THEME, NARRATIVE, AND ADAPTATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN *THE LAST OF US*

By
Anoush Ralapanawe
English, University of Colorado at Boulder

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Karim Mattar, ENGL

Defence Committee
Dr. Karim Mattar, ENGL (Primary Advisor)
Dr. Benjamin Robertson, ENGL (Honors Committee Representative)
Dr. Kurtis Hessel, PWR (Outside Reader)

Abstract

In the decade since the game's release, *The Last of Us* (TLOU)'s ending still captures the imagination of its audience because it asks a very fundamental question– what do we, as individuals, owe to the collective that makes up society? How far are we allowed to go to protect our loved ones and what should we sacrifice along the way? In the game, this question is presented through the lens of empathetic immersion, testing the limits of the game designers' and writers' ability to make the player understand Joel's desires and follow them through, while reminding the player that even though they control his movements, they aren't truly Joel. However, the immersion central to this presentation is heavily dependent on the video game medium itself. Thus, to ensure the ending doesn't lose its poignancy, the writers of the game's 2022 TV adaptation were posed with the challenge of re-establishing the core themes that support it, as well as the empathetic connection between the audience and Joel. They largely accomplish this goal through the full utilization of adaptational expansions to the game's environmental storytelling to highlight themes of individualism and collectivist sacrifice, foreshadowing Joel's choice to save Ellie's life and damn humanity, and heightening its narrative weight. In creating parallels between Joel's individual narrative arc and those of the individuals and groups he encounters, the writers of the show broadened the scope of the narrative's commentary on the game's fundamental premise. Through applying it over, and over again, in a myriad of contexts, the show takes the game's final thematic question and digs deeper into its nuances. The show's questioning of the game's ideological framework is subtle, built upon the audience's recognition of parallels from the game's narrative and ending and therefore primarily benefits the prebuilt gamer audience. For the new audience, the show's narrative presents a much more straightforward argument in favor of Joel's position within the final dilemma, as it

narratively limits the philosophical options made available to them, mirroring the game's denial of the choice to the player. By studying the adaptational changes and their implications on the story's major philosophical dilemma through the lens of Individualism vs. Collectivism, this thesis further explores TLOU's impact on the cyclical relationship between society and media.

Introduction

Released in 2013 to overwhelming critical acclaim, Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (TLOU) follows the story of gruff, reluctant father figure Joel Miller and his surrogate daughter figure Ellie, as they take a cross country road trip through what remains of America around twenty years after the outbreak of a zombie fungus pandemic known as Cordyceps. The game's monumental success lies partly in its enmeshment of narrative and form, fully utilizing the immersive interactivity of the video game medium in order to forge a radically empathetic relationship between player and protagonist. The game's close relationship between medium and theme makes it particularly difficult to adapt, a challenge which was well met by Neil Druckmann and Craig Mazin, creative directors of the game's 2023 nine episode TV adaptation. Although the show stays largely loyal to the game's plot, it greatly expands the scope of the narrative, following not just the two primary playable characters, but further fleshing out the stories of the places they visit and the people they meet. Each episode features a new (or expanded) storyline which, in addition to giving the world additional depth, act as thematic foils to Joel's personal narrative, which was the game's focus. In doing so, the creators managed to keep the character-centric focus of the game's story, while expanding its narrative and thematic complexity to better reflect its new medium.

Chapter 1 will examine the close relationship between the thematic storytelling of TLOU and its video game medium, particularly its effects on the set up and portrayal of the game's final philosophical dilemma– whether to save Ellie's life or let her die in the name of developing a vaccine cure to the zombie fungus. Notably, this moment breaks video game conventions about player agency within a narrative, as although they are in control of the character, the player is not in control of his actions or decisions. It emphasizes the game's overall focus on complete immersion and deep understanding between player and character by forcefully reminding players that they are experiencing Joel's story, not creating their own. This close entwining of medium and theme makes the game particularly challenging to adapt, as its narrative strengths pose its greatest adaptational challenges. Although the two mediums are similar in terms of structure and length, they most importantly differ in mode of engagement. Due to their interactivity games are deeply emotionally immersive but typically feature a limited point of view. Similarly due to its episodic nature, TV is far more suited to exploring multiple storylines and different perspectives on a theme or idea. The creators tackle this change in medium through expanding on the narrative of the game, adding new storylines and lore to flesh out the world of TLOU.

Chapter 2 will examine the game's 2023 TV adaptation, particularly focusing on how its creators take advantage of the difference between mediums to expand upon the thematic storytelling of the original game. Although the two mediums are similar in terms of structure and length, they most importantly differ in mode of engagement. Due to their interactivity games are deeply emotionally immersive but typically feature a limited point of view. Similarly due to its episodic nature, TV is far more suited to exploring multiple storylines and different perspectives on a theme or idea. The creators tackle this change in medium through expanding on the narrative of the game, adding new storylines and lore to flesh out the world of TLOU. Notably,

these additions all address the same core thematic questions that arise from Joel's journey. This allows the show to consider these ideas with more nuance and from different perspectives, presenting a variety of different individuals and groups whose stories, for better or worse, acts as a foil for Joel. In doing so, the creators are able to maintain the story's focus on Joel and his personal narrative while adding a degree of openness towards thematic complexity which the game was less focused on exploring.

Chapter 3 will be tying together the two previous chapters by examining how the different portrayals of the narrative change its philosophical implications and interpretations. The game's portrayal of the story results in an ending which pits the players own moral ideals against the philosophical position of the show. The game's ending is fundamentally characterized by its denial of choice, presenting an unambiguously individualistic perspective on the final trolley problem-esque dilemma. Although the show's usage of parallels presents several interesting avenues of questioning for this framework, the subtle nature of this approach means that this added nuance is largely to the benefit of those who experience the show as an adaptation. Where the show subtextually questions its own premises, its text largely embodies its inherited individualistic framework. In identifying and examining these implied frameworks, it is possible to consider the relationship between society and media and its implications during global crises such as the COVID 19 pandemic.

Chapter 1: Becoming Joel

In his 2019 article on the history of narrative games and their storytelling, Chris Stone defined two distinct elements which make up video game narratives– structure and portrayal– which provide a framework through which to investigate the developers' use of medium for

thematic storytelling. Structure, which refers to “the progression of the story, the different sections and subsections, and how they are connected and interconnected to form a plot”, encompasses both the actual storyline itself as well as how much the player is allowed to drive it through making choices, whereas portrayal, which Stone defines as “how the game conveys or shows the story”, encompasses gameplay elements and narrative strategies such as cutscenes, dialogue, in-game text, collectibles, and environmental storytelling. As structure functions on a relatively high level, it is often much easier to translate into different mediums in adaptation unlike portrayal, which functions more on the level of gameplay, which makes it far more intricately tied to the game medium. Structurally, *The Last of Us* would be considered a linear game, as there is a single defined plot and while the players are given opportunities to explore and complete optional areas and tasks they are not able to affect the narrative as a whole through their actions.

The story of *The Last of Us* puts us in the shoes of Joel, a father who tragically lost his daughter during the outbreak of the Cordyceps zombie pandemic, traumatizing him for the 20 years between the outbreak and the game’s events, during which he is tasked with transporting Ellie, a teenage girl immune to the fungus, across the country to a lab with the hopes of reverse engineering a vaccine from her DNA. The game ends with the player, as Joel, finding out that the vaccine requires Ellie’s brain tissue, the acquisition of which would kill her, and then going on a murderous rampage to save her, killing both the doctor about to operate on her and the leader of the Fireflies, the group that sent her to her doom. Due to this linearity, the game designers have to carefully portray the game’s narrative in order to diminish the likelihood of dissonance between player and character. They do so by focusing on clearly establishing then heightening the understanding between player and character, tying the story and gameplay together through

clever usage of the medium and its inherent immersive quality to curate a convincing emotional and philosophical framework within which to portray the ending.

