Empowerment in the representation of female characters in video games. Raising awareness of social problems with The Last of Us Part II

Empoderamiento en la representación de los personajes femeninos de videojuegos. Sensibilización ante problemas sociales con The Last of Us Parte II

Empoderamento na representação de personagens femininos de videogames. Conscientização de problemas sociais com The Last of Us Part II

5

ARTICLE

Guillermo Paredes-Otero

University of Seville (Spain)

Journalist and researcher specialized in video games. Doctoral candidate at the University of Seville within the Interuniversity Doctorate program in Communication in the Journalism line. Graduated in Journalism (CEADE) and Master in Communication and Culture at the University of Seville. Member of LADECOM (Laboratory of Studies in Communication). His line of research is focused on video games as a cultural phenomenon and journalistic tool.
guillermoparedes87@gmail.com
orcid.org/0000-0002-9732-521X

guillermoparedes87@gmail.com
orcid.org/0000-0002-9732-521X

Abstract

This research studies the case of The Last of Us Part II (Naughty Dog, 2020), understanding the video game as a means of representation capable of promoting critical thinking and social change. This is an adventure set in an apocalyptic future with society decimated by a pandemic, where different female characters converge. As an objective, the empowerment of these women will be analyzed and how, through them, social problems of contemporary society such as homophobia or ideological extremism are manifested. The conclusions show that this game offers a realistic image of women away from sexism and stereotypes to address these issues.

Resumen

Entendiendo el videojuego como un medio de representación capaz de fomentar el pensamiento crítico y el cambio social, esta investigación estudia el caso de *The Last of Us Parte II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), una aventura ambientada en un futuro apocalíptico con la sociedad diezmada por una pandemia y donde convergen

81

diferentes personajes femeninos. Como objetivo se analizará el empoderamiento de estas mujeres y cómo a través de ellas se manifiestan problemas sociales de la sociedad contemporánea como la homofobia o el extremismo ideológico. Las conclusiones muestran que este juego ofrece una imagen realista de la mujer alejada del sexismo y los estereotipos para abordar estos temas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Empoderamiento, Representación, Personajes femeninos, *The Last of Us Parte II,* Videojuegos.

Resumo

Entendendo o videogame como um meio de representação capaz de promover o pensamento crítico e a mudança social, esta pesquisa estuda o caso de The Last of Us Part II (Naughty Dog, 2020), uma aventura ambientada em um futuro apocalíptico com a sociedade dizimada por uma pandemia e onde convergem diferentes personagens femininos. Como objetivo, será analisado o empoderamento dessas mulheres e como os problemas sociais da sociedade contemporânea como a homofobia ou o extremismo ideológico se manifestam através delas. As conclusões mostram que este jogo oferece uma imagem realista das mulheres longe do sexismo e dos estereótipos para abordar essas questões.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Empoderamento, Representação, Personagens femininos, The Last of Us Parte II, Videogames.

1. INTRODUCTION. THE VIDEO GAME AS A FORM OF REPRESENTATION

Video games are "a powerful form of representation that fosters critical thinking, personal empowerment, and social change" (Frasca, 2001, p. 114). Venegas and Moreno (2021) understand that factors such as easy and free access, the possibilities of connection worldwide and its power of attraction (thanks to interactivity, empathy, or simulation) mean that interactive leisure can "transfer problems real, fully valid and current, of political, social or economic significance to the virtual world" (p. 11), which creates debate around these issues.

Molina (2020) highlights that change in society necessarily implies a use of the media to express different ideas. If we understand videogames as a means of mass communication, they must be presented as "an alternative to market logics and committed to a vision of society with a critical conscience" (Flores & Velasco, 2020, p. 17).

There is no consensus when it comes to calling this type of interactive proposal. Genvo (2021) understands them as 'expressive games' that "propose putting yourself in the place of others to explore social, cultural, psychological issues, etc., while allowing you to experience the dilemmas, choices and consequences derived from those situations" (p.12); the gameplay is in the background. Bogost (2007) opts for persuasive games, games that due to their persuasive quality stand out for the desire to convince with an argument. Paredes-Otero (2018b) qualifies as games for social change those "video games that, while teaching social and civic values, seek to make citizens aware of problems of a social nature" (p. 308).

