It Can't Be For Nothing[*]

Communicating Intentions for Play Through Trophy Design in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*

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Introduction

To borrow from Katherine Isbister, a games researcher and educator, one of my primary concerns when it comes to the study and design of games is *how games move us.*[1] I enjoy the double meaning that this invocation of "movement" entails—that is, to be moved as both an *emotional* and an *embodied* experience. Indeed, in chapter three of her book, "Bodies at Play,"[2] Isbister explores precisely this intersection, an intersection that I have also explored (albeit from a rather different theoretical position) in my first scholarly engagement with *The Last of Us* in 2019.[3]

I want to keep this phrase in mind—*how games move us*—as we proceed to consider both games in developer Naughty Dog's post-apocalyptic oeuvre: *The Last of Us* (2013)[4] and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020).[5] I am specifically interested in the way in which Naughty Dog subtly attempts to *move* the player through the extrinsic motivator of PlayStation trophies, and the way this movement has evolved in the seven years between releases. It is my contention that the marked difference in emphasis in trophy design between parts one and two of *The Last of Us* indicates a change in ethos on Naughty Dog's part that brings (at least some of) the ludic aspects of the sequel in line with the themes that it tackles,

[1]Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[2]Isbister, 73-108.

[3]Eric Stein, "Bodies in Form: Motricity Across Mediums in *the Last of Us* and *the Last of Us: American Dreams*," ImageText in Motion: Animation and Comics, April 13, 2019, https://academia.edu/38800196/.

[4]Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann, *The Last of Us* (PS3: Naughty Dog, 2013).

[5]Neil Druckmann et al., *The Last of Us Part II* (PS4: Naughty Dog, 2020).

and in doing so, upsets certain values of the triple-A development space and player base that will be explored below.

I begin this study by situating the two games in *The Last of Us* franchise in context before proceeding to summarize the core thematics of each game against this background. Then, I briefly cover the "trophy" as a motivator for play. From here, I proceed to a review of Brendan Keogh's work on the patriarchal structures of gaming culture, and his positioning of *The Last of Us* in relationship to this culture. Finally, I compare the trophy lists of *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*, using the preceding analysis to interpret the evolution in design between the two games. I conclude with some commentary on emotion and embodiment drawn from Isbister, looking to the future of *The Last of Us* as a franchise, Naughty Dog as a studio, and the games industry at large.

Everything We've Been Through

The Last of Us, the critically and popularly acclaimed PlayStation 3 exclusive game, first began to come together in 2004 when Neil Druckmann, then a student, envisioned a game that blended the gameplay of *Ico* with a rough-around-the-edges protagonist in the spirit of *Sin City* and a setting ripped from *Night of the Living Dead*.[6] This triad of influences is illustrative of the tension at the heart of the game that Druckmann, now creative director, and his team at Naughty Dog would release almost ten years later.

In 2001's *Ico*, a boy is locked away in a fortress in which he finds the princess Yorda, who has been imprisoned in a cage suspended at the top of a tower. He rescues her, and then, for the remainder of the game, he must navigate the fortress and attempt to lead Yorda to safety. Famous for its ethos of "design by subtraction," *Ico* is notable in the genre of adventure games for its minimalism and aestheticism. Its emphasis on using gameplay and gamespace to evoke emotion in its players has been widely influential.[7]

Frank Miller's *Sin City*, a neo-noir comic series published by Dark Horse Comics between April 1991 and June 1992 is again distinct for its aestheticism, but unlike *Ico* uses its art style to tell hardboiled stories rife with graphic violence, starring such grizzled figures as John Hartigan, the aging detective who finds himself caught up in horrifying circumstances beyond both his capabilities and his comprehension. Where *Ico* is a story about human connection, *Sin City*'s stories are frequently about human connection as it is consistently thwarted by human evil.

The last element of the triad, George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*,

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[6] Andrew Webster, "The Power of Failure: Making 'the Last of Us'," *The Verge*, September 19, 2013, https://www.theverge.com/2013/9/19/4744008/making-the-last-of-us-ps3, Fumito Ueda, *Ico* (PS2: Team Ico, 2001), Frank Miller, *Sin City* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1991), and George A. Romero, *Night of the Living Dead* (Continental Distributing, 1968).

