

LIFE LESSONS WITH ATREUS AND CHLOE

Mature Video Games as Opportunity Spaces for Family Conversations

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INTRODUCTION

The effects of childhood and adolescent exposure to mature video games has been a recurring topic in popular culture as well as academic research for many years. While many studies have been conducted, a consensus has not been reached. Video games have been shown, however, to play a positive role in family togetherness and act as an opportunity space to encourage family discussion. Through a review of the literature, this article argues that mature video games can serve as opportunity spaces for families with older children and teens. A case study in which the M-rated video games, *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2017) and *God of War* (2018) were played in a parent-child context is then presented to demonstrate how these games were able to stimulate discussion of important developmental topics.

BRIEF SOCIAL HISTORY OF MATURE VIDEO GAMES

For many years, video games have been portrayed in the media as dangerous for children and overtly violent (Williams, 2003). One of the first major public moments in video game history occurred in 1976, when the arcade game *Death Race* was denounced on the television program *60 Minutes* because of its simulated automotive violence, leading to public protests

(Montfort & Bogost, 2009). While the controversy led to an increase in sales, distributor Exidy eventually pulled it from the market. In 1993, parents and government officials were outraged when they discovered the realistic graphics complete with blood splatters, grotesque finishing moves, and women wearing very little clothing in the fighting game, *Mortal Kombat* (1993). Discovery of *Night Trap* (1992), and its violent content against women, led to a Senate inquiry into video game violence. The result of this inquiry was the formation of the industry-managed Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) (Donovan, 2010). To this day, the ESRB reviews video games and provides age-appropriate ratings to give insight into a game's content. Another major moment in the topic of video game content and children occurred in 2011, when the Supreme Court ruled that the state of California could not prohibit the sale of video games to minors (Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association, 2011). Video games have been also blamed for school shootings, including the tragic killings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 (Steinkuehler, 2016). These examples demonstrate that video games with mature content have been the topic of public debate for many years, and have been portrayed as negative and damaging to children and teens. It is with this in mind that this article will explore the research surrounding children and mature video games, families and video games, and benefits of intergenerational play of mature video games.

RESEARCH ON CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND VIDEO GAMES

Childhood Exposure to Mature Video Games

While video games have become a popular topic of research in recent decades, literature focusing on children and adolescents and mature video games has mostly been limited to the study of exposure to violent content. Some exceptions focus on how the sexualized or secondary treatment of women characters in

games may provide children and adolescents with negative views of women, though minors are often one of many populations included in these studies (Miller & Summers, 2007; Ward, 2016).

The wide range of literature covering the effects of childhood and adolescent exposure to violent video games leads to many different conclusions. Some studies have shown that exposure leads to higher levels of aggression, bullying, and violent behavior over time (Anderson, et al., 2010; Dittrock, Beran, Mishna, Hetherington, & Shariff, 2013; Prescott, Sargent, & Hull, 2018). Another concludes, “violent video game play negatively impacts benevolence, ultimately leading to a reduction in prosocial behavior” (Coyne, Warburton, Essig, & Stockdale, 2018, p. 1875). A study by Engelhardt, Bartholow, Kerr, and Bushman (2011) reports that MRI brain patterns of those who play violent video games are less likely to respond when a subject is viewing violent content, therefore showing a desensitization to violent behavior. However, another group of researchers has studied this same phenomenon, and found no evidence of desensitization (Kühn, Kugler, Schmalen, Weichenberger, Witt, & Gallint, 2018).

Many academics have argued that it’s not as simple as whether or not violent video games negatively affect children and adolescents. In an article from 2001, researchers report that reducing all media, not just violent media, leads to reduced aggressive behavior in children (Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Haydel, & Varady, 2001). Ferguson (2010) argues that aggressive behavior must be more clearly defined in these studies, as “intentional behavior produced to cause physical harm or humiliation,” since aggressive play can be a positive experience if consensual (p. 68). The affectivity of the parent-child relationship, exposure to verbal abuse, and physical violence in the home environment are argued to be the strongest indicators of maladaptive gaming behaviors and youth violence by other researchers (Yee-Iam Li, Chuen-ye Lo, & Cheng, 2018; DeCamp

& Ferguson, 2017). Others have argued that video games are the next in a long line of new technologies to be blamed for the “larger struggles within the culture,” and that studies showing a positive correlation between video games and violent behavior in children are more likely to be cited in academic publications and covered by the news media (Williams, 2003, p. 543; Copenhaver, et al 2017).

