

In the Shadow of Violent Men: Emancipation and Moral Autonomy in The Last of Us and The Last of Us Part II

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Article abstract

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In the Shadow of Violent Men: Emancipation and Moral Autonomy in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*

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Abstract

This paper offers an interpretation of *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* as narratives of moral emancipation from patriarchal structures. It argues that the protagonists, Ellie and Abby, participate in the construction of each other's moral agency and autonomy, while navigating their complex gender identities and attempting to break the cycles of violence and retaliation initiated by their fathers. Neither character succeeds in the end. Indeed, the games' main argument is that if moral autonomy is ever within reach, it is not on individualistic or universalistic terms; that is, that the notion itself of being autonomous is necessarily relational, gradual, and situated within the gender politics of each character's moral particularity.

Author Keywords

autonomy, morality, particularism, gender, identity, objectification, empowerment

This paper offers an interpretation of *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* as narratives of moral emancipation from patriarchal structures. It argues that the two protagonists, Ellie and Abby, participate in the construction of each other's moral agency and autonomy, while navigating their complex gender identities and attempting to break the cycles of violence and retaliation initiated by their fathers. Neither character fully succeeds in the end. Indeed, the game's main argument seems to be that although moral autonomy is within reach, it cannot be achieved on individualistic or universalistic terms, because the notion itself of being autonomous is necessarily relational, gradual, and situated within the gender politics of each character's moral particularity.

The first section summarizes the plot elements from the two games that are relevant to the present discussion. The second section argues that *The Last of Us* (hereafter "Part I") is the story of Ellie's growing autonomy, until Joel's actions at the end invalidate her agency and ground

their future rapport on deception. Finally, the third section and the conclusion argue that *The Last of Us Part II* (hereafter “Part II”) is the story of Ellie’s and Abby’s specular quests to become morally autonomous—although, ultimately, neither character succeeds completely.

Plot Elements Relevant to Discussion

The Last of Us is a two-part game released across seven years (2013-2020) by developer Naughty Dog. It is written by Neil Druckmann (both parts) and Halley Gross (Part II only). I refer to it as a unified work, except as needed. In the story, by the year 2033 humanity has been decimated by a cordyceps-type fungal infection. A few thousand survivors live in quarantine zones tightly controlled by state agencies, while large numbers of zombie-like Infected ex-humans roam outside. An anti-government resistance group known as the Fireflies discover that a 14-year-old named Ellie carries a mutated version of the fungus that may be the key to discovering a cure. Fireflies leader Marlene, who knew Ellie’s mother, arranges for the girl’s safe passage from the Boston quarantine zone to a hospital in Salt Lake City, where the Fireflies have medical facilities to synthesize a cure. She entrusts her in the care of Joel Miller, a middle-aged survivalist and smuggler whose teen daughter Sarah was killed in the early days of the outbreak.

Ellie and Joel develop a close but difficult bond during the journey. In Wyoming, Joel tries to go back on his word and leave Ellie with his once-estranged brother Tommy and his wife Maria, who lead a community of a few dozen survivors, but Ellie convinces him to continue the journey. In Nevada, Ellie is captured by a cannibal preacher named David, whom she kills while escaping. In Salt Lake City, Joel discovers that the Fireflies intend to operate on Ellie and harvest her mutation to synthesize a vaccine, a process that will surely kill her. The Fireflies incapacitate Joel and take Ellie. Joel looks for her in a hospital and finds that she is being prepared for surgery. He kills many Fireflies, including Marlene and head surgeon Jerry Anderson, and escapes with Ellie, who is under general anesthesia. Later, he tells Ellie that the Fireflies let them go because they realized that Ellie’s mutation is common and does not hold the cure after all. Though perplexed, Ellie believes his lie.

Two years later, in Part II, Ellie and Joel have settled down in Jackson, Wyoming, where Tommy and Maria’s community has grown to include hundreds of survivors. Over the next two years, thanks to several hints (including the fact that she has never seen another immune person, although supposedly there are plenty), Ellie becomes suspicious of Joel and decides to investigate the Salt Lake City hospital by herself. There she learns the truth about Joel’s actions and, deeply hurt, severs ties with him. Two more years pass. Ellie’s rapport with Joel thaws slowly but never decisively. She develops a romance with fellow 18-year-old Dina, who becomes only the third person (after Joel and Tommy) to learn that Ellie is immune to the infection.

One day, a commando team travels into Jackson on a mission to kill Joel. It is led by 19-year-old Abby Anderson, the daughter of the surgeon that Joel killed in Salt Lake City. Other members include Abby's former lover, Owen, his new girlfriend Mel, a doctor, and five others. Abby beats Joel to death in front of Ellie, who is unable to stop it. After a brief conversation with Owen, Abby decides to spare Ellie and Tommy, claiming that her score to settle was with Joel alone. Several months later, Tommy learns that Abby is likely in Seattle and sets off to track her down. Ellie and Dina follow the next day; unbeknownst to them, Dina's ex-boyfriend Jesse also follows, a few days behind.

In Seattle, Ellie's and Abby's lives intertwine over the course of three days. Ellie and Dina make base in an old movie theater, where Dina, who has been getting sicker every day, tells Ellie that she thinks she's pregnant with Jesse's child. Jesse joins them soon after and convinces Ellie to hasten her vendetta so that Dina may return to Jackson to receive proper care. Ellie tracks down and kills various members of the commando team that hit Jackson, seeking information about Abby's whereabouts.

