



“The road to moral independence: agency, gender, and family in *The Last of Us*”

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Naughty Dog’s 2013 survival horror game *The Last of Us* is among the best the industry has to offer with regard to plot and character development. Written by Neil Druckmann, it is the story of an improbable pair’s journey across a post-apocalyptic America after a disease has exterminated much of humanity: 14-year-old orphan Ellie, who is the only known asymptomatic carrier of the disease, and hardened survivor Joel, who lost his teen-aged daughter Sarah in the early days of the epidemic. Joel is tasked by the Fireflies, a resistance group against the totalitarian government, to deliver Ellie to their medical facilities out West, where they yet retain hope of finding a cure.

The Last of Us (*TLOU*) is one of the most literary games of the modern era, and my personal favorite in a long time, perhaps since the equally well-written *Mass Effect 2*. It is ripe with moral dilemmas and psychologically fascinating characters, and it allows players and critics to discuss gender roles at a conceptual depth seldom seen in the video game industry. Much has been said in the popular press about whether the game is fundamentally sexist with some redeeming qualities or fundamentally feminist with some dark spots. It is in fact both. From a purely critical standpoint, it is a sharp, at times virulent, critique of patriarchal gender roles. But its critique is too understated, and most players will be unable to see it and will risk mistaking villains for heroes and sexism for equality. *TLOU* is the best possible game that could have been written given its constraints, but it could have made its feminist point—which it does have, and which is extremely good—much better.

I. Feminist half-victories: media reception of *The Last of Us*

It is surprising that a game as deeply layered as *TLOU* is yet to receive any scholarly attention in game studies, English, or moral philosophy journals. This paper seeks to fill that lacuna. Within weeks of the game’s release, the gaming press reviewed and discussed it to exhaustion, mixing praise with criticism and almost univocally adopting a feminist critical framework (or whatever degree of attention to gender passes for feminism in some reviewers’ minds). The consensus was that *TLOU* goes boldly, but not far enough. While that is no small victory in a medium that routinely portrays women as either damsels in

distress or busty bimbos, the idea was that for all its good intentions it just does not do enough to subvert gender stereotypes. This section briefly reviews some of the better reactions and responses to the game from the second half of 2013, extracting and introducing the elements that will constitute the bulk of my own contribution in this paper.

The first popular piece discussing the game's gender issues—and the one that is most often cited by the others—is Chris Sullentrop's *New York Times* review. He claims that despite some crucial steps forward, *TLOU*'s near-exclusive emphasis on Joel as the unquestioned protagonist makes it “another video game by men, for men, and about men.”¹ Leigh Alexander of *Gamasutra* agreed that *TLOU* is “the last story of the strong man at the end of the world that I have to play” and insisted that the game can truly only be praised within the narrow confines that this medium imposes on gender roles: “if this is the story that we have to tell . . . it seems difficult to do any better than *The Last of Us*.”² The well-respected Carolyn Petit of *Gamespot* makes this point most starkly, claiming that while *TLOU* is comparatively good, “we've let our notions of what's possible become limited by what's available. Instead, we need to evaluate games and how they handle gender based on their actual merits, not in relation to other games. We need to smash that curve with a sledgehammer.”³

In partial disagreement, Ellie Gibson at *Eurogamer* responded that even though the character of Ellie could have been better, she is not subordinate to Joel and the attention is not all on him: she is “just a normal girl trying to cope with life in a broken world,” which is something that women “can identify with.”⁴ Even more firmly, Tom Rokins at *Kinja* argued that all the women in the game are strong characters, including Marlene (the eventual antagonist), Tess, Maria, and of course Ellie and Sarah themselves. Rokins, however, defines “strong women” in terms of their ability to kick zombie ass, be in command, and take care of things; i.e., stereotypically masculine activities. But of course good feminism does not consist in making women do what men do in order to be accepted.⁵ *TLOU*'s women are indeed strong, but for other reasons. For one, they all pass the Bechdel test: they are many, they have names, and they talk to each other about things other than men.⁶ More importantly, their goals are not defined by winning a man's attention or love. It is true, however, that Ellie and Joel's relationship is not one among equals despite there being no romantic interest or overt subordination; I will discuss this at length in section III.

