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Playing in the Continuum: Moral Relativism in The Last of Us

Abstract

Contrary to common understanding that an objective is a distinctive feature of every game, the success of process-oriented games (Nielson et al.) shows that linear narratives are not the only way to tell game stories. The Last of Us, despite being a goal-oriented video game, undermines the focus on its objective of "saving humanity" by refusing to let the player fulfil that goal. Saving humanity is a "noble" sentiment that is not only a "universal" moral value but one of import from a biological standpoint. This paper argues that the game's insistence on making "questionable" choices on behalf of the player and its depiction of a selection of contrasting social structures are a narrative ruse to unsettle ethical complacencies of the generic player, who brings to the game such moral systems to analyze the game as are incompatible with its temporal and spatial specificity. The question of the admissibility of textual analyses based on external moral parameters is of relevance not exclusively to literary studies but to narratives in new audio-visual media as well. This paper attempts to place player reactions to the questionable character choices at the heart of the game story in a continuum between absolute player identification with narrative elements and complete detachment from the game narrative which facilitates play in an objective manner. This study employs a close analysis of the game text and player vis-à-vis critic responses to the narrative peculiarities of this game.

Keywords: morality, narrative, post-apocalyptic, relational structures, relativism, The Last of Us

Introduction

The Last of Us (TLOU hereafter) is a survival horror video game from developer Naughty Dog. The variety of social structures depicted in TLOU serves as a narrative strategy to bring to attention the relevance of moral relativism in understanding the game narrative, and thereby poses a challenge to the ethical monism that informs player reactions. The central character's controversial decisions, which simultaneously create closure and indefinite narrative loose ends, help confront the generic player's universal value system, irrelevant to the historically specific time and socio-political milieu specific to the gameworld.

About the Game Story

TLOU features a United States devastated by Cordyceps fungal infection, which turns its victims into tortured, deformed monstrous killers who infect healthy humans through contact. One of the central characters is Joel, who loses his young daughter to the chaos of the infected world. When the game cuts forward to a period twenty years after his daughter's death, Joel along with his partner Tess is a smuggler living in a quarantine zone barely kept up by the military. During this time period, no cure for the infection has been found, and there is political instability; an oppressive military rule has been established meanwhile, against which a militant activist group called Firefly has been conscripting survivors. Joel and Tess are forced to smuggle a young teen named Ellie to another part of the country as part of a deal with the Firefly leader Marlene. When Joel and Tess realize that Ellie may be the missing link in finding a cure, with much travail they undertake the journey to get Ellie to a Firefly medical laboratory. At the end of the game, however, when they reach the designated place, Joel learns that the surgery to find the cure is fatal for Ellie. Joel refuses to go through with the plan and escapes along with Ellie. This is a skeletal summary of the game story; the next section discusses the theoretical frameworks used.

Playing in the Moral Continuum

The question of morality in video games is one of the more discussed aspects within game studies. Hartmann's MoDViG model (moral disengagement in violent video games) is a useful framework to understand the nature of violent video games as consumer products and player engagements with

violence intended for entertainment. According to this model, violent video games help players enjoy in-game violence by morally disengaging them from violent actions. Drawing on Bandura's work from 1991 and 2002, which posits eight different factors contributing to moral disengagement in real-life scenarios like warfronts, Hartmann proposes that such factors are often embedded within violent video games so that they help players enjoy them guiltlessly. Hartmann concludes by pointing out the exceptions to his MoDViG model with the examples of games like Spec Ops: The Line (Yager Development, 2012), which were developed by their creators with the intention of triggering reflective thinking in players. Such games refrain from using disengagement devices which help justify violence. Instead, they present situations where the player has to make questionable and violent choices, thus inducing guilt and thereby provoking deeper and intelligent reflections. Hartmann observes that such games are not hedonic but eudemonic entertainment, i.e., intended for personal growth and not mere entertainment (9-10). TLOU can be categorized among the exceptions to the MoDViG model because the morally questionable action at the heart of the game is not an interactive one but a choice the character makes without player input. It is the game system's decision to provoke reflections on the value systems held by players. Despite having no explicit moral disengagement markers, and not portraying a character that is irrationally evil, the game has the potential to justify violence that comes solely from its narrative coherence. This problematizes the moral status of the generic video game player. If theoretically it is possible for a player to fully identify with a game character, assuming that the character is a psychopath/mass murderer, then the question of morality can no longer be raised in relation to standards that are outside the game. The game encourages players to play in a continuum of varying identification with the narrative system. A section of players is provoked by Joel's "immoral" actions because they are judged in relation to a value system outside the game. This section of players is also unable to find the disengagement markers to justify Joel's actions. Another section of players is trained to look for disengagement markers in games; this is reflected in the acceptance of Joel as a father fighting for his daughter. Yet another section of players looks for no external justifications but depends on the narrative cause and effect logic to evaluate characters. These sections of players depict detachment, semi-detachment, and full identification with the gameworld respectively.

