The Video Game Dystopia

Strategies of Persuasion and Player Involvement

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Talk 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

Overview

1. The Philosophy of Utopia (and its Nemesis of Anti-Utopia)

2. Dystopias in Fiction (Literature, Film, Video Games, etc.)

3. Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

4. Strategies of Player Involvement and Persuasion
   (plot framework, world design, affordance design/agency)

5. *The Last of Us* as Ecological Dystopia

6. Concluding Remarks

1) The Philosophy of Utopia

The Term Utopia and Fictional Utopias

- **neologism *utopia*** out of two Greek morphemes: the prefix *ouk* (*u*), means *no* or *not; and* the lexeme *topos* means *place*.

- ***Eutopia:*** the *good place*

- "desirable, yet unattainable" (Ferns 39), "[m]ore perfect than the real world, yet non-existent" (3).

Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516)

The Philosophy of Utopia

The Term Dystopia and Fictional Dystopias

- The bad place which is not

- Warning the reader, viewer, player about worse times to come.

Dystopian fiction harbours **the same function** as utopian fiction!

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
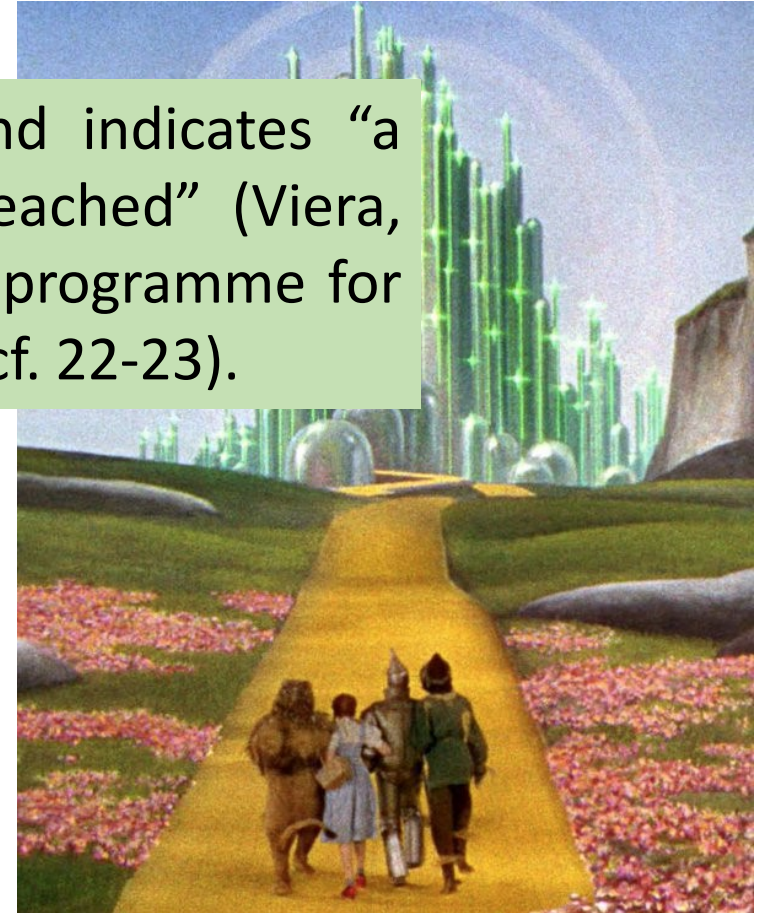
The road to the Utopia of Oz.

Function of Utopia

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).
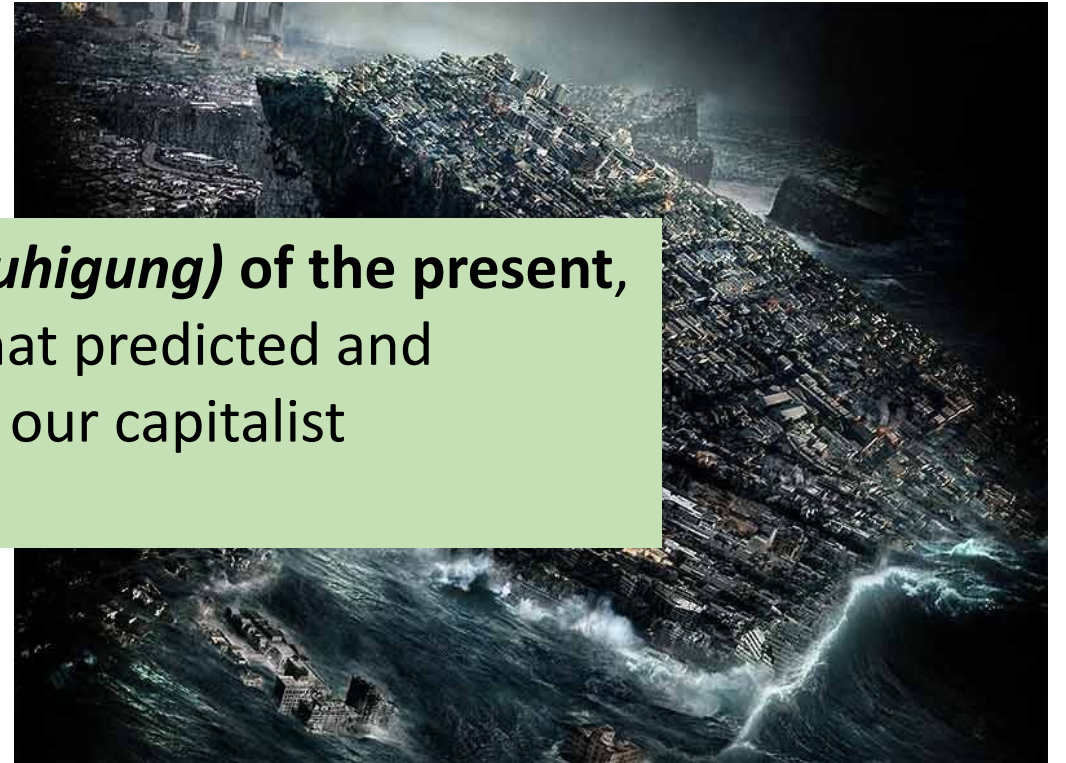
- **Warning** and **Disruption** of the Present

