

## **Storytelling in Video Games**

An Analytical Approach to Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us Part II*

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates how video games tell stories, and if video games can be analyzed in the same way as we would analyze a literary work of fiction. To answer these questions, I will start by investigating the field of ludology and look at the ludology vs narratology debate that occurred in 1999 where there was a lot of disagreement between both fields when considering how one should analyze a game. I will also look at how the narrative in a video game is structured.

My main source for this investigation will be Naughty Dog's, *The Last of Us Part II*. To analyze this game, I am combining Konzack and Malliet's layer theories which considers different aspects of storytelling in video games. I am combining them because Malliet has made a more modern layer theory which he bases on Konzack's. My investigation shows that video games consist of widely different aspects than novels do, and therefore it is flawed to analyze a game as a book. Furthermore, the way a game tells a story is by using the different layers in a game to trigger emotions in a gamer, which is why it is necessary to look at how video games tell stories through their layers.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction and Previous Research

## 1.1 Introduction

This thesis is a study of storytelling in video games. How are stories communicated in a game? Is it possible to analyze a video game in the same way that we analyze a novel or a work of fiction? My subject will engage with these questions by analyzing the 2020-horror/adventure game, *The Last of Us Part II*.

My questions about how storytelling is done in video games are not new. Years ago, there was a lot of questions about how to analyze a game, does the story matter, or not? A game designer and academic researcher called Gonzalo Frasca, attempted to find an answer to questions like these by writing an article called “Ludology Meets Narratology”. His article tried to address disagreements between ludologists and narratologists, which laid the groundwork for the ludology vs narratology debate. The ludology vs narratology debate was not an actual debate, it was just a label for the occurring disagreements between the two fields. Ludologists meant that gamers only care about the mechanics in a game, so stories should not be considered. However, narratologists countered that by claiming that the most popular games do have a good story, implying that the story must mean something. Narratology is a well-established field that can be traced back to the theorist Tzvetan Todorov who invented the term narratology in 1969 and developed a formula for it (Qiao 393). Ludology, however, is a relatively new field that was first mentioned in 1982. Even though it was mentioned back then, it has not become as established as narratology which can be a result of how video games are constantly changing.

Clearly, there was a lot of discussion around the topic surrounding what games are, which led to different suggestions being offered as a solution. Professor Michalis Kokonis is a professor at the Department of Translation and Intercultural studies at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. He presented a hybrid theory where games combine elements from traditional artforms, with a modern way to present it. He does also consider semiotics as an important factor that is applied during gameplay. Lars Konzack is a Danish game researcher who has a theory about layers. His layer theory is that games should be divided into layers that must be studied separately, for example gameplay and hardware. A few years later, Dr. Stephen Malliet, an associate professor at the University of Antwerp, further developed

Konzack's theory. Malliet has his own layer theory which he had based on Konzack's which he altered by making modernizing adjustments where he included different layers like the complexity of controls and the audio-visual aspect. Video games that were popular at the time Konzack wrote his article did not focus on storytelling or the importance of game controls. Platform games did not need a rich story, it mostly required jumping and reaching a goal. So luckily, Malliet did modernize this theory so that it would consider the game-elements that has changed as video games increased in popularity and became more technologically advanced.

To answer my thesis questions, I will be analyzing video game developer Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us Part II*, by using a combined layer theory by both Konzack and Malliet to see how the diverse gameplay and story elements in these layers work together to create the experience of a story. These theories make it possible to consider several aspects of video games. Looking at the layers makes it easier to see if it is possible to analyze a game the same way as a book is analyzed, because several layers can be found in both books and in games.

I will also look at how a video game is structured to get a wider understanding of how a story in a video game is created by including typical narrative techniques that is important to the people who are involved with the designing of video games. I will mainly be focusing on modern video games.<sup>1</sup> In attempting to understand the structure of narrative in video games, I will mainly be using a book called; *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know about Narrative Techniques*, written by video game developer Evan Skolnick. But I will also consider elements from Tobias Heussner's book, *Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox*. which I believe includes other aspects that complement and advance Skolnick's ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> By modern video games, I am referring to newer games that have realistic features and improved graphics compared to the older generation of video games which consisted of plain pixels and shapes. The evolution of graphics will be further discussed in chapter 1.4.2

## 1.2 Background

I have always loved video games. Finding a game where you lose track of time because you are so immersed in the story has always been my goal. So, when I was choosing a subject for my MA thesis, the only subject that I kept wanting to work with, was storytelling in video games. In his book called “Half-Real”, a Danish video game researcher called Jesper Juul, claims that through the years, video games have been considered “lowbrow catalogues of geek and adolescent male culture” (Juul, Half-Real 21). And now it is becoming a billion-dollar industry where the typical gamer is an adult, and women are starting to occupy a bigger percentage of the fanbase than before. But even though video games and the target crowd has changed, there are still a lot of people who do not understand why video games are so important for some people. Based on this, I want to offer an alternate explanation to why video games are so popular, which is, in my opinion, their ability to tell stories. And I think that one of the greatest stories told through a video game, is that of Joel and Ellie in *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*.

*The Last of Us Part II* is a continuation of the 2013 game *The Last of Us* which is a critically acclaimed game that has sold more than 17 million copies (Sarkar). Both stories take place in a post-apocalyptic USA where a zombie virus has wreaked havoc, infecting a vast majority of the population on earth.

In *The Last of Us*, the main characters, Ellie and Joel, are travelling to Salt Lake City where they are going to meet doctors who are making a cure. Ellie and Joel are strangers until they go on this trip, he is a smuggler and Ellie is the only immune person on earth, which is why they are travelling together. When they arrive at the hospital in Salt Lake City, Ellie is put under anesthesia so that the doctor can extract the growth that causes her immunity. As the surgery is about to start, Joel learns that Ellie will die during the surgery, so he breaks into the operating room and kills the doctor and escapes with Ellie. The game ends when Ellie wakes up in the back seat of a car and Joel tells her a lie, that her immunity meant nothing.

*The Last of Us Part II* was released in 2020. It sold more than 4 million copies during its release weekend, making it the most successful PlayStation 4 exclusive launch. No other game has won more awards than *The Last of Us Part II* (Kennedy).

This story takes place five years after the incident in Salt Lake City. Now Ellie and Joel live in a small town called Jackson. Life seems good until Joel is killed by a girl called Abby, without any apparent reason. Joel's murder changes Ellie: she becomes filled with rage and goes on a revenge journey to find and kill Abby. During this trip, she is joined by her girlfriend Dina, their friend Jesse, and Joel's brother Tommy. Throughout this game which takes about 30 hours to finish, we kill zombies<sup>2</sup>, scavenge for supplies, and encounter different extremist groups posing a threat. We also get to play as Abby and therefore learn that Abby's father was the doctor who Joel killed to save Ellie. After a long time playing as both Ellie and Abby, where we learn more about them and their backgrounds, we are back to playing as Ellie who now finds Abby and they fight. During this fight, Abby bites off several of Ellie's fingers. The fight ends when Ellie decides to let Abby go. Then Ellie returns home to look for her girlfriend who left when Ellie went after Abby.

### 1.3 Aim and Research Questions

My thesis is a study of storytelling in video games. My research questions are: How are stories communicated in a game? Is it possible to analyze a video game in the same way that we analyze a novel or a work of fiction? My subject will engage with these questions by investigating how the story in a game is structured as well as looking into how video games have become what they are today. After that I will be analyzing the 2020-horror/adventure game, *The Last of Us Part II*.<sup>3</sup> By analyzing this game I hope to demonstrate how a story is told through a game and find out if a game can be analyzed in the same way as we analyze books after considering different theories offered by known ludologists and game designers.

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<sup>2</sup> I will refer to zombies from TLOU2 as infected creatures, since the game calls them infected.

<sup>3</sup> After this introductory chapter, the game will be abbreviated to *TLOU2*.



## 1.4 Previous Research

### 1.4.1 A Brief History of Video Games

The first video game was created in 1952, it was a tic-tac-toe game which was called *OXO* and the computer's size filled an entire room. Luckily, technology has advanced since then, reducing the size of computers while extending their abilities.

During the 80s, the most popular way to play video games was on an arcade machine. Arcade machines had an advantage compared to computers because arcade machines were specialized in gaming while computers were not. Computers did not have the graphical ability that game consoles had, so they only had text-based games. Text-based games entailed that written information was displayed on a screen, and you had to respond with how you would like to deal with the situation. For example, you see a cave, what do you do? – enter the cave, or turn around. These types of games relied heavily on the gamers' imagination. The function of computers changed when the first computer game with graphics was released in 1980, called *Mystery House* (Role Players, 15:30). This gesture made computers take a step closer towards becoming gaming consoles.

After tic-tac-toe, text-based games, and arcade machines, and simple computer games, gaming consoles appeared. Now you could play a game anywhere, as long as you had a TV, or a Gameboy. The development of gaming consoles changed the target crowd for games because as different consoles came, those consoles were aimed towards a wider crowd. Nintendo's target crowd was children under 13, while Sega aimed at older gamers. (This is War 29:03)

Video game consoles and arcade machines had the advantage of smooth side-scrolling when playing a graphic game. Computers could not do that because of mediocre graphics and how slow computer games were, which resulted in computer games not being able to handle games correctly. When computers could perform a smooth side-scroll<sup>4</sup>, "It was validating the PC as an actual game-playing machine" (Level Up 6:21). It made a PC equivalent to popular game consoles like Sega or Nintendo.

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<sup>4</sup> Smooth side-scrolling can be seen in *Super Mario*. As Mario moves to one side, the screen follows him without any problems or disruptions.

Suddenly, “video games were for more than just computer nerds” (Level Up, 34:15). Now there were plenty of different types of games available, which in turn also triggered an interest in games with violence during the 1990s. This led to people voicing their concerns because many gamers in the 1990s were children. There was a fear that games could cause children to replicate what they had done in a game, teaching them “to enjoy inflicting the most gruesome forms of cruelty imaginable” (Fight! 39:13). To avoid such situations, unreproducible violence became important in video games (Fight! 34:10). For example, instead of killing a person in a game, designers would create a creature that cannot be found in real life. For example, if a game entailed killing zombies, that would not be a problem because zombies do not exist, so a person would not kill a zombie in real life.

Eric Hayot is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He has written an article about how video games have changed during the last 60 year: “In the last sixty years, the video game industry has grown from quite literally nothing to a behemoth larger than the film or television industries.” (Hayot 178). Hayot also writes that popular games during the 1990s were oriented towards kinesthetic pleasures like jumping and quick movements with flashes, which made games differ from movies and novels because they were often directed towards intellect and emotions.

Games have gone from being mainly about kinesthetic pleasures to being influenced by a society where people constantly crave to be entertained and be the best to succeed in life. Video games offer a chance to be just that because games are about winning. In a game, everybody has the same chance to succeed; everybody starts equally and if you fail, you start over (Hayot 183). In many video games, people have the opportunity to play with an alternate reality without suffering—a world where every obstacle can be overcome before there is a happy ending in a perfect world. If there is suffering, it usually transforms into a story about success with a lucky character. Weakness works as a prelude to strength (183). The suffering becomes a necessary part of a character’s personal growth. However, if there were a game filled with disaster and no hope, where it would be impossible to succeed, it would go against our ultimate goal, which is, according to the ludologists, “the need to win” (Hayot 184). Therefore, one could easily assume that nobody would play a game that is almost impossible to win. That assumption would be contrary to a theory presented by Jesper Juul. He claims

that we enjoy losing because there is a chance of winning. which is a topic to which we shall return in the next chapter.

Different art forms have been shaped by similar forces, with an important one being culture; video games are not different. As culture and interest change, art forms change with it. Few considered video games an art form back in the 1970s. However, since then, the world has become more digital. Stories change because of what is happening in the world. What is art today was perhaps not the case several years ago, and vice versa. Moreover, what is a good story now, would perhaps have been insulting 50 years ago. Society changes, and so does its artforms.

A way to see how significant the influence of society has been on video games is by considering when games came to be. Games appeared when audience interaction became popular in other art forms. Games were a new medium, and video game designer, Howard Scott Warshaw, who designed a game called *E.T. Atari 2600*, says: “we’re taking the TV, which has been a traditionally passive medium, and turning it into an active medium” (Boom & Bust 00:34). Meaning that a TV would usually be something one would just observe, however now it was changing into something that one could interact with, through video games.

As Hayot says, “the novel today is unquestionably being shaped by the cultural presence of video games, just as it has been shaped by the history of television and film.” (Hayot 180). What he means by that is that while novels were usually the ones to impact video games, now it goes both ways, just like with movies. Novels can shape a game, while a game can also shape a novel. Based on this, we should not only consider video games and movies or literature to be separate art forms but as different art forms that illuminate each other’s cultural presence (Hayot 182). This happens when a game is based on a book, or a movie is based on a game. One artform compliments the other. For example, *Silent Hill* is a movie that started as a game, proving how the game highlights the movie and vice versa.<sup>5</sup>

The visual aspect is an essential factor that has changed. The graphics have become similar to a movie instead of something that can be compared to cartoons—perhaps being the factor that

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<sup>5</sup> How different artforms impact each other, is further addressed in chapter 2.9

made gaming stop being an activity that was mainly practiced by children. There is also a significant difference concerning graphics. Instead of presenting a fictional world, games are now inviting us to interact in a realistic replication of our world. Old games were not designed as realistically as games are today. This will be addressed in the following section.

### 1.4.2 The Evolution of Video Game Graphics

The most noticeable change that has occurred in video games in the last 60 years concerns graphics. Games have gone from being pixelated and two-dimensional to becoming realistic and comparable to movies. As computers have become more advanced, the games have done the same thing because modern computers make it possible to produce more sophisticated games that are more challenging than before. In the beginning, games were mainly played on arcade machines before gaming consoles and computers became dominating. This could also have caused the consequence that video games became longer because, in an arcade, games usually last for a few minutes, which encourages you to keep spending quarters to try the game again (Boom & Bust 16:57).

Considering that arcade games were short allows one to speculate if the length could have hindered an opportunity to include a rich story in a game. Especially since Jesper Juul has claimed that as graphics and storage improved, emphasis on fiction increased (Juul, Half-Real 163). Only having a few minutes to leave an impression makes it vital to choose what the game should focus on, the gameplay or a story. By making gaming consoles and computers, a gamer would not need to spend quarters to try a game repeatedly, because the gamer would be gaming at home. This, in turn, could also be a reason why console games cost more, and the story has become a feature that is of importance. If an arcade game required that you continuously spend quarters to play and most of the paid time would be a cut-scene, it would be more tempting to just go to a cinema. So, when buying a long game with a combination of gameplay and story, people could be more willing to pay a lot as a one-time-fee instead of constantly spending money on short games.

If one wants to understand how drastic the technological development has been, consider how the storage space has changed. A PC in 1950 could store 128 bytes, while a typical computer today has the capacity of storing 1 terabyte, and more. One could argue that modern

computers can handle demanding games and contain several games at once. If one were to play a modern game on an old computer, the game would need a lot more space to save the game, proving that games have become more demanding than before. You cannot save a modern video game on a floppy disc that can store 5 megabytes, because it is too small (History of Computer Memory). As mentioned earlier, Jesper Juul claims, “In combination with the improvements in computer graphics and storage, this results in an increased emphasis on game *fiction*” (Juul, *Half-Real* 163).

