

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING: A CASE STUDY OF *THE LAST OF US*

by

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing a degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Abstract

This research explores how adaptations like *The Last of Us* impact storytelling experience when transferred from interactive gaming to an episode-based structure in the TV series format whose audiences are generally understood as passive participants. This would contribute to the complexity and fairly new and evolving area of the transmedia research of both storytelling and adaptation. This research focuses on how the TV series adaptation of *The Last of Us* reimagines the source material of the video game by adding new elements and making changes which reveals how adaptation utilizes transmedia storytelling strategies and the evolving nature of contemporary media adaptation. By analyzing the expansions, omissions and alterations through textual analysis it reveals that transmedia adaptation in today's world is not just merely copying a story from its source but enriching the story in different mediums. Expansions focuses on developing character relationships, backstories, emotional depth and script expansion. Omissions excludes crafting mechanics of the game and replaces them with practical problem solving scenes through cinematic presentation. And lastly, alterations focus on the changes made in themes, worldbuilding, moral ambiguity and the shift from interactive to passive medium. By analyzing expansions, omissions and alterations this thesis investigates how adaptation utilizes transmedia storytelling strategies to engage a variety of audiences. The study highlights the new nature of contemporary media adaptation showing their ability to reimagine and create beyond fidelity to the source text. The purpose of this research is to look into transmedia storytelling experience from different approaches where video games serve as a source text and this is a new area to explore among many. The purpose of choosing this topic is to show adaptations are free to enrich the story beyond traditional boundaries. Traditional adaptations are all about copying

and retelling the exact same narrative but adaptation in today's media is all about making it unique and using the uniqueness of different mediums. This paper leaves scope for further research on this topic as this is a rising aspect in today's media world.

Dedication

To the video game players who find emotion, adventure and meaning in story-driven video games.

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Transmedia Storytelling: A Case Study of *The Last of Us*

Chapter 01 Introduction

In my own life, my journey through video games has been nothing short of an epic adventure and it has shaped part of my childhood. First, it started as a hobby, but now it is a part of my identity, which mainly inspired me to work on this research and delve into the world of transmedia storytelling. When I first came to know that the game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) was getting an adaptation into a live-action television series, it was a joyous experience for me. I eagerly awaited the release of the series. The idea of adaptation has shifted from its traditional boundaries in today's media world. For example, from a simple adaptation of a book to a film to a more complex transmedia experience. This new kind of storytelling allows storylines to unfold across different media platforms. It creates a connected and diverse storyworld that involves audience engagement in a more immersive and compelling manner. Transmedia adaptation in today's world not only just transfers text from one medium to another, it also enhances, enriches, develops, and even challenges the source text universe by using each medium's unique capabilities.

I chose *The Last of Us* as a case study because of the unique possibilities it offered to examine the transmedia experience, which remain understudied and the changing nature of adaptation. *The Last of Us* is an action-adventure game (AAG) developed by the game developer Naughty Dog in 2013 and published by Sony Entertainment Company. The storyworld or narrative space setting in this game is dystopian and it is about an apocalyptic world devastated by an infectious disease. Here, an infectious sickness brought on by the Cordyceps fungus devastated the planet. The main characters of the game are called Joel who is a middle-aged man and a girl named Ellie with whom Joel started a journey in this apocalyptic world to find a cure to end this misery. But,

throughout the journey, they become close and form a father-daughter kind of relationship which led Joel to not let go of Ellie into the hands of the Fireflies. Ellie wanted to sacrifice herself for humanity so that the world can get back to normal. But in the end Joel did not let that happen. Fireflies is a militia group that was formed after the apocalyptic situation and they were trying to find a cure and Ellie is immune to the virus. The Fireflies may utilize Ellie's immunity to find a cure for the virus (Naughty Dog, 2013). So, the story is already gripping enough that it can get the player's attention easily, and because of its action-adventure nature, people are hooked into it till the end to know what plot twists it has to reveal. It gives the players an interactive experience where they are getting it firsthand.

Written and produced by Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann the tv series *The Last of Us* was released exclusively on HBO and its streaming service HBO Max on January 15, 2023. Pedro Pascal, a Chilean-American actor and Bella Ramsey, an English actress played the roles of Joel and Ellie in the series respectively. The first season contains nine episodes, covering key moments from the video game while adding new depth and enrichment to the story.

Fans were really concerned when they first heard after HBO's announcement that this game is getting an adaptation. Even the most devoted of fans appeared surprised by how much more depth and enrichment the series had than the video games in terms of character relationships and narrative design when the first episode was released in January 2023. In order for their adaptation to be successful, Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann realized they had to find a balance between accurately capturing the originality of the game and being aware of the specific storytelling needs of television. The original game's director is Druckmann as well. The case study of *The Last of Us* would reveal that it is here to portray video games as a central narrative in the world of transmedia storytelling and its experience in different media platforms.

It can be observed that the video and TV series adaptation combine together in order to create one narrative among different media platforms. The narrative is created on the basis of the video game with its interactive gameplay and deep storytelling. The TV series does more than merely copy the game's storyline. Significantly, it contributes to the story, language, character development, and side characters depth by expanding the storyworld. *The Last of Us* is a popular video game which then becomes a central text for the TV series adaptation. This is an interesting example of transmedia adaptation which is a part of transmedia storytelling.

As mentioned by Henry Jenkins, 'an adaptation takes the same story from one medium and retells it in another (Jenkins, 2011).' Transmedia storytelling is not the same as it uses modern digital technology to deliver a single narrative experience across several platforms and mediums with options for additions and expansions. It is basically looking into the same narrative space with the help of various media, which also come to contribute to the way the story unfolds. Every medium has its own unique way of presenting the story to the consumers which contributes to the central narrative. Most of the time, a story is either adapted from a book or a series into a game. There are not many examples of video games being the central text but it has already started to spread in the transmedia storytelling sector.

One of the most important characteristics of transmedia adaptation is its capacity to handle omissions and additions in a way that enhances the overall narrative arc. Focusing on the TV series as an adapter text, I want to explore how *The Last of Us* as a transmedia adaptation expands the story world across different mediums and what transmediality adds to our understanding of adaptation beyond traditional boundaries set by one central narrative. In existing academic research, there is a remarkable gap specifically in transmedia adaptation where video games serve as a source text. Following this, it makes this area remain understudied.

Transmedia adaptations not only broaden the story universe, but they also define our idea of adaptation itself, pushing it beyond the boundaries of fixed source materials. This would help explore how the adaptation contributes to today's media adaptation without relying on copying. Instead, it focuses on the specific nature of adaptation today which includes narrative expansion, additions and the incorporation of elements appropriate for the television format. It highlights the use of transmedia storytelling as a device for examining the artistic choices that went into the special additions, omissions, and contributions made to the TV show.

The aim of this research is to provide more insights into how adaptations like this can enrich the storytelling experience and because of its transfer from interactive gaming to episode-based structure if it makes any impact on the audience, who are generally understood as passive participants in the TV series format. This would contribute to the complexity and fairly new and evolving area of the transmedia research of both storytelling and adaptation. Accordingly, my research question is:

How does the TV series adaptation of *The Last of Us* expand, omit, and alter narrative elements from the original video game, and what do these changes reveal about transmedial storytelling strategies and about contemporary media adaptation?

1.1 A Note on Methods Used:

I have used a qualitative research method and did a textual analysis of both the game and the TV series with the hope that the findings will provide directions for further transmedia adaptation projects. The video game *The Last of Us* was accessed from the PlayStation 4 where I was an active participant and experienced it on my own. The TV series *The Last of Us* was accessed from HBO Max. All the findings provided in this paper were based on the game and the series

itself. The analysis was done by looking closely into the specific scenes, dialogues and tones which provide textual details.

Chapter 02 Literature Review

This section discusses the operational definitions of concepts used and their relevance to the present study by reviewing existing literature on them. The concept of adaptations and how slowly it connects to transmedia adaptation and transmedia storytelling and then convergence culture is a crucial aspect to examine. Also, the concept of video games, interactive storytelling in video games, and how interactivity and narrative work together form the main focus of this section.

