



Playing Dystopia

Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response

Talk is based on:

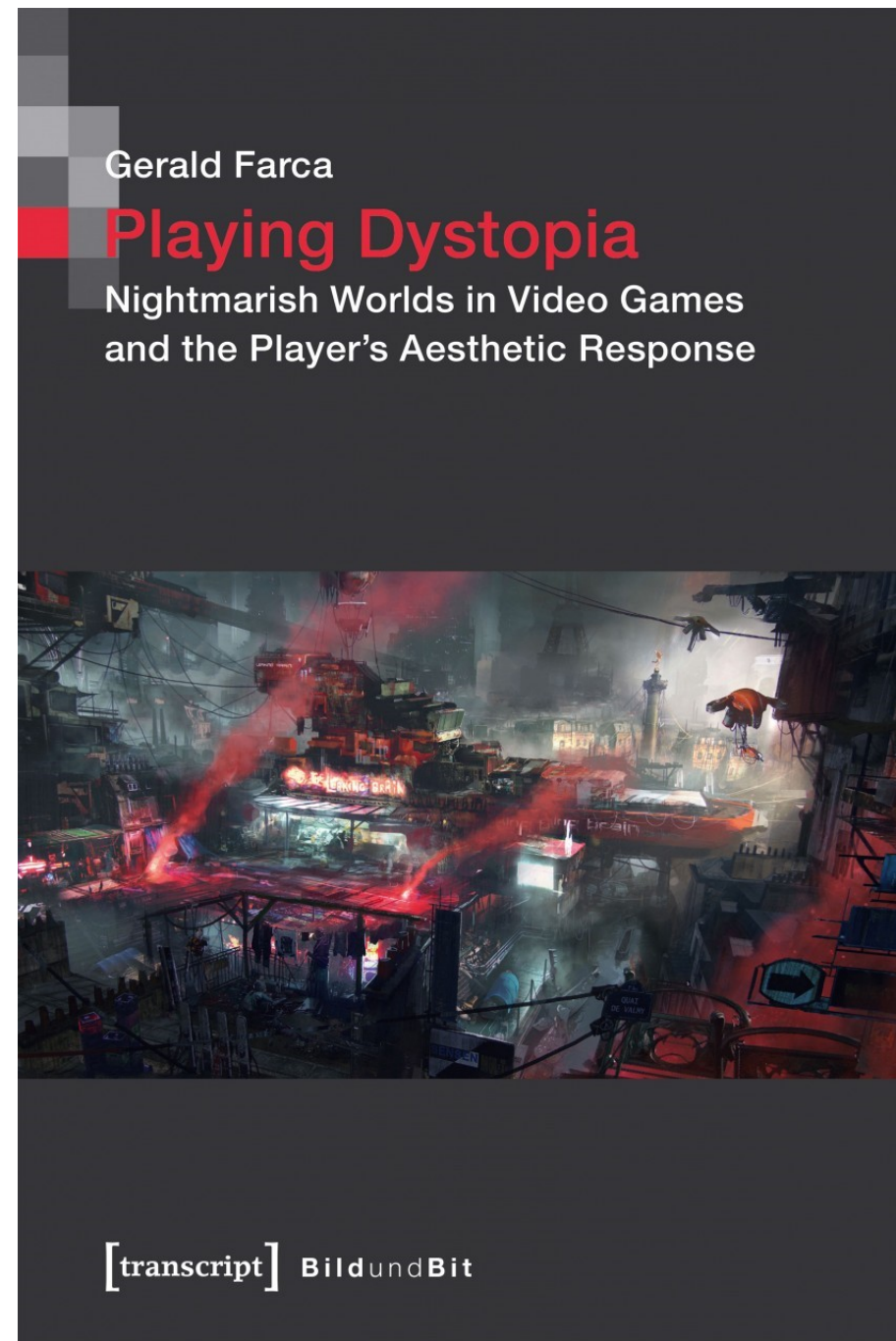
Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response

<https://www.transcript-verlag.de/detail/index/sArticle/4330>

https://books.google.de/books/about/Playing_Dystopia.html?id=mRM0vAEACAAJ&redir_esc=y

https://www.amazon.de/Playing-Dystopia-Nightmarish-Aesthetic-Medienkultur/dp/3837645975/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1541699007&sr=8-2&keywords=playing+Dystopia

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Playing-Dystopia-Nightmarish-Aesthetic-Response/dp/3837645975/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1541699026&sr=8-1&keywords=playing+dystopia+farca



Research Question(s)

1. Can the video game dystopia **help us overcome** the precarious situation of our times?
2. And if so, **what are its specific strategies of doing so**—of having a lasting **influence on the player** by involving her or him in the dystopian gameworld?
3. Taking into account the **specific mediality of the video game medium** in relation to non-ergodic forms of representational art.

Hypothesis

As a new strategic enterprise of Utopia, **the video game dystopia** sends the player on a cathartic journey through hell and involves her in a ***playful trial action (or trial run)*** in which she may **test, track, and explore** in detail an estranged gameworld and an alternative societal model.

The player's experience thus comes close to—though differs in certain aspects from—that of the reader, spectator, or viewer. For in contrast to ideology, “heuristic fiction”, as Iser claim, “**proposes *trial runs* for approaches to what is**” (*Imaginary* 143; italics mine).

Method

Imaginative

See everyday norms and conventions, social habits of thinking and feelings, in a different light



Play(fullness)

Explore, in a kind of *trial action* in a virtual environment, the consequences of breaking and transgressing norms without having to fear sanctions in real life” (Berensmeyer 79; italics mine).

