

# The Naturalization of Humanity and the Construction of Morality in *The Last of Us*

by Sophie Publicg

Immediately after its release, Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* has received lots of critical praise for its immersive take on morality and emotionality.<sup>1</sup> Characterized as an action-adventure with survival horror elements in third-person-perspective, the plot of the game reflects many symptoms of post-apocalyptic narratives: set twenty years after the outbreak of the Cordyceps virus that causes infected people to act like zombies, grouchy survivor Joel accepts a deal to escort fourteen-year-old Ellie across the unruly ruins of the United States on a mission to retrieve a cure for the disease. During their travels, they encounter not only the physically infected, but also the morally infected, narrating a story of the banality of evil in humankind.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the experience strengthens their relationship and gives them a chance to form a new sense of morality.

Evaluating the narrative of a game means examining the most prominent layer of its mediation of meaning or “the primary way in which we make sense of and structure the world.”<sup>3</sup> *The Last of Us* stands in a long tradition of post-apocalyptic narratives that have enjoyed a revival in the twenty-first century, but in what ways is this narrative used to construct a certain stance on morality? How does it connect to the representation of nature? And how does it reflect contemporary events? I will show how the game uses the narrative of the post-apocalypse to naturalize and therefore legitimize morality and how this exemplary process can be interpreted as a contemporary approach to the ethical dealings with environmental catastrophes.

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See Matt Karmen 2013, URL: <https://www.empireonline.com/gaming/last-us/>, Andy Kelley 2013, URL: <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/409703/the-last-of-us-review-survival-horror-masterpiece-is-naughty-dogs-finest-moment/>, and Colin Moriarty 2013, URL: <http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/06/05/the-last-of-us-review> (23.10.2019)

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Julia Round, *The Horror of Humanity*, in: Wayne Yuen [ed.], *The Walking Dead and Philosophy: Zombie Apocalypse Now*, Chicago 2012, p. 156.

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Jesper Juul, *Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge/USA 2005, p. 44.

The post-apocalypse is the aftermath of the inevitable catastrophe of the end of the (anthropocentric) order of the world—in contrast to dystopia, which denotes a negative outlook on a society often characterized by political oppression. Most importantly, humans are in the center of dystopian narratives: they may depict a controlling government as in George Orwell's *1984*, but do not contain a sublime element like a divine punishment or a natural disaster that caused these events. The inclusion of a superior element is already evident in the etymology of the term apocalypse: deriving from the Greek *apokálypsis*, which literally means “an uncovering” or “an unveiling”.<sup>4</sup> The origin of the term can be found in the Book of Revelation to denote the Day of Judgment.<sup>5</sup> The Christian connotation begins to wane with the propagation of the Enlightenment and ultimately disappears with the onset of Modernism. Susan Neiman links the secularization of the apocalypse to the great earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people, raising the question: “how can God allow a natural order that causes innocent suffering?”<sup>6</sup> However, the beginning of secularization does not mark the end of post-apocalyptic narratives—quite the contrary: in Romanticism, cultural agents put emphasis on individualism and the power of nature. The rejection of industrialization and the idealization of *pristine* nature—leads to a projection of spiritual and religious symbols onto natural phenomena, giving birth to a new, secular iconography of nature, e.g., Caspar David Friedrich, but also affecting the nature-culture dichotomy, which contributes to humans' disconnect to nature. Although there is a crucial shift in the cause of the end of the world from a clerical to a secular level, the apocalyptic narrative itself does not change. The process stays the same, but the executing powers shift from transcendental gods to sublime forces of nature, which becomes the non-human agency with the capacity to destroy the world on its own terms.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the process of naturalization is mostly used to legitimize certain standards and values; concerning the apocalypse, this points to the power to destroy the *old* world and a new set of values to create a *new* world.

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Daniel Knickerbocker, Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium, in: *Extrapolation*, Vol. 51 (3), 2010, p. 346.

