

Introduction

This project analyzes how queer representation in contemporary media facilitates discussions regarding the fictional and historical narratives of minority identities. Episode 3 of HBO's *The Last of Us* functions as a highly relevant research object for this topic due to the recency of its publishing however, since its narrative is based on a piece of media released nearly a decade prior, an acknowledgement of their differences reveals how the distinction between quantitative and qualitative representations of queer identities in media changes over time. In the critique of how this object presents non-heteronormativity, I will pose the question, how does Episode 3 of *The Last of Us* navigate the "bury your gays" trope to establish the authenticity of its queer characters?

By considering how the research object functions as a form of representation for queer relationships, this analysis will not only examine what makes it innately queer but also what techniques the show uses to imply queerness to its viewers. This notion of implied representation considers what aspects of the show make it read as a subversive narrative. These discussions often reveal how stereotypes function in contemporary media to efficiently establish the purpose of a character with less time taken on-screen. To examine the potential influence of the research object, the analysis will highlight to what extent the implicit and explicit queer coding in Episode 3 of *The Last of Us* functions as a method of identification for queer viewers.

The research object is centered around the relationship of two cisgender men. The characters are portrayed in a manner that acknowledges the expectations of hegemonic masculinity but, they play with the audience's expectations of how these portrayals of their gender influence their identity. To consider how gender presentation functions as an identifier for

queer sexuality, I hope this project can question how the representations of masculinity within the research object affirm or deny traditional hegemonic masculinity in media.

A Brief History of Queer Representation in Media

Regarding queer representation in media through the “bury your gays” trope, Haley Hulan argues that the trope serves at least one of four purposes within any example of its implementation: refuge, exploitation, spectacle, or catharsis. The trope’s function as a refuge refers to its first labeled implementation in the early 20th century reviews of 19th century literature where queer authors would be allowed to publish queer narratives as the death of these characters at the end of the narrative connoted that the author did not endorse a lifestyle that strayed from heteronormativity. The function of exploitation examines how heteronormative media uses the portrayal of its queer characters to warn the audience of the dangers of a queer lifestyle. The trope’s function as a spectacle highlights its purpose to produce shock value and improve television ratings. Although the functions of exploitation and spectacle can be similar, Hulan suggests that the direct hostility towards queer people might be less present in examples of “bury your gays” as a spectacle. Finally, the trope’s function as catharsis argues that it can be used in queer-produced media to reflect on community trauma. Hulan proposes that the relevancy of each purpose changes depending on the time and place in which the media example is published, however, the relevancy does not correlate to the trope’s necessity. This is evident with the trope’s influence as a spectacle.

Due to the recency of the research object, it currently has no scholarly research however, there is some commentary present on its source material. To examine the authenticity of queer representation in videogames, Lara Keilbart surveys its history over the past few decades through a theory that breaks down queer authenticity into at least one of three categories: the inclusion of

speech or behavioral acts that clearly enunciate queerness, meaningful/impact in the game world, or the distinct mirroring real life experiences or events (Keilbart 183). Keilbart analyzes the queer representation of Ellie from the game *The Last of Us (2013)* and determines that her characterization serves as a model of queer authenticity. Keilbart's theory maintains a similar process to Hulan's regarding the influence of queer representation on queer audiences however, her emphasis on the abundance of poor representations provides important context for how the research object is perceived and interpreted by the public as an adaptation of games media.

Considering the notion of implied versus innate queer representation, Scott McKinnon examines how queerness was prescribed through movie memory, which he defines as the importance placed on a scene in the life of an individual, and how that scene links to the larger narrative of the community. McKinnon argues that this process in reality, and its representation through queer-coded characters in media served as a beneficial form of representation by providing a platform for the community-sharing of information (McKinnon 218). By examining indirect forms of queer representation over the past few decades, this strengthens the project's ability to identify authentic queerness in the research object and consider how the characters recognize each other as queer, thereby enhancing the authenticity of the narrative.

Gender Performativity on and off Screen

To critique how the research object subverts/affirms traditional notions of masculine heteronormativity, the analysis will draw from the discursive analytical method of Jennifer Coats, who examines the role of language as a tool for cultural construction through the lens of Queer Linguistics. Coats characterizes the queering of linguistics studies as a process that actively challenges the unmarked status of heterosexuality (Coats 537). She argues that heterosexuality functions through a hierarchical structure, with the most favored expression of

heterosexuality being one that affirms monogamy, reproduction, and other traditional gendered expectations (Coats 538).

