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Side-Eye from the Side Kid: Child Sidekicks as Disciplinary Tools in Contemporary Video Games

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Abstract: In this article, I analyse the function of supporting child-characters in contemporary videogames. I integrate Stephen Zimmerly's typology of sidekicks in Young Adult literature with critical writing on the 'Daddening' of videogames, a coinage that refers to the rise in the number of videogames that centre on the filial bond between a father figure and a child. Bringing these ideas into conversation with each other allows me to expand Zimmerly's sidekick typology to include the 'Ludic Gateway', the 'Morality Certificate', and the 'Disciplinary Tool'. I explore each category in greater depth using two case studies: *The Last of Us* series (2012; 2014; 2020) and the *God of War* series (2008; 2018; 2022). These commercially successful, critically acclaimed franchises rely on young deuteragonists to humanize and redeem the gruff, aggressive, violent male player character. Furthermore, the child sidekicks also serve to regulate the player's in-game behaviour by way of a parasocial relationship. Using a close reading approach, I demonstrate that the supporting child-characters function as meta-critical devices to discipline gaming communities and the video game medium itself.

Keywords: childhood; video games; interactive texts; digital games; new media



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1. Introduction

Child-players of video games are often in the spotlight. For the past four decades, psychologists, education researchers, media studies scholars, behavioural psychiatrists, policy makers, and legislators have treated child-players as a special demographic that is uniquely susceptible to the formative influence of interactive media (Reay 2024). Cultural anxiety about our changing relationship with communications technology and digital media finds expression in these child-focused studies, where concerns about dependency, vulnerability, and ignorance can be explored without undermining conceptions of the 'adult' as independent, rational, and competent.

Child-characters in video games have not received a proportionate amount of academic attention (Sjöblom 2015). It is true that the material turn in Cultural Studies has triggered a more general shift in focus from text to user, but formalist analysis of media representation is usually still considered key to contextualizing the lived experiences of different social groups. Feminist, queer, critical race, and critical disabilities scholars, for example, frequently critique how specific identities are represented in video games. They argue that video game characters can be symptoms of, causes of, and even potential remedies for misogyny, homophobia, racism, and ableism in gaming cultures. It is inconsistent that researchers analysing the effects of video games on child-players are seemingly uninterested in representations of children and childhood.

The neglect of child-characters and the overfocus on child-players suggest that many research paradigms do not approach 'the child' as if it were a socially constructed identity (Jenks 2005). While we are becoming better at understanding gender, sexuality, race, and ability as relational identities that emerge from the interaction between biological and social factors, childhood is often positioned as if it were a universal, ahistorical, and apolitical

state (James and Prout 1990). Despite the fact that definitions of childhood vary significantly across cultures and over time periods, common sense understandings of childhood assume that young people can be meaningfully corralled and classified according to age in years (Lesnik-Oberstein 2011). Taking seriously the representation of child-characters in video games reminds us that much of what is assumed to be natural, obvious, and straightforward about the label ‘child’ is in fact the product of a complex, shifting matrix of social rules, economic conditions, and political mandates that are specific to a particular time, place, and culture (Reay 2021). Understanding the effects that video game representations of childhood have on players of all ages undoubtedly requires the insights of child-participants through audience reception studies. However, critiquing fictional depictions of children as they appear in video games can make explicit the social scripts and behavioural norms that are made available to young people via the media they consume and co-create. This, in turn, provides valuable context for conceptualizing how young players might submit to, subvert, or resist the stratification of society by age. It also facilitates better conversations about how adult-players calibrate their own age-based social identities in response to representations of childhood. In short, expanding critical attention to include child-characters on the screen as well as child-players in front of the screen can sensitize us to the ‘interpellative work of age’ (Edelstein 2018, p. 11) and its ideological function as a regulatory tool across multiple areas of our lives.

Representations of children have been analysed in contemporary film (e.g., Balanzategui 2018; Lury 2010), contemporary literature (e.g., Bernstein 2011; Bond Stockton 2012; Renner 2013; Beauvais 2015), political messaging (e.g., Stephens 1995; Edelman 2004; Bacon and Ruickbie 2020), and advertising (e.g., Cross 2004; Holland 2006). In this article, I posit that representations of children in video games are equally important to understanding contemporary constructions of childhood. The very fact that the medium is frequently vilified as a threat to childhood whilst simultaneously being denigrated as mere ‘child’s play’ suggests that video games are key arenas in which definitions of childhood are being created and contested (Reay 2018, 2020). Furthermore, while the material reality of childhood can sometimes feel fixed and stable—solidified by medical, legal, educational, and commercial pressures—the immateriality of video games and the tension between their audiovisual layers and their underlying code suggest that childhood is a state that could be modded, speedrun, patched, paused, or reloaded. As playful media, video games invite experimentation, and as rule-bound media, video games enforce boundaries. Thus, discovering what interactions are possible when playing as (or with) a digital child-character can reawaken players to the artificiality of the strict rules that segregate children and adults and the stratification of society by age more broadly (Reay 2024).

2. Method and Corpus Selection

In this article, I examine the figure of the ‘child sidekick’—or the Side Kid—in contemporary video games. In 2020, I surveyed representations of children in over 500 popular video games published between 2009 and 2019. I found the Side Kid—a non-playable child deuteragonist who accompanies the avatar on their adventure—was a common trope, particularly in action-adventure games with photorealistic graphics. Through close readings of two commercially successful, critically acclaimed video game series—*God of War* and *The Last of Us*—I argue that the Side Kid not only scaffolds the identities of the adult protagonists but also carefully shapes the subject positions available to players of these games.

