

Anything, Anytime, Anywhere: Semiotic Landscapes, Labour, and Ideology in *The Last of Us*

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Due to advancements in technology, capital-intensive videogames now often include rich semiotic detail in their simulated spaces. In *The Last of Us*, specifically, much of the playable space is stylised as dilapidated capitalist cities. In this article, I argue that the semiotic constitution of these spaces creates opportunities to reflect critically on contemporary life. It also reveals the ideological complexity of the videogame, challenging assumptions that videogames have singular, authorised meanings, and that mainstream studios produce games that uphold dominant values. By focalising the politics of abundance and the economics of capitalism, I demonstrate that the semiotic landscapes of *The Last of Us* unravel a parallel set of ideological assertions to those expressed in the dialogic mode – simply, that while dialogue exhorts us to count our blessings in late capitalist society, the semiotic construction of space raises the spectre of the exploited, underpaid worker for whom ‘apocalypse’ may not be such a terrible thing. My reading draws the actual conflicts between workers and capitalist in the videogame industry into the interpretation of the game itself, and raises the question as to why there is, as yet, no interdisciplinary work at the intersection of linguistic landscapes, ideology critique, and game studies. It aims to break ground for such projects in the future, and to show the transformative value of examining videogames from the perspective of their semiotic landscapes.



Introduction

When exploring Pittsburgh – the fourth of six urban levels in *The Last of Us: Part One* – Joel and Ellie might stumble upon Laron’s (Figure 1). Prone mannequins, smashed plate glass, and the advert for a fall line suggest that it was once a fashion boutique. The metal sign is an expensive flourish that, alongside the sober serif typeface, suggests a high price point. If the player approaches, Ellie remarks that the woman in the advert is ‘so skinny’, before adding ‘I thought you had plenty of food in your time’. This is one of several optional dialogues in which characters reflect on contemporary America, finding it ‘depthless’ and superficial in contrast to ‘the gory and gritty reality of life in 2033’ (Fuchs, 2019: 73). Joel lamely explains that, in the past, some people chose not to eat ‘for looks’. Ellie is born after the 2013 cordyceps pandemic zombies America, and calls this ‘stupid’. For her, nothing about our present is naturalised. Comparable exchanges typically ask us to see the present through Ellie’s eyes, which means appreciating the peace and abundance of high capitalist society. Across the two main games, conversations about coffee, outfits, dating, and movies are all framed by Ellie’s question: ‘Is this really all they had to worry about?’ (Fuchs, 2019). We are lightly nudged to count our blessings, though a more critical response is possible. Consider that Laron’s is the product of systems that reward specific human aesthetics with cultural, social, and economic capital, especially for women. The slim woman



Figure 1: Laron’s (Pittsburgh). All images author’s own.

is photographed at work – she is a model – and her earnings are tied to her physical size and appearance. The boutique itself indexes a global industry worth nearly \$2T, which has a stake in aesthetic politics and eating disorders (to which Joel seems to glibly refer). And while there is plenty of food, market logic dictates who receives it, by virtue of who can afford it. In dialogue, *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2022; 2024) invokes material and cultural abundance as the common property and privilege of contemporary Americans, entirely inaccurately. But for players who look beyond what is said, I argue that the game can also prompt questions about the strictures that regulate abundance, in ways that could profoundly alter their readings of the post-cordyceps world and encourage them to take a critical stance on lived-world contemporary capitalism.

The Last of Us is set in a decade that is all but destined to signal the broken promises of redistributive capitalism. Keynes expected that, by 2030, abundance would free us from economic necessity and allow us to work fifteen-hour weeks. But despite a century of dramatic growth in capitalist societies, ‘the working poor, the middle class, and the rich ... continue to spend most of their waking hours at work’ (Wall, 2015: 395). Few have the opportunity to be free from work in capitalist economies, and many enter the relationship Marx called “exploitation”, creating more value than they receive in wages, and thus enriching others with their labour. This is partly because, unforeseen by Keynes, income inequality has grown fairly consistently since the neoliberal turn in the 1970s, with the spoils of rising productivity and growing surpluses increasingly garnished by the richest, especially in the US and UK (Piketty, 2020: 29–33; 418–420). These dynamics make the moment of reflection offered through dialogue at Laron’s pernicious. The interaction performs the work of ideology, understood in a critical lineage as the force that naturalises, legitimises, justifies and universalises the social order (see Eagleton, 1991; Piketty, 2020). The critique of our “superficial” present captures contemporary malaise but directs it at culture rather than economy, asking us to recognise our good fortune to live in times of plenty – to meet concrete problems with gratitude and positive thinking, rather than organisation or collective action. But ideology is complex and multivalent, and few forms demonstrate this as well as the videogame. In this article, then, I examine an alternative set of ideological propositions about capitalism, communicated through space and semiotic landscapes. I argue that these stoke a critique of capitalist political economy, which in turn reveals the importance of conflicts within the videogame industry, and raises significant conceptual questions about who communicates with whom through videogames. These are critical points of consideration for the cross-disciplinary project of ideology critique, with implications for sociolinguistics and multimodal game studies.

Negotiating ideology in *The Last of Us*

Videogames refract reality from specific, interested perspectives. *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), for example, characterises “crime” as street-level violence rather than creative accounting in private boardrooms – which is fitting given that its publisher was investigated for fraud during development. As Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter argue, this choice arbitrates the cultural imaginary of capitalism, obscuring the importance of financial crimes (2007: 170–177). Elsewhere, Murray argues that by presenting an Afghan village as devoid of citizens, *Metal Gear Solid V* (2015) conceals the human cost of American intervention in the Middle East – euphemistically, the “collateral damage” (2018: 141–182). These particular refractions fit the assumption that ‘mainstream games ... tend to prop up the values of dominant culture, by creating fields of possibilities circumscribed by particular value systems and world views’ (Murray, 2018: 95; see Cassar, 2013: 350). Such examples seem to support the idea that mainstream games are produced under the aegis of a dominant group, which invests in games that will propagate its interests – turning a profit all the while. But games are at the heart of complex ideological interactions, which are rarely, if ever, monovalent. *The Last of Us* has been variously read as reproducing/complicating ideas of Whiteness as American salvation (Murray, 2018; Callahan, 2019), casting progressive ideas as ‘precarious luxuries’ to be abandoned in a crisis (Kagen, 2022: 216), and calling on players to work with nature to achieve an ecological utopia (Farca and Ladvèze, 2016). To complicate matters, these diverse readings speak to the fact that meaning is dependent upon the text *and* the player. The player ‘negotiate[s] ideology, adopting, adapting, and rearticulating ideological elements from the text and connecting them with existing beliefs and ideological currents from elsewhere’ (Spowage, 2025: 7. Italics in original). Their life experiences are part of this, such that in the US – where 18.1% of people fall below the poverty line (OECD, 2025) – it would seem hard to convince a player that *The Last of Us* is right to present the contemporary moment as ‘defined by abundance and affluence’ (Fuchs, 2019: 75). Rather, the mismatch between lived reality and ludic representation might spark players to think critically about the narrative being circulated – to clash with ideology, and find it wanting. We cannot understand ideology in late capitalism without a sophisticated account of the videogame, and such an account must begin from the position that the meanings of games are complex, multivalent, and mutable.

The fact that the same text can be understood in different ways means, from the outset, that it is naïve to ascribe a singular ideological force to any cultural product (see Hawreliak, 2019: 10). But if players reject the dominant ideological strand of a text – its overriding message, as it were – this does not necessarily mean that they are freed

from its ideological work. *The Last of Us* is rich in meaning, with multiple ideological strands, partially because it is highly multimodal. Text, image, sound, and haptics are superordinate modal categories that are central to most videogames, which each manifest in particular communicative channels, such as in-world books, menu text, character models, animated movement through space, music, dialogue, vibration, and gesture (2019, Chapter 2). *The Last of Us* often communicates conflict, for instance, through animated models of enemies, tense music, creaturely sounds, and haptic vibrations. Spaces are also meaningful – the dark, cramped, dilapidated sites that host the ‘infected’ feed feelings of fear, urgency, or panic. The experiential and ideological meanings we take from ludic texts are scaffolded by multimodal ensembles, which we experience simultaneously. But by separating modes heuristically, we can disassemble the text and identify meanings that are coded in diverse, sophisticated, and potentially divergent ways. Crucially, popular videogames need not be ideologically coherent, and dissonance is one possible outcome of a highly complex productive process (see Hawreliak, 2019: Chapter 6). As I argue below, this is a transformative point that requires us to complicate our theoretical understanding of videogame texts as ideology. But it also explains my interest in the dialogic mode (what is said) and, particularly, what I call the spatial-semiotic ensemble, in which image, text, and representations of space interact to create meaning. The conversation at Laron’s uses the dialogic mode to offer what we might view as the most on-record, available interpretation of modelling, food politics, and fashion in *The Last of Us*. In this particular scene, nothing in the spatial-semiotic ensemble contradicts the propositions about contemporary capitalist life in America. Elsewhere, however, the spatial-semiotic ensemble provides grist for more critical thinking.

Representations of playable space court particular experiences and emotions, but also have an ideological force, as the cases of *Grand Theft Auto* and *Metal Gear Solid* suggest. For Callahan (2019), the geographical trajectory that governs the narrative in *TLOU1* recalls the unrealised promises of the American Republic, celebrating and lamenting national fantasies; Farca and Ladvèze find the in-game cities visually oppressive, and read them as traces of a failed ‘bureaucratic consumer capitalism’ that cast nature as a saviour (2016, p.8). These interpretations demonstrate the meaning-making potential both of directional movement through/to space and of the architectures that structure occupied space. Where Callahan (2019) and Farca and Ladvèze (2016) each examine meanings encoded in the text, Kagen draws attention to the role of the player who undertakes ‘subversive rambles’ through the ruins of American cities and is invited to ‘reimagine’ the possibilities of space without the constraints of contemporary political economic and ideological structures (2022: 125). For her, the ‘wandering’

that is central to *The Last of Us* – violent encounters are in fact moments of narrative punctuation – creates ‘the potential for critique of those conventions of contemporary life that seem so permanent and intransigent outside game worlds’ (2022: 125). In this view, wandering becomes an avenue for players to negotiate the ideological content of the text, potentially developing vernacular critiques of its encoded propositions (McLaughlin, 1997; Spowage, 2025). Ludic cities are rich sites for this kind of engagement, since their lived-world counterparts exist, in discourse, as distillations of societies and political economies – the city is metonymic of social life (see De Certeau, 1984: 95). The ideological force of *The Last of Us*, then, depends in part on the details of the cities represented, including their semiotic landscapes.

Semiotic landscapes are critically important to defining spaces, and cities are especially dense with their meanings. I use the term, following Jaworski and Thurlow, to refer to assemblages of meaningful material that utilise text and/or image (as on graffiti or public notices), whose meaning is attenuated by factors such as architecture, environment, and pathways through space (2010: 2). Semiotic landscapes give space meaning, in ways that often interact with ‘identity claims, power relations, and their contestations’ (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010: 8), as multilingual contexts like Israel/Palestine exemplify (Shohamy and Gorter, 2009; Karlander, 2021). In the lived world, expectations around the placement of signs and the uses of space help to shape the meaning of landscapes, which ‘manifest the regulatory, historical and normative discourses creating the ideological structures for the creation and maintenance of social order’ (Sergeant and Giaxoglou, 2020: 311). Semiotic landscapes are obviously valuable for game designers crafting meaningful spaces with narrative or ideological functions. Indeed, contemporary AAA games often include rich semiotic landscapes in designed cities. The curious thing is that, while valuable research has been published on the semiotics of videogame architecture (see for example Aroni, 2022; 2025), there has been no focussed analysis of semiotic or linguistic landscapes in videogames. This is a loss for sociolinguistics, game studies, and ideology critique alike. Vološinov argues that consciousness is not presocial, but ‘nurtured on signs; it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws’ (1930/1973: 13). He sees signs as meaningful units that ‘reflect’ and ‘refract’ reality in line with political interests (1930/1973: 9). Put another way, they perform ideological work. And, crucially, because all signs are ‘located between organized individuals’ (1930/1973: 12), they can be sites of conflict that mirror *and* enact social conflicts. Anticapitalist graffiti both emerges from the conflictual relations of capitalist political economy *and* struggles against the system that produces them. But the conflict is also fought out through the ascription of meaning to signs, and particularly the fixing of specific meanings as dominant, ‘supraclass’ and

‘eternal’ (1930/1973: 23). Thus the Chanel purse can signify career success, *joie de vivre*, or rampant consumerism, but the question is which meaning becomes mainstream. Struggle through and over signs, then, is part of political struggle. Landscapes and videogames are alike here: both perform ideological work, and both can be sites of contestation.