There is certainly a concern that non-sexualized, non-stereotypical women do not sell. *TLOU*'s writer Neil Druckmann reported in an interview for *VG24/7* before the game's release that, when designing the game cover, “we've been asked to push Ellie to the back and everyone at Naughty Dog just flat-out refused.” It is unclear who asked, though presumably it was the publisher, Sony; and it is unclear whether to the back of the picture on the front of the box or to the back of the box itself.⁷ Regardless, the idea remains: women on video game covers, especially if young and masculine, may spell commercial failure. That *TLOU* went on to be the fifth highest-grossing game of 2013—the top original game behind the latest installments of affirmed franchises like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*—should quell those fears

¹ Chris Sullentrop. “In the same boat, but not equals.” *The New York Times*. 14 June 2013. [Link](#).

² Leigh Alexander. “*The Last of Us* is the least we should ask of games.” *Gamasutra*. 2 July 2013. [Link](#).

³ Carolyn Petit. “*The Last of Us* and grading on the gender curve.” *Gamespot*. 3 July 2013. [Link](#).

⁴ Ellie Gibson. “*The Last of Us* isn't the solution to sexism in games, but it's a start.” *Eurogamer*. 5 July 2013. [Link](#).

⁵ Tom Rokins. “The women of *The Last of Us* – A step forward in videogame feminism.” *Kinja*. 5 July 2013. [Link](#).

⁶ An overview of the test and a comprehensive list of results can be found [here](#).

⁷ Dave Cook. “*The Last of Us*: acting out the end of the world.” *VG24/7*. 12 December 2012. [Link](#).

(though again only within the generally dismal landscape: *TLOU* was also one of only two games out of the top ten to feature a female protagonist or co-protagonist at all).⁸

Perhaps the strongest early criticism of the game was made by Keith Stuart of *The Guardian*. In the same vein as Sullentrop, he argued that despite its female presence *TLOU* is still mostly a story about a gruff man who kills his way out of problems. Stuart felt that the underlying message is that “the future will be ruled by men of violence and fervour, and that we have to become like them in order to survive.”⁹ Danielle Riendeau partially agreed in a lengthy commentary written with Chris Plante for *Polygon*: “At what point does Ellie herself become a sociopath? At what point does a smart, kind, [...] empathetic person become a complete monster just to survive?”¹⁰ I will not discuss violence in detail, but I do agree with both Stuart and Riendeau. I think Joel’s violence and Ellie’s eventual strive to become more like him are part of the complex interplay between the two, which cannot be simplified quite so much.

The critical consensus about *The Last of Us* is well taken. For the most part I agree with it and much of what I argue below belongs to a nearby camp. At the same time, I depart from these critiques—to situate myself beside and not against them—by arguing that there is ample textual evidence that *TLOU* criticizes its own sexism rather than endorsing it. This can be seen by analyzing three topics that, to my knowledge, no commentator has discussed explicitly: agency, objectification, and family. The rest of this paper is dedicated primarily to these three.

II. Agency, freedom, and consent: Ellie’s stunted moral growth

For much of the first half, Ellie is a non-character. She is charming and occasionally fearless, but there is no doubt that this is Joel’s adventure. With time, his rugged individualism rubs off on her, and likewise he gradually warms up to her, shares more about his painful past, and ultimately commits to her safety. In this regard the game sways very little from the standard narrative of the protector-provider (typically male) and the passive, dependent sidekick (typically younger and female). This dynamic is sometimes masked by the fact that the player cannot solve most puzzles unless Ellie and Joel cooperate, which gives the game a veneer of character equality, but from a storytelling standpoint Joel leads and Ellie follows.

Ellie gradually comes into her own in the latter half of the game. First, she provides the main motivation to find the Fireflies when Joel’s resolve falters and he tries to dump her on his estranged younger brother Tommy, who has settled down and is living peacefully in Wyoming. The dam scene is important because Ellie refuses to be the object of an exchange between two adults, and two men at that, and for the first time tries to impose her will. I say “try” because ultimately she gives in, and it is only because *Joel* chooses to continue protecting her that their journey resumes. Still, this is the first time that Ellie shows the will (though not yet the power) to free herself from the controlling structures in her life.