The focus on the negative behavioral effects of mature video games causes researchers to overlook the potential benefits these types of games could provide. It is the potential social-emotional benefits that may be afforded by video games with mature content and themes that will be explored later in this article.

Benefits of Playing Video Games

Many academic articles demonstrate a range of benefits for children and adolescents who play video games including cognitive, motivational, emotional, altruistic, and prosocial improvements (Granic, Lobel, and Engels, 2014; Whitaker & Bushman, 2012). Video games have been shown to provide improvements in moral reasoning, team building, and leadership (Passmore & Holder, 2014). They can allow players to gain empathy for others’ experiences, through both game narrative and online interactions with other players (Ferguson, 2010; Khoo, 2012). In an educational setting, video games can deepen a learner’s understanding and support deeper levels of systemic thinking (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010; Squire, 2011). Students who play strategic video games are found to have high problem-solving skills and report a high concern for academic grades (Adachi & Willoughby, 2013).

Parental Involvement in Media Consumption

While the literature is often conflicting, one point has remained consistent- the importance of parental knowledge of the media being consumed by their children. The American Academy of

Pediatrics (AAP) urges parents to co-view media with their children and discuss how violent solutions could have been solved with nonviolent alternatives (2009). The AAP describes viewing and playing with children as a fun, family activity that, “encourages social interactions, bonding, and learning,” and allows parents an opportunity to “introduce and share your own life experiences and perspectives- and guidance- as you play the game” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2015, np).

Not only will the consumption of media as a family allow parents to be more aware of what their children are viewing, it can also contribute to a sense of family closeness. Multiple studies of parent-child relationships have shown that positive relationships and open communication lead to lower levels of adolescent drinking, higher self-esteem, and a more positive overall well-being (Ainsworth, et al, 2015; Kuendig and Kuntsche, 2006; Wang, Taylor, & Sun, 2018).

Families Playing Together

In 1985, Professor Edna Mitchell surveyed families on the impact home video games had on their interactions and relationships. The families surveyed contributed overwhelmingly positive comments including new opportunities for father-daughter interaction, much-needed in-home leisure time for mothers, and sibling interaction where age and gender are overlooked. Mitchell (1985) concludes that her study had found, “families enjoying a unique moment of discovery of each other and development of new interpersonal relationships within the family circle” (p. 135). This survey had been conducted at a time when video games were marketed as a gender-neutral family activity that turned the television from a “disreputable, passive medium,” into an active, family-centered pursuit (Chess, 2017; Newman, 2017, p. 47). Later in the 1980s and early 1990s, the marketing and advertising of video games shifted to an activity for teenage boys to play in their bedrooms.

The industry marketing approach began to shift back to families in 2005, bringing video games back into the living room (Chambers, 2012). The timing in this marketing shift tracks well, as the average gamer age in 2005 was 33 years old, suggesting that the teens who were playing video games in the 1980s and 1990s now had families of their own (Entertainment Software Association, 2006).

Video Games as an Opportunity Space

Video game play provides an excellent opportunity to facilitate intergenerational communication. Research has shown that it improves the overall well-being of family members, allows for the sharing of knowledge, provides a space to connect and share feelings, and creates a venue for sharing for families that struggle with communication (Costa & Veloso, 2016; Wang, et al., 2018). A space where families come together to share, learn from one another, and form values is defined by authors Siyhhan and Gee (2018) as an opportunity space. Traditionally, the most common opportunity space for families is the dinner table. Siyhhan and Gee argue that video games serve as an opportunity space where families can consider identities and experiences that are different from their own, that can be discussed and considered within the individual identities and values of the family members. They argue, “this aspect of video games is quite powerful for families, especially during a time when children go through cognitive, social, and emotional changes as they transition into adolescence” (p. 108).

Thoughtful, intergenerational play of video games can also serve as an excellent way to teach children how to approach video games in a conscientious and critical way. While video games are all “architectures of engagement,” they are not all the same (Steinkuehler, 2016, p. 51). They all carry different messages, experiences, and themes (Steinkuehler, 2016). It is important to teach children how to look at individual games to find these

messages and make sense of them. Critical consumption of media is an important skill that should not be overlooked when preparing children to become informed digital citizens (James, Weinstein, & Mendoza, 2019).