Social Structures and Value Systems

In my argument that the variety of social structures presented in the game acts as a narrative device, a good point to start the analysis is the final chapter of the game, which is clearly disruptive because it turns the objective of the game on its head. From the start, the game attempts to build a dysfunctional and barren world, which is evidenced by the disarray of vehicles and deserted buildings along with the conspicuous absence of the slightest allusion to religion by way of altars, pictures, rosaries, or sculptures but craftily placed graffiti instead, which read “when we are in need he shall provide!” Props bring attention to the pointlessness of intelligent existence in the gameworld. Owing to the fact that the characters are in constant mortal danger, they are sworn to “endure and survive” in such a world because survival tends to be located in the broad discourse of instinctual behavior[1] rather than the philosophical category of meaning.[2] A possibility for cure from Cordyceps infection is presented in the form of Ellie, who is resistant to the infection. At this point in the narrative, many blocks fall into place for the game. An apparently meaningless world is presented with meaning, and the goal for the player/character is decided; Ellie must be taken to a Firefly laboratory across the country so that existence would no more be in vain. Facing a slew of obstacles throughout the long journey that becomes the game itself, at the point of destination Joel refuses to comply with the fatal surgery on Ellie that might save humanity. This seems disruptive as it ruins the player’s effort in its entirety. It is as though the game mocks its goal and the player for taking the goal seriously (Plante). If the identification of the player with the character is absolute, the mockery is on the trust the character places on an abstract idea of humanity and collective good because the idea of a society, i.e., a pre-epidemic society, is dated in the gameworld and the character owes it nothing. A player who experiences absolute identification with the character theoretically has no qualms in both making and executing the “morally ambiguous decision.” Everything is reduced to the question of the kind of player one is and the kind of moral judgment one brings to the game.

At different narrative junctures the game depicts a number of social relational structures:

1) Pre-pandemic American society

2) Society amidst the initial spread of the infection

3) Twenty years after in a post-apocalyptic US

4) Societies in the form of interpersonal relationships

5) Illegal;[3] transgressive social relations

6) Isolation and relatively full withdrawal from society

7) Tommy's retreat society

Superficially, these structures serve as a transitional mechanism, along with graphic cues, to differentiate game spaces, characters, and their motivations. This diversity helps the game narrate a nuanced story because the variety in communal structures captures the subjectivity and individuality of character responses to a calamity. Within the broad genre of the survival horror, the game communicates a consistent tone of utter devastation through graphic representation of dysfunctional urban spaces, without simultaneously committing the error of homogenizing character responses to the traumatizing event at the center of the story.

A Case for Moral Relativism

Pre-pandemic US has in fact only been alluded to in the game, but it is crucial to setting the stage for the succeeding depictions of extreme alternatives to this initial, "normal" society. The prologue is set in the pre-infected country, where Joel and his daughter Sarah have the time and peace of mind to engage in friendly conversations. (The only issue is that Joel, like countless others, does not have a stable job.) Soon enough, the pace and tone of the game quicken, and Joel is forced to shoot down his infected neighbor. That is Joel's first kill, and it marks the onset of his character transition. The pre-pandemic society is a subtle reflection of American society: friendly neighbors and an integrated community, with a welfare state system in place, but one that inevitably struggles with the persistent threat of unemployment. Nevertheless, it is to be gathered that there is an elected government in place that works in the best interests of the people.

