

# When boys turn into women: a critical reading of postfeminist masculinity in *The last of us*

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## ABSTRACT

Video games play a significant role in promulgating dualistic gender roles and prescribing sexual identities. Situated within the broad theoretical framework of postfeminism, this explorative study analyses the distinctive articulation of masculinity in the post-apocalyptic video game, *The last of us* (2013 Naughty Dog). While it has been argued that video games are still firmly rooted in a distinctively patriarchal version of hegemonic masculinity and its attendant association with competition, domination, and aggression, we investigate the emergence of a different representation of a male protagonist as morally complex, intuitive, and emotional. In an attempt to gain a better understanding of this transformed representation of masculinity, we explore the ways in which disillusionment with patriarchal masculine values becomes evident in the post-apocalyptic setting of *The last of us*. We investigate the implications of this transformation of traditional heroic masculinity in video games for the negotiation of male identities in this sphere of visual culture.

**Keywords:** Postfeminism, video games, *The last of us*, gendered values, hegemonic masculinity, femininity, feminisation of masculinity, post-apocalypse.

# Introduction

1. Post-apocalyptic narratives are particularly interesting to study, since they often depict and explore '... an old, corrupt world and the potential emergence of a renewed, perhaps better world' (Anderson 2012:267).

2. According to Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susana Pajares Tosca (2008:187), a 'survival horror' game can be understood as a game in which '...the player controls a character who has to get out of some enclosed place solving puzzles and destroying horrific monsters along the way'.

3. The game seems to sit uncomfortably between both genres. Not only rooted in the 'traditional iconography of action, guns and violence' of the action-adventure genre (Kirkland 2009:165), Joel's character transformation is also 'concurrent with the survival genre [whose] gameplay evokes a particularly unmasculine sense of helplessness' (Kirkland 2009:162).

4. Many video games utilise this familiar idea of the 'merciful killing' of a disposable female character in their plots. Examples include *Prey* (2006), *Gears of war 2* (2008) and *Pandora's tower* (2011), to name only a few.

5. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the entertainment software industry is the fastest growing industry in the United States of America (USA) (The Transformation of the Video Game Industry 2015:13), with the American video game industry estimated to be worth more than \$22 billion. These figures give an indication of the extent to which video games are being consumed, if not in a global context, then certainly in the USA. Furthermore, these statistics provide sound justification for the stance taken here: that video game studies is an important area of research particularly when analysed through the lens of visual culture studies.

Hailed as the *Citizen Kane* of video games (Poole 2013:[sp]; Kamen 2013:[sp]), the Naughty Dog 'zombie survival horror video game', *The last of us* (2013), is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape where a natural fungus called Cordyceps has turned sixty per cent of the human population into zombies (*The last of us* wiki 2013:[sp]).<sup>1</sup> Set mainly in 2033 – twenty years after the fungus first broke out – only pockets of human resistance remain. Straddling the genres of both 'survival horror'<sup>2</sup> and 'action adventure', in this game Joel – the complicated protagonist – is described as a 'violent, brutal killer and a torturer' (*The Last of Us* wiki 2013:[sp]), who will go to any lengths to survive.<sup>3</sup> As a smuggler, Joel is tasked with transporting a fourteen-year old girl, Ellie, to an anti-government group called the Fireflies. Although at first it is not clear why Ellie must be transported to the Fireflies, eventually it becomes known that Joel is expected to sacrifice her, as she will (potentially) provide a cure for the zombie infection. Owing to their belief that she is immune to the Cordyceps fungus, the Fireflies must kill her in order to manufacture a cure. After an initial suspicion and distrust of Ellie, as the narrative develops Joel becomes attached to her and the two form a tight bond. For this reason, Joel, now displaying attributes such as empathy, kindness, and emotion, refuses to sacrifice Ellie and instead chooses to rescue her from the Fireflies and save her from certain death. In other words, whilst initially represented as a stereotypical male action-hero character exhibiting behaviour culturally sanctioned to suit this role, as the game progresses, Joel's character undergoes a curious transformation displaying intuition, compassion, and empathy.<sup>4</sup>

The ideological construction and representation of gender in popular (visual) media is a topic that has been extensively researched in various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Postfeminist theorists such as Rosalind Gill (2007a, 2007b, 2008) and Angela McRobbie (1994, 1999, 2004), among many others, have contributed greatly to the understanding of gender construction in visual media such as film, television, and advertising. Even though several quantitative studies have been conducted on the representation of gender, specifically the representation of femininity in video games, (see for instance, Dietz 1998; Beasley & Standley 2002; Jansz & Martis 2007; Burgess, Stermer & Burgess 2007; Dickerman, Christensen & Kerl-McClain 2008; Downs & Smith 2009; Crowe & Watts 2012), comprehensive qualitative studies on this topic are still limited. Since the video game industry is rapidly expanding, the importance of continuously examining new developments taking place in this field cannot be overstated.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this article explores the representation of gender – with a specific focus on the representation of masculinity – in the specific video game, *The last of us*. Utilising a postfeminist approach, both

the narratological and ludological (gameplay) structure of the video game are analysed.<sup>6</sup> This approach is helpful in exploring and exposing the ways in which the combined operation of these structures serves to not only maintain and perpetuate hegemonic gender norms, but may also provide a space for the resignification of stereotypical gender constructs. In other words, we argue that a postfeminist approach rooted in complexity is particularly useful in order to interrogate and critique the underlying masculine structures of video games, instead of focussing on simply the portrayal and inclusion of female characters in video games.

