

## Trauma, empathy and complicity in *The Last of Us Part II*: playing as enemy characters

*Trauma, empatia e cumplicidade em The Last of Us Part II: jogando como personagens inimigas*

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### **Abstract**

*The Last of Us Part II* continues Ellie's story and introduces the new playable character Abby as they inhabit a post-apocalyptic world. This article aims to analyze how the game portrays trauma, which is a central component of the narrative. Considering the existence of two different diegetic agents, the article also discusses the concepts of empathy and complicity. The results indicate that through the experience of playing as enemy characters, the game successfully builds empathy for people with distinct motivations while also making the player feel complicit with the violence committed by the characters. The article also concludes that video games and their capacity for making the player feel empathic and complicit with the on-screen events present a very interesting possibility for a readerly engagement with trauma.

### **Keywords**

Video game. Trauma. Empathy. Complicity.

### **Resumo**

*The Last of Us Part II* continua a história de Ellie e apresenta a nova personagem jogável Abby em um mundo pós-apocalíptico. Como o tópico do trauma é central para a narrativa, este artigo analisa sua representação no jogo. Considerando a existência de duas agentes diegéticas distintas, os conceitos de empatia e cumplicidade também são discutidos. Os resultados indicam que a experiência de jogar como personagens inimigas produz sentimentos de empatia e faz com que a jogadora se sinta cúmplice da violência cometida pelas personagens. Também se conclui que videogames e sua capacidade de fazer a jogadora sentir empatia e cumplicidade com os eventos mostrados na tela trazem uma possibilidade muito interessante para um engajamento de leitura com o trauma.

### **Palavras-chave**

Videogame. Trauma. Empatia. Cumplicidade.

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*The Last of Us Part II* (2020) is an action-adventure video game developed by Naughty Dog and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment for the PlayStation 4. It is the highly anticipated sequel to *The Last of Us*, released seven years prior, in 2013. The first game tells the story of Joel, an adult smuggler who is in charge of escorting a fourteen-year-old girl named Ellie across a post-apocalyptic United States. The reason for their journey is the search for a group called The Fireflies, who believe that they will be able to create a vaccine against the Cordyceps Brain Infection if they can examine Ellie, who is apparently immune to the disease. Throughout the game, the player sees and experiences the deepening of the bond between Ellie and Joel. In the beginning, the man sees the teenager as an annoyance. Nevertheless, as they travel together, help each other and learn about one another, their relationship starts to resemble that of a father and his daughter. In the ending of the narrative, as they reach The Fireflies, Joel confronts an unpleasant surprise: the doctors believe that they can indeed create a vaccine if they perform a surgery on Ellie's brain, but the process will kill the girl. Unwilling to pay such a price, Joel undergoes a murdering rampage, during which he kills an entire building full of Fireflies - the doctors and nurses included. When Ellie wakes up from anesthesia and asks Joel about what had transpired as she was unconscious, the man lies and tell her that their journey was pointless, as The Fireflies had already examined several people who were immune to the disease, and even then, the vaccine had turned out to be impossible to create.

The sequel is set five years later, as Joel and a now nineteen-year-old Ellie live in a community named Jackson, with Joel's brother Tommy and several other people. In only a few hours of gameplay, Ellie witnesses Joel get tortured and killed by a group led by a woman who we have controlled briefly as a playable character in a previous scene, but whose identity we do not know much about yet. Moved by grief and seeking for revenge, Ellie embarks on a journey after said woman: Abby. After Ellie has murdered countless people - both alive and infected by Cordyceps Brain Infection - the two women are finally in the same room. Nevertheless, the game presents a twist precisely at that point: after playing as Ellie for hours (around four in-game days), the player now goes back to day one, playing as Abby. This allows the user to see events and get to know the motivations of a character who had previously been thought of as the villain in Joel and Ellie's story.

