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GDD 101

10/4/22

Critical Analysis: The Last of Us II

Just as I had gotten my PlayStation 4, the free game of the month was *The Last of Us*. I thoroughly enjoyed the game and the story it told. It was both heartbreaking and heartwarming, as it told the tale of two survivors on a grueling journey across the country. Hearing that the second game would be released two years later excited me more than anything as I anticipated its launch. After completing the game, thirty-six pulverizing hours of gameplay, I was at a loss for words as to what I had just experienced. It was grueling, it was depressing, and it left me questioning whose side I was on if anyone's at all. The entire journey of the game had been fueled by a rampage for revenge. Playing *The Last of Us II* made me feel incredibly guilty and taught me to be more forgiving than vengeful. Being able to reflect on these actions showed me to act with sympathy and understanding, and most importantly able to let go of grudges.

Revenge is something that people are taught not to have, as it is unhealthy and causes negative outcomes between both opposing parties and anyone in between. It is ironic, because although we are told not to act out these things, and although it has proven to have numerous negative impacts, we still act on them and believe ourselves to be satisfied as a result. The truth in this is that revenge just enters a sequence of never-ending violence, hurting countless people and never being enough for those who are seeking revenge from one another. This concept plays throughout the entirety of *The Last of Us Part II:*

Instead, it fashions itself into a parable about the futility of revenge and the way that violence only begets more violence. (Sheehan. para. 18)

Each death and each immoral action that the game induces filled me with the utmost guilt, but this is how the story is designed to play out. By the end of the game, neither Ellie nor Abby gain anything from the antics played out in the game. In fact, they lose loved ones, their sense of morality, and more importantly, their option to be more forgiving. They instead choose to continue their quarrel of heinous acts, taking countless lives along the way. In the end, the story proves revenge to be pointless. The act of vengeance turned into the act of constantly being violent to the point of no return.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this story is playing the game through two different characters. I act brutally as one character, and then the game switches me to the other character, witnessing what I had just done as the other:

[…] forcing the player to contend with the consequences of their own actions and to wonder at what point the cycle of violence and the duty of vengeance has become too much for anyone to bear. (Sheehan, para. 21)

This function in the game serves as a way for players to feel empathetic, and possibly even regretful of what they had just acted upon. There is an intense sequence in which this exact situation plays out back-to-back. Ellie and Abby get into an intense fight with one another, and the level involves the two chasing and hunting each other down backstage in an old theater. When I played, I was quite literally hunting myself down. At this stage in the story, I had a good understanding of Abby's story. I learned more about how she came to be, and what motivated her to act the way she did in the game. To my surprise, I found Abby to be a much more likable

character than when she was first introduced in the story. As for Ellie, she had been a character I was familiar with since the first game, who had slowly begun to turn into a villain. Having to play as these characters witnessing and committing these vile acts, created a conflict between whose side I was on. Both had been driven by revenge, going to similar extents to follow through with their vengeance, and I played through it. This guttural cycle left me questioning why people do this, why I would do this, and how it can ever stop or be prevented.

The designers of *The Last of Us Part II* created characters that are certainly not good but are also not outright evil. The balance of their good and bad qualities are similar, so picking a side is more complicated. The designers make the decision for players to play as Abby and learn about her, despite depicting her as immoral or evil from the beginning. When I first saw what she had done, I was angry and didn't understand why she would do anything so retched. However, as I played her side of the story, more human characteristics in her were brought out, and the more I

understood her character. The creators cultivate sympathy for Abby, despite what she has done. Meanwhile, Ellie is seen losing her human touch throughout the game, consumed by hatred and revenge. This game's design is interesting because I played two characters that directly impacted one another's stories and actions, and any choice that I made, I later had to suffer the consequences as the other person. I was able to play like them in their darkest moments, but also learn about how they came to be, and what motivated the things that they did.

