

A Tragedy at the Ends of Time: Applying Aristotle's *Poetics* to *The Last of Us Part II*

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ABSTRACT:

Digital games have come a long way since their origins as pure entertainment and can no longer be easily brushed aside as a frivolous pastime. The past decade or so has seen the introduction of many narrative-intensive games that take the joy of watching a great story unfold and combine it with a sense of agency in the audience, in this case, the player, thus giving us a new form of dramatic narrative. Despite the seeming appropriateness, however, attempts at conjoining Aristotle's *Poetics* to digital game scholarship have been contentious. This paper aims to show that there is great merit in viewing narrative games through the lens of the terms and mechanisms discussed by Aristotle, more specifically his outlining of the ground rules for the desired form of tragedy. Additionally, a more in-depth definition of words like hamartia, catharsis, and mimesis and their application will show the appropriateness of such a method in arguing for the artistic and aesthetic worth of this new medium that is known for obfuscating the more familiar structures of other narrative forms. To support the argument, the paper relies on recent digital game discourse and uses Naughty Dog's award-winning, and highly contentious game, *The Last of Us Part II*, to demonstrate how it fits the mould designed by Aristotle and why it deserves the title of tragedy.

KEY WORDS:

Aristotle, catharsis, digital game studies, hamartia, narrative, *Poetics*, *The Last of Us Part II*, tragedy.

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Introduction

The word tragedy has been so soaked in day-to-day language that one could not be faulted for ignorance of its true Greek origins. In a technical sense, tragedy means something almost radically different than the sense we are used to today. A deeper analysis of tragedy lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, it would not hurt to have a closer look at some of the scholarly debates in the field to get a better sense of what Aristotelian tragedy is. What makes a narrative a tragedy is not so much the sad, and at times horrific, ending but the 'feelings' that it arouses in the audience (Kaufmann, 1992). Aristotle (2002) defines tragedy as an imitation of an action that "accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing [(catharsis)] of experiences of this sort" (pp. 17-18). Hence, the end result of tragedy, according to him, is to stir a range of unpleasant emotions inside the audience who are watching the play (action) unfold and then, through careful manipulation of the plot, reach a point of catharsis for the audience. The reason why the audience will be capable of gaining pleasure from watching harrowing events (inducing the feeling of fear) befall a protagonist who probably does not deserve the severity of their punishment (hence he or she deserves our pity), is that such works so organize their material that we can recognize that toward which we feel so violently, thus setting us free to enjoy not pitiful and terrible events, but their adding up to more than just these events strung together. For in tragedy, they add up to intelligible chains of events, which illuminate human possibilities

in extremis (Schaper, 1968). So, it would not be too far-fetched to claim that it is through this recognition, enabled by proper mimesis, or imitation of the human condition, that a true tragedy, a work of art, is born.

The study to demonstrate that *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020; henceforth TLOU2) has all the makings that define a well-made tragedy based on the Aristotelian principles of catharsis, mimesis, and hamartia, all of which are included in the in-depth analysis that establishes these concepts' importance to Aristotle's tragedy as outlined in his *Poetics*. The rationale behind applying Aristotle's ideas is not to dismiss the relevancy of other approaches to narrative games, but to suggest that such time-tested ideas are also relevant in the context of digital game scholarship as they have been so in more traditional ones such as drama, fiction, and cinema and to suggest new ways of seeing an emerging medium for stories and narratives. Often praised for its narrative depth and emotional impact, TLOU2 has attracted serious academic attention from a wide range of fields, each focusing on a different aspect of the game and its reception by the players. In their important work on the online fandoms of the series, Letizi and Norman (2023) argue that the game has led to an unprecedented backlash from what they called 'alt-fandoms'. They point out that such a reaction is emblematic of a confrontational media climate that seeks to challenge any media text seeking to represent more controversial matters.

Following a similar trend, Dennin and Burton use the game as their case study to show how to employ 'experiential play' as a means of critiquing resistive queerness in digital games. They define experiential play as "the embodied experience of a player as a result of the overlapping intersection of a game's narrative, formal elements, and affective intentions" and use it to show how TLOU2 relies on representations of queerness to engender empathy among the non-queer player (Dennin & Burton, 2023, "Abstract" section). Aside from queer representation, the game has been scrutinized for its cast of female characters. For example, Tomkinson has analysed the divergent reception of Abby, a female character that we get to know in the second half of the game, particularly regarding criticism of her 'masculine' physique. She argues that these critiques reveal underlying tension in gaming discourse over realism, immersion, and the perceived politicization of video games (Tomkinson, 2023).

