The Kid in the Fridge: Sacrificial Children and Vengeful Masculinity in Contemporary Videogames

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Abstract

A recent content analysis of child characters in contemporary videogames found that over a third of the digital kids recorded in the dataset were murder victims – their lives cut short by drownings, shootings, stabbings, hangings, intentional traffic collisions, cannibalism, murderous religious rituals, and giant spider attacks (Reay, 2021). This article builds on critical analysis of the sacrificial child in other media (e.g., Tan, 2013; Sanchéz-Eppler, 2005; Houen, 2002; Mizruchi, 1998; Nussbaum, 1997) to explore the rhetorical and ludic function of this trope in videogames. Using the Assassin's Creed *series as a case study, I examine how the archetypal dead child serves to justify – and even glorify – the hero's ruthless, aggressive domination of others through physical violence. I compare the child sacrifice to the "woman-in-the-refrigerator" trope (Simone, 1999) to explore the ways in which the "fridged kid" perpetuates misogyny and sexism, irrespective of its gender. In these games, maturity – defined in terms of mastery and agency – is equated with masculinity, while the cultural conditions of childhood – vulnerability, innocence, and dependence – continue to be coded as feminine. Through close readings of Phoibe's death scene in* Assassin's Creed: Odyssey *and Shadya's death scene in* Assassin's Creed: Origins, *this article suggests that the digital child is sacrificed in order to purge the adult male hero of his hesitancy, his self-doubt, and his cowardice. The dead child impels action without compunction by creating a schematic moral superstructure that overrides all other ethical concerns: it liberates the adult hero from both apathy and empathy. This article concludes that the dead child in games is a powerful tool for resolving ludonarrative dissonance, for promoting player-avatar identification, and for eliciting strong affective responses; however, in replacing nuance and ambiguity with certainty and purpose, the dead child legitimises an extreme form of vengeful, militarised, hypermasculine violence in the guise of reasonable, responsible, protective paternalism.*

The temple is dimly lit and at first I don't notice poor, little Phoibe slumped against a pillar. However, when the two guards standing over the child's lifeless body clock Kassandra, a combat sequence is immediately initiated. With little regard for my own health bar, I attack the guards with everything I've got, including my newly upgraded fire sword ability. The guards sizzle with small flame icons above their heads, screaming and cursing in Greek. "I ordered medium-rare", I tell one lightly roasted guard as I impale him on my sword. Hammy acting feels appropriate for this level of melodrama. Then I accidentally stab a civilian who happens to be in the temple too.

My health bar flashes red. I usually prefer stealth and ranged attacks because I enjoy combat that feels like a puzzle, but on some level I'm aware that this sequence is more about role-playing than it is about careful strategy or technical ability. On-screen I role-play blind rage expressed as a violent outburst, but off-screen my emotional state is better described as mildly annoyed. Killing Phoibe is like kicking a puppy – a lazy way to get a reaction. I toast the final guard and a cutscene begins. Kassandra dashes towards Phoibe's limp body, cupping her face in her hands and begging her to get up. Realising that the child is already dead, she sheds silent tears and offers up a short prayer to Mother Earth before kissing Phoibe on the head and returning to her the wooden eagle that symbolises their filial bond. Kassandra murmurs "aniazo" – Ancient Greek for "grief-stricken" – and walks away, while the camera pans over Phoibe's small, slack body, coming to rest on her hands cradling the children's toy. I'm crying and I hate it.

Excerpt from my notes compiled for an autoethnographic close reading of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, Nov. 2019

The Sacrificial Child

Dead children are everywhere and nowhere in contemporary videogames. In a recent content analysis of over five-hundred titles, I found that while many games protect their child characters by making them either invincible or invisible, a significant number of games feature a child non-player character (NPC) who is brutally murdered by in-game antagonists (Reay, 2021). In fact, of the fifty-nine named child NPCs recorded in the dataset, twenty-one died violent deaths, their lives cut short by drownings, shootings, stabbings, hangings, intentional traffic collisions, cannibalism, murderous religious rituals, and giant spider attacks. Susan Tan (2013) writes, "[t]he vision of the dead child is one of the most horrific images in

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our cultural imaginations. It is also one of the most pervasive" (p. 54). She traces the literary history of child sacrifice from Isaac's near death at his father's hand in Judeo-Christian texts, through Medea's murder of her own children, to the virtuous, self-sacrificing children that populate sentimental Victorian novels, and concludes with Suzanne Collins's contemporary young adult book series *The Hunger Games*. This article extends Tan's documentation of the omnipresence of the figure of "the sacrificial child" in literature to explore its significance in contemporary videogames. In this article, I combine close readings of child deaths in the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007 –) and comments left under video walkthroughs of these moments of gameplay. Drawing across analyses of child deaths in literature and feminist theorisations of the "woman-in-the-refrigerator" trope (Simone, 1999), this article argues that the dead child is a powerful tool for resolving ludonarrative dissonance, for promoting player-avatar identification, and for eliciting strong affective responses. However, in replacing nuance and ambiguity with certainty and purpose, the dead child legitimises an extreme, aggressive form of vengeful, militarised, masculine violence in the guise of reasonable, responsible, protective paternalism.

The Kid in the Fridge

The figure of the sacrificial child has a long literary history and has generated an equally expansive body of critical writing (e.g., Nussbaum, 1997; Mizruchi, 1998; Houen, 2002; Sanchéz-Eppler, 2005; Tan, 2013). However, the sacrificial child in videogames has yet to be fully explored. The Little Sisters in the first two *Bioshock* games – who can be sacrificed by the player in exchange for important resources – have been analysed as central components in the games' moral trolley problems (e.g., Parker & Aldred, 2018; Adams, 2020), but this article defines a "sacrificial child" as one whose death is a non-optional plot point that cannot be avoided through player intervention or abstention. In fact, I am particularly interested in how the withdrawal and reinstantiation of player-agency either side of the child's death contributes to a game's presentation of power and control.

