# Get real: Narrative and gameplay in *The Last of Us*

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**Abstract**

*This essay addresses problems of ludonarrative dissonance in the 2013 video game The Last of Us. Much of the game's production is well executed and very realistic, both in terms of graphics and storytelling; however, a few unrealistic elements in its gameplay undercut the otherwise compelling narrative. While many other video games include similar tropes to make the games more accessible and appealing to consumers, the narrative in The Last of Us ultimately suffers because of its developers' attempt to appeal to a mass audience.*

**Keywords**

*Video games, gameplay, narrative, ludonarrative dissonance, realism*

"Because it's a video game."

For a few decades now, we gamers have been able to forgive, to even embrace certain unrealistic elements of our games. We expect or rely on tutorial levels, save points, health regeneration... The chance to start over. Most of the time, we don't require (or provide to any non-gamers who ask) any explanation for these tropes beyond "Because it's a video game." This, however, is becoming an increasingly unsatisfying answer. As technology advances and game developers try to tell us implicitly and explicitly that they are placing us into much more graphically realistic game worlds, certain conventional elements of gameplay and design that hew closely to those of earlier games start to seem glaringly old-fashioned. These archaic elements become more jarring and distracting, sometimes to the point of silliness—sometimes, to the point that they undercut the emotional stakes at the heart of the game's narrative. Such

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flaws present in *The Last of Us* stand out because the "story" we experience—that we *create*—while playing is at points in direct opposition to the literal story occurring in the game.

Since its initial release for the PlayStation 3 in 2013 and rerelease for PlayStation 4 last year, *The Last of Us* (from developer Naughty Dog) has been universally praised by critics and gamers alike for its memorable and realistically-rendered characters, well written story, superb voice acting and performance capture, visually rich environments, tense gameplay, and moody minimalist soundtrack. It topped numerous 2013 Game of the Year lists, and many gamers regard it as the best PlayStation 3 game ever made. For others, it's one of the best games, *period*. It *is* good, fantastic in some respects, but don't let the gushing praise fool you. *The Last of Us* does have its flaws. These problems may seem nitpicky—things many gamers would not perceive as problems at all—and are by no means particular to *The Last of Us*.

The game tells the story of middle-aged Joel and fourteen-year-old Ellie twenty years after a worldwide fungal pandemic called CBI (Cordyceps Brain Infection) wiped out much of the population (and civilized society) and transformed many humans into ferocious fungus-mutants that can't wait to rip out your throat. (The word *zombie* is never used—they're referred to generally as "infected" and more specifically as "runners," "stalkers," "clickers," or "bloaters" based on the stages of the fungal infection—but for all intents and purposes you're dealing with zombies.) Joel is tasked with escorting Ellie to a militia group that hopes to use her to develop a vaccine since she appears immune to the Cordyceps fungus.

Even in games that involve zombies or aliens or monsters, it seems a bit strange when your character can haul around a dozen weapons, thousands of rounds of ammunition, pieces of armor or clothing he or she is not currently wearing, and a plethora of other useful or useless objects. These almost infinitely deep pockets aren't bound by the physical laws of the real world and are just one of many tropes that have become part and parcel of video games that we accept, understand, take for granted… and have come to depend on. We double-jump with ease or chow down on a turkey leg in the midst of battle to immediately heal a supposedly fatal stab wound, and we think nothing of it. We suspend our disbelief because we want to be able to carry as much stuff as we please. Having every gun or sword or grenade or potion just a button-tap or two away trumps our desire for realism.

Is it stupid and unrealistic? Sure. Does it matter? No. Why? *Because it's a video game.*

Some games have attempted to more realistically limit what you can carry (usually two weapons—one large, one small—as well as a few grenades or bombs of some sort). *The Last of Us*, upon first glance, seems to limit Joel in a similar manner. Ammunition isn't as plentiful as in other games, which would be the case in the event of global cataclysm. Also, limited ammo heightens the tension—though this tension is undercut by another aspect of the game, which I will get to shortly. *The Last of Us* also limits the number of weapons Joel has readily available. He has to kneel and swap them out from his backpack while, for added realism and tension, the action doesn't pause as it normally would in

most other games. Still, Joel is eventually able to access several guns almost instantaneously. I'm perfectly fine with having the choice of several different weapons in the game, but if Naughty Dog wants realistic, nail-biting gameplay, why not limit the number of guns Joel can tote to only two or three? How much more tense would the game be if you had to select only two guns for Joel at a time as opposed to having all of them all the time?

