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**Ellie, Torture, and the Abyss:
The Moral Representation of Torture in
*The Last of Us Part II***

ABSTRACT - In this article, which intends to contribute to the growing interest of legal studies in video games, I analyze the representation of torture in *The Last of Us Part II*, a video game released in 2020. I argue that, in the context of the game's overall moral argument and generalized interest in the matter of violence, torture holds an exceptional status. This conclusion is brought forward through the in-depth analysis of a particular episode, the torture of Nora, which, I argue, constitutes the lowest point of the protagonist's moral degeneration in her descent into violence. In my analysis, I also give special consideration to the game's resonance with events from the United States' recent history. Through its portrayal of torture, *Part II* contributes to both the development of the language of the video game medium and public discourse on the subject of torture more generally. I locate three issues in particular that, although successfully addressed by the game, otherwise afflict both the cultural perception of torture and its representation in video games.

KEYWORDS - *The Last of Us Part II*, Violence, Torture, Video Games and Legal Studies

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1. Introduction

In a pioneering 2004 study of the semiotics of video games, when academic interest in the new medium was still severely lacking, semiologist Massimo Maietti observed that one of the earliest stages of the critical reflection on video games was represented by a literary genre that could be labeled as the «apologetic pamphlet». Flourishing in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the apologetic pamphlet aimed to rehabilitate the image of video games, especially in response to their widespread demonization at the hands of pedagogists, politicians, and the mainstream media¹. At the dawn of the third decade of the third millennium, the status of video games as both respectable products of human culture and legitimate objects for academic inquiry is no longer in doubt. The major outlets of the mainstream media now review, discuss, and analyze video games alongside other, more traditional forms of art and entertainment, while the apologetic pamphlet as a locus of critical reflection has been gradually sidelined by full-fledged scholarship across a variety of disciplinary fields; long neglected, video games have finally entered both academia and mainstream media².

Of course, academic redemption has not been complete, as the study of video games, «does not yet share the same status of other similar areas of study, such as those of literature, film, or even television studies»³. In a way,

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¹ M. MAIETTI, *Semiotica dei videogiochi*, Unicopli, Milano, 2004, 22–30.

² On the growing status of video games both within and without academia throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, see D. MURIEL, G. CRAWFORD, *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*, Routledge, London, 2018, 16–59.

³ *Ibid.*, 43.

the apologetic intent of the early literature lives on in the enduring need to justify video games as a legitimate field of academic study—a need that, at least up until recently, the very field of video game studies was still struggling to overcome⁴. While the field of video game studies as such may no longer be beset by the issue of scientific legitimacy as pressingly as before⁵, video games have yet to enter academia at large; within the boundaries of particular disciplines and epistemic communities, they often remain an untrodden ground, whose scientific utility and legitimacy is yet to be fully argued for and acknowledged accordingly.

This is precisely the status of video games in relation to legal studies. To be clear, legal scholars have not failed to take notice of video games as an object of regulation, litigation, and legal interaction more generally. What has largely been missing is an interest in analyzing the content of video games in themselves, which is especially apparent in contrast to law's ubiquitous sorties into analyses of literature and, less frequently, films and other arts. Through the last decade, however, an embryonic interest of the second type, too, seems to have finally begun to coalesce. In 2015, for example, the International Law Centre of the Université Libre de Bruxelles launched an online publishing platform devoted to investigating the representations of international law in popular culture, with a specific section dedicated to video games⁶. Around the same time, a small network of Australia-based scholars began analyzing video games as a locus or catalyst for legal reflection within the theoretical framework of cultural legal studies⁷. Individual contributions have also appeared at the hands of scholars that do not directly operate within the context of networks of this sort⁸.

Not unlike novels and films, video games may have something relevant to say on issues of law, normativity, justice, and morality. Indeed,

⁴ See, e.g., B. KUHN, A. BHÉREUR-LAGOUNARIS, *Introduction: "Levelling Up" and the Impact of Videogames*, in *eaed.* (eds.), *Levelling Up: The Cultural Impact of Videogames*, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford, 2016, vii–xii, at viii, reporting on the climate of a 2015 conference.

⁵ As argued by D. MURIEL, G. CRAWFORD, *op. cit.*, 42.

⁶ <https://cdi.ulb.ac.be/culture-pop-et-droit-international/>.

⁷ For reference to this literature, see A. SHUM, K. TRANTER, *Seeing, Moving, Catching, Accumulating: "Pokémon GO", and the Legal Subject*, in *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 30 (2017), 477–493, at 479.

⁸ See, e.g., B. CLARKE, C. ROUFFAER, F. SÉNÉCHAUD, *Beyond the Call of Duty: Why Shouldn't Video Game Players Face the Same Dilemmas as Real Soldiers?* in *International Review of the Red Cross*, 94 (2012), 711–737; C.J. NEWBERY-JONES, *Answering the Call of Duty: The Phenomenology of Justice in Twenty-First-Century Video Games*, in *Law and Humanities*, 9 (2015), 78–102.

outside the orchard of legal scholarship, matters that are contiguous to it are already broadly investigated by a thriving literature, especially focused on video games and video game culture in relation to morality⁹. Moreover, by reason of their increasing popularity on a global scale¹⁰, video games are now among the main forms of expression through which the general public may be exposed to reflection on the aforesaid issues; as such, they call for critical analysis by the relevant specialists.

The present article thus intends to contribute to the growing interest of legal studies in video games through an analysis of the representation of torture in *The Last of Us Part II* (henceforth, *Part II*), a video game developed by the American studio Naughty Dog and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment exclusively for the video game console PlayStation 4. Released on June 19, 2020, *Part II* is a sequel to a 2013 video game by the same developer, *The Last of Us*¹¹, with which it is intimately connected.

In scholarly discourse, most definitions of torture take their cue from existing international treaties¹². For the purposes of this article, too, torture can be preliminarily understood as «an aggravated and deliberate form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment», which includes the infliction of «severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental», as in the United Nations Declaration against Torture¹³. I supplement this basic definition with the requirement of a relational element: in the words of David Sussman, for torture to occur, the victim «must be unable to shield herself in any significant way, and must be unable to effectively evade or fight back against her tormenter»¹⁴.

⁹ For a recent overview of common themes and the relevant literature, see M. GROEN *et al.* (eds.), *Games and Ethics: Theoretical and Empirical Approaches to Ethical Questions in Digital Game Cultures*, Springer VS, Wiesbaden, 2020.

¹⁰ See D. MURIEL, G. CRAWFORD, *op. cit.*, 27–30.

¹¹ *The Last of Us*, Naughty Dog, Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013. The game was released exclusively for PlayStation 3. In February 2014, Naughty Dog and Sony Computer Entertainment issued additional content that included what can be and is in fact often regarded as a separate game, *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. Later in 2014, the same companies released *The Last of Us Remastered*, a PlayStation 4 edition of *The Last of Us* and *Left Behind* that differs from the originals primarily in terms of its enhanced graphics.

¹² On these definitions, see N.S. RODLEY, *The Definition(s) of Torture in International Law*, in *Current Legal Problems*, 55 (2002), 467–493.

¹³ Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, adopted December 9, 1975, United Nations General Assembly Res. 3452 (XXX), Article 1.

¹⁴ D. SUSSMAN, *Defining Torture*, in *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 37 (2006), 225–230, at 227. This requirement ought not to be understood restrictively—limited,

The aforesaid definitions may not be conclusive but are heuristically very useful, as they also contribute to capturing the moral foundation of the absolute, non-derogable prohibition against torture under international law¹⁵. Indeed, as argued by Michelle Farrell, such terms as «inhuman» and «degrading» are effectively descriptive of the dehumanization of the victim of torture. In other words, the absolute prohibition against torture amounts to a prohibition against reducing the human to non-human—that is, the recognition that human beings ought to be treated as human¹⁶. Within this theoretical framework, there cannot be a valid moral argument for the permissibility of torture, not even in exceptional circumstances: «to question whether a human is, or should be, human makes no sense on ethical grounds»¹⁷.

Despite its absolute prohibition under international law and widespread condemnation, the practice of torture remains pervasive throughout the world¹⁸; the challenge it poses to the scholars of the relevant disciplines, therefore, is unquestionable. Why, then, should legal scholars concern themselves with *Part II* in particular? A provisory, general answer to this question has already been given above: video games, particularly best-selling video games, are sociologically relevant by reason of their booming popularity. Most importantly, however, as will be apparent throughout this article, *Part II* is uniquely relevant by reason of its own artistic and intellectual merits. At the same time, the scope of my research rests on the persuasion that the abovesaid gap in legal scholarship in relation to video games can only be adequately filled through a critical and analytical engagement with individual works.

