

THE LAST OF US
AND PHILOSOPHY
LOOK FOR THE LIGHT

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Is Ellie's Revenge Ethically Justified?

Alberto Oya

The Last of Us Part II (Naughty Dog, 2020) maintains the gaming mechanics common to the action video game genre, including the customization of weapons, the acquisition of new abilities, puzzle-solving tasks, and some degree of platforming. The gameplay ultimately revolves around shooting at (and thereby killing) enemies. So, it's not its gaming mechanics that makes *The Last of Us Part II* an innovative video game, but rather its ability to challenge the narrative common to the action video game genre.

One common feature of action video games is that the narrative is set in what we might call a heroic light. In these video games, the player takes the role of a video game character who must face the honorable (and challenging) endeavor of fighting an evil force that threatens to destroy human life. This evil may take different forms, but it is always something that threatens human life and acts against commonly accepted moral standards. Importantly, the video game character is often presented as being the only one who can succeed in overcoming the evil force, not as a matter of free choice, but of fulfilling one's duty. Such a heroic narrative facilitates immersion in the gaming experience because it provides an ethical justification for the violence of the playable video game character. Thanks to the in-game heroic narrative, engaging in violent gaming mechanics does not require players *to suspend* their own ethical judgment. An in-game heroic narrative facilitates players' immersion in the video game since it allows them *to accommodate* their own ethical standards. Notably, the embedded nature of video games indicates that moral considerations are still relevant even when players are well aware of being immersed in a purely fictional scenario.¹

Endorsing Ellie's Quest for Revenge Is an Overtly Contradictory Ethical Position

At the beginning, *The Last of Us Part II* follows the heroic formula. During the first half of the video game, when players occupy the role of Ellie, the video game takes care to show Abby as the common cliché of the despotic and sadistic villain who doesn't even care about her comrades, and who enjoys torturing Joel to death. Abby is presented in a way that makes players feel justified in seeking to kill her. All in all, Ellie's revenge seems to be a just act.

However, in the second half of the video game, players occupy the role of Abby. It's then that players come to realize that Abby is not as cruel as she first seemed. In fact, Abby cares about others, even those who are not part of her own group, such as Lev and Yara. Most importantly, players become aware that Abby's motive for killing Joel was revenge for him having killed her father, an act committed by the gamer in the culminating moments of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). So, it was the players who, while gaming as Joel, killed Abby's father.

By forcing players to alternate between Ellie and Abby as their playable character, *The Last of Us Part II* requires that players occupy overtly contradictory ethical positions. Given the evident parallels between Ellie and Abby, if players agree that Ellie is ethically justified in getting revenge on Abby for her having killed Joel (who is a father figure for Ellie), then players should also agree that Abby is ethically justified in getting revenge on Joel for him having killed her father. The argument can easily be extended: in the *hypothetical case* in which Ellie kills Abby (which she does not), if we agree that Abby is a sort of paternal figure for Lev, then players would also have to agree that Lev would be ethically justified in killing Ellie for the sake of revenge.

The problem is not that the cycle of revenge would end up generating, as the video game shows, an endless and increasing spiral of violence. The ultimate problem is conceptual, not just practical. That Ellie is ethically justified in killing Abby is itself a contradictory claim. Here's why. If Ellie is ethically justified in killing Abby, then Abby is ethically justified in killing Joel. But if Abby is ethically justified in killing Joel, then she cannot be blamed for it—and so Ellie cannot be ethically justified in killing Abby. The only way to avoid this contradiction is by accepting that it is ethically justified to punish a morally sound action; but this is also a contradictory claim.

Once players become aware of, or at least intuit, this contradiction, they come to realize that Ellie's aim of killing Abby is not an act of doing justice, as they probably thought during the earlier stages of the video game. Rather, it is nothing more than a matter of passionate revenge. It's in this way that players are progressively moved to the conclusion that all the

violence they're engaged in during their own gaming experience is simply gratuitous and not justified by any honorable moral principle.

Retributive Justice and the *Lex Talionis*

The contradiction between the permissibility of Ellie's and Abby's actions cannot be resolved by assuming a retributive notion of justice. The core claim of retributive notions of justice is that wrongdoers should be punished according to the way in which they have offended. The intuition behind these positions is that there is a sort of pre-existing balance of justice, and that each time an offense is committed, the balance is broken and only restored when the offender receives a punishment that accords with the gravity of the offense.

