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ENDURE AND SURVIVE: DYSTOPIA IN THE POST-APOCALYPSE AND ITS
INSIGHT INTO HUMAN EXISTENCE

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Department of English and Philosophy

Idaho State University

Fall 2014

Committee Approval

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Thesis Abstract--Idaho State University (2014)

Dystopian stories are hypothetical scenarios where fear and paranoia are projected into a fictional society in order to comment on the flaws of the present-day culture. As a social commentary, post-apocalypse fiction functions in the same way as dystopian literature, but bears a fatalist perspective wherein society has crumbled as a result of some global catastrophe. By analyzing the post-apocalypse as it is found in dystopian literature, this thesis studies two popular examples of modern fiction: Cormac McCarthy's "The Road" and PlayStation 3 game "The Last of Us," developed by NaughtyDog studios and written by Neil Druckmann. I examine how this genre of literature can carry an agenda or motive, and how such commentary can help repair certain cultural flaws. In particular, this thesis focuses on how these pieces of fiction comment on human cruelty, the degradation of the environment, and the factors that exist in these fictional societies that prevent society from restructuring itself. It also explores how different kinds of media can accomplish these objectives.

Chapter 1: Of Dystopia and the Post-Apocalypse, and of Ways to Read It

The first chapter of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* begins with the unnamed protagonist waking from a dream. The writing style of the book is peculiar—described by John Hillcoat as “a form of poetry”—and seems sometimes just as stilted and confused as the dream from which the protagonist awakes, with the sentences running together with barely-sensical and inharmonious constructions:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world” (3).

McCarthy never bothers to explain what is happening in this skeletal nightmare. He offers no exposition. Instead, he drops the reader into a post-apocalyptic wasteland as if we, too, have just woken from a strange and confusing, yet terrifying nightmare.

Wakefulness is no release from the nightmare, but a descent into even darker reality. Fear is always present, yet the source of it is not always tangible or easy to describe. The book is written in an unusual literary style with lapses in punctuation and spelling, which seems to reinforce the confusion present in the story's plot. James Wood describes McCarthy's style thus: “Hard detail and a fine eye is combined with exquisite, gnarled, slightly antique (and even slightly clumsy or heavy) lyricism. It ought not to work, and sometimes it does not. But many of its effects are beautiful—and not only beautiful, but powerfully efficient as poetry” (par 16). It is partly as a result of his style that many of McCarthy's fans feel the book carries a foreboding message about human existence. The

broken style suggests that society has broken, or rather that it is in great danger of breaking.

McCarthy purposely leaves many aspects of the novel to the imagination, including backstory and important environmental details. Instead, he presents us with two nameless protagonists: a middle-aged man and his ten-year-old son, walking down a desolate road, possibly in October. Their destination is the ocean, and they presume that they must reach it before winter or they will starve to death. They carry very little: just a shopping cart with supplies, and they are armed with a pistol containing only two bullets. Billions of people have died, and the plant and animal life appear to be long gone. The survivors of whatever event has transpired are mostly presented as a danger to the man and his boy. Roving militias haunt the road, and cannibalistic cults infest the woods surrounding it. The man tells the boy that their purpose is to “carry the fire,” a metaphor indicating their motivation to maintain their grasp on humanity despite the evil in the world.

Post-apocalyptic literature has enjoyed a great deal of recent popularity and has featured prominently in both critical and popular media, inspiring books, comics, movies, television series, and video games. *The Road* is by no means unique as a work in this genre, but it is unusual in that it manages to approach the subject in such a way that illuminates some of humanity’s deepest fears and emotions. Published in 2006, the book quickly gained popularity, winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2007, and was quickly adapted to film by John Hillcoat in 2009. The film involved much of the same imagery as Danny Boyle’s zombie apocalypse film *28 Days Later* or AMC’s *The Walking Dead* television series. The film version of *The Road*, in conjunction with these other works,

then became a source of inspiration for other adapters, in particular Neil Druckmann and Bruce Straley, writers and creative directors of the PlayStation 3 title *The Last of Us*.

This thesis will examine McCarthy's *The Road* and its film adaptation by John Hillcoat, *The Last of Us*, and other media by Neil Druckmann exploring the game's extended story arc, including DLC (Downloadable Content) and comics produced by NaughtyDog. The game was released in 2013; in that year it was a best-selling title and won several game-of-the-year awards, becoming the most-awarded game of all time, and shattering the expectation that it was yet another zombie shooter game. Game critics have heralded it as a masterpiece in storytelling, lauding both its visual beauty and interactivity. The game-critic website IGN described the game as a "near-perfect analog" of *The Road*, and aptly demonstrates the connection between the two:

Both present a hopeless, post-apocalyptic situation navigated by two characters—an adult and a child—with nothing but absolute despair surrounding them. Like *The Road*, *The Last of Us* is perpetually dangerous and unpredictable, and like *The Road*, what happened to get society to a point of rapid decay isn't the focus. It's the story of the characters at hand, and those characters alone, at the center of both plots. The beauty of *The Last of Us* when compared to *The Road*, however, is that it's fully interactive, complete with all of the vulnerability, uncertainty and perpetual insecurity such a situation inherently provides. (Moriarty, par 1)

The Road and *The Last of Us* also invite other, more direct comparisons, especially given the fact that the film adaptation of the novel was one of the main inspirations for the story. For example, the last spoken word in the film is "Okay," and the last spoken word in *The Last of Us* is also "Okay." Both lines are delivered by the main child protagonist.

The line is also delivered many times by the boy in the novel. There is also an Easter-egg in the game in which Ellie carries a book in her backpack titled “To Get to the Other Side,” with a picture of a chicken on the front. The author of the book is “Kathryn McCormack,” which is very nearly an anagram of “Cormac McCarthy.”

The texts mentioned herein are significant first because they are derived from one another, and second because the different narrative methods allow the storytellers to examine the post-apocalypse from different angles that help develop a few of the unexplained implications of the novel. The goals of post-apocalyptic literature in general are very similar, but in this case each work manages to present a facet of dystopian society that the other doesn’t emphasize as strongly. It is significant that these works, derivative as they might have been in their inception, still manage to focus on their own agendas as they tell a similar story. Each is unique, but examining them together can help generate a snapshot of what post-apocalyptic literature has to say about human existence.

There are a number of studies of McCarthy in general, such as John Cant’s *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* and Julian Murphet and Mark Stephen’s *Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy’s ‘The Road’*. These focus specifically on *The Road* and the elements which distinguish it as a post-apocalyptic novel, but neither spend much time on their dystopian implications. There is very little scholarship about *The Last of Us* other than what appears in game-review websites and independent user reviews. This thesis makes use of some critical sources that comment on the post-apocalypse in *The Road*, particularly those which emphasize the work as actually encouraging cultural change, such as Claire P Curtis’s. “Last One Out, Please Turn Out the Lights: On *The Beach* and *The Road*,” which deals heavily with the social

contract present in the post-apocalypse. Direct feedback from unpublished sources, such as user feedback, is in some ways just as useful as other forms of criticism as they show the direct impact of the work on the user sans critical background. As there is very little scholarship of video games, user feedback is vital to establishing reader response and determining what *work* can be accomplished by this genre of media.

Dystopia and Post-Apocalypse

Dystopian stories depict hypothetical societies in which fear and paranoia about the present are projected into a fictional future in order to comment on the flaws of the culture that produced it. As a form of social commentary, post-apocalypse fiction functions in the same way as dystopian literature, but adds a fatalist perspective wherein society has crumbled as a result of some global catastrophe. Because of this similarity of function, many pieces of literature like *The Road* can be considered dystopian as well as post-apocalyptic. An interesting phenomenon is that people often conflate the terms, but rarely do writers make an effort to justify the “dystopian” label for post-apocalyptic works. The most common definition of dystopia is “an imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives” (Merriam-Webster), but most dystopias are much more complex than simply a horrible, dehumanizing place. One thing is for certain: not all post-apocalyptic stories are dystopian, and not all dystopias are post-apocalyptic.

The types of dystopia are quite varied, but they do bear this in common: they are all fictional realities attempting to comment, in one form or another, on some state of things in the world. In order to do this, they create an exaggerated social reality that is bound by a different set of ideologies than those that exist in our present society.

Many of the most popular examples of dystopia represent societies governed through totalitarian governments backed by an isolated and privileged political elite, and enforced by surveillance, militaristic force, and political ideology. Stories that take place in this kind of environment usually depict the struggle of someone who wishes to overthrow the governing structure, like Winston Smith in *1984* (1948) or Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* (2008). Authors imagine worlds where commodities are restricted to a particular class, where the working class can be subjugated without complaint, and where people can effectively be brainwashed into believing whatever truth the government wished them to hold. These stories refer indirectly to real-world situations of societal oppression, such as Hitler's Third Reich or Stalin's Soviet Union, or anticipate the state of North Korea today. The most frightening aspect of dystopian literature is that it resembles real history—and sometimes manages to predict the future.

Post-apocalyptic societies are different from conventional dystopias in that they lack a structure of oppression: there is no government, no leadership, and no intact social system. Instead, the post-apocalyptic story places special emphasis on what is removed, carefully constructing a reality that resembles our own, only without amenities as laws, governments, food and water supplies, safe homes, and traditional families. They hold up reminders of the past, often with a kind of fragmented elegiac beauty—the reality that used to exist is gone, and now all that remains is a broken, tormented present. And while most traditional dystopian literature manages to address threats like corruption and control, post-apocalyptic literature imagines what happens after there is nothing left to govern. James Berger mentions that our society has been met with several kinds of apocalypse—Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the American Civil War, etc.:

It seems significant that in the late twentieth century we have had the opportunity, previously enjoyed only by means of theology and fiction, to see after the end of our civilization—to see in a strange prospective retrospect what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi death camp, or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland. We have been able to see these things because they actually happened. (Berger xiii).

These themes are present in literature as a reflection of real-life and imagined events, and portray the world as it *could be*, if the events that could destroy the world were allowed to transpire. Popular literature has imagined the world being destroyed by nuclear wars, alien invasions, pestilence, climate change, political unrest, mind-controlling drugs, and technological failure. Berger notes that post-apocalyptic literature is not so much a story about the actual destructive event, however, as it is a discourse about “aftermaths and remainders, about how to imagine what happens after an event conceived of as final” (xii). The actual event that caused the global cataclysm has ended, and yet, the “text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself” (Berger, 5). What is left is destruction and confusion, and a kind of overemphasis on pain and suffering, but also a kind of commentary on rebirth, renewal, corruption, and purification. A subgenre focusing on the subject of bodily corruption and destruction is zombie fiction, which is right at home in post-apocalyptic literature. *The Last of Us* handles the subject of pestilence and zombification symbolically through a fungus that infects the brain—a concept lauded by critics as a social commentary that extends beyond physical corruption and on into mental. Gomel explains that pestilence offers a unique vision of the apocalypse:

On the one hand, it may be appropriated to the standard plot of apocalyptic purification as a singularly atrocious technique of separating the damned from the saved . . . on the other hand, the experience of a pandemic undermines the giddy hopefulness of Endism. Since everybody is a potential victim, the line between the pure and the impure can never be drawn with any precision. Instead of delivering the climactic moment of the Last Judgment, pestilence lingers on, generating a limbo of common suffering in which a tenuous and moribund but all-embracing body politic springs into being. The end is indefinitely postponed and the disease becomes a metaphor for the process of living. The finality of mortality clashes with the duration of morbidity.” (406-407)

Gomel directly compares pestilence in post-apocalyptic literature to the trope of political subjugation found in dystopian literature. Political oppression can result in the destruction of the social order, but a global pestilence levels the playing field and leads those who inhabit it to consider that they are experiencing an act of God’s will—sometimes as an act of social control, since it requires a formal group or social structure to articulate that will. The topic turns from merely a question of ideology and control in dystopian scenarios, and becomes a metaphysical discussion where human nature is questioned and scrutinized.

