Mapping LGBTQ+ centred controversy in the video games industry

Uncovering the interplay between controversy, LGBTQ+ representation, and crisis communication

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ABSTRACT

The video games industry has been at the centre of many polarized debates. From those debates controversies can sometimes arise, yet video game companies fail to prepare for successfully tackling controversy. A cultural movement is slowly growing within the games industry and challenging the long-held norm of catering to and representing the desires of the cisgender, white male. With the inclusion of historically marginalised publics within video game content, controversy is bound to happen because of the choice to challenge the dominant game culture through content. This is also exactly what took place when the video game The Last of Us Part II was released by game developer Naughty Dog, and a digitally born controversy developed. By researching the publics involved, and the stances they take within the LGBTQ+ centred controversy, foundational information can be revealed about issues within games and among gamers as well as how companies tackle such debates. Thereby the following main research question has led the research paper: "How do different stances taken by actors as a reaction to a LGBTQ+ themed video game controversy construct (reactive) public relations approaches by studios?". Through the application of discursive controversy mapping and analysis of an online controversy, different publics and actors stemming from different corners of the video games industry have been revealed to partake in the debates surrounding The Last of Us Part II. In order to map a significant part of the controversy several data sources were used, such as Reddit, articles written by game journalists, and interviews. With the publics' appearance onto the map also came the interconnections that showed interaction among and between video game industry professionals, game journalists, and the video games community. The actors, which usually stemmed from these aforementioned publics, took stances within the ongoing debates that displayed larger issues at play, both linked to the controversy as well as the video games industry overall. Furthermore, while the controversy was unfolding Naughty Dog's crisis communication strategy did not align with the communication of its employees on social media. This begged the further question how contradicting communication during an online crisis impacts the image and reputation of the company.

KEYWORDS: *Controversy, Video games industry, Controversy mapping, Crisis communication, LGBTQ+ representations*

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1. Introduction

1.1 The video games industry and its debates

With its seventy-year life span the video games industry is not shy of being at the centre of many polarized discussions. The entrance of the new medium into the market, as with most new digital media, was the ignition of the many public debates to come (Karlsen, 2014; Prot et al., 2012). The video games industry is a complex one, with diverse audiences, producers, and products making an impact socially, culturally, economically, and at the same time globally.

Over the years (academic) discussions about the industry have focused on the effects, whether psychological, physical, or social, of video games. Research has thereby ranged from the products' influence on violent behaviour, (mental) health, and gender norm impacts to research on gaming culture and what it, as well as the gamer, actually encompass (Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Shaw, 2009). Academia is not the sole aficionado on discussions about what video games are or what they should be. Differing opinions are neither lacking among the consumers and industry professionals. Throughout the years a fair share of controversies in the industry arose, as a result of these debates (Jones et al., 2013; Prot et al., 2012). One of the most well-known and long spanning ones being Gamergate, which started off as addressing problems found in ethics of gaming journalism but ended up being a central point of harassment and sexism within the industry and its community (Dowling et al., 2020; Elliot, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Perreault & Vos, 2018). Gamergate played a central role in the voicing of toxicity within gaming culture itself, further opening up issues or controversy in the industry (Elliot, 2018; Gray et al., 2017).

The recent "blitzchung controversy", linked to Hong-Kong protests of 2019-2020, also showed that subjects of debate do not solely remain social but can extend into the political sphere (Clark, 2019; Falcão et al., 2020; Watts, 2019). Even though the content and products the industry creates might reflect and impact society as well as political issues, the games industry is simultaneously famous for its avoidance of discussion on political topics (Campbell, 2018). However when crises like these arise, the video game companies affected are sometimes forced to take action and respond. The "sub-genre" of public relations, namely crisis communication, therefore plays an important role in these type of situations, whether political or not. Yet, there shows to be a lack of research that focuses on the industry as a unique entity which needs its own set of strategies in handling communication when controversy arises.

1.1.1 *Debates surrounding the LGBTQ+ community*

Since video games are home to consumers and producers of different identities, a much-debated subject is that of what these products should or should not entail. Within that debate is the concept of representation. Representation is a broad subject however, spanning throughout the gaming audience, game content, and the employees that create it. It can touch upon concepts of gender, sexuality, or marginalization and has proved to be a complex issue within the industry over the past decades (Krobová et al., 2015; Ruberg, 2019; Shaw, 2012).

A stereotype that impacted much of the representation in the industry was that of the video game consumer being white, young, heterosexual, and male, however years of academic research have proven the opposite (Gestos et al., 2018; Shaw, 2009, 2017; Williams et al., 2009). While the assumption of the video game audience necessarily adhering to the aforementioned stereotype has caught on, the vision of the gamer being white, male and heterosexual has nestled itself deeply in the industry. Several research papers touch upon this issue and will be elaborated upon further in the theoretical framework. The LGBTQ+ community plays a key role in this issue however, as this is one of the marginalized groups that is historically mis- and underrepresented in the gaming media both in aspects of content and employment.

The Last of Us Part II is a fairly recent case of controversy surrounding an LGBTQ+ central video game. *The Last of Us Part II* is a triple A video game developed by Naughty Dog and was the focus of the research, because of its generation of online public debate. Triple A is an informal classification within the industry, which refers to the game's (relatively large) budget and publication by a well-established studio or publisher. The game, an awaited sequel to "The Last of Us", was released in the summer of 2020 and received a lot of, positive and negative, attention from professionals in the video games industry and gamers alike (Hernandez, 2020). This case was used for the thesis project as a potential interconnection of several relevant concepts could be uncovered through its research, further discussed in the next paragraph.

1.2 Societal and academic relevance

Besides there being a minimal amount of research on controversy within the video games industry (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Massanari, 2017), there seems to be a gap in knowledge addressing how such controversy and the publics within highlight issues of representation. In addition there is also little to no research on how controversy impacts public relations practices, like crisis communication, within the video games industry. With

companies in the industry being careful to avoid discussion of political issues, it created an interesting opportunity to study a recent controversy surrounding a video game that addresses social issues and representations. A research project focused on controversy gives insight into the different actors partaking in the debate, potentially revealing sources of what causes and who is involved in the debate. By gaining insight into the who, what and where of the controversy, foundational information could be revealed about issues within games and among gamers as well as how companies tackle such debates. Taking this into account, the following main research question has been formed

"How do different stances taken by actors as a reaction to a LGBTQ+ themed video game controversy construct (reactive) public relations approaches by studios?"

Researching how different groups react to certain issues within a game could inform the video game industry of potential future problems, what publics might be involved, how to react and what strategies to form, as well as what to improve in their products in order to adapt to the public's needs. In addition, a case like *The Last of Us Part II* which was fully sparked and developed online can bring new knowledge onto the table in regard to what actors become actively involved in the controversy, and how they react to it. In order to gain a better understanding of the issue, and enable a more substantial answer to the main research question, two sub-research questions were formed. The first one highlights the importance of bringing the involved publics onto the map and is formed as follows *"Who are the different actors within the video game controversy?"*. The second sub-question goes deeper into the subject of the marginalized LGBTQ+ community that plays an important role in previously established literature about the industry as well as in the case study itself. The reactions to the inclusion of major LGBTQ+ characters can inform both the industry as well the academics of a leading discourse surrounding this community in the video games industry. The second sub-research question is therefore *"How are LGBTQ+ representations discussed within the controversy?"*.

1.3 Thesis structure

In the following section, the thesis will continue with a theoretical framework where concepts central to the research will be discussed. The concepts touched upon will explore the LGBTQ+ community's role in the video games industry, controversy in its theoretical and methodological form as linked to the mapping method, and crisis communication within the frame of public relations. All concepts are crucial to discuss due to their importance and interconnectedness within the thesis.

The method section will followingly discuss the design of the research, and further address the choices made when collecting and analysing the data. Because of the use of (discursive) controversy mapping as a method, the research had to remain flexible during data collection from different digital sources in order to map a significant amount of the controversy for multiple actors and issues to be found.

Consecutively the results section will be split up into two parts. The first part will focus on the publics and actors involved in the controversy, while the second part discusses the issues which caused conflict between the heterogeneous actors and thus played a central role in the controversy (Marres, 2015). Throughout the results section an analysis of the findings is performed and weighed against past findings. The implications of these findings are further explored in the conclusion section. In this concluding part of the thesis, the research questions are answered, the limitations are considered and suggestions for future research are given.

2. Theoretical Framework

The three main topics addressed in the following chapters form a crucial foundation in order to build an understanding of the concepts, and answer the research questions, leading the thesis. The theoretical framework is therefore split into three parts, starting with the LGBTQ+ community. A short overview of the marginalized community's representation, history and role within the industry is given in order to show the important role the community takes within the industry and this research itself. In addition the controversy used as a case study is further explained in order for the reader to grasp the context of the situation. Secondly, controversy as a concept and controversy mapping are discussed. Controversy plays both a theoretical and methodological role in the research. In this section, the theoretical aspect is touched upon and an explanation of controversy itself and controversy mapping is given. The methodological part which touches mostly upon the mapping process of controversy, and the use of the discursive method of mapping and analysis is discussed in the method section of the thesis. The third and last main topic of discussion is public relations. While initially a broad concept, the focus is laid on crisis communication further linked to the video games industry in order to create relevant focus to the research. Because public relations (PR) is quite an unexplored topic in regard to focusing on the specific industry of video games, several sources focusing on crisis communication subjects of relevance were used to create a foundational understanding when applying the concept to the games industry.

2.1 LGBTQ+ and the video games industry

Being part of the gaming community and identifying as a gamer, for many means a complex intersection with identities such as sexuality, race, gender, and social context (Burrill, 2017; Shaw, 2012; Street, 2017). This complexity conflates with the stereotypical gamer image mentioned in the introduction, and while the intersectional nature of the gamer identity touches upon different identities, the focus in this research will remain on the LGBTQ+, also queer, identity.

According to Shaw (2012), the video games industry has too long focused on finding evidence that marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community are in fact part of the gamer community. This focus however needs a switch from proving that these marginalized groups are gamers, to the creation of content that includes the complex intersections of the (potential) gamers' identities.

Queer representation is not just about the images and stories we see on our screens when playing games. Queerness is also about how the LGBTQ+ public interacts with the games they play (Krobová et al., 2015; Ruberg, 2019). Since most games cater to a heteronormative public, it is up to the LGBTQ-identifying player to challenge the heteronormative gameplay. Krobová et al. (2015) found different strategies the marginalized public uses when interacting with games made for the heterosexual majority, where "imaginative play" stood out the most because of its ability to manifest queer meanings into implicitly heterosexual content (para. 16). Enabling the LGBTQ+ publics to engage with video games on their own terms impacts the games themselves and "can profoundly transform the meaning of games and unleash their queer potential" (Ruberg, 2019, p.1). The interactions and reactions to video game content therefore are important aspects that could give insight into queer elements in video games which adhere to heteronormative norms.

2.1.1 History of the LGBTQ+ community in video games

LGBTQ+ representations in video games have gained an increasing amount of attention in comparison to fifteen years ago, both in society and in academic research (Shaw, 2017). However, to put it as simple as there being no LGBTQ+ representation in video games until recent years is a misinformed interpretation of the actual queer video game history. To quote Ruberg (2019), the oversimplification of LGBTQ+ history of characters, gamers and creators, brings with it the dangers of "erasing the complexities and obstacles of LGBTQ subjects' lived experiences" (p. 2).

LGBTQ+ and queer activism have been present in western society for as long as digital games have existed as commercial products in the Unites States (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Going back to the 1970s and 1980s, it is also around that time when these social groups have gained more visibility. The queer history of video games is somehow still commonly told as one of absence and linear progress, with LGBTQ+ characters said to have been all but non-existent in commercial games, with a slow but steady rise from the early 2010s to the present. However, queerness has always been a part of video games. Queer video game characters, while scarce, have appeared in video games since the 1980s (Ruberg, 2019; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019).

Several papers have however shown that despite the increasing interest in LGBTQ+ aspects in the video games industry, there is a lack of research diving into specifics of representation and content throughout the past decades (Krobová et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2019; Utsch et al., 2017). Inspecting games over the span of two decades, starting in 1985,

Shaw et al. (2019) were able to provide some crucial insights into LGBTQ+ game content through time. Their findings reinforced the fact that LGBTQ+ video game content has existed since the early days of video games. In addition, Shaw's et al. (2019) findings reveal some of the connotations made within video games that lead to believe that those who did not conform with mainstream norms were associated with otherness. Non-humanness for example was usually linked to sexual difference or consisted of an implicit sexuality. Past research by Sliwinski (2007) also linked the use of homophobic text to the description of weaker gamers within the community. Research focused on a recent case including non-heterosexual characters is therefore also important in order to pinpoint in what discourses the LGBTQ+ players as well as characters are discussed today.

2.1.2 Current dynamics of queer in the video games industry

As noted by Shaw (2017), a paradigm shift has taken place in the studies of LGBTQ+ representations in the video games industry. While in 2006 the research was extremely scarce, mostly focusing on gender representations, today the approach through a queer game studies and theory lens allows for in-depth research and insights about important advancements (Burrill, 2017; Ruberg, 2019; Shaw, 2009, 2017; Street, 2017; Utsch et al., 2017)**.** The lack of representation of diverse groups has been linked to the far too long held stereotype that video games are an exclusive ground for white, heterosexual males (Shaw, 2017). Researching representations of marginalized groups, their stances, and issues in matters of both game content and the industry is important due to the constructing role of media and the discourses it shapes (Clark, 2017; Shaw, 2017). Shaw and Friesem (2016) also studied the different forms that LGBTQ+ representation can take in video games, highlighting that there is more to it than explicitly queer characters or the option for same-sex relationships. Their findings emphasized the importance of character interactions with the environment, as well as the importance to include trans- and homophobia as part of the conversation when talking about LGBTQ+ content in video games.

The stereotype of (cisgender) white males being the dominant group of videogame players has to a certain extent become a reality in the industry. More specifically referring to this issue is the concept "Hegemony of Play" elaborated upon by Fron et al. (2007). The concept refers to "a complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures" in the video games industry which affects the process of video game creation, or development, because of the industry's male dominated, and white, group of corporate and creative leads (Fron et al., 2007, p. 1). The research by Bulut (2020) also further elaborated

upon this phenomenon by focusing on the creation process of the game by developers. The findings evidently showed that the predominantly white male workforce creating the games (subconsciously) codes the dominant values and ideologies into gameplay. These dominant ideologies thereby adhere to the norms held by the stereotyped but realistic white male worker, inherently informed by the deeply engraved dominant discourses reflecting that same stereotype. The dominating view of the cisgender white male thereby ignores the minority game consumers who actually make up the majority of the game population (Bulut, 2020; Fron et al., 2007).