A significant proportion of Side Kid examples in my survey appeared in video games that were part of the ‘Daddening’. The Daddening refers to the rise in the number of video games that centre fatherhood, most of which were published between 2010 and 2020 (Totilo 2010; Stuart 2013; Myers 2013; Brice 2013)¹. The Daddening trend has been analysed through the lens of postfeminist masculinities (e.g., Stang 2017; Parker and Aldred 2018; Conway 2020), but thus far the focus has been on the adult protagonist at the expense of the child deuteragonist. This article complements existing critical thought on the Daddening,

offering an alternative interpretation of the implications for gaming communities and the video game medium more broadly. Critics of the Daddening see the protagonist's paternal role as a re-entrenchment of masculine dominance: with 'Dads' at the centre of these virtual worlds, women and children exist primarily to create situations in which aggressive violence is legitimized as fierce protectiveness or as vengeful justice. I agree that there are many examples of child deuteragonists in video games whose sole purpose is to shore up patriarchal power in male-centric stories by being sites vulnerable to violation by the Other. These fragile child-characters glorify the brutal, cathartic elimination of the Other by invoking a moral superstructure that absolves the death-dealing hero of his ruthless bloodlust (Reay 2023). However, the exercise of creating a typology of child sidekicks nuances this reading, demonstrating that some Side Kids can also undermine hegemonic masculinity and disrupt the normalization of violent mechanics in video games. Applying this typology to select games from two series that continue to be important focal points for discussions of the Daddening (*God of War* (2018; 2022) and *The Last of Us* (2012; 2020)) reveals medium-specific 'growing pains'—impulses coalescing in the figure of the Side Kid that are, by turns, both patricidal and emancipatory.

Beyond their child deuteragonists, the video games discussed in this article have other significant similarities. They are both AAA², third-person, action series with a predetermined narrative, photorealistic graphics, and cinematic cutscenes. Both are fully motion-captured and voice-acted, and both are part of flagship series for PlayStation consoles. In terms of plot, each follows the development of the relationship between a grizzled, violent, bereaved adult man and a vulnerable, brave, exceptional child on a long, arduous journey through a lush but dangerous land. In terms of mechanics, both games combine traversing the environment (by foot and horse in *The Last of Us*, and by foot, boat, and wolf-drawn sleigh in *God of War*) with satisfyingly 'juicy', 'crunchy' combat. 'Juice' and 'crunch', respectively, refer to the haptic pleasures and strategic intricacies of a video game's combat system. Outside of death-dealing and survival, *The Last of Us* leans into stealth, crafting, and inventory management, whereas *God of War* favours solving environmental puzzles and customizing the characters' combat abilities.

The Last of Us series is set in a verdant, post-apocalyptic North America that is rapidly being rewilded by natural forces. The gameworld is almost an Edenic garden of childly rejuvenation, but the presence of fungus-ridden, cannibalistic zombies, roving militias of murderous survivors, and the rotting remains of the dead somewhat impedes the characters' enjoyment of this thriving, temperate jungle. The narrative traces the evolving bond between a hard, bitter smuggler called Joel and a fierce, funny, sensitive preteen called Ellie (Figure 1). In *The Last of Us* (2012), Joel transports Ellie across the country to a rebel base where a besieged bastion of doctors and scientists hope that studying Ellie's immunity to the zombie virus will enable them to develop a vaccine. When Joel discovers that their research requires the removal of Ellie's brain, he murders the entire rebel faction and lies to Ellie about doing so. *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) begins by killing off Joel. Players subsequently switch between playing as Ellie—who sets out on a blood-soaked mission to avenge Joel's death—and playing as Abby, the young woman responsible for Joel's murder and the daughter of the brain surgeon Joel killed to save Ellie.

God of War (2018) follows Kratos—the eponymous god of war—and his young son Atreus on a pilgrimage to the highest peak in the realms to scatter the ashes of Atreus's recently deceased mother (Figure 2). The grieving pair navigate wildernesses haunted by the restless spirits of those who died in combat, revenants who exchanged their humanity for magical powers, mythical monsters, and murderous Norse gods. They also form relationships with two feuding dwarven brothers, the Vanir goddess Freya, and the knowledgeable head of Odin's former advisor, Mimir, which Kratos severs from Mimir's trapped, tormented body and wears dangling on a belt hook for the remainder of the game. At the game's conclusion, Kratos and Atreus have repaired their fractured relationship, establishing a connection rooted in mutual trust and respect. *God of War: Ragnarök* (2022) tests their newly formed filial bond, with Atreus craving greater independence and Kratos

expressing his protective instincts through controlling behaviour. Atreus yearns to embrace his fate as 'Löki: the destroyer of Asgard', but Kratos is adamant that they will forge their own pacifist destiny. At the game's conclusion, Kratos and Atreus emerge triumphant and united following their defeat of Odin. However, the murder of the likeable, foul-mouthed dwarf Brok and the furious grief of his surviving brother Sindri make it a bittersweet victory. These two games are a marked departure from the six preceding console games in the *God of War* series, developed between 2005 and 2015. Previous instalments played gross-out violence for laughs and featured crass, misogynistic sex mini-games that pandered to the alleged tastes of teenaged boys.



Figure 1. Ellie and Joel in *The Last of Us* (2012).



