



THE LAST OF US (TV SERIES)

MAZIN, G., DRUCKMANN, N. (Created by): *The Last of Us*. [VOD]. New York, NY : HBO Max, 2023.

Zdenko Mago

“At the end of the day, there are people out there that will never pick up the controller, and they will never experience the story. And I think our story is special enough to bring it to them”.¹

- Neil Druckmann

The critically acclaimed multi-award-winning digital game franchise, the titles of which belongs to the best-selling and generally the most successful games for a given platform in history, may seem like an ideal subject for a television adaptation but, at the same time, a considerable challenge to represent the story in a new format to a new audience to at least fulfil if not exceed the already high expectations. It is even more difficult with an awareness that every detail will be under the strict scrutiny of gamers and fans. The TV adaptation of the game series *Halo*² faced something similar in 2022.

The game *The Last of Us*³ from 2013 is one of the most popular and most recognized PlayStation games, so the TV adaptation process had to proceed very carefully and precisely. This was ensured by the production by Sony Pictures Television and PlayStation Productions and also by the engagement of several creators of the original game, especially its writer N. Druckmann and music composer G. Santaolalla. The approach to the adaptation had a clear philosophy: to faithfully preserve the original game story but to predominantly devote more space to the events that were not developed in the game, particularly those that concern the main characters but took place between chapters or the background stories of secondary characters. In this way, another human dimension was added, making the adaptation more dramatic and, in some scenes (e.g., a talk show with epidemiologists, a consultation of a strange case with a mycology professor), also disturbingly realistic. It thus brings an intensive experience to viewers non-familiar with the game and, at the same time, expands the original game story experience for loyal fans.

A significant benefit was that the DLC *Left Behind*⁴ for the first game, as well as the sequel *The Last of Us Part II*⁵ had already been released, so the TV series creators could already consider these games and even adapt some parts into the overall picture (or incorporate DLC into the main story immediately). This is the reason why in the series, we

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- 1 DENEHY, B., SONTAG, K. R. (Produced by): *Making of 'The Last of Us'*. [VOD]. New York, NY : HBO Max, 2023.
 - 2 BUNGIE et al.: *Halo (series)*. [digital game]. Redmond, WA : Microsoft Game Studios, Microsoft Studios, Xbox Game Studios, 2001-2021.; KILLEN, K., KANE, S. (Created by): *Halo*. [VOD]. New York, NY : Paramount+, 2022.
 - 3 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013.
 - 4 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us: Left Behind*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Computer Entertainment, 2014.
 - 5 NAUGHTY DOG: *The Last of Us Part II*. [digital game]. San Mateo, CA : Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2020.

were able, for example, to visit the city of Jackson, only seen in the distance in the game, and also to briefly get a first look at some characters like Dina, who will be more important in the future.

A certain sobriety was noticeable in terms of the genre treatment as well. While in digital games, genre hybridization is ordinary and often necessary to design an abundant interactive experience, in this regard, the TV adaptation was more fluent and straightforward. Individual episodes were more dedicated to the dominant genre, so the audience could absorb content more easily and maintain continuous immersion during the longer period of weekly episodic experiences. Basically, it is the same system of sequential construction as in digital games, but within the gameplay, it runs more smoothly due to the higher frequency. In summary, while the game was an intensive action adventure with survival horror elements, in the TV adaptation, only the action and horror sequences necessary to preserve the storyline were kept, so the genre gradually settled on a kind of road-movie drama. However, in combination with the approach 'beyond the cut of the game' and an almost unbelievable attention to game design details – from the main characters' wardrobes to the fictional movie posters and the appearance of the world destroyed by the infection – it actually worked.

In terms of the current trends in media production within which, among others, emphasis is placed on a balanced representation of gender and gender identity, races/ethnicities (several changes in casting contrary to the game were obvious in this regard), cultures, and sexual orientation, it was a certain advantage that the game *The Last of Us* has always been LGBTQIAP+ communities friendly, and not only because the main protagonist Ellie is one of the most famous homosexual digital game characters and one of the few such characters that are also playable.⁶ Unlike games like RPGs, in which the player often has an opportunity to choose their own sexual identity as well as the subject of their romantic interest (e.g., the *Mass Effect* series), in the case of *The Last of Us*, Ellie's sexual orientation is default by the game story. This issue could thus be further elaborated more naturally.

The TV adaptation further enhanced this aspect with the casting of Bella Ramsey, who identifies as nonbinary regarding her gender identity, into the role of Ellie and with two episodes focused on tragic queer love stories, which evoked conflicting opinions and reviews. Episode 3 depicted the fate of the secondary characters Bill and Frank, and significantly differed from the game (they did not romantically die together, in the game, Frank left Bill because he was refusing to leave Lincoln). Episode 7 becomes important for Ellie's character portrayal, depicting a flashback to her past and particularly to a key event in her personal (also game) past. It included not only the moment she was bitten, leading to the discovery of her immunity to the fungal infection and acquiring the undesirable position of humanity's possible saviour, but also the admission of her sexual orientation, both fundamental for the future character development.

The critics indicated that both episodes were narratively unnecessary and thus could be skipped without missing the point of the main plot.⁷ It perhaps might be partially understandable in Episode 3, basically created based only on a note from the game that the player did not have to even discover while playing the game, but as already mentioned, it was in line with the approach to this adaptation – to focus as much as possible

6 Remark by the author: In the first game, *The Last of Us*, Ellie is a playable character only in one part since Joel is the main protagonist but the only playable character in the game's DLC *Left Behind*. Subsequently, she is the main playable character in the sequel *The Last of Us Part II*.

7 JOHNSTON, D.: *The Last of Us Episode 7 Proves Episode 3's Worst Critics Are Wrong*. Released on 27th February 2023. [online]. [2023-05-18]. Available at: <<https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/last-of-us-episode-7-defense-of-flashbacks>>.

on events which were not directly developed in the game. Although it is worth considering whether the intentional intervention in the fate of Bill, which is contrary to the game's story, caused 'more harm than good', possibly setting a double-edged precedent for the next series. Regarding Episode 7, it adapted the quite extensive DLC for the first game, titled *Left Behind*, set within the main storyline and narrated events between original chapters, not as a spin-off. In addition, even though it was 'just' DLC, against strong competition it was able to win the category Story at the 11th British Academy Games Awards in 2015 (just like *The Last of Us* the year before), so some opinions about narrative irrelevance or emptiness are out of place here. Paradoxically, this episode achieved lower ratings on average than episode 3, so, in this case, non-fulfilment of the game fans' expectations from this part of the story had to play some role. For example, the emotional climax of DLC, when Ellie, with her eyes closed, was imagining playing a broken arcade game while her friend (and latent love interest so far) Riley was describing the gameplay to imagine, was missing in the TV episode.⁸

Overall, it seems that the TV adaptation of *The Last of Us* can maintain its renown for a long time and thus become a worthy alternative to the original interactive experience for viewers. Although it must be emphasized, so far, the series has only been based on the 'less problematic' first game and its DLC, so the real challenge for the TV series creators is still ahead. We will see how N. Druckmann and C. Mazin will deal with managing the second, more controversial part (already announced as being divided into two series) and eventually, as in the case of Bill, whether they will have enough courage to change its most criticized aspect,⁹ and thus perhaps even the entire fate of this adaptation.

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8 Remark by the author: The impact of mentioned media production trends was subsequently more prominently present in the game sequel.; For more information, see the review: MAGO, Z.: *The Last of Us Part II*. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2020, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 87-88.

9 Ibidem.

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