Hope for Change in the Post-Apocalypse: Gender Roles in *The Last of Us*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the portrayal of gender in the post-apocalypse by looking at the post-apocalyptic video game The Last of Us. *The paper uses scholarship on apocalypse, video games, and gender to show that while the game adheres to some gender stereotypes it ultimately represents progress in its representation of gender roles. The paper uses examples of the game's portrayal of its characters and its depiction of the consequences of violent masculinity in a zombie apocalypse to illustrate how a post-apocalyptic video game can take steps towards imagining new gender roles in the post-apocalypse.*

Gender roles in post-apocalyptic literature often represent both progress and a return to traditional stereotypes. James Berger's *After the End* states that "the study of post-apocalypse is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed" (7). After the destruction of an apocalypse, traditional patriarchal systems that were present before the disaster routinely dominate the rebuilding process. Often in post-apocalyptic stories, gender roles are a reflection of the society that remains. While *The Last of Us*, a 2013 video game, does follow this formula to a certain extent, I will argue that it ultimately takes steps towards transforming what remains by imagining different gender roles in the post-apocalypse. While the majority of other post-apocalyptic narratives do not portray progress in gender roles, this game opens up a comparatively large space for gender equality. It exposes the consequences of a stereotypical view of masculinity while providing an opportunity to consider what a strong female character looks like in the post-apocalypse. If the Greek word that apocalypse comes from means a "lifting of the veil," this game uncovers gender stereotypes. It portrays a future where the present does not have to repeat itself, where breaking down gender norms is beneficial, and where there is opportunity for change.

The Last of Us is set in the aftermath of a virus that turns people into zombies, or "the infected." Individuals play as the protagonist, Joel, whose daughter has been killed—not by the infected but by the soldiers trying to keep order in the initial chaos. However, the main storyline doesn't start until Joel accepts a job to smuggle a girl, Ellie, out of the quarantine

zone to the capitol building for undefined reasons. As the game progresses, their relationship begins to change towards something more familial, and the reason for their journey is revealed: Ellie is immune to the virus and may hold the key to developing a vaccine against it. For this purpose, Joel ends up taking her all the way across the country, a journey in which they must fight and kill not only infected but healthy humans as well. Before I begin analyzing *The Last of Us*, I am going to examine what other critics have said about the gender dynamics in the game. In contrast to many other games in the post-apocalyptic video game industry, *The Last of Us* has received positive reviews. *The Guardian* calls it daring and brave, *IGN* compliments Ellie's personality and sense of wonder, and *The New York Times* praises the game's indirect characterization and moral ambiguity. However, the game is not wholly without criticism. *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, apart from bestowing compliments, also raise concerns over gender roles. *The Guardian* argues that while the story presents itself as developing equal representation of both genders, having the majority of the gameplay from Joel's perspective ensures that it is Joel's story told— not Ellie's. Keith Stuart of *The Guardian* says that Ellie and other characters like her are "effectively the Manic Pixie Dream Girls of dystopian gaming; they exist as testing boards for their male counterparts—strong yet vulnerable, belligerent yet loyal—they're there to provide the beats in the hero's journey from sociopath to rounded adult male" (Stuart). Chris Suellentrop of *The New York Times* criticizes the lack of opportunity to play as Ellie, saying the game casts her "in a secondary, subordinate role" (Suellentrop). There is some validity to their claims, as *The Last of Us* does indeed follow many of the same old tropes and ideas seen in other post-apocalyptic video games.

However, I argue that this post-apocalyptic game ultimately represents progress in its portrayal of gender roles because of Ellie's overall role in the game and because of its depiction of the consequences of violent masculinity in a zombie apocalypse. I will do this by providing an overview of gender roles in post-apocalyptic media and video games. Then I will analyze the game itself. To illustrate the show's more progressive gender dynamics, I will examine Ellie's role in the cover art of the game, the conceptualization of the story, and the portrayal of the consequences of Joel's violent actions.

