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**Silenced Women: Gender Representation and
Narrative Technique in Naughty Dog's Video Game**

The Last of Us

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

Although considerable research have been devoted to the analysis of the relationship between Ellie and Joel, little to no attention has been paid to the narrative techniques used and their effect on gender representation in Naughty Dog's video game *The Last of Us*. The objective of this dissertation is, therefore, to re-examine the portrayal of female characters and the plot devices involved in the process. Hence, I argue that even though female characters are not represented according to gender stereotypes they are ultimately silenced and disempowered by the narrative itself. Taking evidence directly from *The Last of Us Remastered*, I will present and discuss the elements that contribute to the character's identity, such as clothing, in-game model designs, camera angles and narrative tropes. Finally, I give special attention to Joel's dominance and authority over Ellie's agency and destiny.

Keywords: *The Last of Us*, Naughty Dog, video games, femininity, gender representation, narrative, Game Studies.

0. Introduction

Ever since its popularization in the 80's, the video game industry has had an overwhelming amount of success, which has allowed it to consolidate itself as one of the main providers of entertainment. According to recent studies, 64% of American households own a device used to play video games (ESA, 2018). Because of its presence as a prominent form of media, there has been growing academic interest in the Game Studies field. Researchers have focused on two main areas of study: violence and its effect on human behavior (Janz, 2005; Scharrer, 2004; Sherry, 2006; Smith et al. 2003) and gender representation and sexuality (Downs and Smith, 2010; Ivory, 2006; Kennedy, 2002). Unfortunately, the studies concerned with gender have shown that women are at a disadvantage in comparison to men.

Female characters started to appear in video games as a strategy to appeal to a different market dominated by women. However, in spite of its efforts to expand its demographics, the video game industry “inherited the gender disparity” that was present in “computer science and software fields” remaining, therefore, a male centric market (Lynch, 2016). Female characters were not only scarce but also depicted according to gender stereotypes. In fact, one of the first human female characters that appeared in a leading role was Lara Croft, a controversial figure. Her development illustrated “a transitory period for female game characters” and the beginning of the tradition of sexualized female characters within the industry (Perreault et al. 2016). Indeed, she was designed so as to embody and communicate both capability and sexuality, a pattern known as the ‘Lara Phenomenon’ (Jansz and Martis, 2007). This was further encouraged by the companies themselves. In order to secure the retention of the male audience, developers decided to focus their marketing strategies on the promotion of the beauty and

the attractiveness of the female characters rather than on their skills and intelligence (Ewa, 2014).

Video game history took a turning point in 2013 when several companies published games featuring powerful women in leading roles. Many critics noted that, Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (hereafter *TLU*) seemed to be the most revolutionary one in terms of the treatment of women imagery within the game. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic America where people have to defend themselves from cannibals who have been infected by a mutated strain of the *Cordyceps* fungus. The plot is divided into seasons and begins when Joel, the protagonist, has to flee the city with his brother and his daughter Sarah. Unfortunately, Sarah is shot by a soldier and dies in the arms of her father. The game, then, shows Joel's life twenty years into the future. At that point, he has managed to survive by living in a quarantine zone controlled by the military while working as a smuggler alongside his partner Tess. As they are following the steps of a black-market dealer, they are asked to escort Ellie, a teenager who is presumably immune to the fungus, into a safe zone in Massachusetts.

As the story progresses, so does the relationship between Joel and Ellie. This has been of special interest for critics who argued that *TLU* distances itself from the tradition of relegated women. However, significantly less attention has been given to the effect that narrative techniques have on women's image and the way in which players perceive them. Therefore, I intend to argue here that even though *TLU* gives women the opportunity to have agency, they are ultimately silenced by the narrative.

The aim of this dissertation is, thus, to analyze the factors that contribute to the gamers' perception of both Ellie and other secondary female characters as strong and powerful women. In order to do so, in the first segment, I present the positive aspects of the video game that manage to position women in a non-stereotypical position. To that

end, I analyze typical gender depictions of the industry, such as clothing, modeling of the bodies, poses and camera angles to the way in which they appear in the game.