2.1 Adaptation:

A video game, movie, television series, or theater play that has been transferred from one medium to another is primarily referred to as an adaptation in general. Robert Stam's idea of adaptation is essential to modern adaptation studies. In his essay, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation" found in *Film Adaptation* (2000), he questions traditional views on the relationship between the source material and adaptation. Stam draws his arguments from scholars like Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Mikhail Bakhtin for a more adaptable and approachable concept of adaptation, utilizing their ideas of intertextuality, dialogism, and deconstruction. As defined by Stam, fidelity suggests a system of hierarchy in which adaptation is viewed as relational experience, secondary to the original text and often considered a failure for not recreating the source material. He criticizes this as a restricted and simplified understanding of what adaptation is capable of, proposing a more dynamic and diverse structure. He draws heavily on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism that considers text as a component of a larger cultural discourse. From this view, adaptations are a continuous conversation between texts, cultures and ideologies rather than just being copies of the source material. He suggests

that adaptations generate meaning in an interconnected network where the source and the adaptation interact as equals. In addition, Stam rejects the idea of a single, authentic source text by including Barthes' thesis of intertextuality. According to him, every text originates from earlier texts, therefore every adaptation is but one intertextual interaction among many. Adaptation is about engaging in a wider network of textual and cultural interactions rather than just replicating the original. From this angle, changes are seen as independent creative and interpretive processes that give the story new depths of meaning (Stam, 2000, 54-76).

Similar to Robert Stam's view on adaptation, Linda Hutcheon's concept of intertextual adaptation offers a framework for understanding adaptations across different media in *A theory of Adaptation* (2006; 2nd edition 2013). Her view portrays that adaptation is not just a question of fidelity to the source material but an unique act in its own right. Her explanation of transcoding, or the transformation of a tale or idea into a different medium, clarifies for us how adaptations change the original material in order to appeal to new audiences. This concept has relevance when examining *The Last of Us* TV series and the video game which serves as the source material. As stated by Hutcheon, the adapter interprets and reworks the original story in order to suit the possibilities of the new medium, the cultural settings and the expectations of the audience. This process is known as intertextual adaptation (Hutcheon, 2013, 8). To be more specific, the reconstruction of *The Last of Us* TV series involves transformation of the game's interactive and action-adventure driven narrative into a more reflective, character-focused TV series. The series focuses on creating emotional depth, giving depth to the backstories of the side characters and introducing new scenes that are more appropriate for the TV series rather than trying to exactly copy the game's narrative. One of the main aspects of Hutcheon's idea is 'transcoding', which refers to how narrative's form, structure, and meaning shift as it is

transferred across media (Ibid., 33). The TV series *The Last of Us* does this by rearranging the way viewers see the emotional journeys of the characters. For example, the video game offers an interactive and immersive perspective by putting the player's in the place of the protagonists. On the other hand, the TV series offers a more non-linear narrative. It makes use of dialogue, pace and cinematography to convey more complex emotional arcs. Additionally, Hutcheon argues that adaptations are more accessible to a wider audience including people who would not have played the video game or source material (Ibid., 85). This is specifically relevant to *The Last of Us* because the TV series allows the audience to get connected to the storyline who might not have played the game with its rich themes like survival, humanity and loss.

Investing even more power to adaptation, Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) argues that adaptations are not only just transferring the same story from one medium to another but can also be subverted for new contexts and audiences, basically suggesting the expansion of narrative universe. Adaptations can basically challenge and critique their original (Sanders, 2006, 18-30). She also mentioned adaptation beyond fidelity. She argues that one of the main misconceptions of adaptation is the notion of fidelity to the original text. She emphasizes that while adaptations are not restricted by their source material, they frequently converse with it (Ibid., 47-55). In *The Last of Us*, this intentionally breaks away from the game as needed. For example, the addition of new characters like Kathleen in episode 4 broadens the post-apocalyptic world's socio-political framework and gives viewers fresh insights into leadership and survival. Sanders argues that adaptation is a dialogic process rather than a straightforward act of replication, and these variations support her claim (Ibid., 50-51).

Regarding the scope and nature of changes seen in adaptation Thomas Leitch in *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2007) presents the problem of fidelity where he explores how cultural and

historical differences between mediums necessitate creative transformations. Keeping *The Last of Us* in mind, the TV series does not focus on implicating the interactivity of the game, rather it focuses on emotional depth, offering the audience a deeper connection with the characters and narrative elements (Leitch, 2007, 15-40). Instead of focusing on the faithfulness of an adaptation to its source material, Leitch argues that adaptations should be seen as changes that take place within their own creative settings. So, it shows how transmedia adaptation and traditional adaptation is different in that manner.

As the above discussion on the idea of adaptation suggests, a good adaptation needs to have a balance between the source text and the creative transformation. While absolute fidelity is questioned, it must remain true to the original material in order to produce a meaningful resonance. Applied to the present context, this transaction with the audience in a transmedia setting is sure to complicate matters further. While video games by their nature incorporate interactive storytelling to captivate players and provide an immersive experience, its adaptations, while adding depth in the storyline, must find a way to remain true to the original material in order to remain recognizable and produce a meaningful result. The following section will concentrate on the theory of transmedia adaptation and storytelling and how, in one way or another, it is likewise tied to adaptation and interactive storytelling of video games.

2.2 Transmedia Adaptation and Transmedia Storytelling:

As stated in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, Transmedia storytelling is seen as an important expansion in storytelling forms which defies traditional media obstacles. This kind of storytelling entails developing richer, deeper experiences that captivate people in ways rather than merely translating a tale from one medium to another. This promotes interactive and

cooperative storytelling (Leitch, 2017). The interactive and cooperative storytelling often indicates audience engagement; it can be in an active way or a passive way as well. Active way refers to actively participating in firsthand experience as in video games. And, passive way refers to just watching or reading a story as in films, TV series and books.

Moreover, the idea of interactive and cooperative storytelling supports transmedia adaptation which shows that transmedia adaptation is not just about transferring one story to another medium but also helps with enriching and deepening a narrative. This connects with Henry Jenkins idea of transmedia storytelling which sets transmedia adaptation apart from transmedia storytelling (Dena, 2019). According to Henry Jenkin, in the context of transmedia storytelling every media should ideally contribute to the plot in some way (Jenkins, 2007). But, transmedia adaptation is adding more depth and meaning to the story. As a result, transmedia adaptation is a different kind of approach which transforms the story into a more meaningful experience for the audience, where narratives are no longer just constricted in a single platform but spread into multiple platforms.

As stated by Christy Dena (a renowned scholar in transmedia storytelling and adaptation), Transmedia adaptation is the process of extending and modifying stories across multiple media platforms. For example, interactive media, video games, books, and movies, each of which adds a different and uniqueness to the overall narrative experience (Dena, 2019). Unlike traditional adaptation which involves simply transferring one narrative from one to another platform like books to films, transmedia adaptation helps with enriching and deepening the story by expanding and enhancing narrative across multiple media. Each platform offers uniqueness to the one core story which is contributing to keep the base of the story intact. As for *The Last of Us*, the video game is giving players an interactive experience and in the TV series adaptation it is adding

meaning to the story by enhancing the story while keeping the base or foundation intact.

It involves a different experience for the viewers too. Dena places a strong emphasis on how viewers interact with transmedia narratives. Audiences actively participate in piecing the expanded information together and the experience is different from one medium to another.

Narrative expansion is another important aspect which changes the experience, such as, a side character may become more important in the adaptation than the core text. Different media are designed to complement each other in their own platform while keeping the base intact. Such as, using TV series for side character developments and enhancing their stories and in games it works with interactive mechanics. Dena also argues that adaptation is indeed a part of transmedia storytelling, which portrays stories from a new point of view and enriches the narrative instead of just retelling the same story (Ibid).

To add to this discussion, American scholar Regina Schober connects it with the changing role of culture in the digital age. Her idea suggests that culture in the digital age serves multiple purposes beyond simple representation (Schobar, 2019). Transmedia adaptation reproduces something new and enhances the core essence of it. This idea supports Dena's argument which shows that adaptations are essential to the creative variability of narratives across different media platforms. Dena's idea emphasizes on how important it is to take the adaptation process into account while telling transmedia stories. She points out that when adaptation is used with transmedia, it may enhance the story by reinventing it and using creative innovation while keeping the base or core text intact.