*The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* both present a strong focus on narrative and have received high scores in critics' reviews. The sequel is played from

a third-person perspective as the user traverses post-apocalyptic environments and enters abandoned buildings and cities whose grass and bushes have become overgrown in order to advance the story. When it comes to confrontation and combat encounters, the player can choose from a variety of strategies, including stealth and sneaking up on enemies, using bows and crafting silencers for guns to be used from a long distance, using short-range weapons such as pistols and revolvers, and crafting melee weapons such as machetes and bats. The player can also pick up objects such as bricks and glass bottles to throw and distract the enemies, and craft explosives and medicine kits. In order to have ammo for the weapons and supplies to craft various items, the user needs to explore the scenery and environment around them, looting abandoned buildings and cars. It is also important to look for clues in letters and photographs on the walls whenever there is a safe around, since those need a code to be opened. In addition to such codes, reading letters and notes found in the scenario can also give a typically somber understanding of the terrible fates met by many people and different groups in the post-apocalyptic world. Those pieces of information help piece together the story of how humanity has survived and succumbed after the spread of the Cordyceps Brain Infection. The game also includes a significant number of cutscenes, presenting dramatic events of the story and meaningful moments between the characters. At times, an icon appears over the head of some companions, indicating that the player may go talk to them and learn more about their personalities, personal stories and thoughts. It is also interesting to note that the production of the game used performance capture, which means that motion and voice were recorded simultaneously. This process gives depth to the facial and body expressions of the characters.

With all of this information available, but scattered throughout the scenario, players need to investigate, analyze, and put together what they find. Additionally, the nature of the video game media requires not only mental commitment, but also the mechanical effort of pressing buttons and taking actions in order to advance the narrative. Thus, it is ergodic literature, a term that game studies researcher Espen J. Aarseth (1997) uses to describe a type of narrative in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (p. 1). The scholar explains that this process is different from nonergodic literature because it also demands a performance in an extranoematic sense. Aarseth (1997) explains that the user of a cybertext effectuates

a semiotic sequence, which constitutes a physical construction that is uncharacteristic to nonergodic literature.

The specifics of the video game media and some of the ways in which they can portray trauma are analyzed by scholars Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps (2014) in the article “Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game”. The researchers note that

In the same way that creators in other fields have exploited the particular characteristics of their respective media in order to achieve unique rhetorical effects, game developers use the specific qualities and capabilities of games in order to represent the symptomatology and cultural significance of psychological trauma in their own way. This involves harnessing the mechanical (ludic) and aesthetic (narratological and audiovisual) qualities of games together in order to produce an experience that must be analyzed holistically, as something greater than the sum of its parts (SMETHURST; CRAPS, 2014, p. 2).

The scholars also state that, in spite of the trauma trend within video games in the last decade, they have scarcely been discussed by trauma theorists. In similar ways, video game scholars have not yet made a connection with the field of trauma theory, thus creating a “blind spot in games and trauma studies” (SMETHURST; CRAPS, 2014, p. 3). According to the researchers, games can work with the concept of psychological trauma in ways that are very specific to their media. Therefore, they believe that

A trauma-theoretical study of games has much to offer to our understanding of the ways that trauma can be represented, in addition to giving game studies scholars further insight into how games manage to elicit such strong emotions and difficult ethical quandaries in players (SMETHURST; CRAPS, 2014, p. 3).

Considering these observations, the present article aims to analyze *The Last of Us Part II*, observing the ways in which trauma is portrayed in the game. This work also seeks to discuss how *The Last of Us Part II* explores the possibilities of the video game media in order to produce a sense of empathy and complicity in the player. The methodological procedures include two steps: first, a brief review of trauma theory is conducted in order to revisit some concepts and observe how they are presented in the game. Then, some concepts linked to game studies are discussed in their connection to *The Last of Us Part II* gameplay in an attempt to demonstrate how the media can explore empathy and complicity through the use of different diegetic agents.

In the conclusion, I close up my analysis discussing the possibilities that games present for a readerly engagement with trauma.

### **Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: Ellie's shattered life**

In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, scholar and professor Cathy Caruth (1996) presents the most general definition of trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena” (p. 11). Caruth (1996) also notes that in the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of trauma was typically linked to soldiers who had witnessed sudden and massive death while in a state of numbness, and who would later relieve that witnessing through recurring nightmares. Nevertheless, the significant number of overwhelming war experiences and other types of catastrophic responses in the last half of the twentieth century led psychiatrists and physicians to review and reshape their understanding of mental and physical experiences, thus including events such as work accidents, child abuse and rape as potential catalysts for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth (1995) explores the notion that the pathology of trauma cannot be defined by the event itself or in terms of a distortion. According to her,

The pathology consists, rather, solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event (CARUTH, 1995, p. 4-5, emphasis in the original).