In the second segment, through the analysis of key moments in the story, this dissertation considers the ways in which narrative resources, such as the trope of “the woman in the refrigerator” and “the damsel in distress” belittle women’s role. Finally, I analyze how Joel establishes himself as an authority while denying Ellie of any form of agency or control over her destiny.

In order to support these arguments, I will focus my analysis on TLU Remastered, an updated version of the game that includes *Left Behind*, an extension pack that features Ellie’s past and her relationship with her friend Riley.



Figure 1. Marketing Asset: The Last of Us

1. Positive Representation: Visual Aspects

1.1. Bodies and Clothing

One of the most often researched topics in the Game Studies field is the portrayal of body diversity. Unfortunately, as many scholars have argued, there is a marked tendency within the industry to assign certain elements to the characters according to their gender. This usually results in an unbalanced system that belittles women in the eyes of the player by portraying them as beautiful and fragile, while portraying men as strong and powerful individuals (Scharrer, 2004).

Even though both men and women suffer the consequences of stereotypical body portrayals, the situation is not equal. In order to appeal to a primarily straight male audience, women are usually sexualized and objectified through a variety of mechanisms. One of the most common ones is the manipulation of body proportions. In fact, for the most part, female characters are modeled with slender figures, small waists, and abnormally big breasts. As a consequence of this canon, women are restricted to being represented with a specific body type “while male characters are free to embody whichever physique best communicates their personality or abilities” (Sarkeesian, 2014: online video).

Needless to say that the depiction of body types is not the only problem related to gender stereotyping in video games. Similarly to what happens with body shapes, women are also limited in terms of the clothing that they can wear within a game. Clothing has as much importance as the body itself in terms of the information that it can give. Since characters are usually featured in the game cover arts, clothing becomes one of the first things that a player notices even before actually playing the game. It contains and communicates several aspects that can help construct the identity, the personality and the story behind someone even without engaging with the game itself.

In the case of women, however, the information given through their attires does not always correspond to their reality as characters. Clothing is, in fact, used so as to bring attention to their bodies, particularly their breasts, which carry strong sexual meaning for the player. The most common pieces of clothing for women in digital games are tank tops, shorts, swimsuits, and lingerie, regardless of their age, profession or background. In consequence, clothing does not function as a source of reliable information about the individuality and identity of a female character. Instead, women are dressed following the same parameters regardless of the activities or challenges that they might face during the gameplay.

By analyzing the presence of these aspects in *TLU*, it can be noticed that the representation of female characters in the game does not correspond to stereotypical depictions. In fact, every female character encountered in the narrative is modeled according to the situation in terms of clothing and body shape. They are not dressed so as to attract male players but to suit the needs of survival in their post-apocalyptic world. This remains true for both main and secondary characters. Therefore, in adopting a more lifelike and accurate representation of bodies and clothing, *TLU* manages to push and redefine the boundaries of gender representation within video games.

As opposed to what the cover art of the game might suggest, the first playable character is not Joel, but his daughter Sarah. Since she is the first character that can be controlled, she is present during the earliest moments of interaction between the player, the mechanics of the game and the narrative. As a result, she becomes crucial in determining the impression that players have of the game as a whole. The first thing that can be noticed is that, in contrast to the tradition of sexualized teenagers in video games, Sarah's proportions correspond to the average body of a young girl. She does not have pronounced curves or big breasts. Instead, her features resemble those of the body of a

12-year-old girl at the beginning of puberty. In terms of the clothing, Sarah is also presented according to her age. She is never seen wearing revealing outfits that would objectify her in the eyes of the player. In fact, while she is present in the game, she wears checkered pajama pants and two t-shirts, a grey one over a long-sleeved one. Along with the narrative, clothing and body representation encourages us to perceive her as an individual with feelings and personality of her own. The combination of all these elements together allows us to see her as the representation of a complete human being rather than as a sexual object whose purpose is solely to please the player.



