"You're My People Now"

The Last of Us Series on the Question of Human Belonging and Citizenship during the Age of Pandemics

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Introduction

Typically, when we think of video games, we might associate them with popularized discourses about aggression levels in players or the fear of an increasingly isolated society glued to their screens. However, as the academic field of video game studies has established over the last decade, video games are not only a cultural, even economic, capital but also narratives which deserve to be explored and experienced (Bourgonjon and Soetaert 2013; Domsch 2013). Video games' role in society extends further than their mere entertainment stereotype, as they could also be dubbed a communal culture—as demonstrated by MMORPGs (massively multi-player online role-playing games) or other forms of online play. The communities which are formed here often reach beyond the online spaces from which they originate (Mäyrä 172), while the narratives presented by the games could also be interpreted as communal narratives themselves. Video games, as both a genre and a lifestyle, seem to achieve this notion of communal belonging in two ways: on the one hand, the "shared playful activities experienced … promote the formation of close and long-standing friendship bonds between a player and the other members of their online community that are not traditionally found in other mediated channels" (Kowert 96),[1] on the other hand, at the core of most narrative-based games lies a conflict of belonging which the players experience through their characters' continuous struggles to achieve a state of security and stability.[2] One could argue that

1 However, it should be noted that online-offline spaces originated from online multiplayer games are sometimes also toxic environments (Hilvert-Bruce and Neill 2020).

2 Most role-play games (RPGs) are narrative based. However, one could argue that other forms of gameplay, such as first-person shooters (FPS), also follow a narrative structure which involves the players' *and* characters' fight for survival and a community which grants them stability. For instance, FPS like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) mainly feature team-based combat, while the different missions primarily focus on the players by securing hostages and loca-

the players' *and* their characters' challenges surrounding communal survival and ensuring their own as well as others' safety is also a matter concerning citizenship.

In this regard, a player's expression of citizenship, for instance, becomes valuable to the socio-cultural understanding of "video games … [as] both an activity and a space where the practices of … people are analyzed" (Bourgonjon and Soetaert 3). An intersectional reading of video games and video game culture(s) through the lens of both video game studies and citizenship studies can provide useful insights on how citizenship is conceptualized in online and offline spaces and what impact this might have on our understanding of citizenship as a whole. I argue that video games contribute to ongoing debates around the (re)conceptualization of citizenship by exploring the participatory relationship between characters within the game and players on the outside. Here, aspects of community and citizenship become relevant in a multitude of ways, as a game's structures and narratives can and should be read alongside their probable impact on players—the participatory, intersectional audience *behind* the controller.

In this chapter, I look at how representations of citizenship and their ambiguous characterization are employed in the game series *The Last of Us* (2013–2020) by Naughty Dog, specifically in relation to the medicalization of civic rights as well as the trauma narratives at the core of *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Part II* (Isin and Turner).[3] Both games explore stories of people's survival during and after a pandemic apocalypse, caused by a fungal infection, quickly wreaks havoc on the North American continent where the series takes place. The fight for resources is one of the central aspects of the series' portrayal of new civic life, with communities hoarding and battling each other over supplies, locations, and even citizens' status, as communal affiliations and constitutions vary drastically, from military structures to religious sects to the representation of democratic values.

The characterizations and portrayals of citizenship within *The Last of Us* series generally seem to follow, though conflicted and ambiguous in their narrative execution, internationalized Western conceptions of citizenship, primarily coined by the UN charter on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and cumulative legal documents such as the charter on *The Rights of Non-Citizens* (2006). The latter, as published by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, defines a citizen, and, in turn, a non-citizen, as follows:

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tions to ensure their own (teams') as well as non-playable characters' (NPCs) safety. In this regard, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* features both online and offline accounts of community—and citizenship—as players from all over the world engage in online combat against and with each other.

3 For short: *Last of Us I* and *Last of Us II*.

> Citizens are persons who have been recognized by a State as having an effective link with it. International law generally leaves to each State the authority to determine who qualifies as citizen. Citizenship can ordinarily be acquired by being born in the country (known as *jus soli* or the law of the place), being born to a parent who is a citizen of the country (known as *jus sanguinis* or the law of the blood), naturalization or a combination of these approaches. A non-citizen is a person who has not been recognized as having these effective links. (5)

Although the apocalyptic setting in *The Last of Us* series has effectively dismantled all previously known forms of State and (international) State law, its portrayal of new judicial and communal structures seems to be informed by current systems: in the series, members of a community can technically acquire citizenship by being born into it, or having a parent in this community, or by naturalization.[4] However, although *The Last of Us* games seem to build upon this definition of the acquisition of citizenship, these seemingly established "links" between person and State are overruled by one crucial factor: a person's health status. In *The Last of Us* series, citizenship status is granted only to those who are not contaminated with the fungus, regardless of *jus soli*, *jus sanguinis*, or naturalization processes. Here, I argue that *The Last of Us* series narrates citizenship as an ongoing conflict by conceptualizing citizenship, and in turn, its recognition, as a status tied to someone's medical(ized) humanness, whereby humanness means "being human" and to "be human" means one must be uninfected. In turn, being and/or passing as uninfected not only grants human status but also (communal) citizenship, whereas being infected classifies a person as non-human and thus renounces citizenship status. Consequently, citizenship is not granted easily: people who have just been contaminated, immediately receive the status of "non-human" and are either killed or exiled from their communities to prevent infectious outbreaks. In this regard, the games utilize medical terminology to define and redefine what it means to be both human *and* citizen. The recognition of citizenship is thus not only linked to the individual's health status but also their correlating humanness. In this paper, I will continue to differentiate between humanness and humanity: whereas humanness describes the condition of a person being "human" (as in, of the human race), humanity refers to a person's benevolence as part of their identity as a "human." In some of the research referenced here, these two terms are used interchangeably, however, in my analysis of *The Last of Us* series, I wish to maintain their differentiation to further contrast the games' use of both as origins of (oftentimes) traumatic conflicts for the characters and the players. Here, the series' protagonists represent border existences, as they progressively deviate

4 This alludes to my argument above that video games cannot and should not be read separately from the structures they exist within (meaning our societies and communities) but are instead informed by and comment on these very structures.

from their world's definition of medicalized "humanness" and its correlation to citizenship which gives rise to conflict over their *humanity*. In turn, the player is assigned a specific role in the games' narratives and beyond, reshaping questions of humanity, humanness, and, consequently, citizenship yet again.

