

**“It can’t be for nothing”**  
Understanding escapism through narrative techniques in ‘The  
Last of Us’ (2013)

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# UNDERSTANDING ESCAPISM THROUGH NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN *THE LAST OF US* (2013)

## ABSTRACT

*The gaming industry has been growing since the first commercially successful video game in the 1970's, and is now one of the leading industries in global revenue. The abundance of platforms and devices from which video games can be enjoyed sparks academic interest into why these video games and their experiences are so desirable. One of the key components in the growing popularity of video games is the use of narrative, and the way in which video games are emerging as a prominent form of storytelling. This paper set out to expand on existing literature on this topic, by looking specifically at escapism; the goal to use video games as an escape from real life through a fictional narrative. Escapism has been discussed in different contexts, however, it is a particularly prominent phenomena when it comes to video games and the emotions it evokes in players (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Prinsen & Schofield, 2021). However, the gap in existing research concerns how escapism is achieved, in particular, how narrative devices are employed to develop escapism. This research aimed to dissect the popular video game 'The Last of Us' (2013), and use it as a case study to understand the posed research question: 'How is escapism achieved through narrative techniques in the world renowned video game: The Last of Us?' In order to answer this question, a qualitative approach was chosen in order to construct meaning from the game. More specifically, thematic content analysis was used for its ability to deconstruct the data found within the game into identifiable themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). From the data collection, four themes were identified: 'cutscenes', 'gameplay', 'worldbuilding' and 'character development'. Through the data analysis, examples from the game were used to illustrate the importance of these themes to the overall narrative, and with the use of existing literature, their connection to escapism (Ip, 2011; Deleuze et al., 2019). It was found that cutscenes and gameplay were used to further the narrative and keep the player engaged, while worldbuilding was used to create an immersive virtual environment, and character development helped create player-character identification. Therefore, within this research it was found that different narrative techniques can be used to increase player engagement, immersion, identification and interactivity which are all responsible for promoting higher levels of escapism.*

**KEYWORDS:** Escapism, Narrative, 'The Last of Us', Video Games, Immersion

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## 1. Introduction

Video games have become an inherent part of everyday entertainment consumption (Kuo et al., 2017), and are established as one of the largest media industries in the world (Banyai et al., 2019; Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Reid, 2012; Prot et al., 2012). Muriel and Crawford (2018) argue that video games have fast emerged as a habitual culture in contemporary society, a claim which can be corroborated with the fact that the video game industry is, as of 2021, worth 95.5 billion dollars (Statista, 2021). Furthermore, in 2016, 2.5 billion people were found to have played video games (Georgiev, 2022), illustrating the growth and popularity of the industry since games were first introduced in the 1970's (see Appendix A for overview of gamer statistics). Over the last 50 years, video games have evolved from arcade games such as the first commercially successful game 'Pong' in 1972, to an amalgamation of games across different platforms, devices and technologies (Wallach, 2020). The most significant part of this evolution is the emergence of PC games, console games and now mobile games which contribute at least 25% each to the current revenue generated by video games and highlight the abundance of different ways to play (Wallach, 2020) (see Appendix B for overview).

Within this growth of video games and the platforms on which they are played, narrative and storytelling have become one of the more salient elements to attract audiences (Ip, 2011). Ip (2011) elaborates on narrative in video games, and delineates that there is an increased use of narrative techniques, which would usually be found in "more traditional forms of storytelling such as books, film and theatre" (p. 108). This illustrates the idea that video games have become more than just something to play and are now fully established forms of interactive stories. The popularity of video games in society suggests that there is a growing culture surrounding this form of entertainment (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

The popularity of such entertainment and storytelling forms stems from the emotional responses that video games evoke (Ceranoglu, 2010; Blasi et al., 2019), while also offering an escape from the real world (Kosa & Uysal, 2020, Deleuze et al., 2019). This escape from the real world is encapsulated by the term 'escapism', as discussed by entertainment media and video game scholars (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016; Deleuze et al., 2019; Blasi et al., 2019). Therefore, this research aims to explore video games and how escapism is achieved through their narrative. An exploration into escapism and narrative features in video games has already been explored through academia (Kosa & Uysal, 2020;

Deleuze et al., 2019), therefore this paper incorporates a case study to provide a more in-depth investigation into how escapism is achieved, extending upon existing research (Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016).

The relevance of this study stems from previous research on video games and its existing relationship with escapism (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Deleuze et al., 2019). This paper, however, intends to use the case study of the video game ‘The Last of Us’ (2013) (see Appendix C for details) to fill the gap in knowledge surrounding how escapism is achieved and extend understanding on the appeal of escapism in video games. This research is looking at narrative, which is known to be an important tool in creating complex stories that lead to escapism (Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016). Therefore, the academic relevance is that this investigation will provide a deeper knowledge on exactly how escapism is achieved and more specifically how a story-driven game like ‘The Last of Us’ can serve as a paradigm for video game and escapism research.

The social relevance on the other hand focuses more on how video games achieve escapism, while understanding why video game narratives are so popular and influential within society. Providing this knowledge may help gamers be more aware of why these games are more desirable, and whether they understand how video games are affecting their mood, or if they are simply seeking virtual stimuli: escapism (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Deleuze et al., 2019; Blasi et al., 2019). This research aims to also provide game developers with more knowledge on how they can achieve escapism within their games through specific narrative devices.

To address this social and academic gap, this dissertation sets out to answer: ‘How is escapism achieved through narrative techniques in the world-renowned video game: The Last of Us?’ This will be done by considering two main sub-questions which serve as a guide for the overall study;

1. What narrative devices are implemented within The Last of Us that contribute to the overall video game experience?
2. How do these features conform with and extend the knowledge surrounding escapism within video games?

To answer both the main research question and the proposed sub-questions, this paper will be structured into four main sections: Theoretical framework, Methodology, Results and Conclusion. The ‘Theoretical Framework’ section will examine existing literature surrounding

video games, narrative and escapism in an attempt to create a deeper understanding of these salient components. The section will look at what motivates people to play video games, using the work of Muriel and Crawford (2018), to illustrate the culture that has emerged within the video game industry. Furthermore, the work of scholars such as Ip (2011), Landa (2005) and Abbot (2008), will be investigated to better understand the academic perception of narrative, and its role in contemporary media. Finally, academic work on escapism will be examined, with an in-depth analysis into how escapism is perceived, with video games in particular being described as the “epitome of contemporary escapism” (Calleja, 2010, p. 336).

The ‘Methodology’ section will discuss the qualitative approach that was selected for this research and how the use of content analysis will help decode the date in a way that produces effective results (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The design of the research will be outlined in this section, along with credibility and ethical considerations to ensure the reliability of this study. Following this, the ‘Results’ section will cover the main components that emerged from the data collection, with the use of in-game examples to illustrate the overall arguments. This data analysis will be at the centre of the research and will provide key insights which will be imperative when answering the research question. The ‘Conclusion’ section will briefly touch upon all other sections, whilst also providing a concrete answer to both the research question and the sub-questions. In this chapter, the implications and limitations of this study will also be examined, with the goal of generating more discourse on the topic of escapism through future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This research focuses on exploring and understanding the role of video games, and the elements that make them appealing. Escapism is the focal point of this study, and therefore existing literature will be examined and discussed in an attempt to gain a better understanding of video games in general and more importantly, the links to escapism. However, this section will look at the contributing elements that lead to escapism, with a particular focus on salient elements such as narrative, examining its definition and role in video games.

### 2.1 Video games

#### 2.1.1 Video games as a culture

This study aims to explore the role of escapism within video games and therefore understanding the effects of this form of entertainment is pertinent. Over the last two decades, video games have emerged as an established culture and have become an ingrained part of contemporary society (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). This can be corroborated through the claim that people of all backgrounds are becoming video game players, with Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., (2008) stating that the amount of “people who have never played a video game, from first graders to retirees, seem to be inexorably dwindling” (p. 134). This suggests that video game players, including those who may have only played video games once are no longer in the minority, which further elucidates the notion that video games are a sought-after commodity within contemporary society (Molesworth, 2009; Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Kuo et al., 2017). What this means for this study is that video games in general are something worth researching and understanding the effects can help break down what leads to escapism and how video games are contributing to this.

#### 2.1.2 Motivation behind playing Video games

The book ‘Video games as culture’ by Muriel and Crawford (2018) explores the role of video games and their effects on the people playing. The authors of this book claim that video games can be seen as a medium to escape the ‘ordinariness of our everyday lives’ (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 115), and escapism is seen as an important reason why people play video games. However, this does not limit the desire to play video games to just seeking escapism, as many experiences can be associated with playing video games (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Molesworth, 2009; Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Blasi et al., 2019; Ip, 2011). Muriel and Crawford (2018) expound

on the idea that the reason people play video games can include “interactivity, entertainment, fun, enjoyment, simulation” (p. 84). However, they also suggest that video games can be interpreted as experiences. This is further addressed through the work of Klimmt and Hartman (2005), who discuss the role of interactivity within video games as a key motivator for why people play. Intrinsic motivation is another key factor in understanding the desire for video games (Klimmt & Hartman, 2005), as well as providing immersive, diverse and fun experiences (Przybylski, Rigby & Ryan, 2010). Video games as an experience can highlight the idea that all forms of video games provide certain gratifications to the players and therefore, it is appropriate to explore different forms of video games before diving into the role of escapism within this gaming ‘experience’.

### 2.1.3 Video game effects on players

The work of Banyai et al., (2019) explores e-sports, the professional video game scene, and investigates the problematic aspects of it. This is relevant since e-sports is one of the most involving and participatory parts of gaming, and therefore can provide a strong starting point in understanding the role of video games. The main arguments presented in this article include the notion that video games are now becoming a career option and looking into the motivations behind that can help frame how video games are perceived. There have also been links established between excessive video game playing and gambling, and how the effects of video games can be problematic (Banyai et al., 2019). This suggests that video games can evoke addictive feelings in its players, and is a concept heavily discussed in the video game sector. Video game addiction is defined as a syndrome online and can be described with its own symptoms and treatment (Van rooij et al., 2011; Griffiths et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant since links with how video game addiction can be mistaken for escapism have also been discovered. (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). Therefore, understanding that playing video games can be regarded as a desirable profession while at the same time can turn into a negative habit, showcases the wide spectrum of effects and influence that video games have.

Furthermore, the work of Blasi et al., (2019), investigates whether using video games as a coping strategy is problematic or not, using large multiplayer games as the focus of the study. This also links to the work of Kosa and Uysal (2020), as they describe escapism as related to coping mechanisms and how video games may be sought out for this reason. Multiplayer games

can also allow players to increase their social interactions, and potentially connect with like-minded people (Hastall, 2017), which highlights the social side of video games (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014). Therefore, it could be argued that video games can stimulate positive emotional reactions from players (Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014). Understanding and exploring the relationship between videogames and emotional regulation is another opportunity to learn more about how video games can affect its users, and how it is received (Blasi et al., 2019; Granic, Lobel & Engels, 2014).

Although video games do seem to have specific effects on different people, it is also key to note that the contributing elements within these games also play a significant role.

## **2.2 Narrative**

One of the key elements of this investigation is narrative and how it helps explain the role of escapism within video games. This section will provide a thorough exploration of current literature surrounding the definitions, roles and techniques of narrative.

### **2.2.1 What is narrative**

Narrative can be defined as “A semiotic representation of a series of events connected in a temporal and causal way.” (Landa, 2005, p.1), which provides a rigid insight into the concept. A more expressive definition is provided by Abbott (2008) who described narrative as the way “we apprehend the world” (p. 6). Abbott (2008) also provides a quote from filmmaker Brian De Palma: “People don’t see the world before their eyes until it’s put in a narrative mode” (p. 6). Hendry (2007), expands on this by offering the perspective that narrative is an important part of society, as it is not only how the world is comprehended and perceived, but the understanding of our own lives and the lives and experiences of others. This suggests that narrative is a pathway to understanding the world, and when considering its role in media, it serves as a mechanism in understanding certain events and can be considered the main form of storytelling (Landa, 2005). Narrative, however, has evolved in the last few decades, particularly within media, as technological advancements have contributed to the emergence of new types and uses of narrative (Ryan, 2004). Ryan, (2004) also argues that new media can influence how narrative is construed, with a reference to digital media such as video games as the future of narrative storytelling. Therefore, an investigation into the new uses of narratives in video games is more

relevant for this research, in order to examine their role in providing more thought evoking and meaningful experiences.

### 2.2.2 Narrative in video games

Drawing on the work of Ip (2011), narrative has been shown to become an increasingly significant element in the development of video games. Over the last few decades, with the advancements of hardware and available software, narrative has been given extra emphasis, resulting in games that provide more in-depth narrative which in turn create a “greater sense of meaning and immersion” (Ip, 2011, p. 104). Ip (2011) also provides a definition of narrative, providing a quote from the work of Cohan and Shires (1988): “A narrative recounts a story, a series of events in a temporal sequence. Narratives give expression to feelings, but within the framework of a story and its telling” (p.1). This definition suggests that narrative also allows for the expression of emotions, and allows feelings and thoughts to be illustrated through storytelling. This is relevant since Ip (2011) highlights that emotions also are a significant element in the creation and structure of richer and more in-depth narratives.

