

# EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE IN *THE LAST OF US*: EMOTIONS IN VIDEO GAMES, BETWEEN NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND PLAYER ALLEGIANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

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Playing a video game is generally considered to be an enjoyable experience. This assertion probably doesn't need support from academic literature, and yet, if we take a moment to think about our time playing video games, we will realize that in emotional terms it is an extraordinarily diverse and complex experience: a state of extreme excitement, in which our consciousness flows freely; rewarding, even when it is not necessarily delightful or successful. In fact, as Jesper Juul (2013: 42-43) points out, we experience failure with pleasure, in a curious paradox similar to other forms of fiction like literature and cinema.

Emotions, such as the player's enjoyment or vicarious responses to a character's pain, reflect the kind of narrative complexity found in works of fiction. The emotions elicited by a text—in this case, a video game text—are the product of narrative and aesthetic mechanisms and participatory

dynamics. We can see this in recent video games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Celeste* (Matt Makes Games, 2018), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), and *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), all of which feature complex characters whose emotional richness, often filled with contradictions, leads the player to make difficult and sometimes even morally reprehensible decisions. These characters, played by the players, convey emotions that are the result of a gameplay experience inseparable from the storyline.

For this study we have chosen the two aforementioned instalments of the game *The Last of Us*, because of the transformative arc experienced by their main characters, and the emotions that they can elicit from the player as a result. The questions we seek to answer are: How do we feel while we're playing a video game? What elements of a video game and a fiction narrative elicit emotions from us? A list of the emotions or the content



An anxious and claustrophobic moment in *The Last of Us*

thereof seems to us less relevant to this analysis than the formal relationships that trigger them. Our methodological approach will therefore draw mainly from film narratology. In other words, our aim is to deconstruct the appeal of *The Last of Us* as a video game text, particularly in relation to the characters' suffering and the player's aesthetic and ludic enjoyment.

### FROM CINEMATIC EMOTIONS TO VIDEO GAME EMOTIONS

In a video game narrative, as in other fiction forms, the characters express emotions that allow us to better understand their intentions and motivations. The consumers of these narrations can also experience emotions, sharing them with the characters, or even feeling them vicariously. In many video games, players are linked to a specific character with whom they experience the game; this character is known as the player character (Planells, 2015: 138).

The player character enables users to project themselves into the diegetic world of the game and to operate (play) within it. The immersive experience in the fiction world constitutes a context of experience and a source of emotions different from those of our everyday lives. We cross this threshold thanks to the character in whom we are embodied, i.e., who defines us as an entity in the game world. The configuration of this character is therefore essential to the emotional experience that the player gets from the game. In this sense, we are emotionally stimulated through the character. As Klevjer (2012: 21) suggests, in games involving an embodied character, the player discovers the fiction world not through the screen but with the screen, and therefore with the character, as if that character were a vehicle for exploring the story that conditions its reception. The emotions referred to here are not those of a real individual, but of a theoretical or ideal figure. In this sense, the receiver of a given text is defined as inscribed or placed in it, as the implied reader/

spectator/player (Anyó, 2016: 43-52), rather than as a specific or ethnographically considered individual, as would be the case in cultural studies, gender studies, or other fields closer to sociology and anthropology.

As a minimum definition, with room for nuance in each of the theories that have studied them, emotions refer to changes or alterations in an individual that at the same time involve states of consciousness, their content, as it were, and their physiological manifestations, or form. The relationship between content and form, and also their relationships with thought and with the world, is the focus of most theories that have sought to explain emotions. It seems important here to identify which emotion, at least etymologically, relates to movement, just as the movement of the player character is necessary in video games, often physically through the diegetic space, in order to activate the story.

Western thought in relation to the emotions, particularly since René Descartes' highly influential text *Les passions de l'âme* (1649), has been founded on the idea of a separation or opposition between emotion and reason. This notion, consolidated by Romanticism, relegates the emotions to the realm of the irrational, ungovernable and even arbitrary, as a kind of naturalist and intimist biological universal. This perspective was perpetuated by Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), and by the James-Lange Theory (1884-1890) asserting the inscrutably physiological origins of all emotions.