Of particular interest for this paper will be how the series' main characters, Joel and Ellie, navigate their individual yet correlated processes of citizenship and its recognition, with regard to other characters and the players. As the narratives unfold, it becomes apparent that each character's citizenship status is both reliant on but not innately tied to their community's recognition of citizenship. Instead, the characters are forced to relearn their varying states of citizenship as embodied as well, going beyond the seemingly fixated link between citizenship and health status. Here, the traumatic experiences the characters go through, inform their perception of citizenship as they—and thus the players—are repeatedly forced to overthrow their previous sense of community and its affiliated civic status, to instead replace it with their own definitions of belonging. This creates central moments of conflict for the characters and shapes the way *The Last of Us* series conceptualizes the dissonance between citizenship and individuality in relation to the characters' traumatic experiences. Moreover, these conflicts put the player in a peculiar situation, as they at once cause and determine the characters' precarious citizenship status, while themselves reflecting on their own citizenship status outside the game.

Methods and Literature Review

Reading *The Last of Us* series as located at the intersection of citizenship studies, video game studies, and narrative medicine grants a multi-faceted outlook on the correlations between citizenship and its medical as well as non-medical determinators, while also analyzing the consequences of such correlation for our own understanding of a person's (and a people's) humanness and humanity.[5] Rita Charon defines the field of narrative medicine as "the work that has … potential to help move an impersonal and increasingly revenue-hungry healthcare toward a care that recognizes, that attunes to the singular, and that flows from the interior resources of the participants in encounters of care" (2). Beyond this, narrative medicine is also a methodology which reads health and illness narratives through a lens of care, rather than cure. Thus, in this paper, when I analyze *The Last of Us* series with the help of a conjunction between modern citizenship studies and narrative medicine, I wish to uncover the

5 Mita Banerjee's chapter from this volume, "'What the Eyes Don't See': Medical Citizenship and Environmental Justice in Monda Hanna-Attisha's Medical Memoir," provides further analysis of the intersection between narrative medicine and citizenship studies as they relate to environmental racism in the context of the Flint Water Crisis.

underlying structures which have defined our views of human beings and citizens alike, while also being able to offer an alternate approach as to how we can find re-definitions of both in the games—and beyond.

Even though unraveling apocalyptic crises like that in *The Last of Us* series may seem fantastical, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that there is need for a discussion on core social values and how we perceive of ourselves as (global) citizens. The game series hereby offers a narrative exploration of individual(ized) emotional versus civic duties, which, in turn, could shed light onto our own relationship with these aspects: "Video games have the ability to tackle one of the primary obstacles to developing the citizenship identity by utilizing fictive worlds to help players imagine a larger community and see their relationship in it" (Davisson and Gehm 42). Thus, while investigating how citizenship is established in the game series, this paper will also join discussions on inclusivity and displacement in conversation with "digital technology, … [which makes] the format [of video games] a unique rhetorical tool for imagining oneself as citizen and acting out that imagination" (40).

The modern discourse on citizenship is centrally concerned with an endeavor to expand the term and its associations, moving away from exclusively legal and political/politicized conceptions of citizenship to include

> [c]hanging patterns of mobility and connectivity, migration and transnational cultural interconnections … [C]itizenship today is at the same time associated with old and ineffective protocols, which continue to produce exclusion, and yet is also 'in the making', moving into a position beyond the given … At its best, this ambivalent performance of citizenship has the capacity to rearticulate or reinvent citizenship, to link old and new figurations of citizenship … across given thresholds of legal and political institutions, social conventions, disciplinary competencies and discourses, ascriptions and attributions of race, class, culture and gender. (Hildebrandt and Peters 3)

In this ambivalent space, the field of video game studies becomes especially useful to the examination of *performances* of citizenship, as video games act both as a medium to be spectated and a performative space (Fernandéz-Vara 2009). Citizenship in this regard is not only enacted within the narrative by the characters, but also through the player engaging with the narrative as an active participant: the game's plot can only unfold when the player interacts with its interface, while games like *The Last of Us* series also aim to include their players not only on a mechanical level but on a narrative level as well. Here, the players engage with "old and new figurations of citizenship" (Hildebrandt and Peters 3) through the characters they navigate and are meant to form an emotional bond with (Brookes 2011). By integrating the players into the characters' traumatic and conflicted journeys around their varying states of

citizenship, *The Last of Us* series positions itself in an ambivalent space of redefining citizenship—for both its narrative and characters, as well as its players.

Analysis

Ethical and Emotional Imperatives of Health-Related Citizenship Statuses

The series begins by showing its audience the collapse of the world as they and the characters know it: the first outbreak of a fungal infection on the North American continent in 2013 forces people to flee their homes in a hurry, while the US military desperately tries to control the quickly escalating situation. Here, the series' first main character Joel is introduced, who tries to escape with his daughter Sarah, but is stopped by soldiers. Unsure about whether he is being confronted with two newly infected citizens, one of the soldiers shoots at Joel and 12-year-old Sarah who, fatally wounded, dies in Joel's arms. This beginning sequence of *Last of Us I* confronts the player with the series' themes of medicalizing people and the traumas that result from the sudden instability of citizenship and its processes of recognition for the first time.