Struggle through and around spatial-semiotics is part of the narrative in *The Last of Us*. Its cities are postcapitalist, in the historical sense that they are situated after capitalism and in the relative sense that capitalism is an essential reference point for making sense of them. New factions appropriate and transform old spaces. Besides Jackson, the autonomous town in which Ellie and Joel settle at the end of *TLOU1*, built-up spaces are generally abandoned or controlled by either the Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA), the Washington Liberation Front (WLF) or the Seraphite cult. All assert control over territory through signs; signs also register in-game resistance to each faction (Figures 2, 3, 4). After the Prologue, the first sequence of gameplay in *TLOU1*’s Boston indicates something of the spatial-semiotic ensemble and the in-game importance of signs (Video 1). FEDRA has transformed an urban neighbourhood. The first exterior shot features a FEDRA officer patrolling on a rooftop, before the camera pans to ground level and the player assumes control. The player sees a battered sign, declaring 6PM – 6AM as ‘Curfew Hours’ and explaining that the penalty for unauthorised activity is arrest and execution. Within ten paces, an unmissable FEDRA ‘Secure Area’ sign has been vandalised, indicating social conflict. In the street, a chain link fence constricts the movement of civilians who wait for rations, while an execution signals a new juridical order that befits the new spatial order. The landscape has a narrative function, communicating the changed world to the player, but it is also presented as part of the ideological and coercive means of FEDRA’s in-game hegemony. Players thus orient themselves in space and find themselves confronted with a different politics of space. In this sense, the critical possibilities of moving through space are, as Kagen (2022) would suggest, tantalising. The player must make sense of spatial rules in-game to proceed, and they might also recognise something mimetic in the control of space as part of political dominance. This sequence, I argue, primes players to pay attention to the transformed spaces they proceed through, most of which host interesting signs. There are also rewards for paying attention to signs, including safe codes, optional dialogues, and narrative detail. Some signs are highly conspicuous or explicitly acknowledged through dialogue: in *TLOU2*, for instance, graffiti inspires Ellie and Dina to name the ‘Fuck FEDRA Gate’ (Figure 5), which becomes a named landmark on the in-game map. Usually, the signs that attract comment signal the social conflicts of 2033, which are either inter-factional or between civilians and the factions that tyrannise them.

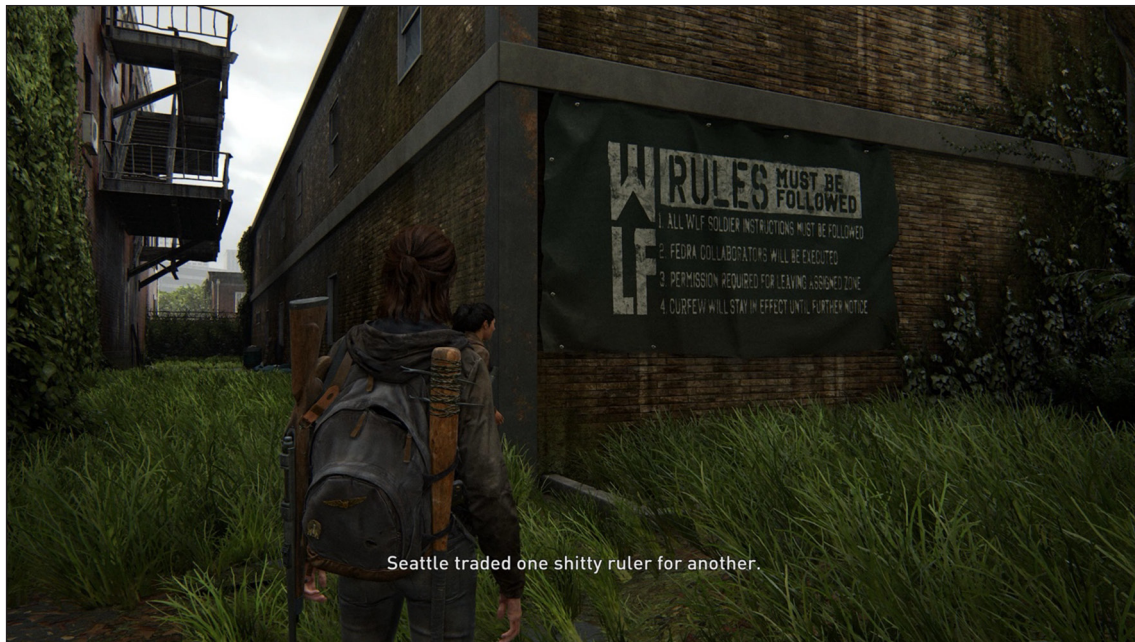


Figure 2: WLF Rules Poster (Seattle).

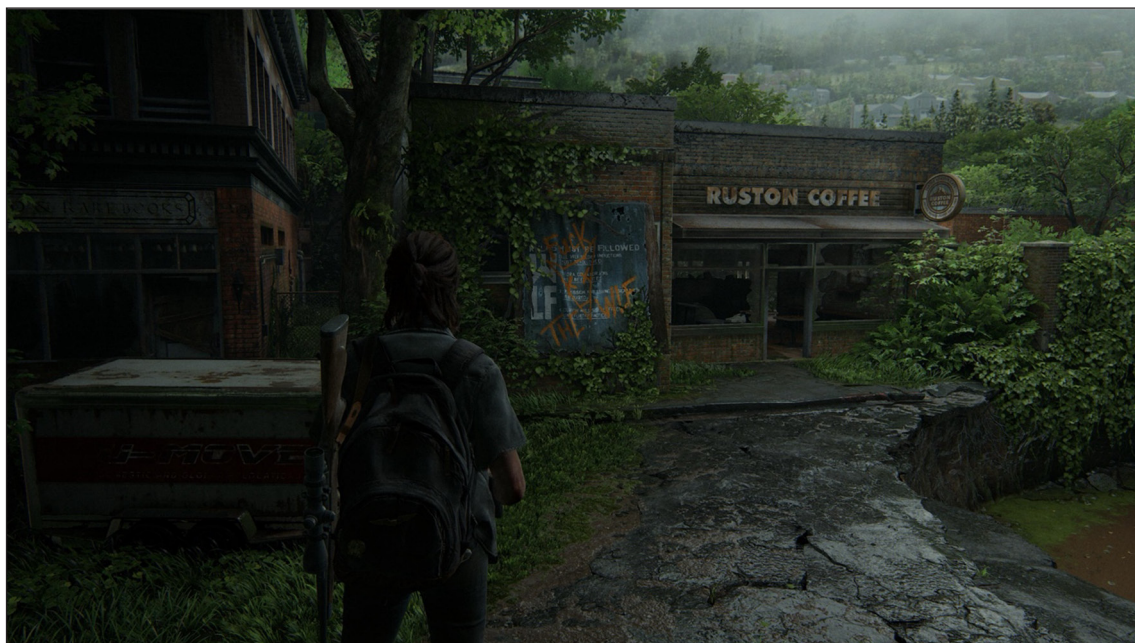


Figure 3: Defaced WLF Rules Poster ('Fuck the WLF') (Seattle).



Figure 4: Anti-FEDRA Graffiti (Pittsburgh).



Video 1: Post-Prologue Opening (Boston).



Figure 5: 'Fuck Fedra' Gate (Seattle).

There are mundane signs in *The Last of Us*, which never attract comment in the dialogic mode, and which have been overlooked in scholarship. They vary considerably, and represent the semiotic detritus of American capitalism – signs advertising products for defunct businesses, naming abandoned streets, warning of the volatility of long-since siphoned oil. They are given meaning, in part, through their relationships with the “living” landscape that remains in use. Blommaert, building on Bakhtin (1981) uses the term “chronotopes” (from Greek, “timespace”) to refer to culturally-available, ‘invokable histories’ knowledge of which allows us to ‘construct, for precisely targeted effects, elaborate patterns of different sociocultural materials’ (2015: 112). His point is that complex spatial-historical assemblages can be brought to mind by the deployment of specific linguistic and semiotic resources; coffee, drawn on a chalkboard, calls to mind a particular vision of life and leisure in contemporary America. These need not be precise historical moments, but are rather ‘chunks of history’ (2015: 111). Thus, the in-game past is constructed as a vague stretch of time that is contemporary, American, and, implicitly but inescapably, capitalist. Two chronotopes are juxtaposed in the semiotic landscape, through signs and structures that are presented as pre- and post-cordyceps. The latter come to build, and regularly reassert, the chronotope of the in-game present, while the former invoke a pre-cordyceps chronotope, which usually enjoys a productive slippage with the chronotope of the lived-world present – meaning that, except when significant details differ, the in-game past is taken as our present. Semiotic landscapes and spatial configurations that are traceable to the lived-world chronotope are situated as defunct, belonging to a different social order. They also derive meaning from their relationships to post-cordyceps signs, through layering,

defacement, and relative legibility. This dynamic, which I call chronotopic disjuncture, encourages the player to denaturalise our present by locating it on a historical plane. By design, this is the function of the interaction at Laron's – to denaturalise contemporary food and fashion culture. Chronotopic disjuncture is, in this way, generative, and while it has moments that lean into the ideological work of encouraging us to accept the present, it also structures a series of opportunities to think against capitalist logic. This becomes particularly apparent when players wander through “worker's spaces” – parts of the gameworld that are spatially and semiotically constructed as sites of labour from the pre-cordyceps and/or lived-world chronotope. As I argue below, the semiotic landscapes associated with work complicate the representation of capitalism in *The Last of Us*, and even call into question the disastrous connotations of “apocalypse”.

Spaces of work and semiotic landscapes

Before the Boston sequence, *The Last of Us* opens with Joel returning home at 11.50PM on his birthday, the night before society collapses. On the phone, he delivers the first lines: ‘Tommy, he is the contractor. He is the contractor. I can't lose this job’. His ill-fated daughter, Sarah, is waiting with a present – she had his watch fixed. The dialogue continues:

Sarah: You kept complaining about your broken watch... So I figured, you know.

[...Joel jokes with Sarah...]

Joel: Where did you get the money for this?

Sarah: Drugs. I sell hardcore drugs.

Joel: Oh, good. You can start helping out with the mortgage then.

The brief exchange tells us something of Joel's economic position – his house is mortgaged, and fixing his watch seems to be considered a luxury. Sarah jokes about selling drugs, but Joel's response suggests another source of income *would* be helpful. To my knowledge, this is the only scripted reference to money, wages, or financial commitments throughout the games. In the dialogic mode, there are regular engagements with the pre-cordyceps chronotope, but in relation to culture and leisure rather than economics. Ellie shares observations about coffee, fashion, and lesbian fiction, but she never asks about work, money, or debt. Still, the opening of the game hints at the fact that Joel's life was never characterised by abundance, and it primes players to recognise fragments that evoke economic life under capitalism. While dropped from the dialogic mode, many of these fragments are available in the spatial-semiotic ensemble, which the player is incentivised to read.