Ergodic



Method

Fictive

Ludus

Apollonian

Precarious Play

Having an influence
on the player's
habitual dispositions

Imaginary

Paidia

Dionysian

The **possible**

Structured with
distortions and
doublings

Organized in the implied
reader/player as a
system of perspectives

Primordial force that
negotiates the fictive

Expresses itself in the
player's imaginings and
ergodic actions



Part I

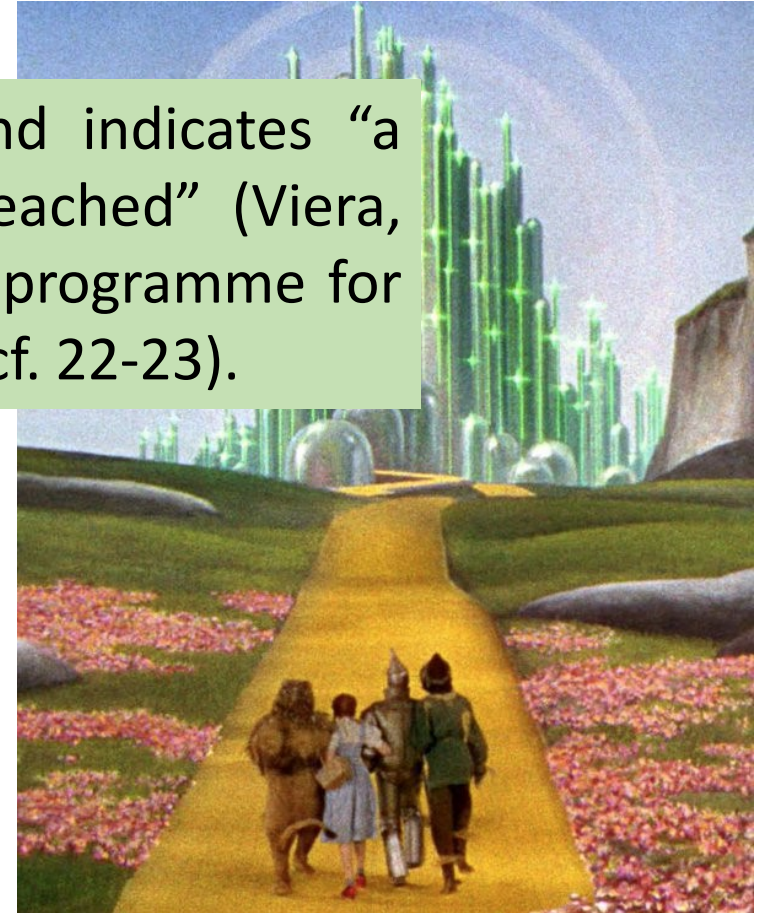
Towards the Video Game Dystopia

1. Utopia and the Dream of a Better World
2. Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds as Distorted Anxiety Dreams
3. Warning, Effectiveness, and Targets of the of the Video Game Dystopia

The Philosophy of Utopia

Utopia in the 21st century evokes a *cautious desire* and indicates “a direction for man to follow, but never a point to be reached” (Viera, *Concept 22*). It takes on “the shape of a process” and “a programme for change and for a gradual betterment of the present” (23) (cf. 22-23).

- A philosophy of hope
- A route towards a new now
- No perfectionism but ...
- A continual struggle for the betterment of societal arrangements
- Through constant negotiation between various parties



The road to the Utopia of Oz.

Function of Utopia(n Fiction)

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”(Jameson 228; bold mine).

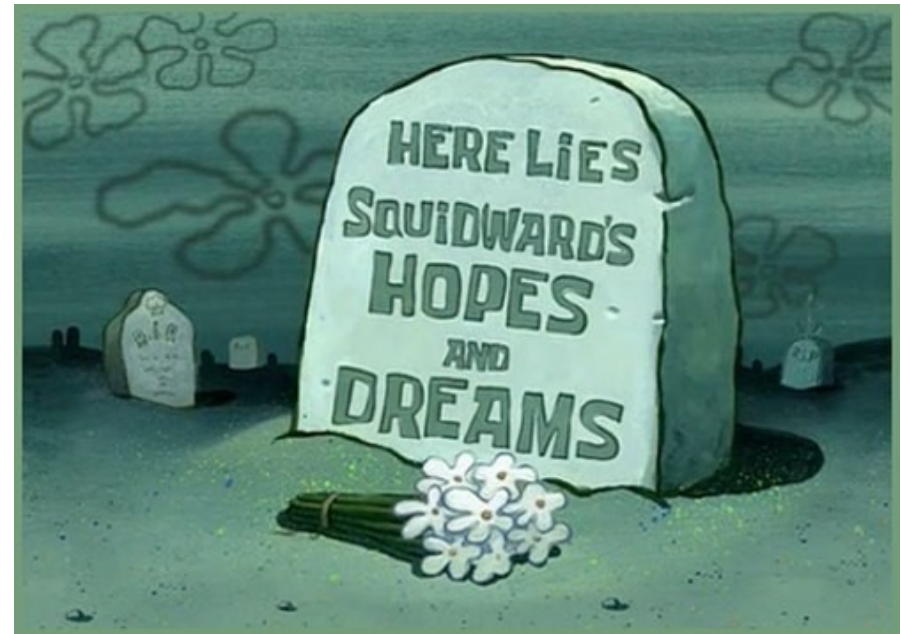


- **Warning and Disruption of the Present**

Anti-Utopia

Throughout modernity ... the anti-utopian persuasion has systematically worked to silence and destroy Utopia, but Utopia ... has always offered a way to work against and beyond these attacks” (Moylan, Scraps 104).

- Directed against utopianism
- Absence of hope
- Solidification of the status quo
- The present world is the best of all worlds



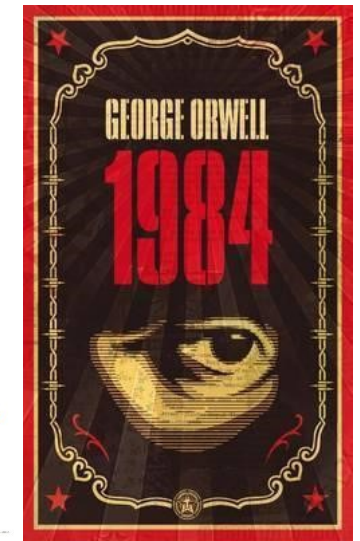
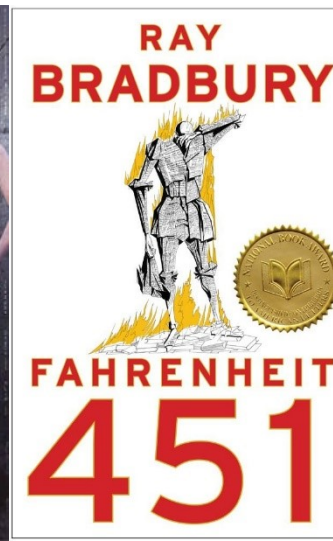
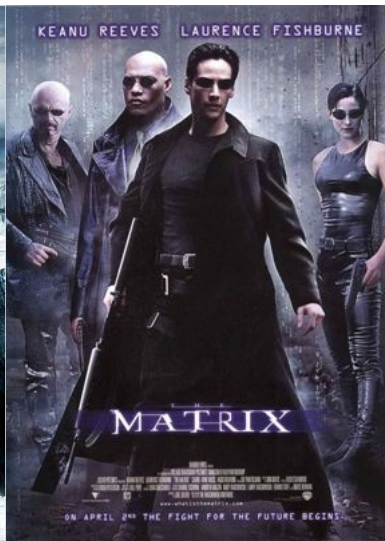
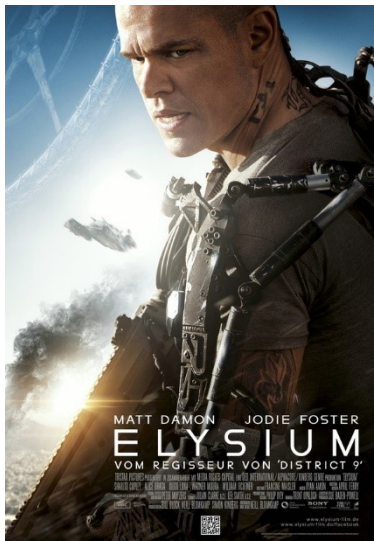
2. Dystopias in Fiction