Meanwhile, after returning from Jackson, Abby has resumed her regular life as a soldier in the Western Liberation Front (WLF or "Wolves"), a large militia presiding over thousands of families and ruled by the ruthless veteran Isaac. They are at war with the Seraphites, a luddite cult from a nearby island, and are planning to invade their island in the coming days. Still unaware of Ellie's presence in Seattle, Abby goes AWOL to find Owen, who has left the WLF without notice. Abby is captured by the Seraphites but rescued by teenage siblings Lev and Yara. They are former members of the Seraphites, on the run from the cult after Lev defied tradition by living as a boy after being raised as a girl. Yara's arm is badly injured, so Abby sees to her safety before resuming her search for Owen. At the Seattle Aquarium, she finds that Owen and Mel (who is now six months pregnant) are planning to travel to Catalina Island in California to chase rumors that the Fireflies may have regrouped there. Abby and Owen have sex in a moment of passion. Stricken by guilt, she returns to Lev and finds that Yara's arm must be amputated if she is to survive. She brings her to Mel, who performs the surgery. The next day, Lev takes off toward the Seraphites' island to look for his mom, and Abby and Yara follow him there on a boat. In the process, Abby witnesses her best friend Manny killed by a sniper, who turns out to be Tommy, although she is unable to identify him.

While Abby is gone, Ellie's search eventually leads her to the Aquarium, where she kills Owen and Mel. When she discovers that Mel was pregnant, she is horrified at what she has done and decides to give up her vendetta and return to Jackson to aid Dina.

On the Seraphites' island, Abby and Yara find Lev in his house. He has killed his mother in self-defense after she attempted to kill him for leaving the cult. The WLF are invading the island, so Abby, Lev, and Yara try to escape without being caught in the crossfire. A patrol led by Isaac intercepts them. Yara kills Isaac to protect her brother, and is then shot dead by other Wolves.

Abby and Lev escape the island. Upon returning to the Aquarium, they find Owen and Mel slaughtered. They track Ellie down to the movie theater. Abby kills Jesse and incapacitates Tommy, and is about to execute Dina despite Ellie's pleas not to do so because she is pregnant. However, she spares her on Lev's suggestion, and she lets them all go. Ellie and Dina return to Wyoming and settle down on a farm near Jackson to raise their child, J.J. (named after Joel and Jesse). Abby and Lev, instead, set off for California in search of the Fireflies.

Months later, Tommy informs Ellie that he has found Abby again. Ellie decides to finish her vendetta, as she is plagued by PTSD and cannot function normally. Dina threatens to leave her, but Ellie goes anyway. She travels to Santa Barbara, California, where she finds Abby and Lev impaled on a beach, tortured and left to die by the Rattlers, a local militia. Moved to compassion, she frees them and leads them to a boat. However, the memory of a bloodied and dying Joel pushes her to attack Abby again. Although Abby bites off two of Ellie's fingers, Ellie prevails. Just as she is about to execute Abby, the memory of a happy Joel playing guitar convinces her to spare her life. Abby and Lev leave for Catalina Island, while Ellie returns to the farm in Wyoming. As expected, Dina and J.J. are gone. Ellie tries to play Joel's guitar, but cannot because of her missing fingers. She leaves the guitar in the empty house and walks away toward the woods.

Dead Girls and Replacement Daughters

Game critics have identified Part I as an example of what Brice (2013) and Voorhees (2016) call the "dadification" of games, a tendency to focus the main story arcs of lead characters on paternal relationships. Joel is motivated by his daughter's loss, a common narrative device where dead or hurt women serve as catalysts for men's emotional identities and self-righteous violent excesses. Sarah's loss is also the main ingredient of the rapport between Ellie and Joel, as the script makes plain by introducing another teenage character within minutes of play from Sarah's death. In fact, Ellie and Joel's intimacy develops almost entirely around sharing memories of Sarah. In Pittsburgh, he comments on a poster from a "dumb teen movie" and she asks, "who dragged you to see it?", but he does not respond. In Wyoming, she confronts him about Sarah and he retorts: "I ain't your dad and you sure as hell ain't my daughter." In Colorado, he grows silent when she brings up Sarah again, so she asks, "Too much?", to which he says, "Yeah." But in Salt Lake City, after growing closer following the David incident, Ellie gives Joel the picture of him and Sarah that she took from Tommy, and his response is different: "I guess you can't let go of the past." This progression, plus the two times that he calls her "baby girl" (in a burning lodge in Nevada and in the Salt Lake City hospital), cements Ellie's role in Joel's mind as someone to protect the way that he was unable to protect Sarah—a replacement daughter.

That Joel sees Sarah in Ellie is not seriously in dispute. But he also objectifies her with little regard for her as a person (Stang, 2017). To illustrate this objectification, I borrow a point from

the critical literature about Nabokov's novel *Lolita*, whose protagonist uses the same logic as Joel does; of course, the two texts are otherwise entirely unrelated. In the novel, a young Humbert loses his childhood crush Annabel, and throughout his life he projects his obsession for her onto other young girls, ultimately fixating on Dolly, whom he kidnaps and rapes. Humbert idolizes her as an echo of someone else, a mythical creature or "nymphet," but never as what Dolly actually is: a woman and a person (Hasty, 2004). Joel similarly projects Sarah on Ellie, and just as Dolly initially edges Humbert on with innocent flirting games, not realizing that he would hijack her limited consent and violate her (Kauffmann, 1989), so Ellie encourages Joel to open up about Sarah, only to become uncomfortable with his eventual self-appointed role as protector-provider. So, in both cases, a young girl's desire for intimacy and friendship is misappropriated by a more powerful man, whose objectification (sexual in Humbert's case, fatherly in Joel's) forces her into an unwanted role.

