TELLING STORIES FOR *THE LAST OF US*: A LUDONARRATIVE TRAUMA ANALYSIS

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
English

Charlotte

2023

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ABSTRACT

Holly Buescher. Telling Stories for *The Last of Us*: A Ludonarrative Trauma Analysis.
(Under the direction of Dr. Balaka Basu)

In this thesis, I propose that *The Last of Us* franchise functions as an exemplar on how survival horror video games are uniquely situated as a genre and medium to make precise statements about empathy, complicity, and trauma. However, upon applying a ludonarrative trauma analysis to the series, the statement it makes is one of exclusion. Ludonarrative trauma analyses work across disciplines to draw methodology from two disparate fields. From literary trauma theory, I utilize understandings from trauma theory rooted in psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and deconstruction, to parse out how trauma is represented in *The Last of Us*. From video games studies, I apply narratology and ludology in tandem to uncover not only what the game represents in a traditional literary sense, but also how it engages its players through gameplay. Understanding how *The Last of Us* uses both its ludic and narrative aspects together to represent trauma allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how the series functions. Namely, this cross-disciplinary framework shows how the series calls upon its players to alternately empathize with characters and immerse themselves in the game play, creating not only empathy with representational trauma survivors, but also complicity with trauma's workings. While *The Last of Us* does effectively represent trauma in innovative and striking ways, this ludonarrative trauma analysis reveals how the series simultaneously upholds hegemonic structures, despite seeming to subvert them with its female playable characters in *The Last of Us Part II.* As a result, this thesis should demonstrate to video games studies scholars the merit and applications of literary trauma theory to the field and further encourage the construction of more truly subversive survival horror games.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not be possible without the guidance of its director, Dr. Balaka Basu. I am deeply indebted to her for the time and energy she committed to the success of this project and for her belief in me as a scholar. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis committee members. Dr. Juan Meneses has always said 'yes' whenever I needed help, for which I am immensely grateful. His expertise in post-colonial theory helped me ask myself research questions that would go on to ground this work and make it more meaningful in a 'real-world' context. Dr. Aaron Toscano's insights into the field of video games studies were instrumental in the development of this thesis' theoretical positioning. This work is more robust and effective thanks to both of these professors' valuable contributions. Many thanks to Dr. Vetter and the Department of English at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for accepting me as a graduate assistant and funding my graduate tuition. I'd also like to acknowledge Dayna Verhey for providing me with her PlayStation 4, her emotional support, and cuddles with her cat, Harrow, as I replayed an at times terrifying video game franchise. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the companionship of the 2023 cohort of Department of English graduate assistants: Rachel Currie, Julianna Peres, Dayna Verhey, Grace Viera, Abigail Vincent, and Sarah Willey. Thank you all.

DEDICATION

To chosen families everywhere. May you help each other heal—however you can.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FEDRA	Federal Disaster Response Agency
NPC	non-playable character
PC	playable character
QZ	quarantine zone
TLoU	*The Last of Us*
TLoU2	*The Last of Us Part II*
VGS	video games studies
WLF	Washington Liberation Front

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has traumatized people across the globe in many ways, ways in which I am sure we have not yet come to fully comprehend. Because so much of how we understand, heal from, and try to prevent trauma is through the stories we tell about it, using trauma theory to study these stories has become even more urgent than ever before. The scope of this work should include narratives and modes previously thought unworthy of serious study. One such mode is video games. As trauma theorists grapple with the ethical issues of voyeurism and victimization that come with bearing witness to trauma, video games offer an intriguing site for trauma theory research. The relationship between player and character is different than player and reader, implicating the player in exceptional ways, making the need to integrate trauma theory into video games studies (VGS) pressing.

In order to navigate these muddied and complex intersections between trauma and play, and player and character, my primary text for analysis will be Naughty Dog's landmark horror series *The Last of Us* (*TLoU)*. The first game in the series has already been the subject of significant scholarly study. As a relatively recent release, *The Last of Us Part II* (*TLoU2*) has as of yet received less scholarly attention. However, given its two female playable characters (PCs) and its use of much more sophisticated narrative structures, I believe that studying the first game in conjunction with its sequel will offer new, valuable insights about trauma and gender as it is narrativized in survival horror video games, which would be impossible to uncover by studying literature or film, or by studying video games that handle trauma with seemingly less care (i.e., *Grand Theft Auto*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, etc).

For context, *TLoU* presents a standard zombie apocalypse story, with its grizzled male protagonist, Joel, struggling to survive in the post-outbreak world, heartbroken after he failed to

protect the life of his daughter Sarah. As such, trauma permeates the world of the game. *TLoU2* picks up Joel's story five years after the end of the first game and centers on his teenage companion, Ellie. As players switch back and forth between these two characters and between their presents and their memories, the narrative develops into a complex story, offering commentary on the cycle of violence and the nature of suffering and hope in a post-apocalyptic world. Since the game's narrative and gameplay defy expectations to blur black and white understandings of victimhood and aggression, it provides a rich point of entry into studying games through trauma theory.

From the work of trauma and feminist theorists alike, such as Caruth, Radstone, Tal, and Mardorossian, it's apparent that the key terms of this thesis, like 'victim,' 'survivor,' and even 'trauma' itself, have volatile meanings that fluctuate across contexts and carry various connotations. Before forging on, it is imperative to clearly define these terms and to make the theoretical positioning of this work clear. Within this thesis, the term 'victim' signifies a broad category of people who have experienced suffering caused by an external force, human or otherwise. This does not preclude the possibility of an individual's complicity; however, it also does not define an individual's entire identity. A victim's other aspects of identity, such as age, race, gender, or relative positioning within other social hierarchies may make a person more likely to experience violence. This is not necessarily due to an inherent psychic weakness, but rather institutional hegemony. As a result of their suffering, a victim may experience mental or physical health complications, inflict suffering upon their aggressor and others, or even die. The category of 'survivor' overlaps with that of 'victim,' while maintaining its own separate definition; in order to be a survivor, an individual must live despite their suffering. This does not make survivors any stronger or more resilient than victims, as this difference could be the

outcome of any number of variations in circumstance outside of an individual's control, including their aggressor's actions. I also avoid romanticizing the term 'survivor.' Often it takes on a connotation of pride and honor, but particularly as survivors are represented in the context of this video game franchise, they are always deeply suffering. To survive is to grapple with what may seem to many to be untenable.

Moreover, 'trauma' comes as potential result of a survivor's suffering, but only when this suffering causes lasting impacts beyond the initial experience of suffering, as in when survivors are met with intrusive memories, panic attacks, or other significant changes in affect or behavior. It is necessary to delineate trauma or traumatic events from other experiences of suffering, because this distinction can help readers/viewers/players make more precise and fruitful observations about representations of suffering and the characters subject to it within narratives. In the contemporary American vernacular, there is a tendency for the word 'trauma' to be more casually used such that it could apply to any negative experience or instance of violence, and while it is important to reduce the stigma surrounding survivors of trauma, for the context of this work it is also important to maintain the specificity and weight of this terminology, such that productive scholarly discussions around trauma and how it is narrativized can take place.

Of similar concern is the fraught history of rather unproductive conversations in the American cultural imaginary regarding video games, how they depict violence, and the effects of these depictions on their stereotypically youthful target audience. To be as clear as possible and to avoid beating any long-dead horses, it is just as imperative to this thesis to define terms relating to VGS, as it is to define terms relating to feminist and trauma theories. Within the medium of video games, there are many genres that vary in their depictions of violence. For instance, in puzzle games like *Candy Crush* or *Tetris*, the violence is limited to the destruction of

brightly-colored shapes, and the focus is not on how devastating the destruction is, but rather how efficiently players can rearrange the shapes. In short, the point of the game is to solve the puzzle, not seek devastation. By contrast, there are fighting game series, like *Super Smash Bros* or *Mortal Kombat*, where the point of the game is violence, more specifically to injure or even murder the player's opponent as violently as possible. *Mortal Kombat* especially seems to revel in gore, making its PCs scream and writhe in pain as they are punched, 'x-raying' characters to reveal their bones snapping, and splaying limbs and blood prolifically across players' screens (Boon). Of course, in-between bright, happy puzzle games and darker, more graphic fighting games, there are many genres, which vary in how frequent and intense their depictions of violence are and how central this violence is to the narratives of the games (if the games happen to have a narrative at all). Because of this multiplicity, this thesis seeks not to make generalizable statements about all video games or even how a whole genre of games depicts violence, but rather, the represented violence and its ramifications as depicted in a specific series, namely, *TLoU*. The scope of the thesis will be centered on this series and this series alone, with the analysis wherein intended to be specific and precise, relevant to VGS beyond this immediate context only as an example of how similar video games with similar depictions of violence might be fruitfully analyzed in light of trauma theory. These 'similar depictions' would only include video games wherein the violence is portrayed as a thematic element meant to be examined, rather than simple entertainment.

Of course, as diverse as video games are, so too are video game players, thus necessitating a clearly delineated definition of 'player,' as well. Because this thesis is feminist in its approach and working to apply trauma theory to VGS, it centers a perhaps underrepresented group in VGS: survivors of trauma. While anyone can be subjected to traumatic experiences and

anyone can survive (or be killed) in the wake of these experiences, certain groups of people are more likely to have experienced trauma than others due to systemic, institutional forces, i.e., patriarchies, white supremacy, etc., which societally disempower them. Consequently, when 'player(s)' is used in this thesis, it refers to a non-specific, neutral person, who has played *TLoU* and *TLoU2*. When I use 'gamer,' it will be in reference to the societally dominant player, a player who regularly plays video games and for whom most video games are the intended audience. These gamers are typically cisgender, heterosexual white men. In contrast, when I write about the 'societally disempowered player(s),' I refer to a hypothetically traumatized player, who is most likely female or gender-nonconforming, queer, and/or non-white.

With my terms clearly defined, chapter one presents my theoretical basis for analyzing both what video games represent and what they do. In it, I provide examples of how *TLoU* as a series manipulates the time, attention, and affect of its players to emphasize certain aspects of the narrative and decenter others. The game play and narrative work with and against each to create a unique storytelling experience that is constructed differently than literature or film and even other video game franchises, and as such, engages its audience in a unique way, particularly through its representations of violence. Chapter two combines this VGS methodology with my theoretical approach to trauma theory. I apply the two lenses together in my analysis of *TLoU* to reveal how the series represents trauma. Ludonarratively, the series makes a compelling statement about how trauma, empathy, and complicity relate to each other. Finally, chapter three takes these insights on the games to their eventual social conclusion. If as a survival horror series, *TLoU* has something to say about the meaning of trauma and survival, it also tells us something about the survivors themselves. In chapter three, I delineate what these social

statements are, their out-of-game implications, and how they operate within a male-dominated, white video game industry.

In this thesis, I propose that *TLoU* functions as an exemplar on how survival horror video games are uniquely situated as a genre and medium to make precise statements about empathy, complicity, and trauma. However, upon applying a ludonarrative trauma analysis to the series, the statement it makes is one of exclusion. *TLoU* reasserts the dominant social hierarchy that declares the world operates under the Darwinian law of "survival of the fittest," with the fittest referring to cisgender, heterosexual white men. Further, the series envisions a post-apocalyptic future in which these same privileged few, despite being the least likely to experience trauma, are the most capable and worthy of healing from it. An exceptionally well-crafted narrative that makes effective use of its ludonarrative toolkit, Naughty Dog's *TLoU* nevertheless missed an opportunity to empower queer and Black trauma survivors in a way few stories could. Instead, it continues to surreptitiously disempower these players and uplift already dominant gamers, all under the guise of ground-breaking narrative innovations in console gameplay. Understanding how *TLoU* uses both its gameplay and narrative aspects together to uphold hegemonic structures, despite seeming to subvert them with its female PCs in *TLoU2,* will demonstrate to video games studies scholars the merit and applications of literary trauma theory to the field and further encourage the construction of more truly subversive survival horror games.

CHAPTER 1: PLAYING WITH NARRATIVE

Typically, the general American population thinks of video games as a form of relatively mindless fun, played for entertainment or to kill time. Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary defines a "game" in its noun form as, "amusement, sport, fun; pleasure, enjoyment," or "An activity played for entertainment, according to rules, and related uses." In *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia,* a widely-cited theoretical text amongst game studies scholars, Bernard Suits develops a full analytical framework for game-playing, which includes prelusory goals, or the object(s) of the game; lusory means, or the affordances of the game; constitutive rules, or the limits of efficiency enforced by the game; and the lusory attitude, or a player's willingness to buy into the game and its goal, means, and rules. Another way of explaining the lusory attitude is that "the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [the game itself]" (Suits 41). His simplest definition of game-playing that accommodates all these corresponding parts becomes "the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (41).

Despite fitting into this simple definition, video games as a medium and their study itself is complex. Despite their wider reputation as simple fun and therefore perhaps unworthy of 'serious' scholarly attention, VGS scholars take up the medium as their central subject. Historically, VGS as a field has been plagued by a debate about how video games should be studied. On opposing sides of this debate stand narratologists and ludologists. Narratologists argue that video games can be effectively studied using literary theories and methodologies, as novels are, while ludologists assert that video games need to be understood and studied differently than literature. In short, ludologists believe that video games should not be studied for what the content represents figuratively, but rather what the players literally do when they play them.

More recently, there has been a call to marry both sides together, creating an amalgamation of narrative and ludic methodologies to use when studying video games. In his book chapter, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," renowned new media scholar Henry Jenkins "offer[s] a middle-ground position between the ludologists and narratologists" (119). According to Jenkins, rather than poor one-to-one adaptations of written scripts, video games are most successful when game developers design stories as they would a space or a building. Another way of thinking of it is that if video games create new narrative worlds for players to explore, they should be built around detailed maps, rather than turn-by-turn directions. Beyond this more spatial understanding of the medium, Jenkins also insists that video games rely on narrative in varying degrees and to different effects, and as such, should be approached differently depending upon on these factors. The four types of narrative video games he delineates are: evocative, embedded, enacted, and emergent. In this way, video games are structured differently than works of literature or film, yet still create narratives.

To adjust Jenkins' proposal slightly, I suggest that game designers invested in the creative process of building a narratively innovative game can draw on aspects of all four types of video games, which further fit into Suits' two broad types of games in general. The two types are open, games played simply to "keep the dramatic action [of the game] going" (Suits 137) or to play 'make-believe,' or closed, games which have an "inherent goal whose achievement ends the game" (Suits 133). Open games tend to be cooperative, while closed games tend to be competitive. The relevant question to this thesis is whether *TLoU* and *Part II* (*TLoU2*) constitute open or closed games. It would seem in this case that because the narrative significantly impacts the goals of the game and the gameplay itself that Suits would classify the series as an open game. However, given that the games' narrative is technically built by the developers, not

collaborative players, and that the games do have defined end points, they could be classified as closed. This remains true, despite the fact that the games are single-player, rather than multiplayer, which means that the player is not in competition with another player, rather computer-generated enemies. *TLoU* as a series thereby defies Suits' typography, being simultaneously open and closed. As such, I propose a deconstructionist solution, wherein these labels are not mutually exclusive, and the object for the player is both to continue building the story by playing in creative and interesting ways and also to successfully reach the series' end by fighting enemies. And further, I propose that aspects of all four of Jenkins' video game types are utilized strategically in the series such that the game design and the narrative of the games work in tandem to produce a challenging gaming experience and engaging narrative for its players.

To sketch out what this looks like in practice, specific features of *TLoU* can serve as exemplars. For instance, when Druckmann in creating his narrative architecture sends players deep into the grimy, dilapidated basements of old, abandoned buildings to fight off the monsters that lurk in their dark recesses, he *evokes* conventions of the gothic tradition and the horror genre. When he includes the stories of past survivors through collectable artifacts and narratively rich environments, i.e., a makeshift preschool in a sealed sewer (Druckmann ch. 6)[1], he *embeds* the narratives of non-playable characters (NPCs). These evocative and embedded elements increase the narrative drama.

Further, when Druckmann sets up the gameplay rules such that the player's priorities match that of the would-be zombie-apocalypse survivor's—stealth, conversation of resources, and survival—the player *enacts* a faithful rendition of the story by using the lusory means

[1] The chapter numbers in these citations for *TLoU* and *TLoU2* refer to the chapter divisions in the games' save menus and commonly referred to in online forums. To gather primary source material, I played both games, took detailed player notes, and saved screen recordings of my playthroughs to watch back. To request access to these screen recordings, please email holly.buescher96@gmail.com.

necessary to play by its constitutive rules. This enacting goes a step further when players have affective responses to the emotional states of the character they control. In *TLoU*, the game designers strategically call forth these responses, such as in the first game when the player as Ellie confronts David, the cannibalistic, pedophilic cult leader. This 'boss fight' culminates in both Ellie and David being knocked out and accidentally setting the restaurant in which they were fighting on fire. When Ellie wakes up, the game prompts the player to push Ellie to crawl on hands and knees towards David's dropped machete by highlighting it in bright white. Tilting the right analog stick all the way forward produces only a slow crawl, when previously in the game it would cause the PC to run. This ludic change simulates the Ellie's relative incapacity and the resulting desperation she feels in the player (Druckmann ch. 9). These enacted aspects of narrative help to promote a lusory attitude and suspension of disbelief in the player.

Finally, setting up the flexibility for players to engage in their own play-style through the use of skill trees and weapon upgrades and opportunities for optional interactions, Druckmann even creates the space for *emergent* narratives to fill in the gaps between set plot points. Aspects of all four of Jenkin's video game types (evocative, embedded, enacted, and emergent) work to create a video game series that 1) explicitly challenges players to progress through the narrative architecture of the series; but also 2) implicitly invites players to prolong the time they spend exploring the dystopian world the game developers have created. Again, the series is both open and closed. Therefore, *TLoU* is remarkable in part because it invests heavily in both the ludic and narrative aspects of the medium. The game play serves the narrative and the narrative serves the game play. As a result, the series presents its players with a playing experience rife with opportunities for scholarly analysis of both what the game represents and what players do. In

fact, any such analysis would be incomplete if it did not attend to both a game's representational potential and ludic workings.

On the Same Virtual Page: Ludonarrative Cohesion in *The Last of Us*

To take a closer look at how the series' game play and narrative cohere, *TLoU* opens with the player controlling a twelve-year-old girl named Sarah. In terms of game play, Sarah is capable of far less than the average PC, limited to walking and prompted interactions, such as picking up and examining objects, opening doors, and looking in different directions (Druckmann ch.1). Despite any fervent button-pushing on the part of a player, Sarah will only amble around her home in Texas at what may seem like an excruciatingly slow pace. As the events of the so-called "Outbreak Day" progress, Sarah breaks her leg, leaving the player to control the story's key protagonist, Sarah's father Joel. Such an early perspective switch, along with the 20-year time-jump after the opening title card, dissolves "the boundaries between game play and narrative" (Cheng 22). These ludonarrative techniques destabilize a first-time player's potential understanding of the series as typical of the action-adventure or horror genres, opening up the potential for a wide variety of narrative trajectories later in the series.

The use of cutscenes in the series also defies more conventional understandings of genre that inform how VGS scholars interpret the boundaries that separate the ludologists from the narratologists. Traditionally, cutscenes have been viewed as more filmic and less interactive, or an aspect of game design that feels to players as more 'out-of-game.' More staunch ludologists may even view cutscenes as a distraction from the game itself or a crutch. However, Paul Cheng in his article "Waiting for Something to Happen: Narratives, Interactivity and Agency and the Video Game Cut-scene," uses landmark video game titles, such as, *Resident Evil 4* and *Peter Jackson's King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie* to reframe this dichotomous

understanding of the cutscene. These games were among the first to utilize advances in game design technology to generate new types of cutscenes that engage the player in quick time reaction events, in which the correct button or series of buttons must be pressed in response to a narrative event. The success or failure of these quick-time events result in different narrative effects or even game overs. According to Cheng, these cutscenes also create what he terms "representational agency," a type of agency, which do not necessarily give players increased autonomy over what happens in the context of the story, but rather increases the player's feeling of being a part of an action-adventure story, linking "player effect to player affect" (17-18). In other words, "the player is allowed to *do* more" through these cutscenes than the set of standard player abilities offer by the controls in the course of regular gameplay, increasing the number and variety of ways the player can interact with the world of the game (18). These types of cutscenes and, thereby, this concept of representational agency is deployed frequently throughout *TLoU*. To demonstrate, we can refer back to the aforementioned cutscene in which Ellie desperately crawls towards the machete to fend off David. In the first game, going prone and crawling is not a standard stealth control; players can only use the circle button to crawl. This cutscene with Ellie facing off against David not only reproduces Ellie's desperation in the player, but also increases the narrative drama and representational agency of the scene by allowing players to engage with the game world in the way that is beyond the typical scope of the game play. This type of cutscene is used throughout the series, especially in *TLoU2*, in such a way that meshes a device typically seen as more filmic with the type of participation that has traditionally set video games apart from film and literature, thus further developing ludonarrative cohesion.

