Playing as/against Violent Women: Imagining Gender in the Postapocalyptic Landscape of *The Last of Us Part II* [1]

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Abstract

This article examines how femaleness and femininity are constructed in the 2020 video game *The Last of Us Part II* (*TLoU2*), analyzing how it imagines gender narratively, visually, and ludically. The game is set in a postapocalyptic future in which the majority of the population has turned into zombie-like creatures, while the surviving parts of humanity have formed new societies and groups that fight against each other. Players control two characters, Ellie, who was already featured in the first *TLoU*, and Abby, who is initially set up as the antagonist of the story and whom Ellie determines to kill in an act of revenge. *TLoU2* is thus one of very few mainstream video games that champion (especially active, dominant, and, indeed, violent) female characters as protagonists. In order to examine the depiction of gender in the game, I approach *TLoU2* through an affective framework that analyzes the nexus of violence, femininity, and empathy. I argue that *TLoU2* constructs violence as liberating and emancipating for its female protagonists in a postapocalyptic world that itself was created and is regulated by violence. Simultaneously, the game insists on the importance of balancing potentially justified violence with empathy for the position and perspective of others. It establishes this point both diegetically in the story of its two protagonists and extradiegetically in how players are forced to act aggressively against characters they have grown to empathize with, a 'ludo-affective' dissonance that consciously and productively discomforts the act of playing.

[1] I want to thank the editors of this special issue, Judith Rauscher and Marta Usiekniewicz, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their many insightful comments and suggestions, which have vastly improved this contribution.

1. Introduction: *The Last of Us Part II* and Gendered Anti-Fandom

When the video game *The Last of Us Part II* was released in June 2020, it garnered a polarized reaction: game critics and journalists praised the game as one of the best available for the PlayStation 4, while some players seemingly considered it a definite failure. This divided reception was encapsulated in the average scores that the website *Metacritic* tracks for 'critic reviews'—95 out of 100 right after the game's release—and for the 'user score': 3.4 out of 10 (Tassi). As it turned out, the game was subject to 'review-bombing,' a concerted effort by players of certain communities (most of whom had not had the time to finish the game) to 'bombard' the game with bad reviews. Despite this concerted effort, which seems to have been driven by a particularly outspoken minority of players, *The Last of Us Part II* has now been cemented as one of the most highly praised video games in gaming history, collecting "more game of the year awards than any other release ever" (Calvin) and at times being called a "work of art" (Glennon). Yet even after so many months of critical acclaim and popular success, disdain for the game still remains strong in some digital communities (Trumbore). While there are certainly legitimate complaints against the game, the kind of 'hate-watching' or 'anti-fandom' (cf. Click) that some gamers have organized around focuses not so much on the game itself but on what some players think it represents. Put differently, the outrage says something about a particular segment of (US) gaming culture rather than about the quality of the game. Indeed, the main complaints lodged against *The Last of Us Part II* in these critiques (cf. Trumbore) have to do with how it represents gender, alleging that this is a game made by and intended for "'social justice warriors'" (Trumbore) because it features a female protagonist (Ellie) who is shown in a same-sex relationship, a second female protagonist (Abby) whose muscular physique is not normatively feminine, and another character (Lev) who is transgender (Byrd; Glennon; Trumbore).[2] For any other type of fictional narrative, and perhaps especially works of speculative fiction in other media, the inclusion of these characters might not have been particularly noteworthy, but in the realm of video games, non-normative forms of sexuality and gender identity are still rarely represented. In *The Last of Us Part II*, as Jen Glennon summarizes, the presence of queer characters

[2] Many of these players would certainly criticize this as an unfair characterization, claiming instead that their complaints are merely about the game's story decisions. However, besides a few other aspects of the game that get targeted in these reactions, most of the complaints can be linked back to a sexist and frequently explicitly anti-feminist ideology, a tendency within video-game communities that has already been explored in considerable detail (cf. Cote; Fox and Tang).

has led to a number of outspoken players being "angered by what they perceived as [game developer] Naughty Dog and game director Neil Druckmann's desire to 'force' left-leaning views on gender and sexuality into the game" (Glennon).

In this sense, the backlash against the game certainly fits into the regressive political climate that has predominantly been visible in the United States both in 2020 and in previous years (not just since Trump's election, but certainly amplified by it). On a smaller scale, the controversy around *The Last of Us Part II* is also related to the notorious Gamergate harassment campaign, which has brought to light the deep-seated anti-feminist and anti-queer sentiments in some segments of the 'gaming community' (cf. Cote 177-87; Murray, *On Video Games* 35-42). However, I posit that the game's content is worth a much closer look than is possible within these broader 'political' strokes implied in the controversy surrounding the game's alleged 'feminist agenda.' In particular, I would like to propose that the game uses its postapocalyptic setting to complicate and defamiliarize 'traditional' conceptions of femininity common in speculative fiction as well as in video games, particularly through the omnipresence of violence.