Negotiating the terrain between the
historical antinomies of Utopia and Anti-Utopia

Utopia
Optimism



Anti-Utopia
Pessimism



3. Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

Utopia

Optimism

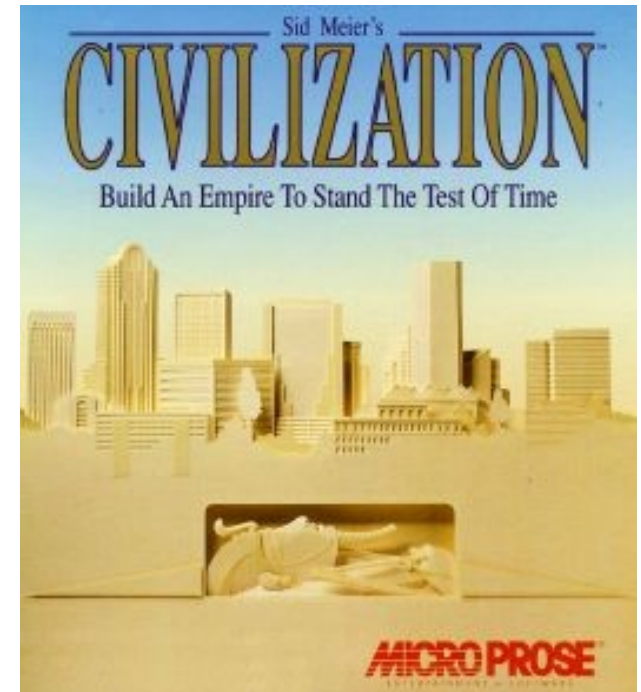
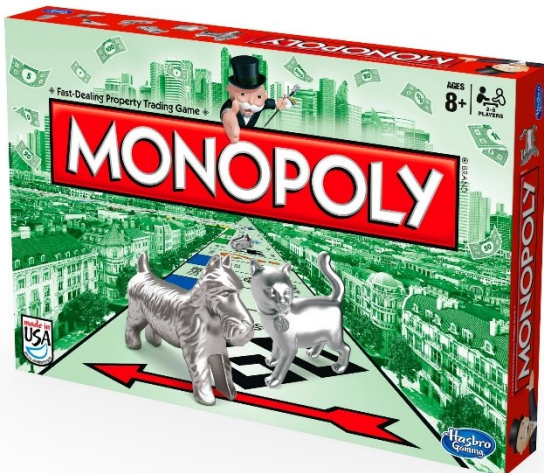


Anti-Utopia

Pessimism

- **Fortifies the status quo** in **deceiving** players of its critical nature or involving them in pleasurable ludic action to **attenuate** the system it represents.

• Anti-Utopia



Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

Utopia

Optimism



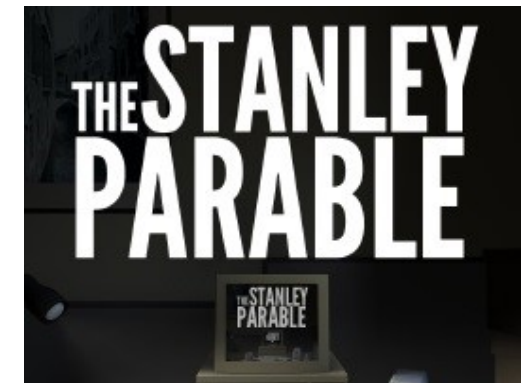
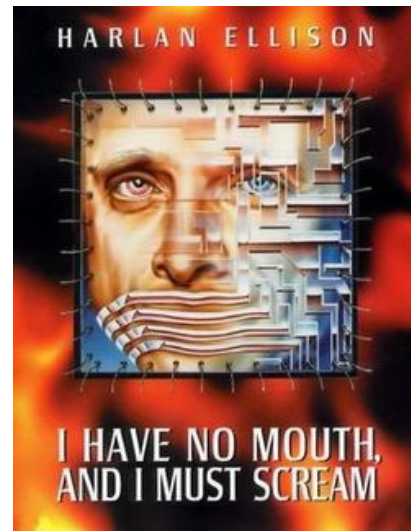
Anti-Utopia

Pessimism

- **The prospect of hope** lies *without* the bounds of the gameworld
- Failure to overthrow the dystopian regime
- **Hope** with the player and in a militant response to dystopia

• **Classical Dystopia**

• Anti-Utopia



Every Day the Same Dream



Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

Utopia

Optimism

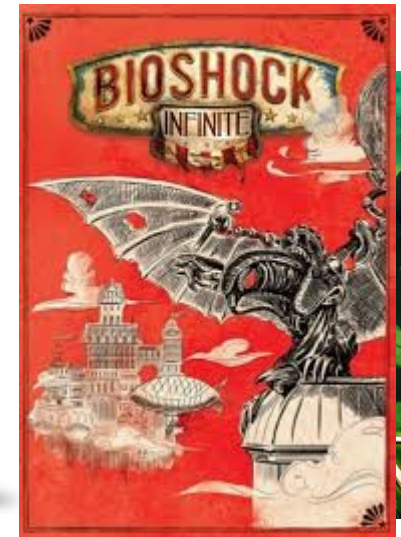
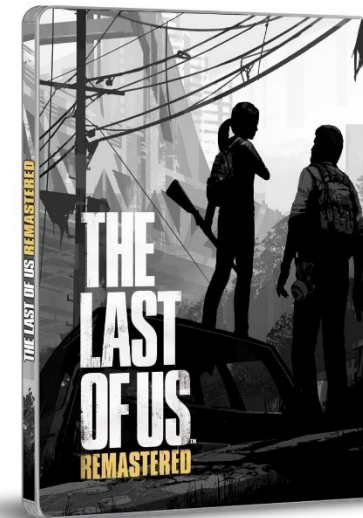
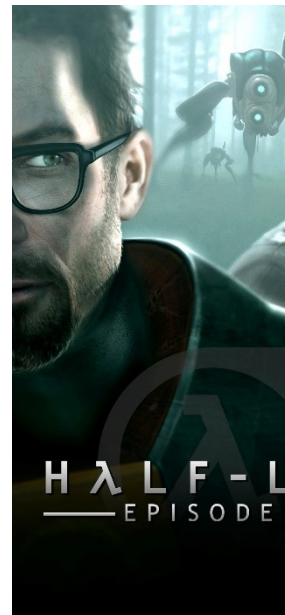


Anti-Utopia

Pessimism

• **Critical Dystopia I** • Classical Dystopia • Anti-Utopia

- **Hope** lies *within* the bounds of the gameworld (utopian enclaves, places of resistance)
- **Hopeful or ambiguous endings**
- **Often explain** how dystopia came about
- **Predetermined** by the game system



Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

Utopia

Optimism

Anti-Utopia

Pessimism

• **Critical Dystopia II** • Critical Dystopia I • Classical Dystopia • Anti-Utopia

- The Prospect of Utopia is directly **laid into the player's hands**.
- But also the **failure** of attaining it.
- **Choice of becoming a catalyst** of change and transformation
- **Optimistic, ambiguous, or pessimistic** ending.



