

Queerness in Transmedia: An Analysis of the videogame and TV series The Last of Us

Queerness en el Transmedia: Un Análisis del Videojuego y la Serie de TV The Last of Us

Queerness no Transmedia: Uma Análise do Videogame e da Série de TV The Last of Us

María-José Higuera-Ruiz^{1*} 

José-Patricio Pérez-Rufi^{2**} 

¹ Universidad de Salamanca. Spain.

² Universidad de Málaga. Spain.

* Permanent Professor in the Department of Sociology and Communication of the Universidad de Salamanca. Spain. Email: mhiguera@usal.es

** Associate Professor of the Department of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising of the Universidad de Málaga. Spain. Email: patricioperez@uma.es

Received: 14/06/2024; **Revised:** 19/09/2024; **Accepted:** 20/09/2024;
Published: 23/12/2024

Translation to English: Sophie Phillips

To cite this article: Higuera-Ruiz, María-José & Pérez-Rufi, José-Patricio. (2024). Queerness in Transmedia: an Analysis of the videogame and TV series The Last of Us. ICONO 14. *Scientific Journal of Communication and Emerging Technologies*, 22 (2): e2187. <https://doi.org/10.95/ri14.v22i2.2187>



Esta obra está bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Atribución 4.0 Internacional

Abstract

Transmedia storytelling expands audiovisual content through different media, such as video games and television series. This research focuses on a comparative study of both formats, specifically examining the social representation of the LGBTQI+ collective. The study centers on *The Last of Us* videogame (Naughty Dog, 2013) and its television adaptation, produced by Sony Pictures and PlayStation Productions for HBO (2023-). The primary aim of this study is to determine the presence and representation of queer characters within this universe, which was chosen for its popularity and critical acclaim and is considered a paradigmatic case in this context. Using a qualitative approach and a theoretical framework that encompasses both transmedia storytelling and Queer Theory, textual analysis is applied to compare the representation of two same-sex couples in both formats: Bill and Frank and Ellie and Riley. The findings commend the queer inclusion within the fictional universe, particularly in the television series, while also noting certain shortcomings and stereotypes in the original video game's storyline regarding the male characters. Despite this, the inclusion is positive, and its acceptance is evident, which favorably impacts the self-identification of the LGBTQI+ community in audiovisual media and broader societal recognition, considering the media's role as a socialization instrument. The study concludes by emphasizing the potential of transmedia to update and reconstruct social representations, particularly queer representations, across different media over time.

Keywords

Videogames; TV Series; Queer; Transmedia; The Last of Us; streaming

Resumen

La narrativa transmedia expande los contenidos audiovisuales a través de diferentes medios, como el videojuego y la serie de ficción. El estudio comparativo de ambos formatos es el foco de atención académica en esta investigación, concretamente, desde la representación social del colectivo LGTBQI+. Sobre el caso del videojuego *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) y la serie del mismo título producida

por Sony Pictures Television y Play Station Production para HBO (2023-), el objetivo principal de este trabajo es determinar la presencia y representación *queer* en el universo de la ficción, seleccionada por su popularidad y aceptación, y siendo considerada como un caso paradigmático en este sentido. Desde un alcance cualitativo y un enfoque teórico que abarca tanto la narrativa transmedia como la Teoría *Queer*, se aplica el análisis textual para comparar la representación de dos parejas de personajes homosexuales en ambos formatos: Bill y Frank, y Ellie y Riley. Los resultados aplauden la inclusión *queer* en el universo ficcional, especialmente en la serie, anotando ciertas carencias y estereotipos en el videojuego original en lo relativo a la trama masculina. A pesar de ello, la inclusión es positiva y la aceptación patente, lo que repercute favorablemente en la identificación de la comunidad LGTBQ+ en el audiovisual y el reconocimiento de la sociedad en general, atendiendo al papel de los medios como instrumentos de socialización. Los hallazgos del estudio concluyen las oportunidades del transmedia para actualizar y reconstruir las representaciones sociales, concretamente lo *queer*, en diferentes medios a lo largo del tiempo.

Palabras clave

Videojuegos; Series de televisión; *Queer*; Transmedia; *The Last of Us*; streaming

Resumo

A narrativa transmídia expande o conteúdo audiovisual por meio de diferentes mídias, como videogames e séries de ficção. O estudo comparativo de ambos os formatos é foco de atenção acadêmica nesta pesquisa, especificamente, a partir da representação social do grupo LGTBQ+. No caso do videogame *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) e da série homônima produzida pela Sony Pictures Television y Play Station Production para HBO (2023-), o objetivo principal deste trabalho é determinar a presença e a representação *queer* no universo de ficção, selecionada pela sua popularidade e aceitação, sendo considerada um caso paradigmático neste sentido. A partir de um escopo qualitativo e de uma abordagem teórica que abranje tanto a narrativa transmídia quanto a Teoria *Queer*, a análise textual é aplicada para comparar a representação de dois casais de personagens homossexuais em

ambos os formatos: Bill e Frank, e Ellie e Riley. Os resultados aplaudem a inclusão queer no universo ficcional, especialmente na série, constatando certas deficiências e estereótipos no videogame original em relação à trama masculina. Apesar disso, a inclusão é positiva e a aceitação é evidente, o que tem um impacto favorável na identificação da comunidade LGBTQBIQ+ no setor audiovisual e no reconhecimento da sociedade em geral, tendo em conta o papel dos meios de comunicação social como instrumentos de socialização. Os resultados do estudo concluem as oportunidades da transmídia para atualizar e reconstruir representações sociais, especificamente sobre queerness, em diferentes mídias ao longo do tempo.

