

Niall Ng

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Prof. Paul Davarsi

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Playing in Role: How *The Last of Us Part II* Perfects the Revenge Story

As technology in video games continually evolves, so do the possibilities for video games to tell compelling narratives. Players used to have to experience a video game narrative through text-based dialogue, polygon-shaped characters, and low-quality music and sound design. This generation of gamers, however, can experience games which are highly cinematic, utilizing and combining the highest quality of writing, acting, programming, visual art, and music. Film and television have been producing high-quality narratives for decades, but the audience experience has always been that of the observer, witnessing and interpreting the character's actions from an outside view. Video games, on the other hand, put the player in the role of the protagonist, and the actions of the character and audience are more easily interpreted as one.

The Last of Us (2013) developed by Naughty Dog, is one of the most celebrated single-player, roleplaying narratives in video games. The game features thrilling gameplay, rich dialogue, and intriguing moral dilemmas in a post-apocalyptic setting. The game's sequel, *The Last of Us Part II (2020)* features equally superb quality of design and narrative storytelling, winning the honor of Game of the Year, Best Direction, and Best Narrative 2020 from The Game Awards (The Game Awards, 2021). *The Last of Us Part II* is a revenge story, in which the

player takes the role of Ellie, seeking vengeance on Abby, another young woman who killed Ellie's father figure, Joel. Revenge stories have been told through several mediums across literature and entertainment, and often the point is made that revenge is a self-destructive action with little satisfaction. This is also reflected in the revenge story of *The Last of Us Part II*, but never before has the audience been able to take on the role of the characters and experience their perspectives so directly. Playing in role provides a richer, more nuanced experience for audiences compared to merely observing, and provides greater opportunity for social-emotional reflection and learning through narrative study.

The first act of *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) features the murder of Joel, the protagonist of *The Last of Us* (2013). In my experience, this shocked me when I first played the game. In the trailers leading up to the game's release, the developers never revealed or suggested that Joel's death would be the catalyst for Ellie's actions in the game. And after taking on the role of Joel in *The Last of Us*, I felt a personal connection to the character, making his demise even more disturbing than if I had simply observed him. He is murdered as revenge by a young woman named Abby, whose father was murdered by Joel in the previous game, several years earlier. Players then play as Ellie, as she sneaks into enemy territory to exact revenge on Abby. Because of my personal connection to Joel, I related to Ellie's feelings of hatred and was genuinely motivated to get revenge on Abby as well. On her journey, Ellie kills several of Abby's friends and risks the lives of her own loved ones, and the game takes a turn when Ellie and Abby finally come face to face. To continue the narrative, the player is forced to do the unthinkable, take the role of the perceived antagonist.

The narrative shifts focus to Abby, and returns us to the moments after she kills Joel and returns to her own settlement. As Abby, we experience firsthand her struggles, triumphs,

relationship with her murdered father, and relationships with her friends. I was apprehensive about the concept of playing as Abby at first, but as I continued to take on her role, I began to empathize with her, and understand her feelings and motivations. I realized that the people I killed as Ellie weren't villains, they were just imperfect people trying to survive and help their friends. When Abby realizes that Ellie killed her friends, I felt guilty and understood her hatred as well. When the two meet again, the player plays as Abby, trying to kill Ellie, our original protagonist. Abby wins the fight, but chooses to show mercy and let Ellie live. In the final act of the game, Ellie returns years later, just in time to save Abby from a group of bandits. One final time, the player plays as Ellie as she brawls Abby in a fight to the death. After experiencing the perspectives of both characters, it was a painful experience forcing the two to fight each other. I was forced to fight to progress the narrative, but with each punch I just hoped that the two would finally stop and put their hatred to rest. In the end, Ellie wins, but spares Abby in return, abandoning her quest for revenge. As the player, I felt more relieved at the end than ever during my experience with the game. *The Last of Us Part II* succeeds where revenge narratives in other mediums have fallen short for generations, it made me relate to both sides of the conflict, and it did this through the reflective experience of playing in role.

Creating the uniquely rich experience of having players take the role of opposing characters was always at the root of director and writer Neil Druckman's concept for *The Last of Us Part II*. In an interview with Indiewire, Druckman explains the controversial character switch decision by stating,

"You're already connected to Ellie and Joel from "The Last of Us," so we put them through a very tragic event, give you one look at a quest for revenge, and then shift to Abby in order to tell a mirror story of redemption that follows the person who — by

killing Joel and avenging her father — has already accomplished what Ellie is trying to do, and is struggling to come to grips with it” (Druckman, 2020).

