

Game Narrative Review

=====
Your name: Adam Morina
Your school: University of Southern California
Your email: morina@usc.edu
Month/Year you submitted this review: March, 2021

=====
Game Title: The Last of Us: Part 1
Platform: Playstation 3/Playstation 4
Genre: Third-Person Action/Adventure
Release Date: June 14, 2013
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Creative Director/Game Director: Neil Druckmann/Bruce Straley

Overview

“I’d thought those memories would be the ones I always cherished, but as the days and years passed by, those beautiful memories became my pain.” We do not typically associate selfishness with one’s attempt to find solace, yet by nature, the goal of healing is insular. Walking this line is a tight rope. The deeper we fall into suffering, the more profound our avoidance of truth. This is a story about the illusion of hope told through the eyes of Joel Miller in *The Last of Us*.

Joel’s journey in *The Last of Us* begins twenty years after the loss of his daughter, Sarah, during the hyper-chaotic Outbreak Day of the Cordyceps Brain Infection. The virus turns humans into “mindless-infected”. These are not zombies; they are infected human beings. One bite from an Infected turns the victim into a zombified creature within two days. Desperate to fix the problem, the American government declares Martial Law and breaks the country into militarized quarantine zones. Twenty years later, the vast no-man’s land between the zones harbors dangerous factions, military personnel, and Infected. Joel works as a weapons smuggler between zones and is blindsided with a new piece of contraband to smuggle. Joel is contacted by Marlene, the leader of resistance group, the Fireflies. Marlene wants Joel to smuggle a fourteen-year-old girl named Ellie to safety. Joel is resistant at first; memories of his daughter resurface, but eventually due to changing circumstances, he agrees to the mission. During his attempt to smuggle the girl, Joel learns that Ellie was bitten three weeks ago, but she has yet to become infected.

Joel and Ellie set off on a perilous journey across the apocalyptic United States in search of the Fireflies who seek to create a cure. Hardened by the violent world, Joel and Ellie do not seek to bond early on. Because of the primal human reversion caused by this infection and the brutality of their adventure, Joel and Ellie are forced to work together out of need and ultimately develop a father/daughter relationship. Joel is blessed with another chance

to have a relationship with a daughter figure since his own child was cruelly taken away from him 20 years ago. *The Last of Us* is a world that has allowed humanity to disintegrate. Human beings exist in their most pure animalistic forms. Joel is a character who has suffered intensely, and the world around him closely resembles his mental state. If Joel is forced to exist without his daughter in his personal hell, everyone else must live with the knowledge that hope is non-existent.

Characters

- **Joel Miller** – Prior to Outbreak Day, Joel works as a contractor outside of Austin, Texas. As a single father in his early 30s, Joel constantly feels out of his element. Joel loves to play the guitar and is a true country-boy. Joel is a native Texan, and like many in his homeland, is built tough. He does not often show his emotions, preferring to keep them locked inside. When Joel is forced to confront pain, his outbursts of emotion are immense. Joel’s biggest strength is that the hostile world does not rely on inner emotion. Twenty years after the events of Outbreak Day, Joel is working as a smuggler through the quarantine zones with his partner, Tess. The duo typically moves guns for different factions. Before the events of the game, Joel is already comfortable handling a gun. Through all the brutality of *The Last of Us*, Joel’s actions are the manifestations of his interminable grief over the untimely death of his daughter, Sarah.
- **Ellie** – Ellie is a fourteen-year-old orphan who was born after the events of Outbreak Day. The only world that Ellie knows is this bleak, violent, and shattered society. Ellie is comfortable with violence and has developed a driven personality. She is highly intelligent, loves to swear, and curious to learn everything she can. Ellie may be a young woman, but her lust for life is unmatched. The closest figure Ellie has to a parent is Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies. Marlene brings Ellie to Joel and Tess so that she can be smuggled out of the Boston Quarantine Zone. Prior to the events of *The Last of Us*, Ellie and her dear friend Riley run away from school. They are attacked by Infected and are both bitten. Riley and Ellie make a pact that they will stay together and become infected: “... We can be all poetic and just lose our minds together.” Riley loses her mind in front of Ellie, but Ellie never turns. In her words, “I’m still waiting for my turn.” Ellie dreams of finding freedom from her survivor’s guilt.
- **Tommy Miller** – Tommy is Joel’s younger brother and a salt-of-the-earth Texan. Tommy and Joel ran their contracting/construction business together. Tommy was single when the outbreak hit and met his wife Maria after Outbreak Day. Tommy operates a haven settlement in a powerplant outside of Jackson, Wyoming. Tommy and Maria have developed a small, protected colony. They house women, children, and families who seek to avoid the violence of quarantine zones. Tommy was in his mid-20s on Outbreak Day. He did everything he could to help Joel and protect Sarah, including save Joel’s life. But the pain of losing his niece caused a rift between Tommy and Joel. Tommy was deeply affected by the loss.