> Halfway through The Last of Us Part II, players switch from Ellie to Abby, and discover that the latter has sound reasons for revenge. As the game progresses, the appeals to empathy are steadily amped up, introducing you to Abby's friends and family, using conversations and extended flashbacks to plunge you deep inside their stories (Dougherty, para. 27)

Witnessing both sides of each character brought light to their perspectives. It was no longer a one-sided story about a girl who seeks revenge over her father figure, but a conflicted story of two enemies fixed on defeating one another who has also acted on good morals. The more these characters' stories unravel, the more they seem alike. In fact, labeling these characters as "hero" or "villain", "good" or "bad", does not fit these characters. They exist as all people do, making mistakes and following through with bad decisions, consumed by negative qualities. However, they also show mercy, remorse, and protectiveness. For example, although Abby ruthlessly beats Ellie and nearly kills Dina, she spares her after learning that she is pregnant and leaves the theater. Ellie in an earlier part of the story, however, does not spare Mel who is also pregnant. Upon discovering that Mel was pregnant, she immediately feels guilty. The game shows this through the muffling of audio and Ellie falling to the ground with a distraught expression on her face, vomiting after realizing what she had just done. The designers are sure to show that through

the repulsive things both characters have done, there are human reactions or qualities within them that neutralize their otherwise negative reputation. After I had evaluated the positive and negative acts of Abby and Ellie, there was no real protagonist and antagonist, and they had both been fighting a worthless battle that did more harm than good.

(Via. CINEMATIC GAMING on YouTube)

There is an interesting approach that is applied in introducing a character with a bad first impression. Most games tend to show the regression of a character's morality and good sense, which is seen in Ellie. In the first game she is a young girl with solid values whereas, in the second game, she becomes more of a villainous character over vengeance. The way Abby was written and portrayed was the complete opposite. She is introduced in the story in her worst form; a killer. As the story progresses, she possesses more redeeming qualities like mercy towards others and even the protectiveness of Lev and Yara, who come from an enemy force. It is even shown why she is so vengeful in *The Last of Us Part II.* The creators show that Abby's

story is more than all the bad she has done and that her actions came with reason, despite them being very bad decisions. Understanding her story gives her more depth as a person and shows her perspective of the game's events. When I learned the difference in perspective through this game, I reflected immensely on the times that I often neglected the stories that others carried behind their actions. There was more to consider about someone once I had learned more about them.

There are countless games that create a world where players can bring out the most aggressive, merciless forms of themselves. Very few of these games get into the minds of players and inflict guilt on them. *The Last of Us Part II* executes this perfectly with the use of graphics, audio, and an immersive mechanic within the game. While it may be a video game, there is no exception to what is being committed within this digital world. Each level in the game is set up with several enemies, where players can choose to escape stealthily, or run rampant and slaughter each enemy. The latter is often the easiest answer to completing each level, as both Ellie and Abby become equipped with a plethora of weapons and craftable explosives throughout the game. It may also simply be satisfying for players to run around killing several fictional people and moving around stealthily is extremely hard in the game. If players choose to massacre enemies in the level, the game audibly induces guilt within the player. Enemies cry blood curdling screams, some even begging to be spared or to be killed. In fact, the game does a lot to create a realistic combat sequence. When fighting enemies, the moves are smoother and almost cutscene-like, and there is a mechanic where the player can dismember certain body parts by cutting or shooting certain parts of enemies. This is, of course, where they begin to shout in pain before dying. This mechanic, however, combined with the audio features, does a well-rounded job of creating a realistic situation that immerses the player into the game by involving their

actions directly with the environment around them. These are all things that make the player feel remorseful for what they have done. The game teaches the pointlessness of revenge and the cost that it has on many lives. This is portrayed through the game's atmosphere, very rainy weather, dark music and scenes, and jarring audio that inflicts penitence onto players.

> It takes violence to a level that is uncomfortable even by the standards of video games, and seemingly does everything in its power to make gamers feel bad about the act of playing it. (Dougherty, para. 5)

I personally tried very hard to make it through these levels stealthily. Many times, I found myself spotted by enemies and gave into the more aggressive approach. The levels had also gotten more difficult to make through passively, and if I were spotted the enemies would be much less forgiving. In a sense, I felt forced to kill all these people, and afterward, I felt nowhere near satisfied with what had just occurred. I felt almost repulsed and wondered why the game was making me do these things countless times. Hearing the screams of enemies distressed me severely. The enemies who had begged to be spared or put out of misery I sympathized with. I found this very interesting for a game, as I had never felt this way before playing it.