In the following pages, therefore, I suggest that *Part II* provides one of the most compelling, thoughtful, and morally engaged representations of torture in the video game medium, which, I argue, contributes to both the development of the language of the medium and public discourse on the subject of torture more generally. I begin my argument with an overview of *Part II*'s sustained interest in the matters of both violence and torture.

for example, to the situation of an overpowered prisoner.

¹⁵ On the notion of the absolute prohibition of torture under international law, see, e.g., M. FARRELL, *The Prohibition of Torture in Exceptional Circumstances*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, esp. 28–81; and J. BARNES, *A Genealogy of the Torture Taboo*, Routledge, London, 2017.

¹⁶ M. FARRELL, *op. cit.*, 242–251.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁸ See *Amnesty International Report 2021/22: The State of the World's Human Rights*, Amnesty International, London, 2022.

Torture, I argue, holds an exceptional status in the game's overall moral argument, as is especially apparent through the analysis of a particular episode, wherein the game's protagonist tortures another character, marking the lowest point in the moral degeneration of her descent into violence.

Since the beginning of the so-called War on Terror, representations of torture in popular media have proliferated¹⁹. While different works are obviously diverse in character and moral orientation, the relevant scholarship has observed a number of troubling trends. The practice of torture, we often observe in fiction, is effective in overturning «diabolical conspiracies», while the torturer is either «a messianic figure ... whose administration of “world-destroying” pain is righteous and even necessary» or «a benevolent “outlaw”, one willing to transcend the law to save civilization»; pain is itself «an essential and beneficial quality, intrinsic to the restoration of social and political order»²⁰. From this perspective, I also seek to present the representation of torture in *Part II* as a valuable counterargument to narratives that are disquietingly common in popular media.

In video games, meaning is constructed through the combination of a plurality of different means, including, but not limited to, visual elements, textual elements, and elements of *gameplay*, that is, what the player actively does in the game, or, from another perspective, the actualization of the game's rules through the player's interaction²¹. All these elements are inevitably considered in my treatment of *Part II*.

2. Violence: Story, Game World, and Gameplay

Violence is inherent in *Part II*. Both *Part II* and its 2013 predecessor *The Last of Us* take place in a fictionalized version of the present-day United States, twenty-five and twenty years, respectively, after the initial outbreak of a fungal disease caused by a mutated strain of *Cordyceps* that turns the

¹⁹ See M. FLYNN, F.F. SALEK, *Screening Torture: An Introduction*, in *id.* (eds.), *Screening Torture: Media Representations of State Terror and Political Domination*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, 1–17; H. NERONI, *The Subject of Torture: Psychoanalysis and Biopolitics in Television and Film*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015, esp. 17–18.

²⁰ M. FLYNN, F.F. SALEK, *op. cit.*, 10–11.

²¹ The term “gameplay” lacks a commonly agreed upon definition; for an attempt at a basic definition, see, e.g., S. EGENFELDT-NIELSEN, J.H. SMITH, S.P. TOSCA (eds.), *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, 4th ed., Routledge, New York, 2020, 126–127.

infected into zombie-like creatures and has decimated the population. According to the much-limited but ubiquitously adopted taxonomies of video game genres²², *Part II* can be described as an action-adventure video game with elements of “stealth” gameplay. For the majority of the game’s long journey, the player controls Ellie, a 19-year-old girl (previously the protagonist of *The Last of Us*), as she explores a variety of American locations and landscapes, scavenges for resources, engages in combat with both competing humans and the zombie-like infected, and interacts with other characters through extensive dialogues and cinematic sequences. Enemies are encountered frequently. Direct combat can often be avoided, but engaging in it, at medium settings of difficulty, is not particularly discouraged—as it would be, for example, if resources were scarcer or the game imposed the repetition of lengthier sections upon the player’s death; on the contrary, eliminating the enemies allows for an easier scavenging and exploration. In other words, combat tends to be frequent.

While the encounters with the zombie-like infected are numerous throughout Ellie’s journey, it is the violence of and against human beings that takes center stage; as is often the case in zombie-themed fiction²³, the focus of the narrative is not so much on the non-human threat but on the exploration of interhuman relations and morality²⁴. The main story of *Part II* is set in motion in the first act of the game (“Jackson”) by the event of the torture and murder of Joel—Ellie’s foster father and the co-protagonist of *The Last of Us*—at the hands of a young woman named Abby and her

²² On the limits of current classifications, see M. MAIETTI, *op. cit.*, 30–38; and, more recently, R.I. CLARKE, J.H. LEE, N. CLARK, *Why Video Game Genres Fail: A Classificatory Analysis*, in *Games and Culture*, 12 (2017), 445–465.

²³ See G. GARRETT, *Living with the Living Dead: The Wisdom of the Zombie Apocalypse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017; see also K.W. BISHOP, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, N.C., 2010, with a particular focus on the origin of the motif in George A. Romero’s filmography.

²⁴ While a number of works of fiction have long since begun to explore the residual humanity and personhood of the zombie (on the matter, see K.W. BISHOP, *American Zombie Gothic*, 158–196; K.W. BISHOP, “I always wanted to see how the other half lives”: *The Contemporary Zombie as Seductive Proselyte*, in L. HUBNER, M. LEANING, P. MANNING [eds.], *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, 26–38), at face value, the infected of *The Last of Us* and *Part II* are essentially inhuman monsters, seemingly devoid of an inner life and only driven by some sort of predatory instinct. Although undoubtedly relevant as a subject of inquiry on its own (see, e.g., T. LINNEMANN, T. WALL, E. GREEN, *The Walking Dead and Killing State: Zombification and the Normalization of Police Violence*, in *Theoretical Criminology*, 18 [2014], 506–527), the exploration of the violence against this sort of fictional foe lies outside the scope of this article.

accomplices²⁵. As it will be revealed later in the game, Abby sought to avenge the death of her own father, who was killed by Joel during the events of the 2013 video game. From this moment onward, *Part II* essentially narrates the story of Ellie's quest for revenge. Through most of her journey, Ellie is accompanied by her girlfriend Dina.

Besides the overt matter of its main story line, *Part II* entertains a sustained focus on the subject of violence throughout. Violence is everywhere, takes many different shapes, and is explored through a number of different means and techniques, some of which are distinctive to the video game medium, as in the case of *Part II's* abundant use of embedded narratives for forwarding its overall story and themes²⁶. The city of Seattle, for example, the location in which most of the game's action takes place, is depicted as an enduring witness to violence past.

Seattle makes its initial appearance in the second act ("Seattle Day 1"), as the location of the supposed whereabouts of Joel's killers, recognized as belonging to a group that goes by the name of Washington Liberation Front (WLF). In Seattle, Ellie and Dina encounter the numerous traces of the violence perpetrated by both the Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA) and the WLF. FEDRA is a highly militarized remnant of the government of the United States that was in charge of managing quarantine zones after the outbreak of the *Cordyceps* infection; it is prominently featured in *The Last of Us*, as the organization that still controls Boston's quarantine zone twenty years after the outbreak. As it can be reconstructed through a number of documents found in *Part II's* Seattle, a part of the population rebelled against FEDRA to eventually become the WLF. The traces of the armed conflict between the two factions are found everywhere throughout Ellie and Dina's first day in the city. Amid the backdrop of a group of corpses of FEDRA soldiers that have seemingly been executed by an improvised firing squad, the player finds a letter ("Plea to a friend letter") that details the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by the federal agency. Ellie hypothesizes that downtown Seattle, with many of its buildings reduced to rubble, may have been bombed by FEDRA, according to an established tactic in the fight against either the infected or rebels. Another document found in Seattle ("WLF recruiter journal") refers to the federal agency as «fascists». In addition, for the player of the 2013 video

²⁵ *Part II* is divided into eleven acts, unevenly subdivided into a total of forty-five chapters.

²⁶ On this classic technique of the video game medium, see H. JENKINS, *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, in N. WARDROP-FRUIIN, P. HARRIGAN (eds.), *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, 118–130.

game, FEDRA is the unequivocal oppressor that governs Boston through restrictions of basic freedoms, constant surveillance, violence, and summary executions²⁷.

