

**'You'd just come after her': Images of American Literary Experience in
*The Last of Us***

**'You'd just come after her': Imagens de Experiência Literária
Americana em *The Last of Us*¹**

Gonçalo Dias

Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto

goncalo.dias.2398@gmail.com

ABSTRACT. The present essay proposes to analyse Naughty Dog studio's best-seller *The Last of Us Remastered* through a thematic lens which perceives this video game as a vessel of American mythology, and places it in parallel with literary creations recurrently analysed as identity and cultural artefacts, such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, using Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* as an introductory acknowledgement of the difference in platform and medium. Using American cultural criticism, with special emphasis on Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, points of cultural intersection between the three aforementioned narrative creations will be traced, such as the American duo as recurrent factor in American literary creation, considerations of the natural world in its capacity for meaning in American experience, and the rejection of dominant systems in favour of individuality. Throughout the present essay, such matters will be approached and selected intersections between the main objects of study located in order to argue Naughty Dog's creation as characteristically American.

Keywords: The Last of Us; Adaptation; North-American Literature; Nature; Leo Marx.

RESUMO. O presente ensaio propõe analisar *The Last of Us Remastered* do estúdio Naughty Dog através de uma lente temática que entende o respetivo vídeo jogo enquanto recipiente de mitologia americana, e o coloca em paralelo com criações literárias recorrentemente analisadas enquanto artefactos de identidade e expressão cultural, como *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* de Mark Twain e *The Road* de Cormac McCarthy, usando *A Theory of Adaptation* de Linda Hutcheon enquanto reconhecimento introdutório da diferença em plataforma e meio. Usando crítica cultural americana, com ênfase específica em *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* de Leo Marx, pontos de interseção cultural entre as três criações narrativas mencionadas serão traçados, tais como o duo americano enquanto fator recorrente em criação literária americana, considerações do mundo natural na sua capacidade de

¹ This paper was presented in a shorter, simpler format at the international online conference *The Impact of Video Games on Culture and Education* hosted by CETAPS NOVA, under the title "Not one of those things': Images of Americanness in *The Last of Us*," on 18 February 2022 – the present format, then, is an edited transcription of this presentation, extended in order to further defend the presented argument.

significado na experiência americana, e a rejeição de sistemas dominantes em favor de individualidade. Ao longo do presente ensaio, tais assuntos serão abordados e interseções selecionadas entre os objetos principais de estudo localizadas de modo a argumentar a criação de Naughty Dog enquanto caracteristicamente americana.

Palavras-chave: The Last of Us; Adaptação; Literatura Norte-Americana; Natureza; Leo Marx.

INTRODUCTION

Naughty Dog's video game entitled *The Last of Us Remastered* (2014) comprises the story of a duo composed by Joel and Ellie, the former a disillusioned man and the latter a hopeful and sarcastic adolescent girl, in their journey West toward a Firefly base, expecting to discover a cure for the *Cordyceps* infection, which has devastated the game's American landscape. The referred original story, however, presents various moments which echo narratives that are recurrently considered as culturally relevant regarding the United States of America, such as Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). Taking such overlapping and crossing examples into consideration, in what ways does the diegetic narrative of *The Last of Us* resonate with these American cultural artefacts, and where can such echoes be located? If the post-apocalyptic diegesis is explicitly located in the United States of America, how does the landscape present remnants of a past cultural identity, and in what ways can this identity reveal (and conceal) itself in such a landscape? And, ultimately, how can (if at all) a past experience of proclaimed exceptionalism manifest its existence in an environment hostile to its maintenance and preservation?

Such questions are rarely brought forth in game studies. Although gamification theory reviews are common, there is a distinct gap in the thematic approach towards video games in their textual and cultural relevance. Despite the popularity and financial success of the present video game, its American cultural markings have been recurrently ignored in favour of arguments regarding horror and dystopia inside the realm of gamification. The present paper, then, proposes to bring attention to this gap in game, literary and cultural studies, as the quasi-untapped potential of interactive narratives for expressions of identity, selfhood, nationhood and culture may prove to be of significance.

