A Study of Player Immersion in The Last of Us: Philosophical and Technological Aspects

Games are an ever-evolving form of entertainment. From the earliest of times, games like checkers and chess have been around since 3000 BCE and 600 AD. respectively. (8 oldest board games in the world, 2017) With the advancement of technology came an advancement of games. Boardgames with plastic shaped instead of wood shaped avatars came about, and eventually with the current rise of technology, games went digital. In 1962, the first ever digital game was created for the Programmed Data Processor-1 (PDP-1). (History.com Editors, 2017) Spacewar! was created by Stephen Russell and was revolutionary; now games were enjoyable on multiple computer installations. (History.com Editors, 2017) A decade later, Wallace Krischner and Lawrence Haskel invented the game cartridge. (Edwards, 2017) An advancement that paved the way for the now billion-dollar business of video games to flourish. In 1994, Sony Computer Entertainment released the very first PlayStation which put them in the forefront as the market leader in the video game industry. (Britannica, T. Editors, 2021) It utilized compact discs (CDs), thus moving away from Krischner and Haskel’s cartridges. (Britannica, T. Editors, 2021) The PlayStation launched a generation, with the PS5 released most recently in November of 2020. (Pino &amp; Vjestica, 2021)

Naughty Dog is a subsidiary of Sony Interactive Entertainment that was established in 1984 most notable for creating the hit video game *Crash Bandicoot* before later moving on to modern narrative-based games such as the *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us* series. (Naughty Dog , 2021) Essentially, the latter two franchises can be broadly classified into third person shooter games, but they are, as most fans contend, much more than simply that. They are narrative-based games that mostly incorporate linear storytelling, but that tweak game-design and gameplay aspects to their advantage to immerse and enrich gamer experience. The way in which Naughty Dog design their games follows through with multiple philosophies on narrative-based games, the two most prominent being Henry Jenkins and the idea of “narrative architecture” as well as Brain Sutton-Smith as his “rhetoric of the self”. Jenkins claims that games are a different form of media and therefore tell stories distinctly, mainly through space. (Jenkins, 2004) Players gain information by exploring the space that game designers have laid out for them. (Jenkins, 2004) While movie-like cut-scenes are also employed, most of the information is gained by what Thi Ngyuen paraphrases as, “temporally uncontrolled exploration” in his own article, “Philosophy of games.” This is very evident in *The Last of Us* in which story does not unfold unless a player explores the gamer space. If Ellie and Dina had not gone on patrol to explore and watch out for possible enemies, then they would not have found the house in which Joel was captured by the WLFs. While the main story is linear and this event is scheduled to happen, it is up to the player to explore the architecture of the game to enact this part of the story. Sutton-smith applies the concept of “the rhetoric of the self” as a philosophy of gaming which is defined to be, “forms of play in which [attention is focused on desirable experiences] of players – their fun, relaxation, their escape.” (Sutton-Smith, 2001) *The Last of Us* series falls into “the rhetoric of the self” as it provides players with a sense of escape into the post-apocalyptic world of Joel and Ellie in which they are emotionally immersed. The way in which Naughty Dog allows for this immersion is made possible by the many advancements of technology in our current time.

*The Last of Us* was initially released for PlayStation 3 in 2013 (metacritic, 2013). After being remastered for PlayStation 4 the game sits at 50GB for the CD with digital downloads over 40GB. (Dunning, 2014) This is mind boggling considering that the initial Kirschner and Haskel cartridge invented only 40 years ago supported games with a maximum limit of 256 bytes (Edwards, 2017). *The Last of Us II* was released for PlayStation 4 just recently in June of 2020 (Amazon, 2020) with the largest install size of any PS game to date. The game requires 100 GB of free storage and occupies 78.3 GB once fully downloaded (Kain, 2020). In less than a decade from the first game, the second game nearly doubles the storage once again demonstrating how the advancements of technology have allowed for the skyrocketing of the quality of games. This is only one of the many examples in which the second installment of the franchise demonstrates significant advancement over its predecessor.

Right off the bat, the graphics are shown to have improved significantly, with cleaner and clearer icons, subtitles that do not draw attention away from the screen, and the remarkable advancement of animation of the characters, with many praising Naughty Dog for its attention to detail which bring the story to life in ways never seen before. The use of motion and face capture plays a big role in creating smooth movements and animation that not only look pleasing but are unbelievably close to reality. (Hernandez, 2018) The scene in which Ellie and Dina kiss has received much praise from fans, due to its realism. (Hernandez, 2018) Normally, intimate animation in such games appears awkward and lagging, but it is Naughty Dog’s use of advanced face capture that is able to make the final cut so elegant. (Hernandez, 2018) Details such as the sweat on Ellie’s face and her matted hair due to the crowd of people allocated much praise from critics as it advanced animation in a way rarely seen before. (Hernandez, 2018)

The larger storage available also gives game designers the ability to create scenarios in which players can learn and adapt skills they may later need when facing off enemies. This is of significance because it allows the players to feel as though they have trained and are more prepared to face off against threats. This is opposed to previous games in which storage is limited and so players had to learn and strategize during combat in which they would have to die multiple times before being able to progress to next levels. With the increased storage that game consoles like PlayStation provide, players do not have to face these multiple failures against enemies, but rather they learn with futile tasks and develop the needed skills so that when combat does arrive they are able to build on their past experiences and now focus on strategizing to avoid death, instead of having it as a requirement to learn. Henry Jenkins, in his paper on “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” described this process in which, “some games create a space for rehearsal, as well, so that we can make sure we understand our character’s potential moves before we come up against the challenges of navigating narrational space.” (Jenkins, 2004) In this way, the gameplay is more immersive, and players feel as though they are truly facing off these enemies. Skilled players even attempt to get past these combat levels in one try as though their avatar’s death were their own, further showcasing how this method increases player immersion. This is only made possible by the increased storage of game consoles, which is in overall thanks to the advancement of technology.

In conclusion, *The Last of Us* franchise demonstrates some of the magic that the advancement of technology can bring to gameplay. With the proper use of this, game designers can create an overall immersing experience for gamers in which they can escape their worlds and connect emotionally to characters like Ellie and Joel. Naughty Dog is remarkable for its incorporation of details that bring animation to life to facilitate the emotional immersion of gamers. Characters feel like real people, any harm or loss is felt both by them and the gamers controlling them. In this way, the advancement of technology holds endless possibilities for the future development of games. If a game is able to go from a limit of 256 bytes to almost 80 GB in forty years, who knows the possibilities that lay in store for the next half decade?

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