Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse

The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel

Valentina Romanzi

Abstract

Naughty Dog's video games *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) stage a complex tale of human drama in post-apocalyptic settings, retrieving several features of the Frontier myth. In this essay, I argue that the characters' narrative arc is a post-apocalyptic, American Frontier tale in which the individual and collective levels clash (as they often do in such stories), generating moral challenges for the characters and, in turn, for the player controlling them. Thus, I set out to analyze how TLOU draws on and subverts some of the traditional tropes and characters belonging to the classic American Frontier tradition, investigating a number of issues related to individualism, collectivism, violence, and selfishness.

Suggested Citation: Romanzi, Valentina. "Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel." *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2023): 311–330, DOI: 10.47060/jaaas.v4i2.161.

Keywords: individualism; collectivism; video games

Peer Review: This article was reviewed by the issue's editors and one external reviewer.

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Staying Human in the Post-Apocalypse

The Frontiers of Individualism in *The Last of Us* and Its Sequel

Valentina Romanzi

In July 2013, the American video game developer Naughty Dog released *The Last of Us* (TLOU1), followed by a long-awaited sequel, *The Last of Us Part II* (TLOU2) in 2020.[1] Both are third-person action-adventure games set in a post-pandemic world in which the few human survivors must fend off hordes of zombie mutants in order to survive. The events start in 2013, when a new kind of Cordyceps fungus spreads throughout the United States, transforming most of the population into monstrous creatures. The games, which have a fixed, non-modifiable diegesis, give the player control of one of the three main characters: Joel, a smuggler tasked to deliver teenager Ellie to the Fireflies in the hope of using her immunity to the fungus to develop a vaccine; Ellie herself; and Abby, a National Liberation Front fighter who is seeking revenge on Joel for killing her father to save Ellie. As the story unravels, the player is forced to switch characters several times and, in the case of TLOU2, to relive the same three days in Seattle from two diametrically opposed perspectives. As the games retrieve a Frontier setting evocative of the origins of the United States, in what follows I argue that the characters' narrative arc is a post-apocalyptic, American Frontier tale in which the individual and collective level clash (as they often do in such stories), generating moral challenges for the characters and, in turn, for the player controlling them. Thus, I set out to analyze how TLOU draws on and subverts some of the traditional tropes and characters belonging to the classic American Frontier tradition, investigating a number of issues related to individualism, collectivism, violence, and selfishness.

The Last of Us as a Post-Apocalyptic, American Frontier Tale: The Setting, the Tropes

The American Frontier tale, which originated in early Euro-American folklore and

popular writing and later coalesced into the western,[2] has narrated the evolution of the United States and its ideology, glorifying it during its most prolific moments and attempting to address it critically as it started to decline around the 1970s. Set at the American Frontier, the western—especially its filmic version—helped solidify the myth of the lone ranger, the small, tight-knit community surviving in and taming the wilderness, and the fear of a ferocious enemy—be it a cruel outlaw or some "savage Indians." The tension between the individual and the collective level has thus become a staple of classic westerns, mirroring the same attention it has received in historical reconstructions of the real Frontier experience.[3]

The classic western tale set at the Frontier, depicting "man coming to terms with the lawlessness of survival in an untamed frontier, the unrelenting power and cruelty of nature, and slippery notions of good and evil,"[4] started to wane at the tail end of the Vietnam War, signaling a crisis in the ideology it depicted.[5] However, the genre has not disappeared completely; rather, it underwent a transformation that gave rise to a series of texts generally known as "post-westerns." As Neil Campbell has noted, "In the post-West there might live on the haunting presence of the past within the present and future and . . . together these multiple stories provide some fuller and better understanding of the contemporary West itself."[6] Susan Kollin, in her 2007 edited collection *Postwestern Cultures*, also attributes the post-western genre a critical dimension, an intent to reassess and interrogate the narrative of classic western tales.[7] This critical impulse can be found even beyond texts that evidently belong to the western genre, even in its "post" phase. According to Richard Slotkin, in the past fifty years some traits of classic western tales have been absorbed by other genres like science fiction and horror to constitute what he calls "post-Frontier" narratives, in which the "underlying structures of myth and ideology that [have] given the genre its cultural force" have been translated into different settings and contexts, but "violence [remains] as central to these new genre-scenarios as it [has] been to the Western."[8] One such genre lies at the intersection of science fiction and horror, generating post-apocalyptic narratives like TLOU. In these post-Frontier texts, the myth of the Frontier is "inverted" so that the themes recurring in western fiction find a setting which stifles their original optimism, rather than enhance it. In Slotkin's words, "the borders their heroes confront are impermeable to the forces of progress and civilized enlightenment; if anything, the flow of aggressive power runs in the opposite direction, with the civilized world threatened with subjugation to or colonization by the forces of darkness."[9] This inversion is evident in TLOU, where the few human survivors must fend off continuous attacks by the mutants and other violent communities, trying to defend themselves from the aggressive power of "savagery" rather than asserting their "colonizing" power over them.

Diegetically, there are several other elements that configure TLOU1 and, to a lesser extent, TLOU2 as a post-western, post-apocalyptic, American Frontier tale. In terms of characters, John Cawelti identifies three broad types populating western fiction: "the townspeople or agents of civilization, the savages or outlaws who threaten this first group, and the heroes."[10] At first glance, such a tripartite division can also be found in TLOU: the small communities featured in the games mirror the original Frontier townspeople in trying to tame the wilderness that has reclaimed most territories in the aftermath of the pandemic; the "savage" infected threaten the precarious civilization restored by these settlements[11]; and the heroes—especially Ellie in TLOU1—attempt to secure the permanence of these new experiments in communal life. Nevertheless, as Michael Fuchs has observed, in TLOU1 "America has forsaken the idealization of the Founding Fathers and the nation's foundational myths—which begs the question as to whether this post-apocalyptic America may still be considered America."[12] In my view, TLOU does portray an American frontier, not just because it uses a traditionally American setting and stages some of the original social dynamics ascribed to the Frontier, but because it seems to be doing so in order to expose them to nuanced criticism—the very goal of the postwestern. In other words, the American setting and "feel" of TLOU serves the specific purpose of highlighting the failure of what once was one of the most self-celebratory narratives of American exceptionalism. As such, the games had to retrieve some of the most recognizable features of western Frontier tales to expose them to critical assessment and showcase the failure of such old systems in a new world.

The nods to the American Frontier setting are most visible in the small communities that exist within the game ecology: the small, protected settlement in Jackson, so evocative of a Frontier shantytown, down to the stables and saloons, and the two warring factions in Seattle, which are reminiscent of (more) contemporary American examples of armed militias and extremist religious communities (Illustration 1), respectively—expressions of a different kind of Frontier.