This theoretical viewpoint, supported by authors like Paul Ekman, Robert Plutchnik, and Carroll Izard, predominated throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was characterized by the production of numerous lists of emotions that are curiously diverse given their concern with a supposedly universal phenomenon unaffected by cultural diversity.<sup>1</sup> In the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the study of the emotions gradually broke away from this physiological determinism and biological universalism, as the introduction of a culturalist perspective began to recognize emotional diversity on the one hand, and the intimate link

between the faculties of reasoning and the perception of the emotions on the other, in the work of authors like António Damásio, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, R.I. Levy, Catherine Lutz, and Cheshire Calhoun & Robert C. Solomon (Surrallés i Calonge, 2000: 178-183).

In the field of film studies, by the 1970s or 1980s two basic schools of thought had emerged to explain the role

of emotions in relation to audiovisual media: the psychoanalytic perspective and the cognitivist perspective. To the psychoanalytic perspective we owe the concept of identification, which we believe essential for connecting narrative mechanisms to fictional emotions, while the cognitivist perspective places emotions in relation to knowledge, rather than in opposition to it. Nevertheless, both perspectives suffer from certain limitations. The psychoanalytic perspective in film studies, drawing mainly on Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, treats emotions as hidden, almost ineffable forces. Cognitivist theories, on the other hand,

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**IN THE FINAL DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE STUDY OF THE EMOTIONS GRADUALLY BROKE AWAY FROM THIS PHYSIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM AND BIOLOGICAL UNIVERSALISM, AS THE INTRODUCTION OF A CULTURALIST PERSPECTIVE BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE EMOTIONAL DIVERSITY ON THE ONE HAND, AND THE INTIMATE LINK BETWEEN THE FACULTIES OF REASONING AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE EMOTIONS ON THE OTHER**

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tend to overlook the diversity of human emotions, presenting them in the form of supposedly universal lists, with what we would argue is an excessive attention to content.

In our view, what is needed is not to compile lists of emotions, which in any case involves a minefield of subjectivities, but to analyse the narrative mechanisms and other devices that elicit them. The objective should not be so much to determine the content of emotions as to identify their narrative origins, their relationships with the story and the game, and their intensity, which is possible through a narratological analysis.

The cognitivist approach, as its name suggests, defines emotions on a rational basis—or to be more exact, in relation to conscious knowledge. In film studies, it is assumed that an understanding of cinematic emotions involves focusing on the intellectual component of the emotion, i.e., the spectator's evaluation of the object that unleashes it, in a process that entails changes in

physiology, mood, and thinking (Plantinga & Smith, 1999: 6).

Noël Carroll (2003: 66), one of the most emotions-oriented theorists in film studies, relates each emotion to a cognitive judgement or criterion associated with it. Thus, being harmful is the criterion for fear, misfortune is the criterion for sadness, etc. The basic point of Carroll's theory is the way in which the important events in a film have been predetermined on the emotional level by means of the mechanisms of film language that make the story being told emotionally meaningful to us. Films are thus emotively prefocused, because the emotions they evoke are governed by appropriate criteria, and this is something that can even be analysed by genre. For example, in horror films, fear is the prevailing emotion, provoked by the criterion of the danger or threat of harm, invariably of a fatal nature, accompanied by something disgusting, impure, or abominable (Carroll, 2003: 79).<sup>2</sup> All these emotions, and their

One of the terrifying clickers that populate *The Last of Us Part II*



appropriate categories, depend on the narrative structure and aesthetic given to the film: its cinematic form.

Although cognitivism's (and particularly Carroll's) contributions to the analysis of emotion in film have been extremely valuable, they can be criticised for two shortcomings. The first is a certain tendency towards the production of lists of emotions, prioritizing content over narrative mechanisms, with a perspective that once again falls prey to a kind of universalism. The second is a certain analytical vagueness in relation to cinematic form. Indeed, although Carroll explicitly states that emotions are prefocused by film language, and therefore their content derives from the film's form, this idea is not developed, as the focus is on emotions and their criteria of appropriateness. It is not possible to conduct a narratological analysis of the mechanisms for emotional construction, which we believe would be more revealing, without an analysis of audiovisual language itself.

