

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD COMPANION

Ethics of care in single-player narrative game The Last of Us (2013)



Figure 1. Joel and Ellie hiding from other survivors

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Abstract

This thesis draws on theories of ethics, game and childhood studies to study relationships of care within the video game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2012). First, the philosophical ethics of care framework is discussed and the approach of Murphy and Zagal is expanded to apply to a broader range of games. A textual analysis is performed to focus on child companion Ellie and the care values constructed by *TLoU*. By drawing on research from game studies the social role of companion characters in ethical gameplay experiences is discussed. Next, research from childhood is used to explore the social status of children in European and North American societies. I conclude that the child character Ellie fits the dominant childhood discourses of both innocence and at-risk in the violent world of *TLoU*. The relationship between player-character Joel and Ellie also fits traditional and passive ideas of childcare, but her character's abilities and care practices challenge this adult-child binary later in the game. And Ellie performs again a dual role of providing diegetic conversations and ludic service within gameplay. In addition, care practices are not prioritised by social groups in the post-apocalyptic world of the game, especially for children. These findings contribute to the intersection of ethics and game studies, but also feminist and childhood studies by highlighting the care practices between adults and children in games.

Introduction

How can we innovate how we solve moral questions and find new ways to reflect on our own morality? In the past ten years researchers have explored the intersection of games, morality, and learning. Like any other object, games facilitate, suggest, and prevent certain actions of the players. Game scholar Kat Schrier notes that digital games can therefore be used to introduce audience to ethical values and support ethical thinking skills (Schrier, 2014, p. 142-143). That is because games have several characteristics that make them useful for ethical exploration and practice, such as the ability to adopt a new identity and the ability to experience consequences without harm.

Depending on the type of game, players interact with many different game elements, play with friends or strangers online and interact with the non-playable characters (NPCs) of their game. People can develop emotional attachments when compelling stories are told, this includes digital media such as videogames (Bowman, Schultheis & Schuman, 2012, p.169). Apart from the complex and emotional narratives in single-player games, players emotional attachment to games also comes from the supporting cast of different NPCs that inhabit a game (Daviault, 2012, p.442). Story worlds without any inhabitants feel empty which is why that is the premise of game such as *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017).

More than ten years ago game journalist Stephen Totilo noted that games often included a father as the main playable character, characterizing this trend as “the daddening of video games” (Totilo, 2015). Games with paternal relationships include titles such as *Bioshock 2* (2K Marin, 2010), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) hereafter referred to as *TloU*, *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (TellTale Games, 2012), hereafter *TWD:S1*. As Totilo notes, the theme of being a ‘good dad’ is central to these games which includes caring for someone that is quite helpless (2010). The player is therefore given the role of capable paternal protector of the child character, which often accompanies the player throughout the whole game as a digital companion.

Game scholar Julienne Greer defines digital companions as NPCs that tag along to the player’s journey and are designed to elicit emotional reactions (Greer, 2013, p.138-139). In addition, digital companions often play a central role in the game’s narrative, thus enabling the player to share their otherwise solitary and personal experience (p.135-136). However, the use of young female characters as digital companions is not a coincidence in games such as *TloU* and *TWD:S1*. It is a cliché that can be connected to the ‘damsel-in-distress’ trope (Lawlor, 2018; Reay, 2021). Scholars note that games with vulnerable young female children use these characters as a moral shortcut to create emotionally engaging games by using the unique social status of children in our society (Lawlor, 2018; Reay, 2021).

Sociologist Chris Jenks central idea posits that children are the opposite spectrum of how adults see themselves (2005). As 'the child' is a non-adult, they do not fully act in our society on a political, economic, and cultural level (Christensen, 1994). In addition, children are not vulnerable, innocent, and morally pure whereas adults should not be. Game scholars Björn Sjöblom and Emma Reay have noted that the unique social position of children influences the way children are represented in games with adult themes as it puts game developers in a difficult position. Some games, like the open-world *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar, 1997- present) series which incorporates severe topics of violence, abuse and trauma often leave out any children's characters (Sjöblom, p.72-73). In addition, Reay points out that the most successful and acclaimed games between 2009 and 2019 did not contain any child character at all (2021).

The role that children's companions play in games might especially be revealing, as their role of NPCs are not only an extension of the developer's intentions (Daviault, 2012). They are also draw on existing discourse and social status children have in our society to create a high-stakes narrative (Reay, 2020; 2021). By looking at the way a game encourages social relationships and other personal or emotional experiences with digital companions similar to relationships with other players or player characters, we can understand try to understand the role of subjective factors with moral decisions and behaviours (Murphy & Zagal, 2011, p.71).

However, game scholar Miguel Sicart argues that if the player is limited by the rules of the game to make choices in-game actions become a requirement (2009). And when something becomes a requirement, it takes away from any moral meaning and value the game wants it to have. Even so, games like *TWD:S1* and *TloU* use their narrative, character design and mechanics to encourage the player to emotionally engage with the child companion (Lawlor, 2018, p.35). Game scholars John Murphy and José Zagal (2011) developed an ethics of care approach to study the game design, fictive context, gameplay and asymmetrical relationship of players and NPCs of a game's social ecosystem (p.70). That is why I will use the ethics of care approach to look at the single-player narrative game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) and answer the main research question: How are ethics of care values constructed by *The Last of Us* with the child companion Ellie? To answer the main research question, I will perform a textual analysis which I will discuss in more detail in chapter three and the results in chapter four.

However, before I can answer the main research question I need to touch upon the intersection of ethics and game studies where multiple analytical frameworks exist. Murphy and Zagal (2011) developed their ethics of care approach to study social simulation games *Animal Crossing: City Folk*

(Nintendo, 2008) and *Little King's Story* (Cing & Town Factory, 2009). Therefore, I will first introduce in chapter one the creation and context of this approach within on the field of game studies through the sub question: How can the ethics of care approach be applied to the action-adventure single-player game *The Last of Us*? In addition, it is necessary to discuss the social role of digital companions in games and define what a child companion is. Multiple researchers from game studies already noted that children's characters are often used as stand-in for other gendered stereotypes (Lawlor, 2018, p.31; Reay, 2021). Therefore, in chapter two I discuss the intersection identity, social status, and function of characters in games to answer the sub question: What is the role of the child character Ellie within the ethics of care approach in *The Last of Us*?

Chapter 1: The Intersection of ethics and game studies

To understand the ethics of care framework and the motivation of using this approach for this research, I first address the general intersection of ethics and game studies and explore the ideological power that games embody (1.1). Then, I discuss the morality of being a videogame player using Sicart's argument of player as 'ethical skin' (1.2). Lastly, I will discuss scholars who have looked at representations of care in games and discuss the ethics of care framework as a unique way of looking at games (1.3).

1.1 Ethical gameplay and ideological power in games

A variety of scholars have studied the different ways morality and ethics are represented in games. Within the academic context the concepts of ethics and empathy are difficult to define and therefore often colloquially used (Groen et al., 2020; Schrier 2014). Game scholar Kat Schrier uses Nathan Tierney's understanding of morals which he describes as a series of guiding principles, universal truths, or agreed-upon rules by society (Tierney, 1994, p.ix). In contrast, Tierney refers to ethics as the practicing of these morals on an individual level, meaning to make choices and judgements using morals a compass.

Game scholars Kat Schrier and Matthew Faber note that many scholarly fields find the affective aspects of games as digital texts and humans noteworthy of study (Schrier & Faber, 2021, p.208). Researchers such as Tilo Hartmann use a media-psychological perspective to study factors and cues from games influencing moral (dis)engagement of players (2010; 2017). They build on the social-cognitive theory of Albert Bandura by adapting the idea that players morally disengage if they justify the moral transgressions within a game (Hartmann, 2017, p.2). In addition, scholars Holl, Bernard and Melzer (2020) focus on which gaming scenarios are perceived in a moral way and how factors of interactivity, framing, predictability, reversibility, and emotional engagement with game characters can lead to moral reflection (p.280-283).

To understand how games represent morality and the different ways players can engage in ethical gameplay it is crucial to explain how games exhibit and express ideological power. Game scholar Miguel Sicart uses Jesper Juul's definition of games as designed rule-based systems which constrain the player within a digital power structure (2009, p.25-27). Unlike traditional analogue games, video games impose rules on the player and give no room for negotiation. In this sense rules constrain the actions of the player and by doing so express certain ethical values which can be interpreted and judged by players (Sicart, 2009 p.36). The game developers bear the ethical responsibility of the framework and its implicit values, while the gamers are responsible for the ways they deal with

these ethical values (p.59). Thus, gameplay can be seen as the process of experiencing rules through interactions with the game world.

In addition, Sicart draws on philosopher Michel Foucault's understanding of power to explain the ideological power that games embody. Foucault understands power as something not necessarily negative, but rather as force of creation (1980, p.59). By acknowledging the existence of certain power relations between the different structures in society and the formal and informal institutions of our society we can understand how power influences us at every level. Therefore, Sicart understands games as power structures. Meaning games use their power to reward or punish players actions within the game. Players willingly accept these power relations and commit themselves to this form of play as a player-subject, because if they deem the gameplay not enjoyable, they should be free to stop playing (p.68).