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
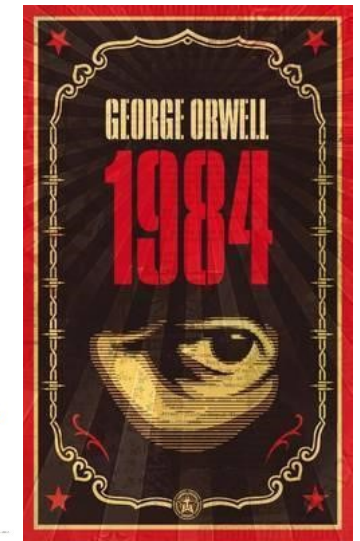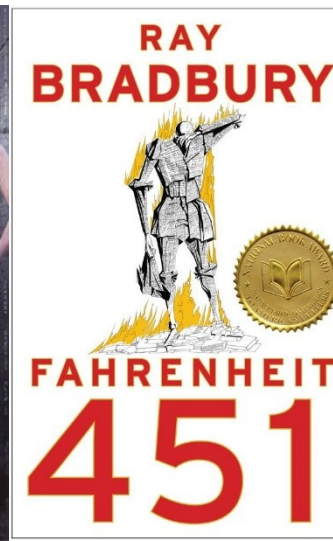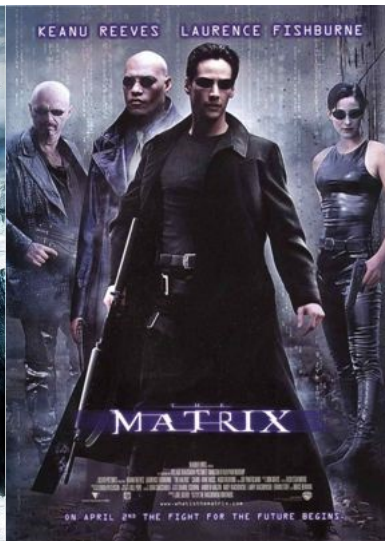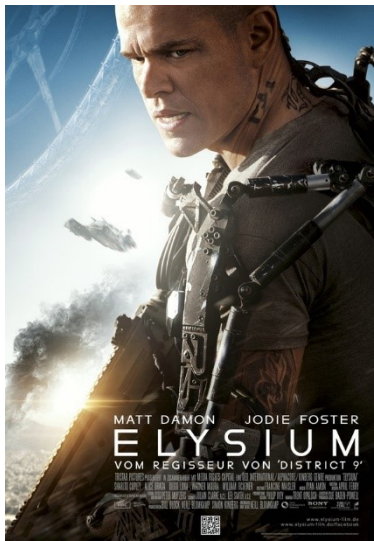- The present world as the best of all worlds
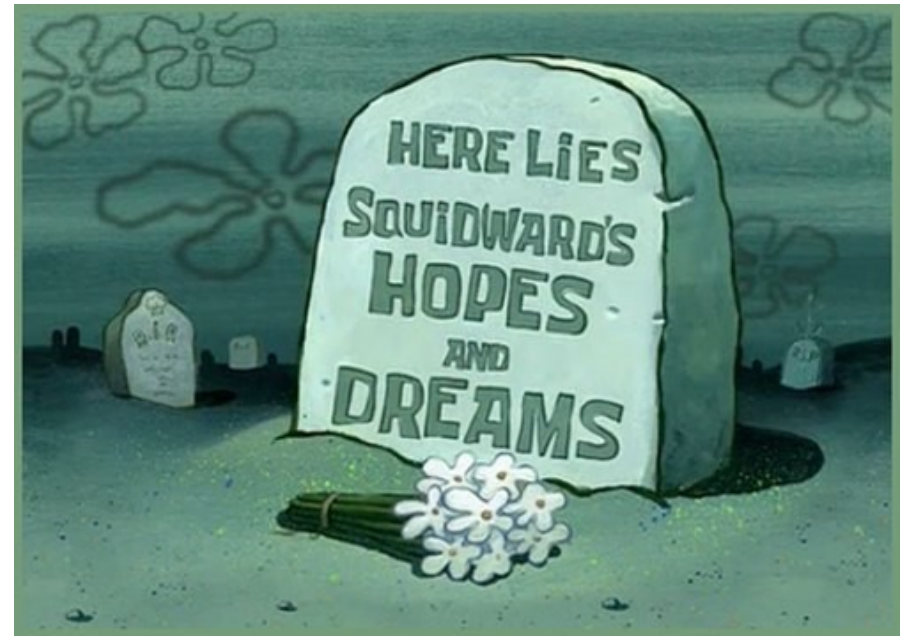
2. Dystopias in Fiction

