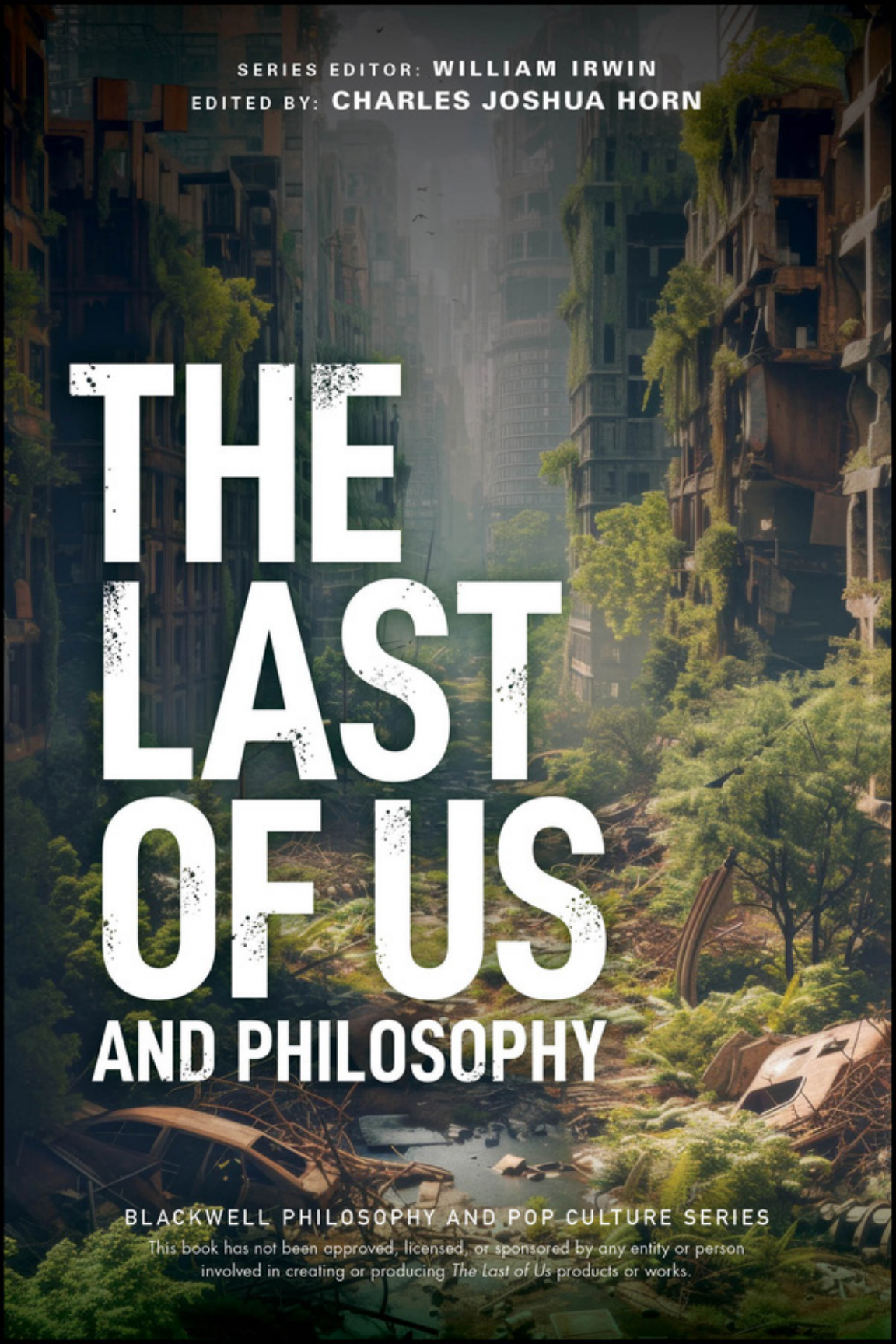
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EDITED BY: CHARLES JOSHUA HORN
THE LAST OF US
AND PHILOSOPHY
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THE LAST OF US AND PHILOSOPHY

LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

Edited by

Charles Joshua Horn

University of Wisconsin Stevens Point
Stevens Point, USA

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Contents

Contributors

Survivors

Peter Admirand, like Ellie, enjoys comic books and wanted to be an astronaut as a child, but unlike her, he fears tight spaces, heights, the dark, and pun books. Enduring and surviving, he is a theologian, Deputy Head of School, and the Director of the Centre for Interreligious Dialogue at Dublin City University. Most recently, he authored a book examining the comics *Y: The Last Man* and *Saga* and is the editor of the forthcoming *Theology and The Last of Us: Violence, Ethics, Redemption*? If a fungal pandemic arises, his wife and five children know it's safer to stick with her no matter how many Clickers he supposedly ambushed.