Part II

Playful Trial Actions in Estranged Gameworlds

4. Towards the Implied Player
(The Gameworld as a System of Perspectives)
5. Estrangement through World and Agency

Implied Player

- Representational works of art **prescribe certain imaginings** (Kendall Walton, 1990: *Mimesis as Make-Believe*)
- Wolfgang Iser's implied reader: outlines an **aesthetic response** in the empirical reader (1978, *The Act of Reading*)
- **implied player** as both the ***structure of the game*** and a ***specific role ascribed to the player***.

the affordance and appeal structure of the (dystopian) game which holds all those preconditions necessary for the game to exercise its effect—an aesthetic effect experienced in and through the act of play.

Perspectival System of the Game

1. **Visual perspective:** the player's visual yet participatory perspective on the world of the game (difference between player and player-character).
2. **World perspective:** the gameworld including its settings, objects, architecture, sounds, music, and labyrinthine structures; and characters.
3. **Plot perspective:** the plot developments that are outlined according to a narrative framework.
Offical narrative and counter-narrative in dystopia
4. **System perspective:** processes, playing styles, and player actions that are outlined by the game's dynamic system and rules.

Part III Playing Dystopia

6. *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013)

Theocracy +
American
Exceptionalism +
Capitalism

Forgiveness + Self-
Sacrifice to attain
Utopia



Part III Playing Dystopia

8. *Fallout 4*

**Human Nature,
Conflict of
Ideologies
(Western World /
Communism),
War Never
Changes**

**Struggle to build
a new world** laid
into the player's
hands.



THE LAST OF US AS ECOLOGICAL DYSTOPIA

**and CRITICAL
DYSTOPIA of Variant I**

PRESS ANY BUTTON



Player Involvement and Response through Oppositions

Official narrative/counter-narrative, city/nature, indoor/outdoor,
fire/water, destruction/rebirth, entrapment/liberation, storm/sun,
dark/bright, tense/calm, survival/dialogue, regressive/progressive
and the four seasons of summer/fall/winter/spring.

The Official Narrative

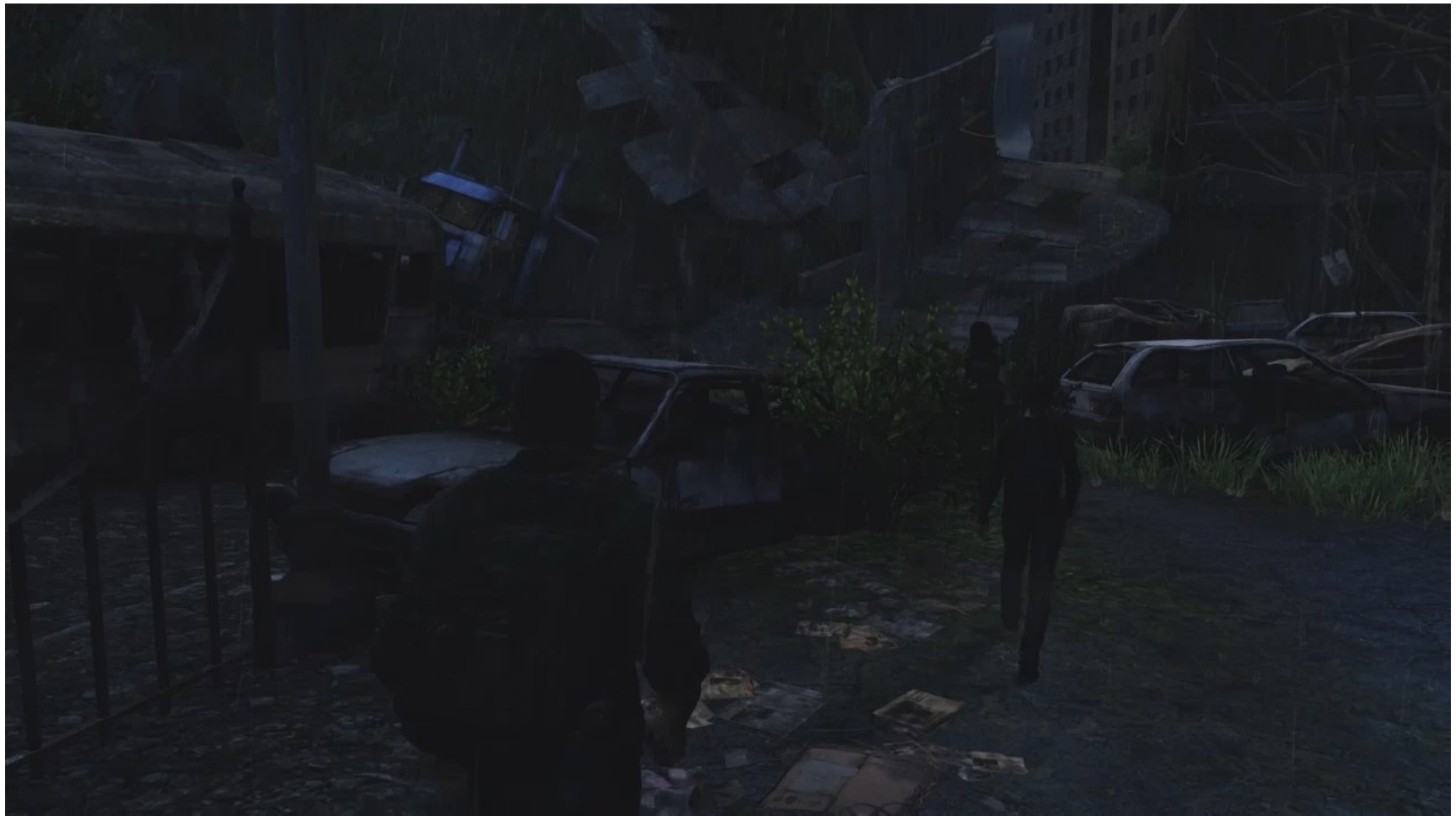
City Spaces of Conflict and Violence

The Player's Experience of City Spaces

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.

