A Bad Gay Waiting for Vengeance:
Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), a videogame with explicit queer representation that forefronts a queer main playable character—Ellie—that behaves in morally ambiguous, even villainous, ways. The aim of the article is to examine Ellie's behavior and concretize what sort of queer representation she brings to popular culture, particularly because she is "bad." The main question posed is if the game's expressions of waiting—primarily Ellie's intense waiting for vengeance after one of her loved ones is murdered—makes her antagonistic traits pronounced? Theoretically, the article draws on "deidealization" (Amin 2017), a concept that helps scholars to accept rather than redeem or critique imperfect, messy, and complex queer objects of study (historical and current), as well as theories of waiting (Heidegger 1959). The article concludes that although Ellie's anger is relatable, her methods in the game (mainly her propensity for violence) are questionable. Still, studying Ellie constitutes an important lesson: if we allow ourselves to be blinded by hate for people we see as our enemies, we might, inadvertently, turn into villains.

Keywords: queer theory; game studies; deidealization; waiting; *The Last of Us*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article is focused on *The Last of Us*, a pop cultural franchise made up of two videogames and a TV series (HBO, 2023–) set in a postapocalyptic United States where a mutant Cordyceps fungus outbreak has turned humans into violent zombie-like creatures. Beyond that, the world of *The Last of Us* involves nuanced queer representation (lesbian, gay, and trans characters) and tends to be far from subtle when it comes to portraying queer themes. For example, in *The Last of Us Part I* (Naughty Dog, 2013/2022, henceforth *TLOU1*), there are hints that the character Bill (W. Earl Jones) is gay, which is fleshed out significantly in "Long, Long Time" (Peter Hoar, 2023), one of the most memorable episodes of the TV series. In *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020, henceforth *TLOU2*)—which is at the center of my analysis below—the romance between protagonist Ellie (Ashley Johnson) and Dina (Shannon Woodward) is unambiguously depicted. The game, "a landmark in diversity and representation because of its lesbian main playable character"

(Dennin and Burton 2023), forefronts queerness in more ways than that, however. There are rainbow flags and a trans flag hanging from overgrown buildings in Seattle, and in an old bookstore, Ellie and Dina (who were born after the world fell apart) find remains of an extensive but lost queer culture that they will never experience (e.g., titles like *The Big Book of Gay*). Also, early in the game there is a didactic scene in which a bigoted character is forced to apologize for making homophobic remarks, which signals to the player that in the world of *The Last of Us* (and beyond) it is wrong to discriminate against people who are sexually different.

Although *TLOU2* involves progressive queer representation, its characters often embody exaggerated and stereotypical masculinity (Fielding-Redpath 2024), everything from fist bumps to a masculine-looking female character (Abby, more on her soon) who says things like "ladies first" to her male friend, and a male character referring to Ellie as "man." Also, the game's queerness can be seen as "pinkwashing," that is, the way that nations and institutions forefront queer-affirming inclusivity to divert attention from their problematic policies.[1] Even though the queer representation in *TLOU2* can be seen as admirable, it has been pointed out that instead of constituting a mirror for queer players (i.e., a story in which queers can see themselves represented authentically), the didactic elements in the game are there for the purpose of normalizing queerness for non-queer players (Dennin and Burton 2023). While that is a valid point, queer representation is not only more nuanced in the world of *The Last of Us* than in most other franchises, but also, what I find interesting is that Ellie, the most prominent queer character, behaves in morally ambiguous, even villainous, ways in the second game.

Generally, for queer characters, villainous behavior brings about a set of troubling associations, mostly that behaving in an antagonistic manner is a consequence of being queer. It is true, of course, that because of experiences of marginalization, stigma, loneliness, and shame, queer forms of antagonism can be violent, which concepts like "queer rage" and "trans rage" demonstrate (see, e.g., Halberstam 1993; Stryker 1994; Stanley 2021). Those concepts recognize that queerness is sometimes intimately entangled with

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[1] The concept of pinkwashing arose as a reaction to "Israel's promotion of a LGTBQ-friendly image to reframe the occupation of Palestine in terms of civilizational narratives measured by (sexual) modernity" (Puar 2013, 337). The director of *TLOU2*, who grew up in Israel, has cited the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as an inspiration for the game (https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/video-games/news/the-last-of-us-part-2-ellie-evolution/, accessed February 13, 2025). Because of current events in the Middle East, I feel it is important to acknowledge that my choice to interpret a cultural product with an obvious link to Israel does not mean that I condone Israel's genocide in Palestine. For further reading on the Israeli-Palestinian symbolism at the center of *TLOU2*, see Emanuel Maiberg's (2020) insightful analysis in *Vice*. In the game, Maiberg sees a "firmly Israeli way of seeing and explaining the conflict which tries to appear evenhanded and even enlightened, but in practice marginalizes Palestinian experience in a manner that perpetuates a horrific status quo" (https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-not-so-hidden-israeli-politics-of-the-last-of-us-part-ii/, accessed February 13, 2025).

