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"What Are We Doing Here? This Is Not Us": A Critical Discourse Analysis of The Last Of Us Remastered

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“What Are We Doing Here? This Is Not Us”:

A Critical Discourse Analysis of *The Last Of Us Remastered*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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Abstract

Video games are often written off as juvenile or frivolous, but they are actually vehicles of socialization and hegemonic ideologies. Because of this, video games are deserving of research and critique. In video games, women are often underrepresented or hypersexualized, while men can be hypermasculinized. Many times, racial and ethnic portrayals in video games paint the person of color as victims of violence, villains, or sports athletes, while white characters take the role of hero or protagonist. Heterosexuality typically goes unmarked and is considered the default sexuality, and homophobic sentiments and slurs are prevalent in the gaming community. Because game developers still adhere to the belief that gamers are a homogenous group of white, cisgender, heterosexual men, LGBT+ representations generally fall into stereotypes—if they are included in the first place. With the lack of marginalized representation, gamers can queer video games through role-playing, queer readings, and in-game modifications. Furthermore, an intersectional analysis of video games is a missing gap in the literature, and this research aims to fill this gap. Through the deployment of critical discourse analysis, I analyzed the critically acclaimed video game *The Last of Us Remastered* and its accompanying side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* for hegemonic or subversive representations of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and intersectionality. I discovered that although the game may incorporate diverse characters, the story ultimately centers on masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness through deployment of hegemony.

Chapter 1:

Introduction

How Do Video Games Matter?

Video games are part of a multi-billion dollar industry, which continues to expand yearly (Carson 2008; Hinton 2016), but they also have a myriad of learning and teaching possibilities inside the classroom (AlShaiji 2015; Sáez-López, Miller, Vázquez-Cano, and Domínguez-Garrido 2015; Wainwright 2014; Hovious and Van Eck 2015; Overby and Jones 2015; de Araujo, Silveira, Souza, Strey, Flores, and Webster 2016; Novak and Tassell 2015; Israel, Wang, and Marino 2016). More importantly, instead of perceiving video games as merely frivolous or childish contraptions, scholars view video games as “vehicles of ideological meaning and cultural products affirming contemporary hegemony” (Leonard 2004).

Comments like “It’s just a game” often repel critique, but video games provide insight to dominant ideologies and deploy race, gender, nationalism, sexuality, and much more (Leonard 2003; Consalvo 2013). Scholars and the general population alike must critique the hegemonic ideals and boundaries and structures at play. Video games can easily reproduce manners of masculinity and femininity and racial or LGBT stereotypes through their representations of men, women, people of color, sexual and gender minorities, and other marginalized identities. Video games provide perceptions into prevailing philosophies and can deploy narratives of race, gender, sexuality, and ethnocentrism. By adopting the skin of the “other” through the virtual world, video games can demonstrate certain dominant ideologies regarding stereotypes about gender, sexuality, or race and ethnicity, foreign policies for the United States, and legitimizing the status quo (Leonard 2003). Whether purposely or subconsciously, game developers

perpetuate stereotypes and certain beliefs about how the world operates through video games, touching on subjects like heterosexism, misogyny, masculinity, femininity, and white supremacy (Consalvo 2013; Everett and Watkins 2008).

Games consistently confine their gamers through normative narratives and mechanics like heteronormativity or racial stereotypes (Chang 2015). The dominant assumption within gaming culture is a heteronormative, homophobic, and racist environment. Offensive slurs are continually exploited and clearly affect who feels comfortable within the gaming community (Shaw 2015). Unfortunately, game developers still hold the belief that the majority of gamers are young white heterosexual males—even though many studies have disproven this very notion. Because of this expectation of a homogenous gamer, representations of marginalized identities often fall into stereotypical depictions (Shaw 2009; Shaw 2011; Shaw 2015). In reality, gamers support the introduction of more diverse romances and storylines in video games. Like other forms of popular media, video games provide an opportunity for marginalized individuals to see characters who look and act like them (McDonald 2015).

With this in mind, one must begin to wonder: where are the non-hegemonic, non-stereotyped representations of marginalized identities? Those who desire more diverse representations in video games are not only the individuals who are in marginalized identities—though people who identify with minority statuses are more likely to ardently want more diversity. Even those in dominant groups have stated their desire for more diverse, non-hegemonic portrayals of marginalized identities (McDonald 2015). Video games have the grand opportunity to construct diverse, non-hegemonic portrayals of marginalized groups, yet developers still succumb to familiar tropes and stereotypes because they think it will sell best.

Video games matter because they are used as a learning tool, a way of socialization, a method of carrying political messages, and addressing social issues. Video games should no longer be swept aside as merely for children, because video games have an agenda and disseminate and perpetuate certain dominant ideologies (Leonard 2004). As the interaction between humans and technology increases, it must be emphasized again that video games serve as a significant vehicle of socialization (Daniels and LaLone 2012), which typically take up a normative framework favoring hegemonic images of white cisgendered heterosexual masculinity and repressing any who do not fit the expected mold (Ritsema and Thakore 2011). Furthermore, amidst the articles revolving around gender, sexualities, and racial portrayals and representations in video games, a significant gap in the literature includes the intersection of these important identities. Primarily, the literature may focus on the singular identities of gender, race, or sexuality, but rarely—if any—look at the intersection of these marginalized identities. As such, the focus of this research is to investigate video game representations at the particular intersection between gender, sexualities, and racial and ethnic identities.

Research Focus

This particular research sought to examine, through critical discourse analysis, the action-adventure survival horror video game *The Last of Us Remastered*, which was released in North America on July 29th, 2014 for Sony's PlayStation 4, and its accompanying downloadable side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014). *The Last of Us Remastered* is an enhanced version of 2013's *The Last of Us* and includes enhanced graphics, higher frame rate, and improved combat mechanics and automatically includes the side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind*.

This specific game was chosen because of its widespread critical acclaim and sales numbering in the millions as well as the seemingly impressive representations of gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity. In its first week, *The Last of Us* sold over 1.3 million copies, and by the third week, the game managed to sell over 3.4 million copies (Tassi 2013; Karmali 2013). In the weeks before the release of *The Last of Us Remastered* for the PlayStation 4, *The Last of Us* reached the 7 million sales mark (Karmali 2014). When *The Last of Us Remastered* was released, the game climbed to the top of various sales charts and stayed number one for several weeks as well as sold over one million units after its first month of release (Nelva 2014; Haulica 2014; Dunning 2014; Lillah 2014). With its release, *The Last of Us Remastered* has also been sold as part of a bundle with the PlayStation 4, which not only furthered the game's sales, but also pushed Sony's PlayStation sale of 10 million units (Shaikh 2014; AOTF Staff 2014). Additionally, *The Last of Us* and the Remastered edition have both been exclusive to the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4 respectively, which suggested that Sony saw the game as a flagship game for its company.

The Last of Us is the story about survival, conflicted morals, strong characters, heartbreak, and hope. Joel, a white, middle-aged, cisgender, presumably heterosexual black-market smuggler, is tasked with escorting a white, lesbian teenage girl named Ellie across a post-apocalyptic United States in the hopes of discovering a cure to a mutant fungal outbreak. Similar to a zombie narrative, the infected humans become cannibalistic monsters who attack uninfected humans. In the main game, individuals play as Joel and briefly as Ellie as they travel across the United States and encounter various infected creatures and enemy human bandits. The accompanying side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* follows Ellie as she searches for medical supplies for an injured Joel while simultaneously delving into her tragic past friendship with her

best friend Riley Abel. In *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, the gamer takes control of Ellie as she fights to preserve Joel's life and reflects on her past.

On top of the significant amount of sales, *The Last of Us* has been known for its multitude of nominations and wins at various award ceremonies including but not limited to the BAFTA Game Awards, D.I.C.E. Awards, Game Critics E3 Awards, and the Game Developer Choice Awards (Snider 2012; Karmali 2014; Karmali 2014; Molina 2014; Pitcher 2014; Dutton 2014; Graser 2014; Haywald 2014). Furthermore, *The Last of Us* has won well over two hundred Game of the Year awards, making it one of the most awarded video games in history (Dutton 2014; Staff Writer 2014; Nelva 2014; Bowen 2014; Raza 2014; Pierre 2014). Along with a myriad of accolades, the game has also been praised for its representation of powerful female characters and inclusion of positively portrayed gay and lesbian identified characters (Gibson 2013; Killingsworth 2013; Dale 2015; Mattos 2014; Mattos 2014; GLAAD's Entertainment Media Team 2013; NewNowNext Staff 2013). Overall, *The Last of Us* seemed to have broken through stereotyped barriers and incorporated diversity into its storyline.

Due to the increase of interactions between people and technology, game developers, individuals who play video games, and academic researchers should be mindful of how video games represent modes of socialization (Daniels and LaLone 2012). Delving deeper, Ritsema and Thakore (2011) explain how video games take on a hegemonic framework that privileges certain identities including but not limited to whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity, which in turn suppresses individuals with minority statuses. Based on this information, previous research on video games has looked at the portrayal of women, representation of LGBT individuals, and the depiction of people of color as singular aspects of identity (Todd 2012;

Chang 2015; Everett and Watkins 2008; Leonard 2004; Shaw 2009; Pulos 2013; Consalvo 2013; Mikula 2003; Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 2015).

For this research, I not only analyzed these previously listed identities and the presence of heteronormativity, but also the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity. This research delved into how minority individuals are represented in video games with the hopes of providing a voice to the underrepresented and encouraging more diverse portrayals of individuals who identify with marginalized statuses. My research questions and subsequent sub-questions are as follows:

1. How does the video game “The Last Of Us” portray gender?
 - a. To what extent, and in what ways does the game reproduce or subvert hegemonic images of gender?
 - b. What kind of imagery present gendered performance or subtextual narratives?
2. How does the video game “The Last Of Us” depict sexuality?
 - a. To what extent, and in what ways does the game reproduce or subvert hegemonic images of sexuality?
 - b. In what ways does the game insert subtextual or overt illustrations of sexuality?
3. How does the video game “The Last Of Us” represent race and ethnicity?
 - a. To what extent, and in what ways does the game reproduce or subvert hegemonic images of race and ethnicity?
 - b. How is the demise of characters significant?
4. How does the video game “The Last Of Us” illustrate the intersections of the previously stated identities?
 - a. To what extent, and in what ways does the game accomplish intersectional portrayals of its characters?
 - b. To what extent, and in what ways are the depictions of intersectionality stereotyped?