LGBTQ+ representation, or the lack thereof, is not just limited to the products the industry creates. Among creatives and developers, people that identify as LGBTQ+ still make up a minority (Bragança et al., 2016). However, as Bragança et al. (2016) state, the game industry has been affected by a cultural movement taking place with the goal of progressing the social norms of video games. While such a movement is important to create a more inclusive industry, not all members of the gaming community agree. These disagreements refer to, for example, a part of the community thinking "the medium is threatened by the presence of feminists", or anyone that tries to fight for a change straying from the dominant perspective in video games (Bragança et al., 2016, p. 937). Valadares and Ribeiro (2020) and Anthropy (2012) highlight the important role of the game maker, relating it back to the coding of one's values into the game. By diversifying the work force, these diversely identifying employees could potentially tip the scale in the right direction overpowering the dominant video game culture (Ruberg & Phillips, 2018).

2.1.3 The Last of Us Part II controversy

The conversation surrounding LGBTQ+ representations in video games has especially been highlighted quite recently with the case of *The Last of Us Part II*. The game was labeled as the very first "mainstream" game of its kind (Donohoe, 2020) because of its feature of multiple LGBTQ+ characters, including the game's main character. In addition, non-traditional female representations seemed to steer the pot among the public when the game was published. The inclusion of, and conversation about, LGBTQ+ characters also made sure that the voices of the marginalized LGBTQ+ community were widely shared, and were able to join the conversation about the game and its content (Chilton, 2020; Glennon et al., 2020; Shaw, 2012).

The sequel to "The Last of Us" developed by Naughty Dog has caused some upheaval among the video game community which lasted for most of 2020, even going into the new

year of 2021. Before the official release important parts of the game and its story were leaked online. This had caused the first wave of backlash from people upset with certain aspects of the game, among which was the LGBTQ+ representation (Hernandez, 2020). The discussion further became more complex when Naughty Dog laid out strict guidelines for critics in discussing the game (Hernandez, 2020). This formed a certain restriction to how the game could be critically discussed by professionals in the industry, adding onto the complicated view the gaming community had because of the pre-release spoilers. Furthermore it could limit the critical discourse as far as reviewers falling too easily "into the trap of writing a glorified product review" (K. Bailey, 2020). This embargo on writing had reflected back on the developer of the game and the people working there. This further enlarged the field of discussion with more players taking part in the controversy.

When the long-awaited sequel eventually came out, on the day the game was released it was bombarded with bad user reviews on review websites such as IMDb and Metacritic, despite its positive critical reception (MacLeod, 2020). The thousands of negative reviews however did not mean the game was an unsuccessful one. According to Sony it was "the fastest-selling first-party PS4 exclusive ever with more than 4 million copies sold" (Lempel, 2020, para. 1). The problem with the bad reviews, specifically on Metacritic, was the fact that a vast amount came in right after the game's release, thus suggesting that most of these negative reviews were based on the assumptions people in the gaming community had made rather than their actual experiences with playing the game (MacLeod, 2020). This created a problem with Metacritic and its inability to show realistic representations of how the gaming community feels about the game, because of people abusing the ease with which they can bombard negative comments without realising the consequences (Schreier, 2015). As a result, the conscious choice for this research was to leave Metacritic comments out of the mapping process and rather focus on the community active on Reddit.

The conscious inclusion of central LGBTQ+ characters and stories in the game thus tackled the dominant social norms currently held in video games and the industry, creating an important point of research regarding its role in the formation of the controversy. Controversy mapping therefore plays a crucial role in bringing into the picture the diverse set of people, or actors, active in the controversy. In addition, the mapping process can also reveal the stances these actors took towards central points of debate in the controversy.

2.2 Controversy

2.2.1 Mapping controversies

While controversy mapping has originally been developed for the purpose of Science and Technology Studies (STS), its application to studies of digital media has been growing for the past two decades (Marres & Moats, 2015). Bruno Latour was one of the main contributors to the method and further adapted it as a part of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), stating that it should focus on "researchable relations between a whole variety of heterogeneous actors" (Marres & Moats, 2015 p. 3; Venturini, 2010). The approach was supposed to enable the focus on different interplays ranging from society to industry, including both human and non-human actors. The key to the method is to map the issues or as stated by Latour (1987, as stated in Marres & Moats, 2015, p. 3) track "both human and non-human" actors "in their (competing) attempts to define the controversy".

Studying controversies is a way of discovering and understanding the construction of social life (Venturini, 2012). It poses an opportunity to study actors involved in specific issues, their identities, and the different arguments they use. In addition, this approach can bring "new actors onto the field" and give more insight into how different sociocultural issues might connect, arise, and bring in the different actors (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016, p. 81). By mapping the controversy, it helps navigate the issue and the publics involved together with their different stances. Within controversy, issue publics play a key role (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). While actors are referred to as both human and non-human, publics can be defined as acting through communicative media sources and who can be understood as "emergent socio-political assemblages with shared or interlocking concerns" (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016, p. 80).

Studying controversies helps uncover arguments and gain a deeper, or even fundamental, understanding of identities involved. This is of crucial analytical focus when one of the publics involved has a complicated relationship and history within the industry and its products. Uncovering how publics navigate and interact with the issues of LGBTQ+ representation when intersecting with a controversy makes the mapping of such issue publics ever so important. In current research, issue publics and actors are at the forefront of the mapping process. Adhering to Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández's (2016) definition, both (human) actors and publics will be used when further describing the people involved in the controversy. While actors thereby are used to refer to a single voice or person, publics will adherently stick to its meaning of assemblage and refer to a group of actors with a shared aspect.

Issues can be defined as "matters of shared concern that involve uncertainty and/or disagreement", emphasizing the possibility for multi-sidedness within the discussions (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016, p. 80). Here also the cruciality of treating all actors, or publics, and stances as scientifically viable is of importance (Marres & Moats, 2015). Venturini (2010) highlights the complexity involved in observing the phenomena of controversies. The author's definition of the concept is pretty straightforward however, stating that "controversies are situations where actors disagree" (p. 261). When looking at Venturini's (2010) definition one can see the overlap with issues as defined by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016). For the adaptation of controversy mapping to digital media however, the authors distinguish between issues and controversy, stating that the latter "are of a different ontological order to issues", meaning that controversies form a distinct ground for ambiguity and debate centred on a particular issue (Callon et al., 2001, as cited in Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016, p. 81).

2.2.2 Born-digital controversies

Marres and Moats (2015) indicate the importance of applying controversy mapping to social media research in order to address the issue of social media being both the object of research, as well as the resource for research. According to Marres and Moats (2015) debates, or controversies, on social media usually have at its core the fact that to a certain extent they focus on issues concerned with digital culture. The dual-purpose of controversy mapping when applied to digital sources enables for a balanced approach towards dynamics within issues as well as media technologies, further enabling the researcher to gain insight into how social media platforms mediate issues, and how controversies mediate social media platforms "as an object of public attention" (p. 1).

Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) applied controversy mapping to several social media platforms using the case study of GamerGate, and outlined three steps crucial in the process of issue mapping and controversy analysis to social media. The three steps listed were "building an issue inventory, mapping the issue networks, and identifying the key mediators" (p. 80). In line with Marres and Moats' (2015) suggestion of controversies that take place on social media being focused on digital culture, Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) recognize the "born digital" controversy (p. 79). Born digital refers to the controversy originating and being enacted through digital media. Mapping digitally native controversies gives the research the ability to emphasize both multi-sidedness and intersectionality of such types of controversies. Thereby, media objects, minority

perspectives, as well as patterns and interactions between different issue publics are identified more clearly (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Furthermore, using digital sources enables the analysis of readily available multitude of data through, usually, organized and structured platforms and through time (Marres, 2015; Venturini, 2012).

2.3 Public relations & crisis communication

2.3.1 PR, crisis communication, and the games industry

Issue mapping and controversy analysis could provide insightful findings regarding how controversies might emerge, what actors partake in the conversation and how businesses can develop strategies to prepare for similar future scenarios. All three aspects can be further linked to public relations, or more specifically its sub-genre crisis communication. Case studies prove the dominant method for studying crises and communication strategies taken therein (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Researching crises leads to a better understanding of audiences and their needs. They test the effectiveness in current approaches taken by different (institutional) actors (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). It is also important to include media stories in the examination of crisis communication, providing insight into how different actors and the industry itself respond to the crisis, in this case controversy (Holladay, 2010).

To put it simply, a public relations crisis encompasses any type of negative or controversial incident, or review, which gains public attention (in the media). When a crisis arises, it affects not only the business and its employees itself, but also the social groups connected to the company (Marsen, 2020). When looking at public relations specifically focusing on the video games industry, the first thing that is surprising is the lack of academic research thereof. While the industry is full of polarized opinions, discussions and encounters different controversial subjects on a regular basis, the research found focuses on for example corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Jones et al., 2013). Most articles focusing specifically on how companies or managers within the games industry can handle PR crises, are written by employees with experience or games industry writers themselves (Chan, 2019; Miller, 2019; Wijnen, 2016). A common line of thought in these articles is the fact that there is a lack of strategy within the video games industry regarding PR practices, especially when taking into account its relatively highly active communities globally spread over multiple interaction channels. Chan (2019), also makes critical note of the two-sided reactions put out by video game studios as a PR move, usually either publishing brief statements or remaining silent. The highly active communities are also addressed by Lapolla (2020). While focusing on the toxicity in games by gamers, the research paper not only identifies what is considered as toxic

behaviour, such as hate speech and cyberbullying. Lapolla (2020) also provides proof that this toxicity takes place and can impact developers and studios in a negative way, potentially causing controversy and crisis situations.

2.3.2 Crisis communication and the role of social media

New media overall has for a long time been labelled as a useful tool for PR in times of crises (Mei et al., 2010). In the case central to the research *The Last of Us Part II* however, the opposite happened, and controversy arose from it. This specific controversy could thus be labelled a "born-digital controversy" (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016. p. 79). In line with the suggestion made by Mei et al. (2010) digital media can potentially be a source of crisis or controversy escalation rather than a tool for times of need. There are two sides of the coin however, and the fact that controversies might develop through digital media, also enables the study of all visible data left behind by the actors communicating on the crisis at hand. Thus, with the use of controversy mapping, the company's response in particular can be taken into consideration. Further analysis could offer clarification of the business' position and how they contribute to the narrative, through crisis communication.

Social media have become extremely important to organizations in times of crises. They play a fundamental role in communication with publics, and have consequences regarding how organizations are able to coordinate and control public debate (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). The lack of traditional gatekeeping on social media also brings with it the possibility that information, whether during crisis or not, spreads from several sources. Publics are able to retrieve information from official social media accounts of companies, as well as employee accounts who are able to publish information more freely (Westerman et al., 2012). This influences how controversies might develop, and enlarge the publics that might partake in discussions with different perspectives on the ongoing issue.

Sellnow and Seeger (2013) also link the uses and gratifications theory to how publics use media in situations of crisis, showing that audiences select media sources based on what gratifies their needs. The increased use of social media has been often linked to the theory because of actors turning to the medium for information in crisis situations, accepting it as a credible source when used often. At the same time, the theory shows the active (online) information selection by audiences, which is crucial to keep in mind when strategizing to communicate with online audiences during PR crises.

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2.3.3 Crisis communication strategies

Conducting a meta-analysis of image repair strategies used over the span of thirty years, Arendt et al. (2017) were able to pinpoint strategies that could lead to success or failure when trying to address a crisis situation. Differentiating between most and least successful strategies, as well as the most common ones and important mitigating factors, the authors actually found that the least successful strategy was also the most used one. Among the most successful strategies, corrective action stood out, followed by the evasion of responsibility. The most common, and least successful strategy was denial, a strategy whose name reflects the actions taken during crisis. Corrective action points to the company taking responsibility for their actions and finding ways of fixing what has caused the upheaval (Arendt et al., 2017; Bentley, 2012). Evasion of responsibility on the other hand tries to reframe what is being said by the publics involved, and point the blame towards someone else involved (Arendt et al., 2017). In contrast to Arendt et al.'s (2017) findings, the best practices highlighted in earlier research on crisis communication using social media included open, understanding, and honest communication with the public (Veil et al., 2011). This is however also at the core of communicating with consumers overall, since it builds a certain level of trust and credibility before a crisis can even arise. Veil et al. (2011) also note that social media can play an empowering role because of the direct ability to communicate with consumers, and the ability to show that the company is not afraid to discuss the crisis at hand.

Van Zoonen and Van der Meer (2015) highlight the importance of source information during socially mediated crisis situations. Because of social media and verified accounts on platforms such as Twitter, audiences tend to retrieve information from multiple sources linked to companies. Rather than solely focusing on the Twitter account of the company, its employees are usually also used when forming public perception. Employees can thereby publish information on their own terms, without editors getting in their way, and thereby influence the ongoing debates during crisis situations (van Zoonen et al., 2014). Van Zoonen and Van der Meer (2015) highlight the fact that employees, while affiliated with the company they work for, act as individuals when posting information. However, while acting as individual actors the employees still play an important role in maintaining a positive PR and thus reputation of the company, because of the publics often attributing the crisis blame on organizations rather than its employees who are still seen as credible sources of information.

Lapolla (2020) clarifies the importance of staying in control of crisis surrounding toxicity in the game community. By addressing the toxicity rather than ignoring it or staying silent, the studio not only takes a positive proactive approach but to a certain extent is able to

set itself apart from the toxic behaviour that might influence their reputation.

2.3.4 Effective communication with LGBTQ+ publics

Interestingly Ciszek (2020) researched how companies can approach communication through public relations with diverse publics. Higher outreach towards LGBTQ+ publics has been found because of shifting social norms and the increasing importance of inclusivity (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). Ciszek (2020) however specifically focused on LGBTQ+ publics, stating that organizations still struggle communicating effectively with consumers identifying as non-heterosexual.

Effective communication could potentially lead to the realisation of higher inclusivity and commitment to diversity through a higher engagement in dialogue with the public (Ciszek, 2020; Gurr, 2017). Trust plays a fundamental role here. In theory, trust has been understood to follow after dialogic communication. When addressing diverse, minority publics however Ciszek (2020) focused on how trust can enable the dialogue by building meaningful relationships with marginalized publics, and thus being the antecedent to dialogue. As the author states however, minority populations are the ones who prove to be challenging, and therefore much effort is needed to build trust. Furthermore, Ciszek and Pounders (2020) uncovered the need for authenticity in communicating with historically marginalized publics, of whom LGBTQ+ publics are one. In order to effectively apply authentic communication according to LGBTQ publics, and accordingly build trust, authenticity through inclusivity, diversity and fairness needs to be a pledge the company makes in its identity and organizational foundations (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). Therefore an inclusive company culture already plays a key role in effective communication and trust with marginalized publics.