Much of the gamespace is rendered as defunct workplaces, which players explore. These sites are diverse, indexing different levels of income, toil, and desirability. But even desirable work is not uncritically celebrated. Often, spatial-semiotic ensembles register critiques of control, which can in principle be a conservative position (see

Callahan, 2019). But there are also elements that lean towards an anticapitalist reading. ‘Bloom + Baer Creative Agency’, which Ellie finds in Seattle, has a metal sign indexing professionalism, capital investment, and, with the fused stem on <l> and playful creativity – a connotation that is strengthened if the irreverent tilted <+> is in place through design rather than decay (**Figure 6**). Yet the myth of creative work as a form of paid amusement is challenged by the semiotic landscape of the space. Two whiteboards at Bloom + Baer refer to an advertising campaign for cat food. The scant ideas on the first whiteboard suggest a creative block (**Figure 7**), with vague prompts for sales pitches and one reference to a ‘really funny idea’ next to a drawing of a cat – both unfinished. A post-it note asking ‘What’s 4 lunch’, legible if the player uses a scoped weapon, suggests disengagement from the work, or perhaps creative frustration (**Figure 8**). The true nature of this creative exercise, as work, is cemented by the ‘Goals for Q1’ post-it on the second whiteboard – image, text, and 3D models construct a space in which creativity is labour, channelled into commodity promotion (**Figure 9**). Chronotopic disjuncture is striking here, because this material is juxtaposed with a mural from the post-cordyceps chronotope (**Figure 10**). The mural is a more obviously creative endeavour. It does not signal recreational utopia – it depicts the Seraphite prophet, figurehead of one of Seattle’s warring factions. But as a completed creative project driven by inspiration, it illuminates the stilted frustration of professional creative labour, and denaturalises the space of the “creative agency” – where, in fact, company goals and the technology of the whiteboard direct and constrain the agency of workers. Profit and control seem, here, to stifle the creative spirit.



Figure 6: Bloom + Baer (Seattle).

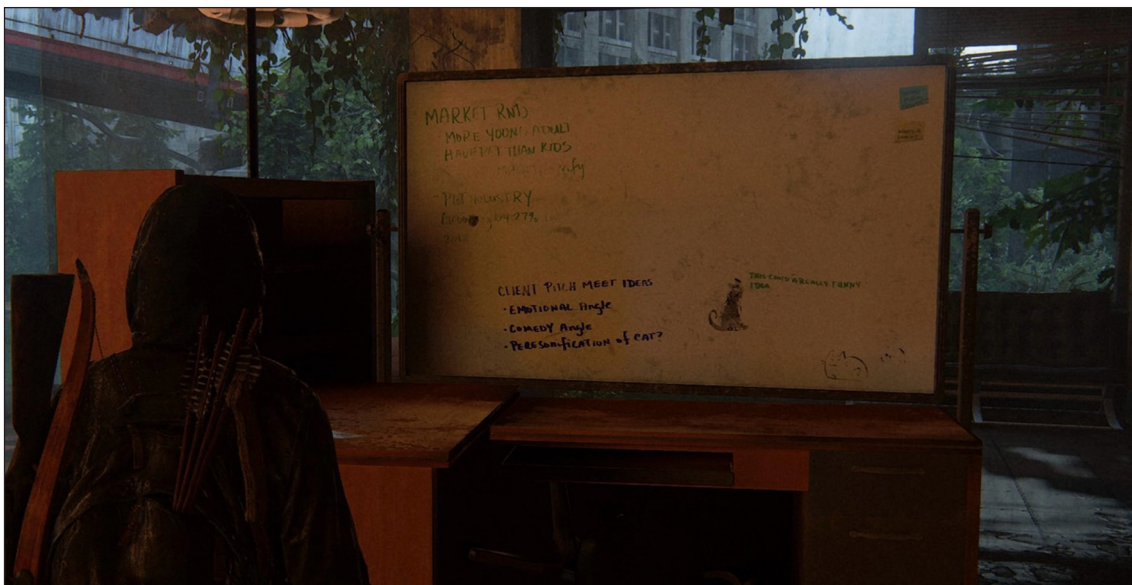


Figure 7: Whiteboard at Bloom + Baer (Seattle).

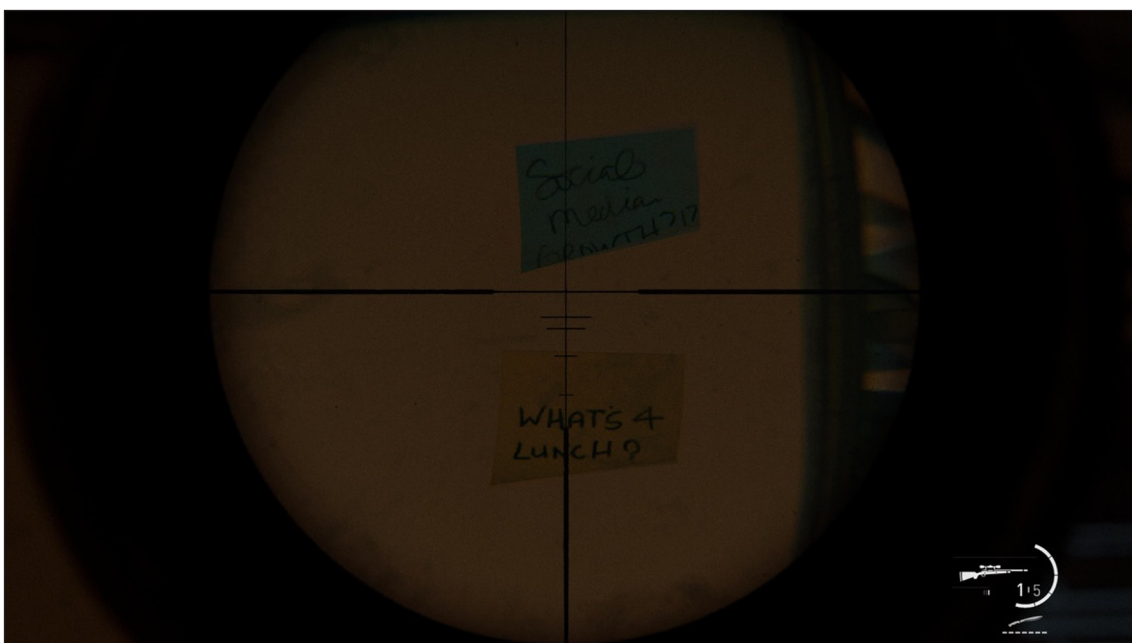


Figure 8: 'What's 4 Lunch?' Post-It (Seattle).

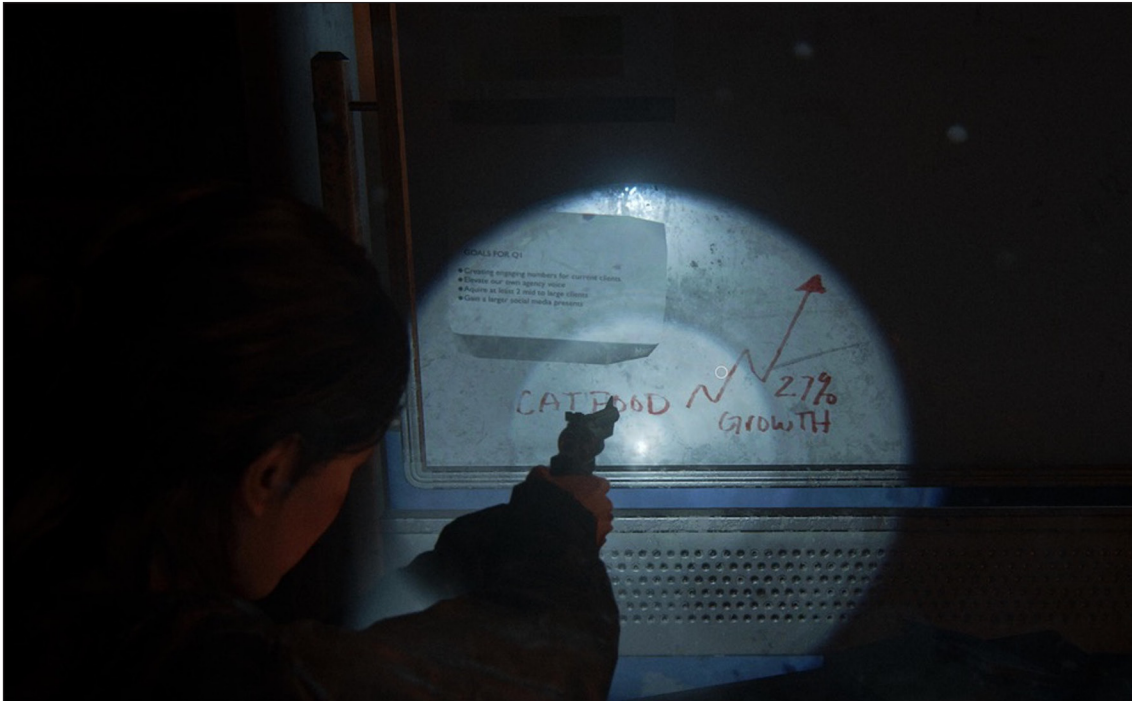


Figure 9: Goals for Q1, Bloom + Baer (Seattle).



Figure 10: Seraphite Mural, Bloom + Baer (Seattle).

In Bloom + Baer, juxtaposition creates critical potential. Many mundane signs, though, become meaningful to players because of (near-)repetition throughout the gameworld. Whiteboards become indexical of the pre-cordyceps chronotope, and one common thread that emerges between them is that they instruct and organise workers. One generic whiteboard model, reused or adapted in multiple spaces, features a checklist for successful business: 'PRACTICE | HARD WORK | FOCUS' (Figure 11).

When adapted, as in the image here, it is with graphs, sales data, and/or strategic plans to increase revenue. Many spaces also include unique whiteboard models, **Figure 12** being an example from Greenplace Market in *TLOU2*. As in Bloom + Baer, it expresses the tasks required of workers, organised around the brand, profits, and revenues – the middle column concluding with ‘HAPPY CUSTOMERS MORE \$\$\$’. Because of the slippage between the in-game past and the lived-world present, these signs suggest the organisation of American life around labour and profit. Post-cordyceps whiteboards complicate this. In a former Seattle boardroom, two survivors use a whiteboard to record their required medical supplies and the passing of the days (**Figure 13**). In the Seattle courthouse basement, a whiteboard communicates FEDRA instructions for storing confiscated goods (**Figure 14**). The bloodied corpse of a FEDRA soldier, alongside three wanted posters, has a narrative role in communicating the WLF uprising that takes place before the protagonists arrive in Seattle. But at a structural level, these elements also reassert the social conflict found in FEDRA spaces throughout *The Last of Us*. WLF whiteboards, meanwhile, show details of patrols and training plans across Seattle, strategies in their power struggle first with FEDRA and later with the Seraphites (**Figure 15**). The survivors use it as an *aide-memoire*, while FEDRA, the WLF, and capital each use the technology to direct the energies of others. If, as Kagen (2022) suggests, wandering between examples serves to connect them, the use of post-cordyceps whiteboards to maintain authoritarian order appears to mirror an earlier controlling capacity of workplace whiteboards. By analogy, players can arrive at a systemic critique: FEDRA and the WLF control footsoldiers in their power struggles; capital controls the worker in pursuit of profit. The connections court the idea that, for the addressee of the whiteboard, the operations of these different social orders are similar.

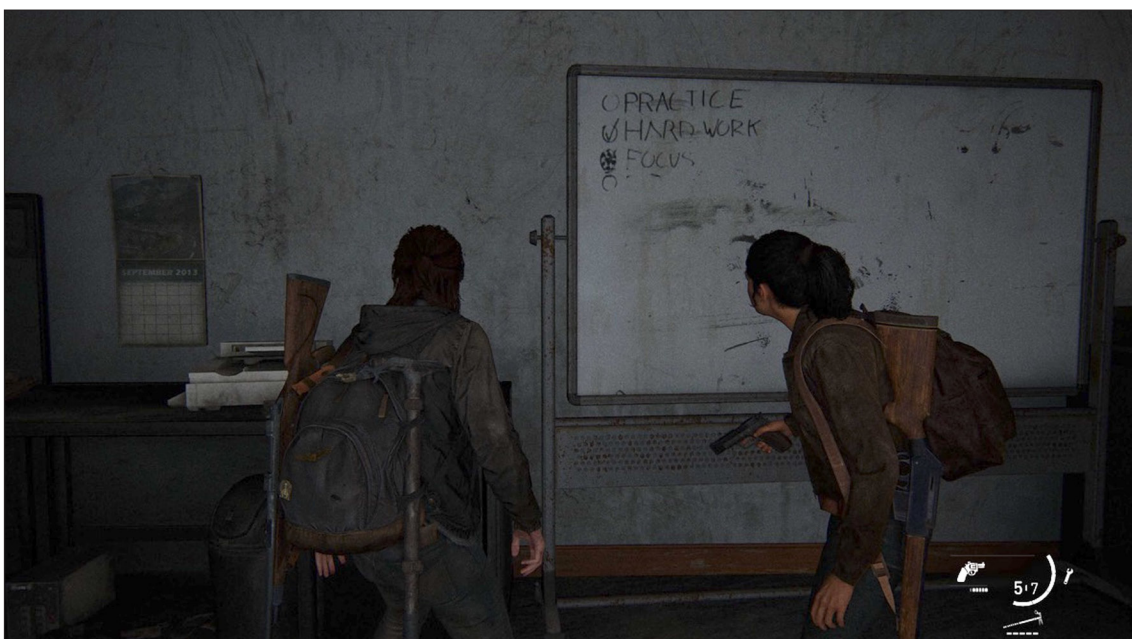


Figure 11: Generic Whiteboard, Bank of Meridian (Seattle).