Christina Obmann agrees with Keilbart's assertion that the majority of non-masculine, non-heteronormative representation in videogames is relatively poor however, she disagrees with the notion that the influence of passively absorbed media, such as film and television, is equal to that of games media. Obmann argues that the direct character control and perceived influence over the narrative as a player makes the analysis of its representations of real-life identities much more important as it sets a negative precedent for in-person interactions (Obmann 150).

Although she acknowledges that this effect does not function to the extreme extent that it is portrayed within anti-gaming rhetoric, she considers the limitations of viewing games media through a purely textual analysis. Despite the research object being a piece of television media, recognition of the source material's medium as a videogame allows this analysis to contemplate how the character's establishment in gaming culture influenced their representation for the serial adaptation.

To add to the discourse surrounding how gender performativity influences gender identity, Jessica S Robles and Anastacia Kurylo examine how stereotypes function during interpersonal communication to affirm traditional gender roles. They define stereotypes as the naming and association of groups of people "associated with some essential quality which constitutes a recurrent feature of everyday discourse" (Jessica S. Robles 673). To identify how individuals categorize gendered expectations they label mobilizing categories, "the process of naming a category to determine which participants are in or out of that category. A motivating alignment, which suggests how the individuals are aligned with or against others based on category membership. The reframing action, which relocates one's current activity as occasioned

by others' (inapposite) categorical demands." (Jessica S. Robles 677). They conclude that cultural assumptions regarding gender can be reinforced by practical actions. Considering this finding within the analysis of the research object will aid in the potential identification of the gendered norms that affirm traditional standards of masculinity present within the research object.

The Role of Identification in Minority-Centered Narratives

Regarding the performance of identity, Bruce Wilshire introduces the concept of phenomenology, which he describes as a process used to deconstruct and convey complex experiences that might be considered obvious (Wilshire 12). To conduct this process, he proposes a process of perception that links senses with imagination to deconstruct socially ingrained prejudices. Wilshire argues that an actor conducting phenomenology establishes a memetic network of the emotions portrayed in and out of character (Wilshire 16). Judith Butler similarly uses the concept of phenomenology to examine how performances of gender are reconstituted across identities. They argue that the body is a point of active identification that shifts between physical and emotional to determine an individual's gender presentation (Butler 519). Butler argues that the body is forced to conform to the conception of gender, but they can never completely align due to the established everchanging memetic network that relies on the perception within a specific context. An assessment of how this process functions through the lens of Jennifer Coats queer linguistics will allow the analysis of the research object to consider how its actors represent queer-coded experiences in a manner that feels authentic to its queer audience.

Maria Sulimma's reception theory of the outward spiral argues that gendered identities signify culturally and socially through viewer responses. By promoting the recirculation of the

material produced within a media example, she suggests that this process reveals new layers to characters by using them as a starting point for social and political discourse (Sulimma 114). This theory affirms Wilshire's theory of phenomenology by emphasizing how the viewing of an actor's portrayal of a character strengthens that character's identity within cultural discourse. Alternatively, use of these theories may conflict with Hulan's analysis of queer representation through the "bury your gays" trope as she argues that the outcome of the representation falls on the intent of the author, while Wilshire and Sulima argue that the effect of the representation is ultimately influenced by audience reception.

When considering how the research object might function as a tool of identification for queer audience members, the analysis will draw from aspects of Muñoz theory of disidentification; which considers the cultural impact of minorities from various social groups disassociating from the stereotypes of their perceived positionality(s) to deconstruct their perception of identity (Muñoz 9). The research object maintains an awareness of queer and heteronormative masculine stereotypes. The use of this theory in the analysis of the research object will help identify if these devices perform in a manner that is subversive to, or affirmative of the heteronormative experience, thereby aiding in the determination of the research object as an effective platform of disidentification for queer viewers.

Context

The Last of Us is a post-apocalyptic drama series that began airing on the streaming platform HBO on the 15th of January 2023. The series is based off a game of the same name released on the 14th of June 2013 however, this project will focus on the analysis of a collection of scenes from the show in episode 3 '*Long, Long Time*'. This analysis highlights the narrative arc of the side characters Bill and Frank to critique how the creators portray elements of the

“bury your gays” trope and other aspects of heteronormative performativity to establish the multidimensional nature of the series’ queer characters. Using this episode as the site of analysis will allow this project to examine the ways in which contemporary media has been influenced by its predecessors by identifying how this influence manifests itself, and what this influence does for the contemporary discourse surrounding the representation of marginalized identities in media.

