

Digital Humanities and Game Ethics: Investigating the Impact of Representation in Gaming

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Abstract

“Digital humanities” is about the usage of computer-assisted tools to preserve knowledge and disseminate them through technological resources. An extension of these techniques can be seen in today's hyper realistic games with high-concept storytelling. These games immerse the players in a world that enables them to experience a different reality and often ask them to make choices that have real-life social impact. They have empowered artists to create worlds that could become a testing ground for philosophical theories. This paper concentrates on the impact of gaming on real-world ethical and political questions. This paper primarily focuses on the impact of *The Last of Us Part II*- an action-adventure game developed by Naughty dog- on the discussion of the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters on already existing IP (Intellectual Property). The response that the game received among the players can be used to understand the general perspective of these elite communities on LGBTQ+ issues. This paper also includes the positive impact of such inclusion and argues that the diversification of characters in already existing IP substantially contributes to inclusivity and equality.

Keywords: digital humanities, games, media, ethics

1. Introduction

“Digital humanities” is about the usage of computer-assisted tools to preserve, disseminate, and interpret knowledge through technological resources. According to the canonical history (Rockwell, 2007) of digital humanities, the field originated with the path breaking work of father Roberto Busa with IBM. The project was to create *Index Thomisticus*, a concordance of about 179 works of theologian Thomas Aquinas, which took almost 30 years to complete from its envisioning in 1946. This was achieved through punch-card processing and primitive computational technologies, initiating the usage of digital tools in the field of Arts and Humanities. With the development of more sophisticated storage and processing capabilities, structured electronic text and media archives began to be widely used in the field of humanities. This led to the consolidation of digital textual analysis in humanities. This naturally interested the scholars to study the impact of digital tools on the larger universe of Humanities and Social Sciences, thus marking the beginning of the field of Digital Humanities (DH). The “canonical history” of DH has grounded the subject in the realm of textual analysis. Several attempts have been made to record non-mainstream history of DH. Scholars argue that non-numerical computing in political science, anthropology, history and other major social sciences can also be considered as early instances of DH. Vanhoutte (2013) for example, talks about cryptanalysis and machine translation during the two great wars as an example of DH at play, that predates the canonical story of Robert Busa. Multiple attempts were also made to expand the scope of DH beyond the realm of textual analysis and storing of data. This was further accelerated by the development of the internet by the end of the 20th century.

The development of the internet gave a new dimension to DH. The access towards the common pool of information went wide with people from the nook and corner of the world now accessing the information in front of their computer screens. The subject matter of DH too had evolved from concordance creation and text-based analysis into complex code writing and decoding. From using room-sized machines and punching cards to perform simple arithmetic tasks to using interconnected computers to transfer information across continents, computers had come a long way since their invention in the field of humanities in the 1950s (Schreibman et al., 2008). The extension of these technological advances has provided us with tools that surpass basic text analysis and push us into a realm of virtual reality, where texts (stories) pictures (graphics and visual effects), and music can be combined together to create profound experiences for human beings. This

meant that digital technologies have greatly seeped into the lives of ordinary people. The technological advances have made it possible to envision texts and stories in two and three dimensional space.

The world-ending apocalypse of 2012 (Columbia Pictures), the horrifying effects of Thanos' snap (Infinity War, 2018), and the brooding crime world of the Irishmen (Irishmen, 2019) were all a result of computer-generated effects which transported people into different worlds, where their everyday toils are forgotten to experience a different reality on the silver screens. In 2010 CNN reported that several moviegoers experienced depression after watching the movie Avatar (2009). It was the result of people's inability to accept the "broken" reality instead of the pristine computer-generated world of Pandora. This phenomenon was later named as Post-Avatar Depression Syndrome. The extension of this text to visual transition is further accentuated by interactive art forms like video games and virtual reality. The purpose of this paper is twofold. One is to establish games as a serious art form that greatly impacts the human psyche. By achieving this, the subject of gaming now lends itself conveniently for investigating it through the lens of DH. Readers might be puzzled as to why one should view games through the lens of digital humanities? As DH is still viewed largely as a subject dealing with text analysis, archiving, and data visualization, to emancipate the subject from its history and propel it into the future, studying new media through the lens of DH is a must. This paper primarily focuses on the impact of Last of Us-II, an action adventure game that visualizes powerful text in three-dimensional space. Along with visualization, the game's usage of contemporary political themes in the narrative has promoted a wider discussion about identity, sexuality, otherness, and empathy.