Joel's treatment of Ellie may seem benign because it is non-sexual, but it is still vicious given the importance of the coming-of-age plot in Part I. All adult characters treat Ellie as someone who does not deserve free agency and the respect typically accorded to autonomous adults. Joel's former partner, a smuggler named Tess, uses her as a token of exchange to complete a business deal; another acquaintance of Joel's, a scavenger named Bill, refers to her in the third person to her face; David the cannibal preacher wants her for food, sex, or both; Fireflies leader Marlene would sacrifice her for humanity's sake without informing her that the procedure to harvest her mutation will kill her; and even for Joel she is "just cargo" at first, and later a passive ward in need of protection. But throughout the game Ellie evolves from a dependent sidekick to a self-determined ally (in Colorado) and eventually to a leader (in Nevada), only to be reeled back in when Joel deems it appropriate. Joel's objectification must be assessed in the broader context of this autonomy-building subplot. It is not only the depersonalization of a female individual, which is a common problem in this medium, but also the unjustified interruption of the construction of a young adult's moral emancipation.

There is ample textual evidence that Ellie's autonomy-building is the narrative core of Part I. The first act, Summer, sways little from the narrative of the active provider and the passive beneficiary. This dynamic is masked occasionally by gameplay design choices, as players cannot solve certain puzzles unless Ellie and Joel cooperate (Vella, 2014), but from a narrative viewpoint Joel leads and Ellie follows. Ellie begins to come into her own in the second act, Fall, by refusing to be an object of exchange between adults. When Joel would hand her over to Tommy, she insists he follow through with his original commitment instead, because finding the Fireflies and developing a cure is too important to her. This manifests a desire to be free from the control of adults (two men, at that) and to impose her own moral decision-making.

Her autonomy develops further in the third act, Winter. When Joel is critically wounded, Ellie becomes the protector-provider. She hunts game, kills Infected, and bargains for medicine for

Joel with the cannibal preacher David. And just as Ellie learns to fend for herself, players must learn to manage a different skill set, different tools, and a different gameplay mechanic. This allows them to witness first-hand the development of her agency and to identify closely with it. While some players may incorrectly attribute Ellie's "weaker" skills to her sex rather than to her lack of experience, the truth is that 14-year-olds of any gender are just not very good action heroes, so the game's characterization is on-point in this regard and serves the autonomy-building plot well.

Ellie also continues to free herself from the control of adult men when David captures, beats, and almost kills her. Although it may seem that Druckmann hurts another female character to motivate a male one, this section plays skillfully with perspective. Players are briefly allowed to control Joel to experience his rescue attempt and the rebuilding of his fatherly identity ("I'm coming for you"), but suddenly the game switches back to Ellie, who frees herself and kills her assailant. Joel is entirely irrelevant to her story of self-salvation, a fact that seems lost on him as he embraces her, calls her "baby girl," and tells her that "it's over." In his own life story, this moment may well replay the night he lost Sarah, but with a different outcome that allows him to exorcise his demons. But players know better. They participated first-hand in the painstaking construction of Ellie's self-reliance through the game's most difficult and distressing encounter, only for Joel to steal her thunder and claim her triumph as his own. It is here that players are supposed to begin feeling cognitive dissonance toward Joel's fatherly attitude.

Ellie's developing autonomy, as yet unacknowledged by Joel, is finally stunted at the Salt Lake City hospital in the Spring, the game's final act. Stang (2017) argues that Joel overrides Ellie's decision "to sacrifice herself to save humanity" (p. 169), but I disagree that she made any such decision at all. It is true that joining the Fireflies to find a cure is Ellie's main goal: she makes that clear in Wyoming (when Joel threatens to back out) and in Utah (when Joel gives her the option to back out, after the giraffe scene). But there is no indication that she ever understood that she might lose her life for the cure. When entering the science building on the university's campus, Joel reassures her that the Fireflies "will probably just draw some blood" to find the cure, which, true or not, may influence Ellie's expectations of what finding the Fireflies will entail. More importantly, upon waking up from the anesthesia in the car leaving Salt Lake City and seeing that she is in a hospital gown, Ellie protests: "what the hell am I wearing?" This indicates that she had not consented to the surgery and, most probably, that she did not know that she was going to die. This is evidence that Marlene violated her autonomy by initiating the surgery without Ellie's consent. Of course, Joel fares no better when he falsely tells Ellie that the Fireflies "have stopped looking for a cure," and conveniently omits that he executed many people in order to save her—including, as it turns out, Abby's father Jerry.

Both Marlene and Joel rob Ellie of the freedom to choose whether to sacrifice herself for humanity. Throughout this ordeal, Ellie has no voice and is relegated again to an object of

exchange among adults, a condition obviously symbolized by the scene where Joel lays her unconscious body between him and Marlene as they debate Ellie's purpose. Players, too, are stripped of the same choice, as all these decisions happen in cut-scenes and the game has only one possible ending (Lota, 2014). But that is precisely the point, as the players' inability to choose mirrors Ellie's lost autonomy, which is why Joel's deception is so insidious.

Two accounts of moral autonomy

So far, I have assumed a view of moral autonomy that is almost uncontroversial in the liberal-universalist tradition of Western political philosophy. Moral autonomy (literally, "self-law") is the capacity to be the final decider of one's ethical beliefs, as opposed to being arbitrarily subjected to the will of other individuals or of society as a whole. A person who is morally autonomous "owns oneself," in Locke's (1690) sense of having control of oneself (bodily integrity) and of being able to make decisions based on one's own ethical beliefs (moral agency). In this understanding then, moral autonomy is what sets each of us apart from other persons and from lower animals, and it is the cornerstone of virtually all liberal thinkers from Kant (1788) to Rawls (1971). On this account of autonomy-as-self-ownership, Ellie is not being treated as a full individual endowed with a rational will, as Kant demands of autonomous persons, but instead as a passive recipient and a mere means to ends defined by someone else.