The game begins with the player playing not as Joel, but rather his 12 year old biological daughter, Sarah. As Sarah, the player gets to explore Joel's pre-Cordyceps house and then watch as the world begins to burn, first through panicked voicemails, then on TV, then finally, right in front of her eyes as her father shoots an infected neighbor, point blank. This section, while serving as a tutorial of the game's movement and interaction mechanics, also gives the player a sense of connection to both Sarah and Joel, as well as creating a sense of dread within those who know the game's genre. It sets Joel up as a loving father and seeing the relationship between him and Sarah gives the player an immediate reason to root for and empathize with him. Seeing Outbreak Day through Sarah's naive eyes further heightens its impact, as the player easily empathizes with her complete fear and confusion.

The player only gains control of Joel for the first time when Sarah gets injured during the subsequent car crash, further strengthening the empathetic bond between them through the act of 'mutual' protection. Although video games are quite violent by nature, they don't often show children dying (because of their cultural significance as symbols of hope and innocence). Thus, when Sarah is shot point blank by a military official at the end of the prologue, the player, who has spent the whole prologue either being Sarah or physically protecting her, is just as shocked and devastated as Joel. The emotions of the cutscene linger as the introductory credits roll, making the scene memorable but giving the player a moment to process their shock. Ellie's fate at the end of the story parallels Sarah's, as both Sarah and Ellie were faced with death at the hands of an institution (the military and the Fireflies) for a 'greater good' (keeping Austin safe from potential infected and creating a vaccine), and while Joel couldn't save his first daughter, he

had the ability to choose to save his second one so he did. Thus, in heightening the impact of Sarah's death, the game sets the framework for the ending's emotional appeal.

The story picks up 20 years later, with Joel now living in a quarantine zone in Boston. He has become a hardened smuggler, working alongside his partner Tess to smuggle goods in and out of the city. Although the interactions between Joel and Tess lack warmth (despite their long partnership and Tess's subtle flirting), the difference in Joel's behavior isn't truly apparent until he meets Ellie. Where the Joel of the prologue was a (albeit somewhat gruff) caring and protective figure, he is now emotionally distant and closed off. While he and Ellie are alone he is curt, only speaking to her to give her instructions and giving largely one word responses to her questions. His demeanor is in stark contrast to Tess's, who is much more open to talking to Ellie and taking on a more protective role. She regularly calls out to Ellie during both combat and non-combat situations, giving her instructions, checking in on her, and encouraging her. Joel, on the other hand, stays largely silent and rarely interacts with Ellie. There are still moments in which his caring nature betrays itself, such as when Ellie has a close call with an Infected and the player can choose to prompt additional dialogue in which Joel briefly checks in on Ellie. Although reluctant, Joel agrees to ferry Ellie across the country to Tommy's at Tess's dying request. As Ellie attempts to console him he snaps, telling her to never bring Tess up and "keep [their] histories to [themselves]", further betraying his initial guardedness, particularly with regards to his past. As the two travel through the game, Joel's guard slowly begins to fall. He slowly begins to open up to Ellie, answering her questions of the pre-Infection world and generally warming up to her childish antics.

Much of this character and relationship development occurs not in cutscenes but through dialogue during gameplay segments, an innovation which set TLOU apart from its

contemporaries. The game further encourages the players to get to know the characters by adding many optional sections of dialogue that the player can seek out by interacting with the characters during downtime. Through these interactions, as well as the lack of common, lengthy cutscenes meant that the game "[creates] a relationship between two characters that evolves over the course of the game — that's fully playable" (Martens). Small interactions between Ellie and Joel give their characters a great deal of depth and personality, as well as adding a degree of levity and excitement to the game's 'downtime', when players are exploring, solving puzzles, and doing otherwise non-combat related gameplay. For instance, at an early point in the game Ellie finds a book of jokes which she will read from randomly during moments of downtime, emphasizing her innocence and childish sense of humor. She also constantly asks Joel questions about everything, particularly the world before the Cordyceps, emphasizing her youth and vulnerability as well as giving the player an avenue to learn more about Joel through his answers.

Their roles within their dynamic itself were carefully chosen to suit the game medium, according to creator Neil Druckmann. As the main playable character, Joel's practicality and concern about matters such as safety, resources and survival reflects the mindset of the player as they attempt to complete the game. These similarities allow the player to easily immerse themselves into his mindset at the start of the game. Ellie, as the young, naive, sidekick character, "[helps] players see that it's not always about fighting and survival, that there is time to admire the beauty of the world, damaged as it is" (Parker). Her quips, observations and questions bring a sense of levity and joy to what would have otherwise been a dark story, set in a dark world, with a sad protagonist. Spread out over around 50 hours of gametime, this allows the player, like Joel, to slowly open up and care for Ellie. This positive view of Ellie is further encouraged within the player by ensuring that her in-combat AI "[eliminated] the traditional

annoyances associated with buddy characters, [as well as] giving her agency in the world through her combat abilities" (Dyckhoff) which allows her to cleverly navigate terrain and hide, actively participate in combat as well as occasionally 'save' Joel. Within both combat and non-combat situations, the game encourages the player to get attached to Ellie and become invested in her wellbeing, allowing them to further empathize with Joel's sense of betrayal and horror upon learning of her impending death.

Throughout their journey, Joel and Ellie encounter various allies and enemies, including Bill, a paranoid survivalist; Henry and Sam, a pair of brothers also trying to survive; and David, the leader of a group of cannibals. These interactions further emphasize Joel's generally distrustful nature, which both narrative and gameplay work to present as justified, as many of the people he and Ellie meet in their journey eventually end up betraying or hurting them. Their best allies are Bill and Tommy, both of whom Joel had known and trusted prior to the events of the story. Even so, Bill is hesitant to give up his resources and Tommy's wife nearly shoots Joel upon first meeting him. Many of the others they meet are immediately hostile or have hostile intentions. For instance, the cannibal David works with Ellie to dispatch some Infected, and lures her into town with him under the guise of giving her medicine for Joel, giving her no obvious reason to be distrustful of him. He offers to let her join his group then attempts to kill (and presumably eat) her when she refuses due to disgust at his behavior. Similarly, when traveling through Pittsburg they encounter a man who appears to be injured on the street, which Joel correctly identifies as an ambush tactic. Even Sam and Henry, the brothers that Ellie convinces Joel to reluctantly trust end up unintentionally betraying them, as Sam becomes infected and doesn't tell anyone out of fear of what they would do to him, putting them all at risk.

Due to its survival horror genre, the game's mechanics further encourage the player to adopt this distrustful, survivalist mentality particularly within its combat. The player must constantly be on the lookout for any potential threats in both Infected and human enemies, fostering similar levels of distrust towards both groups within the player. This paints a picture of humanity characterized by desperation, deception and violence, setting up the ending's stakes in several ways. Firstly, it emphasizes the lengths to which desperate people would go in order to preface the choices Joel will eventually make. Additionally, it presents a case for why Joel wouldn't care enough about humanity as a whole to feel a drive to save it over his second chance at a daughter, as humanity has done little but fail him and his family. In carefully curating its presentation of humanity, the game gently nudges its player further along Joel's ideological path, closing off philosophical alternatives.

