THE LAST OF US PT.2

The Power of Gaming Storytelling

Naughty Dog's **The Last of Us Part 2** has been one of the most anticipated games of the last few years. Within a few days of its release, it became Sony's biggest ever PlayStation 4 launch and is the fastest-selling game of 2020 so far. Such success demonstrates how the compelling story – mixed with gameplay and design – of the first title managed to create a fanbase eager to know more about this universe.

However, The Last of Us Part 2 (TLoU2) is not for everyone and the game's director, Neil Druckmann, expected the divisive story to cause controversy. Following on from Part 1, drastic changes in the plot and characters have divided gamers and critics. The choice to let Joel, the brave, stoic and masculine hero of the first title die has upset fans. Furthermore, the decision to replace him with characters Ellie and Abby (Joel's companion and killer respectively) has triggered additional backlash, tentative boycotts and even death threats from fans, some of which has been in response to Ellie's character being openly gay.

The strong depiction of female LGBTI+ protagonists enters the game into an ongoing cultural debate around inclusivity and representation and the role of media in shaping society. The complex storytelling in the game demonstrates that gaming, as with cinema and TV, is a mature medium able to deliver culturally relevant and socially impactful narratives with the potential to inspire discussions and possibly drive change.

TLoU2 is an incredible case study able to highlight audiences' responses and innovative elements in the gaming and entertainment industries, with several learnings and points of reflection for the whole media industry.

The evolution of The Last of Us is an example of the industry shifting

In Part 1 we played as Joel, a resourceful survivor travelling across a post-apocalyptic USA infested by zombie-like creatures and human scavengers. His mission was to protect his partner Ellie (a sarcastic and virus-immune teenager), leading her to the scientists able to use her immunity to create a world saving cure. During their adventures, the two characters developed a father-daughter bond leading to a dramatic and bitter ending. Despite a somewhat traditional "damsel in distress" narrative, the game excelled in its emotional intensity and character development rivalling the emotional intensity of similar movies and TV plots.

The game's second title moves away from traditional narratives and embraces controversial contemporary topics, adding extra depth and innovation to the already compelling story.

The first departure from traditional storytelling in gaming is provided by Joel's death. His death is sudden, unexpected and violent. Murdered by Abby, the daughter of one of the scientists Joel killed to save Ellie in the first title, Joel becomes the starting point in a revenge narrative. The death of the iconic character has been central to the backlash towards the game, as players refused to accept it, showing

"How do we explore all the facets of what it's like to be 19? You think you're invincible. You think you know what's right and wrong in the world. You are sexually attracted to people you're attracted to... Those are all things we want to explore for this character – that's how we do honest storytelling."

Druckmann

how decades of franchises focusing on the same key characters has created expectations that some gamers struggle to let go (even inducing some fans to harass and send death threats to the actress voicing Abby) and demonstrates the strong fan-character bond games can create.

The backlash against Joel's death is fuelled by the fact that at points in the narrative gamers find themselves playing as the character who killed their hero, forcing them to identify with the enemy and to reconsider the concept of "villain". There is no doubt that forcing audiences to move away from a clear cut representation of the fictional universe has been a brave decision by Naughty Dog. Playing Abby against Ellie, after having spent hours guiding the young girl in her revenge is a tough experience.

TLoU2: a tale about women

The second innovation in the plot is its representation of women, social roles and sexualities. Following Joel's death gamers play as Abby and Ellie. The characters in this second title (both protagonists and secondary characters) move away from stereotypes and the over-sexualisation of the female figure, and display a spectrum of genders and sexualities, including transgender, bisexual and homosexual characters. The game also depicts female characters is a variety of social roles, including many in positions of power.

Audiences knew about Ellie's sexual orientation (as clearly depicted in the standalone expansion game The Last of Us: Left Behind), but having female LGBTI+ main characters that break problematic, stereotypical tropes is ground-breaking, especially when the game lands in a period inflamed by controversy about LGBTI+ rights – as exemplified by the Gender Recognition Act Reform in the UK.

The gaming industry has historically had issues with female representation – from the use of mainly male protagonists and hyper-sexualisation of the female body, to trolling and negative stereotypes about female gamers. Controversies such as GamerGate and YouTube channels like Feminist Frequency (which analyses the historical evolution of the sexist "damsel in distress" and "woman as reward" tropes in videogames and entertainment) demonstrate these issues.

TLoU2 is an example of the improvements of recent years that have led to the redesign of iconic characters such as Lara Croft (who in more recent titles has forgone the excessive and unrealistic curves of earlier instalments in favour of an athletic, but less sexualised figure) and to the use of strong female protagonists in titles such as: **Wolfenstein Youngblood, Uncharted: The Lost Legacy, Horizon: Zero Dawn**, etc.