While the existence of a sequel to the referred video game is acknowledged, solely the first game will be considered in the present paper, along with a brief reference to a comic miniseries published prior to the release of the game: *The Last of Us: American Dreams* (2013). The "Left Behind" campaign of the referred video game will not be considered either. Additionally, *The Last of Us Remastered* will be referred to as *The Last of Us*, for simplification and due to the narrative of both iterations being the same.

ADAPTATION

Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) considers how the different forms and manifestations of adaptation and intertextuality strive for the legitimization of intermodal and intermedium interactions, while supporting the contemplation of different versions of the same narrative as of equal value – as Hutcheon argues, "Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically" (xv), in reflection of a "dehierarchizing impulse" (xiv) that moves the author's work. This egalitarian approach results from the recurrent understanding of adaptations as "minor and subsidiary" due to the value of these works being conducted in terms of fidelity to an "original" piece (xiv-xv). Hutcheon's argument that "art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories" (2) subverts the hierarchical consideration of different works into an intertextual experience, as "an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (8) in its capacity of engaging with previous creations.

This argument, however, does not render the narratives present in *The Last of Us*, *The Road* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* interchangeable in their content or form. Instead, one may argue that, inside the diegetic universe of Naughty Dog's creation, it is possible to locate elements and sections which echo an American literary tradition of human relation to and experience in the natural world that is similarly present in the Twain and McCarthy's works. Their novels, then, are specifically chosen for their stronger resonance in the video game's portrayal of American landscape(s).

Whilst the possibility for video games' development of artistic expression is uncertain and controversial in the active participation of an exterior force – the player – and in their mechanical and digital creation process, their capacity for storytelling may be regarded as comparable to that of cinema, oral tradition, novels and other media. The present essay, then, whilst not necessarily placing the video game format in an equal standing to that of literature, does consider this media's potential for thematic expression through narrative. The differentiating and differentiated level of interaction, as well as the multiplicity and convergence of stimuli (namely, an auditory level being potentially added, along with a set of visual and tactile dynamic interactions) are factors to be taken into account in the *translation* of stories, myths and artistic creation into video games, but these factors will also not be considered here. Therefore, and purposefully, no hierarchy of value has been placed regarding the different media.

The theoretical framework provided by Hutcheon's theory, following the public disclosing by Naughty Dog that literary pieces such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* were sources of inspiration for the creation of the diegetic world and narrative of the video game (Turi, 2012), becomes specifically relevant. As (American) aspects of the (referred and other) novels and works are reformulated and integrated into the diegesis of *The Last of Us*, the video game achieves a level of palimpsestic existence (Hutcheon, 2006: 8) which

creates a system of mutual information between all three involved creations. *The Road's* dystopian setting and the bond maintained by the father and the son as they are "carrying the fire" (83) through a southward journey in search for a regenerative and safe location echo that of *The Last of Us'* diegetic world, as well as Joel and Ellie's westward journey from Boston, Massachusetts. Such resonance appears to be purposeful, as the title of a tie-in comic miniseries entitled *The Last of Us: American Dreams* (Druckman, Hicks, Rosenberg, 2013), published *a priori* to the video game's release, established the setting and tone through which the products of the series may be considered: as creations derived from and informed by an American landscape.

AMERICAN DUOS

After the "Prologue" section, in which Joel, the male protagonist, is introduced, along with the *Cordyceps* fungal infection and Sarah (Joel's young daughter, who is killed by human reaction to the destruction of the known world), the narrative re-considers Joel as living in a quarantine zone located in Boston, Massachusetts. This zone is perceived and defined as a militarized and threatening surviving civilization against a backdrop of further destruction, harm, and death. It is in this same location that Joel meets Ellie, the young female protagonist who is immune to the *Cordyceps* infection – which has decimated the world – and whom Joel must deliver to the Fireflies, a paramilitary group attempting to find a cure for the post-apocalyptic scenario and illness.

Both protagonists initiate their own individual movement through space towards a differing goal: Joel's mission is one of retrieving ammunition and weaponry, while Ellie wishes to contribute towards the development of a promised cure. However, the protagonists are forced to converge into the common goal of delivering Ellie to the paramilitary group after being attacked by the oppressive Boston military, in light of the oppressive domination dynamics perpetuated in the quarantine zone. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and Jim experience a similar scenario: their journey through the Mississippi river begins with the convergence of each character's individual goals and is, in parallel to Joel and Ellie's westward journey, developed in order to reach liberation from extreme limitation. In both cases, this liberation has been transposed to a material space immersed in hope, and the convergence of different motivations gradually develops into a symbiotic relationship in which both elements of the pairs mutually support each other, enriching their counterpart's knowledge and perception of the world – a characteristic which pervades the relationship and experience of the three pairs of protagonists.