Using the woman-in-the-refrigerator trope as an interpretive lens reveals the gendered nature of this conditional allocation of power. The term "woman in the refrigerator" refers to Issue 54 of the *Green Lantern* comic, in which the titular superhero returns home to find that his girlfriend has been murdered by his enemies and her body has been stuffed into the fridge. Gail Simone coined the term in 1999 to describe the trend of female comic book characters being brutalised or killed as a plot device designed to move the male protagonist's story arc forward. Anita Sarkeesian (2013) builds on the dataset crowd-sourced by Simone to document the use of the woman-in-the-refrigerator trope in videogames. Sarkeesian notes that, "although these stories use female trauma as the catalyst to set the plot elements in motion, these are not stories about women. Nor are they concerned with the struggles of women navigating the mental, emotional, and physical ramifications of violence" (n.p.). Invariably, videogame narratives that use the woman-in-the-refrigerator trope are strictly male-centered stories in which the tragic damsels are just "empty shells" whose deaths have

a much greater impact on the plot than their lives (n.p.). Sarkeesian concludes that the true source of the male hero's torment in these games is not the loss of the deceased individual, but his feelings of weakness and guilt over his failure to perform his socially prescribed, patriarchal duty of protecting women.

The release of Sarkeesian's YouTube series "Tropes vs Women in Video Games" in 2013 contributed to a larger movement within feminist games scholarship, games journalism, and game design that drew attention to the misogyny inherent in the "fridged wife" trope. As a result of these interventions, the trope has been gender-bent, ironized, or dropped altogether in several recent games. *The Last of Us, Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), for example, has its young, female protagonist embark on a violent revenge quest after witnessing the murder of her surrogate father. Similarly, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) sees a young, female Norse warrior descend into hell to retrieve her male lover's soul. However, the decline of the damsel-in-distress trope has not slowed the rise of the damselette in distress. Although Sarkeesian lists a number of games that feature both a fridged wife and a fridged child (e.g., *Max Payne*, *God of War*) or, more commonly, a fridged wife and a damseled child (e.g., *Outlaws, Kane & Lynch: Dead Men, Prototype 2, Inversion, Asura's Wrath, Dishonored*), there has been a shift over the last ten years away from using a murdered woman as a plot catalyst to using a murdered child. The kid in the refrigerator serves a similar function to the woman in the refrigerator and yet, despite frequently being female, the fridged child has thus far evaded accusations of sexism. Gary Cross (2004) argues that Western society requires a social group to concurrently symbolise both weakness and goodness. In combination, these qualities comprise a conception of "purity" that must be protected from corruption through systemic paternalism. Since the feminist revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s demanded that women be released from this symbolic function, the burden "was shifted to the child" (p. 6). Sarkeesian lists the characteristics of the fridged wife as "purity, innocence, kindness, beauty, or sensuality" (n.p.). Although the fridged child is rarely overtly sexualised, contemporary understandings of childhood as a sacrosanct age of sincerity, guilelessness, and innocence (Robinson, 2008) mean that the child sacrifice can perform purity with even greater assurance than the fridged wife. Furthermore, the paternalism of the adult avatar is rendered seemingly reasonable, apolitical, and inoffensive when it is directed towards a young person rather than towards a woman.

Positioning the child sacrifice as an evolution of the fridged wife illuminates the heterosexism and violent masculinities behind child deaths in contemporary mainstream action games. This is important when one considers the fact that some games that lean heavily on the trope of the child sacrifice, such as *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, have been praised for their progressive depictions of gender and sexuality (Durkee, 2019). The theoretical framing of this article helps to expose the latent misogyny inherent in the child sacrifice by pointing to the fact that maturity – defined in terms of mastery and agency – is equated with masculinity, while the cultural conditions of childhood – vulnerability, innocence, and dependence – continue to be coded as feminine. Sari Edelstein (2018) argues that "adulthood" refers to

"the period of life associated with autonomy, legal and political rights, financial independence, and the initiation of a heteronormative life trajectory. Adulthood functions less as a biological status than a social achievement" (p. 4). She concludes that adulthood is "best understood as an ideal rather than an inevitability," since social groups that are denied full emancipation on account of race, gender, ability, or class are prevented from attaining adult status. Maturity is, in Edelstein's words, "unevenly dispensed" (p. 146). The connection between the infantilisation and the disenfranchisement of women can prompt a desire to disavow and sever connections between childhood and femininity. However, in an age where adulthood is characterised by individualism, self-reliance, and independence, standing in solidarity with the child is one way of de-stigmatizing dependence, non-productivity, and playfulness.

Defining the Child Sacrifice

Child deaths in videogames are not all alike. In this section I briefly point to other examples of child deaths in contemporary games to justify my focus for this article. This article is specifically interested in a subset of digital instances of infanticide that I differentiate from other child deaths through their alignment with the woman-in-the-refrigerator trope. The woman-in-the-refrigerator blueprint suggests two key criteria that can be appropriated to distinguish the child in the refrigerator from other dead children in contemporary videogames. Firstly, the child's death must be more significant than its life; secondly, the child's death must harden the adult protagonist, inuring him to future suffering and strengthening his resolve to harm others. These criteria rule out several of the dead child characters that appear in contemporary videogames. The death of four-year-old Joel in *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), for example, has a profound effect on the adult protagonists, but because these adults ultimately process their loss through interpersonal connection, self-reflection, and the nurture of their surviving children it does not meet the criteria outlined above. That is to say, since a key part of their grieving process involves the adults lowering their shield of resilience, the death of their son softens rather than hardens. Despite Jason's death in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) being more meaningful than his short and unremarkable life, he is also excluded from the category of child sacrifice because his death has an atrophic effect on the adult protagonist, Ethan Mars. Ethan becomes withdrawn, listless, and pathetic following Jason's death, and his contemptible weakness renders him unfit for his role as husband and father. In contrast, the abduction of Ethan's second son, Shaun, transforms Ethan into a fierce, reckless, death-dealing brute who competes in a series of violent, harrowing challenges to redeem himself as a paternal protector. Shaun, therefore, qualifies as a child sacrifice. Sarah's murder during the exposition of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) is a paradigmatic child sacrifice: when fleeing a zombie outbreak, Sarah is shot by a policeman and dies in her father's arms. The bullet that kills her simultaneously destroys the wristwatch she had gifted her father for his birthday just hours earlier. Her father continues to wear this watch for the rest of the series, despite it not functioning as anything other than a timestamp for his daughter's murder. Sarah's death becomes the cornerstone of her

father's personality, and this moment of transformation – his rebirth as a hard, cold, closed, ruthless smuggler – is marked as a point of discontinuity through the symbol of the shattered clockface.