Furthermore, there is no conventional tutorial level, unlike in many other video games across a variety of genres. Instead, players receive controls, abilities, and strategic tips as they

become relevant to the context of the story. For example, as Joel, players unlock the ability to heal when first handed the supplies to craft a "health kit," and before unlocking any combat abilities, like firing a long-range weapon, reloading, or attacking with a melee weapon (Druckmann ch. 2). In terms of gameplay, sneaking, scavenging, and protecting or cooperating with other characters are all prioritized over open combat. Due to the strategic advantage of risk-reduction in this series and the scarcity of vital resources in an apocalypse scenario, a relatively inexperienced player especially will be forced into playing as a 'completionist,' scouring the corners of maps to hoard health kits and ammunition, preparing for the cost of inevitable failed attempts at stealth. The game encourages and nearly requires care, strategy, and patience of its players as a matter of course.

Wielding Players' Perceptions on Violence: Violent Delights Have Violent Ends

Because of the depth of thought needed to successfully navigate through the series as a player, *TLoU* in its dedication to creating both engaging game play and compelling narrative stands in direct contrast with other video games and video games series that use the violence represented within as entertainment. In "Video Games and the Cerebral Subject: On Playing *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3,*" Pasi Väliaho studies the images of *Modern Warfare 3* and their effects on the player, to create a political model of first-person shooters through contemporary neuroscience and post-structural theory. Central to this model is how the player's perceptions of the game are tied to the player's emotions. Väliaho states, "In the visual economy of the first-person shooter, the directness of perception is coupled with affective immediacy" (122). Because the content of the game is warfare, what is being perceived on-screen is violence. The object of the game is to kill as many enemies as possible. Each kill "gives us pleasure; being killed by them teaches us through pain" (122). Players process the action of first-person shooters visually

and emotionally. In this way, the player pedagogies[2] of *Modern Warfare 3* and *TLoU* do not differ.

However, *TLoU* does differ from first-person shooters in that with video games like *Modern Warfare 3*, the "imagery defies critical distance […] There is no time to think about what is in the image, no time to reflect" (129). The kills in *Modern Warfare* are quick and efficient. The better players are at the game, the more indirect the means of victory become, and the higher their kill counts grow. When these players are successful, they unlock unmanned vehicles, drones, and satellites to deal swift deaths to human enemies. The time between images of death is decreased as much as possible. This directly opposes the gameplay of *TLoU* series, which reinforces the slow, intimate stealth kill as the most quiet and cost-effective approach to combat encounters, and therefore the most strategically sound. Stealth kills, unlike melee attacks or firearms, make no detectable sound, and thereby avoid alerting other nearby enemies, infected or human alike. As Ellie, who carries a switchblade, stealth kills also expend no resources. Even Joel and Abby, who both have to craft shivs with which to quickly stealth kill, can execute a cost-free stealth kill by strangling enemies. The only resource a player must spend on stealth kills is time. Sneaking around enemies to find cover behind which to execute a successful stealth kill takes time, and the stealth kill itself takes longer than firing a bullet. In this way, if a player is good at *TLoU,* images of death on are screen for a comparatively long time, with longer spaces between each kill. There is time to think and reflect. The series fosters critical distance from many of its representations of violence, rather than enforcing full immersion in explosive action.

Such a difference between these games' framing of violence is illustrative. The barrage of random violence in multi-player first-person shooters like *Modern Warfare 3* is not controlled. It

[2] The term 'player pedagogy' refers to how a video game instructs its players to effectively play the game.

is not contextualized. It is not presented in such a way that encourages players to reflect on the violence. While the kills in such games may feel cathartic, "here the video game screen is a 'screen' in the double sense of the word: both a material instantiation of the images it displays and a sort of sieve that selects what kinds of images will emerge in our cognitive reality" (Väliaho 133). Because in *Modern Warfare 3* this sieve selects images of random, often unmanned violence, the corresponding images that emerge in the player's cognitive reality create the "anxiety related to the constant awareness of potential threat" (122). This screen or sieve is a construct of the game's neuropower, a neuroscientific power construct, as opposed to a social power construct. In Väliaho's words, neuropower is "a mode of power that seeks to modulate and regulate the conduct of individuals, *not* through mental subjugation, *but rather* by modifying their adaptive and self-organizing capacities and conditions" (134; emphasis added). In this way, when working thoughtfully, a game developer wields neuropower, intentionally selecting which images and emotions to bring to bear in the player's mind, through both game play features and narrative representations of events. Väliaho's writing suggests that, intentionally or otherwise, *Modern Warfare 3* functions to modify the mental capacities and conditions of its players in a way that represents violence as random and omnipresent. Because *TLoU* functions much differently, it thereby shapes its players' cognitive realities differently. In it, violence is more frequently represented as a slow, deliberate choice enacted by sympathetic characters, as a requisite condition of their survival. It can emerge suddenly from monstrous sources, but just as often it is brought upon by other humans as a calculated decision.

Game Over: Dying in *The Last of Us*

Death, as an almost inevitable result of this violence, slows down the game's progression and stretches the player's experience within otherwise shorter sections of the game, manipulating

the player's attention and potential affective responses. The places a PC is most likely to die are maps with many enemies. In diegetic time, the bouts of combat in these maps would typically only last a few minutes, an hour at most. However, in nondiegetic time, especially for players whose accidental or intentional failures to abide by the rules of game (i.e., conserve supplies, employ stealth, and shoot accurately) frequently result in character death, combat could last for hours, or even across multiple play sessions. Moreover, the further into the story a player ventures, the more times the PCs are likely to have died, and theoretically the more likely it is that the player will experience these repeated deaths as ludic barriers rather than narrative events. In other words, the more times a PC, in this case Joel, dies, the less keenly a player will mourn the death as the end of his life and the more reflexively a player will react to the death as a frustrating roadblock to killing more enemies, progressing through the game, or finding out what happens next. This works counter to the critical distance created by encouraging players to play carefully and make conscious decisions. Rather than reminding players to think critically about their game play strategies and the narrative itself, repeated character deaths can have the effect of numbing the player to the thematic heft of the series.

However, there are several built-in counters to this numbing, or possibly even cathartic, effect. The first of these is the design of the character death itself. In the first game, when Joel dies, the player loses control over him, and a cutscene plays. This pattern continues into the second game with Ellie and Abby. There is a unique cutscene that plays for each type of infected (i.e., runners, clickers, stalkers, and bloaters) that can kill a character, as well as each type of weapon death (i.e., bare knuckle beating, melee weapon bludgeoning, gunshot wounds, Molotov cocktail combustion, etc). The variety of enemy types and, by extension, death cutscenes helps to

prevent any one type from being repeated too frequently, unless of course, a player is prone to a certain type of death or is slow to uptake the player pedagogy of the series.

This is where the second counter comes into play. Based on my personal experience with playing the series, the more difficult an enemy (meaning the more likely player death is to occur), the more brutal and violent the death cutscene that immediately follows. For instance, in the first game, when Joel dies to a human enemy via gunshot, a flash of red appears, and Joel falls first to his knees, then to the ground facing away from the 'camera,' making sounds that suggest he is choking on and gargling his own blood (Druckmann). While this representation of violence may seem harrowing, it is relatively rare in the game and trifling when compared to the more gory bloater death (Druckmann). A bloater, when killing Joel (instantly upon approach), will first punch Joel across the face, close the distance, and then proceed to grab hold of him from behind. Desperately struggling to rip the bloater's massive fleshy hands off of his face, Joel's horrified, bloodied facial expression is in full view. Then the bloater grips Joel's top teeth in one hand, his bottom teeth in the other, and tears his jaw from his skull. Players witness the simulated crunch of Joel's skull splintering and the blood spurting from his mouth in his final moments. It is not cathartic to watch. Dying to a bloater repeatedly means watching this relatively lengthy, gruesome cutscene repeatedly. The player may experience 'gamer rage' when falling to the same bloater more than twice in a row, but perhaps they also feel the representational weight of such a horrifying death more keenly than a much quicker, less likely death (such as a gunshot wound).

The third counter is the companion death. Even if a player becomes desensitized to Joel's death cutscenes, it is more difficult for a player to feel indifferent toward the death of companion character. Beyond survival, the rules of the first game demand that Joel act as a protector to those

who accompany him at all times. (The same remains true in *TLoU2* when Ellie travels her girlfriend Dina, or when Abby rescues her friends Lev and Yara). In Pittsburgh, Joel and Ellie meet up and agree to travel with a pair of brothers, elder Henry and younger Sam. Through surviving hunters in the city and infected in the sewers, the four bond, forming a chosen family (Druckmann ch. 5). In a suburban neighborhood outside Pittsburgh, the four are haunted once again by vengeful hunters, who are protected this time by a sniper in the second story window of one of the abandoned houses (Druckmann ch. 6). After taking the sniper out, Joel takes up the scoped sniper rifle himself to protect Ellie, Henry, and Sam from waves of oncoming hunters and infected. Here the character in imminent peril isn't Joel, but rather his companions. Each time a player fails to protect the group and Ellie, Sam, or Henry's death cutscene plays, there is the opportunity for a player wince at Joel's represented guilt and grief.

Ludonarrative Dissonance: Creating Conflict in Players

Though this chapter so far has suggested that *TLoU* and *TLoU2* are uniquely effective and thematically impactful video games in that the game play and narrative are cohesive, deliberately creating dissonance between the two aspects can also produce potent effects. In fact, some of the most striking and emotionally powerful moments of both games come as the result of breaking this cohesion between the thematic meanings the games convey and what they ask players to do as the characters. This does not mean that either the ludologists or narratologists were right and that one aspect video games is more valid or worthy of study than the other; rather, it presents yet another way for game designers to thoughtfully use both in tandem. Three key moments of the series offer poignant examples: 1) the conclusion of the first game; 2) the switch to Abby's perspective in *Part Two*; and 3) the conclusion of the *Part Two*. I will describe and analyze the first here in chapter one and return to the second and third in chapter two.

"Think of all the lives we'll save": *The Conclusion of* The Last of Us

The conclusion of the first installment takes place in Saint Mary's Hospital in Salt Lake City, where the Fireflies, a group originally presented as a terrorist organization, have been researching a possible cure for the fungal *Cordeceps* infection that causes zombieism. Ellie, being immune to the infection, is the key to this cure. However, when they reach Saint Mary's Joel discovers that the process of creating this cure will require a fatal brain operation on Ellie. Consequently, he decides to remove Ellie from the situation, no matter the cost. For the player, this involves not only multiple combat encounters with heavily armed and armored Firefly soldiers, but also the murder of unarmed doctors, a rare and vital human resource in this representational postapocalyptic world. Though the whole chapter is vital to the game and the series overall, I will limit my description here by beginning partway through with Joel's entry into the operating room.

At the end of a long, dimly lit hospital corridor, players control Joel as he approaches a red door marked with a sign that reads "*NOTICE* AUTHORIZED PERSONELL –ONLY—" with the wall to the immediate left of the door tagged with the Firefly emblem. The emblem's spray-painted design drips a dark red, clearly reminiscent of blood. The game prompts players to open the door by marking its doorknob with the triangle button icon, as is the game's standard convention for interactable objects. Joel opens the door to enter a theatre for the operating room. The theatre's windows are covered by curtains, on which players can clearly see the silhouette of three doctors either prepping for or conducting surgery; the central figure appears to be hunched over an operating table, while the figure on the right adjusts an I.V. bag and the figure on the left monitors the equipment. The tableau effectively creates tension, prompting the player to ask themselves narrative questions, like 'Is it too late; Is Ellie already dead?' The only option that

remains as a player is to approach the door to the operating room and press triangle to have Joel open it and find out. When Joel opens the door, the tableau is confirmed: three doctors surround Ellie on the operating table. The screen centers Ellie's supine frame in the player's field of view, emphasizing her vulnerability. She is illuminated by bright fluorescent spotlights and strikes a stark contrast to her usual grimy appearance, clean and bright in her hospital gown. While immediately the steady "beep-beep-beep" of her heart-rate monitor assures both Joel and the player that Ellie is still alive, the scene is tense nonetheless. Two of the doctors back up and away toward the far walls, while the closest picks up a scalpel to stall Joel. "What're you doing here?" the doctor asks in a defensive tone. "I won't let you take her. This is our future. Think of all the lives we'll save" (Druckmann ch. 11). Here the doctor correctly assumes and inhibits Joel's intentions to take Ellie, builds common ground, and asks Joel to frame himself as a hero who has the privilege of helping the doctors along with Ellie save the future of humanity. In a few short sentences, he's deftly appealed to Joel's better nature and suddenly flipped the script on the player. Through the effective cohesion of the ludic elements and the narrative, the game has clearly conveyed its rules to the player: "endure and survive;" protect Ellie at all costs (Druckmann). Suddenly, the game has reversed this cohesion, breaking its previously set pattern, and creating what Ferrari and Soraci call "ludonarrative dissonance" by calling upon the player to pause and consider that what Joel intends to do is not supported by the game's narrative theme, thus putting the narrative at odds with the pre-lusory goal of the game so far (protect Ellie).

At this point, the player is still in control of the narrative and of Joel. The return of the heads-up display with the Joel's health bar and currently equipped weapon at the lower right hand of the screen reminds players that Joel still considers this a combat and rescue mission, and

that he's fully prepared to use his inventory and health to do what he thinks he must. As the player maneuvers Joel closer to the lead doctor, he continues, saying "Don't come any closer. I mean it," and raising the scalpel higher. If the player tries to maneuver Joel closer to Ellie, the doctor stands in his way, and Joel can't continue forward. He only has the small space between the door and the doctor to navigate. The game presents no alternatives. Eventually, despite the moral quandary at hand, the decision to act must be made if the player is to complete the game. Joel must equip a weapon. Joel must kill the doctor. The game treats this violence like it does any other combat encounter. Through Joel, the player aims, pulls the trigger, and the weapon fires. The doctor falls, not attacking or approaching as Joel draws his weapon. The female doctor cries out, "No! You fucking animal!" Her colleague reacts harshly, scolding, "Kari, shut the hell up!" Joel's range of motion opens up, and the player can now navigate him towards Ellie. However, upon approach, no triangle button prompt appears. Joel can't save her yet. Apparently, he's not done. The game presents players with a choice by way of withholding any interaction with Ellie, or any other new input. Who should Joel kill next? Again, the player must pick Joel's target. The player hits buttons on their controller as Joel aims, pulls the trigger, and his weapon fires again. This time, neither doctor is holding an impromptu weapon in defense. Neither doctor blocks Joel's path or tells him to back off. No, this is a choice Joel could sidestep making, or the player might wish to avoid, but the game insists that the representation of an innocent, defenseless person is killed. The final doctor responds by begging for his life in a quavering voice, "Oh Jesus. Oh God. Ah, just take the girl and leave, okay?" Two corpses litter the floor, their blood spattered across the linoleum: a fresh crime scene. Now, if players choose to navigate

back to Ellie, the triangle button prompt appears. It is up to the player whether to grant the final doctor his life or to kill him (Druckmann ch. 11).[3]

Finally, a cut scene takes over as Joel quickly removes Ellie's I.V. and oxygen mask, scooping her up, and murmuring "Come on, babygirl. I gotcha…" A mournful violin plays and the final doctor cowers in the background of the scene as Joel cradles Ellie's limp form in his arms. Breathing heavily, a startled Joel cries, "Oh shit," as alarms blare and flashlight beams appear on the other side of the operating theatre door. Unable to access his weapons while carrying Ellie, players resume control, guiding Joel back through the cheerfully painted pediatric wing of the hospital, as more armed soldiers search for them. Ellie's head and limbs bounce painfully as Joel jogs through the hospital, the alarms, the flashing lights, and intense swells of sorrowful string instruments combine to create an overwhelming sensory experience for the player. Joel and Ellie are okay. They are together. But at the cost of humanity's hope for the future (Druckmann ch. 11).

Joel and Ellie make it safely out of the hospital. Joel encounters his final obstacle, Marlene, in the hospital's parking garage. Players have no control in this matter, the rest of the chapter is cutscene. He shoots her in the stomach after she reasons with him about the futility of his actions. He was holding a handgun at his waist while still carrying Ellie. As Joel loads Ellie up into a car, Marlene drags her wounded body across the concrete toward the car and begs for her life. Joel shoots her in the head. When Ellie wakes up in the car, she asks Joel what happened, and he lies, telling her that the Fireflies had found many immune people through the years and that there was no way to develop a cure. The cure is a hopeless cause. The final chapter takes place a while later, with Joel and Ellie approaching Jackson, Wyoming on foot.

[3] Personally, I do not kill more innocents than I have to, but I'm sure there are gamers who identify strongly enough with Joel and his righteous indignation who wouldn't even question it.

Joel's brother Tommy and his new wife Maria have started a permanent settlement there. With the end and Jackson in sight, Ellie asks Joel to wait. She confesses to feeling survivor's guilt over her old friend Riley, along with former party companions Tess and Sam. In response, Joel insists, "None of that is on you […] I struggled for a long time with survivin'. And you—no matter what, you keep finding something to fight for." He tries to continue on, but Ellie cuts him off: "Swear to me. Swear to me that everything that you said about the Fireflies is true." Joel lies again, saying "I swear." The camera cuts to a close-up of Ellie's face. She hesitates and furrows her brow slightly before her expression clears. She gives a slight nod, and states, "Okay." The screen cuts to black and the end credits roll (Druckmann ch. 12).

Without a doubt, the game designers created a morally complex ending to the first game. While the bond Joel has developed with Ellie seems to justify his actions (who wouldn't save the life of their beloved adopted daughter, given the chance?), players are left to reckon with the human cost: the lives of the Fireflies, the doctors, and the future of humanity itself. This is compounded by the fact that players know Joel went against what Ellie would have wanted. Earlier in the story, Joel offers Ellie the chance to go back to Jackson without ever going to the Firefly lab. This offer represents Joel's choice to openly recognize the love he has for Ellie. He is offering her the choice to live with him in relative safety, without completing his charge as her smuggler. He is now her family and will take care of her regardless of her choice. Ellie responds: "After everything we've been through. Everything I've done. It can't be for nothing" (Druckmann ch. 10). This dialogue makes it clear that despite the sacrifice Ellie would be making, she would want to follow through in creating the cure. The game clears ample room for players to disagree with what Joel has done, while still understanding the logic and emotion behind his choices. The bittersweetness of the tone, the tension between Joel and Ellie as she

doubts his version of events, and the internal conflict Joel experiences lying to Ellie are all heightened by the intentional break in ludonarrative cohesion the developers created in the operating room. The overall affect at the conclusion of the game is one of dissonance, which has been created by intentionally and effectively using narrative and game play with and against each other. Without attending to both the ludic and narrative workings of the game in this analysis, these amplified effects would have been lost. In chapter two, I add literary trauma theory to this ludonarrative approach to further unveil how *TLoU* calls upon its players in unique ways.

CHAPTER 2: REPRESENTATIONAL TRAUMA THROUGH GAME PLAY

The interplay between the ludic and narrative design of *TLoU* as a series generates not only compelling plotlines, engaging gameplay, and poignant themes, but only innovative ways of narrativizing trauma. While chapter one of this document examines the role of elements, such as cutscenes, pacing, character deaths, etc., to create both ludonarrative cohesion and strategic ludonarrative dissonance, chapter two will analyze how the series uses similar techniques to deftly narrativize trauma, in ways that would be difficult, if not near impossible, in other narrative media, like literature and film. In order to do this, it is necessary to contextualize this ludonarrative trauma analysis within the theoretical history of literary trauma theory, to show how representational trauma has been theorized and analyzed previously.

