

7 THE LAST OF US and the Journey to Nature

THE LAST OF US: REMASTERED (Naughty Dog 2014)¹ is a critical dystopia of variant I that sends the player on an extraordinary journey towards nature, away from the derelict city spaces of a bygone era.² It is a route that is extremely dangerous yet well worth pursuing. For the world of 2033 is not one that players know, and a plague by the name of the Cordyceps Brain Infection (CBI) has wiped out large parts of the human population and paved the way for a new order in which nature has astonishingly reclaimed the planet. The post-apocalyptic gameworld the player thus encounters is both terrifying and magnificent. It involves him in a bitter struggle for survival against fellow humans and infected alike and in a torturous journey towards an uncertain future. But it is also a route that promises renewal and re-enchants the player in his perception of the natural world by exposing him to its glimmering allure.

This dialectic between decay and rebirth, between the failures of a past civilisation and the chance for redemption, is a common trope in post-apocalyptic fiction and can be observed in narratives such as Warner Bros. Television's television series *REVOLUTION* (2012-2014) or Alloy Entertainment's *THE 100* (2014-2017). It usually begins with "total breakdown" and "the necessary purgatory for bringing people to their senses" and continues with "a reversion to more primitive

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- 1 THE LAST OF US: REMASTERED (PS4, 2014) is the visually and performatively enhanced version of Naughty Dog's original game *THE LAST OF US* (2013). To simplify things, I will refer to the game as *The Last of Us*.
 - 2 This chapter is based on the 2016 DiGRA/FDG paper I wrote with Charlotte Ladevèze. (Gerald Farca and Charlotte Ladevèze, "The Journey to Nature: The Last of Us as Critical Dystopia," *Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FGD* 13, no. 1 [2016], <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/the-journey-to-nature-the-last-of-us-as-critical-dystopia/>).

forms of economic and social life.”³ But in *THE LAST OF US* it differs from H. G. Wells’ dystopian tales in which, as Kumar holds, after a certain “period of transition,” the “scientific intelligentsia takes power” and gives birth to a renewed and better society.⁴ Instead, the game clings to the failures of science and technology and visualises a long-lasting ecocatastrophe as a direct consequence of humankind’s missteps. Mismanagement and an utter imbalance with nature are the main culprits here, and *THE LAST OF US*, consequently, issues a terrifying warning. It is humankind’s arrogance, unhindered expansionism, and the unrelenting struggle to (re)claim the top of the food chain which are to blame and that disrupt an otherwise prosperous ecosystem designed for balance.

Figure 21: THE LAST OF US sends the player on an extraordinary journey towards nature and grasps his attention through astonishing beauty and style. The picture depicts the journey’s end.



THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. Jackson.

Such an aesthetic response and ethical effect on the player sensitises him to thinking differently about the ecosystem and urges him to reevaluate his position in it and the impact the human species has on it. To acquaint the player with such issues, the game refrains from making didactic statements about it but relies on fiction’s sensualising powers—by having the player participate in an intimate story

3 Kumar, *Modern*, 222.

4 *Ibid.*; cf. 222.

that revolves around the relationship of its two main characters, Joel and Ellie. They embark on a perilous yet cathartic journey across the U.S. towards the scientific enclave of the Fireflies who promise a cure for the CBI. Ellie is supposedly immune to the fungus, and it is Joel (and the player controlling him) who is to accompany the fourteen year old girl. Soon, however, their journey turns out to be longer and more tortuous than expected, and on various occasions Joel utters doubt about the path they took. Consequently, when they finally reach the Fireflies, and when Joel learns that in order to extract a vaccine from Ellie requires surgery that will kill her in the process, his course of action is understandable—and not solely based on the loss of his daughter Sarah during the original outbreak.

The choice for Ellie is certainly a personal choice and implies a decision against a potential cure to the CBI. However, it can also be universalised to the struggle for Utopia: in favouring one utopian proposal over another and cherishing a life in a small community in the woods of Jackson County over a return to modern civilisation. In Tommy's settlement, people have found a way to live in balance with nature, but whether the player agrees with Joel's decision is a different matter and does not concern the level of the ergodic—for the player has no say in it. Yet it is debatable from an interpretive point of view. Although hopeful, the game's ending in Jackson County leaves the player with an ambiguous after-taste—since there is no certainty about the future of the settlement, nor about the society the Fireflies would have created. Notwithstanding these implications, the road towards the ending has it shine in a clearer light and suggests an ecological, not scientific, solution.

In this respect, the strategies of *THE LAST OF US* become of particular importance, as they outline a specific insight in the player. Several images arise out of his acts of ideation, and these are themselves in constant flux, guided and at the same time negated by the continual emergence and creation of perspectives. The perspectives, thereby, can be grouped in various *oppositions* and involve the player in a dialectical negotiation of the positions they propose—for none of them is without moral flaws. Consequently, the player's attempts to ideate are first of all reinforced and frustrated by the factions in the game, which adhere to certain ideologies and ways of living. While most of them are flawed (such as the militaristic regime of the Quarantine Zones or the Hunter and Bandit factions), it is the opposing world view of the Fireflies and Tommy's settlement that spur on the player's confusion. The two perspectives evoke differing imaginings about the gameworld's future, and by closing the blanks between them, the player will come to a personal conclusion about the proposed positions.

Were it only for these perspectives, the solution would remain quite ambiguous. However, *THE LAST OF US* does not content itself with this state of affairs and

covertly aims to steer the player's acts of ideation. Especially if viewed from an ecological perspective (which the game promotes), and how the factions adjust to the new situation, *THE LAST OF US* can be considered a cautionary parable that scratches the surface of the ecotopia. It thereby proceeds by creating further oppositions to address ecological questions—concerning “growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources”⁵—but that also speak to the player's emotions. Two of the most prominent of these can be discerned in the juxtaposition of the city's confining indoor spaces and nature's alleviating outdoor spaces and in the relationship between Joel and Ellie.

Hence, *THE LAST OF US* confronts the player with an *official narrative* that is characterised by an intense struggle for survival and the scavenging for supplies. These procedures and gameplay events are most violent and are primarily to be encountered in the city's confusing mazes and derelict spaces, which aim to evoke in the player feelings of entrapment and suffering. They thus remind him in an estranged way of the precarious confinements of contemporary times: technological and capitalist excess, overpopulation, and a lifestyle marked by stressful interactions and an imbalance with the grander ecosystem. In stark contrast to this are nature spaces, which are depicted in utter beauty. They instigate a subtle *counter-narrative* by tempting the player into beautiful imaginings and they provide a safe space for human dialogue and progression. Nature spaces have a calming and liberating effect on the player and are presented as dynamic enclaves and regenerative solutions to dystopia. The perspective of Ellie furthers this image. For the young girl assumes the role of this story's temptress (which she shares with Mother Nature herself), reminding both Joel and (by extension) the player of nature's preciousness through her youthful enthusiasm and curiosity.

In the following I will illustrate the player's path of realisation towards beauty and emancipation. It is outlined by the genre-specific conventions of the critical dystopia of variant I, which illuminates how the dystopian society came about and maintains possibilities for renewal in suggesting that only a respectful treatment of the ecosystem and a life of balance with it may save humankind from disaster. To place this inception in the player, several oppositions guide his participation and acts of ideation such as fire/water, destruction/rebirth, city/nature, indoor/outdoor, entrapment/liberation, storm/sun, dark/bright, tense/calm, survival/dialogue, regressive/progressive, and so on. Their interdependence and, often, mutual negation contributes to the creation of various images and is reinforced through the

5 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 3rd ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), 254.

context/surroundings in which they occur and the four seasons of summer/autumn/winter/spring. Now, to begin the investigation into the *ecological dystopia* of THE LAST OF US, the image of the CBI becomes of importance, which finds itself in continual negotiation.

