The Journey to Nature: *The Last of Us* as Critical Dystopia

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ABSTRACT

As an instance of the critical dystopia, *The Last of Us* lets the player enact a post-apocalyptic story in which human society has been severely decimated by the Cordyceps infection and where nature has made an astonishing return. This paper examines the ecological rhetoric of *The Last of Us* by laying emphasis on the empirical player's emancipated involvement in the gameworld (virtualized storyworld) and how s/he engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player. In suggesting the utopian enclave of a life in balance with nature, *The Last of Us* scrutinises the ills of our empirical present and lays a negative image on the latter. As such, *The Last of Us* is a magnificent example of the video game dystopia and succeeds in triggering a powerful aesthetic response in the empirical player, which might result in a call to action in the real world.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, critical dystopia, utopia, implied player, oppositions, video game dystopia

INTRODUCTION

The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2014) represents a video game dystopia which takes the player on an extraordinary journey towards nature and away from the derelict city spaces of a bygone era. By extrapolating ecological issues of our contemporary present into a post-apocalyptic future, *The Last of Us* serves as a powerful *warning* and reminder that should these tendencies continue, we may face a similar catastrophe as depicted and enacted in its virtualized storyworld (used synonymously for gameworld).

To trigger such an *aesthetic response* in the player, *The Last of Us* makes use of the critical dystopia's plot framework—the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative—and cleverly juxtaposes dystopian and utopian possibilities inscribed in its game- and storyworld. Consequently, the official narrative confronts the player with *confining city spaces* that shall remind us why the post-apocalyptic world came into being in the first place. They are characterised by an intense ludic struggle and violence and serve to trigger within the player the ludonarrative feelings of entrapment and suffering; reminding us through an estranged experience of the precarious confinements of our

times: overpopulation, technological excess, and a lifestyle in utter imbalance with nature. In contrast to this, *The Last of Us* initiates a counter-narrative through various devices of its discourse and suggests as a potential solution to dystopia a return to nature and the utopian enclave of a life in balance with the latter. As opposed to the city, *nature spaces* have a calming and liberating effect on the player and are presented as dynamic enclaves for progress and human dialogue.

The ecological rhetoric in *The Last of Us* is undeniable and is deeply inscribed into the *implied player*: defined as the *affordance and appeal structure of the game* which holds all the preconditions necessary for the game to 'exercise its effect' (an *aesthetic effect* experienced in the act of play) (for a complete description see Farca 2016). In *The Last of Us*, the implied player has primarily outlined the empirical player's aesthetic response through the strategic placement of *oppositions*. These foreground vital differences between *city* and *nature* and are organised in a system of perspectives: 1) the critical dystopian plot and its oppositional structure of official narrative and counter-narrative, 2) the many oppositions found in the gameworld and that are created through its spaces, signs, labyrinthine structures, sounds, music, and characters, and 3) the rules of play and resulting processes, making the player familiar with the system of the nightmarish but surprisingly beautiful gameworld. In combination with the game's labyrinthine structure, the processes that emerge during play round off the city/nature opposition, juxtaposing ludic encounters in multicursal mazes to linear nature spaces that offer the opportunity for dialogue and human compassion.

In the following, we will analyse *The Last of Us* as an instance of ecological fiction and the critical dystopia: a narrative genre that shows both how the dystopian situation came about as well as proposing potential solutions to it. For this purpose, we will lay emphasis on the player's *emancipated involvement* in the game as s/he engages in a creative dialectic with the implied player, closing the blanks between the perspectives s/he encounters and helps create. Such a task, it is needless to say, necessitates an *emancipated player* (Farca 2016) who interacts with the implied player on a high level of complexity and who, in addition to that, shows an ecological consciousness.

THE CRITICAL DYSTOPIA AS A VARIANT OF UTOPIA

It is easy to misunderstand the concepts of Utopia and Dystopia, and such a confusion can be dangerous and outright misleading. To begin this paper, it is therefore necessary to briefly determine the vocabulary of Utopia: the concept's function and its various manifestations in fictional narrative form. One of these is the *critical dystopia*, a variant of Utopia's fictional discourse that, in between all the terror it portrays, retains a firm and indestructible core: Utopia's hope for a better future.

Throughout history, utopianism has most often been regarded as "a philosophy of hope" (Sargent 2010, 8) and is generally conceived of as being inherent to humankind, so powerful as to stir our imagination and effort. Utopia, in other words, gives us hope in times of discontent and incessantly drives humankind towards a gradual betterment of their societal arrangements (Viera 2010, 20, 23). And, indeed, it is Utopia's relentless but cautious drive towards an unfulfilled future that gives rise to its primary function. In provoking deliberations about a better or worse future, Utopia inevitably places empirical reality in the spotlight, exposing it to meticulous scrutiny (Viera 2010, 23). As such, Utopia functions as *warning* to humankind and can be described as "a critical and diagnostic instrument" (Jameson 2005, 148) which deliberately reminds us that what is at stake is nothing less than our future itself. To put it in the words of Fredric Jameson:

Utopia shows us "the future as *disruption (Beunruhigung)* of the present, and as a radical and systematic break with even that predicted and colonized future which is simply a prolongation of our capitalist present" (228).