Mature Video Games as an Opportunity Space

As previously described, much of the literature surrounding children and mature video games focuses on the negative effects violent video games, specifically, may have on children. Very limited research has been published arguing for benefits gained by children playing mature games along with a parent or guardian. One argument recommends harnessing the popularity of violent video games as a way to deliver informational content, and adds that adolescents can improve their reading and writing skills by contributing to the well-supported forums and wikis that already exist for many popular mature titles (Ferguson, 2010). Games with mature content may also contain a wealth of prosocial content. Gentile, et al. (2009) define prosocial content in games as, “scenes in which characters help troubled persons and scenes where friendships or affections between parents and children are shown” (p. 757). Many mature games include rich, impactful narratives in which characters face challenges and circumstances that, as Siyahhan and Gee argue, can be immediately discussed and evaluated in the context of individual and family values. Characters’ choices can be questioned, family and interpersonal drama can be applied to life experiences, and alternative solutions to violent actions can be discovered.

MATURE VIDEO GAMES AS AN OPPORTUNITY SPACE: CASE STUDY

This case study illustrates an example of how video games that contain violent and mature content may provide positive prosocial experiences, lead to open family communication, serve as opportunity spaces for important family interactions, and provide children with the tools to think metacognitively about

the media they consume. The games played in this case study are not typical for family gaming time; notably because both are single-player games and both are rated M 17+. Those major differences aside, they do include many qualities that can make a video game a meaningful, immersive opportunity space for families. These titles explore issues of discovering one's identity, navigating difficult family relationships, the struggles that come with growing up, coping with anger and grief, and the consequences of making harmful choices.

The titles were chosen primarily because both had received high praise from game reviews and the podcast, Giant Bombcast for the quality of the gameplay experience. Additionally, the games were not reviewed as showing sexist representations or gratuitous violence. Above all, the games were selected for the well-crafted stories that could potentially lead to a memorable experience that could be shared together. The presence of at least one parent during all gameplay meant that the games could be stopped at any point if they were found to be too intense or inappropriate (by parent or child). It wasn't until the mother observed the gameplay and both parents acknowledged that it had prompted their child (age 10) to begin asking important questions about life and relationships, both during and outside gameplay, that this experience revealed itself as a potential for further study and documentation.

The Games

God of War (2018) is an action-adventure game featuring warrior Kratos his eleven-year-old son Atreus (Barlog, 2018). While this is the fourth game in the *God of War* franchise, the 2018 version is quite different from previous titles that featured a hypermasculine antihero Kratos hacking and slashing through light storylines, where women were mere sexual objects. This title follows Kratos and Atreus as they journey through a land of Norse mythology to scatter the cremated remains of Faye,

Kratos's wife and Atreus' mother, from the highest peak of the realm. One reviewer describes the adventure as one where, "enemies are destroyed, allies are made, secrets come to light and unwanted memories surface" (Marrow, 2018).

Life is Strange: Before the Storm (2017) is an episodic three-part game in the graphic adventure genre, where players take on the persona of Chloe Price, a sixteen-year-old high school student. Chloe's story includes negotiating a difficult family life in which she and her mother struggle after the death of her father, as well as the strained relationship with her mother's boyfriend. Chloe also navigates complex interpersonal relationships with her classmates. One reviewer describes *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* as "both a critical and commercial success, it proved there was a mainstream audience for a female-centric game about friendship, family, and relationships" (Byrd, 2018). This game is the prequel to *Life is Strange* (2015), in which Chloe Price was a supporting character.

Topics and Conversations

While the two games seem very different at first, many parallel topics recur throughout both that served as life lessons and conversation starters. The gameplay responses are divided by topic, then game. The scenes described are by no means complete summaries of these complex games, but have been chosen because of the memorable dialogue they prompted.

Parent-child relationships

In both *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* and *God of War*, a recurring theme is tension within parent-child relationships. This topic was especially relevant as gameplay happened in a parent-child context. Chloe and Atreus push boundaries, show disrespect, and struggle to establish open communication with their parents.

