# Negative empathy in videogames: to play or not to play?

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## Introduction

> "The user gets into an empathic feeling with the story they are following. And therefore if the protagonist suffers, so does the user."
>
> D. Cajelli, F. Toniolo in STORYTELLING CROSSMEDIALE

Stories can take several shapes, depending on the artistic medium they are told in, thus eliciting different responses and unique sensations: listening to *Don Giovanni* and his unfavourable fate in Mozart's musical endeavour is not quite the same as reading *Don Juan Tenorio*. Both works manage to shake strings of our sensibility in manners that are exclusive to those specific forms of expression.

Speaking of exclusivity, there is indeed a comparatively recent medium that found its path to rise above all the other arts precisely for the unprecedented way it moves and entertains people: videogames. Their uniqueness, in fact, lies in interactivity, which is their defining feature: not only do we get to experience how a story unfolds, with all its twists and turning points, but we are also, and especially, able to live it, as we are essential components of that narrative world that has been set up for us to get lost in.

And this is where empathy plays a crucial role.

The emotional connection we may feel to the main character(s) of a videogame is sensibly emphasized by the fact that we do not sit back and watch them act before our eyes, but we instead play in their shoes, meaning

we act as them and, even for a limited time, we *are* them. Empathy, in this sense, allows us to tune in with the inner side of a person that we, as players, are called to embody, establishing thus a sort of "pact of complicity", not only in terms of what they feel but also, especially, in terms of what they do.

What if these characters were bad, though? What if they behave in manners that clash with our ethics and morals? How would we react? Would we still want to keep playing?

These are exactly the kind of quandaries embedded in the concept of "negative empathy", which will be scrutinized through a thorough analysis primarily devoted to exploring this aesthetic experience in close relation to videogames and the way they affect us on an exquisitely intimate level.

Incidentally, this dissertation also aims at providing a much broader understanding of the gaming medium, with the intent of contributing to ennobling this artistic form of entertainment so as to acknowledge it as equal to literature, cinema or television, which are the three pivotal media it draws inspiration from.

# I. Negative empathy

*Achieving empathy: identification and narrative situation*

> "[T]he story told from the restricted point of view of a character […] becomes one of the most efficient ways with which foster the empathy of the reader"
>
> Ercolino and Fusillo in EMPATIA NEGATIVA: Il punto di vista del male

At the very foundation of any kind of story we might read or watch, there is necessarily one paramount element that cannot be left aside: characters. They can be regarded as the real core of the narration, whether they are speaking or non-speaking, anthropomorphic or fantastic, good or bad, a story with no characters is not a proper story. The author can then mould them the way he wishes, gifting them some definite characteristics, both exterior and interior, providing them with a precise behaviour, maybe even with a personal background or a distinctive trait. This is where the reader comes in: this whole process of characterization of fictional beings is, for all intents and purposes, what draws the reader closer to (or apart from) those very characters. In fact, in accordance to our sensibility we may grow fond of a particular character, who might resemble the way we are as individuals, embracing the same values that we stand by, and acting in manners that we ideologically approve. The trigger of this peculiar

sensation of attachment towards somebody, which leads us to justify someone's actions, or also share their feelings and thoughts, is condensed in a key term: "empathy".

Empathy is a concept that cannot be overlooked when it comes to discussing literature, and it has been explored numerous times over the past few centuries, especially from the 18th century onward, the historical period when the novel, as a new literary genre, was born. Novels, unlike any other literary genre, allow us to plunge into a character's mind, discovering its darkest nooks, unveiling their inner sphere. Case in point, one of the first novels ever written, *Robinson Crusoe,* intended to tell the story of its main character in first person, introducing this narrative technique as an efficient empathic strategy to provoke an almost instant bond between the protagonist and the reader. As Suzanne Keen claims, first person fiction is "thought to invite an especially close relationship between reader and narrative voice"[1]. There is no formal filter, no external narrator, no narrative distance between these two entities; this method is in fact primarily utilized to foster one of the crucial ingredients to achieve empathy: *identification*:

> When large numbers of readers are consulted about their empathetic reading experiences, a strong pattern emerges supporting the notion that character identification lies at the heart of readers' empathy[2]

With these words Keen establishes the significance of identification, which can also be promoted through other effective tools such as behavioural

[1] Keen Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 97
[2] *Ivi*, p.68

descriptions and representations of consciousness. Nonetheless, identification is also something not easily attainable per se, therefore impossible to reduce to the employment of precise modes as opposed to others, since it can vary from one reader to another. The more a character resembles us in any way possible (the way they look, act and reason) the more we could see ourselves in their shoes, hence the consequential empathic response we would have when the character rejoice or suffer. Keen herself displays her conviction on this matter, stating that "the similarity of the reader to the character is widely believed to promote identification"[3].

Speaking more broadly about the process of identification with a character, academic critic Rita Felski points out two major factors that have quite a bearing on this experience: *alignment* and *allegiance*. The former is intended as the series of formal tools which allow the reader to have access to the character, such as the adopted point of view, the amount of details in the descriptions of the characters, their being main or minor, or them being flat or round. The latter, instead, is regarded as a "sensed affiliation or solidarity with certain characters that occurs when we get to take sides with a character and with what we think it stands for politically and ethically"[4]. Consequently, if the alignment is effective enough as to get us an insight of a given character, and especially if we feel ideally adhering to that very character as a result of the allegiance, we cannot help being sensitively empathetic in their regards, thus feeding our bond with them, and reinvigorating it as the story progresses and as the character undergoes change. When this is the case, it is almost as though we transform along with the character themselves, thus experiencing what Goldie called "*in-his-shoes perspective shifting*", a mental process by which we "consciously

[3] *Ivi*, p. 94

[4] Felski Rita, "Identifying with Characters", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 82

and purposely alter our perspective aiming to picture what thoughts, feelings and decisions we could attain if we were in the same circumstance the other person is in"[5].

Another author worth mentioning, who dwelled upon this topic, is certainly the German philosopher Hans Robert Jauss. In particular, he enlightens us on the several iterations identification can be subject to: I) *associative*, "when we take on a role, as if we took part to the action"; II) *admiring*, "concerning the potential admiration and emulation towards the hero, the saint or the wise"; III) *sympathetic*, "regarding the compassion we might feel for the hero in pain"; IV) *ironical*, involving a "critical and creative reaction to the character"; and finally V) *cathartic*, which is a "form of identification that results in the tragic purification or comic laughter"[6]. Specifically, this last example is quite crucial to our discussion on empathy, because it employs an instrumental component in literary fiction ever since epic poetry: catharsis. This concept was first introduced by Socrates as something supposedly originated from dialogue, and it was then at the very core of what is allegedly one of the most influential works in the classical age, namely the *Poetics* by Aristotle. The Greek philosopher here focuses on the effects of tragedy on spectators, asserting that catharsis, which is determining in tragedy, is the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief, of strong or repressed emotions: through it, readers are provided with a feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment, which is, among other things, the reason why literary genres like the gothic were (and still are) so successful. Now Jauss' definition of a cathartic identification is closely aligned with Aristotle's thinking, as he defines it as an "aesthetic attitude" which transfers the reader "from their real interests and sentimental involvements

[5] Goldie Peter, "Anti-empathy", Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 50

[6] Jauss Hans Robert, "Esperienza estetica ed ermeneutica letteraria" trad. it. di Bruno Argenton, in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 45

of their world into the state of the hero in pain" – which is exactly what empathy is founded on – so as "to provoke the liberation of their spirit by means of tragic emotion or comic relief"[7]. Nevertheless, in order to accomplish this deep-felt purification and especially empathy for the characters, there must be necessarily some definite distance between us and them. A fitting example might be a passage from the second book of *De rerum natura* where Lucrezio illustrates the old topos of the so-called "shipwreck with spectator", describing sailors lost at sea facing an impending storm. Ercolino and Fusillo offer us an in-depth aesthetical study of this very piece, declaring we can empathize with the sailors "only if there is a safe distance between us and them". In fact, they proceed, "if we fully empathized with them, that is if we felt the exact same emotions and shared the same thoughts that cross their minds" then, they conclude, "we would be presumably paralyzed out of terror and would not be able to feel any pleasure for being alien to their fate, nor we would experience any aesthetical enjoyment"[8]. Therefore, in light of what has just been discussed, it may be suitable to outline the prominent function that distance serves as Hume depicted it, that is to say an "experiential asymmetry between whomever is empathizing and the recipient of that empathy, in order to unleash compassion"[9].

That being said, this is not the only way empathy can be produced. There is another aspect worth taking into account, which does go hand in hand with the process of identification, but that can also, alone, contribute to the emotional response in the reader: the so-called *narrative situation*. In fact, we may not only identify with one of the characters, but we could also feel involved in the context in which the story unfolds, or psychologically

[7] *Ivi*, p. 46
[8] *Ivi*, pp. 47-48
[9] Hume David, "Trattato sulla natura umana" trad. it. di Paolo Guglielmoni, in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 47-48

invested in a momentous event regarding its development, like a turning point, a fight or a cliffhanger. For instance, such a case might be found in *Ivanhoe*, the successful historical novel by Walter Scott. During the course of the story, we get to witness several arguments between Ivanhoe, the main hero, and his father Cedric. Succinctly, the former has been disowned by the latter because he has decided to embark on the Crusades – which he considers to be only a "vain hurly-burly"[10] – thus following King Richard I the Lionhearted, who his father deeply despises for his Norman blood that he even calls him a "false-hearted liar"[11]. Now regardless of each character's motives, which the reader might or might not subscribe to, at the very source of all the verbal fights Ivanhoe and Cedric engage in there is the universal conflict between fathers and sons. We might not be on board with Ivanhoe's choices or condone his stubbornness, the same way we might disapprove Cedric's rigid moral code and his seemingly irrevocable decisions, but if there is anything at all that readers can relate to in this two-sided opposition, is a son standing up to his own parent. No matter who we are, what our personal background is or how old we are, we all know what it is like to confront our parents, we all have experienced this unsettling act of bravery. Accordingly, not necessarily is the identification to a certain character essential to eliciting empathy, since we can also be emotionally captivated by the aforementioned narrative situation, which can at times resonate with us more than the characters themselves.

*Empathy, negative characters and villains*

[10]Scott Walter, *Ivanhoe*, Oxford University Press; 2008, p. 85
[11] *Ivi*, p. 71

> “Novels can provide safe spaces
> within which to see through the
> eyes of the psychopath, to occupy
> the subject position of the
> oppressive racist, to share the
> brutalizing past of the condemned
> outcast.”
>
> S. Keen in EMPATHY AND THE NOVEL

Is it possible to be empathetic towards a murderer? Are we able to display compassion for a pedophile? Would we feel emotionally in tune with a rapist? Or is it all unalterably unfeasible because of the atrocity of their deeds?

In real life, we would certainly be significantly hindered in our hypothetical struggle to exhibit emotional understanding for these kinds of people, but in the realm of fiction things tend to be quite different. Adam Morton in *Empathy for the Devil* reflects just on this matter, affirming that “when we empathize with an evil person in the real world we have to overcome numerous mental “obstructions” that impede us from feeling a potential empathic suffering”[12]. This is primarily due to what he defines our *barrier of decency*, which constitutes an “almost insurmountable obstacle to empathizing”. Yet, “in the aesthetic domain, this very barrier might instead not limit our empathic response in (almost) any way”[13]: when we approach a story, and therefore its characters, regardless of its formal features –

[12] Morton Adam, “Empathy for the Devil” in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 53-54

[13] *Ibidem*

whether it is a novel, a movie or a videogame – and as realistic as it may seem, we do realise that whatever is we are reading or watching is not actually real. Accordingly, this basic awareness allows us to experiment some extreme feelings that we would normally feel the urgency to repress for personal or social norms that we all try to abide by. For example, we may, simply put, enjoy when a character we root for kills a character we could not stand, yet we all know that killing is wrong and death is not something to be treated lightly. However, fiction offers us a way out of reality, a sort of emotional escapism, which we can take advantage of so as to possibly get to step over that fine line that separates us from disagreeable and morally deviant characters. Such characters might be described as "negative", for they are connoted to embrace aspects of human nature that are generally repulsive in everyday life, but which become source of interest and deep reflection in fiction: the potential empathy we might show towards them is hence defined as "negative" as well.

Why is that, though? And how is negative empathy achieved?

One of the most incisive means to lure the reader into the supposed appreciation for a negative character (or even idolization, in the most effective cases) is to show their humanity: undressing the character of their layers of negativity, freeing them from the horrendous traits of their psyche and personality, is critical to revealing that at the very bottom of their persona there is instead a person, after all. That is why characters like Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, whose story was then expanded in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, or Hetty Sorrel from *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, ooze a delicate allure on readers, in spite of their despicable behaviour. They are both psychologically on edge and emotionally unstable, and this displeasing condition leads them to adopting a blameworthy and dangerously harmful conduct: as Bertha's mental health deteriorates, she progressively transforms into a bestial monster, she

becomes aggressive with Jane, turning into a frightful threat for the poor girl, who is deadly scared by her “demonic”[14] laughter and by her animal-like appearance, since she even starts crawling on all fours and snarling. Not only that, she keeps getting more and more violent to such an extent that she even bites and stabs her own brother, and, towards the end of the novel, after repeatedly wreaking havoc around the house, she sets fire to all Thornfield Hall[15], burning the mansion to the ground and committing suicide right afterwards by throwing herself off the roof. Hetty, on the other hand, is not to be trifled with, either. She is in fact a fashionable yet cold-hearted attractive young woman who happens to be involved in a series of wretched events that will reach their climax in her disturbing murder of her own newly born crying child, whom she abandons with apparently no remorse nor emotional alteration whatsoever, coming across as a totally detached and reason-lacking person.

However, those are just the features that stand out the most, as they turn out to be the more unsettling ones regarding these two characters, and therefore the main ones that the reader can associate Bertha and Hetty with. Nevertheless, this is only what they are on the surface, but the real core of their being lies instead underneath: both Bronte and Eliot are masters in activating our empathic response for these rather negative characters, by portraying vivid details of their life experiences: they are necessary, as Ercolino and Fusillo write in *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, since the amount of details accumulated “encourage the reader to establish a close and disturbing empathic bond with the character”[16]. In fact, Bertha was not just born mad, she was driven crazy by her former husband Rochester, who abused her, confined her in an attic, and harass her, for her

[14] Bronte Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Classics; 2006, p. 167
[15] *Ivi*, Ch. XXXVI
[16] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani, 2022, p. 57

only fault was to be a poor helpless woman whom he never “loved”, “esteemed” and “did not even know”[17]. Hetty, on the other side, was victim of a love affair that did not evolve happily: she was in love with a man called Arthur, who took advantage of his social position as a rich and powerful aristocrat, just to seduce her and share a sexual intercourse, though he perfectly knew that he was not in love with her nor he planned on getting married. Then he left her, she got pregnant, and that ultimately prompted her to go in search of him all the way down to Windsor. However, after not finding him, she fell into a state of such a despair that almost cost Hetty her own life, since she reached the point of contemplating her death imagining drowning herself into an icy cold pond. At the end, she will also repent her actions bursting into tears, as the sound of her baby’s cry, in need of his mom, keeps incessantly haunting her mind. Now, are the feelings we felt for them the same as they initially were? Or has that impetus of reprobation left room for some sensitive understanding? Of course their deeds were dreadful, and remain that way, but after catching a glimpse of their background and their psychological turmoil, it would be arduous to withhold any empathic connection. This exemplifies, as the abovementioned Ercolino and Fusillo claimed, the role of art – in this case of literature – which “cannot turn negative into positive, but it can make us feel the negativity as something beautiful, putting in the foreground its human dimension”[18], which is exactly what Bronte and Eliot fulfilled with Bertha and Hetty: we cannot help pitying the two of them, as a result of the bewildering circumstances that affected both, though we certainly do acknowledge the brutality of each character’s decisions, and thus we ideologically and realistically abhor them.

At this point, if we wanted to give a brief delineation of negative empathy, based on these previous examples, the conclusion we would draw is that

[17] Bronte Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, Penguin Classics; 2006, p. 483

[18] *Ivi*, p. 31

negative empathy is a form of emotional tuning that nonetheless causes "conflict", an "internal detachment" and a "judgement of unpleasantness"[19]. What if we were to go even further? So far we have taken into consideration secondary characters, part of a story whose focus was not strictly on them, rather on the effect they had on the protagonists. However, what would happen if this time the negative character was indeed the protagonist? And what if they were even worse, far more inwardly deranged? As we would get to spend much more time with them, and know them on a more intimate level, is this going to enhance our empathic response, or instead quench it?

Macbeth, in the homonymous play by Shakespeare, would be a particularly suitable case to examine.

One of the leading techniques that Shakespeare employs to make the reader bond with the future king of Scotland is to equip him with a notable psychological depth. Ever since the very beginning, and especially as the story unfolds and things keep worsening, we are constantly made aware of his thoughts and doubts, primarily thanks to the utilization of the form of the soliloquy, which effectively renders the psychological complexity of Macbeth as he gradually loses his moral compass. If we analyse the pages that precede his first murder, for instance, we chance upon a momentous passage that manifests his faltering will to cool-bloodedly kill Duncan and rise to power taking his place as new king. He is torn between remaining loyal to him, whom he himself praises saying that his faculties are "so meek" and his "virtues will plead like angels"[20], and accomplishing his ambitious, evil plan to be crowned new sovereign, venomously sustained by his wife. He is also well aware of his peculiar position: he is not only Duncan's subject and cousin, but even Duncan's guest and supposed

[19] Lipps Theodor, "Ästhetik : Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2007, p. 33
[20] Shakespeare William, *Macbeth*, Oscar Classici; 2021, p. 40

protector, someone who should "against his murder shut the door, not bear the knife"[21]. On top of that, he has just been commended by him for his outstanding exploits in the battlefield, so much so that Duncan granted him complete trust, declaring that he himself "will labour to make thee full of growing"[22]. Besides, if we bear in mind that Macbeth has just confronted the traitor Macdonwald, "unseamed him from the nave to the chops" with his smoky sword and even "fixed his head on our battlements"[23], beholding now his wavering towards murder, something he seems to be quite used to, is even more disconcerting after witnessing the way he slaughtered his adversary: he is not a ruthless, merciless madman (not yet, at least) who has fun in taking someone's life, he is just a soldier observant of his duty and still has a working conscience here. This involute internal conflict is, as a matter of fact, a nodal factor in the ignition of the reader's empathy for the hesitant new thane of Cawdor[24]. Ercolino and Fusillo claim that the internal conflict is "one the basic mechanisms of negative empathy", ever since "modern archetypes like Macbeth"[25]. As a result, thanks to the thorough description and the stirring soliloquy, it is as if we were sharing Macbeth's quandaries and pondering which path to opt for, simultaneously feeling our ideological and emotional attachment to the character. What is more, for a moment he actually seems to be bent on reconsidering the plan and being done with it once and for all, he even stands up to lady Macbeth claiming firmly "we will proceed no further in this business"[26]. At this point, the reader should be taking his sides, or at least comprehend the implications of such a contemptible gesture: this very understanding of the character's

[21] *Ibidem*
[22] *Ivi*, p. 26
[23] *Ivi*, p. 6
[24] *Ivi*, p. 16 ("Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!" The witches call Macbeth this way for the first time)
[25]Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 323
[26] Shakespeare William, *Macbeth*, Oscar Classici; 2021, p. 40

perspective is in fact another fundamental step in the empathic response for him. Later, however, because of lady Macbeth's caustic words, outrageously pronounced as intended to assault his husband and question his manhood, he will unfortunately change his mind, yielding powerless to her, and hence accomplishing his murderous plan.

When later on Macbeth will succumb to his obsession with power, becoming an aloof, impassive tyrant fixated on maintaining his position – which led him to even have Macduff's family all killed including his children – what comes to mind is precisely his first alarming approach to killing: how can someone have turned into such a monster when in the first place we witnessed him flinching by only thinking about murdering a person? This is exactly the evidence of the evolution of the character, whose psyche has been plumbed down to its remote depths through seven soliloquys, and who changed over the course of the story. He will also change even more significantly as we get closer to the final act: dropped his dreams of glory and wishing to just be a soldier and a national hero again, as he was at the very beginning of the play ("give me mine armour"[27]), he will, in the renowned "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow"[28] soliloquy reflect on the vacuity of life, coming to realise how futile and fruitless his path to the throne was, and how naïve he revealed to be in putting his trust into the deceitful prophecies of the witches.