Arcades had just a few games and were created for one purpose, to play a game. A modern gaming PC can do countless things in comparison. For example, make a new game as well as playing it while at the same time watching a movie. A computer has become a multi-purpose tool instead of being mainly a complicated calculator with databases.

Dr Aki Järvinen is a game professional and academic who has a doctorate in game studies.

When considering graphics, Järvinen claims there are three main types of games: abstractionism, caricaturism, and photorealism (Järvinen 114). These three types have appeared as video games have developed through the years. The difference between these three is that abstractionism includes the first games that were made, those that consisted of simple shapes like *Pac-Man*. Caricaturist games are further developed games, for example, as mentioned earlier, *Hitman 2*. In *Hitman 2*, the characters and environment appear square and stiff with fewer details than photorealistic; however, it is understood that the characters in these games represent people. Another example of caricaturist games is *The Sims 2*. Clothes are stiff, and different parts of the world and furniture look like square blocks with solid lines. There is minimal focus on individual details or natural facial expressions, which shows that the game is made by following a caricaturist style. Photorealistic games can be described as games created so realistically that they can sometimes look like they have been captured with a video camera, not created through computer software.

This is because “photorealism is largely about simulation” (Järvinen 121), which means that these games aim to recreate our real world, in a game. These three types could be said to demonstrate the development of graphics in video games. Games started as 2D shapes and went on to being 3D with a more detailed environment and characters, and then games became photorealistic. As Dr. Aki Järvinen writes about the change between caricaturist and photorealistic games: “Technical advancements in audio and graphic accelerators allowed the

rendering of seamless 3D graphics” (Järvinen 114). A caricaturist game could be situated in a place like an open world like ours; however, it would have fewer details and could look like it was drawn. Now, photorealistic games may look as if it has been made with a video camera.

At the start of the millennia, characters in games were often made in a caricaturist way. This is why many characters looked more like cartoons than real people, which can be seen when looking at characters in games that came out around the turn of the millennium. Take for example, *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*. The physical appearance was still unrealistic because of how square faces were and how stiff and unnatural the characters moved. Those are typical traits for games that are created in a caricaturist way. Details like that implies that relatability to the character becomes equally essential as storytelling becomes important. And since the improvements in graphics made it possible to make a game that looked more photorealistic, the chance for relatability increased.

Fast-forward a few years to 2008, when *Grand Theft Auto IV* was released where characters were still leaning towards the unrealistic square features, then go forward ten years and consider a game that was released in 2018, called *God of War*. *GTA IV* is clearly caricaturist, while *God of War* is photorealistic. *God of War* game has been highly praised for its graphics and story and has been labelled a masterpiece (Dornbush). One notices that the evolution is astounding by looking at an abstractionist game from the 70s, for example the *Space Invaders*, and then looking at *God of War*.

As a result of many modern games taking place in an open world, there has been a lot of focus on making the world believable or recreating our world in a fictional setting. Countless characters are added to avoid making a world too bland, and also to help with objectives in a story (Tavinor 26). Wind affects grass, trees sway, and stormy weather can create puddles while the sun can dry things. These are not things that were of concern in arcade games because not only would it have been superfluous, but graphics could also have hindered it. Furthermore, there is no need to spend time and resources on adding unnecessary aspects to a game where it will not affect the story or gameplay in any way. Perhaps that is why for example, *Super Mario*, takes place in a fictional world that probably could have similar weather to what is experienced on earth. However, it would have been unnecessary to add features like realistic weather in a game where the weather does not do anything.

Games with simple graphics are still popular today, and they are often labeled as indie games. Indie games are made with a small budget, where the focus has not been on being realistic or pushing the limits within game design. These are often games where the story is important, and graphics have been created in an old-fashioned style on purpose. For example, in 2015, a pixel game was released called *Undertale*. It received much praise, and people liked the game for its great storytelling and dialogue (Plagge). It can be said that the game designers created an old-fashioned video game in a modern way, like Kokonis' theory about hybrids. Gamers have different preferences towards certain types of games, according to Simon K Jones, and some prefer the old-fashioned ones. Even though most video games today will focus on having realistic graphics and aim to impress their audience, it is still possible to make games that can trigger nostalgia and therefore be enjoyable simply for being simple.

In *Super Mario*, when Mario walks into a dangerous flower, visually, Mario flashes and loses a life. Many modern games display a character with facial expressions and identifiable reactions to pain. Watching a flower hurt Mario does not trigger the same reaction as watching Joel from *TLOU2* receive a deadly blow to the head with a golf club. This could be an explanation to why it is easier to relate to the pain felt by Joel as opposed to the pain Mario feels. If Joel started flashing, it would be unrealistic and could hurt the integrity of the game. Mario flashing is justified because it is an abstractionist game. We acknowledge *Super Mario* as a game located in an entirely fictional universe, so it does not hurt the game by being unrealistic. Perhaps it would even disturb the game if Mario started bleeding when he was hurt because it is not realistic within that universe.

### 1.4.3 Ludology

The field of ludology, also known as the study of games, can be traced back to 1982, when there was a discussion about the possibility of comparing human play and animal play (Juul, *The Definite History*). This comparison was made because play and game have always been close-knit. Play is often considered the activity children do, for example, hide and seek. However, ludology has now moved closer to video games and does not include play. Although ludology got its name in 1982, it was not until Gonzalo Frasca popularized it with his article called *Ludology Meets Narratology* that it became familiarized. Studying the history of ludology can be problematic, it is, and has always been, changing.

Through the years, ludology has been interpreted in numerous ways, and Jesper Juul has listed the most popular definitions attached to the name. For clarity's sake, this thesis agrees with the first proposition.

1. The study of games.
2. The study of games as rules, ignoring their fictional content.
3. The study of games with a strong anti-narrative stance.

(Juul, *The Definite History*)

Modern ludology<sup>6</sup>, which is about the study of games, grew in popularity during the 90s when games were transitioning as technology became more advanced. Computers became capable of performing more than just text-based games. Now *Super Mario* was created and became popular with its story about beating different levels in order to save the queen who was kidnapped. This development continued, and at the start of 2000, more complicated games came to be, which started to look more photorealistic. This development has been continuous, which is probably why opinions surrounding video games changed and disagreements blossomed. A game that was considered to be revolutionary in the 90s suddenly became outdated compared to newer games.

#### 1.4.4 Narratology vs Ludology

The Narratology vs. Ludology *Debate* (narrative studies vs. game studies) was addressed in an article written by Gonzalo Frasca, called "Ludology meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (video)games and narrative". His article acted as a response to the problems raised by ludologists and narratologists who were discussing how one should analyze a game. Should it be done by analyzing the story, or the mechanics of the game? Are games just an extension of books? Or is it a combination of elements within books and games? Gonzalo Frasca tried to answer questions like these by attempting to unite the two fields by finding a common ground. However, the attempt created more discussions and perhaps problems because people did not necessarily agree with his opinions. He tried to

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<sup>6</sup> By modern ludology I am referring to ludology without play.



enlighten the differences and similarities between the two and wrote that “basic concepts of ludology can be used along with narratology to better understand video games” (Frasca).

The ludologists argue that you cannot analyze the narrative in a game because a gamer does not care about the story; they only care about how to win the game. Furthermore, since video games were not created with storytelling as their main task, it is not of importance. Narratologists countered by claiming that the most popular games share strong narrative elements with other visual mediums (Kokonis 173), therefore stories must matter. In an attempt to find a solution to this problem, different approaches have been suggested, which will be the main focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter 2 - Theory

This chapter will consider what a video game is, how it is structured, how storytelling in video games differs from other media. This chapter will also consider mistakes that can affect the story in a game and the zombie sub-genre. Different ludologists and their theories will be discussed, starting with Jesper Juul, Espen Aarseth, Hayot, Kokonis, Konzack, and Malliet.

### 2.1 What is a Video Game, According to Jesper Juul.

Jesper Juul is a Danish game designer and a ludologist who has written several articles and books about video games. He is known for his opinions regarding the importance of storytelling in video games and the challenge of implementing emotions in video games. He is also known for voicing a theory where he introduces games as being half-real, which means that despite the fact that a game takes place in a fictional world, we win or lose in the real world. The game is unfolding in a fictional place by following our rules. We are partaking in a fictional place with the help of real things. The half-real theory is addressed further after an introduction to Juul's six classical features in games.

According to Jesper Juul, anything that is called a game has some similarities when considering features. Due to the transmedial nature of games, it does not matter if it is a video game or a board game; they will all have certain six features in common which considers the basic elements that are present in a game. Transmedia, in this case, means that the game can be played on different devices, much like how stories can be experienced through a book as well as through a game or a movie (Juul, Half-Real 7). For example, you can play chess on a board, and you could also play it on a PC. The rules for playing chess on a board will be the same as if you play it on a PC.

Juul's classic game model was written for anything that could be called a game, and his model features elements in games that can be traced back for thousands of years (Juul, Half-Real 7). Understanding how games have changed can offer an explanation to the difficulties encountered while deciding what a game is. This can also offer an insight into why games were considered to be an activity mostly practiced by children because the six features do not consider the story or how a game can impact a person's life.

The technicalities do not consider every aspect of video games, for example, how a story is told or how some aspects, like audio or referentiality, can trigger responses in a gamer. However, the features do acknowledge the basic aspects in a game, which in turn can enhance a story.

Juul's six classic game features are:

1. Rules.
2. Variable, quantifiable outcome.
3. Valorization of the outcome.
4. Player effort.
5. The player is attached to the outcome.
6. Negotiable consequences.

(Juul, *Half-Real* 7-8)

1. Games are filled with rules that are either written down or programmed on a computer. For example, to win in *Super Mario Bros*, Mario must reach the end of the level and jump on a flagpole. This is unchangeable because it has been programmed into the game.
2. The game has different ways to reach a set goal. For example, in *TLOU2*, the journey towards the end scene depends on actions taken by the gamer; however, the ending is always about confronting Abby. The ending is unchangeable.
3. Winning is good; losing is bad. The goal is always to get the highest score or reach the end of the game.
4. Player effort is possibly the most important feature in modern video games. Player effort entails the investment given by the gamer while playing the game. The result of this is that a gamer might get attached to the game after facing and conquering challenges.
5. When reaching the end of the game, the gamer might have developed an emotional attachment resulting in the gamer feeling genuinely happy or sad about the ending. This can be experienced in *TLOU*, where Ellie and Joel drive away from Salt Lake City after Joel rescues Ellie from the fatal surgery. Usually, the gamer will feel happy about the outcome after observing the relationship between Ellie and Joel. This can be a result of how the story has justified the survival of Ellie by

demonstrating how Joel is healing from losing his daughter; and it would be meaningless to make him go through that again. Moreover, if one likes the game, it would be counterproductive to wish Ellie dead because there would be no reason to make a sequel.

6. There can be real-life consequences like games where you must download an app to play or use VR goggles. Alternatively, for instance, in an online multiplayer game called *Grand Theft Auto V*, you can go into a casino and spend real money. There are also positive artistic consequences that can come from games, for example making online friends.

Jesper Juul goes on to claim that games are half-real. This means that while the game takes place in a fictional world, the game is still real because a person interacts in a fictional world by following actual rules. His focus on rules in games has proved to be essential for him because he considers all types of games to be about rules. To play a game, rules must be programmed into the game software. If you confront a monster, there will usually be a rule that allows you to shoot it while simultaneously stopping you from randomly or intentionally shooting a friendly target. Rules also apply to other aspects of the video game world, for instance, movement. If the game takes place on earth, the character will be allowed to run around and jump without needing a spacesuit. It would be equal to how it would be obligatory to wear one if the game took place in outer space, where the characters would be human. Game rules will also stop you from walking through a wall if that is not something that is allowed to do in that world.

Everything is affected by rules, even emotions. According to Juul, “it is hard to create a game about emotions because emotions are hard to implement in rules” (Juul, Half-Real 21-23). Emotions happen naturally in life; perhaps that is why it is hard; taking something that happens naturally and replicating it in a game filled with rules. Juul also mentions the emotional attachment a player has to the outcome of a game, implying that players develop feelings when having invested time and effort in a game; however, this is purely a psychological feature of game activity. (Juul, Half-Real 41) So games do trigger emotions; however, the game will rarely be *about* emotions. How a person feels a need to see what happens in the end after spending hours trying to get to the final “board” will not be the same as having an emotional game that triggers empathy by replicating situations that the gamer

can relate to. Jesper Juul is not the only one who voices concerns about implementing emotions in video games.

Eric Hayot agrees that “video games cannot fully represent the social and emotional range of a human being” (Hayot 184). He explains that it results from constraints created by the need to win. This underlines how there was a worry regarding emotions in video games. By not being able to reflect emotions in a video game accurately, it could be harder for the crowd to identify with a character and feel attached to the game, which could have negative consequences for the overall experience. By not realistically replicating emotions, it could create a divide and make a gamer dislike the game. However, if one would only focus on realistically replicating emotions, there would also be a risk for the game to fail. This is perhaps because something emotional does not always end successfully. Failing with emotions could obstruct a winning ending.

Let’s consider the ending of *The Last of Us*. When Joel rescued Ellie, was that a winning ending? The game started as being about creating a vaccine that would save the world. However, now the world is doomed, and Joel has sealed his own fate by killing the doctor. Recreating human emotions did sabotage a happy ending for humanity. However, if the game had killed Ellie, it would be so uncharacteristic that it would hurt the game because it would create a ludonarrative dissonance with Joel. He is a protector who is willing to do anything for the people he loves, so he would never let Ellie die. Human emotions are hard to implement in games; however, in this case it seems to be used as a tool to continue the story. By avoiding a definite answer to what happens in the future, it does in a way recreate human emotions because emotions are never predictable or grounded in rules. The story had a fixed ending, so even though there was never a cure to be found, it consequently made it possible to tell a story that combined human emotions and gameplay. Perhaps the reason why this was possible, was that the goal in the game changed. It went from creating a vaccine, to saving Ellie.

If we are prompted correctly, through experiencing the story, we will accept the pre-planned conclusion where the world is ending instead of hoping for Ellie to die and the world survives. (Hayot 186) So that is why it might not be as noticeable that our free will in the game is being challenged; after experiencing the story, our experience is being adjusted into accepting the unavoidable outcome. The survival of both Ellie and Abby has become a justified ending after

becoming familiarized with Abby's background. Abby is no longer the evil character; she is a misunderstood person struggling with a traumatic past. Killing Abby would harm the ending more than compliment it because it would impact the open ending where she leaves Joel's guitar, the same one he had taught her to play on, and thereby leaves her past behind her. It would also not ring true with Ellie's personality. Letting Abby go can be interpreted as Ellie accepting what has happened and further realizing that she has been neglecting her own life by going on a hunt for revenge when nothing can change what Abby did. By knowing that Abby lost her father, which is a similar situation to what Ellie experienced, Abby goes from being something evil to becoming a human. Leaving it with an open ending becomes an appropriate way to end a game that relies heavily on human emotions and attachment to characters.