Palavras chave

Videogame; Série de televisão; Queer; Transmídia; *The Last of Us*; streaming

1. Introduction

In today's audiovisual landscape, transmedia possibilities and media hybridization have opened avenues for new forms of dialogue between media, creating a visual and narrative experience that transcends the consumption of a single product, offering audiences a more expansive and more enduring relationship with content franchises. Intersections and dialogue between video games and audiovisual fiction are not new in contemporary cultural and entertainment offerings. However, the relationship between both formats has become more pronounced over the past decade, especially in serial fiction. This shift is driven by the rising popularity and prestige acquired by television series and the interdisciplinary scope of video game theory within the context of digital convergence. This convergence brings video games closer to other domains, such as transmedia, thereby redefining the paradigms that have traditionally shaped the discipline (Cuadrado, 2016, pp. 19-20).

In examining the relationship between audiovisual fiction series and video games, it is essential to highlight Joyce's (2023, pp. 13-17) concept of "dual industrial core franchises," which refers to the transmedia expansion of video game fantasy worlds into television adaptations. While these adaptations share narrative elements and brand identity with the original games, they maintain sufficient distance to prevent the videogame from establishing a canon that must be followed

in its expansion into serialized fiction. This duality in the transmedia expansion of videogame universes applies to series such as *The Witcher* (Netflix, 2020-), *Resident Evil* (Netflix, 2022), *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023-), or *Fallout* (Prime Video, 2024).

Following these premises, *The Last of Us*' narrative universe is selected as the focus of this research due to its recognition as a successful transmedia phenomenon (Paredes-Otero, 2023), particularly after the adaptation of the videogame (Naughty Dog, 2013) into a television series (HBO, 2023-). Both formats have been praised for their inclusion and representation of queer characters. In addition, the universe has expanded across various media and platforms, including comics, live script readings, downloadable content, sequels, remastered versions, and even fan-made films (Burgess, 2023; Paredes-Otero, 2022b). Therefore, in accordance with Sánchez-Mesa and Baetens (2017), we recognize not only a primary adaptation of a work from one medium to another in the traditional sense but also a transmedialization of the universe, which allows for the creation of simultaneous stories across different media.

The selection of *The Last of Us* for examination also responds to the widespread acclaim received by both the videogame and the television production, regarding sales and audiovisual awards¹. The story has also been commended for its inclusion of empowered women, queer and racialized characters (Mago, 2023; Murray, 2019; Sipocz, 2018), garnering attention from GLAAD (*Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation*) for its contribution to diversity through characters such as Bill, among others (GLAAD's Entertainment Media Team, 2013).

Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2013) and Cuadrado (2016) turn to Game Studies and Media Studies to examine video games and television series from a generic approach, comparing the narratology and ludology of both formats. Concerning the case at hand, previous studies have focused on the video game *The Last of Us* from perspectives such as metamodernism and cybertext (Radchenko, 2020), aesthetics and gameplay (Suárez Mouriño, 2020), ecology (Farca & Ladevèze, 2016) and morality (Green, 2016), as well as from the perspective of its transmedia universe (Kitrar, 2024).

Regarding social representation, Paredes-Otero (2022a) examines the rupture of female stereotypes and the manifestation of social issues, such as homophobia or ideological extremism. It concludes that the game portrays women in a way that challenges traditional sexist stereotypes, aligning with Atrio's (2019) findings.

Additionally, research interest in the television series highlights Jonsson's (2023) study on the cinematic aesthetics of the project and Canavan's (2023) examination of the two main characters, Joel and Ellie, and their narrative evolution throughout the journey that unfolds in the plot.

However, there is a significant lack of research addressing both formats within a transmedia context, particularly concerning queer representation in *The Last of Us* videogame and its television adaptation. This study, inspired by prior publications, seeks to fill this gap by applying Queer Theory to analyze the portrayal of same-sex couples within the narrative, with a focus on comparing this representation in each of the media formats studied.

2. Theoretical framework: From the videogame to the TV series

In the contemporary audiovisual landscape, there has been a notable rise in the production of projects with transmedia aspirations, accompanied by increasing academic interest (Sánchez-Mesa & Alberich-Pascual, 2019). In analyzing the transmedia expansion of a cultural product, Rosendo Sánchez (2016b) emphasizes the need to define the elements of the universe and understand the transitions that occur as the narrative moves across different media. The author (referencing Wolf, 2012) notes:

The original medium of that world is important, but so is the media through which it expands. Therefore, to study its processes, it is essential to consider each medium's properties, capacities, and peculiarities and the conventions and expectations they generate among their audiences (Rosendo-Sánchez, 2016b, p. 59).

In response to this demand, *The Last of Us* universe is presented through both the videogame and the television series, highlighting the relationship between these two formats and their unique approaches to the characters and their queer representation.

