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Aesthetics of Ambivalence and Whiteness in Crisis

How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally representation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.¹

Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images*

Introduction

Chapter 2 examines constructions of the normative white figure under duress and, particularly, an amassing crisis in relation to crumbling dominant Western narratives of progress. In the course of this chapter, I trace the emergence of an 'aesthetics of ambivalence' that has emerged as a political response to the exhausted masculine types that have populated mainstream games. The primary game in question, *The Last of Us* (2013) by Naughty Dog, portrays a melancholic vision of a post-apocalyptic United States. But in order to more fully unpack ideologies around representations of whiteness in crisis and a discernable aesthetic turn toward ruin as the backdrop for these representations, I also discuss two other iconic games: *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and *Tomb Raider* (2013), both of which feature victimized white protagonists in hostile circumstances. *The Last of Us* takes place two decades after an outbreak of an airborne fungal pandemic. As the fungus spreads in their brains and slowly takes over their bodies, the infected are rendered progressively more deformed and rabid. Scrappy factions of survivors operate in desperation, set against a horrific backdrop of civilization gone feral. In this game, the future is sublime and bleak and terrorizing, and it won't be over quickly. Spectacular inside-outside spaces within the ruins of a once-high-capitalist culture are imaged as repurposed by humans and largely reabsorbed by nature (see Figure 2.1). Much of what was once considered so precious is now useless, while the simplest scavenged tools (bricks, bottles, alcohol) can mean the difference between life and death. *The Last of Us*, as one high-quality example in a plentiful survival-horror genre, taps into the popularity of zombie and pandemic apocalypse narratives in films like *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), *Planet Terror* (Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2007), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), *Zombieland* (Ruben Fleischer, 2009), *The Book of Eli* (Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 2010), and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, 2013). Even more recent and somewhat less directly 'apocalyptic' narratives like the highly successful reboots *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Rupert Wyatt, 2011), *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (Matt Reeves, 2014) and *War for the Planet of the Apes* (Matt Reeves, 2017) create similar scenarios of whiteness in ruins. Other narratives, like that of the blockbuster spy-action movie franchise *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol* (Brad Bird, 2011), eschew the epidemic model but create the conditions for the white hero to become a victim/underdog through spoiled master plans, personal failings, faulty technologies and disavowal from the power structure.



Figure 2.1 Joel and Ellie in the remains of civilization. *The Last of Us* (2013) image provided by Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC.

Widely acclaimed as a masterpiece, *The Last of Us* strongly provokes discussion of the ethical quandaries arising around the cost of survival, such as has been explored in the popular television series *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–). The greater collective fear of contagion – of being overrun, overwhelmed, colonized – and the complex fixation on the extreme survivalist scenario all resonate in a cultural moment when there is so much global restructuring, competition and transformation underway. In keeping with the rapid pace of change, the infected have gotten faster as well.

This chapter undertakes close textual analyses of each of these games, as mass culture artefacts that are powerful representations of social groupings, in this case, an embattled so-called 'majority'. The centrepiece of this examination, *The Last of Us*, has become iconic as a beleaguered, mournful magnum opus. It reflects a cultural moment of anxiety in the United States as an embattled superpower under the dual pressures of economic globalization and environmental catastrophe. I have also chosen two other highly successful AAA games: *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and *Tomb Raider* (2013). Both games thematically resonate with the turn that *The Last of Us* epitomizes. The paradoxical *Spec Ops: The Line* has become famous (or notorious, depending upon one's position) for upending the conventional military shooter genre. The white, heteronormative male protagonist begins the game as an icon of masculine prowess, a super-soldier on a mission, who purports to be a conventional hero onto which a player may map themselves. Yet hours of gameplay purposefully test and manipulate the player's identification with this character, over time becoming unnatural and strained, and eventually utterly estranged, as the clichéd 'hero' character gradually metamorphoses into a psychopath. My second example, the cinematic survival action-adventure *Tomb Raider* (2013), reconfigures its iconic white female protagonist Lara Croft from her indomitable super-archaeologist-adventurer status into a much more vulnerable figure, surely capable but clearly imperilled. I am keen to read this narrative and its representations in an intersectional manner alongside *The Last of Us* and *The Line* for several reasons. Certainly, there are conspicuous parallels in terms of seeking to interrupt the conventional hero image, which is an ongoing theme of this book. But Lara Croft is also almost universally discussed in terms of gender, which greatly overburdens readings of the character for obvious reasons. But, the intervention of considering the revamped Croft through an analysis of whiteness opens up new possible interpretations for the *Tomb Raider* heroine, as well as for an aesthetics of ambivalence that seems to mark some of the most iconic titles in mainstream games today. And like both *Spec Ops: The Line* and *The Last of Us*, *Tomb Raider* has a narrative of loss.

disempowerment or disadvantage – of things going horribly wrong. A tension exists between the figure and a hostile, brutal or unrelenting environment. In short, this chapter scrutinizes a moment of self-consciousness in regard to the interruption of heroic protagonists, as exemplified by these three dominant games that so strongly feature beleaguered forms of whiteness.

In the following pages, I paint an image of the complex representations in *The Last of Us*, making connections to other forms of mass culture and considering its key iconographies, its makers and socio-political context. Then, I consider theoretical connections and comparisons to the other aforementioned games, in the interest of articulating how form, representation and affective qualities within each of these games engender a particularly ambivalent, embattled form of whiteness. This will necessitate theoretical examination of whiteness as a construct. I largely focus on constructions of whiteness in visual culture as theorized by film theorist Richard Dyer, alongside critical whiteness studies scholars like sociologist Ruth Frankenberg and others. Through detailed formal analysis and careful attention to these paradigmatic examples, this chapter critically deconstructs the 'normative' invisibility of whiteness and how it functions within mainstream games, particularly at a critical historical juncture in which whiteness is in crisis. This chapter asks: within the cultural context of their development and release, how do these mainstream games represent whiteness? How is whiteness seen in them? And what does this tell us about the prevailing sentiments in a fraught cultural moment in which power dynamics are shifting? This should not be confused with unilateral statements (that I would never make) regarding a group of people that one might collectively call 'white'. And this does not have to do with presumptions of what individuals within that group might be thinking. This has everything to do with *systemic* issues of representation and cultural construction – and the observation of visual politics at play – as it relates to an ideological construction of whiteness. Such seeing, as Dyer argues in the epigram, comes from representation, and this chapter concerns itself with what is seen within dominant games.