In her article "Trauma Theory: Context, Politics, Ethics," Susannah Radstone traces the history of trauma theory back to its theoretical origins in deconstructionism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and psychological clinical work. She further presents the points of tension between the differing mimetic and anti-mimetic approaches to trauma theory to call into question what she sees as the current trajectory of trauma theory towards relying upon problematic binary structures, such as "'inside' and 'outside', 'trauma' and 'normality', and 'victims' and 'perpetrators'" (Radstone 19). She concludes by offering considerations for scholars conducting trauma analysis in the humanities, including ethical issues for analysts, like "voyeuristic […] fascination" with trauma, "sadistic fantasies of control and/or blame," "masochistic identification with victimhood," the "authoritative analyst," and the colonization of trauma (23-24).

Throughout her analysis of trauma theory's development, Radstone interrogates the theoretical role of witnessing trauma. Through an application of her preferred mimetic lens to VGS, the video game character becomes a traumatized subject and the player a witness to that

representational trauma. Together, the PC and the player confer meaning to the events of the narrative and the traumatized subject's behaviors in the aftermath. Gameplay becomes an intersubjective path to interpreting trauma. This path is heavily mediated: by a heads-up display, by a controller, by other characters in the story. For instance, in the first game of *TLoU* series, Joel is always accompanied by others, first Sarah and Tommy, then Tess, and finally Ellie, which means Joel's beliefs and actions are consistently questioned in-game by a third party. In this way, the game's developers invite players to sidestep a strict binary understanding of his trauma and instead offer critical distance in which to think about Joel's behavior and where it falls on a "continuum" between the "normal" and the "pathological," particularly when set against others' behavior in response to potentially traumatic events (Radstone 18).

In Radstone's parting words, she encourages trauma analysts to embrace ambiguity (26). Such positioning is equally encouraged in playing *TLoU*. Its players are faced with much ambiguity as the game problematizes the ethics of survival and Joel's role in his post-apocalyptic world. Even in just the initial four chapters of the first game, Joel is both victim and perpetrator, protector and aggressor. This trend continues throughout his time in the series. For example, his first kill is his former neighbor Jimmy, who he refers to by name before shooting, an action he rationalizes to Sarah through Jimmy's "sickness" (Druckmann ch. 1). As Joel, Tommy, and Sarah desperately try to escape the terrifying events of the *Cordyceps* outbreak in their car, Joel refuses to help a family on the side of the road, despite Tommy's insistence that "They've got a kid," and Sarah's chiding, "But we have room" (ch. 1). Each decision can be interpreted both as protecting loved ones and callously harming newly othered victims of the *Cordyceps* infection in turn. Joel is further victimized by Sarah's murder (ch. 1), the outbreak itself (ch. 1), and the harsh living conditions under which he survives in the highly regulated Quarantine Zone (QZ)

established by the Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA)[4] (ch. 2). However, he further acts as an aggressor in that he participates in the torture and murder of a man who stole from he and Tess (ch. 2), and in that the first shot the player fires as Joel is straight into a survivor who was breathing in spores (ch. 2).

Though Radstone in "Trauma Theory: Context, Politics, Ethics" aligns her work with mimetic theories of trauma that embrace ambiguity and the complicity of a victim within their own trauma, she sets herself against theorists, like the widely-cited Cathy Caruth, who Radstone views as occupying an anti-mimetic school of trauma theory. To further explore the scholarly landscape of trauma theory and investigate this site of tension, we turn our attention to Caruth.

In her monograph, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* Caruth lays out her theory of trauma and applies it to various works of art, psychoanalytic writings, and literary theory. Heavily rooted in Freudian understandings of trauma, Caruth describes trauma as, "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). This unknowability forms the basis of her approach to theorizing trauma, that it is not fully knowable or assimilable, yet can nevertheless be represented within narratives. These narratives of trauma, or in her words, narratives of "belated experience," center on "the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the corelative *crisis of life,*" begging the question, 'which is worse: the event or surviving it?' (Caruth 7). Here it

[4] FEDRA is the fictional executive agency of the US meant to handle natural disasters. FEDRA installed martial law after the *Cordyceps* outbreak, quarantining urban centers (called QZs) and gating them off from the rest of the world. At least in Boston, FEDRA agents are corrupt and cruel towards the citizens of the QZ. FEDRA is likely a reference to the non-fictional FEMA and an embedded critique of how the federal government responds to out-of-game natural disasters.

becomes apparent where Radstone took issue with her interpretation of Caruth's theory. In a mimetic approach to trauma theory, it is the memory of the event that is traumatic, rather than the event itself. In Caruth's theory, the matter is less settled.

In chapter two of her monograph, "Literature and the Enactment of Memory (Duras, Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour*)," Caruth applies her brand of trauma theory to the French-Japanese film, *Hiroshima mon amour*. A complex interweaving of death, survival, witnessing, and testimony, the source material requires an adept literary and filmic hand to disentangle. However, what is relevant to the context of analyzing *TLoU* is Caruth's discussion of forgetting. For the male and female leads of the film, as Caruth interprets it, their differing positions in relation to Hiroshima the catastrophe (geographically, culturally, and personally) necessarily affect their differing abilities to remember it with specificity. As a Japanese citizen with family members who died in the bombing, the male lead occupies a traumatized subjective position. Whereas the female lead, who is French, subjectively remembers Hiroshima in such a general, historical way as to "turn the very actuality of catastrophe into the anonymous narrative of peace" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 29). Instead, her trauma stems from her own specific past: the death of her German lover. In this way, in order to successfully drain their own specific traumas (decrease the severity of their trauma's resulting symptoms and impact on their daily lives), each character would have to conduct their own "necessary betrayal of the particular past in the understanding of a [broader] history" (30). As it applies to literary trauma theory, this means contextualization and narrativization.

In the context of the *TLoU*, this understanding of forgetting is pertinent to Joel's particular trauma. The player understands Joel as someone who, through an abundance of experience, has become skilled at and comfortable with killing infected and healthy humans

alike. Though players don't have access to these previous experiences, it seems as though the intervening twenty years that passed between the opening scenes and the main plot of the first game brought the necessary time to allow Joel to process his own horrifying acts as a healthy response to unavoidable violence, rather than a pathological one. To him, violence is not a psychological or ethical issue, but a matter of survival. As Ellie and Joel frequently say, "Endure and survive" (Druckmann). Players see evidence of this through his interactions with Ellie. After witnessing Tess's death, Joel wants to keep moving, while Ellie clearly expresses the need to stop and talk about it. This remains true for Ellie's first kill. While Joel makes no comment, a breathless Ellie asks, "I shot the hell out of that guy, didn't I?" (Druckmann ch. 5). Joel has been able to assimilate violence as an integral aspect of his own personal narrative. He is able to forget the specific harm of each individual act of violence to keep functioning. The only particular past he can't seem to "betray" or narrativize is Sarah's death. This is shown through his inability to discuss, label, or otherwise recognize his own personal relationships with other characters. What has become traumatizing, and what he resists belatedly experiencing, is the death of (and thereby life of and close relationship to) his daughter Sarah.

As with this document's orientation with regard to studying video games as a medium, its positioning in relation to literary trauma theory will combine approaches. From Radstone: 1) representational trauma will be viewed as carrying inadmissible meanings for the survivor; 2) gameplay will be viewed as an intersubjective path to interpreting trauma between the PC and the player; and 3) binarized understandings will be rejected in favor of continuums or ambiguity. From Caruth: 1) these inadmissible meanings become unspeakable, and at times unplayable; 2) this intersubjective path to making new meaning out of traumatic experiences becomes the effort of player and PC to willingly betray that character's particular understanding of their past in

order to heal, and finally; 3) in an effort to embrace ambiguity, we will consider both the event and the aftermath of it to contain traumatic potential.

Now that this combined VGS-trauma theory lens is established, the remainder of the chapter will be dedicated to fully deploying a ludonarrative trauma analysis on *TLoU* as a series on two levels. The first level of interrogation is the broader macro-trauma of the zombie outbreak itself, which forms the premise and post-apocalyptic setting of the series. The second level analyzes the much narrower and more specific traumas of individual PCs: the moments in characters' lives, which the series frames as traumatic, even amongst the ever-present horror of death and decay in a zombie apocalypse. My character analyses will focus on the traumatic experiences of the series' three main PCs, in this order: 1) Joel Miller, 2) Ellie Williams, and 3) Abby Anderson.

The Zombie Apocalypse as a Traumatized Ludonarrative Setting

As previously stated, the narrative catalyst for the events of the series is the outbreak of the fungal virus *Cordyceps* in humans. The outbreak not only kicks off the events of the series as it focuses in on the lives of Joel and Ellie in particular, but also creates a setting with rich narrative architecture on which to build an exploration of representational trauma. The *Cordyceps* outbreak borrows narrative archetypal weight from fraught real-world settings of trauma that commonly form the basis of trauma narratives across media: war, famine, and global epidemic. In this way, the game developers and writers have situated what many players might consider traumatic as the day-to-day reality of the characters' lives and must therefore find resourceful ways to indicate what constitutes genuine experiences of trauma for the characters. To reiterate, in this paper, trauma comes as potential result of a survivor's suffering, but *only* when this suffering causes lasting impacts beyond the initial event, as in when survivors are met

with intrusive memories, panic attacks, or other significant changes in affect or behavior. While this language is reminiscent of the DSM-V's definitions and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, it is important to remember that in this analysis, PCs are not being diagnosed with psychological disorders, but rather that their characterizations are being examined, in order to better understand how authors, directors, and game designers effectively tell stories about trauma. I am writing about representational ludonarrative trauma, not psychological trauma itself.

That established, in *TLoU*, I argue that the zombies themselves rarely figure into experiences that game designers present as especially traumatic to the PCs. Much more frequently, survivors traumatize each other, either in their efforts to "endure and survive," or to take revenge on each other for previous slights. However, this doesn't mean that the zombies, or as they are referred to in-game, infected, bear no relevance to the series. Instead, the infected function more to fulfil genre conventions, set the atmosphere, and carry thematic weight. Because of this, the zombies themselves often become a pacing tool for the plot, in addition to a rich allegory for societal issues, rather than sources of specific traumas for the individual characters.

In their work "Ludic Zombies: An Examination of Zombieism in Games," Hans-Joachim Backe and Espen Aarseth reflect on the history and iconography of zombies in film, which they then use to conduct short case studies of select video games to determine whether gameplay conflicts with the monster's allegoric potential. Key to their argument is that since their on-screen inception with Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), zombies have been "neither subject nor object, and resisting an either/or distinction," and as such, become "a stand-in or euphemism for threatening but too human Others" (Backe & Aarseth 2). Further, the authors assert that over

film history, zombies act as a "a post-modern *momento mori*, […] shift[ing their] concrete allegoric function in the economic domain, yet always remain[ing] a reminder of the possibility of slavery, poverty, and meaninglessness" (6). The few zombie video games that the pair determine to successfully utilize the allegoric potential of the living dead show that gameplay can "encourage ethical reflection and express ludically the core elements of the zombie allegory, the commodification of human bodies and the threat of consumerism to human culture" (Backe & Aarseth 13). I would argue that this is true not only of the games they study, like *Fallout 3* and *Day Z*, but also of *TLoU* as a series.

In their paper, Backe and Aarseth tie specific iterations of zombie, i.e., the original slow, shuffling kind, or the more recently created hordes of sprinting undead, to specific economic allegories. The same structure for analysis can be applied to the infected of *TLoU*. Presumably at least in part to create a wide variety of enemy types for players to fight, the game designers created a form of zombieism that impacts its sufferers in different ways over time. Because of this, there are effectively four major types of infected in the series, all at different stages of disease progression. Frequently, players encounter infected at relatively early stages of the disease: runners (the first stage) and clickers (the third). Runners look the most like a stereotypical depiction of a zombie; corpse-like and decaying, they attack on sight, running at the PC full-tilt. Clickers have a face that has been split open by the *Cordyceps* fungus from the inside, destroying their eyes and nose. They locate the PC by making clicking noises, which they use as a form of echolocation. Players must stealth kill clickers to effectively fight them; otherwise, they instantly kill the PC. These two infected types carry similar allegoric meanings to previous iterations of zombies from film. Appearing frequently in places related to consumer-capitalism, like abandoned shopping malls and stores, they remind the reader of films like

Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* trilogy, which critiques the economic trajectory of American society and portrays death as triumphant over the economic institutions to which American capitalists cling.

The other, more rarely encountered infected types in *TLoU* use further variations on typical zombie iconography and enhanced combat difficulty to increase the allegoric weight of the infected and resulting sharpness of the social critique in the games. These infected types, particularly their initial presentations in the series, each communicate critiques of different types of corruption. This paper will argue that bloaters allegorically challenge economic corruption in the American public school system, while stalkers are used criticize corporate greed, and a final boss, known as the Rat King, levies a powerful critique of privatized health care.

Bloaters are the result of a body reaching the fourth stage of infection, after a human has been infected for many years. They are huge and monstrous, much larger than the original host, and covered in fungal armor. The body has become bloated irregularly, due to tissue that has become inflated with a gas known as mycotoxin. Bloaters can rip off sections of this tissue at will and throw them at the PC, causing asphyxiation and chemical burns. Shamblers are a subtype of bloater that appear first in *TLoU2*, extant only in wet climates, like that of Seattle. They are similar to typical bloaters, though they also explode mycotoxin and spores upon defeat, essentially self-destructing.

Interestingly, players first encounter a bloater in chapter four of the first game ("Bill's Town"), in a high school gym of all places. As a combat map, ludically this makes sense. A school gym is relatively small space, boxed in all sides, and as anyone who has ever played a game of dodgeball knows, has very few places to hide. Thematically, there is more to consider, especially when pairing this initial encounter with another notable encounter with a bloater,

which occurs on the University of Eastern Colorado's campus[5]. Since, as this paper has shown, in *TLoU* infected remain "connected to discourses of economic power (or lack thereof)," the situatedness of these bloaters on school campuses calls the economic role of American public education into question (Backe & Aarseth 6). While this critique is mostly subtextual, it is difficult to synthesize a precise and supported interpretation of it within the bounds of this paper. However, the massive form of the bloaters, in comparison to a relatively small Joel and even tinier Ellie, reflects on the power dynamics of the public education system, in which children with relatively few rights are subjected to the gargantuan will of school boards, state governments, and the Department of Education.

On the other hand, stalkers are about the same size as their host, being only the second stage of infection. Despite this, they are encountered rarely during the course of the series. The progression of fungal growth in stalkers is between that of a runner and a clicker. Their faces remain in tact, but plates of fungus can be seen growing off of the head and shoulders. Rather than fighting the PC directly, stalkers pursue their prey silently from the shadows, ambushing unsuspecting players. Stalkers from *TLoU2* will even hunt in packs, coordinating attacks, and seeming to evince much more premeditation and intelligence than runners, clickers, or bloaters. In *TLoU2*, the first appearance of stalkers occurs in an office building containing the only cubicles depicted throughout the franchise. The remarkable intelligence of these infected, along with their presence in a blatantly corporate setting, implies a critique of capitalist corporations, managerial hierarchies, and greed. Stalkers tend to hunch and cower, scurrying just around the periphery of the PC's field of view. Such visuals echo cultural depictions of sycophantic corporate executives and managers, who take advantage of their lower-level employees. In the

[5] The University of Eastern Colorado is fictional, invented specifically for *TLoU.*

world of *TLoU,* even beyond death, the parasitic and underhanded practices of these executives persist.

A final, one-of-a-kind infected is featured as a boss in *TLoU2*. Discovered during Abby's experience of Seattle Day 2 (Druckmann & Gross ch. 7), the "rat king" is a horrifying amalgamation of infected that have grown together into a massive lump of flesh and fungal tissue with flailing limbs reaching out in all directions and multiple faces seething and screeching in rage and pain. Located in the basement of the Lakehill Seattle Hospital, the so-called 'ground-zero' of Seattle's zombie outbreak, the rat king is the result of a small horde of infected hospital patients agglutinating together after decades of being sealed off from the world above. Evoking a level of horror in Abby almost beyond comprehension, the rat king chases her relentlessly across the dilapidated hospital basement, killing her instantly upon approach, much like a clicker, bloater, or shambler. After successfully damaging the rat king enough times, the player reaches a combat checkpoint at which an infected with all the cunning of a stalker and armor plating of an advanced clicker *tears itself off* of the rat king, creating a secondary enemy. The two enemies together take more successful attacks and precious inventory items to defeat than any other enemy in the game. At once visually grotesque and capable of provoking existential questions almost too appalling to contemplate, the rat king's iconography and behavior contains much allegoric potential.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'rat king' "originally denot[ed] a large rat which feeds from the catch of others" and "later any one of a group of rats connected by their entangled tails, which rely on others for feeding" ("rat n.1"). At first glance, this definition suggests that out-of-game rat kings are thought to have a parasitic nature that given the in-game rat king's setting of the hospital and ground-zero for *Cordyceps*, evokes right-wing conservative

fear-mongering in the contemporary American debate surrounding universal healthcare as offering ‘hand-outs’ to ‘freeloaders’ attempting to take advantage of the welfare system. When examining the setting of the game more closely, players will also find notes left behind by nurses and doctors attempting to treat an overwhelming number of *Cordyceps* patients for long, thankless hours in unsafe working conditions. In this light, rather than universal healthcare being revealed as the hideous monster, it is the crisis that occurs when masses of Americans over-crowd hospitals and drain the resources and staff of a fractured medical infrastructure crippled by the existing privatized system in the wake of a public health crisis. This interpretation of *TLoU2*’s rat king rings true when set against the out-of-game use for the term to work “figuratively for something difficult to disentangle” (“rat n.1”). The debate over healthcare has thwarted American politicians as an especially tricky platform issue for decades, becoming one of longest standing political sticking points contemporary American history. The rat king, more than simply highlighting American fears about the economy and its effects on the public, tells a poignant cautionary tale that became especially relevant with the COVID-19 epidemic.

Each stage of *Cordyceps*’ disease progression and each resulting form of infected with their varying iconographies and *modus operandi* reveal the wide-reaching societal traumas of the on-going crises of our contemporary era. The outbreak of zombieism situates the series within the survival horror genre, while setting its characters and its thematic explorations of survival and revenge against a tonal backdrop of paranoia and fear about the American economy, public education, and healthcare. In conclusion, while the infected offer at times incisive allegorical commentary on contemporary American social issues, the experiences of each PC and their interactions with other humans is where its representations of individual experiences of trauma come into play.

Representational Traumas in *The Last of Us* and *Part II*

Each PC of *TLoU* survives their own individual experiences with trauma. In particular, Joel is traumatized by the death of his daughter, his own actions to survive in the immediate aftermath of Outbreak Day, and the death of his partner, Tess. In only the first game, Ellie is traumatized by an assault and attempted rape at the hands of the cannibal, David, the deaths of her companions, brothers Henry and Sam, and being kidnapped by Joel, despite his role as her paternal figure. In the second game, she is traumatized by Joel's brutal murder at Abby's hands and her own violent actions to pursue revenge afterward. Finally, Abby is traumatized by Joel's murder of her father at resolution of the first game. As my ludonarrative trauma analysis progresses, the narrative complexity of each instance of trauma will increase, and the ludo-narrative tool kit used to represent this trauma as distinct from other forms of suffering in the zombie apocalypse becomes more varied and nuanced.

Joel and His Paternal Grief

In her article, "Trauma in Autobiographical Videogames: The Case of *Father and I* (2012)," Loredana Bercuci unpacks the difficulties of studying video games as opposed to other mediums. Arguing that "much of the narrative in video games is the work of the player," Bercuci insists that more than readers do in textual narratives, "players intervene" in the process of storytelling within video games "both by interacting with the narrative and by the act of reading it" (18-19). This has fascinating implications for all video games, but most pressing for my work are video games that narrativize trauma. Using commonly cited "trauma tropes" from the work of Caruth, Laub, Leys, etc., Bercuci applies a combined game studies and trauma theory lens quite similar to mine to analyze and interpret her primary text: autobiographical indie game *Father and I*. She concludes by claiming that "video games prove to be a fertile medium for the

depiction of trauma as it is defined by traditional trauma theory by foregrounding the participatory and interrelational dimension of how the meaning of trauma is created through interactivity" (37).