Apparent as it may be by now, the profound writing of the character, who lays bare in front of us in his internal emotional tension, is an excellent means to make us feel the same psychological commotion he experiences, corroborating factually Ercolino and Fusillo's statement that the "psychological profundity of the negative character is a key factor to triggering negative empathy in literature"[29].

[27] *Ivi*, p. 168
[28] *Ivi*, Act V, scene V, p. 174

However, regardless of the intensity of our empathic reaction to a given character, though we might feel for them or share their viewpoint, it does not necessarily mean that we can always identify with them, let alone if it is a negative character as in the case of Macbeth: Shakespeare portrays his progressive evolution, and the identification may actually be viable in its first stages, when he is still endowed with a grain of humanity, but by the end of it, when he has "transformed into the embodiment of evil, the identification does not seem sustainable any longer"[30]. Once again, it is thus crucial to bear in mind the function of the emotional distance as a sort of "protective mechanism against particularly engaging negative emotions"[31] as Hume described it in his *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. This kind of distance itself must not be repressed, but should be, according to Georges Didi-Huberman, activated in the "alternating rhythm between moments of proximity and moments of critical detachment"[32] towards the character. In addition, this critical detachment is a symptom of a moral thinking process that the reader is called to make when put in front of a negative character or a negative situation: perhaps we would not agree with the character's choices or would not be able to tolerate their conduct, but that is why we would feel the need to ideologically separate ourselves from them, even if the moment before we managed to fully empathize. This makes the reader choose a position to stand by, which might oppose the character's. Consequently, it would be befitting to expand the notion of negative empathy as not only an aesthetic response towards characters negatively

[29] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 84
[30] *Ivi*, pp. 159-160
[31]Burke Edmund, "A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful" in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 49
[32] Didi-Huberman Georges, "Storia dell'arte e anacronismo delle immagini" trad. it. di Stefano Chiodi, in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 231

connoted, but also as an insisting solicitation "asking the reader to undertake a moral reflection, and pushing him to adopt an ethical stance"[33]. Another kind of negative character that we need to inspect is the *villain*, which will turn out to be significantly relevant to our argument.
A villain is perhaps the quintessential embodiment of what a negative character is and how it is supposed to act: most aspects about it are negative, and it generally serves the function of counterbalancing the *hero*, which is instead the positive oppositional figure. The ambitious politician Claudius in *Hamlet*, the deceptive and liar Fernand Mondego in *The Count of Montecristo*, the ruthless O' Brien in *1984*, or, if we want to take a look at more recent works, a few examples might be Voldemort in the best-seller saga of *Harry Potter*, Sauron in the acclaimed fantasy trilogy of *The Lord of The Rings*, or lastly the White Witch in the first book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. All these are characters that embrace evil, and in some cases they even are the very incarnation of it, which makes them almost impossible to connect with: they are bad and they remain that way all along, very seldom is there a transformation, and if there is, it is generally only in even more negative terms. This leads us to concur with Ercolino and Fusillo's thought on the figure of the villain as a "type of negative character rarely capable of stimulating the reader empathetically in a profound manner"[34]. Yet how come that, in the history of literature (and not only), some villains managed to reap such a success and remarkably enthral a vast audience? What is exactly that fascinates us, and that granted them a "certain fortune over time"[35]?

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[33] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 70
[34] *Ivi*, p. 91
[35] *Ibidem*

Katherine Tullmann calls it the *sympathy for the devil phenomenon*[36], meaning a complex feeling that encompasses "any *pro-attitude* towards a fictional character that is immoral or despicable"[37]. This specific kind of attitude that she mentions might be supposedly triggered by the charm that these extreme characters ooze, by their disruptive charisma, which ends up having quite an influence – negative indeed – on the reader, allowing us to feel attracted to them, no matter how negative they could be. In addition, Tullmann adds that, as far as our disposition to liking negative characters is concerned, we are all victims of what she describes as the *fascinated attention approach*[38], which is grounded in the foundational "fascination that we experience for certain negative characters", which has the prime result of making us "concentrate on the seductive aspects of an immoral character, rather than the destabilizing ones"[39]. It is as though the appeal of a given negative character, thus including a villain, were too powerful to resist, and blinded us to the point that we are driven to suspend our critical judgement on their worst sides, in favour of an (almost) complete abandonment to their intoxicating allure.

Moreover, when neither the identification nor any empathic response occur in regards to the villain, it can nonetheless make the reader still feel something, which is in most cases a blended array of negative emotions that make them very uncomfortable: a villain is supposed to perpetrate hideous deeds, and as a result of his dire behaviour the reader's psychological integrity might be put to the test. Say, for instance, that we behold a villain like O' Brien in *1984* torturing Winston, the main character. Regardless of our empathy for him, whether we fully like him, only partially or not at all, witnessing the shocking violence he is forced to

[36] Tullmann Katherine, "Sympathy and Fascination" in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 57
[37] *Ivi*, p. 58
[38] *Ibidem*
[39] *Ivi*, p. 58-59

endure may affect us emotionally, and even more so, if the cruel actions O' Brien commits are depicted explicitly: after beating Winston for months, he takes him to Room 101 to expunge any form of human sentiment from him and have him completely brainwashed, he straps Winston to a chair, then clamps his head so he cannot move, and finally uses his worst fear against him: he places a cage near him full of writhing, squirming rats ready to devour his face.

We have ascertained in the previous section that not necessarily can we empathize with the character, but also with the narrative situation. In fact, even if we do not empathize with Winston, this scene alone is extremely disquieting, and therefore makes the reader feel not completely at ease with the events portrayed. Iin some cases we may even feel disgusted, to the point that we do not wish to know what happens next: this very feeling is actually another not negligible factor that weighs on the negative empathic reaction we might have, and it can be equated to anguish. Incidentally, art historian Wilhelm Worringer used to "put anguish at the centre of the aesthetics", deeming the experience of negative empathy as "nerve-wracking, euphoric and dysphoric, pleasant and painful at the same time" and consisting also in the "empathizing process towards a certain atmosphere"[40]. This very atmosphere is named *Stimmung*[41], which is related to negative emotions that can be, as Ercolino and Fusillo remind us, "primary" like sadness, fear or disgust; "social" such as embarrassment and guilt; or "generic"[42], similar to malaise, tension, agitation or instability.

To conclude, using once more Ercolino and Fusillo's words, the last enrichment we could implement to the notion of negative empathy is indeed that it is, among other things, an aesthetical experience resulting in

[40] Worringer Wilhelm, "Astrazione e empatia", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 217-218
[41] *Ibidem*
[42] *Ibidem*

empathizing “with characters, figures, performances” that are negatively connoted, which are also “capable of triggering a profound *empathic anguish*”[43].

## II. Cybertext: defining a videogame in literary terms

### *Agency and its implications*

[43] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 70

Before examining the theme of negative empathy through the gaming experience, which will be scrutinized in the following chapters by means of an in-depth analysis of three key videogames, it is indispensable to first elucidate the very concept of "videogame", concerning its essence and its aims, especially in relation to literature. Among all the different arts and media, literature is the pivotal source of inspiration for a specific category of games whose intent is to tell a story. As a matter of fact, the common denominator of successful story-driven videogames is primarily good writing: the most riveting stories in games, as well as in movies or TV series, begin with a piece of paper, which is then filled with words that will forge the narration, mould the characters and their dialogues, and contribute ultimately to the positive reception of those very stories. Therefore, it would not be inappropriate to say that literature has much to teach videogames, first and foremost regarding the creation of the whole narrative structure and the development of its components, which are crucial in conveying a fully-shaped story through this interactive medium.

If we were to consider a videogame as a text, the sub-category to which games would belong is the one of "cybertext", regarded by Aarseth as a kind of product that "centers attention on the consumer of the text as a more integrated figure" and especially that proposes a "physical construction that the various concept of 'reading' do not account for"[44]. The central reason why a cybertext is in fact "user-oriented", is directly connected to the distinctive trait that typifies videogames: interactivity. The gamer is the real protagonist of the experience, which is inherently active. When we play, in fact, we get to control the main character, e.g., making it move the way we want and for how long we want, allowing them to use objects that we see in the virtual environment or even letting them talk to other characters, depending on the type of game we are playing. Likewise,

[44] E.J. Aarseth "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic literature" in Radchenko, *Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of The Last of Us*, Interlitteraria; 2020, p. 250.

when we read a cybertext, our participation is active as well, for we do not just read the story and go through its unfolding passively, but we do have a certain degree of freedom to make decisions. The reader of a cybertext, like the player of a videogame, is thus provided with interaction and "knows that he can *change* something according to his own ideas"[45], as Radchenko affirms. He also remarks that "cybertext constantly requires a reader to develop the story" and, by doing that, "it opens new horizons for interaction with the described world, heroes and plot"[46]. This entails a greater significance of the reader-player's activity as opposed to the one of a book-reader or a movie audience, and not just because of their interaction with the cybertext or videogame, although this remains its most noteworthy feature, but also because, from both a narrative and empathic viewpoint, they "doubt, feel and travel together with the game characters", thereby making "the player's [or reader's] involvement […] much more intense"[47]. Additionally, this precise activeness in the use of the cybertext explains the second part of its definition: its "physical construction" actually refers to the variety of physical actions involved in playing and that the gamers are called to perform, such as holding the controller, moving the analogue stick, or pressing buttons, which model their active experience, based on what the user does or does not do: reading a book only requires the reader to turn (or swipe) the pages; watching a movie is an even more passive entertainment since all we need to do is sit; to admire a painting we only have to look. None of these actions, however, is going to change the book, the movie or the painting in front of us. Instead, the way a person plays, which might differ considerably among gamers, will have an impact on the experience the player has of that videogame, changing its course, making it

[45] Radchenko Simon, *Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of The Last of Us*, Interlitteraria; 2020, p. 250
[46] *Ibidem*
[47] *Ibidem*

short or long depending on how much time we spend on a level, sometimes even affecting the world and the development of the story it is supposed to tell. That is because the gamer is provided with *agency*, which is, in the context of videogames, the degree to which a player is able to cause significant change through their choices. According to a recent study conducted by Tom Cole and Marco Gillies, there are actually four main types of agency: the first one is called *interpretive*, and it accounts for "what the player can think"; then there is the *actual*, which regards instead "what the player can do"; the next one is defined as *fictional*, which is meant to verify "whether an action affects the narrative and characters of the game"; and lastly, we have the *mechanical*, about the "actions of the player themselves"[48].

The first type of agency, the interpretive, is very likely to be present in most narrative games, because it involves the ability of the player to construct their own cognitive and emotional understanding: in other words, it represents the extent to which a player can "build their *own interpretation* of the data given them"[49]. It occurs when there is scant narrative information about a character, their background, or the story itself: a flashforward, for example, might prompt the gamer to "fill the gaps" in order to figure out what happened in that time skip. For instance, in the videogame *Mafia*, we have a considerable amount of interpretive agency. The protagonist, Tommy Angelo, is narrating his own story through flashbacks regarding his past as a taxi driver and the way he got into organized crime, ending up serving Don Salieri. In his narration, there are several jumps in time, where we get to know only the highlights of his criminal life, therefore remaining unaware of some details and some events. We do not know his whole experience, or everything that happened

[48] Cole Tom, Gillies Marco, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games*, Sage; 2019, p. 9
[49] *Ivi*, p. 10

to him, because he is carefully picking what to reveal, moving back and forth across eight years. Consequently, when the player is given little to no information on what happened between one year and another, they have to appeal to their own imagination to complete the story.

In addition, interpretive agency is not only possible when information is scarce, but also when the gamer is supplied with different versions of the same fact, and they have to decide which piece of information is the more trustworthy. In *Twin Mirror*, the protagonist wakes up with a hangover after a wild night wholly spent in a local bar, experiencing a memory lapse that renders him unable to recall what happened the previous night, with the aggravating factor that he finds his shirt covered in blood. We – the players – know as much as he does, and we are now bent on shedding light on things so as to possibly understand what has gone wrong and what we have (or have not) done. We have to go talk to different people that were there with us and they will tell us their version of the story, which is going to be a little bit different and more (or less) accurate every time we speak with someone new. This makes the gamer confused and puts them in a complex situation, where they do not really know who to trust, but will eventually have to make up their mind and follow a lead, thus integrating this second configuration of the interpretive agency.

Actual agency, the second type mentioned above, is quite close to the pre-established definition of agency and it is in fact simply related to the meaningfulness of the player's actions and how much weight they have either on the development of the story or on the gameplay. Going into detail, it is influenced by the variety of choices the gamer is granted, but on the fundamental condition that these options actually produce a change, that they lead to an outcome that has to be different depending on the decisions the player makes. Otherwise, no matter how wide the range is, if the choices all lead to the same result, then there is no actual agency. To

give a practical example we should consider games like the *Pokémon* series: each main episode of this gaming franchise starts with the player having to pick a Pokémon out of three (see fig. 1). This choice is not insignificant, it actually does produce an impact on the game: since these creatures are divided into eighteen categories the *Pocket Monster* we choose is going to affect our experience, as this will give us access to features exclusive to that category, thus influencing the way we may approach the game.

*Pokemon Ruby*, by *Game Freak*, 2003.
Traditional beginning of a Pokémon game. The player is called upon to open all the three pokéballs to check the Pokémon inside and then make a choice. (fig. 1)

Fictional agency pertains to the diegesis of the videogame, involving not only the narrative itself but also the characters. It occurs when the player is given the power to affect the course of the game or alter the "development and story of other characters in the diegesis"[50], as Cole and Gillies point

[50] Cole Tom, Gillies Marco, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games*, Sage; 2019, p. 11

out. In titles like *The Wolf Among Us*, or in *RPG*s ("role-playing games"[51]) such as *Mass Effect* or *Fallout*, when we interact with other characters we are offered different lines of dialogue from which to choose (see fig.2), thus establishing the amount of relevance, that is to say the narrative weight, that a given character is going to have in our story.

*Fallout 4,* by *Bethesda Softworks,* 2015 (fig.2).

Nevertheless, this form of agency might sometimes be merely apparent, meaning that it gives the player only the illusion of holding the reins of the story, when in fact – the variety of decisions we might make notwithstanding – the final result is always going to be the same. David Cage, the head of game development studio Quantic Dream, has recently called such games "bending stories", narratives that can "stretch a little bit,

[51] Wolf Mark J. P., *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming VOLUME ONE*, Greenwood; 2012, p. 545

but which will always need to snap back into place sooner or later"[52]. Nonetheless, despite this "artificial" feeling of control over the course of the events, which can be more or less effective depending on the game, or more palpable in some cases rather than others, the choices the player makes still mean something to them: while they may have little to no effect on the story or on the virtual world of the game – i.e., in the "space between the controller and the diegesis" – they will however have an impact in the "space between the controller and *the mind of the player*"[53], as they can still substantially influence the player's experience. This is primarily due to our interactive involvement with the game and its world, the way we are immersed in the development of the story, so even if the choices the game poses us are "fake", we cannot help perceiving them as real. More specifically, though we may realise that our decisions will not alter the story much, when we are put in front of multiple options and asked to select only one them, we would still choose the one that we personally think is best, whilst feeling somehow invested of an ostensible narrative control. Nevertheless, we can also opt for choices that do not match our personality, i.e., play against our better judgement, just to see where the story takes us if we make different choices: some games let us be a bad guy and direct the conduct of our virtual alter-ego in ways that we would normally not tolerate. Saying things we would never say and do things we would never do, usually restrained by our moral in our everyday life, might just be another incisive strategy to render our experience more stimulating and favour our enjoyment in gameplay.

Not all games, however, allow us to have this specific type of agency: generally these kinds of products belong to the RPG genre, the point-and-

[52] Cole Tom, Gillies Marco, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games*, Sage; 2019, p.3

[53] *Ivi*, pp. 3-4

click adventures, or the so called "interactive movies"[54], those particularly cinematic games that aim to "make the player feel like the driving force behind"[55] the story and to bestow upon them the chance of tailoring the narrative through their gameplay. *Detroit: Become Human* is one of such games, where fictional agency finds, still to this day, its utmost expression in the unique interactive experience the game offers.
Finally, the last type of agency is the mechanical. It essentially regards the player's range of action within the game itself. It concerns aspects of the experience like the "avatar movement and control"[56], and it varies on the basis of the complexity of the gameplay. Now "gameplay" is a term to be clarified: according to Salie and Zimmerman, the gameplay is the "formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game and experience its system through play"[57]. More specifically, it represents the ways in which the player, through their experience, can interact with the virtual scenery, the characters or the objects in the game, which are also determined by the difficulty and by the challenges and patterns the game offers. A game, for instance, might be easy to beat because it has an accessible gameplay that revolves around the same simple reiterated actions: this is the case of products like *Tetris*, *Candy Crush* or *Pinball*, games meant for everybody, no matter whether one is a "hardcore gamer"[58] or a casual one. Conversely, other games offer challenging experiences, which require a considerable amount of skill: titles like the critically acclaimed *Dark Souls* series by From Software, which even spawned a

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[54] Wolf Mark J. P., *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming VOLUME ONE*, Greenwood; 2012, p. 322
[55] Cole Tom, Gillies Marco, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games*, Sage; 2019, p. 11
[56] *Ivi*, p. 10
[57] Salen Katie, Zimmerman Eric, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, MIT Press; 2004, p. 3
[58] Meaning an expert. Wolf refers to them as "those gaming for more than 4–6 hours a week" in *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming VOLUME ONE*, Greenwood; 2012, p. 313

whole new subgenre known as *Souls-like* or *Souls-light*, actually owe their success to the remarkable challenge they present, which is at times extreme, to the point of being profoundly frustrating. Yet, they have managed to entertain millions of players worldwide, so much so that the first *Dark Souls* was even elected the "Ultimate Game of All Time" at the Golden Joystick Awards of 2021[59].

The mechanical agency embedded in these two types of games is extremely different, because the actions the player can take are limited and simple to execute in the first case, and instead numerous and complex in the second: practically speaking, in *Tetris* for instance, all the player needs to do is rotate the blocks as they come down in order to make them stick together so as to occupy as little space as possible. On the other hand, a session of *Dark Souls* will definitely turn out to be significantly more complicated, not only for the diverse arrays of enemies that we run into and that can kill us (in Tetris we have no enemies, we cannot die or fail the level), but also, and especially, for the intricate set of skills that we are supposed to acquire so as to possibly progress in the game: every enemy has specific moves and attacks that we need to study and remember in order to know how to fight them properly, and all these actions are associated with a specific combination of buttons to press. It goes without saying that the more ways we can interact with the game, or the more things we can make our character do, the more complex our mechanical agency is going to be, and this is not just because we can perform more actions, but because in order to act them out we need to use the controller in a more elaborate manner. Therefore, we can infer that mechanical agency goes hand in hand with the complexity of the game itself, as well as the challenge that it offers the player.

[59] Galluzzi Michele, Everyeye, "DARK SOULS È IL MIGLIOR GIOCO DI SEMPRE AI GOLDEN JOYSTICK AWARDS" 24th November 2021: https://www.everyeye.it/notizie/dark-souls-miglior-gioco-golden-joystick-awards-2021-554643.html

This last type of agency can also be associated with the interpretive, forming the *interpretive mechanical* blend. A videogame is equipped with this specific version of agency when the player is supposed to "examine their actions in the game and what they mean when the answers are not made clear to them"[60]. Concretely, this occurs when we perform an action in the diegesis of the game, or when we make a definite choice, but there is no feedback regarding it, whether it was right or wrong, and we will not even know its outcome. This lack of information on our deeds and decisions is primarily due to two main factors: either the story does not tell us what our choices led to, or the character does not overrly react to them. There are in fact cases in which our character is "mute", meaning that it does not talk, not because it cannot, but because the author does not want it to, as they perhaps intended to leave any form of emotional response or critical reflection to the player, without influencing them on how they should feel or what they should think.

*Papers Please*, an indie game released in 2013, is a good example to deliver a practical explanation of interpretive mechanical agency.

In this videogame, which Cole and Gillies analyse in their "Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games", the player's experience revolves around one apparently simple and repeated gesture: stamping an NPC's ("non-playable character"[61]) passport with either "approved" or "denied", thus accepting or rejecting somebody's request to be welcomed in your country (see fig.3). Though this action is indeed simple and easy to interpret, what is instead a lot more shadowy is what is going to happen next. The player is left with no

[60] Cole Tom, Gillies Marco, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Video Games*, Sage; 2019, p. 12

[61] "All the characters within a game world that are not playable by the character", *but with whom the character can nonetheless interact* (Italics mine). Wolf Mark J. P., *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming VOLUME ONE*, Greenwood; 2012, p. 60

feedback on their decisions and with a sense of uncertainty fed by the following pivotal quandary: “Did I make the right choice?”.

