Ugly Death: Rotting with the More-than-human in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)

Dr Merlin Seller, [she/her], Lecturer in Design and Screen Cultures, The University of Edinburgh

Figure 1

Living beyond humanity in a videogame wrought with ugly affects, players of Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) face an intense meditation on death, fungi and plants that polarised its critical reception. If our exposure to death is increasingly spectacular and technologically mediated (Gibson 2007; Jacobsen 2016), this videogame offers a powerful case-study for appreciating blockbuster screen death. Its player must repeatedly evade human and fungal parasite [Fig.1] alike in close-quarters pursuit of a troubling revenge. While previous scholarship has incisively unpacked its prequel's representation of human identity (Russworm 2017; Sipocz 2018; Radchenko 2020), I argue that *Part II* pushes player's humanity to messy extremes in a rotting post-apocalypse, and that the absence of discussion surrounding the nonhuman actants which drive its world warrants redress.

Tragic sequel to a 2013 third-person action-driven horror which, alongside *Hotline Miami* (2012) and *Spec-Ops: The Line* (2012), was instrumental in problematising ludic heroics with

videogames' capacity to mobilise guilt (Sicart 2009: 2; Bogost 2007),[1] *The Last of Us Part II (TLOUP2)* expands on the franchise's unique take on the zombie apocalypse scavenger: lush cities turned green by flora, and human bodies mutated by fungal parasites. *TLOU2* positions players as Ellie at its outset and conclusion[2], asymptomatic carrier of the fungal infection that zombified most humans decades prior. In the prequel we played father-figure Joel, delivering Ellie to medics working on a cure. When it transpires that developing the cure would kill Ellie, player-Joel kills the surgeons and 'rescues' unconscious Ellie. In *TLOU2*, Ellie learns what happened, is wracked by survivor's guilt—'I was supposed to die in that hospital, my life would have fucking mattered' (Naughty Dog, 2020)—and has her trauma compounded by Abby's lethal revenge on Joel. Avenging Abby's revenge leads Ellie to dispatch Abby's kin, pushing away all she loves. Omnipresent is the backdrop of a world displacing the human—cities reshaped by fungi, lichen and plants. The player thus becomes entangled in chains of murder and the self-defeating pursuit of death that 'matters,' in ways which engage abject subversion of humanity's ontological centrality and a haunting more-than-human ecology.

My reading here focuses on the character of Ellie and follows Haraway's injunction to 'stay with the trouble' (2016:2): that life is disturbing, unavoidably entangled with the more-than-human, and that's when it gets interesting. Re-framing this videogame's pervasive death I will make troubling connections with fungal zombies and background assets. First, I discuss affect in relation to human elements of narrative and mechanical death before focusing on the backdrop to recontextualise survival in relation to the nonhuman. Combining Affect Theory (Ngai 2005; Berlant 2011; Halberstam 2011) and Nonhuman Studies (Tsing 2015; Haraway, 2016; Keetley 2016; Sheldrake 2020) approaches, I use discourse and textual analysis to unpack the player-character's struggle with meaningful death in a world of what I term 'hypermarginal life': the rooted beings of fungi, lichen and plants which live beyond even our peripheral sympathies for the animal world. Here I combine direct textual and visual analysis with reception studies, to form an argument synthesising existing scholarship in a contextual reading of this case study.

Reception and Revulsion

To begin unpacking *TLOU2*, we must first address its reception before tracing the roots of its anxious disgust. Both positive and negative critical appraisals emphasise its

darkly affective intensity: '[an] emotionally shattering story' (Dornbush 2020); 'devastating […] tragic, heartbreaking' (Plagge 2020); 'like being made to dig […] graves with your teeth' (Zacny 2020). This is a game of desperate flight through rain-sodden warzones and breathless stabbings in rot-choked hallways - ugly acts and ugly affects: 'a depressing, distasteful nihilism […] full of ugly flourishes' (Eurogamer 2020). Indeed, its compulsive return to violence, shame and revenge reads as indulgently excessive for many critics and an inescapable vortex for others: 'a game of squalid cruelty' (Zacny 2020); 'Ellie is trapped, somehow unable to grow, learn, or change, and I'm stuck with her' (Myers 2020). For Zacny this affective focus leads to a sense of frustrated progress with 'themes it repeats to exhaustion' (Zacny 2020), a quagmire deepened by its thirty-hour narrative (Bailey 2020). This sustained, grim engagement with death seems to run counter to the routine and procedural nature of death as an enduring mechanic in games (Jordan 2015), and disrupts the commonly 'glamorized and trivialized nature of death as entertainment' (Schott 2017:4). Critics appear to be both shocked and bored, a seemingly paradoxical conjunction that Ngai nevertheless identifies as prevalent in postmodernity: the destabilising affect of 'stuplimity' (2005:271).[3]

Such is death's ubiquity here, multiple critics have expressed exasperation at its 'monotonous,' 'old,' and 'dissonant' design (Sims 2020), that 'fails to escape its own past' (Myers 2020)—a supposed vestigial growth of gaming's violent and repetitive roots: 'doomed to walk in a well-worn circle, unable to break out of the ever-thickening carapace forming along its skin, just like the victims of the Cordyceps fungus' (Myers 2020). They recoil at the player-character's passivity - left at the mercy of repetitious negative affects.

Scholarship on the franchise offers similar readings of the series' violent excesses as 'ludo-narrative dissonance'[4] (Hughes 2015). In Radchenko's analysis, the prequel's existential and emotional framing positions it as a 'metamodern' text that rejects postmodern irony to pursue an ambivalent but 'human' desire for connection (2020). Similarly Green (2015) identifies in the original a terrain for reflection on the moral ambivalences of an ethics of care, controversially making the moral case for Joel's actions but leaving discursive space for engaging with the game's critical framing of the player's mass-murderous activities as well as intersections of identity. More incisively, Sipocz points to its ambivalent portrayal of queer identity—foregrounding progressive articulation of queerness through Ellie's character (2020). Critically, Russworm has deconstructed the prequel's token representations of race as secondary and sacrificial (2017:112). As trenchant and necessary as these analyses are, scholarship on the franchise has largely reified the centrality of its human protagonists in line

with press discourse, pejoratively framing negative affects and marginalising the fundamental nonhuman actants of this world.