The Last of Us Part II is a sequel to a game by the same name released in 2013. Both present a fictional world in which the United States suffered an outbreak of a mutated cordyceps fungus that turns infected humans into highly aggressive zombie-like creatures (called 'Infected' in the game). The outbreak occurred in 2013, with the first game taking place twenty years later, in 2033, and the second one mainly in 2038 (while also including a few flashbacks). Both games depict a ruined civilization, a world in which nature has reclaimed some of the cities that humans have abandoned and in which danger is ever-present not only because of the roaming Infected but also because different groups of humans vie for authority over the remaining cities. In the original game, players control a character called Joel, a smuggler who lives in Boston's quarantine zone, which is under the totalitarian rule of the militarized FEDRA (Federal Disaster Response Agency), one of the last remnants of the US government. Joel travels westward across the US to deliver a teenage girl, Ellie, to a group of scientists called the Fireflies. Ellie is immune to the infection and hence of interest to the scientists. Over the course of the journey, Ellie and Joel gradually form a close bond. Only when they reach the Fireflies in Salt Lake City does Joel learn that in order for the scientists to try to create a cure, Ellie would have to die. As a result, Joel proceeds to kill most of the Fireflies in order to save Ellie from this procedure and lies to her afterwards, claiming

that they were unable to develop a cure and that there are other immune people.[3]

In the sequel, players control Ellie instead of Joel. Through later flashbacks, they find out that she has grown distant from Joel after discovering the truth about his actions—she was especially furious that he chose her life over the chance for a cure. Early on in the second game, Joel is killed by Abby, whose father—as players find out much later—was killed by Joel when he rescued Ellie from the Fireflies. Following Joel's brutal murder, Ellie in turn plots to take revenge. Accompanied by her girlfriend Dina, she tracks down Abby in Seattle. Players first witness the three days Ellie spends in Seattle from her perspective, then they switch over to Abby's during the same time. The game concludes after multiple pursuits and confrontations between the two characters, who, eventually, forsake their plans for revenge and go their separate ways. The switch from (mainly) controlling Joel in the first game to playing as both Ellie and Abby in the sequel recontextualizes the franchise's postapocalyptic setting by letting players explore it from the perspective and through the experiences of two different (but equally violent) female characters.

In terms of the gameplay (i.e., the way in which the game works and players interact with it), *The Last of Us Part II* (*TLoU2*) is an action adventure. Players control Ellie and Abby from a third-person perspective. With the camera positioned behind their avatars, players move through the environment, fight against Infected and human enemies with a variety of weapons, sneak around them, find helpful equipment, and overall traverse the game's postapocalyptic world in order to pursue Ellie's and Abby's individual goals. There are a number of cutscenes in the game, i.e., filmic sequences when players have to watch the narrative unfold without any possibility to intervene. In addition to that, dialogues between characters also take place 'automatically' while players are in control of the protagonists (and can, for instance, move away from a character they are speaking to). In order to glean more narrative information on what has happened in the game's storyworld, players can also overhear conversations between other

[3] Most of the characters and narrative events from the first game are important for the second one, yet I will focus on the latter in this article and refer to the previous one only if it is relevant for understanding aspects of the second game. Thematically, there are also important parallels between the two titles, and there is quite a bit of scholarship on the first game that can help contextualize the second one as well—for instance on nature and the environment (cf. Green), fatherhood (cf. Hill; Cruea), femininity (cf. Jones), and whiteness (cf. Murray, *On Video Games* 109-21).

characters, find hidden notes and documents, and pay particular attention to their visual surroundings. It is especially through this kind of environmental storytelling, via the 'narrative background' (cf. Magnet; Schubert 78), that players can gain more information about how society is structured in the game's postapocalyptic world, fleshing out the fictional setting.

The protagonists arrive at the main setting of the game, Seattle, years after FEDRA has given up control of it. Through a number of dialogues and additional documents, they learn that the Washington Liberation Front (WLF, or Wolves), to which Abby also belongs, has taken over after a protracted war against FEDRA's military forces. In 2038, many parts of the city have been left to the Infected, while the remaining territories are fought over by the WLF and the Seraphites, a group of people depicted as a fanatic and primitivist cult. Ellie gets attacked by both groups when she encounters them in the city, and she also witnesses them fight against each other. Violence thus is omnipresent in the game's world, both physically and symbolically. The Seraphites, for instance, uphold a repressive and heteropatriarchal gender regime—when the trans character Lev refuses to be married off as a wife to another Seraphite and shaves his head in defiance (and in a symbolic act of asserting his masculinity and maleness), he is ordered to be killed. In this sense, while US society and the US government as players know them from their extradiegetic world seem to have collapsed in the game (as is common in postapocalyptic scenarios), the new social order and the individual groups that the game depicts have created their own particular systems that exert power through force. That is, in the postapocalyptic absence of a government, these smaller groups have formed communities that enforce order and control in a way that builds on violence, similar to how a more centralized state would.

Overall, the game offers an intriguing case study of a postapocalyptic world made playable in which violence is a central element narratively, visually, and ludically. At the same time, violence is closely connected to how the game constructs the gender identities of its two protagonists. Since there is, as of now, little scholarly engagement with the game,[4] I want to focus on a slightly broader reading of the game's gender politics, particularly in terms of its construction of femininity. Specifically, I want to examine the game through an affective framework and especially consider the nexus of violence, femininity, and empathy that I see as central for the cultural work

[4] There have, however, been quite a lot of critical discussions of the game on blogs and other websites, for instance around Lev's trans narrative (cf. Muncy; MacLeod) or gendered violence (cf. Flores).

that the game does. Exploring this nexus will allow me to punctuate this overarching analysis with a few close readings of *TLoU2* that show how narrative, visuals, and gameplay affect representations of violence, femininity, and empathy in the game. Overall, I argue that *TLoU2* constructs violence as liberating and emancipating for its female protagonists in a postapocalyptic world that itself was created and is regulated by violence. Simultaneously, the game insists on the importance of balancing potentially justified violence with empathy for the position and perspective of those others who are perpetrators or may become victims of violence. It establishes this point both diegetically in the story of its two protagonists and extradiegetically in how players are forced to act aggressively against characters they have grown to empathize with, an affective dissonance that consciously discomforts the act of playing.