Despite the game’s critical success, the game’s feedback from its fanbase was polarizing. Many were extremely satisfied with the game, as I was, but many were so upset by the narrative that they decried the game online and even issued death threats to the game’s cast and creative team (Tassi, 2020). Why did so many people find the concept of changing roles so triggering? And what can we learn from it? A study conducted at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology sought to find the answers to such a social phenomenon. They interviewed players who reported various levels of satisfaction with *The Last of Us Part II*, and asked a series of questions concerning their experience with the forced character switch. Unsurprisingly, they found that reported satisfaction with the game directly related to the player’s satisfaction with the character switch (Erb, et al, 2021). But researchers were also able to categorize specific common themes regarding player-character relationship based on responses. One of the major themes which determined the player’s level of satisfaction is “Malleability of Character Image” (Erb, et al, 2021). As I play a role-playing game, I tend to view my character as more of a version of myself, while also defining my own image of who I believe the character to be. Dissatisfied players reportedly held on to their character image as the player, meaning that they found it difficult to rationalize Abby’s decisions and were attached to their positive perceptions of Joel and Ellie. Satisfied players, on the other hand, were flexible in adjusting character image, meaning that they were able to adjust their image of the characters based on new information, allowing them to have a stronger player-character relationship with Abby after the forced character switch. *The Last of Us Part II* presented its audience with a challenge. Most video games challenge players’ coordination and strategy skills, but this game went deeper by

challenging players' social-emotional skills. Players were challenged to use social reasoning and empathy to reevaluate their perceptions of the characters when presented with new information and experiences. This process of continual self-reflection is an essential part of social-emotional development, making the game an excellent choice for narrative study, particularly for young adults.

All narratives are subject to criticism, and so dissatisfied players are not wrong for their perception of the game. However, there are many who may not have fully met the social-emotional challenge presented by the narrative. Like any good game, the developers created opportunities for players to develop their social-emotional skills to make meeting the challenge possible. Jane McGonigal in her book, *Reality is Broken*, cites several benefits gaming culture has on its participants, specifically, providing meaningful rewards. "Compared with games, reality is pointless and unrewarding. Games help us feel more rewarded by making our best effort" (McGonigal, 2011, p. 148). To help players' meet the social-emotional challenge, developers created moments for the audience to connect with Abby and reap emotional rewards. As an example, a reportedly satisfied player who participated in the aforementioned study at Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology stated that they closely related to Abby's fear of heights and experienced strong feelings of empathy when Abby is confronted with her fear (Erb, et al, 2021, p. 7). In my experience, I recall the moment I knew that I no longer wanted Abby to die. In a particularly scary section of the game, Abby braves a dark, abandoned hospital basement filled with the monstrous infected. She ventures down in search of medical supplies to save a girl who once helped save her life. Abby is confronted by, and kills a terrifying infected monster known as, "The Rat King". In this iconic boss battle, I was greatly challenged and upon victory experienced fiero, a term which McGonigal defines as an emotional

high after triumphs over adversity (McGonigal, 2011, p. 33). I was proud of myself, and therefore Abby, for going through such a terrifying ordeal and making it out alive, and all for the sake of another person. Because I accepted the social-emotional rewards that came with experiencing Abby's triumphs, I was motivated and prepared to take on the game's biggest challenge: changing my perception of my perceived enemy. The examples mentioned, as well as several other moments in the game, show that the social-emotional challenge of *The Last of Us Part II* is not, by any means, insurmountable.

But how does this narrative, based on the revenge cycle between two fictional women, apply to our understanding of the real world? We may not all harbor hatred for other individuals or groups, but we each view society from a particular social lens. For each of us, there are people of other backgrounds in society whom we typically believe as other, or completely outside ourselves. The narrative in *The Last of Us Part II* provides a kind of social-emotional simulation, in which we can safely explore our negative feelings and our perceptions of groups as other. Video game simulations offer players a unique opportunity to explore new circumstances by exploring and facing challenges firsthand. In a case cited by James Paul Gee and Elisabeth Hayes in their book, *Women in Gaming*, a German game designer creates a modified version of *The Sims 2 (2004)*, developed by EA, to help players understand the challenges of the poor in society (Gee & Hayes, 2010). *The Sims 2 (2004)* normally allows players to build and create their dream homes over time as their simulated avatars conduct everyday business at an accelerated rate. But in this version, the player's avatar was a single parent, forced to work a job for unskilled laborers, and buy nearly everything they would need to survive, instead of relying on the game's free food and clothes. Many of us are fortunate enough to understand poverty intellectually, from an outside perspective. This version of *The Sims 2*,

however, seeks to connect the issue of poverty to the players on an emotional level (Gee & Hayes, 2010). By having players accept the role of an impoverished single parent, the players connect to the struggles of the working poor on an emotional level by developing a play-character relationship with their avatar. Unlike *The Sims 2*, *The Last of Us Part II* is a narrative-driven game with a fixed plot and characters. But it does provide players with a simulated character relationship in which they can explore negative emotions including anger, grief, sadness, and fear. No one wishes to experience such feelings, but they are a part of our lives, and it is important to know how to deal with them in healthy ways. Cautionary tales against taking revenge have existed in literature for generations, but *The Last of Us Part II* gives its audience a safe opportunity to explore negative emotions firsthand in a simulation of circumstances which create these feelings.

