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Ludonarrative Dissonance in *The Last of Us Part II*: Attempting to Create Empathy with a Villain

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ABSTRACT

In Story-based videogames, the Author has an intended story he wishes to communicate to the player and carefully constructs it to arouse specific sentiments, such as empathy towards characters, which support the development of the narrative as he had imagined it. However, the main obstacle of interactive narratives is reconciling intended storylines with the players' always unique sense-making of the narrated events. This paper investigates this matter by analyzing the post-apocalyptic videogame The Last of Us Part II (Naughty Dog, 2020). The plot unexpectedly sees Joel, the main character of the first installment and fatherly figure to co-protagonist young woman Ellie, killed by a woman named Abby under Ellie's eyes. After the murder, players suddenly switch from controlling Ellie to playing as Abby for a long section of the game, with the authorial intent to show them her side of the story. After about 10 hours, the game reaches a climax in which the player is forced to attempt to kill Ellie while still controlling Abby. This videogame is particularly interesting in the attempt of creating empathy towards videogames characters, as the intended target of the sympathy (i.e., Abby) was initially introduced as a villain in the story. To study this matter in-depth, we have selected the three most viewed gameplay videos on YouTube commented by English-speaking players and the three most viewed commented by Italian speakers. Performance and thematic analyses were performed on the gameplay sections immediately before and during the climax. We have independently analyzed the six videos and identified shared recurring themes.In the section before the climax, players are shown the bodies of Abby's friends killed by Ellie: a dog, a man, and a pregnant woman. Remorse was often demonstrated by players at the sight of the dog's body, yet some players justified the human killings. Interestingly, five out of six players manifested their dissent with the authorial choice of the climax, verbally and physically refusing to harm Ellie. Most players across the two languages engaged in verbal protests and self-sabotage, such as intentionally running out of ammunition, making noise to be discovered by Ellie, and ultimately and deliberately seeking death as Abby, leading to multiple intentional game overs. Besides, most players praised Ellie and her craftiness, skill, and speed. This indicates that these players' empathy towards Abby, however present to some extent, was apparently not strong enough to justify killing Ellie. These results give relevant insights about storytelling in videogames and the creation of empathy, underlining the importance of discriminating between the creation of cognitive and emotional empathy. That is, even though players cognitively commiserated Abby because of the suffering she endured, they were apparently too emotionally attached to Ellie to let this feeling prevail. Finally, the climax section can act as a starting point for an interesting discourse related to breaking the contract between an author unintentionally disincentivizing the player to do well and a player who refuses to play according to the rules.

Keywords: Ludonarrative dissonance, Story-based video games, Empathy

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Background

The Author of every written narration has an intended story they wish to communicate to their audience. Therefore, the story is carefully constructed with the specific objective to arouse determined emotions, sustaining the unfolding of the narrative's development as the Author had imagined it. In short, every text speaks to an ideal or *intended reader*, who is meant to understand and interpret it as the Author originally planned (Eco, 1979; Chaouli, 2005). As story-based digital games can be described as games designed to convey a story to the player, they present a partial continuity with traditional narrative texts and can be assimilated to such a classic framework to a certain extent, yet with an interactive twist (Wei, 2011; Kwan, 2016).

Like traditional narratives address an *intended reader*, video games speak to an *intended player*. Game Authors have developed a variety of languages through which they can manipulate how players perceive the story, its development, and the emotions it arouses (Kwan, 2016). Game worlds can be skillfully constructed to hint at the right direction (Karhulahti, 2012), meaning the physical navigation of a digital world, but also an appropriate interpretation of the antecedents and possibilities of the story. For instance, the *mise-en-scene* of a digital game involving camera movements, props, lighting, and décor, can create evocative spaces with a high rhetorical value, influencing the appropriate modes of play for that situation (Jenkins, 2004; Ferrari, 2010).

Nonetheless, readers and players alike play a more active role than it might appear and, most of the time, they cannot be simply stirred in the "right" direction by the Author without somewhat resisting. According to Rosenblatt's *Reader Response Theory* (Rosenblatt, 1995), the reader's role does not require a mere reception of the story but rather a comprehension of the writer's statement and its reconfiguration into a narration that makes sense *for them* (de Wildt, 2014a). This implies that readers and players alike work their way through the text in a unique way (Dunne, 2013), following a personal process of meaning-making based on their unique experiences in other fictional worlds as well as in real life (Gillern, 2016). If hermeneutics truly is an individual activity (Schleiermaher, 1998), then the reader/player actively participates in writing the story, becoming a secondary Author.