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However, predecessors of this narrative can also be found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the story of Noah and the Ark in the Torah, or in form of Ragnarök in Norse mythology, among others.

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Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought. An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton 2002, p. 3.

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In cases where the propellant apocalyptic force is the nature of humankind, for example, in the *Fallout* series, it becomes evident that the boundary between nature and culture is porous and not clearly defined.

In addition to the recent surge of post-apocalyptic films and television, there has been a significant rise in such narratives in the video game industry: from zombie survival horror games like the *Resident Evil* series (since 1996), the mutant aftermaths of radioactive warfare in the *Fallout* series (since 1997) and post-human biopunk shooters like the *BioShock* series (since 2007) to artificial intelligence's take-over of power in *Portal* or *Portal 2* (2007 or 2011) and emotionally charged decision-making in *The Walking Dead* (since 2012). As the demand for these narrative rises, we must ask: why have we become obsessed with the end of the world?

Eva Horn relates this phenomenon to the approaching era of the post-anthropocene: “[h]umankind looks back upon itself *after* its end. It is a gaze in the future perfect, a future that *will have been*.”<sup>8</sup> The concept of time in post-apocalyptic fiction could be deemed retro-futuristic; the future on display is already located in the past. Walter Benjamin's logic also applies: considering that an apocalyptic narrative demands for a linear progression of time—a concept Benjamin harshly critiqued—the catastrophe appears in *Jetztzeit* [present time], a moment located outside the rigid notions of the past and the future.<sup>9</sup> In this vein, *Jetztzeit* is the moment of the Other, the non-ruling class, providing the possibility to narrate another past and future. Thus, post-apocalyptic narratives recount stories of a world different to the one we know, but remind us of the entanglements between our reality and fiction. Because one day, the moment of *Jetztzeit* might materialize and shift into reality: for example, I can still recall the panic Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* caused when the film hit theaters in 2004. Depicting spectacular climatic phenomena like large-scale floods and an ice covered New York cityscape, the film appears to be more fact than fiction a mere fifteen years later. But how can we use this on a productive level? While referring to the Christian apocalypse, Slavoj Žižek writes:

*Their message is: yes, of course, there will be a catastrophe, but watch patiently, don't believe in it, don't get caught in precipitous extrapolations, don't give yourself up to the properly perverse pleasure of thinking 'This is it!' in all its diverse forms (global warming will drown*

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Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe* (eBook), New York 2018, p. 17.

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Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, n.d. (1940), URL: <http://www.textlog.de/benjamin-begriff-geschichte.html> (23.10.2019).

*us all in a decade, biogenetics will mean the end of being-human, et cetera, et cetera). Far from luring us into a perverse self-destructive rapture, adopting the properly apocalyptic stance is—today more than ever—the only way to keep a cool head.<sup>10</sup>*

In this way, the consumption of post-apocalyptic narratives takes on a cathartic role that prepares for the worst case scenario because even when the world as we know it might come to an end, some other version of it will go on. Therefore, the post-apocalypse is much rather situated in the present than in the past or future. Instead of simply being washed over by the next big catastrophe, I believe that a constant engagement with the apocalypse raises our awareness to identify what exactly is wrong at the moment and what we can do about it. Eva Horn also points out the diverse diffusion of contemporary catastrophes—tsunamis, avalanches, power blackouts, epidemics, breakdowns of governments and GPS systems, and so on—and talks about a “catastrophe without events,”<sup>11</sup> or catastrophic events that cannot be reduced to one singular disaster. Our paranoia of the looming apocalypse fuels our demand for post-apocalyptic scenarios—and with the ongoing multiplicity of environmental crises, its threat might be the only impetus to change our actions to prevent the end of the world. Indeed, the destruction of the old world and the values it represented constitutes the biggest asset of post-apocalyptic fiction because establishing a new cosmology or world order demands new values. As shown in the next section, in *The Last of Us*, this new order is constituted through naturalism and morality.