The power comes a few weeks later, on two related occasions. The first is when she has to care for a wounded Joel by becoming the forager and breadwinner through the rigid Western winter. Players must relearn to play as a character with a totally different skill set, just as Ellie is learning to apply what she has picked up from Joel. This is empowering for both her and us because finally we get to see Ellie take care

⁸ “The 10 bestselling video games of 2013.” *The Fiscal Times*. 13 December 2013. [Link](#).

⁹ Keith Stuart. “*The Last of Us*, *Bioshock: Infinite*, and why all video games dystopias work the same way.” *The Guardian*. 1 July 2013. [Link](#).

¹⁰ Chris Plante, Danielle Reindeau. “Let’s Talk About: the ending of *The Last of Us*.” *Polygon*. 23 July 2013. [Link](#).

of herself and of Joel. The unfortunate side effect is the remarkable difference between Joel's full arsenal of deadly weapons and Ellie's reliance on cunning and stealth. On the one hand this makes sense, because regardless of gender 14-year-olds are just not very good at extreme survival. On the other hand, it is unavoidable for the least critical players to attribute Joel's superior resourcefulness to his being a man rather than an adult. This is one of the ways, which I discuss in the conclusion in more detail, in which the game is more than a little clumsy in its handling of gender.

The second occasion is when Ellie is captured, beaten, almost raped, and almost killed by the cannibal preacher (and possibly pedophile) David, the game's most sinister character. Setting aside for a moment that rape seems to be the go-to thrill-seeking plot twist for female characters, here the game pulls a fast one by playing with perspective. When Ellie is in danger, first the players are placed back in Joel's shoes so that we may live out his anguished rescue attempt and the rebuilding of his fatherly identity. But half-way through his rescue the game switches back to Ellie, who frees herself and kills the would-be rapist. As it turns out, Joel's role is meaningless in this chapter, which is Ellie's story of self-salvation.

But lo and behold—that fact seems to sail right over Joel's head. Upon their reunion, he embraces her sorrowfully and for the first time calls her his “baby girl,” which is how he had called his daughter Sarah as she lay dying in his arms 20 years prior. In the story of Joel's life, that moment replays the night he lost his daughter, only this time the outcome is different. As far as he is concerned, he *has* rescued Ellie and exorcised his ghosts. Of course, we as players know better, because the part where Ellie must elude David and eventually subdue him is one of the most difficult and distressing of the game. The player-as-Ellie has sweated it out with her, fought with her and as her, and has witnessed first-hand her newfound power of self-ownership. And when Joel comes in and steals her thunder, it feels contrived, annoying, and useless.

For the first time, players are supposed to experience cognitive dissonance with regard to Joel's fatherly attitude, which now begins to feel disconnected from reality as Ellie affirms herself. Because of this, here the two characters begin to take separate narrative ways, ironically at the very apex of their hard-won relationship. The exquisite sensitivity with which Druckmann allows them to begin drifting apart in the same instant that they finally come together as a family is one of the story's finest points (though again I fear that it may be lost on all but the most perceptive players).

This painstaking process of creating Ellie's identity and agency is eventually shattered in the game's final act. First, upon reaching the Fireflies' lab in Salt Lake City, Joel is knocked out and Ellie is drugged and made to undergo a surgery that will kill her in order to extract the cure. All of this happens strictly without her consent. Joel eventually rescues her, and upon waking up and seeing her hospital gown Ellie protests: “what the hell am I wearing?” This proves that she did not even know she was going to be put under the knife, let alone sacrificed for the greater good of humanity. The Fireflies' ruthless leader Marlene, despite seeing herself as a surrogate mother for Ellie, was all too ready to disregard her agency by depriving her of bodily autonomy.