- Estrangement through world and agency



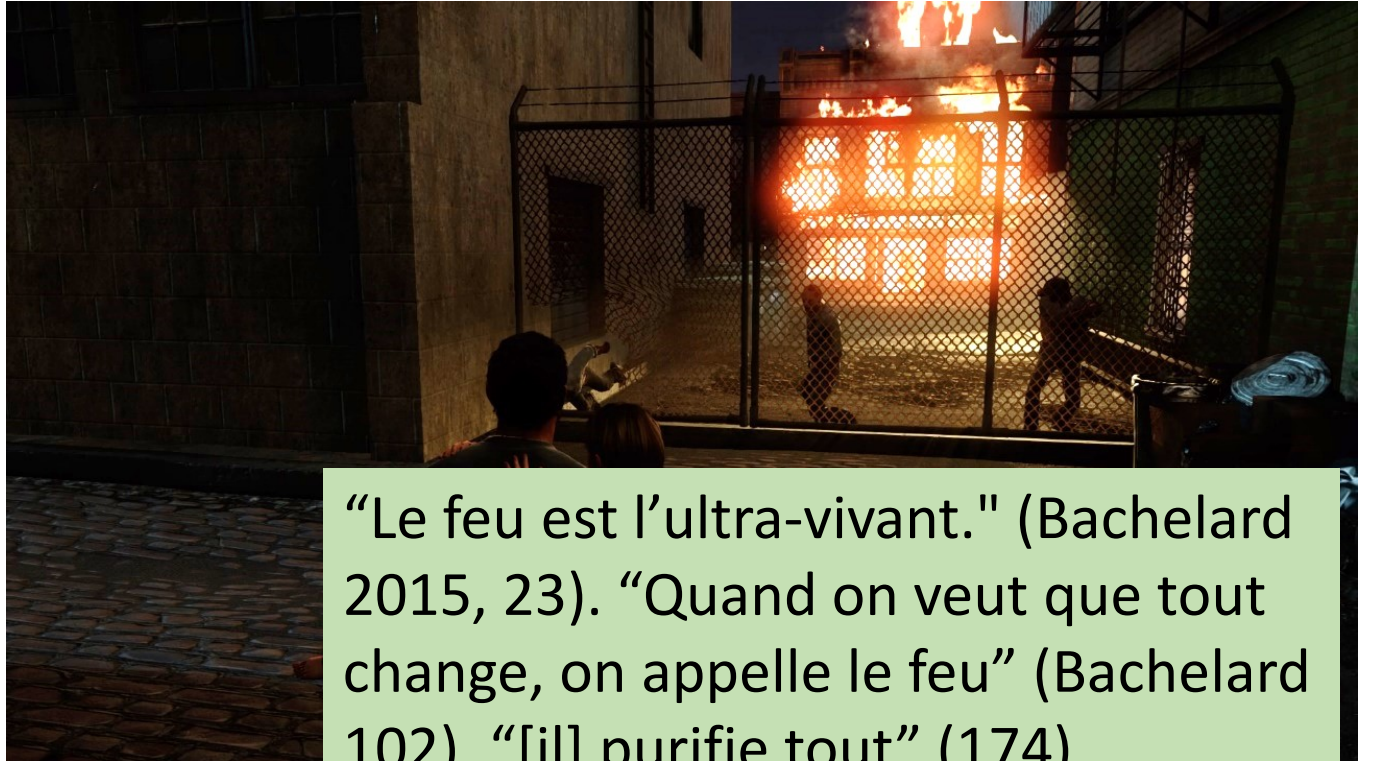


OFFICIAL NARRATIVE

THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY

(How dystopia came into being)

Summer and the Symbol of Fire



“Le feu est l’ultra-vivant.” (Bachelard 2015, 23). “Quand on veut que tout change, on appelle le feu” (Bachelard 102), “[il] purifie tout” (174).

OFFICAL NARRATIVE

THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY

Guiding the Player's Understanding and Involvement

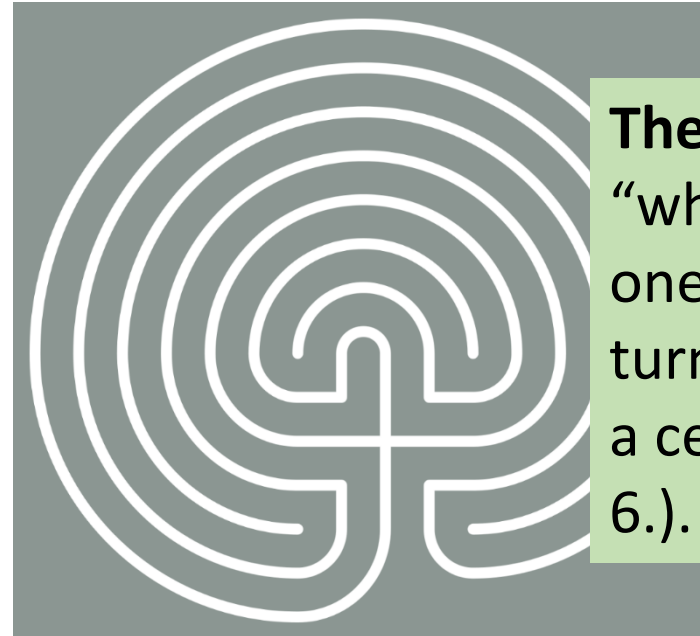
- Explosions and turmoil, breakdown of media
- The **prologue** directly leads towards *death*: to Sarah's and, on a bigger scale, to that of modern civilisation.



THE DYSTOPIAN MICROCOSM OF THE BOSTON QUARANTINE ZONE

Entrapment through Space and (Lack of) Agency

- Inhabitants live in miserable conditions



The unicursal labyrinth
“where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center” (Aarseth, 5-6.).

THE CONFINING INDOOR SPACES OF THE CITY

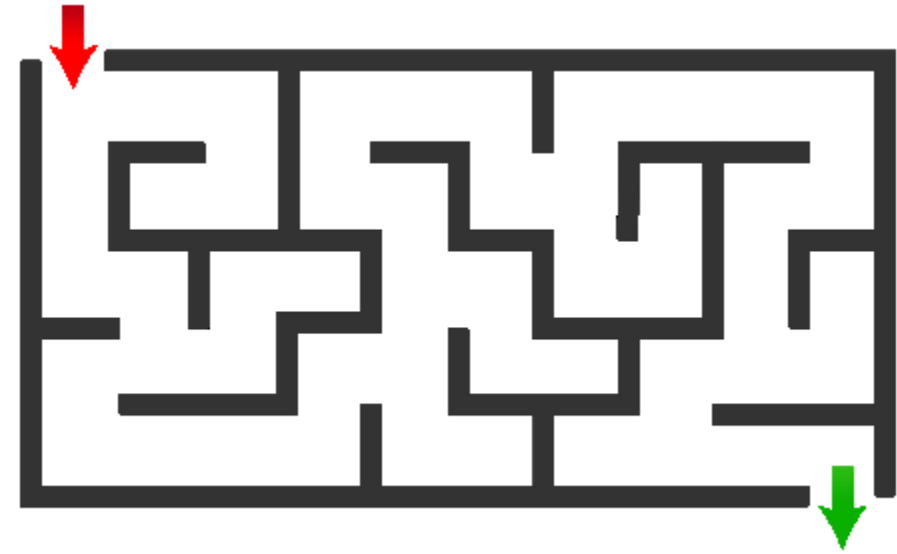
- **Suppression of individual freedom**
experience by the player: lack of agency in helping people.