Another salient element of the overall narrative of a video game is the use of cutscenes, and their contribution to the overall story and characters. Cutscenes are a heavily integrated part of video games in contemporary video game development, since they are a influential form of narration (Ip, 2011). Additionally, according to Riha (2014), cutscenes are an “inseparable part of the gaming experience” (p. 661), and are used in order to help players understand the overall narrative direction of a game. This is backed up by King and Krzywinska (2002), with the argument that cutscenes help develop the initial storyline, whilst also furthering the overall narrative. Therefore, it can be suggested that cutscenes play a vital role in the overall enriching of the narrative, with players getting a chance to gather extra information about the storyline (Riha, 2014). Cutscenes also allow for an opportunity for players to learn more about the goals of the characters through their dialogue, which can be another significant way the narrative is extended through cutscenes (Kromhour & Forceville, 2013; Lobowitz & Klug, 2011; Dubbelman, 2021). More importantly, these elements contribute to the overall player engagement and, therefore, cutscenes help create a more immersive experience whilst providing additional context for the narrative (Ruan & Cho, 2014; Ip, 2011). It is important to note that the importance of cutscenes can help explain a player’s immersion and ultimately the achieved

escapism in video games, due to cutscenes' contribution to the overall narrative and player experience.

Other than cutscenes, the most prominent element within video games is the gameplay, which provides an insight into how the player experiences and interacts with the game (Frome, 2019). Suter (2021), claims that gameplay is one of the pertinent ways in which the narrative emerges, and allows players to forge their own experiences and their own perception of the story. Gameplay can be defined simply as the “actions taken by the players” (Ang, 2006, p. 306), in addition to the level of interactivity the game offers (Lebowitz & Forceville, 2013; Ermi & Mayra, 2005). However, it should be noted that gameplay should not be considered just “procedure” (Fabricatore, 2018, p. 88) and that it gives the opportunity for players to find their motivation and connect to the gameplay experience. Keeping the player interested, however, does require variety within the gameplay, with a video game offering different gameplay encounters as a way to keep the player engaged (Dubbelman, 2021). Gameplay’s influence on the overall narrative carries importance as well, as players' enjoyment of a story or the game itself stems from the joy and positivity that the gameplay experience offers (Jarvinen, 2008; Quick, Fulton & Lin, 2021). Moreover, Quick, Fulton and Lin (2012), elucidate the idea that components such as exploration, challenge and fantasy all play a role in the overall development of a player’s gameplay experience.

The gameplay experience is something highlighted through the work of Ermi and Mayra (2005), with gameplay being defined as the “interaction between a particular kind of a game and a particular kind of a game player” (p. 7). The gameplay experience can be further explained through the use of three dimensions: sensory, audio-visual and challenge-based immersion, which highlights the importance of immersion and escapism for a worthwhile gameplay experience (Emri & Mayra, 2005). These dimensions can help further illustrate the notion that gameplay is a salient component in the overall narrative of a video game, and how it contributes to the overall feelings of escapism.

The third concept related to narrative that will be important to this research is worldbuilding, which can be seen as the way in which the player interacts with the world’s environment (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Suter, 2021; Joyce, 2018; Prinsen & Schofield, 2021). Therefore, an important part of the worldbuilding is how the player perceives the environment they find themselves in at any given moment in a game, with the interactive aspect allowing

them to feel part of the narrative process and not merely a spectator (Suter, 2021). A video game's environment and world can help progress the narrative and provide extra information which can contribute to the overall environmental storytelling (Suter, 2021; Jenkins, 2004; Joyce, 2018). This type of storytelling can also be done through the use of digital artefacts that carry additional narrative information, but are easily missable (Jenkins, 2004; Joyce, 2018). This entails that players can experience and explore a video game's digital world and find additional narrative artefacts. This can contribute to the player soaking up the environment which can increase the overall immersion within the game (Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Paterson, Williams & Cordner; Kuo, Hiler & Lutz, 2016; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Another salient element that contributes to worldbuilding is the use of background music, which can enhance the emotional experience of a player, especially during core narrative moments (Zhang & Ghao, 2014; Ganiti, Politopoulos & Tsiatsos, 2017).

These narrative techniques provide an insight into what is important when developing a video game story and can help identify key elements that can contribute to the overall feeling of escapism. Existing research has found that escapism can be achieved through narrative transportation, which not only applies to video games, but entertainment media as a whole (Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Narrative transportation can be further achieved through complete immersion and absorption into a story's narrative, which can be understood as escapism.

## ***2.3 Escapism***

### **2.3.1 What is escapism**

This research is tackling the concept of escapism and how it is achieved through video games, however, there have been many theoretical discussions on the role of escapism in everyday life. Escapism was defined by Hirschman (1983) as a way to offer "the individual an avenue to a more desirable state of being than the one presently experienced" (p. 64). It has since evolved into a concept that is directly associated with the use of media, explained as an attempt by the individual to escape real life problems (Hastall, 2017; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Kosa and Uysal (2020), have defined escapism as leaving somewhere individuals do not want to be and escaping to a more desired place which, in the context of this research, is a virtual place. Based on these definitions and understandings of escapism, it can be regarded as a sought-after motivator for

media use, and more specifically a motivator for avoiding present problems. Individuals who seek out escapism have been correlated not only with high levels of anxiety and stress (Hirschman, 1983), but also with a preference for media which provide them with unfamiliar settings which they can escape to (Addis & Holbrook, 2020). Escapism has also been discussed in the context of internet use, with Kardefelt-Winther (2014), explaining that people tend to go online to escape, which leads to excessive internet use and addiction. In addition, escapism tends to be sought-after by individuals who have trouble disassociating themselves from their stressful real-life problems (Hirschman, 1983), in an attempt to enhance their mood and attain higher levels of relaxation (Hastall, 2017). Therefore, it can be understood that escapism is typically a motivator for media use, in an effort to avoid a present reality, which has been found to have both negative and positive connotations.

### 2.3.2 Positive or negative escapism

Escapism can also indicate a preference for virtual stimuli rather than real-life, a belief argued through the article by Deleuze et al., (2019). The main arguments provided in this article are that video games can evoke feelings of ‘achievement (e.g., succeeding in quests, gaining in power), immersion (e.g., discovering the game, knowing its secrets, being immersed), or social interactions’ (p. 1025). There is also a feeling of ‘empowerment’ that comes from playing video games, a feeling they may be lacking in the real world, and therefore is something achieved through video games. This suggests that escapism can provide benefits that users are not used to within their real-life environment, and therefore these video game experiences are sought out in an attempt to get access to these emotions. Liao et al., (2022) explicate that escapism has been found to increase levels of enjoyment and gives the player the sense that they are achieving something. In addition to this, Hastell (2017) argues that escapism leads to higher levels of relaxation and well-being, which contributes to certain positive connotations such as mood enhancement and higher self-esteem.

There is also an argument for the negative effects as well as the positive effects of escapism, as numerous scholars have argued and investigated the idea that escapism has a relationship and correlation with negative emotions (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Deleuze et al., 2019). The work of Banyai et al., (2019) explores the effects of professional video gaming on psychological well-being of its players, including an investigation into problematic gaming.

Video games can be used as a coping strategy which can lead to problematic reactions among players (Blasi et al., 2019). It has also been found that escapism can have a negative effect on interpersonal relationships and can be a significant factor in excessive media use (Hastel, 2018). Hagström and Kaldo (2014), highlight that escapism can be seen as negative due to the nature in which individuals use video games to escape problems, along with feelings or even social encounters. These studies are useful in understanding the role of video games and exploring both the positive and negative effects of excessive gaming. However, this research aims to understand escapism and how it can be defined and explained through video games.

### 2.3.3 Escapism in video games

This section will start to dissect the concept and understand how it has been defined, understood, and explained through the work of different video game scholars. In addition, understanding the role of escapism in media in general provides a starting point in the exploration of escapism. Escapism is heavily discussed within academia when considering video games and their effects on users (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). It has been claimed that video games are nowadays considered the “epitome of contemporary escapism” (Calleja, 2010, p. 336), which suggests that video games provide the best platform for understanding how escapism is sought out, achieved, and understood in an entertainment context. Calleja (2010) explains that digital games offer virtual environments which can be considered another step in the overall escapism within video games. This can be further explained through the work of Ruan & Cho (2014), who expound on the idea that certain elements within video games, such as cutscenes, contribute to the feeling of escapism. Therefore, understanding that video games offer multiple components contributing to escapism (Calleja, 2010; Ruan & Cho, 2014), it can be argued that escapism is something directly linked to video game use.

The work of Kosa and Uysal (2020) provides an introduction into how escapism is pursued, desired, and achieved through video games and its users. There are multiple main theoretical concepts within this article to discuss, starting with ‘avoidance of the real’ and ‘mood management theory’, which describes how people seek out this feeling of escapism to get away from feelings and issues taking place in the real world. The former, ‘avoidance of the real’, is essentially the focal point of the escapism argument and refers to how video games “take place in a temporally and spatially bounded virtual space that is separated from the real” (Kosa & Uysal,

2020, p. 63). This suggests that leaving the real and being virtually transported into an artificial and digital world through video games is something that is sought out among players. This claim is corroborated by Muriel and Crawford (2018), who argue that video games are “representation environments, which are there for the gamer to explore and experience” (p. 101), which demonstrates the idea that video games offer a space for individuals to explore and escape to.

The latter theoretical concept mentioned within the Kosa & Uysal (2020) article, ‘mood management’ theory explores the notion that players either try to maintain their positive mood or alter negative feelings (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). Furthermore, escapism can relate to coping mechanisms, where players are seeking entertainment to cope with problems or stress (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Deleuze et al., 2019; Blasi et al., 2019). Kosa and Uysal (2020) argue that escapism can be a good coping method through the medium of video games, as long as the time spent playing is managed. Escapism can also be linked with the idea of recovery, and how video games provide a ‘recuperation’ opportunity, where players can feel like they are letting go of stress and pressure from the outside world (Kosa & Uysal, 2020). In addition, escapism within video games can be associated with higher levels of relaxation and contributes to the overall motivation towards playing video games (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Therefore, it can be seen that the appeal and effects of escapism is a common topic within video game academia. However, this research seeks to investigate how it is achieved.

### **3. Research design and methods**

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

This research aims to understand how escapism is achieved through narrative using a case study to provide a deeper look into escapism within video games. An analysis of the techniques used within the narrative structure of the video game will help explore how escapism is achieved. Accordingly, the main research object of this study will be the popular ‘The Last of Us’ game, which released in 2013, has received critical and popular acclaim (Mason, 2021). This video game in particular has been described as one of the best games of the PlayStation 3 generation (McHendry, 2016), due to its complex, damaged and real characters. The game has won many ‘game of the year’ awards, with it receiving praise from critics and fans, while also being a success commercially (Haider, 2021). The game follows two characters, Joel and Ellie, and their survival in a zombie apocalypse, as they journey across the country in the hope of using Ellie’s immunity as a key to a future cure. It is a story involving heartbreak, challenges, bittersweet moments, and brutal truths. They provide an interesting and relevant framework for what constitutes a good narrative, and therefore the analysis of them can help break down escapism and how it is achieved. The game directors, Neil Druckerman and Bruce Straley, have talked about how they wanted to make a narrative-heavy game that focused on the relationship between two characters, and how it can grow throughout a game (Takahashi, 2013). This illustrates the story-driven nature of the game, and how it was designed to focus on the relationship between the characters and the effect that has on the core narrative, which is why it was chosen for this research. The focus will be on the narrative techniques that are present within ‘The Last of Us’, with these aspects being framed through the lens of escapism, and therefore the right approach is necessary to guarantee relevant and positive results.

To understand and explore the posed research question, this paper will adopt a qualitative approach. This method provides a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the research topic through the dividing and reconstruction of the data (Boeije, 2010). Qualitative was chosen over quantitative due to the limitations associated with the latter method, including the inability to measure perception and meaning making, and focusing more on facts and generalisation (Gray & Densten, 1998). This analysis relies on measuring perception and is focusing on the messages hidden within the data, which qualitative analysis is suited for (Boeije, 2010). This research will then opt to use content analysis of the games, with thematic analysis

additionally being used for the data analysis. Key characteristics of these analyses include “systematic process of coding, examining of meaning and provision” (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 100), which through the creation of themes can help develop a more knowledge-based understanding of the data. This can be expounded through the idea that this analysis can help deconstruct the data and help in the identification of meaning and certain nuances that may not be found through other forms of data analysis. Thematic analysis was chosen as it highlights and investigates thematic patterns that have been discovered within the data. It also allows for a more efficient structure of the data analysis, due to the process of categorization of the data into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### ***3.2 Reliability and Credibility***

This research will draw from the work of multiple scholars to better assess reliability, credibility and ethical considerations concerning qualitative research. Considering the work of Brink (1993), who elucidates the notion that reliability and validity are crucial, and that careful consideration of them are imperative to conducting credible research. Therefore, understanding the limitations and risks of the selected research approach is paramount to ensuring research that can be trusted (Brink, 1993). One of the more significant factors that could hinder credibility of is the data collection and analysis, mainly due to the idea that research can only be considered successful and reliable once it can be repeated and reconstructed by other scholars. This claim is supported by acknowledging generalizability, and how it can be considered as an indicator of high-quality studies. Therefore, being able to repeat the study, while also being able to generalise the data increases both the validity and the reliability of the research (Brink, 1993, Golafshani, 2003).

Furthermore, this investigation aims to avoid researcher bias, as this could negatively affect the outcome of the results and the insights, especially within qualitative studies (Galdas, 2017). To avoid this, the design of this study is described in detail to ensure consistency and neutrality, as outlined through the work of Noble and Smith (2015). In addition, the sampling method has been selected to avoid any bias over the unit of analysis, and to ensure the video game was chosen via a series of criteria rather than preference. This dissertation is adopting content analysis, through the use of thematic data analysis, which involves the use of coding. To remain accurate and credible through the coding process, consistency must be maintained when

defining codes. This ensures that throughout the full process, the same approach is being used and that the data is being processed and analysed in the same manner (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). These steps will be taken to maintain reliability, validity and credibility within this research.