In his study of the kinds of emotions associated with video games, Bernard Perron (2005) draws on film studies to propose three basic types. The first two are common to films as well, while the third is unique to video games. His first category is fiction emotions, or *F emotions*, characteristic of immersion in a fictional world that is experienced as real insofar as the player agrees to enter that world as a separate context of experience. Perron calls these "witness emotions" due to their vicarious nature, but they are emotions nonetheless. His second category of emotions, also shared with film, is that of artefact emotions, or *A emotions*, associated with the spectator's admiration for the narrative product as a product, for the artistry of its creation, and related to a fascination with the realism of its mimetic representation of the world. Finally, *G emotions*, or *gameplay emotions*, are exclusive to video games, resulting from the player's action in the fiction world, which has a direct effect on that world, altering it in one way

or another. While the first two types are passive emotions, the third is active. There is thus a direct relationship between the player's vicarious or witness emotions—*F emotions* and some *A emotions*—and that player's ability to deal with the challenges posed by the game—*G emotions*—since meeting those challenges, and moving forward in the story, depend on it.

On the other hand, Jonathan Frome (2007: 832-833; 2019: 859-862) uses two criteria: the player's role—which he divides into observer and actor, the first being similar to a film viewer while the second is unique to video games—and the type of emotion—divided into emotions associated with gameplay action, emotions associated with the narrative, characters, and dramatic situations, artefact emotions related to aesthetic enjoyment, and ecological emotions, which involve responses that are the same as those experienced in real life. Ecological emotions seem a somewhat fuzzy concept, mainly due to the lack of clarity on how they are distinguished from the other types—particularly after studies like those by Byron Reeves & Clifford Nass (1996) and Norbert Wiley (2003). There is a similar fuzziness to artefact emotions, which Perron suggests could be integrated into narrative emotions, given that they form part of the cinematic form.

## PLAYER CHARACTER AND EMOTION IN THE LAST OF US

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In the *The Last of Us* saga, there are several characters that we play, but only two that have clear leading roles. In the first game, Joel is the main player character, although in some stages we also play with Ellie (quite significantly, as will be discussed below); and in the second game, although we play with Joel for a short initial scene, and with Abby in several sequences, Ellie is the main protagonist. In the connection between game world and gameplay, the player character possesses a dual role: one constructed in narratological terms,

and the other as a vehicle for interactive gameplay, or what Burn & Schott describe as a “heavy hero” and a “digital dummy” (Burn & Schott, 2004: 213-233). Given the participatory nature of video games, the player character is at once a fictional and a functional embodiment of the player.

For Cuadrado, who compares films and video games in an effort to deconstruct the operation of the emotive process in each medium (2013: 158), the characters in a video game often have an instrumental function; they are vehicles for the game rules or for a series of actions available to the player to engage with the game world. The jump to the “dramatic character occurs when the character, in addition to being instrumental for a series of actions, acquires some of the qualities of a character from a film, play or book, a character with emotions, psychology, traits, etc.” (Cuadrado, 2013: 163).

In a narrative video game, the player character is the trigger, the force that sets the story in motion. Without the player character there is no story. How and where the player character acts has an impact on the narrative complexity. Britta Neitzel (2005: 238), drawing on the narratological categories posited by Gérard Genette, proposes the concept of “point of action” to refer to the player’s relationship of control over the game, and facilitates an analysis of the player character as the axis of the narration. But it is also necessary to consider point of view, the perspective from which information reaches the player. In audiovisual media, point of view referring to visual and auditory focalization needs to be separated from point of view with an exclusively cognitive value, i.e.,

ocularization and auricularization of focalization itself (Gaudreault & Jost, 1995: 139). The two video games analysed here are 3D games in which players control a specific player character—Joel, Ellie, or Abby—with a point of action that is intradiegetic, homodiegetic, and immediate. The perspective is in the third person, with the player’s view limited to a position behind the player character. The point of view thus never completely aligns with the character’s, although the character always serves as a point of reference. A strong bond is established with the avatar, permitting a much