From Bercuci's viewpoint, the most traumatizing event for the child protagonist of *Father and I* is the moment in which he witnesses his abusive, alcoholic father murder another man. However, players themselves never witness this representational violence, and as such, "the game complies with the demand of trauma theory that trauma be represented through silence" (32). The same can be said for *TLoU*. The first example in the game is the twenty-year time jump that takes place during the presentation of the title card and the opening credits. These extradiegetic elements of the narrative act as an absence that represents Joel's trauma in the wake of Sarah's death (Druckmann ch. 1). Instead of playing through Joel's painful experiences after Sarah's passing, this period of his life is unplayable, making this representation of trauma compatible with Caruth. This also creates two versions of Joel: the fully integrated self that existed prior to his daughter's death, and the fractured self that has apparently murdered infected and innocent people alike in the interim. Such a fracturing can be interpreted as either a successful adaptation to the post-outbreak world, or a maladaptive reaction to his trauma; this ambiguity only further serves the game's fitness for a ludonarrative trauma analysis.

Similarly, Joel's reaction to the death of his post-outbreak partner, Tess, is silence. As a stereotypically 'strong and silent type,' Joel and Tess's romantic relationship is only briefly alluded to. The most direct reference occurs just before her death, after she reveals she's been infected and that she plans on sacrificing herself to buy Joel and Ellie more time to escape from the advancing FEDRA forces. Here, she tries to make Joel promise to carry on in their mission to smuggle Ellie to a Fireflies base, stating, "There's enough here that you have to feel some sort of

obligation to me" (Druckmann ch. 3). Sure enough, Joel keeps the promise he never outwardly made, suggesting that he cared more for Tess than he was willing to show. At the next available stopping point where Joel and Ellie can safely talk, Ellie attempts to speak with Joel about Tess's death, venturing, "Hey, look, um… about Tess…I don't even know what to-" before Joel cuts her off to establish his three ground rules, the first of which being, "You don't bring up Tess—ever. Matter of fact we can just keep our histories to ourselves" (ch. 3). The implication here is that he would never willingly broach the topic of Tess's death (and, accordingly, life), so Ellie is the only person who might. While Joel is willing to discuss any current issues that may come up pertaining to their immediate survival, including violence and the infected, he won't discuss what he has been traumatized by, including Tess.

This silence as enacted through forward leaps in time, like the time jump after Sarah's murder, is repeated a handful of times in the first game. One example of this follows directly after Henry and Sam's tragic deaths (Druckmann ch. 6). After fending off the infected horde in the suburbs, it is revealed to the player alone that Sam, a child around Ellie's age, has been bitten by an infected on the ankle. The next morning when Ellie goes to wake Sam for breakfast, Joel and Henry hear her scream. Bursting through the door, Sam has 'turned' and is attacking Ellie. Having promised Tess to protect Ellie, Joel scrambles to the floor to grab a handgun from his pack. Henry, a man probably in his twenties, is horrified and shoots at Joel to keep him from firing on Sam. Henry's gun goes off a second time, and Ellie pushes a limp Sam off of her and he slumps to the floor. Henry keeps repeating Sam's name, his voice breaking into a sob. Angry at Joel for letting this happen, it looks as though Henry is going to shoot him after all, yelling, "This is all your fault!" before turning the gun on himself. The player's gaze is trained on Joel as Henry shoots himself, the screen cutting to black as the player hears Ellie breathe, "Oh my god!"

(ch. 6). The title card "FALL" appears before another cutscene begins, showing that Ellie and Joel have somehow traveled all the way from Pittsburgh to Jackson County, Wyoming (ch. 7). Again, the black screen, the title card, the jump in time and space all signify Joel's processing of this event as traumatic. Further, players were not privy to the visuals of Henry's death itself, an absence made present through Joel and Ellie's reactions. This is reiterated by the Joel's silence itself. When Joel and Ellie later stumble upon what is clearly a child's grave, Ellie remembers that she forgot to put Sam's beloved toy robot on his grave. She attempts to discuss this with Joel, but he only responds, "Things happen… and we move on" (ch. 7). Of course, this echoes Joel's traumatized refusal to discuss Sarah or Tess.

Another instance of a time jump occurs after Joel is severely wounded on the University of Eastern Colorado's abandoned campus, where he is near lethally impaled after being pushed from a balcony and falling on a length of rebar. The player as Joel can barely walk, let alone fire a gun or protect Ellie as the pair are attacked by bandits. The heads-up display disappears from the screen, the environment fades in and out of focus, and players can only intermittently access one of Joel's weapons. While technically limiting Joel's capabilities, these techniques increase the representational agency of the player. The game works to faithfully represent the injuries. Now, despite Joel remaining the PC, Ellie is clearly in charge of their joint survival. This is further proven after Joel loses consciousness, and the player's point of view shifts to Ellie (ch. 8-9). Again, these extradiegetic gaps in Joel's experience help players make sense of what is traumatic for Joel and what is not. Any number of the attacks from infected and human enemies alike could be considered harrowing. However, only the events the Joel refuses to remember, discuss, or otherwise process are depicted as traumatic. The parts of the story that can't be played are the parts that Joel hasn't psychically healed from.

Employing a ludonarrative trauma analysis to examine Joel's experiences in the first game can help player-scholars more productively interpret the events of its conclusion. Now it is clear that Joel's extreme efforts to kidnap Ellie at Saint Mary's Hospital constitute a desperate attempt to avoid yet more loss, grief, and its accompanying trauma. Having grown paternally attached to Ellie and thus recovered what he lost in Sarah—a daughter—and in Tess—female companionship—Joel cannot face a world in which he loses Ellie, and in the process retraumatizes the emotional wounds he suffered losing these other women. To avoid any further trauma, Joel commits violent atrocities and dooms an already devastated post-apocalypse humanity.

Ellie: From Heaven-sent to Hell-bent on Revenge

Originally Joel's charge and eventually his hope for personal salvation, on the surface, Ellie's agency does not seem to be a matter of much significance in the first game. This would seem especially true given that chapter nine, titled "Lakeside Resort," is the only chapter of the first game in *TLoU* series in which the player has the opportunity to play as Ellie. The chapter picks up from her point of view, hunting for food in the snow to take care of and provide for a still-wounded Joel. In the plot of the chapter, Ellie runs into David, a seemingly kind man from a nearby settlement of survivors. Despite her cautious suspicion of the stranger, Ellie and David work together to take down infected after he offers a trade: antibiotics for deer meat. This tenuous alliance is broken after David reveals that she and Joel killed some of his men at the university. Furthermore, David's group survives through cannibalism, and the ambush at the university was an attempt to hunt more meat for the settlement. According to David, he keeps Ellie alive because he believes she could be of value to the settlement down the line (the implication being that the group needs more women to continue having children survive).

Additionally, players may overhear other men refer to Ellie as David's "latest pet." For her part, Ellie makes an enemy of David by breaking his finger, and escaping to try to return to Joel, killing more of David's men in the process. Eventually, the game presents players with a boss fight: a showdown between Ellie and David (Druckman ch. 9).

As explained in chapter one of this thesis, the boss fight culminates in both Ellie and David being knocked out and accidentally setting the restaurant in which they were fighting on fire. When Ellie wakes up, the player works their way through an interactive cutscene that causes players to feel Ellie's desperation and fear. David jumps up before Ellie can reach the machete players push her to crawl towards, and he kicks Ellie in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her and forcing her to collapse to the restaurant's floor. He stops, giving Ellie the chance to "give up." As the player, the only option is to continue pushing Ellie towards the knife. Once she starts crawling again, David kicks Ellie hard in the stomach once more. He then kneels on the ground to straddle her comparatively small form, grabs the back of her head by her hair, and tilts her face back and up toward his to growl, "You can try beggin'" (Druckmann ch. 9). This positioning and language invokes the dynamics of dominant and submissive engaged in a sexual scene, reinforcing the suggestion that David was not only interested in saving Ellie for the potential benefit of his community, but also to enjoy and consume her in every possible sense, further illuminating the earlier "pet" comment from his men. However, given David's unambiguous role as Ellie's predator (i.e., the hunting metaphor presented at the beginning of the chapter, his cannibalism, their age difference, etc.), the scene plays as thoroughly non-consensual, layering the threats of death and cannibalism with that of sexual violence.

Here David roughly flips Ellie over to face him. He grasps Ellie's throat with both hands, strangling her as she struggles. The game prompts players push triangle, triggering Ellie to grab

the machete. Ellie slices at David's arms, forcing him to release his chokehold and roll off of her. She quickly flips the script, straddling David. The camera zooms in on Ellie's face, and she slashes at David over and over again with the machete, spraying more and more blood everywhere: on her clothes, on her face, even on the lens of the camera, both positioning players as a witness to violence in the form of a 'camera-person' and making strategic choices about how to represent the sensory experience of violence. This framing not only recalls a staple theme in the horror genre, the spectacle of violence, but creates critical distance it in a post-modern, self-referential way to remind players that they aren't living inside the world of the story, but rather playing it from the outside. In this way, the game developers use Väliaho's sieve to shape player's understanding of the narrative and to encourage thoughtful consideration Ellie's actions, rather than allowing them to get fully swept up in a strong current of emotion.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Joel grabs Ellie in the midst of her frenzy and rips her off of David, yelling for her to stop. At first she doesn't realize it's him, mistaking him for another cannibal, screaming "No! Don't fucking touch me!" When she notices that it's Joel, she starts to say, "He tried to—," but she cuts herself off and gives in to Joel's embrace, sobbing. Again, what is traumatic is conveyed as what is unspeakable. Comforting her, Joel hugs Ellie and cradles her face, calling her "baby girl" and repeating "it's okay, it's okay." Then their conversation cuts out with the game continuing to show their actions visually, but drowning out the dialogue with a quiet, melancholy guitar. Joel and Ellie leave, leaning on each other, and the camera pans over to the bloody machete handle, which players can assume is sticking out of David's corpse. The screen cuts to black (Druckmann ch. 9). A simple title card appears: "SPRING" (ch. 10). The loss of their dialogue, the panning away, the cut to black, and the flashforward all maintain the representation of trauma the game utilizes with regard to Joel's perspective and experiences and

applies it to Ellie's. The traumatic aspects of each event—the violence itself, its psychological implications for the traumatized subject, the subsequent process of trying to make sense of the horror—are unspeakable, unknowable, and thus, unplayable.

Only other one event in the first game is depicted as traumatic for Ellie. Finally, after the horrific violence of Joel's kidnapping of Ellie from the Firefly lab at Saint Mary's, after they travel to the outskirts of Jackson and Ellie's final word of the game, "okay," the screen cuts to black and the end credits roll (Druckmann ch. 12). Given the game's standard use of cuts and title cards to delineate experiences of trauma from other experiences of violence and suffering, this sequence when analyzed from a ludonarrative trauma framework shows that Joel's betrayal of Ellie's trust traumatizes her as much as anything else in the plot of the first game. Therefore, while Joel's traumas in the first installment are those of loss, Ellie's are threats to her bodily autonomy.

Ellie first depicted experience of traumatic loss doesn't occur until *TLoU2*. While the most evident thematic subject of the first game is the ethics of survival, in *TLoU2* it is revenge. Throughout the game, its PCs march to its persistent beat. The first beat of this march sounds with the heavy thwack of a golf club against Joel's skull. Abby, the daughter of the Firefly surgeon meant to operate on Ellie at the end of the first game, has already lost her father Jerry to Joel and is simply further down a revenge plot of her own. Players enter Abby's narrative from a different vantage point and at a different time in her life than Ellie's and are thus called upon, at least at the beginning of *TLoU2*, to view her as an antagonist. Abby, along with other members of a group wearing patches bearing the acronym "WLF," have come to Jackson in search of Joel, so that she can avenge her father by killing him (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1).

Ellie's story collides with Abby's when she hears from Jesse (her partner Dina's ex-boyfriend) that Joel and Tommy haven't returned to Jackson from their paired patrol route. She immediately sets off on her horse, Shimmer, to find them, despite her by-now apparently strained relationship with Joel in the aftermath of the first game. Of particularly resonant relevance to the first installment is the setting of her journey to the chalet where Joel is being held. In Ellie's first major trauma, her encounter with David, she is on her own. Joel is mortally wounded. Their default roles have been reversed. She wanders through a blizzard, hoping she can protect him. At the hands not of a decaying infected, but of another survivor, she faces the possibility of her own undoing, a contention she had been able to sidestep through her own flawed perception of her immunity to *Cordyceps*. In this blizzard, she runs face-first into this possibility. She is almost murdered. She is almost eaten. She is almost raped. These three threats, only narrowly escaped and through her own will and means, represent the most horrifying threats possible for a young girl living in the zombie apocalypse. Though that chapter in the first game and in Ellie's life began with Joel's near-death and her own remarkable efforts to survive, it ended with his safe return and the warmth of his paternal embrace (Druckmann ch. 9). Again, in *TLoU2,* as Ellie searches for Joel, she fights to navigate a forest through a bitterly cold and gusty blizzard. This setting, reminiscent also of classic fairy tales in which young children encounter wolves, witches, and all manner of monsters, echoes across both games as a signifier for Ellie's fear, her isolation and search for familial comfort, and her impending trauma (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1).

By contrast, the chalet in which Abby holds Joel hostage should represent sanctuary. It's a large, cozy mountain retreat. There's a fire in the hearth; the rooms are well-furnished. However, as players explore the building, the soundscape creates a juxtaposition through a new tone of unease. As players push Ellie to approach the stairs down to the basement where she will

discover that Joel is being slowly beaten to death, she breathes heavily. Joel's pained cries become increasing clearer and more frequent. The music is pared down to a deep drumbeat, growing louder and faster as the emotional implications of Joel's suffering for Ellie loom ever larger (Druckman & Gross ch. 1). What will transpire in that basement room affects the player's understanding of the rest of *TLoU2*. Given its narrative and thematic gravity, I will examine it closely here.

As Ellie opens the door, control over her cedes from the player to the narrative, revealing a glimpse of Abby, as she continues to beat Joel with her golf club. Her swing is viscous. Joel lies prone against a wall. The shoulders of his jacket are soaked with blood. It's smeared across the cold tile floor in front of him. It streams down and across his face, leaving a puddle under his head. It cuts to a close up of Ellie's face as the severity of Joel's condition dawns on her. Her expression changes to grim determination as she raises her handgun and bursts through the door, only to be knocked to the ground by another Washing Liberation Front (WLF) member or "wolf." Ellie he pushes herself up to fight back, her trusty switchblade biting into flesh once, only to be surrounded and pinned to the ground again. She is across the room from Joel, mirroring his position, eye-level with his bloodied face. The camera pans over to Tommy, who is also lying prone on the floor, his hands bound behind his back. Ellie screams obscenities in protest, but the wolves maintain their position on top of her, and one man kicks her forcefully and repeatedly in the stomach. He's so angry that another more level-headed WLF has to grab and restrain him (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1).

The scene set and the stakes fully conveyed, the camera pans back to Abby, who looks down at Ellie, and then again to Ellie, whose eyes piercingly glare at her. Ellie is unrecognizable from the wide-eyed 14-year-old, who followed Joel around like a lost puppy in the first game.

What youthful fullness she held in her cheeks has vanished. Her forehead and brow are tightly knit in rage. Her freckles are blotted out by the blood that has spurted from her nose and mouth and by a scrape across her right cheek bone. There is a feral glint in her eye. Desperately, as she struggles to break free from the weight of her captors, she screams at Abby in her fury: “You’re gonna fucking die!” Her voice is high-pitched, but ragged and harsh. Players of the first game have never heard Ellie sound like this. There is no room to doubt the seriousness of her statement. It is not an empty threat; it is promise that she will keep, consequences be damned. Abby’s ex-boyfriend Owen arrives in the basement with questions about Ellie’s identity. It stirs up conflict among the wolves, who begin to bicker about whether they should expect an attack. Owen approaches Abby, still holding the golf club, and tells her, “You’re done.” The moment between them is tense, with Abby replying, hurt, “You want what I want, right?” But Owen insists that she end it. It pans back to a close up of Ellie, whose face has shifted from frenzied anger into sheer desperation. She is close to hyperventilation. She begs Joel to get up, but he can barely open his eyes in response. She begs Abby to stop, but by now the player has sense enough to know that these pleas fall on deaf ears (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1).

Silhouetted against the dim, cold light softly emanating from the frosty sliding glass door in front of her, Abby faces away from Ellie and Owen, and back towards Joel’s limp figure. She readies her weapon. It cuts to a shot taken from behind Joel, almost at eye-level with Ellie on the ground, so players can see the back of Joel’s head and Ellie’s face at the same time. Abby slams the head of the club down on the side of Joel’s head, the sharp metal ringing against the bone of Joel’s skull. Blood spews upward. Ellie’s face is a contorted mask of fear and anguish, as she heaves the word “nooo!” between gasps, eyebrows raised and knit together, eyes wide in horror, the corners of her mouth painfully pulled down towards her jaw. She breaks into a sob,

something, again, players have never witnessed. Blood is spattered against the glass door. A man walks over to Joel, whispers, “Burn in hell, *pendejo*,” and spits on his corpse. Rage and grief now mix in Ellie’s face, her breath still heaving, she swears “I’ll fucking kill you.” The noise of the wolves, now arguing again about whether to kill Ellie, is drowned out by a growing ringing and the pounding of blood rushing in Ellie’s ears. She ignores the wolves. She looks from Joel to Abby. Finally, the man who kicked her before approaches and knocks her out with a swift kick to her face. The screen cuts to black (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1). Thus, the trend of signifying an event as traumatizing with cuts to black and time jumps from the first game continues into the second.

However, Ellie’s next trauma departs totally from her construction as a traumatized subject thus far. Again, given its pivotal role in *TLoU2* and its implications for the meanings of trauma and revenge as presented by the series, I will engage significantly with a description of what transpires. While listening to radio chatter in their makeshift headquarters of the theatre during their time in Seattle, Dina (Ellie’s girlfriend) informs Ellie that Nora, one of Abby’s wolf crew from the chalet, is at the hospital. After locating the hospital on their tourist map of Seattle, Ellie heads out on her own to find it. As with any span of the narrative thus far involving travel, Ellie’s progress is thwarted by enemies, human and undead alike, and obstacles in the environment. When she finally arrives at the Lakehill Seattle Hospital, Ellie infiltrates the WLF camps on the outside to sneak in. They have been looting the hospital floor by floor to gather the leftover supplies inside before the Seraphites (a religious cult and the wolves’ rival gang) could. Ellie finds Nora’s location within, ambushes her, and a chase ensues. Ellie holds Nora hostage at the edge of a dilapidated hallway, which crumbles away into the spore-infested basement of the

hospital.[6] Three wolves surround them, and much to their surprise, Ellie chooses to fall with Nora, maskless, into the spores[7] below. A combat encounter with clickers and the wolf soldiers, who have since masked-up to follow Ellie, ensues. Finally, Ellie stalks Nora into a room off of the main basement map (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3).

The game prompts players to open the door by pushing the triangle button. The door noisily creaks open, revealing a small, relatively empty corridor with Nora coughing and falling to her knees at the far set of double doors. Her voice low and menacing, Ellie mocks her, saying "Hi, Nora," and slamming the door behind her. The hallway dimly glows red with the light from the hospital's alarm system. The score sounds like a reprise of the pounding heartbeat from Joel's death scene (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3). The developers have effectively established an atmosphere of coming violence, borrowing symbolism not only from other narratives and media, but also from their own storytelling. It's clear to the player that this moment in Ellie's story will be a turning point.

As Ellie barricades the door with a nearby chair, Nora gasps, "Oh god, oh god," either in horror at the realization of her impending transformation into an infected or at Ellie's looming presence in the room. The game cedes control of Ellie back to the player. With nothing else to do, players push Ellie to approach Nora, who is fully on her hands and knees, coughing. Once Ellie is within close range, the narrative takes over yet again, switching back to traditional cut scene. Nora has been hiding a pipe between her frame and the door, and she now takes this opportunity to swing it at Ellie's ankles. Ellie simply takes a step back. Having shown her hand, Nora swings the pipe again from her kneeling position. This time, Ellie catches it and yanks it

[6] Chronologically, Abby has already visited the hospital and defeated the rat king, though at this point of their first playthrough, players are not yet privy to the existence of the rat king nor its defeat at Abby's hands.
[7] Canonically, inhaling or ingesting infected spores causes infection. To the wolves, this would have seemed like suicide.

from Nora's grasp. Wielding the pipe in her right hand, Ellie twists her body to the left to gain momentum and then swings back to deal Nora a blow which resounds with a heavy thwack. Nora cries out in pain. Shivering and moaning, she struggles to lift her the weight of her body off the floor without putting pressure on her arm, which Ellie has rendered totally useless (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3).