Federico Dal Barco is a PhD candidate in philosophy and the history of ideas at the University of Milan "San Raffaele" and the LMU München. Fearful of Cordyceps, he spends most of his time in a quarantine zone where he writes articles about modern philosophy and reviews for an Italian videogames journal. Surviving in the academic world is sometimes more challenging than dealing with raiders, but Immanuel Kant helps him to cope with the infections of editors and reviewers!

Steve Bein got infected by philosophy in his senior year of high school. From his brain it spread swiftly into his spinal column and extremities. These propelled him all over the planet, to contract various philosophical contagions in Illinois, Germany, Japan, Hawai'i, Minnesota, New York, Texas, and now Ohio. There, he is Patient Zero at the University of Dayton, transmitting his now hideously complex syndrome to hundreds of unsuspecting students every year. He infects countless others through skin contact or aerial contact with his written work, which includes chapters in twenty-two books and a handful of the top journals in the field. Though he obtained a doctorate in philosophy, he has been unable to develop a vaccine. There is no known cure.

Lance Belluomini is mostly known for having published the only academic essay on *Tenet* in *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy*.

He's also contributed chapters to a variety of Wiley Blackwell volumes, most recently on *Ted Lasso* and *Mad Max*. Immediately after watching *The Last of Us* pilot, Lance went on Atkins (like Joel) to improve his odds of surviving any large-scale fungal outbreak.

Mary Bernard is a Registered Mental Health Counselor Intern in private practice in Florida, where she counsels from an existential and feminist orientation. Mary was first infected by the philosophy bug as an undergraduate at Stetson University, where she majored in philosophy and French literature. An avid gamer, Mary binged the first season of *The Last of Us* after recognizing the title from various video game awards. A completionist at heart, when she was offered the epic quest of contributing to this volume with Dr. Susan Peppers-Bates, she accepted without hesitation.

Enea Bianchi obtained his PhD at the University of Galway (Ireland), where he teaches in the Italian Department. He has published a book on the thought of Italian philosopher, Mario Perniola, and contributes to journals including the *British Journal of Aesthetics* and *Journal for Cultural Research*. He's currently researching the aesthetics of catastrophe and traditional archery (being an archer himself). Perhaps that's the reason why he finds solace in exploring post-apocalyptic realms with bow and arrow, and that's also why he felt a twinge of sadness when he realized that, alas, neither Joel nor Ellie uses this weaponry in the TV show. Dear Mr. Mazin and Mr. Druckmann, can you please consider incorporating this element in season 2?

Armond Boudreaux is Associate Professor of English at East Georgia State College. His publications include *The Last Revolution* technothriller series, and contributions to several volumes in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series. He has been on the verge of becoming a full-blown prepper for a long time, and writing this chapter might have been the thing that tipped him over the edge.

Per F. Broman is Professor of Music Theory at Bowling Green State University, Ohio. He never wanted to become a singer, but grew up playing his four-string violin on the firefly-infested porch. He likes to lose his mind in film music, modernist art music, and aesthetics, intertwining music theory, musicology, and philosophy with the harsh lessons of academic endurance and survival. As he walked through the scholarly valleys in Sweden, Canada, and the United States, he published on filmmaker Ingmar Bergman's use of music and biographies of composers Karin Rehnqvist and Sven-David Sandström. If somehow the Lord gave him a second chance in those moments, he would do it all over again.

Matthew Crippen grew up along the Nottawasaga River in a stretch of woods, not unlike where Bill lives in *The Last of Us*. Because his parents are biologists (among other things), he got to look at interesting organisms through microscopes from a young age. Though he's never dealt with a zombie apocalypse, he was in Egypt for a revolution and later a coup, and saw both the good and bad ways that people deal with crises. Since then, he's moved to Busan—famous for the zombie movie, *Train to Busan*—and taken an interest in how East Asian ideas contributed to the trajectory of classic American philosophies.

