

KEEP FIGHTING: CRITICAL DYSTOPIA IN *THE LAST OF US*

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**Keep Fighting: Critical Dystopia in *The Last of Us*, Master's Degree 2021, Habiba Abudu,
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Abstract

My MRP studies the video game *The Last of Us* (*TLOU*) as a critical dystopian text. Four scenes were analyzed using Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA) which looks at images, sounds, and texts. MMDA—in a cohesive way—depicts a dichotomy between city and natural environments. By studying *TLOU*, I can see the mechanics used to create a dystopian environment to warn about the dangers we face in crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Introduction

Actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt said the future of storytelling is in video games (Wald, 2020). He further goes on to explain video games provides storytelling in ways other mediums cannot (Wald, 2020). That said, I believe video games are a valuable medium to study, and it is important to consider their use in current communication practices.

In my own life, video games were a formative part of my childhood. The various elements of the medium, be it the music, character design, or plot, have paralleled the books I read. These games can range from an open-world environment such as the video game *Fable*, *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series, or a story with deep emotional pathos such as Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* or *Kingdom Hearts* series.

While working on this paper, I learned video games have their field of analysis—game studies—which comprises many interdisciplinary practices and methodologies for the research and education of games (Mäyrä, 2008). It is highly difficult or even impossible to use all methods when looking at games through a critical lens, which made it hard to narrow my topic and research methods (Mäyrä, 2008). Following discussions with Sibó Chen and friends, I decided to study the action-adventure video game *The Last of Us (TLOU)* because it relates to humanity within a dystopian world; future paragraphs will delve into this deeper.

TLOU can be considered a cultural product (Nieborg & Hermes, 2008). Cultural products such as *TLOU* reflect the period or social/cultural milieu it is a part of and can provide insight for the time it was made (Pérez-Latorre, 2019). In this case, *TLOU* fits this definition as it seeks to be progressive by showing forms of resistance with the main characters Joel and Ellie leaving the city in the hopes of acquiring utopia (Chang, 2011). However, there is a negotiation between the city—which represents the old order and utopian-like communes (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

In my MRP, *TLOU* is considered an extended form of text (Green, 2016). In fact, *TLOU* is a hypertext due to its interactive capabilities (Cassidy, 2011). Through this method, I also considered the narrative and ludic elements of video games, which will be further discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

While exploring current topics on methodologies used to study video games, I found two ways video games are analyzed: narratology, which emphasizes the storyline, and ludology, which strictly looks at game mechanics (Cassidy, 2011; Murray, 2005). However, in recent years, scholars are also considering analyzing games through semiotics (signs or symbols), which considers many modes to form a cohesive picture, or “meaning” (Kress, 2011).

Ultimately, I decided to use multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA), which uses language with images and sounds to create a cohesive understanding (Kress, 2011). Therefore, using MMDA will develop a better understanding of *TLOU*.

TLOU is a critical dystopian text due to many factors, such as being made after the ‘80s, a period in which scholars were forced to reevaluate their circumstances and its depiction of resistance on the dystopian environment it is situated in; therefore, illustrating progressive values (Chang, 2011; Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2017). It also draws upon the general overarching dystopian themes, including government control and survival (Henry, 2018; MasterClass staff, 2020).

This MRP will begin with a literature review that will provide an overview of theories that influence my analysis of *TLOU*, such as cultural and game studies, and the literary genre dystopia. The subsequent section will discuss the methodologies and the research methods I used. The final parts of the paper will highlight and discuss the findings that show how *TLOU* is a critical dystopian text and will add to the current literary work that views it as such.

Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, video games can be seen as text (Green, 2016). Based on this, I will be conducting a textual analysis of *TLOU*. I will be observing scenes that highlight its dystopian themes through sounds, dialogue, and images. I will explore how *TLOU* portrays messages or meaning in comparison to other critical dystopian texts. To do this, I will be using the following three questions to guide my research:

- What sounds, images, and discourse are found in nature and city scenes, and how do they contribute to the story's overall meaning?

Based on MMDA readings, this data collection will ensure a cohesive understanding of scenes that are reviewed. I imagine nature and city scenes would elicit different responses. Further, it is necessary to contrast city and nature scenes as critical dystopian texts seek to provide utopia in a predominantly dystopian environment (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). The differences in sounds, images, discourse will show the difference of being in nature and city environments. In *TLOU*'s case, there is an intentional juxtaposition between nature and city scenes. That said, I expect commonalities throughout the nature and city scenes. Ultimately, my findings here would help me answer my second research question:

- How does *TLOU* depict itself as a critical dystopian text?

This question will be answered using my understanding of the literary genre critical dystopia and my own experiences of playing the game. Using these tactics and drawing upon key characteristics of critical dystopia, I will be able to showcase how *TLOU* is depicted as such.

- How does *TLOU* compare to other critical dystopian texts?