Unlike Role Playing Games (RPGs) and other non-linear games, which allow players to create their own unique personal characters and give them a great degree of control over that character's narrative actions, narrative based games (such as TLOU) must navigate the player character's "dual role as the controlled figure of the player in the game and a narrative device for the game developers" (Erb et.al.) in order to create a sense of immersion. These roles are often balanced through the strategic placement of cutscenes and gameplay, which ensure that the player never really feels like they lost control of their character (which breaks their immersion), while still dispensing important story beats exactly as they are meant to be experienced (through short, near cinematic cutscenes). While TLOU gives the player a great deal of agency within much of its game time (particularly with regards to relationship building), most of its key narrative moments take place within cutscenes. That is, until the final segment of the game,

where the player controls Joel through his entire rampage, including when he finds Ellie's operating room and murders her (mostly) innocent surgeon.

This choice was somewhat unusual for a video game, as if the player is given agency in terms of character control during critical moments, they are often in turn given agency over the decisions the character makes, even critical ones. The removal of this agency within TLOU was a contentious one, with critics such as Paul Tassi and Carol Pinchefsky arguing that "the designers broke the game's logic in order to achieve the climax they wanted" (Pinchefsky), forcing the players to 'make a decision' which they may view as "not heroic, however it may look" (Tassi), fundamentally ruining the player's ability to 'control' the character and breaking their immersion. Other critics, such as Polygon Editor-in-Lead Chris Plante argue otherwise, claiming that "the game's designers needed to emphasize that the wants of Joel and the wants of the player are not the same. … Forcing you to shoot the doctors — to externalize what's happening inside of Joel's brain — is the writer shouting, "Shame on you for assuming you are this man"" (Plante). For critics like Plante and Kain, who wrote an essay dedicated to the subject, the ending reveals the game's true nature and ultimate thesis– it is not a game about immersion through control and choice, but through empathy and understanding (Kain). By forcing the player to become merely the instrument of Joel's narrative, the game subverts the expectation that while the player is in control of the character they are then also in control of the narrative. Through this portrayal the game asks its player to consider the dilemma not simply on its own but within the context of Joel's personal narrative which the player had been experiencing along with him since its inciting incident, the death of his biological daughter on Outbreak Day. The success of TLOU's ending (and narrative) thus relies heavily on its ability to make the player truly empathize with Joel's character and emotions, forcing the game designers to limit the

philosophical landscape of the narrative in order to present an argument allowing the audience to understand why Joel had no choice *but* to save his surrogate-daughter despite the fact that they themselves may have made different choices in his place.

Chapter 2: Thematic Expansion Through Adaptation

As video games began to enter mainstream culture in the 90s, film studios began to take interest in adapting their stories and IPs. This led to the release of the first wave of video game films including *Super Mario Bros.* (1993), *Street Fighter* (1994), and *Mortal Kombat: Annihilation* (1997), to much critical and box office failure. This failure can be partially attributed to the fact that the games adapted in these initial films didn't have much of a story element, leaving the filmmakers in a difficult spot when it came to adaptation. However, as more story based games such as Resident Evil and Tomb Raiders were adapted into badly received film series, the genre gained a largely negative reputation within the film world which it only began to shake in the mid to late 2010s with the release of Netflix's *Castlevania* in 2017 and both *Detective Pikachu* and *The Angry Birds Movie 2* in 2019, which were received much more positively. These successes paved the way for a massive revival of video game adaptations, making up some of the biggest releases in both film and TV of the past few years including *Arcane* (2021), *The Super Mario Bros Movie* (2023), *Uncharted* (2022) and most recently *The Last of Us* (2023), which was considered one of the best video game adaptations of all time upon its release.

Since its first few failed adaptations in the 90s, the video game industry has only grown more and more successful, eventually dwarfing the film industry in terms of total revenue (Arora). This success plays a significant role in the improvement of the quality of game

adaptations according to Asad Qizilbash and Carter Swan, the president and senior producer of the studio behind *The Last of Us*– Playstation Productions– who discussed the issue in a 2023 interview for *The Ringer* magazine. They argue that the gaming industry's massive success has given companies and game creators a great deal of leverage within the adaptation process. Due to the increased financial and reputational risk associated with adapting video games, companies such as Sony have opted to keep the adaptation of their games in house by setting up their own studios for the sole purpose of video game adaptation. This allows game creators to play a much bigger role in the adaptation process of their games, bringing with them an intimate knowledge of the game, its story and how it is impacted by its medium. As video games became more mainstream and those who grew up playing them joined the workforce, gamers and fans began to make up a much more significant portion of the creative teams behind adaptations. Because of their own knowledge of and personal attachment to the games and stories being adapted, these fans-turned-adapters "know what best to adapt, what to take in, what to pull out." (Lindbergh) These factors both come into play within the adaptation of TLOU, as it was co-created by Neil Druckmann, who was both a writer and creative director for the game, and Craig Mazin, who was a lifelong fan of it.

Quizilbash and Swan particularly highlighted the rise of TV as a "boon" for video game adaptations and indeed, many of the most successful video game adaptations in recent years are those that were adapted into TV, including *Castlevania*, *Arcane* and *TLOU*. Its relatively long screen time and episodic structure, they argue, is a much more natural fit than film for the adaptation of games, which can run anywhere from 10 hours to over 100. Similarly, Justin Charity argues that "the player's engagement in a video game, even in the most self-consciously "cinematic" titles, has always more so resembled serial literature and seasonal television"

because “video games aren’t stories so much as they’re environments” (Charity) and the medium of film, due to its time restrictions, doesn’t allow the audience to ‘settle into’ its world the way even TV does. Although games typically tend to just follow a few protagonists, they often feature a wide ensemble of side-characters and possible character interactions which are often cut due to time restrictions for film adaptations. TV, on the other hand, has the screen time to not just depict these characters, but expand on their stories as well. Due to its linear nature, the narrative structure of TLOU already shares many similarities with that of TV, making it a perfect fit for adaptation.

While the two mediums do have a lot in common, they most notably differ in their mode of engagement. In her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defined the three modes of engagement as being telling, showing, and interacting. Of interest for this thesis are the showing and interacting modes, which roughly map on to the mediums of TV and Video Games respectively. Showing a story “involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time.” (Hutcheon), which is set apart from interacting with a story because “in the showing mode we do not physically enter that world and proceed to act within it” as we do in the interacting mode. Hutcheon argues that these three modes differ in the ways in which they immerse their audiences, with telling utilizing “imagination in a fictional world”, showing “the perception of the aural and the visual” and interacting immersing “physically and kinesthetically”. One of the most prominent features of the interactive mode is a sense of agency over the events of a narrative. Typically, this is reflected in a non-linear narrative structure which presents a variety of different player-determined paths through the story.

Although this is not the case for TLOU, its interactivity still presents a challenge within adaptations, as creator Neil Druckmann acknowledged in an interview with Megan Vick from

TV Guide, saying “the game is about — sometimes — immersion and these continuous sequences through continuous space and time to get you to feel like you're that character…and the show, if we were to shoot it exactly like that, it would just get boring” (Vick). In his book *Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse*, Stephen Joyce provides a framework for the adaptation of games such as TLOU, which enhance their storytelling through limiting player choice, into good TV. His framework emphasizes a focus on world-building and story-world preservation between media. Similarly, in his article on storytelling strategies in transmedia TV, Jason Mittel suggests that adaptations should expand on side plots and character backstory to enrich the original game’s narrative universe.