The evidently distressed reception of *TLOU2* draws our attention to the unusually intense affective 'ugliness' (Ngai 2005) of its screened death, which causes anxiety for critics privileging the idea that 'humans can learn and they can change, and that's what makes a story satisfying' (Myers 2020). Behind this lie deeper assumptions concerning the player's right to flourish and be rewarded, and the value of progress/innovation over inhuman extension/repetition: 'punishing rather than rewarding' (Sims 2020); 'Seattle feels much the same as Boston did in the first game […] Once again you are navigating fairly uniform urban ruins in the process of being reclaimed by nature' (Zacny 2020). Players experience displacement in this game, oscillating between anxious shock and boredom when mired in weeds. As Ehrlich (2020) notes, it appears to withdraw control from the player—thus I argue *TLOU2* is challenging because of its repulsiveness: it attacks player entitlement, agency and centrality.

To those unfamiliar with the series, *TLOU2* might at first read as a conventional zombie videogame with player aggression satisfyingly projected onto unproblematically sacrificial zombie Others (Kryzwinska 2008:153). However, *TLOU2's* reception demonstrates its violence to be far from simply 'satisfying.' When the camera takes the red-lit perspective of one of Ellie's victims, Nora, and the game compels us to break her in the crimson darkness, we experience how games can rot the glamour of death by negating a victory or 'win state' (Schott 2017) and generating tragedies in which players are 'complicit' (Juul 2013:29).

Within Game Studies there is a growing awareness of the salience and nuance of affect in increasingly intimate player relationships with videogame narratives (Isbister 2016; Anable 2018) and the corporeal modes of interface with screen and controller through which videogames aesthetically engage the body's senses (Dovey & Kennedy 2006; Keogh, 2018). For Anable, videogames 'entangle us in a circuit of feeling' (2018:xii) and Keogh has powerfully made the case for addressing videogames on aesthetic, affective and phenomenal registers to embrace their messy interrelation of virtual environment and corporeal response: 'we must embrace the irreducible, contradictory, and embodied entanglement of bodies and worlds' before and behind the screen (2018:196).

Significantly, key components of *TLOU2's* melancholy vengeance—failure and loss—are counterintuitively core elements of the medium (Juul 2013). Rejecting Aristotle's model of catharsis, Juul sees videogame players' 'paradoxical' repeated rehearsal of frustrating failure (which normally we avoid) as an affect videogames produce rather than purge (2013:5). The

affective nadir of critics, contending *TLOU* present dissonance or taints them with 'squalid cruelty,' arguably stems from the tangled roots of the medium where failure is made to feel personal (Juul 2013:7). However, Anable argues 'failures that cannot be redeemed by fantasies of success' are the most interesting forms of failure, forcing players to embrace diverse affects and question the structure of success (2018:104). Where McGonigal (2015), *TLOU2's* negative reception, and even Juul (2013) valorise the player-hero fantasy of eventually succeeding in overcoming obstacles, *TLOU2*'s quagmire keeps us rooted in the dirt. It affectively reminds us to be critical of the restrictive anthropocentric emphasis on the human protagonists over the messy nonhuman background where: 'All others in the prick tale are props, ground, plot space, or prey […] The last thing the hero wants to know is that his beautiful words and weapons will be worthless without a bag, a container, a net' (Haraway 2016:118).

Human Death: Ugly Affects and Self-Negation

Death, anxiety and self-disgust suffuse the rotting world of *TLOU2,* as we scramble and scavenge our way through a stormy Seattle beset by human-fungus hybrid and suicidal warring factions. Through the repeated, spectacular and chillingly abrupt death animations of both player and non-player characters, *TLOU2* 'wallows' in the 'deathsetics' trend of contemporary videogames' 'aesthetic engagement with the affect and representation of virtual death' (Curtis 2015:101). The denial of reward in what is distinctly 'not a story of healthy humans finding happiness' (Myers 2020) queerly rubs against the grain of journalism and scholarship's limiting 'assumption that, first and foremost, games are supposed to be fun' (Ruberg 2015:109), exposing the potential of games' negativity. Rather than failing upwards to success, *TLOU2's* tragic spiral rejects player mastery as we experience all sides of its central conflicts, embracing 'the true affective full complexity of play: its messiness, its painfulness[…]' (Ruberg 2015:110).

While many mainstream games offer players empowerment, *TLOU2* rewards combat with misery as both player-controlled Ellie and Abby lose and destroy families, wrestling with serial murder and regret. The player's emotional entanglement is intentionally messy, and for the videogame's Director 'empathy' counter-intuitively: 'comes from making mistakes […] trying to correct your mistakes and overshooting and messing up' (Druckman in Wilson 2020). In line with Halberstam's wider imperative, *TLOU2* makes us rot and

recompose the meanings and structures of success by pushing us to empathy through self-defeat: 'resist[ing] mastery […] investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity' (2011:20). Through this radical subversion, I argue *TLOU2* highlights negative affects which, though normally suppressed, provide ambivalent spaces of resistance to hegemonic values (Ngai 2005:3). Rather than finding agency in a 'flow' state (the feeling of being 'in the zone') between extremes of anxiety and boredom (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), players are hit by stuplimity - the affective tension of anxiety and boredom found in 'dirtier environments,' struggling with repetitious guilt in the vast, naturalistically-rendered post-apocalypse that reveals 'the limits of our ability to comprehend [its] vastly extended form as a totality' (Ngai 2005:271).

Critics looking for signs of hope or for characters to develop, miss the critical capacity of *TLOU2's* negativity and stuplimity to probe the shame and disgust that circulate around death and their powerful complication of both the triumphal player-avatar relation and the centrality of the human protagonist. Reception of this post-apocalypse, Shulzke would argue, reminds us that theorists often ignore the critical power of dystopia, misguidedly searching for an emphasis on potential resistance, 'a utopian moment in dystopia' (2014:323), but it is arguably 'hopeless' complicity that makes dystopia so powerfully involving and affecting (324). If the player is complicit in a process which 'digs two graves, fills them with blood, and then just fucking wallows in them' (Zacny 2020) I argue that this 'abjection' is where it gets troubling and interesting: disgustingly and productively problematising the subject's borders with the world (Kristeva 1982).

Figure 2

At the conclusion, our avatar crumples in the tide [Fig.2], negative affects wash over us visually and kinaesthetically as we move in empathy with our avatar, wracked with sobbing tears for Joel and for what we've collectively done. Heavy breathing before and behind the screen connects us through the proprioceptive relation of real to virtual body (Pearce 2009:123). Proprioception is the sense of where our body parts are in space that comes from feeling muscular movement, and this form of projection, prediction and internalisation can extend to prostheses like games which entangle us. This narrative of loss audio-visual-haptically affects us with breathlessness as we cobble together weapons from detritus and evade intelligent pursuers who scour every hiding place. As Narrative Lead Gross notes: 'we want you to be in alignment with Ellie, who can never fully breathe when she experiences this trauma' (Gross in Croft 2020). Like the choked corridors filled with fungal spores, this world is tense and suffused with mechanics of stabbing, grabbing, throwing and recoiling. We shake our controller to fix our faltering torch, and hammer the square button to frantically strangle a guard or shove away the zombie filling our screen. Each moment we grapple and kill without grand decisions or cathartic release, instead we powerfully feel the pulse of desperate combat, rolling from crisis to crisis and thrown brick to broken bottle. Much of *TLOU2's* morbidly fascinating motion-capture and performance-capture focuses on breathing—actors dragging air into lungs as we're pushed between unconscionable acts and

existential threats.