7.1 THE CORDYCEPS BRAIN INFECTION AS FICTIONAL NOVUM AND INSTIGATOR TO DYSTOPIA

There are literally thousands of different types of Cordyceps fungi and, remarkably, each specializes on just one species. But these attacks do have a positive effect on the jungle's diversity, since parasites like these stop any one group of animals getting the upper hand. The more numerous a species becomes, the more likely it will be attacked by its nemesis, a Cordyceps fungus.⁶

In the post-apocalyptic storyworld of THE LAST OF US, a mutated version of the virulent and extremely aggressive Cordyceps fungus (*Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*) has wiped out 60% of Earth's population by 2033 and transformed the once familiar society into the estranged environment the player encounters. The Cordyceps infection progresses in four stages and leads to irrevocable brain damage. It deprives its hosts of vital brain functions and transforms them into degenerate and aggressive versions of their former selves. In addition, the fungus is extremely contagious. It can be transmitted through bites or is spread airborne via spores that are released from the remains of a dead host. This is the premise of THE LAST OF US, whose gameworld is built around the logic of the CBI as fictional novum. In direct extrapolation from contemporary times, players are shown a marvellous place where nature⁷ has reclaimed the planet and where *the old order* of a

6 BBC Worldwide, "Cordyceps: attack of the killer fungi - Planet Earth Attenborough BBC wildlife," YouTube, November 3, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuKjBIBBAL8>

7 I will use the concept of nature as something overarching, stretching into the vastness of the universe, and aiming to create harmony between its individual elements in a dialectic between creation and destruction. Such an "intelligent nature" may struggle "against the ecological heresies of humankind" in order to restore balance. (Brian Stableford, "Science Fiction and Ecology," in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed [Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005], 132; cf. 132-133). In this sense, the city is also part of nature's larger ecosystem, but I will nonetheless contrast them, for reasons

bureaucratic consumer capitalism has literally corroded. *THE LAST OF US* describes the downfall of humanity's hectic lifestyle, its reliance on technology and increasing alienation from nature, which have led to such a catastrophe. In a cleansing apocalypse of brutal renewal, the Cordyceps fungus has cleared the way to achieve a balance lost long ago, in which humankind lives together in harmony with nature. The player, now, is confronted with *a new order*, a return of the natural world and a renewal of Earth's ecosphere, in which he will vicariously participate. Still, in order to compose such a positive image of the CBI, rigorous work is required, and a tedious start shows the fungus in a darker light.

The reasons for the fungus' outbreak are explained relatively early in the game, at the dawn of disaster in a newspaper to be found in Joel Miller's house. Contaminated crops from South America have imported a mysterious infection to the U.S. in 2013, and the player will soon witness its ramifications. The plot of *THE LAST OF US* consequently begins twenty years in the past in a suburb of Austin, Texas. With the initial cutscene, players are shown a loving father and his daughter Sarah—of whom they take control. She constitutes the first focalizer in the game, and the prologue lets players enact her confusion when she encounters hints that introduce the situation. Television stations broadcast scenes of violence and turmoil, and when Joel arrives, he is agitated and in a hurry. Their neighbours have turned, and Joel has no other option than to shoot them. Eventually his brother Tommy arrives, and the three attempt to make it out of town towards the countryside.

This initial section grants the player an external perspective on Joel. It is an interesting way to commence the game and not only contributes to the Joel's characterisation but also depicts him in a way that anticipates his later treatment of Ellie, which is "paternal, protective, level-headed, resourceful."⁸ This foregrounded father-daughter relationship will become an important landmark for the player's acts of ideation and, in the context of Sarah's death, contribute to the creation of various images in the subsequent events.

Right from the start, the gameworld of *THE LAST OF US* is thus plunged into chaos. The date is September 27th, and the streets are filled with panic as people's neighbours have turned into irrational and violent predators. A rapid and purifying

of simplicity and to see the city as an element that regularly disrupt nature's intimate harmony.

8 Daniel Vella, "Modelling the Semiotic Structure of Game Characters," *Proceedings of DiGRA 2014: <Verb that ends in 'ing'> the <noun> of Game <plural noun>* 8 (2014): 15; cf. 15, <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/modeling-the-semiotic-structure-of-game-characters/> "Characters"

apocalyptic fire is about to consume humankind. This fire not only manifests itself in the burning chaos and anarchy the player witnesses and enacts but also in the parasite of the CBI, which spreads like wildfire. In a beautiful metaphor of the human condition, the infection relentlessly consumes humankind and turns them into insanity-driven beings who could no longer bear the conditions of their times. It is as Gaston Bachelard pictured the apocalypse. When the symbol of *fire* pervades the scenery and consumes anything it finds on its way: “Le feu est l’ultra-vivant.”⁹ “Quand on veut que tout change, on appelle le feu,”¹⁰ “[il] purifie tout.”¹¹

It is here that the perspectives players have gathered and co-created are ideated into an initial image of the CBI, which is permeated by the symbol of fire. This is because at this point in the game, the reasons for the outbreak are unknown to the player and will only later be implicitly illustrated. For now, it is only the hint of the crops and the player’s knowledge (of similar post-apocalyptic stories) that fuel his imagination. However, these point in a certain direction. It is known that *Cordyceps* fungi thrive in humid climates, like the tropical rainforest—and, therefore, humankind’s invasive agricultural expansionism and consequent deforestation can be held responsible for the outbreak and its spread. Such imaginings are underscored by the fact that the idea of *ecology* is based on the relation of organisms with their environment and on the self-regulatory (defensive) forces of nature. Of considerable importance in this respect is the influence of the food chain. For even a minor disturbance to it can have comprehensive effects on the environment¹² and reminds one of the ecosystem’s “complexity and intricacy.”¹³

9 Gaston Bachelard, *La Psychanalyse du Feu (Folio Essais)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015), 23.

10 *Ibid.*, 102.

11 *Ibid.*, 174.

12 An arresting example illustrating the importance of the food chain could be discerned in the Yellowstone National Park in 1995 when wolves were reintroduced into its plains. While absent, a large population of deer were responsible for the park’s meagre vegetation, as they consumed most of it. With the reintroduction of the wolves, however, the deer’s behaviour changed considerably, and they started to avoid certain regions of the park, giving the plants and forests a chance to regenerate. A chain reaction kicked in, and a variety of species like birds, beavers, foxes, and weasels repopulated the area. What was truly extraordinary, though, is that the wolves also changed the flow of the rivers, since the recuperation of the forests resulted in a stabilisation of the river banks. In short, a small number of wolves not only transformed the park’s ecosystem but also had an influence on its geography. (Sustainable Human, “How Wolves Change Rivers,” YouTube, February 13, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa5OBhXz-Q>).

13 Stableford, “Science Fiction and Ecology,” 127; cf. 127-128.

This “harmony”¹⁴ also applies to the relation between “human beings and their environment,” the “intimate bond with the nurturing aspects of Mother Earth”¹⁵ which “modern civilization ha[s] sacrificed on the altar of technology.”¹⁶ THE LAST OF US continues to develop this idea of *disbalance* and turns it into an “ecocatastrophe.”¹⁷ As a common trope in post-apocalyptic SF, man-made ecocatastrophes are often a direct consequence of issues such as “the ‘exhaustion’ of the soil crop bearing capacities,” “overpopulation,”¹⁸ or the excesses of “capitalism.”¹⁹ They depict a “worldwide disaster”²⁰ and outbreak of dystopia in which the player vicariously participates. He thus engages in a playful trial action that has him scrutinise the aftermath of an ecocatastrophe but also in a world that is purifying itself, characterised by “a redemption of the Earth’s ecosphere from the threats posed by human activity.”²¹

The player will only later come to appreciate such deliberations, as for now the downfall of human society governs the spectacle. The strategies of the prologue thereby send him on a path that inexorably leads towards *death*. Closed-off alleys, scripted events, lighting, and bright objects point the way—but, most significantly, the level’s labyrinthine structure guides the player in a linear fashion. It strips him of agency and leads to Sarah’s death when she is shot by a government soldier.