- **Marlene** – Marlene is the leader of the Fireflies, the militia revolutionist movement hoping to take back control of the quarantine zones/government. Fireflies believe in restoring peace, prosperity, and order to human civilization. Marlene is a de-facto aunt to Ellie. Marlene was asked by Ellie’s mother to protect her daughter, but Marlene was unable to meet Ellie until after she got bitten. Marlene and the Fireflies have launched bombing campaigns against the quarantine zones. She seeks to restore order and find a cure for the virus. Tommy ran with the Fireflies for a period after Outbreak Day, and that is why Marlene trusts Joel.
- **Sarah Miller** – The daughter of Joel. Sarah is mature and wise beyond her years. Joel entrusts her to stay home alone and be responsible. Because of Joel’s busy schedule, Sarah is more than capable of taking care of herself. She is sarcastic and loves to mess with her father. Sarah is killed by a soldier during the mad dash out of the city on Outbreak Day. While Joel, Tommy, and Sarah are escaping, she breaks her foot. Joel carries her away from the danger, but when they make it to a quarantine zone, the soldier is told to shoot on sight. Joel tries to protect her, but Sarah is struck by the bullet and dies in Joel’s arms.
- **Tess** – Joel’s smuggling partner, friend, and occasional romantic interest. Tess is tough and does not empathize with their militia clients. Tess has a brutal exterior but believes in the Fireflies’ attempts to restore civil order. During the smuggle of Ellie, Tess is attacked. Joel refuses to leave Tess for dead. Tess quickly convinces Joel to take Ellie across the United States to Tommy’s settlement. Tommy will know where to find the Fireflies. Tess finds hope in unlikely places at the end of her life.
- **Henry** – Henry is the older brother of Sam and from the Hartford quarantine zone. Earlier in the year, the military abandoned the Hartford zone. With their safety now in question, a group of survivors moved on in search of a secure home. The group intended to meet the Fireflies and make their way through Pittsburgh. They were ambushed and split up. They planned to meet at the top of the radio tower outside the city. Henry will do anything he can to protect Sam, which is the only thing he lives for.
- **Sam** – Sam is the younger brother of Henry, who is also from the Hartford Quarantine Zone. Henry keeps an extremely close eye on Sam and will do anything to protect him. Sam loves Henry but wants the trust of an adult and freedom of a kid. Henry and Sam’s relationship foreshadows Joel and Ellie’s growing dedication to each other.
- **David** – Dedicated to his family, David leads a tribe of men, women, and children in the mountains. David is a sociopath. He creates the illusion of safety and preys on his victims. David is a cannibal and leads a group of cannibals. He blames their cannibalism on desperation. While he finds this practice justifiable, it is far

from right. He feels an eerie connection to Ellie after meeting her for the first time.