Michael K. Cundall Jr. became a philosophical zombie at age fourteen. His parents thought it was a phase, but the questions grew from sporadic to full fungal by the time he reached college, where he found the right growth conditions under which to pursue philosophy to its evolutionary zenith. He spends his time working on philosophical issues related to humor, laughter, and mirth. His recent book is *The Humor Hack: Using Humor to Feel Better, Increase Resilience, and (Yes) Enjoy Your Work*, and he's currently working on a monograph exploring humor and the common good. When not watching *The Last of Us*, he can be found carving spoons and bowls. His favorite woods to carve have beautiful spalting—and that's no joke.

Yassine Dguidegue was born and raised in Morocco, where his passion for understanding why certain religious beliefs promise heaven for some and hell for others took root. His deep interest in diverse cultural, religious, and national groups led him to explore and engage with their stories. Inspired by Ellie and Joel's narrative in *The Last of Us*, Yassine felt a connection to their struggles with not completely fitting into Quarantine Zones (QZs). This connection fueled his desire to write a chapter depicting the paternalistic actions of quarantine zones and their respective social institutions.

Darci Doll is Professor of Philosophy at Delta College in Michigan. She has written extensively on pop culture and philosophy, including on Anthony Bourdain, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Queen, and *Better Call Saul*. When she's not writing or teaching, she's really poetic and losing her mind with the people she loves.

Mariya Dvoskina is a psychologist in Denver, Colorado. Her work involves providing training, consultation, and therapy. When she is not head-shrinking, she enjoys annoying her husband with mid-movie plot analysis. She is a fan of dystopian fiction and consumes it in all its forms. Or does *it* consume her? Mariya is also a trained mushroom hunter (owing to her Russian heritage), so beware, Cordyceps!

Mackenzie Graham is Senior Research Fellow at the Ethox Centre, University of Oxford. He works primarily in practical ethics, and the philosophy of trust. He is a huge fan of video games in the post-apocalyptic genre, though he probably wouldn't last very long in a real zombie apocalypse.

Lucas Hinojosa-López is a philosopher of biology at the University of Valparaíso, Chile. His research focuses on the impact of the mutualistic relationship between plants and fungi on their ecosystems. He seeks to evaluate whether the emergent abilities of plants in this relationship can be defined as cognitive. As an avid mushroom forager, he has inhaled countless spores while doing fieldwork in the forests of Chile, showing no signs of infection … yet. Some people claim that he talks to plants, but he claims that this is not a symptom of infection.

Charles Joshua Horn is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point. He specializes in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy (mostly focusing on the thought of Spinoza and Leibniz), metaphysics, and philosophy of religion. He also regularly plays and researches all sorts of video games. He has previously published several articles connecting philosophy to video games like *The Legend of Zelda*, *Bioshock*, and *God of War*. Aside from Joel and Ellie's journey, the only other escort mission he's ever liked is the one with his children, Sophia and Jonah, even though sometimes they're more trouble than Cordyceps or raiders.

Daniel Irwin is an aspiring screenwriter and filmmaker. In his free time, he loves building Lego sets, hunting for collectibles around the neighborhood with his dog Duncan, and (of course) playing video games. When he played *The Last of Us Part I,* he was younger than Ellie in that game, and now he's older than Ellie from *Part II*.

William Irwin is Professor of Philosophy at King's College in Pennsylvania and is the General Editor of the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series. In addition to his work on popular culture, Irwin has published the novel *Little Siddhartha* and two books of poetry, *Always Dao* and *Both/And*. Like Joel, Bill loves music, has a goofy sense of humor, and maybe shows a bit of bias toward his family.

Clint Wesley Jones teaches philosophy at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. His scholarly work focuses on environmental problems, utopianism, pop culture, Marxist philosophy, and issues in critical social theory. He has contributed to several Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture volumes, including those on *Inception* and *Mad Max*. His most recent book,

Contemporary Cowboys, is an edited volume that examines the changing role of the cowboy in contemporary cultural mythologies. Though he one day hopes to be a survivor in a zombie apocalypse, he is equally sure that he doesn't want it to be one started by Cordyceps.

Tim Jones is Course Leader for the BA in Psychology with Sociology at City College Norwich in the UK, where he also lectures on their Access to Higher Education Diploma in the Humanities and Social Sciences. His absolutely ideal module would take a speculative look at the new social forces and structures impacting individuals in a world devastated by Cordyceps, but he's instead stuck lecturing on digitalization and climate change. He lives with his wife and two cats, who'd totally have ripped Ellie to shreds if she'd dare go near them with a shiv.

