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2014). "Endure and survive" mark a dialogue (e.g. scene found at GameRevolution GR 2013) in the game and signify words which many of the game's players have said impacted their lives profoundly.

Since their breakthrough into mainstream culture at the end of the 20th century and continuing into the 21st, video games have had an undeniable impact on the economy, entertainment and academia (Zeiler 2018, 3–13). In addition, recent modern cinematic video games have the ability to facilitate meaningful connections with players via multiple levels of communication (Rautalahti 2018, Oliver et al. 2015). Games continue to impact and connect with players even after they have ended, after the console or the computer has been turned off. Reflections on games reach deeply into players' lives. Games move people in emotional, positive, and even life-changing ways, although this is seldom recognized (Isbister 2016, xvii).

In this study, I examine videos and forum discussions related to the theme or titled "How video games changed my life". The sample material of the chosen social media platforms, YouTube videos (2013, 2015–2017) and Reddit forum discussions (2013–2018), is especially focused on the game *The Last of Us*. I question, using themed content analysis, how *The Last of Us* is brought up in conversation texts and video content, including themes on *life change* or *affecting life*, as found through usage of the search term *life change*.

This article discusses religion, video games, meaning-making and identity. The study consists of five videos and 23 threads in which the aforementioned topic is discussed. The study asks what constitutes a life-change for *The Last of Us* players by locating major reoccurring narrative themes, and secondly what functions the narratives afford as formats or models within the emerging *The Last of Us* community using the

purposes for popular culture material where religion is not explicitly at hand. In this case, the life-change narratives of players are examined through the instrumental framework of religious testimonies.

The study material of life-change narratives linked to *The Last of Us* especially supports the evaluation of attributes describing what a favourable or positive life-change could be. Previous work on the positive changes of playing video games is argued by Bourgonjon et al. (2016) based on online forum discussions. They used Belfiore and Bennett's (2008) theory of approaching data as reflecting the *impact of the arts* (Bourgonjon et al. 2016), asking what is said in online forums about video game play. Their findings concentrate on the rhetorical use of specific literary expressions about video games; for example, games were referred to by the players as a *Significant part of life* or a source of *Self-development* (Bourgonjon et al. 2016). More often, comments were related to the positive impact of video games than their negative effects. In addition, Oliver et al. (2015) found that players also recall enjoyable gameplay moments as meaningful. However, while similar remarks can be found in the data used for this article, the focus here is to see what constitutes a life-change narrative and how the emerging community encourages the use of such narrative expressions.

The receptive and actor-centred approach in the fields of popular culture and religion is also discussed within fandom studies, specifically in regard to how fandom provides meaning-making analogies and features similar to lived religion, underlining again the significance of popular culture in society (Blom 2013). Even though the approach of focusing on a player's receptivity is also present in this article, which means that it could easily also be included under fandom studies, here the questions of locating life-change narratives and examining an emerging (fan) community are

survive in a life-or-death situation, and what would be your means of surviving? This, I argue, is ultimately the meaningful dilemma that has inspired the self-reflective narratives in the YouTube videos and forum discussions on meaningful life-changes.

Expressing Life(-Changing) Stories on YouTube and Reddit

“A really late game feelings post: “after playing this, it's like I feel an emptiness that I didn't recognize before. It's somehow feels like it started a search for something meaningful like a relationship like Ellie and Joel's in life, that I somehow ignored before. I was just depressed and doing nothing after finished it. It helped me reconsider and change and now feel like my life actually ended up a bit better.” (3771504405 2017)

The sample of self-made YouTube videos and forum discussionsⁱ explicating life-changing experiences, or turning points in life based on reflecting on the video game, falls into the genre of personal narratives. Often described as oral narrative recollections of one’s meaningful life events, life stories are differentiated, for example, from written autobiographies (Linde 1993, 3, 20–22). Life stories describe “who we are and how we got that way” as well as negotiate membership, according to Charlotte Linde (1993, 3, 20–22).

As this article’s material consists of oral or otherwise expressive videos, as well as conversational – although written – forum posts of personal narratives, they fall into the category of life stories. The explicit intention of these narratives, to reach out to a possible audience or forum community, underlines their impact on their makers. Linde describes the “reportability” of life stories, which may include content usually considered intimate, as being more private and shared with those with whom one has a close relationship (Linde 1993, 22). Given the public (albeit at times anonymous) nature of the material, the act of sharing life-changing events, even those which have

perhaps previously been intimately reflected on, seems to be done publicly. In addition, it should also be kept in mind that the online platforms themselves afford and enable such outcomes of public communication and sharing.

The sample videos are understood in this study as personal narrative performances within the rules and frame of a public outlet or sharing platform. The performance type of the videos is usually a casual vlog or, in a few cases, a more artistically thought-out presentation with editing, cut-scenes and music. The videos portray a rather ordinary scene, common among YouTube videos, with the exception that they are labelled as *life changing*.

