

THE STORYTELLING POWER OF VIDEO GAMES: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS  
OF *THE LAST OF US*

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Communication to the Office of Graduate  
and Extended Studies of East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania

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## **ABSTRACT**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication to the Office of Graduate and Extended Studies of East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania

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### **Abstract**

This thesis explores video game narration to advocate for the legitimacy of video game narratives in an ever-expanding mediated world. The study utilized narrative criticism to break down the narrative of the video game *The Last of Us* to understand why this specific game is significant to the video game industry. The results of this study showed this video game narrative to be strong based on the blending of reality and the game's reality. This strength was shown to affect the player greatly by allowing them to reflect their experiences to the experiences from the game. Through this research, video game narratives were found to be profoundly powerful in helping players to develop a deeper understanding of themselves. The significance of this research stretches beyond the scope of video games and narrative capabilities. This research is dedicated to advocating for those without a voice to be heard and listened to.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **The Potential for Video Games**

Media have an empowering effect on people and video games are no exception. People are inspired by what they see and experience. However, many parents think their children play too many video games or do not quite understand the appeal of video games. They do not see video games being comparable to other media. In hindsight, video games are nothing like any other form of media. The truth of the matter is anything is possible in a video game. All the coding and programming involved in the development of a video game can bring any narrative or super powered ability to life. The wildest imaginations from developers can be crafted and brought to life. The potential of video games is immeasurable. Due to this, they can have positive effects on society.

Currently, in the year 2020, there are many systemic issues being brought to light amongst a global pandemic. Our society is being split into groups who support opposing sides of various issues such as police brutality and racism. Protests and arguments are being made to enforce basic human rights for people of all races, genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, etc. Based on these issues, there is a clear need for positive change in America. Some people choose

to tackle these issues with violence, but this will only bring about more violence from the other side. Can there be a compromise when it comes to basic human rights? How can someone deem another person to be inferior to them? These are questions being asked in 2020. The real question to be asked is what can be used to help people to understand different points of view? My answer to this is media.

The news stations people choose to watch can shape their views. The television shows and films people choose to watch can impact an audience in varying ways. The music people listen to can be focused on specific issues and helping people to shape their own stance on those issues. Video games are no different than any other media channel in any of these regards. If video games can be understood outside of the stigmatized context many people hold them in, then true changes can become possible through a new media channel. The social issues facing America can become better understood and people can start to come together once again. There was a time in human history when people worked together just to survive and did not have to worry about greater societal problems. Where did humanity go wrong?

### **The Need for Change**

Humanity has come far in the hundreds of thousands of years we have lived on this planet. We transcended nature and made our own civilizations and destroyed what once was our ancestral home for the sake of “progression”. Progress has been the staple theme throughout our human history. We progressed to the point that our species now lives on most of the world’s land. We “conquered” land and created countries for the sake of further progression. Wars have been fought for countries to “progress”. Naturally, these have helped the victorious countries to progress, while the countries who lost end up regressing. We are the smartest beings on this planet, yet we turn a

blind eye to most of the other people in this world. Why is that? What about other people makes us so oblivious to them? Is it because of individualism? Nationalism? Fear? How did we progress together as fellow people and suddenly turn our backs on each other? This must be progression at work again.

Life is all about progress as well. We mature and develop and become adults like any other animal. Our biological life purpose is to reproduce (as is the basic purpose of any life form). Just like any other life form not every newborn is able to survive to reach adulthood. Terrible events such as natural disasters, accidents, and disease are all responsible for ceasing someone's progression. No one lives life without facing terrible circumstances or struggles at some point. Death is inevitable and is what all our progress will lead to in the end. If progress is our natural trait, then why do we insist on not allowing others to progress?

As people, we all want to move on from bad times. We do not want to face them, but it is inevitable to be faced with circumstances outside of our control. Sometimes our actions are the cause of suffering for another person and we regret our actions. Apologies are sometimes all we can do to make up for those moments. We want to know what we did once can be forgiven and we are told this from early childhood. We make the world out to be so nice when we explain it to our children because we do not want to scare them. We want them to know they will continue to progress every day. Progression is natural for us after all. Let us face reality though. There are things people will not let you live down especially with the prominence of social media in the present day. Not everyone will be faced with problems like this, but life is not fair to everyone. Nowadays things can always be saved, and nothing is untraceable anymore. Sometimes we will be pushed down for traits or circumstances completely out of our control. Sex, gender, ethnicity,

sexual orientation, religious background, and any trait you were born with/into will always be judged by people. This includes every decision you make in your life. No matter how hard we try to redeem ourselves, labels will always follow us followed by hatred, persecution, discrimination, and any other form of mistreatment. The way the world is right now, it does not allow true progress to be made. However, progression is not impossible under these circumstances because there are true stories of people overcoming the odds. Keep in mind, they are one person among another soon to be eight billion people in the world. They were just the lucky ones. Most people do not get the opportunity to escape from their past whether it be a result of their family history, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. We all are individuals trying to make lives for ourselves and instead of holding each other up, we beat each other down to get ahead. This societal context is not a healthy place for people to progress because if anything, it causes many people to stop and move backwards. The walls and hurdles limiting people from progressing must be stopped. The countless old arguments and hatred bred through fear and ignorance need to be eradicated. Enough is enough. Progress should only be made in one positive direction and it is time to enact progressive change. A significant way this world or society can change is through communication and thorough deliberation.

### **The Role of Communication**

Communication is central to progression because how do we progress without communicating? When civilizations arose due to our use of agriculture, we needed to communicate with each other to survive, just like other animals. Our form of communication is often seen as being more advanced and multifaceted than other animals. However, we do not necessarily know if this is true or not. This might just be the result of humanity's superiority complex. Just because

other animals have not created complex civilizations does not mean their communication patterns or abilities are inferior to our own. Communication is still playing a vital role in survival between people and animals alike. Humans communicate in many ways such as writing, talking, body language, as well as through our own inventions. Progression and communication go hand in hand. When a company is planning to progress and launch a new product or service, how do they let the public know? They communicate through the media available to them using advertisements. We post daily on social media sites to show how we are progressing in our lives. Sometimes we reflect on past experiences or history to show how far we have progressed whether individually or as a country etc. Communication is also key to advocacy efforts to progress a certain agenda or idea throughout society. Change is another key trait of humanity and communication is what allows change to begin. Society's view of video games needs to be changed which will be the focus of this thesis.

### **An Industry in Need**

Communication is involved with everything we do as human beings. Due to this, communication scholars probe every form of media content extensively. Video games have been progressing but, from society's view, they have not progressed much at all. Why are video games not looked at as a legitimate communicative media channel especially considering the scope of the industry? The video game industry is the most profitable and popular entertainment industry (D'Argenio). Video games have often been focused on in the psychology field due to the stigma of video games impacting mental health. However, video games are believed to have so much more to offer especially from a communication perspective. Not all video games are about shooting and killing enemies. Many modern games have a story mode or some sort of narrative

to be played through. Creative directors and entire teams are involved in the development of video games, which has helped this industry to grow and prosper. The industry has progressed greatly, but there have been steps taken backwards recently. In October of 2019, The Writer's Guild of America (WGA) announced they would be removing Videogame Writing as a category for their annual awards until more associated writers and games are covered by the Guild. Specifically, they mention they want a "critical mass" of WGA games (Allen). Not only is this a slap to the face of countless artists and video game writers, but also to a booming industry which is revolutionizing its own medium.

### **Why Video Games Deserve Study**

To showcase why video games are deserving of study, a section of Ian Bogost's article titled *The Rhetoric of Video Games* will be discussed. In his article, Bogost writes about the reasons why video games are not necessarily taken seriously by people. The main reason he points this out is because they are "games" and are considered an "unproductive expenditure of time" and childish (Bogost, p. 120). Play is a term associated with children and Bogost believes video games need to be extended out from this mindset and to utilize a different definition. He specifically quotes a more abstract definition from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman: "play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (Bogost, p. 120). Within this context, play can be associated with any form of social or material practice or in other words "possibility space" (Bogost, p. 120). "The possibility space of play includes all of the gestures made possible by a set of rules" (Bogost, p. 120). Bogost goes on to talk about how the possibility space in video games refer to the way we interact with the game and play the game. "The rules do not merely create the experience of play – they also construct the meaning of the game" (Bogost, p.

121). This means everything the video game involves whether they are the rules/mechanics, or the overall experiences of the game all add to the significance of the game (Bogost, p. 121).

“Video games represent processes in the material world – war, urban planning, sports, and so forth – and create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics. That representation is composed of the rules themselves. We encounter the meaning of games by exploring their possibility spaces. And we explore their possibility spaces through play” (Bogost, p. 121).

The stigma of video games needs to be broken. New definitions and views for how video games are perceived need to be embraced. The video game industry has some of the most unique and artistic creations in the world. Every piece of art has the potential to move people or to inspire action or change in a person. There is one game that has revolutionized the art of storytelling in the video game industry. *The Last of Us* is a piece of art that has been able to change and shape people’s views.

### ***The Last of Us***

*The Last of Us* takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States which has become this way due to an outbreak of the cordyceps fungus. It spreads across the country and eventually the world (Naughty Dog 2014). Roughly 60% of the world’s population is believed to be dead and/or infected with the cordyceps (Naughty Dog 2014). The fungus takes over the host’s brain and makes people become zombie-like with the fungus sprouting out of their bodies (Baggs). This is all based on an



actual fungi group called cordyceps which is made up of roughly 400 species. In the wild, these parasitic fungi mainly attack ants and other insects (Hill).

In the game, people who have been infected are referred to as “infected”. Once a person is infected with the cordyceps fungus, there is nothing they can do. There is no vaccine or cure. Within a day or two, they will have lost their humanity to the cordyceps. The only thing they can do to stop from turning is to commit suicide and die before the fungus can take over. There are two primary ways people become infected with the cordyceps. Most often it is from being bitten or scratched by an infected person which transmits the fungus into their body. They can also breathe in fungal spores from mounds of the cordyceps that can be growing in dark and dreary places such as subway tunnels and other areas devoid of sunlight. In the game, there are four distinct stages to the cordyceps infection in people.

Runners are newly infected people because the fungus has only recently taken over their bodies. Stage two infections are referred to as stalkers because they are found in dark places and will ambush players who enter their territory. Stage three infections are referred to as clickers because of their lack of eyesight due to the fungus growing over their eyes. To see, they use echolocation like bats and will make distinct clicking noises. Stage four infections are referred to as bloaters and a person must have been infected for a long time to become one. Their bodies are fully taken over by the cordyceps fungus and they become large and grotesque as a result. Infected only react to non-infected people, so they do not respond to each other. If they see a surviving person, they will attack them with no hesitation.

Due to this setup, the game has a horror aspect to it, and therefore, is focused on survival. However, not all the enemies in the game are infected people. Many surviving people are living

across the country, and as the main characters encounter them, they are hunted by them to gather more resources for themselves to survive (Naughty Dog 2014). Due to this, there are multiple perspectives for the player to see. They are playing as specific characters, and this creates the want for the player to keep them alive. However, to survive the player must kill the other survivors because they have no other choice besides being killed themselves. It is one thing to kill the infected because they are no longer people. The fungus killed the person who once resided over the body, but killing other survivors is harder to do. People are less predictable than infected. The game depicts survival and the post-apocalyptic world itself as being black and white. Even in the real-world, survival does not allow negotiation. To survive, people will resort to whatever is necessary.

*The Last of Us* is one of the greatest games to come out of the last decade and many argue it to be one of the best video games ever made. It is considered one of the best games of the past generation of video games and many people consider the game to be the “game of the decade” (Campbell). The game came out in June 2013 on the PlayStation 3 console and was rereleased on the PlayStation 4 console in July 2014. It is described as a third-person action-adventure survival horror game. The game has the player control Joel, a smuggler who is tasked with escorting a teenage girl Ellie, across a post-apocalyptic United States (Naughty Dog 2014). *The Last of Us* has been highly and critically acclaimed by a numerous amount of game critics, magazines, award ceremonies, fans, and fellow game developers alike. The game has won multiple game of the year awards and a sequel launched on June 19, 2020. There is even a comic set in the world of *The Last of Us*. On February 14, 2014 new downloadable content (DLC) including a new story driven single-player campaign was released which focuses on a prequel of Ellie before the events of the

main game (Naughty Dog 2014). In addition to all of these accolades, on March 5, 2020 it was announced HBO will be making a television show based on *The Last of Us* with the head director of the game, Neil Druckmann, being one of the lead writers and executive producers of the show (Baggs). All this recognition and praise must speak to the legitimacy and relevance of video game narratives. *The Last of Us* is a stark contrast to its game developer's previous works.



Figure 1. The official cover art for *The Last of Us* featuring the main characters, Joel, and Ellie

## **Naughty Dog**

Naughty Dog is the game studio who created *The Last of Us* as well as many other successful and popular video game franchises. They are a first-party video game developer based in Santa Monica, California which has a history of creating incredibly successful game franchises. Up until the release of *The Last of Us* they had a production history of creating one specific game franchise per video game console generation (Webster). Their first successful game series was

*Crash Bandicoot* on the original PlayStation console. They followed up with the *Jak and Daxter* game franchise on the PlayStation 2 console. For the PlayStation 3 console, they created the *Uncharted* series which was hugely successful and ground-breaking. Towards the end of this console generation is when the studio released *The Last of Us*. This was their first game which focused heavily on the narrative as opposed to gameplay (Webster). On the PlayStation 4 console, they created two new games for the *Uncharted* series and recently released the sequel of *The Last of Us* in June 2020.

### **Narration vs. Gameplay**

The gameplay of *The Last of Us* is different than most of Naughty Dog's other games. Their previous successful game series *Uncharted* was focused as a shooter game, meaning the story and gameplay were not necessarily focused on each other (Naughty Dog 2007). Many people compare *The Last of Us* with the *Uncharted* franchise because of how similar they are. This is a valid comparison because during the development of *The Last of Us*, the Naughty Dog studio split in two teams to create the next *Uncharted* game and *The Last of Us*. In the *Uncharted* series, there are cinematic story moments which transition to gameplay which is how *The Last of Us* works as well (Naughty Dog 2007). However, the belief for this thesis is the gameplay and cinematic moments coincide better in *The Last of Us*.

In *The Last of Us*, the gameplay all connects to the story being focused on survival. You as the player have the choice throughout most of the game to play how you want (Naughty Dog 2014). Due to all the various infected and survivors you come across during the journey, you must constantly adapt and play the game accordingly. You can stealthily kill enemies through utilizing the environment and the resources available to you, or you can use your guns and other weapons

to kill enemies to advance further in the game. There is a layer of realism to the gameplay as well. If you choose to use guns, then infected and regular survivors will hear the noise and look for you. When you are injured, you do not regain health automatically which is how the health system works in the *Uncharted* games (Naughty Dog 2007). The only way to heal your health is to find/create medical kits and use them. There are also limited resources available to you. Depending on the difficulty the player is playing on, the amount of resources that can be found are scarcer the higher the difficulty is set at. You can only carry so many materials/crafting resources, gun ammo, and health kits. These various elements all add to the focus on realistic survival. You can also find gear parts during the journey across the US which can be used to upgrade the weapons you acquire, as well as to create other weapons such as Molotov cocktails and smoke bombs. There are also supplements that can be used to upgrade different abilities such as the maximum health of the character (Naughty Dog 2014).

There are also collectibles to find in the game which all tell stories of their own. There are four types of collectibles in *The Last of Us*. They are artifacts, comic books, firefly pendants, and training manuals. Artifacts are notes, journals, photographs, and other objects from the early days of the outbreak. The comic books are an entire series titled *Endure and Survive* which Ellie reads. Firefly pendants are like dog tags in the military where every Firefly has their own pendant with their name. Training manuals are used to either upgrade existing weapons or to craft new weapons (Naughty Dog 2014). Many artifacts depict early stages of the fungal outbreak before the country completely fell apart where people were writing in journals and leaving notes for their loved ones to find (Naughty Dog 2014).

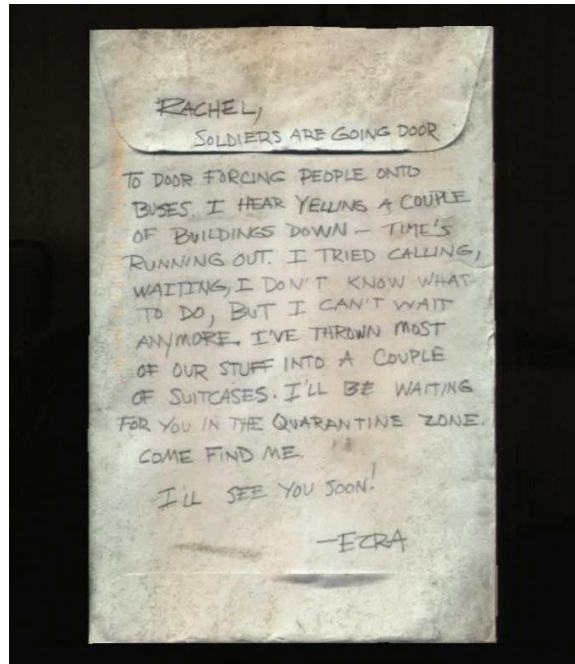


Figure 2. Early artifact found in Bill's Town chapter

These collectibles add to the narrative because they showcase the missing time from the beginning of the apocalypse. Many times, when you pick up the artifacts and examine them, it will trigger conversations for Joel and Ellie to engage in. Many of these conversations are focused on Ellie asking about how the world used to be because all she knows is the post-apocalyptic world (Naughty Dog 2014). Another important element of the gameplay is the game is showcased in a third-person perspective which adds to the uniqueness of the video game media channel. A third-person perspective allows the player to see the character they are playing as a legitimate separate character rather than themselves. Games that focus on a first-person perspective make the player out to be the main character, which also adds an extra layer to the storytelling of video games.

## **The Importance of Storytelling**

Video games are an entertainment medium and because of this, they are devoted to entertaining the player. Storytelling is one of the oldest forms of entertainment. In fact, storytelling is one of the foundations of what makes us human beings. We are so easily captivated and mesmerized when we listen to stories told to us from other people. Storytelling has evolved over the thousands of years mankind has existed on the planet. What started out as cave paintings on walls, have become stories shown on giant screens. I do not think there is a single better storytelling medium than video games. How can you beat a story where you yourself play as the main character/s and experience the story along with them? When you watch a film or television show, you are passively watching and absorbing what is happening on the screen. You yourself have no control over what happens in the story. The same might be true of video games, but many games allow the player to have complete control over what happens in the narrative.