The faces of Utopia are many, and probably the most fruitful to convey Utopia's message comes in the form of the fictional narrative. As described above, Utopia attempts to raise awareness of societal issues, to arouse us from stupefaction and the paralysed state of the well-adjusted citizen, and to transform us into active agents that gradually change the world for the better (Viera 2010, 6, 17). This persuasive attempt is inscribed into all of utopian and dystopian fiction, and a particularly fruitful derivative of the genre is the *critical dystopia*, which shall be defined after Lyman Tower Sargent as "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out the hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with eutopia" (2000, np). Considering these definitions, it becomes clear that there can be no deliberations on dystopia without regarding utopia, and, in fact, the entire genre shares a common denominator (Viera et al. 2013). As Viera emphatically maintains: "dystopias that leave no room for hope do in fact fail their mission" (2010, 17), and it is especially the critical dystopia that leaves fertile ground for utopian explorations.

The *critical dystopia* (examples of such include: Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991), The Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), Valve's *Half-Life* 2 (2004), or Irrational Game's *Bioshock* (2007)) differs mainly from the *classical dystopia* (George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), or Galactic Café's *The Stanley Parable* (2013)) in that it leaves its diegetic characters room for contestation and revolt against the dystopian regime. Besides interrogating the ills of the dystopian society (and thus indirectly the one's of the empirical world), the critical dystopia enables its diegetic characters to find and pursue potential ways out of the dystopian confinement. Baccolini formulates this as follows: "the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (2003, 7). In the light of these findings, the search for utopian enclaves within the dystopian storyworld (see Sargent's definition) and the ambiguous endings of the critical dystopia that leave fertile ground for the betterment of society (see Baccolini) become of particular importance for analysis. Such an analysis is especially interesting with regard to the video game dystopia which often places the prospect of hope directly into the player's hands and whose gameworld offers virtual possibilities to find and actualise.

But the differences between the classical and critical dystopia do not end here. In addition to the above mentioned facts, Peter Fitting mentions that the critical dystopia lays emphasis on both "an explanation of how the dystopian situation came about as much as what should be done about it" (2003, 156). Such an understanding can be beneficial in a variety of ways. In the first place, it implies a dynamic storyworld by laying emphasis on how dystopia emerged out of the author's empirical reality and through suggesting potential ways out of it. And secondly, the concept of a dynamic storyworld naturally fits well the discussion of an ergodic medium; a fact important to consider for any deliberations on the video game dystopia. In this regard, Marcus Schulzke formulates an interesting aspect: "Because of the interaction of their narrative and ludic elements, video games can make players participants in the flawed worlds and allow them to become part of the underlying logic of how these worlds are created and sustained" (2014, 324). Now,

it is this understanding of the underlying logic of the dystopian system that the video game dystopia can outline particularly well (Domsch, 398ff.). But it would be a mistake to think that only "the practice of using processes persuasively" (Bogost 2010, ix) is crucial to its success. Indeed, processes can only hold meaning iff (if and only if) they are viewed in context of the gameworld's remaining perspectives.

THE CRITICAL DYSTOPIA'S PLOT FRAMEWORK AND THE ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF *THE LAST OF US*

Since its inception in the twentieth century and as a response to the dark times of this period, the dystopian genre has both captivated and shocked its appreciators. This is primarily due to its narrative structure, which Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini have described as the "clash of the official narrative"—the description of the dystopian society—"and the oppositional counter-narrative" (Moylan 2000, 142)—conducted by one or more dissident thinkers who only slowly come to realise the situation for what it really is (xiii, 112; Baccolini 2003, 5). Now, it is easy to discern that this narrative structure is a perfect fit for an ergodic medium, for in the video game dystopia, the player assumes the role of the dissident and becomes directly responsible for laying the foundations of the better society. This is so because the search for utopian horizons is frequently laid into the player's hands or is at least enacted through her (see also Domsch 2013, 401). Analysing the oppositional structure of official narrative and counter-narrative, then, it becomes possible to determine the prospect of hope in any dystopian narrative. And, oftentimes, this hope is located in country spaces and far away from derelict and oppressive city spaces; for example, in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Similarly proceeds *The Last of Us*, whose counter-narrative shows a particular strong ecological consciousness, making the analytical method of ecocriticism a perfect fit for the game.

Ecocriticism was established in the United States in the late 1980s as a response to the gravity of the environmental situation. It proposes to read literary works with a focus on the physical environment and adopts an ecocentric and non-anthropocentric point of view. "Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty 1996, xviii). The work of the ecocritic, then, revolves around tracking "environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear" (Kerridge 1998, 5). To do so, s/he analyses concepts such as growth/energy, balance/imbalance, symbiosis/mutuality, or the sustainable/unsustainable use of energy (Barry 2009, 254). But ecocriticism is not just based on literary analysis. It is an interdisciplinary field, also connected to science (which represent an indispensable source of knowledge for the ecocritic), and has spread to all cultural studies, trying to give an answer to environmental catastrophes through an analysis of different cultural media. Consequently, as the ecocritic seeks "to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyze and criticize the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and trough which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place" (Garrard 2012, 5).

Due to such broad areas of application, ecocriticism can be a very fruitful method to analyse ecologically conscious video games such as *The Last of Us*. Because of the medium's dynamic nature, a player can literally test and experiment with the outcome of negative effects such as global warming or the impact human population has on the

planet. In *The Last of Us*, we are made aware of the potential consequences of a capitalist consumer society by enjoying the possibility to scrutinise the aftermath of an *ecocatastrophe*, leading to several ways of life more or less in balance with nature. *The Last of Us* can therefore be placed within the genre of *ecological fiction*, and a close reading will be especially profound when using ecocriticism as a method of analysis.