Figure 2. Sarah's in-game model

Evidently, this can also be applied to women of a different age range. In fact, stereotypical gender representations are more visible in adult female characters than in teenagers or children. Traditionally, when women appear in video games, their clothing reflects their sex appeal rather than practicality regardless of the genre of the game. One famous example of this situation is Lara Croft, the main protagonist of a series of survival

and adventure games. Even though Lara is part of an archeological expedition crew who has to face dangers and risk their lives, she was designed wearing small shorts and a tank top, an outfit that accentuates her exaggerated physical attributes rather than have a practical role. To a certain extent, ever since her creation, an overwhelming amount of female characters have been modeled while trying to emulate her complexion. As a consequence, unrealistic and sexualized female bodies seem to be the norm.

However, this is not the case for Tess, the first adult female character that the player meets in *TLU*. Taking into consideration the context of the plot, it is clear that having a useful outfit is more valuable than looking attractive. Seeing Tess dressed provocatively would be as unrealistic as seeing her in fashionable clothing, simply because it is not a priority. Designing Tess in simple and comfortable clothing not only makes the game seem more believable and authentic, but it also positions her at the same level as her male counterparts. Similarly to Joel, she is seen wearing an attire that adapts to her circumstances and that facilitates her survival in society. In fact, her in-game model includes a pair of blue jeans, a t-shirt, boots and a backpack for her supplies.

In order to get a complete image of the way in which Tess is portrayed, her body needs to be considered as well. In terms of her physical appearance, even though she is of a thin built, she is not disproportionately slim. She does not have an extremely small waist or oversized breasts. In fact, she has an average body for a woman who has to be in good shape in order to accomplish her daily tasks as a smuggler. Moreover, her body does not distract the player by the use of exaggerated physical features as in the case of Lara Croft. Instead, Tess's body carries as little sexual meaning as the body of any male character in the game.



Figure 3. Tess's in-game model

In Ellie's case, the most important female character in the narrative, the developers' intention of transmitting a respectable image of women is reinforced. She was designed so as to be memorable for her personality rather than for her looks. Even though her appeal is not related to her appearance, Naughty Dog still invested many resources into creating a wide range of clothing for her. In fact, she is one of the few characters, apart from Joel, that has several pieces of clothing that change as the story progresses. Including *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, Ellie is seen in a total of six different outfits. In spite of the season of the year, she is never positioned as an object of sexual desire for the player. As a matter of fact, she is always seen in full-length clothing such as jeans, sweaters, and jackets. By looking at her, it can be deduced that she is probably in a situation that requires her to move and think fast in order to survive. Furthermore, her clothing also helps us understand the state of her surroundings with regards to both the temperature and the struggle of being in a post-apocalyptic society.

In terms of the appearance of her body, Ellie is presented as a “cute kid not easily mistaken for woman. Relatively thin, she has few curves, small breasts and narrow hips (Voorhees, 2016: online). Similarly to other female characters in *TLU*, her in-game model is used so as to communicate information about who she is without sexualizing her or centering the attention of the player on specific body parts.



Figure 4. Side by side comparison of Ellie’s in-game model during summer and winter

1.2. Gendered Gaze

As technology advanced, developers gained more freedom to create complex and multilayered stories. They did not have to limit the narrative to simple dialogues or one-angled cameras anymore. Eventually, the industry began to take inspiration from narrative techniques that were traditionally associated with the film industry. These included the use of more cinematic scenes, different camera shots, and more in-depth plots. Unfortunately, the transition towards more engaging storylines did not happen without the adoption of stereotypical conceptions that were also present in the

film industry. Similarly to what happened in movies, women were portrayed according to what men wanted to see. In 1975, Laura Mulvey coined the term ‘male gaze’ in her feminist theorization of how women were depicted in cinema. In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey explains that the audience usually experiences the world from the perspective of a heterosexual man. As she clearly stated, the male gaze is strongly connected to negative gender representations because women are styled and presented in order to meet male spectators’ fantasies. For the sake of placing the audience in the eyes of a man, film producers use certain camera shots and scenes, such as close-ups, that emphasize specific attributes of the female body. This technique is also present in video games, especially during cutscenes. In fact, when women are introduced in the narrative, the most common resource is to depict them as “separate body parts or with the camera following the shape of their bodies while circling them or otherwise moving up or down” (Löf, 2015:18). In doing so, they are sexualized and offered as a source of pleasure for both the characters within the plot and the audience watching it.