In the game's last act, our avatar, Ellie, abandons a happy life, her wife and child, to again pursue vengeance on Abby after an extended interval where the player has assumed control of the latter and experienced the equality and mutual futility of both characters' struggles. Our first attempt led to the death of a friend and Ellie's own guilt-saturated murder of many accomplices to Joel's death, to the point of vomiting in shame. In the penultimate scene, we free Abby from a third party in order to fight her, but we experience no relief through victory, only tragic self-defeat in our belated act of forgiveness [Fig.2]. Denying the player's apotheosis, *TLOU2* troubles the common neoliberal: 'demand to translate the insistence, the pulsive force, of negativity into some determinate stance or 'position' whose determination would thus negate it' (Edelman 2004:4). In other words, this is a rejection of narratives of self-improvement and mastery that regulate subjectivity. Here player-Ellie is passive, pushed and pulled by dark affects Ellie struggles to articulate to loved ones, and which she iteratively rehearses in serial murder. Through gruelling repetition, what at first reads as revenge is defamiliarised and broken open into an appreciation of the ambiguous existential nadir that compels her to redress one death with countless others - the final flashback where Ellie laments: 'I was supposed to die in that hospital.' Her survival is the marker of humanity's doom, the cure locked in her body's benign parasite, and so player success and agency are recast as already dead on arrival.

If previous historical visual traditions such as the *memento mori* imbued death with existential reflection, the blunt, empty and graphic death of multiple characters might reflect what Jacobsen sees as a twenty-first-century trend of 'spectacular death' (2016:12). However, death's overt, blood-spattered, material facticity in *TLOU2* compels us to dwell on existential dread that refuses resolution. Indeed, the intensity of Ellie's narrative arc reflects failed mourning - 'melancholia' where opposition to the lost libidinal object 'is so intense that a turning away from reality takes place' (Freud 1918:244), and by displacement 'one part of the ego sets itself over against the other' (247). Hatred for what is lost having left us is turned into hatred for the self having lost it, preservation of the sense of loss looming larger than preservation of the self. Hazarding repeated vengeance, and deliberately repetitious violence, we don't struggle for success but wrestle with melancholia's suicidal ideation (1918:247) and the death drive which Freud argues manifests in the desire for repetition regardless of displeasure, in pursuit of constant or zero stimulation (1920:55-6). The affective quagmire that *TLOU2* faces us with is the subject position of a tragically suicidal character whose revenge quest resists a rational determination that would contain its 'pulsive force,' driven by

the implicit search for death that 'mattered' (Naughty Dog, 2020) What is violated here is both existential meaning and the possibility of processing mortality, in a dystopia which unravels what Bauman sees as society's imperative to process death into meaning (1992:9).

Ellie's avenging of Joel is exhaustively bodily, built around the momentum of weaving and lunging from choke-hold to gunshot, but the fractious and distanced Ellie-Joel relationship we see in repeated flashbacks frames this quest as more self-destructive than passionate. Indeed, we find what Freud characterises as melancholia's internalisation of loss where, following the denial of a good death for Joel (and by his acts her own good death) Ellie's 'reproaches against a loved object […] have been shifted away from it onto the patient's own ego' (1918:248). Moreover, melancholic loss can also be highly abstract, characteristic of Ellie's remorse at surviving a meaningful death, and player-critics' stuplimity at Ellie's repetitious compulsion reflects how the melancholic subject often struggles to articulate *what* they have lost (1918:244). Our dissonant play evokes melancholy abjection, with felt bemusement and awe.

Through these ugly, suicidal affects and *TLOU2's* pulsive negativity, the player-avatar relationship is abjectly recomposed—exploring self-negation, shame and the horror of survival itself. This is a powerful inversion of the 'survival horror' genre, which Perron argues is centred on 'the most canonical videoludic actions[…]: to kill in order to survive' (2018:1). Where Perron explores how earlier horror games offer the player constrained and delimited 'fear' where players have power, agency and action (Perron 2009:6), this affective priority has since shifted, and in *TLOU2* we see self-critique of player centrality, deep self-disgust and abject problematising of the imperative to survive in place of empowerment, success and ludically-constrained fear.

Death of the avatar self comes in pieces: losing blood, fingers and our community in our melancholy unravelling where Ellie experiences 'social death' (Mulkay & Ernst 1991) rather than total bodily collapse – death as marginalisation and reduction to the position of the not-quite-human monster. This is an extreme form of 'slow death' – the condition of being exhausted, precarious and reduced to 'managing life's wearing out' familiar to contemporary life (Berlant 2011:96). Yet rather than cruel optimism's self-defeating fixation on 'a fantasy of the good life' promised and withheld in a world of inequality (Berlant 2011:1), we live in the shadow of a good death, scrambling to find a means of going on when a meaningful death is impossible and our survival tortuous. Quick button prompts to grab and throw objects to desperately slow an aggressor, recurring frequently in combat, is the work of maintenance in this condition. We are a scavenger pillaging human and zombie remains and throwing

together improvised weapons to kill more, our avatar clutching our wounds between fights and heaving with exertion. Ugly affects permeate players' physical and virtual 'embodiment across worlds' (Keogh 2018:35), communicated as much by subtle non-verbal cues as the rhythmic mechanics. Here the richness of actors' motion-capture that can hold our breath can also differentiate between meaningful glances and haunted anticipation. The aesthetics of ugly feelings make visible the cost of survival and 'slow death.'

Oscillation of player perspective from Ellie to Abby and back again reveals the dizzying depths of guilt, self-defeat, abjection, negativity, melancholia and horrifying survival, but *TLOU2* also entrains a vast multitude of dark perspectives. Generic non-player characters grieve—guards verbally lamenting the countless people we kill in an environment where even the dogs are assigned unique names. Every sequence is a new tragedy, begetting further invisible entanglements beyond the screen. Turning to nonhuman perspectives on *TLOU2's* rotten horizons, we can start to even dig beyond humanity in the context of the game's haunting and omnipresent flora and fungi. The precarity of life in this dystopian critique of player mastery refers us to wider ecological perspectives on our contemporary guilty moment of multispecies death, as radical ecologist Anna Tsing writes of neoliberal society: 'mastering has made such a mess that it is unclear whether life on earth can continue' (2015:1). Indeed, human affects are as infectious and misanthropic as *TLOU2's* zombie ecosystem, and as Ngai argues these feelings are an opening, one that motivates a contextual 'mediation between the aesthetic and the political' (2005:3).