rage and thus, by extension, with forms of antagonism. It should be noted, though, that anger itself is often vilified and because of the negatively coded affective characteristics of it (see, e.g., Nussbaum 2016), many humans (if not most of us) suppress it. When we are angry, we are prompted to calm down and because of the many taboos associated with *acting* on one's anger, anger and rage tend to be ascribed to others, those who we perceive to be behaving antagonistically. Although queer people have a lot to be angry about, queerness is not to be understood as the utmost reason why queer people might behave badly. Yes, we are angry, but not because we are queer. Usually, we are angry because normative culture stigmatizes our queerness. So even though there are expressions in popular culture (and beyond) of queers who behave antagonistically because they themselves are treated badly, queer pop cultural representation has, in recent years, involved a growing interest in portrayals of antagonistic queers whose motives for being bad are more complex.[2] Also, increasing interest in historical and current antagonistic queers with complex motives is demonstrated in the podcast *Bad Gays* (2019–), hosted by Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller. The podcast—and the book *Bad Gays: A Homosexual History* (2022)—examines the lives of queer history's truly complex and outright evil figures (like Ernst Röhm, Roy Cohn, and Aileen Wournos). *Bad Gays* emphasizes that complex queers are not a new phenomenon, neither among real-life queers, nor in popular culture. Film history, for instance, is filled with villains who have served as canvasses for all sorts of queer qualities, from truly complex to stereotypical.

The aim of this article is to examine Ellie's morally ambiguous, even villainous, behavior and concretize what sort of queer representation she brings to popular culture, particularly in light of her not behaving in an exemplary manner. I ask: Is it that *TLOU2* involves various forms of *waiting*—primarily that Ellie experiences an intense waiting for vengeance (more on why in a moment)—that makes her antagonistic traits pronounced and turns her into a bad gay? As I have conveyed elsewhere, queer characters (both good and bad) often endure various forms of waiting, a phenomenon that is universal (everyone must wait for one thing or another) but constitutes an intrinsic feature in queer-themed narratives.[3]

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[2] Notable examples include Bret Easton Ellis's coming-of-age novel *The Shards* (2023); the film *Saltburn* (Emerald Fennell, 2023); and the TV series *Mary & George* (DC Moore, 2024).

[3] For further reading on *queer waiting*, see von Seth (2025). Waiting, I argue, is a queer cultural phenomenon. The concept of queer waiting refers to "waiting that is entwined with what makes people queer, like gender nonconformity, norm-challenging sexualities, and forms of kinship that challenge heteronormative relationality" (von Seth, Oscar. 2025. "Queer Waiting in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*," *Lambda Nordica* [online first]: 1–24. https://doi.org/10.34041/ln.v.1006, 4–5).

2. BACKGROUND

Whereas *TLOU1* has been called "a story about love," *TLOU2* is "a story about hate" (stated by Neil Druckmann).[4] In the first game, the main playable character is Joel (Troy Baker), a middle-aged man who makes his living as a smuggler twenty years after the original Cordyceps outbreak. Joel, who lost his daughter during the outbreak, must bring fourteen-year-old Ellie, who is immune to the fungal strain, across the bleak remains of the country to the Fireflies. They are a paramilitary group whose doctors might be able to create a vaccine using Ellie. She carries a mutated form of the infection inside her but unlike others who are bitten she does not turn into a zombie-like creature (called "infected"). After finding the Fireflies at a hospital in Salt Lake City, Joel understands that the vaccine-making process will claim Ellie's life, which he refuses to accept. Over the course of their one-year quest, Joel and Ellie have grown close. So, without hesitation, Joel kills the Fireflies at the hospital and saves Ellie. Afterwards, he lies to her about what happened, saying that there are others like her who can aid in making a vaccine. Overall, the first game relies on a balance between violent encounters (with humans and infected) and beauty, as conveyed in Joel and Ellie's evolving parent-child relationship.