The following analysis demonstrates that, as with the woman in the refrigerator, the child is sacrificed so that the adult, male protagonist can gain new power. When the child is sacrificed, the adult is purged of his hesitancy, his self-doubt, and his cowardice. The child sacrifice pre-emptively absolves the adult of his future sins, giving him license to be ruthless, violent, and bloodthirsty. It impels action without compunction by creating a schematic moral superstructure that overrides all other ethical concerns. In this way, the figure of the child sacrifice liberates the adult man from both apathy and empathy. By integrating close readings of Shadya's death in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017) and Phoibe's death in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) with comments left on video walkthroughs created by The Bleach Keeper (2017) and Zanar Aesthetics (2018) respectively, this article posits that the central function of the sacrificial child is to resolve ludonarrative dissonance by framing the hero's homicidal actions as morally defensible. Ludonarrative dissonance is a term coined by Clint Hocking (2009) to describe the sense that a game's mechanics – its rule-based systems and the interactions available to the player – are at odds with the game's fictional framing. In the case of these *Assassin's Creed* games, the narrative context presents the protagonists as noble, rational, compassionate heroes, while the mechanics limit their actions to remorseless slaughter. This article also suggests that fatherly forms of masculinity are used to excuse and even glorify brutal, tyrannical, militaristic models of masculinity. I conclude that the *Assassin's Creed* games sanction a kind of pleasure latent in the pain of losing a child. The righteous rage occasioned by the child's death precipitates action, challenge, and excitement: it can foment intense emotional engagement, then provide satisfying opportunities for adrenaline-fueled catharsis.

Comments as Critique

Following Diane Carr (2019), Emma Vossen (2018), Stephanie Jennings (2020), and Tanya Kryzwinska (2006), I take an autoethnographic approach to close reading, wherein my analysis of a game's formal properties is rooted in my own playthroughs of pre-selected sequences. For this article, I have chosen to locate my autoethnographic close readings in the context of a chorus of comments left under video walkthroughs of these same moments of gameplay. Doing so allows me to embed my interpretations alongside debates that are already taking place within gaming communities. It facilitates the blurring of different types of expertise and affirms the utility of academic games research for scaffolding existing conversations that are being had online by contributors with a variety of knowledge bases. Mapping a relevant theoretical framework onto constellations of comments enables me to synthesise experience-based insights and reflect on the implications of dominant patterns. Having played through both sequences featuring a child sacrifice, I made extensive written notes documenting my initial reactions. I subsequently screenshotted, annotated, and organised

comments left by other players under walkthroughs of these sequences. I then replayed both sequences, pausing regularly to cross-reference the notes from my first playthrough with the dominant themes emerging from the comments section.

I selected videos hosted on YouTube that had the child character's name and the word "death" in the title based on the assumption that these search terms attract commenters deliberately seeking out spaces to discuss the child character's murder. I further limited my search to videos that had over 10,000 views and more than one hundred comments. The ethical implications of citing critical perspectives and expertise shared in online spaces such as comments sections are complex. Since this article intends to engage with online commentary as critique rather than as data, it seeks to balance the ethical attribution of ideas with protecting the identity of their originators. I have, therefore, followed Kishonna Gray's (2020) precedent of removing personally identifying data whilst attempting to preserve the essence of the original handles. While I have purposefully clustered similar comments together, there is, in fact, an inherently choral component to all the viewpoints presented in this article. This is because individual comments often receive collective endorsements expressed through actions such as upvoting. Although I have highlighted moments of convergence between my experiences as a player and those expressed in the comments section, I have also attempted – through the close reading of individual comments – to preserve the nuance, complexities, and divergence contained both within and between different perspectives. Finally, I would like to briefly note here that the pronouns "he" and "him" are used to refer to the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* throughout this analysis, despite the game giving players the option to choose the gender of their avatar. The implications of choosing the female avatar, Kassandra, instead of the male avatar, Alexios, are discussed at the end of this article.

Affection, Anxiety, and Agency

The figure of the sacrificial child leads players on an emotional journey from anxious attachment, through painful dispossession, to a satisfying slew of wrathful retribution. The characters of Phoibe and Shadya are designed to elicit feelings of affection through their cheery, playful, loveable demeanours. Phoibe, the protagonist's orphaned protégé in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, is mischievous, adventurous, energetic, frank, confident, and fun-loving. The admiration that she expresses for the protagonist is flattering, and she provides some light-hearted, comic relief. Early in the game, for example, she is kidnapped by thugs and, upon being rescued by the protagonist, nonchalantly informs him, "It wasn't so bad. Last time they put a cloth in my mouth so I'd stop biting." When the protagonist leaves the island of Kephallonia to pursue his destiny, a breathless Phoibe meets him at the docks, desperate to accompany him. The protagonist declines out of concern for Phoibe's safety, and so she offers him her favourite toy in her stead as a sentimental token of their filial bond – a carved wooden eagle gifted to her by her dead mother. This gesture is designed to endear her to players as well as to suggest there is a fateful connection between Phoibe and the protagonist. During interac-

tions with Phoibe, players are presented with dialogue choices that allow them to praise her, lecture her, or to ask her questions about herself. Although these dialogue choices do not significantly alter narrative events, they transfer ownership of the protagonist's fond indulgence of Phoibe from the avatar to players themselves. Having players decide upon the manner and the extent to which they show affection to Phoibe engages our "emotions of agency" (Isbister, 2016), thereby making players feel responsible for the state of their relationship with the young child.

