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Thema:      Video Game Design and the Influence on Players' Empathy - An Analysis of Shadow of the Colossus and The Last of Us Part II


Verfasser:    Justin Simon


Gutachterin:   PD Dr. Birte Christ

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# Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit

Anglistik

Video Game Design and the Influence on Players'
Empathy -
An Analysis of *Shadow of the Colossus* and *The Last of Us Part II*

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| Vorgelegt von: | Justin Simon |
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| Betreut durch: | PD Dr. Birte Christ |

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# 1. Zusammenfassung in deutscher Sprache

Die vorliegende wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit befasst sich mit den Eigenschaften von Videospielen und hinterfragt wie diese sich auf die Empathiefähigkeiten der Konsument:innen auswirken. Anhand einer kontextualisierten Analyse zweier Videospiele, *Shadow of the Colossus* und *The Last of Us Part II*, werden die den Videospielen zugrunde liegenden Eigenschaften analysiert und deren Zusammenhang mit den empathischen Prozessen der Spieler:innen überprüft.

Die Besonderheiten des Mediums der Videospiele umfassen eine Vielzahl an Eigenschaften die eine Forschung des Einflusses auf das Verhalten der Spieler:innen befürwortet. Die Interaktivität, die es den Spieler:innen ermöglicht, Teil des Narrativs eines Videospiels zu sein, eröffnen neue Möglichkeiten der Partizipation. Hinsichtlich des Narrativs kann beobachtet werden, dass die moderne Entwicklungen vieler Videospiele einen Fokus auf vielschichtige Narrativität legen und somit auf eine Beeinflussung der Emotionen der Spieler:innen abzielen. Innerhalb der Wissenschaft der Videospiele, auch als *Game Studies* bekannt, gibt es seither Diskussionen darüber wie das Medium gelesen werden sollte. Jene, die im Bereich der Spielforschung tätig sind, in der akademischen Welt auch Ludolog:innen genannt, berufen sich auf die Einzigartigkeit der Videospiele und verlangen nach einer Reform der Forschungsarten, da ihrer Meinung nach die bereits vorhandenen Forschungs- und Analysemethoden der Literatur- und Filmwissenschaften nicht auf die Besonderheiten der Videospiele angepasst werden können. Verfechter:innen des ludologischen Ansatzes lehnen aus diesem Grund die Annahme ab, dass Videospiele Narrativität besitzen und ähnlich wie andere narrativ geladene Medien behandelt werden. Forscher:innen aus dem Bereich der Erzähltheorie (Narratolog:innen), versuchen Videospiele mit den ihnen bereits bekannten Theorien und Methoden zu erforschen. Im Gegensatz zu der Ansicht der Ludolog:innen, sprechen sich einige Narratolog:innen dafür aus, sich dem neuartigen Medium anzupassen, auch wenn der Fokus weiterhin auf der

narrativen Ebene der Videospiele liegen soll. Innerhalb der vorliegenden Analyse wurde ebenfalls die Narrativität der Videospiele in Betracht gezogen, unter Berücksichtigung der Besonderheiten des Mediums der Videospiele.

Die Empathie-Prozesse welche innerhalb dieser Studie erforscht werden, berufen sich auf die Definitionen des Empathie-Begriffs verschiedener Forscher:innen und dient als Grundlage für die Analyse der beiden Videospiele. Im Zusammenhang mit den Videospielen soll erforscht werden, inwiefern Spieler:innen Empathie mit ausgewählten Charakteren der Videospiele empfinden können, d.h. inwiefern Spieler:innen sich in die Perspektive der Charaktere versetzen, und ähnliche Emotionen erleben können. Die besondere Eigenschaft der Interaktivität des Videospiels befürwortet die Perspektivübernahme der Spieler:innen.

Die Analysen von *Shadow of the Colossus* und *The Last of Us Part II* liefern Belege dafür, dass es einen Zusammenhang zwischen den Eigenschaften der jeweiligen Videospiele und dem Empathie Prozess der Spieler:innen während des Spielens gibt. Da das Auslösen von Empathie bestimmte Eigenschaften voraussetzt, begrenzt sich die Analyse auf Videospiele, die zum einen den Fokus auf narrative Inhalte legt und zum anderen Immersion fördert. Hinsichtlich dieser Faktoren begrenzt sich die Analyse auf Videospiele des *adventure game* Genres, da diese die zuvor genannten Kriterien erfüllen. Durch die kontextualisierte Analyse der beiden Videospiele kann gezeigt werden, dass durch die Instrumentalisierung des Perspektivwechsels, sowie die emotionale Beeinflussung durch spezifisch ausgewählten Design-Entscheidungen Empathie in Spieler:innen erzeugt werden kann. Trotz dieser Belege, wird anerkannt, dass für einen endgültigen Beweis des Empathie-Einflusses auf Spieler:innen empirische Studien mit Testsubjekten erforderlich sind. Nichts desto trotz zeigen die Befunde der Analyse eine Tendenz der intendierten Instrumentalisierung von Empathie durch das Videospiel Design der Spiele Entwickler:innen, welche die Empathie Fähigkeiten der Spieler:innen auf unterschiedliche Art und Weisen beeinflussen können.

## 2. Introduction

> "Right and wrong are not what separate us and our enemies. It's our different standpoints, our perspectives that separate us. Both sides blame one another. There's no good or bad side. Just two sides holding different views." (*Squall Leonhart 1999)*

In this quote Squall Leonhart, a character from Square Enix's video game *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square Enix 1999), not only points out the inherent dilemma at the essence but also indirectly touches on a subject that has been more frequently researched within the last few decades, namely empathy. Due to the importance of this psychological phenomenon or skill in everyday interactions, it is unsurprising that it receives a significant amount of academic attention. The seemingly ever-increasing digitalization experienced globally and in every aspect of daily life seems to hinder our ability to empathize with others by increasingly limiting our interactions to social media and the like (Global Risk 2019: n. pag.; Wulansari et al. 2020: 1). Real-life interpersonal contact is decreasing and consequently so are one's chances at honing empathic ability. While these negative effects of digitalization on social behavior are heavily researched, not as much effort has been dedicated to identifying how technology, more precisely the consumption of video games, can increase empathic abilities. But why of all things is it interesting to research the effects of empathy in video games specifically? Considering the number of hours the average player spends playing, it should become clear that this medium plays an important role in the lives of its audience. According to the *State of Online Gaming* report from 2019 the average player spends more than seven hours a week on video games (Anderton 2019: n. pag.). By surveying over 4,500 consumers from different countries the report showed that players in 2019 with the age gap of 18 to 25 years spend 9.9% more time on video games than the same report showed a year before. The largest increase came from the age group between 26 to 35 which spent 26% more time on video games compared to 2018 with over eight hours a week (Anderton 2019: n. pag.). Recent studies show that the growth of video games is still on the rise with no signs of stopping: the global number of video game

consumers was almost two billion in the year 2015 and more recent reports support the trend of video games increasingly gaining popularity (Clement 2021a: n. pag.): The statistics of the *Global Video Game Consumer Segmentation* report from February 2021 shows that over three billion people consume video games across different devices. That means that of the world's approximately eight billion people around 40% play video games, with mobile video games making up nearly half the market in numbers of players (Williams 2021: n. pag.). Especially during the still ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic many are looking for ways to entertain themselves at home since the majority of the public entertainment industry closed down to inhibit the spread of the virus. Reports have shown that video gamers in the United States spent 45% more on playing video games when quarantine measures came into effect (Clement 2021b: n. pag.). Video games can be used as a form of escapism, especially during times when people crave distraction from existential problems that are spread worldwide. While the pandemic's positive impact on the video game industry is indisputable, it is not the reason for the overarching trend of playing video games becoming more common. The state of video games evolves and breaks its own limits every year and with that the possibilities of this medium continuously expands. Just as the psychological effects on consumers of literature and films have been researched over the years, so should those on consumers of video games be studied as well.

However, such research on the effect video games have on its consumers is not truly new. Psychologists have conducted many different studies over the years to research potential behavioral changes when playing video games. One of the most prominent questions in this being whether or not video games cause antisocial or aggressive behavior. Even though one might intuitively think that 'violent' video games could enhance anti-social or aggressive behavior, hard evidence that validates such a claim of causality has yet to be discovered (Boffey 2019: n. pag.; Kühn et al. 2017: 1220). It does, however, make sense to look at the correlation between the medium and empathy since the participatory nature of video games encourages emotional involvement from the player. Just as aggression or anti-social behavior have

been researched, there are psychological studies about the effect video games have on empathy. Although the amount of empathy studies is not as significant as the ones of other types of behavior, the trend of these studies suggest that story-driven video games can have an impact on the 'perspective taking' of players (Wulansari et al. 2020: 1). Additionally, others have focused on the correlations between 'good' and 'evil' characters in video games and their respective empathic reactions (Happ & Melzer 2014: 53).

Due to the variety of players and their versatile behavior these psychological studies are heavily dependent on the test subjects chosen. To counteract the uncertainty of the behavior of individual players, this study will be conducted independent of test subjects and rather focuses on the inert supporting grounds found within video games that suggest an influence on the player's empathy. The methodological approach of this study will be conducted via contextual analysis of two story-driven video games, which, as this paper argues, both possess the possibility to evoke empathy towards characters in the given video game. Within these analyses each argument made will be supported by visual examples from the respective video game. Due to video games multimediality the references will be either implemented by screenshots from said video games or via gameplay footage. The latter can be found on the enclosed DVD, which contains all of the numbered clips that are referenced throughout the analysis, and online via a Dropbox link.[1]

To research the relation between empathy and video games some initial theoretical groundwork will be provided before the analyses are conducted. Since video games are essentially fictional narrative environments, it is initially necessary to discuss narrativity itself in order to later understand the uniqueness of narrativity in video games. A study about video games and empathy presupposes both concepts to be introduced. Therefore, a short historical introduction of video games as well as an explanation of the ludological and narratological approaches, which have significantly shaped the field of video games studies, will be provided.

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[1] The gameplay clips can also be accessed via the following Dropbox link: https://bit.ly/2SyjHEv

Furthermore, the concept of empathy will be properly defined to provide the reader with the necessary information about both research objects. Since this study will merely allow for a small insight into the versatility of video games (studies), further research opportunities will also be presented.

## 3. Video Games and Empathy: Theoretical Framework of Narratology and Ludology

The exact moment video games as we know and define them today were created is difficult to determine when compared to other forms of media, such as movies and music. For any medium the answer to the question of its origin is always tied to one's definition of said medium: determining at what exact moment the drumming of Neanderthals on a piece of driftwood turns into music is arbitrary, but rather dependent on our current understanding of music. The same can be said for video games: when does the experimentation with basic computer programming become to be considered a video game? In research, there are several differing opinions about the origins of video games.

The so-called prehistory of video games refers to the period that the groundwork for all future video game development is attributed to (Malliet & De Meyer 2005: 23). The first prototype and predecessor to a video game was created by Willy Higinbotham, an engineer at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in 1958. This early prototype allowed the player to interact with an oscilloscope[2] and play a very basic version of the video game later known as *Pong* (Atari 1972) named "Tennis for Two" (Malliet & De Meyer 2005: 23). This was arguably the first interaction between humans and machines that focused on entertainment and could therefore be classified as a video game. There are several other important milestones of video games such as *Spacewar* (Steve Russel 1962) and later the already mentioned *Pong* (Malliet & De Meyer 2005: 24). These early video games resembled already existing games of skill, chance, strategy, or traditional board games (Arsenault 2006: 1) transferred to the screen. Knowledge of milestones such as these and a broad overview of the history of video games are necessary to understand the evolution of the medium and to form an appreciation for its current state.

In order to understand how the narratives in video games but also their interactive nature is intertwined with the acquisition and further development

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[2] A machine that transforms vibrations into a wavelike motion on a screen (Malliet & De Meyer 2005: 23).

of empathic abilities, it is necessary to take a step back and more broadly examine what narratives are and consequently how they interact with empathy. With this interrelationship discussed it needs to be applied to the medium of video games. The resulting question of how video games can contain narratives will also be answered in this chapter. Since the narrativity of video games sparked a lot of debate between the different scholars of game studies, both the narratologists' and the ludologists' views will be taken into consideration during this chapter. Following this, the fundamental concept of empathy will be defined in order to discuss the correlation of narratives and empathy and consequently the correlation of empathy and video games.

## 3.1. The Characteristics of Narrative Literature

Relating to a character when reading or viewing a piece of literature is an experience almost everyone can connect to. This can be because of many reasons, such as the similarities of the character and the reader or viewer or even the contrasting identity of these two individuals. Needless to say, this requires well created characteristics and a rich backstory. But how exactly must the narrativity of a given narrative be structured in terms of story and character presentation to allow for an empathic reaction? To understand this correlation, it is first necessary to determine what exactly narrativity is. The primary aim of this chapter is to create a list of characteristics of narrativity that can be used to determine what a piece of literature, irrespective of its medium, needs to display in order to be called a narrative.

The concept of narrativity is complex as it can be defined in multiple often very broad ways – different scholars take different approaches when trying to get to the core of narrativity itself. Herein also lies the problem of its definition: the angle from which to approach the concept and what to focus on is not agreed upon (Prince 2008: 20). Prince himself approaches the definition by breaking narrativity down into the specification of the class of objects that are designated by the noun "narrative" as well as the narrativity of those objects itself, which he calls "narrativehood" (Prince 2008: 20).

Additionally, narrativity can also be seen as a quality that shifts the focus from narrative as a noun to narrative as an adjective, and therefore Prince calls this aspect "narrativeness" (Prince 2008: 20). This dissection of the concept of narrativity creates a broad spectrum of layers, all of which need to be considered when looking at narratives. As for the definition of narratives themselves, Prince states that "an object is a narrative if it is taken to be the logically consistent representation of at least two asynchronous events that do not presuppose or imply each other (Prince 2008: 51)". This definition shows the first characteristic of narrativity that will later be used when discussing the conformities in narrativity between literature and video games.

A different approach is taken by Vera Nünning: she states that narrative can be either regarded as a mode or cognitive schemata manifested in texts or media formats (Nünning 2014: 51). According to Nünning, narrativity can be understood as (1) a bundle of features or characteristics of a specific kind of text; (2) a rhetorical act; and (3) the previously mentioned cognitive schemata (Nünning 2014: 51). Concept (1) deals with either the level of the plot of literature or the narrative mediation and perspectivization, concept (2) describes the communicative relation between author and reader, and concept (3) points out the cognitive processes that readers use in order to build mental models of narrative worlds and the attribution of narrativity to a given sequence of sentences or sequences (Nünning 2014: 51). These concepts, even though they are still relatively vague, are important to understand the larger picture of narrativity.

Similar to Prince's understanding of narrativity, Nünning presupposes the happening of an event as a prerequisite for narratives as well (Nünning 2014: 52). This indicates that the first prerequisite for a story to work as a narrative is that there must be an event, or at least two asynchronous ones, according to Prince. Such events happen at a specific time at a specific place and therefore the next characteristics of narrativity consist of spatial- and temporal prerequisites or in other words a setting on which the narrativity can take place. Marie-Lauren Ryan affirms this and adds to it that narrative representation not only consists of a setting and happenings but is also

populated by individuals, or characters, who are inhabitants of the narrative world and participate to a certain degree in those events (Ryan 2001: n. pag.)

The three traditional components of narratives are thus comprised of the setting, particularly the spatial and temporal level; the characters that inhabit the narrative world; and, lastly, the events happening in this world at a specific time. There is a potential fourth characteristic of narrativity depending on the given definition– the 'how'. The manner and medium in which a story is told are arguably equally as important as what is told, especially when considering how video games tell their stories. This aspect will be further analyzed when the narrativity of adventure games will be discussed. Given these points, the necessary characteristics of narrativity are determined. However, to understand how the potential of narrativity in video games is realized, the debate between narratologists and ludologists needs to be examined.

## 3.2. Video Games and the Potential of Narrativity

When conducting any academic research into video game narratives, it is inevitable to come across the debate between the so-called narratologists and the self-proclaimed ludologists. The narratologists-ludologists debate is a discussion between scholars of different academic backgrounds surrounding the question of how to define video games that dates back to when the medium was still considered new (Neitzel 2014: n. pag.). Some theorists, in particular the narratologists, argued for the narrative approach when discussing video games, while the ludologists followed a more autonomous video game approach.

As a fairly new discipline on the academic horizon, research into video games often fell on deaf ears and was rarely considered seriously. It seems that this is one of the major driving forces behind the ludologists approach as described by Espen Aarseth, one of the pioneers of the ludologists movement:

> "Computer game studies is virgin soil, ready to be plotted and plowed by the machineries of cultural and textual studies. What better way to map the territory than by using the trusty, dominant paradigm of stories and storytelling?" (Aarseth 2004: 45)

This rather polemic statement echoes a sentiment shared by several ludologists of the time. The general intent of the ludological approach is to halt any attempts of using already existing storytelling theories for the assimilation of video games and instead create new structures and theories specifically for video games. Additionally, due to the high variation in terms of genre, social contexts, and technologies within the video game sphere, Aarseth does not label video games as a new kind of medium, but rather a flexible material technology (Aarseth 2004: 46) – to him games are simply games. Aarseth criticizes the notion that everything has to be a story: video games are not stories to him but rather a story-generating machine, with the story being the part when the player retells his experiences of the game to a third party (Aarseth 2004: 50). The only appropriate exception to be made when it comes to the discussion of narrativity according to Aarseth is the adventure game genre. His approach only allows for this genre to have a story-like, episodic structure (Aarseth 2004: 51) but he also states that "the standard concepts of narratology are not sufficient to explain the literary phenomena of adventure games" (Aarseth 1997: 111). The structure behind this genre and video games in general in terms of setting and plot is supposedly neither narrativity nor interactivity to Aarseth, rather it is simulation (Aarseth 2004: 52). Similar to Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca emphasizes an understanding of video games as simulations. For him, the storytelling model is not an appropriate fit for video games and limits our understanding of them (Frasca 2003: 221). Despite the fact that narratives and simulations share certain elements like characters, settings, and events, they are essentially different (Frasca 2003: 222). "To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system" (Frasca 2003: 223). A simulation not only encompasses audiovisual characteristics but reacts to certain stimuli according to a specific set of conditions (Frasca 2003: 223).