2. Contextualizing Violence, Femininity, and Empathy in (Postapocalyptic) Video Games

A large number of video games could be said to be part of speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and related genres. This is true for the earliest video or computer games (Tringham 1) just as much as for more recent ones, even though more recent games sometimes evince less direct or visible links to such easily identifiable generic roots (Tringham 13). Partly, this is also because genre can be seen as designating two different aspects of games. One could be called 'gameplay genre,' so the difference between a role-playing game or a strategy game or a racing game, while the other could be understood as the 'narrative genre' that is commonly used outside of video-game parlance: a role-playing game can be science fiction or fantasy or Western, etc. (cf. also Apperley). The *The Last of Us* series is arguably rooted quite strongly in the narrative genre of postapocalyptic fiction, of which there have been many video games of diverse gameplay genres especially in the last decade (cf. Pérez-Latorre). Since *TLoU2* is thematically quite rich (touching on questions of survival, grief, trauma, revenge, justice, love, family, and many others), I want to focus on only three aspects—and their interconnections—that, I argue, stand out in this postapocalyptic world: violence, femininity, and empathy. I will briefly accentuate these vast topics in terms of how they figure in video games like *TLoU2* in particular.

Much has been written about violence in video games, and especially outside the scholarly realm, violence is still often the predominant cultural lens through which games are discussed, in addition to more focused academic studies (cf., e.g., Markey and Ferguson). However, I am not

interested here, as most of the nonacademic and some of the academic studies are, in the psychological effects playing violent video games might have, but rather in the functions and meanings of violence within a game like *TLoU2*, in which social relations are such a large part of world-building. Some gameplay genres centrally build on players performing violence and are consequently constructed around competition and domination, which, in turn, such games envision primarily as physical conflicts. Generally speaking, the violence that is often featured in works of speculative fiction either on the representational level or as a subject matter certainly exists in most postapocalyptic video games as well. Yet, in action adventures, this is intensified by the violent actions that often constitute the main gameplay. In this article, my focus will be on the (inter)active potential of (and limits to) performing violence as an integral and constitutive part of playing the game—and, during that process, of making sense of it and of the social relations that it depicts. In order to examine the representation of violence in *TLoU2*, I will analyze what the game does and does not allow players to do, what it forces them to do, how it portrays violence visually (including what is and what is not shown), and how it features violence narratively.

In comparison to the long established issue of violence in games, gender and sexual identities have received attention only in more recent scholarship on video games (cf., e.g., Malkowski and Russworm; Ruberg and Shaw; Murray, *On Video Games*; Wysocki and Lauteria). Both scholars and cultural critics have pointed out the continuing representational problems of many video games. This includes a general lack of representation of non-normative gender identities on the one hand and stereotypical, often sexualized portrayals of female characters on the other. *TLoU2* offers more complex representational politics, and studying its portrayal of femaleness and femininity can be linked in particular to the act of playing (and performing acts of violence) *as* these female and more or less feminine characters. Since playing is inherently an active process, featuring female and feminine protagonists in video games already complicates a stereotypical association of femininity with passivity. Instead, the kinds of active, dominant, and violent femaleness that Ellie and Abby exhibit in the game could also be framed as notions of 'female masculinity' (Halberstam). My interest lies in tracing how the game depicts its female protagonists as engaging in behavior that is stereotypically coded feminine or masculine in the players' worlds and in how these gendered associations (in particular in reference to violence) might work differently in the game's postapocalyptic setting.

Lastly, I want to suggest that these issues of violence and femininity can be especially productively explored in video games—and in *TLoU2* in particular—through a reading of the game's affective dimension, and specifically in terms of how *TLoU2* transports empathy. The study of emotion, feeling, and affect has become more influential in cultural studies for a few years now, prompting some to speak of an 'affective turn,' and more recently such investigations have extended to video games as well (cf. Anable; Murray, "America"). Here, I am particularly interested in what Soraya Murray calls 'political affect': "a diffuse structure of what Ann Cvetkovich has described as 'relations between the emotional, the cultural and the political,'" an "affective component [that] can gather up intensities" ("America," para. 3). While Murray traces this dimension of political affect through the visual landscapes that video games evoke (which is potentially a very fruitful approach for *TLoU2* as well), my reading will focus more on how characters in the game transfer certain affects onto the players. For that, I build on Sara Ahmed's work, which has highlighted "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" (1). In this phenomenological understanding of affects or emotions (which, in line with Ahmed [205-08], I understand as less easily distinguishable from each other as some scholars posit), certain emotions 'stick' to a body and can get transferred to another person when these bodies encounter each other, a process that, if transferred to video games, could also be traced from fictional character to extradiegetic player.

Studying affect in fictional texts can potentially invite criticism of "[p]henomenological imprecision" (Anable 6). Trying to circumvent that methodological risk, I want to analyze what could be called the 'affective affordances' of the game. Caroline Levine has made the term affordance productive for literary and cultural studies in using it "to describe potential uses and actions latent in materials and designs" (6), shifting attention away from a text's 'intended' usage towards the "potentialities [that] lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements" (6-7). Extending this to questions of affect, the affective affordances of a text can be understood as describing how its material, medial, or formal properties shape its affective resonances. Examining a game's affective affordances—i.e., the narrative, visual, and ludic elements that enable and encourage a particular structure of feeling—is thus meant as a means of analyzing how a game makes its players feel, and how it can trigger empathy or apathy

through the act of playing.[5] This overall interest in the game's affective dimension will guide my analyses in the following sections.