2. Method

Qualitative method was used to collect data from relevant articles and literature from reputed sources such as Jstor, ResearchGate, Academia, and books such as "Blackwell's Handbook of Digital Humanities" and "Bloomsbury Handbook to Digital Humanities". It ensured that the selected texts and articles span a diverse range of topics within the field of digital humanities, including but not limited to art, new media, pop culture, and ethics. The goal was to both analyze the existing conversation regarding digital humanities and also explore how this field can be expanded through the study of emerging technologies like video games and social media. To better understand representation, a collection of articles on the subject was created. The findings from various articles and texts were synthesized and relationships between different themes and concepts were identified. Conclusions were arrived at by analyzing how these themes relate to the research question, providing a nuanced understanding of the impact of technology in digital humanities.

3. Discussions

3.1 Games as Art

Defining art is a difficult task. For many, art depends on the subjective pleasures given by orchestrated events or meticulously arranged objects, or carefully mixed colors. For others, art is defined by what they stand for; it's politics, its history, or the inspiration behind its creation. Based on these, art theorists have put forth three major theories of art. They are, Formalism, Institutionalism, historical theory. One could argue the case for games being art under each of these categories. Assassin Creed's use of real world art for pushing forward the narrative of the game can be an example of video game formalism. In one of the instances in Assassin's Creed 2 (Ubisoft 2010), the player is offered four different renderings of the famous story of Cain and Abel: Cain slaying his brother Abel by Paul Ruben, The Murder of Abel by Tintoretto, Cain's Murder of Abel by Bartolomeo Manfredi, and Cain Killing Abel by Albert Dürer. The images are also accompanied by four different quotes from the revision of the Bible by Joseph Smith (Boseman, Wieringen, 2023). This is a perfect example of real world "art" being merged with the virtual art; a perfect blend of intertextuality and formalism. Institutional theory of art argues that the status of art or artifact will only be conferred upon a thing by an formal institution- an art gallery or an exhibition. George Dickie in his essay defining art argues the following.

"If urinals, snow shovels, and hat racks can become works of art, why can't natural objects such as driftwood become works of art?" and, of course, driftwood and other natural objects can become works of art if any one of a number of things is done to them. One thing which would do the trick would be to pick it up, take it home, and hang it on the wall." (Dickie. G, 1969).

Many formal institutions have conferred the status of art on games. Games such as The Marriage (2006, Rod Humble, PC), Deep Contact, and Flower are displayed in various art exhibitions, conferring the status of art upon these games. Historical theory of art argues that art should always be in relation to its times. It should relate, reflect, and sometimes revolt against the times in which it was made. Games have a longstanding history of doing this. Some very new examples include Last of Us-II and the metal gear solid series deals with life, loss, bigotry, identity, and spirituality. Even though games fit into these major theories of art, one should observe that games surpass the traditional notions of art. It is just not about the strokes of the brushes, or the arrangements of objects, it transcends the very reality of an audience. It unites the creator and the consumer much more than any medium of art out there.

Tolstoy in his essay "What is art?" (Tolstoy, 1898/1995) ponders over the idea of art. While rejecting the views that

considered art as subjective pleasure, he puts forth the idea of art being a communion between the artist and the consumer. Every work of art results in the one who receives it entering into a certain kind of communion with the one who produced or producing the art, and with all those who, simultaneously with him, before him, or after him have received or will receive the same artistic impression. (Tolstoy, 1898/1995).

Video games are a perfect example of art when one considers the definition of Tolstoy. The creator of a game enters into communion with the player and through this communion, she conveys certain feelings- fear, pleasure, love, success, and failure – to the player. Take for example “The Beginner’s Guide” (Everything Unlimited) created by Davey Wreden, which enables the player to experience the crazy ideas of a game developer named Coda. Here the player plays essentially as herself, taken through the half-developed niche ideas of Coda by a narrator. Wreden himself plays the narrator as well as an in-game character that is obsessed with the creations of Coda. The Beginners Guide transports the players into the world of game development and makes them privy to the nuances of developing a game. Beginners Guide is also a philosophical and narrative maze that wrestles with the idea of artistic intention and authorship (Solberg, n.d). It also provides limited gameplay choices to the player, making them a part of the story, but not the primary influencer. In this way, Davey holds the narrative thread and does not deviate from the narrative and philosophical intent of the game. This answers criticisms that games are not art since they lack “authorial control”, put forth by film critics like Roger Ebert (Boseman, Wieringen, 2023).