Utopia and Dystopia

The post-apocalypse can be considered, in many circumstances, to be a sub-category of the dystopian genre. “Dystopia” can be seen as a blanket term encompassing many pieces of literature that describe a society constructed to be unsettling or

frightening—at a basic level the opposite of a Utopia, but more precisely a method to call attention to a threat in real-life society. The function of the utopian genre is to construct a society as an analog and contrast to our own in order to comment critically on many different sociopolitical issues: environmental, religious, economical, psychological, political, or technological. The term was coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 book *Utopia*, which describes a perfect imaginary society in the Atlantic Ocean. The world More describes is, at heart, an ironic projection of an ideal society, given the extreme measures undertaken to make it so. The cities of Utopia all look the same, with uniform houses and gardens. Private property does not exist, and people leave their doors unlocked all the time. The city is presented as a standard of perfection that is oversimplified and unreachable, and many of the book's place names hint at its unachievability. Even the word "Utopia" hints at the concept by cleverly playing on words: the word "eutopia" means "good place," but the word "utopia" (or outopia) means "no place." Moylan explains that dystopia is similar to utopia in that both concern hypothetical situations that some have called "social dreaming," which includes "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives in which the dreamers live" (5). More's *Utopia* is a fictional space designed for these dreams to take place.

By drawing attention to the unreality of the place he has invented, More seems to be purposely drawing connections between it and the society he lived in. The society he has invented does not exist, and never has. It may be tempting to argue that More's model of Utopia would provide a standard that modern societies could theoretically emulate; however, the reality is that these "perfect" societies are but pipe dreams. More's utopia

would require vast amounts of control and maintenance, and could only exist through the cooperation of all the inhabitants. Often, examples of perfect societies end up degenerating into fantasies of hedonism, as illustrated by Hieronymus Bosch's 16th century painting, "*The Garden of Earthly Delights*." On the central panel, it depicts mankind reveling in all kinds of sensual exploits, and on the right panel, it depicts the last judgment. As a complete narrative, it both illustrates hedonism and warns against it, portraying the lie next to the reality. More and Bosch both depicted societies in which perfect harmony and bliss seem obtainable, but both these works bear an unrealistic—almost surreal quality. What they both do effectively is make clever use of metaphor to draw connections with the real world.

Cultural Work

Jane Tompkins describes pieces of literature that successfully make these real-world connections as doing "cultural work," indicating that their authors have created them for the purpose of accomplishing some actual task. Her examples include *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: a work that was so impactful that Abraham Lincoln is rumored to have said to Harriet Beecher Stowe: "Is this the little woman who made this great war?" (Vollaro, par 1). Her novel was widely popular, and was revolutionary in that it exposed the depravity and evil nature of slavery. The novel's popularity and the persistent use of the apocryphal quote from Lincoln can be attributed in part to modern intellectuals' desire for a method "to affirm the role of literature as an agent of social change" (Vollaro, par 28). Other works are well-known today for accomplishing social change, such as *The Jungle* (1906) by Upton Sinclair and *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson. As this thesis will demonstrate, works that appear on the surface to be solely fictional or fantastic

may in fact relate directly to the real world in ways that are deeper than strictly metaphor. Those who read a text in this way can put aside critiques of the author's style and focus on the *function* of the text.

Cultural Work Can Influence a Reading of a Text

By viewing a dystopian text as a historical piece, a picture can be painted of the fears and paranoia of the society that produced it. Tom Moylan points out that a revival of dystopian literature took place in the aftermath of World War II, starting with authors who tried to imagine a better place—"eutopian" narratives where a far-off society enjoyed benefits that we could only dream of achieving—which eventually gave way to works in the form of the "critical utopia," which is designed with the "*critical mass* required to make the necessary explosive action" in society (Moylan 2). By analyzing recent (and popular) dystopias as cultural works, we can build an even more complex image of what these authors fear and believe is yet to come.

Dystopia is functionally important as a means to comment on a broad spectrum of political issues and dystopian stories can be effective in bringing about social change. It is not possible, however, to package the genre neatly and describe what it does uniformly; works must be examined within the context of the society that produced them. Categorizing dystopias is also challenging because they overlap with a variety of other fields of literature that may not necessarily be classified as dystopian. What is constant, however, is that each is a kind of "prophetic vehicle," which (to continue Moylan's description) functions as "the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn

our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside”

(2). The tendencies outlined in this particular kind of writing are quite varied—some of the best and most popular examples have established what is understood to be “traditional” dystopian literature.

The “underside” of utopia is usually represented by governments that are totalitarian, panoptic (in Jeremy Bentham's sense), or led by a privileged social hegemony. A major function of dystopian stories is to comment on the state of things in the world by creating a fictional, yet plausible reality where humanity's greatest terrors can be realized. Dystopias exist to comment on the fears of the societies that produce them. Some of the best-known examples of this kind of dystopia are George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. These stories bear the marks of being places “worse than the ones we live in” (Baccolini 1) by demonstrating how social hierarchy creates “iron cages” of control and ideology—restructured systems of thought-control where ideologies are defined and social orders are prescribed.

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Neil Druckmann's *The Last of Us*

Works like *The Road* bear a peculiar power that captivates readers. One explanation for this is that the protagonists of this kind of literature hold to a kind of resistance—the outlook is bleak enough to be unsurmountable, and yet the protagonists insist upon holding fast to the moral rightness of their goal. The same motivation to resist was felt by Winston in *1984*, Katniss in *The Hunger Games* series, John in *Brave New World*, Guy Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*, and many others who resist state or ideological

repression. Some of these champions fight for the freedom to choose, to learn, or to be free of subjugation, and others believe in a world where thought can be practiced without restriction. McCarthy presents a world where the rules are unclear, where immoral behavior seems to be a natural—if not necessary—reaction to the apocalypse, yet his characters represent the idea that there is something worth standing for that is more important than survival.

Stephen Murphet notes that *The Road* manages to approach this subject without buying into the clichés of other books in this genre, and that it does so much more effectively than even the book’s own film adaptation:

McCarthy’s novel lacks the sense of narrative destiny we would otherwise associate with the “quest,” and it rejects the cheap thrills of contemporary apocalypse scenarios; but what it most wants to evoke is this very stylistic “signature” of poesis peculiar to modernist letters. This is why John Hillcoat’s genuflectingly faithful film adaptation lacked the tremendous energy of its literary source: the book’s mimetic narrative was only ever a precursor to its style, which cannot be translated in any simple way into a medium other than prose; to film and project *The Road* is to lose sight of that. (4)

As with any critically-engaging piece of literature, the important response is to elicit a reaction in an audience and to encourage it to engage in critical thought leading to change. If the message is important enough—and many seem to feel that McCarthy’s missive is—then reaching a wider audience is vital to the distribution and adoption of the moral. Murphet (and others) believe that the film adaptation of *The Road* is much weaker than the source text, and many have said that his brand of poesis cannot possibly be

adapted to a visual medium. These critics fail to address properly nonliterary sources apart from movies, such as the growing medium of video games. David Koffer notes that video games address the issue of visually representing a story like this by allowing the player to “become” the lead role:

The player of a video game shares many similarities with the reader of a more traditional narrative, but with a key difference of structurally mandated interactivity. This interactivity results in the *avatar* (a simulated video game character through which the player interacts with the game) becoming a hybrid of human consciousness and computer code. Furthermore, the avatar allows for a particularly immersive experience for the video game player, and offers new methods by which storytellers engage an audience. Some games, such as *Bioshock*, tell stories in a way that can *only* work as video games. By manipulating a player’s agency and choice, and by presenting scenarios in which a player may speculate on her choices, video games broaden the dimensions of narrative. (2)

As an analog to *The Road*, *The Last of Us* may be considered to retell the same story with a similar moral. It is also a road narrative with two characters on a journey. *The Road* is a story of a man and his son; *The Last of Us* about a man and a girl who resembles his long-dead daughter. *The Road* portrays the characters traveling through a world where there is no other life, while *The Last of Us* adds essentially a zombie threat (mostly because it is a video game, and the creators needed something to make the gameplay more interesting (*Grounded*)). *The Road* depicts a mission to reach the ocean (and hopefully food and safety there); in *The Last of Us* the mission to find a group called

the Fireflies, who could presumably identify a cure for the zombie virus. Neither group of characters ends up finding exactly what they were looking for at the end of their journey, and both endings are equally ambiguous.

The film adaptation and *The Last of Us* offer another striking insight into the fictional universe in the form of music. The music of the game is composed by famous composer Gustavo Santaolalla on an out-of-tune guitar, perhaps because a properly tuned instrument would be difficult to find in a post-apocalyptic world. The music of *The Road* by Hillcoat demonstrates the hopeless, lifeless struggle of the characters with slow, striking chords which resemble the chiming of a bell. The music from both works is slow and disharmonious, yet it effectively underscores the introspective tone of each work. The most striking piece of audio, however takes place after the closing credits in the film: as the movie ends and the screen cuts to black the audio shifts from the movie score to sounds of an outdoor picnic. In the darkness it is possible to hear people talking, a lawnmower and sprinkler running, and the sound of birds chirping and dogs barking. These sounds cannot exist in a post-apocalyptic world. Their presence at the credits is jarring and foreign given the bleakness that precedes them. The music and sounds should allow participants to reflect and to ask could have brought humanity to this point.

Many of the biggest questions asked by *The Road* and *The Last of Us* relate to moral issues, particularly because the definitions of right and wrong seem to break down during times of global pressure—morality becomes overshadowed by the need to survive. *The Road* takes place in an indeterminate time in the future after everything has died; *The Last of Us* takes place twenty years after the world is torn apart by a kind of fungus called cordyceps. The cordyceps fungus is similar to other zombie stories in that it uses the

brain of its host to create a walking killing machine and is also transmittable through bites. The fungus becomes a central focus for the story because it is responsible for wiping out nearly all of the human race. The game allows players to explore how the world copes with the downfall of humanity in this kind of environment.

Critical Reception and Interpretation

Many post-apocalyptic stories, such as the ones examined in this thesis, involve innocent individuals caught in the wake of a disaster that is totally outside of their control. The ensuing social disruption, which causes humanity to destroy itself out of fear, tests the protagonists by causing them to question their basic morals and beliefs about humanity. Through the use of visual imagery and a natural immersive nature, comics, movies, video games, and television shows are just as capable of accomplishing cultural work as the classical pieces of literature that are more commonly studied. In addition, as cultural works, these unusual media forms benefit from an expanded audience of comic readers and gamers, deliberately choosing to follow new paths of media immersion with the intention of spreading their message more effectively.