Therefore a video game could be considered a simulation in its most basic state since pushing buttons and using the joystick creates a certain behavior. The distinguishing aspect between simulations and narratives is that a *reader* has no power to change the narrative as it is merely representational. In contrast, a *player* has control over the behavior and the outcome of the simulation, by influencing it with the given control mechanisms. As Jesper Juul concludes: there are video games, like the adventure game *Half-Life* (Valve 1998), which uses narratives for storytelling purposes. But in general, there is no narrativity (in the classical sense) in video games due to its differences (Juul 2001: n. pag.). The ludologists' perspective within this debate is in essence that they argue for the independence of their own field of research. Even though some of them might not deny the very existence of narrativity in video games, they argue that it is more important to gain insight into the particularities and technicalities of the video game. Frasca states that the lack of a coherent and formal discipline that focuses on video games forced early researchers to apply theoretical tools from literary and movie theory as well as from narratology (Frasca 2003: 222). To see if this is true, it is necessary to take a look at how narratologists approach the medium of video games.

The narratologists explain the medium of video games through the use of narrative theories and focus their efforts on researching narrative aspects of video games, similar to those of literature or movies. Narratologist scholars predominantly use already existing theories and methods and apply them to video games. One of the first narratologists who showed interest in video games was Janet Murray. She concerns herself with the question of the "game-story" (Murray 2004: 2). To her the characteristics of a video game such as still images, moving images, text, audio, and three-dimensional, navigable spaces are great building blocks of storytelling and therefore need to be considered when discussing the narrativity of video games (Murray 2004: 2). Within her research, she concludes if society at large wants to explore and experience the contests and puzzles of our newly global community and the postmodern inner life (Murray 2004: 3), digital media,

such as video games, are the right vessel for it (Murray 2004: 8). According to Murray, the evolution of narrativity in the 21st century created a kind of storytelling that outgrew the strict and linear nature of novels and movies (Murray 2004: 4). Murray, as well as Espen Aarseth, were looking for a new genre that could incorporate this new way of dynamic storytelling. The former settled for computer and video games, whereas the latter chose to differentiate between narrativity and video games.

After Murray's work revealed the narrative potential of video games other theorists began to follow her lead and tried to contribute to this new medium, each with their own theoretical approaches. For example, the narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan expands on the point of the digital medium and its capacities of narrativity with a comparison to hypertext literature[3]. Ryan's definition of narrativity contains the diegetic narration, the verbal act of storytelling, and the mimetic narration, the gestures, and dialogues performed by actors (Ryan 2001: n. pag.). Even though hypertext literature contains both these narrative structures, it is more problematic to ascertain narrativity to computer games because to her not all computer video games make use of narrative themes (Ryan 2001: n. pag.). *Tetris* (Alexey Pazhitnov 1985) for example does not use any narrative structures because "fitting blocks of various shapes into slots as they fall from the top of the screen is hardly interpretable as the pursuit of human interests in a concrete situation" (Ryan 2001: n. pag.). Nevertheless, she does not deny video games narrativity but rather claims that there needs to be an expansion of the catalog of narrative modalities beyond diegetic and dramatic modes to fully understand and categorize the narrativity of video games. An addition of a phenomenological category tailor-made for video games needs to be created.

Similar to Ryan, Henry Jenkins admits even though not all games tell stories the potential for narrativity is embedded in the architecture of video

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[3] Hyperfiction is defined as nonlinear fiction created in electronic hypertext form and contains multiple branching plot developments and endings which can be accessed via hypertext links by the reader (Modir et. al 2014).

games (Jenkins 2002: 119). He approaches the debate with a favor for the ludologists' point of view:

> "[…] I understand what these writers [ludologists] are arguing against – various attempts to map traditional narrative structures ("hypertext", "Interactive Cinema", "nonlinear narrative") onto games at the expense of an attention to their specificity as an emerging mode of entertainment." (Jenkins 2002: 118)

Jenkins respects the individuality of video games and tries to find a middle-ground between ludologists and narratologists. He examines "games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (Jenkins 2002: 119). For video games to be able to tell good, video game designers who are schooled in computer science and graphic design need to be retooled in the basic vocabulary of narrative theory (Jenkins 2002: 120). Similar to one of Juul's arguments that games and stories cannot be narratively equated the same way novels and movies often are (Juul 2001: n. pag.), Jenkins states if games do tell stories they will tell them unlike other media (Jenkins 2002: 120). They tell stories via their virtual architecture, more precisely their spatial and character design (Jenkins 2002: 129). The narratologists do not necessarily try to "colonize" this new academic field, as Aarseth (2001: n. pag.) accuses them of, but surely their goal is to see how this medium interacts with narrativity. It is not about ignoring the fundamental technical particularities of video games but to see how some of those inert the opportunity to tell stories without being just another storytelling medium next to novels and movies.

Comparing the different perspectives present within the academic field of video game study, it is necessary to understand how narrativity in video games actually reveals itself. This comparison has shown that the right way to approach narrativity in video games is to do so without disregarding the particularities of video games that differentiate them as a medium. [4] As different scholars stated correctly, not every video game attempts to or has

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[4] Most of the arguments from the debate are concerned with video games of their respective time. This needs to be considered when looking at arguments from the past especially with a fast evolving medium such as the video game. Video games in the present time, including the video games this study concerns itself with, are far more technically evolved and refined.

the potential to tell stories. However, this is not the goal those kinds of video games try to achieve. There is a distinction to be made between non-narrative and narrative video games. The amount of video games that exclude narrativity altogether is arguably rather low, however, this ultimately comes down to one's definition of what counts as a narrative. Ryan stated that people who deny video games narrativity usually tend to use a more exclusive definition of narrativity since it enhances their argument (Ryan 2006: 184). For example, a definition that states that narrativity can only exist if a narrator presents a story excludes not only video games but other narrative media as well. A narrative video game tells its story in a uniquely different way compared to other media. There is one genre of video games in particular that contains all characteristics of narrativity and is therefore able to tell stories: the adventure game genre (Neitzel 2014: n. pag.; Fernández-Vara 2009: n. pag.). In the following pages this genre will be discussed by examining how adventure games tell their stories. This is necessary as it is only possible to analyze and explain the relationship between empathy and video games when the narrativity of video games is made clear. The characteristics that need to be identified are as follows: a setting (spatial and temporal level), events happening in the world, characters, and the manner in which the story is told. With these characteristics explained it is possible to understand how video games convey their stories to the player.

First adventure games need to be defined: This genre contains a variety of story-driven video games that encourage the player via a quest-like structure to fulfill the overarching task enforced upon by the story. The prerequisites of an adventure game are at least one playable character as well as a world to explore and navigate in. Generally, story-driven video games can range from text-based ones like *Zork* (Infocom 1980) to more graphically sophisticated ones such as *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998). Both share the characteristic that progress within the video game simultaneously means progress within the story. However, the story itself can be experienced through different outputs. *Straight narratives* such as traditional cut scenes are one of those outputs (Domsch 2013: 29). A cut scene

is a cinematic narrative scene in which the player has no control over the video game. It is usually used to depict narrative content indispensable to the story told, such as characters in action shots, dialogue, or background information regarding the storyworld[5] (Domsch 2013: 32). *Evocative narratives* use other outputs such as the spatial design of the storyworld (Jenkins 2002: 123), e.g. visual clues, the structure of the surrounding architecture, and the atmospheric lighting and sound effects to convey the narrative. *Embedded narratives* use yet another output: artifacts and items with which the player can interact in the video game and through which they are able to learn about the storyworld (Jenkins 2002: 126). These can be audio logs, diary entries, or encyclopedic information that enrich the history of the storyworld (Domsch 2013: 29). All of these narrative outputs can be combined and used simultaneously. By playing and progressing the video game, the player automatically experiences certain events in the video game. When looking at the list of characteristics of narratives, the point of "events happening in the world" means that there has to be some kind of event in the video game that creates the potential of narration. This could be realized in nearly endless possibilities of gameplay. Fighting certain enemies, collecting artifacts, or communicating with the non-player characters (NPCs) of the storyworld can all be considered events. This should not be confused with the *event trigger*[6] which is also a particularity of video games. *Event triggers*, however, are not to be excluded from the events of the narrative of the video game but rather add to the diversity of how video games convey their narrativity.

Typical for adventure games is the existence of a protagonist. This is the character created by the game designers that serves as the main character controlled by the player. Depending on the game the character is

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[5] Storyworld refers to the projection of an author's text (here a game designer's game) in the mind of the reader (player). The narrative content of the fictional world creates a representation of this world (Ryan 2014: 34).

[6] "An event trigger defines an action performed by a player that triggers a narratively relevant event that would not have occurred without this action, yet is not causally related to it in the storyworld. It is not an event that is effectuated directly by the player, but whose coming to pass is dependent on the player." (Domsch 2013: 41)

preconstructed by the game designer or the player has the option to create a customizable avatar (Beil & Rauscher 2018: 202). The preconstruction of an avatar has several effects on the gameplay and narrative. Even though the avatar is controlled by the player the immediate control of their personality is still in the hands of the game designer. The personality and characterization of the avatar creates another narrative output that the player can identify with, preconstructed or not. One of adventure games' most interesting features is the interaction between the playable characters (PCs) and everything in the storyworld, object or character. Those entities are computer scripted and created by the game designer. NPCs are computer controlled entities with which the player can interact via their controls. They differentiate themselves from other NPCs like enemies that can usually only be interacted with through combat (Domsch 2013: 43). The interaction with NPCs can range from a few informative statements about the storyworld or tasks the player has to fulfill to full-on conversations and reoccurring interactions that are important to the story. The individuality of these characters and the interaction and communication with them is what creates an emotional involvement while playing such video games. This emotional involvement will be further discussed in chapter 3.3 *Correlation between Video Games and Empathy*. Similar to novels, there are supporting characters as well as main characters who will cross the player's path repeatedly during a playthrough of the video game. Depending on the video game's design the interaction between the NPCs can be either dynamic or static.[7] When the player talks to an NPC there are two methods a game designer can use to structure the conversation: (1) The NPC simply makes statements that provides the player with information about the storyworld. Here the player has no option to contribute to the conversation; (2) The player is given the option to choose between multiple answers. Depending on the answer (as well as the given video game's other mechanics) the conversation changes. Reoccurring NPCs can also change their text dialogues while progressing the game. The interaction with this

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[7] It is important to note that depending on which video game era one focuses on the dialogues in video games can either be textual or auditory. The latter uses audio files from voice actors. The auditory dialogue is getting more prominent as the video game medium is evolving.

variety of narrative elements of the storyworld creates an experience very distinct from other media. Due to video games' interactive nature the narrative of adventure games somewhat depends on the initiative and willingness of the player to move the narrative forward. If the player is not interested in the story of the video game he can ignore some, but not all[8], narrative elements to progress faster. This, however, can result in an unsatisfying ending when the story is not comprehensible for the player. Skipping certain parts of a story-driven video game is similar to skipping certain pages of a novel in order to finish the book. Even though video games possess such narrative potential, they are first and foremost games and players can (to a certain degree) choose how they want to experience the game. If the player is invested in the story however, the narrative involvement the video games offers, creates a unique experience. The combination of narrative elements through audio visual stimuli with the ability of interactivity is what makes the video game in general and the adventure game in particular a unique medium.

Going back to the list of characteristics of narrativity it can be seen that adventure games contain all of the following: (1) Adventure games provide a world (spatial level) and time (temporal level) in which the player can progress. (2) Video games in general are an amalgamation of different events the player can and will trigger by progressing. (3) Adventure games consist of a vast variety of characters in addition to the avatar the player controls. Considering the manner of story-telling, the different narrative outputs of the adventure game, e.g. straight narratives, evocative narrative, and embedded narratives create a unique story-telling device. Given these points it can be said that video games, and especially adventure games contain narrative potential.

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[8] This specifically concerns micro-narratives like embedded narratives and evocative narratives. The main story has to be experienced to progress in the game due to the synchronic nature of the story and game relation.

### 3.3. Correlation between Video Games and Empathy

Now that the narrativity of the adventure game genre has been proven the next step for analyzing the correlation between video games and empathy is to separate this correlation and initially focus on examining and defining empathy in a satisfactory fashion. Providing a satisfactory definition of empathy creates the fundamental tools to discuss how empathy and narrativity interact with each other. Given those steps it is possible to consequently discuss the theoretical framework of the correlation between video games and empathy.

Different scholars define empathy in different ways. Nünning (2014) for instance describes empathy as "a synonym for taking the perspective of others, which involves both affective and more abstract cognitive processes […]" (94). Suzanne Keen (2006) defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (208). Both point out two important factors of empathy: the sharing of affect and taking the perspective of others. When empathizing with others, one experiences similar cognitive and emotional states to the person they empathize with. Additionally, the empathizer imaginatively experiences the target's experiences from the target's point of view. However, the empathizer maintains self-other differentiation[9] (Coplan 2004: 144). Empathy is divided into cognitive empathy and emotional empathy, as was just stated. The former describes the active and conscious process of putting oneself in another's perspective in order to understand them better, whereas the latter describes a rather passive unintentional process of reacting and adapting the feelings of another person (Craps & Smethurst 2014: 275). Simply put, empathy is an ability which can consciously and unconsciously create a psychological state of perspective change and emotional sharing. A more in depth look at the

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[9] "In the process of empathy, the empathizer simulates the target's experiences without losing the ability to simultaneously experience his or her own separate thoughts, emotions, and desires" (Coplan 2004: 144).

particularities of empathy can be found in the respective chapters of the analysis later on.

A related psychological phenomenon that is worth mentioning is empathic sharing. It describes how the empathizer's body/face often mimics the target's emotions. For example, the seeing of certain expressions on the target's face activates certain neurological networks in the empathizer's brain that lead to them mirroring the target's facial expressions. These neurological networks are also called mirror neurons (Nünning 2014: 96). However, studies have shown that context plays a significant role in this process. If an action or facial expression is context-less the likelihood of a mirroring of said action or facial expression by the empathizers is less likely (Nünning 2014: 97). Therefore, empathic sharing occurs often when playing narrative video games since the given character, a person empathizes with, is part of a fictional narrative that serves as their context (Nünning 2014: 97). Thus, adventure games have the ability to evoke empathy due to their representation of narratives as well as their audiovisual characteristics. However, before continuing to take a deeper look at how media specificity plays a role when confronting empathy inducing media and specifically video games, it must be pointed out that there is another psychological phenomenon many tend to mistake for empathy: sympathy. Whilst being similar in regards to the psychological processes that occur, sympathy differentiates itself from empathy through its engagement or lack thereof. A sympathizer cares and concerns themselves with the target but does not share their experiences or take the target's perspective (Coplan 2004: 145).

The question at hand is how video games, in particular adventure games, evoke empathy in the player and how their method of doing so differs from other media. In his definition Neel Burton touches on an important aspect not yet explicitly discussed: "Empathy can be defined as a person's ability to recognize and share the emotions of another person, fictional character, or sentient being" (Burton 2015: n. pag.). Feelings of empathy, as has been hinted at in the previous chapter, can be directed towards fictional characters just as much as it can be towards real people. Therefore, one would

conclude empathy to also be medium-independent. Suzanne Keen introduces the term "narrative empathy" and defines it as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen 2013: n. pag.). The ability to create different fictional characters and include an unlimited amount of narrative context creates great potential for perspective taking. However, it is important to keep in mind that every medium has its own particularities that evoke empathy differently, even though fiction in all media shares such a potential. The non-visual nature of novels for instance lead to a greater need for imaginative efforts on the part of the reader compared to other media. If imagination is defined as the "capacity to make something present to us which is not actually present or does not exist" (Schmetkamp & Ferran 2019: 746), then it should also allow for the creation of mental capacities in which empathy can occupy space. In movies on the other hand, an additional audiovisual dimension is at play (Freyermuth 2015: 131). The visuals and sounds of movies allow the audience to mirror the characters emotional expressions, activating the psychological phenomenon of empathic sharing. Therefore, one could argue that literature primarily activates cognitive empathy within the reader, whereas movies activate both cognitive as well as emotional empathy in its viewers (Stadler 2016: 4).

Altogether it can be said every medium has a different effect of empathy. However, since these topics have been researched on different occasions, this study will focus on the medium of video games and the effect of empathy within it. On that account it is time to answer the question of why it is worth looking at the correlation between video games and empathy in particular. As discussed above there are several similarities as well as differences between the narratives when it comes to empathy. The following discusses the specialty of video games in this regard.

Since empathy involves mentally inhabiting the position others find themselves in, PCs, which arguably only exist to be inhabited, are a perfect fit for this, especially the ones in adventure games. This level of interactivity allows for the player to not only put themselves in the 'mental shoes' of the

avatar, but also allows them to actually control said avatar and choose what they do and how they do it.[10] Being able to control both character action and thereby event outcomes makes video games fundamentally different from movies and literature as their audiences are only able to witness and not influence the given characters' experiences and the given story's events (Happ 2013: 52; Neitzel 2014: n. pag.). Adventure games are embedded in a rich narrative structure so the context that is needed to successfully empathize with a character is given as well. The comparatively complex narrative potential that the interactivity of video games allow for creates a dynamic which facilitates and encourages empathizing. As previously stated traditional media is representational, as video games are simultational (Frasca 2003: 223). This difference influences how the given recipient feels while experiencing a narrative within these media. Watching a flying plane in a movie creates a different emotional response than playing a plane simulator where the player has the power to change the outcome (Frasca 2003: 224). Being able to change the outcome of a narrative situation influences the player's emotional investment. However, the player must be committed to the narrative to a certain degree for any emotional investment to exist. When experiencing fiction, especially in video games it involves the temporal and partial neglect of knowledge in order to function (Domsch 2013: 27). Such a state of neglect is called immersion. Gordon Calleja describes the concept of accepting the fictional and in this case virtual reality as actual reality for a specific period of time as *immersion as transportation* (Calleja 2011: 27). This concept can only be realized if the video game presents not only engaging activity, but also a narrative rich world to be navigated in (Calleja 2011:27). Being transported to this virtual reality and consequently being in contact with the characters of the world creates the potential for empathic investment. Noël Carroll, however, objects to the empathic involvement within fiction and yet simultaneously strengthens the argument for such involvement in video games:

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[10] This kind of control is of course limited by the technical limitations of the game designer. The topic of control will further be discussed in the analysis of *The Last of Us Part II.*

> We do not typically emote with respect to fictions by simulating a character's mental state; rather [...] we respond emotionally to fiction from the outside. Our point of view is that of an observer of a situation and not[...]that of the participant in the situation. When a character is about to be ambushed, we feel fear for her; we do not imagine ourselves to be her and then experience "her" fear. (Carroll 2001: 311-312)

Where this can arguably be true for representational media, video games allow the recipient of the narrative to be more than an observer, namely a player. Due to the participatory nature of video games the player is not only an observer of the situation but a participant as well. This is what allows for the empathic involvement on part of the player. Although, not only PCs but also NPCs can be characters the player empathizes with. While being immersed in a video game and controlling a PC, empathizing with NPCs within the given storyworld is not only possible but often encouraged.