The narrative takes place in a present-day version of Earth that has been devastated by an evolved species of fungi that have the capacity to infect and control the motor functions of living creatures. The only goal of the ‘infected’ (as they are referred to in the show) is to spread the infection to other living beings. Twenty years after the outbreak, a large majority of the world’s population is infected, while the remaining population is forced to live in highly isolated quarantine zones. The narrative follows Joel Miller, a man who lost his daughter on the day of the outbreak, and Ellie Williams, a girl who appears to be the only human immune to the infection of the ‘cordyceps’ (the classification of the evolved species of fungi). A series of events unites the pair, and the show illustrates their journey across the U.S. as they search for a research facility that could potentially study Ellie’s immunity to develop a vaccine against the process of infection.

In episode 3, the pair are traveling to a small town west of Boston, Massachusetts, in search of aid and supplies for the journey. The episode begins by illustrating how the pair renegotiate their relationship after the death of Tess, a woman who functioned as the leader of the group. Despite Joel being portrayed as a strong, independent person, who holds some power in the Boston quarantine zone, Tess is highlighted as one of the only people that has some influence over his actions, hence her gaining the status of leader at the start of the journey. Their

implicit romantic connection is affirmed as the narrative draws parallels between their relationship and Bill and Frank's explicit romantic relationship.

When Joel and Ellie acknowledge how this shift in their dynamic influences their journey in a practical sense, the two begin to open up to each other. After some time spent travelling, Joel suggests that they deviate slightly from the path however, due to the lack of apparent danger, Ellie refuses and continues onwards, where she encounters a large pile of human remains just off the main pathway. Joel explains that the remains are from groups who were killed off by evacuation teams due to the overpopulation of the quarantine zones. This prompts a flashback cut to 20 years prior where a group of people are shown evacuating the town, a cut to a surveillance camera, and a cut to an individual watching the view from the camera surrounded by similar monitors in a dark room, which begins the show's introduction of Bill and the research object of this project. This shift resituates Bill as the focal character of the episode and illustrates his life in isolation, his introduction to Frank, their life together, and their demise before the arrival of Joel and Ellie.

Throughout the first 2 episodes, the show maintains narrative consistency with its source material however, episode 3 somewhat deviates from this pattern by having Bill die before the arrival of Joel and Ellie. In the game, a paranoid Bill functions as an obstacle for Joel and Ellie to overcome. After the pair convince him that they are not a threat, it is revealed that Bill has been left alone for an undetermined amount of time when Frank committed suicide before completely succumbing to the infection. Bill acknowledges that this loss had a detrimental effect on his psyche however, the exact nature of the two's relationship is not explicitly stated. Frank's suicide note reveals some turmoil in his relationship with Bill near the time of his death. This leaves Bill's character bitter and broken, which functions as a warning for Joel against his growing

fondness of Ellie. *'Long, Long Time'* actively acknowledges the shift in Bill's character from the game to the serial adaptation to connote the intent behind its inclusion to the narrative. By expanding on the lives of Bill and Frank before the arrival of Joel and Ellie, and adding a sense of agency to their deaths, the serial adaptation of the narrative has an opportunity to expand on the representation present in the game and consider why the change is necessary/valued in a contemporary media work.

Due to the differential portrayals of these characters from the game to the serial adaptation, after the release of *'Long, Long Time'* a variety of dialogues took place across social media between certain fans of the franchise that questioned the episode's authenticity to the source material. The inspiration for this project came from conversations on Twitter that provided immediate reactions upon the episode's release, and Reddit, which spawned longer, more detailed conversations that spanned the runtime of the season. The fans' critique of the episode's diversion from the source material suggested that the changes made to this section of the narrative diminished Bill's character by minimizing the influence of his paranoia after meeting Frank. This led to another argument that proposes the implementation of Bill and Frank's backstory ruins the immersion of the narrative by idealizing this scenario within the context of a dystopia. It is likely that some of these critiques stem from a sense of internalized homophobia however, it is also plausible that the change is emotionally jarring for long-time fans of the series as it has been in circulation for nearly a decade, with a bit of a resurgence after the release of the second game in June of 2020. An awareness of these perspectives is important context for the analysis of this episode as it provides an outlet to consider how representations of queer experiences are influenced by audience reception.