In short, the image of this militarized remnant of the US government is an essentially negative one—FEDRA is the embodiment of a military dystopia. It is difficult not to contextualize the representation of FEDRA in light of the United States' history of police brutality. The publication of *Part II*, released on June 19, 2020, significantly overlapped with the early weeks of the George Floyd protests²⁸. At the time of the game's release, Seattle, in particular, was the theater of major protests, which infamously prompted then President of the United States Donald Trump to urge Mayor Jenny Durkan and Governor Jay Inslee to «take back» the city from the «domestic terrorists» that had taken it over²⁹. While the release of *Part II* during the George Floyd protests happened by mere coincidence (much like the game's release during the first global wave of the COVID-19 pandemic), the relation between the United States' much longer history of police brutality and Naughty Dog's depiction of FEDRA ought not to be overlooked.

The opposers of FEDRA, at the same time, do not fare much better. A number of documents found in the downtown inform the player of the crimes committed by the WLF as they were seeking to overthrow the military. The “FEDRA census document”, for example, alleges that the food distribution quotas could not be met due to the disruption of supply chains by the WLF. A WLF source, the already mentioned “WLF recruiter journal”, informs the player that the election of the rebels' commander, Isaac, had been contentious, due to «his summary execution of those prisoners». As the women continue their journey through Seattle, a number of hints begin to suggest that, after taking over, the WLF became at least as bad as the military; «Seattle traded one shitty ruler for another», Dina comments in the fourth chapter of act two (“Capitol Hill”), upon running into a short list of rules enforced in the city by the WLF. A letter (“Fran's refusal”) found in

²⁷ On the representation of FEDRA in *The Last of Us*, see G. FARCA, C. LADEVÈZE, *The Journey to Nature: “The Last of Us” as Critical Dystopia*, in *Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, 2016, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_246.pdf, 7–8.

²⁸ For a synopsis of the events related to the killing of George Floyd and its aftermath, see, e.g., *How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next*, in *The New York Times*, November 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd.html>.

²⁹ See M. BAKER, *Free Food, Free Speech and Free of Police: Inside Seattle's “Autonomous Zone”*, in *The New York Times*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/us/seattle-autonomous-zone.html>.

the same chapter chronicles the summary execution of a citizen of Seattle by the WLF; the latter, too, like FEDRA before them, are emblematically labeled as «fascists». The WLF «are doing the same exact thing» as the military before them, we read in an old letter (“Need a plan note”) in a later chapter. Finally, the WLF are the people who tortured and killed Ellie’s foster father Joel and are now attacking any trespasser on sight—the moral balance certainly cannot weigh in their favor. In short, in the video game’s portrayal of Seattle’s «civil war», as Ellie defines it, the violence of either faction is the object of a univocal and unambiguous condemnation.

A recent paper by political scientist Eugen Pfister has opportunely criticized the politically uncommitted orientation of the zombie narrative as it is exploited in most video games, contrasting it with the political engagement of the earlier writers and filmmakers that devised the genre. While routinely enacting scenarios of «systemic political failure», Pfister argues, zombie video games are generally devoid of «conscious political messages»; the aforesaid scenarios are merely included as an unreflective «myth» that has become a trademark of the genre³⁰. As the foregoing analysis indicates, *Part II* breaks loose from these conventions and develops a moral and political argument that is conscious, elaborate, and consistent.

Another mean through which *Part II* explores the subject of violence is gameplay. While the zombie-like infected are encountered early on as opponents in the interactive sections of the game, human opponents are encountered for the first time in the third chapter of act two (“Eastbrook Elementary”). The mood of the confrontation is constructed through an apt evolution in the plot. Ellie has been captured and brought to an outpost of the WLF; while she is interrogated by a man who can be recognized as one of Joel’s murderers, Dina breaks in through a skylight. A fight ensues and the player is given the opportunity of freeing Ellie and assaulting the man, who is attempting to strangle Dina. In the non-interactive sequence that follows the player’s input, the man is stabbed twice in the throat; upon falling to the ground, he can be heard gasping in his own blood. As the player is again given control, Ellie and Dina are tasked with escaping the WLF outpost, while the comrades of the slain begin to flock to the girls’ position. It is the first encounter of the player with human—that is, non-infected—enemies.

As in most scenarios throughout the game, the player has the

³⁰ E. PFISTER, *Zombies Ate Democracy: The Myth of a Systemic Political Failure in Video Games*, in S.J. WEBLEY, P. ZACKARIASSON (eds.), *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, Routledge, London, 2020, 216–231.

opportunity to either sneak around and avoid direct confrontation or to engage the enemy in combat. The weapons, devices, and tactics at Ellie's disposal are numerous. By the end of the game, she can depend on a number of different firearms, including handguns, a rifle, a pump-action shotgun, and a submachine gun. Other weapons and devices include a bow, Molotov cocktails, explosives, a knife, and various types of improvised melee weapons such as metal pipes and baseball bats, but also axes, machetes, and the like. Combat is brutal. Ellie can sneak around the enemies and either avoid or surprise them (the so-called "stealth" gameplay), wherein surprised enemies can be killed, for example, by slicing their throat with a small knife. Other weapons and tactics are no less gory. Melee weapons disfigure enemies and kill them in a few blows; gunshots behave differently, depending on the firearm used and the body part hit. The shotgun, for example, can be devastating: a single shot can blow an enemy's limb or head off. One of the most disturbing tactics, however, does not actually require the use of weapons. At times throughout the game, Ellie can find herself in areas occupied by both the infected and human hostiles. The infected react to sounds; by throwing as little as an empty glass bottle, the player can cause the infected to swarm the selected location and begin hunting the humans. The sound design of combat is no less gruesome than the visuals. Dying enemies may be heard gasping in their own blood. The wounded may horrifyingly howl in pain. Enemies may react emotionally to the onslaught by calling for the names of their fallen comrades. Ellie's remarks during combat can be bleak; upon killing an enemy, for example, she sometimes utters, «Eat shit».

Ellie herself is not invulnerable—indeed, the gory death of the player-controlled Ellie is a common occurrence during a typical playthrough—but she is undoubtedly powerful. Young, agile, cunning, having grown up through the apocalypse, proficient in both close combat and the use of firearms, ready to suture her own wounds after battle (as is shown in a cinematic sequence during the game's third act), Ellie, *de facto* grown as a child soldier, is the epitome of the video games' fantasy of the perfect soldier.

In terms of the aesthetics of combat and its role in both gameplay and the narrative, *Part II* may not seem to meaningfully differentiate itself from the mass of other horror and action-oriented video games. Both the game's narrative and the procedural rhetoric³¹ of gameplay seem to reinforce an

³¹ I refer to the notion of procedural rhetoric as devised by I. BOGOST, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007.

impression of the necessity of violence. Combat can often be avoided, but the player is not, for example, given the option to resolve conflict through dialogue. Viva La Dirt League, a group of sketch comedians specializing in parodies of the logic of video games, have imagined that the game could have ended before Joel's brutal murder, if only the characters chose to pursue dialogue instead³². In the logic of combat-focused video games, this is hardly a possibility—and certainly not one that the player can autonomously choose to pursue.

The player-controlled Ellie is hunted down and shot on sight by heavily armed fellow humans; regardless of having initiated combat or not, the player is attacked. This elementary mechanism of gameplay, which belongs to the conventions of the vast majority of combat-focused video games, is given particular emphasis and meaning through the game's narrative. At their arrival on the outskirts of Seattle, Ellie and Dina are greeted by graffiti on the city walls, signed by the WLF, that reads, «Trespassers Killed on Sight!» In the chapter "Capitol Hill", after escaping capture, Dina comments, «Can't believe they just attacked like that». (Although on alert because of the ongoing incursion by Joel's brother, Tommy, who has preceded Ellie and Dina in Seattle, the WLF—a much larger group than the circle of Abby's friends—supposedly does not know that the girls entered the city with hostile intentions.) «These people are not like us», Ellie replies. At the end of yet another fight, Jesse, Dina's ex-boyfriend, who joins the girls in Seattle in the course of the third act, comments, «These Wolves, man. So trigger-happy». «Wolves», from WLF, is itself an interesting designation. Chosen by the WLF during their original uprising against FEDRA—«They think we're sheep! Bare your fangs», we read on an old flyer ("Join WLF note")—the designation evokes much different associations in the perspective of both Ellie and the player. For a relevant strand of the so-called Western tradition, the wolf is the absolute other and natural aggressor; between man and wolf there can only be war³³.

When attempting to break the cycle of violence, both Ellie and the player are immediately punished for their perceived mistake. In a non-interactive sequence in the course of "Seattle Day 2", Ellie ambushes a member of the WLF, threatens her with a knife against her throat, and demands to be told the whereabouts of Nora, one of Abby's allies and an accomplice in Joel's torture and murder. After obtaining the information,

³² Viva La Dirt League, *How The Last of Us Part 2 Should Have Ended*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HDZyBreN1E>.