Caruth's comprehension of the pathology of trauma as a result of an event which is not assimilated at the time it occurs is also present in her discussion of Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In this work, Freud (2006) discusses certain compulsive repetitions which seem impossible to link to the pleasure principle, as they are related to past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never have brought any sense of satisfaction even to instinctual impulses that may have since been repressed. Such experiences are connected to catastrophic or very painful events. As Freud (2006) notices, they present no possibility of having ever produced pleasure in the past, and they are not any less unpleasant today. Additionally, they do not take the shape of dreams or memories; they instead haunt

the survivor in the form of fresh experiences, repeated under pressure of a compulsion. Freud (2006) also observes that one of the traits of these cases is connected to how the survivor has had a passive experience, over which he has no influence, and in which he repeatedly meets with the same fate. This means that the traumatized individual is subjected to a series of recurrent painful events over which they do not have any control and for which they certainly do not wish. Freud (2006) turns to literature in order to exemplify and discuss this series of repeated events as he analyzes the story of Tancred and Clorinda in Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581). In the tale, the hero Tancred unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda, disguised as an enemy knight, in a duel. In grief, the man goes into a mythical forest and strikes at a tree in a fit of rage and pain. It is then that blood comes out of the trunk as the voice of Clorinda complains that Tancred has wounded her once again, for her soul is stuck in that tree. Freud (2006) sees this repetition of harm as confirmation that there is in the human mind a compulsion to repeat that overrides the pleasure principle.

In her analysis of both the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the story of Tancred and Clorinda, Caruth (1996) interprets the way in which the hero unwillingly hurts his beloved a second time as representative of how a traumatic event repeats itself, exact and literal, against any will of the survivor. She also highlights the voice that comes out of the tree as it is struck. In her understanding, it is through this repeated act and the cry that comes out of the trunk that Tancred is urged to actually witness what he has done for the very first time. When Clorinda's voice addresses Tancred, it also bears witness to the past that the man has unknowingly repeated, representing "a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know" (CARUTH, 1996, p. 3). Thus, Caruth reflects on trauma as a wound that

Is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on (CARUTH, 1996, p. 4).

Therefore, we can understand trauma as an overwhelming event which cannot be fully witnessed as it takes place, and which may later return in its unassimilated and literal form to torment and haunt the survivor. In relation to that, professor and scholar Irene

Visser (2011) observes that the subject of study in trauma theory is indeed more connected to the traumatic aftermath than to the traumatic event itself: “trauma thus denotes the recurrence or repetition of the stressor event through memory, dreams, narrative and/or various symptoms known under the definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)” (p. 272).

Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk (2000) explains that traumatic events present such horror and threat to people that they may affect the ideas that they have of themselves, their biological threat perception, and their capacity to cope with events; effects that might be temporary or permanent. Kolk (2000) also notes that traumatized individuals are frequently diagnosed with PTSD, which means that their consciousness is haunted by the memory of the traumatic event, which interferes with their ability to find pleasure and meaning in life. When describing symptoms associated with PTSD, Kolk (2000) mentions depression, shame, self-hatred, dissociation, amnesia, and aggression against self and others. The psychiatrist also explains that the diagnosis of PTSD is based on three major elements: the avoidance of reminders of the event, a pattern of increased arousal, and the repeated reliving of traumatic memories. The first tends to result in emotional numbing and detachment, rendering the survivor unable to experience joy and pleasure and causing them to withdraw from engaging with life. The second may manifest itself as startled responses, concentration problems and irritability. Finally, the third is related to visual and sensory memories, which are often accompanied by feelings of distress.

*The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II* present trauma and PTSD as central themes to their narratives. The storyworld in itself is an extremely violent one, to the point that children need to be taught how to shoot, because danger is always looming around the corner in the forms of infected, or even other alive humans who belong to different factions. In the two games, the players are presented with cannibals, cultists and slavers - all representing threat to the playable characters. In addition to them, even groups with different goals can become enemies who will try to capture or kill Joel, Ellie and their friends. It is also very interesting to note that the violence in the storyworld can destroy the psyche of the characters because it is not a world that they are entirely used to yet. In the first game, we witness the pandemic break out in 2013 and see Joel navigate the post-apocalyptic United States twenty years later, in 2033. As Amy Green (2015) observes, this choice of time jump and setting present to the player a landscape which is scarred and broken, but still recognizable. The scholar

also comments that “main protagonist Joel exists in a post-apocalyptic world that is at once broken, close enough in time to yearn for the pre-infection idyll of life, and not yet certain in its ultimate reconstruction of human community” (GREEN, 2015, p. 4). This means that as present as violence and death are in the storyworld of *The Last of Us*, they have not become the absolute norm, in the sense that the characters remember or have access to books and movies that portray “the old world” with its notions of civilization and legal and moral institutions. We learn, for instance, that there are movie nights in the Jackson community, and that Joel has shown Ellie some of his favorite films. There is also a journal containing the documentation of an attempt to escape the pandemic by boat, in which the captain registers the following dated texts:

10/5/13

19:05 - Ms. Roberts' request to have everyone re-examined by ship's medic denied-We don't have the appropriate scanners anyways. Her subsequent request to hand the weapons also denied-I'm not going to let paranoia lead to disaster.