This event illustrates a personal tragedy that, on a bigger scale, can be equated with the death of modern society and “the breaking away from order, civility, and the relative comforts of law.”²² The directive strategy of the prologue thus fulfils a dual role: it directs the player towards a certain goal through breadcrumbing and funnelling—strategies to keep the player on the right track or to bring him back to

14 Ibid., 133.

15 Ibid., 128.

16 Ibid., 133.

17 Ibid., 137.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 138; cf. 137-138.

20 Ibid., 137.

21 Ibid., 131.

22 Amy M. Green, “The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in The Last of Us,” *Games and Culture* 11, no. 7-8 (2016): 4, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412015579489>

it²³—and serves to complement the negative image of the CBI. A strategic placement of events and signs outlines this process. These begin with the first explosions and turmoil, when the player experiences the breakdown of media (telephone lines are dead and television stations have stopped broadcasting), and culminate in Sarah’s demise, which is framed by the burning chaos of the CBI. It is these typical things of modern society that have perished in the blink of an eye and whose destruction illustrates the downfall of the capitalist and technology-dependent order, pushing humankind to the brink of extinction. In the vein of the critical dystopia, then, *THE LAST OF US* explains the circumstances of how dystopia came into being—and this emphasis will continue throughout the experience.

7.2 THE OFFICIAL NARRATIVE: CITY SPACES OF VIOLENCE AND CONFLICT

THE LAST OF US begins in *summer* with the symbol of fire permeating the season and the image of the CBI composing itself in the player’s mind. For now, this image does not comprise the positive effects of balancing the grander ecosystem and will be worsened through the accompanying image of the city. Indeed, there is much dispute about city ecosystems in utopian and dystopian fiction, which often foregrounds the opposition between the city and the countryside.²⁴ The city, thereby, occupies a continuum between Utopia and Anti-Utopia and cannot be allocated to either side.²⁵ Instead, it enables a potential space for both utopian and dystopian deliberations, and one usually cannot determine whether a recipient would deem a certain city utopian or dystopian (especially considering the thrills of cyberpunk megalopolises).

In *THE LAST OF US*, conversely, the situation seems clearer. The city spaces of Austin, Boston, and Pittsburgh are marked by combat, violence, and panic; and depict the dilapidated remains of an order that perished on the day of the apocalypse. They hence involve the player in a specific *official narrative* and have him experience an estranged place that on closer inspection seems alarmingly similar to the real world. Such an image begins to foster twenty years after the breakout. Yet when the player again takes control over Joel, he is not the same person as in

23 Chris Bateman, “Keeping the Player on Track,” in *Game Writing: Narrative Skills for Videogames*, ed. Chris Bateman (Boston, Mass.: Charles River Media, 2007), 89-99.

24 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 143, 157.

25 *Ibid.*, 161.

the prologue. The post-apocalypse has changed him. Having lost most of his family, he tries survive as a black market smuggler and does not shy away from immoral behaviour. When the game continues, the player thus encounters Joel and his partner Tess on a route through the dystopian microcosm of Boston's Quarantine Zone (QZ) towards another smuggling job. After the Cordyceps outbreak, these were established in urban areas by the U.S. military division FEDRA (Federal Disaster Response Agency) with the intention of safeguarding the remains of humankind from the infected. Initially a noble pursuit, the QZs degenerated into the oppressive regime the player now encounters.

The perspectival structure of the QZ is thereby similar to that of the prologue. Again, the player follows the trajectory of a unicursal labyrinth and is taken on a tour through the new Boston, which presents itself in the worst possible manner. The city's inhabitants live in miserable conditions, the streets are littered with garbage, and the grey shades of the environment foregrounds the despicable character of the place. In the meantime, people are suffering from a shortage of food—and, indeed, the city's currency is now ration cards (with money another element of the old order has disappeared). Moreover, there are the regularly conducted and feared tests of FEDRA. These determine whether citizens show symptoms of the CBI, and in case of a positive result, they are executed right away.

In essence, the QZ evokes the image of a *prison*. It represents a space that is cut off from its surrounding environment and from human rights alike, and when navigating its confines one cannot deny the feeling of claustrophobia and helplessness. The suppression of people's freedom is directly experienced by the player, whose agency is severely reduced and who encounters processes that are both terrifying and resilient. For example, trying to save people from being executed (or coming too close to FEDRA soldiers) will quickly result in failure and in Joel's death. Moreover, there are death sentences for helping supposed criminals, regular curfews, brawls between citizens, and the nonstop surveillance by the FEDRA troops. The image of a prison, then, culminates in two telling examples the player finds on his way: 1) the grey walls separating the QZ from the remains of Boston and 2) the caged up dogs, whose imagery illustrates the atrocious circumstances people live in. Such a journey through dystopia does not leave the player unharmed and involves him on an affective level. The prevalent symbol of the QZ is thus one of *entrapment*, while the perspectives gathered and co-created complement the negative image of the CBI and the establishing one of the city.

7.2.1 The Strategies of the Game and the Opposition Between Indoor and Outdoor Spaces

It has been established that the confines of the QZ are made accessible to the player through visual/spatial demonstration and a reductionist gameplay in which his actions are limited to following a pre-established pathway and disallow further interferences. Yet THE LAST OF US would do no justice to its status as critical dystopia were it not to include hopeful possibilities within the confines of its official narrative. Consequently, *utopian enclaves* are already discernible within this first hour of play. For one, there is the resistance militia group of the Fireflies, who have scattered signs and graffiti across the QZ. Their agenda lies in finding a cure for the CBI and the fight against the FEDRA military in order to secure a return of all government branches. For another, and probably more remarkable, THE LAST OF US confronts the player with the astonishing beauty of the natural world. Plants and animals have steadily reclaimed parts of the city and create an atmosphere that surrounds the player with awe and calamity. In doing so, they bring forth utopian spaces that covertly infiltrate the dystopian integrity of this world and forebode a vital strategy that will subsequently guide the player's acts of ideation and participation in the game.

Already in its beginning, THE LAST OF US juxtaposes the bleak and derelict architecture of the city (and its torturous mazes) with the quaint and tranquil spaces of unclaimed wilderness and the transition between them. This results in a tension between *confining indoor spaces* and *liberating outdoor spaces* that create most interesting blanks to close. The player first encounters such an opposition when Tess and Joel traverse the QZ and come across a section where the natural world has made an astounding return within the confines of the city. Walking towards the exit of a rundown diner, the player is guided by a bright light shining through its door and windows, while dramatic music enhances the feeling of frenzy. Once outside, a dialogue between Tess and Joel underlines this romantic imagery of nature, in which Joel acknowledges that he has not been out for a long time, while Tess connects their stroll to a date. Although brief, the section is revelatory, as it provides a variety of interlocking perspectives that guide the player and initiates a *counter-narrative* that covertly speaks to his emotions. It is as Eugen Pfister explains: the secret lies in a dialectic between architectural ruins that

express the decaying body of American civilisation and an extraordinary panorama of the natural world, which has recaptured what is hers and grants the player brief moments of tranquillity.²⁶

Consequently, it is no coincidence that not long after this initial contact with nature, the player first comes to meet Ellie Williams. Ellie grew up in the Boston QZ and has never left its bounds, but she is about to set off a series of events that will have a drastic influence on Joel and the player's perception of the gameworld. Shortly, the player will learn that Ellie is immune to the CBI, and Marlene (a further character who is introduced, and head of the Fireflies) tricks Joel into escorting Ellie out of Boston and into the hands of their scientists. What they do not know at this point is that the journey will be longer and more complicated than expected. Step by step, Joel (and also the player) realises that it might be worth the effort. In a cathartic experience, the unexpected journey to nature will not only turn into a second chance for Joel but into one for the entirety of humankind.