THE LAST OF US AND THE PLAYER'S JOURNEY TO NATURE

> "There are literally thousands of different types of Cordyceps fungi and, remarkably, each specializes on just one species. But these attacks do have a positive effect on the jungle's diversity, since parasites like these stop any one group of animals getting the upper hand. The more numerous a species becomes, the more likely it will be attacked by its nemesis, a Cordyceps fungus" (BBC).

In the post-apocalyptic storyworld of *The Last of Us*, a mutated version of the virulent and extremely aggressive Cordyceps fungus (Ophiocordyceps unilateralis) has wiped out large parts of Earth's population and transformed the once familiar society into the estranged environment the player encounters. The Cordyceps infection progresses in four stages and leads to irrevocable brain damage. It deprives its hosts of vital brain functions and transforms them into degenerate and aggressive versions of their formers selves. In addition, the fungus is extremely infectious. It can be transmitted through bites or is spread airborne via spores that are released from the remains of a dead host. So the premise of *The Last of Us*, whose virtualized storyworld is built around the ludonarrative logic of the Cordyceps Brain Infection and thus of what Darko Suvin has called a "*fictional 'novum'*" (1979, 63). In direct extrapolation from our times, we are shown a marvelous place where nature has reclaimed the planet and where *the old order* of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism has literally corroded. *The Last of Us* describes the downfall of humankind's hectic lifestyle, our reliance on technology, and increasing alienation from nature that has led to such a catastrophe in the first place. In a cleansing apocalypse of brutal renewal, the Cordyceps fungus has cleared the way to achieve a balance lost long ago in which humankind lived together in harmony with nature. The player, now, is confronted with *a new order*—a return of nature and a renewal of Earth's ecosphere—in which s/he will vicariously participate.

The player's ergodic and imaginative participation in *The Last of Us* is primarily outlined by a plot structure similar to the coming-of-age novels (Bildungsromane) of literature. These share a high resemblance to dystopian fictions, as they foreground the moral growth of a fictional character and her or his quarrel with societal structures. Accordingly, the plot in *The Last of Us* revolves around the story of Joel Miller, a survivor of the Cordyceps apocalypse, and the teenage girl Ellie Williams, who grew up in Boston's Quarantine Zone (QZ) where she and other survivors struggled against an oppressive regime. Twenty years after the plague's outbreak and the loss of his daughter Sarah, Joel is tricked into a dangerous but life-changing journey. He meets Ellie (who is ostensibly immune to the Cordyceps infection) and is persuaded by Marlene (a member of the resistant militia group the Fireflies) to safely escort the girl out of the QZ and into the hands of their scientists. Soon, however, the journey turns out to be longer and more torturous than expected. But step by step, Joel and also the player realise that it might be worth the effort. In a cathartic experience, the journey to nature in *The Last of Us* not only turns into a second chance for Joel, but also into one for the entirety of humankind.

In order to trigger such an aesthetic response in the player (that is, to offer its preconditions), *The Last of Us* has cleverly outlined the player's coming to awareness

through an ecological rhetoric. This persuasive intent is inscribed into the implied player and is primarily expressed in the juxtaposition of *dangerous city spaces* and *calming nature spaces*. The two following sections will therefore describe the clash between official narrative and counter-narrative (the critical dystopia's plot structure) and lay emphasis on symbolic oppositions found and co-created by the player such as: city/nature, indoor/outdoor, fire/water, entrapment/liberation, storm/sun, dark/bright, tense/calm, survival/dialogue, and the four seasons of summer/fall/winter/spring.

The official narrative: city spaces of conflict and violence

Throughout the genre's history, utopian and dystopian fiction has often foregrounded the opposition between city and country (Jameson 2005, 143, 157). The city, thereby, as Jameson writes, occupies a continuum between Utopia and Anti-Utopia and cannot be allocated to either side (161). Instead, it enables a potential space for both utopian and dystopian deliberations, and oftentimes one cannot determine whether a recipient would deem a certain city utopian or dystopian (specifically considering the thrills of cyberpunk megapolises). In *The Last of Us*, conversely, the situation seems clearer. The city spaces of Austin, Boston, and Pittsburgh are marked by combat, violence, and panic and depict the dilapidated remains of an order that perished with the day of the apocalypse. As such, *The Last of Us* lets the player enact the official narrative as s/he directly witnesses an estranged place that, on closer inspection, seems alarmingly similar to her real world.

Figure 1: The city spaces in *The Last of Us* are characterised by an intense struggle and entrapment that manifests itself both physically and temporally.

The story of *The Last of Us* begins in *summer*, and it is noticeable that already in the prologue, the overarching symbol we encounter is *fire.* With the Cordyceps outbreak, the storyworld of *The Last of Us* is plunged into chaos. The streets are filled with panic, as people's own neighbours have seemingly turned into irrational and most violent predators. A rapid and purifying apocalyptic fire is about to consume humankind. But this fire not only manifests itself in the burning chaos and anarchy the player witnesses and enacts, but also in the virus of the Cordyceps infection, which spreads like a wildfire. In a beautiful metaphor of the human condition, the infection relentlessly consumes humankind and turns them into insanity-driven beings who could not bear anymore the conditions of their times. As such, the symbol of fire in *The Last of Us* shows striking similarities to how Gaston Bachelard describes the phenomenon. "Le feu est l'ultra-vivant." (2015, 23). "Quand on veut que tout change, on appelle le feu" (102), "[il] purifie tout" (174).