Figure 2. Atreus and Kratos in *God of War* (2018).

3. Proposal

Stephen [Zimmerly \(2019\)](#) argues that there are four definitional roles that traditional sidekicks perform: the Narrative Gateway, the Comic Relief, the Foil, and the Devil's Advocate. The Narrative Gateway allows the reader to better understand the enigmatic protagonist. The Comic Relief lightens the serious mood set by the protagonist. The foil is juxtaposed with the protagonist to magnify the protagonist's defining features. The Devil's Advocate provides a contrasting perspective to that of the protagonist. In this article, I locate the characters of Ellie and Atreus within Zimmerly's typology. I demonstrate that the childliness³ of the Side Kid generates three further roles: the Ludic Gateway, the Morality Certificate—which could perhaps be considered a replacement for the Devil's Advocate—and the Disciplinary Tool. I propose that this expanded typology (Table 1) be used as a tool to map to the rhetorical function, symbolic value, and the ideological force of supporting child-characters in contemporary video games.

Table 1. Expanded Typology.

Trope	Summary
Narrative Gateway	Ignorance facilitates exposition through dialogue with protagonist
Ludic Gateway	Inexperience facilitates narrativized tutorials that train the player without undermining the expertise of the protagonist
The Comic Relief	Age discrepancy creates the incongruity necessary for comedy
The FFoil	Weaknesses magnify the protagonist's strengths and proficiencies expose protagonist's shortcomings
The Devil's Advocate/The Morality Certificate	Advocates for playstyles that prioritize narrative satisfaction, emotional gratification, and the performance of one's moral position Personal development of Side Kid is a legible record of the moral decision making of protagonist
The Disciplinary Tool	Regulates both the protagonist's and the player's actions by encouraging integrity over expediency and self-sacrifice over survival

4. Demonstration

4.1. The Narrative Gateway and the Ludic Gateway

The Side Kid's innocence and inexperience can facilitate expository dialogue that provides important narrative context. Communicating key information to the player via dialogue between the protagonist and the Side Kid can feel less contrived than having two adult characters explain to each other a situation or concept that they are meant to be familiar with, or having the protagonist speak their thoughts aloud. The latter method would feel particularly forced in the case of characters such as Kratos or Joel, whose stolid, unforthcoming restraint would be undone by the addition of a chatty inner-monologue.

At the beginning of *The Last of Us* (2012), Ellie has never left the quarantine zone and so the outside world is as new to her as it is to the player (Voorhees 2016). Joel explains the dangers and opportunities of the apocalyptic environment to Ellie in a way that would not make sense to one of his associates or peers. The Side Kid means that the player and the adult protagonist do not need to learn in tandem because the child's presence provides an opportunity for the player to glean key information for the first time without the protagonist appearing uncharacteristically ignorant.

Atreus is positioned as less experienced and less knowledgeable than Kratos, and he begins the game unaware both of Kratos's traumatic past and of his own burgeoning godhood. His constant questions may annoy Kratos, but they provide opportunities for the game to communicate lore to the player—especially if the player is new to the *God of War* series. Atreus demonstrates that in addition to functioning as a Narrative Gateway responsible for the delivery of exposition, the Side Kid also onboards the player as a Ludic Gateway. The Side Kid's age-related unworldliness also serves to narrativize gameplay tutorials that introduce players to input controls and mechanics. To put it another way, the Side Kid is a pedagogic device in the Socratic mode.

The opening father–son hunting quest in *God of War* (2018), for example, doubles as the game's ranged combat tutorial. Kratos instructs Atreus to kill a large, white stag. With the player guiding Atreus's aim, the young boy is able to injure the majestic animal with an arrow. This tutorial is not extraneous to the game's central narrative because it also introduces key dynamics of the relationship between Kratos and Atreus. When Atreus is faced with ending the stag's suffering using his mother's knife, he falters. In a cutscene,

Kratos places his huge hands over Atreus's weak grip and guides the knife into the stag's jugular. Killing, here, is presented as a rite of passage both for the young boy and for the player, as it marks the end of the tutorial. However, the game makes clear that there is more to learn than basic survival skills. Following the stag's death, Atreus struggles to read Kratos's silence, which in turn makes it difficult to express himself. He begins, 'I...' but words fail him, and so instead he mirrors his father's pose—kneeling, with one hand resting on his thigh, looking out over the mountain pass. He has interpreted his father's silence as disappointment and disapproval, and in copying his father's physical posture, he reveals a desire to be more like the stoic, hardened man beside him. The camera tracks backwards and the player sees Kratos attempt to place a comforting hand on his son's shoulder—a gesture of affection and understanding. But just as Atreus could not complete the violent act with the knife, Kratos cannot complete this reassuring gesture: his hand hovers in mid-air and then falls to his side. Knowing the shortcomings of both characters, the player may reinterpret their mirrored poses. Their symmetry conveys not just the aspirations of a young boy hoping to be more like his father but also the father's need to reciprocally learn from his son.