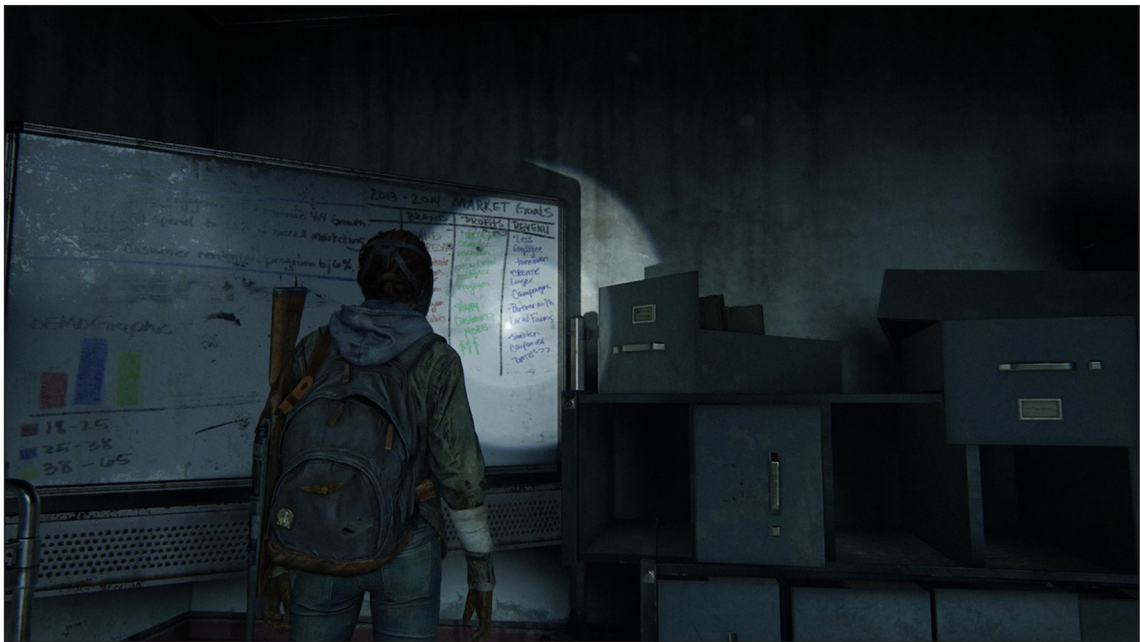


Figure 12: Unique Whiteboard, Greenplace Market (Jackson).

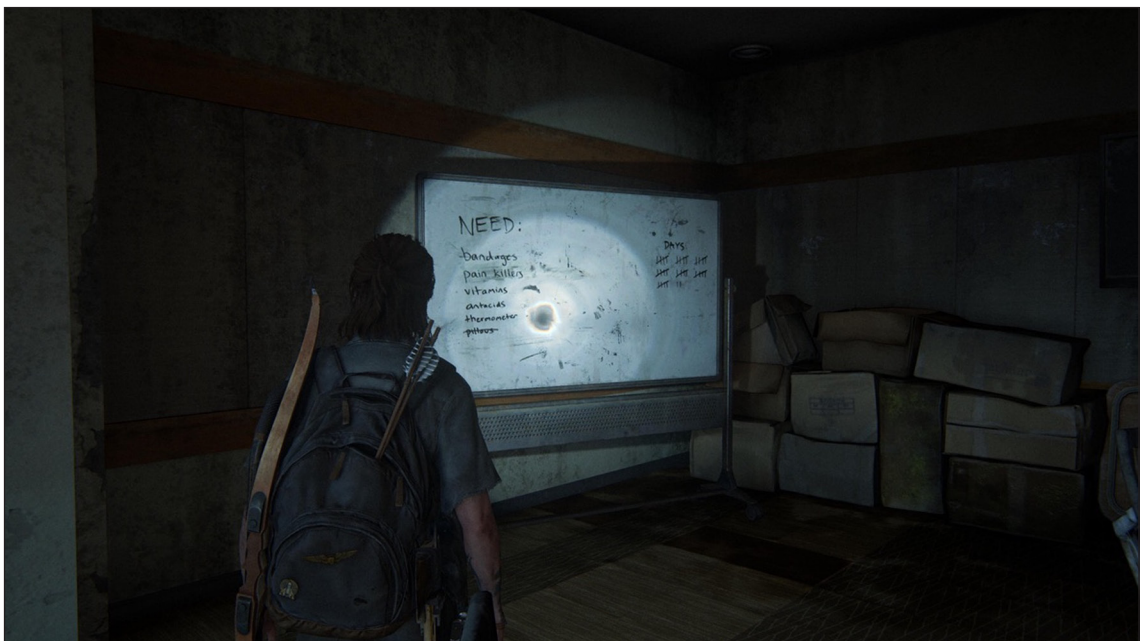


Figure 13: Survivor's Whiteboard (Seattle).



Figure 14: FEDRA Whiteboard (Seattle).

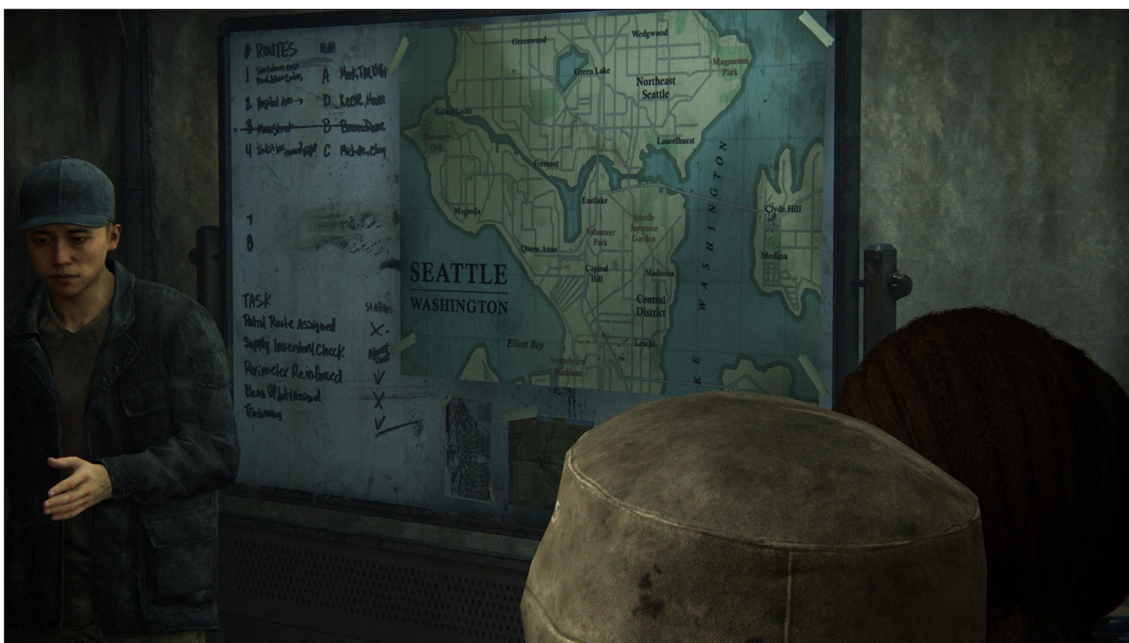


Figure 15: WLF Whiteboard (Seattle).

The most common signs in workers' spaces, though, are workplace posters (**Figure 16**). In the US, these posters are required by federal and state law, the theory being that they inform workers of their rights in order that they can exercise them (see Alexander, 2016). In-game, the most consistently legible of these signs is the Federal Minimum Wage poster (**Figure 17**), which is slightly altered from the US Department of Labor's

official design, but asserts the actual minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour (unchanged since 2009). Often, only the headlines of these posters are legible. They refer to workplace threats, from sexual harassment to discrimination and dangerous conditions. They also issue warnings: one reads ‘Worker’s Compensation Fraud is a Felony’ – the only workplace poster that is ever translated, appearing in Spanish in Seattle (‘Fraudo en el trabajo se un delito’) (Figure 18).¹ The posters invoke a wide range of problems that can arise at work, while also suggesting that government-enforced protections applied to pre-cordyceps workers. They also enable a critique of labour conditions, especially where the spatial mode shapes their meaning. For instance, in the Seattle subway maintenance tunnels workplace posters adorn small, dark, concrete rooms (Figure 17). This subterranean complex – also the site of one FEDRA whiteboard (Figure 19) – is overrun with infected, and functions as one of the more dangerous, combat-laden sequences of play. Airborne cordyceps spores force Ellie and Dina to don gasmasks, but the similarities between this and other, pre-cordyceps atmospheric dangers is courted by the inclusion of protective, plastic-textured workwear in lockers near the workplace posters (Figure 20). The contextualisation of these posters in an unliveable and claustrophobic space creates new associations for them, and reveals forms of work that are particularly dangerous and structurally (physically) hidden from public view.



Figure 16: Workplace Posters (Bill’s Town).

¹ This is, interestingly, almost the only instance of a language other than English in *The Last of Us* – there is Spanish in Manny’s dialogue and the semiotic landscape of the WLF Stadium, but it remains marginal. To my knowledge, the only other in-game language is Chinese, featured exclusively in Seattle Chinatown. The depiction of the US as almost exclusively anglophone departs considerably from its sociolinguistic reality, though this is not my focus here.

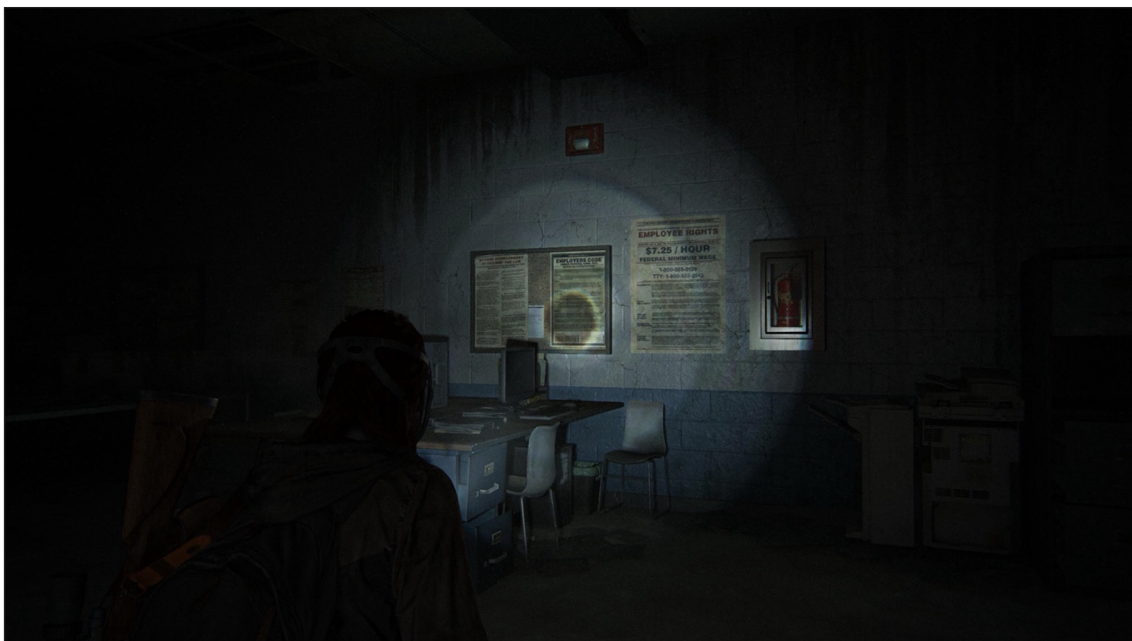


Figure 17: Federal Minimum Wage Poster (Subway Tunnels).