Last of Us I introduces its audience to a new charter of citizenship statuses, granted as protective status of a person *and* a community's body and mind as related to medical determinators. The most important distinction here is the differentiation between humans and the Infected, who are depicted as non-human monsters: "They might still look like people, but that person is not in there anymore" (*Last of Us I*). The Infected are the enemy; they cannot be reasoned with and they attack any living being upon sight—thus, once a human has been infected, they "turn" and need to be eliminated to ensure the survival of those still uninfected. *Last of Us I* and *II* do not often feature people turning, however, and if they do, the correlated cut-scenes also portray the emotional conflicts arising from losing someone to the infection and, in turn, having to make the dire decision to kill them. In this regard, the series correlates the emotional effects of the pandemic and its aftermath, with the impact on characters' social behavior and their survival strategies. The medical knowledge the characters, and, hence, the players, have of the infection is limited since not a lot is known or revealed to them about the intricacies of the infection aside from it spreading quickly and being lethal to the person's humanity *as well as* their humanness and, consequently, their life. In limiting scientific knowledge, the games instead lead their players to focus on individual and family fates, as well as on the humanity of those who are still human. The fight for survival is thus emotionally connotated and is not processed by the characters in a primarily medicalized manner, in the sense that they perceive of the infection and its consequences as an "illness" to be cured. Instead, the characters fear and dread the infection

particularly because of what it might do to themselves and their community. The infection is defined through its traumatic consequences and experiences for the characters: They lose their loved ones twice; first, because the infection "kills" the conscious aspects we define as "human" in a person, and second, because the now inhuman being needs to be killed to ensure *human* survival. The games' narrative and visual depiction of despair and loss are hereby directed towards those still alive; their status as "humans" and as "citizens" is defined by their *lacking* medicalization. If a character is not infected and thus rendered as "healthy," there is no need for others to question their status as citizen/human, whereas once someone leaves the state of "healthy" by means of an infection, their humanness and consequently their status as citizen are immediately revoked, regardless of their communal affiliation.

Herein, the games create a dissonance between the medicalized view of the Infected on the one hand, and the emotional perspective of humans on the other hand. While fighting Infected in the games, the players are constantly confronted with the medicalized perception of these beings, marking them as visually and narratively inhuman(e) and thus worth, even necessarily, being killed by the players during combat to ensure both the character's and the player's survival.[6] Herein, the Infected are not designed to make the player feel guilty about killing or using violence—in contrast, the narratives and varying combat sequences relating to *human* characters do intend this affect, especially in *Last of Us II*. Particularly interesting here, is that in stripping the Infected of their humanness, they are rendered as objects (as opposed to subjects) which complicates the series' depiction of citizenship. By portraying the Infected as non-human beings, their medicalized characterization as "ill" simultaneously renders them as *inhumane* and dangerous. Similar to the way Robert Williams (Lumbee) traces the concept of the "savage" to white supremacist citizenship culture which labels various peoples as inhuman(e) and therefore uncivilized, *The Last of Us* series constructs the Infected as "savages" to contrast human and non-human, citizen and non-citizen, friend and foe: "Alien and exotic, threatening and subversive, the savage has long been imagined as a familiar, diametrically opposed figure throughout the history of the West, helping to define by counterexample and antithesis a distinctive form of Western civilization" (9). This binary between "us" and "them," framed by Western notions of citizenship, in turn not only enables *The Last of Us* series' depiction of the Infected as "savages" but as non-citizens as well (due to their being uncivilized), whereas human characters are "diametrically" marked as civilized and thus citizens.[7] Moreover, the objectifying, medicalized view

6 If the played character (the avatar) is killed in the game, the player is forced to replay the sequence.

7 See Vanessa Evans's chapter in this volume, "'You've Heard it Now': Storytelling and Acts of Citizenship in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*," for a look at how Indigenous Peoples reimagine citizenship and belonging through storytelling after apocalypse.

on the Infected is amplified by some of the games' apocalyptic environmental settings, which often feature abandoned hospitals or crashed ambulance cars. When such eerie medical surroundings are featured in the series, they almost always develop into combat sequences against Infected, reiterating the latter as both emotional and medical enemies to characters and players. The Infected are hereby not only characterized as uncivilized monsters needing to be killed to secure one's survival/health status, but they also represent the emotional extents of the pandemic: humankind as we know it has been destroyed, there is no hope left, and those who were lost are better off dead than turned into "those things out there." (*Last of Us I*)

At the same time, however, the series does—though only subtly—problematize certain interactions with Infected. In a scene during *Last of Us II*, one of the protagonists encounters a military stronghold which has purposefully captured Infected to use as bait, target practice, or subjects of torture simply for fun. The degradation that the Infected suffer in this sequence marks the ultimate denial of any humanness within them—to the human military group the Infected are not even considered post-human any longer, and instead become objects of violent desires and cruel fantasies. This then raises the question to the military group's own *humanity* as well as their *civility*—to invoke Williams again: "the Western world's most advanced nation-states continue to perpetuate the … images of … savagery … to justify their ongoing violations of the most basic human rights" (8f.). This, unfortunately, is only commented on shortly while players are given the option to kill the Infected who have been captured or engage in their torture, potentially creating ethical dilemmas for the players as well:

> The nature of what it means to be human functions as a primary theme to the game's [*The Last of Us*] narrative. This becomes juxtaposed against the larger question of what it means to be moral in a world where all previous structures imposed to govern morality—courts, jails, an organized central government, and even communities—have fallen away. (Green 747)

Nonetheless, by refraining from commenting on the player's own ethical (or unethical) desires to act (in)humane against the Infected, and even leading players to objectify them—herein possibly encouraging the players to engage in their torture—the game not only remains ambiguous in its portrayal of non-human non-citizens, but also remains (questionably) ambivalent in its depiction, even choice, of humanity. Although *The Last of Us* series largely remains within the binary boundaries of (oppressive) Westernized notions of citizenship (us vs. them), the games complicate their own citizenship narratives with questions of humanity by confronting players with these ethical dilemmas. In doing so, the games insinuate the very conflicts around non-citizens and their protection in our society outside the games: "If non-citizens are lawfully deprived of their liberty, they must be

treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of their person. They must not be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and may not be held in slavery or servitude" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 15).