Game scholar Ian Bogost argues in a similar sense, using the concept of 'procedural rhetoric' to describe the way rules are tied to a form of authority and can limit behaviour (2007, p.3-6). Following the classic Greek model, Bogost explains that procedural rhetoric involves persuasion using processes as arguments and ideas (p.28-29). Developers do not have to explain their ideology but are able to code win or fail conditions in games as part of an ideological argument. Therefore, both Bogost (2007) and Sicart (2009) argue that because games are carefully designed systems, they must be considered cultural and ideological products worthy of study.

1.2 Players as moral subjects

If we view videogames as objects capable of expressing ideological and moral power, what role do players have? Even though some games present themselves as simulations, game scholars agree that players have varying degrees of agency. Sicart notes that every player already has a cultural background and specific context in which the game is played, letting their own culture and values affect the gaming experience (2009, p.63). And while players do not have absolute moral agency due to their subjectivity to the game, they are free to create their own interpretations and set their own goals. Sicart refers to this approach as the 'ethical skin' of players which enables them to see the boundaries of their own behaviour in games and themselves as moral agents outside of the game world (2009, p.112).

A good example is the violence within certain games and the cultural meaning of violence outside of games in the real-world. Often players rationalise game experience through the ethical wisdom derived from cultural and individual perspectives (Sicart, 2009, p.88). They condone the actions they use within the game if the game experiences are framed as 'just a game/experiment' or that the

violence and aggression are justified by a righteous cause (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010, p.89). Thus, gamers are active audience that do not passively absorb a message. However, videogames can use strategies to either encourage or discourage moral engagement. Game scholars Holl, Bernard and Melzer noted in their qualitative study with experienced players that less predictable moral scenarios in games led players to report more reflection, while restrictions on reversible actions led to more realism and increased engagement with the game (2020, p.282-283).

Notably, Sicart argues that the concept of player-subject is not limited to actual gameplay. Instead, it operates as a relevant subjectivity and acknowledges the cultural influence of games beyond time the actual time individuals spent playing games (p.73). Like older media such as books, television and film, people also engage in related activities after the time actively spent reading, watching, or listening. More importantly Sicart argues that players of video games should be seen as ethical beings who can use their ethical knowledge playing games (p.65). In line with Sicart, game scholar Mia Consalvo concludes that they adapt their playing style on conditions such as if it is their first or second playthrough, cultural and relational contexts and other rules (2009, p.408). Meaning playing as a morally bad person gets easier for players when they are playing for a second time, for example to get new content by choosing different narrative options or playing styles.

An exploratory survey with 1.000 gamers from game critic Amanda Lange suggests that those players are in constant negotiation with games as are not able to fully pause their own moral belief systems when they are playing a game (2014). Even when some players acknowledge the fictional aspect, they struggle playing mean or immoral (Harth, 2017, p.16). Thus, suggesting that certain players like to play as an idealized version of themselves (Joeckel et al., 2012, p.479; Harth, 2017, p.16). A critical point that Neely makes is that strong identification with the player-character can influence the way players make moral decisions. (2019, p.352). In other words, even though players are capable of ethical reflection they might be role-playing as the ideal ethical person they want to be. Thus, research suggests that while most players might be more comfortable at first glance playing as the morally good person, players are simultaneously able to negotiate with themselves to ethically reflect and choose the opposite of what they would naturally do during the second playthrough.

1.3 Ethics of care

We have acknowledged the ideological power of games that are embedded with coherent ethical values and the agency of players to negotiate with their ethical skin to play morally good or bad. What is the relationship between games and meaningful care? First, I will discuss the philosophical

roots of the ethics of care. Then, I will look at the way scholars have used care ethics as a lens to study games. Focusing on the case studies that John Murphy and José Zagal have chosen for their ethics of care approach. Lastly, I will explain my understanding of this framework and the useful lens it creates to study games.

The ethics of care philosophy has been used to acknowledge that relations of interdependence and dependence are a key feature to human existence (Robinson, 2011, p.12). Dependency in relation to power has been widely discussed by feminist scholars and philosophers. As such, the ethics of care has been developed into something suitable for individual relations between family and friends, but also large scale social and political institutions (Held, 2006). Political science professor Joan Tronto posits we should not assume that everyone is equal, but instead that everyone at one stage is dependent on others (1993, p.163-164). More importantly, we should acknowledge that this is a universal condition. In addition, American philosopher Eva Kittay notes that dependency does not have to mean unequal if the relationship is not determined by domination (1999, p.34). For example, the person who cares must have the power and authority necessary to meet the responsibilities of the care work (p.31). Norwegian Philosopher Tove Pettersen describes the normative values of care related to the condemnation of hurt and exploitation and the universal commitment of human prospering (2011, p.54). Thus, care is not only refraining from harming others but also actively preventing harm.

In contrast to other philosophies, ethics of care scholars do not rely on abstract reasoning and deduction (Held, 2006, p.11). Instead, the contextual differences are accepted, and personal experiences and self-reflections are considered (Pettersen, 2011, p.55). As stated earlier, some game designers and scholars are concerned discussing eliciting care or empathy through games. Game scholars Bonnie Ruberg and Scully-Blaker understand the various meanings of care that reflect the complexities in academic, industry and popular discourses (2021, p.656). They explain that “care evokes an action (to perform in ways that support others), an affect (to feel empathy or compassion), a mode of engagement (to ‘care about’ a person or situation), a politic (to insist on the importance of caring) and even a tool for social change (whether for subverting hegemonic norms or justifying discrimination).” Therefore, using an grounded ethics of care approach to study games is more than just looking at the positive effects of playing games but actually focuses on the interrelations of being human and the ways one can attend to the needs of others.

Ruberg and Scully-Blaker used three case studies to focus on the tensions that emerge when we understand games as ‘technologies of caring’ and question the fundamental assumption that games *can* not only make players care, but that they *should* (p.656). They note that care is a feature of

many game genres, both as a representational element and as a set of mechanics (p.657). Players are often responsible for someone or something over a period of time, such as an animal, child, plant or town. Game scholar Soraya Murray argued that videogames are well-designed media expression which fulfil a persuasive function as image-making practice, as well as functioning as a mirror of current societal discourses (2018, p.15). In other words, the ways games represent care and caretaking reflects how our society values these concepts. Ruberg & Scully-Blaker argue that the lack of these values in mainstream triple-A games is an unfortunate example of the biggest target audience of gamers: young, able-bodied, cisgender, straight, white men with financial freedom and spare time to game (2021, p.659).

In contrast to the discourse analysis of Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, game scholars Murphy and Zagal (2011) used a textual analysis-based approach. They focused on the fictive context, gameplay and asymmetrical relationship of players and NPCs of a social ecosystem. Their 'ethics of care' framework is based on the ethics of caring from educator and philosopher Nel Noddings. Her work is rooted in the ethical obligation that care is an obligation and foundation of all relationships (2008, 2013). Ethical behaviour is not motivated by abstract moral rules but is rooted in building and maintaining relationships and therefore more useful in concrete situations (2013, p. 702). Murphy and Zagal noted already that other feminist scholars such as Deane Curtin (1991) and Virginia Held (2010) expanded and strengthened the ethics of care framework to include caring about political, non-human and larger-scale issues. In addition, they argue to include the ethical care approach to understand ethical experiences in games and the ways games encourage players to build caring relationships and opportunities for moral reflection (2011, p.72).

Murphy and Zagal focused on two social simulation games, *Little King's Story* (Xseed Games, 2009) and *Animal Crossing: City Folk* (Nintendo EAD, 2008). Both games encourage the development and maintenance of relationships with other characters and reflection on these relationships (2011, p.77-78). Thus, performing acts of care and care itself are core elements of these social simulation games. More importantly, both games also treat NPC characters as one-of-a-kind, giving them personalities, traits and stories, which players can discover by spending more time with them. *Animal Crossing: City Folk* like other games in this series puts the player in a small island community in which the player is equal to its animal neighbours (Bogost, 2007, p.273-274). The neighbours even move away to give the impression that they have independent lives thus, stimulating the player's imagination and encouraging caring about maintaining relationships.

In a similar vein, *Little King's Story* uses its narrative, symbols, and rules to encourage the player to care about the citizens of the kingdom they rule (Murphy & Zagal, 2009, p.72-75). The game is a

combination of role-playing, real-time strategy, and life simulation with adventure game elements. Mechanically, *Little King's Story* gives the player responsibility of their citizen's lives as citizens will blindly follow orders. They can be asked to join the players' party of adventurers but also be ordered to fulfil other tasks which help expand the kingdom. Thus, Even though the game does give the player feedback through multiple ways, the game's ethical framework raises questions and encourages reflection on loyalty.