3. Violence in *TLoU2*

Violence is omnipresent in *TLoU2*. Like in many postapocalyptic works, the world that the game depicts has partly regressed to championing physical strength and to solving conflicts through violence. While the game depicts a few self-sustaining and peaceful locations (e.g., the town of Jackson that Ellie has been living in for a few years), there is also a constant need to protect these settlements from the Infected—and from other humans. Outside of these settlements, many autocratic and warring groups seem to exist, evidenced by the conflicts between the WLF and the Seraphites, Ellie's interactions with members of these groups in Seattle, or also by the existence of gangs like the Rattlers, a group of heavily armed slavers that Ellie and Abby encounter in Santa Barbara toward the end of the game. In addition to the physical violence manifesting in these conflicts, many of the communities or factions in the game have also been formed around systems of social and symbolic control, such as the strictly heteronormative role that the Seraphites prescribe for Lev and how they deny the validity of his trans/gender identity. The storyworld that the game constructs thus features numerous instances of physical and symbolic violence in its settings and its character interactions. Additionally, the (often brutal and tragic) deaths of characters form a main part of the narrative as well, overall establishing the pervasiveness of violence in this postapocalyptic setting.

Arguably the most viscerally and cognitively disconcerting representation of violence in *TLoU2* is in its gameplay. Ellie and Abby shoot other humans and Infected with a variety of guns and arrows, stab them with numerous melee weapons that they can find in the environment, kill them silently with a shiv, or in more dramatic fashion with hand-crafted bombs, mines, or molotov cocktails. While the game, in many areas, also offers players a stealth-centered approach to advancing in the game, focused on circumventing rather than fighting enemies, there are a number of encounters which produce conflicts that have to be solved with physical violence. Since almost every area in the game is filled with various enemies, thinking of ways to fight and dispose of them is, in many ways, the main method of progressing in the game—and thus also of advancing the story.

[5] In other words, this is not an investigation of an empirical player's feelings when playing the game but of the structures that the game provides for how players are supposed to feel, for instance because of the bodily display of emotion of a fictional character.

Given that ludic violence is such a central element, it is crucial to consider how it is visually (and aurally) depicted in the game. For instance, thinking about the affective affordances of some first-person shooter games, killing 'hordes' of enemies can produce a desensitizing tendency, since 'faceless' masses are more difficult to recognize and feel for than individual human beings. Instead, *TLoU2* opts for a particularly visceral display of physical violence that highlights the effect of violence on individual characters. Specifically, it represents violence in a highly realist mode, comparable to how postmodern genre films such as examples of revisionist Westerns reacted to earlier glorified portrayals of violence in the classical Western by including the physical, and literally bloody, consequences of violent actions (Loy 122). To create this effect of realism, the game features elaborate character models that visibly react to Ellie or Abby hitting and shooting them. The game not only shows their deaths in notably gory detail but also includes gruesome screams, drawing attention to the pain and suffering that Ellie's and Abby's acts of violence cause, which helps to actually mark that violence as a significant aspect of the game's world.

Although players look at their avatar from behind their shoulders, there are many semi-scripted encounters in the game in which the camera is explicitly positioned differently in order to highlight the brutality of a murder. For instance, when Dina tries to save Ellie but then is struggling for her life against the WLF member Jordan, players—as Ellie—rush toward his back and receive a prompt to 'strike him' (chapter "Seattle Day 1 (Ellie)"). When they do, a brief cutscene seamlessly takes over: as Ellie grabs Jordan around his back and shoulder, the camera spins around 180 degrees to show their faces. Ellie (who at this moment is not controlled by the player) stabs Jordan twice in the neck with her switchblade, and each time a hit lands, the camera jerks to the right, simulating the knife's motion. Simultaneously, the camera moves even closer onto Jordan's face, with blood gushing out of his mouth and neck. Ellie's face and her reactions are also clearly visible in this particular shot—she does not seem particularly shocked at her own actions but instead content in having managed to overpower Jordan. His body then falls to the floor, positioned at the bottom of the frame, and players hear his choking and gurgling noises. He rolls out of frame and dies, which leaves a shot that shows Ellie and Dina standing over him. While, in terms of camera positioning, this scene is filmed through an external focalizer, the composition increases the identification with both characters: Jordan suffering the consequences of Ellie's brutal actions, and Ellie's intensity and satisfaction with them, as she exclaims: "Got you, motherfucker." While

excessive violence might be an everyday reality in the world of *TLoU2*, the game stages this violence in a way that makes it spectacular, precisely so as not to appear mundane—but instead to shock and disturb. This dramatization also makes the players' gameplay more meaningful on a narrative level, displaying the consequences their ludic actions have on the character they are playing just as much as on the other characters in the world. Such scenes are repeated throughout the game, and they can often lead to discomfort with what is being displayed—or with what players have to do to complete the game successfully.[6]

The choices that the game does and does not offer in terms of how violence is being used by its protagonists are crucial in provoking an emotional reaction from players. Generally, players are free to roam around the different areas of the game, to explore them in detail or ignore them, and to choose how exactly to engage with the many other characters (most of them enemies) in the game. However, the main story of *TLoU2* is linear, with no significant choices, featuring a low amount of narrative agency (cf. Schubert 36-37). This combination of ludic freedom and narrative constraints is also evident in the depiction of violence, as in the cutscene just discussed. The way the death of another character is staged in the game illustrates this connection even better: after a long chase, Ellie finally catches up to Nora, one of Abby's friends, and wants to know where exactly Abby is hiding ("Seattle Day 2 (Ellie)"). Moments ago, Nora got infected, with no way to save her life, so she sees no point in helping Ellie, at least not until Ellie retorts: "I can make it quick. Or I can make it so much worse." The sequence that follows is once again a cutscene where the camera switches between looking at Ellie and at Nora, all bathed in red from the emergency light of the building. When Nora declares initially that she is "not giving up [her] friend," the camera is positioned above Ellie, looking down onto the crouching Nora, and then turns around to show Ellie's face, in a slight low-angle shot that suggests Nora's perspective. Ellie seems to struggle with what to do for a while, but after a few seconds, a button prompt pops up on the screen, indicating to players to push the square button on their controller. When they do so, Ellie hits Nora's face with a pipe that she picked up earlier, and while the camera remains in the same position, blood is seen splashing upwards

