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THEMATIC SECTION

Reimagining Western Femininity Through Ellie in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*

CATARINA RICARDO

FCSH – NOVA University of Lisbon

ABSTRACT: Women in the Western genre have conventionally been assigned roles in which they are subordinated to the male hero's journey, acting as civilizers, love interests, or sexual objects. This article argues that Ellie in *The Last of Us* (2013) and its subsequent DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), stands out as a remarkably transgressive character when compared to the archetypal representations of women in Westerns. Acknowledging the video game as a *Weird Western*, this article analyzes several aspects of its narrative and gameplay in which subversion becomes evident, focusing in particular on the plot, game mechanics, and character design. Firstly, the overturning of the classical female role is made possible through the masculinization of Ellie, who temporarily becomes a playable protagonist, assuming the place of the cowboy in all his autonomous resilience: hunting animals and killing enemies who endanger Joel. Ellie's killing of David sets her apart from the expected female behavior by

RESUMO: Os papéis convencionalmente atribuídos a mulheres no *Western* tornam-nas subordinadas à jornada do herói masculino, atuando como civilizadoras, interesses amorosos, ou objetos sexuais. Este artigo defende que Ellie, em *The Last of Us* (2013) e no seu DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), se destaca como uma personagem excepcionalmente transgressiva quando contrastada com as representações arquetípicas associadas às mulheres nos *Westerns*. Reconhecendo o videogame como um *Weird Western*, este artigo analisa diversos aspectos em que a subversão se torna evidente, nomeadamente o enredo, as mecânicas do jogo e o *design* de personagem. Primeiramente, a subversão do papel feminino clássico é possibilitada através da masculinização de Ellie, que temporariamente, se torna uma protagonista jogável, assumindo o lugar do *cowboy* e a sua resiliência autónoma, caçando animais e eliminando os inimigos que colocam

demonstrating her self-sufficiency and the futility of relying on a savior. Furthermore, her queerness is presented to the player as an inherent trait, challenging the virtually compulsory heterosexuality of the Western. Nonetheless, this portrayal is not without its limitations. As this paper argues, the ending of the game empowers Joel at Ellie's expense, ultimately upholding familiar tropes that glorify patriarchal authority. Thus, while Ellie is unquestionably a revolutionary female character, traces of tradition still seep into the contemporary (*Weird*) Western.

KEYWORDS: *The Last of Us*, *Weird Western*, Female representation, Queerness, Feminine masculinity.

Joel em perigo. A morte de David, às mãos de Ellie, distancia-a ainda mais do comportamento esperado, demonstrando a sua autossuficiência e a ausência de necessidade de um salvador. Além disso, a sua *queerness* é apresentada ao jogador como uma característica inerente, desafiando a heterossexualidade praticamente compulsória do *Western*. Todavia, esta representação tem limitações. Como o artigo demonstra, o final do jogo empodera Joel em detrimento de Ellie, preservando tropos recorrentes que glorificam a autoridade patriarcal. Assim, embora Ellie seja inquestionavelmente uma personagem feminina revolucionária, certas tradições continuam a infiltrar-se no (*Weird*) *Western* contemporâneo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *The Last of Us*, *Weird Western*, Representação feminina, *Queerness*, Masculinidade feminina.

INTRODUCTION

The Western genre's obsession with masculinity has stood at the heart of its productions since its genesis, relegating women to secondary positions. A later reimagination of the genre, the Weird Western, has eagerly attempted to decentralize this narrative, creating active female characters who defy gender roles in various ways. Recognizing *The Last of Us* as a Weird Western, I argue that Ellie mostly subverts traditional Western archetypes and tropes in several ways, contributing to the reinvention of female characters in an otherwise restrictive and structurally heteronormative genre.

The central purpose of this article is then to analyze Ellie's gender performance throughout *The Last of Us* and its extension. With this goal in mind, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on various areas of knowledge, including game studies, gender studies, and genre studies. The analysis inspects Ellie's character design, behavior and speech across *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* with the objective of assessing her transgression of female archetypes in the Western.