Research dealing with the representation of gender in video games has mainly focussed on the misogynistic depiction of female characters (Dietz 1998; Consalvo 2012), while the ways in which masculinity is constructed in the realm of video games is rarely addressed (Kirkland 2009:165). We argue that a close analysis of the ways in which a male character is represented in a particular video game reveals that a discursive reconstruction of masculinity may be underway in this realm of popular culture.

In order to do so, we first consider the ways in which certain character traits and values in society have been stereotypically ascribed to either men or women in popular visual culture. Thereafter, we explain why postfeminism provides a useful lens through which to analyse constructions of masculinity in visual culture, and in video games in particular. Thirdly, the gendered nature of the gaming environment is considered, combined with the problematic ways in which women are represented in this arena. Finally, *The last of us* is analysed more closely from a postfeminist perspective, in order to show that the disillusionment with hegemonic patriarchal masculinity subtly displayed in the game surfaces in a feminisation of the protagonist, the game world depicted, and the gendered role the player is invited to perform.

The question we ask is: how does this revised version of masculinity destabilise, or at the very least, contribute to the subversion of the misogynistic character of the video game industry and offer new possibilities for the expansion of the roles represented for men in video games? Alternatively, is this merely an impotent attempt at including previously marginalised groups and values in an inherently patriarchal system?

6. Even though we acknowledge and recognise the tension between the narratological and ludological schools of thought, it is outside the scope of this article to deal with this debate in any detail. This article follows a combined approach, and takes the narrative, as well as the gameplay aspects of *The last of us* into account.

## Gendered values, postfeminism and visual culture

As the feminist project has demonstrated, the gendering of particular values in society is deeply entrenched in the notion that a “natural” polarity exists between male/female, rationality/emotion, hard/soft, and so forth (Gamble 2006:66). Moreover, the assumed polarity between men and women is perpetuated in visual culture by means of signifiers of so-called “natural” masculinity and “natural” femininity. For example, MacInnes (1998:47) has argued that character traits such as aggression, rationality, violence, and domination are gendered as male and are thus associated with men and so-called “healthy” masculinity. In a similar vein, Charles Soukup (2007:172) points out that a patriarchal (heterosexual) masculinity is ‘defined by the exertion of physical domination and mastery via violence and aggressive competition’. On the other hand, values such as emotionality, nurturing, irrationality, and compassion are often attributed to women and have become the signifiers of femininity (Beynon 2002:80; Sawyer 2004:26; Gove & Watt 2004:46; Soukup 2007:172). Of course, these associations are mainly culturally constructed and should not be considered biologically determined only. In other words, traits considered masculine are not necessarily inherent to all men, just as feminine traits are not necessarily inherent to all women, but are rather attributed to specific genders based on cultural and historical contexts and ‘become sedimented into common sense’ over time, with the mass media contributing to the dissemination of these ideas (Gill 2014:193).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in patriarchal societies, values associated with masculinity are typically privileged over values associated with femininity (Gamble 2006:[sp]; Soukup 2007:172).

7. Much has been written on the relationship between biology and culture in the formation of gender identity. Our contention is that neither body nor culture should be unduly privileged in the equation. As Amanda du Preez (2009:46) points out, ‘the sexed body is ... not a pure given or clean slate, waiting passively to be produced by the inscriptions of the supposedly active gendered mind’. Instead, a subject’s (biological) sex should not be discounted as a site where identity formation constantly takes place. In light of this, Du Preez (2009:46) does not consider ‘... gender entirely amputated from sex, but rather propose[s] that gender and sex are mutually, although not pre-scriptively, instantiated’.

8. The concept ‘hegemonic masculinity’ was first defined by Connell (1987) as the assumptions and beliefs about masculinity that are taken for granted in particular contexts.

Our use of the concept ‘hegemonic masculinity’ and the stereotypical signifiers with which it has been associated, as pointed out above, requires some further explanation.<sup>8</sup> For as Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005:854) point out, when assumed to comprise ‘... a fixed character type, or an assemblage of toxic traits ...’ a unitary notion of masculinity is wholly unhelpful to analysing hegemonic constructions of gender relations. Instead, the route we take here analyses the construction of masculinity in a particular game, *The last of us*, in relation to the broader context of representations of gender specifically in the realm of survival horror video games. As will be shown, these kinds of video games value competition, aggression, and extreme violence (Kirkland 2009:166), and are thus firmly entrenched in a familiar and quite specific trope of hegemonic masculinity discursively constructed in the video game industry since its inception (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36).