We can begin once again by underscoring the importance of thinking about games as meaning-producing practices.² Games engage in a politics of identity through their inclusions and omissions, their complex constructions and their highly manufactured totalities. It is important to consider that, when examining any game, its images are all entirely intentional – and 'images', once again, encompass visual, aural and textual elements in the broadest sense. While photography's presumptive realism has come under question in recent years due to the manipulability of the image, there is still a sense that the photographic image to some degree connects to something that existed and was captured by the camera. With digital imagery and simulations, one has no such expectation of its connectedness to any kind of realism. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain, in the shift from the photographic to the digital image, relations to the referent have shifted:

an image generated exclusively by computer graphics software can be made to appear to be a photograph of actual objects, places, or people, when in fact it is a simulation, that is, it does not represent something in the real world. There is no expectation, in digital imaging, of the camera 'having been there' to document something that really happened, which we see here and now in the image. Digital simulations of photographs imitate photographs of real phenomena using mathematical formulas translated into visual coordinates that approximate photographic conventions of space. The difference resides in the fact that the process of producing a digital image does not require that the referent (the actual object, person, or place) is present or even that the referent exists.³

So, to an even greater degree than photographic representation, the images produced in games are completely and thoroughly constructed and intentional. Even if they are highly naturalistic and display extreme photographic realism, they are not documents of something that has occurred, and was recorded. Rather, they are refined, totalizing visions that are collaboratively developed using software in order to produce a series of effects. This is not to suggest that unintended interpretations of the image are impossible; however, it is key to understand that their visual cultures are purposeful and highly calibrated. Digital media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun even goes so far as to discuss software in general as 'a functional analog to ideology', calling computers with their software and hardware 'ideology machines'. She declares: 'They fulfill almost every formal definition of ideology we have, from ideology as false consciousness (as portrayed in *The Matrix*) to Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as "a 'representation' of the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence."⁴ According to Chun, the form of software as medium engages in 'the very effort of making something intangible visible, while at the same time rendering the visible (such as the machine) invisible.'⁵ However, the software theorist simultaneously acknowledges that the analogy between ideology and software must be understood in all its complexity – the 'onion-like' nature of software, while analogous to ideology, also has connections to the critique of power that all ideology necessarily contains.⁶ 'By interrogating software and the visual knowledge it perpetuates,' she posits, 'we can move beyond the so-called crisis in indexicality toward understanding the new ways in which visual knowledge is being transformed and perpetuated, not simply displaced or rendered obsolete.'⁷

Fully comprehending this highly constructed and intentional, apparently indexical nature of games as software, while also appreciating the complexity and multi-layered dimensions of them as both ideology and ideological critique, renders the analysis of games incredibly insightful in terms of what they *seem* to make visible, and what they purport to hide. Rather than assuming the visual culture of games to be a more naïve form of image-making that lacks the presumed sophistication of filmmaking, art or theatre, I consider them as complex, fully formed visual media equally suited to nuanced ideological deconstruction. Video games convey themselves through the images resulting from the action of the software, but also, as D. Fox Harrell has similarly asserted, through the ways in which their software systems themselves contain social values. As he writes, 'All technical systems are cultural systems.'⁸ As the current investigation focuses on the visual culture of games and their ideological formulations, I will not deconstruct the specific software systems that have gone into their construction, and Harrell has already excellently done so. However, it is useful to consider the playable aspects of these representations – both their affordances and their limitations – in relation to the worlds they image for their players. Harrell's work sets forth affirmative strategies for thinking about how computational systems can better serve human needs and values. As a computer scientist, his research and in-depth consideration of the cultural phantasms that exist within computing systems is invaluable.⁹ I would assert, on the basis of Harrell's interventions, that the software systems of games already serve human needs – yet they serve some humans' needs more than others. That is to say, mainstream games as software systems tend to prop up the values of dominant culture, by creating fields of possibilities circumscribed by particular value systems and world views. Other visions become difficult to image within the scope of a game as a computational system, or are even altogether annihilated. While, like Gerald Voorhees, I agree there is always transformational potential in the 'agonistic incitement of an economy of motivations, desires, discourses and signs provided by player and game', the worlds of games and the contexts that produce them strongly impact how players receive messages from the games they play.¹⁰

Cultural Context: Whiteness in Crisis, Racial Violence and Games

When an act of violence occurs in the United States, especially when perpetuated by a young white male, it is quite commonplace that the mass media casually mention video games – even in cases where there has been no evidence that the perpetrator actually played them. As I write, the United States has suffered a blunt force national trauma in the form of a racially motivated mass killing in an historic black church. On Wednesday, 17 June 2015, just after 8:00pm, a young man described as Caucasian, clean-cut and in his early twenties entered the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston (also known as 'Mother Emanuel'), South Carolina, one of the most historically significant churches in the nation and celebrated as a core site for the revolutionary uplift of African Americans since its founding in 1816. After sitting with a prayer group that included Senator Clementa Pinckney (also a pastor) for almost an hour in the church basement, the young man pulled a gun from his waist pack and killed nine African-Americans, including the senator. Three others survived. A suspect, Dylann Roof, was identified and apprehended within 48 hours and, almost immediately, information surfaced in the form of testimonials from acquaintances, as well as from survivors, that he had verbalized his desire to start a race war.¹¹ Photographs gleaned from the Facebook page of the accused contained Roof wearing a jacket with flag patches of the former white-controlled Rhodesia, current-day Zimbabwe, as well as the apartheid-era South African flag. Then, a website called 'The Last Rhodesian', purchased under Roof's name, was discovered, containing 60 photos of the young man waving the Confederate flag, which is associated with the US antebellum period and also the secessionist and white power movements in the South. In an essay in *The Atlantic*, one journalist summarized the flag as 'created by an army raised to kill in defense of slavery, revived by a movement that killed in defense of segregation, and now flaunted by a man who killed nine innocents in defense of white supremacy'.¹² There were images of Roof visiting plantations, confederate museums and cemeteries, of displaying his handgun, and defacing the national flag in various manners including burning, spitting and trampling. An extended manifesto declared a belief in white supremacy, a tirade of bigotry outlining how various races eroded the dominance of whiteness around the world, his disdain for race mixing and his coming into a racial awareness that his 'superior' white race is losing ground. The manifesto ended by explicating his target, Mother Emanuel, as follows:

I have no choice. I am not in the position to, alone, go into the ghetto and fight. I chose Charleston because it is most historic city in my state, and at one time had the highest ratio of blacks to Whites in the country. We have no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet. Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.¹³

By Sunday, 21 June, a news story broke indicating that several prominent politicians including Republican presidential nominees had

accepted campaign donations from Earl P. Holt III, leader of a right-wing Council of Conservative Citizens and known white supremacist, whose website was cited by Roof as an inspiration for his radicalization.¹⁴

Video games repeatedly surfaced as a cause, among the many commentators in the first few days of the massacre's news reportage, even though no official connection has been drawn between the accused and games. Of particular note was a mention by Martin Luther King III, son of the slain civil rights leader, who commented on the Charleston church massacre on CNN:

When you have kids playing video games all day long, when you have some of our cartoons [having] violence in them. When you have movies that are violent, it is no wonder that our society is violent. We've created and accepted a culture of violence. We must find a way to create a culture of nonviolence.¹⁵

It bears mentioning that this racially motivated act of killing, which was immediately identified as a hate crime – an act with many precedents in terms of a long and determinedly pre-video game history of racial violence against African-Americans in the United States – was unquestioningly and unequivocally linked to games, and by such a notable public figure.¹⁶ This is problematic on many levels, not the least of which is that it suggests a dimension of influence, moral corruption and brainwashing endemic to the medium that has not been conclusively verified by study. But the grim coincidence of this rhetoric's resurgence is nonetheless relevant within the context of a white-supremacist act of violence, when considering constructions of whiteness in this embattled medium.

