

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Last of Us
Platform: PlayStation 3/4
Genre: Action-adventure, survival horror
Release Date: June 14, 2013 (PlayStation 3) July 29, 2014 (PlayStation 4)
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Neil Druckmann

Overview

The Last of Us (TLOU) is a third person shooter action-adventure/survival horror game that follows the journey of a man named Joel twenty years after an outbreak of a mutant Cordyceps fungus and the resulting death of his daughter. Post-apocalyptic America is in ruins. Some survive in the wild, in quarantine zones, occupy lost cities, and everyone fights to stay alive. People not only have to worry about the zombie-like creatures (called the infected) produced by the outbreak, but other humans who pose threats as well. Joel takes on the task of smuggling fourteen-year-old Ellie, who was bitten by the infected yet has not been taken by the cordyceps disease, across the ravaged United States to an organization's lab to test for a possible cure.

The game draws players into a story full of emotion, outstanding visuals, flexible gameplay, and insight into a world which could potentially be our own someday. *TLOU* provides a unique experience in the way that the characters themselves feel remarkably *real*. The dialogue exchanged between Ellie and Joel seems like the type of conversation one would have with one of their friends or family, and the excellent writing put into these exchanges build the characters beyond the cut scenes. *TLOU* stands at the apex of Naughty Dog's story driven titles and stands as an epitome of narrative gameplay.

Characters

- **Joel**— The majority of the game is played through Joel, a tough, skilled survivalist in his forties who navigates the dangers of post-apocalyptic America. At the start of the game, players witness his life before the breakout and his role as a single, suburban father working to take care of his daughter Sarah. After Sarah is shot and killed by a military soldier, players are taken to his current life, where he resides in a “quarantine zone” and

is a much more hardened man. He is a ruthless killer who seems tired of the state of the life he now lives. Despite his sense of brutality, players get glimpses of the morality in him, from his loyalty to Tess, to his fatherly love for Ellie. Overall, Joel is a complicated man with a dark history residing in the twenty years unrevealed to the audience. Players see his THEN and his NOW, and can judge him as a bad person or a good person forced to make bad decisions to survive.

- **Ellie**— A fiery, brave, stubborn, and impulsive young girl, Ellie is the second playable character in *TLOU*. Forced to grow up fast in a world full of brutality. Ellie was raised in a military zone in Boston, never having known her parents. At thirteen, she met Marlene, who promised her mother she would look after her. When exploring a mall with her friend Riley, Ellie was bitten but never became infected. Marlene gives Joel the task of delivering her to the Fireflies (a revolutionary militia group) main base in Salt Lake City. Throughout the journey, Ellie shows how violent and independent she can be for her age. Despite her darker nature, there is an innocence in Ellie demonstrated by her curiosity of the world and the way she interacts with others.
- **Tess**— A smuggler in Boston’s quarantine zone, Tess seems to be Joel’s main friend and possible past romantic interest. Having met Joel at some point during her time in the zone, the two became a fearsome duo, everyone afraid to cross them. She was smart and tough, having various contacts in the underworld. When accompanying Joel and Ellie on a mission to a nearby capitol building, she is bitten by the infected. Refusing to die as “one of those things”, Tess buys Ellie and Joel time to escape while she is shot down by the incoming militia.
- **Tommy**— Brother to Joel, players briefly see Tommy early in the game when witnessing Joel’s past. He protects Joel and Sarah as they navigate through the outbreak’s chaos. After Sarah’s death and the transition to Joel’s current life, Tommy is not seen or heard of until later in the game. It is revealed that Tommy is now an ex Firefly, and that he and Joel went separate ways after the beginning of the outbreak. He now lives with a small community and a love interest in a dam. Joel and Ellie visit, and Joel is reunited with the brother he still trusts and loves.
- **Marlene**— Leader of the Fireflies, Marlene comes into the game to task Joel with taking Ellie to the capitol for a Firefly pickup. She tells him that Tommy told her she could rely on Joel if she were ever in a jam. She is leveled and can be rather cold where the fate of humanity is concerned. At the end of the game, she becomes the final antagonist to Joel when she tries to stop him from taking Ellie away from the hospital. Joel shoots her down.