Four conditions to building trust with LGBTQ publics emerged from Ciszek's (2020) research. These include, first, cultural competency, meaning that organizations need knowledge of lived experiences of these minorities and thereby the ability to create content that resonates. Second, organizational congruency, referring to internal policies reflecting the "external efforts toward diversity and inclusion" (Ciszek, 2020, p. 5). Third, the empowerment of the minority publics by for example helping them tell their experiences and stories. And lastly authenticity, which to a certain extent encompasses the trustworthiness of the company and them willing to put in work to build a relationship with the public. As Ciszek and Pounders (2020) state, the "subculture of LGBTQ publics" is still misunderstood

by many organizations (p. 111), lacking the strategies on how to approach these publics while communicating an inclusive and consistently representational rather than a separating way.

3. Methodology

The methodology chapter of this thesis discusses the choices made when conducting the study. First an overview of the research design will be given, where the choice for controversy mapping as a fitting method is justified. Next, the sampling and data collection are described as transparently as possible, including an extensive overview of the types of data collected and why several sources for retrieving data are key to the research. Subsequently, the choice for a discursive controversy mapping analysis is elaborated upon, and the operationalisation of the main concepts is given. Lastly, the validity and reliability of the research are touched upon, referring to previous literature that applied the method successfully in past research, before a short consideration of ethics in research that is conducted using data solely collected from digital surroundings.

3.1 Research design

Controversy mapping played both a theoretical as well as a methodological role in this research. The process of discursive controversy mapping, and analysis as a qualitative method was used to answer the research questions at hand. This decision was made because of the approach enabling to identify and form deeper understandings of the interplay of the main concepts leading the research, namely the controversy itself, LGBTQ+ representations and crisis communication within the video games industry. Mapping the controversy and analysing its content include an in-depth qualitative approach to how the different publics are connected within the controversy. Further looking at the issue(s) and discussions, allows to form an understanding of how such texts help with the construction of social realities (Brennen, 2017). The discursive mapping method enabled to study the publics and their stances within the specific social context, facilitating a richer description of the "expressive and discursive practices" through which different power structures unfold (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016, p. 92).

The main steps described in the process of controversy mapping as outlined by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) were taken as a loose guideline, and adapted using a manual approach rather than a digital tool. While digital tools are extremely useful in the mapping process of "heterogeneous domains" Reddit, which was one of the main sources used, however remains a complex social media platform (Marres, 2015, p. 659). The platform's complexity makes the analysis and visualization of its content through digital tools more difficult than when applying such tools to platforms like Twitter or YouTube

comments.

Since Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) developed a research design focused on issue mapping and controversy analysis through social media, their approach sequence proved helpful when applied to this research project as well because of the similar focus within 'born-digital' controversies, centred on social media as one of the sources. The choice for a manual approach was made because of the focus on several different sources and the unavailability of an easily accessible digital tool to collect data from one of these sources.

The analysis part of the research was made up of two phases, firstly the mapping of the publics involved within the controversy, secondly the interpretation of the connections between these publics which uncovered stances that the publics took. This further enabled for the uncovering of issues central to debate and thus the controversy itself. Thereby, the aim of the discursive controversy mapping was to uncover the involved publics and to unravel how different publics communicate and what stances they take within a specific controversy on and through social media.

3.1.1 Challenges with mapping on social media

Since controversy mapping has a rich history in STS, its relatively recent approach to social media has proved to bring with it its challenges. The web-based methods used for mapping issues in STS, while providing an effective method for that purpose, is simply too narrow. Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) refer to this method being blind to the "medium specificity of social media as opposed to the Internet in general" (p. 81). By ignoring the fundamental effects of social media on the formation and communication of issues, a proper adaptation of the method is needed. Through their research Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) were able to highlight the importance of the previously mentioned key media objects as mediators within digitally native controversies.

When implementing the method of controversy mapping as a digital one the problem of digital bias comes up (Marres, 2015). The bias of applying the method digitally stems from both the social media platforms as well as search engines which influence the way controversies might play out digitally (Marres, 2015; Marres & Moats, 2015). The digital bias might impact community sites such as Reddit differently because of the community site's reliance on user contribution and a user voting system (Massanari, 2017). Reddit's unifying algorithms could potentially shift power more towards the users however, as Massanari (2017) mentions, the platform remains academically unexplored, thus more research would be needed to see how user centred platforms could impact digital bias differently than other

social media platform algorithms. Marres (2015) suggests for the adaptation of a "more open-ended approach" whereby both controversies are analysed and issues are mapped, however a clear distinction between the two is made (p. 657).

Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016), as well as Marres (2015), mention the availability of digital instruments enabling visualisation in controversy mapping as a tool of advantage during the application of the method digitally. While these digital tools are extremely useful in the mapping process of "heterogeneous domains" Reddit however remains a complex social media platform (Marres, 2015, p. 659). The platform's complexity makes the analysis and visualization of its content through digital tools more difficult than when applying such tools to platforms like Twitter or YouTube.

3.2 Sample and data collection

Focusing on a specific controversy surrounding *The Last of Us Part II*, there seems to be a moment in time when the controversy started building, namely a leak before the game's release (Hernandez, 2020). Further on, according to the news media, two points in time can be identified where the discussion peaked. First, after the game's release (Tinner, 2020) in June 2020 and later that same year in December when the game won the title of Game of the Year (*Game of the Year,* 2020). The two peaks in activity, after the game's release and its win, were therefore used as a condition for the data collected, in order to make the research feasible. Initially, it was expected that these two points in time could give deeper insights because of the availability of relevant information that developed over time. To be more specific the criteria for the data in the first time frame was that its publication date had to be no earlier than the 19th of June (the game's release date) and no later than the 19th of August. Since much relevant data linked to game journalists stemmed from right after the leak took place in the last days of April 2020, an exception to the aforementioned publication date was made in this case. Thereby, the first publication time frame used for the collection of articles was adapted to range from May 2020 until August 2020. The criteria for the data collected in the second time frame, for all data sources, was a publication date of the month December 2020.

The units of analysis within the research were thus actors, or publics, within the controversy and their texts. The sample consisted of several sources in order to allow for the mapping of the different actors with the ability to look both at the game community, the producers of the game, and other professionals in the industry. The data was mainly collected from Reddit (reddit.com), interviews or podcasts available through YouTube, articles written

by (game) journalists which were published by (game centred) news outlets, and lastly also relevant tweets found through reference in articles or Reddit comments. Past research using controversy mapping described the method as a mixed one, due to the capturing of social media data for analysis through digital tools playing a major role in research projects. As mentioned earlier, because of the more complicated mechanics of Reddit, and lack of tracking software for such type data, the data collection was done manually. The different sources were chosen in order to try and map the different publics that were expected to be involved within the controversy and were part of the key concepts in the research questions.

In order to allow for equal distribution among the different potential publics initially twenty articles, two interviews, and 392 subreddit thread comments from 10 different threads were collected. Using a purposive sampling method, it allowed for flexibility during the sampling process, which was crucial because of the mapping process potentially uncovering new sources that were included in the data. While the controversy was being mapped, or analysed, connections to other relevant sources were made, in this case these were presented as tweets. Therefore these additional sources were taken into account and the total data collected by the end of the mapping process was somewhat different in size. In the end twenty-nine (game) articles, two interviews on YouTube, 13 tweets, and 392 subreddit thread posts and comments were part of the controversy analysis. The amount of subreddit comments and podcast interviews thus remained the same. The data from Twitter arose as a result of it being directly mentioned or referred to in some of the articles written by journalists or comments made by Reddit users. A substantial amount of data was collected between March and April of 2021, however further data stemming from the mapping process was also integrated and therefore the collection process could be said to have taken place between March and May of 2021.

As mentioned before, a purposive sampling technique was used when collecting the data, which allowed for the needed flexibility when applying the method of controversy mapping and discourse analysis (Flick, 2007, 2011; Silverman, 2011). Keywords, the earlier mentioned time frames, and relevance to the controversy subject, were used as the conditions when collecting the data. A purposive sampling method is necessary to approach the data more flexibly, and to be able to filter out relevant posts among the many subreddit threads (Flick, 2007; Rapley, 2014).

The fact that subreddit threads can vary extremely in length, all varying in post length, makes it a difficult task to establish the exact sample size beforehand. A previous master thesis (Diets, 2020, p. 33) has formed a typology for Reddit. The categorization therein gives

a general overview of the type of post, the contents thereof, the number of types posts collected within the research and the average length of each type of post. Based on this typology a clearer overview can be given regarding the amount of data that is needed for collection when using Reddit as one of the sources. The table (see Appendix A1) takes the typology created by Diets (2020) as an example in order to give a clearer overview of the Reddit post categorization used for this research paper.

When searching for subreddits focused on *The Last of Us Part II* two subreddits showed most relevance to the subject of research. To be specific, these were 'r/thelastofus' with 187k members, 'r/TheLastOfUs2' with 41.9k members at the beginning of the data collection process. Within a subreddit certain threads are labelled with a 'flair'. A flair hereby indicates the main type of content the thread contains. For example within the subreddit 'r/thelastofus', the flair 'PT2 DISCUSSION' indicates a thread that focuses on the discussion surrounding the second "The Last of Us" video game. When looking at the sampling technique, the keywords 'PT2 DISCUSSION', 'Part II Criticism', or 'TLoU Discussion' in relation to the controversy of *The Last of Us Part II* were taken into account in order to narrow down the content available. In total ten threads were collected, five from each subreddit, based on relevance to the controversy and the aforementioned conditions. Of these ten threads, eight adhered to the first time frame in the summer of 2020, while two were posted in December 2020. These threads varied from having 75 comments, up to 7.800 thousand comments per thread, however only comments which adhered to the time frame were selected. The high amount of comments on certain threads can be linked to the fact that while one thread was archived, the other was not. Meaning that some threads were still active, while on other threads users could not post comments anymore.

In order to further narrow down and select the comments, or posts, within the thread the comments were first sorted by 'Top' after which the first 20 relevant comments to the discussion were collected. By sorting with 'Top' the comments are arranged by showing the most upvoted comments at the top of the page, starting with the comment with the most upvotes. Thereafter the same thread was sorted by 'Controversial', and a further 20 relevant comments were collected. Sorting using 'Controversial' however sorts the comments by including both the up- and downvotes, meaning that there might be a higher level of disagreement (Reddit Originals, 2009; Salihefendic, 2015). Bringing the total comments collected to 40 per thread, no matter the number of comments within that thread. If a thread did not allow for the collection of 40 first line comments, because of the lack thereof, the maximum amount of first line comments were collected (see Table A3 for details).

It was important to focus on the relevance of the comments, since some content included extremely short form of text that could not substantially reveal how the user felt about the subject at hand. Therefore these short comments were usually omitted from the data collection. Other than that, it was not unusual for comments in threads with a lower amount of comments to overlap when being sorted by both 'Top' and 'Controversial'. Doubles were omitted until the forty relevant comments were collected.

Reddit gives users the ability to comment, or react to, comments made within the thread, however only "first line" comments were collected in order to make the data set manageable. First line hereby means that only direct comments to the initial post that started the thread were collected, and none of the reactions to other comments were included. This way of sampling the comments within threads ensured a certain level of iterativity while still maintaining relevance to the controversy.

Purposive sampling allowed the mapping process to be flexible in the sense that the sample, or data, was not fully collected beforehand but rather over time and when relevant data stemmed from an initially collected source, this could be taken into the sample as well. While initially it was thought that any official statements made by Naughty Dog on their website would also be taken into account, none were found. During the mapping process many articles however revealed connections to Naughty Dog and publics involved, including relevant tweets. Therefore, in order to be able to map and analyse the publics coming from producers side as well, tweets from Naughty Dog, and relevant actors within the relevant time frames were collected, and included in the data set. This was thus done later during the mapping process, when these sources were found to be explicitly connected, and proved relevant, to the data through the already collected data set.

Lastly, when collecting (game) journalist articles on the subject, again all three conditions were used whereby keywords such as "The Last of Us II", "The Last of Us II controversy", and "The Last of Us II issues" were used. Most articles were collected through the Google search engine, while others were collected because of their connection to the data during the mapping process through explicit mention within the text.

3.3 Operationalisation

The theoretical framework formed an important role in the establishment of central concepts and the identification of their elements during analysis. The concept of controversy itself in this research is the application of the concept in order to map the involved actors and their texts within the controversy. This means that through the process of mapping and

analysing the different actors, their stances, and uncovering the issues, the concept of controversy in itself becomes clearer as to how it manifests itself.

The concept of an issue played a key role, since it enabled the identification of points of debate that were central to the controversy. An important aspect of an issue is the fact that actors try to make their own definitions of the controversy. The attempts at defining are done through stances, which can be seen as multi-sided discussions and disagreements on subjects of shared matters (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marres & Moats, 2015). Issues were therefore identified by analysing the different stances the actors took and looking at how these stances manifested a debate on a topic that fit in the controversy. If multi-sided debate was present among multiple actors linked throughout the controversy, an issue on the subject of debate could be identified.

To further effectively form an answer to the research question(s), LGBTQ+ representation and identity also had to be operationalised, meaning that it had to be identifiable how actors form texts in regard to the experiences with the video game that led to the debates. While Chess et al. (2017) focused on gamer gender representation in advertisements, their approach proved useful in identification of certain characteristics in text during the analysis. The physical characteristics, the behaviour, and the personality traits as linked to an LGBTQ+ character were taken into account when analysing actor's texts. These categories helped to reveal in what discourse the LGBTQ+ characters were discussed in regards to the characteristics deemed as LGBTQ+ adhering. Furthermore LGBTQ+ representation could also manifest itself in its presence or lack thereof, and in what context the actors either praised or critiqued the LGBTQ+ presence within the game.

Aspects of crisis communication in the text were perceived through the presence or absence of interactions between Naughty Dog as a company and actors connected to Naughty Dog itself. Informed by literature, the communication coming from Naughty Dog and relevant actors was then analysed against crisis communication techniques and strategies found by past research. This was used to form an understanding of how or if a game company uses text to react to the issue language of actors.