Not only do the characters in this genre face challenges specifically related to the apocalypse, but they also exercise typically dystopian methods of control and surveillance over one another in their fear of losing any amount of power or resource in a broken society. *The Last of Us* provides a scenario where protection is offered by the government in a form of a military compound, but citizens must surrender their privacy and freedom in order to maintain safety. The restructured society toes the line between disorganized chaos and panoptic totalitarianism.

Characters in this kind of society adapt to a new system of ideologies and social norms, created by the apocalypse, which the characters must choose to either follow or resist. The reader is intended to experience a kind of culture shock at the difference between the fictional society and the real one. The promise of the loss of freedom can be a striking concept, but the loss of simple pleasures can have an equally hard-hitting impact on the audience. In *The Road*, for example, the man finds a can of Coca Cola in a broken soda machine and shares it with his boy. The boy quietly observes that they have taken the time to sit and enjoy it: “It’s because I won’t ever get to drink another one, isn’t it?” (23) A can of Coke is a very simple thing, but the possibility of its not existing manipulates the audience’s emotions and adds gravity to the message. *The Road* and *The Last of Us* both take advantage of this trope, from soaked books on a shelf and an abandoned coffee shop to a soundless, lifeless forest. These visuals are small horrors that introduce the reader into the uncomfortable reality of the story, and provide a stepping stone to new horrors, such as finding hostages in a basement who are being kept for the purpose of cannibalism.

For the audience, the choices made by the character in the face of an unfamiliar ideology either create hope and support the idea of humanity’s inherent goodness or cause the reader to question whether humanity has any redemptive qualities at all. The man in *The Road* is a character who demonstrates goodness and charity, but who also does not hesitate to kill another man in order to defend his child when the occasion presents itself. The juxtaposition of the good and morally vague elements in this kind of story deliberately creates a kind of terror and reduces the complex reality we live in to a more carnal and basic existence. What is left in these stories is often a stark minimalism

that somehow manages to allow the reader to look at all of its nastiness in a kind of detailed, merciless credibility. In *The Road*, McCarthy's narrator constructs the scene without quotation marks and with incomplete sentences; the effect is jarring and eerie, and perfectly paints a picture of the scenery and the struggle. The tone of the book is often introspective, given the solitude of the landscape and the nature of the characters' interaction. The man and his boy walk through a landscape that is "barren, silent, godless" (4), a lifeless wasteland of dead trees and abandoned houses. "Everything as it once had been save faded and weathered" (8). These characters bear a weighty desperation, and the simple interactions between the man and his boy are telling of the desperateness of their situation:

Are we going to die?

Sometime. Not now.

...

What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay. (10-11)

Reactions to this kind of media are surprisingly strong. Julian Murphet and Mark Stephen believe that those who read *The Road* critically all share "an impulse of sober analytic attentiveness, as if every word in the text counted; as if the pages of this book are what they sometimes purport to be—well-nigh sacred, apocalyptic in the true sense of issuing a vision for a community of believers" (7). The community of believers is

apparently strong enough that in June of 2008, Entertainment Weekly listed it as the best novel, fiction or nonfiction, written in the past twenty-five years (Entertainment Weekly). Reacting to his own experiences reading the novel, political activist George Monbiot refers to *The Road* as “the most important environmental book ever written,” and describes his experience:

The Road considers what would happen if the world lost its biosphere, and the only living creatures were humans, hunting for food among the dead wood and soot . . . McCarthy makes no claim that this is likely to occur, but merely speculates about the consequences.

All pre-existing social codes soon collapse and are replaced with organized butchery, then chaotic, blundering horror. What else are the survivors to do? The only remaining resource is human.” (1)

Monbiot later says that even weeks after finishing the novel, he was haunted by its bleak yet powerful message: a message he feels is connected to the way mankind takes care of the planet and each other. Monbiot’s initial reaction was to news articles on sulfur emissions, food production dealing with the world’s population, water scarcity, rainforest logging, and the global economy, but McCarthy’s tale of a Hobbesian world in a world that is devoid of resources appears to have struck a chord with him. The issues that Monbiot raises are real ones, and humankind is developing, in a very real sense, the ability to, if not destroy ourselves, perhaps severely damage the world we live in. But while his concerns about the environment are very real, Monbiot follows that the only logical recourse for a lack of food in a post-apocalyptic environment is to consume human flesh; in a world without any other life, there can, of course, be no other option.

The boy and his son endure chronic hunger and sickness, fear of their surroundings, and fear of the people they encounter. In the film, this is reinforced by the sound of falling trees—a sound that gets repeated over and over all the way through—and short disturbing bits of imagery, such as skeletons and corpses found in homes. The book and the film slowly and deliberately force the participant to endure the awful reality of it all, in a kind of unwavering horribleness. They are continually enveloped with the fear of starvation and death, and as a result are continually pressed by the temptation to take the easy way out.

Much of what can be said about *The Road* can be said also of *The Last of Us*. Some of these simple interactions make the characters seem alive, and cannot be ignored when reviewing the gameplay, which Grant Voegtle, a game critic who felt that *The Last of Us* changed his life, notes that game manages to do in some very daring and imaginative ways: “*The Last of Us* was able to impact me ... in a way that no work of fiction has before. It took me some time to realize it, but playing *The Last of Us* actually made me want a daughter.” He explains that this came as a surprise to him, as he had always considered that children were a major burden and that he never wanted them. In his review, he explains that the interactions between the player and Ellie as a character felt so natural that the player practically developed a bond with the character. “All of that build-up was overcome by the connection that develops not only between Joel and Ellie, but between the player and Ellie. I firmly believe that this kind of connection is not only enhanced by the narrative possibilities that video games allow, but that this is the only medium capable of developing such a strong connection.” Voegtle’s reaction is not unique. Many other gamers and reviewers have noted that *The Last of Us*, despite the fact

that it resembles on the surface many other zombie shooters, manages to accomplish something that other games in this genre can barely hope to achieve. Mike Krahulik of PennyArcade describes his experience:

“I can still remember finishing it and just sitting on the couch with tears in my eyes. I actually woke up my wife who was already in bed so I could tell her how it wrapped up. *The Last of Us* moved me in a way that very few games (or books, or movies for that matter) ever have. Maybe it delivers more of an emotional payload if you’re a parent.” (Par 2)

Neil Druckmann, writer of *The Last of Us*, explains that he believes many aspects of the story are virtually interchangeable, with essentially the same effect on the audience. “We weren’t consciously trying to pick male or female for characters. We just try to pick characters and just be honest with who they are—it almost doesn’t matter. Joel’s daughter could have been Joel’s son; Ellie could have been a boy; Joel might have been Tess. I think you could have swapped those roles and the story would have still worked” (*Grounded*). In this sense, the formula for these works is important to analyze closely. Bruce Straley, game director at NaughtyDog studios, which created the game, describes the presentation of the game and how they deliberately and painstakingly engineered it to toy with the audience’s emotions and morals:

We feel that the interactive medium has an untapped potential to touch the feelings of the player. You have that connectivity: the fact that I’m actually in the world and participating in what’s happening on the screen in front of me, it gives us some sort of advantage to make [the audience] feel connected with what’s actually happening...that’s what we’re trying to do: pair a story and gameplay

together. If we can make you feel like you're actually with these characters on that journey, and that you're invested in those stories and those characters, then you're feeling, in theory, the same thing that they're feeling. (*Grounded*)

The Road is well-known in literary circles, even if it is not critically regarded to be in the same academic category as many other well-known dystopian works. Its characters are essentially stand-ins for any other human being—blank-slates onto which any personality may be placed. This is perhaps either a stylistic choice or done deliberately. The plot is possibly quite formulaic: a road narrative with two characters on a journey. The two travel while encountering hardships, as the author seems to torture his characters with perils along their journey. The result of the narrative is an object lesson about life, of “carrying the fire,” and of persistent sticking to morals despite overwhelming opposition. These story elements and even the moral are not uncommon to many pieces of popular fiction, but it is a theme that seems to resonate with audiences regardless of how many times it is repeated; however a different interactive experience, such as a video game, provides a new way of commenting on a subject that has been addressed many times previously.

The payoff the game provides is emotional as well as philosophical. It is designed to test and challenge ideologies and preconceptions by causing the player to ask what he or she would do if placed in the same situation. This principle is effectively the same as what is found in dystopian literature, and is worked out magnificently in the game's major story arc, as well as its several subtexts. Many people react to the apocalypse in different ways—some band together, some go it alone. The protagonists encounter many

different people throughout their journey, each of whom have dealt with the situation in different ways.

The game forces the player to examine this fictional reality in a form that is very visible and tangible. In a sense, the player *is* the main character, and so the main character's decisions become the player's. A lot of people are put-off by how dark the game is, but if the game is placed side by side with *The Road*, for example, it somewhat strangely seems at times lighter, brighter, and more optimistic than its counterpart. Instead of barren and dead scenery, most places seem overgrown with lush plant life. Instead of torturous, barren emptiness punctuated with wistful memories of the past, there are genuine happy or uplifting moments between characters—shining glimpses of happiness and optimism in what would otherwise be an oppressive and bleak landscape.

Cultural Work Accomplished by These Texts

The function of post-apocalyptic literature in these stories is to comment directly on what kinds of decisions we (the readers) might make if we found ourselves in the same place. What if the world as we know it came to an end? Would we choose to feed the beggar? Would we stop to help the wounded? Would we sacrifice the life of a loved-one to save humanity? What if that loved-one was a child? To what lengths would we go to protect him or her? What if I were in this position? Would I make the same choice? Whatever the case, the post-apocalypse seems to have been able to reach audiences in a deep and cathartic way.

Apocalypse fictions are interesting. They test us, ask us how we might survive, rebuild, prepare, or even how we would likely die. There's a masochism inherent to the apocalypse story. We want to suffer along with these characters but only

because we believe in some way that we can isolate a part of ourselves, that we can find out what it means to be human when “being human” is all that remains.

These stories appear time and again because, perhaps now more than ever, we find in the complexities of our daily lives a desire to cut away the chaff, the politics, the trappings of modernity, and remind ourselves that below it all, there is something terrifying, inspiring, depressing, or hopeful within ourselves. We want to know if in the heart of desolation, there is something worth saving.

(Albor, Par 9)

Despite their great popularity, post-apocalyptic stories have mostly been ignored in dystopian studies, as they omit many prominent components of the more commonly studied dystopian works, such as government surveillance, Orwellian propaganda, or totalitarianism. As the purpose of dystopias in general is to exploit present paranoia to warn of a possible future, post-apocalyptic fiction does so, but from a different viewpoint. Post-apocalyptic literature allows the reader to understand that our modern society is dealing with many other issues. The fact that these issues are so commonly demonstrated by post-9/11 literature in a genre of literature that is so populated with zombies and destruction suggests that there are some fears that exist in our current society that were not always at the forefront of the minds of authors like Orwell or Huxley. Their works, and also more recent post-apocalyptic media can be used to examine the fears and paranoia of the society that produces them. Modern works, such as *The Road* or *The Last of Us* can be examined to see what issues are causing social conflict today.