Breakdown

TLOU is twelve chapters long, but the structure of the game is broken down into a prologue, summer, fall, winter, spring, and an epilogue.

Prologue

A man (Joel) comes home to his daughter Sarah, exhausted from a long day of working. It is revealed that it is his birthday, and his daughter hands him a new watch. After some conversation and Joel joking that the watch is broken, Sarah eventually falls to sleep and he puts her to bed. She wakes in the night to a call from her uncle Tommy, which is soon cut off. Clearly, there is something very bad happening. The player is given control of Sarah and can navigate the house. Soon Joel returns home and Sarah witnesses him shoot their crazed neighbor, who breaks through their back door and tries to attack them. Tommy arrives, explaining that the crazed people may be a result from an outbreak, and the crew tries to escape the city by car only to end up in an accident. Sarah injures her leg and Joel has to navigate through a town filled with fires, panicking people, and people who seemed to have gone mad and are attacking everyone. He runs into a military officer who shoots the crazed people chasing after him. The soldier apologizes and attempts to kill Joel and Sarah, yet only Sarah dies. Tommy catches up and witnesses Joel weeping, holding his dead daughter's body.

This introduction showed how story-driven games can match the level of movies in terms of emotional engagement. The experimental nature of gaming and how Naughty Dog implemented it may even pass that of movies. Playing as Sarah, you were able to explore the house and piece her life together through small interactions, reading calendars, newspapers, birthday cards, watching an explosion happen outside, seeing the news play on a TV... Naughty Dog is a master when it comes to interactive story telling. As a player, you felt fearful... the tension that surrounded Sarah seemed to be surrounding you. The car ride, seeing the bustling people, the world coming apart before your very eyes... these were things you could imagine, and they were actually happening. The death of Sarah was truly emotional and had many in tears. You felt Joel's loss and even your own loss of someone you were just getting to know through dialogue exchange and the interactivity of the house.

Summer

Twenty years later, Joel is a smuggler living in a quarantine zone in Boston. His friend Tess arrives at his apartment to tell him how she was jumped by people sent by a man named Robert, and that he had stolen their guns. The two track Robert down and he confesses that he stole the guns only because he owes the Fireflies (a revolutionary militia group that wants to restore the U.S government. Joel and Tess go to the Fireflies to explain that the guns belong to them in the hopes that they will get them back. They run into their leader Marlene, who they are already acquainted with, and she promises they will get double their guns back if they do a smuggling job for her. She introduces them to a young girl named Ellie, who they are expected to smuggle to the Capitol building. It is revealed along the way that Ellie was bitten a couple weeks prior to them meeting her, yet she shows no signs of being infected. When they arrive at the Capitol to see that the Fireflies there have been slain, Tess shows that she herself was bitten hours before and asks that Joel take Ellie to his brother Tommy. She fights the incoming militia and dies to buy them time, and Joel takes off with Ellie. The two visit a man Joel knows as Bill

who produces a working car for them to travel on with. Journeying through Pittsburgh, the two are ambushed by Hunters and join forces with a pair of brothers, Henry and Sam, to escape. Henry abandons them to save Sam, but eventually the four are reunited sometime later. Onward they go towards a radio tower, taking on hunters and a horde of infected along the way. Ellie converses with Sam before they go to sleep. The next morning when she goes to wake him, she notices he is acting strange. He turns and attacks her, and Joel is forced to shoot Sam, who had become infected. Henry comes out, aiming the gun at Joel in anger, but eventually turns the gun on himself and commits suicide.