3.4 **Analysis**

As mentioned in the research design, the analysis section of the research was split into two phases done through the process of controversy mapping. Taking an exploratory approach to controversy mapping, the focus on the first part of the analysis was mapping the publics within the controversy. Hereby the focus lay on identifying major publics and the

actors therein and how they were connected. From there on the relations of the issues behind the publics could also be identified. The mapping process was done manually and therefore enabled to flexibly and visually link actors to one another in a map using a free mindmap website (mindmup.com). This process created a visual that clarified what actors belonged to which larger public, and the interactions within and between the actors (see Appendix B). The map provided the relationships between actors visible for further interpretation by other audiences, being a key aspect in the exploratory nature of the discursive mapping method (Beck & Kropp, 2011; Marres, 2015). Further insight into the issues was however gained through the analysis which also showed the stances different publics took within the controversy. This approach to controversy mapping, or analysis, could also be described as a discursive one (Marres, 2015). Within the discursive approach the positions taken by actors are at the forefront (Beck & Kropp, 2011; Marres, 2015). Taking a discursive method to controversy analysis is most relevant to the current research because of its preoccupation with positions of publics rather than status of truth or falseness of statements made (Marres, 2015). Using this approach was expected to deliver the most valuable results in order to be able to answer the research questions.

The application of discursive controversy mapping and analysis to digital surroundings, rather than STS, makes the exploratory approach an important one because of the further need to gain a better understanding of the controversy through the stances taken on by the actors (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). This approach is crucial in order to find the deeper meanings within these complicated publics but also because of the relatively new application of the method digitally. Thus, to gain a deeper insight into the actual issues that the publics have taken a central role within the controversy it is important to further analyse the texts communicated by these publics in-depth, which was possible through the application of the discursive mapping method.

The preoccupation with mapping the positions of actors in the debate was done through the analysis of the stances, or issue terms. Meaning that the claims made were analysed for whom they received support from, revealing what issues were central to debates. Questions such as who the actors are, where they decide to voice their opinion, and what language they use to form relevant issue terms was important to analyse how the issues in the controversy were composed while maintaining the exploratory nature of the discursive approach (Marres, 2015).

3.5 Validity & reliability

An important point of critique made by Marres (2015) is an arising problem when applying controversy mapping to digital media, namely the possibility for digital bias. In her paper, Marres (2015) suggests a thematic switch to issue mapping, and explains this through the framework of empiricism. The author states that it is the digital technologies themselves that make attempts to apply controversy analysis to digital methods more difficult. This is because both social media platforms as well as search engines are able to influence the controversy itself when taking place online (Marres, 2015; Marres & Moats, 2015). Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016) also indicate this shortcoming because of the initial focus of the controversy mapping method to topics of science and technology rather than "the internet in general" (p. 81).

In order to ensure the validity of the analysis, two initial paths can be taken. The first, which was also applied through the discursive approach, is the precautionary approach. The second is the affirmative approach, which is also seen as the more appropriate one by Marres (2015), even though both acknowledge the possibility for digital bias. The precautionary approach detaches the digital data collected from its digital surroundings, thereby treating "digital media technologies as a source of noise that must be neutralized" (Marres, 2015, p. 665). The affirmative approach however considers the role of these digital surroundings, to a certain extent, as influential on how controversy develops and therefore crucial to take these digital sources into account. For this research however the precautionary approach was taken. The reason for this was the exploratory focus of the controversy mapping process whereby the importance lay on how the publics were connected and their stances, rather than how the controversy developed through these digital surroundings. Furthermore, in order to minimise digital bias Marres (2015) suggested the adoption of a "more open-ended approach" whereby both controversies are analysed and issues are mapped, however a clear distinction between the two is made (p. 657). This is done by not only applying the process of mapping the controversy, but also analysing the issues through the actors' stances using the discursive method of mapping and analysis, which was also the central approach taken in this research paper.

To retain reliability in the research it was important that reflexivity was kept throughout the process of the thesis. In order to maintain transparency the data collection and analysis process have been described in detail and examples of data have been included in the appendices (Flick, 2019). Applying the mapping method, it enables for any researcher to track down the actors within the controversy and map their interactions, however through the

application of the discursivity the possibility for different interpretations of the text, or stances, remain. Therefore objectivity, and the treatment of all actors and stances as equally important was crucial (Marres & Moats, 2015).

3.6 Ethics

Several research papers (Beck & Kropp, 2011; Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Marres, 2015; Marres & Moats, 2015) state that controversy analysis in the digital era gives great opportunities to apply this to digital media, because of all the digital footprints and thus readily available data that people leave behind. Here however the issue of ethics comes into play. The data used to map and analyse the controversy was partly posted by anonymous individuals, such as on Reddit. All other sources however explicitly include the individuals' names. However these individuals either choose to willingly post on public platforms, or are public figures whose profession requires them to credit their (written) content, or both. The fact that the conscious choice by individuals is made to post in public digital surroundings makes it ethically acceptable to use this publicly available data by the anonymous users (Angrosino, 2011). The public figures' information, such as those of journalists, is readily available online for the reader to review and thus issues of privacy are not necessarily present when revealing the authors name. As Markham and Buchanan (2012) state however, it is important to consider how the internet data used might influence the creator, whether an author or commenter on Reddit. Since the users of Reddit remain anonymous however, no ethical issues were found in leaving the username in the content of the research.

4. Results

In the following section of the research paper the results of the controversy mapping and analysis process will be presented and discussed. Hereby the publics involved in the controversy will be examined through their connections and position(s) within the controversy. While the first step involved the connection of actors and publics among one another, the second step allowed for a deeper understanding of the issues central to the controversy and the stances each actor took towards these issues.

First an explanation of the controversy map itself will be given, followed by the presentation of the involved actors and publics. This enables us to form an answer to the sub-research question *"Who are the different actors within the video game controversy?"*. After the involved publics are presented, the chapter moves on to the results found through the use of the discursive mapping method. Through the discursive method the stances taken by the different actors and connected to the controversy were revealed, revealing the issues central to the controversy. This part of the results section was crucial to the formation of an answer to the main research question *"How do different stances taken by actors as a reaction to a LGBTQ+ themed video game controversy construct (reactive) public relations approaches by studios?"* as well as give insight into how certain actors handled the subject of LGBTQ+ (representations), thereby addressing the second sub research question *"How are LGBTQ+ representations discussed within the controversy?"*.

Throughout this section the results are put into perspective through the inclusion of established theory and past research. The PR or crisis communication by Naughty Dog specifically will be addressed. The discursive method allowed for an understanding of how Naughty Dog, and its linked actors, approached the controversy through the activity in digital surroundings and the stances thereby taken. Therefore while in the previous section the issues and stances of all publics were at the centre, the last section will delve a bit more into the discussion of already established crisis communication theory and weigh it with Naughty Dog's actions within the controversy.

4.1 The controversy publics mapped

Starting off broadly, it can be said that the publics involved in the controversy mostly stemmed from three main (digital) surroundings. First, Naughty Dog and its employees who were involved with *The Last of Us Part II* project. Second, video game journalists involved in communicating written pieces, interviews, or other content to the public. And third, the video

games' player community, of whom the majority was active on the social media platform Reddit. 'Mostly', in the beginning of the paragraph is the key word here however, since outliers are present too. These outliers, such as Sony representatives or respected game developers, proved to be connected back to other important positions in the games industry overall. In order to break the involved actors down and create a clear overview of the controversy, these (digital) surroundings will be referred to as a starting point for the different branches as we dive deeper into the publics in the controversy. The concept of born-digital, as referred to by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016), was also key throughout this controversy. The enactment of the issues and connections among actors were all brought to the front by the digital media which they were enacted through. An important factor here was also the mapping of the patterns of minority perspectives which the authors mention in their research. The marginalised voices of the LGBTQ+ community, which initially might not identify as gamers because of the toxicity issues within the dominating gamer culture, were still able to be mapped and analysed because of the digitally native controversy (Elliot, 2018; Gray et al., 2017; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). Reddit might encourage such marginalized groups to voice their stances on different issues because of the ability to remain anonymous, thereby also enabling to identify more publics and their intersections more clearly.

In order to visualize the publics, and (individual) actors, a map and a corresponding table with the actors was created (see Appendix B). The map is intended to give a somewhat easier visual overview of the three main controversy publics and actors therein, whereby emphasis is also put on the connections between the involved publics. As explained in the theoretical framework, while publics and actors could be used interchangeably, in this research paper publics refer to the three main groups found. Actors then further refer to groups of people or individuals within the specified public. When looking at the map the connections between the publics are evident. Coloured connecting lines showcase an interaction between the publics, while grey connecting lines represent interaction within the publics. Starting at the centre and stemming from *The Last of Us Part II* are the three main publics mentioned in the previous paragraph. Naughty Dog coloured blue, video game journalists coloured green, and video game community coloured orange. During the initial mapping process, several pre-selected sources were used, thus influencing how the map might develop and eventually turn out. This also means that while the focus gave a better understanding of the publics as shown in the map, it does show a mere part of the controversy which took place in these (selected) online surroundings.

To further clarify the controversy map a brief explanation of the layout (colours)

comes in handy. When actors stemmed from one of the main publics, the same (lighter) colour was used as that of the main public itself. For example Neill Druckmann, an actor connected to Naughty Dog, is shown using a light blue colour, or the reddit page r/TheLastOfUs2 that stems from the video games community public is coloured a lighter orange. Visually this enables the reader to instantly get an indication of what actor(s) belonged to what public. A few of the earlier mentioned outliers, who still played important roles but could not necessarily be put into a main public, were coloured pink.

The connecting lines between and within the publics also play a crucial role in the formation of an answer to the research questions. First, these connections indicate the level of interaction between the publics. Interaction hereby does not necessarily mean that it is both-sided. During the analysis an interaction could indicate a mention of a certain actor or public, a direct (online) discussion between actors, or a simple comment directed at a certain actor or public. To limit the visual overwhelmingness, four main colours were chosen to indicate the connections between the actors. The blue lines indicate a connection between the Naughty Dog public, or actors therein, and the video game journalists and writers. A connection between the journalists and the video games community is shown using a green line. The red lines indicate an interaction between the video games community and Naughty Dog (actors). Lastly, yellow lines connect the outlying actors to the rest of the publics and actors therein. Because of the layout of the map the main actors were able to be visualised in their own grouped positions, with on the mid-lower left the journalists, on the right the community and more to the top Naughty Dog. This enabled for the connections within the groups to be left grey in order to keep a level of clarity.

The constructed controversy map generates an answer to a foundational sub-question to this research paper, namely "Who are the different actors within the video game controversy?". An answer to this (sub) research question forms the foundation for answering the main research question and is thereby essential to further study the phenomenon of digital controversy among publics within the video games industry. Further delving into these actors will give more detail on the main publics and actors involved in the controversy, and set some introductory steps to the stances and discussions within the controversy necessary to answer the other research questions.
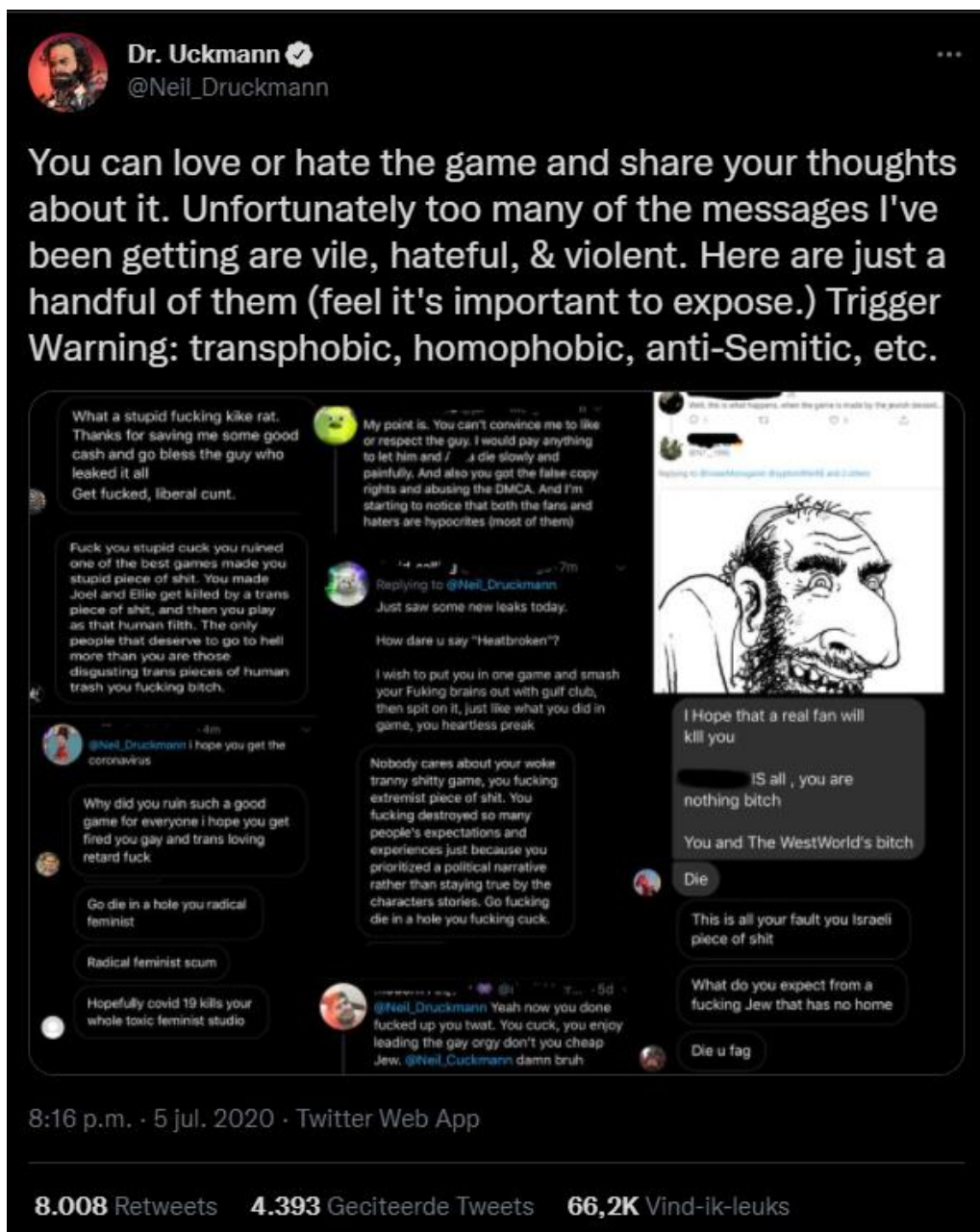
4.1.1 Naughty Dog

Naughty Dog proved to form a big network which could be traced back to many actors involved across the controversy. Connecting back to Naughty Dog were key players

within the video games industry, several journalists, as well as the games community itself. One such key player, further referred to as an actor, was Neil Druckmann. Looking at the controversy as a whole, Neil Druckmann showed to be one of the most connected actors therein. The result of his connectivity can be traced to his active communication on the social media platform Twitter, but also to him being seen as a certain central point in what was happening around *The Last of Us Part II*, because of his leading role in the project as a (co-)writer and director, as well as him being the co-president of Naughty Dog.