10/6/13

18:35 - Despite protests, additional passengers claiming of various ailments (headache, indigestion, dizziness) all temporarily quarantined in the "infirmiry" below decks.

10/6/13

20:17 - Visual landfall of Seattle, tried radio channels to inquire about refueling, but no answer. Will press forward.

10/6/13

21:00 - Everyone in the infirmary has been executed. Those people were not infected. This is cold blooded murder. No one is going to disembark until we find the responsible party.

10/6/13

As suspected it was Roberts. We shot each other. I can't imagine she'll survive. If I pull this thing out, I'll probably bleed out in minutes. Going to steer toward the shore so everyone aboard can get to land.

Port is close. Need to stay. I hear infected outside my door. Was she right? (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020).

In the passage above, we can see the struggle of people who still remember what the world and its ethic and moral codes used to be like. Thus, even if the storyworld is now full of violence and death, it is still a setting that can affect and traumatize the characters who inhabit it.

Trauma and PTSD are especially relevant when we consider Ellie's story in *The Last of Us Part II*. In the beginning of the game, we become aware that she and Joel have recently had an argument, but we do not know what exactly it was about; the only information we do have access to is that their relationship is not at its best at the moment. Playing as Ellie, we promptly go on a patrol mission with Dina - a girl who the main character has a crush on and who has kissed her the night before. In one of the



Jackson community outposts, the girls take a break to relax and have sex. Meanwhile, the player is once again given control of Abby, a new playable character about whom they do not have much information at that point - all we have heard her say is that the man she is looking for is nearby. In control of Abby, we play through an escape sequence in which we run away from the infected. Eventually, we witness Abby be rescued by two men who the player knows well: Joel and Tommy. When the trio gets stuck, Abby suggests that they try to find her friends in a mansion nearby. The scene then changes to Dina and Ellie, talking lovingly after sex. A few minutes later, they are found by Jesse, Ellie's friend and Dina's ex-boyfriend, who informs them that Tommy and Joel have not returned from their own patrol. Ellie immediately becomes worried and distressed and decides that they have to go on a search for the older men. After that, another cutscene begins, and we see Abby's group immobilize Joel and Tommy. As the woman swings a golf club to hit Joel, the scene fades to black and the player is once again in control of Ellie. When the girl enters the house where Joel is being tortured, she can hear screams and grunts of pain. Upon opening the basement door, she sees Joel lying in a pool of his own blood as he is hit by a woman with a club. Before Ellie can shoot or intervene, a man jumps her and she is pinned down to the floor by a few people. One of the men tells Abby that they have to go before the whole Jackson town arrives while Ellie begs Joel to get up and the woman hurting him to stop. Nevertheless, as she is pinned down to the floor, Ellie can only watch as her father figure is murdered in front of her. As she vows to kill the group around her, the sound fades to a high pitch and it becomes impossible for the player to distinguish what is being said by the people surrounding Ellie; we can only see that some of the members of the group intervene and stop others from murdering the girl. The subtitles for the scene show only "[muffled voices]" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020) and all we can hear is Ellie's cries and that high pitched noise before one of the characters kicks the girl in the face and knocks her out.

As the perspective of the scene seems to be Ellie's, the presenting of a high pitched noise on the background and very little else in terms of sound produces a very interesting effect. As Ellie is overwhelmed by sudden and extreme violence when she sees her friend and father figure get killed, we can interpret that Ellie is dissociating, unable to fully assimilate the event that is happening right in front of her. Even as Dina finds Ellie and says that she is sorry, all we can hear the main character say is "no" as she stares at Joel's body, clearly lost.