## **The Uniqueness of Video Game Narratives**

TellTale Games was a game studio who focused on making video game narratives that had key points in the story where the player had to choose what the main character would do. These decisions by the player would affect the game narrative moving forward (Webster). This type of storytelling represents reality because everyone at some point in their lives regrets decisions they have made. They wonder what would have happened if they chose something else. These video game narratives make the player want to play the game again to see how the events differ based on the different decisions available to them. Quantic Dream is another studio devoted to this more realistic form of storytelling in video games. In their latest game *Detroit: Become Human*, there

are over a hundred different ways the story can end based on the player's choices (Quantic Dream 2018).

Game studios like these two, who took unique approaches to storytelling, have helped revolutionize the entire video game industry. Most video games contain a story that cannot be changed or manipulated by the player which is true of most media narratives. However, Quantic Dream and TellTale Games were both focused on having the narrative of their respective games unfold based on the player's actions. These are revolutionary methods of storytelling, which will only become more prominent as we move towards the future with the development of virtual reality. With virtual reality, entire stories can be experienced by the player themselves. The technology is still relatively new, and many games are not capable of telling long stories through virtual reality yet, but eventually the technology will be there for them to do so. Some people believe video game characters do not accurately represent real people, but real people are used to design and create the characters they play as. Not only that, but voice actors give a voice to those characters as well. Nothing about these "virtual" characters is inhuman.

### **Video Game Production**

Many video game production teams have used real people to base their characters from (Ochami). *Death Stranding*, *Until Dawn*, *God of War*, and *The Last of Us* are all examples of games that used real people to model the characters from. This is done using motion capture technology. For *The Last of Us*, Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson, voiced their respective characters, Joel and Ellie, and were used as bases of the character designs through motion capture technology (Naughty Dog 2014). Voice acting is incredibly important not just for video games but any animated form of media to give more life to the characters. Motion capture technology is



interesting as a production technique because of how it works. Instead of the animators creating entire character models and animating all their movements, the actors are used to help with the animation process. They are hooked up with numerous motion sensing cameras that record their movements. Then, the animators can use this data to animate the characters instead (“The Rise of...”). Not only does this make the job on the animators easier, but it also makes the characters more realistic because actual people are the bases of the characters. The progress the video game industry has made is substantial and with realistic characters comes more narrative driven games.

### **The Effects from *The Last of Us***

Since the release of *The Last of Us*, many game studios have begun to focus on story driven games. Specifically, the game studios that are a part of Sony have been creating similarly strong narratives. The PlayStation console is one of Sony’s biggest and most profitable products. Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo are the major companies involved in the video game console market (Gilbert). PC gaming is also widespread and popular. Recently Google has created their own gaming console platform called Stadia as well (Gilbert). Considering the competition all these companies are in, it is no surprise they each need to separate their consoles from the other consoles on the market. Sony’s main advertising campaigns since the debut of the PlayStation 4 have been focused on their exclusive titles, as opposed to the core features of the console or anything else (Gilbert). This is believed to be because of the extreme popularity and success of *The Last of Us*.

The exclusive games should be the sole focus of the advertising for a video game console. The PlayStation and Xbox consoles have consistently competed over being the superior console. Based on their functions and designs, they have been built relatively similar and play games at the same graphical capabilities as well as other similar features (Gilbert). Because of this, Sony has

established and acquired specific first-party studios across the world to produce games specifically for the PlayStation console. This was done to further the differences between the PlayStation and other gaming consoles and services. Many PlayStation exclusive games that have been released since *The Last of Us* have received similar critical acclaim based on the characters and narratives being portrayed (Hood et. al). *God of War*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *Marvel's Spiderman*, and *Death Stranding* are a couple of examples that have become staple series for the PlayStation 4 console (Hood et. al). Since *The Last of Us* has had such a great impact on the PlayStation brand, the main focus of this analysis will be on the strength of the narrative of *The Last of Us*. This analysis will focus on the main themes of the story and various other elements which will be discussed later. Due to this focus, there is a specific research question this thesis will be focused on:

**RQ:** How is the survival focused narrative of *The Last of Us* capable of impacting a player and brand so much?

The narrative of *The Last of Us* will be broken down using narrative criticism which will be discussed further in the next section.

## **Narrative Analysis**

Naturally, a definition of a narrative is an important place to start to explain narrative criticism.

“A narrative text is one that brings a world to the mind (setting) and populates it with intelligent agents (characters). These agents participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), which cause global changes in the narrative world. Narrative is thus a

mental representation of causally connected states and events that captures a segment in the history of a world and of its members”

(Foss 320).

This definition lays out four key parts of a narrative: at least two events, an organized order in which the events take place, there must be a causal relationship among the events in the story, and a narrative must be focused on a specific unified subject (Foss 320). Narrative criticism focuses on analyzing the narrative of an object to find its overall objective and to discover any hidden meanings throughout the narrative (Foss 326). The use and study of narratives dates to Ancient Greece and Rome with classic philosophers Aristotle and Quintilian writing about narration (Foss 321). However, narratives were not focused as a subject of study until the 20<sup>th</sup> century where many scholars across a multitude of disciplines began to utilize and focus on narratives as a valid source of study. Some of these scholars are Vladimir Propp, Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette, and Wayne C. Booth (Foss 321-322). These 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars realized the impact and importance of narratives to people and their studies helped the knowledge and study of narratives to grow. The discovery of the impact of narratives to human beings helped shape advocacy efforts for a wide array of subjects as well as helping to shape company and brand narratives as well. Narratives are a great tool to be used to spread certain messages or beliefs to a wide audience. By doing so, it makes it easier for people to conceptualize and think about them, rather than if they were present in their everyday lives (Foss 322).

Narrative criticism has been heavily influenced by Walter Fisher’s theory of the narrative paradigm. This theory was influential for developing and understanding the study of narratives in the communication discipline (Foss 322). The theory is based on the belief that all meaningful

communication is done utilizing storytelling and narration (“The Narrative Paradigm”). Since our current selves are products of our past experiences, Fisher believed that our past experiences always play a factor in how we communicate and in our decision-making. Fisher’s theory of the narrative paradigm focuses on the believability of a narrative on an audience based on two principles. These are coherence and fidelity. Coherence is the degree of sense making of a narrative (“The Narrative Paradigm”). This is influenced primarily by three factors: the structure of a narrative, the resemblance between stories, and the credibility of the characters. Fidelity is defined as the credibility or reliability of the narrative in question (“The Narrative Paradigm”). Fidelity needs to answer certain questions for the audience. Are the events described really factual? Have the facts been distorted while narrating? How does the argument in the story effect the decision making of the listener? (“The Narrative Paradigm”). This theory is like the basic model of communication. This model has a sender and receiver, and storytelling works the same way. The only difference is it adds extra elements to the messages being sent and how they are interpreted by the receiver. Walter Fisher’s theory of the narrative paradigm and narrative criticism will be the two forms of analysis for the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*.

### **Focal Areas**

There are many areas this analysis of *The Last of Us* will focus on. The specific focal point of this analysis will be looking at the narrative specifically being shown through a video game. Walter Fisher’s theory will be crucial to this point based on how most video games do not represent reality. This is especially true in the case of video game narratives because they are set in other worlds or different versions of our own world, which adds to the unrealistic nature of video game narratives. Video game characters are also typically powerful, and not entirely accurate as real

human beings. This study will help individuals understand how realistic gaming helps add to narrative fidelity. Hopefully, this will encourage future researchers to do similar studies on other groundbreaking video games that will be released in the future. Another hope from this thesis is to see video games being studied for their positive effects on mental health across all age groups instead of the continuous stigmatization on the negative effects of video games.

Another focal point will be looking at the characters and what they symbolize. The main characters from *The Last of Us* have been one of if not the most highlighted aspect of the game from critics and fans alike (Baggs). This analysis aims to break the characters down and find the symbols and meaning that makes them so acclaimed and loved. Another focal point is the apocalyptic setting to discover why this setting decision was made for the game. This is a specific type of setting and is also a common setting for many media narratives in recent years. A few narratives that come to mind are *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *I am Legend*, the *Fallout* game series, and *The Planet of the Apes* franchise. Specific research questions regarding the characters are listed below:

**Q4:** What do the main two characters symbolize?

**Q5:** Why do these symbols resonate with players?

Another major focal point of this analysis is to advocate for the acknowledgement of video games as a storytelling media channel. The end goal of this thesis is for positive progressive change to be made in terms of people's perceptions of the video game industry. The video game industry deserves recognition and respect from regular people, scholars, critics, and fellow gamers alike. The hope is for these changes and progress to be spread to other industries. This can help make

certain topics more prominent to be addressed by our elected leaders and officials. We should always be striving for positive change and this thesis is focused on this endeavor wholeheartedly.

### **Looking Forward**

This thesis will be made up of four more chapters in the following order: a literature review, a methodology section, the narrative analysis, and an overall conclusion of the study. In the literature review, I will be reviewing studies and articles utilizing the same research tools and criticism methodologies. In the methodology section, I will go into further detail about the specific way I will conduct my analysis. The analysis section will be focused on my actual in-depth analysis of the narrative of *The Last of Us*. The conclusion will be focused on addressing the findings from my analysis and addressing areas of potential future research and the overall implications of the study.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction to Literature Review**

The focus of this literature review will be on video game research. Most of the research chosen for this chapter focuses on different aspects of video games to showcase the broad scope of potentiality for video game research. Some researchers and articles were chosen because of the differing stances they take to the study of ludology (the study of video games). Rather than focusing on the traditional and stigmatic view of video games, the scholars selected look at video games as legitimate rhetorical artifacts worthy of study. Not only will this study influence communication and ludology research, but the hope is to break the stigma of video games through this study as well. Later, the focus will switch to specific research on video game narratives which will help to guide the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*. The only piece of research not necessarily focused on video games is an essay from Roland Barthes which is focused on the rhetorical implications of images which will begin this chapter.

### **Rhetoric of the Image**

This essay from Roland Barthes delves into the implications of images as symbols and whether images can create meaning when they are not entirely real. He believed all images are

mere representations of what they are. Through a picture or image, you can see something, but you do not see it in any other way than how the image presents it to you (Barthes, p. 32). Due to this, images can trick you into believing certain characteristics or appearances are true. This is clear to see in the modern age with editing technologies such as photoshop. Models and images are enhanced and edited to make them appear to be something they are not. Another example can be a simple family picture. A family picture only shows the family in that moment but there is no connection to who those people are themselves or why the picture was taken. For all we know, the family could hate each other. No one would guess this because the family picture seems to represent happiness and love.

Barthes focuses on advertising images in his essay because they are used to sell products which means they were chosen for a reason. For instance, he breaks down an advertising image to reveal three hidden meanings all images share. These are the linguistic message, the denoted image, and the connoted message (Barthes, p. 37). Through his analysis of the advertising image, Barthes showcases how every detail of the image plays a role as a signifier that gives significance to the entire image itself. This includes the text surrounding an image, the specific pieces of the image, and the meaning of the image. Nothing is included in an image for no reason because every piece plays a part in the construction of the whole. This is especially true in advertising considering the advertiser is trying to sell some type of message or feeling in their product or service to gain a profit. As this article has clearly shown, imagery is powerful and can be intricate in its creation.

This article was chosen for this literature review because of the usage of images throughout this thesis. They were all chosen to bring more significance to not only *The Last of*



Us, but also the video game industry itself. While Barthes would potentially argue the dangerous implications of the imagery from video games due to their unreal nature, this thesis argues they can be powerful imagery tools instead. Every year, video games appear to be more realistic from a graphical standpoint. Not only this, but the characters can represent real human beings and that can have a profound effect on people. People are more willing to connect with those who share their values and who have had similar experiences. If film and television imagery can be impactful on people's lives, then how is video game imagery any different? The argument from this thesis would suggest the "unreal" imagery of video games can be incredibly impactful to people if given the chance they deserve.

### **Video Games as Rhetorical Artifacts**

One of the most influential researchers of video games as rhetorical artifacts is Ian Bogost. Throughout many of his works, he writes about video games as a different medium compared to other media channels. The next article for this literature review will be his article titled *The Rhetoric of Video Games*, which was briefly discussed in the previous chapter.

In this article, Bogost delves into various video games as rhetorical artifacts as well as talking about "gamer" culture. One such example is *Animal Crossing* which is about the player beginning life in a small-town involving working, upgrading, and other miscellaneous tasks. Bogost describes the game as:

“a game about everyday life in a small town but also about long-term debt. It is a game about the repetition of mundane work necessary to support contemporary material property ideals. It is a

game about the bittersweet consequences of acquiring goods and keeping up with the Joneses” (Bogost, p. 119).

*Animal Crossing* is a prime example of a video game that does not fit into the stigmatic view of video games in society. The game is about the player’s own life living in a capitalistic society. This game proves the point mentioned in the previous chapter of video games being more than what they are at face value. There is always some underlying theme or element present in the game from the developers. Often, these can be connected to society or specific social groups.

In Bogost’s article, he talks about the importance and relevance of communities in video game culture. As Bogost points out, “video game play could be understood as a community of practice” (Bogost, p. 119). Communities are formed for individual games such as *Animal Crossing* where fellow players can gather to discuss the game, share their experiences, and help one another out by answering questions etc. (Bogost, p. 119). An important distinction Bogost points out in this article is how video games and the communities associated with them do not represent values from inside of the game, but rather the values in our society (Bogost, p. 119).

“They are media where cultural values themselves can be represented – for critique, satire, education, or commentary. When understood in this way, we can learn to read games as deliberate expressions of particular perspectives. In other words, video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate” (Bogost, p. 119).

In this sense, video games have a more practical and educational aspect to them as opposed to the stereotypical outlook of them being mentally damaging and psychologically impairing.

Bogost continues his discussion by focusing on video games as rhetorical artifacts and how to study them. This is important for the current study because *The Last of Us* will be studied as a rhetorical artifact that undoubtedly holds significant meaning to the fans of the game. Bogost uses the term procedural rhetoric based on how video games utilize procedures in their construction and play. Procedural rhetoric is the practice of authoring arguments through processes (Bogost, p. 125). Video games can utilize procedural rhetoric based on the various elements they are made up of such as coding and programming.

“...its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming” (Bogost, p. 125).

This provides further evidence as to why video games are more intricate and worthy of study compared to other media channels. Video games are designed by creators to be played and interacted with in specific ways. Every detail and capability the player has available to them was done on purpose. This indicates the need for video games to be studied as rhetorical artifacts and validates the current study being done.

Next, Bogost delves into how video games are prime artifacts to showcase procedural rhetoric through making claims about the world. One example he uses is *The McDonald's Videogame*. This game examines the business structure of McDonald's and showcases the various ethical, immoral, and tragic business decisions the corporation makes.

“The player controls four separate aspects of the McDonald's production environment, each of which he has to manage simultaneously: the third-world pasture where cattle are raised as cheaply as possible; the slaughterhouse where cattle are fattened for slaughter; the restaurant where burgers are sold; and the corporate offices where lobbying, PR, and marketing are managed. In each sector, the player must make difficult business choices, but more importantly he must make difficult moral choices. In the pasture, the player must create enough cattle grazing land and soy crops to produce the meat required to run the business. But only a limited number of fields are available; to acquire more land, the player must bribe the local governor for rights to convert his people's crops into corporate ones. More extreme tactics are also available: the player can bulldoze rain forest or dismantle indigenous settlements to clear space for grazing. These tactics correspond with the questionable business practices the developers want to critique.” (Bogost, p. 126-127).

This is a prime example of a video game serving a greater purpose than being strictly for entertainment purposes. *The McDonald's Videogame* showcases decisions and business practices that are made every day by corporations such as McDonald's. By continually supporting these types of businesses, people are allowing them to prosper. Why are businesses who continue to ruin the environment and people's livelihoods being supported by the public? Without this game being made, many people would never have been exposed to the outright greed and corruption businesses thrive on behind the scenes.

Another underlying aspect of our society video games can help to expose are ideologies in the world. These tend to be the hidden ways of thinking that often drives social, political, and cultural behavior (Bogost, p. 128). One game Bogost focuses on in this section is the first-person shooter *America's Army: Operations* which was conceived and published by the U.S. Army as a recruiting and communications tool (Bogost, p. 128).

“The game was released on the Army's website for free and within the first six months over one million users had registered, of which over 600,000 had completed the game's basic rifle marksmanship and combat training, a necessary step before gaining access to combat missions” (Bogost, p. 128-129).

However, unlike many first-person shooters, the game follows strict rules of warfare where you must abide by the rules of engagement and not go against them. Going against the proper protocols and rules will put the player in a prison cell and they might not get the chance to redeem themselves (Bogost, p. 129). *America's Army: Operations* utilizes procedural rhetoric to establish a clear understanding for the players to know what it is like to join and be recruited as

new U.S. Army recruits. While this decision from the U.S. Army showcases serious ethical and moral problems, this warrants more reasoning as to why video games deserve study. If anything, this shows the game developers need to be studied just as much as the game itself.

Bogost's article was crucial for establishing a need for research on video games by providing an overview of video games and their uniqueness as rhetorical artifacts. As Bogost has shown in his article, video games can be utilized in a variety of ways other than being purely for entertainment to address criticisms of our society. His article may not have addressed the narrative elements in video games, but his research is still important to outline the current state of video game study. While Bogost's article focused on an overview of video games, the following articles will be looking at specific elements of video games.

### **Post-Apocalyptic Narratives**

The third article focused specifically on analyzing post-apocalyptic video game narratives. Some of these video game narratives were *The Last of Us*, *Fallout 4*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Plants vs Zombies* (Pérez-Latorre). Due to the author utilizing *The Last of Us* in its study, this makes it a necessary article to utilize in this literature review. This article focused on looking at these post-apocalyptic narratives and comparing them to the Great Recession and finding key aspects from that era in the games. The author termed these key aspects "utopian enclaves" which make up the sample of the study. Specifically, the underlying utopian enclaves were post-apocalyptic cowboys, back to nature and do-it-yourself, and community leaders, empathy, and rebelliousness (Pérez-Latorre). The sample consisted of multiple best-selling video games between 2009 and 2017 (Pérez-Latorre).

The article begins by describing post-apocalyptic narratives and the questions they usually ask: “Post-apocalyptic narrative tends to gravitate towards issues like: What went wrong? How can we survive? What kind of new life and new society will emerge from the rubble?” (Pérez-Latorre). These are important questions for the current research study considering *The Last of Us* is a post-apocalyptic narrative itself and utilizes these questions. From prior research the article addresses post-apocalyptic video game narratives as “critical dystopias” and the author goes into detail about this term:

“There are two types of dystopian narratives: the first is the anti-utopia, that is, narratives in which there is no room for hope, where social change seems impossible, and where the main character is incapable of “fixing” a wrecked society or changing its direction. The second is the “critical dystopia,” in which the narrator offers at least one utopian enclave or holds out that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with utopia” (Pérez-Latorre).