One of the reasons why *TLU* was praised by the critics, is because it offered an alternative to the tradition of objectification produced by the use of sexist cinematic mechanisms in video games. In this case, the player is distanced from the male gaze by adopting a more neutral perspective that gives women a complete human identity. The characters are represented using the same cinematic techniques and procedures regardless of their gender. Even though the cinematic storytelling of the game includes a variety of camera shots, it never uses close-ups as a method to direct the attention of the player to the body of a character.

As Mulvey noted, in films, the amount of time that needed to be dedicated to the admiration of women’s bodies relegated them to passive roles. For the spectator, the presence of a woman meant that the plot would stop in order for them to admire their

bodies while the presence of a man triggered the progression of the plot (1975). Since, in *TLU*, both genders receive the same kind of cinematic treatment, women are associated with dynamic and active roles like their male counterparts. Ultimately, female characters can define themselves by something more representative than their looks.

The male gaze can also be applied to other elements, such as movement. Ideally, the way a character moves should match the character's personality, background or feelings at the moment. However, this is only the case for male characters who are coded so as to reflect certain moods or characteristics like, for instance, agility, strength or even clumsiness. On the contrary, there is a tendency for women to move in ways that do not represent who they are as a character. For the most part, they climb, jump, sit and walk in a sensuous way that emphasizes their hip sway regardless of their skills or abilities.

In *TLU*, movement is programmed so as to communicate information about the characters and the environment that surrounds them. They move according to their age, mood and physical state in general. This can be seen more clearly in Ellie's case. She is one of the few characters that the player constantly sees both in cutscenes and during regular gameplay. Her body language not only reinforces her identity as a young girl in danger, but it also helps to understand what she has been through in the past. Her movement reflects "a sense of tension and danger, demonstrating what it is like when female characters are animated in ways that emphasize their personality and emotional state rather than serving to sexually objectify them" (Sarkeesian, 2014: online video).

Altogether, *TLU* rejects the tradition of sexually objectified women through the implementation of realistic visual depictions of both genders. As a result, women are presented as round and complex characters in the same way that men are.

2. Negative Representation: Narrative devices

2.1. Women in the Refrigerator

The term “woman in the refrigerator” was coined by Gail Simone in 1999 amid a discussion about sexism in pop culture. It was originally inspired by an event in *Green Lantern*, the comic. In issue #54, the protagonist comes home and discovers that his girlfriend has been murdered and stuffed into the refrigerator. Simone noted that this was not an isolated plot device used specifically for this case. On the contrary, it was a trope that was present in several comics and stories. Women’s deaths were used as a plot mechanism that allowed the structure of the narrative to move forward by forcing the hero to act. While this might have been beneficial for the development of male characters, it completely disabled women from having an active influence on the story.

Careful attention to the structure of *TLU*’s plot reveals that the death of female characters is also used as a fuel for the narrative of the male protagonist. Originally, the aim of the game was to be positioned as “an interactive, mixed-company version of *The Road*,” in this case the story of the relationship between an older man and a 14-year-old girl as they try to survive in an oppressive and deadly wasteland” (Suellentrop, 2014). However, as the story progresses, it is clear that the narrative is primarily tailored around Joel. Every death caused and decision made is, ultimately, for his personal benefit and survival.

The way in which Sarah is managed in terms of the plot is the first example of this. The game starts by allowing the player to control her. In experiencing the beginning of the apocalypse from her point of view, we perceive her as someone determinant for the storyline. Nonetheless, as soon as the player gets comfortable with the mechanics of the game, Sarah is injured in a car accident. From that point onwards, she is replaced by Joel as the playable character. Since she cannot walk or move on her own, Joel’s mission

becomes, therefore, to protect her at all costs. Eventually, the game removes Sarah from the narrative when she is killed by a soldier despite Joel's efforts. This event causes the story arc to move forward by giving him a justification for his future actions. Equivalently to what happened in *Green Light*, Sarah's death becomes necessary to tell the story of a man and later functions as the justification for Joel's acquired sense of fatherhood towards Ellie. The fact that there is such a violent background that motivates his future behavior contributes to the creation of an unbalanced relationship between them. In fact, "while Ellie is dependent on Joel for companionship, Joel's relationship to Ellie is much less healthy, and he sees her as a second chance to save his long-lost Sarah, making Sarah's death a narrative sacrifice to further Joel's story (Jane, 2013: online).