The second game takes place four years after the ending of the first. Ellie is now nineteen, and she and Joel live in a settlement in Wyoming. They are estranged but it is unclear why. At the start, the player is led to believe that Joel is still the main playable character. However, shortly after the story commences, he is tortured and killed by Abby (Laura Bailey), who has come from Seattle with a group of friends to seek vengeance on him. At this point, the player does not know why Abby kills Joel but over the course of the game, it becomes clear that one of the Fireflies Joel killed at the end of the first game (one of humankind's last doctors and the only one able to develop a vaccine) was Abby's father. Following Joel's brutal death, Ellie, who is traumatized by having witnessed it, embarks on a violent quest for vengeance on Abby and her group. The narrative alternates between Ellie's and Abby's perspectives, and explores themes like hate, loss, and the "cycle of violence." Overall, *TLOU2* juxtaposes brutal fighting scenes with Ellie's and Abby's respective grief over losing a father (or father figure).

I want to acknowledge here that *The Last of Us* games and the TV series are contemporary cultural products, which means that previous research on them is limited. There are, for example, studies about queer representation (Dennin and Burton 2023; Peppers-Bates and Bernard 2024), gameplay experiences (Erb et. al. 2021; Hayot 2021), the games' use of narrative (Spence 2024), as well as masculinity in *TLOU2* (Fielding-Redpath 2024). Beyond that, there is a growing field of philosophical approaches to the world of *The Last of Us*. For instance, analyses of morality and ethics (see, e.g., Horn 2024a; Anderson 2022), as well as *The Last of Us and Philosophy: Look for the Light* (Horn 2024b), a

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[4] https://kotaku.com/the-last-of-us-2-will-be-a-game-about-hate-1789662506, accessed February 13, 2025.

collection that brings philosophy scholars and fans of *The Last of Us* together to explore the philosophical diversity of the games and the TV series (e.g., feminism, forgiveness, villainy, and violence).

3. "DEIDEALIZATION"

A question worth pondering is why I, a queer scholar, want to spend time examining outlines and intricacies of a morally ambiguous, even villainous, character like Ellie? Why not emphasize another cultural product than *TLOU2*, one involving "positive" and "respectable" queer representation? Here I align myself with Kadji Amin (2017), who argues that, in its approach to objects of study, Queer Studies is characterized by an idealizing tendency that has led to an unwillingness to engage with some of the truly complex qualities of queer history's "undesirable objects." Rather than acknowledging complexities among queer people, queer cultural products, and queer practices (like antagonism in queer characters) scholars tend to engage with objects that are politically fruitful or "respectable"—for instance, "out-and-proud gay and lesbian activists fighting to destigmatize and diversify sexual practices and intimate forms" (Amin 2017, 8). Considering this tendency, how should queer scholars approach objects that are difficult to romanticize and celebrate, like truly flawed queer people who behave in heinous ways? To manage that, Queer Studies requires "deidealization," an approach that does not mean annihilation of previous ideals, but involves, Amin underscores, that we learn to live with rather than redeem or critique imperfect, messy, and complex objects from queer history. An overarching objective of this article (beyond its stated aim) is to deidealize Ellie. My goal is to look beyond her most obvious contribution to queer pop cultural representation (i.e., that she is a lesbian main playable character in a hugely successful videogame). Although Ellie, by being openly queer, brings queer visibility to an otherwise heterosexist and male-dominated form of media (see, e.g., Ivory 2006; Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Cross et. al. 2024), her antagonism is equally (if not more) interesting to examine.

I should clarify here that in the following, I refer to Ellie as a character who embodies "antagonism" or possesses "antagonistic traits." She is not, however, a straight-up antagonist in the Aristotelian sense, that is, an opponent or enemy of the story's main character. Ellie is one of *two* primary characters in *TLOU2*; Abby is the second one. Both embody antagonistic traits and can be said to serve a similar purpose as in Aristotle's definition of an antagonist, that is, to provoke conflict and thereby facilitate a compelling and engaging plot.

Before commencing the analysis, let us agree that we should not think of or view Ellie as free from guilt for her bad deeds. But at the same time, let us try to hold at least two contradicting thoughts in our heads, namely that despite the badness of Ellie, there are surely things we can learn from studying her. Such a mindset has nothing to do with a desire to excuse her behavior but should be seen as an ambition to recognize her

complexities. That ambition is important for many reasons, one of them (mentioned by Ben Miller in the *Bad Gays* podcast) is that if we are only able to identify antagonism in cartoonish characters (the obviously bad ones) and fail to see the complexities of all types of people, we will be unable to distinguish true evil when we witness it.[5] Also, in my assessment, an exclusively "positive" representation of queer people in media involves a risk, namely that unreasonable standards are set for queers in real life. My motive for studying a morally ambiguous character like Ellie is neither that I want to solely critique her, nor "solve a problem" or redeem her, but to recognize complexities and challenge certainties in the field of Queer Studies about what it means to be queer and bad.