Games can be understood as technology with the ability to create ethical experiences. The ethics of care as a philosophy that is useful to study the universal experience of dependency and caregiving, both at the core of being human. In line with the ideas of Ruberg and Scully-Blaker, I argue that expanding the ethics of care framework is useful to look the representation of care and caretaking beyond game genres focused on social networks. First, it allows the start of discussion and reflection on these themes for a new player audience outside of role-playing games (RPGs) and social simulation games. These genres are known to encourage players to invest emotionally into the game's world and its inhabitants by creating a unique gameplay experience. While narrative driven games do not offer this kind of unique experience, they do encourage players to emotionally engage with the game's world and its characters. However, narrative-driven games can introduce and normalise themes of care by putting them into alternative and more familiar contexts for certain players. Secondly, the ethics of care framework allows the exploration of interdependency and dependency for a caring relationship between the player and a companion. While the player often is the dominant and main character in the relationship with NPCs, companion characters have a lot of influence on the enjoyment of player experience. Third, particularly child companions and care are intriguing because they adhere to both progressive and traditional views on children in our society. Both companion characters and child companions will be discussed in detail in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: Children as digital companions

In this chapter I will discuss research that touches upon the player-character relationships in games from different fields such as human-computer interaction (HCI), game studies and media-psychology. In order to understand digital companions, I first discuss the ways companion characters are distinctive from other NPCs (2.1). Then I will explain the social role of companion characters in meaningful gameplay and moral situations (2.2). Lastly, I will discuss the unique role of children in European and North American society and the use of children's characters such as Ellie from *TLoU* in games (2.3).

2.1 Companion characters in games

Currently, big-budget games can include lots of different computer-controlled characters. NPCs can be seen as an extension of game developers as they can enhance the player experience by helping the player to progress without being condescending (Daviault, 2012, p.442). Game scholar and designer Dan Pinchbeck therefore defines NPCs as agents with some level of individuality to be able to differentiate between characters who are part of a crowd (2009, p.262). Research shows that players distinguish game characters through their different functions within the narrative and gameplay (Warpefelt & Verhagen, 2017, p.46-48). NPCs can be classified into four metatypes: functions, adversaries, friends, and providers. These can in turn be broken down into general behaviour roles such as *vendor* (function), *enemy* (adversary), *companion* (friends) and *storyteller* (provider).

Like Pinchbeck, game scholars Henrik Warpefelt and Harko Verhagen also note that the individuality or characterhood of NPCs is an important aspect to set them apart from others (2017, p.41). This aspect can be reflected in the way a game shapes the role of an NPC. They use the comparison of a merchant NPC as this character can be functionally the same compared to a vending machine. This occurs when the merchant NPC only can exchange money for another resource. However, the addition of theatrical audio-visual elements, such as animations and speech for bartering, provide a more engaging game experience for players. In other words, the active portrayal of a role by NPCs sets them apart from just being background characters.

Turning to companions, most scholars deem the actual time spent together as important to distinguish companion characters from other NPC types (Pinchbeck, 2009, p.262; Warpefelt & Verhagen, 2017, p.48; Emmerich et al., 2018, p.142). Pinchbeck uses the concept of persistence to set apart recurring NPCs or have a definable role in the world and plot (2009, p.262-263). In a similar fashion Emmerich and colleagues define companions as (non-)human which accompany the player

over a large period (2018, p.142). Thus, broadening the concept to include pets in games like the *Fallout 3* and *4* (Bethesda, 2008, 2015) and *Fable 2* (Lionhead Studios, 2008). In doing so, Emmerich and colleagues also argue that the concept of companion characters should not be limited to characters who are controlled by the player unlike Warpefelt and Verhagen (2018, p.142). They use the dog Dogmeat in the *Fallout* games as an example of a companion that is more than a decorative character. Dogmeat also supports the player by finding resources and participates in combat. Depending on the type of gameplay it might be appropriate for a companion to switch between roles *sidekick* (resource gathering and giving information) or *ally* (fighting alongside the player). Each role evokes different expectations for players and not meeting these expectations might lead to an incoherent and unpredictable game experience (Warpefelt & Verhagen, 2017, p.42).

The inclusion of companion characters is not limited to specific genre of games, but most are found in single-player games with complex stories and game worlds with large social populations. These types of games often promise an immersive and engaging player experience, which is why game developers spend a lot of resources to create realistic game characters to enhance player enjoyment (Daviault, 2012, p.441). NPCs are often side characters, but their presence enriches game worlds and permit social interactions. NPCs regularly used in narratives to create high stakes through self-sacrifice or when they are in jeopardy (p.442). In the last ten years or so, researchers have studied the design of virtual agents and the ways player develop relationships with NPCs. The research of Bopp and colleagues (2019) explored the different emotional attachments players feel for game characters and reported their findings on a spectrum with functional value to emotional value. In addition, the research of Burgess and Jones (2020) focused on romanceable NPCs, which concluded when players feel strong emotional and interpersonal connections it influences how they engage with the mechanics of the game. For example, by matching their in-game avatars appearance to their love interest or influencing the composition of a cut-scene through choices (p.11).

Digital media scholar Jonathan Harth argues that players are willing to suspend their disbelief to be able to perceive NPCs as social entities (2017, p.6). Due to subliminal attributions and human-like social cues together with spending a lot of time together allows players can temporarily see NPCs as characters worthy of compassion (p.14). Player's base most of their expectations on the visual cues of a character (Warpefelt, 2015, p.6; Warpefelt & Verhagen, 2017, p.50). Observable aspects such as gender, age, ethnicity, status, and behaviour give player clues to *who* a companion is and *what* they do within the game. Another important aspect of a companion's believability is realistic companion behaviour. Practically speaking this means players expect NPCs to be aware of their bodies and their surroundings (Lankoski & Björk, 2007, p.419-420). However, immersion breaks when companions will not appropriately react when hit by enemies or pushed by the player, in other words fail to meet

the players expectations. In addition, self-initiated behaviour that shows a companion's personal goals and motivations gives an NPC more humanity and therefore adds to believability.

In other words, well-designed companions with a unique personality to distinguish it from other characters add to the game enjoyment (Lankoski & Björk, 2007; Lee & Heeter, 2012, p.91). Greer's definition highlights the developer's intent of creating emotionally engaging characters. Therefore, I will use Greer's definition of companions: "as an object or creature which is dedicated to forming a relational bond with the game player" (2013, p.135). Of course, the extent of emotional response varies between the individual player and the developer's interpretation, however companion characters play an important social role in games which is what I will discuss in the next paragraph.

2.2 The social role of NPCs in meaningful ethical experiences

Engaging and believable companion characters should also have the necessary communication capabilities to show off their personality (Greer, 2013, p.140; Lankoski & Björk, 2007, p.420). Players prefer contextualised conversations, meaning that responses from companions should not be repetitive and relate to the current situation. While companion characters are often on the same side as players, it is not a requirement (Emmerich et al., 2018, p.145). This allows for player characters and companion characters to react differently to the same situations or NPCs that they encounter. Thus, showing off their different personalities, behaviours, and emotions. Game companions which can understand emotions and expressing them enhance the player experience and facilitate the bonding between players and companions (Chowanda et al., 2016, p.94). Suggesting that players like to engage with companions that they consider as equally emotionally intelligent. However, Emmerich and colleagues note that most companions are only able to express realistic emotions during cutscenes and often fall short during the interactive phases of gameplay (2018, p.145).

Psychology scholars Iten and colleagues (2017) tried to understand how, and which game characteristics make meaningful game experiences. They define meaningful experiences as "a state of being moved, of gaining insight into important and difficult questions of life's purpose, and of connecting with other players or game characters" (p.496). And in line with previous research of Rogers and colleagues (2017), they concluded that players indicated social interactions with morally relevant decisions give a meaningful game experience (Iten et al., 2017, p. 499-500). Players reported on meaningful choices in fourteen different games in which the choice often related to decisions that asked loyalty to their own group or to harm or care for others. For example, in

TWD:S1 the player as group leader must decide if the group takes the supplies they found (in-group loyalty) or to leave them for other people (care for others).

NPCs were involved in almost all the cases described by the participants of the study of Iten and colleagues (2017, p. 500). In most cases it was clear that there would be immediate consequences, for example when the player must choose to save or let an NPC die. However, the requirement of consequences is debated. Game scholars Jeff Nay and José Zagal argue that the choice is meaningful because it reflects how the player see the character or themselves, whether the outcome differs (2017, p.3-4). They use the virtue ethics approach which focuses on the character traits and motivations people have when making moral decisions. Nay and Zagal argue that inconsequential decisions allow players to explore the deeper nature and meaning of the character they play. Moral choices are seen as ways to characterise instead of a risk-reward opportunity that encourages the player to think in terms of strategy to get the best ending or rewards (Nay & Zagal, 2017, p.5; Sicart, 2005, p.11).

Players also report being emotionally moved by experiences when they have formed certain emotional attachments (Bopp et al., 2016, p.2999-3000; Bopp et al., 2019, p.316-319). Seven forms of emotional attachments that players form were identified, each with distinct key emotions attached (Bopp et al., 2019, p.320). The degree in which players put emphasis on the functional value or the emotional value of the character is tied to the character role. Player characters were often described through their in-game capabilities as 'cool and capable', whereas NPCs were characterized by their strong personal connection through gameplay and narrative as 'trusted close friend' (p.317-319). Players expressed towards younger companion characters an explicit concern for one's protégé. They experienced deep concern, worry and a sense of responsibility for these characters, while also acknowledging that these characters were not helpless as companions. These results support the argument of Daviault who argues that NPCs are used by game designers to create more engaging narratives and game worlds (2012, p.442). Thus, players are likely to see NPCs more as part of the game's narrative than a generic mechanic.