Regardless of their name, these "serious games" offer mechanisms to achieve other objectives besides entertainment (Michael & Chen, 2005), such as teaching or disseminating messages. Some techniques that, for their correct use, must consider characteristics of video games such as multimodality, interactivity, narrative, and multiplayer modes (Klimmt, 2009).

Empowerment in the representation of female characters in video games. Raising awareness of social problems with The Last of Us Part II

The situation of the game can reduce resistance when receiving messages related to change: interacting with the elements on the screen increases the probability of connecting with the contents of the game and being able to subsequently apply the knowledge acquired. Even the multiplayer modes facilitate communication and resolve doubts (pp. 254-265).

In games focused on social problems such as immigration, homophobia, gender violence (Paredes-Otero, 2018b) and mental illness (Paredes-Otero, 2020), the predominant awareness techniques are the inclusion of didactic material and messages with real data on those topics and engaging the user in the facts with situations where the game directly addresses the player or uses the first-person perspective.

The gameplay based on decision-making is also used to transfer the user to real situations. However, Bogost (2007) underlines that the representation of the problem is simply not enough to create a change, one more element is necessary: arguments for the resolution of said conflicts within the game.

These video games that seek critical thinking and awareness are usually exclusively related to *indie* development studios. Cerezo (2020) argues that in "these independent development teams we put the burden of making video games 'a mature industry' and that 'deals with important issues', while we allow the companies responsible for the so-called triple A to make games without apparent depth" (p. 155). There is a belief that the big developers move solely for economic reasons and the objective of entertaining, while other purposes are the task of *indie* titles.

However, as we will see in this study, triple-A games can also be about social issues and raise awareness. Hence, the objective of this work is, on the one hand, to analyze empowerment

when representing female characters in the video game *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) and, at the same time, social problems that are manifested throughout this interactive adventure and the messages that reach the user.

2. THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN VIDEO GAMES

By female empowerment we understand the ability of women to be able to control their own lives, have the same educational and health capabilities as men and equal access to resources and opportunities (ONU, 2017). This requires "awareness, developing self-esteem, expanding their options, more access and control of resources, and actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate discrimination and gender inequality" (p. 34).

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was decisive in the fight for women's equality. Point 35 insisted on the importance of equal access for women to economic resources, including technology, professional training, and information, as a means of promoting the development of women and girls and the empowerment of their role (UN, 1995).

Technical advances must be used to improve the situation of women, an idea that includes the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Specifically, under the premise "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", the need to "improve the use of instrumental technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women" (UN Women 2015). An objective that can be

reached with information and communication tools such as video games.

Women have always been present in interactive leisure since practically the conception of the video game. Whether as a programmer, founder of development companies or responsible for the artistic treatment of games (Marie, 2018). However, her role in the history of the video game has been silenced, to the point of making the female presence invisible and even decontextualizing her work (Gil, 2020).

In Spain, although of the 15.9 million players in 2020, 45.9% were women (AEVI, 2021), in terms of development they are only 18.5% (DEV, 2021). For Garzón (2021), the contrast between both figures responds to the fact that the video game draws from "the oppressive structures generated by heteropatriarchy" (p. 480). Hence, for many years there has been the belief that the target of video games were men. With titles for men, created by men, "[a woman] is made to know that this is not her place, it is not a socialization space that belongs to her or in which she will feel comfortable" (pp. 482-483).

Díez (2004) concluded that video games "tend to reproduce sexual stereotypes contrary to the values that we have established educationally and socially as basic principles in our society" (p. 329). Rodríguez (2016) highlights how "women tend to embody passive or simply decorative and hypersexualized characters; while male characters are characterized by their strength, their leading and dominant role, their resolving capacity, etc." Continuing with hypersexuality, Downs and Smith (2009) highlighted that factors such as nudity, disproportionate body dimensions and inappropriate clothing were more typical of female than male characters. In terms of attitudes, Ivory (2009) recorded active roles in 75% of the male characters in the cases studied, while their female counterparts barely reached 33%.