To understand the ways in which *The Last of Us* configures as a Weird Western, it is first necessary to outline its narrative as well as essential gameplay aspects, which will be alluded to later in the article in relation to Ellie's transgressive features and behaviors.

The Last of Us is a survival horror video game set in the ravaged scenery of post-apocalyptic America, following the widespread outbreak of the Cordyceps fungal infection. This event transformed billions into hostile beings who viciously attack unaffected humans in their eagerness to spread the disease. The player incarnates Joel, a middle-aged survivor who was hardened by the loss of his daughter, Sarah, at the hands of a military officer in the first days of the panic. Twenty years later, Joel is a callous smuggler operating in the Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ) alongside Tess, his partner and possible love interest. Upon encountering Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies, a paramilitary group combating FEDRA, the authoritarian military force terrorizing and confining the members of the QZ, she tasks him with the delivery of a 14-year-old girl, Ellie. While initially unaware of the reason for the unusual "cargo", Joel rapidly discovers that she is immune to the Cordyceps infection.

Their initial drop point fails, resulting in Tess's death and Joel's promise to fulfill their objective, which will take Joel and Ellie on a long journey westward through the wastelands in search of the Fireflies in order to develop a vaccine. During this time, the pair slowly grow close, bonding as father and daughter throughout the seasons as they struggle against

enemies, injuries, and the loss of dear friends. As the protagonists approach their destination, St. Mary's Hospital in Salt Lake City, Joel is knocked unconscious by Fireflies, and both are taken inside the hospital. There, the player is reunited with Marlene, who informs Joel that Ellie is being prepared for brain surgery, inevitably resulting in her demise. In a desperate effort to save the life of his surrogate daughter, Joel goes on a rampage, ruthlessly murdering Fireflies, hospital staff, and Marlene. Acknowledging the selfishness of his actions, Joel swears to Ellie that their journey had ended fruitlessly, as the Fireflies had ceased their search for a cure.¹

In the DLC, the player's attention is divided between segments of Ellie's time caring for an injured Joel, and her experiences before the events of the first game took place. As such, the expansion provides substantial context on Ellie's background and motivations, introducing her Firefly best friend and love interest, Riley. While most of their interactions are lighthearted, their meeting turns disastrous as they are chased down by infected in the abandoned mall they had been exploring, leading to their mutual infection. Though not explicitly stated in the game, Ellie is presumed to have put down her (then zombified) companion. Her resulting survivor's guilt becomes a powerful driving factor for her decision to submit to the Fireflies' attempts at a vaccine.

Regarding the ludological aspects of *The Last of Us*, game mechanics play a crucial role in immersing the player in the game's post-apocalyptic reality. Primarily, the scarcity of resources in the game makes it necessary for the player to scavenge and explore the surrounding areas, which in turn influences the desired approach to combat situations (stealth or overt). Secondly, the game offers a "Listen Mode" mechanic, which allows players to detect movement through walls while crouching. The player is also reliant on a crafting system whose items are updated throughout the game, including throwables (Molotov cocktails, Nail Bombs, Smoke Bombs) as well as healing items and melee weapons. Finding certain collectables, such as Instruction Manuals and Tool Upgrades, grants the player upgrades on their craftables and weapons, which must be enhanced at a workbench. The DLC maintains these mechanics, innovating only with the addition of a few dialogue choices between Ellie and Riley.

The Weird Western is a contemporary instalment of the Western which explores its themes through the lens of the strange, using "horror, supernatural, or fantasy elements and themes" (Paul Green 2016, 2), and has thrived in the different media forms it is

adapted to. It explores the main genre's reliance on certain tropes and recognizable iconography whilst simultaneously warping the boundaries of the Western, namely through gender.

The Last of Us can be ascribed to the Weird Western genre as it reconfigures various aspects of the Western, such as placing the identifiable white male hero (Joel) against a post-apocalyptic backdrop, and having the main characters cross a populated frontier into uncivilized territory rife with hostiles. Furthermore, the nature of this frontier is paradoxical, as it concomitantly stands for the civilized world and a place of oppression by the military forces in power. Thus, departing from it would certainly be liberating, but it would also entail serious dangers beyond the scope of the protection these agents offer.