Moreover, by positioning their players in these types of scenarios, *The Last of Us* series complicates its overall portrayal of citizenship and its processes of recognition: on the one hand, due to the crass differentiation between humans and Infected, little room for a multi-faceted ethical exploration of humanness, citizenship, and humanity is left. On the other hand, the players are often thrown into emotional paradoxes, in which the lines between "healthy" and "ill" (infected), "citizen" and "non-citizen" are blurred and moreover, emotionally loaded. The following scene from *Last of Us I*, in which the protagonists Ellie and Joel encounter two brothers, Sam and his older brother Henry, demonstrates the extent of this paradox:

> [Ellie goes to wake Sam up and discovers that he is contaminated and turning into an Infected. Sam attacks Ellie—Joel tries to intervene and prepares to shoot Sam; Henry, however, stops him by drawing his own gun.]
> [Henry, shoots a warning shot at Joel] "That's my fucking brother!" [Ellie is heard screaming in the background, struggling against a turning Sam.]
> [Joel] "Screw it!" [He reaches for his gun again. Henry shoots at him first, but then turns to shoot his little brother in the chest. Sam dies, while Ellie is left free and unharmed.]
> [Henry, miserable] "Sam … " [He breaks down crying, while still holding his gun. Joel walks over to him, worried.]
> [Joel] "Henry!"
> [Henry, sobbing to himself] "Henry, what have you done?!"
> [Joel approaches slowly] "I'm gonna get that gun from you, ok?"
> [Henry, points his gun at Joel] "It's your fault!"
> [Joel] "This is nobody's fault, Henry!"
> [Henry, crying] "It's all your fault!" [Henry suddenly shoots himself in the head. He is dead immediately.] (*Last of Us I*)

This scene exemplifies the emotionally laden ethical paradoxes *The Last of Us* games push players into: for one, the lines between life and death, citizen and non-citizen, seem to be clearly drawn in accordance with a person's health status—Sam has been contaminated thus he needs to die. After all, once infected, a person is marked as "ill" and practically considered dead;[8] therefore, they can be rightly stripped of their

8 Herein, the games also invoke the notion of "social death," describing the way society renders the yet living or already deceased physical body as "dead," or having experienced "a series of losses," including "a loss of social identity; a loss of social connectedness; and losses associated with disintegration of the body" (Borgstrom 5).

citizenship to protect those who remain "healthy," meaning being alive, human, and thus citizen still.

Scenarios like these, however, also create difficult ethical imperatives: anyone who has been officially declared dead, *must* in fact die, regardless of their (emotional) relation to others which is why Henry ultimately decides to shoot his own brother. Interestingly, although the scene also depicts the pain and trauma of such an act, as Henry sees no other way but to end his own life as well, his suicide does not alter the established acts of recognition of humanness *and* citizenship as directly related to health and health status. Instead, civic responsibility overrules emotions in all aspects, even if it requires one's own death. Having witnessed this, the players are then confronted with the ultimate paradox: Ellie.

The Last of Us series centers its main narratives on Ellie, protegee daughter of Joel, who is the only known human being to survive an infection and thus become immune which renders her neither human nor Infected. By placing the players in the role of Joel in *Last of Us I*, and then Ellie in *Last of Us II*, leading them to care for Ellie, the series uproots its own principle of "civic responsibility over emotions." In *Last of Us I* this reality ultimately climaxes in Joel's rescue of his protegee daughter from a surgery that would have ensured a vaccine for humankind but also would have resulted in Ellie's death—a choice Henry, or anyone else for that matter, was not allowed to make for his family.[9] In turn, in *Last of Us II*, Ellie's immunity is meant to be kept secret, so not to reveal her non-human, non-citizen identity and instead ensure her human citizenship, even if it means disregarding the established rules over health, humanness, and citizenship status to maintain everyone else's safety. The ways in which Ellie's role complicates the series' depiction of citizenship and citizenship recognition, as well as civic responsibilities, will be analyzed in the coming pages.

By creating paradoxes like these, *The Last of Us* series continuously unravels and destabilizes its own (un)ethical narratives and subsequently, the role of their players, as the lines between good and evil, right and unjust, emotion and civic responsibility, are constantly blurred: is Joel in the right for saving his daughter's life despite her non-human non-citizen status? And is Ellie in the right for protecting her own citizenship status above all else, despite the established rules? In a sense, though the series remains conspicuous here, *The Last of Us* games offer their audience a multi-layered perspective on the very conflicts and ethical dilemmas of citizenship, health, and health status we face in our modern-day society:

9 This is particularly problematic with regard to the fact that Henry and his brother Sam are African American, whereas Joel and Ellie are white. However, for sake of continuity, I will abstain from a detailed discussion here.

> The most typical public health ethical conflict is in deciding upon how to balance the needs of "the many" against the rights of "the individual." Classic examples of this dilemma are who should be saved if not everyone can be saved and how can an individual's privacy and liberty be respected whilst still protecting and promoting the health of others? When addressing these questions, "trade-offs" inevitably occur; however, in order to ensure that these are fair and just, one must be able to assess the duties and rights of all the parties involved. (Stapleton et al. 4)