Unlike King, I do not wish to suggest a literal connection between video games and enacted violence. Nor do I believe that the three games in question have a white supremacist agenda. However, I do want to underscore the relationship between the overblown language of Roof's 'Last Rhodesian' manifesto that contained multiple references to the loss of white power in the supremacist sense, and a more general perception of a decline in the dominance of whiteness around the world.

This violence occurred within a long history of a 'disturbing epidemic of angry white boys and young men participating in the burning of black churches and the murder of their schoolmates around the country' outlined by critical whiteness studies scholar Ruth Frankenberg.¹⁷ Identifying these acts as an extension of fears, Frankenberg identifies several false presumptions used to argue that white dominance in US society has become destabilized: civil rights gains, a government that fails to see whites as the new 'oppressed' group, and 'overcorrection' resulting in reverse-racism and unfair gains by non-whites. Indeed, a strong ideological bent in US visual culture configures whiteness – and more specifically the white male protagonist – as *victim* rather than hero.¹⁸ Richard Dyer colourfully sends up these overblown white fears as they manifest themselves in visual culture: 'in the future, what with the teeming hordes and the remorseless march of affirmative action, we [whites] shall be the niggers.'¹⁹ The games in question tap into the kinds of deep-seated anxieties that scholars like Dyer and Frankenberg outline as an extension of a larger cultural malaise. That is to say, in the following discussion of whiteness in relation to the games in question, it should be understood that I see whiteness not as 'invisible' or 'empty' or normative, but as occurring within the context of a dominant culture that is in fact intensely aware of whiteness, and an entertainment industry that is likewise tuned in to what will resonate with the dominant market.

The Last of Us

The Last of Us presents a scenario steeped in loss, melancholia and an aesthetics of ambivalence. It tells the story of Joel, a white working man and single parent, and his pale, slight, blonde daughter, Sarah, with whom he has a close relationship (see Figure 2.2). It is clear that Joel has long strenuous workdays and is under duress. He is not well-off and the game clearly represents him as doing his best despite the odds. Initially playing in the third person as 'Sarah', players wander the domestic space and learn from contextual clues and secondary characters that their Austin neighbourhood is in turmoil, and in fact the problem goes far beyond their location, having spread to both national coasts. An aggressive infection is spreading that renders those who contract it violent. In the aftermath of a car accident that occurs in the chaos, the player character role switches to Joel, as he tries, unsuccessfully, to protect his injured daughter from the pandemonium ensuing. A soldier who has been ordered to execute the potentially infected mistakenly shoots Sarah, and she dies in Joel's arms. Even though all this happens in the dark of night, her skin and hair give off a soft glow.



Figure 2.2 Joel and his daughter, Sarah, in better times. *The Last of Us* (2013) ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC. Screen shot by author.

In the aftermath of these events, the player is reintroduced to the primary playable character, Joel, some 20 years later. He is now a smuggler, and a much more dishevelled, worn-down figure to whom far too much has happened. We find him in a post-apocalyptic Boston that is a crumbling police state. The 'new normal' is a daily existence of scavenging and desperation, barter and bribery, limited resources and survivalism. Alongside a female companion named Tess, who initially acts as a guide for the player through the perils of the militarized zones and quarantined areas, Joel grimly traverses the environs. As an action adventure survival-horror game, stealth, puzzle-solving and effective utilization of the environment are key, but the game also uses a crafting system that allows for the development of weapons from found objects, in addition to guns and other arms. Killing is a core mechanic, although it is framed mostly as grim and necessary for survival, rather than spectacularized and heroic. While it is immediately clear that Joel is resourceful and jaded enough to address his circumstances pragmatically, he (as the playable character) is clearly traumatized and endangered. His look and manner are consistent with mainstream representations of a 'heartland' American male: presumed straight, Caucasian, shortish dark hair and beard, assertive carriage, able-bodied and wearing a Western shirt and jeans. He doesn't talk much, and is acerbic when he does.

Soon after a series of scenarios that function largely as in-game tutorials on controller usage, and to relay content that contextualizes the aftermath Joel lives in, we meet Ellie (see Figure 2.3). She is 14 years old, and a precocious, dark-haired, wide-eyed vulnerable young white teenager who predictably invokes the memory of his lost daughter, Sarah. Ellie externalizes Joel's seriously compromised sense of hope. Protected by a revolutionary militia called 'The Fireflies', who mysteriously deem her important, Ellie becomes the precious cargo Joel and his partner Tess are enlisted to smuggle safely away from the Boston quarantine zone. Tess is lost soon after, and the remaining gameplay mostly consists of Joel's odyssey to ferry the young Ellie to safety while trying to fully understand her significance to the militia. Along the way, Joel and Ellie grow close as they face tremendous peril, hardship, loss, failures and ethical quandaries.



Figure 2.3 Ellie. *The Last of Us* (2013) ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC. Screen shot by author.

In addition to the post-apocalyptic United States backdrop, to which I will return, key to this narrative are the 'infected' themselves. These are humans whose brains and eventually whole bodies have been overtaken by a horrific mutation of the Cordyceps fungus, which slowly transforms them into something uncontrollable, violent and monstrous. Unlike the typical zombie narrative, there are four distinct phases of the infection and therefore a variety of types of infected: Runners, Stalkers, Clickers and Bloaters. Runners still retain some human characteristics and seem as though they are simply rabid and unable to control their impulses toward aggression. However, they are relatively easy to fend off except if they are able to overwhelm a player in very large groups. Stalkers demonstrate a more profound fungal infection and are known for hiding and sneak attacks; they are quick and deadly. Clickers are stronger than the previous two forms. As they are more thoroughly infected, they take on a more mutated, horrific form, and possess the power of echolocation. Their nickname derives from the sounds they make in order to orient themselves in space. Clickers are difficult to kill, and even blasting off huge chunks of the fungus may not impair them. The fourth category of infected humans, Bloaters, are the most fearsome due to their imposing stature and resilience when under attack (see [Figure 2.4](#)). Bulbous fungal growths cover their entire bodies like a kind of armour plating. Little of their human form remains. To be caught in their grip means instant death. Bloaters function completely on aggressive instinct, and are able to lob infectious clumps at the player-character. Even after a Bloater dies, the fungus continues to grow and spores are released from their decomposing bodies. I cannot underscore enough the psychological revulsion these creatures engender: they at once conjure uncontrollability and phobias around communicable disease. They stimulate dread, disgust, panic and horror such that it was common to read that the intensity of the overall affective experience made players take frequent breaks to collect themselves.²⁰ Unlike the survival-horror genre conventions, the violence enacted within the game was observed as 'heavy, consequential and necessary'.²¹ In my own playthrough of the game, it seemed that the affective dimensions of the game were established not merely through horror, but the interplay between horror and the melancholic. More specifically, these affective dimensions emanated from the ideological construction of whiteness as ineffectual, as characters stumble about in the ruins of a patriarchal order that is defunct and deathly. Faced with overwhelming odds, as well as the imminent threat of both the infected and the human (see [Figure 2.5](#)), Joel is forced to repeatedly place his own body between this overwhelming terror and the innocent Ellie, and he does so grudgingly. It is the binary opposition between whiteness and radical otherness – and particularly the repeated

trauma narrative of declining white masculinity – that comes to the fore and reconfigures Joel as victim.²²



Figure 2.4 Joel aims at a Bloater. *The Last of Us* (2013) image provided by Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC.