The social organization following the infection takes a very different turn; this transition is introduced by the infected neighbor whom Joel shoots down. The auditory accompaniment to this

scene in the game includes panicked shrieking and general chaos, from which Joel and Sarah are barricaded by a thin door. When Joel shoots the neighbor, Sarah murmurs in shocked numbness: “dad you shot him… I saw him this morning.” This initial killing is in sharp contrast with the violence that follows in the rest of the game. It marks the transition to a social system that has a different set of parameters with regard to what is acceptable and unacceptable. It is a transitional stage where the lever or the screw that held in place the pre-pandemic society is hastily unscrewed by the in-game mechanics, but it is in fact a systematic unscrewing by the genre itself. The survival horror genre employs certain conventions to propel the narrative forward. One such convention is to provide a believable cause to the characters to fight for resources that are scarce and strewn around the gameworld in such a way that they are procured with some difficulty. In TLOU, the genre provides this believable cause by rendering the existing social structure irrelevant and anachronistic. When one considers the fact that the infectious outbreak happens without any government warning in a politically and economically powerful nation, the importance of this letdown is starker. In the immediate panic of the outbreak, there is effectively no functioning authority that provides, guards, and much less cares; an armed military personnel shoots at Sarah, a citizen, for fear that she is a threat. The welfare state is in shambles, but there is still the possibility that the structure may recover.

When the story is set twenty years after Sarah’s death, in a destroyed world, one sees that the hope for a recovery of the welfare state has turned sour. There are military quarantine zones established across the country. The military rule is oppressive, there are stringent curfews in place for the survivors living in heavily guarded quarantine zones, but the world outside is dangerous and teeming with the infected, bandit groups, and a militant savior organization working against the state military – the Fireflies – which goes by the slogan “look for the light.” The military provides necessities for the quarantine zone’s population. It is not just the food that is on ration but trust, freedom, and humanity. Since there is a semblance of a providing state system in the military rule, it has to be mentioned that the military-led structure is a necessity without which nobody can survive. In the military-led system, something of the old government’s morality of welfare state resides but is ineffective because it has not found a cure for the disease and merely gets by a day at a time.

Interpersonal structures. Throughout the game, characters are introduced and portrayed not individually but as a chain of interpersonal relations. This is true of Joel and Tess, Marlene and Ellie, Joel and Ellie, Bill and his partner, Henry and Sam, Ellie and David, and in the DLC[4] again Ellie and her girlfriend Riley. Interpersonal relationships work as an alternative form of retaining a semblance of social networking. A major reason for the prevalence of such a structure is the fact that resources are scant, there is danger all around, and it is, therefore, easier to work, travel, scavenge for food and ammunition, hunt, and stay safe as a duo. The symbiotic relationship that the pre-infected nation nurtured in the reciprocity between citizens and the State is reproduced in the microcosm of interpersonal relations. In the pre-infected US, the citizens supported the State by way of manual and intellectual resources and gave back by way of taxes while the State protected and provided an environment to pursue the American dream. This symbiosis is functional in a drastically altered fashion in interpersonal havens. As a stand-alone relational structure, its acceptable behavioral code would dictate honor only to one another.

Transgressive relational structures. Outside every quarantine zone, illegal smuggling groups, and roving marauder communities terrorize lone survivors by scavenging, looting, and murdering. Some groups are deadlier than others, but they all share the truth that anybody who is not one of them is dispensable competition for the scarce resources in the gameworld. Every member of such groups need not share the same enthusiasm for unlawful activities but may be forced by circumstances to do them. McShea questions the appropriateness of such distinctions as thief and killer within the gameworld: “The downfall of civilisation redefines moral boundaries. No longer do labels like thief and murderer mark you as a criminal; everyone must steal, must kill, must do whatever it takes to survive.” (“One Unforgettable”) However, Mc Shea further contradicts himself by labelling the central characters except Ellie as selfish: “Without any sympathetic characters to latch on to, you are left with little attachment to this pack of selfish animals.” (“One Unforgettable”) Rebellious communities exist in highly monitored societies, but in the gameworld where twenty dangerous years of state inactivity has left everybody to fend for themselves these raiding communities have an internal structure that dictates honoring trust only among themselves.