Meta-Citizenship: Rights and Responsibilities

Although *The Last of Us* series' protagonist Ellie is characterized as occupying a border existence in the games' exploration of health, humanness, and citizenship status, which brings about its own traumatic challenges for her and those around her, Ellie, nonetheless, remains an able, white, queer woman, who passes as "healthy" and thus as "citizen." The obstacles she faces due to her immunity, e.g., Ellie having to keep her immunity secret so not to lose her ambiguous citizenship status, can generally be overcome and often do not even pose an imminent threat to her safety—both regarding her citizenship recognition as well as her humanness recognition. Here, the series does not seem to be able (or does not want to) push the limits of traditional Western conceptions of citizenship too far, as if to remain within the bounds of what has established itself as the (white supremacist) social norm: even though the games position Ellie as the only other non-human non-citizen next to the Infected, she is no "savage." Ellie is no antithesis to be degraded, instead, her unique medical status as the first (known) person to be immune to the infection ultimately renders her as the first of a new kind of human—and citizen. In transcending the established definitions of humanness by tying it to a person's medical "health" status, Ellie destabilizes the existing norms of regulating citizenship through medical determinators. In this sense, Ellie's position could be correlated to the term "patient zero," typically describing "a person identified as the first to become infected with an illness or disease in an outbreak" (Merriam-Webster). In *The Last of Us* series' post-pandemic scenario, Ellie is no "patient zero" in the traditional sense. However, she could be described as "citizen zero," since her health status as neither human nor Infected surpasses any previously established forms of humanness and thus citizenship. Ellie has no "rightful" claim to any citizenship within her world: the recognition processes of both humanness and citizenship status as tied to distinct medical categories (healthy equals human and grants citizenship vs. ill equals not human and revokes citizenship), are not only *not* applicable to Ellie but undermined by her as well, due to her distinctive (un)humanness. In turn, just like "patient zero" marks the first existence of a new ill human, Ellie's existence marks the first instance of a new (un)healthy human—a "meta" human—forcing those around her to reevaluate previous definitions

of health and humanness. Consequently, in her medical novelty, Ellie also marks the emergence of new forms of citizenship, overriding the seemingly stable frames for determining humanness through medical factors, which, in turn, grant citizenship. Hence, in her meta humanness, Ellie could be dubbed a "meta citizen" as well.

Respectively, Ellie is set apart from those around her because of her medical and civic duality. For some, Ellie represents the only hope left for humankind's survival, for others, she signifies a risk too great to take, as her ambiguity threatens the (though fragile) stability of society prior to her appearance:

> [Ellie has joined Joel and his partner Tess shortly before the following sequence. Joel and Tess are protecting Ellie, who is fleeing the military, trying to reach the rebel group Fireflies; Joel, however, follows this plan reluctantly. As the military follows them after a conflict, the three seek shelter in an abandoned government building.]
> [Tess] "I'm not … I'm not going anywhere. This is my last stop."
> [Joel, baffled] "What?"
> [Tess] "Our luck had to run out sooner or later."
> [Joel] "What are you going on about—" [He approaches Tess and tries to take her arm.]
> [Tess jumps back, panicked] "*No don't*—! Don't touch me."
> [Ellie approaches slowly] "Holy shit. She's infected."
> [Joel looks back and forth between Tess and Ellie. He scoffs, visibly hurt, and takes a few steps back.] "Let me see it."
> [Tess pulls her shirt back and reveals the bite mark on her neck. Joel huffs in shock.] "*Oh, Christ*!"
> [Tess suddenly walks up to Ellie and grabs her arm.] "Give me your arm!" [She pulls up the sleeve and shows Ellie's old bite mark to Joel demonstratively.] "This was three weeks. I was bitten an hour ago and it's already worse. This is fucking real, Joel!"
> … [Tess walks up close to Joel] "Look, there's enough here that you have to feel some sort of obligation to me. *So, you get her to Tommy's*."[10]
> … [The military has arrived and begins to approach the building. A decision needs to be made.]
> [Ellie] "You want us to just leave you here?!"
> [Tess] "Yes…. I *will not* turn into one of those things."
> … [Ellie and Joel reluctantly leave Tess behind, who sacrifices herself to buy them some time.] (*Last of Us I*)

Interesting here are the different emotions towards Ellie and her immunity, specifically regarding Tess and Joel's conflict about a civic, even humanitarian responsi-

10 Tommy is Joel's brother and plays a crucial role in the whole series, as he is one of the few people to know of Ellie's immunity and acts as her protective family as well.

bility towards themselves, and the world they live in. Ellie's condition is, though unraveling, also something that inspires hope even for those whose situation is hopeless—like Tess's infection. Therefore, when Tess urges Joel to feel "some sort of obligation" to her, she is not only referring to an obligation to her as Joel's partner, but also to her as a human being. Tess's human death is inevitable; the infection will spread and turn her into an Infected, which not only strips her of her human consciousness, but ultimately renders her non-human and thus non-citizen as well. However, what matters most to Tess here is the value of her life as a human being, which ultimately results in her decision to end it by sacrifice before she turns into an Infected. Tess *consciously* chooses her humanness in her death, and in doing so, her humanity, by trying to hold onto the remaining fragments of agency over her life. In framing her sacrifice as "an obligation" to be fulfilled by Joel, Tess asks him to choose her humanness with her, to value her sacrifice as a human being rather than dwelling on the loss her death represents.[11] By reminding Joel of his responsibilities as a human being, Tess also reminds him of his responsibilities as a citizen to and of this world: in *The Last of Us* series, citizenship is granted as a protective status by an individual's community—the civic responsibilities tied to this recognition process, in turn, involve ensuring and reinsuring the (medically) determined humanness of each individual, including one's own. Particularly interesting in this regard, is how Tess then not only uses these established definitions of civic responsibilities,