But even if we agree with this view, it remains true that moral autonomy is not just given to everyone by fiat, nor does it simply appear when one is mature enough. Instead, it must be discovered and developed within the specific social contexts of our actual lives. After all, I am not just "a" person with autonomy, but "this" person, a specific and unique individual whose autonomy was shaped by localized and situated moral circumstances. In political philosophy, this observation grounds the distinction between universalists like Locke, Kant, and Rawls, and particularists like MacIntyre (1981), Sandel (1982), and Walzer (1983); see Kymlicka (1989) for a discussion of how the identities of individuals are linked to the identities of communities. I will not attempt to settle this debate here, but simply borrow the universalist notion of autonomy-as-self-ownership and the particularist notion of autonomy-as-gradual-development. These two features are not incompatible, and I believe that they are quite useful to the rest of this analysis.

This particularist notion makes Joel's and Marlene's choices to override Ellie's decisions somewhat more justifiable. In a family, sometimes parents make decisions to protect their children from harm, to ensure long-term welfare, to prevent the dissolution of the family unit, and of course to foster the children's moral growth. This latter desideratum also justifies limiting and occasionally overriding children's developing moral autonomy, especially in life-or-death situations where allowing a budding person to exercise their inexperienced autonomy with complete freedom may have disastrous consequences and prevent the formation of fuller

autonomy later in life. Paradoxically, sometimes one must violate a child's present autonomy in order to preserve its future autonomy. This seems to be Joel's and Ellie's case. Joel's top priority as a protector-provider is to keep Ellie alive in a dangerous world, and he also wants to keep their family unit together for as long as possible.

That is not to say that his motives are pure or noble. As I have argued above, he is driven by a self-interested desire to replace a lost daughter; and as I will argue in the next section, he can only relate to Ellie as a father figure because of old patriarchal preconceptions of the family unit. But although his motives are problematic, they explain why he believes it necessary to violate Ellie's autonomy in a life-or-death situation. If so, then the worst we could say about Joel is that he is weak. He could have imposed his will as an adult, father, and family protector, but still be forthcoming about his reasons for doing so: "Sorry, kiddo: I know you want the cure, but the cure will kill you. Case closed." He had overruled Ellie in the past, so his decision to lie can be ascribed to fear, cowardice, or poor moral fiber. And even if Ellie were not yet entitled to full autonomy—on account of her age, not her gender—she is certainly entitled to honesty about why her choices are being deliberately limited by a more autonomous person.

An alternative interpretation of the end of Part I is that Joel's deception does not violate Ellie's autonomy at all. Perhaps she sees right through it and consciously decides to accept it, which would be consistent with retaining autonomy. Druckmann has stated that Ellie's final line of text, "okay," was intentionally delivered ambiguously enough to warrant uncertainty: "I thought it would be interesting to take that simple word, but the way [voice actor Ashley Johnson] would play it would have such a different subtext, and people could interpret it in different ways" (quoted in Wallace 2013). The importance of this line is similarly highlighted by Green:

Whether Ellie does or does not believe Joel, she appears to understand why he made his choice. They are family. They protect their own but do not kill maliciously. They try to work with the world as it is, not how they may wish it to be. It is that smallest construction of human community on which the future rests. This sequence, like Marlene's death, was not without its controversy between those gamers who agreed and disagreed with this apparent complicity. That very act of debating, again, underscores the value of the game as a fictive exploration of human morality. (2016, pp. 760-761)

If Ellie takes Joel at face value, she is being deceived. If she does not, then either she suspects foul play but postpones confrontation, or she acquiesces because ignorance is bliss, because some things are best left unexplained, or because she just trusts Joel to know better. While any of these options is a step back in her emancipatory journey, they are all sensible in the interest of self-preservation and conflict avoidance, and they are especially tempting to a young person for whom the semblance of a stable family life is finally, after much pain and loss, within reach. All of these options are compatible with Ellie's eventual suspicions in Part II, which develop gradually over time and that make her question her allegiance to Joel and his motives toward her.

The discussion so far positions Ellie as a young adult with a budding moral sense. Her autonomy-building process is promising and ongoing, but it is hindered by an adult man who holds more power. While this hindrance is more justifiable on some interpretations than on others, it remains a fact that Joel's deception silences any voice that Ellie might have had in the decision of whether or not to sacrifice her life for the cure. All of these elements remain important in Part II, where the notion that a person's moral autonomy is necessarily relational and gradual is even better supported by the text. The autonomy that Ellie and Abby are both chasing is rooted deeply in their relationships with their own fathers and in the gendered power structures that affect them.

The Cycle of Revenge and the Struggle for Autonomy

Ellie and Abby obviously serve as dramatic foils for each other. The script immediately positions them on comparable experiential planes: the walkthroughs of Jackson and the WLF headquarters are remarkably alike; what little we see of Abby's upbringing mirrors Ellie's; and they even share similar love triangles consisting of a partner, an ex, and a pregnancy. Of course, the most glaring similarity is that they both lost a father because of Joel's actions. Abby has finished her vendetta and is reeling from the consequences, while Ellie is struggling to finish hers. As such, it may be tempting to interpret the game as a traditional story of cyclical violence: Jerry would kill Ellie, so Joel kills Jerry, so Abby kills Joel, so Ellie kills Abby's friends, so Abby hunts Ellie down, and so on.