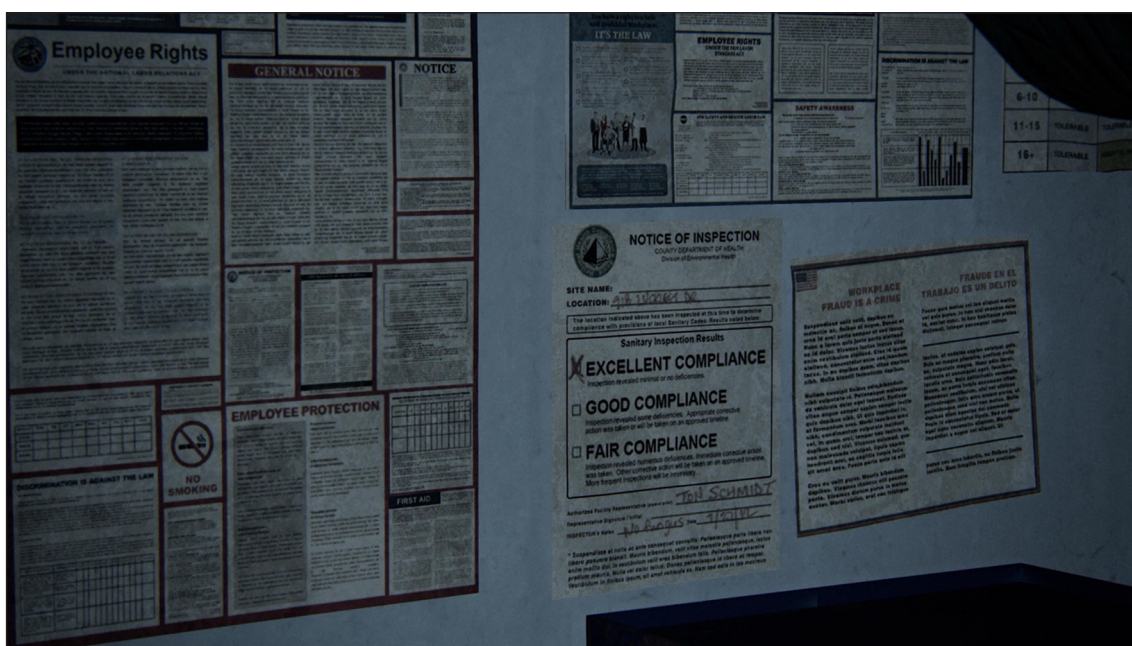


Figure 18: Bilingual Workplace Fraud Sign (Seattle).

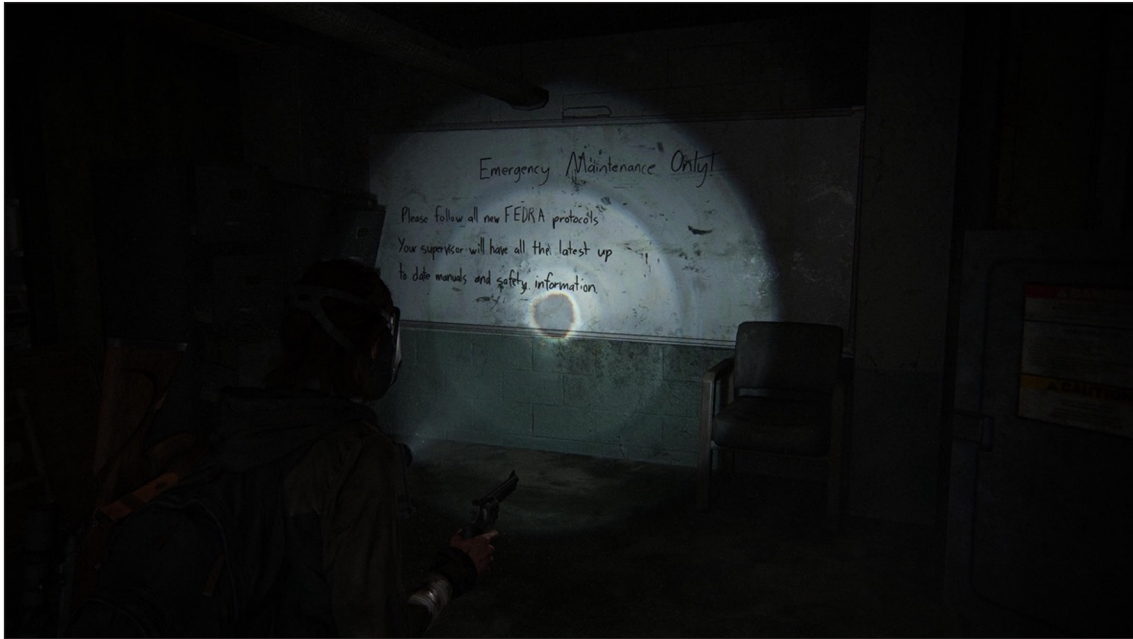


Figure 19: FEDRA Whiteboard (Maintenance Tunnels).



Figure 20: Workwear (Maintenance Tunnels).

Exploring workplaces that are invisible and inaccessible to the general public is a critical affordance of the postcapitalist wandering game. Infrastructural workplaces suggest the worst conditions, but the workers' spaces nestled within leisurely spaces are more surprising. All cities feature spaces of leisure, as sites for free wandering and more constrained action sequences. In part, they seem to complement the reading of contemporary capitalism as defined by abundance and underappreciated freedoms,

which is, again, made conspicuous in dialogue. In one optional but cult *TLOU2* scene, Ellie plays a melancholy cover of A-ha's *Take On Me* (1985) to Dina, using a guitar found in a music shop. Framed by green ivy growing inside the building, the moment can be read as a eulogy for the contemporary order, indexed by 1980s pop music, or as a testament to the enduring humanity of music and other elements of popular culture that, unlike fashion, are not dismissed as stupid. Coffeeshops are common, and coffee is discussed several times: in *TLOU1*, Joel waxes lyrical about coffee to Ellie after finding a machine in a former hotel; in *TLOU2*, Ellie tells Dina that Joel would 'trade half his stuff for a bag of beans' (despite coffee tasting like 'burnt shit', in Dina's words). In the latter dialogue, the exaggeration of the price Joel would pay for coffee suggests an irrational love nurtured in a time of excess. This is filtered through Ellie and Dina's frame of reference – trade rather than monetary exchange. But, interestingly, prices are legible throughout former coffeeshops and similar spaces, telling players that small cappuccinos (for example) were \$3.59 or \$4.29, flavour depending (**Figure 21**). Since the minimum wage on workplace posters is the only reference point for income, the semiotic landscapes make clear that, at least for some, this is roughly half an hour's wage (47.9% or 57.2%). The spatial-semiotic ensemble, again, seems to offer unique critical purchase on the material life of American workers. If we are tempted to romanticise the leisure culture of the contemporary US, we are also reminded that the simple pleasure of the coffeeshop is not universally affordable. The coffeeshop is a site where disposable income is exchanged for flavour and relaxation, a point indexed by kitsch chalkboards constructing coffee as affect, not fuel (**Figure 22**). Absent is the fact that simple coffee brewed in a thermos might be the drink of choice for a worker who, like Joel, needs to be alert through the night.



Figure 21: Cappuccino Board (Seattle).

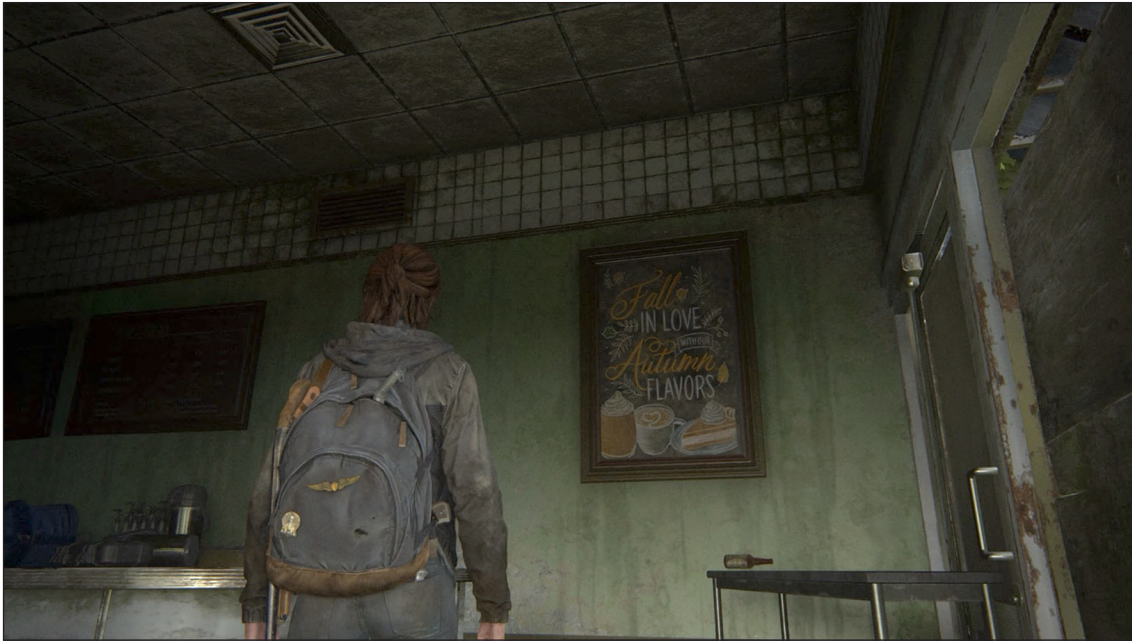


Figure 22: Coffeeshop Sign (Seattle).

These opportunities to think critically about American working life are distributed throughout the games, but some contained sequences or spaces are particularly rich for reflection. In *TLOU2*, one such sequence models, through spatial organisation and semiotic landscapes, three essential components of American capitalist hegemony. It begins with Ellie travelling through a distribution and logistics business with Jesse, in Seattle. WPL, a sign tells us, has delivered ‘trusted shipping since 1942’. Ellie enters the customer-facing front, which has faded blue walls and some natural light. The place is tarnished, but when the player proceeds to the workers’ space in the back, they find it windowless with bare brick walls. There are standard workplace posters here, in relatively high definition. Headings include: ‘sexual harassment is against the law’; ‘employee rights’; ‘employee protection’; ‘no smoking’; and ‘workers’ compensation fraud is a felony’. There is also the federal minimum wage poster. Interestingly, these posters are not faded or tarnished, unlike those detailing services in the customer-facing area. They are more legible, and they have more to say. Like in the maintenance tunnels, workers are invoked in the least appealing space available, and the space in which players might most expect to be attacked by infected. Moreover, the workers invoked here are essential to the functioning of an economy and society that relies on the movement of goods. When the player leaves the building, having removed a physical blockade, they find a street occupied by WLF soldiers. There is no way across the street without being seen at the beginning of the encounter, so the player is motivated to move to the adjacent building – a travel agent.