Isolation and withdrawal. When Ellie and Joel visit an old friend of the latter’s to ask a favor of him, the game portrays another alternative society in the form of a deserted town, controlled by one

man. Bill lives in his town in relative isolation from the rest of the world. His town teems with the infected, but Bill knows his territory well and has set up traps all over the place. When Joel and Ellie visit this town, they sometimes accidentally or intentionally get rid of these traps to move ahead in the game space. Bill is upset, and he cries out in desperation, “you come into my house and you set off all my traps!” An alternative to a harrowing social structure is withdrawal from it, and the perimeter of his territory and the provision of his safety depend on the traps he sets. Naturally, as soon as Joel and Ellie leave that part of the game play area, Bill will have gone back to setting traps throughout his town. This structure’s acceptable behavioral code dictates the consideration of one’s own safety alone. Here, everyone who comes into the territory, friend or enemy, suffers the same fate.

Tommy’s retreat society. Joel’s brother Tommy is a Firefly deserter. When Ellie and Joel are unable to communicate with the Fireflies, it is to Tommy that Joel takes Ellie, in the hope of getting help. Tommy, along with his wife, has set up a rudimentary form of retreat society. A number of survivor families have joined them, who work to survive and protect each other. More importantly, they provide an environment for the children in the group to have something resembling a peaceful childhood (Green 17). It is neither an ideological set up nor a vengeful militant community. It is a society that expects everyone to do their share of work toward building it. After attacking the Fireflies and escaping with Ellie, it is to this sanctuary that Joel and Ellie return. The acceptable ethical and behavioral code in this society dictates honoring trust within this community, where everybody handpicks the other; a primal society, as it were, where everybody in the community knows everybody else.

The variety of social relations serves as a game trope to espouse a case of moral relativism. The formulation and acceptability of a value system depends intimately on the society that produces and practices it. Each of the social structures necessitates value systems irrelevant and impractical in other frameworks. This case of moral relativism that the game builds through its narrative is in fact the ideological and theoretical basis on which the final chapter of the game and the controversial decision it makes can be understood. In order to talk about the society that Joel lives in, a structure that encompasses all that Joel has seen in the twenty years in the infected world has to be considered. Joel’s society, or the society he perceives he lives in, is a composite of all the

listed structures. His decision to sacrifice humanity is informed by his experiences in this composite structure. The common denominator in all these fractions suggests the rationality that only the known and the handpicked can be trusted and this is what Joel does in the end. Joel's decision against humanity is one that drew flak from a section of critics and players because it shakes by the head some deep-seated values regarding what constitutes right and wrong. The following section discusses the ethics of the game through player/critic reactions to the game.

Morality and Player Responses

As a player, I found the lack of choice in refusing the surgery upsetting. It made me feel guilt for being selfish and cruel. My reaction to the in-game choices points to a larger question concerning what constitutes a legitimate player reaction to a game narrative which can be formulated in one of these three ways: 1) where the player experiences absolute identification with the character she plays, 2) where the player is a semi-detached character, and 3) where the player is fully detached from the narrative of the gameworld. In this context, it is relevant to mention some of the player/critic reactions expressed in online discussions, articles, and reviews of TLOU. Here is a selection of opinions that express resentment to the perceived moral ambiguity in the game. Carolyn Petit observes in a review on Gamespot:

> *Because TLOU is an action game that adheres to the established template of the genre, over the course of your journey you murder not just one or five or 12 people, but dozens and dozens of them, and it's questionable whether a man who treats the lives of so many of his fellow human beings as so disposable would really be capable of placing any meaningful importance on the life of one particular individual. You can't soil your hands with the blood of hundreds and still have room for love in your heart.*

When Joel decides to take Ellie out of the surgery, the player has no choice but is forced to harm innocent surgeons and other Firefly members who stand up against him. Essentially, the player is asked the question of whether, if and when placed in such quandary, the player would choose her own happiness over the safety of the world; the question is then answered on the player's behalf

with an emphatic no. Polygon's "TLOU Review: Dead Inside" clearly expresses displeasure at such questionable and enforced events in the game:

Early on, I slowed down between encounters to ease TLOU's tension; by the end, I was pausing because I felt like a bad person doing bad things. It's a seemingly intentional choice, but the game struggles to justify it with the same ease that Joel justifies murder... I couldn't find any deeper meaning in the horrible events in TLOU. (Kollar)