But while the theme of cyclical violence is definitely present, it is merely instrumental to the autonomy narrative. The game does not seem to argue that revenge is immoral in general, but that it poses a grave threat to the development of one's moral autonomy. In turn, this narrative can be articulated as two analytical themes. The first is Ellie's and Abby's emancipations, which posits that their coming-of-age story arcs should be seen as liberatory struggles from the power of their elders. The second is the assertion and performance of gender identity, which suggests that Ellie and Abby are not only young adults seeking emancipation, but young *women* choosing how to perform as members of their gender outside of patriarchal restrictions. These themes are further bolstered by ancillary discourses interwoven throughout the script, such as the role of forgiveness (which takes on different meanings for each woman); Ellie's sexual orientation (her immunity may resonate well among queer players as a metaphor for sexual diversity); and the script's refusal to equate emancipation with individualism (as it often refers to parenthood and family as key elements in the construction of identity). Other minor plot points provide further support, such as Abby's supposed gender nonconformity or the references to Lev's gender identity, although the latter are occasionally transphobic.

Forgiveness, atonement, and emancipation

Joel's and Ellie's relationship was always volatile. When she discovered his deception, she severed ties with him. Then, gradually, they were on the mend, and when he dies she is thrown into chaos. Part of why losing a loved one is tragic is that there are often unresolved issues, unfinished projects, or unsaid things. In Ellie's case, she never got around to forgiving Joel. Her process of forgiveness was ongoing, as evidenced by the guitar lesson opening scene and the flashback at the end: "I don't think I could ever forgive you, but I would like to try." But his death cut it short. Understanding the purpose of forgiveness and its role in moral growth is crucial to making sense of Ellie's actions and motives in Part II. In this subsection, I argue that Ellie's incomplete forgiveness toward Joel is completed by sparing Abby's life, and that the conclusion of this journey of absolution is the main contributor to her achievement of moral autonomy.

There are a half-dozen philosophical theories discussing the moral underpinnings of forgiveness; see Hughes & Warmke (2017) for a review. In an influential argument, Nussbaum (2016) defines forgiveness as a moral "change of heart" toward an offender who has harmed us, based on appropriate expressions of contrition on their part and a shared willingness to recover the relationship that was marred by harm. She describes a transactional process whereby anger gradually gives way to grief. The object of grief is the relationship-that-was, the one unmarred by harm, which no longer exists. And if the relationship in question is an intimate one, such as with a spouse or a parent, then the final goal of forgiveness is not just to feel better, but to lay the groundwork for the future of the relationship. Nussbaum's argument follows some popular views in care ethics (Noddings 1984; Held 2007) in positing forgiveness as a *relational sentiment*. It does not exist only within one's mind, but must be developed externally and in concert with the work of another person. It is not itself an end, but an instrument to a higher virtue, such as peace, wisdom, or the stability of an intimate relationship.

Nussbaum's transactional process is clearly unavailable to Ellie, because Joel is dead and can no longer play a role in the journey from anger to grief to forgiveness. At most, she can achieve a different kind of forgiveness, one that is not relational but internal. She can forgive him privately and posthumously, learning to let go of the anger caused by his deception and by his premature death that robbed them of the opportunity for reconciliation. She can, at most, allow herself to grieve peacefully. While this is still a transactional process, the absence of Joel makes it harder, as he can no longer make amends, express contrition, or lay the common groundwork for their future relationship.

This is precisely where Abby becomes relevant. Consider this analysis by Favis (2020):

The subtext of the final scene demonstrates Ellie's reclamation of her autonomy. While Joel's death provided purpose, forgiveness gives her freedom. Her life is no

longer overshadowed by his death, his lies and his love. Ellie is faced without a clear future, and one without family, but one all her own.

The forgiveness that “gives her freedom” is not toward Joel, but toward Abby. As Ellie is about to deal the fatal blow, she experiences a fond memory of Joel playing guitar, and then decides to spare Abby’s life. The choice of that specific memory is crucial. Ellie’s flashback is not to a happy and carefree time with Joel, but to one when she felt herself on the verge of a breakthrough and vowed that she “would like to try” to forgive him. It reminds her that forgiveness was within reach—and it is within reach again, right now, with a different object, so I think that this is how we should interpret Ellie’s decision to spare Abby’s life. I am not arguing that Ellie experiences what psychoanalysts may call “transference,” the subconscious or intentional transferring of emotions from a subject to another. Rather, I am arguing that Ellie’s decision to spare Abby is a moral choice borne of learning and experience. It is the moment where she takes the final step from anger to grief to forgiveness, and while that forgiveness is incomplete and imperfect, it is the only form available at that point. As in Favis’ analysis, it is the moment where Ellie truly becomes free (of course, whether “free” equals “autonomous” is a more complex issue, as discussed in the previous section and again in the next one).