In the wider domain of popular (visual) culture, familiar gendered characters are not only repeated and recycled but also continuously renegotiated. The renegotiation of gender is especially evident in the current postfeminist era, which was ushered in with the waning of the twentieth century and the dawning of the twenty first. Estelle Freedman (2002:5) argues that at the end of the twentieth century, '[a] generation of western women came of age influenced by feminism to expect equal opportunities'. Even though the majority of women of this generation often claim that they are uncomfortable with the label 'feminist', they still expect to be included in political and economic activities in the same way as their male counterparts (Freedman 2002:5). This rejection (and misinterpretation) of the term 'feminist' is also evident in contemporary popular opinion. For example, *TIME* magazine included the word 'feminist'<sup>9</sup> in a 'light-hearted' poll in which readers could vote for a word to be 'banned'<sup>10</sup> in 2015 (Steinmetz 2014:[sp]). Accompanying 'feminist', words such as 'basic', 'kale' and 'bossy' were also listed.

Although the poll was intended to be playful, it quite clearly illustrates not only the extent to which (some) women distance themselves from the label 'feminist', but also highlights the negative way in which feminism is now conceived. Genz (2009:2) refers to this distancing from feminist politics as a sort of '... intellectual fatigue and exhaustion as we seem to have run out of steam debating the state of women in twenty-first-century culture and society'. It would appear that postfeminism, as an intellectual movement has developed in light of, and perhaps in response to such ;intellectual fatigue; (Genz 2009:2).

Even though there is little consensus among scholars as to the exact definition of postfeminism, Gill (2007b:147) considers it to be '... one of the most important [notions] in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis'. She maintains that postfeminism should be considered a sensibility, rather than a fixed, static system from which to analyse particular popular media texts (Gill 2007b:148). Likewise, Stéphanie Genz (2009:28) considers the prefix 'post-' to signal an opportunity to explore different potentialities in terms of feminism and femininities, rather than '... assuming a predetermined frame of reference'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, as Ann Brooks (1997:1) explains, postfeminism can now be understood as '... a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism'. This positions postfeminism as an ideal framework through which to understand contemporary gender representations, since it provides an analytical grid with certain salient touch points and parallels with feminism, but with an added dimension that allows for the critique of the complex cultural and economic structures that generally inform depictions of femininity and masculinity in visual culture.

9. According to *TIME* Magazine's website (Steinmetz 2014:[sp]), the definition of a feminist is: '[to] have nothing against feminism itself, but when did it become a thing that every celebrity had to state their position on whether this word applies to them, like some politician declaring a party? Let's stick to the issues and quit throwing this label around like ticker tape at a Susan B. Anthony parade'.

10. 'Banning' words refers to the hypothetical removal of specific words from everyday conversation; that is, words that the respondent to the poll considers over-used and irritating.

11. In this regard, the relationship between third-wave feminism and postfeminism is also a complicated one. See Genz's (2006:333-353) useful discussion of their similarities and differences.

Owing to the fact that postfeminism developed from a number of different contexts such as academia, the media, and consumer culture (Genz 2006:341), the term does not only refer to a theoretical framework from which to analyse texts, as Brooks (in Lotz 2010:113)<sup>12</sup> suggests, but should also be understood to refer to the texts themselves. In other words, postfeminist texts, which offer women a variety of versions of femininity to choose from, can be unpacked from a postfeminist position productively, if not always in easily delineated ways.<sup>13</sup> Equally, postfeminism allows for the interrogation of representations of masculinity in postfeminist texts. As Gill (2014:192) notes in her analysis of postfeminist male fiction, ‘relatively little has been written about men and masculinities in relation to postfeminism’. Therefore, as both a theoretical framework and a ‘cultural sensibility’ (Gill 2007b:148), postfeminism provides a useful lens through which postfeminist masculinity can be explored in *The last of us* in which qualities deemed ‘feminine’ are—strikingly—repackaged as desirable masculine characteristics.<sup>14</sup>

12. Brooks (in Lotz 2010:113) maintains that, ‘Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change’.

13. In this regard, see Genz (2009), Genz and Brabon (2009) and Gill (2007), to name only a few.

14. In other words, postfeminism as an alternative approach to contemporary visual texts, allows the interrogation of the underlying gendered structures of *The last of us*, whereas a traditional gender studies or feminist analysis would perhaps have focused only on the visual representations in the video game. Although *The last of us* can be understood as a ‘typical’ post-apocalyptic video game that is inherently masculine, we argue that by approaching *The last of us* from a postfeminist angle, alternative understandings of the visual construction of masculinity can potentially be opened up.

15. Equally, the physical playing piece used in a board game represents the player in such a way that the plastic token actually *becomes* the player the moment the game begins (Salen & Zimmerman 2004:96).