Both Ellie and Atreus are hyper-ludic (Conway 2020) in that they expand the interactive possibilities available to the player and allow the player to be a more potent agent in the gameworld. Kratos and Atreus possess complementary skillsets that combine to produce harmonious flow states during combat and satisfying balance during puzzle solving. The enemy types known as 'revenants', for example, teleport too rapidly for Kratos to hit them with his Leviathan axe, and so players must direct Atreus to stun this enemy type with a well-timed arrow to give Kratos a window to attack. Furthermore, Atreus's bow can harness magical powers that can be used to create bridges and destroy blockages to unlock previously inaccessible areas and items. In this way, the Side Kid uncovers more lateral space for exploration, which leads players away from the linear trajectory of the main narrative to engage in pleasurable delays. Finally, Atreus is a useful ally for the player when attempting to navigate the gamespace and solve environmental puzzles. The AI controlling Atreus is programmed to have him run slightly ahead of Kratos wherever possible, meaning that Atreus often leads players in the right direction through the expansive gameworld, meaning he can help to orient players if they are lost and direct their attention towards points of interest. Some of Atreus's comments suggest a meta-awareness of his role as the Ludic Gateway. At one point he says accusingly, 'the only time you talk to me is when you need something from me!', a statement that implies he would like to engage in dialogue with Kratos that goes beyond the purely utilitarian exchanges of 'Boy! Read this!' and 'Boy! Come here!'. Nonetheless, his usefulness to the protagonist and to players ensures the gameplay does not replicate the dynamics of the much-maligned 'escort mission', wherein the orbital non-player character is experienced as an unwanted burden that limits fluid gameplay. Instead, the Side Kid ingratiates itself with the player by being an invaluable expository and ludic device.

While players may feel an embodied connection to the adult protagonist that they direct via their controller, they are likely to feel a stronger psychic connection with the Side Kid, whose sense of wonder and awe better matches their own orientation towards the fictional world and whose initial ignorance mirrors the player's own unfamiliarity with both the game's mechanics and its lore. In offering players a subject position shaped to the space *between* the adult protagonist and the Side Kid, these games can instruct and guide their players without undermining their sense of identification with the hardened, worldly, authoritative protagonist. In other words, players can step into the flattering role of the protective father whilst benefitting from the handrails and instruction provided by the games' tutorials.

4.2. The Comic Relief

In their typology of humour in video games, Dormann and Boutet note that comedy often arises 'from characters' juxtapositions in unlikely environments or situations' (Dormann

2014, p. 1). The age gap between the Side Kid and the protagonist can result in a juxtaposition of skills, experience, and perspectives, which produce humorous incongruities. Additionally, the presence of a Side Kid creates opportunities for witty repartee and funny commentary on in-game events through the exchange of dialogue expressing competing perspectives. Dormann and Boutet claim that comic non-player characters are preferable to comic avatars because an avatar with a strong, well-developed personality can impede player–avatar identification that relies on the avatar being a blank screen for the player’s self-projection. On one hand, both Joel and Kratos are dour, grumpy characters whose disinclination for talking gives them a cryptic, brooding quality that could be seen to better facilitate player projection by leaving the character’s emotional responses ambiguous. On the other hand, the Side Kids often bring to light the comedic potential of these protagonists by drawing attention to how *unrelatable* the protagonists’ muted, phlegmatic reactions are within the context of exciting, beautiful playspaces.

Although Kratos seems almost incapable of laughter himself, he does facilitate moments of humour. For instance, when Atreus is filled with wonder at the prospect of journeying to the land of the giants, he enthuses,

‘We’re going to Jötunheim! The lost land of the giants! That’s . . . that’s . . .’

‘Inconvenient’, Kratos interjects.

Atreus continues in a subdued voice, ‘. . . yes. That is just what I was going to say’.

Kratos’s permanently sombre mood, aggressive silences, and menacing glare are occasionally so wholly inappropriate as social responses that he essentially becomes a parody of masculinity. Viral memes of the game’s cover art with the title ‘*God of War*’ replaced by the words ‘*Dad of Boy*’ poke fun at Kratos’s terse, monosyllabic concisions that refuse to reveal anything beyond what is immediately necessary for the situation at hand. One could argue that Atreus acts as the ‘straight man’ in this comedic duo rather than the Comic Relief. Atreus’s relatability in these situations highlights how utterly unrelatable Kratos’s stiff, flinty attitude is. This is significant because it invites players to laugh at the sternness and seriousness of traditional, masculine video game heroes, deflating the gravitas usually bestowed upon these figures. Therefore, the presence of the Side Kid means that the subject position available to the player is not one of total identification with the protagonist, but of ‘flickering’ identification (Keogh 2018) that alternates with ironic detachment.

The Side Kid’s comedic potential is rendered explicit in *The Last of Us* (2012). In moments of calm when players are exploring new areas, Ellie will announce that it is time to ‘lighten the mood’ and will produce the joke book *No Pun Intended*, vol. 2 from her backpack and proceed to read aloud from it. The jokes rightly are condemned by Joel as ‘awful’ and include highlights such as ‘It doesn’t matter how many times you push the envelope. It will still be stationary’ and ‘I used to be addicted to soap, but I’m clean now’. The tired, staid jokes seem fresh and funny to Ellie because she is experiencing them for the first time. In contrast, the groans that the jokes elicit from Joel emphasize his jaded outlook. In fact, the only joke that earns a snort of approval from Joel is one he admits he had ‘actually never heard’ before. Adult cynicism and fatigue can be eased by reliving a moment when a pun was original and surprising vicariously through the delight of a child encountering it for the first time.