Moving away from the issues of gender and queer representation, there is a considerable body of research dealing with the games narrative and the issues that play a prominent role in the game's story. Johnson (2023) uses the game's midway player-character switch as a departing point for his study of how the game examines the effects of trauma and a dark circle of violence. Accordingly, such a move leads players to either adopt a flexible position that is more accepting and tolerant towards the characters, thus opening up the possibility of change and learning or one of outright rejection and inflexibility, similar to how the two playable characters in the game, namely Ellie and Abby, handle the violence and revenge. Following the player-character shift controversy, Ferrari and Soraci (2022) demonstrate how players navigate authorial intent in digital games using TLOU2 as their case study. They write that despite the game's attempt to garner sympathy for Abby, whom they see as the villain, players often resisted, refusing to harm Ellie due to their existing emotional attachment to her. This highlights the complex interplay between authors' attempts to evoke specific emotions and the players' agency to shape their own experiences. Their study suggests the difficulty of solely relying on cognitive empathy in building player connection, while also emphasizing the importance of emotional resonance (Ferrari & Soraci, 2022). There has also been research on the para-narrative aspects of the game as well and how it ties in with the events and characters in the narrative. Using Genette's (1997) concept of *paratext*, Banfi (2022) focuses on Ellie's in-game

journal where she writes her thoughts, the events that transpire, and at times doodlings of scenes or characters in the story. He tries to show how this journal, through giving access to Ellie's interior monologue and thoughts, expands the narrative and forms an intimate bond between the players and the character they are controlling. Seller (2022) argues that the game's grim and repulsive approach towards death is its way of challenging the orthodoxy of player agency and centrality in the game and anthropocentrism in general. She adds that this idea of failure and loss in the game, with its brutal tragic spiral of repetition and inevitability is in fact helping players rethink the idea of success, negativity, and what it means to play a game in general.

For this study, we decided to utilize a comprehensive approach that combines close playing and textual analysis to critically examine the characters and narrative structure of TLOU2. The first section that follows explores how Aristotelian concepts have been borrowed and used to analyse other digital games. Next, we provide a background for the core Aristotelian concepts that will be used in my analysis of the game. The last two sections deal with the application of these concepts and how they are relevant when analysing the narrative structure of TLOU2.

Aristotle and Game Studies

The scholarly field of digital game studies is no stranger to Aristotle. Meakin et al. show how fruitful it can be to perceive the unique ways in which games such as *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) make meaning through the lens of Aristotle's theories (Meakin et al., 2021). Humphreys tackles the question of whether playing digital games, in general, is a moral activity and how gaming aligns with Aristotle's conception of a life well lived (Humphreys, 2016). In another interesting take, Mawhorter et al. try to fashion a working theory that reconciles the two opposing poles of diegetic and extra-diegetic choices in digital games using Aristotle as their starting point (Mawhorter et al., 2014). Meanwhile, Owen reconciles the famous Aristotelian notion of unity of time and place with the general plot line of *BioShock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia, 2007) while demonstrating how the game closely follows the narrative structure that Aristotle prescribed (Owen, 2010). The studies that were picked here are only a handful and there are more papers where scholars have deemed it worthwhile to apply Aristotle's ideas to game studies. The move in game studies to embrace theories with a focal point in the narrative, such as *Poetics*, has not always been a smooth ride. One of the more formidable and influential figures of this resistance, which, for the most part, has run out of steam today, was Aarseth, who led the charge against the position that games are narratives and textual, like films and novels:

Games are not "textual" or at least not primarily textual: Where is the text in chess? We might say that the rules of chess constitute its "text," but there is no recitation of rules during gameplay ... A central "text" does not exist – merely context". (Aarseth, 2004, p. 47)

While his caution against overgeneralizing and seeing games as something they essentially are not, namely narratives, could be seen as somewhat relevant even today, the extent of the full argument is harsh. The militaristic opposition in this case, however, is understandable due to the state of digital games in the early 2000s. With most games still dabbling with incorporating plot as a fundamental and irreplaceable part of the gameplay experience, the earlier academic attempts to elevate them as a genuine medium for telling stories were going a step too far.