The QZ evokes the image of a prison, and navigating its spaces, one cannot deny the feeling of claustrophobia and helplessness.



CITY SPACES AS MULTICURSAL LABYRINTHS

- The city spaces of Pittsburgh are designed for **combat** and **survival**.
- Multicursal labyrinths (where there is **only one exit to the maze**) and allow for diverse combat strategies.
- Focus on **scavenging** for supplies and **fierce combat encounters**.
- Urge to **safeguard** Ellie from city's atrocities and maze-like structures.



The multicursal labyrinth, “where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia” (Aarseth 1997, 5f.).

CREATING TIES TO THE FAILURES OF A BYGONE AGE

- Crumbling buildings, the crying remnants of its employees, out of order coca cola machines, allusions to a proud U.S. history.
- Image of an “unnatural, ... toxic” environment (Jameson 161) that “consumes more than it produces” (Domsch 2014, 405).
- **Official narrative** shows the **failure and consequent breakdown** of a bureaucratic consumer society.

***The Chronotope of the City**
Defined as an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (Bakhtin 15), the city chronotope is linked to the season of summer and to the symbol of fire (as a metaphor for both the world and gameplay).*



ESTRANGEMENT THROUGH WORLD AND AGENCY

- Showing us the fictional society in a **cracked and distorted mirror**.
- Taking parts of our empirical world (**norms conventions, artifacts, processes**) but rearranging them within the context of a science fiction gameworld.
- Can only be deciphered in a **feedback oscillation** (comparison) between empirical world and the SF storyworld.
- Step by step we recognize our world in the game (but in a defamiliarized way) **a shocking, enlightening exp.ience**





Nothing. It's just... I've never seen anything like this,
that's all.

The Counter-Narrative and Chronotope of Nature

Guides the player's coming to awareness and resistance to dystopia

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).

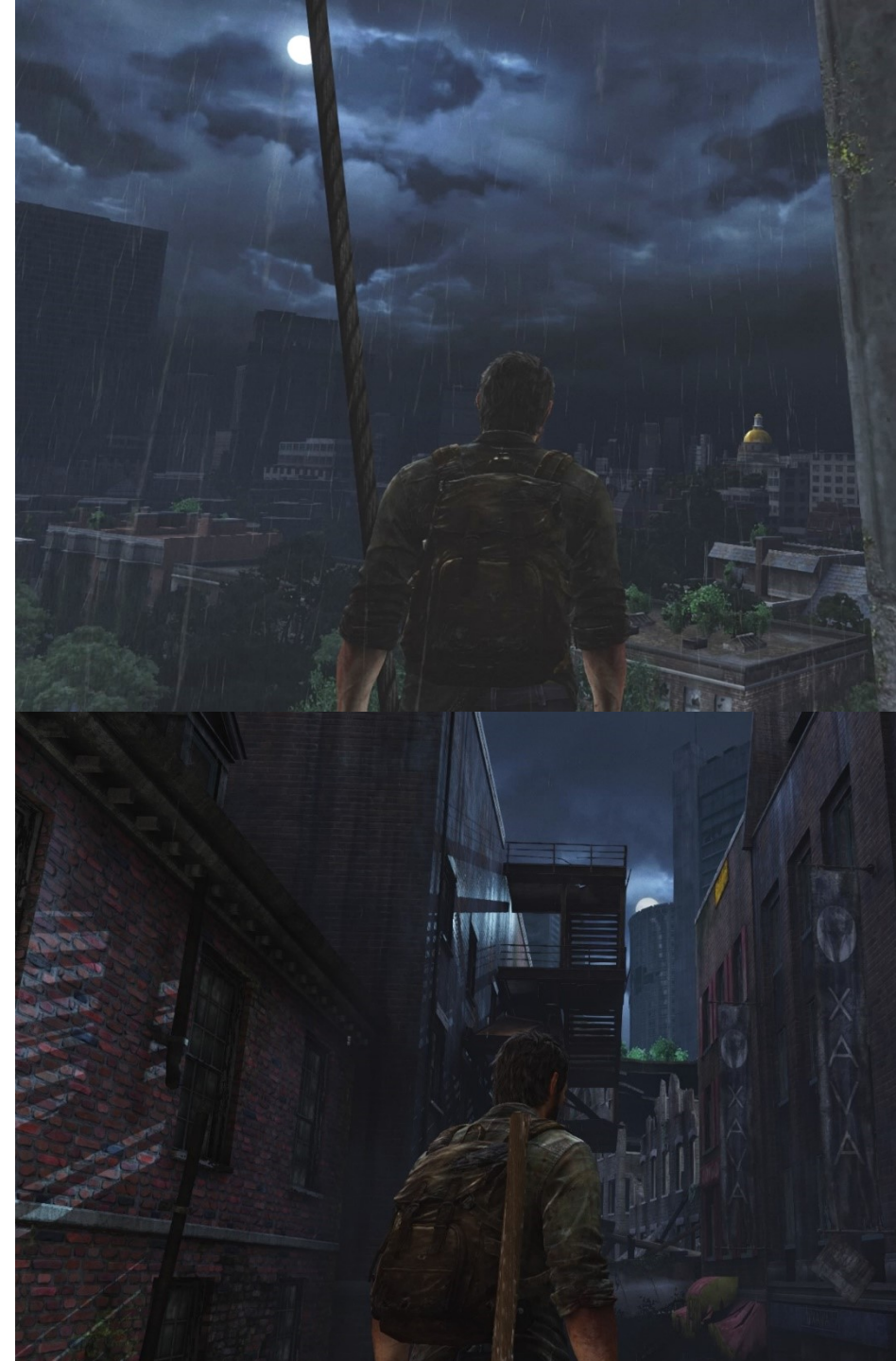


NATURE'S DIRECTIVE RHETORIC AND THE ESCAPE FROM THE CITY

- Escaping the Boston QZ through the city's canals under the shelter of **night and rain**.
- The **moon**, pointing the way towards the Capitol building.

Water flowing steadily towards Nature

- Canals or river streams.



THREE TYPES OF WATER

1) Water that stagnates in the City's Sewers

- Dirty and attracts infected.
- **Impure Water** (Bachelard 13): stands for the waste and drainage of the city.

2) Standing Water

- Greenish in colour, foreshadows death (Tess's in the Capitol building).
- **Dead Water** (89, 96): also in David's cannibal settlement.



THREE TYPES OF WATER

3) Flowing Water

Fresh, clear, helps to produce clear energy

- Gives people **hope** in times of discontent.
- **Pure water** (47, 193), or **springtime water**, shows a childlike character, young and loud, innocent and hopeful.



Actually kinda pretty ain't it?



NATURE'S ALLEVIATING FORCES

INDOOR/OUTDOOR SPACES

- In nature spaces, **the player's pain and suffering** (stemming from maze-like structures and ludic encounters) is **"alleviated"** (Navarro-Remesal 2016) through the calming/regenerative appeal of the environment.
- Are **linear** in structure and represent a **space for intimate *dialogue*** between Joel and Ellie.