Jesper Juul is also known for claiming that "fiction in games is unimportant." (Juul, Half-Real 13). He based his claim on how the symbolical or metaphorical meaning in a game did not have to be connected to how you play it, making it arbitrary. (Juul, Half-Real 14) It is important to know that he first made this claim in 1998, which was at around the same time that the narratology vs. ludology debate occurred. Juul has admitted that what he said was wrong, so he has retracted his statement, saying that "everything can be presented as narratives" (Juul, Games Telling Stories). I think that the fact that he retracted his statement shows how ludology has constantly been changing. The opinions voiced by ludologists in the 90s are perhaps not accurate today.

Juul claims that storytelling with its fixed ending does not fit with how games are structured, because, according to him, games do not have fixed endings. This is because a person becomes attached to a video game after making an effort to reach the end. If the end is fixed, there would be no effort, so a person would not become attached to the outcome. (Juul, Half-Real 44).

Interestingly, his claim does not reflect neither *TLOU* nor *TLOU2*, because both endings were always fixed. However, it is not revealed until you reach the end, on the way, there, things do not unfold the way we expect them to. The attachment or effort given does not go away, even though the endings are fixed because games can have an element of surprise (Juul, Half-Real 57).

Juul wrote *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, in 2005, which was the time when Juul claimed that storytelling in games was a misunderstood opinion of what games were about (Juul, *Half-Real* 192). However, one could speculate that all these six features that he has identified are parts that build a story in a game. The rules in a game exist in a way that enforces a story because the rules are hidden, which allows a gamer to focus on the appearance of the fictional world as opposed to focusing on the game as if it were only consisting of rules (Juul, *Half-Real* 162). For example, in *TLOU2*, there is a scene where Ellie and Joel are battling a bloater, the game is programmed so that the gamer who plays as Ellie cannot kill the monster in that particular scene. Only Joel can because it enforces his backstory as a protective father figure for Ellie, if Ellie was always the one to save Joel, it could damage his credibility. This scene feels like any other battle with an infected creature, but there are rules that hinders the gamer so that only Joel can kill it. The rules are hidden and only the fiction is visible.

There are different ways to reach the ending of *TLOU2*; however, every alternative enforces the severity of the state of the world. Considering the game's outcome, allowing the story to be shown from both sides makes it acceptable that Abby does not die, so there are no negative feelings when she leaves. The way to win the game is to reach Abby. The effort given in this game by fighting off infected creatures, upgrading weapons, and staying safe is a way to feel attached to the story and thus care about the game's outcome. The real-life consequence is that the game can make a profound emotional impact on a gamer.

Jesper Juul also says that a central part of enjoying games is when we can escape failure by succeeding; therefore, some people do enjoy games because they fail while gaming. (Juul, *The Art of Failure*). The more people fail, the more enjoyable it will be to finally succeed. As long as it is possible to succeed in a game, failing will be accepted because it is a challenge that can be won. If there were no chance of winning, it would be different because there would be no reward in the end and no inspiration to keep playing.

The claim that games consist of these six features is undeniable; however, it does not consider the different genres and reasons why people play video games. Furthermore, most importantly, it does not consider the audio/visual/interactive aspect. So, this model does describe the most essential features of games in general. However, it does not include enough

to describe modern video games which are games that are mostly created in a photorealistic way, because it does not consider storytelling. However, it offers an insight into how video games were when video games were still finding their place in society.

## 2.2 Espen Aarseth and His Ludonarrative Software

Espen Aarseth is a Norwegian academic who specializes in video games. One of his topics of interest includes finding out how a game differs from another. He takes a different approach to studying video games than Jesper Juul. He does not focus on its gameplay, but he considers common traits in stories and games to highlight flaws concerning analysis by demonstrating how comprehensive video games are (Maiberg). He encounters similar topics as Jesper Juul, which makes it possible to compare them. However, Aarseth does acknowledge the importance of characters and storytelling in video games, which Juul does not. And he offers a solution to how one should “approach software that combines games and stories” (Aarseth 2). In his article called “A Narrative Theory of Games”, Aarseth introduces a theory of ludonarrative software by considering similarities between stories and games.

Aarseth claims that all stories and all games have four elements in common:

1. A world that can be linear, multicursal, or open.
2. Objects that are dynamic, user-created, or static.
3. Agents that are bots, shallow characters, or deep characters.
4. Events that are arranged openly, selectable, or plotted.

(Aarseth 3)

Aarseth further explains by commenting that his model can analyze the physical appearance of a video game; however, it does not consider the “content” aspects of ludo-narratives, which are according to him: “emotions, themes, style...” (Aarseth 6). This is where Juul and Aarseth disagree. While Juul claims that because stories are not important in video games, they cannot be analyzed as a novel is analyzed. Aarseth counters that and claims that analyzing a game by using the same theories and methods that are used when analyzing a work of fiction, is sometimes possible. However, because the analysis does not include the essential aspects of ludo-narrative software, like audio, “narrative theory is not sufficient to understand these new forms” (Aarseth 6). What he means by this is that it is sometimes possible to analyze a game



using the same theories and methods as one would use to analyze a book, however it would not be sufficient.

By using this model above, consisting of four elements, he proves that it is sometimes possible to analyze elements in a game the same way as in a novel. However, the same approach cannot be taken with any kind of game because “the *nature* of ludo-narrative works is complex and multiform, and yet there are few basic ontological dimensions that can be used to describe this variance” (Aarseth 6). That means that it is hard to analyze games because so few traditional aspects can be applied to video games during analysis. This can also be the reason why some elements can be analyzed as a novel. Aarseth’s four elements can be applied to both mediums. However, it is possible to speculate if it is flawed *because* there would be so few aspects that fit both mediums, leading to a misrepresenting analysis where one medium would have an unfair advantage. Espen Aarseth claimed earlier that it is possible to analyze some sides of a video game like one would analyze a novel, so there are similarities between the appearance of stories in games and novels because stories are structured similarly with a beginning a middle and an end. There is also the aspect of characters that can be analyzed in a similar way. However, it would be flawed to analyze these mediums in the same way because it would not recognize the greatness in both. By analyzing a game as a novel, the audio would not be considered, and by analyzing a novel as a game, there would be no audio there to be analyzed.

When considering characters in video games, Aarseth and Juul disagree about importance. Juul does not consider the importance of the characters in a game or the emotional attachment a gamer can feel towards a character; instead, he focuses on gameplay and the effort taken in reaching the end. In contrast, Aarseth thinks that “the most important dimension for storytelling in games is that of agents/characters” (Aarseth 5). It seems like Juul’s characters function more as a tool to be used to play the game instead of being a possible tool used to tell a story. Characters are necessary for video game storytelling because creating deep and interesting characters, as Aarseth calls them, “is the most effective way of creating ludo-narrative content” (Aarseth 5).

Aarseth further claims that it is faulty to call video games “games” because it has become a combination of different mediums, so perhaps “ludo-narrative software” would be more suitable (Aarseth 6). These are different opinions about storytelling in video games which

offer an insight into the problems that occur when a type of media evolves quickly. It furthermore offers a demonstration of opposing opinions about what is of importance in video games. For example, Jesper Juul is prone to considering video games as they were before, focusing on gameplay and appearance. Meanwhile, Espen Aarseth offers a more contemporary perception of video games where he acknowledges that video games are more than just gameplay; they have stories and characters that matter.

So, after learning about different opinions concerning what video games are and are not, let's move on to see how the narrative in a video game is structured to tell a story.

### 2.3 Evan Skolnick and Tobias Heussner Explain the Structure of Narrative in Video Games

There are many things that video game designers must consider when programming gameplay around the story in a game. For example, the importance of avoiding player dissonance, which is when narrative and gameplay are contradicting, like when the narrative says that the game is about settling down on an island, while gameplay encourages leaving that same island. The narrative wants one thing while gameplay counters the narrative. Due to how video games often include free play, the designers do not have total control over how the game will unfold. A game designer must consider how much free will can impact the game; will a gamer stop playing if the game is too hard? Are there any mistakes that make the game unplayable? Will a cutscene make the game frustrating? Problems like these can be avoided in games like *TLOU2* where you can adjust the level of difficulty and apply unlocked modifications or skip tedious cutscenes. The question surrounding mistakes is whether there are any “bugs” in the game that have not been detected. Bugs are simply game slips, for example if a character is supposed to jump up, but instead trips. This can happen if an important action in a game is unavailable because of a programming error that has occurred during development. If you must jump and you cannot, the game is “bugged”. The question around mistakes that can affect the story in a game, is further addressed in chapter 2.6.

Every story is structured similarly, which can be demonstrated by using the Three-Act-Structure, written in 1978 by a screenwriter called Syd Fields. All games have a beginning, a

middle, and an end. This is called the setup, confrontation, and resolution. All these stages in a story surround a conflict. During the setup, the audience is presented with the central conflict. This is when the foundation of a story is made by explaining what has happened and what do the protagonists want to do to resolve the conflict. The confrontation is the most prominent part where the groundwork for the resolution is laid. Due to its size, it is sometimes divided so that different aspects of the problem can be demonstrated by changing the playable character in a game. In order to keep a story interesting during this large part, there will be other sub-missions and obstacles that must be overcome before the story proceeds to the resolution, which is when the central conflict is resolved, and the game ends because it is “out of fuel” (Skolnick15).

Aristotle once claimed that “Tragedies require the keen development and pristine execution of six hierarchical elements... Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Song” (Forrey). Although Aristotle lived thousands of years ago, these elements are still relevant today, and can be found in the narrative structure of video games.

Evan Skolnick is a video game developer who wrote a book called *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know About Narrative Techniques*. Some essential topics he focuses on are conflict, archetypes, consistency, architecture, dialogue, and music.

Every story has archetypes. These are character types that reoccur in most stories, for example, a hero, a mentor, a henchman, a shapeshifter, a trickster, and a villain. Evan Skolnick refers to Joseph Campbell, an American mythologist and writer who, in 1949, wrote about typical archetypes in video games. Skolnick says that according to Campbell, "each of these archetypes represents one component of a human psychological profile –so that, combined, they represent a complete individual psyche" (Skolnick 28). This can allow one to consider if the individual psyche could have something to do with how attached one can feel to a game. You spend hours immersed in one story, only to feel lost when it is over.

A hero will usually only embody one character, while the other archetypes can vary. The hero is the most critical archetype because it is directly involved with the central conflict in a story where the hero often experiences sacrifice or personal growth. The mentor is usually older than the hero and acts as a teacher and adviser. The henchman acts as a lesser villain, providing sub-conflicts for the hero. The trickster infuses comedy with its personality; the

shapeshifter will be a character the audience cannot identify as bad or good. And finally, the villain is the instigator behind the central conflict. (Skolnick 28-32)

As a result of how video games and stories emerge from a joint history of storytelling (Hayot 181), these archetypes can also be found in *TLOU2*.

In *TLOU2*, the hero is Ellie, who is out for revenge, and the mentor is Joel's brother, who offers advice. Several henchmen are trying to stop Ellie; the trickster is not as clear cut as in other stories. The characters who are best suited are Ellie and Joel who tell jokes during flashbacks. Since Joel has died, Ellie becomes darker and there is minimal humor in this game from her side because she is grieving, and the jokes often functioned as an internal thing between them. It does look like Abby's friends Joel and Owen could be the replacement for the trickster element in this game when the perspective is portrayed from Abby's side. The shapeshifter is Abby, who is portrayed as being bad before it is revealed who her father is and how she helps a teenager in the end. Before Abby is revealed as a shapeshifter, she is the main villain.

A story must be logical, where consistency and architecture are essential. However, consistency is a big part of spatial properties in a game, which is about how the story has to progress in a natural way that makes sense. For example, what can and cannot be performed within that world. The rules within a world must be enforced so that there are no illogical surprises. A story that takes place on this earth must continuously follow the rules that are already present. If the world has changed significantly and it impacts how life on earth transpires, it has to be assessed early on.

Consistency also applies to characters. They must be believable and not do anything that does not make sense and could damage the credibility of the character. This is because the audience wants to believe that a character is a real person, so if it does something strange, that could create ludonarrative dissonance. That means that if a character who is blind in the beginning, has to be blind throughout the story, unless there is some logical reason why that character can suddenly see. Alternatively, a character who is terrified of dogs cannot suddenly have a dog and claim that she has always loved the animal. The ultimate goal in a game is when the gameplay matches the story being told, which is called ludonarrative harmony.

(Skolnick 39) This means that a kind-hearted character will have the appropriate language and behavior that suits to that personality.

The architecture in a game is connected to consistency and ludonarrative harmony. If the protagonist walks into a partially collapsed building, the elevator will also be broken. “The layout and architecture should also be designed to intentionally evoke the history, values, and culture of its fictional designer and/or denizens” (Skolnick 149). Skolnick often uses elevators as an example to describe how a game designer would encourage a gamer to do certain things, like walking in a certain direction. He mentions different alternatives like how a game has to encourage the gamer to ignore the elevator and look for the stairs while creating a realistic situation where people would not use the elevator. This can be done in different ways depending on the surroundings. If there is no electricity, it is easy because the elevator does not work, so logically one would start looking for alternative ways to reach the upper floors. And since there is no electricity, there could be a sign that glows in the dark, offering directions (Skolnick 151). Thus, creating ludonarrative harmony.

In games, dialogue is often used to explain background information or as a tutorial because it is the easiest way to do it. However, using dialogue can be flawed because long informative dialogues in tutorials can be draining, so most games offer the option to skip those dialogues or make sure the exchange of dialogue is kept to a bare necessity to avoid people skipping it. By skipping a dialogue, one can miss important information, which can affect the experience of the story in the game in a negative way. As Skolnick says, it can cause people to become “confused about what to do next” (Skolnick 96). This can cause the story to be inaccessible because you are stuck after missing instructions which revealed how to get past the obstacle.

Allowing a gamer to choose to skip a dialogue makes a game adaptable for people who prefer to focus on gameplay, not the story. There is another alternative to adding dialogue without allowing it to be skipped, which is by letting the dialogue take place during gameplay. This happens a lot in *TLOU2*. For example, when Ellie walks around and suddenly sees a checkpoint gate and says, “I need to get past that checkpoint gate” (MKIceAndFire 9:11:41), this works as a discrete way to show where you are supposed to go to continue with the game.

Another example is when Abby says, "Getting closer to your tall building."(15:42:00) It avoids confusion about where to go in the game; however, it does not feel forced because it

can be done at any pace. Otherwise, conversations and cutscenes can be triggered at certain times by pushing a button, which allows the gamer to finish scavenging or exploring the area before letting the story continue. Many games have trophies that can be obtained by triggering conversations, which will add to the feeling of accomplishment after receiving them. Having something to work towards keeps games enjoyable and avoids the risk of people giving up.

In general, music and audio are essential in video games because it is a way to "*make the player feel*" (Skolnick 183). If there is a scene when the player is supposed to be afraid, the narrative and audio will enhance that by adding appropriate sounds like louder breathing. If nothing happens, ambient sounds will be present to enhance the consistency in the game world, for example, by adding wind or bird sounds outside or remote sounds of monsters. If the scene includes sneaking around hostile people, a tense sound will warn the gamer if the threat is near. The sound can ultimately become scary during stressful scenes because it demands quick actions and could be overwhelming for some.