This is even more varied in cases of adaptations from video games to TV series and especially where video games serve as a source text. It is bound to involve much more than just retelling a

story on different platforms. It requires an understanding of the perseverance of source text and also narrative design and pacing inherent from one medium to another.

2.2.1 Convergence Culture

Convergence culture was coined by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006), is extremely relevant to transmedia adaptation and transmedia storytelling because it explains the convergence of various media forms and the interactive concept of viewing media in the digital age. The term transmedia storytelling and convergence has a certain connection that needs to be examined in order to understand them well. Transmedia storytelling is a type of narrative that unfolds across multiple media platforms and with each new creation making a valuable contribution to the whole narrative. On the other hand, convergence means the flow of content across multiple media platforms. So, it means Transmedia storytelling is the outcome of convergence through which scattered fictional elements are systematically carried through multiple media delivery platforms. Both ideas emphasize how content flow works across different media channels. Transmedia storytelling guarantees that each and every medium adds something new to experience, while convergence culture assures that consumers follow the content across different media platforms. For example, Harry Potter spread its narrative across movie series and books with each piece contributing to enriching the storyline.

In simple words, the approach of conveying one narrative or experience across multiple mediums and media using modern digital technology is known as transmedia storytelling. Henry Jenkins, professor of comparative media studies, first introduced the concept of transmedia storytelling. According to him, “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels to create a unified and

coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, 2007).” Jenkins explains the concept of adaptation in the context of transmedia storytelling and convergence culture. He mentions that transmedia storytelling goes beyond in terms of simple adaptation, where a narrative is conveyed from one medium to another. Instead of creating the same story, transmedia storytelling makes the experience unique and authentic. According to him, an adaptation essentially presents a tale from one medium to another. As a tale travels from one medium to another, an adaptation in the context of transmedia storytelling attempts to add extra. Transmedial content also offers a backstory, maps the world, offers other characters' perspectives on the action, and deepens audience engagement. The Hollywood-based transmedia structure requires a tale presented or a universe explored across many media platforms. It may be marketed to viewers independently and represent several points of contact with the brand (Jenkins, 2011).

On the other hand, from his point of view, “convergence is the flow of content across multiple media platforms. In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms. Right now, convergence culture is getting defined top-down by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and bottom-up by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms. It is shaped by the desires of media conglomerates to expand their empires across multiple platforms and by the desires of consumers to have the media they want where they want it, when they want it, and in the format they want (Jenkins, 2006)”.

The basic principle of transmedia storytelling is encouraged by convergence culture, which pushes media businesses to communicate their tales across multiple platforms. For example, *Spiderman* and *The Walking Dead* comics, TV series and video games to enlarge its universe. In

his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins explores how narrative unfolds across multiple media channels and how transmedia storytelling thrives within the ecosystem invented by convergence culture. A complex example of media convergence and Transmedia storytelling is *The Matrix*, as Jenkins explained. It's hard to grasp the storyworld of *The Matrix* with just films. To understand the storyworld (fictional world described by narrative), one needs to look through animated shorts, video games and comics. He uses this example to highlight how core narrative can be a span of films, TV series, online content, video games and comics. Each medium can add new authenticity to the narrative and which makes it unique.

According to Jenkins' media convergence is not just about technology but also about culture which shows how media industries and audiences interact in a shared space. The example of *The Matrix* mirrors how *The Last of Us* operates as a transmedia phenomenon. Jenkins investigates how the *The Matrix* franchise is told across movies, video games, and comic books. He explained how *The Matrix* is a critical example because it took the concept of transmedia storytelling too far to achieve mass viewership and profit. There were gaps in the films which could only be filled if one person spent time in other media platforms like comics, video games and the anime. A lot of times consumers can easily fall to boredom or because of time management they might not explore every media platform to fully understand the storyline or narrative. As Jenkins mentioned, the public had not received enough information from the production company explaining how important these additional media outlets were to the overall experience. Jenkins also mentioned, he frequently hear from readers of *Convergence Culture* that while they like the first *Matrix* movie, they were put off by the sequels since they didn't appear to add up to anything, and they were unaware that the majority of the other series' associated materials were available (Jenkins, 2007).” With this sort of approach by the production team,

The Matrix displays how transmedia storytelling can create an entirely immersive experience in which each medium adds quantities and features to the storyline. To keep the flow in multiple media platforms, the fandom needs to actively participate and in order to enjoy the storyworld they have to go through each and every media platform. It portrays the principle of convergence culture where old and new media converge (Jenkins, 2006, 94-97). The idea of transmedia storytelling evolved with this example and Jenkins showed how transmedia adaptation happened here in the context of transmedia storytelling. When transforming stories across different media platforms, the story needs to evolve and enhance in order to create a different experience while keeping the source text intact. Specifically, from video games to TV series adaptation, the source text is the contribution to the adaptation and the experience changes with interactivity to a passive audience experience. *The Last of Us* provides an interactive narrative when the Tv series offers emotional depth through visual storytelling.

To contextualize the present study, as previously discussed, *The Last of Us* is an AAG (Action Adventure Game) which was adapted into an HBO series in January, 2023. It is also a captivating example of transmedia storytelling and convergence culture. *The Last of Us* has unique and authentic contributions to each medium, both video game and TV series. Fans of the video game are very interested to see how the characters and story are portrayed in a new format which might as well inspire the viewers to play the game who discovers the series first. As mentioned earlier, interactive storytelling in video games have captured players' attention to keep them engaged and *The Last of Us* is also an example of Interactive storytelling in video games. While the source narrative stays similar in both platforms, each medium provides additional content and depth to the story. The series has background information and backstory of the characters, side characters and incidents deeper than the game. For instance, the series

includes insights of characters and sequences that are not a part of the game. It improves the whole experience of the story without copying thoroughly. The adaptation helps fans to engage and participate in discussions or online communities. It helps with franchise's reach and profitability as well.

As it is evident now how *The Last of Us* is an example of transmedia storytelling and convergence culture, and how all the concepts relate, the next section discusses how video games function as source narrative that eventually expands in other media platforms. It also focuses on how the narrative mechanics of video games are different from other mediums and how *The Last of Us* as a transmedia project creates a consistent and immersive world, despite the differences in medium.

2.3 Video Games

Video games provide players with an extensive range of experiences and it has become a significant component of modern day society and entertainment. They are engaging virtual experiences that can be played on various platforms such as, computers, laptops, playstations and mobile phones. To understand the transmedia storytelling experience of a video game it is crucial to know about the concept and how they play a vital role in modern society. It is also significant to know about interactive storytelling in video games and what role they play in transmedia storytelling. During the 1940s, video games were just computing experiments before becoming video games. The 1950s first saw the creation of electronic games by engineers and researchers. One of the earliest examples was the game Tennis for Two (1958), created by physicist William Higinbotham using an oscilloscope (a device for viewing oscillations by a display on the screen of a cathode ray tube). The video game industry truly started from the

1970s. In 1971, Computer Space, the first arcade video game, was released by Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney. During this time, arcade games started to become popular among teenagers. The rise of modern consoles happened during the 1990s and the rise of internet and multiplayer gaming happened in the 2000s. The 2000s marked the rise of online gaming. Consoles like the Xbox, PlayStation 2, and later, the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 introduced online multiplayer gaming, while PC games like World of Warcraft and Counter-Strike popularized the idea of massive online communities (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2016, 61-120). This is how the game industry came to this stage where it is now.

2.3.1 Understanding Video Games:

After the wake of *The Matrix* trilogy, *the Grand Theft Auto*, *Uncharted*, and *Red Dead Redemption* games, it is obvious by now that movies or TV shows and videogames are borrowing from each other (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2016, 7). Video games are worth exploring because of their narrative, cultural and artistic components. Video games are an expression of art with storyline, plot, character, music, graphics, visual arts and interaction. In game design, player interaction, narrative design, level design and aesthetics are crucial aspects. These elements work together to create a cohesive and engaging experience for players. Video games have been a topic of discussion in the entertainment industry because of their interactive storytelling feature.

According to Salen and Zimmerman, “A video game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome (Ibid., 47).”

Another definition of video games comes from Jesper Juul, “A video game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels

attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable (Ibid., 47).”