As the article points out, many video game narratives have the player play as the hero or the character tasked with bringing humanity/civilization back from the brink of destruction. This presents a unique perspective for the player because they are playing as a potential savior of humanity and civilization. The implications of this task are monumental and must bring some sense of responsibility in the player. This article is important for establishing the study of the setting for this analysis of *The Last of Us* due to the post-apocalyptic setting tied to its narrative.

## Uses and Gratifications in Gaming

The following article focused on looking at the video game media channel as a source of entertainment beyond the scope of traditional entertainment media channels many scholars in the past have examined.

“Traditionally, entertainment has been conceptualized in communication research as a hedonic experience, with conceptualizations and measurement of entertainment focusing primarily on enjoyment. Recent research efforts, however, have broadened that conceptual scope by investigating media entertainment experiences that go beyond enjoyment, such as a deeper appreciation of moving or thought-provoking media narratives” (Elson, Malte, et al., p. 521).

This article utilizes the terms hedonic and eudaimonic to represent enjoyment and pleasure received from playing video games. Both terms refer to happiness gained, but in different ways. Hedonic happiness is derived from experiences of pleasure and enjoyment whereas eudaimonic happiness is derived from experiences of meaning and purpose. The researchers of this article look at video games as being sites where both forms of happiness can be obtained.

The article emphasizes on needing to look at video games differently as an entertainment medium because of the various elements that are unique to video games themselves. These elements create a stronger effect on the narrative of the games. People engage with media to



satisfy needs they have at any present moment. This study revealed video games can be even more satisfying than other forms of media based on multiple elements which strengthen video game narratives further.

“Building on the framework provided by the IMP (Integrated Model of Player Experience), we propose that both hedonic and eudaimonic gratifications from digital games depend on the interplay of variables related to game narratives, mechanics, and the social context of play. Similar to other media, the narrative of a game is a much better means for eliciting meaningful experiences and delivering eudaimonic gratifications, but with digital games the experience of that narrative can be augmented and enhanced dramatically by game mechanics” (Elson, Malte, et al., p. 537).

The conclusions for this article are important for this study because they showcase how video game narratives are stronger based on multiple other elements that work with the narrative, such as social engagement and the mechanics of the game. Not only that, but this study also proves video games provide happiness to gamers which breaks the stigma of the impairment of video games. While *The Last of Us* might not be a multiplayer game, there can still be a social aspect to the game. The ability to engage with other fans and gamers alike about the narrative can be impactful on the player and can help influence the meaning and importance behind the video game narrative. This social connection of gaming will be the primary focus in the following article.

## **The Socialization of Video Games**

The final article looking at specific elements of video games is focused on looking at the positive effects of video games on players' lives. Specifically, the researchers analyzed online forums where fellow gamers interact with each other and discuss the positive impact of video games on their lives. This is an important study in relation to the current study because of the focus on real messages from gamers about the effects of video games on their lives. There is no better way to advocate for the positive effect of video games than to use messages from real gamers.

“While some game developers argue that the full potential of video games is yet to be explored, many players already articulate the profound impact and everyday effects of video games on their lives, thus contributing to the “social institutionalization” of gaming. Indeed, at the level of personal experience, people have regularly expressed and shared stories of how their lives were affected by books, movies, or video games. Such statements can be analyzed “not as evidence of what people really know or believe, but as a form of social action which serves particular social purposes” (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1733).

This focus was chosen based on the growing relevance of video games as well as to further research on new media technologies and the arts.

“... defining what games are and what they do can be described as “a site of struggle,” which is defined in the article as “a point in the dialectic where rhetorical forces are exerted in an effort to gain dominance over competitors, technologies, players, concerned citizens, and the media” (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1733).

The researchers utilized New Rhetoric to analyze the sample of messages they assembled from a multitude of different popular online game forums.

“According to Kenneth Burke, a founding father of the New Rhetoric, discourse should not merely be studied as argumentative persuasion but also as an important mechanism in the construction of meaning. The New Rhetoric examines how people adopt and repurpose terms and arguments that have long existed in the public sphere or intellectual tradition. It thus provides us with the epistemological basis to understand how people’s talk about the impact of video games is constitutive of both the personal and social construction of the impact of video games” (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1733-1734).

Utilizing the sample created by the researchers, they conducted a qualitative content analysis to understand the underlying themes and messages within the discussion forum. “All messages were screened using directed qualitative content analysis, focusing on expressions of how video games positively changed the life of the players” (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1735).

The sample was made up of 964 messages that were coded by trained coders to determine which coding categories each message fell into. Some of the most notable coding categories discovered through their study were civilization, self-development, personal well-being, catharsis, education, and significant part of life (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1736).

“By analyzing players’ positive experiences using a theory-based coding scheme that is attentive to the wide array of effects that have been ascribed to the arts, this study offers a broad perspective on the attributed impact of video games. We found traces of most arts-centered categories in players’ forum messages” (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1744).

The overall conclusions of this study are important for the current study because of the focus on advocacy for video games and the narrative capabilities of them as well. The results of this study showed clear falsities in the societal view of video games being detrimental to a person’s health. Two results distinctly stood out:

“Many players challenge the overly negative conceptualization of the impact of video games in the academic debate. With regard to escapism, players provide indications of improved feelings of personal well-being, for example, by traveling to virtual worlds” (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1745). “In contrast to research on mental health risks as a consequence of video gaming, we found that many messages rather focus on the psychological benefits. This might inform research on the use of video games in

institutionalized therapeutic practice. Based on players' descriptions of gaming as self-medicating - for both daily concerns (e.g. stress relief) and serious psychological traumas (e.g. abuse) - we suggest a reassessment of this negative evaluation through further research on the testimonies of players" (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1745).

Many of the forum messages that were coded and analyzed in the study were focused on game narratives and how they shaped and changed how gamers saw aspects of the world or themselves. Two messages stood out:

"It sounds silly, but exposing myself to a lot of video games, books, and movies since I was young has certainly affected my outlook on life and worldview. Many people scoff at the archetypal hero and the notions he or she throws around, but those are things I've internalized and worked into the way I see things" (Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1740).

Unlike what many would like to believe, video games (as well as media in general) can be profoundly impactful on people's lives.

"For me, *Lost Odyssey* would have to be the one game in my life that has really altered my perspective of things. After playing it, I began looking at things very differently. After all, having just spent the last however many hours seeing the world through the eyes of a man who could never die, and always lived on regardless of those

he left behind, you can't help but be affected in some way”  
(Bourgonjon, Jeroen, et al., p. 1740).

Fictional narratives can have a profound effect on people especially when they are presented to a person at specific moments in their lives. This study showcases specific positive impacts of video games on people which is precisely what this thesis is advocating for. This study showcases how the video game industry needs advocacy actions to be taken to change society's view of video games towards a positive direction.

From here on, the literature review will begin to focus on specific narrative elements of video games.

### **Narrative Focused Literature**

In the article written by Thomas H. Apperley, he focuses on readdressing how video games should be studied. Specifically, he investigates genres and criticizes scholars on using the same genres other media channels use to define video games.

“I suggest that the primary problem with conventional video game genres is that rather than being a general description of the style of ergodic interaction that takes place within the game, it is instead loose aesthetic clusters based around video games' aesthetic linkages to prior media forms” (Apperley, p. 7).

Ergodic interaction in this case is the specific interactions video games present the player with. The interactivity of video games changes the way video games should be viewed and why they should not be categorized in the same groups. Considering every video game brings

different interactivity elements to the player, Apperley believes no two games can be categorized into the same genre because interactivity is the main defining element of video games compared to other media.

The narrative focus in this article is derived from the different viewpoints video game scholars utilize. In traditional video game study, the researchers are concerned with understanding video games through their structure and elements specifically regarding the rules of the game. Contrast to this view, is the narratological concern from other researchers who are focused on understanding video games through their narrative and representational strategies. Based on these two distinctions between researchers, genre plays a key role in video game study. One set of researchers are focused more on the video game genre itself whereas the other set of researchers is focused on looking at the video game in an all-encompassing view, taking into consideration the narrative and the genre of the game. Thus far, the information discussed in this thesis has helped Apperley in his argument for video games needing to be looked past their genres and focused more on their narratives and other unique elements.

A key element of Apperley's argument stems from the targeted audience for video games: "...it must be noted that players of games - that is, their audience - are not necessarily satisfied with the same generic conventions being endlessly repeated" (Apperley, p. 9). Genre gives the audience expectations of what to expect but video games are not a stagnant media channel. The industry is constantly in a state of flux and innovation from development teams all around the world, as well as continuous technological advances. Video game players rarely want the same stories and gameplay mechanics rehashed repeatedly. Player bases always want more from the next installment or new project in the works. Due to this, there are practically no video

games that are the same as another unless they are a part of the same franchise. However, even in cases such as this, there are usually new mechanics and gameplay features different than the previous entries. This clearly demonstrates a distinct feature of video games from an analytical standpoint. If the video games are not the same based on narrative features or gameplay mechanics, then how can they be categorized into the same genres? If anything, this is insulting to the creative and innovative teams creating new original video games. How can their creations be reduced to simple genres? Why should their unique game be in the same category of another game that is completely different?

This article highlights specific issues surrounding video game study and the limitations those issues create for scholars studying video games. *The Last of Us* is no different to any other video game being categorized into different genres, but this thesis will argue the game is far from a typical game in its genre classification primarily because of the narrative. The genre classification does not provide justice for the game being one of the most important video games from the past decade as has been previously discussed.

The study from Teun Dubbelman examines the new possibilities in the storytelling practices of video games. Specifically, Dubbelman investigates how narration is often looked at as representational and argues video game narratives cannot be looked at the same as traditional media narratives. In Dubbelman's article, there is a primary focus on critiquing structuralist narratology. This is a view of narratives derived from structuralism, which states nothing can be understood or studied by itself, but rather needs to be looked at as a piece of a larger structure.

“Though scholars in what often is referred to as structuralist  
narratology disagree about the exact definition of narrative, their



work unanimously conceives narrative as representational in nature. ...these narratologists believe the standard conception of narrativity to be manifested in the act of telling somebody else that something happened, with the assumption that the addressee is not already aware of the events” (Dubbelman, p. 159).

Narratives being representational in nature indicates the narrator is giving new life to the events of the narrative by recounting events that happened in the past.

“The concept of recounting implies that the events expressed (the story) already happened and find themselves re-presented in the present by some discourse, whether verbal, written, pantomimic or any other form of narrative transmission. For structuralist narratologists, then, a narrative retrieves the there-and-then in the here-and-now, thereby suppressing (but not replacing) our direct experience of the here-and-now” (Dubbelman, p. 159).

This view is legitimate when looking at narratives derived from traditional storytelling techniques such as through oral or written communicative forms. However, this view is trickier to uphold when narratives without a narrator are analyzed.

Not all narratives require a narrator to be present for a story to be understood. There are a countless number of television shows and films that do not contain any sort of narrator. In these narratives, the stories are not being recounted and are rather being presented to the audience. While both representational and presentational narratives have impacts on the audience, based

off Walter Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm, presentational narratives are stronger. If a narrative is presentational as opposed to being focused on representation, then it is more impactful on the audience. This is because presentational narratives involve the audience whereas representational narratives do not (Dubbelman, p. 162-163). When a narrator is present in a story, then there is a sense of knowing how the narrative will end whereas if a narrator is absent, then the result is a mystery to the audience. Presentational narratives are focused on providing first-hand real-life experiences. Couple this with the impact narratives can have on people, and the power of presentational narratives is profound.

Video games are entirely presentational as opposed to representational considering the player is taking part in the story. Typically, the player assumes a major role in the narrative of the game, which makes the narrative more impactful on the player. No other media channel offers the audience a central and integral part in the story besides a select few of niche exceptions, such as choose your own adventure books. The argument can be made not all video games are presentational in nature and can be more representational. However, there is the argument that the multiple elements in video games create the presence necessary for a story to be presentational:

“Events feel as if coming into existence in the very moment they are expressed as the discourse focuses on describing what happens in the here-and-now (description), rather than providing a lot of background information on the plot (exposition). Plots fragment into episodes and encounters. Unlike the representological mode, where the discourse structures events in tight strings of cause-

and-effect, the discourse of presentation places events meaningfully beside each other rather than after each other” (Dubbelman, p. 168).

The most important element of video games is the player playing as the protagonist, which creates the presence of the player in the narrative. In Dubbelman’s article, he utilizes Henry Jenkins’ work *Game Design as Narrative Architecture* to discuss the idea of video games being spatial and how this makes them more presentational in nature.

“In many cases, the characters – our guides through these richly-developed worlds – are stripped down to the bare bones, description displaces exposition, and plots fragment into a series of episodes and encounters. ... Spatial stories also portray the protagonist less as a distinctive other and more as an empty vessel for somebody to project one’s own identity on. Because of this, they succeed in extending our physical presence and thus function effectively as guides through richly developed worlds” (Dubbelman, p. 168).

The player being put into the position of needing to learn about the world they have been thrown into, as well as being tasked as the protagonist of the video game, is enough to define video games as presentational based narratives. This article is crucial to this narrative analysis of *The Last of Us* because it is focused on painting a new light for video game narratives. As previously discussed, this is one of the main focuses of this thesis. The presence phenomenon discussed in this article plays an important role for the player in the consumption of the narrative.

The concept of presence will be utilized later in the analysis of *The Last of Us* because it is a primary factor in how a player will be impacted by a video game narrative.

The final study for this literature review is the study by Aaron Hess based on the game *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*. Unlike the previous two articles, this article delves into how this specific game helps to construct public memory of the events of World War 2 through the narrative of the game by utilizing narrative criticism (Hess, p. 339).

“While other war video games arguably glamorize war, such as *Aces of the Pacific* or *Axis & Allies*, *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* combines violence with history, providing gamers with a seemingly educational and realist portrayal of the era. Its first-person perspective provides gamers with direct contact with its narrative and immerses players into its historical narrative.” (Hess, p. 339-340).

Public memory is an important focal point because of the historical significance of the events from World War 2 the game delves into. Public memory can also be important for the current study to assess the potential changing shifts in how video games are perceived by society.

A particularly interesting and noteworthy point from this study was how *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* and many other video games provide the opportunity to allow players to help shape public memory while individually experiencing the fictionalized versions of historical events.

“The use of digital interactive media, then, highlights an exceptional location of public memory, whereby the creation of

memory via a public artifact is experienced in private spaces. Users are invited to take part in history from their living rooms, replicating the museum, from a video game console” (Hess, p. 341).

The main implication Hess points out in his article is the chilling prospect these fictionalized versions of history can change the gamer’s perspective on war and their recollection of what happened during major historical moments. While creativity is important for the development of a video game, Hess is right in his argument of how video games have potential implications for society and citizens.

“...historical war games attempt to create an experiential history, placing gamers inside the war rather than witnessing it from the camera’s purview. The danger of this teaching lies in its subtle form: gamers come for entertainment and walk away with selective memories of the past” (Hess, p. 354).

As this article has pointed out, video games have the potential to reshape public memory of real events, which is a serious outcome. Keep in mind, this study is from one game specifically, so there cannot be definitive conclusions to associate all video games with this discovery. However, game developers should be made more aware of the impact they can have on gamers especially when they are developing a game specifically focused on history. While *The Last of Us* is not a game focused on real history, the narrative delves into an alternate future which can be used to better understand our own society.

## Summary

As this chapter has shown, video games have many intricate variables and elements associated with them as opposed to simply shooting and killing enemies. The chapter began by defining and better understanding imagery through the essay written by Roland Barthes and the importance it can bring to video game research. Bogost's research shows how video games are highly educational and can help people to learn valuable skills and information. Pérez-Latorre's article showcases how post-apocalyptic narratives are often based on actual historic moments in history which indicates a significant element traceable in those narratives. The article from Elson and his colleagues shows video games need to be analyzed and looked at differently by scholars and the public alike because of their uniqueness as a media channel. The article from Bourgonjon and his colleagues showcases real messages and emotions from gamers who say video games have been monumental and helpful for their lives. Thomas Apperley's article focused on changing video game study by reshaping the notion of genres and what they represent. Teun Dubbelman's article focused on how video games are a powerful media channel for delivering narratives due to their presentational form. Hess' article focused on an actual narrative analysis of a video game utilizing narrative criticism. In the next chapter, the methodology of the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us* will be discussed.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter will focus on outlining the analysis of *The Last of Us*. Specifically, the chapter will delve heavily into narrative criticism because of it being a central aspect to this study. However, it is important to address the importance of storytelling before discussing narrative criticism. This will help to showcase the importance of storytelling not only in our lives, but also for the communication discipline as well. After this, the chapter will shift to outlining the actual narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*, which will be done in chapter four.

### **The Relationship Between Communication and Narrative**

Narratives are impossible to avoid in the present day. Narratives are present in the media as well as in our own lives. We break our own lives down to a narrative to better understand ourselves and our memories. When we explain to people our memories and past experiences, we tell them through a narrative because it makes it easier for them to digest and understand. Since narratives are so prevalent throughout society, it is necessary these narratives be examined and better understood. Researchers use a variety of ways to study people's usage of narratives such as interviews. "Because narrative is one of the major ways in which people perceive, experience, and evaluate their actions, people often shape their responses to interview questions as stories"

(Foss, p. 322). This showcases the engrained power and prevalence of narratives in people. “Narratives are now being used in the communication discipline not simply as stories to be studied for their meaning and significance but also as research tools” (Foss, p. 322). Some key areas of the communication discipline that can benefit from studying narratives are interpersonal communication, organizational communication, and political communication. All three of these areas are crucial sites where narratives are not only created, but continuously change as well.

Storytelling as a communicative practice has significance in the communication discipline. Communication is a vital area of study because nothing can be learned without communication being present. Humanity would not be the dominant species of the planet if there was no communication among our species. Communication and storytelling can be incredibly impactful on people especially when they can change their perspectives or how they interpret the world. This thesis argues for enacting change throughout society, and narratives are crucial to this endeavor. The inclusion of narratives has been shown to be effective for helping people to understand other points of view and perspectives.

“Patients, for example, may be asked to construct narratives about their illnesses to help medical professionals understand their experiences and to develop specific intervention plans for them. In disability studies, the narrative method has been used to offer “alternative maps...regarding disability and impairment that refuse and displace the tragedy story”” (Foss, p. 323).