In the Summer of The Last of Us, we see what Joel's life currently is. There is no concrete information on what he had done in the twenty years, only a THEN and a NOW. Players can piece together what they can of the world through picking up notes, reading posters, listening to recordings, and interacting with other characters and objects throughout the game. The scarcity of materials and ammo add to the survival factor of the game world. When Ellie and Joel witness innocents being ambushed by a group of hunters, Joel grudgingly admits that "he's been on both sides". This indicates that Joel is not really a hero, or the "good guy". He may not even be classified as the "bad guy". He is a man who did bad things to survive, and the game leaves it up to the player to decide how they will judge him. Despite the darkness in Joel, he does have a Hero's Journey that's first cycles start in this stage. His ordinary world: living as a smuggler in the quarantine zone. His call to adventure: to take a young girl to the Capitol. Refusal of the call: when the Fireflies are absent from the meet-up point, Joel does not want to take Ellie all the way. Meeting of the mentor: intriguingly it can be one thing to the players and another to Joel, for the mentor to the players may be Tess and the mentor to Joel is Bill, who gives him access to what he needs. Crossing the threshold: Joel and Ellie take off in the car that Bill provides, into an unknown world, and Joel will deliver Ellie because that was Tess's dying wish. The tests, allies, and enemies take place across summer and fall.

The tense stealth gameplay of TLOU brings out the survival aspect of the game. From Ellie tossing you ammo in the middle of a fight to Henry shooting a Clicker (infected enemy type) sneaking behind you, the gameplay adds to the depression and desperation of the world's content. You not only see the relationship building between Sam and Ellie through dialogue or the connection in their age and curiosity, but you FEEL it when your heartbeat quickens in a fight, or you're darting behind bookcases to avoid detection.

Fall

Joel and Ellie continue their journey to find Tommy. On the way, Joel explains how he and his brother had gone separate ways after the outbreak. Tommy joined the Fireflies, but is not with them anymore. They arrive at a dam and meet Tommy's wife Maria, who interrogates them at the gates of the community and eventually lets them in when Tommy comes up and recognizes Joel. Joel tells Tommy of his situation and tries to convince him to take Ellie the rest of the way. The two are interrupted when bandits ambush the settlement. After fighting their way back to Ellie and Maria, Tommy converses in private with his wife about taking Ellie to the Fireflies. Ellie overhears and, distraught, takes off on one of the community's horses. Joel and Tommy grab horses and set out to find her, eventually locating Ellie in a ranch house. Joel and Ellie have a heated argument in which he makes it clear that they are going their separate ways. The ranch

is attacked by bandits and, after the ride back to the dam, Joel has a change of heart and decides that he will take Ellie the rest of the way. The pair heads to the University of Eastern Colorado, where Tommy informed them that there was a Firefly lab there. After exploring the college, it becomes clear that it has been abandoned for some time. They find a recorder that tells of the Fireflies current whereabouts, and soon they are ambushed by a group at the University. While trying to escape, Joel falls down two stories and is impaled by a metal beam. They manage to get going on horseback, but Joel eventually slumps off the horse. Ellie panics over his unconscious body, and the cut scene ends.

Here, the Hero's Journey continues. Joel faces more tests when he fights the bandits ambushing the dam, and when he goes after Ellie. Here is also one of the most memorable cut scenes: the fight between Joel and Ellie. By this point, players have seen the characters grow a bit and their fears shine through. Ellie is scared to be alone, and believes that those who have crossed paths with her always meet a terrible fate. Joel is the only one who has not succumbed to this, and it's plain that she has grown to care for him. Joel seems to reject this, but has a change of heart later. We see that he needs Ellie as well, and the archetypal "loving father" remains in the broken man. The approach to the innermost cave happens as the two explore the University, unknowingly heading into a bad situation. His ordeal is the fight that leads to his impalement, which is technically the death, and his rebirth comes in the winter chapter.

The hazy visuals and impaired gameplay of Joel after impalement make the player feel his injury. This is where Naughty Dog excels at tying story to control; if a player is shot and near dying, Joel's movement reflects that. Gameplay is directly impacted by what the characters undergo, and the best example of that is the dramatic escape of Joel and Ellie from the college.