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

Utopia   **Anti-Utopia**

Optimism   Pessimism

3. Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia
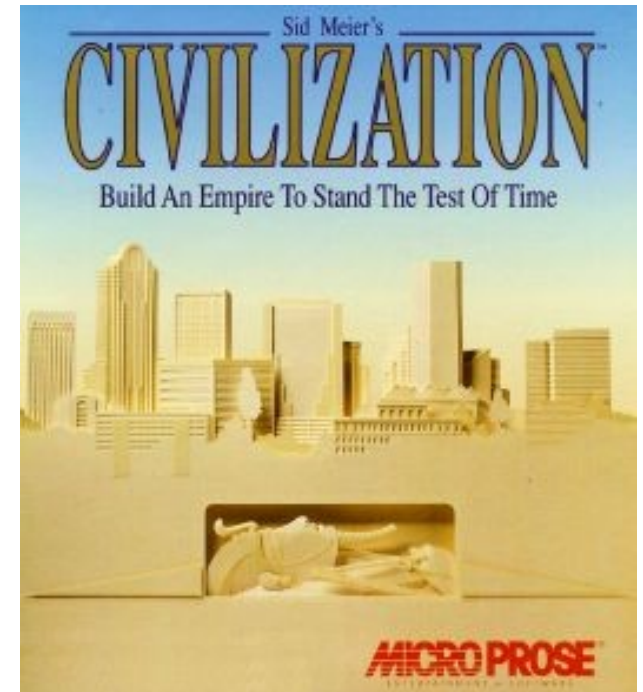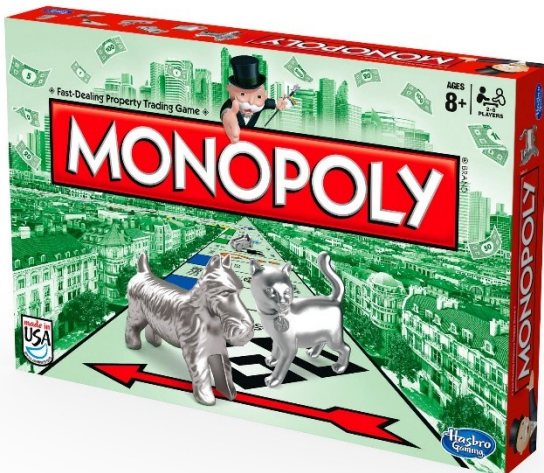
Utopia

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 ⟵————————————⟶ **Anti-Utopia**

Optimism   Pessimism

- **Classical Dystopia**   - Anti-Utopia
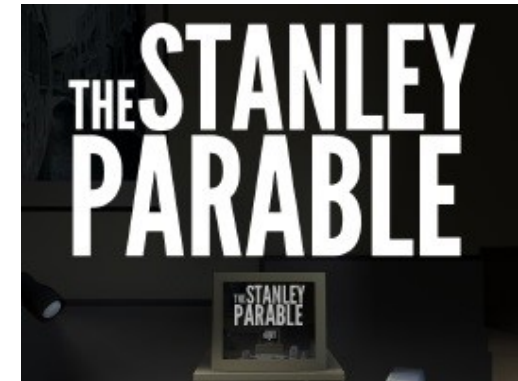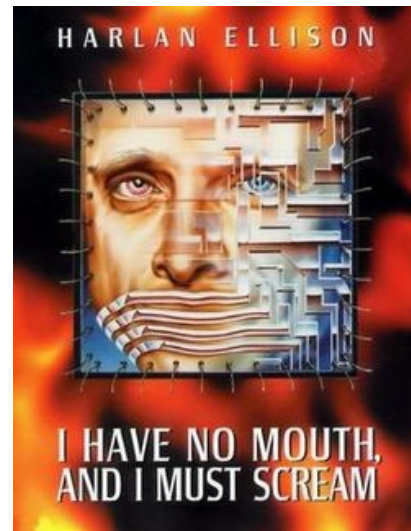
- **The prospect of hope** lies *without* the bounds of the gameworld

- Failure to overthrow the dystopian regime

- **Hope** with the player and in a militant response to dystopia

Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

Utopia ⟵————————————⟶ **Anti-Utopia**

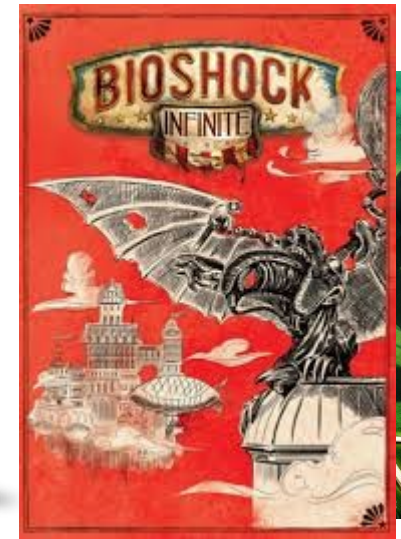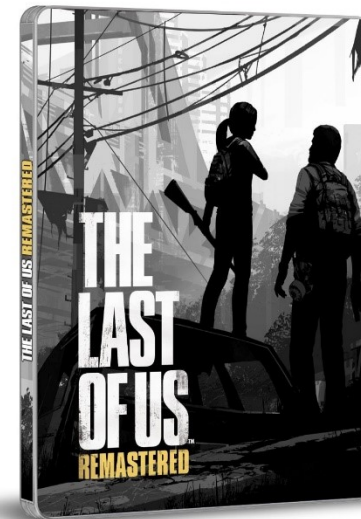Optimism   Pessimism

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

- **Hope** lies *within* the bounds of the gameworld (utopian enclaves, places of resistance)

- **Hopeful or ambiguous Endings**

- **Explaining** how dystopia came about

- **Predetermined** by the game system

Four Variants of the Video Game Dystopia

Utopia ←————————————————→ **Anti-Utopia**

Optimism   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.