³³ See G. MARVIN, *Wolf*, Reaktion Books, London, 2012, 7–10, 35–118.

Ellie distractedly moves the knife away from the girl's throat and is immediately punished: the girl reaches for her own knife and attempts to stab Ellie, who promptly kills her. «Fuck. That was dumb», Ellie comments thereafter. The player is given similar insights through the interactive sections. Wounded enemies may react by begging for their life; if the player chooses to spare them, they will quickly reach for their weapon and attempt to kill the player-controlled character. In short, violence is rhetorically constructed as the only reasonable choice.

At the same time, the game soon begins to question this very logic. Throughout the first half of a typical playthrough, however, such arguments remain weak. In general, it may be argued that the gore and violence of combat is not exploited for the purpose of mere entertainment; *Part II* does not indulge in violence for violence's sake. Along similar lines to what has been observed by the specialized press in relation to *The Last of Us*³⁴, whose aesthetics and rhetoric of violence have much in common with those of its sequel, the above-described sound design and visuals of combat and violence are unsettling rather than indulging. Additionally, while the option of killing an enemy that begs for mercy is rhetorically constructed as the preferable course of action, Ellie's companions, either Dina or Jesse, remark on the player's choice with shocked exclamations of surprise.

Some of the early counterarguments to the game's overarching narrative of violence are more compelling. Early on, it becomes apparent that Ellie is not only guided by an irrational desire for revenge but also by an opinion of justice; upon entering a WLF outpost, the Serevena Hotel, and discovering the body of a member of the organization that has recently been devoured by the infected, Ellie murmurs that, hopefully, Joel's killers were not taken out «by some random infected», for that would not be «justice». After the girls' first encounter with the WLF, as the player-controlled Ellie begins to leave behind a trail of blood, Dina often asks, «You recognize any of them?» «None», Ellie inevitably replies. The player's numerous killings, the game hints, are quite futile. Dina also wonders why Abby and her gang did not kill Ellie and Tommy when they had the chance after Joel's torture and murder, but Ellie cuts the conversation short.

An interesting conversation on the subject of violence and retributive justice occurs between Jesse and Ellie in "Seattle Day 3". Jesse questions

³⁴ See R. MITCHELL, *The Last of Us Review: Humans, Conditioned*, in *Joystiq*, June 5, 2013, now at <https://www.engadget.com/2013-06-05-the-last-of-us-review.html>; A.J. AGNELLO, *2013 in Review: In The Last of Us, No Death is Meaningless*, in *USGamer*, December 27, 2013, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/2013-in-review-in-the-last-of-us-no-death-is-meaningless>.

whether Ellie considers that the WLF may return to Jackson, that is, Joel and Ellie's settlement, and seek revenge for their fallen comrades. The girl replies that they are currently killing the WLF due to what the WLF has done to them. Yet, Jesse insists, was Joel not killed because of what he must have done to the WLF? At this point, Ellie answers that Seattle is not like Jackson. Indeed, in act one, Joel and Tommy saved Abby from the infected (and were therefore lured into a trap), while in later acts trespassers in Seattle are shot on sight—as happened to Jesse himself. Jesse may have a valid point, but so does Ellie. There is a difference between Jackson and Seattle; perhaps, the game attempts to persuade us, Ellie's violence and retributive justice are justified and reasonable. This, however, is not the final word on the matter.

3. *Torture*

In the previous section, I have begun to analyze the encompassing presence of violence in *Part II*, as it manifests itself not only through the main story but also, and especially, through the game world and gameplay. Violence is inherent to conventions that *Part II* seems to embrace; it comes from all sides and is rhetorically constructed as seemingly inescapable. As I have argued, however, this encompassing presence of violence does not amount to an entirely naturalistic and value-neutral portrayal. The story of the struggle between FEDRA and the WLF, in particular, entails an all-around critique of violence—and political violence specifically—that refrains from embracing the perspective of either faction; at the same time, a number of embryonic elements, including the unsettling design of player-controlled combat and brief lines of dialogue, begin to mount a growing critique of the violent deeds perpetrated by either Ellie or the player. Through this and the next section, I argue that *Part II's* critique of violence reaches its apex through its relentless confrontation with the subject of torture. The force of the argument, I argue, descends from a portrayal of torture and its consequences that is morally uncompromising, aesthetically remarkable, and politically relevant.

The thread of torture runs throughout *Part II* from its very inception. As I have already mentioned, the events of the game are set in motion by the torture and murder of Joel at the hands of Abby, who has gone on an expedition from Seattle to Jackson, Wyoming, to avenge the death of her father. In the introductory act of the game ("Jackson"), Joel and Tommy are

lured by Abby into a chalet where she had set up camp with her accomplices. Without any other explanation besides declaring that she knows the two brothers, Abby suddenly fires a shot that disintegrates Joel's right knee, orders her friends to tourniquet the man's leg to prevent him from bleeding out, picks up a golf club, and begins a brutal beating that amounts to torture. Joel's last moments are witnessed by Ellie, who had been searching for the missing brothers; both her threats and pleas on Joel's behalf go unanswered, but her life and Tommy's are spared amid an argument that breaks out among Abby's group.

This is not the game's first reference to the matter of torture. During an earlier chapter of the first act ("Patrol"), Dina reveals to have heard that Tommy «slow-tortured some big FEDRA general». Dina cannot imagine Tommy doing that, but Ellie is not surprised: «He could do worse ... He and Joel... did a lot to survive after the outbreak». Casual conversations like this, which occur between characters in the course of interactive sequences, often function as a means of forwarding the game's story and themes. A particularly interesting conversation on the subject of torture occurs in the second chapter of "Seattle Day 1" ("Downtown"), as Ellie and Dina are exploring a fitting location, a disused courthouse: Dina casually wonders what it was like to serve on a jury, to which Ellie bluntly replies, «Just give me five minutes and my knife. I'd tell you if they were lying or not».

The above is not the only circumstance in which Ellie declares herself ready and willing to torture. In a later chapter of the same act ("Capitol Hill"), as the two are attempting to track Leah, one of Abby's accomplices in the murder of Joel, Ellie declares she will only need a minute to make her talk. In this case, however, the game confounds both Ellie and the player's expectations, for Leah has already been killed by another group of competing survivors. Tommy's willingness to engage in the practice of torture, on the other hand, finds confirmation in an earlier episode of "Downtown", at the Serevena Hotel, a WLF outpost in which Ellie and Dina hope to find a lead in their search for Joel's murderers but are only greeted by dead bodies. It becomes apparent upon finding the tied-up bodies of two men that have seemingly been tortured that the slaughter is Tommy's work; Ellie recognizes the method used for extorting a confession—in this case, information about Abby's whereabouts. Dina is shocked but confesses that, if she had her sister's killers tied to a chair, she would do worse.

In *Part II*, everyone is either a torturer or potential torturer. Different characters, whether friends or foes, similarly delve into the same loathsome crime that, at the beginning of the game, had Joel as its victim. Through

“Seattle Day 1”, Ellie begins to encounter the traces of yet another faction, the Seraphites, a group of religious fundamentalists at war with the WLF³⁵, who are given a major role in the second part of the game, where they come out as a specific embodiment of religious violence. For now, however, they mostly contribute to the general climate of violence. Their methods are brutal; the TV station where Ellie and Dina expected to find Leah has in fact been raided by the Seraphites, who have left behind a trail of mangled and hanged bodies. In the third chapter of the next act, “Seattle Day 2” (“The Seraphites”), Ellie begins to personally encounter them. Both their appearances and combat techniques are fearsome; they often wear hoods and long raincoats and have a predilection for archery and melee combat; the men also shave their heads and bear a general resemblance to figures of monks from the Gothic imaginary. Hung bodies are one of their common signatures. The player/viewer is given the opportunity of witnessing their method of execution, which amounts to a form of torture murder: the prisoner is hung by a rope tied around the neck, and then, while alive, stabbed in the abdomen, cut open, and disemboweled.