The creators of TLOU’s TV adaptation follow many of these principles in their adaptational approach, as much of the show features new or heavily adapted content which serves to expand upon the game’s storytelling both in scope and theme. The show particularly expands upon the stories of many of the side characters encountered by the game’s duo including Sam, Henry and Bill, adapting their narratives to better parallel Joel’s. Due to its character-driven narrative, the game also notably presents a limited perspective of the world, largely relying on environmental storytelling and optional collectible notes to imply the stories of the different groups and survivors within the game’s world. The show takes these subtextual narratives and makes them explicit, explicitly depicting the group dynamics and social organizations of several different groups encountered by Joel and Ellie within the game.

As the show is not limited to Joel (and Ellie’s) perspective, it is able to take several detours from their story to expand on the narratives found within the game as well as worldbuild. Most notably this occurs in Episode 3, *Long, Long Time*, as the narrative takes an almost episode long pause from following Joel and Ellie’s journey to tell its audience the love story of Bill,

hardened survivalist, and Frank, a man who stumbles onto his camp one day. Bill is introduced through a scene depicting the government-led evacuation (and subsequent murder) of the residents of Lincoln, MA following the initial Cordyceps outbreak, which he evades by hiding in his underground bunker due to his general distrust of the government. He is then shown setting up traps, hunting, killing zombies and setting himself up for a comfortable solitary life. This introduction portrays him as a doomsday prepping conspiracy theorist, survivalist, and a traditional post-apocalyptic narrative's dream protagonist, the same kind of protagonist that Joel is in the game. It seems that he had succeeded in fulfilling Hollywood's narrative ideal that "when disaster strikes, those who are prepared are the most likely to live" (Dresselhaus). This is the Bill that players meet in the game– hardened, brusque, and alone– a perfect cautionary tale for Joel, exemplifying the loneliness and dissatisfaction that can come from his path of disconnection.

The parallels between Joel and Bill are heightened when, upon finding Frank in one of his traps Bill initially denies him food (and help), arguing that "If I feed you, then every bum you talk to about it is gonna show up here lookin' for a free lunch, and this is not an Arby's" (*Long, Long, Time*), demonstrating a similar level of distrust that Joel does at the start of the story. Frank eventually manages to charm Bill into giving him a shower, a meal, and then a relationship. As their relationship progresses throughout the episode, Frank's presence in Bill's life begins to change him, giving him a greater appreciation for life and his surroundings as well as a fear of loss which he admits to never feeling before Frank "showed up". Here, the show implies that while Bill was able to survive before Frank, that survival was almost mechanical, with no emotion or will behind it besides necessity and that his relationship with Frank is the piece he was missing to invigorate his life and give him purpose. The show goes on to imply that Joel's

relationship with Ellie had a similar effect on his emotional wellbeing, setting up the framework through which the audience should perceive the ending.

Frank's different perspective had practical advantages for Bill as well as emotional ones, as it was through Frank's intervention that he met Joel and Tess, who were able to notice the wear on his defense system and provide the materials necessary to repair it, further benefiting his prolonged survival. Their story ends in a moving double suicide, as in his old age, Frank chooses to succumb to his illness and Bill, who once cared only about his own survival, chooses to follow him into death. Although this moment is presented as a poetic declaration of his love, it implicitly depicts the price of this kind of intense, individualistic love. Frank's presence gave Bill's survival a sense of purpose, as he writes in his final note to Joel; "I used to hate the world, and I was happy when everyone died. But I was wrong because there was one person worth saving. That's what I did. I saved him. Then I protected him. That's why men like you and me are here" (*Long, Long, Time*). Through this letter, the show emphasizes the parallels between Joel and Bill, implicitly passing on Bill's newfound purpose of protection to Joel as he, like Bill, enters the post-Outbreak world purposeless (with Bill losing his purpose of preparing for the world's end and Joel losing his during Sarah's death).

This theme of purpose in protection and the cost of failure is further emphasized within the changes made to the story of Henry and Sam, the brothers Joel and Ellie briefly ally with in their attempt to escape the Pittsburg raiders in the game. Their circumstances were adapted to create closer parallels between Henry and Sam's relationship and that of Joel and Ellie. In the show, Sam is deaf and much younger than he was in the game, giving him a sense of vulnerability which parallels Ellie's youth and inexperience. The increased age difference between the brothers further makes Henry's relationship to Sam seem closer to parental than

brotherly, better parallelling Joel's parental feelings towards Ellie. The most notable change to their story lies within the reason they ally with Joel and Ellie. In the game the brothers are merely other survivors from a group who had fallen prey to the raiders'' ambush and join forces with Joel and Ellie to escape. In the show, they are specifically being targeted by Kathleen, the leader of the rebels, and a completely new addition for the show, because Henry betrayed her brother (Michael, the previous rebel leader) to their local government, leading to his death.

Henry reveals that he did so in exchange for Sam's lifesaving cancer medicine, paralleling Joel's decision at the end of the story to betray all of humanity to save Ellie's life. He expresses a great deal of guilt over this betrayal, describing the man he inadvertently killed as a "great man" who "was never afraid… never selfish…[and] always forgiving" and himself as "the bad guy because [he] did a bad guy thing" (*Endure and Survive*), but no regret, telling Joel "you get it, though. You might not be her father… but you were someone's" (*Endure and Survive*). By establishing these direct parallels between Henry and Joel's choices, the show questions its own ending in Kathleen's confrontation with Henry when she asks him "did you ever stop to think that maybe [Sam] was supposed to die?" (*Endure and Survive*). He justifies himself by saying that Sam is just a kid to which Kathleen replies "[kids] die all the time. You think the whole world revolves around him? That he's worth… everything?" (*Endure and Survive*). These questions suggest that, although they mean the world to Joel and Henry, Sam and Ellie aren't necessarily more special or deserving of life than any other child or person. Especially in the case of Ellie, whose death had the potential to save the lives of thousands, including kids just like her. Kathleen's words seem all the more pointed when despite all of Henry's sacrifices, he fails at keeping Sam safe and alive as he gets bitten by an Infected and attacks the others, causing Henry to shoot him. This failure devastates Henry, who begins to hyperventilate, repeatedly asking

himself what he'd done before turning the gun on himself and following his brother into death. As with Bill and Frank, upon losing his brother, whose protection was the source of his life's purpose, Henry loses his will to go on.

These changes emphasize the narrative's thematic set up - the devastating cost of one's failure to protect their loved ones, a cost which Joel is already shown to be intimately acquainted with, as both of the first two episodes feature a moment in which he fails to protect someone he loves. As in the game, much of the show's first episode takes place 20 years prior to the events of the story on Outbreak Day. Unlike the game, the show spends more time with Sarah, following her as she goes to school, visits her neighbors, and goes into town to fix her father's watch for his birthday. This extra screen time compensates for the lack of medium driven immersion, giving the viewer time to get attached to Sarah through emphasizing how much she cares about her father, as she goes out of her way to give him a good birthday. Through focusing on the closeness between Joel and Sarah, the show heightens the emotional gut punch of her death and Joel's failure to protect her. In the final episode, Joel reveals that the resulting grief and guilt caused him to nearly take his own life at the time, further setting the stakes for the ending.