The games community, which will be further delved into in the following parts of the results section, was often connecting its stances with the second "The Last of Us" video game to Druckmann. The interaction with this specific public was not one-way however. The actor himself reacted to what was going on as well and chose to interact with the game community by reacting to stances that the games community took within the controversy. An example of a tweet the actor posted, as seen in figure 1, also shines light onto one of the main issues discussed further in the paper, namely that of toxicity.

Figure 1

A tweet by @Neil_Druckmann

Dr. Uckmann ✓
@Neil_Druckmann

You can love or hate the game and share your thoughts about it. Unfortunately too many of the messages I've been getting are vile, hateful, & violent. Here are just a handful of them (feel it's important to expose.) Trigger Warning: transphobic, homophobic, anti-Semitic, etc.

8:16 p.m. · 5 jul. 2020 · Twitter Web App

8.008 Retweets   **4.393** Geciteerde Tweets   **66,2K** Vind-ik-leuks

Note. The tweet was posted on the 5th of July 2020 on Neil Druckmann's verified Twitter account. To the tweet several screenshots are attached of hateful messages the co-president of Naughty Dog received as a reaction to the release of The Last of Us Part II (Druckmann, 2020a).

Through a single tweet the actor was able to showcase the toxicity present within the video games community and at the same time, rather than ignoring the ongoing debates surrounding the game, decided to partake in the debate which further presents the

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contradicting communication coming from Naughty Dog as a company and its employees throughout the crisis. In line with van Zoonen and Van der Meer's (2015) statement however, because of the lack of (media) gatekeepers, the company itself is not the sole source for information and the influence of perceptions. As discussed later in the results, the contradiction in this case is the silence on the side of Naughty Dog as a company, while its employees join the debates surrounding the controversy. When further looking at the issues stemming from the controversy, discussion of such issues is extremely important in order to achieve the goals of the (queer) cultural movement within the video games industry (Anthropy, 2012; Bragança et al., 2016; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018; Valadares & Ribeiro, 2020). Therefore, the fact that Naughty Dog's employees joined in on the conversation enables for a clearer mapping of issues. In addition it also conveys the message to marginalized publics that representatives of the company stand behind them in fighting toxic and non-inclusive game culture, which might positively reflect on the company's culture since employees are often seen as a credible and closely connected source to the company (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

While the actor's connections to others working on the video game project were anticipated, there were also significant connections to video game journalists. N. Druckmann being one of the creative leads of the projects was often a connecting piece when writing about the game or about (fan) reactions to the game. Not all journalists however decided to write about the game in a positive light. This unveiled connections formed between Naughty Dog and game journalists whereby a team from Sony, representing Naughty Dog, stepped in. This consequently led to several journalists taking stances critiquing Naughty Dog's (PR) strategy, which will be discussed in the next section.

Another central actor stemming from Naughty Dog was Laura Bailey, a voice actress who had worked on several Naughty Dog projects including *The Last of Us Part II* where she voiced a character named Abby who was significant to the controversy. This actor was highly connected to the video game community active on Reddit, due to the subreddits often directly referring to the actors when discussing the video game. Laura Bailey plays a central role here and can be further associated with a major issue within the controversy regarding (gender) representation, the LGBTQ+ community, and gamer toxicity. The voice actress was also one of the actors that voiced her stances towards the toxic gaming community through twitter. An example of a tweet showcases a screenshot of threatening messages she received from gamers.

Figure 2

A tweet by @LauraBaileyVO
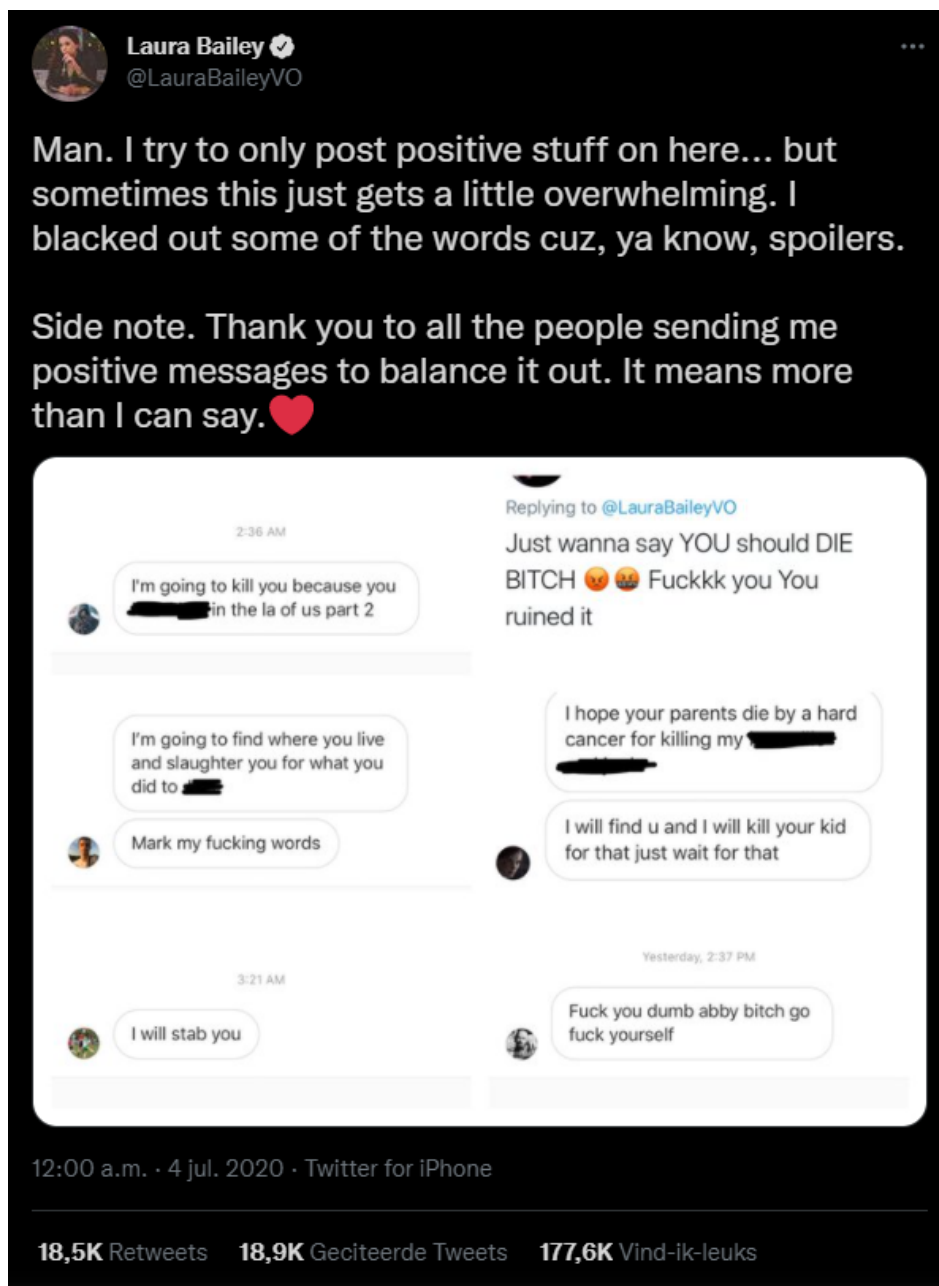
Note. The tweet was posted on the 4th of July 2020 on Laura Bailey's verified account. A screenshot of hateful messages received from people in the games community is attached (L. Bailey, 2020).

Laura Bailey hereby takes the same step as Neil Druckmann and decides to call out the toxic games community, thereby revealing further connections to issues within the controversy. Furthermore, this caused debate within the video games community as well, where Reddit threads such as the one created by user 'u/LifesAMeme118' called "After all the hate Laura Bailey got just for being the person behind Abby, this is super satisfying to

see. Congratulations Laura on your Game Award!!" was dedicated to praising the actress, partly because of the harassment and hate she received by other community members.

While the research refers to the three main publics by grouping together actors that are connected to the publics, Naughty Dog forms an exception to the rule. Naughty Dog itself is an individual actor as well. While the actors connected to Naughty Dog form a public and whose voice could be (unintentionally or intentionally) seen as speaking on the company's behalf, it was also crucial to look at the company itself since (unspecified) PR representatives of the company proved to approach journalists throughout the ongoing controversy. A striking result here however is that while Naughty Dog as a company is highly connected, the connections or interactions are quite often one-sided. This gives an initial indication of how Naughty Dog handled the controversy as a company, and if, or what kind of communication practices were used throughout the controversy, giving the impression of the non-interactive, nor proactive, communication taken by Naughty Dog as an individual actor.

4.1.2 Game journalists & writers
When mapping and analysing video game journalists, it was evident that this public could be split into three sub-publics or groups. First, there were journalists that felt limited by Naughty Dog and reported taking critical stances relating to the company which arose from the video game's controversy. These stances uncovered connections to Naughty Dog's PR and marketing team as mentioned in the previous section. It seemed as though Naughty Dog was trying to retake control of the discourse by restricting dialogue about the game through the reviews written by the journalists. Multiple journalists voiced their critique on this approach. To provide an example, Kat Bailey from USGamer was critical of what Naughty Dog's guidelines, or restrictions, were doing to the discourse overall. According to K. Bailey (2020) in her article for USGamer, this stops critics and gamers alike from having a critical conversation about representations in the game, rather than stimulating critical discourses, which in this case would be much needed when the video game is one that through its content deviates from dominant games culture (Bragança et al., 2016; Donohoe, 2020). Furthermore, journalists writing reviews containing aspects critiquing the game, were approached by Sony representatives on behalf of Naughty Dog trying to make the writer(s) reconsider their critical views (Hernandez, 2020). In this situation it seemed that rather than keeping open communication with the media outlets, as suggested by the research of Veil et al. (2011) where keeping an open and honest communication with publics was a key factor in a successful approach when crisis arose, Naughty Dog's controlling approach resulted in

somewhat of a backlash from some of the actors.

Second, there was the sub-public of journalists who either applauded Naughty Dog for the video game they had created, or simply reported on the game without including their opinion on it. However here a striking connection to the video games community was evident among most of the actors within the sub-public. Several journalists explicitly referred to the subreddit 'r/TheLastOfUs2' as being the most active but also the most toxic within the fan community of the video game. There was however no interaction between the journalists and the previously stated gaming community. This meant that while journalists and writers reported on the stances of the community, and at the same time took a negative stance towards the behaviour of that part of the video games community, the games community itself did not often involve connections to game journalists. This finding reflects something that Perreault and Vos (2018) mentioned in their research about journalists' role within the GamerGate controversy, namely them taking on a certain "paternal role" (p. 553). While gaming journalists usually focus on a genre of lifestyle journalism, in these cases of controversy where a certain part of the public is harassed or attacked, they take on a role where attention is given to the condemning of the toxic behaviour displayed by a part of the community by taking on a disciplinary voice. An example of a paragraph written by journalist Phillip Tinner for Screenrant, as seen in figure 3, showcases this disciplinary voice the journalist takes towards gamers posting hateful comments about the game. Coming back to the point of one-way interaction between journalists and gamers, there was an evident exception with regards to the video game and entertainment media website IGN. Reddit actors referred to IGN in a joking or sarcastic tone. One of the actors within the "toxic" community took several stances within a single comment, as seen in figure 4.

Figure 3

A paragraph taken from an article written by Phillip Tinner for Screenrant.

Essentially, the undefined overlap between players who are only unhappy with the story and the forever bitter bigots that fight for ideological footholds wherever they can on Reddit has intrinsically tied vocal anger at *The Last of Us Part II* to alt-right political extremists (in the kind of, "Is this a Venn diagram or circle?" kind of way). This banal hatred has latched itself onto genuine disdain for the game's plot on the subreddit since almost immediately after the leaks, as evidenced by popular posts like this one that applied the now-poorly aged adage, "*Get woke, go broke*," linking the game's *controversial* stance that women and gay people exist to a wildly misinformed poor sales forecast.

Figure 4

Comment by reddit user u/HamstersAreReal
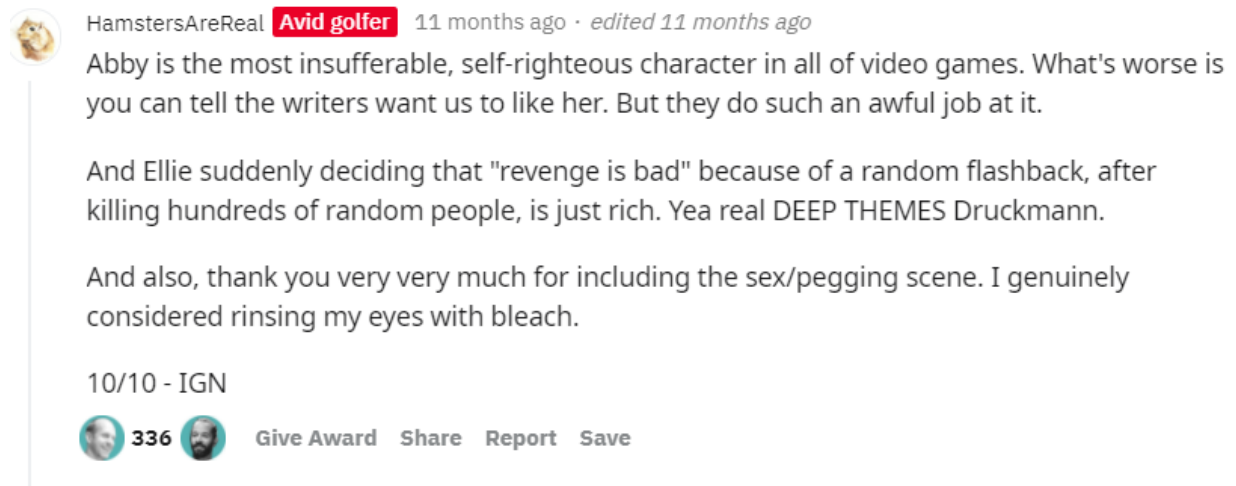
The sarcastic tone of the inclusion of the IGN rating refers to some actors within the community disabling the website as a trustworthy source for them. Furthermore, as one can read there is an evident connection to Neill Druckmann, and negative stances towards the actor as well as gender portrayals are stated.

Most journalists referred to Naughty Dog and some of the important employees within the project, such as Neil Druckmann, Laura Bailey, Troy Baker among others, whereby on occasion a two-way connection was found through (podcast) interviews.