Chapter 2:

Literature Review

Hegemony, Docile Bodies, Performativity, and Video Games

Gramsci describes hegemony as the bourgeois values and norms having ideological prominence over the proletariat, and the State and civil society play a role in diffusing bourgeois ideologies to the masses. Hegemony, in other words, involves the successful attempts of the dominant class using its leadership to shape the values and interests of the subordinate class. The subordinate class is persuaded into accepting and sharing the values and beliefs of the dominant class. Gramsci points out various societal institutions like the school, church, and museum as apparatuses of hegemony (Carnoy 1984). In terms of video games, they are vehicles of ideologies that affirm hegemony (Leonard 2004). As will be discussed throughout the literature review, video games deploy hegemonic ideals pertaining to masculinity, whiteness, and heteronormativity. Because game developers believe that gamers are primarily white, heterosexual males, video game creation caters to that particular demographic, which in turn pushes marginalized representation into stereotypical archetypes (Shaw 2009; Shaw 2011; Shaw 2015).

In relations of power, systematic inequalities pertain to the uneven distribution of resources. Those who benefit from inequalities aim to protect the system, while those who suffer seek to end it. Gender inequalities are related to women's lack of resources compared to men. As Connell (2002) describes it, the patriarchal dividend is defined as the advantage men, as a group, gain over women through upholding gender inequalities. The important part is that the patriarchal dividend is beneficial to men as a group; individual men may benefit more or less

depending on their standing in the social order. Under this system of gender inequalities, women are exploited and vulnerable. Additionally, these inequalities are deployed at a hegemonic level. Patriarchal power operates through institutions like mass media, churches, and governments. Furthermore, figures of power such as popes, generals, and media figures establish the dominance of men (Connell 2002).

Connell (1987) details hegemonic masculinity in relation to gender inequalities. There are various forms and a specific ordering to these forms of masculinity and femininity in overall society. Among men as a group, there is a hegemonic form of masculinity that is constructed in relation to other subordinate masculinities and to women. On the other hand, all variations of femininity are based upon the subordination of women in relation to men. Hegemonic masculinity relies upon a cultural model of masculinity—one that instills the idea of an unachievable goal. One can observe masculine ideals through media as well as men who hold great social power. Men as a group gain an advantage from the subordination of women, and hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression of this dominance. Hegemonic masculinity is often deployed in relation to women and subordinated masculinities. Furthermore, heterosexuality is a significant aspect of contemporary hegemonic masculinity, which means that homosexuality is perceived as a subordinate masculinity (Connell 1987). Relating to video games, women characters are often relegated to non-playable, secondary roles, while action games typically have a male protagonist (Todd 2012), which falls directly into the hegemonic belief that women are subordinate to men as a group (Connell 1987). Video game avatars are also hypersexualized or hypermasculinized, which further depict how men and women should appear and employ the hegemonic ideologies tied to gender (Baker 2014; Chang 2015).

Foucault (1977) explains the creation of docile bodies through discipline and confined subjectivities. Foucault (1977) discusses the construction of docile bodies and discursive power, which can be appropriately applied to the game developer's pre-construction of avatars for gamers to utilize and the understanding of video games as discourse. In the case of video games, docile bodies are constructed through programming by game developers and do not give gamers the option to play as a different or preferred avatar. Butler (1990) also further describes how masculinities and femininities are cyclically and systematically reiterated in society, which can be applied to video game characters. As such, femininity is built into the video game's programming and influences how male and female characters run, what they wear, how they speak, and how they act. More often than not, gamers do not have a choice of whom they are permitted to play or how the character may be presented. Gender binaries are not important to the gameplay of the video game, but game developers constantly uphold the gender binary as though it were of most dire importance (Pulos 2013).

Foucault (1977) engages the idea of the docile body and confined subjectivities, and Butler (1990) deploys gender performativity in regards to the reiteration of masculinity and femininity in society. In regards to video games, customizable avatars fall within parameters of masculinity and femininity with no marker of sexuality, but the default and presumed orientation is heterosexuality. For characters that are already pre-programmed and assigned to the gamer, heteronormativity still prevails either explicitly or implicitly. Cohen (1997) insists that there must be more than simply the binary assumptions of sexuality, and instead of focusing and reinforcing the dichotomy, an intersectional approach should be employed. As stated before, intersectionality is a major lacking point within the literature surrounding representations of sexuality, gender, and race and ethnicity in video games.

Again, video games are more than just frivolous modes of play. Scholars should understand video games as “vehicles of ideological meaning” (Leonard 2004), which have the ability to reproduce hegemonic values. Instead of viewing video games as simply games, one should analyze these as mediums that deliver dominant beliefs and deploy certain topics including but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationalism (Leonard 2003; Consalvo 2013). Interactions between human beings and technology is constantly increasing, and because of this, gamers, game developers, and researchers alike must keep in mind that video games are important vehicles of socialization (Daniels and LaLone 2012). Moreover, video games generally assume a hegemonic framework that privileges identities such as white, cisgender, heterosexual, and masculine, while simultaneously repressing individuals who do not adhere to this normative ideal (Ritsema and Thakore 2011).

Hypersexualization and Hypermasculinity: Gender Representation in Video Games

Research demonstrates that women are widely underrepresented across various media outlets, and current portrayals of women are typically in stereotypical, negative, or subordinate manners. Women are constantly portrayed in revealing clothing and demoted to stereotypical positions (Collins 2011). One must begin to contemplate how this dramatic underrepresentation of women might negatively influence the consumers of media. The underrepresentation of women can be problematic because fewer stories *about* women could lead to fewer narratives *for* women. If young girls do not witness themselves, will they believe themselves to be lesser and unimportant? If young boys see the significant underrepresentation of females in media, will they also think women are irrelevant? Young girls may be lacking positive role models resulting from the underrepresentation (Collins 2011).

Because of limited portrayals of women in popular media, young girls may not have a great deal of role models and proper representation of realistic women, which in turn can negatively influence their interpretations of themselves and their own understandings of self-esteem and self-importance (Collins 2011). With underrepresentation in media, young women may falsely believe they are not welcome in certain realms such as gaming. In action games, a female as the leading protagonist is generally omitted, which leaves only a male avatar available for gamers to inhabit. When women are depicted in action video games, they are usually sexualized or relegated to secondary roles as non-playable characters (Todd 2012). Likewise, female gamers may not be confident in their abilities to play well, especially when playing with their male significant other, and they can be pressured into supporting roles in team games (Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy, and Williams 2015). Furthermore, additional social and psychological factors like misogyny and stereotyping in gaming culture can maintain hostile environments where female gamers feel as though they do not belong or are generally unwelcome (Ratan et al. 2015).

Video games are significant and worthy of study because the virtual world can disrupt or bolster real world dominant values by mapping gender and sexuality onto avatars. Video games permit individuals to delve into virtual worlds and interact with a wide variety of characters in diverse settings, both of which generally reflect real life physiques, environments, social issues, and cultural ideologies (Todd 2012). In all aspects of life, masculinity and femininity are reiterated through continual reproduction to which there is no origin (Butler 1993; West and Zimmerman 1987). In video games, masculinity and femininity are reiterated through the physical characteristics of customizable avatars and pre-constructed characters. Male characters dominate the representation in video games, and both male and females are portrayed in

hypermasculine or hypersexualized manners (Glaubke, Miller, Parker, and Espejo 2001; Jansz and Martis 2007).

For example, Lara Croft, one of the most prominent female protagonists in gaming, is often discussed in an academic setting regarding gender representation, sexual objectification of women, and feminist symbolism (Jansz and Martis 2007; Kennedy 2002; Mikula 2003). Lara Croft is the main character from the acclaimed action-adventure *Tomb Raider* video game series and is well known for her hypersexualized wardrobe. Game developers create game characters within the constraints of what is stereotypically understood to be feminine and masculine, which includes large breasts, emphasis of muscles, aggression, violent behavior, the color pink, or revealing clothing.

Todd (2012) asked a group of female gamers why they would prefer to play with a male avatar, and they came up with three responses. First, video games often established women as weaker or subordinate to their respective male counterparts. Second, sometimes video games do not permit an option to choose between a male or female avatar. More often than not, male characters are the default or only choice to play a game. Third, the female respondents came to understand that playing with a male avatar was superior and more effective, but unfortunately, this conclusion was a result of the first two responses. The women respondents reported enjoying their gaming experience more when they were able to choose an avatar that mirrored their own real world identities, which does not always take place because of the pre-programmed nature of video games. Furthermore, the restrictions of the gender binary exist only because of the reiteration of masculinity and femininity as well as an excuse to provide certain aesthetics to the male and female avatars. The customizability of female avatars is generally more diverse than that of male avatars. Perhaps this explanation stems from the convoluted notion that women need

larger wardrobes and care significantly more about their appearances in comparison to men. If so, then real world ideologies were literally placed into the virtual world and then deployed as if this was the norm and dominant belief of heteronormative femininity (Todd 2012). Games rarely take on transgender topics or construct transgender characters, and even less often are the incorporation of non-normative gender identities including but not limited to nonbinary, androgynous, genderqueer, agender, and many others.

In BioWare's *Mass Effect* series, the alien species constructed in the games are still confined within masculine and feminine physical traits. Characteristics like buff muscles, deep voices, and breasts all make an appearance to for the observer to construe manliness and womanliness among the alien races (Baker 2014). On the other hand, *World of Warcraft*—an acclaimed massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) with character creation—allows their gamers to choose their own species and gender to play, but even then, the avatars are confined within reiterated understandings of femininity and masculinity. Human and elvish characters are either hypermasculinized or hypersexualized. Muscularity and large breasts are markers of masculinity and femininity, and developers continually create these depictions (Chang 2015).

