THE JOURNEY TO NATURE

THE LAST OF US AS CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

PRESS ANY BUTTON

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THESIS:
DYSTOPIA'S **WARNING** AND AESTHETIC EFFECT

The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013, 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 gameworld.

THESIS:
DYSTOPIA'S WARNING AND **AESTHETIC EFFECT**

The **aesthetic / persuasive effect** *The Last of Us* has on the player; suggesting a return to nature and a life in balance with the many things Earth has to offer (things we might have forgotten).

➢ **Positive reaction** on the player's side.

➢ The player goes through this transformation in a **process of gradual realisation**.

THESIS:
OPPOSITION BETWEEN **CITY** AND **NATURE** SPACES

➤ What are the **preconditions** of such an effect on the player? What is the **structure** that influences the player?

➤ Analysis of the **implied player** becomes necessary and its structure of **oppositions**.

Main Opposition

The Last of Us makes use of the **critical dystopia's plot structure and framework of play**—the clash between **official narrative** and **counter-narrative**—and juxtaposes dystopian and utopian possibilities inscribed in its gameworld.

THESIS:
OPPOSITION BETWEEN **CITY** AND NATURE SPACES

- 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 **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.

THESIS:
OPPOSITION BETWEEN CITY AND **NATURE SPACES**

- 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**.

FULFILS THE FUNCTION OF **UTOPIA**

The Philosophy of Utopia (Utopianism)

- "a philosophy of hope" (Sargent 2010, 8).

- Incessantly drives humankind towards a gradual betterment of their societal arrangements (Viera 2010, 20, 23).

The Function of Utopia(n Fiction)

- Utopia functions **as *warning* to humankind** and reminds us that what is at stake is nothing less than our future itself.

- 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).

WHAT IS THE CRITICAL DYSTOPIA?

A Subgenre of Utopia / Dystopia

• Traditional utopia, euchronia, critical utopia, ecotopia.

• Classical dystopia, anti-utopia, **critical dystopia**.

The Critical Dystopia as a Sight for Hope

• as "a non-existent society ... 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**" (Sargent 2000, np; bold mine).

• **Examples**: Pat Cadigan's *Synners* (1991), The Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999), Valve's *Half-Life* 2 (2004), Irrational Game's *Bioshock* (2007), Bethesda Game Studios' *Fallout 4*, or *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014)

WHAT IS **THE CRITICAL DYSTOPIA?**

Utopian Enclaves and Ambiguous Endings

- The critical dystopia enables its diegetic characters **to find and pursue potential ways out of the dystopian confinement**: "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**" (Baccolini 2003, 7; bold mine).

Illuminating the Causes of Dystopia / Proposing Solutions

- 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" (Fitting 2003, 156; bold mine).

THE ECOLOGICAL RHETORIC OF THE
IMPLIED PLAYER

Ecological Fiction

- *The Last of Us* can be placed within the realms of **ecological fiction** as it outlines a particular strong ecological rhetoric.

The Implied Player as a Framework of Play

- Offers the empirical player **a particular role** (cf. Aarseth 2007, 132).

- 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).

THE **ECOLOGICAL RHETORIC** OF THE IMPLIED PLAYER

The Player's Process of Ideation is outlined by the Implied Player's Structure of Oppositions

Official narrative/ counter-narrative, 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 **emancipated player** engages in a **fruitful dialectic** with the implied player: both accepting and critically scrutinizing his role.

THE **OFFICIAL NARRATIVE** AND THE **CHRONOTOPE OF THE CITY**

The Official Narrative

Description of the dystopian society / regime and how it subjugates the individual (cf. Baccolini 2003, 5; Moylan 2000, xiii, 112, 142).

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.

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" (102), "[il] purifie tout" (174).

Keep going! Find a way outta here!

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.

THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY
HOW DYSTOPIA CAME INTO BEING

A Path that Invariably leads towards Death

• The **prologue** directly and inexorably leads towards *death*: to Sarah's and, on a bigger scale, to that of modern civilisation.

The Perspectives that guide the Player's Understanding

First explosions and turmoil, breakdown of media, telephone lines and TV stations are dead, human beings turn into most violent predators.

➢ *The Last of Us* enlightens the **circumstances** of how dystopia came into being.

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.

THE DYSTOPIAN MICROCOSM OF THE
BOSTON QUARANTINE ZONE

Entrapment through Space and (Lack of) Agency

- Inhabitants live in miserable conditions, the streets are littered with garbage, grey colour shade, food shortages.

The unicursal labyrinth "where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center" (Aarseth 1997, 5f.).

And this path will eventually lead to nature!