Shadya's character in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* is likewise designed to endear her to players. Her sweet personality is briefly sketched in two short cutscenes: in the first, Shadya's father – who is a political fugitive – has asked the protagonist, Bayek, to deliver a doll to his daughter to comfort her in his absence. When Bayek kneels before the little girl to present her with the doll, she is giddy with excitement. She gushes, "Oh, I love my new doll, Bayek! I will name her Iset, and she will be the protector of all Faiyum," before making the doll give Bayek a kiss on the forehead. In this tender exchange, the perennially sombre, stoic, formidable Bayek smiles and laughs freely: being in the presence of this sunny child seems to instantly improve Bayek's mood. Shadya then makes herself useful to players by guiding Bayek to her house to show him the location of a ledger that her father has stolen so that Bayek can retrieve it during a later mission. On route, she calls Bayek "Uncle" and he fondly refers to her as "Little One," establishing a closeness and familiarity between them. Players are inclined to share Bayek's warm feelings towards Shadya, not only by virtue of player-avatar identity entanglement, but also because she assists players in achieving a ludic goal, thus presenting herself as both a source of diegetic joy and ludic service.

Having constructed the sacrificial children as precious and adorable, these games go to great lengths to emphasise their vulnerability, prompting feelings of parental anxiety in players. In the second cutscene that centres on Shadya, for example, her sensitivity to the beauty of the world is juxtaposed with her naivety about its dangers. Shadya's family have taken a stand against a powerful, clandestine figure called the Crocodile, who is an influential member of the enemy sect known as the Order of Ancients. Shadya's father, Hotephres, has stolen a ledger that contains information about the identity of the Crocodile and has stashed it in his house until such time as Bayek can retrieve it. When Bayek tells Shadya that she needs to be careful, she responds, "Nothing bad can ever happen to me. Iset can fight, you know! She will protect me." Shadya's faith in the combat ability of her straw doll reflects her childly innocence, suggesting that the player's duty is not only to preserve her life but also to safeguard her guileless optimism. That is to say, ridding the gameworld of evil-doers feels like a more concrete calling when one has a personal connection to a future inhabitant of that player-inaugurated utopia.

Assassin's Creed: Origins repeatedly foreshadows Shadya's death, stoking players' solicitousness over her well-being and priming them to intervene in her fate. When Bayek eventually goes to collect the ledger, he finds the Order of Ancients have already ransacked Shadya's

house. What is more, they have discovered Shadya's diary in which she confesses to having absconded with the ledger in the hope that removing it from the family home will allow her father to return. The player discovers that The Order has slaughtered Shadya's pet dog and impaled her doll on a javelin – both of which are heavy hints at the kinds of violence they will wreak on Shadya herself. Despite there being no ludic time limit during this sequence, players are motivated to collate clues about The Order's movements with a heightened sense of urgency. They discover that Shadya and her mother have been taken to a nearby lighthouse. Players race to the docks, where they find Shadya's mother kneeling at the end of a pier weeping and whispering Shadya's name. Heads-Up Display text appears that reads "Objective in Proximity," prompting players to use Bayek's eagle to survey the area. The eagle identifies a target, but it is far out at sea, raising questions as to whether Shadya is being held on a ship, or has been stranded on a rock, or thrown overboard. The latter concern is captured by commenter @LickNames in the (unintentional?) pun,

> That sinking feeling you get when you see the marker hit over water.

Some players may commandeer a nearby boat, while others might plunge directly into the ocean and swim out to the location marker. On arrival, Shadya cannot be seen from the surface, but if players dive underwater they will find her drowned body, tied by her ankles to a rock on the sea floor. The soft, haunting music and the pitiful smallness of Shadya's body combine to elicit feelings of grief, while Shadya's upturned face bobbing just below the surface of the water taunts the player with the thought that she died still fighting for survival. Swimming towards Shadya triggers a cutscene that wrests agency from players and prevents them from being able to interact with Shadya. There is, after all, nothing more they can do for the dead girl.

Both Shadya's death scene and Phoibe's death scene (see epigraph) undermine the player's role as protector by suspending player agency. Through the bestowal and subsequent retraction of agency, the child sacrifice can engage one of the most powerful emotions elicited through interaction: guilt. As Katherine Isbister (2016) argues, "[t]his capacity to evoke actual feelings of guilt from a fictional experience is unique to games" (p. 9). She claims that while a reader or a filmgoer may feel strong emotions when presented with horrific fictional acts on the page or screen, "responsibility and guilt are generally not among them. At most, they may feel a sense of uneasy collusion" (p. 9). In both *Assassin's Creed* games, guilt is simultaneously experienced vicariously through empathy with the protagonists and felt first-hand by the players. A commenter using the handle @TheDudeHimself notes,

> Man Bayek must have been fucked up inside after that shit, he must've felt as though he had failed as a guardian, not just to Khemu, but now Shadya – which explains his reaction when he meets the Crocodile

The sense of failure that this commenter ascribes to Bayek is felt directly by another com-

menter, @SpringtimeJean, who writes,

> There is no way to save her I feel like I messed up.

Bayek's "failure" as a guardian is experienced directly by the player as a ludic failure. Similarly, in relation to Phoibe's death, @BigFool writes,

> I tried to restart this scene to see if I can save her by killing the guards as quick as possible...I failed...saw Phoebe [sic] die twice that day...

This comment indicates two things: firstly, the player's expectation of agency was so strong that initially it did not register that their ability to act within the gamespace had been suspended, and secondly, even after they had acknowledged Phoibe's death was unavoidable, they continued to experience a sense of failure. The remedy for the negative affect triggered by failure is to prove one's mastery through a series of ludic triumphs: the antidote to guilt is pride.