### ***3.3 Sampling***

This research explores how video games achieve escapism through narrative techniques and therefore, the type of video games is important. To achieve this, it was imperative to carefully select a video game that is well known for its narrative and has been praised for its well-established virtual world. Therefore, through purposive sampling, as defined by Babbie (2017), a selection of video games were chosen based on specific characteristics as well as their relevance to the main research purpose. Accordingly, the main attributes chosen as criteria for this sampling process are: video game genre, linear storyline, and critical acclaim. Through these criterion, ‘The Last of Us’ was selected based on its action-adventure genre and its story-driven, linear narrative. It has also received critical acclaim and therefore it was considered highly relevant for the purpose of this research.

In addition, it was also selected based on existing academic work surrounding the video game, where it is held to exhibit narrative complexity and invoke emotional responses through playing the game (Anyo & Colom, 2021). This game also contains an abundance of heavy and significant narrative-driven story beats, and therefore will provide enough data to allow for a thorough thematic analysis. This game is exclusive to the PlayStation platforms, with the game released on the PlayStation 3 in 2013. Its relevance to this research is that it is an extremely popular video game and has been regarded to promote feelings of immersion and presents one of the best narratives in a video game (Mason, 2021). Therefore, in order to explore narrative and how it can contribute to escapism, the case study needs to provide a strong narrative and an immersive environment. Based on the awards and the critical acclaim, this paper can argue that the story within this game can serve as a paradigm to further escapism and narrative studies. The game is set in an apocalyptic world, which suggests that the characters and narrative are pertinent to creating an immersive gaming experience (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005). These factors have been considered, and through the sampling process, this case study has been selected to provide a relevant and applicable research object.

### **3.4 Data collection & Data analysis**

The first step of the data collection and analysis of this study includes the video game ‘The Last of Us’ being played, which allows for a better understanding of the overall narrative. Certain segments of recorded gameplay have been carefully selected and coded using Atlas.ti, based on their connection to the narrative, as well as escapism. Taking inspiration from the work of Hartmann, Krakowiak and Tsay-Vogel, (2014), who use content analysis to measure violence in video games, this dissertation will use coding of pre-recorded gameplay to find relevant in-game examples. Through this method this research aims to find narrative-related content from within the game to be further examined in the data analysis. There has been an exploration into certain character interactions, their development and how this relates and affects the overall narrative. The segments have also been coded based on their ability to capture certain narrative elements, whether it be a certain action sequence, challenging gameplay, or even simple dialogue. Through this coding process, an amalgamation of codes were formed and applied to different parts of the game, which can be further explained through a better understanding of the thematic analysis process.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a five-phase process for thematic analysis: data familiarisation, code recognition, thematic identification, review, and refinement. This will be the framework that the data analysis part of this research will rely on. For this to be achieved through the analysis of the selected video games, certain theoretical concepts relating to video games, narrative and escapism will be carefully selected. These concepts have been broken down into identifiable ideas, phrases, or moments within the games themselves. Through this, a thorough process of coding followed, where each line, story beat and action sequence within the video game was carefully analysed and coded. The most important aspect of the data analysis process is establishing the prominent features that contribute to the narrative and feelings of escapism, and how these features can contribute to providing an answer to the research question.

The coding process used the data coding program Atlas.ti, where multiple rounds of coding were completed, through a thorough analysis of the video game. Key words, features and moments were identified and through coding were then further examined, breaking down what is important, and how they contribute to the overall narrative. This process included three steps, the first being a broad coding process which involves open codes being applied to the key scenes and

gameplay that has been selected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A large number of codes that encapsulate intricate details help establish a strong code framework and begin the identification of the recurring ideas. The second step of coding looks at exploring the relationships with the codes and understanding their association with each other and highlighting their connections which in turn helped establish overarching codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These more refined codes helped categorise the open codes and create a better idea of identifiable patterns within the data. The third and final step was taking these more selective codes and creating four main themes from them (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which are then used through the results section to effectively answer the research question. These themes have been established through creating final connections and associations with the existing codes, and placing them in overarching codes, which in this case will be the themes.

#### 4. Results

In this section, there will be an overview of the data collected from the comprehensive coding process of the game ‘The Last of Us’. Following this process, four main themes emerged, which were ‘cutscenes’, ‘gameplay’, ‘worldbuilding’ and ‘character development’.

These themes emerged through an intricate coding process, which produced 152 different codes applied throughout the entire game (see Appendix D for codebook). These codes were then further examined, with associations and connections formed between them, which helped identify sub-themes such as *narrative development* and *character interactions*. These sub-themes in particular were then found to be most prominent throughout ‘cutscenes’, which was assigned as the first emerging theme from the data. The second theme, ‘gameplay’, was assigned four sub-themes: *looting and gathering tools*, *zombie threat*, *human threat* and *additional dialogue* which were all prominent codes throughout the game and highlighted the gameplay contribution to the overall narrative. ‘Worldbuilding’ and ‘character interactions’ were the final two themes, with the former consisting of three sub-themes: *background music*, *background narrative* and *environment* which were prominent codes contributing to how the virtual world further developed the narrative. The theme, ‘character development’ included both *Joel’s characteristics* and *Ellie’s characteristics*, which were two of the most common codes throughout the game, illustrating the character’s reactions, motivations and more importantly, their evolution in relation to the narrative. Understanding what these themes represent and their contribution to narrative and escapism is the key in answering both the research question and the sub-questions.

Before further examining the role of each of the themes through in-game examples and in-depth analysis, their definitions will be provided to help frame their importance in video games. ‘Cutscenes’ can be defined as the way a video game illustrates key story moments, provides context and furthers the narrative through cinematic scenes where the player can only watch (Ip, 2011; King & Kryzwinska, 2002; Riha, 2014). ‘Gameplay’, on the other hand, is where the player gets to interact with the world, and comprises the actions taken by the players to progress the narrative and engage with the digital world (Ang, 2006; Frome, 2019; Suter, 2021). Thirdly, ‘worldbuilding’ can be explicated as the environment the player finds themselves in, and the degree in which they can explore and experience it (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Suter, 2021). In addition, ‘worldbuilding’ also contributes to the overall narrative through the use of embedded narrative, with pieces of the story found around the world, in order to further engage

the player (Joyce, 2018; Jenkins, 2004; Prinsen & Schofield, 2021). Finally, ‘character development’ investigates how the in-game characters are portrayed, with their goals, emotions and motivations on display in an attempt to help the player identify and connect with them (Ip, 2011; Mittel, 2012; Krieken, Hoeken & Sanders, 2017; Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007). Each one of these themes help develop the narrative, which as a result contributes to the overall escapism within the game. In-depth examples will be provided in order to illustrate the data that has been recorded.

#### **4.1 Cutscenes**

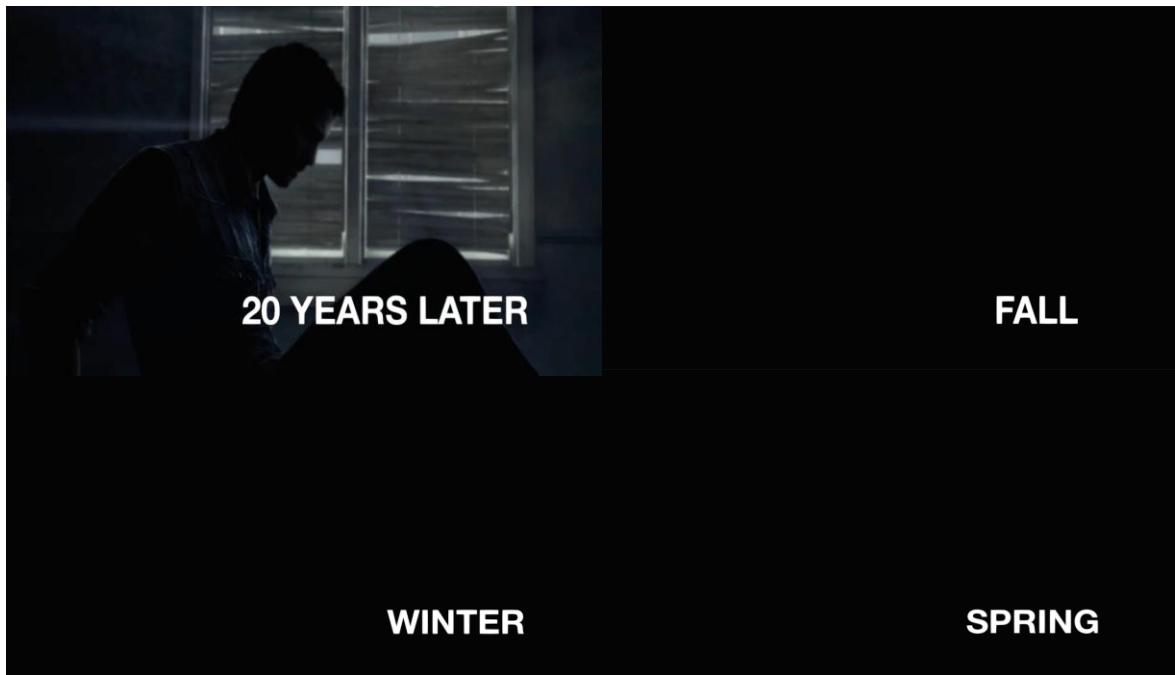
##### **4.1.1 Narrative development**

Through the data analysis, it was found that one of the more prominent features within cutscenes was the *narrative development* code. *Narrative development* was coded during moments within the game, primarily cutscenes, where the story would advance, and it was clear that these moments would have significance in relation to the overall narrative. This meant that most of the story progression came through the cutscenes, as these usually had important *character interactions*, along with *core story points* that helped progress the narrative. Throughout all the cutscenes, *narrative development* was coded 19 times, which is an indication that the main story development was done through these cutscenes, and that they were the main form of storytelling throughout the game. In addition, one technique used within the cutscenes are *time jumps*, which are clearly indicated to the player as shown in Figure 1.1 below (see Figure 1.1). There are four main time jumps within the game, usually showing the jump between seasons (Fall, Winter, Spring). One of the more memorable *time jumps* comes after the death of characters Henry and Sam, two brothers who had been accompanying Joel and Ellie for a few days. Their death is a very emotional and unexpected part of the game, and right after it happens, the players are shown a black screen, followed by the word ‘Fall’, indicating a few months’ *time jump* (see Figure 1.1). This also indicates to the player that the story has now progressed, and the next part of the game will now begin, giving the players little time to fully process the deaths of two characters. The other significant *time jump* is when Joel is injured after being impaled by a piece of metal, and Ellie is trying to carry him onto a horse to get him to safety: the player sees Joel collapse followed by a black screen and the words ‘Winter’, indicating another *time jump* (see Figure 1.1). This is an example of how the game progresses the story without giving the player any

answers, since the player then has to play as Ellie and they do not see Joel immediately, leaving them wondering if he is still alive or not. The biggest *time jump* however, comes at the beginning of the game, which comes after Sarah's death, which is a 20 year *time jump*, and shows Joel waking up. This is a large span of time, and may give the player much to think about, since they had just seen the death of Joel's daughter, giving them an impression of the story's overall tone. These *time jumps* are used for *providing context* to the player, while also helping with *story progression* as they let the player know time has passed and the story will now continue.

### Figure 1.1

Examples of the *time jumps* used throughout the game.



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:16:13; 6:26:48; 7:56:44; 8:59:49)

In addition, another way cutscenes show *narrative development* is through *core story points*, which has been coded 10 times in association with the code *cutscenes*. It should be noted, however, that although *narrative development* is happening within the cutscene, it does not always constitute a *core story point*. Throughout all the cutscenes within the game, *core story points* were only present 10 times, which suggests that not every cutscene provides a crucial story beat. With the game being around 10 hours long, a total of 10 codes of *core story point* during cutscenes indicates that there was one core story point for every hour of the game.

Although there are more cutscenes every hour, it does highlight the idea that these core story points are cleverly presented to keep the player interested, especially after perhaps a long gameplay sequence. These cutscenes therefore provide important *narrative development*, in addition to *core story points*, which can reignite or further amplify the player's interest in the overall story. Some of these vital *narrative development* cutscenes can be impactful to the characters, and therefore also the players, and can change their attitude within the game. For example, when Joel's daughter Sarah dies at the beginning of the game (see Figure 1.2 below), it sets the tone for the rest of the narrative and also provides Joel with a sad, heart-breaking backstory which may influence his personality during the rest of the game. Another example could be Joel saving Ellie in the hospital (see Figure 1.3 below) at the end of the game before she has been killed to potentially create a vaccine. This is a strong illustration of the growth between Joel and Ellie, and the extent of their relationship by the end of the game, and the cutscene makes it more realistic and helps the player feel immersed within the game. These two examples, at both ends of the game, are vital in the overall narrative, with the first setting the tone for the rest of the game, whereas the second highlights a significant choice by Joel and sets up the end of the game.