[6] This is especially the case in the scenes that pit Ellie and Abby against each other, which I will discuss in more detail below. Additionally, the violent and brutal nature of deaths in the world of the game is also displayed whenever Ellie or Abby are killed by enemies, with a zoom on them actually showing them dying before the game then reloads to a previous stage.

and Nora is heard sobbing. The prompt, which players now know is a prompt to beat Nora to extort information from her, comes up two more times, before the screen fades to black. The next scene shows Ellie as she arrives back at her and Dina's hideout with a hint on Abby's whereabouts—but also visibly distressed at what she had to do to receive that information. If players do not push the button three times, the scene does not advance.

In this sense, even though the sequence involves a kind of interaction (players have to press a button), it still offers no practical agency and no meaningful narrative choices at all. Instead, it forces players to use Ellie to torture Nora—while at the same time making them more complicit in the violence committed than if the cutscene had progressed without any player input. The sequence thus works similarly to a canonical moment in video-game history, a scene in the game *BioShock* which explicitly and self-reflexively highlights that players have had no practical agency in any of the game's events so far (cf. Schubert 92-99). While *TLoU2* generally does not offer narrative choices in this way, pointing one such choice out so clearly in this scene, while really making only this one choice possible, serves to strengthen the notion that players have to perform violence even if they feel discomfort doing so (a point I will come back to later)—and, by implication, that such violence might be necessary in a postapocalyptic world.

While many deaths in the game emphasize the brutality of killing another human being by explicitly depicting the direct consequences of violence, players do not see how Nora gets killed. Instead, the game foregrounds the distressing effect the torture of Nora precipitating her death had on Ellie. In my reading, both of these representational strategies establish that *TLoU2* does not use violence gratuitously and does not glorify it, which was a controversial question surrounding the game's release as well (cf., e.g., Bailey). Instead, the realist depiction of violence is meant to disturb and distress players. The occasional explicit death sequences serve to instill a feeling in players that they are not just pressing buttons to progress the game but that their actions have brutal diegetic consequences and thus certain ethical implications. This realization might lead to discomfort and frustration, and to the desire to look away while playing the game—or even to take breaks from playing (cf. Sims). Yet this is exactly the point the game wants to make: that there is ultimately nothing redeeming or glorious about violence, even if it is apparently necessary in the game's postapocalyptic world, not only ensuring the protagonist's survival but also also forming a crucial part of how their identities are constructed.

4. Femininity and Violence in *TLoU2*

For both Ellie and Abby, violence is central to their gendered identities. The game's setting generally builds on a construction of gender that differs from the lived realities of its players—the postapocalyptic world, after all, is organized in vastly different ways, so that not all markers of femininity or gender performances prevalent in contemporary US society apply in the same way. And yet, twenty years after the outbreak of the infection, gender as a social category of difference of course still exists and matters in the game's world, and characters are frequently gendered by others in specific ways. For instance, Ellie, at 19 years of age, is repeatedly called a "girl" by other characters and enemies, infantilizing her perhaps due to her small stature but also more generally, since she is apparently not being taken seriously as an adult. In contrast, Tommy, Joel's brother, recalls another person describing Abby as "a woman […] built like an ox" ("The Farm")—such a reference to her muscular body type is typical of how a number of characters react to her, and the dehumanizing comparison to a male animal also implies that her physique and overall appearance is not considered normatively feminine. While physical violence plays a central role in establishing these gender identities, unlike in many stereotypical portrayals of women (especially in video games), this is not primarily about the violence done *to* these female characters. While both Ellie and Abby are certainly also victims of violence—being attacked by numerous enemies and shown in many cutscenes as being punched, hit, and shot by others, men and women alike—much more often and centrally they are the perpetrators of violence themselves.[7] This propensity of female characters in *TLoU2* to commit violence as part of their gender performance adds to the ways in which the game subverts stereotypical depictions of women as necessarily feminine and of femaleness and femininity as associated with non-violence, which particularly a lot of video games but also other popular postapocalyptic fictions still adhere to (cf., e.g., Garland et al.; Keetley). Other aspects of the narrative do revert to those more stereotypical portrayals, though, overall leading to ambivalent representational politics.

Ellie and Abby are very much round characters, and while many players will already have known Ellie from the first *TLoU* game, the second part also includes a number of playable flashback scenes for both of them, most of them quieter and less violent than the main chapters, providing a deeper

[7] Notably, the game does not depict overly sexualized violence—sex scenes between Ellie and Dina or Abby and her former boyfriend Owen, for instance, happen consensually—even though the world itself is full of violence.

characterization. Throughout the game, Ellie and Abby both appear as active, dominant, assertive, emotionally strong, and violent women—all of which works against reactionary depictions that, in binary constructions of gender, associate being a woman with being feminine, and femininity with non-violence. At the same time, none of these characteristics take away from their gendered identities; it is Abby's physical appearance, not her personality traits, that prompt others to comment unfavorably on her as a woman. This way, in the world of the game, being violent can be understood as performing a kind of normative femininity, since the postapocalyptic setting has made it necessary for women and men alike to be prepared for its physical dangers. At the same time, Ellie and Abby are also very different characters and exhibit distinct gender identities that go beyond stereotypical binaries still prevalent in mainstream (genre) fictions (such as between the character types of the 'fair' and the 'dark lady' [cf. Cawelti 11]).