Both of these definitions are similar in the manner that they both mentioned that games are systems and they have calculable outcomes. Only a few specific differences can be seen, Salen and Zimmerman pointed to artificial conflict whereas Juul is more focused on describing the player. These definitions are crucial to know because it indicated the interactive nature of a video game. Jasper Juul’s concept of video games makes more sense for how video games work in today’s world. Video games are based on player interaction and which gives a completely different experience of storytelling. Specifically, when a transmedia adaptation of a TV series happens where video games serve as a source text, it is crucial to know how video games storytelling works.

In *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005), Jasper Juul provides a crucial structure for examining the unique storytelling and organizational mechanics found in video games. Juul’s focus is on the conflict between real rules and virtual worlds in games, where formalized systems intersect with storytelling and imaginative elements. He argues that the combination of reality and fiction in games distinguishes them from storytelling platforms like movies or books, where viewers simply follow a predetermined plot. Players’ choices in video games have a direct impact on results and they are bound by a strict set of rules (Juul, 2005, 5). The interactivity of games offers players a narrative control with more linear experience. His idea of emergent gameplay focuses on games which are based on the player’s decision. And his notion of progression portrays a more linear narrative that the player follows (Ibid., 67). Both of his ideas are crucial to know because according to him they come differently and can not be in the same platform. But for *The Last of Us*, narrative experience is highly

displayed in its feature along with enough interactivity to allow players to feel a deep sense of engagement. Juul's work ensures that, when there is freedom in gameplay, there can also be an overarching story that is fixed even though there is tension between the two. Jasper Juul's view of emergence and progression shows that video game's storytelling is different from any other platform because of its interactive element even though both of these concepts can create conflict together according to him. But examples like *The Last of Us* have changed that view in today's world of video games.

For Juul, a video game depends on the player's attitude towards the activity in the game. His idea is an effort to clarify the standards by which humans usually distinguish games from non-games. He provides a model that shows the complete reasons for calling something a game. He refers to the model as 'classic game model' and based on his point of view the modern games do not comply with the traditional criteria that have been part of the game definitions. The first level of the model represents classic criteria such as fixed rules, players effort, variable outcome, player's attachment to outcome and negotiable consequences. This criteria shows how players are an active participant of the game and interactivity is crucial to video games. The second level is known as borderline cases which do not require games to always have fixed rules for them. Because this criteria is explaining the types of game that exists in the world. All these can have different sorts of outcomes. For example, pen and paper roleplaying games have fixed rules which can only have one outcome. Skill based requires skills in gaming, not every player can be a part of it and so on. And, the third model falls outside the classic model. It has 'storytelling' in video games where player interactivity is a must and it has a fixed outcome. This is one of the main focuses of this paper to dive deeper into transmedia storytelling. Most of the games that have storytelling always have a fixed outcome and require no effort by the player to have

different endings (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2016, 47-48). Specifically, *The Last of Us* is an action adventure story oriented game which has a fixed outcome no matter how the player plays the game. It is the interactivity mechanic of the game which makes the experience different for the player.

If a game does not require any effort by the player to have different endings then why would people play the game and what point does the game serve? This sort of question is yet to be researched and looked at by the theorists and researchers. Modern games like *The Last of Us* provide another angle to this discussion, bringing in narrative and aesthetics as important elements. A game's success with the consumers may depend on the type of the game and its engaging storytelling process. If the game is an AAG (Action Adventure Game) then it includes challenges and skills throughout the whole gameplay. Overcoming obstacles and mastering the gaming mechanics can be very appealing to people. Also, these sorts of games have an aesthetic and artistic appeal to them which can be very captivating because of the audiovisual designs of the game. These sorts of games might not have replay value because of having a fixed ending but there are other factors that contribute to the enjoyment of these types of games that might make some players want to replay the game. Sometimes, the overall experience, the gameplay, the depth in storytelling and the characters going through a development adds much more enjoyment to the gameplay experience. The entertainment value can keep the players engaged and might as well work as escapism.

Henry Jenkins insists that video games are a new form of popular art from a cultural perspective. As stated by Jenkins in *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*, video games are creating possibilities for various aesthetic and artistic experiences. It is very suitable for the modern day world as well. He says most of them are following well-known recipes rather than

creating something new. They are commonplace, predictable and formulaic. He also mentions that video game technology changes so dramatically every few months that designers spend a lot of time catching up instead of exploring the medium aesthetically. According to him, one can only achieve the best experience in video games when they feel that their impact and participation in the game has made it better. Moreover, he refers to play as performance which means that gaming brings about immersion into an extent not found in other arts. The artistic potential of video games will be met when designers concentrate on exploring the aesthetics of action instead of trying to imitate other media (Ibid., 43-44). His statement includes that video games always have something new to bring and they have been changing drastically with their types. But it does not change the criteria of player interaction because it is one of the main aspects of video games. The storytelling in video games happens with player interactivity into the game world. The players explore certain areas in the games to progress in the game by interacting actively. This is why understanding interactive storytelling is crucial to video games.

As stated by Jasper Juul, “many computer games contain narrative elements, and that in many cases the player may play to reach a narrative sequence. Interaction and narrative elements in a video game can create conflict. You can’t have narration and interactivity at the same time (Ibid., 199).”

However, Henry Jenkins has presented four ways in which narrative or storytelling can appear in games. The first one is known as evoked narratives which talks about a world in video games that is reproduced from other works of fiction. For example, *Blade Runner*, a game, reproduces the world of novel and film for the player to relive the stories that exist in their imagination. The second one is called enchanted narratives where the story can revolve around a character’s progress in space and environmental aspects may either decelerate or speed up this plot’s path or

track. These sorts of projects are more concerned with exploring space than developing plots. It is one of the most suitable forms for video games in which a world is created by the designer for the player to go through and overcome. The third one is embedded narratives and the classic example for this can be discussed as a detective story. For example, there are some adventure games where the player comes across a different world of details that needs to be explored in order to know more about the main storyline. *Myst* is a video game which falls under this description. It is a first-person point-and-click adventure game, where players navigate through static images to explore the island and solve puzzles. The gameplay forwards with exploration and puzzle-solving rather than action. Players interact with objects and clues to unlock new areas. Players assume the role of the Stranger, who discovers a book titled *Myst*. The book transports them to a mysterious island where they must explore and uncover the secrets of its various worlds connected by linking books. The last one is called emergent narrative where gamespaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players. Juul referred to them as ‘object oriented narration’ where the gamespace is filled with objects with their own behavior so that player interaction creates unique events. Sometimes these interactions can help players create their own stories based on game mechanics (Ibid., 227).

Four of these types of narratives help us move beyond the frozen interactive versus narrative discussion mentioned by Juul. Because these categories highlight some crucial components of video game narratives. They provide a path to introduce contextual elements such as evoked narratives and their spatial elements are another example. In relation to video games, they provide a unique and different use of literary theories. The idea of the interactive narrative gained a certain recognition during the 1990s. It refers to a type of role-playing in which the

computer can anticipate and collect the player's reactions and give an illusion of interactivity. It does not refer to video games itself or any other forms of digital literature. It is a deeply immersive and engaging concept which is considered an ideal form of digital storytelling (Ibid., 228). *The Last of Us* falls under enchanted narratives because of the narrative being driven by player interaction and choices of action like combat. Also, it falls under evoked narratives because it suggests a rich and broader backstory evoking a world in ruins after the apocalypse, while pulling from familiar tropes of post-apocalyptic fiction.

According to Marie-Laure Ryan's in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (2015), video games like *The Last of Us* construct captivating environments that are deeply tied to player agency. She offers how narratives function in different media, especially through the lens of interactivity and immersion. Immersion in interactive storytelling (active engagement) comes from the player's sense of agency, where the player is choosing how the story goes and the story reveals itself with interaction. But for TV series (passive consumption), the narrative is fixed so that the viewers consume without any ability to change the outcome (Ryan, 2015, 94-103). Ryan's view on passive consumption and active engagement is highly connected to *The Last of Us* because of the change in narrative experience and how each platform tells the story in their own way.