4. Strategies of Player Involvement and Persuasion

1. Dystopia's **plot framework**:
   official narrative and counter-narrative
2. Estrangement through **world**
3. Estrangement through **agency (affordances)**

To entertain the player on a basic level of **ludic pleasures and emotions**

But also on an **aesthetic level** of personal response to the game.

Plot Framework: Official Narrative and Counter-Narrative

Offical Narrative (of the Hegemonic Order)

- Has the player experience the **dystopian society** and lays emphasis on its confinements.

Counter-Narrative (Resistance)

- Has the player enact the life of one or more **dissidents** that struggle(s) with their surroundings.

- Process of **realisation** and consequent **action**.

- Holds out hope in one or more **utopian enclaves** (critical dystopia).

5. *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.
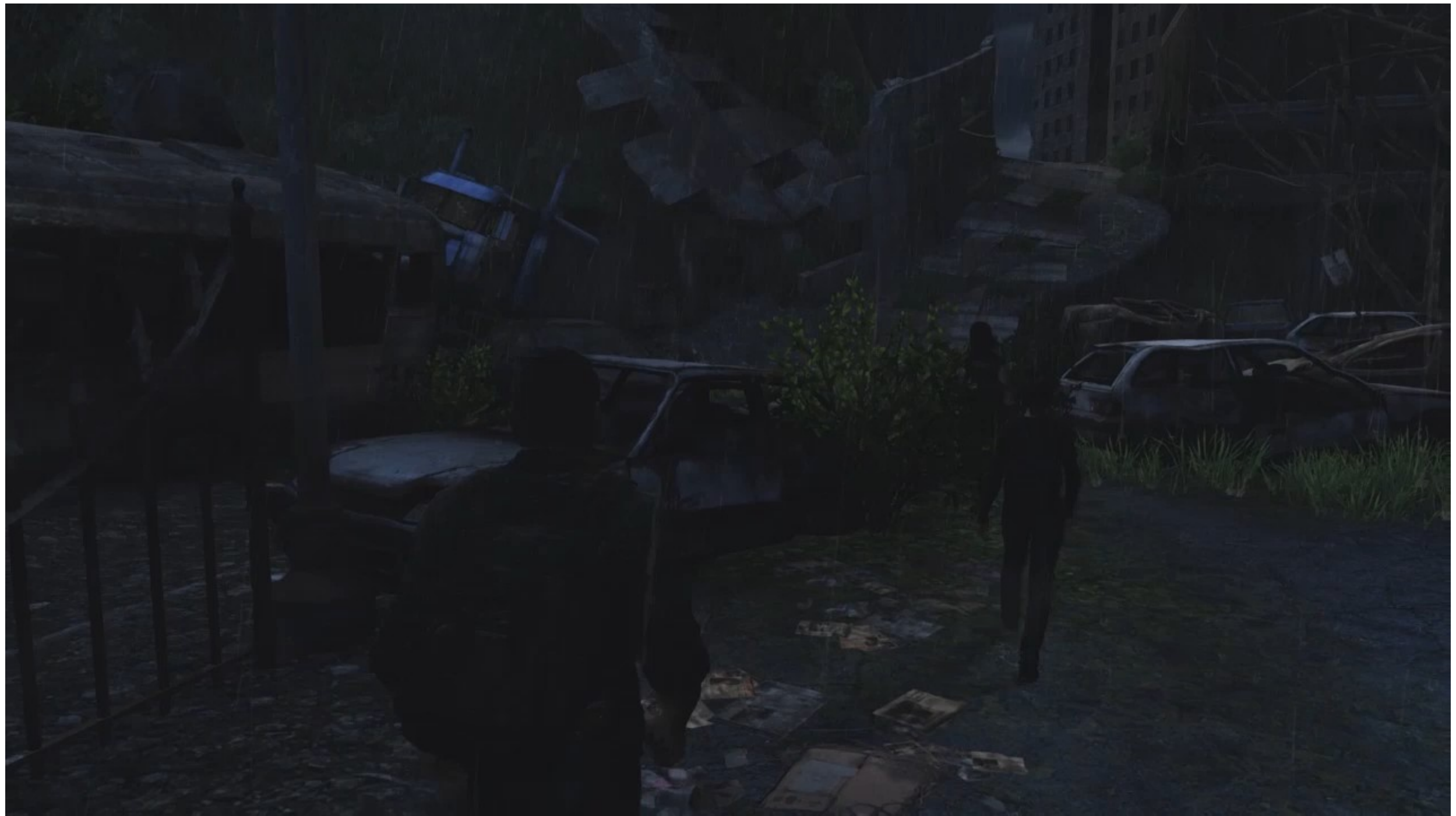
The Official Narrative
City Spaces of Conflict and Violence

The Player's Experience of the 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

OFFICAL NARRATIVE
THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY

(How dystopia came into being)