The Road's set of protagonists, however, share this tightened bond from the beginning of the narrative, as a consequence of their already-existing parental relationship. Over time, Joel and Ellie's bond grows into one of quasi-parental protection: Joel's lack of a child figure is gradually replaced by the presence of Ellie as a vulnerable quasi-daughter

who the father figure must help and guide through the hostile post-apocalyptic landscape, whilst the young girl provides a sense of hope, clarity and, oftentimes, moral standing. In parallel to *The Road's* son, who maintains a hopeful and merciful, albeit frightened positioning, Ellie recurrently advises Joel against unnecessary killing, and constantly nurtures an optimistic perception over the world, an understanding of a regenerative possibility which she attempts to transmit to Joel. Ellie develops a rhetoric of hope which simultaneously motivates and grounds Joel's difficult connection to the post-apocalyptic world, while Joel ensures Ellie's protection and, in time, reinforces the maintenance of this rhetoric. Such a relationship, then, echoes that of *The Road's* father and son, whose dynamics of protection and guidance mutually assure the physical and mental survival of both protagonists.

The three sets of protagonists, then, may be considered similar in their convergence against a hostile, oppressive and dominant world. All three duos are comprised of people whose marginality in the present diegetic order and dynamics of society forces them into developing an emotional and intellectual bond of mutual growth in favour of survival. Such a bond is marked by a quest which demands a material dislocation to a point of projected hope in the face of a chaotic and nonsensical society, as a result of the mutual rejection between the protagonists and their communities – an experience transversal to the duos. While Huckleberry Finn and Jim journey through the Mississippi river and the father and the son journey towards the South, Joel and Ellie (relevantly) journey towards a general American West upon which hope for a cure – a regenerative force through which the previous mode of civilization might return – apparently rests. In this light, a series of intersecting moments and considerations may be perceived throughout the three different narratives in their relation to the material space.

THE (AMERICAN) NATURAL WORLD

As aforementioned, the opening section of *The Last of Us* presents Joel accompanied by Sarah during the initial breakout of the *Cordyceps* infection. In attempting to flee the infected-riddled area where the family lived, Sarah is killed by fearful human action – namely, a figure of armed authority was ordered by a superior to execute both Joel and Sarah due to their contact with the infected area, despite their lack of infection. This is the first moment in which one is confronted with the reversed order which is to grow into normalcy.

Massachusetts, where Joel lives and meets Ellie, is, concurrently, the location where the Massachusetts Bay Colony was established by Puritans in the American continent in 1630. John Winthrop delivered the sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity" aboard the *Arabella* ship, in light of the arrival to the American continent, specifically to establish the aforementioned colony. In this sermon, Winthrop proclaimed a Covenant entered with God by the *Arabella* group (1630: 46), in which they would have to adhere to

(Puritan) Christian belief in order to survive and thrive in America. This sermon also established America as a place of promise, "a city upon a hill" (47), which is to exist in contrast with an "evill world" (45) conceived of as dangerous wilderness, corresponding to the non-acceptance of the Covenant.

One can find this same idea in *The Last of Us* regarding existence of a lurking threat beyond the walls of safety, but the communal space is also treacherous. The quarantine zone where the protagonists inhabit, despite being a location of protection from a threatening, infected-shaped natural world, defined as unknown, savage wilderness and danger, is also a location of extreme oppression, control and death. Both locations – outside and inside the borders of Boston – are presented as a threat to the protagonists. As Roger Williams, in *A Key into the Language of America* (1643), denotes, American wilderness and animal life is characterized by "a cleere resemblance of the world, where greedie and furious men persecute and devour the harmlesse and innocent, as the wild beasts pursue and devoure the Hinds and Roes;" (97).