Going deeper into the roles, Curiel (2018) establishes a classification of five types according to the representation of female characters in video games. The woman as an object or damsel in distress is the most recurrent form, where the male character sets off to save his female counterpart (Princess Peach in the Super Mario games). The woman as destination, the suffering caused by the villain is the starting point for the hero to begin a story of justice or revenge (Shadows of Mordor, by Monolith Productions, 2014). The woman as a recipient consists of turning her into an "affective reward for having done something for a woman" (p. 125), like rescuing her, with which the hero receives the well-known "kiss of victory", either literally or metaphorically (Shadow of the Colossus, Team ICO, 2005).

Titles such as *Final Fantasy VIII* (Squaresoft, 1999) or *Resident Evil Village* (Capcom, 2021) present women as opponents, who use their status as women to hinder the protagonist, usually male, exploiting "her sexuality to deceive, trick and betray" (Curiel, 2018, p. 127). Very different from the woman as an assistant, whose role is reduced to being a companion to the male protagonist, assuming an added difficulty due to her helplessness (BioShock Infinite, by Irrational Games, 2013).

Finally, there is the role of women as controllable subject or protagonist. However, being able to adopt the role of a woman in a game corresponded above all to a marketing strategy to attract the attention of a market dominated by men (Atrio, 2019), as happened with *Lara Croft* and *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) until the reboot of the saga in 2013.

To this must be added the so-called "pink games" such as *Imagine being a mother* (Visual Impact, 2007) in which women are shown in a stereotyped way and discrimination is perpe-

tuated by reminding "the infants who approach the technology what their place is in society, what type of entertainment is theirs, and establishing a clear dividing line between leisure for girls and leisure for boys" (Garzón, 2021, p. 476).

The year 2013 was a turning point when some companies marketed games starring women with strong personalities (Atrio, 2019). The developers "are beginning to realize that what we are asking for now are very different things, at least in the treatment given to women" (p. 491). Hence, there are female characters who "desire, fear and fight for what they believe in. The player can choose to ignore them or support them, but regardless of how they decide to configure their play experience, female representations increasingly show a psychological complexity that overcomes traditional prejudices" (Planells, 2012, p. 14). Characters like Max in *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2016), Aloy in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) or, as we will see, Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), show that this change of representation is not something exclusively of independent studies. Paredes-Otero (2018a) points out how, from the very covers of the games, the female characters are no longer hypersexualized, and wear clothing far removed from eroticism, thus leaving aside the role of women as sexual objects.

However, Garzón (2021) speaks of the fear that companies have for creating these different characters in large developers, a slower process compared to "the independent scenario, which works under its own rules, but has a limited impact" (p.497). Along these lines, Cabañes (2020) mentions the rejection of those who do not belong to the universal target "by the gaming community, which insults, despises and even harasses or threatens those who belong to other groups" (p. 212). This not only occurs

with derogatory comments towards specialized journalists (Manzano-Zambruno & Paredes-Otero, 2020), eSports players (Díaz, 2018) or developers, but even towards characters that deviate from universal representation. This was the case of Abby, protagonist of *The Last of Us Part II*, who received homophobic comments from users (Delgado, 2020) or about Aloy's "unfeminine" appearance in *Horizon Forbidden West* (by Guerrilla Games; 20 Minutes, 2021).

3. *THE LAST OF US* PHENOMENON

Focusing on the video game franchise on which this studio revolves, *The Last of Us* was a game developed by *Naughty Dog* and was released for sale for PlayStation 3 in 2013. The plot places the player twenty years in the future with a United States post-apocalyptic and a society decimated by a fungus known as Cordyceps, capable of infecting human beings and causing them to lose reason and become violent and cannibalistic. The few survivors live in quarantine zones controlled by the military or in groups without law or order. In this context we find Joel, a smuggler who is tasked with taking Ellie, a 14-year-old girl immune to the virus, to Massachusetts.

