

Sins of the Father: The Last of Us Part II and the Limits of Empathy

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Joel Miller is so inextricable from *The Last of Us* that it's easy to forget we don't begin the original game controlling him.

[This article contains major spoilers for *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*]

After she's awakened by a phone call, we help Joel's daughter Sarah search for him in the small home they share in Texas. These are the very first minutes of a zombie virus outbreak, and they offer just a tiny glimpse of what's to come. This is also the last time we'll ever see Sarah, as she's shot and killed while trying to escape with Joel. Twenty years later, when the game really begins, Sarah is just a memory.

This is the first of many times *The Last of Us* shifts the focus to Joel and quietly erases the agency of its female characters. The most egregious example is Joel's surrogate daughter Ellie, a main character in the first game who becomes the protagonist of *The Last of Us Part II*. Despite being the protagonist, Ellie is never allowed to develop as a character beyond the first game. Because her story hinges entirely on Joel's, it never feels like she has agency, and as a result her character feels hollow.

Sins of the Father

When we see Joel again, an anti-government militia (the Fireflies) has hired him to smuggle an immune child to a hospital across the country. While Joel's partner Tess is eager to accept, Joel is reluctant to upset the status quo and leave his life in Boston.

Upon reaching the Firefly hospital, Joel realizes Ellie, who has become a daughter to him, will be sacrificed to find a cure. To save her, he kills everyone in the hospital, including Marlene, one of Ellie's former caretakers. Before she

dies, Marlene explains that she let Joel live because he was the only person who could understand the importance of Ellie's sacrifice.

Joel does not extend the mercy Marlene showed him. He negates her agency in a matter of moments, giving the final scenes in the hospital a remarkable weight. Joel's decision is undeniably selfish, but with the player having just spent hours ensuring Ellie's survival, it's also understandable. Joel's desperation to save Ellie demonstrates growth—he began the game surly, closed off, and callous. By the end of the game we get a glimpse who he would've been if Sarah had lived: Joel the father, who is protective, devoted, and gentle toward Ellie.



Ellie looks at a photo of Joel and Sarah, found in his house after his death.

What happens at the hospital incites the story of *The Last of Us Part II*, which begins with Joel and Ellie living in Jackson, Wyoming. Their relationship is strained, though we don't know why. This is part of where *The Last of Us Part II* fails Ellie: we only ever understand her as she relates to Joel.

Though the events at the hospital are five years past, Joel's actions come back to haunt him. The surgeon's daughter, Abby, finds, tortures, and kills Joel while Ellie and Joel's brother, Tommy, watch. Within the first two hours, *Part I*'s protagonist is killed in a scene of visceral violence—Abby's hatred is tangible in its cruelty. She takes her time with Joel, shooting him before beating him with a golf club and forcing Ellie to watch him die. The group leaves Ellie and Tommy alive, and Ellie's desire for revenge consumes the rest of the game. This narrative framing naturally sets Abby and Ellie up as parallel characters, but because Ellie, unlike Abby, never develops past that desire for revenge, the plot feels contrived and hollow.

Ambiguous Endings

The theme of revenge is also the major distinction between the two games. We don't know why Abby goes after Joel at first, but rationally, it could be any number of reasons. Joel alludes to having done a lot of wrong in the name of survival, but Tess says it best all the way back in Boston: "We're shitty people, Joel. Been that way for a long time." Yet... players empathize with Joel. We understand why he makes the choices he does as we watch his relationship with Ellie grow. At the end of their journey, Joel's choice feels like the *only* choice. He can't bear the thought of life without Ellie because it would be like losing Sarah all over again.

The first game's ambiguous ending is compelling. We don't know whether Ellie believes Joel's lie about the hospital, but they made it out together. There's a path forward for them to enjoy a relatively normal, quiet life in the peaceful Jackson settlement. Both finally have the chance to escape the endless waves of violence they've experienced on the road. It's up to the audience to fill in the blanks; I could imagine Ellie and Joel working toward a better future,

building a life in Jackson together. Between the game's tight narrative experience and bittersweet ending, it felt like a complete story.

The Last of Us Part II peels back the curtain on the ambiguity of that ending. This is Ellie's game, but her relationship with Joel is the plot's driving force. Despite the tension in their relationship, she's willing to hunt down every single person who participated in killing him, and sacrifices nearly everything to do so. We understand Joel's decision to kidnap Ellie from the hospital, but it's yet another example of him stealing agency from another character; Joel is always the one with the power and agency. As the protagonist of *Part II*, it never feels like Ellie has agency in the way Joel did, because everything she does is an attempt to make sense of their relationship after his death.

Like *Part I*, *Part II* ends ambiguously. Ellie spares Abby's life after a brutal fight that nearly kills them both. She returns to the farmhouse she shared with her girlfriend Dina and their baby to find it empty of everything except for her little art studio. She picks up a guitar that she struggles to play thanks to the loss of two fingers, and leaves. The final shot shows Ellie crossing the yard and leaving the property.



After letting Abby go in Santa Barbara, Ellie returns to the farmhouse she and Dina shared in Jackson.

Ambiguity served the first game well but feels less purposeful in the second. The narrative boundaries constrain Ellie's character because *Part II* doesn't take time to develop her in any meaningful way. Instead, the player's knowledge of Ellie during the first game does the heavy lifting in building her character. We know she's resourceful and sarcastic, with a penchant for silly puns and dad jokes. We know she likes comic books and action movies because she and Joel bond over them, and these are consistent traits whether Ellie is 14 or 19.