Jackson, in particular, features the same social structure and values typically associated with the traditional American Frontier. Remarking on the gendered structures of such tales, Brenda M. Boyle argues that "in American westerns (essentially war stories about manifest destiny) the male and thereby masculine individualist cowboy riding alone across the plain is prized over the female and thereby feminine collectivist woman developing a frontier community. Or, in a traditional American war story (ostensibly masculine), males leave to fight heroically at the combat front, while (ostensibly feminine) females remain pitiably at the home front."[13] Despite the modernization of social roles, which is especially noticeable in the two female protagonists, the Frontier community of Jackson is still mostly built around Maria, who is never shown leaving the town, while her husband Tommy and other men routinely

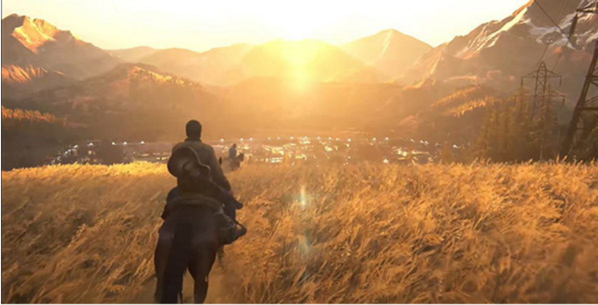
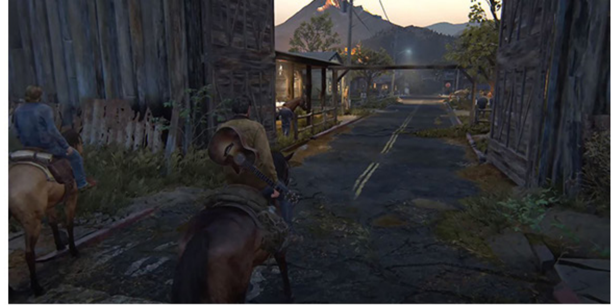
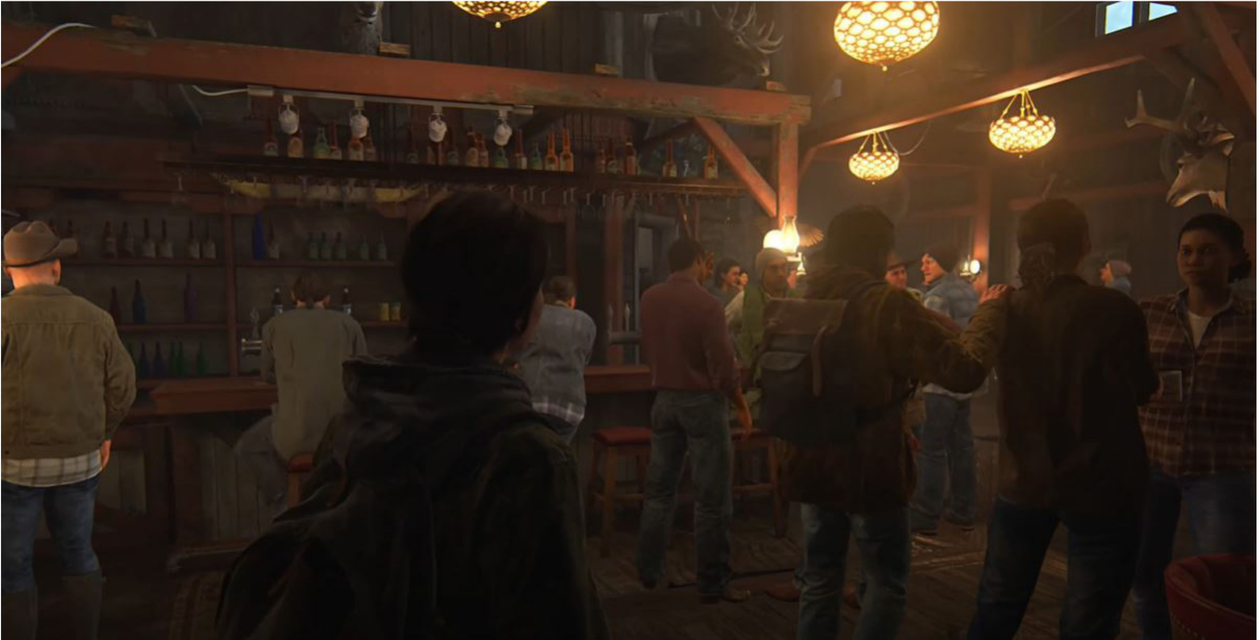
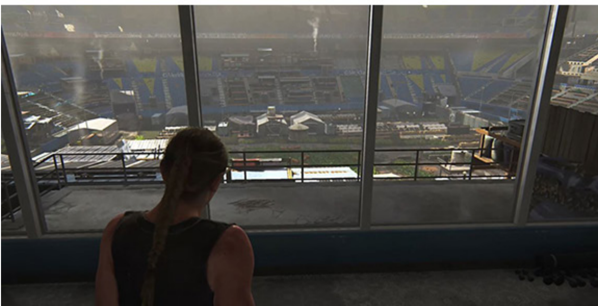
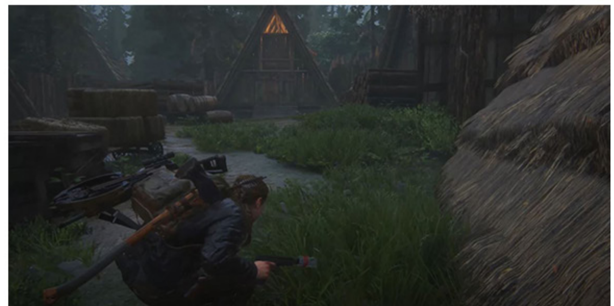






Illustration 1: The small communities evoke the American Frontier.
Screenshots from *The Last of Us* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013, and *The Last of Us Part II* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2020.

go hunting and protect the community from outsiders' attacks. Despite emphasizing this dimension, I do not wish to downplay the overall importance of the decisions made by TLOU's creative team in terms of gendered stereotypes. In TLOU2, the player experiences life in the settlement in more than just brief glimpses, and it is quite evident that the developers put some effort into showing that *not only* men go out hunting and patrolling, and *not only* women take care of the community. Within

the wider video game ecology, moreover, most traditionally "masculine" traits are transferred to both Ellie and Abby—a move that has gathered loud criticism from a small but vocal subset of the fanbase.[14] Nevertheless, Jackson retains enough social dynamics and roles to perpetuate the same social patterns that typified the traditional Frontier outpost—even in the aftermath of an apocalyptic event.