[7] Chris Kohler, "The Obscure Cult Game That's Secretly Inspiring Everything," *Wired*, September 12, 2013, https://www.wired.com/2013/09/ico/.

holds a significant position in the genre of zombie fiction, being the first to depict zombies in what we might now understand to be their modern form, which is to say, as "reanimated, flesh-eating cannibals," rather than people "entranced" by witchcraft.[8] More importantly, however, *Night of the Living Dead* is known for its conjoining of extreme violence with commentary on American race relations and the Vietnam War, using the pulpy form of the horror movie to subvert American norms and values.[9]

To attempt an interpretation of this cultural milieu informing *The Last of Us*, then, I would argue that these sources of inspiration each reckon with the tension between the experiences of human goodness and human evil and the messy work of navigating this space between when every societal arbiter or guarantor of this divide has failed. Despite their differences in style and their final conclusions on the matter, in *Ico*, *Sin City*, and *Night of the Living Dead*, 'goodness' and 'evil' name real patterns of human behaviour, patterns that are ascribed with value for their efficacy and their outcomes in a given social context, but which are ultimately motivated by the choices of individual humans, and not ideal forms of good or evil.

The Last of Us draws these three influences together to tell a story about a man and a girl travelling across an America plagued with ravenous fungal zombies and rapacious bands of human hunters. Joel, who lost his daughter during the outbreak in 2013, finds himself twenty years later tasked with escorting Ellie, a fourteen year old girl immune to the Cordyceps infection that consumed the world, from Boston to Salt Lake City, in hopes that the Fireflies, a militia group in search of a cure, might be able to use Ellie's immunity to save humanity. There are echoes of *Ico* here, but unlike Yorda, Ellie is fully realized as an individual, and it is her humanity that leads Joel to rediscover his own. At the same time, however, there are echoes of *Sin City* in *The Last of Us*'s brutal depictions of violence, violence that the player-character must repeatedly enact against humans and infected alike over 15-20 hours of gameplay. The infected are a constant threat, but far more chilling are the humans who commit atrocious acts against other humans in the name of survival. This is a world in which even Joel, our protagonist, must do terrible things out of necessity. And it is this state of the world that echoes the social breakdown of *Night of the Living Dead*, using a horrific, extended crisis to highlight the *choice* undergirding acts of human evil. Zombie fiction obliterates alibis for violence, because the most eminent of alibis, the law, no longer provides humans with justification for their bloodletting. The only necessity is the necessity of choice—the contingent will of an agent to exert force upon a situation to attempt to bring about the ends that they desire. This is the narrative terrain that *The Last of Us* traverses. It is simultaneously a simple, intimate story about two traumatized people coming to

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    [8]Jordan Bergman and Mia Galuppo, " 'Night of the Living Dead' to 'Maggie': The Evolution of Zombie Films," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 20, 2013, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/night-living-dead-maggie-evolution-572492/4-night-of-the-living-dead-1968.

    [9]Elliott Stein, "The Dead Zones," *The Village Voice*, January 7, 2003, https://www.villagevoice.com/2003/01/07/the-dead-zones/.

care and fight for each other against overwhelming odds, and a grand, sweeping narrative about the lengths to which people will go to survive, and the reasons at which they arrive to justify their actions.

In *The Last of Us Part II*, this theme of justification is only intensified. Set four years after the first game, *The Last of Us Part II* is entirely concerned with the consequences of Joel's actions, and specifically, with the consequences of a choice that Joel makes at the end of part one. Primarily playing as Ellie, now nineteen, *Part II* further troubles the space between human goodness and human evil, complicating the question of justification and foregrounding its basis in human choice. Even more brutal than the previous game, *Part II* has proven contentious, dividing critics and fans alike as to whether the game is successful in its more high-minded intentions.[10] Without delving into spoiler territory (since the game was only released in June), the way *Part II* plays with perspective and with narratives of justification makes any simple reading difficult, refusing to be interpreted monolithically. *Part II* is, for better and for worse, relentlessly focused on individual people and the individuality of their choices. This is not to say that *Part II* has no interest in structural questions of human organization (indeed, it attempts, if unevenly, to engage with such questions throughout—see Cole at *Bullet Points*,[11] Maiberg at *Vice*,[12] and Kunzelman at *Bullet Points*[13] for some excellent structural readings of *Part II*) but rather that the game is interested in the ways in which the messiness of human desires, the complexities of human relationships, and the contingencies of human choices, often motivate the broader *movements* of human organizations, leading sometimes to cohesion and sometimes to collapse.