However, one should not conclude from the preceding discussion that Abby is merely a passive foil for Ellie to find herself. Her own journey of forgiveness and emancipation is also present, although it is substantively different. Unlike Ellie, Abby is seeking no-one’s forgiveness, and if anything she is already more familiar with this feeling. While Ellie kills WLF soldiers seemingly indiscriminately, Abby intentionally spares Tommy’s and Ellie’s lives not once but twice. In Jackson, Owen advises her that “if we kill them, we’re no better than [Joel] was,” to which Abby agrees. She echoes that sentiment in the Seattle movie theater when she tells Ellie that “we let you both live, and you wasted it.” Secondly, and also unlike Ellie, Abby has already accomplished her vendetta and is now dealing with its fallout. While she may have expected to find peace after Joel’s death, she has lost everything because of it: her relationship with Owen, her WLF social standing, and ultimately her friends’ lives. And though she is not seeking forgiveness, she is definitely seeking to atone for these actions. She knows that the Jackson raid is what made Owen go AWOL, which is why she seeks him out and eventually sleeps with him; and she becomes involved in Lev’s and Yara’s lives “to lighten up the load a bit,” as she says. The “load” is obviously the knowledge that her accomplished vendetta is unraveling her life and the lives of the people whom she involved in her plan. In this regard, it is also noteworthy that Abby’s rescue of Lev and Yara is sandwiched by memories of her own father. She decides to seek them out after having a nightmare where she finds them dead in the room where her father died; and after rescuing them, she dreams of her father, alive and smiling, in the same room. Abby’s relationship with Jerry is more complex than this, as I argue in the next subsection, but it is clear that many of her actions are proximally motivated by her accomplished vendetta.

So, although Part II does contain cycles of violence and revenge, analytical readings that focus on breaking these cycles would be enriched by positing moral emancipation as the characters' main motive for wanting to break them in the first place. These cycles should be broken not for their own sake or to make the world better, but for the sake of becoming autonomous adults unsaddled by meaningless anger and undirected grief.

The preceding argument—that forgiveness and/or atonement are instrumental to moral emancipation—further reinforces the notion that emancipation is not individualistic, but social and relational. Part II contains ample evidence that Ellie's and Abby's quests are driven by a desire for stronger familial bonds and a deeper connection to other human beings. Saavedra (2020) argues that Abby decides to spare Ellie in Seattle only for the sake of Lev, toward whom she feels protective as an older sibling or motherly figure (it is also possible that the Abby-Lev dyad replicates the same dynamic as Joel and Ellie, especially during their interactions in Santa Barbara, although there is insufficient evidence in the text to argue this point at length). Similarly, as argued earlier, Ellie spares Abby in California in an attempt to bring closure to an unfinished process of forgiveness toward Joel. If Saavedra's framework is correct, these motives reveal that emancipation is not freedom from relations, but freedom *to relate*. Both women are not just seeking to be independent, but are also actively trying to rebuild families, Ellie with Dina and J.J. and Abby through Lev and the search for the Fireflies. And while Ellie may fail in the end, Abby may succeed.

Gender, identity, and performance

The second analytical theme that develops the games' moral autonomy narrative is that all these processes of forgiveness and emancipation are distinctly gendered. It is women who are saddled with the task of forgiving, in line with the stereotype that they should be good "communicators" and entrusted with the psychological wellbeing of the family. At the same time, Ellie and Abby go to great lengths to be different from their fathers, so what they seek is specifically emancipation as young women in a world of men. This subsection argues that their struggles toward a fuller moral autonomy relate directly to their struggles to find, define, and perform their gender identity.

A bit of critical background is in order. When Part I was released, many critics in the popular press (Alexander 2013; Petit 2013; Gibson 2013; Plante & Riendeau 2013) argued that although the script was unusually sensitive to gender-related issues for a videogame, it did little to subvert stereotypes. It was a standard game "by men, for men, and about men" (Sullentrop, 2013), portraying a future "ruled by men of violence and fervour" that we must imitate to survive (Stuart, 2013), and that evaluates women's abilities based on their willingness to emulate men. Likewise, though the game passes the so-called Bechdel test—it features at least two named female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man—all the women in the script have male-related, male-oriented, or male-defined goals.

It is well established in critical theory that a person's aptness as a member of their gender depends on how their actions and beliefs relate to social structures that are explicitly or implicitly gendered (e.g., Gilligan 1982). Somewhat more contentiously, gender itself is a social language, the practical and relational aggregate of visible expressions that Butler (1990) calls *performativity*. Therefore, simplistically but correctly, one's acts determine both one's gender identity and one's relation to it. Here it is important to note that such accounts of gender and gender identity from critical theory are usually non-normative. There is no one "right" way that a self-identified woman "ought to" act as a woman, although she ought not to reinforce the structures of patriarchal oppression, as argued by some non-liberal feminists such as MacKinnon (1989) and Jaggar (2005). Likewise, there is no one way that someone should act in order to be able to identify as a woman in the first place, although one's past experiences vis-à-vis patriarchal oppression may qualify some persons more than others to claim the role of "woman" (but see Kean 2017 for why some arguments in this vein may be gender-essentialist and transphobic). By definition then, the acts of a person who identifies as a woman are women's acts, which then become open to the usual scrutiny and debate—how do they relate to gendered power structures? how do they position one in relation to other women, non-binary and trans* persons, and men? how do they help define one's development and perception of their own gender identity and/or of their gender *qua* performance? and so on.

The framework just described allows us to identify several instances across both games when both Ellie's and Abby's quest for autonomy is distinctly gendered. The first is that they are not only seeking emancipation from older adults, but specifically from their fathers. All father-daughter relationships, no matter how benign or empowering otherwise, embody some form of patriarchal domination. Although they are also parent and child, a father is a man and a daughter is a woman, and those identities matter too, and sometimes more. The gendered dynamics of the Western family unit are self-evident to the lived experiences of most women and barely require argumentation, but plenty of arguments do exist. For example, Rothman (1996) argues that the very notion of *family* in the liberal-capitalist tradition is necessarily patriarchal, for it is men's means of social sustenance and genetic propagation for which women are coopted as child-bearers and raisers, and all resulting dynamics follow from that fact. Oakley (2014) makes this theme central to *Father and Daughter*, a sociological treatise about the relationship between a highly accomplished father and a similarly gifted but far less successful daughter, exposing the maleness of public life and its influence on the private realm. Bechdel's (2006) tragicomic novel *Fun Home* argues that her father's unquestioned patriarchal role and repressed homosexuality both thwarted and empowered her own identity as a lesbian. Even classic literary figures like Plath (1965) zero in on this theme in much of their opus (e.g., "every woman adores a fascist," namely, her father).