Compare this to Polygon's 2018 review of TLOU Remastered version and we see Joel being interpreted as a psychopath and a madman:

The story begins to wend its way toward resolving Joel's need to come to terms with his daughter's death. But when we begin go see the cracks in his tough exterior emerge, we aren't witnessing the bright flowering of a welcome, healthy emotional inner life. We're watching the emergence of a psychopath. (Campbell)

The review interprets Joel's actions as those of a madman because he has lost all perspective in his grief over the loss of his daughter. This was a reason for the 2013 discussion between senior-reviewer Danielle Riendeau and editor-at-large Chris Plante at Polygon about the game on the Po lygon website. This discussion confidently concludes that Joel is a sociopath, evidenced by the lack of choice in the mass slaughter of "innocents" that he commits at the end for "selfish" motives. This is reminiscent of how easy it is to make a "normal"[5] person insane through collective and consistent effort. There are a number of key narrative details that such reviews either forget to consider or ignore on certain grounds. One such detail is an audio recorder that the player collects at the hospital where Ellie's surgery is to take place. This device plays a recorded clip of Marlene's equivalent of an audio diary entry/soliloquy. In this clip Marlene confesses how even from her, the Firefly leader, the fatal nature of the surgery was kept secret by the medical team. The entire journey is built on a deception, and the doctors knew about the danger to the girl; only, the parent/guardian of the child was not informed about it. This strikes at the heart of the gameworld; trust is a scarce resource in this world, and deception, therefore, is unforgivable treason. This leads to a discussion on one of the stated objectives of this paper, i.e., to analyze how the central

character Joel's controversial decision helps challenge the generic player's universal value system, irrelevant to the historically specific time and socio-political milieu specific to the gameworld.

If one is to judge the moral quotient of the game based on its last chapter, the game ought to score miserably low, whereas, if an effort is made in the direction of eliciting morality in micro scales throughout the game, a different end picture results. In fact, characters that in some way or another are non-threatening to the player display high moral quotient in their interpersonal relationships. Consider the following situations: 1) in the initial breakout panic, it is Joel's brother Tommy who guides Joel and Sarah away from the chaos of the city, ignoring his own safety, 2) Tess sacrifices her life in order to buy vital time for Joel and Ellie to escape from enemies, 3) throughout the game, Joel and Ellie put themselves in mortal danger to save each other, 4) Bill's partner commits suicide because he doesn't want to turn into an infected menace to the world, 5) siblings Henry and Sam protect each other at all costs, but then Henry kills Sam when he realizes he is a danger to others (infected), and then takes his own life. What this shows is that the characters are not selfish or immoral to the point that they think only of their own survival. When a situation presents itself that ranks high in their subjective value system, they honor it with their own lives, and this includes Joel as well. This stands in stark contrast with the game's symbolic representations of duty, state, security, military and hope, Fireflies, all of which fail the survivors.

In "TLOU: The Kotaku Review," Hamilton profiles Joel as a "tired old killer" whose morality and actions are consistently questionable. This review claims that the game does not shy away from portraying a morally ambiguous hero (Hamilton). This view of Joel as a "tired old killer" seems to reflect Bertrand Russell's idea of the evil impulses in man that are stifled by civilization; since they are so stifled, they come out unchecked when opportunities arise. Russell advocates rough sports to keep these instincts under control (Authority). Reviewing the DLC Left Behind that centers on Ellie and features Joel much lesser, a Gamespot review of the game expresses relief over not having to play Joel:

> *When I played through the main game last year, I had trouble connecting to Joel, because his rough demeanour and questionable choices left a bitter taste in my mouth. So it was a relief that his desperation was nowhere to be found in Left Behind. (McShea, "So Long")*

In “Coming to Terms with the Difficult Ending of TLOU,” Tassi is critical of Joel:

He's doing it for her, to some extent, but mostly he's doing it for him. He couldn't stand to lose a daughter twice, and even if he has to murder dozens of innocent, well-meaning people, kill untold millions by proxy from a lack of a cure, and tell Ellie a lie that if she ever discovered was untrue, would ruin her, he's going to do it.