Figure 2.5 Joel fights a cannibal. *The Last of Us* (2013) image provided by Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC.

The critical response to the game was overwhelmingly positive. *The Last of Us* received a Metacritic score of 95 out of 100 for both its PlayStation 3 and 'remastered' PlayStation 4 iterations. It was considered landmark for its effective AI, photorealism and character development. Many lauded it as the last great game of its console generation. *The Last of Us* was proclaimed by many notable game review sites to be a perfect game, and along with its remaster, a 'masterpiece' of its generation.²³ A melancholic and poignant score by Academy Award-winning composer Gustavo Santaolalla, combined with the strong storyline and unrelenting scenarios, make for a great deal of pathos and affective engagement during play. Many critics described the affectively taxing nature of the game, describing it as 'both emotionally exciting and physically exhausting'.²⁴ While there were some complaints that the game ultimately failed to outstrip the male-oriented narrative, many others hailed the game for its complex representation of several female characters, including Ellie.²⁵ The scholarly response focused thus far more on the construction of the relations between the natural world and human beings in the game, as well as ethical decisions that the game refuses to let players skirt – though it engenders internal self-reflection through the difficulties encountered.²⁶

Critical Whiteness Studies and Whiteness After 9/11

My use of the term 'whiteness' is not one of simple classification of skin colour, but a term that has come to define a much more phantasmagoric position that takes into account ideological dimensions of meaning ascribed to this complex construction. Whiteness studies, or 'critical whiteness studies', arose from post-colonial and post-modern theory made popular in the 1970s and 1980s, with a strong surge in the US in the 1990s. As Tyler Stallings summarized this moment, 'vocabularies and strategies had developed based on the notion that forcing the dominant culture to recognize itself – to name itself, when for so long it had claimed to have no name – was the first step toward dismantling it.'²⁷ Ruth Frankenberg, in her *White Women, Race Matters*, outlines three key facets of whiteness: 'First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a "standpoint," a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at a society. Third, "whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.'²⁸ She goes on to discuss the ways in which naming whiteness displaces its 'structured invisibility', reconnecting it to

complex histories of colonialism, imperialism and assimilation; it productively racializes whiteness; and it opens up possibilities for antiracist whiteness.²⁹ There are many and disparate approaches to critical whiteness studies, most of which are associated with Frankenberg's delineations, but which also study other dimensions of the subject such as white privilege,³⁰ the stratification of various groups according to race and its effects, ontological questions of whiteness, and the connections between race and power.³¹ Some see the study of whiteness and white privilege as a topic that has become dated in a purportedly 'post-racial' Obama era. Denaturalizing the normative position of whiteness is extremely useful for unpacking dominant representations in games.³² While there are numerous intellectual resources in many established disciplines that engage with whiteness, I focus primarily on interventions in visual culture, as well as a uniquely post-9/11, and subsequent post-Obama moment of anxiety in which the stability of white heteronormative patriarchy is threatened.³³

Whiteness just isn't what it used to be in America. The white majority has waned in the United States and, along with it, value systems have shifted. This has been taken up in the popular media, as well. For example, Hua Hsu in his article 'The End of White America?' reports:

According to an August 2008 report by the U.S. Census Bureau, those groups currently categorized as racial minorities – blacks and Hispanics, East Asians and South Asians – will account for a majority of the U.S. population by the year 2042. Among Americans under the age of 18, this shift is projected to take place in 2023, which means that every child born in the United States from here on out will belong to the first post-white generation.³⁴

The perception that something has changed in terms of the eroding of white dominance has become a site of intense racial anxiety.

The World Trade Center bombings in New York on 11 September 2001, referred to as '9/11', complicated this sense of white racial anxiety further by traumatizing the public imaginary of white America through, according to Thomas Ross, the ideological configuration of the victims of 9/11 as white fire fighters and white Wall Street business people caught in the towers.³⁵ Of course, the reality was much more diverse – especially given the international melting pot of New York. Nevertheless, there emerged a strong binary opposition between white 'heartland' (i.e., straight and Christian) authentic American families and Arab-looking (i.e., Muslim) men, whose resemblance to the hijackers of the doomed planes instilled a new fear into the hearts of white America. The mass media incessantly covered the losses of families that conformed to the flag-flying, white picket-fenced, white ideal that came to stand in for all victims of the tragedy. Images of the Twin Towers collapsing were looped on the news, while pre-existing images of the towers were scrubbed from popular culture so as to avoid distressing Americans while the nation healed. If there was any doubt about the global attack on an American 'way of life', this event was politically managed to effect an absolute nationalist, jingoistic sentiment that has religious, cultural and racial overtones.³⁶

In summarizing the psychic damage wrought by 9/11, Ross suggests:

The White man at the dawn of the twenty-first century faces all the commonly shared perils of his fellow citizens, the lingering horror of 9/11, the uncertain contours of the War on Terror, but also and uniquely, he faces the knowledge that an America that he has always thought of as essentially his seems to be slipping away in an increasingly multi-racial America.³⁷

This perspective is similarly supported and enhanced by Frankenberg, who in the same year wrote 'Cracks in the Façade: Whiteness and the Construction of 9/11', which connects the nomenclature around this event with ideological connections to whiteness and 'narratives of innocence, goodness, Godliness and strength'.³⁸ Ultimately calling attention to how 'alongside national self-importance, a sense of entitlement and the actuality of US military and economic might, is a brittle and fragile sense of nationhood which easily senses danger everywhere,' Frankenberg entreats readers to honour the dead by not imbricating them in false narratives of whiteness and Americanness.³⁹ Hsu similarly describes demographic shifts in the nation and the subsequent fear of what Pat Buchanan has called 'Third World America'.⁴⁰ Calling attention to an increased expectation of diversity in entertainment, advertising and the presence of high-profile success stories such as Will Smith's Hollywood success as an A-list leading man, Tiger Woods' dominance in golf, Sean Combs' entrepreneurial empire in the music industry and the general global impact of hip-hop, the author points to the profound sense held by some white Americans that they are 'losing control' of the institutions that were once theirs.

Notable, as well, are the ways in which these kinds of conversations repeat themselves in times of duress. For example, the fear of a 'Third World America' echo debates that took place in California around Proposition 209 in 1996, which argued for the elimination of affirmative action programs in state institutions.⁴¹ Over the course of the debates that took place around this proposition, whiteness became constructed as a form of victimhood that, according to some whiteness scholars, 'was repeatedly used as a threat in this

campaign'.⁴² In their introduction to their anthology on whiteness, editors Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Irene J. Nexica, Eric Klinenberg and Matt Wray described the political manipulation as follows:

The image of 'angry white men'—the men supposedly left behind as women and people of color advanced—was called upon in many debates over affirmative action and made occasional appearances in campaign advertisements and journalistic stories. This figure was both a sign of the putative loser of affirmative action programs and an implicit suggestion that white men around the state were seething with outrage, perhaps even preparing to use violence to defend their interests. Identifying men who were angry and increasingly unhappy, the term signified and promoted a white backlash against civil rights gains of the 1960s. It served as an effective means of configuring people of color (and, to a lesser extent, white women) as an oppressive group and angry white men as a group who could, would, and should revolt.⁴³

This is complicated by the fact that whiteness, in an American context, has shifting associations that fluctuate between: a racial categorization, an ideology of power relations, a Western term of normativity, an 'empty' signifier for lack of authenticity or ethnicity, a marker of violence and terror for some, and an extension of an institutionalized and pernicious form of categorization installed during European colonial and imperialist expansion.⁴⁴ This is shored up through visual culture, of which games are now a part, and it is through analysis of these forms of dominant culture that insight can be gained.