The most straightforward example of a juridical principle based on a retributive understanding of justice is the so-called *lex talionis*. The earliest known juridical use of this principle was in ancient Babylon. It is also referred to in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24–25; Leviticus 24:17–23; Deuteronomy 19:21).² The *lex talionis* states that offenders should face a punishment that is *equal* to the offense they have committed—“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” For example, according to the *lex talionis*, if someone murders another person, the murderer must be punished by their own death, thereby compensating one death with another and in doing so somehow restoring the balance of justice.

Just for the sake of the argument, let's grant that “an eye for an eye” is a sound moral principle, such that justice requires that wrongdoers be punished in exactly the same way in which they offended. To this effect, we may concede that the imbalance brought about by a murder is redressed by the death of the murderer, and therefore that killing a murderer is an act of justice and therefore a morally sound action. It is important to emphasize, however, that killing a murderer is a morally sound action because it restores the imbalance initially caused by the murderer. Killing the murderer's executioner is not ethically justified. The new murder would only serve to break the equilibrium once again, which is why the application of the “an eye for an eye” principle does not make “the world go blind.”

Even assuming a retributive understanding of justice in the form of the “eye for an eye” principle, if Ellie was to succeed in killing Abby, then it would not be an act of justice. The restoration of the equilibrium that retributive justice seeks has already been achieved by Joel's death. Endorsing the claim that Ellie is ethically justified in killing Abby is tantamount to accepting that executioners should be sentenced to death.

It may be argued that Abby killing Joel was the act that broke the equilibrium of justice in the first place. If Joel was ethically justified in killing Abby's father, then Abby killing Joel would be an act of injustice—and, according to *lex talionis*, Ellie killing Abby would thereby become an

act of doing justice, of restoring the equilibrium. This line of reasoning requires an argument to conclude that Joel was ethically justified in killing Abby's father, which itself would depend on whether Abby's father was ethically justified in sacrificing Ellie for the sake of finding a vaccine for the fungal outbreak. Otherwise, if Abby's father was justified in sacrificing Ellie, then it was Joel who first broke the equilibrium of justice, meaning that under the "eye for an eye" principle, Abby killing Joel would be ethically justified—and, in such a case, Ellie killing Abby would therefore not be ethically justified.

The most compelling argument for claiming that Joel's actions are ethically justified was formulated by Charles Joshua Horn in his article "*The Last of Us* as Moral Philosophy: Teleological Particularism and Why Joel Is Not a Villain."³ In it, Horn convincingly argues that Joel's actions in the original *The Last of Us*, including the decision to rescue Ellie from the hospital no matter the cost, are morally defensible inasmuch as Joel has taken on the role of Ellie's father, and fathers have the moral duty to protect their children no matter what.

The argument is compelling and is probably the reason why most players do not see Joel as a villain, despite the brutality of some of his actions. However, the same reasoning can be used to justify Abby's father's decision to sacrifice Ellie for the sake of finding a vaccine. It may be argued that the ultimate reason why Abby's father intends to sacrifice Ellie is the fatherly desire to guarantee his daughter a safer and more peaceful world to live in—one in which there are no zombie-like violent mutant creatures.

We then face a contradiction similar to the one we faced when claiming that Ellie was ethically justified in killing Abby. For the same reason we might conclude that Joel is ethically justified in killing Abby's father, we should conclude that Abby's father is ethically justified in killing Ellie. But if Abby's father is ethically justified in killing Ellie, he cannot be blamed for it. So Joel cannot be justified in killing Abby's father.

The Requirement to Empathize with Abby

In order for players to realize that Ellie's aim of killing Abby isn't an act of doing justice, but simply a matter of passionate revenge, players are required to endorse Abby's perspective as much as they had endorsed Ellie's perspective during the first half of the video game. It's then that players come to realize that both characters are ultimately driven by the same kind of motivation—the obsessive desire to kill their father's killer. Otherwise, if players carry on seeing Abby as a one-dimensional, evil character, then they will fail to realize the evident similarities between Ellie and Abby. They will therefore feel no conflict about killing Abby. In fact, they will feel overtly contradicted when, while playing as Abby, the video game asks them to chase and fight against Ellie.

Even though the video game is clearly designed with the purpose of moving players to first condemn and later empathize with Abby, not all players are able to do the latter. Some players persist in seeing Abby as a one-dimensional evil character, despite the video game's efforts to show Abby as a much more complex character than just a sadistic and soulless clichéd villain. This can be explained by their strong attachment to Joel and Ellie during the original video game. Fans of the original *The Last of Us* were eager for a sequel that would allow them to see how the character of Joel, and his relationship with Ellie, had developed. What they were not expecting was a sequel in which they are forced to play as Joel's murderer.