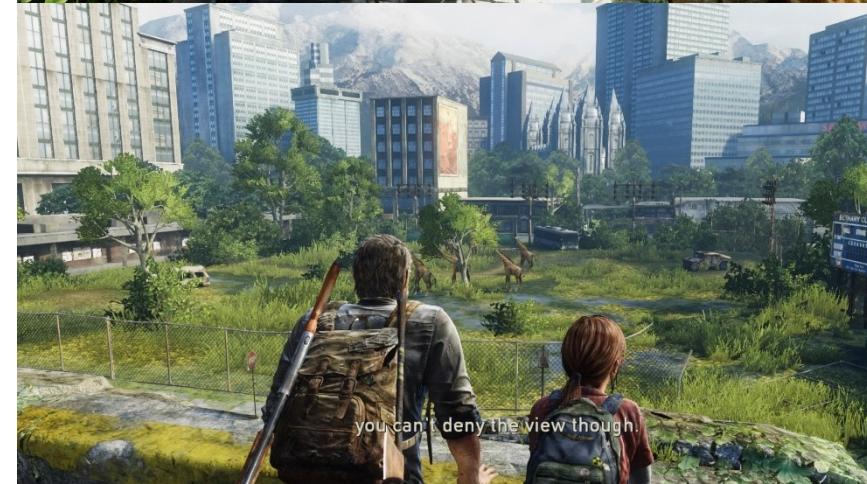


ELLIE AS TEMPTRESS TOWARDS NATURE

- **Ludic role** in combat
- **A figure of guidance** as she helps the player gain insight into the dystopian society.
- **Ellie assumes a position similar to the player's** as she discovers the unfamiliar world and reminds Joel (and the player) of nature's beauty.

Treatment of Animals as Utopian Enclave

- Full of juvenile enthusiasm, curiosity of nature's many wonders.
- **The giraffe scene as an enclave of hope.**



UTOPIAN ENCLAVES

Tommy's Settlement

- **A life in balance with nature,**
- a place for families, in the safeguard of mountains
- self-sustainability
- use of natural resources to produce clear energy.

"Remember how we thought no one could live like this anymore? Well, we're doing it" (Naughty Dog 2014, Tommy).



UTOPIAN ENCLAVES

The Scientific Enclave of the Fireflies

- Bringing back humankind to the **top of the evolutionary scale.**
- Sacrifice Ellie in order to create a vaccine.
- **Return to old order.**



THE MORE TORTU(R)OUS ROUTE

Fall as a Season of Uncertainty

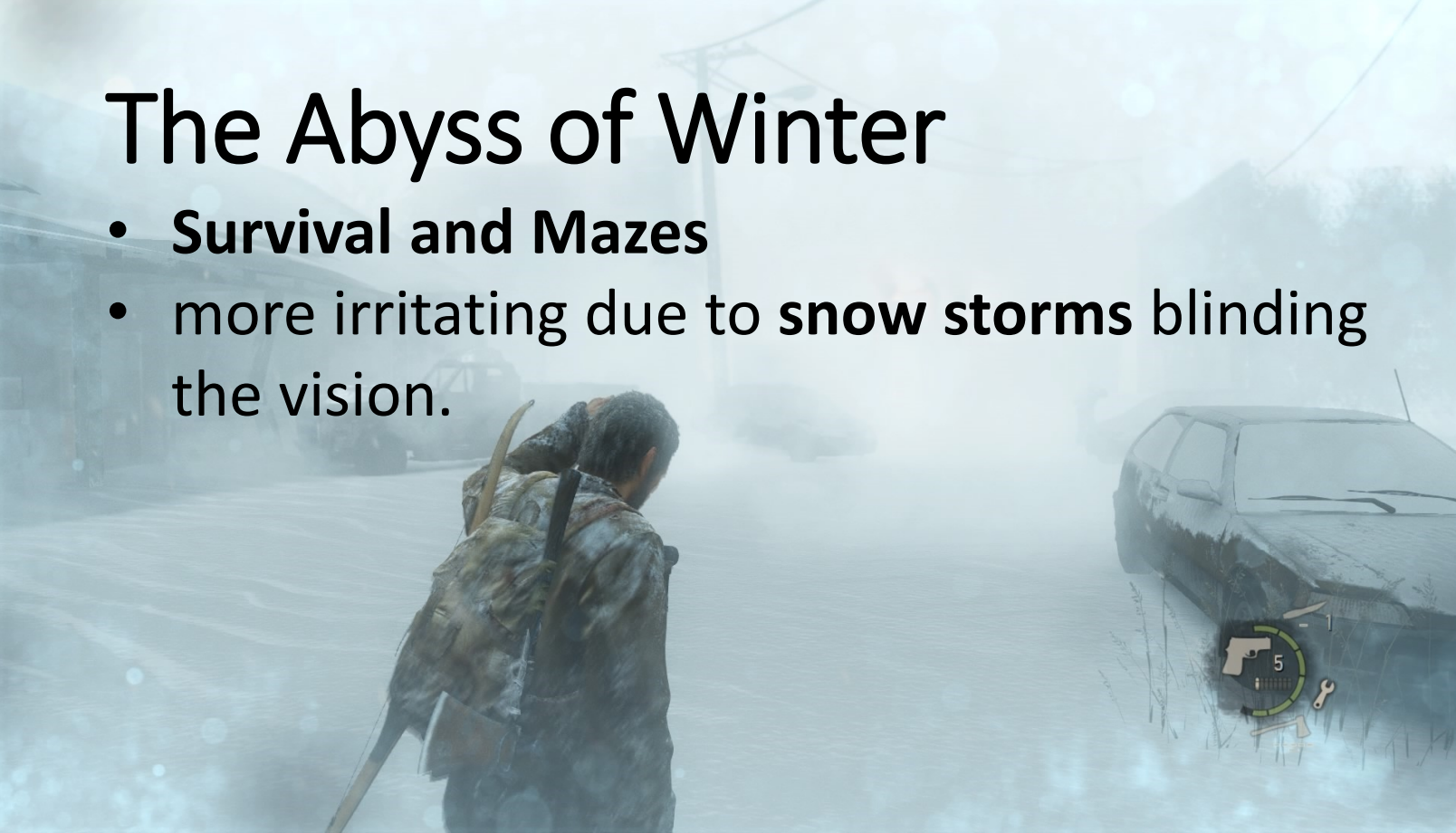
- The choice between **two utopian propositions**: Tommy's settlement and the scientific enclave of the Fireflies.



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.