As such, *THE LAST OF US* can be described as a coming-of-age narrative and outlines a father-daughter relationship²⁷ similar to other post-apocalyptic fiction. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), for example, a loving father takes care of a child without knowledge of the exterior world, and this child becomes the sole "raison d'être" for the father.²⁸ Coming-of-age narratives thus share a high resemblance to dystopian fictions, as they foreground the moral growth of a character and his quarrel with societal structures. *THE LAST OF US* continues in this mode and has the player enact a coming-of-age which is brutal for its participants and plastered with hindrances to catharsis.

7.2.2 Defamiliarised City Spaces and the Clutches of a Bureaucratic Consumer Capitalism

The counter-narrative in *THE LAST OF US* develops once Joel takes care of Ellie. Although reluctantly at first, he will assume a role that is both protective and re-

26 Eugen Pfister, "Jacques Lacan, Caspar David Friedrich und die Zombie-Apokalypse: Eine Erste Annäherung an Mythen in 'The Last of US'," *Spiel-Kultur Wissenschaft Mythen im Digitalen Spiel* (2015): 3-4, accessed February 20, 2016; Green, "The Reconstruction of Morality," 9.

27 Vella, "Characters," 13, 15; Óliver Pérez-Latorre, Mercè Oliva, and Reinald Besalú, "Videogame Analysis: A Social-Semiotic Approach," *Social Semiotics* 27, no. 5 (June 1, 2017): 11, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10350330.2016.1191146>

28 Hensel, "Zwischen *Ludus* und *Paidia*," 153; cf. 146, 152-153, 156.

ceptive to the girl's temperament and curiosity of nature's wonders. At first, however, the journey leads them through the dystopian spaces of Boston and Pittsburgh, and from an escape from their suffocating indoor mazes to the scientific enclave of the Fireflies, who promise hope to a world in despair.

Eventually, this route brings Tess, Ellie, and Joel to Boston's financial district and has them pass through the crumbling ruins of two skyscrapers, precariously leaning on one another. It is in the inside of these buildings that the player first has to deal with the infected in a combat situation. Entering the area, Runners (those in the first stage of infection) are standing paralysed in the building's hallways, while Clickers (the third stage) are wandering blindly through the area. One can hear their screams and see them sobbing, as if they were mourning the loss of bureaucracy and the capitalist order that drove them insane in the first place. Throughout the game, the infected are largely encountered in city spaces, their canals, but also in suburban areas. They remind the player, as Pfister claims, of the decaying human body being recaptured by nature and its defamiliarisation²⁹—and thus stand for the dying remnants of a past society, paralysed by its system and gone mad in their greed for profit and gain.

The CBI and the ludic experience of the infected thus evoke a frightful image for the player, which is fortified through additional perspectives. In this respect, Joel's ludic capabilities in confronting enemies and the game mechanics that afford them become of interest. These are, as Vella describes, influenced by the genre conventions of the third-person action-adventure and include the ability to walk, run, take cover, pick up and upgrade certain objects, engage in dialogue, and commence combat through melee attacks or weapons. The goal thereby is to ensure Ellie's and the PC's survival and pass a certain area without dying. Whether this is done stealthily or in an upfront manner often (though not always) depends on the player. However, the stealthy approach is fortified by Joel's ability to craft weapons or traps and to hear enemies from long distances by the press of a button—the player will see their silhouettes displayed in the game environment.³⁰ Consequently, “these affordances emphasize a strong sense of spatial and environmental awareness, privileging careful, studied planning”³¹—which makes

29 Pfister, “Jacques Lacan,” 3.

30 Vella, “Characters,” 10, 11, 15.

31 *Ibid.*, 10.

sense “in the face of an extremely hostile environment”³² that involves its characters in a struggle for survival and has Joel’s actions appear in the light of “desperate self-defence.”³³

The intensity of the action is thus palpable in every respect. But *THE LAST OF US* does not content itself with hordes of Runners attacking the player or the treacherous ambushes of Clickers, whose sense of hearing is highly developed and who kill with a single bite. Instead, the game intensifies the player’s anxiety through the maze-like structures of the multicursal labyrinth. There is only ever one exit to such a maze, and the combat sections make the player *suffer*—as Victor Navarro-Remesal would say.³⁴ In doing so, they also serve as perspectives for an important image to develop on the level of significance. Closing the blanks between them (the mazes, processes, city ruins, enemies, and tense combat, etc.) and aligning them with the horizon of past perspectives, the player will soon come to see the city spaces for what they really represent.

In selecting norms and conventions of contemporary society but rearranging them in *analogic* relation in the estranged gameworld, *THE LAST OF US* evokes imaginings of a terrifying bureaucratic consumer capitalism and the processes that fuel it. The enacted events can thereby be linked to the hectic, consumerist lifestyle of the player’s contemporary city surroundings, which now seem surprisingly close to what is occurring in the game. Such an observation also explains conclusions about the game’s real-world targets, for example Pérez-Latorre et al.’s observation that it thematises “the current ‘great recession’” and contemporary “debates around capitalism, austerity and ways of dealing with economic crises.”³⁵ However, its methods of involving the player and creating such an image go further than relying on the “signs of decay of capitalist civilization” in the environment—“leaning skyscrapers, urban landscapes invaded by wild nature, supermarkets in ruins, traffic jams scenarios with empty dilapidated cars”³⁶—and include the labyrinthine structure of this world, its processes, characters, and the events that occur.

Pittsburgh, the second expansive city space in *THE LAST OF US*, intensifies this terrifying perception of the city. It is the most dangerous city space the player

32 Ibid., 11.

33 Ibid., 10.

34 Victor Navarro-Remesal, “Regarding the (Game) Pain of Others: Suffering and Compassion in Video Games” (lecture, Concerns about Video Games and the Video Games of Concern Conference, IT University of Copenhagen, 2016).

35 Pérez-Latorre et al., “Videogame Analysis,” 11.

36 Ibid., 12.

encounters, but it is not the infected that pose the greatest threat, and, instead, gangs of survivors expose Joel and Ellie to severe problems. They call themselves Hunters and prey on their victims to plunder their belongings. Joel and Ellie fall victim to such a trap and only survive through brutal combat and a resourceful scavenging of supplies. Again, the ludic situation is intensified by maze-like structures both within and outside of the city buildings. Various multicursal labyrinths allow for diverse strategies of engagement and offer an advantage to the skilled player. However, they are hard to play on the higher difficulty levels, as they expose the player to constant threat and the need to safeguard Ellie from the city's atrocities. Complicating matters is the need for supplies such as ammunition, bindings, alcohol, scissors, rags, and explosive materials, which can be crafted into first-aid kits or Molotov cocktails. While true that on the lower difficulty settings these are abundant, and partially transform the city into a "'supermarket' of free objects,"³⁷ the higher the difficulty, the scarcer they get. In both cases, the city spaces of *THE LAST OF US* transform into a horrific scenario where rotten utensils and supplies are essential to the protagonists' survival (whether abundant or scarce) and create an image of a dead city cut off from the grander ecosystem.