Grounded Death: Nonhuman Non-endings

With it's disturbing more-than-human ecology, the dead future of humanity that we explored in the last section leaves openings to explore forms of being normally obscured in anthropocentric narratives that treat the nonhuman as resource. In *TLOU2* we are arguably surrounded by what Chang categorises as a 'vertical symbolism' conflating personal moral and global physical collapse in this world (Chang 2019:188). However, Ruberg's normatively disruptive 'painfulness' of play, the intensity of ugly self-negating affects surrounding this collapse in *TLOU2*, and the problematising of player/human agency, success and centrality, also engage Estock's radical interrelation of pain and ecological awareness: 'Pain dissolves the boundaries […] of the body while forcing the sufferer to recognize or imagine material agency outside of that body' (Estock 2014:133-4). In other words, the negation and abjection

of the human player creates space for engagement with the more-than-human and dissolves us into the growths of the vegetal, lichen and fungal setting. Indeed, Ellie's benign fungal infection connects human and nonhuman worlds in intimate affective terms. If grief haunts Ellie, Haraway would remind us that grieving losses we are complicit in is a crucial first-step to climate-crisis ecological thinking: 'we must learn to grieve-with,' to think what is painful to think and feel our situation (2016:38). Nonhuman horror working 'in tandem with ecological politics' (Keetley 2016:20) lets us consider how we might productively expand and trouble our understanding of survival ecologically.

As ugly feelings suffuse a world of monsters in *TLOU2*, Haraway's nonhuman 'container' without which the hero is nothing (2016) mobilises the powerful hybridising effects of monstrosity for rethinking life/death, self/other, culture/nature (1992). As fungal 'Clicker' monsters echo-locate with their concave lichen heads, croaking and convulsing with their recomposed human bodies [Fig.1], animate agency is implicated on this border. The static fungus, conventionally defined, as Marder (2013) argues of plants, by its static rootedness, here makes compost move. If *TLOU2* digs two graves, Haraway reminds us that in speculative fiction there are 'many inhabitants which/who can refigure the earth' (1992:297). Indeed, perhaps in Anthropocene times 'It's not a "happy ending" we need, but a non-ending' however dark (1992:327), the recognition that the world has no tidy narrative and that we need to stay with the troubling to both facilitate and appreciate flourishing where we might not think it possible.

Ngai (2005) and Haraway (2016) have distinct but related interests in messiness which broaches the more-than-human world through affect. They both take issue with our inability to reckon with the uncomfortable underside of life, much as Ariès speaks of death's post-enlightenment elision into invisibility, 'furtively pushed out of the world of familiar things' (1974:104). With the rejection of decay, Haraway and Ngai argue, we lose an appreciation of the affect messiness needed to navigate a complex world of limited agency. For Ngai this involves probing negative affects to explore modern life's ambivalences; for Haraway this is sustained, disturbing reflection on ecological trouble, that sticks with lowly critters even in the bloody mud, to become with diseases, fungi and plants: '[Earthy critters] are not safe; […] they writhe and luxuriate in manifold forms and manifold names in all the airs, waters, and places of earth. They make and unmake; they are made and unmade' (Haraway, 2016:2).

Critical frustration with the lack of innovation or progression in *TLOU2*—described as repetitious, exhausting and derivative—speaks to a temporal displacement of the human, and this sense of redundancy and belatedness is likened to *TLOU2's* fungus by Myers (2020) as

we have seen, pejoratively but evocatively linking the negative affects covered in the last subsection to the nonhuman. Boredom and anxious exhaustion with characters and ruins who refuse to develop speaks both to a privileging of positive affects, and a wider videogame industry ideology of perpetual innovation: 'structured by the very idea that the future needs to be narrated almost constantly' to drive speculative investment in more of the more-or-less same (Ruffino 2018:4). However, as Tsing argues from an environmental perspective, we must deconstruct progress models to appreciate more-than-human temporalities (2015:5) like the slow inhuman durations and rhythms of plants (Marder 2013:103-4). *TLOU2's* huge vistas of dilapidated cities-turned-forests and rotten offices-turned-compost encourage critical readings of growth and progress, where the player is stuck in a world of detritus that continues rotting and 'growing' without them. Human progress is relocated to the earthy margins - an ecology that precedes and exceeds the human is now the motor of history, recomposing 'success.' This post-apocalypse suggests a nonhuman 'non-ending,' rather than a triumphal human *teleos*.

Focusing on the human/player traps us 'in a tiny prison of our own devising, one in which all that concerns us are the fleshy beings that are our kindred' (2012:3). In following the self-destructive melancholy avatar into the zone of human annihilation, we might break free of it. This videogame's landscape of dead bodies made lichen and architecture dominated by flora facilitates player reflection on more-than-human ecology as Chang advocates, providing a speculative visual 'mesocosm' (Chang 2019:11). A mesocosm, more commonly an outdoor experiment, is a space between life and a lab, a messy edge-effect between the human and nonhuman Chang sees games capable of articulating in their complex encounters. Here, a slice of Seattle's posthuman biosphere represents how the non-animal world might digest the urban fabric. Its blooming fungal rooms and grassy highways focus aesthetic contemplation on disturbed boundary zones between ecosystems and on the anthropogenic nature of our realworld biosphere: the strange reality that humans have already impacted all ecosystems (Ellis 2015). Our vulnerability and displacement in these landscapes accentuates how: 'failure and loss as felt through play can lead to a collective, multispecies, and multiscalar awareness' (Chang 2019:12).

Indeed, we already live in a 'plantscape,' a biosphere dominated by non-animal life that eclipses animal biomass and human endeavours (Hall 2011:3), a latent truth laid bare by *TLOU2*. This manifests the horror of vegetal revenge in the Anthropocene, stemming from the repressed knowledge that in death we are all food for fungus and flora (Keetley 2016:1), and this stalling of human futures haunts *TLOU2's* critics and its grieving characters. As

Morton argues, ecological thinking across scalar levels from lichen to city to spore to forest-spanning mycorrhizal (fungal) network exposes the ways in which we are already conceptually at 'the end of the world,' the end of the tidy narratives we once believed in, and requires us to think counter-intuitively about how life/death and foreground/background might entangle when seen from different angles and scales (Morton 2016). Death breeds new life, and all life is interrelated.