But to a teenager, five years is an eon. Ages 14 through 19 especially represent a time of flux, which for real-life United States teenagers spans the end of middle school through the first years of adulthood. This isn't to say that interests can't remain consistent over time. It's even understandable that Ellie is guarded around her friends. The problem is that Ellie is just as guarded when it comes to what the player sees through her eyes. The only reliable gauges we have for understanding Ellie are her relationship to Joel and her journal. Something has fundamentally changed between her and Joel, but we don't know what. Even the journal barely scratches the surface of Ellie's thoughts, because entries are scant and infrequent. It hardly helps that it's easy for players to miss journal entries because they aren't a central mechanic of the game. The journal is just there, and players are presumably supposed to remember to look at it every now and again.

Ellie's ambiguous motivations highlight the disconnect between the two games. We understand Joel even if his actions are often reprehensible, but the same is less true of Ellie. *The Last of Us's* ending always left open the possibility that Ellie didn't believe Joel's lie about the hospital. Though she does learn the truth before the beginning of *Part II*, the game withholds that information until nearly halfway through.

Two years before the events of *Part II*, Ellie confronts Joel, desperately telling him she'll go back to Jackson regardless of the truth. But, when she does hear the truth about what happened at the hospital, she tells him she can't forgive it. Even that only partially explains the rift between them—was Ellie still holding that grudge years later? And if she was, why was she so willing to risk her own life and the lives of her friends to get revenge on behalf of a man she hated?

The Last of Us Part II saves Ellie and Joel's final conversation, which skims the surface of those questions, for the climax. Ellie has the opportunity to kill Abby, very nearly drowning her before she remembers talking to him on his porch the night before he died. She says she would like to try to forgive him for what he did at the hospital—for taking away her choice. Just as Abby realized killing Joel wasn't what would help her move past her father's death, Ellie presumably realizes killing Abby won't help her forgive Joel or move past his death. However, reserving this reveal for the final fifteen minutes of the game doesn't make Ellie any more sympathetic or justify any of the things she has done.

It was easier to empathize with Joel as he and Ellie made their cross-country trip. Despite his many flaws, Joel grew and changed as a character over the course of the game. We knew about Sarah from the very beginning. We understood, possibly even before Joel did, how much he cared for Ellie. Joel was a morally gray character, but in a way that made sense.

Ellie's character doesn't develop in the five year gap between the two games, and she doesn't develop over the course of *Part II's* story, either. Nor does *Part I's* gray morality carry over into *Part II*: Ellie's actions can only be called morally gray because she's framed as the protagonist and the game wants the player to empathize with her, to root for her even as we participate in gruesome violence.

Fighting For and Against Joel's Legacy

The attempt at presenting a morally gray game is another moment of disconnect between *Part I* and *Part II*. Abby and Ellie are presented as parallel characters, but saying they're both motivated to kill because of their dead fathers is a false equivalence—we can't understand why Ellie is hell-bent on avenging the death of a man she seemed to loathe. Outside of their motivations, the biggest issue is that *The Last of Us's* women do not get to be characters outside of violence, and their catalysts for change are always men—aside from Ellie, Abby seeks revenge for her father but becomes a more caring person because of her ex-boyfriend Owen.

Maybe it's not their fault; the game and everyone in it seem unable to imagine a world without conflict. *The Last of Us Part II's* quiet moments—the ones where we get to see Ellie and Joel's relationship develop—are its best, but, crucially, they're all set in the past. Who is Ellie when she isn't killing? What does she have if she doesn't have revenge?

The answer, it seems, is nothing. Ellie struggles against Joel's legacy, even if she shows remorse after killing Abby's friends. She panics, but doesn't stop until she gets to Abby. The only indication that Ellie has begun to move on from Joel's death is her final journal entry—a sketch of Joel playing guitar on his front porch—which becomes available once Ellie returns to the farmhouse. (Incidentally, I didn't see this journal entry because the journaling aspect of the game felt so inconsequential.) *Part II* ends shortly after.



Ellie's final journal entry appears after she returns from Santa Barbara.

Perhaps the most shocking thing about *Part II's* end is how little I cared. Ellie's motivation feels weak in light of the tension between her and Joel. Revenge seems more like something Ellie feels she *has* to do, not something she *wants* to do. Ellie was always going to inherit the sins of her father, but *Part II* passes up the opportunity to do anything with those themes in favor of a rote revenge story.

In the ambiguity of Ellie wordlessly leaving the farmhouse, *Part II* loses the potential to have her to grow and develop beyond Joel. It loses the potential for *The Last of Us* to say anything interesting about the forgiveness that, separately, Abby seeks and that Ellie wants to give. This utterly galls me because I can imagine a version of this game that took the time to develop and define the most interesting character in *Part I* beyond her considerable capability for cruelty and violence.

But *The Last of Us Part II* is not that game. Instead, it is a game built using predatory and violent labor practices, about violence, that does nothing particularly new or interesting with that violence.

Though Ellie has started to move on when she leaves the farmhouse, she essentially ends the second game where Joel began the first. She's cut herself off from her family, friends, and town only to figure out that revenge isn't worth it. It's impossible to know what she thinks as she crosses the farmhouse yard because the player is never truly privy to her thoughts and motivations. We know she struggles with survivor's guilt, we know she worries her friends won't understand what happened to her.

What we don't know is whether any of it was worth it. We can infer that she's letting go of Joel, or of the life she built with Dina, or of her hatred of Abby, but we don't know those things, either. *The Last of Us Part II's* narrative is designed to wring emotion out of its players. You're supposed to feel a flash of guilt when you kill a character with a name or a dog. But in guilt by design—and by extent, Naughty Dog's obsession with making *The Last of Us Part II* into the height of AAA gaming—it forgets what got us so invested in the first game: a violence motivated by love and a desire to protect rather than love that can only be realized through violence. Regardless of whether Ellie was determined to escape Joel's legacy, *The Last of Us Part II* could not, and the narrative, and Ellie's character, suffer for it.