Similarly, the Seraphites, a religious sect controlling the Lower Queen Anne suburb of Seattle (by 2038 isolated from the mainland by several flooding events), reinstate some of America's earliest notions of community. Their connection to the Puritans, who first settled in the Northeast, is evident in their architectural choices (bottom right in Illustration 1) and in the religious teachings and practices they put in place (most evidently, their strict regulation of families and social roles). More broadly, they borrow from several religious doctrines present on American soil, such as the Amish—with their rejection of modern technology—and the Mormons.[15] These scattered examples of communal life in TLOU have a decidedly American feel: in a sense, they are seedlings—primitive, run-down versions of the original experiments that gave birth to the very nation that is trying to resurface from the aftermath of catastrophe. However, whereas the original Puritan settlers, running from a Europe they considered apocalyptic,[16] imagined America as "the site of the new heaven and earth" envisioned in the Book of Revelation, the events in TLOU locate the apocalypse *within* the United States, and what is left of the Promised Land is nothing but ruin and danger. It is a rather different endeavor, then, that the "settlers" in TLOU must undertake: they are not facing the unknown territories of a continent that held the potential reward for their faith, but the monstrous remains of their own civilization, the sad testament to the failure of American society, to face the devastation brought about by the cordyceps epidemic. Thus, the protagonists of TLOU must make their way through eerily familiar locations slowly being reclaimed by nature; they move in and through uncanny spaces whose monstrosity—the very same feature that the first European settlers attributed to the unknown territories of North America[18]—derives not only from the fear of what might hide in these untamed lands but from the sense of loss for a world that would have been deemed safe before the apocalypse. Well-known landmarks are portrayed as both threatening and harshly beautiful, as the landscape slowly elides the traces of civilization and nature takes over spaces once tamed by a human hand,[19] a process well represented by the giraffes roaming Salt Lake City in TLOU1 (Illustration 2).

Of the two games, the first reproduces the path taken by nineteenth-century pioneers more evidently than its sequel, as the player follows the protagonists on a journey from Boston to Jackson, in Wyoming, passing through Pittsburgh. Joel and Ellie then have to double back to Boulder, in Colorado, only to resume moving westward toward Salt Lake City and finally once more back eastward to Jackson. Conversely,

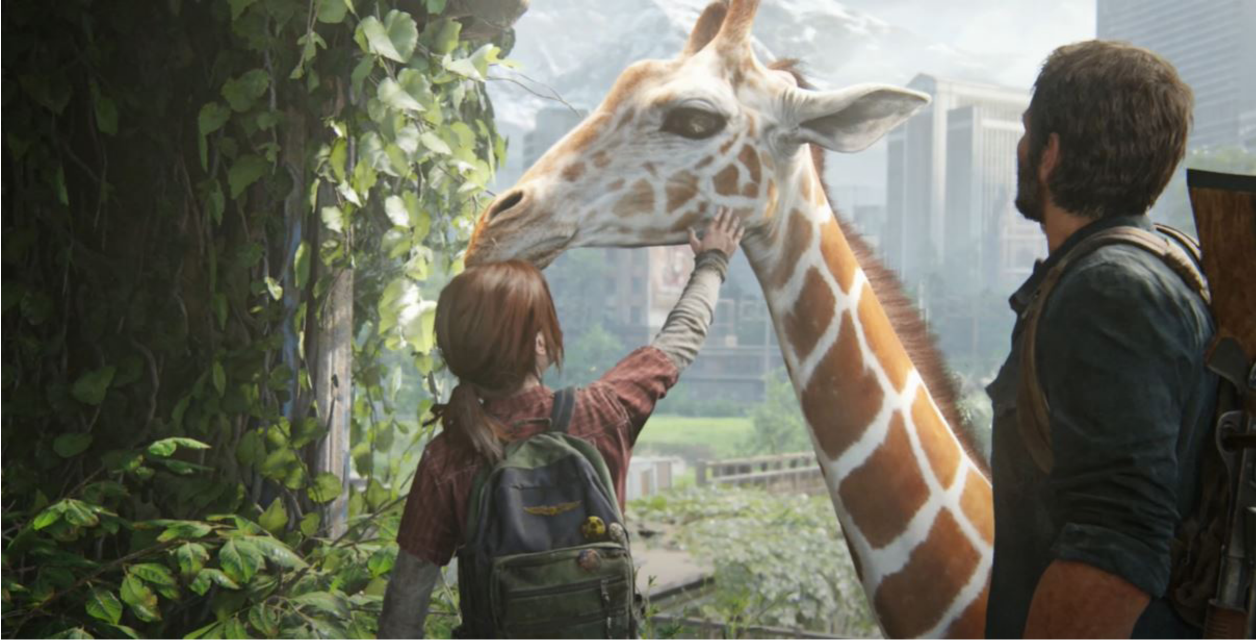
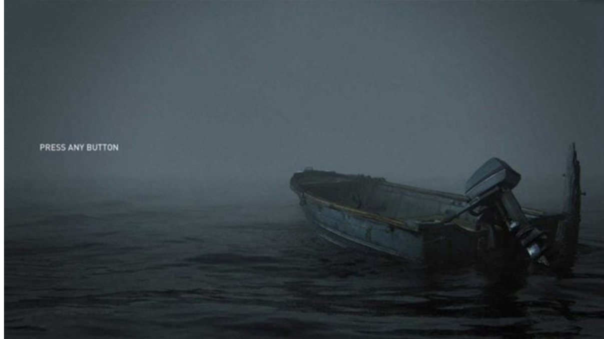


Illustration 2: Giraffes and other wildlife inhabit the vacated former urban centers.
Screenshot from *The Last of Us* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013.

the playable events of the sequel all take place in static locations, mostly Jackson, Seattle, and Santa Barbara, with much less attention to the journey between these cities—an indicator, in a sense, of a shift in diegetic focus and themes in TLOU2. Nevertheless, the second game complements the westward journey begun in the first one: as David Callahan rightly notices, TLOU1 does not take its characters to California, leaving the pioneers' journey incomplete.[20] TLOU2 remedies that, as it moves most of its story to the west coast and ends on the idyllic, usually sunny shore of Santa Barbara, depicted in shades of ominous gray for the last fight between Ellie and Abby. Such a setting also plays an understated but profoundly important role in conveying a post-diegetic message: for the duration of the entire first playthrough, TLOU2 opens on a menu portraying an old boat floating on gray, foggy water, moored to a broken pole. Eventually, the player recognizes it as the boat Abby uses to leave with Lev, the Seraphite child she is traveling with, after Ellie decides not to kill her at the end of the story. Once the first playthrough is completed, the main menu transforms to show the same boat resting on a sunny beach, with Catalina Island visible in the background (Illustration 3). It is the last known location of the Fireflies, and the destination Abby and Lev head for at the end of the game, inferring that they might have reunited with the last survivors of the rebel group. After such a long, gloomy experience, it is a small beacon of hope for the player,[21] and a fitting conclusion of the westward journey started in TLOU1. The player-character's final destination is fixed permanently on a (digital) canvas, a visual memento inhabiting the gray area between realism and romance that Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher attribute to the art