Another, more recent attempt at contesting the applicability of universal narrative models, like that of Aristotle, comes from Koenitz et al. (2018) who argue that "Aristotle's work is often misunderstood as a general description of narrative, when a closer reading actually reveals the opposite: it is a medium-specific understanding of narrative that distinguishes between epic (prose) and mimetic (dramatic) forms and focuses on the latter with a detailed analysis of the tragedy" (p. 109). While this position is not as dismissive as that of Aarseth, it is still wary of accepting digital games under the larger umbrella of narrative studies discourse. However, it is not impossible to challenge this position. To begin with, we must remember that "Aristotle's observations are form, rather than medium, dependant" (Meakin et al., 2021, "Aristotle in Videogame Discourse" section, para. 3). This follows that mimesis is an integral part of Aristotle's understanding of tragedy, and narrative in general, and that mimesis is also a major aim of any narrative digital game in order to help create a believable layer of meaning-making for the player. As a second riposte, it could also be argued that games rely on player action for their story to progress, and action, according to Aristotle is an integral part of the narrative structure (Mateas, 2001).

Before moving further, it is paramount to address two important ambiguities that might hinder the argument if left unattended. The first has to do with the issue of agency in digital games. As discussed earlier, one affinity of digital games with Aristotelian drama is the concept of action carried out by the player, who is also the audience. However, some have argued that in order for the action to be meaningful, there has to be true agency in the form of absolute freedom on the side of the player with noticeable ramifications for the game's overall story, which is at odds with the plot design in games (Frasca, 2010). To work around this issue, this paper adopts a new definition of agency that provides a workable solution to this internal dissonance between freedom and narrative structure. K. Tanenbaum and T. J. Tanenbaum (2010) redefine agency "as the process by which participants in an action commit to meaning" (p. 13). This definition is basically veering the focus away from the outcome of choices to their intents. As long as the action is meaningful, even when there is no choice but to engage in an activity in the game, we are committing to meaning. This is in line with what Aristotle deems necessary in order for catharsis to happen. If the actions of the protagonist are not plausible and do not derive from a causation chain, then we have a weak story. The second point of importance is the fact that viewing the structure of games with a strong narrative focus through Aristotelian mechanisms would allow us to discuss both the game text and its effects on the audience/player. The word text is used in the fashion suggested by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) as a "gestalt of medium and the message", meaning that the medium is not easily separable from the message that it conveys (p. 5). This sits well with Aristotle who dedicated so much attention to the emotional effects stirred in the audience by being exposed to a story, even though we are talking about digital games, which are known for confounding the traditional norms and narrative structures.

Many digital games offer rich ground for analysis through the Aristotelian tragic framework. To explore this approach and showcase its potential, we'll delve into a few prominent examples. This comparative approach will not only position the main argument within a broader context but also highlight the valuable insights this lens can provide. The first game that lends itself well to such analysis is *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018), an action-adventure game set in a fictionalized Wild West on the brink of modernization. Players take on the role of Arthur Morgan, an outlaw grappling with his loyalty to his declining gang and his own mortality. When read through the lens of Aristotelian tragedy, this game is exploring the downfall of a flawed protagonist. Morgan's unwavering loyalty to Dutch van der Linde, the gang's leader, becomes his tragic flaw. Arthur remains blind to this fact until he is diagnosed with tuberculosis later in the game and starts

questioning the morally dubious decisions he has taken in the name of loyalty and seeing the increasingly bloody path that Dutch has taken. Witnessing Dutch's betrayal shatters Arthur's faith, leading to a reckoning with his outlaw past. Despite his own wrongdoings, Arthur attempts redemption by helping John Marston escape, a final act that evokes both pity for his fate and fear for the dangers of blind loyalty.

The second game that works well with such an analysis is ZA/UM's *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019). When viewed through the Aristotelian tragic lens, the game presents a complex protagonist in Harry Du Bois, a detective whose brilliance is constantly undermined by his inner demons. Harry's hubris, a fractured psyche fuelled by substance abuse and amnesia, impedes his ability to solve a seemingly straightforward murder case. Each dead end and internal struggle represents a reversal of fortune, forcing him to confront his own failings. As Harry delves deeper into the investigation and his own psyche, moments of recognition emerge – fragmented memories, ideological clashes with the various voices in his head. The true nemesis, however, is not a singular antagonist but the totality of Harry's inner turmoil. The choices he makes throughout the investigation, influenced by these warring voices, determine his fate. *Disco Elysium's* catharsis is multifaceted. Depending on Harry's choices, he may achieve a fragile sense of redemption, a glimmer of hope for rebuilding his life. However, the potential for further descent into self-destruction always lingers, leaving the player to contemplate the tragic consequences of a brilliant mind crippled by its own internal battles.