### **Figure 1.2**

The character Sarah dying in Joel's arms



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:14:19)

**Figure 1.3**

Joel saving Ellie from fatal surgery at the end of the game



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (9:48:24)

#### 4.1.2 Character interactions

Another important aspect illustrated through the use of cutscenes are the *character interactions*, which help shape the relationships and the personalities of each character in addition to the overall narrative. These scenes are *providing context* whilst also showing *story progression*, which is highlighted through the interactions of the characters. The *character interactions* drive the cutscenes, since this is where the most important and intense conversation take place, with different dialogue and interchanges depending on the situation. These interactions within the cutscenes provide the player with insight into the characters themselves, their motives, personalities and also their role in the overall narrative. These *character interactions* would also change throughout the game, especially with Joel and Ellie as their relationship and connection grows into a *father-daughter* dynamic. At the beginning of the game, for instance, the majority of their interactions involve arguments and confrontation or what has been coded as *Joel and Ellie clashes*. Notably, in one of the cutscenes shortly after the character Tess's death, Joel and Ellie have one of their first arguments, with Joel making it clear that he

did not want to talk to Ellie about Tess or even his past. This interaction sets the tone for their relationship at the beginning of the game as seen below (2:06:22 – 2:06:58):

**Ellie:** Hey, look, um...about Tess. I don't even know what to –

**Joel:** Here's how this thing is gonna play out. You don't bring up Tess - ever. Matter of fact, we can just keep our histories to ourselves. [...] And lastly, you do what I say, when I say it. We clear?

**Ellie:** Sure

**Joel:** Repeat it

**Ellie:** What you say, goes

This scene has been coded with *cutscene*, *character interactions* and *Joel and Ellie clash*, indicating that this relationship at the beginning of the game revolves around Ellie doing what Joel says, and no talk about Tess or their backstories is allowed. The code *Joel and Ellie clash* appears eight times alongside the code *cutscene*, highlighting that this type of interaction is prominent within the cutscenes and is a common theme throughout the game. Another core example of these clashes comes much later in the game, where Ellie is mad at Joel for wanting to give up on their adventure together and hand her over to his brother Tommy to take her on the last leg of the journey. Ellie lashes out at Joel accusing him of having wanted to get rid of her since the beginning, and Joel gets particularly upset when Ellie brings up Joel's daughter Sarah. The end of this interaction involves Joel saying that Ellie is not his daughter and that they will be going their separate ways (see Figure 2.1 below)

## Figure 2.1

Joel arguing with Ellie and reminding her about the nature of their relationship



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (7:04:02)

In contrast to this, another important character interaction found between Ellie and Joel is *Joel and Ellie growth*, which was coded nine times alongside the code *cutscene*, again showing the importance and prominence of this interaction. It is also in contrast to *Joel and Ellie clash*, which as a result shows a different side to their relationship, and how it changes throughout the game. There are two main examples of this growth that are noteworthy which help illustrate the change in their relationship. The first example comes after the *Joel and Ellie clash*, as mentioned above (see Figure 2.1), and is in direct contrast to this clash, as Joel seems to come to his senses and makes the decision to take Ellie on the rest of the journey and telling Tommy that he can stay (see Figure 2.2). This interaction indicates to the player that Joel may have changed his feelings towards continuing this journey with Ellie, and that the argument they shared had affected him.

**Figure 2.2**

Joel deciding to take Ellie himself on the final leg of the journey



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (7:09:00)

This example indicates that their relationship has changed, and also illustrates that Joel cares deeply about Ellie, so much that he is not willing to just let her go. This next example continues to show their growth, indicating a paternal bond between the two. This interaction was coded as *Joel and Ellie growth* but also *father-daughter*, since Joel even calls Ellie 'baby girl', something that he had only said to his daughter Sarah at the beginning of the game. This cutscene involves Joel finding Ellie after she had just killed a man named David after he tried to kill her and assault her. She is visibly affected by this, and Joel arrives in time to comfort her (see Figure 2.3 below).

**Figure 2.3**

Joel finds and comforts Ellie after her near-death encounter



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (8:59:11)

These four examples of *Joel and Ellie clash* and *Joel and Ellie growth* encompass the character interactions between the two main characters throughout the game. There are many interactions throughout the game which indicate both clashes and growth between the characters. However, these were selected based on their importance to the narrative and their significance to the characters and their relationship.

#### 4.1.3 Cutscene analysis

As the data collection showed, the game used cutscenes as an opportunity to progress the narrative with big story moments and impactful character interactions. Using the work of Ip (2011), it is conveyed that narrative has become a vital element in the development of modern video games. Therefore, this section hopes to begin providing a pathway into understanding how this narrative is constructed within video games. Cutscenes are at the forefront of the narrative development within 'The Last of Us' according to the data, and this can be exemplified through King and Krzywinska (2002)'s notion that cutscenes impact the narrative direction of a game.

King and Krzywinska (2002) further note that cutscenes also function as a way to “to forward the storyline and to entice or reward players with sequences of spectacular action and/or dialogue” (p. 142). We see that the use of *time-jumps* within cutscenes in the game are used to establish context for the player and to illustrate the progression of the story through a form of transition, which as explicated by Dubbelman (2021) and Ip (2011), is a key element in the use of cutscenes for narrative development. Figure 1.1 shows the ways in which the game provides the context for a *time-jump* with an indication to the amount of years that have passed or the time of year the game will now continue in. This allows the player to feel involved and to understand the current setting (King & Krzywinska, 2002), and although cutscenes do not always follow the *time-jumps*, they are usually used in order to set up the *time-jump* and function as an “information system” for the player (Riha, 2014, p. 661).

In addition to *time-jump*, *core story point* is another way cutscenes are used for the *narrative development* of the game, where main parts of the narrative are portrayed through the events of a cutscene. According to Ruan and Cho (2014), cutscenes are utilised in order to illustrate core narrative moments to the player, whilst also increasing their engagement in order to create an emotional connection. The *core story point* examples as highlighted through the data collection involve Joel and his daughter Sarah moments after her death (see Figure 1.2) in comparison to Joel when he is saving Ellie from her potential death at the end of the game (see Figure 1.3). These two moments were selected based on the time they took place in the game, with the former being at the very beginning, and the latter being at the very end. Sarah’s death, being one of the first cutscenes of the game, allowed the player to not only understand Joel’s backstory (Kromhour & Forceville, 2013; King & Krzywinska, 2002), but also to feel the same emotions as the character, immediately helping the player feel engaged and involved (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011).

Throughout the rest of the game, cutscenes function as opportunities for the game to further the story, provide context and keep the player engaged (Ip, 2011). All the cutscenes carry their own significance. However, the third example found in the data collection takes place at the end of the game, where Joel saves Ellie from the fireflies (see Figure 1.3). This example may carry the most significance in regards to its impact on the narrative, since it takes place at the end of the story, and shows a big character decision by Joel, highlighting the relationship change between him and Ellie. Joel choosing to save Ellie illustrates that Joel cares more about Ellie

than a potential cure and, therefore, the player can understand how the journey the characters have endured impacts the narrative (King & Krzywinska, 2002; Ruan & Cho, 2014; Lebowitz & Klug, 2011). Being with Joel and Ellie during their journey and the entire narrative, the player can feel as if they have lived the same experiences due to their engagement and immersion within the game (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

Moreover, another aspect fleshed out and developed through cutscenes are the *character interactions* which were found during the data collection. Muriel and Crawford (2018) address the idea that video games are experiences, and a part of that stems from the connection formed with the characters and their experiences throughout the game. The interactions between Joel and Ellie include their *clashes* and their *growth*, and the examples illustrated in Figures 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3, are ways in which the game showcases their relationship on a personal level. The cutscenes in this case highlight the consequences of the characters' actions (Ip, 2011), with Joel and Ellie's cutscene arguments stemming from their fear of trusting new people. Their interactions also demonstrate their connection, which has been developed through their journey together, which the cutscenes accentuate through the emphasis on more personal dialogue. The dialogue between Joel and Ellie goes from cold and curt, to warm and open as the story goes on, with their connection and willingness to talk highlighted through the cutscenes, which is key to the overall narrative (Kromhour & Forceville, 2013). Finally, Lebowitz and Klug (2011), discuss how understanding the characters allows for an emotional connection to the game and the story, which underlines the importance of these cutscenes to put emphasis on these *character interactions* between Joel and Ellie and their role in developing the overall narrative.

The cutscenes in 'The Last of Us', contribute to the narrative through the use of *time-jumps*, *core story points* and the *character interactions* between Joel and Ellie. As discussed before, the cutscenes help provide context, develop the main storyline, and illustrate backstory as well as setting for the player (Ip, 2011; Kromhour & Forceville, 2013; King & Krzywinska, 2002; Ruan & Cho, 2014). These elements are all developing the overall narrative, which allows players to understand the environment and world they are playing in, as it has been found that narrative is key in comprehending the world (Abbot, 2008; Hendry, 2007). Ip (2011), claims that narrative is a core element in the development of video games, and it can also be argued that this narrative helps transport players to an alternative reality, better known as escapism (Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016). Therefore, cutscenes contribute to the overall feeling

of escapism due to the immersion that they bring (Deleuze et al., 2019; Ruan & Cho, 2014), through their ability to strengthen engagement with the players, and create a mediated experience (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Muriel and Crawford (2018), expand on the idea that video games are experiences, which can be cemented through a strong narrative and connection to the characters. Players go in search of these experiences in order to be transported into a digital world, and escape their reality (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Calleja, 2010) and therefore this paper is able to conclude that the cutscenes in ‘The Last of Us’ help create these experiences, thereby, contributing to the overall escapism within the game.

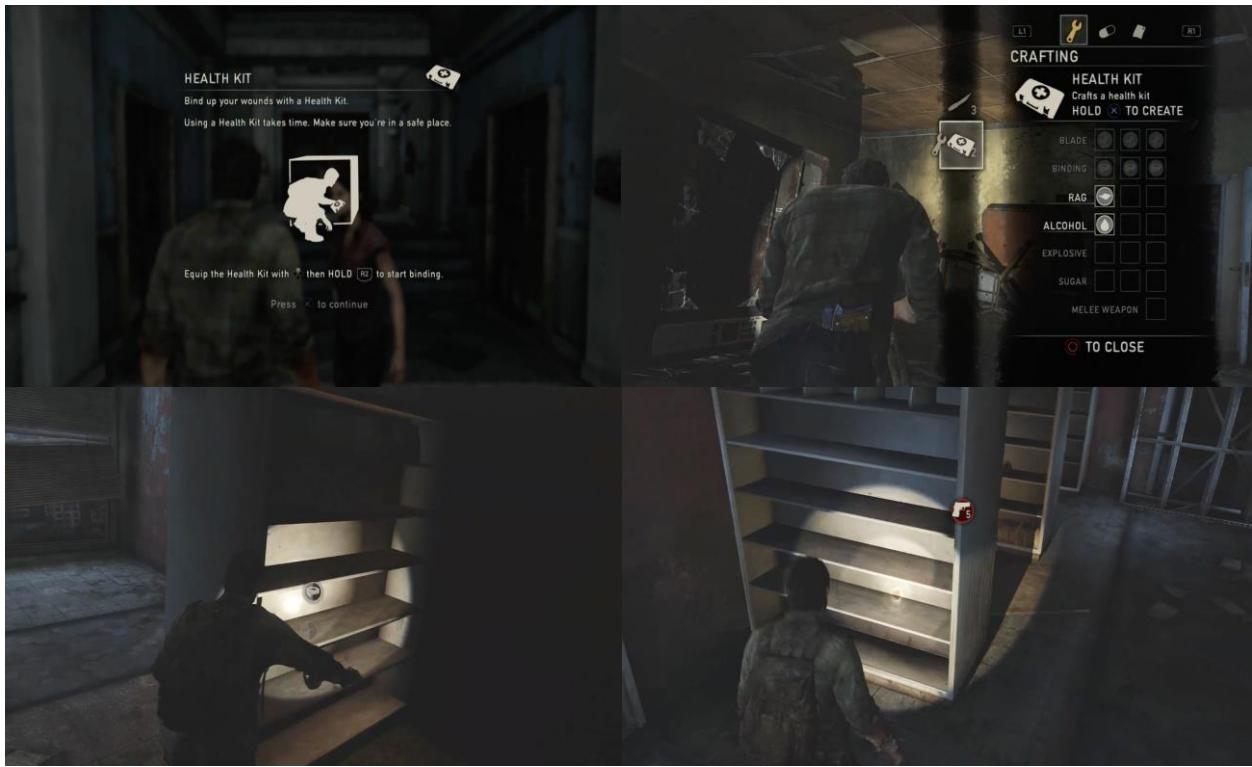
## 4.2 Gameplay

### 4.2.1 Looting and gathering tools

One of the most important parts of the gameplay within ‘The Last of Us’ is the *looting* and *gathering tools* component. This means a significant part of the gameplay includes the player exploring their environment in order to locate and find materials key for the survival of the character (player). *Looting* has been coded 150 times, showing that it is a core component of the game, and is something the player is constantly engaged in during gameplay. Looting involves *gathering tools* (coded 84 times), such as materials (alcohol, rags, scissors, etc..), which was coded with *looting* 77 times. These materials can be used to craft certain items such as a medical kit or even weapons such as explosives, which is explained within the game, and coded as *tutorials* (see Figure 3.1 below). The player also has to find ammunition through *looting* as well, since they cannot craft it, which again highlights the importance of exploration for survival (see Figure 3.1 below).

**Figure 3.1**

In-game examples of tutorials, crafting and looting for materials and ammunition



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:21:14; 1:22:48; 1:23:27; 1:23:18)

In addition to collecting *crafting* materials, players can also find supplements and gears through exploration and *looting*. These items are used for *upgrading* not only the player but also the guns the player uses. The former, supplements, are used to upgrade certain stats such as total health whereas the latter, gears, can be collected which then facilitates *upgrading* the player's guns, which is done via a *workbench*. Both these mechanisms have been coded alongside *player progression* and can be seen in the example below (see Figure 3.2).