Third, there were the journalists who used the opportunity of the game's controversy to report on it but also addressed other issues ongoing in the video games industry. These issues however also came to light because of the ongoing controversy, which posed an opportunity for them to be discussed, but at the same time form sub-controversies which can stand on their own outside of *The Last of Us Part II*. They often related to diversity, character depiction, and the activity of crunching. Journalists, such as Jason Schreier, were able to broaden the view of the actors in the controversy by reporting on the often overlooked role of

the developers and the issue of extremely long working hours, known as crunching. Other journalists, such as the writers from INVERSE, addressed issues related to the LGBTQ+ community that stemmed from several different negative reactions and stances that a part of the game community took after the games' leak and release. While these issues were found as a result of *The Last of Us Part II* controversy and can be linked to both the video games industry as well as its community, they can be further connected to the dominating discourse within the industry, which has long adhered and still in large amounts adheres to the perspectives of the cisgender white males (Bulut, 2020; Elliot, 2018; Gray et al., 2017). The choice to voice these issues links back to the importance of continuing to diversify and shift the cultural norms in the industry. The negative reactions from a part of the community showcase the presence of the actors that feel threatened by the presence of content and people who fight for diversification (Bragança et al., 2016; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018).

4.1.3 Video games community

Within the games community two major opposing publics were found, which split the community into three evident groups. On the one hand there was the highly critical public, also labeled as the "toxic" part of the community by journalists, other game community members, and some Naughty Dog employees. On the other hand however was the supporting public, praising and defending Naughty Dog and the video game they had created. Lastly however was the public that remained quite indifferent, and while reacting to what was going on tried to remain neutral throughout the controversy. The first two groups will be addressed mostly throughout the findings of the research since the actors therein took clear oppositional stances and revealed the most connections within and between the publics.

Since Reddit was central to the research, this is also where a major connection of presence and ongoing dialogue about the controversy from the side of these game community publics was found. Within Reddit itself there was an evident opposite leading discourse among the two subreddits analysed. While the highly critical, or toxic, public was overwhelmingly present on 'r/TheLastOfUs2', the more supporting part of the community was mostly active on 'r/thelastofus'. The mapping process however revealed the highly critical public to be present on several social media platforms. Among these were Twitter, Twitch, and most often referred to by the journalists and Naughty dog actors, Metacritic. The latter revealed that a large part of the community showed their displeasement with the video game by bombarding the Metacritic platform with negative reviews within hours of the game's release. While Metacritic reviews themselves were not part of the data set, it was

clear that Neil Druckmann could be connected to that part of the community through his tweets. A day after the game's release, the actor posted a tweet taking a rather sarcastic tone as a reaction to the backlash found.

Figure 4

A tweet by @Neil_Druckmann

Note. The tweet was posted on the 20th of June 2020 on Neil Druckmann's verified account, a day after the official release of The Last of Us Part II. The tweet included a screenshot of the amount of ratings posted on Metacritic, accompanied by Druckmann's text (Druckmann, 2020b).

The actor refers to the fact that most of the people that bombarded the platform with negative reviews were unable to have experienced the game, meaning that the reviews were based on possibly untrustworthy experiences. Druckmann's text shows the actor did not shy away from starting a conversation about the backlash.

The findings show that throughout all of the publics, the video game community which was labelled as toxic, also seems to show most interaction or connections to the other actors. An interesting finding was the connection between the two subreddits which revealed

a certain ongoing sub-controversy on Reddit. While only two subreddits were analysed, there was evidence of critical opinions exchanged about each other's subreddit in several comments. To be more specific, 'r/thelastofus' which consisted of a mostly supporting public, and discussed the supposed toxicity of 'r/TheLastOfUs2'. While in the latter subreddit, supporting comments of the video game were usually seen at the top when sorting by controversial, while at the same time several explicit mentions of 'r/thelastofus' described as closed-minded were present. The public is referred to as a highly critical one, however it could be seen as an umbrella term for several stances that this public stood behind throughout the controversy.

4.2 The issues within the controversy

The use of the discursive controversy mapping allowed to look at the controversy from different angles. As seen in the map (see Appendix B), the interactions between the actors and publics were identified. Through the process of discursive mapping and analysis the stances these actors took were also revealed. The stances, or issue terms, reveal different aspects of discourse surrounding the video game, and followingly showcase which issues played a central role in the controversy of *The Last Of Us Part II*. While these issues were found to be central to this specific video games controversy, it does not mean they solely exist within the discourse of this video game alone. As explained further, some of the issues can be identified as an issue running deeper within the discourse of the industry or game studies itself, therefore forming a sub-controversy.

The findings discuss the interactions rendered visible between and within the actors, the issues of representation, and the issues of Naughty Dog and communication. Each of these issues touched upon different actors, and their stances within the controversy and is further linked to the larger theoretical discourses of concepts related to the research questions such as crisis communication, LGBTQ+ publics and game studies.

4.2.1 The issue of LGBTQ+, gender, and diversity

After analysis of the data, a group of issue terms, also referred to as stances, were found concentrated within the video game community. While these were not unique to the actors within this public, they were a dominating discourse within the Reddit comments. The stances have been grouped together under the issue of "representation", but can be split into three main focus points when discussing the issue of representation within this specific controversy. First, is the issue of LGBTQ+ (community) representation, secondly the issue of

gender (norms) and last, the issue of (racial) diversity. The representation issues are not necessarily seen as standalone ones as they do interconnect at several points. The result of these issues can point to the deep manifestation of the earlier mentioned "hegemony of play" concept that showcases the ongoing dominant vision and culture within the industry and its products (Fron et al., 2007), and what could happen if one deviates from it.

The issues of representation have brought onto the map the evident interaction of socially located actors, and publics, which might not have been visible before, as the issue of representation showed connections between and within all three major publics. The two Reddit groups analysed referred to one another explicitly in multiple threads, apologizing for the other's behaviour, accusing the other of close-mindedness, or belittling each other because of their views on the video game itself. The stances the different actors within the publics took also influenced the way they communicated about them, if and who they blamed, and how other publics in the controversy, like the game journalists and Naughty Dog actors, interacted or talked about the video game community.

For the video games community, Reddit played an important role in the voicing of the community's stances within the controversy. As stated in the previous section there were two major Reddit groups within the video games community with opposing views. One being labelled as the toxic public and the other as the supportive one. Within the toxic public, dominantly present on 'r/TheLastOfUs2', there was an evident negative discourse when the game was discussed. Issues of representation were not always, but often, discussed in a negative light. By sorting data during collection, it became visible that stances taking on a positive view when discussing the characters and story within the game were mostly found at the top of the 'controversial' comments, while 'top' comments which had the most upvotes took on a mostly negative voice towards LGBTQ+ story and gender visualisation. Among the actors within the toxic Reddit community the stances on gender (norms) stood out the most, and could be interconnected to the LGBTQ+ representation to a certain extent, since masculine attributes were sometimes interlinked with a transgender identity.

In *The Last of Us Part II* there was a character named Abby. The character was a white female with a muscular body, which showed to be the source for much of the issue terms when discussing representation. The stances surrounding Abby could often be linked to gender norms and LGBTQ+ issues. The character was often referred to as too masculine or muscular, or wrongly labelled as transgender, which was further linked to the displeased experience with the game that certain actors in the 'r/TheLastOfUs2' Reddit community had. The description of Abby as muscular was for example linked to "utilitarian and strong"

character descriptions (u/Extrarium), reinforcing the traditional gender norms of male attributes and the expectations towards female visualization in video games to be attractive in a feminine way (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2019).

The dominating discourse within the toxic community reinforced some older research on gender and LGBTQ representations within video games (Bragança et al., 2016; Fron et al., 2007; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Shaw et al., 2019). By taking negative stances towards the representations of gender and LGBTQ in *The Last of Us Part II*, the dominating discourse can be linked to the dominant mindset described through 'hegemony of play' (Bragança et al., 2016; Fron et al., 2007). The upset reaction of these actors could be linked to the fact that Naughty Dog decided to not portray the experiences of the assumed dominating demographic and further reinforces Bragança et al.'s (2016) as well as Ruberg and Shaw's (2017) description of behaviour when the dominating public feels threatened and lashes out.

An interesting finding was however that while some of the actors thus took on a negative stance within the issue of gender norms and LGBTQ+ representation, a specific reddit thread was dedicated to the issue of (racial) diversity where an early sketch of the Abby character was shown to be a person of colour, with what was considered a more feminine look. Here the community often took on a supportive stance towards racial diversity, mentioning white-washing as a negative outcome. On the other hand however, the initial feminine sketch was also praised for its more feminine form, relating back to the issue of gender norms. Here actors referred to sexually explicit scenes being "certainly … easier to watch" (u/Bobozett) with the initial design, and Naughty Dog not choosing feminine looking characters because it "offends trans people" (u/pnshr38). Thus it can be concluded that the support for a racially diverse character was to a certain extent shown because of it aligning with the believes that it would be a better alternative than the gender nonconforming character the public saw in the final version of the video game. Looking at this finding the concept of intersectionality comes up. Shaw mentions the importance of acknowledging for intersectionality when researching gamers and their identities, in part because of their important nature in debates as the one seen about race and gender representations mentioned before (Shaw, 2012). Through the examination of and acknowledging for the intersectional nature of the different identities, one can gain a better understanding of how the different intersecting aspects make up the lived experiences of gamers. Furthermore the stance taken by 'u/pnshr38' could be linked to the assumption of the "gay agenda" (Drushel, 2017, p. 11). Such assumptions link the LGBTQ+ community to the "corruption" of the traditional or dominating discourse in the media, which lead to a threatening feeling. As a result this leads

to less representational coverage of the historically marginalized community in the media.

On the other hand, the supportive 'r/thelastofus' often took different stances towards the issues of diversity and LGBTQ+ representation in the game. A user (u/necroblackbishop) started a Reddit thread thanking Naughty Dog for the diversity and depth of characters found within the game, especially regarding the Asian-American community. Other users followed by commenting their experience with the diversity, which ended up showcasing mostly positive stances to the writing and representation of different racial ethnicities and transgender characters. In addition, lesbian and bisexual relationship representations were also praised for their realism, with users implicitly referring to other games using it as a ploy for marketing "Seeing my favorite game … showing lesbian relationship without making it look like a big deal and without using it as a marketing tool" (u/_OdeToSleep). Referring to the LGBTQ+ backlash, the user 'u/thebigman85' also commented with "... the fact that it gets so many people upset is a sad reflection of reality and how gay people still have to put up with stigma…". This latter comment also represents past research on LGBTQ+ representations in video games, where dominant ideologies influence the content being made as well as the reception of the video games by the people they were actually catered to (Bulut, 2020; Fron et al., 2007). When content thus does not adhere to these ideologies a part of the gamer community takes a stance against it and the progressive representations therein, while blaming the marginalized communities whose experiences are represented (Bragança et al., 2016; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Sliwinski, 2007; Valadares & Ribeiro, 2020).

While Naughty Dog thus is praised as a developer for breaking away from the stereotype of catering towards white heterosexual males and creating content that is representative of the more complex intersections of what it is to be a gamer, at the same time it is being criticized for supposedly pushing a political agenda through the inclusion of LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming characters. The two-sidedness of the video game communities however represents two very different discourses. On the one hand the community labelled as toxic seems to discuss the game holding on to the dominant game culture and discourse while actors within the supportive community tend to discuss it more within the queer discourse of games. The fact that this happens also shows that Naughty Dog did deviate from the dominant discourse, confirming the research stating that shifts are happening within the industry (Bragança et al., 2016; Perreault et al., 2021; Ruberg & Phillips, 2018). The greater inclusion of queer characters, their experiences and stories also leads to a higher inclusion of queer publics themselves (Clark, 2017). This potentially leads to more of the marginalized publics making their voice heard as well, enabling greater

interactivity with the community that would potentially not want to identify with dominant gamer culture (Krobová et al., 2015).

Relating back to Ciszek's (2020) research on communication with LGBTQ+ publics, it can be said that Naughty Dog also applied cultural competency as a company. Through its creation of *The Last of Us Part II* itself, the company was able to create content resonating with the marginalized community. The inclusion of several LGBTQ+ characters allowed the public to step into a game which represented them as a minority public. The stances of actors identifying as members of the LGBTQ+ community itself also reflected this. Since this goes back to a core aspect of the company, representing a more diverse image to the outside world, it can also build (intended) trust with LGBTQ publics.

4.2.2 The issue of toxic video game culture

The actors that were mapped and belonged to the journalists and writers public were the only ones who linked the issue of representation to deeper problems within the video games industry and its culture, as well as highlighted the importance of all issues of representation. Thus, when issue terms of the game journalist actors were analysed they showed a dominantly supportive discourse towards Naughty Dog and *The Last of Us Part II* because of their take on the issue of representation. A critical tone was however voiced towards the industry overall in regards to the issues of (mis-/under-)representation, as well as the "toxic" community who took on a negative discourse towards these issues. The game journalists often put their stances in the larger context of the industry while discussing the game, thereby showing the extent of the issues at play. References to toxic game culture have unfortunately been present long before this controversy, and have become increasingly visible ever since this side of game culture was addressed through the controversy surrounding GamerGate (Elliot, 2018). Massanari (2017) researched how Reddit played a role in these toxic game communities, and how these groups often voiced problems with more progressive and diverse views of game content. The digital surroundings could facilitate the ways in which the displeasure of the community is being voiced. Naughty Dog, as an individual actor, also pushed their stance on this issue by posting a statement on their official Twitter account (@Naughty_Dog). While it is important for studios to voice their support and stand behind employees and gamers if they are being harassed, and condemn the toxic behaviour, Naughty Dog did not seem to take any further PR action.

As seen in previous examples such as those in figures 1 and 2, harassment and online bullying went as far as using insulting language related to marginalised groups, including that

of the LGBTQ+ community, in order to get a hateful message across. Sliwinski (2007) linked the use of homophobic language to calling out weaker gamers in his research, however in this case the use of homophobic and transphobic language is used to harass industry professionals involved in the creation process of the game. As stated earlier, through the creation of a video game which diverted from the norm, Naughty Dog at the same time diverted from the gendered and racialized ideologies driven by cisgender, white, masculine gaming and game production cultures (Bulut, 2020). As Bulut (2020) states, with the presence of a white masculine game production culture, the creative desires of that same group of people are represented on the screens. With the issues that became visible as part because of the controversy surrounding a game that does not meet these creative desires, there is evidence that meeting these gendered desires is still an expectation among a big group of the video games community. Unfortunately in this case it also points to a problem, that when these desires are not met, but rather try to tip the scale as mentioned by Ruberg and Phillips (2018), a significant portion of the community will still push back to keep the dominating culture in place (Fron et al., 2007).