These findings showcase the tremendous positive effects of narratives on not just the specific people involved, but also the implications for societal change as well. While narratives



have been shown to be necessary in people's lives, they need to be analyzed to make sure they are promoting positivity and change. This is where narrative criticism comes into play.

### **Defining Narrative Criticism**

The text *Rhetorical Criticism* written by Sonja K. Foss will be used here to establish a clear and distinct breakdown of narrative criticism. According to Foss, there are four main steps in the process of narrative criticism: selecting an artifact, analyzing the artifact, formulating a research question, and writing an essay (Foss, p. 323). Any rhetorical artifact containing a narrative can be used for a narrative criticism analysis. This can include any narrative from any media channel whether those channels contain traditional media or not. The focus for this section will be on the second step which is when narrative criticism is conducted. When it comes to analyzing the artifact, there are two primary steps Foss points out: identifying the objective of the narrative and identifying the features of the narrative to discover how they accomplish the objective (Foss, p. 325).

Once a narrative is told, the storyteller has no control over the effects of the narrative from that point onward, which is an important distinction that must be made. If the objective is found to be positive, but had negative effects and implications, then the researcher's findings can be used to help fuel better storytelling techniques and channels. Overall, the aim for the critic is to identify the reasoning and overall objective of the narrative from the storyteller's perspective (Foss, p. 326). Depending on the narrative being looked at, the critic can trust the word of the original storyteller or come to their own conclusions from their analysis. Foss points out narratives can have more than one objective, but there is typically one main objective of a narrative. Some examples she provides are to defend or justify an act, to encourage action, to

inspire, and to educate (Foss, p. 326). After the overall objective of the narrative is discovered, the critic must then shift their focus into identifying the features of the narrative that help to reach the objective.

This portion of the narrative analysis is focused on the specific elements and events of the narrative that help to accomplish the narrative's objective. These can be the characters, setting, structure, the use of a narrator, etc. Foss points out a third step of a narrative analysis which is evaluation. During this step, the critic evaluates the successfulness of the narrative as well as the relevance of the objective (Foss, p. 336). This step of the narrative criticism process is where the critic provides their personal view of the narrative and the thoughts/opinions that have come to light during their time analyzing the narrative. The next section will delve into how narrative criticism will be used to analyze *The Last of Us*.

### **Constructing the Analysis of *The Last of Us***

Based on all the reviewed literature from chapter two, it is clear to see how video games have a legitimate place in society and are worthy of study as well. These studies have helped to shape the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us* for this thesis. As discussed previously, the main theme of *The Last of Us* is survival. However, narrative criticism is focused on looking at an artifact and understanding the purpose of the narrative associated with it. Due to this, the theme of survival will continuously be highlighted throughout the analysis, while not being the central point of the study. As previously mentioned in chapter one, the goal of this thesis is to understand the strength of the narrative of *The Last of Us*.

**RQ:** How is the survival focused narrative of *The Last of Us* capable of impacting a player and brand so much?

To answer the primary research question for this thesis, specific features from the narrative of *The Last of Us* will be analyzed. These are the plot, setting, and the main two characters, Joel, and Ellie. The analysis will begin with a plot breakdown which will uncover the main objective of the narrative. The plot is significant to this study considering it follows a specific narrative structure as well as being a key aspect of the narrative itself. Analyzing the plot will also allow more people to be exposed to the narrative of *The Last of Us*, which supports the goal for the advocacy of the game itself. After the objective of the narrative is identified, the analysis will shift to analyzing specific key moments of the plot to showcase their relevance to the objective. The following research questions will be utilized for the plot analysis:

**Q1:** What is the main objective of the narrative of *The Last of Us*?

**Q2:** Which key moments in the plot are significant to achieving this objective?

After the focus of the plot is complete, the analysis will shift towards the next feature of the narrative: the setting.

The setting will be important for this narrative analysis considering the narrative of *The Last of Us* is post-apocalyptic. This means the setting must represent specific questions and concerns according to Pérez-Latorre's study. One notable and important question from his study for this analysis is: how can we survive? This again, brings up the theme of survival. Also, since the narrative of the game is focused on a journey across America, the setting constantly changes. It may still be the post-apocalyptic world, but the locations are all unique and have their own

stories to tell. These various settings are believed to add more depth to the overall game narrative. This is because of how each level of the game represents a new part of the game narrative. The question below will be used for the setting analysis:

**Q3:** How do all the various settings throughout the *The Last of Us* add to the narrative as a whole?

After the setting is analyzed, the analysis will shift the focus to the main two characters.

Since Joel and Ellie are the main two characters from *The Last of Us*, they are crucially important to this analysis. As was stated in chapter one, they are often referred to as the best aspects of the game (Baggs). Joel and Ellie will also be broken down to understand what they represent because they are survivors in the post-apocalyptic world. Therefore, they must be symbolic of certain characteristics of humanity. In this portion of the analysis, the presence phenomenon Dubbelman pointed out in his article will be focused on as well. By doing this, not only will the objective of the narrative be better understood, but the perspective of the player can be analyzed as well. Due to the analysis being on a video game, it is important to understand how the player is being impacted by the narrative. Specifically, since the player is playing as one of the main characters, it is crucial to understand their perception of Joel and Ellie to understand the depth and power of the game's narrative. The following questions represent this portion of the narrative analysis:

**Q4:** What do the main two characters symbolize?

**Q5:** Why do these symbols resonate with players?

**Q6:** How does presence impact the player's consumption of the narrative?

Finally, Walter Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm will be used to analyze the narrative of *The Last of Us* to evaluate the strength of the narrative on the audience. As was mentioned in chapter one, Walter Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm is focused on the believability of a narrative. Since every player has had different experiences in their lives, they all can be affected by the game narrative differently. These past experiences also bring the potential for the believability of the narrative to be questioned by the player. For *The Last of Us* in particular, the narrative is set in stone, meaning the player has no control in how the narrative plays out. Even if they disagree with what the characters are doing, they must play the game out the way it was intended. This must have a significant impact on the player and their perception of the game narrative.

### **Looking Forward**

This chapter focused on outlining the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*. The chapter began by discussing the relationship between communication and narratives. Then, narrative criticism was explained and followed by the discussion of the methodology behind the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*. The chapter wrapped up by outlining how the narrative of *The Last of Us* will be analyzed and the specific narrative elements that will be focused on. These are the main theme, plot, setting, and main characters. Walter Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm was also discussed as a methodological focus in the analysis. The following chapter will apply all the methodology described in this chapter to the narrative of *The Last of Us*.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

### Introduction to Analysis

This chapter will detail the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*. The primary focal areas of the narrative will be the plot, setting, and characters. By doing this, the objective of the narrative can be discovered. The chapter will conclude by applying Walter Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm to *The Last of Us* to better understand the narrative as a video game narrative. Utilizing this theory will allow the strength of the narrative to be compared to other similar narratives. This will invoke the readers to not only want to experience the game itself, but also to look at video game narratives differently.

### Plot

Considering the scope and relevance of the narrative of *The Last of Us* for this thesis, the plot discussion will be the longest portion of the chapter. This does not discredit the settings or the main characters because they are still relevant for the narrative. The reasoning for the sheer scope and size of the plot section is to convey the most accurate representation of *The Last of Us* for the readers. By detailing the plot, the setting and characters can be easier to understand and analyze as well. The plot will be detailed extensively and will be analyzed from a chapter to

chapter basis. Some chapters will be grouped together for an analysis to show similarities between events and messages being showcased. Also, some chapters are shorter, and more gameplay focused compared to being integral to plot progression. These chapters should not be ignored but rather should connect with other chapters to include them into the analysis.

Before delving into the plot, a map of the chapters of *The Last of Us* will be outlined to help familiarize the game with those who have not played it. *The Last of Us* has twelve distinct chapters which make up the plot of the entire narrative. Some of these chapters are more plot driven and others are more character driven, but they all will be discussed below. This list will not contain the chapters of the DLC *Left Behind* because it was an addition to the narrative after the release of the base game. The DLC is only recommended for players who have beaten the base game because of the spoilers it contains for other events in the game's narrative. The DLC will still be discussed in the plot section because of the relevance it contains for the narrative. Specifically, it will be discussed after the base narrative of *The Last of Us* is examined fully. The discussion of the plot and the subsequent chapters of *The Last of Us* will be done in the same chronological manner they were in the game. The chapters are as follows:

1. Hometown - Prologue
2. The Quarantine Zone
3. The Outskirts
4. Bill's Town
5. Pittsburgh
6. The Suburbs
7. Tommy's Dam

8. The University
9. Lakeside Resort
10. Bus Depot
11. The Firefly Lab
12. Jackson - Epilogue

The plot of *The Last of Us* takes place over the course of one year as Ellie and Joel travel across the United States. However, there are two primary sections in the game where the story is focused on moments outside of the one-year time window. The first is the first chapter of the game because it is the prologue of the entire narrative. The other is from the DLC *Left Behind* which focuses on Ellie's backstory prior to Joel's first meeting with her. The plot structure is interesting because it is divided up based on the seasons. A noteworthy point of the game is how the major plot points happen during cutscenes which have a film-like quality to them. This is a case of media convergence where media join. Due to this, the cutscenes will be the primary focus for this section of the analysis as opposed to the gameplay. The specific research questions this section will try to answer are below:

**Q1:** What is the main objective of the narrative of *The Last of Us*?

**Q2:** Which key moments in the plot are significant to achieving this objective?

### **Hometown - Prologue**

*The Last of Us* begins in Texas with a scene of Joel returning late from work and his daughter Sarah waking up on the couch from his arrival home. They live just outside of Austin, Texas. She checks the time to make sure the day has not ended yet and presents Joel with a



birthday present which he had forgotten about. Her present was a new watch because his was no longer working (Hometown). Sarah falls asleep on the couch and Joel carries her to bed. Sometime afterwards, Sarah is woken up from a phone call from her uncle Tommy. Sarah grows worried because Tommy seems scared of something and he asks her to tell Joel to call him. Now the player begins to play as Sarah and going around the house trying to find Joel. During this time there are hints around the house from the television news and a newspaper of a new infection rapidly increasing in cases (Hometown).

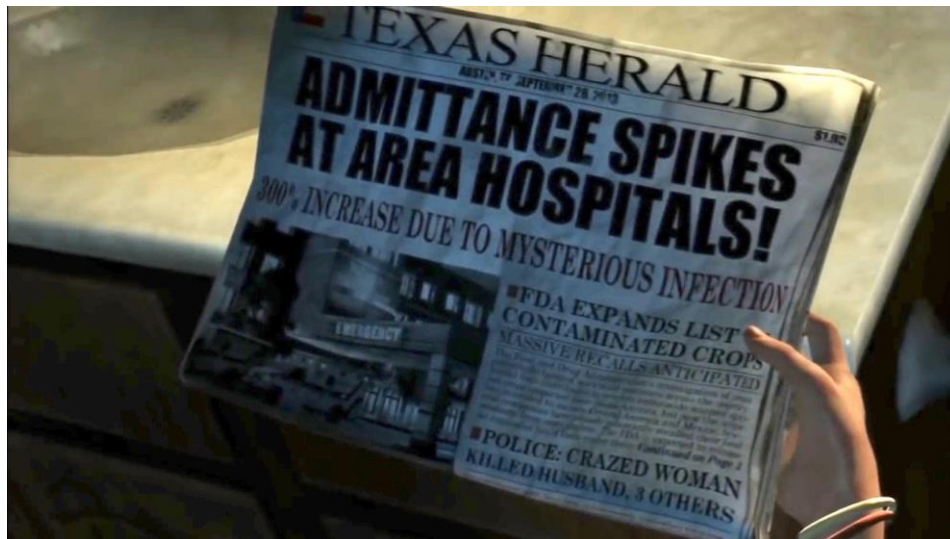


Figure 3. Newspaper article depicting a new infection

The previous day is revealed to be September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Sarah hears sirens and explosions from the city and becomes increasingly anxious and scared. As she gets to the last room, Joel arrives from outside and tells Sarah to stay back. Suddenly, their neighbor runs into the glass door and smashes through it. Joel, after pleading with him to stop, shoots and kills him which terrifies Sarah (Hometown). Tommy arrives and Joel and Sarah get into his car to find a safe place. As they are driving, they encounter a house on fire and people asking for a ride, but

Joel refuses to stop because they need to prioritize themselves. They get to the highway and discover heavy traffic all over the highway, so they decide to go through the city instead. While in town, they see countless people running in fear and many infected people attacking and killing people. They end up in a car crash due to the pandemonium going on (Hometown).

Sarah's leg is injured in the crash and now the player is playing as Joel, who is carrying Sarah as they attempt to flee. While making their way through the city, Tommy protects them all from infected and tells Joel to continue and he will catch up. Joel and Sarah make their way to a dirt road heading out of the city and encounter an armed military officer. He radios his commanding officer that he has encountered two people and one is a young girl. He is given an order to eliminate them to prevent a risk of possible infection. The officer hesitates and wonders if this is necessary, but shortly after shoots at them. Joel jumps away and drops Sarah. Before the officer executes Joel, Tommy arrives to kill the officer. Joel and Tommy rush to Sarah and see she has been shot in the abdomen. She cries to Joel because she does not want to die. Joel tries to comfort her as she dies in his arms (Hometown).



Figure 4. Joel's final moments with Sarah after she is shot by the officer

The chapter ends with the presentation of the title of *The Last of Us* and depicting various news reports of the infection spreading around the United States and the world. Military rule is outlined, and the creation of quarantine zones is mentioned as well. This sequence ends with the introduction of the Fireflies which were a group created to fight back against the military. Their leader Marlene states everyone should “look for the light” and “believe in the Fireflies” (Hometown). The game then picks up twenty years later in early summer.

### **Analysis**

The most important element of this chapter is the established tone it creates for the narrative moving forward. The player begins the game playing as Sarah, who represents innocence in a world that has begun to turn violent. Everyone is confused and does not understand what is going on around them. Her death indicates to the player the days of living peacefully day to day are now over. The officer's decision to shoot Sarah will leave a lasting impression on Joel. Was the officer justified in their decision to limit the spread of the infection?

Did he perhaps save Sarah from a worse death at the hands of the infection? Could Sarah's death have been helpful for Joel to survive in a post-apocalyptic world? Being cold-hearted can make it easier to survive in the new world that is emerging. One thing is for certain from the prologue: The apocalypse has begun due to the Cordyceps fungus. Survival skills are now a necessity.

It is important to focus on the Fireflies here as well due to their presence at the end of this chapter. The name of the Fireflies is important because the world is entering a dark age. In the dark, fireflies are a source of light. This can be interpreted as the group itself being a guiding light for humanity. People are lost in the darkness of the world and they want to build followers to join them. Not only that, but they want people to see there is something to fight for in the apocalypse. Their light does not need to be symbolic of one exclusive thing or idea. Their light should represent something different for everyone. The Fireflies will be an important group in the narrative of *The Last of Us* moving forward.

## **Summer**

### **The Quarantine Zone**

Joel is now living in the Boston quarantine zone, which is under strict military rule. There are curfews, forced labor, and food rationing happening. The military is referring to the Fireflies as "terrorists" and are hunting them down. Joel has been working with a woman named Tess for some time as a pair of smugglers (The Quarantine Zone). She notifies Joel about an acquaintance named Robert who has wronged them and stolen their supply of guns. Tess and Joel make their way to Robert's place which involves sneaking out of the quarantine zone due to the high military presence. When they confront Robert about their guns, he tells them he sold them to the

Fireflies and Tess kills him afterwards. Shortly after, the leader of the Fireflies, Marlene, appears looking for Robert while wounded from an attack from the military (The Quarantine Zone).



Figure 5. Marlene confronting Joel and Tess about Robert's whereabouts

With Robert now dead, she asks Joel and Tess to smuggle something out of the city to another group of Fireflies. Marlene says she will repay them with their guns and more if they are successful. She takes them to a safe location where Ellie almost stabs Joel and Tess because she thought they had injured Marlene. Marlene tells Ellie to stop and these two will take her to another group of Fireflies. Marlene apparently knew Ellie's mom and told her she would take care of her. Tess tells Joel to take Ellie to one of their safe houses while she goes to the Firefly base with Marlene to see the guns for herself. As they wait for Tess to arrive, Ellie asks Joel "It can't be any worse out there, can it?" Joel decides to go to sleep, and as he falls asleep Ellie points out that his watch is broken, which is the same watch Sarah had repaired for his birthday (The Quarantine Zone).



Figure 6. Joel “killing time” by going to sleep to wait for Tess

### **The Outskirts**

Tess meets back up with Joel and Ellie later in the night to start the smuggling operation. Shortly after they leave, they end up being found by a city patrol unit who begin to use a device that can determine if someone is infected or not. When they get to Ellie, she creates an opening to allow Tess and Joel the opportunity to kill the officers. Afterwards, Tess and Joel look at the device and see Ellie is infected and immediately aim their guns at her. Ellie claims she is not and shows the bite mark on her arm and says the bite is three weeks old (The Outskirts).



Figure 7. Ellie showing her bite mark to Tess and Joel

They do not buy it because most people “turn” in two days at most. More military arrive, so they continue to flee together. After escaping further away from the quarantine zone they manage to evade the other city patrols. Tess asks Ellie why Marlene wanted her to be smuggled out of the city. She tells them the plan was to get her to another group of Fireflies to escort her across the country to a Firefly outpost that is focused on developing a vaccine or cure for the outbreak. Marlene believed whatever happened to Ellie is the key for not only a vaccine, but also to restore civilization. After hearing this, Joel wants nothing to do with this mission because he does not believe any of this. Tess on the other hand is focused on the “what if” scenario and they continue to take Ellie to the capitol building which is where the Firefly group will be waiting for them. While traveling through the night, they encounter many infected in the buildings they are traveling through (The Outskirts).





Figure 8. The group is ambushed by a clicker

After traveling all night, they make it to the capitol building to discover the Firefly group has been killed. Tess freaks out and argues with Joel about what to do now because she has nowhere left to go. Ellie realizes Tess was bitten because she knows what it feels like to feel the impending doom waiting to “turn”. Tess shows her bite and compares it to Ellie’s and there is a clear difference in the severity of hers compared to Ellie’s (The Outskirts). While Ellie’s bite seems to have healed with fungal growths, Tess’s looks to be infected. She also is clearly suffering from a fever and was only bitten two hours earlier during an infected ambush. Tess begins to beg Joel to take Ellie to his brother Tommy who was a Firefly, so he could take Ellie to the Firefly outpost. A military convoy arrives outside of the building and Tess decides she will sacrifice herself so Joel and Ellie can escape which will also keep her from turning into one of the infected. After successfully escaping, Joel decides they will head to a town north of the city



to meet up with a trading partner he and Tess dealt with to see if he could provide them with a car to travel (The Outskirts).