By the end, Joel is carrying a shotgun, a hunting rifle, an assault rifle, a flamethrower, a bow (and several arrows), four pistols, over a hundred rounds of ammo for said weapons, a hatchet, three shivs, three Molotov cocktails, three nail bombs, three smoke bombs, a brick, three health kits, dozens of books and notes and maps, various materials used to craft health kits and bombs (alcohol, blades, duct tape, explosive materials, sugar, and rags), and a few other small items. By my estimation, if all this could even fit into one backpack, it would weigh at least a few hundred pounds. Are we to believe that all of it is then easily schlepped around by a man who, despite his size and strength, lives in a world where food and sleep are scarce?

You could say I'm being mighty persnickety about the verisimilitude in a game that involves zombies, but the developers went so far as to try to provide a more scientifically sound explanation for these zombies, something other than the typical vague "viral outbreak" or "mysterious infection" you find in most zombie fiction. The outbreak in *The Last of Us* is caused by a mutated form of the parasitic Cordyceps fungus that actually exists and is known to control the behavior of the insects it infects. If Naughty Dog went to the trouble to create realistic characters (graphically, emotionally, behaviorally, etc.), realistic environments, and even "realistic" zombies, why then give the main character Hermione Granger's magically bottomless handbag?

Why? Because it's a video game.

Another trope is bestowing superhero abilities, e.g. the gravity-defying double-jump or the power to slow or completely stop time, upon characters not meant to be superheroes. This makes its way into *The Last of Us* as well and, like the bottomless backpack, bothered me more than in other games. Joel can see enemies in almost complete darkness and even through walls. It's called "Listen Mode": with the press of a button, the world goes gray and enemies (the ones making any noise, at least) are outlined by a glowing halo. I understand why the developers dubbed it "Listen Mode," to make us think that Joel is concentrating on the sounds made by those hostile humans or fungus-mutants in order to pinpoint their locations and track their movements, but no matter what Naughty Dog calls it, it's basically a super power akin to Superman's X-ray vision. To their credit, the developers did include the option to turn this mode off, which does make the gameplay more realistic.

However, stripping Joel of this one ability does not change the fundamental misstep of *The Last of Us*: its characters' vulnerability. Joel and Ellie are certainly emotionally vulnerable, or so they become to one another by the game's conclusion, which is why these characters have resonated with so many gamers. However, the narrative and gameplay are at odds in regards to the characters' physical vulnerability. On the one hand, there are times when Joel (or Ellie, during certain segments of the

game when you play as her) can be instantly and brutally killed by enemies. While these insta-kills are frustrating to me as a gamer, they are quite satisfying in the context of the story; they emphasized the fact that Joel and Ellie are traversing a savage landscape inhabited by creatures and humans that could end their existence in the blink of an eye. There are several other instances—when Joel is impaled by a section of rebar and struggles to maintain consciousness as he hobbles to safety with Ellie's help, or when Ellie is attacked by the leader of a cannibalistic group of survivors and has to crawl across the floor to reach a machete—that show just how fragile human existence can be, especially in such an extremely violent world. These moments also show how strong the will to survive can be. *The Last of Us* is at its best in such moments when it's not trying to be like other video games, when it's trying to be something different, when it's trying to do (what some gamers might consider) less. In doing less, the game becomes something *more*.

On the other hand, throughout most of the game, Joel can withstand numerous bites, blows, cuts, and even gunshot wounds by healing himself almost instantly with a health pack, which involves bandages that Joel wraps around his wounds in a matter of seconds. All better! The amount of damage Joel can take before he's killed depends on the difficulty setting you choose, but he—like countless other video game characters—is able to absorb a slew of bullets and keep going.

Then there's Ellie. For a majority of the game while you control Joel, Ellie is practically invincible. She doesn't even seem to exist in the eyes (or ears) of the enemies. As long as Joel sneaks around quietly and remains hidden, Ellie can stroll around in what should be plain sight, talking or whistling, and not a single foe (human or infected) will react. Furthermore, when enemies do attack Joel and inflict damage upon him, Ellie isn't hurt. As far as the gameplay is concerned, you don't have to protect her; you only have to keep Joel from getting shot at or ripped apart.