Post-apocalyptic stories often portray gender roles as a return to traditional norms disguised as progress. By examining the characters of *The Last of Us*, it is evident how the post-apocalypse serves to reinforce traditional gender roles; however, this game also provides an opportunity for recognizing the consequences of such a portrayal. Additionally, there is hope for the portrayal of gender in video games, in general, because people have a

chance to play and understand different gender roles. This representation of gender allows people to better identify with characters. It allows different stories to be told and experienced. Ellie and Joel's story is not just one of survival in the post-apocalypse, but it is also a story of loss, comfort, family, and wonder. It is a story of a fierce, optimistic girl and a man learning to embrace hope in the face of the post-apocalypse. Their story makes the players themselves question gameplay in terms of gender roles, which could lead them to question their own views on gender. The post-apocalyptic setting opens up an awareness of possibilities of what could be: if something could change in the post-apocalypse, it could change in reality as well.

Often, post-apocalyptic fiction portrays gender roles as traditional. Keith Booker, who studies the history of dystopias written by women, finds that even in works written by feminists, there was mostly a return to traditional gender roles. The "major works of the genre have done relatively little to challenge conventional notions of gender roles. Despite giving frequent lip service to equality of the genders, literary dystopias (and utopias, for that matter) have typically been places where men are men and women are women, and in relatively conventional ways" (Booker 337). The authors that Booker studies find it difficult to imagine an equal society, and their utopian communities fall back into patriarchal structures. One would expect that everything should be equal in a society where everyone is just trying to survive; the apocalypse should level the playing field. However, power structures quickly arise again as conventional gender roles reassert their authority.

Fiction offers a way to explore our hopes and fears as a society. As scholar James Berger says in his book *After the End*, "The post-apocalypse in fiction provides an occasion to go 'back to basics' and to reveal what the writer considers to be truly of value" (8). Consequently, fiction created by society reflects the ideals and values that the society itself holds. This holds true in both literature and video games. It especially holds true in post-apocalyptic stories that promise the audience an eventual simplification out of the chaos of both the apocalypse and of current life. Because the superfluous is destroyed, only what is supposedly necessary remains.

In some post-apocalyptic stories, the men who write them value a complete destruction of female empowerment: "there is an important strand of apocalyptic imagining that seeks to destroy the world expressly in order to eliminate female sexuality. In the post-apocalypse, desire and fear find their true objects; we see what we most want and most abhor. And these objects frequently are the same object—some instrument of universal annihilation" (Berger 11). Females with agency and authority are deemed superfluous in this

model. Men both desire women sexually and fear a world where women would have any sort of power. Gender norms such as this one, combined with the apocalypse, cause views of females as being other and lesser in the post-apocalypse. Lina Rahm describes a study she conducted on members of an online forum who compared women in an apocalyptic situation to either threatening "mama bears" or victims who should be helped in exchange for sex. These members of the forum felt a moral obligation most of the time to help women but were full of a condescending patriarchal attitude. Rahm concludes that the way these forum members view women in the imagined apocalypse is a reflection of how they view women in real life (78). Just as post-apocalyptic literature can reveal what people value, even an imagined apocalypse can reveal people's true ideals and opinions. As such, a game where one of the main characters is a strong female lead challenges the forum members' view of individuals' roles in the post-apocalypse. However, their view is not the only one that people hold.

The members of the forum's ideas about gender roles were fairly outspoken. Others may not be as apparent in their distrust of female power but may view the apocalypse as a way to return to the "good old days." Katherine Sugg compares the post-apocalypse with the traditionally male-dominated frontier myth or Western. The return of the frontier myth is reflected in many aspects of culture, for as mainstream culture progresses, men can sometimes feel lost. Jackson Katz, the author and presenter of *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood, and American Culture*, says, "Again and again, at key moments in American history, you see men reacting to change in just this way—by retreating into a hyper-masculine fantasy world" (00:43:55-00:44:05). As society changes and threatens traditional male control, men hold onto the past even tighter.