The game begins with a flashback of the outbreak of the Cordyceps virus back in September 2013.<sup>12</sup> The weaving of fact and fiction is very present in the Cordyceps virus, which is not a phantasm created by developers Naughty Dog, but based on the *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* that acts as a parasite to ants:

*The fungus famously uses a specific species of ant to complete its life cycle. To live, it must zombify an ant. [...] The poor infected insect—once adorned with a harmless looking spore—then has its tissue*

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Slavoj Žižek, *Christianity Against the Sacred*, p. 47-80, in: Slavoj Žižek, Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain. Inversions of the Apocalypse*, New York City 2012, p. 80.

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Horn 2018, p. 153.

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Just a couple of months after *The Last of Us* was first released in real-life on June 14, 2013.

*slowly eaten and replaced. All that remains of the ant at this point is the exoskeleton, a husk.*<sup>13</sup>

Most interestingly, Cordyceps fungi are responsible for controlling the population in an ecological system and will spread in order to keep balance once a species becomes too dominant.<sup>14</sup> In a truly post-anthropocentric fashion, the fungus that is normally harmless to humans begins to mutate and spread out, thus suggesting that humanity has to be kept at bay to prevent the collapse of the planetary ecosystem.

The Cordyceps outbreak results in a chaotic turmoil that destroys all kinds of infrastructure: the burning houses, blocked traffic, and, most importantly, attacking infected everywhere are well-known to any zombie movie connoisseur.<sup>15</sup> In a truly post-apocalyptic manner, we do not know what happened and are left to speculate. Although Holger Pötzsch criticizes the lack of information, arguing that *The Last of Us* is missing out on the chance to comment on contemporary global problems such as an ecological meltdown or growing social inequalities,<sup>16</sup> I believe that this is necessary to emphasize the emotional aspirations of the game. Following protagonist Joel and his daughter Sarah, who are introduced as a loving father-daughter-duo despite combating severe financial problems, the moral is as simple as it is compelling: although they seem to struggle to survive, at least they have each other. This gets turned upside down in the night of the breakout that ultimately ends with the death of Sarah—however, not due to an attack by an infected, but by the hands of a soldier pointing his gun at her after receiving explicit orders through his radiophone, thus killing her almost instantly. This action draws a clear line of morality: even when the world is overrun by infected, humans remain the undisputed root of evil, whether to better their position or by blindly following orders.

Although generally referred to as the *infected*, there seems to be little difference between the victims of the Cordyceps fungus and the figure of the zombie.<sup>17</sup> In popular culture, zombies may often serve as a metaphor for consumerism, loss of willpower, unreflected obedience, and affirmative commodity fetishism.<sup>18</sup> Mostly, the

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Kyle Hill, The Fungus that Reduced Humanity to The Last of Us, 2013, URL: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/but-not-simpler/the-fungus-that-reduced-humanity-to-the-last-of-us/> (23.10.2019).

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The process of the Cordyceps infection can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuKjBIBBAL8> (23.10.2019).

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The first 15 minutes of the game can be watched on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzF4qb6hYWU> (23.10.2019).

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Holger Pötzsch, Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters, in: *Games and Culture*, Vol. 12 (2), 2017, p. 170.

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Attack of an infected clicker. GameStar, The Last of Us Remastered - Screenshots, URL: [https://7images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered\\_2492876.jpg](https://7images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered_2492876.jpg) (10.12.2019).

