

# The Last of Us: Game Diaries, Part IX

The real horror of the game is far worse than the infection.



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Ellie hunts alone at the beginning of the Winter section of the game.

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Time passes strangely in *The Last of Us*. The seasons change between cutscenes, days and months passing in the second after a cutscene fades to black.

Fall slips into winter in the seconds after Joel and Ellie leave the University of Eastern Colorado. When the scene changes, there's snow on the ground and Joel is nowhere to be found. The last time we saw him, he had just been gravely injured; now, Ellie hunts alone. Presumably, Joel isn't dead, but the scene is *just* ambiguous enough to make you wonder.

I've said before that *The Last of Us* is Joel's story, but somewhere along the way that stopped being entirely true. Slowly, this story has become just as much Ellie's as it is Joel's. Ellie becoming the player character feels symbolic of his reliance on her, because although Joel would have been worse off without Ellie by his side before, she's certainly the only thing keeping him alive after his injury. Their lives and stories are irrevocably, undeniably intertwined.

Playing as Ellie also gives a glimpse of who Ellie-the-person is beyond who Ellie-the-survivor is. She has always been more prone to wearing her heart on her sleeve regardless of the dangers that may pose. It's impossible not to see a little of Sarah in Ellie's sarcastic streak, but underneath it she cares, deeply. One of the strangest things to think about is that for Joel, his life has become a learned sort of normal. For Ellie, who was born into a post-pandemic world, she doesn't know any different. She carries different burdens than Joel, some figurative, and some literally in her backpack.

Being able to see Ellie's backpack is one of my favorite things about this section of the game. It contains several items, and, unlike Joel, Ellie carries things from her past: children's books full of puns, her friend Riley's pendant, Sam's robot, a walkman, a switchblade, a note from her mom, the photo of Joel and Sarah he left behind in a previous chapter of the game. Being able to view these items offers a glimpse into her life before Joel, something Ellie hasn't been allowed to talk about.

I love the idea of the kids books, especially because the jokes in them are ones Ellie repeats throughout the Pittsburgh section of the game, when she still doesn't know Joel very well. The note from Ellie's mom suggests that before she was with Joel, she spent most of her life under Marlene's care with the Fireflies. We haven't seen much of their community, only that Joel was often at odds with them, and it makes me wonder what Ellie's life growing up was like. At the very least, she was safe, surrounded by others, and had at least one friend her age in Riley. I was also enormously relieved that Ellie had stolen the photo of Joel and Sarah, because even though he didn't seem to regret leaving it behind, I did.

This all puts Ellie's talkativeness and willingness to connect with others (Tess, Sam, Henry) into perspective. Traveling for months on end with a single companion must

be awfully isolating, and it's not something you think about often because *The Last of Us* transitions between chapters so seamlessly. There are days, weeks, months between Boston and Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh and Jackson, Jackson and the University of Eastern Colorado. I can't imagine how monotonous, exhausting, and lonely it would be, but at least Ellie and Joel have each other.

When Ellie is alone in winter, it makes her need to be with others more obvious. She still talks to herself under her breath and can still handle herself, but when she comes across a pair of hunters after she kills the deer in the first part of this section of the game, it makes you realize just how comfortable she has gotten around Joel. From the moment Ellie runs into David, a thin, soft-spoken middle-aged man, and James, his younger partner, she's wary. It's strange to see Ellie so uncomfortable around another person, but I think it reinforces and puts her and Joel's trust in one another into perspective. David and James at least trade her antibiotics for her the deer meat, which she quickly takes back to Joel.

He's not in great shape, but by some miracle, he's alive. I said in my last game diary that Joel was too stubborn to die, but it's not just that. I think Ellie was too stubborn to let him die, too.