Sugg also suggests that the post-apocalyptic frontier myth has roots in the recession and its impact on men and masculinity (797). While *The Last of Us* was released in 2013, it was developed for several years earlier, and a lasting consciousness of masculinity in the face of the economic recession could have certainly influenced the game. The apocalypse restores individual agency, as there is no government or larger society; all people have to care about are the effects of their individual choices. As men feel lack of control in real life, apocalyptic fiction gives them power. Katz says, "We're witnessing a culture in retreat—a narrative that tells men that the best way to respond to change is not to adapt, but to reclaim traditional masculine control and dominance from the forces of feminization" (00:40:47-00:40:53). Men are facing what they deem to be an apocalyptic situation. However, the men who are embroiled with a fight for masculinity do not see after the end, where society has

been transformed. They simply see the destruction of masculine control and attempt to hold on to their control no matter what it takes.

In some ways this attempt to reclaim masculine control takes the form of destroying femininity completely. Other times, this desperate grasp for the past takes the form of violence, as some men feel that this is the only control they have left. Post-apocalyptic media enables violent scenarios to be more removed from the present day, thus facilitating the development of unchecked violent masculinity. Today's culture teaches men that masculinity is linked to violence and that they must reject emotions at all costs. Katz says, speaking for men,

> We can't show any emotion except anger. We can't think too much or seem too intellectual. We can't back down when someone disrespects us. We have to show we're tough enough to inflict physical pain and take it in turn. We're supposed to be sexually aggressive with women. And then we're taught that if we step out of this box, we risk being seen as soft, weak, feminine, or gay. (00:14:25-00:14:45)

Video games and post-apocalyptic fiction allow for these norms to be reinforced. In many of these narratives, life is portrayed as the survival of the fittest. Characters must be the toughest to survive the story or game, and any weakness results in failure.

Other norms perpetuate the idea of sexual conquest through violence. Katz makes the point that violence is almost always perpetrated by men, but that gender and gender norms are never discussed when talking about the problem (00:02:56-00:06:00). The post-apocalypse is violent. It is hard to look at progress in gender when everything is wrapped up in bloodshed. Video games also have a reputation of being violent. However, violence has consequences, even if some narratives portray otherwise. George Gerbner, a scholar who studies fear, talks about the routine of violence or "happy" violence—violence that is portrayed without consequences. Violence is often a fundamental facet of storytelling; however, in current media, it is frequently portrayed not as a vehicle with emotions and grief attached but instead as a mode of release with no consequences for the perpetrator or for the victim (Gerbner 00:08:30-00:10:20). This happens often in video games, where violence is usually just a game mechanism and a way to progress the storyline without any focus on what the consequences would be—emotional or otherwise—for the characters. In video games, happy violence is especially potent because the interaction is entrusted more to the intended audience. Instead of just watching the action passively, the player actively controls the characters and feels the consequences, or lack thereof, of violence more intimately.

Video games do not just deal with violence, however. As stated previously, in post-

apocalyptic fiction there is often a return to traditional gender roles, and video games also often address these traditional gender roles: gender roles within video games and within the video game community are often critiqued as exclusionary and sexist. Looking at the video game industry overall shows how *The Last of Us* changes the conversation about gender, not only in the post-apocalypse, but also in video games and in post-apocalyptic video games. *The Last of Us* shows how video games can portray gender roles as something complicated and nuanced without relying solely on stereotypes. This game opens up different roles, not just for gender in the apocalypse but for gender in video games as well.