Given this context, it is alleviating that Ellie is helpful during combat.³⁸ There is the potential for her death, of course, in certain situations—for instance, when she is attacked by Hunters or the infected, and when Joel comes to her rescue too late. But she never feels like a burden to the player.³⁹ This manifests itself in that Ellie searches for supplies/items in the game environment but also in that she attacks enemies with a knife or by throwing bricks on them. She is thus far from the helpless child in *The Road* and represents a "capable daughter" who, although in need of Joel, is about to develop into a potent young woman who will serve as a role model for both Joel and the player.

Consequently, and having in mind the perspectives gathered and co-created, the composed images of Boston and Pittsburgh are outright negative. They fuse

37 Ibid., 13.

38 Gerald Voorhees, "Daddy Issues: Constructions of Fatherhood in *The Last of Us* and *BioShock Infinite*," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 9 (2016), <http://adanewmedia.org/2016/05/issue9-voorhees/>

39 Pérez-Latorre et al. describe Ellie as "a difficulty-creating factor in the game" (Pérez-Latorre et al., "Videogame Analysis," 14), whereas Voorhees clings to the other extreme and misjudges the possibility of Ellie's death—claiming that she is neither "a physic [n]or physical burden to the player." (Voorhees, "Daddy Issues.") The truth lies in between these observations, and Joel (and the player) may fail to protect Ellie during combat sections.

with that of the CBI and evoke the image of *virus* and an “unnatural ... toxic and poisonous” environment.⁴⁰ The city spaces in *The Last of Us* thus stand as a reminder that although the city is “part of a larger eco-system ... it consumes more than it produces,”⁴¹ and that if “mismanagement”⁴² causes an imbalance between the availability of resources and human population, the city might easily turn into a “dysfunctional social order.”⁴³

Figure 22: The spaces of the city are inexorably linked to the old order of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism and the failures of bygone civilisation.



THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. The Outskirts.

As such, the city spaces add to the player’s knowledge of how dystopia came into being in that they craft perspectives that outline a devastating imagery of contemporary society’s true nature. Crumbling buildings, including out of order soft drinks vending machines and the crying remnants of its employees, or sites like the Capitol Building in Boston (exhibiting paintings of a proud U.S. history) are reinforced by tense combat encounters. Especially the references to a bygone American history are thereby striking. They are, as Green notices, juxtaposed with bleak, derelict spaces, the infected running madly through the remains of their

40 Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 161.

41 Domsch, “Dystopian,” 405.

42 Stableford, “Science Fiction and Ecology,” 136.

43 Kim S. Robinson, *Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1994), 10; cf. Stableford, “Science Fiction and Ecology,” 133.

offices, and atrocities that abound.⁴⁴ This does not imply a nostalgic look backwards, however—even though this could seem so after the experience of homes the player passes. These are filled with objects—such as books, television sets, and children’s toys—which conjure up positive imaginings about the old days. What is more difficult to grasp, however, is that this old order has failed—and to do grasp this is to see the truth behind the appearances and see the city for the site of capitalist madness it has always been.

Such an image will be intensified by additional perspectives in the following events—and, consequently, *THE LAST OF US* creates an official narrative that involves the player in a precarious situation marked by death and destruction. Symbolic for this are the details I described above but also the demise of companions such as Sam and Henry’s in a suburban town outside Pittsburgh and Tess’ execution in Boston’s Capitol Building. Surrounded by incoming FEDRA soldiers and shot to death, the city devours the woman in a symbolism of its destructiveness. Yet even this desperate act to keep its citizens in check and within its perimeters cannot distract from the city’s failures and the incapacities of an old order that perished on the day of the apocalypse. The city, as such, resembles a venue of stasis and violence, of entrapment and suffocation, and the player has to learn these rules through games of estrangement. All in all, it is thus not unreasonable to speak about the formation of a certain *chronotope*, defined as an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships.”⁴⁵ As such, the *death of the city* is demarcated by the above-mentioned criteria and inherently linked to the season of summer and to the symbol of fire as a metaphor for both world and gameplay.

7.3 THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE AS THE JOURNEY TO NATURE

Learning the rules of dystopia is strenuous, experiencing its processes restrictive, and trying to escape its madness dangerous. *THE LAST OF US* does not surrender to such despair and embarks the player on a renunciation of its official narrative. To do so, it sends him on a journey to nature that leads westwards, from Boston across the country into the wilderness of Jackson County, where Ellie and Joel

44 Green, “The Reconstruction of Morality,” 9.

45 Michail M. Bakhtin, “Form of Time and the Chronotope in Novels: Notes towards a Historical Poetics,” in *Narrative Dynamics, Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2002), 15.

settle down in Tommy's community. It is "the classical journey into the west,"⁴⁶ but not solely, as Oli Welsh remarks, one designating the death of a nation rather than the establishment of a new one. In the vein of the critical dystopia, *THE LAST OF US* initiates a counter-narrative that covertly captures the player's attention and guides his coming to awareness: leading from *the old order* (by showing contemporary city spaces in an estranged and shocking manner) to the *establishment of a new one*, which is Utopia, where life has returned to a healthy balance with nature. This transition is brutal. But it serves the purpose of renewal and of renegotiating the image of the CBI while shaping that of the city.

7.3.1 The Guiding Function of Nature as Utopian Enclave

The natural world in *THE LAST OF US* is presented in an extraordinarily beautiful way and outlines the player's *escape* from the city. The game, thereby, strikes a careful balance between gameplay purpose and that on the level of significance and continues to employ breadcrumbing and funnelling techniques to assure the player stays on track. Consequently, players are guided by bright colours standing out from the environment (often yellow), faded directional signs, and, in general, the beauty of nature itself. This is especially apparent in the escape from the Boston QZ, where the player leads the group through the city's canals, which lead them to safety under the protective shelter of night and rain. Later, the moon's brightness takes over this directive symbolism—and so right from the start, nature assumes a guiding role and outlines a specific image in the player that reminds him of nature's beauty and re-sensitise him to the benefits of a life in balance with her.

A remarkable example of nature's guiding efforts can be found in the element of *water*, flowing steadily towards the countryside. In general, there are three types of water in *THE LAST OF US* which can be described with Bachelard's observations on the phenomenon. To begin with, there is water that stagnates in the city's sewers. It is dirty and attracts the infected, and often one encounters floating corpses while diving. Using Bachelard's terminology, such *impure water* metaphorically stands for the waste and drainage of the city and for the contaminating character of civilisation itself.⁴⁷

46 Oli Welsh, "The Last of Us Review: Journey's End: Our Original Review, to mark the Release of *The Last of Us Remastered*," *Eurogamer*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-07-28-the-last-of-us-review>

47 Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves, Essai sur L'Imagination de la Matière* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1987), 13.