By referring to other critical dystopian texts from film, TV, and literature, I want to see how *TLOU* bears similarities and differences. My research has found *TLOU* to be a hybrid text

due to its interactivity (Cassidy, 2011). A player can participate in the game in a way that is not possible in films and television shows (Cassidy, 2011). That said, one can liken viewing the playthrough version of the game to a movie experience. In addition, considering *TLOU*'s dialogue or script alone would be similar to reading a novel. For the purposes of this study, I used *The Giver*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Attack on Titan*—other critical dystopian texts to compare with *TLOU*.

The Last of Us

Before the literature review, I will provide a short introduction to the game's storyline and setting. *TLOU* depicts a world devastated by an infectious disease caused by the Cordyceps fungus (Naughty Dog, 2014). The main characters are a middle-aged man named Joel and a teenager named Ellie. They team up for a year-long journey across America in hopes of locating the militia group The Fireflies. The Fireflies can potentially use Ellie's immunity to find a cure for the virus.

As mentioned earlier, *TLOU* can be considered a critical dystopian text. That said, I argue dystopian texts or products are critical, but generally, this genre features elements of survival, environmental damage, and government control (MasterClass staff, 2020). Further, *TLOU* can also be viewed as a cultural product and a speculative text—all of which will be discussed in the literature review.

Literature Review

My literature review comprises an interdisciplinary approach that includes cultural studies, game studies, and dystopia.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies consider the way culture is made (The Cultural Studies Faculty and Staff, n.d.). It is also an interdisciplinary field that draws upon many schools of thought, such as social sciences and humanities (The Cultural Studies Faculty and Staff, n.d.). Further, it considers the wide range of beliefs and systems, and acknowledges its ever-changing nature in society (The Cultural Studies Faculty and Staff, n.d.).

As the player/viewer progresses in *TLOU*, critical commentary is provided throughout the different geographic locations such as Utah, Texas, Massachusetts, and Colorado (Callahan, 2019). For example, Boston represents failed dreams (Callahan, 2019). Boston—a place for settlement—is now filled with dilapidated buildings and an overwhelming sense of restrictions (Callahan, 2019). Further, Boston is also depicted as a police state—the only area which features law enforcement to emphasize the failure of American values (Callahan, 2019). Pittsburgh is another location in the game and represents the Industrial Revolution and symbolizes America's societal breakdown (Callahan, 2019). The video game shows the city filled with disease-infested people (Callahan, 2019). That said, historical buildings show the implications of a group whose focus is capitalism (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). In summary, cultural studies show how society is made, and *TLOU* uses familiar landmarks to provide satire. The next section will discuss a field that is considered an offshoot of cultural studies: game studies (Nieborg & Hermes, 2008).

Game Studies

Game studies comprise a scientific and academic practice (Mäyrä, 2008). Depending on the game that is being studied, a different approach may be needed (Mäyrä, 2008). Further, the scientific method is constantly revised and amended (Mäyrä, 2008). Many disciplines can be used in game studies, such as literature, which will influence this study as *TLOU* is considered an extended form of text (Mäyrä, 2008). However, there has not yet been an established approach to study games (Mäyrä, 2008).

This paper will use a humanities-based approach, in which games are regarded as a piece of text and signifiers are considered with other signs to form meaning (Mäyrä, 2008). It is this way game studies are similar to cultural studies as it looks for signifiers. The next part of this paper will discuss dystopia and the subgenre *TLOU* is a part of: critical dystopia.

Dystopia

TLOU can be considered a dystopian video game within the subcategory of critical dystopia (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). Therefore, I would like to provide an overview of the ideology of dystopia as it is needed to provide a foundation for my analysis and research questions, alongside terms related to dystopia.

Dystopia in Greek refers to a bad place (Henry, 2018). Dystopian texts project a possible scenario and are fictional (Henry, 2018). Writers of dystopian literature look at current social and economic structures to anticipate what would happen if these institutions were amplified (Henry, 2018). An example of this in *TLOU* is a worldwide public health crisis with limited supplies. As a result, characters in *TLOU* are comfortable with taking extreme measures to survive.

Further, dystopian texts such as *TLOU* seek to pose philosophical questions (Henry, 2018). In *TLOU*, Joel can help humanity by letting Ellie—who is immune from the Cordyceps virus—be killed to save countless lives possibly. That said, Joel finds meaning in his life again through his relationship with Ellie (HeY DeVuH, 2019). This inspires Joel to kill others to allow Ellie—and inadvertently himself—to survive (Henry, 2018; HeY DeVuH, 2019). However, viewers and players alike can question if his actions are justifiable as humanity suffered for preserving Ellie.

