

The Last of Us and Inconclusive Endings

Fiction conditions us to anticipate finite resolutions, but real life is rarely so clear-cut. You might apply for a job, and instead of a rejection letter, you simply never hear back. You might look for closure following a breakup, but that heartache lingers whether or not you find the answers you're looking for. The linearity of fiction—exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution—doesn't have a place in the media we wish to consume. It's haunting. It's unsatisfying. It's...

It's *The Last of Us*. In its zombie-infested dystopia, *The Last of Us* depicts a world that exists in legacy alone. Major governments are diminished to rag-tag federal troops and rebel militias. Urban sprawls are covered over in moss and foliage. In Boston, the only recognizable remnants of what once was are the Capitol building and an entrance to the Orange Line. At a time when the human population is almost entirely depleted, survivors kill each other with little disregard, either to quell dissidents among larger collectives or to pillage for supplies. Despite the hellish conditions that remain, there are desperate attempts for survival. In underground tunnels, there are murals drawn into concrete walls, children's books and toys scattered about—the remains of a self-sufficient group that prepped their kids for a world that would never return. A survivor and his partner live alone in a town crawling with Infected, protected only by makeshift traps and weapons. It is a world constantly at odds with itself: dying, and yet, refusing to do so. This indecision is persistent in the many deviations the recent HBO adaptation makes from the source material. Pedro Pascal's portrayal of the lead protagonist, Joel, is markedly different from the games, and somehow, so much the same. It's in the final moments of the games before the harsh cut to black followed by credits. This conflict with the self, an

unwillingness to nestle into the catharsis of resolution, goes against the most basic aspect of fiction: to present a plot is to promise a conclusion. You didn't have to keep up with every Marvel film of the last decade to know that the Avengers would eventually overcome Thanos, no matter how routinely outmatched the heroes seem. Joel breaks the very foundation of conventional plot structure. At the end of the first game, he pairs the story's climax not with falling action, but with even more conflict. The entire journey to bring Ellie across the country to a Firefly hospital where a vaccine can be manufactured from her immunity is rendered pointless as he rips her away from it. Because of his selfishness, there is no rest for the protagonists. They don't get to live happily ever after. Rather, they live under the shadow of the worst parts of themselves. In this frustrating way in which *The Last of Us* refuses to be neatly wrapped up in a bow, I can't help but find it morbidly mesmerizing. It's not content being finite or nailed down. It's not content being resolved. It's bleak, even damnably hopeless at times, but it feels all the more real because of that. *The Last of Us* is a story about indecision and distress and inconclusiveness because real life isn't confined to the conventions of fiction. For this reason, it resonates so immensely with me.

That inability to find contentment in a resolution has loomed over me for a long time. It's a constant feeling of not having fully come to terms with the worst parts of myself. I think about ending my life a lot—not an active feeling of wanting to, but rather, a rumination on the time I almost did. Five years on from my suicide attempt, I can still perfectly recall standing atop a chair with a noose in my hand, wanting so desperately to unburden myself. Like Joel and Ellie, my lowest moment coincided with the apex of my grief. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't move on from a friend's suicide the year prior. I swayed between blaming myself for not knowing he was hurting and blaming him not letting us know. My depression spiraled. My

already seemingly pointless life felt like it had plummeted to irreparable depths. And while I've moved on from that loss, I don't know if I've moved on from that loss of self-preservation, even if it was fleeting. How do you reconcile the reckless abandon with which you handle your own life?

Suicidality is intrinsically a conflict with the self of the highest order. It goes against everything. It goes against millennia of evolutionary machinations instilling within us a will to persist even through the most dire of circumstances. In certain religious sects, it goes against what is considered sacred. Our bodies create and destroy, hold hopes and anxieties and scars, and are the culmination of innumerable statistical anomalies. To survive gestation, to reach adulthood, only to cast it aside, makes no sense. But that's what suicidal ideation is. It's so much more than the walls closing in on you. It's the pressures from every direction drowning out any thought that begins to resemble logic and reason. It's the constant droning in the back of your head in happy moments reminding you that you don't deserve this reprieve. It's nauseating and disorienting and utterly debilitating. Nothing made sense when I was at my lowest point.

This internal conflict persists even in the ways *The Last of Us* presents suicide. In the first game, Bill and Frank are partners living in an abandoned town, getting by on the scrap they find and the food they grow. Aside from the occasional trading of goods with Joel, they are entirely isolated. Unable to suffer their survival any longer, Frank abandons his lover and hangs himself. The characters look upon his body with pity. In a world where they know only to endure and survive, he is unable to do just that. The HBO adaptation makes one of its many diversions from the source material here. Bill and Frank grow old together, eventually both taking their lives in unison when their bodies have been weakened by age and disease. It's not a moment of shame or weakness, but acceptance, a celebration even, of the richness of their shared life. To them, an

existence fully lived is not wasted when the clock runs out. It's morbidly romantic. Despite living almost entirely in isolation as they do in the game, they're able to find richness in their strenuous circumstances through simple pleasures. It's in the strawberries they grow in their backyard, the way Frank decorates the abandoned clothing boutique up the street, the wines Bill meticulously pairs with their dinners. To them, life is characterized entirely by the minutiae, even if the world is falling apart at the seams.