Though there is much to examine at the thematic level across the two *The Last of Us* games, this paper takes aim at the way in which Naughty Dog has built this thematic of human choice and justification into their games at the level of design, and in particular, built it into the design of their trophy lists. So, before we proceed to a discussion of what, precisely, Naughty Dog is doing in this area of design, we must make clear the digital artefact that is the PlayStation trophy.

Put My Name Up

What are trophies? Known as achievements on other platforms, trophies are digital awards used in the PlayStation ecosystem to recognize player accomplishments in games. Trophies are attached to a player's PlayStation Network (PSN)

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[10] Joseph Stanichar, "*The Last of Us Part II*'s Reviews Are Extremely Divided," *Paste*, June 12, 2020, https://www.pastemagazine.com/games/the-last-of-us-part-ii/the-last-of-us-part-iis-reviews-are-extremely-divi/.

[11] Yussef Cole, "Their World," *Bullet Points Monthly*, July 8, 2020, https://bulletpointsmonthly.com/2020/07/08/their-world-last-of-us-part-ii.

[12] Emmanuel Maiberg, "The Not so Hidden Israeli Politics of 'the Last of Us Part II'," *Vice*, July 15, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bv8da4/the-not-so-hidden-israeli-politics-of-the-last-of-us-part-ii.

[13] Cameron Kunzelman, "Destroyed in the Cut," *Bullet Points Monthly*, July 22, 2020, https://bulletpointsmonthly.com/2020/07/22/destroyed-in-the-cut-the-last-of-us-part-ii.

name and are grouped by game. For each game, trophies are categorized and valued according to their difficulty to obtain—bronze being common and easy to obtain, silver uncommon and more challenging, and gold rare and most challenging. For 'trophy hunters,' obtaining all trophies for a game rewards the coveted platinum trophy, highlighting a player's skill, tenacity, and 'fan cred.' Websites like PSNProfiles are dedicated to aggregating trophy data, allowing PlayStation players to compare their statistics with friends and the broader PlayStation community. Websites including PSNProfiles, PowerPyx, and PlayStationTrophies feature in-depth guides from community members explaining how to obtain the platinum trophy for most games on the platform, often including extra details like difficulty, time-to-platinum, and information about missable or glitched trophies.

As a lifelong player of video games, I have always found something satisfying in these "extrinsic" or "meta-motivators," a satisfaction that I share with many friends and colleagues who also enjoy videogames. Trophies often provide an extra layer of challenge on top of the base level of challenge that a game provides, forcing players to try different strategies or styles of play, to explore a game thoroughly, and to push themselves beyond their supposed limits. But this extra layer of challenge can also have a dark side. Extremely difficult or unfair trophies can make the process of obtaining the platinum trophy for a game a cause for anxiety. For some, this anxiety might surface as low-grade irritation whenever a trophy notification appears; for others, this anxiety might surface with real symptoms of psychological distress—something which, as a perfectionist with strong completionist tendencies, I can attest to from personal experience. In short, to invoke Isbister once more: trophies *move* us. This ought to render them worthy of our consideration.