Summer and the Symbol of Fire

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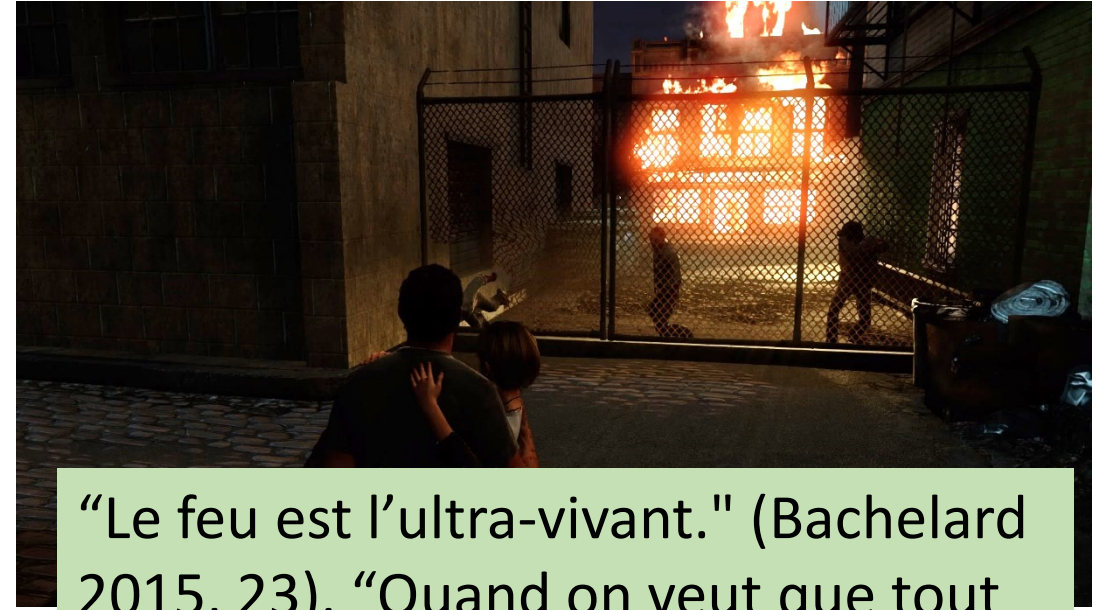
"Le feu est l'ultra-vivant." (Bachelard 2015, 23). "Quand on veut que tout change, on appelle le feu" (Bachelard 102), "[il] purifie tout" (174).

OFFICAL NARRATIVE
THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY

Guiding the Player's Understanding and Involvement

- Explosions and turmoil, breakdown of media, telephone lines and TV stations are dead, human beings turn into violent predators.

- 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 streets are littered with garbage, grey colour shade of the environment, food shortages, etc.
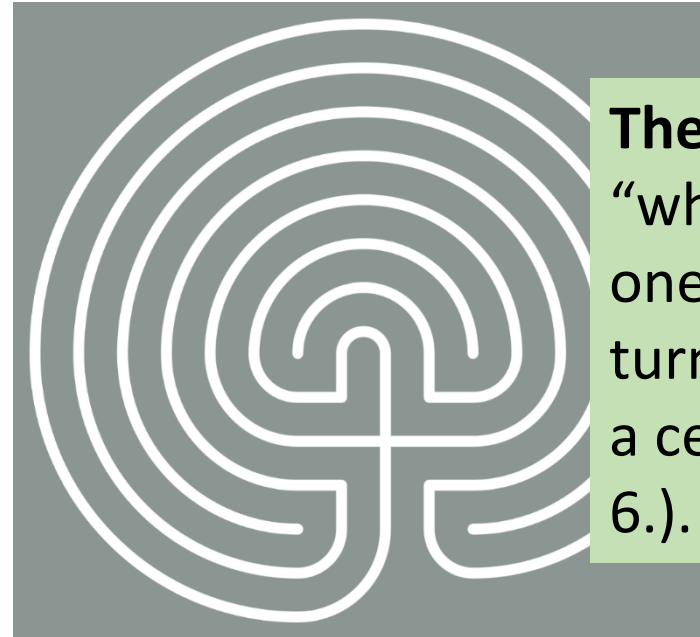
The unicursal labyrinth "where there is only one path, winding and turning, usually toward a center" (Aarseth, 5-6.).

# 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**.

- Arranged in 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.
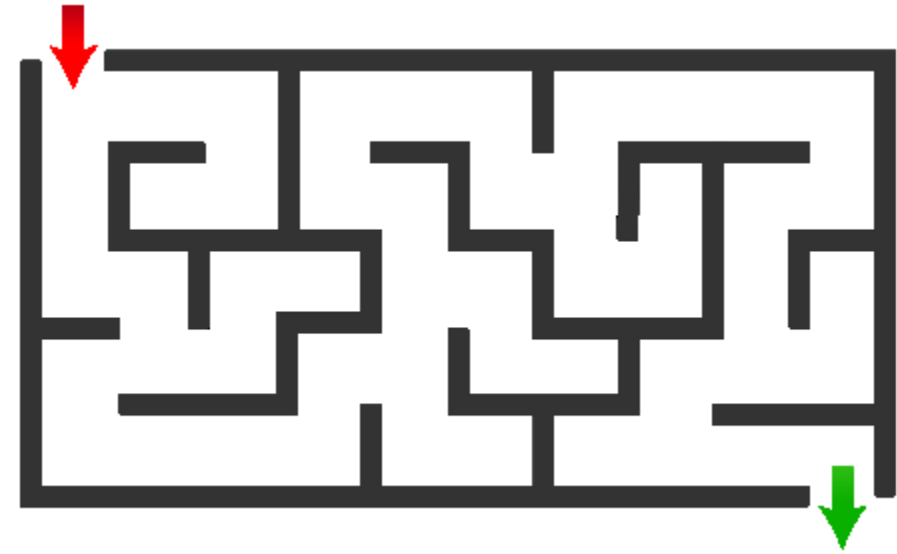
The multicursal labyrinth, "where the maze wanderer faces a series of critical choices, or bivia" (Aarseth 1997, 5f.).

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 **failures 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 our empirical world in **a cracked and distorted mirror** (defamiliarization).

- Taking parts of our world (**norms, conventions, artifacts, processes**) but rearranging them within the context of a science fiction gameworld.

- Deciphered in **a feedback oscillation** (comparison) between empirical world and the SF storyworld.

➢ Step by step we recognize our world: **the entrapment of the mazes**, **the tense interactions**, **the scavenging**, and **the struggle for survival**, etc.) as **the mechanisms of a bureaucratic consumer capitalism**.