Guilt and pride are both emotions of agency, and so they are elicited primarily through interactions (Wright, 2006). The central interactive mechanics in the *Assassin's Creed* games are freerunning through open-world environments amid bouts of violent combat. In order to intuitively connect pride and violence, the games must convince players that murderous revenge is an appropriate expression of grief. This is executed, in part, through dialogue between characters. Bayek tries to console Shadya's bereaved father by promising to murder his child's killer. Her father laments, "none of that will bring Shadya back," but Bayek rejoinders, "No, but at least you will have the comfort of revenge. We both will . . . . I will find this monster, friend. He will die." The solidarity expressed in Bayek's promise "we both will" implicitly pledges the player's aid in this quest for vengeance, and the almost oxymoronic link between comfort and murder makes it plain that the path to a satisfying conclusion is littered with the bodies of one's enemies. Furthermore, the reductive moral binary established by the child's murder is captured in the extreme juxtaposition of "monster" and "friend."

A similar exchange follows Phoibe's death in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*. With gritted teeth and clenched fists, the protagonist swears, "I won't let them get away with this," to which Aspasia – Phoibe's sympathetic employer – responds, "You have to fight. For her." Her use of the imperative underscores the seemingly irrefutable logic that connects the death of a child to extreme retributive violence. Berkowitz and Cornell (2005) argue that "[w]hat vengeance offers in response to trauma and loss is the fantasy of control" (p. 316). In a sense, the *Assassin's Creed* games reverse engineer this process, justifying the pleasure of agency by locating it within the context of traumatic loss.

Violent Retribution and the Hardness of Masculinity

Killing a child is considered such a heinous crime that it demands a degree of punishment exceeding all standard executions of justice. Shadya and Phoibe are deliberately earmarked for assassination because of their connection to the player-character and, by extension, to the player. This makes the games' villains irredeemable and authorises the player to exact a heavy price for the loss of each child. Since the murder of children is widely condemned as being "worse" than the murder of adults (Meyer, 2007), the bodies of hundreds of adult henchmen and bosses do not outweigh the body of the dead child when measured on the scales of justice. Commenters seem to differentiate between the murders of adults and the murders of children. One commenter, @Brutus, responds to the video of Phoibe's death with,

> Before this point, things seem quite light hearted [sic]. There was [sic] killings here and there and mutilated bodies, but nothing too bad. Until this. I was genuinely shook that they killed off a little child.

Both Phoibe and Shadya's deaths are less gory than most player-perpetrated killings, and yet they are felt to be more distressing. The games themselves work to sacralise the children's deaths by having them take place off-screen, with the implication being that a child's death is too horrific to be depicted. In short, killing a child is presented as such a dastardly perversion of moral norms that it initiates circumstances in which the vigilante hero's bloodbath of vengeance can be understood as an expression of love and care. The validity of violence in the name of the child sacrifice is recognised by commenters. @StarrySmilez notes,

> Used to kill the cult member [sic] only to upgrade Leonidas spear, now I'm killing them for a [sic] revenge.

The child's death turns the practical mercenary into a noble hero, and this same rhetorical move transforms the empty, violent man into a loving, righteous patriarch. The protagonist in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* expresses his grief as anger, and Aspasia's recommendation is that he exorcises these negative emotions through action. Commenters seem to respond in kind, with @Devilman stating,

> The one mission that made me really angry and inspired to kill the enemy

And @ElN adding,

> When Phoebe [sic] died it hit me so hard I banged my table and was about to cry [two tears-streaming emojis] she was the best [sad face emoji]

The latter comment received one thousand upvotes from other viewers of the video, suggesting the collocation of pain and rage was a widely relatable response. Anger has a hardening effect on grief. The fluidity of tears must be balanced by the solidity of a clenched fist, or of a

blunt weapon. Commenter @GregoryBaker reflects,

> I was So [sic] pissed at this point that I chain killed the first three [guards surround-
> ing Phoibe] then switched to a heavey [sic] blunt weapon to take out the last guy. The
> death animation as Kassandra beat the man over the head and kicked him in the face
> was extra satisfying. // Ps. This is the only time I used a bunt [sic] weapon.

The death animation is an instance of ludic feedback that affirms the player's success, and
so the intensification of gore can be read as the narrative equivalent of a high score, eliciting
the same feelings of triumph. The visual display of brute strength is enhanced by rumble
feedback via the controller, which reinforces players' experience of the game's responsive-
ness to their input and validates their entitlement to agency within the gameworld. Arguably,
Phoibe's death makes this familiar mechanic feel "extra satisfying" in part because it resolves
ludonarrative dissonance.

The sacrificial child is key to reconciling "hard," violent mechanics with the narrative char-
acterisation of the protagonist as a decent, moral person. Amanda Phillips (2017) posits that
the fixation on "hard" masculinities in videogames restricts characters to "a limited range of
emotional and physical responses. Anger and violence, with their obvious shows of strength
and rejection of weakness, predominate" (n.p.). Bayek is often presented as sensitive and
compassionate in cutscenes, but under the player's direction his behaviour mostly consists
of throat-slitting, bludgeoning, and skewering. Similarly, the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed:
Odyssey* butchers Spartans, Athenians, Cultists, thugs, mercenaries, gladiators, pirates, poli-
ticians, and even mythical creatures from Greek legends yet is still revered as a sympathetic,
kind, fair saviour. The central function of the child sacrifice is to assuage the ludonarrative
dissonance inherent in the idea of a benevolent, virtuous protagonist whose primary mode
of interaction with the world is limited to lethal violence.

The interweaving of the player's ludic goals and the game's overarching narrative is apparent
in the dialogue exchanged after Shadya's death. Hotephres expresses his hopelessness: "It is
over. The Crocodile has won. The ledger, lost. My daughter . . . my Shadya . . . . He has taken
everything from us." Hotephres uses ludic language ("won," "lost") as if he were describing
the current game state. Bayek's response is to demand a rematch: "He will pay for this. And
all those who serve him." Hotephres frames his daughter's murder as something that was
"taken" from him – he was robbed of a possession, and Bayek's oath is that he will ensure
the thief "pays" for what was stolen. The child sacrifice is a debt to be paid, a score to be
settled. Players experience a dispossession that parallels the loss experienced by the charac-
ters: they are barred from further interactions with a likeable character, and they are stripped
of their status as heroic guardian. This speaks to Sarkeesian's observation that the murder
of the fridged wife is a direct assault upon the hero's masculinity. Revenge makes sense not
because, as Hotephres himself notes, it will bring back the dead child, but because it will
restore the man's sense of self. Steven Conway (2020) posits that the vengeance narrative

is "the most hypermasculine of narrative tropes" because it centres on a protagonist who "seeks to dominate those who once emasculated him" (p. 945). That fatherhood is another form of masculinity rather than a relational status is evident in the fact that the protagonist can reclaim his right to patrimony simply by exerting power over his enemies, with or without the continuing existence of his progeny.