Post-apocalyptic literature often differs from stories which may be considered “traditional” dystopian stories in its depiction of the potential of hope and redemption for humanity. This is a dramatic shift from what Moylan’s dystopia: “Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space for hope within the story” (7). Redemption is not granted to characters like Winston from *1984*. Moylan explains that most dystopian literature intends to “maintain utopian hope *outside* [its] pages,” for it is understood that we consider the scenario as “a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future” (7).

And while many new critical dystopias, such as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, are choosing to portray the breaking-down of the totalitarian regime, many works of post-apocalyptic literature offer a different avenue of hope for the future beyond the inescapable realities offered by Armageddon. The apocalypse may actually allow humanity to start over and perhaps learn from the mistakes that cast it into destruction. I intend to explore not only the critical warning but also the function of hope in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic environment.

Post-apocalyptic literature deviates from dystopia in a few respects—many modern authors and audiences are less concerned about totalitarianism and dictators than with the fear that humanity might actually possess enough power to destroy wide swaths of the world’s population with nuclear weaponry. The fear of being subjugated under an evil dictator has been replaced in many works of literature with the fear of global nuclear holocaust, ecological disasters, overpopulation, disease, and so on. In the events following the detonation of the first nuclear device, Winston Churchill warned that the intense power of nuclear weaponry would lead to the destruction of humanity: “The dark

ages may return, the Stone Age may return on the gleaming wings of science, and what might now shower immeasurable material blessings upon mankind, may even bring about its total destruction” (par 19). Post-apocalyptic literature serves to comment on such fears and premonitions, but instead of focusing on the apocalyptic event itself, it sets the timeframe many years further into the future to comment on our current state of existence.

The purpose of revealing the problems in society isn’t to provide the answers, but to ask the questions. Perhaps authors like McCarthy or game developers like Neil Druckmann are trying to reveal the problems present in our society by talking not about governments, utopias, and politics, but by stripping away the fat by showing their characters living in a broken mirror society. The objective here is to cause the reader to ask questions, not to provide all the answers, with the dystopia not a matter of governmental control, but of social systems which are grounded in beliefs and ideals. The post-apocalypse has a unique ability to touch our sensibilities because it is theoretical. It is not mystic, nor is it divine, and yet as a piece of fiction, it holds a relatable quality which begs for comparisons against our society. The work these pieces produce as a result of their narrative has a specific function and purpose, which is to elicit change.

Summary

The rest of this thesis will analyze Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Neil Druckmann’s *The Last of Us* as critical dystopias serving as commentaries on the fears and paranoia of modern society by looking at patterns in their storytelling and looking for interpretations of how they dialogue with modern social and political issues. As has been mentioned earlier, apocalypse can have a variety of causes. Cormac McCarthy’s *The*

Road hints at (but does not explicitly point to) a nuclear holocaust; *The Last of Us* draws inspiration from McCarthy's novel, but replaces the post-nuclear devastation with an infectious mind-controlling parasite.

Both *The Road* and *The Last of Us* are stories of a man traveling a desolate highway in a lifeless world with a child, and both explore the paternal instinct of the adult protagonist. Both feature characters forced to make moral choices in a world filled with extenuating circumstances. Placing *The Last of Us* alongside *The Road* helps provide commentary on post-apocalypse fiction by noting how some versions of this kind of narrative can qualify as dystopias, as well as what specific sorts of warning or commentary can be offered by this variation of the dystopian genre. The two stories are near-perfect analogs of one another in theme, and despite the fact that *The Last of Us* does not claim to be a direct adaptation of the novel, the game manages to produce a visual representation of many of the hidden fears present in the concept of the post-apocalypse. *The Road* lacks the zombie element, but as IGN's Colin Moriarty said above, the actual apocalypse is not the focus of the narrative, but rather the interactions between characters. The actual apocalypse serves only to create a plausible reality where the narrative can take place. It is when stories approach these kinds of elements that they may be considered dystopian, and may be counted among stories that serve as a vehicle for sending a message to humanity.

The Road and *The Last of Us* may be considered examples of dystopian literature because: A) their purpose is like traditional dystopian literature in commenting on a hypothetical, fearsome future for society; B) they account for the re-structuring of society with behaviors that are exactly like those found in traditional dystopian literature; C) the

citizens of post-apocalyptic literature, like citizens of many dystopias, look backward to an earlier time, wishing for a past that has been lost forever; and D) the purpose of the story's existence is to provide a kind of prophetic warning to the *status quo* of human existence. *The Road* demonstrates these elements with the two main characters and their struggle to collect and keep resources, as well as their dilemma of whether to help others in a changing and morally ambiguous world. *The Last of Us* is very similar thematically, but portrays survivors living in small, protected compounds under martial law.

Works such as these qualify as dystopian because they are designed to point out the flaws of a society, or at least point out social frailties which are in need of repairing. Some of the frailties they attempt to repair are political, and some of them are based on simple, social concepts. Much of what these works *do* is accomplished easily, and without special attention given to the execution, but the stark juxtapositions of the familiar against the unfamiliar surprises the audience and allows it to react.

The two stories (as well as the film adaptation of *The Road*), can be used together to make a few patterns regarding categories of social dystopia. The second chapter of this thesis will outline three of the most prominent patterns of human corruption that are found in post-apocalyptic media, and will explain what *The Road* or *The Last of Us* has to say about each one. The three “prophetic” warnings offered by these particular texts can be boiled down to three main issues that the authors seem to be warning against: the destruction of natural resources, unjust distribution of wealth, and the impact of human cruelty. The third chapter will address how these texts promote positive social change, and will address three other concepts. First, the disintegration of social prejudices, second the insistence of a text like putting importance on faith in the wake of outright

hopelessness, and third the strange message of hope for the future that an end-of-the world text provides.

Much of what these texts accomplish has to do with the medium, and how the creators of the particular work have chosen to do something unique in their area of entertainment. Also, much of what can be said about the text and its interpretation has to do with what the audience has to say about it. The important factor here is identifying positive social change, and how a piece of post-apocalyptic work is able to produce it.

Chapter 2: The Fears and Preoccupations of Dystopian Post-Apocalypse

The Road is a piece of speculative fiction. Much like George Orwell's *1984* or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, it is a hypothetical future, at some unknown time period where the biggest change from reality is the structures that govern society. The novel is only one example of post-apocalypse literature, a quickly growing and immensely popular genre. As a member of that category, it is not a huge deviation from other works. Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Walter Miller's "*A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960)," and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), bear resemblance to the novel in that they all concern a world where the vast majority of the population has been eradicated; they are concerned with the "aftermaths and remainders" that exist in a society with a broken social system.

This brand of fiction is popular in literature as well as in other forms of media—some stories that focus on the immediate apocalypse, such as Roland Emmerich's *Day after Tomorrow* or *Independence Day* (1996) are effective at capturing the public's sadomasochistic need for stories that depict a fallen society.

Moylan mentioned "social dreaming"—with a world so stripped bare, there is little to distract from the dream presented at hand. What follows are a few of the ways in which the dreams and nightmares of our society are read into *The Road* and *The Last of Us*.

Warning against the Destruction of Natural Resources

The apocalypse has already occurred at the beginning of *The Road*, but it is never said exactly what the source of it is. The only perceivable objects are cold, gray, and barely visible. Curtis describes the novel as a world that is totally and utterly dead,

“absent of any life beyond the husks of humanity that wander searching for cans of food” (19). The story presents two perspectives: One man who remembers the past, and a boy who has no memory of anything other than the present desolation. They are traveling on an overgrown and forsaken road, toward the ocean it seems, and the story details the events of their journey alongside some philosophical narration regarding how they got to that point and what they intend to do now. The story takes a limited perspective of the two characters, and focuses narrowly on their story as they plod through a post-apocalyptic wasteland, taking extra precautions to dwell on the landscape and environment. A natural question to ask when confronted with this kind of desolation is to ask what happened. Chris Danta responds to this question:

Like so many other things in this novel the disaster remains unnamed. In fact, so spare is McCarthy’s style in *The Road* that the words *disaster*, *catastrophe*, and *apocalypse* never appear. Critics have wondered whether his precise but incomplete description of the event refers to a nuclear apocalypse or to some other natural cataclysm (11).

In some ways, the cause of the apocalypse is not important. Whatever its source, its effects are felt globally by only a few who were unfortunate enough to survive into the barren waste that follows. The disaster prevents society from banding together to reconstruct itself, and creates a system where resources are only obtained through dangerous or brutal means. The threat of being exposed or caught unprepared is such a real and crippling reality that survival entails hiding, scavenging, and cowering in fear. Organization in this kind of society is represented only by factions of cannibals—

criminal bands whose only benefit for organization is to provide an overwhelming force for those who are weaker and less organized.

The social contract of this society is exhibited by the behavior of the man and his boy and is present in every action they perform: they push a cart with their supplies, and they carry knapsacks in case they need to abandon it and run for their lives. The simple fact that this is a precaution they have made indicates that this is a real danger they have to deal with. The same is illustrated by many things. The gun he carries: there are two bullets left “one for you, and one for me,” he says in the film. There are repeated worries about dying, the repeated worries about having enough resources. The man’s constant cough. All of these things work together to force the image that the future is bleak and hopeless, and McCarthy never lets his reader forget it. The man and his boy are up against “the crushing black vacuum of the universe,” and are like “two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover” (130). The setting for *The Road* reminds the reader of the subject matter on every page. In the book, hopelessness and despair are illustrated in the almost poetic language. According to Chris Danta, the word “gray” appears 81 times in the novel. He remarks:

It is impossible to read *The Road* without noticing how gray everything looks: days are gray; dusks are gray; dawns are gray; the light and the sky are gray; the landscape is gray; the city is gray; tree stumps are gray; the ash is gray; the slush, sleet, and ice are gray; the beach, sea, and hagmoss are gray; the water is gray; clothes are gray; the human body, both living and dead, is gray; hair is gray; teeth are gray; viscera are gray. And last but not least—the heart is gray (10).

Some might go so far as to wonder if the author is punishing his characters, or causing them to suffer unnecessarily, in order to prove a point. If so, what is that point, and what lesson can be gained from a destitute pair of helpless humans starving to death in the cold? There is no chance the reader might forget that the world has effectively ended through a description of a sunny day.

Although the exact method is not totally clear, the blame for the source of the apocalypse can be identified as a result of the imagery used. Danta argues that the purpose of the gray imagery in *The Road* is “that the world no longer emits or casts light, that it appears as though it is being illumined—that it is, as a result of the disaster that has befallen it, a ‘cold illucid world’” (13). *Light* as a visual metaphor can represent truth, wisdom, or knowledge: Danta’s claim is that the characters in this world are no longer capable of receiving “light” as a result of the disaster, with the only source of illumination that remains being the disaster itself. If the event that caused the apocalypse were a nuclear bomb, for example, there would be a stunning overexposure of light followed by a dazed blindness. Danta argues that an event of this type may have been the source of the apocalypse, and is the event that calculates the destinies of the characters for the rest of the novel.