11 This commentary on the fragile relationship between life and death, humanness and humanity, citizen and non-citizen is a reoccurring theme in *The Last of Us* series. For instance, this relationship can be observed in the scene with Henry and Sam, as referenced above: Henry perceives of himself as *inhumane* for killing his little brother, even though his act signifies the enactment of a civic responsibility (Sam is now an Infected, hence, he must die). The *obligatory* fatal violence against his brother's quickly vanishing humanness then symbolizes a violation of Henry's humanity—meaning that Henry's capacity for acting as an empathetic human being dies the second he kills Sam. The aforementioned "civic responsibility over emotion" thus also has significant consequences for Henry's emotional integrity. Nonetheless, *Last of Us I* also resolves this ethical and emotional paradox for the players: Henry, by killing is brother, not only upholds his civic responsibilities, but also reinstates his agency as a *humane* human being, by killing himself, too. In his suicide, Henry restores the balance between life and death, humanity and humanness: if he cannot be humane, then he also cannot be human, thus, he must die. Even more so, Henry's and Sam's processes of citizenship recognition remain intact as well since their deaths are in accordance with the rules of this world. Sam is rightly stripped of his citizenship status by becoming infected and then killed, whereas Henry remains a citizen, even in death. The whole scene, though unsettling, hence not only reinforces the "lawful" enactments of citizenship and civic responsibilities but also restores the emotional balance for the players, who, as with Tess, witness the ultimate sacrifice: to die for the sake of sustaining humanness, humanity, and citizenship—not only for oneself, but for others, too.

to determine her own actions and predetermine Joel's actions, but to redefine these responsibilities as well.

By sacrificing herself to ensure Ellie and Joel's survival, Tess reevaluates previously fixed relations between humanness, humanity, and citizenship through medical determinators: not only can Tess remain an active agent of her own unraveling non-human, non-citizen, soon-to-be inhuman existence, but she can also ensure the success of Ellie's unraveled existence. Ellie, whose meta status as non-human non-citizen would technically require her death and/or social exile, is now protected by Tess's small, yet impactful redefined communal structure—her sacrifice, in turn, becomes a civic act of responsibility for this renewed community. By urging Joel to equally recognize Ellie's importance and require her protection, as the girl's immunity exemplifies the hope that the horrors of the pandemic might soon be over, Tess also claims Ellie's meta human existence as a lived reality: "This is fucking real, Joel!"

Ultimately, Tess's sacrifice is more than a personal choice to merely avoid "turning into one of those things." Instead, Tess acknowledges that by protecting Ellie, she is enabled to choose a better life for everyone else as well, while reestablishing her civic integrity as a human being despite her sinister past: "[Joel] This is *not us*.' [Tess scoffs] 'What do you know about us? About me?' … 'Guess what, we're shitty people, Joel. It's been that way for a long time.' [Joel, angrily] 'No, we are *survivors*!' [Tess, desperate] '*This* is our *chance*—!'" (*Last of Us I*). Tess understands her role as part of a bigger civic and humanitarian scheme because she recognizes Ellie's importance as well as the centrality of her own decisions to ensure Ellie's success (in whatever form). Hence, for her sacrifice not to be in vain, Tess urges Joel to follow her example. Here, Nuraan Davids writes that

> human flourishing is possible only if we begin to act in ways, which not only recognize our mutuality, but if we are prepared to put in place the measures to sustain that mutuality. Citizenship … provides us with a language to negotiate renewed understandings and practices of civic engagement and disagreement; it is up to us to accept this responsibility. (190)

This new practice of citizenship and citizenship recognition based on an understanding of mutuality, which Davids refers to here, is not only exemplified by Tess's behavior but also signifies an overall theme in the game series. Tess understands that she is not exempt from the fate of getting infected, despite the measures she has taken in the past to secure her safety. She is not a "survivor" anymore, as Joel calls them; instead, in her changed position from human to "soon-to-be-Infected," she begins to comprehend that no one is safe, until a different solution to the pandemic is found. Hereby, Tess finds a mutuality with others before her and, in turn, accepts Ellie's special role in changing the future for the better. In voicing her developing perspective and, eventually, by sacrificing herself, Tess practices a

citizenship based on kinship with Ellie as meta citizen and meta human, as well as those before and after her.[12] Ellie's existence proves to her that change is indeed possible—Tess may have been "shitty people" but in accepting her responsibilities as a *citizen to humankind*, she takes the "measures [needed] to sustain that mutuality" of which she is now a part (Davids 190).

After Tess's sacrifice, the players consequently experience a change in Joel's behavior as well, as he not only agrees to help Ellie but soon grows to care for her. By letting the players take the role of Joel in *Last of Us I*, the game makes them a part of redefining the established recognition processes of humanness and citizenship alike. In doing so, the players not only get to work towards the specific objective of "saving humankind" by protecting Ellie, but they are also asked to reflect on the established frames of defining humankind and, in turn, citizenship in a highly medicalized world. Here, *The Last of Us* can not only be read as commentary on our own society and its medicalized humanness/citizenship recognition processes (Isin and Turner), but also as an example of "the ways that video games can encourage modes of engagement that develop into a player's imagination of citizenship" (Davisson and Gehm 42), humanness, and humanity.

At the same time, however, this is where the series takes a dramatic turn in its portrayal of Ellie and her supposed role in the narrative. Even though Ellie is treated as meta citizen or "citizen zero" by those who know of her immunity, Joel abstains from doing so, herein leading the player to do the same. Joel's relationship with Ellie is not based on feelings of civic responsibility because of her condition; rather, Joel begins to feel an emotional responsibility for Ellie because he cares for her as a *human* being. In Joel's mind, Ellie is not meta, no *wunderkind*, or "citizen zero" to be protected at all costs for the sake of humankind; she is to be protected because of her own innate humanity as an aspect of her distinct humanness. This is also the reason for Joel to save Ellie from the rebel group Fireflies, who want to perform a lethal surgery on her to extract a vaccine. As Joel, however, cannot bear to see his protegee daughter die, he kills the entire medical team to save Ellie's life and, thus, rescue her humanity as well.