1.1. An overview of the portrayal of gender in the Western

To fully grasp the ways in which *The Last of Us* innovates with its portrayal of Ellie, it becomes vital to situate the woman's role in the Western throughout its many eras. John Cawelti's foundational work on the Western has effectively outlined two major feminine archetypes in the genre: the schoolmarm and the saloon-hall girl, which he claims to "[have] been almost as stable a feature of the Western formula as the horse and the gun" (Cawelti 1999, 122). These two figures stand in stark opposition to each other since they constitute antithetical expressions of morality, with the virginal schoolmarm acting as a civilizing force that tames the male hero. Conversely, the saloon-hall girl stands as a raw representation of the West on account of her morally ambiguous character and eroticized figure.

While Cawelti's work is highly influential, other Western female archetypes were also put forward, namely, the "sturdy helpmate of the frontier" and the "weary and forlorn wife" (Paul 2014, 327). According to theorists, these figures fit into the broader umbrella terms of the "good woman" and "bad woman", in which the good woman encompasses all roles that promote purity, peace, and domesticity, and the bad woman represents immorality, sexual expression, and, to a certain degree, even masculinity.

However, even when considering the representation of the "sturdy helpmate of the frontier", it is imperative to note that their action is circumscribed to domestic boundaries. Moreover, the existence of feminine characters is often secondary to that of their male

counterparts, frequently lacking narrative agency while also serving as plot-driving points for the (male) hero (Tompkins 1992; Underwood 1985).

As revisionist and eventually Weird Western representation evolved, women began benefitting from a greater liberty of gender expression and were increasingly more able to escape the fixed gender binary. Following this trend, formerly marginalized female characters were promoted to lead roles and began to challenge the previously normative behaviors. A major aspect of transgression in this sense was the adoption of a “female masculinity” (Hockenhull 2020). This personality blurred the gender barriers originally set by the classic Western, granting a female protagonist the same set of skills as the male hero—such as marksmanship and horse riding—and even donning the same leather chaps.

Nevertheless, other authors such as Minz defended that women in the Western have exhibited an innate masculinity since the primordial times of the genre. Drawing on classic Westerns such as *Johnny Guitar* (1954), Minz advocates that saloon girl characters have long freely alternated between performances of gender, from a theatrical performance of femininity to one of masculinity by simply wielding a rifle (Minz 2020, 111). In fact, these women, enabled by their masculine (and, by association, phallic) presence, are fully capable of dominating and emasculating male characters, even in such a seemingly limiting genre for women.

1.2. The video game Western

The timeless popularity of the Western stems from its ability to shift and adapt thematically, whilst still preserving archetypal aspects that are familiar to the viewer and evoke the same American myths. This unique versatility is not only applied to the reinvention of the genre in film or literature, but also to the entirely interactive medium of video games.

The transportation of the Western genre into the early video game industry prompted the emergence of many products that promised to incorporate its iconic elements for the player: cowboys, shootouts, and Indians. Protagonism was unquestionably reserved for a white, male hero, resulting in the marginalization of other ethnicities and genders. Cowboys ran the show, while “digital women behaved as petticoated lovers,

gartered prostitutes, or sassy gun-fighters in the image of Calamity Jane” (Wills 2008, 277) in 80s games such as *Cheyenne* (1984).

A review of contemporary games engaging with the Western’s iconography and motifs is a valuable task in the process of understanding how the genre continues to be understood. *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) is relevant in this regard, as a video game rendering the Western through revisionist eyes.

Despite its “attempt to present itself as a moralizing, revisionist-style Western” (Bird 2023, 117), *Red Dead Redemption 2* has suffered criticism for its seeming virtue signaling and glorification of the white male West. The abundance of multicultural characters is deceiving to the player seeking a progressive portrayal of the genre. The lack of screentime provided to these minority groups has been criticized by theorists such as Bird, finding the protagonism provided to white male heroes far too overwhelming, as well as limiting for a supposedly critical view of the classic Western.