Telling a story through a game also depends on which genre applies to the game. In "Comparing Storytelling in Games & Literature", Simon K Jones claims that games consist of two genre definitions (Jones, Comparing). There will be one genre that surrounds the story, while there will also be a mechanical genre. The difference between these two genres is that the mechanical genre is about what the game will physically require from the gamer in order to access the story. It will for example imply if the game consists of puzzles or fighting.

A story genre will for example be adventure, while the mechanical can be Role Playing Game, also called RPG. In an action-adventure RPG game like *TLOU2*, it is normal that most of the game surrounds gameplay, and cutscenes will not be overbearing. But what is experienced as being too much for one gamer could be too little for another, the goal is to let the gameplay and story combine naturally. (Heussner 163) The number of different mechanical genres vary; however, the most popular ones are:

1. First person shooter: Games with one-on-one shooting.
2. Third person shooter: Similar to first person, however gameplay is from a third person view.
3. Beat-Em-Up: Fighting games where the entire game surrounds for example a boxing ring, and the goal is to beat an opponent.

4. Puzzler: Games with puzzle solving. For example: *The Witness*, which is a game that consists entirely of solving puzzles in different destinations.
5. Action-RPG: Action role playing game where the story is more pre-determined. Since the story will unfold no matter what, the focus will mainly be on finishing sub missions and battles. *TLOU2* is an action-RPG. The main story does not change, the way one chooses to experience the story and its obstacles, is individual.
6. RPG: Role playing game, the player decides more of the story and how challenges will be handled.
7. JRPG: Japanese role-playing game, where the game has been developed in Japan. For example, *Pokémon*.
8. Interactive fiction: often includes a mystery story that has to be solved. For example, a game called *Gone Home*, where the gamer has to find out what has happened in that empty house by looking for clues.
9. Platformer: Games like *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario*. Jumping, running and climbing between different levels, also seen as platforms.
10. Simulator: Games like *Euro Truck Simulator*. Real actions simulated on a screen.

(Jones, Comparing)

The selection is narrower when considering the story genre. That is perhaps one reason why it could be hard to analyze a video game like a novel. The mechanical genre in a game is vital for the story to be experienced in the right way, so if one ignores the mechanical genre, the story would be faulty. The story in a game relies on the mechanical genre because it needs it to unfold the story. You need both in order to tell the story properly.

Concerning story genre, the most popular ones in video games are:

- Fantasy.
- Science Fiction.
- Cyberpunk. (Dystopian futuristic setting)
- Action thriller.
- Horror: also includes the zombie sub-genre.
- War.

While comedy is popular in movies, the same cannot be said about games because “it is hard to be funny on demand” (Bradley). Another genre that is difficult to use in a game, is romance. Horror games are popular; however, the reason could be that it is easier to make

games that trigger fear because it needs less interaction to make sense and make a connection. Let a scene unfold in a scary environment with a creature that runs towards you while screaming. There is no need for explanation, this situation is not pleasant, and you want to get away from the threat.

There have been attempts at making games with comedy. However, it has not been as successful as typical genres because comedy is safest when added to an already strong game where it is not forced (Bradley). Making a comedy game is unpredictable because something intended as funny can ultimately be perceived as needy or bad (Bradley). Comedy works best as a bonus feature. The same could be thought about romance. According to Heussner, cutscenes are a good way to express complex emotions (Heussner 111). So perhaps it could be difficult to make a video game where the focus is on romance because it would make the gameplay suffer. Adding it as a bonus in a game works better because it would be like adding something experimental into something that is well-established. Even though a romantic scene could fail, the overall story in the game could still be good.

While a romantic story would need more explanations with cutscenes or situations for the gamer to connect to it and feel that they care about the story. A romantic game would perhaps need a lot of dialogue, which in turn does not work properly with a video game. A love story is perhaps better suited in a movie, or as a bonus feature in a game. Like in *TLOU2*, where the relationship between Ellie and Dina is shown during cutscenes, and some gameplay does occur with both of them where dialogue is used as a source of information that reminds you of how close they are. The gameplay does not impact their relationship. For example, at the beginning of the game we see Ellie and Dina dancing, kissing, and talking. This happens during a cutscene, and we cannot alter it. Otherwise, there are scenes where a push of a button triggers dialogue, or a simple embrace. The gameplay offers an extra insight into their relationship; however, it is impossible to break them up. This is how romance can work in games, as an extra element that cannot be changed. However, games that are purely about romance often fails because it takes a lot of work, and the target crowd is slim compared to other games. Tobias Heussner mentions how there are typical presentations of romance in games, like romance between Non-Playable-Characters (NPC), between two players, and between a character and an NPC. However, he concludes by saying that these options do not tell you how to write a successful romance. (Heussner 25). This problem could also a result of



nobody really knowing what romance games are yet (24). Which could be the reason why romance in video games functions more as a bonus element, and not a main focus.

## 2.4 How the Visual Impacts the Experience of a Story

The visual aspect is essential for video games. Instead of unfolding as an imagination, the story unfolds in front of the gamer. This can affect how a story is experienced for different reasons. One is that it could be easier to follow a story that you are partaking in and shaping. Another reason is that terrifying creatures can manifest on screen, making a scary story realistic because you have to interact to remove the threat; it will not go away without action. Since games today often look like movies, it can be hard to separate reality from fiction. A story can be told in different ways, but actively participating in it could be unsettling because of the psychological effect of seeing something manifest on a screen, then actively killing it. Another way the visual can affect how a story is experienced in a game, is the matter of how video games can trigger motion sickness, which has often caused people to stop playing a game. This has caused a lot of games, including *TLOU2*, to add anti-motion sickness settings.

Reading about something could have a different impact on how it is experienced compared to observing it. While something that is read can still be thought to be fake, observing it makes it real. Much like how it is easy to say that an article is fake news, it is harder to say the same about a video recording of the same incident. For example, if a person claims that they are capable of jumping two meters straight up, it would be easier to discredit that based on a Facebook post, than after looking at a video of that person proving it.

Reading about a wolf being killed is different from having to shoot the animal in a game while watching it happen on a screen. Especially since gaming controllers often have special effects that make actions feel realistic, such as vibrating if there is a loud sound. If the visual experience is too much for a gamer, they could stop the game. How strongly the visual part of a game impacts a gamer depends on the person playing. If there is constant animal abuse, many people will not enjoy the game because it would impact them emotionally. Furthermore, a movie filled with violence can make people hate it. However, perhaps a person who is used to hunting would not be bothered if they must kill an animal in a game. In the same way, a

person who has never played a violent video game could react more strongly if they suddenly played a graphic shooter game.

The visual can also impact in a way that makes it superfluous for a person to play the game themselves. Some could feel that observing the game is enough, so they watch the game instead of playing it. Even if the experience would be different from the one who plays the game, it would still allow a person to experience the main story. This has become popular in the last years as people have started live-streaming video games where people enjoy watching them play. Observing a live stream offers a unique way to experience a game as if it were a movie. It also allows people to see different ways to solve a quest, creating a learning opportunity. For example, if a person has played the same game but quit because they got stuck, watching a live stream could help them continue with the game by revealing how the scene is completed. It can also be interesting to see how other people solve different challenges or find something that people easily miss—for example, a hidden area in a game, or hidden artifacts.

The use of Virtual Reality in horror games can create a terrifying situation because it makes our world and the game world melt together during gameplay. A gamer is physically and visually experiencing things that are occurring in a fictional world, and even though what happens is fake, it becomes terrifying, and something that a lot of people don't enjoy. Making a horror game too real can be negative consequence caused by great work, because it can be too scary.

## 2.5 Triggering Emotions, and its Consequences

Aristotle considered emotions to be an important factor for why people watched plays. This idea can also be seen in video games, because “players expect to experience a range of emotions that feed into the core desire to win” (Walton & Suckling). Even if the type of games has changed since Aristotle was around, emotions are still an important accomplishment that is every game developer's goal. “The prevalent emotions in video game fictive practice are frustration, anger, and elation” (Tavinor 36). Which can be noticed when playing *TLOU2*, you are frustrated when trying to overcome challenges, you feel angry at Abby and elated when the game concludes with Ellie letting Abby go.

*TLOU2* is known for its ability to trigger intense hate. The game triggers hatred for a fictional character because you care so much about Ellie and Joel. The hate occurs because it feels unfair that Joel was killed. The man who has suffered through so much and has finally found happiness, going from a difficult and lonely life to having some sense of normalcy and friendships. Then suddenly, his past comes after him and makes him take the consequences for his actions by being ferociously killed in front of Ellie. To have him killed right after he helps Abby escape from a horde. The unfairness caused by all this has stirred up intense hate amongst fans, and the game creators have said in an interview, that making people hate Abby, was a goal (Nicholson). A game's ability to trigger hate based on fiction is astounding. The reason why this is possible could partially be explained with how "Emotion and action are close cognitive bedfellows" (Tavinor 36).

A philosopher of the arts, called Grant Tavinor, whose research focus includes video games, claims that; "The nature of video games as interactive fictions determines the type of emotional responses we have toward them" (Tavinor 36). Playing a game that is too hard to succeed in can result in a gamer reacting strongly and quitting the game while also getting rid of all your stuff in that game. This has been called rage-quit (Marcuson 5). When making a video game it is vital to avoid making a game that triggers that because the story will not be reachable. Naturally, this is more important for the type of games included in Simon K Jones's first approach to video games. The games that rely on gameplay to access the story, which are the games where the story is the most crucial part.

When playing a game, there is always a chance that the gamer gets attached to a character in a game, much like how one can feel connected to a character in a TV show. (Jones, Approaches) This can quickly happen in video games where the characters can be personalized in a way that makes them realistic and perhaps a digital version of the gamer. A character can either be pre-made or be shaped by the gamer. Some would create a character that looks cool, or they would make a character with similar features as themselves (Somerdin 7). Doing that can trigger empathy because the gamer could see the character as a mirror of themselves. When you play a game, you are killing creatures on behalf of a character, so it can sometimes feel like you and the character have become fused together, especially if you

can modify personal traits as well as the appearance of the character, making your character look like yourself.

Emotions in video games are unique because of its way to trigger guilt. When one plays a game and kills a person who is innocent or perhaps slaughters an animal, it is not unusual for the gamer to feel bad for what they have done. The reason why this is possible, is that we are “interacting with the fiction in a way that would make the ascription of guilt appropriate” (Tavinor 39). Grant Tavinor furthers this by explaining that because our role generates the content of fictional worlds, and this interactive role is extended within video games, compared to other mediums (39). This means that a gamer feels guilty because what happens in the game, is a direct consequence of actions taken by the gamer. “The emotions appreciators have for video games are usually derived from their interaction with the gameplay: the player feels angry at their inability to defeat the massive fiery lobster monster, frustrated by the difficulty of completing the platform jumping task, fearful of possible loss, or elated at defeating the hordes of mutants and maniacal monkeys” (38). This implies that emotions that are triggered by a sense of accomplishment within the game. If one loses, it becomes a personal feeling of defeat.

## 2.6 Mistakes That Can Affect the Story

During the design phase, there are several things that can go wrong and could affect a story negatively, where one is about stereotypes. Many games aim to reach a wide crowd by considering diversity amongst the characters, which is important because the typical gamer has changed. While that is a positive change that has come to light in video games during the last years, it also poses a risk of failure if it is not done correctly. Designing a game with an unrelatable story risks ending up as a game filled with stereotypes. Considering that the typical gamer has changed from being a white male to being adults of all sexes, this is a factor that has to be considered by the design team because everybody should feel included.

By having a person who has no experience with a topic, design a game that surrounds that same topic would be risky because it could hurt the integrity of the story if there is nobody who can double-check if the story works. For example, if somebody were to make a game where the main character uses a wheelchair, it would be hard to know what it is like to be in

one, without somebody who has first-hand experience. That is why many video game developers include people with experience with diversity to make a game. By having someone who can comment on situations that can be interpreted as insulting or unrealistic, the story can be told better and relate to more people. To avoid stereotypes in games, the game developers try hard to include a lot of characters and often include people who have some experience with the problems that occur, which is called diversity counselors. These people offer insight into how different types of situations can be represented in a realistic way (Skolnick 168).

For example, in *TLOU2*, there is a vast list of characters with different personalities, gender orientations, nationalities and people with opinions that are generally disliked. Moreover, even though the creators have tried to include everybody in a society, which has received much praise, because the queer community is usually marginalized and underrepresented in games, there has still been discussions based on that some characters do come through as being stereotypical. For example, Abby's Mexican friend Manny, who keeps saying pendejos. Minorities in video games have often been portrayed as being weaker than other characters. It can be noticed when considering who dies in a story. The person who dies a premature death, is often a person with a minority background, like Manny. However, the case of weaker minorities has started to change considering that the person who harasses Ellie and Dina while they dance, is a white male, who apologizes the next day for his actions. This is contrasting to how white men in video games have traditionally been portrayed as being powerful and aggressive (Yang 3). The reason why women are portrayed as being strong in this game, as opposed to sexualized, could be a direct consequence of how the target crowd is no longer predominantly male (Webb).

Another issue that occurs when designing a video game is how to properly communicate a scene. When using a cutscene, it is important to consider what comes before and after to make the story logical (Heussner 114). There is also the question of how to add information to a game. Should it be with a cutscene, quests, or something else entirely. There is a need to know why something happens, and if that never happens, it can become frustrating, and the gamer could lose interest in the game because it is not entertaining (Skolnick 60). By using a cutscene before a scary encounter, it can offer an explanation to what you are supposed to do to get rid of the threat, or why that scary encounter is important. After beating that threat, there will often be another cutscene that acknowledges what has happened and offers an

indication about how the story will progress from there. A cutscene could also be used to reveal events that happened in the past, for example when we learn that Abby walked into the surgery room to see her father dead on the floor. That is the moment when we learn that Abby's father was the doctor who Joel killed, which offered an explanation to why Abby was so troubled.

If a cutscene were added to every situation where something scary occurs, that would be unnecessary and ruin the fear of a game. However, "cutscenes are generally the best way to convey conflicted, complex emotions, due to the extra control of face effects and voice" (Heussner 111). For example, emotions that surround internal struggles and a person's suffering can be explained using cutscenes because it can focus on facial expressions and add a sound to enforce the emotion felt by the character. Dialogue is also a great way to convey complicated emotions because it makes it possible to demonstrate exactly how that person is feeling and give them a voice to inform the gamer of their inner thoughts (111). It also makes it possible to observe a dialogue between characters, which could reveal information that would otherwise be hidden. In *TLOU2*, Ellie's inner thoughts are revealed through the journal she writes in, which can be read by the gamer.

Architecture is also an aspect that can be a slippery slope. While the architecture can "reinforce the narrative background" (Skolnick 151). For example, *TLOU2* still has reminders of the world that was before outbreak day; signs are rusty, stores have been looted, and there are still roads that are filled with abandoned cars. Architecture can also "clash with it and negatively impact consistency and believability (151). While *TLOU2* does not have any clear situations where architecture has failed, there is one questionable situation that occurs in surrounding a zebra that is alive. When almost everything has been killed by either infected creatures, or been killed for food and supplies are scarce, it is difficult to understand how a zebra can walk around freely. The zebra could have been added to symbolize how nature is taking over, however, it still doesn't ring right to me that it has survived.