The game is essentially one long escort mission. However, with escort missions in most other games, the person or people you're trying to protect can actually be injured or killed, sometimes very easily. It can be annoying, which is why many gamers will tell you they would rather go read *The Old Farmer's Almanac* from 1798 than play an escort mission, but it doesn't have to be. In 2002's *Ico*, developed by Team Ico, you play as a young boy helping an ethereal princess through a dangerous castle. *Ico* too was mostly one long escort mission, yet the game was one of PlayStation 2's best (and, for me, one of the best video games of all time).

Which brings me to the very premise, the very story, the very *heartbeat* of *The Last of Us*: protecting Ellie. At the beginning of the game, at the outset of the Cordyceps outbreak, Joel's daughter Sarah is killed. Throughout the rest of the game, as Joel ushers Ellie to the militia group that wants to use her to make a vaccine, he comes to terms with his daughter's death, for which he feels responsible. At the end, when Joel learns that the militia group intends to kill Ellie (for whatever reason, she won't survive the procedure they must perform on her to create the vaccine), he chooses to save her (and possibly doom the human race). He chooses to protect her life at all costs.

What the gameplay tells us, though, is that Ellie doesn't need his protection. She's invincible, remember? I understand why Naughty Dog made the game this way. It would be much harder and much more frustrating for players if Ellie was constantly noticed and hurt by enemies. That's just it, though. *That is* the story they're attempting to tell. Joel is trying to protect a young girl who could, who should, constantly be noticed and hurt by enemies. The story screams, *Ellie needs your help!* while the gameplay screams, *Ellie doesn't need your help!* We are made to feel as though we're affecting the game and the story in a way we're not.

"But it's a video game," you say. True, true. After all, how fun would it be to play a game in which one bullet killed you or the slightest mistake meant the death of the person you're trying to protect? That's too close to real life. That's why we play video games, isn't it? To escape or forget our fragile existence, right? Many people play games for enjoyment, and they won't keep playing (or buying) them if their characters are dying every three seconds from a single gunshot or sword swipe. (Occasionally, though, that's the very thing that entices some gamers; just ask anyone who's played *Dark Souls* or *Dark Souls* 2.) Such design and gameplay elements are included to essentially make this game, and countless others, if not more fun to play, then at least less frustrating. The more fun and less frustrating a game is to control and interact with, the more likely it is to be played (and, more importantly, purchased) by the largest number of consumers. However, by going after the widest possible audience, Naughty Dog has actually done a disservice to this game's story.

I know, I know: here's another leftist academic shaking his fist at corporations and grumbling that capitalism stifles art. I'd like to think the developers at Naughty Dog didn't sit around a table twirling their mustaches while asking, "How can we make a game that makes the most money?" I imagine their thoughts were something more along the lines of "The scope of our ideas for *The Last of Us* are so massive, we have to make certain choices while designing the game in order for it to recoup enough money so that we don't go bankrupt." I completely understand why a company like Naughty Dog would want and need to produce a game for the widest possible audience. My point is this: *The Last of Us*, specifically, should not have been a game aimed at the entire gaming populace. The developers could have made it more realistic, thereby weaving its narrative and gameplay together more cohesively. This particular game is not meant to be a "fun" game to play, just as *Schindler's List* isn't meant to be a fun film to watch or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* a fun book to read. The story in *The Last of Us* is brutal, unforgiving, and intense; the gameplay, not so much. If instead of including these traditional gameplay elements to attract the most players, what if Naughty Dog had severely limited Joel's weapons, items, and abilities *and* made the game a true escort mission in which the threat of Ellie being captured or killed was looming constantly over Joel (and, therefore, you)? This distressing realism wouldn't have simply served to inform the story; it *is* the story.

Ultimately, it boils down to how much realism we want or need in our video games, and in what aspects of a game we can forgive a lack of realism. Games today, if their stories call for it, could stand to have a little more realism—not in graphics but in

gameplay. If developers want their virtual world to seem brutally real, they shouldn't hold back. They should make that world as real as they possibly can, in all facets, and not let "Because it's a video game" be their answer or their excuse.

We can take it.

For real.

**Scott Hughes** received an MFA in creative writing from Georgia College & State University in 2004. His fiction and poetry have appeared in such journals as Crab Creek Review, Crazyhorse, and Redivider, and he is currently at work on a young adult novel. His critical essays focus on video games and other types of pop culture media. He has been an instructor at Central Georgia Technical College since 2007.