Dystopia can be depicted in many ways, and *TLOU* showcases several characteristics of the genre. Features of dystopia include: financial challenges, such as a divide between the wealthy and poor (in *TLOU*'s case, resources are limited, and characters are seen wearing dirty clothes); environmental damage and pollution that wreaks havoc on the lives of characters (in *TLOU*, the water supply in the city is filthy and filled with corpses); technology as a means for controlling the masses; an emphasis on survival techniques; a loss of individualism since a dystopian society often robs people of their rights and freedoms; and propaganda to reinforce ideas (Henry, 2018; MasterClass staff, 2020; Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

According to the Canadian English Oxford dictionary, a utopia is “any real or imaginary society, place or state, etc., considered to be perfect or ideal” (“Utopia,” 2004). This quote shows how utopia differs from dystopia. Further, these utopias are usually reflections of the author (Henry, 2018). In *TLOU*, paradise is depicted in Tommy's (Joel's brother) enclave (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). This portrayal of utopia in the video game leads to the subcategory of critical dystopia—which often negotiates between utopian and dystopian environments, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

Critical Dystopia

Critical dystopia refers to dystopian works after the '80s (Chang, 2011). It is a relatively new genre that seeks to look at the emerging circumstances of modern times while trying to offer hope (Moylan, 2000, as cited in Chang, 2011). It looks at the contrast between dystopia and utopia, which is politically resistant (Alkan, 2016). Sargent (2001, as cited in Chang, 2011) considers critical dystopia as:

...a nonexistent society described in considerable detail and normally located in the time and space the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally included at least one utopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopias can be overcome and replaced with a utopia (p. 222, as cited in Chang, 2011, p.4).

Further, Baccolini and Moylan (2003, as cited in Chang, 2011) argue critical dystopian texts are mixed since they draw upon different genres. In fact, *TLOU* features elements of science fiction and dystopia, which depicts its hybrid nature (Callahan, 2019). For example, the Cordyceps virus infects the brain of humans in *TLOU*, with the worse stage being a “bloater.”

TLOU depicts progressive values as characters opt to survive in a world where resources are limited. Such resistance can be considered progressive and offer some form of critique for the world we live in (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2017). That said, Baccolini (2000, as cited in Chang, 2011) also mention that critical dystopia features open endings with the interpretation left to the reader or viewer. In *TLOU*'s case, Joel lies to Ellie after saving her and says the Fireflies no longer needed her. It is unclear whether Ellie believes Joel, but she seemingly accepts his explanation (Plante, 2013). Ambiguous endings such as *TLOU* provide hope utopias can be found within a dystopian world (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

Fitting (2003, as cited in Farca & Ladevèze, 2016) says critical dystopia discusses how the world emerged and offers possible solutions. In film, some producers will attribute the cause

of a dystopian world to capitalism (Mirrlees & Pederson, 2016). In this way, the world the author creates is based on their “empirical reality,” which influences how the story world is produced (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016, p. 3).

Critical Dystopia in Other Texts

There are several examples of critical dystopian texts, and they will be used as a means of comparison with *TLOU*. First is *The Hunger Games* novel series (later adapted in a film saga) by Suzanne Collins. This series depicts the young teenager Katniss Everdeen in a battle-royale tournament sanctioned by the government. Further, the ruling party controls the narrative, distorts history, and uses propaganda as a means of government control (Kula, 2017). Similarly, in *TLOU*, there are government sanctions in which martial law is imposed with quarantine zones (Callahan, 2019). Through means such as government control and entertainment, the masses are kept passive (Nyman, 2015). There is a loss of individuality as children are forced to fight in the games for entertainment. One of my favourite quotes from the film adaptation is when fellow participant Peeta Mellark expresses his desire to keep his humanity in the games to Katniss:

Peeta Mellark: I just don't want them to change me.

Katniss Everdeen: How will they change you?

Peeta Mellark: I don't know. Turn me into something I'm not. I just don't want to be another piece in their game, you know? (Ross, 2012, 58:44-58:51)

Peeta depicts resistance—a feature of critical dystopia—by expressing his desire to keep his humanity (Baccolini & Moylan, 2000). That said, the fictional city of Panem in the series punishes any forms of rebellion (Kula, 2017). Katniss shows subversion by hunting—which is illegal in Panem (Nyman, 2015). It is through subversive acts *The Hunger Games* is similar to

TLOU. Similarly, Joel does not accept his circumstances and stay in the city, but instead leaves in defiance for a chance of utopia.

The Giver is another example of a novel that depicts a critical dystopian society. Science has removed many problems in this narrative by enacting sameness among humanity (Stewart, 2007). Sameness is also incorporated in the novel, where the people in the community have no choice in whom they will marry, their vocation, etc. (Stewart, 2007). *The Giver* oversees the community's memories (Stewart, 2007). Similarly, in *TLOU*'s case, Ellie, who is surprisingly immune from the Cordyceps fungal virus, can cure humanity, depicting the role science and technology play in the video game.

The anime and manga series *Attack on Titan* show a world where humans are faced with the human-devouring humanoids. Humanoids is similar to those infected by the virus in *TLOU*. It is also similar to *TLOU* in which there is government sanction and actions for the betterment of humanity. The government is a stratocracy in which there is military control. There is a divide between the haves and the have-nots (ZERON87, 2021). It can be considered a form of speculative fiction since it parallels modern-day society with its economic divide. This is similar to *TLOU* as it depicts scenarios that can happen today. Speculative fiction will be discussed further in the following paragraph.