Since it would not make sense, it would become interesting because there must be something there, and the focus on the main story would be disrupted because the house became distracting and accidentally shifted the focus. This could lead to one becoming distanced from the story. If the representation in a game is wrong, it poses a risk for a gamer to make

assumptions that are wrong and therefore miss important information about the game (Juul, Half-Real 177).

## 2.7 How are Stories Applied to Video Games, according to Simon K Jones and Evan Skolnick?

Simon K Jones is a writer who has held speeches and written articles about interactivity in video games, and also compared video games to novels. He claims that when applying a story to a video game, everything is about "the intersection of story with game design, and how that balance is weighted" (Jones, Approaches). Jones refers to three approaches to how a story is used in a video game. The first approach is when the gameplay is used to tell the story. This entails that the story in the game is the most critical part, and the mechanics are used to tell the story. For example, in a game called *Life is Strange 2*. This game is about two brothers who are on the run after their father was killed by a cop. This game mainly consists of multiple-choice decisions, where every choice has an impact on events that happens later in the story. Therefore, the story depends entirely on gameplay to tell the story.

The second way games tell stories, is the opposite of the first one. This is where the gameplay is the most crucial part, and the story is used to enhance it. These games do not need a story; however, one is provided to make the gaming experience deeper. Here one could consider *Super Mario Bros*. In *Super Mario Bros*, the ultimate goal is to complete the last board in order to save the princess. However, the game would work without knowing about the princess, because beating every board becomes a goal, while the princess becomes a bonus. Another example used by Jones is a game called *Subnautica*. This game is about scavenging, exploring and building bases, and the story provided is that the character is stranded after their spaceship has crashed on earth, and now the goal is to stay alive. This is a background story that gives the game a deeper meaning, however, the game would still work without it.

The third way is a combination of the first two. It is impossible to separate the mechanics and stories in these games. For example, *TLOU2*. What is special about this approach, is that the fiction supports the story, and the story supports the fiction. The game tells its story through environmental information, which can be seen during scavenging or exploring. For example, during exploring at a hospital, Ellie finds a recorder where somebody says that "the only

person who can develop a vaccine is dead” (MKIceandFire 10:08:11). Because of this recording, Ellie learns that Joel lied about what happened when she was under anesthesia at the end of the first game.

A simple way to separate these three is by considering what is adamant for the game; the story, gameplay, or both. If the game will not work without the story, it belongs in the first category. If the gameplay is obligatory, the second. And lastly, if there is a mutual dependency on both, it belongs in the last one.

All games are designed differently, but they all do belong somewhere between being tightly scripted with minimal chance to affect the story, to being a game where the gamer decides almost everything. That spectrum is called game story vs player story (Skolnick 118). Evan Skolnick mentions that when considering storytelling in games, the divide varies a lot, however, where the game is placed depends on what type of game it is. Much like Simon K Jones, Skolnick has a theory of approaches, where the first three are similar to Jones'. Games that are game story dominant, player story dominant, and a balanced game and player story.

Furthermore, Skolnick includes that some games do not seem to have stories at all by adding a fourth approach which is 99% player story. Those are the games which I mentioned do not seem to have stories at all. These games will typically not have a surrounding story and there will not be a clear ending to the game. The game could end at random times, depending on how good a gamer is at keeping the character alive. (Skolnick 124) This is where the importance of having something to work towards becomes apparent. As Skolnick says, after the central conflict in a story has been resolved, the interest in the game vanishes (Skolnick 15). So, consider a game that does not have a conflict, no point, or implications about what you are supposed to do. Nobody would play that game because there would be no experience of success, no challenges, no way to get better at anything, and nothing to keep the game interesting. There is no reward in playing a game that has no direction or anything that contributes to the feeling of accomplishment. As Skolnick says “A game with no challenges, goals, or obstacles can hardly be called a game, any more than a story without conflict can be called a story (Skolnick 9). To enjoy a game, there has to be something there to keep a gamer interested. So, since the games that do not seem to have stories are still enjoyable, it seems like it can simply be because the game has other elements that keeps a gamer interested,



which could be survival gameplay, or perhaps the excitement of scavenging and building bases. There is no story, but it does not need one either.

So, when narratologists say that the most popular games have stories, I would say that it is not entirely true because there are a lot of popular games without stories, just as there are popular games with stories. In a game called *ARK*, you create a character who is placed in a world where the only point is to find a good place to build a safe place in a world with different dangers, tame dinosaurs, and scavenge for building supplies so that the safe house can be upgraded and not be destroyed by dangerous creatures. There is no deep story there, just explorative gameplay.

Today's popular games are different from games that were released 20 years ago because games have become more advanced, and they can exist with and without a story. This further means that doing as the ludologists and saying blankly that games do not need a story and gamers do not care about stories would be flawed because it does not consider the full scale of different types of games and what people look for in a game. Some gamers want a story, while others do not.

Jones' theory about how storytelling is done in video games supports how Aarseth suggests that games should be called ludo-narrative software because Jones's theory demonstrates how there are many different types of games and stories. Rebranding video games and calling them software would be a more helpful way to understand what it is because playing a game consists of a lot more than just playing a game. It can be an all-consuming experience. Renaming it would also underline how the hybrid theory by Kokonis<sup>7</sup> is partly correct because it says that games have both story and game elements at once; a story that is told in a modern way through a game.

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<sup>7</sup> Kokonis' hybrid theory is discussed in chapter 2.10

## 2.8 The Zombie Sub-Genre

The zombie genre is a sub-genre of survival horror, a story-driven genre which originates from films (Backe and Aarseth 5). While other creatures have typical traits common among all, for example, vampire fangs, zombies do not (5). There is no typical appearance that defines a zombie, which can be noticed if one compares the creatures in a popular TV series called *The Walking Dead* and the zombies, who are called infected, in *TLOU2*. Even though they do differ if one considers how the zombies in *The Walking Dead* deteriorate as time passes, while infected in *TLOU2* evolve into more dangerous creatures, both still belong to the zombie category. The feature needed to define something as a zombie is when the entities are “empty shells of life that scandalously continue to function in the absence of any rationale and of any interiority” (Backe and Aarseth 5). Infected creatures in *TLOU2* meet the same criteria as zombies and do therefore belong in the same category.

Infected creatures are categorized as zombies because they are empty shells of former human beings. A zombie is a physical vessel that once was a human being and has now transformed into something evil and furious that longs for any living creature as if longing for what it used to have. The idea of creatures that are empty shells has been linked to the American occupation of Haiti with its slavery, and also the unfortunate people during the great depression in 1929. That is because slaves were treated as meaningless humans, and during the great depression, people lost their jobs and stood in long unemployment lines. Both were walking around without a plan and just existing in a cruel world (Backe and Aarseth 5).

The fear of zombies can be interpreted as being a result of constantly being reminded that everybody in real life, dies one day (Backe and Aarseth 6). Society today has been built in a world filled with fear and war, where what we fear the most is the lack of control of our lives and fear of rage itself (Backe and Aarseth 6). Traditional zombies were not usually filled with anger; they were empty shells that did nothing but roam around. However, this changed when a movie called *28 days later*, “reinterpreted zombies as a running, raging pack of hunters instead of the traditional image of ‘humanity stripped of passion soul and spirit’” (Backe and Aarseth 6).

As society has changed, our fears have done the same. Being put in a situation where life is uncertain, and you do not know what will happen can be a part of why being chased by a

furious zombie that threatens to take away the little you have left is a terrifying thought. Furthermore, because video games offer the opportunity to fight back against this threat, it could be the best way to approach a zombie story. This, of course, also depends on how a zombie is applied in a game. If it is just roaming around in the background where it poses no threat, it would perhaps function better in a movie.

Concerning storytelling in video games, the zombie sub-genre can be used to trigger our inner fear of being in a situation where everything is taken away, and we must fight to stay alive. There is a similarity between *TLOU2* and *The Walking Dead Telltale Game*, where it becomes clear that even though the world has gone under because of zombies, another threat that could seem unexpected, and is noticed when playing zombie games, is the danger of strangers. The survival aspect of this game does not only concern fighting zombies but also dangerous rival groups that have been established. Zombies work well in video games because zombies immediately react to a character in a game. A character would only need to be present and not do anything and the zombie would still charge at the character, “provoking strong emotional reactions” (Backe and Aarseth 3) in a gamer because it is a constant reminder of the fragility of life (3). Zombies in stories are threatening simply by existing (3).

Placing zombies in a horror game is safe because “the conventions of horror are easily communicated” (Backe and Aarseth 3). Instead of taking risks by trying something new, zombies are placed in a genre that already has a successful formula (Backe and Aarseth 3).

Trusting other people becomes a dangerous task because there are no rules that make it safe. The lack of a sophisticated society where you can more or less expect people to behave in a civilized manner becomes lethal. The world changes, and death is around every corner if one is not careful. The importance of belonging to a group proves to be vital. Everybody is in danger, and since there are no rules, there is no sense of security when you are alone. These things build up the tension in *TLOU2*, the seriousness of being in a world without security. Killing a rival becomes acceptable because you are protecting yourself and your group. The game proves how one becomes neutral to the idea of having killed many people, because the game world is dangerous, so kill the threat and move on to the next obstacle.

As for *TLOU2*, while the main story is expected to be about infected creatures, it is actually about “the lengths a parent will go to protect a child” (Dougherty) So why have they chosen infected creatures as the cause of the destruction of world society? It could just as easily have

been aliens, or the aftermath of a war. It could also be because it was a more realistic alternative considering that they added an explanation to how the infection started, and that they based it on a real virus. Adding a realistic aspect makes it possible to play with the thought of it hypothetically happening. Further making us realize everything that we could lose if we were in that situation. The severity of a virus destroying the world. Or perhaps it was simply because a an infected creature can work as a reminder of our own fear of destruction.

## 2.9 How Does Storytelling in Games Differ from Other Artforms?

Skolnick argues that a story “is told through the game” (Skolnick 163). I believe that this claim is key for understanding the most important ways a game differs from other storytelling media. While other mediums use observation and tell a story to a passive crowd, games do not. A game needs interactivity and interaction from a gamer, as well as observation so that the gamer can make decisions about how to complete the game, based on what is displayed.

It has been argued that appreciators of novels are denied the experience of particular types of emotions because of their inability to act within fictional worlds (Tavinor 39). This means that different fictions can trigger emotions, but the element of interactivity can conjure emotions that other mediums cannot, for instance guilt. There is also a claim that contrasts the fictive engagement one has with films and novels by mentioning that “...the epistemic access the audience has to a fictional world is constrained by the narration” (Tavinor 26). This is a result of how movies and novels have passive observers, while games have active. This means that movies and novels are presenting a predetermined fiction, while gamers are actively shaping a story through participation. Although video games do have predetermined storylines, what makes it differ is the way the storyline unfolds, because it depends on the gamer.

Simon K Jones, wrote an article based on a speech he gave, called “Comparing Storytelling in Games and Literature”. This is the same writer who explained the three ways storytelling is done in video games. He addresses several important functionalities in a video game, where a crucial one is about genre, and another one is about the first-person perspective. As mentioned in chapter 2.3, Jones claims that video games consist of two definitions, one is called a thematic one which considers the story, the other one is the mechanical genre which is when a

game is labeled as for example an RPG game (Jones, Comparing). The mechanical genre will reveal what you can expect to do when playing the game.

For example, *TLOU2* is a horror/action/adventure game where the mechanical genre is a single player survival/action RPG. This means that the game's mechanical part requires actions associated with survival, like scavenging. Action RPG means that the game allows the player to control the character freely (role-playing), and there will be combat scenes. Combine these two, and you will notice that in the case of *TLOU2*, it describes how the story has a horror/action/adventure story where you will have to battle against threats like infected creatures. However, you control how it is done and which weapons you want to use.

A mechanical genre is necessary because the story can be an adventure genre, while the mechanical genre can be a simulator or first-person shooter. The mechanical genre reveals what kind of skill set the game requires, making it easier to decide what game to play based on a person's preferences. Moreover, it is essential to combine the right ones in terms of being able to play the game. If it is a first-person game like *What Remains of Edith Finch*, where a player walks around exploring to learn what happened to Edith Finch, it cannot be designed as a third-person shooter game because it would ruin the game. If the game mechanics do not allow the gamer to control the viewpoint camera correctly, the story will be inaccessible and fail (Jones, Comparing).

Skolnick claims that “Environmental storytelling may be something that games can do more effectively than any other medium” (Skolnick 152). By environmental storytelling, he is referring to how a story can be experienced through exploring and scavenging a scenery and being present in a destination where you can experience the world yourself. You can “manipulate and interact with the fictional environment” (Tavinor 26). For example, in *TLOU2*, it is possible to explore abandoned houses that contain clues to how the world was before. And it is also possible to find clues to the disaster by observing newspaper-clippings.

Environmental storytelling can also contribute to a scary scene. Suspense is created by using sounds and often letting the scene play out in a dark place. A gamer must actively choose to walk down that dark corridor with blinking lights while mysterious sounds are coming from a closed-door before a jump scare happens as something unexpected appears from the side. A

gamer is simultaneously observing this at the same time as they are actively contributing to let the story continue.

Skolnick thinks that because of how a gamer partakes in the story, the gamer feels more involved than if a person would observe the story as a movie (Skolnick 152). If it were a movie or a book, the scavenging and exploring would be presented instead of being experienced through participation in the story.

First-person perspective in games differs from literature and movies because it includes playing a character who can get physically close to something, for example, close enough to shoot something in the face (Jones, Comparing). A gamer does not know what the game character is thinking while shooting a monster. If the same scene unfolded in a book, it would be more about being 'physically' close with the protagonist (Jones, Comparing). And in a movie, it would be similar to a novel where one is observing the scene from the viewpoint of the main protagonist. What this means is that while a first-person perspective in a game involves becoming the protagonist and doing things on their behalf, novels and movies do this differently. First-person perspective in novels entails knowing their inner thoughts and get deep insight into the narrator's personality instead of actively controlling a character and making them shoot a monster. While playing a game where a player must shoot something in the face, it does not stop to explain what it is thinking; the character/gamer just shoots. However, games like *TLOU2* have made attempts at revealing inner thoughts by, for example, letting the protagonist write in a journal that the gamer can read. In movies, inner thoughts could easily be added through dialogue.

As mentioned earlier, while playing a game, the gamer kills on behalf of the character while they are controlling the character. The character becomes a vessel for the gamer. Being entwined with the character makes gameplay more intimate than to just observing that it happens without having to do anything. When playing a game, people easily say "I" when disclosing something that was done, and not the character (Somerdin 7). For example: "I killed that runner", or "the infected killed me". This happens when the gamer identifies with the character in a game, especially the hero (Skolnick 38).