THE DYSTOPIAN MICROCOSM OF THE
BOSTON QUARANTINE ZONE

The Confining Indoor Space of the City

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

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

SPACES, SIGNS, PROCESSES, AND ACTIONS
AS PERSPECTIVE SEGMENTS / PROPS

City Spaces as Multicursal Labyrinths

- 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.
- Focus on **scavenging** for supplies and **fierce ludic encounters**.
- The urge to **safeguard** Ellie from city's atrocities and maze-like structures.
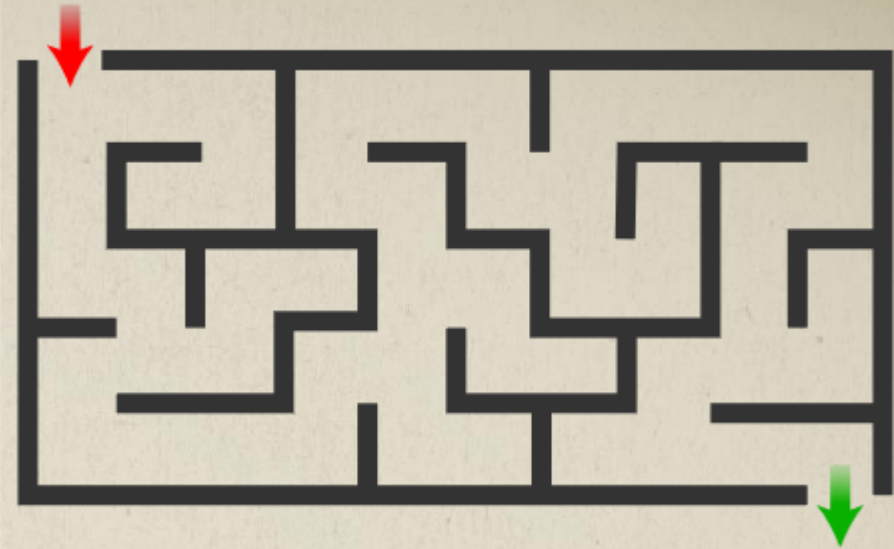
The multicursal labyrinth, "where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia" (Aarseth 1997, 5f.).

SPACES, SIGNS, PROCESSES, AND ACTIONS
AS PERSPECTIVE SEGMENTS / PROPS

Perspectives we Encounter and Help Create

- Imagery of crumbling buildings and the crying remnants of its employees, out of order coca cola machines, the many allusions to a proud U.S. history, fierce ludic encounters and the scavenging for supplies.

Filling in the Blanks between Perspectives

- Image of a viral and "unnatural, … toxic and poisonous" environment (Jameson 2005, 161) which "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 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 AND THE CHRONOTOPE OF NATURE