Speculative fiction seeks to take dystopia—which is known to be in the future—and shows circumstances that could happen today (Henry, 2018). For example, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* portrays a world that does not feature advanced technology and takes place in 2005—which can cause readers to wonder if they are living in a dystopian society (Henry, 2018). There are elements of *TLOU* that parallel today's world and can be a warning if we do not

change our ways (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). Similarly, *TLOU* uses familiar stakeholders such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

In summary, dystopian texts seek to discuss a potential reality with critical dystopia considered a subcategory of this genre (Henry, 2018). Dystopian environments contrast with utopia in which a perfect scenario is depicted but is highly improbable (Masterclass, n.d). The critical dystopian genre emerged at the end of the 20th century as creators started to negotiate between dystopia and utopia by offering hope and are often depicted with themes of resistance (Chang, 2011). Further, several texts have come from the period, such as *The Hunger Games* and *TLOU*. That said, I will now discuss *TLOU* as a critical dystopian text.

***TLOU*: A Critical Dystopia**

TLOU is considered a critical dystopian text. Green (2016) explains why *TLOU* is a text:

The reason for considering the game's narrative against the traits of a literary genre is this: The humanities, as a larger discipline, benefit most from the ability to draw from different genres, forms, and lenses of critical theory, rather than pigeon-hole texts into strict definitions and boundaries. This includes embracing an expanded definition of "text" about what is literary (p. 749).

This challenges the traditional view of a text which states text can only be found within a book.

In *TLOU*, communities are created as a form of resistance to the predominantly dystopian world (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). These places provide optimism as one can improve their circumstances in these environments (Pérez-Latorre, 2019). This is illustrated in *TLOU* as Ellie and Joel become adept in tactics such as far hearing to survive (Besalú, Oliva, & Pérez-Latorre, 2017). That said, players also participate in resistance by rebuilding society (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

Research Methods

By studying *TLOU* as a viewer/player, I had a hands-on experience that enabled me to understand the game's interactive components and narrative elements. To do this, I watched a 10-hour playthrough of *TLOU* on YouTube. The experience of watching recordings of the video game gave me a film viewing experience similar to seeing *The Hunger Games* or *Attack on Titan*. I also played five hours of the game.

I made notes while watching the game, being mindful of pertinent scenes that contribute to the overall story, key quotes, gameplay, the environment, characters, and emotions that players elicited. After the game's conclusion, I went over my notes, watched YouTube videos and read several articles that provided an in-depth analysis for *TLOU* on its narrative, storytelling, ending etc. I also used the walkthrough on Game FAQs for reference.

I chose four scenes based on the city and nature to illustrate the juxtaposition of critical dystopian text. The four scenes are titled: Opening, Car Ride, Diner, and Giraffe. The Opening Scene features cutscene elements and provides an origin story. Here we are introduced to dystopian elements such as government control, sanctions, and the need to escape the city. Additionally, the Opening Scene is significant because it provides “emotional weight” and a “subtextual meaning that would otherwise be loss...” for Joel's actions and dialogue following the scene (Hello Future Me, 2020, 2:20-2:50).

The Diner Scene shows the most debased forms of humanity and can show how far we can go if we do not change our exploitative ways (Green, 2016). Further, the Giraffe and Car Ride scenes contrast with the Diner and Opening by showing an escape from the restrictive city life and provide a potential reality that can be obtained (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). The nature

scenes use similar colours and modes to establish a utopian escape in a predominantly dystopian world (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

Watching the scenes again on YouTube using MMDA, I would review the dialogues, sounds, music, and colours to answer the research questions. Previous methodologies for analyzing games traditionally relied solely on narratology or ludology (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2017; McManus & Feinstein, 2006). However, MMDA which is the extraction method, does not emphasize one mode over another; instead, MMDA realizes that it is necessary to look at various modes in a piece of text to find meaning (Kress, 2011). In that way, narratology and ludology can be included in a means such as MMDA. One can liken MMDA to social semiotics, which considers various signifiers to find meaning. That said, the following paragraphs will show narratology's role in *TLOU*.

Narratology

Video games allow interactivity within a narrative via: a mouse, keyboard or joystick, making them a unique medium (Cassidy, 2011). In *TLOU*, I used a controller with a series of controls (L1, R1, circle buttons) to crouch and to throw. The player can influence the game through their actions which shows the narrative is not stagnant (Cassidy, 2011). Further, video games such as *TLOU* can be made a narrative because although the text is interactive, the players experience a single linear narrative (Cassidy, 2011). As mentioned before, the game progresses through the course of a year with different chapters such as “Prologue,” “Bill’s Town,” and “Pittsburgh.”