Shortly following these events, as Ellie and Tommy argue, the girl says that if it were Joel in their position, he would already be halfway to Seattle in search of the group who had murdered one of his loved ones. She also informs Tommy that she will leave to do just that the following day. Nevertheless, it is Tommy who runs in the middle of the night, seeking for revenge. The following morning, Maria - the leader of the Jackson community and Tommy's wife - tells Ellie and Dina that Tommy has disappeared, very likely in pursuit of the faction that had killed Joel. The girls then decide to do just the same. It is then that the player embarks with Ellie on her journey for revenge, travelling to Seattle and looking for clues that can lead her to Abby.

Throughout the chasing gameplay that encompasses most of the game, we can see Ellie exhibit multiple symptoms of PTSD. She is depressed and aggressive, violently attacking and murdering the people she encounters who belong to Abby's group and who try to shelter her antagonist. The girl also has nightmares and flashbacks, which are cleverly exploited in order to tell Ellie's story. In the preface to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth (1995) observes that even though it is not an easy or simple task, it is crucial to find ways of listening and responding to traumatic stories and retellings without oversimplifying them or taking away from their impact. The scholar also notes that therapists, filmmakers, novelists, neurobiologists and literary critics, among others, have tried to propose models for this complex addressing of traumatic tales. In Caruth's (1995) understanding, both psychoanalysis and the narrative arts are interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. As creators write tales that address and portray trauma, voices crying out from wounds like the one in Tancred and Clorinda's story are likely to be heard: the knowing and not knowing of the events that transpired are intertwined in the narratives and in the characters' voices and actions. As the scholar summarizes, literature and art can present possibilities of speaking of complex and overwhelming experiences of trauma precisely because they do not do so in a language that is straightforward or literal, but "in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 5).

In *Trauma Fiction*, scholar Anne Whitehead (2004) observes that "in testing formal boundaries, trauma fiction seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event" (p. 82). In her studies, the scholar has noticed that the fiction that addresses trauma tends to register the unassimilable and overwhelming nature of its subject in formal and

structure terms. She highlights the use of techniques such as repetition and fragmented, dispersed narrative voices. According to Whitehead (2004), repetition “mimics the effects of trauma, for it suggests the insistent return of the event and the disruption of narrative chronology or progression” (p. 86). The repetition in a literary work can be applied to language, imagery, plot, etc. As Whitehead (2004) observes, it is inherently ambivalent, existing between trauma and catharsis. In relation to the first, repetition replays the traumatic past as if it were still in the present, leaving the survivor under trauma’s paralyzing influence. However, repetition can also be related to memory and catharsis, helping in the reformulation of the past. Meanwhile, the fragmented or dispersive narrative voice is related to the concern of not allowing a traumatic experience to be oversimplified or lose its impact as it is being told to others. In Whitehead’s (2004) understanding, literary fiction has the flexibility and freedom that may be necessary in order to articulate the impact and resistance of trauma.

This fragmented narrative is a strategy cleverly used in *The Last of Us Part II* both as a technique to approach the theme of trauma and to represent Ellie’s symptoms of PTSD. During the gameplay, the present time of the story is sometimes interrupted by flashbacks in which the player is also in control of Ellie. Through these snippets of the past, it is possible to reconstruct some of the events of the last four years that we did not get to play chronologically. This helps the player understand what has caused the tension and distance between Joel and Ellie: the girl has discovered that Joel lied to her and that she could have helped the Fireflies develop a vaccine. Ellie cannot easily forgive Joel for making that huge decision in her place and then lying to her about it, and their relationship grows strained.

After Ellie and Abby have had their first confrontation in Seattle and the latter has decided to spare the younger girl, the story progresses a few months. We see that Ellie and Dina have started building a new life in a farm outside Jackson, raising JJ, Dina and Jesse’s baby son. The child’s father was killed by Abby during the confrontation between the main characters, as he tried to help Ellie in her quest.

The first few minutes of cutscenes and scenario exploration in the farm show the player a peaceful, good life, as Ellie takes care of JJ and has playful, romantic interactions with Dina. Nevertheless, it quickly becomes apparent that the main character has not found her peace yet. When Dina asks Ellie to get the sheep into the barn, the latter knocks off a shovel in the process, and the sound produced by the clash serves as a trigger: we embark in a flashback with Ellie and see Joel screaming in the

pool of blood where he died as he is hit by Abby with her golf club. Back in the present, the door to the barn closes and the screen goes dark. Then, we are once more with Ellie in the stairs that led to the basement door where Joel died, hearing his screams of pain and struggling to open the lock. The scene cuts to the present again, and we see Ellie screaming on the floor while JJ cries on her lap and Dina tries to bring her back from her panic attack.