Similarly, Mark J.P. Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), argued that how active engagement and passive consumption works differently in world-building for different mediums. Her key idea is that different mediums bring unique strength and limitations to world-building. For example films give both visual and sensory immediacy, while books may offer world history and sophisticated interior monologues (Wolf, 2012, 119). Video games like *The Last of Us* gives players a firsthand experience into the game world by

interaction which adds layers to the player agency. When in the TV series, the interactive elements are replaced by cinematic technique to deepen the story and to focus on the narrative. This shows how differently mediums can portray a narrative while keeping the source text intact.

From the above discussion it is clear that narrative or storytelling and interactivity both need to come together and are very crucial in the modern day gaming industry because of its engaging and immersive experiences which comes from players' actions unfolding the story in a video game. The world of the game can provide narrative elements which the player has to interact with to get to the next part of the game to go further in the story. Through interaction and exploration with elements in the game world, players unfold background information, context, visual clues, hidden items and atmospheric details that helps enrich the story and the experience of interactive storytelling. Now the next part is going to explore how video games work as a source text, it does not necessarily mean transferring the same story but keeping the main elements of the story intact when enriching the story.

2.4 Video Games as Source Text:

To research a phenomenon it should have a clear definition first. The concept of ‘mothership’ or ‘source text’ and how it works in the context of transmedia storytelling have been discussed by Henry Jenkins.

2.4.1 Mothership in Transmedia Storytelling:

Henry Jenkins introduces the idea of ‘mothership’ as the core or central narrative that ties up transmedia storyline. The ‘mothership’ is the primary source which serves as the introduction scheme for audiences to understand the characters, main story and world-building (the creation

of a fictional world that is believable and consistent within the context of the story). Various adaptations such as comics, TV series, video games, films and other media platforms construct upon mothership. It contributes to the overall narrative. The mothership is also known as source text or source narrative or the starting point of any product.

Jenkins mentioned, “in recent times, Hollywood has shifted toward a ‘mothership’ approach where the focus is on one core property that may be extended into other platforms depending on market response. Above all, creators seek to drive audiences to the mothership and most often a feature film or a television series. Other media should deepen the audience’s engagement without ‘cannibalizing the market’ (a phenomenon that happens when there’s a decreased demand for a company’s original product in favor of its new product). The mothership should not depend for its dramatic pay-off on something that consumers have to track down elsewhere. The mothership must be perceived as self-contained, even if other media add new layers (Jenkins, 2014, 247).

The ‘mothership’ or ‘source text’ behaves as the central point that helps enrich the transmedia storytelling experience. It is important to the success of the mothership model for the audience to actively engage with different media adaptations in the context of transmedia storytelling.

The Last of Us was released in 2013 as a premium narrative experience for the PlayStation 4. The firm responsible for creating the game, Naughty Dog, was instrumental in establishing the benchmark for narrative-driven video games that closely resembled classic Hollywood formats. *The Last of Us* and its several variations have dominated the video game industry for more than ten years. Now, it is also ready to do the same when it comes to media adaptations. As mentioned by Cameron Kunzelman, according to early evaluations, HBO’s *The Last of Us* television series that premiered on January 15, 2023 is one of the finest video game adaptations

to date (Kunzelman, 2023). By establishing the main characters, locales, and central plotlines, the video game builds the main narrative. So, the game is playing a key role in creating the core narrative. As the game came out first, creating interactive storytelling for the players to engage more and get hooked into the storyline, it serves its purpose as the primary text in this transmedia storytelling experience. Players take an active role in the plot, influencing it as they go along by making decisions. The whole transmedia storytelling process has this one starting point and that is known as core text or mothership. Even though not many games have been seen as the starting point of a transmedia storytelling process, there are special cases like the case example I am presenting in order to understand the transmedia storytelling experience it provided as the video game being the source text. This gave an unique and creative contribution to each medium.

While the video game offers the player an interactive storytelling experience by exploring the world of the game and engaging more with the story by different game mechanics, the TV series delves deeper into the narrative details and character developments while providing a cinematic experience possibly reaching a mass audience.

To conclude this section, at first thought it might seem that transmedia storytelling experiences on video games are no different than other media platforms adaptations but it is an crucial aspect to look at because the discussion about video games being adapted to new media is growing in the modern day world. As discussed the concepts of adaptation, transmedia adaptation, transmedia storytelling and video games, it is clear that transmedia adaptations should stay true to the source text or central narrative while enhancing the storyline and video games can tell interactive storytelling. The example of convergence culture also shows how transmedia storytelling flows in the industry through new media platforms. The reviews on these concepts and ideas helps with the understanding of how transmedia storytelling experience can change

with different transmedia adaptations and provides a more meaningful approach in each media while it also helps enrich the storyline in its own authentic way in each media platform. The video games contribution is the base of the narrative, while the TV series enriches and adds more depth to it. The interactive nature of the game and the audience of the TV series adaptation are passive participants.

Chapter 03 *The Last of Us*: Expansion and Omission

This chapter attempts to understand how the TV series adaptation of *The Last of Us* expands, and omits narrative elements from the original video game by closely looking at it. The changes reflect the different storytelling approaches in interactive and non-interactive media, showcasing the creative adaptability required to transform a narrative across different forms. These expansions and omissions provide an understanding of what these changes reveal about the transmedial storytelling strategies and contemporary media adaptation.

3.1 Expansion:

One of the most noticeable ways a TV series expands in video games is in its character relationships, backstories of side characters, emotional depth to the characters and additions in the script which were only slightly hinted at in the game. These aspects are crucial to explore because video games can not completely portray them but TV series can expand on these in order to reach the emotional engagement of the audience.

3.1.1 Character Relationships, Backstories and Emotional Depth:

The character relationships are equally portrayed in the game and series while enhancing it at some point. The contrasting aspects can show the expansion that happened in the adaptation. It is necessary to look into both the platforms in order to understand the base the Video game created as a source text for the TV series as an adapter text and how the experience changes based on relationship depths.

Out of all the side characters who added more depth to the storyline in the series adaptation was Sarah who appeared in the beginning of the show. In the game, Sarah was just a character who

was everything to Joel and when she was gone Joel's heart was shattered. But in the series, the viewers get to meet Sarah for a day and she was made out to be important too because it was portrayed as her story. She comes back home from school and prepares for her father's birthday surprise and she was the first one to confront an infected person. To be more exact, the video game only shows Sarah as a minor character with not much depth but the character is still authentic in serving its purpose in the adaptation. In the game, the first cutscene only shows Sarah moving around the house and looking for Joel and Joel did not arrive home yet because of chaos created by the outbreak. She is scared and looking for her father when she comes in contact with a zombie for the first time (Naughty Dog, 2013). But, in episode 01 of the series, Sarah's character gets much more depth and it shows her character has an important impact on Joel's character even though she is a minor character. She goes to school, and while coming back she goes to a watch repair shop to surprise her father on his birthday. Later, at night, with the commotion created by the outbreak, she goes to her neighbor's house and almost dies because of a zombie in her neighbor's (Mrs. Adler) house (Mazin et al., 2023). This shows how her character was kept authentic but served its purpose as a foundation and changed the experience for the audience by adding more depth to the character. Compared to the game, Sarah's portrayal on the series added more depth to her character and she was more important to Joel.

Tommy Miller (Joel's brother) who made appearances in the beginning of the game and also in the series got a huge change in relationship with Joel in the series. And this change makes a lot more sense in the series than the game. To be more specific, in the game, Tommy is a member of the Fireflies (a highly-skilled, revolutionary militia group revolting against the U.S. government's military arm FEDRA in the quarantine zones across the country) which Joel completely hates because he does not like the group. Despite hating, he still tried to look for

Tommy so that he can ask Tommy to help him save Ellie from the Fireflies because he thinks he is not capable enough to save Ellie from a group because he is alone. Fireflies are looking for a cure and Ellie is immune to the virus and she might have the potential to provide a cure. The conversation between Joel and Tommy goes like this. Joel says “I need you to take her.” Tommy asks “You want me to deliver her to the Fireflies?” Joel replies, “They’ll kill her if they think they can get that cure from her.” Tommy argues, “They could cure this thing. You know that, right?” Joel states, “They’ve been doing this shit for years. I’ve seen their handiwork (Naughty Dog, 2013).” This conversation takes place in Tommy’s dam Wyoming. Here, Joel makes it clear that he does not believe Fireflies and even though Ellie wants to sacrifice herself, Joel is not ready to give in yet but still in denial that it is happening because he has formed a bond with Ellie. Tommy also is not very convinced with taking Ellie on his behalf because he is ignorant about his brother’s emotions towards Ellie. But in the series, his emotions towards the militia group are indifferent, and it makes sense why he would reach out to Tommy. To be more precise, the scene takes place in a civilized and reconstructed town named Jackson which is safe and where Tommy already has formed a family. In this scene, Joel says to Tommy, “You have everything you need here. I can’t keep going.” Tommy asks, “You want me to take her?” Joel says again, “I’m just gonna get her killed. I know it. I know it.” Tommy says feeling empathetic, “That’s not true.” Joel says, “It is. I have dreams... every night. I failed (Mazin et al., 2023).” This conversation between Tommy and Joel shows his vulnerability in front of Tommy and Tommy also respecting and listening to what his brother says. This gives his request for Tommy more weight. In the game, Tommy really does not respect his brother much when making decisions but in the series they tried communicating before making any decisions which added a lot more depth to their brotherly relationships. In my opinion, their relationship was portrayed in

a better manner in the series than the game and which also helps with being emotionally engaged to the series for the viewers. The basis and authenticity is intact here but the depth in relationship changes the experience.