This is especially true when we consider a digital game's interactivity. By controlling a game character, players are called to make decisions inside the digital world, ranging from jumping over an obstacle or sliding under it to deciding matters of life and death of other characters. Decisions are partially informed by the voluntary subjectification of the player to the Author-written character's backstory. By voluntarily immersing themselves into the narration (De Wildt, 2014b), players engage in the artistic performance of playing the role of another human, empathizing with their motives and expectations. Therefore, this experience is not dissimilar to the theatre of improvisation (Gaut, 2010) and ultimately leads to the birth of a hybrid identity: the player/character (Boudreau, 2012). However, besides the *subjectivized subject*,

there always is a "*super subject*": the actual player applying their own ethics and experiences to make sense of what is shown on screen. As action derives from an understanding of one's surroundings (Cole & Gillies, 2021), the *super subject* influences how players play, to a certain extent (De Wildt, 2014b; Christensen, 2018).

Such double nature results in tension, tugging Agency between what the player desires according to their personal meaning-making on the one side and the limitations posed by the Author to their created characters on the other (Veale, 2015). This ultimately gives life to what has been previously described as the *Narrative Paradox,* i.e., the conflict between the player's Agency and the Author's control over the story world (Roth, van Nuenen, & Koenitz, 2018).

The Game

The Last of Us represents one of the most beloved series in the story-based genre. Developed by Naughty Dog and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment, *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) depicts a post-apocalyptic world in which many have been infected with fungi that have made them violent. The player performs the role of Joel, a smuggler tasked with escorting a teenage girl, Ellie, to a secret location. Joel, who lost his daughter in an accident years before, develops a near-parental relationship with Ellie throughout the game. He eventually discovers that the girl must be taken to a research laboratory because she is immune to the disease and therefore represents hope for humanity's cure. However, the therapy cannot be developed without killing Ellie. When Joel is faced with the evidence, he will choose to rescue Ellie from the laboratory by killing the doctors who were about to operate on her, indirectly condemning humanity to live with this terrible disease. *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) is a direct sequel to the first title and takes place five years after the first game's events. The game begins with the players controlling Ellie, now 19 years old. Soon after the beginning of the game, the plot unexpectedly sees Joel brutally killed under Ellie's eyes by an unknown woman named Abby. After the murder, players suddenly switch from controlling Ellie to playing as Abby for a long section of the game, with the authorial intent to show them Abby's side of the story. During this section, players discover that Abby's father was one of the doctors killed by Joel in the first game and that she has been driven by revenge from that very moment. Therefore, this videogame is particularly interesting in the attempt of creating empathy towards videogames characters, as the intended target of the sympathy (i.e., Abby) was initially introduced as a villain in the story. In fact, even though it sold an estimated 4 million copies within the first week after its release, the game was the victim of the practice of "review bombing", that is, the massive publication of negative reviews on specialized websites by angered players.

METHODS

To investigate this matter, it was necessary to gather experiential information from players to shed light on their sense-making of the narration. The choice

fell onto Gameplay videos, i.e., players recording themselves and sharing the video on YouTube. Besides being readily available, Gameplay videos usually include the player's commentary, serving as an effective Think Aloud Protocol substitute without it being detrimental to the player's experience. That is because professional YouTubers are used to openly share their inner thoughts and act them out without being distracted by the act of talking (Roth, Nuenen, & Koenitz, 2018). Moreover, given the global diffusion of YouTube, gameplay videos of the very same scene played by people with different backgrounds are available for study. This is an exciting opportunity, as games can be considered a cultural product (O'Hagan, 2009) and can be subjected to different meaning-making based on the player's personal history.

Two telling moments were selected for the analysis. In both scenes, players control Abby. In the pre-climax scene, players are shown the bodies of Abby's friends killed by the player himself while he was playing as a vengeful Ellie earlier in the game: a dog (Alice), a man (Owen), and a pregnant woman (Mel). Then, in the climax scene, players are shown a *cutscene* (i.e., a non-interactive cinematic section) in which Abby shoots Ellie's friends, Tommy and Eugene, possibly killing them. Then, the control is handed back to the player, who is then forced to attempt to kill Ellie while still controlling Abby. The climax ends with another *cutscene*, in which Abby tries to kill Ellie and her girlfriend, Dina, before being stopped by Lev, a kid Abby previously saved from a fire.

Videos involving the scenes were then selected according to the following criteria: i) being unedited; ii) being accompanied by a verbal commentary; iii) being the three most viewed videos of the target scenes for the target language, i.e., English and Italian. Three videos per language were selected as it was noted how the number of views decreased dramatically between the third and the fourth most-watched videos.