4. FORMS OF WAITING IN THE GAME

As I demonstrate below, waiting is, in *TLOU2*, a phenomenon that permeates the narrative and, subsequently, affects Ellie's antagonistic traits. Let me acknowledge right away that there are many philosophies of waiting, too many to summarize here. In my reflections on Ellie's waiting—for vengeance and other things—I draw specifically on notions formulated by Martin Heidegger in *Discourse on Thinking* (1959). To begin with, Heidegger states that if one is to have an authentic and meaningful relationship with the world the concept of "releasement" (in German *Gelassenheit*) is crucial. In short, someone who possesses releasement is "calm" or "composed," and the concept is often explained as a sort of "letting-it-be attitude." Also, in Heidegger's reflections on the entwinement of releasement and waiting, he distinguishes between waiting "for" and waiting "upon." Waiting "for" implies waiting for something specific. It is a form of waiting that involves expectations of a certain outcome at the end of one's wait. In contrast, waiting "upon" is an existential form of waiting that does not involve a specific goal: "In waiting [upon] we leave open what we are waiting for," Heidegger writes (1966/1959, 68). Thus, waiting "upon" can be understood as waiting "in good faith," that is, with an openness that waiting will lead somewhere (or not).

In *TLOU2*, Joel's death makes Ellie's waiting "for" vengeance (a tangible sort of waiting, i.e., for something specific) the main expression of waiting in the story. Throughout the game, Ellie's waiting is oriented toward that goal, and it never waivers. However, other examples can be identified as well, and they emphasize an overarching significance of waiting in *TLOU2*. For instance, when Ellie's quest for vengeance brings her and Dina to Seattle—a city turned into a quarantine zone surrounded by walls—the gameplay is characterized by time moving slowly. For Ellie and Dina, getting into the city is a tedious, methodical process (they must find ways to open gates, search through abandoned buildings, and so on), and Ellie is clearly impatient. "Where are these fuckers?" she asks,

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[5] Huw Lemmey and Ben Miller, hosts, "James Levine." Bad Gays (podcast), March 12, 2024, accessed February 13, 2025, https://badgayspod.podbean.com/e/james-levine/.

which mirrors my impatience as a player. Like Ellie, I am eager to punish those responsible for Joel's death. But during the process of getting into Seattle, the game relies on waiting for something to happen (like encounters with infected or cutscenes moving the story forward) which makes Ellie's need for retribution a motive that stands out. "Haven't found any of 'em yet," Ellie says. "Hey, it's a big city," Dina replies, adding: "We barely started looking." As I see it, Ellie's impatience here signifies a lack of releasement, that is, she is neither calm nor composed, and, overall, she demonstrates an inability to let go of her desire for vengeance. In fact, it consumes her to a self-annihilating degree (more on that later).

After entering Seattle (where Ellie and Dina spend three days), Ellie pursues Abby and her group while Dina must wait in an abandoned movie theater for Ellie to return after her daily campaigns. The reason Dina stays put in the theater is that she is pregnant, which is also a form of waiting. Additionally, references to tangible waiting occur in handwritten notes found throughout the game, like: "Can't wait to sleep in the same bed with you again," or: "I'll be holding my breath, waiting for a sign that you're okay," and: "Can't wait to see you again." At one point, Ellie finds a note written by someone named Paige who is worried about her husband who has gone out scavenging for medicine: "It's been... I don't even know how many hours since you left," Paige writes. Sometime later, Ellie comes across a note written by Paige's husband, who has been ambushed and is about to die. His note reads: "My wife Paige is waiting for me back in the old conference center at Pike and Convention ... Please take her this medicine, she's pregnant and could die without it." Not only do the notes convey people's waiting to be reunited with their loved ones—which reminds Ellie of having suffered a tremendous loss and fuels her need for vengeance—but they also highlight that waiting is a key phenomenon in end-of-the-world narratives overall, since humans, in these types of stories, are forced to rely on pre-technological forms of communication.