I am not concerned with trophies as "gamification," however—insofar as trophies have been used to gamify education, for instance—but rather as a matter of *design*. Trophies are *made*, and a well designed trophy list can clearly indicate a set of intentions for play, pointing players in the direction of a particular "meta-experience" that may in fact add to the base experience of play. If trophies are designed in collaboration with the narrative and creative teams, a development studio can use trophies to highlight key plot points, reward attentiveness to nuance, and reinforce tone, atmosphere, and theme. In this way, good trophy design can actually elevate the gameplay experience. Furthermore, thoughtfully designing a trophy list can help developers shape player behaviour by providing positive motivators for some actions and not for others. Given the extreme toxicity in certain corners of *The Last of Us* fandom, which became all too apparent in the lead up to the release of *Part II*,[14] such work on the part of developers may help in the creation of healthier, kinder communities in the future. Such a project is, I would argue, evidenced by the trajectory seen in Naughty Dog's design of the trophy lists between part one and part two of *The*

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[14] Patricia Hernandez, "The Last of Us Part 2 Has Become a Minefield," *Polygon*, June 30, 2020, https://www.polygon.com/2020/6/30/21307200/the-last-of-us-2-controversy-critics-press-naughty-dog-vice-review-leak-sony-ps4-playstation.

Last of Us. But to understand what makes this design shift important, we first need to situate *Part II* in the context of gamer culture.

So Great and Small

In 2015, the games scholar Brendan Keogh published an article in the *Overland Literary Journal* in which he examines the relatively recent emergence of the computer-mediated mode of masculinity that is the "gamer."[15] Sparked by the toxic upsurge of the Gamergate movement in August of 2014—which in many ways set the stage for Donald Trump's successful presidential campaign in 2016[16]—Keogh works to "situate Gamergate in the context of the broader patriarchal structures from which video game culture emerged." These are the same structures that showed themselves once more with the launch of *The Last of Us Part II*, structures that are necessary for us to interrogate if we are to understand the evolution of Naughty Dog's trophy design.

As Keogh explains, the "gamer" emerged from the earlier form of the "hacker," the "alternative masculinity" that arose through its "repulsion of jock culture and physical prowess," establishing a new "masculine normativity" through mastery and domination of the computer. This "hacker ideology," though largely defined in opposition to the dominant "masculine ideology," effectively reproduced the norms of that ideology in a new domain. Gaming spent "decades symbiotically attached to student hacker culture," and as a consequence, attached to these masculine hacker norms.

As Keogh clarifies, this "is not a claim that video games are naturally masculine," but rather that the history of video games is a history of power and the exclusions that power asserts and maintains in order to perpetuate itself. As video gaming transformed from a hobby into an industry, the "hacker ideology" of its enthusiast base became the mainstream ideology of the form—which is to say, an ideology of technological mastery and domination. These values were "carefully cultivated" by the early gaming press and game developers followed suit in building games for this particular "consumer identity" with its "narrow, clear set of values and tastes." Gamers, in turn, grew up and became game developers and game critics, continuing to make games and talk about games for the pleasure of gamers just like themselves.

The unique power of this alternative masculinity is its persistent victim complex: "[m]asculine computer culture" is "a field traditionally inaccessible to those who aren't male or upper middle class, but dominated by those teased and bullied

[15] Brendan Keogh, "Hackers, Gamers and Cyborgs," *Overland*, no. 218 (August 2015), https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-218/feature-brendan-keogh/.

[16] See Ian Sherr and Erin Carson, "GamerGate to Trump: How Video Game Culture Blew Everything up," *CNET*, November 17, 2017, https://www.cnet.com/news/gamergate-donald-trump-american-nazis-how-video-game-culture-blew-everything-up/, and Ari Waldman, "Donald Trump and Steve Bannon Need Angry Young Men. They're Using Gamergate Culture to Get Them," *Quartz*, February 3, 2017, https://qz.com/901761/donald-trump-and-steve-bannon-are-using-gamergate-culture-to-attract-angry-white-men/.

for not being macho," writes Keogh. Though the white, male gamer is in fact a privileged identity, holding a significant amount of power in a global industry projected to reach \$300 billion by 2025,[17] insofar as that identity is defined in opposition to another dominant identity by which it is threatened (the 'macho' man), that privilege remains obscure to itself. As barriers to women, people of colour, and queer folk in the games industry have been challenged, and a greater diversity of voices have started to be represented in development, games criticism, and games culture generally, the "true gamers" have doubled down on their self-understanding as a "marginalised, discriminated identity under attack," while using their "hegemonic and normative" privilege to attack the actually vulnerable and marginalized members of the gaming community.