Melvin G. Hill in his comparison of video game father figures notes that Joel portrays instances of bad faith in his journey to an authentic fatherhood. Needless to say, this interpretation focuses on Joel’s role more as father than an individual. For this reason, Hill opines that Joel’s bad faith is located in “self-deception”: he refuses to talk about his dead daughter, and his “other-deception”: he lies to Ellie about the decision to abandon the surgery. These are a few among the player reactions that describe Joel as “unlikeable,” “questionable,” “selfish,” and along the lines of having “questionable morality” and an “ambiguous personality.” Below is a selection of responses that identify positively[6] with Joel and his actions. In her blogpost on Gamasutra, “Learning from Joel: A Dissection of Successful Character Design,” Jennifer Mendez observes:

Joel is more than a standard hero character. He’s not inherently good nor bad; he’s human. He’s capable of judgment and anger, but he’s also filled with love to give for those who earn their place. He’s hardened, yet softened by the meaningful. In other words, Joel wasn’t just written. He wasn’t just given a personality. He was given life.

In an article on IGN, Colin Moriarty is all praise for the character. He notes:

Joel is surprisingly easy to root for. In many ways, he’s strangely relatable. He retains shreds of his humanity as best he can, considering the extraordinary circumstances he finds himself in. He has a sharpness to him, but a tenderness, too, which he occasionally displays to his partner, a woman named Tess.

For the Escapistmagazine, in a response titled “In TLOU, Joel Had It Right,” Young finds Joel cold and cruel but thinks his final decision is justified: “[i]n classic literature, a tragic hero is an otherwise

virtuous character that is undone (usually killed) by a single flaw. Joel is the opposite of this, being a cold, cruel man who is undone by a single virtue."

Melvin Hill's analysis of Joel as someone engaging in self and other-deceptions, as mentioned earlier, later reconciles with the actions of Joel because they are done in the name of love and protection. He is justified because Joel listens to his conscience on his way to an authentic fatherhood (Hill). Academic studies on the game provide insight into the narrative capacities of the TLOU and the implications of this potential on the video game medium in general. Reflecting on the increasingly fashionable trend which Totilo terms the "Daddening[7] of Video Games," Voorhees examines the role of fatherhood in the central characters of TLOU vis-à-vis Bioshock: Infinite (Irrational Games 2013). He points out that, while this "daddification" of Joel is perhaps by far the most thoughtful and acceptable portrayal of a father figure in video games, it is not without complications:

It says something about the culture of mainstream digital games that Joel, as problematic as he is, is a father figure worth recovering. But in an activity still dominated by hypermasculine heroes and littered with sexualized heroines, if daddification can temper the militarization of games, then it is a step in the right direction we might appreciate without uncritically accepting. (Voorhees 15-16).

Farca and Ladevèze explore TLOU in relation to the potential of the video game medium to tell stories that offer strong critiques of the exploitative and materialistic trends in contemporary society. They bring to focus the critical dystopian structure of the game and observe that the Cordyceps apocalypse is a counter-narrative to the excesses of the greedy capitalist order prevalent in the real world. They observe that,

[i]n TLOU, the infected metaphorically stand for the dying remnants of a past society, paralysed by its system and gone mad in their greed for profit and gain … We can hear their screams and see them sobbing, as if they were mourning the loss of bureaucracy and the capitalist order that drove them insane in the first place. (Farca and Ladevèze 8)

Farca and Ladevèze note that the settlements portrayed in the game act as potential enclaves to counterbalance the game's dystopian world because, without providing utopian alternatives (here

the enclaves), no dystopian narrative can achieve its intended impact. Amy Green's analysis of the game recognizes the significance of this game in proving video games a right and capable medium to handle complex narratives and to raise questions of ethics and morality, not just through a central character but through a number of characters presented in the game. Green interestingly observes that, much like the literature that has an explicit allegiance towards the Naturalism movement, the narrative in the game pitches humans against a powerful nature which questions "the sense of the absolute certainty of human dominance that existed before the first scientific revolutions began to question that place" (9). Although Green points out the importance of the breakdown of society as a major reason for moral ambiguities in the gameworld, she concludes by championing the argument that fundamentally Joel's actions are paternalistic, and therefore selfish, and it is in this regard that he stands justified.