The Last of Us is set in a near-future dystopian world, specifically in the year 2033 in the United States. In this postapocalyptic world, a global pandemic caused by the Cordyceps fungus has transformed the infected individuals into cannibalistic

monsters. The country, now in ruins, operates under a new social order enforced by the military-controlled FEDRA (Federal Disaster Response Agency) within quarantine zones. At the same time, the Fireflies resistance movement opposes this regime (Paredes-Otero, 2023). The main characters, Joel, a man who lost his daughter at the onset of the outbreak, and Ellie, a young girl who appears to be immune to the infection, must travel from Boston to a hospital in Massachusetts to develop a vaccine using her immunity.

The Last of Us (2013) is a third-person video game developed by Naughty Dog. Sony acquired it and released it exclusively for PlayStation 3. It was subsequently remastered for PlayStation 4 in 2014. The game was directed by Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann and features designer Jacob Minkoff and composer Gustavo Santaolalla. It received critical acclaim and achieved commercial success, reinforcing its popularity; it has been described as “visually arresting, mechanically solid, maturely written” (Sartori, 2013).

Sony Television Pictures and PlayStation Productions produced the adaptation of *The Last of Us*, which aired on the cable TV channel HBO and its streaming platform, Max. The first season premiered in January 2023, with episodes released weekly until March of the same year. The series was created and written by Neil Druckmann, the director of the original videogame, in collaboration with Craig Mazin, and features music by Gustavo Santaolalla, the composer of the videogame. HBO’s distribution, which is associated with brand values of prestige and innovative content, alongside the casting of well-known actors such as Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey, contributed to the project’s success. The TV series remains faithful to the original format, as it features dialogues and audiovisual narratives that closely mirror those of the videogame. This fidelity is cited by the creators and critics as a critical factor in the popularity and acceptance of the adaptation: “Keeping the 'soul' of the video games while employing the changes needed to take the story to a different medium was a key aspect of production for Neil Druckmann” (Burgess, 2023).

A preliminary approach to the video-game-fiction series binominal refers to seriality, around which this relationship is configured. Seriality is characterized by repetition, change, and continuity; the interplay of these elements gives rise to various representations of interactions between time, character, and action. Videogames are serialized through frequency and repetition across three

dimensions: (1) the performative dimension, where gameplay takes precedence over characters and narrative; (2) the evidential dimension, where the character/player's skills evolve through trial and error; and (3) the structural dimension, where the character/player seeks to progress and conclude the story (Cuadrado, 2016, pp. 24-25). The videogame *The Last of Us* emphasizes the linearity of its plot and primarily features a structural repetition accompanied by a strong expectation of closure that the player pursues through the character of Joel (Cuadrado, 2016, p. 27). For instance, this repetition is evident each time Joel confronts a new group of infected individuals that he must defeat to continue his journey and advance the plot.

On the other hand, digital seriality in the narrative universe of a videogame can manifest in three distinct ways: (1) inter-ludic seriality, which involves the production of supplementary material, such as sequels, remakes, etc. (2) intra-ludic seriality refers to the internal content of the videogame (levels, chapters, and repetitions), and (3) para-ludic seriality, which encompasses relationships with other media through transmedia strategies (Denson & Jahn-Sudmann, 2013, p. 11). The videogame *The Last of Us* encompasses all three forms of seriality because (1) it includes remastering, DLC –DownLoadable Content, and *Part II*, (2) it is structured into chapters and relies on repetition within its gameplay, and (3) it expands transmedially with its adaptation into a television series, among other media.

Narrative seriality is closely linked to the player's or viewer's emotional engagement with the plot and characters of the fiction (Anyó & Colom, 2021). In video games, this engagement tends to be more intense due to the interactive possibilities offered by the cybertext: the player is the one who experiences doubts, emotions, and the journey through the characters, thereby becoming part of an emotional story (Radchenko, 2020). This aspect is particularly prominent in *The Last of Us*, where the relationship between Joel and Ellie is central, allowing the player or viewer to empathize with the characters and observe their positive development and growing intimacy throughout the narrative.

This phenomenon is termed incorporation: "The players' active input creates the potential for a more intense emotional experience, whether satisfying or trusting, that non-ergodic media provide" (Calleja, 2011, p. 135). Concerning *The Last of Us*, Anyó and Colom (2021, p. 85) highlight the complexity of the characters to emphasize the significance of the emotions generated by the narrative and

aesthetics of the videoludic text: “these characters, whom we play, convey emotions that arise from a gaming experience inseparable from the plot.”

Emotional engagement plays a crucial role in representing social minorities, such as the LGBTQBI+ collective. The parasocial contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) posits that the inclusion of non-normative realities in fiction influences audience perceptions, particularly among individuals who lack real-life interaction with or knowledge of the minority (Marcos-Ramos et al., 2022). Consequently, positive, realistic, and stereotype-free representation can foster trust and reduce negative prejudices within the community being portrayed and in society at large.

3. Objectives and methodology

The primary aim of this work is to determine the presence and construction of queer characters in the narrative of *The Last of Us*, identifying key differences between the video game and the television series. A qualitative approach is employed to achieve this, using a methodology based on the textual analysis of both formats following their prior viewing.

An approach to Cultivation Theory refers to fictional series as reflections of social representations of behaviors and ideas, serving as instruments of socialization that shape public knowledge and perceptions of diversity (Marcos-Ramos et al., 2020). In alignment with this theory, Paredes-Otero (2022a, p. 81) extends this perspective to video games, describing them “as a medium of representation capable of fostering critical thinking and social change,” which encompasses both AAA games (an informal classification for high-budget, commercially driven videogames) traditionally seen as primarily motivated by economic factors, or more modest, niche productions.