Audio, including dialogue, is one of the crucial elements that differ from the experience of reading a novel. The way it differs from novels is that while "in traditional storytelling media,

dialogue conveys three types of exposition: *plot, character, and emotion*. In game stories, it is also employed to convey *gameplay* exposition." (Skolnick 92) This is when storytelling is used to "communicate gameplay goals, instructions, and hints" (Skolnick 96), which can be done with cutscenes where you for example learn how to handle weapons or where to find supplies. This will usually not be scenes that can be skipped, because it would cause problems when playing the game. In *TLOU2*, the character you are playing as, will disclose when you have cleared out all the infected creatures, so that you avoid spending hours looking for more in that same area. Information about which direction you are supposed to go, will also be mentioned by the character. For example, Ellie mentions that she is going to the aquarium, which is located next to a Ferris wheel, implying that one has to go towards the Ferris wheel which can be seen in the distance.

World consistency partially differs from novels because a game developer has to consider what the gamer will do when present in the fictional world where the story occurs. A novel explains how the world works and what the characters will do and does not have the uncertain element where the story depends on audience participation and understanding in order for the story to proceed correctly. Possible mistakes made by the gamer must be considered when making a game.

Making a game into a movie is difficult, while making a movie based on a book seems more possible. Perhaps it is because it is easier to divide a story from a book, or that there are so many impressions and senses triggered with games that it is hard to recreate it as a short story through a movie. Many games like *TLOU2* can last for up to 30 hours, which makes it challenging to try to compress the entire story into a typical 2-hour movie. When a story transcends its original medium, it is often done because another medium has something to contribute.

For example, *TLOU* started as being games, and now there is a TV-series being made which will "fill things out and expand" (Russel). Another example is the *Harry Potter* franchise. It started with books, then they turned into movies that offered a visual experience of the story, and finally, they were adapted into video games where people could interact with this magical world. The novel offered the story, the movies the visual, and the game the interactive part and background information. Adding more aspects to the story and deepening the experience because it becomes possible to learn more about that world, and the people in it. For example,

*Lego Harry Potter* allows gamers to explore areas that have not been prominent in the other mediums, like the different common rooms. Tobias Heussner claims that games can be enjoyed without watching the movie which is based on the game<sup>8</sup>, and games are more profitable than movies. Perhaps that is a result of how games expand the story in a movie. (Heussner 77) This can be noticed when considering the *Harry Potter* franchise that has greatly expanded the story in the books, and therefore perhaps become profitable because fans of a movie, and people who like games, will buy the game.

As a result of novels existing for longer than video games, it has caused novels to impact video games in the same way as, for example, novels impacted movies. So, one could think that without novels, there might not have been video games. When an art form is still finding its place, it copies other art forms. For example, movies copy books, and games copy movies. This can be noticed in video games because there is a similar structure to how a story is told and the type of story taking place. A way to see that a medium has become integrated into society is when this goes both ways (Hayot 180). For example, there are books where you can make decisions about what happens next in the story by following instructions based on different decisions. Books like these have existed for a long time, for example, the *Goosebumps* series by R.L Stine. However, today, this type of storytelling is dominated by video games. This could be because it might be easier to digitally present a story that contains alternate storylines. After all, it has the visual aspect, the same way movies do. For example, there is a movie on Netflix called *Bandersnatch*, where you must use a remote and make a decision that impacts the rest of the story and impacts which version of the story you will see. Modern video games and movies have a lot of similarities when considering storytelling, the main difference will be the interactive part which is being crossed with movies and series, like *Bandersnatch*, where one can decide what the actor does.

*TLOU2* challenges traditional interactivity in order to let the story progress appropriately. This is done by taking away the gamers' ability to choose. If you allowed a gamer to choose to kill the protagonist Ellie during the first game, there would be no sequel because there would be no Ellie who would be seeking revenge. This makes the game similar to a novel because the story has to progress in a pre-planned way without the option to change the outcome.

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<sup>8</sup> Enjoying an adaption of a story is not unique for games, it is mentioned to demonstrate how the mediums work together.



It is also important to consider that while books are universally available, movies and video games are not. Most popular video games today are expensive, which can cause people to feel left out if they cannot access them. The age of digitalization has caused video games to become expensive and to play the newest games, upgrading your software or even waiting until you can afford a better PC could be required. Even though many great books can be expensive, there are plenty of great books available for free or there are cheaper alternatives to a book where one could purchase a digital edition, while the same cannot be said about video games. Although, to read an e-book, one would need a tablet or a PC, so a book could easily become expensive that way. To watch a movie, you need a screen and a movie, a streaming service, or a ticket to a cinema. To play video games on a computer, one would need access to electricity, internet, a game, a screen, mousepad, keyboard, computer mouse, a headset with a microphone, a table for the computer and its accessories, and a chair. This could perhaps be causing digital books, movies and video games to become an activity for the more privileged people. It seems like as digitalization progresses, storytelling got more expensive as well. One could wonder if digitalization has pushed video games into becoming something for the privileged.

## 2.10 Kokonis and Hayot

There was much discussion around the topic surrounding video game analysis before and after the time of the narratology vs ludology debate, which led to different suggestions being offered as a solution. Professor Michalis Kokonis has a hybrid theory where video games combine narrative and games while also considering semiotics.

Michalis Kokonis wrote an article complementing Gonzalo Frasca, the person who wrote the article which fueled the ludology vs narratology debate, by expanding his theory about similarities and differences between ludology and narratology. He did that by saying that video games should be considered hybrids because of their reliance on elements from both fields. He further mentions that ludologists fear that ludology could become a mere subfield to English, Literature, or Media Studies (Kokonis 173) and that this is a potential reason for the disagreement between the ludologists and narratologists. Ludology has always sought to establish itself as a field on its own right, without being absorbed into an already existing one

(173). This could explain why a hybrid could be the best alternative for a solution, making it a combination of both; however, keeping it separate—combining the old with the new.

Calling it a hybrid entails that “video games combine elements from the more traditional art forms with new traits that derive from its digital technological base” (Kokonis 175). This means that video games consist of traditional elements like stories, and a modern way to present that story, which is through a video game. He goes further by saying that instead of excluding each other, ludology and narratology do not exclude each other because it can combine in the study of text by including video games as texts (178). He claims that this should be possible because it has been done in the past when he researched the role of play and game in literary metafiction texts (178). The reason why it is hard to include games as text, is that, as Espen Aarseth has claimed, it would not include the “content” aspect of ludonarratives, and therefore it would be flawed (Aarseth 6).

Expanding the hybrid idea, Kokonis thinks that using semiotics (how meaning is made and communicated) to understand games fulfills both sides of video games. He does this because while playing video games, one is constantly looking at shapes and objects on a screen, trying to interpret them (Kokonis 179). These objects will cause a gamer to interact based on their interpretation of the object. For example, by looking at a threatening character on a screen, the gamer will interpret the character as threatening and decide to remove the threat by pushing buttons on a controller to eliminate it. Or perhaps by seeing an arrow, the gamer will interpret it as a guide about which direction to choose.

Hayot said that culture had an impact on video games because the people who created the games had grown up in a society with these modern gadgets. So perhaps one should acknowledge the value in both and understand that they are separate mediums that can at times be similar.

He further underlines how important it is to remember that video games are not like novels and films, partly because “they do not simply represent their story-worlds, but rather invite their users to shape them in action.” (Hayot 178). This can be seen in games like *The Last of Us*, a gamer can choose if they want a horror-filled experience with difficult combats or a laid-back experience with scavenging, just go into settings and adjust it in any way you like. Furthermore, based on the earlier quote about how users shape their story-worlds, he thinks

that “Understanding games while relying solely on existing theories of the novel would be to make a significant category mistake” (Hayot 178).

## 2.11 Konzack and Malliet

Lars Konzack is a Danish game researcher who works as an associate professor at the university of Copenhagen. He has written several articles about video games and his fields of interest includes ludology and transmediality. In 2002, Konzack wrote a paper about how video games should be analyzed, where he claims that games should be divided into layers that must be studied separately.

One should start by describing two levels; the virtual, which is the setting of the game, and the playground, which is the setting where the players are present (Konzack 90). Then the game should be divided into additional layers that consider different aspects of the mechanics: hardware, program code, functionality, gameplay, meaning, referentiality, and socio-culture. All layers are studied separately. He also underlines how he thinks that it is important to consider the personal aspect from the gamer. The game experience is important because as games are created, the designers must always keep in mind how things will be perceived by the audience, and if there are problems that the gamers can cause.

Konzack’s Layers:

1. *Hardware* considers where the story is unfolding and what is needed to make that happen. For example, a PC, internet, a monitor. All video games have a list of requirements that a computer needs in order to be able to run the game; that is what hardware is about.
2. *Program* code is about how the game is created with codes. If you press one button, then something pre-programmed happens. This is what Jesper Juul calls rules.
3. *Functionality*: Does the game do what it is supposed to?
4. *Gameplay* is about the game itself, what you can do, and how do you do it. It considers battles, scavenging, goals, and sub-goals. It also considers if the game is a multiplayer game.
5. *Meaning* is about semiotics, the meaning of signs. Is the game made in a way that makes sense? This could be important when considering emotions. It makes sense that

a person could feel terrified by encountering a monster or feel sad when looking at a picture of a person who is no longer around.

6. *Referentiality* is about ties between different stories. These are often called crossovers or easter eggs. For example, in *TLOU2*, there is a ring located in a safe-deposit box. When looking closely at that ring, it is revealed that it is the same ring that is in a game called *Uncharted*.
7. *Socio-Culture*: The relationship between gamers and the outside world. How do gamers behave in the game? Who is the target crowd?  
(Konzack 91-98)

Some years later, in 2007, Konzack's theory was further developed by Dr. Stephen Malliet. Malliet is an associate professor at the University of Antwerp who has published several articles about video games and analysis.

He made his own scheme which was based on Konzack's theory where he added modernizing adjustments where he included similar layers. These layers are audiovisual style, narration, the complexity of controls, game goals, character and object structure, the balance between user input, and pre-programmed rules, spatial properties of the game world.

Video games that were popular when Konzack wrote his article did not focus on storytelling and the importance of audio. Platform games did not need a rich story; they mainly required jumping and reaching a goal. So luckily, Malliet did modernize this theory to consider the game elements that have changed as video games became more modernized, for example audio, as the computer became a standard appliance in a home. Naturally, video games are constantly improving and changing, and the five years between the layer theories were not different. Games changed and needed more aspects for analysis than Konzack had to offer. The number of games that were created with an emphasis on telling a story, exploded in that short period of time, and visually, games started to look a lot like movies because they were made in a photorealistic way. This happened because of the rapid evolution of graphics which was discussed earlier.

To this day, video games are still becoming more and more realistic, and during those five years between Konzack and Malliet's respective theories, there were some visual changes that could be noticed. Video games went from having a visual appearance that could be compared

to comic books where a character's appearance was clearly fiction, which is called caricaturist, to becoming more advanced with refined detailing which made video games look more like movies, called photorealistic. This made video games become a medium that can be compared to several artforms, which made Michalis suggestion about hybrids a necessary alternative to consider.

Malliet's Layers:

1. *The complexity of controls*: the mental and physical aspect, what is needed to complete the game?
2. *Game goals*: competitive play, explorative or narrative. How important is the type of play?
3. *Character and object structure*: elaborated characters and objects, what is the hidden ideology in the rewards?
4. *Spatial properties*: Does the world complement the game? Does a wargame take place in a world that reflects that there is a war?
5. *The audiovisual style* considers how sound and visual elements are used in a story. For example, how sounds are combined with certain characters, like how a monster with a particular sound can enhance a terrifying scene. Just like the sound made by the ghost in the movie *The Grudge*.
6. *The narration* is often about justifying why something is done in a game. You are present in a dangerous world, and therefore you are allowed to kill dangerous creatures to survive. Rebels are out to kill innocent people -therefore one is justified for killing them.
7. *The balance between user input and preprogrammed rules* varies a lot between games. Some games have a story that has to be followed without any chance to alter it, while others rely entirely on user input –for example, a game called *Until Dawn* where you decide what happens and who survives until the end. Save someone or let them fall, you decide.

(Malliet)

This chapter considered what video games are while also introducing different theories about what video games are, by Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth. It also included an overview about the structure of the narrative in video games as well as different aspects like how the visual

impact the experience of a story, how emotions are triggered, how mistakes can impact a story, and how games tell stories compared to other mediums. The zombie sub-genre has been introduced, since it is a relevant topic considering *TLOU2* is known as a zombie game. This chapter concluded by presenting different theories including hybrids by Kokonis, and the respective layer theories by Konzack and Malliet.

## Chapter 3 – Method

This chapter builds on the former chapter which considered different aspects within video game design. It justifies why I have chosen to analyze *The Last of Us Part II*, while explaining how I will analyze the game as well as why I decided to combine two similar layer theories for my analysis.

### 3.1 Why is *The Last of Us Part II* a Good Game to Investigate?

As stated earlier, my project here will concern *The Last of Us Part II* and not *The Last of Us*. My reasons for this are many. For one, *The Last of Us* created a solid foundation for the second one when considering player attachment to the characters and the game itself, which made it more tempting to focus on Part II. Also, the second game seems to have altered time consuming features that could make the first game too hard, and ruin the experience of the game. For example, the zombie fights in *The Last of Us Part II* are more manageable because of the available modifications, like one kill shot. Crafting bandages or making traps can be accomplished without scavenging for parts because you can unlock infinite ammo and tools to create bandages or bombs. The different modifications and difficulty levels demonstrate that the game considers the different experiences a gamer is after. Experiencing the story - or focus on survival. Do you want to focus on experiencing the story with minimal challenges, or would you prefer to spend hours fighting monsters without any simplifying modifications? The choice is yours and you can just alter the settings.

*The Last of Us Part II* features something as simple as an unbreakable shiv, which was a favorable feature instead of constantly making a new one, like in *The Last of Us*. When considering the characters in this game, it has a much vaster character list with all kinds of people, making it easier to reach a wider crowd. There is a more extensive character cast instead of having mainly two characters, like in *The Last of Us*. *The Last of Us Part II* has more situations and elements to work with when trying to analyze a game that contains a rich story because it has extended the story from *The Last of Us* by giving it a richer meaning with deep characters as well as making gameplay easier and combats adjustable. Jesper Juul claims that adjustable settings are added purely as an attempt to consider the gamer from the real world (Juul, Half-Real 162). This feature is, in my experience, highly appreciated by most gamers.

It is also noticeable that the characters have not been rushed during the planning progress because the game makers focus on details and create realistic personalities by basing them on real actors and the voice actors. For example, the actor who Ellie's appearance is based on, is called Ashley Johnson. Joel is based on the voice actor and musician Troy Baker. And Abby is based on a voice actor called Laura Bailey. The way these characters are based on real people is by recreating certain features of the actors and combining them with important features of the characters. For example, Abby is a strong, muscular woman with the same eyes and facial expressions as Laura Bailey as well as the same voice. The way this is done is by acting out the scenes while wearing suits and face markers so that it can be digitally edited on screen. The markers are also known as a process called facial motion capture, which is when expressions and movements are converted into a software that produces graphics. The character that perhaps resembles its actor the most, is Ellie.