Furthermore, when we consult Ellie's journal entries, we find the following text: "Happened again. Got rid of the images pretty quickly, but my skin hurt the rest of the morning. I gave up trying to go back to sleep. Dina stayed up with me. When will this stop?" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). Another entry that further establishes Ellie's traumatized condition reads as follows: "It happened again. I was hunting this boar and I'd cornered it in this old gas station. It was bleeding out, screaming. Sounded like him. Then I couldn't get the images out of my head. I left it there, dying. My skin hurts" (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). These two passages show us that the panic attack in the barn that we saw Ellie experience earlier as we controlled her was not an isolated incident: the girl has been recurrently suffering from nightmares and flashbacks. Furthermore, as we continue to examine her journal, we find more indications of PTSD symptoms:

I don't know how Dina talks so easily about Jesse. She tells JJ all about him. She thinks it'd be good for me to talk about Joel. To get it out. When she says that, it makes the memories sound like food poisoning. I don't want to talk about it. It's just gonna hurt. And I think once I'd start I wouldn't be able to stop (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020).

This entry above can easily be linked to the attempt to avoid reminders of the event, which can cause detaching and emotional numbing. This pattern of behavior can also be seen in the following passage:

Jesse's parents came out today. It was nice at first. They're good people. But then they started pushing for us to move back to Jackson. I couldn't handle it and left for the woods. I didn't come back until late at night. Dina stayed up for me. I could tell she was mad, but she grabbed my hand and led me to bed. I feel so guilty (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020).

When we consider the nightmares, flashbacks, pattern of increased arousal and the inability to find true joy in life that Ellie has been experiencing, it becomes easy to recognize the trauma and PTSD themes in the game. Nevertheless, it does not stop there. Exploring the possibilities of the video game media, *The Last of Us Part II* also

immerses the player in a discussion about trauma and violence through the use of empathy and complicity, two concepts which will be examined in the next section.

### **Empathy, complicity and Abby: are we playing as the enemy now?**

In the first hour of gameplay, we are introduced to the idea that we may have a new diegetic agent in the storyworld of *The Last of Us Part II* as we are given control of a woman whom we have not met before. The first scene in which she is present shows her interacting with a group of characters that we do not yet know. One of her friends takes her to an outpost from where it is possible to see the community of Jackson. The two then start discussing strategies to get to “him” - a male whose identity has not been revealed by that point. Then, Abby goes on her own to explore the area and ends up overwhelmed by a horde of infected, from whom she is rescued by Joel and Tommy. The scenes progress as explained previously in this article and we soon learn that this new playable character is Joel’s murderer.

The first instinctual reaction which the player has is probably to feel angry and hate Abby and her group. This feeling is validated and reinforced as we spend the first half of the game playing as Ellie and witnessing her suffering and thirst for vengeance. Eventually, it even seems that we are approaching a climax as after in-game days of search, we finally see Abby again. Nevertheless, it is just then that the story resets and we are back to day one in the skin of the character whom we have been made to hate up to that point in the game: Abby, the murderer of beloved father figure Joel.

In the book *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, Sebastian Domsch (2013) explains that choices and actions in narrative games present a doubled form of agency. Thus, as the player presses buttons and chooses different approaches to different game sequences, those actions and choices are also understood and experienced as actions and choices of an agent who is part of the storyworld. Typically, “the avatar/protagonist of a game that clearly identifies the player with one diegetic agent” (DOMSCH, 2013, p. 127). The scholar also makes the very interesting observation that

Video games realized that their use of fiction also gave them access to one of fiction’s most fascinating (if conflicted) abilities: besides constructing a difference between the self and the other, the ability to provide an identificatory perspective on the other. Fiction can do this because it can present the other’s perspective, but games could even go one step further, by letting the player play and act as the other (DOMSCH, 2013, p. 159).

Therefore, as we play as both Ellie and Abby, we are presented to their different perspectives and we live them: we play as them, we act as them, we *are* them. This perception activates two interesting ideas: those of empathy and complicity.