Right from the start of the game, the player is thus confronted with the breakdown of human society as we know it and follows a path that invariably leads towards death. This

fact is expressed through a variety of discursive strategies the prologue employs (strategies of the implied player), and first and foremost through the game's labyrinthine structure. Stripping the player of agency, besides following the unicursal labyrinth "where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center" (Aarseth 1997, 5f.), the prologue directly and inexorably leads towards *death*: to Sarah's and, on a bigger scale, to that of modern civilisation itself (see also Green 2015, 4). Naturally, one could argue that such a structure is due to breadcrumbing and funneling (Bateman 2007) intentions on the developers' side, but the directing of the player is also being used as a tool of sense making. In her escape from the city, the player is guided and made aware of the situation through scripted events and various signs that are strategically placed in the gameworld (perspective segments the player encounters and co-creates; as the connections between these perspectives remain unstated, the player fills in the blanks that invariably arise). These begin with the first explosions and turmoil where the player experiences the breakdown of media. Telephone lines are dead and TV stations have stopped broadcasting. It is these typical things of our modern society that have perished in the wink of an eye and whose destruction illustrate the downfall of the capitalist and technology depended order, pushing humankind to the brink of extinction. In the vein of the critical dystopia, then, *The Last of Us* enlightens the circumstances of how dystopia came into being, and this emphasis will continue throughout the experience.

As mentioned earlier, *The Last of Us* begins in *summer*, and we have shown that the season is linked to the symbol of *fire* and to the breakdown of an old order. Twenty years later, this symbolism is intensified when the player again takes control over Joel and is taken on a tour through the dystopian microcosm of Boston's Quarantine Zone. After the Cordyceps outbreak, these were established in larger urban areas by the U.S. military division FEDRA (Federal Disaster Response Agency) with the intention to safeguard the remains of humankind from the infected. Initially a noble pursuit, the QZs quickly degenerated into the oppressive regime the player now encounters.

The structure of the QZ is similar to that of the prologue, and, of course, this has an impact on the player's experience. Again, we are following the trajectory of a unicursal labyrinth and are taken on a tour through the new Boston which, right off the bat, presents itself in the worst possible manner. The city's inhabitants live in miserable conditions, the streets are littered with garbage, and the grey colour shade of the environment further underlines the despicable character of the place. In the meantime, people are suffering from food shortages, and, indeed, the city's currency are now ration cards (with money another element of the old order disappears). In addition, there are the regularly conducted tests of FEDRA. These determine whether citizens shows symptoms of the Cordyceps infection, and in case of a positive result, they are executed right away.

In essence, the QZ evokes the image of a *prison*, and navigating its spaces, one cannot deny the feeling of claustrophobia and helplessness. The suppression of people's individual freedom is directly experienced by the player, whose agency is severely reduced. For example, trying to save citizens from being executed (or even coming too close to FEDRA soldiers) will quickly result in failure and in Joel and the player-character's death. Moreover, there are death sentences for helping supposed criminals, regular curfews, brawls between citizens, and, naturally, the nonstop surveillance of the FEDRA troops. The image of a prison, then, culminates in two telling examples we find on our way: 1) the grey walls separating the QZ from the remains of Boston and 2) the caged up dogs we encounter and whose imagery perfectly illustrates the atrocious circumstances people live in. It is clear that such a journey through dystopia doesn't leave

the player unharmed and involves her on a deeply affective level (Calleja 2010, 135ff.). The prevalent symbol of this experience is thus one of *entrapment*.

Images of terror notwithstanding, *utopian enclaves* are already discernible within this first hour of play. For one, there are the Fireflies, a presumable resistance militia group who have scattered signs and wall writings across the QZ. Their agenda lies in finding a cure for the Cordyceps infection and in the fight against the FEDRA military in order to secure a return of all government branches. For another, and probably more remarkable, *The Last of Us* confronts the player with the astounding beauty of nature. Already in its beginning, the game cleverly juxtaposes the city's bleak and derelict architecture to the quaint and tranquil spaces of nature. We first encounter such an opposition when Tess and Joel traverse the QZ and come across a section where nature has made an astonishing return (even though within the confines of the city). Walking towards the exit of a rundown house, the player is guided by a bright light shining through its door and windows, whilst dramatic music further enhances the feeling of frenzy. Once outside, a dialogue between Tess and Joel underlines this romantic imagery of nature, in which the latter acknowledges the fact that he hasn't been out for a long time, while the former connects their stroll to romantic date (again, all the above listed occurrences can be regarded as perspective segments between which blanks emerge).