Racial and Ethnic Portrayals in Video Games

Omi and Winant's (1994) concept of racial formation outlines the sociohistorical process of the dynamic creation and transformation of racial categories. Concepts of race are constantly changing, and these concepts help structure both the state and the public. Additionally, one must also consider how beauty and desire are racialized. Desire and beauty are racialized because of white supremacy (McBride 2005). Bell hooks (1992) argues that black women's bodies are far

more sexualized and exploited than the bodies of white women. While white women can occasionally be depicted as the hero protagonist, black women are often subject to subordinate, hypersexualized roles. One must investigate and critique the prevailing images of sexual objectification of both black and white women. Furthermore, a historically established narrative of racialization is that of protecting white women from outside forces, and therefore, provides a justification of violence against people of color who are seen as threats to white women (McClintock 1995).

In regards to video games, male and female characters are predominantly white—especially the hero protagonists—while African Americans are typically portrayed as victims of violence (Jansz and Martis 2007; Glaubke et al. 2001; Dill, Gentile, Richter, and Dill 2005). Race in video games matters a great deal because game developers both explicitly or implicitly generate and then implement stereotypes, racial cues, assumptions about race and ethnicity, and racialized images or ideologies. It is important to investigate race in video games because most representations allow permission to promote racial inequality and reaffirm the status quo (Leonard 2003).

In the massively multiplayer online role-playing game—commonly termed as MMORPG—*World of Warcraft*, the “good” characters are depicted with lighter skin, while the “evil” races are shown with darker skin tone. Even the surrounding environments are reflective of their good and evil natures where the Alliance (“good”) areas are bright and green, while the Horde (“evil”) have shadowy, burning, and desolate landscapes (Chang 2015). In *The Sims*, avatars are created from limited options. Instead of racial identities, the game allows the choices of light, medium, and dark skin tones with whiteness having the most options of skin tone (Consalvo 2013). In Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto* series, racial and ethnic characters are

generally depicted in stereotypical roles like black or Latino gangsters, while the white characters are shown as savior-like or heroically fighting against the darker skinned criminals. Some colorblind gamers might disregard racial matters as simple jokes or aesthetic related, while others reject and criticize the racial content (Venegas 2012). By falling into the notion of colorblind racism, individuals ignore blatant racist stereotypes and play them off as simply humorous jokes or not intentionally harmful. Overlooking race allows for the furthering of microaggressions, stereotyping, and racism.

Race in video games is important because stereotypes reaffirm the status quo or further promote ideologies that supposedly explain black athleticism, female sexuality, and inner cities. Video games also stand as a significant vehicle for hegemonic belief systems and stimulate approval through a variety of white supremacist projects (Leonard 2003). These topics are often falsely purported or glamorized, and scholars must critique video games as modes for the transportation of prevailing ideologies linked to racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and more. Popular video games and their developers have the power to mirror, influence, replicate, and teach dominant ideologies about race and ethnicity in the United States. At a young age, children already have the propensity to construct ideologies regarding race and difference (Everett and Watkins 2008).

With this in mind, video game developers often create representations and narratives regarding race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation for a particular audience that does not always include individuals who do not fit the normative mold. Individuals who absorb the subtle messages video games and other outlets of media will have their understandings shaped dramatically. Rockstar Games's *Grand Theft Auto* series enacts a great deal of racist discourse that already is floating around in mainstream culture and clearly exacerbates these racist

stereotypes and messages through gameplay. As technology has advanced over the years, various markers of race and ethnicity and gender are depicted in more explicit manners with voices, skin tone, and gestures (Everett and Watkins 2008). Rockstar Games is renown for their racist, misogynistic, and homophobic depictions in video games, and so, young adults and even children who play their games can easily absorb the depreciatory yet dominating ideologies the game developers present. With enhanced technology, identity markers are more overt, which can also succumb to further racialization or sexualization when it should improve diversity in the gaming universe.

The large majority of black male characters in video games are sports competitors, which suggests that the only visibility African American men deserve is in the realm of athleticism (Leonard 2004). Sports games also legitimize stereotypical perspectives regarding black athleticism and white intelligence. In the midst of sports games, there exists a space that not only reveals and revels in white hatred for blackness but also white adoration for blackness (Leonard 2004). Moreover, gamers can vacation as the “other” without consequences or cost to themselves (Leonard 2003). Permitting gamers in dominant positions to simply peruse the “other” without any sort of outcome becomes problematic. One must first critique who is constructing these images and notions of the “other.” By briefly adopting the body of the “other” for a few hours at a time, the player does not become more aware of important social issues like inner city decay, police brutality, or extreme poverty. If anything, this becomes a manner of “high tech blackface” because white individuals can easily take on the skin of the “other” without consequence or harm to themselves (Leonard 2004; Leonard 2003). White individuals can play as a black athletic star on the inner city streets, and then continue on with their safe, suburban, white picket fence lifestyle because there is no consequence in utilizing black avatars.

According to Leonard (2004), the majority of black male video game characters are sports athletes, and these games emphasize “black coolness” and highlight negative representations of racial minorities. While a white athlete is perceived as successful due to hard work, a black athlete’s accomplishments come from innate talents, superhuman abilities, or animalistic characteristics. The want to “be black” begins to play out within sports video games because of the prevailing ideological notion that black men are imbued with great superhuman strength, superior athletic capabilities, and animalistic dominance and sexual energy. Some sports games such as *NFL Street* romanticize inner city areas, while simultaneously disregarding powerful realities including but not limited to police brutality, gentrification, and poverty. Within these virtual realities, white players can adopt the identity of a black male from the safety of their homes and from places of privilege (Leonard 2004).

In many MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* that have the option of character creation, the online environments are lacking in racial minorities, which brings into question whether minorities will be less likely in engaging these virtual worlds because of the inability to construct avatars that look like them (Dietrich 2012). As human and technological interactions increase, it becomes clear that video games become a noteworthy instrument of socialization that tell gamers the significance—or rather, unimportance—of representing racial minorities (Daniels and LaLone 2012).

Heteronormativity in Video Games

Homosexuality, as an identity, is a recent invention. It did not always exist. Although same-sex behavior has always existed, the creation of homosexuality as an identity was a historical event that occurred in 1869 (Somerville 1994). Heterosexuality is not inherent in any

manner and may be perceived as an institution of male dominance (Rich 1980). Adrienne Rich (1980) criticizes the naturalization of heterosexuality and how scholars must turn the lens and question this unmarked category. Video games rarely address or refer to sexual orientation within the virtual realm, but individual gamers, reviewers, developers, and others in the human world push the labels of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender onto the fictional characters. For example, in the downloadable side game *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, which reflects on a teenage girl's past friendship in the midst of a post-apocalyptic world, two young teenage girls share a kiss. Within the game, the characters' lesbian identity is not explicitly stated or explored beyond subtextual hints in the pair's close friendship and the eventual, blatant same-sex kiss, but game developers publicly confirmed the characters' lesbian identity (Mattos 2014; Mattos 2014; GLAAD's Entertainment Media Team 2013; NewNowNext Staff 2013). Although the same-sex kiss may be considered subversive, perhaps another way to look at the scenario would be to perceive two women kissing as titillation for a heterosexual male audience.

The majority of video games include heteronormativity, which is not a coincidental or random choice. Heterosexuality is explicitly or implicitly perceived as the default norm, making the identity unmarked and unquestioned (Krobová et al. 2015; Shaw 2009). On the other hand, fictional video game characters may be constructed by stereotypes regarding sexual minorities as a method of demarcating heterosexual and homosexual characters (Shaw 2009). With this in mind, game developers knowingly or subconsciously construct their games and characters through a heteronormative framework. Characters do not necessarily need a sexual orientation, yet most are presumed to be heterosexual because it is perceived as the default sexuality. Furthermore, game developers continually maintain the gender binary as if there is no other option to portray a fictional character (Pulos 2013). Like with the gender binary, compulsory

heterosexuality is also insignificant and trite (Rich 1980). Many may wonder, “Why do we *need* to have a gay character?” but not enough people question and critique the consistent inclusion of heterosexual characters and how the non-heterosexual character should be represented, as if no other sexual orientation holds meaning. Lastly, the “Bury Your Gays” trope in media is known well by audience members where writers establish a tragic narrative for their LGBT+ characters, most commonly resulting in the death of an LGBT+ character’s love interest (“Bury Your Gays – TV Tropes”).

A popular, and perhaps not entirely unfounded, belief of gaming culture and gamers is an overtly strong presence of homophobic sentiments (Shaw 2009). Pejorative and homonegative discourse has bled through the real world and into the digital realm, and words like ‘dyke’ and ‘fag’ are frequently utilized to demean other players as well as marginalized individuals (Pulos 2013). In the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, Valentine’s Day-related quests revolved around heteronormative relationships as well as homophobic shaming. In many MMORPGs, well-known holidays like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween, or Valentine’s Day bring in new quests, themes, and items unique to a particular holiday for that specific year. In 2010, Blizzard Entertainment “straightened” many of their Valentine’s Day quests by eradicating a great deal of same-sex substance. The creators and developers of *World of Warcraft* consciously removed much of the queer possibility and opportunities for players to establish alternative methods of narrative within the game during Valentine’s Day in-game celebrations (Chang 2015).

One specific quest within the game floats around the idea of penetrative male-on-male sex by playing with the word “shafted” in the special holiday item and quest title. Another poke at homophobic humor includes another particular quest that commands you to kiss a male non-playable character and supposedly regret it the following morning after a night of fictional

drinking. The apparent regret the main character is meant to experience rings loudly of homophobic shame pardoned by fictional drunken revelry and experimentation (Chang 2015). Keeping all of this in mind, homophobic sentiments easily have a powerful effect on who feels safe and welcome in the gaming community (Shaw 2015). An LGBT individual playing *World of Warcraft* during Valentine's Day might feel uncomfortable toward all of the straightwashed, heteronormative quests and behaviors in the game.

