

Why *The Last of Us* is Good but Not Great

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Naughty Dog's 2013 action-horror adventure *The Last of Us* is a good zombie game. It's not the greatest game of the generation, and it's not the best game of the decade. I won't squabble with those who called it Game of the Year, but I can't give it that honor. It does some things very well, but the most important things (especially the ending) are merely decent at best.

Spoilers ahead. Obviously, you shouldn't read this if you haven't played the game.

The First Problem

Zombie games have been done. Zombie stories saw a modern resurgence with George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, and video game developers have been in love with shambling corpses since *Resident Evil* in 1996 (although they appeared in classic titles like *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* (1985) and *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992)).



So after such a profound glut of zombie games, including *Dead Rising*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Killing Floor*, *Dead Space*, *FEAR*, *I Made a Game with Zombies In It*, *Plants vs. Zombies*, the *Borderlands* DLC *The Zombie Island of Dr. Ned*, *Dead Nation*, *Dead Island*, *No More Room in Hell*, and *Space Pirates and Zombies*

(not to mention *Minecraft* and *Call of Duty*), how can anyone do new things with the zombie genre? (I'm leaving *The Walking Dead* out for now, since it came out at more or less the same time as TLoU.)

I'm not saying it's *impossible* to do new things with zombies in video games — only that it's very difficult. Furthermore, despite the constant noise from professional critics, it's *not* necessary for every excellent game to do something new.

There are three ways for a work of art to shine:

1. **Present an original idea.** This is very difficult, since there's nothing new under the sun. The best ideas we have are probably variations on things we've seen, read, or heard from the past. The more popular our medium or genre of choice, the more difficult it becomes to develop original ideas.
2. **Combine older ideas in new ways.** The Wachoskis do this beautifully in *The Matrix*. Valve took the basic concept for *Portal* from the freeware game *Narbacular Drop* and polished the heck out of it. This is the way most innovative video games come about, and it can work very well if done right. (If not, the developer appears to be copying other game-makers and/or their own earlier work.)
3. **Use expertise to create something very well.** There's not really anything new or fresh in *Limbo*, but that game is beautiful and compelling. Same with *Ico* and *Super Meat Boy*. The developers of these games put their noses to the grindstone, figured out where to concentrate their work, and took pride in the finished product.

Naughty Dog chose option three for *The Last of Us*. They're known for engaging stories with intriguing characters, especially in the later *Uncharted* games. Those aren't amazing stories, and I believe they wanted to break new mold in powerful narrative with Joel and Ellie. The fact that we care about them proves that they succeeded at least in part. Unfortunately, the follow-through is much less successful.

What the Game Does Well

I believe strongly in giving every work of art its just due. People who love this game and hate me for refusing to call it "great" usually mention the items in this section, and I want to make clear how strongly I agree with them.

The game mechanics are rock-solid. Having developed a firm sense of precision and fluidity in the *Uncharted* series, Naughty Dog puts a potent blend of guns and melee attacks into the player's hands. I had some trouble figuring these mechanics out at first, but I'll accept most of the blame there. Once I got my brain around the way we're supposed to play, I had lots of fun taking down the bad guys and moving ahead with my missions.

Related to these mechanical matters is the game's fantastic sense of place. More (much more) than any other post-apocalypse game (with the possible exception of the two most recent *Fallout* games), *The Last of Us* immerses the player in an America without civilization, a shell of a nation with tiny clumps of

vermin still crawling through the rubble. We gaze at the beautiful sunsets draped across dead highways, abandoned buildings ready to collapse into urban rivers.



The game then goes further and uses these vistas as more than just window dressing. When the giraffes appear, we don't just watch them pass by; we acknowledge their presence as something essential to understanding what has happened. Joel bonds with Ellie in these small moments, providing both parental intimacy and deep character evolution — both of which are sadly absent from most video games.

Other games have created interesting relationships between characters. Our companions in *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, for example, get to know each other as they walk around after a battle scene. But *The Last of Us* goes beyond these sideline conversations and brings us profoundly inside the mental and emotional worlds of the characters. This is without question the game's most effective element. (That's also why the emotional payoff is so profoundly insufficient.)