At this point, *The Last of Us* initiates a *counter-narrative* and forebodes a vital opposition that will prevail throughout the entire game: the contrast between confining *indoor* and liberating *outdoor* spaces. These manifest themselves in a variety of instances and differ not only in aesthetics and visuals, but also in their type of gameplay.
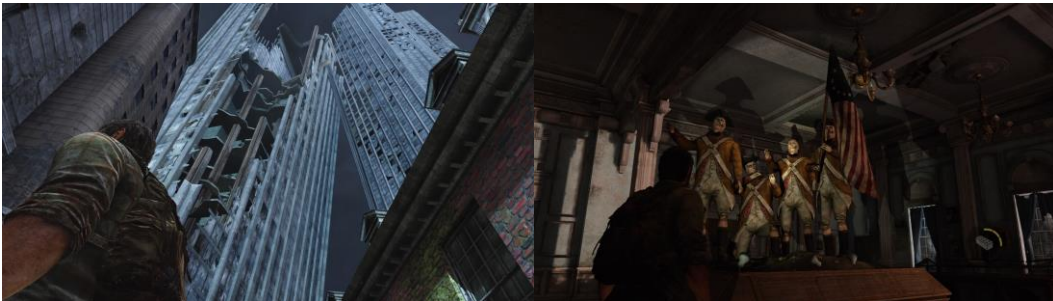

Figure 2: City spaces are inexorably linked to the old order of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism and to the failures of a bygone civilisation.

One of these indoor spaces is the *city*, which is clearly shown by the examples of Boston and Pittsburgh. On their escape towards the countryside, Tess, Joel, and Ellie traverse Boston's financial district and the crumbling ruins of two skyscrapers, precariously leaning on one another. It is in the inside of these buildings that the player first has to deal with *infected* in a ludic situation. In *The Last of Us*, the infected metaphorically stand for the dying remnants of a past society, paralysed by its system and gone mad in their greed for profit and gain. Entering the area, runners (the first stage of infection) are standing motionless in the building's hallways, whilst Clickers (the second stage) are wandering blindly through the area. We can hear their screams and see them sobbing, as if they were mourning the loss of bureaucracy and the capitalist order that drove them insane in the first place. This audio-visual experience, as Victor Navarro-Remesal would say, makes the player *suffer*. But *The Last of Us* does not stop here and throws the structure of a

multicursal labyrinth, "where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia" (Aarseth 1997, 5f.), and *ludic encounters* into the equation. The result is a more comprehensive and frightening experience of "ludonarrative suffering" (Navarro-Remesal 2016) (Ludic encounters and processes can be put into perspective just like any other sign or occurrence in the gameworld).

The threat continues when Joel and Ellie are forced to make their way through Pittsburgh and a group of hunters, preying on the victims, are bidding them a warm welcome. In most post-apocalyptic narratives, several groups of survivors roam the lands and often these are ill-conducted and expose passers-by to severe problems. It is not surprising, therefore, that the city spaces of Pittsburgh are designed for combat and survival. They are arranged in various multicursal labyrinths (where there is only one exit to the maze) and allow for diverse combat strategies. These structures involve the player in fierce ludic encounters (Calleja's ludic involvement 2011, 147ff.) and result in the urge to safeguard Ellie from city's atrocities and maze-like structures.

Combining the perspectives we gained of Pittsburgh and Boston and closing the blanks between them, there is no denying the fact that the city spaces in *The Last of Us* evoke the image of *virus* and an "unnatural, … toxic and poisonous" environment (Jameson 2005, 161). They stand as a reminder that although the city is "part of a larger eco-system … it consumes more than it produces" (Domsch 2014, 405) and that if "mismanagement" (Stableford 2005, 136) causes an imbalance between the availability of resources and human population, the city might easily turn into what Kim Stanley Robinson calls a "dysfunctional social order" (1994, 10) (Stableford 2005, 128). As such, the city spaces in *The Last of Us* add to our knowledge of how dystopia actually came into being, as they carefully craft various perspectives the player encounters and helps create. The imagery of crumbling buildings (including out of order coca cola vending machines and the crying remnants of its employees) and sites like the Capitol building in Boston (exhibiting wall paintings of a proud U.S. history) are further reinforced by intense ludic encounters. Consequently, *The Last of Us* not only shows us the failure and consequent breakdown of a bureaucratic consumer society, but, in doing so, creates a powerful *official narrative* that involves us through various strategies of the implied player (including procedural strategies of persuasion), making us enact the precariousness of the situation.

The above mentioned observations, then, lead to an interesting conclusion. *Summer* in *The Last of Us* again ends with death: with that of Tess in the Capitol building, Sam's and Henry's in a suburban town outside Pittsburgh, and, on a larger scale, that of the city itself. In addition, we have shown that the city spaces of *The Last of Us* are characterised by complete and utter stasis, entrapment, violence, and intense ludic encounters. Having these facts in mind, a certain *chronotope* can now be established, which is that of the *city*. Defined as an "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Bakhtin 2002, 15), the city chronotope in *The Last of Us* is inherently linked to the season of *summer* and to the symbol of *fire* (as a metaphor for both the world and gameplay).

The counter-narrative as the journey to nature
The Last of Us would do however no justice to its status as ecological fiction and critical dystopia were it not to encourage a renunciation of and departure from its official narrative. It thus sends the player on a journey to nature that leads westwards, and from Boston across the country into the wilderness of Jackson County where Ellie and Joel settle down in Tommy's community. It is "the classical journey into the west" (2014, np), but not solely, as Oli Welsh remarks, one designating the death of a nation, rather than

the establishment of a new one. In the vein of the critical dystopia, *The Last of Us* initiates a counter-narrative discoursed through a well-crafted ecological rhetoric that guides the player's coming to awareness: leading her from the old order (by showing contemporary city spaces in an estranged and shocking manner) to the establishment of a new one (which is Utopia, where life has returned to a healthy balance with nature).