Significantly, these differences are established in the game not only through how differently Ellie and Abby behave in the narrative and how they are visually depicted, but also via gameplay: when players start controlling Abby in her chapters, the gameplay subtly shifts. The game does not explicitly indicate this (unlike with other gameplay hints that the game does provide), but since Abby's physical strength enables her to effectively harm enemies by punching them and since she generally has more weapons available, her chapters can at times be approached in a more fight-oriented, hands-on way. Ellie's shivs and crafted tools, in turn, allow for a slightly stealthier approach (especially against Infected enemies). This ludic difference is significant because in many other games, playing as different avatars entails playing a character that looks but does not play differently. In *TLoU2*, this difference in game mechanics adds to the overall complexity of Ellie's and Abby's portrayals. Such nuanced depictions extend to other female characters in the game as well, like Ellie's girlfriend Dina, Abby's fellow WLF member and Owen's girlfriend Mel, or Lev's sister Yara. While they all are supporting characters, they have distinct personalities that go beyond serving the interests of a main character. As mentioned before, this breadth of representation also extends to sexuality—even though the characters in the game do not use any explicit labels for themselves, from their actions, players can infer that Ellie is lesbian, Dina is bisexual, and Abby is heterosexual.

While some of these characters' queerness subverts stereotypical portrayals of women in games as heterosexual and as sexually available to heterosexual men, more reactionary gender tropes are woven into these

subversive portrayals. Perhaps this becomes most evident in the interactions between Ellie and Dina, as Ellie is generally the more assertive and active one in their relationship (and in the game's story in general). While Dina initially accompanies Ellie on the dangerous trips through Seattle, she has to stay at 'home' in their hiding place once Ellie finds out that Dina is pregnant (from a previous relationship with the character Jesse), while Ellie (and later Jesse as well) ventures out. The pregnancy pushes Dina into a position and gender role that recalls traditional patriarchal constructions of femininity, with her assuming a more passive and submissive role in the relationship with Ellie and in the couple's struggle for survival. The heteronormative evocation of a family in which the mother stays at home while her partner provides for her is repeated later in the game, when Ellie and Dina are depicted living on a farm after the events in Seattle, with Dina's child JJ having been born and the two taking care of him together. When Tommy visits the two with information on Abby's whereabouts, Ellie wants to go after her again, to which Dina vehemently disagrees. As Dina explains, she does not just want to "sit here and wait for [Ellie]" and instead evokes their shared life: "We've got a family. She [i.e., Abby] doesn't get to be more important than that." Ellie, in contrast, notes in brief sentences that she feels restless and not like herself as long as Abby is alive: "I don't sleep. I don't eat," and when Dina begs her to stay, she replies curtly: "I can't" ("The Farm"). In depicting Ellie's identity as so centrally organized around her desire for revenge that she disavows the idea of family as providing an alternative source of identity, Ellie's and Dina's relationship here works according to stereotypical narratives for heterosexual couples. Thus, the game casts Ellie as active in contrast to Dina, portraying their queer relationship in heteronormative, binary terms, with a clear power imbalance.[8]

Ultimately, this kind of ambivalence between subversion of and submission to stereotypical tropes also extends to the connection between violence and femininity in *TLoU2*. Both Ellie and Abby are centrally motivated by revenge and use violence as a means to an end: Abby kills Joel to avenge her father's death, and Ellie wants to kill Abby to avenge Joel, in a similar emphasis on (adopted) fatherhood. However, especially as the story progresses, they also resort to violence in order to protect others and care for them. This is already evident in the scene of Ellie killing the WLF member

[8] Similar to the first game's thematic relation to some myths of the Western genre, this can be seen as another nod to tropes of the (classical) Western in which the male Western hero can never stay in 'civilization' but has to continuously move further westward into the wilderness to stay independent—just as Ellie travels west to Santa Barbara.

Jordan that I discussed in the previous section. She kills him so brutally and while visibly enraged because he was about to harm Dina; Ellie's use of violence thus often explicitly serves to protect her loved ones. This is arguably less the case for her overall quest to avenge Joel's death, which seems more self-serving. However, at the end of the narrative, Ellie gives up that pursuit—she does not kill Abby when she has the chance but lets her leave instead. The ending suggests that Ellie is eventually able to forgive both Abby and Joel and move on to a different chapter in her life: the last shot shows her leave the guitar Joel gave her at the farmhouse (which Dina has since left), and as the camera moves forward to look out of a window, Ellie is visible walking into the distance ("Epilogue"). The shot is laden with symbolic meaning that goes beyond the scope of this article, but while it is unclear if she will try to reconnect with Dina or not (potentially embracing family life), she has certainly given up on the idea of revenge.[9] Abby's story has a parallel development, just further advanced—when players control her, it is already a while after she has exacted her revenge on Joel. This act apparently was unable to give her the satisfaction and closure she had been seeking, as she becomes disillusioned with the WLF and her current life throughout the ensuing days. Gradually distancing herself from the WLF, she eventually focuses on protecting and taking care of Lev, with whom she drives away in a boat after the final confrontation with Ellie. Their kind of mother-child relationship suggests an embrace of family as well, and a way for Abby "to find something meaningful in her life" (Muncy). While a focus on the caring and 'nurturing' role of motherhood is certainly a stereotypically reductive imagination of femininity, Abby still combines this focus on caring with her propensity towards violence, using violence not for revenge but for the purpose of protecting others.[10] The quasi-motherly role that she adopts is thus still one as a violent woman, a dominant and not a submissive carer. This connection between violence and empathetic caring overall manages to complicate stereotypical portrayals of femininity.