James Newman's model of on-line and off-line engagement, argues for a whole different approach when it comes to video games and empathy. His model proposes that the player is not able to feel empathy towards the characters of a video game, because during the on-line sections of the video game, the moments the player actually controls the character, these characters cease to exist in the mind of the player (Newman 2002: n. pag.). Thereby the player, as he is involved in the video game the most, only focuses on the characters actions and performance opportunities, not on the character itself and therefore loses their ability to empathize with said characters (Newman 2002: n. pag.). However, this argument can be invalidated when considering the emotional effect an engaging and narrative rich video game along with the effect of immersion and interactivity has on a player. Instances that will further enhance this argument will be discussed during the following analysis of *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Last of Us Part II*, where it will be shown how interactivity (or as Newman labels it, on-line engagement) is able to lead to empathy within the player after all. The technical nature of the video game consists of two aspects that form the pillars of empathic involvement within this medium: interactivity and immersion. Due to the many types of video games, there are different components that need to be considered when

researching the correlation of empathy and video games. Accordingly, those components will be further discussed in the respective chapters of the analysis.

## 4. Video Game Analysis

Within the previous parts of the present paper it has been shown how the discussion surrounding the theoretical aspects of narrativity in video games has shaped the academic field of the game studies. Both the ludological and narratological views have provided fair and poignant arguments that have ultimately led to a necessary focus on the adventure game. This genre relies both on a strong narrative structure as well as the inherent ludological framework of a video game and is thus the right place to start when trying to research empathy in video games. A broad variety of video games could have been chosen to showcase this genre and serve as an example for the following analyses. However, two in particular have been chosen here for a reason which will be explained in addition to the structure of the analysis and the procedure of the following chapters.

The global video game industry is undoubtedly still growing (Clement 2021b: n. pag; Wijman 2020: n. pag.) as there are new releases of video games on different platforms every year ranging from the so-called AAA[11] titles to the independent ones, colloquial known as indie games[12]. With this ever growing amount of video games, the emergence of new genres is not surprising. One genre worth mentioning in particular is empathy games. However, this category is not officially used by game developers, but rather a commonly used description of a certain type of games. Empathy games confront the player with real and serious human issues, such as depression, alcoholism, bullying, terminal illnesses or suicide (Bartelson 2016: n. pag.). An example for this genre is *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016) which follows the story of a one year old boy suffering from terminal cancer.

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[11] AAA games refer to high budget and -quality productions in the video game industry. Those games are generally produced by large development teams, employed by major studios and thereafter published and distributed by well-known publishers, such as Nintendo, Sony, Microsoft or Ubisoft. The term AAA games could be compared to the term Blockbuster in the film industry (Kiley 2016: 87; Vicente 2020: n. pag.).

[12] Independent games refer to video games that are usually developed by a single person or small groups of people. In contrast to AAA games these games are developed and distributed without high budget and marketing campaigns (Kiley 2016: 26; Computer Hope 2017: n. pag.).

Ryan Green, one of its developers and the father of the kid on whom the young boy from the video game is based on, created the video game as a way to cope with his situation (Bartelson 2016: n. pag.). Another example is *Papo & Yo* (Minority Media Inc 2012): In this game the player follows the story of a young boy and his monster, who are getting along fine until the monster eats poisonous frogs that makes the monster consequently attack the boy. Vander Caballero stated that he created *Papo & Yo* as a metaphor for his real-life experience with an alcoholic father. He sees video games as tools that can help players to cope with human tragedy (Bartelson 2016: n. pag.). Lastly, Lucas Pope created a real-life simulator with *Papers Please* (3909 LLC, 2013) that puts the player in the role of a border officer in a fictional communist country. The player is forced to inspect the passports and backstories of the entrants to decide who is allowed to pass the border (Xu 2020: n. pag.). All of these video games encourage the player to take the perspective of another person and relive parts of their life, thereby creating emotional investment in the player. However, these video games are explicitly created to help players and creators alike to cope with real-life human tragedies, and therefore naturally aim at the emotional investment of the players. None of the mentioned video games or empathy games in general are primarily played for entertainment which is why they could rather be regarded as pieces of art that aim to evoke certain feelings rather than pure video games. The difference of why these video games are played and what they primarily focus on is one of the key aspects of the given selection of video games in this study. Since the aim of this study is to analyze how video games are able to evoke empathy, taking a look at video games whose primary and often sole objective is to evoke empathy would be redundant. It is much more relevant to focus on more trivial video games which are played by people for the purpose of entertainment, and how they evoke empathy, because entertainment is what video games are primarily made for.[13] This does not limit the analysis to only focus on AAA games, but does slightly

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[13] This does not mean that empathy games are in any way less a video game than others, on the contrary, the development of *meaningful* video games, as they are also called, is important for the evolution of this medium.

shift the focus onto video games with a certain mass appeal: The video games chosen for this paper are primarily consumed by players with the purpose of playing a story-driven and entertaining video game but are different nonetheless. *The Shadow of the Colossus* and *The Last of Us Part II* were not only created in different time periods but also differ in budget- and quality cost. The overarching theme of these video games is the emotional investment[14] they create within the player by delivering a story with different narrative techniques.

The following analysis is segmented into two parts, each of which deals with one of the two already mentioned video games. Both games are going to be analyzed with respect to their individual characteristics. Every individual characteristic will be broken down into several subsections to explain their individual correlation with empathy. The methodological approach taken here will be structured as follows: First the video game needs to be contextualized. Game developer, genre, technological context, audience, and franchise are all aspects that have to be considered before diving into the analysis of the formal elements of a video game. Secondly, an overview of the overarching plot of the given video game as well the gameplay[15] structure will be provided. A short summary of the plot is necessary since narrative structure and empathy are as closely related as has already been discussed in the second chapter. An explanation of the gameplay is just as necessary for presenting an authentic summary of a video game, since without it they would not be considered video *games*. This given overview can be seen as a prerequisite for the following formal analysis. Depending on the hypothesis of the analysis, the different game mechanics and design choices of the respective video game will be discussed in depth.

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[14] In this study the term emotional investment refers to the concept of the video game having a certain emotional effect on the player, be it the narrative techniques or the design and music of a given video game. If these design choices emotionally affect the player, they tend to be emotionally invested in the video game.

[15] The concept of gameplay refers to the interaction between the player and the rules of the video game as well as the experience they gain while interacting (Juul 2014: 216). A more player-centered perspective would define gameplay as a "set of activities that can be performed by the player during the ludic experience, and by other entities belonging to the virtual world, as a response to player's actions and/or as autonomous courses of action that contribute to the liveliness of the virtual world" (Fabricatore 2007: n. pag.).

Due to the emphasis on different hypotheses, each analysis will focus on different formal aspects of the respective video game. However, it has to be noted that certain elements found within these video games are difficult to comprehend without actually experiencing them by playing the video game. Each and every playthrough of a video game creates a subjective impression of the gameplay and narrative that is influenced by an infinite number of factors such as past experience, mindset, skill, and many more. Additionally, subjectivity in experiencing empathic feelings is a factor that has to be kept in mind when conducting this analysis. Although the methodological approach of the following analysis focuses on the inert supporting evidence of these video games and the effects they can have on the player, it has to be kept in mind that the potential emotional effects of a video game can differ depending on the player. When looking at certain design choices that are intended to create a specific emotional effect, they might not affect all players. The discrepancy between the intended effect and the actual effect on the player can be due to a variety of factors, for example players' lack of interest in the video game or the personal interpretation of presented events that deviates from the developer's intention (Calleja 2011: 140). Yet, there are certain design choices within these video games that suggest the assumption of certain emotional tendencies within the player.

## 4.1. *Shadow of the Colossus*: Empathy through Music and Design

*Shadow of the Colossus* (from here on as SotC) is universally revered as a piece of art as much as it is a piece of video game history (Grosso 2018: n. pag.; White 2020: n. pag.; Metacritic 2018: n. pag.[16]). This stems not only from its unique art design but most notably from its deviation from other titles within the adventure game genre. SotC was developed by *Japan Studio* and *Team ICO* and published by *Sony Computer Entertainment* for the

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[16] Metacritic is a website on which different reviews are aggregated into one score. It is mostly used when validating the popularity of a video game, similar to IMDb or Rotten Tomatoes for movies and series.

*Playstation 2*[17] in 2005. Fumita Ueda, lead developer and designer of Team ICO, showed his unique approach to video game design in his first hit *Ico* (Team ICO 2001) which shows a lot of similarities to SotC in terms of character design, narrative and atmosphere. Considering the technical limitations of the *Playstation 2*, SotC was very much ahead of its time - the open world[18] being proof of this. This is also why in 2018 *Bluepoint Games* remade SotC and polished it for the *Playstation 4*. Even though they changed the heavy bloom lightning as well as the desaturated colors, one of Fumita Ueda's signature features, they did keep most of what made the original earn its status as a unique classic. The remake added a new art style, new lighting, a revised control scheme (as an option besides the original one), a reduction in control lag, and a photo mode (Welsh 2018: n. pag.). Features that could have been reworked, but would have changed the intended design of Ueda, were left untouched: The arguably unresponsive character controls, which would usually diminish the enjoyment of such games are left in as an option intentionally because they serve a narrative purpose to some extent. The analysis is mainly based on this 2018 remake.

SotC follows the story of a young boy named Wander who enters the Forbidden Lands to seek the help of a mysterious deity named Dormin in order to resurrect his dead lover Mono. Upon reaching an ancient temple and laying Mono on a stone altar, Wander is ordered by Dormin to slay 16 colossi that roam the wastelands of the Forbidden Lands if he wishes to gain its[19] assistance. With his loyal horse Agro by his side and the Ancient Sword in

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[17] Playstation is a stationary console developed by Sony Computer Entertainment. The name of each generation of console just differs in the numeric title, e.g. Playstation 1, Playstation 2, etc.

[18] The virtual world of video games is usually segmented in different areas that have to be loaded individually by the hardware of the platform. This results in disruption of the gameplay, otherwise known as loading screens (Domsch 2013: 34). An open world creates a more non-linear playstyle of the game and creates the illusion of a near endless world in which the player can interact.

[19] Dormin refers to itself as "we" implying that it consists of different beings or possesses multiple personalities. Considering the voice of this deity, which consists simultaneously of a male and female voice it does make sense, however, when the deity gets talked to they refer to it as he. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity as well as consistency Dormin will be referred to as "it".

his possession, which he stole prior to his journey, Wander proceeds to do as he is told, ignoring any consequences he might face. After slaying all 16 colossi, he returns to the temple and comes face to face with the shaman called Emon and his soldiers. It turns out that after Wander stole the Ancient Sword and escaped to the Forbidden Lands, Emon and his soldiers followed him in hopes of apprehending him. The reasons for doing so are revealed as Dormin shows its true intention. Dormin, who in fact is evil in nature, was sealed in the Forbidden Lands with its soul being split into 16 fragments and sealed within the 16 colossi. It is revealed that Dormin tricked Wander into breaking the seal, consequently releasing it. Dormin takes over Wander's body, which has become corrupted as a consequence of slaughtering the colossi, and transforms into a dark colossus. Emon and his soldiers, having failed at preventing this, manage to defend themselves against the dark creature and during their fight Emon manages to obtain the Ancient Sword. He then uses it to open up a portal sealing Dormin's soul once and for all. With Dormin being sealed away, the broken shadowy husk of Wander, who has regained consciousness, is left behind. Trying to escape the pull of the portal he eventually fails and gets sucked into it as well, seemingly vanishing forever. The story ends with Emon and his soldiers fleeing over the crumbling bridge that connects the Forbidden Lands with the rest of the world and with Mono, lying on the altar she was placed on by Wander, opening her eyes. As she wakes up she is greeted by an injured Agro, who supposedly died before Wander could reach the 16th colossus. Without having any knowledge of what happened mere moments before, Mono and Agro walk inside the temple just to find an infant with horns[20] lying at the exact spot the portal appeared previously.

Before looking at the gameplay the overall structure of SotC has to be shown. The video game can be segmented into three parts. The first being the introduction of the narrative with Wander arriving at the temple, looking for a way to resurrect Mono, and hearing Dormin's voice coming from above to

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[20] In the video game *Ico* the player takes the role of a young boy named Ico who, similar to the infant at the end of SotC, has horns. This, among other design and narrative similarities led to speculations that SotC is the prequel to *Ico*.

offer its help to Wander; The second part, which the majority of the video game consists of, being the completion of the pact Wander and Dormin made, i.e. traversing the different areas of the Forbidden Lands, tracking down the several colossi and slaying them one after the other; And finally, the last part being the final cut scene which is mainly passive in nature with the exception of the interactive parts that forces the player to control the dark manifestation of the colossus and the attempt to escape the pull of the portal as the broken version of Wander. When analyzing the gameplay it is best to focus on the second part of the video game, since this is the part where most of the interactive gameplay takes place.

Essentially all parts of SotC's gameplay consist of the player taking control of the protagonist Wander. After the introductory segment, the player is able or rather forced to test and figure out the video game's controls by walking around the temple as there is no explanation or tutorial explaining these mechanics. While the gameplay design of SotC is simplistic with its limited variation of button commands (walk, attack, jump, grab, calling Agro), allowing even inexperienced players to figure out how to maneuver Wander, a basic level of video game literacy is necessary and presents a hurdle for complete novices. However, during the initial cut scene Dormin does explain to Wander (and therefore the player) how to use his sword to show the destination of the first target. It is shown that the player can create a ray of light emitting from the tip of the sword that works as a sort of compass that can be used to navigate during the journey. The gameplay that follows from here on out mostly consists of riding through the different areas of the Forbidden Lands and tracking down the colossi one by one. Each colossus

Figure 1: Weak spot of the fifth colossus in SotC;
Source: https://bit.ly/3zoRNLz

Figure 2: Weak spot of Gohma, the first
boss of The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of
Time;
Source: https://bit.ly/3gmfwop

can be found in a different themed area such as forests, vast meadows, deserts or abandoned ruins. Reaching those areas consists mainly of riding and navigating to said areas and finally climbing certain terrain to arrive at the specific territory of the colossi. These territories function as arenas in which the fight against the respective colossi are held. Each colossus has a unique design and has to be fought against in a different way from the previous one. However, all fights share a common principle: in order to slay the giant and thus to fulfill the video game's overall victory conditions, the player is required to direct Wander towards small, visually distinct, and predetermined vulnerability regions, known as weak spots (Fig. 1 & Fig. 2), along the body of each colossus to inflict damage to them. Wander has to climb the giant body structures of the slow moving colossi to reach these weak spots, since they are the only locations on the colossi's body where his sword can pierce their skin and inflict serious harm. The gameplay of the fights themselves consists of a hybrid form of action-adventure and puzzle elements: The player must hone and utilize their reflexes when maneuvering and dodging during combat and analyze the colossi's movements to locate the required path to reach the weak spots.

As already mentioned in the preface of this chapter, SotC stands out when comparing it to other titles of its genre. The fantasy plot may seem generic at first but its unique design and gameplay distinguish it from other video games. To begin with, the structure and scarcity of the fights is unusual for adventure games. Players are traditionally faced with a variety of smaller enemy encounters scattered throughout the world, which function both as

training to improve the player's fighting abilities, preparing them for the boss fights[21], as well as acting as obstacles along the way to entertain the player and fill out the video game. Additionally, enemies contain the narrative function of enhancing the liveliness of the storyworld as well as increasing the feeling of risk during the journey of the hero. Other adventure video games like the franchise *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo) for example are segmented into different areas called 'dungeons', each one ending with a boss fight. The player typically encounters several smaller enemies throughout the dungeon that keep them from reaching its end and allow them to obtain different items or abilities upon defeating them that prepare the player for the final boss of the video game. Traditionally, the player is rewarded with a special item or ability upon defeating a boss which they can use later on to overcome challenges such as puzzles or defeating other enemies. SotC on the other hand limits its range of (fightable) NPCs to 16 enemies, whose respective fights resemble more boss-fight structure than being encounters with smaller enemies, leaving the video game feel more like a boss-rush[22] instead of a traditional adventure video game. Instead of being rewarded for mastering the challenge of fighting against a colossus, the player is relatively unceremoniously teleported back to the temple just to track down the next colossus. Considering other NPCs SotC does not utilize this mechanic of traditional video games as well. Whereas other video games contain a variety of NPCs with which the player is able to interact, trade, and communicate, SotC does not use any additional NPCs next to Agro and the colossi. The nonexistence of other NPCs as well as the lack of a true reward system are only a few examples of SotC's unique design choices and mechanics that show the developers' intention to create and focus on the emotional investment the player creates and that ultimately makes them empathize with

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[21] A boss fight is a traditional mechanic of a video game which tests the players skill as well as being the goal of the video game. Boss fights indicate either the last enemy of a specific dungeon or the last enemy in the game, functioning both as a narrative closing point in the story and a victory condition for the video game to finish. Boss monsters are stronger and bigger than standard enemies and take the player all of his arsenal of weapons to fight against.
[22] A boss-rush mode can usually be found at the end of certain video games as an opportunity to fight against the already defeated bosses of the respective video game. This mode is usually considered as additional content, after the main storyline of the video game is finished.

the video game's characters. The following pages will discuss the correlation of empathy with SotC via two hypotheses: (1) The audiovisual and game mechanical design of the SotC, encourages the player to empathize with the colossi and; (2) The design of the avatar Wander as well as the narrative structure SotC itself encourages the player to both being able to empathize with the colossi through the perspective of Wander but simultaneously being able to empathize with Wander himself.