But one should also consider that authorial control alone cannot provide the status of art to a medium. The profundity of the existential notion conveyed by the medium is also one of the important qualities of acknowledging something as art. In video games especially, the player intervention in most cases would contribute to the philosophical richness of the message that a game tries to convey. In silent hill 2, a horror-survival game developed by Konami Computer Entertainment, there are six alternative endings and players will get different endings depending on how they play. Silent hill is also an excellent example of video games conveying existential notions to their players. In Silent Hill 2 the players are put into the shoes of James Sunderland, a young widower who lost his wife 3 years ago. He comes to the silent hill- an ominous abandoned American town - after receiving a letter from his dead wife. After navigating through the ominous town of silent hill and escaping from various disturbing monsters, little by little, various pieces of information are revealed to the player’s avatar about his wife’s past and his own. It is revealed in the end that it is James who killed his wife Mary, who was suffering from a deadly disease. The themes explored in Silent Hill directly correspond with the ideas of repression discussed by Sigmund Freud. All the monsters we face in Silent Hill 2 are manifestations of these subconscious thoughts, not only related to the act he performed, but also the repressed sexual desires of James (Wisecrack, 2019). Here, it also follows Carl Jung’s energetic theory of libido (1956), where not literal sexual desires, but abstract thoughts that point people in a particular direction.

The above examples are an effort to convince the readers that video games are arts in and of themselves. The interactiveness of it, the impact it has on the human psyche and its free availability to the masses unlike the traditional “art” pushes it to become something that is much more impactful than any art form out there.

3.2 *Last of Us -II- A Meditation on Empathy*

When Last of us II was released on June 19, 2020, it divided the whole gaming community. The critics praised the game as one of the best games ever created while a considerable number of players criticized it as a product that betrayed its loyal fan base and feminist propaganda (AP Nerds, 2020). Last of Us-I was both a critical and commercial success. It meditated on the idea of love and parenting in a post-apocalyptic world, where exercising your primal emotions is not restricted by the institutions of state authority (Washington Post Live, 2023) . The Last of Us is set in a post-apocalyptic United States, where the majority of people are infected by a mutated fungus in the genus cordyceps. In this zombie-ravaged world, Joel, a smuggler, is tasked with escorting a girl named Ellie who is immune to zombie bites. Joel has to escort her to a firefly (a rebel militia group) hiding in the Massachusetts state house. What follows is a third-person action-adventure shoot-out, where the player plays both Joel and Ellie, traveling through the state for over 2 long years. Ellie and Joel meet various characters that make them and in turn, the players contemplate ideas of love, humanity, violence and pain. When Joel reaches the fireflies hideout, he gets to know that Ellie has to be killed in order to create a vaccine out of her. Joel kills the chief surgeon and others in the room and escapes with an unconscious Ellie, obliterating any chances of developing a vaccine. At the end of the game, when Ellie asks about what happened, Joel lies to her that her immunity meant nothing. The game satisfied the gaming community by having a traditional worn-out masculine hero shepherding a young rebellious girl across the state on an adventure.

Last of Us II takes place five years after the events of the first game. Now Ellie and Joel living in a relatively peaceful community are trying to mend their relationship that is somewhat troubled by Joel’s actions in the first game. Though Ellie doesn’t know the whole truth, she realized that Joe was lying, leading to the deterioration of their relationship. We also follow one more important and perhaps the most controversial character in recent gaming history Abby. Abby is the daughter

of the surgeon that Joel murdered and she is out for revenge. When all three characters meet, Joel gets horribly murdered by Abby before Ellie's eyes. Ellie then goes on a revenge spree which involves torturing and killing the friends of Abby, including a pregnant woman named Mel. Did Ellie get her revenge? Or will Abby kill Ellie? These two fundamental questions punctuate the rest of the game. Games are known for their escapist brand of entertainment, where players are asked to suspend their disbelief and travel into an alternate world, where most of their daily problems are forgotten. Last of US II is a rare game that asks its players to confront everyday realities- political, cultural, and psychological- instead of escaping from them. It asks the player to understand the perspective of the killer of their favorite character. It asks the player to bear witness to many questionable decisions that Ellie makes throughout the gameplay. It makes the player privy to all the traumas that various characters go through. It questions belief systems, confronts gender politics, and promotes humanity over hate. All these qualities were very important in the larger socio-political scheme that the game was released in. Amidst the mid of the pandemic, when the world was grappling with the question of mortality, repercussions of climate change, and racial injustices, the game forced the players to confront these realities in the fictional realm. The game had characters from different racial backgrounds, sexuality, and genders while tackling a wide range of real-life issues such as queer relationships, religious fundamentalism, PTSD, revenge, mortality, and empathy. All these made the critics rate the game as one of the greatest of all time. One of the primary themes of the game was the concept of the consequences of revenge and the practice of empathy. Joel's actions in the first game sowed the seed for his murder in the second game and Abby's quest for revenge led to the death of her friends. When Ellie goes on a revenge spree, she loses herself, committing acts of violence that scar her for life. To break this vicious cycle of violence, Ellie has to find the strength within herself to forgive Abby and let go of Joel. She had to practice empathy to bring sanity and order to a world of chaos.