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Stephen Harper, Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate: George Romero's Dawn of the Dead, in: *Americana*, Fall 2002, Vol. 1 #2, URL: [http://www.american-popularculture.com/journal/articles/fall\\_2002/harper.htm](http://www.american-popularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2002/harper.htm) (23.10.2019).

zombie achieves immortality through resuscitation by a virus, but is paying the price with an unfulfilled (after-)life fixated on the eating of brains. According to Slavoj Žižek, the zombie oscillates between the physical (or real) death and the depreciation of meaning thereof—it occupies the void between mere biological existence and whatever is regarded as a fulfilled life.<sup>19</sup> This ontological ambiguity is precisely what makes the zombie a successfully creepy figure in horror stories—what does life even mean once you have overcome death but are doomed to be a slave to your most primal drives?<sup>20</sup> The biased hatred towards the undead also contains a moment of colonialism that leads to the inherent Othering of the infected as shown through the constant need to fight, control, and cure them.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the zombie is angst-inducing because it is objectified on the one hand but still driven to kill and act on its own terms on the other. The bio-political fate of the zombie is therefore either to be tamed or killed,<sup>22</sup> similar to the treatment of natural resources, animals, and, of course, victims of slavery. Instead of reiterating this dichotomy, *The Last of Us* brings up the question: what if *the right thing to do* is not to control the zombies, but instead learn how to live with them?

Fast-forwarding to twenty years later, there are only very few traces to be seen from the pre-apocalyptic world. Cities lay desolate, basic necessities like electricity and water supply ceased entirely and a whopping sixty percent of the world population has perished.<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> Survivors of the still actively spreading Cordyceps virus either live in gated communities, gangs of bandits or as lone nomads. Joel is working as a blackmarket smuggler for scarce resources needed by the members of the gated community in Boston. During one of his fulfillments, he comes to know about a legendary resistance group known as the Fireflies, and, shortly thereafter, gets to meet their leader, Marlene. Joel agrees to escort Ellie to the rebels' headquarters without questioning her importance; it is only much later that we learn about her immunity to the infection. Upon arriving at the headquarters, the two quickly find out that none of the rebels survived, leading them to a road trip across the United States on the trail of the Fireflies to find whoever may be left alive.

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Gary A. Mullen, Adorno, Zizek and the Zombie: Representing Mortality in an Age of Mass Killing, in: Journal for Cultural and Religious Studies, Vol. 13 (2), 2014, p. 48-49.

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In fact, there are only very few conceptions of a re-humanisation of the zombie, e.g. in *Warm Bodies* (2013).

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Knickerbocker 2010, p. 353. Also, this connects to the origin of the zombie myth that arose from ideas on an after-life for deported, enslaved Africans in conjunction with Haitian folklore.

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Exploration of a city's remnants that have been reclaimed by nature. GameStar, The Last of Us Remastered - Screenshots, URL: [https://8images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered\\_2494597.jpg](https://8images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered_2494597.jpg) (10.12.2019).

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This becomes evident when Ellie has the last conversation with her infected, destined-to-die friend, who poses the question: "Those people out there - what if they are still inside [their bodies]? What if they're trapped in there?" to which she responds: "They may still look like people, but that person is not in there anymore." This scene can be watched on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GjhDMwudKY> (23.10.2019).

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Hill 2013, n.p.

The route resembles traditional American settler's stories: Joel and Ellie travel westwards through a strange land full of foreign dangers. During their odyssey, they must learn not just how to survive but how to survive alongside nature.

The representation of nature in all of its facets is a key factor in the interpretation of *The Last of Us*: the environmental design shows the remnants of a collapsed civilization in favor for a ruin porn aesthetics which elicits the temporality of the echoing of a *golden age*.<sup>25</sup> But what if the golden age has not been, but instead is happening in the here and now? Across the country, nature slowly began to reclaim its territories: overgrown building facades, streets, power lines, and so on. The aesthetics of decaying ruins, which was heavily used in artworks of the Romanticism era, can be understood as a clash between the dichotomy of nature and culture—as Siobhan Lyons stated: “[R]uin porn is the new sublime.”<sup>26</sup> However, I think the ruin should rather be thought of as a site-specific palimpsest that combines different forms of temporalities: on a certain place, buildings will rise and fall just like climate may change the same site from an ocean to a desert. Additionally, the ruin is always located in contemporary times: it combines paradoxical implications of time that point toward the past, present, and the future. However, there is no urgency for the ruin to decide whether it is part of nature or nurture, because it depends on the deeper entanglement of *both* forces. In this vein, a ruin can always evoke the sublime certainty of the processual flux of change. This becomes particularly evident in one of the game's most beautiful scenes when Joel and Ellie sight a flock of giraffes in Salt Lake City, roaming around freely and peacefully.<sup>27</sup> Long gone are their days in human captivity, and as the Cordyceps only proliferates within a human host, they seem to be free from enemies and the imprisonment in space and time.<sup>28</sup>