### Hypothesis (1): Empathy with the Colossi

Starting with the initial design choice used in SotC to influence the emotions of the player is the design of the Forbidden Lands. As previously mentioned, the nonexistence of NPCs and the vastness of the SotC's world creates a feeling of loneliness within the player, opening them up to reflect on the history of the video game's world. The only exposition the player receives after all is during the initial cut scene in which an unnamed narrator provides the player with spares amounts of background information about the storyworld[23][24]. Here the player learns about the origin of the Forbidden Lands through straight narratives, though the information is presented in a mysterious rather than purely informative manner. This naturally leads to the player wondering what events might have transpired for this part of the world to be named the Forbidden Lands. Other than that the only narrative output the video game uses to convey its story is mainly through the usage of *evocative narratives*: SotC uses evocative narratives to convey the history of the storyworld through the spatial design of the world as well as the architecture found in the game. By presenting the player with giant ruined architecture without any straight narratives for background information, SotC creates curiosity within the player and forces them to use their imagination. Just as Brian Dillon, the curator in Tate's exhibition of *Ruin Lust* in 2014 said,

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[23] Clip 1: "Exposition"
[24] All Clips are taken from a playthrough on YouTube and can be found on the enclosed DVD or the Dropbox link. The link to the original video can be found in Works Cited.

"there's always more going on when we look at these structures and places than simply a prurient interest" (MacDonald 2014: n. pag.). The way the landscapes and architecture in SotC (Fig. 3 & Fig. 4) are structured are not purely designed to look interesting but also to amplify the player's fascination with these structures to such a degree that they are essentially forced to try to explain the world by themselves, a method called narrative interpretation: What



Figure 3: Arena of the 15th colossus fight in SotC; Source: https://bit.ly/3xelxJg



Figure 4: Entrance of the 16th colossus fight in SotC; Source: https://bit.ly/2TVTRdO

happened to this place? Which ancient society built these structures? What was the purpose of those structures? Asking these questions causes the player to be emotionally invested in the storyworld.

This leads to the second indicator for empathy creation and also the main feature of the video game: the different colossi the player is forced to fight against as Wander. Since every combat-related encounter the player experiences is one in that they fight against a colossus, the importance of the fights in SotC is clear. Furthermore, when looking at the game mechanical aspect of SotC the player has to fight the different colossi in order to progress in the video game, thus meeting the predetermined victory conditions of the video game. This leaves them no choice but to do so and thereby follow Dormin's commands. However, the internalized behavior of players who experienced other video games would most likely not think twice before following those conditions, since this kind of progression seems to fit within the traditional structure of other video games within the genre. On the surface level it seems like any other adventure game: the hero (Wander) goes off to fight the dragon (Colossus) in order to save the princess (Mono). This classic

fantasy structure is abundant not only in video games but in movies and literature as well. Therefore, the player follows the narrative rules they believe to know and starts to track down the colossi in order to save Wander's 'damsel in distress'. The following pages will discuss the audiovisual and game mechanical design of the colossi and the respective fights against them as well as their implications on the narrative and the players emotions.

The colossi are gigantic creatures seemingly made out of stone and fur or moss, creating a combination of artificial stone structures and biological matter making them seem like colossal statues come to life (Fig. 5 & Fig. 6).

Figure 5: The 3rd colossus resembling a knight;
Source: https://bit.ly/3pPnPMo

All of the 16 colossi are unique in their design, although some of them share similar visual traits. Some of them resemble more humanoid creatures while others show signs of animal anatomy such as that of birds, snakes, or mammoths. All of them seem to be ancient, indicated by the ruined state of the stone structures across their bodies as well as the condition of their fur. Due to their mystical and ancient

Figure 6: The 2nd colossus resembling a mammoth;
Source: https://bit.ly/2RTaBBX

appearance as well as their sheer size, they create a feeling of reverence within the player. Besides their individual design, every colossi's behavior is noticeably different. The player is made aware of this whenever they approach the colossi in their territory. Most of these giants are rather passive in nature and do not show aggressive behavior towards the player unless provoked by them. This is also indicated by the color of their eyes which normally shine in a blue color, but change into an alarmingly red color when they start to turn hostile towards the player (Fig. 7 & Fig. 8). Their behavior

Figure 7: The 2<sup>nd</sup> colossus non-hostile;
 Source: https://bit.ly/3gr8jSM

Figure 8: The 2<sup>nd</sup> colossus hostile;
 Source: https://tcrn.ch/3pSPg80

does not seem to be determined by any intrinsic motivation, like bosses in other adventure games, but rather by a reactionary animalistic instinct. Even the ones that are immediately hostile towards the player when entering their domain without any additional provocation, seem to merely want to defend themselves from the threat they perceive in Wander. This arguably makes them feel more realistic and alive, opening the doors for the player to begin to feel empathy. This can also be observed in clip 1[25]: Here the player approaches the colossus and shoots his arrow at its body. While this might initially not seem out of the ordinary, the behavior of the player found within the clip shows another dimension when analyzing it from a meta perspective: the player's behavior and their preemptive strike is the result of the internalized conditioning they have undergone from playing other video games of the genre that makes them to attack a given enemy as to not be attacked by that enemy first. The colossus, however, does not show any hostile behavior towards the player even though they fired an arrow at it. Due to its size and mass, the colossus was most likely not hurt from the arrow and therefore does not react aggressively towards the player, i.e. Wander. Instead it begins to observe the small human approaching him showing signs of curiosity in its body language, allowing for the belief that this creature possesses a certain degree of intellect. This is further reinforced by the colossi's ability to feel pain, which can be seen in clip 2[26]. Here the player attacks one of the vulnerability regions of the colossus, its calves, causing the

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[25] Clip 2: "Player attacks the 1<sup>st</sup> colossus"
[26] Clip 3: "Player stabs one of the colossus' weak spots"

colossus to hunch over and groan in agony, providing the player with evidence of their ability to feel. All of these aspects can be observed during each of the 16 colossus encounters. SotC's developers made these design and gameplay choices intentionally in order to have the player view the colossi as more than mere monsters and creatures worth compassion. Before taking a look at further instances that exemplify this, however, there is an additional aspect that has to be analyzed first: the music of SotC's fights.

When looking at reviews of SotC (Puleo 2020: n. pag.; MacDonald 2018: n. pag.; Darkstation 2018: n. pag.) a clear trend of praise towards the soundtrack, composed by famous video game and anime soundtrack composer Kow Otani, becomes apparent. Its melancholic and somber pieces and rousing orchestral scores that both fit the narrative of SotC rather well are reasons for that. Research has shown that music alone is able to induce happiness or sadness within the listener (Liljedahl 2011: 32). However, if sounds and music are combined with other media, such as pictures or videos the music's impact increases exponentially (Liljedahl 2011: 32). This increased emotional effect can be experienced or observed when looking at the correlation of music and emotions during the battle with the colossi. The music starts as soon as the player approaches a given colossus, creating the atmosphere of an adventurous battle between the player and the colossus, reminiscent of the battle between David and Goliath[27]. Suitable for an event like this the music begins with dark and heavy string instruments, with sporadic whimsical tunes and cymbals placed in between representing the tension between the dangerous and menacing colossus and the brave heroic Wander.[28] This piece plays as long as the player walks around the colossus while figuring out how to climb the giant. As soon as the player manages to climb a colossus, by making use of its respective weaknesses or the given surroundings, such as stabbing its calves, luring it into a trap, shooting its

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[27] The analogy of David and Goliath is used to describe a situation in which a small or weak person or organization tries to defeat another much larger or stronger opponent. From the Bible story in which Goliath, a giant, is killed by the boy David with a stone. (David and Goliath 2021)

[28] Clip 4: "Roar of the Earth – Grotesque Figures"

wings, or breaking parts of its armor off, the music shifts to a grand orchestral crescendo[29] with strings and trumpets as the player holds onto the now aggravated colossus with his life.[30] Accompanied by feelings of heroism thanks to the music, the player continues to climb the colossi and attack its weak spots, just as they were told and have been conditioned to do. In this case the music supports the conventions of the traditional video games, making the player believe they are the hero of this story and are doing the right thing by (once again) slaying the evil monster in order to save the princess. However, the atmosphere changes drastically every time the player defeats the colossus. As the player delivers the final blow, time slows down and the music fades into silence. The gameplay stops and the player is presented with a cut scene of the given colossus crumbling down and its gigantic body collapse onto the ground.[31] These scenes are accompanied by a somber soundtrack with deep and sorrowful vocals and slow strings, similar to a requiem in a church, later transitioning into a higher string-driven part that, while sounding less sorrowful, still underlines the melancholic theme of its entirety.[32] Kow Otani himself acknowledged this by stating in an interview that it is unusual in video games for an achievement like killing such a strong enemy to be accompanied by a soundtrack that has more in common with a prayer or a requiem (*Shadow of the Colossus – Kow Otani Interview | PS4* 2018: 0:45 – 1:03). These pieces of music are one of the key elements of the emotional process the player goes through while playing SotC. Instead of being rewarded with a victorious and marching tune for slaying the monster, as most players are conventionally used to hearing in video games like *Final Fantasy VII*[33] (Square Enix 1997) or *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*[34] (Nintendo 1992), the traditional reward structure of video game music gets contradicted. Furthermore, after a colossus hits the ground and the cut scene

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[29] The term crescendo describes a gradual increase in loudness, or the moment when a noise or piece of music is at its loudest (Crescendo 2014).
[30] Clip 5: "Roar of the Earth – The Opened Way"
[31] Clip 6: "Death of the colossus"
[32] Clip 7: "Roar of the Earth – The End of the Battle"
[33] Clip 8: "Final Fantasy VII - Victory Fanfare"
[34] Clip 9: "The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past - Great Victory!"

ends, dark tentacles emerge from the colossus's corpse racing towards Wander. Though the player is able to attempt to escape, the game mechanics do not allow this to ever happen. The player is shown a cut scene of Wander being impaled by the shadowy tentacles and his subsequent 'death'. Immediately after, the player is presented with a cut scene of a dark tunnel, resembling some kind of warp hole, that functions both as a loading screen (Domsch 2013: 34) and as a visualization of the teleportation of Wander to the temple where he first met Dormin.[35] These two events, the abrupt change of mood in the music as the colossus dies and the impaling of Wander that also teleports him back to the temple, occur after every battle against a colossus. To further enhance the argument of hypothesis (1) it is necessary to analyze how these design techniques are used to manipulate the feelings of the player.

As already mentioned, SotC uses straight narratives and evocative narratives to convey its story to the audience. However, the majority of its narrative expression happens through the utilization of music. This happens at various points throughout the video game, be it the non-existence of music in the non-combat parts of the game or the intentional breaks from conventional patterns such as "The End of the Battle" used in the death cut scenes of each colossus. Ueda intentionally used such unusual methods to convey SotC's story. In an interview he stated that, while developing SotC, he was having doubts "about simply feeling good by beating monsters and getting a sense of accomplishment" (Taylor 2019: n. pag.). Though he did not design SotC as some sort of antithesis to the conventions within the industry, he did focus on SotC's emotional and narrative design consistency and differentiating it from other video games (Taylor 2019: n. pag.). For example: the use of melancholic music is supposed to make the player think about what they just did, questioning whether or not they, as the protagonist of the video game, are also automatically the hero of the story. Rather than rewarding the player for the defeat of a colossus, the player is forced to reflect on their action, coming eventually to the conclusion that instead of being the 'hero,'

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[35] Clip 10: "Player gets impaled and teleported to the temple"

they might be the 'predator' and instead of the colossi being the 'dragons,' they might be the player's 'prey.'

The music alone, however, is not all that conveys this notion. It is the sum of all of the different design elements at work that create this feeling. These elements are: (1) the emptiness of the Forbidden Lands as well as the unique and ancient design of the different colossi, that make them seem more like majestic creatures who try to live their days in peace instead of aggressive monsters with evil intent; (2) the music that accompanies these design choices. In the case of the Forbidden Lands the silence creates a sense of loneliness and for the colossi, the music initially creates the feeling of heroism in Wander's acts only to contradict this notion in its entirety later on by using a melancholic tune instead of a victorious one when defeating a colossus;. and lastly, (3) the narrative of the video game takes place in a world where all life seems to have vanished and the only things that still roam these lands are the awe inspiring colossi who are hunted down by the player. All of these design choices are made to go against pre-existing conventions of what characterizes the 'hero' and play with the player's emotional expectations by manipulating their feelings toward the colossi in such a way that they feel some degree of empathy for them.

There are several instances in which these particular design techniques are used to further underline the roles of 'predator' and 'prey'. In the case of the 11th colossus the developers used different design choices to call upon the relationship between humans and animals. The 11th colossus is one of the smallest colossi, with the 14th colossus having a similar appearance, resembling a lion- or dog-like creature.[36] Unlike most of the other colossi, it is very aggressive towards the player as soon as they enter its territory. Its fast movement combined with its reckless attacks makes it one of the wilder colossi. However, this changes as soon as the player picks up a burning torch,

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[36] Clip 11: "11th colossus opening scene and pillar scene"

which conveniently drops from the ceiling after the player tricks the colossus to ram its head into an old stone pillar. As soon as the player takes the burning torch and walks towards the rabid colossus, it flinches and



Figure 9: The 11<sup>th</sup> colossus and its fear of fire;
Source: https://bit.ly/3xiXpVP

walks backwards in fear (Fig. 9).[37] The game developers could have implemented dozens of other ways to defeat this aggressive colossus, but they choose to use fear of fire as a mechanic to push the colossus off an edge and therefore destroying his armor and exposing his weak spot. The humanization of this colossus through the integration of emotions in its design is another way of making the colossi vulnerable. Similarly, the design of the 6<sup>th</sup> colossus utilizes features of humanization as well in order to more easily allow for an emotional investment. The 6<sup>th</sup> colossus shares its humanoid form with the first colossus with the exception that it does not possess a weapon. One of its particularities is its beard, which is used by the player to climb the colossus during the fight. The curious and almost child-like behavior is another design choice used to make the colossi seem like innocent creatures with no bad intentions. As soon as the player enters its domain the 6<sup>th</sup> colossus immediately starts to chase Wander, similar to a small child who runs after a small animal with the intention of petting it. Due to its size and bulkiness the colossus begins to destroy the ruin's walls in its path. However, it seems to lose interest in the player rather quickly - once again a similarity is shared with a child whose attention span is brief, therefore the player has to attack the colossus constantly to keep its attention. If the player does not do so, the colossus just wanders around somewhat aimlessly. After drawing its attention towards themselves by firing arrows at its body, the video game mechanic requires the player to hide between the ruins to make the curious colossus

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[37] Clip 12: "11<sup>th</sup> colossus' fear of fire"

Figure 10: Signs of curiosity within the 6<sup>th</sup> colossus; Source: https://bit.ly/3pOcAUE

search for him in order to create an opportunity for them to mount it.[38] This opportunity comes when the colossus crouches down and searches for the player within the ruins, creating the impression of curiosity within the colossus, for which it ultimately gets punished by the player (Fig. 10).

The 13<sup>th</sup> colossus depicts another instance of the roles of 'predator' and 'prey.' It is the biggest and most peaceful colossi of all and can be found in the desert. As soon as the player enters its domain, it emerges from the sand, ascending into the sky. It does not show any human-like traits such as curiosity, fear, or even any true intellect, rather it resembles an instinct-driven animal. Compared to other colossi who either resemble humanoid anatomical features or an animal-like structure this colossus looks other-worldly. However, this does not diminish its harmless behavior towards the player. On the contrary, it is rather apathetic towards the player and just glides through the air. There is an argument to be made that it does or cannot naturally notice the player at all as Wanders is tiny in comparison to it. Even when attacked by the player it does not respond by attacking them back (Fig. 11).[39] Unlike its intimidating appearance it is not able to defend itself, and thereby has to passively endure the player's merciless attacks until it is defeated, reinforcing the sentiment that what the player and therefore Wander is doing might not be the right thing to do.


Figure 11: The player pointing bow and arrow at the 13<sup>th</sup> colossus; Source: https://bit.ly/3iFyLe7

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[38] Clip 13: "Getting the colossus' attention"
[39] Clip 14: "13<sup>th</sup> colossus battle"

The visual design and behavior of the colossi as well as the music that accompanies them was clearly intended to create uneasiness within the player while fighting against these creatures, which is supposed to lead to them questioning their actions. However, it has to be noted that the feelings the player experiences towards the colossi lean more towards sympathy, pity, or possibly guilt rather than empathy. Even though they show signs of intelligence during their encounters as well as the ability to feel pain when hurt and/or killed, it is not sufficient to prove that the player is supposed to empathize with them. As stated in chapter 3.3 *Correlation between Video Games and Empathy*, the process behind sympathy involves, according to Coplan, caring for and feeling concern towards the target, however, a prerequisite of empathy is to attempt to share the target's experiences or rather take the target's perspective (Coplan 2004: 145). The next part of this chapter, however, will show that SotC in its entirety was designed to first create sympathy with the colossi and eventually transform this feeling into empathy. The way the video game introduces this transition can be observed in the last part of the game.