The larger group to which Abby and her accomplices belong, the WLF, similarly engages in the systematic practice of torture. In acts six to eight, as Abby becomes the player-controlled character and the main focus of the story, the player/viewer gets to take a look at the ordinary life of Ellie’s enemies. The overall picture is not very flattering. The most prominent element in the representation of the WLF is likely their militarism, which is repeatedly referenced. The organization of their headquarters, which are established inside a stadium, includes elements of communal life that noticeably contrast with the independent housing and small workshops of Jackson, Ellie’s town, as seen in the first act. The different bases of the WLF boast a collection of fighting vehicles that, in all likelihood, have been inherited from FEDRA. Gameplay, too, contributes to conveying the same impression. In Abby’s first sortie outside the stadium at the beginning of act six, a small battalion fights alongside the player-controlled character, just as Ellie is often accompanied by either Dina or Jesse. There is Mel, visibly pregnant but capable of fighting without noticing the wounds received; Manny, a sturdy man and furious fighter; and Alice, a military working

³⁵ For the present purposes, I understand fundamentalism as a model of the religious characterized by «the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social, indeed of human existence» (B. LINCOLN, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11*, 2nd ed., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006, 5). This is a description that fits the overall characterization of the Seraphites.

dog, who engages in combat as effectively as the others. An early encounter with the infected, including a “shambler”, one of the most dangerous creatures among the infected, does not really convey an impression of danger as much as it serves as a showcase of the group’s fighting abilities. Abby’s outward appearance and combat style, too, are suggestive of combat proficiency. Her arms and shoulders, often seen unclad, are bulky and muscular; in player-controlled combat, she is capable of strangling enemies taken by surprise, as opposed to Ellie’s use of a switchblade in the same circumstances.

The new perspective of acts six to eight also draws additional attention to the generalized violence and moral degradation of the WLF. The third chapter of act six, in particular, returns to the subject of torture, by allowing the player to visit a base in which the WLF imprison, interrogate, and torture captured Seraphites. The episode opens a window into recent history. The base in question is often referred to in the dialogues as «FOB», that is, “Forward Operating Base”, a term that indicates a base located forward in a hostile area and used to support tactical operations and strategic objectives. The chapter is similarly titled “The Forward Base”; to reach it, indeed, Abby’s party had to cross hostile territories controlled by the Seraphites. Conversely, torture chambers are not seen in the WLF’s headquarters at the stadium, and the narrative suggests that they may in fact be specific to the forward base: «I don’t miss this place», Manny comments upon walking through the bloodied corridors of the FOB, «always hated the smell». It is difficult not to look at the WLF’s practice of torture in the specific location of what is insistently defined and portrayed as a FOB on the background of the United States’ practice of torture on the sites of FOBs such as that of Abu Ghraib³⁶.

The portrayal of the location is itself vivid. A number of prisoners are restrained within their cells in uncomfortable positions, while the ones who can move cower and crawl away if the player-controlled Abby comes too near to them. One of the prisoners repeatedly emits an audible sigh

³⁶ The modern concept of FOB is intrinsic to the so-called War on Terror: see E.J. PALKA, *Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and the Use of Forwarding Operating Bases (FOBs)*, in E.V. McDONALD, T. BULLARD (eds.), *Military Geosciences and Desert Warfare: Past Lessons and Modern Challenges*, Springer, New York, 2016, 205–219. FOBs have also been established along the border between the United States and Mexico: see D. MILES, *Concept Perfected in Iraq, Afghanistan Used Along U.S. Border*, in the News section of the US National Guard’s web site, December 4, 2006, <https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article-View/Article/572837/concept-perfected-in-iraq-afghanistan-used-along-us-border/>.

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throughout the duration of the visit³⁷. Large trails of blood color the floor, as if dead or alive bodies were dragged from one chamber to another. In one of the rooms, behind closed doors, one of the prisoners, fully naked and tied to a chair, is being interrogated by Isaac, the leader of the WLF. «Don't let him fall asleep», Isaac recommends in handing over a knife to a guard and leaving the room. A document found in the antechamber (“WLF interrogator letter”) clarifies that the Seraphites at the forward base are interrogated and tortured for acquiring intelligence; in other words, the torture performed by the WLF is goal-oriented, as opposed to the torture murders of the Seraphites, which have the outward appearance of religious rituals.

Torture is practiced by every large group of survivors featured in *Part II*—that is, the people of Jackson, the Seraphites, and the WLF, including Abby and her accomplices. A fourth and final faction, the Rattlers, encountered in act ten (“Santa Barbara”), is no exception. The Rattlers are yet another embodiment of extreme violence. They practice slavery; the gang seems to capture small groups of people and lone travelers and employ them in forced labor. The crops standing tall in their base are the culturally charged witnesses to this practice. In adding to the violent and sadistic nature of the Rattlers, captured infected are chained throughout the camp and kept as both guard dogs and a seeming source of entertainment. In terms of gameplay, the Rattlers make for a powerful opponent, which can count on the large number of its troops, heavy armament, and use of traps and combat dogs. The most remarkable element of the characterization of the Rattlers as dwelling on extreme violence, however, consists of their use of crucifixion as a method of torture and execution; on the beach of Santa Barbara, crucified prisoners, their arms outstretched above their head, are fastened to wooden beams that are scattered throughout³⁸. Overall, the combination of slavery, crucifixion, and

³⁷ Cf. the notorious account of the tortures at Abu Ghraib: «He moans a constant short Ah, Ah every few seconds for the rest of the night. I don't know what they did to this guy» (from a letter written by former reservist and convicted war criminal Sabrina Harman, quoted in P. GOUREVITCH, E. MORRIS, *Exposure: The Woman behind the Camera at Abu Ghraib*, in *The New Yorker*, March 17, 2008, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/24/exposure-5>).

³⁸ Historically, the method of what can be defined as crucifixion varies greatly and does not necessarily nor most typically include the suspension of the prisoner on a crossbeam but also on a simple upright pole: see H-W. KUHN, *Die Kreuzesstrafe während der frühen Kaiserzeit: Ihre Wirklichkeit und Wertung in der Umwelt des Urchristentums*, in W. HAASE (ed.), ANRW II.25.1, *Principat. Religion. Vorkonstantinisches Christentum: Leben und Umwelt Jesu*;

plantations within the US state with the largest economy evoke multifaceted historical suggestions, ranging from ancient civilizations, to slavery in the United States and the neoliberal exploitation of workers in modern economies.

4. *Ellie, Torture, and the Abyss*

In the previous section, I have surveyed the different references to and occurrences of torture in *Part II*, with the exception of a particular episode, which is the subject of the present section. *Part II*'s portrayal of torture is undoubtedly impactful. In the cases considered above, however, torture is most often perpetrated by the story's villains. While the torture and murder of Joel is loathsome in itself, it is especially so because the player/viewer is made to see it through Joel and Ellie's perspective and emotions. Conversely, the encounter with the men tortured by Tommy at the Serevena Hotel may be somehow shocking but does not carry the same weight. At the same time, on multiple occasions, Ellie has declared herself ready and willing to torture. In this section, through a detailed analysis of the torture of Nora at the hands of Ellie in act three, chapter three ("The Seraphites"), I argue that torture is given a special status in *Part II*'s moral argument and represents the lowest point reached by Ellie in the moral degeneration of her descent into violence.

By intercepting the radio communications of the WLF during their second day in Seattle while on the trail of Joel's murderers, Dina has learned that one of Abby's accomplices, Nora, has been assigned to a certain hospital in the city. Ellie goes to the streets alone. As usual in the journey toward her destination, the player-controlled Ellie has to traverse areas occupied by either the infected or human hostiles. While the pattern remains the same as always, some encounters in this particular journey are especially horrific. Among the infected, Ellie begins to encounter the so-called "stalkers", agile creatures that attempt to close in undetected on their prey before launching a frontal attack. At this point in the story, Ellie also begins to personally encounter the Seraphites and witness their practices of

Neues Testament (Kanonische Schriften und Apokryphen), De Gruyter, Berlin, 1982, 648–793, esp. 679–685; G. SAMUELSSON, *Crucifixion in Antiquity: An Inquiry into the Background and Significance of the New Testament Terminology of Crucifixion*, 2nd ed., Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2013, esp. 1–35. In *Part II*, while most posts on the beach of Santa Barbara consist of a simple upright pole, some also include a crossbeam; the latter, however, are unoccupied.

execution.

Upon reaching the hospital, Ellie ambushes a member of the WLF, threatens her with a knife, and demands to know Nora's whereabouts. The episode, an important argument in the game's apparent construction of violence as the only reasonable choice, has already been analyzed in a previous section. Significantly, the argument is presented precisely at this moment, as Ellie's actions are about to become inenarrable.