God of War (2018) opens with Kratos cutting down and chopping

up a specially-marked tree, then proceeding into his home where Atreus is praying and crying over Faye's shrouded body. Kratos and Atreus then proceed outside and place her body on the funeral pyre. Without thinking, Atreus removes the knife that once belonged to his mother that had been ceremoniously placed on the pyre, burning himself in the process. In a touching moment, Kratos places snow on Atreus' wounded hand and wraps it in a bandage. This touching scene is cut short when Kratos immediately insists that Atreus proves to him that he is able to hunt. While in the nearby woods, Atreus takes a wild and careless shot with his bow causing his father to sternly share his disapproval of his son's sloppiness. Later, after taking his father's advice, he makes a well-aimed shot against his prey, fatally wounding it. As the animal is slowly dying, Kratos motions to Atreus to finish it with his mother's knife. Atreus hesitates, looks to his father, and says he can't do it. Kratos then takes Atreus' hands in his own and forces him to kill the animal. This sequence of actions in the game prompts a conversation about the emotion of the events and Kratos' stern approach to interacting with Atreus.

Dexter (son, age 10): "This is the scene where he [Kratos] starts to get harsh on Atreus. If I was in the scene, I wouldn't be mad, I'd be scared- since I'm not used to getting yelled at like that. Kratos was hard on him because his wife just died, and because he could fight so well, he was expecting the same from Atreus. He was feeling impatient and sad."

Adam (father): "They set the tone that Atreus was much more attached to his mother than his father. They talked to each other in a very formal way"

Dexter: "It made me think, 'what would I do if I lost a parent?' It would be really scary."

While Kratos, Atreus, and Faye lived in a magically contained

area of the woods throughout Atreus' life, Kratos remained emotionally distant from his son. The almost jarring transition between the heavy emotional weight of the funeral pyre followed immediately by Kratos commanding Atreus to kill an animal provides insight into the relationship between the two characters at the start of the game. The emotion of the scene led to a discussion about how Kratos eventually learned how to show affection for Atreus.

Adam: "Kratos is gentle with Atreus at many important points, like when Atreus is upset after killing someone, though these interactions are followed by strictness, and brief comments like, "let's go home," "give up," and famously, "don't be sorry, be better."

Dexter: "Yeah, Kratos loved Atreus more than he showed. That definitely got better through the game."

Adam: "For example, in the beginning of the game, there's a scene where Kratos almost touches Atreus' back to comfort him, but pulls away. Throughout the game, he eventually does learn how to comfort Atreus- so there's a lot of development there. Though it takes him a while to show he cares in the traditional way a father does, there are many times during combat when he shows it, like sticking his arm in a giant's mouth to protect Atreus from getting bitten."

Throughout the game, the player learns that Faye's final wishes to have the tree cut down that lifted the magical protective barrier she had placed many years ago, and to have her ashes scattered far away from home, were to set father and son on a journey to force both Kratos and Atreus become aware of truths about themselves and each other.

Dexter: "When I first learned the tree he [Kratos] cuts down in the beginning breaks the shield, I didn't know why she would have asked them to cut it down, but then I realized that she had them do that on purpose so the monsters that came in would

make them go on a journey. She wanted Atreus to grow and knew that he was ready, and wanted Kratos to help Atreus grow on the journey.”

Angela (mother): Did the mom’s influence show in any other parts of the game?

Adam: Yes, especially when they would come upon troubled spirits throughout the world. Atreus would always want to help them where Kratos would say that it’s a waste of time. This is where Atreus would likely mention how his mother would have wanted them to help others. A ‘what would mom do in this situation?’ kind of thing. Kratos would maintain his gruff exterior but melt a bit inside and then cave to his son and help out the spirit, begrudgingly.

In *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* (2018) the main character Chloe and her mother, Joyce, have a very tense relationship that is eventually shown to have developed that way since the accident that killed William Price, Chloe’s father and Joyce’s husband. This relationship is made more difficult by her mother’s boyfriend David, whose strict demand for respect makes Chloe even more distant. While the player is able to determine the direction of the dialogue between Chloe and Joyce, there is no getting around the often strained nature of their conversations.

Dexter: “Chloe was sassy and kinda sad and I feel bad for her to have to go through all that stuff. It gave me a good idea of what might be happening with a girl at my school. She would sometimes argue with my teacher and say ‘you’re just like my mom’ and talk about stuff that would happen at home at recess. Seeing Chloe helped me to have more understanding toward her and makes me feel grateful for my family”

Angela: “What do you think Chloe’s mom is feeling?”

Dexter: “The mom is trying to get the family to stick together

and get Chloe to like her boyfriend, and that's making her really stressed out trying to get both of them to work together. Plus she's trying to get over losing her husband."

Adam: "Did Chloe and Atreus have anything in common by both losing a parent?"

Dexter: "They both have a hard time controlling their attitude, and sadness can sometimes turn to anger because they don't know what to do with the sadness they have."