## Videogames as patriarchal playground

Video games provide a particularly interesting and important area of study regarding the representation of gender owing to the unique engagement they produce between media and players who are required to provide direct, active input continuously in order to progress in the game (Sarkeesian 2014). In addition to the amount of time and input provided by the player, her or his investment in a game is also influenced by the ‘magic circle’ as first postulated by the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. Huizinga (1957:10) explains that:

[a]ll play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

In other words, these ‘temporary worlds’, or ‘magic circle[s]’ refer to the space entered into by a player which creates a new ‘reality’ ‘... defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players’ (Salen & Zimmerman 2004:96).<sup>15</sup> The ‘magic

circle' offered by a video game constructs a deep investment by a player in the medium, potentially resulting in a highly powerful way in which certain ideologies and discourses are constructed, maintained, and perpetuated via this medium.

When approaching video games and the video game industry from a postfeminist perspective, the dominant patriarchal values that have informed and continue to underpin this medium, in which the default player is mostly considered to be a heterosexual man, come to light (Kirkland 2009:165). In other words, the historical context from which the medium emerged plays an integral role in understanding the ideas, values, and messages that are perpetuated in video games. By considering the history of the medium, a deeper understanding can be reached of the ways in which signifiers of stereotypical hegemonic masculinity are privileged in video games, while empathy, intuition, and nurturing (usually associated with stereotypical femininity, as argued by Beynon 2002:80; Sawyer 2004:26; Gove & Watt 2004:46; and Soukup 2007:172) are denigrated or simply do not appear. Even though some forms of video games (mainly role-playing games) are including the option for players to choose their character's gender, these characters are often nothing more than '... simply a female "skinned" version of the male protagonist' (Layne & Blackmon 2013:1); the character's abilities, choices, reactions, and the values for which they stand stay the same, whether the character is male or female. Therefore, the character still mainly embodies a specific type of masculinity while in the body of a woman.<sup>16</sup>

The inherently masculine framework underpinning technology (Wajcman 1996:1; Harding 2003:2, 3) and in this case, video games has contributed to the types of values with which games are associated (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36). In the 1950s and 1960s, the US military provided substantial funding for research in artificial intelligence (AI) and, in so doing, not only provided the technological tools to create digital games, but also laid the foundation for the largely taken-for-granted values with which they are still associated, such as competition, aggression, and violence (Hjorth 2011:19, 20).

The overall patriarchal bias of the video game industry was already evident with the inception of video games in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In the majority of action-adventure video games—in which the main aim of the game is to shoot as many enemies as possible—the representation of male characters tends to align with stereotypical models of masculinity 'rooted in the traditional iconography of action, guns and violence' (Kirkland 2009:165). As Patrick Kolan (2011:[sp]) states, these male heroes 'all have shaved heads, frowns and featureless mugs. They're cookie-cutter, archetypal action heroes – and they all look like each other'. This overly aggressive, one-dimensional portrayal of men perpetuates and privileges the association of masculinity with aggression, strength, and dominance (MacInnes 1998:47). As a result of this mainly masculine-

16. Nevertheless, in some ways these developments may be considered an improvement in terms of the overall gender-consciousness of the gaming sphere.

17. The development of the first video games broadly coincides with the birth of computer science—a generally accepted male domain—as an independent discipline in the 1950s and 1960s at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Hjorth 2011:19).



oriented mindset, strongly underpinned by notions of patriarchal (heteronormative) masculinity, it should come as no surprise that the representation of women is often overtly sexualised (Schleiner 2001:222), with characteristics traditionally associated with femininity being marginalised in video games (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36).<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between the expanding video game industry, gender, and neoliberalism—with which contemporary, globalised societies are now thoroughly interwoven (Saad-Filho & Johnston 2005:1)—should not be underestimated. Values such as competition, rational expectation, and utility maximisation are firmly entrenched in neoliberal agendas (Birch & Mykhnenko 2010:5). In addition, neoliberalism has a strong link to postfeminism. As Gill and Scharff (2011:7) suggest, perhaps neoliberalism is always already gendered and ‘... women are constructed as its ideal subjects ...’. Moreover, Gill and Scharff (2011:6) consider neoliberalism to be ‘... a force for creating actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are increasingly exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice ...’. In other words, neoliberal systems, which are mainly focused on economic efficiency, financial growth, as well as production and industrial development, promote and privilege values that impoverish large parts of the world’s population and, according to Ray Bush (2007:xiii) and Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (2003:ix), women in particular.

In this neoliberal landscape, ‘which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns’, as Sarah Gamble (2006:[sp]) argues, women ‘are treated inequitably within a society’. Moreover, ‘within this patriarchal paradigm’, she argues, ‘women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on’ (Gamble 2006:[sp]). According to this view, representations of women in popular culture, and more specifically for our argument, video games, are often negatively associated with weakness, emotion, and passivity, with these qualities being denigrated as undesirable character flaws.