Quân Nguyen is a teaching fellow at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He researches feminist philosophy and climate ethics, and has worked as a climate campaigner—but he also hates mushrooms, so he was extra excited about a video game and TV series that both cover climate and environmental change and at the same time serve as a warning about the dangers of fungal life forms.

Alberto Oya is Investigador Doutorado Contratado at the Instituto de Filosofia da Nova (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal). He is the author of *The Metaphysical Anthropology of Julián Marías*, *First-Person Shooter Videogames*, and *Unamuno's Religious Fictionalism*. He has published over thirty papers in professional philosophical peer-reviewed journals. It saddens him that Ellie from the video game didn't get the chance to play in a working arcade.

Susan Peppers-Bates is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Stetson University, where she teaches and splits her research between Nicolas Malebranche, feminist philosophy, the philosophy of race, and the philosophy of religion. Though she loves most science fiction, she loathes most horror and only agreed to watch *The Last of Us* so her partner could prepare for its house at Halloween Horror Nights. To both of their surprise, she was immediately infected and so craved yet more fungal contact that she sought out the video games and tracked down the editor of this anthology. Her children, Robin and Anne-Marie, alas share her horror of horror and won't be reading her contribution.

Traci Phillipson is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. She specializes in the history of philosophy, especially medieval philosophy in the Latin and Arabic traditions, while also working in ethics and the philosophy of religion. She isn't sure that she'd survive a Cordyceps outbreak, or that she'd want to.

Remis Ramos Carreño teaches philosophy at the Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago, Chile. He has expended most of his experience points upgrading his philosophy of mind and cognitive science skill trees, researching how and why humans and other animals are able to acquire abstract mental representations and concepts. He has been playing video games since he was a nerdy little kid in the early 1980s, when arcade machines were a staple in every neighborhood instead of being a distant relic of the past.

Juliele Maria Sievers is Professor of Philosophy at the Federal University of Alagoas, Brazil. She has unlocked several achievements during her character arc. After graduating and getting her Master's Degree from the Federal University of Santa Maria in Brazil, she moved on to the hard mode of doctoral studies at the University of Lille 3 in France, followed by a legendary mode working as *Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiterin* at the University of Konstanz in Germany. After that, her character's journey brought her back to her homeland, where she was a postdoctoral researcher, before beginning to work in her current position. She is interested in the connections between philosophy and literature and normativity, has published works on philosophy and video games, sci-fi films and series, and is constantly researching about other ways of doing and playing with philosophy.

Dylan Skurka is a philosophy PhD student at York University in Canada. His research focuses on the intersection between transcendental phenomenology and the philosophy of psychiatry, perilously straddling the line between the Continental Philosophy Fireflies and the Analytic Philosophy Disaster Response Agency (or APEDRA, for short) in their post-apocalyptic battle in the unforgiving wilderness of academic philosophy. He heads his school's graduate student philosophy blog, *Brainwandering*, and his work has been published in *Philosophy Now*. In his spare time, he enjoys infecting his wife Sasha and their baby on the way with bad jokes and incoherent rants about Edmund Husserl.

Acknowledgments

Thank Who You Can Thank

Unlike the survivalist, Bill, I couldn't have accomplished this project alone. I'm very thankful to each of the authors who contributed thoughtful and original chapters that were even better than what I had in mind when I envisioned the book. The chapters were a pleasure to read, teaching me a lot and heightening my appreciation of the video games and the show.

A special thanks to my former professor, Scott Davison, too. In 2003 (over 20 years ago!), I started my undergraduate work at Morehead State University, and he had just published an essay in *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy*. Davison's essay was on how Tolkien could help us think about the nature of evil, and it helped make sense of some of the earliest philosophical questions I had from growing up in the Bible Belt in Eastern Kentucky. Davison's work, and the Blackwell Pop Culture and Philosophy series more generally, had a profound impact on my education and interests, and inspired me to continue studying philosophy. It's my sincere hope that this volume has the same impact on young philosophers, too.

I also want to thank William Irwin, the editor for the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series, who has been a tremendous source of support and encouragement from the first moment that I proposed this volume in 2014, not long after *The Last of Us* was released. With his guidance, patience, and keen insight, there wasn't an instance where I felt lost in the darkness.