The 16th and last colossus is a stationary massive construct almost like a building, with a humanoid upper body that has a mythical appearance.[40] This colossus attacks the player with magical projectiles as soon as they enter its respective area, which appears to be a ruined battlefield, fitting the theme of the final battle. Its deliberate and controlled attacks make the last colossus seem more intelligent than the others, almost as if it wants revenge. Its aggressive behavior does make sense considering that the player slaughtered every single one of his kin, leaving it to be the last surviving member of its family. In all previous encounters the colossi seemed to feel threatened and acted more instinctively defensive. This, however, is not the case with the 16th colossus. Its attacks are purposeful and are meant to hurt the player for what they have done. But even in this final showdown between the player and the avenging colossus there are certain design elements that go against this atmosphere of the fight, once again contradicting the conventional patterns of

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[40] Clip 15: "16th colossus battle"

a final boss fight: a ruined battlefield accompanied by rain and thunder, and the final enemy enthroned atop of the hill planning its adversaries' demise. All of these design choices could be arbitrarily applied to every other video game's final boss fight, however, the important difference is once again the choice of music. The music chosen for this final battle encapsulates the emotional weight of the player's journey thus far and its implicit moral questions perfectly. The remorseful feelings that resulted from the slaughtering of the colossi and Wander's simultaneous and subsequent loss of his humanity, is expressed in the music. While most would expect a beat heavy, driving, and somewhat impulsive musical arrangement for most final boss fights to further underline the games climax, SotC subverts such expectations and uses a more emotional soundtrack, mostly without drums and featuring a heavy use of strings, organs, and vocals.[41] The heroic music used in the previous battles is nowhere to be found in this fight, increasing the uniqueness and perceived importance of this encounter. However, the battle ends as all have done so far with Wander ramming his sword into the colossus' weak spot and a cut scene of the colossus collapsing accompanied by the already known "End of the Battle" music. Yet, instead of the loading screen cut scene of the black tunnel, the player is presented with a cut scene of Emon and his soldiers arriving at the temple of Dormin, leading to the final part of the game and simultaneously the last part of the transition from sympathy to empathy the player is going to make. First the final part, which consists of cut scenes as well as gameplay scenes, has to be explained to contextualize the arguments that can be derived from this material in order to prove hypothesis (1).

The cut scene[42] shows Emon and his soldiers entering the temple and discovering that all of the idols[43], which represent each colossus are destroyed with the last one crumbling before them as they enter the temple. Immediately

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[41] Clip 16: "Roar of the Earth – Demise of the Ritual"

[42] Clip 17: "Emon's arrival and encounter with Dormin"

[43] After a colossus is defeated a stone statue, called an idol, gets automatically destroyed. From the narrative perspective this means that each of the statues represent a keyhole, all of which form the prison in which Dormin is sealed. From a game mechanical view the idols present the player a way of tracking their progression in the video game.

after the camera pans to the altar, on which Mono's lifeless body is lying, "Premonition of Revival"[44] which title fittingly matches the situation, starts to play. With menacing organs the music forebodes the impending doom Emon already anticipated. The scene changes to the battlefield of the last fight between Wander and the last colossus, now in broad daylight, showing the unconscious and corrupted body of Wander in the midst of the ruins and the dead colossus. Every time the player defeated a colossus and was impaled by the black tentacles the screen would fade in black, transitioning into the dark tunnel cut scene. This time the player can see how Wander's body begins to levitate and flies towards the sky before the scene cuts back to the temple. As Emon examines Mono on the altar, Wander's body suddenly appears in the temple, with his sword landing a few meters away from him. In anticipation of the impending resurrection of Dormin the music changes to dark organs with sinister vocals, emphasizing the dreadful situation that is about to unfold.[45] Emon realizes what Wander has done and decides to put him out of his misery, since the corruption took over his body leaving him with white grey skin, black veins, glowing blue eyes reminiscent of the ones from the colossi, and horns on top of his head. One of Emon's soldiers approaches Wander and thrusts his sword into his heart. Instead of Wander's life ending, a geyser of black blood ejects from the wound, similar to when Wander stabbed a colossus. Wander withstands this normally fatal attack, though he seems to be at his limit. He stands up and reaches for Mono in the distance.

In his last moments he grips the shaft of the sword that impales his body and pulls it out, opening the wound and leading to the black blood consuming the entirety of his body. As Emon and his soldiers contemplate what



Figure 12: The dark colossus face to face with Emon;
Source: https://bit.ly/3iFzxYs (Screenshot by Author)

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[44] Clip 18: "Roar of the Earth – Premonition of Revival"
[45] Clip 19: "Roar of the Earth – Resurrection"

they have done, Wander's corrupted body is transformed into the dark colossus Dormin (Fig. 12). It reveals to everyone present and thus the audience that Emon and his people were the ones that severed the deity's body and soul, cut its soul into 16 fragments, and sealed them away in the 16 colossi across the Forbidden Lands. Dormin used Wander to open up the seal in order to be reborn. The camera pans above the dark colossuses head as the cut scene fades to black. This is the point where the empathic transition truly begins.

The cut scene changes to gameplay and the player is able to control the dark colossus.[46] The gameplay mechanics here are rather simple: the same button the player used to attack with Wander makes the dark colossus smash his fist to the ground and the analog stick still allows them to walk, albeit slowly, and move the camera. Even though there is no clearly defined goal at this moment, the player is encouraged to attack Emon and his soldiers, by these limited controls. Therefore, the player, who is already conditioned to attack enemies they are presented with, does what the video game defines as necessary for the progression of the narrative. As the soldiers attack the dark colossus, the player experiences difficulties defending themselves, due to the dark colossuses sheer mass and consequent slow movement, forcing the player to endure the soldiers' attacks. Additionally, the position of the camera during the fight is right above and behind the colossus' head, making it harder to orient oneself (Fig. 13). As the gameplay scene progresses there is not much the player can do except to attempt to attack the soldiers until they inevitably flee through the entrance of the temple. As soon as they do so, the gameplay ends and the next cut scene[47] starts. Emon casts the Ancient Sword, he obtained during the encounter with the dark colossus, into a well at the



Figure 13: Point of view during the dark colossus gameplay;
Source: https://bit.ly/3iFzxYs (Screenshot by Author)

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[46] Clip 20: "Player controlling the dark colossus"
[47] Clip 21: "Emon and his soldiers escape and seal Dormin away"

bottom of the entrance room, opening up a vortex with the intention of pulling the dark colossus into it and sealing Dormin once and for all. The dark colossus tries to withstand the pull of the vortex but is eventually pulled into it, leaving a broken shadowy husk of Wander behind. The cut scene ends and the player is once again given control over Wander, yet there is nothing they can do but try to escape the pull of the vortex.[48] This 'control' the player is given, however, is just a metaphorical design, since the outcome of this scene is fixed and the only way to progress is to let go and let the vortex pull Wander in. The entirety of this scene, during which the vortex is open, is accompanied by "The End of the Battle", the same melancholic music that plays after the player defeats a colossus. After Wander is pulled into the vortex the final cut scene starts and the video game ends.

The game mechanical design of these final moments is what ultimately facilitates the transition from feelings of sympathy towards the colossi to feelings of empathy for the colossi. The visual design of the colossi, their lack of ill-intent towards the player and their general behavior that humanizes them, along with the melancholic orchestral music that plays every time the player defeats one of them, initially creates the notion of 'predatory' intent behind Wander's actions with the colossi being his 'prey', which contradict traditional video game conventions. The audiovisual design creates sympathy towards the colossi and leaves the player with a feeling of uneasiness, wondering if what they did was wrong. This feeling is confirmed in the final part of the game as the player learns that their actions free Dormin and lead to Wander's demise. The key point that enables the player to empathize with the colossi is the game mechanical design choice of letting the player control the dark colossus themselves. Instead of taking the perspective of Emon or one of his soldiers fighting against the dark colossus, the developers of SotC intentionally let the player control a heavy and sluggish colossus that has much difficulty defending itself from the attacking soldiers. These intentional heavy controls were designed to recreate a similar experience to how the colossi must have felt whilst fighting against Wander.

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[48] Clip 22: "Player trying to withstand the pull of the vortex"

Without a doubt the colossi are strong and powerful creatures but in a fight against a small agile human they are too slow and heavy to have a realistic chance of winning. This hopelessness the colossi had to endure while fighting Wander, gets reversed to the player's perspective. The perspective change from Wander to the dark colossus lets the player experience how it must have felt like to fight against a small and agile enemy such as Wander. Additionally, the choice of using "The End of the Battle" both when a colossus dies and when Dormin/Wander gets pulled into the vortex underlines the emotional weight of the perspective change further. As discussed in chapter 3.3 *Correlation between Video Games and Empathy*, empathy presupposes a perspective change as well as an emotional sharing with the target. SotC initially prepares the emotional sharing through its audiovisual design which consequently creates sympathy towards the colossi and finally transforms these feelings of sympathy to empathy by letting the player experience the colossi's perspective through Wander's transformation into the dark colossus.

### Hypothesis (2): Empathy with Wander

As mentioned in the beginning of chapter 4.1 *Shadow of the Colossus: Empathy through Music and Design*, this paper proposes two main hypotheses which support the claim that the developers of SotC intentionally made certain design choices to encourage an empathic reaction from the player. By analyzing the audiovisual design choices as well as the game mechanical ones, it was possible to verify the first hypotheses and therefore lay a foundation for the second one. As explained, SotC encourages the player to be able to empathize with the colossi through the perspective of Wander, hypothesis (2) however, claims that the player is also able to empathize with the avatar Wander himself. To clarify this hypothesis it is necessary to fully understand how the empathic process of the first hypothesis worked. As already mentioned by different scholars within the field of video game studies, video games are seen as being simultational. By playing SotC the
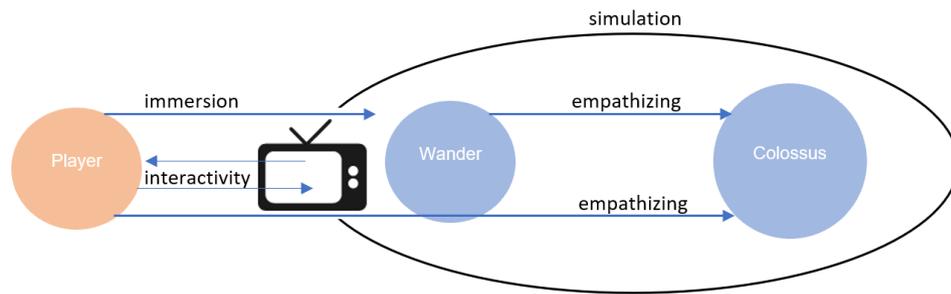
Figure 14: Visualization of the empathic process in hypothesis (1);
Source: Graphic created by the Author

player dives into a simulation and controls the playable avatar Wander. This level of immersion gets supported by the narrative rich environment within the simulation as well as multiple levels of interactivity while controlling Wander. This allows for the player to take Wander's perspective and empathize with other characters of the world through him (Fig. 14). The second hypothesis, however, touches on another empathic process, a rather direct approach. Here the player does not empathize with another character in the video game through the perspective of Wander, but rather empathize with Wander himself (Fig. 15). Similar to the first hypothesis, this is made possible through the different design choices the developers of SotC used. The following chapter is going to analyze the design of the avatar Wander as well as the design of Agro to explain this process. Additionally, the atmosphere of the Forbidden Lands as well as the story of SotC itself play important roles in allowing the player to empathize with Wander.
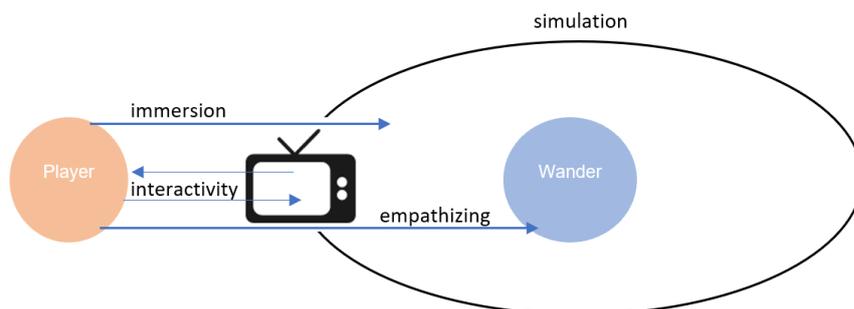


Figure 15: Visualization of the empathic process in hypothesis (2);
Source: Graphic created by the Author

The design of an avatar is crucial when it comes to being able to identify with said character. Since the player controls the avatar for the majority of the video game their immersion and identification with the characters is dependent on their visual design and personality. There are many

video games, especially role-playing video games, in which the player is able to configure their own avatar by using a character creation screen (usually at the beginning of the game). These allow players to choose their character's sex, race[49] (e.g. human ethnicity or alien/fantasy species), overall appearance, and sometimes skills and personality traits. While some of these choices have functional aspects (for example specific races possess certain abilities) most of these traits are for cosmetic purposes (Domsch 2013: 94). The opportunity to create one's own avatar can further increase the identification with said avatar, however, identification is not limited to these instances. There are other video games that make use of a predefined avatar, usually for the sake of telling a specific story (Domsch 2013: 94). The extent of the avatars'

predefinition can vary from very detailed personality and character traits to rather bland personalities, depending on what the developers intend to do with that character. An example of an immensely predefined character can be found in the main character of the *Uncharted* series, Nathan Drake (Naughty Dog 2007), a charming and humorous survivalist whose adventurous battles with and against thieves and pirates are always accompanied by witty jokes and a confident attitude (Fig. 16).



Figure 16: Nathan Drake from Uncharted;
Source: https://bit.ly/3iCtSSX

In contrast, there are also silent protagonists such as Chell from the *Portal* (Valve 2007) series or Gordon Freeman from the *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) series, both characters whose appearances and actions made them iconic heroes of video game history, yet their personality is never truly shown. When looking at the protagonist Wander it can be said that he is located in between

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[49] Since the term 'race' can be interpreted negatively, depending on its context, it is necessary to clarify that the usage differs from the one used in political contexts. Whereas 'race' in terms of ethnic groups was misused for political ideology (at least in the German translation 'Rasse' which stems from a different origin than the US American word 'race'(Süddeutsche Zeitung 2018: n. pag.)), the term 'race' in the context of video games refers to the biological race of characters within the sphere of video games. These 'races' differ from the human race and can range from fantasy races like orcs, taurens and trolls to more sci-fi oriented races like droids or other alienated races.

these two extremes. While his appearance as well as his personality are predefined, he shows little of his personality and is a rather emotionally neutral character (Fig. 17). The only times the player learns anything about



Figure 17: Wander from SotC; Source: https://bit.ly/3iFzxYs (Screenshot by Author)

Wander's personality is during the cut scenes of the game. Here Wander is usually depicted as a brave young man who is willing to do anything for the sake of Mono's revival. However, apart from his self-sacrificing character traits, Wander's personality is not detailed in the video game any further. His stoic, reserved, and non-emotional attitude creates room for interpretation for the

player. Additionally, Wander is not a very intimidating or very powerful looking protagonist, which makes him seem more vulnerable than other video game protagonists. Ueda stated in an interview that he deliberately chose to design Wander this way, rather than making an immaculately perfect protagonist, so that players could more easily empathize with Wander (Taylor 2019: n. pag.). This idea can also be observed in *Ico* and *The Last Guardian* (SIE Japan Studio 2016), which were both developed under the same director, Ueda, and which both have young, vulnerable, and unobtrusive protagonists. Because of the design of Wander, the player is able to project themselves onto him rather easily, making it easier to take on his perspective while playing the video game.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, loneliness is a key aspect of SotC. The vastness and emptiness of the Forbidden Lands and the music and often its non-existence create such a sensation and atmosphere. However, there are other sounds apart from the musical scores that add to the immersion of the game: ambient sounds. These sounds replicate the natural sounds the events within the game would produce. Since moving a physical object creates sounds in the real world, it does so in the virtual world as well to help create immersion. Ambient sounds in video games are the sounding

counterparts to the graphic background and can create an immediate experience of presence and reality (Liljedahl 2011: 32). Those sounds are especially present when background music is non-existent and the focus of the player is not distracted. When traversing the Forbidden Lands with Agro the sensational output the player is subject to are the landscapes of the virtual world (visual) and the sounds generated by the world and the player (auditory). Since the majority of SotC consists of traversing through landscapes in search of the next colossus, immersion during these sections is fundamental. The sounds that are presented to the player while riding through the landscape are the *avatar sounds* (Liljedahl 2011: 32), which are realized by Wander's grunting, driving the horse, or by calling Agro's name[50] and *character sounds* (Liljedahl 2011: 32), which are primarily realized by Agro's grunting and neighing, the sounds of her hoofs touching the ground while riding, as well as other instances of animal sounds, though they are not as prominent as the ones from Agro. Since SotC does not feature many NPCs these *character sounds* are especially important to reinforce immersion. Finally there are the environmental sounds, or *ornamental sounds* (Liljedahl 2011: 32), which are realized by the blowing of the wind, the sound of waterfalls, or the flowing of rivers to name a few. Although these sounds do not convey any gameplay information, they enrich the atmosphere of the game (Liljedahl 2011: 32) especially when there is no background music to be found. The non-existence of musical scores, the consistency of ambient sounds, and the beautiful yet empty landscape of the Forbidden Lands reinforce the notion of loneliness in SotC.

This intentional feeling of loneliness also intensifies the empathic process by increasing the importance of Wander's relationships with Mono and Agro. The player does not get much more information about Mono's or Wander's past than has been presented in this paper. The only information the player receives is through the straight narratives in the beginning of the game. Here the player follows the arrival of Wander in the Forbidden Lands, as he rides on Agro's back with the seemingly dead Mono in his lap. No

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[50] Clip 23: "Testing controls of Agro"

information is given about where they come from or what happened to this trio, except that Mono fell victim to a human sacrifice for she had a 'cursed fate.'[51] The only other thing to deduce from Wander's self-sacrificing behavior as well as him reaching for Mono during the transformation scene in the final part is that Mono means a lot to him and is the main driving force behind his actions, implying a strong relationship between these two.[52] The second relationship that gets highlighted in SotC is the one between Wander and Agro. Horses in video games are commonly not only a means to travel but also silent and loyal companions to the protagonist. This trope can also be

observed in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998) where the young hero Link has a strong connection with his horse Epona (Fig. 18). The concept of companions is used to make the



Figure 18: Link with his loyal companion Epona; Source: https://bit.ly/3xemd1g

protagonist more realistic as well as emotionally available for relationships, which consequently makes the player care more about the protagonist and their companions as well. This humanization of protagonists with horses is further reinforced by game mechanical options such as petting the horse or feeding it (Fig. 19). While options like these do not necessarily have any use in the video game, their implementation proves the developer's intention to create an emotional investment in these companions within the player.