**Figure 3.2**

In-game examples of upgrading the player through supplements and upgrading guns through gears



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:45:42; 2:42:46)

#### 4.2.2 Zombie threat

Apart from *looting*, another pertinent component of gameplay is the threat posed to the player in the form of zombies and other humans. The game revolves around the idea of survival, and therefore the player must be able to defeat the enemies they are put up against, which is done through the *use of guns* (coded 77 times), *stealth* (coded 74 times), *tactical gameplay* (coded 38 times), *violence* (coded 89 times) and *strategic play* (coded 23 times). Firstly, the main threat within the game comes from zombies, and avoiding getting bitten by one of the many zombies is key to surviving. The code *zombie gameplay interaction* was coded 50 times, with one every three interactions coded and therefore the total number of *zombie gameplay interactions* is 150. This shows that throughout the gameplay, the player would often find themselves facing off against zombies, which illustrates the constant threat posed by the zombies, and can be identified as a core element of the gameplay. There are four different types of zombies present within the game (see Figure 4.1 below): the runner zombie, the clicker zombie, the bloater zombie and the stalker zombie. Each type comes with its own challenges and the player must alter their gameplay style to deal with each one. The runner zombie was present in the majority of *zombie gameplay interactions*, with the clicker zombie being the second most common. The bloater and stalker zombie appear only a handful of times throughout the game, but offer *different gameplay*

*situations* which were often associated with *increased difficulty*. These *different gameplay situations* also were present with the other two zombies and offered the player a more difficult encounter which can be seen in the example below (see Figure 4.2).

**Figure 4.1**

In-game examples of the four different zombie types (runner, clicker, bloater, stalker)



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:58:43; 1:24:57; 3:07:02; 4:16:08)

**Figure 4.2**

Joel having to fight zombies while hanging upside down increasing the difficulty



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:26:11)

#### 4.2.3 Human threat

On top of *zombie threat*, another important part of the ‘gameplay’ section is the *human threat*, which would include gameplay interactions with the other humans of the world, and the threat they pose. The code *human threat* has been coded 75 times throughout the game, indicating the high presence of this type of encounter. However, the code *human threat* and *gameplay* are together 41 times, which means that many human enemy encounters occur in cutscenes and are not exclusively present in gameplay sequences. The human threat aspect of the game, however, provides different situations for the player, and therefore different approaches are necessary, since the encounters are very different to that of *zombie gameplay interactions*. Many encounters with human enemies would lead to shootouts (see Figure 5.1), which meant that the *use of guns* was another prominent code during these confrontations, with it being coded 25 times in association with *human threat*.

**Figure 5.1**

In-game examples of gun shootouts with human enemies



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:38:58; 6:47:55)

Furthermore, *human threat* did not indicate just one type of enemy, with there being a threat from the *military* in the game's world, in addition to *hunters*. The *military threat* code was found 17 times, whereas the *hunter* code was found nine times. This data does not cover all encounters so does not encapsulate the prominence of either enemy. The *military* was a threat at the beginning of the game, whereas the *hunter* threat emerged towards the middle of the game. During these encounters the player could choose to use *stealth* as a way of *avoiding confrontation*, which would include hiding behind cover and playing slowly to avoid being seen (see Figure 5.2). When the player was forced to fight the enemy, the *use of guns* was not the only solution, with other tools such as molotov cocktails and nail bombs also available. These tools provided the player a chance to use *strategic play* (coded 14 times with *human threat*) and eliminate more than one enemy at a time and were prominent for both *human threat* and *zombie threat* encounters (see Figure 5.3).

**Figure 5.2**

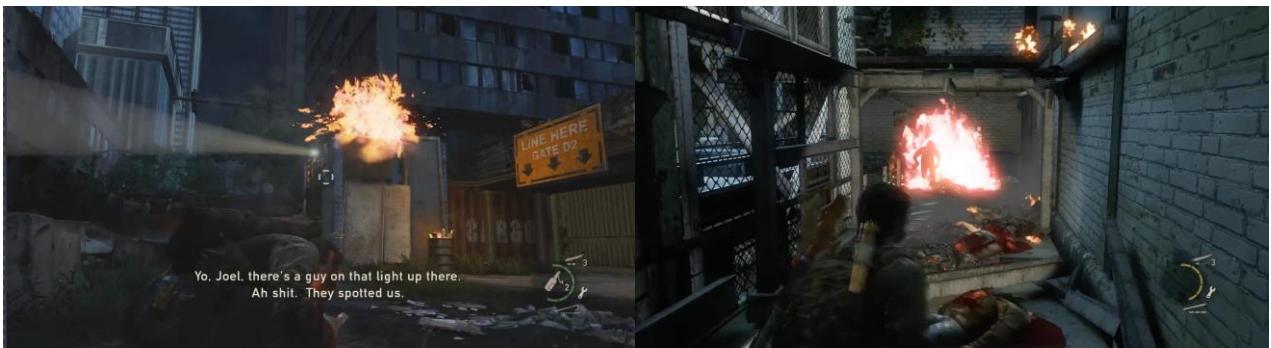
In-game examples of the player using stealth when dealing with the human threat



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (1:58:15; 1:12:00; 6:14:46; 8:32:10)

**Figure 5.3**

In-game examples of using molotov cocktails to set multiple enemies on fire



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (5:24:20; 5:56:05)

#### 4.2.4 Additional dialogue

Gameplay also contributes to the *narrative development* of the game, and one of the ways it achieves this is through *additional dialogue*, i.e., *character interactions* which occur during gameplay sequences. These are also usually optional, and the player must press a prompt to start this *additional dialogue*, which usually involves an interaction between Joel and Ellie. *Additional*

*dialogue* was coded 33 times and is used within gameplay to provide some extra context or interactions which builds the player's connection with the characters. An example to illustrate this would be when Joel and Ellie stumble upon an old arcade machine: if the player selects the prompt for *additional dialogue* (see Figure 6.1), Ellie then explains to Joel how she has a friend who knows everything about the game. Joel states that he was never a big fan of the games. However, the interaction has been coded with *Joel and Ellie growth* since this is a chance for the characters to engage in conversation unrelated to the narrative. A second example is when Ellie asks Joel if he can talk, and then apologises about the death of the character Tess (See Figure 6.2). It is a short interaction, but as *additional dialogue* it is not guaranteed that the player will hear this conversation and it subtly adds to the narrative, therefore making it a relevant inclusion in this data. Although these interactions are not part of cutscenes and therefore carry less weight towards the overall narrative, due to the number of times these types of interactions appear, they can be deemed a relevant part of the *narrative development*.

### Figure 6.1

The game giving the player a prompt to begin additional dialogue with Ellie



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:15:00)

**Figure 6.2**

An example of *additional dialogue* with Ellie apologising to Joel about the death of Tess



*Note:* Screenshot from ‘The Last of Us’ (2013) (2:54:59)

#### 4.2.5 Gameplay analysis

The ‘gameplay’ aspect of the video game ‘The Last of Us’ can be considered to be important to the overall narrative and escapism due to its ability to engage and promote feelings of enjoyment for the player. According to Jarvinen (2008), gameplay is a way in which “games impose goals on players” (p. 108), and this can be considered a form of enjoyment for the player. Using this notion, it can be said that the video game in this research uses its gameplay in order to set goals for the players, whilst also giving them the freedom to interact with certain parts of the game in their own way.

Lebowitz and Klug (2011) focus on different types of interactivity within video games, and how they affect the main storyline. The *looting* system in ‘The Last of Us’, allows the player to explore and find tools that can be helpful for their journey and experience, without affecting the main narrative, which can be described as an ‘Interactive Traditional Story’ (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011, p.121). Furthermore, the exploration aspect of the game, as the data collection highlights, allows the player to explore certain areas, which as Quick, Fulton and Lin (2012)

address is an important aspect that leads to gameplay enjoyment for the player. In addition to this, *gathering tools* and *upgrading* of a player's stats and guns, can allow for a sense of progression, which can also contribute to a player's agency, which can be essential to the gameplay experience (Cole & Gillies, 2021). Therefore, it can be said that players enjoy the feeling of agency during their gameplay experience, as it lets them feel as if they are making impactful choices. The gameplay mechanics of *looting*, *crafting* and *upgrading* do not directly influence the overall narrative, but, they are only done through the actions of the player.

Cole and Gillies (2021), underline the importance of video games that offer a challenge to the player, and claim that this is vital to the overall experience. Challenge can therefore be linked to the enjoyment of a gameplay experience; as Denisova, Guckelsberger and Zendle (2017), discuss, it is a salient component contributing to immersion. The *zombie threat* and *human threat* as found in the data collection are core aspects of the gameplay component within 'The Last of Us', and present the player with challenging scenarios, where survival is the goal. The *different gameplay situations* occasionally lead to *increased difficulty* such as the sequence where Joel is hanging upside down fighting zombies (see Figure 4.2). These difficult situations offer a challenging experience for the player, and with a good balance between difficulty and player's ability, these encounters can be considered contributors to the challenge-based immersion within the game (Ermi & Maya, 2005). The enemy variety and *strategic play* present within the core gameplay moments, are examples of the way in which the game offers a number of different gameplay experiences, which can help keep the player interested, challenged and engaged (Dubbelman, 2021).

The fourth aspect of gameplay found in the data collection that contributes to the overall narrative and experience is the *additional dialogue*, namely the optional conversations between characters during gameplay. These interactions do not have any direct influence on the core narrative but can add background story, additional character interactions and provide some extra context to the situation the player is in. Dubbelman (2021) underlines the importance of dialogue and its contribution to "engaging narrative experiences" (p. 80). Additionally, it has been argued that narrative emerges from gameplay (Suter, 2021; Dubbelman, 2021; Ip, 2011), and considering these *additional dialogues* do address *core story points* (see Figure 6.2), 'The Last of Us' can be considered a video game that offers the player opportunities to expand the narrative through their gameplay experience.

The overall gameplay components for ‘The Last of Us’ consist of exploration, resulting in *looting* and *gathering tools*; the threat of humans and zombies, offering *differing gameplay situations*; and *additional dialogue*, which allows the player to explore extra narrative content through their gameplay. As stated before, gameplay is at the core of video games, and is a contributing factor to the core narrative and storytelling (Suter, 2021; Dubbelman, 2021; Ip, 2011). In addition to this, gameplay is a determining factor in the player’s enjoyment of a game, as well as the increased immersion for the player (Ermi & Mayra, 2005; Quick, Fulton & Lin, 2012; Frome, 2019; Jarvinen, 2008). Similarly, due to gameplay’s involvement in the narrative, escapism is achieved through the player’s focus on the narrative and story, with both being further developed through gameplay sequences (Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). The notion that gameplay equals enjoyment in video games prompts the question: is escapism achieved through pure enjoyment of a game? Using the work of Muriel and Crawford (2018), it can be argued that escapism is a salient reason why people play video games, and is a pleasant experience, which suggests that the enjoyment of a video games and escapism are interchangeable. Therefore, it can be concluded that through the gameplay of ‘The Last of Us’, players are offered a variety of gameplay situations, which include offering agency to the player, providing challenges and giving the choice of additional narrative. These components contribute to a positive gameplay experience, which has been found to be salient in the overall escapism of a game (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

### **4.3 Worldbuilding**

#### **4.3.1 Background music**

The first key element of ‘worldbuilding’ throughout the ‘The Last of Us’ is the *background music* which is used in select moments throughout the game to provide ambience, tone, and emotion for the player. It was coded 22 times and is used in both the cutscenes and the gameplay and can be present during a *core story point* or even just a gameplay sequence to add more atmosphere. In some instances, eerie and upbeat music is used during certain sequences involving enemies which can add extra tension for the player. The music, however, is most impactful and prominent during important cutscenes, and significant story moments, such as Henry and Sam’s deaths. The music that follows this *core story point* is sombre and with the *time-jump*, the player is given no time to reflect, and the music in the background adds to the

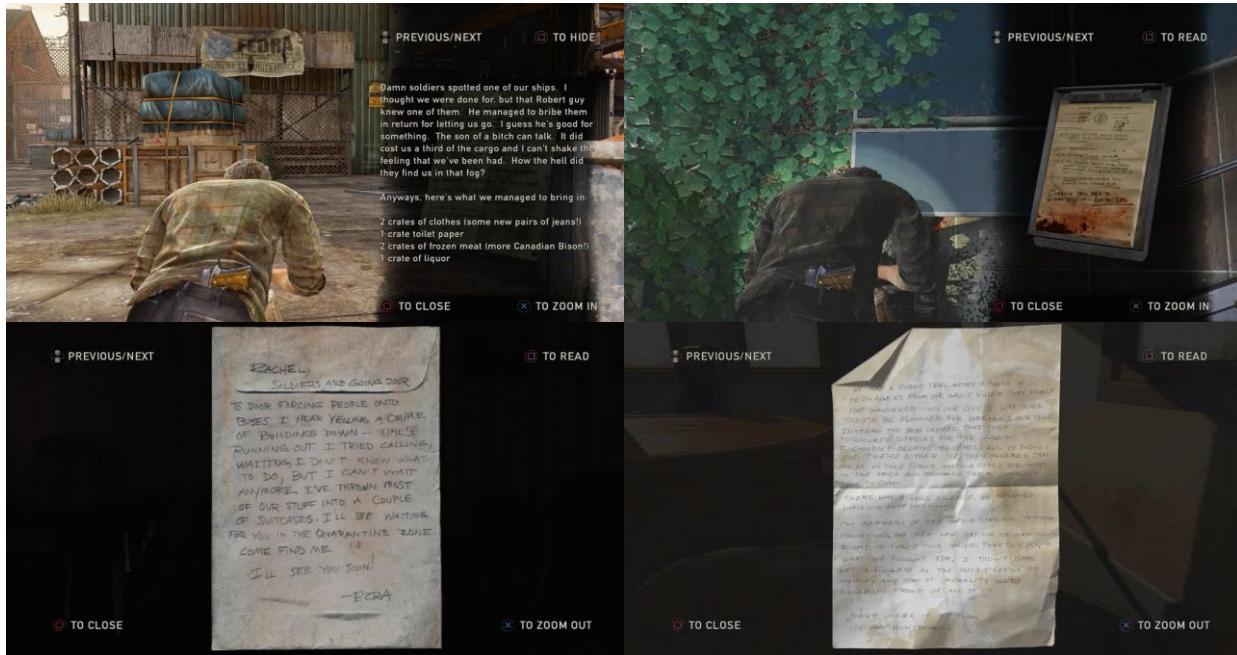
heavy emotion and dark tone that is prominent. The *background music* has been coded nine times with *gameplay* and six times with *cutscenes*, with codes like *narrative development* (coded three times alongside *background music*) and *story progression* (coded four times alongside *background music*) also prominent.