Insofar as visual culture is concerned, Richard Dyer's *White* is most urgent for this discussion, though the author never specifically addresses video games. Surveying a broad array of Western image-making practices such as photography, cinema and print media, Dyer presents a clear-eyed assessment of images that purport to present 'nonparticular' (i.e., white) identities by underscoring their particularities and addressing the underlying presumptions that accompany their imaging.⁴⁵ This text is key for my own analysis of the three games in question, although, given their playable dimensions, I expand upon Dyer's innovations in constructive ways for the medium.

Dyer unpacks the normative and 'invisible' nature of whiteness in both representation and the ways in which the visual is spoken of. While the film scholar clearly identifies that 'the privilege of being white in white culture is not to be subjected to stereotyping in relation to one's whiteness,' he also points out the contradiction that this perceived sense of being the normative, betrays a persistent and underlying fixation with whiteness.⁴⁶ Dyer writes on the representation of whiteness and heteronormativity:

Women, ethnic minorities, gay people and so on are not the only ones to be social groupings; everyone belongs to social groupings; indeed, we all belong in many groupings, often antagonistic to one another of at the least implying very different accesses to power. The groupings that have tended not to get addresses in 'images of' work, however, are those with the most access to power: men, whites, heterosexuals, the able-bodied [...] This must not imply, however, an equivalence between such images and those of women and other oppressed groupings. The project of making normality strange and thus ultimately decentering it must not seem to say that this has already taken place, that now masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are just images of identity alongside all others [...] As in all issues of representation, we must not leave the matter of power out of account any more than the matter of representation itself.⁴⁷

The non-particular status of white identity as normal or universal identity is often perceived of as unthinking or oblivious in its usage. However, importantly, in his book-length examination of whiteness, Dyer does not let those engaged in so-called 'normative' representation off the hook. Rather than excusing them on the basis of ignorance, he points instead to the self-consciousness of these representations:

most of the time white people speak about nothing but white people, it's just that we couch it in terms of 'people' in general. Research—into books, museums, the press, advertising, films, television, software—repeatedly shows that in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard.⁴⁸

He discusses whiteness in terms of its tremendous instability, the fluidity with which certain ethnic groups like Jews and the Irish may have held different positions in terms of the colour hierarchy, as a means to police the privileges whiteness affords.⁴⁹ Pulling away from a discussion of whiteness as 'white ethnicity', and certainly not white nationalism, he instead deconstructs whiteness itself and conceives of how it can be possible to go about 'making whiteness strange'.⁵⁰ Covering a history of the term—in accordance with several cited venerated scholars including Winthrop Jordan and Martin Bernal—Dyer finds the modern origination of the term 'white'

to be connected to the American colonies, and deeply imbricated in the Christian tradition.⁵¹ It is all innocence, purity, cleanliness, beauty and ultimately a form of absence. Of course, as he further explains, these are not without their underside: 'the lure of the ideal is also, often imperceptibly, haunted by misgiving, even anxiety. Not only is whiteness as absence impossible, it is not wholly desirable. To relinquish dirt and stains, corporeality and thingness, is also to relinquish both the pleasures of the flesh and the reproduction upon which whiteness as radical power depends.'⁵² Interestingly enough, the logical outcome of the ideal of whiteness is ultimately unattainable and self-annihilating.

The Last of Us and Imperiled Whiteness

The impossible, imperilled position of whiteness is embodied in Joel, the bedraggled protagonist and primary playable character of *The Last of Us*. He is self-consciously normal and 'everyman' in his manifestation, possessing neither superhuman powers nor the skills of a supersoldier. He is vulnerable, emotionally shut-down and compromised, definitively an anti-hero. At some point in the narrative, his young partner, Ellie, takes on the protector/provider role after he is seriously injured. Several extended analyses of this game utilize a feminist approach that variously interprets the game as either propping up gender norms or displaying a sense of mourning toward the loss of heteronormative unity.⁵³ Commentators observed that this game presented a paradigmatic example of the 'dadification' of video games, or in other words an emerging thematic trend toward paternal relations between a primary male character and a younger female character who needs protection.⁵⁴ Joel is in many ways a cypher for the so-called American average hardworking man, come to the end of his rope and emptied out of his inherent value in a society that has changed around him. Dyer's examination of this male everyman type is best exemplified in his analysis of the 1993 crime drama directed by Joel Schumacher, *Falling Down*, which describes the events in the day of an 'ordinary' middle-class man (to be read as white man) who finds himself at war with the 'everyday world' (to be read as the increasingly diverse world) and descends in to a nihilistic meltdown after losing his job, his family and his sense of purpose.⁵⁵ In the case of this film, it is exactly the main character's ordinariness through which the anxieties around the endangered nature of the white man comes into focus: '*Falling Down*'s success may derive from its expression of the state of play in the contemporary construction of whiteness, between a renewedly respectable supremacism, the old everything and nothing-in-particular hegemony and the fear of an annihilation that will be the realisation of our [whites'] emptiness.'⁵⁶ Importantly, the *Falling Down* model of white masculinity ideologically melds ordinariness and a constructed alterity, something which *The Last of Us* repeats to excellent effect. Dyer ultimately summarizes the film as 'an allegory of the death of the white man, or at any rate, the white man as endangered species'.⁵⁷ Teetering at the mouth of this gaping emptiness, Joel of *The Last of Us* demonstrates a similar disorientation, but it comes in the form of a deathward-looking melancholia that is staved off by the purpose of protecting Ellie against a hostile environment.

There are many meaningful essays on the connection between photographic/filmic technologies as media of 'light', the visual culture of the luminous white woman, and the white man's muscles as depicted in cinema. However, for the sake of this analysis, the connection Dyer draws between whiteness and melancholia or death at the end of empire interests me most. Deconstructing the ideological roles of white women and white men in the imaging of European imperialism, he asserts that man embodies colonial expansion within many of these narratives. Likewise, white women specifically embody the fall of empire by complicating the scenario with sexuality and heterosexual duty that interrupts the fundamentally masculine and homosocial relations taking place. White women constitute a sexual drain on the male imperializing spirit, and possess the potential to betray white men through their relations with non-white men. And they demonstrate a conscience around empire that generally weakens the will.⁵⁸ In his enumeration of these tropes in relation to his specific televisual object of study (the 1984 British TV series *The Jewel in the Crown*), Dyer uses descriptors like 'ineffectiveness', 'lethargy', 'desolation' and 'non-doing' to capture the affective qualities of whiteness—specifically white female positionality—at the end of empire.