The journey of both characters through a devastated United States and the relationship established between the two made this video game one of the most awarded in history, it accumulated more than 250 awards (Muñoz, 2021). Seven years later, in 2020, and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the sequel came out, *The Last of Us Part II,* which achieved records and milestones practically since its launch. It sold four million copies in just three days (Alonso, 2020), being the fastest-selling PlayStation 4 exclusive (Malo, 2020), and sur-

passing its predecessor in just seven months with 255 awards (Muñoz, 2021).

The saga has aroused interest in the academic community. Hughes (2015) analyzes it from the perspective of ludonarrative dissonance. Farca and Ladevèze (2016) understand this game as an example of critical dystopia where cities reflect the rejection of capitalism. Murray (2019), on the other hand, focuses on the characters, specifically on how the loss of power and dominance of the white race is illustrated through a narrative based on the fear of contagion, the apocalypse, and the collapse of society.

Atrio (2019) focuses his study from the point of view of the representation of female characters, shown realistically in terms of clothing, especially, while the narrative techniques do the opposite, eliminating attempts to show women independent of the figure masculine. For his part, Suárez (2020) highlights how the game criticizes the present through a post-apocalyptic future thanks to the aesthetics, the characters, the settings, and the elements present in them, as well as interactivity. Radchenko (2020) does the same with the concept of metamodernism and how it manifests itself through the oscillation between the new and the old, the reconstruction or the feelings that the characters express. Finally, Anyó and Colom (2021) analyze the feelings produced by the characters in both games of the saga, introducing the term "emotional ambivalence" or the coexistence of two or more opposite emotions.

4. METHODOLOGY

We start from the hypothesis that *The Last of Us Part II* breaks with the classic stereotypes of representation of female characters in video games and that these figures also serve to address various social problems. To verify or re-

fute this statement, this video game is studied from the point of view of ludonarration (Cuadrado & Planells, 2020) to "unravel how this process of interweaving narrative elements occurs in a specific video game" (p. 41).

The success in sales and prizes obtained from this sequel, as well as the academic interest that the first game aroused, makes us choose *The Last of Us Part II* for this work. In addition, its triple A game condition makes it ideal for the proposed objective in order to check what the female characters that are presented are like and the messages on social issues that reach millions of receiving users.

The method used consists of a ludic-narrative analysis, a technique previously used to study the representation of social problems such as mental illness (Paredes-Otero, 2020) or death and awareness of it (Paredes-Otero, 2021) through the interactive entertainment. The analysis is carried out in two phases. First, the characters themselves are focused on and categories related to classic stereotypes of representation and of women in video games seen in the conceptual framework are taken into account, such as physical appearance, clothing, and dramatic roles. The second phase shows how situations typical of social problems manifest themselves at specific moments taken from the game.

5. RESULTS

5.1. EMPOWERMENT OF FEMALE CHARACTERS

The empowerment of women in *The Last of Us* saga can be seen in the number of female characters, their roles, and the evolution of both factors between the two installments of the saga and their comparison with their male

counterparts. In the first game there were six men and five women, of which one man (Joel) and two women (Sara, in the prologue, and Ellie, during a segment of the story) were controllable for much of the adventure.

The roles of these characters were similar, regardless of gender. We could find smugglers, both Joel and Bill (men) and Triss (woman), or mere survivors like Ellie or the pair of brothers Sam and Henry. On the other hand, the groups that Joel and Ellie encountered along the way were led by characters of both sexes: Marlene was the leader of the militia known as Los Luciérnagas, while David did the same with a band of cannibals, and the marriage composed by Tommy and Maria was in charge of directing a settlement of survivors.

In *The Last of Us Part II*, the number of characters grows, especially the female ones, and reaches an equality of eight men and eight women. The playable characters also change: Joel is controlled only in the prologue while the female figures of Ellie and Abby are distributed throughout the rest of the story.