Grounded Death: Zombie, Backdrop and Lichen

The zombie operates on the human-nonhuman border and embodies this stalled future with 'a very slow apocalypse' (Abott 2016:91), shuffling through worlds of 'untimely death' and infrastructural collapse (Bishop 2010:11). The slow, excessive and repetitious time of the zombie disturbs us, revealing 'the state of being human is fundamentally uncertain' (Prince 2004:2) through distortion of the human form. As Aarseth and Backe argue, zombies are not 'homogenous' (2013:13), from Romero's allegories of consumer capitalism, to *The Walking Dead's* staging-ground for Hobbesian drama, but frequently they articulate a kind of animality shorn of humanity, 'unfettered pursuit of immediate physical cravings' (Dendle 2007:54) or irrational shell deprived of intentionality (Shaviro 1993:85).

Figure 3

TLOU2 inflects the zombie's existential threat with ecological anxieties of nonhuman others and the revenge of non-animal life. Within the 'omnipresent topos' (Castillo & Browning 2016:2) of the zombie narrative in modern media, *TLOU2* stands out in its fungal-hybrid premise, inspired by a parasitic fungus (Cordyceps) which invades the bodies of ants, replacing 40% of their mass, and manipulating their behaviour through chemistry, viral agents and physical penetration of muscle fibre (Sheldrake 2020:107-115). Here motion capture mixes with the kinds of vegetal and fungal growth we only see belatedly, by its architectural traces and the erratic behaviour of more-than-human bodies transitioning through stages: rabid 'runners' to inanimate lichen. *TLOU2*'s trouble entangles more-than-human bodies, and we see this dramatically in its rampaging Rat King lichen composed of multiple human-fungal bodies—animated from the motion capture of three actors tied together. The fungus here can animate hybrids, or collapse them into the rooted stasis of surface texture conjoining limbs and fusing humans with walls. Here the human becomes both more-than-human and part of the backdrop: figuratively displacing humanity's centrality, and literally reducing the dead to static mouldy interiors [Fig.3]. An wider manifestation of stuplimity, humanity is stuck in a cycle. Indeed, player-Ellie's lack of agency in the storm of ugly affects, pushed towards the death drive of zero/constant stimulation, is like a rooted fungus or plant in its passivity and iteration.

If monsters are categorical violations 'relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature' (Carroll 1990:34), *TLOU2's* infected violate our sense of ontological hierarchy and human exceptionalism. These hybrid creatures, fulfil Jański's call for videogames to 'challenge or subvert the notions of animal subjectivity and the related human-animal boundary' (2016:97). Moreover if, as Marder argues, animals are on the margins of our awareness, and plants the 'margin of the margin' (2013:2), I pose fungi's rotting lives as an even more radical Other: the margin of the margin of the margin. Cumulatively, I term fungi, lichen and weeds 'hypermarginal life' whose radical strangeness both 'make and unmake' (Haraway 2016:2) human values and lives.

This post-apocalyptic ecology is not without precedent: from the Devonian Prototaxites lichen which grew 8.8m tall (Kibby 2019), to the modern cordyceps zombie fungus, the biomass of the plants above the soil and the fungi beneath has always dwarfed that of the animal kingdom (Bar-On et al. 2018). Plants account for 80% of earth's total biomass (Sheldrake 2020:127), and Pollan has even suggested that, from the perspective of highly successful cereal crops, plants have effectively domesticated us already (2002)—while

humans have devastating impacts, we are still eclipsed by nonhuman life, and in our absence other species rapidly take our place (Flyn 2021). In having the human reduced to the dead-on-arrival, abjected beyond its limits and exiled to the periphery as discussed in the previous subsections, I argue that—while players cannot mechanically interact with ecological systems as Chang hopes for—the visuality of *TLOU2's* messy ground is nevertheless where 'nonhuman longevity, mortality, history and territory are measured' (Chang 2019:141).

While Chang (2019) and Jański (2016:92) argue for the powerful affordances of foregrounding nonhumans, turning nonhumans into independent figures with the agency of a protagonist, I argue that we can find critical potentiality in a game's backdrop where the human is already displaced without forcing the nonhuman to conform to our ideas of agency and success. Rather than lamenting the relegation of the nonhuman to backdrop, we might instead question our categories of success, and consider treating 'background' as a positive mode of being from the perspective of hypermarginal life like plants that Marder argues possess no teleos and extends diffusely rather than intentionally, with no cleanly delimited heroic subjectivity or even bodily integrity (2013:66). Here Ruberg, Halberstam and Edelman's radical negativity and powerful failure have prepared us to appreciate the inanimate background, the prop and the asset in their compromised mode of being as interesting and messily powerful hypermarginality.

Instead, the negation and deprication of the player character I have outlined might enable Tsing's 'arts of noticing' (2015:17), which is to be attentive to the commonly ignored hypermarginal life in this melancholy narrative and their potentials for new entanglement and lifeways. Moreover, taking Tsing's assertion of the unintentional 'design' of physical landscape and ecology by the more-than-human agencies that construct them (2015:15) in conjunction with Chang's observation that game mechanics, aesthetics and design 'straddle multiply real and imagined worlds' (2019:11), we might be attentive to the ecological meanings and effects of *TLOU2's* nonhuman environmental art informed by realworld precedents. As I have argued elsewhere, the aesthetic importance of set-dressing game assets such as plants are deserving of attention in their own right as sources of player anxiety (Seller 2020). Our tendency to read environmental assets and props in games as secondary, or even invisible, might seem odd given both the screen space and resources dedicated to them (here more than 71 artists working directly on environments, with the addition of overlapping consultants, lighting artists, animators and outsourced studios), but fits with our society's 'plant blindness' (Wandersee & Schlusser 1999) our ignorance and dismissal of hypermarginal life that constitutes 'the thing we can't or won't see' (Keetley 2016:8). Indeed,

seemingly static things like plants, in their radical alterity, haunt us, a horror we would rather ignore because of its capacity to abjectly transgress and deconstruct our concepts of corporeality and temporality through modes of slow diffusion and repetition (Marder 2013). We should not dismiss the backdrop as players, but rather, as Bogost puts it, wonder at how the alien is ‘everywhere’ (Bogost 2012:133).