Professor James Newman (2002) differentiates empathy in video games in relation to two moments: on-line and off-line engagements. The latter refers to moments in which the player does not need to press buttons in order to achieve goals: the cutscenes, for instance. According to Smethurst and Craps (2014), games are most similar to passive visual media during periods of off-line engagement, as players cannot intervene in the story during them. Thus, in those off-line moments, empathy works closely to how it works in other media: players can infer the feelings and thoughts of groups represented in the game and/or look at similarities between themselves and characters in the game (BELMAN; FLANAGAN, 2010). Meanwhile, during on-line engagement, the player is in effective control of the character, pressing buttons in order to make them jump, shoot, walk, etc. During these periods, the player does not focus as much on the identity of the playable character, but on their abilities and capacities, which allows the user to experience, inhabit and explore the gameworld (NEWMAN, 2002). Thus, during on-line engagement, empathy in an emotional sense might not be present. Instead, the player feels like they are directly experiencing the gameworld. As Smethurst and Craps (2014) summarize, games are an amalgamation of off-line and online sequences, thus creating a sense of empathy that alternates between traditional empathic response (off-line) and characterless involvement (online). The scholars also suggest that the player identifies with the entire space of the gameworld, using the instrumentalized avatar “in order to become telepresent in the game” (SMETHURST; CRAPS, 2014, p. 9).

As for complicity, Smethurst and Craps (2014) define it as the capability that games present of making the player feel as if they were complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events. Since the player is directly responsible for the outcome of the tale, games can exploit empathy by making the player do things which they know are wrong or at least controversial, but that are necessary in order to successfully complete the game. Furthermore, the narratives can also induce the player to perform actions which they believe to be morally correct, but that are later shown to be wrong; or to compel them to sideline morality in order to achieve some goals and then later make them face nauseous consequences when the realization of what they have done dawns. As

Smethurst and Craps (2014, p. 10) explain, in many cases, such “rhetorical tricks rely on carefully situating the player in various places on the on-line/off-line continuum, making (empathy for) characters vanish and reappear where appropriate”.

*The Last of Us Part II* explores the concepts of empathy and complicity very interestingly. It is quite likely that we start the game hating Abby for killing Joel and making Ellie suffer. After all, the bond which the player has created with them is one of the reasons to play the sequel. Therefore, it is quite probable that we feel that the girl is justified in her quest for vengeance. Nevertheless, as the game progresses, the player is likely to feel more and more uncomfortable with Ellie’s choices and actions. With each passing day, the character grows more ruthless. There is a particular disturbing scene in which Ellie is torturing a character named Nora in order to discover Abby’s whereabouts. The game plays with the on-line and off-line engagements, as the cutscene can only be completed once the user presses the button to punch Nora again and again. It feels visceral because it is not a mere cutscene as most of the situations where a relevant character dies. Instead, it is a moment of on-line engagement which asks the player to inhabit the storyworld and help perpetrate violence. It feels like more than Ellie crossing a line and descending into torture; it feels like *you*, the player, are also crossing a line.

The game also explores the on-line and off-line engagements in relation to the switch of diegetic agents. When we start playing as Abby, we find a whole new perspective that is very interesting, because it is quite sensible and logical. Playing through flashbacks, we discover that Abby is the daughter of the surgeon who would perform the operation on Ellie and who was killed by Joel. Thus, she hates the man for killing her father and many other people she knew and for taking away a possible hope for humanity. We also meet her father through flashbacks, and he is quite a likeable character, which makes it even more complicated.

It is also interesting to note that when Abby and her friends are talking about whether or not it was smart to leave Tommy and Ellie alive, one of the members of their group says that they did the right thing, because otherwise they would be “just as bad as him” (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020). It is a little shocking to see a beloved character perceived that way, but once this reading is presented and we reflect on it, it does not come as a complete surprise. After all, Joel has murdered many people for his own interests, and so it makes sense that he would be perceived as a villain by the loved ones of his victims.

Also noteworthy is the fact that during the first half of the game, when we are playing as Ellie, we kill many characters who do not feel important to us, because we do not know who they are. As we navigate the scenario in on-line engagements and kill non-playable characters in order to advance the story, we do not empathize or even stop to consider the number of people we are killing. The cutscenes (representing off-line engagement) do feel a little more disturbing - especially the one where Ellie kills a woman and then realizes that she was pregnant. Nevertheless, it is only in the second half of the game that the guilt for the actions we committed together with Ellie truly set in. When we play as Abby, we have the opportunity to meet characters who we know will be dead in a few days - and dead because of acts in which we are complicit. Indeed, in her analysis of the first game, Green (2012) points out that “the player does not make decisions for Joel, but rather bears witness to his decisions, and whether the player agrees or disagrees, he or she must play through those choices as an active participant” (p. 15). The same is true for the playable characters in the sequel, and this feeling of being an active participant amplifies the guilt and the complicity sensation. Furthermore, as we learn about their personalities, hopes and dreams, our empathy for Abby’s friends grows and we question Ellie’s decisions more and more.