The last example that we will look at is *Returnal* (Housemarque, 2021). This innovative third-person shooter throws astronaut Selene into a relentless cycle of death and rebirth on the unforgiving alien world of Atropos. Despite its non-traditional structure, analysing *Returnal* through the lens of Aristotelian tragedy holds the potential for fascinating insights. Unlike a protagonist felled by a fatal flaw, Selene is trapped in a cycle of death and rebirth due to unresolved trauma. Her relentless pursuit of escape, fuelled by grief, ironically becomes her hubris. Each death, a reversal of fortune, forces her to confront the futility of her initial approach. Fragmented memories scattered across the alien world serve as moments of recognition, piecing together the source of her suffering. The cycle itself acts as her nemesis, a consequence of her emotional baggage. Yet, *Returnal* offers a unique catharsis. As Selene confronts her past and potentially breaks free (depending on the ending), the narrative transcends tragedy, offering a glimmer of hope and the possibility of overcoming trauma through perseverance.

While these games lend themselves well to such an analysis, they are not the only ones. As it will become clear in the course of this study, such a reading could not only help us gain deeper insights into the characters' motivations and struggles, but also bring the moral dilemmas embedded within the plots to the forefront. This critical reflection extends not only to the choices presented, but also to the lack thereof and their potential consequences. Such a multifaceted approach both enriches our understanding of digital games as narratives and invites us to engage with deeper questions about the human condition.

Tragedy According to Aristotle

Compared to the other genres of writing at the time like comedy, epic poetry, and history, all of which are mentioned in *Poetics*, tragedy held an esteemed place for Aristotle. He provides the following definition of tragedy:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation [(mimesis)] of an action that is of stature and complete, with magnitude, that, by means of sweetened speech, but with each of its kinds separate in its proper parts, is of people acting and not through report, and accomplishes through pity and fear the cleansing [(catharsis)] of experiences of this sort. (Aristotle, 2002, pp. 17-18)¹

So, to put it more simply, tragedy is an imitation of an action that has a beginning, a middle, and an ending, hence complete while also boasting a certain expanse to it, not being too short but grand instead. The subject matter should not deal with 'lowly' topics, such as the ones he later ascribes to the ranks of comedy, but with universal subjects that are serious and can exalt the mind. In other words, the audience should not be induced to laughter and ridicule by what they see. The character, along with thought, also has a higher place than the narration since it enables action, the crux of tragedy. Most important of all, tragedy would be nothing if it fails to awaken pity and fear in the audience and then handle these emotions with care to the telos, or the main goal, of the tragedy, which is catharsis. This, of course, we concede is a limited definition of some of the most hotly debated lines in *Poetics*. However, for the purposes of this paper, going any deeper would be missing the point.² The last bolt in Aristotle's system of tragedy that binds the whole web together is the concept of hamartia, which has been translated as flaw, mistake, moral fault, and tragic flaw (Kaufmann, 1992). While each translation is valid in some respect, this paper will use the original Greek term since it preserves the entirety of its meaning though it has no exact match in the English language. The following paragraphs will be dedicated to defining and briefly analysing the concepts of mimesis, catharsis, fear, pity, and hamartia.

Mimesis, like catharsis, is among the more elusive concepts that are put forward by Aristotle. One could say that all arts are mimetic but each with its own content and structure (Schaper, 1968). However, in the case of tragedy, mimesis is what enables the audience to feel pleasure at watching the unfolding of terrible events that are common to such plays, events that would be otherwise unthinkable in real life. In other words, it is not so much the events themselves that attract the audience but "the presentation of a coherent action, made transparent and intelligible through artistic formulations" (Schaper, 1968, p. 139). But still, one might rightly ask, what is the pleasure in watching horrendous acts portrayed? Will it not be true that making them all the more 'transparent and intelligible' will be counterintuitive by making them seem more terrifying and appalling than what they used to be? Golden (1976) would counter by arguing that mimesis involves "an intellectual pleasure" involving "learning and inference by which we move from a perception of particulars to the knowledge of universal" (p. 438). Accordingly, tragedy is concerned with what could be and what would happen as a consequence of certain actions, and the audience, through recognizing the similarities between what they see and their own lives, gain deeper insight and, thus, learning happens. Aristotle argues that tragedies of the higher order will masterfully employ mimesis with the aim of inducing such an intellectual state in the audience.