A video game can be considered a form of hypertext (Cassidy, 2011). The variety of choices afforded to a player can parallel the *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel series (Cassidy,

2011). In this way, a player can be a “collaborative author” (Cassidy, 2011, p. 296). This is precisely the case in *TLOU* as I can navigate environments, choose weapons, methods of killing etc. Video games do differ from standard narratives by using protagonists we are unfamiliar with. In contrast, other mediums such as film may already possess emotional investment due to the presence of a person (Cassidy, 2011). In summary:

...video games contain a sequence of events (which are determined in part by the viewer-author) that are causally linked into a linear narrative, complete with characters (at minimum the player him/herself) and setting (which is programmed by the original author) (Cassidy, 2011, p. 297).

The following sections will discuss the ludic elements of the game.

Ludology

Computer game formalism (CGF)—another term for ludology—stresses the mechanics of video games (Murray, 2005, para. 5). Ludology comes from the Latin term *ludus*, which means to game (Murray, 2005). Ludology is an ideology and methodology for games (Murray, 2005).

Some of the merits of ludology include allowing games to be viewed as a unique entity to be analyzed and it requires individuals to actively manipulate its components (Murray, 2005). Further, ludologists believe agency is important, and narratives play a small role in that. Further, such theorists argue the user is a critical component of the game, and their choices supersede the game as a narrative text. Aarseth (2004, as cited in Holmquest, 2013) states the simulation part of a video game is important and differs from a narrative by providing a constant in an environment. Aarseth (2004, as cited in Holmquest, 2013) also said a player is too involved in a video game for a narrative to exist. That said, the player is privileged in the ludological model as they can manipulate the game (Holmquest, 2013).

In *TLOU*, Ellie serves as a guide to nature and reminds players and the character Joel of the value in oasis-like environments (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). In terms of ludic elements, Ellie cannot be harmed in the story as she accompanies Joel, which shows she does not inhibit the gameplay (Voorhees, n.d.). That said, Ellie's inability to be impacted by gameplay may cause players to forget her when making decisions (Voorhees, n.d.). The following paragraphs will show how MMDA considers both ludic and narrative elements in *TLOU*.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA)

Multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) studies dialogue with other elements such as images, music, etc. (O'Halloran, 2011). For this study, scenes will be analyzed for their colours, sounds, images, and dialogue. In MMDA, "the textual 'threads' are many and they are materially diverse: gesture, speech, image (still or moving), writing, music (on a website or in a film)" (Kress, 2011, para.11). Further, texts are made of two- or three-dimensional structures (Kress, 2011). MMDA argues texts realize the interest of their makers and are made coherent by semiotic resources (Kress, 2011). I found MMDA as the best way for obtaining data, for it considers many parts to get meaning/understanding in *TLOU*.

However, there is no guarantee my interpretation of *TLOU* will be the same as someone else's (Kress, 2011). This is since my own experiences, and social/cultural biases will impact my interpretation of the text (Kress, 2011).

Cohesion or having the images, text, and sounds connect in a way that provides meaning, also comes from the social environment from which it is made (Kress, 2011; Scribd, n.d.). As mentioned earlier, *TLOU* was produced shortly after the great recession of 2008 and before COVID-19 (Pérez-Latorre, 2019). The world in the game is directly influenced by cities such as

Boston and Pittsburgh (Callahan, 2019). Therefore, using means such as MMDA acknowledges that all modes are treated equally to paint a cohesive picture. The game's dialogue can also be analyzed to find meaning within the scene and overall narrative.

Additionally, images also bear significance (Paltridge, 2012). An image's perspective is important as it can help the viewer/player understand the narrative (Hello Future Me, 2020). Further, other interpretations can be made from lighting, colour, shot's focus, and the extent to which image imitates reality (Paltridge, 2012). Multimodality acknowledges text is just one means of eliciting a response, and language can also bear a partial understanding of a message (Kress, 2011).

Using MMDA helps narrow the gap between ludologists and narratologists. This is because MMDA acknowledges text bears significance with other parts to create meaning. *TLOU* follows a three-act structure, and it is important to consider the story, time, colours, setting to understand the narrative as a whole (Hello Future Me, 2020). That said, the ludic elements are important since a player is involved in the story by interacting with the environment. All components are necessary to understand *TLOU* as a critical dystopian text, and MMDA will provide the means for that instead of strictly looking at ludological or narrative elements.

Since *TLOU* is a critical dystopian text, I wanted to contrast scenes based in nature and the city. After playing some of the game and watching the entire playthrough, I chose four scenes based on their juxtaposition of sounds, images, and dialogue. These are important to contrast as city scenes would show the origins of a dystopian environment, while nature scenes have a calming effect and provide an optimism of a utopia (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). After choosing four scenes, I would watch the scenes again on YouTube to be thorough and consider aspects such as sounds, colour, speech, landscape, dialogue, and its significance to the overall story.

Findings

This section will explore brief descriptions of the four scenes that I have chosen from *TLOU*. I was mindful of sounds, colours, and their context within the overall story.