Winter

Ellie is hunting out in the winter wilds for a buck. She manages to get a few shots in, but does not kill the animal. She follows a blood trail to where she finds the buck in an abandoned shack. When arriving, a pair of men, David and James, approach and offer to trade for the buck. Ellie says she will make an exchange in return for antibiotics, and James goes to get some from their community while she and David stay behind. Ellie is very on guard and is hostile towards David even though he tries to befriend her. The two are attacked by infected and they work together to fight them off. Later, when James returns, David reveals that the people Ellie and Joel fought at the university were from his community. James returns aiming a gun at her, but David makes him give her the medicine and lets her go. Later she treats Joel at their new safe house and then takes a nap. She wakes to hear noise outside and discovers that David's people had tracked her down. She leaves to draw them away from Joel. Eventually, David catches up to her and knocks her unconscious. She wakes up in a cage to see David and James on the other side of the bars, threatening to chop her up for food. While this is going on, Joel wakes at their safe house. He notices that Ellie is missing and desperately searches for her, coming across two of David's men. He tortures them until they reveal their community's location. At the resort (where the community lives), Ellie is on the chopping table. She bites David and manages to escape. Navigating through the resort, Ellie eventually meets David again in a restaurant. David seems to have gone a little crazed, which may be a result of her biting him with the Cordyceps in her veins. After struggling with each other in the restaurant and the place catching on fire, Ellie and David have one last tussle before Ellie repeatedly stabs him in the face with his machete. Joel

comes up behind her and wraps his arms around her, trying to calm her and let her know it's just him. The two leave the restaurant, the camera showing the handle of the machete which is sticking out of David's face.

Here, we see an even uglier side of the post-apocalyptic world seep through: cannibalism. David first appears to be a friendly survivor, and players experience him as an ally through their gameplay of Ellie. Players also see a contrast between Ellie and Joel from Ellie's capabilities in combat. She is, after all, a little girl; her stealth kills consist of her clinging to the backs of enemies while she stabs them with a switchblade, whereas Joel can sneak up behind someone and snap their neck. The gameplay of Ellie also brings out her character; she is a brave young girl who will go to amazing lengths to survive. From fighting off the worst of the infected to the hide-and-go-seek boss battle against David, she balances her fear with her will to sustain her own life, and that of Joel's. This makes Ellie an even more engaging character and highlights the fact that, in this future, harsh reality makes growing up a different process. Even after hacking away at David's face, Ellie sobs into the arms of Joel, and the audience is again reminded of her innocence.

David's boss fight also reflects the result of Ellie biting him to escape. He acts crazed, darting around and behaving more like an animal than the controlled, calculating man players had met in the shack. You are left wondering if Ellie had passed the Cordyceps disease on to him, or if he has truly gone mad. "Everything happens for a reason" was something David had said to Ellie earlier on. How many of the occurrences in TLOU are due to this philosophy? How can the shape of characters be thought of in this way? Naughty Dog presents the idea of fate and coincidence to the audience through its use of David. Here the Hero's Journey for Joel also continues. He is reborn from the medicine provided by David, and is rewarded when he finds Ellie at the resort.

Spring

It is now spring. Joel and Ellie are navigating through Salt Lake City and see Saint Mary's Hospital in the distance. After a touching encounter with some giraffes, the two make their way through an underground tunnel infested with infected. Navigating through the debris, Ellie eventually ends up sucked into the water. She cannot swim. Joel finds her and drags her to a shore. While trying to revive her, the Fireflies approach with guns and order him to step away. He refuses and is knocked out. When he wakes up, he discovers that he is in the Firefly hospital and that Marlene is there to greet him. She informs him that Ellie is being prepped for surgery, and that they are going to reverse engineer a vaccine from the mutated infection in her. Joel realizes that this will mean Ellie's death, and he fights Marlene on it. She says that they do not have a choice and tells a Firefly guard to march Joel out and, if he tries anything, to shoot him. Joel manages to escape on the way out and fights through the Fireflies to the operating room. There is a surgeon and two doctors, and the surgeon attempts to stop Joel from taking Ellie away. Joel kills him and leaves with an unconscious Ellie (players can choose whether or not to shoot the other two doctors). When running out into an elevator and exiting into the basement garage, Joel comes face to face with Marlene, blocking his way with a gun. She tries to change his mind again, and he pretends to give in. Right when he is about to hand her over, he shoots Marlene. Putting Ellie in a getaway car, he goes back to finish the job. She tries to tell him that he can still do the right thing, but Joel shoots her dead anyway. Later in the car, Ellie wakes up and asks Joel

what happened. He lies and tells her that the Fireflies have stopped looking for a cure and that she is not the only human immune to the disease.