Research shows that players like to play as a good moral subject and generally avoid anti-social behaviour (Weaver & Lewis, 2012, p.613; Grizzard et al., 2018, p.503). This falls in line with the first proposition that Tilo Hartmann puts forth in order argue for the "Moral Disengagement in Violent Videogames model" (2017). The model builds on Bandura's social-cognitive theory of moral thought and action and adapts its argument with empirical evidence from media-psychology to argue for certain moral disengagement when playing violent games (p.2-3). Hartmann argues in the first proposition that players intuitively perceive game characters as social beings, despite knowing

otherwise (p.2-4). The second proposition builds on this by stating that the moral socialization of individuals for social beings leads players to treat game characters as worthy of proper moral treatment. As the third proposition posits, it is only natural that some players feel guilty when game characters are harmed. Hartmann points at experimental evidence of players reporting guilty feelings after they performed unjustified violence (Hartmann, Toz & Brandon, 2010, p.354; Schmierbach & Limperos, 2013, p.538). To be able to enjoy playing violent videogames, gamers morally disengage through one or more contextual influences. Hartmann uses the same eight moral disengagement factors of Bandura (1991, 2002): moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, attribution of blame, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences and dehumanization (2017, p.7).

Hartmann concludes that many violent games are designed as entertainment and accordingly use moral disengagement factors to justify the player's violence (2014, p.315-316). Not only do games justify the violence used in-game, but they also distort the consequences of said violence by excluding victims and their suffering. This suggests that meaningful game experiences not only include believable NPCs which allow players to form emotional attachments to, but also must include the harmful consequences of a players' social or ethical decision. In addition, Oliver and colleagues note that games also include elements that encourage players to reflect on in-game themes through the inclusion of topics of terrorism, trauma, and compassion (2015, p.2). This could be done through an a branching storyline or an overview and comparison of a players narrative choices in TellTale games such as the *TWD:S1*.

2.3 The duty of care for children

Within childhood studies it is acknowledged that children compared to other social groups carry a special status in our European and North American societies. The psychological assumption leans on the idea that childhood is a natural psychobiological phase everyone experiences, while sociology treats childhood as a structural component in the organisation of social life in societies (Kehily, 2009; James & Prout, 2003). A third position sees the concept of childhood as a social construction, which is created through social discourse. As such sociologist Anneke Meyer argues that both children and childhood are used as a moral rhetoric argument by adults (2007). Both are used to explain or legitimize a viewpoint as rightful and morally good, while removing the necessity to provide actual arguments: children *become* the reason (p. 85). Three distinct discourses that conceptualise children and childhood in our contemporary culture: innocence, evil and rights (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Depending on the type of social issue, one discourse may be more dominant. For example, when children are victims of crime the discourse of innocence may be used to focus on the innate

innocence that children supposedly possess. Thus, explaining how crimes against children are worse than crimes against adults (p.96). In contrast, the discourse of the evil child is used when children are the perpetrators (Valentine, 1996). Even so, Meyer acknowledges that some also broaden discourses to discuss child crime in terms of the 'innocent yet damaged child' (Morrison, 1997).

Both Christensen and Meyer acknowledge that children have had less time to physically and psychologically develop but that the discourse of innocence constructs children also imagines them as naive and vulnerable (Christensen, 2000, p.38-41; Meyer, 2007, p.89). The innate innocence paired with implicit assumptions of vulnerability means that adults carry the moral responsibility to care for children, while the child is positioned as someone who is dependent and passive (Christensen, 2000, p.38). This discourse of the child-at-risk reinforced the belief that childhood is defined by the possible exposure to a variety of dangers (Furedi, 2001, p.25). The idea that children rely on the nurturance of adults and need a safe environment to develop successfully provides a justification for adult supervision and control over children (Christensen, 2000, p.41). Both the discourse of innocence and the child-at-risk are extremely resistant to challenges and nuance (Furedi, 2001, p.25; Meyer, 2007, p.89). Take the example of internet knowledge and skills. While children are often more skilled in practical use of the internet, they are often drowned out in the discussion of internet safety and reconstructed as passive agents when encountering online dangers.

Film and television scholar Karen Lury argues that the media reflects the discourse of the innocent child by placing children as 'perfect victims' since they are blameless (2010, p.105). Children in media are often equated as the future of our society and thus used by adults to further their own agenda (Moeller, 2002, p.39). Failings in the duty of care of children of parents and childcare agencies therefore have a special newsworthiness (Sweeney, 2020, p.199). The media often covers these instances with a certain hostility towards parents and childcare agencies which have failed this adult solidarity (Furedi, 2001, p.11-12). In addition, leaning into the discourse of the innocent child or the duty of care gives moral weight to adult protectors or advocates while overshadowing the voices of children themselves (Meyer, 2007, p.91).

The research of game scholars Emma Reay and Björn Sjöblom focuses on how the ways children are represented in games. Emma Reay's review of children's representation in games builds on the content analysis of videogame characters done by Williams and colleagues (2009) and concludes in line with Williams and colleagues that children are still underrepresented in videogames (2021). And when they are, the representation is overwhelmingly white and male dominated. Reay connects the lack of playable child characters to the symbolic or passive object status of children in our society. When games did include playable child characters they were often used to express and explain the

restricted combat options for a player. Thus, dominant stereotypes can communicate game mechanics to players in seamless in-game tutorials. The exception of powerful children that exist in games were justified by their supernatural powers, royal heritage or exceptional circumstances which still supports the idea of children as the recurring underdog.

In line with the discourse of innocence, child characters are often used to evoke empathic reactions which are characterized by “sympathy, care, worry, and the feelings of loss to parental concern for the character” (Eichner, 2016, p.175). For example, Reay argues that the narrative and characters from *Detroit: Become Human* reflect a conservative and paternalistic view children (2020, p.10). Reay adds that the child Alice is both a moral barometer for other characters and a source of ludic and narrative concern. Another use of the child character is to add more depth to the player’s adult character (Reay, 2021, 2022, p.63-64). Flashbacks with playable children’s characters provide an easy way to explain the personality, motivations, and behaviours of adult characters as childhoods are universal and relatable. In addition, flashbacks showing childhood trauma are used to humanise powerful adult characters and can justify the violence and vengeful behaviour players use as adult characters. By framing violence this way players are allowed to enjoy the cathartic experience of excessive violence in the name of the referred inexcusable crime against ‘the child’. Thus, games reflect the moral rhetoric of children and childhood when breaching the topic of violence.

The concern for the safety of children also includes digital children and provide a difficult topic for game designers. Players express strong resistance to killable children because the discourse of the innocent child is quite strong (Sjöblom, 2015, p.75-78). While killable children in games represent true realism for a game simulation, games often use them as collateral damage and claim believability. This way developers ensure they keep up the moral standard of themselves and the players of the game, besides from the practical marketing and selling of adult rated media. As Sjöblom notes that in most media graphic depictions of violence are scarce (2015, p.77). And often the violence in games is implied and included just to make a moral point in line with existing discourses of innocence.

Sjöblom uses both the ideas of Bogost and Sicart to explain that games as ideological artefacts manage violence towards digital children in three different ways: exclusion, acceptance and segregation or adaptation (p.70-71). Some games like, the *Grand Theft Auto* games made by Rockstar (1997-present) pretend that children do not exist, thus preventing players to engage in violence towards children (p.72). Other games treat children differently from other characters and give negative (social) consequences when the player harms them, segregating them through game rules (p.73). Lastly, games can adapt the level of violence to make it suitable for children by drawing

a line at death or certain weapons used. Instead, games like *Bully*, also made by Rockstar (2006), opt for prank related violence and passing out.

Games journalists and scholars note an significant increase of father-daughter relationships in games around 2012 and 2013, such as *BioShock 2* (2010), *TWD:S1* (2012), *BioShock Infinite* (2013) and *TLoU* (2013). Games journalist Stephen Totilo dubbed this phenomenon the 'daddening of video games' and argues that the fatherhood portrayed in these games represents cultural idealistic versions of masculinity (2011). It allows players excessive forms of violence as a father to protect their virtual child, which Shannon Lawlor coins as 'essential paternal masculinity' (EPM) (2018, p.29). Game scholars Gerald Voorhees (2016) and Sarah Stang (2017, 2019) both looked at the ways violent fatherhood is constructed in different games and concluded that the daughter-companion character is used as an incentive. In addition, these games often overshadow the agency of the younger female characters, while only a few leave room for emotional and physical care within the so-called 'father-daughter relationship' (Brice, 2013; Lawlor, 2018, p.33). Thus, the fatherhood in these games use the both the innocent child discourse and the child-at-risk discourse to present the player with a duty of care towards the daughter figure.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to answer my two research questions, I perform a textual analysis and use game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara-Vara's *"Introduction to Game Analysis"* (2019) to structure my analysis. Therefore, I will first explain the steps that Fernández-Vara-Vara proposes for textual analysis of games and discuss the building blocks I have chosen of the three interrelated areas: context, game overview and formal elements (3.1). In this chapter I will also reflect on my position of player-researcher and discuss the ethics of care framework provides focus during the analysis (3.2).

3.1. Analysing games as texts

Within game studies it is common to focus on the game, the player, and the context of play. Game scholar Fernández-Vara-Vara argues that a sophisticated discourse on games can only be supported when games are understood as texts (2019, p.5). She notes, like Sicart, that games and their players do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, scholars should not limit themselves to the meaning within the game but also the impact it makes in society through its cultural significance. The player has a significant role in unpacking meaning from games. Fernández-Vara-Vara argues that they are a necessary part of the medium, as players interpret game rules and engage with the game in a variety of ways (p.7). This cycle of feedback between the game and its player is a form of designed communication enabled by the game developers. This means that players decode the values and ideas that are enclosed in games. Thus, she argues that textual analysis can be used to interpret the game beyond the actual play but making sense of the text and addressing the different ways people engage with the game (p.9).