The characters react to that source of illumination in several ways. Sometimes the characters (and by extension, the reader) have the freedom to use that light to learn truths about existence, but most of the time they blindly wander in the “cold autistic dark” (15). For most people this is the case: “By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp” (32). McCarthy’s language, the real source of beauty and horror in this novel, uses personification to demonstrate loss and sorrow. On this subject Chris

Danta opines, “One might say that personification is the last resource in a world in which the only living thing is human” (18). In this case the only light that remains is haunting, gloomy, grey, cold, and lost. The light is lifeless, but its effects—like the shadows of civilians burned onto the sidewalk after the Hiroshima bomb—force the characters to accept that life has changed. The old society is dead, including its technology, wisdom, and light, so now if possible it is necessary to seek a new source of light.

Some critics maintain that the premise of the book is unrealistic. For a novel which contains so many allusions to the color gray, there seems to exist a stark dichotomy of personalities in terms of black or white. The only good characters (in particular the boy), are borderline angelic, and the bad characters cannot possibly commit greater evil. Readers wonder if the book is actually a metaphor for understanding humanity or merely a sadomasochistic experience. What is most disturbing about the book, from the overarching storyline to the point of close-reading, is that there is something inherently flawed with its circumstances: if every single living creature died in the Unrevealed Holocaust, and the sun hadn’t been visible for that long, then there would be no protagonists to carry the story. According to the story there are no birds, all the trees are dying, there used to be fish in the ocean but now there are none . . . For any of these conditions to exist, then there can be no practical explanation for survival at all. Once the world’s store of canned goods ran out, there would be nothing to eat, and everyone would starve to death. Whether or not it is technically feasible for this level of grand destruction to even happen can be left only to our imaginations, but to a modern audience it should at least be possible to recognize McCarthy’s intention in non-literally discussing how humanity can endure strife. As for why the apocalypse is never

mentioned, Danta believes, “McCarthy is more concerned to trace the consequences than he is to identify the cause of the catastrophe,” (11). The practical *function*, then, of *The Road* is to present a hypothetical scenario and invite its readers to set aside unimportant details and focus on character interactions. The characters are nameless: “They stand in for any father and son. This can be a way of focusing the attention on the pair as the last vestiges of what we understand humanity to be. It is also an indication of the role that names play. There is no need for a name in a world that is ending. Names give particularity and meaning to human life” (Curtis, 31). Any reader might replace him or herself with the characters in the story and accomplish the same effect. This is done deliberately with a kind of minimalistic flourish. The reader, having been inserted into the story, must endure the brutality of its plot firsthand—protecting a child, eluding deadly cannibals, suffering from hunger, and ultimately dying on the journey are experienced by the reader as a result of this transposition.

Unjust Distribution of Power and Wealth

The story of the game is told through several short, vignette segments of a road narrative. It begins with a regular man named Joel who tragically loses his daughter at the cusp of the apocalypse, and then fast-forwards to twenty years after the initial outbreak. *ErrantSignal* notes that the game’s title begs a particular question—a question normally not addressed because of the expectations attributed to zombie survival games:

Specifically, the game wants us to ask who the “Us” is in the Last of Us. How do we define “us”; how do we sculpt and cultivate social groups and loyalties? Do you mean you and yours or do you mean your greater community or do you mean humanity as a whole? And whatever your answer, how much are you willing to

lose, to hurt, to sacrifice, and to harm others for that “us?” It’s a title that frames the “us” as under threat, and how you define “us” and how you react to that threat is the core idea the game toys with throughout. (Franklin, par 3)

The main character Joel becomes involved in the story because of a girl named Ellie, someone who is apparently immune to the effects of the fungus. Joel is tasked with escorting her to find someone who can use her immunity to develop a vaccine, and the two develop a relationship of trust throughout their journey. Their relationship is partly due to the fact that Ellie vaguely resembles Joel’s daughter Sarah, for whom he is apparently still grieving.

The relationship they build is complicated—nothing in *The Last of Us* is ever easy to explain in terms of black or white—but it leads to a major climax at the end which has generated a lot of controversy for raising moral issues

Joel’s character experiences the conflict of the society struggling to rebuild from a variety of perspectives, allowing the player to sample how different factions have attempted to reconstruct society. He has been on both sides; he’s killed numerous people to survive, and his character has hardened as he has attempted to adapt to the new world order. The game plays as a kind of commentary on these societies, and a kind of social experiment to sample how some are more effective than others.

The first chapter of the game takes place in a military-protected compound in Boston, where a system of martial law is in place to regulate the population within it. The compound is a society separated from the world, but functioning as a small microcosmic dystopia—apparently there are several compounds just like this one dotted around the

country, yet pockets of humanity have managed to survive through various means, constructing several small examples of societies. Apart from the government-sanctioned compounds, there are roving bands of hunters or small communities that sustain their ranks using whatever means they can. Some of these groups, such as the one led by Tommy, Joel's brother, band together to compound their ingenuity for the benefit of the group. The small community in Wyoming boasts the use of hydroelectric power, and even agriculture. This can be contrasted to a group led by a man named David which has resorted to cannibalism to keep itself alive. The Fireflies are another group which has defied the government-sanctioned regulations in its attempts at creating a vaccine, but in its vain efforts to survive, has done nothing more than grasp at straws. Most societal groups are small, sometimes only one or two individuals. Every group manages to react to the apocalypse differently, with varying levels of success. The virus has forced the population into a situation where they are unable to lift themselves out of their trial, and the result for most communities is a spiral into decay and corruption.

What is interesting about each society is that they all function as a kind of dystopia. Some are more obvious than others. The compound in Boston at the start of the game is where Ellie is born and raised, and is a quarantine zone run by the US government. The city is regulated by checkpoints, soldiers, and body scanners who routinely check for infection. If a scan turns up positive, the person is executed on the spot. As Joel walks through the streets of Boston, he overhears conversations from people on the streets; many are complaining about a lack of resources, being "volunteered" for dangerous duty, or of being afraid of the soldiers running the compound.

The situation in the compound exemplifies many of the attributes that characterize traditional dystopias, but the definitions are more gray than clearly defined. As the player explores what is left of Boston, it is possible to see soldiers on the streets and rooftops with automatic weapons. A loudspeaker proclaims reminders to the citizens, indicating that all residents must carry an ID, that compliance to the rules is mandatory, and the penalty for stealing, and so on. This is of course leveraged against the population as a protective defense against the virus, but it is clear from conversations in the game that the militia that is serving to protect the city is benefitting from their position of influence. As Joel and Ellie stumble through another abandoned compound, this conversation takes place:

ELLIE: "Why wouldn't they give them their food?"

JOEL: "Sometimes they ran out. Most times they just held on to it."

ELLIE: "That never happened in Boston."

JOEL: "Trust me, it happened all the time."

This and other small conversations demonstrate that what the player is able to see immediately is only a small portion of a larger problem. The environment of the compound tells its own story: signs are up explaining that a curfew is in effect, and that those caught outside after dark will be arrested. In order to maintain safety, the compound has been turned into a totalitarian state. Some of the rules are put in place by the government, and some regulations are indications that the military is abusing its power.

The safety and protection the people endure in the quarantine zone is very similar to what is experienced in *1984*, but with an important distinction. O'Brien tells Winston that the purpose of seeking power is to secure control:

The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power, pure power . . . no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means; it is an end.

One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship.

In Orwell's society, the nation was permanently held in subjugation by holding the threat of war over the heads of the citizens. The war in Orwell's society was in fact an illusion designed to prevent the citizens from questioning the government's usage of resources and materials—an illusion that the government maintained by dropping bombs on its own people. The revolution was but a means to preserve a few privileged individuals in positions of power while denying wealth and resources to the masses.

The quarantine zone in Boston in *The Last of Us* exhibits many of the same attributes, but it is notable that the soldiers who regulate the city are exercising control in the same way as Big Brother's bourgeoisie. The militia in place to protect the city bears as much authority as their position and guns provide, yet they are exercising their authority above and beyond what their authority affords them. Another curious difference from the society in *1984* is the fact that the citizens of this compound don't seem to be accepting the governance of the state outright: Joel and Tess are involved with a black-market trade organization, and move undetected through secret passages in and out of the compound. They are apparently not the only ones doing this, and it is clear that many people within the compound are dissatisfied with the state of control. There is a clear animosity toward the military that governs the city, with talk on the street decrying their actions and misdeeds over the people.

The city bears the residue of an anti-government organization called the Fireflies in the form of graffiti and snatches of conversation on the streets. The group proclaims hope and rescue from the grasp of the military state, and contends that the government is incapable of protecting people adequately. The compound promises protection, but the Fireflies are attempting to make it clear that the residents have traded their freedom for safety.

The Fireflies are a subterfuge group that is organized underneath the government. They claim to have the ability to make a cure, but they really have made no progress. Despite this, the organization has carried out subterfuge missions against the compound, with objectives such as smuggling in forbidden supplies, but their efforts have probably done more harm than good in their undermining the regulations of the government. As people escape the compound to scavenge for resources, people get infected. When they return to the compound, they infect more people, and the security of the militia only gets stronger as a result. The game allows the player to see that the Fireflies are perceived as saviors from the reality they endure in the quarantine zones, and then allows the player to see that the Fireflies are, in reality, false saviors.

Human Cruelty and Depravity

Both the book and the game spend time discussing the repercussions on society of an extreme lack of resources. Both scenarios explore the concept in a fictional universe, and allow their characters to experience scarcity and desperation, and sometimes abject horror. Benjamin Percy argues that *The Road* has “the scariest passage in all of literature.” Describing it, he says:

I'm still haunted by that passage. No matter how many times I read the book, it still seems to affect me. It grabs you by the throat and drags you down the rabbit hole. Our world dissolves, his world takes over. That's a major accomplishment—when you make flesh and blood and wood and stone out of ink and paper. (Par 13)

This is of course the section of the story when the man and his boy discover a locked basement containing dismembered but still-living bodies of human beings used for food. Cannibalism is the most horrific and extreme kind of scarcity, as it clearly illustrates the notion of great desperation.

The passage creates fear for the people in the basement, but we mostly fear the people who put them there. For most readers, this scene is the darkest and most gruesome (yet somehow, not gratuitous) scene in the novel, yet its presence in a fictional universe may possibly cause the reader to distance from the story and dismiss the events in this scene as impossible. The novel does involve fictional characters in a fictional society in fact, yet the reader should remember that cannibalism has, and does, happen in our modern society, in total absence of an apocalypse. The same can be said of governments that persecute their citizens, of people who disregard or destroy natural resources. Just because developed nations rarely see the effects of scarcity doesn't mean they don't exist—there are people in portions of the world starving to death today. This is a reality which, if thought of during the scene where the man and his boy discover a campfire scattered with the remains of a baby that had been cooked and eaten, ought to encourage readers to explore methods of alleviating suffering in the world.

If the game does one thing well, it is the psychological interaction between the characters and the philosophical questions raised by their interactions, hence the emphasis from the developers that the game is not a zombie game. The infection is based on the real cordyceps fungus, which works by taking over the brain—therefore it could be argued that the game is actually a commentary on the nature of human thought and sanity—a topic that is brought into question at several points throughout the game. In the scope of the desperate nature of the actions the characters are asked to endure, and the bitter choices that they are forced to make, sanity becomes an important question for gauging whether or not the characters can be accountable for their own actions.