BioWare's *Mass Effect* series provides same-sex romance options, but the game chooses not to depict any manner of homophobic responses such as intolerance, intimidation, or violence toward the player character based on their choice of partner (Baker 2014). This omission of homophobic backlash in the video game may be considered positive, since the game encourages embracing one's sexual minority identity instead of hiding it away. On the other hand, purposely not portraying homophobic reactions from other characters takes away a potential eye opening learning moment for those who do not identify with the LGBT community.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Representation

In 2006, Rockstar released *Bully*, a video game where the main protagonist could kiss either a boy or a girl. The significant media coverage on the main character's controversial homosexual or bisexual romantic options revealed the grand lack of LGBT representation in video games (Oswald 2006; Sinclair 2006; Sliwinski 2006; Towle 2006). Debatably, the gap in LGBT portrayals in games is due to the prevailing feelings among the game developers, who are wary of destabilizing their current comprehension of their audience. Gamers are not strictly white heterosexual males, but rather, include a diversity of identities. Still, game developers are nervous to expand their horizons and incorporate non-hegemonic representations (Shaw 2009).

Some of the few game series that involved same-sex romance options include *Fallout*, *Fable*, and *The Sims*. The limited portrayals of non-heterosexual romance are not accidental. The purposeful exclusion of certain representations reveals the belief that creators and developers value one kind of lifestyle and identity over other marginalized ones (Shaw 2009).

Even though there is still the common belief that the average gamer is a young white heterosexual male, gamers are diverse in their identities, and as such, it only makes sense that video games ought to establish appropriate portrayals to reflect the diversity of their audience (Shaw 2009). Effectively, the omission of LGBT representation upholds the idea of a predominantly heteronormative ideal among the gaming community (Todd 2012). By consciously erasing certain portrayals in video games, the status quo is maintained and those with marginalized identities must continue to make do with the limited options in customizable avatars or utilize the white heterosexual avatars presented to them. Currently, most gaming spaces do not challenge or interrupt the status quo of heteronormativity, which has been the dominant ideological norm in not only the real world but also the virtual sphere (Todd 2012).

Furthermore, *The Sims* series—a life simulation computer game—presents no racism, no gender difference, and no sexual identity. With this conscious decision, the game challenges the “born this way” narrative, which is further disrupted by applying the term “free lovers” to the Sim characters instead of homosexual or bisexual (Consalvo 2013). By providing a historical contextualizing of *The Sims*, Consalvo (2013) pulls away from contemporary understandings of same-sex relationships and romances and uses the label “free lovers” as a more applicable comprehension of the video game and its characters. Also, many gamers with marginalized identities might choose to disidentify with certain games and the respective characters because popular media does not always represent the minority groups. Disidentification is described as

not associating or rejecting oneself with mainstream culture, but rather, transforming it for one's own purposes (Muñoz 1999).

LGBT gamers can read subtext or take one step further and utilize in-game modifications that change fundamental aspects of the video game. Well-known modifications on the character Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series include a nude-like skin or altering her appearance to that of a butch lesbian or drag queen (Mikula 2003). In-game modifications can be simply for fun, or one can utilize it to disidentify with the game and its normative content. In general, there is substantial support for more queer romance in video games, and an overall demand for more frequent and quality LGBT representation. Marginalized individuals have a desire to play characters that look and perform similarly to them. If anything, gamers are ready and waiting for more inclusive identities in video games (McDonald 2015).

Queering Video Games

Again, video games revisit docile bodies and the application of confined subjectivities (Foucault 1977). While some gamers want to create avatars that look like them, more often than not, characters are already pre-constructed for the gamer to play. With role-playing video games, some gamers may choose to create an avatar that appears differently than how they look in the real world. This act of gender swapping could be utilized as subversive or a method of queering, but since it is actually a fairly normative practice within video game culture, gender swapping does little to challenge the status quo or disrupt prevailing ideologies regarding gender within mainstream gaming spaces (Todd 2012). Role-playing games generally permit customization of an avatar character, but gamers do not always have a choice in how the main protagonist will look or how they identify in a gendered, sexual, or racial orientation. The game developers are

the ones who create a generic main protagonist for a multitude of players to utilize. With disidentification, individuals who fail to discover representations of themselves in popular media must find alternative methods of finding portrayals (Muñoz 1999). Heteronormativity and gender presentation is programmed into countless video games, and so, finding ways to queer and subvert gameplay becomes a manner of disidentification. Many gamers in minority positions may grow tired of seeing a certain type of main character—often a white, cisgender, heterosexual man—and so, might take steps to disidentifying through finding alternative methods of gameplay such as in-game modifications or subversive readings of the game.

In-game modifications, which occur when gamers reprogram parts of the game's characters or aesthetics, involve a specific set of programming knowledge and skills. Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series, who is one of the most iconic female heroes in the video game world, is generally depicted in scanty clad clothing. With disidentification, Lara is subject to a variety of in-game modifications that can depict her as a drag queen, butch lesbian, or transgender person. Individual gamers sought and were able to remake Lara Croft for themselves and find representation in a game that was originally programmed to reject such depictions (Mikula 2003). People who exist in marginalized identities must constantly find alternative methods of disidentifying with the popular media that often fails to accurately and respectfully represent who they are and what they stand for, whether it is through queer readings or in-game modifications.

With the gap in appropriate LGBT portrayals, minority groups can participate in queer readings, imaginative play, stylized performance, and role-playing as principal methods of disidentifying with popular media. Even though a video game character may be heterosexual, gamers can make up for the lack of LGBT representation by partaking in queer readings, which

basically delves into the subtext and ambiguity of the narrative (Taylor 2002). Additionally, three methods of queering video games include imaginative play, stylized performance, and role-playing. With imaginative play, LGBT gamers strategically read into the implicit character outfits, dialogue, and more in order to shift characterizations from heterosexual to homosexual. For stylized performance, gamers can purposely denote their avatar with stereotypical symbols of one's own sexuality. For example, a person may portray homosexuality by giving their male avatar pink outfits or choosing short hair for their female avatar. Role-playing can include participating or not participating in the various romance options the specific game may provide (Krobová et al. 2015).

According to Nathan James A. Thompson (2014), *World of Warcraft* gamers were able to forge sexual play between avatars in a game that was not constructed for sexual activity. On a specific server, erotic role-playing takes place, which has garnered significant controversy among other players and Blizzard Entertainment. Not every female avatar is controlled by a woman, and usually, female avatars are used by gay or bisexual men who seek to experiment or role-play. Not every species in the game is human, which muddles the lines of fetishism and bestiality. The queering of *World of Warcraft* troubles the boundaries of gender, sexuality, and bodies (Thompson 2014). Moreover, queer alternatives include but are not limited to presenting non-normative storylines and resistance to commodification of video games, but not every gamer queers video games in the same manner (Harvey 2014). Some may deploy subversive readings or role-playing within the narrative, while others have the know-how to perform in-game modifications, which take specific skill and knowledge of programming.

Where is the Intersectionality?

In light of sexual and racial portrayals in contemporary video games, one begins to wonder about the intersection between gender, race, and sexual identity and the extreme lack of representation in these particular categories. Among the multitude of articles focusing primarily upon gender, sexual orientation, and racial and ethnic portrayals and representations, a significant lack in the literature includes the failure to address the intersection of these identities (Shaw 2015). For example, the life of a white heterosexual man is drastically different compared to a transgender Latina woman because of the dynamic powers of racism, transphobia, and sexism at play. A person cannot separate themselves from their various identities. Being of a certain race or ethnicity does not exempt them from homophobic sentiments nor does it shield them from misogynistic attitudes. Being of a higher class does not suddenly eradicate the notions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism that might possibly come with a variety of identities. These identities are dynamic and not static because there is a sense of fluidity among gender and sexuality. It is rare for someone to stick solely with masculine or feminine features, but rather, there can be opportunities for overlap of those gender identities and expressions.

One must incorporate theories of intersectionality relating to race, gender, sexuality ability, and class in order to transform systematic methods of oppression and domination (Crenshaw 1993; Crawley and Broad 2008; Ferguson 2004; McBride 2005; Collins 2004; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Combahee River Collective 1977; Johnson 2001; Cohen 1997; Thompson 2014; Dill et al. 2005). The literature surrounding representation in video games has focused singularly on topics ranging from gender to sexual orientation to race and ethnicity, but rarely will the literature incorporate the intersections of these subjects together. One must deploy intersectionality because gamers themselves do not exist as singular identities, but rather, at the

intersections of various characteristics. As Adrienne Shaw (2011) insists, gamer distinctiveness must be contemplated with respect to intersectional and contextual identities. Unfortunately, some identities are perceived as more important and ultimately more valued than others, with the white cisgendered heterosexual able-bodied male being the center of focus. If the community marginalizes sexual and gender minorities or women's voices, then social issues cannot be addressed (Collins 2004). By purposely excluding non-normative sexual, racial, or gender representation, game developers are blatantly telling gamers that their identities and stories do not matter as much as the dominant ideologies of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness (Shaw 2009).

Around the same time as the invention of homosexuality, scientific racism was occurring in parallel with the oppression of homosexual individuals. Both categories are not mutually exclusive, and scientists were attempting to pinpoint farfetched, supposed abnormalities in both queer and racial groups (Somerville 1994). For McBride (2005) contemplating issues of "race" would not be possible without additionally thinking about sexuality. Plus, both identities are so intertwined that one cannot separate the two. Moreover, racism, sexism, and homophobia shape who feels welcome in the gaming community (Shaw 2015). Racial, sexist, and homophobic slurs are flung around in the everyday language of the gaming community, and so, these derogatory and hostile environment narrows down who feels safe and welcome enough to play video games. Gamers are diverse in their gender, sexuality, and race, but because of the archaic and narrow perspective of who plays video games, representations of marginalized identities generally fail to incorporate rich, quality portrayals and dynamic characteristics (Shaw 2009; Shaw 2011; Shaw 2015).