One would do Aristotle justice by claiming that catharsis is the cornerstone of any 'good' tragedy, which binds the whole together, making the narrative piece not only enjoyable but also a work of art that is aesthetically pleasing. Despite its high standing in his opus, though, catharsis is among the most cryptic and least discussed of Aristotle's ideas on tragedy and there is a plethora of studies dedicated to dissecting this same concept. Hence, it would not exactly serve the purposes of this study to dive deep into the rabbit hole of different interpretations, so snippets here are better than heaps.

1 Remark by the author: These lines were taken from Benardete's translation. The words in brackets were added by the author to signal the original Greek words which will later be used in the paper.

2 Remark by the author: For a deeper and more informed discussion of Aristotelian tragedy refer to Kaufman's (1992) *Tragedy and philosophy* and Kruse's (1979) *The process of aristotelian catharsis: A redefinition*.

It would be possible to sort the existing arguments on catharsis into three basic categories of 'clarification, purgation, and cleansing' of the emotions, supposedly fear and pity, stirred in the audience (Kruse, 1979). Essentially, the emotional state of the audience would not be the same before and after they are exposed to a tragic narrative, and it is the task of catharsis to ensure that this holds true. Schaper beautifully summarizes the point thus:

In contrast to purely intellectual understanding of a given situation, the enjoyment which tragedy affords emerges from emotional response to the events and completes itself in a grasp of their significance. The emotions are not superseded or left behind; they are transformed into aesthetic emotions, that is, emotions in which being involved and being distanced through understanding are held in balance. ... The full sense [(of catharsis)] is available only when we think of catharsis as the result of a work of imitation, the result of a deliberate construction in which something about human nature and life is made clear for us. (Schaper, 1968, p. 139)

This is why we do not get the same sense of emotional involvement when reading the news of terrible atrocities happening in far-off corners of the globe, some of which far surpass those that move us to shivers in great tragedies: we have distance from the events, but we are not involved because we are not emotionally attached to the events and characters. The balance between distancing the viewer for better understanding and at the same time involving them is key for catharsis to occur. In another passage, she expands upon the concept by arguing that:

... what is unified in tragedy is events which in life would crush us and leave us numb, but which, in the cosmos of a work, contribute to a mimetic whole. Tragic catharsis through pity and fear, provides the most poignant instance of a cathartic effect. It shows in a very striking form what is at stake in the enjoyment of any work of art: that the emotions felt by the audiences or spectators and the complex reactions to fiction are functions of the work *qua* work, that is to say, bound up with the formal nature of the artefact. ... For Aristotle, catharsis is the response to an imitation, to that which is presented as if it were real, to that which is convincing and probable despite not being fact, to that which is complete in itself by the virtue of conforming to some formal principle of art. (Schaper, 1968, p. 141)

Now that a working concept of catharsis has been established, we must turn our attention to the remaining concepts, namely fear, pity, and hamartia. To put it bluntly, fear and pity are the elements that contribute to the sensation of tragic pleasure in the audience. This, however, gives rise to an irony: what type of fear and pity can lead to their opposite emotional state, namely pleasure? The answer could be that such feelings are felt vicariously by the audience. With a nod to Hitchcock, Nanay explains that when watching a tragic narrative:

... we feel anxiety for the protagonist. But anxiety for the protagonist is vicarious anxiety. Again, we do not feel self-centered anxiety: sitting in the audience, eating popcorn, I am not anxious about anything concerning myself. Nor am I experiencing imaginary or make-believe anxiety: I do not imagine myself in the protagonist's shoes and imagine his anxiety – the protagonist may feel no anxiety, so if I were to imagine myself in the protagonist's shoes, I would not experience any anxiety at all. (Nanay, 2018, p. 1377)