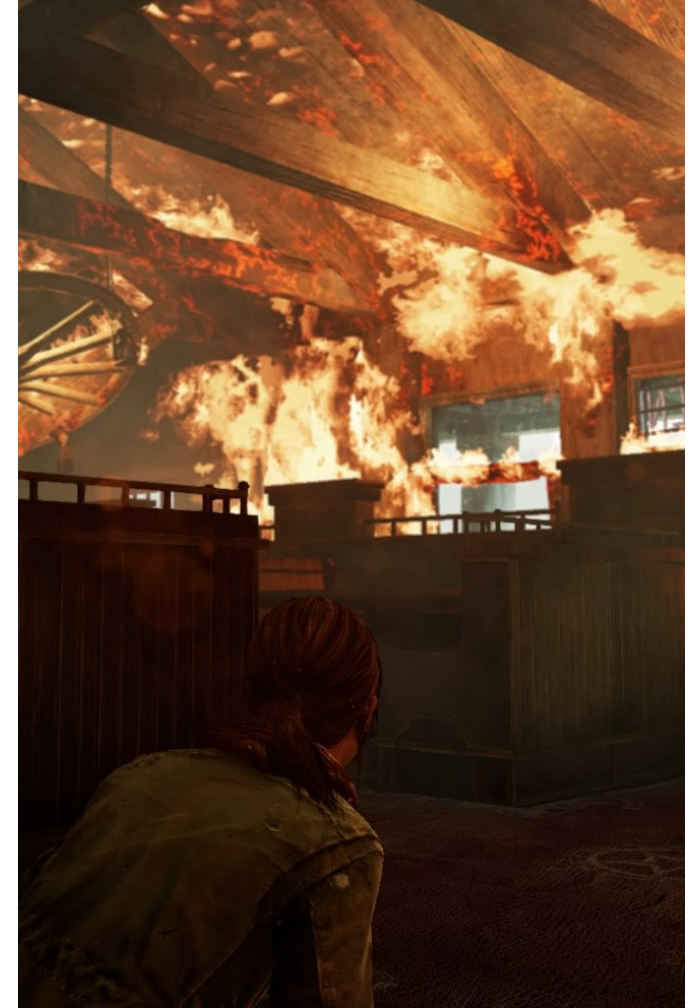
The Abyss of Winter

- **Survival and Mazes**
- more irritating due to **snow storms** blinding the vision.



THE MORE TORTU(R)OUS ROUTE

- Winter is characterised by ***disorientation*** (the snowstorm), ***fear***, and ***confusion***—and these characteristics symbolically stand for **Ellie's inner life**.
- Game now focalized through Ellie: her **coming-of-age**.



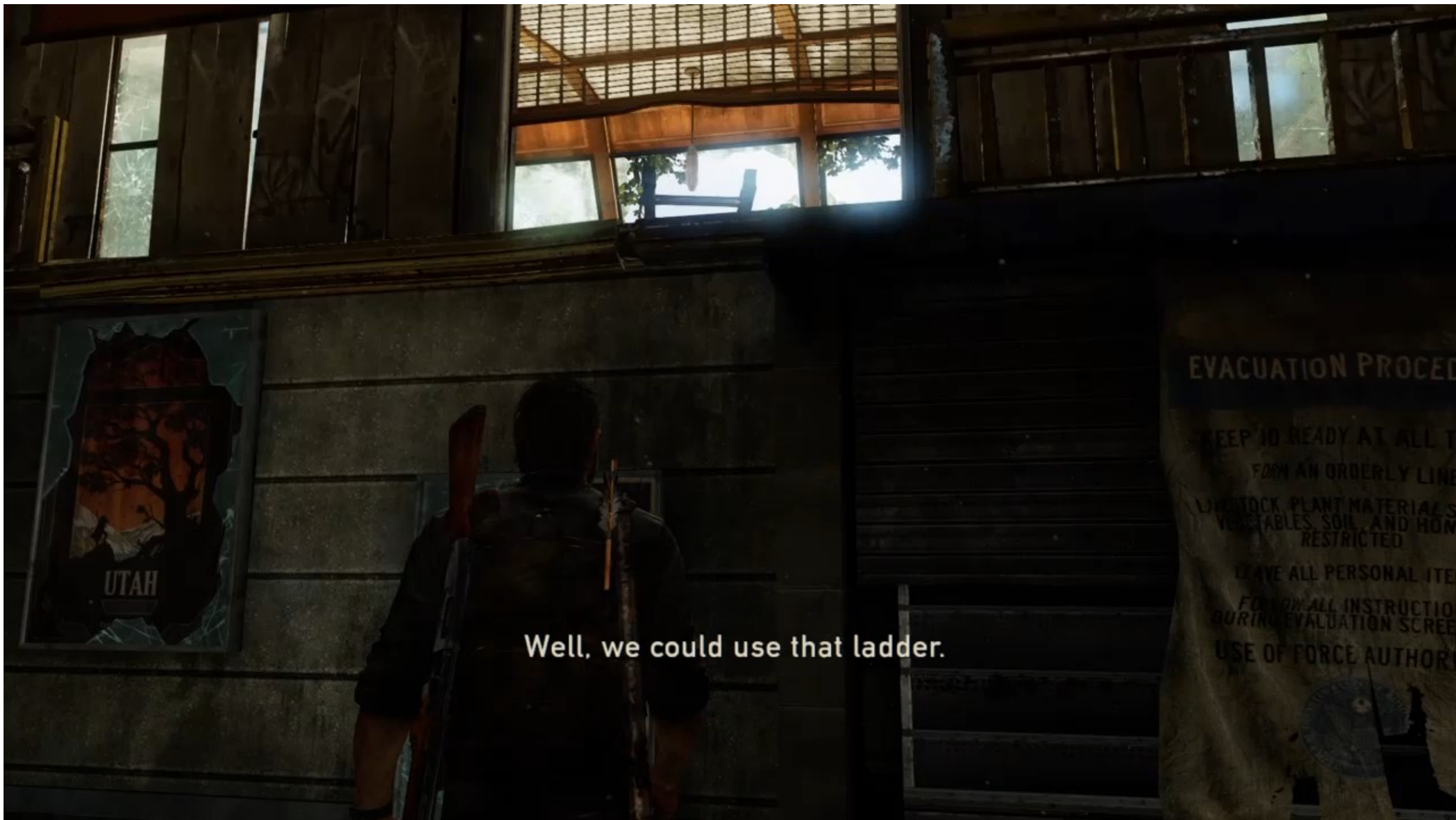
Spring and the Chronotope of Nature



Utopian Enclave

Is characterised by the season of *spring* and the symbols of *renewal* and *hope*.

Following Ellie's model, humankind is maybe offered a truly second chance.



Well, we could use that ladder.

EVACUATION PROCEDURE

KEEP ID READY AT ALL TIMES

FORM AN ORDERLY LINE

LIVESTOCK, PLANT MATERIALS,
VEGETABLES, SOIL, AND HOME
RESTRICTED

LEAVE ALL PERSONAL ITEMS

FOLLOW ALL INSTRUCTIONS
DURING EVALUATION SCREENING

USE OF FORCE AUTHORIZED

References:

See Playing Dystopia as book.