

Joel got what was fucking coming to him.

I feel I have to lay down that unfortunately crude statement at the top because people are just so wrong about their criticism for *The Last of Us Part II*, and part of their problem starts with the emotional attachment they carry to this character.

"Wait!" I hear someone say. "Joel was the protagonist of that game that I really like! I grew to admire his strength and his love for Ellie, whom I also developed a fondness. Killing him in such a sick and dissatisfying way was a disservice to all of us who went along with their previous journey!"

I understand the preceding is a common sentiment. However, I am going to describe to you, in as oblique, generic, and objective a way as I can, the events of the end of *The Last of Us*. Indulge me.

A man, who had agreed to perform the task of escorting a girl cross-country to see if a skilled doctor could take advantage of her unique immunity in order to craft a literal world-saving vaccine. Upon learning that the procedure to develop this vaccine would have to kill the girl, for whom the man had developed a strong paternal bond during their short time together, this man reneges on his agreed-upon promise and executes dozens on his way to liberate this girl. During this liberation, the man kills the one doctor who could develop such a vaccine, thereby removing the most promising solution to this literal apocalyptic virus. This selfish action, undoubtedly motivated by his strong love for this replacement daughter, dooms the hundreds of thousands of survivors still left on this earth.

His actions could be charitably described as a war crime. Taking a 4 iron to the dome was, given the context, a kindness compared to what he ought to have experienced. Were I transported into the world of *The Last of Us*, I would spit on Joel's polygonal grave.

"Wait just a second," I hear once again, "it was Ellie! Surely you couldn't just let these anonymous and uncaring surgeons butcher her in the name of a cure that might not even work!"

Every fucking time. I would let that happen every fucking time. And by the end of *The Last of Us II*, I would have been satisfied if Ellie had been killed whether or not a vaccine could have been developed.

Yet, not in spite of but precisely because of this despicable action, the ending of *The Last of Us* was excellent and intriguing. Pitting the suffering of a parent losing a daughter (again) against the unquestionably larger and more important, yet in the moment seemingly inconsequential, suffering of the world at large gut-punches the player.

Disagreeing with a character's actions, or even a narrative choice crafted by the writer, does not mean that the story is without value. Some of the most interesting narrative conflicts, like Joel's own selfish and despicable action, are things that I myself would never, ever do. I am not Joel. Joel would doom the world to save his adoptive daughter.

However, just because the ending is interesting does not mean that, if this story were to be continued in further installments, that Joel would not deserve any retribution he might face. He, as I started with, got what was fucking coming to him.

So it is with this knowledge that I am so frustrated and confused with the majority of the criticism regarding *The Last of Us II*. "Joel deserved better." "He deserved to die by sacrificing himself to save Ellie." "Then I have to play as the dumb bitch who killed him."

Isn't that what started this whole mess in the first place? As Ellie herself states late in the game's runtime (though early in true chronology), she's a big girl and doesn't need Joel's help. And her absolutely psychotic run through Seattle backs that claim up.

I've heard that countless criticisms about the narrative of the game, but they all miss the mark. Yes, there are problems with the story. No, it's not that this comically buff woman hits a green in regulation with pieces of Joel's skull, and no, it's not that you're "forced" to play as her later in the game.

The game is too long, by far. There are far too many coincidences (the most egregious being Joel's rescue of Abby that leads to the main plot's precipitating event. Coincidences, should never be the main driver of the plot unless the story is directly speaking to the phenomenon of coincidences. Coincidences of convenience irk me to a degree neither rational nor reasonable). The impact and tension of its most dramatic scene is completely lost when we switch points of view, and maybe 5% of the initial tension felt is recovered when we finally make it back to that scene.

Specifically, several encounters in the Hillside neighborhood, most of the token open world section in Ellie's Seattle Day 1, and every time the ground fell out from underneath the character's feet serve primarily to pad out runtime who did not need any padding. I can forgive the Hillside encounters and the token open world (all praise the holy algorithm who has determined that every game, no matter how out of place it will be, now must have some degree of open world action). But the next time I see the ground fall out from underneath my player in a Naughty Dog game, I am shutting the game off and never returning. Ha! I'm sure that will teach them.

The entirety of the Santa Barbara section also smacked unnecessary, but perhaps finally we've found the point. What do I care about the Rattlers? They were given these comically evil and creepy personalities and habits, like torturing their prisoners or chaining up the infected, because why else would I want to slaughter them in the numbers that the game forces me to? While terrible people, they become unintended collateral damage of your pursuit of vengeance. Violence removed from the reason for yet at the same time enabling the other violence you seek.

Like other parts of the game, I think this section is meant to make me tired of the violence. Tired of what Ellie is doing to people, and it becomes so tiring right before Ellie has to make her most important moral choice regarding this violence. We are meant to be in step with Ellie: enough of the violence.

So while Joel got what was coming to him, and many could say that both Ellie and Abby got what was coming to them as well, the genius of this game is that it takes me on the emotional journey of retributive cycles of violence. A common complaint of the game is that the lesson it teaches is done to death, though that misses what makes this **game** great. *The Last of Us Part II* leverages the advantages of the medium of games to not only teach the player about this lesson but make us complicit in its propagation.

We arrive at the end of the game, like the maimed, sobbing Ellie, just so, so tired. Let it stop.