The Last of Us Part II, the sequel to the first game, sees Ellie surrounded by the riches Bill and Frank spent a lifetime cultivating. In the town of Jackson, the survivors have established agriculture, electricity, education, and collectively owned commerce. She's got everything she wasn't allowed to have in the original game: friends, a home, a place where her life matters. But these comforts and the growing disdain for Joel's past selfishness lead to her taking him for granted until it's too late. In attempting to avenge his murder, Ellie pursues his killers time and time again, always coming back unsuccessful. Her friends journey with her, but not all are fortunate to survive. In pursuing her target relentlessly, she leaves behind the town and people she's learned to call home. Ellie is sick, an addict uncontrollably plummeting towards self-destruction. Wallowing in the abyss of her grief, her actions are stubborn, reckless, and an almost certain death sentence. After one last fruitless attempt, she returns home to find an abandoned ranch. It's a miracle she survives, but she doesn't come back unscathed. She loses literal flesh and bone in her thirst for revenge. She plucks at the guitar Joel taught her to play before leaving it behind and walking off into the distance, and the credits roll. Ellie does the opposite of HBO's Bill and Frank; she casts aside the minutiae. In the absence of Joel, she thinks not of the kids she has snowball fights with, the budding romance she's developing with Dina, or her role in protecting the town of Jackson. There is simply the void he's left behind. By the game's end,

she's left with nothing and must now pick up the pieces and try to put her life back together. Can she be redeemed? Does she even deserve redemption? How does Ellie reconcile the reckless abandon with which she handles her own life? It's haunting and inconclusive in a way that only a failed suicide attempt can be.

For a long time, I didn't know how to feel about what I tried to do. Maybe I was Frank; maybe I didn't have it in me to endure and survive. I felt weak and powerless and trapped. Another part of me saw some morbid sense of preservation in it, that going out on my terms might be better than letting the world continue to wear me down. Was I Ellie, sowing my own destruction without even realizing it? I never did attempt it again, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to see it through. I needed my resolution, not this lingering emptiness, this inconclusiveness that gnawed at me every single day. Not knowing how to feel was probably the worst of it. I didn't know if I should regret the attempt or regret not following through. Was I weak or brave to keep trudging on? Did it matter if I was alive? I didn't have the answers. Sometimes, I think I still don't, but it helped when I was finally able to talk openly about it.

In the final episode of Season 1, HBO Joel makes another deviation from video game Joel: he confesses to Ellie that he tried taking his life following his daughter's death at the onset of the zombie outbreak. He didn't see the point in continuing. It's a defining moment that epitomizes the contrast between the two representations of the character. Video game Joel hides his vulnerability under a constant veneer of toughness, while HBO Joel wades in it when the moment necessitates it. This confession acts as an explicit signifier of the ways the pair have bonded. Where earlier he refuses to talk about his past with her, now he is being fully open. In acknowledging how he's healed, he looks at her and says, "It wasn't time that did it."

It wasn't time that made me stop being suicidal. I thought it would. I hoped that if I just held off that despair long enough, maybe it would stop beckoning me. If I could crowd my days with distractions and responsibilities, I wouldn't have time to think about how empty and miserable I felt. I was wrong the whole time. I knew it, but I didn't want to accept it. For years after the death of Joel's daughter and his suicide attempt, he merely survives. I did the same. I got by, but I stopped appreciating the minutiae, and I certainly wasn't confronting that void within me. Joel's reclamation of his life isn't a passive journey, but an active one. He's forced to confront his past in ways he never wanted to. The inability to save his daughter, the inability to save Tess and Sam and Henry and everyone he's almost gotten close to, the inability to save himself—it's what he sees when he looks at her. He puts his life on the line constantly to save Ellie's. Before his emotional shift in character, he chastises her for even daring to bring up the people he's lost. It's a stark contrast between the two. Where Joel finds weakness in his failures, Ellie finds strength in hers. In being able to eventually accept the deaths of those he cares about and face the demons haunting him, he turns that weakness into a strength.

As much as I'd like to wrap this essay up with an overtly positive message, it's reductive to say I'm entirely better, that I've fully confronted my suicide attempt and learned to accept my faults, smell the roses, and love life again. Maybe that would more neatly fit into the conventional plot structure of fiction. Maybe that would feel like a satisfying resolution. But that's not real life. There's still that inconclusive feeling that creeps back in at exceptionally dark moments, but it doesn't constantly eat away at me anymore. My suicide attempt was my lowest point, but I've tried to draw strength from it as much as I can. It's a part of me and my story, but there's no longer a sense of shame to that. If anything, the fallout and healing from it has helped me recapture my love of writing, and I think it's where some of my best work has come from. I

don't hide from it like I used to. It simply is, and I try to pick up the pieces and do better with each passing day.

After his confession, Ellie says to Joel she's glad his suicide attempt didn't work out. He responds, "Me, too." Even still, I don't know if I can say the same about my own, but I'd like to think that maybe one day, I'll be able to.