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

The Counter-Narrative and
the 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).
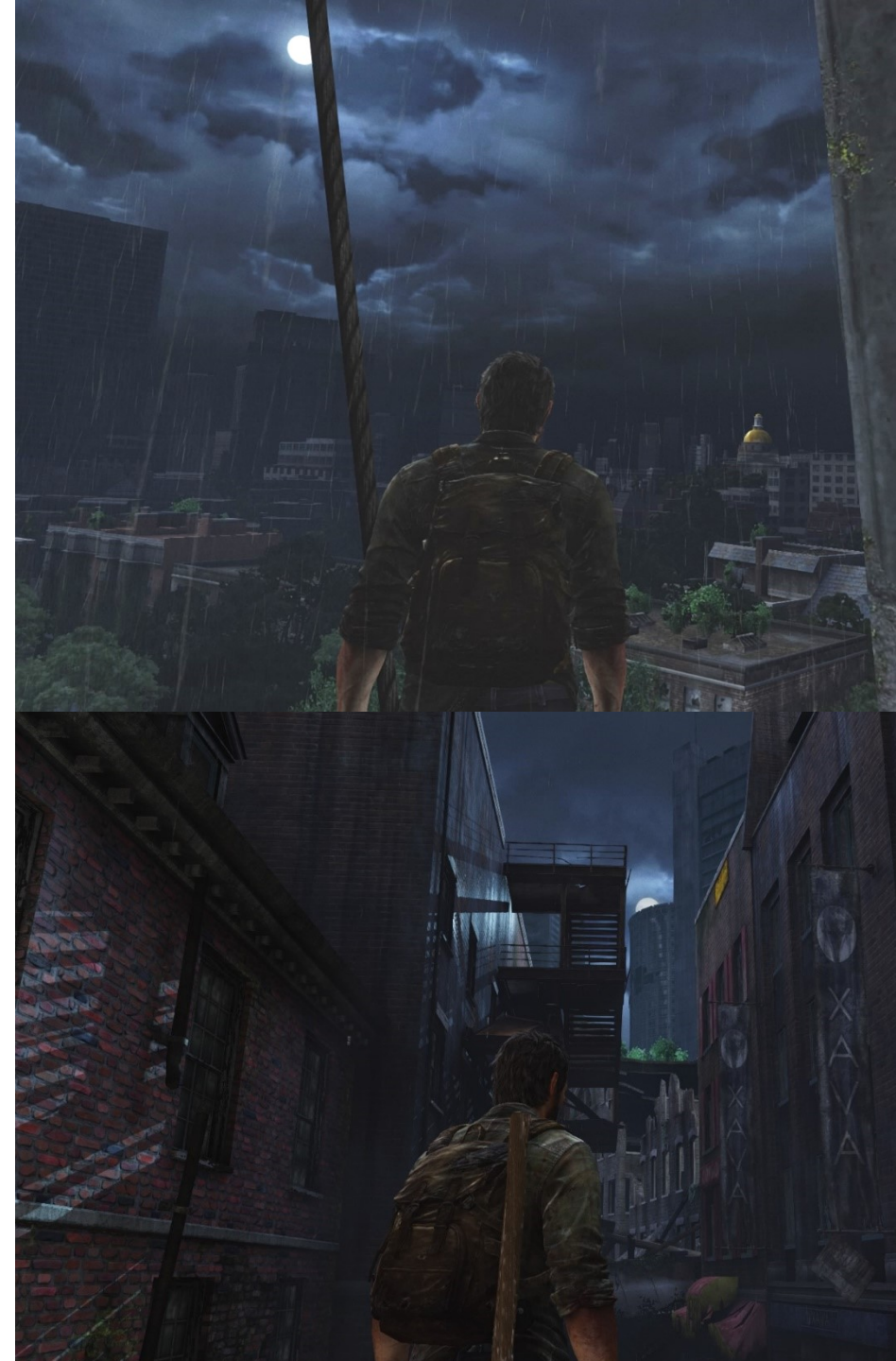
NATURE'S DIRECTIVE RHETORIC
AND THE ESCAPE FROM THE CITY

- Escaping the Boston QZ through the city's canals under the shelter of **night and rain**.

- The **moon** is 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, one encounters floating corpses while diving.

➤ **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 (in the form of a frozen lake, mourning the hideousness of human nature).