Fernández-Vara-Vara argues for a structured method to study games to construct an academic discourse that can connect game studies with other media fields (p.10). She proposes three interrelated areas: the context, game overview and the formal elements (p.13-17). Each consisting of different building blocks which can be selected by researchers to structure their analysis. In table 1 the building blocks I have focused on are shown in the middle column, while other ones proposed by Fernández-Vara-Vara are shown in the right column.

| Interrelated areas | Building blocks of Fernández-Vara-Vara used in this analysis | Other building blocks proposed by Fernández-Vara-Vara |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Production team - Game genre - Technological context - Socio-historical context - Relations to other media | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Context inside game - Economic context - Audience |
| Game overview | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rules and goals of the game/game modes - Game mechanics - Fictional world of the game - Story - Gameplay experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of players - Space of the game - Game communities |
| Formal elements | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rules of the world - Diegetic vs. extradiegetic rules - Relationship between rules and fictional world - Values and procedural rhetoric - The gap between the player and the game: mediation - Audio-visual design - Representation and identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Save games - Abstraction - Procedural content vs. hard-coded content - Game dynamics - Control schemes and peripherals - Difficulty level/game balance - Rule-driven vs. goal-driven games - Levels and level design - Choice design - Cheats/mods/hacks/bugs |

Table 1. The chosen blocks for this analysis and the proposed building blocks of Fernández-Vara-Vara

The context of a game may include the game's genre, the socio-cultural factors surrounding the game and its production environment. I consider the intent of the developers of Naughty Dog because they explicitly stated that their companion character Ellie is different than other child characters. Thus, we need to be aware of other similar games in the same genre and similar characters to understand *how* and *why* developers have chosen to make certain decisions. Next, Fernández-Vara-Vara notes that including an overview of the game is common in analysis as this gives readers a good understanding of the game and the subsequent analysis. An overview may include narrative content, information on the game world, rules and goals and game mechanics that make the game distinct (p.61). Some readers may not be familiar with the game, its genre or both. And in the case of *TLoU* it has also been over five years since it was first released, meaning that readers who have played the game might have forgotten certain details. Lastly, Fernández-Vara-Vara argues that the formal elements of the game lay the foundation for the analysis (2019, p.131). She notes that it is very productive to explore the relationship between the rules and the fictional game world. Due to the focus of my research questions, I have chosen elements that gain insight into the representation of Ellie as a child companion and the values the game places upon her as a child companion. This way I focus on the player experience that is shaped by the rules and restrictions of the game and in what way it matches with the developers intent.

3.2. Reflecting on player-researcher position and ethics of care

This thesis and its related textual analysis will approach the *TLoU* using the ethics of care framework. However, as mentioned earlier in 1.2, Sicart notes that each player will have a unique player experience due to their own personal and cultural background and game experiences (2009, p.63). In line with this idea, Fernández-Vara-Vara argues that the player is the productive agent that interprets the text (2019, p.7). Game scholars Jasper Vught and René Glas therefore argue that the researcher should reflect on their dual role of player and researcher (2018, p.228-29). In doing so, one recognizes the experiential and performative nature of playing games (Reay, 2022, p.86). Thus, acknowledging this position and reflecting on one's personal backgrounds and experiences adds insight into the reading of the game. Therefore, I will shortly reflect on my position and experience with games.

I spend my time more as a game scholar than actual gamer, as my interests lie more in medium-specific mechanics and interactive way of storytelling. In addition, I am attracted to games which include strong female characters for example earlier mentioned games *BioShock Infinite* (2013), *The Walking Dead* series (2012-2019) and survivor trilogy of *Tomb Raider* (2009-2022). Games can limit content and rewards behind skill-based segments of gameplay and I often the time or motivation to

fully commit to one game. This means that I often watch friends and streamers play through narrative-driven games or competitive play.

For my analysis I relied on my own game experience and notes, the official behind-the-scenes documentary called 'Grounded' and playthrough footage. I played the remastered version of the game on the PlayStation 4. The main game is identical, apart from the technical enhancements and the addition of a Photo Mode and in-game commentary by game director Bruce Straley, creative director Neil Druckmann and voice actors Troy Baker (Joel) and Ashley Johnson (Ellie) during cinematic scenes. It should be noted that due to my lack of experience and skills with shooting and combat I played the game on easy mode. To make up for the missing experience of more difficult game modes and playing strategies. I watched gameplay videos from YouTube channel MKIceandFire (2020) to compare to my own notes. They played using 'hard mode' difficulty which encourages more stealth and strategic play due to limited resources.

Chapter 4: Analysis

As mentioned earlier, this chapter will introduce *TLoU* and the subsequent analysis using Fernández-Vara-Vara's three interrelated areas. I will discuss the context of the game (4.1), the game overview (4.2) and the formal elements of the analysis (4.3). Next, I discuss my findings of Ellie as a believable and likable companion character (4.4) And how the responsibility of taking care of Ellie falls into the discourse of innocence (4.5). Lastly, I discuss that the uneven relationship of care between Joel and Ellie is based on EPM and includes selective and conditional care (4.6).

4.1 Context of *TLoU*

The development context of *TLoU* shows that the paternal relationship between Joel and Ellie was designed to evoke feelings of care. The game is developed by North American game studio Naughty Dog and published by Sony Computer Entertainment in 2013 for the PlayStation 3 and 4. Naughty Dog is more recently known for its other successful single-player action-adventure game series *Uncharted* (2013-2022). Similar to this series, *TLoU* is also a third-person shooter but started with a character-driven story. Neil Druckmann was chosen as writer and creative director and his concept for a survival included two protagonists who would form a bond through gameplay and actions rather than dialogue (Takahashi, 2013a, p.1-2). He concludes that "everything in the game – the mechanics, music, gameplay, story – it's all supposed to come together to help you realize how much they care for each other." (Parker, 2013).

One of the main inspirations for Druckmann was the historical fiction story *City of Thieves* (2008) of David Benioff about two World War II survivors in a besieged Russian city (Parker, 2013; Takahashi, 2013a). While this story is set in a bleak world, it also balances the story with playful moments between characters. The developers of *TLoU* wanted to reflect the idea that both Joel and Ellie are regular people who are forced to survive extreme situations, see figure 1. Druckmann explained that the dialogue is kept short and as natural as possible through collaboration with voice actors Troy Baker (Joel) and Ashley Johnson (Ellie) (Dutton, 2013). In addition, game designer Anthony Newman notes that the character of Joel is designed to reflect the struggles of surviving a post-apocalyptic world in which it is easy to lose empathy for others (Savillo, 2013). Druckmann also expressed the idea that parents would relate to Joel's character and his strong bond with Ellie as they both learn to appreciate the other (Cook, 2012).



Figure 2. Joel and Ellie arriving in Salt Lake City

The *TLoU* was first released in 2013 for the PlayStation 3 and released as a remastered edition for the PlayStation 4 in 2014. The remastered edition had enhanced graphics for the new console and included all the all the released downloadable content (DLC), namely the prequel chapter *Left Behind* (2014), the competitive online multiplayer mode and in-game developer commentary (PlayStation, nd.). To date, it is one of the best-selling games with more than 17 million copies sold and has received general critical acclaim. It has won several British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA) in 2014 for its characters and audio-visual storytelling. The game is now part of a media franchise consisting of a four-issue comic book miniseries called *The Last of Us: American Dreams* (2013, Druckmann) published by Dark Horse Comics and sequel *The Last of Us II* (Naughty Dog, 2020). Plans were made in 2014 for a film adaptation and an animated short in 2020, however these projects were ultimately cancelled due to creative disagreements (Stam, 2021). Furthermore, in Sony, Naughty Dog and HBO announced an adapted television series in 2020 (Shanley et al., 2020).

4.2 Game overview *TLoU*

The story of *TLoU* begins in 2013 in the United States when an outbreak of a mutant *Cordyceps* fungus destroys the 21st century society, see figure 2. People who inhale spores or get bitten by infected people suffer from the Cordyceps Brain Infection (CBI) becoming a kind of zombie¹. The infection kills its host by erasing their memories and driving them insane, so they spread the spores to

¹ Because the people suffer from CBI, the zombies are called 'infected' by characters in *TLoU*

others for example by biting. The game begins with a cinematic sequence where players control Sarah Miller, the twelve-year old daughter of Joel at the beginning of the *Cordyceps* outbreak. Joel tries to flee the chaos in the city of Austin, Texas with Sarah and his brother Tommy. However, this segment ends when Sarah is mortally wounded and dies in Joel's arms, thus presenting Joel as a broken man and failed father (Stang, 2017, p.169). When the game skips to twenty years later, Joel is introduced as a broken man as the game hints that Joel is not able to move on from her death.