Overall, Heidegger's definition of waiting "for" can be said to characterize the gameplay experience, despite one not knowing exactly *what* one waits for. The player is aware that something bad is bound to happen at some point (it is a videogame after all). To make it exciting, the game relies on suspense and build-up in tension while waiting for "jump scares," for instance. In the beginning of the story, the player can hear growls from infected inside an abandoned grocery store before entering it, not knowing how many they are, or where they lurk, but that they most definitely are in there. In general, to create suspense, the game includes scenes in which Ellie or Abby (and, by extension, the player) await infected (or human enemies) jumping out of the shadows and attacking them. But the foremost expression of waiting "for" something bad to happen occurs when Abby encounters Joel in the beginning of the story. The player knows that Abby is looking

for someone but is not aware that it is Joel she seeks.[6] However, as soon as she encounters Joel and his brother Tommy (Jeffrey Pierce), the atmosphere gets tense, and the events that unfold are infused with a sort of dreadful anticipation that something terrible awaits. Abby and her friends overpower them, and when Joel is shot in the leg (his kneecap is disintegrated) it is abundantly clear that it is not going to end well. He says to Abby: "Why don't you say whatever speech you've got rehearsed and get this over with." Abby notices a bag of golf clubs standing in the corner of the room, grabs ahold of one, and lets Joel know: "You don't get to rush this" which signals to him—and to me—that the ensuing torture must be suffered. In a sense, to move forward in the story, the player must endure waiting for the murder to transpire. The same is true for Ellie who enters the house where Joel is tortured, awaiting the worst. She hears Joel's screams from behind a closed door and as she opens the door and peeks inside, she sees him beaten and bloody on the floor. At this point, there really is no doubt whether or not Joel will die. I am simply waiting for it to happen. Neither Joel, nor Ellie or the player can be said to wait "upon" an uncertain outcome here. Ellie is struck down, held to the ground by Abby's friends, and forced to witness the violence. In my interpretation, the brutality of the sequence, in conjunction with its temporality being portrayed as suspended—in essence, time comes across as drawn-out and tense, and it is characterized by dread—affects Ellie's antagonistic behavior in the rest of the game. Essentially, the trauma of witnessing Joel's murder intensifies Ellie's desire to avenge him. Also, the narrative is built around waiting to find out *why* Joel is killed. So, Ellie's waiting for vengeance is entwined with waiting for answers.

Beyond expressions of waiting "for" various things (vengeance, loved ones to return, bad things happening, answers), an undercurrent in the narrative is that Ellie waits "upon" absolution (i.e., an existential form of waiting). In a series of flashbacks, the truth about Joel's actions at the hospital in Salt Lake City becomes known, and the player understands why Ellie and he are estranged. Ellie resents Joel for saving her because he did it for his own reasons, thereby denying her the chance to sacrifice herself and making her life "mean something." Their unresolved conflict makes Ellie's grief over losing Joel all-the-more profound, because she knows that she will never have the chance to repair their relationship. In a sense, she allows her grief over losing him (before being able to fully forgive him) to be conflated with the pursuit of vengeance. In a way, Ellie believes that

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[6] In the opening scenes of *TLOU2*, the player is supposed to be unaware of the fact that Abby seeks Joel specifically. However, before the game's release, several scenes involving major plot points leaked online, spoiling Joel's death for players. Initially, it was believed that a former disgruntled employee at Naughty Dog (the game's developer) was responsible for the leak. Later on, it came to light that a young fan in the Netherlands hacked Naughty Dog's servers and leaked the scenes to expedite the release of the highly anticipated game (see, e.g., https://gamerant.com/the-last-of-us-2-leaker-naughty-dog-found-reason-why/, accessed February 13, 2025).

she is waiting "for" retribution, but actually, she is waiting "upon" an absolution that likely can never occur.

The final form of waiting in the game worth emphasizing is that Ellie—who is immune to the Cordyceps fungal strain—awaits being "outed" as such. Her secret comes to light at various points in the games (to a select few people) and constitutes yet another way that the narrative relies on the phenomenon of waiting to create suspense. Also, Ellie's waiting to be outed as immune connotes queerness in the sense that it mirrors having one's sexual orientation outed. However, Ellie does not fear being outed as a lesbian (she is out), and the game thus conveys that being outed as *immune* would have larger implications. In a way, portraying waiting to be outed as immune as a greater reveal than being lesbian works to normalize queerness in the game. Moreover, Ellie being bitten as a fourteen-year-old means that she waits to turn into an infected herself, even though she never does. At the end of the first game, she tells Joel: "I'm still waiting for my turn," a form of waiting that characterizes her entire life. Not having turned *yet* means that Ellie is still waiting for it to happen. The uncertainty involved (i.e., whether it will occur or not) can be understood as waiting "upon." Ellie is unaware of what exactly awaits her. The fact that she cannot be open with people about all aspects of herself makes her inherently lonely (despite the relationship with Dina). In my perception, Ellie deals with her loneliness by becoming completely consumed by the desire to confront and kill Abby.