Next, the authors independently watched the resulting six videos, noting players' performance and transcribing their commentary. Successively, a thematic analysis was carried out by the two authors independently, identifying and abstracting meaningful categories of topics and finally comparing the individual notes.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

During the pre-climax scene, all the English-speaking players (ENG) and two out of the three Italian players (ITA) correctly predicted they would keep playing as Abby in the following section. This sparked some negative comments in two ENG players, who complained about how long they had to play as Abby. As for their opinion on the switch in perspective compared to the first half of the game, in which they played as Ellie, all ENG players described the inversion as *"strange"*, *"weird,"* and *"bizarre"*. In particular, two ENG players said, respectively, it was *"an odd way to tell the story"*, or they *"wished the order of the [events in] the game was different"*. Interestingly, one switched from defining it *"cool"* during the pre-climax scene to *"the strangest turn of events this game has taken"* during the climax. Similarly, two ITA players stated they did not like the inversion, expressing their shock and sadness,

while one described it as "*extraordinary*" for allowing players to experience both sides of the story. Finally, from a user experience point of view, only one ENG player complained about not understanding who he was playing between Abby and Ellie during the hand-to-hand combat.

Only one ENG player described his feelings as "*tense*" and "*nervous*". In contrast, ITA players were more vocal about their internal states. Two ITA players clearly stated their discomfort, saying they were feeling "*nauseous*" and "*distraught*". One said he felt "*anxious*", as Abby lost her backpack during the previous scene, leaving her without medical kits and ammunitions. One of them took to the game Authors to express his frustration, calling them "*bastards*" and swearing against the game.

Regarding their perceived Agency, two ENG and one ITA complained about the lack of choice provided to the player during the whole game, specifically related to being forced to hurt both Ellie and the dog and not being able to protect Tommy.

Concerning the players' opinion on Abby, one ENG player expressed hatred. One did not say anything about her. One stated he did not feel any attachment to her, describing her as the person who killed Tommy and Joel. On the contrary, all ITA players acknowledged Abby's suffering. In particular, one genuinely highlighted her similarities with Ellie's own misery, stating his confusion about what was "*right or wrong*" and how the physical battle poetically referred to the women's inner battle. Another ITA player stated they did not "*feel attachment but rather a connection*" with her, even though she will "*forever be the person who killed Joel and Tommy*". One ITA player expressed disappointment with Abby's aggressiveness, perceived as unnecessary considering the size comparison between Ellie and Abby, with Ellie being described as "*a twig*".

All the ENG players and two ITA players stated their disagreement with the game forcing them to hurt Ellie, saying they did not want to attack her and asking her for her forgiveness. Two ENG players praised her for her skills, defining her as "*accurate*" and "*crafty*". They also complained about authorial choices related to her behavior; one stated she could have easily shot Abby when she was distracted, and another said, "*this is not how Ellie would patrol a situation like this*". Only one ITA player stated Ellie's aggressiveness in placing Molotov bombs to hurt Abby was "*excessive*". Two ENG and two ITA players engaged in self-sabotaging behavior. Some tried wasting all of Abby's ammunitions shooting the floor before facing Ellie, some attempted to make noise to be spotted by Ellie, and some purposefully sought the game over screen. This behavior eventually resulted in their unwillingness to continue playing, pretending to lay down their gamepad and say goodbye to viewers, only to bring themselves to continue the game soon after.

Finally, concerning secondary characters, two ENG players and one ITA player expressed sadness for being forced to kill the dog. One ENG player expressed compassion for Lev, and another praised him for stopping Abby from killing Ellie and Dina. Regarding Abby's friends killed by Ellie, one ENG player stated that Owen "*wasn't really a good person*" and another that Mel "*did not care about [her] baby*". Both of them did not remember Mel's name at first. One ENG player and all ITA players showed compassion for the

fate of Abby's friends. The ENG player stated, "*it just sucks for everybody involved*", while one ITA player told viewers how he knew how much Owen and Mel meant for Abby. One ENG player sarcastically declared remorse for their death, and one ENG and one ITA player did so honestly. All the players across both languages expressed sadness, anger, and worry when they witnessed Tommy and Dina's beating perpetrated by Abby.

CONCLUSION

Results lead to surprisingly shared conducts across both languages, even though some slight differences can be identified. First of all, everyone but one Italian player sided with Ellie during the climax scene, and, while Italian players showed almost neutrality in their evaluation of Abby, English-speaking players tilted more towards open hostility. Based on players' utterances, there may have been a difference in the developed empathy towards the two characters. According to literature, empathy (including towards virtual characters) can be described as a multi-dimensional construct (Pergerson, 2021), the dimensions of which are cognitive and affective/emotional. While the latter refers to the ability to understand and connect with someone's internal states, the former comprises the ability to assume someone else's perspective through a conscious imaginative process (Huang & Tettegah, 2014).