*Papers Please,* by *3909 LLC,* 2013.
Here we see a woman begging us to let her in or else, she says, she is going to get killed. This is yet another crucial decision we are forced to make, and it is only and entirely up to us. (fig. 3)

However, the player’s call can also be influenced by several other variables: the way a person looks, if they have a “good-guy” face or if they look suspicious, which is definitely something that can impact the player’s judgement; what the player reads in their files – for instance if they notice that their asylum application has been previously rejected, this may imply that that person is not to be trusted, and therefore the player may feel more convinced on the idea of rejecting them rather than allowing them in. Some other times the player might also be influenced by what the characters (the NPCs) tell them (see description fig.3): for example, Cole and Gillies highlight a moment of the game when a woman shows up “asking you to refuse entry to a man who is behind her in the queue, since he is going to

force her into sexual slavery"[62]. Should the player believe her? Should they not? They do not know whether she was telling the truth, the same way they will never have proof of such despicable intentions from the man, since the game takes place only in "the confines of your booth at the border, meaning you will never know the effect of your actions"[63].

*Images, empathy and interactivity*

In our discussion on empathy, there is one more version of agency to tackle, which I would name *visual*. It is the one Ercolino observes in his previously cited essay on negative empathy. He claims that "images have, in fact, an agency: they have the power to rouse, fascinate, wound, for many even to heal"[64]. Videogames are intrinsically composed of (moving) images, and, as such, they are considered a visual medium. Significantly, the pivotal way in which games can spark empathy or elicit dismay is through what we see happening on screen. However, to buttress our visual entertainment, and above all nourish our experiential ludic immersion, there are other key ingredients that need examining, such as music: for instance, in videogames, as in films and TV series, images are oftentimes accompanied by a soundtrack, which serves as a directorial tool to lend emphasis on a specific narrative sequence or convey a definite type of atmosphere. Regardless of genre, music is essential in games, even more so in those titles that try to emulate the cinematic and televisual language. Another factor to take into account, primarily for being unique to gaming, is the feedback the controller gives its user. Game designers may program

[62] Cole Tom, Gillies Marco, *Thinking and Doing: Challenge, Agency, and the Eudaimonic Experience in Videogames*, Sage; 2019, p. 12
[63] *Ivi*, p. 13
[64] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 188-189

it to vibrate when the player performs some precise actions or when our avatar gets wounded or hit. For instance, in an action game the vibration may arise when we shoot, to reproduce both the feeling of a trigger being pulled and, in metaphorical terms, the adrenaline rush that comes with firing. Similarly, in a football game like *Fifa*, we may feel the pad vibrating when we suffer from a rough tackle. Besides, this vibration might not only differ in terms of the area where it occurs, as sometimes it could be the whole pad, others only the "triggers" (specific buttons placed on the back of the controller), but also in terms of its intensity, depending on the harshness of the actions we perform or undergo. That being said, notwithstanding the important role of music and haptic feedbacks, it is crucial to bear in mind the supremacy of images over those – as well as any other – components: as we are discussing a visual medium, one that could not exist without images, they take precedence in the authorial creative process. They dictate the musical mode and influence the developers on when and how to implement vibration, not viceversa. We are still fundamentally captivated by what we see, only secondarily by what we hear and feel on the gamepad. Moreover, considering that whatever we are witnessing in the videogame is, to a certain degree, caused by ourselves, the resultant emotional reaction is going to be substantially enhanced, especially if there are some forms of agency at play, such as the fictional, which, as stated above, makes us feel in control of the storytelling process. But before examining interactivity and its impact on the player's experience, we should take a step back and consider the piercing essence of an image in itself, not necessarily with motion or interaction.

Generally speaking, any kind of image is potentially capable of eliciting an emotional response in the viewer, regardless of its shape and style, no matter if it is a picture that we took or a painting that we are admiring: a family photo might bring back memories or trigger a sense of melancholia,

the same way beholding *The Third of May 1808* by Francisco Goya might overwhelm us with a feeling of desperation and helplessness. Depending on the content, images can in fact affect us in an ample variety of different ways, so we should think of them, consistently with David Morgan's view, as "extraordinary sources of enchantment, as devices of seduction of the spectator, which invite us and which is difficult to resist to"[65]. Proceeding with Morgan's reasoning, this tangible effect that images produce on viewers is primarily attributable to two versions of enchantment: one "hinged on the subject of the watching experience", and the other, instead, based on the "force emanated from the images and on its potential of overwhelming the subject"[66]. At its core, the first type is essentially perceived as pleasant and positive, as something "geared towards action and even practical"[67], whereas the second one is something destabilizing and even dangerous. Furthermore, trying to briefly explain these two forms with Morgan's words, the first one consists in "what we do to the world, by means of the images"[68], meaning that our enchantment, stemming from them, can even result in practical actions that we are led to perform as a consequence of the impact images had on us: concretely speaking, if a painting portrays two passionate lovers kissing, like in *The kiss* by Francesco Hayez, we may project our personal sensation of love onto that image, thus feeling perhaps the itch to kiss our partner as a kind of practical manifestation of the effective influence that painting produced on us; similarly, works like *Young Man Drinking a Glass of Wine* by van Bijlert or *Le Fumeur de pipe* by Cézanne, may make us want to drink or smoke. On a more profound level, however, professor Ercolino in *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, provides us with a deeper example of

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[65] Morgan David, "Images at Work: the Material Culture of Enchantment", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 189
[66] *Ivi*, pp. 189-190
[67] *Ibidem*
[68] *Ibidem*

how an image can encourage a meaningful reflection even at the social level, potentially giving rise to a practical deed in the world: he examines *Blessing of the Young Couple Before Marriage* by Dagnan-Bouveret, pondering on the subtle conditioning we might be subject to when we behold such a painting, focused on marriage, which is a formal, interpersonal event that we might come to consider capable of enabling social change, a change that we ourselves could perform in our reality. Establishing a parallel with the essential moral at the foundation of a traditional tale like *Cinderella*, Ercolino states the underlying sway that this specific painting provokes on viewers, suggesting them to "reshape the perception that [they] have of themselves, pushing them to wish to modify the place they occupy in the world"[69].

On the other hand, the second type of enchantment is more about "what images do to us"[70]. It pertains to the emotional range that we might experience in front of an image, or more simply, what and how images can make us feel. There are cases when they make us feel happy or sad, times when they are able to convey shock or wonder, moments in which we are drawn to a picture or a painting that overwhelms us with its beauty or gloominess. The *Stendhal syndrome* is a perfect example of it: we can get upset or even "bewitched" by the tremendous power released by an image, so much so that we might feel lost or disturbed, experiencing therefore an uncomfortable moment. Ercolino refers to this second version of enchantment with two evocative terms, defining it as "subjugating and hypnotizing"[71].

The reason undergirding what we might call the "emotional investment" engendered by the images is then expressly revealed by Morgan himself,

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[69] *Ibidem*

[70] *Ibidem*

[71] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 191

who judges that the "primary agent of the enchantment images induce is empathy"[72]. In this sense, empathy would work as a "*projective faculty*", which "treats images as something that inserts between the human spectator and [their] world", serving the function of making it "emotionally coherent and open to a human understanding"[73]. Consequently, since we, as human beings, are endowed with that innate expression of emotional comprehension and sharing, i.e. empathy, we become the perfect filter to art, since it is in fact created by man for man, and the bond that we get to establish with art itself allows us to really "fall victim" to its very enchantment.

What if we were to apply these few concepts to images that are in motion and with which we can even interact, as in a videogame? How would that enchantment work alongside empathy?

To begin with, as asserted in the introduction, among the several media from which videogames derive their inspiration we might find literature. Also, maintaining the parallel expressed in the opening of this section, based on the closeness between a videogame and a text, we could infer that the ways through which a game triggers empathy are not leagues apart from a reading experience. For instance, in the wake of the analysis illustrated at the beginning of the first chapter, if we consider a videogame as a text, and more specifically as a novel, among the different tools games can utilize to move the player there is *identification*. We have previously declared its utmost relevance, as one of the primary ingredients to lure the reader into the story and to make them connect with the characters. Videogames themselves do abide by this principle: as we said early on in the paragraph regarding agency, at the foundation of a successful story-

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[72] *Ibidem*

[73] Weisberg G. P., "Against the Modern: Dagnan-Bouveret and the Transformation of the Academic Tradition", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 191

driven videogame – and a cybertext, too – there is always good writing, which is the central feature games have inherited from literature. Accordingly, there should be no reason why psychological processes like identification, which does occur in a novel, would not function just as well in a videogame, since both media deal with telling a story that is first and foremost written, before it gets designed and animated. There are nonetheless divergent opinions on the way identification occurs in a book, which we can transfer onto an interactive playing experience: Oatley asserts that "readers [and thus gamers] identify with the character's goals and plans"[74]; Miall, on the other hand, is convinced that identification "depend[s] upon the engagement of the literary text [in our case the videogame] with the reader's experience"[75]; Louwerse instead stresses that what does "have an impact on identification" is "the realism of the characters" as well as a full "psychologically resonant portrait"[76]; and finally, Keen concludes the reasoning by pronouncing a more general statement, that "the similarity of the reader to the character is widely believed to promote identification"[77].

As a result, we might deduce that if the above-listed conditions – or at least some of them – are satisfied in the creative structural process of a videogame narrative, along with its characters, identification would consequently be an operating mechanism, incisive enough as to make the player feel part of the story they are experiencing. Plus, considering its visual nature, it might take even less effort to connect with a videogame character than with a book one, for we might simply like them at first sight, with no struggle of picturing them in our mind as when we read: a glance

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[74] Oatley Keith, "Emotions and Identifications" (1997), in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 94

[75] Miall D. S., "Empowering the Reader: Literary Response and Classroom Learning" (1996), in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 94

[76] Louwerse Max, "The Effects of Personal Involvement in Narrative Discourse" (2004) in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 94

[77] Keen Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 94

might be sufficient for us to like it and ensure our emotional link to them, before they even say anything. In fact, as Jen Adamski maintains in her article "The Power of Visual Storytelling: Why Images Speak Louder Than Words", "[v]isual content is processed 60,000 times faster than text", and not only that, but people also "remember 80% of what they see [and] only 20% of what they read"[78].

Thus, the identification process could be significantly more immediate, even instantaneous in some cases, with little to no struggle whatsoever. Conversely, reading requires me an intellectual effort as far as identification is concerned, given the need to interpret the written word and flesh out the character in our mind's eye. Thus, on a first, superficial layer, a visual dimension allows a more impactful and above all effortless connection to the character. However, if it can be extremely easy to feel attuned to a video game character due to a series of shared features (e.g., looking alike, liking the same things, acting the same way), a player may just as easily despise a character, or not relate to them, if they are too distant from who they are and their tastes.

A videogame conveys stimuli to the consumer in a remarkably more direct and powerful way than a book. Nevertheless, this does not imply that a character in a novel is less intriguing or captivating than one in a game. Games, themselves, often have a verbal component that enhances the visual experience, but are not restrained to it: you can still have fun and be moved even by titles with no dialogues, with no words whatsoever, like *Inside*, *Unravel*, or *Little Nightmares*, where the stress is rather on the gameplay, the way our character physically reacts to the world around them and the atmosphere each level is permeated by. On the contrary, a book with no words cannot exist.

[78] Adamski Jen, "The Power of Visual Storytelling: Why Images Speak Louder Than Words", 23rd March 2023: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/power-visual-storytelling-why-images-speak-louder-than-jen-adamski

Going back to identification, in games where our character does not speak, their "muteness" might be intended as something that hinders our attuning: actually, instead of quenching our immersion, it rather nourishes it, as it lessens the probability of our character saying something with which we might not agree. This is the case of games like the abovementioned *Pokémon Series*, *The Legend of Zelda* or some of the ones belonging to the *immersive-sim* subgenre – whose name already hints at that immersion – e.g. *Half-Life* or *Dishonored*. Such titles allow the player to identify with the protagonist not through their words, but through their actions, which are, for all intents and purposes, driven by the player themselves. Also, this intrinsic interactivity that games have, or rather the control the player holds, which allows them to manoeuvre the character and feel somehow responsible for their diegetic advancement, is another non-negligible element that might exacerbate the player's involvement while heightening their identification with the character they are supposed to control.

That said, the means by which identification is not only promoted but also (re)presented are indeed different and unique in the videogame medium. Following the examination of *Robinson Crusoe*, we have demonstrated earlier how the first-person narration is key to the reader's emotional participation, but we should now reflect on how this very technique functions in a videogame, and verify whether it is as effective.

In a narrative videogame, the first person narration is implemented through a visual convention which gives us the impression of really "inhabiting" the character: it is as if we were seeing through their eyes, perceiving things as we normally do from our own individual perspective, and therefore the only way we would have to see our full figure including our face would be to look at our reflection in a mirror or to take a picture of ourselves, just like in real life. *Call of Duty: WWII* belongs to the *FPS* genre, an acronym

that stands for “First-Person Shooter”[79] and works as a good example for this visual perspective. In this videogame we play as the soldier Ronald “Red” Daniels, who belongs to the Private First Class of The United States Army, and we get to live his whole experience in the battlefield against the German, alongside his brothers in arms, during the atrocities of World War II. The game puts us in his shoes and entrusts us with the burden of shouldering the rifle and facing the impending horror of each battle, such as the one that took place on the infamous Omaha Beach on the D-Day.

*Call of Duty: WWII,* by *Sledgehammer Games*, 2017 (fig.4).

[79] Wolf Mark J. P., *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming VOLUME ONE*, Greenwood; 2012, p. 229

*Call of Duty: WWII,* by *Sledgehammer Games*, 2017 (fig. 5).

*Call of Duty: WWII,* by *Sledgehammer Games*, 2017 (fig.6).

These three images portray the pivotal moments that preceded the Normandy Landing, perfectly exemplifying what the first-person narration (or point of view) looks like in a game. First we are on one of the military boats approaching the beach, in turmoil and agitation for what is coming, alongside our comrades, crouched and with their heads bowed (fig.4); then we jump off the boat and start moving forward (fig.5); and lastly we are in

the middle of the battlefield, surrounded by the corpses of our soldiers and barbed-wire logs, and deafened by the sounds of the shots violently lifting the sand (fig.6). This whole devastating experience is lived to the fullest thanks to the first person point of view, essential for identification, which makes us feel right in that moment and in that place, but also because of interactivity, which enables us to move, look around and fight not as the character would, but as we, personally, would. Interactivity is thus another unavoidable tool to foster identification: we may play the part of a specific given character, but the way we play the game, embodying the character, is up to us. It is us who control them, that is why we feel identified with them. Moreover, witnessing the brutality of war so up close and personal, as though we were there in the battlefield in flesh and blood, spurs us to experiment that same cathartic experience, enabled by the necessary narrative distance, that Lucrezio illustrated in the aforementioned topos of "shipwreck with spectator", which works as efficaciously as in a book: we can enjoy the virtual gaming experience of a soldier partaking in the second World War, only if we know we are not in danger. Only this way can we fully contemplate that feeling of distress and terror that soldiers lived in those instants. Therefore, the second type of enchantment – i.e. the one regarding the images and the disruptive effect they have on us – is at play here, making us feel, in this case, the erratic emotional rollercoaster a soldier goes through in his military duty. Incidentally, this also goes back to that sensation that we previously named *empathic anguish*, which Ercolino and Fusillo acknowledged as essential in his definition of negative empathy: the intensity and barbarity of the experience we make whilst playing that precise fragment of the game may indeed make us feel uncomfortable, but it is this very uneasiness that constitutes the crucial component in our negative empathic response. Worringer, for instance,

asserted that when it comes to art, anguish is "*key* to its comprehension"[80]. Therefore, only if we are willing to accept that necessary unsettling anguish can we possibly understand the message that this sequence intends to convey, which is in fact the terror soldiers felt. However, we must specify that in this case, when the identification is nigh on total, we do not really empathise with the character itself: because of this first-person perspective, which makes us see things literally through the eyes of the character, it is almost as if we were it, and hence it would be like empathizing with ourselves; instead, we rather empathize with the *narrative situation*, war, which is in fact more than anything negative. In addition, when facing the explicit violence of such images, our empathic reaction might turn out to be even more impactful than anticipated: the exceptional graphic realism of the brutality occurring in the battlefield might not only scare us but even disturb us, something that one might not expect from playing a game, even a war one. Additionally, we might even be subject to what Freedberg and Gallese call *embodied mechanisms*[81], which are at the core of a visual artistic experience, as the one a videogame delivers. They are thought to be capable of "*simulating* corporal actions, emotions and sensations in the spectator"[82]: in a videogame this translates into a vivid reception of both the actions that we perform and the ones that affect us. For instance, not only would we feel the adrenaline of firing a rifle, taking cover or throwing a grenade, but we would also, and even especially maybe, feel the shots of the enemies, their bombs brushing against us, their bayonets and knives passing us through, contributing to stoking that sense of distress and tension which lies at the source of negative empathy and the subjugating form of enchantment in the fruition of art. Besides, Freedberg and Gallese

[80] Worringer Wilhelm, "Astrazione e empatia", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 213
[81] Freedberg David, Gallese Vittorio, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Aesthetic Experience", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 220
[82] *Ibidem*

make this clear: when we are in awe of a visual piece of art and we feel emotionally attuned to that depicted reality, as it happens when we play, our “somatosensory cortexes activate *as though* our body was subject to a tactile stimulation”[83]. This peculiar bodily reaction, combined with the inherent interactivity of a videogame, promotes our immersion in the gaming experience, giving us a sort of “credible illusion” of being part of that virtual world. Consequently, the resulting empathic response of our playing, is going to be remarkably enhanced and perhaps even more powerful than any other medium: in a book, if we are witnessing the protagonist killing someone, say for example Mr. Hyde murdering the poor old man Danvers Carew, whom he beats to death in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, we might wonder how something so horrendous like taking somebody’s life can make him feel, or what kind of perverse thoughts must have crossed his mind before, during, and after the assassination. What is more, as Suzanne Keen underlines, we do not have the luxury of questioning the character, or asking him “is that how you really felt?”[84]. However, when it comes to facing a similar experience in a videogame, and especially when full identification occurs, we are not watching the character, we are *embodying* the character: potentially speaking, when we are about to shoot an enemy with our gun (fig.7), we would not only be considering the act that we are about to commit, whether it is worth it, necessary or avoidable, along all its consequences, but we would also become the prime and only perpetrator of it, not the character. In gameplay, in fact, playable characters generally do not move, do not act, if we, the players, do not make them. Furthermore, we would even have to physically imitate the action of killing itself, because, in order to shoot, we have to actually pull the “trigger” – as the specific button is called – of the controller, which almost gives us the feeling of firing a real gun, especially

[83] *Ivi*, p. 222
[84] Keen Suzanne, *Empathy and the novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 136

with the most sophisticated gamepads, equipped with adaptive triggers – which vary their "resistance" adapting it to the weapon we are using – and haptic feedbacks. Therefore, the physical, psychological and emotional involvement is maximum, which is something not all media can produce. The one happening when we aim, shoot and kill is, as Ercolino underlines, an "*immediate embodied empathic response*", but not "*as if* it was us"[85] to do it, as it happens when we are beholding a painting, because this time it does feel like *is* us, in a far more engaging and deep-felt experience than any other. Notwithstanding this non-replicable thorough investment, though, there is still a definite distance between the player and the game they are experiencing: in spite of our immersion, we clearly realize that we are playing a game, hence we need to bear in mind that everything we do in our experience is necessarily enabled by  the avatar we are controlling, and upstream by game designers, who granted us the possibility to perform certain actions through the character itself. More precisely, we should then clarify that our deeds in the game are, on the one hand, effectively produced by ourselves as players – i.e. as primary users of the videogame, in control of its functions – but on the other, regardless of our degree of interactive involvement, they are filtered by our virtual alter-ego, which we are using as a vehicle to express ourselves through playing.

[85] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 228

*Call of Duty: WWII,* by *Sledgehammer Games*, 2017 (fig.7).

Continuing our discussion on the process of identification, we already stated in the opening chapter that the more a character resembles us in any way possible, the more chances we may have to like them, and therefore to hypothetically bond with them on an intimate level. Nonetheless, in a book, a movie, or a TV series, the character is already done and finished and we are introduced to them as they are, or better, as the author wanted them to be. In a videogame, however, we sometimes get to be the author of our own character, shaping them according to our tastes and cravings, making them look as we wish. Specifically, the type of videogame that allows us to do so is primarily the *RPG* genre that we have briefly explored before, which offers the player a considerable variety of options to create our character. This array of choices, however, is pre-established by game designers and directors, who endow the player with only a definite amount of modifiers to choose from: we are really free of choosing the ones we prefer, but our range of freedom, no matter the width of the options provided, is still limited.