The player proceeds from an infrastructural workplace into aspirational semiotic landscapes of leisure. Here, the walls are lined with posters selling popular destinations for US tourists: Acapulco, Hawaii, Cabo. American capitalism has been particularly successful at enabling workers to consume more while also increasing their rate of

exploitation (Resnick and Wolff, 2006: 347–350), and here we see that commodified leisure time is a primary reward for labour. As du Plessis notes, vacation ‘enables the subject to accept the reality of a whole year (minus three weeks) of work’ (2015: 759); the travel agent shows us precisely these reasons to consent to capitalism. But this is also a culturally-contested site, where one vision of vacation as freedom from obligations to oneself and one’s employer – a fleeting chronotope of laziness, sunburn, and binge-drinking – clashes with the late capitalist ‘self-realisation vacation’ that offers ‘personal fulfilment’ or self-betterment (du Plessis, 2015: 756). Beside the Acapulco poster, an infomercial exhorts you to ‘explore more exotic locations’ and ‘become a world traveller today!’ (Figure 23). The poster offers no details, but promises a new subjecthood: one sheds the identity of “shipping and logistics employee” and becomes “world traveller”. This particular personal transformation is available, we are told, for \$599. Again, the only calculus made possible in-game is with the federal minimum wage: the cost is 83 hours of labour – and it doesn’t include an actual vacation. Brochures and pamphlets around the space offer ‘perfect flights at the best price around’, and advertised destinations are generally marketed through the lens of a “good deal”. This sales logic is found throughout retail spaces, acknowledging the limited disposable income of the average customer and, consequently, their interest in securing things cheap. Such vacations are out of reach not only to the minimum wage worker invoked by the game, but to many American workers in the lived world, and presumably many players.

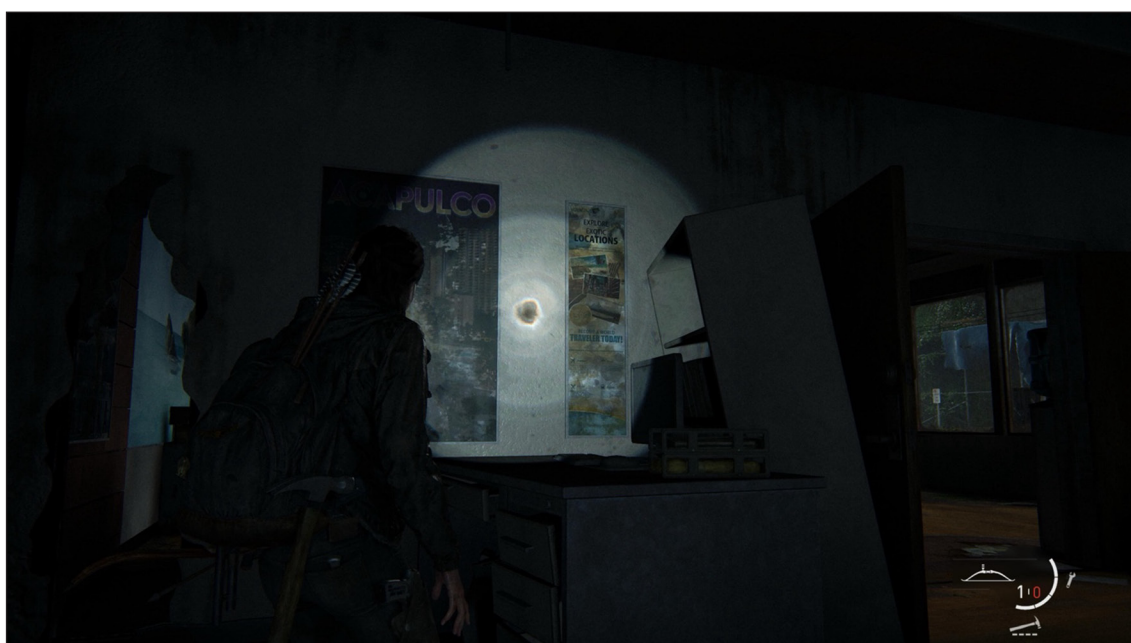


Figure 23: Acapulco and World Traveller Posters (Seattle).

Ellie is next motivated to run across the street, to Columbia Union Bank. The bank promises to resolve the tensions between low-paid exploitation and expensive leisure time. For many, the key to the good life in capitalism is credit. Moving from plastered walls to luxurious red marble, we find filthy but legible adverts for financial products.

The standard arrangement seems to be available via a red ‘premium’ credit card, advertised as offering ‘easy travels’, ‘worry-free leisure’, ‘endless possibilities’ and even 8% cashback (**Figures 24–26**). The promise of the product is precisely that the cardholder can define the ‘possibilities’ they want to pursue, and the card is pictorially presented as the figurative ground for different kinds of vacation (**Figure 24**) and entertainment pursuits (**Figure 25**). Beyond the ‘premium’ card there appears to be another tier, a black card that promises one can ‘experience luxury’ with hotel stays in ‘over 100 countries’ (**Figure 27**). Alongside other examples, these posters present fantasies of leisure and luxury consumption as realisable through credit. The whole concept is captured by an advertisement offering 0% credit for 10 months on purchases over \$800, with the strapline ‘You can now get anything, anytime, anywhere’ (**Figure 28**). This encapsulates the myth of capitalism at the heart of the abundance reading of the pre-cordyceps chronotope, and the real question it poses is whether the offer is open to *anyone*. The conditions mean the purchase has to be worth at least 110 hours of work for the minimum wage worker – and interest begins at 11 months. Set alongside the semiotic landscapes of labour, this is not an obvious celebration of capitalist abundance, nor is it a critique of the vapidness of consumption; rather it demands a critical response from the player on the grounds that it obscures those who are structurally excluded from abundance, whose traces endure into a post-capitalist chronotope. Players experience this space minutes after travelling through the dark, tattered shipping business that invokes minimum wage employees, and, I argue, the experience offers particular grounds for developing a critical reflection on the structural workings of American capitalism, between wage, work, and leisure.

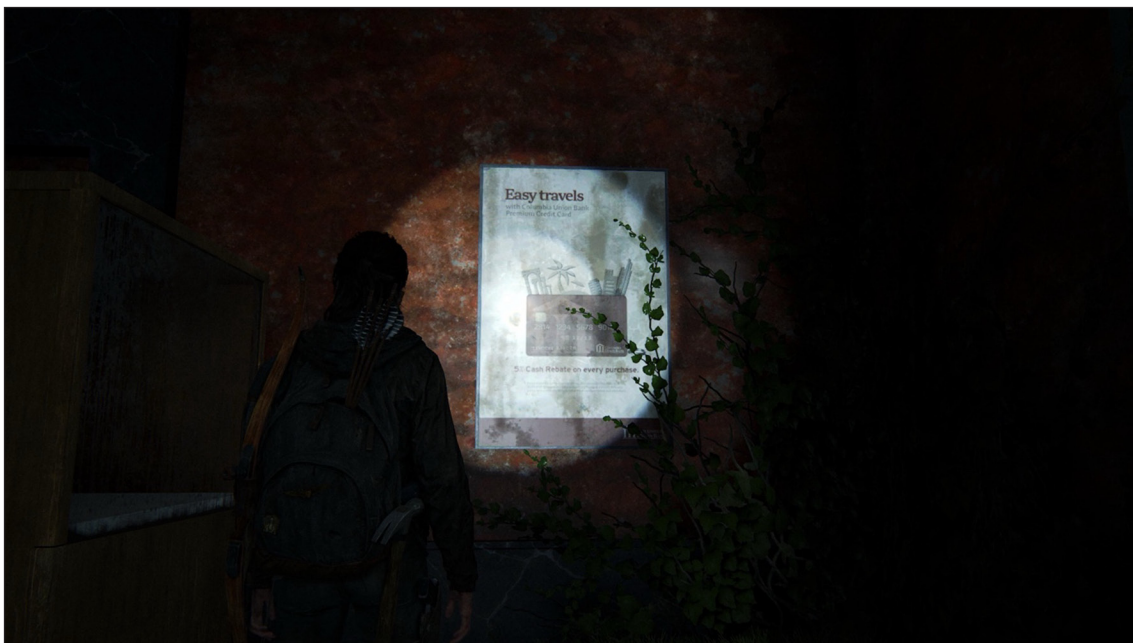


Figure 24: Credit Card Advert (Seattle).

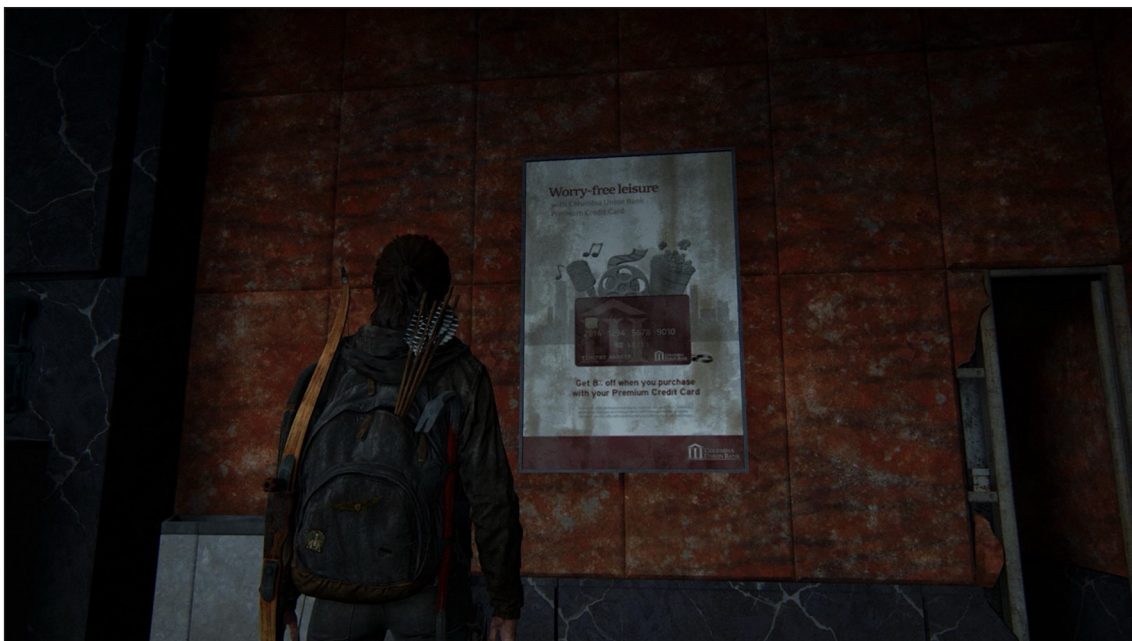


Figure 25: Credit Card Advert (Seattle).



Figure 26: Credit Card Advert (Seattle).

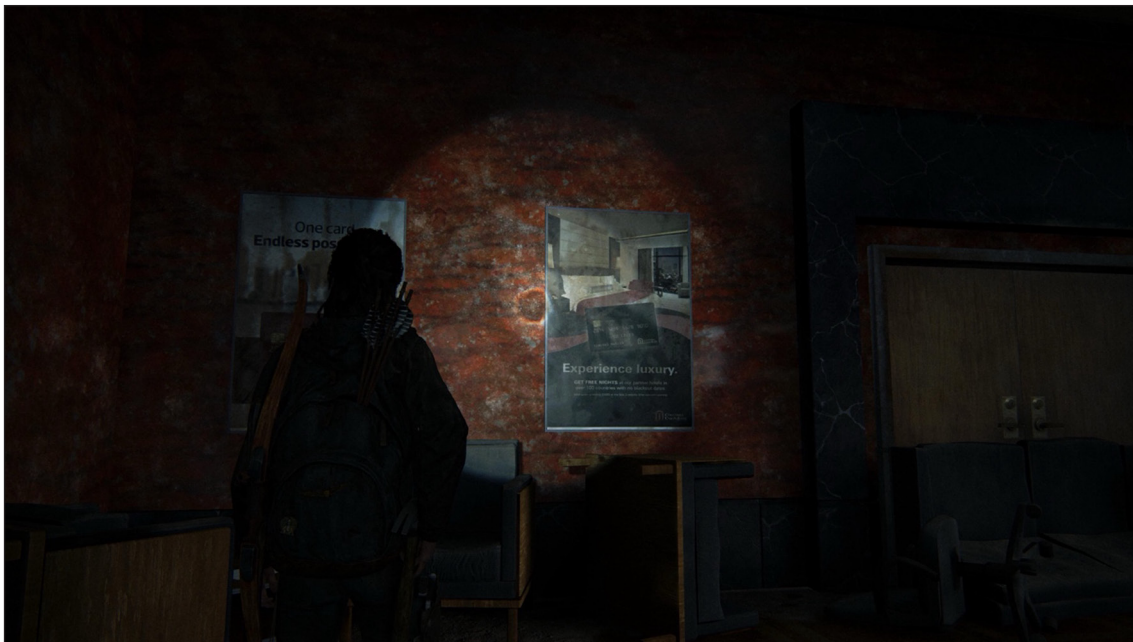


Figure 27: Premium Credit Card Advert (Seattle).