The ecological rhetoric at work

Nature in *The Last of Us* is presented in an extraordinarily beautiful way and outlines the player's *escape* from the city. For this purpose, the game employs several breadcrumbing and funneling techniques to assure the player stays on track or has no problems in getting back on it after a longer pause of play. These include clues and signs in the gameworld or giving the player narrative context to justify certain tasks (Bateman 2007, 89f, 95f). In *The Last of Us*, the player is constantly guided through bright colours standing out from the environment (often yellow), faded in directional signs, and, in general, the beauty of nature itself. But it would be a mistake to reduce these attempts to practical devices for labyrinthine guidance only, as, on a further level, they add symbolism to the player's route and outline a specific insight: they remind us of nature's beauty and the benefits of a life in balance with the latter.

The directive rhetoric of nature makes itself apparent already in the beginning of *The Last of Us* and outlines the player's escape from the city through various perspectives. Escaping the Boston QZ, the player leads her group through the city's canals that under the protective shelter of night and rain lead them to safety. Later, the moon's brightness takes over this directive symbolism. Right from the start, nature thus assumes a guiding role, and this is especially apparent in the element of *water*, flowing steadily towards the countryside. In this respect, we can discern three types of water in *The Last of Us* that can be well described through Bachelard's observations on the phenomenon. To begin with, there is water that stagnates the city's sewers. It is dirty and attracts infected, and oftentimes one encounters floating corpses while diving. Using Bachelard's terminology, such *impure water* (1987, 13) metaphorically stands for the waste and drainage of the city and, thus, for the contaminating character of civilisation itself. Second, there is standing water which is greenish in colour and can also be encountered in city spaces. It foreshadows danger or death (such as Tess's in the Capitol building) and can be compared to a teardrop and the sorrow or melancholia of our times. Standing water is thus similar to Bachelard's *dead water* (89, 96) and can additionally be encountered in the David's cannibal settlement (in the form of a frozen lake, mourning the hideousness of human nature). Finally, there is flowing water which, in contrast to the other forms, is fresh, clear, and steadily streaming towards nature. It helps to produce clear energy and gives people hope in times of discontent (like it does in Tommy's settlement). This *pure water* (47, 193), which Bachelard also compares to *springtime water*, shows a childlike character, young and loud, innocent and hopeful.

Flowing water is a steady companion on Joel and Ellie's journey and inexorably leads them towards nature. This symbolism continues in Pittsburgh where the group follows the lead of a yellow bridge functioning as a landmark and point of orientation. Again, they choose to escape under the cover of the night and pave their way through an outpost of hunters guarding the bridge. They manage to escape, but only with a hearty jump into the raging current. Having almost drowned exposed to the forces of nature, Joel and Ellie are nonetheless saved by the latter. A *storm* is brewing over the city now, underlining the precariousness of the situation, while their route leads towards the sunrise and the beauty of nature. Indeed, Joel and Ellie's journey comes very close to Guy Montag's in

Fahrenheit 451 where the dissident escapes the city alongside and in the safeguard of a river stream leading him into the woods of the forest people. These live hidden and memorise books in order to safeguard human culture. And it is only there that Montag is saved from the nuclear holocaust and from the confinements of the city and its society.

The descriptions above are revealing, as the ecological strategy of the implied player—in the form of oppositions between indoor and outdoor spaces—is again brought into focus. We have already addressed a couple of these, such as city/nature, fire/water, entrapment/liberation, dark/bright, storm/sun, and now want to discuss additional ones whose effect on the player is intensified through gameplay. *The Last of Us* creates a vital distinction between humankind's confining remains (the derelict city and suburban spaces, but also indoor university spaces) and the calming appeal of nature (see also Green 2015, 9). This opposition, now, is reinforced through gameplay and through the antithesis of multicursal city spaces (where there is only one exit to the maze and which are characterised by an intense ludic struggle) and relatively linear nature spaces that function as utopian enclaves for *relaxation* and *dialogue*.

The opposition of agitating city spaces and calming nature spaces is commonplace and necessarily plays with the player's affective involvement (Calleja 2010, 135ff.). In nature spaces, the player's pain and suffering (stemming from maze-like structures and fierce ludic encounters) is "alleviated" (Navarro-Remesal 2016) through the calming appeal of the environment. These sections are linear in structure and represent a space for intimate *dialogue* between Joel and Ellie. They can be compared to Japanese Zen Gardens (Kare-San-Sui) which are also unicursal in structure and aim to trigger deliberations about nature. One example of such a juxtaposition is when the player escapes the city spaces of Boston and makes her way through a claustrophobic metro system. Having escaped the FEDRA military, a narrow staircase leads towards a bright light. The scene is very stereotypical and results in Joel and Ellie's first encounter with nature's beauty. Another example is the campus of Eastern Colorado University. There again, the implied player's strategies juxtapose tense indoor sections (where in a metaphor of science gone wrong we encounter a substantial amount of infected) to picturesque outdoor sections that function as spaces for dialogue and the hope of encountering the Fireflies.
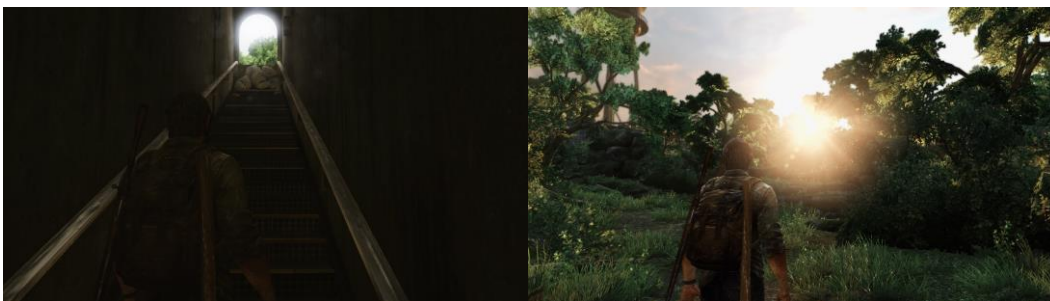