Following the parallel with literature, in a text we may find descriptions or sometimes sketches or little drawings that give us an idea of how the

character looks like physically. Now, we could establish a comparison between the creative process behind the writing of a character and the way the player generates their avatar in RPGs: what the writer does on paper, the player does in the game, selecting the physical features of their character. If, for instance, the character we are reading about is described as blonde, because the author wrote it to be blonde, the player similarly selects the option of the hair colour and chooses "blonde" (fig.8). Again, it is essential to remember the relevance of *agency* in a game: the player is indeed free to deliberately create the character, as if they were its author, the same way a novelist has no restrictions in their authorial choices.

*Hogwarts Legacy*, by *Avalanche Software*, 2023. (fig.8)

Nevertheless, as clarified before, the player does have limitations, for their moulding is always dependant on the freedom that the game developers have decided to grant them: a writer is freer in their creation compared to a gamer, but it should be acknowledged that, over the past few years, avatar editors have become more complex than they used to be in the past, not only expanding the "traditional" set-up – e.g having more options to

modify the skin tone, the hairstyle or the eye colour – but also allowing the player to customize their digital alter-ego in even the slightest, most minute detail, such as choosing its timbre and voice depth, if it is going to have freckles or scars, or even deciding the size and angle of its nose and eyebrows. *Cyberpunk 2077*, released at the end of 2020, features such an advanced editor, whose "possibilities in character customization are still second to none"[86]. Journalist Sharnelle Earle also specifies that "you can change your nail polish color" and, she continues, even "[g]enitals can be edited"[87]. Therefore, despite the player's unavoidable restrictions, which constrain their freedom and force them to choose among the options pre-determined by game creators, such a broadened range is still impactful, as it does foster our identification, allowing us to shape our own "self" in ways that we could have never achieved before, making it closer and closer to how we want it, and satisfying thereby our creative desire. Perhaps developers will never be able to cover all the possible ways in which we might want to characterize our avatar, but either way, going back to the parallel between a writer and the player, the latter can still feel in charge of shaping their own alter-ego at will, given the wide range of possibilities often available. In addition, this possibility given to the player to shape, and even name, a character that might resemble the player themselves, is yet another aspect that substantially weighs on identification, and hence empathy, too. Keen, in *Empathy and the novel* affirms that "[s]pecific aspects of characterization, such as naming [and] description" – this last one comparable to the free interactive creation mentioned above – "contribute to the potential for character identification and thus for empathy"[88].

[86] Earle Shanelle, "The Best Video Game Character Creators Of All Time, Ranked", *The Gamer*, 21st May 2022: https://www.thegamer.com/video-game-best-character-creators-ranked/#blade-and-soul

[87] *Ibidem*

[88] Keen Suzanne, *Empathy and the novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 93

All this considered, the player can also opt to make their avatar look completely different from them, e.g. choosing the opposite sex or physical features that they lack or do not like on themselves in real life. In fantasy RPGs, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, this possibility is taken even further, as we can also create a character of another species, e.g. breeding it as orc or elf, which is something players might wish to do. However, infringing the law of *mimesis* does not necessarily result in a minor involvement compromising identification: after all, the player themselves created their avatar, actualizing their will to play in that appearance, and above all, forging their character on the strength of their tastes. Accordingly, that very character, child of the player's materialized imagination, might be the promoting factor in the establishment of both a ludic and inner tie between game and player: whatever happens to it or because of it we might feel responsible for, inasmuch as we ourselves are authors of it, as character, and simultaneously controllers, as players, of their diegetic course.

## III. *The Last of Us*

*Moral distress and negative empathy in The Last of Us: Part I*

In the whole videogames gamut, from the 1960s up to now, *The Last of Us* stands out for the unprecedented way in which it challenges the player's sensibility and poses moral quandaries, that is through an uncompromising fusion of gameplay and storytelling, with a pronounced cinematic touch.
This critically-acclaimed piece of work, developed by Naughty Dog and released by Sony Interactive Entertainment in 2013, managed to leave a distinct mark in the game industry, contributing to raising the bar for *story-driven* videogames, games that, according to Wolf's *Encyclopedia*, "often cause an emotional response"[89] and whose focus is to tell a story. They can be oftentimes associated with films, or even be called *interactive movies* – and cinema is in fact one of the main sources of inspiration for such titles – as they are rich in "sequences that adopted Hollywood conventions of storytelling and framing, resulting in a more immersive narrative experience"[90]. We will discuss later in this section to what extent the language of cinema is impactful on the grammar of videogames.
When it comes to reviewing *The Last of Us* through the lens of negative empathy, what comes to mind is the unmistakeable moral distress the game begets. The player is exposed to dramatic events and gut-wrenching scenes, upon which they have no control whatsoever, and that is exactly the point: Anderson claims that in games like this, which have fixed narratives, the player "has no narrative decision-making power" and is therefore forced to

[89] Wolf Mark J. P., *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming VOLUME ONE*, Greenwood; 2012, p. 125
[90] *Ivi*, p. 138

"shoulder the moral burden of the character's choices"[91]. In other words, the story we live is fundamentally one and one only, it always begins and ends in the same way no matter how many times we play it, and there is nothing we can do to change it. In addition, we cannot decide what to say (as in *RPG*s like the previously mentioned *Fallout 4*, with multiple dialogue options), since the character speaks for themselves, as if they were alive, following their instinct and reason. What is more, the player does not have the luxury of choosing the direction of the story, in fact there can even be a moral conflict between what the character does and what the player would have done: this might occur especially when a *cutscene* comes up, which is a scene designed to portray a salient step of the story like a turning point, or highlight a dialogue. The most noteworthy feature of this kind of scenes, however, is another: the player cannot interact with the game. In this case it is like watching a movie (in fact these scenes are also called *cinematics*), and the player can only witness passively what is happening on screen. As a matter of fact, these moments when the interaction, and therefore the player's agency, is suspended, are often deployed to reveal the characters' personality, stressing some specific aspect of it, or also to draw attention to their reaction to a certain narrative event. Neil Druckmann, the creator of the game, provides us with a brief clarification on the employment of such narrative devices:

> Usually cinematics [are] for specific emotional turns, where we want to slow things down or we want to look at someone's face. Get a nuance of a close-up performance that you can't during gameplay.[92]

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[91] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 1

[92] Lesson From the Screenplay, Youtube, "The Art of Videogame Storytelling (with Neil Druckmann)", 4th December 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FGlIGYcBos

This is where we get to detect the mark of the author, who wants to ideally convey a message to the gamer and thus has to suspend their influence on the diegesis, or else that very message may not be fully absorbed. The author cannot take chances in leaving a narrative development up to the player: if there is something specific they want the player to experience, and to do it in the precise way they have designed for the story they have written, the player's power must be contained. Anyway, although the plot "cannot be altered by the player's diegetic choices", as Valentina Romanzi specifies, this does not mean that the game "result[s] in a weaker moral involvement"[93]. Actually, the "frustrated agency of the player, who acts as a witness of the character's decisions" is, Romanzi writes, "continuously interrogated and challenged by the – at times brutally immoral – choices that the game forces them to inhabit"[94].

So are we really the character? Or do they act on their own regardless of our agency? We certainly play *as* them, but only in the sense that we make them move: the way they interact with other characters or how they react to given events is not under our control, since they operate according to their personality, and we cannot, in any form, instil ours in them. Consequently, the process of identification here translates differently: we are not supposed to always feel as the character does, because we are not them. We are instead called to witness – and possibly understand – the emotional perspective of the avatar we are controlling, who is a fully formed character. Again, Neil Druckmann sheds some light on this:

[93] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 13
[94] *Ibidem*

> Our characters have their own wants, needs, obsessions, loves. And we are saying: when you’re playing our game, we want you to tap into who they are and play the game as them. Not as you, as them.[95]

Curiously enough, from a visual standpoint, there is no first-person perspective, which here is replaced with a third-person point of view, with the camera angle set right behind the character (fig. 9). In a way, it is as if the visual mode itself already hints at the ideological and experiential separation between the player and the character, who in fact exists on its own with its personal background: in *The Last of Us* we are not Joel, we play *as* Joel.

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig.9)

[95] Lesson From the Screenplay, Youtube, “The Art of Videogame Storytelling (with Neil Druckmann)”, 4th December 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FGlIGYcBos

Druckmann's opinion is complemented by Cohen's, according to which "identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other"[96], and that "other" may not be the way we are. Nonetheless, even though there might be cases when we emotionally respond just like the main character, there may be other scenarios in which their ethical and moral course does not match ours. *The Last of Us*'s diegetic unfolding masterfully leverages these very moments of player-character detachment, making us ponder if what we are called to do in the game, in the shoes of the character, is something we approve of or condemn. If the result is the latter, then this can give rise to moral distress, as we would be controlling a character whose choices we would not make, whose deeds would be at odds with our code of conduct. Hence the dilemma in this thesis's title: should we keep playing? Or should we not? The answer to this question cannot be straightforward, and it depends upon the player's thinking and sensitivity. Nevertheless, before trying to resolve this query, we should investigate the whole narrative arc *The Last of Us* displays, in the attempt to comprehend how this game deals with moral distress, negative empathy, and player-character proximity.

*The Last of Us* is set in a post-pandemic world where humanity has been decimated by a fungus called Cordyceps, which exists in real life, too. In the game, it infects people through spores that over time, as the virus spreads out inside their body, turn them into a horrific creature that might – for someone – resemble the undead monster look of the so-called *zombie*, the renowned terrifying figure invented by the visionary George Romero in *Dawn of the Dead*. However, the game is not (only) about monsters: at its core, the story is about people and the love they can show even, and

[96] Cohen Josh, "Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters. Mass Communication & Society", in Anderson, *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 2

especially, in extreme circumstances. The infected and the post-apocalyptic scenario are then just a "Trojan horse", which conceals on the inside the true essence of a dehumanizing experience that is actually about humans.

The plot features Joel, a middle-aged smuggler, who has to escort a young girl immune to the virus, Ellie, to a group of survivors called The Fireflies so that they can develop a vaccine. The pretext that sets the story in motion is simple, perhaps even banal or unoriginal, but the truly thrilling nature of the game comes to light during the journey that Joel and Ellie undertake, dotted with both appalling and sweet bits.

The plot begins on the night of the first day of the pandemic breakout, September 26, 2013, when Sarah, Joel's daughter, gives him a new watch as a birthday present. After being taken to bed by his father, Sarah is suddenly wakened by the ringing of the telephone. It is her uncle Tommy speaking, Joel's brother, who nervously asks her to "get your daddy on the phone" because he "need[s] to talk to your dad now"[97]. Phone loses signal. Now the player gets to control Sarah. The player gets off bed in search of her father around the house, she calls for him, but no one is there. We finally reach his bedroom where she learns what is going on by watching the news: the city is being evacuated because of a nationwide pandemic due to a new virus that infects people making them aggressive. She is alone, in the dark, scared, we even hear explosions and screams from afar, making this whole scene nightmarish.

It is interesting to notice that, in such a frightening circumstance, we do not get to play as Joel, the protagonist of the game, but as his daughter, a child, and seeing things through her eyes makes this sequence remarkably more impactful: Neil Druckmann himself is firmly convinced that "people are just more scared playing a kid than they are a capable adult"[98]: a child is

[97] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, Prologue

[98] Lesson From the Screenplay, Youtube, "The Art of Videogame Storytelling (with Neil Druckmann)", 4th December 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FGlIGYcBos

more fragile and weaker than most adults, can hardly defend themselves, so not only is the player in an unnerving situation, but they are also put in a position where they are helpless. This is not only a quite engaging authorial choice, but also one of the several moments of the game where the player experiences distress, though not yet from a moral view. Still, that anguish they are prone to as they move around the house looking for Sarah's father, with growing chaos outside whilst the city implodes, is second to none: the interactivity at play here considerably heightens their emotional involvement. Sarah's fear becomes ours, and the fact that they are controlling her, and simultaneously hearing her voice crack calling for her dad, makes their empathic response intense, effectively projecting the character's feelings onto them.

Recently, the TV adaptation of the game came out, produced by *HBO*, and in the pilot we find this very sequence replicated. There are all the elements that we have mentioned in the videogame, however, despite the obviously missing interactive factor, it should be emphasized how in the series the camera is always fixed, either on Sarah, on another character, or on a detail the director wanted us to notice, but it does not move to make us, for instance, glimpse at what is happening around the character. In the videogame, on the other hand, the player also has the capacity of using the "camera angle" to their benefit, as if they were the director of the scene: if they want to check what is behind Sarah's back, they do not have to make her turn around to see it, they just have to move the analogue stick on the controller and set the visual perspective that way. Having this kind of control over the space might be another tool that allows them to feel even more "protagonist" of the narrative situation. However, exactly like in cinema or TV, videogames too have moments when the camera lingers on particulars, using the same language of those media, which results in shots that are very similar to the ones we see in movies: after Joel finally gets

back home to Sarah, he has to shoot his neighbour, who, already in the throes of the infection, breaks into their house crashing through the French door. At this point, the camera strictly focuses on both characters with two tight close-ups, first on Joel (fig.10) and then, with a reverse shot, on Sarah (fig.11).

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig.10)

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig.11)

Druckmann here employs a cinematic style in order to capture the emotional state both characters are in: on one side Joel, as a father, finds

himself in an extremely delicate situation, having to explain to his little daughter what is going on and that they have to leave their home for good; and on the other Sarah, still – and even more now – frightened, who just saw her father kill their neighbour, Jimmy.

These two close-ups exemplify well another leading technique in contemporary videogames to generate empathy: the meticulous reproduction of even the slightest, subtle facial expression, which makes them look not just like a mass of polygons animated by a computer, but as proper characters who are, in this case, ostensibly scared and worried. This deep degree of character realism is essential in these cinematic games, as it may "increase players' levels of involvement and proximity to game characters"[99], making us perceive Joel and Sarah even as real people. This is possible thanks to *motion capture* technology, yet another point of contact between games and cinema: in the film industry it is widely to depict accurately characters that are not human, like Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* by Peter Jackson, or the natives in *Avatar*, by James Cameron, or again the cartoonish people in the animated movie *A Christmas Carol*, by Robert Zemeckis. In the videogame industry, instead, it has been in use since the 1990's, to realistically replicate body movements like jumping, punching and crouching in games like *Mortal Kombat*, but it really started to be employed more extensively around the 2010s. This technology, as the name itself suggests, consists in capturing the whole manner in which the actor, who wears a black suit with tiny balls on the major articulations, moves and acts on stage, from big movements like walking around and using hands gestures, down to the little changes in their facial expression such as a sudden smirk, an unexpected wink or a strange frown. Therefore, we might say that performing in such conditions is not really so different from acting on a movie set or on theatre, it is not like dubbing or voice-

[99] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 2

acting, which was actually the traditional way in which actors were involved in the process of making videogames, but a true filmic experience, where actors interact, react to each other, and convey their emotions with their whole body. When playing, and thus controlling a character, the performance of the actor becomes crucial, not only in terms of the character's portrayal, hopefully faithful to the script, but especially with regards to that potential connection that the player might establish with them: the character-player proximity is considerably influenced by the actor's ability to play a role. Anderson underlines the utmost relevance of *motion-capture* performances in the videogame experience, affirming:

> By capturing the behavioural mannerisms of real actors, the game offers players communicative cues, expressions, and movements to immerse them in simulated social interactivity[100]

Going back to the game, after what happened in the house, uncle Tommy shows up to rescue Joel and Sarah, and they are now hoping to leave the city on his truck. Unfortunately, a while later a car crashes against them, Sarah hurts her leg and is unable to walk. The game now gives us control of Joel, suddenly responsible for trying to carry his injured daughter to safety amidst the outbreak of an apocalypse (fig. 12). He then hands his gun to his brother telling him to "keep us safe"[101]. Again, the game, or rather the author, makes the player live a distressful experience, not only for the burdensome pledge of protecting their daughter, but especially because there is not much they can do: they cannot fight, they cannot hide, they cannot shoot; all they can do is just run and hope they do not die. Once

[100] *Ibidem*
[101] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, Prologue

more we go back to that unpleasant sensation of impotence, only now through a different perspective, the one of a father, and in an even worse scenario, as there are flames, infected and people running crazily all around us.

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 12)

This sequence alone would be enough to illustrate the emotional toll that *The Last of Us* makes the player pay if they want to fully immerse into the game, partaking in its diegesis. But that is just the tip of the iceberg.
Continuing with Joel's desperate run in search for a safe place, after splitting up from Tommy, as he valiantly opted for staying behind and kill the infected that were chasing them down, the player reach a dirt road where they encounter a soldier, who halts them to check if they are infected. The action now stops for a moment and leaves room for a cutscene, where Joel begs the soldier: "We need help, please! It's my daughter, I think her leg's broken"[102]. The soldier seems deaf to his begging. He has got orders to follow, he needs to secure the perimeter from

[102] *Ibidem*

infected, but as Joel and Sarah seems to be fine, he talks to his commanding officer over the radio to receive instructions. The player do not get to hear exactly what the chief tells him, but they can sense that it is not good news, since he seems a little uncertain whilst speaking, saying hesitantly “sir…there’s a little girl…”[103]. He is about to rebut, perhaps in the hope of “negotiating” the orders he just got, but as soon as he tries to speak up he is silenced, and firmly replies to the order with a nice and clear “Yes, sir”[104]. He proceeds to slowly raise his rifle, pointing it at them. However, right before pulling the trigger, Joel, still with Sarah in his arms, instinctively moves aside as quickly as possible to try to dodge the shots, but eventually falls down as the soldier fires. Still alive, Joel begs the soldier once again when he approaches to finish him, but right after Joel’s “please, don’t”[105], Tommy finally catches up with them and kills the soldier with a headshot.

It all seems to have ended well, they are apparently safe now, but as Joel turns around, he faces the darkest instants of his life: Sarah got shot and is now bleeding to death. Desperately hoping to save his daughter by putting his hands on her wound, whilst trying to reassure her that “it’s going to be okay, baby”[106], Joel soon becomes fully conscious of the inevitable, and as he starts shedding tears on his child’s agonizing face, Sarah slowly passes away in his arms (fig.13).

[103] *Ibidem*
[104] *Ibidem*
[105] *Ibidem*
[106] *Ibidem*

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 13)

From a diegetic standpoint, this serves both as a tragic turning point that marks the end of the prologue, and as a significant moment that sets the general tone of the story. However, with regards to the player-character bond, this scene has far more profound repercussions: on the one hand, it stands for Joel's utmost life-changing trauma, which will not only keep haunting his dreams even twenty years later, but will also end up being significantly instrumental in affecting the character's growth and relationship with Ellie later on in the game; on the other hand, although this is an experience that Joel has, and that the player do not get to alter, it cannot help affecting them too, since they were able to control him and feel – though illusively – responsible for his fate and Sarah's up to a few moments before the tragedy, which instead leaves the player powerless as they are forced to witness the events in the cutscene. Accordingly, our "frustrated agency"[107], as Romanzi describes it, meaning that stinging itch of wishing to do something in the game without being granted the chance to, is going to empathetically intensify our emotional response in front of this dramatic outcome. Had the player not been able to control Joel

[107] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 13

carrying Sarah before her death, they would not have felt as “guilty” or as complicit as they do now. The whole prologue could have been a long *cutscene*, where the player only got to *see* Joel running with Sarah in his arms without them actually *playing* him, but the author chose to hand over the control to the player and thus entrusting them with these characters’ life. The key behind this impactful sequence is, for all intents and purposes, dual: the commendable mastery in deciding when to suspend the player’s interaction, and the double-faced impotence, which is at first dictated by the helplessness, in Joel’s shoes, of not being able to do anything incisive to protect Sarah other than running, and in the second instance, by the impossibility for the player to interact in the game – i.e. to play – while Sarah dies: they can only watch the tragedy happen.