In terms of roles, Ellie evolves from a mere survivor to a scout for a community of survivors, a role similar to that of Joel, Dina and Jesse, leader of the scouts. Tommy and Maria maintain their role, while in the military, the leader is the male figure of Isaac. Going down the hierarchy we see that there are both men (Owen and Manny) and women (Abby, Mel, and Nora). The last two carry out sanitary tasks together with the male character of Jerry (surgeon). There are also other roles such as bartender (Seth) and survivors (Lev and Yara). Table 1 shows the relationship of characters and roles in both games:

Table 1

Characters from The Last of Us saga and their dramatic roles

PERSONAJES DE LA SAGA *THE LAST OF US*			
THE LAST OF US		**THE LAST OF US II PARTE II**	
Character	**Dramatic role**	**Character**	**Dramatic role**
Joel	Smuggler	Joel	Scout
Sara	Student	Ellie	Scout
Tess	Smuggler	Tommy	Group leader
Ellie	Survivor	María	Group leader
Bill	Smuggler	Dina	Scout
Sam	Survivor	Abby	Soldier
Henry	Survivor	Lev	Survivor
David	Group leader	Manny	Soldier
Marlene	Militia leader	Mel	Doctor / soldier
Tommy	Group leader	Nora	Medical officer/ soldier
María	Group leader	Isaac	Military leader
		Owen	Soldier
		Jesse	Group Leader
		Yara	Survivor
		Jerry	Surgeon
		Seth	Bartender

Apart from seeing women as subjects in the characters of Ellie and Abby, the role of women as sender, triggering the implementation of the male character, is reversed. If in the first game, Sara's death caused Joel to have the personality that he shows with Ellie. In the second, it is the deaths of Joel and Jerry that cause Ellie and Abby respectively to start their path of revenge and change their character.

5.2. THE HOMOSEXUALITY OF ELLIE AND DINA

The Last of Us Part II shows Ellie being openly gay. Through a diary that she writes, it is revealed that she had a partner named Cat. Everyone knew about this relationship except Joel, something that she justifies by writing: "Should I tell him? I don't know. I don't know how he would react." With this simple phrase, *Naughty Dog* reflects in the game the fear that young people have of coming out to their parents. Later, in a flashback, the moment in which Joel discovers Ellie's sexual orientation is seen, when she is kissing another girl at a party and is rebuked during a homophobic attack. He goes out to defend her to later tell her that he supports her sexuality with the phrase "I don't know what that girl's intentions are, but she would be lucky to be with you."

Apart from the main plot of this video game, Ellie's homosexuality and her relationship with Dina is one of the secondary lines that is most relevant. The user contemplates the courtship between two young teenagers from the moment they begin to notice each other until their breakup.

The high point of this relationship occurs midway through the game when it is discovered that they are living together and raising Dina's child, thus addressing the issue of same-sex families. The two protagonists are seen doing daily activities of domestic life (washing the dishes, hanging out the clothes, playing with the child, looking for food or sleeping together) in the chapter with the most tranquility and peace in the game. There is no action, no enemy attacks, just two women living together.

Realism is also present when it comes to reflecting how they break up their relationship. Ellie is unable to forget that she has a pending revenge on Abby and decides to sacrifice everything she has achieved with Dina to fulfill it. She tries to convince her by crying and saying: "Come on, we have a family. She can't be more important than this." The important thing about this phrase is the word family, a term used regardless of the gender of the components of a family nucleus.

In relation to sexual freedom, it is also possible to find representations of homophobia. In the first minutes it is implied that something has happened in relation to Ellie's sexuality and a party. We witness the comments of one of the survivors of the community (Seth) and the reluctance of the protagonist to accept her apology by stating: "I don't want to know anything about that bigot." Seth's justification is "I think I drank too much last night", an attempt to seek forgiveness by blaming the alcohol and offering him some snacks as compensation. Ellie's response consists of passing the food package to a colleague of hers saying: "For you, bigotry".

It is not until well into the story when, as a flashback, what happened at that party is shown. Ellie and Dina were dancing with their arms around each other in the middle of other couples when they began to kiss, only to be rebuked by Seth a few seconds later, which led to the following conversation:

> - Seth: Hey! It's a family party.
>
> - Dina: Sorry. I'm Sorry!

- Seth: Remember there are children present.

- Dina: Not that you're not an example to follow either. (By this time Ellie and Dina are leaving the dance floor)

- Seth: Yes... What the town needs. Another foul-mouthed lesbian.