Although *The Last of Us* is a widely liked game which people have already researched and studied, I think that the sequel is a better one because it has modified bugs from the first game, and the way it builds on the first game, makes it more appealing to analyze. Remember, the games are called *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*, they are considered to be a part of a unity, not two separate games. So, by looking at Part II, it makes it possible to also take into consideration things that happened in the first game, that continues in the second one. A simple way to explain why I chose to focus on the second part of the game, is that the story in part II has more to work with.

### 3.2 How and Why?

My methodological approach for analyzing *TLOU2* combines the layer theories by Konzack and Malliet. While Konzack thoroughly investigates different elements in video games, it does not include essential features like audiovisual style, narrative, or the balance between user input and preprogrammed rules. Games today do rely on features like these which is why I chose to include them. There are also layers by Konzack that will not be included, like program code, meaning and hardware. That is because it can either be found in other layers or



is not relevant to this study. To see how storytelling is done in video games, the focus will be on studying how these different layers trigger emotions.

Instead of including every layer, I have chosen specific layers from both schemes that consider different aspects and ways to understand how storytelling is communicated in a video game. Not just the appearance of the game which Aarseth was referring to earlier. I have not included layers like hardware, because I don't think it would be helpful when considering how a story is told, because it will not be relevant for my purposes. On the other hand, complexity of control is important because it surrounds how the story in the game is accessed through the controller. It reveals if the gameplay is too difficult or not, or if it can add to the experience of a game to have different abilities with the push of a button. A combined theory creates a fully fletched way to analyze a game without undermining other fields by having a faulty analysis scheme. It combines the old with the new and thus becomes an acceptable way to analyze a game. A combination of layers includes suggested aspects offered years ago, like Kokonis' hybrid, and creating an analytical scheme that recognizes games as an artform and not just a hobby with no profound meaning. I think it becomes a way to analyze a ludonarrative software, as Aarseth calls it.

### 3.3 Konzack and Malliet Combined

The virtual space and the playground come first, before these layers that I have chosen:

1. Audiovisual style
2. Narrative
3. Balance between user input and pre-programmed rules
4. Game goals
5. Gameplay
6. Referentiality
7. Complexity of controls
8. Socio culture
9. Character and object structure

The layers treat video games as a hybrid by considering both old and new essential aspects, including semiotics, narrative, audio, and user input. It recognizes modern video games as the

art form it is, a complex combination of aspects that triggers different senses and emotions. The problems highlighted by the narratology vs. ludology debate are understandable when considering the games that were popular when Frasca wrote his article. Analyzing the mediums equally could be challenging because it would not recognize the greatness in both.

## Chapter 4 - Analysis

Chapter three explained why I chose *TLOU2*, and how I intend to analyze it. In this chapter, we move on to applying the combined layer theory to *TLOU2* to see how the game tells its story.

Visual and Playground:

The world in *TLOU2* is photorealistic with references to the real world because of how the story takes place in known destinations. The story takes place in dystopic USA where the world has gone under. There are road signs around serving as a faint reminder and a link to the pre-outbreak world. The world varies between being dark and bright, depending on the seriousness of the scene. The characters in the game are realistic with natural features and expressions. There is a likeness between the natural world and the game world, making the story more believable by for example having relatable weather. If there existed a zombie-virus, the outcome could be believed to be similar to how the world looks in the game because the outbreak started in a world that looked like ours did in 2013. The story takes place in the future, somewhere between 2033 and 2038, while there is only a PlayStation 3 present because PS4 was released years later. Now people have settled and started to build small communities with different allies and connections to other groups.

This particular edition of the game, which was pre-ordered, is played on a PS4 console with a dual-shock controller. The game is observed on a TV screen, and the audio is heard through a Razer Kraken: Kitty Edition, gaming headset.

### 1. Audiovisual style

The audiovisual style in *TLOU2* is essential. The role of the different sounds is to enhance the experience of the situation. For example, during a battle with the rat king, which is the furthest advanced infected creature, there will be sounds that make the scene more terrifying by working as a reminder of all the different types of infected at the same time. It does trigger memories of difficult battles.

The infected were once human, however after being exposed to spores, they turned. How dangerous these infected creatures are, and the sounds they make, depends on how long they have been infected. Shortly after being infected, they turn into runners. Runners are the ones

who are easiest to kill, and they are the ones who are most human-like due to being recently infected. Their sounds are similar to a human screaming, and their appearance is close to human. They still have eyesight and hearing, so they immediately run when they either see or hear the characters in the game. Due to how recently they have been changed, they are also vulnerable and easy to kill.

After some time, they turn into stalkers. Stalkers are blind and usually hides in the darkness. They still have good hearing, so others will quickly rush to the scene if one is killed with a loud weapon. The sound they make is less human as they go further into the disease, making a wheezing noise.

The third stage is clickers. The appearance of a clicker stands out from the other two because now there will be an evident visual change. The face will not look human anymore because the upper part of the face will look like it has exploded. Only the mouth will be noticeable, and as the name reveals, the sound will consist of a series of clicks. Because of the blindness, the clicking sounds help them discover hiding prey.

The fourth stage of infected creature is called bloaters. They are called bloaters because the years of infection have allowed them to grow several protective layers, making the infected bigger than in the previous stages. Even though the bloaters move slowly, the layers make it harder to kill them. Furthermore, since the bloaters can throw spore bombs, it is more dangerous to be near the bloaters than the infected that are less evolved. The sound they make is a terrifying dark growling.

Shamblers are a further developed infected creature. They can hold their victims and infect them with spore clouds that burn their victim's skin. These infected are also dangerous when they die because they explode, and you see spores being spread around it.

The final one, which is also the most developed, is called rat king. Rat king is a combination of the previous stages and is extremely hard to kill. It looks like all the previous infected have melted into one giant monster. As it gets hurt, the different infected creatures separate themselves from the main creature and start to attack. It takes much work to destroy them. As the infection progresses, the sounds made by the infected become darker and more separated from human sounds.

In the beginning, the sounds made by the infected sound human-like, referring to how the monsters used to be human. While the reminder of humanity beneath the terrifying exterior, the sounds are terrifying in the beginning; however, later on, it becomes more of a sound that is looked for to find out if all the monsters in that area have been successfully cleared out. The sounds do make you think of the monsters and could trigger a feeling of fear, especially if the game is played while wearing a headset in the dark. The more senses that get triggered simultaneously, the scarier it seems to become. This could be because it becomes more realistic. For example, when the controller starts to shake when sliding down a hill, it feels like it is really happening. Or when there is suddenly a loud sound coming from the controller.

The game consists primarily of diegetic sounds, meaning that most sounds come from within the game world. This can be noticed by how a sound happens while the action takes place, like a punch. If the sound is non-diegetic, it is “something from outside the game’s fictive sounds” (Ekman 1), for example music that has been added to the scene. Despite most of the sounds being diegetic, there is some non-diegetic music that appears, primarily during cutscenes.

## 2. Narrative

The narrative in this game can be analyzed by following Syd Field's three-act structure. The game has a setup stage which is where the groundwork for the conflict is laid, which is when Joel is killed in front of Abby. The confrontation is significant, so it has been divided, making the game switch its point of view so that the story gets familiarized with Abby, the archenemy. Then there is a resolution where Ellie and Abby meet. They fight, and a lot is said by being silent. Abby has lost a lot, and Ellie has too, so they stop fighting, and Abby escapes with Lily, a transgender child who has been cast out from her community. Ending the game this way shows a softer side of Abby; it could be compared to how Joel protected Ellie and escaped from harm with her in the final scene in the first game. Also, ending this game by letting both live is justified by the story's progression. Both are victims, so why kill them both. It could also be a way to trigger empathy from the gamer, where they do not want either of the characters to die, because the gameplay and story has justified the survival of both.

Many scenes in the second game can be understood by knowing the first game. It is, for example, not necessary to explain that the zombies are dangerous and must be killed.

The story is told in a tight-knit way to the story in the first game by creating similar situations, making it possible to feel attached to the story quicker because people are already familiarized with Joel and Ellie. There is also more diversity among the characters, for people to identify with, making the story compelling to a broader crowd. There is a lot of environmental storytelling present which adds to the realization of how dangerous the world has become. You can be walking around scavenging and suddenly you notice a person who has been killed.

### 3. Balance between user input and pre-programmed rules.

There is much freedom in this game; however, there are cutscenes that make sure the story goes forward in the right way. Even if it is possible to walk freely for a significant part of the game, there are still some situations where you are discreetly led in the right direction by having a road blocked. However, having the option to roam relatively freely in this game makes learning more about the characters and past events easier while also creating a personal experience with it. By investing time in scavenging, weapons can be upgraded to make the game experience easier based on just that. Better weapons will result in easier challenges. Also, because you are controlling the main character, you might identify yourself with it after a while because of how you have invested a lot of effort in the game. The viewpoint is never first-person, which makes it special because we know a lot about the controlled character and her personality, and inner thoughts are accessible because Ellie writes in a journal that can be read. Ellie is controlled while observing her from a third person perspective, and one would easily say that “I killed a clicker” and not Ellie, making this an interesting combination. Ellie might be unpredictable during the pre-programmed parts and cutscenes, for example, by letting Abby live after all she has sacrificed. However, the gamer and the character can become familiarized, but the fixed ending does not change. Ellie's emotions are often experienced or recognized by the gamer due to spending hours getting to know the character and the story while also having access to her journal.

The experience of the game can be altered by adjusting settings to make the game harder or easier. There is also the option to change the characters' voices so that it sounds like they have

inhaled helium. There are many options like these which could also make it enjoyable for people to re-play the game even if the main story is the same. The only thing that changes is the journey between the scenes. So, it does not matter how many modifications are added; the main story remains the same. However, the experienced seriousness of the story can be affected because settings can be changed so that the gameplay becomes comical. Changing a voice, only changes the voice; it will not alter the pre-programmed story.

By balancing between rules and freedom, the unchangeable parts become acceptable because it has been justified based on cutscenes. To kill Abby after obtaining all that information about her and her past would cause people to react worse to a fatal ending because it would not make sense for Ellie to be cruel; however, it was surprising that Ellie let her go, because Ellie did protest that Abby got to live, when Ellie, Dina and Tommy went temporarily back to Jackson. If the entire game would only consist of free play, the story would not exist because the free play enhances the story as much as the story enhances the free play. By letting the story cooperate with gameplay, it makes the story possible. For example, obtaining supplies during free play to beat the monsters will, in turn, trigger cutscenes. If access to equipment is scarce, the game will take longer to complete.

#### 4. Game goals

This game combines explorative and narrative play, which means that a fair share of exploring, and storytelling is present. The type of play enhances the seriousness in the world where the story takes place because it demonstrates the state of the world after a disaster. It is a horror-adventure game which makes it logical that there will be scary encounters and a fight for survival. Looking for Abby does make the gameplay focus on traveling and scavenging for a significant amount of time. It would not make sense if no scary scenes or zombies were walking around when it takes place in a scary world. If the game were without the narrative part or the option to explore, it would lack an essential feature because the story would not be adequately told. Including narrative, gameplay softens the game by allowing the characters' personalities to be exposed and easily related to. In order to experience the seriousness in this game, it is necessary to encounter monsters and struggle; however, doing that will also create a longing to see what happens later. It is also essential to learn about background stories and other factors, to form a need to see the end of the story. As Jesper Juul said, the effort given in the game creates an attachment that makes the gamer want to complete the game.

## 5. Gameplay

To finish the game, you must complete sub-missions, making it comparable to novels where you have to read every chapter to proceed to the end. The knowledge in this game is open, which means that you know how to beat monsters and get things done because there is a tutorial in the beginning. Nothing is won by chance; it depends on your skills; however, this game does not contain penalties. For example, if you are good with a bow and arrow, hitting the targets at the aquarium, where Abby's former boyfriend, Owen, lives, will be easy. The story will still progress even if you miss all targets, the only consequence is that you will not earn an in-game trophy. These sub-missions offer a deeper understanding of the characters while demanding some effort while doing it. By seeing how Abby is around her former boyfriend, Owen, it is implied that she misses him, which in turn makes it easy to feel sorry for her situation and consider her to be a person and not just a character in a game.

## 6. Referentiality

The referentiality in this game draws lines between the past and the future, and also connects the game to the outside world and other games. It is a way to make the game's history deeper, more filled with meaning, and explains why some things have happened. As Konzack says, referentiality is often used to tie a story to the outside world or other stories by adding something from other stories to give new meaning to the object (Konzack 96). For example, if one wonders about the inspiration behind this game, a part of the answer is revealed when Abby reads a book called *City of Thieves*. This book has been a big inspiration for *The Last of Us*, which is perhaps why the name of the main protagonist in that book, Lev, is also the name of a character in *TLOU2* (Brightman).

There are several discrete symbols or "easter eggs," which it is also called, spread around the game world. For example, a stuffed giraffe can be seen in the scene where Ellie and Dina spend time in an abandoned library. The giraffe sits on a bookshelf, and it can easily be missed if one is not familiar with its significance. The giraffe belonged to Joel's daughter. Missing it will not affect the main story of the game. However, it can add to its experience because it is a reminder of Joel's traumatic past.

Throughout the game, there is a moth that is visual. There is one on Ellie's guitar, which she got from Joel, and she has a tattoo that consists of a moth and leaves. There are also moths



that appear on the screen as the game is loading. There is also a famous quote from this game, stated by Abby: "When you are lost in the darkness... look for the light" (MKIceAndFire 17:54:30). This could be a way to show a discrete resemblance between Ellie, Abby, and Joel. Moths are attracted to the light, even though it hurts them. Joel did not want to allow himself to be happy or see the light again in his life. However, he did when he met Ellie. It can also be Joel who is lost in the darkness and finds Ellie who is the light. It can also be about how Lev becomes a light for Abby who has been stricken with grief since her father was killed, where her grief has become manifested in hatred towards Joel, and later Ellie. Nevertheless, by meeting Ellie, Joel got burned, like the moth who goes into the light, and had to take the consequences of finally being happy again. Abby and Ellie did not allow themselves to step away from their trauma and find a bright future. Abby tried, but she got burned when Ellie killed her friends. Ellie also tried when she returned home to Jackson with her pregnant girlfriend Dina. Both had nightmares and mental trauma after not finishing what they started, which was to kill each other. They realize that both have suffered enough and killing would not take away their pain. It is only at the end that both realize that all the suffering has only taken away their chance for happiness in life, and therefore they quietly let it go and part ways. This focus on revenge could be the reason why a game called *Hotline Miami* is being played on a PlayStation Portable. *Hotline Miami* is a game about revenge.

Joel tells his brother, Tommy, "I saved her" (MKIceAndFire 2:17) when he asked him what he did in the operating room. It can refer to how he could not save his daughter, who died in his arms in the first game. It could have been comforting that he was in control this time and could save Ellie, who has become his not biological daughter. As Joel said to Ellie when she questions him about why he saved her: "If somehow the Lord gave me a second chance at that moment... I would do it all over again" (20:38:32) This could perhaps be because Joel could not save his biological daughter, but he could save Ellie.