In our argument on negative empathy, this whole narrative section, both the interactive sequence and the cutscene, is permeated by that *empathic anguish* Ercolino and Fusillo pinpointed[108], accentuated here by the very helplessness of both the player and the character, the former in an emotionally oppressing gaming frame and the latter in a psychologically taxing situation. This seems to corroborate Ercolino’s stance:

> the power of the reader’s [in this case the player’s] emotional response seems to be partially *subordinated* to the intensity of the psychological suffering manifested by the character we are empathizing with[109]

[108] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 70

[109] *Ivi*, p. 82

Also, speaking of the player's empathic response, what we should not leave out is the individual background experience each player has: it goes without saying that if the player living this interactive session is a parent, their empathic connection to the character, and hence to the narrative situation too, is going to be substantially more resonant than it already is for a non-parent. Empathy then, and especially negative empathy in this case, is highly dependent upon one's subjectivity on one side, but on the other, the way it is engendered by videogames, is heavily conditioned by interactivity: that "artificial" feeling of holding the reins of a character's fate, though it has been obviously predetermined by the author, is exquisitely unique to games and not replicable through any other media. No matter how "fake" or illusive that might be, it will still manage, at its best, to tie us to the character, or the narrative situation, and heighten each shade of our emotional range.

After this dramatic prologue, the game cuts to twenty years later.

Joel wakes up from a nightmare all of a sudden, still apparently obsessed by his loss. In this new post-pandemic society, organized in several QZs (quarantine zones) all across the States, he is a smuggler, flanked by his partner Tess, and they are now appointed by their acquaintance Marlene, leader of a revolutionary militia group called The Fireflies, to contraband an unusual cargo: Ellie, a "fierce 14year-old girl"[110], as reads the game's script in the first scene where she is introduced. Later on in the game, Tess gets bitten and dies sacrificing herself to help Joel and Ellie run away, leaving her 50year-old "smuggler in crime" alone with a kid to tend to. At first, he seems hostile to Ellie, feeling like she is more of a burden than a companion, but by degrees their relationship evolves and eventually reaches mutual trust and affection, similarly to the bond between a father and a daughter. When interviewed on the game by the *Washington Post*,

[110] Lesson From the Screenplay, Youtube, "The Art of Videogame Storytelling (with Neil Druckmann)", 4th December 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FGlIGYcBos

Neil Druckmann declared that he and his directing partner Bruce Strailey, “wanted to create an experience of the unconditional love a parent feels for their child”[111], and this is in fact how Joel is going to feel towards Ellie by the end of the game. However, this is something only concerning the characters. What about the player? How does *The Last of Us* make the player *feel* their relationship and get empathetically close to both characters?

Aside from cutscenes, whose strong emotional effect is primarily attributable to character realism and the actors’ vivid performance, the game gets the player to care about Joel and Ellie especially through gameplay: empathy finds its way through the necessity for the player, who embodies Joel, to rely on Ellie during both exploration and combat. Druckmann offers us this first illustrative scenario:

> I might have a gate that I can’t get past. If I’m with Ellie I can boost her over the gate, she can open it from the other side, so I’m learning to rely on Ellie. If I came on this gate and I didn’t have Ellie I’d have to find a different solution.[112]

This way, the player starts becoming aware of Ellie’s meaningful presence, that she is not just a NPC (non-playable character) controlled by an AI (artificial intelligence), but an actual character that can help us out. The player gets the impression that she is active and participative, and not only does she react to what happens to her, since she hides, runs and shoots if

[111] Washington Post Live, Youtube,“Videogame creator Neil Druckmann on ‘The Last of Us’ and new HBO series”, 9th January 2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viJ6tzdCBNc&t=1543s

[112] Lesson From the Screenplay, Youtube, “The Art of Videogame Storytelling (with Neil Druckmann)”, 4th December 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FGlIGYcBos

she gets into trouble, but also and especially to what happens to Joel, whom the player controls:

> Ellie can save you, Ellie can pick up a brick and throw it at a dude, and give you just enough opening for you to put him down and survive. Likewise if someone grabs you and pins you against the wall, Ellie might, if she's around, jump on the guy's back and stab him to give you that opening[113]

Therefore, the player feels, to a degree, like Ellie cares about us, and the more time they spend with her in the game, the more she would be, to their eyes, like a living being, while they strengthen their empathic bond with her. As a matter of fact, if she is the one in danger or if she is being assaulted by an enemy, they player might feel the emotional urgency to do something about it, to go there and rescue her exactly like she would do with them. The player slowly begins worrying about her as much as Joel, and that ultimately leads them, as Druckmann puts it, to think "I've learned to rely on this person and now when they're not around, I *want* them around"[114]. This is a demonstration of how videogames ensure an emotional rapport between both the characters themselves and the player, that is to say not only how Joel and Ellie feel about each other, but also how the player feels about them, while at the same time being driven towards an empathic correspondence with the main character: the more Joel grows fond of Ellie and cares about her, the more the player does as well. They feel as he feels. However, as we will see later, this empathic matching is

[113] *Ibidem*
[114] *Ibidem*

going to be strikingly eradicated in the game's sequel, by an unexpected overturning of the character's point of view.

Furthermore, gameplay is another essential component in the experience *The Last of Us* – as well as any other game – proposes, which must not be undervalued in our argument on moral distress and negative empathy. First, there is one point that should be immediately expressed: this is a violent videogame, rated "M" (for "mature") in the US and "PEGI 18" in Europe, which means that its content, both visual and ludic, is intended for an adult audience only. That being said, the violence that the game depicts is coherent with the representation of the post-pandemic world the characters inhabit, in which goods and supplies of any kind are frequently insufficient or rigidly rationed, food tends to be scarce and civilians are divided in either QZs (quarantine zones) where militias patrol the streets, insurgent factions such as the Fireflies, or small groups, each of which very well knows that people are willing to do whatever it takes to survive, even if this means lying, stealing or killing. It follows that the gameplay consists of performing illicit actions, especially scavenging, but also injuring and killing other characters. The player can either kill enemies silently or face them head on, but if they do not have enough bullets or weapons to take them down they can still try to go past them stealthily without being noticed. The first thing we should draw attention to is thus the freedom given to the player in terms of how to approach every fight scenario, a feature hardly replicable in cinema or literature. This is also, for all intents and purposes, already an evident manifestation of the *moral agency* implemented by the player: most of the time, the player can decide when to take a life and when to spare one (though sometimes they might not do it for mercy but out of necessity if they, for instance, run out of ammunitions), or also, if someone gives them no choice, they can still choose to kill them brutally or grant them a merciful death by killing them

quickly. Morality in gameplay apparently leans on one's sensibility, as if the game pitched the user the opportunity to express their innate moral dimension, which relies on their set of values and the feelings they experience while playing, through this little interactive choice, dependent upon whether they want – or need – to kill somebody or not. What if this chance was taken away from them? There are sequences where the game leaves them no choice but to fight openly, where the game developers force them to behave immorally and feel what that is like first-hand. This may result in an ideological detachment from the character we are controlling, especially if their morals clash with the character's and if they are somewhat obligated – for otherwise they would not progress in the game – to act in a way they may not approve. The consequential moral distress can nonetheless be eased through an effective technique that Anderson calls *mentalizing*, through which the players create "an adaptive moral framework to cope with moral distress", factually bridging "players' moral beliefs and the [im]moral decisions of the characters"[115]. In other words, the player is able to accept, though not necessarily share, the character's actions – or rather the actions they are forced to perform in the character's shoes – and situate them in the narrative, that is to say to "understand them in context"[116], as Romanzi points out. In order to deliver a tangible example we should consider one of the possible situations the player may have to face in gameplay: when fighting against a group of enemies, if the player manages to kill most of them, some of the remaining ones might get on their knees and beg for mercy (fig. 14). Not only does this significant detail ensure the extreme realism of the game, not just in terms of the verisimilitude of the scene itself but also of the plausible reaction of the

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[115] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 2

[116] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 14

NPC, but it even strikes the player for the position they find themselves in, for now they have to – seemingly – decide what to do with them.

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 14)

Nevertheless, whatever variety of choices the player thinks they have is only delusive: they can press "square" to strike the guy and kill him, they can shoot him, but if they just try to turn around and walk away from him, he will always get back up and try to kill them in turn. This is a clear authorial touch in the gameplay development, as Druckmann forces us to embrace only the one behaviour he has pre-determined in his writing, thus potentially forcing the player's hand: if the player had felt kind enough to spare the enemy's life, they might have died, since the enemy would not have hesitated to shoot them right in the back. Here is a sharp reminder of not only the messed-up world the player is in, regulated by the *mors tua vita mea* external disposition, which makes people feel on edge, but also of the specific kind of morality Joel is affected by, which the author is implicitly trying to inform us of. In fact, the scene we just came across is

doubly significant: on the one side it is conveying the general extreme conditions of that post-pandemic society, where everybody is willing to take advantage of one another's vulnerability to survive; on the other, from a character-oriented standpoint, it is revealing that the player could never have spared that soldier's life not just because he would have certainly retaliated, but above all because Joel would never have done that. He is a ruthless survivor that has been living in that cruel world for twenty years, so in such circumstances he would take no chances. Apparently then, this is a subtle – both diegetic and mimetic – strategy of disclosing the narrative frame and simultaneously letting the player discover what the character they are interpreting is like. In addition, as the player progressively gets to know the main character, this particular cognitive practice of *mentalizing*, Anderson argues, allows them to also "predict character mindsets, motives, and emotions"[117]. What is more, this might result in another relevant outcome: the user may acknowledge that the character they are playing is not them and neither does it have to bear any sort of moral or ethical resemblance to who they are. Accordingly, this very realization might not only allow them to tolerate the immoral deeds of the character, but even enable them to vent in a kind of cathartic transformation, using the avatar that they are embodying as a vehicle to express themselves in ways that they could not in real life: committing all those despicable acts that the gameplay revolves around, such as the ones mentioned earlier, becomes innocuous and it considerably reduces the risk for all that graphic and gruesome violence to start taking a toll on the player. They are surely complicit – even prime perpetrators to a certain extent – of the violence they perform, but they do it through the character, who is not only fictional but also, and especially, someone else, someone that might be different from what they are. The playable character is, in the end, an expression of

[117]Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 2

someone or something that they are not in real life. This is due to the fact that, using Ercolino's and Fusillo's words, when we play – and when we watch a movie, in their argument – "we are free from our personal engagements of our ordinary life"[118] and we can therefore, quoting Gallese and Guerra, "love, hate, feel terror, pleasure, doing it from a safe distance"[119]. Not only that, but we can even overstep for a moment our *barrier of decency*, which Adam Morton identified in *Empathy for the Devil* that we mentioned in the first chapter, because we are in the realm of fiction, where (almost) everything is possible, with no real negative consequences in our life whatsoever. Ercolino and Fusillo make this unmistakeably explicit:

> Readers of novels, as well as spectators in theatre (or in cinema) [and players in videogames] can release repressed negative emotions or aggressive drives, either self-destructive or socially unacceptable, by empathizing with characters who are suffering: the attenuation of [their] suffering [is] due to the certainty that, first of all, whoever is in distress or in pain on the scene is another person, and that, secondly and definitively, it is just a *game* from which no harm for their personal safety can derive.[120]

Furthermore, as far as negative empathy is concerned, not necessarily would the player come to empathize with Joel only, who is, as we have seen, a ferocious man used to murdering and killing in cold blood, thus an

[118] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 284
[119] Gallese Vittorio, Guerra Michele, "Lo schermo empatico", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 285
[120] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 60-61

all-round negative protagonist, but they might also display our emotional tuning towards other negative characters that they encounter in their journey. Specifically, we should take into consideration the chapter "Winter", where Ellie bumps into David, another survivor in need.

First of all, what immediately stands out right at the beginning of this sequence is that the player does not control Joel, since he is gravely wounded, but Ellie, therefore now the perspective shifts from the one of a grown adult that they have been controlling up until this point, to the one of a kid, who is considerably less experienced in surviving in this drifting world and more importantly less physically capable. Druckmann said that when people realize they are Ellie, "they change how they play, because now they're seeing themselves as this child, that doesn't have the stature of this large man [Joel]"[121]. The game here proves once again the crucial significance of identification: Ellie is not as strong as him, if she gets into a fight she cannot start throwing punches like Joel would, so she – and hence the player – needs to find another way to get past the enemies. In addition, not only does the player "play differently and look at the world differently", Druckmann adds, but this strategic perspective switch serves as a mimetic tool to show, through gameplay, "how you can use control of a character to create such strong empathy"[122]. As a matter of fact, he continues, "when you're playing a character you connect with them in this very subconscious level […]; you hear people say 'I am Joel' or 'I am Ellie'"[123], and this same reaction does apply to videogames in general: for instance, when the player fails a level and dies, they do not say "my character died", but rather "I died". Consequently, what this player-character proximity generates is not just a simple emotional tuning, but a

[121] Lesson From the Screenplay, Youtube, "The Art of Videogame Storytelling (with Neil Druckmann)", 4th December 2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FGlIGYcBos
[122] *Ibidem*
[123] *Ibidem*

real psychological and empathic correspondence, where it is almost as if what happened to the character happened to the player as well, both the good and the bad. Speaking of bad, what Ellie – and the player, too – has learned in the time spent with Joel, struggling to survive, is that strangers can potentially have bad intentions, for in this world anyone can be a threat and no one can be trusted. In fact, they made such experience not even halfway through chapter "Summer", the first one, when they were deceived by a thug who acted like he was hurt and in search for aid, when instead he just wanted to lure them out and ambush them with the rest of his group to kill them and grab everything they had. Ellie, therefore, surely knows that she has to always stay on guard, and though now she is temporarily on her own, she definitely remembers Joel's teachings.

Bearing this in mind, it is curious to see how David is presented in this section of the game: Ellie is trying to hunt a deer, she hits it with her bow, but she does not manage to kill it right away; it runs off a few miles and then eventually dies on the ground. Here begins a *cinematic*: as she approaches the deer she hears footsteps behind her, so she quickly turns around and asks "who's there?"[124], ready to shoot with the bow. At this point, David comes around the corner with a rifle on his shoulder, and reveals himself alongside his friend James. Now we should note that David had just enough time to surprise Ellie and even kill her if he wanted to, but he did not, which puts him under a good light compared to the people that Joel and Ellie – and the player – ran into before. Besides, David even seems to be willing to help us out and politely proposes a trade for some of that meat, since he says he and James are "from a larger group [with] women, children, […] all very very hungry"[125]. This time around, the game seems to subvert the player's expectations, who has so far encountered several disagreeable men that tried to kill the two protagonists, whereas

[124] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, "Winter"
[125] *Ibidem*

now, oddly enough, there appears to be some civil exchange with this David, introduced as a reasonable and even likable person. Ellie, nonetheless, who keeps being particularly cautious and has not lowered her bow yet, is still wary of this new guy she has just met, and bluffs saying that she too is from a larger group with women and children. David asks if there is anything they can give her in return for the deer, like weapons, ammo or clothes, and she quickly replies that she needs medicine, antibiotics specifically, which the player knows are for Joel. David agrees to give her what she asked and tells her that she can follow them back to their camp. Before he could finish the sentence Ellie interrupts him and harshly responds "I'm not following you anywhere", demanding then that the "buddy-boy"[126], James, goes get them.

A few hours later, though, the player becomes aware of David's true self: not only is he the leader of a fanatic group of cannibals, but he also plans on making Ellie his "concubine", to be taken advantage of so as to satisfy his sexual appetites. He even tries to deceive Ellie and win her trust by touching her hand, almost as a warm reassurance, and complimenting her that she "ha[s] heart" and that she "[is] special"[127], right after kidnapping her and putting her in a cage (fig. 15).

[126] *Ibidem*
[127] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, "Winter"

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 15)

Now the player might feel misled, as they may not have expected this character to turn out to be a sick man-eater, especially after his initial presentation, which had placed him under a good light.

However, David's portrayal also seems to strive to tickle the player's empathy, or at least their understanding for him, especially at this point, when he is no longer hiding to be a cannibal: David comes to realize that Joel and Ellie have mercilessly killed most of his men over the past few months, but he is not blaming either of them; instead, he tries to give his own justifications for what he and his twisted community have been doing. After Ellie found out the shocking truth behind David and his men, by watching the arm of a corpse being chopped off in the kitchen, she has a direct confrontation with him, who welcomes her after she woke up in the cell by serving her an appetizing dish with some of the deer she had hunted previously. Hesitant to eat as she may well be, after acknowledging to have wound up in a den of cannibals, she eventually cannot resist her hunger and starts eating voraciously, and as she does that, she exclaims:

E: You're a f***ing animal!

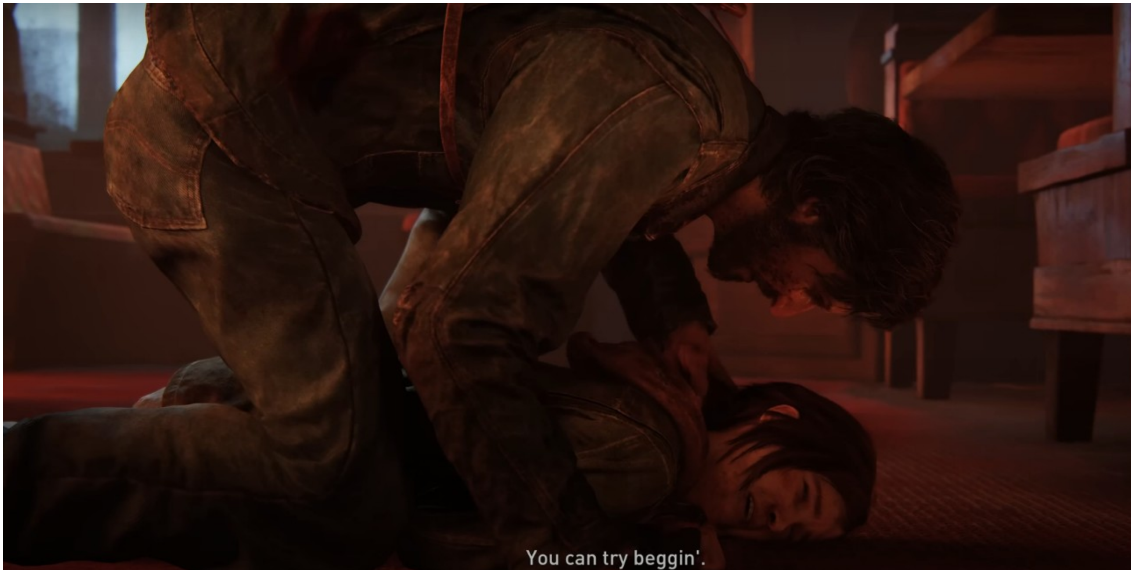
> D: Oh. That's awfully quick to judgement. Considering you and your friend killed… how many men?
> E: They didn't give us a choice.
> D: And you think we have a choice? Is that it?
> You kill to survive… and so do we. We have to take care of our own.
> By any means necessary. [128]

This brief explanation David provides sums up how people have learnt to live in that post-pandemic reality: in particular, there seems to be an "empathy-lacking" society, or rather, a society where empathy is granted only to those individuals belonging to *your* group, with no concern for the rest. More specifically, Fritz Breithaupt, dwelled upon this "social empathy", stating that "empathy drives us to polarize our view of the world into black or white, '*us*' or '*them*'" as a sort of "defence mechanism related to an 'us', meaning to a certain social belonging, in contrast with a 'them'"[129]. This sounds like a befitting description of the kind of empathy at play in *The Last of Us*, reasonably matching David's perspective in this case, no matter how insane he might be.

Indeed, if in the scene we have just discussed he still seems to be tame and willing to help Ellie come around, in the hope of convincing her to join him, in the following sequence he goes beyond any limit and gets to the point of physically abusing her: after turning down his offer, not only does she manage to escape his place but even, impulsive as she is, to break his finger. David is now furious and bent on finding her, to get his revenge. He eventually finds her, and the scene we get is one of the most disturbing in

[128] *Ibidem*
[129] Breithaupt Fritz, "The Dark side of Empathy", in Fontana, *Contro l'empatia? Guardarsi dall'"effetto Lucifero" nella comunicazione contemporanea*, Cultura; 2022, p. 2

the game, not only for what he does to her but also for what she does to him, marking a pivotal turning point in Ellie's arc.
They get into a fight, where David kicks Ellie in the stomach repeatedly and even pulls her hair as she is crawling on the ground (fig.16).




*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 16)

Still not satisfied to have Ellie helpless in front of him, and even more irritated that she does not seem to surrender but instead tries to defy him, David grabs her by the neck and threatens her one more time that she "ha[s] no idea what [he's] capable of"[130] (fig. 17), whilst continuing to choke her with both hands. The player here cannot do much to oppose David, and it may be once again this feeling of helplessness to make them worry about Ellie's fate: the player here is more than halfway through the story, they have had a considerable amount of time to grow fond of Ellie and now that she is on the verge of being assaulted and even killed by this horrendous man they may feel for her. Either way, what the director displays here is certainly a brutal scene to digest, as if he wanted, as

[130] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, "Winter"

Ercolino and Fusillo suggest it happens in immersive experiences, to "test the emotional endurance of the viewer"[131].