As the players follow Joel's, and in the second game, Ellie's point of view, they are led to empathize with Joel's decision to save Ellie's life and, analogously, Ellie's continued struggles over Joel's acts in *Last of Us II*. Here, the games' narratives draw Ellie as a human in her own right: she makes mistakes, is emotional and inhumane at times, whereas her immunity and its potential do not transcend her into a position of godliness. Instead, she is repeatedly confronted with the limits of her own humanness as well as her humanity, as Ellie struggles to accept the weight of her

12 See Marcus Llanque and Katja Sarkowsky's chapter in this volume, "Citizenship of the Dead," for more on how the dead enact their obligations to the living, thereby contributing to community and belonging.

meta status, while at the same time, wishing to be of help: "[Ellie to Joel] Back when I was bitten—I wasn't alone. My best friend was there. And she got bit, too. We didn't know what to do. So… She says, 'Let's just wait it out. Y'know we can be all poetic and lose our minds together.' I'm still waiting for my turn!" (*The Last of Us* I). Nonetheless, the games' narratives deny Ellie the chance to become a martyr, fully in tune with her supposed civic responsibilities towards humankind. Throughout the series, Ellie struggles to maintain a "willingness to engage … from another's perspective … [to broaden her] own lived experiences and vantage points, and hence … [her] capacity to act with compassion and empathy" (Davids 189). In opposition to Tess's decision to sacrifice herself, and in doing so, reclaiming her humanity, Ellie never gets to make that choice—her humanness, her humanity, and her status as citizen, even as a human being *per se*, always seems to be at the mercy of others.

Trauma and Citizenship

In *The Last of Us* series, the conflicts arising from Ellie's ambiguous identity are not purely limited to a medical(ized) discourse focused on the infected versus non-infected body, but also involve both characters and players in emotionally challenging and traumatic experiences of and around citizenship—or, even more elemental, of what makes a being human. The following scene in *Last of Us II* demonstrates the series' overall themes of citizenship trauma as well as the conflicting attempt to maintain one's human(e) identity:

> [While being attacked by an Infected, Ellie's face mask breaks and she is forced to reveal her immunity to Dina, her partner and lover. This moment is interrupted by more Infected approaching, leading the two women to seek shelter in an abandoned theater.]
> [Ellie] "You wanna tell me what's going on with you?"
> [Dina] "What going on with me? Ellie… I just saw you breathe spores." [Dina is visibly shaken.]
> [Ellie, timidly] "I told you… I'm immune."
> [Dina, frustrated] "Okay. You're immune? Come on."
> [Ellie] "I was bitten a long time ago…"
> [Dina] "What the fuck are you talking about?"
> [Ellie, forcefully] "I was bitten, and nothing happened." [Ellie shrugs her shoulders.]
> [Dina, while looking at Ellie's arm] "The chemical burn…"
> [Ellie] "… Tommy and Joel are the only ones who know… [pauses] Knew. Now you know."
> [Ellie hesitates and looks nervously at Dina] "I can't… get you infected if that's what you're worried about. [sighs] I can't make you immune either."
> [Dina sobs and does not look back at Ellie.]

> [Ellie] "Can you say something?"
> [Dina, now crying] "Ellie… [She looks up] I think I'm pregnant."
> …
> [Dina] "I didn't know—[sighs] I wasn't sure, okay? I didn't wanna be a burden…"
> [Ellie, angrily] "Well you're a burden now, aren't you?"
> [Dina looks deeply hurt at Ellie.]
> [Ellie looks away and takes a few steps back.] "I'm gonna… make sure this place is secure. You just rest." [The cut-scene ends, and the player is back online navigating Ellie.] (*The Last of Us II*)

This scene demonstrates the complexities of how citizenship as a "source and marker of social identity" (Isin and Turner 5)—and in this case, not only social identity but *human* identity as well—correlates with traumatic experiences around establishing one's identity and how the people who one has perceived of as one's community, one's family, shape one's perception of self. Again, this sequence shows how profoundly Ellie's ambivalent medical and thus civic status influence her continuous struggles at attempting to find a congruent identity. The traumas she has experienced from having to (seemingly) settle on the perception of her immunity as something special but in need of protection, and thus having to be hidden, have a significant influence on Ellie's relationships with others and particularly those close to her. She knows of the expectations others have towards her because of her condition: "I can't… get you infected if that's what you're worried about. I can't make you immune either." Here, it becomes evident that Ellie has been indoctrinated into her society's mindset of understanding health status as tied to specific civic responsibilities, whereas Ellie's own indefinable health status renders her civic responsibilities as obscure as well. As the world's failed "citizen zero," Ellie is constantly torn between feeling guilty over her inability to be of use and her desire to live a "normal" life. However, Dina's pregnancy also demonstrates to her how fragile this perception of "normalcy" and lived reality is: no one's identity is stable; change, loss and death are integral parts of Ellie's world as "the law of identity *has* been rewritten. The terms of the self and of the real have been renegotiated, demonstrating that they are not fixed but fluid, susceptible to reopening" (Spencer 314; emphasis original). The traumas, in turn, that come with having to accept one's own and others' instability in relation to their bodies, minds, and identities, are deeply rooted in the characters, as we have seen in Tess, but also in Dina, who are genuinely uncertain over how to handle their changing body in a world that is not stable and regards changing bodies as "ill." Regarding citizenship, this instability also lies at the core of not only the characters' personal narratives but also the game series' narrative as a whole: "On the one hand, citizenship ensures access to participation in society. On the other hand, it implies an ideology of ableism, namely the assumption that citizens ought to be healthy and exercise productive social roles" (Waldschmidt and Sépulchree 27).

Within the games' construction of an ideology of ableism, meaning that the community's relational perception of health defines who is rendered "healthy" and thus "able," or "ill" and thus "disabled," Ellie's role is as unraveling as it is stabilizing. On the one hand, the communities Ellie encounters are constructed as (medically) vulnerable, since they need peer protection from the Infected as well as the infection *per se*. On the other hand, Ellie, in her ambiguous meta identity, disrupts the established distinctions between protecting those who are considered "healthy" but vulnerable, and those who are considered "ill" and a threat. As she is neither healthy nor ill, neither vulnerable nor a threat, neither abled nor disabled, Ellie inhabits a liminal space. In turn, her meta existence also makes her vulnerable and in need of protection, as we have seen with Tess and Joel protecting her (and her secret immunity) as part of their civic as well as emotional responsibility. Moreover, Ellie's own traumatic experiences which are both resulting of and enhanced by her identity crisis, shape the way she perceives of herself and is perceived of by other characters and the player: "[Ellie to Joel] I was supposed to die in that hospital! My life would've fucking *mattered*. But you took that from me!" (*The Last of Us II*).