And, of course, a special thanks to my children, Sophia and Jonah, who give me hope for Future Days. Daddy loves you, baby girl and boy.

Introduction

No Questions Left Behind

The Last of Us is a story wrapped in contradictions. It's dark, but hopeful. It's simple, yet has layers upon layers of complexity. And it depicts humanity both at its worst and its best. Using a fictional post-apocalyptic setting during a fungal pandemic, the story of *The Last of Us* follows Ellie, a young girl immune to the Cordyceps infection.

Ellie's story couldn't be told without her protector, Joel, who lost his daughter, Sarah, on the first day of the outbreak. Over the course of the first video game and the first season of the show, Joel grows to love and care for Ellie as if she was his own daughter, culminating in a pivotal moment when he kills the Firefly doctors who were going to sacrifice Ellie's life in hopes of finding a cure for the infection. After rescuing her, Joel doubles down on his morally questionable actions and lies to Ellie, telling her that the Fireflies found others immune from the infection like Ellie, that they couldn't find a cure, and that they have stopped looking. Lying to Ellie was the only way to protect her from going back to the Fireflies to sacrifice herself for the greater good.

Joel's choice to kill the doctors has been controversial ever since the first video game was released in 2013, leading some to wonder whether we were unwittingly playing the villain of the story all along. It's quite reasonable to think that Joel's actions were morally blameworthy. After all, he killed doctors trying to save humanity and then lied about it. And it's quite reasonable to think that the doctors were morally praiseworthy for thinking of the greater good. Ellie's death, while tragic, might have led to saving countless people. On the other hand, some might quite reasonably argue that Joel was protecting Ellie because his moral obligation was not to the world, but to the young girl he loved and promised to protect. Maybe Joel's actions weren't praiseworthy, exactly, but they weren't blameworthy either. In other words, Joel might not be a hero, but he isn't a villain either.

In *The Last of Us Part II*, the second video game in the series, we find Abby, the daughter of the main Firefly doctor, seeking revenge against Joel. In the earliest moments of the video game, Abby finds, tortures, and kills

Joel in front of Ellie. The second video game is primarily a story about revenge and its costs, as it follows Ellie and Abby, whose stories mirror each other in complicated and compelling ways. Ellie, like Abby, has lost a father in moments of cruel violence in the name of justice. We might wonder whether their revenge is morally justified, and more broadly, whether morality and justice even exist in the world of *The Last of Us*.

The Last of Us is filled to the brim with great characters, but they don't exist in a vacuum. They grow and develop together. People need each other—community is necessary for being human, and it's even more necessary in a world filled with Clickers, Bloaters, cannibals, raiders, slavers, and more. But how is it possible to have trust and genuine relationships with others when there are threats around every corner? How can we genuinely care for others, when such care may get us killed, infected, or worse? And perhaps most importantly, is there more to living than just *surviving*? Looking to Bill's relationship with Frank, we have to ask what good security is if you don't have someone to share it with. Sometimes a packet of strawberry seeds might just be more important than a gun.

Because the characters are connected with each other, we can think of their actions not just in moral terms, but political terms, as well. So, in addition to considering whether our favorite characters are moral or immoral, we can also ask questions about the broader systems that govern their world. Is FEDRA a legitimate political power? Does Marlene have legal authority over the Fireflies? Are the rules imposed in the quarantine zones legal or just? Addressing these questions about the *Last of Us* can help us make sense of the moral and political questions in our world, too.

As much as *The Last of Us* is about the morally complex and controversial actions of characters like Ellie, Joel, Abby, and others, it is also about understanding and appreciating the softer moments that speak to our humanity. Can beauty still be found in a world ravaged by disease and the collapse of society? How does Ellie's joke book help to develop her relationships with Riley and Joel? How does Joel's guitar and playing music to Ellie help him recover and heal from the loss of his daughter? More succinctly, how important are art, music, and humor to humanity?

On the surface, *The Last of Us* is a story about surviving in a post-apocalyptic setting, but looking deeper we see it is much more than that. *The Last of Us* helps us to confront and understand what makes us distinctly *human*. What is the proper way to understand concepts like love, justice, hope, responsibility, community, and forgiveness? These and other questions await. So, throw on your backpack and come along for the journey. With this book as a guide through the darkness, we'll look for the light together.