In an analysis of video game studies, Benjamin Paaßen et al. claim that while men and women play video games in almost equal numbers, the stereotype of the male gamer still exists (426). If women are acknowledged as players, they are scorned as being less legitimate or successful. Because of this stereotype, the video game industry is geared towards men. Therefore, many games involve heroic male protagonists and hyper-sexualized damsels in distress. The men who play these games also buy into the stereotype that games are just for men and therefore see any female presence as an invasion. The consequences of this system include: harsher environments for females, lack of good representation of female characters, and some games specified as "girl games" only (Benjamin Paaßen et al. 429). With these constraints there are few popular girl gamers: despite the number of girls playing, most of the celebrities of the gaming world are male. This only serves to perpetuate the stereotype of a male-dominated industry and removes motivation for change.

Now that I have examined gender norms in post-apocalyptic media and in video games, I will move on to analyze the gender politics of *The Last of Us*. I will discuss why, despite some retreading of clichés, this game represents progress. I will look at how Ellie's portrayal in the cover art and within the story allows people to experience gender roles they might not otherwise understand. I will also look at how Joel's interaction with others and how his choices point to the consequences of violent masculinity.

The Last of Us does fall into some of the same gender tropes as stories with stereotypical masculine leads. In *The Last of Us*, there is a complex system of military, smugglers, rebels called Fireflies, and those living outside the walls of the quarantine zones. These structures take on a patriarchal role in Joel and Ellie's life while the characters are in the quarantine zone, but even in communities outside the walls that Joel and Ellie find, the gender roles fall right back into patriarchy. They almost always encounter male enemies, while women and children—for the most part—are presented as background characters or not mentioned at all. There also is a definite sense of the Western and frontier myth in *The*

Last of Us, as Ellie and Joel journey across the land, fighting against the wilderness and others to survive. They even ride a horse. Additionally, Joel definitely hits all of the hyper-masculine qualities in the face of the apocalypse. Joel uses the terminology of surviving. The player does not know much about the twenty-year gap between his daughter's death and the plot starting with Ellie, but a conversation with Joel's brother Tommy shows they did everything that they could to survive:

> JOEL: For all those goddamn years I took care of us.
> TOMMY: Took care? That's what you call it? I got nothing but nightmares from those years.
> JOEL: You survived because of me.
> TOMMY: It wasn't worth it. (*The Last of Us*, "Tommy's Dam")

Joel has used whatever violent means available to him to survive in the post-apocalypse but has somehow become less of what he was before. Joel has survived something horrible that is hard for anyone else to comprehend, which reflects Berger's claims that "the survivor has seen, and knows, what no one else could see and know" (48). To deal with his knowledge and pain, and because of his loss, Joel has retreated into a hyper-masculine shell that rejects any sort of emotion. The apocalypse has left him without control, and he attempts to compensate. He follows the cultural narrative that emotions are a weakness. This sentiment is also reinforced by others in the game. Joel is told that caring is a detriment and that it's better just to survive on his own. Bill, a slightly paranoid, antagonistic man they borrow a car from tells Joel to send Ellie "packing, let her find her own way. Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time I had someone I cared about. It was a partner. Somebody I had to look after. And in this world that sort of shit is good for one thing: Gettin' ya killed. So, you know what I did? I wisened the fuck up. And I realized it's gotta be just me" (*The Last of Us*, "Bill's Town"). However, Joel doesn't listen. He has already decided that he is going to look after Ellie and protect her. He rejects Bill's advice, as he struggles not to lose his protective masculine guise, a struggle that occurs because he has begun to care for Ellie.

Ellie, however, is not so sure that she wants protection. She is grateful for Joel's company but does not like the way that he sometimes dismisses her or his initial refusal to let her take an active part in their mutual protection. The post-apocalypse provides the perfect stage for a hyper-masculine hero to come in and constantly save the day. In any other game, the hero would have followed violent archetypes and come to restore everything to how it was before. The difference in this game, however, is Ellie.