The emotional texture of the entire game is generally excellent. We feel a sharp sense of dread when we hear those clicking sounds. When Joel tells Ellie to "hold up", we know something's about to go down. Many games try to evoke tension and concern (usually using cheap trickery), and then a rush of relief when the danger's past. Naughty Dog actually succeeds here, taking us on a hectic ride with real investment from players.



What the Game Does Serviceably But Not Exceptionally

The clickers are too hard, and that's all there is to it. After several interactions with them, I set the difficulty to easy and I still got taken down all the time. (You can make fun of me for being "a noob" if you want to, but having played video games for three decades, I think I deserve a little more respect.) The stakes are high when those monsters are nearby; I get that. But making the game difficult (especially when those of us who have tense, demanding jobs don't want more tension during our leisure time) doesn't necessarily make the game fun. (This is something of a matter of taste, of course. Some people find the difficulty of *Dark Souls* thrilling and fun. I found it annoying and banal.)

The other important "meh" element (or "meh-lement", as we might call it) of *The Last of Us* is the game's basic structure. Enter an area, fight some swarms, navigate the environment, move a ladder, have a chat, fight more enemies, jump over some stuff, fight more enemies, nearly die, fight a boss, leave the area. Rinse and repeat for 12 distinct zones.

This is a formula that works in video games, but it's extremely predictable. When we head toward the next city because the Fireflies are there, we *know* we're not going to get help there. It's just another pit stop on our way to the next redirection. We judge our place on the timeline based on the number of hours elapsed, rather than getting a real sense of progress in the story arc.



Finally, some real blasphemy: For all the effective techniques used to bring us into Joel and Ellie's world, their relationship really isn't anything special. He lost his daughter and he's scared to make another attachment. She's all alone in the world, and she wants to be treated as an adult. Okay, that's fine, but those are tropes we've seen over and over again in movies, books, and even video games. (We search for Dad in *Fallout 3*, and the character Jack in *Mass Effect* is the archetypal model of keeping emotional distance for fear of "getting hurt again".)

I want to repeat two distinctions for the record. First, we must separate the *techniques* used to display the relationships from the nature of the relationships themselves. As I've said, the game does a superb job of displaying the relationship between Joel and Ellie. But in the final analysis, their relationship doesn't really go anywhere interesting. He comes to care for her (duh) and she finally gets the respect she wants

(double duh). The tension we feel is never based on uncertainty about what might happen between them. (Instead, it's based on running out of ammo and getting trapped by clicking zombies.)

The other clarification I want to make is that I didn't expect anything remarkable or unusual in their relationship. There's nothing stunning or groundbreaking about Ico's relationship with Yorda, but it's presented beautifully. The relationship between the guys in *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* is nothing new, but we follow that relationship closely and we become invested. Again, I don't believe that quality must include originality.

But to hear some people describe it, Joel and Ellie are the most important fictional duo since George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. They're not. They make a good team, but this aspect of the game is nothing impressive. More to the point, the gender element is as ancient as *Beowulf*. Big strong man must protect small weak female. (The 21st century twist is that small weak female can occasionally fight to save big strong man.) If we had a strong adult woman protecting a small weak boy, then we'd be in fresh territory. But guys wouldn't play that game. (Same reason why Elizabeth isn't even on the main cover art for *Bioshock Infinite*.)

Why The Ending is a Failure

Let me start by saying, for the record, that I was not expecting (nor am I requesting) a happy ending. A great many stories have unhappy endings while delivering important and satisfying conclusions: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Se7en*, *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men* are just a few examples.

As I've said elsewhere, storytellers have a responsibility to their audience that doesn't require a happy ending, but does require an ending that is satisfying and appropriate. As I mentioned in an article two years ago, Brent Knowles was lead designer for *Dragon Age: Origins* and one of the "old guard" at BioWare for ten years. He once said: "life in general is full of sh#@\$%y stuff happening all the time. When I invest a hundred hours into a game I need to walk away feeling like a hero."

This doesn't mean that Naughty Dog has a responsibility to make Joel a hero. But it does mean that they have a responsibility to give the player some kind of satisfaction after investing more than ten hours into the game. That satisfaction can take many forms, and some games are satisfying even though they're tragedies. (*The Walking Dead Season One* is a good example.)

But *The Last of Us* is not satisfying, and it presents a pessimistic worldview.



