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FEDRA: Facilitating Equal and Diverse Representation in an Apocalypse

On June 12, 2016, 49 individuals lost their lives at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida (Zambelich and Hurt). While the mass shooting stunned the country, it was one of many acts of violence against the LGBTQ community. The shooting sparked a variety of protests not only surrounding gun rights, but also the LGBTQ community itself. Hate towards the community often stems from misrepresentation and the overuse of stereotypes within the media. HBO Max's television adaptation of the popular video game, *The Last of Us*, follows a middle-aged man, Joel, and a young girl, Ellie, through an apocalyptic world. Through their trials and tribulations, the two form a strong bond and rely on other crucial relationships along the way. Some of these relationships include Bill and Frank, a gay couple, and Ellie's relationship with her love interest, Riley. With the presence of a gay female protagonist and a powerful queer love story, *The Last of Us* sets the stage for a more queer-focused second season and the future of LGBTQ-inclusive television programs.

Within television, the LGBTQ community is severely underrepresented. In the past, being a part of the community was widely viewed as being "taboo." Many of these hateful ideals are still present today. That being said, representation is on the rise within television programs specifically. Between 2021 and 2022, "scripted broadcast primetime programming experienced a 2.8% increase in LGBTQ characters" (Townsend, et al.). The 2021-2022 season continued an increasing trend from previous years. Furthermore, "of the 775 series regular characters

scheduled to appear on scripted broadcast primetime programming for the 2021-2022 season, 92 characters (11.9%) are LGBTQ” (Townsend, et al.). While 92 characters is not much, it is still an 11.9% rise from previous seasons. Despite being minor increases in terms of percentage, the increases are monumental to those in the LGBTQ community and a step towards increasing inclusivity within the media. While LGBTQ representation as a whole is of concern, there is also unequal representation within the community. For years, gay men outnumbered lesbian women in the television industry. However, in the 2021-2022 season, lesbian women outnumbered gay men by 5% (Lavietes). Ellie, one of the main protagonists in *The Last of Us*, is a lesbian. In episode nine, Ellie’s relationship with a former friend, Riley, unfolds before the viewers’ eyes. As the two spend the night in an abandoned mall, they kiss before both are bitten by infected and Ellie is forced to kill Riley (“Left Behind”). Ellie plays an important role in being a female LGBTQ character, who were once significantly less present in the realm of television. Not only does HBO include a female LGBTQ character in the show, but she is also the protagonist.

HBO does not stop at one character, but rather includes two more LGBTQ characters within its first season. In episode three, viewers are introduced to Bill and Frank. Viewers first get to know Bill, a skeptic man living out of an underground bunker when the pandemic first erupts. Bill quickly creates an in-depth security system around his now abandoned neighborhood, eventually trapping Frank, a passerby. Frank and Bill share a meal and suddenly a relationship sparks between them (“Long, Long Time”). The remainder of the episode is dedicated to their love story as the two grow old together and eventually pass away. The majority of LGBTQ characters in the 2021-2022 season were given less than ten minutes of screen time (Wiggins). HBO dedicates an episode to a story that other platforms may have just dedicated a scene or two. Defying the 2021 statistic, Bill and Frank receive a 73-minute episode dedicated to the two, and

Ellie arguably receives a 9-episode season. Thus, HBO sets the stage for shows to include main characters who are a part of the LGTBQ community and not just those who are barely present in the storyline. With increasing LGBTQ representation, the platform helps facilitate a further increase in representation with a gay female protagonist and a prominent and well-developed queer love story.

While representation of the community is on the rise, it is crucial that working towards more inclusive casts does not stop now. For members of the LGBTQ community, individuals need to see others like themselves portrayed in the media. With the original creation of the video game in 2013, LGBTQ gamers felt “excited and empowered by the presence of these [LGBTQ] characters in such a prominent game” (Donohoe). Gaming, often stereotyped as a “straight male activity,” is often destitute of the LGBTQ community. With the presence of LGBTQ characters in the video game, gay men felt that their hobbies were validated and that the gaming community was just as much a place for them as it was for straight men (“HBO’s ‘The Last of Us’ Adaptation Is a Milestone for LGBTQ Gamers”). Representation within television is just as important as within video games, especially for young individuals: “seeing themselves authentically represented in the media, helps LGBTQ+ children and young people validate their experiences. And it fosters a society in which they feel comfortable being their true selves” (“Representation Matters: Are LGBTQ+ Young People Seeing Themselves Represented in the Media?”). In *The Last of Us*, Ellie has the potential to save the entire world as she is immune to cordyceps (“Infected”). Those around her thus make significant sacrifices just to keep her alive. For example, Marlene, leader of the “Fireflies,” is stabbed in an attempt to acquire a truck battery to get Ellie across the country (“When You’re Lost in the Darkness”). As Joel and his partner Tess take on the mission of transporting Ellie across the country, they sacrifice

themselves to save a young gay girl who very well could be a “hero.” In the process, Tess loses her life in order to keep Ellie safe (“Infected”). Later on, Joel himself experiences a near-death experience only to be saved by Ellie (“When We Are in Need”). The depiction of an LGBTQ hero allows individuals in the community to feel seen. In fact, “when children and young people consume media that only depicts one type of hero, it can skew their perception of themselves in a negative way” (“Representation Matters: Are LGBTQ+ Young People Seeing Themselves Represented in the Media?”). The actor who plays Ellie, Bella Ramsey, is a non-binary actor. Thus, the show does not only include representation in the form of a gay character, but also in casting a non-binary actor. Ramsey herself has spoken out regarding LGBTQ representation within the show saying, “I think it’s just really nice and important that people can feel represented, and the hope is that it impacts people who aren’t in the community just as much as it impacts people who are” (Haasch). Additionally, in an apocalyptic setting, the show had the ability to eradicate the LGBTQ community. The presence of these characters emphasizes the point that people of the LGBTQ community will prevail despite horrific circumstances. Ramsey explains, “it’s not like all the gay people got blown up and it doesn’t exist anymore” (Haasch). The community cannot merely be eradicated due to its opponents' wishes, or even by a global pandemic and arguably an apocalypse. Representation specifically in *The Last of Us* helps show individuals that the community will persist despite which way the world may go. Even in the “end of the world,” LGBTQ individuals are still present, emphasizing HBO’s hard work in maintaining representation for these individuals.