(Via. RM Games on YouTube)

When people feel offended or wronged in some form, they often want to return that treatment to the others who have treated them the same way. Sometimes it ends simply with people acting on one another once. Other times, it turns into a cycle of constant payback from both or more parties than can end in very ugly outcomes. Revenge turns out not to be as sweet as it was expected to be. Before I had played *The Last of Us Part II*, my mind wasn't open to the exact aftermath of revenge, especially that of the opposing party. I was often set on exacting my revenge and making anyone else's life very difficult in subtle ways. I hadn't considered why these people would do what they did to me, and I was very quick to act in anger, much like Ellie had done. After playing, it took me a very long time to process what I had just seen. The game had ended with something so unexpected, yet so meaningful to me.

> Unfortunately, it takes a lot of death and disaster before Ellie is finally able to let
> go of her deepest grudges, and while it isn't entirely clear whether she has fully
> forgiven her transgressors by the end of The Last of Us Part 2, she has found

some way to make peace with the past without seeking revenge. (Simelane, para. 11)

While I expected to see an outright fight to the death, Ellie learns to let go of what has happened to her. The author states that lots of disaster and death takes place before this happens, however. If she had learned to let go of her grievances much earlier in the game, fewer people would be affected, and it would spare her the time that she had wasted seeking revenge as much as she did. Reflecting on that aspect, I looked back to times when I had acted the same way. Not being able to let go of grudges had simply made it harder on me in the sense that I had not gained a thing from that experience. I had just learned to respond with more anger and more acts of violence. This was the wrong way to act toward others, and this game had shown me a large part of that. It also told me that others' stories often play a significant role in why they acted in certain ways or did certain things. Rather than looking to get back at them, I considered understanding more about them, and what had occurred to them that influenced their behavior toward me.

The Last of Us Part II made me feel unsettlingly guilty. It was violent, cruel, and depressing. The aftermath of the game's events showed me how revenge can drive a person to go to such high extents and do awful things over it. I asked myself why this video game had this sort of impact on me. I recognized that I treated revenge similarly to how it is played out in the game. It is true that any game with a revenge plot could have impacted me. However, the small details in the game that alluded to revenge's worth, and cost inspired me to recognize these situations within myself and reflect upon them. Oftentimes, anger outweighed understanding, vengeance outweighed forgiveness, and my narrow perspective outweighed the perspectives of others. These reactions and habits could have changed much sooner had I realized them earlier. However, I was sure to react more passively than I had in the past. As difficult as it was, I found

myself releasing grudges, and being more confrontational in asking why someone had done something to me. Trying to seek vengeance against someone would only hurt me more than it would benefit me, and it could cause a cycle of the other person wanting to seek vengeance as well. After playing *The Last of Us Part II*, I became more forgiving and understanding as a person, and more reflective of why things had occurred the way in which they did.

I tend to be very petty with my three siblings since they like to take and use things of mine, often breaking or misplacing them. I was looking for one of my favorite shirts in my wardrobe when I couldn't seem to find it anywhere. I looked in the washer and dryer, dresser drawers, my hamper, and even went around asking my sisters and mother. After being told that the shirt had been nowhere in sight, I lost hope of finding it and hoped that it would turn up somehow. I had been throwing trash out into the garbage can outside of my house when I spotted my shirt right inside of the can. I couldn't believe it was there and knew there was no way that I had put it there. Picking it up, it was smothered in bleach stains; I was devastated. In fact, I got extremely angry as I stormed the house looking for who would do such a thing and went as far as lying to me about it. Confronting my second oldest sister first, she confessed to her wrongdoing immediately and apologized. Rather than shouting at her or trying to get payback, I asked her why she had done it, and more importantly why she had lied in the first place. She first explained that she didn't notice my shirt in the washer as she went to place her own white clothing in it. To my surprise, she told me that she lied due to my behavior in the past where I would overreact and act rudely toward her. This shocked me, and regret rushed over me immediately. I didn't care much for what she had done anymore even if it upset me. It devastated me that I caused her to act in such a way. The conversation had ended with me simply telling her not to do it again. More importantly in this scenario, I learned something from that experience rather than creating

a tense situation. If I had chosen to act vengefully, I wouldn't have gained this insight and adapted my behavior. It wouldn't have nearly been worth being understanding and forgiving. Not only did I understand my sister's motivations, but I was able to communicate with her on a certain level that I wouldn't have been had I reacted vengefully. It would have been easy to retaliate and damage her belongings, but I didn't. Doing that would have created a bad situation for both of us, and I now knew that. Vengeance was not worth it for me anymore.

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