In the case of *The Last of Us*, this is exemplified in the glowing white, blonde Sarah (daughter of Joel), whose life is lost in the game's inciting incident. The ineffectual role Joel played in protecting his child is presumably the origin of his bitterness, and this psychology becomes transferred onto Ellie, a surrogate young white girl. Although Ellie has more agency, Joel repeatedly refuses to permit her a weapon, and persistently adopts a protectorate role. In one scene, for example, Joel comes across a bow and Ellie asks to use it, proclaiming, 'I'm a pretty good shot with that thing.' Joel responds, 'How 'bout we just leave this kind of stuff to me.' Ellie protests: 'Well, we could both be armed. Cover each other.' Joel admonishes her: 'I don't think so.' Given that it would be fairly difficult to shoot oneself using a bow and arrow, it is more likely that Joel wants to spare Ellie the traumatizing experience of killing. The various fatherly shielding gestures enacted during gameplay emphasize this (see Figure 2.6). For example, when crouched

together in a cover position, Ellie often nestles under Joel's arm. Similarly, while standing, he protectively places an arm across her body like a barrier against harm. She is also represented as physically diminutive next to his strong stature. She represents purity, cleanliness of spirit, a normative sense of beauty. Joel's reticence for Ellie to have the agency to kill (by possessing a weapon) throughout the narrative strongly signals his desire to preserve that innocence. Eventually this dynamic shifts, but it comes late in the game and only when it is clear that Joel cannot complete objectives singlehandedly.



Figure 2.6 Joel protects Ellie. *The Last of Us* (2013) image provided by Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC.

Describing the specific role of white women in the colonialist fiction, Dyer asserts that they:

voice a liberal critique of empire and are in part to blame for its decline. Because of their social marginality and because, when they do do anything, they do harm, the only honorable position for them, the only really white position, is that of doing nothing. Because they are creatures of conscience this is a source of agony. Yet it is an exquisite agony [...] Women take the blame, and provide the spectacle of moral suffering, for the loss of empire. For this, they are rewarded with a possibility that already matches their condition of narrative existence: nothing.⁵⁹

In an uncanny reflection of this very conundrum, Ellie's character, who is born into the post-pandemic space, moves about within the flickering embers of Western culture as an embodiment of innocence – that is, in the absence of her actual usefulness as an agent of society's redemption and cure, she is instead ideologically over-determined as an externalization of conscience, as Joel's last grasp of his own humanity, and as a youthful figure who symbolizes the very possibility of a future. For much of the game, he is configured as protector, and she occupies the role of a resourceful kid who needs defending. Her expressions of wonder the first time that she walks in the woods, or sees an old record shop, point to a sense of discovery and a freshness in her perspective that Joel lacks. Yet, increasingly she constitutes a liability for Joel, in that she causes him to deviate from a self-serving routine that has kept him alive. Gameplay reveals that her role is ultimately to do nothing. And of course, true to Dyer's characterization, she ultimately saves nothing. In this case, Joel shares the blame for the downfall of culture through his refusal to allow Ellie's brain matter to be harvested in the pursuit of a cure. While she is unveiled as a kind of sacrificial lamb, this actual role goes unfulfilled, due in no small part to Joel's

unwillingness to let go of her. There is an argument to be made, as well, for the connectedness between the imaging of the ruins of empire and the female figure. According to Dyer, the female figure often operates as the embodiment of a critique, while simultaneously being configured as the cause of the downfall itself. Joel is, after all, imperilled by his growing attachment to a girl who holds the keys to humanity's survival – and who will force him to face insurmountable odds.

This is connected, as well, to the notion of a crumbling phallogocentric order that is embodied in the ruins within which the primary player characters move. Spaces of play, as simulated civilizations, become symbolic extensions of the patriarchal law; only, in this case, that civilization is completely broken. And, as a by-product of the system's having become compromised, other orders become possible. Even the mundane act of imagining other possible uses of the objects strewn about in the destroyed landscape invites new ways of thinking about what the space should be. Describing architectural structures and urban planning as symbolic 'monuments of a masculine dominated society' Evan Watts argues that their ruin is a 'space that offers freedom from the same gender-oppressive institutions that once permeated them, and thus sites of empowerment'.⁶⁰ Watts analyses this through several games, most notably the remains of the underwater city of Rapture in *BioShock* (2007), arguing that in a larger sense, even though the new social order arising from the game is 'horrific' and dystopian, it at least reveals the heteronormative order to be socially constructed and therefore malleable. He identifies the relationship between ruined physical structures and social structures that exist in various media, and in games as well, the frustrated "'masculine' satisfaction accompanying gameplay mechanics of dominating one's environment using violence and aggression".⁶¹

This holds true for *The Last of Us* as well. In the first case, the violence is almost always desperate and off-balance. Beyond scripting and the story's arc, this is also deeply embedded in the game mechanics. With the jerry-rigged weapons and need to constantly scavenge around for anything that will help, one does not feel the power of fetishized weaponry, technological dominance or masterful kills. As a construction, Joel configures whiteness as fundamentally desperate and in crisis. As one critic observed: 'Because of the do-it-yourself crafting system, Joel never felt too strong or overpowered. I had just enough supplies to make what I needed in almost any given situation [...] but the nerves start kicking in when you know your supplies are running out.'⁶² The scrounging, in other words, is neither glamorous nor glorious. Protracted scenarios of scavenging for anything at all that will aid the characters in their survival, heightens the sense of desperation fundamental to the experience of gameplay.

Scavenging in the game is key to a critique of failed capitalism, which is also an extension of the critique of a white heteropatriarchal order that is now in ruins. One of the key characteristics of hypercapitalism is the splitting of objects from their literal use-value. Advanced capitalism invests objects with meaning that may be thoroughly detached from their actual usefulness. The survivalist scenario presented in *The Last of Us* reinvests objects with their practical function, against a backdrop where the ruins of hypercapitalism possess little value except as they may be repurposed. In the second case, as I will show, the militarized male supersoldier trope is frustrated. Rather than enhancing normal human capabilities, in *The Last of Us* one always feels the limitations of too little ammunition, not enough places to hide, the fallibility of the body, the necessity of collaborative effort and the vulnerability of everyone involved.

One possible reading of the *Last of Us*, as an extension of the apocalyptic narrative of contagion or zombies, is that the foe (virus/undead attacker) represents the externalization of an inner threat by making it into a targeted enemy that can be identified, isolated and destroyed. For example, in speaking about the role of the infected in another massive franchise, *Resident Evil*, media and culture studies scholar Derek Burrill writes:

In *Resident Evil*, the true antagonist is the virus. The virus is an oft-used nemesis in videogames from similar genres (such as *Parasite Eve* or *Syphon Filter*), as the virus serves as an internal threat, playing on general cultural fears of HIV, Ebola, and other physical dangers, while it also manifests itself as an external threat in the form of some infected physical presence. This enables the player to overcome representations of internalized struggle and weakness through virtualized, external physical destruction and violence.⁶³