The conversation between Bayek and Hotephres about winning and losing takes place while the two men watch Shadya's mother cradle her daughter's newly mummified corpse as she gasps her way through a lullaby. This impotent pathos of maternal care is contrasted with the masculine imperative to act. If victims are acted upon – and their objectification is presented as feminising and infantilising – then perpetrators are subjects who act, and the role of perpetrator is inherently masculine. In inviting players to act, then, the game offers up a masculine subject position – that of the aggressor. The barring of "women and children" from the category of combatants in these games speaks to a wider issue concerning the gendered nature of the civilian–combatant distinction in contemporary society. As R. Charli Carpenter (2006) notes, this distinction is not only gendered but also aged: "The category 'women and children' conflates infants, who are indeed both innocent and vulnerable, with adult women and adolescents who may be neither" (p. 2). The alignment of childishness and femininity means that both identities function as foils to bound and bolster definitions of masculinity while also positioning men as active, deliberate agents and "women and children" as passive recipients of either violence or protection.

Lights, Child Death, Action

Sarkeesian notes that the wife's death is a call to arms for the bereaved husband. The child sacrifice has a similarly galvanising effect on a game's narrative. The exposition of *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, for example, reveals that Bayek's decision to join the Hidden Ones – a secret, transhistorical, transcultural society of assassins who defend individual liberty against evolving cabals of megalomaniacal oligarchs – is motivated by the death of his young son, Khemu. Khemu is accidentally killed by Bayek's own hand when they are both captured by the Order of Ancients. Bayek attempts to stab one of his captors, who swerves aside in such a way as to guide the dagger into Khemu's heart. Bereft of a child to protect, Bayek takes an oath to protect all Egyptians from the machinations of the Order, thus establishing the game's goals and narrative structure and initiating the game's action. Commenter @JuanitodelGlobo identifies Phoibe's death scene as

> That moment when you decide to hunt them all down.

And a commenter using the handle @StreamrGamr writes,

> Me before: Meh cult, I'll explore the entirety of Greece first
> Me After: When I'm through with the Cult, Hades will curse my name for making

the underworld so busy

This comment not only expresses the child sacrifice's catalysing effect on narrative pacing but also hints at its impact on player identification with the avatar. The shared sense of purpose that now connects the game's violent mechanics with a reasonable narrative explanation has the player combining diegetic language ("Hades will curse my name") with possessive pronouns, suggesting a close affinity between player and avatar. The narrative injustice of the murder of a child correlates with a sense of ludic injustice that arises from the subversion of the player's expectations of agency. The player and the protagonist can both lay claim to legitimate personal grievances and therefore share a common motivation for the bloody annihilation of in-game antagonists. Following the child's death, players can interpret their in-games actions as more than the pragmatic fulfilment of an arbitrary set of ludic challenges: the child sacrifice provides a connecting thread that ascribes symbolic meaning to each killing. This enhances player-avatar intimacy, which is manifest in the fact that players continue to role-play as the protagonist in the comments left beneath the playthrough.

In the *Assassin's Creed* series, players have the option to use stealth tactics to avoid direct confrontation with some antagonists, meaning that players can choose to spare the lives of certain non-player characters. Minimising enemy casualties is coded as expedient rather than noble. In fact, it even could be read as cowardly, since it is a strategy for avoiding combat with difficult enemies. Significantly, after the deaths of Shadya and Phoibe, other commenters on the walkthrough videos explicitly rejected stealth tactics as inappropriate for the task at hand. @MohammedKhan writes,

> When I saw this girl who helplessly tried to swim out but being tied to a rope and drowning made me so rage that right after her death I entirely killed each and every [sic] roman I saw right after this mission I did not go stealth just direct torture kill.

@FattuAhmed concurs, describing his playthrough thus:

> I reached the mother crying without killing anyone behind her and then notice her crying. I then call [Bayek's eagle] to see where shandya [sic] is and after I realised what happened, I took out the bow and started shooting flame arrows in the head at everyone with the skill where I can control the arrow. After that I just took it personal and killed everyone brutally.

The killing method this commenter describes is one that exaggerates the player's agency, allowing them not only to fire the arrow but to control its path as it curves through the air towards the enemies, essentially turning a ranged attack into a form of close combat. Commenters react in identical ways to Phoibe's death. @EgyptianRulers writes,

> I was heated playing this game when this happened. Went on a murder spree after

watching this scene.

Hyperbolic violence characterises comments such as those left by @RaidGhostHeroes, who writes,

> The streets ran red with blood after this every encampment and guard around died

And @RandomGuy, who brags,

> I threw every cultists [sic] body into the sea.

The death of the sacrificial child encourages a different playstyle – one that is more aggressive, more reckless, and more dramatic. Furthermore, each commenter cited here was keen to share the manner in which they left their own, individual mark on their various "murder sprees," suggesting that their revenge missions were part of reclaiming their identities as powerful, capable, and intimidating agents within the gameworld.

Damn You, Ubisoft

The idea that the virtual child's murder is experienced as a personal affront to players is implied in comments such as @RickO'Tool's:

> I was already hunting the cult like crazy just because I liked that part of the game. Uncovering mysterious people and hunting them felt cool. After this, I woyld [sic] not only hunt them but parade their bodies around whatever Island I was on while riding my horse. And I haven't finished the game, but Im [sic] killing Deimos. Phoibe was Kassandra's sibling not Deimos.