Transmedia storytelling (Sánchez-Mesa, 2019) has become a central focus in media studies, Game Studies, narratology, and cultural studies, which, to varying degrees, address the subject of study from the perspective of a medium and/or narrative: “through the media across which it expands or the narrative elements that comprise it” (Rosendo Sánchez, 2016b, p. 61). Both approaches are adopted in this work as we focus on characters, a key component in serial narratives (Rosendo Sánchez, 2016a), to compare the construction of queer representation

in the two primary media of *The Last of Us* universe: the videogame and the television series.

Based on these premises, the projects are first presented within their respective production contexts, whereby the connection between the videogame and the television series is explored through the implications and characteristics of digital seriality. The focus then shifts to queer representation in both media, with a specific examination of the characters Bill and Frank in chapter 4 (*Bill's Town*) of the videogame and episode 3 (*Long Long Time*) of the television series, as well as Ellie and Riley in the *Left Behind* DLC and episode 7 of the same name.

To achieve this, the character analysis proposed by Casetti and Di Chio (2007 [1999]) is applied to identify the construction and functioning of the television discourse across three distinct levels: the character as a person (phenomenological perspective), as a role (formal perspective), and as an actant (abstract perspective). The first level, the most pertinent to this analysis, examines the character's appearance (physique, clothing, gestures), verbal expression, personality, inner life, past experiences, professional, personal, and private lives, and goals and motivations. The second level focuses on the types of attitudes and actions the character expresses according to their function in the plot. Finally, the study of the character as an actant refers to their role in the narrative and their relationships with other characters (Casetti and Di Chio, 2007 [1999]; Valverde-Maestre and Pérez-Rufi, 2021).

Although this methodological approach originates from literary theory and narratology, it is noteworthy that it has recently been applied to Feminist Film Theory and Queer Theory, as it allows for a critical examination of character construction and the underlying ideologies at play (Higuera-Ruiz, 2023). Consequently, several authors have adopted this model in their studies on the representation of the LGBTQI+ community in audiovisual media (Cobo-Durán and Otero-Escudero, 2021; Valverde-Maestre and Pérez-Rufi, 2021; Higuera-Ruiz, 2023). Like this research, these studies explicitly reference issues of gender identity and affective-sexual orientation, examining whether negative stereotypes traditionally assigned to the LGBTQI+ community are perpetuated in the media.

Additionally, specific criteria regarding queer representation in audiovisual media are employed: visibility, identity, body, and social interaction (Capuzza and Spencer, 2017). Two types of scenes are examined: introduction and sex scenes

(Seid, 2014), as both are instrumental in constructing LGBTQI+ characters in audiovisual narratives from a non-heteronormative perspective.

The results will contribute to television studies from a Queer Theory perspective while also highlighting the uniqueness of the transmedia comparison and the conclusions regarding the representation of the community in the video game and television series *The Last of Us*.

4. Results: Queer Representation and character analysis

Queer representation in the media is a subject of academic study, garnering attention from both the industry and audiences in contemporary society, where diverse realities demand greater and higher-quality inclusion of all social sectors in audiovisual content.

On one hand, video games have traditionally been shaped by narratives and mechanisms that reflect heteronormative, homophobic, and racist culture (Chang, 2015). Over the past decade, this paradigm has been partially challenged with the inclusion of LGBTQI+ content, both in characters- through actions, references, and characterization- and in storylines- through narratives, settings, and contexts-. However, this shift is evident in only specific, paradigmatic cases, and homophobia and transphobia continue to persist within the industry (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). In contrast, television series have shown a positive quantitative and qualitative increase in the inclusion and representation of queer individuals (Higuera-Ruiz, 2023), particularly in productions for streaming platforms. However, the results remain limited concerning population demographics and persisting negative stereotypes (Gonzalez-de-Garay et al., 2022).

Queer representation in audiovisual fiction positively contributes to the self-identification of LGBTQI+ individuals, who demand authentic and non-stereotypical visibility of their identities (Shaw, 2009). Additionally, it fosters knowledge and acceptance among the broader society (Ruberg, 2018). Despite certain limitations, the increase and improvement in the quality of these representations in recent years are evident, a trend partly supported by the growing inclusion of queer professionals in the technical and creative sectors of audiovisual production (Poole, 2017).

The transmedia universe of *The Last of Us* incorporates a representation of racial and ethnic diversity, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity, through the narratives that unfold and characters that develop in both the videogame and the television series.

4.1 Bill and Frank in Bill's Town and Long Long Time

Bill and Frank, two cisgender gay men, play a secondary role in the story's narrative. In the television series, their storyline is exclusively developed in episode 3 (*Long Long Time*), which is presented as a flashback. In contrast, they appear briefly in Chapter 4 of the video game (*Bill's Town*).

Bill is depicted as a middle-aged man with a robust build in both the video game and television series. He has short brown hair, light-colored eyes, a graying beard, and a severe demeanor. He is intelligent and strategic, though initially temperamental and stern. Bill dresses in a stereotypical "lumberjack" style, wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, and is always armed. He resides in a small town that was evacuated during the outbreak, which he has fortified with traps and stocked with essential supplies for survival. While the characterization of Bill remains consistent across both media, the television series allows for greater narrative development, revealing a more sensitive and empathetic side to the character that is largely absent from his portrayal in the game.