Second, there is standing water, which is greenish in colour and can also be encountered in city spaces. It foreshadows danger or death (such as Tess' in the Capitol building) and can be compared to a teardrop and the sorrow or melancholia of contemporary times. Standing water is similar to Bachelard's *dead water* and can additionally be encountered in David's cannibal settlement, where it mourns the hideousness of human nature in the form of a frozen lake.⁴⁸

Finally, there is flowing water, which is fresh, clear, and steadily streaming towards nature. It helps to produce clear energy and gives people hope in times of discontent (like in Tommy's settlement). This *pure water*, which Bachelard also compares to *springtime water*, shows a childlike character, young and loud, innocent and hopeful.⁴⁹

Flowing water is a steady companion on Joel and Ellie's journey and inexorably leads them towards nature. This symbolism continues in Pittsburgh, where the group follows the lead of a yellow bridge functioning as a landmark and point of orientation. Again, they choose to escape under the cover of night and make their way through an outpost of Hunters. They manage to escape with a big jump into the raging current and almost drown exposed to the forces of nature—which, nonetheless, functions as their saviour. A *storm* is brewing over the city now, underlining the precariousness of the situation, while their route leads towards the sunrise and utopian beauty of the natural world (which connects the journey to Guy Montag's escape in *Fahrenheit 451*, where the protagonist escapes alongside a river stream and will eventually find shelter in the forest).

The descriptions above are revealing, as the ecological strategy of game, in the form of opposition between indoor and outdoor spaces, is again brought into focus. I have already addressed a couple of these, such as fire/water, destruction/re-birth, city/nature, indoor/outdoor, entrapment/liberation, dark /bright, storm/sun, and now wish to discuss additional ones whose effect on the player is intensified through gameplay. THE LAST OF US creates a vital distinction between humankind's confining remains (the derelict city and suburban spaces but also indoor university spaces) and the calming appeal of nature. This opposition is reinforced through gameplay and the antithesis of multicursal city spaces (characterised by intense combat) and linear nature spaces that function as utopian enclaves for *relaxation* and *dialogue*.

This juxtaposition of *the city's agitation* and the *calming appeal of nature* is commonplace and necessarily plays with the player's emotions. It creates a dialectic between interrelated opposites that, as Hensel claims, are in need of each

48 Ibid., 89, 96.

49 Ibid., 47, 193.

other, driven by the alternations between chaos and calamity, the close-up views of combat and the panoramic vistas from mountaintops or elevated buildings.⁵⁰ This blindness of proximity and the prudence of utopian visibility speaks to the player on an emotional level. I have discussed his pain and suffering, stemming from the maze-like structures and ludic encounters of the city, which is now “alleviated”⁵¹ through the *calming* and *regenerative* appeal of the environment. Nature sections are linear in structure and represent a space for intimate *dialogue* between Joel and Ellie. They can be compared to Japanese Zen Gardens (Kare-San-Sui), which are also unicursal and aim to trigger deliberations about nature.

One example of such a juxtaposition is when the player escapes the city spaces of Boston and makes his way through a claustrophobic metro system. Having escaped the FEDRA military, a narrow staircase leads towards a bright light. The scene is very stereotypical and results in Joel and Ellie’s first encounter with the beauty of the natural world. It enables a utopian space for intimate dialogue in which Ellie says she is sorry about Tess but also shows curiosity about the woods they pass through.

Another example is the campus of the Eastern Colorado University. It is here that Ellie and Joel expect to encounter the Fireflies, but their frustration will be prepared through various strategies of the level. The UEC is probably the most beautiful level in the game from a visual aesthetics point of view. The autumn season is coming to a close, and the scenery is marked by vibrant colours and leaves whistling through the air. Ellie and Joel approach the university by horse and slowly ride through the campus. Unfortunately, Joel has to descend every once in a while. The electricity of the university gates is cut off, and his route leads to the inside of the buildings where, in an allusion to science gone wrong, he encounters a substantial amount of the infected. The terror of these indoor sections evokes the urge to leave their bounds and to escape to the bright and picturesque outdoor spaces of the campus. These are adorned with regenerating grasslands and a return of animal life. Symbolic for this is the scene in which the player encounters lab monkeys roaming the campus. He may follow them quickly by horse, and the scene triggers an intimate dialogue with Ellie. In the meantime, a storm is brewing, and dark clouds are lying over the edifice where the Fireflies are supposed to be.

50 Hensel, “Zwischen *Ludus* und *Paidia*,” 147-149, 151-152.

51 Navarro-Remesal, “Regarding the (Game) Pain of Others.”

Figure 23: The UEC campus is probably the visually most beautiful level in the game. It juxtaposes frightful indoor university spaces with the outside campus, which has been reclaimed by nature.



THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. The University.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Joel and Ellie must reluctantly accept that the Fireflies have moved on. Several perspectives have prepared this disappointment and harmonised it to the image of *science* and *progress*. Maybe this how things should be. But the player is still undecided in this concern, for Ellie fervently pushes on. The allure of nature, however, has not evaded his attention, and the image of the CBI is about to change. Its dual texture of terror and renewal oscillate in the player's acts of ideation—since he has witnessed the later stages of the infection, which transform the infected into heavily deformed giants called Bloaters. Their fungus grows from several parts of their body, and when death is near, they withdraw to dark, moist areas to emit spores that contaminate anyone who inhales them (as is the case for all the stages of infection). Nature, so it seems, is steadily reclaiming the human body and purifying the land from humankind's virulent aggressions and leftovers.

7.3.2 Ellie as a Figure of Guidance and Temptress Towards Nature

An additional strategy of the game which promotes the natural world is Ellie, who functions as a figure of guidance for both Joel and the player. Ellie grew up in Boston's QZ after the apocalypse reduced humankind to a last few. She is therefore not contaminated by civilisation and the capitalist, bureaucratic order; she can be seen as an emblem of innocence who could show the way to a fresh start. In the course of the game, Ellie discovers the new and to her unfamiliar world. She thus assumes a position similar to the player's, to whom this world is also strange, and constantly reminds Joel (and the player) of nature's beauty.

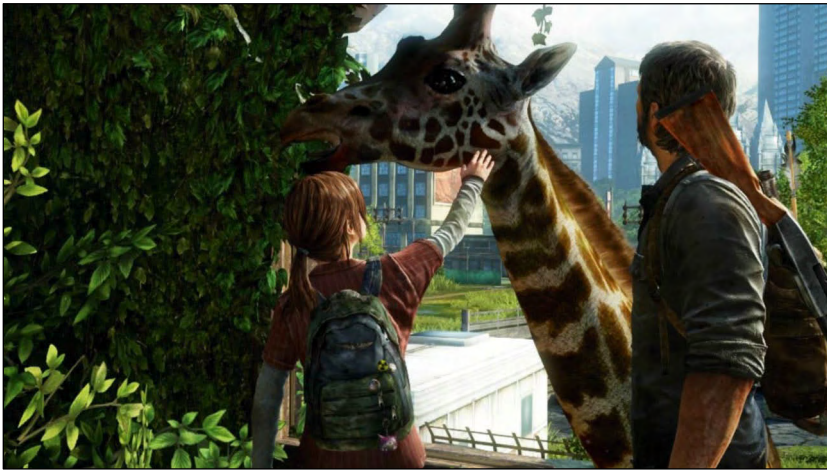
Her role, thereby, is two sided. On the one hand, she is astounded by the natural world, which she discovers for the first time, while on the other she wishes to find the Fireflies and a cure for CBI. Of course, such a longing is understandable, considering the state of the gameworld, but it might be a short-sighted attempt to change things for the better. This may be partially explained through Ellie's naïveté concerning the old world, which seems fascinating to her. On various occasions she interrogates Joel about it and inquiries about things such as movies, baseball games, and children's toys, or is fascinated by comics they encounter on their way. It creates an intimate bond with Joel and the player alike, and this also expresses itself in instances where the young girl tries to whistle or in optional conversations, for example, when Ellie recites a joke.