In the main game players control Joel, now a middle-aged man. He survives by smuggling goods in and out of the military quarantine zone with his long-term smuggling partner Tess. Joel is tasked to safely escort fourteen-year-old Ellie across a post-apocalyptic United States to the revolutionary militia called the Fireflies. When Ellie is introduced to Joel and Tess, she mentions she is fourteen years old and has no living family. She lived at a boarding school within the military quarantine zone, indicating that more children do exist in the world of *TLoU*. It is revealed that Ellie is immune to CBI, because she was bitten but had not turned even after three weeks, see figure 3. And while Marlene is taking care of Ellie, she sends her away to Firefly scientists in the hope of using Ellie's immunity to find a vaccine.



Figure 3. Tess grabbing Ellie's arm and pointing at the three-weeks old bite

As mentioned by the developers, the focus of the game lies in the bond that Joel and Ellie begrudgingly develop through traveling together. As she is crucial for the narrative and ending, Ellie's death will lead to a game over screen. In the last chapter, Joel learns that Ellie will not survive the brain operation necessary to find a cure. To end the game, players must finish a segment where Joel murders Fireflies, the surgeon and Marlene to grab an unconscious Ellie off the operating table. Joel then lies about the events and tells Ellie that the Fireflies have stopped looking for a cure. The epilogue shows Ellie confronting Joel and expressing survivor's guilt when she recalls the friends that have died from CBI, wondering if she could have done more to end the pandemic. Ellie asks Joel to swear to her that he told the truth, and she hesitantly accepts his answer when he does.

As Voorhees notes, the *TLoU* blends elements of adventure, role-playing and shooting games in its gameplay (2016, p.7). The game's events take place within one year, containing twelve chapters and tells its linear narrative mainly through cinematic cutscenes. However, during gameplay characters also discuss background information such as their personal history or make small talk relating to their current environment. These low-action sequences are alternated with combat sequences where players can use a combination of stealth and gun-fight tactics against human and/or zombie-enemies. The next paragraph will explore the game's mechanics which developers characterized as survival-horror genre.

4.3 Formal elements

Now, I will discuss the formal elements, which I have introduced in table 1 (p. 18), that present the game world of *TLoU* as a dangerous place to live in. The audio-visual depiction of a ravaged 21st century landscape presents a realistic and recognizable yet unfamiliar desolate urban environment. The game presents its survival-horror genre through its rules and gameplay which rewards players to engage in combat strategically as resources such as ammunition and crafting materials for healing kits are scarce (Takahashi, 2013b, p.1). Enemies do considerable damage and unlike other action games, the health of Joel does not re-generate just by waiting. The game presents players have multiple ways to engage in combat against zombie enemies, human survivors, and soldiers. The player can arm Joel with firearms, bow and arrow and opt for make-shift weapons such as bricks, bottles, and crowbars.



Figure 4. Player engaging listen mode, grey tinted screen with nearby zombie enemies highlighted

Environmental awareness is key, not just for resources and make-shift weapons, but also to use stealth tactics. The artificial intelligence (AI) lets both human and zombie enemies search and regroup in perceptive ways. For example, enemies can respond to audio-visual cues when the player lets Joel step on glass. In response, players are encouraged to distract enemies by throwing bottles or bricks to misdirect them. In addition, running away is also a valid strategy, as it resets the enemy AI and lets the player return to stealth tactics (Takahashi, 2013b, p.2). In addition to this, Joel has a special ability to 'listen', which gives the player a visualization of near enemies within the environment. The combat segments of *TLoU* forces players to strategize their current survival in horror filled world. At the same time, it showcases the dangers that the zombies pose to society and give players an explanation how the post-apocalyptic world came to be. Thus, the game can be fittingly described using the survival-horror genre (Yablonski, 2013).

4.4 Ellie as believable child companion

Next, I will discuss formal elements that construct Ellie into a believable and likeable companion. Ellie is due to her immunity essential to the game's narrative, meaning the player spends the whole game with Ellie. Her role within gameplay fits the description of a sidekick and ally (Emmerich et al., 2018, p.142). She not only provides information but also helps the player in combat. First, the AI of Ellie's character contributes to the idea that she lives in the game's world. As earlier mentioned, Ellie and Joel are aware of their environments and comment on objects, animals, and people they encounter. It is also reflected in combat encounters where stealth is essential. Her character

crouches and stays near the player, thus adding to the game's immersion and realism (Dyckhof, 2014; Länkoski & Björk, 2007, p.420). However, the game's combat rules do not fully apply to Ellie as a companion. As many already noted Ellie is invisible to enemies (Myers, 2013). Voorhees states that this makes Ellie, like Elizabeth from *BioShock Infinite* (2013), neither a physical nor mental burden to the player (2016, p.7-8). He uses the term hypo-ludic from Steven Conway, to describe how the invisibility of Ellie allows players to focus more on other parts of the game (2010, p.136).

Next, critics have noted that characters which are invisible for enemies during combat, such as Elizabeth and Ellie, have become useful gameplay tool rather than a true companion (Ella, 2013; Stang, 2017). Meaning the game connects no consequences to players relying heavily on help from Ellie or Elizabeth. That is why games journalist Thomas Ella describes Elizabeth as an unlimited ammo and money dispenser especially as she is not physically scavenging for anything (2013). Similar to Elizabeth, Ellie stays near the player and acts autonomously when she engages in combat (Dyckhoff, 2014). Especially later in the game, Ellie is a helpful and capable force in combat encounters because she helps Joel get rid of enemies that attack him. She can stun enemies by throwing objects and when she obtains a gun, Ellie can kill them. Voorhees borrows from Conway again, to describe these acts as hyper-ludic because they enable players to interact with the game in a more effective way (2016, p.8). Thus, players are inclined to like Ellie as a companion character because she makes playing the game enjoyable.

In addition, Myers argues that due to Ellie's invisibility the responsibility of caring for her is taken away from the player (2013). As a companion she can only be hurt during scripted cutscenes which is never the fault of the player. She is designed to be a positive influence on the battlefield, only helping the player. I argue that Ellie's hurt is used as a narrative device in *TLoU*, only relevant if the story needs emotional and dramatic stakes. And as I discuss next, the care responsibility for Ellie is based on arguments that fall within the discourse of the innocent child.

4.5 Taking care of 'the child' companion Ellie

As Reay notes that the few children represented in games and that dying children are used to underline the idea that the game world is savage and hostile (2021). I will first show how Ellie's representation falls within the discourse of the innocent child. Then I will discuss the lack of parental care and the dead children in *TLoU* to show how the game shows the moral degradation of society.

First, the innocence of Ellie is reflected in the way Ellie is introduced and portrayed through framing characteristics of the narrative, visual presentation, and combat mechanics. First, Ellie's immunity places her literally as the future of humanity within the narrative. In the beginning only Marlene is shown to believe that Ellie might be the key to creating a vaccine or cure. However, in chapter two,

after Tess was bitten, she too expresses faith in Ellie's immunity and sacrifices herself to give Joel and Ellie time to escape the soldiers. This forces Joel and Ellie to continue their journey as a duo. In this sense, Ellie does not only represent the future because of her child-status, but also because all the people in *TLoU* recognize her as the only immune person.

Due the dangerous environment, all the dangers to Ellie, both human and zombie are even more distressing. This falls precisely in the child-at-risk discourse, characterizing Ellie's wellbeing as something that is always in danger within the post-apocalyptic world (Furedi, 2001, p.25). Secondly, the generational gap in experience between Joel and Ellie is used to contrast their relationship. Joel represents the generation who lost everything, from family to way of living and had to adapt to a post-apocalyptic survival lifestyle (Parker, 2013). Even though Ellie has always lived in a place with a strong military presence, she is not used to brutal violence. She expresses horror after her first violent encounter, even though initiated it towards the soldiers scanning them for the virus. Thus, in the beginning of the game Ellie's innocence is a stark contrast with the violent world of *TLoU*.

The position of the player is similar to Ellie, we are new to the world of *TLoU* and its inhabitants as well. The game uses Joel to explain the events of the *Cordyceps* outbreak and how the post-apocalyptic society functions, something which would make less sense if he conversed with an adult character (Reay, 2022, p.74; Voorhees, 2016, p.9-10). Ellie shows her admiration for beauty of nature taking back urban environments but also her terror when she learns how the *Cordyceps* virus affects people. The game invites the player therefore to identify with both Joel and Ellie, as we embody Joel the protective father-figure while experiencing the world through the eyes of Ellie (Voorhees, p.10). Ellie's inexperience with the outside world is also used to explain her lack of swimming ability. This introduces multiple puzzle segments where Ellie is fully dependent on Joel to help her cross bodies of water. Therefore, Ellie's innocence and inexperience facilitate expository dialogue and gameplay elements characterizing her as an innately innocent child who needs protection from adults (Christensen, 2000, p.38-41; Meyer, 2007, p.89).



Figure 5. Ellie's outfit of TLoU (2013) in TLoU II (2020)



Figure 6. Clementine in TWD:S1 (2012)



Figure 7. Elizabeth from BioShock Infinite (2013)

In addition to the narrative introduction of Ellie's innocence and immaturity, the visual character presentation also reflects her child-status, see figure 5. As Voorhees notes, the appearance of Ellie is not inappropriately sexualised as she wears tomboy outfits which are practical and have full-length coverage (2016, p.11). The non-sexualization of the daughter character is also visual in *TWD:S1* (2012), with Clementine and her age-appropriate and practical clothing, see figure 6 (Lawlor, 2018, p.35). Unlike Elizabeth, which is positioned as an object of sexual desire based on the damsel-in-distress trope, see figure 7 (Voorhees, 2016, p.11). This trope presents the rescue of the young woman by the hero followed by marriage or sexual activities. Voorhees notes that the game codes the only encounter where Ellie is sexualized as morally wrong. When David, the leader of a group of cannibals, expresses sexual desire towards Ellie the game frames the cannibals as inhuman and savage.