Though we must all experience anger or even hate at some point in our lives, women in particular are encouraged not to express these emotions. Too much anger can be unhealthy, and yet men are typically taught that it is normal and sometimes acceptable to experience anger and act on it. Women, on the other hand, are typically taught that they should avoid angry feelings altogether, and that fighting is a social taboo. The female characters, both playable and supporting, in *The Last of Us Part II* offer representations of women rarely seen in any form of media and literature. Each character displays a full range of emotions, and the hateful emotions expressed by Abby and Ellie are almost never explored by women in fiction. The varied and nuanced female representation in *The Last of Us Part II* enriches the narrative experience for all, but in particular, queer women. Writing queer and female characters in fully realized ways which deviate from cultural norms creates opportunities for reflection and critique of heteronormative perceptions (Sundén, 2012). Ellie is openly lesbian, but physically does not

appear to have masculine traits commonly associated with lesbian stereotypes. Abby, on the other hand, is physically very muscular due to her military training. Although Abby is heterosexual, the way she presents herself physically is entirely against cultural norms associated with femininity, as is her straightforward personality. The supporting cast also features Dina, a bisexual woman in a relationship with Ellie, and Lev, a transgender male (born female, identifies as male) who befriends and accompanies Abby. All of the characters mentioned represent an underrepresented social group within the female/LGBTQ community, offering unique perspectives which are relatively absent in gaming and literature. They each deal with issues regarding how they are perceived in society, and experience homophobia, sexism, and rejection from their community and families. Heterosexual men, who are the majority in video game culture, are given an opportunity to recognize and reflect on the struggles of queer women when playing in role in *The Last of Us Part II*. And for female and LGBTQ players, the game provides the opportunity for an unparalleled player-character relationship, deepening the reflective, social-emotional learning further for players within those groups.

A narrative exploration of wrath in a post-apocalyptic setting does come with a lot of explicit violence, however. *The Last of Us Part II* is a third-person shooter, in which the player wields guns, melee weapons, and bombs against human and inhuman enemies. The realistic graphics of the game are of the highest quality in modern gaming, and they are used to depict violence in a myriad of ways. The issue of violence in video games has been often debated, leading many gamers and critics to question the effects and implications of playing violent video games. When considering a violent video game like Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), in which players can easily shoot to death innocent bystanders, some suggest that the game normalizes violence, others believe it to be merely fantasy, and some think perhaps a bit of

both (Borchard, 2015). At first glance, this may seem like a reduction to the educational and literary merit of *The Last of Us Part II*. However, the realistic violence depicted in the game further enhances the players' understanding of the destructive nature of revenge. Significant time and effort on the development team was devoted to making the enemy artificial intelligence (AI) as realistic as possible. In an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, co-director Anthony Newman explains the relevance of the realistic AI by stating, "That puts the player in Ellie's shoes, realizing that they're fighting against real people who will respond in anguish when their friend dies... That intelligence of the human enemies heightens the tension and the pressure on both Ellie and the player" (Newman, 2020). In *Grand Theft Auto V*, killing the AI characters is simple because they merely scream and fall over, then the player must evade the cops or incur a penalty. Even if they are caught, the player's violence seems to have no effect on the in-game world, and the player may see the same murdered face walking around the game world the very next day (Borchard, 2015). In contrast, the detail and realism of the enemy AI in *The Last of Us Part II* is designed to make killing feel anything but simple. Many of the AI characters have specific names, and the others will call out their name in pain if they see their corpse (PlayStation, 2018, 8:00). If enemies are dealt fatal wounds, but do not die instantly, they will scream in agony until they bleed to death. Most enemy AI in video games is also exclusively represented as male, but in *The Last of Us Part II*, the gender representation of enemies appears relatively equal. All of this detail is intended to make players reflect on the horror of killing, and remember that taking life, even in self-defense, is a traumatic experience. Both Ellie and Abby have friends who die in the crossfire of their revenge cycle, and so the plot and gameplay experience both ask the player to reflect on the concept of revenge. I found myself asking: Would I take revenge on someone if it put my friends in danger? Would I be

willing to hurt an innocent person to get to my target? In asking such reflective questions, I was able to recognize the self-destruction of revenge and violence more fully. If this narrative were written as a book, the reader would be able to read about the atrocities committed by the major characters while receiving some details about the murdered, unnamed characters. But in the game, the player must simulate the taking of life firsthand, and safely experience the horror and mixed emotions of a life-or-death struggle against other people. It is in this key gameplay detail that the experience of playing *The Last of Us Part II* goes beyond any revenge story told in literature, providing nuanced merit for social-emotional and academic study.

Literature in education has been traditionally utilized as the sole medium for narrative study. But as technology continues to advance, so do our means for creative expression. Modern technology allowed the developers to make the narrative experience of playing *The Last of Us Part II* something beyond the realm of possibility for previous generations. The game challenges its audience by simulating not only the experience of killing, but the experience of forgiving those who have wronged us. By making the player switch characters, the developers ask them to consider through role-play the experience of another person, challenging their own perceptions. When I switched to Abby, I was surprised to find how much she actually had in common with Ellie, and with myself. Now, as I conduct myself socially, I always try to remember that I probably have more in common with others than either of us even realizes. This change has made me more mindful, patient, and accepting as a person. In a world filled with social divides, imagine what we could do if we all challenged ourselves to consider the circumstances of others. My particular experience with *The Last of Us Part II* is not guaranteed, but the game does offer an opportunity to embark on a nuanced, self-reflective journey, making it well worth anyone's time.

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