more intense sense of immersion in the scene. The soundtrack reinforces this bond. In the gameplay, the sequence shots and spatial design of the setting, with automatic changes of framing that range from wide establishing shots to closer shots for confrontations in enclosed spaces and lab-

yrinthine passages, are key elements for eliciting emotions of terror and suspense. The frame itself and the space outside it both contribute to maintaining the emotional tension. It is also a game with certain time shifts, amplifying emotions associated with the pure narrative enjoyment resulting from gathering all the information necessary to understand a story presented in bits and pieces, as the narration sometimes switches from internal focalization, where the character and player share the same knowledge, to spectatorial focalization, where the player knows more than the character, and even external focalization, where the player knows less, as will be discussed below.

Fictional embodiment is the element that connects the player with the game world. The player character is a character immersed in a fiction



Some of the options that facilitate functional embodiment



The violent apocalyptic world that characterizes *The Last of Us Part II*

world and the protagonist of a specific story. He or she is the dramatic character, and it is here that narrative emotions come into play. Joel and Ellie are two characters living in a dystopian United States where a virus—a fungus called Cordyceps—has infected much of humankind, turning people into zombie-like creatures who, as the infection progresses, look increasingly revolting and become increasingly dangerous (“clickers” and “bloaters”). In addition to the virus, the surviving humans fight each other in armed battles, having split into rival factions, representing the government, rebel groups, cannibals, and religious sects. It is a wretched and threatening world, made repugnant by the monstrous appearance of the clickers, especially when a player’s lack of skill in the game results in the player character being bitten by one. And yet despite the danger posed by the Infected, the worst enemies of the surviving humans are actually other humans.

Functional embodiment or the instrumental function, on the other hand, is related to the gameplay dynamics, and this is where gameplay emotions are elicited. In this sense, based on their

production and consumers, the two games belong to the genre known as survival horror, and the player characters are configured within the range of basic functions of the genre. Joel, Ellie, and Abby allow players to explore scenes, look for tools, weapons, medicines, or resources, shoot at and attack enemies, sneak forward, escape, improve their weapons and materials, produce cures, open

doors, and drive vehicles. The essential dynamics are related to survival in scenarios with infected zombies and human enemies. The player characters thus offer options of attacking, acting stealthily, or fleeing, allowing us to progress in the game and to push the story forward. Both games set us an ultimate goal—to find the Fireflies in the first, and to find Abby in the second—which we advance towards by means of intermediate goals faced in each stage: fighting through a scene filled with the Infected, finding a character with key information, fleeing an ambush, looking for the gasoline that can be used to start a generator, etc. And all these goals are achieved with very limited resources. The gameplay thus maintains a ludonarrative balance with the game world.

There are very few gameplay moments when there is no looming threat of a sinister creature or a cruel enemy lurking behind a door or around a corner. Players are kept constantly on edge. It is easy to feel disgust at the revolting sight of a clicker’s bite, in addition to frustration, as it spells death for the player character. In the gameplay we also find emotions associated with mastery

and control, especially in relation to shooting dynamics, which we can improve as we practice and advance in the game. Getting through complicated armed confrontations unscathed or sneaking through a danger zone without being detected provokes emotions associated with overcoming difficult challenges and achieving goals. There are also emotions associated with the exploration of a scene, or the discovery of secret places, hidden resources, and other collectables.