5. VIOLENCE AND VILLAINY

Throughout *The Last of Us* games' timeline, violence is a primary theme. *TLOU2* has even been referred to as an "orgy of violence" (Jones 2024, 45). Also, particularly in the second game, violence is intimately entwined with villainy. In its opening scene, Joel tells Tommy about what went down when he saved Ellie from the Fireflies in Salt Lake City four years prior. Images of dead people who have been slaughtered by Joel—including flashbacks of the doctor he shoots to save Ellie's life (Abby's father)—are juxtaposed with the brothers' conversation. The juxtaposition of images serves the purpose of raising the question whether the murder of the doctor was justified or not. Whereas Joel has a gun pointed at the doctor, the doctor has only a knife to his defense. In one of the flashbacks, the player must relive Joel executing the doctor, an action one is forced to participate in, which has been critiqued in previous scholarship (see Hayot 2021). Hence, almost immediately, the player is confronted with the notion that Joel's actions at the end of *TLOU1* might have been both exaggerated and unjustified. Even more so, it insinuates that Joel might have been the real villain in the first game (Horn 2024a). Overall, for me, the opening scene of *TLOU2* renders the feeling that I was left with at the end of the first game—essentially, that I was *relieved* to have saved Ellie from certain death—ambiguous.

Throughout the game, distinctions between heroic and villainous characteristics are consistently blurred, which differs from most other videogames. As stated by Alberto

Oya (2024), the most common form of narrative in games is "a heroic narrative [that] facilitates immersion in the gaming experience because it provides an ethical justification for the violence of the playable video game character. Thanks to the in-game heroic narrative, engaging in violent gaming mechanics does not require players to suspend their own ethical judgment" (37). *TLOU2* does not rely on such a narrative. Rather, one of its key aims (if not the most important) is to raise questions about what villainy is. On a tangible level, Ellie finds superhero collector's cards over the course of her quest, categorized either as heroes or villains. Those collector's cards can be seen as insignificant items, but they prepare the player for a "perspective change" halfway through the game that has been regarded as controversial (more on that shortly). After playing the first half of the story as Ellie, Abby becomes the main playable character at the halfway point. At that time, Ellie and Abby have finally met again, and a violent altercation awaits. But the altercation does not happen. Instead, the scene ends with a cliffhanger and the game jumps back three days in time. For me, being forced to assume the perspective of Abby is awful at first. Also, the game becomes characterized by a new intense form of waiting, that is, waiting to return to Ellie's perspective and "finish the job" (i.e., kill Abby). I am not alone in finding it awful to play as Abby. Following the game's release, many fans found the perspective change extremely provocative, which resulted in "review bombing," an internet phenomenon described as when "a large number of users post negative reviews online to lower the average score of the product—either as a collectively organized attempt to diminish its reputation or simply as a spontaneous way to express their discontent with the product" (Oya 2024, 41). However, when Abby meets and helps two siblings who have escaped a cult in Seattle—one of them is Lev (Ian Alexander), a trans boy—my opinion of her begins to change. Playing as Abby, a character that is portrayed as an outright villain at first, and gradually coming to understand her motives and actions (remember, her father is also murdered), is one of the game's most didactic and innovative aspects. Oya notes it as well: "it's not its gaming mechanics (violence, shooting etc.) that makes *The Last of Us Part II* an innovative video game," he writes, "but rather its ability to challenge the narrative common to the action video game genre" (2024, 37), primarily by posing ethical questions like if Ellie's quest for vengeance is even justified.

In *TLOU2*, Ellie consistently conflates justice with revenge, two concepts that are far from equivalent. Whereas revenge is commonly understood as a personal desire to punish someone responsible for crimes committed against you or your loved ones, justice is *not* based on personal desire to exercise judgment. Justice, rather, is defined as a moral process in which conflicts are assessed and resolved pragmatically. Ellie does not come across as particularly interested in the latter. When entering a courthouse in Seattle, Dina tells her that she would find it fun to be on a jury: "Sit down. Look at evidence. Try to tell if somebody's lying." In response, Ellie scoffs and says: "Just give me five minutes and