Let's start with Ellie. She becomes stronger through the story, especially in the impressive deer-hunting scene. She holds her own and even deals with the two guys who approach her. (Giving the player control of Ellie is a potent reflection of her ability to fight for her own survival.) But the only agency she has about the direction of her life is to make it to the Fireflies. She wants to be the cure (or at least contribute to it), and in Salt Lake City, she refuses Joel's offer to return to his brother's compound. "After all we've been through," she says, "everything that I've done — it can't be for nothing." (This is a clear indication of what she wants; we'll return to this in a moment.)

Joel's story arc is mostly physical. The grey in his hair and the bushiness of his beard are the most important growth elements we get from him. (Also his stomach grows back together somehow after he is impaled on three feet of rebar. I'm still trying to figure that one out.) He grudgingly lets Ellie use guns, and eventually depends on her for his life. But the main purpose for Ellie in Joel's life is as a replacement for his daughter. His main overcoming is a painful attachment disorder, and once he conquers that, he refuses to let something as minor as Ellie's opinion get in the way.

What did Joel expect, once they reached the Fireflies? Even if he didn't expect her to die, the player certainly does. (Either that, or we expect Joel to die so she might be the cure, as in the end of *Fallout 3*.) If he had decided (earlier in the game — in Salt Lake City, perhaps) that he couldn't bear to lose her, Joel could have tried to prevent her from proceeding, and then the battle of wills could have taken an interesting (and satisfying) turn, where maybe Joel dies trying to stop Ellie from leaving him. (Imagine the pain of being Ellie and having to kill Joel!)

Instead, Ellie becomes immobilized for the final act. She is taken completely out of the equation, less significant even than the zombies; at least they can move. Despite Ellie's insistence that "everything I've done" serve a larger purpose, Joel decides he can't bear another loss. So he kills a bunch of doctors to get her out of the hospital. (In the parking garage, Marlene tells Joel that Ellie would want to sacrifice herself: "It's what she'd want, and you know it." To this he says nothing.)

It's sadly ironic that, after Ellie spends so much time demanding respect and agency, the final moments of the game rob her of these things completely. No one ever asks her what *she* wants, and she can't even speak until they're driving away. (Couldn't the Fireflies have given her a medical release form indicating that she is choosing to give her life for the greater good?)

The worst part, though, comes when she makes her final demand to Joel: She wants the truth. The most sacred bond that can possibly exist between parent and child, the foundation for all love and trust. He lies to her point-blank, and then she insists: "Swear to me that everything that you said about the Fireflies is true." He does, and the game ends.

Joel chooses his own need for Ellie over her desire for a cure and the truth. His actions are disgusting and selfish. (Given the gender elements, they also bring us to a conclusion that is definitely *not* feminist, despite the presence of a man fighting powerfully to save the life of a woman. I would also point out the paradox of swarms of — mostly male — gamers celebrating the intimacy between father and daughter in the midst of hours of gruesome murder and brutal violence.)

The game's final moments leave us in a state of existential betrayal, deception, depression, and despair. Joel betrays his own word (not to mention Ellie's desire), and deceives her (or at least tries to) into believing that the Fireflies had "stopped looking for a cure". He is too depressed by his circumstances to accept what Ellie is trying to tell him; when she says "You don't understand" he responds not by listening or asking questions, but by lecturing her on survivor's guilt. (He's right that she shouldn't beat herself up about it, but when he tells her to "keep finding something to fight for", he is oblivious to the fact that the cure *is that thing*.)



I'm not saying a game can never leave the player with elements of despair or depression, but it's unfair to provide *only* those elements to someone who has invested so many hours and worked so hard to reach the end of the game. Furthermore, it is pessimistic to claim that these are the requirements for survival. When Joel and Ellie are left breathing at the end, the game's psychoanalytic perspective is that individuals must lie and condemn humanity to oblivion in order to survive.

That's a pessimistic perspective. We don't have to shed our humanity or our integrity to survive, and the zombie holocaust backdrop is no excuse for confusing pessimism with realism. Because the reality is that survival requires sacrifice *and* self-interest. It requires pain *and* healing. It requires trauma *and* recovery.

A realistic view might require some lies here and there — dishonesty is a part of life. But not when your daughter demands that you swear that your words are true. That's not the time to lie, and if you lie to her in that moment, then you have nothing left.

Joel has nothing left at the end of the game, and therefore neither do we.