The two categories of emotions can be separated for strictly analytical purposes. But when we play, *The Last of Us* intertwines the two. In the first instalment, the personal relationship between Joel and Ellie, and between the player and the two characters, gradually takes shape through the different cutscenes and through our efforts to overcome obstacles. Encounters with other characters have an impact on the emotional quality of human interactions, which is an ever-present theme. Put simply, a kind of father-daughter relationship is established between Joel and Ellie (Eichner, 2016). In the game's first moments, Joel defends Ellie in a cold, professional way, moving ahead to clear the Infected out of a particular area, for example. Later, in the museum in Chapter 3, in a cutscene Ellie and Joel stop to look at the views of the city from above, and Joel realizes that his feelings have changed. At the same time, we realize it as well: a frontal medium shot of the two, a reverse shot from behind them, so that we can also see the devastated but spectacular landscape, and finally a medium shot of Joel, with Ellie now outside the frame, while he looks thoughtfully,



One of the Infected attacks Ellie

perhaps reflecting for a brief moment on sometime in the past when his daughter was still alive. The shot frames him alone, and gentle extra-diegetic music accompanies this melancholy moment. Joel's brief distraction earns a reprimand from Tess, which we receive, as players connected to Joel. It is worth noting that this emotively prefocused moment (to use Carroll's terminology) comes after long hours of gameplay with Joel, consolidating our relationship with the character at least in instrumental or functional terms.

Tess' sacrifice when she is bitten and infected, Bill's opinion that survival takes precedence over friendship (a viewpoint that Joel doesn't share), the list of collectibles that Ellie carries with her (objects of emotional value to her), Sam's death just as his friendship with Ellie is beginning, the suicide of Sam's brother Henry, and the relationship with Joel's brother Tommy are all different episodes in a plot centred or focused on personal relationships and their emotional content of rage, calm, guilt, forgiveness, trust, anxiety, fear, or grief.

By the time they're driving to Pittsburgh in the pick-up truck, the empathy between Joel and



Ellie has become complete. Ella admits to having taken some things of Bill's (magazines and other belongings) without permission, leading to a typically father-daughter interaction about one magazine that Joel insists she should not be looking at because of its erotic content. However, the relationship between Joel and Ellie is often rocky. In Chapter 7, for example, Ellie laments that "everyone I cared for has either died or left me. Everyone [...] except for you," to which Joel, bitter over their disagreement and his own past, replies: "You're right; you're not my daughter and I sure as hell ain't your dad." This conversation, in a cutscene, is presented in a medium close-up with shots and reverse shots between the two characters, until the devastating remark by Joel, who is shown alone in the frame. Once again, the cinematic form of the cutscenes prefocuses the emotional content through some well-executed direction.

Although a game like this offers us a solid plotline with a clear dramatic progression and transformative character arcs for the protagonists, there is more to it than this. Our emotional connection is not sustained solely by the cinematic form, but also by the instrumental function or functional embodiment of the characters. In Chapter 8, to cite one of many examples, the battle against the Infected is exciting for its balance between the level of difficulty it poses and the skills in weapons use, stealth, marksmanship, etc., that we have learned in the previous hours of play along the way. Our engagement with Joel is not unrelated to these skills we have learned, which if applied effectively will help us to survive and to keep progressing in the adventure, but also to keep taking care of Ellie.

### **ALLEGIANCE AND EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE**

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Many video games, especially in the graphic adventure genre, have markedly linear narrative structures, and thus the interactive dimension

affects how easily players advance through the narrative more than the structure of the narrative itself. This is what has been labelled progressive narration (Juul, 2005: 71-72), for which the two *The Last of Us* games provide good examples that can be analysed in the same way as screenplays, according to the schematic paradigm of a plotline divided into two turning points and three acts, as explored previously in relation to the first instalment by Àngel Colom & Lluís Anyó (2015). In this case, complexity, although inherited from traditional narrative, is found in the relationship between narration and gameplay.

In video games, players have a central role in the development of the plot, which conditions their experience in the fiction world, a learning process that ideally provides a balance between failure and success. The relationship between the player's extradiegetic actions and the character's intradiegetic actions can be classified as identification.

The foundations of psychoanalytic theory in film are found mainly Edgar Morin's work on affective participation (Morin, 2011), Jean-Louis Baudry's double identification (Baudry, 1978) and, most influential of all, Christian Metz's primary and secondary identification (Metz, 2001). In short, this understanding of identification in cinema involves considering it in relation to the very act of viewing, in a blurring between the viewing subject and the cinematic device that makes such viewing possible. This identification occurs through every aspect of film language, from framing to editing, and affords the spectator a ubiquitous viewing experience and safe enjoyment that is to a large extent voyeuristic and fetishistic. This primary identification results in a secondary identification, related to the diegetic content and, in particular, the characters who drive the story. It is important to note that this secondary level of identification related to content is always mediated and conditioned by primary identification, which is essentially related to the formal mechanisms that narrate the story.