Whilst LGBTI+ representation in games has often been anchored to negative stereotypes and homophobia, as in Capcom's 1989 **Final Fight**, where the potential issue of beating female enemies is avoided by defining them as transgender, or as in **Grand Theft Auto V** where trans people are the target of several controversial dialogues. In recent years the gaming industry has been

slowly moving beyond stereotypical and/or offensive depictions, offering the possibility to choose a character's sexual orientation or including non-heterosexual or binary characters as in: **The Sims 4, The Walking Dead, Mass Effect 3, Life is Strange**, etc.

What Makes TLOF2 different is that the LGBTI+ components are embedded in the narrative, it is not tokenistic or presented in a diluted way. However, in most games the LGBTI+ component is mostly left to secondary characters, to the players' choice, or as subtext to the main story.

Authentic storytelling is key

The third factor in TLoU2's success is the quality of the storytelling. The same powerful storytelling and character development which moved audiences in the first title isn't lost in the second part. The game creates a compelling universe and uses its apocalyptic setting to explore social tensions relevant to our contemporary culture, highlighting key issues such as: LGBTI+ rights,

objectification of the female body and Gamergate, whilst still providing an engaging drama rooted in classic tropes like vengeance, family, struggle for dominance, etc.

The characters are well rounded, and Ellie's sexual orientation avoids feeling tokenistic or out of place in the game, as the few romantic scenes between Ellie and her partner don't feel forced and seem to be based on behaviours displayed by young people of all genders and sexual orientations.

Authentic characters and intelligent storytelling are important in making content feel relevant to its audience. By establishing an ongoing dialogue with your audience and keeping a close eye on cultural trends it is possible to create content that your audience see themselves and their interests reflected in.

Fictional content is a mirror for dominant and emergent cultural tensions. Leveraging such tensions can define the success or failure of content

Game and content creators have the potential to decide how to embed culture in their stories, either reaffirming established values or stereotypes, or presenting emergent and controversial societal shifts.

Regardless of choice, there are some key insights that are important to take into account. The Last of Us Part 2's reception encapsulates the findings of several Ipsos MORI studies conducted by our cultural analysts and qualitative researchers specialising in gaming and content development.

There are four key insights for the gaming industry and content creators at large to consider when creating content, especially if it is potentially divisive:

1. **Compelling storytelling:** whether talking with gaming, TV or cinema audiences, content needs to be engaging, well written and provide consistent stories that challenge genre tropes and expectations. A strong narrative with emotionally complex characters that develop with the plot has the potential to

increase engagement and the life of a piece of content beyond the medium it is experienced in. Narrative analysis, semiotics and discussions with consumers can help define clear and relevant stories that will resonate with your audience.

2. **Leveraging the zeitgeist:** there are evolving hot topics which reflect the cultural momentum and key social tensions. It is key to investigate what topics and how your brands and products can discuss them without seeming to "jump on the bandwagon" – as recently happened for many brands who tried to leverage the current Black Lives Matter campaigns for example. Cultural analysis, Ipsos Global Trends and deep dives with consumers are a resourceful way to navigate the current cultural landscape spotting do's and don'ts.

3. **Be aware of cultural sensitivities:** as highlighted in Ipsos MORI Thinks Generation Z: Beyond Binary, whether your content will be distributed locally or globally, consider that different cultures and audiences within the same market can be sensitive to different topics and representations. This can be related to the idea of "beauty" – think about the Japanese Kawaii aesthetic, the use of foul language – in Russia it is currently banned, or the use of negative stereotypes about a country or ethnicity. Cultural analysis and deep dives with consumers can help you spot such sensitivities and find possible ways to mitigate or navigate them.

4. **Prepare for the backlash:** whether your content is playing safe or pushes boundaries, there is always the risk of causing stir. It is key to understand what triggers discussions and backlashes – is there an inaccurate representation of some audiences, or is it just divisive because it's challenging? Knowing the reasons and the audiences behind such conversations could support you during content development and marketing strategies. Quantitative

"I'd rather have people passionately hate it than just be like, 'Yeah, it was OK.'"

Druckmann

research, cultural analysis and deep dives with consumers can help you prepare for possible controversies before they even start.

The TLoU2 is one of the hottest games of the year and reaffirms the importance for the gaming and media industries of understanding their audience and cultural landscape in order to create compelling, innovative and disruptive content. All content, brands and products are in mutual relationship with the culture they inhabit. And controversies, good or bad, are just highlighting it.

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ABOUT THE TEAM

Lamberto is a trained semiotician, cultural analyst and qualitative researcher. He applies his expertise in semiotics and cultural analysis to media and technology brands, uncovering how they can leverage cultural context to create compelling products and content.

Yas' qualitative career has seen her focus on harnessing culture to drive change and inform strategy for media, technology and youth brands. Yas has a particular interest in championing diversity and has won a Virginia Valentine Award for her work within this space.

Preeti has spent most of her career studying socio-cultural changes to help build resilient strategies for brands. She believes that the only way for brands to create meaningful campaigns is for them to understand the customers' cultural nuances and the impacts of these on society.

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We are a close-knit team of experts who work exclusively to help you understand the media and tech landscape.

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