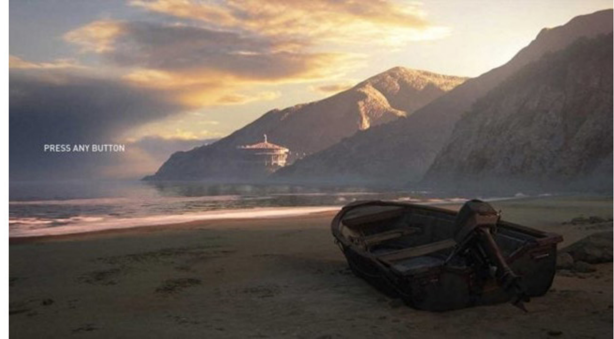


Illustration 3: The main menu changes upon completing the first playthrough.
Screenshots from *The Last of Us Part II* © Sony Computer Entertainment, 2020.

produced to accompany the many real-life Frontier expeditions of the nineteenth century.[22]

Individualism, Progress, and Violence at the Post-Apocalyptic American Frontier

TLOU does not only relate to the traditional Frontier in terms of geographical and spatial commonalities. Rather, it continues to converse with, adapt, and at times critique its traditional themes and ideology. For instance, Joel's narrative arc in TLOU1 is indicative of a shift away from the original American hero, whom Slotkin describes as "the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, [whose] acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against the spirit and her avatars."[23] In Joel, there is no love for the wild territories of North America, nor an intention to tame them through violence in order to make space for a civilized community; rather, his violent acts all serve a much more personal purpose. In the sequel, both Ellie's and Abby's story arcs likewise invalidate the western hero trope, as they contaminate Slotkin's argument of violence as a regenerative force by removing its "constructive" power and only staging its "destructive" side. While in traditional Frontier tales violence serves the purpose of establishing Western civilization and is considered regenerative for the European settlers who were looking for a blank slate to create their Eden on earth, in TLOU violence—brutal and extremely graphic, as several reviewers acknowledge[24]—only leads to futile loss. Joel's murder of Abby's father leads to his death, which, in turn, drives Ellie and Tommy to embark on a wild hunt for Abby that ends with several casualties on both sides and, eventually, no happy ending. Although regeneration arguably happens at the end of TLOU2, when Ellie and Abby choose to stop fighting each other and go their separate ways, such a decision yields but a pale substitute of the bounty usually awaiting the traditional Frontier hero, granting them respite rather than a reward.

This rewriting of the classic Frontier tale extends to the underlying ideology

expressed by the western genre. With regard to TLOU1, Michael Fuchs notes that although Joel and Ellie's journey feels "mythical in scope," it does not reproduce the original Frontier ethos completely, as "Joel and Ellie repeatedly stray off well-trodden paths which epitomize the American experience."[25] Of the many features typifying the traditional American Frontier experience, here I only focus on how TLOU engages the strongly held belief in the above-mentioned power—if not inevitability—of human progress as a force that will move civilization forward at and beyond the Frontier, and how such portrayal of progress derives from its relationship with different forms of individualism.

TLOU's gameplay is progress-based: the player is forced to follow a pre-set series of events in a linear way that will increase the completion percentage as they play. However, diegetically TLOU avoids both encouraging and celebrating progress. Despite some scenes hinting at the improvement of the lives of the community that Joel's brother and his wife have founded in Jackson, the few advances made at the collective level are left in the background and often invalidated by the choices of the characters. There are several examples of this, but the most evident are the decisions that end the two games and the one that jumpstarts the action in the second installment.

In TLOU1, after months of looking for the Fireflies in the hope of developing a cure for the cordyceps infection, Ellie and Joel reach the hospital facility in Salt Lake City, where Ellie is meant to be sacrificed for the greater good. Upon learning that the Fireflies are willing to kill Ellie in order to produce a vaccine, the player, acting as Joel, must force their way through several floors, leaving a trail of dead bodies in their wake before reaching the operating room where Ellie is about to be sacrificed. There, Joel shoots the surgeon and nurses. He takes Ellie back to Jackson, swearing that the Fireflies had no use of her because they had already tried and failed to develop a vaccine using other immune subjects. Joel's decision contrasts with the stated goal of their whole journey and Ellie's strong desire to help humanity; it places him in the role of the villain of the story, the one whose decision condemns humanity to continue suffering, as an online reviewer argues.[26] The reactions to such a controversial moment have been as numerous as they have been nuanced, with some players expressing solidarity with, or at least understanding for, Joel's plight and others rejecting his choice as wholly selfish.[27] Setting the moral value of Joel's actions temporarily aside, his decision essentially resets the diegesis, at least in general terms, with the characters and society itself being back to square one: at the end of the events of TLOU1, humanity still has no hope for a cure, Ellie has lost her purpose as a savior of humanity, and her relationship with Joel has been damaged by the suspicion that he is lying to her about the events in Salt Lake City.[28] There is very little to no progress to the overall state of things.

Five years later, the consequences of what transpired at the hospital jumpstart the events of TLOU2: after Abby, the surgeon's daughter, kills Joel to avenge her father's murder, Ellie, her girlfriend Dina, and Joel's brother Tommy all decide to leave the community in Jackson to fend for itself in order to chase after her. Such a choice leads them on a wild hunt that feels increasingly futile and which progresses painstakingly slowly, lingering on Ellie's increasingly harsh and violent actions as she seems to set morality aside and lets her thirst for revenge drive her.[29] Thus, the one character whose youthful innocence and selflessness propelled the heroic quest of TLOU1 regresses to a state of unchecked selfishness that leads to personal and collective catastrophe. Moreover, after three days of playing from Ellie's perspective while she tracks down Abby's friends and kills, maims, and tortures them to get information, the game switches characters and makes the player interact as Abby, starting again from the first day in Seattle and nullifying all the progress made both plot-wise—as the player must relive the same three days "meeting ghosts"[30]—and game-mechanics-wise, as Abby does not inherit the skills, weapons, and extra resources the player acquired as Ellie.