By experiencing an immersive story about a family that is different from his own, Dexter is able to empathize with children at his school and gain a better understanding of their lives. He is able to step into both the perspective of the child as well as that of the parent to understand that there are often struggles adults are dealing with that impact interactions with their children.

Making bad choices

Throughout the games, both Chloe and Atreus make selfish choices that often lead to both physical and emotional harm to themselves and others.

Around the midway point in *God of War*, Kratos tells Atreus that he is a god, making Atreus part god. This causes the previously polite and restrained Atreus to become arrogant and dominating. Upon their next encounter with Brok, a character whom they've met many times at this point in the game, Atreus tells him to, "do something about it or shut up already" in response to Brok's ongoing complaining about his brother Sindri, and continues by saying he and Kratos are, "sick of hearing about little people's problems" (*God of War*, 2018). This arrogant and unkind behavior is very different from how Atreus has interacted with Brok in previous encounters.

Adam: “What did you think when you saw Atreus act so differently?”

Dexter: “I started to think, ‘woah that was really rude’ I kinda felt scared for him thinking Kratos would burst and grab his arm and yell at him. It was a huge jump in his character- a big change. It made me think, ‘I hope he gets what he deserves,’ not in a violent way- but get yelled at by Kratos.”

Adam: “Did it make you think how you’d act?”

Dexter: “Yeah, I’d just think it was a big change to know that, and I’d be kind of surprised, maybe happy, but I wouldn’t think ‘I’m a god, I can be rude to everyone.’”

Adam: “What do you think his mom would have wanted him to do?”

Dexter: “I think his mom would be proud if he learned he was part god then used his powers for good.”

Earlier in the game, Kratos kills a character named Magni. His brother Modi becomes belligerent (especially about Atreus’ mother) and emotionally unstable and returns to attack Kratos and Atreus multiple times throughout the game. His final return happens while Atreus is still acting out from the knowledge that he is part god. After Modi is defeated, Atreus does not follow his father’s wishes to allow him to live, but stabs Modi in the neck (paralleling the deer at the start of the game), and pushes him off of a high ledge. When Kratos responds with disappointment and tries to reason with Atreus about why that was wrong, Atreus responds with, “Nobody cared about him anyway. What’s the difference?” followed by “whatever,” as he walks away.

Dexter: “When Atreus is going to kick him [Modi] over the edge, Kratos says stop, Atreus says, ‘we’re gods, we can do anything we want,’ the game did a really good job of making me wish he

stopped being so sassy. It made me feel angry at him. We thought Kratos was being hard on him, but then we start to wonder if Atreus was also like this when he realized he could shoot a bow perfectly, and that's why Kratos was so hard on him."

Angela: "Did Atreus' behavior remind you of anything you've done, or that you've seen kids at school do when they've won or found out they were good at something?"

Dexter: "Yeah, when kids have won something at school, they say, 'haha, I got this and you didn't. They'll tease, brag, poke...'"

Adam: "After a lot of these scenes with Atreus acting out, we had to pause and discuss why he was doing a lot of these things. Without the adult guidance and discussion, that's how a lot of these scenes can be damaging to a kid."

Throughout *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, Chloe makes many choices that upset her mother and mother's boyfriend, and that the player can see are destructive or unhealthy behaviors.

Angela: "What kinds of bad choices does Chloe make throughout the game, and why do you think she does these?"

Dexter: "Because of dealing with things like her dad dying, she doesn't like her stepdad, has problems in school- she does drugs, at least it shows that she has in the past, you see her smoke, she runs away from home. When someone has problems like she does, I think the person would be sad and scared, but she was more mad than anything. She did feel a little better when she found that old truck in the junkyard and repairing it helped her to remember when she fixed cars with her Dad. She also found the car from the accident that killed her Dad. That's when she got a baseball bat and started hitting things at the junkyard. I felt like she must be going through hard times and I feel bad for her, and I'm glad I'm not her."

Angela: “Did seeing Chloe experience those things help you understand where others were coming from and why they might make mistakes and bad choices?”

Dexter: “When Chloe and her friend ran away, I know she knew the things she was doing were bad. She hesitated a little when her friend said to run away, and she hesitated to jump on a train in another part of the game. She hesitated and knew they were wrong.”

Adam: “Do you see people act out like Chloe?”