In the field of Game Studies, engagement is considered an essential defining characteristic of the player, in terms of the player's active role in the development of the plot. In this sense, we can differentiate between engagement and immersion. The latter, which has been the subject of extensive theoretical analysis in literary, film, and new media studies, including pioneering work by Murray (1999: 111) and Ryan (2004: 117), refers to a diegetic dimension. However, in video games, the extradiegetic dimension of immersion, which McMahan calls "engagement" (2003: 69), is also of special importance.

Murray Smith, an author who could be assigned to the cognitivist school, reviews the concept of identification in film psychology in depth, and proposes the alternative concept of engagement, whose main characteristic is the spectator's rational and ideological distance from the text, rather than his or her unconscious submission. Engagement is divided into three levels (Smith, 1995: 81-86): recognition, of the characters by the spectator, based on the textual form; alignment, which marks the spectator's relationship with one or more characters; and finally, allegiance, which

Ellie and Joel



is the spectator's moral and affective agreement with the character.

Although engagement may seem conceptually very close to identification, the essential difference lies in the fact that from the cognitivist perspective, contrary to the psychological view, the move from alignment to allegiance—in other words, the move from primary to secondary identification—is a conscious, evaluative process.

Víctor Navarro, also taking a cognitivist perspective, explores the question of player motivation. He finds an answer in theorists like Stéphane Bura and Jesper Juul, who argue that the player plays to feel emotions, not to complete levels (Navarro, 2015: 68). Then, based on Aki Järvinen, Navarro proposes an emotional design model for video games based on emotions as positive or negative evaluations. Emotions are the result of the conscious recognition of an agent, an event, or an object, which provokes a reaction and sets up the action. According to Järvinen, the game creates a provocative or triggering situation that incites player action and establishes uncertainty as to whether the goal can be achieved. Navarro's model, although somewhat mechanistic, is interesting

for the central role of responsibility for the narrative given to the player. However, this role is not exclusive, as the player's actions, which push the story forward, depend on textual triggers, i.e., formal strategies of video game language that can be analysed. Of less interest in our view is his list of emotions (Navarro, 2015: 74-75), very typical of universalist theories, although the author

himself questions its viability and highlights its limitations.

As can be seen, Carroll's concept of emotive prefocusing is similar to that of the provoking or triggering condition, the first being passive and applicable to cinema and the second being active and applicable to video games. Both are conscious and are found in the audiovisual text. Antonio José Planells refers to a similar conscious process when he connects intention and motivation. An action in a video game, carried out by the player (i.e., the player character), such as shooting or hitting, will be associated with an immediate intention, such self-defence or killing an enemy, and a more general or distant motivation, such as obtaining a diegetic or extradiegetic reward (Planells, 2015: 135).

Complexity in video games therefore cannot be judged solely in terms of their narrative content, but should also consider their processes, the

active learning that the player must undertake to direct the player character and, in so doing, direct the narration. This is the "full experiential flow", as Torben Grodal calls it, the experience of learning the procedures in a video game that differentiates it most from other narrative forms like cinema (Grodal, 2003: 148-149) and that culminates with the feeling of *fiero*, the term given to the pride we feel after a triumph (Andrews, Bradbury & Crawford, 2020). If we focus on the idea of engagement, it is clear that Joel and Ellie are the player characters who receive our moral and affective support from the outset. In the case of the first game, Joel and Ellie form a team and have the same ultimate goal: to find the Fireflies. Thus, in Chapter 9, after a violent confrontation in which Joel is seriously wounded, we shift to controlling Ellie at the Lakeside Resort without knowing whether the character of Joel is still alive; there is no disruption, only