The original purpose of the Cordyceps fungi—to control populations in an ecological system—suggests what the revelatory character of the apocalypse in *The Last of Us* could be: repositioning nature as the strongest force on the planet by eliminating (self-centered) humans. The sublime motif of nature finally putting an end to the anthropocene is also reflected in the intersections of morality and

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Environmental design of a post-apocalyptic Pittsburgh, PA. GameStar, The Last of Us Remastered - Screenshots, URL: [https://2images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered\\_2492871.jpg](https://2images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered_2492871.jpg) (10.12.2019).

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Siobhan Lyons [ed.], *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay*, Cham 2018, p. 1.

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View of ruinous Salt Lake City, UT. GameStar, The Last of Us Remastered - Screenshots, URL: [https://2images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered\\_2492871.jpg](https://2images.cgames.de/images/gamestar/279/the-last-of-us-remastered_2492871.jpg) (10.12.2019).

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The giraffe cutscene can be watched on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfapMy-mIXo> (23.10.2019).

the different habitats of people: those who are living in a governmental-gated community, thus warding off nature, tend to be bleak characters, mainly focusing on defense, the rationalization of resources, and clinging to fantasies of returning to the pre-apocalyptic life someday. A more positive representation is granted to the autark community living in an abandoned power plant: here, people learned to live with nature, using hydropower to generate electricity and agriculture to grow their own resources. Those people are also by far the most sympathetic and morally steadfast throughout the game, providing commendable living standards also to the weaker links of their society. However, just because their camp is safe from the infected, it does not prevent bandits from attacking their base; showing again how evil is not found within nature, but within humans.

An interesting case of moral conveyance can be found in the character of Marlene, whose role as leader of the Fireflies is a key figure for examining the rebel alliance's code of ethics. When Ellie is told she has to leave Marlene, she revolts, insisting that Marlene is the closest family she has. Later, we learn that Marlene knew Ellie's mother well and promised her to keep her daughter safe.<sup>29</sup> When Marlene appears again at the end of the game, waiting for Joel and Ellie to arrive at a hospital in Salt Lake City, she finally confesses to the single motive of their odyssey: to engineer a vaccine against the Cordyceps infection using Ellie's brains. However, in order to do so, Ellie has to undergo surgery that she will not survive. Nevertheless, she agrees to the procedure in order to satisfy Marlene, even though she cannot provide Ellie with any evidence supporting the mere possibility of fabricating a cure. Meanwhile, Joel, furious, is shooting his way through the hospital to find Ellie. At this point, a cutscene is triggered where Joel and Ellie are seen driving away from the hospital. When she asks about what happened, Joel tells her that the Fireflies did not need her anymore: "Turns out, there's a whole lot more like you, Ellie. People that are immune. There's dozens, actually. [...] They stopped looking for a cure." Nevertheless, the film on screen shows what really happened during the showdown: after wounding her fatally, Marlene is begging Joel to spare her. Still, he

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The in-game artifact *Marlene's Recorder* states: "Hey Anna... It's been awhile since we spoke. I uh... I just gave the go ahead to proceed with the surgery. I really doubt I had much of a choice, asking me was more of a formality. I need you to know that I've kept my promise all these years... despite everything that I was in charge of, I looked after her. I would've done anything for her, and at times... Here's a chance to ave us... all of us. This is what we were after... what you were afer. They asked me to kill the smuggler. I'm not about to kill the one man in this facility that might understand the weight of this choice. Maybe he can forgive me. Oh, I miss you, Anna. Your daughter will be with you soon.



shoots her in cold blood, stating that she “would only come after her [Ellie].” In the very last cutscene of the game, which is set in the vast nature of a dropout-fantasy par excellence, Ellie is asking Joel to swear to him that everything he told her about the events with the Fireflies is true—which he does without batting an eye.