In terms of thwarted diegetic progress, the ending of TLOU2 mirrors that of the first game, as it also returns the story to its original point of departure. Indeed, in TLOU2 the characters show a recurring tendency to have a change of heart and not follow through with their original decisions. Abby kills Joel but spares Ellie's life in Jackson. Ellie chases her down to and through Seattle and there, for a second time, Abby, originally hell-bent on killing her, chooses not to. Ellie then goes back to Jackson, only to walk back on her decision to return. She abandons Dina and her new-born to pick up Abby's trail again, only to relent at the very end. After their gruesome fist-fight on the shore of Santa Barbara, Ellie lets Abby go and returns to Jackson *again*, only to find Dina and the baby gone. It is a much more disheartening ending than the one of the previous game: in TLOU1, players can understand the loss of a potential cure for humanity in exchange for a newfound father-daughter bond between Joel and Ellie.[31] In TLOU2, both Ellie and Abby experience profound loss, with the former, especially, returning to an empty house that can bring no solace to her: as she has chosen revenge over love, abandoning Dina and the child, so she is in turn abandoned. She cannot even play the guitar—one of the skills that Joel taught her—because she has lost two fingers in a fight with Abby. Although the ending of TLOU2 may indicate a moment of moral growth, as both Ellie and Abby understand the futility of revenge, several reviewers have lamented the bitterness they felt upon not finding emotional release, some form of catharsis that most players expected as a reward for engaging with such challenging content for dozens of hours.[32] Thus, at the end of TLOU2, progress is also thwarted on the level of play: while players complete the game, not everyone derives enjoyment from it.[33]

Both games tell a story that shows a noticeable lack of progress because of the form of individualism expressed by the characters inhabiting this specific post-apocalyptic frontier. Individualism—the ideal that "regards each individual as a moral, political, and economic primary, meaning that each person in a civil society is by right an independent and sovereign being and that he or she should be free to choose his or her associations voluntarily and not have obligations or duties imposed by society without consent"[34]—is one of the prominent traits of American identity. Validating J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's and Frederick Jackson Turner's classic studies,[35] sociological research has tied the concept of Frontier individualism to the contemporary American attitude toward the community.[36] Despite its prominence in the culture of the United States, individualism is not in direct opposition to collectivism at the traditional American Frontier. As Thomas Paine once claimed, "Public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals. On the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected. It is the good of all, because it is the good of every one; for as the public body is every individual collected, so the public good is the collected good of those individuals."[37] Eric Daniels, among others, draws on Paine's assertion to argue that at the traditional Frontier, individualism was believed to beget collective benefits. In other words, the Frontier ethos worked on the assumption that individual good would spread onto the collective dimension.[38]

Elsewhere, I have distinguished between inward-looking individualism and outward-looking individualism—that is, between a form of individualism that is put at the service of the community, and one that is mere narcissistic decision-making.[39] In essence, individualistic choices made in order to prompt positive change at the societal level—choices that, despite being tied to the one person making them, have conscious repercussions on the wider community— differ drastically in intent and effect from decisions that disregard the collective dimension altogether and derive from a form of selfish, isolated contemplation of one's needs and wishes. Inward-looking individualism characterizes our contemporary society, making it an atomized gathering of individuals that do not truly cooperate to generate a collective body.[40] Outward-looking individualism, conversely, is what Alexis de Tocqueville calls "self-interest well understood" or "enlightened self-interest"—that is, a form of selfishness that retains a collective, congregational dimension, and that is said to typify American democracy especially.[41]

The forms of individualism depicted in TLOU reveal the mechanism that "sours" the Frontier experience of its characters, stripping them of their heroic import and impeding progress both at the personal and collective level. Indeed, the games foreground the individual struggles of Joel, Ellie, and Abby, exploring the intimate relationship between the necessity of violence and the moral boundaries the characters must cross as the plot unravels. While the collective dimension of the story is not

absent, it is evidently placed in the background. Thus, TLOU eschews being categorized as a narrative that tells a story of the violent construction of a civilization in the wilderness.

In a previous work, I have suggested that a trait shared by protagonists of contemporary dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives is their displaying outward-looking individualism as they stand up to a monstrous community and strive to bring about a new society through personal choices.[42] However, this is only partially true of TLOU1 and does not at all apply to the sequel. At its outset, TLOU1 seems to follow the general outline of the heroic quest, with Joel and Ellie traversing a perilous land in order to save humanity, but a closer look reveals that their journey is less about saving the world and more about Joel and Ellie forging a bond with each other. As the IGN reviewers commented about TLOU1, "Like [Cormac McCarthy's] *The Road*, TLOU isn't so much about what happened to humanity as it's about the tale of two people and their journey."[43] As the game progresses and the player gets access to Joel's—and, to a smaller extent, Ellie's—emotions, the narrative shifts away from the collective dimension of their quest, the stated "restorative" goal of their journey, toward an exploration of the familial bond that the two protagonists develop and that guides their decision-making. The ending of TLOU1, already discussed earlier, underscores this by sacrificing humanity in favor of the father-daughter relationship that drives Joel's actions. This authorial choice serves well to highlight that the game has never really been about saving everybody, but rather only about saving Joel, who finds in Ellie a new reason to live. In other words, by centering the plot so prominently on the individual dimension of the characters, TLOU has no need to invest them with outward-looking individualism: Joel and Ellie—not to mention Abby—are not saviors of an imperiled society who need to make personal decisions to benefit the community. They are people thrown together by events outside of their control who are trying to survive first and foremost, no matter what the cost for the rest of the world.

In an essay analyzing morality in TLOU1, Amy M. Green argues convincingly that there are three dimensions of moral choices in the diegesis: the player has to judge whether "a character acts only in self-interest, acts with compassion, or acts with senseless brutality."[44] Here, I assimilate self-interest to inward-looking individualism, while compassion is at times (although not always) a trait of outward-looking individualism. Senseless brutality, instead, removes decision making from the equation, but retrieves the classic Frontier theme of violence.

Joel, whose perspective the player inhabits for most of the first game, seems to act in shrewd self-interest, especially at the beginning of the main plotline, when he is a smuggler in Boston. His reluctance to get attached to Ellie suggests a form of selfish detachment from any type of social bond, a refusal to engage in any kind of

community. Tess, his smuggling partner, for instance, first convinces him to take Ellie to the Fireflies, saying that "she's just cargo" and appealing to his greed. When they realize their liaison with the Fireflies is dead and they have to take Ellie to a lab "someplace out west," Tess guilt-trips him into following through with her plan by revealing she is infected and choosing to sacrifice herself to make sure Joel and Ellie can flee the city without being followed.