This suggestion of the transfer of an internal or nebulous fear into an object that can be isolated, controlled or ultimately killed is made within a larger discussion of the performance of masculinity. However what is enacted again and again in *The Last of Us* – as a kind of technology that is engaged with – is a traumatized, frustrated white masculinity. Keith Stuart of the *Guardian* made several insightful observations about the genre, most notably that a heroic sense of masculinity is off-balance in these games:

there's no coincidence in the sudden onslaught of dystopian fiction, which has affected movies and literature as well as games. We've seen these spikes before and they usually reflect and explore wider sociopolitical fears. The rush of '50s sci-fi flicks about

mutated insects and invading aliens came out of post-war fears about the atom bomb and communist revolution; and the slasher films of the seventies processed the global economic downturn, the collapse of the patriarchal nuclear family and the rise of feminism's second wave. Our current obsession with zombies and failed utopias is arguably driven by the gristly meat of 24-hour news coverage: fears of pan-global diseases like avian flu, the over-population of the Earth, the financial collapse of 2008 and mass uprisings like the Arab Spring. Our sense of certainty has been decimated over the last five years – the world is once again a weird, unpredictable and violent place. Video games are reflecting this. But they are reflecting it through a very particular prism.⁶⁴

Attenuating the analysis to consider how this is manifested in games about the zombie-apocalypse, Stuart picks up the thread of the dystopian representation as it is played out in a flurry of high-profile games like *Bioshock Infinite*, *The Walking Dead*, *State of Decay* and *The Last of Us*. While the scenarios themselves might have continuity with the history of these types of narratives, the protagonists are compromised, flawed and decidedly unheroic:

In the past, these characters tended to be assured action heroes; men fighting for a just cause against irredeemably evil enemies. But in current titles that is all getting muddled. Lee [*The Walking Dead*], Booker [*Bioshock Infinite*] and Joel [*The Last of Us*] are damaged men, victims of the violence they have perpetrated on others. Lee has killed his wife's lover and ruined his own life in the process; Booker has been destroyed by his involvement in murderous military campaigns, Joel has had to become a sociopath to survive 20 years in a devastated America. These guys aren't heroes like Master Chief or Marcus Fenix; they're scarred, vulnerable fuck-ups, barely functioning as reasoning adults anymore.⁶⁵

One scholar went even further, describing the nature of the aforementioned representations as tantamount to visualizing the end of heteronormativity. Gerald Voorhees writes of the *The Last of Us*:

trauma and loss are the most frequently recurring ideas. Death colors the tenor of the game and defines the most poignant moments of the narrative: Sarah bleeding out in Joel's arms, Tess in a pool of blood on the capitol floor, Bill's lover hanging from a ceiling fan, Sam and the two bullets from Henry's gun, Joel's incapacitation at the university campus, David stealing the last shreds of Ellie's faith in humanity, and of course, the world that died during the open credits and the dream of resurrecting that world that died with Marlene's final plea to Joel.

But it's the death of heteronormativity, heroic masculinity in Joel's case and heterosexism in Ellie's, that some players and commentators can't seem to get over.⁶⁶

The latter part of this observation relates to additional downloadable content, called *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, released in 2014. It contains additional narrative around Ellie, and depicts a same-sex kiss between she and another young female survivor, Riley. Many hailed this moment as a "breakthrough" for its deviation from heteronormativity that is especially pronounced in game representation.⁶⁷

It is true that trauma and loss are foregrounded in the game, as Voorhees describes. However, what is also at work is Dyer's theory of 'white death': that is to say, that whiteness has associations with 'deathliness'⁶⁸ and that whiteness is ultimately configured as being dead and bringing death, something that the film theorist goes on to explicate through his interpretation of the zombie film.⁶⁹ There is a palpable sense in which the configuration of whiteness as purity, otherworldliness, a certain rigidity of body and pallor begins – for Dyer – to approach the horizon of death as the absolute expression of whiteness. Through his interpretation of 'startling images of white people as the dead devouring the dead' it becomes clear that, on the ideological level, whiteness as death results in a kind of inevitable, almost hysterical catharsis linked to finally capitulating to the horrors of its own making – something that Dyer identifies as the apotheosis of whiteness itself: 'to be destroyed by your own kind'.⁷⁰ While misery is at the forefront, more central is the notion of whiteness as endangered and fundamentally unsustainable, albeit through its own complex machinations.

In the game, this is relayed in all the ways that Voorhees has described. But, it is also self-contained in the very character of Ellie, the white female, who is at once the embodiment of innocence to be protected, the bearer of the moral suffering for the way things have become and the unwitting cause of the decline of (American) empire. This is illustrated through the final catharsis of the game in which Joel learns of Ellie's true importance from the Fireflies leader, Marlene. Ellie's purpose, as someone immune to the fungus, is to submit to an invasive brain matter-harvesting that would provide key samples necessary to developing a vaccine. Her function, in other words, is to die. This is relayed in a cut-scene in which Marlene (who, according to the narrative, values Ellie) attempts to convince Joel of her moral position. However, after all that he and Ellie have been through, Joel is strongly bonded to the girl; so he opts to save her.

What follows is extensive combat in which an injured Joel takes on the Fireflies, in a maze-like defunct medical facility, while locating a sedated Ellie and snatching her from the operating table before it is too late. In an upending of all that Joel and Ellie strived for throughout their travails, our anti-hero must kill everyone who knows of Ellie in order to liberate her from the burden of her responsibility to humanity. In terms of actual playability, the player has no choice but to pursue this killing if they wish to continue playing the game. No ethical option to save or not save Ellie is offered. The prototypical last stand that Joel engages in, with the limp Ellie in his arms, is bitter (see [Figure 2.7](#)). It evokes the vulnerable body of Joel's dying daughter, and this is confirmed when he calls Ellie 'Baby Girl' – a term of endearment he once reserved for his own child. It also generates ethical questions in the player regarding the pyrrhic victory of saving Ellie at the cost of a possible cure. While the player must be goal-oriented in their efficient killing of the Fireflies, the context of this bloodbath suggests that it is highly problematic, and forecloses the possibility of heroism on behalf of humanity. One may be a hero only to Ellie, and only nebulously so. After preserving her from immediate physical harm, in a conventional shooter/action sequence that culminates with killing Marlene, Joel and Ellie escape. In a cut-scene, the player sees Joel and Ellie returning to a small community of uninfected, where it is presumed that they hope to live. Ellie asks one last time whether it is really true that the Fireflies militia has stopped searching for a cure, and therefore it is no longer necessary for her to sacrifice herself to this cause. While it may be true that her brain matter may not result in a cure (we learn from a found doctor's recording that past attempts have not been successful) it is patently untrue that the doctors no longer want to use her to create a vaccine. Although it is unclear whether Ellie believes Joel, she acquiesces to his declaration that he speaks the truth. Thus, the dying of the world is symbolically sealed in a lie that Joel tells Ellie, out of his weakness for her.



Figure 2.7 Joel attempts to save Ellie. *The Last of Us* (2013) ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC. Screen shot by author.