Heron and Belford observe that, though most video games fail to engage with the question of ethics and morality with the same intensity as traditional art and literary forms, games like Papers, Please (Pope 2013) and Spec Ops: The Line (Yager Development 2012) show a marked positive change in this regard. They rightly observe that the above games "show that when well designed and engineered, games can offer truly meaningful experiences for players, and that these experiences can be sufficiently compelling to be carried with us into real life" (20). This statement is certainly true of TLOU as well.

Most of the reactions quoted above have the character of the semi-detached relationship/engagement with the game narrative, whereas the rest describe a more or less absolute identification with the game narrative and central characters. Clearly, some of these reactions share an antagonism to the actions of Joel, leading to the surmise that Joel is best understood through negative qualifiers. The foundation of such antagonism is the deemed superiority of a morality system that eulogizes sacrifice for abstract crusades against the satisfaction of an individual subject's desires and needs. The value of sacrifice is generally considered greater but this raises the question regarding the relevance of a time and space specific analysis. For example, world war literature has a place in the history of humanity because it puts to test the currency of preconceived value systems. The glory of war maybe a universal value, but in truth it is "the hell where youth and laughter go" (Sassoon). The point is that unusual

times bring forth unusual social structures and behavioral patterns![8] TLOU is a game that plays out in a world torn by twenty protracted, miserable years of isolation, betrayal, and death. The actions of Joel seem like those of a sociopath/psychopath] because they are judged using a value system irrelevant and unspecific to the gameworld. A person may be deemed mad or unusual in a negative relation to her environment, i.e., normal against abnormal, or abnormal against the norm. Joel in this sense cannot be mad because the gameworld is not extant in a negative relationship with his character. A number of pointers can be given to justify this claim: 1)A country as powerful as the US is unable to produce a cure, 2) The protector/state lets the misery continue for twenty years with no intervention during the time the game plays, 3) The state kills in its paranoia, 4) The state is oppressive and broadcasts lies; in Left Behind, the state's claim that fresh infection is curbed and under control is a lie, and 5) Fireflies lie too; the danger to Ellie is concealed, and it is unclear if the medical team itself knew definitively if the surgery might have turned out to be a success. As a citizen of a nation whose authorities lie and betray trust, and where every other person is a potential threat, Joel's "negative" attributes are just fin to a fish. The structure of the pre-pandemic society is wrecked by the genre as a narrative device, and it breeds distrust, along with an ethos of survival, as its lone meaningful concept. Throughout the game, different types of relational structures are depicted either in the form of introducing new characters, as transition to new gameplay areas, or as providing background or motivation to characters. Every one of these relational structures engenders and supports mutually exclusive behavioral codes. The contention is that by intertwining the ideology of moral relativism into the narrative itself, the game prospectively challenges a meta-analysis of the game using rigid and non-pluralistic moral systems.

There is a difference between arguing for moral relativism and anticipating a complete abandonment of pre-conceived morality that one brings to the game. The increased focus on immersion via virtual reality technologies would lead to intense forms of identification with the gameworld and its characters in the future. The ethical implication of such identification is anticipated in relation to the moral problem the game raises. Not only does TLOU reject a reliance on moral disengagement markers to justify its "immoral choices," but it also builds a credible, fortified narrative structure that contains its own cause and effect logic within itself. TLOU does not

resist the interpretation that outside morality has no relevance to the game world; it encourages players who fall outside the current debates about morality in video games.

Conclusion

Most of the game happens twenty years after the prologue. Players can choose to comprehend this time gap as either a casual or a significant detail. Since the time gap is mentioned and not visualized, it is up to the player to imaginatively and organically assimilate the significance of the intervening years. The contextual moral relativism of the game makes sense only when one understands the context of the game as a situation in itself guided by its own self-defining parameters. When a significant portion of that context is left to the imagination of the player, the game also tests the competence of its players to imagine its reality in as realistic a manner as possible. What might have happened in those twenty years that made Joel so run down and ready to distrust others? The responses to these questions can either be overlooked or framed properly by the players and can affect the enjoyment and understanding of the narrative profoundly. Only a logical but empathic imagining of that intervening time frame can appreciate the case for moral relativism put forward by the game. Such a viewpoint does not automatically imply an absolute defense of moral relativism; what instead is propounded is that moral relativism serves as an important ideological parameter to view the game for what it is: a morally relativist world where the capacity for survival is what matters.