## **Analysis**

This chapter introduces the main quest of Ellie and Joel's journey and introduces the new post-apocalyptic world. Joel and Tess are merciless in their pursuit of Robert which is telling of the world. If you are wronged, then you wrong the other person. The Fireflies are also highlighted which showcases an important aspect of the current world. Oppression will lead to revolts from the oppressed. The Fireflies were created for the purpose of trying to bring back civilization and to end the corrupt military rule across the nation. Ellie's immunity is representative of the Fireflies' goal because it is the first major lead they have found. Ellie could be considered the light they are searching for. However, we see Joel and Tess have differing views towards Ellie's immunity.

After what Joel went through, he cannot see the world returning to what it once was. If the world were to return to normal, then he would have to live thinking about how much Sarah missed out on. In the new world, he can be happy Sarah did not have to see what he has done to survive. Tess on the other hand, sees the potential for Ellie's immunity to be the key for humanity's comeback. Ellie and Joel's journey can bring an end to the apocalypse and can potentially bring back civilization. Joel only agrees to do it because it was Tess's dying wish and he feels indebted to her as a friend and partner. Ellie's question to Joel about how the outside world cannot be worse than in the quarantine zone is important to highlight because it foreshadows a dark journey where there is no military protection to keep them safe from infected etc.

## **Bill's Town**

This chapter of the game was found to be more focused on gameplay and character development rather than being integral to the plot. The only real goal for this chapter of the game is to travel across the town to get a car. However, there are two key moments in this chapter of the game that advance the plot. One is early on Joel tells Ellie about his brother and how the Fireflies are focused on trying to restore the country to how it was. For Tommy, their goal was valiant and meaningful, but Joel wanted nothing to do with it, so they went their separate ways (Bill's Town). Joel had heard his brother was living somewhere near Jackson, Wyoming so that is their current destination. The second moment is about the trader who they meet up with in the town, Bill. He is a loner and reveals at one point he had a partner named Frank who he relied on and looked after. After Frank left, Bill realized other people will only hold you back. Survival can be seen in different ways and some people think there is survival in numbers whereas others think being alone has the best chance of survival. After obtaining a truck at the end of the chapter they leave and head to Jackson, Wyoming to find Tommy (Bill's Town).

## **Pittsburgh**

While traveling, they make it to Pittsburgh but the road to the Fort Duquesne bridge is blocked off. Joel decides to drive through the city rather than backtracking trying to find another route. Shortly after driving into the city they are ambushed by a hostile group of survivors (Pittsburgh). The game refers to these types of people as hunters. After killing the group of hunters who ambushed them, Joel and Ellie discover these people have killed many people like them who have made their way into the city. Through reading some of the collectibles early on in

this chapter, it is revealed these hunters took over the quarantine zone by overthrowing the military (Pittsburgh).

Joel and Ellie continue heading towards the bridge and eventually must make their way through a hotel to continue. As they are making their way through the hotel they are separated. Joel tells Ellie to stay put and he will meet back up with her when he makes his way around. As he makes his way to Ellie, he is ambushed by a hunter and almost killed in a puddle of water. Ellie arrives and picks up Joel's gun and kills the hunter which Joel responds to coldly. He is upset with her as to why she had not stayed put and how he "almost got his head blown off by a fucking kid" (Pittsburgh). Ellie wants a thank you or some recognition for saving Joel's life, but she receives negativity and criticism instead. Shortly after, Joel realizes Ellie is hurt and she was in the right. He gives her a rifle to use to defend him as he moves ahead to take on a group of the hunters on an old street. Before heading down to the street, he tells Ellie "it was either him or me" which Ellie takes as a thank you and replies "You're welcome". After killing the group of hunters, Joel takes the rifle from Ellie and gives her a pistol and says, "this is for emergencies only" (Pittsburgh).



Figure 9. Ellie after killing the hunter to save Joel

While continuing to evade the hunters who have taken over the city, they meet two brothers Sam, and Henry, who have been separated from their group. Upon meeting they try to kill each other, but they quickly realize they are more similar than different. Sam and Ellie are similar in age being thirteen and fourteen, respectively. Henry appears to be in his mid-twenties and Joel is in his late forties. They decide to work together to survive and escape the city. They devise a plan to sneak past the guards near the outskirts of the quarantine zone that night. Henry tells Joel his group had planned to meet up at the radio building outside of the city, so they want to head there to find any survivors from their group. He also tells Joel they are planning to meet up with the Fireflies, which is a coincidence considering Joel and Ellie are doing the same thing. The two of them see how Sam and Ellie have become quick friends which makes Henry and Joel both happy to see (Pittsburgh).



Figure 10. Ellie and Sam having fun eating blueberries

When attempting their escape plan, Henry ditches Joel to save Sam. Ellie stays with Joel and convinces him to jump off the bridge with her. They almost drown but Henry ends up saving them. When Joel wakes up and sees Henry, he is ready to kill him, but Henry convinces Joel his call was the correct one when it came to protecting Sam. They then venture onwards towards the radio station together (Pittsburgh).

### **The Suburbs**

This is a similar chapter to Bill's Town where there is not much focus on the overall plot, but rather being very character driven. However, the events that transpire at the end of this chapter shape the tone of the narrative moving forward. Due to this, they will be discussed here. After the group escaped infected from the sewers and more of the hunters from Pittsburgh in the suburbs outside of the city, they made it to the radio station and began to unwind (The Suburbs). Joel and Henry talk amongst themselves and so do Sam and Ellie. Sam believes Henry thinks he

cannot do anything right and is clearly upset. He proceeds to ask Ellie a myriad of questions regarding the infected and other personal things. “Do you think the people are still there and trapped inside? Is there a heaven? What’s your biggest fear?” Ellie says her biggest fear is ending up alone. Sam says his is becoming an infected. As Ellie leaves to go to sleep, Sam looks down at his leg and shows a scratch mark (The Suburbs). This happened at some point after escaping from the hunters and being ambushed by a horde of infected who were drawn to the noise from the skirmish between their group and the hunters.



Figure 11. Sam’s scratch

In the morning Henry tells Ellie she can go wake Sam up since he let him sleep in for once. Sam (who has “turned”) attacks Ellie and Joel tries to shoot Sam, but Henry shoots at Joel to stop him. Henry then proceeds to kill Sam and is stricken with overwhelming grief and despair. Joel tries to comfort Henry, but he commits suicide right in front of Joel and Ellie (The Suburbs). After this, the story picks up sometime in the Fall.

## **Analysis**

The Pittsburgh and Suburbs chapters connect to each other due to the inclusion of Sam and Henry. They are different versions of Joel and Ellie. Henry's goal was to join the Fireflies because he wanted to show Sam the importance of fighting for something in life. However, after losing Sam, he lost his reason to live. He had a responsibility in being Sam's protector and he failed. The major flaw in Henry's survival strategy was being too overprotective of Sam. Prior to their meeting with Henry and Sam, Joel and Ellie had a similar situation because Joel did not trust his life in the hands of Ellie. However, Joel realized he would have died if Ellie had not been there and had his back. Joel was recognizing Ellie's usefulness and value by providing her with a gun. Sam is a perfect representation of Ellie before Joel gave her a gun. He felt useless and wanted to have some use while traveling together. Henry could not see that, which might be a prime reason why Sam was scratched. How do you survive without a sense of purpose?

The only major difference in Sam and Ellie was how Ellie had a purpose in her survival due to her immunity. The Bill's town chapter can be connected to the other two chapters based on the question of survival. The inclusion of Bill, Sam, and Henry brings up the question of whether there is a "right" way to survive. Survival in numbers does not warrant much success if one person is doing all the work. The downside to surviving with other people is the resources need to be shared between everyone. If you are surviving on your own, then you can keep all the resources for yourself. Surviving by yourself might be the optimal choice, but if you are cornered then you have no chance of backup. When it comes to survival, are you supposed to prioritize yourself or others? Everyone needs to ask these questions and decide for themselves what they are willing to do. What works for one person might not work for another person. This is also

something that is noticeable from reading the artifacts in the game. Many of them depict families being torn apart, or people questioning their best chances of survival. Should they try to team up with other people and trust their life in the hands of others? Or are they better off surviving on their own?

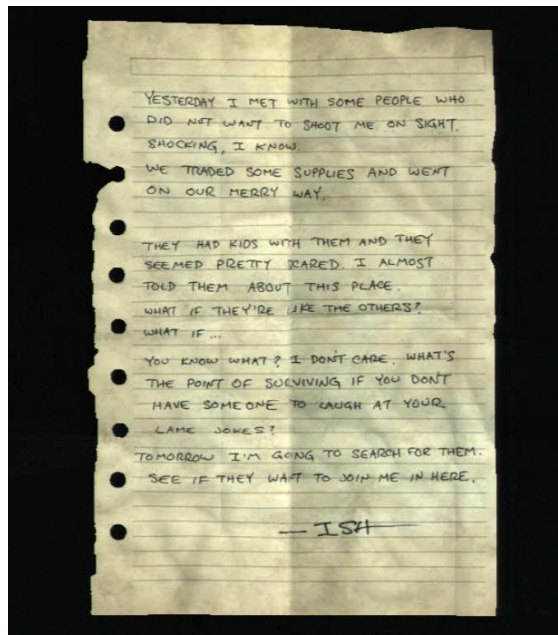


Figure 12. An artifact from the sewers section of the Suburbs chapter

## Fall

### Tommy's Dam

The chapter begins with the duo finally making it to Wyoming. Joel talks more about Tommy and how the two of them parted ways on bad terms. He is not sure what to expect when they find Tommy. Not long afterwards, Joel and Ellie make their way to a dam and are met with guns pointing at them, but then Tommy tells them all to lower their guns (Tommy's Dam). Tommy and Joel hug and start to become reacquainted. Tommy tells Joel he got married to



Maria, who takes Ellie to get some food. Joel tells Tommy he needs to talk to him, so they head to the other side of the dam to see the finishing touches on fixing up the dam. By doing this, Tommy and his group now have stable electricity in their settlement. Before they go to talk, Tommy tells Joel he went back to Texas a while back and recovered a photo of Joel and Sarah and asked if he wanted it. Joel looks at it but says no and Tommy says he will keep it in case he changes his mind (Tommy's Dam).



Figure 13. An old photo of Joel and Sarah after a soccer game

After finding a private room where they can talk things out, Joel asks Tommy to take Ellie off his hands. Joel also asks if he can take some gear for himself so he can go off on his own. He tells Tommy of Ellie's immunity and the importance it holds to the Fireflies' mission. Tommy refuses and says his new cause is his family and his Firefly days are over. He cannot leave after establishing an entire community who he now is responsible for. They argue and are about to get into a physical fight, but bandits arrive. The two of them work together to kill all of them (Tommy's Dam). After dealing with the bandits and seeing Joel and Ellie interact with each

other, Tommy realizes Ellie needs to get to the Fireflies, so he decides to take her himself. Maria and Tommy then argue, and Ellie asks Joel if it is about her and Joel tells her “we’ll talk about it later” and Ellie leaves frustrated. Shortly after, Tommy and Joel hear that Ellie stole one of the horses, so they go after her (Tommy’s Dam).

They find the horse she stole at an old ranch house nearby and Tommy lets Joel deal with Ellie while he makes sure there are no bandits around. Joel and Ellie’s conversation here is one of the most important conversations in the game because it leads to a major shift in the narrative. Their conversation is detailed below starting with Ellie reading an old journal from a teenage girl from before the apocalypse:

Ellie: “Is this really all they had to worry about? Boys, movies, deciding which shirt goes with which skirt. It’s bizarre.”

Joel: “Get up. We’re leaving.”

Ellie: “And if I say no?”

Joel: “Do you even realize what your life means? Huh? Running off like that, putting yourself at risk, it’s pretty goddamn stupid.”

Ellie: “Well, I guess we are both disappointed in each other then.”

Joel: “What do you want from me?”

Ellie: “Admit that you wanted to get rid of me the whole time.”

Joel: “...Tommy knows this area and...”

Ellie: “Oh fuck...(gets up and walks over to Joel)”

Joel: “Well I’m sorry I trust him more than I trust myself.”

Ellie: “Stop with the bullshit. What are you so afraid of? That I’m going to end up like Sam? I can’t get infected. I can take care of myself.”

Joel: “How many close calls have we had?”

Ellie: “Well we seem to be doing alright so far.”

Joel: “And now you’ll be doing even better with Tommy!”

(Sad music plays and a long silence)

Ellie: “...I’m not her you know.”

Joel: “What?”

Ellie: “Maria told me about Sarah and...”

Joel: “Ellie! ...you are treading on some mighty thin ice here.”

Ellie: “I’m sorry about your daughter Joel, but I have lost people too.”

Joel: “You have no idea what loss is.”

Ellie: “Everyone I have ever cared for has either died or left me. Everyone (pushes Joel) fucking except for you. So, don’t tell me I would be safer with someone else, because the truth is, I would just be more scared.”

Joel: “...you’re right. You’re not my daughter and I sure as hell ain’t your dad. Now we are going our separate ways.”

Tommy bursts into the room and tells them more bandits have arrived (Tommy's Dam).



Figure 14. Joel and Ellie's conversation at the ranch house

After dealing with the bandits, they all head back to Tommy's settlement (Jackson) and there is no talking amongst them because they all have things they need to think about. They make it to a hill overlooking Jackson, which is an entire town full of children and other survivors now equipped with electricity. Tommy remarks "the kids will be watching movies tonight" (Tommy's Dam). Joel asks Tommy where the Fireflies are, and he tells him last he heard they were at the science building at the University of Eastern Colorado (UEC). Joel tells Ellie to get on his horse and Ellie is elated to hear they will continue to travel together (Tommy's Dam). Tommy tries to talk things out with Joel, but Joel has made up his mind. As they head off, Tommy tells them they always have a home to return to at Jackson. This is the major turning point in the story based on Joel and Ellie's reformed relationship and how it affects the narrative.

## **The University**

This is yet another chapter that is more character driven than completely plot focused. However, the end of this chapter relates to the next entire portion of the game. Joel and Ellie have made their way to the UEC campus on horseback. Ellie has named their horse Callus. They see signs of Firefly activity but encounter no guards or anything. Ellie is extremely anxious to finally have answers to her questions about her immunity. They get to the science building and find a tape recorder indicating the Fireflies have left. The recording says they have moved to St. Mary's hospital in Salt Lake City to continue to conduct research (The University). Just as they are about to leave, they are ambushed by a group of hunters. While trying to escape the building, one hunter tackles Joel and they fall off the second-floor balcony and Joel is impaled by a metal pipe through his abdomen upon hitting the ground. Ellie helps Joel as best she can while dealing with the rest of the hunters. They make their way back to Callus as it begins to snow. As they are riding away Joel collapses from Callus (The University). Winter has come.

## **Analysis**

Tommy's Dam and the University of Eastern Colorado chapters of *The Last of Us* contain the major turning point for the story due to the renewed relationship between Joel and Ellie. They have become closer and respect each other. They are not father and daughter, but they both have an interest in the other and getting to know each other on a deeper level. Through their conversation at the ranch house they have talked out their concerns and misgivings. Joel realizes he never gave much attention to Ellie's feelings. He was focused on getting to Tommy so he could drop her off with him and move on with his life. Joel treated the journey as another smuggling job, as opposed to understanding Ellie's perspective on everything. Perhaps he was

scared to get too close to Ellie based on her similarities to Sarah? Those feelings could interfere with his survival skills. However, Joel knows what loss can do to a person, so he cannot allow Ellie to feel more despair and fear. Unfortunately, after realizing this, he is gravely injured, and Ellie is on the verge of losing someone again. This is the first time either of the pair has been injured to such an extent.

## **Winter**

### **Lakeside Resort**

The chapter begins with Ellie killing a rabbit with a hunting bow in a forested area. She is about to give up hunting for the day but spots a deer in the distance. She decides to take this opportunity to acquire more food. The player is now playing as Ellie. Joel's whereabouts and condition are unknown. After successfully landing multiple arrows into the deer, Ellie tracks it outside of a mining camp (Lakeside Resort). She hears some people approaching and immediately is on full alert. She tells them to come out and two men appear. The one introduces himself as David and the other as James. David tells Ellie he has a whole group who could really benefit from bringing the deer back with them. Ellie is careful and asks questions to not arouse any suspicion. After some negotiation, Ellie says she will trade the deer for antibiotics. David tells James to go back to their camp and get two bottles of penicillin and a syringe (Lakeside Resort).



Figure 15. Ellie meets David and James

David and Ellie decide to wait in one of the buildings to get out of the cold. While waiting, a horde of infected appear and David and Ellie are forced to work together to fend them off. After successfully fighting the horde off, David tells Ellie he believes everything happens for a reason. He tells her a story about how a few weeks earlier members of his group were slaughtered by “a crazy man” who was traveling with a young girl (Lakeside Resort). Ellie immediately realizes the severity of the situation and points her gun at David. She knows the group from the university were members of David’s group. James returns with the antibiotics and Ellie grabs them and flees back to Callus.

She makes her way back to a house of a lakeside resort. In the basement lies Joel covered in blankets and appearing to be in bad shape. The wound in his abdomen has been stitched up but appears to be infected. Ellie injects some penicillin near the wound and lays down with Joel and falls asleep (Lakeside Resort).



Figure 16. Ellie lying next to Joel after giving him a shot of penicillin

Ellie wakes up in the morning to discover David's men are in the resort area and looking for them. She realizes David has trapped her and contemplates what her best move is since his group is clearly after revenge. As Joel is still asleep, she tells him she will lead David's men away and make her way back to him. While trying to escape on horseback, David's men kill Callus and Ellie is forced to make her way back around to Joel on foot while killing more of David's men. Right before Ellie is about to make her way back to Joel, David appears and knocks her out (Lakeside Resort).

Ellie wakes up in a cage and witnesses a human body being chopped up and realizes David's group have resorted to cannibalism. David brings her some food, but Ellie is skeptical of the meat, but he assures her it is deer. While eating Ellie calls David "a fucking animal" (Lakeside Resort). He tells her she is quick to judge considering how many people they have killed. Ellie responds by saying her and Joel were left with no other choice. David asks her if she thinks they have a choice in the matter: "You kill to survive and so do we. We have to protect



our own by whatever means necessary” (Lakeside Resort). David tells Ellie he thinks she can change and join their group, but she will have to show an effort to change considering his entire group wants her dead except for himself. He refers to Ellie as “special” and Ellie touches David’s hand to then break his finger. She tries to get the keys to the cage from David, but he slams her against the cell bars. He then hints Ellie will be cut up into tiny pieces tomorrow (Lakeside Resort).