What makes this cooptation of the victim position on the part of privileged white male gamers especially frustrating is the deployment of questions of ethics and taste for its justification. As Keogh recounts, Gamergate famously presented its misogyny as concern for ethics in games journalism, and the outrage of the movement toward games like The Fullbright Company's *Gone Home* centred on the game being "too short, too easy, lack[ing] conventional gameplay and [being], ultimately, an insult to 'true' video games." Gamergate repeatedly framed its vitriol as a desire for the betterment of gaming, when in fact it sought nothing but the maintenance of the white male gamer's power.

With this context established, what, then, can we learn about Naughty Dog and *The Last of Us*? In his review of *The Last of Us Part II*, Keogh describes Naughty Dog's position in the industry as a "jaded messianic one."[18] Their games "bravely push[] the medium forward with their sheer level of craft" while also "holding it back with how they anchor that craft in musty old conventions." As I noted above, both games in *The Last of Us* franchise are distinguished by the creative tension at their core between the experiences of human goodness and human evil, between an aesthetic, humanistic vision of the world and a violent, nihilistic one—a tension that is expressed mechanically as much as it is expressed thematically. Inasmuch as the gamer ideology prizes artistry while preserving masculinist norms and values, Naughty Dog remains thoroughly trapped in this in-between space: a triple-A developer of 'gamer's games' (big budget, high production values, violent) that also cares about complicated questions of morality and careful portrayals of characters and their relationships.

Naughty Dog resolutely believes that games can be "real art," while also relying on the staid conventions of the action game to make this "art" fun for their traditional fanbase. This belief has put Naughty Dog in the unfortunate position of being a representative for the very gamers defending the legitimacy of the form against the threat of so-called non-games made by independent and marginalized

[17] Liz Lanier, "Video Games Could Be a \$300 Billion Industry by 2025 (Report)," *Variety*, May 1, 2019, https://variety.com/2019/gaming/news/video-games-300-billion-industry-2025-report-1203202672/.

[18] Brendan Keogh, "The Rest of Us: Revenge, Prestige, and Putting *the Last of Us: Part II* in Its Place," *Overland*, July 28, 2020, https://overland.org.au/2020/07/the-rest-of-us-revenge-prestige-and-putting-the-last-of-us-part-ii-in-its-place/.

developers (recall Gamergate's alibi of 'taste,' above). Joel, the protagonist of the first game, a gruff, white male, has become an icon and role model for many white, male gamers—he's strong and capable (a typical macho man) while being tortured and complex (the hallmarks of the nerdy, embattled male gamer). His characterization is realistic, nuanced. He doesn't talk much, but he feels deeply. He's complex. He cares. And he's willing to do terrible things to protect the people he loves. If the gamer ideology contains in microcosm the patriarchal values of mastery and domination while obfuscating those values with a veneer of sensitivity and victimhood, Joel is the ideal embodiment of this ideology, the archetypal 'sad dad' who demonstrates that the gamers, the white men, those poor misunderstood fellows, have been good guys all along.

With *The Last of Us Part II*, however, Naughty Dog appears to have consciously pushed back against this cooptation by the toxic members of their community, accomplishing this most blatantly through their shifting of perspective from Joel to Ellie—a shift that, without giving too much away, is integral to the narrative of *Part II*. The gamers that we have been discussing here saw this as a direct attack on their values, taking it upon themselves to harass and threaten the developers and actors involved in the game.[19] In response, Druckmann took to Twitter, turning a line of Joel's dialogue back upon the character's supposed defenders: "if somehow the lord gave me a second chance at making this game, I'd do it all over again."[20] With this quip, Druckmann made clear that he and the team at Naughty Dog knew what position they were taking. Indeed, when *The Last of Us* first launched in 2013, Druckmann said of Ellie that he had a "secret agenda . . . to create one of the coolest, non-sexualized female video game protagonists," and that if Naughty Dog did this well, they would have "an opportunity to change the industry."[21] Somehow, the "true gamers" did not detect this "agenda" in the first game; with the second, Naughty Dog made sure to drive it home.