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), which Bachelard compares to **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.
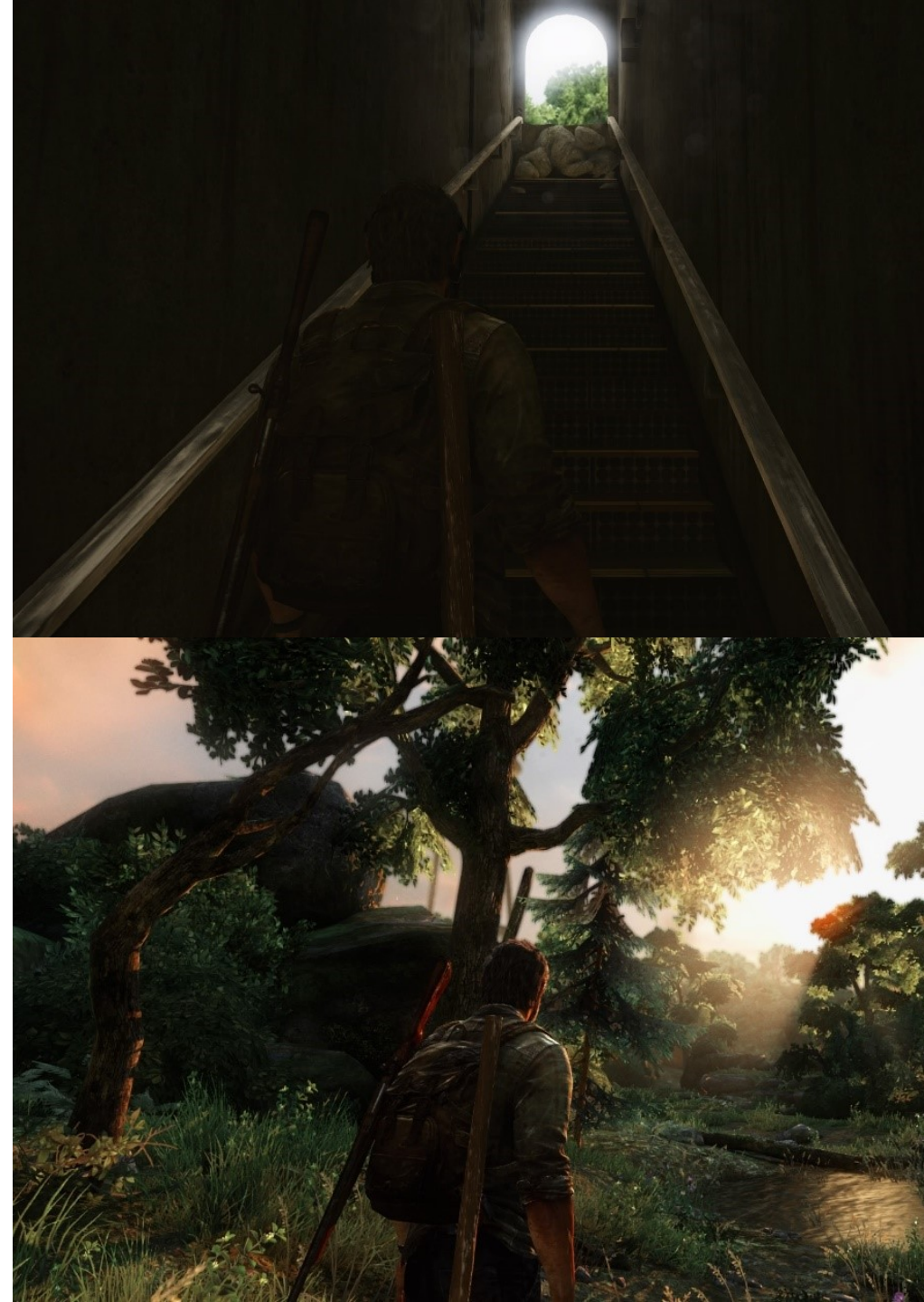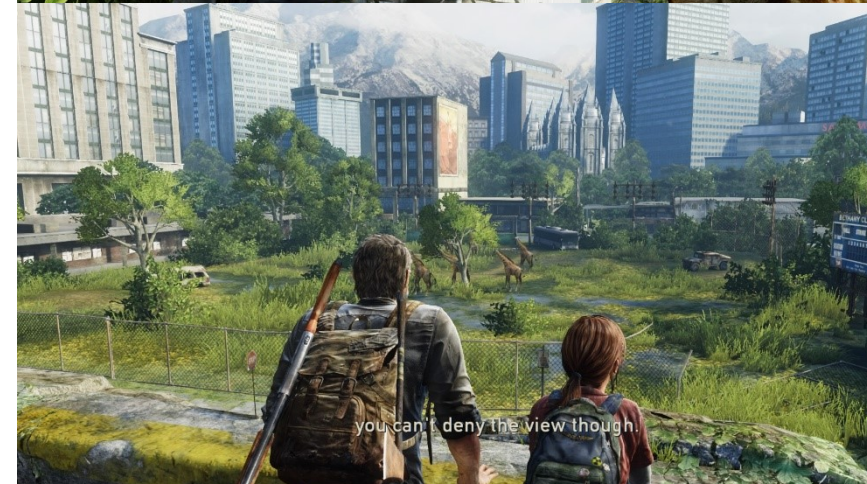
ELLIE AS TEMPTRESS
TOWARDS NATURE

- **Ludic role** in combat (helping the player; no burden)

- **A figure of guidance** as she helps the player gain insight into the dystopian society.

- **Ellie assumes a position similar to the player** 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**.

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.

UTOPIAN ENCLAVES

Tommy's Settlement

- **A life in balance with nature,**

- a place for families, in the safeguard of mountains

- self-sustainability by growing crops, farming livestock

- use of natural resources to produce clear energy.