Tess (side character), who was played by Anna Torv (Australian actress) in the show and Annie Wersching (Actress) in the game, has both similarities and differences. Tess in the show is astonishing but in the game she was outstanding. To be more specific, there are interactive gaming mechanics in the game where Tess gets to climb through buildings and help to lift Joel which not only shows how powerful and strong her character is, but also adds to the excitement of the game. In contrast, Tess in the show did not participate in those game mechanics where she gets to help Joel. Those parts were mostly replaced by running and walking around scenes in the TV series. In the game, Tess shows Joel that she got bitten by a zombie and soon she was going to die so she sacrificed herself when they were getting chased by FEDRA (the main authority and military arm in the US following the outbreak of the Cordyceps fungus) in Boston. Even though Tess in the game was a more powerful character she did not have much emotional depth. Her being strong was mainly the part of the interactive gameplay but not really emotionally deepened (Naughty Dog, 2013). But in the show, the same thing happened but they were getting chased by clickers (a third stage for people who have been infected for at least one year) and Tess sacrifices herself so that Joel and Ellie can run away in the meantime. Tess's character shows more emotional depth in this scene than the game which adds to the experience. To be more specific, after being chased by the clicker in the second episode, Tess confesses that she got beaten by a clicker. The conversation starts with them running away and all of a sudden Tess pauses for a second in an area where there were less zombies. Tess says emotionlessly, "I was bitten. Back there. In the museum." Joel in disbelief says, "No, no, no, NO!" Tess forcefully

says, “Yes, Joel. I’m not going anywhere. This is real. Look, I’ve seen how this goes. I don’t have much time left. But you can still save her. Take her to Tommy’s. He’ll know what to do.” Joel angrily says, “I can’t just leave you!” Tess calmly says, “Yes, you can. And you will. My luck was bound to run out sooner or later (Mazin et al., 2023).” By saying this, Tess indicates that she should run away when there is still time because the clickers are still coming after them. So she decided to sacrifice herself for them to go on with their journey. The show was more thoughtful in terms of Tess’s character here. In the game, she was just beaten and dead in the next minute but the series added much more depth. The video game being the source text added the base of her character and kept it authentic but the experience changes with the depth in character which helps the audience to be more engaged emotionally because of her sacrifice. With extended characterization they have portrayed her character to be more thoughtful. In the game, Tess’s sacrifice was abrupt. It just happened out of nowhere, she was bit by a zombie and died on the scene. In the TV series, her character got more depth which is emotionally captivating for the audience. Her sacrifice is shown as a more conscious and meaningful act. Her character shows that Ellie is the main priority in that scene because she is immune to the fungus and she can be the next weapon against the fungus to save humanity. So, she decides to stay back and lure the zombies towards her so that in the meantime Joel and Ellie can run away. As previously mentioned, they were chased by zombies and Tess out of nowhere says she was bit by zombies and she tells Joel to run away. At first, Joel refuses but eventually takes Ellie to a safer place. Tess says to Joel, “Joel, this is real. I never asked you for anything, not to feel the way I felt. But now, I am asking you to do this one last thing. Please. Take her and leave.” Joel says, “No, we are not leaving you.” Tess replies, “I didn’t ask you to leave me. I’m saying leave. There is no other choice here. Our luck had to run out sooner or later. Save who you can save

(Mazin et al., 2023).” These dialogues from episode two shows how humanizing the character more led to experience the same scene with an intensification of emotion for the audience.

A TV series is more engaging emotionally than video games. The video game gives the player a first hand experience when on the other hand a TV series provides a passive engagement for the audience. The expectations and priorities are different when it comes to these two formats. In video games, the first expectation and priority is interactivity. Players get to control the character and explore the storyworld is the expectation where puzzle solving and combat mechanics are the priority in this sector. Immersion through interactivity is the main expectation and priority as well. But when it comes to TV series, the main expectation and priority is emotional engagement. Acting, dialogues and dialogue delivery, visual storytelling and cinematic representations are the main priority through which audiences expect to be emotionally invested in the TV series. The video game follows an extended playtime when the TV series has an episodic structure which makes it more engaging because of continuation of the narrative. Mastering skill and player agency is the main focus of the video game. On the other hand, emotional connection and storytelling is the priority of the TV series.

Other side characters like Bill and Frank also created an impactful entry in the show than the game which changes the experience and helps with emotional engagement a lot. When Joel and Ellie went to visit Bill in his area where he was helping them to fix a car in the game, and his partner Frank, a mere corpse and author of a brutal note to Bill, received a full episode’s worth of alone time. They might not have a lot of contribution in the video game but their story, as a matter of fact, is worth capturing the audience of the series. Even though they might not add anything to the narrative of the game, they have the potential to point to an example of finding the meaning of surviving in the apocalypse.

To be more specific, in episode 03 of the series, Bill and Frank were introduced to the viewers. Bill was a self-appointed doomsday planner who, once the cordyceps virus took hold, took control and sheltered himself in an abandoned Massachusetts town. His story was shown through a series of intimate time jumps spanning 20 years, during which he planted explosives throughout the town, fell in love with an outsider named Frank, and spent the remainder of his days growing old together and discovering his sexuality for the first time with his partner. None of this was a part of the game and never shown in the cutscenes. So, the recent events of the series are happening 20 years after the first outbreak and Joel came to know about him after the apocalypse started. So, eventually he knew about Frank and visited them from time to time. Then, he met Ellie who was his first priority to take care of and they needed a car which is why they revisit Bill and Frank which was Ellie's first time knowing about them (Mazin et al., 2023).

But, in the game Joel did not even know about Frank. In the game, Joel and Ellie seek out Bill, shown as a paranoid loner who speaks to himself, to help them fix up a vehicle and carry on across the country. Frank, also his partner in the game, is only seen dead, hanging after committing suicide some time ago after the infected bit him. But Bill decided to keep living and he eventually helps Joel and Ellie to fix the car. We find out from the game that the two had a terrible falling out, which ultimately led to Frank's demise. Joel even asks Bill, "Who the hell is Frank (Naughty Dog, 2013)?" On the other hand, in the HBO version, the couple has a blissful life together and passes away in each other's arms without ever seeing Ellie. In the game, Bill is still thought to be alive. Frank was not even a part of the game so they did not have any scenes together but his character was existent in the game. The series gave it a completely new perspective and episode which adds more depth to the characters and enhances their personalities.

So, as discussed, character relationships made their appearance in their own unique way in both the game and the series which gives the players and viewers a different emotional experience contributing to their authentic features. The additions in the series helped create more emotional attachments, and the experience of the same text changed because of that emotional depth. So these are examples of the expansion in character relationships and backstories of the video game and the TV series and how it changes the transmedia storytelling experience. This also shows by making expansion, adaptation utilizes the transmedia storytelling strategy of expanding narrative universe across different media platforms and it also adds to the evolving nature of contemporary media adaptation by going beyond fidelity.