At one point, Joel and Ellie enter a university looking for the Fireflies, but are ambushed by a group of stragglers and Joel is injured. While Joel recovers, Ellie happens upon a small band of stragglers led by a man named David, who tells her that “everything happens for a reason.” It turns out that David and his community have resorted to cannibalism to survive the apocalypse, and that the individuals who attacked and injured Joel were part of his company. Strangely, David describes Joel as a crazy man, and accuses him of killing people with barely any justification. By questioning Joel’s sanity, the game is questioning the player’s morals and rationale, and by extension the player’s sanity as well: Joel never tries to talk his way out of a situation, and instead resorts to violence on many occasions to get through trying times. His obvious lack of guilt for some very violent actions is apparently due to years of experience in dealing with inescapable situations. He appears to be jaded and feels that there is no acceptable answer to the conflict besides kill or be killed. *ErrantSignal* critiques Joel’s character and

identifies him as incredibly flawed, which demonstrates much of what is controversial about this title:

He's a selfish bastard afraid of being hurt when the game opens and he stays a selfish bastard as the game closes. The zombies are there when the game opens, and they're still there when the game ends. The only thing that changes is that a lot of people are dead. (Franklin, par 8)

Joel is an interesting character because his personality is so greatly flawed. He seems to be capable of emotional thought, but he buries his emotions, perhaps releasing his guilt through his violent behavior. Psychologically speaking, Joel is emotionally unstable. He is unfit because of the world he lives in. He blames it on survival, but considering his actions, he is a desperate murderer with little more to lose than his own life. He could have taken his own life, but he seems to have been searching for a moment of hope. "You keep finding something to hope for." David says that "everything happens for a reason." Ellie echoes this sentiment with her own desperate optimism: "It can't be for nothing."

The thing with Joel is that he has nothing to give up anymore, and that has a way of making him selfish. In other words, selfishness in this world isn't based on greed or consideration, it's based on the psychological need to protect oneself and family. There's an optional conversation after an ambush where Joel explains that the military murdered many people "to sacrifice the lives of a few to save the many." He justifies the military's overzealous protective behavior because in his mind, they did what they did because it was their job to protect the many. Joel isn't driven by any kind of state or structure; he's self-governed, and this is why he is desperate. He's doing what anyone would do in this

case—do anything to protect his family. There’s nothing about heroics or right versus wrong for Joel when it is his loved ones at stake—his actions seem justified to him because he’s protecting the one he loves. For Joel, the “Last of Us” can be boiled down to refer to him and those around him that he cares about, with no one else. In his own words, “You either hang onto your morals and die, or do everything you need to survive.”

ErrantSignal is correct that the game is not doing anything dramatically different from other games in the genre, but the majority of fans who have participated in this kind of content seem to feel that the game is delivering its content in a way that is emotionally stronger than that which other games have managed to produce. Like other games, it has zombies and guns and cutscenes, but unlike other games it makes an effort to involve the player in the physical story, a mechanism that cleverly morphs what would otherwise be a cutscene into an immersive gameplay experience. It also bears some strong symbolic connections, such as the watch that Joel wears. Sarah gives Joel a watch at the beginning of the game, only a few hours before she is killed. Twenty years later, Joel is still wearing the watch, even though it is broken at this point. It is a constant reminder of Sarah to Joel, as well as a symbol to the audience of his fragmented mental state. It is a reminder of the world that has disappeared since the apocalypse, and exists only in a broken shadow of its former self. There is no way to measure passage of time in this new society other than the seasons and the distance traveled, and the game marks the passage of time cautiously. The passage across the country is slow and deliberate, with the only quick section being the hospital scene at the conclusion. One of the best ways to illustrate this is found at the end of the game.

When the Fireflies are finally discovered, it becomes apparent that in order to attempt to make a vaccine, Ellie's life would have to be sacrificed. Joel responds by rushing back into the operating room, murdering anyone who stands in his way, including the surgeon in the operating room, in order to save her. When Ellie wakes up, she is confused and demands to know what has happened. Joel tells her that the doctors said a cure was impossible, and that they are leaving. Ellie asks Joel to swear that he's not lying, and he swears to her that he is not.

Ellie's reaction to this lie, a long pause followed by a short "...Okay" is the final word spoken before the credits roll in the game—a deliberate callback to *The Road*, in that "Okay" is the final word spoken by the boy there as well. Joel's actions in rescuing Ellie and the lie which follows are the subjects of controversy and discussion for those who have played the game. In an interview with game-review website Kotaku, Neil Druckmann responds to some of that criticism:

It sure wasn't a satisfying ending; there was no intense final boss battle, no emotional goodbye, and no great sacrifice. In many ways, it was the opposite of the more traditional (though no less worthy or affecting) ending we saw in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* game. None of the more predictable "zombie endings" people had guessed came to pass: Joel didn't die, he wasn't forced to kill Ellie, nor was she forced to kill him. Despite the fact that the game was built on so many zombie-movie tropes and clichés, its ending avoided all of them.

(Hamilton, 6)

The game is deliberately avoiding many of the trends found in zombie games, partly because the creators didn't view it as merely another zombie thriller. What they were trying to do was make a point, and to strongly connect these characters to the audience. Reactions to the game, and particularly the ending are very strong, and generated a lot of discussion among fans. One reviewer noted:

“Ask everybody who has played the game, and they'll give you a different perspective of the hospital scene, and how they reacted to the realization that they had no choice but to kill the brain surgeon. Some went in gung-ho and just murdered him. One guy I listened to on YouTube said that he tried to scare the surgeon off with a shot to the ceiling and then attempted a non-lethal shot to the foot. Most people I've talked to lingered for a solid minute or two before the inevitable truth set in on them ... [By] actively murdering that brain surgeon, though you may not agree with what you're doing, you are experiencing exactly what Joel felt: the hesitation, the guilt, the sickness.” (Voegtler)

The game cleverly uses this mechanism to challenge the players' ideologies. This can at times be disturbing or unnerving. Neil Druckmann explained that this was done intentionally:

Sometimes people don't realize they can shoot all the doctors, and sometimes they don't realize that they don't have to shoot the doctors. And sometimes they're like, 'Hey, I don't care, I just went in there guns blazing—how dare they do what they're doing!' And some people were disgusted that they have to shoot the first doctor. (“Grounded: The Making of ‘The Last of Us’”)

Druckmann explains, however, that gamers were in agreement that they would have all rescued Ellie themselves—despite possibly damning the human race, they were in agreement on at least the point that rescuing her was the right thing to do.

The end-game scenario is dreamlike, as if Joel were re-living the night he lost his daughter. He has metaphorically adopted Ellie, and returning to 'his brother is the way for Joel to feel as though he is returning to a world where everything is ok. Ellie has sort of replaced Sarah.

In the final vignette, Joel is forced to choose between the two forces we saw at play in the opening of the game; he's forced to decide whether to protect humanity and help the Fireflies get their cure or protect a loved one despite the dangers that might pose to the greater population. And in the end he kills for Ellie and he lies to Ellie. Not to protect her, but to protect himself. He's a selfish bastard who has experienced tremendous loss and never wants to do so again. And by making him the one responsible for keeping humanity endangered the game critiques traditional hero tropes, suggesting that a save-the-damsel-you-love narrative is a horrifically selfish construct in the face of genuine systemic change; that when your definition of "us" is too narrow you become more monster than hero. It frames strong, intimate bonds as selfish if it means removing a sense of empathy for all. (Franklin, par 7)

The dead-end with the Fireflies demonstrates Joel losing his only chance of hope. This is a world where you look after yourself. When characters help out one another, it shows that humanity is still there. Joel doesn't help out the rest of the world because he believes

that it doesn't need saving. He seems to believe that the world will move on, somehow. The point is that the ending leaves gamers scrambling to grasp the meaning of what has just happened. The character they had once identified with is replaced with one who is more like a villain and less like a hero, and gamers are left with the shadows of poor choices and an uncertain future, which deeply disturbed some players and resonated strongly with others.

Despite giving the initial impression that it allows the player to make decisions, *The Last of Us* still follows a linear storyline. The player still needs to get from point A to point B to set off the next cutscene, or short story-driven video which the player does not control. The game carefully mixes actual gameplay—characterized by combat, searching for resources, and navigating ruins—with the cutscene experience by allowing the character dialogue to continue while seemingly routine aspects of gameplay are taking place. The constant character interaction in the face of constant peril—Ellie will often defend the player-controlled Joel character if he is attacked, for example—allow the characters to feel real and convincing, and a kind of bond is created with Ellie that causes the player to feel compelled to protect her. The bond that develops is the source of moral conflict when Joel (the player) will literally do anything to protect Ellie. It's the player choosing to keep playing despite the moral conflict that makes the story work, and in that sense the game performs very well, forcing the player to encounter unexplored ideologies and challenging the player's personal beliefs. By coupling Joel with Ellie—a character without morals with a character who still has them—players learn to fight, but feel they are fighting for a cause. In the end, players feel that they are fighting *for* Ellie, which is why they justify Joel's response in the hospital at the end.

The effect is produced not just by the cutscenes, but also by the gameplay itself. Combat presents the player with several dangerous situations, many of which involve other people, some of whom are looking to kill Joel, and some whom are just other survivors of the apocalypse. As a result of the stealth component to the gameplay, Computer-controlled characters are often overheard having conversations about life, supplies, or their families. Others express fear. Some enemies will beg for their lives after being injured, and the player has to decide how to remove the threat. Some situations can be avoided entirely through careful stealth, others can be removed non-lethally; some, however, require the player to kill. As a facet of Joel's character, the gameplay interacts with the cutscenes perfectly, bearing no marks of ludo-narrative dissonance, which is conflict between narrative and gameplay, and a major problem that other games struggle to master. The game's cutscenes and gameplay work together better than many other titles, unlike, for example, *Grand Theft Auto 4*, in which the protagonist tries to be a good man in the cutscenes despite plowing down pedestrians and murdering people in the actual gameplay. Joel's choices feel justified, given the scenario the game creates, but for many gamers, this created a different problem. One gamer shares his experience:

The developers . . . crafted an experience where you and the character feel justified when pushed to do harm, but afterward you, the gamer, feel disgusted with yourself and horrified by the power of the situation to change your behavior and shift your moral center. You find yourself quickly learning to avoid violence—a behavior I was astonished to see evoked in myself inside a game world, and was thrilled to experience. (McRaney, par 4)

The reasoning for this response is that the player is directly involved with the violent actions taking place in the game. Joel is a violent person who, through the course of the game, kills a *lot* of people to survive, and it seems as though he has become numb to the idea of murdering someone. In the game, Tess describes the characters that she and Joel have become: “We’re shitty people, Joel it’s been that way for a long time.” Joel’s numbness may be justified or understandable given the circumstances of the game, but to the player, his actions are shocking and potentially unforgiveable—and yet, the player is required to follow through and perform Joel’s actions in order to win the game. Whether the player wants to or not, he or she will kill a *lot* of people to win the game. The result is that the game challenges the players’ beliefs and tests their willingness to accept concepts that are distressing or difficult to accept.