Dexter: “Sometimes kids in my class talk back to the teacher, and even though I know that’s bad to do, it can be satisfying hearing what I kind of wish I could say. It’s like that with Chloe. She always knows what to say.”

Angela: “But you see how much it hurts the other people?”

Dexter: “Even though it’s going fast, time feels like it slows down to see what the person’s reaction is going to be. Sometimes the mom is yelling and says, ‘Why are you doing this? Just behave for me,’ and you see in Chloe’s eyes that she does feel bad, but she just acts like, ‘whatever.’”

Angela: “So when you’re a teenager, we’ll both try our best to communicate and talk when we feel frustrated and angry?”
[laughs]

Dexter: “haha, yeah”

One scene in the game shows Chloe looking for something in a secret spot in her locker and showing disappointment when it is empty. Following this scene, she encounters Joyce and David and is told to empty her pockets.

Dexter: “This one part when her parents were telling her to empty her pockets... at school there was a hole in her locker

where there were supposed to be drugs but they weren't there, but she had cigarettes in her pockets. She would have gotten in HUGE trouble if there were drugs there. Things for her could have been much worse if she had the drugs in her pocket”

Angela: “Do you think she learned a lesson by almost getting caught?”

Dexter: “I don't think she learned a lesson from that. I think she was just happy she didn't get caught with drugs.”

Angela: “If she had been caught, do you think she would have learned a lesson from her punishment? What do you think her punishment would have been?”

Dexter: “I think she would definitely be sad from her punishment- that would probably be to not be able to go out of the house and get yelled at. She probably would have to have a private teacher following her around all the time at school.”

The implication of Chloe's drug use led to a conversation about why people might take drugs, and what types of punishments or treatments are fair in the context of learning about why some might be lead to want to take drugs. Though Dexter's age and inexperience with legal matters did show when he thought she would simply be grounded and have a teacher follow her around at school as a penalty for carrying illegal drugs, this topic provided an opportunity to share the seriousness of partaking in illegal activities- not just because of the punishments, but also because of the hurt it would cause to family members.

In addition to the implication that she takes drugs, Chloe is often seen smoking cigarettes.

Dexter: “There's a couple of parts where Chloe takes out a cigarette and I was just willing her to stop. Today we had someone from a high school come to school and show us pig

lungs that are healthy, and pig lungs filled with tar from smoking and it was really gross. I felt bad for her and wanted her to stop doing that to herself. She would smoke and [mimes smoking coolly and breathing out in relief], and it was so bad for her.”

Angela: “Even though she felt cool and calmer after, you knew that she was hurting herself?”

Dexter: “Yeah, like even before I saw the pig lung.”

Seeing Chloe smoke happened to line up with lessons that were currently being taught at school for Dexter. Having an example of someone who smoked at the same time as these lessons provided a great opportunity to discuss that even someone you like could make choices that are bad for them and not to forget about how harmful activities like smoking can be.

Violence

The games in the *God of War* series have been well-known for their combat and violence. The major difference in the latest installment in the series, however, is the approach to death and violence. Kratos teaches Atreus the importance of mercy and kindness and that killing always has consequences. This game also shows Atreus, a child, contributing to the violence and having it enacted upon him. We see Atreus carry out many attacks, get commended for the improvement in his fighting skills, but also get attacked and injured.

Dexter: “It is different to have a kid who is a main character along with a big strong character in an intense game. I think it’s cool that he fights and tries to help his Dad and that they also show love for each other, and the dad helps him. Like when they climb, he’s on [Kratos’] back, and he lifts him onto things. Atreus can not only fight, but also read language of giants that he was taught by his mother.”

Angela: “Does it make you feel uncomfortable seeing a kid get injured in a game?”

Dexter: “The game puts a lot more effort into explaining when he’s injured [as opposed to Kratos] and makes it more dramatic because Kratos is so used to getting hurt.”

Angela: “When does [the violence] feel like it’s too much?”

Dexter: “There’s one animation where the red circle shows up [the finishing moves]. One of the animations is kind of too much, where [Kratos] puts his axe into a troll’s mouth and swings around... the realistic animation is too much. I liked that the most common enemy was a draugr and I like that they’re like zombies and they just glow when they get ripped apart.”

Adam: “Do you think it’s because they don’t look human-like, or alive?”

Dexter: “Yeah, it’s like that troll that gets sliced- that’s too much and I felt really bad for it.”

Adam: “During a lot of the more realistic violent scenes he had to look away and I told him when they were over.”