4.2.3 *The issue of Naughty Dog and communication*

One of the striking components found related back to a key question in the research. The public relations approach taken by Naughty Dog, focusing on its online communication in the time of what could be labelled as crisis for the company, was quite contradicting. The fact that this communication was seen as an issue, was due to the stances taken on by actors within the game writers/journalists public and actors linked to Naughty Dog. Shortly mentioned in the previous section, the reaction from Naughty Dog as a company was minimal. The official Naughty Dog Twitter account (@Naughty_Dog) and website blog (naughtydog.com) seemed to remain silent regarding the negative, or positive, voices on social media as a reaction to the release of *The Last of Us Part II*. The tweet published by the company, as a reaction to the backlash from a part of the community, rooted for a supportive environment and condemned any type of harassment towards Naughty Dog employees. While no statement is made directly in regard to issues of representation, this can be seen as the company remaining silent but at the same time standing behind the product and content that it has created. The statement made does however further uncover the issue of toxic (online) video game culture that falls on the shoulders of the people working in the industry.

Because of the opposing stances of the video game community, interactions to Naughty Dog actors were revealed. While Naughty Dog as a company further remained silent

on any issues, its employees took the opposite route and took to social media and interviews to discuss their views, and thereby show their own stances towards representation issues as well as the issue of toxic video game culture. The main actors here being Neil Druckmann, and Laura Bailey. This contradiction in the approach to communication among employees and the company as a whole uncovered insights that aid in answering the main research question. In addition to Naughty Dog's related communication as a result of the controversy, there were also communication issues found that linked the company to both journalists and the video games community. While the PR team issue was mentioned earlier, indicating the restrictions put on journalists, there was also an evident issue that the video games community had with the Naughty Dog marketing team which was also linked, by some on Reddit, to Neil Druckmann.

Naughty Dog's communication during the controversy seemed to rely on their employees to communicate what their products stand for and to defend them. This could also be explained by the fact that the co-president of Naughty Dog, Neil Druckmann, could be seen as an official source of statements that are also representative of Naughty Dog itself. The communication strategies adopted links back to Chan's (2019) article about studios often making a single statement and having no further strategy in regard to communicating with the public active in the crisis or controversy. Communication in this case is however crucial, since problems of toxicity can further impact the studio in a negative way (Lapolla, 2020). As stated earlier, the employees of Naughty Dog did not turn away from discussing different aspects of the controversy on social media however. The fact that Naughty Dog decided to remain somewhat quiet and let their employees do the PR related communication could be reinforced by findings of van Zoonen and Van der Meer (2015) and van Zoonen et al. (2014). Here, by leaving the communication to employees in crisis situations, both a positive and more credible image of the studio can be retained. Both Coombs and Holladay (2014) as well asn Xu and Wu (2020) showcase the importance of emotion when communicating with publics during, or after company crisis. Using positive emotions in the form of sympathizing can lead to favourable effects in public response tone and amount. However, to showcase emotion the company actually needs to interact with its community. Interactivity also plays an important role, something lacking from Naughty Dog's communication (Xu & Wu, 2020). Interactivity through Twitter can not only affect relations with publics in a favourable manner, but can potentially be received as more credible and trustworthy, impacting how and whether the message is received by the publics (Jin et al., 2014; Xu & Wu, 2020). While the

interactivity remained high for other actors within the company, they often took on a stance defending the content they created, sometimes using sarcasm or humour in their texts.

By putting most of the PR work on their employees, Naughty Dog as a company itself did not take a reactive approach. The publication of a single tweet addressing a single problem, while important, cannot be said to showcase an active or reactive approach from the company itself in relation to the controversy at hand. However, the choice to further remain quiet and not "feed" the controversy could be a strategy in itself (Arendt et al., 2017). By remaining quiet Naughty Dog takes on the strategy of denial and does not take responsibility for anything that has resulted in the backlash coming from the community. Arendt et al. (2017) states that this exact strategy is highly used but least successful. Not only does it lower credibility but it lacks transparency, while both are much needed in situations of crisis. While Naughty Dog does not need to take responsibility for the community's actions, a reactive strategy could have helped the company distance itself from the toxic behaviour playing itself out on online platforms (Lapolla, 2020).

The active approach towards communication within and between the publics connected to Naughty Dog on the other hand can still reflect back on the company. The damage that was done by Naughty Dog through their strategy of not including themselves in the conversation might have been mellowed out by the active discussion of issues by the employees. However, the employees' reactions could at the same time add more ground to cover in discussions surrounding the controversy. The fact that Naughty Dog itself did not intervene could potentially have the reversed effect on its reputation, because of them choosing not to actively communicate to the outside world that they stand with both their employees and what they create in times of backlash and crisis (van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). This further could lead to more distrust from the marginalized publics they catered their content or products to, since trust is a key aspect to building a good relationship with marginalized publics (Ciszek, 2020).

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summarizing the main findings

The main goal of this research paper was to explore a recent case of controversy within the video games industry. Studying the controversy brings onto the table an interconnection between three relevant concepts, namely that of LGBTQ+ representations, controversy itself, and crisis communication. In order to explore the video game controversy a discursive controversy mapping method was applied. The mapping process clarified the interconnectedness of different actors and thereby the manifestations of the concepts in discourses through the actor's stances or debates leading the controversy. The use of a case study like *The Last of Us Part II* means that the findings of the case are applicable to the specific controversy. While only a part of the controversy could be mapped, the implications of the issues in the findings can however be interpreted within the larger discourse of the video game industry and thus be linked outside of the controversy itself.

The discursive mapping clarified the different actors that actively partook in the controversy surrounding a game that defected from the dominating game culture and expectations. Thereby an answer to the sub-research question "*Who are the different actors within the video game controversy?*" could be formed. For detailed layout of the actors please see the controversy map (Appendix B), however a summarized answer could state that three main publics, from which further actors derived, could be stated as key sources of debates within the controversy. These publics being Naughty Dog and its employees, the video games community which found itself divided in two, and video game journalists and writers who were able to put the controversy into larger perspective.

Through further analysis of issue terms used by the actors, the stances in regards to main issues could be revealed. These stances were crucial to answering the main research question "*How do different stances taken by actors as a reaction to video game controversy construct (reactive) public relations approaches by studios?*", and the second sub-question "*How are LGBTQ+ representations discussed within the controversy?*". Stances often took negative or positive attitude towards issues of diversity, LGBTQ, and gender representation within the game. Discussions on LGBTQ+ representations were part of the opposing issues. While on one side the representations of marginalized characters were praised for their story, experiences, and visuals, they were also critiqued for those same reasons. The way in which the representations were discussed was highly dependent on the discourses in which they were discussed. Critical voices often discussed the game itself in the dominant discourse of

game culture, while praising stances were often taken by actors who identified as members of LGBTQ+ community itself or discussed the game adhering to the shifting norms within the industry. Other important stances were also linked to toxicity found in video game publics and culture and formed an interconnectedness with the dominant discourse which felt threatened by the diverting image presented by Naughty Dog through the game. There was thus a certain interconnectivity found with critical stances towards gender and LGBTQ+ representations in the game and toxicity through online harassment among others.

Forming a further answer to the main research question, as seen in the findings there was not much insight on how Naughty Dog as a studio constructed a reactive strategy when in the midst of a controversy. While a statement regarding harassment was released, and it was made known that to a certain extent the company tried to retake control through what was being said by game media outlets, not much else was found. However, the lack of interaction on behalf of Naughty Dog points to an approach in itself. While Naughty Dog remained (mostly) silently in the background, the studio's employees took to social media to voice their stances on issues within the controversy. Thereby all aforementioned issues were debated upon as major actors within the Naughty Dog public took condemning stances on toxic behaviour, defended the LGBTQ+ and gender related content and depictions within the game.

Naughty Dog thus chose a non-reactive strategy that closely relates to the PR strategy of denial (Arendt et al., 2017). Through their silence Naughty Dog does not take any responsibility and denies the existence of the controversy overall. Taking this strategy, which is widely used but tends to be unsuccessful, might have done more harm than good to the company's image (Arendt et al., 2017). The same strategy however does not mention the aspect of employee involvement, which was quite high in this case. The employees often did not shy away from discussion and thus kept an open, and honest line of communication with the publics. In addition employees are often seen as credible sources of information, adding positively onto transparency which could positively impact the company's image (Veil et al., 2011, van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). However the contradiction here is that publics tend to blame companies in times of crisis, therefore this strategy is more successful when both communication from employees and the company would be on the same line. Thus a preferable strategy would be to have an institutional response in addition to employees influencing ongoing debates online.

5.2 Theoretical discussion

The research paper provides insight into the existing intersection of concepts such as crisis communication, video games controversy and the marginalized LGBTQ+ community within video games. The interplay of these concepts showed visible connections between several publics in the video games industry and how their interactions lead to further discussions on issues both born from the controversy but also spread further across the industry itself. In addition these discussions showcase issues that are still widely spread and present across gameplay and gamers, such as those of a dominating (white, cisgender, and male) video games culture and toxicity (Fron et al., 2007; Bragança et al., 2016; Lapolla, 2020). The issues however are also able to further link the issue of toxicity with representations of marginalized publics, showing that the toxic game culture was not just an isolated issue within the GamerGate controversy where women were targets of harassment, but also spreads further into marginalized publics becoming the target within the video games community (Elliot, 2018). Furthermore, the research reinforces the findings which suggest that deviating from the cultural norm of video games can cause upheaval among the publics who have representational expectations of games adhering to these norms (Bulut, 2020; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017).

The process of mapping the controversy online further recognized the digitally born controversy as suggested by Burgess and Matamoros-Fernández (2016). The publics and actors were able to be mapped because of the digital surroundings where debates took place and connections became visible, enabling for a clearer identification of certain publics. However, while Marres (2015) and Venturini (2012) highlight the organization and structure of platforms making it easier to map the high amounts of data, a contradiction to this could be stated when observing Reddit. The platform takes on a more complicated form of interaction between community members, with no readily available mapping instruments to be found. This makes the process of mapping a controversy on Reddit itself more difficult and should be focused upon more in future research since Reddit is a central point of debates among and between communities on different issues which could enrich research on digitally native controversies (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016; Massanari, 2017).

Furthermore, the implications for crisis communication strategies throughout the results of the research have highlighted the importance for video game companies to actually start strategizing for crisis situations which might (heavily) impact their reputations (Chan, 2019). The lack of strategies developed for specific industries need to be tackled, since crisis communication is not a "one size fits all" and needs to be adapted according to the ongoing

discourses within the industry. Especially when targeting historically marginalized publics, such as those that identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, strategies are needed for building trust which in hand influences the image conveyed to the public (Ciszek, 2020; Ciszek & Pounders, 2020). As findings suggest, video game professionals also become highly involved in online discussions surrounding certain issues, however when the communication strategies of employees and its company do not align nor support one another, it is yet unknown how this might impact the reputation of the company or what the company is trying to achieve by adapting an opposite approach from its employees (Arendt et al., 2011; Veil et al., 2011; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015).

5.3 Limitations and future research

Among limitations of the research was the widespread nature of the controversy among several digital surroundings. While only a part of the controversy was mapped, this still had to exclude certain data in order to keep the research manageable. While several sources were chosen for data collection, namely two highly active Reddit communities, journalistic game articles, and interviews which further also lead to the inclusion of several tweets, still only a limited amount of data could be mapped. The amount of data used for the mapping of the controversy influences the way the map eventually turns out, meaning that in order to create a more accurate map a large range of actors needs to be mapped. For future research it would be suggested, if the unavailability of a digital tool remains, to focus on a single digital platform as a source of dispute in order to create a completer and more in-depth look at how the controversy unfolds within that digital surrounding. While focusing on a single platform for data collection this could bring onto the field a smaller range of actors but also a larger range of issues, through the ability to discursively map the stances more in-depth. With the availability of a digital tool a clearer map could also be created, and gives more potential for the researchers to focus on in-depth analysis of the data found (Burgess & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016). Furthermore the discursive approach and thus the analysis of written text was based on the interpretation of the researcher. While objectivity and reflexivity throughout the research play a key aspect in collecting and analysing the data, for the future it would also be interesting to see the research approached through a mix of on- and offline data (Beck & Kropp, 2011).

Consecutively, it would be interesting to further explore the interconnection of the video games industry and crisis communication in further research through the exploration of a potential case study that deals with a controversy where the strategies taken by studios have

clearly failed or succeeded. Since little research is done on the PR aspects of the industry specifically, such a study could give more insight into several strategies used. Because of the somewhat broad focus in this research it was sometimes difficult to find a balance between all the concepts at the centre of it, therefore a more focused plan of action could deliver quality insights into PR and crisis communications strategies within the video games industry overall. An interesting finding central within the research was the double-sidedness of the communication coming from the game developer Naughty Dog and its employees. To further research impacts of PR and crisis communication strategies taken by companies on trust, and image or reputation impacts from marginalized publics, it would be advised to look into the effects of such diverging communication strategies through in-depth interviews with marginalized publics. This could further uncover how companies can better understand marginalized publics such as the LGBTQ+ community, and how to strategize in order to not damage one's reputation (Ciszek & Pounders, 2020).

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Appendix A

Table A1

Table of Reddit post categorization, based on Diets' typology (2020).

Type of post	Contents	Number of posts	Exemplary post
Textpost	The textpost initiates the discussion and enables other users to place comments within the thread. It always includes a title and will usually be followed by text or an image.	7	See Table A2
Long textpost	The same as above can be said for a long textpost with the exception of its length. Long textpost exceed the 200 words and usually go in-depth on argumentation by the user initiating the thread.	3	See Table A2
Comment	In this research the comments collected were solely the individual responses made by users to the textpost. While excluded from data collection, users also have the ability to comment on another user's comment.	351	See Table A2
Long comment	The same as a regular comment, however exceeding the wordcount of 150. These usually include an elaborated text.	31	See Table A2

Table A2

Examples of Reddit posts based on typology as seen in Table A1

Textpost example	As an Asian-American I was ecstatic because of the high quality writing for the Asian-American characters in the game. There was so much depth to Jesse, Yara, and Lev. Thank you ,Naughty Dog, this means a lot to me.
Posted by u/necroblackbishop in r/thelastofus, 2020 June 28	
Long textpost example	Lesbian relationship representation in TLOU2 I'm a girl attracted to girls (bi!) and I was so happy with the wlw representation in TLOU part 2. Seeing my favorite game in the entire world showing lesbian reationship without making it look like a big deal and without using it as a marketing tool made me genuinely so happy. I also like that the relationship is canon and not 2 random unknown characters holding hands in the background like in many films or series that claim to have "representation". It's not the most important thing to discuss about this great game, but I just wanted to say that because it's not very common to see (well done) lesbian relationships in big movies/series/video game. It should

	be normal, but it's not yet, so I think it's important to say it when it's done well, and not just when it's not ! So yeah, not sure if this kind of post is allowed but i just wanted to share my happiness :) (Sorry for my English !) Update: So I don't know why but got my very first award !! Thank you kind stranger ! It made my day :) Update 2: So I got many awards and I don't know why, I mean it's so cool but I don't deserve all of this for just exposing my opinion, so yeah thanks everyone for the love and support !!! I really love talking about the game so I'm happy I can talk about it under my post with a lot of ppl !