Here, TLOU differs from most games in that it leaves much open to moral interpretation. Marlene is the final antagonist... or is she? Is she just a woman who is acting on behalf of humanity, or is she an enemy trying to take the life of a character players have developed an emotional bond towards? Is Joel a hero gone mad, willing to do anything to save someone he now sees as his daughter, or is he a selfish monster, willing to cut down dozens of people fighting for survival just so he wouldn't have to experience the loss of a girl he loves again? The player is able to see Marlene's struggle of choosing to take Ellie's life through recordings found in gameplay. Yet the player has not been Marlene. They have not fought through hordes of infected as her, have not pet giraffes as her, have not shared an emotional journey across the United States as her. What Joel decides to do is not only a question of right and wrong, but a direct question on empathy and human nature. How willing are we, as individuals, to see the other side of things when we only have our own emotions and experiences to rely on? The final gameplay with weapons also gives players an interesting option. We can shoot the remaining two doctors, or we can walk away with Ellie and let them live. Either choice has no impact on the ending, yet your ability to make that choice is what matters. Here the player can express their curiosity, or their own moral choice, or what they think Joel's moral choice would be. This is a highlight of Naughty Dog's lasting theme in TLOU; everything is open to interpretation and, in the game, there is no wrong or right choice, just what you can relate and agree upon.

In this season, there is also the few last stages of the Hero's Journey for Joel. His road back; the trip to the hospital through the underground tunnels. Resurrection: fighting the Fireflies to get to Ellie in the hospital and making the decision to kill Marlene.

Epilogue

The two are back in Jackson County and make their way to Tommy's on foot. Ellie confronts Joel about what happened earlier and wonders if she could have done more to stop the outbreak. She asks him to swear that what he said about the Fireflies was true, and he does. She uncertainly accepts what he says.

Joel now finishes the final cycle of his Hero's Journey, the return with the elixir. He is a changed man in the way that he now has a new "daughter" to look out for, adding to the positive aspects of him yet also adding to his negative aspects based on how he acquired this role. Many liked the ending to TLOU, and many didn't. The moral ambiguity of the whole situation had players struggling to even carry out Joel's actions in the final moments. Most tragic endings involve the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few, yet here it's not so. The tragedy of TLOU is that you, as the player, have difficulty choosing whether or not you are satisfied with the ending because it forces you to question your own character. Joel and Marlene both had different views as to what was best for Ellie, yet Ellie made no choice on the matter at all. The player is also left to decide what they think she would have done, and that can either conflict or agree with a character (Joel) that they have shared an emotional journey with. He had told her to find something to fight for, yet he robbed her of that choice by keeping her in the dark about what happened at the hospital. The player has seen Ellie grow; she is now more mature, more capable of making her own decisions, yet Joel still sees Sarah. He still sees a little girl and he

still thinks like a parent. Players are left with more questions than answers, which is what Naughty Dog intended.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *The Last of Us* is its character development. Each individual in the game feels like a real person with real emotions, decisions to make, weaknesses, strengths, fears, and abilities. Players grow to care for Joel and Ellie and are impacted by what happens to them. Character is everything in the game, for it shapes the story and is the reason *TLOU* is known to have such an emotional response from the gaming community. Through Joel and Ellie and the secondary characters, Naughty Dog is able to present their moral ambiguity and reflections on human nature that they wouldn't have been able to deliver without the strength in their writing. Gameplay is also made much more tense because players have a better sense of what thoughts are running through the mind of who they are playing, and they also feel for the safety of that person.