The violent scenes in this game also led to a discussion about anger, and how that’s often tied to violence.

Dexter: “The anger the characters feel makes me sympathize with them. I like how Kratos doesn’t immediately commit to fighting. He gives enemies chances to leave before they fight.”

Adam: “What does that say about him?”

Dexter: “That he’s good at controlling his anger.”

Life is Strange: Before the Storm is more grounded in reality than the fantasy setting of *God of War* with a more realistic approach

to violence and its effects. One scene includes Chloe's friend Rachel unexpectedly get stabbed by a peer.

Dexter: "That kinda came out of nowhere- wasn't gory, more 'oh my gosh, what's going to happen?'"

Angela: "Did it seem realistic, and did realistic stuff happen after?"

Dexter: "She went into shock and fell over a little, then Chloe picked her up and took her to the hospital."

Adam: "There was violence- but it wasn't the focal point, but they were dealing more with the emotions you would feel and the consequences that would happen after something like this."

Dexter: "Yeah, it was more real. She didn't pull out the knife, make herself glow to heal, pull out her axe and attack the person like Kratos."

Bullying

Because of the graphic adventure gameplay style of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*, a major portion of gameplay involves making decisions on behalf of the game's protagonist, Chloe. In one particular scene, Chloe gets in the middle while one classmate (Nathan) is getting pushed and teased by another (Drew). As the dialogue continues, we learn about the struggles both students deal with, hear them insult one another, and have to make the choice about whether or not to step in.

Dexter: "Standing up to the bully shows she doesn't want to be bad or emo, it's just her self-defense right now, but she's really a good person"

Adam: "Chloe is an interesting role model. She doesn't feel like she fits in anywhere and that causes her to get into trouble with a lot of authority figures. Despite the trouble she gets in, she shows

her capacity for kindness and caring for her classmates and other characters in the game. She doesn't have a lot of friends, which isn't surprising with how much of a non-conformist she is. On the other hand, her thoughtfulness and kindness should have attracted many friends. This showed us that you don't have to sacrifice kindness if you're inclined to take the lonelier path and be an outcast."

Dexter: "If she came across someone who needed help, she would help"

Adam: "How do you think she determined when to be nice or mean? She could do both really well."

Dexter: "She would usually be nice to her friends and people who shared the same experiences as her."

By choosing to stop the bully, they were able to bring together different parts of Chloe's personality, and talk about how someone who may not seem outwardly friendly, or who makes bad choices, can still be kind to others and stand up for what they think is right. It also led to an opportunity to talk about how some behaviors are always wrong, though they may sometimes seem more complicated.

Growing Up & Adult Situations

Experiencing a storyline that featured a young woman provided Dexter with the opportunity to experience and relate to someone with a different identity.

Angela: "What do you think about seeing an interaction between a mother and her teenage daughter? Does it make you relate to Chloe differently than you might relate to Atrous?"

Dexter: "Her being a teenager gave me something to think about

as I get closer to becoming a teenager. I imagine there will be a lot of similarities with peer pressure and friendship drama.”

Rather than focus on the differences, the discussion became an example of experiences teenagers face. The realistic nature of Chloe’s story also made it more relatable than Atreus’ fantasy-based story.

Life is Strange: Before the Storm contains a number of adult situations, including an arc where Chloe and her friend Rachel learn about some complex family secrets involving Rachel’s parents.

Adam: “There’s a moment where Chloe and Rachel are witnessing, from a distance, Rachel’s father kissing a woman that’s not her mother. This results in a heavy emotional scene where Chloe tries to comfort Rachel after she realizes her dad is having an affair. As an adult, it was easy for me to follow along with what was happening, but for Dexter he didn’t piece things together as smoothly. This very-pause-worthy moment resulted in a good discussion about how complicated adult relationships can get.”

Dexter: “Part of my mind thought that I should be lucky to have someone to explain it to me and I feel sympathy for people who have to go through this stuff, and some more understanding with what some people might be having troubles with.”

Adam: “If something happens suddenly that I wasn’t prepared for, or if I can tell if something is about to happen that needs some parental guidance. I’ll pause the game and say, ‘what do you think is about to happen.’ If he says he doesn’t know, I’ll start to peel back the layers of complexity in the situation to make an adult situation easier to understand for a kid. I’ll ask questions to help him figure out what is happening without me telling him. If I were to have gotten the feeling that he wasn’t taking a lot of the

more mature topics seriously, I would have turned the game off and told him he's not ready for these games."