This definition of wilderness perfectly overlaps with the considerations of the American landscape present in both *The Road* and *The Last of Us* – whilst the infected in the video game's diegesis are presented as "wild beasts" without any possibility of self-control, humans with freedom of intellect are equally as incommensurate in their destructive rage, both inside and outside the supposedly safe communities. The presence of the infected along with the non-civilizational aspect of humans who have succumbed to a notion of human wilderness presents, then, an anachronistic reversion of civilization and its systems and dynamics into destruction, chaos and – oftentimes, material – hetero-consumption proclaimed in the Puritan consideration of wilderness.² The infected present in the diegesis are biologically expected to behave in a specific, expected murderous manner, and the several episodes in which Joel and Ellie encounter humans, patterns of organized murder, cannibalism and destruction can be perceived – the most explicit of which being the encounter with David and the cannibalistic community he leads.

In McCarthy's *The Road*, human encounters are defined as being threatening to the protagonists' survival, triggering episodes of extreme violence and quasi-death experiences for the father and the son, because these rare confrontations recurrently highlight the tendency for domination and cannibalism in the small groups that are formed. Only specific moments of human contact are not threatening to the protagonists, such as the interaction with the evasive Ely (2007: 161), whose rejection of a possible religiousness and moral standing is countered by the father's defence of the son's regenerative potential. In both *The Road* and *The Last of Us*, one can locate organized

² In claiming "the non-civilizational aspect," one should contemplate a definition of a society which has not necessarily lost its organized consideration of civilization and human experience in community, but which has subverted and redefined this consideration through the implementation of murder or cannibalism. The infected are implied produce these effects instinctively.

systems of valuation and human interaction whose organization prioritizes an alternative, self-consuming manifestation of previously-existing civilized human existence. The existing humans – living and non-living, in the case of *The Last of Us*³ – persist in this hostile environment, but their persistence and continuation is based upon a consumption of other humans, in an act that prevents true continuation and natural renovation. To be cannibalistic, both in the novel and in the diegesis of Naughty Dog's creation, and whether willingly or not, is to actively refuse and reject living human presence and renovation, even if such a consumption maintains the life of existing human forms – even if such forms are maintained, the possibility of their renovation through progeny is destroyed or severely limited, as understood in the implied consumption of a new-born by humans in McCarthy's *The Road* (198).

Such systems of human interaction and, consequently, human destruction, then, grow parallel with a notion of a natural world which is not only wild and untamed, but also untouched in its rejection and distancing from human experience and existence. It is through this reversion of civilization back into savagery and, consequently, back into wilderness that Joel and Ellie, similarly to *The Road's* father and son, must navigate in their journey.

The natural world in *The Last of Us*, however, is not linear in its expression of hostility towards the protagonists. As can be understood throughout the narrative, Joel and Ellie often encounter an idyllic predisposition of nature in its pastoral capacity and *re*-untouched state. Beginning their quest in the Boston, Massachusetts zone, the illusive point of their destination is located in the general West, towards which the protagonist duo takes a pioneering dislocation into a possible and promised regeneration. Thomas Jefferson conveyed to James Madison in a personal letter that "the earth is given as a common stock to man to labour & live on" (1786), in an explicit defence of an agricultural experience to be applied in American territory. Jefferson's utopian anxiety for economic agrarianism perceived a communion with the American natural world which was similarly existing and informing of Emerson's Transcendentalist thought. Such a development led to the conception and proliferation of, as Leo Marx considers in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), an harmonious placing of oneself inside a peaceful natural world, in "peace, leisure, and economic sufficiency" (23), as opposed to industrial experience, as Marx exemplified with Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing (11-14) – "For it is industrialization, represented by images of machine technology, that provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design" (26).

³ The term "non-living" is of higher accuracy regarding the condition of the *Cordyceps*-infected humans – the infected are not fully dead, as one is capable of taking their lives; instead, the parasitical fungal infection imposes on the living brain an overpowering destructive and cannibalistic quality which renders the host powerless to resist these urges.