This trope also extends to other female characters, like Tess. When she is introduced in the storyline, it is difficult to understand the nature of her relationship with Joel. Based on what can be deduced from their interactions they work together as partners in order to survive in the quarantine zone. In the beginning, their dynamic positions her as a more powerful character than Joel. Tess is, usually, the one that manages the decision-making, both as an individual and as a team. Her resourcefulness along with her strong personality naturally guides her to take the position of the leader. There are many traces of her dominance that can be found in her dialogues with Joel. In fact, their first interaction in the game already reinforces the hierarchy of their relationship. After Joel realizes that Tess has been attacked, he blames her for acting on her own. However, she makes it clear that she has the authority necessary to decide what to do and how to defend herself in case of danger. Her attitude is noticeably more proactive than that of Joel. Tess is interested in building useful connections, finding resources and solving unfinished transactions, while Joel seems to be in a state of lethargy regarding his own life.

Tess's entrance into the story comes with the information that a set of guns and ammo have been stolen from them. At this point, her power as a key character is reinforced once they decide to leave in order to find their weapons. As they are traveling around the city, Joel is received with hostility by the community, while Tess is treated as an influential individual. Her social network becomes crucial for the group. In fact, in order to access certain areas and passages, she needs to introduce Joel several times. Without her initiative, their capacity to make business, and more importantly, to survive would be drastically reduced. The fact that she is actively looking for opportunities allows them to live in better conditions than most of the population that have to depend on ration cards and scarce resources.

At some point in their journey, they encounter Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies. Since they discover that she is in possession of their guns, handling the situation carefully becomes a priority. Marlene offers to trade their guns back if they agree to smuggle Ellie into a safe zone. During their interaction, Tess takes a decisive role and becomes "the character who drives the first act of the game" (Kunzelman, 2017: online). She controls the negotiation, mediates the communication between both parties and decides whether or not to accept the deal. Meanwhile, Joel remains in a more passive position. He becomes a spectator of the situation and falls into a secondary position. Furthermore, he is asked to stay behind with Ellie for several hours while Tess and Marlene verify the condition of the weapons. As a consequence, his character not initially associated with dynamism. While the rest of the characters are contributing to the progression of the narrative, he remains in a passive role.

As the story advances, Tess continues to position herself as a predominant presence in the narrative. Unfortunately, while they are escorting Ellie outside the city, Tess is bitten and, therefore, infected with the Cordyceps fungus. Her imminent transformation

creates a lot of tension and disagreement, not only because she was one of the closest persons to Joel but also because she was the one keeping the group united. Up until this point, Joel still thinks that smuggling Ellie is only a job. However, for Tess, it represents a chance for humanity. She knows that the mission needs to be accomplished even if she dies, which is why she appeals to her past with Joel in order to convince him. While they are arguing a group of militaries arrives and try to enter the building. Finally, Tess decides to sacrifice her last hours alive so as to gain time for them to escape. Once more, the narrative removes a central female figure in order to locate the focus on the male protagonist while giving him more justifications for his actions.

The developer's decision to kill Tess has been discussed by reviewers and fans. One of the main points that cause controversy is whether or not it was necessary to have a man as the protagonist. When Tess dies, the player has only one option: to continue the game as Joel. The possibility to save her is never considered in the storyline. Even though she knows how to fight, use guns and is as capable as Joel of taking care of herself and others, her character is confined to a trope that fuels the narrative. In my view, Tess could take the leading role and accompany Ellie the rest of the game. She can function as a protector without interfering with the storyline because her identity as a character allows her to take that position. Her personality, skills and physical condition make her suitable for the task. In addition to this, the elimination of Tess from the plot reinforces the absence of motherly figures in the game. Throughout the story, mothers seem to be systematically removed. Sarah's mother is never mentioned, Ellie's mother is dead and Tess, a potentially motherly figure, is killed. As a consequence, the only person that can be associated with parenthood is Joel, a man who is "on a quest for a symbolic replacement of his own girl, Sarah" (Colăcel, 2017:44).