Sexuality and Consent

Throughout the course of the game, Chloe and Rachel's friendship becomes very close. Depending on the choices made by the player, Chloe and Rachel's close friendship can turn into a romantic relationship.

Adam: "When it was obvious that dialogue options were suggesting to have Chloe pursue something romantic with Rachel, we would talk it through. We often didn't think it was safe to assume that Chloe thinks that Rachel likes her. When they designed the game, they didn't make that obvious, so it's up to the player to decide how it should go. We analyzed the situation to see if we thought the signs had been there for Chloe to act on, but we'd talk and decided they weren't there. There could have been a great love story, but we decided not to act on that."

While the game mechanic did allow players to pursue a romantic relationship between Chloe and Rachel, Adam and Dexter decided not to do this. While it could have provided an opportunity for representation of an LGBTQIA+ relationship, it turned into an opportunity to discuss the signs to look for when pursuing a romantic relationship. The fact that the gameplay signs were not explicit enough to make Dexter and Adam feel comfortable pursuing the romantic actions and dialogue options with Rachel led to an extremely important conversation on consent. In our present time when so many women and men are speaking out about decades of unwanted sexual advances and behavior, this was a welcome opportunity to broach this topic.

Gameplay Summary of Experiences

After playing both of these games together, the family members described what the gameplay and discussion experiences meant

to them. Dexter expressed a feeling of being lucky to have had the opportunity to not just play these games, but to have his dad with him to help him understand the complexities he would have missed if he had played them alone. He also acknowledged that if he had played these games by himself, the violent content would have scared him and the adult situations would have confused him to the point where he would have simply stopped playing them. Adam explained that these games almost felt like flashcards for difficult life situations. The topics and scenarios were neatly set up in the games to be dealt with and discussed without the seriousness or repercussions that would have followed if they had happened in real life. Both Adam and Dexter expressed a feeling of togetherness that was strengthened by playing these games and having the resulting conversations. They agreed that it felt like they had gone on a quest together, especially with *God of War*, and had been positively impacted by the realness of *Life is Strange: Before the Storm*. Angela indicated that she was happy that the family was able to find so much meaning in these games that, at first look, seemed inappropriate for a ten-year-old child.

CONCLUSION

A variety of topics that prompted further discussion and important life lessons arose in parent-child gameplay of both *Life is Strange: Before the Storm* and *God of War*. These games can be seen as an opportunity space, similar to a family dining room table, despite the fact that they are both rated M 17+ and not intended for children. Parents should use caution when playing games like these with their children, and be sure to stop whenever the child feels uncomfortable and is unable to talk about the events of the game, or if the child is not behaving in a mature and thoughtful way. Even when played alongside a parent or guardian, games that are rated M 17+ may not be appropriate for many children. It is important to consider each individual child and their life experiences when considering playing mature games when they are present. If the child is able to remain

engaged in the content and shows they are able to discuss the occurrences in the game, co-playing of mature-rated games could provide an enriching family activity and an opportunity space for important, often difficult, conversations. Families that are having a difficult time communicating or parents/guardians who are looking for an opportunity to connect through challenging conversations may especially benefit from co-playing games with mature content.

How to do this (or Not)

Parents and guardians who are interested in exploring mature topics with their older children and teens through mature gameplay should be sure to prepare themselves for the content of the individual video game titles they may be selecting. The ESRB includes both age-related ratings and content descriptions on the game box and listing (if downloaded digitally), as well as a ratings summary on the ESRB website, <http://www.esrb.org/>. More in-depth reviews are available from the Common Sense Media website at <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/game-reviews>. In addition to an age recommendation and content summary, these game reviews include a section titled, “What Parents Need to Know,” gameplay video clips, charts indicating the amount of occurring themes (including positive messages, violence, sex, and consumerism), community-contributed reviews written by parents and children, talking points for parents and children who may play this game, and a variety of game and story details. These resources can help a parent or guardian make an informed decision on whether or not a title is right for their child or teen, and begin to generate conversation points to enrich the experience of intergenerational play. After considering the game’s content, parents and guardians should then consider the child’s maturity level, openness to discuss difficult topics, possible triggering life experiences, and temperament. If it feels appropriate to continue with the game, keep in mind that every child’s experience is different, and even

though a game may have been working out in the beginning, it may be necessary to turn it off and revisit it at another time in the future.

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