Similarly, the show depicts the relationship between Joel and Tess as much more overtly romantic in order to heighten the emotional impact of her death. Many of the changes to their dynamic are subtle and nonverbal, portrayed through looks and small gestures which "contribute to the idea that Tess kept Joel going" (Kling). As she dies, Tess leverages this connection as she pleads with Joel to finish their mission with Ellie, saying "I never ask you for anything, not to feel the way I felt…". Although he may not have acted on them, Joel's desperate denial of that statement reflects the depth of his feelings for Tess, as does his desperate denial of her infection. In setting up Joel's central sense of purpose as protecting those he loves, and emphasizing his

failure to do so in the cases of Sarah and Tess, the show lays the foundation for Joel's mindset when faced with a choice between failing another loved one and saving the world. Through carefully curating these examples, the show creates a limited framework through which it guides the audience towards accepting Joel's decision.

The usage of adaptational expansion to set up parallels to Joel's story was not just limited to the various side characters Joel and Ellie meet in the game, but also extends towards the show's world building, particularly its presentation of different communities and societies. Within the world of TLOU, survival within groups is made especially difficult by the fact that those who were bitten or otherwise turned usually don't transform into zombies for a few hours or days. Anyone could be an Infected and randomly turn on their allies. This harsh reality is the first thing the audience learns about the post Cordyceps world, as the first scene after Sarah's death depicts a boy entering the Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ), being scanned for the fungus, coming back positive, then being killed by lethal injection. The woman who interacts with him treats him with compassion, even after learning he is a zombie, telling him that they'd give him new toys, clothes, and his favorite food after they give him a little shot. Later on, a soldier who works at the QZ tells Joel "the more you shoot people the harder it is to sleep, I guess" (*Look For the Light, time)*, depicting the toll this (incredibly necessary) work puts on the people who are forced to do it. These scenes emphasize the difficult (and often brutal) choices people have to make in order to ensure survival within this new Infected world and that certain individuals, despite their still present humanity, have to be denied their right to life and a future for the sake of the collective. Striking a balance between individual agency and collective safety is presented as the most important facet of maintaining the survival of the group, paralleling the choice between individual right to life and collective safety presented to Joel at the end. In extending the

ending dilemma into its worldbuilding, the show further adds to its philosophical framework, creating thematic cohesion between its new material and the game's narrative.

The mishandling of this balance is best exemplified by the character of Kathleen who, like Joel, sacrifices the survival of the collective for her individual benefit. Having become leader of the Kansas City rebel group after her brother's death at the hands of FEDRA, Kathleen's storyline follows her quest for revenge on Henry, the man who caused the death of her brother. She is depicted as single mindedly focused on this goal, regardless of its consequences which escalate from torturing and killing one of the few remaining doctors for information to ignoring the possibility that the Infected (who were previously driven underground by FEDRA) are escaping confinement. She consistently chooses to follow her own ambitions and goals without considering its impact on the people under her protection, eventually damning most (if not all) of them to death or Infection due to her neglect. Even though she questions Henry on his actions, hers are arguably worse, as she was compromising the lives of people who trusted her as their leader to have their best interests in mind. Her actions are worsened by her admission that "The last time [she] saw [Michael] alive in jail… he told me to forgive. And what did he get for that? Where is the justice in that? What is the point of that?" (*Endure and Survive*, time), demonstrating her awareness of the selfishness of her goals, as she isn't even attempting to get revenge on Michael's behest or behalf, but rather going explicitly against his wishes to alleviate her own grief.

Within this narrative the show poses an interesting thematic consideration for Joel's choice at the end– what would Ellie have wanted? Although it never directly answers this question, in its final episode Joel offers to take Ellie back to Tommy's, giving her an out. Ellie declines, saying "there's no halfway with this. We finish what we started", demonstrating her

determination to see her quest through. Determination which seems driven by a fear of losing purpose, as she prefaces her decision to go on by saying “after all we’ve been through… everything I’ve done… it can’t be for nothing”. In choosing to save Ellie’s life, Joel very well could have caused Ellie the same loss of purpose he was avoiding for himself. This complicates Joel’s moral position in the end, particularly since he chooses to lie, telling Ellie that the Fireflies realized there was no hope for a cure.

While Kathleen’s narrative demonstrates the ways in which a disregard for the needs of the collective among leadership can be destructive, the show uses its depiction of the Boston QZ and FEDRA, the ex-US military organization that governs it, to argue against a complete dismissal of individual desires and need for agency. FEDRA’s hold on power is based on complete control over its citizens’ movements, work, and (often) death in the name of keeping the collective safe. While the audience gets a brief glimpse into the struggle of living within these conditions in the first episode, the mentality behind FEDRA is further explored through Ellie’s flashbacks in the seventh episode. Here, the audience witnesses a conversation between Ellie and the FEDRA captain who is in charge of her military boarding school where he tries to convince Ellie to stop rebelling by describing the two potential paths she has in life within the QZ.

First, there is “the life of a grunt”, her future if she continues to rebel, which includes working menial jobs, taking “shit orders” and then dying either to a bullet, a drunken accident or a workplace accident. This is the life that was chosen for Riley, Ellie’s best friend who was assigned to work in the sewers, pushing her to join the Fireflies. Then, there’s the life of an officer, the prize for keeping her head down and following the rules, which comes with the perks of a nice bed, room, food, climate control and finally the ability to “tell the Bethanys of the

world exactly where to shove it" (*Left Behind*). By ending with this point, the show demonstrates the corruption endemic within the structure of the QZs, as one of the primary perks of leadership is portrayed to be the misuse of that power to control and hurt those without it. Furthermore, it is implied that although Ellie has the power to somewhat affect which role she may be placed within, ultimately she would not be able to choose, mirroring her loss of agency within the narrative's end.

The stark contrast between the lives lived by those within the ranks of the military and the ordinary citizens of the QZ further emphasizes the corruption of the system, as there are clearly resources that can be used to improve the lives of citizens that are being utilized to instead give those with power a life of relative luxury. As the captain continues, he claims that this corrupt leadership is "the only thing holding this all together", as without it "the people in the zone will starve or murder each other" (*Left Behind*), demonstrating the near complete structural dehumanization of ordinary QZ citizens in the eyes of the military leadership. This dehumanization of the people among leadership leads to a lack of regard for their concerns, desires and sense of purpose, manifesting in the complete control and regulation of their lives. The QZ's strict control and hierarchy robs its people of any agency, leading to dissatisfaction, general unrest, then rebellion. The show's expansion into the sociopolitical environment of the QZs adds further depth and narrative support to the Firefly Organization, which was created due to people's dissatisfaction with FEDRA's corrupt policies. Additionally, it furthers the show's argument that people will resort to individualistic behavior if they have the opportunity to, which is central to justifying Joel's decision at the end of the story.

The final group Joel and Ellie meet is led by a pastor named David, who maintains his peoples' survival through cannibalism which he masks with lies about going on hunting trips and

sending parties to trap deer. These lies, and the control over the town they give him, are built upon a foundation of religious rhetoric as seen in an interaction with James (one of the townsfolk who is aware of the cannibalism) where he expresses some reservations about their actions. David remarks that he "sensed doubt in [the statement]", prompting James to backpedal, saying "I still believe" (*When We Are In Need*, time), demonstrating the power he has already amassed within this community through directly associating belief in him with belief in God and God's plan. This usage of rhetoric is made even more insidious by his later revelation to Ellie (who he intends to recruit to work with as an equal) that he doesn't really believe in God and was rather 'shown the way' by the Cordyceps. The fungus, he argues, isn't evil, rather "It's fruitful. It multiplies. It feeds and protects its children, and it secures its future with violence, if it must. It loves", a chilling parallel to the violence Joel later uses to secure Ellie's future. In comparing Joel's later behavior to the Infection, the show calls into question both his and the Cordyceps' humanity as well as the notion of humanity itself.

