

Queer enclosure in the cinematic adaptation of *The Last of Us*

Bjarke Liboriussen

University of Nottingham Ningbo China

199 Taikang East Road

Yinzhou District, Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, China

Bjarke.Liboriussen@Nottingham.edu.cn

Games are ‘at the crossroads’, says DiGRA. For game studies, as Brendan Keogh reminds us, that crossroads has transmedial and intermedial dimensions: ‘Now, what is important is that we understand the *context* of videogames . . . - how they are similar to other media forms, how they deviate’ (2018, 196. Emphasis in the original). Cinematic videogame adaptation offers a rich site for increasing our understanding of media forms through critical comparison, especially at a time when adaptation is at an upward trajectory both commercially and critically.

The presentation offers an ecoqueer close reading of the cinematic adaptation of the videogame *The Last of Us: Part I* (Naughty Dog 2022) into nine episodes of roughly one hour each released for domestic viewing as the first seasons of the series *The Last of Us* (Mazin and Druckmann 2023). Building on the foundational work on queer ecology by Timothy Morton (2010) and, especially, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (2010), the reading seeks to understand what happens to the intertwined themes of ecology and queerness as the videogame becomes serialised cinema. Depending on context, I refer to ecology as site (Demos 2019) and/or theme. As for queerness, I follow Karen Barad’s loose definition: ‘a radical questioning of identity and binaries, including the nature/culture binary’ (2012, 29). Themes of ecology and queerness are sometimes highlighted and combined to strengthen each other, a process I call ‘ecoqueering’. In other instances, themes of ecology and queerness are suppressed through ‘straightening’ (cf. Demory 2019 on adaptation as queering).

The close reading begins with genre clarification that helps identifying the adaptive gaps (Leitch 2017) that function as analytical entry points into ecology and queerness. One of the most important adaptive gaps is what I call the *gameplay gap*, which opens when a cinematic adaptation takes away the viewer’s possibility of influencing the text. Gameplay is foundational to a videogame’s *erotics*. I build on Christopher Patterson’s definition of the erotics of videogames as ‘an art of conceiving how pleasure, desire, and the interactive work upon the body as a way to master ourselves and to recognize how our pleasures impact others’ (2020, 22) but I prefer to specify erotics at the level of genre rather than medium. In the case of *The Last of Us*, I pay attention to the erotics of stealth, that is, the management of the prolonged erotically charged tension that stems from superior asymmetrical and tactical knowledge. The tension can be diffused, but not entirely released, in dominant moments where powerful enemies who embody oppression are either avoided or killed. My definition of the erotics of stealth is developed in conversation with, and sometimes in opposition to, Toni Pape’s (2024) recent work on the stealth genre.

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In the fictional world of *The Last of Us*, a fungal mutation has decimated human civilisation. One of the protagonists, the teenage girl Ellie, realises that she is sexually attracted to another girl. Surely, this must be the perfect opportunity for the themes of ecology and queerness to connect and strengthen each other. The presence of nuanced, queer characters in popular culture is still to be applauded, and the videogame did offer breakthrough moments in both 2013 (release of the original version) and 2014 (release of DLC). Also, the adaptation of characters previously performed by synthesians (Desjardins 2016) into characters performed by actors opens adaptive gaps that accentuate the human body at a fascinating intersection of videogame and film.

I argue, however, that the videogame already contained reactionary nostalgic notions of both queerness and ecology. *The Last of Us* takes Lee Edelman's (2004) reproductive futurism (a delegitimization of not wanting children that underpins heteronormativity) to the next level by strategically dispensing player agency when they could endanger a protagonist Child (I reframe Edelman's application of Lacanian psychoanalysis in terms of nostalgia for the Imaginary order). Also, *The Last of Us* nostalgically insists on a continuation of the Anthropocene by depicting the radical interspecies collectivism that Donna Haraway (2016) calls the Chthulucene as a monstrous nightmare.

The adaptation not only reproduces but also exacerbates reactionary nostalgia through spatial and temporal enclosure of queer characters. Spatial enclosure refers to a suburban town inhabited by only two humans, Bill and his lover Frank (episode 3), and to a mall (Ellie and Ripley, episode 7). Both of these liminal spaces between the urban the wild (cf. Halberstam 2020) are further enclosed temporally by appearing in flashbacks. Such narrative compartmentalisation undermines the prospect of queer characters having a fluid rather than merely segmented sense of self.

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