

Theme, Narrative, and Adaptational Philosophy in ‘The Last of Us’



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Abstract

In the decade since the game’s release, *The Last of Us* (TLOU)’s ending still captures the imagination of its audience because it asks a very fundamental question— what do we, as individuals, owe to the collective that makes up society? How far are we allowed to go to protect our loved ones and what should we sacrifice along the way? In the game, this question is presented through the lens of empathetic immersion, testing the limits of the game designers’ and writers’ ability to make the player understand Joel’s desires and follow them through, while reminding the player that even though they control his movements, they aren’t truly Joel. However, the immersion central to this presentation is heavily dependent on the video game medium itself. Thus, to ensure the ending doesn’t lose its poignancy, the writers of the game’s 2022 TV adaptation were posed with the challenge of re-establishing the core themes that support it, as well as the empathetic connection between the audience and Joel. They largely accomplish this goal through the full utilization of adaptational expansions to the game’s environmental storytelling to highlight themes of individualism and collectivist sacrifice, foreshadowing Joel’s choice to save Ellie’s life and damn humanity, and heightening its narrative weight. In creating parallels between Joel’s individual narrative arc and those of the individuals and groups he encounters, the writers of the show broadened the scope of the narrative’s commentary on the game’s fundamental premise. Through applying it over, and over again, in a myriad of contexts, the show takes the game’s final thematic question and digs deeper into its nuances. The show’s questioning of the game’s ideological framework is subtle, built upon the audience’s recognition of parallels from the game’s narrative and ending and therefore primarily benefits the prebuilt gamer audience. For the new audience, the show’s narrative presents a much more straightforward argument in favor of Joel’s position within the final dilemma, as it narratively limits the philosophical options made available to them, mirroring the game’s denial of the choice to the player. By studying the adaptational changes and their implications on the story’s major philosophical dilemma through the lens of Individualism vs. Collectivism, this thesis further explores TLOU’s impact on the cyclical relationship between society and media.

Introduction

Released in 2013 to overwhelming critical acclaim, Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us* (TLOU) follows the story of gruff, reluctant father figure Joel Miller and his surrogate daughter figure Ellie, as they take a cross country road trip through what remains of America around twenty years after the outbreak of a zombie fungus pandemic known as Cordyceps. The game’s monumental success lies

partly in its enmeshment of narrative and form, fully utilizing the immersive interactivity of the video game medium in order to forge a radically empathetic relationship between player and protagonist. The game’s close relationship between medium and theme makes it particularly difficult to adapt, a challenge which was well met by Neil Druckmann and Craig Mazin, creative directors of the game’s 2023 nine episode TV adaptation.

Although the show stays largely loyal to the game's plot, it greatly expands the scope of the narrative, following not just the two primary playable characters, but further fleshing out the stories of the places they visit and the people they meet. [...]

Chapter 1 will examine the close relationship between the thematic storytelling of TLOU and its video game medium, particularly its effects on the set up and portrayal of the game's final philosophical dilemma—whether to save Ellie's life or let her die in the name of developing a vaccine cure to the zombie fungus. Notably, this moment breaks video game conventions about player agency within a narrative, as although they are in control of the character, the player is not in control of his actions or decisions. It emphasizes the game's overall focus on complete immersion and deep understanding between player and character by forcefully reminding players that they are experiencing Joel's story, not creating their own. This close entwining of medium and theme makes the game particularly challenging to adapt, as its narrative strengths pose its greatest adaptational challenges. Although the two mediums are similar in terms of structure and length, they most importantly differ in mode of engagement. Due to their interactivity games are deeply emotionally immersive but typically feature a limited point of view. Similarly due to its episodic nature, TV is far more suited to exploring multiple storylines and different perspectives on a theme or idea. The creators tackle this change in medium through expanding on the narrative of the game, adding new storylines and lore to flesh out the world of TLOU.

Chapter 2 will examine the game's 2023 TV adaptation, particularly focusing on how its creators take advantage of the difference between mediums to expand on the thematic storytelling of the original game. Although the two mediums are similar in terms of structure and length, they most importantly differ in mode of engagement. Due to

their interactivity games are deeply emotionally immersive but typically feature a limited point of view. Similarly due to its episodic nature, TV is far more suited to exploring multiple storylines and different perspectives on a theme or idea. The creators tackle this change in medium through expanding on the narrative of the game, adding new storylines and lore to flesh out the world of TLOU. Notably, these additions all address the same core thematic questions that arise from Joel's journey. This allows the show to consider these ideas with more nuance and from different perspectives, presenting a variety of different individuals and groups whose stories, for better or worse, acts as a foil for Joel. In doing so, the creators are able to maintain the story's focus on Joel and his personal narrative while adding a degree of openness towards thematic complexity which the game was less focused on exploring.

Chapter 3 will tie together the two previous chapters by examining how the different portrayals of the narrative change its philosophical implications and interpretations. The game's portrayal of the story results in an ending that pits the players' own moral ideals against the philosophical position of the show. The game's ending is fundamentally characterized by its denial of choice, presenting an unambiguously individualistic perspective on the final trolley problem-esque dilemma. Although the show's usage of parallels presents several interesting avenues of questioning for this framework, the subtle nature of this approach means that this added nuance ...largely ...benefit[s] those who experience the show as an adaptation. Where the show subtextually questions its own premises, its text largely embodies its inherited individualistic framework. In identifying and examining these implied frameworks, it is possible to consider the relationship between society and media and its implications during global crises such as the COVID 19 pandemic. [...]