

Video game *The Last of Us Part II*: Violence begets violence

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Directed by Neil Druckmann; written by Druckmann and Halley Gross

The Last of Us Part II is a PlayStation 4 video game developed by US studio Naughty Dog and directed by Israeli-American game designer Neil Druckmann. It is a sequel to 2013's *The Last of Us*, one of the bestselling and most critically acclaimed games of the past decade.

While receiving a more polarized response from audiences, *Part II* was generally well regarded in the video gaming press, and was one of the bestselling games of 2020. In December, it received the “game of the year” honor from the annual Game Awards ceremony. For better or worse, it is representative of the more “serious” efforts in video gaming.

The story takes place in a “post-apocalyptic” setting where a fungal infection that turns its hosts into menacing zombie-like creatures has ravaged human civilization. Human survivors eke out a brutal nomadic existence, scavenging among the ruins while under constant threat from both the creatures (known as the “infected”) and the remaining humans.

The original *Last of Us* followed Joel (Troy Baker), a smuggler and petty enforcer who was tasked with protecting Ellie (Ashley Johnson), a precocious teenage girl who had spontaneously developed an immunity to the infection. The two traveled from a military-controlled quarantine zone in Boston to a Salt Lake City outpost run by the Fireflies, a militia group hoping to develop a cure for the disease. However, when Joel learned that developing a cure would require an operation that would kill Ellie, he murdered the surgeon in charge of the operation and escaped with Ellie unconscious in his arms.

Part II takes place four years later. Joel and Ellie have relocated to a communal settlement in Jackson, Wyoming, where the inhabitants have built a relatively stable life. During a routine patrol for the infected, Joel runs into a band of former Fireflies led by Abby (Laura Bailey), the

daughter of the surgeon that Joel had killed. Abby tortures and murders Joel in an act of revenge. Ellie vows revenge of her own, and, joined by her girlfriend Dina (Shannon Woodward), travels to Seattle in search of Abby.

The two arrive in Seattle to find it in the grips of a war between the Washington Liberation Front (WLF), a paramilitary organization composed of former Fireflies and other militia groups, and the Seraphites, a fanatical religious sect whose members believe the pandemic was “divine retribution” for the sins of modern civilization.

Ellie and Dina hunt down Abby while struggling to stay ahead of the WLF, the Seraphites and the hordes of infected. Dina reveals she is pregnant with her ex-boyfriend's baby, which complicates their situation. Ellie tortures a WLF soldier for information on Abby's whereabouts, an act which deeply unsettles her; nonetheless, she presses on. When Abby and Ellie confront each other, the game shifts perspective, and the player takes control of Abby in an extended flashback sequence.

We see Abby's loving relationship with her father and her complicated romantic entanglement with fellow Firefly Owen (Patrick Fugit). We see how her life is thrown into chaos with her father's death, and how her revenge against Joel only increases, rather than relieves, her personal anguish.

Abby is increasingly disillusioned with the war against the Seraphites. She meets two Seraphite outcasts, Yara (Victoria Grace) and Lev (Ian Alexander), forced to go on the run after breaking religious rules. Abby endangers herself to save them, becoming an outcast herself from the WLF in the process.

Abby discovers that Ellie killed Owen and his pregnant girlfriend while looking for her. Abby locates Ellie in an abandoned theater and confronts her in a brutal fight sequence, nearly killing her and Dina. At Lev's urging, she decides to let them live.

Ellie and Dina return to Wyoming and take up residence in an abandoned farmhouse. Ellie attempts to enjoy a quiet, domestic life of tending livestock and co-raising Dina's son, but painful memories of Joel's death continue to haunt her. She tracks Abby down to a compound in Santa Barbara, leading to a final, painful confrontation.

Druckmann has said that he intended *The Last of Us Part II* to deal with "cycles of violence" and the futility of violent retribution. The game was partly inspired by his experiences growing up in the West Bank; in particular, the hatred he felt toward Palestinians in his childhood and the subsequent regret for those feelings he experienced later on. In interviews, Druckmann has said he intended for the player to initially feel a strong desire for revenge against Abby, only to question that desire once the player had come to understand, and empathize, with her in the game's second half.

A work whose aim is to inspire empathy and understanding may be said to be well-intentioned. However, a work must be judged on what it accomplished, not what it intended to accomplish. By this measure, *The Last of Us Part II* is a thoroughly miserable experience; nasty, gratuitously violent and misanthropic.

In addition to the horrors described above, the player will end up killing countless people and humanoid monsters over the course of the game's 20-30 hour runtime. This is standard fare for games in the action-adventure genre; developers merely take for granted that the "action" must entail simulated, consequence-free mass murder. While the developers have claimed they designed the combat sequences to make the player feel the "weight" of violence, the truth is that the repetitive nature of the killing, the hours and hours spent shooting and maiming, can *only* have a desensitizing effect.

The narrative's gestures toward "empathy" are highly limited. While Abby eventually comes to recognize the common humanity she shares with Yara and Lev, this doesn't stop her from killing other Seraphites she comes across, nor from killing her former WLF comrades when they stand in her way. The final horrific confrontation between the Seraphites and the WLF is presented as both sides getting what they "deserve." (Lev: "They're killing each other." Abby: "Good.") In the view presented here, empathy is only worth extending to certain "lone wolf" individuals, not to entire peoples, who are presented as mindless and violent "tribes."

(It should be noted that the depiction of the WLF and the Seraphites mirrors a wrongheaded, middle-class

outlook on the conflict between Israel and Palestine: two "sides" equally implicated in violence. Such a view distorts reality and legitimizes the historical oppression of the Palestinian people at the hands of the Israeli state.)

"Apocalyptic" stories have long had a place in narrative fiction. The best such works (the novel and film *On the Beach*, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies*, numerous episodes of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* ...) have carried with them an element of protest, implicitly or explicitly, against a social order that leads toward barbarism.

The Last of Us games, by contrast, greet the end of the world with passivity and resignation. They share the same premise as other recent "apocalyptic" works such as *The Walking Dead*, *The Road*, etc.: that beneath the civilized exterior, human beings are inherently savage and cruel. The games' rare moments of beauty come from images of nature "reclaiming" spaces that have been abandoned by humanity, implying that the world might be better off without us.

Certain moments are compelling. The acting is well done, particularly by Johnson and Bailey, under circumstances that would be difficult for any actor (motion capture, voice-over and the like). The final confrontation between Ellie and Abby effectively captures something of the self-destructive futility of a quest for personal revenge. Scenes set among the mountains of Wyoming are visually impressive, reflecting the significant technological-artistic leaps made in gaming over recent years. (This came at some cost: the developers reportedly worked 12-hour days in the leadup to the game's release, a particularly brutal example of the video game industry's "crunch" culture.)

Ultimately, the artists' lack of perspective on the *social*, rather than merely emotional-psychological, roots of violence blocks the work from saying much of importance, and its adherence to the tropes of violent action gaming makes it more of a symptom of a coarse and violent culture than a commentary upon it.



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