Since 2005, YouTube has grown as an online media outlet enabling countless users: viewers, commenters, video makers and professionals. YouTube videos today are used in many ways, such as for seeking information, sharing and self-expression (Lange 2014). In general, apart from videos used for commercial purposes, YouTube consists of ordinary people and amateurs making videos, usually reflecting on present times. As Michael Strangelove (2010, 4) argues, YouTube videos represent co-operation or conflict with the present; this is not far from how John Storey, John Fiske and Hall (Storey 2015, 243, Fiske 1989, 20–21, Hall 2009, 518) commented on popular culture as always representing resistance or acceptance. Strangelove (2010, 71) also defines vlog and diary-format videos, where comprise the data for this article, as entailing an empowering type of confessional discourse within YouTube culture.

Reddit, also founded in 2005, is a social sharing and discussion platform. Sometimes described as a social network aggregation, Reddit is one of the most popular online communities today for sharing information, ideas, links and images, which are organized into categories called *subreddits*. *The Last of Us*, like other popular culture

products such as film and music, has had its own subreddit (/r/thelastofus) formed, enabling different threads and conversations about the game. Registered users may join the discussions and upvote or downvote other users' comments; however, all entries are visible to anyone who visits the site (Redditblog 2014). In addition, Reddit uses a karma feature for the most-liked entries, which can be seen as creating a social hegemony among commentators (Reddithelp 2019). Regarding this article's research question on communal formation around the sharing of life-change narratives, it is recognized that the Reddit platform itself encourages a predominant sense of harmony, at least to some extent. The threads, comment chains and discussions on *The Last of Us* analysed here are archived on Reddit (as threads that are older than six months), meaning that no new votes or comments can be posted (k9d 2013).

The threads represent similar personal narratives as the videos: the video game *The Last of Us* is presented in comparison and reflection on formulating a narrative of life-change. As previously discussed, they represent a genre of life stories that may be compared to religious speech conceptualizations, in a sense that the life-change narratives have a testimonial and transformative tone. Not to discount the online platform's programmed technical functions as spaces for public sharing, which to some extent steer behaviour, the located life-change narratives have an element of declaration in them, which is one factor behind faith performatives (Hovi 2016, 185–186).

In the selected videos and forum discussions, players tell how and why the game has had such an impact on their lives, usually pinpointing and describing a specific event or life phase. The life-change narratives embody four identified themes associated with the change, or reformulation of the self.

***The Last of Us* and the Reformulation of the Self**

The story of the video game is connected by the player to the understanding of the player’s own life. The association of the game narrative with a specific point in life is done first via reflections on the game story through realization of similarities in one’s own life, and secondly by recognizing the game as providing aid and support. These aspects are shared by both the videos and forum discussions. The recognized life-change is declared and shared with others, namely, the emerging community. By treating the life-change narratives as communicational models or formats similar to narratives of religious experiences, this study sheds new light on explicating the processes of meaning-making through video games, as well as why in particular this game has had such a profound impact on players.

According to Hovi (2016, 185), religious traditions offer cultural models for transferring experiences, which are “internalized” by personal narratives. In this article, tradition facilitates two planes: the online sharing platforms lay out a designed and programmed *tradition* providing structured spaces for sharing experiences, similar to how the emerging *The Last of Us* community provides a structured social narrative for integrating players’ life-change experiences. The narrative itself, as a tradition, allows and supports a social declaration, a model of testimony, administered by the emerging community, as the following video and discussions samples show. The social act of sharing one’s life-change narrative is in addition as much of an experience as the initial realization of the change; according to Hovi (2016, 185), narrative and experience cannot be treated as separate. The fan community uses the narrative for sharing the experience and declaring the experience.

User Nick Tyupin (2015), who made a musical video, wrote in its description:

“The Last of Us changed my life, my world view. This game is not about monsters, it’s about people, it’s about us. I was so inspired by the game that I decided to write my own songs dedicated to the game. I’d like to thank Neil Druckman, Bruce Starley and all Naughty Dog team for “the Last of us”. My first impression after the game was – shock. I was completely in shock how Naughty Dog conveyed the feelings of a post-apocalypsis. I was shocked how used to I got to Joel and Ellie. This is not just a game. It’s mean a lot for me. Thank you Naughty Dog.”

Whether through the way in which the story and gameplay are forwarded, the dramatic setting of the game, or other technicalities such as graphics design, it is important to note that the game as an innovation in itself has inspired emerging attention. This is visible in the videos and forum discussions. The sample videos and discussions date from 2013, when the game was originally released for the PlayStation 3 console, followed by the 2014 launch, when the game was remastered for the PlayStation 4 console. Meaning, the game could have been experienced in its many technical stages. The association of connecting the game with life-change narratives could therefore also be a result of the players realisation that a video game, providing a novel technological experience, could have such an impact on one’s day-to-day life. Expressing emotional awe around digital play, which is a recurring literary trope in the discussions and videos, is noted also by Possler, Klimmt and Raney (2018, 74–75) as a staple element of video game entertainment. The life-change narratives here would suggest, however, that players continue to embrace an existential level of emotional reflection on lifeworlds in connection with the game and its story, similar to what Amanda Lagerkvist calls “existential thrownness” into digital media (Lagerkvist 2017).