One of the possible actions which may return in the second half of the game to haunt the player is related to the killing of a dog. When we are trespassing enemy areas as Ellie, the group to which Abby belongs often commands their dogs to locate the character. It is possible to avoid the animals and progress in the story, but it requires agility, good strategy and fast thinking. If the player decides to take an easier mechanical path and just kill the creatures, it is quite likely that they will face feelings of guilt later on. In one of the scenes in which the user can choose to kill a dog as Ellie, a desperate scream of “NO! BEAR! NO!” (*The Last of Us Part II*, 2020) is heard in the background. Hours later, when we play as Abby, we get to meet, pat and throw balls for Bear to catch, growing attached to him as a companion. It may be visceral then to realize that during our on-line engagement, we have treated the animal as a mere NPC monster.

It is quite likely that the player’s empathy will also extend to Abby herself. The woman is strong, determined, loyal and funny. She has brilliant moments with witty quips. Furthermore, we see her journey progress as she decides to help a transgender boy from an enemy faction, leaving behind the place and people she knew in order to do something that she considers morally right: sparing the boy’s life and helping him.



It is also interesting to note that when Lev (the boy) asks Abby why she is assisting him even though they belong to rival groups, the woman just says that she needs to do it, that she just has to see that she can still do something good and right. It is not difficult to ascertain that Abby is feeling guilty and considering that she may have done something wrong by killing Joel, and this recognition and attempt at atonement makes it easier for the player to empathize with Abby.

The two direct confrontations between the main characters prove to be very challenging moments for the player, both mechanically and emotionally. As our attachment to the two has developed and we have come to understand both of their motivations, it becomes hard to control either Ellie or Abby as they punch and hurt each other. Indeed, the player is more likely to just feel like begging them to stop as Ellie begged Abby to stop, since we are experiencing a similar feeling: a character who has become dear to us is tortured and in pain. If we feel as much and if we do not want either of them to die, we can say that the game has successfully ignited in us those feelings of empathy and complicity.

### **Final considerations**

Scholar and professor Eden Wales Freedman (2016) proposes a readerly engagement of traumatic literature through a process that he calls dual-witnessing, in which the reader or listener effectively enters the narrative of the speaker, generating an account that is mutually witnessed. According to Freedman (2016), acting as a secondary witness requires the acknowledgement of one's indivisible role as an empathic bystander who stands side by side with the survivor, a potential victimizer, and a survivor-in-solidarity with the speaker, and a careful navigation of those spaces. Freedman (2016) also writes that dual-witnessing is a challenging process, but it is also one that can offer healing to both speaker and reader or listener, if successfully maintained.

I believe that this concept can also be used and applied to reflect on some video games. Dual-witnessing in *The Last of Us Part II* is indeed a challenging process, as it requires the player to empathize with different diegetic agents and their different perspectives. It requires them to listen and live the same story, as it is told and molded by distinct parties. It is indeed an exercise in empathy as we are potential victimizers inhabiting the skin of "the enemy" and causing damage, and as we stand side by side with Ellie and Abby, witnessing their journey and hoping for their healing.

We see Abby leave behind the faction which she belonged to, ready to start a new life with Lev and the surviving Fireflies. She feels the weight of what she did and she wants to turn a new page, to do better this time. This is probably one of the reasons why Ellie gives up on murdering her when she finds the woman a second time in Santa Barbara. She knows Abby as a torturer and killer, but the woman she finds in California is a survivor who risks her life for a boy that she is desperately trying to save. It is only when she understands that the Abby she is trying to get her revenge on does not exist anymore that Ellie herself can start her healing process.

In the final scene, we see the younger girl back in the farm where she was living with Dina and JJ, who have now left. Ellie picks up the guitar that Joel gave to her, but as she has lost two fingers in her vengeance quest, she cannot play anymore. Even so, the girl holds the object close as she reflects on past moments with her father figure. Then, we see her leave the farm, seemingly in peace for the first time in months. It looks like Ellie is, just like Abby, ready to start anew, to become someone new - a journey that we, the players, have witnessed and helped set in motion. Therefore, it becomes possible to affirm that the attentive and empathic playing of video games can also enable the readerly engagement with trauma proposed by the dual-witnessing model, as we listen, participate, and *live* those traumatic stories.

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