First I am going to look at Ellie's portrayal on the cover of the game. Melinda Burgess

et al. did a study examining over two hundred video game covers to analyze the trends of gender representation, and they conclude that video game covers show prevailing patterns in the portrayal of gender in video games, most of them negative. The cover includes the characters the developers deem relevant to the game and establish a player's first impression of the game (Burgess et al. 421). For *The Last of Us*, it is a little complicated because there are two covers: one cover is for the PlayStation 3 version of the game, and the other is for the remastered PlayStation 4 version. Normally on video game covers, males are portrayed as violent, while females are sexualized or nonexistent. While Joel is ready for action with a gun in his hand on both covers, Ellie is actively holding a gun on the second cover. Neither of the covers show Ellie in a sexualized manner. She is not objectified or idealized but portrayed as an important character in her own right. Males are normally more prominent on covers, but Ellie is more the focus on the first cover. On the second cover, she is as important as Joel. While only the cover, it shows how the developers decided to market and present the game. It shows what they believe about the game, which is that Ellie is a strong character, equal or even more primary than Joel.

However, the covers are not the only place where there is a difference in gender portrayal. To demonstrate this, I will also look at Ellie's portrayal within the actual story. In *The Last of Us* there are cut scenes, which show emotion and character development, and gameplay, which involves both fighting enemies and secondary dialogue. In both the cut scenes and the gameplay, Ellie is portrayed as a strong, complex character. She has never been outside the quarantine walls before and is extremely curious about the world around her. She admits fears of being left alone. She cracks jokes and teases Joel. She is portrayed as having her own thoughts, feelings, and motivations. She is her own individual character who people really enjoy. This is not common in video games, as Burgess et al. also found that only 21.4% of characters in their game sample were female (424). Ellie opens up new opportunities for gender roles, proving that a game with a strong female leading character can be successful.

Within the story Ellie is also portrayed as important. However, there is criticism from both *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* about the lack of time with her as a playable character. Sullentrop in *The New York Times* claims that the game handles the female characters with "depressing sameness" (Sullentrop). Stuart in *The Guardian* says that "in terms of identification and raw experience, we're with Joel all the way" (Stuart). I think that it is important to address this criticism. Alessandro Gabbiadini et al., in a study about empathy, masculinity, and video games, found that in a story-based game such as *The Last of*

Us "the assigned role fosters a sense of 'vicarious self-perception'" (11). Identifying vicariously through a character allows the player to more easily adopt their point of view. This means that play time is important. There is some validity to the criticism that *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* offer; however, there is more to the story.

Video games are also different than other forms of media because they are interactive. When someone takes control of a character, do they describe themselves as enacting the actions, or do they talk about the characters doing the action? In my experience, at least during the actual gameplay, people are more likely to say things such as "I just shot that guy" or "Oh no, I have to hide" than to describe the actions from a third person perspective. Because they view the game from the character's point of view, the player begins to share the character's feelings and goals. This means even the short time individuals get to play as Ellie allows them glimpses and insight into an experience of gender that they may not have had the opportunity to empathize with before.

At one point in the game, Ellie is almost a victim of sexual violence while looking for medicine for Joel, which will be discussed later in this paper. Gabbiadnini et al. claim that playing some video games "increases masculine beliefs and decreases empathy for female violence victims, especially for boys and young men who highly identified with the male game character" (10). Joel is the main playable character for the majority of the game and is highly identifiable with masculine self-identity. Gabbiadnini et al. also refer to sexual violence in video games, writing, "because they are forced to adopt the visual perspective of the perpetrator, it is difficult for players to put themselves in the shoes of the victim" (10). In contrast, when the sexual violence is shown in this game, players do not play from the perspective of the perpetrator, but from that of the victim.

A fire traps Ellie with a man, David, who is threatening sexual violence. The fire adds to the atmosphere of terror and may symbolize the power that David has over Ellie in that moment. However, Ellie is fairly collected as she determinedly tries to get the keys to the door for her escape from David. It is not until she is able to kill David as he tries to force himself on her that the player is really able feel the desperation of the scene. The player has no choice but to acknowledge the horror of what happened and what almost happened. They empathize with Ellie and feel the injustice of the situation. This perspective, combined with Ellie's previous character development and her resolve to save Joel by finding medicine despite danger, open up new opportunities for gender role exploration. Many of the men who play these games would not have had the opportunity to identify with a female character in this way before, and the game sends a powerful message with that

identification. It forces them to look at themselves and their own attitudes and actions, which may otherwise have gone unchecked.