Figure 4

This is a world coloured by a brown and green palette of fungus and leaf [Fig.4]. Ivy scales skyscrapers, moss crowds roofs, and grass buries tarmac. Trees split pavements, fungi cling to damp corners and lichen eat the walls. Clear attention has been paid to how hypermarginal life follows the water, where roads have collapsed into subways-turned-rivers and the unchecked flooding of creeks cascades over carparks. As roots and rot have collapsed buildings piece by piece, plants are placed and posed in pursuit of the light, while fungi spread between dead bodies in the dark like mycelial networks. As co-game director Newman notes: ‘We would choose appropriate vegetation based on what kind of light is likely to hit that environment’ (Newman in Schulz 2020). These weeds express how the devalued world of plants and fungi might be ‘quietly gaining the upper hand’ over human labours (Marder 2013:90)

Careful research and complex apparatus render the biosphere of the Pacific Northwest, as

the director attests: 'the team studied a lot of the architecture of the city, the foliage that grows in that part of the country. They scanned different materials so we can make them authentic' (Druckmann in Singh 2020). Indeed, Statham et al note that natural environment assets and props in blockbuster games such as *TLOU2* often rely on sampling textures and computationally processing multiple photographs into three-dimensional models: photogrammetry (2020:12). In the words of an indie developer promoting the technology: 'Mother Nature has worked a billion years on some of these assets' (Poznanski in Statham et al. 2020:6). By incorporating indices of flora and fungi through this mapping process, *TLOU2* thus affords detailed aesthetic engagement with the natural world.

Specifically, *TLOU2's* landscape is sampled from both Seattle and the post-industrial forestry of the Pacific Northwest that has returned to haunt it. As Tsing exhorts, forests are dynamic and active even when appearing static, America's Pacific North-West pines are 'among the most active trees on earth' (2015:122) - *TLOU2's* Seattle forests continue a history of rapid growth. Tsing explores how this region became the centre of international trade in fungus – the prized matsutake mushroom - because human disruption facilitated mushroom growth by making openings in the soil and canopy for their pine partners to flourish. In fact this symbiotic mushroom prefers to grow in post-industrial ruins. The collapsed timber industry of Washington and Oregon, has proven a productive mulch for mushroomkind in troubled times, and by thinking through patchy gatherings of enduring critters, Tsing sees mushrooms as a medium conveying how 'places can be lively despite announcements of their death… In a global state of precarity, we don't have choices other than looking for life in this ruin' (2015:15).

From the perspective of hypermarginal life, the post-apocalyptic landscape is an anthropogenic landscape like many before in which plants and fungi remain the substantive fabric of the world and humans exists as ambivalent symbionts. Indeed, as a place that remains 'lively' alongside human destruction and death, the abundant hypermarginal world reframes human struggle. Not only is the biosphere 80% plant, but over 90% of plants mutually rely on supportive, symbiotic fungal networks (Sheldrake 2020:138). This is not nature red in tooth and claw, this is co-operation as much as competition, and in its repetitive, excessive, continuous growth we see the 'non-economic generosity of plant soul' that provides for all life (Marder 2013:52). Indeed, the ubiquity of hypermarginal life frames the world as co-operative as much as competitive. Plants and fungi exist in dynamic partnership exchanging minerals and sugars, and while species may appear to be competing for space or sunlight, their integration in the web of mycorrhiza frequently involves the mutual support of

plant species sharing resources with disadvantaged kin, even keeping otherwise dead tree stumps alive (Sheldrake 2020: 289). Hypermarginal 'zombies' are both more friendly and troubling than we might assume.

TLOU2's scanned leaves and lichens thus implicate revelations emerging from the study of fungal-floral relationships which are complicating our understanding of Darwinian competition. Hustak and Myers even argue for the term 'involution' to replace 'evolution,' capturing organisms' tendencies to involve themselves in each other's lives as much as diverge and compete (2012). Just as Ellie is involved with the Cordyceps fungus within her and the melancholy internalisation of Joel's memory, so is she involved romantically with Dina and Dina's baby by another partner and ambivalently violently-cooperatively with Abby whom she frees in order to kill, only to let go, all driven by the exigencies of a nonhuman container. The involution of critters is messy and manifold.

Crucially, involution does not respect traditional boundaries of the organism—we are always already involved with other species in ways which problematise 'species' as a category. Our cells bear the traces of ancestral symbiosis: cells symbiotically engulfing cells created mitochondria, and 5-8% of our genome is in fact viral DNA (Belshaw et al. 2004). More remarkably, when Haraway argues that we are both more and less than ourselves (2016), she highlights the dizzying fact that 90% of the cells in our bodies are bacterial (Gilbert et al. 2012:86). As Griffiths (2015) argues, life is queer at the cellular level - reproducing itself in strange and densely symbiotic ways. While lichen were once seen as anomalous - multiple fungal and algae 'species' forming a single organism - Gilbert et al. argue symbiosis is the norm and there are no genetic, anatomical or immunological individuals: 'we are all lichens' (2012:87).

This realisation recasts the fungal zombie as the symbiosis of critters that are already lichens. As Griffiths argues and our microbiome demonstrates, with sweetness tinged by melancholy, we have never been clean: 'If we have never been individuals, then neither have we been uninfected' (2015:37). In *TLOU2,* when Ellie is asked after an early lichen encounter 'are you clean?', the player already knows the hidden answer from the benign fungus in her head is 'no'—queer lichenology compounds this by responding 'never.'

Indeed, parasitism itself is re-framed by the radical ontology of all of us, embedded in the more-than-human backdrop of this world and the lichen brain of its protagonist. If we are already lichen, who is parasitising whom? We can now appreciate that what we conventionally think of as parasites operate to 'generate diversities and are opening up new possibilities for flourishing and facilitating evolutionary change' (Kupers 2020:293). As

Serres powerfully argued, parasites are central to life in that they generate change by disrupting balance—it is in life and death 'an elementary relation' (1982:182). If we have learned to question success and infection, perhaps the ambivalent 'horror' of *TLOU2* is that the Clicker and Rat King are still human, but that our abjection and negation exposes how we are all already hybrid bodies of messy co-operation and conflict with and against ourselves and Others. To adapt Morton's path to ecological awareness in *Dark Ecology* (2016): by affectively transitioning from Ellie's dark depression through the dark uncanny of lichen zombies and into the dark sweetness of play with hypermarginal life we might find peace with dizzyingly entangled coexistence.

Non-end

Thus, following Tsing's mushrooms into Seattle, we find life in the ruins, messy symbioses across bodies and architectures. Digging graves lets us see the writhing masses of life where we and our zombie kin 'are who are' (Haraway 2016:2). Through subversion of player agency in ugly failure, character passivity, and stuplimity in the place of success and flow*;* Ellie's melancholic quest displacing the human with abjection transgressing values, categories and even the imperative of survival; we find kinship with games' grounded backdrops as the aesthetically powerful expression of omnipresent but commonly elided hypermarginal life. In reckoning with this container, we find *TLOU2's* horror questions the nature of survival - haunting us with the possibility that we are all already lichen.