The conversation is loaded with nuances. On the one hand, the intolerance of seeing two women kissing and understanding it as something that children should not see, lest they imitate it. On the other hand, Dina and Ellie must go if they want to continue together, that is, they must hide. They have two options: control or avoid their feelings because their union is not well seen in public or isolate themselves and keep their relationship secret. Ellie is one of the best trackers and marksmen in the community, however, her skills take a backseat: she is recognized for her sexuality.

5.3. THE RUPTURE OF ABBY'S FEMALE STEREOTYPES

The second main plot has Abby as its protagonist, a character that breaks with the classic representation of women in video games. She physically distances herself from the prototype of a submissive woman. This character has a strong complexion, with developed muscles, an appearance that is the product of the physical evolution that Abby experiences and whose explanation responds to realistic conditions. She has a goal: to take revenge on Joel for the death of her father, and to achieve it, she undergoes physical training for over four years.

Clothing is another point that distances her from the established canons. Both she and all the characters wear clothes according to the circumstances and move away from the idea that women must necessarily wear sensual clo-

thing such as shorts, tight shirts, or short dresses. In Abby's case, she can be seen wearing a tank top on a sunny day or a coat and mountain clothes when it's cold. None of the characters are sexualized. They are independent women each with their own physique and personality.

5.4. LEV AND GENDER IDENTITY

In Abby's story arc we find Lev, presented as a boy with a shaved head, and his adult sister Yara. Both are deserters from the Seraphites group. Along the way, some enemies throw out statements like "That girl is an abomination." It is not until they call him Lily that it is revealed that Lev is actually a girl. When Abby finds out, Lev asks if she wants to ask him something but receives a refusal from her partner. With this, Abby shows that she respects his identity and that he should be the one to tell it when he wants. However, it is Yara who ends up telling the story of Lily/Lev:

- Yara: It took me a long time to understand why he always questioned the laws, the traditions. When he explained to me how he felt inside I told him he had to keep it to himself. I was hoping he would get over it. Afterwards it seemed that he was fine, then he shaved his head, like men. it was a suicide.

- Abby: Did you run away then?

- Yara: At first, I yelled at him. I hit him. I was so stupid.

- Abby: Why do you think he did it? Shave his head.

- Yara: Last week you were assigned your role in the community. He wanted to be a soldier like me. But they decided that he would be the wife of one of the elders. It's tradition.

- Abby: Poor boy.

This conversation reflects situations that must be endured by those who have a gender identity that is far from the norm. The recommendation that his sister gives to Lev is to hide, something that happens in a similar way with homosexuality. Shaving the head is the act of rebellion against the system of the Seraphites. Lily stops accepting it and embraces his real condition, the best way is to pretend that he is a boy not only mentally but also physically. The reason for this action is an arranged marriage. Lily refuses to be a submissive wife and chooses to run away. Finally, Abby accepts Lev's true identity by calling him in masculine terms.

5.5. PRESENT SUBTHEMES

There are also other sub-themes not so present but with conceptual value to be able to consider this game as a paradigmatic example of the ability to represent social issues through triple A titles:

- Maternity. Theme represented in two characters, first in Dina, who confesses to Ellie that she is pregnant but that she never said anything so as not to be considered a burden, which happens. Ellie's reaction, with the expression "But now you are, aren't you?" manifests the practice of seeing women differently simply because they are pregnant. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Dina is a fundamental part of Ellie's mission: she manages to fix a radio and guide her partner. At the same time, *Naughty Dog* shows the theme of single mothers with the fact that Dina, despite not maintaining the relationship with the father of her child, is willing to continue with the pregnancy alone.

While Dina is in the first weeks of her pregnancy, Mel is in an advanced state of pregnancy, but she also presents herself as an independent woman who wants to remain active, doing raids, doing medical work and, like Dina, she does not have a properly stable relationship. Mel's character is also questioned that she ceases to be an active part:

> - Abby: You could stay, they would you let you.
>
> - Mel: I'd rather stop if it's not necessary.
>
> - Abby: What does Owen think?
>
> - Mel: Not that it depended on Owen…

With this last answer it is clear that she decides what to do with her life, regardless of what others think.