For this particular research, I aim to fill the gap in the literature regarding intersectionality in video games and add to the conversation by utilizing critical discourse analysis to critique the critically acclaimed video game *The Last of Us Remastered* and its accompanying side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* on portrayals surrounding gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and the intersections of these identities.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

This research centers on the cinematics in the video game *The Last of Us Remastered* and its downloadable side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. The goal of this research was to examine how the game developers portray gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity and the intersections of those identities. More specifically, this study examined whether this game is a step toward non-hegemonic images and ideals of video games. In order to accomplish this study, I deployed critical discourse analysis as I analyzed the cinematics in the main storyline of *The Last of Us Remastered* and its additional side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* multiple times.

Ocularcentrism refers to the increasing significance and centrality of the visual in the Western world as societies shift from premodernity to modernity to postmodernity (Jay 1993; Rose 2016). Visual culture is in reference to the myriad of ways that the visual is intertwined with social life (Rose 2016). These terms bolster the idea that the visual is becoming more and more important in contemporary Western societies, and therefore, should be critiqued and researched as meaningful. Furthermore, critically analyzing visual culture entails observing images seriously, considering aspects such as cultural practices and meanings and social conditions, and contemplating one's own manner of seeing and interpreting images (Rose 2016). With these concerns in mind, Gillian Rose (2016) defines discourse as specific knowledge about the world that influence how we think about that particular knowledge, and in turn, how we act based upon that line of thinking. Discursive power exists in an omnipresent form and produces subjects who think and act in specific manners according to the dominant discourse. In addition, discourse analysis can be utilized on visual images and how these images establish certain views

on the social world (Rose 2016). Critical discourse analysis examines how inequality and hegemony are deployed, repeated, or challenged through textual discourses. This specific method of analysis aims to observe how dominance is contested and (re)produced through discourse (van Dijk 2005; van Dijk 1993). Through this method of critical discourse analysis, I explored how hegemonic discourses were employed in the cinematics in *The Last of Us Remastered* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*.

Cinematics—also known as cutscenes—are short, pre-rendered moments in the game that reveal key plot points. Players do not interact with the game, but rather, watch the story unfold. Every player will watch the same cinematic images, and so, the cinematics is the one part of the game that is a consistent experience for all players. I investigated to what extent and in what ways *The Last of Us Remastered* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* reproduce or subvert hegemonic images of gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity. Furthermore, I paid attention to how the game illustrates the intersections of the previously stated identities.

Sampling

Strategically scattered throughout *The Last of Us Remastered* and its accompanying side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* are various cinematics, which are brief, scripted moments that show key plot points and function as important teaching moments for how to read and understand the game. The cinematics also function as important teaching instances for how to read and utilize the game itself. There are thirty-eight cinematics in *The Last of Us Remastered* and five cinematics in *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. The cinematics range roughly from less than a minute to almost seven minutes with the average being around two minutes long. The reason for analyzing the cinematics is because gamers are guaranteed to see these pre-scripted moments

scattered throughout the game. Gamers are less likely to notice multiple aspects in *The Last of Us Remastered* like secondary characters, gameplay, collectable notes and letters, and background pictures.

For this particular research, I analyzed every cinematic from the video game *The Last of Us Remastered* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* in order to gain a holistic perspective of the story and to analyze the visual and verbal portrayals of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and the intersections of these identities. I closely observed the forty-three cinematics and wrote down the length of time, featured characters, and plot—giving special attention to how the themes of the cinematic may or may not be relevant to my research questions. I chose to analyze every cinematic in both storylines because each cinematic signified some aspect of gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality, or intersectionality within its scene.

Chapter 4:

Findings and Discussion

Following previous research (Everett and Watkins 2008; Pulos 2013), I utilized critical discourse analysis for this study. According to van Dijk (2005), critical discourse analysis scrutinizes the manners by which issues like inequality and hegemony are deployed, reiterated, or subverted through textual discourse in social and political contexts. This particular analysis pays close attention to how dominance is challenged and (re)produced through discourse (van Dijk 1993). Critical discourse analysis seeks to critique the interactions among discourse, power relations, dominance, and the construction and reproduction of inequality through text and verbal communication (van Dijk 2005; van Dijk 1993). With this method of analysis, I will investigate the game developers' portrayals of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and the intersections of these identities in relation to the reproduction or subversion of hegemonic depictions.

I watched each of the cinematics from *The Last of Us Remastered* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* and made notes on how it reproduces or subverts hegemonic images of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and the intersections of these identities along with answering the complementary subquestions for each overarching research question. The coding was done by individual cinematic and its normative, subversive, or mixture of normative and subversive features. I coded for gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity based upon the entrance or exit of characters and their purpose within the presented cinematic. I also coded for the dialogue, actions, and interactions of the various characters.

The Last of Us is takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States in the wake of a widespread, zombie-like outbreak, turning average humans into cannibalistic creatures known

only as the “infected.” The main character Joel—a white, cisgender, heterosexual man—is a black market smuggler who takes on the task of escorting Ellie—a white, cisgender, lesbian teenage girl, who holds the cure to the infection. Along the journey, Joel and Ellie develop a father-daughter relationship, while meeting a variety of different characters that help them reach their destination.

The Last of Us: Left Behind is an accompanying side story to the main game *The Last of Us*. A side story is a downloadable, separate story that gamers can purchase to play in addition to the main game. In the case of *The Last of Us Remastered*, the side story *Left Behind* is already available with no need to purchase separately, but this does not guarantee that every gamer will play the side story. *The Last of Us: Left Behind* shows two parallel storylines where players take control of Ellie. In the present day story, Ellie must find medical supplies for a severely injured Joel and fend off infected monsters and bandits. Through flashbacks, Ellie reflects on her reconciliation with her best friend and eventual romantic interest Riley Abel, who later dies from the zombie-like infection.

The following chart is a timeline I constructed regarding every character’s appearance within *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. *The Last of Us* is comprised of cinematics one through thirty-eight, while *The Last of Us: Left Behind* is composed of cinematics thirty-nine through forty-three. The cinematic number is listed on the left-hand side, and the location of a character’s name signifies which cutscene in which they first appear. The vertical lines show which cinematics in which they continue to appear, and the horizontal lines indicate moments when a character is missing from the cinematic(s). Names highlighted in yellow mean they are white, gay or lesbian characters, while names highlighted in red signifies that these are characters of color. Hearts are placed between two romantic partners, and black hearts signify a deceased

partner, while the pink heart implies both partners are still living. The X shows the death of a character. For example, Tess is understood to be white and heterosexual. She first appears in the second cinematic, makes appearances in cinematics two through nine, and then dies in the ninth cinematic. Marlene is understood to be a person of color who appears in cinematics three and four, is missing from cinematics five through thirty-five, then reappears in cinematics thirty-six and thirty-seven, and then, dies in cinematic thirty-seven. Riley is the only character that is at the intersection of being LGBT and a person of color.

Both *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* seem to incorporate diverse characters within its stories, but the central focus still revolves around masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. These three subjects are threatened periodically throughout the game, but these subjects are never truly in danger because the script is continually written to re-focus the story back to masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness.

Masculinity

The main story in *The Last of Us Remastered* is essentially a story about preserving white, cisgender, heterosexual masculinity. The story tells the tale of Joel—a white, cisgender, heterosexual man—who is hired to escort Ellie—a white, cisgender, lesbian teenage girl—across the country because she holds the cure to an infection that has plagued the world. Players also encounter a diverse cast of characters who interact with Joel and Ellie along the way. Throughout the game, there are five specific moments that threaten Joe’s masculinity, but ultimately, masculinity prevails.

First, Tess—a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman—is Joel’s black market smuggling partner, but she is very much the one in charge of various situations shown in the cutscenes. Tess interrogates minor antagonist Robert—a white, cisgender, heterosexual man—who owes Joel and Tess weapons, and she is the one who eventually shoots Robert dead after questioning him. During her time on screen, Tess does most of the talking and gives orders, in comparison to Joel, who remains silent. Tess also pushes Joel to accept escorting Ellie, which he takes on as a solo mission when Tess becomes infected and is killed by enemy soldiers. Immediately after reaching safety, Joel commands Ellie to never mention Tess again as he suppresses his own pain and mourning. With this scene, the mantle of power shifts from Tess to Joel through the death of Tess and Joel’s new charge over Ellie.

Second, Joel and Ellie meet Joel’s ally Bill—a white, cisgender, gay man—almost immediately after Tess’s death. Joel asks Bill for help finding a working vehicle in order to continue escorting Ellie. Bill takes on a more dominant role with his aggressive personality and commands Joel and Ellie where to go. Joel again takes on a more passive role in the partnership by following Bill’s orders, similarly to his relationship with Tess. By parting ways with Bill after

they discover a working vehicle, Joel's masculinity is preserved because he takes back the role of being the leader with the exit of Bill.

Third, the appearance of brothers Henry and Sam—a black, cisgender, heterosexual man and teenage boy respectively—threatens Joel's masculinity because the brothers have a plan to escape from a city full of enemy bandits. Because Joel and Ellie are unfamiliar with the city, the older brother Henry often leads the way and even rescues Joel and Ellie from drowning at one point. Joel's role as a leader changes into one of passivity as Henry directs the group. Henry knows the layout of the land, which places him as the one who leads the group, while Joel must shift roles from leader to follower. The threat on Joel's masculinity is resolved with the deaths of Henry and Sam, which is also a comment on racialized power and will be discussed in a future section. Henry may have led the group through the city, but the mantle of masculinity shifted back to Joel after Sam becomes one of the infected, and Henry dies by suicide due to tremendous grief over the loss of his younger brother.