The natural world, in the diegesis of *The Last of Us*, takes an oppositional standpoint as a space for liberation against the quarantine zone and other urban space's oppressive dynamics in the perspective of the characters. For the majority of the narrative, it is when located inside the material urban space that Joel and Ellie are attacked or ambushed by both the living and the non-living. In both mandatory and optional pieces of dialogue, Ellie recurrently discloses her amazement at her new-found perception of nature as idyllic and paradisiac, in contrast with her oppressive experience in the urban environment of the quarantine zone of Boston. Such a perception of the natural world as liberating is recurrently established by the protagonists throughout the narrative, as exemplified in dialogue between the protagonists: "Ellie: Man... / Joel: What? / E: Nothing. It's just... I've never seen anything like this, that's all. / J: You mean the woods? / E: Yeah. Never walked through the woods. It's kinda cool."

Upon reaching a hydraulic power plant surrounded by nature, Joel re-encounters his brother, Tommy, who has developed a self-sustained community which draws electricity from the surrounding natural resources, in apparent communion with the realm of the natural. Gerald Farca and Charlotte Ladevèze's interesting ecocritical approach in interaction with critical dystopian considerations of the video game in *The Journey to Nature: The Last of Us as Critical Dystopia* (2016) is revealing; however, nature cannot be perceived as a place for possible regeneration of the protagonists nor of society – at least, not without ambivalence, – nor should the limited perception of the characters be fully trusted. It is often in the natural world that Joel and Ellie's lives face risk – twice do they nearly drown, being saved by other humans, and Tommy's compound is raided soon after the protagonists' arrival. The presence of water as a manifestation of the natural, despite its nourishing of Tommy's hydraulic plant, recurrently rejects communion with the protagonists.

The first moment of possible death by water is prevented by Henry and Sam – brothers who are encountered by Joel and Ellie in Pittsburgh, – rescuing the protagonists after they jumped towards a body of water in order to escape hunters. Henry and Sam helped the protagonists solely due to Ellie's convincing of Joel to help the brothers, similarly to how the son in *The Road* recurrently advises his father to help those in a situation similar to their own. The second instance where the protagonists are at risk of drowning is when, in Salt Lake City, after having been made aware that such could be the location of the Firefly laboratory attempting to produce a cure, the protagonists are attacked by the paramilitary group. Falling upon a water stream, Joel rescues an unconscious Ellie from the water, but is immediately attacked by this same group.

Whilst Twain's Mississippi river appears as a location of communion and integration of human existence in an idyllic natural world that liberates the protagonists from the dynamics of limitation and oppression present in their diegetic community, *The Last of Us'* post-apocalyptic conditions prevent such factors from being within reach of the protagonists. Instead, the manifestation of the natural world in the shape of bodies of

water further immerse the protagonists in physical and intellectual enclosure from which they cannot escape alone, as the violence of the natural world is overlapped with the violence perpetuated by the infected and by human experience. If Twain's river allows for the survival and integration of Huckleberry Finn and Jim into the natural world, *The Last of Us* water integrates the characters in suffocating immersion, in its convergence with societal oppression; if the Huck Finn and Jim's river allows for individual human thriving, the bodies of water present in Joel and Ellie's journey destroy any individual human figures, and this destruction can only be prevented if other humans rescue those in the water. This is also made evident in the interactive factor of the video game, as Ellie cannot swim, therefore requiring Joel to, at all times when needing to cross a body of water, fetch or devise a makeshift raft upon which she can be carried. In turn, Joel often requires Ellie to clear spaces in the water through varied mechanisms so that Joel may proceed with the narrative and emerge from the water, in a manifestation of their developed symbiotic relationship in material action.

In this light, one can conclude that it is not regular nature which is present in Naughty Dog's creation, but a characteristically American one – there is a recurrent oscillation between an idyllic consideration and perception of one's placing into the natural world and projection of promised regeneration, and an unfitting and destructive force which contaminates and obliterates this idyllic state and landscape. Due to this permanent state of contamination and obliteration of and by the natural world, one cannot attribute to nature any stable (and hopeful) possibilities of regeneration, communion and integration. Instead, one finds these possibilities in the growing bond shared by the protagonists, who are capable of overcoming all obstacles a destroyed world – both communal and natural – produces.