Chapter 3: Promoting Positive Social Change Through Post-Apocalyptic Literature

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of dystopia is to reveal the problems in a society, or at least to warn of realistic hypothetical ones. Both of these stories present an apocalypse and demonstrate it with characters who adapt to it as a method for endurance and growth. At the conclusion of each story, we are met with sadness at the unsolved apocalypse and at the deaths which take place, but each story bears a strangely hopeful attitude for the future. The touch of optimism in *The Road* is strange given the story's unescapable horror throughout, but at the end the boy is welcomed by a family—not cannibals—who are apparently one of possibly many other surviving families who reject the chaos of the new world order. We leave *The Last of Us* grateful for the life granted to Ellie, but conflicted at Joel's actions in rescuing her and lying to her. Joel may have saved Ellie, but he may have doomed the entire human race as a result. These stories invite their participants to strip away the extraneous details to focus on human relationships and to question the elements that build our reality. Claire P. Curtis explains that the “society” that is created in the wake of the post-apocalypse is a kind of social contract—the system of social codes and rules that the characters of the story must follow in order to survive:

Post-apocalyptic fiction is premised on a state of nature: the hypothetical fiction that is the driving force behind the social contract. The apocalyptic end destroys all semblance of organized political life, thus producing the conditions of the state of nature. But in order for the social contract to emerge from the post apocalypse there has to be some thought that life can go on . . . But what happens when a

post-apocalyptic account refuses to let humans come together for another try at civil society? (18)

The characters of the story, at least at the beginning, are identified plainly in terms of black and white. There are the good guys and there are the bad guys. Some of the bad guys are cannibals, and to the good guys, virtually everyone they encounter on the road is a threat, or at least could be a threat. The broken society presents a few very specific challenges to the main characters as a result, all of which distinguish this novel from other post-apocalyptic stories. In *The Road*, the apocalypse has destroyed life entirely—not in the simple sense that all of humanity has been wiped out, but in the literal sense that there is almost no mention of life anywhere in the pages of the novel. And if they are, they are told of as if in shadows of forgotten memories:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (88-89).

This passage demonstrates the “Hobbesian” attributes of human existence. The world they inhabit is filled with “numbness and the dull despair” (88), devoid of animals and vegetation, is populated only by exhaustion, hunger, suicide, cannibalism, and death. The world is boiled down to its most core survival elements, and is stripped bare from any distractions from these raw “parsible entities.” Claire P. Curtis explains that the social contract between the functioning society and the apocalypse creates a system of questions which the reader must ask in order to explain and understand how this kind of

literature *functions*, as well as how paring the story down to its basest referents accomplishes “cultural work”:

When social contract thinkers discuss the state of nature they are describing a set of conditions under which humans will act unencumbered by the restraints and rules of interaction under civil society. Whether through a fear of punishment (Hobbes) or a desire to be seen as the kind of person who obeys the law (Rousseau) we are described as beings that alter our behavior when restricted by rules that we understand to be largely person-made. Part of why post-apocalyptic fiction is seen to embody the state of nature is this unencumbered quality—the post-apocalypse world strips our behavior bare: what would people do if they were not restrained? (38)

Clearly *The Road* and *The Last of Us* represent humans operating without any kind of restraint. This applies to everyone except the protagonists, for whom there is even more restraint exhibited.

The Disintegration of Social Prejudices

Maureen Dowd, an OP-ED columnist from the New York Times, published an article titled “Moral Dystopia,” which opens with the statement: “Everyone is good, until we’re tested” (par 1). In the essay she writes about how extenuating circumstances in life challenge our moral natures and challenge our most basic beliefs about right and wrong. The dystopian philosophy dictates that choices are regulated or controlled by a higher power or ideology, which is what Dowd is suggesting of our modern society. Afraid to make waves or cause problems in the world around us, we sometimes shy from making

the moral choice in the name of self-preservation. By pointing this out, Dowd begs this question of our modern society:

Do greater opportunities and higher stakes cause more instances of unethical behavior? Have our materialism, narcissism and cynicism about the institutions knitting society—schools, sports, religion, politics, banking—dulled our sense of right and wrong? (par 28)

The Last of Us seems to be addressing morality and choice in much the same way, but it continues on to address some of the major conflicts that govern other aspects of modern society. It contains a scene where Ellie is reading another girl's diary, which she finds left behind in an abandoned farmhouse. Troy Baker, the actor who voices Joel, reacts strongly to this scene, even though the conversation here seems very simple:

There's that beautiful scene where Joel finds her inside the house and she's reading through this girl's journal: 'Is this really what they used to worry about? What shirt do I wear and what boy am I gonna go out with?' You know, and to be met with those first-world problems that we deal with every day and go, 'How trivial is all of this?' ("Grounded: The Making of 'The Last of Us'").

The game presents something familiar—a girl's journal—and sets it up against a backdrop where everything around it is unfamiliar. The girl who owned the journal and lived in the house is gone, and all that remains are the shadows of past cares and worries.

Baker goes on to say that he believes the game will resonate with female audiences, as it provides a strong female character who is not tied to the confines of traditional media, thus daring to challenge the expected notions of the audience regarding

women. Ellie is bound by a separate set of social codes which govern her society, and somehow, despite the fact that humanity is encompassed by a new danger, she seems freed from some of the unimportant cares of ages past. Baker says that he feels this kind of character is important for inclusion in these kinds of games: “We’ve seen the strong woman , or we’ve seen the weak women, but we haven’t necessarily seen the empowered woman from this kind of standpoint,” and that a work like this one can challenge—and hopefully fix—some of the destructive ideologies that pervade our culture. These destructive behaviors are at a basic level tied to morality, but at a different one reflect our “materialism, narcissism and cynicism” of our culture which has potentially “dulled our sense of right and wrong” (Dowd). The player realizes that right and wrong are sometimes fluid concepts, and that a new ideological situation can shed light on notions that seem so important to our society, but which seem unimportant to a different one.

In one scene, Joel and Ellie are walking through an abandoned shopping center. They comment on several elements of what they see in the store, but one sign catches Ellie’s eye: a picture of a model in a bathing suit:

ELLIE: That girl is so skinny... I thought you had plenty of food in your time.

JOEL: We did. Some just chose not to eat it.

ELLIE: Why the hell not?

JOEL: For looks.

ELLIE: That’s stupid.

It is notable that the game uses a broken society to comment on our modern, real-life society, and to construct an idea that there are potentially some aspects of the new world order that are perhaps better than the source domain. The game developers subtly take

advantage of the influence they have to comment on some very specific issues in modern politics or social issues.

The game introduces a character named Bill that Joel and Ellie go to see who helps them briefly on their journey. He is a skilled mechanic and a very intelligent man, but his solitude has made him somewhat paranoid and sarcastic. Through some subtle clues in the game's narrative, it is implied that Bill is gay: he mentions a former "partner" of his, a man named Frank, and is visibly saddened when the team finds his old friend's body. Joel locates what turns out to be a note from Frank, and attempts to console Bill as he learns of his old friend's death. The inclusion of Bill was praised by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) for introducing what they felt was a "gritty non-stereotypical gay character." What is significant about this character element is that it is not really all that important to the story—Bill just *happens* to be gay, and Joel and Ellie aren't concerned with dwelling on that aspect of his personality. Presumably, our modern society's preoccupation with the moral argument surrounding gay and lesbian rights is not important to a post-apocalyptic environment. Instead the game uses Bill's relationship with Frank to talk about how the apocalypse has affected him personally: "Once upon a time I had somebody that I cared about ... Somebody I had to look after. And in this world, that sort of shit is good for one thing: getting you killed." Bill's words seem to speak to Joel directly, and serve to remind him of the people he has lost.

What is unspoken in this portion of the story is Ellie's reaction, which is expanded upon in a recent release of downloadable content (DLC). The DLC explores some of Ellie's backstory in the events just prior to her and Joel's first encounter, and

involve her and her best friend Riley as they explore an abandoned mall. Fans who waited months for a sequel were disappointed to hear that the DLC would not be a continuation of the storyline, but rather a flashback, but were surprised to experience gameplay that focused on character interaction instead of conflict. It details Ellie and Riley working out some old tensions through some very open and lighthearted play, as the two friends reminisce and attempt to say goodbye to each other. Riley is going off to join the Fireflies, and won't see Ellie again for a very long time. As the two begin to part ways, we see Ellie in what is perhaps her happiest moment—spending time with Riley—juxtaposed against her saddest moment—Riley leaving her for good. It's at this moment of emotional catharsis that Ellie begs Riley not to leave, and then gives her a kiss on the lips. The scene prompted a wave of controversy regarding what NaughtyDog's motives may have been in including this element in the story, as well as what it meant for the greater interpretation of the message of the DLC. Fans wondered: Is Ellie gay? How come there were no obvious signs? What objective could NaughtyDog have in including a gay, interracial relationship? Perhaps one of the best explanations of this scene is provided by Grant Voegtler:

Many took this as a sure sign that Ellie is gay, and much like the ending of *The Last of Us*, ultimately it's kind of up to interpretation . . . Now, let's keep in mind that *The Last of Us* has never been a game about black and white values. Notice how Joel's actions at the end of the main story can't be defined as right or wrong, but rather both or somewhere in between. This is similar in the sense that love isn't black or white for Ellie, especially not after the fall of mankind. There's not a whole lot of trustworthy or friendly people left, and established gender roles

have [apparently] faded away along with functioning society. I think that Riley is really the only person that Ellie can care for or trust at this point in her life. This is probably the closest thing to love that she's ever felt. And with the whole "not knowing if she'll make it from this day to the next" thing, I'm not really surprised by what happened. And quite frankly, I don't care if she's straight, gay, bi . . . it doesn't matter. What matters is that it breaks down the invisible presumptions and rules we have about love and relationships, and uses the extremity of the fall of man to expose how ultimately pointless these presumptions are. (Voegtler)

The scene where Ellie and Riley kiss takes place only a few minutes before they are interrupted by a swarm of the infected, and have to run and fight for their lives. In the process, the two are both bitten. Their future, which had just seemed so clear and happy, now seems empty and pointless. As the two realize that they have both been infected, they realize that there is only a short period of time before the fungus reaches their brains and they turn into the same mindless zombies that have plagued the world for over twenty years. They react with anger, sadness, and fear, and then sit on the ground and talk about what to do next. Riley, with a gun in her hand, offers a solution: "Way I see it, we got two options. One, we take the easy way out. It's quick and painless. I'm not a fan of option one." She throws the gun down and continues: "Two, we fight. There are a million ways we should've died today. And a million ways we could die before tomorrow. But we fight for every second we get to spend with each other. Whether its two minutes... or two days... we don't give that up. I don't want to give that up." In the end, it is Riley who will eventually die as a result of the infection, while Ellie will go on to survive. She never

mentions Riley to Joel by name, but she does use her experience of losing people to relate to Joel—both of them had lost loved ones.

Faith in a Godless World

In McCormack's novel, the man and the boy are living by some kind of moral code: a decision to "carry the fire," which seems to include a sense of moral uprightness. The man and the boy have made a decision to avoid cannibalism, no matter how hungry they get; the boy's insistence at helping Ely, or of trying to return goods to the man who robbed them are also great examples of this code. The morality of the boy takes a mystical, almost spiritual double meaning, which seems even stronger given the strong opposition it faces. The boy becomes a kind of moral guide for his father: "He knew only that his child was his warrant. He said, If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5). The boy is his connection to the past, his motivation to endure, and his protection against giving up: perhaps the greatest temptation for him. It is clear, however, that suicide is not an option, and the man questions whether he would have the power to end his life if the circumstance became dire enough: "Can you do it? When the time comes?" (29) The man channels his restraint from ending his own life into caring for his son:

My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?