The story then switches back to Joel as he wakes up and is seemingly better than he was before Ellie had left. He is worried about Ellie and goes off to find her even though he should continue to rest. Joel runs into some more of David’s men who were continuing their search for him. Joel ends up capturing two of these men and brutally tortures them for information regarding Ellie. One of the men reveals she has become David’s newest “pet”. Joel obtains Ellie’s new whereabouts then kills the two men and heads off to rescue her (Lakeside Resort).



Figure 17. Joel interrogating one of David’s men

The story picks back up the next morning as Ellie is dragged out of her cage by James and David who are about to chop her to pieces. Before they do, Ellie screams at them and says, “I’m infected!” and tells them to look at her arm. David looks and sees the bite mark, but he does not buy it because it does not make sense how she has not turned by now. James is fully convinced though and he argues with David about what to do. During their argument, Ellie grabs a knife and kills James and manages to escape from David outside into a blizzard (Lakeside Resort). After a while, Ellie manages to make her way to an old restaurant where David confronts her. David sets the building on fire, so Ellie has no escape because he no longer has any interest in keeping her alive. In their struggle, they end up knocking each other out.

The player switches back to Joel to see he has found his way to the town and is searching for Ellie in the blizzard. Eventually he sees the restaurant on fire and assumes Ellie is there. Back inside of the restaurant, Ellie and David wake up. Before Ellie has the chance to grab David’s machete, David kicks her and tells her “it’s okay to give up”. He then climbs on top of her and tells her she can “try begging”. He goes on to say, “You think you know me? Huh? Well, let me tell you something. You have no idea what I’m capable of.” (Lakeside Resort). His intentions here are left open to interpretation for the player. For this analysis, the belief is his intentions were to rape and murder Ellie as he begins to strangle her. However, before he has the chance to do anything further, Ellie grabs the machete and stabs David with it to get him off her. She then repeatedly stabs him in the head after she has already killed him. Joel arrives and embraces her to try and calm her down. He reassures her everything is going to be fine now (Lakeside Resort).



Figure 18. Joel comforting Ellie after she killed David

### **Analysis**

This chapter is shaped by the theme of survival and doing whatever is necessary to survive. Ellie and David are the main characters of this chapter while Joel takes a backseat due to his injury. This is the first chapter where the player plays as Ellie. An important point to note about this chapter is winter is the harshest season to survive in. Due to this, it makes sense Ellie is faced with an entire group to deal with on her own. It also indicates why Ellie is faced with such serious and brutal forces. For Ellie's character, all the people she killed will impact her greatly. Joel was always the one to kill most of the other human enemies they have encountered thus far. Not to mention, she was almost raped and murdered by a man who at one time was a survivor partner who she had to place her trust in. Ellie was faced with the dark and grim realities of the post-apocalyptic world by herself. In many ways, she was living out her greatest

fear of ending up alone because Joel was not around to make her feel safe. Her encounter with David will traumatize her as she and Joel near the last leg of their journey.

In many ways, David could be considered an alternate version of Joel. They are of similar age and both had to put their survival in Ellie's hands. Both he and Joel had excellent survival skills as well. He treated himself like Ellie's protector just like Joel because capturing her ensured her safety from the rest of his group. His distinguishing differences from Joel were his firm belief that everything happens for a reason and his treatment of Ellie. While Joel attributed survival with luck, David believed fate was the reason he would survive and why everything happened. He also consistently treated Ellie like a child and would talk to her in a patronizing tone to fool her into thinking she was in control of her situation. For example, when David and Ellie were working together to fend off the infected at the mining camp, he revealed he had a hidden revolver on him that Ellie had no clue of (Lakeside Resort). At any point, he could have killed her. Joel early into their journey treated Ellie similarly as a child, but eventually let go of this view of her. Also, based on the response Joel got from one of David's men, it is safe to assume Ellie was not the first young girl to be captured by David. Was David always capable of these cruel acts or did the post-apocalyptic world shape him into what he had become?

In terms of survival methods, David believed survival worked best as a group. Therefore, David was so desperate to get the deer from Ellie in the beginning of the chapter. Based on some of the collectibles from the resort, his group had not built up enough of a food supply to last through the winter. They probably over hunted the deer in the area. This also explains why David's group had to resort to cannibalism because they would not have been able to survive without doing so. This proves the drawback previously mentioned of choosing to survive in a

group. Survival will require doing things that you will not want to do. To survive they had to treat strangers as a food source rather than as real people.

## **Spring**

### **Bus Depot**

Joel and Ellie have made their way to Salt Lake City. There is a stronger bond between Joel and Ellie after the events from the winter. However, Ellie is noticeably quiet and distant when Joel tries talking to her about the future. Ellie is not only still shaken from those previous events, but also more determined than ever to find the Fireflies to bring this journey to an end (Bus Depot). Upon their arrival to the city they discover it was at one time a quarantine zone. To progress any further into the city requires them to go through a bus depot. While trying to help Joel to continue further into the bus depot, Ellie runs off after seeing something. Joel catches up with Ellie to encounter a herd of giraffes which must have escaped from the zoo after the outbreak. One appears in front of them eating some of the foliage growing around the building and the two of them get to share the experience of being able to pet a giraffe (Bus Depot).



Figure 19. Joel and Ellie encountering a giraffe

They are both mesmerized by the experience and it allows them both the chance to step away from the journey and to see life thriving in the wake of the apocalypse. Shortly after the giraffe herd fades away into the distance, Joel tells Ellie they do not have to do this and wants her to understand there are other options. Ellie in disbelief asks, “what other option is there?”. Joel tells her they can go back to Tommy’s and say goodbye to all of this. Ellie responds with “After everything we’ve been through..., after everything I’ve done, ...it can’t be for nothing”. Later, Ellie gives Joel the photo of him and Sarah because she took it thinking he would want to keep it. He responds by saying “no matter how hard you try; you can’t escape your past” (Bus Depot).



Figure 20. Joel telling Ellie “we don’t have to do this”

While traveling through a flooded turbulent subway tunnel on their way to St. Mary’s Hospital, Ellie is knocked unconscious after attempting to save Joel from a subway car. While Joel is attempting to resuscitate Ellie, he is approached by two armed guards who knock him out.

### **The Firefly Lab**

Joel awakes to see Marlene in a hospital room where she reveals to him, she lost nearly all her men while traveling across the country. She is amazed they managed to make their way here. Joel claims it was all due to Ellie who “fought like hell to get here” (Firefly Lab). Joel asks to see Ellie and Marlene tells him he cannot see her because she is being prepped for surgery. The doctors did scans of Ellie’s brain to understand why she is immune. They found that the Cordyceps fungus mutated in her brain which is why she is immune (Firefly Lab). The doctors think they can reverse engineer a vaccine after they remove the fungus from her brain. Joel questions how safe the operation is considering the fungus grows all over the brain. He then realizes the operation will kill Ellie and tells Marlene to find somebody else. She understands

how Joel feels but tells him there is no one else and this is the best course of action for mankind's survival. The decision was not easy for her to make either considering she promised Ellie's mother she would look after her but that this is the only choice there is. Joel tells her "to keep telling yourself that bullshit" (Firefly Lab). Marlene tells the guard with her to escort Joel out of the hospital and to kill him if he tries anything. Marlene says, "Don't waste this gift, Joel" and she leaves. Joel manages to kill the guard escorting him after torturing him to figure out where the operation room is. Joel proceeds to kill all the Fireflies who get in his way as he makes his way to the surgery room. When Joel gets there, he saves Ellie and rushes to keep her safe as he is chased down by more Fireflies.

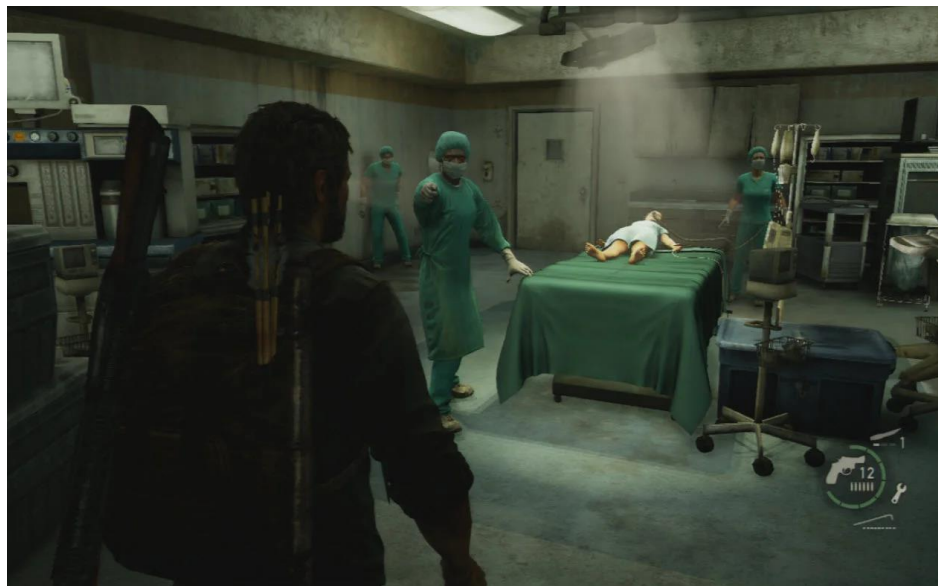


Figure 21. Joel arrives at the operating room

Joel manages to get to the parking garage of the hospital, but Marlene confronts him before he can leave. She tells Joel he cannot keep her safe and deep down, he knows this is what Ellie would want. Joel, hiding a gun in his hand, shoots Marlene and gently lays Ellie in the



backseat of a car. Before he leaves, he goes back to Marlene who is begging for him to spare her. He tells her he knows she would just come after her and kills her (Firefly Lab). Later, Ellie wakes up as Joel is driving back towards Jackson. She asks what happened and Joel tells her there are dozens of people like her who are immune, and the Fireflies had stopped looking for a cure. Ellie feeling lost and defeated turns away from Joel as he apologizes to her stating “I’m sorry” (Firefly Lab).



Figure 22. Ellie turning away from Joel after he lies to her about the events at the lab

### **Jackson – Epilogue**

Joel and Ellie make their way back to the outskirts of Jackson. The player is again playing as Ellie who is depressed and defeated. Meanwhile, Joel is happy and talking about Sarah and how he thinks Ellie and her would have been great friends (Jackson). They make it to a hill overlooking the settlement and Ellie gives the backstory of how she was bitten. She tells Joel she was with her best friend Riley who also was bitten. They had decided to wait things out

and see what happens, which was Ellie's immunity and Riley's death. "She was the first, then Tess, and Sam. I'm still waiting for my turn" (Jackson). Throughout their journey, Ellie has been suffering from survivor's guilt. Joel tells Ellie none of their deaths are on her hands and she needs to find things to fight for to continue to survive. Ellie tells Joel he does not get it. She asks him to swear to her everything he said about the Fireflies was true. Joel says, "I swear", and Ellie responds with "okay" (Jackson). The End.



Figure 23. The final shot of the game as Ellie accepts Joel's lie as the truth

### **Analysis**

The ending of *The Last of Us* is not the typical ending that would be expected from a post-apocalyptic narrative. Rather than bringing an end to the apocalypse, Joel decides to save Ellie so she can live a life. Joel's decision will have repercussions. Not only did he doom mankind to stay in the apocalypse, but he took away the meaning behind the journey for Ellie.

Ellie needed everything they have been through to mean something based on her quote “It can’t be for nothing”. Not only that, but Ellie feels as if everyone’s deaths were in vain. Based on her final conversation with Joel, she was prepared to do whatever was necessary. As Marlene pointed out to Joel, she would have wanted to go through with the surgery. However, Joel did not want to lose a daughter again.

By this point in the story he sees Ellie as a second daughter. His new view of Ellie as a second daughter is clear to see based on his openness about Sarah as they are walking towards Jackson. When Sarah was taken from him, he could not do anything. Marlene’s quote “Don’t waste this gift, Joel” can be interpreted as a second chance to save a daughter. Watching Joel carry Ellie away from the Fireflies is like the beginning of the game when he was carrying Sarah away from the infected. In both instances, he was met with a gun pointed at him. However, now he can save a daughter and he will do whatever it takes. This time he was prepared, which is why he shoots Marlene. Joel’s decision is selfish considering the scale of what Ellie’s immunity can mean for mankind. Joel is focused on Ellie and does not care about the rest of the world. For him, Ellie is his world, and he cannot allow her to give up her life for other people. He does not believe Ellie understands the joy of living. This point is important considering the encounter with the giraffe herd. Much like how Sarah represents innocence, the giraffes do the same. The herd fading into the distance helps to show Ellie how life moves on even in the grimmest of realities. Their world still has beauty even if a mass infection ruined civilization. Even though what she went through scarred her, there are things to keep living and fighting for.

On one hand the ending leaves the player wanting more. However, the ending also is a refreshing take on post-apocalyptic narratives. Rather than the narrative leading to the restoration

of humanity, the conclusion further dooms mankind. This is noteworthy and revolutionary because it focuses on messages that would not normally be thought about. The ending of *The Last of Us* is fascinating because it makes the player question if the world could even return to what it once was. Can humanity return to how they were after twenty years of living in a post-apocalyptic world? As Ellie pointed out, could anyone recover from the trauma and actions they had to take to survive? Would the old “normal” be achievable for society? These questions are purposeful and allow the player to think about the decisions made by the characters and to see their perspectives. The player can then come to their own conclusions. The one question that sticks with the player after beating *The Last of Us* is whether Joel is justified in lying to Ellie?

### ***Left Behind***

This is the DLC which was released the following year after the initial release of *The Last of Us*. As previously mentioned, the narrative from this content is focused on Ellie’s backstory before the events of the main game to fully flesh out Ellie’s character. This content also fills in the gap of time after Joel was injured and Ellie took care of Joel’s wound. The narrative of this new content switches between Ellie’s backstory and when Ellie initially patched up Joel’s wound throughout the playthrough. However, for this analysis, Ellie’s backstory will be the primary focus. This is because the portion focused on dressing Joel’s wound is more focused on gameplay with Ellie trying to find medical supplies inside of a mall near the college. There is not much plot relevance besides witnessing the full aftermath of their escape from the University of Eastern Colorado when Ellie dresses Joel’s wound.

There are six chapters of the *Left Behind* DLC. As previously mentioned, they are split between the flashback with Ellie and Riley and Ellie looking for medical supplies to stitch up Joel's wound. The chapters are as follows:

1. Back in a Flash
2. Mallrats
3. So Close
4. Fun and Games
5. The Enemy of My Enemy
6. Escape from Liberty Gardens

In terms of relevance for this narrative analysis, only four of the chapters will be focused on. These will be Back in a Flash, Mallrats, Fun and Games, and Escape from Liberty Gardens because they are focused more on Ellie's backstory.



Figure 24. The poster released for *Left Behind* featuring Riley and Ellie

## **Back in a Flash**

*Left Behind* begins in early summer before the events of the main game. Ellie is woken up in her room by her best friend Riley who has been missing for over a month. They are attending a military boarding school. Riley surprises Ellie with her recruitment into the Fireflies which has always been her dream (Back in a Flash). Ellie is upset with Riley because she disappeared without a trace and believed she was dead. Riley apologizes but assures Ellie she will forgive her if she sneaks out to the mall outside of the quarantine zone. This is a place they had snuck off to countless times before. Ellie is hesitant because she has military drills in the morning, but Riley convinces her she will be back in time for them (Back in a Flash).



Figure 25. Riley convincing Ellie to sneak out with her

## **Mallrats**

Through their traveling to the mall they try to patch things up because of a fight they had before Riley had left to join the Fireflies. Her time away was because Marlene was testing her to

make sure she was worthy of becoming a Firefly. Ellie asks if she can become one too, but Riley tells her Marlene wants her to stay in school (Mallrats). When they arrive at the mall, they begin to enjoy themselves by having competitions between each other and exploring old stores. The surprise Riley wanted to show Ellie was turning on the power for the mall because she had found out the military had not shut it down. The run-down mall was brought to life for the two of them to see for the first time (Mallrats).

### **Fun and Games**

Ellie and Riley enjoy some of the technology that had never worked before such as a merry-go-round and an old photobooth. The two of them make their way to an old arcade where they find all the arcade games are broken, which disappoints Ellie because she always wanted to play one. Riley helps Ellie to imagine herself playing one of the games as the character “Angel Knives” and this experience is enough for Ellie to be satisfied with (Fun and Games). Riley wants to venture further into the mall, but Ellie tells her she needs to go because she cannot get in trouble again. She tells Riley she is excited to continue exploring another day. Riley reveals to Ellie she will be leaving tomorrow because Marlene wants her to join another group of Fireflies outside of Boston (Fun and Games). Ellie is upset because she does not understand how everything went wrong because they had been better than good before she had left. Riley reveals to Ellie she is supposed to be holed up on the other side of town, but she decided to spend this time with Ellie. Ellie tells Riley she should go because this has always been her dream, but Riley runs off to continue exploring (Fun and Games).



Figure 26. Riley tells Ellie she will be leaving Boston

Ellie catches back up to Riley in a music store. Riley reveals she had stolen back a pair of water guns they had previously lost because Ellie wanted them back so much. They decide to have a water gun war before they talk everything out to calm themselves down. Afterwards, they begin to talk things out (Fun and Games). Ellie tells Riley she will be able to survive without her, but Riley tells Ellie she is the only person who could convince her to stay. Riley asks for Ellie's Walkman and connects it to one of the speakers in the store. Riley jumps on top of a table and drags Ellie up with her to dance together. During this, Ellie discovers she does not want Riley to leave and tells her "don't go". Riley then tears off her Firefly pendant from her neck symbolizing she will not go. They both stare at each other and Ellie kisses Riley, but quickly apologizes. Riley tells her she does not mind, and they are both elated. Their happiness is quickly cut short when a small group of infected show up (Fun and Games).





Figure 27. Ellie and Riley's kiss

### **Escape from Liberty Gardens**

Riley pulls out her gun and protects them as best she can while they flee. After a desperate struggle to escape, they manage to kill the infected that pursued them, but at a cost. Riley tells Ellie to look at her arm where she discovers she has been bitten. Riley shows her hand to Ellie which also has been bitten (Escape from Liberty Gardens). Frustrated and scared, Ellie begins breaking potted plants with a metal pipe. Their conversation brings the DLC to a close as the cutscene switches between Ellie and Riley in the past and Ellie stitching up Joel in the present:

Riley: "There's some more stuff over there that you can break."