I will also discuss Ellie as a contrast to Joel. One could argue that violent masculinity is necessary in a post-apocalyptic world. Joel definitely agrees that violence is the only way to survive. He has built up reasoning and excuses for his violent actions in his head as a defense mechanism to justify what he has actually done. In the game, the player sees him kill indiscriminately, torture others for information, and smuggle things on a strictly need-to-know basis. He defends himself from his smuggling partner Tess as she says, "Really? Guess what, we're shitty people, Joel. It's been that way for a long time" by replying, "No, we are survivors!" (*The Last of Us*, "The Outskirts"). Joel justifies his violence as a means to survive and to protect others around him.

Violence may or may not be necessary in a post-apocalyptic situation, but Ellie serves as a reminder of the consequences when violence is highly tied to gender roles. Near the end of the game, Joel is injured, and the player gets to control Ellie. Throughout the game, Joel becomes a father figure for Ellie, but in this instance, she is his caretaker. Mark Pajor comments on the rise of fatherhood in popular video games and notes that the fathers are often made to prove their love for their child (or child surrogate) through violence. This is what he describes as parental masculinity, a type of masculinity that frames violence as existing for the sake of protection (Pajor 129). Joel's entire storyline is defined by his desire to protect Ellie. He begins by behaving antagonistically towards her, or, at least indifferent, but comes to care about her. With that care comes his increasing desire to protect her however necessary. While the formation of this parental relationship makes for an interesting story told by the cut scenes and dialogue, it does take away some of Ellie's agency and leaves her as somewhat of a plot device, at least in the combat gameplay. She is sometimes left to the side as Joel fights as the controllable character. Other times she does fight back, but it leads into a cut scene which has less impact on a player's identifying vicariously with the character than gameplay does.

However, Pajor also looks at Ellie as a parental figure. While Joel is hurt, Ellie takes on the role of protector. She hunts for food and bargains for medicine with dangerous men, one of whom, David, seems reluctant to kill her. When the men ultimately chase her, she leads them purposefully away from Joel in an attempt to protect him. All of these things work to reduce the stereotype of Ellie as the damsel in distress. When Ellie is eventually captured by these men, she finds out that they have resorted to cannibalism and is almost raped by David. Pajor points out that the player alternates control between Joel and Ellie

at this point as Ellie temporarily escapes her trap by tricking David and as Joel struggles through the snow (140). This builds up the false expectation that Joel will arrive in the vital moment to save Ellie. It also builds a comparison of both Joel and Ellie. The game portrays them both as competent. Joel is able to struggle through the snow and search through the town, but Ellie also has the aptitude to escape repeatedly. Ellie turns a stereotype on its head by showing she does not need rescuing, and the game helps show this by portraying her as equal to Joel.

As this game compares Ellie and Joel, it also contrasts Joel and David. Both David and Joel believe that violence is inevitable in the post-apocalypse, illustrated in a conversation Ellie has with David while she is his prisoner:

> DAVID: Oh . . . you're awfully quick to judgment. Considering you and your friend killed how many men?
>
> ELLIE: They didn't give us a choice.
>
> DAVID: And you think we have a choice? Is that it? You kill to survive . . . and so do we. We have to take care of our own. By any means necessary. (*The Last of Us*, "Lakeside Resort")