Fourth, Joel gets seriously injured to the point where Ellie must rise up and become the caretaker and the hunter. While Joel lies unconscious, Ellie hunts for food and medicine in the hopes of healing Joel. Ellie is eventually captured by enemies and finds a way to escape, almost being killed in the process. While Joel's masculinity is briefly passed along to Ellie, he regains his masculinity when he awakens. After finding Ellie missing, he captures and violently tortures two bandits to find out Ellie's whereabouts, and then, brutally murders both bandits. Joel goes on to rescue and comfort a traumatized Ellie, which reveals how Ellie surrenders possession of masculinity and returns it to Joel.

Lastly, the final threat to Joel's masculinity is Marlene—a black, cisgender, heterosexual woman—at the end of the story. Marlene is the competing leader who decides to make a

diplomatic decision to risk Ellie's life for the sake of discovering a cure to the infection. Joel resists this notion by rescuing Ellie and killing Marlene in order to prevent her from following and recapturing him and Ellie. Joel later lies to Ellie by fabricating a story about how Marlene and the rebel group—the Fireflies—stopped looking for a cure instead of revealing his actions of murder. Marlene counters Joel's leadership role over Ellie, and ultimately, perishes because of it.

The Last of Us Remastered is a story about Joel, a white, cisgender, heterosexual man, who was never truly in danger of being stripped of his masculinity. Joel may have had moments of passivity, but he still came out alive and in charge in the end. There were also times where his white, cisgender, heterosexual masculinity might have been called into question, but those who might have threatened Joel's masculinity conveniently died or were written out of the story before doing lasting harm to his masculinity. Any time a character would counter Joel's leadership role, the central focus would always return to Joel before long.

Tess, Henry, and Marlene challenged Joel's masculinity by adopting leadership positions over Joel, but these characters were killed off and used as shock factors and emotional moments. When Tess showed a break in masculinity through irrationality and fear, the mantle of masculinity returned to Joel through her death. Bill's masculinity opposed Joel's masculinity by ordering Joel and Ellie around, but Bill was soon written out of the story after he showed a break in his masculinity through the grieving of his deceased romantic partner. Ellie temporarily adopted the mantle of masculinity by becoming Joel's protector when he was seriously injured, but Joel reclaims the position by torturing and killing enemy bandits, and then, rescuing and comforting a traumatized Ellie. When Joel finally finds Ellie, she is experiencing an emotional breakdown, which reveals a crack in masculinity, easily allowing Joel to reclaim the mantle. Henry challenged Joel's masculinity by taking the leading role for the group, but as soon as

Henry showed a break in masculinity through grieving over his younger brother, his character was removed from the story through suicide. With Henry's death, Joel was able to guiltlessly reclaim masculinity. Finally, Marlene countered Joel's charge over Ellie, but she paid the price through death when she revealed a break in masculinity by trying to compromise with Joel, and then, begging for mercy. As said before, Joel's position may have shifted between follower and leader, but the story always found a way to re-focus its attention back to Joel and his masculinity.

Any time a character that held the mantle of masculinity showed a break in masculinity, such as showing irrationality, fear, or grief, they would lose their hold on masculinity, and it would immediately be returned to Joel. Pertaining to hegemonic masculinity, Joel fits directly into an idealized model of masculinity similar to the film characters performed by John Wayne or Sylvester Stallone (Connell 1987). Joel is a white, cisgender, heterosexual man who exhibits qualities like stoicism and toughness. He is nearly indestructible, except for a brief moment when he is seriously injured, and comes out alive and unscathed regardless of how many enemies or monsters he encounters. Joel is never truly in fear of losing his masculinity. The mantle of masculinity may have fluctuated between Joel and other characters, but he never has to violently fight to take back the mantle, except in the case of Marlene. Rather, it is nearly always peacefully returned to him when the other characters show a break in masculinity, implying that nobody else besides Joel is capable of handling masculinity. Moreover, Tess, Bill, Henry, Ellie, and Marlene are all considered subordinate relative to hegemonic masculinity. Tess, Ellie, and Marlene are women, which is a position inherently subordinate in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). Bill is a homosexual man, and Henry is a black man. Both of these are subordinate masculinities in comparison to white, hegemonic masculinity as well (Connell 1987). Therefore, no one of "equal" position to Joel ever truly challenges him. In conclusion,

Joel is hegemonic masculinity, and because of this, he is never in danger of losing his hold on the mantle of masculinity.

Heteronormativity

In the video game *The Last of Us*, there are three romantic couples: Bill and Frank, Tommy and Maria, and Ellie and Riley. Gamers generally see the previously stated couples in this particular order because individuals typically go through the main game then the side game, but even then, not every gamer will play the side game *The Last of Us: Left Behind* where Ellie and Riley appear. This distinction between the main and side games is significant and will be discussed in later paragraphs. Overall, the game may depict gay and lesbian characters, but it immediately falls into the “Bury Your Gays” trope where gay characters are not permitted to have happy endings and often see the death of one of the romantic partners involved (“Bury Your Gays – TV Tropes”)¹.

Bill—a white, cisgender, gay man—is an ally who owes Joel some favors and is introduced in the eleventh cinematic. He helps Joel and Ellie find a functioning vehicle and periodically talks about how he once had a partner. When Bill does briefly speak about his partner, he projects a bitter attitude, which suggests a sour parting of ways between Bill and his partner. Players do not encounter Bill’s partner until the fourteenth cinematic where Bill and Joel discover a dead body hanging from the ceiling. Bill tells Joel that the man is named Frank, and he was Bill’s partner. At this point in the game, players—if they did not pick up the vague hint through the usage of the term “partner”—realize that Bill had a romantic relationship with Frank,

¹ The “Bury Your Gays” trope suggests that fictional gay characters are not permitted to have happy stories like their heterosexual counterparts. Instead, if there is a relationship between two gay characters, one of them is destined to die. There is a tendency for gay characters to be killed off more frequently than straight characters (“Bury Your Gays – TV Tropes”)

though he does not blatantly state that he identifies as “gay” in the cinematics. So, in this first instance of a romantic relationship, the game’s creators depict a gay relationship, but Bill’s partner Frank is dead before players even meet Bill. On top of this, Bill spoke rather ambiguously of his partner and in a disparaging attitude. The first romantic relationship shown on screen may have been a gay romance, but one of the partners is deceased, while the survivor is left to suffer the loss. This falls into the typical “Bury Your Gays” trope that describes a gay or lesbian romance that often results in a deceased partner (“Bury Your Gays - TV Tropes”).

In the twenty-third cinematic, players reunite with Joel’s younger brother Tommy—a white, cisgender, heterosexual man—and meet Tommy’s wife Maria—a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman. From the very beginning, Maria appears to be co-leaders with Tommy in the safe compound Joel and Ellie stumble upon. Maria and Tommy kindly provide temporary refuge for Joel and Ellie for a few scenes. In comparison to the homosexual romance, the heterosexual relationship is fleshed out and shows the players various emotions the two characters exchange with one another like worry, caring, concern, and frustration. This heterosexual romance is the only other romantic relationship shown in the main game, and as far as the players are aware, both Tommy and Maria survive until the end of the story. The single heterosexual romance in the game is shown to have a happy ending, unlike the gay and lesbian relationships of Bill and Frank and Ellie and Riley. Moreover, the safe compound where Tommy and Maria reside is heavily guarded, which further suggests that they are well-protected and never truly in danger.

In the side game *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, players witness the close friendship between Ellie—a white, cisgender, lesbian teenage girl—and Riley—a black, cisgender, lesbian or bisexual teenage girl—blossom into something romantic. Chronologically, the depictions of

Ellie and Riley's friendship takes place before the primary storyline of the main game. Riley takes Ellie to an abandoned shopping mall, and there, the two teenagers have serious conversations about whether or not Riley should leave the city and officially join the rebel group called the Fireflies. After Ellie touchingly tells Riley not to go, Riley signifies that she will stay with Ellie, which leads to a kiss shared by the two girls. Almost immediately after the kiss, they are chased and eventually bitten by the infected monsters, which again leads the narrative into the "Bury Your Gays" trope where a gay or lesbian romance results in the death of one of the characters ("Bury Your Gays – TV Tropes"). As the main storyline details, Ellie contains the key to a cure. On the other hand, Riley succumbs to the infection. Moreover, this scene reveals the centrality of masculinity by titillating the audience with a lesbian kiss, and then, immediately killing the love interest. The scene also shows the centrality of whiteness by choosing the white woman as the survivor, while the black woman dies, even though she is perceived as more capable than her white counterpart.

The Last of Us Remastered and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* both show gay, heterosexual, and lesbian relationships, but the heterosexual relationship is allowed to be overtly depicted and is permitted to live on. In comparison, both the gay and lesbian relationships have deceased partners before the main storyline even begins. The heterosexual relationship is plainly presented as normal and protected in a heavily guarded safe compound, while the only time the gay character's romantic partner appears is in a deceased state. The lesbian relationship shows a slow build up to a romantic kiss before immediately ending with the death of one of the characters. Also, if players do not play *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, they would not be aware of Ellie's sexual orientation since the main story shows no hints of Ellie's sexuality whatsoever. Although the game's creators attempted to provide diverse images of romantic relationships, it becomes

clear that heterosexual relationships are prized over the others when both non-normative relationships have tragic endings before the main game even begins.

In terms of sexuality, heteronormativity is central. The story falls into the established “Bury Your Gays” trope where gay or lesbian couples often result in a deceased partner much more often than that of heterosexual couples (“Bury Your Gays – TV Tropes”). Although there are two gay and lesbian romantic couples, the gay and lesbian character both have deceased partners. The heterosexual couple is permitted to be overt, heavily protected, and survive until the end of the story. On the other hand, the gay couple is only hinted at through the term “partner” and results in a love interest that is deceased before the gamers are even introduced to the character. The lesbian couple may have built up to a heartwarming kiss, but the brief stint of happiness is immediately interrupted by tragedy. The living gay and lesbian character, Bill and Ellie respectively, are forced to carry the weight of their deceased love interests, while the heterosexual couple, Tommy and Maria, are permitted to present a spectrum of emotions and survive beyond the end of the game.