By morning, the hunters have followed Ellie back to the lakefront resort cabin she and Joel were hiding out in, and Ellie desperately tries to lead them away from Joel. He's in no shape to run, even if he is more alert after a night of sleep, and the plan works until Ellie is captured and taken to David's group's base a short distance from the resort. Ellie wakes up in a cage to see David dismembering a human torso that he will presumably later eat, and all of the recent pleasant moments with Tommy in Wyoming and at UEC drain away in the blink of an eye.

*The Last of Us* is a survival horror game that usually leans more into the survival aspect than the horror. As someone who startles badly when someone so much as opens a door unexpectedly, I've always been more susceptible to *The Last of Us's* jump scares than the appearance of the infected. The infected are vicious, grotesque, and strong enough to rip Joel apart, but the thing that makes them most horrifying is more existential. Sam asked it back in Pittsburgh, after he had been bitten but

before he died: “What if the people are still inside? What if they’re trapped in there, without any control over their body?”

I’m not sure when I started thinking of the infected as more sad than anything else. It might have been when Sam asked that, right before he turned, or finding the Firefly tag on a bloater in the UEC dormitory, or studying the mostly intact outfits the runners wear. It might have been hearing the noises runners make, which are still distressingly human. It might have been coming across a clicker, and watching its movements, which look like pure agony. The game constantly reminds you that yes, there’s a person in there somewhere, buried under years of fungal growth.

The real horror in *The Last of Us* is that, despite the ever-dwindling pool of survivors, most of them are trying to kill other survivors in cruel and sadistic ways. David and his borderline-fervent followers are the other hunters taken to the extreme, the worst evolution of that lifestyle. The cannibals’ actions are horrifying and, along with his implied sexual desire toward Ellie, monstrous in any context. They feel perhaps even more monstrous because Ellie is the player character during this time, and despite her toughness and quips, she’s still just a child. If we had been playing as Joel, David would have felt like just another hunter, but playing as Ellie, David is vile, dangerous, and can’t die soon enough.

The cruelty of others is the one constant in every place Joel and Ellie travel in the game. Joel isn’t absolved from killing, either; we already know he’s been on both sides of the gun, like he said when they came across the fake victims in Pittsburgh. I think the horror aspect brushes up against an interesting question, which is, “What is acceptable in the name of survival?” without declaring a right answer. Instead, *The Last of Us* suggests that what actions are acceptable in the name of survival are determined by individuals or small groups of people. Joel and Ellie have made hundreds of kills to survive, but I’ve been slower to judge them for it because they’re the protagonists. Besides, it’s not like systems exist to functionally hold people accountable for their actions. There are only other survivors to play judge, jury, and executioner.

Having recovered a little from his fever, Joel discovers Ellie gone and frantically searches for her in town. He finds her in a restaurant, where she fought and brutally

killed David — judge, jury, and executioner. Once again, their relationship has shifted, and their separation is effective in showing that, especially because Joel doesn't hesitate to tear through the town and the hunters in it to find her. It's even more evident as he pulls her away from David, saying, "Oh, baby girl... It's okay, it's okay." The players can't hear anything else he says, but it feels so significant because it's what he called Sarah at the beginning of the game. Even though he's obviously cared about Ellie for some time, saying it out loud (however indirectly) feels like a major step in character growth, in admitting that Sarah died and accepting that he cares about Ellie.

I think playing as Ellie answers the question of who will carry on the legacy of others, because as we look through her backpack we can see she's already doing it. Her mom's note, Riley's pendant, Sam's robot, the photo of Sarah and Joel are physical reminders of the people Ellie has cared for throughout her life. It's the same stubborn optimism I felt in the last section of the game, and reminds me yet again of Richard Siken's poem "Snow and Dirty Rain," which I quoted in a previous game diary.

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*We have not touched the stars,  
nor are we forgiven, which brings us back  
to the hero's shoulders and the gentleness that comes,  
not from the absence of violence, but despite  
the abundance of it.*

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I think that gentleness, Ellie's devout remembrance of the people she loved and the care Joel extends to her, feels optimistic, and it's a feeling that's worth holding onto.