Furthermore, Agro's design and behavior is made to be as realistic as possible both visually, by shaking her head or rearing up when confronted with dangerous situations, and personality-wise, as it often seems as if she has her



Figure 19: Wander petting Agro; Source: https://bit.ly/3gxpAd1

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[51] Clip 24: "Mono's cursed fate"
[52] Clip 25: "Wander reaching for Mono"

own mind. Additionally, the controls of Agro are not very precise, making it hard to control the horse in narrow paths or when the player tries to navigate Agro too close to an obstacle. While one could argue that the imprecise controls derive from the technical limitations of the *Playstation 2*, the remake, which improved other control mechanics, left this part in its original state, suggesting that these controls are intentionally designed to behave in a difficult manner. Another game mechanic that shows Agro's loyalty towards Wander is the ability to call for her at any point in time and at any location. Considering Agro's visual, auditory, and gameplay design suggests that the developers wanted to design a companion for Wander to counteract the loneliness of the Forbidden Lands, while simultaneously making it clear that Wander has an emotional connection to Agro.

Just as Wander's transformation into the dark colossus and the subsequent battle peaks the player's empathy for the colossi, so does a scene exist that peaks their empathy for Wander. The mentioned scene takes place during the final journey through the Forbidden Lands that will lead Wander to the 16th colossus.[53] Like the previous colossi hunts, the player has to track down the colossi with the navigation system of the Ancient Sword. As the player arrives at their destination, they come across an abyss that is beset by the ruins the player previously came across during their journey. The only way to traverse the abyss is to ride with Agro towards it and jump onto a stone bridge that connects to the other side. Since the player experienced several instances where Agro is able to overcome obstacles, such as ledges and mountain ridges the player instinctively uses the only game mechanical option at his dispense and rides towards the gap. As soon as the duo jumps onto the stone bridge it begins to collapse as they ride to the other side. Shortly before they arrive safely at the end of the bridge the gameplay stops and transitions into a cut scene of Agro jumping over the last gap onto a collapsing stone structure. In her last attempt to save Wander she bucks him onto the platform, with the stone structure crumbling below her. Wander quickly gets back up and rushes to help Agro but it is already too late - he has to watch his

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[53] Clip 26: "Agro's fall"

companion fall into the abyss in front of him. As Wander shouts Agro's name it begins to rain and the scene is accompanied by somber vocals, depicting the dramatic loss of Wander. The weather worsens by the second and thunder can be heard in the distance as Wander stands up and is hit by the realization of what just happened. He looks towards the summit of the mountain on which the last colossus rests. This scene embodies a point-of-no-return for Wander as well for the player: his motivation to save Mono made him lose his closest companion and later makes him kill the last living creatures of this land, the final colossus, consequently corrupting his body with Dormin's soul fragments. His self-sacrificing behavior made him not only lose himself but his last living companion as well. Through the crumbling stone bridge there is no way back for Wander and the only way to further progress is to face the last colossus, and therefore succumbing to the corruption completely. Looking at this situation the player realizes that they are cut off completely from everything familiar and the possibility to further explore the Forbidden Lands, leaving them to walk along a one-way street of loneliness.

While the structure of this scene clearly intends to emotionally affect the player it is neither the dramatic music, the weather change, nor the loss of Agro alone that is so emotionally devastating. The reason why the player feels for Wander is due to their identification with him that comes as a result of the interactive nature of the video game itself. Throughout the duration of SotC, the player is able to slowly identify with Wander, see things from his perspective, and therefore be him, all while building a relationship with Agro. This relationship is what made Wander and the player cope with the loneliness of the Forbidden Lands because they knew that wherever they are, they can call for Agro and she will eventually appear.

Considering these arguments it is necessary to continue with the validation of hypothesis (2) and look at the evidence within SotC. The interactivity of the video game medium and the design of Wander encourages the player to experience emotional reactions towards Wander's misfortunes. If one compares the emotional response to Wander's journey as a player and as a sole viewer it could be seen that there are different psychological

processes at work. If SotC were a (well-made) movie instead of a video game, its audience would feel sympathy or pity towards Wander. But in this case the interactivity of the video game lets the player perceive those events not as an observer but as a participant which ultimately creates an empathic and not merely sympathetic reaction towards Wander's experiences as they are also the player's experiences. By showing the narrative structure of SotC and explaining how the design of the avatar Wander affects the player's perspective while playing the video game shows how SotC encourages the player to empathize with Wander.

## 4.2. *The Last of Us Part II*: Empathy through Perspective Change and Control

*The Last of Us Part II* (2020) (LoU2), as the name suggests, is the sequel to *The Last of Us* (2013) (LoU). Both games were developed by the *Naughty Dog, LLC* who became famous thanks to their *Crash Bandicoot* (1996) and *Uncharted* (2007) franchises, of which the latter marked the beginning of the modern narrative driven adventure games. After releasing the second installment of *Uncharted* (2007), it did not take *Naughty Dog* long until they began the development of their new, more serious, and narrative-heavy action-adventure game LoU. The game was published by *Sony Computer Entertainment* for the *Playstation 3* and released after four years of development in 2013. With LoU being one of the most critically acclaimed video games for the *Playstation 3* (Metacritic 2013: n. pag.), the demand for a sequel was high. The action-packed and narrative-driven adventure featured complex and realistic characters with emotionally and accessible relationships arguably largely unseen in the medium. In 2020 *Naughty Dog* fulfilled their audience's request for a sequel and released LoU2 for the *Playstation 4*. Yet, instead of sailing on the same wave of acclamation LoU generated, its heavily anticipated sequel sparked several controversies.

　　　To understand the controversies surrounding LoU2 it is important to shortly summarize the original's plot: LoU is set in an apocalyptical version

of the United States in the year 2013 during and after the outbreak of a parasitic mutation of the cordyceps fungus that transforms its hosts into vicious mindless zombie-like creatures. The video game follows the story of Joel, a man in his mid-forties who is still recovering from the loss of his daughter during the outbreak. He is assigned to transport Ellie, a 14 year old girl who is immune to the fungus, to an organization called the Fireflies. With her immunity the Fireflies hope to create a vaccine to save what is left of humanity. During their journey through the destroyed remnants of the United States, the player experiences Joel and Ellie's relationship developing into a father-daughter-like bond. Near the end of the video game, when they finally reach the Fireflies, it is revealed that in order to create a vaccine with Ellie's immunity, Ellie will inevitably die during the process. Being reminded of the loss of his biological daughter during the outbreak, Joel refuses to lose his surrogate daughter and stops the doctors and scientist from completing the procedure. He does so by force and goes on a literal killing rampage, murdering every Fireflies member he comes across in the facility, irrespective of their direct involvement. As Ellie later wakes up from the anesthesia she was under, she wonders what has happened. Joel lies to her and says that the Fireflies were not able to find a vaccine.

The journey of Joel and Ellie and their relationship led to the gaming community as a whole forming an emotional attachment with these characters. The open ending immediately led players to hope for a new installment of the franchise so they could enjoy more of this dynamic duo and their journey. However, *Naughty Dog* decided to take an unexpected approach to telling more of their story. Before LoU2's release in April 2020 major aspects of the game and its narrative had been leaked on YouTube by unknown individuals (Franzese 2020: n. pag.). It was revealed that the widely beloved main protagonist Joel dies within the first few hours of LoU2. This revelation generated an outrage, the extent of which the developers did not expect. Neil Druckmann, the director of LoU2, said in an interview that they were aware of the fact that fans might not like their decision to kill Joel, but the fashion in which this scene was presented due to the leaks was the worst

way possible (*Last of Us 2 Spoilercast w/ Neil Druckmann, Ashley Johnson, Troy Baker - Gamescast Ep. 26* 2020: 34:28 - 35:35). Without any context, the scene was not able to fulfill the purpose it was given in LoU2's complex narrative. Druckman began to receive hateful and anti-Semitic comments online, as well as death threats (2020: 33:32 - 33:50). When LoU2 was finally released in June 2020 and players could make their own impression, the general attitude towards the scene within parts of the community that were initially unhappy with it did not change. Despite the positive reviews professional critics gave LoU2 with a score of 94 based on 108 critics, the user score plummeted to a 4.8 (Van Boom 2020: n. pag.). People expressed their anger and disappointment over twitter and attacked the developers via their devices. Many felt insulted by the intentionally unceremonious manner in which Joel was killed, while others complained about the supposedly forced inclusion of a more diverse set of characters. For instance, Ellie's openly lesbian relationship with another woman or the existence of a young trans boy led to many players suggesting that the developers were using the game to promote a leftist agenda and fulfill their "social justice warrior"[54] fantasies (Trumbore 2020: n. pag.). While these critiques are not representative of the gaming community as a whole or LoU's fanbase for that matter, it still shows that problems arise when LGBTQ+ people, People of Color, or women are more commonly represented in video games. Apart from Joel's death another controversy sprung up around the character that killed him, especially since the players are forced to play as this character for nearly half of the video game. Abby, the second protagonist of LoU2 is initially an antagonist and only playable after having killed Joel. She is the daughter of the Fireflies doctor who was supposed to do the surgery on Ellie in LoU.

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[54] "social justice warrior [...] is used by the right as an epithet for someone who advocates liberal causes like feminism, racial justice or gay and transgender rights. It is also sometimes used to imply that a person's online advocacy of a cause is insincere or done for appearances. It became widely used during "GamerGate," a controversy that began in 2014 over sexism in video game subcultures." (Stack 2017: n. pag.)

Figure 20: Left: Samus Aran from Metroid (Nintendo)
Right: Abby from LoU2 (Naughty Dog);
Source Left: https://bit.ly/2SA2Y3F
Source Right: https://bit.ly/3pTjQ1j

Apart from her role in LoU2's narrative, her appearance upset some players as well. In contrast to other female protagonists in video games, who more or less conform to conventional beauty standards, Abby's design drew the community's attention because of her muscular physique (Fig. 20).[55] This led to several sexist remarks and body-shaming comments targeted at the newly introduced character. Some people suggested that 'real' woman could never look this muscular and 'manly' and that she must therefore be transgender (Hernandez 2020: n. pag.). To state the obvious, these sexist remarks are not only morally wrong but factually inaccurate, since Abby is based on the CrossFit athlete Colleen Fotsch (Blechman 2020: n. pag.). Nonetheless, this 'controversy' continued and even led to Laura Bailey, Abby's voice actor, receiving anonymous death threats online (Coles 2020: n. pag.; Zinampan 2020: n. pag.).[56]

It is interesting to see how the death of a virtual character and the narrative as a whole was able to create such an outburst of (mostly negative) emotions. However, the average score that LoU2 was given by critics would not have been as high as it was, if the video game had failed completely as some make it out to have. Likewise, this study would not have focused on LoU2, if it did not possess a certain kind of relevance to empathy. Although

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[55] It has to be noted that representation in video games has gotten more attention in the last decade. While the sexualization of women in video games is still present, especially video games such as League of Legends (Riot Games 2009), there have been attempts to steer the role of women into the right direction. For more insight into the representation of women, LGBTQ+ people, People of Color and more, read Malkowski and Russworm's "Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games" (2017).

[56] It is important to note that these people are part of a loud minority, and their behavior does not represent the whole community. Additionally, the user score on Metacritic turned out to be not as telling as it first seemed since a lot of those reviews were written by a loud minority in the form of 'review bombing', a phenomenon in which a group of people create bots and several accounts to leave bad reviews on a product in order to damage their reputation or as in this case the overall score of the video game.

LoU2's major events have been hinted at, it is important to shortly summarize its plot before analyzing the structure, the gameplay and formal elements of the video game.

LoU2's story is set five years after its predecessor and initially continues to follow the story of Ellie and Joel after they settled down in a small community named Jackson. As already mentioned before, a couple hours in to the video game, Ellie witnesses the brutal murder of Joel at the hands of Abby and her comrades, who are part of a new organization called the Washington Liberation Front (WLF), after he and his brother Tommy get lured into a trap. Shortly after, Ellie, motivated by hatred and guilt, hunts down Abby in search of revenge. On her way, she comes across infected and several members of the WLF, among them close friends of Abby, and kills them mercilessly. Eventually after three days Ellie encounters Abby but instead of allowing the player to avenge Joel in a climactic showdown, the video game rewinds to one day after Joel's murder and lets the player experience the following three days from Abby's perspective. Here the player learns not only about Abby's personality and motivation for killing Joel but also experiences her relationships with her friends. Her segment ends as both Ellie's and Abby's timeline collide and they meet again where the player is forced to fight against Ellie.

The gameplay structure is segmented into multiple chapters that focus on different narrative perspectives and the characters' differing skill set respectively. In the first half of the game, which is segmented into three chapters titled Seattle Day 1 to 3, the player controls Ellie on her way to find Abby. On her journey she is accompanied by Dina, a young woman from Jackson, with whom Ellie has a romantic relationship, and later by Jesse, a young man from Jackson, who is also the ex-boyfriend of Dina. In between these chapters, there are several subchapters in which the player is presented with interactive flashback sequences during which they learn more about how Ellie and Joel's relationship evolved during the last 5 years. After Ellie encounters Abby at the end of Seattle Day 3, the second half of the video game begins and the player takes the role of Abby, now back on Seattle Day

1. Similar to Ellie's segment, the player has to play multiple flashback sequences during which they learn that Abby and her father, as well as other people in her group, were former Fireflies members. Since Joel killed not only her father, the doctor who tried to create a vaccine, but also nearly all of the ranking members of the Fireflies, it was Joel's rampage that led to the dismantling of the organization, and therefore the destruction of humanity's last hope. During three days the player plays as Abby, as she is on a journey to find Owen, her ex-boyfriend, who went missing after the incident with Joel. At the end of Seattle Day 1, she gets captured by Seraphites, a religious cult who is in conflict with the WLF over control of Seattle. Shortly before she is to be killed, she is saved by two Seraphite siblings, Yara and Lev, who have both left the cult due to Lev being a trans boy and therefore defying the cult's traditions. While helping them, Abby finds out that all of her friends have been killed by Ellie and decides to track her down until they meet on Seattle Day 3. These six chapters, respectively experienced from Ellie's and Abby's perspective constitute the main part of the video game.

LoU2's gameplay consists mainly of traveling through abandoned and destroyed cities (such as Seattle) and fighting against the many infected enemies or members of the opposing factions. Combat in LoU2 can vary based on the situations the player finds themselves in but most of the time they are able to choose between attacking their opponents head on with guns and melee attacks, which are supply demanding and draw the attention of other enemies, or a slower stealth option, which gives the player the opportunity to kill enemies without being noticed and additionally saving ammunition and supplies. In order to obtain weapons and ammunition or craft supplies the player has to scavenge for materials that are scattered in different locations. These materials can also be used to upgrade certain weapons, which can be found throughout the video game. While traversing the destroyed

environments the player comes across letters and notes, written by past inhabitants or random survivors (Fig. 21[57] & Fig. 22[58]). These letters work as *embedded narratives* and deepen the understanding of the tragic events that occurred during and after the outbreak. In addition to the backstory of the storyworld, the letters and notes can also obtain codes with which the player is able
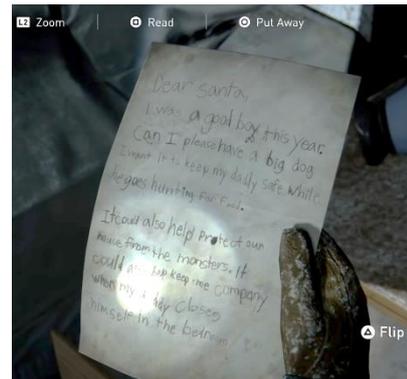

Figure 21: Letter to Santa; Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

to open safes that are filled with items, such as ammunition or special weapons. Most of the environmental exploration in video games is optional, but the design of the items in LoU2 encourages the player to explore the environments and therefore experience the narrative of the storyworld while simultaneously rewarding them with helpful items. However, most of the narrative output is realized either by conversations between the characters controlled by the player and their respective companions or during cutscenes. The conversations vary from talking about the circumstances of the current

situation to everyday small talk, both giving the player the chance to learn more about the characters' personalities while also guiding them towards their current goal. The cutscenes are mostly used for dramatic events and important scenes between the characters. Due to the narrative-heavy nature of LoU2 there is a great amount of cutscenes compared to other adventure games. However, thanks to the video games
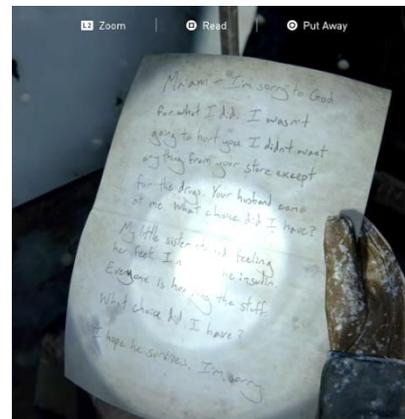

Figure 22: Note from a survivor; Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

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[57] Transcription: "Dear Santa, I was a good boy this year. Can I please have a big dog. I want it to keep my daddy safe while he goes hunting for food. It could also help protect our house from the monsters. It could also help keep me company when my daddy closes himself in the bedroom."

[58] Transcription: "Ma'am - I'm sorry to God for what I did. I wasn't going to hurt you. I didn't want anything from your store except for the drugs. Your husband came at me. What choice did I have? My little sister stopped feeling her feet. I needed the insulin. Everyone is hoarding the stuff. What choice did I have? I hope he survives. I'm sorry."

usage of performance capture[59] and the realistic graphics, the cut scenes come close to the visuals of high-budget movies.

Even though showcasing LoU2's gameplay is important for the contextualization of the video game as a whole, especially since a lot of narrative elements are linked towards the gameplay it is not the combat alone that makes this particular video game worth discussing. The focus on a complex and realistic narrative, expressed through authentic conversations between the characters, powerful cutscenes, and surprising perspective changes, creates exceptional storytelling that makes this video game worth discussing. A video game that encourages the player to feel for their characters and take their perspectives, while also utilizing a forced perspective change for narrative purposes is especially promising when discussing empathy. Similar to chapter 4.1 *Shadow of the Colossus: Empathy through Music and Design* this chapter will take the approach of analyzing LoU2's influence on the player's empathy via the following hypothesis: By forcing the player to inhabit Abby's perspective, a character initially introduced as an antagonist, and making them experience the narrative from her perspective via interactive gameplay, the video game creates empathy through control. Before looking at the perspective change, however, the design choices that create emotional investment as well as the immersion of LoU2 have to be discussed.

