

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: The Last of Us
Platform: PS3
Genre: Survival Horror/Action-Adventure
Release Date: June 14, 2013
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Director(s): Neil Druckmann, Bruce Straley
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Neil Druckmann

Overview

Twenty years into a fungal pandemic that has wiped out most of the world's population, Joel, a hardened survivor, is tasked with delivering Ellie, a teenaged girl immune to the virus, to those who might be able to develop a cure. As they travel across the post-apocalyptic United States, Joel and Ellie face horrors that simultaneously bring them together and drive them apart.

The development of their relationship serves as a focal point for the game and for its themes. It's a story about the growing familial love between these two very different characters, each with their own problems and stumbling blocks. *The Last of Us* is a story of finding light within darkness, hope in despair, love in the face of death.

Joel: So...this everything you were hoping for?

Ellie: It's got its ups and downs, but...you can't deny the view though. (Naughty Dog, 2013)

Characters

- **JOEL** – The player character for most of the game, Joel is a gruff, older man charged with the task of delivering Ellie safely to the Fireflies. Hardened by twenty years in a violent post-pandemic world and the loss of his daughter, Joel is not a particularly warm or friendly person. Though he is initially resistant to bonding with Ellie, his gradual softening and growing affection for her serves as one of the central themes of the game.
- **ELLIE** – A fourteen-year-old girl, Ellie is immune to the fungal infection that has wiped out most of humanity. Ellie is stubborn and independent, but also fiercely loyal and kind, even in the face of the current world. Though she's suffered greatly during her short life, Ellie tries to brighten the world around her through joke books and games. Her outgoing attitude, sense of humor, and colorful language are a stark contrast to Joel's closed-off attitude. Ellie serves as the emotional heart of game, for both the player and Joel. Her relationship with Joel serves as the main facet of the game.
- **THE FIREFLIES** – A renegade group resisting the strict control over society that the government has enacted. They are currently searching for a cure for the zombie infection.
- **SARAH** – The player character for the opening section of the game. She is Joel's daughter, and the two of them are shown to have a close relationship. Her death at the beginning of the game at the hands of a soldier sets the tone for the game and for Joel and Ellie's relationship.

Breakdown

The Last of Us follows two main characters, Joel and Ellie, across a post-pandemic U.S. During promo for the game, developer Naughty Dog constantly made the point of saying that Ellie is a main protagonist, as important as Joel, or maybe more so. This attitude is also clearly reflected in the game. Ellie is the character who gets the most development over the course of the game. Although Joel is the main player avatar, his goal, and therefore the player's goal, is to get Ellie to the fireflies. In fact, Joel more or less functions as a vehicle through which the player gets to meet and experience Ellie. Additionally, Joel's purpose in the game revolves not only around Ellie, but also around his daughter Sarah. As stated by creative director Neil Druckmann: "That's what the story is about, the bond with these two girls." (Takahashi, 2013) *The Last of Us* is a story about two little girls, and how they impact and affect not only the male character, but the players.

Sarah and Ellie never meet, separated as they are by time. Sarah dies at the beginning of the game, at the onset of the fungal outbreak, six years before Ellie is even born. Joel thinks that they would have liked each other, and his ideas are backed up by the similarities seen in-game of the two girls. The girls certainly share a sense of humor and an appreciation for the outdoors. Additionally, both girls are incredibly mature for their age; able to stay calm and collected in stressful, dangerous situations. They're both also caring and selfless. "We can't leave him!" Sarah cries, when her uncle stays back to give her and Joel time to get to safety. Similarly, when Joel's partner Tess takes a final stand to give Joel and Ellie time to get away, Ellie expresses her disbelief that, "we just left her there to die!" (Naughty Dog, 2013)

The Last of Us gives players several hours (on average, the game clocks in at around twelve hours of gameplay) to know, love, and connect to Joel, and more importantly, Ellie. But Sarah dies before the title card, within about the first half hour of gameplay. And even in that incredibly short amount of time, players are able to care for Sarah so greatly, that her death is as heart-wrenching for us to experience as it is for Joel. His loss is our loss, made more impactful by the fact that Sarah wasn't introduced to us as Joel's daughter. Instead, Joel is introduced as Sarah's father. We care more about Sarah than we do about Joel. We feel his loss, because it is our loss too, we're losing the character we've come to love, just as he loses the daughter he loves.

This brave, sweet girl is the first character we meet, the first character we play as, the first character we connect with, and also the first one we lose. And it's not to the zombie pandemic; she's killed by a *man*, a soldier ordered to shoot Joel and Sarah. The first major thing that happens in the game is the loss of a sweet, funny, selfless girl to an act of senseless violence. In the video game world, where violence is common and often brutal, the devastation of this moment is a powerful commentary, and a sobering reminder to the players as they continue through the game and violently fight their way through zombies and people alike.