As for why he became a pastor, he reveals that "[the townsfolk] need God. They need heaven. They need… they need a father… I'm a shepherd surrounded by sheep" (time), implying that rather than finding a true sense of purpose in religion and leadership, he simply identified the power vacancy within his community as being one of faith and manipulated the people's need for stability and purpose to gain control over them. Rather than being honest with those under his care and figuring out a way to work together to learn how to hunt and find food, he chose to keep the illusion of his competence as a leader in the eyes of his people while subjecting them to an unwilling degradation of humanity through cannibalism. Through his deception, he is stripping his people of their agency by manipulating their desire for a sense of purpose. This narrative echoes Marlene and Ellie's dynamic over the show. Marlene finds Ellie at a time when

she was lost and vulnerable, having just discovered her immunity while watching her best friend (and love interest) turn into an Infected, and gives her a sense of purpose within the potential of using her immunity to make a cure. Like David, when she's unable to deliver her promise (since a cure would result in Ellie's death), she chooses to save face and lie by omission rather than owning up to her failure. This parallel complicates Ellie's desire to use her immunity to find a cure, as it suggests that Marlene may have manipulated her into this desire, presenting an argument against that of Kathleen's narrative.

The show opens its finale with a new scene which depicts the events of Ellie's birth and handover to Marlene, tying together fragments of discoverable lore about Ellie's backstory from the game to provide an explanation for her immunity. The scene follows Anna, Ellie's pregnant mother, as she attempts to escape a group of Infected. She manages to hold them off until the last moment, getting bitten moments before she is able to cut the umbilical cord. It's implied that these few moments were enough for Anna to develop and pass along Cordyceps antibodies to Ellie through her umbilical cord, giving Ellie's body natural immunity from the fungus. Marlene finds them, and Anna pleads with her to take Ellie, promising Marlene that "[she] cut it before I was bit." This moment deeply complicates Marlene's character from the game, as it gives her an explicit reason to care for Ellie as deeply as Joel does. She understands Joel more than anyone else yet still decides to forfeit Ellie's life for the sake of humanity, a choice which Joel himself is unable to make. In explicitly depicting the cause of her immunity and suggesting that Marlene may have enough information to deduce it, the show makes her argument that Ellie is humanity's last hope for a vaccine seem more duplicitous.

The scene also sets up a parallel with the episode's final scene, where Joel lies to Ellie about what happened at the Firefly hospital, sealing his decision to forfeit the potential for a

vaccine in exchange for Ellie's life. The episode then cuts back to Joel and Ellie as they travel the final stretch to the hospital, encountering some giraffes, emotionally recovering from their experiences with David, and generally bonding. That is, until Joel gets knocked unconscious and they are taken to the hospital, where Marlene tells him both that there was "not a scratch" on Ellie and that they didn't tell her about the life-ending surgery she was about to enter because they didn't want to "cause her any fear". This makes Marlene's deception of Ellie feel all the more insidious, as unlike the game where both Joel and Ellie are knocked out in a combat sequence prior to arriving at the hospital, the show implies that in lying, Marlene had the opportunity to let Ellie choose yet deliberately took that choice away from her.

Through these adaptational expansions the show sets up the philosophical underpinnings of the narrative's ending, which it uses in lieu of medium driven immersion to convince its audience to support Joel's decision. The game's linear narrative, while a boon to its adaptors, also presents them with a very limited framework within which they are allowed to expand upon the story's themes and ideas. Although the show's expansions subtly question Joel's decision and add layers of nuance to his narrative, in order to retain its audience it must still present a strong enough philosophical argument to convince their audience to root for him in the end. The show achieves this balance by cleverly curating its adaptational deviations to textually parallel and support Joel's position yet implicitly providing avenues to challenge it.

Chapter 3: The Ellie Problem

The dilemma set up within the story's ending– whether to save one girl or give humanity a chance of returning to normalcy– is a moral one reminiscent of philosophical thought experiments such as the Trolley problem and presents several different opposing philosophical

views. Firstly, there are the Fireflies, who hold an obvious moral advantage over Joel as their goal (to kill Ellie and produce a vaccine), would potentially allow them to save all of humanity.

Thus, although they'd be killing a person, they'd be trading that single person's life for the life of the entire human race. On the other hand, Ellie is a young, innocent girl who doesn't deserve to die. During one of the sequence's cutscenes, Marlene (the leader of the Fireflies) tells Joel that the operation is "what she would would have wanted", implying that Ellie didn't get to make the choice herself but rather Marlene made it for her, and that Ellie was likely unaware of her impending death. In saving his surrogate daughter, Joel is saving the life of an innocent girl who didn't consent to giving her life to the vaccine development cause. Thus, if we solely take into account the outcome of the decision, when viewed through the perspective of deontological (judging morality through the act itself) and consequentialist (judging morality through the act's consequences) ethics, both positions could be considered morally correct.

In his paper analyzing the philosophical themes of the game, Joe Trianna argues that "ambiguity of the ending comes from two incompatible positions represented by Marlene and Joel, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Utilitarianism vs. Justice, Consequentialism vs. Deontological Ethics" and that an individual player's response to the game's ending reflecting upon the ideals and ethics that they personally value. This dichotomization, while a useful tool in understanding the dilemma's broad philosophical implications, is built upon a fundamentally Western paradigm. In his research on the trolley problem, Harvard professor Joshua Greene noted that unlike most people in the West, Buddhist monks would consistently choose to sacrifice the life of one for the sake of many. Unlike those who did so in the West who, according to Greene, were typically either economists or psychopaths, and viewed the problem through a utilitarian lens, these monks approached their decision through the lens of compassion. The

monks argued that even if they had to take the single life themselves, "[it] is a terrible thing to do, but if your intention is pure and you are really doing it for the greater good, and you're not doing it for yourself or your family, then that could be justified." (Madrigal) Unlike Trianna, who sees Joel's decision as morally ambiguous at worst, the monk would argue that it is completely immoral. Other Eastern philosophical frameworks, such as those within China, Korea and Japan would present the dilemma itself as 'morally questionable' as it presents a false dichotomy which refuses to consider contextual factors (Murti). While the story engages with the dilemma within a wholly Western philosophical framework, it is useful to keep in mind that the framework itself could be considered questionable and worth considering.

Despite the fact that the player is in control of Joel during this sequence however, they don't really get an option to make the other choice– saving humanity's future instead of Ellie– and must play through these events, as the game does not offer alternative endings. In doing so, the game presents two alternate ways in which players may experience the ending. First there are those who, over the course of the game, have become fully immersed in Joel's personal narrative. With the game's encouragement they experience the full range of his emotions, from the tragedy of Sarah's loss, the reluctance to trust again, slowly growing to care for Ellie then becoming enraged upon discovering of her imminent death. They don't question Joel's desire to save Ellie's life at any cost, and are completely immersed in this final sequence. These are the players who gunned down the surgeon immediately upon entering the room, as they were convinced by the game's case for Joel. This is likely the intended response to the game's conclusion, as the split second decision timing and the medium's task-driven narrative structure contribute to potentially tricking players into making hasty, adrenaline-driven decisions– the same way Joel does. It's a powerful demonstration of the game's ability to fully utilize its medium's interactive mode of

engagement to get the audience to become completely immersed within the mindset of a character.