These dynamics are also at play in Part II, though with more nuanced outcomes. While Joel's and Jerry's deaths proximally motivate their daughters' vendettas, they also mark the end of

patriarchal relations and the start of gendered emancipation. It should be obvious that extremely few women would choose the violent physical death of their fathers as the preferred method of liberation, and certainly both Ellie and Abby would have much preferred to reckon with their live fathers than to be freed through violence. And as argued in the previous section, Nussbaum's relational view of forgiveness as mutual reconciliation is preferable to forgiveness as a private emotion. But just as surely, both of them are cast into womanhood precisely because their fathers are no longer there—a tragic silver lining, as it were.

The preceding point is easier to argue with regard to Ellie than Abby, whose relationship with her father is relatively under-developed. We know that she looked up to him and that he was an influential figure in their community, a patriarch to be sure. And we know that their bond was strong enough to motivate her vendetta for years to come. Yet their rapport is missing key details. In a flashback, Abby overhears Jerry convincing Marlene to let him kill Ellie to synthesize the cure, so she tells Jerry that “if it was me, I’d want you to do the surgery.” Apparently, Abby was always okay with the fact that her father was going to kill a non-consenting child, a fact that should have received some attention in the script. Coming to terms with the fact Joel was not a good person is a sizeable part of Ellie’s gendered emancipation, but a similar process on Abby’s part is missing. This would have been useful, since Jerry’s death not only motivates Abby’s revenge, but also seems to inject meaning in other areas of her life, such as when she dreams about him regarding Lev and Yara. So while Ellie seems to have realized Joel’s patriarchal role in her life, Abby’s progress in this sense appears to be still in its early stages.

We can appreciate another way that Joel’s and Jerry’s deaths are emancipatory for Ellie and Abby by analyzing the games’ portrayal of socially sanctioned gender roles. The post-apocalyptic universe of *The Last of Us* is populated by strong female leaders: Tess, Marlene, Maria, Ellie, Abby, Nora, Mel, the prophet worshiped by the Seraphites, and to a lesser extent even Ellie’s love interests: Riley (a resilient survivalist), Cat (an independent spirit and artist), and Dina. By contrast, Joel’s mannerisms evoke an old-world mentality where muscular men lead and sensitive women follow, or at most administer or manage. But such divisions of labor are largely moot in the microcosms of Part II, where little gendered hierarchy seems to exist in the social groups that we see: the Jackson citizens, the Fireflies, the WLF, the Seraphites, and even the Rattlers seem to employ men and women equally in all tasks, from warfare to leadership. It is sensible to argue that Joel’s ways hold Ellie back as she tries to exist as a woman in a gender-egalitarian present, that Ellie’s desire for autonomy threatens his masculinity (or, at least, the privileged place of his actions in a world that is on its way out), and therefore that his death increases her positional liberty as a woman. A good example of this fact is Ellie’s anger at Joel for “defending her honor” after a bigot insults her and Dina for kissing in public. In this future, women do not need men to stand up for them. To an extent, all of science-fiction asks us to imagine a different future. In Suvin’s (1979) classic analysis, juxtaposing an imagined future

with more familiar social elements creates cognitive estrangement, which allows sci-fi to be effective as a narrative genre. The same sort of imagination allows Ellie to envision a better future than Joel ever could. Patriarchy limits not just opportunities or liberties, but also the imagination. Joel can only imagine relating to Ellie as a protector and a father, so his death liberates her from that mold and allows her to imagine more freely.

Other frameworks

The protagonists' gender identity and performance play an even bigger role in *The Last of Us*. Ellie's sexual orientation, for example, is not a "throwaway subplot but, instead, an essential part of her," which is uncommon in AAA games (Ryan, 2020). On the one hand, one must be careful not to overstate the interpretive importance of orientation, because assigning gayness to a female character is a heavy-handed cliché to depict a woman's emancipation from men. On the other hand, while being a lesbian is a central trait for Ellie, it does not define her fully, which allows the script to avoid a stereotypical tokenization of non-straightness; unfortunately, the authors are not as tactful with Lev's identity, as I argue below.

Ellie's and Abby's alleged lack of femininity further reinforces this point. Upon release of Part II, some sexist commentators complained that women in videogames should not look so masculine; see Coles (2020) for an overview. Others lamented that they are too violent to be credible, although the same acts on Joel's part raised no eyebrows; see Flores (2020) for a discussion of this double standard. All these arguments are clearly sexist, but Ellie's and Abby's looks matter for another reason. Traits that contemporary audiences may perceive as nontraditional are normalized in a world where brawn is a valuable survival skill and where most receive some paramilitary training. These traits are so normal that they are associated with a homosexual woman (Ellie), a bisexual one (Dina), and a heterosexual one (Abby); and, if anything, it is the latter who presents as the least stereotypically feminine. Presentation and behavior seem mostly unrelated to orientation and identity in this game, and they are byproducts of world-building narrative choices. As Schubert (2021) argues, the game subsumes a balance of empathy and justified violence under a feminist, egalitarian conception of femininity.