Hypermarginal stories of symbiosis dwarf our human drama but also involve us fundamentally, recomposing and composting the human with the fungus and the pervasively (in)visible plant. The existential questions that harrow Ellie are ones we already have to deal with in our present troubled times – human deaths don't mean much, on a nonhuman scale, and humanity's future is suspect. But from hopelessness there arises dark sweet trouble: we were never pre-apocalypse, never uninfected and never human to begin with. In the final cutscene Ellie abandons Joel's old guitar, which her wounded hand can no longer play in the same way, and walks from her empty farm into the forest which will eventually consume it. Here, saturated with loss, shame, forgiveness and lichen, the player might see how we are more and less than ourselves: screened death is involved with hypermarginal life that both makes and unmakes.

[1] Bogost and Sicart's shared premise is that videogames ask us engage with systems and to actively perform actions ordinarily spectated in other media, adding embodiment, weight and ethical reflection to narrative decisions, affording guilt.
[2] For reasons of scope given the length of this narrative, and the author's interest in fungal infection, the focus here will be on Ellie's character, but it is important to note that the player inhabits Ellie's adversary (Abby) for a third of the narrative. This exposes the player to multiple ethical vantages, emphasises the spread of negative affects I discuss here, and redoubles player trouble—narratively amplifying the ethical aporia explored in other contexts through my analysis.
[3] Ngai envisages this as the modern conjunction of sublimity and stupefaction, a defense of modernist techniques of repetition as generating the powerful yet underappreciated, paradoxical affect of numb shock.
[4] A term denoting a perceived conflict between narrative and mechanically enacted ideology, here a game that appears to treat murder as a serious ethical concern in the plot but a trivial and repeated action in gameplay, popular in the trade press (popularised by Clint Hocking 2007) but largely absent in the academic literature, described by Gonzalo Frasca as the 'debate that never took place' (2003).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, Espen & Backe, Hans-Joachim, 'Ludic Zombies: An Examination Of Zombieism In Games,' *DiGRA '13 - Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference*, 2013.

Abott, Stacey, *Undead Apocalypse: Vampires and Zombies in the 21st Century*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Anable, Aubrey, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

Ariès, Phillipe., *Western Attitudes Towards Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum, Baltimore, Md: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Bailey, Kat, 'The Last of Us Part 2 Review: An Emotional Reckoning and a Worthy Sequel,' *USgamer,* (2020). URL: https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-last-of-us-part-2-review [Accessed: 10/03/21]

Bauman, Zygmunt, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

Belshaw, Robert, Pereira, Vini, Katzourakis, Aris, Talbot, Gillian, Paces Jan, Burt, Austin, & Tristem, Michael, 'Long-term reinfection of the human genome by endogenous retroviruses,' *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 101:14, (2004), 4894–99.

Berlant, Lauren, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Bishop, Kyle, *American Zombie Gothic*, Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2010.

Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or, What it's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Carroll, Noel, *The Philosophy of Horror*, London: Routledge, 1990.

Castillo, David & Browning, John, 'Introduction: Our Zombies, Our Remnants,' in Castillo, D., Reilly, D, Schmid, D. & Browning, J. (eds.), *Zombie Talk: Culture, History, Politics,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Chang, Alenda, *Playing Nature,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

Croft, Liam, 'Final Inside the Last of Us 2 Video Details its Deadly World,' *Pushsquare*, (2020), URL: https://www.pushsquare.com/news/2020/06/final_inside_the_last_of_us_2_video_details_its_deadly_world [Accessed: 12/03/21]

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience,* New York:Harper & Row, 1990.

Curtis, Stephen, 'To Fatality and Beyond: The Deathsetics of Failure in Videogames,' The Luminary, 6:1, (2015), 95–108.

Dendle, Peter, 'The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety,' In Scott, N. (ed.). Monsters and the monstrous: Myths and metaphors of enduring evil, Amsterdam, New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007.

Dornbush, Jonathon, 'The Last of Us Part 2 Review,' *IGN*, (2020), URL: https://www.ign.com/articles/the-last-of-us-part-2-review [Accessed: 10/03/21]

Dovey, Jo, & Kennedy, H. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*. London: Open University Press, 2006.

Ellis, Erle, 'Ecology in an Anthropogenic Biosphere.' *Ecol. Monogr*., 85, (2015) 287–331.

Ehrlich, David 'Neil Druckmann and Halley Gross Open Up About the Biggest Twists of "The Last of Us Part II,"' *IndieWire*, (2020), URL: https://www.indiewire.com/2020/06/the-last-of-us-part-ii-interview-neil-druckmann-halley-gross-spoilers-1234568597/ [Accessed: 11/03/21]

Estock, Simon, 'Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia,' In S. Iovino & S. Oppermann (Eds.), *Material Ecocriticism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.

Flyn, Cal, *Islands of Abandonment: Nature Rebounding in the Post-human Landscape,* Glasgow: William Collins, 2021.

Frasca, Gonzalo, 'Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes From A Debate That Never Took Place.' *DiGRA '03 - Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference*. 2003.

Freud, Sigmund [1918], 'Mourning and Melancholia,' in J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

Freud, Sigmund [1920]. 'Beyond the pleasure principle.' in J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard*

edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. London: Hogarth Press, 1955.

Gibson, Margaret. 'Death and mourning in technologically mediated culture.' *Health Sociology Review* 16 (2007), 415–24.

Gilbert, Scott, Sapp, Jan & Tauber, Alfred, 'A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals,' *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, 87:4 (2012), 325-34.

Green, Amy, 'The Roconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in *The Last of Us*,' *Games and Culture*, 11:7-8, (2015), 745-763

Griffiths, David, 'Queer Theory for Lichens,' *UnderCurrents* 19, (2015), 37-45.

Halberstam, Jack, The Queer Art of Failure, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Hall, Matthew, *Plants as Persons: a philosophical botany*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.

Haraway, Donna,'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others,' in Grossberg, Lawrence, Nelson, Cary & Paula A. Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Haraway, Donna, *Staying with the Trouble*, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016.

Hayot, Eric & Wesp, Edward 'Towards a Critical Aesthetic of Virtual-World Geographies,' *Game Studies*, 9:1, (2009), URL: http://gamestudies.org/0901/articles/hayot_wesp_space [Accessed 02/03/21]

Hocking, Clint, 'Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock: The problem of what game is about' [Blog post]. *Click Nothing*, (2007). URL: http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html [Accessed 30/03/21].

Hotline Miami, Dennaton Games, Devolver Digital, 2012.

Hughes, Scott, 'Get Real: Narrative and gameplay in The Last of Us.' *Journal of comparative research in anthropology and sociology*, 6:1, (2015) 149–154.