Posted by u/OdeToSleep in r/thelastofus, 2020 August 17

Comment example	Might be true since ND doesn't seem to understand what made the first game 'Likeable' for most players. From tlou2 it's just another zombie franchise now. The first one was unique due to the other writers aswell. And it was a good storyline. It just looks like the original storyline for tlou2 was good enough. It got ruined as development continued.

Posted by u/JackDockz in r/TheLastOfUs2, 2020 June 26
Thread title: "At this point, I'm convinced that TLOU was an accidental masterpiece."

Long comment example	More than the skin color change, I am just taken aback in that the original idea of having her parents killed by Joel when he was a far less savory character makes perfect sense and is clearly what they should have gone with. Yeah, it loses the firefly angle, but who gives a shit? One of the biggest hurdles to overcoming Abby is that what Joel did wasn't evil, and her killing him for it is something that crosses a huge moral line. But if it was this? If she was one of Joel's victims in the old days, hell someone he left alive because he couldn't kill a little girl and saw Sarah in her, think about how much more powerful the actual story of the cycle of revenge would be. Joel is a better man because of his experiences with Ellie, he's not the hunter he once was, but there would be no way for Abby to know that. Seriously, what a boneheaded fucking change.

Posted by u/gfm793 in r/TheLastOfUs2, 2020 July 7
Thread title: "Abby was not white in the beginning.. there's been discussion of her dad being black. Can we discuss this because my mind is blown..."

Table A3

Reddit threads used for data collection and mapping

r/thelastofus					
Title	**Date Posted**	**Comments (at time of collection)**	**User**	**Reddit link**	**# of comments collected**
Troy Baker quote. Enough said.	24 June 2020	2.5k	u/ashtinfay y	https://www .reddit.com/ r/thelastofus /comments/ hf1ifq/troy_ baker_quote _enough_sa id/	40
As an Asian-American I was ecstatic because of the high quality writing for the Asian-American characters in the game. There was so much depth to Jesse, Yara, and Lev. Thank you ,Naughty Dog, this means a lot to me.	28 June 2020	738	u/necrobla ckbishop	https://www .reddit.com/ r/thelastofus /comments/ hhne21/as_a n_asianame rican_i_was _ecstatic_be cause_of_th e/	40
To everyone who finished the game ignoring all the hate	7 July 2020	834	u/Sil3ntW riter	https://www .reddit.com/ r/thelastofus /comments/ hn0jsq/to_e veryone_wh o_finished_t he_game_ig noring_all/	39
Lesbian relationship representation in TLOU2	17 August 2020	422	u/OdeToSl eep	https://www .reddit.com/ r/thelastofus /comments/i ban2u/lesbi an_relations	40

				hip_represe ntation_in_t lou2/	
After all the hate Laura Bailey got just for being the person behind Abby, this is super satisfying to see. Congratulations Laura on your Game Award!!	11 December 2020	278	u/LifesA Meme118	https://www .reddit.com/ r/thelastofus /comments/ kb69cz/after _all_the_hat e_laura_bail ey_got_just _for/	40

r/TheLastOfUs2					
Title	**Date Posted**	**Comments (at time of collection)**	**User**	**Reddit link**	**# of comments collected**
TLoU2 User Game-Discussion Topic	19 June 2020	7.800	u/MilesC W	https://www .reddit.com/ r/TheLastOf Us2/comme nts/hbvpyc/t lou2_user_g amediscussi on_topic/?s ort=controv ersial	40
At this point, I'm convinced that TLOU was an accidental masterpiece.	25 June 2020	99	u/AlexRav en91	https://www .reddit.com/ r/TheLastOf Us2/comme nts/hfjos3/at _this_point_ im_convinc ed_that_tlou _was_an/	34

Abby was not white in the beginning.. there's been discussion of her dad being black. Can we discuss this because my mind is blown...	07 July 2020	284	u/_King_ Cav27_	https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastOfUs2/comments/hmlb3r/abby_was_not_white_in_the_beginning_theres_been/	40
As a fan of TLOU2, I apologise for any immature behaviour	12 December 2020	75	byu/theanonymousdude101	https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastOfUs2/comments/kbproc/as_a_fan_of_tlou2_i_apologise_for_any_immature/	29
A chad on r/ps4 going against the narrative after all the top comments are people praising the game's story as perfect.	25 June 2020	312	u/CanWeStOpThisBS	https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLastOfUs2/comments/hflmv3/a_chad_on_rps4_going_against_the_narrative_after/?sort=controversial	40

Table A4

Overview of game journalist articles used for mapping, which have also revealed further connections to tweets posted by actors

Title	Source of Publication	Name of writer	Date published
The Last of Us Part 2: Why some players hate this sequel	Den Of Geek	Matthew Byrd	22 June 2020
Why 'The Last of Us: Part II' Deserves to Be in the 'Game of the Year' Conversation	Collider	Dave Trumbore	3 July 2020
The Last of Us Part 2 has become a minefield	Polygon	Patricia Hernandez	30 June 2020
The Last Of Us 2's Legacy Will Be Remembered More Than The Controversy	Screenrant	Christian Stridiron	5 August 2020
The Last Of Us Part 2: What's The Problem Here, Exactly?	Forbes	Paul Tassi	20 June 2020
2020's Most Controversial Video Game Reveals the Worst Thing about Fandom	INVERSE	Jen Glennon	13 December 2020
The Last of Us Part II Controversy Will Not Go Away	Comicyears	Taylor Bauer	6 July 2020

The rest of us: The last of us part II trans controversy exmplained	INVERSE	Jen Glennon, Dais Johnston, & Eric Francisco	14 May 2020
The controversies around the last of us part II are overblown	Gamerterra	Unknown (Staff writer)	1 July 2020
The Last of Us Part II (Spoilers): Justifying the Ways of Naughty Dog to Entitled Gamers	PlaystationLifestyle	Brianna Reeves	24 June 2020
'Last of us Part II' controversy born from fan ignorance	Technique	Akhil Gundra	16 July 2020
The Game Awards host breaks his silence on The Last of Us 2 controversy	SVG	Keegan McGuire	18 December 2020
The Last of Us 2 Reddit Is Losing It Over The Game Awards Wins	Screenrant	Brianna Reeves	11 December 2020
The Last Of Us Part II Is Being Absolutely Trashed On Reddit	We Got This Covered	Tim Brinkhof	27 June 2020
The Last Of Us 2 Subreddit Has Turned Against The Sequel	Screenrant	Phillip Tinner	24 June 2020
Sony CEO Jim Ryan Addresses The Controversy	HappyGamer	Aaron Hans	22 November 2020

Surrounding The Last Of Us Part 2			
As Naughty Dog Crunches On The Last Of Us II, Developers Wonder How Much Longer This Approach Can Last	Kotaku	Jason Schreier	3 December 2020
Naughty Dog condemns abusive fans sending death threats, harassment to TLOU2 team	The Verge	Andrew Webster	6 July 2020
The Last of Us Part 2 is getting internet hate. You can ignore it.	CNet	Daniel Van Boom	28 June 2020
The Last of Us Part 2's Overly Limiting Embargo Only Hurts Critical Discourse	USGamer	Kat Bailey	22 June 2020
The Last of Us Part 2: Why the hate for its story and ending is so wrong	News.com.au/Technology	Sam Clench	10 July 2020
Gamers roll their eyes at 'The Last of Us Part II' wining big at The Game Awards	TheWrap	Samson Amore	10 December 2020
Where 'The Last of Us Part 2' Ending Goes Wrong	VICE	Rob Zacny	2 July 2020

Naughty Dog responds to the abuse and harassment of those who worked on The Last of Us 2	Gamesradar	Vikki Blake	5 July 2020
Naughty Dog's Neil Druckmann responds to angry The Last of Us 2 reviews	Dexerto	Brent Koepp	20 June 2020
Why The Last of Us Part 2 Is Already So Controversial	Screenrant	Alexandra Sakellariou	17 June 2020
As expected, angry trolls are review bombing The Last of Us II and harassing its cast and devs	PlaystationLifestyle	Zaremna Khan	20 June 2020
The Last of Us 2 director shares examples of threats and harassment	Gamerant	Rory Young	5 July 2020
Should games like 'The Last of Us Part II' be rewarded for crunch?	Forbes	Erik Kain	13 December 2020

Table A5

Interviews used for mapping

Title	Posted by	Duration	Retrieved from	Date of publication
Naughty Dog On The Last Of Us Part II's Controversy, Characters, And Ending	Game Informer	59 minutes, 15 seconds	YouTube	14 July 2020
Last of Us 2 Spoilercast w/ Neil Druckmann, Ashley Johnson, Troy Baker – Gamescast Ep. 26	Kinda Funny Games	1 hour, 57 minutes, 6 seconds	YouTube	25 June 2020

Appendix B

Appendix B1: Controversy map including the actors and main publics together with their interactions visualised through linked connections and colours
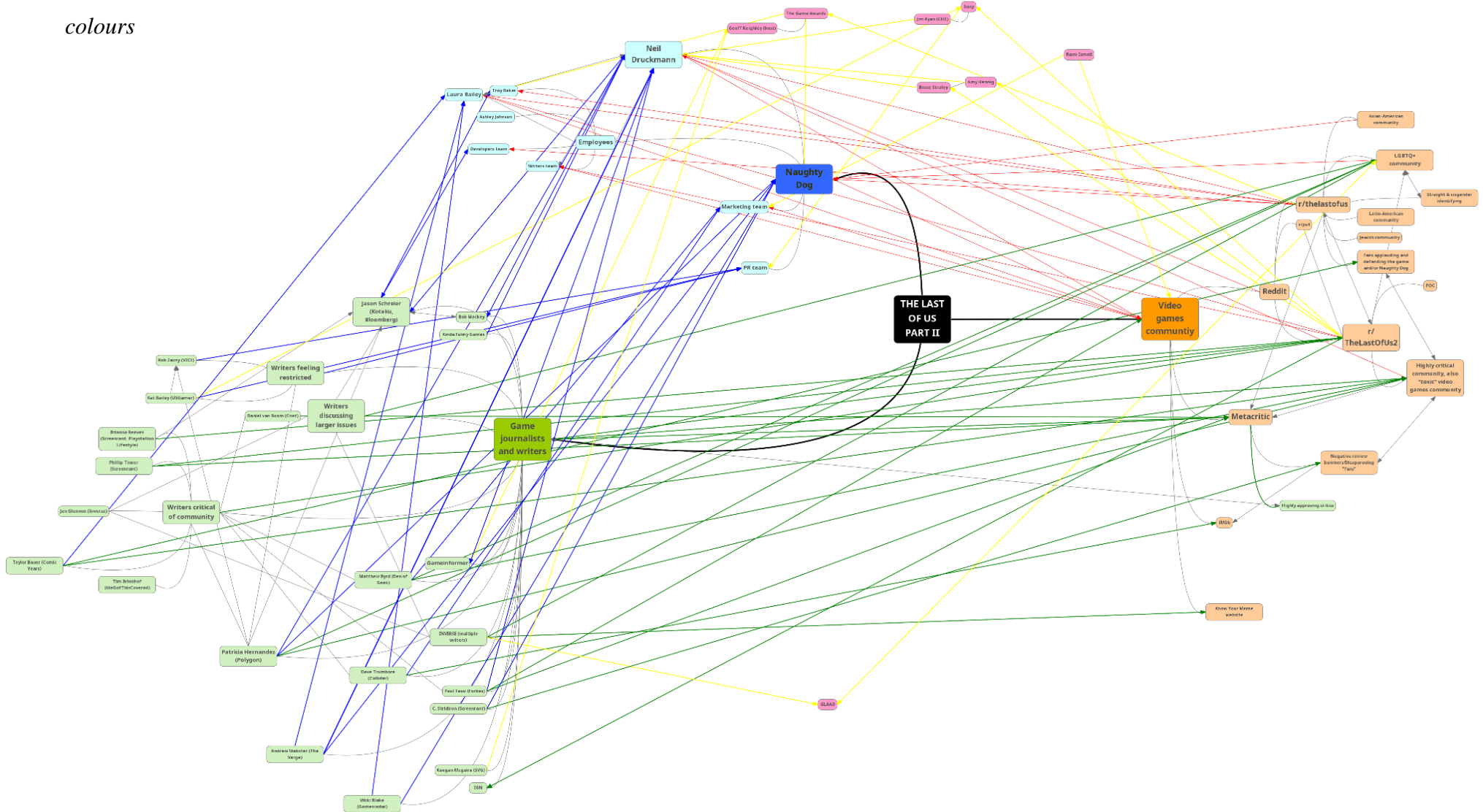
Table B2

Colour-coded table of the publics and actors as seen in the controversy map in Appendix B1

Main publics	Naughty Dog	Video games community	Game journalists & writers	
Actors	Neil Druckmann	r/thelastofus	Writers discussing larger issues	Sony
	Laura Bailey	r/TheLastOfUs2	Writers feeling restricted	Jim Ryan (CEO)
	Troy Baker	r/ps4	Writers critical of community	Bruce Straley
	Ashley Johnson	Reddit	Kinda Funny Games	Amy Hennig
	Developers team	Metacritic	Bob Mackey	The Game Awards
	Writers team	Asian-American community	Jason Schreier (Kotaku, Bloomberg)	Geoff Keighley (host)
	PR team	LGBTQ+ community	Rob Zacny (VICE)	Rami Ismail

Marketing team	Latin-American community	Kat Bailey (USGamer)	GLAAD
	Straight & cisgender identifying gamers	Daniel van Boom (Cnet)	
	Jewish community	Brianna Reeves (Screenrant, Playstation Lifestyle)	
	Fans applauding and defending the game and/or Naughty Dog	Phillip Tinner (Screenrant)	
	POC	Jen Glennon (Inverse)	
	Highly critical community, also "Toxic" video games community	Taylor Bauer (Comic Years)	
	Negative review bombers/Disapproving fans	Tim Brinkhof (WeGotThisCovered)	
	IMDb	Gameinformer	

		Know your Meme website	Matthew Byrd (Den of Geek)	
			INVERSE	
			Patricia Hernandez (Polygon)	
			Dave Trumbore (Collider)	
			Andrew Webster (The Verge)	
			Vikki Blake (Gamesradar)	
			Paul Tassi (Forbes)	
			C. Stridiron (Screenrant)	
			IGN	
			Keegan Mcguire (SVG)	

Highly approving critics