Since *Part II*'s release, the discourse has been ceaseless and exhausting. For every thoughtful, careful piece of criticism that has been published, a torrent of

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[19] Patricia Hernandez, "The Last of Us 2 Dev Naughty Dog Condemns Harassment, Death Threats," *Polygon*, July 6, 2020, https://www.polygon.com/2020/7/6/21314543/the-last-of-us-2-harassment-neil-druckmann-laura-bailey-naughty-dog-abby-death-threats-ps4.

[20] Hernandez.

[21] Webster, "The Power of Failure." I do not, however, want to naively praise Naughty Dog as a studio. Naughty Dog has an endemic culture of crunch that makes for unbearable working conditions for many developers (see Jason Schreier, "As Naughty Dog Crunches on the Last of Us II, Developers Wonder How Much Longer This Approach Can Last," *Kotaku*, March 12, 2020, https://kotaku.com/as-naughty-dog-crunches-on-the-last-of-us-ii-developer-1842289962.). Furthermore, in 2017 Naughty Dog side-stepped allegations of sexual harassment levelled at a lead developer by a former employee, choosing to deny having ever "received allegations" from the employee indicating "that he was harassed in any way at Naughty Dog or Sony Interactive Entertainment" (see Patrick Klepek, "Ex-Naughty Dog Employee Alleges Sexual Harassment, Studio Issues Statement," *Vice*, October 16, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/evpjgw/ex-naughty-dog-employee-alleges-sexual-harassment-studio-issues-statement. and Naughty Dog, "An Important Statement from Naughty Dog," October 15, 2017, https://www.naughtydog.com/blog/an_important_statement_from_naughty_dog.). Naughty Dog is not always as progressive as they would like to appear.

hatred and bigotry has been spewed onto the internet. To delve further into the commentary around the game far exceeds the scope of this paper—my annotated bibliography of games journalism on *Part II*, which I began working on at the end of June, has already exceeded 50,000 words. I intend to produce a much more substantial study on this game in the future—one in which I do not have to be as reticent about plot details. But in the mean time, allow me to turn at last to the trophy design of *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*, tying together the various threads that we have been following here.

Endure and Survive

For the original version of *The Last of Us* on PS3, there are fifty trophies that players can earn, including the platinum trophy for earning all the other trophies. Of these fifty trophies, fourteen (28%) are difficulty-related game completion trophies. There are four trophies for completing the game on Easy, Normal, Hard, and Survivor, four for completing new game plus on each of these difficulties, four for completing the DLC story content *Left Behind* on each of these difficulties, and one each for completing the game on Grounded Mode (a difficulty level higher than Survivor) and Grounded Mode Plus. Insofar as trophies provide an extra layer of motivation on top of the usual motivations of story progression and entertainment, Naughty Dog seems to be intending the difficulty of *The Last of Us* to be a significant portion of the player's experience. This trophy list remained mostly unchanged with the remastered edition of *The Last of Us* on PS4, except for the trophies for the two downloadable multiplayer map packs which, for the PS3 edition, were exceptionally challenging to obtain (for instance, *down three opposing players and survive a match without dying*, which, given the style of play in *The Last of Us* multiplayer, is no small feat). For the remastered edition, Naughty Dog changed the criteria for these multiplayer trophies, making the experience of obtaining them feel less impossible, though ensuring that they remained a challenge.

If we look at this trophy list through the lens of patriarchal gamer values provided us by Keogh, it becomes quite obvious that the design intentions of the trophy list for *The Last of Us* subscribe to the values of mastery and domination characteristic of the masculine gamer ideology. To truly complete the game, players must confront the most insurmountable odds and prevail, and then take their skills into the multiplayer arena and dominate other players. Though Naughty Dog made the trophies for multiplayer domination more accessible in the remastered edition of the game, they remain focused on defeating other players (another eight trophies, 16%, are rewarded for this violent mastery of the multiplayer mode). While the narrative of the game tells a complex human story about life and love in the rubble of civilization, the story that the trophies of the game tell is one of masculine superiority negotiated through violence (a story that ultimately came to inform many fans' interpretations of Joel as a masculine hero). One need only play a few rounds of multiplayer to see that this is the case. The multiplayer community of *The Last of Us* is one of the most

toxic, unwelcoming online game communities in which I have ever been involved.