The last death used as a plot device in the game is the case of Marlene. She is arguably the most powerful character in the story. Ever since the creation of the Fireflies, the militia group that fights against military oppression, she has been in command of their operations across the country. Her position as a leader allows her to be in control of a significant number of people, guns, and resources that are inaccessible to most citizens. Even though the amount of time that she appears is rather limited, the game creates a global image of her identity, her past and her goals. Marlene is not restricted to a single facet. On the contrary, she is seen in a wide spectrum of roles such as a leader, a friend and a protector. However, her destiny is not different from the rest of powerful women in the game. In the final scenes, when Joel is trying to flee the laboratory with Ellie, she decides to spare his life to try to convince him:

Marlene: You can't save her. Even if you get her out of here, then what? How long before she's torn to pieces by a pack of clickers? That is if she hasn't been raped and murdered first.

Joel: That ain't for you to decide.

Marlene: It's what she'd want. And you know it. Look... You can still do the right thing here. She won't feel anything.

(The Last of Us. PlayStation 3, Naughty Dog, 2013)

Sadly, Joel decides to shoot a deadly bullet that would silence her forever. In killing her, the narrative “reinforces the notion that stories about men are more valuable and meaningful than stories about women, and that women are often important not so much for being fully-fledged people in their own right, but for what they--and often, what their deaths--mean to the men of the world” (Petit, 2014: online).

2.2. Damsel in Distress

One of the most common portrayals of women in literature, cinema and media in general, is the damsel in distress trope, which involves a beautiful and, often weak female that requires the assistance of a man in order to escape a difficult situation. Even though on the surface, representing women as “pure” and “in need of protection” might seem

positive features, this is actually the result of a subtle kind of sexism (Barreto & Ellemers in Perrault et al., 2005:13). There are mainly two types of sexism that can be differentiated. On the one hand, there is hostile sexism which implies a “clear antipathy towards women”. On the other hand, there is benevolent sexism which “takes the form of seemingly positive but in fact patronizing beliefs about women” (2005: 634). The damsel in distress trope is the result of the latter. At first glance, this might seem a harmless representation, nonetheless, it is still deeply rooted in gender stereotypes that belittle women. Unfortunately, in the video game industry, most female characters are constructed based on this tradition. In fact, they usually “play a second fiddle to the male hero. So they are either portrayed as victims to be rescued by the hyper-masculine hero or as the reward for the winner” (Jaggi, 2014: 19).

In the case of *TLU* the use of the damsel in distress trope and, therefore, of benevolent sexism is less evident. However, it is still present in the portrayal of Ellie. I believe that it is important to remember that, as in many other stories, the narrative of the game was influenced by external factors that cannot be ignored. As a matter of fact, the creative director Neil Druckmann was experiencing fatherhood for the first time while developing the game. According to him, the concept of the game centers in “trying to build a bond, and trying to replicate the mechanics and storytelling of a bond of father and a daughter.” (in Trachtenberg 2018: online). Clearly, as he has stated in several interviews, this affected not only the portrayal of Joel and Ellie’s relationship but also Ellie’s personality in itself. Even though having a daughter probably changed his perception of female sidekicks, Ellie’s character was originally designed according to traditional models. She was supposed to be a more traditional, passive and dependent character. Her strong-willed personality was, in fact, finally achieved as the result of a series of contributions made by Ashley Johnson, the voice actress that plays Ellie. In an interview for Eurogamer, Johnson

states that she did not want Ellie to feel like a burden for the player. (in Eurogamer 2013: online video). Her input allowed Naughty Dog to understand that women can also be more aggressive and active especially in situations of danger. Even though Ellie still needs to be helped whenever there are passages flooded with water, she does not represent an obstacle for the progression of the game like previous female sidekicks did. She is given a level of independence and autonomy that complements her strong identity by allowing her to defend herself. However, as I will show later, she is still narratively disempowered in order to benefit Joel's story.