Frank appears younger than Bill; he is tall and slender, with thick hair, light-colored eyes, and a beard. His attire is similar to Bill's, reflecting their shared context. Frank is portrayed as pleasant, sociable, and humorous from the outset. In contrast to Bill's obsession with protecting against intruders, Frank seeks to lead a life reminiscent of the normalcy that existed before the pandemic: making friends, dressing elegantly, and maintaining a small vegetable garden.

We examine the introduction scene of both characters in the series, where a shot/reverse shot employs high-angled/low-angled shots to depict Bill from above as he points a weapon at Frank, who has fallen into one of his traps. This dominant/submissive power dynamic shifts in the intimate scene, where Frank discovers that Bill is gay (Bill is playing a song on the piano, and Frank asks about the girl in the song; Bill replies that there is no girl, to which Frank nods

in understanding). Frank then takes the initiative and kisses Bill, subsequently positioning himself on top during their sexual encounter, guiding the interaction. Thus, as actants, the characters exchange their roles as objects/subjects and sender/receiver in these scenes.

The narrative of this episode unfolds over time, portraying an almost idyllic romantic relationship despite the harsh environment built on mutual support, affection, and understanding. The couple's story concludes dramatically, highlighting the tragic endings that often characterize queer relationships in audiovisual media, particularly those involving women, a phenomenon known as the "Dead Lesbian Syndrome" (Millward et al., 2017). Meanwhile, Joel and Ellie arrive in Bill's town, where they learn of Bill and Frank's deaths through an emotional letter left by Bill for Joel.

However, the video game's storyline involving Bill and Frank is entirely absent. Instead, Joel and Ellie, the protagonists, go to Bill's town in search of a car. As previously mentioned, Bill is depicted in much the same way as in the television series, except for his more sensitive and empathetic side, which is only hinted at when they find Frank's body hanging.

As a result, the player is unaware of the homosexual relationship between Bill and Frank, as it is never explicitly presented. Bill refers to Frank as his partner (it is translated as "*socio*" in Spanish version, which means "business partner"). Later, Joel/the player finds a suicide note from Frank to Bill, in which Frank angrily explains the reasons that led him to take his own life: he despises his life with Bill and prefers death to living in that town. The nature of their relationship is not made explicit in these words either. Finally, as Joel and Ellie leave in Bill's car, Ellie finds several magazines featuring homosexual pornographic content, which leads the player to infer Bill's sexual orientation.

The storyline of Bill and Frank in the videogame spans approximately 5 minutes and, as noted, offers minimal visibility of queer representation through these characters. This highlights how the change in medium results in significant variations in the portrayal and construction of the characters, including Bill's rougher and more hostile characterization to Frank's near absence in the videogame, as well as the subtle depiction of their romantic relationship. To elucidate these differences, we reference the words of the creator Neil Druckmann: "My philosophy on this show has always been, when should we deviate and when should we come

back. If it's kind of the same or worse, we stay where the game is. If it's better, we deviate".

4.2 Ellie and Riley in *Left Behind*

In the videogame, Ellie, as a co-protagonist, stands out as a playable character whose sexual orientation is not a choice for the player, thereby contributing organically to the narrative. The story, titled *Left Behind*, both in the game- and downloadable content (DLC)- and in the episode in the series, is a flashback depicting Ellie's life during her training in the quarantine zone, where she meets her best friend Riley, whose role is secondary. Both characters are cisgender, homosexual female characters.

As a character, Ellie is a 15-year-old girl with a fair complexion and brown hair tied in a ponytail who dresses in old, comfortable, non-sexualized clothing. She is characterized by her adventurous and rebellious spirit, somewhat nervous and disobedient, yet independent and strong, although she ultimately forms an almost paternal relationship with Joel. However, in the narrative we are examining, Ellie is being mocked by her peers and requires Riley's protection, making her the object. At the same time, Riley takes on the role of subject in the unfolding action, viewed from the perspective of the character as actant. Riley is a black girl with long, braided hair who has escaped school to join the Fireflies. She is older than Ellie and exhibits certain leadership qualities in their relationship, making her a potential role model for Ellie.

The plot developed in *Left Behind* is consistent across both the video game and television series. In both versions, the friends sneak out of school at night and head to an abandoned shopping mall, where Riley has prepared a series of surprises for Ellie. They dance in Halloween masks, play arcade games, ride the carousel, and take pictures in a photo booth. All these scenes are present in both media, with only minor variations in the order of events or small details that do not diminish the visibility of the characters' identities.

In the introduction scene, during the night, Riley enters through the bedroom window she once shared with Ellie, waking her up with a playful prank. Ellie, startled, initially reacts as if she is being attacked. This scene, and how it is executed,

conveys subtle nuances about their relationship, highlighting Riley's role as the older figure who leads their pranks and acts as her caretaker. The viewer quickly grasps the bond between the two friends, who laugh and joke around together but have missed each other and are upset about being apart.

As the plot unfolds in the shopping mall, the dynamic between the girls is intensified while still maintaining the depiction of friendship between them. The climax occurs when Riley confesses to Ellie that they will have to say goodbye for good as she is leaving to join the Fireflies. Ellie then begs her to stay. Riley nods, and Ellie kisses her. After they pull away, they laugh shyly, highlighting the depth of their connection and the innocence of their relationship at such a young age.