“While TLOU might not, like, lead to me having kids one day, it has put the thought into my mind. Which is more than any other game has ever done. That for me is the main reasons I love The Last of Us. It just wasn’t a brilliant crafted story, the character development, the breath-taking graphics and voice acting... It was that fact that it put me into a new frame of mind.”

The game as a normative element can change one’s views on life, as Shubs puts it.

The game is held as the authority for “legitimation” and a reason for one’s altered life views (Hovi 2016, 193).

Do Not Give Up on Life

Hardships, issues with mental illness, or general depression in life are brought up in conversations many times.

“No matter how bad the depression or the bipolar or the anxiety gets, there’s always a reason for me to be here, to not do something stupid, to not have negative thoughts. And I can give you a couple of examples: my mom, my two younger sisters, my grandpa, my friends, hell, even my little puppy that I have just sleeping on my bed right now. There’s always something worth fighting for in life. There’s always something to have your life meaning – or give your life meaning, I should say – and this story really nailed that point.”
(TheBioshockHub 2017)

A user u/deleted wrote under the topic “The Last of Us saved my life”:

“This is a grim story that I never thought would see the light of day, but I think the time has come upon to share it. The Last of Us asks a single question, which I was asking myself for a long time: is love worth losing your humanity? I lost someone very important to me three years ago and buried myself within a fabricated reality to escape this tragedy. [...] Long story short, as the relationship of Joel and Ellie progressed, so did my wellbeing. I realized in the end that this game was a god-send and that the narrative reflected my maturation. I learned to move on and believe. I didn’t necessarily have somebody like Ellie, but my family and friends were the exception.” (u/deleted 2017)

Brittany16691 (2017) writes also about her suicidal past and how the game helped to change her views on life:

“I was in a dark place before this game, and I believe not admitting that I was bisexual played a big part in my struggles. But, knowing that Ellie and Riley don't even know that there was a society that was so judgmental and that they are free to be whatever they wanted to was so inspiring to me. I'm not ashamed to love who I love even if it isn't the apocalypse.”

Brittany16691 identifies the game as a positive normative element for the life-change she experienced. This is done in a confessional narrative style and even underlined by addressing the emerging community: “And last but not least, I have had the chance to join this sub and become close to so many of you!” (Brittany16691 2017). The user also legitimises her act of performing a life-change narrative by expressing belonging and membership in her comment.

Accept Yourself as Who You Are

User sorrydonthaveinternet (2017) writes on the forum about their changed attitude towards life:

“The Last of Us taught me that everything I've been through, it can't be for nothing. Joel's dialogue at the end is one of my favourite quotes of all time: "I've struggled a long time with surviving, and no matter what, you keep finding something to fight for.”

The fourth theme regarding life-change narratives defines the player's self-representation and gives a reason to accept oneself as one is. In this process of self-legitimization, a confessional tone in the narratives is present.

The act of sharing a personal, even intimate, life story on a public platform connects the sharer to a larger community of similar acts of narrative sharing. When Hovi (2016, 189–190) researched neo-charismatic Christians sharing religious experiences, she found that personal narratives are “regarded as passports to memberships”, simultaneously verifying one’s own conviction in comparison with that of other believers. In this case study, *The Last of Us* community provides a space for sharing the life-change narrative; furthermore, it usually gives a response and evaluation.

User the_hiding (2017) begins a topic by writing: “Hey, /r/thelastofus. Wanted to share my gratitude for the medium-sized impact TLoU has had on my life.” They continue to describe how the game influenced their decision to write their own short stories and pursue a career in game development. The user EllieandJoel4ever (2017) answers: “Just another example of Ellie and Joel changing someone's life! Just like they did mine. I'm SO proud of them! Thanks for posting this peekaboo. I'm very happy for you! You are One of Us! =)”. To this the_hiding (2017) responds: “Thanks for being so warm to everyone around here! Proud to be one of us :D”.

An important element that is present in the online platforms is the possibility of sharing and forming communities, thereby providing a space of belonging. As discussed above, even though bringing people together through public sharing is a function of the online platform, the emerging community intentionally begins to define one another as *One of Us*. This label is often or always brought up when someone, usually a new commenter, begins a thread or confession describing how deeply the game has affected them. The sharing of the narrative is awarded by the new title. The sharing of the life-change narrative gives credibility and status to the commenter or video-maker to be regarded as a community member (Hovi 2016, 191).

narrative of how the game and its story had a profound impact on their lives, provides an operative tool to discuss meaning-making, identity and community formation in today's fluid emerging communities.

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