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Cordyceps, COVID-19, and Care: Investigating Disabled Futures in HBO's *The Last of Us*

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Abstract

HBO's recent hit TV show adaptation of The Last of Us (TLOU) video games depicts the aftereffects of a dystopian world ravaged by an ongoing plague. The show grapples with representations of Disability on many different fronts, from the trauma of living through a mass disabling event to navigating relationships and forming disabled identity. While dystopian fiction is often presented as a projection of society in the future, its extremification of ideologies are centered in our current state of mind. Thus, understanding not only the influences that create pieces like TLOU, but also why they are consumed so heavily, can reveal our current understandings of Disability. As such, an analysis of TLOU through a Critical Disabilities Studies (CDS) lens reveals both the projected fears and hopes of disabled futures. This project focuses on investigating the caretaker dynamics between Ellie and her main parental figures, Marlene and Joel, emphasizing Disabled ways of knowing, Disability justice, and Disabled futures informed by CDS scholarship.

Introduction

The *Last of Us* (TLOU) features an apocalyptic world ravaged by Cordyceps, a zombifying fungus introduced to the human population through contaminated wheat consumption and passed on through bites from infected individuals. Joel Miller, one of the main protagonists, is a middle-aged man dealing with PTSD from the loss of his daughter and the trauma of surviving the onset of the Cordyceps plague, who fatefully crosses paths with Ellie Williams. Ellie is a fourteen-year-old girl who Joel becomes the begrudging guardian for as they begin a journey to find a cure for Cordyceps. This project investigates the parallels and projections of dystopian pandemic literature and reflects on the ways TLOU handles the concept of Disability, informed by Critical Disabilities Studies (CDS) scholarship.

Cordyceps and COVID-19

Cordyceps and COVID-19 are both global pandemics whose scale affected millions of people in what is known as both a mass-disabling and mass-traumatizing event. The height of the COVID-19 pandemic was particularly intense for members of the disability community for a multitude of reasons, including restricted access to already limited medical care, dehumanizing rhetoric, and a constant barrage of death– of friends, loved ones, and community members. The Cordyceps narrative parallels some of the aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic that dehumanized people with disabilities and contributed to identity loss through rhetoric.

Rhetorically, Cordyceps victims are stripped of all humanity as they are overtaken by the fungus, becoming known only by their status of impairment and simply referred to as "the Infected." This process of dehumanization through language is a recurring item of concern for CDS scholars with ongoing discussions of how "person first" or "disability first" language can impact the acceptance or dehumanization of people with disabilities. This issue of language came to the forefront of discussion many times during the COVID-19 pandemic. In one instance, rhetoric emerged that rationalized the lessened danger of COVID-19 for able-bodied persons with the sentiment that COVID-19 only affects individuals with pre-existing conditions and the elderly as a notion of comfort, rather than a call to action to support these vulnerable populations. Even the head of the CDC in an interview with Good Morning America stated that this news was "encouraging," reducing human beings to a dehumanized marginalized group whose deaths fall into the category of acceptable losses (Hill 2022).

Cure-Making vs. Caretaking

In many ways, the Cordyceps fungus itself is an indictment of prominent fears of disability, as becoming infected with Cordyceps is depicted as the worst possible situation and in turn reveals the underlying assumption that becoming disabled is the worst possible future. There is no known treatment and the only solution presented to the audience for maintaining humanity's continued survival is immediate, violent death for all infected regardless of age, status, or significance of relationship. This othering and dehumanization of Cordyceps victims begins to break open, however, when Ellie's infected but immune status is revealed. Ellie's disability is largely hidden with no outward physical manifestations of the disease other than a bite mark on her forearm. Ellie has no perspective of what life was like before the pandemic and relies heavily on Joel to begin to imagine a life beyond her Infected status, that in turn, revitalizes Joel's own hope for the future. Ellie's situation also sets a precedent for living with Cordyceps, raising questions about who can be saved, if there is a cure, and who will need to be sacrificed in order to make one.