Joel: What are we doing here? This is not us.
Tess: What do you know about us? About me?
Joel: I know you are smarter than this.
Tess: Really? Guess what? We are shitty people, Joel! It's been that way for a long time.
Joel: No, we are survivors!
. . .
Tess: You've got to get this girl to Tommy's. He used to run with this crew, he'll know where to go.
Joel: No, no, no, that was your crusade![45]

In this brief passage, Joel highlights how his worldview hinges on the notion of survival and on not participating in communal efforts to restore some form of civilization, as the Fireflies (and his brother Tommy) were attempting to do. Tricked into participating in a rescue mission badly concealed as a smuggling gig, he tries to back out from it at every possible point, showing his deeply ingrained distrust in others and his stubborn refusal to join forces with others. This theme recurs throughout the first game. For instance, after traveling with Ellie all the way to Jackson, Joel tries to convince Tommy to take Ellie to the Fireflies, saying, "This is your cause," reiterating that he has no interest in trying to restore society or self-immolating for it. Yet, even Tommy, who is framed as an idealist, seems to reject an appeal to the collective good, arguing that "[his] family is [his] cause now," and refusing to ask other members of the community in Jackson to undertake the task, as "they got families, too." What little remains of a collectivist approach to human life seems to be reduced to small forms of familial bonds, which Joel nevertheless continuously tries to sever: in one of the most emotionally loaded moments of TLOU1, when Ellie confronts him after she learns he tried to convince Tommy to take over the mission, he angrily tells her: "You are not my daughter, and I sure as hell ain't your dad."[46] Despite his refusal to acknowledge the bond forming between them, Joel eventually allows Ellie close, to the point that, as mentioned earlier, the most selfish, inward-looking decision he makes is sacrificing humanity to save her and, at the same time, himself. An online reviewer has expressed this idea eloquently: "I don't even know that he saved Ellie for the sake of saving her . . . In some sense, I think it was kind of a selfish decision. I mean, it's why he lies to her about it at the end. With the amount of loss and suffering that he's experienced in the past, he'll do anything to prevent it from happening again, even damning

the rest of the world, because Ellie quite literally means the world to him."[47]

Yet, argues Green, "Joel's actions cannot be classified as wholly selfish. TLOU consistently contends that community equates to danger and that the human race may not be worthy of saving."[48] She frames Joel as implicitly making an outward-looking individualist decision that will lead to the slow demise of humanity in favor of earth's non-human inhabitants. Although in general terms I agree that TLOU tries to eschew the collectivist outlook of many contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives, I struggle to see Joel as a character that has any form of outward-looking individualism. His actions might have collective repercussions, but his intentions are deeply, almost totally self-centered. Rather, in TLOU the very last vestiges of a collective vision for humanity, of a form of individualism that looks at the betterment of society, are mostly embodied in the stubborn, youth-infused idealism of Ellie, who is indeed willing to sacrifice herself for the good of humankind. As Joel is running away with her after having killed the surgeon, the leader of the Fireflies, Marlene, tries to stop him by saying, "It's what she [Ellie]'d want… and you know it," which makes Joel hesitate, seemingly admitting that she is right.[49] At the very end of the first game, Ellie makes him swear that his story about the Fireflies having given up on finding a cure is true, and he acknowledges her need to find a new purpose after months of being defined by her wish to put herself at the service of humanity at large.

If Ellie is the last remaining outward-looking individualist in TLOU1, in the sequel, she, too, steps away from decision-making focused on the community. In a sense, there is very little in TLOU2 that evokes the classic post-apocalyptic narrative and its focus on the restoration of civilization, as the game dials up the focus on morality by staging a tale of personal vengeance from two opposed perspectives and at the same time removes the collective dimension completely. As soon as Joel is killed, both Ellie *and* Tommy, arguably the two characters that cared the most about the community, abandon Jackson and their commitment to protect its people to chase down Joel's murderer. Familial ties continue to play a fundamental part in the decision-making process of the characters, although in TLOU2 most choices lead the characters on a quest for blind, selfish revenge—in itself another type of classic western tale. This is true not only for Ellie and Tommy, but also for Abby, who is motivated by her father's death. TLOU2, then, turns out to be little else than a visceral tale of personal unraveling, as both protagonists face increasingly harsher moral decisions that they make out of pure inward-looking selfishness. For instance, Ellie's choice to hunt down Abby, despite going against the well-being of the community in Jackson, feels morally justified by her love for Joel. Her subsequent decision to torture Nora, Abby's friend, and gruesomely beat her to death with a metal pole, mirroring Joel's murder, sits much less easily with her: she returns to the theater, where Dina and her ex-boyfriend Jesse are waiting for her, covered in blood, visibly in shock, shaking and

horrified by her actions. Despite the toll her choices take on her, she does not desist and, a few scenes later, kills two other friends of Abby's, Owen and Mel, realizing only too late that the woman was pregnant. Online reviewers have latched onto such a radical devolution of Ellie's morality, with most commentators highlighting how challenging it was to enact such reprehensible actions within a diegetic context that did not "excuse" or "absolve" them (compared to, for instance, games like *Grand Theft Auto*, where violence is the standard, unpunished *modus operandi*). Every murder in TLOU2 is felt to a degree, aided by the extremely life-like animation of killings and by the introduction of non-playable characters that call out for each other and mourn each other loudly. Even the most insignificant NPCs die in a graphically accurate way that does not let the player avoid confronting the action the game has just made them act out.[50] Ellie's repugnant actions, however, only seem to yield more abhorrent choices: they feed her need for revenge, as it is her only justification for them. Additionally, it is not only in the cruel, murderous actions against strangers or enemies that Ellie's moral downfall is evident; her personal life also suffers from it. Despite being in love with Dina, who has followed her to Seattle but has fallen ill due to an unexpected pregnancy, Ellie chooses to leave her behind; and, even upon returning to Jackson the first time, she cannot seem to settle into a quiet family life. Her familial bonds are not strong enough to surmount her desire for revenge, and when she realizes the importance of her emotional bond to Dina and her son JJ, it is too late: Ellie returns to Jackson to find an empty house and nobody waiting for her.

Abby's arc is somewhat different, as a good portion of her story focuses on her encounter and subsequent relationship with two Seraphite children, Yara and Lev, who are running away from their religious sect. Abby's relationship with her friends Owen and Mel is strained after she had taken revenge on Joel, which they have facilitated and witnessed, and she is trying to navigate life after killing her father's murderer—that is, life after getting the revenge she was seeking. Her plotline intersects Ellie's at the end of the three days in Seattle, when Abby finds Owen and Mel dead at the aquarium and she tracks Ellie down to the theater, only sparing her life because Lev stops her. Unable to remain in Seattle with a Seraphite child in tow and her friends' blood on her hands, Abby takes Lev to Santa Barbara in the hope of finding the Fireflies, but they are both captured and enslaved by a gang called "the Rattlers." Following the opposite trajectory of Ellie's plotline, Abby's biggest moral failure is at the beginning of the game, when she chooses to torture and kill Joel, and her subsequent actions seem to be less morally questionable and more directed toward building a redemption arc for her, in a sense foreshadowing what could await Ellie once she obtains the revenge she is after. This is most evident in the way Abby's relationship with the Seraphite child Lev, both unforeseen and initially unwanted, echoes the evolution of Joel's bond to Ellie in TLOU1. As a reviewer argues, Abby is a "hardened killer