The Last of Us initiates a **counter-narrative** discoursed through a well-crafted ecological rhetoric that **guides the player's coming to awareness and resistance to dystopia**: 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).
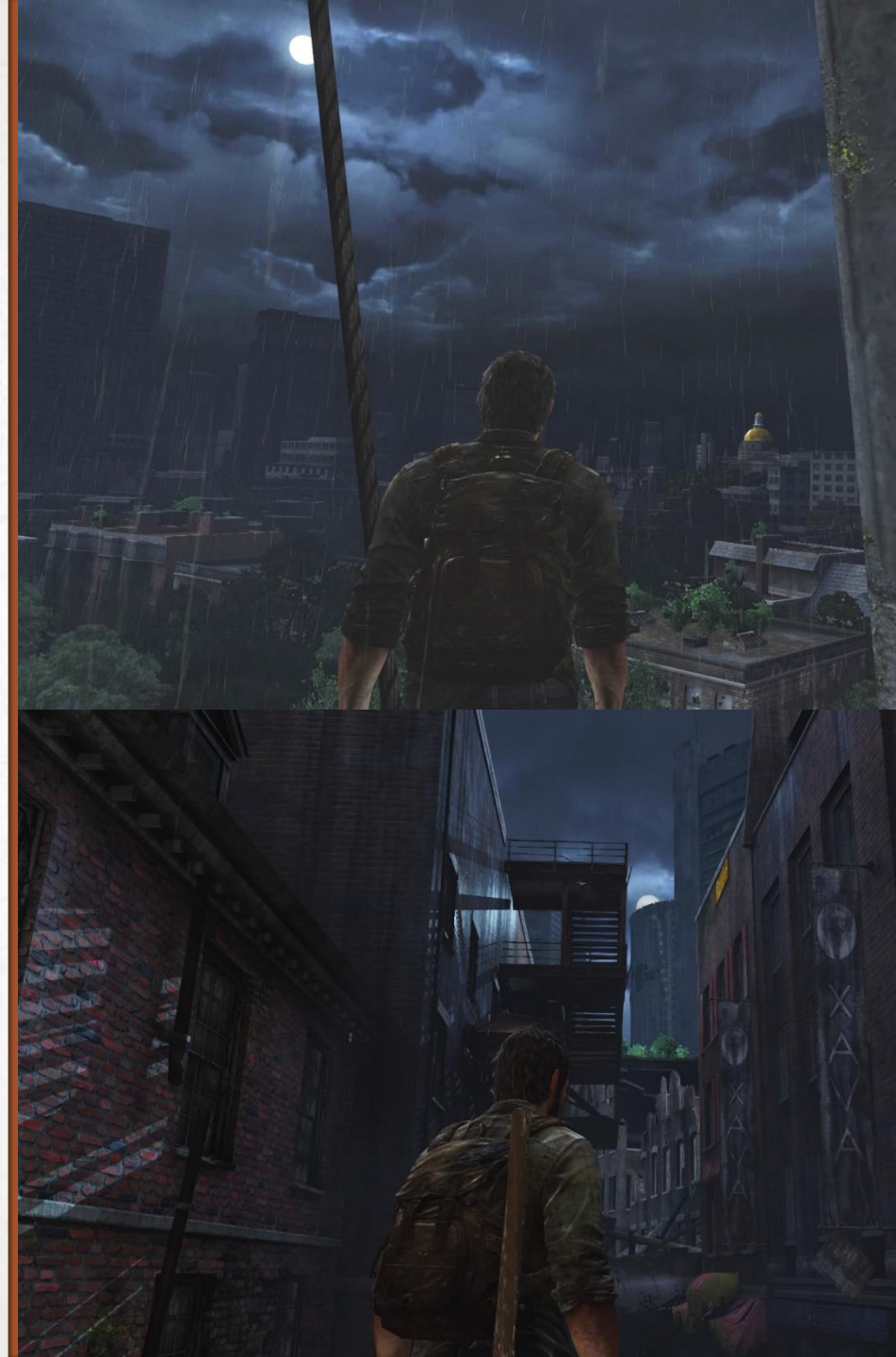
NATURE'S DIRECTIVE RHETORIC
AND THE SYMBOLISM OF WATER

The Player's Escape to Nature is guided by Various Perspectives

- 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!

THREE TYPES OF WATER

1) Water that stagnates in the City's Sewers

- It is dirty and attracts infected, and oftentimes one encounters floating corpses while diving.
- ➤ **Impure Water** (Bachelard 1987, 13): stands for the waste and drainage of the city.

2) Standing Water

- Greenish in colour and foreshadows death (such as Tess's in the Capitol building).
- ➤ **Dead Water** (89, 96): can additionally be encountered in David's cannibal settlement (in the form of a frozen lake, mourning the hideousness of human nature).

THREE TYPES OF WATER

3) Flowing Water

- **Fresh**, **clear**, and helps to produce clear energy
- Gives people **hope** in times of discontent.
- ➤ **Pure water** (47, 193), which Bachelard also compares to **springtime water**, shows a childlike character, young and loud, innocent and hopeful.

NATURE'S ALLEVIATING FORCES

- 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.

- Are linear in structure and represent **a space for intimate *dialogue*** between Joel and Ellie.

- **Juxtaposition of Tense Indoor and Alleviating Outdoor Spaces**

Oh... well, when I was a kid I used to want to be a singer.

ELLIE AS FIGURE OF GUIDANCE AND TEMPTRESS TOWARDS NATURE

Ellie discovers the New and to her Unfamiliar World

- **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).

- **Ellie assumes a position similar to the player's**, to whom this world is also strange, and constantly reminds Joel (and the player) of nature's beauty.

Treatment of Animals as Utopian Enclave

- Full of juvenile enthusiasm, shows curiosity of nature's many wonders.

- **The giraffe scene as an enclave of hope**.