[9] Ellie puts down the guitar also because she cannot properly play it anymore, having lost parts of two fingers in the fight with Abby, a reminder of how their violent encounters have (also physically) changed her. Still, I read the composition of the shot as symbolically expressing hope, demonstrated by Ellie leaving behind a personal item that, as a reminder of Joel, was closely connected to her quest for revenge.

[10] Following the parallelism in Ellie's and Abby's characterizations, and since Ellie has already broken with the cycle of violence between the two at the end of the game, this might also be read as a hint that Ellie, too, will seek relationships or family life to fulfill her life beyond thoughts of revenge (instead of staying alone).

5. Empathy, Femininity, and Violence in *TLoU2*

In a last argumentative step, I want to connect the notions of violence and femininity in the game through the lens of empathy, which is both a particularly important theme throughout the game's story and part of a range of emotional reactions that the game wants to trigger in its players as well. The importance of understanding another person's perspective, to feel for them and with them, is centrally evoked in the game through its emphasis on the perspectives of two mutual enemies who players are both encouraged to empathize with, by playing through the same period of time first as Ellie and then as Abby. After Ellie is ready to give up on her search for Abby and leave for Jackson with Dina, Jesse, and Tommy, Abby ambushes them in their hideout. At the moment when Abby seems to have decided to shoot Ellie, the screen suddenly fades to black and reopens with players controlling Abby in a flashback scene (at the end of which they learn that Joel killed her father). The next chapter is again titled "Seattle Day 1," but this time the game unfolds from Abby's perspective, who is woken up by her friend Manny. Subsequently, players control her while she traverses the base of operations of the WLF, a repurposed stadium. For a number of minutes, there are no violent scenes in the game, as Abby walks through different areas of the stadium and players get to witness how the WLF functions as a self-contained society (similar to an earlier chapter from Ellie's perspective in Jackson). This includes walking past school classrooms, talking to some of Abby's friends in a cafeteria, looking through her and Manny's room, and seeing the farms and training facilities that the WLF has set up. The overall picture is one of tranquility and organized, 'civilized' life in this particular settlement—which stands in stark contrast to how players experienced the WLF as Ellie, namely as a seemingly hyper-aggressive and militant organization and thus as the enemy. This contrast of perspectives is repeatedly evoked throughout Abby's chapters, especially since she meets more and more characters that players have already killed in Ellie's chapters. In terms of the game's affective affordances, these scenes are set up to provoke shock and guilt, to make players realize that many of the characters they previously killed while assuming them to be 'faceless' enemies are (diegetically) real people, with friends and relationships, lives and personalities of their own.[11]

[11] As one example, in the chapter "Seattle Day 2 (Ellie)," Ellie kills a female WLF soldier who played the video game *Hotline Miami* on a handheld console, the music from which is audible to players as well. Later in the game, as Abby in the chapter "Seattle Day 1 (Abby)," they encounter the same character—particularly noticeable and memorable because the

In switching perspectives half-way through the game, *TLoU2* turns Abby from the central antagonist in Ellie's story into another protagonist; simultaneously, the enemies Ellie has killed without much regard for their humanity become more fleshed-out characters from the players' perspective. Such a complication of the question of who is positioned as protagonist and antagonist in a fictional world and the moral ambiguity that follows from this complication is particularly important for mainstream video games, whose narratives often still work with simplistic moral binaries, and it is also typical of postapocalyptic fiction's interest in the complexities of humanity. While *TLoU2* makes this explicit through the shifted perspective on the WLF, it also hints at a similar importance of considering another person's point of view for other groups depicted in the game.[12] Additionally, the overall narrative suggestion that players consider their enemies as complex humans is also mirrored in the gameplay: the gameplay demands that players think of their human enemies as complex actors as well, since the game's artificial intelligence will provide particularly challenging combat situations in which simply rushing your enemies will almost always lead to failure. While this could be seen as an instance of ludonarrative harmony, at the same time, players still cannot always avoid violent confrontations, so they will have to continue killing enemies despite the game making them want to think of them as individual human beings, an affective frustration that is also evoked through the game's main plot.

In fact, the pivotal moments that bring these affective dimensions together are the two direct confrontations between Ellie and Abby. Generally, even though they are very violent characters, the game is invested in making both of them likable. Most players playing *TLoU2* will already be attached to Ellie thanks to the first game (in which they assume Joel's role as her protector), and there are many more moments in the second title that further flesh out her characterization. Evoking the same depth of character is more complicated for Abby, who is initially introduced as a villain to players. Yet in terms of affective affordances, the game is designed in a way that encourages players to understand and feel for her as well, be it through the crucial switch in perspective or through a number of flashback episodes that

music from *Hotline Miami* is playing again. Only now do they learn the character's name, Whitney, and that she was acquainted with Abby, transforming her from a previously 'faceless' enemy just like the many others that Ellie has killed.