In light of the alleged denigration of feminine qualities in video game culture,<sup>19</sup> is it not somewhat surprising that values stereotypically associated with femininity—that is, compassion, empathy, and intuition, for example—are now repositioned in a relatively favourable light and associated with “healthy” masculinity in *The Last of Us*? In other words, what circumstances have led to what we refer to as the ‘feminisation of masculinity’ in the gaming world once (and undeniably still) firmly rooted in the promotion of power, aggression, maximised production, and competition? (Kirkland 2009:166; Consalvo 2012).

18. Schleiner (2001:222) notes that until 1996 mostly male avatars or characters appeared in ‘shooter/adventure’ role-playing games. As in most other video game genres, the only female characters were the ‘... princesses offered as battle trophies’ (Schleiner 2001:222) in games such as *Prince of Persia* (1989), and so forth. The appearance of Lara Croft on the video game scene embodies a very important shift in computer games with female characters now sometimes taking the starring role in this genre. The dubious representation of these characters is, of course, ideologically complex. Schleiner (2001:222) is of the opinion that Croft is merely a ‘... monstrous offspring of science: an idealized, eternally young female automation, a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze’.

19. Several examples can be provided for the negation of feminine values. For instance, of the top 20 selling video games in 2014 (The transformation of the video game industry 2015:11), only one of these titles could be considered relatively non-violent. Furthermore, it is clear that the video game industry presents a particularly hostile work environment for women, as demonstrated by the so-called Gamergate controversy of 2014. Game critic Anita Sarkeesian and video game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu received rape and death threats for speaking out about misogyny in the gaming sphere (Consalvo 2012:[sp]; Hudson 2014:[sp]).



## Feminisation of masculinity in *The last of us*

While girls have been ‘turning into men’ in video games for decades, ‘boys turning into women’ is a more recent phenomenon in this domain of visual cultural production.<sup>20</sup> The feminisation of masculinity appears to have surfaced as one of the latest tropes of masculinity in a postfeminist era. Genz and Brabon (2009:135) argue that technological changes since the 1960s have resulted in men increasingly being regarded as ‘... redundant in a biological, social and economic way as the historic roles of “heroic masculinity”, “old industrial man” or simply “old man” have been phased out ...’. As a result, the representation of masculinity in popular culture has taken on a variety of new forms in the last decades, with values previously cast as uniquely “feminine” now manifesting visually as “desirable” qualities (for men) in popular culture.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, in *The last of us* a capitalist, rational, ‘civilised’, male-oriented society destroyed as a result of the absolute adherence to competition, production, domination, and exploitation is portrayed. As in the many versions of apocalyptic disaster evident in contemporary popular culture, representations of the downfall of a capitalist, post-industrial society can be read as a visual manifestation of the suspicion of the longstanding negation and oppression of its opposites – empathy, intuition, and compassion (so-called feminine values) in society.<sup>22</sup> Apparently, arising alongside the downfall of hegemonic ‘heroic’ masculinity is the postfeminist ‘unheroic’ man, embodied in the character, Joel in *The last of us* (Figure 1).

Joel’s initially aggressive outlook on life, although necessary to survive in a harsh world, plagues him once he meets Ellie and he questions the values to which he subscribes and which he has, thus far, privileged. At the beginning of this morally complex game, Joel—conforming to the ‘macho-template’ of video games (Kirkland 2009:166)—is dismissive of feelings and emotions, acting extremely violently in order to overcome obstacles and reach his goals. For example, in one of the early scenes after the apocalypse, Joel kills many henchmen in order to retrieve his weapons. As Chris Suellentrop (2013:[sp]) points out, at the beginning of the game killing takes place without ‘... much consideration or reflection’, the only motivation being the business transaction. Throughout his journey with Ellie to reach the Fireflies’ laboratory, Joel’s character changes as he develops a deep emotional bond with her eventually displaying characteristics such as kindness and caring (Figure 2).

20. For instance, in 1986 Samus Aran was introduced in gaming as one of the first main female playable characters in the Japanese video game *Metroid* (1986). Likewise, *Tomb raider’s* (1998-2013) Lara Croft entered the video game scene in 1998. Whilst represented as highly sexualised figures, these female characters are not portrayed as simply competent, but competent and dominant in a traditionally masculine way, as well as in terms of traditionally male activities. Jansz and Martis (2007:1) refer to the increasing appearance of female characters in a competent and dominant position in video games as the ‘Lara phenomenon’.

21. See for instance Gill’s (2014) research on the representation of the ‘unheroic masculinity’ of the ‘new lad’ in ‘guy lit’ or ‘lad lit’ which has emerged in popular fiction since the 1990s in response to the ‘new man’ of earlier representations of masculinity. For Gill (2014), these differing profiles of masculinity have taken shape in response to feminist critiques of hegemonic masculinity.

22. Evan Watts (2011:247) highlights the possibilities for alternative conceptions of dominant social structures that exist within the post-apocalyptic landscape of ruin: ‘... [o]ne of the many themes that emerge from such an analysis is the idea that the destruction of *physical* structures is paralleled by, and symbolic of, the destruction of *social* structure, thus associating ruin with liberation and freedom’.



