

# Post-Apocalyptic Margins, Motherhood and Feminist Identity in Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us Part II*

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The post-apocalypse serves as a practice space in which to ponder on contemporary anxieties such as pandemics, nuclear threats, environmental decay and climate change. The fictional disaster and the speculated future are, as Beckert understands, a means of making future imaginable by establishing character relationships and events that are portrayed aside the imaginary plot and world (cf. 69) - in this case in the ludo-narrative experience of video games. The post-apocalyptic setting and its re-imagined societal infrastructures and hierarchies invite the player to think of the end of times not as the stop to humanity, but instead as an opportunity to navigate a story whose characters “dwell in the ruins” and “negotiate the terms of [...] survival in a traumatized but not amnesia-inducing setting” (Doyle 101). Consequently, this leads to considerations of how societal issues such as gender roles, social and personal identities (cf. Kaplan 123) and expectations are influenced by the limitations forced upon characters in a world after the end, and how “previously denigrated or devalued identities” (Kaplan 124) are being recognized in a speculative context.

The depiction of women in the history of video games has been difficult with many portrayals tending to be less “aspirational or flattering (e.g., [as] sex objects, damsels in distress)” (Draycott 11). Particularly mothering or maternal characters have not fared well in the post-apocalyptic genre or the medium of video games. Stang observes that mothers in games are often “generally absent, deceased before the story begins, killed off during the game, or portrayed as villains or monsters” (237-8). This complicates the idea of mothering as empowering to female and non-cis male characters in maternal relationships. And although in recent years, more complex and diverse representations of female, maternal and marginalized characters have been featured, especially in post-apocalyptic games (e.g. in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* franchise, Guerilla Games's *Horizon* series and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* duology), depictions of gender identity, empowerment and diversity in connection to ideas of mothering still require further attention.

With the loss of previously established societal and political structures after an apocalyptic event, the post-apocalyptic video game raises questions on how formerly fixed ascriptions of identities of gender and motherhood are re-evaluated. The object of this analysis, *The Last of Us Part II*, as Schubert argues “uses its postapocalyptic setting to complicate and defamiliarize ‘traditional’ conceptions of femininity common in speculative fiction as well as in video games, particularly through the omnipresence

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of violence” (32). These acts of violence (portrayed as necessity for agency and protection) reconstruct the concept of the maternal for the ludic and postapocalyptic context.

This paper focuses on how the maternal is represented as social and personal identity-feature; as well as on how these representations are communicated and constructed narratively and visually via “language, of signs and images” (Hall 1), and lastly, what functions can be seen in these depictions of female/non-cis-male characters that are caught between violence and the maternal. I will therefore draw on maternal theory (O’Reilly 2021) that discusses motherhood as “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential [...] shall remain under male control” (lxi, emphasis in original). And while TLoUP2 suggests the possibility of empowerment in the act of mothering, it also highlights the limits for agency for maternal characters (particularly for owners of mothering bodies) who are still subject to repressing structures in the postapocalyptic future. This issue is depicted in the relationship of protagonist Ellie, and her pregnant girlfriend, Dina, who engage in a blossoming relationship that is complicated by Ellie’s vendetta. It also impacts the narrative of Abby who, after being introduced as a vengeful antagonist, slowly establishes a mother/sister role for teenagers Yara and Lev, who come from an opposing community – which puts her into conflict with her own people as well as with the player’s expectations.

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