This virtue signaling is also visible in the character of Sadie, an outwardly transgressive woman who rejects domesticity and embraces violence in the true cowboy way. Nevertheless, her transformation occurs on account of her connection to a nominal male character, and functions as Sadie’s drive for action in the remaining duration of the game. Ultimately, she does not become more than a sidekick, a set-piece, furnishing Rockstar’s Western, as “the women are only useful and able to exist in reference and service to an androcentric narrative of ‘progress’” (Wright 2023, 141).

As the article contends, the same description is not applicable to Ellie, who embodies masculinity physically and in gameplay, surpassing the expectation of a sidekick to become a strong, playable protagonist with a unique personality.

2. CLOTHING AND CHARACTER DESIGN

A necessary first step in understanding Ellie’s portrayal in the game is a close analysis of her physical depiction. The Western genre is “a deeply body-conscious and body-obsessed genre” (Fine *et al.* 2025, xiv). Thus, the portrayal of its various feminine characters is also necessarily done on a physical level, and different clothing styles are used to reinforce gender expectations and behaviors, further cementing gender stereotypes. The

aforementioned archetypes for women, namely the saloon hall girl and the schoolmarm, are thus not only distinct in their conduct but also in their appearance.

Schwarz explains that “ranch and farm women wear practical working clothes with aprons, while prostitutes and saloon girls wear bright-colored Victorian lingerie, and schoolmarms and townswomen wear form-fitted dresses with high collars and tight waists” (2013, 54-55).

Therefore, clothing holds the power to convey ideas of morality, specifically those related to notions of purity and promiscuity, or the reinforcement of domesticity tropes (through, for example, the use of the apron). These feminine figures can be considered a part of a “male spectacle”, placed in these narratives to reinforce traditional roles or to serve the male gaze, such as in the case of saloon-girls, who were the regular victims of objectification.

A study of Ellie’s character design in *The Last of Us* and *Left Behind* reveals a clear deviation from this norm. Her outfits of choice provide full coverage of her body and always include a pair of pants, rather than quintessentially feminine garments like skirts or dresses. She is not compliant with gender expectations, as her wardrobe is purely utilitarian, allowing for practicality in the post-apocalyptic environment she faces and granting her the ability to run, jump, and crawl, if needed. It does not transmit the ideological messages regarding sexuality or domesticity that are typically present in the Western.

Furthermore, Ellie’s body itself is steered clear of objectification. Her character design reveals a realistic body type for a 14-year-old girl, without any radical changes to her proportions, in order to appeal to male player demographics. As Atrio mentions, no attempt was made to emphasize her figure through camera shots; her screentime is as sexually neutral as Joel’s or any other male character’s (2018).

Thus, Ellie is visually depicted on the same plane as the male hero, in the sense that she does not represent a commodity solely because she is a woman.

3. FEMININE MASCULINITY IN THE WINTER CHAPTER

Beyond her fitting character design, Ellie is not a simple helpmate to Joel, diligently following his steps as NPC.² Indeed, in the Winter Chapter of the first game, as well as sections of the DLC, Ellie is obligated to assume the role of the protector, which had

formerly been reserved for Joel. Following Joel's grave injury at the University of Colorado, Ellie must simultaneously nurse her surrogate father back to health and guard him from external harm from the threats that lie in the West (the infected and David's group of cannibals).

Ellie, a young girl, faces an absolutely unforgiving frontier in total solitude, braving the cold, barren wilderness whilst facing enemies significantly larger than her and in greater numbers. In this sense, she is akin to the westering woman in that she must face a relentless frontier. However, she is the one breaking a path through the wilderness, not confining herself to the models of domesticity.

Ellie's enhanced sense of autonomy during these sequences can be matched to the concept of feminine masculinity, as coined by Halberstam (1998) and further developed by Hockenull (2020). Drawing on Hockenull's analysis of the Western heroine, we might find that Ellie too "becomes masculinized in order to succeed (...). Forced to adopt traits and expertise normally associated with traditional male iconography in the Western" (2020, 272). This iconography is primarily represented through specific symbols, notably horse riding and the use of firearms. Furthermore, she displays an acute hunting ability, showcasing the type of resourcefulness typically associated with a frontiersman.