@RickO'Tool moves between first person and third person, suggesting that while they are closely aligned with the focalising character, they also view themself as an angel of justice whose unseen machinations must right the game's wrongs. Since there are no textual prompts or ludic rewards for "parading" the corpses of one's enemies in Assassin's Creed, @RickO'Tool's performance can be interpreted as an effort to assert ownership over their in-game actions through the kinds individualisation interactive media afford. @RickO'Tool's diegetic performance of their personal emotions speaks to the metaleptic blurring that characterises the way in which some players see the computer-controlled antagonists as being metonyms for the game system as a whole, or even as surrogates for the game's designers. Commenter @JarvisKamamoto curses the whole development studio:

> DAMN YOU UBISOFT, SHE WAS JUST A KID

@BadBoyDoge rages,

First Khemu, after Shadya, and now Phoibe???? For fuck safe [sic], Ubisoft

A commenter with the handle @YoSeJesus exclaims,

How dare they kill Phoibe!

That vague pronoun could encompass both the in-game antagonists and the narrative designers at Ubisoft, but the sense of annoyed outrage seems more appropriate when directed towards the latter rather than the former. @SantosCortez directs the violence that the game encourages towards computer-controlled antagonists back towards the game's creators through the virtual spaces cohabited by developers and players:

Ladies and gentlemen I think this call [sic] out for a massive attack on all of Ubisofts [sic] social accounts demanding that they update the game to add an option to save phoibe [sic]

Commenter @NFLCinema writes,

After that scene I felt more angry than Kassandra did, not on the cult, on Ubisoft for doing it again. After Khemu and Shadya I set the goal to myself to protect her this time and I didn't even get the Chance to do, in a game with dialog options it feels like betrayal. From todays [sic] view, I read that Phoibe is based on the remains of a real girl called Myrtis to be found in the Athens museum, so her fate was set in stone just as Pericles was. I have been playing very diplomatic with Kass and sparing a lot lives [sic], but now I want to slaughter just everyone in my way. Including Deimos.

It is interesting that this player claims to feel *more* anger than their fictional counterpart. This is Kassandra's first experience of losing a surrogate child, but it is the jaded player's third experience. @NFLCinema connects the emotionally-charged experience of "betrayal" with the game's dialogue options, suggesting that the game cheated players by reneging on its promise of interactivity. The dialogue choice mechanic implied players could control the relationships between characters, but Phoibe's death was "set in stone" – a scripted plot point predetermined by history that undermines the medium's promise of narrative customization and co-creation. However, one could argue that @NFLCinema's anger at Ubisoft is not a rejection of the figure of the child sacrifice but an affirmation of its rhetorical efficacy. That is to say, if interactive media ties emotion to action, the rage elicited by the child's "unfair" death ensures grief is expressed in a legible way through the game's violent mechanics. Furthermore, the player's desire to influence the text beyond its encoded interactions attests to the child sacrifice's power to intensify the value players place on agency and control.

Commenters demonstrate a meta-awareness of the rhetorical function of the sacrificial child. @AnyaHarret recognizes it as a common, even tired, trope:

In every single Assassin's Creed game there are always children you love and they die

@Playa4Eva writes,

> She didn't deserve to die but I get why they killed her off to give you motivation for destroying the rest of the cult, but tbh I didn't need much anyhow!

While an in-game antagonist killed the character, the developers "killed the character *off*," suggesting this commenter experiences Phoibe's death as a transparent moment that reveals the intentions of the game's developers. Annoyance at Ubisoft's blatant manipulation of the player's emotions aggravates feelings of anger but also elicits feelings of righteousness. Just as the Order of Ancients and the Cult of Kosmos are shadowy institutions that pull strings from behind the scenes, so too is the game's system perceived as a callous, unjust conspiracy that opposes individual freedom and the right to self-determination for players. As assassins, players defeat "the system" and dismantle the ruling power that acts through proxies. Thus, mastery of the game becomes a metaphor for mastery of the Order or Cult. The player and the protagonist are the David to the system's Goliath – their death-dealing is rendered brave and honourable because it defies an omnipresent, controlling power that oversteps its own authorial remit.

The Case of Kassandra

One could argue that replacing the fridged wife with the fridged child creates a narrative framework within which the hero could be female, and that this might constitute a feminist challenge to sexist norms. In *Resident Evil 2*, for example, the male protagonist Leon is paired with a supporting female character Ada, while the female protagonist is paired with the child character, Sherry. The child character creates a context in which the female character can be strong, courageous, and competent. *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* gives players the option of choosing a female hero, Kassandra. However, when played as Kassandra, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* demonstrates that while a female hero is possible, feminine heroism is not. Feminine heroism can be defined here not in terms of biological essentialism but simply as a foil for masculine heroism – where the latter is hard, excessive, violent, and physical, and the former is soft, subtle, non-violent, and cerebral if not emotional. In Maria Tatar's (2021) unearthing of the literary history of the female hero, for example, she finds that while male heroes are characterised by brute strength and athleticism, which they use to inflict injury, female heroes are often characterised by their curiosity, their quick thinking, and their concern for others. Despite their different genders, both Kassandra and Alexios are cast in the role of the mighty patriarch in relation to the sacrificial child. As many commenters noted, prior to Phoibe's death players might choose to navigate the gameworld using careful strategy and stealth tactics, thereby avoiding unnecessary combat. They might choose to spend time away from the central, linear narrative, admiring the beautiful gameworld, finding collectibles, and completing comparatively mundane side quests for various NPCs. That is to say, players

may exhibit the qualities Tatar connects to the female hero: curiosity about the world and concern for its inhabitants, and battles of wits rather than of brawn. Phoibe's death, however, constitutes an almost irresistible push to single-mindedly pursue a homicidal campaign to eliminate every member of the opposing faction and reach the game's narrative conclusion.