The true source of humour is not the puns themselves but the relationship dynamics they engender between Ellie and Joel. The exchanges between the characters elicit Meyer’s three forms of humour—superiority, relief, and absurdity (Meyer 2000). Joel seems almost physically pained by the puns, which cause him to wince, sigh, and finally command Ellie to desist. Witnessing his distress might cause players to experience *schadenfreude*, a form of mirth arising from the misfortune of others and connected to a sense of superiority. Players may also feel superior to Ellie as she often does not fully understand the jokes that she reads (despite finding them hilarious). The puns make references to pre-apocalypse contexts and

phenomena of which Ellie has had no direct experience, allowing players to laugh at Ellie's ignorance and to be 'in on the joke' being told by the game at her expense.

The capacity of humour to relieve tension is directly referenced by Ellie, who often comments on the need to alleviate the stressful, fraught atmosphere before launching into one of her stand up performances. A one-liner in the book reads, 'People are making apocalypse jokes like there's no tomorrow'. Ellie grimaces after she delivers it and then asks Joel, 'Too soon?' The flippant wordplay could feel out of place in the context of the game's bleak, harrowing dystopia, but Ellie's deadpan delivery ruptures this tension, permitting a kind of gallows humour. If *The Last of Us* consistently maintained the levels of anxiety, fear, and adrenaline that characterize interactions with the game's enemies and environmental hazards or the levels of emotional turmoil created by the game's narrative, players might become fatigued and demoralized. Moments of levity, often instigated by Ellie, offer players a temporary respite from the game's onslaught of tragedy, as well as reminding them that they are fighting for a future in which these small incidents of light-heartedness are commonplace rather than exceptional.

At one point, Ellie bumbles a punchline, saying, 'A book just fell on my head. I only have myself to blame . . . Oh wait, I said it wrong. A book just fell on my head. I only have my *shelf* to blame. Ruined it'. She laughs hard at the wordplay and at her own mistake. Ellie's botched delivery adds a level of realism to her dialogue because it suggests that she is more than a rhetorical device designed to be a repository of comic one-liners. She exceeds the template of the archetypal Side Kid—even as she is seen to possess one of the trope's key qualities. Her fallibility humanizes her, contributing to the illusion that she is more than a cleverly skinned game component, more than a mere machinic novelty or a line of code made legible.

Sometimes Ellie will only start telling jokes if players linger in a specific location or if they direct Joel to speak to her during certain moments of exploration. The understated, optional nature of these exchanges gives them an emergent quality, which encourages players to feel that they have instigated a moment that makes their playthrough—and, therefore, their relationship with the characters—deeper and more special. The belief that she is more than either a narrative contrivance or a ludic device lays the groundwork for strong parasocial bonds with players, wherein players invest in the illusion that their interactions with Ellie are personal and unique. This, in turn, elicits the 'emotions of agency' (Isbister 2016): players feel a sense of ownership of their unfolding relationship with Ellie and a sense of responsibility towards Ellie.

4.3. The Foil

The idea that 'the child' is a conceptual foil for 'the adult' is pivotal within childhood studies. James Kincaid famously argued that the 'hollow child' functions as a negative space whose primary purpose is to delineate adult identities. As the adult's conceptual foil, the child is 'a coordinate set of *have nots*, or negations' (Kincaid 1998, p. 14). However, the adult protagonists in the games discussed in this article embody the perceived shortcomings of traditional mainstream video games norms, while the Side Kids are aligned with a surfeit of imagined trajectories for the evolution of the medium. In other words, the Side Kids give shape to and make palpable what the developers perceive to be *lacking* in competing and antecedent video game titles. Specifically, the rigidity of 'the old' is negatively juxtaposed with the nimble softness of 'the new'.

Ellie is a foil for Joel in obvious ways—the headstrong tweenaged girl's optimism and energy throw into sharp relief Joel's cynicism and weariness. Furthermore, on a metatextual level, Ellie functions as a foil for players' expectations of female supporting characters in video games. These expectations are represented within the diegetic gamespace via Joel's initial attitude towards Ellie: Joel is loath to take on the burden of a dependent girl and expresses an annoyance that borders on disgust with qualities traditionally associated with youth and femininity. Ellie, however, proves to be a foil both for the Damsel in Distress and for the Strong Female Character (King and Krzywinska 2006; Conroy et al. 2023). She

is by turns soft and steely, fragile and tough, wily and noble, vicious and compassionate. Far from being the liability Joel imagines, Ellie is level-headed, resourceful, and competent, aiding Joel and the player by scavenging for useful items and assisting with traversing the environment. Her complexity ultimately highlights how flat Joel's inner world has become following the death of his daughter two decades earlier. The void left by his loss has hollowed Joel, creating a narrative reason for the traditional AAA video game hero's one-dimensional blankness. Ellie's surprising dynamism and layered personality challenges Joel to reveal new and unexpected parts of himself. In parallel, Ellie's character encourages players to approach *The Last of Us* not just as a killing field for the cathartic slaying of the mushroom-ridden undead but also as a social encounter with empathetic characters whose compelling humanity requests a reciprocal humanity in the player.

There is a long tradition of silent, flat, blank video game avatars, such that one might even say that it is part of the 'standard grammar' of first-person games. The postfeminist critique of *The Last of Us* rightly points out that Ellie exists primarily as a catalyst for Joel's character development, and the fact that the young girl's suffering is in service of white, male growth re-inscribes hegemonic masculinity. However, analysing the ways in which Ellie both fulfils and exceeds her role as a narrative and ludic device draws attention to the fact that the transformation she prompts in Joel is also a disruption of the standard grammar of video games. The player might be inured to the empty lifelessness of video game avatars, but Ellie compellingly demonstrates the limits of this trope. As the numb void of a 'hardened man' is undone, so too is ready identification with (or projection onto) the avatar. In other words, it becomes more difficult for players to treat Joel as a tool or a vehicle that enacts their will through (violent) interaction when his difference—his strangeness—is repeatedly foregrounded through his juxtaposition with the Side Kid.