In terms of game mechanics, it is essential to note her ability to craft items, especially throwables such as nail bombs or Molotov cocktails. This not only speaks of her craftsmanship, but broadens the divide between her and the stereotypical defenseless woman of the Western by placing her directly in the front lines of a confrontation in which she actively participates.

When engaging in combat, her takedowns can also be noted to be particularly brutal. Whilst Joel quietly smothers his victims, Ellie's inferior strength obligates her to jump on her target, gruesomely stabbing him to death amidst sprays of blood. Her willingness to be lethal essentially contradicts the trope of the "good woman" who is a moral symbol and necessarily pacifist in nature. As Baker and Zuvella explain, "male violence in the Western requires a female audience, since in order for Western violence to be morally acceptable, the feminine, a 'pacifist' force, must yield and publicly give her imprimatur to the very violence she resists" (2013, 5).

Ellie does not subscribe to a greater narrative of peace but rather engages in the violence that said women are expected to abhor. Furthermore, her proficient

marksmanship also serves as a signifier of masculinity and promotes her agency. Her confidence in this skill is demonstrated when she first encounters David and James. Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, her threats of violence are enough to subdue them, demonstrating her assertive power.

4. DEFEATING DAVID

At the very end of the season, Ellie must escape David and his sadistic plans inside a restaurant. In the cutscene that ensues, David attempts to sexually assault her. Both characters struggle, and Ellie is eventually able to overpower her attacker, brutally slashing him with a machete numerous times, continuing even after the threat is neutralized. This narrative sequence is particularly valuable for critical analysis and comparison with the Western, as it subverts several behaviors stereotypically expected of women in the genre.

Firstly, Ellie's resilience and sheer power in this scene set her as diametrically opposed to the Western women. As Tompkins explains, "the message (...) in the case of women in Westerns generally, is that there's nothing to them. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble" (1992, 76).

However, it is imperative to note that this was not a singular occurrence, and that this character has risen to the occasion several times throughout the game, namely by gunning down Joel's attackers both in cutscene and in gameplay (in her behavior as an NPC).

Secondly, the game deliberately constructs this sequence to suggest that salvation will come at the hands of the male hero. The player is forced to alternate between the two playable characters in a few short sequences until the dire cutscene at the restaurant takes place.

As Benkert states, "this builds up the false expectation that Joel will arrive in the vital moment to save Ellie. Ellie turns a stereotype on its head by showing she does not need rescuing, and the game helps show this by portraying her as equal to Joel" (2018, 49).

Thus, Ellie's triumph against David's predatory attacks further subverts the trope of helplessness generally surrounding women of this genre, as she is the one who ultimately (and successfully) defeats her aggressor.

5. ELLIE'S QUEERNESS AS A TRANSGRESSIVE FEATURE

Whereas the previous sections emphasized Ellie's resilience amid a hostile frontier, the DLC foregrounds matters of identity, complementing the player's previous knowledge with an exclusive insight into her relationships prior to meeting Joel, as well as her queer sexuality.

The revelation of Ellie's queerness in the DLC and the romantic relationship she establishes with Riley is extremely important in analyzing this game under the genre's light, as it completely shatters the "hyper-heterosexual, hypermasculine confines of the Western" (Symmonds 2018, 3). Additionally, it further places Ellie away from the role of women as "wife and mother, effectively taming the native wilderness and the male hero", assigning her a level of masculinity that accompanies her non-heteronormative sexuality.

The representation of queer love in *Left Behind* is intentional and does not exist for shock value, nor is it an optional quest left to the decision of the (potentially biased) player. Players that expected the heteronormative framework of most media were, in this case, "unable to avert Ellie's *queer* love and must therefore roleplay as a *queer* character to complete the narrative" (Funk 2022, 79).