my knife. I'd tell you if they were lying or not," a statement conveying a disregard for justice and a preference for taking matters into her own hands. In fact, for Ellie, it is not enough that those responsible for Joel's death die. When she and Dina find a dead soldier from the WLF (the Washington Liberation Front, a military group to which Abby belongs), Ellie says, worriedly: "If those fuckers who killed Joel got taken out by some random infected…" thereby implying that *she* should be the one who kills them. Dina, the voice of reason in the game, notes: "Then they'd still be dead, Ellie" whereby Ellie replies: "I'm not sure that's justice," again conflating justice with her desire for vengeance. Later, after finding one of Abby's friends dead, Dina says: "Well… she's dead. How do you feel?" Ellie answers: "I'm pissed we couldn't talk to her," whereby Dina tries to reason with her: "Yeah. But she didn't hurt Joel. It would have been pretty fucked up to make her talk." Ellie's stance remains firm: "She travelled hundreds of miles to torture him. I don't care whether she held the club or not." Ellie clearly has become blinded by hatred and desire for retribution. Gradually, her anger completely consumes her, and it does not fade over time, rather the opposite. Throughout the game, Ellie embodies the thesis that acting on one's anger only fuels it (see Bushman 2002). In the final scenes, when Ellie has pursued Abby to Santa Barbara, her anger and antagonism reach their peak. Ellie murmurs that infected better not have killed Abby before she can do it herself, and when she realizes that Abby has been captured by a motorcycle gang, Ellie tells herself: "I better find her before these idiots kill her," not to save her, however, but to make sure that she is the one who executes Abby.

Considering the examples above, there is no doubt that Ellie embodies villainous characteristics. But her moral ambiguity is part of what makes her an intriguing character, as I see it, which is not an uncommon perception among audiences of popular culture. As Richard Keen et. al (2012) state, there are many "seemingly normal, well-adjusted people" (129) who are drawn to and root for fictional bad guys, characters that break society's rules or challenge its conventions. A possible explanation why people root for very violent bad guys (both Ellie and Abby are apt examples) is our innate aggressive drive as humans. Following Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories about the "id" (a feature of the personality that works to satisfy our basic needs, desires, and urges, and is oftentimes unconcerned with the consequences thereof), Keen et. al suggest that experiences of violence in narrative media "may serve as an outlet for our aggressive tendencies" (2012, 137). Essentially, in a cathartic way with a villain as a proxy, we can live out our own immoral urges. Moreover, Keen et. al explain, the more we know about the underlying reasons for someone being a villain, the likelier we are to be empathetic with them (in *TLOU2*, empathy with Abby, for instance, is fostered after the perspective change, mainly because I come to identify with her).

Over the course of *TLOU2*, identifying with (or even rooting for) Ellie becomes all-the-trickier. Killing Abby's friends—picking them off one by one like an outright serial

killer—makes Ellie's villainous characteristics more noticeable than Abby's. Essentially, Ellie's propensity for violence—accentuated by her disregard of the concept of justice in favor of a personal desire for revenge—eclipses Abby's actions. As Charles Joshua Horn (2024c) points out, not only is Ellie unable to recognize that Abby's reasons for killing Joel are valid (from Abby's perspective, the murder of Joel is justice), but also, until the very end, Ellie is unable to see that their motives are almost identical (115–116). Throughout the game, Ellie unequivocally condemns Abby's actions, thereby demonstrating an inability to assess her own behavior critically. Horn argues that Ellie exemplifies profound self-deception that, in my understanding, is necessary for her to be able to engage in—and stomach—the brutal acts she perpetuates. For example, to extract information, Ellie beats an already dying person to death with a lead pipe. Also, she kills the love of Abby's life, and she even shoots and kills a pregnant woman. While Ellie is disgusted afterwards (in her defense, she did not know the woman was pregnant), the murder constitutes an ultimate low point that renders her a monster. As the events of *TLOU2* play out and Ellie becomes all-the-more perceivable as a villain, I come to realize that Joel might have been a villain too, which, subsequently, shakes the entire project of seeking revenge on those who killed him. Nevertheless, it has been argued that Joel is *not* a villain. Horn (2024a) emphasizes Joel's paternal feelings toward Ellie as crucial when discussing whether he is a villain or not and concludes that Joel's actions at the end of *TLOU1* are "morally defensible given that he interprets his moral obligation to protect Ellie as more important than his moral obligations to the rest of humanity" (1755). I want to underline that Horn's reasoning does not work as well on Ellie's actions in *TLOU2*. In contrast to Joel instinctively protecting "his child," Ellie *chooses* a path of violence and villainy. Because she endures waiting (mainly for vengeance), her antagonistic traits (e.g., her propensity for violence) become all-the-more prevalent throughout my gameplay experience. Although I, a queer scholar, truly appreciate that *TLOU2* includes unambiguous queer representation, the sum of Ellie's actions confirms that she definitely is a *bad* gay.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this article has been to examine Ellie's morally ambiguous, even villainous, behavior and concretize what sort of queer representation she brings to popular culture. In my opinion, the fact that Ellie, a main playable character in a hugely successful videogame, is a lesbian—thereby bringing queer visibility to a historically "un-queer" form of media—while simultaneously behaving in a far from exemplary manner, constitutes an important lesson. Not only does Ellie teach us that queer people, like all others, can be flawed to the point of being outright reprehensible, but also, she prompts us to look beneath the surface of her moral ambiguity. Why is Ellie bad? Is it because she is blinded by the need for revenge? What does her antagonism teach us? To think twice before acting on our violent impulses maybe?