The game's narrative conclusion has Joel making the fundamentally unheroic and selfish decision to slaughter the rebel faction attempting to create a vaccine from Ellie's brain. Players may empathize deeply with Joel because they too have embraced the role of Ellie's paternal protector, but they may also feel a strong sense of cognitive dissonance as they step into the role of 'bad guy', killing unarmed nurses and surgeons to thwart humanity's best chance of ridding the world of the cordyceps blight (Anderson 2022). This is far from the power fantasy commonly associated with mainstream video games. In fact, players may feel that agency is being withheld from them as they have no choice but to fulfil Joel's murderous rampage around the hospital. Players may expect a certain degree of agency when engaging with interactive media, and so any divergence between the player's desires and what they can enact on screen is felt acutely. The online controversy triggered by the endings of both *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* contains repeated expressions of outrage that the respective protagonists acted in ways that contravened the players' wishes and made players feel morally uncomfortable⁴. Ellie's function is not just to make the male protagonist's character more complex, but to complicate the player's relationship to the protagonist by introducing some friction—and perhaps even some critical distance—between player and avatar.

While Atreus's weaknesses certainly magnify his father's abilities, his proficiencies give form to his father's flaws. Ever shirtless in spite of the snow, Kratos's impossibly muscled torso and bulging biceps attest to his superhuman strength. Atreus, on the other hand, is small and slight, and therefore relies on Kratos to lift the boulders that block his path, to carry him on his back when they scale cliffs, and to fling him up onto high ledges to traverse the gamespace. Kratos's immovable frown conveys the rigidity and narrowness of his emotional range and the deep, growling monosyllables that emanate from his thick beard are often closer to animalistic grunts than they are to actual words. In contrast, motion capture technology makes Atreus's pinched and occasionally pouty face both expressive and legible. Unlike his father, Atreus is compassionate, earnest, open, sensitive, and curious about other people. In opposition to Kratos's misanthropic cynicism, Atreus's trusting optimism allows the pair to form mutually beneficial relationships with other characters. Finally, Atreus is a skilled linguist and can telepathically sense the

thoughts of non-verbal beasts, ghosts, and ancient beings. His ability to understand others is a supernatural manifestation of his godhood: whereas Kratos's divine gift is physical strength and endurance, Atreus's is the power of communication.

While Atreus fluently relays tales of the Norse gods told to him by his deceased mother, Kratos is a terrible storyteller. Navigating between islands by boat creates opportunities for storytelling as a means of passing the time. After sustained lobbying from Atreus and Mimir, Kratos delivers a version of 'The Tortoise and the Hare': it constitutes a two-sentence summary of who won and why, as if he were recounting the results of an actual race. It is laughably bad, and it serves as a criticism of the quality of narratives in popular mainstream video games—including previous instalments of the *God of War* series—which are more sport than story. In this way, Atreus throws into sharp relief not just his father's incompetence but also the deficiencies of mainstream game design. As Atreus is defined in opposition to his father, so too is *God of War* (2018) defined against its own back catalogue, and through Atreus, the game positions itself as a successor ushering in a new era.

A lauded technological innovation in *God of War IV* is that the game is one continuous shot: the camera never cuts away and there are no loading screens. This makes the transitions between cutscenes and gameplay almost imperceptible. Despite how difficult it was to achieve, the game's director Cory Barlog insisted on this smooth flow between player-controlled action and scripted action (*Raising Kratos* (Akiaten 2019), dir. Akiaten). Atreus's talent for documentation and authorship, combined with his ready knowledge of folklore and mythology, align his character with the narrative layer of the game, while Kratos's fighting prowess aligns his character with the game's combat mechanics. If Atreus represents narrative and Kratos represents gameplay, their symbiotic relationship intensifies the integration of multimodal game elements in a non-hierarchical fashion. Rather than storytelling being relegated to cutscenes and interactivity defining gameplay, the two flow into each other like tributaries of the same river. As metonyms for narrative and gameplay, respectively, Atreus and Kratos's transformation from being each other's estranged foil to being close kin symbolizes the artistic trajectory envisaged by Santa Monica Studio for their franchise.

The repeated refrain in *God of War* (2018) and *God of War: Ragnarök* is 'We must be better', and the Side Kid embodies a hopeful optimism that video games will outgrow their boyhood and emerge older, wiser, and more responsible: a mature medium that belongs alongside venerated art forms. Kratos comments indirectly on the humanizing power of the Side Kid and connects it to elevated storytelling. In the concluding sequence of *God of War* (2018), he tells a story about his son's namesake, the warrior Atreus of Sparta, remarking that he 'was unlike the rest of us . . . He inspired us to hope that though we were machines of war, there was humanity in us'. The machinic quality of a video game avatar whose primary mode of interaction with the gameworld is repetitive, violent combat must be reimagined with the entrance of a child, whose presence is a reminder of the redeeming potential of uncertain futures. The softness and the blankness of the child in an invitation to program it—and program mainstream action-adventure video games—differently. The documentary *Raising Kratos* (Akiaten 2019, dir. Brandon Akiaten) makes this didactic impulse explicit. The documentary centres the game's creative director, Corey Barlog, who returns to work on the long-running franchise after the birth of his first child with a new vision for the sequel. Barlog explains over the course of several interviews that he recognizes the need for the series—and for the gaming community at large—to mature. The documentary clearly identifies a meta-awareness on the part of the development team that *God of War IV* had to lead resistant and unwilling players⁵ on a coming-of-age journey in tandem with Atreus and Kratos, so that the toxic masculinity of previous eras would not be re-entrenched for future generations of players.