Even worse is that Joel lies to Ellie about the whole thing. After rescuing her, he tells her that the Fireflies did not really need her after all, for she is not the only carrier and they have decided to find someone else. He also conveniently hides from her that during the rescue he murdered many people in cold blood, including Marlene. Too dazed to ask questions, Ellie believes it all. But later, as they approach Tommy's dam back in Wyoming and prepare to settle, she asks Joel to swear that what he said about the Fireflies was true. Her motivation for asking is that so much blood has been spilled over her and that everyone who ever cared about her has died (including her would-be girlfriend Riley from *Left Behind*), so she wants to

know if it was worth it and if Joel is telling the truth. He looks her dead in the eye and, after a pause that is only slightly too long, says: "I swear." Ellie flatly replies "okay" and the game cuts to end credits.

Joel's lie deprives Ellie of her freedom to have a say, just as Marlene does. Marlene robs Ellie of the freedom to decide whether or not to help humanity by providing a cure, and by opting to kill her without her consent she violates her right to bodily autonomy. But by opting to save her and then lie to her Joel reinforces that violation. Ellie has no voice throughout this dilemma. This is further symbolized by the fact that while all of these decisions happen she is unconscious, naked under her hospital gown and ultimately vulnerable and powerless, first under anesthesia in the hospital and then carried bodily to safety. One does not get any more un-free than that. (Notice, too, that the choice is not only stripped from Ellie, but from the players as well: we do not get a say on what happens and the game only has one ending regardless of how the players feel about it).¹¹

Initially, it is extremely upsetting that a game that has spent so much time building up its young character's independence would end on such patronizing judgment calls. But Druckmann is too good a writer for this to have been an unintentional mishap or a concession to a reassuring happy ending. The brashness of the finale, Ellie's unenthusiastic concession, and the jarring cut-to-black is intended to reinforce the message that Joel's lie is not okay. Druckmann seems perfectly aware that he has undone in ten minutes what he has spent 14 hours crafting, so it must have been in order to deliver a message quite different from what players might have inferred until then.

What, then, is this message? As I claimed in the introduction, I think the game intentionally portrays Joel as a villain to make a broader point about the injustice of traditional gender roles and their fundamental pervasiveness in the human condition, though this is a point that might be lost on all but the most acute players. To understand that point, one must be familiar with certain views of *objectification* and *family*. I take up these notions in turn in the next two sections.

III. Female objectification: dead girls and replacement daughters

We have seen that Joel derives much of his motivation from the loss of his daughter, a standard male-centered narrative where dead women serve as catalysts for the emotional needs of men. Perhaps for that reason, Sarah's death is so ugly to watch that at first I turned off the game and did not intend to play any further. The game's prologue works its charm well, for players are meant to be disturbed and carry Joel's burden as they control him. This makes quite uncomfortable the absence of any dialogue related to Sarah in the first half of the game. Druckmann skillfully hints to it on several occasions, such as when Joel reminisces about a poster of a "dumb teen movie" about werewolves and Ellie asks "who dragged you to see it?" Joel does not reply. Ellie eventually comes to learn of Sarah from someone else, and when she confronts Joel about it in Wyoming he is very defensive: "You are treading on some mighty thin ice here."

With time, this becomes the main reason for their closeness. Months after Wyoming, the memorable giraffe scene in Salt Lake City is their first genuine father-daughter interaction; and when Ellie brings up Sarah again, minutes later, Joel's response is entirely different: "I guess you can't let go of the past." This, plus the two times that Joel calls Ellie "baby girl" (in the burning hotel and in the operating room), cements her role in his mind as a replacement daughter. After all, players knew this was coming when an-

¹¹ Kenneth Lota. "Subverting player choice in *The Last of Us* and *Bioshock: Infinite*." *Ethos Review*. 27 May 2014. [Link](#).

other teen girl was introduced within two hours of play from Sarah's death, and then confirmed when, halfway through the game, Joel barks: "you are not my daughter, and I sure as hell ain't your dad." Denial is a powerful signifier.¹²

That Joel sees Sarah in Ellie is not a point of contention. What is interesting, especially in light of my analysis of agency, is that Joel *objectifies* Ellie as Sarah. Every adult character in *TLOU* treats Ellie as a thing, which reinforces her coming-of-age narrative and makes Joel's final lie even more treacherous. Marlene and the Fireflies want her body for research; Tess uses her as an exchange token to retrieve her weapons; Bill just wants her to shut up; David wants her body for sex, or food, or both;¹³ and even Joel sees her as baggage at first ("the girl is just cargo") and only later as a replacement kid.