The show is classified as a thriller and a drama, but it maintains elements of horror from the games. Situating the episode within/adjacent to the horror genre makes the critique of its queer representation all the more relevant as the genre has a notorious history of focusing trauma on queer/queer-coded characters. This is done through the monsterification queer identities, or the death of queer characters under the guise of representation, which has been classified in the aforementioned 'bury your gays' trope. The structure of the episode acknowledges the audience's awareness of the trope's prevalence within the genre and uses that awareness to subvert expectations for the narrative.

The dichotomy of Bill: *Queering Masculine Hegemony*

An examination of Bill's introduction highlights how his performance of hegemonic masculinity influences his identity, thereby creating a more comprehensive representation of his queerness. *'Long, Long Time'* introduces Bill's character through a series of shots that reveal his paranoia surrounding the apocalypse. The scene cuts from a surveillance camera aimed at the ongoing evacuation, to a shot of Bill's silhouette in a dark room framed by the light of the surveillance monitors. There is the sound of a door opening above him, proceeded by footsteps, radio chatter, and muted voices. Bill stands up, gun in hand, and mutters, "Not today, you new world order jackboot fucks." After a shot of the evacuees leaving the city, it cuts back to Bill and the room is now illuminated to reveal a wall of guns, a bookshelf filled with gun-related books, and 3 tubs of sulphuric acid. He then emerges from a hidden staircase, wearing a gas mask, crouched with his gun at the ready as he surveys the area. He exits the house, looks around to determine that all the soldiers have left with the evacuees, then removes the gas mask with a small smile as *'I'm Coming Home to Stay'* by Fleetwood Mac plays in the background (Hoar 17:00-18:48).

In introducing Bill as an onlooker of society, through the surveillance cameras from the safety of his hidden basement, the show alludes to his queerness in the non-normative, or strange, sense of the word. After later revealing his queer sexuality, it becomes clear that this sequence functions as an allegory for being closeted, hence why after the town is evacuated, Bill smiles at the prospect of being able to live freely and authentically in the absence of people.

This connotation of the subtle shift of his presentation in isolation is affirmed during his first meeting with Frank. After accepting Frank's plea for some food, Bill grants him a shower and a clean change of clothes, after which the two share a meal. During the dinner Frank is shocked by Bill's cooking skills, pointing out that he is "a man who knows to pair rabbit with a Beaujolais." Bill responds, "I know I don't seem like the type." To Bill's surprise, Frank states, "No, you do." The two lock eyes and share a quiet moment of recognition before continuing the meal (Hoar 27:20-34:48). This is clearly a rare moment where Bill has felt seen for his true self by another individual. By illustrating the subtle shift in Bill's presentation that allows him to experience being coded and recognized as queer for the first time, the narrative examines the complexities of the queer identity through a deconstruction of the stereotypes associated with hegemonic masculinity and queerness.

Bill's distrust of the government creates an interesting parallel to a queer viewer's reading of the show and their potential skepticism of the creator's portrayal of Bill as a queer individual in the narrative. His use of conspiracy theorist rhetoric in the statement, "new world order jackboot fucks," emphasizes his disdain for overarching figures of authority. Similarly, viewers of the episode who are fans of the game and thus already aware of Bill's queer identity, will likely be weary of any changes the creators of the show make to his character and narrative arc for the adaptation. His emphasis on establishing a sanctuary through a variety of violent

means (guns, traps, etc.) illustrates his desire to protect; however, his calm attitude before the arrival of Frank establishes a contradictory lacking fear towards the prospect of death. Although when Frank does arrive and they establish a relationship, Bill proclaims, “I was never scared before you showed up” (Hoar 45:15-45:19), which connotes the fear of death that Bill has gained, not for his own life but for Frank’s. In imbuing Bill’s character with this doomsday-prepper mentality and a new fear of death, the narrative signals to the audience an awareness of the ‘bury-your-gays’ trope by alluding to how would affect viewer reception of the show through its characters.

Disruption of sanctuary, spectacle, or catharsis?

The creators use the raid sequence to examine how an underlying awareness of the ‘bury-your-gays’ trope would influence the audience’s experience of the narrative. The sequence begins with the camera focused on Frank asleep in bed with the light of a fire starting to come through the window. Frank wakes up to the sound of gunshots and realizes that Bill is not next to him. Frank runs through the house calling for Bill, but he does not respond. After seeing Bill outside, Frank grabs a gun and finds Bill in the middle of the road shooting at the raiders who avoided the fence traps. Bill notices that Frank has left the safety of the house and orders him to get back inside, and while turning to face Frank, Bill is shot. Frank runs to Bill’s side and helps him back in the house. He lays Bill on the dining room table and prepares to take the bullet out and care for the wound, all while Bill uses what appear to be his final moments to explain how to manage the upkeep of their home for Frank’s safety. Frank encourages this despite Bill believing that he is going to die. The scene fades to black with Bill and Frank, both bloodied and holding hands as Frank uses his other hand to continue to care for the wound (Hoar 46:08-48:50).