This inability of some players to empathize with the character of Abby due to their strong attachment to Joel and Ellie explains why, in contrast with the highly positive reception the video game had from professional critics, who praised it for its complex but nonetheless enticing narrative, *The Last of Us Part II* faced a significant backlash from a segment of the fanbase of the original video game. The video game was subjected to "review bombing," an online phenomenon in which a large number of users post negative reviews online to lower the average score of the product—either as a collectively organized attempt to diminish its reputation or simply as a spontaneous way to express their discontent with the product. Despite having an average score of 95 out of 100 by professional reviewers and critics, *The Last of Us Part II* was given a score of 3.5 out of 10 by players on the review aggregator Metacritic, based on the almost 30,000 reviews posted within the first two days after its release.⁴

The inability to endorse Abby's perspective may not only impede the player's understanding of the overtly contradictory position they're assuming while endorsing Ellie's quest for revenge, it may also stop them from getting any enjoyment out of the video game. The reason for this is that players tend to distance themselves from what they consider to be immoral characters.

Players are willing to take on the role of an action character even if this character is not morally perfect, provided they are still ultimately driven by an honorable purpose. In *The Last of Us*, Joel is an excellent example of this. Although as a character he may be ethically questionable, all his actions during the video game are ultimately driven by the honorable fatherly purpose of protecting Ellie.

In contrast, very few players (if any) will find it entertaining to take on the role of an arrogant and soulless character who enjoys torturing people to death and mocks the suffering of their victims. Abby is first shown along these lines. She takes her time in slowly and brutally torturing Joel to death, and she seems to enjoy it. To Joel's request of "why don't you say whatever speech you've got rehearsed and get this over with," Abby replies, "You stupid old man.... You don't get to rush this."

The soulless and sadistic way in which Abby is first presented is the reason why all players are initially reluctant to play as Abby. However,

most players overcome this initial reluctance as the story progressively reveals Abby's reasons and motives. Abby is shown to be a very similar character to Ellie, and just as complex. Moreover, as the story advances, players also discover Ellie has the same kind of need for gratuitous brutality as Abby has. For example, just before killing Nora, one of Abby's friends, Ellie claims that "I can make it quick, or I can make it so much worse" (which she does). By switching perspectives, players come to understand that if they are to empathize with Ellie, then, for the very same reasons, they should also empathize with Abby. And if they are to feel repulsion for Abby, for the very same reasons, they should also feel repulsion for Ellie.

The players who are unable to identify the obvious similarities between Ellie and Abby will be stuck in Ellie's subjective perspective, and continue seeing Abby as a one-sided and completely soulless character. For these players, taking the role of Abby is an undesirable and unrewarding gaming experience.

The entire gaming experience offered by *The Last of Us Part II* consists in forcing players to alternate between the roles of Ellie and Abby, so if players don't relate to both these characters, but instead feel repulsion for one of them, it's clear that this will diminish their interest in playing the video game.

A recent psychological study conducted by Valérie Erb, Seyeon Lee, and Young Yim Doh provides empirical evidence for the role of empathy in shaping players' responses to *The Last of Us Part II*.⁵ The authors interviewed twelve players who completed the video game in order to explore the connections between the player-character relationship and the overall satisfaction with the video game. They found that players who were able to overcome their initial aversion to playing as Abby developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of her character as they progressed through the video game. They learned more about Abby's personal story, motivations, and relationships, which enabled them to empathize with her perspective and actions. The empathy for Abby enhanced their enjoyment of the video game and made them perceive *The Last of Us Part II* as a "meaningful emotional experience." In contrast, the players who were unable to empathize with Abby because of their strong attachment to Ellie and Joel expressed a general dissatisfaction with the gaming experience.

Challenging the Heroic Formula *While* Playing

Admittedly, *The Last of Us Part II* is not the first video game aiming to entice players to reflect on the ethical justification of their own gaming behavior. The most explicit and straightforward way in which video game designers have invited the player to reflect on the ethics of their own behavior is by compelling players to face an ethical dilemma during their

play. The use of ethical dilemmas is interesting because it shows the attempt by video game designers to make the player's own moral intuitions an explicit part of the gaming mechanics.