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**COMPLEXITY IN VIDEO GAMES CANNOT BE JUDGED SOLELY IN TERMS OF THEIR NARRATIVE CONTENT, BUT SHOULD ALSO CONSIDER THEIR PROCESSES**

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a restrained emotion of uncertainty about Joel's condition, and perhaps an emotion of enjoyment thanks to a narrative ellipsis that will keep us on edge for a long time due to this change in focalization, from internal to spectatorial, through parallel editing. In this case, it could be argued that on the emotional level, the player characters are largely interchangeable, as they possess the same general motivation, and the procedures learned with one can serve us when we control the other. This narrative fragment, with cutscenes and gameplay, cuts back and forth between Ellie and Joel, both of whom are player characters with the same goal: to find each other again. While Ellie tries to flee from David, the leader of the cannibal group, Joel is searching for her. Our allegiance to

both player characters is total, as their goals are practically the same in instrumental and dramatic terms. The cross-cutting scenes end with a cutscene where they finally

meet, after Ellie has killed David with a rage that is wild but justified under the circumstances, and Joel embraces her and consoles her. The extradiegetic sound is gentle, calm music, while the diegetic sound stops and, on-screen in several close-ups, the two characters remain locked in their embrace. The emotional ambivalence, with the coexistence of two or more opposing emotions, comes later in this case, when in the final chapter, Joel (as the player character) saves Ellie from being killed in the operating room. After an ellipsis, Ellie asks Joel what happened. Joel lies, telling her that there are a lot of people like her who are immune to the virus, but that she wasn't of any use for the vaccine, while we see a flashback of the difficult decision he took to kill Marlene in order to save Ellie, while at the same time giving up the chance to obtain a vaccine. In the end, for a fleeting moment, Ellie is the player character, perhaps

because we need to be distanced from Joel, who has made a morally complex, even reprehensible decision. The player's allegiance may possibly be affected by this decision. As players, witnessing this moment as spectators, we cannot help but wonder what we would have done in his place, what decision we would have made.

In the case of the second game, emotional ambivalence, with the strategy of changing the player character, forms a central part of the narrative and the gameplay from the outset. Regardless of whether we have played the first game or not, our allegiance is directed at Ellie and Joel. In the first stages of the game we naturally control Ellie and (briefly) Joel. But soon the first moment of disengagement occurs. In Chapter 1, in Jackson, in the stage at the overlook, we control an unknown character with whom we have not developed any level of engagement. In this case, it is not a matter of player choice, as it is imposed by the game. There is no way to give up control of the character in question if we want to advance in the game. Later

we will discover that this unknown character is Abby and that while we were controlling her in the game, what we were really doing was taking her to Joel so that she could kill him. We will control this character again on numerous occasions, and with different emotional responses, always aware that she is Joel's killer and that Ellie wants revenge. While the first time we control her the most prominent emotion is uncertainty, a kind of external focalization where we don't know exactly what is going on, the second time the emotion that emerges is contradictory. After we see Abby kill Joel, several hours of gameplay pass in the stages in Seattle where we only control the character of Ellie, with whom we have reinforced our engagement after Joel's murder. As a result, the change of player character to Abby constitutes a blow to our renewed allegiance.

Our first contact with Abby as a player character after Joel's death may elicit feelings of rejection, but such rejection has to be absorbed and at least partially overcome in order to keep playing,

The fight between Abby and Tommy



as once again, we will not be able to advance in the game without Abby. And we are obliged to do so for hours. In this way, as we get to know the character better, our engagement with her increases. And although we may never come to accept Joel's murder, as we progress in Abby's story we will begin to develop empathy for the character. The moment that perhaps best exemplifies this occurs in Chapter 8 at the port in Seattle, when we are playing with Abby and, together with a companion, we are trying to hunt down a sniper who is shooting at us. During the gameplay, we try to dodge the bullets while the Infected appear in our way. This is a somewhat difficult stage where, due to the game dynamics, we quickly become eager to get rid of the sniper so that we can get past it. When at last we reach the sniper, he kills our companion and ambushes us. At this moment, we discover that the sniper is Tommy, Joel's brother and Ellie's friend, and thus part of a group that we were emotionally aligned with. After a body-to-body struggle, Tommy falls into the water and flees. From the player's perspective we identify his face, but the character of Abby does not recognize him because her back is turned. This spectatorial focalization results in ambivalence. We therefore experience different points of view, while feeling uncertainty because we don't know which player character we will continue the story with.