This latter objectification is more subtle and, of course, more central to the plot. To illustrate it I borrow a point from *Lolita*, whose male protagonist uses much the same logic as Joel's; everything else about the two stories is, of course, totally unrelated. In Nabokov's masterpiece, Humbert loses his beloved Annabel during his youth, and throughout his life he projects his obsession for her onto countless little girls, ultimately fixating on Dolly/Lolita, whom he kidnaps and rapes. Humbert does not see her as a person but as a mere echo, shadow, or idea of another person. He thinks of Dolly—and Annabel, and all little girls—as a mythical creature or heavenly "nymphet," but never as the only thing that Dolly actually is: a person, an equal, and a child.

Joel does much the same with Ellie, minus the romance (Druckmann is very careful to avoid even the slightest hint of sexual tension between them). Slowly, he projects Sarah unto Ellie like Annabel on Dolly, and when the transfer is complete his obsession with her protection is total. And just as Dolly initially edges Humbert on with her innocent petting games, having no notion of how quickly he will turn them into rape, so it is Ellie who encourages Joel to become more open about Sarah, only to become uncomfortable with his resulting commitment to her as a daughter. The game's last walk-and-talk, right before the shock ending, is quite telling in this sense. Joel says: "You would have loved Sarah. You two would have been great friends." To which Ellie replies glumly: "I guess we would have..."¹⁴ Just as in *Lolita*, in *TLOU* we also see an example of a young girl expressing a desire for closeness which is hijacked by a more powerful man whose objectifying desire (sexual in Humbert's case, fatherly in Joel's) overrides her agency, will, and self-ownership.

Of course, this seemingly benign objectification is the driving engine of everything that happens in the game. For one, it is the reason behind Joel's lie, for he cannot stand the thought that Ellie might choose in a way that would make him lose her. He is uncomfortable with her having that much freedom, so since he has the power to curb it, he does. It is also the reason for Ellie's concerns at the end. The best feature of

¹² There are too many father-daughter references in the game to discuss, including the scolding-teasing character of most of their dialogues and Joel's often referring to Ellie as "wandering off" or "getting in trouble." I trust the reader was sufficiently sensitive to these references when playing.

¹³ A hunter refers to Ellie as "David's newest pet," suggesting that he has done this before; and David's remark that he "would rather not" chop her into tiny pieces is a grim hint to what might have happened to the other girl(s). Other than this, the origin of his obsession with Ellie is never revealed. He is a religious man and the leader of a cultish following, which is common in post-apocalyptic stories (e.g., *Crossed: Family Values*). But perhaps he too has lost a daughter and is seeking to replace her, though in a sick and twisted way. While that is an interesting theory, there is simply not enough in the game's text to support it beyond speculation.

¹⁴ If the conceptual comparison with *Lolita* holds, we can also interpret David as a foil for Joel, or the Quilty to his Humbert. The reservations expressed in the previous footnote about that interpretive framework still apply.

the game's ending is its dismaying ambiguity. Not only are we left with a lie, but we are not even sure if Ellie buys it. "Okay" can mean many things, and the way Ashley Johnson (Ellie's voice- and motion-capture actress) performs it leaves everything to the imagination. If she buys it, she is being screwed over. If she does not, she has either decided to postpone the inquiry or to acquiesce in the lie. At the very least, Ellie realizes that Joel's conflation of her and Sarah should give her reason to doubt his truthfulness on other matters, so even if she momentarily buys his lie the seed of doubt has already been planted.