Ellie: "What are we gonna do?"

Riley: “The way I see it, we got two options. Option one. We take the easy way out.

(gestures with her gun) Its quick and painless. (puts the gun down) I’m not a fan of option one. Two. We fight.”

Ellie: “Fight for what? We’re gonna turn into one of those things”

Riley: “There are a million ways we should’ve died before today. And a million ways we can die before tomorrow. But we fight...for every second we get to spend with each other. Whether its two minutes...or two days...we don’t give that up. I don’t want to give that up. My vote...let’s just wait it out. You know we can...be all poetic and just lose our minds together.”

Ellie: “What’s option three?”

Riley: “Sorry. C’mom. Let’s get outta here.”



Figure 28. Ellie and Riley’s final conversation of *Left Behind*

## Analysis

*Left Behind* is a great name for this addition to *The Last of Us* because it represents Ellie's feelings throughout the main game. The main story ends with Ellie providing the background behind when she was bitten and how she was with her best friend. This DLC provides the full backstory on their ordeal with the infected and showcases their relationship as best friends. However, based on the events that take place, they were on the verge of becoming more than friends. This adds to the relevance of Riley's response to Ellie about why they should still fight after being bitten. It represents one of the key messages *The Last of Us* is trying to convey: find something to fight for and to never give up hope.

Every day can be our last day alive, so we should cherish the time we have with our loved ones because who knows what can happen. The DLC ends with their conversation, so there is no depiction of Riley's death, but it is clear she died from the infection. Her death is where Ellie's survivor's guilt originated from because they pledged to wait things out together, but the infection had no effect on Ellie. She was prepared to die with Riley, but instead was forced to live on. For Ellie, her immunity had to mean something greater than herself after losing Riley, considering they wanted to fight and die together. For Ellie, their experience in the mall that day made the need for the entire journey with Joel to matter. Her immunity had to make her life valuable, so Riley dying would not have been in vain. Joel's decision made this exact prospect a reality which devastated Ellie.

The analysis will now shift towards analyzing the various elements of the setting in *The Last of Us*.

## **Setting**

This section will be devoted to analyzing the various settings of *The Last of Us*. By doing this, the world of *The Last of Us* can be better understood. This will add to the understanding of the plot as well as the themes and messages being described through the game. To begin this portion, the seasons will be analyzed to understand their significance. The specific research question for this section can be seen below.

**Q3:** How do all the various settings throughout the *The Last of Us* add to the narrative as a whole?

## **The Importance of the Seasons**

*The Last of Us* uses the seasons to break up the different chapters of the story. Through analyzing the plot, every seasonal change seemed to indicate notable changes in Joel and Ellie's respective characters. These changes will be further discussed in the character analysis in the next section of the chapter. This is effective because of the use of a natural phenomenon to represent the changes in the characters.

The game begins in the summer which is when the world/nature is flourishing. Starting the narrative in the summer is important when you look at the purpose of Joel and Ellie's journey. Ellie is the potential cure for humanity and her immunity manifested in the summer. In a sense, the summer brought out the cure for the Cordyceps fungus. Nature works in mysterious ways and this could be the case for Ellie as well. The summer breathes new life into Joel and Ellie who both have been wrought with grief and despair for years. However, summer ends with Sam and Henry's deaths which breaks both Joel and Ellie's spirits after they were beginning to

find some sense of happiness again. This is more apparent in Ellie than Joel after analyzing the plot. The narrative is based on tragedy and despair which seems to always come back to haunt Joel and Ellie.

The fall represents the preparation for winter. All life in nature begins to physically prepare themselves for the winter. For the narrative, this season represents preparing Joel and Ellie for what will happen to them as their journey moves forward. They face each other and express their feelings towards their journey so far. Their relationship is renewed and becomes stronger which is necessary for their actions to come. Joel is then critically injured at a crucial point in their journey, which forces Ellie to quickly adapt to survive. Would Ellie have been able to survive her ordeal with David and his group if her and Joel had not patched up their relationship?

Winter is the harshest season to survive in for all life. Many life forms end up going into a state of hibernation during this time because they would not be able to survive otherwise. If there was not enough preparation done in the fall, then winter can be the cause of death for many forms of life. David's group was facing this very predicament which is why they had to resort to cannibalism. The winter portion of *The Last of Us* was a desperate struggle for survival between Ellie and David's group. Joel and Ellie are no longer continuing their journey because of Joel's condition. Joel for much of the season was on death's door until Ellie was able to get the antibiotics. If David and James had not been hunting at the same time as Ellie, then Joel would most likely have died. In the grimmest of circumstances, Ellie found a way to save Joel which almost got herself killed in turn. This is representative of survival.

The spring represents a new beginning. Life begins to come alive once again and this is true for Joel and Ellie's journey as well. They have made it to their destination and Joel and Ellie have renewed resolves. Ellie is determined to do whatever it takes to help with the creation of a cure because of the trauma from the winter. Joel on the other hand is determined to make sure Ellie has the most fulfilling life possible. In many ways the beginning of the spring portion of the game can be considered the calm before the storm. The giraffe herd gives the player a sense of serenity and peacefulness before Joel shakes up the entire world. He decides to save Ellie and kill anyone who gets in his way. At the end of *The Last of Us*, Joel decides to lie to Ellie because his lie will bring their journey to a definite end, so they can begin new lives in Jackson.

As was shown in this analysis thus far, the focus on the seasons was brilliant. They not only accentuated the plot of the story, but also initiated significant character development for Joel and Ellie. The next portion of the setting analysis will focus on specific settings showcased throughout the game.

### **Specific Chapter Settings**

The initial beginning of *The Last of Us* depicts the world and society as reality. However, the initial outbreak causes pandemonium and disaster to begin to take over. When the story picks up twenty years after the Cordyceps outbreak, populations of people have been living in quarantine zones controlled by the military. Society as it once was is gone. There is only one still functioning quarantine zone to use to understand how life is like inside of a quarantine zone. Military checkpoints are installed across the zone to maintain peace and order. The people living in the Boston quarantine zone look depressed and tired from military rule. There are constant checks for infection from the military and public executions seem to be common. Food ration

cards have become the new form of currency in quarantine zones. Tess and Joel did some bargaining with them early in the game on their way to Robert. As was stated in the previous section on the plot, other quarantine zones were taken over by the people who were being oppressed by the military. Others were abandoned altogether most likely due to infections or uprisings.



Figure 29. The military rounding people up to check for possible infections in Boston

Outside of the quarantine zones, destroyed city landscapes line the horizon. The cities have been taken over by foliage and infected. Skyscrapers are tilting and/or have begun to degrade and fall apart. Whole sections of city streets have been blown apart and abandoned cars line the roads. Early in the game when Joel and Tess are smuggling Ellie to the capitol building, Ellie asks why the city looks so destroyed. Tess reveals quarantine zones were established by the military to isolate the infected so they could bomb the cities to kill them, but it did not work. This was especially true in Boston where infected roamed all over. Pittsburgh would be the exception because there was an entire large group who had patrols on watch to keep infected

from getting into the city. Cordyceps spores are rampant in some old buildings particularly in cities because of the subways and other closed off areas where the fungus can grow unhindered.



Figure 30. Joel, Tess, and Ellie traveling through Boston after leaving the quarantine zone

The suburb chapter has a different feel to it compared to the previous chapters. This is due to the fact of how the rest of the game does not take place in a city setting. This provides the player with an interesting change of scenery and perspective. Rural areas are relatively more peaceful than the cities and easier to survive in. Cities will attract survivors searching for supplies but are far more dangerous due to the presence of infected and hostile survivor groups. Rural areas also appear to be more like what they once were even after twenty years of the apocalypse. Houses and other buildings are starting to deteriorate from the lack of care and maintenance. Overgrown lawns and other foliage have begun to grow outside of abandoned vehicles and homes. However, houses are still recognizable from the inside. The interiors appear to be either savaged by other people searching for supplies or are just as they were when the



owners left. Children's rooms are still full of toys and games. While scavenging through homes across the journey, it is easy to picture how families were once living there before the world was faced with an overwhelming pandemic.



Figure 31. Joel and Henry in the suburban development featured in the Suburbs chapter

### **The Old vs. the New**

One of the most enjoyable aspects of *The Last of Us* is seeing the contrast between the old reality and the new one. During the Pittsburgh chapter, Ellie sees an old advertisement depicting a very skinny woman and remarks how stupid it was to choose to not eat for looks. From her perspective, it does not make sense because her reality is focused on survival. The past reality was more focused on entertainment and pleasure. The contrast between these realities is striking to say the least. In a sense, they are not comparable at all. However, survival was still crucial in both realities. In the old reality, people still needed to survive. They needed to survive in more ways than one when finances, social relationships, and other important variables of life

are considered. The new reality erases all the other variables affecting people's lives and allows them to just focus on just staying alive. When taken into this context, is the new reality as bad as it seems? People seem to always wish life could be simpler and less complicated.

The focus of the analysis will now shift to the main characters, Joel, and Ellie.

## **Characters**

This section of the analysis will be focused on analyzing Joel and Ellie. This is important because of their significance to the *The Last of Us*. As was previously mentioned, they are repeatedly highlighted as one of the best aspects of the game (Baggs). By breaking down their actions, they can be understood as symbols. Symbolism is crucial to this analysis because symbols are what are used to represent an ideology or subject. By breaking the symbol down to its core, the meaning can be extracted and understood. The questions this section will be focused on answering are as follows:

**Q4:** What do the main two characters symbolize?

**Q5:** Why do these symbols resonate with players?

**Q6:** How does presence impact the player's consumption of the narrative?

## **Joel**

Joel is the perfect representation of a survivor. He is only concerned with the present moment. In the world of *The Last of Us*, you must be focused on survival each day. His actions are always focused on how to survive the current situation. However, he attributes survival with luck because he does not have faith in himself as he pointed out to Ellie in their argument in the

ranch house. After losing Sarah, he lost everything which caused him to act on anger. Joel's hesitation and disbelief to Ellie's immunity are from twenty years of hate for the world. He is forced to accept it as reality after he sees Ellie breathe in enough spores that would normally kill anyone.

Joel arguably changes more than Ellie over the course of their journey. The Joel from the beginning of the game would have allowed Ellie to become the cure for humanity. However, after the events of their journey, his outer layers of hatred and grief are peeled away. Towards the end of the game, he revealed more about himself and Sarah to Ellie. The old Joel would never have allowed himself to talk about Sarah to anyone. To him, Ellie had become a second daughter. Their relationship was not exactly indicative of a father and daughter, but they grew to love each other as they survived through a harsh journey together. How could you not? When you place your life in the hands of another person, there needs to be absolute trust and faith in them. They would not have survived without each other which Joel needed. He needed to be able to protect someone again. Joel began the apocalypse losing the one person he had pledged to keep safe at all costs, Sarah.

Grief and despair are hard to overcome and they can certainly be overwhelming and taxing on a person. After Joel sees Ellie going so far to protect him during the winter, he has a complete change of character when they arrive in Salt Lake City. He can face his feelings and start to move on. By this point in the story, he just wants to go back to Jackson because he regained something he had lost long ago. Therefore, he rescues Ellie and decides to kill the Fireflies who try to stop him because he cannot lose what he has finally regained. For twenty years, he has regretted his actions on that first night when Sarah was killed. Throughout the

journey, he sees how Ellie is trying desperately to find meaning in her immunity and their adventure. Joel wants to live life with a daughter again and be happy. Many would consider his final actions to be selfish, but his actions are true to his character. For him, he will do whatever is necessary to help Ellie to live a happy and fulfilling life. His lie at the end reflects his resolve to help Ellie to look past her immunity and focus on her own happiness. In a sense, he wants Ellie to live on for not only herself, but Sarah as well. In many ways, his selfish actions represent the whole of humanity.

Human beings are inherently selfish creatures. They will do what is best for their own self-interest. Not all people are selfish all the time, but no one makes decisions that do not take their own interests into consideration. As individuals, we all are different and will act on what we want. The individuals who bring life to large corporations and factories are doing so for themselves. Their company goals might be positive, but profits will always be the main concern with large corporations and businesses. The destruction of the environment to build new factories or the pollution of the environment are all results from humanity's selfishness. The seven deadly sins described in the bible are indicative of our selfishness as well. Every person has those characteristics inside of themselves. Others may act on them more than others, but no one can escape from their selfish desires. Therefore, criticizing Joel's decision to allow Ellie to live means you must criticize humanity as well. In the world of *The Last of Us*, selfishness often is the best course of action for survival. If people were to truly put themselves in Joel's shoes, then his decision might not seem so wrong.

## **Ellie**

Ellie is the potential cure for humanity. She never wanted to be the cure, nor did she ask for this entire journey across the country. However, she accepted the responsibility of her situation and understood the magnitude of what her immunity meant for the restoration of humanity. Due to this, her immunity needed to mean something to her. She constantly wondered why was it her? When she was first infected, she made peace with the fact she was going to die because she would be dying with her best friend. However, she did not die, and Riley had to die alone after they pledged to survive together. To Ellie, she broke their promise. Ellie believed surviving the journey and bringing the restoration of humanity would be enough to make up for breaking their promise. It would mean her continuing to live on had meaning. She needed to know everything she had to do and everything they did together was worthwhile. This took a mental cost throughout the journey.

Ellie throughout the journey sinks deeper into despair. Before the events of the main game, she lost her best friend who she had just gotten back. Not only that, but she lost her first love in Riley as well. When she meets Joel and Tess she is confused and anxious to understand why she was immune. Then, she loses Tess, who she had grown to like, and was left with Joel who felt heartless. She stayed with him because she had nowhere else to go. The resolve to find answers to her immunity drove her to continue. Then, they met Sam and Henry which helped her to gain a friend who was her age again. Their traveling together began to make Ellie feel happy again because they were all heading to the Fireflies together. A noteworthy point regarding Ellie's character is during the Pittsburgh chapter she will tell jokes from a joke book every so often to lighten the mood. The last time she tells jokes is before Sam and Henry died. After their

deaths, she never once opens the book back up. This shows how she could not bring herself to laugh and have fun because she does not believe she deserves to. From then on, she becomes attached to Joel because he is all she has left.

Ellie knew Joel did not want to go on this journey which made her feel even more worthless. The only person she has wants nothing to do with her. Again, her immunity keeps her from giving up. However, she confronts Joel at the ranch house because she fears being alone. Pawning her off to Tommy was the last thing she ever wanted. Thankfully, she broke through to Joel and their relationship was renewed and they both regained some happiness. Again, Ellie's happiness is cut short when Joel is injured, and she must try to survive on her own while taking care of Joel. Then, she is traumatized from being locked up in a cage and almost raped and murdered while alone. Her trauma is apparent in Salt Lake City and she is focused on the present moment unlike Joel who had begun to look towards the future. Therefore, during the final scene she confronts Joel about what he had told her in the car ride leaving Salt Lake City. When Joel initially lied to her, she took it as the truth. However, since she was unconscious during the entire ordeal in the hospital, she had her doubts about what Joel told her. Ellie could not move on and start a new life without having a confirmation of whether he told her the truth. After Joel lies to her again, she accepts it and decides to move on from everything. For Ellie, an entire year's worth of turmoil and struggle led to nothing. Her defeated feelings will not be easy to let go of.

An interesting aspect of Ellie is she masks all these feelings until the end of the game. This is representative of real people. Often, the people who always seem to be the happiest are the ones who are suffering the most inside. When playing through the main game during the summer, you would not think Ellie was depressed because she had plenty of happy moments.

Her depression becomes noticeable in the fall because of how the summer ends with more death. Depression is a disease that is misunderstood by many people. Everyone will beat themselves up inside whenever they make a mistake or are hit with terrible circumstances. Most people will be able to overcome those feelings after enough time has passed. Other people are not so fortunate. Some things will weigh on people and the weight will continue to grow after every instance of sadness or guilt. In many ways, Ellie is representative of people with depression. However, her feelings towards her immunity and her life are more representative of humanity.

Ellie represents the average person searching for meaning in their life. Curiosity is a lasting trait of humanity. People want to know their life will have purpose. No one wants to die, but we all live everyday knowing our time will come. Because of this, every single person tries to find their “purpose” in life. People define their life’s purpose in a myriad of ways. Some consider their purpose to be their career, some say their significant other, others as a mother/father, or even some spiritual or philosophical idea. Whatever way people define their purpose, they feel better about dying because they feel as if they mattered. Ellie believed her purpose to be the onset of the restoration of humanity. She never once thought her immunity was meaningless. Most people would think the same as Ellie. However, does her immunity need to mean something? Has anyone genuinely thought life does not need to have a purpose? While we all search for some meaning behind our lives, we are losing out on countless potential experiences. We each are just a small speck on the planet Earth. Animals die every single day because the circle of life must continue. No one questions whether an animal had purpose when they die. Once you place the same situation in a human context, the interpretation changes

drastically. Why is that? Are we not animals living on the Earth? The only thing that connects living things together is the want to live. All life fights to survive.

### **The Impact of Presence on the Player**

The presence phenomenon plays a critical role in the player's consumption of the narrative of *The Last of Us* because the player becomes sympathetic with the main characters. Not only that, but they are learning about the world from their perspectives as well. Joel and Ellie have differing perspectives on the world because of the age difference between them. Joel has lived through the entire apocalypse and knows what life is like outside of the quarantine zones. Ellie on the other hand only knows life inside of a quarantine zone until she leaves with Tess and Joel. Due to this, Ellie and the player are both experiencing the world for the first time. It is an interesting point of view because the player is playing as Joel throughout most of the game whereas they connect and resonate more with Ellie. However, by the end of *The Last of Us* the player can understand Joel's decisions.

This makes the ending of *The Last of Us* conflicting for the player because you are not quite sure how to feel. Ellie did not achieve her goal of helping to create a cure, but she is able to live out the rest of her life. In Joel's case, the player can feel conflicted because you want Joel and Ellie to live together, but the apocalypse cannot be stopped now. After witnessing the events of the game, the player wants to see the Cordyceps fungus stopped. However, if Ellie's life is what it takes to bring an end to the fungal reign, then the player does not want that either. *The Last of Us* is reminiscent of a situation where you cannot get what you want. The ending of the game is not satisfying for the player, but would any of the other potential endings be any better? From a player's perspective, it is hard to tell since every player will have their own interpretation



of the events and meaning of the narrative. Therefore, personal experience is so critical to the consumption of media especially video games. The feelings and gratifications you receive are what should be focused on. Criticisms from other people should not disvalue your feelings about the media content.