Breakdown

Profound loss is where *The Last of Us* begins, on our protagonist's birthday. Like so many, Joel moves through his life with a focus on adult responsibilities, such as putting food on the table for his daughter. When Joel returns home in the evening from a long workday, the unique relationship between Joel and his daughter, Sarah, is evident. She gives her father a gift, a silver-plated watch. She can hardly contain her excitement when Joel unwraps the present, and he cannot help but mess with her by pretending it does not work. Clearly touched, Joel asks where Sarah got the money for the watch, and Sarah says, "I sell hardcore drugs." This is the relationship of a father who is not overbearing but trusting. He believes in bestowing responsibility to his young daughter. I define this paragraph because every piece of motivation in our protagonist is laid out in this opening scene. This is also the first time we experience our core theme: the illusion of hope. Soon after Joel's birthday (later that evening), the outbreak occurs. In his attempts to protect Sarah, we see Joel's willingness to bend his morality. During the early commotion, Tommy picks up Sarah and Joel. While they are trying to escape out of the city, a family is stranded on the side of the road looking for help. Tommy and Sarah want to stop, but Joel demands that they keep driving. Sarah comments that they "could've helped them." This relationship dynamic foreshadows Joel and Ellie's different moral standards later in the story. Joel instinctively believes that he must always protect his own. When they approach the roadblock, the group are attacked by Infected. They are forced to take a different route and end up in the middle of downtown Austin. They are blindsided and rammed by another car. Sarah breaks her foot in the car accident, and Joel is forced to carry her out of the carnage. With Tommy protecting them, Joel carries Sarah to safety. A batch of Infected hold Tommy up, and Joel is forced to flee with Sarah on his own. They barely make it to the military zone when the soldier spots them and raises his weapon. Here we see the first consequence of the illusion of hope. Joel tries to convince him that they are not sick, but the soldier receives orders to shoot. Joel tries to protect Sarah, but the bullets fly, and they hit the ground. The soldier approaches Joel to execute him but Tommy saves Joel just in time. Sadly, off to his right is Sarah, hit by the bullets and bleeding out. Joel holds her in his arms, but the wounds are too fatal. She dies in Joel's arms. This moment will plague Joel for the rest of his days. This is where *The Last of Us* begins.

The Last of Us takes place over the course of one year and begins in the Boston Quarantine Zone. The story breaks its chapters into seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter. Twenty years after the events of Outbreak Day, Joel is working as a smuggler between quarantine zones with his partner, Tess. Joel and Tess smuggle guns for factions and are forced to go get a missing cache back from Robert, a faction leader who screwed them over by selling their shipment to the resistance group, The Fireflies. After killing Robert, Joel and Tess are approached by Marlene, an acquaintance and leader of the Fireflies. Marlene tells them that she will double the cache they lost if Joel and Tess do something for her. She has important cargo that needs to be moved outside of the Boston Quarantine Zone to the Massachusetts State house where Fireflies are waiting to make the hand off. Joel and Tess agree but demand to see the weapons first. Marlene agrees, but introduces them to

their cargo, a fourteen-year-old girl named Ellie. Joel is hesitant, but Tess encourages him so that they can get what they lost. The trio sneak out into the night but are overrun by government patrol. The patrol holds them at gunpoint and scans for Infected. The scanner reveals that Ellie is infected. Joel and Tess take out the military personnel and hold Ellie at gun point. Ellie explains that she was bitten three weeks ago but has never turned. The Fireflies need Ellie because her immunity may lead to a cure. Joel and Tess decide to continue towards the Statehouse through hordes of Infected. When they arrive to meet the Fireflies, they have all been killed by Infected. Tess is heartbroken by the death of the Fireflies and reveals that she was bit during their push through the infected hordes to the Statehouse. Tess demands that Joel take Ellie to Tommy, a former Firefly, to contact them. Without this smuggle job, Tess would not have died. Joel holds Tess's death against Ellie, setting up the conflict that drives the narrative. They set off towards Tommy.