[12] For instance, the impression players get of the Seraphites is mostly one from an outsider's perspective, yet in Abby's chapters certain assumptions about them are also occasionally challenged by Lev.

provide more motivation for her actions.[13] The fights between the two female protagonists, however, set up a conflict between characters players should both be attached to. After players have reached the end of day 3 in Seattle for the second time, this time from Abby's perspective, the fight between the two resumes. The cutscene plays again and continues, and then the game returns control over Abby to players, now in Ellie's hideout, with the task of killing her ("Seattle Day 3 (Abby)"). This sets up a crucial affective disconnect: at this point, players have gone through both Ellie's and Abby's journeys, but in this crucial sequence they are only in control of Abby. Whereas she (perhaps understandably) wants to exact revenge on Ellie for having killed most of her friends, players arguably will not want to do that—Ellie is, after all, the first and main protagonist. While the overall switch in perspective is supposed to increase players' sense of empathy for those that Ellie has murdered, she had been a flawed character already before that, and yet one that the game sets up as likable also because of this more multidimensional characterization.

The key confrontation scenes are thus characterized by a profound affective dissonance. When the game shows Ellie killing Jordan, the scene is set up in a way that aligns players with her panic and anger in that moment. Here, however, players cannot share the emotional state of the character they control, since they have already experienced half of the game's story from the point of view of the character introduced as their opponent. In this way, the scenes afford identification with both characters simultaneously, a highly unusual situation for action-adventure games that normally build on players rooting only for the character they play as—and having them perform violence against antagonists only. In turn, this feeling is intensified because, once again, players have to perform particularly gruesome violence: when Abby does manage to sneak up on Ellie and to hit her, the game switches to cutscenes that depict the two brutally hitting, stabbing, and shooting at each other with different weapons. When Abby gains the upper hand for the third time, she seems to break Ellie's arm and then punches her repeatedly with full force in the face while Ellie lies on the floor. In this way, the game forces players to see how their avatars perform violent acts against a character they have grown to like and identify with, potentially frustrating them due to their

[13] This might not have worked for some players who express their 'hate' for Abby in criticism of *TLoU2*, but the game is still structured in a way to afford such an emotional bond with Abby as well. For instance, the experience of seeing her father killed is also set up as a parallel to Ellie witnessing Joel's death, and there are many moments of her bonding with Yara and Lev, joking around, or 'humanizing' details like her fear of heights.

lack of agency and creating a feeling of discomfort. As Sara Ahmed notes, "[d]iscomfort is a feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled" (148). These sequences create discomfort for players because, for once, there is no character on screen whose body visibly expresses the emotion that the game design encourages players to feel. Instead, players might experience an odd sense of relief when Ellie briefly seems to win the fight, attacking the character players currently control; or they might be tempted to lose the fight so that Ellie does not get hurt; or they might try not to act at all (similar to not pushing any button when Ellie is about to torture Nora)—but none of that would progress the game. Abby has to win this fight against Ellie for the story to continue, so in terms of the affective regime the game has set up by then, players are essentially playing against themselves: against their own discomfort and their own moral compass.

The lack of agency in these scenes is, again, not accidental, I would argue, since it fits within the game's overall interest in highlighting, but also complicating, empathy in the context of a veritable culture of violence. It forces players to play as somebody with whose goals and emotional state they are not aligned in this moment,[14] shifting their perspective and identification to their opponent—just as the game previously highlighted the importance of understanding one's apparent enemies as complex human beings as well. In turn, this discomfort—what one could call a 'ludo-affective dissonance'—also extends to a hesitance to perform such violent acts against each other, and in this way, the game transfers its characters' emotional turmoil to the extratextual level of players currently playing this game.

6. Conclusion

This article's analysis of *TLoU2* has attempted to highlight how the game's complex affective setup combines questions of violence, femininity, and empathy. While video games of this genre often inherently build on violence, *TLoU2* uses it more self-reflexively to represent different constructions of femininity that its postapocalyptic setting make possible and believable. It forces its players to experience (narratively), look at (visually), and perform

[14] While in their first confrontation, players, unlike Abby, do not want to kill Ellie because they have gotten to know Ellie for the majority of this and the previous game, in the final confrontation, when players, now as Ellie, this time have the upper hand on Abby ("Santa Barbara"), they have already been compelled to internalize what Ellie is about to realize only at the very end of their fight—understanding Abby's perspective and being able to forgive her.

(ludically) acts that are excessively violent and disturbing, only to make them realize the full extent of these actions later, appealing to their empathy. The frustration that might come from a lack of choice in what the characters do even after players have already internalized this appeal to empathy is used purposefully to evoke a feeling of discomfort that fills the act of playing with more meaning exactly because it is pointed out as such: players control a character, narratively assuming to *be* that character, in a situation that restricts or might fundamentally contradict their preferred action. Meanwhile, *TLoU2* also shifts the focus away from the omnipresence of violence that the game only alludes to as governing the institutions and communities that structure the remainders of US society to the more 'localized' and everyday violence perpetrated within that world—and notably one that is fundamental to the game's protagonists' gender identities.

This complex of frustration and discomfort that the game sets up players to feel can perhaps constitute a legitimate complaint to be lodged against the game, unlike the ideological criticism I mentioned at the beginning of this article. Yet in order to make the ludic experience of a postapocalyptic world more meaningful, it seems crucial to also productively trouble this playing experience—to make playing not only fun but also grueling and unsettling, a feeling that can still elicit pleasure beyond 'mere' entertainment (similar to pop-cultural pleasures of horror, cringe, or disgust). *TLoU2*'s affective setup will leave players with these unresolved emotions, offering no simple answers to the 'merit' or potential necessity of revenge or violence but encouraging them to think about the consequences of the deeds they have performed as these fictional characters. Certainly, though, the game's postapocalyptic world provides the space to think about and imagine the need for violent female figures in situations or constellations that also exist beyond the realm of speculative fiction.

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