Joel's traumatic past is often referred to throughout the story. When Ellie is in his house after his death, pictures of his daughter can be seen in several places. During this walkthrough, Ellie finds Joel's revolver and his broken watch. The revolver was a gun that Joel always preferred, including the night when his daughter died. The broken watch was a gift from his daughter, and he used it constantly, even after it broke. When Ellie goes after Abby, she brings these two objects, perhaps as an attempt to be close to Joel during her journey. As Ellie is walking around in Joel's house, she is still wounded after the encounter when Joel was

killed. She walks around as an empty shell of her prior self and there is a disheartening scene as she finds his characteristic jacket. Her holding the jacket while smelling it is heartbreaking because it does demonstrate how she really feels. Even though she puts on a stern exterior, her vulnerability is demonstrated in that discrete way. The jacket is a reminder, in other words, of everything they went through together in the first game.

There is a Pearl Jam poster on the wall, a real band. The poster has been included because they are the ones who wrote Ellie's song, which is called *Future Days*, in real life. In the game, Joel is the one who wrote that song, where a popular line is, *If I ever were to lose you, I would surely lose myself*. The line could be interpreted as her saving him from losing himself because he changed significantly from the beginning of the first game. He went from being dissatisfied with life to finding Ellie and hope again. The close relationship between Ellie and Joel, and especially his fatherly protective behavior, is described in a scene where Dina's ex-boyfriend Jesse tells Ellie that "it is funny how involved he gets whenever you are scheduled to go out."

When Ellie walks through her and Dina's house during the last scene, she picks up a guitar Joel had given her at the beginning of the game. Ellie tries to play Ellie's song on it, however, because she has lost several of her fingers, she is unable to play. She realizes all she has lost because of this journey for revenge, and she puts down the guitar and leaves. By leaving the house and the guitar, she is symbolically moving on from the trauma in her past and accepting that nothing can change what happened. The empty house makes her realize that anger and revenge have overshadowed her chance of happiness. It can be compared to how Joel left his traumatic past and tried to shape a new future. Ellie leaves her trauma to go after her new future with Dina.

There is a flashback scene when Ellie and Joel are at a museum where Ellie listens to a tape of an Apollo space launch while daydreaming about being an astronaut. Then the tape ends, and then reality is back. Gamers realize that Ellie can never be an astronaut. This is a moving moment because gamers realize that her dreams will never come true; however, this scene works by demonstrating that she still had an optimistic personality before the second game came. She also said that people had it easy before the outbreak. She also thought that she should have died in the hospital in the first game, because then her life would have mattered. Her personality changed a lot since the first game because all this trauma made her

personality more troubled. She had never experienced a pre-outbreak world, and she still had an optimistic personality, until she learned about the vaccine disaster.

It is revealed that Ellie has learned to swim during the trip to the museum mentioned above, referring to how Joel had to help her cross waters by having her float on pallets, which he steered to safety in the first game. The game is constantly reminding of the close relationship between Ellie and Joel, which makes it understandable how much she leaves behind when she leaves her guitar behind, and symbolically leaves Joel.

When Ellie was younger, she had a friend with whom she visited a Halloween store. It can be experienced by playing a short bonus game called *Left Behind*, which is about the incident where Ellie gets infected, and her friend Riley dies from the infection. During that bonus game, she and her friend Riley try on Halloween masks, so when she visits a similar store in *TLOU2*, she reveals that she does not like masks. The only way to know this side story, is by playing that bonus game. It is not mandatory to understand the game, however, it offers an extra insight into Ellie's past and how she got infected. Another hint toward Ellie's childhood friend happens when she walks past an arcade game called *The Turning*. This arcade has a drawing of a colored girl and a girl who looks like Ellie. Other than that, the game does not mention her childhood friend.

Ellie collects trading cards, and one of the cards that can be found refers to the vice president of Naughty Dog, who are the creators of the game. Furthermore, in the first game, she collected comic books called *Savage Starlight*. The comic appears in *TLOU2*, but not as a collectible.

The referentiality symbols in this game do not only concern Ellie and Joel. However, many of them are connected to Joel and his past, which is perhaps a result of Joel being dead, and it is a way of highlighting his importance in the story by keeping his memory alive. Some are added to tie the story to the real world, and others are fun extra effects.

Ellie looks out a window and sees a white rabbit, this scene can be interpreted in two ways: as a nod towards a streamer who went viral after a white rabbit was killed in the first game, or that it works as a nostalgic reminder of how Ellie caught a white rabbit in the first game when Joel was hurt, and she was providing for them both while he was recovering. That scene in the

first game worked as a chance for Ellie to prove that she was a responsible person and that he could rely on her. She was not a burden that could not take care of herself. If he gets hurt, she is capable of keeping them safe.

A ring can be found in a safe while scavenging; it has nothing to do with the story in the game; it only refers to another game made by Naughty Dog, which is called *Uncharted*. The ring has an inscription that reads: “greatness from small beginnings.” This is a nod towards Ellie and Dina's relationship and also a nod towards the small community they live in, which started as being small. There is another object that is a reference to a game made by Naughty Dog, and that is the precursor orb. The precursor orb looks like a golden egg, and it references to an old Naughty Dog game called *Jak and Daxter*.

There is a brief view of a page in a children's book called *The Velveteen Rabbit*. The page is about how something becomes real if it is loved by a child, and that it can hurt. It can be interpreted as the characters in the game, who are fiction, have become real because people love them. And that's why it hurt when Joel died. Or perhaps Joel became real because Ellie loved him as a father, which in turn hurt because parenthood can be filled with worries, and he always wanted to protect her, but could not protect her from being filled with grief after witnessing his death.

These references all offer different insights into parts of the game that are not always noticed. Moreover, one effect that it offers is that it becomes clear that there are real people with interests who have designed this game

## 7. Complexity of controls

The main buttons that need to be pushed to play the game are easy to remember. However, there are times when it is hard to remember everything, especially later in the game when you have access to different weapons and recipes for bandages and other extra abilities. For example, it is easy to forget how to upgrade weapons or which button to press to see where the enemies are. However, it will not impact the main story but could cause frustration while getting into it. This, in turn, could make one dissatisfied with the game and stop playing. The emotional effect caused by controls during gameplay is not as extensive as the effect caused

by audio. However, as mentioned earlier, gameplay can cause frustration if someone is not good at it. The controls will not trigger empathy in this game; however, the controls make it possible to progress with the story, which can trigger emotions. Having a controller that is easy to maneuver, avoids a negative connection with the game. Struggling with the game mechanics can ruin the game because it can result in negative affiliations. It would not be rewarding to constantly fail. Juul's theory about gamers enjoying failing because of how rewarding it is to finally succeed is a good way to see how important it is for a game to function properly (Juul, *The Art of Failure*). To enjoy failing, there must be some hope to succeed. If the controls are too complicated, the failure will most likely not result in a person continuing with the game.

## 8. Socio-culture

*TLOU* created the basis for attachment to *TLOU2*. The need to know what happens in this story existed before it was released because the fans loved the first game, and it ended openly. This game is also unique because even though there could be people who do not like the story in the game, however, those people could like its graphics, the art, and observing the world. The story might not be their favorite, but other parts could convince them to play the game. As Juul points out, "Different games emphasize different types of enjoyment and different players may even enjoy the same game for entirely different reasons" (Juul, *Half-Real* 20).

This video game has a contrasting effect on people in real life because it has a vast target crowd. During the story, we encounter people dealing with different problems that many people can relate to. Discrimination, homophobia, grief, loneliness, and countless others. Including these aspects make it easier to relate to a character and sympathize with their situation. This happens quickly with Ellie at the beginning of the game when Joel's protective side towards Ellie is demonstrated as he defends her when a man complains about Dina and Ellie dancing.

Moreover, by making it easy to feel sorry for Ellie, it can make one automatically dislike the source of her problems, Abby. However, as roles change and we become familiarized with both characters, this changes, and the feeling dissolves. There is a scene at the beginning of the game, before she and Dina go on their first patrol in the game, where an older man criticizes Ellie for her sexuality because she was seen dancing and kissing Dina the night

before. If a person has experienced a similar situation, that person could relate to that and dislike the older man. There is also the situation around Lev, the biological girl who identifies as a boy and has therefore been declared an outcast by her group, the Seraphites.

Then there is Abby portrayed as being strong and dangerous, showing a softer side where it becomes understandable that her traumas have made her become like that. This happens when she helps Lev and Lev's friend, Yara. Yara has her arm broken by a violent group after refusing to talk. Abby helps them even though they are supposed to be natural enemies belonging to opposite groups. It is also implied when Abby talks to her ex-boyfriend Owen when they are at the aquarium. Abby says that it must be nice for him to have a new girlfriend who is sweet, after being with someone like her, to which he replies: "Well, under that badass exterior, you can be pretty sweet too" (MKIceAndFire 14:21:08). This could perhaps be relatable to people in real life who have traumas that have made them appear tougher than they are.

Showing people in so many different situations could cause people to play the game because it does something unusual by being so openly friendly towards all types of people. It reflects life more realistically because everybody struggles with something, and the game acknowledges that. This makes the game and the story enjoyable; it is realistic and does not romanticize anything. Seeing the suffering and sometimes redemption, people being punished for cruel actions, becomes something that triggers satisfaction.

## 9. Character and object structure

This game is filled with deep characters who have their own personalities and features. The clothes and equipment they wear is affected by every combat or even the weather, which are all traits that contributes to us regarding the characters as being real. There are also animals around that are affected by combats and the surroundings. There are countless NPC's<sup>9</sup> who are present to complement the story, which is noticeable when we play as Abby as we walk around a stadium which is where her group is stationed. As we walk towards a canteen, we come across numerous people where we can walk towards some of them and trigger a conversation. Even though these are also NPC's, they feel more real because we can interact and choose to talk to them. By allowing us to trigger conversations, we can be familiarized

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<sup>9</sup> Non-Playable-Character.

with different personalities and their struggles. Neil Druckmann and Halley Gross wrote the story for *TLOU2*. And during an interview, they mentioned how their cooperation strengthened Neil's confidence and made them want to "go into areas we've never done before" (White). Which can be a nod towards how they did something out of the ordinary, creating a story where the main character is openly a lesbian. Normally, homosexuality would be represented with characters that are less important, however this game does the opposite.

The hidden ideology in rewards in this game is to feel a sense of accomplishment. We can walk around looting and scavenging for parts which allows us to unlock different extra features like funny voices or play the game in only black and white. We can also upgrade weapons so that they become more advanced or easier to handle. If we successfully upgrade them all, we can unlock a trophy, and trophies can be visible for other people who use a PS4. This can in turn enhance our sense of accomplishment because it can be compared to the achievement of others. However, it can also have the opposite effect by causing a sense of failure if we never succeed in unlocking trophies or finding hidden objects.

#### 10. Looking at all the layers together.

By considering the story and viewing all these different layers, it becomes apparent that all these aspects work in different ways, creating different emotions depending on the surroundings. The effect of how trauma can establish in a person is often noticed by considering referentiality. The focus has been on creating relatable situations and visualizing them with realistic characters to trigger emotions. The brutality of a reality where something like a broken arm can result in an infection that kills, underlines the seriousness of a world that has gone under. It makes you think about how dangerous that world is, how the lack of medical care is dangerous, and how the characters have to battle in a dangerous environment, where you can die even if you kill a monster, because there is a risk of being killed by bacterial infections and other invisible threats around.

The zombies are equipped with a background story that makes it possible to consider if it could happen in real life. The virus started in Africa and spread throughout the world. Every infected has once been alive, making it possible to consider the seriousness of the situation where the characters are constantly reminded of how they could be the next to die. Having characters that are so different and represents a vast majority of people in a modern society,

makes it possible for people to relate to different situations. Which can further result in the story leading to real-life consequences. For example, by observing how Ellie's dream of becoming an astronaut will never be fulfilled could act as an inspiration to people, resulting in them going after their dreams.

The feeling of terror is triggered by gloomy surroundings and eerie sounds that you associate with fear. Even though the emotions experienced can be uncomfortable, people still play the game because of the need to know what happens in the end. Another way to keep the story interesting is by adding trophies or adding something that creates a red line between other stories. By having all these layers cooperating to create a story, it becomes apparent how it can sometimes feel like an emotional rollercoaster, much like how great writers can do the same when they write stories. The more details, the more relatable the story becomes, much like in video games. Make it realistic; then people will connect to it, which is what has been done in *TLOU2*. A lot has been done to justify violence in the game, for instance, having scenes where zombies attack, or violent groups of people who are threatening. This makes it acceptable to kill another character or zombie because it is interpreted as a threat, pulling the gamer to become a part of the story. Many sounds are triggered as a goal to warn the gamer, which can trigger a sense of terror by only hearing a sound without knowing where it comes from.

It is clear that it is possible to analyze parts of a game as a book; however, it would be deficient. To analyze a book, audio is not essential, however, it is crucial in video games. The story itself could be analyzed like a book. However, it would not consider the way the story is told by using different cooperating ways in the game. Analyzing *TLOU2* without the audio, gameplay, complexity of controls, no trophies, or the individual experience would take away a big part of what makes a game in a story enjoyable. So, yes parts of it can be analyzed, but no it would not be adequate because, as Aarseth says, "narrative theory, while necessary, is not sufficient to understand these new forms" (Aarseth 6). Games tell stories by triggering several senses at once during gameplay, and when only the visual part of a game is analyzed, the rest of them stay hidden. This simple argument could justify that games and books are separate, however, they "share a relation to a much longer history of narrative" (Hayot 179).



This chapter looked at how the different layers that are found in *TLOU2* work together to tell a story that triggers different emotional responses from gamers. This thesis will now move on to the fifth and final chapter which will summarize how games tell stories.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusion with a Recommendation for Future Research

The way video games tell stories is by combining different layers that work together as a unity. The narrative is designed to highlight sound, sound is added to enhance the visual aspect, the visual does the same for sound and the narrative. The characters are created as a tool to reveal the story and to keep the gamer interested. The controls are created in a way that allows the gamer to feel that they have made an effort, and that they have saved the world. The effort is felt with different controllers that can underline the choice taken. The narrative structure can trigger emotions by creating relatable situations where the gamer feels empathy for the characters, and therefore genuinely cares about a game. This can especially happen if something unfair happens to somebody in a video game. Gamers can experience a story in a way that could seem individual because they can decide how to play the game. The combination of all this does challenge the idea of a possibility to analyze a video game as we would analyze novels or other works of fiction, because there are several aspects in video games that are not present in novels.

Games do share some similarities with novels; however, analyzing a game by using the same theories and methods that are used when analyzing a book, is flawed, based on how multiform games are. Games include audio, the visual and gameplay, which is not something that is found in books. For example, it would not be necessary to analyze how sounds are used in books or the complexity of controls. I think that games should be analyzed for what they are, a ludonarrative software where the story and the way that story is told through gameplay, is equally important.

I wish there were more women who dared entering the field of video games. Writing a master's thesis where less than 10% of the sources are written by a woman feels somewhat frustrating because this skewed distribution makes the thesis feel somewhat unfinished. Women could have different experiences of a story in a game and react to different elements within storytelling. Just think about which genres are often more popular amongst women, and those are the genres which are often failing in video games. So, I would recommend an investigation into if storytelling in games could be affected by women entering the gaming industry.

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