Ellie's antagonistic traits help us acknowledge that queer objects of study—historical and current—need not be "respectable" to be worth engaging with. As emphasized by Kadji Amin (2017): "the alternative and the nonnormative—those terms most valued within Queer Studies—*need not be politically desirable or affectively pleasurable*; at times they might be experienced as barely tolerable, or more likely, as nauseating in the ways in which they twist the valued terms of the present to an unrecognizable state" (31). Remember, to deidealize is to recognize and accept *everything* Ellie represents; to dare to look beyond the most obvious fact that yes, she brings queer visibility to a major pop culture franchise (which is a good thing for sure), while also being honest about her flaws and complexities. On the one hand, Ellie's anger is relatable. Initially, I want to punish Abby too. On the other hand, Ellie's methods are questionable. Over the course of the game, I come to realize that *wanting* to punish Abby does not necessarily mean that I am *entitled* to.

As noted earlier, villainous behavior in queer characters tends to bring about a set of often-troubling associations, primarily that behaving badly is a consequence of being queer. It should be emphasized, therefore, that Ellie's queerness and villainous characteristics are unrelated. Queerness and badness are merely two aspects of her. It goes without saying that Ellie's function in *TLOU2* is not to teach players how to be queer. Rather, her journey teaches us something far more valuable, namely that if we allow ourselves to become blinded by hate for people we see as our enemies, we might, whether we are queer or not, inadvertently, turn into villains.

The main question in this article has been if Ellie's intense waiting for vengeance makes her antagonistic traits pronounced and turns her into a bad gay? Overall, the trauma of Joel's death fosters a burning desire in Ellie to avenge him, and because she is forced to wait for vengeance (and other things), the violence she perpetuates is increased and intensified. In the end—during a final confrontation between Ellie and Abby, who both are visibly beaten by the endless cycle of violence—I have arrived at a feeling of near pointlessness. Playing the game has made me sick of its nihilism and violence. At this point in the narrative, I am simply waiting for it to be over, which I believe is its intention. It is abundantly clear that an end to the *violence* is the only "happy ending" possible. Ellie's anger has consumed her to a self-annihilating degree. She has forsaken everything except her need for retribution, including a blissful family life with Dina and the now-born baby in a secluded farmhouse. When Ellie resumes her search for Abby, Dina refuses to sit around and wait: "So, what? I'm just supposed to sit here and wait for you, for god knows how long, just thinking you're fucking dead the entire time?" she says before Ellie leaves. Catering exclusively to her own needs and disregarding Dina's plea to stay is the definitive expression of Ellie not possessing releasement. She cannot leave her desire for vengeance behind, even if it means losing Dina, which, subsequently, signifies that the cycle of violence never stops until someone chooses to stop it. Ellie's lack of releasement

can be said to accentuate her antagonistic behavior. It is interesting, also, to emphasize that in the beginning of the game, Abby does *not* kill Ellie when she has the chance. Ellie and Tommy are spared because Joel is the one Abby wants to punish. In a way, the cycle of violence could have ended there, had Ellie possessed releasement. Arguably, Abby possesses releasement to a greater extent. She can leave her hatred behind when she has finally brought Joel to justice (as she sees it). Ellie and Tommy, however, cannot deal with their hatred. In the scene right before the perspective change, Abby says to them: "We let you both live and you wasted it!"—thereby drawing attention to the fact that Ellie, of her own volition, has chosen violence and villainy.

Before concluding, I want to emphasize two final things: First, during the confrontation at the end, Ellie witnesses the parental love Abby has for Lev which triggers her own memories of Joel's parental love and care for her. This makes Ellie finally forsake her quest for vengeance and release the self-annihilating rage within. Throughout the game, Ellie has committed monstrous acts of violence, but she does break the cycle in the end. Second, although Ellie's waiting for vengeance is a drawn-out affair, Abby's waiting is an even longer ordeal. When the player first encounters her (shortly before Joel is murdered), Abby has been waiting to avenge her father for *four* years. After the perspective change, I gradually come to the realization that Abby's desire for retribution has made her unable to form intimate connections with other people. Much like Ellie, Abby forsakes everything but her need for revenge, including the man she loves. By the end, I am left with the feeling that the two protagonists in the game are not all that different. Under other circumstances Ellie and Abby might even have been able to unite across their differences. Such alliances are certainly worth striving for, which, as I choose to see it, constitutes the game's ultimate message.

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