Pacing back and forth like a lioness who has cornered her prey, Ellie begins the interrogation: "Where's Abby?" Now sitting with her back against the doors, Nora focuses her gaze on Ellie's face, as if seeing her for the first time. Ignoring the question, she utters, "You're breathing spores," in shock. Feeling the effects of the spores herself, Nora pauses, wheezing, and whispers, "You're her." Cutting from an over-the-shoulder view of Nora back to Ellie from the waist-up, the player sees Ellie look down to consider the weight of Nora's realization: Nora knows of Ellie's immunity and Joel's decision to choose her life over the future health of humanity. "You Firefly?" Ellie asks in response. Voice cracking, Nora answers, "There are no Fireflies anymore." Here the camera stops switching back and forth between semi-close-up views of each character as she speaks and cuts to a wide shot of the women, with Ellie standing over Nora's weak frame. It's clear who's in charge here, despite Nora's dropped bomb. There's a pause and Ellie paces again (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3).

Picking up the interrogation again, the camera returns to its alternating semi-close-ups. Again, Ellie demands: "Where's Abby?" Voice sounding as if it's about to break, Nora indignantly complains, "I'm fucking dead anyway. Why would I tell you anything?" Here Ellie crouches down, using the pipe for balance like a cane, to look Nora directly in the eye. Matter-of-factly, Ellie replies, "Because I can make it quick. Or I can make it so much worse." Desperate, Nora tries appealing to Ellie's sense of reason. She begs, "Think about what he did.

How many people are dead because of him?" Ellie stands, closer to Nora than ever. "It's your last chance." Determined and surer of herself, Nora rejects the offer: "I'm not giving up my friend." The camera cuts back to Ellie. Her face is neutral. She sharply takes in a breath. Her brow furrows. She takes another. Her mouth slightly opens and the corners turn down. Her eyes gleam. She has worked her face into a mask of rage (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3).

In the midst of the drama, a simple white icon of the square button appears next to Ellie's face. It calls upon the player to press it. At this point familiar with the controls, the player should recognize it as the button assigned to melee attacks. Until the button is pressed, the pulse of the timpani will pound in the player's ears and Ellie will continue taking ragged breaths, her face unchanged. Once pressed, Ellie swings the pipe, dark red blood splashes across the field of view, and a sickening gurgle accents the steady heartbeat. As with Henry and David's deaths in the first game, the camera does not cut to Nora to reveal the impact of Ellie's swing. It remains focused on Ellie. Eyes wide and shining, Ellie's face is paired with the square button prompt again. Another swing. Another splash. Another gurgle. The game prompts players with the square button one final time. Ellie yells as she swings, this time faster and more viscously than before. The screen cuts to black. The next scene is of Ellie's return to the theatre, where she, sobbing, confesses the torture to Dina, who tenderly dresses her wounds (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3).

Here the game developers, using the ludonarrative trauma player-pedagogy they employ in the first game and return to with Joel's murder in *TLoU2,* convey to us that Ellie has processed this experience as traumatic. Throughout the series up to this point, the games have presented cuts to black, time jumps, and title cards as a way of offering to the player a clear signifier of the traumatic against the backdrop of the zombie apocalypse. This gap in particular has compelling

implications for this work, as it is the first traumatic signifier that occurs immediately following a character's suffering other than Joel's or Ellie's. The entire scene stands out amongst other scenes of violence due to Ellie's subject position. No longer a clear victim or bystander, or even a survivor acting out of self-preservation, Ellie perpetrates cruel and unnecessary violence. There is no easy justification, nor does the game call upon players to find one, allowing the critical distance from the violence and, for the first time Ellie, to stand. The setting resonates with Saint. Mary's, the place where Joel violently extinguished the Fireflies. A place where anyone should receive care and treatment becomes a site of violence and death. A place where Marlene, a Black woman like Nora, begged for her life, and Joel shot her dead. It also resonates with the chalet where Joel and Tommy were held hostage. There was a descent into a basement. A beaten victim slumped against an impenetrable door. A strong figure swinging a golf club, or now, in this case, a pipe. The game lingers on the torture in both cases. The game focalizes Ellie's facial expressions in both cases. These parallels juxtapose Ellie's shift in subject-position from survivor of trauma to aggressor, revealing that the boundary between the two is not as clear as originally represented. Once beholden to violence, she has become its arbiter. While seeking revenge on Abby, Ellie has taken up her position.

This complex position of survivor-aggressor is one Ellie will continue in inhabit in *TLoU2.* Having tracked Abby's possible location across the map to Owen's hideout at the aquarium, she runs into Owen, who is Abby's love interest, and Mel, his pregnant girlfriend, there. Holding them at gunpoint, Ellie barks orders at them to each tell her where Abby is by pointing to her location on the map.[8] Mel seems willing to cooperate, while Owen clearly isn't. After Mel slowly approaches Ellie and the map, Owen takes advantage of Ellie's intense focus

[8] This tactic of cross-referencing answers across victims' during 'enhanced interrogation is a reference to Joel's actions in the first game and Tommy's earlier in *TLoU2.*

on Mel to try to disarm her. The pair struggles for a quick moment, but Ellie quickly dispatches him with a shot to the chest. As Owen falls, Mels runs at Ellie with her knife. The two women grapple, but soon Ellie overpowers Mel, who lands on her back on the wet concrete floor of the aquarium, where Ellie stabs her in the throat with her own knife. Mel gasps and her head jerks up involuntarily, her eyes bugging out, before collapsing. Still making noise, it becomes clear that Owen is alive. Ellie marches over to him to demand more information about Abby, and he is barely able to choke out, "she's… she's… pregnant." Ellie pauses, not seeming to process Owen's gargled words. Then, Ellie has an Aristotelian moment of realization. Turning to stride over to Mel's body, she frantically whispers, "no, no, no." She crouches down and rips open the puffer jacket Mel had been wearing to reveal her pregnant stomach. Immediately, Ellie stands up and backs away from the body, as if to distance herself from her own actions. She whispers, "Oh fuck," and wears a mask of shame. Much like at the beginning of the game after Joel's death, players hear the ringing and rush of blood in Ellie's ears as her heart pounds, and she bends over, retching. Tommy and Jesse, their friend who followed them shortly thereafter, appear and help a clearly distraught Ellie leave. She moans, "I'm sorry." As they leave, the camera pans down to show Mel's blood mixing with the water on the floor, spreading towards Ellie's map of Seattle, which she's dropped. The screen cuts to black. Again, in her violent actions to take revenge on Abby, Ellie seems to have exacerbated her own representational trauma. The game clearly communicates this using the series chosen ludonarrative vocabulary for indicating the traumatic amidst the postapocalyptic (Druckmann & Gross ch. 4).

In response to these events, Abby hunts down Ellie to her headquarters in Seattle, the theatre. There Abby kills Jesse and shoots Tommy in the face. After the second of Abby and Ellie's three confrontations (the first being when Abby kills Joel), Ellie and Dina only barely

escape with their lives. Dina, like Mel, is pregnant, which not only increases Ellie's horror in response to murdering Mel, but also, along with Tommy's near fatal injury, forces Ellie to return to Jackson without having successfully met her own standards for revenge upon Abby. Near Jackson, Ellie lives with Dina and her newborn baby J.J.[9] on a sheep ranch, living out a dream Dina had shared with Ellie much earlier in the game. The little family of three paint the picture of peaceful domesticity. Ellie and Dina flirt, listen to music from their record player (a rare blessing in the post-outbreak world), and dance together, while Ellie takes care of the baby and Dina does the dishes. Later in the evening, Dina hangs up the laundry to dry, while a baby sling adorned Ellie herds the sheep, given cute names, such as Snowy, Daisy, and Ewe-gene, from the fields back into the barn, talking to J.J. all the while (Druckmann & Gross ch. 9).

Once inside the barn, players are prompted by a triangle button icon on the screen to shut the sheep inside their pen. Afterwards, Ellie notices a lamb in the darkened back corner of the barn. Players navigate Ellie toward the lamb, and press triangle to move the shovel it hides behind. Frightened, the lamb bolts, knocking over the shovel on its way. Abruptly and only for a split second, an extreme close up of Joel's beaten and bloody face on the floor of the chalet takes up the entire screen. Ellie breathes heavily, trying to remain calm as she turns to see the lamb running toward the open barn door. Players push Ellie, who will only walk, towards the lamb as it leaves the barn. Before Ellie can follow it out, the barn door slams shut, plunging Ellie and J.J. into darkness. Ellie screams. For a moment, players must wait and listen to Ellie's short, gasping breaths in the dark, before she appears again. However, J.J. is gone and she's dressed as she was at the beginning of the game in Jackson, standing at the top of the stairs leading down to the chalet's basement, where Joel was killed. In pain, he screams, "Ellie! Help me!" Presented with

[9] Jessie Jr.? Joel Jr.? Jesse Joel, or Joel Jesse?

only the long stairwell down to the basement, the player's only choice is to make Ellie walk down the stairs toward the shut basement door. Once at the door, players are prompted to press triangle to open it. But it won't open. It's locked, and a panicked Ellie throws herself against it again and again, hearing Joel's screams from behind the door. The screen cuts back to Ellie's face in the barn. She's clearly having a panic attack, hyperventilating and screaming as she holds a crying J.J. Dina is calling Ellie's name, apparently trying to break her from her hallucination. It's evident from Dina's response that this has happened before. She crouches down to Ellie's level, and says, "Look at me. It's okay, you're home. You're home. Breathe. Breathe." Dina takes J.J. and sits on the ground next to Ellie as she catches her breath and finally regains her composure (Druckmann & Gross ch. 9).

After this episode, it is evident that Ellie still struggles with the lingering side-effects of her trauma as a result of witnessing Joel's death. Not only has the game recreated the experience of living through an intrusive memory and its accompanying panic, but through representational agency developed in the interactive cutscene, it has done so to such an extent that would be difficult, if not impossible, to do in a film or novel. Ellie's emotions of shock, fear, and frustration are duplicated in the player as they attempt to use only even the basic controls, like walking and interactions, only to be met with unintended and upsetting results. This conveys how Ellie must feel in her day-to-day life. While Dina insists that Abby "doesn't get to be more important" than their family, Abby's actions and Ellie's resulting trauma and grief impact her ability to function on a daily basis, even in the safe and stable environment of the farmhouse (Druckmann & Gross ch. 9). This is communicated through the story of the game narratively, through Ellie's dialogue ("I don't sleep. I don't eat."), as well as ludically through the played flashback and through Ellie's embedded journal entries about her experience of the flashbacks,

which have occurred repeatedly (ch. 9). Because of the inescapability of her trauma and her inability to heal from it, Ellie leaves the farmhouse to hunt Abby down in Santa Barbara, where Tommy has been told Abby and Lev are. Though to Dina and perhaps to many players, this attempt at closure seems misguided (how could yet more violence help?), Ellie's current psychic pain has been represented as untenable. She will do anything to end it and feel like she has control over her own mind and life again. Applying a ludonarrative trauma analysis to Ellie demonstrates the long-term effects of trauma and how it impacts every other facet of life.

Abby: Aggressor, Victim, Survivor, or Hero?

From examining Ellie's trauma, it is clear that she and Abby's stories are inextricably tied to each other. However, Abby's story functions differently than Ellie's in that she has already realized her goal of revenge. Joel killed her father at the end of the first game, and at the beginning of *TLoU2* she successfully kills Joel in retribution. What players witness in their playthrough of Abby's section then, is the aftermath of that successful revenge, or a picture of what Ellie's life could look like if she successfully kills Abby. Rather than achieving the peace of mind and closure that Ellie herself so desperately seeks, Abby's life remains unsettled after she murders Joel. She still grieves her father's early and unjust death.

The game depicts Abby's discovery of her father's death early in her section of the game. Rather than relying simply on a flashback in the form of a cutscene, the game brings players back into Abby's memory to play the event. Players of the first game should recognize the long pediatric care hallway leading to the operating room and the red Firefly logo to the left of the red door to the operating theatre. Players as a younger Abby run towards it, then open it, and finally the operating room door itself to reveal Abby's friends Owen and Manny standing over her father's bloody corpse. Abby screams and cries, trying to push past Owen to get to her father. He

blocks her and holds her as she collapses to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably. The camera slowly zooms in on her contorted, tear-stained face, before transitioning to an extreme close-up of her face in the mountain chalet's basement, stained now with Joel's blood. It's the same scene of Joel's murder from earlier in the game (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1), but rather than the hyper-focus on Ellie's emotional journey through close ups of her face, the camera has panned out to show the whole scene with all its characters. Here players learn that Abby ended the debate about whether to kill Ellie and Tommy, stating, "Stop! We're done," and throwing the golf club down. The screen cuts to black. The familiar white title card for "SEATTLE" pops up at the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. Then a long pause ensues before "DAY 1" reappears next to it, clearly communicating to players for the first time that Abby is a major PC, and that they will be replaying the past three days in Seattle as Abby (ch. 6).

A character who was initially presented as an antagonist, if not fully a villain, is now framed as a protagonist and PC with whom players will be asked to empathize. Not only this, but the ludonarrative vocabulary used to show players that Joel and Ellie have experienced trauma has now been applied to Abby. Compellingly, a time jump does occur right after she discovers her father's death and sees his corpse first-hand, but the full cut to black and title card doesn't occur until after she's murdered Joel, signaling to players that taking revenge on Joel not only failed to bring Abby closure, but contributed to her experience of trauma. Like Ellie in torturing Nora and murdering Mel, Abby experiences her own trauma-fueled actions of aggression as traumatic in of themselves. True, Abby's inclusion in the story dramatically erases the boundary between protagonist and antagonist and the classic division between 'good' and evil,' but even further and more significantly, it reasserts trauma as ambiguous and difficult to disentangle. When a character in the game suffers a major trauma amidst the apocalypse, they are not only

victim, but survivor and aggressor. Left without a clear path to healing, they continue to inflict yet more suffering and trauma on others, and themselves. This is true of Joel, Ellie, and Abby, as *TLoU2* makes readily apparent.

Throughout her time as a PC, Abby regularly dreams about her past experiences, deepening her characterization and giving players a better sense of who she was before she became a wolf. These dreams also indicate to players her mental state with regard to her own trauma. For example, her experience of "Seattle Day 1," sends her on a search for Owen, her best friend with whom she's had a tense relationship since her father died. They were romantically involved, but her constant search for Joel and quest for revenge drove them apart. They've remained close friends, but as her memory of their first trip to the Seattle aquarium shows, she's been unable to connect with him emotionally (Druckmann & Gross ch. 6). Because of this, Abby has isolated herself, and Owen has moved on to date their mutual friend and former student of Abby's father, Mel. Rumors at the WLF camp suggest that Owen has betrayed fellow wolf Danny to show mercy to their enemies, the Seraphites. To investigate and make sure Owen is safe, Abby ventures to the aquarium yet again, fighting Seraphites, or "scars" as the wolves call them, along the way. At one point, Abby hangs from a noose and about to be cut open by a scar attempting to "cleanse" her. Here at her most vulnerable, she is rescued by two scars the others refer to as "apostates." These apostates are siblings Yara and her younger brother Lev. Yara herself has been brutally injured by the other scars, who have "clipped her wing" (pinned her down and viciously beaten her arm with a hammer). On her way to the aquarium Abby helps Yara and Lev find safety from wolves and their fellow Seraphites alike in an abandoned trailer. Abby sets Yara's arm, and then continues on (ch. 6). Once she finds Owen at the aquarium, her trauma's impact on their by-now quite complicated relationship becomes yet more clear.

Abby finds Owen drinking hooch in the sailboat he's patching up. Owen explains why he betrayed Danny; he couldn't bring himself to kill an enemy scar in front of Danny, which brought Owen's loyalties into question. When Danny challenged Owen, they fought, and Owen shot Danny. The lighting in the boat is dim, the mood is bleak. Owen reveals his plan to defect from the WLF and follow a lead, which indicates a possible Firefly regroup in Santa Barbara, and the two argue. Abby tells Owen to grow up, to which he replies disdainfully, "Oh yeah? How do I do that, Abby? Should I go find the people that killed my family? Cut into 'em? I can torture them until they're crying in their own—" Here Owen clearly mocks Abby for how she attempted to heal from her own father's death by killing Joel. It's cruel. Abby pushes Owen and the two grapple, with Abby gripping Owen's shoulders and Owen pulling her long braid. It's a stalemate. The two pause and slowly loosen their hold on each other. Almost imperceptibly, the mood shifts. Suddenly, the two embrace each other, kissing passionately. Clothes come off. Then Abby turns her back toward Owen, and though it's not graphically depicted, it's clear that pair are engaged in intercourse (ch. 6).

It seems appropriate at this juncture of my examination of Abby's trauma to remind readers that I have a purpose here. Lest readers who haven't played the game get lost, I want to dissuade anyone from thinking that this sexual encounter is a blissful expression of mutual attraction and care. Though consensual, this encounter does not occur as a result of open communication and healthy relationship building. Significantly, it demonstrates their shared betrayal of a friend and partner, Mel, who they both know would be hurt by Owen's cheating and Abby's part in it. It also stands in stark contrast to the only other sex scene of *TLoU2*, between Ellie and Dina in the first chapter of the game, prior to Joel's death. Leading up to their sex scene, Ellie and Dina have spent a whole day of diegetic time cooperating with each other,

defending each other against infected, and flirting. The conversation immediately leading into sex was in reference to a kiss from the night before. The emotional tenor of the scene is warm and light-hearted, and the characters exhibit a deep and abiding respect for and interest in each other, which they express through sexual intimacy. In contrast, the sex scene between Abby and Owen more clearly presents a dysfunctional expression of pent-up frustration. Despite their physical closeness, Abby and Owen are less attuned to each other emotionally than ever. A relationship that had healthy potential prior to Abby's traumatic experiences has deteriorated now to the point of toxicity.

Immediately following this scene, Abby falls asleep and straight into a nightmare about the discovery of her father's death. Players once again control a younger version of Abby, in the long pediatric care hallway of Saint Mary's. The alarms blare, the red light flashes. Players navigate Abby down the hallway, through the operating theatre, and to the final door into the operating room. Once she opens the door, the operating table and medical equipment remain, this time however, she's opened the door into Seattle's forest. It's nighttime, the only light is thrown from a flame off-screen. The younger Abby gasps as she looks up to find Lev and Yara hanged, entrails spilling out and dangling from their midsections in the signature ritual killing of the Seraphites. It's the fate she almost suffered before they rescued her. The game cuts to a close up of the siblings' lifeless faces before the older Abby jolts awake, finding herself still laying next to Owen. Shortly afterwards, the title card for "SEATTLE DAY 2" appears (Druckmann & Gross ch. 7).

This nightmare makes abundantly clear how Abby's present emotional state and social conflicts get wrapped up in her previous trauma. Killing Joel hasn't helped her heal, and neither has her relationship with Owen. She still dreams about her father's death, and whenever she

experiences all the feelings she associates with the event—fear, sadness, survivor's guilt—her memory of it interrupts her life. Viewing this understanding of her lingering trauma ludonarratively only reinforces such an interpretation. The player's experience of the game from Abby's point of view, fighting zombies and scars, is interrupted by her nightmare. Suddenly, the player is thrust into a younger PC interacting with an event that seems to have nothing to do with the current objective: nothing except Abby's trauma and the emotions shared between it and her choice to leave Lev and Yara behind.

These feelings motivate Abby to try to rid herself of these nightmares and her traumatic symptoms. After the nightmare, she returns to the trailer she left Lev and Yara in to check on them. The rest of her time in Seattle is spent guiding Yara and Lev to safety and doing her best to defend them from harm. Here Abby takes on yet another label: protector. This further blurs the lines between the different traumatic roles. It also has the effect of continuing to dissolve the boundaries between protagonist and antagonist. In the first game, part of what makes Joel a sympathetic PC is his protection of Ellie. Despite whether the player agrees or disagrees with his choices, his protection of a younger innocent garners sympathy. Abby's adoption of Yara and Lev, people who by all rights should be her enemies, not only makes her an aggressor-survivor-victim-protector, but also more like Joel. This complicates players', and especially gamers', experience of the game. Players who liked and related to Joel were also the most likely to dislike and resent playing as Abby, his killer. Now these same players are called upon to draw connections between Joel and Abby narratively. Ludically, her game play mechanics, including her weapon loadout and physical frame, also more closely mimic Joel's than Ellie's. Such a conflict in the player calls on them to exercise their empathy in ways difficult to recreate in a novel or film.