The key that enables such vicarious feelings is the distance of the audience from the events, which nevertheless bestows them with the privilege of knowing more than the protagonist does. This feeds very well into the concept of hamartia. As illustrated earlier, most translations of the word point to a moral or intellectual fault or error in judgment that ensures the downfall of the protagonist. What induces our pity as the audience is knowing that the protagonist acted as they did not because they were innately wicked but because

they did not know any better. We as the audience, through knowing more than the characters, know this and therefore feel pity towards a tragic hero like Oedipus. We feel this way because the misfortune befalling the character in the story is not commensurate to their misstep. *Hamartia* is basically the cleansing factor that reduces the severity of the character's wrongdoings by putting things into perspective and allowing the audience to feel differently than they would have done in real life. As Murnaghan explains, "*Hamartia* makes tragedy acceptable by exonerating the characters tragedy imitates, protecting tragic characters, and by extension the spectators who identify with them, from the evil that attaches to their actions" (Murnaghan, 1995, p. 764). Now that we have laid sufficient groundwork for this study, it is time to introduce the digital game that is vividly illustrative of what has so far been discussed. Doing so will demonstrate how the concept of catharsis applies to the game while discussing in more detail the makings of a game that can enthral the audience with its story alone. A Poetics reading of a critically acclaimed game with a strong narrative component like *TLOU2* will show how the journey of the player and the protagonist intertwine in a story that does not fall short of Aristotle's standards for a strong tragedy.

Ellie and the Player in *Last of Us Part II*

Naughty Dog's *TLOU2* is an action-adventure game that lets the player control Ellie, a young woman who seeks revenge for the murder of Joel, her father figure, at the hands of Abby, in a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by the cordyceps fungal infection, which has turned the greater population of the planet into mindless beasts and flamed faction wars among the remaining survivors. The first half of the game lets the player experience Ellie's bloody hunt for Abby and her friends, who helped her kill Joel, while the second half puts the player in the shoes of Abby, while providing more details about her motives and character in narrating the events she endured while Ellie was getting closer to finding her.

The first feature that must be looked for when performing an Aristotelian reading of a text is the handling of the character-audience distance and character identification. As shown earlier, catharsis relies heavily on mimesis, which gives the audience the distance they need from the events in order for them to perceive the universal truths about the human condition and not become entangled in the particulars. A suitable distancing enables the audience to feel both fear and empathy for the protagonist's deeds. A good tragedy must aim for the perfect balance since too much of either fear or pity will not be constructive towards the final goal, which is catharsis; too much of the former leads to repulsion in terror while an excess of the latter results in sentimentalism. Naughty Dog handles this task masterfully throughout the long span of the two games. Whether the player knows Ellie and Joel's story and background or is just beginning to know them, the brutal torture and the eventual murder of Joel in the game's prologue is enough to stir the feeling of empathy and justify the player's wish to help Ellie have her revenge. The degree of commitment, however, among the fans of the series and those who lacked the emotional attachment of the first group was different; those who had played as Joel in the first game did not need convincing to hunt down Abby, as the death threats to Abby's actress attest to that (Tassi, 2020), while the rest were following the journey out of their sense of justice or a mere curiosity to learn more. To try and bring the two groups of players onto the same page, the developers dropped in quite a few playable flashbacks through the course of the game which aimed to provide more background about the characters

and make them emotionally commit to the story of revenge that was ongoing in the present. As Neil Druckman, the game director, states in a podcast about the game that the goal he had in mind for the second instalment was to make the players hate a character, i.e. Abby, and then be able to bring them back from that hatred and animosity to understanding and even compassion (Spicer, 2020). Therefore, as an attempt to check the blood thirst of the die-hard fans and establish some distance between them and the well-loved player characters Ellie and Joel, Naughty Dog employed one of the boldest moves imaginable: shifting the player character and making the players gain a new perspective on the plot by playing as Abby. As with most authorial intentions in works of fiction, though, the response that came from the fanbase was extremely divided. In an attempt to study this polarization, Erb et al. (2021) employ Calleja's (2009) concept of 'focalization' where the player background and disposition is central to understanding 'alterbiographies' (or stories about themselves). It determines whether the player experiences the narrative as the story of an 'entity' (another character) or as their own alterbiography. What their study found was that the players who resisted most to this change of perspective were those invested in the characters and the story as parts of themselves, i.e. their alterbiographies, while the more flexible players viewed this change as something valuable, complex, and unique.