FIGURE **Nº 1**



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Joel in *The last of us* (Naughty Dog 2013).



FIGURE **Nº 2**



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Ellie in *The last of us* (Naughty Dog 2013).

John MacInnes (1998:47) argues that conventional signifiers of masculinity have indeed shifted in a noticeable way:

... [w]hat were once claimed to be manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine vices (abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to be flexible, to communicate, to empathize, to be soft, supportive or life affirming).

Similarly, John Beynon (2002:79, 80) claims that traditional masculinity is 'out of fashion', even going so far as to argue that a reversal of female and male traits has taken place. To substantiate this claim, Beynon (2002:80) refers to Anthony Clare's explanation of how taken-for-granted masculine values (such as rationality, aggression, and competitiveness), in presumably both men and women, are

... now seen as the stigmata of deviance ... [whereas], the very traits which once marked out women as weak and inferior—emotional, spontaneous, intuitive, expressive, compassionate, empathetic—are increasingly seen as the markers of maturity and health.

In other words, the signifiers of acceptable masculinity have come to signify men's inadequacy. In addition, when used to define men, the signifiers of femininity—previously considered evidence of women's inferiority—have been transformed into markers of men's maturity, for these authors at least. However, despite this transformation of gendered signifiers in contemporary society, men continue to dominate the public sphere, especially in terms of politics and economics, even as this domination takes on new forms that are presumably more gender progressive (MacInnes 1998:48). Simply put, even though transformations in what masculinity means and what is expected from men in society can be observed, these shifts are firmly entrenched in traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity, from which the feminisation of masculinity has evolved.

According to Leathwood and Read (2009:10), the term 'feminisation' refers (with suspicion) to several 'concerns' emerging in society. Firstly, and perhaps most often, feminisation is used to describe an area, or field, where women are in the majority. In this regard, feminisation refers to the presence of women in relation to men in a particular sphere (Leathwood & Read 2009:10). The second use of the term feminisation described by Leathwood and Read (2009:10), is the indication of '... cultural change or transformation, whereby "feminine" values, concerns and practices are seen to be changing the culture of an organization, a field of practice or society as a whole'. This transformation is usually attributed to the increase in the number of women in a given field (Leathwood & Read 2009:10). Although the

video game industry is undoubtedly undergoing a 'feminisation' with regard to the number of women entering this sphere, the values on which the medium continues to be based primarily remain firmly aligned with hegemonic masculinity.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the inclusion of more women in the video game sphere, should lead to an increase in female protagonists and a more equitable and empowering representation of their characters.<sup>24</sup> However, as in other social, economic, and political domains women will likely simply be included in an inherently male system, thus leading to "business as usual".

Our use of the concept, "feminisation of masculinity" refers to the signifiers of femininity being transposed onto a male character, presumably in order to transform him into a more complex character. In *The last of us*, this feminisation is most noticeable in the character transformation that male protagonist, Joel, undergoes throughout the narrative of the game, facilitated by Ellie, the teenage girl for whom he is responsible, as well as the environment through which they travel. Joel's demeanour changes from that of a detached, unemotional, and rational person, to someone who displays compassion and what can only be described as "irrational" behaviour at the end of the game.

In the final scene of *The last of us*, Ellie lies unconscious in a Firefly laboratory, while scientists are preparing to perform (fatal) brain surgery on her in order to potentially engineer a cure for the Cordyceps fungus. Joel chooses to save Ellie from the Fireflies instead of sacrificing her to save the world, signifying the depth of his character transformation, as well as his acknowledgement that the (masculine) world as they know it might not be worth saving. In other words, Joel's initially stereotypical masculine character—logical, rational, and disciplined (as argued by Beynon 2002:80)—has transformed into a character that expressed intuition, compassion, and empathy, thus bearing the traits of a particular expression of femininity.

23. According to Miller (2012), although more women are playing games, the percentage of women in the industry (in other words, women developing games) has remained between eleven and twelve per cent.

24. According to Mark Milian's (2014:[sp]) article, *Video games can't afford to ignore women*, although leading video game developers have until recently ignored and dismissed requests from players to pay attention to female audiences, they have apparently now decided to '... show more interest in cultivating female players'. Additionally, Keza MacDonald (2014:[sp]), and many other commentators, is of the opinion that women should be included in the production and development of games on all levels.

Joel's character transformation is largely facilitated by the post-apocalyptic environment through which they travel, whose visual depiction contrasts strongly with the Quarantine Zones, which are all that remain of former "civilised" (neoliberal) American cities. The latter are depicted as grim, oppressive, and dangerous environments in which to live, heavily guarded by soldiers. Any resident suspected of being infected with Cordyceps is immediately executed (Figure 3).