However, Abby's ambiguous role with regard to a player's understanding of trauma does more than reveal how complex trauma is. It also further complicates her relationships with her friends. Mel in particular is totally withdrawn from Abby. In Seattle Day 1, Mel and Abby's dialogue reflects an uneasy tension between two old friends. Previously, there seems to have been mutual respect and care, with their shared friend Manny characterizing their relationship as one between "family." "Not like the rest of" the Salt Lake Crew of former Fireflies, Mel is a medic, not a soldier, who as a result has been scarred by her experience witnessing Abby's torture and murder of Joel (Druckmann & Gross ch. 6). This tension builds as the game progresses and finally comes to a head, presumably after Mel realizes that Abby helped Owen cheat on her. When it appears that Yara, Lev, Owen, Mel, and Abby all have an opportunity to escape the conflict between the wolves and the scars in Seattle by sailing to Santa Barbara, Mel refuses to go if Abby will. In their longest one-on-one conversation of *TLoU2,* she berates Abby: "You're a piece of shit, Abby. You always have been. I'm done with you" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 8). More of their dialogue reveals that in large part, Mel's dismissal reflects her inability to reconcile Abby's simultaneous roles as aggressor and protector. Suspicious, Mel states, "[Owen] may fall for your little act with these kids, but I don't," and further doubts, "Isaac's top Scar killer suddenly had a change of heart?" Mel questions Abby's intentions, disbelieving that someone capable of doling out trauma in brutal and wide-spread ways could be capable of protecting others from it. She ends their conversation with sardonic advice: "You wanna help these kids? Get out of their lives before you screw them over too" (ch. 8). For Mel, the only way a dyed-in-the-wool aggressor like Abby can help innocents and potential victims is to give them a wide berth.

Mel and her relationship with Abby demonstrates how many view trauma as a sorting machine that places different types of people into different boxes. People are either inherently capable of surviving trauma, or not, subjecting people to it, or being subject to it themselves. Abby's complex relationship with trauma being its victim, surviving it, enacting it upon others, and hoping now to save others from it, confuses Mel's understanding of trauma. Rather than adapt her definition of trauma to account for Abby's multiple lived experiences with it, Mel ejects Abby from her life. One of the several long-term impacts of Abby's search for revenge in the aftermath of trauma, rather than healing, has been to alienate and disgust her friends, including Owen and Mel. Regardless of her intent to protect others, and in a way, save herself, Abby's maladaptive reactions to her own suffering have had life-changing consequences, which are best understood through a ludonarrative trauma theory lens.

Trauma Bonding: Empathy and Complicity in the Player-Character Connection

At the core of this ludonarrative trauma analysis are the shades of meaning that could not be revealed without using both a ludonarrative VGS lens and a literary trauma theory lens at the same time. In the same way that Mel is challenged by Abby's ambiguous relationship with trauma, so too are the players who interact with her as a PC. Her disruptive presence as a PC in Ellie's narrative in *TLoU2* "elicits an active response from the player to accept or reject Abby as a character on the same level as Ellie" (Johnson 10). This player response depends on how their alterbiography has been constructed prior to Abby's introduction at the end of Ellie's three days in Seattle. To explain, "the alterbiography is a composite PC identity formed when a player brings their own experiences and intentions to bear upon the game and its scripted narrative" (7). Similarly to how first-person perspective operates in a literary narrative, playing and thereby enacting a PC's perspective elides the line between player and character, generating this player-

character connection or alterbiography. Given that trauma and representations of it are integral to the game's ludology and narratology, "the realistic depiction of PTSD in the lives of both [Ellie and Abby] must be incorporated into the player's alterbiographies, which creates a forced choice between an expansive, complex, and flexible disposition toward the story and its characters, or a rigid, inflexible one" (11). In other words, like Mel, players of *TLoU2* must choose to expand their prior definitions of trauma and all its interpellated roles, or to maintain them with prejudice. If players choose an expansive disposition, they will accept all aspects of both PCs and engage more readily with the PC switch and its corresponding ludonarrative dissonance.

However, in a qualitative study of players' responses to Abby, researchers found that "only the satisfied players who saw the PC as a 'social other' could build an attachment to Abby as an additional 'social other,' while the dissatisfied players could not create an additional 'me'" (Erb, et al. 8). This means that players who played the first game and strongly identified with Joel, thus totally collapsing the dividing line between player and character, developed an alterbiography including Joel, which they then closely tied to their own personal out-of-game identity. The more a player kept their self-concept separate from their alterbiography as Joel, the more accommodating their alterbiography was to Abby in the second game. Because of this, it is harder for the set of players who related to Joel to take up an expansive disposition towards the series' characters and forgive Abby for her revenge. This further prevents these players from taking up an expansive disposition towards the series as a whole and its representations of trauma as complex and ambiguous, as opposed to clear-cut and binarized. As Stephen Michael Johnson found in his paper, "'Go. Just take him.': PTSD and the Player-Character Relationship in *The Last of Us Part II*" the series' abrupt perspective switch between Ellie and Abby thus "provides opportunity for players to develop their understanding of trauma and practice of

empathy over the course of the game" (2). The player-pedagogy of *TLoU* then relies on empathetic players in order to effectively enact its representations of trauma. For others, the initial ludonarrative dissonance that occurs with the PC switch to Abby proves to distract too much from the game and its themes.

While relying on empathy to narrativize trauma, *TLoU* as a video game series also makes use of complicity in ways that are unique to the medium. As Toby Smethurst and Steph Craps claim in their essay "Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game," "by playing a game—by putting their hands on the controller and becoming part of the player/game feedback loop—players become complicit with the events portrayed within" (277). Compellingly, this complicity comes not from empathizing with individual characters who commit acts of violence, as Joel, Ellie, and Abby frequently do. Rather,

> while the player is most invested and involved in the action on-screen—when the game is as interreactive as possible and the feedback loop between player and game at its most complete—what they focus on the most is not the identity of the character(s) under their control, but the capabilities and performance of the character(s) which allows them to inhabit and progress through the game world. (276)

As many ludologists assert, in these moments of interreactivity, it matters less who the PC is and more what the PC is doing. The player here, when killing waves of infected and fervently focusing on survival, empathizes not with the characters, but with the narrative architecture of the game itself. The player internalizes the action of the game and its progression. What ludologists miss in studying this interreactivity exclusively is the significant role played by cutscenes and the more filmic moments of the game. It is in these more narratologically pressing

moments that empathy with individual characters is generated using dialogue, music, camera angles, etc. By "carefully situating the player in various places on the on-line/off-line continuum [and] making (empathy for) characters vanish and reappear where appropriate," (278) game developers, like those of *Walking Dead* and *TLoU,* can orchestrate a subtle rhetoric in which players both feel for the PC and carry guilt for their actions.

In this way, video "games are well equipped to draw the player in, to make them feel for the characters who may be traumatized, and to make them feel responsible for the traumatic events portrayed within" (Smethurst & Craps 278). More than other modes of narrative, like film or literature, this gives video games the ludonarrative toolkit necessary to create exceptionally compelling representations of trauma, which intersubjectively call on the player to make meaning of their experience with the game. This is why the critical distance from the violence and suffering in *TLoU* is so urgent. As Väliaho states and I explained in chapter one of this document, many video games create the conditions in which players can fully immerse themselves in violence as entertainment. This is antithetical to the process of effectively draining trauma of its potency and effects on the player's out-of-game life. Instead of situating the societally disempowered player who is a survivor of trauma as in control of their own responses to their environment, first-person shooters situate this player as needing to be constantly monitoring their environment for unseen dangers. By contrast, for the traumatized player, *TLoU* creates critical distance from violence by strategically switching between on and offline moments. The series, for its complexity and flaws, which I will discuss further in the next chapter, does offer the space to consider various forms of trauma, such as the death of a loved one, sexual assault, or brutal violence, from a different subject-position. *TLoU*, unlike first-person shooters, generates the opportunity to place one's suffering in a character, enact that

character's story, and see it from the outside. Because of this, the games' representations of violence don't shape a player's cognitive reality in such a way that encourages fear, but rather presents an opening to safely trauma drain through controlled exposures to violence from a critical distance. This conclusion would have been impossible to draw without attending to the series' ludology, narratology, and representations of trauma simultaneously.

CHAPTER 3: WHO ARE *THE LAST OF US?*

Critically and commercially, *TLoU* and *TLoU2* have achieved a renown like few other console gaming franchises have. Despite the review-bombing that occurred in response to *TLoU2*'s inclusion of canonically queer characters, both games saw recording-breaking sales and received various awards, seeming to offer much for many. This review-bombing, however, indicates the need to pay close critical attention to the game's representations of sexuality and gender. In the context of a gaming industry that still produces almost exclusively stereotypical depictions of women and routinely objectifies their digital bodies, merely setting two women as PCs seems controversial. The effects of this are intensified by the fact that since *TLoU2* is a scripted game; playing as these characters is mandatory to complete the games. While socially-conscious players can see some evidence of the industry standard slowly changing, the games' inclusion of these PCs is not a choice to be made between a customizable male or female avatar, such as in role-playing games like *Skyrim,* or by-default limited to a male character, as is the case for the majority of other games.

Beyond their mere inclusion as PCs in *TLoU2*, Ellie and Abby do present a major departure from more normative depictions of women in video games. Abby's digital body takes a striking form different than that of other well-known female video game characters, like *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft, *Street Fighter's* Chun-Li, or *Mortal Kombat's* Sonya Blade. Abby is tall and strong, but not lithe or statuesque. A trained military combatant who looks every bit the part, Abby's form is bulky and intimidating. Her muscle takes up space. Ellie, on the other hand, is lean and wiry.

Furthermore, the varied body types of these two PCs makes sense ludically (Schubert). The difference in play-styles between the two characters is meaningful. Significantly, the

characters' loadouts are different and, as such, must be wielded differently to produce the greatest effect. Though there are some weapon types common to both characters (two handguns, a rifle, a shotgun, and a bow each), key differences remain. Ellie carries a switchblade and recovers a silenced sub-machine gun, which both clearly pose a strategic stealth advantage over Abby's shivs, which have only limited durability and must be crafted again once broken. The unique weapon Abby eventually scavenges is a flamethrower, which relies on power and force, rather than stealth. Though both characters can use explosives, Ellie is equipped with trap mines, which can kill enemies without revealing Ellie's location, stun bombs, which allow her to regain a stealthy position in case one has been lost, and Molotov cocktails, which work against multiple enemies as a sort of last resort. On the other hand, Abby only carries pipe bombs, which are significantly less subtle than Ellies trap mines or stun bombs. Here, the difference is evident. While Ellie's weapons and small frame prioritize stealth and enable players to take a more indirect approach to combat encounters, Abby's weapons and strength allow for the successful use of more brute force. In this way, the ludonarrative cohesion of the characters' respective loadouts allows for a deeper characterization of both women, making the strengths and weaknesses of each present not just in how they appear, but how they play.

This varied representation goes much further than most video games in presenting a variety and depth of character with regard to their female characters. Narratively, Ellie and Abby are also complex characters, who struggle with their relationships and morality. Ellie is a lesbian, which is virtually unheard of for a scripted PC. In the series, the two are surrounded by other round, though non-playable, female characters, like Dina, Mel, Yara, and Maria, who all exhibit their own unique personalities, ethics, religious affiliations, body types, gender expressions, and sexualities. While it is regrettable that this bears mentioning, again given the context of the video

game industry as misogynist, it is noteworthy that none of these characters are hyper-sexualized by compromising poses or unnecessarily revealing or tight clothes. Often, these women dress similarly to the men of the zombie apocalypse, in comfortable clothing suitable for the weather at the time, with their hair cut short or pulled back into braids or ponytails. Similarly, all of the depicted sexual encounters add value to the story by deepening players' understanding of character dynamics and figuring meaningfully into the plot of the narrative. At least in *TLoU2*, both of the two sex scenes are consensual and one is queer. None are gratuitous, salacious, or contain more nudity than could routinely feature in a PG-13 movie. This is not to say that female and gender non-conforming characters in video games can't or shouldn't dress provocatively or engage in whatever kinds of sex they like, as often as they like. However, it is imperative to address the fact that the representation of the women in *TLoU* is not limited or flattened, only present to titillate or gratify the stereotypical gamer, as might well be the case in other popular video game franchises, like *Grand Theft Auto.*

Of equal significance to the interpretation of gender in the series is the role violence plays. As previously discussed, the player pedagogy of violence in the game is more nuanced and productive than in other franchises, like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. When viewing the violence of *TLoU* through a feminist lens, it also becomes clear that especially in the second game, violence is enacted by women, onto women and men equally (Schubert). In a scripted video games series that features women heavily as PCs, it is perhaps surprising that most of the violence is not overtly gendered or sexual. However, these women are routinely subject to representational trauma, as shown in chapter two, and as such their represented traumas are not without identities; they have implications about gender and sexuality that must be unpacked and studied in more detail to identify and to determine their ramifications.

"Oh babygirl": Gendered Traumas in *The Last of Us*

Rape, though never explicitly depicted in either game of the series, is nevertheless present as a representational gendered trauma. A fraught and complex issue to take up in this or any literary, film, or VGS analysis, I look to feminist theory to broach it in a sensitive and productive way that honors the lived experiences of out-of-game rape survivors. In "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape," Carine M. Mardorossian challenges both conservative and post-modern feminist theories of rape, arguing that both approaches handle sexual violence in way that reinscribes gender roles and limits understandings of trauma to a psychical context, reducing trauma to an individual identity, rather than the result of interlocking hegemonic social constructs. Furthermore, she encourages her fellow feminist scholars and activists to reconceptualize rape to better account for these constructs *and* the agency of survivors.

One of the most salient elements of Mardorossian's work is her response to post-modern feminists. Along with bemoaning the dearth of contemporary feminist publications on rape, Mardorossian criticizes what she sees as an over-correction in response to postmodern feminist theory: "The question is no longer whether women's identity is immutable or constructed, or whether they need to discover or continually produce their inner self, but whether an emphasis on interiority and self-reflexivity is not itself a technology of domination that pathologizes women and displaces male agency" (758). It is this pathology that she sees as having taken the definition of 'victimization' and "changed [it] from an external reality imposed on someone to a psychologized inner state that itself triggers crises" (770). As a result, in post-modern feminist writings, "victims themselves are represented as irremediably and unidirectionally shaped by the traumatic experience of rape and hence incapable of dealing with anything but their own inner turmoil," an inner turmoil that they inevitably bring upon themselves (768). This representation

is not only an over-simplification of how rape affects its victims, but it also infantilizes women, frames 'victim' as one of the few possible identities for women to take up, and blames them for violence perpetrated by individual men and upheld by systemic patriarchy. Radstone's conception of trauma as ambiguous is incompatible with their narrow understanding of rape as trauma. On this basis, I agree with Mardorossian and will view sexual trauma as just as complex as other kinds of trauma, with its interpellated roles, like 'victim,' just as nebulous and difficult to disentangle from other roles.

In this vein, Kalí Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* explores how individual experiences of trauma relate to their cultural representations, contextualizing representations of trauma in order to better understand them. Tal's sites of investigation not only center on specific historical events, such as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the many traumas present within and around them, but also on long-standing sites of trauma that continue to permeate the American status quo: sexual assault, rape, and incest. Given the threat of rape present in "Lakeside Resort," chapter nine of *TLoU*, it is imperative to analyze the series' representations of sexual trauma, in light of its cultural context. Before setting forth such an analysis, it is necessary to pause and explain my positioning sexual assault and rape as an intrinsically gendered trauma.

While the experiences of male rape survivors are valid and significant, it is common knowledge that rape, both in its material reality and its cultural representation, is more frequently committed by male offenders, who most frequently attack women or gender non-conforming individuals. Not only are male offenders more prevalent, both in reality and in fictional representations, but they are also in general much more violent than female offenders. It is true too, that women and gender non-conforming people have never used rape as a systemic tool

against men in the context of genocide or war, while the reverse is almost universally the case. This being said, sexual assault and rape are examples of intrinsically gendered traumas as a result of patriarchal hegemony, and I will be referring to them in this work as such.

"In a society where violence against women [perpetrated by men] is supported and condoned, excused and rationalized, [and] the testimony of survivors of sexual abuse is silenced, ignored, distorted, and drowned out by the thundering voices of the patriarchs," how does *TLoU* and *TLoU2* narrativize gendered violence and its subsequent trauma (Tal 197)? The inciting narrative action of the first game, and pertinently, the first instance of trauma in this series, was the death of Joel's biological daughter, Sarah, in the wake of the *Cordyceps* outbreak (Druckmann ch. 1). Feminist scholars of contemporary media might fairly criticize the first game because of this, labeling the death of the male protagonist's closest female loved one for the sake of furthering the plot, 'fridging.'[10] In light of this, the inciting narrative action of the second game, which is also represented as traumatic, becomes a fruitful point of interrogation. This event is Joel's death. Though it might be tempting for some gamers to cry 'misandry' or 'reverse sexism,' perhaps claiming this plot point as a case of gender-inverted fridging, such self-righteous indignation would be misapplied. While the most players ever learn about Sarah is that she is Joel's daughter, listens to rock music, and plays soccer, players spend a whole game learning about Joel. Joel has also far out-lived most of the game's depicted zombie-apocalypse survivors, while arguably taking on far more risks and killing more infected than the average citizens of Jackson. In this way, when properly contextualized, Joel's life carries enough narrative weight to justify his death (if the death of the standard white, cisgender, heterosexual hero calls for justification), even before *TLoU2* memorializes the character by following Ellie as

[10] Fridging is a term fittingly named for an infamous scene in an issue of the DC comic book series *Green Lantern* in which the titular hero returns home to find his girlfriend's corpse stuffed into his refrigerator.

she mourns him, visits his grave and home, and ultimately marches down the tragic revenge plot of the game (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1).

Before revisiting the events of "Lakeside Resort," I will return to the ending of the first game. While controversial, the resolution of *TLoU* relies on "an American tradition so entrenched it barely needs to be described" (Tal 154). That is "the evocation of rape as justification for the use of force against an enemy 'other' (particularly as justification for vigilante action)" (154). Here, the key term is "evocation." Rather than using the embodied realities or potential suffering of actual rape survivors, American politicians *evoke* figurative rape as a tool to justify attacks on the 'other.' This is the logic that has been used to sway the American public to support wars over-seas many times over. This is also the logic that writers take up in their work to sway readers, viewers, and players into agreeing with the morally questionable actions of their protagonists. To map this dynamic onto the ending of the first game, the developers reinscribe this culturally resonant rape metaphor through Joel's justification for his killing combatants and unarmed doctors alike to rescue Ellie. From his point-of-view, the Fireflies were going to penetrate Ellie's body against her conscious will in order to satisfy their need to develop the cure. In his mind, by killing the Fireflies, he is taking vigilante action to protect his property. Though Joel clearly cares for Ellie and never consciously refers to her as property in a literal sense, the implication is there. Notwithstanding patriarchal, historical institutions that are every American's colonial heritage, such as primogeniture and coverture, the outset of the game frames Ellie as contraband goods for Joel to smuggle out of Boston. Despite his affective care for her, Joel at least in part views Ellie as his property. In his mind, it is his right to save his property from damage and theft, in other words, from metaphoric rape and literal death, using whatever means necessary.

However, Joel, along with gamers who unflinchingly defend his actions as a character, fail to see the hypocrisy of employing this logic. Though the game developers frame the narrative through Joel's eyes, thus privileging his beliefs and actions, they also do not obscure the Fireflies' motivations. The Fireflies could employ the same logic to rationalize the means to their ends. From their shared point-of-view, the infected are penetrating the remaining human population against humanity's will in order to satisfy their lust for healthy human flesh. According to the Fireflies' collective mission, by sacrificing Ellie they are taking vigilante action to protect *their* property, their own lives and the lives of others like them, again from metaphoric rape and literal death. Either way, these evocations of rape diminish the value of human life, prioritize the dominant, masculinized will over the feminized will, and justify violence. Furthermore, they overlook the reality of actual in-game rape survivors. In the context of the game's world, it is implied that rape has persisted into the zombie apocalypse, and in the context of the societally disempowered player's out-of-game life, she may be a rape survivor herself.