For *The Last of Us Part II*, however, the base game has twenty-six trophies, only one (4%) of which is related to completing the game and none of which are tied to difficulty or multiplayer (the latter of which has been completely eliminated from *Part II*). Paired with this rather striking shift in trophy design is an unparalleled commitment to accessibility, the likes of which is unheard of in triple-A game development, and indeed, in game development generally. The base game comes loaded with sixty fine-grained accessibility options, which lead the journalists at the accessibility-in-gaming site *Can I Play That* to hail *The Last of Us Part II* as "the most accessible game ever."[22] By emphasizing accessibility and removing difficulty-related trophies, Naughty Dog has deliberately challenged the gamer values of mastery and domination. Like the first game, there are trophies for being thorough and exploring every nook and cranny and for taking the time to participate in scenes of character development, but gone is the emphasis on masculine prowess and triumph. This change in design mirrors the narrative and thematic changes that Naughty Dog undertook in *Part II*, and which I alluded to above in the perspectival shift from Joel to Ellie.

In August, Naughty Dog released the Grounded update for *Part II*, bringing Grounded Mode to the game, and a Permadeath mode as well (a new feature for *The Last of Us*). With these two new modes came two new trophies rewarding players for completing these difficulty challenges, but the marketing materials from Sony and Naughty Dog loudly emphasized that these trophies were not necessary for getting the platinum trophy for the game. Furthermore, the Grounded update came with even more accessibility options and improvements for the game, showing that Naughty Dog's commitment to accessibility continues post-launch.[23] Though I find the inclusion of trophies related to these modes to be a step backward on Naughty Dog's part, *The Last of Us Part II* remains a boundary-pushing game for its context, setting new goalposts for triple-A developers in the future.

In sum, we have seen that *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* are working in the contested space of gamer values, using the competing value sets of their influences (aestheticism and humanism versus violence and nihilism; human goodness versus human evil) to attempt to chart a path forward for games as an art form. We have seen that *The Last of Us* was not entirely successful in its goal, reproducing the toxic masculinity of which it is critical in both its narrative and its fanbase. But with *The Last of Us Part II*, we have seen Naughty Dog make a concerted effort to try and get beyond violent masculinity and the fanbase that idolizes it, pursuing this goal even in such peripheral spaces as trophy design. What remains, then, is to look toward the future and assess what

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[22]Steve Saylor, "Our the Last of Us 2 Discussion on Accessibility and Blind Impressions," *Can I Play That*, June 12, 2020, https://caniplaythat.com/2020/06/12/our-the-last-of-us-2-discussion-on-accessibility-and-blind-impressions.

[23]Ben Bayliss, "The Last of Us Part 2 Grounded Update Brings Accessibility Improvements," *Can I Play That*, August 11, 2020, https://caniplaythat.com/2020/08/11/the-last-of-us-part-2-grounded-update-accessibility-improvements/.

impacts Naughty Dog's work might have, and how we as players, developers, and researchers might build upon Naughty Dog's accomplishments to surpass their own limitations as a studio.

It Can't Be For Nothing

In *How Games Move Us*, one of the first elements of emotionally effective game design that Isbister examines is that of choice. "Actions with consequences—interesting choices—unlock a new set of emotional possibilities for game designers," she writes.[24] What is fascinating about the *The Last of Us* games is that Naughty Dog gives its players no say in the direction of their narratives. In *The Last of Us Part II*, remarks Keogh, the characters are "already fully-formed before the player occupies them ... [possessed of] their own histories, identities, ambitions, decisions."[25] This does not mean, however, that Naughty Dog sacrifices the potential of choice; rather, they mobilize choice itself as a theme, designing their characters in such a way that players are required to inhabit the perspectives of these fully realized individuals and so carry out their choices as if performing material from a script.[26] As Isbister writes, "our feelings in everyday life, as well as games, are integrally tied to our goals, our decisions, and their consequences."[27] What Naughty Dog accomplishes then—and perhaps nowhere in their catalogue is this clearer than in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*—is a dispossession of the player by the character wherein the player's feelings become tied to the distinct goals, decisions, and consequences of the character, even when that character's goals and decisions might differ from the player's own, and the consequences of these goals and decisions are undesirable.