4.4. The Devil's Advocate/Morality Certificate and Disciplinary Tool

Both Atreus and Ellie offer opposing worldviews to the adult protagonists. However, 'Devil's Advocate' does not seem like the right descriptor when these characters function for the most part as an 'angel on the shoulder' of the protagonist. It is Atreus, for example, who insists Kratos save a dwarf from a dragon when Kratos would rather avoid a difficult battle. This dwarf goes on to become the armorer who upgrades Kratos's weapons, suggesting moral virtue leads to ludic rewards. The Side Kid acts as an externalized conscience whose actions and reactions provide compelling narrative reasons for the protagonist to behave virtuously and altruistically. By extension, this challenges the player to transition between play styles that prioritize traditional ludic goals related to competition and mastery and play styles that value emotional satisfaction, poetic justice, and the expression of one's values.

Lee [Edelman](#) (2004, p. 18) describes the figure of the child as a 'disciplinary image' used to shame and chasten people into repressing desires and needs in the present in the service of a hypothetical child that belongs to the future. *God of War's* repeated mantra—'We must be better'—implicates the father, the son, and the player in the need for change. The requirement to be 'better' is not a demand for the player to be more skilful or the protagonist to be more powerful, but for both parties to become more empathetic, responsible, and humane. The Side Kid is integral to this shift because it is presented as the human face of the game's monitoring system and its ludic feedback loops. The Side Kid does not simply perform disapproval when the protagonists behave in morally dubious ways—rather, the protagonists' moral and emotional failures imprint onto the Side Kids, warping their worldviews such that they become dark mirrors for each father figure's flaws.

Kratos's emotional neglect of his son leads Atreus to suppress his sensitive side, culminating in a cutscene wherein Atreus kills the Norse god Mödi in cold blood. Atreus stabs Mödi in the neck, inverting his previous inability to end the life of the deer with the same manoeuvre. Looking at the weapon rather than the dying man, Atreus casually comments, 'Huh, this is a much better knife than mother's', suggesting he has left behind his mother's world of storytelling and embraced his father's domain of combat mechanics. When reprimanded by his father, Atreus responds, 'Haven't you been teaching me to kill?' This exchange can be read as a proxy for a conversation between the stereotypical video game player and the traditional action video game. Atreus has become completely desensitized to violence to the extent that he sees his enemies as little more than whetstones for a new knife. Kratos, and by extension the game's mechanics, has implicitly condoned the cathartic pleasure of mastering one's enemies through violent domination, such that their calls for restraint seem hypercritical. Kratos's prohibition of further violence only elicits a sulky 'whatever' from his son, suggesting that simply punishing or preventing players' indulgent violence is not going to convince them to adopt a different playstyle. What is needed is a persuasive argument delivered as an allegorical thought experiment—a vision of the future if they resist pressure to change: the Side Kid. This argument is less about the formative effects that video games might have on players (especially child-players) and more about how video games belong to a decades-long genealogy wherein certain traits and tropes are unthinkingly passed on. While graphical interfaces and computer processing power are rapidly advancing, the same set of core mechanics, flat characters, and narrative clichés are handed down like secondhand sweaters: shapeless, unfashionable, and increasingly uncomfortable for new playerships. In *God of War IV*, the entrance of the Side Kid is accompanied by the entrance of more dynamic characterization and a narrative framework that goes beyond the trammels of a rage-fuelled revenge quest.

While Kratos is prepared to grow and change in response to his son's needs, the character of Odin in *God of War: Ragnarök* is the subject of a cautionary tale about the fate of the 'Bad Dad' who refuses to adapt. Odin is bent upon preventing the apocalyptic event 'Ragnarök', thus making him an agent committed to maintaining the status quo. In addition to repeatedly thrusting his male children into violent combat, Odin is exceptionally cruel to the women in his life, particularly to his estranged wife. The fact that Atreus is joined by two female NPC child companions in *Ragnarök*—Thrud, a powerfully built redhead, and

Angrboda, a Black teen with locs—suggests that the future of the series is more diverse, both in terms of race and gender. As such, the murder of Odin could be read as a symbolic purging of the misogyny and racism in previous instalments in the series. However, it is important to note that while the cast of characters and the plot imply a rejection of past norms, the mechanics mostly remain the same. This means that the only method for dispatching the villain Odin is through violent combat. Kratos manages to escape the cycle of patricidal revenge, but the game mechanics nonetheless demand a surrogate victim for the altar.