Moreover, Joel's myopia and hypocrisy extends even further. While it is clear that the Fireflies did not ask for Ellie's consent to operate (they picked her up while she was unconscious and immediately prepped her for surgery), Joel did not ask for her consent to take her away (Druckmann ch. 11). Her dream and the pair's shared goal throughout much of the game was to reach the Fireflies, so that they could use her immunity to develop a cure. When Joel offers Ellie the opportunity to stop, turn back, and live with Tommy in Jackson before they reach Saint Mary's, Ellie refuses, concluding, "After all we've been through, everything I've done… it can't be for nothing" (ch. 10). Joel confirms that he was listening, heard Ellie, and understood what she wanted out of that refusal after further reflecting on these events. In *TLoU2*, he explains to Tommy, "She needed her immunity to mean something'" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1). This

indicates that Joel knew Ellie likely would have wanted to sacrifice herself for the sake of the cure and the future of humanity, but he 'saved' her anyways. Joel's will and sense of entitlement subsumed Ellie's right to bodily autonomy. Because he failed to protect his biological daughter, Sarah, he is even more determined to protect Ellie. Despite resisting the role for so long, Joel commits to being Ellie's father, who like many fathers before him, carries out his vision of that responsibility, even when it means denying his daughter access to her right to consent. Given this problematic American tradition of evoking rape as a narrative tool, one possible way to interpret the conclusion of the first game suggests that Joel's actions are tantamount to rape, and given his role as surrogate father, incest. While there are many who would refute such an interpretation, the mere possibility of it stands as testament to Joel's position of power over Ellie and the workings of the patriarchy that are at play in the game.

Besides, Joel's power and privilege as a white, cisgender, heterosexual male protagonist follows the conventions of other traditionally masculinized narratives, like that of the epic and the comic book, in that the reader, viewer, or player, through the character, vicariously experiences the fulfillment of male power fantasies. Because of the unique affordances of the medium, in video games this fantasy fulfillment isn't simply read, but enacted and internalized. In this case, Joel's characterization allows gamers to internalize many male power fantasies, even the seemingly contradictory ones, including that of the survivor and hero, the provider and protector, and finally the avenger and dominator. Other characters in the narrative of the first game only serve to increase the credibility of these fantasies. Sarah and Tess are 'fridged' to provide traumatic backstory and motivation for Joel. Beyond them, Joel outperforms every companion in the game. He's a more stereotypically masculine protector than his gay counterpart, Bill, who failed to save his life partner, Frank. He outlived his Black counterpart in

Henry, who failed to save his younger brother Sam from infection *and* committed the ultimate sin in a game of survival: suicide. He murders Marlene, a Black woman and Ellie's surrogate mother, when she tries to stop him from leaving Saint Mary's with Ellie. Just as Joel's characterization is subject to insidious constructs of the patriarchy, so are his companions'.

Ellie, despite her interruptions of Joel's dominant point-of-view in the first game, is no exception. She, alongside these additional othered characters, upholds Joel's hierarchical positioning as the white, heterosexual, masculine ideal. If Joel is to have someone to protect, he needs Ellie to be in danger. The threat of her rape at the hands of the cannibal David plays directly into these male power fantasies. Despite Joel's entirely ineffectual attempts to rescue Ellie, gamers still feel the emotional catharsis of Ellie collapsing into his warm embrace, undermining the thematic weight of her proven ability to defend herself. Her voice is quieted by his whispers of "Oh babygirl. It's okay" (Druckmann ch. 9). Significantly, this phrase simultaneously infantilizes and feminizes Ellie. Once Ellie's capacity for violence and ability to successfully protect herself threatened Joel's representational masculinity and role in the narrative, the scripted dialogue reasserts his masculine position of power over her. "Babygirl" is a phrase he repeats as he picks an unconscious Ellie up off the operating table at Saint Mary's, strengthening the potential interpretation that he views David's attempted rape and cannibalism similarly to how he views the Fireflies' attempt to create a cure using Ellie's body (Druckmann ch. 11). The fact that Ellie is a young white girl lends the fantasy more cultural heft. Not only does her identity make her more vulnerable in the eyes of an American player taught to view white womanhood as victimhood, but it re-instantiates his idealized masculinity through contrast, if it was ever in doubt, even for a second.

In this way, *TLoU* relies upon patriarchal gender norms to situate Joel as the prototypical survival horror genre hero. Given that the protagonists of its sequel are both women, and with one of the lead co-writers, Halley Gross, also a woman, *TLoU2* already stands in contrast to its predecessor and most other games without further inspection. However, this does not immediately determine that the sequel's representations of gendered trauma transcend the misogyny of the original. For instance, after gaining even only a limited understanding of the plot, a feminist scholar would challenge how despite living in a future post-apocalyptic setting, Ellie and Abby seem driven entirely by their relationships with their father figures. And while the 'chosen one' of the series is a woman and lesbian at that, the resolution to her story is tragic. Though Ellie survives, her adopted father rips away her chance to save humanity, and eventually she is left alone in every sense of the word. Finally, there is the inclusion of Lev, a trans boy. While he survives, his fellow Seraphites, including his mother, label him an apostate for attempting to transition, refuse to use his masculine pronouns, and exclusively refer to him by his deadname, "Lily" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 7). Both his biological mom and sister Yara struggle to accept his transness and both are dead by the end of the series. These issues are worth interrogating further in the context of this paper and beyond, especially given kind of societally disempowered player I'm writing about and to and for: women and gender non-conforming survivors of trauma. Living and surviving in a patriarchal, heterosexist, white supremacist society is a traumatic reality for these players, and therefore, how *TLoU* represents healing becomes urgent, even more pressing than how it represents trauma itself.

Depictions of Healing in *The Last of Us* and *Part II*

Ellie as Perpetually Traumatized: Like a Moth to the Flame

When Ellie leaves the farmhouse she shares with Dina and J.J., it is to hunt Abby down for the final time. Hoping to quiet her troubled mind, she seeks her final, permanent revenge for Joel's murder. Again, though misguided, truly her search for Abby is an attempt to heal the trauma she sustained witnessing Joel's murder. As always when characters travel in this series, her progress towards Santa Barbara, where Abby and Lev are searching for a group of former Fireflies, is thwarted by enemies. Upon arriving in Santa Barbara, she encounters the Rattlers, a local gang of slavers. Ellie is near-fatally wounded when she accidentally triggers one of the Rattlers' traps, but uses her wits and grit to escape and get information about Abby's location. This intel leads her to the Rattlers' headquarters, a domed building on Catalina island, and a long series of combat encounters, which take their toll on Ellie, who loses more and more blood from her wound each minute she keeps fighting. By the time she finds Abby, she can barely stay upright (Druckmann & Gross ch. 10).

Having fallen prey to a ruse in which the Rattlers lure former Fireflies to Santa Barbara by posing as their headquarters, Abby and Lev were captured and enslaved. Rather than live under the conditions of enslavement, Abby and Lev attempt an escape. Ellie is informed by a group of prisoners she has released that they've been taken down to "the pillars" as punishment. With the newly freed prisoners to keep the remaining Rattlers occupied, Ellie leaves the compounded undetected and heads into a palm grove. On the other side, the horror of the pillars is revealed. The sky is grey and bleak. Seagulls fly in circles overhead crying, their screeches contributing to the eerie atmosphere. The pillars themselves are a field of palm trunks, repurposed as stakes. A person hangs from most of them, each victim essentially crucified,

except their wrists are tied together over their heads, instead of their arms being stretched out to either side. Even Ellie, who has seen her fair share of horrors, is awe-struck. The player as Ellie searches amongst the pillars, seeking out Abby. Once she's found, the game prompts the player to press triangle to interact. Abby's first words: "Help me. Please…" She is nearly unrecognizable. The camera cuts to a close up of her face to emphasize just how much she has endured during her time at the Rattlers' base. Her signature braid cut, her hair has been sheared to a close crop. Her arms have lost a significant amount of muscle mass. Her skin is sunburnt and scarred. Her lips are visibly chapped. Her face is gaunt. Her eyes sunk in, her cheekbones jutting out, her cheeks concave, she is clearly emaciated. Ellie cuts her down. Suspicious and unsure of Ellie's intentions, Abby keeps a wide berth while she frees Lev. She picks him up and carries him a way, telling Ellie, "There are boats this way" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 10).

Arriving at the shoreline, each woman loads up her own separate motorboat. It's unclear to a first-time player what will happen next. Ellie, looking worse for wear herself, pauses after setting her gear in the boat. She touches the open wound on her side, and when she removes her hand, her palm is coated in her own blood. She looks down at it, and an extreme close-up of Joel's beaten and bloody face flashes briefly across the screen. It cuts back to Ellie, still staring at her hand. She looks over her shoulder in the direction of Abby's boat and then back down to her bloody hand. She turns away from her boat and back towards Abby (Druckmann & Gross ch. 10). This moment, though fleeting, further illuminates the nature of Ellie's trauma and search for healing. Unable to heal, she can't let go of Joel's death as it constantly interrupts her thoughts. She's convinced that getting revenge on Abby and taking her life is the only path to clearing them. This, despite how her own actions of aggression toward Nora and Mel left her further traumatized.

Despite Abby's initial refusal to fight, Ellie assaults her. When Abby still won't take the bait, Ellie threatens Lev's life, holding her switchblade at his throat. Abby gives in. The third and final confrontation begins, and what ensues is by far the most emotionally intense and grueling combat encounter of the series. Players control Ellie as the two throw themselves at each other, grappling, pulling, and tearing. The fight is messy. All of the clean precision and strategy learned from earlier combat has fallen to the wayside. They swing at each other wildly, frequently missing (Druckmann & Gross ch. 10). If players have effectively adopted both PCs as social others, achieving some degree of empathy with both, while not attaching either too closely to their out-of-game sense of self, this is another moment of strategic ludonarrative dissonance. The scene fatigues both women and the player themselves. Yes, Ellie and Abby are considerably weakened by their recent injuries and dealings with the Rattlers, but more significantly, they carry the weight of their many traumas and, indeed, the series on their shoulders. They are each tired to their cores. The fight scene viscerally depicts this physical and emotional exhaustion: the cost of their survival in the face of trauma.

Eventually, after what may seem to players an eternity of punishing gameplay, Ellie kicks Abby into the shallow ocean water and then kneels next to her, aiming to force Abby's head underwater, to drown her. Abby struggles, managing at one point to even bite off two of Ellie's fingers. However, Ellie gets the better of her, grabbing her by the throat and forcing her face under the surface. Still Abby grabs at and slaps Ellie's arms, continuing to struggle and jerk underwater. Somber music begins to play in the background, contrasting with Ellie's screams and grunts of effort. The camera pans from its over the shoulder shot of Ellie looking down on Abby to turn towards Ellie. Her arms gleam with oceanwater, sweat, and blood. She grits her teeth. Abby's legs kick wildly, and in response Ellie pins Abby's closest hip down with her knee.

The camera zooms further in on Ellie's face, and a brief clip of Joel playing the guitar on his front porch flashes across the screen. Once the camera has cut back to Ellie's face, it is clear she is crying. Suddenly, it cuts to a wide shot, and Ellie releases Abby. Ellie sits down in the water. Abby is left choking and gasping for air. She backs away. The camera centers on Ellie, though Abby is in view in the background. Ellie resigned, cradling her injured hand, sobs, "Go. Just take him." Abby hesitates, never turning her back on Ellie, walks to the boat and out of frame. Off-screen, players can hear the engine starting. It cuts to a wide shot of Ellie from behind, sitting all alone in the center of the grey ocean and misty sky. After a moment, across the left-hand edge of the screen, Abby and Lev pull away in their boat and disappear into the mist. A somber acoustic guitar plays. The screen cuts to black (Druckmann & Gross ch. 10).

The significance of this climatic scene to the thematic messaging of *TLoU2* and to *TLoU* overall cannot be overstated. The series' representation of how violence, revenge, and trauma operate all hinge upon it. At first, players might be confused by Ellie's sudden decision to let Abby go. After a whole game, dozens of non-diegetic hours of play, spent leading to this moment, why would Ellie let go of what she's been chasing this whole time? The explanation relies upon her sudden memory of Joel on his porch. Unlike the flash of his bloodied corpse, this second memory of the scene was not a post-traumatic intrusion, but rather a bittersweet memory. This moment of recollection stands for Ellie's realization that killing Abby won't erase either memory. It won't erase Joel's death, nor his life. The impact of his death upon Ellie can't be separated from the impact of his life upon her. While this epiphany can't exactly be categorized as healing, Ellie's insight has saved her the trauma of yet another murder in cold blood.

Moreover, the scene highlights just how instrumental the relationship between Joel and Ellie is to the game's thesis on healing. To explain, throughout the second game, their connection

has been underlined by the presence of music. In particular, the guitar is laden with thematic weight. Early in the game, Joel serenades a younger Ellie with Pearl Jam's "Future Days" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 1). The song carries poignant hopefulness in a post-apocalyptic world: "I believe/And I believe 'cause I can see/Our future days/Days of you and me" (Pearl Jam). After performing the song for her, he gives her the guitar, and promises to teach her how to play. In this way, the lyrics are also a promise to care for each other. After Joel's death and throughout Seattle, Ellie finds a couple of opportunities to practice her skills. If players fully explore the downtown area in Ellie's experience of "SEATTLE DAY 1," in an abandoned music shop, she will pick up a guitar to serenade Dina with an acoustic cover of A-ha's "Take on Me" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 2). In the theatre, there's a guitar on which Ellie plays a few chords of "Future Days" (ch. 2). These moments of music bring stillness and calm in the midst of a game that is frequently fast-paced and harrowing. Often, they trigger happy memories.

When Ellie returns to the farmhouse in the epilogue, it is barren and empty. Dina has taken all of her and J.J.'s belongings, leaving Ellie's collected albums, posters, and paintings in her room upstairs. In it, players also find Ellie's guitar. However, this time when Ellie picks up the guitar, its significance and emotional tenor has shifted slightly. When players strum the notes across the controller's touch pad, the chords don't ring on Ellie's guitar quite like they used to. In the final confrontation with Abby, Ellie lost two digits on both the ring and pinky fingers of her fret hand. Now, she can't finger the chords properly. Rather than gracefully dancing, the song limps. She stops playing and pauses. A memory follows in the form of a cutscene. It's of Ellie and Joel's last conversation before his death. Players have never seen the moment prior to Ellie's recollection of it, except for the brief flash of Joel on the front porch that caused her to stop drowning Abby. The two make small talk, but inevitably the conversation comes back around to

the source of their hang-ups: Saint Mary's. Frustrated, Ellie avows, "I was supposed to die in that hospital. My life would've fucking mattered. But you took that from me." There's a long pause. Then, Joel replies, "If somehow the Lord gave me a second chance at that moment… I would do it all over again." At first, it seems as though the two won't be able to reconcile their differences, with Ellie sighing and responding, "Yeah… I just… I don't think I can ever forgive you for that." Then she adds, "But I would like to try." The memory ends, and the game returns to the present-day at the farmhouse. Ellie stands up to lean the guitar against the windowsill, leaving the case unused and open. She picks up her pack and leaves the frame. The camera slowly zooms in on the top of the fret, centering the moth engraved there and showing the field outside the farmhouse in the background through the window. Through the window, players see Ellie walk off into the trees (Druckmann & Gross epilogue). *TLoU2* ends here.

This final scene of the series demonstrates the layered nature of Ellie's trauma. Not only did she lose her father in Joel, but Abby cruelly took him from her just as they were beginning to repair their relationship. Ellie grieves not only Joel and their shared past together, but also the potential to share their "future days." In the wake of this trauma, Ellie routinely chose her dysfunctional need for revenge over building and strengthening the relationships she has with her new family. What brought her joy and happiness before, i.e., loving Dina, caring for J.J., and playing guitar, have all been lost to her. These connections have been severed. This leaves her unable to fully heal.

Throughout *TLoU2,* moths figure centrally as a symbol. As previously explained, there is a moth engraved on the fretboard of the guitar Joel gave her. The same moth appears in the tattoo that covers most of Ellie's forearm, camouflaging the scar from the infected bite wound. The loading screen depicts light emanating from the upper right-hand corner of the screen. Hundreds

of moths flit around the screen in the light. Moths are known as creatures who seek out light in the darkness. This calls back to the Fireflies' slogan from the first game: "When you're lost in the darkness, look for the light" (Druckmann ch. 11). They wanted to be humanity's hope in the post-apocalypse. Ellie is tied closely to this idea through her tattoo and guitar. She wanted to help the Fireflies bring the cure to humanity. In the aftermath of Joel's decision to prevent that, she remains unsure of where the light is. It could have been in her relationship with Joel, but Abby murdered him. Moths are meant to be guided by the light of the moon. But like a moth to the flame, Ellie's attempts at healing from her trauma were misguided. The only coping skills she learned in the zombie apocalypse were of violence and retribution. She learned from Joel, and his actions to avoid trauma were of mass murder. She and Joel might have learned more together, or she might have been able to find happiness with Dina, but those opportunities were cut short, first by Abby and then by herself. In the end, she's able to set aside the dysfunction of her grief when she leaves behind the guitar, a symbol of her relationship with Joel, but the cost was too high. She's lost her family. Though it's possible that her intrusive memories and hallucinations might have lessened or disappeared as a result, players can't know this for certain, because it's not depicted or alluded to within the confines of the game.

While Ellie is a lesbian character, in *TLoU2* she is totally guided by her relationship with Joel, to the detriment of her relationship with Dina. She chooses her past relationship with her father over her current relationship with her female lover. As a result, she proves unable to be a loving wife and mother. In the end, *TLoU* and *TLoU2* represents a lesbian life not only as a hopeless one, but also as incapable of sustaining domestic life. While the lesbian relationship between Ellie and Dina was framed as potentially healing, it ultimately proved impossible to

maintain. In this representation of the post-apocalypse, there is no successful path to healing for its queer PC. Ellie ends up alone.

Abby as Hopefully Healed: Not a Wolf, a Firefly

While Ellie's story concludes with her isolated and scarred by her trauma, Abby's resolution, while dark, is still slightly more hopeful. Having already taken her revenge and realizing it has not brought healing, she turns her efforts to heal from her trauma toward other, less violent avenues. After leaving Lev and Yara to fend for themselves in the trailer, she has her dysfunctional sex scene with Owen, and then the nightmare in the pediatric ward of St. Mary's where instead of her father's corpse, she finds Lev and Yara hanged. The next day, she goes back for them, and takes them to Owen's aquarium, where she knows that Mel as a trained doctor can treat Yara's broken arm. Unfortunately, Yara has developed compartment syndrome and requires an amputation. Mel sends Lev and Abby to retrieve medical supplies from the Lakehill Seattle Hospital and return with them so she can safely operate. On their perilous journey to the hospital, Lev and Abby get to know each other better. Being from opposing sides of a war over territory in Seattle, their ideas about each other are shaped by the stereotypes the WLF soldiers hold about the Seraphites and vice versa. They have a lot to unlearn before they can get to know each other as individuals. Finally, once they are both comfortable being more authentic and vulnerable in front of each other they discuss Abby's motivations for helping Yara and Lev, whom she could have left for dead. When Lev asks, "Why did you come back for us?" Abby replies, "Guilt." When Lev presses further, stating, "You don't owe us anything," she explains, "I just… needed to lighten the load a bit" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 7). This dialogue illustrates that despite her revenge, Abby still struggles with the on-going the effects of trauma, including these recurring dreams about her father's death. As I explained in chapter two, she continues to suffer from

representational post-traumatic stress, the events in her life and her feelings about them get wrapped up in her trauma. “Lightening the load” is Abby’s way of trying to find effective coping mechanisms for her trauma, her way of trying to heal now that it’s clear her violent retribution was a disordered and fruitless attempt.