IV. Lies and families: choosing social levels

Ellie's question and Joel's lie are important not only with regard to what had transpired before, but also and perhaps most importantly for what will happen next. The whole game hints to the fact that Joel is tired of his life as a wanderer and wants to settle down and live out the rest of his days in relative tranquility, and finding peace about Sarah through Ellie is the final piece of the puzzle. Many lines of dialogue in the game's last quarter also point to that direction as Ellie and Joel make future plans, such as learning to play football or guitar. At one point, soon after the giraffe scene, Joel even tells Ellie that they could quit if she wants to: "we don't have to do this, you know?" He does not say what they would do if they did quit, but it is pretty clear that he is already envisioning settling down with her, probably back at Tommy's dam. At first I feared that these lines were the famous last words and that either Joel or Ellie would die, but the game was one step ahead and actually delivered the envisioned happy ending—except that by that time it was not happy anymore, built as it was on Joel's deception.

Joel and Ellie's relationship is based on mutual trust and accountability. He looks after her and she comes through for him; they rescue each other; they share beds and supplies; they are a team; and in time they even come to love each other. In short, the game is an exercise in family building. Families are contracts that children cannot agree to sign, and part of growing up is to decide whether one wishes to remain a signatory; that is, choosing to give or withhold consent when one acquires the option to. The ending of *The Last of Us* is precisely that time for Ellie, when she and Joel, after being cast together by accident, decide to build a family unit based on consent. Ellie is willing to sign the contract, but only provided that Joel is truthful. The fact that he is not delivers the game's shock ending.

So the problem is not only that Joel lies (an action that can be judged in the *present* on its own demerits), and not only that Ellie is deprived of her agency (a *past*-looking problem), but also what his lie entails for their *future*. We know that whatever comes next is not genuine, for it is built on deception. Human beings are resilient creatures who adapt to many situations, but most of us fear deception and betrayal even more than outright hostility. Ellie, who is the moral motor of the story, surely thinks along those lines. There can be no mutual respect in the presence of falsehood. Perhaps, in the end, that is what pushes her to say "okay": she may intuit that Joel is lying to her, but the possibility of that being the case is far too scary and it is preferable to stop wondering instead.

In addition to whether or not Ellie believes the lie, the ambiguity of the ending also rests with the morality of the lie itself. Because while lying is *prima facie* always wrong, Joel's lie is one that many of us would find very tempting to tell. A more thorough analysis of the lie reveals an additional interpretive layer of *TLOU*. Here we must stray a bit from the game's script and venture into more speculative territory, for I do not believe that Druckmann's writing contains enough to support this interpretive framework. Still, part of the livelihood of a text consists in how it can be expanded upon and what it *can* say in addi-

tion to what it *does* say. This is especially true of post-apocalyptic scenarios, which rarely directly comment on the apocalypse itself but always conceal hints about the human condition in those circumstances.

We can begin from the game's title. In the first analysis, "the last of us" refers to the only humans left alive after the spread of the disease. But the game shows six levels of social organization, six kinds of "us". (1) The loner, like Bill, who survives on his own. (2) The duo, like Joel & Tess and Joel & Ellie, and also Henry & Sam and Bill & his partner. (3) The small family, like Joel and Ellie wish to be and what Sam and Henry already were. (4) The group, like Tommy, Maria, and the twenty-some families at the dam; and also like David's cult, the Fireflies, etc. (5) The city, like Boston or Pittsburgh and the other large groups within the old quarantine zones. (6) Humanity as a whole, the survivors everywhere.

The choice of which Ellie is deprived is the choice among which level of social organization she wants to benefit; that is, with whom she belongs, with whom her moral, social, and metaphysical allegiances lie. She carries within herself a genetic mutation that, if harvested, could benefit the whole of humanity, though this would mean her life. Marlene would have forced her to sacrifice herself, while Joel forces her not to. Thus both Marlene and Joel, who see themselves as Ellie's surrogate parents, identically override her agency to choose what is best for her (In this light, Joel's line to Marlene before killing her, "you'd just come after her," recasts that scene as little more than a custody dispute).

In partial defense of Joel, we can understand his motivation—though not the actual lie—as his allegiance to the family unit more than to Ellie's individual choice. In a family sometimes parents make decisions for their children and justify them partially by the need to protect children against harm and partly by the need to prevent the dissolution of the family unit. Joel is doing both. He wants to protect Ellie from potentially making a decision that will kill her, as any reasonable parent of a 14-year-old would do; and he wants to keep their newfound family together, though that is also partly because of his egotistical desire not to lose his replacement daughter. So while it is true that Ellie is a female deprived of agency by a male's power, she is also an adolescent, and it is not chauvinist to deprive adolescents of their agency in certain situations.