Where the *God of War* series seems quite earnest and sincere in its allegorical manifesto for the future of video games, *The Last of Us* (2012) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) are much more cynical and pessimistic about the future of the medium. Playing *The Last of Us Part II* is a bleak and harrowing experience, but even more grim is the sexist, transphobic, antisemitic reception the game received. The outraged baying of this vocal minority of Gamers was a loud and emphatic refusal to ‘be better’ (White 2020). *The Last of Us* series problematizes the idea of the Side Kid as a symbol of futurity that redeems the protagonist and by extension redeems its playership. Firstly, it is significant that Ellie is a lesbian. Edelman’s connection between the figure of ‘the child’ and the ideology of oppressive reproductive futurity exposed the homophobic deployment of the rhetoric of childhood. Ellie’s opportunity to retreat into an idyll of queer domestic bliss with her loving girlfriend and their adorable baby is stolen from her by the long shadow of her father figure’s hegemonic masculinity. Rather than preparing Ellie to survive in the world on her own terms, Joel teaches Ellie to survive as he has—through extreme violence and mistrust of others—which is perhaps why Ellie seems to question whether survival is even worth it at all. She cannot exit the vortex of violent revenge quests that pull her away from a peaceful ending, leading her to abandon her new family to continue the pursuit of Joel’s killer, Abby. Although she ultimately chooses to let Abby live (along with Abby’s newly acquired Side Kid, Lev), both characters sustain serious injuries, including the loss of Ellie’s fret fingers. The fact that Ellie can no longer play the guitar is a final, damning indictment of Joel’s formative influence on her. Joel first taught her to play the guitar, and making music becomes one of the only non-violent mechanics in *The Last of Us, Part II*. The slightly janky input controls involve softly stroking the PlayStation touchpad to ‘strum’ the strings. The awkwardness of this gesture contrasts with the precision of the input controls used for violent combat, drawing the player’s attention to the novelty of this kind of interaction. The loss of Ellie’s fingers feels like the premature curtailment of a mechanical innovation for mainstream action games—the abrupt end to a failed experiment. The guitar song associated with Joel and Ellie’s relationship is ‘Our Future Days’, by Pearl Jam. The lyrics include the lines that suggest the Side Kid has failed to save the ‘future days’ of video games:

All the complexities and games,

No one wins, but somehow, they’re still played.

Players are subjected to waves of loss as they play *The Last of Us, Part II*, even as they ‘win’ individual encounters with the Infected or with hostile humans. Whereas the *God of War* series connects ‘maturation’ to a more humane and less machinic dynamic between players and digital games, *The Last of Us* series connects maturity to darkness. Players are still permitted—or still bound—to enact violence, but not with childlike impunity.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined child deuteragonists in mainstream, action video games—specifically two series that were pivotal in critical discussions of the ‘Daddening’. I have argued that the childliness of the characters in these games shapes the narrative, ludic, and rhetorical function of the sidekick role. Ellie and Atreus perform many of the functions of the traditional sidekick, but they also represent the future—both of the fictional world that they inhabit alongside the protagonist and the future of the video game medium. In tracing how these characters fulfil and exceed an existing typology of sidekicks, I am offering an alternative conclusion to the one reached through postfeminist critiques of the video game

Dad. While I agree that the substitution of the ‘Damsel in Distress’ for the ‘damselette’ permits a continuation of violent, militarized, aggressive masculinity, I believe that the Side Kid can alienate the player from the protagonist, prompting critical distance that challenges the player to reflect on both the inadequacies of hard, violent heroism *and* the inadequacies of soft, postfeminist paternalism. This sense of dissonance is intensified by the player’s expectations of agency within interactive media and the player/avatar entanglement that is part of the ‘standard grammar’ of mainstream game design. What is more, I believe the tension between the traditional avatar and the Side Kid is a comment on the ‘growing pains’ of the video game medium itself. Mainstream video games are burdened by inherited traits that include narrow, repetitive, and violent mechanics, flat characters, and clichéd stories. Whereas the *God of War* series seems earnestly optimistic about the future of the medium, *The Last of Us* series suggests that rich, nuanced, dynamic characters will not be able to escape the mandate of violent mechanics, and every story will be diverted away from empathetic connection and towards violent domination. However, one could interpret this dystopic view of the future of video games as a warning and as a call to action, which in itself betrays a glimmer of hope. I believe that since my typology emphasizes the *function* of the Side Kid, it could serve as a bridge between game designers and games scholars to facilitate meta-discussions about these imagined futures of the medium.

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Notes

- ¹ Examples include *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), *The Last of Us* (2012), *Bioshock II* (2010), *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013), *The Walking Dead* (2014), *Dishonoured* (2012), *The Witcher 3* (2015), *God of War* (2018), and the parody *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (2014).
- ² ‘AAA’ refers to video games produced and distributed by large, established game studios. They could be considered the equivalent to ‘Hollywood Blockbusters’.
- ³ I am using the word ‘childliness’ here to denote the positive qualities associated with childhood such as openness, curiosity, simplicity, playfulness, etc. Its opposite would be childishness, which denotes the negative qualities associated with childhood such as irrationality, weakness, foolishness, petulance, etc.
- ⁴ Some paradigmatic examples of this outrage can be found here: https://www.siradio.fm/news/Why_the_ending_of_The_Last_of_Us_ruined_the_entire_game_for_me (accessed on 30 June 2023), <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2022/jan/27/now-that-ive-finally-played-the-last-of-us-who-wants-to-talk-about-that-ending> (accessed on 30 June 2023), <https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/09/16/the-uneasy-ending-of-the-last-of-us> (accessed on 30 June 2023).
- ⁵ The targeted harassment levelled at Sweet Baby Inc, a video game narrative consultancy company, sparked by reactionary YouTuber Matt Walsh and fuelled by Elon Musk in 2023, is just one example of how certain vocal groups of capital-‘G’ Gamers resist perceived changes to the medium.

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