Figure 3: Claustrophobic indoor spaces juxtaposed with nature's alleviating outdoor spaces.

Ellie as a figure of guidance and temptress towards nature

An additional strategy of the implied player is Ellie who functions as a figure of guidance to both Joel and the player. Ellie grew up in Boston's QZ after the apocalypse had reduced humankind to a last few. She is therefore not contaminated by civilisation and the capitalist, bureaucratic order and functions as an emblem of innocence that could lead

the way to a fresh start. She has never been outside the QZ and now for the first time in her life discovers the astonishing beauty of nature.

In the course of the journey, Ellie discovers the new and to her unfamiliar world. She thus assumes a position similar to the player's, to whom this world is also strange, and constantly reminds Joel (and consequently the player) of nature's beauty. This manifests itself in various conversations in which she interrogates Joel about the ancient world and also in her curiosity of nature's many wonders. Especially noteworthy here is her treatment of animals which is tender and full of juvenile enthusiasm and that culminates in one of video gaming's most memorable moments. Having experienced several setbacks and the torturous encounter with David, Ellie is frustrated and lacklustre. She seems to have lost hope, but is awakened by a magnificent event. Leading Joel the way, Ellie discovers a herd of giraffes, which after the breakdown of civilisation now freely roam the lands (a scene reminiscent to the return of animal life in Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954)). The player is now given the chance to express compassion by the option to pet the giraffe. In actualising this possibility, we take away Ellie's shyness to approach the animal and become affectionately involved in the events (what Calleja has called shared involvement (2011, 100ff.)).

Figure 4: A return of hope juxtaposed to Ellie's previous encounter with David and the burning cabin resort as a symbol of her inner life.

Ellie, then, assumes the role of the *temptress* (towards nature) that in dystopian fiction is most often a woman the main protagonist meets and with whom he falls in love with (or establishes some sort of close relation). The temptress functions as a figure of guidance, as she helps both the protagonist and the reader to gain insight into the dystopian situation of the fictional society (Walsh 1962, 101). Similarly, Ellie makes Joel and the player aware of things they might miss or didn't even recognise and constantly reminds them of nature's beauty. She therefore assumes a didactic role and helps the player to gain a fresh perspective not only on the virtual gameworld, but also on her empirical reality.

The more tortu(r)ous route

Fall in *The Last of Us* is a season of *uncertainty* and the choice between two utopian propositions: between Tommy's settlement (which we will address shortly) and the scientific enclave of the Fireflies, whose promise of a cure has impelled Joel and Ellie from the beginning. But in the course of the journey, Joel starts to raise doubts and is only convinced by Ellie to continue the search. This leads them to the disappointment of the Eastern Colorado University (UEC), where the Fireflies were supposedly located, and into the abyss of *winter*, where they will face the horrors of human nature. It is a fatal choice that, as Lucian Ashworth puts it, reminds us of man's folly for always choosing

the "longer and more tortuous" route (2013, 69). But, maybe, it is a necessary one to see things clearer.

Winter in *The Last of Us* is by far the most torturous season in the game and resembles a maze (a tortuous route) in which Joel and Ellie seem lost and face near death. Until now, they always had a strict goal in mind, but with Joel's severe injury (symbolically followed by the first snowflakes), the focus is inevitably laid on *survival*. Like in the city, then, the player is exposed to fierce ludic encounters (including the stereotypical marks of blood on the white snow) and multicursal mazes which are made even more irritating due to snow storms blinding the player's vision. The season finally culminates in Ellie's encounter with David and his cannibal settlement which, as Amy Green rightly observes, shows us "the lowest manifestations of humanity" (2015, 12).

Winter is therefore characterised by *disorientation, fear*, and *confusion*, and these characteristics symbolically stand for Ellie's inner life. Supporting this argument is the fact that the story is now focalised through Ellie herself, as the player takes control of her. In a brutal process of coming to age, Ellie has to nurse the injured Joel and is confronted by David, the inglorious leader of the cannibal town in Silver Lake. He locks Ellie in a cell, but his intentions go further, for he shows paedophilic traits. The symbolism of winter, then, culminates in the two telling images: 1) the *disorienting* snowstorm and 2) the burning cabin resort in which Ellie struggles for her life against David and which metaphorically stands for her *fear* and *confusion*.

The Search for Utopian Enclaves
It seems, then, that we are left with only two potential utopian enclaves. The city and its gangs are rapidly excluded. They show no affiliation to nature and assume a role appropriate to their environment: scavenging for supplies instead of living in a healthy balance with their surroundings. Equally, we can exclude the bandits who regularly raid Tommy's community and whose settlement in the woods shows a similar imbalance with nature, and also David's cannibals (see also Green 2015, 10). All of these factions remind us of humankind's potential ugliness, and none of them show any progressive aspects, for they are caught up in the static indoor space and chronotope of the city.