Despite their enlightening treatment of gender and its relation to moral emancipation, the games contain several shortcomings that weaken their argumentative force. One is the inconsistent treatment of Ellie's immunity from the infection. In Part I, it is her main motive for seeking out the Fireflies, which is what makes Joel's and Marlene's disregard of her autonomy so treacherous, as argued in earlier sections. But Part II mentions the immunity and the cure only three times. The first is as a way to build intimacy between Ellie and Dina, first in Jackson and then in Seattle. In this regard, Ellie is unique in a scary way that makes her vulnerable, which some gay players may equate to coming-out narratives and homosexual identity-building in a violently heteronormative world.

The second time is when Ellie begs Abby to spare Dina: “I know why you killed Joel. He did what he did to save me. There’s no cure because of me. I’m the one that you want.” This hints to the fact that for Ellie, her immunity and the potential for a cure was a large part of why she was so hurt by Joel’s deception. And she confirms as much in the final flashback, the day before Joel’s death, when she tells him that “I was supposed to die in that hospital. My life would’ve fucking mattered. But you took that from me.” Notably, neither Abby nor Joel respond in kind to these statements. Abby is not interested in the cure, but only in the trail of blood that flowed from Joel (“you killed my friends”); likewise, Joel only cares about Ellie’s survival and not about her potential (“I would do it all over again”). So although the immunity and the cure are still on the table, the script chooses to sideline their narrative importance in favor of other factors.

Another issue with the script of Part II is its treatment of its one transgender character, Lev. There is no fundamental need to know a character’s orientation or identity: there is no scene to show us that Ellie is not trans, so why do we need one to show us that Lev is? Having to justify trans identity but not cis identity assumes that only the latter is normal, which is transphobic. On the other hand, knowing a character’s orientation or identity contributes to their distinctiveness, like learning about their favorite music or whether they have siblings. A depiction of gender is only objectifying and tokenizing if it is the vast majority of what we know about a character and if it underwrites the bulk of their interactions with other characters and with the gaming world. That is not the case with Ellie, as argued above, but unfortunately it is the case with Lev. His story arc revolves almost entirely around being trans: it is the motive for his and Yara’s escape, it is why Abby feels protective toward him, and it is his reason for returning to his mother and eventually killing her. We know nothing about Lev that does not revolve around his being trans, and likewise for Yara, whose role is merely to be her brother’s savior. Nor does it help that although the script does not contain the word “trans,” it uses all the stereotypical token ways to signify trans identity: a high-pitched voice, a shaved head, and loads of deadnaming by cisgender characters.

This issue is further confounded by the fact that Lev is voiced and motion-captured by a transgender actor, Ian Alexander. While this is excellent trans-affirming representation (Glennon et al., 2020), that alone is a poor substitute for equity. Lev is still written by cis authors, and the abuse he endures because of his identity is coopted to elicit empathy from cis characters and a vast majority of cis players, a common “trauma porn” literary device (Wakefield, 2020; Muncy, 2020). Inclusive representation would be achieved only when trans characters were written by trans authors, who retain full control over these narratives and employ them in whatever way they see fit. Surely, this means that the inability of this and other games to provide valid trans narratives is simply a result of Western society’s deeply ingrained transphobia.

Conclusion

There is a lot of pain in *The Last of Us*. From the bleak color palettes to the dying cities, from the screeches of the Infected to the gushing guts of the humans, the games deliver a harrowing narrative experience. The characters are similarly grim, including Ellie and Abby. It is extremely difficult to sympathize with their predicament, especially since so much of it is of their own doing. Certainly they are dealt a bad hand by an unforgiving world that is not kind to women and young people in general, but their vendettas have turned bad to worse. Ellie, who was shocked at Joel's killings in Part I, murders dozens in cold blood in Part II. Abby repeatedly expresses a desire to torture the Seraphites, something that she has probably done before. They are not "good" people. They are people doing bad things that have become normalized in their society and that have taken a toll on them. One can hardly blame them, then, for desiring emancipation, not merely as youth from elders or women from men, but also as humans from pain (for this reason, a thematic analysis of the games that centered on hubris and the loss of innocence may be compelling, too).

Given all the negative reality of the game's narrative, it is debatable what sort of emancipation Ellie and Abby achieve at last. For Paez (2020), the seemingly desperate ending of Part II actually symbolizes a new hope, for although Ellie has lost everything—Joel, Dina, J.J., Jackson, and her fingers—she has found herself. Abby's fate is similarly hopeful. After the credits, the title screen with the anchored boat in the fog at dusk is replaced by the same boat on a beach at sunrise overlooking the Catalina Casino. According to co-author Gross, this scene is meant to signify hope: "maybe they've arrived at Catalina, maybe they've found the Fireflies, maybe they found community and home" (quoted in Trumbore, 2020).

However, I cannot help but notice how far the goalposts have to be shifted in order to consider the ending "optimistic." Ellie and Abby have traded peaceful, if difficult, lives in their communities for strife and loneliness. They carry the weight of their choices etched on their skin, in Ellie's bruised back and Abby's broken bones, and their future is all but certain. The particularistic account of moral autonomy as necessarily relational entails that its discovery is an ongoing journey, so the uncertainty about the future is not to be feared; or, to put it like Gross and Druckmann, "no one's story is finished" (Trumbore, 2020). But the same view also entails that the development of autonomy is a distinctly social endeavor, not an individualistic one. Ellie and Abby are almost entirely alone now, and they did most of it to themselves to escape the trail of destruction initiated by their fathers. To whom will they turn to continue growing? To whom will they turn to *at all*?

I do not doubt that Ellie and Abby were seeking some sort of emancipation, whether from the grief of loss, from patriarchal structures, etc. But what they found instead is a glimpse of what emancipation may potentially look like in the distant future, a foretaste of adulthood and a step in

the general direction of self-ownership—although more steps remain and no one knows how many or how hard they will be.

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