



THE LAST OF US PART II:

NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us Part II*. [digital game]. Tokyo, San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.

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Before its release, it was considered as one of the most (if not the most) anticipated digital games of recent years, and the postponed release date amplified fans' expectations even more. After its launch, it quickly became the most acclaimed game of the year, but also at the same time the most discussed game of 2020. *The Last of Us Part II*, the long-awaited sequel of the game that rightfully belongs to digital-gaming milestones with a guaranteed future place in the Hall of Fame of digital games, shook up the gaming world as well, but this time in a slightly different way. By way of introduction, it is necessary to note that it is essentially impossible to review this game without avoiding serious spoilers in the following text.

Firstly, the overall audio-visual experience is certainly less debatable, following the aesthetics of the first game so faithfully that the 7-year gap separating them almost completely disappears. Fluent transitions and continuity of quality between gameplay and cutscenes again make from the game a highly intensive interactive cinematic experience. Of course, in order for the sequel to bring something new and attractive some features were upgraded, such as movement options (crawling), arsenal, and enemies (guard dogs, Shamblers, the Rat King, etc.). Illustrating animations were also updated, are more frequent, and contain more stunning details. In particular the weapon modification process is no longer as empty as before.

The more problematic perceived elements of this game are related to its story. In general, *The Last of Us Part II* is designed for a different audience than other zombie-like post-apocalyptic games. The concept uses the 'zombie' theme secondarily rather as a metaphor (even political) for chaos and decay in society, and in the spirit of *The Witcher* games, true monsters are mostly humans who have survived and live in such a world. Unlike the first game, which was aside from other issues dealing with a possible cure for humanity, in the case of Part II, a separation from the zombie leitmotif is more noticeable. The attention is almost solely focused on the characters' inner frame of mind as well as the individual ways they settle with their outer existence, and then furthermore the relationships between characters.

The overall narrative of both games is actually built in a cycle. The first game shows how loss can lead to new hope, love, or even a new life in a ruined, dangerous world. On the contrary, the second game shows how a blinded, stubborn desire for revenge leads to aimless violence and consequently to the loss of everything that still has value and is rare in such a world. This includes the fingers needed to play the guitar – the very last remaining connection which exists with a deceased loved one. There were several moments at which the game could end to make it less confusing, or evoke mixed emotions; however, this was the purpose. Not another happy ending but ambivalent feelings from the reality emerging from the game. This is exactly what can be expected from the artwork, the design of which artistically generates deeper meanings than the design of common pop-culture blockbusters.

It became a stumbling-block that resulted in the staggering dissonance of the game ratings – it scored 93 of 100 in critics' reviews, but users scored it as only 5.6 out of 10 on Metacritic. Most reviews point out that negative ratings came from three groups of users – those who had been a priori indignant based on the officially released as well as leaked information about the narrative even before playing the game themselves, those who played the game only as far as a specific sequence (Joel's death), and those who finished the game but did not understand it, nor its intended meaning.

Another reason could be the fact that *The Last of Us Part II* is designed as if according to a criteria checklist of the currently most significant pop-cultural trends as positively evaluated by critics. It is not just about gender equilibrium, retained in the game even on the zombie level – male and female infected are distinguished. Particularly it is a representation of LGBTQ+ concerning the main characters – Ellie, the strong lesbian female without exaggerated feminine shapes in line with the current appearance of Lara Croft, and Abby, the muscular female originally considered as transgender based on the released trailers. From other aspects present in the game, which are also critically evaluated not only in relation to digital games, there is a balance of genders, races, and ethnicity in both leadership and support roles, representation of various faiths and religions, and more naturalistic violence (based on the trending penetration of the exploitation genre and an 'R' rating in the mainstream). Complicated (interracial) relationships around the main character are a relevant example of the integration of the mentioned components – Ellie's current girlfriend (partner), Dina, a Jewish female with obvious features of the Middle-East ethnicity, is at the same time pregnant by Jesse, her Asian ex-boyfriend.

The adaptation to popular trends presupposes a positive response from interest groups of the audience as well as critics, which could be seen for example in the results of recent years at the Academy Awards. On the other hand, such adjustments tend to be conspicuous, even acting unnaturally (or comically). At present, this oversaturation is already evoking some boomerang effects, which we can observe in several current Hollywood box-office bombs.

In conclusion, while *The Last of Us* metaphorically ended the era of the PlayStation 3 (and 7th generation game consoles in general) and became a timeless artefact, *The Last of Us Part II* symbolically ended the era of the PlayStation 4 (and 8th generation game consoles), but whether players will take her on grace, will be evident over time.

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