As I have argued, players are invited to develop positive feelings towards Ellie through the virtue of player-avatar identity entanglement and because Ellie is a likeable and useful companion. Reay notes that all beings enter this world in a state of extreme dependency and in need of specific care to survive (2022, p.37). However, how immaturity is understood beyond the biological aspects is culturally dependent (James & Prout, 1990, p.7). During winter Joel is incapacitated and the player takes control of Ellie. From this moment on she becomes a playable companion with similar combat abilities to Joel (Voorhees, 2016, p.10). Notable, she has a switchblade that does not break after use

compared to Joel's crafted shivs which break after one to three uses. The similar combat abilities signal an equal survivor status of both characters which is unique. While the role-reversal also conveys the idea that Ellie as a protégé is now capable of fending for herself and her father-figure. Most games certain stealth games that use a child character to explain the avatar's helplessness and encourage the use of an evasive, tactical playing style (Reay, 2022, p.63). In addition, the sole fact that Ellie is a playable character is exceptional, as Reay notes that less than 9% of the 506 games she analysed had a playable child.

4.6 Taking 'care' of the child Ellie

I have established what elements help Ellie shape into a believable digital companion and how her representation reflects the social status of a capable child. Now I will discuss the role of violence within the ethics of care and the concept of mature care. Then, I discuss the dependency of children and the parental responsibility in *TLoU*. Next, I argue that the way care portrayed in *TLoU* fits within the post-apocalyptic society, but ultimately represents a form of hegemonic masculinity. As the controversial ending shows, Joel cares more *about* Ellie than *for* her and her own interests.

The post-apocalyptic society of *TLoU* is quite violent, the military controls the quarantine zones and outside various survivor groups fight against zombies and each other. American philosopher Virginia Held has specifically discussed the role of violence in care ethics. She states that ruling out violence beforehand is not an option, because even in the context of care violence may be necessary (2010, p.121). For example, one might violently yank a child out of harm's way. But the ethics of care generally promotes change and maintaining order in a non-violent way. Relating to the dependency of people, Held therefore argues that care needs should be interpreted from the perspective of the recipient and the provider. For the inhabitants of *TLoU*, the priority of care might just be physical safety from attackers. However, Held also notes that care can also be provided in oppressive, insensitive and ineffective ways (p.121-122). For example, the military preventing citizens to leave quarantine zones and forcing them into labour in *TLoU*. This is not good care, as the ethics of care promotes the idea of meeting the needs of persons in responsible ways that are liberating, sensitive and effective.

Even if the inhabitants of *TLoU* world need to use violence to defend against the zombie threat, the United States society never recovered from the martial law implemented at the beginning of the CBI outbreak. Joel and other NPCs mention that basic resources, weapons, and ammunition got scarcer each year, but nobody in the game narrative reflected on the way different social groups survived. All social groups use violence to accomplish their goals. For example, the Hunters who kill and rob

anyone who trespass their territory or the Fireflies who use violence to restore the control of the United States government. The term mature care was first coined by Carol Gilligan to describe people who were able to weigh and mediate the interests of both themselves and others (1982). In addition, Pettersen notes that this requires active thinking to acknowledge different emotions and motivations (p.56). Mature care is then to accept the interests of all affected. American moral and ethics professor Erik Wingrove-Haugland notes that ethics of care even sees enemy combatants as objects of care. Thus, preventing the idea that there are no moral limits on violence against those you consider as enemies.



Figure 8. David introduces himself to Ellie

Notably, its David as leader of the cannibal group who is the exception of people who rely just on violence as he has shown a type of mature care, see figure 8. During the winter Ellie hunts animals in the woods while taking care of an incapacitated Joel. When she has successfully hunted a deer, she meets David and James who propose to share the meat of the deer in exchange for medicine. David is introduced as a caring leader, who compliments Ellie's survival capabilities and supports his people by performing survival tasks. He complies with commands of a distrustful Ellie but reveals a hidden revolver when zombies attack to save Ellie. When Ellie gets taken by David, she learns that the group has resorted to cannibalism which disturbs her. However, David thinks they are both similar stating:

David: "Oh...you're awfully quick to judgment. Considering you and your friend killed how many men?"

Ellie: "They didn't give us a choice."

David: "And you think we have a choice? Is that it? You kill to survive...and so do we. We have to take care of our own. By any means necessary."

The player, as Ellie, eventually kills James in boss-fight and is reunited with a recovered Joel. From then on, the player controls Joel once again. However, the relationship between them is reversed as Ellie is shown as more distant and less talkative. Suggesting that the violent experiences that Ellie had with David and his group impacted her mentally. The fact that the only representation of mature care is related to a morally deplorable character due to his cannibalism and coded sexual attraction leaves a bitter taste. As the lack of representation of mature care suggests that trusting and caring about others will get you killed.

Another difference between David and other characters is the fact that he acknowledges Ellie as 'just' a kid. Other interactions of adults with Ellie reflect that idea that parental responsibilities are not prioritised nor held as ideals by the post-apocalyptic society. As stated earlier in 2.3, adults often have the upper hand in relationships with children. The adults acknowledge Ellie's young age, but do not show empathy for her or take on caregiving responsibilities for her. Sociologist and gender studies scholar Andrea Doucet has conceptualized parental responsibilities as something that is emotional, community-based, and morally associated with social values (2017, p.16). For the moral aspect relates Doucet leans on Sara Ruddick's (1995) argument that parental caregiving is associated with social groups and social values within which caregiving takes place (2020, p.16). Both Doucet and Tronto argue that one must recognize parenting is community-based, as parental responsibilities and care practices are done by everyone involved in a child's life. Thus, societies expectations of gender and caregiving can pressure or influence people to perform certain kinds of care practices.



Figure 9. From the left Ellie is holding her hands up while Sam on the right points gun at Joe, Henry is lying on the ground in the middle

Within the game society there are no indications of gendered expectations or pressures of parental responsibilities towards children. The player stumbles upon the remains of one survivor group which included multiple children, they even made a small classroom. Other survivor groups, such as the Hunters, kill everyone they deem useless for the survival of the whole group. The only other child in *TLoU* is thirteen-year-old Sam who is accompanied by his older brother Sam, see figure 9. Henry identifies that Joel is friendly and not affiliated with the Hunters, because he is with Ellie. As Reay notes, this identification process of children as moral barometers also works for the player, who is introduced to both Henry and Sam in this cutscene (2020). Thus, we can conclude that caring for children is not prioritised by social groups found in *TLoU*, but the exception. This reminds me of the proverb: “It takes a village to raise a child”. But in the case of *TLoU*, what happens if most people in the village of *TLoU* do not care about the child?

In a society where everyone, regardless of gender, only cares for themselves, it is even more notable that Joel takes on the parental responsibility to care for Ellie. Joel is introduced as someone who will do anything to survive. And at the beginning of the journey, Joel makes it clear he will only take care of Ellie’s physical wellbeing as long as he gets paid. This refers to the distinction feminist scholars make with caring *for* as the practical tasks of care and caring *about* as the affective relations of care (Elliot, 2016, p.248). Karla Elliot argues that it does not matter if men do not care *about* children initially, because actual care practices allow men to develop the affective and emotional aspects of care (p.249). This reflects the relationship of Joel and Ellie, as it gets more affectionate and stronger

the longer they journey together (Dutton, 2013; Takahashi, 2013a). Going back to the parental responsibilities and ethics of care, Doucet uses Joan Tronto's (1989, 1993) understanding of emotional responsibilities relating to skills and practices of attentiveness and responsiveness (2020, p.16). In other words, it is the act of thinking about the needs of a child and the skill of attending to those needs. As Joel had a daughter before the CBI outbreak, we can assume he is a capable caregiver.

Joel only later portrays a caring masculinity that includes both the practical tasks of care and the emotional responsibilities when he also cares *about* Ellie. Elliot understands caring masculinities as "masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care which include positive emotions, interdependence, and relationality." (2016, p.240). In the beginning of the game, the relationship of Joel and Ellie is shaped by Joel's dominance (Joyce, 2014). He deems her as incapable of protecting herself and as 'a delivery job'. Joyce notes that this control is also reflected in the emotional development of Ellie because he does not allow Ellie to discuss her feelings or experiences with him after traumatic experiences. Similarly, Henry commands his little brother Sam to only take necessities in his backpack and encourages him to 'man up'. Thus, teaching Sam a form of emotional stoicism to hide and push down any emotion (hooks, p.5-6).

Lawlor notes that in this segment of the game differences in paternal figures are highlighted, but I disagree and argue that the actual difference is the characterisation of the children (2018, p.33). Ellie's character is written as someone who is strong and independent. Most dialogue initially was written by Druckmann, but during shooting it ended up as a collaboration between Druckmann and the actors portraying the characters. For Ellie, then 33-year-old actress Ashley Johnson, actively influenced Ellie's portrayal as someone who acts and reacts rather than hide (Betrand et al., 2014; Eurogamer, 2013). While Ellie pushes back against Joel's dominance and her good moods are not discouraged by Joel's lack of response, Sam is portrayed as a non-rebellious pessimistic child. For example, unlike Henry he did not not believe others from his group survived the Hunters.