This is a romance that evolves organically throughout the DLC, and that is gradually hinted at with increasing intensity until it culminates in a kiss scene. Before this scene takes place, players are given unprecedented dialogue options, also enjoying some ludic moments (such as the water-gun fight) between the two girls. This demonstrates the amount of intimacy between the characters and negates any deliberate commodification of queerness for a simple sensation.

However, Ellie and Riley's short-lived romance, though impactful, has been subject to criticism due to its tragic nature, potentially aligning it with the contemporary "Bury your Gays" trope.³ While their relationship is a hallmark of representation due to its queer and interracial nature, some argue that it falls victim to this disposal of LGBTQ+ characters, which is not only present in the Western, but also common throughout film and game genres. A reviewer in TheGamer regretfully writes:

Aside from a fleeting kiss, there is never a chance to appreciate their sudden confession, or to bask in the delightful confusion and unexpected euphoria that comes from pouring your heart out as a teenager. (...) They promise to lose their minds together, but we all know that doesn't happen, and our heroine is forced to watch her first love perish right in front of her. I

understand *The Last of Us* is a miserable game in a miserable world with miserable characters, but when the most pronounced tragedy is placed on an otherwise groundbreaking queer character I can't help but feel bitter about things. (King 2022)

Nevertheless, it aids in building an increasingly more individualized character with emotional depth and a backstory, further placing Ellie in the role of the protagonist and presenting a clear justification for her drive to fulfill her fate with the Fireflies. In this sense, it not only pushes her out of the usual position women are supposed to serve in the genre, but also works towards her agency as a character.

6. SUBVERSIVE DISCOURSE IN *LEFT BEHIND*

Establishing a comparison between Ellie in the DLC and images of the woman in the Western reveals significant differences in their social behavior representation. In the sections in which she is with Riley, the two exhibit a rowdiness that is not present in the original game. Ellie does not follow the expected feminine conduct present in the Western, a genre where “the true woman was supposed to be submissive, pure (sexually innocent or sexually faithful), pious, and domestic” (Underwood 1985, 95). Conversely, her rebellious nature shines through in her exploration of an abandoned mall—an urban frontier riddled with its own perils—with her companion, Riley. The two curse freely around each other and engage in stereotypical teenage behavior, vandalizing cars and engaging in substance use (with a bottle of whiskey).

Gonzalez highlights the uniqueness of her behavior in *Left Behind*: “There are no male figures around policing her behavior, so Ellie feels like she can be her true self around Riley” (2018, 61). The same cannot be said in the original game, as Joel constantly censors her language, especially when Ellie tries to convey her feelings, which he finds overwhelming and offensive. These dynamic takes place on various occasions throughout *The Last of Us*. An example of this is Joel’s policing of Ellie’s language after the death of Tess, for whom he potentially harbored romantic feelings. He declares: “Here’s how this thing’s gonna play out. You don’t bring up Tess. Ever. Matter of fact, why don’t we just keep our histories to ourselves?” (*The Last of Us*). This linguistic hierarchy over women’s discourse is a prevalent occurrence in the Western, as mentioned by Heba and Murphy:

“[The male lead] simply responds with something like ‘Get to the point, woman.’ Here, the language hierarchy is reinforced” (2010, 315).

The male hero thus establishes a dynamic that dignifies male characters’ speech or their silence over women’s input, placing the man in a dominant position whilst framing the woman’s verbalizations as hysterical and undesirable.

Considering this, it becomes evident that Ellie’s discourse is markedly more subversive in the DLC. The character adamantly refuses to be censored, dismissing any hint of submissiveness with the loudness and explicitness of her words. This rings especially true in a certain part of the game, as explored by Gonzalez:

Both male and female players are fascinated by Ellie as a character since she does not adhere to traditional feminine norms. For example, when Ellie was in a Halloween store and encountered Skeleseer, a skeleton-shaped magic eight ball, and started asking it questions, it gave a response that Ellie did not like which prompted her to respond, ‘Well Skeleseer can suck my dick’. This line demonstrates Ellie’s rejection of feminine norms of being passive and quiet by joking about having male genitalia, which places her in a position of agency. (2018, 61)

Once more, Ellie gains agency by associating herself with masculine imagery (as seen earlier with her gun ownership, another symbol often conflated with the phallus). She is, thus, bringing herself closer to the feminine masculinity that is more prevalent in contemporary Westerns and Weird Westerns.

