like to stress, however, that their popularity means

that these games are being played over and over again – and that the messages within them are being consumed repeatedly as well.

Their popularity also pushes the trend they are part of forward; again, these games were released by major studios. Making more games that utilize what made these so successful – in part, their depictions of masculinity – is a no-brainer for profit-driven companies. These games are not and will not be the end of this trend.

One thing that was touched upon briefly is the context surrounding the release of these games – social, cultural, and political events occurring around the same time they dropped. I hesitate to say that these specific events shaped the creation of these atypical heroes and the non-traditional masculinities they espouse, but the anxieties and conflicts on which these events center likely did; it takes time before any particular problem builds up enough pressure to create a movement. Therefore, the #MeToo movement may not have directly influenced these games, for example, but the push against workplace harassment and female victimhood may have. Another example - the 2016 election may not feature in these games, but the rise in political tensions and far-right hate groups may influence the way revolutionaries or dictators are portrayed. No piece of art is divorced from the context within which it is made, and video games are no exception.

I also suspect, though this project did not have the time or resources to dive into it, that these four games' being series has much to do with the shift in their portrayals of masculinity. The people who made these games likely grew up playing prior iterations, and at the time of creating them were likely at a time in which fatherhood and personal struggles are serious concerns of their own. Shifting their protagonist's anxieties would, then, be a reflection of not just social and cultural changes in masculinity but simple life stressors as well; things that come

with age and maturity. This would need its own project to delve into, of course – and this project here is not it.

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