However, ironically, the gaming community was not empathetic to the game. Last of Us II became one of the most controversial games in recent times. Its message of empathy did not sit well with a considerable number of players. The fans of the first installment felt betrayed and were outright offended by the maker's choice of making players play as Abby. The game also became a target of anti-feminist and transphobic hatred. The inclusion of Lev, a trans character and the design of Abby's physic that defies all established norms of the female body was also criticized by the "fans". As of 2023 on Metacritic, the game has a 93/100 rating from critics whereas the audience's rating stays at 3.4/10. A game that asks the players to empathize with its "villain" was met with severe hatred. The reception of this game informs us of the attitude of gaming communities towards inclusivity and gender equality. Taking only America into account, 64% (163 million) of American adults are gamers, which is an overwhelming number by any standards. Globally speaking, about 2.69 billion gamers consumed video games as one of the chief sources of entertainment in the year 2020 (Finances Online, 2023). Thus, any response from the gaming community should be taken seriously.

Is the negative response towards Last of Us II a rejection of empathy? Even in a technologically advanced time, will people stick to the traditional exploitative institutions? Even during a time when the world is grappling with the idea of mortality, will hate triumph? The answer to these questions would be a resounding No. Last of us became one of the fast-selling games on the PS4 platform and the fast-selling PS4 exclusive game. Many players expressed that Last of US helped them in coming to terms with the anxieties caused by the pandemic, process the loss of a loved one, and contemplate the transient nature of mortality. Although the game was divisive upon its release, many gamers resonated with its idea of empathy and hope. A number of Surveys were also conducted to understand the impact of the game on people. One survey conducted by the research firm Ipsos MORI, in July 2020 aimed to understand how players responded to the themes in the game, including issues such as empathy, mortality, revenge, grief, and the portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters. The survey reported that the majority of players found the game to be emotionally engaging and thought-provoking, with 78% of respondents agreeing that the game dealt with mature themes in a responsible way. The survey also found that 82% of players felt that the game's portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters was either good or excellent.

Below are some of the comments written by players in a recent youtube interview that Neil Druckmann the co-president of Naughty Dog and creator of the Last of US gave to the Washington Post.

"I experienced a lot of loss before and during my first playthrough of The Last of Us Part 2 and the game really hit me in my core, I felt that intense anger, guilt and grief that Ellie felt but I understood how dangerous and degrading that is to hold on to. How Ellie physically and emotionally felt on that beach was a perfect representation of how destructive those intense feelings can be when you hold onto them."

"I love what he's created, the last of us is so important to me it is not just a game to me, But a part of my life."

Along with these comments, a number of youtube video essays have been made by loyal fan bases to break down the philosophy of last of us 2. This indeed proves that the message of empathy has been understood by the fans despite the initial outrage by the fans. Last of Us II was a great example of swimming against the tide in popular culture. As mass theorists proclaim that popular culture would only create marketable non-critical, vacuous products, Last of Us II broke the tradition by encountering the ideas of grief, trauma, revenge, and vengeance, providing an important message to a

world that was ravaged by the pandemic. It promoted the message of empathy and love, a message which is more important in an increasingly divisive world.