7. THE WITHDRAWAL OF AGENCY

Although Ellie’s consistent subversion of gender roles is a significant point for analysis, this article argues that this subversion is incomplete. Joel’s authority looms over her throughout the game, restricting her access to potentially life-saving weapons, as well as suppressing her discourse. After the brief moment of complete autonomy afforded to her by Joel’s injury, Ellie is reigned in once more upon arriving at their destination: St. Mary’s Hospital. Thus, the greatest obstacle standing in the way of subversion is the denial of full agency by the male hero; a trope that is consistent with major plots in this genre, and described in detail by Tompkins in her work:

In this story, as in many Westerns, women are the motive for male activity (it's women who are being avenged, it's a woman the men are trying to rescue) (...). Time after time, the Western hero commits murder, usually multiple murders, in the name of making his town/ranch/mining claim safe for women and children. But the discourse of love and peace which women articulate is never listened to. Indeed, the viewpoint women represent is introduced in order to be swept aside, crushed, or dramatically invalidated. (...) The genre's revenge plot depends on an antithetical world of love and reconciliation both as a source of meaning—it defines the male code of violent heroism by opposition—and as a source of legitimation. (1992, 41)

Consequently, the inescapable nature of this scene and the absence of choice for the player cast Ellie in a more passive tone, as her powerful motive is overridden by her male counterpart. This section of the game remains as a pinnacle, reinforcing the tropes of classic Westerns, and as an obstacle to Ellie's complete subversion of gender expectations.

Ultimately, this decision leads to Joel's downfall (and, arguably, Ellie's as well) in *The Last of Us Part II*. After the events of the first game, their relationship dynamics are increasingly strained by Ellie's lingering doubt about Joel's promise to her. The consequences of his actions at the hospital culminate in a patrol assignment in Jackson, as the final blow is delivered by the golf club in Abby's hands. A mere witness to this, Ellie takes on a mission of vengeance against her adoptive father's murderers, unaware of the real reason that drove Abby's attack. Thus, Ellie undergoes a painful transformation that directly results from the initial moment in which she is denied agency. The purpose that she was destined to serve is stolen from her by her male counterpart, leaving her with a persistent feeling of unfulfillment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Ellie mostly subverts classic feminine archetypes of the Western by finding her character's agency, adopting masculine traits and skills and fulfilling her queerness. These are her most valuable transgressive points. Her character is a product of the mission set out by Weird Westerns, to provide a stage for marginalized groups, dismantling its typical white male authority. However, as in many Weird Westerns of today, representation

is not yet entirely transgressive, and the male hero still holds considerable power over his feminine counterparts.

END NOTES

¹ See in The Last of Us Wiki.

² Non-player character. An NPC is not controlled by the player but by the computer system, so its actions are limited and oriented in a specific way. Ellie's NPC form plays a support role to Joel in the ways mentioned above.

³ The "Bury Your Gays" literary trope was first noticed around the end of the 19th century and persists in the 21st century. It was initially created as a form of protection for LGBTQ writers who would inevitably face backlash for representing gay characters in their work. The solution was then to condemn these characters to miserable endings to curb the impression that homosexuality was being promoted. Contemporary uses of this trope include various purposes: to advance the narrative in some way, to induce shock, or as a way of punishment from its homophobic straight authors- (Hulan 2017). Furthermore, these deaths often take place immediately after a confirmation of queer love, namely a kiss scene (as is the case with Ellie and Riley).

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CATARINA RICARDO

Catarina Ricardo holds a Bachelor's degree in Languages, Literatures and Cultures from NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities. She is currently a Master's student in the same faculty. Catarina is interested in the fields of game studies, American studies and gender studies.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4378-2624>

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