The first step of their journey takes them to Bill, an old smuggler and survivalist who owes Joel a favor. Bill provides Joel and Ellie with a working vehicle from the area. Joel and Ellie make it to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and are ambushed by bandits. Here they meet Henry and Sam, two brothers who mirror Joel and Ellie's ages in the story. The groups decide to team up for safety, but Sam (younger brother) is bitten and hides it from the group. After making it to a safehouse, Sam asks Ellie, "What's your biggest fear?" She responds, "Ending up alone." The next morning, Sam turns infected and attacks Ellie. Henry kills his younger brother, turns the gun on himself, and commits suicide. This moment returns to the core theme of the story, an illusion of hope. This moment in the story follows a deadly sniper's attempt to kill Henry, Sam, Ellie, and Joel. The group barely survives this treacherous passage, yet a small slip-up becomes an infected death sentence for Sam. Neil Druckmann and Bruce Straley, the directors of this game, want us to be unsatisfied with violence. Yes, *The Last of Us*, is a tremendously violent game, so violent that it begs me to ask the question: Is the violence too much? That is the core thematic point of what Druckmann and Straley want to display. Violence in games should not be romanticized, and we see this play out with the characters. Just when they find safety, the hope is ripped away. The world/environment design that Straley chose to focus on is one that ran out-of-control. In *Grounded: The Making of The Last of Us*, Bruce Straley explains that in their research, they learned how much we do in society to hold nature back. Typically, in post-apocalyptic stories, everything is a barren desert. Straley and his team chose to do the opposite and let everything grow. Vines hang over buildings, water has flooded the streets, and nature has won. This adds to the tension, disorder, and chaotic atmosphere that the game seeks to put the player into. These layers all add to the emotional wrought that is necessary for these characters to survive. We recognize this style in the final location where we see Henry and Sam. They hide out in a lighthouse in the forest, near a river. The dichotomy of nature and violence is core to *The Last of Us*. The murder/suicide of Henry and Sam brings the story from Summer into Fall. The shift in season lets the player know that we are facing more extreme violence. We are going deeper into each circle of hell, and the seasons act as an emotional warning.

As the weather grows colder, Joel and Ellie make it to Jackson, Wyoming, where Joel's brother Tommy has assembled a protected settlement. They live in the facility and near a hydroelectric dam. Tommy has married since he has last seen Joel to a woman named

Maria. Maria is tough as nails but kind to Ellie. Tommy tries to give Joel a photo of Sarah, but Joel refuses. What would be a normal acceptance of pain for most living in the “real” world, Joel does not have to accept anything. However, all the characters in *The Last of Us* live with survivor’s guilt. There does not have to be mental reconciliation for anyone. Ellie and Joel’s journey and their dependence on one another has brought them closer together, but Joel is still plagued by the loss of his daughter. Ellie recognizes this and confronts Joel about Sarah. “I’m not her, ya know,” she says to him. Joel’s reaction to hearing the name, Sarah, does not elicit a loving response, but purely a defensive one. Joel stiffly says, “You are treading on some mighty thin ice here.” Ellie responds, “I’m sorry about your daughter, Joel, but I’ve lost people, too.” Joel coldly approaches and says, “You have no idea what loss is.” I write these lines of dialogue to illustrate a character theme I addressed above: Grief can be selfish. Joel embodies this. When humanity is dead around you, there is not much of a point to move on. This is the cathartic moment in the story where Joel turns. Ellie yells, “Everyone I’ve loved has either died or left me, except for you.” Joel, once again, refuses to open his heart, and tells Ellie, “You ain’t my daughter, and I sure as hell ain’t your daddy.” But Joel realizes something. He has found someone to fight for. Ellie can fill the vast blackness that has tormented him for twenty years. Tommy tells them about the Fireflies who have a settlement out at the University of Eastern Colorado. Tommy tells Joel that there is a spot at their settlement. Joel asks Ellie to join him. They silently make up and head off towards the Firefly base.