For others, being forced to pull the trigger themselves is the sobering moment where they fully realize the kind of man who they have been playing. This reaction bears similarities to the phenomena of ludonarrative dissonance, which refers to a disconnect between the game's mechanical elements and its ludic (or narrative) ones, often found within action-adventure games where the purported 'good' protagonist must commit acts of uncharacteristic violence in order to justify the required combat sequences. Here, however, there is no real ludonarrative dissonance, as the game cleverly intertwines the ludic and narrative elements which set up Joel's decision. The player's discomfort is instead a product of dissonance between their own values and the mechanical elements of the game which force a choice onto them. In presenting an ending which has the potential to create dissonance it gives its audience an avenue through which to question Joel, even if the narrative itself doesn't do so. This portrayal shifts the thematic focus of the ending away from a generalized philosophical question– the game isn't asking the player what they think would be the right thing to do, or even necessarily asserting to them that Joel's decision *was* the correct one, just that it was the only one he could have made.

As Karoline Anderson discovered in her study on moral distress in TLOU, this forces players to utilize a number of different coping and rationalization strategies in order to deal with any potential distress. She argues that because the game requires that players remain morally and emotionally engaged with its characters throughout the game, they were unable to utilize typical coping strategies such as moral disengagement and gut or game preferentialization practices. Instead, most players "developed empathetic narratives about the characters to regain moral control", utilizing their moral agency "as a cognitive control mechanism to overcome emotional

and moral distress within fixed TLOU narratives." (Anderson) This strategy is particularly reliant on the game's player-character interactivity, which encourages players to "[relate] to characters through a simulation of social interaction and even imprinted their experiential contexts onto their perceptions of characters' mindsets" (Anderson), rather than the "definitive subsuming of character identity traits suggested by identification." (Anderson) She concludes that "players resolved emotional and moral conflicts through mentalizing and integrating player-character contextual knowledge, resulting in empathetic engagement as a means to reconcile moral dilemmas." (Anderson) This overall player response demonstrates the game's success at utilizing its medium in order to create an immersive, empathetic relationship between its player and protagonist, as it manages to convince its player to regulate their own moral distress about the game's narrative through altering their own moral position. However, this success hinges on its interactive medium, further challenging its adaptors to foreshadow the ending and create an empathetic relationship between audience and Joel such that the audience isn't forced to undergo moral distress they may not be able to resolve.

Due to the inherent passivity of the TV medium, the show's audience is neither expecting to have a say in any of Joel's decisions, nor do they feel complicit in his actions. This makes it easier for the audience to question Joel's choices, as there is a degree of separation between the two which doesn't exist in the game. As its medium doesn't facilitate the same kind of empathetic understanding between audience members and characters, the show must take alternate paths to develop it. Most notably, it does so by carefully curating its use of narrative foils and thematic parallels to present a philosophical framework within which the audience may understand Joel's mindset when faced with this decision, allowing them to become empathetically immersed in his narrative. Within several different new (or changed) subarcs and

side stories such as those of Bill and Henry, the show emphasizes the importance of a sense of purpose during survival, implies that most people (including Joel) find purpose in keeping their loved ones safe, then demonstrate the dire consequences the loss of this purpose (or the person it was tied to) can have on someone. In conjunction with these side stories, the show fleshes out Joel and Ellie's dynamics, showing the audience how he slowly grows to care for her as he did Sarah, the daughter he failed to protect. This sets the stakes high for the finale, where Joel is given a split second choice between failing his daughter (again), the emotional consequences of which were dire the first time and are implied to be fatal the second, and a chance at saving humanity. The audience is primed to immediately understand how severe the emotional consequences of Ellie's death would have been for Joel and are then able to understand if not empathize with his decision to save her life at any cost. Thus, the show's narrative works to build empathy towards not just Joel as an individual, but towards the specific decision he makes at the end of the story as well.

The story's post apocalyptic setting, in its portrayal of humanity at its most desperate and broken, has an inherently revelatory nature. The constructs upon which much of modern society is built are stripped away, leaving those who survive to create new ways of interacting with the world and each other. Narratives within these extreme contexts often need to assert that "human nature would survive" (Tuttle). In TLOU, most of these familiar elements of modern society can be found within both character ideology and group power structures, particularly its individualist framework which reflects the highly individualistic nature of American society. Thus, the maintenance of certain modern elements within such different and dire contexts can be analyzed to understand their central role within the structure of contemporary society (Hudgens).

The way in which their continued existence is depicted within the narrative can be analyzed to assess their performance within extreme situations. Although these theoretical assessments and ideas may not be explicitly mentioned within the story, scholars argue that narratives themselves act as 'implicit theories' through their depiction of how a sequence of events within a certain context leads to specific outcomes (Phillips). In American media, the zombie apocalypse genre has become especially known for reflecting contemporary social issues within its narratives such as "power dynamics between owners and laborers" (largely during the Depression era), power dynamics between women and men (during the women's rights movement), "invasion from within" (during World War II and the McCarthy era), consumer capitalism (during the hippie movement in the 1960s) etc (Dendel). While both stories present similar theories about humanity and how people respond to extreme situations, the show's portrayal presents a far more complex argument and a nuanced perspective as to why.

If, as Trianna asserts, the story's ending presents a moral dilemma of individualism vs. collectivism, the game produces a compelling argument for the individualist perspective. As the narrative is presented through the perspective of Joel, a character who in many ways embodies the ideal post-apocalyptic individualist survivor, its very framing is biased towards his individualistic perspective. His consistent distrust of everyone he meets in the story (including Ellie) demonstrates the 'us vs them' nature of many modern apocalypse stories which "[make] heroes out of the people who hoard instead of sharing with "untrustworthy" outsiders" (Dresselhaus), another product of an individualist culture which prioritizes the survival of an individual over helping a collective. As the archetypical survivalist, Joel's character is defined by his self-reliance, resourcefulness and ambition. These traits are closely tied to his role as the main playable character of the game, but occasionally crumble, such as when one of his injuries

becomes infected, leaving him vulnerable and reliant on Ellie to get him antibiotics. Here, the player briefly gains control of Ellie, allowing them to immersively bond to her as well as presenting her as a kind of extension of Joel, as she takes over when he can't but works to complete his objectives. Damningly, in this occasion, Joel subverts the assumption that "when the individual and the collective are in conflict, the individual has an affirmative duty to sacrifice, no matter what it takes" (Suderman), one of the rare narrative situations where individualism regularly relinquishes its thematic hold on Western storytelling. In its consistent depiction of humanity's selfish disregard for the needs of the collective, the story makes the implicit argument that this kind of individualistic thinking is inherently human.

The show, while largely inheriting this individualistic narrative framing, utilizes its adaptational additions to call into question the story's individualistic conclusions. The story of Henry and Kathleen, for instance, is rife with thematic parallels to Joel's final dilemma. Through the figure of Henry, Joel's direct parallel, the show questions the urge to place the weight of one's will to live on the survival of another, depicting it as ultimately harmful to self and survival. Through Kathleen's interrogation of Henry, the show indirectly questions Joel's eventual actions. In having Kathleen's prediction about Sam's fate come true, the show considers the role of fate within Joel's dilemma, questioning whether Ellie's immunity dooms her to the fate of a sacrificial lamb. While Henry's narrative shares the most similarities with Joel's in terms of details, Kathleen's features far more comparable stakes. Like Joel, in choosing to follow her own desires, she is compromising a collective to which she holds a degree of responsibility. Although both Henry and Joel are presented more as anti-hero figures, the show portrays Kathleen as explicitly antagonistic. Through Kathleen, the show questions whether we agree with Joel because he is right or if we do so because he is framed as the protagonist.