Yes. He sat there cowed in the blanket. After a while he looked up. Are we still the good guys? he said.

Yes. We're still the good guys. And we always will be" (77).

In the film, the boy hesitates before the corpses of several people who had apparently hanged themselves. The boy asks why they did it, and the man tells him that they had taken the easy way out—not an option for themselves. Curtis notes that despite the hardships the man and his boy endure, suicide is never an acceptable release from the horror they endure. “The one suicide discussed in *The Road* is presented as a failure of will and love” (29): it is that of the man’s wife, who kills herself many years before the book begins. The natural question is: What kind of personal justification do the characters have for maintaining their morality, and refusing to take “the easy way out” in a time like this? Why is it necessary to endure the crippling pressure of a world that has abandoned hope? And what is “the fire”? What does it mean to “carry the fire” and be one of the “good guys”?

The reasoning for maintaining one’s morals is predicated on the principle that one who is good does not do bad things, the justification of which does not always need to be grounded in religious values. God’s presence in *The Road*, however, takes the form of a kind of fuzzy agnosticism: He is looked for in this story as a salvation from the apocalypse, but He is just as often cursed as the root and cause of it. Sean Pryor comments on the ritual of prayer that appears near the end, when as the man is dying the boy promises to “talk to” him every day. He observes McCarthy’s rhythm, and notes that invoking religion interrupts his poetic requiem:

This post-apocalyptic adaptation of the ritual of prayer plays neatly into the novel’s turn to religion, but it complicates the meaning of McCarthy’s rhythm. A fugitive trudge across a dead planet may be a limited life, but dialogue and prayer give that life value. There are rhythms that must be suffered, and others that must

be cultivated. The problem of the value of a rhythm in prose is related to the problem of its value in life. (37)

Pryor is noting that in a world so full of waste and destruction, so much of what McCarthy writes about is there to be endured. The apocalypse is inescapable and desolate, but the close communication of the man and his boy, his plea that the boy speak to him, and even the language about God give the story deep value:

So is it then that *The Road* embraces the apocalypse in familiar and comforting orders? Its religious, biological, and celestial rhythms stretch before and after the brief interval of its narrative, and in conspicuously beautiful harmonies, its verbal rhythms match even the most miserable experiences. It is as if McCarthy's rhythm redeems the wasteland. (37)

Perhaps it is human nature, "When one has nothing left make ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (74). The man invokes God as he regards his son as his "warrant": "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (5), and he invokes Him again while watching his son sleep peacefully: "When he went back to the fire he knelt and smoothed her hair as she slept and he said if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different" (218). This all stands in stark contrast to the narrator's descriptions of the sweeping destruction of the world: "The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence" (274). It's clear that the "coldly secular" world is represented by the unholy, the broken, and the corrupted, while the holy and pure is synonymous with goodness, sensory experiences, and his son: "Maybe he understood for the first time that to the boy he was

himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed” (153). His son anchors him to the world and prevents him from indulging in the release that suicide and self-destruction would bring.

The boy grounds him morally and provides him with the motivation to continue and to feel remorse for his bad decisions. The man “breathes upon” the concept of his boy’s goodness. Pryor notes,

The boy’s graceful soul may rightly discern the good and the bad, but no education has achieved this. The lesson of prayer is important, then, as an exception to that rule. It resolves the pedagogical impasse and grounds morality.

It is a kind of resistance, a deliberate effort opposed to the state of the world. (40)

It is worth noticing how often concepts like prayer, redemption, and God are invoked in these narratives. The concept is not out of place--the word “apocalypse” itself is connected with the scriptural *Armageddon*, which refers to the place of a great battle at the time of the last days of the earth’s existence. In fact, one of the basic components of Christian philosophy is a culmination of earthly events in a final “Last Judgment,” or *eschaton*, which points to the Second Coming of Christ as the event that will signify the last days of human existence on earth. The purpose of most religious discourse is identifying the actions that will allow one to pass through this eventual conflict without perishing. The word “apocalypse” is derived from the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which means “to uncover” or “to reveal.” This etymology is significant because it suggests that there is an existence beyond the final battle—a kind of triumph over death and evil on a global, cataclysmic level.

Both *The Road* and *The Last of Us* take the time to mention the concept of the afterlife specifically, and both invoke God as either an epithet or as a potential source to look to for escape. For both texts, this results in a kind of strained agnosticism where God's existence is up for debate—the purpose of the piece of literature being not to attempt to prove or disprove His existence, but to make the reader question his or her own belief on the subject. For example, in *The Road*, the protagonist questions himself,

He woke before dawn and watched the gray day break. Slow and half opaque. He rose while the boy slept and pulled on his shoes and wrapped in his blanket he walked out through the trees. He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God. (McCarthy, 11-12)

The message here is made ambiguous (and surprisingly scriptural) by repeated references to his boy in terms of Christian imagery. The man in *The Road* concerns himself with only the task of keeping his boy alive, and on more than one occasion connects this task with a higher power: “He knew only that his child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). In one passage the man curses God for the evil that has taken place on the world, and in another, he thanks Him.

Perhaps McCarthy is trying to reveal the problems present in our society not by talking about government structures, but to connect the question to something more elevated. Perhaps He's trying to pierce through the quaint façade we hide behind—the

notion that any of us knows the meaning of life or the secret to happiness. The dystopia here is not a disturbance of social order but a revealing of the false senses of security we hold. The methods employed are unusual, sometimes secular but occasionally steeped with religious metaphor. On occasion, He laments the status of the world and cries out that none are left who maintain moral goodness: “On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world. Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?” (32) And on occasion, He refers to his son as an angel, his warrant, and even the “word of God” (5). At one point, the man and the boy encounter an old man on the highway. The boy feels an impulse to help the man, and the travelers share a meal together. As they eat, their discussion turns philosophical:

How would you know if you were the last man on earth? he said.

I don’t guess you would know it. You’d just be it.

Nobody would know it.

It wouldn’t make any difference.

When you die it’s the same as if everybody else did too.

I guess God would know it. Is that it?

There is no God.

No?

There is no God and we are his prophets.” (169-170)

The last line is spoken by the old man, whose name is Ely. The name Ely echoes the name Elijah, the prophet mentioned in Malachi to be the prophet who will appear before the “coming of the great and dreadful day of the lord” (Mal 4:5 KJV). Readers might ask if this is the same person, and if his language regarding the existence of God is in fact a

deliberate misdirection in order to teach a lesson. Malachi indicates that the purpose of Elijah is to “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest [God] come and smite the earth with a curse” (4:6). If Ely accomplishes anything, it is to help the man recognize that he is the steward of one of the last vestiges of goodness that remain in the world, in that sense successfully turning the father’s heart toward the child.

Another critical perspective says that Ely is being cynical, and that his accusation calls out people who live by an unspoken moral code, prophets of a non-god: bound to their humanity to make a constant search for meaning in the inevitable meaninglessness of the world. As with everything in this kind of story, the answer is not given: only the question raised for consideration. And whatever Ely’s motive, the answer is still the same: it is necessary to endure, it is necessary to maintain one’s morals, and it is necessary to survive. “Maintaining the fire” is but a metaphor for that process.

Carrying the Fire

At the heart of each story is a father figure learning to appreciate pure, good aspects of life, despite the fact that both major characters are challenged morally. The quest for good is elucidated by the boy in *The Road* with the concept of “carrying the fire.” *The Last of Us* seconds the moral with the phrase “endure and survive,” derived from Ellie’s comic books that she finds along the way. Paul Patton points out that these characters have a strange drive for moral rightness, despite evidence that they are desperately clinging to survival in a godforsaken, morally-backwards world, shorn of “the sacred idiom.” They seem to be searching aimlessly for meaning in a world that has none. Patton illustrates the imagery of “carrying the fire” to a passage in another

McCarthy novel, *No Country for Old Men*, in which an aging man recounts a vision-like dream of his father:

It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin. He just rode on past and he had this blanket wrapped around him and he had his head down and when he rode past I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. An in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up. (309)

Patton emphasizes the words in the second-to-last sentence, in which he believes the significance of the fire is expressed: “It embodies the comforting belief that we are not alone in the dark and cold universe, and that somewhere out there in time and space there is a light and warmth waiting for us at the end of the journey” (141). John Cant has also made this connection, though for *No Country for Old Men* the fire symbolizes the passage of knowledge and civilization from father to son. His argument for *The Road* is that the fire represents “that vitality that burns within the ardent heart, the mystery that is the spark of life itself and that needs no reason to exist” (271). Patton notes that there are a few possibilities that can be derived from these definitions, and their referents to human existence. He speculates that the notion of carrying the fire is “a necessary illusion perhaps, but one that can be understood as more than just the expression of nihilism, of giving up on life. It is rather a way of coming to terms with our condition of being alone in a dark, cold universe” (142). From the reference point of a post-apocalyptic wasteland,

this makes a lot of sense—what more can those trapped in it desire than release? There is only one way of escape from this scenario, and that is death. Whether as a matter of faith or of necessity to preserve sanity, death is a release from the horror of the present. The protagonists of each story would likely have taken that option long ago if not for the rising generation.

“Endure and survive” is the phrase often repeated by Ellie in *The Last of Us*, a mantra that suggests when the struggle is on behalf of loved ones, there is no challenge hard enough that is not worth their preservation. The reality is that at some point there will be those who inherit the world we have lived in, and that it is the current generation’s responsibility to prepare it for the next. Future generations will have to deal with the reality that the current ones are sometimes abusing or using to excess natural resources, that social prejudices exist, and that there are pressures in society to abandon moral codes. The carrying or passing of the fire is a kind of promethean gesture and a way of promoting wisdom and goodness from one generation to the next. The man tells his boy that he needs to be careful:

You’re not the one who has to worry about everything.

[...]

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one (259).

Joel echoes this sentiment: “I’ve struggled a long time with survivin’, but no matter what you have to find something to fight for.” The game and the novel present several small pieces of beauty: the love the characters develop for each other and the experiences they share as they travel in spite of the terror they’ve experienced. This is what the game offers as the characters walk through an old coffee shop, as they walk

through a music store, and as they read old comic books, from which Ellie derives her own form of wisdom, and as they stand on a rooftop in the overgrown remnants of Salt Lake City and gaze out at the escaped giraffes: “To the edge of the universe and back, endure and survive.” *The Road* and *The Last of Us* offer a silver lining on the edges of their clouded narratives.

The silver lining, however, depends on humanity’s ability to abandon the same self-destructive tendencies that plague post-apocalyptic societies, such as human cruelty, destruction of natural resources, and restrictive social situations. These particular stories are vastly different from many other dystopian novels, because despite the overwhelming oppression of the apocalypse, there is still a small glimmer of hope that things can get better. It should always be stated that the apocalyptic element is almost always preventable, and even if it isn’t (as in *The Last of Us*), humanity is likely to survive if it manages to heed the warnings offered in these texts.

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