Joel and Ellie now have formed a deep and lasting connection. Joel intends to look out for her. Ellie is in good spirits with Joel and trusts him. The two of them make it to the University of Eastern Colorado but the school is abandoned. Once again, we experience the illusion of hope. This story is exhausting. The characters struggle from moment to moment. The respites from madness are well-earned. Here as the player, Game Design meets Narrative Design. The player and Joel are desperate to find the lab and get Ellie to the goal. Joel and the player are one in the same. The game design fully connects the player to the core theme of its story, the illusion of hope. Joel and Ellie learn that the Fireflies moved to a hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, but were attacked by bandits. During the fight, Joel falls out of a window and onto a metal spike. He is barely able to walk, but with Ellie’s help, he makes it to the horse. Joel blacks out. The season changes to Winter. Straley and Druckmann let us know that the next section of the game will be its most brutal. We are in Winter; this is the season in which hope dies. While fighting off the bitter cold, Joel and Ellie take shelter in the mountains. Joel is on the brink of death and Ellie must take care of him. Ellie hunts in the mountains and one day encounters David. David and his friend James are scavengers willing to trade medicine for food. Back at their camp, they have women and children who are hungry. David gains the trust of Ellie after they are attacked by Infected. David supplies Ellie with medicine for Joel. Before Ellie leaves, David reveals to Ellie that the “bandits” at University of Eastern Colorado were his men. David lets Ellie leave, and she delivers the medicine to Joel. David’s group attacks Ellie and Joel’s shelter but Ellie leads them away. While trying to protect Joel, David subdues and kidnaps her. He hopes to bring Ellie into his band of cannibals. David embodies the illusion of hope to Ellie. We know that Ellie is afraid of ending up alone. She is desperate to trust those around her but cannot. David gives Ellie hope for support but soon turns into the most purely evil character in the story. Ellie is in a cage, held by David. Joel wakes up in pain but does his

best to fight through the town to rescue Ellie. While the town burns to the ground, Ellie and David face off, culminating in Ellie hacking David to bits with a machete. After this intense, violent showdown, Ellie is in near catatonic shock. Joel holds her in his arms, echoing the embrace of Sarah at the beginning of the game. The violence, fear and mental exhaustion for these characters is it at its peak. The seasons of the game move with the world. The unjust world gets crueler as it gets colder. After David is defeated, we finally see Spring.

Joel and Ellie arrive in Salt Lake City. The sun shines, and there is a tinge of real hope in the air. While they are moving through the city, the duo come across grazing Giraffes, the first real respite from the pain and anguish leveled at us during the story. The moment is powerful because as Joel, the player wants Ellie to rest. We want Ellie to relax, take in the tender moment of being a kid connecting with nature. During the last leg of their journey, Joel and Ellie move through hordes of Infected. Water rushes at them, and they get pinned under debris. They are close to drowning but are barely saved by the Fireflies. Joel wakes up in the hospital, Marlene is standing in the doorway. Joel's relief quickly disintegrates. Marlene tells Joel that Ellie is being prepared for surgery in hopes of producing a vaccine for the infection. In order to do this, the Firefly surgeons would have to remove the infection portion of Ellie's brain, no doubt killing her. Joel is horrified and outraged. Marlene begs Joel to accept Ellie's fate. Marlene also sees Ellie as family. Joel is unwilling to let her die. He battles his way to the operating room and kills the lead surgeon. Joel carries her off the table and into the parking garage. Marlene confronts him, but Joel shoots her. On the drive out of the city, Ellie wakes up and Joel says that the Fireflies had found other immune people and did not need Ellie. Joel and Ellie make it back to Tommy's settlement. For the first time, loud and clear, Ellie expresses her survivor's guilt to Joel. Ellie asks Joel for the truth about what happened with the Fireflies, "Swear to me," she says. Joel does. Ellie responds by simply saying, "Okay." *The Last of Us* culminates in its greatest illusion: playing a trick on the player by not allowing a choice in Joel's decision. We become Joel's selfishness, his pride, desperation, and loneliness. We are forced to lie to protect ourselves and choose a ghost over the betterment of humanity. Straley and Druckmann save the last illusion of hope for us, the player.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of this narrative is the motivation. Each and every character bring their own backstory and motivation into this story. This is what separates *The Last of Us* from every other AAA game and why it changed the course of storytelling in video games. We learn Joel's overarching want and motivation in the first beats of the story. He wants to protect his daughter; he is unable to. That is a sharp juxtaposition for a strong, burly character. We are used to strong, male characters in video games, but we have never seen one so vulnerable who bawls his eyes out within the first 45 minutes. Why are we comfortable with that? Because it is human. Joel has shown us who he lives for and that one person is cruelly ripped away from him. We do not know him as a character; we have yet to become him. By the time we as the player make the most selfish decision in the story, saving Ellie, we fully understood Joel as a person. We feel he is justified in saving Ellie because we have grown to love her as a character. This is all set up through amazingly simple and clear motivation: the premature death of Sarah. Druckmann clearly

demonstrates building character with an internal struggle and external motivation. No matter how monstrous Joel becomes, we will always agree. That is the strongest narrative element of *The Last of Us*.