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 17)

What is even more testing though is what comes after: Ellie manages to reach David's machete, which had slipped under a table during their first fight, and proceeds to violently strike him, chopping his head to pieces, as she screams from the top of her lungs whilst covered in blood (fig. 18).
Ellie now, the innocent girl that the player – as Joel – had to protect, is coming across as no longer a childlike character, but as a ferocious, potentially dangerous – as she will become in *The Last of Us Part II* – killer, who does not settle for just killing a man out of self-defence, but rather vents out all her rage in an atrocious murder, going on and on with her unrelenting attacks.

[131] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 269

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 18)

She is, in a sense, the negative character now, and this is all still a cutscene: there is nothing the player can do to stop this. However, in spite of the negativity surrounding Ellie in this fragment – mainly attributable to the brutality of her deeds – the player might still feel empathetic in her regards, as they come to acknowledge what she has just escaped. This is when negative empathy comes to the fore: regardless of how despicable an act could be, the player can still feel in tune with the character perpetrating it, since they not only share a sentimental attachment to them, but also because we are aware of their psychological state, and we can rationalise their actions. Finally, the reason behind such a shocking portrayal of a killing might be due not only to a necessity of showing Ellie's fury, but also to what Arturo Mazzarella wrote in his *Il Male necessario*, that "evil, from being an ethical category, turned into an aesthetical one"[132], leading as a result to what Ercolino and Fusillo name the "spectacularization of

[132] Mazzarella Arturo, "Il Male necessario ", in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 61-62

evil"[133], which seems to be matching exactly Druckmann's directorial path for this scene.

Now we should skip to the end of Joel and Ellie's journey and focus on the unrelenting catastrophe triggered by Joel's morally distressing decision.

After travelling through the United States across three seasons (summer, fall and winter), their dangerous and tiring venture seems to have finally come to a well-deserved end. They have reached their destination: the hospital in Salt Lake City, now turned into the general base of the Fireflies.

Joel wakes up in a bed hospital after he and Ellie were captured by some of Marlene's men, who did not know who they were and thus decided to bring them to the base. Marlene apologizes to Joel for her men capturing them and he immediately asks where Ellie is and to be taken to her. Marlene reassures him that she is fine but denies Joel to see her, adding that "she is being prepped for surgery"[134]. Now Joel wants to understand what is going on, and especially what is going to happen to Ellie. Marlene provides then a brief yet direct elucidation, which will make Joel perfectly aware of what is coming:

> M: The doctors tell me the cordyceps, the growth inside her, has somehow mutated. It's why she is immune. Once they remove it they'll be able to reverse engineer a vaccine. A vaccine.
>
> J: But it grows all over the brain…
>
> M: It does.[135]

[133] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 269

[134] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, "Spring"

[135] *Ibidem*

Here comes Joel's realization: the only way they can create a cure is by killing Ellie. But he is not willing to sacrifice her, as he does not want to lose a daughter again:

> [W]ith the amount of loss and suffering that he's experienced in the past, he'll do anything to prevent it from happening again, even damning the rest of the world, because Ellie quite literally means the world to him[136]

Joel then opposes Marlene by saying "find someone else", but that is just not possible, because "there is no one else"[137], she replies. Joel stiffens up, rages against Marlene and gets knocked to the floor. Marlene explains him what a great deal this means to her as well, since not only did she "knew her since she was born" but she also "promised her mother [she] would look after her"[138]. Yet, Marlene believes this has to be done, no matter the cost, not even if this means killing a person she loves:

> J: Why are you letting this happen?
>
> M: Because this isn't about me. Or even her. There is no other choice here![139]

[136] Grant Voegtle, Youtube, "The Last of Us Changed My Life: In Depth Analysis and Dissection", 23rd December 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sJA-C1yrtk
[137] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, "Spring"
[138] *Ibidem*
[139] *Ibidem*

Joel still does not get it, cannot get it and never will (as at the end of *The Last of Us Part II* he says he would still want to save Ellie[140]), so he proceeds to tell Marlene to go to hell, and in response she orders a man of hers to "march him out of here" and shoot him if "he tries anything"[141].

We should now linger for a moment over this enthralling dilemma the game poses, which, at its core, induces a significant moral and ethical reflection: this whole matter is reduced to a sort of primal individualism, where the game apparently seems to ask the player "are you willing to lose someone you love to serve the interests of the many?", which, in Joel's perspective and in the world of *The Last of Us*, is even more exacerbated and translates into a far more crucial query, upon which depends the fate of mankind: "are you willing to sacrifice your daughter to save us all?". What is beautifully powerful of such quandary is that it cannot help resonating with each and every one of us: we all have people we love, just like Joel, who has in the end found in Ellie his reason for living, and we would hopefully never sacrifice them, not even to save the world. It is man's innate egoistic wellness put to the test here. Nevertheless, regardless of how easily this choice might come, it certainly entails a highly oppressive moral consequence, as the price Joel would have to pay to save his dear one is depriving humanity of a cure for the infection, which might most likely, over time, take the world back to normality, as it once was prior to the pandemic, and hence stop the atrocities of that post-apocalyptic reality. This is precisely the other side of the coin in this dilemma: to do something good, either saving a person he cares about or saving the whole world, Joel would necessarily have to do something bad, either letting a child, Ellie, be killed, or making man's damnation on earth perpetual. There is no getting away with this without a sacrifice. Here is the ultimate moral distress. No

[140] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*; 2020, In Joel's last conversation with Ellie he says: "If somehow the Lord gave me a second chance at that moment, I would do it all over again".
[141] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*; 2013, "Spring"

matter the brutality of the player's deeds throughout the game, the people they, through Joel's avatar, have killed, it all led to this one decisive climactic choice. A choice, though, that the player, of course, does not get to make, but only Joel.

Going back to him, for Joel the path to follow is perfectly clear: he is going to do everything in his power to rescue Ellie, even if it means murdering everybody. After being escorted towards the exit of the hospital, he finally takes some action: he is able to disarm the guard that was watching him and then forces him to reveal the location of the operating room where Ellie had been taken. He then kills the soldier with two shots to the guts and one to the head. The fireflies hear the noise of the gun firing and proceed with an organized advance, with soldiers on every floor, to take Joel down once and for all. This segment is interactive, yet all the game allows the player to do here is keep moving upward, towards the top floor, and kill every soldier that stands in our way. We do not have much of a choice here, it is either us or them. The player may not approve of all this violence, and it can presumably even sicken them, perhaps because as they are perpetrating it they cannot forget the moral weight behind it, that they are in fact dooming humanity, yet it is just this unpleasantness of the deeds they are committing that sets up fertile land for the merger of moral distress and negative empathy: the player does realise the twisted morality of such choice, however, right in this moment, hands on the gamepad, they are factually embodying a negative character, not so different from the ones we have mentioned previously, such as Macbeth or Mr. Hyde. From an extra-diegetic point of view the user is in fact playing the role of a madman who ruthlessly murders an entire hospital, and even condemns the whole human species for eternity, only to save a child, whose life is apparently worthier than any other on earth. What is more, and this is the point, the game drives the player towards a strong empathetic connection with him, not only

because they may have grown fond of Joel after all the time they spent impersonating him, getting to know him up close and personal, but also, and especially, because had they been in the exact same position, deep down, they would have done the same: in the comment section under a Youtube video about the ending of the game, a user shared her experience:

> I told my dad about this ending, and this is how it went;
> Me: [S]o the choice was between saving humanity, or saving who's essentially become his daughter.
> Dad: No one's that altruistic.[142]

Blaming Joel results in blaming ourselves: we are the ones playing this sequence, this is not a cutscene, we are the ones killing those soldiers and morally allowing – and making – the catastrophe to happen. The one and only way to oppose this, if it is all too much for the player, is to put the controller down and stop playing. And yet, either way, the game still manages to unleash negative empathy, with two pivotal and opposite outcomes: on the one side, the player may be on board with Joel's decision, identify with him – again identification plays a crucial role – and keep playing, fully aware of the expensive moral cost behind the tragedy they are causing and bearing the burden it results in; on the other hand, if they do not wish to partake in this final unfolding of the story, ideologically avoiding being complicit to this madness, they are induced to not only separate themselves from Joel, the character they have been playing as and empathized with this whole time, but also to maybe even stop playing completely, for they no longer identify or cannot empathize with him

[142] Grant Voegtle, Youtube, "The Last of Us Changed My Life: In Depth Analysis and Dissection", 23rd December 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sJA-C1yrtk

anymore, out of the overwhelming anguish – a necessary ingredient in the generation of negative empathy – the game engenders. In other words, as Romanzi explains, "the player has to choose whether to sacrifice their morality or their desire to win [the game]"[143].

After making the player kill all those soldiers, inspiring guilt on them, the game takes us to the operating room, where Joel sees Ellie laying on a bed, unconscious, but before he can even try to do something, he is threatened by the surgeon, who grabs a scalpel and, while pointing it at him (fig.19), speaks up:

> Surgeon: I won't let you take her. This is our future, think of
> all the lives we'll save.
> Don't…come any closer. I mean it![144]

Here is the author emphasizing those instants before Joel's potential "original sin", when he can still change his mind and save the world. It is not too late for him to walk away and allow humanity a future, "our future"[145], as the doctor says.

[143] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), pp. 13-14

[144] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*, 2013, "Spring"

[145] *Ibidem*

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 19)

Plus, this is gameplay, the player still holds control, but it will soon be reduced to the same binary, interactive diegetic choice: we make the story proceed by playing, or we make the story halt by refraining to. We just killed all the fireflies left in the hospital and now we are once more put in a life or death scenario: as soon as we approach the surgeon there is a visual prompt, "triangle", to interact. He is the last person standing between us and Ellie, hence, assuming we have learned to know Joel and, above all, in light of the carnage we just engendered, we can – even though the game does not tell us explicitly – very well imagine what pressing that button will do. But that is not a soldier who will fire back, that is not a guy armed to the teeth eager to kill us, nor a military man who knows how to fight. This is just a regular person, a surgeon, who will attack us only if we give him a reason to. Even so, he is threatening us with a paltry scalpel, when we, instead, are equipped with guns and a bow. Besides, he can surely tell what we did in the lower floors, he must have heard the gunshots, so now seeing us walking in the operating room unhurt should clearly hint that we are actually more of a threat to him than he is to us. The riveting writing of the game, which up until this point has always placed the player in a

position of inferiority, now grants them feeling in charge in front of that surgeon, testing their sensibility again, and making them wonder how they would behave in that context. For instance, the player might have had enough of all the chaos and cruelty produced so far in their ludic experience, and they would now feel like it is time to stop for a moment because this is becoming too much to handle. Yet, this is where the game goes even further, reinvigorating the tight bond between distressing morality and negative empathy: say for example that the player, according to their morals, wants to spare the surgeon, because maybe he does not deserve to die after all; the player may think that, if they really want to let him live, they could only just threaten him in turn, with a gun perhaps, way more harmful than a scalpel, and make him move aside so that they could take Ellie away from there. Or, if he does not budge, they could fire a warning shot to scare him even more, that will maybe be more effective. Actually, they could also threaten him in words, they could try anything, as long as they manage to keep him alive. Nevertheless, the player perfectly knows by now that they do not have a real say here, this is only something maybe they would do, but they are who they are and Joel is Joel. Here comes evidently the clash between the player's morality and the character's, and negative empathy, here more than ever, takes effect: as they player presses "triangle", Joel takes the scalpel off the surgeon's hands and sticks it in his throat, killing him (fig.20). The player might want to stop the violence, but they cannot; they are still embodying Joel, here a viciously pitiless man, and as such they are supposed to behave. It is the game laying claim on its untameable fixed narrative, and on the characters inhabiting it, with whom the player cannot reason but only come to terms passively accepting the way they are and the choices they make.

As Eric Hayot underlines, “[w]hat makes *The Last of Us* interesting, then, is how it takes away the possibility of interactivity”[146]

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 20)

However negative Joel may be, if the player wants to see the end of his and Ellie’s story, they can only go along with his decision. But Joel is not only that ferocious monster he has just turned into, he is also a father, and no reasonable father would ever consent to his child’s life being taken, that is why the player empathizes with him:

> [The player] realize[s] […] that there was a selfish aspect to Joel’s decision to save Ellie at the expense of humanity. But […] that understanding of giving your child a life, and just being allowed to live that life, that’s what being a parent is, that’s what real love is[147]

[146] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186
[147] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4

Once again, negative empathy amounts to an emotionally excavating mechanism that requires the player to go beyond their ethical and moral boundaries to tune in with a negative "other", of whom they must recognize at least a gleam of humanity: paraphrasing Ercolino and Fusillo, who, as stated in the first chapter, asserted that art "can make us feel the negativity as something beautiful, putting in the foreground its human dimension"[148], *The Last of Us*, a videogame – which I dare consider a form of art – does just so, for the player embodies, especially in the game's final moments, a morally deranged – and thereby negative – character that wins their hearts for the humanity, in the shape of his deep love for Ellie, that he is capable of.

Joel then grabs Ellie in his arms and takes her out of the operating room while being chased by the few remaining fireflies, in a desperate run that touchingly parallels that of Joel with his daughter Sarah at the very beginning of the game (fig. 21). Again, control is handed to the player.

*The Last of Us Part I*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2022 (fig. 21)

[148] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 31

Once more we go back to that same feeling that the player intensely experienced in the prologue, only now the helplessness ailing them is contextually different and has another kind of moral weight behind: the player is still embodying a father trying to save his daughter, and all they can do is again run and run only, but, if the first time the enemies were the infected, since the virus was quickly spreading, now their opponents are men, or rather, broadly speaking, mankind itself, which they are condemning. It goes without saying that the moral guilt that the player's actions are imbued with remarkably sharpen their emotional involvement: Smethurst and Craps attest that this very "guilt, provided by the interactivity, empathy, and complicity, causes players to feel responsible for the traumatic events portrayed in the game"[149], which is in fact yet another feeling exquisitely unique to gaming, not nearly replicable through literature, cinema, or any other art form.

Narratively speaking, however, Green argues that, "Joel's actions cannot be classified as wholly selfish"[150], as he still decided to save someone, though not providing "the possibility of a happy ending", to which "one is so accustomed in videogames"[151]: the ultimate moral message the author, Druckmann, might be implicitly conveying here is that "the human race may not be worthy of saving"[152] after all, and that, deep down, "we will,

[149] Smethurst Toby, Craps Stef, "Playing with Trauma: Interactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in The Walking Dead Video Game", in Adnan, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 7

[150] Green Amy M., *The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in The Last of Us*, Sage; 2016, p. 759

[151] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186

[152] Green Amy M., *The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in The Last of Us*, Sage; 2016, p. 759

correctly prompted, like Joel, love the end of the world more than we love the possibility of its redemption"[153].

This is how *The Last of Us* makes the player feel the perpetrator of such catastrophe while simultaneously connecting them to the main character.

After his run to take Ellie out of the operating room, Joel is intercepted by Marlene, who points a gun at him and forces him to stop. Druckmann leaves room for a cutscene, suspending the action to make both the player and Joel reflect upon Ellie's side on this matter, which have been so far overlooked. Marlene's words, no matter how much Joel and the player might disagree with, stand for another quite plausible perspective on this thorny scenario:

> M: You can't save her. Even if you get out of here, then what? How long before she's torn to pieces by a pack of clickers? That is if she hasn't been raped and murdered first.
>
> J: That ain't for you to decide.
>
> E: It's what she'd want. And you know it.[154]

What we can infer is that, although the player might come to empathetically share Joel's emotional urgency to rescue Ellie, having found a daughter again, what is not – and cannot – be guaranteed is whether Joel will always be capable of protecting her. Accordingly, given the everlasting danger permeating that post-pandemic world, it would rationally make much more sense to try and give the world a second chance by sacrificing Ellie, rather than risking to lose her in a far more heinous way. "Don't

[153] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186

[154] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*, 2013, "Spring"

waste this gift, Joel”[155], Marlene told him earlier, and now she is proving her point. In addition, Marlene seems to know Ellie well enough to even speak on her behalf and say that sacrificing herself for the fate of humanity is “what she’d want”[156], “to which Joel hesitates, seemingly admitting that she is right”[157]. According to Grant Voegtle, the player is in these moments “experiencing what Joel felt: the hesitation, the guilt, the sickness”[158], on which he comments:

> [E]ven though Joel may have been dead set on rescuing the one person worth saving to him, [the player] can imagine these thoughts were probably zinging around his head[159]

Nonetheless, in spite of the intricacy of the moral situation, this quandary cannot be entirely filtered through reason, but mainly through feelings, otherwise Joel – and by extension, the player – would not have killed the surgeon, and Ellie would still be in the operating room. Apparently, emotionality outweighs rationality, and selfishness defeats altruism: Joel’s feelings for Ellie are more powerful than his concern for the rest of the world, and his selfish loving side, in the end, takes over. In fact, Druckmann highlights Joel’s initial decision a second time: once again he is put in front of the same pair of options he was dealt earlier, whether to sacrifice Ellie – now respecting her will, too – and save the world, or do something to prevent that from happening. Marlene is still convinced that

[155] *Ibidem*
[156] *Ibidem*
[157] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 11
[158] Grant Voegtle, Youtube, “The Last of Us Changed My Life: In Depth Analysis and Dissection”, 23rd December 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sJA-C1yrtk
[159] *Ibidem*

he can come around and tells him that he “can still do the right thing here”, that “she won’t feel anything”[160], but Joel did not change his mind and makes the exact same choice he made earlier: killing whoever stands between him and Ellie. He shoots Marlene, even justifying why he cannot let her live – as she “would just come after her”[161] – and takes off.

The story, however, is not over yet. The very final sequence is yet to be examined, which brings about another moral conjugation of negative empathy, uncompromisingly putting on display the humanity that the game is permeated by.

After leaving the Fireflies base, the player sees Joel driving with Ellie on the back of the car, still unconscious. Then she wakes up and asks him what happened. At this point, Joel lies:

> J: Turns out there’s a whole lot more like you, Ellie. People that are immune. It’s dozens actually. Ain’t done a damn bit of good neither.
> They’ve actually st – they’ve stopped looking for a cure.[162]

Now the empathy the player might be drawn to feel for Joel, who lied to Ellie out of shame and guilt, not revealing the atrocity he committed, is a specific kind, it is what Patrick Colm Hogan calls “situational empathy”[163]: it may have happened to us as well, to lie about something we were not proud of, and this is precisely what drove Joel to withhold the truth about what really occurred back at the hospital. This type of empathy thus

[160] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*, 2013, “Spring”
[161] *Ibidem*
[162] *Ibidem*
[163] Hogan Patrick Colm, “The Epilogue of Suffering: Heroism, Empathy, Ethics” (2001), in Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 95

depends “upon a [player] having a memory of a comparable experience”[164] to the one of the character. It works because there is a mutual emotional side that makes the player bond with Joel: as a matter of fact, Hogan continues, “situational empathy alone […] leads to the ethics of compassion”[165], which is exactly why Joel’s lie, in spite of his despicable deeds, still seems understandable to the player.

Later on, however, Druckmann takes this a step further, and, same as he did with Marlene’s death scene, explicitly underscoring Joel’s coldness, here he underlines even more Joel’s (im)moral dimension, by pointing out to what extent he is willing to lie to a person he loves.

As they are approaching Jackson on foot, Ellie stops and opens up to Joel about her own feeling of “guilt”, way different from his.

> E: Back in Boston -- back when I was bitten. I wasn’t alone. My best friend was there. And she got bit too. We didn’t know what to do. So… she says, “Let’s just wait it out. Y’know we can be all poetic and just lose our minds together”.
> I’m still waiting for my turn.
> […]
> Her name was Riley, and she was the first to die. And then it was Tess. And then Sam.[166]

Apparently, Ellie is blaming herself for her own immunity: had she not been immune, she would have avoided the “curse” of watching the people she cared about die. What the player might infer from Ellie’s reflection is that, exactly as Marlene told Joel – proving that she did know Ellie after

[164] *Ibidem*
[165] *Ibidem*
[166] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us*, 2013, “Spring”

all, maybe even more than Joel did – she would have sacrificed herself to save humanity, because “it’s what she’d want”[167], because that way she could have finally washed away the burden of being alive while other people she loved, like Riley herself, did not, could not. She would have wanted to be of service, and her life to matter.