The midway player character shift plays a pivotal role in the narrative structure of the game. By playing as Abby, the player learns that she was also avenging the death of her father, the doctor whom Joel killed to rescue Ellie. We start this portion by playing as a young Abby on the day Ellie was admitted for surgery and Abby lost her father, and then move to the time right after she and her friends have returned to their HQ after killing Joel. We get to see how the events in Jackson have left a lasting scar on Abby and her friends, offering a glimpse into how those experiences have changed them. After playing Abby's section, it would be very difficult to deny her humanity and seek revenge blindly. This humanizing act also makes us ponder Ellie's brutal treatment of anyone who stood in her way to get to Abby. Remembering, for example, how Ellie mauls Nora, one of those present during Joel's torture, to learn Abby's hideout now seems terrifying and pitiable; terrifying because Ellie is also hacking at her humanity with every blow, and pitiful because of the fact she does not deserve this either. Without familiarizing us with the other side of things, the game might have ended up just like another revenge story of endless and pointless killings and shooting until the avenger quenches her thirst, since the distance between the viewer and the character would probably be on either side of an extreme. One would not have the vantage point, the necessary distancing achieved by mimesis according to Aristotle, to see the true horribleness of carnage and revenge.

The Vengeful Fury with a Heart: Hamartia and Catharsis

Ellie's hamartia is her inability to forgive others and this tendency shows itself in two instances, both of which lead to her downfall. As mentioned earlier, hamartia is that shortcoming or fault in the character that brings about their bitter fate and makes us pity their miserable state since we know they were not at fault, at least not completely. In effect, hamartia acts as a humanizing agent in the plot to bring us closer to the character, justify their motives and why they could not have done otherwise.

When we first meet Ellie in the first game, she has no one, and over the course of the story, comes to act as the surrogate for the daughter that Joel lost, and he instead replaces the father that Ellie never met. Not wanting to lose her, Joel lies to Ellie in the final cutscene, telling her that the previous attempts at making a cure had failed and there was no point trying again. One could easily see the hint of disbelief and suspicion in Ellie's eyes as she takes in Joel's words. The second game capitalizes on this suspicion until Ellie, eventually, learns the truth and confronts Joel. For the next two years, until Joel's death, she cuts her ties with him.

The second instance which fully bares Ellie's unforgiving nature is her relentless hunt for Abby, in which the player is also an accomplice. Her only lead takes us to Seattle, now the territory of the faction Abby belongs to, the Western Liberation Front or WLF for short. Not considering the hordes of WLF soldiers murdered by Ellie to get to those who killed Joel, there are two instances which are meant to shake the audience. The first one is when we finally find Abby's friend Nora. She refuses to give up her friend's whereabouts, so Ellie tortures her and it is the player who has to press the buttons and land the blows. We are spared the gory details but later see a broken Ellie, shaken and traumatized as she returns to an abandoned cinema in which she has set up camp. If that was not enough, the story takes another horrendous turn not very long after as Ellie finally makes it to the aquarium, where to her chagrin, instead of Abby, she finds Owen, Abby's ex-lover, and Mel, their friend and now in a relationship with Owen. A struggle ensues and Ellie manages to kill both of them with the player's help but just before we are able to add their names to the list of other indiscriminate victims of the rampage, we hear Owen using his last breath to tell Ellie that Mel was pregnant. In disbelief, she hurries to the dead body and breaks down in seeing that he was telling the truth. Feeling the sudden pangs of her humanity, she is desperate and distraught. Ellie is then taken home by two of her friends who have followed her for help. Thus ends the first half of the game with Ellie agreeing to get back to Jackson. However, it is still too soon for her anagnorisis or recognition.

As mentioned earlier, what qualifies this game as a tragedy is its constant effort to check the audience's distance from the events and characters so that they develop the necessary feelings for the catharsis at the end. If it was not for the second part where we learn more about the people we have been hunting down with Ellie one by one, we would remain too close to Ellie to see anything beyond what she thinks, knows, and does. Naughty Dog successfully conveys the sense that it is the human condition that is in a miserable state, not that Abby and her friends are bloodthirsty villains who bask in murdering and destroying lives. The fact that we as the audience see more than Ellie does and eventually come to know more about the events and characters than she does, enables us to not only wince in fear at her cruelty but also pity her gradual loss of humanity because of something she cannot control.