Terry Kupers (2005) writes, "contemporary hegemonic masculinity is built on two legs, domination of women and a hierarchy of intermale dominance," which in its current Anglo-American iterations includes "a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger, and unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency, devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and so forth" (p. 716). Kassandra and Alexios are defined in opposition to a cast of female characters, who fall into the categories of villainous hags, seductresses, wives, and mothers, but they are also both presented as more "male" than certain men. *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* features a prominent NPC named Alkibiades who is an effete, polyamorous, pansexual man. Alkibiades often appears scantily clad and is presented as promiscuous, frivolous, and flamboyant. He can be added to the player-character's list of sexual conquests. Within intermale hierarchies, Kassandra ranks higher than this feminised character, who is another foil for her heroic masculinity. Tatar's concerns seem especially relevant when applied to Kassandra. Tatar asks, "[d]o we risk installing a disturbing new archetype of female heroism, one that emulates the muscle and agility of classic male heroes?" (p. 263).

Phoibe is unmothered irrespective of the protagonist's gender because mothering is not assigned an action. Phoibe acquires a temporary, surrogate mother figure in the character of Aspasia – the courtesan-turned-politician's-wife – who offers Phoibe employment when the child arrives in Athens. However, it is quickly affirmed that mothers cannot perform the role of protector. Phoibe goes missing shortly before her death and the protagonist reprimands Aspasia for allowing Phoibe to venture out alone, saying, "Aspasia, there's a plague. You've seen the streets. She's just a child." Aspasia replies, "Give her the credit she deserves – she's more a fighter than I was at her age." Aspasia trusts in Phoibe's ability to take care of herself, but by advocating for the child's right to participate in the adult world, Aspasia undermines the need for a controlling father figure. Aspasia must be proved wrong with Phoibe's imminent, horrifying demise so that protection through total domination can be established as both reasonable and necessary.

The *Assassin's Creed* series does envisage feminine violence, but it is characterised as fundamentally unheroic. The Crocodile, Shadya's murderer, is revealed to be an old, rich crone who uses her wealth to command an army of gladiators. Although she usually bids others to commit violent acts on her behalf, one of her minions describes how the Crocodile tied Shadya's ankles herself and threw her into the water. The disparity between her adult strength and Shadya's childly weakness make this murder unjust and despicable, but the disparity between Bayek's adult male strength and the Crocodile's feminine, elderly weakness goes unremarked. In short, the presence of a sacrificial child does not alter relationality

in a way that creates space for feminine heroism; rather, it functions to create circumstances for feminine villainy. To act in these gameworlds is to be violent – and violence that is heroic is also definitively male. Finally, the game's narrative conclusion reveals that the original leader of the Cult of Kosmos is, in fact, Aspasia. It was on her orders that the protagonist's infant sibling was sentenced to be thrown from a clifftop, making Aspasia another child-killer. Aspasia's femininity disguises her power, which is rooted in dissembling, duplicity, and disloyalty, and her subtlety and aptitude for social manipulation provide a final point of contrast between villainous female power and heroic male power. The sense that this character withheld vital information from the avatar and from the player encourages a suspicion of feminized abilities and an affirmation of the apparent directness and honesty of physical, masculine combat. Again, although Tatar does not include videogames in her otherwise wide-reaching survey of female heroism, her line of questioning seems particularly apt for the games examined here: "What is the future of the female trickster, and how will she evolve? Does she run the risk of turning into an antiheroine, an outlaw force that turns toxic, using her brainpower to take charge and undermine in dark, devious ways? Now that heroines have found their way into new arenas of action, will villainy, too, assume new faces and features?" (p. 270).

Conclusion

The proximity of the child sacrifice to the woman in the refrigerator in the games discussed in this article becomes clear when one compares the child sacrifice to child deaths in classic literature. Robin Bernstein (2011) writes, "[b]oth romanticism and sentimentalism constructed the death of a child not as dispossessive but as *preservative*, as a *freezing* that paradoxically prevents the essential child-quality from ever dying through maturation" (p. 24, my italics). The language of fridging seems to underpin critical discussions of literary child deaths; however, the rhetorical effect of the dead or dying child – particularly in nineteenth-century fiction – is at odds with the rhetorical effect of the child sacrifice in these *Assassin's Creed* games. Sanchéz-Eppler (2005) notes, "[t]he power that adheres in the figure of the dying child may be used to enforce a wide array of social issues, and any reader of nineteenth century fiction can easily produce a list of the lessons – temperance, abolition, charity, chastity, and most of all piety – underscored by the death of a child" (p. 101). Although she nuances her arguments by discussing the increasing commercialisation of grief, Sanchéz-Eppler documents private poems, personal letters, essays, and novels in which the death of the child creates conditions wherein the patriarch can be soft, incomplete, lost, and vulnerable. She complicates the space between the dead child as a narrative cliché in fiction and "the acute pain, the unassimilable wrench of an individual child's death" (p. 101) by examining the private post-mortem photographs of nineteenth-century children. She suggests that these posed images do not necessarily "fix" or preserve the child as a possession objectified by death, but instead function as "wounds" that are prevented from healing.

In contrast, the child sacrifice in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Origins* represents the patri-

arch's externalised weakness, and thus the symbolic burning of the child on the pyre has a cauterizing effect on the adult's vulnerability. The living child was the wound, and the child's death heals that opening, affirming the imperviousness of man. With the child removed from the picture, softer emotions can be set aside in favour of the hardness of rage. Nuance and ambiguity are replaced by certainty and purpose, and the value of militarised masculinity can remain unquestioned. As Susan L. Mizruchi (1998) writes, "the social is defined by what is given up in order to reproduce it" (p. 23). In the games discussed in this article, the blood of children is spilled so that videogames can continue to reproduce some of the most troubling aspects of patriarchy. Since the death of the child is figured as an assault upon the player-character's identity as a patriarchal protector, the consequent revenge quest can be understood as a mission to restore the hero's masculinity through the violent domination of others. In this way, the child sacrifice permits a return to extreme, aggressive forms of masculinity whilst side-stepping questions about the ethics of violence: ridding the world of child-killers cannot be wrong, and retaliatory violence is not only necessary but heroic.

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