Joel tries to console her, “none of that is on you”[168] he says, followed by his personal empathic response to Ellie’s preoccupation: he feels Ellie’s burden and thus provides what he hopes to be an efficient moral teaching to stop Ellie from worrying and allow her to move on:

> J: I struggled for a long time with survivin’. And you -- no matter what, you keep finding something to fight for.
> Now, I know that’s not what you wanna hear right not, but it’s --[169]

He does not get to finish his sentence that Ellie cuts him off, seemingly not satisfied with what he just told her. Her thoughts once again go back to what Joel said in the car, still obsessed about her immunity being useless and not really knowing for sure if Joel’s words were to be believed:

> E: Swear to me. Swear to me that everything that you said about the Fireflies is true.
> J: I swear.
> E: Okay.

[167] *Ibidem*
[168] *Ibidem*
[169] *Ibidem*

Druckmann remarks upon Joel's lie, which is even more oppressive now, in the light of Ellie's burden revelation. Yet Joel still cannot tell and face the truth. His lie, however, holds a double significance this time: we might say he lies out of shame again, same as before, to avoid admitting his cruel selfishness, knowing now that Ellie would be mad at him if she knew what he did; but, as Romanzi points out, Joel might have also "acknowledge[d] her need to find a new purpose after months being defined by her wish to put herself at the service of humanity"[170]. Accordingly, the only way to grant her a new start is lying.

From this perspective, we can look at Joel's lie even as an act of empathy, both negative – for the moral cost behind it – and positive – for Joel's emotional sensibility to Ellie's anxiety.

The Last of Us writing masterfully engenders this form of double-sided empathy, blending together the negative and the positive, and finally striking the player with an unexpected cliff-hanger: after Ellie's "okay", which leaves the player wondering whether she really believed Joel or just accepted his lie, the game ends.

[170] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 11

*Moral distress and negative empathy in The Last of Us: Part II*

The second part of the story takes place five years after the events of the first one, and this time the main playable character is not Joel, but Ellie.
After escaping the Fireflies hospital they came back to Jackson, where Joel's brother, Tommy, has founded a little community with his wife Maria. Jackson seems to be almost a utopian place, where people live happily, in peace, each with their own task and sharing everything they have, almost as in a small-scale communistic society, which strives to reach a semblance of normality.
The adventure begins with a regular patrol that Ellie and her girlfriend Dina have been sent on, as normally happens in Jackson's daily routine. Unfortunately, during their scouting, they are caught by a blizzard and they have to stop at an old outpost, waiting for it to pass. A few moments later they are joined by a friend of theirs, Jesse, who tells them that he had been looking for Joel and Tommy because they had not showed up back at the camp and are now missing. Ellie is already worried sick, and asks Jesse for more information about it, such as how long they have been missing and where he went looking for them. The blizzard has not stopped yet, but Ellie does not care, mounts up on the horse and starts riding to find them – and we with her.
She eventually reaches an abandoned lodge, control is now handed to the player: we go in and as soon as we pass the doorstep we hear someone screaming in the distance. We realize it must be coming from downstairs, so we go down and interact with a door to open it. Cutscene.
Ellie's telling look already suggests that the scene happening before her eyes (fig. 22) should worry us, too.

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 22)

She found Joel.
He is being tortured like an animal by a girl using a golf club, and seems now approaching his last moments (fig. 23).

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 23)

This whole fragment is apparently imbued with a striking amount of emotional distress: from the anxiety both the player and Ellie feel in their

desperate search for Joel, to the chilling cries they heard when entering the lodge, to the altering tragedy they are to witness in the next scene. This is a game, Anderson specifies, that “is so rough, so brutal” and whose “brutality profoundly affect[s] players’ emotions and their regulation of negative affect during and after gameplay”[171]. The sequence we are going to experience exemplifies that precisely.

Paralyzed, Ellie tries to do something, but as she hesitantly walks inside the room she gets knocked to the floor and disarmed, forced to witness what is about to happen. There is a final glance Joel and Ellie share, where Ellie agonizingly tells him to get up repeatedly, though clearly seeing that he cannot and that his end seems inexorable. Druckmann suspends the scene here and lets his characters have a final moment to look at each other (fig. 24 and 25), without saturating the scene with too many words: it is just “[their] locked eyes”[172], as the actress that played Ellie (Ashley Johnson) stated, what makes the scene work, both from a narrative and emotional standpoint:

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 24)

[171] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier, 2022, p. 4

[172] Kinda Funny Games, Youtube, “Last of Us 2 Spoilercast w/ Neil Druckmann, Ashley Johnson, Troy Baker - Gamescast Ep. 26”, 25th July 2020: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6rRfK-V2jY&t=3271s

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 25)

As Ellie continues to agitate on the ground helpless, the girl with the golf club sentences Joel to death: she violently strikes him on the head, blood starts pouring out, and Joel dies on the spot.

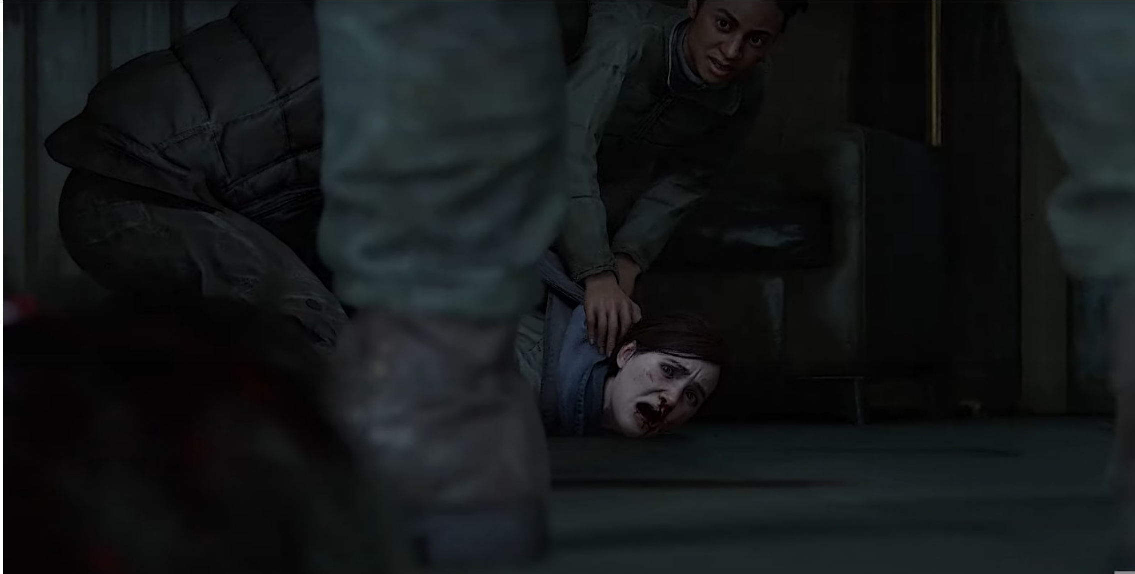
From a diegetic standpoint this altering narrative sequence parallels Joel's loss at the beginning of the first game, when he saw his daughter die: in fact, Ellie, like Joel, is now living the traumatic experience of losing someone loved, and, same as in the first game – though with a different weight on the story – this moment is going to haunt Ellie for a long time. Visually speaking, this scene is also undeniably disturbing, not only for the vivid violence per se, but also for the impact it has on Ellie, which the player is aware of thanks to an extreme graphic accuracy, which renders Ellie's sorrow palpable. Adnan highlights the shocking authenticity of such scene and the empathic investment the player gets affected by:

> One such representation of trauma [along with] the intensely realistic animated faces in the game and the extraordinary way they

> imitate real human emotion cause players to empathize with the characters[173]

Plus, Ashley Johnson's striking portrayal of Ellie makes the character even more real, so much so, that "even without the heartrending voice acting, one can feel Ellie's pain simply by looking at it"[174], and that is precisely how compelling videogames could get when they rely on a strong visual dimension: her performance is that powerful and true that, Adnan declares, she "hauntingly expresses every emotion she is feeling: the horror, the grief, the desperation"[175] (fig. 26), which ultimately provokes the player's emotional and psychological correspondence to her. As a matter of fact, not only does this death traumatize Ellie, but the player, too: on the one hand, she is losing her father figure; on the other, the player is witnessing a character they felt attached to being killed off, and in the most vicious way. Ellie's reaction to Joel's death is thus not so far away from the player's, as they both loved him, and they both could not expect his death to be so brutal and – from a diegetic perspective – to be so early on in the game. The player is invited to experience an emotional and empathic closeness to the character through trauma. There is an alignment between Ellie and the player, which is, however, going to be disrupted later on in the game.

[173] Adnan Sariya, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 6
[174] *Ibidem*
[175] *Ibidem*



*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 26)

After taking Joel's life, the murdering girl escapes with her gang, leaving Ellie alive.

Ellie is rescued by Dina and Jesse, who found her passed out on the floor, along with Tommy, who had been previously captured with Joel, but who was on the contrary spared. They go back to Jackson.

Ellie wants revenge. She has a conversation about it with Tommy, which turns into a blunt confrontation: she wants to get after those people who killed Joel, no matter if she has just one clue to find them – they belong to the WLF (Washington Liberation Front), as Tommy had told her; he, instead, would rather let this go, for if he tried to chase down those guys with some of his men, not only would he put them in danger – making them risk their lives and thus potentially making their family suffer the same pain affecting him now – but, as he says, he "would be leaving Jackson vulnerable"[176], with few people to guard and look after the place.

This does not change Ellie's mind, who in fact seems to be firmly unyielding on her position, and even makes it a matter of principle:

[176] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020

> E: If it were you or me, Joel would be halfway to Seattle already.
> T: …No, he wouldn't.
> E: He f***ing absolutely would be!
> […]
> You know what? I'm leaving tomorrow. And if you wanna come with me, great.
> T: You have no idea what you're walking into. You don't know how large that group is, how armed --
> E: I don't care. You can't talk me out of this.[177]

Ellie is apparently bent on getting her revenge, to which the player might be in line, as they might comprehend how Ellie must feel, and therefore share that urgency to retaliate and project the same hate on that girl who killed Joel. The player, though, who in all likelihood never experienced that kind of traumatic event with all that barbarity, can still come to understand Ellie and the reason why she wants to do that, in an empathic effort that takes the shape of an "emotional study" of the character, which brings them closer to the character itself:

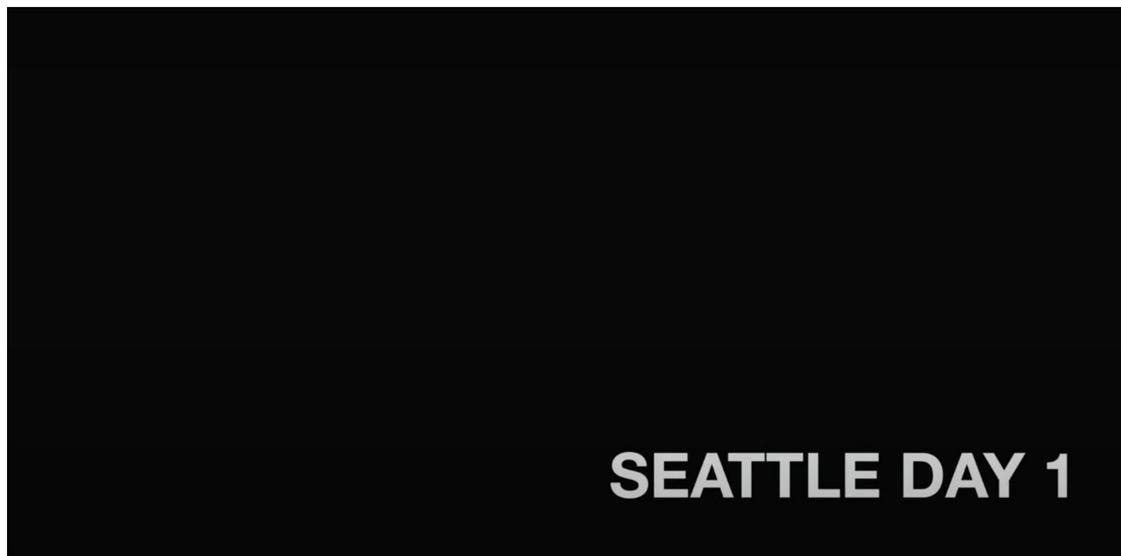
> Players' in-depth evaluations of characters enhance the proximity of the player-character relationship through empathy, […] resulting in player's […] emotional regulation.
> […] The players concoct a moral narrative integrating character actions and viewpoints within a moral framework.[178]

[177] *Ibidem*
[178] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 5

If the player, as Anderson clarifies, regulates their emotions according to the ones the character displays, they are now supposed to feel attuned to Ellie's emotional frequency and this should be enough to prompt them to continue the game and verify whether Ellie is really able to find that girl and avenge Joel.

Ellie then sets off to hunt that girl down, flanked by her loyal girlfriend Dina. They get to Seattle.

From this moment onward the storytelling is divided in days (fig.27), in each of which the player accompanies Ellie in her search.




*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 27)

On day 1, the first finding Ellie and Dina accomplish is locating one of the bases of the WLF, when they get ambushed by some men, who turn out to be members of that military group. After almost dying, they manage to escape, but not before collecting some pictures, found in a bag, which tell them the name of some of the people who were present at Joel's torture

back in Jackson. Ellie recognizes a few, but above all others that one girl who killed him. The hatred she is prone to has now a name: Abby.
On day 2 things get more complicated. After finding shelter in an abandoned theatre, Ellie learns Dina is pregnant and thus cannot keep up with the search for Abby: not only would she slow her down, but she would more importantly put herself and the baby she is carrying in great danger. Consequently, she is going to stay behind at the theatre – which has become their base – while intercepting the WLF's radio communications, and Ellie will proceed on her own.
What they managed to find out so far is that there is a girl, named Nora, who is at one of the WLF's camps, a hospital, and might know where Abby is. Ellie's plan now is to get there and have her reveal Abby's whereabouts.
Later on, Ellie does find Nora, and while threatening her with a gun she commands her to reveal where Abby is (fig. 28)

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 28)

Given the previous matching between Ellie's feeling and the player's, who both were arguably traumatized in losing Joel, if the player made her reach this point of the story it may imply that they want to know where Abby is as much as Ellie. Therefore, we might concur with Ercolino and Fusillo in

such case, as the player's "empathizing process" here translate into "an ideological complicity, […] an alignment [to the character]"[179].

Nora then throws a tray at Ellie in a desperate attempt to run away from her: here begins an interactive sequence where the player gets transported into the action, having to chase Nora. As the player finally catches up with her, Nora has reached a dead-end, she is trapped. Ellie asks her "where is Abby?" once again, but Nora still does not yield, instead she directly defies Ellie by looking her right in the eye and firmly responding "I'm not giving up my friend"[180].

The game here places the player in a narratively interactive position that is not different from the one with the surgeon at the end of the first game: what the player sees on the screen now is Ellie's furious look and the prompt "square" (fig. 29).

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 29)

The only way the player can make the game continue is by pressing that button.

[179] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 308

[180] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020, "Seattle Day 2"

Druckmann, once again, entrusts the diegetic advancement to the player: pushing "square" makes Ellie strike Nora in the face with a pipe. After one hit, though, Nora is still uncooperative. "Square" pops back up on screen: same as before, nothing will happen if the player does not push it again, which means hurting Nora one more time. A second strike is still not enough, Nora does not surrender, yet. The player is again left to press "square" for a third time.

Druckmann's game writing pace here lingers on every single strike the player makes happen, underlining the barbarity Ellie perpetrates intoxicated by rage, presumably conveying that right now she is not so different from Abby torturing Joel. In addition, from a broader narrative perspective, not only may Druckmann be testing the player's "emotional endurance through ongoing gameplay"[181] – making the player perform disturbing, repetitive acts of violence – but he may be also questioning the player's morality and their inclination to take Ellie's side no matter the brutality of her wrongdoings: the game seems to be telling the player that, as they had consented to accompany Ellie in her manhunt, potentially embracing her thirst for revenge, now they have to take accountability for their choices and come to terms with what revenge and blind hatred bring about. The game "puts you on edge and into those emotions, […] challenging your views of your actions"[182], and that may be exactly why Druckmann did not let Ellie's character perform that torture on her own but coerced the player to partake in it, proving thereby how "constraints are a clever way for […] games to force players to become complicit"[183].

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[181] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 5

[182] *Ivi*, p. 4

[183] Adnan Sariya, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 6

What is more, the sequence the game presents here is another intense one, as well as those commented in the pages before, which makes *The Last of Us* “very challenging, very difficult to play [because] it’s brutal”[184].

After this rough scene, where the player witnesses Ellie’s – as well as their own – dark side, hurting repeatedly a helpless person, Anderson points out that “to counter emotional distress, players reconcile moral issues by identifying shared emotions with the characters, thereby integrating player-character contextual knowledge”[185]. In other words, the player situates their feelings within the narrative frame, not only realizing that the way they feel may match the character’s, but also providing a “narrative justification” for the deeds they committed playing: that “contextual knowledge” Anderson refers to, implies that if the player decided to harm Nora, they come to understand that it was because, regardless of their identification with Ellie, the character needed to do that, given the narrative context and the emotional state she was in.

Later on in the game, at the end of day 3, we find Ellie back at the theatre.

All of a sudden, Abby breaks in, surprises Ellie and points a gun at her. This is a cutscene: the player does not get to interact, though they may want to do something, especially after Ellie tosses her gun and stands powerless in front of the girl, who seems just about to shoot her, killing her just as she did with Joel. The player feels as helpless as Ellie, completely incapable of doing anything, fearing to lose a character they might feel attached to and see the enemy win.

At this climactic point, Druckmann suspends the scene and takes the player back in time, to the end of the first game, nearby the fireflies hospital. Now the playable character is neither Joel nor Ellie, but another: Abby.

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[184] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4

[185] *Ibidem*

She is out with her father, when they are caught up by Owen, the boy Abby is in love with, who tells them that "that girl showed up […] the one Marlene keeps talking about", who has "an old bite mark on her arm" but "no signs of infection"[186]. The player can very well imagine who that person is, but what is more relevant about this moment is that the player is also being shown how the perspective has switched, that now neither Ellie nor Joel are the focus of this sequence, but rather Abby and her father.

As a result, Druckmann re-presents the crucial quandary at the end of the first game, now with a different point of view, by means of the following cutscene: Abby's father, Jerry, turns out to be not only a firefly, but, more importantly, the surgeon appointed to perform Ellie's surgery, and is now discussing the procedure with Marlene.

This scene is charged with a double value: on the one side, it stands for the representation of Abby's father's point of view, who strongly affirms that "everything that [they've] been fighting for, all the sacrifices […] are justified with this one act"[187], proving that he wants to sacrifice Ellie; on the other, this scene also serves as a chance to reevaluate Marlene's character, who might have seemed insensitive towards Ellie at the end of the first game, as if she did not show that much conflict in taking the life of someone she cared about, when here she is instead not only defending her, but even displaying sympathy for Joel as well, posing at Jerry the same dilemma that Joel would have to face: "[i]f this was your daughter, what would you do?"[188]

This is how meticulously profound the writing is, "manifesting new moral perspectives, […] by breaking down character's motives and rationales",

[186] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020
[187] *Ibidem*
[188] *Ibidem*

communicating “that people aren’t just bad or good, that there’s always a […] context”[189].

Abby then walks in, and has a moment to talk to her father about the situation. She seems to share the same altruistic drive Ellie displayed at the end of the first game, as she tells her father: “if it was me…I’d want you to do the surgery”[190], making her character ideologically close to Ellie herself. Even at these early stages of Abby’s character development, Druckmann encourages the player to consider how a person they most likely despise, Abby, is not so different from a person they like, Ellie.

In this scene, the player gets to witness a variety of characters’ points of view, and this might be “[w]hat draws [them] in and makes [them] reflect […] about the humanity of others”[191]: accordingly, videogames are not just mere entertainment, but an opportunity to broaden people’s horizons and even “change how [they] approach other people, how [they] empathize with other people”[192].

Marlene then reluctantly accepts to make Jerry proceed with the surgery, but still thinks that Joel should be informed about it, because, as “he travelled across the country with [Ellie], he has a right to know”[193], which demonstrates once again Marlene’s sensibility and honesty, and that the player may have misjudged her in the previous game.

The following sequence marks a momentous turn in Abby’s evolution and “jumpstarts the events [that led to the moment] when she kills Joel”[194]: a cutscene begins, depicting Abby entering the operating room and seeing her father dead on the floor (fig. 30).