At first glance, the character of Marlene takes on the role of moral superiority, claiming to value the fortune of humanity over anything else. However, even after twenty years, the Fireflies did not make any progress towards creating a cure and tried even less to connect with the world as it is. An in-game artifact called *Surgeon’s Recorder* is giving information about the speciality of Ellie’s immunity, revealing that there have been “past cases”—strongly suggesting that she is not the first person who is immune against Cordyceps. Even if her immunity was a special case, chances for creating a cure would be slim, considering that there is no reliable vaccination against fungi infections at all.<sup>30</sup> As for Marlene, her statements from another artifact reveal that her main focus has always been the overcoming of the Cordyceps infection, even if it means sacrificing her friend’s daughter: “Apparently, there’s no way to extricate the parasite without eliminating the host. Fancy way of saying we gotta kill the fucking kid. [...] so be it.” These lines sound severely stressful considering that Ellie trusted her like a family member. During the showdown between Marlene and Joel, they embody two opposed moral positions: the possibility of recreating the *old* world prior to the apocalypse alongside science and a utilitarian body of thought versus the possibility of creating a *new* world order based on community and an affinity with nature. Of course, Joel’s decision is highly problematic, considering that he chooses to lie to Ellie about the Fireflies and the cure. Jesse Ramirez notes how the role of the patriarchal father is reiterated at the cost of a lack of agency of the female characters and asks: “did it really take an apocalypse to produce these characters?”<sup>31</sup> At the end of *The Last of Us*, it may seem that love for other people and for nature emerge as victorious values—but really, the only moral code Joel is subject to is his patriarchal obsession with Ellie that seems to be caused by his

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This is because viruses do not seem to respond well to vaccinations in general. See Amy Green, *The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in The Last Of Us*, in: *Games and Culture*, Vol. 11 (7-8), 2016, p. 757.

**31**

Jesse Ramirez, „Playing with the End of the World: The Last of Us and Post-Apocalyptic Gaming“, Class lecture series „Apocalypse Now: Narratives of Crisis and Catastrophe in the 21st Century“, University of Vienna, Department of English and American Studies, November 9, 2017.

inability to process the death of his daughter Sarah. In the end, Ellie and her agency unknowingly pay the cost of being crossed over:

The significance of the post-apocalypse as contemporary commentary on the alleged superiority of humans over any other forms of living manifests itself in *The Last of Us* not just in the plot and art design, but also in the evolution of the characters' morality. The Cordyceps outbreak instigates the end of an anthropocentric worldview through an exemplary de-humanization of the majority of the world population, so the protagonists are forced to rebuild their moral principles detached from any kinds of spiritual or profane guidance, which leads to the emergence of a morality constantly in need for renegotiation. This very literal naturalization of humanity can be understood as a quite drastic attempt to put people in their place regarding man-made environmental crises, however, it leads to the hardly radical reiteration of a Romanticist image of nature on the one hand and the affirmation of the bourgeois values of the patriarchy and the nuclear family on the other. Still, in contrast to other post-apocalyptic narratives and especially video games of this kind, *The Last of Us* constitutes a prime example of the art of entangling fact and fiction, past and present, and emotion and entertainment, which, far from any kind of moral black-and-white thinking, plausibly demonstrates how a fungus outbreak might become our real form of *Jetztzeit* one day. And with the release of a sequel in 2020,<sup>32</sup> *The Last of Us 2* may also sketch out morally progressive values for the post-apocalypse.

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See also: <https://www.thelastofus.playstation.com> (23.10.2019).