This dichotomy of envisioning a future for Ellie versus envisioning a future for the world is at the center of the struggle that Ellie's guardians, and she herself, are faced with. In CDS, this concept is known as cure versus care approaches to living with disabilities. Cure approaches are centered in the assumption that having a disability means something is wrong with an individual and an outside force is required to alleviate, cure, or contain impairment (Davis, 2017 p. 8). This pathologized interpretation of disability feeds into Marlene's worldview and her frantic hope of preserving humanity, even at the cost of individual lives. Marlene's ability to care for Ellie is subsumed by her obsession with curing Cordyceps as it is revealed that, because Cordyceps takes up residence in the brain, Ellie must die to create a cure. Marlene is so intent on "curing" humanity that she doesn't stop to think who she is saving it for. The human race in Marlene's mind is stripped of personal identity and is only an idealization of life. As such, Ellie's death would mean little to her and she informs Joel that she intends to use Ellie to create a cure by any means necessary.

In contrast, Joel's relationship with Ellie is centered on the idea of care, evolving into an interdependent relationship. Joel and Ellie's interdependence creates a unique space in modern popular media that depicts how to create and navigate disabilities together through relationships centered in care. CDS scholars, including Mia Mingus, have described this concept with phrases like "access intimacy" that describe the ways people with disabilities can form understandings of unspoken needs through similar experiences (2011). The power of access intimacy is revealed when Ellie saves

Joel's life because she discovered Joel's hearing loss even though they had never discussed it. Ellie's insight is drawn from the fact that she too has an impairment that she hides from most of the world and as such, she does not expect Joel to be her perfect protector. Instead, she recognizes Joel's disabilities and finds ways to aid in their mutual survival instead of depending on Joel's assumed abilities alone to propel them into the future. Ellie's recognition and acceptance of Joel's disabilities gives Joel permission to live a disabled life. Through Ellie, Joel rediscovers that life is worth living— with PTSD, with hearing loss, with increasing age —not only despite his disabilities, but in part, because of them. Together, Joel and Ellie start to envision a future that neither could dream of alone, one that is centered in Disability Justice.

Disability Justice has emerged as a means to center disabled voices in social, cultural, and political conversations and policies that affects disabled lives, daring to imagine a future in which disabled people are free from discrimination and violence. "One of the foundational principles of disability justice is that nothing has to be the way it is" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022 p. 144). TLOU shows many ways of surviving the apocalypse and in so doing, uses a multifocality of perspectives to reshape our vision of what is possible, though with complex nuance. Joel and Ellie's greatest hope for survival is each other's continued existence– but in saving Ellie, Joel pits the life of an individual against the possibility of a cure that would potentially relieve the suffering of millions. The morality of this decision is unclear, but it illustrates what CDS Scholars have known for years: that access, care, and justice are different for different people (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ellie and Joel represent some of the complicated realities of care relationships that seek to balance meeting the needs of the self and people who depend on us all within a hostile world that places the needs of both beneath the goals of a productive society. While *The Last of Us* still dehumanizes Cordyceps victims en masse, paralleling the COVID-19 experience for many individuals and feeding into fears that becoming disabled is a life ending event, the show ultimately advocates for compassion for individuals with disabilities.

In the end, Joel and in some ways Ellie, decide that a disabled life is worth living, especially with each other. This is a profound statement in a time where ongoing COVID-19 complications and a rapidly aging population mean that even more people in the U.S., and in many places around the world, will be entering the disabled community and seeking ways to create and enact disabled futures. *The Last of Us* envisions a future for people with disabilities combatting the rhetorical, social and political dehumanization of people with disabilities. We can see this in Joel and Ellie's slowly evolving relationship that builds mutual trust, recognizes the need for care, accepts this interdependency, and chooses to build a future in spite of worldly pressures. In fact, the first and last episode titles from *The Last of Us* reaffirm this idea with the combined phrase, "When You're Lost in the Darkness" "Look for the Light" with Joel and Ellie suggesting, that perhaps, we should look for that light together.

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