Table 1

TLOU Scene Summary Table

Scene	Colours	Sounds	Dialogue Summary	Images
Opening Scene	Red/Black/Grey	Screaming/ Gurgling/ Explosions/ Glass breaking	Sanctions/ Measures being put in place	People running/ Infected people attacking others, including Joel and Sarah/ Joel and Sarah leaving the city/ Fighting Militia
Car Ride Scene	Blue/Green	Rain/Western music	Remembering former times/ Light-hearted banter	Lush greenery/ Abandoned cars/ Rain/

				Joel and Ellie bonding/ Pedestrians/ Attackers
Diner Scene	Red/Black	Fire burning/ /Whispers/ Grunts/ Gun shots	Reassurance/Fear/Panic	Fighting/ Violence/ Overkill/ Ellie and David trying to overtake one another/ Fire
Giraffe Scene	Green	Violin-like sounds/ Birds chirping	Joy at seeing giraffes/ /A discussion on possibly abandoning the mission to join Joel's brother Tommy	Lush greenery/ Ellie and Joel standing together

Note. A summary of the four scenes selected for further analysis in TLOU.

Opening Scene

The opening scene takes place roughly 20 years before the main story in Austin, Texas. In this scene, the player/viewer is introduced to characters Joel, Sarah, and Tommy. I see Sarah first—Joel's daughter—who appears to be in her early adolescent years. It is nighttime, peaceful,

and Sarah is sleeping, as shown in Figure 1. Once Sarah wakes up, the player is in control. Sarah navigates throughout the dark house. Although flexibility is given to the player, there are prompts—as there are many in the video game to ensure the player follows the dictated narrative.

Figure 1

Sarah during the prologue



Note. This image depicts Sarah in the prologue of TLOU. I was able to navigate as a player throughout the house as Sarah, and it is primarily dark in this scene. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

Sarah then approaches the television screen in which a news report shows chaos in the city. Suddenly, an explosion goes off which prompts Sarah to look out and see fire outside. The player can hear dogs barking in the background and Sarah starts to look for her dad. Neighbours presumably infected with the mutant Cordyceps fungus attack the window as Joel gets a gun. Eventually, Sarah and Joel join Tommy in a pickup truck to leave the city and chaos. While

driving, they see a burning farm and people asking for help. The colours are dark (predominantly black), and I feel apprehension and tension as a viewer. The sounds vary from screaming, loud noises, explosions, and helicopters.

Further, there are prompts for the player to press the square button to free Joel from the pickup truck when it crashes. We also see frantic pedestrians running in all directions. There are more sounds of constant screams, gurgling, and incomprehensible sounds. At the end of the prologue, Sarah is shot by a government shooter, and I see Joel cradling a dying Sarah in his arms, as depicted in Figure 2. The image is primarily dark with red bloodstains.

Figure 2

Sarah's death



Note. This image depicts Joel holding a dying Sarah in his arms. It is a dark scene with red bloodstains. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

After the opening scene, which sets the stage for the rest of the video game, there is another scene with various dialogue that shows mistrust in the government with increasing

sanctions. The discussion shows a reporter indicating regions placed under martial law, riots, and mass deaths. Further, there are stakeholders such as former President Barack Obama making a statement, but with interruptions. Mandates such as quarantine are mentioned, and we are introduced to the Fireflies militia group (Shotgunnova, 2014, GS09).

Car Ride Scene

Joel and Ellie go on a car ride after leaving an acquaintance of Joel's. With the sounds of Western-like music and soft rain. There is a short glimpse of a lavender flower. That said, the highway is blocked, as shown in Figure 3 with abandoned cars, and there are trees with moss and other greenery overtaking the terrain. Joel and Ellie drive into a neighbourhood where a pedestrian appears to be in need of assistance. Joel insists the pedestrian does not need help and that they should continue their journey. The pedestrian turns out to be from a group of individuals trying to harm them.

Figure 3

Onwards to Pittsburgh



Note. Ellie and Joel leave Bill's (an acquaintance of Joel) town for Pittsburgh. It is difficult to drive with trees and leaves overtaking the terrain. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

Diner Scene

Ellie is now more mature. While hunting for food, she meets David, who at first seems unassuming, but is later revealed to be a cannibal. The encounter culminates in a fight at a diner that is on fire. The scene is primarily dark with glimmers of red, and Ellie uses stealth as shown in Figure 4 to gain an advantage over David. Fire is mostly burning throughout the diner.

Eventually, the scene ends with Ellie committing overkill on David. At the conclusion of this scene, there is Western music playing. Shotgunnova's (2014) game script provides dialogue from

when Joel finds Ellie in the diner. It shows Joel pleading with Ellie to stop while she is still stabbing David. Joel consoles Ellie as she is visibly shaken, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 4

Ellie vs David



Note. This image depicts Ellie seeking to gain an advantage over David using her stealth skills.