## Emotional Investment and Immersion in LoU2

To fully understand the empathic process the developers of LoU2 intended to initiate within the players, what made the players emotionally attached to the characters must be analyzed first. The outrage surrounding Joel's sudden death shows that LoU and LoU2 achieved a level of appeal when it comes to fictional characters and their relationships that is unmatched by most other video games. According to Natali Panic-Cidic this stems from the narrative

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[59] The term performance capture describes the process of recording the movements of an actor, used for example in film-making and video games (Performance capture 2014).

elements of the video game, more specifically the gradual character development. For the player to be able to experience any meaningful bond with these fictional characters, high-quality storytelling techniques, i.e. narrative elements which support a gradual, unforced character development (Panic-Cidic 2018: 16), have to be made use of. Due to its interactive nature, the player only experiences the characters and their relationships develop while interacting with and therefore progressing within the video game. As a result, the player builds an emotional bond with the characters at the same time their personalities and relationships develop. Another reason for the emotional bonding is the design of realistic authentic characters and interactions. The exceptional writing in tandem with the variety of emotional expressions on the characters' faces and through their body movement, which are a result of the performance-capture of actual actors, make them more accessible for emotional bonding.

Throughout the entirety of LoU2 the player experiences a wide range of conversations between characters - some story-relevant and some seemingly random as can be seen in Clip 27[60][61]. Here Ellie and Dina are on patrol to secure certain trading routes around the settlement Jackson and ensure that there are no infected roaming around. The player learns about the patrols in the beginning of the video game when Ellie and other inhabitants of Jackson are assigned to different routes. In this specific scene Ellie and Dina talk about their plans for the evening and talk about movies Ellie and Joel have watched together. Conversation sequences start as soon as an *event trigger* gets activated, in this case, when Ellie walks through a door. *Event triggers* like these are encoded in the environmental space and cannot be seen by the player, which creates a natural transition from silent moments to conversations. These spontaneous conversations create a realistic dynamic between the characters and simultaneously between the characters and the

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[60] All of the clips are taken from a youtuber who did a commented playthrough. When analyzing these clips the focus should lie on the conversations between the characters and not the comments of the youtuber if not noted otherwise. If the voices of the characters are difficult to understand there are additional subtitles to ensure the conversations comprehension.

[61] Clip 27: "Conversation between Dina and Ellie (movies)"

player. Since these conversations happen during interactive gameplay the player experiences them while being a participant which further increases the emotional bond between the player and the characters, while simultaneously watching the characters build their relationships with each other. Clip 28[62] is another example of Dina and Ellie talking with each other, this time about Dina's hopes for the future. She tells Ellie about her dreams of living on a farm, which later come true in the epilogue, when Ellie and Dina move to a farm and live there with Dina's baby, further emphasizing the gradual development of the character's relationships. While conversations about the character's interests and hobbies help the player to learn more about them, there are other conversations that relate to the specific moments they are in. On several occasions an icon with a triangle button appears above NPC's heads, indicating that the player is able to communicate with them (Fig. 23). Instead of the automatic process of the *event trigger* that starts a conversation without the player's explicit input, these conversations can only occur if the player interacts with the NPC, and are therefore optional. Such instances give the player more information about the situation they are in at the given moment or more background information about the NPC(s) or the environment that the player otherwise would not receive. Clip 29[63] is an example of this feature: here the player interacts with Jesse and starts a conversation sequence in which they experience how Jesse and Ellie talk about the possible repercussions of Ellie's actions, which could endanger the people in Jackson. Conversations between the characters can be separated in two types: the first one being the 'small talk' type which



Figure 23: Interactive communication; Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

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[62] Clip 28: "Conversation between Dina and Ellie (farm)"
[63] Clip 29: "Conversation between Jesse and Ellie (interactive)"

mostly serves as a means to get to know the characters better and also experience the relationships between said characters; the second could be labeled the 'pragmatic' type and serves both as a guide to further progress in the story and also as a reminder of what the current objective is.

There are also game mechanical features that reinforce the relationships between the characters. While playing as Ellie or Abby the player is almost always accompanied by other characters, Dina or Jesse in Ellie's case and Lev or Yara for Abby. When the player encounters enemies these companions help in the fight against them.[64] Since the game mechanical implications are designed to only allow the player to focus only on one enemy at the time, these companions often become indispensable. The player can trust the companions to help them which reinforces and mirrors the intrinsic trust the characters also have towards each other. When the player is alone they have to engage in a stealthier gameplay to adjust to the lack of support otherwise they will be overpowered by the enemies. However, since the companions are computer-controlled entities their movement and actions can be unpredictable or unintuitive. This can lead to situations in which they are spotted by the enemies even though the player decided not to engage and use the stealth mechanics to avoid encounters. While these situations are not in the interest of the player, they make the video game more realistic. If enemies would not spot the companions of the player, even though they can clearly see them, it would break the immersion of the video game. After a companion is spotted by enemies they either fight the enemy, which forces the player to help them, or they try to escape their sight and hide. After an encounter, irrespective of whether the enemy is killed or the companion only managed to successfully escape their sight, the companion apologizes to the character the player is controlling at the moment, which is yet another way of reinforcing the realism of their relationship.[65]

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[64] Clip 30: "Dina kills an enemy"
[65] Clip 31: "Companions apologize after getting spotted"

Another way for the player to create an emotional investment in the characters is through the previously mentioned flashbacks sequences. These sequences are small subchapters in which the player experiences preselected moments in the life of Ellie and later in that of Abby. These subchapters are implemented differently depending on the character the player controls at the given moment. After Ellie and Dina find shelter in a theater at the end of Seattle Day 1, the player experiences the first flashback chapter revolving around Ellie. Through the displaying of the current time frame the player is made aware of the scene taking



Figure 24: Flashback "3 years earlier";
Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

place three years prior (Fig. 24). This is also indicated by a younger looking Ellie and Joel still being alive. It is Ellie's birthday and Joel planned a surprise trip for her to an abandoned museum. The chapter follows their day as they joke around and enjoy their time together while traveling to the museum. The player is able to enjoy this scene as well because of its stark contrast to the dark and heavy moments of the present: they are able to witness Ellie's childish excitement as she explores the dinosaur displays and Joel's fatherly lessons about these dinosaurs.[66] The emotional climax of this flashback comes when Ellie and Joel enter a space shuttle inside a space exhibition. Here the player is presented with a cut scene of Joel gifting Ellie a tape of a space shuttle launch that she is supposed to listen to inside the space shuttle they are currently in.[67] Since these flashback sequences are somewhat separate from the normal gameplay experience of the present time, meaning that the player is unable to collect items, adjust the characters talents, etc., they essentially have no consequences on the present and are solely used as narrative output to give the player additional information about the character's past. In this case it is supposed to make the player more aware of

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[66] Clip 32: "Ellie and dinosaur display"
[67] Clip 33: "Ellie and Joel inside the Space Shuttle"

the emotional bond between Ellie and Joel, while also allowing for the player to understand Ellie's dedication to kill Abby in the present time. While this particular flashback gives the player a chance to enjoy the father-daughter dynamic of LoU again, the other flashback sequences that occur over the course of the video game reveal how Ellie distances herself from Joel as she suspects he lied to her on what had happened at the end of LoU. The last of Ellie's flashbacks shows Joel telling Ellie the truth, which leads to Ellie breaking of contact with Joel due to her survivor guilt[68] and feelings of betrayal by Joel.

While the conversations and the flashback sequences are the major narrative techniques, there are other, more subtle features that are used to enrich the backstory of the characters. These narrative outputs are realized by the implementation of *evocative narratives* and *embedded narratives*, such as the already mentioned letters and notes. While these narratives are supposed to give the player more backstory to the storyworld and its inhabitants, there are other narrative outputs that focus more on the emotional aspects of the characters and can be found in interior design of character houses or certain items in their possession. An example for this can be found at the beginning of LoU2 when Ellie and Dina enter Joel's house after his death. Every detail of the environment and the interior is used to convey narrative information. These narrative elements can be separated into two categories. Firstly, non-interactive items that convey their narrative information automatically via narrative interpretation and items that have to be interacted with to give the player additional information. The flowers and letters in front of Joel's house belong to the first category and show the player that Joel was a beloved member of Jackson (Fig. 25). Inside the player can find several items, with which they are able to interact such as drawings Ellie gifted to Joel (Fig. 26), souvenirs from the day they spent in the museum, or photographs from Joel and his brother Tommy, ones of Joel and his daughter, and ones of Joel and Ellie. The player is able to interact with these items by picking them up,

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[68] The term survivor guilt describes difficult and painful feelings caused by the fact that one is still alive after a situation in which other people died (Survivor guilt 2014).

Figure 25: Flowers and letters in front of Joel's house;
Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)



Figure 26: Interactive items;
Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr
(Screenshot by Author)

rotating them, and looking at them from different angles. Another room displays Joel's wood crafting with several self-made guitars and sculptures that can be found here.[69] All of these items serve the purpose of telling a story through *embedded* and *evocative narratives*. By showing how Joel has spent his time the last couple of years, the player understands Joel's character development better - that being one from vicious smuggler to creative and laid back member of Jackson. During the exploration of Joel's house, Ellie uses her journal on several occasions to capture her thoughts. This is yet another feature used to let the player in on Ellie's emotions and thoughts without having the characters explicitly state them (Fig. 27[70]). When the
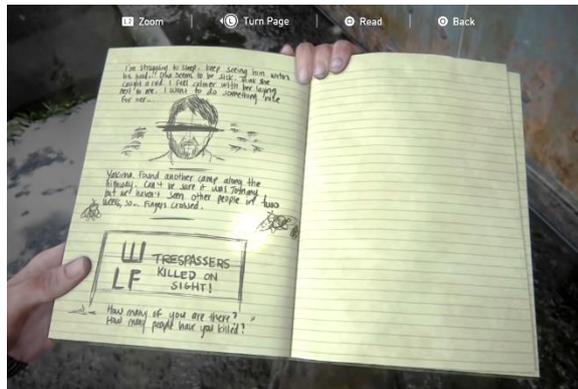


Figure 27: Journal Entry;
Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

player comes across certain items in the environment, an icon with the text "journal" appears above it, indicating that they can interact with them. By pressing the assigned button Ellie writes down her thoughts about the given

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[69] Clip 34: "Joel's crafting room"

[70] Transcription: "I'm struggling to sleep. Keep seeing him with his head. Dina seems to be sick. Think she caught a cold. I feel calmer with her laying next to me. I want to do something nice for her." "Yakima. Found another camp along the highway. Can't be sure it was Tommy but we haven't seen other people in two weeks, so… fingers crossed." "How many of you are there? How many people have you killed?"

item.[71] These journal entries mostly visualize her inner dialogue, nostalgic moments, hopes and fears and provide additional insight.

All of the above mentioned narrative techniques are used to highlight character development, authentic relationship building and enables the player's emotional investment in these characters. This serves as the foundation for LoU2's empathic process that emerges while progressing in the video game. Before analyzing this process, one last aspect needs to be clarified: the immersion in LoU2. As stated in the previous chapters, empathy in video games can only work when a certain level of immersion is achieved. In *Hypothesis (2): Empathy with Wander* the concept of identification was discussed: while Wander's more neutral design and lack of emotions made it easier for the player to project themselves onto the character, LoU2 works differently in regards to identification with its characters. The developers of LoU2 put a definite emphasis on conveying the individuality of their characters. This ultimately led to the creation of clear and concise characters with elaborate background stories, hopes, and dreams. While added context increases emotional investment in characters, it concurrently makes it harder for the player to project themselves onto said characters, especially when their personality differs greatly from the player's. Such circumstances can make it more difficult for the player to take the characters' role and 'be' these characters. In LoU2's case the player, although controlling the characters, are still not in control of their choices, and therefore the overall story. As Chandler Wood, an author of the website Playstation Lifestyle, puts it:

> "The Last of Us is not our Story. It's Ellie's story. It's Joel's story. It's [about] Dina and Jesse and Tommy. It's [about] Abby and Owen and Lev. It's a character story, made up of many individualized people. We may be put in their shoes, but we are never meant to "be" them." (Wood 2020: n. pag.)

The rich narrative of LoU2 and its individual character designs make it harder for the player to experience the story from their own perspective, but rather has to do so through the eyes of the story's characters. It may not be the player's story but they are still an essential part since the story only unfolds

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[71] Clip 35: "Ellie writes in her journal"

if and when the player progresses in the video game. This makes identifying with the character improbable, if not impossible. However, it is still possible to empathize with these characters without having to 'be' them. As discussed in chapter 3.3 *Correlation between Empathy and Video Games* one of the characteristics of empathy is the self-other differentiation, the concept of being able to understand and feel the target's emotions, while still being aware of one's own emotions. This means that in LoU2's case the player is able to empathize with the characters, i.e. feel their anger, grief, happiness, and see the world from their perspective without losing sense of themselves. The lack of control the player has over the story of LoU2 contrasts their actual control over the character in terms of gameplay and supports the feeling of empathy and self-other differentiation. Throughout the video game the player is confronted with situations in which they have to act in ways that could be considered morally wrong or are at least against most player's intuition. An example for this is LoU2's introduction of dogs as a new type of enemy. While the other types of enemies, humans and infected, can only detect the player when they are visible to them or make sounds while moving, dogs can follow the player's scent. This does not only complicate the stealth gameplay but it also presents the player with the challenge of killing the dog if they get attacked by them - an act often depicted to be morally questionable or tragic. These scenes are very graphic and explicitly show the killing of the animal which can be emotionally hard on the player.[72] While these situations can easily occur, the player is also able to avoid them with precise stealth gameplay. However, in one instance the player is required to kill a dog during a *quick time event*[73] to progress within the story. While the nature of quick time events leads them to be not as participatory as the normal gameplay, it still requires the player to actively deal the killing blow.[74] A similar dilemma occurs when Ellie confronts Nora, one of Abby's friends. In order to get

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[72] Clip 36: "Dog death scene compilation [graphic]"

[73] "Quick time events are pre-rendered video sequences that can be interacted with by the player. Compared to normal gameplay situations, there is a dramatically limited range of options, as well as a strict limitation on when options become available" (Domsch 2013: 36).

[74] Clip 37: "Dog Quick Time Event [graphic]"

information about Abby's whereabouts, Ellie hits Nora multiple times with a steel rod. During this scene the player sees Ellie through the eyes of Nora (Fig. 28). Similar to the dog-killing quick time event, the player is forced to press the 'square' button to make Ellie



Figure 28: Ellie from Nora's perspective;
Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

hit Nora, which eventually leads to her giving Ellie the information and presumably her death[75][76]. The player might consider these actions morally wrong, but in order to progress the story, they cannot get around executing these actions. By forcing the player's hand, LoU2 reinforces the self-other differentiation. The player might be able to understand why Ellie wants to kill Nora, or why she defended herself against the dog, but they can simultaneously condemn these actions. As long as the player accepts both the regulations of the limited control they have as well as understanding the characters actions due to empathy's self-other differentiation, the player does not lose their sense of immersion. Considering these circumstances, it can be said that LoU2 creates an in-between state of feeling emotionally close to a character and understanding the reason for their actions (which are performed by the player), which ultimately allows for the player to be immersed in the video game, while on the same time being aware that their control is limited and that they are just complying to the characters intentions, without losing their sense of immersion.

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[75] Although this is never shown and can just be assumed since the next scene shows Ellie back at the theatre with the information she needs.
[76] Clip 38: "Nora Quick Time Event"

## Hypothesis (3): Empathy with Abby

With the emotional bond between the player and the characters explained and the immersion elaborated, the key moments of the empathic process in LoU2 can be analyzed. For this matter Abby's character and storyline has to be further analyzed. The player is introduced to this, at this point unknown, female character at the beginning of the game, when they are made to play as her. Here the player learns that Abby and her friends are looking for someone in Jackson, which is later revealed to be Joel. Other than this basic information the player does not learn anything else about her during this introductory segment. While Abby is looking for Joel on her own she gets ambushed by a horde of infected and is saved by Joel and Tommy by sheer coincidence as they were on patrol. Together they escape to Abby's temporary base in a mansion where her friends are waiting. After some short small talk and friendly conversations Tommy and Joel introduce themselves, which leads to Abby's group realizing he is who they were looking for. At this point the player is still unaware of how Abby's group is affiliated with Joel, but considering his past as a ruthless smuggler and his rampage at the Fireflies outpost at the end of LoU, it is not surprising that Joel has enemies. However, the gruesome murder of Joel at the hands of Abby comes unexpected, especially since this takes place within the first few hours of the video game. Since LoU2 is a sequel, it can be assumed that the player has played its predecessor. Considering the amount of time the player has spent playing as Joel in the first video game as well as the emphasis on the depiction of his gradual character development and the authentic build-up of the relationship between Joel and Ellie, one can assume that the player was able to empathize with them and was therefore emotionally affected by this scene in some form. If they were, they would experience the same devastation, helplessness, and anger that Ellie does as she watches Abby kill Joel with a golf club.[77] And even if they were not able to empathize much with Ellie and Joel, as long as they enjoyed LoU, they would have surely anticipated to be able to play as

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[77] Clip 39: "Joel's death scene"

Joel and Ellie just as much in the sequel as they did in the original and not have one of the main characters die off early on. The player is now either emotionally affected by the death of a beloved character or at least disappointed because of the loss of the option to play as that character. These negative emotions are consequently directed at Abby and her group and paint them as the villains of the story that initially turns into a revenge-fueled tale from here on out. These effects were undoubtedly intended by the developers of LoU2 to emotionally manipulate the player in such a way that later parts of the story could resonate as intended. LoU2's main goal is to challenge the player's empathy by manipulating them into hating a character that they are then supposed to empathize with later on.