Figure 28: Credit Arrangement Poster (Seattle).

A final example invokes one of the essential observations of anticapitalist thought: that production structures conflictual social relations, primarily conceived as between workers and capitalists. In a Seattle laundromat, players might find a ‘Worker Rights’ sign (Figure 29). Posted to a cork ‘Community Board’, its subtitle reads ‘Protect your

place in the workspace'. The barely legible subheadings include 'Know your union'. The image – a yellow hand holding a spanner – indexes manual, skilled labour and a non-racialised working subject (yellow being the default colour of stylised human emojis). The universalism of the skin tone overrides the specificity of the spanner: the poster invokes the category of 'worker'. Its placement is important; alongside a flyer for a local soccer club and a disco night, the community board is, as its name suggests, a grassroots sign technology. It appears makeshift, if not totally amateur, and it is located outside the institutions that structure capitalist hegemony and the workspaces that host federal notices. It advertises recreational activities that are self-organised and apparently cost nothing, unlike the leisure pursuits discussed above. Importantly, the sign casts worker-led organisation as a conspicuous absence in workplaces – there, unionism and collective bargaining are never represented. The laundromat reveals the agency of workers, illuminating in turn the specificity of other pre-cordyceps signs created by government, employers, or businesses. The spatial separation of signs explaining federal regulations from those that aim to *improve* conditions for workers calls into question the *status quo* represented by workplace posters. This is a unique sign, easily missed, and it suggests the invisibilisation of unionism in both the social and semiotic systems of contemporary capitalism. At the same time, the fact that it was inserted into the game at all testifies to the counter-hegemonic possibilities of popular ideological forms, and the latent potential of workers.

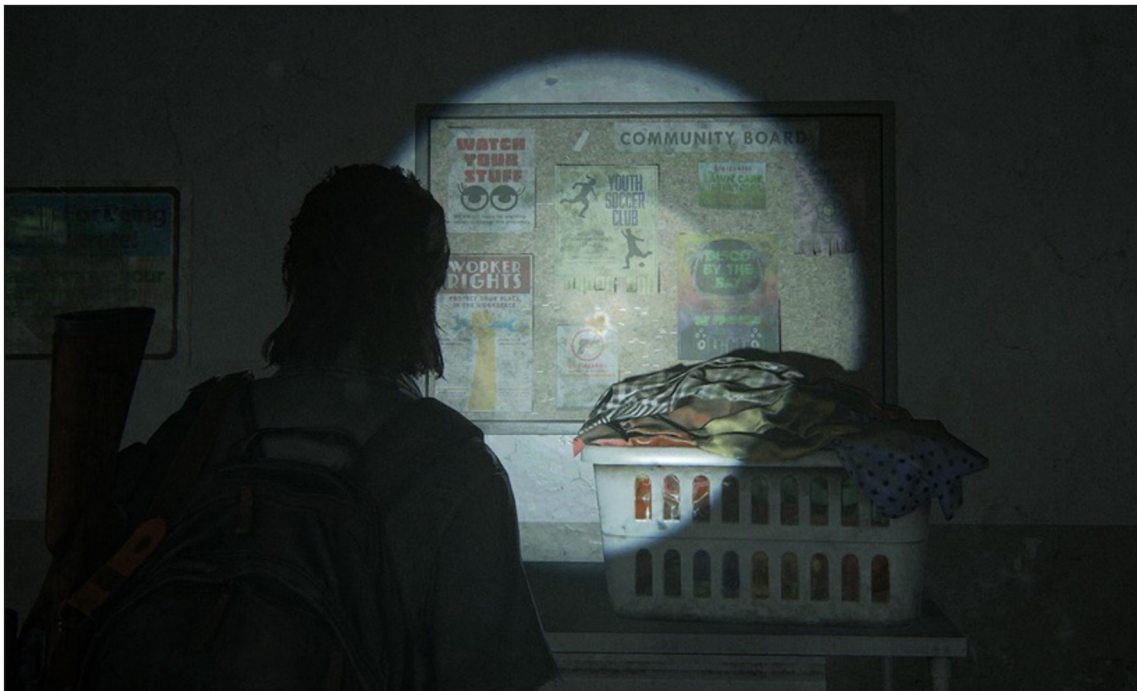


Figure 29: Worker Rights Poster (Seattle).

The ‘worker rights’ sign also highlights the porous boundary between gameworld and lived world. In 2013, when *TLOU1* was released, a series of employer-led lawsuits challenged regulations from the National Labor Relations Board, which would require workplace posters to explain the right to unionise and collectively bargain (Alexander, 2016: 490–491). The federal appeals court ruled in favour of businesses, and the regulations were rescinded. Intentionally or not, the semiotic landscapes of *The Last of Us* reflect this victory of capital over labour. These landscapes embed opportunities for anticapitalist critique, partly due to mimesis. As Kellner argues, producers of realist media ‘must draw upon an often nasty and conflictual reality in order to gain credibility’, hence they ‘may deflate or undermine the ideological illusions of their own products and however unwittingly engage in social critique and ideological subversion’ (1984: 203). If this ‘deflation’ is governed by the realist aesthetic that is dominant in contemporary videogames, the spatial-semiotic ensemble is particularly well-suited to making the puncture. After all, the modes it comprises (text and image as semiotic landscapes; spatial organisation) have a prominent role in conveying narrativised histories and the character of the gameworld (its “lore”) without disrupting narrative progression. Players can ‘examine [a still] image in-depth and at their own pace’ (Hawreliak, 2019: 53); the same is true of legible text and explorable spaces. In doing so, they access a particular ideological strand of *The Last of Us*, with critical and anticapitalist elements. Excepting the prologue, the dialogic mode takes capitalism as a culture, made sense of with reference to its leisure pursuits – coffeeshops and cinema. But the semiotic landscapes, which are hard to ignore, constantly invoke capitalism as a political economy. Aided by chronotopic disjuncture, the spatial-semiotic ensemble denaturalises certain ideological representations of contemporary life, culminating in an available reading of the in-game history – our slippery present – as organised not around leisure or abundance, but labour.

As an interpretive frame, labour grounds a critique of ideology in the world and on the walls. It sheds a critical light on signs at the Fresnel pharmaceutical company and Seattle hospital that promise to service the human body so it can fulfil its obligations as an instrument of labour (**Figures 30 and 31**). Likewise, pre-cordyceps domestic spaces come to conjure subjects who need to assure themselves, through motivational posters, that their material conditions might change for the better (**Figure 32**). This reading also changes the meaning of the radical break represented by cordyceps, particularly for working-class labourers like Joel. Between *TLOU1* and *TLOU2*, Joel lives in a well-maintained, two-story house, with music, films, and literature, while spending a great deal of time living as a sort of modern cowboy – a lifestyle that seems to reflect his love of horses and Westerns. He is free of any mortgage or wage relation, but partakes

in communally-organised work, leading patrols that fit his skillset, have a clear social purpose, and amuse the player. He has a surrogate daughter, a brother, electricity, and a literal safe space (he dies because he *leaves* Jackson). For all the spatial-semiotic reflections on labour in *The Last of Us*, it is cordyceps that gives Joel, and others in his position, an alternative outcome to exploitation sweetened by wage increases: the ‘end to the wage system’ desired by Marxists (Resnick and Wolff, 2006: 347–350). Framed by the references to American working life, this outcome calls into question the dystopian nature of apocalypse. Equally, it effectively places the end of the wage system where Marx located it – in an epoch of revolutionary political economic transformation, achieved here not through human agency but through collapse. Thus while in some respects *The Last of Us* tends, like much postapocalyptic media, towards conservative narratives and value systems (Murray, 2018; Callahan, 2019; Kagen, 2022), such tendencies are undercut by its caustic registration and representation of capitalist political economy and its exclusions. This complicates the ideological force of the text, and raises questions about whether and how it might influence players to engage with the politics of our present. But if such a mainstream game harbours counter-hegemonic ideological strands, which do not seem to constitute the authorised reading of the game, why is it available? Is this solely a mimetic reflex, or can it be traced to a more complex dynamic?



Figure 30: Fresnel Logo (Seattle).

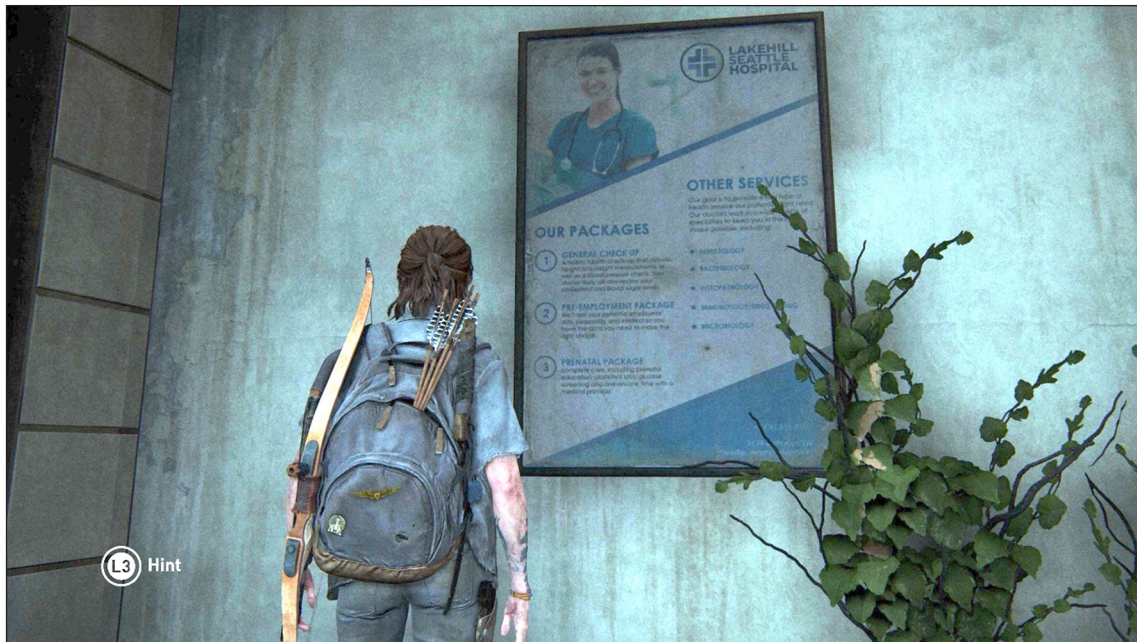


Figure 31: Hospital Services (Seattle).