Unsuccessful Element

The most unsuccessful element of *The Last of Us* is not something that one would classify as unsuccessful. This was a choice made that not only represents the character but motivates the ending of the story. I will highlight this decision as unsuccessful because it further amplifies the cruel, dark world that this story offers. This element is the decision Joel makes at the end of the game. Joel decides to selfishly save Ellie, against the betterment of humanity and lies about it. The reason for doing this is entirely motivated. Joel finds an unlikely match for his daughter and refuses to let fate repeat itself. The problem with this decision; it stands up to the illusion of hope theme that is hammered into us again and again. I find the experience would be more powerful if in that ending, we are heartbroken by the death of Ellie, but decide to put our faith in the future of restoring humanity. I believe that Joel wants the world to keep on the way it is. There is less of a chance for him to face the trauma he suffered after the loss of Sarah. This ending provides us with pain and disillusionment. As a character, the decision is correct. As the player experiencing the ending, I wanted to find hope in this ending. I wanted to see that the character I became one with was not selfish. I did not want to view myself as this type of narcissist, but the game put me in that position. I understand why they made that choice; it perfectly fits the character, but I was desperate for some form of positivity after the bloodbath 20-hour story.

Highlight

The strongest element of *The Last of Us* is one amazingly simple moment. This moment is a respite from the madness, insanity, and violence that our characters live through in every waking moment. This scripted, playable moment is when Ellie and Joel come face to face with real, grazing Giraffes. The Giraffe beat is a stunning example of game and narrative design working together. When Ellie spots the Giraffes, we as Joel are doing our best to climb up a ledge. Ellie takes off running towards something, but she does not say what. We do our best to catch up with her, but she cannot contain her excitement. As Joel, we operate under the assumption that there is something dangerous around the corner. Straley and Druckmann consistently throw violent wrenches into the story. Just when we think we are safe, someone or something comes along to take that away. What is so beautiful about the giraffe moment is that they trick us.

We are chasing after Ellie under the assumption that we are going to be attacked around the next corner. Luckily, the only monsters we come face-to-face with are friendly Giraffes. After being so incredibly tough throughout the game, Ellie is afraid to interact with them but we, as Joel, approach the Giraffes. In this moment, Joel and the player are one in the same. We want to provide Ellie with some rest from the madness. After what we have been through, she deserves to be a kid. This is one of the rare feelings of hope we feel for these characters throughout the story. When Ellie reacts to the Giraffes, she says, "So fucking cool." This line creates another character contrast. Ellie is having her

childlike moment; we forget that she is only a child in this hostile world. The dialogue takes us out of it when she swears. In any realistic setting, a father and young daughter at the zoo would feel almost the same, yet Ellie's swearing brings us back to reality, the great juxtaposition of *The Last of Us* on display again.

Critical Reception

Source: IGN

Reviewer: Colin Moriarty

Score: 10/10

"*The Last of Us* isn't so much about what happens to humanity as it is about two people and their journey." Moriarty emphasizes the success of the subtlety through contextual conversations. These moments of dialogue give greater insight into the evolving relationship. The game takes advantage of telling a story through not only cutscenes but gameplay as well. He feels that the game is a case study in how games can immerse you through clear character intention. Simple, little dialogue choices only add to the experience rather than pulling it apart.

Source: Polygon

Reviewer: Philip Kollar

Score: 8/10

Kollar explains that *The Last of Us* made him feel sick, and not in a positive way. Because the vision of humanity is so cold, and lifeless, it makes the game not a fun experience to play. He feels that the relationship between Ellie and Joel is the powerful element within this world, their emotions are apparent outside of cutscenes. Naughty Dog's focus on building out the intimate dialogue and the emotional high notes in their game makes it that much more effective. This feeling eventually dissipates under the exhausting tension of the linear, repetitive progression.