#### 4.3.2 Background narrative

Worldbuilding is not always solely reliant on a good narrative and immersive environment, as the characters and the different narratives surrounding the world also play a vital role. In ‘The Last of Us’, there is a strong emphasis on providing an abundance of *background narrative*, in the form of *collectables* and *background dialogue*. The former is a result of *looting* and although part of gameplay, its contribution to worldbuilding is pertinent to note. Throughout the exploration aspects of the game, the player can stumble across and find a collection of notes, letters, posters and flyers that have been scattered around the world, which all provide their own background narrative (See Figure 7.1). They have been coded as *collectables* and were found 89 times, with *background narrative* coded 45 times. The two codes were found together 34 times, meaning that the player has the opportunity to find a huge variety of these *collectables* which all provide their own contribution to a *background narrative*. These *collectables* do not have any impact on the overall story of the game, but each one helps build the world which can help the player feel more involved and immersed.

**Figure 7.1**

In-game examples of collectables providing background narrative

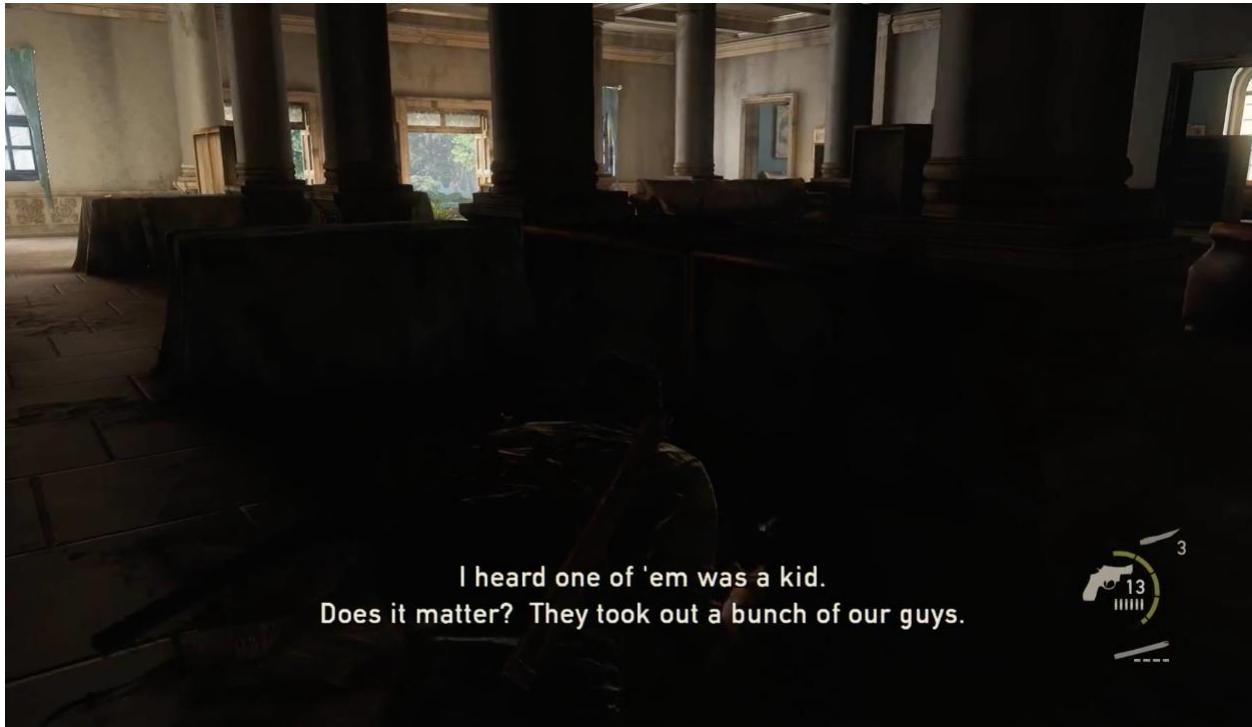


*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:46:02; 1:20:18; 2:23:50; 5:17:46)

In addition to *collectables*, the *background narrative* is also built upon with the use of *background dialogue* (coded 42 times), which has been described as the dialogue that takes place in the background between non-playable characters or even just human enemies. Usually engaging in simple conversation, the *background dialogue* occasionally involves dialogue about the two main characters, which although not essential to the narrative, does add some extra context and immersion for the player. An example of this would be when Joel and Ellie come across a group of military enemies, and the player can overhear them talking about two people going around killing all their men, who happen to be Joel and Ellie (see Figure 7.2).

**Figure 7.2**

An example of background dialogue where Joel overhears enemies talking about him and Ellie



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:00:03)

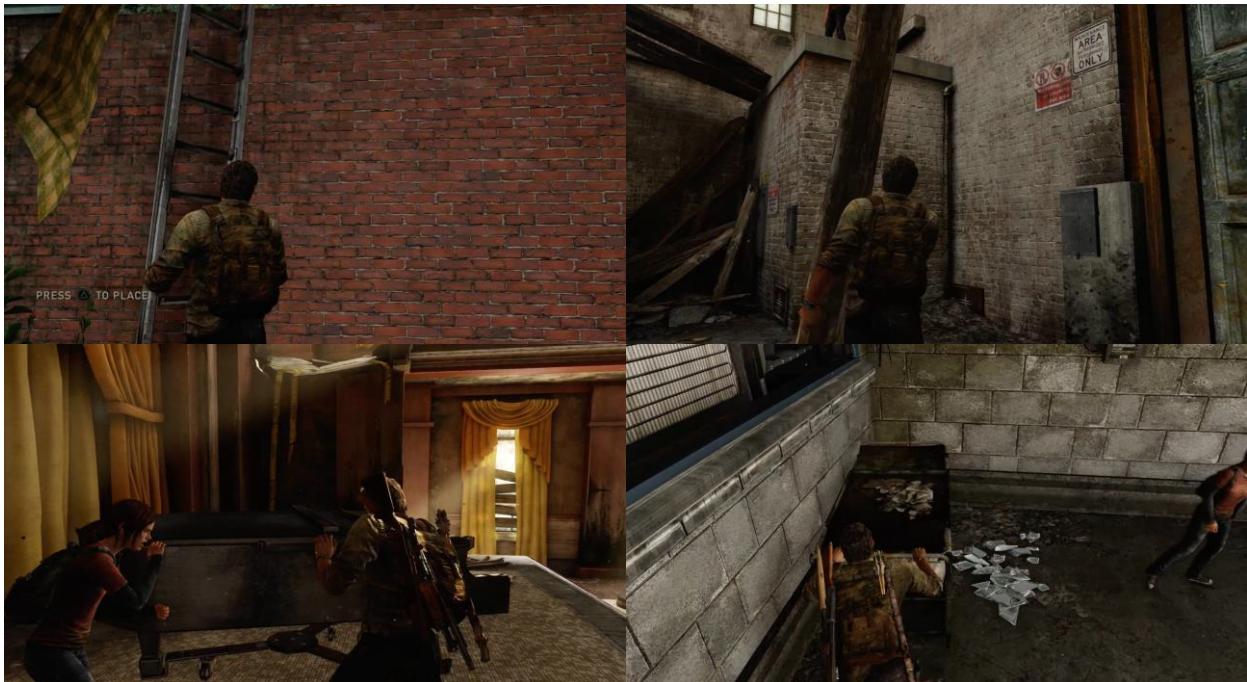
#### 4.3.3 Environment

Worldbuilding is also reliant on the environment in which the player finds themselves, which includes being able to interact with different parts of the environment, which in turn results in *involving the player*. The *environment* code was used 25 times, and was typically associated with a new environment, typically after a *time jump* or a cutscene. However, *interacting with environment* was coded 70 times, which would involve *puzzle solving* and *involving the player*. Examples of this include having to find items lying around the current environment, such as a ladder or plank to use to progress to the next section of the game, or to get past a certain obstacle (see Figure 8.1 below). This was coded alongside *immersion* since it allows the player to feel involved and as if they are progressing through the game with the characters. However, there would be more prominent instances where *interacting with the environment* was more than just placing a ladder or plank. The first example of this would be in the instances where Joel would have to find a wooden board in the water for Ellie to stand on,

since she cannot swim (see Figure 8.2). This example highlights that the player must find certain interactive items, such as a ladder, plank, climbable object or even a wooden board in order to help the characters progress through the environment (see Figure 8.1 below).

### Figure 8.1

In-game examples of the player *interacting with the environment* to progress the story



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:25:18; 0:31:22; 4:30:15; 4:47:35)

**Figure 8.2**

Example of Joel helping Ellie across water using a wooden plank



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (3:54:30)

Additionally, *changing environment* was coded 24 times which would indicate a change in the setting, which can be seen in the multiple examples below (see Figure 8.3 below). This changing environment would follow a cutscene or a sequence where the characters would have to escape to a new area. Another environment code that also contributes to worldbuilding is *destructive environment*, which would involve a certain part of the environment collapsing or breaking, typically due to it being old. An example to illustrate this, and how it contributes to the overall worldbuilding, would be when Joel becomes trapped behind a door, and separated from Ellie and Tess (see Figure 8.4 below). This means that the player would have to find a new way for Joel to progress through the environment, resulting in additional exploration, which can offer a level of interactivity to the player.

**Figure 8.3**

In-game examples of the different environments found within the game



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (1:09:38; 2:07:49; 8:00:09; 9:53:00)

**Figure 8.4**

Joel getting trapped behind a door due to the destructible environment



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (1:44:48)

#### 4.3.4 Worldbuilding analysis

In addition to ‘cutscenes’ and ‘gameplay’, worldbuilding is another salient element that can contribute to the overall escapism of ‘The Last of Us’ and, as the data collection addressed, consists of *background music*, *background narrative* and *environment*. Firstly, *background music*, as the data suggested, was a core element of the game, being used during big story points. According to Zhang and Gao (2014), the use of music in video games serves to increase the overall experience for the player, particularly on an emotional level. The *background music* can add to the overall immersion of the game, and can be a signifier of core narrative moments, whilst also increasing the level of engagement and presence for the player (Zhang & Gao, 2014; Ganiti, Politopoulos & Tsatsos, 2017). For example, moments after the death of characters Henry and Sam, the screen turns to black, with a text indicating that there has been a *time-jump* to Fall, a few months later. During this, soft and emotional *background music* is used, which can contribute to the emotional experience the players may be going through, especially after this *core story point*.

The second element in relation to worldbuilding is the *background narrative* found through *collectables* within the game, which are items found, such as letters, pictures and notes around the world that the character (player) can pick up and read (see Figure 7.1). These *collectables* usually include stories, or small anecdotes written by people of the world, which the player can engage with, giving them additional *background narrative*, and are prominent in environmental storytelling (Suter, 2021). Environmental storytelling can also entail embedded narrative information (Jenkins, 2004), in addition to the use of mise-en-scène to include additional narrative that a player could easily miss (Joyce, 2018). These *collectables* are usually found through exploration, which as Quick, Fulton and Lin (2012) highlight, is a prominent feature in enjoyable gameplay experiences. This exploration of a virtual world means that the player can “become an active participant in the narrative process and are no longer passive spectators.” (Suter, 2021, p. 57). Suter (2021) also argues that players can make sense of the world they are in through the extra narrative information found in the form of digital artifacts like *collectables*. The more the players can make sense of the world through digital artifacts, the more immersed they may feel, helping them escape their reality and engaging with the game’s worldbuilding (Jenkins, 2004; Paterson, Williams & Cordner, 2020).