This leads to the final portion of the analysis of *The Last of Us*.

### **Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm**

This section coincides with the previous section on the presence phenomenon based on Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm. According to Fisher's theory, every person who plays *The Last of Us* will interpret the game differently due to our individual unique past experiences. To quickly recap, the theory of the narrative paradigm is focused on the believability of a narrative based on two principles: coherence and fidelity. Coherence is the degree of sense making of a narrative ("The Narrative Paradigm"). This is influenced by three factors: the structure of a narrative, the resemblance between stories, and the credibility of the characters. Fidelity is defined as the credibility or reliability of the narrative in question ("The Narrative Paradigm"). Fidelity needs to answer questions like are the events described factual? Have the facts been distorted while narrating? How does the argument in the story affect the decision making of the listener?

In terms of coherence, *The Last of Us* is strong between the three principles. The narrative structure is straightforward and continues forward without any flashbacks etc. The only exception would be for the DLC *Left Behind*, but this was done after the game was completed. This does not convolute or disorient the player from not understanding where the events take

place. There are also many moments in the game where the story skips a vast amount of time, which occurs between seasons specifically. Through this analysis they were not found to be confusing or jarring to the player. *The Last of Us* is also comparable to other post-apocalyptic video game narratives such as the *Fallout* series and *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. None of them are the same, but they all share common themes of survival and continuing to move forward after traumatic events.

In terms of credibility of the characters, Joel and Ellie feel and act more like real people than many other video game characters from other games. They do not use overwhelming feats of power or strength to defeat enemies, nor do they have powers that are unique to themselves. They survive using the resources they find around them as they travel. They can very easily be killed if the player makes a mistake. The ranch house scene featuring Joel and Ellie's argument about their journey is one of the most realistic depictions in the game. Their reactions to each other and their feelings towards each other gradually grow at a realistic pace. Joel's decision at the end of the game is an accurate representation of a father. If any other father were in the same situation, would they have just let their child be killed to save people? There was no guarantee a cure would be able to be made from Ellie's immunity.

Fidelity is more focused on the player's interpretation of *The Last of Us* and how the message of the game affects them. Since *The Last of Us* is a video game, there cannot be an entire accurate portrayal of reality because that is the driving motivating force behind people's want to play video games. To escape from reality and live and play as someone else. This was addressed previously in the literature review. *The Last of Us* portrays reality to a strong degree, while maintaining the appeal of video games to gamers. There are moments of the game that can

be unreliable and unrealistic, such as when Joel is injured and is still alive after weeks of fighting off an infection from his wound. However, the player can look past this because they understand video games will not perfectly represent reality. No one would want to play a video game that reflects reality perfectly because what would be the point of playing a game then? If reality in the video game is true to our own reality, then why not just experience reality in the real world?

*The Last of Us* works well as a video game because every subtle detail adds to the overall narrative. A movie or show will not be capable of being as in depth as a video game because there is only so much that can be done using the real world. In a video game, anything is possible because technology was used to engineer an alternate reality from the ground up. A show or movie will need real footage to be shot and filmed. Depending on the specific scene, they might need the weather to be exactly what is described in the script which means the production is limited to reality. There are CGI and other computer-based editing technology that are used, but the more of those that are used take away from the realness of the film or show. Video game worlds are crafted entirely utilizing computer graphics and other similar technology. There are real people and sounds used as a basis for the characters and world, but people want video games to be unreal. The reason *The Last of Us* works so well as a game is because the characters reflect real people accurately, while the world maintains the unrealistic feel of video games. They work in tandem to create a piece of art that pushes the player to look beyond themselves and to embrace other views and opinions.

### **The Objective of *The Last of Us***

Through this detailed analysis, the objective was found to be portraying life through the context of a post-apocalyptic world. Ellie and Joel together represent the whole of humanity

looking for meaning and purpose in their lives while maintaining the selfishness that is unique to humanity. Another key objective of the narrative was to showcase how there are always reasons to continue living for. No matter the circumstances someone is faced with, they must press forward and continue to live and fight for what they believe in. Even if someone is living for one specific goal or objective, then there will be something to continue to live for. In the world of *The Last of Us*, survival is more than just the want to live. You need to have something to fight for, and that will continue to push you forward.

In Ellie's case, she only wanted to survive to be able to help stop the Cordyceps fungus. She had no real plans afterwards and because of this, she was willing to die to restore humanity. For Joel, he survived for years to find things to live for. He was the one who told Ellie that no matter what you might face, you must find something to fight for to continue. Giving up on life is never the answer because there potentially is nothing else. You have this one chance at life and to give up that life is the worst thing you can do. Many people die young from illnesses, accidents, and other tragedies. Joel lost Sarah in a similar way and he could not allow Ellie to give up her life at such a young age because she has no conception of what life can offer her. All Ellie has known is despair and grief, so Joel wants to be able to provide her with happiness for the rest of their lives.

The most important moments in the plot for achieving this objective is the ending of *The Last of Us*. However, the entire journey helps to build the objective of the game. The DLC is important as well because by playing through it, Ellie's feelings are better understood. In many ways, she wants to die because she feels like she is constantly being left behind by the people she cared for. Joel is the only one she still has which is why the ranch house scene is so important.

This scene is when Joel realizes Ellie's feelings and starts to see things from her perspective. Joel looking past his own selfishness and seeing Ellie's views is what *The Last of Us* wants players to do. To look past yourself and embrace the people around you to learn from them. From then on, their relationship grew to the point that Joel saw Ellie as a second daughter. He could not lose her. Their world is full of grief and despair. Joel wanted to fight for a happy and bright future even if it might not be the one the rest of humanity would want. His lie to Ellie is proof of his resolve to protect her from anymore despair and grief.

## **Summary**

This chapter covered the narrative analysis of *The Last of Us*. The chapter began with an extensive portrayal of the plot of the game to present an as accurate portrayal of *The Last of Us* as possible. Then, the setting was analyzed based on the seasons and various environments Joel and Ellie traveled through on their journey. The analysis then shifted to focus on the characters and what they represent as symbols. This section also focused on the presence phenomenon taken from Dubbelman's article from chapter two. Next, Walter Fisher's theory of the narrative paradigm was used to evaluate the narrative of *The Last of Us*. This was done to showcase the relevance of the narrative as being from a video game. Finally, the objective of the narrative of *The Last of Us* was explained to bring all the elements of the analysis together. The next chapter will address the conclusions from this analysis and how they can be used for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The final chapter of this thesis will be the conclusion based on everything discussed throughout the previous four chapters. The chapter will begin by highlighting video game narratives and their relevance to the video game industry. This will bring the focus back to advocacy which was the overall goal of this thesis. Then, potential weaknesses for the study will be discussed. This will then lead to a discussion of what future researchers can investigate regarding video game narratives. Some personal thoughts on *The Last of Us Part Two* will then be discussed due to its relevance to this study. Finally, the chapter will conclude with readdressing the purpose for this thesis.

### **The Fight for Change**

Change is necessary for the world right now. However, this thesis is most concerned with changing the view of the video game industry. As mentioned in chapter one, many parents and adults believe children play too many video games. However, the gaming audience is far from just being targeted towards children. According to a 2020 survey by Statista, 38% of video game players are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four (Gough) *The Last of Us* is rated M (for mature 17+) for a reason. Many of Sony's signature titles on the PS4 were rated either teen or

mature because they require a certain level of knowledge and competence to understand the game mechanics and story.

This past generation of gaming has brought about a heavy narrative focus on video games. Game narratives are becoming more unique and varied. Every developer is starting to think about how they can separate themselves from the other developers. The narration is one of the ways developers are doing this. Some video games require multiple playthroughs to learn the entire story because the game is not explicit in narrating the story. Other video games make their narratives more unique by adding in gameplay elements into how the narratives are told. This is a unique aspect of the video game media channel because shows and films cannot change their approach to narratives easily. Those media channels are representative in nature and therefore, cannot allow the audience to be active and participate in the narrative. Video games are entirely presentational and allow the player to be active in the narrative.

People respect famous actors and directors for their roles in releasing blockbuster hit television shows and films to the world. Why are video game directors and the voice actors not seen the same way? In chapter one, I discussed how video games utilize real people for many elements including character modeling, gameplay actions, voiceovers, etc. Video games and shows/films are not as different as some would like to believe. However, video games are believed to be stronger in terms of narration. As this thesis has demonstrated, video games are capable of being incredibly impactful on players. The passion and attention to detail in video games since the release of *The Last of Us* has been evident. Video games and their creators deserve more recognition from the public because they can stand on the same level as celebrity actors and directors. The fact *The Last of Us* is being produced into a television show is evidence

of this. The timing of this announcement is also important to point out because of the current pandemic and the way life has become. Media will change and reflect what society is thinking/feeling.

*The Last of Us* is relevant to the current time because of the similarities between the game's reality and our own. In 2020, everyone is confused and coping with the current pandemic and protests in their own ways. In times like these, people need something to help them escape from their strenuous lives. There are many people who seek out ways to escape from reality to gain something that can be used to help them in their real lives. Video games are the best media channel to use because they do more than any other media channel. They come with a fully crafted world for the player to explore and enjoy. Players can resonate more with the characters because they are playing as them. Video games present everything to the player and allow them to explore every element in their own way. Conversely, most other media channels try to represent reality because the creators believe people want realism. However, to truly escape from reality requires unreal features. Any possibility can be created in a video game. However, video games like *The Last of Us* are strong because they bring the real and unreal together to bring out narratives that are believable and impactful on the player. The messages and themes people take away from a story are the most important elements of what makes a strong narrative.

Narration is built into what makes us human beings. Stories have been told throughout our human existence. We seek out stories to escape from the world and to experience something new. Let us face the truth: reality can be boring. Therefore, people choose to spend their time engaging in media to escape from their boredom. If those escape mechanisms can provide people with new knowledge or perspectives to use, then they should be praised. For *The Last of Us*, the



story makes the player think about Joel and Ellie's journey which will reflect back to their own life. Their journey is symbolic of your own personal life as you experience more of what life has to offer. Joel and Ellie's struggles can make your own struggles seem smaller than what you believed them to be. The objective of the game was to portray life through a post-apocalyptic world. Their reality is cruel and makes our own reality to be better than what we might believe it to be. This can only help people to cope better with their own struggles and feelings. Many people need experiences like these to better understand themselves and others.

“When you're lost in the darkness, look for the light” (Naughty Dog, 2014). The Fireflies' slogan is representative of life in general. No matter how bad things might seem, they will get better, but you must take the initiative to search for something to help you. It can be family, friends, a story, media, or anything for that matter. This thesis would argue video games to be an answer. But this thesis stands for more than just video games. It is founded on the firm belief that life is sacred and should always be fought for, just as the characters in *The Last of Us* fought for every second they could. You might not be able to escape your past but dwelling on the past will do nothing for you. Pushing forward towards a brighter future is the ultimate sign of resilience and strength. Every single person deserves happiness. It is without a doubt a human right. Ellie must try to move on and find happiness after Joel lies to her. It will not be easy just like life itself, but she must fight for something now. The ending of *The Last of Us* asks the player to move on along with Ellie. Society must also move forward past the stigmatization of video games. If this is done, then video games can receive the respect and recognition they deserve.

## Potential Weaknesses

There are two primary potential weaknesses to this study. The first is personal bias due to *The Last of Us* being my favorite game. This is due to sentimentality as well as the game having personal meaning to me. Due to this, some portions of the analysis could be illegitimate.

However, most media are impressionable and are not tailored towards one person. Anyone can watch a show or film or play a video game and interpret events and themes differently. Narrative criticism is focused on the researcher's own personal analysis, so this weakness is not necessarily accurate.

The second weakness is this was my seventh time playing through *The Last of Us*. This involves the of reliability of this study because if another researcher were to replicate this study, they might not come to the same conclusions because they only played the game once. However, this also brings back the goal for this thesis to create the motivation for people to experience the game for themselves. Even though this analysis was detailed and thorough, there are many other aspects of the experience that could not be accurately described. The subtle details of the world and the character interactions are hard to replicate in the written word. As the saying goes, some things are better experienced for yourself. This is especially true for video games because they are a media channel focused on the player and their actions. This connects back to Dubbelman's article focused on looking at video game narratives as being presentational because the player is taking part in the narrative. As this analysis has shown, the player is left with feelings of unease after beating the game. This is crucial to better understanding video game narratives.

## Future Research

Future researchers can utilize this study to investigate similar video game narratives to help drive this area of research forward. Specific video games that should be looked into further are any of the first-party PS4 exclusives that launched during the PS4's lifespan. Some of these are *God of War*, *Death Stranding*, *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, and *Ghost of Tsushima* as well as a myriad of others. With a new console generation looming over the horizon, this is a great opportunity to examine and analyze the best games of this past generation. Not only did *The Last of Us* pioneer the way for these various video game narratives, but they also were crucial to the success of the PS4.

Future research can also investigate other video game narratives outside of the PlayStation brand to determine how other video game console brands are tackling video game narratives. The two most notable competitors for Sony would be Microsoft and Nintendo. Their marketing strategies are different compared to the PlayStation. New research could help to determine if one marketing strategy is more effective than the others. The PlayStation brand was focused on the exclusive games that were available for the PS4 throughout its console generation. Microsoft and their Xbox One were focused on the console and what it was capable of. Nintendo and the Nintendo Switch has focused their marketing strategy on the player's experience while using their console. All three of these brands were successful this past generation, but moving forward will they continue to be successful? Future research could delve into the next generation of console gaming and compare it to the previous generation to determine if these strategies are the same or whether they are changing to match their competition.

Another potential area for future research based off this study is to compare video game narratives and film/television narratives. Specifically, the impact of the narrative can be measured between participants. This could be beneficial in figuring out what the “best” media channel is for delivering narratives. This thesis was focused on advocating for video games specifically, but television and film narratives are strong in their own ways. They are all important to the rapidly changing world we live in. However, for a study like this, the researchers must make sure to clear out any bias from the participants due to the stigma of video games by some people. People who equally enjoy these media channels should be selected to participate.

While finishing up the analysis for *The Last of Us*, one research question needed to be discarded. It was based on Walter Fisher’s theory of the narrative paradigm. How much of a role do personal feelings play in the believability of a video game narrative? This question is hard to analyze because it is hard to measure. How do you create a baseline for your personal feelings? There were too many variables at play to adequately measure this question in this analysis. Even for future research it might be impossible to answer. Perhaps that is how it should be? Since everyone is unique, there are bound to be instances where people will view events and actions differently. This is what makes analyzing media such a fascinating experience because everyone will have their own interpretations. This can only benefit intellectual conversation and debate.

The primary area of future research based on the current study are for the sequel of *The Last of Us*, *The Last of Us Part Two*.

## *The Last of Us Part Two*

This study could be taken further by analyzing the sequel, which has been widely criticized and debated about. Many gamers argue the sequel to be a disgrace to the original and are critical of it (Tassi). As this thesis has shown, *The Last of Us* was revolutionary for the video game industry. The game proved video game narratives can be as good and acclaimed as film and television show narratives. Without going into too much detail, I would like to outline certain areas of focus for a follow up narrative analysis focused on the sequel.

To start, *The Last of Us Part Two* is not like the original. In many ways, they are completely different games because of the major theme of the narrative. The first game is focused on a journey across the United States and the lessons learned over the course of the journey. However, *The Last of Us Part 2* is focused on revenge after tragic acts are committed towards Ellie. Due to this difference, there are stark differences between the two games. The first game focused on the more positive and beautiful aspects of the world and life through a post-apocalyptic context. There were many dark moments in the game, but the happy moments are the ones that stick with you. The sequel is darker and fueled by hatred and anger, but it still depicts those happy moments like the original to balance out the tone of the narrative.

Throughout *The Last of Us*, the player does not feel uncomfortable with the characters' actions until the end of the game with Joel's decision. However, the sequel is uncomfortable for the player throughout the entire game. The player is forced to do things they might not agree with but are forced to do. While this could be considered mental abuse or traumatizing, I think it is important to better understanding ourselves and the people around us. As was mentioned in chapter one, *The Last of Us* is relevant to the current times with a mass pandemic and society

being flipped upside down. Many people have had enough with the discomfort from years of mistreatment and systemic racism being built into the systems we depend on daily. The protests which have come about are fueled by anger, but they are focused on positive change. In many ways, I would consider *The Last of Us Part Two* to be even more relevant to the present day than the original.

If we take justice into our own hands, then what does that say about justice itself? Justice could mean many different things if we all choose to use it the way we want. Some people like to think revenge is the right choice, but all it does is repeat a continuous cycle of hate and violence. There are laws and systems in place to get revenge legally. If your loved one was murdered and you believe murdering the perpetrator will make the world right, then you will be treated the same as the murderer. People have every right to be upset and angry in circumstances such as those, but if those feelings are used to perpetuate a cycle of hate, then there is no change. *The Last of Us Part Two* might be uncomfortable for players, but that discomfort drives the want and need for change in the world.

### **Contribution and Significance**

This study advanced current research on video games by focusing on a game narrative that revolutionized the gaming industry. The present study has paved the way for future narrative analyses of video games. This research has also helped to advance narrative studies done in the past. Video game narration differs from typical narration styles, so the present study can be used to compare video game narration with other narratives from other media channels. Some of the research from the literature review has also been expanded by this study. Apperley's article focused on redefining video game genres was found to be important for video game narratives. A

third-person action survival game does not encompass what *The Last of Us* is about. The narrative is the focus of the game, so the genre should reflect the narrative as well as the gameplay. Gameplay and narration can work together to create impactful experiences for players. When it comes to the socialization factor of video games, this analysis could be considered my opinions being put out for the world to read. In a way, this analysis could be considered socializing about *The Last of Us*.

The present study is significant because it is focused on advocacy and positive change. While most research is focused on better understanding something, this thesis was built integrally for advocacy purposes. *The Last of Us* was better understood by undertaking this analysis, but there was an alternate purpose to this thesis. Through this narrative analysis, people can better understand video games and their contribution to the world. This study has shown how video games are not a waste of time or useless to society. People are asking for change now more than ever. *The Last of Us* changed the video game industry from within. It was the catalyst to bring about the first change to the video game industry. The hope for this thesis was to build further onto the change *The Last of Us* created for the video game industry. The goal is for the change to spread across society. “I struggled for a long time with surviving. and no matter what, you keep finding something to fight for” (Naughty Dog, 2014). The fight for change will never stop just like the fight to survive.

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