A year after the publication of the game, Naughty Dog decided to explore Ellie's background and origins in more detail in *Left Behind*, the DLC¹. In this expansion, Ellie is given control of her own storytelling and "empowered in the most significant way a character can be given power within a video game: by becoming the playable character, and thus an extension of the player" (Curtis, 2015: 47). Through the use of flashbacks, the player learns about Ellie's past and about her relationship with her girl friend Riley. Several months before meeting Joel, Ellie was exploring an abandoned mall with Riley. Suddenly, she lives a traumatic episode that will change her life and the way she approaches people from that point onwards. As they are wandering in the mall, a group of infected hear them and start chasing them. Eventually, they are both bitten and infected with the fungus, which leads to Riley's death and to the discovery of Ellie's immunity.

In learning about her past, the narrative creates a new dimension for the character. The player is positioned in her perspective and lives her evolution from a "more naïve and innocent Ellie" to the "hardened, survival Ellie" (Druckmann, 2014: online). In contrast to the main campaign, the DLC shows different parts of her personality, such as

¹ Downloadable content

a more playful and childish side. The player can, therefore, construct a broader image of Ellie's identity. As Druckmann noted, "in telling this parallel story about Ellie's bond with Riley and how it gives her strength, it gives you a different understanding of why Ellie fought so hard to save Joel" (2014). Taking her background into consideration becomes paramount to understand her behavior once Joel is injured. Since she has already experienced loss numerous times, she knows she cannot afford to lose him as well. Consequently, she risks her life and goes through extremely difficult situations in order to save him. The game finally takes Ellie's power away during an attempted rape scene. She manages to kill her aggressor but loses the capacity to control her narrative from this point onwards. Moreover, the rape scene is used as a mechanism to strengthen their bond while furthering Joel's character arc (Brice, 2013: online).

In spite of their seemingly natural connection, Ellie and Joel's relationship is a complicated one. From the beginning, it is clear that since Joel is an adult he dominates and controls their interactions according to his will. His dominance over Ellie is evident in the early stages of the narrative when he refuses to give her a gun. Even though Ellie "commits several acts of violence throughout the game in a matter of necessity", Joel refuses to trust her with weapons and physical combats (Curtis, 2015:45). As a consequence, her capacity to survive on her own is limited. At this point in the story, Ellie is left defenseless and dependent on Joel and, therefore, confined to the trope of the damsel in distress. She has to be taken care of and saved numerous times. Even though over time Joel actually decides to give her a gun, he continues to establish and reinforce his dominance in the relationship through the use of other resources such as language itself. After spending a considerable amount of time together, Ellie tries to connect with Joel by talking about Tess's death, an event that tragically affected both of them.

However, he forbids her from talking about what happened and imposes himself as an authority by limiting her communication:

Ellie: Hey, look, um...about Tess... I don't even know what to--
Joel: Here's how this thing's gonna play out. You don't bring up Tess -- ever. Matter of fact, we can just keep our histories to ourselves. Secondly, don't tell anybody about your condition. They'll think you're crazy or they'll try to kill you. And lastly, you do what I say, when I say it. We clear?
Ellie: Sure.
Joel: Repeat it.
Ellie: What you say, goes.
(The Last of Us. PlayStation 3, Naughty Dog, 2013)

A similar situation occurs towards the middle of the game when Joel decides that it is better for Ellie to stay with his brother Tommy and his girlfriend Maria. In order to try to change his mind about leaving, she mentions Joel's past once more, this time in reference to his daughter Sarah. His reaction is even crueler than last time. He refuses to talk about the current circumstances while ignoring Ellie's feelings. The following quotation shows how he disregards the pain that she has felt in the past by acknowledging only his own:

Ellie: I'm not her, you know.
Joel: What?
Ellie: Maria told me about Sarah. And I--
Joel: Ellie. You are treading on some mighty thin ice here.
Ellie: I'm sorry about your daughter, Joel, but I have lost people too.
Joel: You have no idea what loss is.
Ellie: Everyone I have cared for has either died or left me. Everyone fucking except for you. So don't tell me that I would be safer with someone else -- because the truth is I'd just be more scared.
Joel: You're right... You're not my daughter, and I sure as hell ain't your dad. And we are going our separate ways.
(The Last of Us. PlayStation 3, Naughty Dog, 2013)

Evidently, Ellie is a strong character who eagerly tries to gain agency throughout the game. She is constantly looking for ways to be helpful while minimizing the situations that turn her into a problem for others. Yet, the narrative is ultimately a long escort mission which turns her into a damsel that needs protection. This could have been different if Ellie's hopes and desires were listened to at some point. However, the truth is that the only opinion that matters is Joel's. Even though he might have

good intentions, he acts without taking into consideration Ellie's opinion. As Brown notes, "he kills, he tortures and he dominates other survivors for reasons everyone can empathize with. He wants to save the people he loves" (Brown, 2018: online video). Nonetheless, he does it without considering the effect that it has on Ellie's life. In doing so, she is prevented from having any form of agency regarding her own life. She is relegated to a passive position where others get to decide for her. This is reinforced in the final scenes of the game. After Joel discovers that Ellie cannot survive the surgery planned for her, he decides to kidnap her. This contributes to Joel's character arc more than it contributes to Ellie's. In deciding what to do without asking for her consent, he not only "redeems his paternal masculinity", but he does it "at the expense of Ellie's agency" (Stang, 2017: online). Rather than serving to her freedom, Ellie's abduction sentences to be trapped in her own story as a damsel in distress.

3. Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation, I have analyzed the use and influence of narrative techniques in the representation of female characters in *The Last of Us*. As I have argued, the game begins by positioning women in powerful roles that give them to the chance to be treated as equals by their male counterparts.

As seen in the first segment, from a visual point of view female characters are represented according to realistic expectations. In terms of their bodies, their physical attributes and proportions are not designed in order to attract attention to certain body parts that have sexual connotations. Instead, they represent average bodies for women of different age groups. Likewise, their clothing is designed so as to reflect a part of their identity. Contrary to the sexist tradition that sexualizes women by giving them revealing clothing regardless of who they are, in *The Last of Us* the character's attires give useful information about them. In fact, the player can get a better understanding of their motivations, story and living conditions in a post-apocalyptic world.

Taking Mulvey's definition of the male gaze as the starting point, I also argued that other visual elements, such as the camera angles used during cutscenes, do not objectify women within the game. Moreover, the movement and mannerisms of female characters are designed so as to reflect their strength, ability, and personality correspondently.

In the second segment, I discussed the narrative elements that lead to the disempowerment of women in *The Last of Us*. Every female character that has some form of influence in the story, is situated in a position of power. This can be expressed in the form of leadership, independence or even playability of the character. However, whereas

the game gives them power, the narrative ultimately takes it back. I identified two main narrative tropes used in the story that serve Joel's character arc at the expense of women. On the one hand there is the trope of women in the refrigerator, that is to say, women who are killed in order to contribute to the development of a man's story. This is the case of Sarah, Tess, and Marlene, three powerful women who are eliminated to stress Joel's heroic role once they establish themselves as dominant presences in the narrative.

On the other hand, there is the trope of the damsel in distress, a clear example of benevolent sexism in the narrative. Ellie's personality naturally draws her towards taking action and becoming useful. However, she is prevented from doing so by Joel. He limits her capacity to act on her own for an important portion of the game by denying her the use of guns and violence. Even if eventually she manages to get a weapon of her own, Joel continues to dominate the relationship by controlling their communication according to his will. Paradoxically, when he is wounded Ellie becomes the playable character, which gives her the most powerful role a character can have. This creates a space where the player can learn about her background and her previous life while giving her absolute control of the narrative. Nevertheless, her agency not only ends with an attempted rape scene that serves to further Joel's bond with her, but which also marks the end of her agency altogether. Her destiny is left in the hands of Joel, the person who will finally sentence her to be a damsel in distress by prioritizing his own wishes.

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