Before entering the hospital, Ellie has to either kill or avoid a conspicuous number of WLF guards. Once inside, Nora is quickly located; she is alone. Ellie begins questioning her at gunpoint, demanding to know Abby's location, but Nora manages to distract Ellie and escape. The player-controlled Ellie has to chase the woman throughout the hospital, until finally catching up before an opening in the collapsed floor. Three soldiers of the WLF have caught up, too; Ellie has no other choice than to grab Nora and jump into the abyss. The two women end up in an abandoned section of the hospital, where the air is thick with infectious fungal spores. Ellie is immune to the disease, but Nora, who has meanwhile escaped again, has no protective mask, which means certain death. The player is again given the clear opportunity of using the infected against the WLF, who have worn masks and are now in pursuit. After dealing with the hostiles in one way or another, Ellie can resume trailing Nora. The search cannot be long. As the player-controlled Ellie traverses dark rooms infested with spores, someone begins to be heard coughing in the distance. Ellie enters the room in which Nora has taken refuge, blocks the door, and draws closer to the woman; she wants to know where Abby is (see fig. 1). «I'm fucking dead anyway. Why would I tell you anything?» — «Because I can make it quick. Or I can make it so much worse».

There can be little doubt on either Ellie's intentions or what is about to happen: Ellie tortures Nora. What is more, Ellie tortures Nora through the player's input. Both the cinematography and overall conception of the scene are compelling. As often in the game's portrayal of locations that have been overrun by the infectious spores, the scene is dimly illuminated by a red light. The camera, which has been following the verbal exchange through varying angles, now moves frontally before Ellie at the approximate distance of a medium close-up, as if we were to look at the girl from Nora's perspective. At this point, the solicitation of the player's input appears on the screen in the form of an icon representing the "square" button, which is most commonly used in *Part II* for the performance of melee attacks. There are no other options; in what, as I argue, is a central moment of the entire

narrative, Ellie and the player are forced to become one, through the addition of interactivity to a cinematic sequence that offers no alternatives. Thus, as the player pushes the button, Ellie forcefully hits Nora with a metal pipe. Blood spatters and stains Ellie's clothes and skin. The camera angle does not change, and, for a second time, the player is requested to give the same input. Another hit, more blood, and another request for the player's input (see fig. 2). The third hit ends the scene. Nora is not merely beaten to death: «I made her talk», Ellie later reveals to Dina.



Fig. 1: Ellie approaches Nora and begins questioning her, before proceeding with the torture. *The Last of Us Part II*. © 2020 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC.

Torture, a practice so «inherently loathsome» that even discussing its viability would qualify as a «moral unthinkable»³⁹, is the lowest point reached by Ellie in the moral degeneration of her descent into violence. *Part II* seems to be aware of torture's special status; in an imaginary world in which killing has become commonplace, torture remains beyond any conceivable moral boundary. This conclusion is brought about through a number of different elements, starting with the cinematography of the scene of Nora's torture. As observed above, as torture is about to begin, the camera moves frontally before Ellie, and Nora is consequently removed from the vision of the player/viewer. Amid the game's countless acts of

³⁹ M. LA TORRE, «Jurists, Bad Christians»: Torture and the Rule of Law, in B. CLUCAS, G. JOHNSTONE, T. WARD (eds.), *Torture: Moral Absolutes and Ambiguities*, Nomos, Baden-Baden, 2009, 10–38, at 23, 20.

violence, this aesthetic is unique to this particular episode; what is happening has an exceptional status. In keeping with the general orientation of the game's narrative, the interest of the scene lies especially in Ellie's agency; therefore, the aforementioned exceptionality is expressed through a camera angle that focuses on Ellie. At the same time, the subtraction of Nora from the eye of the viewer is itself significant: the camera angle curtails the possibility of indulging in the unique violence of torture; somewhat ashamedly, the camera's eye withdraws from showing the full extent of Ellie's—and the player's—brutality.



Fig. 2: Ellie has already hit Nora with a metal pipe through the player's input. The player is again prompted to give the same input. *The Last of Us Part II*. © 2020 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC.

The aftermath of the scene similarly contributes to constructing torture's unique status. It may be useful to compare the aftermath of Nora's torture to Ellie's reaction after killing Mel at the end of the next day in Seattle ("Seattle Day 3"). Nora has revealed that Abby is sheltered in the city's aquarium. Upon reaching the location, however, Ellie only finds Owen and Mel (two of Abby's friends and accomplices in Joel's murder) and, after a brief struggle, kills them both. As Owen attempts to whisper before dying, Mel is pregnant. Ellie walks toward the woman's dead body, opens her jacket, and notices that she is pregnant. She falls to her knees, starts retching, and, in a state of confusion, almost shoots Tommy who has arrived at the same location. Although, obviously, the shock is accentuated by the implicit identification of Mel with Dina (who is also pregnant), Ellie's

reaction nonetheless contributes to the game's overall presentation of violence. The episode also brings the first part of the game to a close and, all in all, is quite relevant in the development of the narrative. On the one hand, the deaths in the aquarium mark the emotional conclusion of Ellie's apocalyptic journey through Seattle; on the other hand, they serve as a prelude to the change of perspective that occurs in the second part of the game, in which Abby becomes the player-controlled character, and both Owen and the aquarium become central characters of the narrative—this will shed an especially tragic light on the death of Owen in particular.

Notwithstanding the prominence of the episode at the aquarium, the aftermath of Nora's torture is incomparably more peculiar, dramatic, and meaningful. After Ellie's third hit and a sudden cut to black, the scene moves back to the girls' hideout at the theater. The player is made aware of the change of location through a static shot of the theater's sign, which is shortly followed by a close-up of Ellie's bloodied and trembling hand. Noticeably but unemphatically, Ellie, shown through a medium close-up of her back, avoids placing that hand on Dina, who has meanwhile opened the theater's doors and welcomed Ellie with a hug. As Dina asks, «Are you okay?» the camera angle changes and shows Ellie's face, spattered in what has to be Nora's blood, her eyes lowered, imperceptibly nodding in response to Dina's question. Dina and Jesse are shocked. Without saying anything else, Ellie walks a few steps inside the room, unfolds the map of Seattle, and points at a particular location—«She's hiding out in the... in this aquarium».

The next scene opens on a close-up of Ellie's side profile, her back curved and lightly oscillating, her eyes locked in a blank stare, a quiet but painful sadness on her face. The camera angle changes to a medium close-up of her upper back; with Dina's help, Ellie's shirt is slowly lifted, and the player/viewer is offered the sight of a battered body, marked by numerous cuts, and almost entirely covered in bruises. A subsequent close-up again brings the focus to Ellie's face, at a nearly frontal perspective, while Dina, sitting in the background, begins wiping her back. The insistence of the camera on Ellie's bleak eyes elicits a comparison with the large, hopeful eyes of fourteen-year-old Ellie in the 2013 video game. Tears appear on her bloodied face; «I made her talk», she utters. At this point, after a brief verbal exchange between the two girls, the camera cuts to black, and the player is brought to an especially dramatic flashback ("St. Mary's Hospital"), relating to the events set to occur between *The Last of Us* and *Part II*, the analysis of which, however, would go beyond the scope of this paper. After the

flashback, as the third day in Seattle begins, the camera pauses again on Ellie's back: the skin is now clean, but the wounds and bruises are not gone.

In the entirety of what is, indeed, a very violent video game, such a lengthy and painful coda remains unique to this particular episode. There is no simple walking out on Nora's tortured body; this is indeed the bottom of Ellie's abyss.

5. *Torture, Video Games, and Public Discourse: A Lesson from "Part II"*

The representation of Nora's torture, as analyzed in the previous section, is exceptional in relation to both its gameplay and cinematography. In 2020, the year of *Part II*'s release, video games were certainly not new to the portrayal of torture, which, however, has not always been very poignant nor thoughtful—a situation that has prompted journalist Clive Thompson to claim that «we need *more* torture in videogames. And *better* torture»⁴⁰, in a 2008 piece that might as well be written today. I identify three primary issues that relate to the representation of torture in video games.

The first issue relates to the interactivity of the video game medium. In the decades-long controversy on violence in video games, a major point of criticism has focused precisely on the active role assumed by the player in the perpetration of virtual violence, as opposed to the more passive experience of watching films and television programs⁴¹. Misguided as it may be, the perception of this issue has also affected the approach of both critics and developers to the representation of torture. A major controversy, in particular, has focused on the graphic representation of torture in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, Rockstar Games, 2013), which features a mission in which the player-controlled character can subject another character to electric shocks, tooth extraction, waterboarding, and a brutal mauling with a pipe wrench⁴². During the same year as the release of *Grand Theft Auto V*, Japanese company Konami was met with criticism upon the release of an R-rated trailer of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, which

⁴⁰ C. THOMPSON, *Why We Need More Torture in Videogames*, in *Wired*, December 15, 2008, <https://www.wired.com/2008/12/why-we-need-more-torture-in-videogames/>.