Hustak, Carla & Myers, Natasha, 'Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters' *differences* 23:3, (2012), 74–118.

Isbister, Katherine, *How Games Move Us: emotion by design*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016.

Jacobsen, Michael, '"Spectacular Death"—Proposing a New Fifth Phase to Philippe Ariès's Admirable History of Death,' *Humanities (Basel)*, 5:2, (2019) 1-20.

Jański, Krzysztof., 'Towards a Categorisation of Animals in Video Games.' *Homo Ludens*, 1:9, (2016), 85-101.

Jordan, Tim *Information Politics: Liberation and Exploitation in the Digital Society*, London:

Pluto Press, 2015.

Juul, Jesper, *The Art of Failure: an essay on the pain of playing video games*, London: The MIT Press, 2013.

Keetley, Dawn, & Tenga, Angela, *Plant Horror Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Keogh, Brendan, *A Play of Bodies: a phenomenology of videogame experience.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018.

Kibby, Geoffrey, 2019. When giant fungi (or lichens) ruled the world - the latest discovery about Prototaxites. *Field Mycology*, 20(4), 128.

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror: an essay on abjection*, New York; Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Krzywinska, Tanya, 'Zombies in gamespace: form, context, and meaning in zombie-based videogames,' In McIntosh, S. and Leverette, M. (eds.). *Zombie Culture. Autopsies of the living dead. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press,* 2008.

Küpers, Wendelin, 'Queer(ing) Moves: Beyond Anthropocene, Toward Convivial, Sustainable Futures,' *World Futures,* 76:5-7, (2020), 287–313.

Marder, Michael.,*The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

McGonigal, Jane, *SuperBetter,* London: Penguin Random House, 2015.

Morton, Timothy, *Dark Ecology: for a logic of future coexistenc*e, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

Mulkay, Michael & Ernst, John, 'The Changing Profile of Social Death,' *Archives of European Sociology*, 23, (1991), 172-96

Myers, Maddy. 'The Last of Us Part 2 review: We're better than this,' *Polygon,* (2020), URL: https://www.polygon.com/reviews/2020/6/12/21288535/the-last-of-us-part-2-review-ps4-naughty-dog-ellie-joel-violence [Accessed: 10/03/21]

Ngai, Sianne., *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Pearce, Celia, *Communities of Play*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

Perron, Bernard, *Horror Video Games: essays on the fusion of fear and play,* Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2009.

Perron, Bernard, *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror,* London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

Plagge, Kallie, 'The Last Of Us Part 2 Spoiler Review - Dog Eat Dog,' *Gamespot,* (2020), URL: https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-last-of-us-part-2-spoiler-review-dog-eat-dog/1900-6417487/ [Accessed: 10/03/21]

Pollan, Michael, *The Botany of Desire: a plant's-eye view of the world*, London: Bloomsbury. 2002.

Prince, Stephen, 'Introduction: The Dark Genre and its Paradoxes,' in Prince, S. (ed.) *The Horror Film.* Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Radchenko, Simon, 'Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of The Last of Us.' *Interlitteraria* 25:1, (2020), 246-259.

Ruberg, Bonnie, 'No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt.' QED, 2:2, (2015), 108–124.

Russworm, TreaAndrea, 'Dystopian Blackness And The Limits Of Racial Empathy In The Walking Dead And The Last Of Us.' Malkowski, J. & Russworm, T. *Gaming Representation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017

Schott, Gareth, '*That Dragon Cancer:* Contemplating life and death in a medium that has frequently trivialised both,' *DiGRA '17 - Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference,* 2017.

Schulzke, Marcus, 'The Critical Power of Virtual Dystopias,' *Games and Culture,* 9:5 (2014), 315–334.

Shaviro, Steven, *The Cinematic Body*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Sheldrake, Merlin, *Entangled Life*, London: The Bodley Head, 2020.

Sicart, Miguel,*The Ethics of Computer Games*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009.

Sims, David, 'The Last of Us Part II Tests the Limits of Video-Game Violence,' *The Atlantic,* (2020), URL: https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/07/the-last-of-us-limits-video-game-violence/613696/ [Accessed: 11/03/21]

Sipocz, Daniel, 'Affliction or Affection: The Inclusion of a Same-Sex Relationship in The Last of Us,' in Harper, Adams & Taylor, (eds.) *Queerness in Play*, Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018.

Seller, Merlin, 'Vegetal Horrors: Blair Witch, Darkwood and Non-human Turn Game Studies,' *DiGRA '20 - Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference: Play Everywhere,* 2020.

Shulz, Chris, 'Dogs sneeze and grass grows: Why details matter in The Last of Us Part II,' *Stuff,* (2020), URL: https://www.stuff.co.nz/entertainment/games/300037248/dogs-sneeze-and-grass-grows-why-details-matter-in-the-last-of-us-part-ii [Accessed: 20/03/21]

Singh, Surej, '"The Last Of Us Part II" game director reveals new Infected details,' *NME,* (2020), URL: https://www.nme.com/en_au/news/gaming-news/the-last-of-us-part-ii-director-reveals-new-infected-details-2680912 [Accessed: 20/03/21]

Spec-Ops: The Line, Yager Development, 2K Games, 2012

Statham, Nataska, João, Jacob & Fridenfailk, Mikael, 'Photogrammetry for Game Environments 2014-2019: What Happened Since The Vanishing of Ethan Carter,' *DiGRA*

'20 – Proceedings of the 2020 DiGRA International Conference, 2020.

The Last of Us Part II, Naughty Dog, Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.

Tsing, Anna. 'The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins,' Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Wandersee, James and Schussler, Elizabeth, 'Toward a Theory of Plant Blindness,' *Plant Science Bulletin*, 47:1 (2001), 2-9.

The Walking Dead, Darabont, Frank & Kang, Angela. Fox Broadcasting Company, 2010.

Welsh, Oli, 'The Last of Us Part 2 review - a gut-wrenching sequel,' *Eurogamer*, (2020), URL: https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2020-06-12-the-last-of-us-part-2-review-a-gut-wrenching-sequel [Accessed: 10/03/21]

Wilson, Aoife, 'A spoiler-heavy interview with The Last of Us Part 2 director Neill Druckmann,' *Eurogamer*, (2020), URL: https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2020-07-01-a-spoiler-heavy-interview-with-the-last-of-us-part-2-director-neil-druckmann [Accessed: 20/03/21]

Zacny, Rob, '"The Last of Us Part II" is a Grim and Bloody Spectacle, but a Poor Sequel,' *Waypoint*, (2020), URL: https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxqnxy/last-of-us-part-2-review [Accessed: 10/03/21]