The player, as Ellie, subsequently goes off to hunt down Abby, a quest during which they kill several of her friends and countless WLF soldiers, who might not necessarily be innocent people overall, but had nothing to do with Joel's death. The player shares Ellie's emotions and is just as motivated to kill Abby as she is. However, the player witnesses moments that are intended to make them reconsider Ellie's actions or the way she goes about conducting them. The ruthlessness with which she kills, scavenges, and survives slowly becomes unsettling and unlike her usual self. To further emphasize Ellie's brutality and increase the player's uneasiness with her actions the developers made use of small details such as letting enemies talk to each other about mundane stuff, begging for mercy or having them call for their comrades in agony when the player kills them.[78] During Ellie's revenge-fueled quest she kills several of Abby's friends, all in equally brutal fashions but the most unsettling murder comes right before the climax: After Ellie receives information about Abby's whereabouts from torturing Nora, she comes to an abandoned aquarium where two of Abby's friends, Owen and Mel created a home for themselves. As she encounters the two she puts them at gunpoint and threatens to kill them if they do not reveal to her Abby's location. As Owen tries to disarm her, the situation escalates and Ellie shoots Owen. She then is attacked by Mel which leads to Ellie stabbing her in the neck. After

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[78] Clip 40: "Enemy interactions"

both Owen and Mel are dead, Ellie realizes that Mel was pregnant, which leads to her having a panic attack. Tommy and Jesse find Ellie struggling with her emotions and take her back to a theater that serves as a safe place from them at the moment. Shortly after they arrive, the group decides, albeit to Ellie's dismay, to stop hunting for Abby since they went far enough and that the loss of all her friends is enough to constitute her getting what she deserved. Just before the group decides to leave for Jackson the climactic showdown begins as Abby arrives at the theatre. The player is presented with a cut scene of Ellie and Jesse talking about what happened as they hear gunshots from within the theatre, which the two immediately investigate. Entering the adjacent room, Jesse is immediately shot and killed by Abby and Ellie is face to face with her. Abby, fueled by hatred and the loss of her friends, points the gun at Ellie and the screen fades into black. This is the moment where the empathic transition begins. Instead of fulfilling the player's expectations and presenting them with a showdown between the two, the player is forced to play through another flashback sequence, only this time from Abby's perspective and four years in the past. From this point on, which is about halfway through the video game, the player controls Abby. Many players, among them the one commentating the playthrough seen in the clips referenced in this chapter, were disappointed by this twist and felt betrayed that instead of being able to get revenge for Joel, they were forced to play Abby.[79] Considering the circumstances this might seem understandable, but the developers knew that such reactions would be common. Nonetheless, they decided to force the player to take on Abby's perspective and for good reason: the developers wanted to show that every conflict has two sides and that context is needed to fully understand the motivation for the actions of everyone involved. The best way to do so is for the player to live through the experiences of the characters first hand. In addition, LoU2's perspective change, even if disliked by many players, is the only way to allow for the player to empathize with Abby.

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[79] Clip 41: "Commentator about perspective change"

Abby's story begins with the previously mentioned flashback sequence that takes place at about the same time Joel and Ellie arrive at the Fireflies outpost in LoU. Here the player not only learns that she and her father were both members of the Fireflies, but that her father was the lead surgeon who was supposed to perform the surgery on Ellie and was killed by Joel as well. While the newly established context might not morally justify Abby's actions, it allows for the player to understand her motivations and therefore empathize with her. Furthermore, this sequence also introduces another concept LoU2 that exists to make empathizing with Abby possible: the parallels between her and Ellie. Under closer examination these become rather clear throughout the video game. The particular scene shows Abby and her father as they are trying to save a zebra that is stuck in a trap. Their conversations during this trip show similarities, to the ones between Ellie and Joel, just in different situations.[80] Another example is a flashback sequence similar to the museum flashback in which Abby and her ex-boyfriend Owen lightheartedly explore the abandoned aquarium. The flashback sequences themselves are arguably a symbolic means to show their similarities as only these two characters receive any (Fig. 29). The developers' intentions were to highlight both the good times Ellie and Abby had with their family and friends, but also the problems that define their story arcs: At the end of the
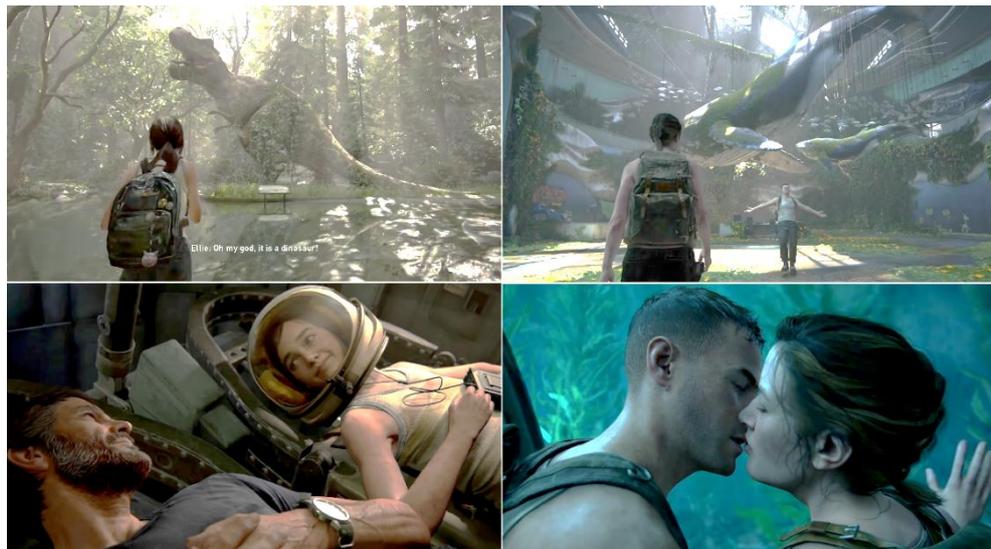


Figure 29: Parallels between the museum- and aquarium flashback;
Source: https://bit.ly/3xhiikr (Screenshot by Author)

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[80] Clip 42: "Conversation between Ellie and Joel and Abby and her father"

museum flashback Ellie and Joel explore an abandoned building and find an old Fireflies graffiti on the wall with the word 'Liars' beneath it. Since the Fireflies stood for the recreation of society, people felt betrayed after they were dismantled. As Ellie sees the graffiti it triggers her survivor's guilt and the previously lighthearted atmosphere shifts.[81] In Abby's aquarium flashback the same atmospheric shift from lighthearted to serious occurs when Abby mentions her obsession with finding Joel as this ultimately led to Abby and Owen's relationship to end.[82] Both Abby's and Ellie's flashback sequences are a narrative technique used to firstly give the player additional context to understand the characters motivations and actions and secondly, to show the similarities between Ellie and Abby, which ultimately allows the player to empathize with Abby as well.

Similar to the first half of LoU2, in which the player controls Ellie, the player also experiences Seattle Day 1 to 3 in the second half of the video game only this time from Abby's perspective. After killing Joel, Abby and her friends go back to the WLF home base. Here the player experiences Abby's present personality as well as her behavior around her friends for the first time. At first it seems unnatural to see the still villain of the story in such an everyday environment but this is done to show that Abby is human as well. During her half of the story the player learns through flashbacks and conversations with other characters what her reasons for hunting and killing Joel were. However, the player is clearly not supposed to like Abby, a task arguably impossible to achieve especially if the player had played LoU. The player is only supposed to learn to understand her through context and empathize with her by seeing things from her perspective, even if initially reluctantly. Over the course of her half of LoU2, Abby tries to find Owen who went missing after the incident with Joel. Throughout her story the player learns about the WLF's conflict with the warring Seraphites, who are also known as Scars by WLF members. While looking for Owen, Abby is captured by the Scars and saved by the two of their outcasts Yara and Lev, as

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[81] Clip 43: "Fireflies graffiti"
[82] Clip 44: "Abby's obsession with Joel"

mentioned previously. Through helping these two children, Abby's story turns into one of redemption. Her redemption arc begins when she risks her life to save Yara, who was seriously injured when she saved Abby from the other Scars. The chapter Seattle Day 2 is about Abby and Lev going to an abandoned hospital to find the necessary medical supplies for Yara, who needs to undergo rudimentary surgery on her injured arm. On this journey the player learns more about Abby and Lev and gets to experience some heartwarming moments between the two.[83] By making the player control Abby while she risks her life to save Yara, an innocent child from a rival organization, the player learns to see Abby as compassionate and unlike the monster the player was made to believe in the beginning. Here the dual-perspective comes into play again: During Ellie's gameplay she enters the aquarium and finds a room with a medical bed, surgery supplies, and bloody rags. Since the player does not know yet anything about Abby, her people, or her story at this point, they are made to believe that something terrible happened there, perhaps even torture (as the commentator's reaction confirms)[84]. Only later, when playing as Abby, does the player experience what went down and that these remains were one from the surgery that would save Yara's life.[85] This dual-perspective emphasizes the importance of context and how different perspectives change the perception of the events.

The developers of LoU2 managed to create a unique narrative experience that can only be achieved within the medium of the video games. With their focus on designing multifaceted characters with clear but complex personalities, relationships, and the authentic dialog that the player experiences in an interactive manner creates an emotional investment in said characters and story. However, this does come with the price of not being able to easily portray oneself onto them, as often encouraged in other video games. LoU2 opts to rather encourage the player to experience the story from the characters' perspective by putting them in charge of said characters but

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[83] Clip 45: "Abby and Lev conversation"
[84] Clip 46: "Ellie sees the bloody rags"
[85] Clip 47: "Surgery scene"

without giving the player the option to decide where the story will go. As soon as the player accepts their limited control and their overall role in this narrative, the immersion can begin to take place. By ensuring that the player is emotionally invested, and therefore immersed, LoU2 makes it possible to challenge the player's ability to empathize. The challenge of creating empathy towards Abby, a character who the player is initially manipulated into hating, can only be achieved by experiencing things from her perspective and the video game does so by forcing the player to control her. This 'twist' was undoubtedly a risky move, hence the controversies surrounding LoU2, but if the player perseveres they eventually grow to understand Abby as the developers intended. LoU2 is a story about two women and their respective revenge- and redemption-arcs but most importantly, it is a story about how empathy can be used to understand opposing sides of a conflict.

## 4.3. Results

The principal goal of this case study was to show whether video game design is able to influence the player's empathy and if so, how. Empathy is always directed towards a subject, and in the case of video games this usually means directed towards the fictional characters of the given virtual world. Their design or that of the world around them is what allows the video game to be able to evoke empathy. Both Shadow of the Colossus and The Last of Us Part II were contextualized before their respective analyses to support this academic paper's thesis based on the inert evidence of the respective video game. The evidence found realized itself in differently but under the same premises in both games, that being in the form of interactivity and immersion. The analysis was based on three hypotheses, all of which touched on different subjects that could be the target of empathic reactions from the player. Hypothesis (1) focused on the audiovisual design of SotC and how its implementation influences the player's emotional response to encountering or defeating a colossus. The usage of a specific set of design choices in combination with the perspective change during the final parts of the video

game enables or rather manipulates the player to feel empathy towards the colossi. Hypothesis (2) addressed the formation of feeling empathy towards the avatar Wander. While interactivity is an essential requirement for the formation of an empathic process with characters within the medium of video games, the narrative structure and audiovisual design of SotC, are crucial to enabling the player to empathize with Wander. Lastly, hypothesis (3) was examined within the confines of the second video game, LoU2. Here it was analyzed how LoU2's narrative and change of perspective forcefully created empathy towards Abby, a character the player initially saw as the antagonist and was made to despise. However, through the utilization of an unexpected perspective change and added context the game allowed the player to empathize with Abby.

Both the inherent interactive nature of video games and design choices made by the developers of both SotC and LoU2 that have been pointed out serve as evidence that it is possible for video games to have an influence on the player's empathy. Since this particular study focused on only two video games, the result found herein can not necessarily be applied to video games universally. As with any other medium the particular composition of any given video game influences its effect in regards to the evocation of empathy. Nonetheless, there are factors inherent to every video game that can be universally applied. These are the interactivity and immersion unique to video games. However, the existence of these factors does not immediately lead any given video game to evoke an empathic reaction, rather they have been pointed out to show that this medium's natural composition lends itself to allow for exactly these processes to occur. The natural composition of a medium that supports perspective change via interactive participation as well as a narrative driven world in which the player is able to immerse themselves into, suggests the assumption that the evocation of empathy could be possible under those circumstances.

# 5. Conclusion

First and foremost, this deep dive into the history of video games and their distinctive properties showed that it is a medium worth looking into. While the field of video games studies gained considerable attention over the last decade, it is still not a field as respected in the academic world as others that focus on different narrative literature. Similar to how film had to prove itself as a literary medium, video games currently have to do so to enjoy the same positive academic attention. Additionally, they will have to continue to do so at a faster pace, due to their rapid evolution and rise in popularity. According to the ludologists' approach to studying video games, the analysis and research of this medium cannot copy its structure from other already existing research in fields that focus on other forms of narrative literature. A rapidly changing medium such as this one is in need of an advanced set of tools and techniques that allow for adequate research suited for its complex nature. The fact that active participation in the narrative is inherent to video games opens up new areas of research not only about the medium itself but also its effects on its players. There have been several empirical studies about the influence of video games on the behavior of its players that have been pointed to in this paper, yet those studies are studies in the field of psychology and therefore use that field's already existing tools. Instead of solely focusing on the behavioral changes correlating with playing video games, it would also be worthwhile to focus on the medium itself. If the video game as a medium were to be researched more frequently and extensively, the results of empirical (psychological) studies could be understood in a much better context.

Before looking at the medium itself or even the psychological processes behind empathy, common ground between the medium of video games and already existing methods of literature analysis had to be created, because of the lack of available methods and tools regarding the research into and analysis of video games. Hence, narrative literature as a whole but also specifically in its written form and its accompanying methods of analysis, which were later used to show the similarities between these two media, were

introduced. First, the question of the existence of narrativity in video games was discussed by examining both the narratologists' and the ludologists' views on the medium. This discussion led this study to focus on the narrative-heavy adventure game genre. While other genres arguably possess narrativity as well, depending on the definition of narrativity at least, the adventure game genre clearly lends itself the most for the analyses conducted in this study. Chosen were two video games of that genre, SotC and LoU2, to exemplify the greater thesis that certain video game design is able to make players empathize with a given video game's character. The analysis of both video games included a diversity of factors that played a defining role in their respective empathic processes. Even though the analysis focused on the inert elements of the video games, this does not mean that these empathy-inducing elements will influence every player. Just as the individuality of test subjects has to be considered in empirical studies, so does the players' diversity have to be kept in mind. Regarding the subjectivity of the player as well as that of the analyst, a certain bias is unavoidable, as it is with any literary analysis. Thus, to empirically prove the cause-and-effect relation between the inherent empathy inducing elements of a given video game and the interacting player, it is still necessary to rely on control groups.

Nonetheless, the results of this study lend further insight into the general empathic processes that generally occur during the active consumption of (adventure) video games. However, the topics touched upon in this study are not fully academically exhausted. Within the analysis of LoU2 this study was merely able to touch upon the question of the player's actual amount of control within the given narrative. While the participatory nature of video games encourages the player to be invested as it implies the ability to change the outcome of the narrative, in reality the actual control the player has is limited as the player is not able to change the predefined outcome of the video game. While most are aware of this, it can still be frustrating for the player to be able to exert influence only within parameters of the video game's narrative structure. These limitations can therefore hinder the emotional investment the player has in the video game. For further research

into the players limitation in control and how they can possibly relate to their empathy, the following outlook should introduce new research opportunities.

There are other video games that are designed to counteract this kind of limitation, such as the indie video game *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015). Undertale is built around the game mechanic to let the player decide how they want to advance within the game via the implementation of a 'mercy' and 'kill' option. Upon every encounter the player has the option to decide if they want to kill an enemy by fighting it or engage in a conversation which eventually leads to the 'mercy' option. Both options lead to 'defeating' the enemy, and therefore rewards the player, with the distinction being that depending on the player's decision the enemy gets to live or die. While this mechanic seems arbitrary at first, the consequences of one's decision reveal themselves much later during a playthrough: killing an enemy can later prevent the player from engaging with friends of the previously killed enemy; sparing an enemy can open up opportunities for further interactions and rewards. Additionally, when engaging in a conversation instead of fighting the player learns more about the enemies and therefore information about the storyworld. In contrast to other video games, which usually have a fixed ending, Undertale has several endings that can be experienced depending on the actions and decisions during the player's journey. The game mechanical implementation of decision making and consequences opens up a whole new level of emotional investment. There are several video games that use the same formula of decision making, therefore opening up a whole new formal element for analysis. Considering the potential empathic processes that could evoke within the player as they not only take the perspective of a given character but also being presented with the opportunity of decision making which on the other hand have consequences, could lead to new insights of video games influence on empathy. As the tools for academic analysis of video games gets more advanced, additional formal elements with the potential of empathic influence can be explored.

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# 7. Ludography

*Crash Bandicoot* (Naughty Dog 1996)

*Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix 1997)

*Final Fantasy VIII* (Square Enix 1999)

*Half-Life* (Valve 1998)

*Ico* (Team ICO 2001)

*League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009)

*Papers Please* (3909 LLC, 2013)

*Papo & Yo* (Minority Media Inc 2012)

*Pong* (Atari 1972)

*Portal* (Valve 2007)

*Shadow of the Colossus* (Team ICO 2005)

*Spacewar* (Steve Russel 1962)

*Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (Nintendo 2018)

*Tetris* (Alexey Pazhitnov 1985)

*That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016)

*The Last Guardian* (SIE Japan Studio 2016)

# 7. Ludography

*The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013)

*The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020)

*The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (Nintendo 1992)

*The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998)

*Uncharted* (Naughty Dog 2007)

*Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015)

*Zork* (Infocom 1980)

## 8. Selbstständigkeitserklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich die vorliegende wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit selbstständig verfasst, keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel verwendet und sämtliche Stellen, die anderen Druckwerken oder digitalisierten Werken im Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach entnommen sind, in jedem einzelnen Fall unter Angabe der Quelle kenntlich gemacht habe. Die Versicherung gilt auch für verwendete bildliche und sonstige Darstellungen. Weiterhin erkläre ich, dass die vorliegende Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit weder von mir noch von anderen zuvor im Rahmen einer anderen Prüfungsleistung eingereicht wurde. Mit der Überprüfung der vorliegenden Wissenschaftlichen Hausarbeit mittels einer Anti-Plagiatssoftware bin ich einverstanden und ich reiche die Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit auch in digitaler Form ein.

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this academic paper and that I did not use any other aids or resources than the ones stated. Those parts of the paper that were taken from other works, either as quote or paraphrase, are marked by respective statements of sources. This is also the case for drawings, and other similar works. Furthermore, I declare that this academic paper has not been handed in for a different academic assessment by me or another person. I agree to my academic paper being screened using anti-plagiarism software and will also hand in a digital copy of my academic paper.

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