The plot again takes a tragic turn when this moment is interrupted by the sound of an infected individual in the shopping mall. The girls fight off the threat and emerge victorious but soon realize they have both been bitten. There is a notable difference in their reactions: Ellie responds with violence and desperation, while Riley expresses sadness and resignation. This reveals that there are not only differences in their personality but also their past experiences: Riley, having lost her parents, is familiar with death and capable of accepting the loss of a loved one. Through this flashback, the viewer gains insight into how Ellie became infected and the origins of her apparent immunity.

As previously noted, both the narrative development and character construction remain practically identical across the two mediums. However, it is important to highlight how this storyline is integrated into *The Last of Us* universe. In the case of the videogame, the narrative is embedded in a DLC released after the original game and included in the remastered version. In contrast, the TV series incorporates the story as a flashback in an episode of the same name as the downloadable content. Therefore, both analyses reveal a quantitative and qualitative improvement in the representation of queer identities within this universe, both in terms of inclusion (as exemplified by the game's DLC) and in the representation of relationships (illustrated by the portrayal of Bill and Frank's relationship in the series). The transmedia expansion of the universe facilitates this improvement. The representation of LGTBQI+ individuals in the two mediums is subject to the unique characteristics of each: the videogame conveys queerness through limited mechanics and interactions, while the series offers a more emotionally nuanced and profound narrative. Consequently, these different formats provide distinct

perspectives on these representations, influencing their visibility and depth. The transmedia adaptation facilitates the evolution and impact of queer narratives.

5. Discussion and conclusions

From the analysis of the homosexual characters within *The Last of Us* universe, viewed through the intersection of Game Studies, narratology, Queer Theory, and transmedia analysis, several conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the social influence of entertainment media is emphasized, particularly in the context of video games and serialized fiction, due to their predominance and popularity in leisure time. As instruments of socialization, these media contribute to shaping public perceptions of certain collectives and social minorities, such as the LGBTQI+ community. Consequently, ensuring that their representation is fair, realistic, and devoid of stereotypes is essential.

The popularity and acclaim that the transmedia universe of *The Last of Us* has garnered due to the inclusion of queer characters within its narratives warrant academic attention for in-depth analysis. This examination aims to explore the characterization and implications of two same-sex couples while also comparing the potential variables between the video game and television series.

In the case of the characters Bill and Frank, it can be concluded that, despite the recognition received by the videogame from GLAAD, the inclusion and representation of homosexuality within it is brief and limited, not overt and ultimately stereotypical. At no point is Bill explicitly identified as homosexual; the only evidence is the presence of gay pornographic magazines in his car, which reinforces a negative trope associated with LGBTQI+ representation. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the term “partner” fails to convey the nature of their relationship clearly, and Frank appears only as a lifeless body in a farewell letter. However, the game developers significantly reworked this storyline while writing the television adaptation. In this medium, Bill and Frank have a fully developed narrative independent of the main plot, showcased in an entire episode of the series. Although their narrative goes beyond normative romanticism and appears somewhat incongruent with the post-apocalyptic setting, it culminates in a tragic ending that often befalls queer characters in fiction. Nonetheless, it provides a representation

that is more appropriate and socially relevant. Various factors contribute to this evolution, stemming from the decisions made by the executive producers and the inherent differences between the two formats; the ten-year gap between the release of the videogame and the television series may account for the positive evolution of queer representation in this instance.

The narrative development involving Ellie and Riley is mainly identical across both formats. Once again, the inclusion and representation of the LGBTQI+ community in the video game are favorable, particularly from a feminist perspective, especially considering that Riley is a racially marginalized character. Therefore, the intersectionality of their representation is significant and positively acknowledges their presence in an industry that has historically been marked by sexism, homophobia, and racism. Moreover, it is essential to note that Ellie will take on the protagonist role in the video game *The Last of Us Part II*, enabling her character's evolution and characterization by exploring various romantic relationships. This development will pose a unique challenge for the production of the second season of the television series, offering opportunities to expand upon the conclusions drawn from this analysis through a comparative study of the upcoming content.

Despite the limitations and improvements needed in queer representation identified in this study, there is a positive increase in the presence and characterization of LGBTQI+ characters in audiovisual media. In response to criticism concerning the necessity of these characters' storylines in both formats, it is worth noting that their presentation as flashbacks impacts the main narrative involving Joel and Ellie by allowing the player/viewer to develop a deeper understanding of the protagonists' personalities, motivations, and decisions. The study concludes that the significance of transmedia expansion is vital for a comprehensive understanding of queer representation within *The Last of Us* universe. Additionally, it highlights the potential of transmedia storytelling to enhance the quantitative and qualitative inclusion of LGBTQI+ narratives in audiovisual media.

Authors Contributions

María-José Higuera-Ruiz: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Writing-original

draft; Writing-review & editing. **José-Patricio Pérez-Rufi:** Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Validation; Visualization; Writing-original draft; Writing-review & editing.

All the authors have read and agree with the published version of this manuscript.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article

Funding

This work has been supported by the Spanish State Research Agency through the project “Transmedialización e hibridación de ficción y no ficción en la cultura mediática contemporánea (FICTRANS)”, Ref. PID2021-124434NB-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033/FEDER Una manera de hacer Europa, Plan Estatal de Investigación Científica, Técnica y de Innovación 2021-2023. Principal researchers: Domingo Sánchez-Mesa Martínez and Juan Ángel Jódar Marín

Acknowledgement

Authors thank Mario Rodríguez for his insightful feedback on drafts of this article.