The sequence creates a sharp juxtaposition to the scene before it, which embodies the joy Frank and Bill feel in sharing their differing approaches to love with each other. In this scene, Frank surprises Bill with a strawberry garden. When Bill asks how Frank acquired the seeds, Frank reveals that he traded one of Bill's guns for a pack of seeds. Although Bill is somewhat disappointed by this revelation, it does little to dampen the mood of the scene. By highlighting the contrast between life and growth in the strawberry garden, and the sudden threat of Bill's death, the narrative connotes the fragility of love. While the use of this allegory is especially impactful in portraying the series motif of love, its use in the portrayal of Bill and Frank's relationship leads to an affirmation of the "bury your gays" trope as spectacle. That is because the sharp contrast alludes to the greater importance placed on serving the overarching narrative, as opposed to letting the audience sit with the positive energy of the prior scene. Ironically, one might argue that despite the negative atmosphere of the sequence, it promotes a more pessimistically authentic portrayal of queer relationships as many of them are unable to run their course due to external circumstances.

The final image of this sequence alludes to the history of "bury your gays" as a form of exploitation. Despite Bill willingly and actively maintaining his relationship with Frank, a heteronormative analysis of how the two exhibit hegemonic masculinity would suggest that Bill is more masculine, and therefore less queer than Frank. By identifying Bill as the character who could be perceived as less queer at the start of the narrative, his potential death as he progresses towards queerness denotes the consequences of this series of choices. Simultaneously, in a materialization of another trope about queers in popular cultural texts, Frank as the less masculine, more queer, character through this lens is also punished for "inflicting" queerness on Bill, evident through the blood that ends up on his hands. The analysis of this scene from the

heteronormative perspective reveals how the history of the trope influences contemporary media despite its attempt to subvert it.

Burying your gays: *Agency and Authenticity*

A cut to ten years after the raid reveals that both Frank and Bill are alive and living comfortably together; however, it appears that Frank is suffering from an unknown illness. By portraying an aging queer relationship, the narrative considers how the notion of agency influences the death of its queer characters in a genre where the pre-mature death of queer characters has been highly popularized to the point where it is expected. In this scene, Bill wakes up to find Frank sitting in his wheelchair. Bill softly scolds Frank knowing that the effort it took him to get there will leave him feeling especially weak for a while. However, Frank assures Bill that he will not fall asleep in the chair because “today is my last day”. The two lock eyes in silence before the camera cuts to the pair sitting across from each other in a different room.

Bill on a couch and Frank in a wheelchair, Frank reflects on their life together and says how he would like to spend his last day. Bill is hesitant, but ultimately agrees to Frank’s wish and a sequence plays out just like the list. When the pair sit down for a final glass of wine, Frank’s glass is supposed to be the only one filled with enough crushed up pills to stop his heart, but after the pair down their respective glasses, Bill reveals that he dosed both drinks. Frank weakly protests but appreciates the heartfelt gesture to which Bill responds, “This isn’t the tragic suicide at the end of the play. I’m old, I’m satisfied, and you were my purpose.” The two laugh, share a final hug and Bill walks Frank to their bedroom as the song ‘*Vanishing Grace*’ plays in the background (Hoar 53:02-1:03:13).

The notion of agency is affirmed throughout this section of the narrative. Frank goes against the will of his clearly weakened body to show Bill he has the resolve to have one last good day before he dies on his own terms rather than succumbing to illness. Bill playing out the sequence of events almost exactly to Frank's wishes shows the agency they have established together in their home over the last 20 years, secluded from the chaos of the world outside. Bill no longer feels threatened by death knowing that he and Frank made an active choice to end their lives on a high note.