3.3 *Why Representation in Pop Culture Matters*

The term popular culture refers to the set of practices, beliefs, and artistic output that is prevalent in a society at a given point in time. Serious academic studies on popular culture have existed since the 1920s, trying to understand the impact of radio and other mass media that has a particular effect on society (Strinati, 1995/2004). In contemporary times the bandwidth of mediums that are involved under the term “Popular Culture” has considerably widened. Along with Radio and popular novels, Television, social media, OTT platforms, comics, and games have occupied the discussions on popular culture. Though many may see the growth of popular culture as a reflection of technological advancements breaking down elite notions of art and providing voices for the masses, some theorists argue that the growth of popular culture is in fact a hindrance to human culture as a whole (Strinati, 1995/2004). Mass culture theorists argue that capitalism, industrialization and urbanization have broken down traditional human bonds, hierarchical systems, and moralities leading to the creation of “atomized individuals”. This mass of atomized individuals lacks any coherent cultural structure to mediate information given to them nor foster, define conduct and fashion morality” (Strinati, 1995/2004). This makes them open to coercion through mass propaganda. Ever since the medium of films has been consumed by a large audience, authoritative forces have used them for mass propaganda and careful curation of Mass culture. The Nazis and Fascists of Germany and Italy used to produce films that promoted their political agendas of antisemitism and homogenization of the population. In a similar vein, Mass cultural theorists consider that mass-produced media are used by capitalists to promote their own agendas under the guise of democratization and liberalism. They argue that popular culture is produced by industrial techniques, and marketed for mass public consumption. These popular arts lack the spontaneity and earthy quality of the folk arts since they are qualified by “form”; which is usually defined by the powerful elites of modern societies.

“Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying.... Folk Art was the people’s own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their master’s High Culture. (McDonalds, 1957)”.

It is indeed controversial to interpret popular culture as a primary tool of mass propaganda and to incline towards archaic hierarchical systems and regressive moral principles. But mass culture theories provide an important insight into how to interpret the impact of popular culture in the contemporary world. Pop culture indeed plays a huge role in shaping the perception of contemporary mass societies, making it a dangerous weapon that could be used by powerful forces for manufacturing consent. Feminists have also argued against the portrayal of women in popular culture since the 1950s (Strinati, 1995/2004). Feminists have criticized the usage of women as a sex symbol, and being portrayed in a stereotypical, exploitative, manner. Similar to mass culture theorists, Feminists believe that contemporary popular culture plays an important role in shaping the idea of a particular gender. They argue that the “cultural representation of women in mass media perpetuates the prevailing sexual division of labour and orthodox conceptions of femininity and masculinity” (Strinati, 1995/2004). When contemporary popular art tries to break away from this stereotypical representation of women, they are met with online hatred and criticism. When Brie Larson-the protagonist of the Marvel movie Captain Marvel-pointed out the lack of proper representation of women and non-white males in the movie review industry, the movie was reviewed on famous review sites such as IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes (Vox, 2019). In 2016 when “The Last Jedi” tried to expand the lore of Star Wars by introducing a strong female character as the last hope, it was again hated by the so-called franchise fans (Vox, 2019). Similarly, the representation of persons of colour in popular media has predominantly been stereotypical and problematic, contributing to acute real-life problems such as police brutality, institutional discrimination, and general hatred towards black and other communities of colour. When movies tried to break away from these stereotypical representations, they were met with severe online hatred, labelling the movies as Feminist Propaganda Films or Social Justice Warriors-films. This trend points out the impact of pop culture on mass culture, but they also act as testimonials to the necessary need for proper representation of gender and races in popular culture. Gaming has always been perceived as a male’s pass time and games are predominantly modelled keeping the male audience in mind. Though several games have had female protagonists, they are modelled to appeal to the male gaze. For example, Lara Croft Tomb Raider (Eidos Games), has a hyper-sexualized (revealing clothes, whispery voice, and chest twice as wide as her waistline) female archaeologist, whereas the uncharted series (Naughty Dog) has a more masculine, fully dressed male archaeologist. Video games largely had unique male characters of all body types with solid backstories, whereas the female characters have always been reduced to their hyper-sexualized bodies and whispery voices. This is where Last of Us-II swims against the tide and promotes discussion on empathy, identity, sexuality, representation and LGBTQ+ rights. The wide hatred for the game reflected the immediate response to a media that breaks away from the tradition, yet, the later acceptance proves that the message of representation, empathy, and identity had very well been accepted by the masses at large.

4. Conclusion

After presenting the results, you are in a position to evaluate and interpret their implications, especially with from the above study, it is clear that games, which represent a new form of art, have a wider reach than any other traditional art form. Using the example of 'The Last of Us Part II,' we can infer that rendering texts as three-dimensional interactive art forms will impact the human psyche more extensively and profoundly than other art forms. This proves that adequate representation of race, gender, and sex, along with abstract notions of empathy in new media, will indeed have a progressive impact on society. Hence, it is concluded that games can be one of the most important tools in DH, which can be used to understand the impact that technology has on the human psyche and society at large.

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Authors contributions

Prof. Edhaya Chandran E was responsible for study design, ideas and revising. Prof. Dr. Gnana Sanga Mithra S drafted the manuscript with methodology and revised it.

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