Both men fit the mentality of what Sugg calls "savage war" (804). In the post-apocalypse, leadership is tied with ruthlessness. Brutality proves someone is fit for leadership. Even Ellie is only recognized as able to hold her own after she kills a man attacking Joel; she does not initially kill within the storyline. It is only after her kill that Joel trusts her with a gun because her brutality has proven that she is capable of new responsibility and leadership. Joel and David are brutal and violent almost as a default, but Ellie has to prove herself. While Ellie's violence may be tied to protection and responsibility, David and Joel's is also tied to masculinity. Joel's blame is not absolved. Indeed, he only sighs when Ellie asks if he has killed a lot of innocent people. However, as the game shows Joel killing more and more people to rescue Ellie, David takes a different idea of any means necessary. A man calls Ellie David's "newest pet" (*The Last of Us*, "Lakeside Resort"). David's masculinity and leadership are tied to sexual conquest and to violence against Ellie. Both men are just trying to survive the apocalypse, but both have different ideas of what it means to just survive. Ellie fights back against David and against the idea that she is just an object to be used or a trophy to be won to prove someone's leadership or manhood.

If *The Last of Us* were playing into traditional gender tropes, Joel would heroically get there just in time to save Ellie. However, he gets there just as Ellie saves herself by killing David. Ellie is almost a victim of sexual violence perpetrated by someone who believes he

could find his masculinity in that act. Therefore, this post-apocalypse allows us to see the consequences of violent masculinity.

In another game, Joel would have been a hero, but here he does not get to fulfill this traditionally masculine role. Here he takes on the more feminine role of comforter. He takes on a parental role that is not violent. He stops, and he comforts Ellie. He holds her when she cries. He does not prove his masculinity through violence, but rather he proves his fatherhood through comfort.

In the game, violence has consequences. Michael Goerger, in a paper about ethics in gaming, argues that this is what makes *The Last of Us* as a game different from other violent video games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, in which an individual plays as a violent criminal (104). While in *The Last of Us* there is almost always someone getting stabbed, shot, or strangled, individuals also see the consequences of the actions. Ellie, for instance, almost gets sick after she has to shoot someone holding Joel underwater. At another point, she kills someone and feels sick to her stomach. Joel has been hardened by years of violence. He has become deadened towards it to survive, but it affects his character. Ellie mourns the death of two brothers who momentarily join them even when Joel does not want to talk about it. The game even opens with the despair Joel feels after losing his daughter, her dying in his arms. In *The Last of Us*, there is grief felt over death. In *Grand Theft Auto,* everything is just treated trivially.

Within the story there are consequences, and then there are consequences from the perspective of the player. People may not always like the actions of the character with whom they are identifying. Some may not like Joel's two instances of torturing others for information about Ellie's whereabouts. Others may be uncomfortable at his callous acceptance of a double-crosser's death at the very beginning of the game. There are many occasions where a traditional male, heroic, violent act that Joel performs is not presented as the right thing to do but is questioned, in-game and by the player.

In the same way, the end of the game leaves us wondering about the consequences of traditional gender roles. Joel is the protector throughout the game, and this can take away Ellie's agency. However, at the end, he takes away the ultimate choice from Ellie—the choice to live or die. Ellie is the supposed key to finding a cure for the virus. However, when they finally reach the end of their journey, Joel finds out that the surgery they need to do will end up killing Ellie. With Ellie already unconscious, he decides that he must save her and shoots his way out of the building while carrying her. Later, Ellie asks about what had happened, but Joel lies and says that they stopped looking for a cure. Joel realizes that if given a choice,

Ellie probably would have sacrificed herself. However, he cannot let her make that decision. In the post-apocalypse, he reclaims his power as the masculine figure by taking away Ellie's power. He has come to care for her, but he also cannot give up his role as father and guardian. This decision at the end of the game is, at least in part, because of the consequences of gender norms. Joel still sees himself as a masculine protector and Ellie as needing protecting, as incapable of making the choice for herself.