Of course, the first appearance of Ellie brings Sarah back not only to Joel's mind, but to ours as well. Ellie even comments on the watch Joel is wearing, the same one Sarah gave him. The themes and connection between Ellie and Sarah continue throughout the game. Sarah opens the game, Ellie ends it. Both bright, happy, sweet, funny girls ultimately get destroyed and broken (Sarah physically, and Ellie more metaphorically) not by the pandemic, but by humans.

Just as the players learn to care for Sarah in the game's prologue, they too grow to care for Ellie over the course of the main game. This feeling comes both from the fact that Ellie is always with you and from the incredible detail given to Ellie's AI in the game.

While the player is controlling Joel in combat, Ellie will distract enemies, warn you of their positions, shiv enemies that grab you, and later on, will even help you shoot them. When Joel is searching through an area for supplies or is otherwise somewhat idle, Ellie doesn't stand still. Instead, she'll do a variety of things. She'll walk around, hum songs, whistle, fix her ponytail, tie her shoe, bend down to look at something, pick things up, and more. If you're too idle for long enough, Ellie will even comment on it. If the player spends too long in one place without moving on, the game will think that they are stuck or lost, and often Ellie will give you directions or point out a way out of the area. Even though you are playing a single player narrative you still feel as though you have a companion. This is so poignant that in the few points when you play as Joel without Ellie by your side, the game feels more difficult, lonely and dull.

She's easier for the player to connect with than Joel as well. Like the player, Ellie is less familiar with the world we're in than Joel is. She'll ask about the infected and people you encounter, and the terminology Joel uses. She even adds to the world building of the game by asking questions about things the player is familiar with (such as hydroelectric dams) highlighting the differences between our world and hers. She is an integral part of the world of *The Last of Us*, and its gameplay experience.

Unlike Joel, who is standoffish and grumpy, Ellie is a chatterbox. She talks to you, making her feel even more like a real person, someone you know, than Joel. As you travel through the world, Ellie starts up a lot of different kinds of conversations. In certain locations, if you stay there long enough, Ellie will pull out a book of puns and read a set to you.

She'll also comment on the environments themselves. Sometimes they're more of a stream of consciousness, or attempts to connect to a distant Joel. As she's more successful with this later on in the game, she'll start asking Joel more personal questions, adding to his character and development.

What makes Ellie's dialogue even more effective is that a lot of it isn't really prompted by anything the player does, other than entering a specific area. She just wants to talk to you. However, some conversations can be prompted by pressing the triangle button. These are referred to as "optional conversations", and there's a lot of them in *The Last of Us*. These optional conversations tend also to develop Joel and Ellie's relationship more than her random chatter.

Some of these conversations are deeply emotional, and some are as simple as a high-five between the two of them. Despite being "optional" these conversations add a lot of depth to both Joel and Ellie and players, when they stumble into the right place for these

conversations, don't skip them. Players also often seek these conversations out, not only because listening to all of them gives the player a trophy, but because they add so much and are entertaining to listen to. Players want to listen to them because they want to know more about the characters, and see them interact more.

All of this is testament to the phenomenal job Naughty Dog did in creating these characters. Players truly care about Ellie, what she has to say, what she thinks, how she's doing. And this is vital to the game; in the last act Joel chooses to save Ellie rather than allow the Fireflies to operate on her brain and kill her to find a cure. The moral question here: did Joel do the right thing in saving Ellie, is much less interesting when one has not grown to know and love Ellie.

Even more depth to the dilemma is brought given that the final act is supposed to bring to mind the first. The players control Joel as he carries Ellie out of the firefly building, just as they controlled Joel when he was carrying an injured Sarah out of the city.

The narrative comes full circle. At the beginning we see Joel as a loving father whose daughter is taken from him. After, Joel shuts down, alienating himself from the world and from other people. He's on the outs with his brother, resistant to the idea of taking care of Ellie, and his partner Tess goes as far as to call them both "shitty people". The players control Joel through his journey with Ellie, as he gradually comes to accept her as his companion, first by acknowledging her abilities by giving her a gun, then by agreeing to continue on their journey with her after the opportunity to stop is presented to him, by comforting her after a harrowing moment, calling her "baby girl", like he called Sarah, by opening up to Ellie about his past, and finally by prioritizing saving her over literally anything else in the world. He ends up once again a man who loves a daughter.

Strongest Element

The strongest part of *The Last of Us* is, of course, it's focal point: the relationship between Joel and Ellie. Over the course of the game Joel and Ellie go from reluctant companions to two people who would do and sacrifice anything for each other. Their relationship is built through casual conversations that are woven into gameplay, specific discussions of heavy topics such as grief and loss, and moments of high tension and drama in fight scenes. It all very extraordinarily natural and serves to get the player invested in Joel and Ellie as people, and in their relationship.

Unsuccessful Element

The Last of Us starts out with a tired, overused, and sexist trope: Women in Refrigerators. Joel's daughter Sarah is killed early on to give Joel motivation and character development. Because the developers were aware of this trope and the consequences of

using it, they went out of their way to make it a worthy moment by fully fleshing out who Sarah is as a character. Although this was ultimately successful, and Sarah's developed character strengthens the game overall, an effort to avoid this trope would have been appreciated.