Considering that the previously-existing civilization had already developed in the light of industrial and mechanical progress, the journey undergone by Ellie and Joel is not one of expansion of the civilized frontier through agriculture, but of reaching a point of promised regeneration from *de*-conquered wilderness, in hopes of creating a re-civilizing force resulting in an agrarian community of pastoral imagery. The Western laboratory of the Fireflies, then, was immersed in an anxiety which echoes that of the exceptional "citty upon a hill" (Winthrop, 1630: 47). Joel and Ellie's journey, thus, becomes a pilgrimage against a lurking destruction imprinted on the (American) post-apocalyptic landscape. Ellie, herself, in her immunity to the *Cordyceps* infection and consequent potential for creating regeneration, becomes an embodiment of exceptionalism in a destroyed American landscape, similarly to *The Road's* son. In their youth and representation of human – American – regeneration, both Ellie and the son present a possibility for the (re-)growth of an American Eden, an American Garden of the World, in which the integration of human existence in the realm of the natural contradicts the disruption of the Garden's peace.

Upon reaching Salt Lake City, where the Firefly laboratory is located, after a troubled and maze-like journey, Ellie and Joel find a visual landscape of idyllic expression and of apparent pre-mature regeneration innate to nature's natural course. Salt Lake City is presented as a natural American pre-disposition for the development of a "citty upon a hill" in its reforestation of the landscape and apparent overtaking of man-made industrial elements, a reflection of the possible regenerative powers carried by Ellie in her exceptionalism. However, immediately afterwards, Joel and Ellie are forced to literally descend into an underground level underneath the depicted scenario, and are attacked by the *Cordyceps* infected. The apparently idyllic scenario is revealed at that moment to be itself contaminated by the main force of destruction, anticipating the disappointment of their arrival to the sought-after Firefly laboratory. Afterwards, Ellie and Joel become unconscious as a result of the deadly force of Nature in the shape of the aforementioned strong currents of water and of aggression from the Firefly militia, respectively. As Leo Marx states regarding Hawthornian expression of the pastoral being interrupted by the industrial:

"the writer sitting in his green retreat dutifully attaching words to natural facts, trying to tap the subterranean flow of thought and feeling and then, suddenly, the startling shriek of the train whistle bearing in upon him, forcing him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream. What begins as a conventional tribute to the pleasures of withdrawal from the world — a simple pleasure fantasy— is transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more complex state of mind." (14-15)

There is, then, an overlapping of Marx's argument with *The Last of Us* – when Joel and Ellie are being immersed in the apparent peace of the natural world (which has overtaken the previous civilized society and its infrastructures), they are suddenly forced to acknowledge the "machine", the infection and human violence which now corresponds to an undeniable reality of destruction and human self-consumption – "the disturbing shriek of the locomotive [and of the post-apocalyptic world] changes the texture of the entire passage. Now tension replaces repose: the noise arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety" (16).

In this episode of the diegesis, it becomes clear why the recurrent images of a peaceful natural world were continuously obliterated throughout the storyline of the video game – because there is an insistence by all characters upon a mode of human existence which is no longer capable of full expression. If the pre-apocalyptic world has been destroyed, the word gone silent – in its similarity to the Biblical consideration of human origin pervading *The Road's* diegesis, – then the possibility of a return to innocence, to full generation and bliss, is no longer valid. Such a realization grows even further in the succeeding diegetic moment, as Joel returns to conscience in the Firefly hospital. Once Joel awakes and has a brief exchange with Marlene, the leader of the Firefly group, he realizes that the procedure for the creation of the promised cure requires Ellie's death.

Such a realization triggers in Joel a full rejection of the system of perception that understood the potential cure as regenerative.

Echoing Huckleberry Finn's decision of saving Jim in the face of supposed Christian downfall and ruination through sin – an idea imposed by the dominant and oppressive forces and their perception, – Joel fully acknowledges the dynamics of the post-apocalyptic rhetoric of false hope and actively chooses to save and preserve Ellie's life. While Joel effectively eliminates humanity's dubious chances of regeneration, he undergoes the same process of critical understanding of society that Huckleberry Finn does in deciding that "[a]ll right, then, I'll go to hell" (Twain, 2004: 341) in liberating Jim from his condition as slave. Indeed, both realize "[w]hat was a grim possibility for Melville became a certainty for Mark Twain and Henry Adams; neither was able to imagine a satisfactory resolution of the conflict figured by the machine's incursion into the garden" (Marx, 1964: 355). The existence of an infection which ravaged the previously-known world and of a new-found humanity in Jim, paralleled in Marx with the effects of the Industrial Revolution on a pastoral imagery of America, was impossible to fully counter and revert, making Joel and Ellie's search for a regenerative cure an anachronistic task.