To conclude the ‘worldbuilding’ analysis, the use of *environment* in ‘The Last of Us’ will be addressed, and how *changing environment*, *interacting with environment* and *destructive environment* contribute to the overall immersion and engagement with the virtual world. Suter (2021) highlights that exploration or puzzle solving can act as secondary narrative elements, leading to the player feeling engaged, whilst staying interested in the narrative. ‘The Last of Us’, through its gameplay, includes many encounters where the player needs to interact with the environment (see Figure 8.1), in order to solve mini puzzles, which will lead to the next part in the story. This is a mechanism used frequently in narrative-driven games (Suter, 2021), and increases the overall interactivity of the game, which is salient in the development of a well-established gameplay experience (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). In addition to this, the *changing environment* (see Figure 8.3) keeps the game fresh and offers new areas and terrains to explore. *Interacting with environment* and *changing environment* illustrate the way in which ‘The Last of Us’ uses the environment to keep the player interested, and the same can be said for *destructive environment* (see Figure 8.4). Since the game is set in an apocalyptic world, it is expected that buildings and parts of the environment will be falling apart, and this can contribute to the overall worldbuilding and the player’s experience (Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

Based on this analysis, it can be argued that the *background music*, *background narrative* and *environment* in ‘The Last of Us’ are salient components in the development of immersive gameplay experiences, which can help enrich the narrative. The use of music and different environments within the game contributes to the player’s engagement and can help further the emotional experiences in addition to the audio-visual immersion (Zhang & Gao, 2014; Ganiti, Politopoulos & Tsiatsos, 2017; Ermi & Maya, 2005). This emotional engagement, and increased immersion within the game both play a part in escapism within video games (Prinsen & Schofield, 2021; Deleuze et al., 2019). The additional narrative involvement resulting from the *collectables* within the game can help further the player’s knowledge and awareness of this digital world. This is corroborated by Muriel and Crawford (2018), who discuss escapism in video games, and how players seek to transport themselves to an alternative world. Therefore, the worldbuilding within ‘The Last of Us’ can be instrumental in increased immersion, engagement and transportation for the player, which are primary factors in the overall feelings associated with escapism.

## 4.4 Character Development

### 4.4.1 Joel's character

Through the cutscenes, gameplay and different forms of worldbuilding, this game is able to use different elements to develop a narrative that players can escape with. However, one final piece of this puzzle is the characters, and not just their interactions as highlighted in 'cutscenes' and 'gameplay', but the actual development of the characters' personalities throughout the game.

Starting with Joel, the main character, his characteristics were coded a total of 91 times, with the codes *impatient* and *frustration* the most common negative characteristics, with 16 codes for the former and 13 for the latter. This is because during the first few hours of the game, Joel shows clear frustration and impatience with the situation, and makes it clear he does not want to be on this journey with Ellie. As seen in the example below (see Figure 9.1), there are many examples where Joel says certain things that illustrate his personality, and his bitterness towards other characters, especially Ellie.

**Figure 9.1**

Examples of Joel's impatience and bossy personality



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (0:58:36; 2:06:46; 4:25:00; 7:02:40)

However, throughout the game, his characteristics start to change, and his attitude towards Ellie becomes much calmer and more sentimental, rather than bossy and frustrated. As

illustrated in the *character interactions* section in ‘cutscenes’, it can be seen that Joel and Ellie’s relationship grows, especially towards the end of the game. Joel’s character becomes more associated with traits such as *concern*, which was coded 19 times for Joel, and other codes such as *sentiment* (coded 15 times) and *sweet* (coded seven times) were found during the last few hours of the game. There is a clear juxtaposition between his attitude towards Ellie at the beginning of the game, and at the end of the game, which can be seen through the example below (see Figure 9.2). However, it must be noted that although his approach with Ellie becomes more father-like, his personality does not change for the most part. With *anger*, *aggression* and *violence* common traits for Joel throughout the game, it is clear that the twenty years of the apocalyptic world has made him much colder and more likely to use *aggression* and *violence*. An example to illustrate this would be the interrogation scene while he is looking for Ellie, where Joel holds two enemies hostage in order to torture them into giving him information (see Figure 9.3). *Joel’s characteristics* vary throughout the game, but one thing is clear through the data, which is that he would do anything, including the use of *violence* and *aggression* in the interests of the rare person that he cares about.

### Figure 9.2

Juxtaposition of Joel’s opinion of Ellie at the start of the game and at the end of the game



*Note:* Screenshot from ‘The Last of Us’ (2013) (0:57:57; 9:34:40)

**Figure 9.3**

Joel interrogating an enemy to find out where Ellie is



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (8:43:47)

#### 4.4.2 Ellie's character

The second main character, Ellie, has a very different and conflicting personality compared to that of Joel. Throughout the coding of the game, it became apparent via 34 codes that *curiosity* was the most common and prominent personality trait for Ellie. It is made clear through a variety of dialogues (see examples below) that Ellie possesses a certain innocence and is constantly asking questions of Joel and other characters and trying to understand the world before the zombie outbreak.

(1:03:03) **Ellie:** You know, I've never been this close to the outside.

(1:16:59) **Ellie:** Holy moley. I guess this is what these buildings look like up close.

(2:07:46) **Ellie:** Yeah. Never walked through the woods.

These examples provide an insight into the type of character Ellie is, and the isolated life she has lived in an apocalyptic world. This continues throughout the game, and she continues to ask questions and demonstrate *wonder* (coded 13 times with *Ellie characteristics*) about the outside world, as she shows her naivety towards the real world, and what it used to be like (see Figure 10.1). However, along with this innocence, Ellie also shows signs that she is not afraid, and often shows her *stubborn* and *aggression* side, with both those codes being associated with her characteristics 15 and 11 times respectively. One of the first examples of these characteristics coming to light is when Ellie and Joel have their first interaction with the side character Bill, where Ellie hits Bill with a metal bar and verbally assaults him (see Figure 10.2). This example is just one instance of how Ellie is often *stubborn* and fights back using her words and is key in establishing her character to the player.

### Figure 10.1

In-game examples of Ellie asking questions and showing *curiosity* about the world



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:07:41; 3:34:28; 6:02:10; 9:08:30)

**Figure 10.2**

Ellie showing her aggressive and *stubborn* side during her interaction with the character Bill



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (2:30:05; 2:30:51)

Ellie, however, is the one character throughout the game that shows *sentiment, empathy* and is a consistently good person, with her acts of kindness towards others. A small example of this includes when she gives Sam a robot toy which he liked as she knew that he would want it (see Figure 10.3). Another significant example would be where, towards the end of the game, Ellie gives Joel a picture of him and his daughter Sarah, a photo that Tommy had tried to give Joel before (see Figure 10.3). This highlights Ellie's effort to show people she cares and is always trying to do small things to make a difference. The whole game revolves around Ellie's immunity and being delivered to the fireflies, and she believes she is doing all of this for the right reasons, which is being a possible cure for humanity. This is illustrated at the end of the game where Joel explains to her that she does not have to go through with all of this, and she tells him that after all they have been through, it cannot be for nothing (see Figure 10.4). Her *determination* (coded 14 times with *Ellie characteristics*) is another constant in her personality and is a prominent element in her character development.

**Figure 10.3**

In-game examples of Ellie doing thoughtful things for other characters



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (6:24:40; 9:14:44)

**Figure 10.4**

Ellie's determination to do the right thing after everything she has been through



*Note:* Screenshot from 'The Last of Us' (2013) (9:09:40)

#### 4.4.3 Character development analysis

'Character development' is the final component of this research and is another salient element of the overall narrative construction of 'The Last of Us'. According to the data

collection, Joel and Ellie's characteristics vary throughout the course of the narrative, as does their relationship. According to Krieken, Hoeken and Sander (2017), characters can evoke strong reactions from audiences, readers and players within entertainment media, and the stronger the connection with the character, the more the player will be engaged with the narrative. Klimmt et al, (2009), argue that video games provide in-depth information on the characters, which contributes to the connection established between the controlled character and the player. The main playable character, Joel, can be seen as a character who is very closed-off, mainly due to the death of his daughter, in addition to violent and aggressive tendencies linked to the ways in which he has had to survive. Understanding Joel's backstory adds depth to his character (Mittel, 2012), and presents the players with an opportunity to better understand him. Although he remains violent in his actions, Joel's character develops into a more caring and understanding guardian for Ellie, which can make him more likeable, which as Krieken et al., (2017) suggest, helps a player identify more with a character.

In terms of Ellie, her character remains likeable throughout the game, and functions as a way for the player to better understand the world and narrative through her *curiosity* and *wonder* about the world. As explained by Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer (2007), character identification is one of the key components within game enjoyment and, therefore, endowing Ellie with characteristics players can relate to is vital for the overall engagement. The emotions expressed by the character, which in the case of Ellie were found to consist of *curiosity*, *sarcasm*, and *determination*, can determine whether the player connects with the characters, and as a result feel immersed in the story (Ip, 2011; Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007). Ellie's choice of words towards the end of the game (see Figure 10.4), illustrate her *determination* to do the right thing, which is something the players can understand and identify with.

Moreover, the choice of Joel going from an impatient and frustrated character to a character who sees Ellie as his daughter, allows players to connect with him and perceive him as more likeable, which can contribute to the identification with a character (Krieken, Hoeken and Sander, 2017). In addition, Ellie's persistence to do the right thing whilst also maintaining an innocence and *curiosity* that can function as a way for players to get more narrative context, can lead to higher levels of character identification. It has been argued by scholars that character identification and experiencing a story through the eyes of an in-game character can relate to immersion and, more significantly, escapism (Hefner, Klimmt & Vorderer, 2007; Lebowitz &

Klub, 2011; Klimmt, Hefner & Vorderer, 2009). Therefore, this paper can conclude that through the character development of Joel and Ellie, players can identify with their motivations and choices, leading to higher levels of immersion and escapism.

## 5. Conclusion

This research set out to investigate how ‘The Last of Us’ – a story-driven video game – uses a selection of diverse narrative devices to achieve an escapist gaming experience. This study began by highlighting the growing popularity of video games over the last 20 years, and how gamers are seeking certain experiences from video games. This dissertation examined narratives within video games as the predictor of escapism using existing research on video game culture (Muriel & Crawford, 2018), narrative’s role (Ip, 2011) and how escapism is perceived (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Deleuze et al., 2019). Through the recollection of current research, it was found that the use of narrative devices within games can effectively evoke higher levels of interactivity, immersion and engagement (Ruan & Cho, 2014; Frome, 2019; Kuo, Hiler & Lutz, 2016). Therefore, looking at the distinct narrative devices that are used within video games to evoke such feelings was at the centre of the social and academic relevance.

Thus, social relevance stems from the fact that this research aids in helping game developers and gamers understand how to achieve escapism through narrative and understand why these experiences are so desirable. On an academic level, previous research had looked at both escapism and narrative and their separate contributions within video games (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Ip, 2011). However, there was no apparent work that investigated how escapism was achieved within any specific games. This research identified this gap in knowledge and, set out to answer the question posed at the beginning of this paper: ‘How is escapism achieved through narrative techniques in the world-renowned video game: The Last of Us?’ To assist in answering this, two sub-questions were constructed to break down the main perspectives in focus:

1. What narrative devices are implemented within The Last of Us that contribute to the overall video game experience?
2. How do these features conform with and extend the knowledge surrounding escapism within video games?

To answer this question and the two sub-questions, a comprehensive understanding of all the necessary concepts had to be established through a direct examination of existing literature on video games, narrative and escapism (Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Ip, 2011; Kosa & Uysal, 2020). Investigating video game motivations and how they are perceived provided a basis for why this research carries significance, due to the social relevance and importance of contemporary video games. In addition to this, the exploration of the different types of

experiences people seek from video games helped establish the notion that narratives, virtual environments and interactive gameplay are at the forefront of these experiences. Narrative is a concept that has been discussed in the context of storytelling for decades (Abbot, 2008; Hendry, 2007) and, therefore, examining literature on narrative's role in media and how it is implemented carries significant importance and relevance for this research, (Landa, 2005; Ryan, 2004). Accordingly, this study understood that examining the narrative of video games was key in comprehending how it contributes to an overall escapist experience (Ip, 2011; Suter, 2021). Finally, literature on escapism was analysed and discussed, as the work done by scholars provides a framework for how escapism is seen as both a motivator for video games and as an actively sought-after experience (Kosa & Uysal, 2020; Kuo, Hiler & lutz, 2016).

In order to apply this theoretical work for the purpose of answering the proposed research question, this paper adopted a qualitative approach, hoping to establish meaning within the data found within 'The Last of Us'. Using content thematic analysis, this research looked at the entire game, and proceeded to code all relevant moments, which highlighted four main themes: 'cutscenes', 'gameplay', 'worldbuilding', 'character development'. Through both playing the game in its entirety and coding beat by beat, the emerging data produced significant insights, providing an answer to not only the main research question, but also the sub-questions posed at the beginning of this paper.

This research concludes that escapism within 'The Last of Us' was achieved through the contribution of all four emerging themes to the narrative. To elaborate, it was found that 'cutscenes' were used to develop the narrative and highlight core story moments, whilst presenting essential character interactions which shaped the narrative direction. In addition to this, 'gameplay' was found to give the player an immersive experience through agency to explore, challenging enemy encounters and additional narrative. The third theme, 'worldbuilding', was the way in which the game presented its narrative, through music and a changing virtual environment, in addition to including a level of interactivity for the player. Finally, 'character development' showcased the personalities of both main characters, Joel and Ellie, and how their relationship evolved throughout the game, and the contribution this made to the overall identification between player and character.

This paper argues that through the combination of cutscenes and gameplay, 'The Last of Us' presents its narrative through a culmination of emotional story moments and challenging

gameplay. These two themes together allow the player to not only experience the narrative for themselves, but also be presented with movie-like scenes that help deliver important plot moments. The two components make up the core of the game, and as the data analysis suggested, increase both engagement and immersion for the player, which were found to stimulate feelings of escapism within video games. Overall, both gameplay and cutscenes have been found to play a vital role in the overall escapism within games; thus, their significant role in ‘The Last of Us’ highlights how this particular game achieves escapism through these narrative devices.