3.1.2 Script Expansion and Additional Scenes:

The additions were not only limited to characters, but in other aspects of the text too. There were many extended and additional scenes in the series which did not meddle with the source text, instead added depth to the whole storyline and characters. It made the players reconnect with what they have already experienced but in a better version. And for the viewers immediately fall into the emotional engagement as the storyline is worth capturing heart. To be specific, Riley, a character who was not a part of the video game but she appeared in the TV series adaptation. Riley is a character Ellie met even before Joel. Riley's story appeared in the DLC (downloadable content) which is an additional content for the players to play and know about the story in depth. In episode 07, the story goes back to the past where Ellie still has not met Joel and she was friends with Riley and they were surviving on their own in the post-apocalyptic world. They decide to explore an abandoned mall and in that scene some of the dialogues between Ellie and Riley were in contrast to the DLC. While exploring, they come across a photo booth where Riley says to Ellie, "I came prepared for this." Ellie asked her, "Have you done this before?" Riley

replies, “Nah, just making it up as I go along. You should try it. But I have heard about it (Naughty Dog, 2013).” And, after that, they could not try it because the mall did not have any electricity and it was not functional. The conversation in the series goes a bit differently because there was an additional and expanded scene here, where Riley goes to the breaker box and turns on the electricity of the mall which makes it fully functional. Ellie asks Riley, “You planned this?” Riley replies, “The electricity, yes, but about the photo booth it's actually my first time (Mazin et al., 2023).” This shows the additional part added in this scene which added more depth in the storyline of the series while the game being the core text contributed to the foundation of this scene. Another scene in the episode shows Ellie and Riley playing *Mortal Kombat II* (video game) together in the arcade of the mall and the conversation goes like, “You’re about to whoop my ass” says Riley. Ellie says, “That’s not gonna happen (Mazin et al., 2023).” This is also evidence of the additional part of the mall scene being fully functional, when in the video game this did not happen. This shows how the video game kept the character intact and added to the base while changing the experience by adding the additional scene. The script adaptation contributed with full potential while adding the expanded and additional scenes and also at the same time keeping the major scenes intact which changes the experience for the player and viewer in a better way.

As mentioned earlier, expansion on character relationships, backstory of side characters, emotional depth and script expansion provides to the unique series adaptation and also the game which gives an amazing transmedia storytelling experience for the audience. The character relationships in the game contribute equally in their own way to the series adaptation and makes it an amazing experience. Same goes for the script adaptation and expanded and additional parts. All these aspects did their job from their own place to make the experience worth remembering

with their authentic contribution and expansion. These examples are proof that TV series adaptation enriches the narrative universe by using transmedia storytelling strategies and this project is a contribution to today's media adaptation. Now, the next part is going to be highlighting omissions which are not present in the TV series.

3.2 Omission:

A very important omission in the TV series is the mechanics of the gameplay in crafting and puzzle solving. These are a main aspect of the video game but they can not be a part of the TV series. These mechanics make the game a more interactive experience when the TV series tries to fill it up with narrative elements.

3.2.1 Practical Problem-Solving and Environmental Challenges:

In the video game, there are moments when Ellie and Joel only go around making small talk while exploring the environment looking for ways to move to the next place, where they might need to solve a puzzle and look for ladders to move to different buildings. But in the TV series the gameplay elements are omitted and those are replaced with dialogues and practical problem-solving in the TV series world to focus more on character-driven scenes and plot progression. By interacting with the objects in their surroundings, players may learn what to do in the next scene, where to go, and which locations to investigate. Along with teaching you how to kill zombies to clear a path that the player is attempting to reach, it also explains how to protect yourself from the virus. With the aid of objects, notes, and contextual cues, the tasks you must complete in the game are made more clear. One of the many examples, there are crafting mechanics in the game which helps you craft your weapon to help you throughout the game. To craft an item from scavenged materials, the player must have the required ingredients, open their backpack, and

perform the craft. To achieve crafting the player must interact with the environment given in the game or else they might lose the chance to keep going in the game. They might not achieve an item and lose the opportunity to craft a better weapon which might not help with the progression of the game. To be more specific, when exploring the world in the game there are tables seen as the crafting station and sometimes there are dialogues involved like, “Hold on, let me craft some things I have found (Naughty Dog, 2013)”. Game mechanics like this give assistance to engaging experience that keeps the player wanting to go more in the game and keep playing. Managing resources is crucial because that is the only survival aspect of the game. Players stay hooked because of this aspect to keep moving forward in the game. Encounters with enemies in another fun experience for the player because after crafting they finally get to use the mechanics to survive.

On the contrary, practical problem solving and environmental challenges scenes are added in the TV series to make up for the exploration of solving puzzles and crafting mechanics. The television series cannot provide an experience like this where the viewer can interact which changes the whole experience but it has its own components which is unique and authentic in its own way. Even though interactive storytelling cannot be a part of a television series, with their practical problem solving and environmental challenges elements they present a contrasting experience in its own way. To be more precise, in episode 04 Joel and Ellie were scavenging for resources such as gas and it showed how they are solving the problem practically which also contributes to world building. The scene starts with overgrown cars lining the highway, the road is almost empty but filled with cars people left behind. Joel and Ellie pass by those cars and make their way to the gas station looking for gas because they need their car running to move forward on the road. Joel says gruffly, “Alright, keep a lookout. This won’t take long.” Ellie

replies jokingly, almost grinning, “What am I looking out for? Zombies? Or other survivors who want to kill us for a can of gas (Mazin et al., 2023)? Joel does not answer. He is a man of action and he is already crouching to attach a hose to the fuel tank. Ellie again adds, “Wait, is this that thing where you, like, suck on the hose and hope you don’t get a mouthful of gas?” Joel exhales sharply, annoyed and amused at the same time. He says, “Yeah, real glamorous (Ibid., 2023).”

This is one of the examples where siphoning gas would be a part of the crafting mechanic in the game which is replaced by practical problem solving in the TV series. Puzzle solving like raft puzzles where Ellie learns how to swim in the video game is replaced with elements like environmental challenges in the TV series. In episode 02, Ellie reveals her inability to swim when Joel and Tess encounter a flooded section of the ruined city. Ellie says, “Wait, is this where you’re gonna say it’s safer to go through water? Because, uh... I can’t swim.” Joel unexpectedly says, “Seriously?” Ellie says pointing at the shallow water, “Like, what are you worried about? It’s ankle-deep (Ibid., 2023).” In the TV series Joel helps Ellie with a raft to pass this scene but the TV series shows this as more like an environmental challenge in the scene.

These are evident examples of how the crafting mechanics and puzzle solving parts of video games are replaced by elements like practical problem solving and environmental challenges in the TV series. The omission reflects the difference between the interactivity of gaming and the more passive experience of television, where engagement must be maintained through storytelling rather than direct player input. These examples are proof that this case study is different from traditional adaptation and contributes to today’s media adaptation. The omissions of these gaming mechanics help complement the tone of the story world by replacing them with practical problem solving scenes and portraying through cinematic presentation. This is a crucial aspect for the TV series because the omissions enriches the story world while keeping the

authenticity of the source material. This might be portrayed as a change but the actual gaming mechanics are omitted and replaced with scenes.

3.2.2 Combat and Stealth Mechanics through Cinematic Presentation:

Combat and stealth mechanics were completely omitted from the TV series and they were replaced through cinematic presentation in the TV series. Combat and stealth is a big part of the video game which is why it cannot be overlooked and it is important to understand how they were shown through cinematic presentation in the TV series where the actors played a vital role to highlight these mechanics.

In the video game, the characters face infected or hostile humans with the gameplay alternating between stealth and combat. These mechanics help with creating a sense of control over the narrative. While exploring the player comes in contact with these threats and uses combat and stealth mechanics to take them down in order to progress in the story but in the TV series these mechanics are completely omitted and they are replaced with scenes that create tension and emotional depth for the viewers.