## NARRATIVE AND VIDEO GAME COMPLEXITY

The narrative act, so transparent in classical cinema, holds a problematic status in post-classical cinema. Narrativity (De Felipe & Gómez, 2008: 204), multiplexity (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2009: 69) and the mind-game film (Elsaesser, 2013) all display a taste for narrative complexity that has become a clear feature of contemporary audiovisual production. The idea of breaking away from a simplistically dualist conception of good and evil, and the desire to give a voice to diffe-

rent groups in order to offer a more plural, complex, and ambiguous explanation, are very much a part of cinema today. We have also seen it in the changes of point of view, point of action, and player character focalization in *The Last of Us*, which leads us as players into a state of emotional ambivalence.

In this case, narrative complexity is founded on player engagement, which is the result of the relationship between the different active and passive emotions, associated with the narrative and with the gameplay. Our allegiance to the player character has two dimensions. It cannot be dissociated from the way in which sound and image, in both the cutscenes and the game, directs our attention and interest, in an emotive prefocusing that fosters engagement through gameplay emotions and the goals shared by player and character. At the same time, this allegiance, which is also constructed through film language and the story, is intertwined with our learning of the skills needed to progress in the game and in the story. ■

## NOTES

- 1 For a review of these debates, see: Le Breton (1999: 163-194); Surrallés i Calonge (2000: 175-177).
- 2 This idea is explored extensively by Carroll (1990).

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## EMOTIONAL AMBIVALENCE IN THE LAST OF US. EMOTION IN VIDEO GAMES, BETWEEN NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY AND PLAYER LOYALTY

### Abstract

This article offers an exploration of complexity through a narratological analysis of video game emotions, considered in two dimensions: the first related to audiovisual language strategies; and the second associated with gameplay. The objects of study are the two instalments in the video game saga *The Last of Us*. Emotions may be pre-focused in the cinematic form, and they may also be the result of an evaluative process. But in addition to these cinematic emotions, we also consider gameplay emotions, which are based on the playable nature of video game narratives and player engagement, as players experience a wide range of emotions by virtue of their allegiance to the player character. This allegiance is prone to ambivalence and contradiction due to the game's narrative complexity and its content, the story, as demonstrated by the strategies used in *The Last of Us* associated with point of view and point of action.

### Key words

Cinema; Video Games; Emotions; Engagement; Ambivalence; Player-avatar; Complexity; Narratology.

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## AMBIVALENCIA EMOCIONAL EN THE LAST OF US. LAS EMOCIONES EN LOS VIDEOJUEGOS, ENTRE LA COMPLEJIDAD NARRATIVA Y LA LEALTAD DEL JUGADOR

### Resumen

Se propone aquí pensar la complejidad a través del análisis narratológico de las emociones videolúdicas, que tendrán una dimensión doble, la primera más relacionada con los recursos del lenguaje audiovisual y la segunda más vinculada al *gameplay*. Se analizarán en detalle los dos títulos de la saga *The Last of Us*. Las emociones podrán estar prefocalizadas en la forma fílmica y, también, podrán ser resultado de un proceso evaluativo. Pero además de esas emociones fílmicas, atenderemos a las emociones del *gameplay*, por el carácter jugable de la narrativa videolúdica, y al compromiso del jugador que, en forma de lealtad al personaje jugador, vinculará gran número de emociones. Esta lealtad no está exenta de ambivalencias y contradicciones, por la propia complejidad narrativa y su contenido, la historia, como se demuestra en *The Last of Us* y sus recursos vinculados a cambios en el punto de vista y el punto de acción.

### Palabras clave

Cine; Videojuegos; Emociones; Compromiso; Ambivalencia; Personaje jugador; Complejidad; Narratología.

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