that starts to reconnect with her lost humanity thanks to the innocence of her child companions. Sounds like anybody you know?"[51] Abby, much like Joel, chooses to save the Seraphite child and his sister more than once, despite them being one of the enemies of the Washington Liberation Front (WLF), to which Abby belongs. Most significant, perhaps, is her choice to risk her life to save Lev's at the end of the game. By then, Abby is weakened by many months of enslavement and torture and has already given up avenging her friends' deaths. Ellie, still unable to let go, forces her to fight by threatening Lev. Abby then sacrifices herself and engages Ellie in a fistfight, so that she might spare Lev's life, and only avoids being killed because Ellie suddenly remembers Joel as he serenely played the guitar. "Go," she orders Abby. "Just take [Lev]."[52] For the second time in the franchise, the main action ends with a parental figure carrying their chosen family out of danger. Much like Joel, and despite her redemption arc, Abby does not express a form of outward-looking individualism. Her initial actions, which started the whole chain of events featured in TLOU2, essentially bring upon her loved ones the brunt of Ellie's and Tommy's revenge, causing the death of most of her friends. Her selfish choice of revenge over anything and anybody ends in catastrophe, and her moral growth through her relationship with Lev does not move past the quasi-familial bond that links them, never reaching the collective level. Just like Joel, she is but a survivor who has found an anchor and a new chance at life in an innocent child. She is willing to sacrifice herself for him, but she would most probably not do that for anyone else, and certainly not for a greater, collective good.

Thus, where TLOU1 jumpstarts the action down a path that leads to inward-looking individualism, annihilating, at the end, even Ellie's desire to help save humanity from its doom, TLOU2 takes this form of individualism to the extreme, never restoring a collective dimension to the post-apocalyptic frontier. With each reckless, grief-induced decision Ellie and Abby make, the protagonists never truly move forward, impeding progress both at the personal and the collective level, as the consequences of their selfishness spill over and reach their friends and communities. Stuck on revenge, they can only move forward once they relinquish it. The ending of TLOU2 suggests that such progress might still happen, given time, past the suddenly clear landscape of the main menu.

Conclusion

With its diegetic subversion of western tropes and ideology, TLOU is a rich example of a post-Frontier text that attempts to retrieve some of the longest-lasting staples of American fiction and address them critically by displacing them to a post-apocalyptic setting. Deprived of its collective outlook, the "mythical scope" of TLOU has little to do with the establishment of a new civilization built on the ashes of an apocalyptic event. Rather, it hinges on interrogating the interplay of violence and morality,

and the boundaries between personal choice and collective good at the post-apocalyptic Frontier. Thus, the mythopoetic intent of TLOU does not aspire to include the collective American society (or what little remains of it); rather, it is invested in the American values that its characters either retrieve, discard, or corrupt. Oli Welsh, in an early review of TLOU, comments, "It's the classic journey into the west, the pioneers['] tale—but turned on its head, because this anti-Western isn't about the birth of a nation. It's about the death of one."[53] By retrieving Slotkin's notion of an "inversion" in the mythical import and diegetic content of post-Frontier tales, Welsh's comment validates the notion that TLOU forsakes the celebration of the ideology undergirding the western tradition and the notion of restoring the United States in a post-apocalyptic setting. Progress, thus, loses meaning and, indeed, relevance in this specific post-apocalyptic setting. The protagonists can only express an individualist, careless attitude toward life, disregarding the consequences of their revenge-driven choices. At the same time, their actions and their motivations originate a serious, critical interrogation of violence, one of the fundamental elements of the traditional mythology of the United States, thus also generating a space for other values to supplant violence as its core motivator. One by one, TLOU stages several traditional elements of the American myth—progress, individualism, violence—and shows them lacking when extracted from their original context, to the point that it is not clear whether, diegetically, we are witnessing the demise of the whole concept of Americanness, together with that of the nation itself. This, perhaps, is the overall message of TLOU: by placing the Frontier in a post-apocalyptic setting and then challenging the very values that propelled the establishment of American civilization, it underlines how they are not fit for the (quasi-)apocalyptic present and post-apocalyptic future; the games underscore that a new era might come about if, individually, we relinquish these old-fashioned tools in order to embrace new, as of yet undisclosed values that better answer to the needs of the future.

Notes

1 As of December 2022, the franchise has sold over 37 million copies globally. See Neil Druckmann, "Reflecting on a Big Year to Come for *The Last of Us*," *Naughty Dog*, January 4, 2023, https://www.naughtydog.com/blog/the_last_of_us_10th_anniversary_kick-off?sf174194040. Henceforth, I will refer to the franchise as a whole as TLOU, to the first game as TLOU1, and to the second game as TLOU2.

2 For a chronology of the evolution of the Frontier tale, see Richard Aquila, "Introduction: The Pop Culture West," in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

3 For an investigation of the clash between individual and collective good in westerns, see, for instance, Matthew P. Harrington, "The 'Citizen-Savage': White Masculine Degeneration in the Indian Hater Narrative," *JAm It!*, no. 6 (2022).

4 Amanda Keeler, "A Postapocalyptic Return to the Frontier: *The Walking Dead* as Post-Western," *Critical Studies in Television* 13, no. 4 (2018): 423, DOI: 10.1177/1749602018796696.

5 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 627–28.

6 Neil Campbell, *Postwesterns: Cinemas, Region, West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 2.

7 Susan Kollin, "Introduction: Postwestern Studies, Dead or Alive," in *Postwestern Cultures: Literature, Theory, Space*, ed. Susan Kollin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xii.

8 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 633–34.

9 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 635.

10 John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 1999), 29.

11 As Patrick B. Sharp argues, even as science fiction (which arguably includes post-apocalyptic narratives) updated the western genre and displaced it geographically and temporally, it retained the racist views of the savage as the biggest threat to civilization. See Patrick B. Sharp, *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 6–7.

12 Michael Fuchs, "'Is That Really All They Had to Worry About?' Past, Present, and Future Hauntings in *The Last of Us*," *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 44, no. 1 (2019): 70, DOI: 10.2357/AAA-2019-0004.

13 Brenda M. Boyle, "Lone Wolf Family Man: Individualism, Collectivism and Masculinities in *American Sniper(s)* and *Lone Survivor(s)*," *European Journal of American Culture* 38, no. 2 (2019): 118, DOI: 10.1386/ejac.38.2.117_1.

14 See Amy Coles, "The Rampant Body-Shaming of Abby in *The Last of Us Part II* Shows Gamers Still Can't Accept a Realistic Female Lead," *The Independent*, July 9, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/last-of-us-2-abby-gaming-naughty-dog-a9609616.html; Jen Glennon, Dais Johnston, and Eric Francisco, "*The Last of Us* 2 Trans Controversy, Explained," *Inverse*, May 15, 2020, https://www.inverse.com/gaming/last-of-us-2-trans-controversy-explained-abby-tlou.