⁴¹ On the matter, for a critical overview, cf. M. SCHULZKE, *Simulating Good and Evil: The Morality and Politics of Videogames*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2020, esp. 3–5, 43–69.

⁴² On this scene, its purported meaning, and the reactions it generated, see M. SCHULZKE, *op. cit.*, 102–105.

contained scenes of torture and extreme violence⁴³. In the wake of the controversy, while arguing that torture is a subject that video games must not fail to tackle, *Metal Gear Solid*'s creator Hideo Kojima reassuringly commented that the torture featured in *Metal Gear Solid V* would not be playable but only limited to non-interactive elements of the game⁴⁴. The approach is perfectly sound and legitimate; indeed, *Ground Zeroes* (Kojima Productions, Konami, 2014), the first part of *Metal Gear Solid V*, provides what amounts to one of the most compelling accounts of torture in the video game medium⁴⁵.

In the scene of Nora's torture, *Part II* has dealt with the issue in a different way. Interactivity, one of the most essential features of the video game medium and that which differentiates it from the other traditional art forms, is not abdicated; the player, as opposed to the viewer, is not spared from the simulated experience of torturing. At the same time, however, *Part II* prevents interactivity from becoming indulgence—from becoming pornography; Nora's tortured body is removed from the prying eye of the player.

Another issue has been aptly identified by Clive Thompson in the aforementioned piece from 2008; it relates to the correct characterization of torture, a practice that in reality «has devastating repercussions», but not so in many products of popular culture, including video games. Thompson's article was prompted by a quest in *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008), called "The Art of Persuasion", in which the player-controlled character has to extract information from an imprisoned sorcerer by repeatedly stinging him with an electric device called «the Neural Needler». Although, as noted by Thompson, the mission is not entirely devoid of meaning—as it includes, for example, details that seem to take issue with the practice of extraordinary rendition—all in all, it fails to take torture seriously; «it does not model any consequences. You torture

⁴³ "Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain" E3 2013 Red Band Trailer (Extended Director's Cut), June 13, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMyoCr2MnpM>.

⁴⁴ According to an interview with the specialized press: M. ROBINSON, *Metal Gear Solid 5's torture scene will be non-playable*, in *Eurogamer*, September 20, 2013, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-09-20-metal-gear-solid-5s-torture-scene-will-be-non-playable>. For detail on the controversy surrounding Konami's trailer, see also I. GIRINA, "Needs to Be Done": *The Representation of Torture in Video Games and in "Metal Gear Solid V"*, in B. JUNG, S. BRUZZI (eds.), *Beyond the Rhetoric of Pain*, Routledge, New York, 2019, 137–158, at 137–142.

⁴⁵ For an overview, see A.M. GREEN, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Trauma, and History in Metal Gear Solid V*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2017.

the sorcerer, but nothing particularly comes of it. You just move on to the next quest»⁴⁶.

While Thompson was specifically thinking of consequences in relation to gameplay—for example, becoming a torturer could make aspects of the game more difficult, or, on the contrary, easier—this, the correct characterization of torture and its consequences, is another area in which *Part II* proves to be successful. As I have argued, *Part II* poses great emphasis on the extreme violence of Ellie’s action, by singling it out before any other instance of violence depicted elsewhere in the game. Ellie does not merely get to walk out on Nora’s tortured body, up for the next quest, but suffers consequences that are shown through a masterfully introspective cinematography.

Finally, I argue that the video game design of torture faces a third fundamental issue, which relates not so much to the characterization of torture and its consequences as to the correct subsumption of a number of seemingly trivial practices under the broader category of “torture”.

To establish what exactly constitutes torture is an unclear and contentious matter. The issue is not merely theoretical, for “torture” is strictly prohibited under international law and abhorred according to the generally accepted morals; what is “torture”, though? Governments that intend to get around those prohibitions, for example, may attempt to establish that certain practices are not, in fact, instances of torture but «intensive interrogations», «special procedures», «moderate physical pressure», and the like; it is what sociologist Stanley Cohen has called the strategy of «interpretive denial»⁴⁷.

This strategy has been notoriously pursued by the government of the United States in the course of the so-called War on Terror that began following the attacks of September 11, 2001. For torturing without violating the law, torture had to be redefined. Legal experts were prompted to produce a definition capable of excluding interrogation techniques that would normally be regarded as torture⁴⁸. Thus, in the text of an infamous memorandum, Assistant Attorney General Jay Bybee argued that «physical pain amounting to torture must be equivalent in intensity to the pain

⁴⁶ C. THOMPSON, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ S. COHEN, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Polity, Cambridge, 2001, 105–109.

⁴⁸ See K.J. GREENBERG, J.L. DRATEL (eds.), *The Torture Papers: The Road to Abu Ghraib*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, with an *Introduction* by A. LEWIS; M. LAZREG, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008, 259–269.

accompanying serious physical injury, such as organ failure, impairment of bodily function, or even death». Additionally, the memo argued, the United States' understanding of torture requires the «specific intent» to cause severe pain or suffering—that is, «the infliction of such pain must be the defendant's precise objective»—as opposed to the definition included in the United Nations Convention against Torture, which understands torture as inflicted for such purposes as obtaining information or a confession⁴⁹. What remained outside the newfound definition of torture were “enhanced interrogation techniques” (a phrasing that became common in political discourse⁵⁰) such as waterboarding, hypothermia, stress positions, controlled fear, sleep deprivation, and so forth—not “torture”.

Interestingly, as the tortures performed by members of the United States Army and the CIA at Abu Ghraib became known to the public, many commentators doubted the correctness of qualifying them as “torture”, preferring such words as “abuse”⁵¹. Is it torture to slap, punch, kick, and flog the prisoners, stomp on their feet, put them in fear of attack by military working dogs, subject them to rape and various forms of sexual abuse⁵²? Not so, for some commentators. Is it torture to place a broken shard of glass in a detainee's mouth and punch him twice in the face for extorting information, as portrayed in the video game *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch, Activision, 2010)?

Reactions to this scene have been mixed. The reviewer for the video game magazine *Game Informer*, for example, wrote of an «uncomfortable sequence», in which «the player has to torture a restrained prisoner»⁵³. Conversely, an earlier preview for the same venue spoke of «a dark interrogation scene», in which «the squad resorted to some pretty

⁴⁹ J.S. BYBEE, *Memorandum for Alberto R. Gonzales Counsel to the President*, August 1, 2002, collected in K.J. GREENBERG, J.L. DRATEL (eds.), *op. cit.*, 172–217, at 172, 174–175.

⁵⁰ See J. DEL ROSSO, *Talking About Torture: How Political Discourse Shapes the Debate*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2015.

⁵¹ For an account of these reactions, see J. WALDRON, *Torture and Positive Law: Jurisprudence for the White House*, in S.A. ANDERSON, M.C. NUSSBAUM (eds.), *Confronting Torture: Essays on the Ethics, Legality, History, and Psychology of Torture Today*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018, 257–293, at 263.

⁵² For the methods used at Abu Ghraib, see M. DANNER, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror*, New York Review Books, New York, 2004, 292–293.

⁵³ A. BIESENER, *Call of Duty: Black Ops Review: The Broadest Call So Far*, in *Game Informer*, November 8, 2010, https://www.gameinformer.com/games/call_of_duty_black_ops/b/xbox360/archive/2010/11/08/review.aspx.

disturbing tactics»⁵⁴. While similarly avoiding mentions of torture, the previewer for *IGN* went so far as to comment that the scene «was gruesomely awesome and set the stage nicely for the rest of Black Ops' intensity»⁵⁵. Certainly, the game does not do much to indicate the seriousness of the interrogation technique employed by the player-controlled character: the victim spits some blood, starts revealing the requested information, and then, as soon as the enemy forces break in, joins the player in the ensuing gunfight and escape through the rooftops.

Torture, however, is not only what can be seen in horror-themed films and video games and does not necessarily entail the use of bulky tools and intricate machinery. For both the video game medium and individual works within the medium to meaningfully confront the subject of torture, practices such as the interrogation portrayed in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* should not be trivialized.

From what has been said so far, it may be easily understood that *Part II* does not embrace any sort of interpretive denial. Throughout the game, the word “torture” recurs frequently, and the nature of what occurs, either through the game’s visuals or in dialogue is never mystified. An entry on Ellie’s journal is particularly indicative of the game’s emphasis: «They traveled to Jackson specifically ~~to kill Joel~~ to torture Joel» (struck-through in the original), she writes during “Seattle Day 3”.