Highlight

The highlight of *The Last of Us* is often referred to as "the giraffe scene". It takes place after the Winter chapter where Ellie and Joel faced some of their darkest situations yet; Joel has been mortally wounded and Ellie – while trying to care for him – ends up going up against a society of cannibals led by a man with a predatory interest in her. The section ends with a shaken Ellie narrowly escaping the man and Joel comforting her after she violently defeat him. Their relationship reaches another level in this moment when Joel holds Ellie to him and calls her "baby girl", echoing back to his interactions with his own daughter at the beginning of the game.

After this, the game switches to Spring, and the dynamic between Joel and Ellie has changed. While Joel is now open towards her and talkative, Ellie is withdrawn and melancholic. Joel has to say her name multiple times to get her attention, she doesn't make any jokes or even talk unless prompted, and instead of staying near Joel she hangs back, sitting on benches and not interacting. This all changes when Ellie spots something off-screen and rushes after it. The player, and Joel, can't see what it is she's excited about but once the player has Joel follow her they see what has enchanted Ellie so much.

It's a giraffe. Amidst the horrors of the world here is a family of giraffes, serenely munching on the plants that have begun reclaiming the world. Ellie breathless with awe, hesitates to approach one that's close, but with Joel's encouragement comes forward to pet the giraffe.

"So fucking cool," she remarks. When the giraffe wanders off, she runs after it.

After this scene Ellie once again opens up. She and Joel share several conversations afterwards, most of them meaningful and personal. Previously forbidden topics such as Joel's life before the outbreak and what happened to Sarah are finally addressed. Joel and Ellie are now on the same page; open to sharing their pasts and emotions with each other.

The moment with the giraffe, a moment of pure wonder after some of the darkest, most disturbing parts of the game, is one of the most impactful scenes in the entire game. It shows so clearly the major themes of the game. Despite the zombie apocalypse that has ravaged the world, life is going on. Plants are growing, reclaiming the land from human structures. Animals are thriving; giraffes can safely wander through what was once the

metropolitan area of Salt Lake City. And Ellie and Joel, despite all the horrors in their lives, are able to have a good moment. They're able to appreciate and see beauty in the world. And through this they are able to connect fully to one another.

Critical Reception

The Last of Us has had enormous critical and financial success. With a total of seven million units sold (Karmali, 2014), it is the second best-selling game of all time for the PlayStation 3. It was the tenth best-selling game of 2013, and the best-selling game that wasn't a sequel or based on an existing property (GameCenter, 2014). It is the most awarded game in history, with more than 230 awards (Nelva, 2014), over 200 of which are Game of the Year awards (Naughty Dog). The game has won individual awards for innovation, storytelling, game mechanics, sound design, and music. It also received forty perfect scores (Naughty Dog), indicating universal acclaim. It has even been referred to as "gaming's *Citizen Kane* moment" (Kamen). *The Last of Us Remastered*, a re-release of the game optimized for the PlayStation 4, sold approximately 632,000 copies in its first week (Kannan, 2014). With the sales of both games combined, *The Last of Us* has sold over eight million units.

Lessons

- **Female Characters Sell** – When the game was in production developer Naughty Dog was warned against placing Ellie in the foreground on the cover for the game. They were told that advertising the fact that the game is about a young girl would hurt sales and reception. However, the praise showered on *The Last of Us* and on Ellie is proof that this is a lie. Because the game only works if players care about Ellie as much as Joel does, its success proves that female game heroes can be popular, successful, and meaningful. They can carry blockbuster AAA games. Male gamers are able to connect with them. And they don't have to be sexualized or appeal to a male gaze to do so. They don't even have to have romantic connections to a male character (Edge 2013, Gibson 2013).
- **Be Aware of Harmful Tropes** – The efforts of the team to counteract the tropes involved in Sarah's death actually served to make the game better. By making Sarah a fully realized character and by giving players control of her, Sarah is a likable, relatable person, and her death isn't an empty gesture that only serves to motivate Joel, but a tragic moment that engrosses the audience.
- **Don't Be Afraid of Linear Narrative** – There is a lot of discussion around narrative design in games that is heavily focused on branching narratives and allowing players to make choices; dialogue choices, choosing which NPC to share or save, or ability choices. *The Last of Us* has none of these things. Its massive success proves that players are interested in single-player narrative driven games,

and that a game without these big choice moments still gets players engaged and invested.

Summation

The Last of Us is an important moment in gaming history. It proves that games with strong authored stories and characters can succeed despite the folk knowledge that only choice-based narratives are what games are best at. *The Last of Us* proves that games are actually exceptional at getting players invested in characters and plot even without direct control over the plot. It also shows that games with female leads can sell, and sell well. Despite the idea that the market is controlled by misogynistic men, players had no problem with Ellie and embraced her character with open arms.

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