Although this episode diverges highly from its source material, I found its somewhat similar representation regarding the role of agency in the game notable. The game's narrative does not reveal much about Bill and Frank's life together. However, Frank's suicide note connotes that Bill made the choice to disregard Frank's desire to implement some of the pleasantries of life into their home, which facilitated his growing resentment of Bill. By enacting his own agency over Frank, Bill leaves Frank with only one form of agency, his will to live. Returning to the show, this idea is acknowledged early on in their relationship during an argument regarding resource management where Bill claims that Frank's suggestions are frivolous, and in response Frank threatens to run into a tripwire trap. Bill's face softens as if he is about to concede, but he questions Frank's reasoning one more time. Frank responds, "Paying attention to things. It's how we show love. This is my street to, just let me love it the way I want to." (Hoar 37:12-39:20) In the next scene, the street and surrounding buildings look more polished, and it appears that Frank's wish was fulfilled. By alluding to the failure that Bill's character made in the game and rectifying it in the narrative of the show, the creators examine how the theme of agency shifts between the pair as their relationship grows. Ultimately, both

versions of the character end with suicide but by enacting Frank's suicide to end his life on a positive note, the narrative of the episode highlights the joy found in the agency over life.

Due to Bill's initial protest, one might argue that Bill is losing his agency by agreeing with Frank and aiding in his suicide, thus perpetuating Haley Hulan's analysis of the way the "bury your gays" trope is used as a spectacle. I argue that Bill choosing to end his life along with Frank's affirms his personal agency, which connotes why Bill was able to fully enjoy this last day beside Frank despite his initial protest, connoting the trope's usage as a form of catharsis for the couple instead of spectacle for the audience. This is affirmed by Bill's final line as it is a quote from *The Boys in the Band*, a play by Mart Crowley that exhibits the lives of a group of gay men living in New York City in the 1960s (Craig Mazin). In using this quotation, the writers of the episode pay homage to authentic queer representation of the past. If Bill had completely followed Frank's wishes, it would be reminiscent of the trope's use as refuge or even exploitation, as it would leave Bill right at the beginning of his narrative arc, alone in his impenetrable fortress with nobody to love. By examining this notion of agency in the lives of its queer characters, *'Long, Long Time'* subverts the expectations of the bury-your-gays trope to create a narrative that brings peace to its queer characters despite the chaos encompassing the outside world. The result is that the 'bury-your-gays' trope gets relocated back in the narrative instead of as a feature of spectatorship.

Final thoughts

After the couple dies, the narrative is brought back to the present, where Joel and Ellie arrive at the town that Frank and Bill called home. They deduce that the town has been abandoned, but Ellie confirms the pair's death after finding a letter written by Bill. In this letter, Bill writes to Joel examining the kinship they share as people whose mutual purpose in life is to

protect the ones they love. Bill identifies this by drawing a parallel between his relationship with Frank to Joel's relationship to Tess, unaware of the fact that Joel failed to protect her during the journey there. Joel is aware of this concept but is deeply shaken by Bill's verbalization of it. This causes a subtle shift in Joel, where he begins to establish a more personal, adoptive parental role for Ellie, which is alluded to at the end of the episode. Before the two drive away in Bill's truck, Joel helps Ellie put on her seatbelt after realizing she has never been in a car before, then the two bond over music playing from the cassette tape left in the truck (Hoar 1:13:18-1:15:10). These small interactions set the tone for the rest of the larger narrative. By addressing their innate similarities, Bill's final contribution to the larger narrative demonstrates how the process of shaping non-normative/queer relationships inspires stronger connections between people trusted to witness them. Despite succumbing to death, Bill's message lives on through Joel's relationship with Ellie, thereby functioning transgressively against the traditional connotations of the 'bury-your-gays' trope.

Finally, I would like to expand on how the contrasting roles of the letter in the videogame and serial adaptations allude to the connotations of queer representation in mass media. In the game, Frank's letter and Bill's distraught nature as a recluse serve as a warning to Joel to not get too close to Ellie. Otherwise, he risks experiencing the same pain he felt after losing his daughter. This inspires a conflicting message regarding the game's stance on the legitimacy of queer relationships, as it affirms their impact through the emphasis on heartbreak but degrades their value through the implication that individual survivability is more important. Conversely, Bill's letter to Joel argues that the purpose of life is to establish these relationships, regardless of the potential heartbreak they might cause. The shift towards Bill writing the letter instead of Frank highlights how he was able to learn this lesson through his relationship with Frank, despite

his initial emotional unavailability, insinuating that Joel has the capacity for this change as well. By repurposing the narrative device of the suicide letter in this manner, the serial adaptation re-examines the role of queer representation in media by creating a message that illustrates the implications of qualitative over quantitative representation.

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