The epilogue of the game shows a seemingly serene Ellie and her partner living in an abandoned farm, leading a life which we soon find is not yet rid of the shadow of their past as Ellie is suffering from PTSD. Things do not stay calm, however, as Tommy, Joel's brother, brings word of a possible lead as to the whereabouts of Abby and tries to stir the fire of Ellie's revenge and succeeds. We follow Ellie in her final expedition and eventually find Abby and her newfound companion, a young boy named Lev, held captive by a crew of slavers and left to starve tied to wooden poles. Ellie cuts Abby down but will not let her go. Abby does not want to fight but Ellie forces her by threatening to kill Lev. A dramatic fight to the death ensues but just as Ellie is about to finally take her revenge, she remembers Joel, sitting on his porch as usual and playing his guitar, looking content. This is her anagnorisis which finally enables her to let go and forgive. In a way, one could say that seeing Abby with Lev reminded her of the relationship she used to have with Joel, the love

and caring, and opened her eyes to the horribleness of her revenge. However, unlike most tragedies that we are used to like *Oedipus Rex*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or *Hamlet*, the moment of recognition for the character does not come with disaster but this time helps her avert it. This does not automatically disqualify this kind of anagnorisis, as Murnaghan argues, since “[w]hat really interests Aristotle about *anagnorisis* is the way that recognition can forestall pathos, the way it can prevent an act of violence from taking place, and the way it supplants that act of violence” (Murnaghan, 1995, p. 763). Through that recognition, the audience is granted the opportunity to see beyond the particulars of the story they just witnessed and draw universal conclusions, and thus for catharsis to happen.

Conclusion

Aspen Aarseth once said that “unlike literature, games are not about the Other, they are about the Self. Games focus on self-mastery and exploration of the external world, not the exploration of interpersonal relationships” (Aarseth, 2004, p. 50). This paper was an attempt to prove that games like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013-2022) series are not just about play but are fully capable of successfully drawing an aesthetically pleasing narrative picture that not only develops a story but also fully explores characters with rich relationships. The way they achieve this end, though, is through a combination of techniques drawn from various fields.

In its premise, this paper aimed to show how a coupling of Aristotle's ideas and theories about tragedy in his *Poetics* could also be fruitfully applied to a digital game. While the parts and mechanisms discussed in *Poetics* might not stand up to the most rigorous philosophical analysis on their own, their combination as a whole is extremely robust and workable. And when applied as an interconnected system, *Poetics* is indeed capable of helping us understand the complex and interrelated narrative webs, such as the one that was analysed here. Using Aristotle, we were able to see how the game makes use of certain mimetic and storytelling techniques to constantly hold the audience in the optimal position regarding the characters and the action of the story, thereby setting the stage for catharsis by arousing feelings of pity and fear and dealing with them through realization and catharsis.

The game that was chosen for analysis, *TLOU2*, is a narrative game that utilizes the abovementioned Aristotelian techniques in its narrative system in order to warrant the title of a tragedy. By artistically distancing the players from the events and characters represented, the game adeptly handles the task of creating deeper layers of meaning-making within itself, and taking the player along with the protagonist on a journey of grasping deeper truths about what it means to be human. The actual distancing technique operates within the complex and interconnected web of catharsis, hamartia, and anagnorisis, to be precise. *TLOU2* makes full use of all these techniques and mixes them to great effect, leading to a game that is both enjoyable to play as a narrative piece on its own, and at the same time, masterfully crafted to attain the status of artwork. Ellie's final overcoming of her hamartia and her newly-attained ability to forgive and let go through her deeper understanding is a prime example of how proper mimetics can lead to catharsis, thus allowing the audience to gain pleasure from watching gut-wrenching events unfold, and in this case, partaking in them as well by interacting with the game as the player. The pleasure comes not because of our sadistic nature but because we are enabled to see beyond the mere events and learn something more, a deeper, more universally applicable understanding of our nature, in a way that is both natural and at the same time not lacking.

As a final note, the author is in no way supporting the claim that all games are narrative, because they most certainly are not, and arguing otherwise would be falling for the narratologist's overgeneralization trap that Aarseth was warning us about. As we have tried to demonstrate, a narrative game is one that is fully capable of achieving the effects of narratives in other mediums through different means. The same must be said of the method chosen for conducting this study. While applying Aristotle in this instance was successful, the reader is asked to see this as an experiment to show how exciting and at the same time illuminating such projects can turn out to be.

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