Results hint that players could reach a multi-dimensional empathy with Ellie but only a cognitive one with Abby. In fact, players' recurring tone with regards to Abby suggested rationalization: an English-speaking player stated he did not feel "*attachment, but rather a connection*" with Abby, an Italian player said he "*knew how much [Abby] cared about Owen and Mel*", and another that Abby's suffering was due to "*her own choices*". On the contrary, players engaged in emotional themes when talking about Ellie: an English-speaking player said he "*[felt] awful*", another asked for Ellie's forgiveness, and an Italian player repeatedly stated he felt nauseous while playing the climax scene.

This favorable stance towards Ellie may be because players had more time to develop an affective relationship with her as opposed to Abby's abrupt introduction, as suggested by one English-speaking player, who stated: "*I guess this [is] 'cause we had a whole 'nother game with [Ellie], you know*". Alternatively, it may be affected by Abby's villainous introduction into the story, as two different players independently identified her as "*the person who killed Joel and Tommy*".

Interestingly, there seems to have been a general change of opinions during the passage from the pre-climax to the climax scene. For instance, the player who initially stated his remorse for harming Abby's friends later protested the demand to kill Ellie. Similarly, another player who described the role inversion as "*cool*" during the pre-climax stated it was the "*strangest turn of events*" during the climax. This suggests that, although some level of empathy for Abby was reached by several players across both languages, it was not sufficient to sustain the participation in the intended narrative. This extreme polarization can also be noted in the fact that Ellie's violent conduct against

Abby was not only justified but praised by most players, with only one Italian player judging Ellie's use of Molotov bombs against Abby as "*excessive*".

This same polarization reflects onto the secondary characters, inspiring sentiments of sadness across both languages over the fate of Ellie's friends. On the contrary, most of the worries of the few players across both languages who expressed some level of remorse for having to kill Abby's friends were directed at the dog. As for the human killings, most players either ignored the matter or engaged in self-justification behavior, stating the victims were morally despicable. It is fascinating that the only two players who mentioned the pregnant woman's death could not remember her name at first. This is yet another clue pointing towards the fact that players might not have been receptive to listening to Abby's version of the events in the first place due to their emotional attachment towards Ellie.

By affecting their meaning-making, players' empathy also impacted their desired course of action during the target scenes (Cole & Gillies, 2021). Interestingly, most players across both languages engaged in self-sabotage, purposefully seeking the game over screen. Whether this peculiar behavior was caused by the desire to help Ellie or out of spite for Abby, it seems safe to say that this section led some players to a *ludonarrative dissonance*; in which the understood narrative points towards a direction, yet the Agency of the player is brought towards another, restricted to fit into the Authorial mechanics constituting the gameplay (Roth, Nuenen, & Koenitz, 2018). We need to underline that the act of playing is "*purely frivolous*" (Caillois, 1961), meaning it is unproductive (i.e., played with the sole objective of playing) and, most importantly, totally voluntary. By seeking the game over and going so far as to pretend to stop playing, players purposefully stepped outside the *magic circle* (Huizinga, 1938), refusing to play and, ultimately, negating the very concept of "game". This reflects in the words of one English-speaking player, who clearly stated: "*I'm so disincentivized to do well*".

In this case, the tug-of-war between the player's desired actions and the limitations posed by the Author got dangerously close to breaking the rope, i.e., a refusal to play. This corroborates the existence of another kind of player besides the *intended* one: the *subversive player* (Aarseth, 2014), whose peculiar meaning-making tugs the desired narration towards a different direction. The solution here used by the game Author to preserve the intended narrative is represented by a *lockdown*: it temporarily requisitions the player's Agency, intending to remove any possibility of deviating from the authorial narrative (Aarseth, 2014), in this case, the objective of harming Ellie. Yet, one of the components of intrinsic motivation for playing is the sense of perceived autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Autonomy, in this context, can be defined as the sense of focus towards the goal that the player experiences while maintaining control over the entire game environment (Wang & Sun, 2011). To satisfy the need for autonomy, a game must allow its players to pursue personal goals and interests and do so in a flexible way (Przybylski et al., 2012). According to the present results, this section of the game failed to do so, as many players across both languages complained about a lack of choice in killing the dog, helping Tommy, or hurting Ellie.

The main obstacle to interactive storytelling's success is the difficulty of reconciling coherent and dramatically engaging plots with the player's autonomy. According to literature, to construct a linear narrative that eliminates players' choices without it being considered a *"tyranny"*, there should be a balance between the Author's and the reader/player's intentions (Sarian, 2018). Such a co-authorship is effectively illustrated in the allegory detailed in the independent video game *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2011), in which the narrator cannot tell a story without the player performing it, and vice versa. This conduct stems from the acknowledgment that the player's choices can (and should) always be considered valid expressions of the Self, as products of their personal meaning-making of the recounted events (Rosenberg, 2014). In conclusion, these results highlight the importance of the persuasive value of storytelling in digital games in sustaining a meaning-making coherent with the authorial intents and the need to find new and effective ways to appease both intended and subversive players.

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