With the portrayal of LGBTQ characters, comes stereotypes regarding the community. While increased representation is desired, stereotypical representation is not always beneficial. Within television, queer characters are often portrayed as being lonely. This loneliness does not

only stem from their platonic and romantic relationships, but also from their familial relationships: “while no relationships end happily per se in “The Last of Us,” queer lives are always *lonely*” (MacLeod). In episode five, Ellie reveals her fear of ending up alone on a pad of paper (“Endure and Survive”). Ellie has no familial connection as she is an orphan, and lost her relationship with her love interest, Riley, tragically. Ellie thus represents the stereotypical archetype of the lonely queer character. While Ellie succumbs to this overused stereotype, her character also fights against other queer stereotypes as “for most of the 20th century, queer characters were portrayed as villains” (MacLeod). Ellie is not a villain, but rather a hero. Ellie had every opportunity to become infected and become a villain; instead, HBO actively fights the stereotype and crafts Ellie as a strong protagonist. With the possibility of being able to “save the world,” Ellie eventually goes under medical procedures in an attempt to extract a cure from her blood (“Look for the Light”). In doing away with this stereotype, HBO shows young LGBTQ viewers that they no longer need to fit society’s stereotypes.

Furthermore, following the AIDS endemic, the stereotype of a gay man in a wheelchair arose. The stereotype quickly found its way into television programs. If present in a program including a gay couple, the man is often seen being transported by his partner (MacLeod). As Bill and Frank grow older, Frank eventually develops a condition that requires him to remain in a wheelchair as he cannot walk. Bill tends to Frank and his daily needs until one day Frank decides he is ready to die (“Long, Long Time”). While Frank does not have AIDS, he still exemplifies the worn-out and displeasing stereotype. Frank unfortunately falls into another queer stereotype as he is obsessed with renovating the shops and stores around their house—typically a feminine or a gay male activity (MacLeod). Characters begin to stray from stereotypes, but cannot completely avoid them; that being said, “queer characters have been “allowed” to be happy,

which has undoubtedly helped a new generation of queer people see themselves and imagine better lives” (MacLeod). In beginning to stray from LGBTQ stereotypes, HBO begins the conversation regarding removing LGBTQ stereotypes from television. HBO tries to move away from these stereotypes, but in a semi-unsuccessful attempt opens the door for other television programs to completely make do with them.

Being an adaptation of a video game, the HBO show does a great job of staying true to the original queer storylines present in the two-part game. While queer characters and storylines are present within the videogame, directors had the ability to change the storylines as they saw fit in their television adaptation. Regardless of this, “ HBO’s *Last of Us* promises to keep the queer representation that was always strong in the game” (Barbosa). As the first season of the show came to an end in early March of 2023, it is very apparent that the show did just that. For example, within the video game, Ellie and Riley’s relationship is pivotal in the game’s storyline as players “witness the blossoming relationship between Ellie and Riley, a young girl she met at a military boarding school. The plot focuses on their friendship, which slowly morphs into a teenage romance” (Favis). Within the television adaptation, Ellie and Riley receive parts of multiple episodes dedicated to their relationship. As Riley surprises Ellie with a night away from FEDRA school, a military school, the two share a date night in an abandoned mall. After exploring the mall, playing games in the arcade, and taking photos in the photo booth, the two best friends kiss (“Look for the Light”). *The Last of Us* video game includes a longer plot, as the show’s first season encompasses part of the video game story. In the full game, Ellie comes out to Joel. In what could have been a tense interaction between the two, Joel shows his soft side in accepting Ellie as she is and reassuring her that anyone would be lucky to have her as a partner (Favis). With the HBO Max adaptation renewed for a second season, the directors can include

Ellie's coming out story as the storyline progresses (Moon). In addition to Ellie's expanded storyline, the show also can include transgender and bisexual characters in its next season—both present in part two of the video game (MacLeod). Despite the show not covering both parts of the beloved video game, gamers are thrilled with the show's accurate representation and attention to detail when it comes to LGBTQ characters and storylines. One gamer exclaims, “a post-apocalyptic zombie show based off a video game somehow making one of the most beautiful queer stories I've seen in a long time—not what I expected” (“HBO's ‘The Last of Us’ Adaptation Is a Milestone for LGBTQ Gamers”). As the show upholds much of the game's storyline, the directors also expand on them, giving Bill and Frank a well-thought-out love story (“Long, Long Time). Instead of sticking directly to the video game plot, directors strayed slightly to expand on important queer storylines. With a solid adaptation in the first season and a continuing strong queer storyline in the video game, the second season has the power to continue the conversation regarding queer representation.

With powerful queer representation, the show paves the way for the future of LGBTQ representation within television. In portraying LGBTQ characters, awareness can be raised regarding the community and the hate crimes they face. Many oppose the community as it is something different that they are not familiar with. In increasing representation, many may realize the community is not something to fear or hate. Without representation, not only in television but also across all platforms, the LGBTQ community will continue to face deadly hate crimes.

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