Part II portrays a number of different types of torture; the word “torture” does not always come up, but that emphasis is never abandoned. At the Serevena Hotel, upon encountering the tied-up and slaughtered bodies of two members of the WLF, Ellie describes what Tommy must have done as following: «You ask this guy a question, but you don’t make him say it... you make him write it down. Then you ask this guy. And if the facts match, they’re telling the truth. If not...» The technique is familiar to the player of *The Last of Us*, where Joel employs it against two restrained men in the chapter “Lakeside Resort”, to extort information about Ellie’s whereabouts; as portrayed in *The Last of Us*, the technique includes elements of psychological torture, a bare-handed beating, and the stabbing of one of the two captives above the knee. In *Part II*, the episode at the Serevena Hotel ties in with Dina’s earlier revelation that Tommy, in his youth, «slow-

⁵⁴ P. KOLLAR, “*Call of Duty: Black Ops*”: *Call of Duty: Black Ops Makes the Leap to 3D*, October 5, 2010, https://www.gameinformer.com/games/call_of_duty_black_ops/b/xbox360/archive/2010/10/05/call-of-duty-black-ops-makes-the-leap-to-3d.aspx.

⁵⁵ N. AHEARN, *Call of Duty: Black Ops Goes 3D and Gets Bot Support*, October 5, 2010, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/10/05/call-of-duty-black-ops-goes-3d-and-gets-bot-support>.

tortured some big FEDRA general». The beating of Nora with a metal pipe, on the other hand, is not explicitly qualified as torture; its moral framing, however, as shown in the analysis above, is much more eloquent than a word alone could be.

Finally, I would like to highlight a detail that is particularly significant in relation to the earnestness of *Part II's* engagement with torture. As detailed in the previous section of this article, Abby first shoots Joel's knee and then orders her friends to tourniquet his leg, in order to prevent him from bleeding out so she can proceed with the torture. Of the eight people at the scene, it is Mel, a trained medic and surgeon, who applies the tourniquet. The circumstance, which is a reminder of the fundamental role played by physicians in the practice of torture⁵⁶, also agrees with Mel's characterization more generally. In the quarrel that ensues among Abby's group after Joel's eventual murder, as seen from Abby's perspective in the sixth act, Mel argues that Ellie and Tommy should be killed, too, for «we can't have loose ends». Self-declaredly shaken by the events of Jackson, Mel believes that Joel «deserved worse ... I just wish I didn't take part in it» (act seven). When Ellie breaks into the aquarium at the end of "Seattle Day 3", Mel is immediately willing to give up the whereabouts of Abby, whom she dislikes on a personal level by reason of their common romantic interest in Owen. Mel's reasons are often petty and opportunistic; her overall character fits the role played as a medic in Joel's torture.

In conclusion, *Part II* provides one of the most compelling, thoughtful, and morally engaged representations of torture in the video game medium, and successfully addresses three particular issues that afflict both the representation of torture in video games and the cultural perception of torture more generally. It is, undoubtedly, a lesson to be followed.

6. Conclusion

In the lengthy flashback that concludes the game's second act ("The Birthday Gift"), the player follows Joel and a sixteen-year-old Ellie in their visit to a long-abandoned Wyoming Museum of Science and History as a

⁵⁶ See, e.g., G.J. ANNAS, S.S. CROSBY, *Post-9/11 Torture at CIA "Black Sites" – Physicians and Lawyers Working Together*, in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 372 (2015), 2279–2281, on the United States' recent history. For a broader perspective, see A. PERECHOCKY, *Los Torturadores Medicos: Medical Collusion with Human Rights Abuses in Argentina, 1976–1983*, in *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, 11 (2014), 539–551.

gift for Ellie's birthday. In a section of the museum that was not part of the original plan of the visit, Ellie finds some disturbing graffiti—«The woman we tortured choked on her own blood», «I killed for them», «There is no light», and so on—until eventually running into an old corpse, next to which lies a “Suicide note”. The note's author is a former member of the Fireflies, an organization that plays a major role in both *The Last of Us* and, to some extent, *Part II*. In the note, the Firefly deplures the atrocities committed for the sake of a higher goal, «Each time we sacrificed part of ourselves ... I can't look at the person I've become», and declares having come to the museum in hopes of finding some purpose, for «My parents loved bringing me here ... before all of the cruelty and savagery». It is difficult to escape the impression that the Firefly's abyss is a projection of Ellie's, as the world of *Part II* often contains details that resonate with the inner life of its protagonists. Indeed, the horrifying graffiti on the walls of the museum speak of familiar details: as mentioned in an earlier section, the enemies slain by Ellie through the player's interaction can often be heard gasping in their own blood.

The episode at the museum epitomizes *Part II*'s understanding of violence as unglamorous, unheroic, unjustifiable, and only leading to the dehumanization of those who perpetrate it, along the same lines already explored in the video game medium, most notably, by *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2K Games, 2012). Heralded by scholars as both an anti-shooter and anti-war video game⁵⁷, *The Line* is unrelentless in exposing the moral degeneration of violence and its dehumanizing power on those who commit it. In what is perhaps the most powerful among *The Line*'s different endings (all of which equally lead to madness and/or death), the player-controlled protagonist, US Army Captain Martin Walker, deliberately chooses to commit suicide by shooting himself⁵⁸.

Contrary to what happens to both Captain Walker and the Firefly at

⁵⁷ For *The Line* as an anti-shooter, that is, a game that takes issue with the conventions of the video game genre of the military shooter, see B. KEOGH, “*Spec Ops: The Line*”s Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter, in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*, 2014, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_55.pdf; and M.T. PAYNE, *War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in “Spec Ops: The Line”*, in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 31 (2014), 265–282. For *The Line* as an anti-war video game, a point that is already contemplated by both Keogh's and Payne's analyses, see also N. MORWOOD, *War Crimes, Cognitive Dissonance and the Abject: An Analysis of the Anti-War Wargame “Spec Ops: The Line”*, in *Democratic Communiqué*, 26 (2014), 107–121.

⁵⁸ *The Line* follows an elite three-man team of Delta Force, led by Walker, as it enters present-day Dubai on a recon mission, after the city has been destroyed by a series of

the museum, Ellie does not end up killing herself. After trailing Abby to California and engaging her in a final confrontation, Ellie has a sudden change of heart while on the brink of victory and decides to spare her opponent's life (act ten, chapter four, "The Beach"). In the course of the battle, however, Ellie has lost the fourth and fifth digits of her left hand, bitten off by Abby as the two girls were fighting in the shallow waters by the coast of Santa Barbara. Thus, while *Part II*'s multifold argument against violence culminates with the assertion of a bold moral choice rather than with the complete annihilation of its protagonist, something in Ellie's humanity has been irretrievably lost. Upon returning to the farm where she and Dina settled in the time between the events of Seattle and Santa Barbara, Ellie discovers she is now unable to play her guitar (act eleven, "The Farm"), a gift from Joel and a constant presence throughout *Part II*; the memory of Joel playing the guitar is precisely what prompted Ellie to spare Abby's life on the beach of Santa Barbara. The very humanity that prompted Ellie to spare another person's life—what is more, the life of another torturer—eludes Ellie's complete possession.

In this article, I have surveyed the engagement of *Part II* with the matter of violence—a trademark of the genre of zombie-themed fiction to which *Part II*, too, approximately belongs. While seemingly embracing the conventions of the genre and opting for an especially graphic depiction, *Part II* approaches violence from the perspective of an all-around critique—an argument that reaches its apex through a portrayal of torture and its consequences that is morally uncompromising, aesthetically compelling, and often resonates with the United States' recent history. In addressing common issues that afflict both the cultural perception of torture and its representation in video games (in the section above, I have located three issues in particular), *Part II* provides not only a valuable contribution to the development of the language of video games but also to public discourse more generally.

Often dismissed as mere *entertainment*—itself a category of dubious analytical soundness—video games have long since reached a remarkable degree of intellectual and artistic maturity, which, however, has not been

catastrophic sandstorms. As the game unfolds, Walker, a «stereotypically rendered white male protagonist super-soldier» (S. MURRAY, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2018, 121) who believes in the good and humanitarianism of the mission, ends up becoming the author of a number of atrocities, including waging war against fellow American soldiers and the mass-slaughtering of tens of civilians with white phosphorus.

matched by an even interest of the different disciplines across the scientific spectrum. My analysis in the present article has both argued for a specific interpretation of a particular video game and attempted to make a case for the capacity of the medium in its current incarnation to express intellectually relevant and aesthetically compelling reflections on topics of moral and legal relevance.