The introduction of Bill’s deceased partner served as a heart-rending moment where gamers could sympathize with Bill. The death of Ellie’s romantic interest was meant to administer shock and heartbreak after becoming attached to the characters. The partners of the gay and lesbian characters are deployed simply as shock factors and emotional moments, but the heterosexual couple is allowed to be safe and have a happy ending. The game may have inserted diverse characters, but with the shocking deaths of the partners of Ellie and Bill, it becomes clear that the gay and lesbian partners serve as plot devices rather than fully fleshed out characters. Hegemonic masculinity is inherently heterosexual, and so, homosexuality is seen as the subordinate masculinity (Connell 1987). This can be seen in the case of Bill—a gay man. While

Bill may have held the mantle of masculinity for a time, he shows a break in masculinity by mourning over his deceased partner. Due to this lapse in masculinity, Bill forfeits his hold on dominant masculinity and is quickly written out of the story.

Finally, gamers could easily misread Bill as heterosexual and perceive Ellie as heterosexual. Bill's usage of the word "partner" as a specifically gay term is never overtly depicted or explained. Instead, his use of "partner" could be misinterpreted or bypassed as "friend" or "ally." Ellie is only revealed as lesbian in *The Last of Us: Left Behind* where she and Riley kiss. In the main game, there is no indication that Ellie identifies as anything other than heterosexual. Additionally, Ellie and Bill's sexualities are primarily constructed and established outside of the game in the social world by the game creators, voice actors, and the gaming community (Dale 2015; Mattos 2014; Mattos 2014; GLAAD's Entertainment Media Team 2013; NewNowNext Staff 2013). Gamers do not have to understand Ellie and Bill as lesbian or gay because their sexualities are ambiguously portrayed or can be disregarded altogether. With this in mind, Tommy and Maria are allowed to blatantly be a couple as well as live through the end of the story. There is no ambiguity regarding their relationship nor is there uncertainty regarding their sexuality. Bill's sexuality is more subtle and indistinct, and Ellie's sexuality is shown only in the side game, which can be disregarded. Although *The Last of Us* may have notably inserted gay and lesbian characters, their representations play right into the hegemonic ideologies present in the social world, namely that of heteronormativity.

Racialization

Out of fifteen different characters in *The Last of Us Remastered* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, four of them are African American, while the remaining eleven are Caucasian.

Marlene—a black, cisgender, heterosexual woman—is the leader of the rebel group called the Fireflies. Henry and Sam—black, cisgender, heterosexual man and teenage boy respectively—are two brothers who become allies to Joel and Ellie. Riley Abel—a black, cisgender, lesbian or bisexual teen girl—appears only in the prequel side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind* and is Ellie’s best friend and romantic interest. Interestingly enough, all four African American characters die before the main game ends. In the case of Riley, she dies before the main storyline even begins. The characters that are alive by the end of the game—Joel, Ellie, Bill, Tommy, and Maria—are all white characters.

The people of color—specifically African American since there are no Latinx, Asian, or Native American characters—are sprinkled throughout the game’s forty-three total cinematics. Marlene shows up for two cinematics early in the game and does not make another appearance until nearly the end of the story where she interacts with Joel before perishing under Joel’s hands. Henry and Sam show up in the nineteenth cinematic, and both die in the twenty-second scene, which means they appear only for four cutscenes. Riley Abel only appears in the side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, which contains five cinematics, and she ultimately dies due to being bitten by the infected, zombie-like monsters.

In the cases of Marlene and Henry, they were in positions of leadership. While Marlene commands the Fireflies, Henry—a black, cisgender, heterosexual man—directs Joel, Ellie, and his younger brother Sam—a black, cisgender, heterosexual teenage boy, but their claims to power are stripped away. When the players encounter Henry and Sam, Henry takes on the role of group leader because he is familiar with the lay out of the land as well as having a clear escape plan. Joel takes a backseat to leading, but this situation is resolved with the deaths of Henry and Sam. When an infected Sam attacks Ellie, Henry is forced to kill his younger brother. Overcome

with grief, Henry accusatorily points the gun at Joel, implying the fault falls on Joel's shoulders, before turning the gun on himself. With the blameless deaths of Henry and Sam, Joel is able to reclaim the position of leader without guilt.

The story dichotomously shows Marlene as vulnerable and villainous. When players initially encounter Marlene—a black, cisgender, heterosexual woman, she is shown as weak due to a fresh gun wound. After only two scenes, Marlene disappears until the end of the story. At the end of the main story, Marlene detains Joel and orders the Fireflies to perform fatal surgery on Ellie in order to extract a cure to the plague. Again, Joel seemingly falls into a passive role where others maintain leadership or control over him, but he regains his masculinity by escaping detainment, killing most of the Fireflies, rescuing Ellie, and then shooting Marlene dead. Gamers see a white man murder a person of color in the name of saving and protecting a white woman who holds the cure to saving humanity. The ending of the story resorts back to historically established narratives of the white male savior protecting the integrity of the white woman in order to reproduce the nation (McClintock 1995). Essentially, there was a choice between saving the world versus saving the white woman, and the latter was chosen. Joel's decision to save Ellie and forsaking humankind reinforces whiteness.

In the case of Riley Abel—a black, cisgender, lesbian or bisexual teenage girl, she makes an appearance only in the side story *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. The side game tells the tale of Ellie—a white, cisgender, lesbian teenage girl—and Riley's close friendship that soon grows into a romantic relationship. The two enjoy a night out at an abandoned mall, which culminates into a kiss between the two girls. Just as the characters are both surprised and excited by the kiss, Ellie and Riley encounter a group of infected. They manage to escape to safety, but they do not escape unscathed. Both girls have been bitten, which is a death sentence. As the main storyline explains,

Ellie is discovered to be immune to the infection, while Riley succumbs to the infection. Again, gamers witness another example of the “Bury Your Gays” trope as well as a racialized decision to allow the white woman to live.

Relating to race and ethnicity, whiteness is viewed as central. All of the characters that survive until the end of the story are white. The four black characters, since Latinx, Asian, and Native American characters did not make an appearance, all die before the main storyline finishes. Henry and Sam—a black, cisgender, heterosexual man and teenage boy respectively—help Joel and Ellie navigate an unfamiliar city swarming with enemy bandits and monsters. Henry takes charge as the leader of the group, but before long, both Henry and Sam meet tragic ends. Sam is bitten and becomes one of the cannibalistic infected humans, while Henry dies by suicide immediately after due to overwhelming grief. Their deaths pander to shock factor and allow the focus to shift back onto Joel and Ellie. Also, Henry and Sam simply serve as plot devices to help progress the journey of Joel and Ellie, and once their purpose is completed, they are removed from the story. Marlene’s—a black, cisgender, heterosexual woman—first appearance show her as injured and vulnerable, but her final appearance depict her as diplomatic and reasonable. Although she is presented as multidimensional, this portrayal becomes null when Joel kills her to protect Ellie. Joel, a white man, murders Marlene, a person of color, for the sake of protecting Ellie, a white woman. This ending falls into historically established narratives of a white male savior defending the integrity of a white woman (McClintock 1995).

In the side story, infected humans bite both Ellie—a white, cisgender, lesbian teenage girl—and Riley Abel—a black, cisgender, lesbian or bisexual teenage girl, but Ellie is written as the sole survivor and carrier of a cure, while Riley dies. Riley is allowed to have a well-rounded personality, but her tragic end is meant to provoke shock and emotion. Plus, there was a

racialized decision to choose Ellie as the survivor, while letting Riley die. Overall, Marlene, Henry, Sam, and Riley are all portrayed as if they were any other character, but it is also telling that these characters die before the end of the main storyline. While the white main characters Joel and Ellie are playable protagonists, the characters of color are ultimately victims of violence (Jansz and Martis 2007; Glaubke et al. 2001; Dill et al. 2005). On the other hand, their deaths are also constructed to elicit emotional responses and serve the purpose of turning the focus back to Joel and Ellie as well as helping progress their journey. They are strategically scattered throughout the primary story in order to appease the audience and placate the desire for diverse representation. The insertion of these characters of color acknowledges diversity while still preserving the normative discourse of whiteness.

Intersectionality

The portrayals of characters from *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* incorporate multidimensional aspects and shy away from established stereotypes, but the central focus of the story consistently reverts back to that of masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. When diverse characters are interspersed throughout the game, they are used to imply “diversity” and are eventually utilized for shock factor, to elicit emotional responses from the gamer, and help the white main characters continue their journey.

In the third cinematic, the interactions between Tess—a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman—and Marlene—a black, cisgender, heterosexual woman—show two strong women characters that challenge one another for leadership, but in the brief moments where they interact, it is clear that Tess has the upper hand. Marlene is introduced with a gun wound, which instantly places her in a vulnerable situation. On the other hand, Tess has just killed someone in

cold-blood, is shown clearly with a gun in hand, and is uninjured, which puts her in a more commanding position over Marlene. The cinematic reveals that even though Marlene may be the leader of a rebel army, she is not allowed to be more powerful than her white counterpart. At the end of the story, Marlene contests Joel's leadership over Ellie by green lighting the attempt to finding a cure for humanity's plague, which would result in the death of Ellie. Marlene is shown as judicious in her decision, but regardless of this, Joel resorts to murdering Marlene in order to preserve Ellie's life. Marlene may have challenged Joel's masculinity temporarily, but she ultimately paid the price for it.