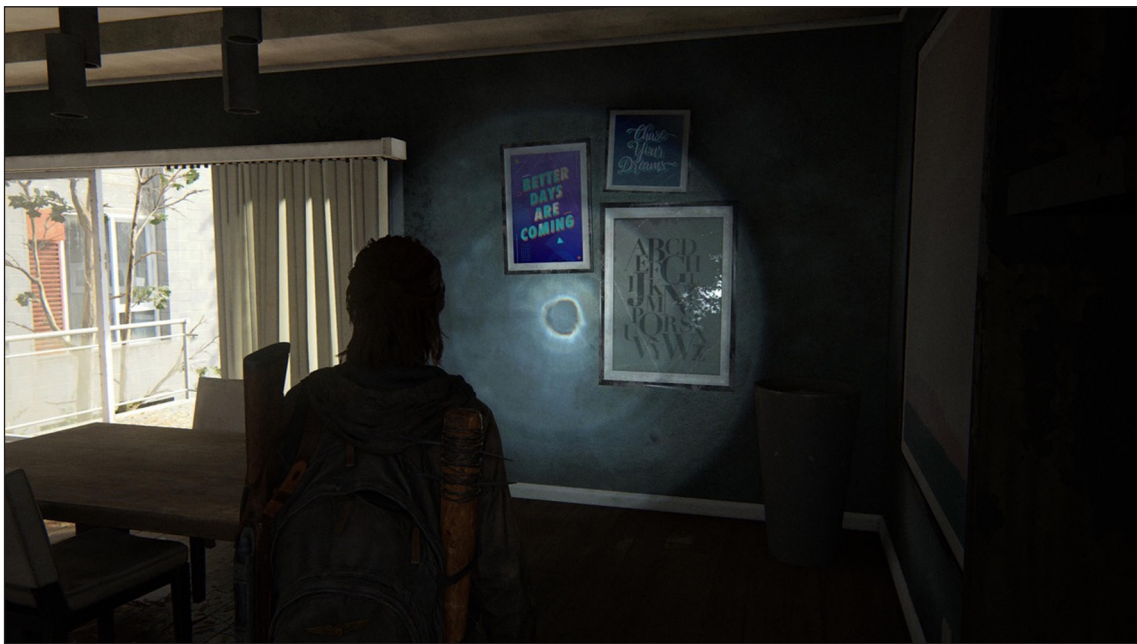


Figure 32: Inspirational Posters (Seattle).

Ideology, conflict, and ludic landscapes

Clearly, it is simplistic to assume that mainstream videogames encode dominant ideological values – that they articulate the interests of the powerful. My original

analysis of *The Last of Us* draws out its anticapitalist potential, while revealing the ideological and meaning-making potential of its ludic semiotic landscapes. But for the larger project of ideology critique, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the text communicates multiple, even discordant, ideological propositions through different modes. After the prologue, the dialogic mode offers a culturalist understanding of capitalism, completely overlooking its political economy. The spatial-semiotic ensemble, though, relentlessly reasserts a materialist understanding of capitalist life. Of course, players might miss parts of the ensemble, but given the repetition of signs through space and themes across signs, they are given ample opportunity to engage with this strand of *The Last of Us*. From a theoretical, methodological, and political outlook, the implications of this point become clear when we consider the production process behind the text. *The Last of Us* is written by Neil Druckmann, Halley Gross (*TLOU2*), and Josh Scherr (*TLOU2*, ‘additional writing’). But over 1200 people worked on *TLOU*, and more than 1700 on the 2022 remake (Moby Games, 2025a; 2025b). An in-house team of 350 led production on *TLOU2*, but 2169 developers worked on the game, many of whom were subcontracted (Lanier, 2020). And to borrow Hawreliak’s evocative phrase, production involves ‘the division of semiotic labor within a multimodal ensemble’ (2019: 44): different teams are largely responsible for different modes, which is one possible explanation for ideological dissonance within the final, published text. To echo Vološinov once more, the semiotic significance of this is in the fact that these are *socially-positioned* individuals – workers whose job quality, pay, autonomy, and beliefs differ, and who exist in socially-patterned structures like anybody else. Given the sheer size of teams involved, capital-intensive videogames emerge from multiple viewpoints and social positions, to a greater degree than traditional objects of ideology critique like novels or advertisements (which are by no means univocal themselves). To make theoretical sense of the text as an act of communication with political significance, then, we need to take stock of the conflicts in videogame production.

Two popular myths threaten to undermine any analysis of AAA games like *The Last of Us*: that game design is a paid leisure activity, and that genius auteurs like Neil Druckmann are responsible for the product on shelves, which are not only entirely intentional, but entirely reflective of *auteurial* intentions (see also Parker, 2017, on *Bioshock* auteur Ken Levine). The first myth, courted by the industry itself, ‘presents digitization as dissolving the contradictions and conflicts of capitalism’ (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, 2009: 66) and emerged when ‘digitally adept youth’ sought ‘escape from the tedium of service or industrial jobs’ by designing games in the 1980s (2009: 24). These games started a \$250bn industry, now serviced by huge teams of workers. Videogame production is a quintessential example of “cognitive capitalism”, in which intellectual labour is subject to the dynamics of exploitation, and thinking

power is purchased with a wage. Employers do not mistake game designers for creative partners in a leisure activity, but recognise them as workers with potentially profitable cognitive skills. Consider the following observation, made by a studio executive: '[u]nlike machinery that stops working at 5:00, ours might be home, [but] they're thinking of new ideas, and their whole life experience is creating the potential for new ideas' (2009: 37). The important point here is that team-based game design is inflected by what Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter call a 'conflict between autonomous invention power and capitalist co-optation' (2009: 32) and the troublesome fact that because this 'mental machinery' is 'also a living subject' it 'constantly poses a problem of control for those who employ it' (2009: 37). In this view, interrogating *The Last of Us* as a text reveals the possibilities for cognitive workers to complicate the ideological content of videogames.

By recognising *The Last of Us* as produced in the structures of cognitive capitalism, we recover the role of workers in shaping the text, which in turn opens an understanding of the semiotic landscapes as part of a resistant politics of solidarity. As mentioned above, there seems to be no theme to the workplaces – players wander through sites of cognitive labour, factory work, infrastructure, and service industries. But, from a critical perspective, all are connected by the experience of exploitation, and, we might imagine, other aspects of contemporary working life, such as subordination to clock time. The videogame industry is fertile ground for such a politics to emerge. In 2009, Dyer-Wither and de Peuter noted that, amid high profile lawsuits and scandals about working conditions, videogame workers were becoming aware of themselves as a 'ludic cognitariat' with 'disruptive potential' (2009: 68). Major studios and publishers have since become notorious for intensified exploitation driven by unreasonable working hours and sustained through short-term contracts. One 'unconscionable' part of 'the digital sweatshop' is 'crunch' where workers put in long shifts, evenings, and weekends to produce exceptional games (Brogan, 2022: 1). The extraordinary detail in *The Last of Us* – the prerequisite for a diverse Special Collection like this – is rooted in 'a culture of perfectionism, where games have to be great, no matter the human cost' (Schreier, 2020; see also Schreier, 2017, Chapter 2; Monterose, 2019). Production on *The Last of Us*, specifically, involved unnecessary work, stress, and burnout. Schreier (2020) judges that, at Naughty Dog, crunch is somewhere between culture and strategy – clearly not demanded from bosses, but encouraged through hiring practices that favour 'workaholics' and a *laissez-faire* approach to overworking. As Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter note, while studios routinely claim to be against crunching, its normalisation 'is a good deal – a steal in fact – for game companies' (2009: 60). Amy Hennig, an industry veteran who was head writer and creative director for Naughty Dog's hugely

successful *Uncharted* series, recalls never working less than an eighty-hour week at the studio, and links crunch on *Uncharted 4* to personal crises among workers, including divorces (*Designer Notes*, 2016). When Naughty Dog defended crunch as the autonomous outcome of ‘passionate’ individuals who want to work overtime, Carrie Patel of Obsidian Entertainment wrote a series of widely-circulated posts on Twitter (now “X”) countering that developers crunch out of fear that ‘their job may be on the line’ (2021). It is a reasonable fear in an insecure industry. The participation of outsourced workers in crunch is less visible, but Yaden (2019) reports that because some Naughty Dog contractors were paid barely above minimum wage, they needed to work overtime, and some even took 24-hour shifts. The working conditions of the industry, then, do not put workers out of touch with dire exploitation, as the public image of “play as work” might lead one to expect. The struggles of labour that we see throughout neoliberal capitalist economies are acute in the videogame industry, and this has shaped the politics of workers.

The Last of Us was made in the context of protracted struggles for the ludic cognitariat. In 2017 – between *TLOU* and *TLOU2* – the *Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo* became one of the first unions for game workers. The following year, Game Workers Unite was founded with the goal of organising the industry. Westar and Legault see this as an important shift from routine, individual acts of resistance at work (slacking, complaining, quitting) to collective action and bargaining. They argue, rightly, that ‘it is through public and collective actions that momentum for change is built’ (2019: 850). If momentum is lost, they fear, workers ‘could interpret the failure of these organizations as closing the book on the appropriateness or feasibility of unions in their industry’ (2019: 858). At the time of writing, there have been extensive layoffs at major studios over several years, but unions have had some success, and there is a sense that they might change the balance of power in the industry (see for example Kerr, 2024). It is equally important, though, that organisation follows a long history of everyday resistance in the workplace and *through* game design. Famously, Warren Robinett created the first known videogame “easter egg” in 1979, in defiance of Atari’s refusal to give royalties or named credits to designers. He coded an obscure pathway to a secret room, with nothing inside but the words ‘Created by Warren Robinnet’ on a flashing, infinite loop. By the time it was discovered, Robinnet had quit and millions of cartridges had been sold. Atari tried to excise the text, but met with the resistance of a coder who would only change it to ‘Fixed by Brad Stewart’ (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, 2009: 10–11). Ultimately, Atari turned the easter egg into good publicity, and made \$25m on a game Robinnet built for a \$22,000 salary. His coded act of resistance was possible because he was the sole designer working on the game, but even in the

vast productive apparatus that created *The Last of Us* there is a certain autonomy, which allows ‘designers and artists ... to add the little graphical flourishes that make Naughty Dog games unique’ (Schreier, 2020). In these games, we might be seeing the convergence of moves to organisation and subtle resistance expressed through design. The semiotic landscapes of *The Last of Us* allude to problems that marred production at Naughty Dog (including an allegation of sexual harassment [Klepek, 2017]), while also countering the invisibilisation of labour. The ‘Worker’s Rights’ poster, and everything that hinges on it, performs ideological work by invoking the category of worker as near universal and automatically invested in fighting for progress – an offer, promise, and request for solidarity in a lived world of workplace struggle.

The semiotic landscapes of *The Last of Us*, then, reveal much about the ideological complexity of videogames and their use of signs. Here, we see that multimodal aspects of the texts represent discrete but connected channels for ideological communication. Certain strands do, in fact, support the assumption that mainstream games articulate dominant social interests. But other strands, concentrated in specific modes, seem more like channels of communication between workers in poor conditions and gamers who are themselves, in other parts of life, wage labourers. Perhaps disciplining labour is in part about disciplining those messages – though it would be a significant and strange absence if *The Last of Us* simply neglected to include the semiotic landscapes of capitalism. As Resnick and Wolff remind us, American capitalism is ‘dependent on, and ultimately vulnerable to, a working class in deep distress’ (2006: 341). Echoes of this distress are represented in *The Last of Us*, as part of a world that is heading towards collapse. But more than that, the distress of workers in lived world capitalism is the generative force that leads the critique to be encoded. This is politically significant: as elements of popular culture, mainstream videogames are the ‘site’ and ‘stake’ of a struggle for change (Hall, 1981/2018: 360), as such popular critiques undermine the core ideological defence that capitalism is the ideal form of social organisation – even if they only articulate a drastic alternative. After all, popular culture is a field where subjectivity and beliefs are not just reflected but formed. Here, ideological conflict takes on a practical, persuasive significance.

Beyond *The Last of Us* and game studies, it is also clear that examining ludic landscapes offers something to more traditional investigations of linguistic or semiotic landscapes. This analysis reminds us not only that signs help us to piece together the story of a place, but that there is an importance to the signs that are hidden from us through the spatial organisation of contemporary societies – signs that regulate *other* workers, who cannot see how we are regulated at work. There is a semiotic world of labour, which is of critical ideological importance and deserves greater attention.

Bringing ludic versions of these signs to the attention of the field allows us to reimagine the goals of examining landscapes, foregrounding the question of ideological struggle that stretches across popular culture and the lived environment. It also reveals that signs are both ideological *and* channels of communication – and the fact that the semiotic worker and interpreter both necessarily exist within the social structures of capitalism is a point of considerable importance.

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Competing Interests

I am co-editing the Special Collection in which this essay appears: 'Gaming and the Humanities: Interdisciplinary Essays on *The Last of Us* (2013–)'. I have had no editorial involvement with my particular essay, which has undergone the standard process of double-blind peer review, and been overseen by my co-editor, Adrienne Mortimer.

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