The military organisation in charge of these zones, FEDRA – depicted as firmly entrenched in a stereotypical version of masculine culture, strongly promoting and valuing patriarchal masculinity – refers metaphorically to technological society. As Judy Wajcman (1996:147) argues, '[i]f there is one institution in society that underwrites



FIGURE N° 3



Boston Quarantine Zone, with FEDRA soldiers examining possibly infected civilians (Naughty Dog 2013).

the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, it is the military'. In *The last of us*, war against the infected is '... the ultimate test of manliness and is the legitimate expression of male violence' (Wajcman 1996:146). In this sense, the armed forces—represented by FEDRA—'represent and defend the masculine ethic' (Wajcman 1996:146). This becomes clear in the way that FEDRA soldiers dominate the Quarantine Zones with physical violence and intimidation toward both the residents and the infected.

In contrast to FEDRA, the Fireflies—a para-military group aggressively opposing FEDRA rule, whose main goal includes scientifically developing a cure for the Cordyceps infection—operate from outside the Quarantine Zones, with several bases located across America (*The last of us* wiki 2013:[sp]). Firmly underpinned by the (masculine) values of progress, rationality, and production (Wajcman 1996:145), the Fireflies act as 'heroic warriors' attempting to 'save' humans from the Cordyceps infection and simultaneously from FEDRA rule. As Wajcman (1996:144) points out, the concept of the 'heroic' is often constructed around combat and violence between men. In the same way, the Fireflies' approach can be considered thoroughly masculine. In other words, although their methods may appear justified, similar to



FEDRA, the nature of the Fireflies is also underpinned by (masculine) values such as domination, aggression, and extreme violence. Owing to their excessive abuse of violence in the pursuit of their goals, as well as their added concern regarding the engineering of a cure in the hope of saving humankind, the Fireflies can be considered an extreme version of masculine aggression and domination.

In its representation of the downfall of contemporary society, the pockets of surviving “civilisation” (both the Quarantine Zones, as well as those associated with the Fireflies) can potentially be understood as hyperbolic depictions of a society where masculine values such as rationality, violence, and aggression dominate almost completely. In other words, while nature—or wilderness (including the Cordyceps infection)—is physically taking back previously “civilised” and “progressive” territories by force, these Quarantine Zones represent a final, desperate attempt by the survivors to preserve a “familiar” (yet extreme) version of previous societal structures. But in the process, values that are traditionally considered progressive in a society (order, structure and a separate sense of self, for instance), dominate completely or are taken to the extreme, and values commonly associated with the feminine (such as weakness, dependence, a focus on community, and compassion), which potentially provide a balance to the masculine values, as represented in the game, are all but destroyed.

The “natural” world is depicted in stark contrast to the portrayal of technological society and functions as the space in which Joel’s character transformation takes place. In other words, his transformation must be understood in relation to the broader “infiltration” of feminine characteristics into the environment depicted in the game. In addition to this, the Cordyceps fungus can be read as a metaphor for nature’s response to its unrelenting exploitation by industrialised society, which has resulted in environmental degradation. Ecofeminists such as Eaton and Lorentzen (2003:x) find a connection between the unlimited exploitation of the environment and the long-standing privileging of masculine values such as efficiency, production, and mastery over nature, as well as the oppression of women. In this sense, the process of nature ‘re-claiming’ physical territory can be understood as an attempt to eradicate exploitative and destructive human practices by means of the feminisation of the game world.

If the ludological structure of the game is taken into account, it becomes evident that the player has limited resources to overcome obstacles, and most of the items are crafted from random, discarded objects scavenged from the ruins through which Joel and Ellie move. For instance, one of the most useful items the player needs is a health kit, which can be crafted from alcohol and rags. This creative



implementation and repurposing of waste materials contrasts sharply with the way in which industrialised society generates massive amounts of excess and waste. This can be read as another way in which the use of force and violence is somewhat tempered by such creative activities, and may indicate the game developer's critique of unbridled capitalistic domination and exploitation of nature.

Interestingly, the player is often provided with the choice to avoid confrontation and violence. Furthermore, in some instances the player cannot advance in the game by using violence, but avoids confrontation with the enemies by sneaking past them instead of killing them. This can perhaps be understood as a subversion of the usual characteristics of gameplay (in which aggression and violence are employed to overcome an obstacle or reach a specific goal). In other words, as the game progresses, aggressive behaviour is avoided resulting in the construction of 'a particularly unmasculine sense of helplessness, entrapment and vulnerability—rather than the mastery and control of more militaristic series and genres' (Kirkland 2009:172).