Still, in light of Ellie's path to moral independence throughout the game, one feels that Joel owed it to her to tell the truth. That is not incompatible with then imposing his will as a father anyway; after all, he had had no problem having the final word until that point. So his decision to lie can be ascribed to cowardice, a lack of moral fiber when it matters the most, a fear of losing his daughter again that was just too strong. He wants to keep Ellie from harm, keep the family together, *and* keep everyone happy about it. This is why I argue that despite Joel being the protagonist, he is also the eventual villain: Druckmann's dissonant ending makes sure that we do not leave his game without realizing that.

As I said, Ellie may or may not have bought into the lie. She may eventually find out and be disillusioned and angry, or she may have decided that even though Joel is lying she should trust his judgment over her own because he has never let her down in the past. The game does not preclude any of these options from happening in the future, and I much prefer a story that leaves them open rather than unilaterally deciding what is best and why. No doubt the road is wide open for a sequel, one in which Ellie, now a few years older and wiser, sets out in search for the Fireflies, perhaps with the intent of sacrificing herself or perhaps merely to know more. Since her journey of self-discovery has been cut short as Joel reeled her back in at the end, it only makes sense that we witness her true coming-of-age in the next game—perhaps titled *The Rest of Us*.

V. Conclusion

When analyzing a text, most of us want to be able to summarize their opinions in a line or slogan. Few texts allow that, and those that do are not very good. Yet, in the interest of synthesis, I will try to draw a few general conclusions from my discussion, though they will be necessarily fraught with qualifiers.

Is the game sexist? I think the right answer is either “yes, but...” or “no, but...” depending on one’s inclination. I agree with the consensus that we can only praise the game within the dismal context of video-game sexism. Yet I have also argued that most authorial choices both criticize sexism rather than endorse it, a fact that seems to be lost on most commentators, and redirect the issue from merely gender roles to family and growth as well. The old question remains of whether I have read too much into the text by bringing my critical structures to bear on it. Is all of this only visible to optimistic and moderate critics, while most of the public will use the story to reinforce their gender prejudice? I have no way to know, but surely the game does not do enough to thwart that danger.

What, then, could it have done differently? Quite simply, allow us to play as Ellie the whole time, or at least the majority of it instead of a mere couple of hours. At the end of the day, the best (some say the only) way to make a text truly feminist is to make it about women, by women, and for women. Stories written by male authors and starring male protagonists, no matter how otherwise respectful or emancipatory, are still not as valuable as women’s stories starring women. Clearly that is not a sufficient requirement, but it is necessary. *TLOU* tells the story from Joel’s perspective only in order to create a cognitive dissonance in the player by portraying him as the eventual villain—but a similar result could be achieved by letting us play as Ellie and see Joel as an *external* villain, without confounding us with a text that might be too complicated for most to understand; that is, without tempting us with the easy way out of seeing Joel as the good guy just because we are in his shoes more than we are in Ellie’s, which many uncritical players will do. Surely if we played as Ellie we would risk objectifying Joel as a stereotypical violent man with a Daddy complex, or some (not I) might say that there is no need for male characters at all; but those risks are still preferable to the critical gymnastics that are currently necessary to rescue the story from the charges of sexism. *Beyond: Two Souls*, another game with an exceptional storyline and character development, does precisely that by placing players in the shoes of Ellen Page’s character, and the results are stellar (though that game suffers from other problems, such as a heavy emphasis on heterosexual romance and the lack of any other meaningful female character).

The fact remains that, critically speaking, *The Last of Us* is among the best videogames ever written. It is a psychotic tale of rare beauty and perversion that takes our moral teeth out, though it gives us a bit too much anesthesia instead of punching us with an uppercut. Its main redeeming virtue is not that it allows for this kind of debate—that bar is too low—but that it takes a genuine, if soft, feminist stance about it.