Most noteworthy, however, is Ellie's perception of the natural world and her treatment of animals, which is tender and full of juvenile enthusiasm, and that culminates in one of gaming's most memorable moments. Having experienced several setbacks and the torturous encounter with David (to which I will come shortly), Ellie is frustrated and listless. She seems to have lost hope but is awakened by a magnificent event. Leading the way, Ellie discovers a herd of giraffes that now freely roam the land after the breakdown of civilisation—a scene reminiscent of the return of animal life in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954). The player is now given the chance to express compassion by the option to pet the giraffe. In actualising this possibility and creating the perspective, he takes away Ellie's shyness to approach the animal and becomes affectionately involved in the events. Such an action does not serve any 'winning' purpose but resonates deeply with the player on an affective and aesthetic level.

Ellie, then, assumes the role of the *temptress* towards nature. She makes Joel and the player aware of things they might miss or have failed to recognise and reminds them of nature's beauty. Part of her role is thus didactic and helps the

player gain a fresh perspective not only on the gameworld but also on her empirical reality. The other half remains driven by a stubborn, naive resolve to find the Fireflies and a fascination about the old world. It is not very well thought out and unites empirical world norms that blindly lay their trust in science and progress while neglecting the ramifications for the ecosystem. Ellie's perspective is thus twofold and creates an opposition in itself by involving the player in a dialectic between both positions, but it also paves the way to game's darkest moments.

Figure 24: The giraffe scene marks a turning point in the plot and a last, most powerful, reminder of nature's preciousness before the final showdown.



THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. Bus Depot.

7.3.3 The More Tortu(r)ous Route

Bill: “You know, as bad as those things are [the infected], at least they’re predictable. It’s the normal people that scare me.”⁵² *Autumn* in THE LAST OF US is a season of *uncertainty* and the choice between two utopian propositions: Tommy’s settlement and the scientific enclave of the Fireflies, whose promise of a cure has impelled Ellie from the beginning. In the course of the journey, however, Joel raises doubts and is only convinced by Ellie to continue the search. This leads them to the disappointment of the Eastern Colorado University and into the abyss of *winter*, where they face the horrors of human nature. It is a fatal choice that, as

52 THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. Bill’s Town.

Lucian Ashworth holds, recalls man's folly for always choosing the "longer and more tortuous" route.⁵³ But, maybe, this is necessary to see things clearer.

Winter in *THE LAST OF US* is by far the most torturous season in the game and resembles a maze (a tortuous route) in which Joel and Ellie seem lost and face near death. Until now, they always had a strict goal in mind, but with Joel's severe injury at the UEC (symbolically followed by the first snowflakes), the focus is inevitably laid on *survival*. Like in the city, the spaces of winter expose the player to fierce ludic encounters (including the typical marks of blood on the snow) and multicursal mazes that are made more irritating due to snow storms blinding the player's vision. They are marked by the previously described closeness of sight and metaphorically describe a faction that has utterly failed as community.

The leader of this faction is David, the true antagonist of this story. Under his lead, the community at Silver Lake has devolved into cannibalism, and David himself shows paedophilic traits. It is as Green expresses: "David's actions represent the lowest manifestation of humanity"⁵⁴ and come as reminder that humankind is by far the worst predator on Earth. Supporting this argument is the fact that the story is now focalised through Ellie, as the player takes control of her. In a brutal process of coming-of-age, Ellie has to nurse the injured Joel and is confronted by David—which triggers a series of events that culminate in the playable section of the burning cabin resort where Ellie struggles for her life. It is this change in Ellie that, as Hensel claims, is addressed by the game mechanics and that moves from a *playful, paidic* attitude and external perspective on her to a *disciplined, ludic* one.⁵⁵ As the player takes control of Ellie, he therefore enacts her coming-of-age and becomes unfailingly exposed to the darkest parts of the human self. Winter, consequently, evokes the composition of two forceful images that symbolically stand for Ellie's inner life: 1) the *disorienting* snowstorm and 2) the burning cabin resort, which has the player enact Ellie's *vulnerability*, her *fear* and *confusion*.

7.3.4 The Search for Utopian Enclaves

Shortly after the devastating encounter with David is the beginning of spring. It is a period of renewal, where the previously-mentioned giraffe scene revitalises the little girl. However, she is still confident about a scientific solution to the problem, whereas the signs in the environment speak differently—and it is Joel who again

53 Ashworth, "Dystopia and Global Utopias," 69.

54 Green, "The Reconstruction of Morality," 12.

55 Hensel, "Zwischen *Ludus* und *Paidia*," 156.

utters doubt but is persuaded by Ellie to continue the journey. Symbolically, the moment is marked by the herd of giraffes disappearing in the woods of Salt Lake City.

Ellie: Hurry up. C'mon, c'mon. c'mon! Oh man ... wow. Look at those things [the giraffes].

Joel: So ... this everything you were hoping for?

Ellie: It's got its ups and downs. But ... you can't deny the view though.

Joel: We don't have to do this. You know that, right?

Ellie: What's the other option?

Joel: Go back to Tommy's. Just be done with this whole damn thing.

Ellie: After all we've been through. Everything that I've done. It can't be for nothing.⁵⁶

Due to Ellie's perseverance, the faction of the Fireflies appears in a bright light right until the game's end. This hopeful ambiguity of their image stands in contrast to most other factions in the game. All of them were well-intended initially (for example, the QZs tried to safeguard the last of humankind from the infection, and David's community flourished), yet they failed as utopian propositions eventually. This is so for a variety of reasons, but primarily due to their incapacity to live in balance with their surroundings. As Green remarks: in contrast to the animal life, humankind is unable to adapt to the new circumstances, for they cling to the ruins of an old age and "isolate themselves further from the natural world, instead of trying to understand it."⁵⁷

Consequently, it is humankind's relation to their surrounding environment that becomes important for determining utopian enclaves. The city and its inhabitants are thereby easily excluded. They remain caught up in societal ruins⁵⁸ and scavenge for supplies/raid passers-by, instead of living in a healthy balance with the surrounding ecosystems. Equally, one can exclude the Bandit factions who regularly attack Tommy's settlement, although their life in the woods provides everything they need, and also David's cannibals. All of these factions recall humankind's potential ugliness, and none of them show progressive aspects, for they are caught up in the static indoor space and chronotope of the city. Such an allocation of norms and conventions to the individual factions (the bureaucratic, capitalist lifestyle of the empirical world) is revealing for the player's acts of ideation—and this applies as well to the Fireflies.

56 THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. Bus Depot.

57 Green, "The Reconstruction of Morality," 10; cf. 9-12.

58 "[G]esellschaftliche Ruine." Pfister, "Jacques Lacan," 5.

Tommy: “Remember how we thought no one could live like this anymore? Well, we’re doing it.”⁵⁹ In strong contrast to the above-mentioned factions is Tommy’s settlement in Jackson County.⁶⁰ There, people have achieved a life in balance with nature and established a place for about twenty families. Tommy’s settlement lies in the safety of high mountains and is surrounded by an electro-cuted fence. They have achieved self-sustainability by growing crops and farming livestock and in their use of natural resources to produce clear energy—with the combined forces of a hydraulic power plant and a river stream flowing close to the settlement. For Green, therefore, Tommy’s settlement constitutes a local “of hope”⁶¹ with “no illusions about reclaiming a lost world,”⁶² and the player is led to the composition of such an image through a variety of perspectives. From arriving in the woods of Jackson County, he steadily follows a river stream and experiences the sublimity of wilderness. Eventually, he reaches the power plant and, once inside, is given a guided tour of Utopia but additionally experiences its vulnerability, having to defend it against the bandits. The image is thus by no means perfect, but it is the best the player has experienced so far.