As evidenced by the history of the novel, radio, and television among others, new media go through an initial state of rejection in comparison to established art forms. Jenkins's work on video games and their cultural relevance based on Seldes' Seven Lively Arts makes the point that the history of video game is no different in this regard (Nielson et al. 31). Criticism of violence in video games foregrounds the idea that reading about or watching a psychopath, for example, instead of playing one, could be different. The arguments put forward in this paper point to the increasing complexity of narratives in the video game medium. Through the diverse social structures presented in the gameworld, the game narrates a nuanced story because the variety in communal structures captures the subjectivity and individuality of moral responses to a calamity. TLOU does not depend on external justifications for its violence. This paper attempts to understand player

engagements with morally ambiguous character decisions by placing player reactions in an identification continuum. This paper also argues that the enforced decision by the game and the undermining of its self-professed goal are a ruse to unsettle the moral absolutes of the generic player. Further explorations could be based on the criticism against video games that they can never aspire to be high art because they lack the authorial control of traditional art forms. TLOU is a goal-oriented game that curtails player agency when it wants to encourage reflective thinking on the player's part. Further research could examine whether there is any significant difference in the way goal-oriented and process-oriented games convey political meaning, i.e., if it requires authorial control to a commendable degree.

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[1] Victor E. Frankl's Logotherapy technique opposes the survival as instinct view. The essence of his work is the understanding that a person has free will and a will to meaning. Even in the worst possible scenarios, those humans fare better who have a will to meaning. But Frankl also argues that this will to meaning is quintessentially a personal journey. Joel and Ellie in fact are no exception. They work toward a goal, but when they are faced with danger, the demands of survival prevail.

[2] It is an interesting question to ponder over whether survival itself does not become profoundly meaningful in a world threatening to endanger it. In a hostile environment, survival becomes enmeshed in so much more than staying alive; a systematic threat to survival could be deemed as a violation of free human will and of the will to meaning.

[3] Moral relativism does not correspond to a total lack of moral standards but rather to the realization that morality is relative to something or that there are no moral absolutes (Kellenberger). In my argument, the moral relativism promoted by the game can be called a 'contextual/situational moral relativism,' which recognizes moral codes that are relative to the specific context of the game world. The qualifier "illegal" is based on a pre-pandemic moral perspective where an elected government is in place.

[4] Downloadable Content. This paper has used as reference material the Playstation 4 remastered version of the game, along with the DLC title Left Behind, which fills certain narrative gaps in the main game. This remastered version was published in 2014.

[5] Stanley Milgram in his work on obedience argues in reference to Hannah Arendt that it takes only a clerk shuffling through papers to cause mass destruction to humanity, all in the name of doing one's duty in deference to authority. From this perspective, Joel's actions cannot be deemed evil. Instead, Milgram notes that in a hierarchical structure people stifle their individual consciences and focus all their sense of morality on doing the task given in the best way possible. In this sense, Joel does keep his conscience under control in pursuit of a universal value, but eventually realizes it is an anomalous value and lets his conscience back in the game. This interpretation of Joel's actions, when seen in the light of Milgram's work, makes them an act of disobedience to the expectations of the social order.

[6] It is in the interest of the moral relativism argument that both responses of a negative and positive nature regarding Joel are presented in the paper. The negative responses show a propensity for judgment based on universal values, external to the game environment. Such values that have credence in the pre-anarchic game world do not suffice as a proper framework in the absence of the civilized world.

[7] Melvin G. Hill's "Tale of Two Fathers: Authenticating Fatherhood in Quantic Dream's Heavy Rain: The Origami Killer and Naughty Dog's The Last of Us" is mentioned earlier in the paper as an interpretation that exclusively studies the role of Joel as a father figure.

[8] Milgram's Obedience to Authority is a study on what factors contribute to obedience to malevolent authority. In the work he mentions the Nuremberg war tribunal transcripts and interview excerpts of American military personnel involved in the Vietnam War and compares these to his own laboratory experiments on obedience by innocuous people to malicious authority. Obedience is posited as a prepotent quality that can lead to dangerous consequences in the name of doing one's duty.

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