Even though the feminisation of masculinity can potentially emerge within a variety of narrative environments in video games – even to the extent that spaces may be created for minorities and marginalised groups in gaming culture - <sup>25</sup> a post-apocalyptic world may indeed be conducive to such a transformation.<sup>26</sup> What is even more interesting is the fact that, since the overwhelming majority of video games developers are men (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36), the relatively positive representation of feminine values such as emotion, nurturing, and irrationality, as well as the feminising of masculinity in some video games are, therefore, largely facilitated by male game developers

25. We have not been able to explore the very important issue of the under-representation of racialised identities in the gaming industry. While in video games such as the *Dragon age* series (2009-2014) and the *Mass effect* trilogy (2007-2012), a player can customise the main character in terms of both gender and race, there are still problematic aspects regarding this approach. For example, BioWare only used the male version of the main character in their *Mass effect* marketing campaign, therefore, once again representing the normative male, white version of the main character. In addition to this, the female versions are essentially only a superficial alternative of the same heavily masculinised character. In other words, the base character, whether s/he appears as black or female, is still rooted in masculine values and traits, and the player can only change the visual appearance of the character.

26. In some senses at least, the post-apocalyptic setting of *The last of us* provides a 'clean-slate' backdrop from which alternate power relations and societal structures can be explored. See for instance, Kyle Bishop (2010:11) who argues that the resurrection of the zombie genre in the twenty first century functions as a form of social commentary. See also Eaton and Lorentzen (2003:x) who maintain that unbridled globalisation – which is, for the most part, critiqued in the post-apocalyptic genre – is inextricably linked to the oppression of both nature and women. The post-apocalyptic worlds in these games can, in this way, be considered a manifestation of anxieties regarding gender roles in society, neoliberalism, and the underlying values of Western society in search of wealth and success.

## CONCLUSION

In an attempt to contribute to research in the developing field of video game discourse, this article has discussed *The last of us* as an example of a video game in which patriarchal masculinity is represented as destructive and negative, and feminine values—when ascribed to a man, that is—are depicted in a more favourable and desirable light than in earlier video games.<sup>27</sup> *The last of us* depicts the imagined dystopian result of a hyper-capitalist, hyper-masculinised society. In this video game, the player navigates the ruins of a former "civilised" society, in order to complete the goals and objectives presented by the games. Both the narrative elements as well as the ludological structure of the game contribute to a sense of

disillusionment with masculine values, resulting in a feminisation of masculinity. In other words, we have tried to indicate an attempt in the video game industry to open up new ways of representing feminine values in popular culture in a more equitable manner.<sup>28</sup>

In an attempt to move beyond binary conceptions regarding gender, a postfeminist perspective has been utilised, in order to take contradictions and underlying complexities regarding these constructions into account, and in this way, to open up alternative ways to understand gender constructions in visual culture. In other words, in order to destabilise and challenge the cultural privileging of values associated with hegemonic masculinity, it might prove useful to question the cultural and economic systems that continue to uphold and promote these values as positive and desirable.

Furthermore, the article has attempted to show that when video games are approached from a postfeminist perspective, they can be utilised as a site of resistance to hegemonic gender constructions already circulating not only in video games, but also in the broader realm of popular culture. By decentralising and problematising normative gender roles, video games can potentially provide a different, less restrictive representation of gender that might move beyond reductive dualistic categorisations.

27. Even though this article explores the relatively progressive portrayal of feminine values in a video game, it should be pointed out that *The Last of Us* cannot be considered an example of an overall trend in popular video games. For instance, video game critic Anita Sarkeesian's recent web video series, *Feminist frequency* (2013), highlights the ongoing importance of interrogating continued negative stereotypical representations of women, which are still prevalent in contemporary video games. One of the more common tropes regarding femininity that Sarkeesian discusses includes the 'damsel in distress' character, which refers to female characters that are in constant need of rescue from a male hero. In some ways, Ellie is certainly Sarkeesian's 'damsel in distress'.

28. In this article, it has not been possible to discuss other games in which the representation of masculinity has changed or is mutating. Further research into the resignification of masculinity may consider games such as *Bioshock* (2007), for instance.

On the other hand, another underlying (and more cynical) reason for the acknowledgment and recognition of feminine values in video games might be an attempt to uphold the dominance of masculinity in this arena. As Kenneth MacKinnon (2003:15) argues, '... in order for masculinity to remain hegemonic, it must admit the feminine at certain historical moments'. In this sense, although it might appear that video games can potentially be a site of subversion in terms of gender representation, in reality the foundation remains firmly masculine, with the inclusion of the feminine remaining tentative and suspect, at best. It can be argued that the general concept of equality in current western society is simply to include previously marginalised groups into a system that is inherently grounded in masculine values. Instead of potentially challenging and questioning the underlying values held and promoted by society, feminine values are often portrayed in a positive light on a superficial level in order to maintain the *status quo*, keeping the fundamental masculine values firmly in place. In other words, the default player of video games is still considered a white male, and mainstream video games continue to perpetuate conventional ideas regarding masculine values as being superior to feminine values.

The limitation of the strategy we have taken in our research is that any discussion of a single male character is necessarily reductive. Equally, for the sake of economy,

we have not been able to explore the subject positions adopted by players themselves in relation to Joel's character. For this reason, the complex ways in which video games work to construct and maintain hegemonic discursive frameworks of gender, and renegotiate them, must continually be interrogated, particularly as women are increasingly entering into the video game sphere.

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