Despite its implicit argument that individualism is inherently human, the show utilizes its presentation of the various collectives encountered by Joel and Ellie throughout the story, to demonstrate the collective harm that often results from individualistic mindsets within a community, particularly among leadership. In the case of FEDRA, despite its noble and collective focused origins, a culture of corruption, dehumanization and selfishness among leadership lead to a society which is rife with unhappiness, violence and rebellion. This is exemplified within the conversation between Ellie and the captain, as in the same breath that captain asserts that the masses need people like him he dehumanizes them. In the case of the resort town, David's personal desire for power and influence lead his people to cannibalism and him to deceit. In these stories, the show demonstrates how the principles of individualism embed themselves within communities through its structure and leadership, leading to the creation of toxic group dynamics which misbalance the desires of the individual and the group as opposed to a true collective.

Notably, the narrative does feature one instance in which a collective appears to have somewhat succeeded. Found in Jackson, WY, this community lives within a gated town by an old dam, which a group of survivors managed to fix, giving the town electricity. Unlike all the communities and cities previously encountered in the story, Jackson is structured like a commune, with a democratically elected council and collective ownership. The town is walled, and all those entering are vetted, allowing those within the commune to go about their lives without immediate fear for their safety. This, as well as its lack of a monetary system, which prevents the kind of institutional hierarchy and corruption found within the Boston QZ, allows Jackson to reach a near-utopic status within its harsh environment. This idyllic environment is maintained through a policy of extreme isolationism and violence towards outsiders in the name

of protecting those in the town from the Infected. The town has a reputation for murdering both Infected and non-Infected alike, leading those in the area to refer to the nearby river as the 'River of Death'. For Vulture critic Roxana Hadadi, these details prompted the consideration that "Jackson wasn't abandoned once Maria and the others showed up" and that Jackson represents a twisted form of manifest destiny that its people "don't want to share" (Hadadi).

While Jackson is a utopia for those who live within it, its 'collectivism' doesn't extend towards those not already within the community, demonstrating the same kind of 'us vs them' dynamic that's characteristic of individualism. This implies that even Jackson's collectivism functions more as an extension of individualist privileges onto a select group of people, placing it solidly within the story's philosophical argument that individualism is a part of human nature. Within the narratives of the various collectives encountered by Joel and Ellie throughout the story, the show portrays the ideals of individualism and collectivism not as a philosophical dichotomy but as two factors– individual agency and collective needs– that must coexist and be perfectly balanced in order for any society to function. While the failures of these groups present a somewhat negatively skewed perspective of collectivism, the particular scenarios through which the show explores the dynamic of the collective are limited, still presenting an overall individualistic framework. This framework is necessary for building the audience's support for Joel, as it presents a negatively skewed view of humanity as selfish and unable to truly work together and form a collective, making Joel's decision to forsake it for the sake of Ellie's life seem slightly more reasonable.

Although the show could have drawn more attention to it, neither version of the story seriously considers the most important decision of all– Ellie's. The question of Ellie's choice is hardly addressed within the game's text, but the issue of agency and choice is littered throughout

its subtext. In forcing the player to kill the doctor themselves, at the end the game places its player in largely the same position as Ellie. Like Ellie, who deserved the right to choose whether she would die for the sake of humanity but was denied it, the player controlling Joel 'deserves' the right to control his decisions but is denied it. This denial of choice creates a narrative that is fundamentally defined by predetermined ideological boundaries, a limitation which is passed on to its adaptation, resulting in its heavily individualistic focus. Within Hutcheon's framework of adaptation as a process where "adapters are first interpreters and then creators" (Hutcheon), this limitation placed upon the game's audience is inherently passed on to the adaptation within its interpretive stage. While the game limits its audience's philosophical options through manipulating its medium, the show does so by choosing to depict narratives which, while presenting a certain degree of critique, fundamentally support the story's overarching philosophical argument. Both show and game make the argument that humanity is fundamentally individualist. Despite this, the show demonstrates a constrained willingness to depict the harm that often results from this 'natural' tendency towards individualism. Many of these implicit theories about society were put to the test during the COVID-19 pandemic, as for the first time in the lifetime of many. Humanity experienced a mass global event comparable to those found within apocalyptic narratives, especially ones like TLOU which feature pandemic-based apocalypses. As the show was released three years following the initial COVID outbreak, its theories about society are in conversation with many of the early events of the pandemic.

The show's thematic focus on the balance between the desires and agency of the individual and the safety of the collective parallels societal discourse around masking and vaccines during the worst of the pandemic. The mass phenomena of panic shopping (and resulting scarcity of toilet paper) demonstrates the prevalence of the survivalist-esque hoarder

mentality among the American people. While the ideologies behind fictional stories do often reflect those of its audience, narratives also have the power to convey their own ideas and shift their audience's perspective. In his theory of cultivation, Gerbner argues the more people watch TV, the more they perceive their reality as reflecting the media they consume (Morgan et al), suggesting that the relationship between narrative and society is two way, with each influencing the other. This has caused some to question TLOU's endorsement of individualist perspectives, particularly in light of how they negatively impacted society's COVID response. In her review Hadadi further argues that the show "punctures the myths America tells about itself" (Hadadi), specifically the myth of American exceptionalism which manifests "on a macro scale [through] the arguable hypocrisy of America's possession of nuclear weapons, use of torture, and international military intervention, while on a micro scale, it manifests as deep-seated individualism" (Hadadi). This individualistic mythology, in addition to being a product of the conditions of America's inception, is amplified and co-created by media and narratives such as TLOU, which present their narratives within the framework of this mythology and its ideology.

As much of the show's questioning of its individualistic framework is built into thematic parallels and implicit, it largely impacts those who experience the show as an adaptation. The first time show viewer isn't going to have the knowledge about the ending necessary to immediately notice the parallels between Joel's narrative and those of the various side characters. To them, these stories serve to primarily get them on board with Joel's mindset and reasoning during this split second he has to make his decision, as well as the decision itself. The gamer audience, on the other hand, is primed through their intertextual familiarity to notice these slight thematic changes. This subtlety, while resulting in a somewhat mild critique of individualism at best, is an excellent choice on the part of the adaptors, as it allows them to tailor the audience's

experience of the show to the circumstances upon which they see it. Due to the controversial nature of Joel's choice in the ending, in order to maintain its new audience, the show must successfully convince its audience to understand, if not empathize, with Joel's decision. Thus, the textual elements of the story largely function in support of this cause, using its narrative to present an argument for individualism. Its gamer audience, on the other hand, have already been sold on Joel's perspective due to the game's narrative design, and likely don't need more convincing from the show. Instead, it invites them to consider the narrative through different lenses, some of which have critical implications. Subtle references to intertextual knowledge keeps the old audience interested and engaged even as they experience the same narrative twice by providing them with a modulated experience of the story. The show's consideration of both these audiences within its thematic and adaptational choices greatly contributes to its historic success as a video game adaptation.

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