Interestingly, in her resentment of what she believes as her failure as "citizen zero," Ellie redefines the construction of citizenship and its processes of recognition within the series altogether. Citizenship now also represents an embodied, innate though changeable sense of self, rather than a status granted by others according to external factors. Ellie is human, humane, and citizen just by way of being a body (and mind); she "at once … [inhabits] the sphere of humanity (the human as the subject of rights) and that of the border (the citizen … as the subject of rights)" (Kesby 116).

Conclusion: Allies and Avatars

In the series "the very idea of citizenship is … charged with the … burden of survival" (Petryna 37), while surviving also becomes a matter of redefining the perceived relationship between humanness, humanity, and citizenship for both characters and players. By repeatedly charging the players with Ellie's survival, in *Last of Us I* as Joel and in *Last of Us II* as Ellie herself, the series makes their players an ally to Ellie, as they are the only ones (besides Ellie) who can virtually engage with the world of the games, without risking infection. Hence, the players' status is unique but also aligns them with Ellie's narrative: she is most akin, most citizen-like to what the players know outside the world of *The Last of Us*. In this sense, both the players and Ellie could be rendered as meta: Ellie, because of her immunity, and the players, because they are "naturally" immune due to them not being "inside" the game. Moreover, players are granted an even higher meta-level of (embodied) citizenship, as they are enabled

to control and decide over Ellie as a *body to be governed*.[13] Here, the players almost become institutions of government themselves as they grant Ellie citizenship in her *inhumaness* twofold: one, because Ellie is a citizen of the immune community (her and the players), and two, because Ellie is, *within* this community, not a human in the first place—she is a fictional combination of pixels. In this regard, Ellie, again, is pushed into an ambiguous citizenship space: she is not "fully" human and thus not "fully" citizen inside or outside the game. At the same time Ellie also embodies a new form of citizenship, one that is, at least within the games, seemingly autonomous from established external determinators, such as bodily health. In this sense, Ellie functions as a narrative anchor for the players to experience the fragility of a system based on an ideology of binaries (healthy vs. ill, human vs. Infected, abled vs. disabled, etc.). Hence, by witnessing as well as taking part in Ellie's traumatic experiences as a result of her social and internal struggles, the players are repeatedly asked to reevaluate the connections between humanness, citizenship, and humanity with her. Ellie is human, humane, and embodied citizen because of everything she has experienced—moreover, she *is* (all these things), because the players recognize her as such. The players, as integral part to the games' narrative gameplay, thus stabilize Ellie's ambiguous identity and existence as embodied citizen (without an actual body outside the game) because they recognize her actions, her feelings, and her fallibility as relatable: "The avatar [the character played] is not simply a means of access to desired outcomes … Willingly inverting self-other distinctions, players … [and] gameplay … [toy] with unstable categories of identity, presence, and subjectivity" (Rehak 107). In a sense, the players make Ellie a "citizen zero" after all, because she is (ideally) recognized as the first of a new form of humane human citizens. Finally, Ellie is reliant on her innate though conflicting aspects of humanness, humanity, and citizenship status, *as well as* others' recognition of these aspects—inside and outside the games: "So much of … [*The Last of Us* series] is about how everything we do impacts other people, … Ellie goes on this journey and the consequences aren't just other people's health and safety. It's also their mental well-being. It's also their future. It's also their ability to love" (Gross qtd. in Takahashi).

In this space, *The Last of Us* series positions itself (among others) through narrative medicine, as the players also explore the characters and their stories through an emotional bond. Here, the overall narratives function as gateways to process the

13 However, players do not have unlimited authority over the games' world or characters, as each player is still required to follow given narratives and cannot make content-related decisions, e.g., not killing a person. (This stands in contrast to minor decisions being granted to the player during combat; these decisions, however, do not alter or disrupt the games' narratives in any way). In turn, formal inactivity, meaning not hitting the control keys to, e.g., kill a person, would result in the gamers' inability to resume gameplay overall.

themes of health and illness, medicalization and citizenship, as well as the importance of one's story for these discourses:

> While at times fantastical, our agency in these polygonal environments allow us to emotionally and cognitively feel as if what we are subjected to in-game is also what our experiences would be in the flesh. There is no distinction between real and virtual. We react to the narratives, spaces, and characters based on our own subjectivities. In doing so, play becomes intensely personal. (Luc 92)

Consequently, the discussion of the medicalization of citizenship also becomes a personal one, asking every player of *The Last of Us* series to reflect on their own civic status regarding their emotional and medicalized identities. Video games can hereby offer us an opportunity to look within ourselves and our society through the stories we tell, as we become aware of our patterns inside and outside the online space: "Accounting for the self becomes not an autonomous act but a relational one, accomplished through experimental and creative contact with the stories of others" (Charon 6). The Covid-19 pandemic, possibly more than any other event in the last century, has shown us with full force how reliant we are on the contact with others and their stories, and, at the same time, how fragile our implemented systems we assumed to be stable truly are. In a fascinating yet slightly disturbing way, *The Last of Us* series has foreshadowed a world full of uncertainties, in which humanness, humanity, and citizenship are constantly questioned and redefined. Here, intersectional approaches of reading and analyzing text—be those texts video games or novels—has proven to be useful to understanding our evolving perceptions of health, illness, and what it means to be human. Therefore, even before but especially now in this age of pandemics, video games finalize proof of their value to the narratives we engage with on- and off-screen, whereas the question of who we are and want to be as a people remains more relevant than ever.

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