They travel back to the settlement of Joel's brother Tommy. Ellie confronts Joel, telling him about all the people who she has lost to the virus. When she was bitten, she was not alone and had to watch her friend turn into one of the infected. As Joel tries to offer platitudes, Ellie demands of him, "Swear to me. Swear to me that everything you said about the Fireflies is true." There is a short pause here, and players can feel Joel's split second hesitation. Then he lies, "I swear." The pause is a lot longer now, and players can see Ellie's eyes move, searching Joel's face. The players know it is a lie, Joel knows it is a lie, and Ellie suspects it is a lie. Individuals see so many emotions playing out across her face. She finally says, "Okay" (*The Last of Us*, "Jackson"). Then the credits roll.

It is an unsettling ending. Joel lies to Ellie because he took away her decision. However, the game does not present Joel's actions as heroic. It leaves the ending morally ambiguous. As the player identifies with Joel, they are uncomfortable with Ellie demanding answers and are left wondering if they did the right thing. Lindsey Joyce, in an essay about the game, says that "responses to the game's ending have been mixed, but the ending has surprised the majority of players as it breaks convention by denying a 'happy' finish. In doing so, Naughty Dog reveals how broken the conventions and tropes used in the game were all along" (Joyce). In another game or another post-apocalyptic narrative, the male hero would have been presented as unquestionably right no matter what, always acting in the best interests of his inferior female companions. In the post-apocalypse especially, female lack of agency is portrayed as the default, and gender roles fall along conventional lines. In this game, however, gender roles are far more open to new imagination and interpretation because, here, Joel's motives and actions are questioned. Ellie as a female character has developed such an identity that the players feel uncomfortable not only with Joel taking away her agency but with him lying to her as well. Joel has shed his violent masculinity enough for us to understand his emotions and motives for his actions but not enough for him to avoid still being morally ambiguous. The game critiques toxic masculinity by showing the players how Joel's actions affect someone he cares about—Ellie.

The characters make their decisions in a post-apocalyptic society because, as Berger

states, "The end is never the end" (5). For a post-apocalyptic story to exist, there must be something remaining after the supposed apocalypse or end of the world. For Joel, the original apocalyptic event may not have been the viral outbreak but the death of his daughter. Joel faces the decision between a personal new beginning with Ellie or a new beginning for society. He could take Ellie, go back to Tommy's settlement, and stick with the gender roles and norms that he knows. Or he could give up Ellie, whom he has come to love and care for, and face change. With his identity tied so strongly to first violent masculinity and then to protection, it is easier for him to choose to protect Ellie and in turn protect his own gender identity. However, the game does not present that choice as right or wrong but simply as a choice. This is how this post-apocalyptic game opens up gender roles.

The New York Times argues that Ellie's lack of playtime is problematic (Suellentrop). While it may appear this way, I believe that the time we do get to play as her is one of the crucial reasons why this game represents progress in gender roles in the post-apocalypse. It is here where Ellie refuses objectification and where Joel first does not get to fulfill the role of violent masculine hero. Ellie fights back against sexual violence, and Joel does not use violence typical of a post-apocalyptic video game to help; rather, he uses empathy and comfort. *The Guardian* also criticizes Ellie's lack of play time and says that she is simply a "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" (Stuart). While Ellie does help further Joel's storyline, in doing so she develops into a full-fledged character in her own right. Part of the reason why the ending is so unsettling is because the player has come to care about Ellie as a character. The player knows her motivations and realizes that the choice that Joel makes for her is not one that she would want for herself. This strength of character makes the consequences of Joel's choices even more evident. While *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* offer some valid criticism, the portrayal of Ellie and the game's critique of Joel's violent masculinity ultimately show progress in imagining new roles in the post-apocalypse.

The ambiguous ending leaves players questioning their own motives and choices in relation to the characters. Showing the character of Ellie and the consequences of Joel's actions allow for new stories of gender roles to develop.

The post-apocalypse reflects values of our own world and is a reflection of the future. Ellie's overall role in the game, as well as its portrayal of the consequences of violent masculinity, represents a step towards the imagining of new gender roles in the post-apocalypse and in the player's real life. It allows the future to be one of hope for the strength that is found in equality.

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