In accordance with Leo Marx's considerations in the "Epilogue" of *The Machine in the Garden* regarding Charles Sheeler's *American Landscape* (1930): "This 'American Landscape' is the industrial landscape pastoralized" (356). The impossibility of returning to a state of previous innocence is not being confronted, for the attempt at finding a cure for the *Cordyceps* infection was merely a masking and avoiding of the new reality. Joel realizes that the imaginary cultivation and essentializing of the image of a possible cure and regeneration of a past life is merely the simplification of an unreachable and impossible goal to recreate past human experience, which would only be attempted at the expense of Ellie's life – the true hope for humanity's capacity for continuation. Joel, by choosing to save Ellie, apparently condemns himself and the rest of humanity to full obliteration, but this condemnation was already fully developed – as Leo Marx expressed, "The resolution of our pastoral fables are unsatisfactory because the old symbol of reconciliation is obsolete" (364).

After escaping the Firefly laboratory, Joel lies to Ellie by telling her that the Firefly group had ceased trying to find a cure; taking Marx's considerations, however, one can understand that there is, instead, a disclaiming of the truth in its un-regenerative meaning. Ellie's survival, instead of being a sacrifice for the regeneration of a past life long gone, is, instead, a maintenance and preservation of a hope which is paralleled in McCarthy's *The Road*, when the son's mission of ceaselessly "carrying the fire" (McCarthy, 2007: 83) is conceived as having the utmost importance, even after the father's death. Similarly to Huck Finn going West, Joel and Ellie return to Tommy's self-sustainable settlement, but not in a transcendental consideration of the Self – instead, the emphasis of continuation is deposited in Ellie's survival as vessel of hopeful continuation. Joel and Ellie return to the location of apparent peaceful integration and

convergence of human existence in and with the natural world, but in an overarching awareness that the concept of regenerative integration is no longer reasonable – that the settlement will be invaded again and that the dynamics of the post-apocalyptic landscape will remain.

In the final moments of the narrative – and similarly to the father's death – Joel's attempt at maintaining a pastoral illusion reveals the older father figures' own inadequacy towards the post-apocalyptic world, due to their involvement in pre-apocalyptic experience. Simultaneously, it establishes Ellie and the son's origin inside the post-apocalyptic landscape as a maintenance of human purpose which has not been tainted by a false possibility of regeneration, instead being nurtured by a diegetically present hope for a new order of generation. Joel's reinforcement of this discrepancy in the form of a lie is a remnant of the comfort present in a pastoral possibility which never truly existed in the first place – but Ellie is implied to be able to see through such societal deceit.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the narrative of *The Last of Us*, there is a recurrence of imagery which echoes those present in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in their capacity for exploring American identity, specifically in the use of the natural world as a projection of utopian/dystopian anxiety. These markings, however, cannot be located solely in literary expression, but also in other media channels that are capable of storytelling, as Naughty Dog's creation shows. *The Last of Us* can be considered a quintessentially American narrative for its capacity for evoking and re-imagi(n)ing American experience and cultural mythology, additionally promoting alternative media formats as efficient in the transmission of American experience.

However, more research should be conducted with this goal in mind. One might consider, for example, the sequel to *The Last of Us* – *The Last of Us Part II*. Are the analysis and arguments present in this article compatible with the diegesis of the sequel, or are there factors which retroactively change the interactions between the characters and, consequently, between the authors and the video game? Is Ellie's implied scepticism regarding Joel's lie maintained as a rejection of a pastoral illusion, and does this imagery pervade further interactions and motivations? Critical analysis of other video games in their (e)utopian/dystopian capacity could also prove to be of interest in light of the gulf between literary and game studies.

Nevertheless, the need for further research of this interdisciplinary field, along with the analysis of different media formats' capacity for narrative expression, is recognized and promoted in this article, even if opposite arguments to the ones defended here are created. After all, the development of knowledge is self-nurturing, not self-consumptive – unlike the *Cordyceps*-infected.

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