In strong contrast to these communities is Tommy's settlement in Jackson County (see also Green 2015, 10f.). There, people have achieved a life in balance with nature and established a place for families (in total 20). Tommy's settlement lies in the safeguard of high mountains and is surrounded by an electrocuted fence. They have achieved self-sustainability by growing crops and farming livestock and in their use of natural resources to produce clear energy (with the combined forces of a hydraulic power plant and a river stream flowing next to the settlement). Again, the implied player's strategies have meticulously outlined this insight through various perspectives. From arriving in the woods of Jackson County, the player steadily follows the river and experiences the sublimity of wilderness. S/he reaches the power plant which forebodes the inside of the community. Once inside, the player is given a guided tour of Utopia and additionally experiences its vulnerability, having to defend it against bandits.

 "Remember how we thought no one could live like this anymore? Well, we're doing it" (Naughty Dog 2014, Tommy). Tommy's opinion of a better life stands in strong contrast to that of Marlene and the scientific enclave of the Fireflies. In their agenda to bring back humankind to the top of the evolutionary scale, the Fireflies attempt to sacrifice Ellie in order to create a vaccine (whose fungus mutated in her brain and has to be surgically

extracted). But this we are only shown at the journey's end where Joel chooses to save Ellie and shoots Marlene point blank. Indeed, the intersubjective structure of the implied player has toyed with us by letting the image of the Fireflies shine in a bright light right until the game's end. This manifests itself in Joel and Ellie's confusion when after leaving Tommy's settlement, they are geographically wandering in circles: to the UEC, David's settlement, Salt Lake City, and then back to Tommy's.

Having in mind the above mentioned facts, the chronotope of *nature* can finally be established. It stands in strong contrast to that of the *city* and is characterised by the season of *spring* and the symbols of *renewal* and *hope*. This conclusion is fortified by the implied player's ecological rhetoric we discussed earlier and which includes *Ellie* herself. She is naturally immune to the Cordyceps infection and therefore shows posthuman characteristics, being genetically adapted to the new environment. Following her model, humankind is maybe offered a truly second chance, and one very different from the prospect of the non-actualised Firefly future. And, indeed, it seems that humankind has to be kept in balance by the forces of nature and by the saviour of the Cordyceps fungus which has achieved a balance lost long ago.

Utopian Enclaves?	Features / Symbols	Balance with Nature / Sustainability	Yes / No
Cities and Quarantine Zones: Austin, Boston, Pittsburgh	violence/conflict/ entrapment/oppression/ storm/fire/suffering/ old order/absence of hope	decay/power generators/ scavenging gangs/ shortage of supplies/ stasis/viral	No
Bill's town	personal decay/isolation absence of hope/fire	abandoned/shortage of supplies/stasis	No
Sewer settlement	entrapment/failed	decay/abandoned/death	No
Tommy's settlement	surrounded by wilderness/ safe haven/families/new order/hope/Ellie (posthuman)	self-sustainable/animals/ clear energy/ progressive/dynamic	Yes
Bandit settlement	raiding/violence	stasis/no progress	No
Fireflies: UEC, Salt Lake City	(false) hope/suffering/ disappointment (UEC)/ overcoming the plague	return to old order/ regressive/ would mankind learn?	unclear (No)
David's cannibals	failed/fire/suffering/hate	cannibals/paedophilia	No

Table 1: Potential utopian enclaves described through features and symbols and determined through ecological aspects.

CONCLUSION
Hope has always been the main driving force behind dystopia, and *The Last of Us* represents a magnificent example of the genre. It suggests that modern society as we know it suffers from entrapment and the ravaging violence of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism and therefore issues a terrifying warning to its players. As a solution to

dystopia, the game suggests a renunciation of the old order and outlines a route to a new one: a return to nature and to the utopian enclave of a life in balance with the latter. And even though the price we pay may be high, the prospect of Utopia seems to be worth the risks. *The Last of Us* thereby employs the formal characteristics of the critical dystopia (showing how dystopia came into being and proposing potential solutions to it) and successfully unifies its theme with the dynamic features of the video game medium.

To trigger such an insight in the player, *The Last of Us* makes use of a particularly strong ecological rhetoric, and this persuasive intent is deeply inscribed into its implied player, which was described as the affordance and appeal structure of the game. The implied player has outlined various perspectives the player encounters and helps create and foregrounds the many oppositions at play in the gameworld. These centre on the general opposition between *city* and *nature*. The city thereby is illustrated as viral and infectious. Framed as the game's official narrative, it lets the player experience a bureaucratic consumer capitalism gone mad and confronts us with derelict and claustrophobic spaces. These are arranged in confusing mazes and are characterised by intense ludic encounters which make the player suffer. In stark contrast to the indoor spaces of the city stand nature's liberating outdoor spaces. These are linear in structure and provide us with the opportunity for human dialogue and compassion. They alleviate the player's suffering and are presented as utopian enclaves that lead humankind to the establishment of a new order. Having gone through this counter-narrative in the act of play and closing the blanks between the various oppositions, the player experiences the video game dystopia's aesthetic effect and may now be inclined to work towards Utopia in real life.

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