Fire is constant throughout this scene alongside the colour red. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

Figure 5

Joel consoles Ellie



Note. The film scene in which Joel consoles Ellie after she kills David. Ellie is covered in red bloodstains from committing overkill. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

Giraffe Scene

This scene takes place in the spring. At this point, Joel and Ellie are still on their journey to the Fireflies headquarters. Before this scene, Ellie had murdered David, and Ellie is despondent even with Joel prompting her to move around. After some challenges of going to the open field, Joel and Ellie are in awe when they see a herd of giraffes, as shown in Figure 6. The player must use a ladder and has difficulty before seeing the giraffes (Gerblick, 2020).

Figure 6

Ellie and Joel with the giraffes



Note. Joel and Ellie are enjoying a scene of giraffes. Players can stay in this scene as long as they would like. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

During this scene, Joel is relaxed and enjoys the time with the giraffes, as shown in Figure 7. Joel suggests that the both of them can go to Tommy's—a chance at the pastoral. Ellie vehemently denies this and insists on following through with their journey to the Fireflies headquarters, as shown in the dialogue provided by Shotgunnova (2014):

Joel: We don't have to do this. You know that, right?

Ellie: What's the other option?

Joel: Go back to Tommy's. Just...be done with this whole damn thing.

Ellie: After all we've been through. Everything that I've done. It can't be for nothing. Look, I know you mean well...but there's no halfway with

this. Once we're done, we'll go wherever you want. Okay? (GS10)

Figure 7

Joel petting the giraffes



Note. Joel depicts some looseness by petting a giraffe. (Naughty Dog Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014)

Further, the music used throughout this scene is not excessive but poignant and calming.

Discussion

I will now discuss the significance of my findings while being mindful of my research questions. I will be going over the impact of each scene and providing a general overview at the end of each scene's analysis.

The Opening Scene provides context for the rest of the game (Hello Future Me, 2020). The trauma of Joel's daughter's death explains why he is despondent throughout the game (Hello Future Me, 2020). Further, it explains his survivalist mentality in which he is willing to do anything to live. The game depicts narrative elements by providing an opening where players see Sarah's perspective and subconsciously see Joel's role as protector (Hello Future Me, 2020).

When reviewing the colours in the prologue, red is associated with fury and hazards (Smith, n.d). Further, black is prominently featured in the prologue scene and represents malice, night, and hopelessness (Smith, n.d). Such colours make the city dangerous, and I felt "heavy" as I was navigating throughout the city while playing the game.

In the post-opening scene, the dialogue reveals political resistance and progressive values—a feature of critical dystopia (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva, 2017). The sounds further establish the city with chaos, apprehension, and disorder. This is shown by the dialogue that mentions riots and introducing the militia group: The Fireflies. Listening to the discussion, I felt overwhelmed hearing conflicting information. Further, the use of colours, sounds, and dialogue establish a dystopian environment (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). This is a stark contrast for the next scene that was analyzed: the Car Scene.

The Car Scene—albeit brief—provides hope of utopia. Rainwater is used to represent naiveite (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). This can be contrasted with the dirty water in the city and is reflective of human's exploitation of resources (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). The dialogue indicates

a longing for normal or creating a utopia within this apocalyptic world. Further, the excessive use of nature in this scene provides a sense of calm. This contrasts with the fire, which seeks to destroy the old world (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). In terms of dialogue, we can see how survival is depicted. Joel is experienced in the tactics of others and was aware of the “pedestrian’s” true intentions just by looking at him, which shows the survivalist mentality that has been acquired due to being in the dystopian environment (Hello Future Me, 2020; Green, 2016).

Additionally, the Car Ride scene also gives a glimpse of utopia. Ellie and Joel appear at ease while discussing the mundane, such as times before Ellie’s birth. The scene which depicts the terrain overtaken by nature has a calming effect. Further, the producers use “coded imagery” or signs that the reader or player is familiar in this scene (Hello Future Me, 2020). We can acquaint ourselves to being in a car ride with our “oldies”-listening dad, while talking about inconsequential matters (Hello Future Me, 2020). Further, green which is prominent in the scene, represents vitality, life, and rejuvenation (Bourn, 2011). Although the shot of the purple (or lavender) flower is brief, the colour is associated with calmness and peace (Smith, 2015). This tranquil scene is a stark contrast to the Diner scene.

The Diner Scene was a place of extreme conflict and emphasizes the city’s unsafe state. A key element of dystopia is survival, and Ellie killed David violently (Masterclass, n.d.). This is an extreme measure, and we can see from the dialogue that she cannot stop until Joel restrains her. That said, in this environment, humans are in a depraved state, with David and his associates representing “the lowest manifestations of humanity” (Green, 2016, p.12). Further, the scene’s timing in winter depicts itself as an abyss (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). Finally, the key features of Ellie’s encounter with David are “disorientation, fear, and confusion” (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016, p.13).

Ellie experienced significant trauma and a loss of innocence after this incident. Further, fire is a recurring motif in the video game and is used to represent the breakdown of society and cleansing for humankind (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). This can be an inadvertent form of resistance against the old order (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). The Diner scene is a stark contrast to the Giraffe scene, which offers a glimmer of hope—a feature of critical dystopia.