Source: Game Informer

Reviewer: Matt Helgeson

Score: 9.5/10

The story of *The Last of Us* displays vulnerability within violence, an emotional beat not seen in stereotypical post-apocalyptic themes. Helgeson feels that there is so much violence in the story, sometimes it becomes too much. The on-screen carnage does too much to overwhelm the fragile humanity of its characters. Although their story is grim, because of its roots in real, human relationships, the game is highly successful in the bond that grows between Joel and Ellie.

Lessons

- Taking the time to build characters, even in small moments, always bonds the player to the story. With many modern, AAA games, there is an expectation that action needs to occur in nearly every scene. Druckmann and Straley demonstrate that focusing on human emotions for their characters breaks up repetitive fighting/violence in video games. As the reviews say, the moments of relief in the game outweigh the brutal acts we as a player are forced to endure. For many reviewers, the action becomes exhausting and repetitive, but the need to see Ellie and Joel's journey to the end becomes the necessity. To me, this is what entertainment is. You want to see something through because you are invested in the characters and their journey and want a payoff.
- Narrative design and game design are one in the same. If the character is exhausted, the player should be, too. In *The Last of Us*, every single moment of action either echoes how a character is feeling or tears away our traditional video game expectations. If the character must get to a radio tower for safety, the player's goal is to reach that location. The goal of the game and the characters are perfectly intertwined. In my experience prior to *The Last of Us*, AAA video games had me fight around a location, win, and gave me the next cut scene. *The Last of Us* puts weight into every single movement in the journey. This gives the player a lack of separation between themselves and Joel. Narrative choices must feed into gameplay and vice versa. I learned that these two elements are one and the same for a successful narrative driven game.
- Environment/Level Design informs Narrative design. Naughty Dog does an incredible job of making the world feel lived in prior to the events of Outbreak Day. Restaurants are destroyed, personal items are left behind, and nature has completely taken control. Although this is a linear game, the level design pushes players into different buildings and areas, which creates this natural sense of exploration. The exploration informs the player about the world that was once lived in. Because the game visualizes this experience, we are constantly learning about what Joel has lost and the only world Ellie has seen. This helps progress the narrative. For example, when Joel and Ellie are in a record store, they have an optional conversation about what records even were. This is a relic of the old world, but it also leads the players to learn more about each other.
- The biggest lesson I have taken away from this game is the lack of exposition. Games still suffer from overwriting exposition because the player needs information before bigger events can start. Even with smaller indie games, players see big chunks of explanation early. *The Last of Us* uses a "show, don't tell" method of storytelling that is (oddly) not used enough in games. The "exposition" comes in conversations while the two characters continue their journey. Ellie asks about the real world, and Joel explains what the concept of a job is. This functions strongly as a narrative device because we are not hit over the head with exposition. All this does is inform us about the characters' personalities. Video games have the unique opportunity not to exploit exposition.

Summation

The Last of Us is a masterpiece in every sense of the word. The story serves its characters, the worldbuilding is unique, and the consequences are dire. Even negative reviewers agree that the highlights are the characters and their relationships. They are fully realized, with nuance and care. Because of this forged connection, the repetitive, stereotypically violent elements wash away. Joel and Ellie are both trapped in the grim reality of their world. We feel the emotional toll taken in the post-apocalypse. We get to know these characters, not as tough warriors but as hardened human beings. Many fans and critics believe that games do not require a story. Games are meant to be picked up and played. Prior to *The Last of Us* game design focused on action and movement as the experience. *The Last of Us* proves that emotion, sensitivity, and character development are key components to building a realistic and strong narrative. Games act as prose, delivering information about characters as it is deemed necessary. If the player is angry with Ellie's decision in an earlier moment, that player does not have to press Triangle and find out more about her during the next moment of gameplay. There is an element of choice and consequence that Joel lives with and is provided to the player. No matter our vehement disagreement, the decisions Joel makes are ours. We feel doomed because through Joel, the player realizes that hope is an illusion.