Article translated into English by Sophie Phillips.

Notes

¹ The videogame sold 37 million copies by 2022 (Matas, 2023) and is recognized as one of the most awarded games in history (Dutton, 2014). The television series has garnered 24 nominations and 8 Emmy awards (Television Academy, 2023). It also received the Best Adaptation of a Video Game award at The Game Awards 2023 (The Game Awards, 2023).

References

- Allport, Gordon W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.
- Anyó, Lluís, & Colom, Ángel (2021). Ambivalencia emocional en *The Last of Us*. Las emociones en los videojuegos, entre la complejidad narrativa y la lealtad del jugador. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 31, 85–102. <https://bit.ly/3RwjGMv>
- Atrio, Andrea (2019). Mujeres silenciadas: La representación del género y la técnica narrativa en el videojuego *The Last of Us* de Naughty Dog. *Revista Hélice*, 4(11), 26–44. <https://bit.ly/3yZ3qgG>
- Burgess, Jacqueline (17 January, 2023). Can The Last of Us TV series finally break the bad video game adaptation curse? *The Conversation*. <https://bit.ly/3XuJL2a>
- Calleja, Gordon (2011). *In-game: from Immersion to Incorporation*. The MIT Press.
- Canavan, Gerry (2023). Joel and Ellie's excellent adventure: The Last of Us as franchise. *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 16(3), 319–333. <https://doi.org/10.3828/sfftv.2023.18>
- Capuzza, Jamie, & Spencer, Leland G. (2017). Regressing, Progressing, or Transgressing on the Small Screen? Transgender Characters on U.S. Scripted Television Series. *Communication Quarterly*, 65(2), 214–230. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2016.1221438>
- Casetti, Francesco, & Di Chio, Federico (2007 [1999]). *Análisis de la televisión. Instrumentos, métodos y prácticas de investigación*. Paidós.
- Chang, Edmond Y. (2015). Love is in the air: Queer (im)possibility and straight-washing in FrontierVille and World of Warcraft. *QED: A Journal in GLTBQ Worldmaking*, 2(2), 6–31. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.2.0006>

- Cobo-Durán, Sergio, & Otero-Escudero, Sofía (2021). Narrativa de los protagonistas trans en la teleserie Veneno. *Zer, Revista de Estudios de Comunicación*, 26(51), 79–97. <https://ojs.ehu.es/index.php/Zer/article/view/23007>
- Cuadrado, Alfonso (2016). Series de TV y videojuegos: la poética de la serialidad en la forma lúdica. *Anàlisi. Quaderns de Comunicació i Cultura*, 55, 17–30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i55.2896>
- Denson, Shane, & Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas (2013). Digital Seriality: On the Serial Aesthetics and Practice of Digital Games. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, (7), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.7557/23.6145>
- Druckmann, Neil, & Mazin, Craig (Executive Producers) (2023-). *The Last of Us* [TV series]. Sony Pictures Television, Play Station Production, HBO.
- Dutton, Fred (2014). The Last of Us and Tearaway take the BAFTAs by storm. *PlayStation Blog*. <https://bit.ly/4epMgZG>
- Emmy Awards (2023). The Last of Us. Awards & Nominations. *Television Academy*. <https://www.emmys.com/shows/last-us>
- Farca, Gerald, & Ladevèze, Charlotte (2016). The Journey to Nature: The Last of Us as Critical Dystopia. *1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*. <https://bit.ly/4eAepJd>
- GLAAD's Entertainment Media Team (2013). Most Intriguing New LGTB Characters of 2013. *GLAAD*. <https://glaad.org/blog/most-intriguing-new-lgbt-characters-2013>
- González-de-Garay, Beatriz, Marcos-Ramos, María, & Angulo-Brunet, Ariadna (2022). LGTB+ Characters in Original Spanish Video-on-Demand Series. *Sexuality & Culture*, 27, 786–804. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-10038-y>
- Green, Amy M. (2016). The reconstruction of morality and the evolution of naturalism in *The Last of Us*. *Games and Culture*, 11(7-8), 745–763. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015579489>

- Higueras-Ruiz, María José (2023). Revisión de la representación trans en la ficción televisiva española. Análisis de la serie de televisión *Todo lo otro* (HBO Max, 2021-). *Revista Mediterránea De Comunicación*, 14(1), 133–146. <https://doi.org/10.14198/MEDCOM.23250>
- Jonsson, Amy M. (2023). *Long, Long Time: An Examination of Identity and Status Connected to Scenography in the Tv-Series The Last of Us (2023)* [Doctoral Thesis]. Malmo University. <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-60741>
- Joyce, Stephen (2023). Video Games in Transmedia Storyworlds: The Witcher and the Mothership Problem. *Imagining the Impossible: International Journal for the Fantastic in Contemporary Media*, 2(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.7146/imaginingtheimpossible.129696>
- Kitrar, Alisa (2024). *From Console to Screen: A Comparative Analysis of Transmedia Storytelling in The Last of Us Game and TV Series* [Master Thesis]. Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.19638.68168>
- Mago, Zdenko (2023). The Last of Us (TV Series). Reviews. *Acta Ludologica*, 6(1), 124–127. <https://actaludologica.com/volume-6/>
- Marcos-Ramos, María, González-de-Garay, Beatriz, & Arcila-Calderón, Carlos (2020). Grupos minoritarios en la ficción televisiva española: análisis de contenido y percepciones ciudadanas para la creación de un índice de diversidad. *Cuadernos. Info*, (46), 307–341. <https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.46.1739>
- Marcos-Ramos, María, González-de-Garay, Beatriz, & Pérez Álvarez, Sara (2022). Todas ellas: análisis de la mujer LTBI+ en las series españolas originales de plataformas. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e8251. <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2022.8251>
- Matas, Fran G. (4 de enero de 2023). La serie *The Last of Us* ha vendido 37 millones y comparte un arte del multijugador. *Vandal*. <https://bit.ly/3xjGqZf>