Figure 10. Ellie with the rifle

During the journey Ellie shows multiple times she can defend herself and Joel. This eventually leads to Joel acknowledging their interdependence and makes room for a more balanced relationship between them. This is shown when he teaches Ellie to shoot a rifle and asks her to watch his back, see figure 10. Later Ellie gets a handgun, giving her the ability to shoot enemies during combat sequences. As previously mentioned, the role reversal of Ellie taking care of Joel could be the epitome of a caring masculinity that Elliot describes (2016, p.248). Ellie is shown to be capable of defending herself against both human and zombie enemies and she ultimately saves Joel's life by helping him recover and getting him medicine. As Voorhees notes, her actions are in service of her paternal caregiver suggesting that fathers can and should have confidence in their daughter figures (2016, p.9). But ultimately, Joel and Ellie fail to have a balanced and caring relationship because they do not reflect on the traumatic events they experienced nor on their own care within their relationship. For example, Ellie got more distant after the events with David and happens to be cheered up by seeing giraffes, which is an external event outside of both of their control. Thus, even the caring masculinity portrayed by Joel during the last chapter of the journey does not accept mentally

More importantly, Joel resorts to control to prevent Ellie to make decision regarding her own life. In the end sequence, Joel and Ellie fail to cross a water stream and fall into fast flowing water. Joel is performing CPR on Ellie when the Fireflies find them. On Marlene's orders she is immediately taken to the operating room. From an ethics of care perspective, both Marlene and Joel fail to give Ellie good care, but not in the same way. First, when Joel gets cold feet and says they do not have to

complete their journey Ellie responds with “After all we've been through... Everything that I've done, it can't be for nothing.” While I would argue we cannot be sure she knows at this moment that the brain surgery would be deadly for, she does express her intent of being part of the search for a cure. It is here that Marlene disregards Ellie’s opinion, by resuscitating her and immediately preparing her for the brain surgery. Thus, preventing Ellie to consciously decide to go through with the deadly operation.

Secondly, Joel lies about the events to Ellie as he claims that more immune people have been discovered and that the Fireflies stopped looking for a cure. Even when Ellie confronts him, he swears that he spoke the truth. Thus, the progression of a harmonious relationship between Joel and Ellie is disrupted by Joel’s conscious decision to prevent Ellie from reflecting on the unique circumstances of her immunity and her relationship with Joel. In addition, by killing Marlene and other Fireflies Joel makes Ellie more dependent on him, as she does not have any contact to other people unrelated to Joel. Ellie even explicitly stated to Sam that her biggest fear is ending up alone, making it unlikely that she would leave Joel if she does not have anyone else in her life. A position that fuels the theme of EPM within their relationship, seeing as Joel is and stays the only caregiver of Ellie (Lawlor, 2018, p.33).

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

In this thesis I drew on theories of ethics, childhood studies and game studies to expand the ethics of care approach of Murphy and Zagal to be applicable to games in general. This is reflected in my first sub question: “How can the ethics of care approach be applied to the action-adventure single-player game *The Last of Us*?”. By going back to the philosophical roots of care ethics, I have focused on the interdependence and dependence of both characters and their interactions in *TLoU*. The usefulness of textual analysis is therefore not limited by the genre of a game. Similar to film and television, narrative cutscenes in addition to gameplay and combat mechanics can be used to analyse care-related elements in games. As the main focus of the game is the relationship between Joel and Ellie, it is fitting to look at the lack of mature care practices between them. Near the end of the game, they have gotten closer as they have experienced pleasant and bitter moments together, but I argue that the strength of Ellie’s character is the driving force that brings balance to their mutual care relationship.

To answer my second sub question: “What is the role of the child character Ellie within the ethics of care approach in *The Last of Us*?” I have used a textual analysis to focus on the portrayal of Ellie’s character. Games can be understood as arenas in which the meaning and value of children and childhood are represent and contested (Reay, 2022, p.195). Apart from the lack of representation of children, figures of ‘the child’ are used to make both progressive and conservative arguments about children (p.196). As Ellie is supposed to be a person worth caring for, she is portrayed in the game as a child that fits the dominant discourses of both innocence and at-risk due to the omnipresent violent dangers of their world. At first, Ellie’s child status and similarity to his deceased daughter Sarah might be the reason why he feels a parental duty of care towards Ellie. However, Ellie’s combat abilities, character traits and caretaking for Joel show she is not a passive recipient of care which challenges the adult-child binary found within childhood studies.

Finally, to answer my main research question: “How are ethics of care values constructed by *The Last of Us* with the child companion Ellie?” I have drawn from the intersection of ethics, childhood studies and game studies. While children and childhood seem like an odd pairing with the post-apocalypse condition, Olsen notes that they both play a central role of struggle for survival and the hope for humanity (2015, p.8). In the case of *TLoU*, Ellie plays this dual role. She is represented as an innately innocent child, while also showing the resourcefulness and capabilities of children in traumatic situations. Within the world of *TLoU* parental or institutional responsibilities of care are not acknowledged and the few children are encouraged to learn survival skills and earn their worth. While Ellie’s immunity does gives her a survival advantage, Sam and the other dead children in the game suggest that passivity is deadly. As Druckmann stated that children in conflict zones were an

inspiration in development seeing as they still find ways to be child-like and play (Parker, 2013). Garlen and colleagues argue that when adults often frame childhood as something that is care-free but forget that children's lives are equally full of care and experiences (p.659). In doing so, we can acknowledge childhood still encompasses relationships, worries, conflicts even if these are differently than adults.

The developers invested the time to make Ellie a believable and likeable companion she is both the sidekick and ally for the player. In this sense, Ellie plays again a dual role of providing diegetic positive conversations and ludic service to the player (Reay, 2022, p.74; Voorhees, 2016, p.9-10). The physical and mental consequences of the violence in *TLoU* is put on the foreground for Joel and Ellie, while others are cast as enemies or killed off when they are becoming too friendly. Moral disengagement to justify player's violence against other NPC's by excluding suffering of others such as the Firefly victims and other survivors (Hartmann, 2014, p.315-316). While there already have been many interpretations of the ending, the developers made a conscious decision to not give players any input (Takahashi, 2013b, p.3). As Straley stated in the interview with Takahashi: "It's because you're not him [Joel] that you get to see him". And I would argue that this decision encourages active reflection and discussion on themes of care, compassion, and trauma (Fruhstick, 2013; Oliver et al., 2015, p.2).

I would also argue that more attention should be focused on the writing of Ellie's character and her personality rather than Joel's character and his selective ethics of care. Feminist scholars have already noted that Joel's character is a typical white, older and middle-class male (Brice, 2013; Myers, 2013). That the players are meant to empathize with the failed father figure just because he tried (Myers, 2013). And that the psychological reversal of the characters negatively affects the daughter figures in both *TLoU* and *BioShock Infinite* (Stang, 2017, p.159). This reflects the argument of game scholar Mattie Brice who states that trauma of other people, the girlfriends or daughters, are still used for character growth for men (2013). Instead, Stang proposes we should focus on relationship which are grounded in mutual care and empathy (2017, p.166). And I would add, especially caring relationships that centre children. Not just because child characters can add diversity within games, but also because games can push players to explore and reflect on their own boundaries of care towards both children and adults.

After the release of the *TLoU* there have been multiple scholars, namely Emma Reay who already approached the game from multiple angles such as childhood studies, feminist, and game studies. With this thesis I have tried to approach Ellie as a child companion from an ethical framework that builds on previous works which looked at the father-daughter relationship (Stang, 2017) and

masculine care practices (Lawlor, 2018; Voorhees, 2016). Due to time constraints this thesis only looked at one game using the expanded ethics of care framework which is quite a narrow scope. Thus, future research could compare the games which are part of the so-called 'dadification' such as the latest *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018) but could also focus on the recent 'momification' (Flores, 2020). Especially as inequalities still exist in everyday care practices it is crucial to be critical on contemporary rhetorics of care because critique is the first step towards a reimagining of care (Ruberg and Scully-Blaker 2021, p.669).

Another limitation is that this research did not include actual player experiences and responses. That is why future research could use ethnographic recordings and analysis from gameplay segments which centre care like Bell and colleagues (2015). They used micro-ethnographic exploration of masculinities by letting two young African American men play through *TWD:S1* (p.7-8). While this method is very time-consuming it can create a deeper understanding of play practices of diverse participants which is critical for games that centre care. Qualitative methods are also useful to study players reflection on NPC relationships and meaningful choice. Scriven recently concluded that the NPCs in *Farcry 6* rely heavily on archetypes and stereotypical narratives, motivations, and behaviours (2022, p.2). While this makes the NPCs more familiar to players, it also creates barriers for deep emotional connection to individual characters and the guerrilla conflict. Playthroughs and group interviews allow players to discuss and reflect on lack of choices in NPC interactions and their connection to certain NPCs. Research which tries to understand the ways players emotionally connect to narratives, game worlds and their inhabitants does not help only game developers create better games. It also helps to connect games as a medium to other societal themes such as care, ethics, and meaningful play.

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