Unsuccessful Element

In my opinion, the unsuccessful element of *The Last of Us* was something that happened often in gameplay and took away from the realistic vibe of the game. You are playing as Joel, slithering around in a library, narrowly avoiding detection from an enemy. Ellie accidentally darts directly in front of this enemy, and he... does nothing. It's as if she wasn't even there. Ellie will sometimes be standing in plain sight of five infected enemies and they will have absolutely no response. The only time they will see her (or any companion you are fighting with) is upon your own detection. For a game that favors immersion, this was a letdown. It really contrasted with the reality of each situation. I do not know if Naughty Dog intended this so that players would only have to worry about their own actions, but it was hard to pretend that your companion was immune to detection when she's standing on the feet of a Bloater (big infected enemy). To improve this, the game designers could make the navigation of the companion in combat situations avoid detection from others while still keeping close to the player. It is no easy feat, but it is essential to realistic gameplay.

Highlight

The highlight of the game to me is when Ellie and Joel run into the pack of giraffes. Seeing Ellie pet the animal, we are reminded of that the fact that she is still a child, and she is allowed to experience childhood. It is a touching moment for her, and it is a touching moment for the audience as well. With all the horror in *TLOU*, the player is allowed a brief moment to appreciate calmness and the landscape. We have fought the entire against a natural disease, yet we have had to rely on nature to survive. The moment shows the role of nature in our lives and also gives us a symbol of hope. There are sweet moments that exist in life, even though they may be fleeting, and they are there even in the worst of times.

Critical Reception

10/10

“The Last of Us seamlessly intertwines satisfying, choice-based gameplay with a stellar narrative. It never slows down, it never lets up, and frankly, it never disappoints. It’s PlayStation 3’s best exclusive, and the entire experience, from start to finish, is remarkable.” –Colin Moriarty, IGN (<http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/06/05/the-last-of-us-review>)

8/10

“Thrust in a lawless world, you feel the ache of a society gone to seed. The Last of Us stretches on for hours, forcing you to endure the suffocating atmosphere and unrelenting despair that citizens of this world have become accustomed to. And that time spent navigating the desolate wasteland draws you deeper inside... The Last of Us is a singular adventure that looks the downfall of humanity in the eyes and doesn't blink.” -Tom Mc Shea, GameSpot (<https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-last-of-us-review/1900-6409197/>)

Lessons

- Lesson 1: **A strong opening is essential.** The first thirty minutes of gameplay draw the players in emotionally and set the foundation for the rest of the game. It makes the player want to continue and see how the pacing of the game will play out, and it also begins the tether between the gamer and the main character.
- Lesson 2: **The environment is a tool in storytelling.** *TLOU* not only tells its tale through cut scenes and in game dialogue, but leaves notes, recordings, tokens, and interactive objects for the player to find throughout the game. This allows one to piece together the world they are exploring. The decrepit buildings and contrast between the beauty of the world and the results of the outbreak reflect on the post-apocalyptic story being told.
- Lesson 3: **Character, character, character.** The relationship between Joel and Ellie and how they grow throughout the game makes *TLOU* such a unique experience. Having great characters supported by terrific writing brought out the cinematic factor of the game and is something that many other games lack. Other developers can learn from how Naughty Dog put great weight on its character design and build up.
- Lesson 4: **Theme.** *TLOU* does not shy away from morality, the relationship between human and nature, and the fears that exist within each and every one of us. Having these themes as central points to the story made players think long after they put down the controller. If game developers want to make more of an impact on an audience and add to their replay ability, they can learn from how Naughty Dog implemented their themes and what originality they brought to the industry.

Summation

The Last of Us is a game deserving of analysis because of its fresh take on cinematic gameplay, terrifically written characters, environmental usage, underlying themes, and emotional impact on players. Unlike movies, games have hours upon hours to tell a story. Naughty Dog

makes use of all that time to deliver something that does not shy away from questions of humanity and nature that are rarely addressed in games. *The Last of Us* sets the bar for any future story-driven titles and will be something most will refer back to when judging the quality of these games and how they use the medium they have to impact the player community.