The Giraffe scene is meant to contrast with city scenes to show a peaceful environment. Since, Ellie's emotions are contained being with giraffes can be liberating for her (Hello Future Me, 2020). Further, scenes such as the Giraffe's parallels real life because research shows that "forest bathing," or taking a walk through the forest, poses positive effects like relaxing the body and mind (Lawton, 2017). As a viewer, I felt levity and light-heartedness during this scene. Also, the video game designers wanted the players to struggle by facing some challenges before seeing the giraffes to provide a feeling of achievement and satisfaction (Gerblick, 2020). This ties in with the obstacles characters face in the pursuit of utopia (Chang, 2011).

The player is given the flexibility to stay as long as they like viewing the giraffes. The dialogue shows how emotionally invested Ellie is in following through with the journey and depicts resistance. The discussion is also significant because Joel gives Ellie a chance at the pastoral: start a new, idyllic life with Tommy and his wife in the enclave they have created. This again touches upon the theme of achieving utopia in a dystopian world. It is interesting as Joel offers optimism in such a context while being mainly despondent throughout the game and also shows how bonds can be formed in utopian-like environments (Hello Future Me, 2020). However, as a player, you are unable to agree to Joel's offer, which stresses the game's mechanics.

Overall Discussion

It is interesting to see the contrasts between sound, dialogue, and images in all four scenes. In scenes with nature, a calming, therapeutic effect is shown. Throughout nature scenes, green is extensively used, which is intended to produce a calming effect. This contrasts with the city scenes, where red is used and can cause apprehension among the viewer/player. Further, city spaces show how the dystopian environment came into being (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). As mentioned in the literature review cities depict the failure of American society (Callahan, 2019). I did feel a sense of despair going through these spaces, while natural-based spaces provided optimism. These locations provide a stark contrast with binaries such as water, which is calming, and fire, which seeks to purge (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). Such extremes are used to show contrasts between utopian and dystopian environments. The city spaces do show a separation from nature, and the game depicts a return to it (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

The game's speculative elements can be highlighted by referring to today's world images with influences from media and text (Turi, 2012). This helped contribute to my experience as I was able to delve into immersive environments as a player. Further, as shown in Figure 8, colour elicits certain moods and feelings, such as green plants or a fiery red, which produces apprehension (Turi, 2012).

Figure 8

Colour Script



Note. TLOU's colour script. The game developers are intentional in their use of colour to evoke emotions for the player/viewer. Retrieved from Turi, T. (2012, November). Nature's Revenge: The Environments Of The Last Of Us. Game Informer.

MMDA is an excellent tool to get information for analyzing critical dystopia. It considers the “complete” picture by looking at language in conjunction with images, sounds, etc. Through MMDA, I can consider narrative and ludic elements of the game. That said, by looking solely at *TLOU's* text, it can be similar to a book such as *The Giver*, where the reader is left to imagine scenes.

It is worth noting the narratology and ludological elements of the video game. Although this study does not emphasize it, it acknowledges the influence in the production of the game. The narrative nature of *TLOU* can depict the dystopic themes and is influenced by other dystopian texts.

Joel mentions in the closing scene of *TLOU*, “...No matter what, you keep finding something to fight for” (Naughty Dog, Inc, & Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014). Critical

dystopian texts illustrate a resistance against society (Baccolini & Moylan, 2000). The previous quote is indicative of that, and Joel fights by helping Ellie. Further, Joel and Ellie continue to depict such resistance throughout the game as they traverse cityscapes and nature.

However, as a critical dystopian text, it also seeks to illustrate how the world came to be in the first place (Fitting, 2003). The game producers had the player navigate through limiting and restrictive city spaces (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016). That said, I do not feel *TLOU* was explicit in depicting how the world came to be, and more context could have been provided to show the dystopian world's origins.

The utopian enclaves embedded through *TLOU* also show a potential reality and provide hope that a utopia can be found within a dystopian environment (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016).

Conclusion

In summary, *TLOU* is considered a critical dystopian text. This is because it was made after the '80s, a time where authors were forced to reconsider their situations; its politically progressive elements; and its ambiguous ending (Chang, 2011; Ustun, 2016). Further, the game is explicit in its depiction of utopia in a predominantly dystopian world. The game producers made an intentional decision to juxtapose the colours, sounds, and dialogue in nature and city scenes. Therefore, it was necessary to consider all elements to understand the narrative made possible through MMDA. Further, *TLOU* has won many accolades in visual design, sounds, and storytelling, which shows the importance of considering all modes.

TLOU is similar to other texts such as *the Hunger Games* and *The Giver* by having dialogue. *TLOU* also includes film scenes that are akin to *The Hunger Games* and *Attack on Titan*. However, it differs from other texts due to its interactive component, where I participated in the story's progression. That said, *TLOU* can also be considered a cultural product, which provides commentary for its period, with the cities representing failed ideals and dreams and reliance on technology (Callahan, 2019).

Future studies can include several critical dystopian video games to add to the existing body of work.

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