As I argued above, *The Last of Us* franchise is deeply interested in human goodness and human evil not as ideals but as realities of praxis. And as we have seen, Naughty Dog has deliberately used the trophies in *The Last of Us Part II* to shape the praxis of their players in a direction corresponding to the praxis and themes that the game articulates. Though Ellie's narrative in *Part II* remains overdetermined by Joel's patriarchal decisions,[28] the game's trophy list presents a fundamentally different value set from that of the first game, seeming to indicate that the terrible events of *Part II* need not have gone that way, that an alternative is possible, that *if only* Ellie could learn to be *otherwise* then the violence might finally cease. Where Joel's choice at the end of the first game has an air of awful necessity (a necessity reinforced by the *ten* trophies associated with the completion of the main story alone), Ellie's choices

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[24]Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, 2.

[25]Keogh, "The Rest of Us.".

[26]Keogh.

[27]Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, 2.

[28]On this patriarchal overdetermination, see Reid McCarter, "The Last of Us, Chaos, and Control," *Digital Love Child*, August 18, 2014, https://digitallovechild.com/2014/08/18/the-last-of-us-chaos-and-control/, Julie Muncy, "*Last of Us Part II* Is Great, but Can't Escape Its Father's Shadow," *Wired*, June 12, 2020, https://www.wired.com/story/last-of-us-part-ii-review/, and Natalie Flores, "Absent Mothers," *Bullet Points Monthly*, July 17, 2020, https://bulletpointsmonthly.com/2020/07/17/absent-mothers-the-last-of-us-part-ii.

are consistently presented as that, as *choices* in all of their contingency. Players only get one trophy for seeing Ellie's story through, a mechanical demotivation of the masculinist narrative arc of mastery and domination that is preserved by the first game's trophy list. These harmful values are devalourized by the very design of *The Last of Us Part II*, revealed at every level for all of their baseless destructiveness. There is another way. We can be otherwise. This is what *Part II* seems to promise.

But this promise is not realized in game. *The Last of Us Part II* remains an extremely punishing experience. Ellie goes so far down the path of patriarchal violence that the *otherwise* for her all but disappears. And while *Part II* is a triumph in its portrayal of individual characters and their motivations, it comes up short in its handling of race[29] and politics.[30] If we are to learn from *The Last of Us Part II* and so, hopefully, grow beyond it, we need to do the hard work of realizing the possibilities of *being otherwise* at which it hints, telling new stories that leave behind the harmful narratives of the old order for good. At the same time, those of us like myself who have in the past benefited from the privileges of the dominant ideology in the gaming community need to recognize and promote the work of marginalized creators who are already telling these new stories.

As the games critic Carolyn Petit writes in her critical assessment of *The Last of Us Part II*, "we know that things can be different," we know "that games like this can use their mechanics in other ways," that "this kind of gameplay can be used as a way to explore the development of a relationship" as much as it can be used to explore "the murder of one person by another."[31] This is the otherwise that is now for us to seek, the otherwise that I long to see more and more of in games, the otherwise that I wish for Ellie in the quiet after the credits have rolled.

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[29]Kunzelman, "Destroyed in the Cut."

[30]Maiberg, "The Not so Hidden Israeli Politics of 'the Last of Us Part II'."

[31]Carolyn Petit, "Broken People, Broken Worlds: Thoughts on the Last of Us Part II," *Medium*, June 29, 2020, https://medium.com/@carolynpetit/broken-people-broken-worlds-thoughts-on-the-last-of-us-part-ii-a012de5d2acf.

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