PART I
JOEL'S CHOICE

1

Joel's Choice

Apocalyptic Fantasies, Dystopian Hope, and the Post-Human Question

Clint Wesley Jones

Apocalyptic stories are generally fun escapist forms of entertainment, and this is especially true of the apocalyptic stories that have dominated popular culture for more than two decades now. Zombies in varying forms, emerging from divergent sources, and aimlessly shambling about a broken world, infest the contemporary imagination.[1] But *The Last of Us* stands apart from the typical zombie stories of the last few decades, and serves as a unique contribution to the genre of apocalyptic literature and media. In *The Last of Us*, the Infected aren't generated from industrial catastrophes such as nuclear fallout, chemical spills, or lab-created diseases, but rather from the accelerated global climate shift that alters the environment enough that Cordyceps can migrate beyond its "natural" boundaries to a new environment—the human.

To properly understand apocalyptic fantasies like *The Last of Us*, it's important to read them within the framework of capitalist-driven social forces, because it's easier to imagine the world ending than it is to imagine capitalism ending. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, "Apocalypse is a failure of the imagination, a giving up on the future instead of a commitment to the difficult work of composing a better present."[2] Cohen is pointing to "dystopian hope" which resides at the heart of contemporary apocalyptic stories.[3] Dystopian hope resonates with consumers as escapist *and* renders catastrophic futures *as desirable*, as the only way to "reset" civilization so that we (the survivors) can right the wrongs of society.

Joel's ultimate refusal to save humanity, stripping the survivors of the reset they desire, and, instead, opting for a post-human existence in the aftermath of Cordyceps, puts *The Last of Us* in a unique position to answer what the right thing to do is in the aftermath of an apocalypse. Joel's decision to save Ellie is justified by rejecting the dystopian hope that resonates with consumers of apocalyptic stories. Joel is a different kind of survivor.

The Last of Us and Philosophy: Look for the Light, First Edition.
Edited by Charles Joshua Horn.

It's Different in the Daylight

Devastation and revelation are the two sides of apocalyptic storytelling. "Apocalypse" is generally understood to be a revelation of some sort, usually divine in nature, but this needn't be the case. In fact, on the devastation side, some catastrophes are described in apocalyptic terms even though they don't meet apocalyptic standards. For instance, in the wake of a Category-5 hurricane, news reporters might describe an apocalyptic landscape. Such descriptions compel the imagination. So when someone is confronted with an apocalyptic story, they conjure up similar ideas, while omitting more relevant or pertinent details necessary to understand an apocalyptic world. For instance, an apocalypse can't be localized, but must be global and total in its reach; everyone may be affected to different degrees, but everyone must be affected.

A dystopia can come into existence without any apocalyptic underpinnings just as surely as an apocalypse could occur without causing undue destruction in its wake. Dystopias and apocalypses are usually conceptually linked because the world is often depicted as falling apart. It's critically important that, when addressing apocalyptic stories, we remember that utopian and dystopian communities both exist. Utopias and dystopias are sociopolitical arrangements, while apocalyptic forces are imposed on communities and are totalizing in their destruction.[4]

A destructive apocalypse would certainly destroy the world as we currently know it, but the way people chose to live in the aftermath would be describable in utopian and dystopian terms. The aftermath of many destructive apocalypses would most likely be a dystopian setting. *The Last of Us* doesn't depict the aftermath of the apocalypse in dystopian terms except for the abandoned cities we're shown. The larger world seems to have escaped the destruction of the Cordyceps infection and serves as the basis for dystopian hope.

The Last of Us is an apocalyptic story, albeit a unique one, and our first task is understanding what makes this apocalyptic tale substantially different from, say, *The Walking Dead*.[5] *The Walking Dead* is one of the most popular apocalyptic stories ever told, but the focus of the story is squarely on the time immediately *after* the fall of humanity. This is generally true of most apocalyptic stories that use some variety of infected as the apocalyptic catalyst for society's downfall. In Robert Kirkman's narrative the reader goes from normal to zombie apocalypse in the first page turn, which accounts for roughly six weeks. *The Last of Us*, by contrast, jumps forward twenty years and forces us to contend with a significantly different set of questions about the post-apocalyptic world. Not only that, but it generates its apocalyptic catalyst from an environmental force derived from climate shift, or, what we might think of as a genuinely green apocalypse.