Tess maintained the mantle of leadership over Joel and Ellie for several cinematics before her death in cinematic nine. Tess's introduction contrasts greatly compared to Marlene's introduction to the story. Tess is initially depicted as tough and no-nonsense. After entering Joel's apartment, she pours herself a drink and explains how she fought and killed two enemy men who attacked her after a successful black smuggling arrangement. When dealing with a minor antagonist, she is clearly the boss of the situation and is the only one holding a gun, which can be understood as a symbol of power. She is generally portrayed as headstrong and capable, but when she reveals that she has become infected by the plague, Tess shows a vulnerable side, becoming irrational and fearful of her fate. Tess may have been portrayed as a dynamic and interesting character, but she eventually dies and resorts to being used as an emotional plot device to propel Joel's story forward and shift masculinity back onto Joel's shoulders. Tess sacrifices herself to help Joel and Ellie escape, and so, her death can be perceived as heroic and valiant. On the other hand, Marlene is died as a villain, which further shows how whiteness is seen as central.

Bill—a white, cisgender, gay man—comes into play in cinematic eleven. He challenges Joel’s masculinity with overt aggression and authoritatively navigates Joel and Ellie through the city. Bill initially seems one-dimensional with his belligerent attitude, but he later shows a softer, more emotional side when he discovers the remains of his deceased romantic partner. Again, we see a multidimensional aspect to the character, but Bill’s grief is used to spark an emotional response from gamers and to re-center the attention back to Joel. Pertaining to masculinities, homosexuality is perceived as a subordinate masculinity in comparison to heterosexuality (Connell 1987). With this in mind, Joel’s masculinity is never really challenged by Bill because the inherently heterosexual nature of hegemonic masculinity reigns over homosexuality. Bill may have held the mantle of masculinity temporarily, but it was simply a matter of time before he would reveal a break in masculinity and return the mantle to Joel.

Henry and Sam—a black, cisgender, heterosexual man and teenage boy respectively—appear in cinematic nineteen and become allies and counterparts to Joel and Ellie. Henry and Sam’s sibling bond is portrayed as unbreakable and loving, which leads to their death and suicide. Sam shows fear of becoming one of the cannibalistic monsters, and he meets a tragic end by transforming into what he feared most. After Henry is forced to shoot his infected brother, Henry is overwhelmed by grief and turns the gun on himself. Henry and Sam closely parallel Joel and Ellie’s partnership, but it becomes clear that the preservation of whiteness holds significance since the brothers, who are both black, perish violently and tragically. The two brothers reveal breaks in masculinity by displaying fear and grief, and their deaths are utilized as an emotional moment and to re-focus Joel and Ellie as the center of the story. The brothers’ primary role is to help propel the journey of Joel and Ellie, and once their purpose is fulfilled, they become easily expendable.

Riley Abel—a black, cisgender, lesbian or bisexual teenage girl—appears only in the side game *The Last of Us: Left Behind* along side Ellie. In just a handful of cinematics, Riley is fleshed out as playful, laidback, and charismatic. She can be seen as a multidimensional character, but she, too, falls victim to becoming a plot device to elicit an emotional response. Most significantly, infected monsters bit both Ellie and Riley, yet Ellie was the one to be written as the survivor and carrier of a cure. Ironically, Riley has been shown as being more capable than Ellie through joining the rebel group, protecting Ellie when the infected monsters appeared, and successfully handling a gun. Allowing Ellie to live is a conscious decision to choose the survival of the white woman over the black woman.

In regards to intersectionality, the characters are depicted as multidimensional, but they all become victims of shock factor and are used to refocus the story back to Joel. *The Last of Us* depict a variety of intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, and race and ethnicity in its vast cast of characters. It seems as though the game incorporates a diverse medley of unique characters, but they all meet tragic deaths or are written out of the story. These intersectional characters may be interesting and multi-faceted, but they are seemingly reduced to plot devices to help propel the story of Joel and Ellie. Furthermore, the representations of these diverse characters prop up the pedestal of masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. Tess, Bill, Henry, Ellie, and Marlene may have temporarily adopted the mantle of masculinity, but as soon as they show breaks in masculinity, the mantle is immediately transferred back onto Joel's shoulders. The gay and lesbian characters both have partners who are deceased before the main storyline even begins, while the heterosexual couple is in a heavily guarded compound and survive beyond the end of the game. Finally, there is a strategic scattering of four black characters, but they all perish before the end of the main story. Both Riley and Ellie become

infected, but there is a conscious decision to allow Ellie, a white woman, to live instead. Marlene dies in a villainous light, while her counterpart, Tess, dies in a heroic firefight to help Joel and Ellie escape from enemies. In the end, there were deliberate decisions on which character would be permitted to live, who would be written out, and how certain deaths would be portrayed.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

I was first introduced to video games when I was three-years-old. My dad brought home a Nintendo 64 one night, and I have been hooked ever since. I love video games' ability to weave intricate stories with enchanting characters and construct clever challenges for me to overcome. Video games are so diverse in their styles of play and narratives and characters that every person is bound to discover a game they enjoy. There are games for those who want a casual experience, players who like puzzles to solve, people who are looking for action and adventure, folks who want to engage in a fantasy world, individuals seeking the rush of competition, and more. The realm of video games is so vast and full of possibilities, but instead of breaking boundaries and expanding, they often reiterate hegemonic ideologies prevalent in larger society. Writing this thesis has been a tumultuous journey. On the one hand, I still very much love *The Last of Us* and the creators' ability to craft multidimensional characters and construct emotional bonds to the characters. The gameplay is solid and thrilling, and the storytelling is engaging and heart-wrenching. On the other hand, I am not only a gamer, but also a sociologist, and I cannot ignore the hegemonic discourses incorporated throughout the game.

Video games are more than frivolous or childish. Video games are vehicles for socialization, dominant ideologies, and deployment of nationalism, race, gender, and more (Daniels and LaLone 2012; Leonard 2004; Leonard 2003; Consalvo 2013). Additionally, game developers perpetuate certain beliefs about the world and explore topics ranging from heterosexism to masculinity to white supremacy (Consalvo 2013; Everett and Watkins 2008). Many game developers still believe that the majority of gamers are a homogenized group of

white, heterosexual males, and because of this expectation of a certain type of gamer, portrayals of marginalized identities are stereotyped (Shaw 2009; Shaw 2011; Shaw 2015). Video games are worthy of research and critique because they provide insight into how groups believe the world operates.

Depictions of women in video games are often sexualized or reduced to secondary, non-playable characters (Todd 2012). Racial representations in video games typically see white characters as hero protagonists, while darker skinned characters are portrayed as victims of violence (Jansz and Martis 2007; Glaubke et al. 2001; Dill et al. 2005), “evil” races (Chang 2015), or sports competitors (Leonard 2004). Heterosexuality is generally unmarked and unquestioned, making it the default norm (Krobová et al. 2015; Shaw 2009), and homophobic sentiments within the gaming community have an influence on who feels safe and welcome (Shaw 2015). There is still a widespread belief that gamers are white, heterosexual men, but in reality, gamers are vastly diverse, and so, video games should reflect their audience and construct appropriate representations (Shaw 2009). Many gamers may not find representations of themselves in media, and so, they must utilize subversive methods of interacting with narratives through queer readings (Taylor 2002), role-playing (Krobová et al. 2015), or in-game modifications (Mikula 2013). Lastly, plenty of research focuses on individual identities and representations, but most literature fails to address intersectionality (Shaw 2015). Because of this hole in the literature, this research also sought to fill the gap with intersectional analysis.

The Last of Us was chosen for research analysis because it was won over two hundred Game of the Year awards, signifying universal critical acclaim (Dutton 2014; Staff Writer 2014; Nelva 2014; Bowen 2014; Raza 2014; Pierre 2014). The game also garnered praise for its portrayal of strong women characters and gay and lesbian characters (Gibson 2013;

Killingsworth 2013; Dale 2015; Mattos 2014; Mattos 2014; GLAAD's Entertainment Media Team 2013; NewNowNext Staff 2013). Because of the video game's widespread admiration, I believed that the game was also deserving of critique. Through critical discourse analysis, I analyzed all of the cinematics presented in the main story and side story and coded for themes such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, intersectionality, dialogue, actions, interactions, subversiveness, and normativity.

The Last of Us centers on masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. Joel may have had moments where the mantle of masculinity shifted from him to another character, but as soon as that particular character revealed a break in masculinity through irrationality, fear, or grief, masculinity was immediately shifted back to Joel. The game may have included representations of gay and lesbian characters with Bill and Ellie, but both characters had romantic interests that are deceased before the main story begins. Both characters' sexualities could have also been overlooked. Bill's usage of the term "partner" is ambiguous, and Ellie's sexuality is not revealed unless gamers play through the side game *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. On the other hand, the heterosexual couple in the main story is permitted to have a happy ending where both characters live through the end of the game and are allowed to be clear about their relationship. Finally, the four characters of color are all deceased before the main storyline is finished. The five characters that survive until the end of the game are all white. The characters of color and queer characters are scattered for the sake of diversity and become used to elicit emotional responses from gamers as well as propel Joel's story forward. Although the cast in *The Last of Us* is diverse and well written, the central focus of the game revolves around Joel's masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. Diversity is not perceived as central to the story, but rather, used as window dressing.

While the game may be a brilliant work of art, it still displays hegemony through the centrality of masculinity, heteronormativity, and whiteness. I wanted to believe that the diverse cast was admirable and inclusive, but as I delved deeper into the structures, it became clear that this was not the case. Every detail of the game and its cinematics served a purpose, and often times that purpose was to refocus the story back to Joel—a white, cisgender, heterosexual man—or for the sake of eliciting emotional responses to seemingly shocking moments. The thing is that game creators do not consciously sit down in a conference room and scheme up different hegemonic ideologies the game can reproduce. Video games have countless opportunities to resist hegemonic values, but these ideologies are so intrinsically embedded within our broader culture that it simply is the way things are.

Of course, I understand that this analysis is through only a single set of eyes—a set of eyes that comes with its own subjective belief system, background, and ways of perceiving the world. Perhaps my analysis is completely off target to some, but to others, maybe my analysis sparks an entirely new way of reading and understanding the game. Regardless of your thoughts on my research, *The Last of Us* is deserving of its universal critical acclaim, but it is also deserving of critique.

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