Given this description, it comes as no surprise that Tommy’s vision of the better life stands in opposition to that of Marlene and the scientific enclave of the Fireflies. With their agenda to bring back humankind to the top of the evolutionary scale, the Fireflies do not shy away from sacrificing Ellie to create a vaccine (the fungus mutated in her brain and has to be surgically extracted). Still, their perspective is not as linear as one could think—for example Green, who suggests that the Fireflies’ “light [is] easily extinguished.”⁶³ Like any other faction in the game, the Fireflies have had to endure setbacks in their search for a cure, and they seem desperate. As such, it is an oversimplification to devalue Marlene’s “conflict about sacrificing Ellie,” which Green considers “little.”⁶⁴ For the route to Utopia is marked by uncertainty and difficult decisions, and this manifests itself in Joel and Ellie’s confusion when, after leaving Tommy’s settlement, they are geographically wandering in circles: to the UEC, David’s settlement, Salt Lake City, and back to Tommy’s.

Right until the end, Ellie and Joel are unsure which route to take, which utopian enclave to follow, and it is finally Joel who takes that decision. For it is not

59 THE LAST OF US (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. Tommy’s Dam.

60 Green, “The Reconstruction of Morality,” 10-11.

61 Ibid., 17.

62 Ibid., 11.

63 Ibid., 13.

64 Ibid.

only Ellie's life he wishes to save (although this is certainly the primary reason), but he implicitly discerns a fatal flaw in the Firefly faction. Their relentless ambition to return to the top of the evolutionary scale and bring back a society that was deeply flawed in the first place has not escaped Joel's (and the player's) view.⁶⁵ It is opposed to the game's positive rhetoric about nature, and in this light, Joel's decision to save Ellie from the dangers of surgery and to shoot Marlene point blank is understandable and not *as selfish* as some critics have argued—describing Joel “as an egocentric and egoistic actor with a lack of sense for overarching responsibilities”⁶⁶ for choosing Ellie's life over that of the greater good.⁶⁷ Such a conclusion is perilous, given the larger context of the gameworld and Joel's reversion to the loving father he was in the prologue. Science and technological progress have failed them once again (in the form of the hospital where they encountered the Fireflies), and it is rather the majority of humankind that “may not be worthy of saving. It seems worthy only of a second chance, over a number of years of hardship and slow evolution, if resistance like Ellie's begins to predominate.”⁶⁸

Hope, as Green rightfully concludes, may thus only be found in evolution itself, and in the *posthuman* solution of Ellie—as “logic would dictate that Ellie's value lies in keeping her alive and seeing whether she can pass along immunity as a genetic trait.”⁶⁹ This enclave is fortified by the many perspectives the player has encountered and co-created during his journey, and their point of convergence culminates in the creation of the *nature chronotope*. Being opposed to that of the city, the chronotope of nature is characterised by the season of *spring* and the symbols of *renewal* and *hope*. It is fortified by the strategies of the game, which include Ellie. She is naturally immune to the CBI and, therefore, shows posthuman characteristics, being genetically adapted to the new environment. Following her model, humankind is maybe offered a true second chance, and one very different from the prospect of the non-actualised Firefly future.

However, it is not only Ellie who is responsible for the emergence of the utopian horizon, and Joel deserves additional merit. For his interference guides Ellie's

65 Several perspectives, such as audio logs, notes, medical records, and radiographs have the image of the Fireflies shine in a less positive light and alter the Joel's and the player's perception of the faction.

66 Holger Pötzsch, “Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2017): 169, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412015587802>

67 *Ibid.*; Vella, “Characters,” 13; Pérez-Latorre et al., “Videogame Analysis,” 12.

68 Green, “The Reconstruction of Morality,” 15.

69 *Ibid.*, 13; cf. 6-7, 13.

naïveté concerning the old world and directs her playfulness in the right direction.⁷⁰ Consequently, this mutual dependence of *ludus* and *paidia* strikes a careful balance for the prospect of human survival and creates a beautiful metaphor for the balanced relation between various ecosystems. Humankind, so the inevitable conclusion, has to be kept in check by the forces of nature and by the saviour of the Cordyceps fungus, which has achieved a harmony lost long ago.

Table 10: Utopian enclaves described through features/symbols and determined by ecological aspects.

Utopian Enclaves?	Features/Symbols	Balance with Nature/Sustainability	Yes/No
Cities and Quarantine Zones: Austin, Boston, Pittsburgh	violence/conflict/ entrapment/ oppression/storm/fire/suffering/old order/absence of hope	decay/power generators/ scavenging gangs/shortage of supplies/stasis/viral	No
Bill's town	personal decay/ isolation/ absence of hope/fire	abandoned/shortage of supplies/stasis	No
Sewer settlement	entrapment/failed	decay/abandoned/death	No
Tommy's settlement	surrounded by wilderness/ safe haven/families/new order/hope/ Ellie (posthuman)	self-sustainable/animals/ clear energy/ progressive/dynamic	Yes
Bandit settlement	raiding/violence	stasis/no progress	No
Fireflies: UEC, Salt Lake City	(false) hope/suffering/ disappointment (UEC)/overcoming the plague	return to old order/ regressive/ would mankind learn?	unclear (No)
David's cannibals	failed/fire/suffering/hate	cannibals/paedophilia	No

⁷⁰ I disagree with Hensel who claims that Ellie reverts back to a paidic playfulness by leaving Joel's ludic path. (Hensel, "Zwischen *Ludus* und *Paidia*," 156). Both need each other, and this balance is the only way for humankind to succeed.

7.4 CONCLUSION

Hope has always been the main driving force behind dystopia, and *THE LAST OF US* represents a magnificent example of the genre. In a mixture of direct extrapolation and analogy with the real world, it suggests that modern society suffers from entrapment and the ravaging violence of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism, and, therefore, issues a terrifying warning. As a solution to dystopia, the game suggests a renunciation of the old order and outlines a route to a new one: a return to nature and the utopian enclave of a life in balance with it. Even though the price may be high, the prospect of Utopia seems to be worth the risk. *THE LAST OF US* thereby employs the formal characteristics of the critical dystopia (it shows how dystopia came into being and proposes potential solutions to it) and successfully unifies its theme with the dynamic features of the video game medium.

To trigger such an insight and aesthetic response in the player, the game involves him in a meticulous dialectic between various oppositions that centre on the general divergence between *city* and *nature*. The scale, however, tends towards the latter end, for the city is illustrated as viral and infectious. Framed as the game's official narrative, it has the player experience a bureaucratic consumer capitalism gone mad and confronts him with derelict and claustrophobic spaces. These are arranged in confusing mazes and are characterised by intense combat, which makes the player suffer. In stark contrast to this are nature's liberating outdoor spaces, which are linear in structure and provide the player with the opportunity for human dialogue and compassion. They alleviate his suffering and are presented as utopian enclaves that exert a regenerative force on him and lead humankind to the establishment of a new order.

Having gone through this counter-narrative in the act of play and closing the blanks between the interrelated oppositions, the player is confronted with a decision about the future, which the game, however, takes for him. Other games, like *PAPERS, PLEASE* or *FALLOUT 4*, allow such a choice (as critical dystopias of variant II). In *THE LAST OF US*, the plot's logic dictates Joel's decisions, however—which is not to say that the game fails to exert an effect on the player. In this respect, Joel's reversion to the loving father he once was and Ellie's open-minded attitude towards nature are of utmost importance and create an intimate balance. They re-sensitise those of us who have lost our appreciation of the natural world and pave the way to a future that inspires the player to work towards a similar Utopia in real life. In this way, *THE LAST OF US* succeeds as critical dystopia and formulates a step in a vigorous utopian direction.