15 Notably, a nod to the history of American Mormons is also evident in the route Joel and Ellie follow in TLOU1: the protagonists, in fact, move on a westward trajectory that takes them to Salt Lake City, mirroring the path taken by the Mormons during their exodus from Illinois to Utah in the mid-nineteenth century.

16 See Matthew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles, *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2012), ch. 4.

17 Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8.

18 Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 32.

19 Several commentators and reviewers of both games remark on the bittersweet feeling of being immersed in such beautiful scenery while being constantly on alert. On TLOU1, see, for instance, IGN, "*The Last of Us* Review," *YouTube*, June 5, 2013, https://youtu.be/GBXuE6jcl4; Rev3Games, "*The Last of Us* REVIEW! Adam Sessler Reviews," *YouTube*, June

5, 2013, https://youtu.be/ZEs33aWkX2Q; on TLOU2, see, for instance, GamingBolt, "*The Last of Us Part* 2 Review - The Final Verdict," *YouTube*, June 16, 2020, https://youtu.be/HXOHEKyeonE; HappyConsoleGamer, "*THE LAST OF US PART II* SPOILER REVIEW - Happy Console Gamer," *YouTube*, June 22, 2020, https://youtu.be/DEMpwoHC2DM; videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)," *YouTube*, June 23, 2020, https://youtu.be/I7OcL8j6rhk.

20 David Callahan, "The Last of the US: The Game as Cultural Geography," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 49.

21 Chandler Wood, "*The Last of Us Part II* Post Credits Scene That Everyone Missed (Spoilers)," *playstationlifestyle.net*, June 30, 2020, https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2020/06/30/the-last-of-us-part-ii-post-credits-scene/.

22 Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 194.

23 Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence*, 22.

24 See, for example, HappyConsoleGamer, "*THE LAST OF US PART II* SPOILER REVIEW"; Rev-3Games, "*The Last of Us* REVIEW!"; videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)."

25 Fuchs, "Past, Present, and Future Hauntings," 71.

26 See Grant Voegtle, "*The Last of Us* Changed My Life: In Depth Analysis and Dissection," *YouTube*, December 23, 2013, https://youtu.be/3sJA-C1yrtk.

27 See, for example, Errant Signal, "Errant Signal - *The Last of Us* (Spoilers)," *YouTube*, July 22, 2013, https://youtu.be/bAzqDgKYfiM; Chris Stuckmann, "*The Last of Us* - SPOILER Review by Chris Stuckmann," *YouTube*, June 24, 2013, https://youtu.be/i_-697pnUjk; Voegtle, "*The Last of Us* Changed My Life."

28 This becomes evident at the beginning of TLOU2 and in a flashback at the very end of the game, where Ellie remembers talking to Joel the night before he was killed. "I was supposed to die in that hospital. My life would've fucking mattered, but you took that from me," she tells him and continues, "I don't think I can ever forgive you for that. But I would like to try."

29 The GamingBolt review, for instance, comments, "As the story progresses and the brutality begins to pile up you start wondering whether any of this is worth it." GamingBolt, "*The Last of Us Part* 2 Review - The Final Verdict."

30 GameSpot, "*The Last Of Us Part II* Spoiler Review," *YouTube*, June 20, 2020, https://youtu.be/houfCEZrFss.

31 See, for example, Chris Stuckmann's comments in his review. Stuckmann, "*The Last of Us* - SPOILER Review."

32 See, for example, The Critical Drinker, "*The Last of Us Part 2* - A Beautiful Nightmare," *YouTube*, June 30, 2020, https://youtu.be/iGtKUaPhdfk.

33 Entertaining players is not the only purpose of video games. Several "games with a purpose" can be used to educate, inform, raise awareness, or even as marketing tools. Nevertheless, TLOU2 does not belong to this category of games; it was developed and marketed as a mainstream, triple-A title and as such players expected to derive enjoyment from it. For a reviewer's take on this, see ScreenCrush, "The Reason People Hate *LAST OF US* 2 is Why it's a Masterpiece," *YouTube*, January 27, 2023, https://youtu.be/n_uWAo8TEJI.

34 Eric Daniels, "A Brief History of Individualism in American Thought," in *For the Greater Good of All: Perspectives on Individualism, Society, and Leadership*, ed. Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 70.

35 See, for example, J. Hector St. John. de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; New Dehli: Prabhat Prakashan, 2015); Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894).

36 See, for example, Geert Hofstede, "Culture and Organizations," *International Studies of Management and Organization* 10, no. 4 (1980), DOI: 10.1080/00208825.1980.11656300; Samuel Bazzi, Martin Fiszbein, and Mesay Gebresilasse, "Frontier Culture: The Roots and Persistence of 'Rugged Individualism' in the United States," *Econometrica* 88, no. 6 (2020), DOI: 10.3982/ecta16484.

37 Thomas Paine, *Dissertations on Government, the Affairs of the Bank, and Paper Money* (Philadelphia: Charles Cist Press, 1838), 9.

38 Daniels, "A Brief History of Individualism," 72–73.

39 Valentina Romanzi, *American Nightmares: Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century US Fiction* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2022), 92.

40 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Society* (London: Polity, 2000); Stefano Tani, *Lo schermo, l'Alzheimer, lo zombie: Tre metafore per il XXI secolo* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2014).

41 Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pt. 2, ch. 8.

42 Romanzi, *American Nightmares*, 98–99. Some examples are the protagonists of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), the movie *The Book of Eli* (2010), and the video game *Detroit: Become Human* (2018).

43 IGN, "*The Last of Us* Review."

44 Amy M. Green, "The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in *The Last of Us*," *Games and Culture* 11, nos. 7–8 (2016): 754, DOI: 10.1177/1555412015579489.

45 *The Last of Us*, dev. Naughty Dog (San Mateo: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2013).

46 *The Last of Us*.

47 Voegtle, "*The Last of Us* Changed My Life."

48 Green, "Morality and Naturalism," 759.

49 *The Last of Us*.

50 See, for example, Easy Allies, "*The Last of Us Part II* - Easy Allies Review," *YouTube*, June 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/wfH-FPwhoto; GameSpot, "*The Last Of Us Part II* Spoiler Review"; HappyConsoleGamer, "*THE LAST OF US PART II* SPOILER REVIEW"; The Critical Drinker, "*The Last of Us Part 2* - A Beautiful Nightmare"; videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)."

51 videogamedunkey, "*The Last of Us Part II* (dunkview)."

52 *The Last of Us Part II*, dev. Naughty Dog (San Mateo: Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020).

53 Oli Welsh, "Journey's End: *The Last of Us* Review," *Eurogamer*, June 5, 2013, http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-06-05-the-last-of-usreview.

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