Voorhees locates the difficulty players have in negotiating the value of Joel's choice as one that issues from the player's own relative attachment to normative heroic masculinity.⁷¹ He suggests that the degree to which the player has a melancholic response to the decision made is directly connected to their perception that his heroic American masculinity is compromised by his irrational choice made on the basis of weakness, sentimentality and selfishness. A much healthier 'mournful' response is one through which the player can see Joel as 'flawed but redeemable'⁷² in the face of highly problematic forms of American maleness. In both cases, the

presumption is that there is an erosion of the normative, to which a player will undoubtedly have a strong response. This is likely to be at play to some degree. However, I am less interested in the debate around the difficult ending, than how the representation of Joel and Ellie – as iterations of desperate whiteness set against ruin and abolished social structures – resonated so strongly with audiences (see Figure 2.8). This suggests a response not only to the individual narrative of the game, but the conditions or socio-political moment within which that kind of narrative would be understood as impactful. The most notable of these in US culture was the re-election of President Barack Obama in 2012, which drew a dramatically more negative response from Republicans than his first election four years prior. Among the reactions associated with the news of re-election were notable paroxysms of anxiety from major right-wing public figures like Rush Limbaugh, Ted Nugent, Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, Donald Trump and many others, who declared that traditional America had 'died', that they had to take back the nation, or strive to make America 'great' again.⁷³ Numerous YouTube videos documenting Republican emotional meltdowns were circulated. Several reported murders and attempted murders were associated with perpetrators who specifically named the cause as distress over the re-election of Obama. There was a small riot on the campus of The University of Mississippi, located in a strongly Republican state whose flag still contains the Confederate battle emblem. What was evidenced was a strong anxiety around the future of the United States, one that carries with it a racialized encoding of what in the nation was perceived as being lost. Tropes around imperilled white masculinity in games clearly reflect this tension. What was as play was a response to a perceived shift in power within the nation, evidenced in the displays of grief and profound anxiety, but also communicated in forms of visual culture like *The Last of Us*.



Figure 2.8 Joel and Ellie in Salt Lake City. *The Last of Us* (2013) image provided by Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC.

Spec Ops: The Line and the White Hero Interrupted

The connection between white masculinity, ruin and abolished social structures is starkly presented in another major title released approximately a year before *The Last of Us* and a few months before President Obama's re-election, entitled *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012).⁷⁴ While there are many possible examples of such themes, *The Line* is notable for the way in which it mobilizes core mechanics of gameplay, as well as a self-conscious frustrating of military shooter genre conventions, to interrupt player expectations

and engender ethical self-inquiry around the masculinized force represented. Designed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games, *The Line* received solid though less than stellar reviews compared to *The Last of Us*,⁷⁵ but was critically heralded for its unique interventions into player-character identification and the ethical conversation it seemed to stir in players.⁷⁶ Among its many innovations, the most important of these was the strategic use of both narrative elements and the core game mechanic of shooting to strain the relationship between player and the playable character.

In the primary role of Captain Martin Walker, the player of this third-person shooter must guide a small team of Delta Force operators (Adams and Lugo) into present-day Dubai, which, in this parallel reality, has been destroyed by a series of mega-sandstorms (see Figure 2.9).⁷⁷ In the guise of the stereotypically rendered white male protagonist super-soldier, the player must navigate the phantasmagoric space of an abandoned Arab metropolis that has been swallowed up by the elements, in order to find the origin of a distress signal from a highly decorated and beloved Army Colonel, John Konrad, and his missing 'Damned 33rd' battalion. While the mission seems simple, once within the ruins of the city a great number of challenges face the team: overwhelming natural elements, desperate refugees and the perils of a defunct urban space. Early parts of the game seem jingoistic. A smart-mouthed band of brothers and the militarized violence that it seems to celebrate set the tone. All the myths about the 'good' and 'justified' American militarized humanitarian vision seem to hold true. As the game progresses, it begins to call into question the construction of such a character – as well as a player's presumptive identification with him.



Figure 2.9 Walker and his team enter Dubai. *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) developed by Yager Development and published by 2K Games. Screen shot by author.

Reviewers described *The Line* as the *Apocalypse Now* of video games for the many similarities it bore to Francis Ford Coppola's film from 1979.⁷⁸ While the setting of the game is the modern-day Arab world, not Vietnam War-era Cambodia, both the gamic and filmic narratives create the conditions for a white American normative male character to traverse a hostile space that takes an increasing mental toll, until the figure finally unravels. Walt Williams, the Lead Developer of *The Line*, indicated that Joseph Conrad's 1899 anti-colonialist novella *Heart of Darkness* constituted a primary source material for the game.⁷⁹ The same novella inspired the psychedelic anti-war vision of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and so the connectedness between these three texts that illustrate the mental deterioration of a normative figure under the duress of increasingly hellish conditions makes symbolic sense. In the film's narrative,



Figure 2.13 Lara accosted. *Tomb Raider* (2013) ©2013–16 Square Enix, Ltd. Developed by Crystal Dynamics, Inc. and published by Square Enix. Image courtesy Square Enix, Ltd.

Conclusion: A Trauma Narrative of Whiteness

The overwhelming absence of a discussion of whiteness as core to each of the aforementioned games points to a larger, understudied area in playable media. Namely, whiteness operates in duplicitous ways as both a universal expression of humanity – which has ideological consequences – and as a specific form of identity politics that goes unrecognized as such. ‘The combination of extreme whiteness with plain, unwhite whiteness,’ Dyer explains, ‘means that white people can both lay claim to the spirit that aspires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly as humanity’s most average and unremarkable representatives.’¹⁰⁹

This undertaking is not about simply deconstructing these specific representations and naming a bias that exists as a form of intellectual catharsis. Rather, it seeks to understand the power at play in these pervasive images. These three games, though inclusive of many themes and dimensions, simultaneously reveal a set of concerns related to a social grouping of heteronormative whiteness, particularly in relation to navigating a scenario of losing power and dominance. These are the ‘aesthetics of ambivalence’ of which I speak, affective qualities that trade on notions of the white male normative hero, but which in fact betray a larger form of whiteness that is deeply in crisis, desperate and which strategically mobilizes itself as a form of otherness. It is a whiteness that appropriates the moral high ground of victimhood through its embattled status as a form of alterity, even while it trades on itself as normative.

If we suspend the idea of these games as representing the normative and consider how they are in fact the expression of a particular group, and if we can make the whiteness of these games ‘strange’, it becomes possible to see several things. In the first case, it reveals a trauma narrative of ideological whiteness that repeats itself unendingly in the innumerable fear-based narratives of contagion, besiegement, apocalypse and the crumbling of civilization (see [Figure 2.14](#)). Second, it becomes clear that, rather than merely a strategy for representing a universal form of humanity, these games in fact fixate on whiteness, even while proclaiming themselves as nonparticular. How can both of these function simultaneously? How can whiteness possess the ordinariness of universalism, while also assuming a traumatic narrative of alterity and disenfranchisement? This double-signification connects to the effort to preserve whiteness from denaturing it to the point that it becomes specified (and therefore non-dominant) rather than universal. This is

mobilized, at least in part, by a representational logic ordered around the normativity of whiteness, and a phobic response to difference. Expressions of whiteness appear again and again in games as both normative and under duress, unremarkable and exalted, deserving of, and denied that which was deserved. That is to say, these games must be understood as the visual politics of dominant culture and, therefore, at the time in which they were made, an expression of the totalizing logics of whiteness.



Figure 2.14 Joel battles a hunter. *The Last of Us* (2013) image provided by Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. ©Sony Interactive Entertainment America LLC. Created and developed by Naughty Dog LLC.