- Millward, Liz, Dodd, Janice G., & Fubara-Manuel, Irene (2017). *Killing Off the Lesbians: A Symbolic Annihilation on Film and Television*. Mc-Farland.
- Murray, Soraya (2019). Playing Whiteness in Crisis in The Last of Us and Tomb Raider. *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, 4(3), 117–146. <https://doi.org/10.26503/todigra.v4i3.102>
- Naughty Dog (2013). *The Last of Us* [Videogame]. Sony Computer Entertainment.
- Paredes-Otero, Guillermo (2022a). Empoderamiento en la representación de los personajes femeninos de videojuegos. Sensibilización ante problemas sociales con The Last of Us Parte II. *Obra Digital*, 22, 81–96. <https://doi.org/10.25029/od.2022.330.22>
- Paredes-Otero, Guillermo (2022b). Estudio de los fan films sobre videojuegos como herramienta de apropiación del canon oficial. *Contratexto*, 38, 153–177. <https://doi.org/10.26439/contratexto2022.n038.5869>
- Paredes-Otero, Guillermo (2023). Periodistas especializados, YouTubers y The Last of Us. Comparativa de la cobertura mediática en YouTube de una serie de éxito. In Sara Rebollo-Bueno, Cristina Algaba, & Luis Manuel Fernández Martínez (Eds.), *Género y educación ante la manipulación de la comunicación* (pp. 1081–1102). Dykinson.
- Poole, Ralph J. (2017). Towards a Queer Futurity: New Trans Television. *European Journal of American Studies*, 12(2), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12093>
- Radchenko, Simon (2020). Metamodern Gaming: Literary Analysis of The Last of Us. *Interlitteraria*, 20(1), 246–259. <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2020.25.1.20>
- Rosendo, Nieves (2016a). Character-centred transmedia narratives. Sherlock Holmes in the 21st century. *Artnodes*, (18), <https://doi.org/10.7238/a.v0i18.3046>

- Rosendo Sánchez, Nieves (2016b). Mundos transmediales: revisión conceptual y perspectivas teóricas del arte de crear mundos. *Icono 14*, (14), 49–70. <https://doi.org/10.7195/ri14.v14i1.930>
- Ruberg, Bonnie (2018). Straight-washing “Undertale”: Video games and the limits of LGBTQ representation. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, (28). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2018.1516>
- Sánchez-Mesa, Domingo (2019). *Narrativas transmediales. La metamorfosis del relato en los nuevos medios digitales*. Gedisa.
- Sánchez-Mesa, Domingo, & Alberich-Pascual, Jordi (2019). Introducción. Monográfico. Narrativas transmediales: entre la industrialización de la mitología y la creación colaborativa. *Pasavento. Revista de Estudios Hispánico*, 7(2), 253–258. <https://doi.org/10.37536/preh.2019.7.2.718>
- Sánchez-Mesa, Domingo, & Baetens, Jan (2017). La literatura en expansión. Intermedialidad y transmedialidad en el cruce entre la Literatura Comparada, los Estudios Culturales y los New Media Studies. *Tropelías. Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada*, 27, 6–27. https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_tropelias/tropelias.2017271536
- Sartori, Paul (5 June, 2013). The Last of Us –review–. *The Guardian*. <https://bit.ly/3Rr0r76>
- Seid, Danielle M. (2014). Reveal. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(1-2), 176–177. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399947>
- Shaw, Adrienne (2009). Putting the Gay in Games. *Games & Culture*, 4(3), 228–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009339729>
- Shaw, Adrienne, & Friesem, Elizaveta E. (2016). Where Is the Queerness in Games? Types of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Content in Digital

Games. *International Journal of Communication*, 10, 3877–3889. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5449>

Sipocz, Daniel (2018). Affliction or Affection: The Inclusion of a Same-Sex Relationship in *The Last of Us*. In Tood Harper, Meghan B. Adams, & Nicholas Taylor (Eds.), *Queerness in Play* (pp. 81–96). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90542-6_5

Suárez Mouriño, Adrián (2020). La crítica al presente desde el futuro en *The Last of Us*. *Barataria*, (29), 36–52. <https://doi.org/10.20932/barataria.v0i29.566>

The Game Awards (2023). Best Adaptation. *The Game Awards*. <https://thegameawards.com/nominees/best-adaptation>

Valverde-Maestre, Águeda María, & Pérez-Rufí, José Patricio (2021). Sex Education (Netflix): representación de adolescentes LGTBIQ+ como recurso dramático. *ZER: Revista De Estudios De Comunicación = Komunikazio Ikasketen Aldizkaria*, 26(50). <https://doi.org/10.1387/zer.22528>