Moreover, ‘worldbuilding’ as the third theme that emerged through the data collection is salient since it allows the player to transport themselves into a virtual environment. In addition, it is argued that the use of background music makes a direct impact on player engagement and immersion, whilst also enriching the core narrative moments. The music, in combination with background narrative, found through collectables around the virtual world, allows the players to fully experience this virtual reality. The final component of this research that helped answer the research question was the ‘character development’ within ‘The Last of Us’, and how this enhanced the identification between player and character. At the beginning of the game, Joel is presented as a bitter and closed-off character, who had to survive for 20 years in an apocalyptic world, made tougher with the loss of his daughter right when it started. Throughout the course of the game, his personality evolved, and he became a much more caring character, especially through his relationship with Ellie. The development of Ellie’s character was not as drastic but was, however, key in establishing a connection between the player which, as a result, increases player engagement. Her determination, curiosity and stubbornness are all traits made apparent during the game, and can be shared by the player, resulting in higher levels of identification which, in turn, increases escapism.

The implications of this research can be described as three-fold, the first being how this study expanded on the idea that escapism within video games is something necessary to guarantee more enjoyable gaming experiences. This research did not only focus on one narrative device but four (‘cutscenes’, ‘gameplay’, ‘worldbuilding’, ‘character development’), which highlighted the importance of how video games can create escapist experiences through a culmination of different components and engaging elements. These four narrative devices are the ones implemented throughout ‘The Last of Us’ to contribute to the overall video game experience, delineating the implications of the first sub-question of this study. The second

implication, which concerns the elements raised by the second sub-question, illustrated that video game narrative devices such as rich cutscenes and engaging gameplay are imperative to achieve higher levels of escapism. The existing literature this study examined highlighted that immersive and interactive video games increase levels of escapism, which was corroborated through the analysis of ‘The Last of Us’. The combinations of the features (‘cutscenes’, ‘gameplay’, ‘worldbuilding’, ‘character development’), aided in extending the knowledge surrounding escapism, by underlining the importance of narrative development in achieving the phenomena. Thirdly, this paper, using a well-known video game in ‘The Last of Us’, allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how existing games are using their components in order to create immersive and transportive experiences. Furthermore, the importance of narrative was illustrated, and can be viewed as a key component in achieving escapist experiences within video games.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to this research; the first being that, although this study did highlight how narrative devices can contribute to escapism, there was no consideration of how the different devices can lead to more specific types of escapism. It was briefly mentioned within the theoretical framework section of this paper that escapism can primarily be positive which has been highlighted through the work of Hastel (2017). Whereas Hagström and Kaldo (2014) have argued that escapism can be linked to negative emotions, depending on why such escapist experiences are being sought out. Overall, this dissertation established that there is a overarching link between narrative devices and escapism within video games, however, it did not investigate which story mechanisms in ‘The Last of Us’ contribute specifically to either positive or negative escapism. Hence, future research can use the established narrative techniques in ‘The Last of Us’ and focus on which type of escapism they produce, establishing a connection between the individual mechanisms and the positive or negative form of escapism.

The second limitation stems from the fact that one game can not fully explain how escapism is achieved. Rather, it only scratches the surface of a topic in need of more thorough examination on a larger scale. For example, the work of Prinsen and Schofield (2021) examined gamer’s reasons for playing video games, in an attempt to understand if they were seeking escapist experiences. During their study, a selection of video games are used as examples of digital escapism games, and therefore showing the benefit of examining multiple games, which this dissertation did not do. Therefore, future research can look at multiple narrative-driven

games through a comparative method, which could produce more hierarchical results concerning which salient elements are the most effective in achieving escapism when looking at different types of video games.

Furthermore, audience studies could also be carried out to understand the gamer's perspective, which is beyond this research's scope. These studies could be useful in understanding how escapism is not only perceived through a variety of games, but how it is achieved through the eyes of the gamer. The work of Deleuze et al., (2019) uses 273 online gamers as participants in a study examining whether gamers prefer virtual stimuli, and if they play video games as a way to escape the real world. Future research could draw from this, while also using the mechanisms identified within this paper on 'The Last of Us', to understand which narrative techniques are most effective and desired among gamers when measuring escapism. In conclusion, future research could expand on the existing knowledge on escapism, whilst drawing from the importance of narrative in escapist experiences, as identified within this dissertation.

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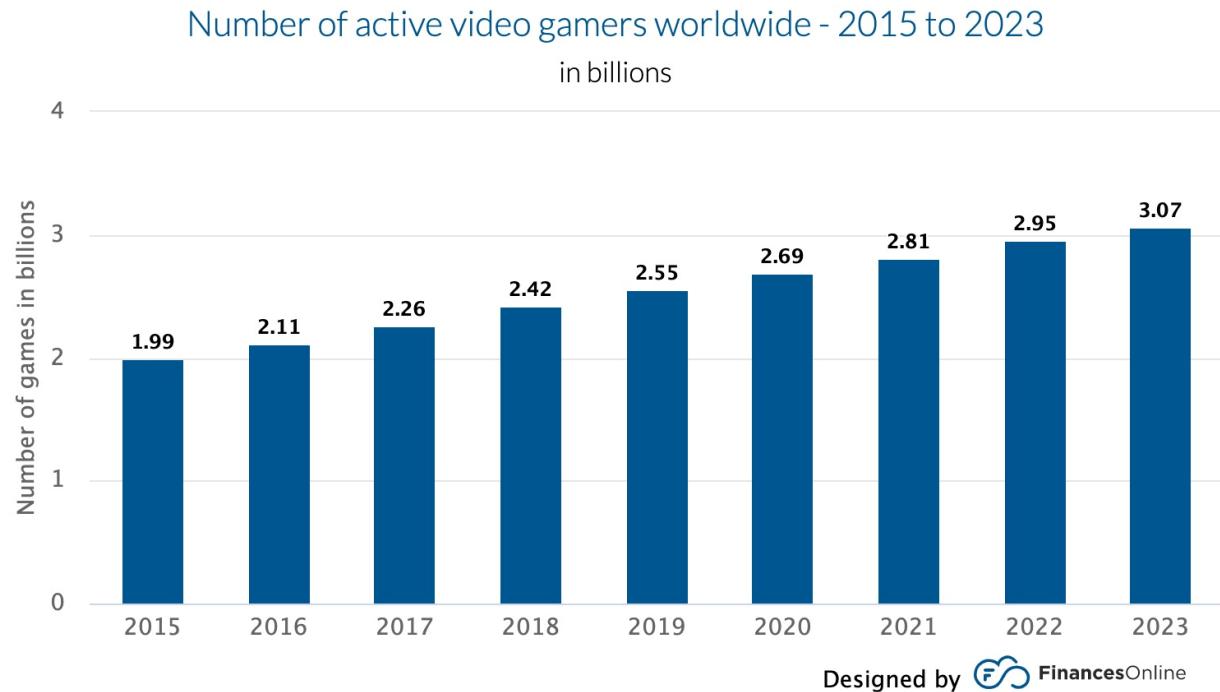
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## 7. Appendix

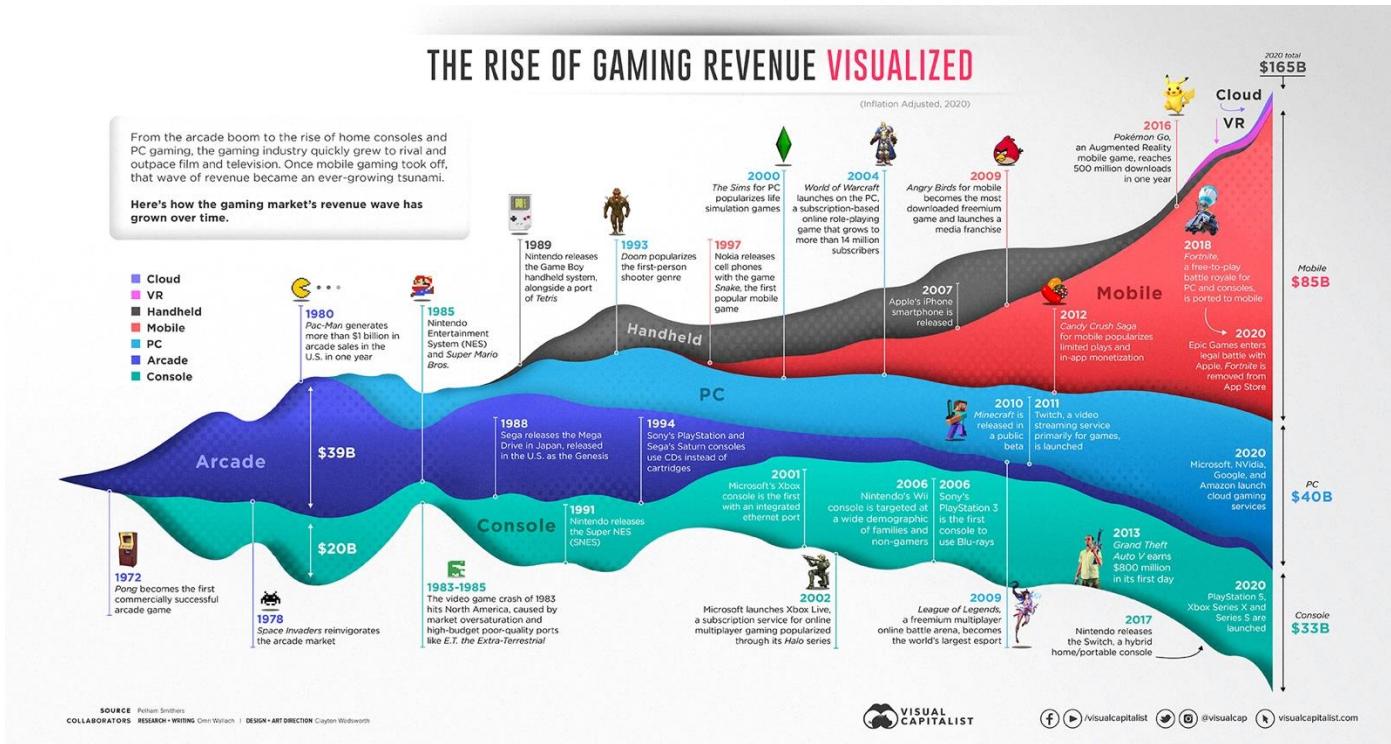
### 7.1 Appendix A: An overview of the number of gamers worldwide from 2015-2023

Retrieved from: <https://financesonline.com/number-of-gamers-worldwide/>



## 7.2 Appendix B: An overview of the development of video games and its revenue over the last 50 years

Retrieved from: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/50-years-gaming-history-revenue-stream/>



### 7.3 Appendix C: 'The Last of Us' details

Retrieved from: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2140553/>

## Details

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**Release date** [June 14, 2013 \(Netherlands\)](#)

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**Country of origin** [United States](#)

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**Official site** [Official Website](#)

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**Languages** [English](#) · [Portuguese](#)

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**Also known as** [The Last of Us Remastered](#)

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**Filming locations** [Seattle, Washington, USA](#)

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**Production company** [Naughty Dog](#)

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## 7.4 Appendix D: Atlas.ti Codebook

### ATLAS.ti Codebook: Master Thesis (The Last of Us analysis)

- Additional dialogue
- Aggression
- Alternative gameplay
- Anger
- Argument
- Avoiding confrontation
- Background dialogue
- Background music
- Background narrative
- Background noise
- Backstory
- Bill characteristics
- Bloater zombie
- Blood
- Bossy
- Caution
- Changing environment
- Chaotic
- Character backstory
- Character choice
- Character collectable
- Character connection
- Character Death
- Character interactions
- Character introduction
- Character relationship
- Character teamwork
- Chasing

- Clicker Zombie
- Collectable
- Concern
- Confrontation
- Core story point
- Crafting
- Curiosity
- Cutscene
- David characteristics
- Day-Night jump
- Destructive environment
- Determination
- Different gameplay situations
- Ellie Characteristics
- Ellie POV
- Ellie's immunity
- Emotional
- Empathy
- End of game
- Environment
- Explosion
- Father-Daughter
- Fear
- First Zombie
- Frustration
- Gameplay
- Gameplay dialogue
- Gameplay mechanics
- Gathering tools
- Grateful
- Happy

- Henry characteristics
- Hint to main storyline
- Hope
- Human threat
- Humour
- Impatient
- Important object
- Increased difficulty
- Infection spread
- Infectious spores
- Interacting with environment
- Interrogation
- Introduction to Ellie
- Introduction to Firefly
- Introduction to hunters
- Introduction to the World
- Introduction to Zombies
- Involving the player
- Joel & Ellie clash
- Joel & Ellie growth
- Joel POV
- Joel's Characteristics
- Joel's past
- Looting
- Love
- Marlene characteristics
- Military
- Military force
- Military threat
- Minor character
- Minor character death

- Narrative development
- New zombie
- Opening credits
- Pain
- Panic
- People dynamics
- Player progression
- prisoner
- Profanity
- Providing context
- Puzzle solving
- Reference to Clicker
- Reference to cure
- Reference to Ellie Infection
- Reference to Fireflies
- Reference to Infection
- Reference to Joel
- Reference to Sarah
- Reference to Tommy
- Reference to Zombie
- Runner Zombie
- Running away
- Sad
- Sam characteristics
- Sarah POV
- Sarcasm
- Savior
- Scary
- Selfish
- Sentiment
- Shock

- Side story
- Smart
- Stalker zombie
- State of the world
- Stealth
- Story progression
- Strategic play
- Stubborn
- Sweet
- Symbolic
- Tactical gameplay
- Tess Characteristics
- Time jump
- Tips to player
- Tommy characteristics
- Trust
- Tutorial
- Uncertainty
- Upgrading
- Urgency
- Use of Guns
- Use of military
- Violence
- Wonder
- Workbench
- World characteristics
- World dynamics
- Worldbuilding
- Zombie attack
- Zombie gameplay interaction
- Zombie threat