UTOPIAN ENCLAVES
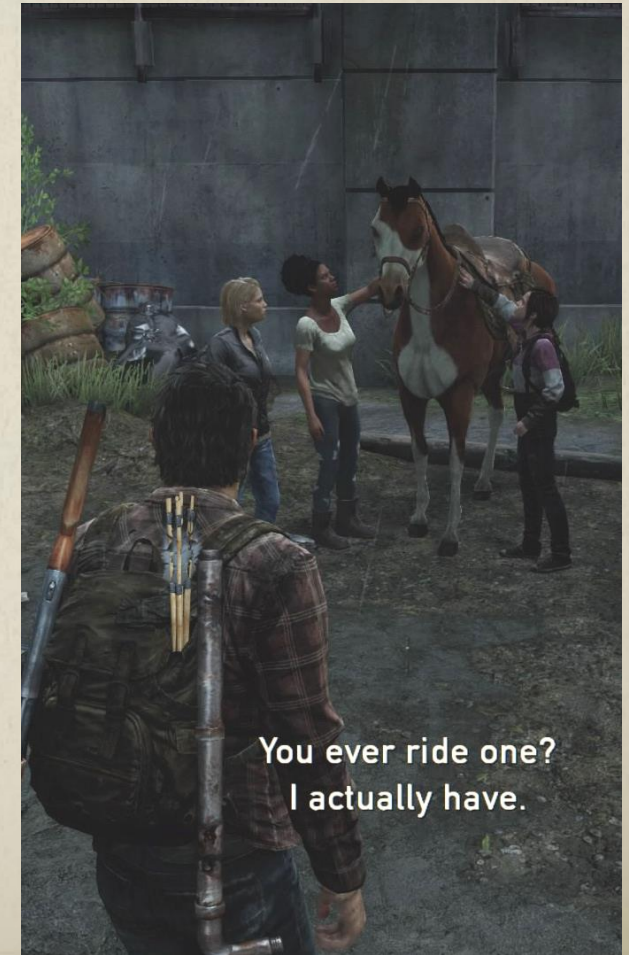
Tommy's Settlement

- **A life in balance with nature**, a place for families (in total 20), lies in the safeguard of high mountains, self-sustainability by growing crops and farming livestock, use of natural resources to produce clear energy.

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**.

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

You ever ride one?
I actually have.

THE MORE TORTU(R)OUS ROUTE

Fall as a Season of Uncertainty

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

Google Maps

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** made even more irritating due to **snow storms** blinding the player's 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 to age**.

you can't deny the view though.
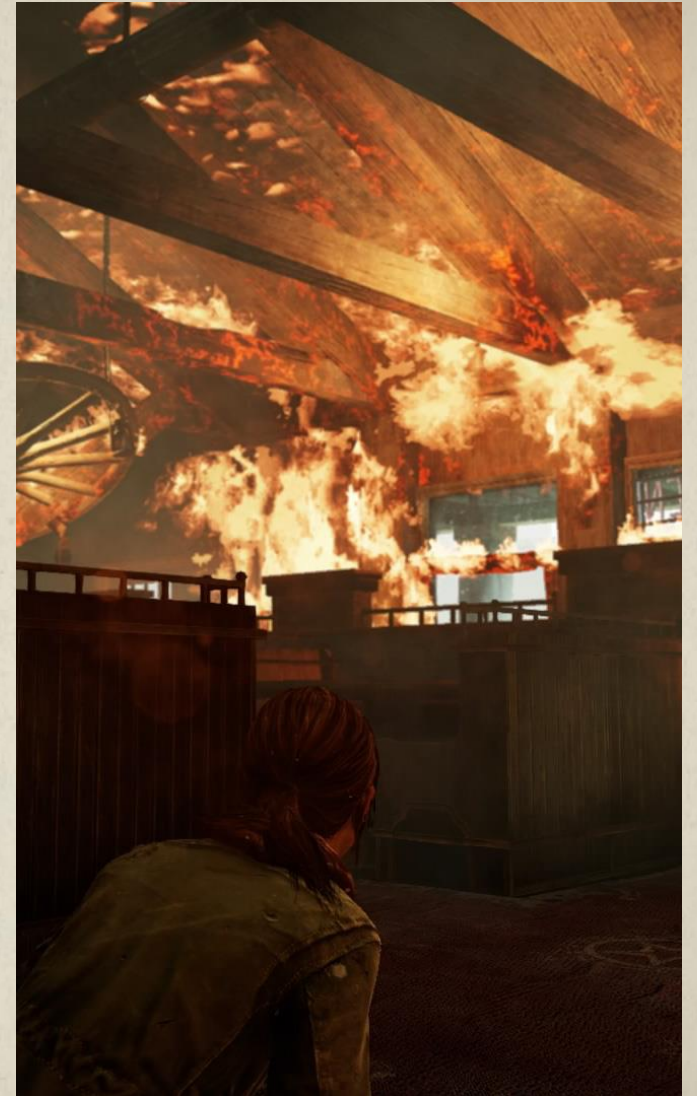
CONCLUSION: SPRING AND THE CHRONOTOPE OF NATURE

Utopian Enclave

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*.

Following Ellie's model, humankind is maybe offered a truly second chance, and one very different from the prospect of the non-actualised Firefly future.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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To quote parts of this talk, please consult the full paper in the DiGRA and FDG conference proceedings.

Thank you.