You ever ride one?
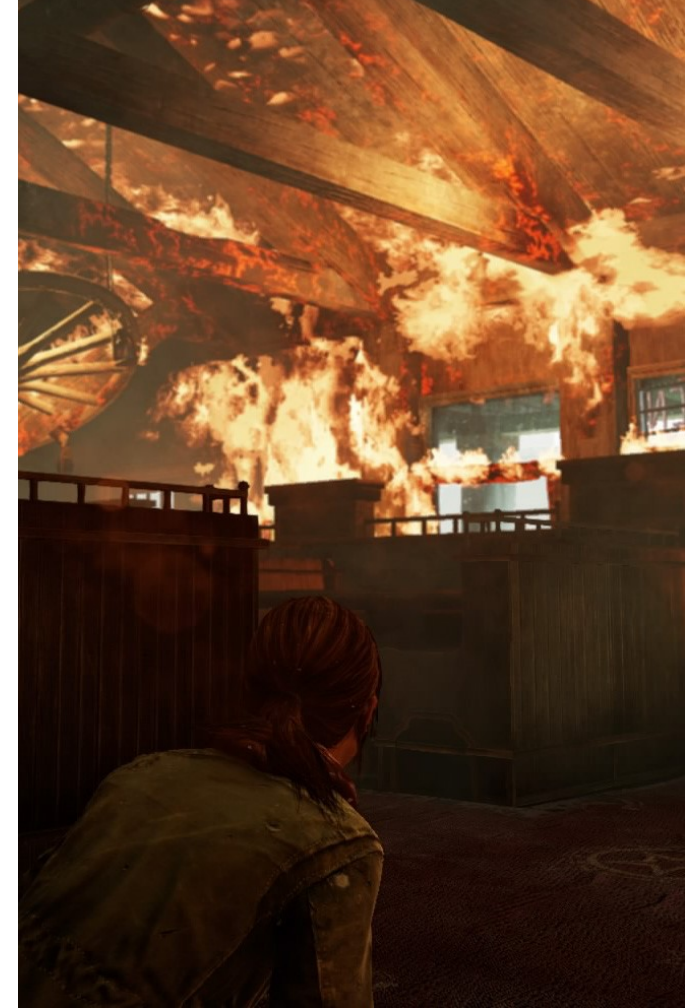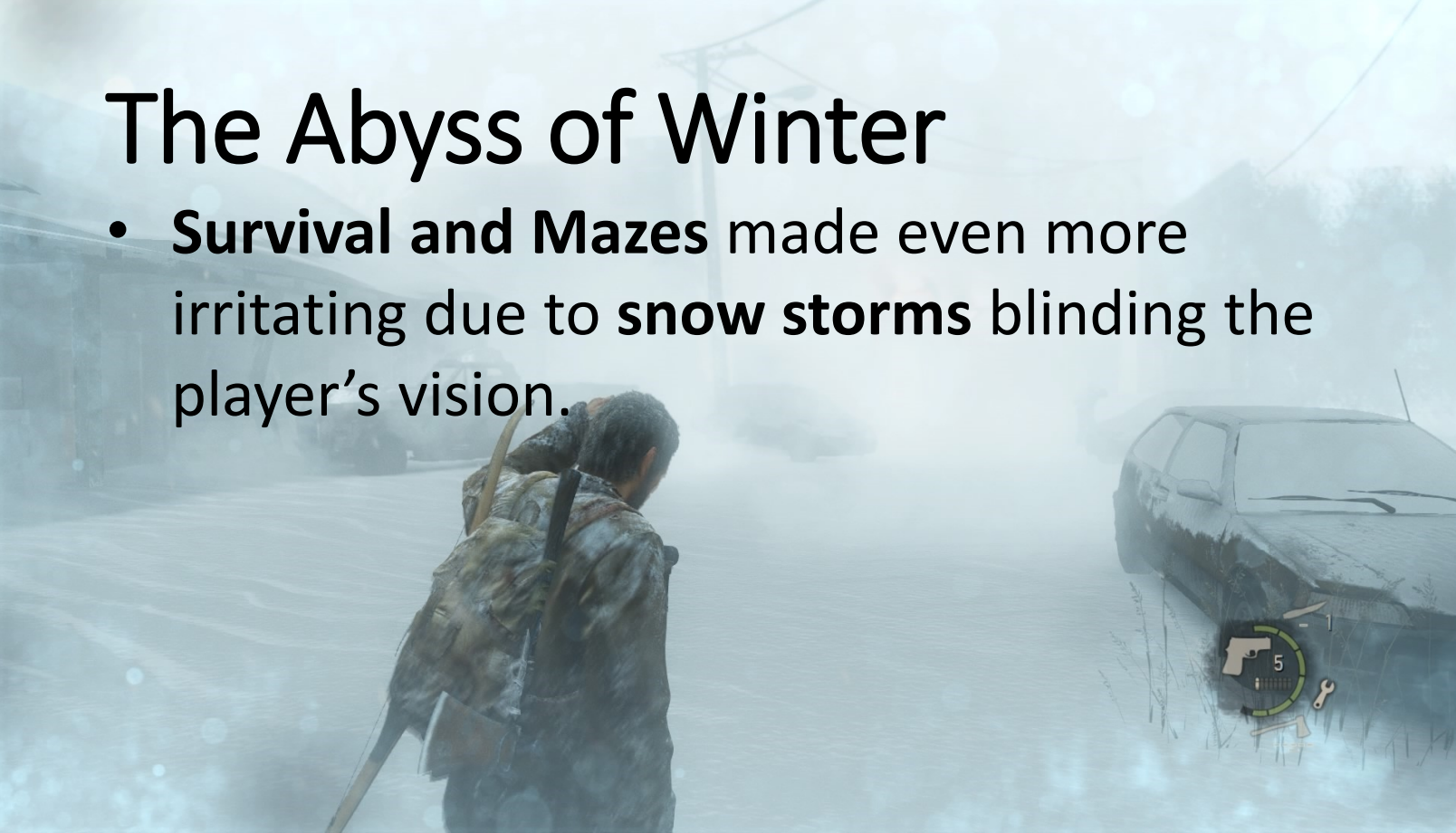I actually have.

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 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**.

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, and one very different from the prospect of the non-actualised Firefly future.

Designing Dystopia: Things you may do

1. Employ the **dystopian plot framework** (offical narrative and counter-narrative) in creative ways.

2. Design a gameworld that centers around a **theme** and involves the player on both an **entertaining** as well as **aesthetic level**.

3. Create **estrangement through world:** labyrinths, objects, processes, characters, etc. (Beware of their interrelations).

4. Create **estrangement through player actions:** shooting, scavenging, stealth, tense combat, etc. (Beware of their interrelations).

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