- Religious Freedom: Judaism is a religion that has a place in the game. Looking for gas to power a generator, Ellie and Dina arrive at a synagogue and discover that Dina and her family are Jewish. Dina explains aspects of this religion: she talks about the Torah or the Jewish Bible, the importance of praying as a way to calm down and show respect in mourning, as well as the importance of Jewish holidays.

- Ideological and religious extremism: Both of these themes are reflected in the Seraphites, a radical group whose extremism leads them to reject any technology or improvement they cannot obtain from nature. A radicalism applied to the members of the group: those who distance themselves from the traditions or conduct practices that are frowned upon (such as having a homosexual orientation or rejecting an arranged marriage) are punished with death. Extremism reaches such a point that Lev's own mother wanted to kill him for rejecting her (Lily) girlhood. This extremism is justified based on a female figure they call "The Prophet", who is idolized but whose writings and teachings, however, have been distorted by the interests of those who lead the Seraphites. Some

Empowerment in the representation of female characters in video games. Raising awareness of social problems with The Last of Us Part II

facts are distorted to manipulate a community unaware of the truth.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From the results obtained, it is clear that the only form of awareness used by *The Last of Us Part II* is through its narrative with the representation of various social problems or discrimination that affect women, either through situations (homophobia or ideological and religious extremism) or their own characters (physical stereotypes, motherhood, or gender identity).

The player is simply relegated to being a passive spectator, since interactivity, a defining and characteristic element of the video game, on this occasion prevents action beyond the established story. The inclusion of playable options such as decision-making to access speeches from different perspectives or the variety of behaviors and reactions would have been interesting. Educational material has also been lacking, apart from occasional conversations between the characters, to delve into social issues. Other factors that promote awareness through the video game, such as online modes or the inclusion of technical advances that involve other senses (Klimmt, 2009), are also not present.

Regarding the importance of videogames in offering solutions (Bogost, 2007), when it comes to dealing with the problems posed, the *Naughty Dog* game not only does not raise them but also offers at certain times a negative message as a response, such as counteracting violence with more violence, flight, or exile in the face of various forms of discrimination.

These lacks of awareness are made up for when it comes to addressing female empowerment with a balanced number of female characters relative to their male counterparts, as well as the roles they play within the game.

In conclusion, we affirm that *The Last of Us Part II* stands out in a positive way for its representation of female empowerment and social problems, but it does not take advantage of its potential as a video game to raise awareness beyond showing them on the screen.

Its female characters move away from the classic stereotypes of representation based on sexuality and passivity. *Naughty Dog* has created characters that leave aside the objectification of women thanks to factors such as physical appearance, clothing according to the circumstances shown at each point of the adventure and dramatic roles.

We see empowerment especially in the cases of Ellie and Abby, characters controlled by the player and on which the entire plot revolves (woman as subject). Two complex figures far from the role of damsel in distress to star, along with their companions, equally elaborate stories, regardless of opinions or being limited by male characters. Contrary to what happened with Ellie in the first game (Atrium, 2019). Thanks to the situations and dialogues, *Naughty Dog* brings up issues that concern contemporary society. Ellie suffers from the fear of revealing her sexuality to the contempt for her homosexual orientation, because of which she experiences homophobic comments when she is with her partner and must isolate herself from urban centers. The abilities and work of Dina and Mel are undervalued due to their condition as pregnant women to the point of wanting to be separated. Lev suffers the physical and verbal violence of ideological extremism due to his gender identity, for which he is forced to go into exile and live on the run due to misunderstanding of his situation.

The starting hypothesis is verified, and we can say that *The Last of Us Part II* is an example of how video games created by large developers also deal with social issues, empower and express different ideas like *indie* games do. However, the reactions against the actresses who embodied the characters, the boycott of the game's scores and the harassment of its creators (El Diario, 2020) are situations that demonstrate the complicated situation experienced by women in video games, whether character or player, wanting to show an alternative speech. It is also an explanation for the fact that there is not a similar ratio between triple A games and *indies* that address these issues, beyond economic benefits and sales.

The Last of Us Part II is a starting point in terms of awareness and triple A games. Therefore, it remains for future research if the *Naughty Dog* title is an isolated case or influences future interactive developments.

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