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[189] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 5

[190] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020

[191] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4

[192] *Ivi*, p. 5

[193] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020

[194] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 11

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 30)

Here comes the player's realization: the surgeon that would not let them take Ellie at the end of the first game, and that they had to kill, was Abby's father. What might strikes the player at this point, is that what seemed to them an insignificant NPC (non-playable character), that they may have killed just to progress in the game, has turned out to be a significant person to someone else. So now, not only does the player have the whole humanity on their conscience, but also a father taken away from his daughter, which might "motivate participants to consciously reevaluate the characters' moral offenses"[195]: in order for Joel to still have a daughter, he – and the player as well – allowed a daughter to not have a father. From an empathic standpoint, the richness of *The Last of Us*'s writing entails the player's reflection on their own actions and an emotional understanding of the other characters, "forcing [the player] to empathize with them, […] to become them": regardless of our connection to Abby, who the player might still dislike if compared to Ellie, it is nonetheless difficult to remain completely

[195] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 6

unperturbed in front of Abby's loss, especially if it is, just like the death scenes the player has experienced before, portrayed with the same disturbing authenticity (fig. 31).

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 31)

What is more, the perspective shift Druckmann produces here can hypothetically be extended, applied to the way the events transpire at the end of the first game, and overturning thereby the way the player would feel towards these characters: what if the first *The Last of Us* had all been about Abby and her father instead of Ellie and Joel? Let us imagine, for instance, that the player controls Abby and gets to experience the search of a cure for mankind from her and her father's perspective: after spending the whole game not succeeding, the player reaches the end, where all of a sudden, they come across an immune 14 year-old girl, a certain Ellie, who might finally give them the chance to create a vaccine and win the game. How would the player react if this chance was taken away from them by a madman named Joel, who not only ran away with the girl, but even killed the father of the character they have been playing all along?

What the player might feel towards Joel is exactly the same hate that they felt towards Abby at the beginning of the game: in fact, it is this very hatred that fostered her thirst for vengeance, which ultimately led her to find Joel and murder him. In addition, this vengeful drive is not dissimilar to the one ailing Ellie when she sets off to chase down Abby, proving once more that these characters are more alike than they might seem on the surface. Neither of them are totally right nor totally wrong to do what they do, yet this "emotional turbulence of TLOU [drove players] to rationaliz[ing] the characters' moral judgements and wrongdoings"[196]: the player might know that vengeance is negative, "messy, it never works out the way you wanted to"[197], but they can still comprehend the reason behind this choice from both Ellie and Abby, why they want to do it. Druckmann's writing strives to convey that there is no absolute good or bad, there are always shades and perspectives to be taken into account, "that people are human", and despite how bad they may seem, "there is always a backstory"[198].

However, the player's reaction to playing Abby was still not the most positive: "when you first play Abby – I was like, 'I'm just gonna jump off a f***ing cliff, because I want Abby to die!' I was so mad"[199]. Apparently, the player still feels that marked rejection towards her, and would rather keep playing Ellie, a character that they know significantly better than Abby, who they just met a few times and know very little about. But "that's the point of *TLOU*, you're playing this character, so you're forced to empathize with them" and led to a "reconciliation with Abby"[200]: the game,

[196] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 5
[197] ReservoirWatchDogs, Youtube, "Quentin Tarantino Interview (2003) – Jane", 11th September 2011: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7k4GQSGvx8&t=3s
[198] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 5
[199] *Ibidem*
[200] *Ibidem*

in fact, makes the player spend a considerable amount of time with her – the same three days they have already experienced through Ellie's eyes – in order to discover more about her character, especially her tender, loving side, which is brought out by her relationship with Owen – the boy she has loved since she was a young girl – and with Lev and Yara, two helpless kids on the run, who will benefit from Abby's intervention and who she will grow to care for. In particular, Abby'arc is defined by redemption, achieved especially through the bond with Lev and Yara, who she will look after: it is love once again, the same love that Joel felt for Ellie – and made the player tolerate Joel's decision at the end of the first game – what might change the player's mind on Abby. Showing that she is human and capable of empathy might, in turn, tickle the player's own empathy for her – though maybe not preferring her over Ellie yet – and "force [them] to re-examine [their] positions"[201].

Later on, the game takes us back to the theatre, when Abby has Ellie unarmed in front of her (fig. 32). After spending three days with Abby, the player had the chance to acknowledge, from her perspective, what Ellie has done against her, such as killing some of her friends, like Nora, and even her loved one, Owen. Now Abby is once again brought back to her vindictive self, which she had buried after "build[ing] some sort of family [with] Lev and his sister"[202], and wants to make Ellie pay for what she has done: "[y]ou killed my friends…We let [you] live…and you wasted it!"[203] (fig. 33)

[201] *Ibidem*

[202] Romanzi Valentina, *Staying Human in the Post-apocalypse: The Frontiers of Individualism and Collectivism in The Last of Us and its sequel* (forthcoming), p. 12

[203] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020, "Seattle, Day 3"

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 32)

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 33)

Right before Abby shoots, Tommy intervenes grabbing the gun Abby is holding, giving Ellie just enough time to run away and retreat to the rear of the theatre. The cutscene ends, and the interactive sequence begins. The player is given control of the character: Abby.

The sharp twist Druckmann performs here is that the shift the player might have hoped to see – i.e. get control of Ellie again, after seemingly concluding Abby's side of the events – does not happen. The player is compelled, once more, and with a new kind "of negative affect during […]

gameplay"[204], to not only play a character they do not want to play, but even do something they do not want to do: kill Ellie. By being forced to play this sequence, the game harshly reminds the player "that they play *with* the characters and *as* the characters"[205], thus when identification is not possible, they are still called to make a sort of role-playing psychological effort and embrace the emotional state the character they are controlling is in: the player may not want to kill Ellie, but Abby does, and so must the player.

There is a moment in particular where Druckmann insists on provoking the player, to verify how far they are willing to go in hitting a loved character, to "test their emotional endurance"[206]: Abby grabs Ellie by the neck, and now it is up to the player to keep chocking her to death (fig. 34).

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 34)

Plus, the ludic experience in these instants is rather unique: in the previous times in which the player had to face such constrictions – such as at the end of the first game before killing the surgeon, or during Nora's torture – the opposing character could not have done much to react. Here, instead, the

[204] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4
[205] *Ibidem*
[206] *Ivi*, p. 5

opposing character does react: Ellie will fight back as soon as the player hesitates, killing Abby in turn and making the player fail the level.

> [T]he game treats any refusal to pursue [Abby's] course of action as a refusal to play and sends the player back to the game's opening screen. The player therefore must choose either 1) to refuse to continue playing the game, or 2) to become directly complicit in [Abby's need for vengeance][207]

To play or not to play: the dilemma is presented once again. Should the player continue the game even though this implies hurting – and even killing, as far as they know – a character they love? Or should they stop to counter the author's perverse game in making them do something they would refrain from?

What is more, Druckmann not only requires the player to embrace Abby's stance out of diegetic necessity, but also to commit to actually wanting to hurt Ellie, as their wavering will be punished with "game over". In fact, as opposed to the above-mentioned interactive scenes, where the player only had to *press* the indicated button, here they are forced to *keep pressing* it repeatedly, manifesting at every push their constant conviction on the act they are performing: it is another cruel way Druckmann takes advantage of to make the player, even for a few moments, become the character they are controlling and presumably feel guilty for hurting so confidently a character they like.

Through the lens of negative empathy, whether the player empathizes more with Ellie or Abby, they would still be empathizing with a rather negative character, as the game clearly demonstrated that both protagonists'

[207] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186

morality was irretrievably tarnished by their dreadful deeds. In addition, this fighting sequence entails what we have previously named *empathic anguish*[208], which we have seen is a key component in the experience of negative empathy, and that has a double value here: not only might the player be affected by such anguish as a consequence of having to harm Ellie, a character they had empathized with during the course of the first and the second game; but, regardless of their ideological wrestling in taking Abby's or Ellie's side, the anguish is also engendered by the fight the game puts the player through, incredibly rough and bloody: Abby punches Ellie numerous times in the face, Ellie stabs her in the leg, shoots her, Abby throws her around violently and even breaks her arm, leading to both of them bleeding profusely by the end of the fight. Anderson highlights that "[t]he game's brutality profoundly affected players' emotions", so much so that "[p]layers frequently noted that the game's [violence] took an emotional toll", describing it as "unflinchingly depressing", "really dark and overwhelming at times", and even "traumatizing"[209].

Abby seems to have won the fight, as she managed to immobilize Ellie on the ground (fig. 35), but she does not go further, she does not kill her: the scared and innocent look on Lev's face (fig.36) is enough to quench her fury and make her spare Ellie's life, but as she walks away from the theatre with him, she threatens Ellie once and for all: "don't ever let me see your face again"[210].

[208] Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, p. 70
[209] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4
[210] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020, "Seattle, Day 3"

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 35)

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 36)

Two years later, the game shows us how both characters have ended up: Abby is looking to join the Fireflies with Lev, as they wander around hoping to find a sign that tells them they have actually regrouped somewhere; Ellie, instead, have started a family with Dina: they live together in a house just outside Jackson, with their baby JJ, and they even have a garden and a barn with sheep.

Apparently, both of them seem better off now, but their quite balance is going to be broken soon: in one of their scouting, Abby and Lev get ambushed by a group of pro-slavery survivors called “the Snakes”, who capture them and bring them to their slavery camp; Ellie, on the other hand, keeps struggling with her PTSD, still haunted by Joel’s death. In her journal she wrote:

> 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.

Such attention to Ellie’s psychological turmoil not only makes the player grasp the seriousness of the character’s condition, but even makes them perceive that “[t]hese characters are real people, having horrible experiences” and that they are in fact “playing a game that reflects human experience”[211]. The authenticity of *The Last of Us*’s portrayal of conflicted, human characters, shines through these bits where the author plumbs their depths, allowing the player to catch a glimpse of their inner reality first-hand. In fact, the following sequence is specifically intended to make the player relive Joel’s murder one more time: as Ellie is gathering up all the sheep inside the barn, she realizes there is a little one that was left behind; she goes there to help her find her way back to the others, but as soon as Ellie gets close to her, the little sheep bangs into a shovel, making a sound that reminds Ellie of Joel being hit by Abby’s strikes. In a panic, she heads towards the exit of the barn, but the door gets violently shut by the wind

[211] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4

and Ellie remains paralyzed in the pitch dark, in the grip of her trauma. The player is now taken back to that moment, in a living interactive nightmare where Ellie hears Joel screaming for her help from downstairs (fig. 37), but as the player tries to open the door behind which Abby is torturing him, Ellie realizes the door is locked, and no matter how hard she tries to smash it, there is nothing she can do to save him (fig. 38).

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 37)

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 38)

Powerlessness seems to be a constant throughout the first and the second game to make both the player and the character live traumatic experiences:

Joel losing his daughter Sarah, Ellie being assaulted by David, Joel running away with Ellie in the Fireflies hospital, Ellie watching Joel die, Ellie defenceless in front of Abby, and now this.
Some time later, Tommy goes pay Ellie and Dina a visit.
He talks to Ellie and says that he has "been putting out feelers for months now, and this new guy heard [his] story"[212]. Neither Ellie nor the player know what this is about, but Tommy proceeds to explain:

> T: He told me about a woman that he traded with while he was moving through California. Described her as built like an ox, travelling with a kid […].
> He said they were living along this coast in a beached sailboat.
> Right here.
> That's gotta be her.[213]

Tommy is clearly talking about Abby. He had been looking for her, still apparently obsessed with wanting revenge, but now asks Ellie to go find her and "make her pay"[214], as she promised him. He cannot go, as he was permanently injured during the fight at the theatre, but Ellie can. And that is what he wants. But Dina steps in and says that "[they] are done with that"[215] and then makes Tommy leave.
As we can tell, Tommy, too, despite being a secondary character, has changed – negatively – over the course of the story: from not wanting to avenge his own brother, so as to avoid putting his people in danger, to wanting to get revenge at all costs, even forcing a person that is like family to him to risk her life again, after barely escaping with it the first time.

[212] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020
[213] *Ibidem*
[214] *Ibidem*
[215] *Ibidem*

Despite Dina's prompt intervention, though, this conversation Tommy and Ellie had was enough to make the seed of vengeance sprout back up in Ellie again. She has not really gotten over Joel's death, that she did not succeed in avenging him, and now she also feels like she has disappointed Tommy.

That night, Ellie prepares to go after Abby one more time. Dina tries to dissuade her from doing that, but she insists she "has to finish it"[216]. Dina begs her to stay, because she "do[es]n't owe Tommy anything", because they "have got a family now" and "[Abby] doesn't get to be more important than that"[217]. As Ellie does not seem to come around, Dina gives her an ultimatum: either she stays with her and their baby or she will lose them for good. Ellie grabs her backpack and walks away.

The player may at this point have learned what blind revenge can bring about, that it can only be poisonous and result in something bad. Accordingly, it would not be inappropriate to assume that the player, just like Dina, may want to stop Ellie – a character they previously felt for – and make her come to her senses, displaying an "emotional investment that is second-to-none"[218]:

> One has of course felt, watching *Othello* or *Hamlet*, the desire to reach out and stop the madness, to throw oneself athwart the inevitable and often stupid march to disaster. But one was not, at the time, actually playing the characters involved.[219]

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[216] *Ibidem*

[217] *Ibidem*

[218] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 4

[219] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186

In fact, “part of the emotional force of the tragedy happens because one cannot accept [Ellie’s choice]”[220], and gets frustrated knowing that the character they grew to love – thanks to the indispensable interactivity – is going down a path that can make her – and by extension the player – suffer yet another time, after all the “moral distress brought on by the game”[221] up until this point.

We get to the ending parts of the adventure, when Ellie, after looking for Abby for a while, finally finds her on a beach in Santa Barbara, where the Snakes had tied her to a post (fig. 39). She is almost unrecognizable, apparently deprived of all her typical features: she is skinny, exhausted, has short hair, and bruises and burns all over her body.

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 39)

Just seeing Abby in this dehumanizing state might already trigger the player’s compassion, but this is where “the game [goes] even further”[222]: at first, Ellie frees her and let her free Lev as well, but as she slowly watches Abby walking away with Lev in her arms – which evokes Joel’s escaping

[220] *Ibidem*
[221] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 2
[222] *Ivi*, p. 4

with Ellie at the end of the first game – Ellie is reminded that she cannot let her go, that she has a mission to accomplish: kill Abby.

As soon as Abby lays down Lev on a boat she finds on the beach, Ellie says it loud and clear: "I can't let you leave"[223]. "I'm not doing this"[224], she replies, whilst untying the rope of the boat, clearly indicating that her only concern is to get away from there with Lev, and nothing else.

Ellie grabs her by the hair and throws her to the ground, kicking her in the gut, but as she still is reluctant to fight, Ellie forces her to, by pointing her knife at Lev's throat, threatening to kill him.

Witnessing Ellie's untameable obsession with revenge, and her turning into such an evil and empathy-lacking person, may in fact elicit the player's empathy towards her opponent, Abby. In fact, though we may be led to think that "[b]y showing most of the story through [Ellie]'s eyes, the author insures that we will travel with [Ellie] rather than stand against her"[225], now the player may not be in line with her anymore, especially "after players experience Abby's side of the story, thus potentially acquiring a positive view of the character"[226]. Besides, going back to that crucial helplessness once again, Abby is impotent, so physically deteriorated and innocuous that she does not even seem herself: even if the player still wanted to project their hatred towards Joel's murderer, that would hardly come easy, because Abby does not even resemble that person anymore.

Druckmann is ruthless, though: this sequence becomes interactive, he hands control to the player, entrusting them with one simple task: kill Abby.

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[223] Naughty Dog, *The Last of Us Part II*, 2020

[224] *Ibidem*

[225] Keen Suzanne, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press; 2007, p. 96

[226] Adnan Sariya, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 7

This part of the game exemplifies why many believe that "*TLOU* is emotionally demanding"[227]: "it puts you on edge and […] it shock[s] your emotions more"[228], since "players may not wish to inflict harm [on Abby] as they did at the start of the game – they realize that she is like Ellie, just a girl trying to survive in a terrible world, thus feeling guilty as they are obligated to hurt her"[229].

The game even insists on those rough moments of physical abuse (fig. 40-41), when Ellie wounds Abby with her knife, making the player perpetrate those acts by *keep pressing* the buttons – as we have explained in the previous pages – thus employing an interactive technique that makes the violence disturbingly tangible.

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 40)

[227] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 6
[228] *Ivi*, p. 4
[229] Adnan Sariya, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 7

*The Last of Us Part II*, by *Naughty Dog*, 2020 (fig. 41)

That being said, as a result of the game “forcing [the player] to take part in escalating violence” and given the “player’s moral disengagement”[230] from Ellie, the previous quandary translates differently: the real question is not only “should or should the player not continue playing?” but also “can the player do so at all?”. In other words, to what point can the player tolerate the brutality of such violence and the fact that they are perpetrating it against their will?

In addition, that *Stimmung* Worringer identified, that aesthetic atmosphere fuelled by negative emotions[231], seems to be what the player gets to feel in these scenes: not only is the player experiencing moral conflict in controlling Ellie, but also, as she has “transformed into the embodiment of evil, [empathy] does not seem sustainable any longer”[232]. What Druckmann wants to prove here is that “now you change sides”, and that the player is indeed capable of empathy even towards Abby, a negative character that

[230] Anderson Karoline A., *Moral distress in The Last of Us: Moral agency, character realism, and navigating fixed gaming narratives*, Elsevier; 2022, p. 1
[231] Worringer Wilhelm, “Astrazione e empatia”, in Ercolino e Fusillo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 217-218
[232]Ercolino Stefano, Fusillo Massimo, *Empatia negativa: il punto di vista del male*, Bompiani; 2022, pp. 159-160

the they had negatively judged: “if you get to the very end, [when] you’re in Santa Barbara, and you’re hesitating, [the game] has done [its] job”[233].
This sequence ends with Ellie stopping right before killing Abby, and eventually letting her go. However, although she did do the right thing in sparing Abby’s life – allowing her to also have a life with Lev – what she did wrong was going after her in the first place, leaving her family behind. Druckmann does not condone her behaviour: as she comes back home, she finds her house empty. Dina left. As she said she would.
On this dramatic note, the game ends, concluding a story “that could not have had the same impact if it had not been a videogame”[234].
In light of the examination provided, there should be no hindrance in assessing *The Last of Us* as follows:

> *The Last of Us* seems to be a masterfully written story about people, their choices and emotions. […] Moreover, it teaches us about who we are and how to stay human even when facing the agony of humanity. [235]

[233] Dan Allen Gaming, Youtube, “Troy Baker on the Hate, Leaks and Fan Reaction of THE LAST OF US 2”, 15th February 2021: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJVS3nmBt6U&t=260s
[234] Sperandio Stefania, Spaziogames, “Tutti i giochi da 10 su Spaziogames”, 1st October 2023: https://www.spaziogames.it/notizie/giochi-da-10-su-spaziogames
[235] Radchenko Simon, *Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of The Last of Us*, Interlitteraria; 2020, p. 257

## Conclusion

As we have seen in this dissertation, videogames have turned out to be complex forms of entertainment, which stand out for their unprecedented and exquisitely unique feature: interactivity. Through it, they are capable of eliciting a strong connection to the character the player controls, ensuring an empathy-based relationship.

In particular, empathy, which is generally regarded as something positive, can also be interpreted as something negative, especially when it is felt towards those individuals on edge, whose morality is tarnished. Such morality, in fact, is one of those aspects related to their characterization to which videogames can give the player access, for example "by forcing them to perform certain actions that they may not approve of"[236] in the shoes of the character. What is interesting about games is thus when the author suspends the power the player exerts on the videogame, reminding them that they are not almighty, but that they have to submit to his will: "this makes it more like a novel, to be sure, but not entirely like a novel"[237]. Accordingly, the player sometimes has to passively go along with the choices the author made – just like when reading a novel or watching a movie – but at the same time actively perform them through playing. In a sense, the player becomes a vehicle for the expression of the author.

Finally, just like novels and movies, videogames can cause emotions, make people upset, move them, make them reflect: "players become invested in videogames", so much so that they even come "to feel for the characters they grow to love, almost as though the characters are real people"[238].

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[236] Adnan Sariya, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 6

[237] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186

[238] Adnan Sariya, *Surviving in a Real-Life Dystopia 101: The Last of Us Part II as a Social Critique Concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Ryerson University; 2022, p. 6

Accordingly, I would dare claim that videogames are “regularly able to equal the aesthetic achievements of the best novels or films”, and that is why they “deserve the right to be included alongside those more prestigious genres in the pantheons of the university or the magazines and cultural reviews of the elite”[239].

[239] Hayot Eric, *Video Games & the Novel*, MIT Press; 2021, p. 186

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