One of the most well-known examples of the use of ethical dilemmas in video games is the first-person shooter video game *BioShock* (Irrational Games, 2007). One type of non-playable character that players encounter in *BioShock* are the so-called "Little Sisters"—young girls, aged somewhere between five and eight years old, who have been altered and brain-washed to collect from corpses, and later preserve in their own bodies, a substance called "ADAM." ADAM is used in the video game to enhance the abilities of the playable character. Whenever players get close to a Little Sister, they must decide whether to "harvest" her or to rescue her. Harvesting her means killing her to literally extract the valuable substance preserved in her body. Rescuing her means saving her life and restoring her humanity. Rescuing a Little Sister gives the players only half the resources that harvesting does. The difference in reward is highly relevant in the first stages of the video game. Each time players get close to a Little Sister, they are forced to choose between satisfying their own self-interest or sacrificing their self-interest for the sake of helping others. Although the video game becomes easier by harvesting the Little Sisters, the video game does not overtly advocate for a "correct" answer. The decision of whether to harvest or rescue a Little Sister ultimately depends on the player's own moral intuition.

In contrast to *BioShock*, the gaming mechanics of *The Last of Us Part II* do not require players to actively take a position regarding any ethical dilemma. The video game's entire storyline is linear and follows a predetermined path, meaning that there is no way that players can alter the events presented in the video game. However, even when giving players no room to decide, *The Last of Us Part II* still manages to entice players to reflect on the ethical justification of their own gaming behavior, and it does so by challenging the heroic formula so characteristic of action video games. As *The Last of Us Part II* unfolds, players become progressively aware that all the violence they have been engaged in throughout their own gaming experience is not an act of doing justice, but only passionate, unjustified revenge.

The Last of Us Part II is not the first action video game to take advantage of the common heroic formula to entice players to ethical reflection. In fact, the original *The Last of Us* already moved players to reflect on the ethical justification of Joel's last decision to save Ellie from the hospital. Other recent and well-known examples of this can be found in some of the titles in the first-person shooter video game saga *Far Cry*.⁶ However, these video games do not move players to question the ethical justification of their gaming behavior until the game's very end, meaning that their aim is not to alter the player's gaming experience, but rather to complement it by allowing them to reflect on their own gaming experience after finishing the video game. In this regard, the innovative aspect of *The Last of Us Part II*

is that the ethical conflict is embedded in the gaming experience itself, aiming to progressively move players to question their own gaming behavior *while* playing the video game.

Notes

1. For a detailed discussion on this topic, see my *First-Person Shooter Video Games* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), especially chap. 5 entitled “The Heroic Narrative in First-Person Shooter Video Games.” My analysis there is specifically focused on the first-person shooter video game genre, although I think that in general it can be easily extended to action video games more generally. Among other claims, I argue that the inclusion of a heroic in-game narrative or background story in first-person shooter video games is explained because players would not enjoy the shooting gaming experience these video games offer if their own ethical standards were overtly contradicted—which indicates that moral considerations are still relevant even when players are well aware of being immersed in a purely fictional scenario.
2. There is some debate among theologians and biblical scholars as to whether the *lex talionis* should be understood literally, as stating that the punishment should be equal to the offense committed, or figuratively, as stating the more general requirement that the punishment should be proportional to the offense. For a first approach to this discussion see Alan Tzvika Nissel, “Equality or Equivalence: A Very Brief Survey of *Lex Talionis* as a Concept of Justice in the Bible,” in Barry S. Wimpfheimer ed., *Wisdom of Bat Sheva* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House, 2009), 111–145.
3. Charles Joshua Horn, “*The Last of Us* as Moral Philosophy: Teleological Particularism and Why Joel Is Not a Villain,” in David Kyle Johnson ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Popular Culture as Philosophy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 1–16.
4. Riley MacLeod, “*The Last of Us Part 2*’s Metacritic Page Shows How Broken Numerical Scores Are,” Kotaku, June 20, 2020, at <https://kotaku.com/the-last-of-us-part-2-s-metacritic-page-shows-how-broke-1844106265>. Notably, the average user score on Metacritic has since slightly increased. As of September 2023, *The Last of Us Part II* has a user score of 5.8 out of 10, based on over 160,000 reviews from players (“*The Last of Us Part II* for PlayStation 4 Reviews,” Metacritic, September 5, 2023, at <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/the-last-of-us-part-ii>).
5. Valérie Erb, Seyeon Lee, and Young Yim Doh, “Player–Character Relationship and Game Satisfaction in Narrative Game: Focus on Player Experience of Character Switch in *The Last of Us Part II*,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021), article 709926.
6. Alberto Oya, “*Far Cry 2*: Are You Sure about Being a Hero?,” andphilosophy.com—The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, December 22, 2022, at <https://andphilosophy.com/2022/12/22/far-cry-2-are-you-sure-about-being-a-hero>.