Furthermore, helping Lev and Yara proves to work for Abby. At the end of her experience of “Seattle Day 2” (Druckmann & Gross ch. 7), Abby and Lev have retrieved the supplies and returned in time for Mel to operate. The operation is a success. Abby kept Lev safe from infected and fellow Seraphites alike, and Yara will be okay. That night, Abby dreams of St. Mary’s again. However, the pediatric care hallway looks different this time. There is no red flashing light, no blaring alarm, just quiet music playing in the background. A soft, pure white light glows from the operating room, which players can see directly into with the red operating theatre door being all the way open. The absence of the flashing red, the red door, and the alarm all immediately dull the atmosphere of sharp danger and fear into one of calm. Players guide the younger Abby toward the door. Here she simply jogs, instead of sprinting as she usually does. When she opens the operating room door, her father stands there alone, bathed in white light. He turns to face Abby and smiles (ch. 7). This dream shows that having “lightened the load” by helping Yara and Lev, she was able to replace the content of the dream in which they were hanged. Further, she has replaced the painful nightmare of what really happened that day with a peaceful, happy moment with her father. By betraying the specific details of her past, she has narrativized it into something with which she can live. Not only has Abby alleviated the guilt she felt from leaving Lev and Yara in the trailer, but she has also created a new positive association with the site of trauma. Abby has achieved a measure of representational healing unlike anything Ellie has experienced.

Having found what works as healing for her, Abby routinely makes decisions that would generate further healing rather than further trauma. Both times Abby is presented with an opportunity to take revenge on Ellie for violently torturing and murdering her companions in *TLoU2,* she chooses not to. At their second confrontation of the game in the theatre after Abby found Mel and Owen's bodies in the aquarium, Abby does shoot both Jesse and Tommy. However, in a world based on survival, when an enemy combatant attacks, there is no choice but self-defense. These were not brutal, pre-meditated attacks. However, when she and Ellie fight afterwards, Abby gains the upper hand. She throws Ellie to the ground, breaks her arm, pins her down, and punches her in the face, over and over again. Dina enters and runs at Abby from behind with a knife. Incapacitated, Ellie can do nothing. Though Dina keeps Abby occupied, her assault doesn't last. Lev defends Abby by shooting Dina with an arrow through the chest. It's not a fatal wound, however. It seems that Lev purposefully aimed to hit muscle, not organ. It is enough, however, to stun Dina, who collapses, face first to the floor. Abby grabs Dina's head from behind and smashes it into the floor repeatedly. Ellie begs Abby to stop. She responds by grabbing Dina and twisting her onto her lap to face Ellie. She holds her knife at Dina's throat. When Ellie says, "She's pregnant," Abby first replies, "Good." It seems as though she's more determined than ever to slit her throat to torture Ellie. Before she can, Lev shouts, "Abby!" The camera is trained on Abby and Dina, both covered in blood. Abby's face twinges with something that looks like shame, and she lets go of Dina, pushing her to the side. She gets up and walks towards Ellie. She states flatly, "Never let me see you again," and then leaves (Druckmann & Gross ch. 8). Here she had the opportunity to take revenge on Ellie for murdering Mel and Owen, but instead she listens to Lev. She chooses to preserve her relationship with him and his idea of her as a role model, rather than continue to hurt Ellie.

Similarly, when Ellie confronts Abby on Catalina Island by the boats, Abby refuses to fight Ellie. When Ellie walks over to Abby's boat and says, "I can't let you leave," Abby simply responds, "I'm not doing this" without even looking up from what she's doing. When Ellie takes it a step further to physically assault Abby, she still refuses, saying, "I'm not going to fight you." It is only when Ellie threatens Lev that Abby gives in (Druckmann & Gross ch. 10). Unwilling to fight for revenge or even her own safety, Abby will only fight to protect Lev, for the sake of her new chosen family. Time and again, Abby has prioritized her new bond with Lev over anything else. She puts his needs and desires before her own, practicing a selfless love she has built on her original efforts to "lighten the load." The path she walks toward healing is one paved by the adoption of a chosen family.

In this way, the game represents the healthiest, purest relationship to be the mother-son relationship that develops between Abby and Lev. Abby's absolution comes from caring for Lev, rather than her toxic romance with Owen. Such a depiction transcends misogynist literary tropes and more normative patterns of storytelling that glorify straight relationships and male validation above all else. However, this representation of healing does problematize Abby as a feminist figure. Representing Ellie as unfit to care for J.J. while Abby becomes Lev's mother reinforces stereotypes that portray straight women as more capable of nurturance and maternity. Though Dina, a canonically bisexual character, presumably cares for J.J. moving forward and was shown to be a caring mother during her time with Ellie at the farmhouse, her pregnancy and previous relationship with Jesse bring her closer in proximity to traditional conceptions of femininity and motherhood than Ellie. *TLoU* represents queerness as less compatible with parenting then straightness. Indeed, with each PC's endings such as they are, *TLoU2* also represents queerness

further as less compatible with healing and happiness, with its lesbian PC left broken and alone, while its straight PC learns to cope more effectively, and as a result, gains a new family.

Joel as the Martyred Hero: Giraffes and Dinosaurs

If Abby is able to make more representational progress towards healing after trauma than Ellie, Joel makes more. True, his initial trauma came from the murder of his daughter Sarah, which occurred twenty years prior to the title card for the first game, so it makes narrative sense for his characterization to develop beyond what might be possible for the two other PCs, neither of whom are even twenty years old yet. Given that his time in *TLoU2* is brief, the first major sign of his healing occurs within the first installment. In Salt Lake City, just before Ellie and Joel are brought to Saint Mary's to develop the cure, the two share a moment of reprieve. From the second story of a dilapidated building, Ellie and Joel take in the view of a city now giving way to nature. Amidst a backdrop of skyscrapers, grass and trees have covered what used to be a baseball field. Peaceful, slow, almost child-like music plays, while giraffes (presumably descendants of the population of the former Salt Lake City Zoo) graze. Remarkably, players are allowed to sit in that moment of calm and breathe for as long as they like. Neither Ellie nor Joel will move or speak, nor will the game prompt you to progress in any of its usual ways. Only when players chose to operate their controller again will Joel move. The game prompts players to open the next door. When Joel reaches for its handle, he pauses to turn towards Ellie, who is now following again. He makes Ellie an offer: "We don't have to do this. You know that, right? […] Go back to Tommy's. Just… be done with this whole damn thing" (Druckmann ch. 10). In this moment, he openly acknowledges that the nature of their relationship has changed. By offering to end his contract and "go back to Tommy's," Joel tells Ellie that he's no longer just a smuggler transporting 'goods,' but her adopted father.

In this scene with the giraffes, it becomes clear that Joel has found what Abby finds in *TLoU2*, his pathway to representational healing. Previously, his inability to emotionally connect with others, including Tess and Ellie herself, signaled his inability to narrativize his own trauma. In Caruth's language, he couldn't betray his own particular past to understand his suffering in a broader context. Emotionally connecting to Ellie would have felt like betraying Sarah. Now that Joel allows himself to adopt Ellie, he is replacing Sarah, but only in the sense that he replaces the hurt he has associated with fatherhood with new positive associations in his love for Ellie. The giraffes help increase the resonance of this moment. In a wounded city, new, non-predatory life continues to grow and move on, despite the infected and the destruction.

Later, in *TLoU2*, players see Joel attempt to continue building his relationship with Ellie and continue down his chosen path to healing. In a series of triggered memories in Ellie's experience of her three days in Seattle, players control a younger Ellie during the intervening five years between the first game and the main plot of *TLoU2.* In the memory relived at the end of "Day 1," Joel gives Ellie her sixteenth birthday present: a trip to explore the abandoned Wyoming Museum of Science and History.[11] In the first wing of the museum, Ellie frolics through dinosaur skeletons, reading pamphlets and discussing the misconceptions about dinosaurs Joel learned from watching Spielberg's *Jurassic Park.* Then, in the upstairs of that same wing, Ellie actually teaches Joel about the history of space exploration. Space being one of her deep passions, Ellie is thrilled by Joel's gift, culminating in the *pièce de résistance*: sitting in a space capsule while wearing an astronaut helmet and listening to a cassette tape recording of the Apollo 11 mission (Druckmann & Gross ch. 2).

[11] Like the university in the first game, the Wyoming Museum of Science and History is a fictional place.

This wing of the museum demonstrates a couple items of note with regard to Joel's motivation and representational healing. First of all, in the dinosaur exhibit, when Ellie asks Joel if he, "went to museums a lot" pre-outbreak, he responds, "Yeah, Sarah loved them. I swear that girl dragged me to every museum in Texas" (Druckmann & Gross ch 2.) This shows that the father-daughter relationship he is actively working to build with Ellie relies on his understanding of what Sarah enjoyed about their relationship. Rather than avoiding reminders of Sarah's death and life, and by extension, reminders of his traumatic past, Joel is continuing to rebuild positive associations with fatherhood and Sarah through Ellie. Caring for Ellie helps Joel heal. Secondly, when the pair approach the skull of the brachiosaur skeleton, Ellie remarks, "Looks like a giraffe." Joel responds, "Yeah it does, doesn't it" (ch. 2). Here, players of the first game will recognize a clear allusion to Joel's earlier declaration of love and initial moment of healing from the first game. In this way, by taking Ellie to the museum, Joel attempts to recreate that moment of vulnerability and familial love from Salt Lake City.

However, when Ellie insists on exploring the second wing of the museum, which Joel hadn't had a chance to enter and clear, players see evidence of their relationship beginning to erode. Throughout the second wing, Ellie discovers graffiti left by a former Firefly. Scrawled in black spray paint across the walls of the Natural History exhibit read messages, such as, "there is no light" and "LIARS" next to the Firefly emblem. Next to this final statement, Ellie finds the Firefly's corpse with a suicide note, apparently having shot himself in the head after losing faith in the Fireflies' mission. At this point, Joel ushers Ellie away and out of the museum (Druckmann & Gross ch. 2). When layering the figurative meaning of the second wing of the museum over top of the first, the trip to the museum becomes Joel's attempt at recreating the trust between he and Ellie that he invertedly killed when he kidnapped her from the Firefly

operating table against her will. Significantly, the giraffe in the form of the brachiosaur is dead, and their connection, like the trip itself, is tainted by the Fireflies' failure to create the cure, all because Joel took advantage of his role as Ellie's father and subverted her right to bodily autonomy, which I would argue, she has suspected ever since she said "okay" at the end of the first game (Druckmann ch. 12). However, by the end of his life, Joel attains closure because, as players learn from the flashback to their conversation on his porch, Ellie disclosed her desire to forgive him and rebuild her trust in him together. In the end, Joel remains healed from the trauma of losing Sarah and dies a martyr. Despite, and even *because,* he dies tragically at the halfway point of the series, as the sole heterosexual, male PC, Joel is characterized more heroically than either Ellie or Abby. By the end of the series, he is the only PC who is represented as fully healed from his trauma and the only character who transcends it through his death. His normative masculinity marks him as the most compatible with healing and heroism.

Who are *The Last of Us*?: White Healing to the Exclusion of Black Survival

Of course, this thesis would be remiss if it overlooked the fact that all three of its PCs are white. Regardless of the level of healing achieved by its PCs, healing is always represented as limited to the landscape of whiteness. In the first installment, Joel and Ellie travel with Henry and Sam, who are Black. Because of this, Blackness does survive to be represented in the post-apocalypse. However, as Melvin G. Hill discusses in his work, "Black Deprivation in *The Last of Us,*" the series' representation of Blackness is filled with "contradictions" that "reveal how Naughty Dog equates blackness […] with despair, nihilism, and death" (7). Despite working as an effective leader by formulating a plan to escape the mine field that is Pittsburgh, protecting his younger brother Sam, and even saving both Joel and Ellie's lives, Henry fails to live up to Joel as a survival horror genre hero (Druckmann ch. 5). In this game of survival, when Sam is

infected and, out of necessity, Henry kills him, he also kills himself (ch. 6). Rather than surviving this representational trauma and finding ways to heal from it, like Abby or Joel, Henry ends his own life. In this way, rather than healing and transcending the status of "survivor" through his death as Joel did, Henry dies and yields to the hopelessness of the apocalypse. Even Sam becomes a subject of pity and represents a loss of meaningful existence in his transformation to a mindless infected. In a video games series in which life amidst ubiquitous death is the ultimate goal, Blackness is affiliated with pity, hopelessness, and death.

Similarly, Marlene's Blackness is subject to problematic contradictions as well. She is presented early in the first game as a Ellie's sole provider and protector. Clearly a capable survivor, Marlene stands as the leader of the Fireflies in Boston, not only surviving, but resisting FEDRA's corrupt militarized regime and representing hope for the everyday citizen (Druckmann ch. 2). While Joel is presented as morally grey, Marlene's initial representation is almost wholly good. However, at the end of the game, Marlene has sanctioned Ellie's abduction and fatal operation without her consent. In Hill's words, Marlene transforms from "indispensable ally to inessential antagonist" (7). Not only that, but she also devolves from being Ellie's maternal advocate to undermining her right to bodily autonomy, from a champion of rights and liberty to its usurper. Despite her initial heroic representation and because of her Black femininity and corresponding distance from dominant white masculinity, Marlene "is intentionally denied any claims to the status of heroine" (Hill 8). To enforce this vision of white masucline heroism, Joel murders Marlene as she tries to prevent him from leaving the hospital with Ellie (Druckmann ch. 11-12). Though Marlene originally possesses all the qualities of a hero (leadership, resistance against death and corruption, protection of the innocent, etc.), and is in fact, perhaps a better hero

than Joel, his framing as a hero and subsequent murder of Marlene ensures her final position as a villain. Blackness and Black femininity is villainized and ultimately destroyed.

This trend continues into *TLoU2*, with the scene in which Ellie tortures Nora, the only other significant Black female NPC. Morally complex, Nora is portrayed as a good friend to Abby. Loyal and fiercely protective, she won't reveal her location to Ellie. However, she is needlessly cruel to Ellie in the scenes leading up to the torture, taunting, "You still hear [Joel's] screams? […] I hear them every night. Yeah, that little bitch got what he deserved" (Druckmann & Gross ch. 3). Nora is the next generation of Black survivor. Like Ellie and Abby, she comes from a generation of people who likely don't remember much, if anything, about life before the outbreak. In other words, they are from the *post*-post-apocalyptic generation. Her existence has been marked by survival from the beginning. Like Marlene and Abby, she was a member of the Fireflies. However, like Sam, she will turn, as in her final scene she breathes in infected spores. She will die regardless of what Ellie does, and still Ellie chooses to make her final moments ones of pain and suffering. Again, Blackness is associated with pain and death, rather than persistent survival, hope, and healing.

While it is heterosexist and misogynist that Ellie, as the series' sole lesbian PC, receives the most catastrophic ending, while Joel, as the series' cisgender heterosexual male PC receives a hero's ending, Ellie at least has a story to tell. Players get the opportunity to explore the world of TLoU in her canvas sneakers through both games. Conversely, the series contains no Black PCs, and all the narratively significant Black NPCs are infected, murdered, tortured, or commit suicide. Consequently, the series' vision of trauma and who gets to successfully survive and heal from it is rooted in deeply white supremacist soil, and therefore limited and racist in its scope.

While *TLoU* is ground-breaking in terms of its relative depth as a zombie apocalypse narrative and its ludonarrative construction, it is simultaneously normative with regard to the messaging of its actual content. This is likely due to its context within a white, male-dominated medium surrounding the screen: the creators, the characters, and the gamers. *TLoU* is about survival, its ethics, and what surviving trauma does to a person and their ability to cope with living. What it tells players is that surviving is gut-wrenching, back-breaking work. Trauma alienates survivors from their friends and loved ones, and isolates them in their search for closure, no matter the cost. It also tells players that healing starts when a survivor is able to manage the day-to-day effects of their pain to be truly present with loved ones, in effect, from decentering the self. However, the implication is that this is *more* possible for those who fit a patriarchal ideal and *only* possible for those who survive. Those who survive, or the elite "last of us," have very little hope for healing. However, they do have hope, and importantly, their lives. In the context of the series, Black people and Blackness itself, has neither. *TLoU* reasserts the dominant out-of-game social hierarchy that places masculinity and whiteness at the center and queerness and Blackness at the margins. In short, within *TLoU* and its ludonarrative system of representational trauma, an individual's access to life, survival, and healing is predetermined by their proximity to traditional masculine heterosexuality and to whiteness. Who are *The Last of Us*? Cisgender straight white men.

CONCLUSION

In playing and critically analyzing *TLoU* as a video game series, I uncovered a deeper understanding of how survival horror games represent trauma. In order to do so, it was imperative to attend to both the series' ludology and narratology, not either/or. As I found throughout my VGS sources, combining a ludological and narratological approach broadens the scope of study to more comprehensively account for how games uniquely operate to tell stories. In *TLoU's* case, it illustrates how the games enact a faithful representation of survival, across their respective plots and through game play mechanics. This approach also illuminates how *TLoU* situates its players to view violence from a critical distance. Rather than immersing players in it, *TLoU* presents violence as a calculated decision, originating from unsympathetic and sympathetic sources alike. Overall, the series' commitment to engage ludically in its own narrative choices affords the games greater impact when intentionally creating dissonance between its ludic ends and narrative messaging, such as in the conclusion of the first game, the PC switch halfway through *TLoU2*, and at the conclusion of the series as a whole.

Combining this ludonarrative perspective with literary trauma theory creates the necessary space to effectively study how the series represents trauma. Being that the catalyst for *TLoU*'s story is the zombie outbreak and that its genre is survival horror, it seems that the infected's collective threat to the survival of humanity would present the series' thesis on trauma. However, studying the history of zombies in film and the various infecteds' ludonarrative roles in the game reveals that the zombies function more effectively as a setting and allegory for societal critique, rather than as individual representations of trauma. For this, we look towards each PC. Joel helps players explore the ethics of survival and ultimately finds trauma so horrifying that he will evade it at any cost. For her part, Ellie shows the debilitating effects of

trauma far beyond the initial wound, representing trauma as persistent in its ability to disrupt lives. Finally, Abby disturbs clearly-defined boundaries between the different roles with regard to trauma: victim, survivor, aggressor, and protector. Through this ludonarrative trauma analysis, I identified the remarkable techniques that allowed *TLoU*'s game developers, as opposed to novelists or film directors, represent trauma in these compelling ways: the unplayability of traumatic moments, off-line empathy developed with PCs through cutscenes and perspective switches, and on-line complicity with the game's events. Importantly, the resulting critical distance generated from the characters and their traumas affords the potential for some traumatized players to drain their own out-of-game traumas.

Again, because players are implicated in the meaning-making process of video games differently than novels or films, the way that video games handle their representations of healing is as urgent as their representations of trauma. With regard to *TLoU*, through Ellie, its only lesbian PC, 'lesbian' is depicted as a perpetually wounded, festering identity marker incapable of meaningful healing. From Ellie to Abby to Joel, a continuum of healing is created in which cisgender, straight masculinity contains the most ability to heal from trauma. Ultimately, Joel stands tall as a role model that the other, more queer, feminized PCs can never measure up to. Further, given that there are no Black PCs in *TLoU* and no surviving Black NPCs at the conclusion of the series, Blackness becomes affiliated with victimization and death. Surviving, let alone healing, is impossible when Black. Though *TLoU* sets itself part from other survival horror video games in the artfulness of its construction, the content of its messaging remains hegemonic.

While feigning revolutionary work in the video games industry, both games in *TLoU* fail to construct a radical feminist, queer, or antiracist ludonarrative framework. These pressing

conclusions would have been impossible to draw without the cross-disciplinary theoretical positioning I took up in combining VGS and literary trauma theory. I call on scholars studying video games to use this theoretical lens and close reading methodology to conduct their own ludonarrative trauma analyses and then to critique my approach refine it, and apply it again. There is further work in this vein to be done in analyzing *TLoU*. My approach in this thesis was wide-ranging, touching upon as many aspects of both games as I could, while there are several areas of interest (Lev's trans representation comes to mind) that deserve deeper study. Furthermore, ludonarrative trauma analyses can and should be applied to other zombie apocalypse and survival horror games, or even video games outside the genre to see how far such an approach can be fruitfully applied and to what ends. Similarly, video games merit study by scholars working in other fields. Games and game developers have as much to say as any other media or form of authorship.

More than anything, this work demonstrates the need for a radical survival horror game. If *TLoU,* even from its hegemonic standpoint, can engage its players in representations of trauma that few other stories could, what can a subversive, socially conscious video game developer produce? If queer, feminine, and Black video game professionals developed a survival horror video game tailored to players who are real-world survivors of trauma, what visions of healing could be produced? What utopic experiences could be represented and played, even within a ludonarrative dystopia?

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