The combat scenes are also included in the series but they are much fewer and far, when in the game these are the main focus. The narrative elements and character development is more prioritized in the series than violence. There are scenes in the series with infected humans where combat is seen. For instance, in episode 05, when Henry and Sam (minor characters) were trying to escape from Kathleen (leader of the militia group The Hunters) and her rebel forces, they come across the runner (2nd infected stage), clicker (3rd infected stage) and most terrifyingly the bloater (4th infected stage) which is life threatening for them. As the infected swarm out of the ground, the human characters are immediately thrown into chaos. Kathleen's force starts

shooting rapidly and people start taking position to hide and save themselves from the zombies. The tension rises when the bloater emerges. The camera shifts to the terrifying bloater to the main characters. Joel and Ellie are also hiding to save themselves where the infected have already started taking other people in the scene who are not important characters but just in the background. Joel yells at Ellie, “Ellie, go! Keep moving!” indicating that she should run to save herself while keeping the gun pointed at the emerging bloater. Ellie quickly thinking that she is incapable of fighting this thing she uses stealth to escape from the scene when Joel uses combat to take down the bloater to escape from the chaotic scene. By using the bloater in the scene, the combat and stealth is present in the series but not in the video game way. These parts are considered omitted in that manner.

As discussed, expansion and omission are crucial aspects seen in the TV series. The game had an interesting interactive storytelling technique which was more contrasting than the series, while conveying the story throughout the whole gameplay where the TV series has its own elements to portray the story in its own unique way with its episode based structure. As mentioned by Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is supposed to make a contribution to unfold the story in its own authentic way. Today’s adaptation is all about expansion and omissions, it is not like the traditional one where adaptation should be exactly a copy of the source text. This section explores how the TV series as an adapter text has expansion and omission in narrative elements from the original video game. The video game basically creates a base for the TV series adaptation with its unique interactive storytelling technique. Now the next chapter explores findings which would explore other changes that show what they reveal in transmedial storytelling strategies about today’s media adaptation.

Chapter 04 *The Last of Us*: Alteration and Additions

Alteration or change is another crucial aspect to look at in order to understand what they reveal because changes and additions add much more depth to the storyline. The video game being the source text contributes its main narrative components and creates a foundation for the TV series which can be seen in the changes of the series. This chapter focuses on changes in thematic depth, worldbuilding, moral ambiguity and how shifting from interactive to passive engagement adds to today's media adaptation.

4.1 Thematic depth for Broader Audience:

The most crucial aspect of transmedia adaptation is the opportunity to be able to deepen the narrative elements in order to engage with a broader audience. Thematic depth is one of the important things to look at. Themes like survival, loss and human relationships are present in the source narrative but for the game those are a part of player agency. For being directly connected to the game, players experience the themes but for the TV series deepening the themes is important because audiences are not directly connected to the series. *The Last of Us* TV series adaptation changes its thematic depth in episodic format to create emotional resonance to reach a broader audience.

To be more precise, as discussed in (chapter 3) Bill and Frank's relationship got an entire episode in the TV series. Their relationship was beautifully portrayed in order to make the audience feel more connected to the characters and invested in the TV series. For example, one of the scenes includes, Bill and Frank are discussing their future together, they talk to each other about their emotions and it shows how love and connection is still existent in this post-apocalyptic world. Franks asks Bill, "Do you love me?" Bill assures him by saying, "Of course, I

do” Frank says again, “Then love me the way I want you to (Mazin et al., 2023).” This shows how they love each other and they want to live for longer. This whole scene was not even a part of the game. Another scene including piano from episode 03, where Frank discovers an old piano and tries to play it but he fails. Then Bill comes and teaches him how to do it properly. Frank pointing at the piano asks, “You know how much these are worth?” Bill replies, “Currently nothing (Ibid., 2023).” Then Bill starts playing a song showing Frank how to play the piano. Frank jokingly asks, “So, who's the girl? The one you're singing about?” Bill says, “There's no girl(Ibid., 2023)!” This moment shows the sweetness between their relationship and it also marks the start of their relationship. But both the characters are authentic and the game adds the basis and does its job as a source text. Bill and Frank's relationship was transferred from a minor subplot to one of its most emotionally resonant moments. The minor subplot of the game becoming a big part of the series shows that adaptation is not about copy pasting the source text, instead it is about enriching the narrative. Their relationship shows how in the end, relationships and love define what it means to survive and thrive. This change in the series contributes to today's media adaptation which shows that different platforms can explore a single story by enhancing themes across mediums.

4.2 Alteration in Worldbuilding:

Worldbuilding works a lot differently in the TV series than the video game. In the video game, worldbuilding is done by exploring the environment in the game world. The player uncovers details with collectibles like notes, recordings and pages from diaries by interacting with objects. The details about Cordyceps infection and devastated state of the environment is also uncovered with exploring the environment.

But in the TV series, the worldbuilding is more explicit with additional scenes and dialogues portrayed in each episode. To be specific, first in episode 02, the Jakarta scene shows that the infection was first discovered in Indonesia. It highlights the infection's fungal origin. This was a notable alteration added in the lore. The opening scene of the series where scientists talk about the possible fungal endemic in the 1960s. It provides an expanded context of the Cordyceps fungus. Set in the 1960s during a televised talk show, the scene features two scientists discussing the potential threats to human civilization. Dr. Neuman, played by John Hannah, and Dr. Schoenheiss, portrayed by Christopher Heyerdahl, engages in a conversation about global pandemics. In that scene, Dr. Schoenheiss says, "Fungi seem harmless enough. Many species are not only helpful but necessary. But the fungi that are dangerous, Cordyceps, Aspergillus, Candida, these are the real threat. The danger comes when the fungus enters a host. It spreads throughout the body, consuming its tissue and essentially turning it into a mindless puppet to spread the infection. Take *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, for example. It infects ants and compels them to climb to a high point before it kills them, allowing the fungus to spread its spores more effectively (Mazin et al., 2023)." This statement confuses the audience but they are intrigued to know more about the fungus. To this Dr. Neuman adds, "But that's not possible with humans. Our bodies are too warm for fungal infections like these to thrive in such a way." And Dr. Schoenheiss adds, "True, at least for now. But what if the world got warmer? What if the fungus evolved to survive in higher temperatures? In that case, humanity wouldn't stand a chance. There would be no cure, no way to stop it (Ibid., 2023)." This scientific conversation about Cordyceps gives the audience an idea about the fungal infection and its threat to human kind. This is a huge alteration made in worldbuilding for TV series. By adding additional components of reality and scientific plausibility, these alterations expand the story's universe.

They enrich the understanding of the audience by contributing to the apocalyptic situation while keeping the core themes like survival and human connection intact. This is another alteration that proves adaptation utilizes transmedia storytelling strategies to show that different platforms can explore a single story across mediums. This also highlights the developing nature of contemporary media adaptation showing their capacity to reinterpret and create beyond fidelity to the source material.

4.3 Alteration in Moral Ambiguity:

The character Joel particularly portrayed moral ambiguity in the narrative of the video game and players are forced to participate in his morally questionable decisions through direct interaction. But in the TV series moral ambiguity is explored in a different way. Audiences are passive participants and are not engaging in Joel's action which is portrayed more emotionally. His actions show internal emotional moments which have been held inside him for so long eventually resulted in questionable decisions.

To be precise, in the TV series the hospital scene is a pure chaos because of Joel's brutality and emotional conflict. When Joel left Ellie to be examined by the Fireflies so that they can make a cure out of her which would result in Ellie's death, Joel suddenly realized that he can not lose another daughter. As previously discussed, Joel lost Sarah (biological daughter) because of the fungal infection, he was deeply and emotionally hurt. He has been keeping his emotions inside him which eventually resulted in his questionable decision to kill Fireflies members just to save Ellie. Ellie wanted to sacrifice herself to Fireflies but Joel was against it. In the hospital scene, Joel moves through hospital corridors looking for Ellie when he comes across Marlene (leader of Fireflies). Marlene says, "You know what you're doing, Joel. You can't possibly think this is

what she would want.” Joel, angrily replies, “It’s not about what she would want. It’s about what I can’t lose again (Mazin et al., 2023).” This shows Joel’s internal pain and he is driven by his desire to save Ellie. He is driven by his personal fear of loss and the loss he went through for losing Sarah. Marlene again goes, “She could have saved them all, Joel. Every last one.” Joel replies, “Maybe. But that’s not her choice to make (Ibid., 2023).” This shows Joel’s emotional conflict and even though he had no connection with Ellie, he was making decisions for her driven by his desire to save Ellie. By presenting this sequence as a montage, the TV series allows viewers to step back from Joel’s direct perspective, creating a space to question his morality more explicitly than the game does.

Another example of moral ambiguity is seen in Kathleen’s character and her resistance. Her character and her resistance is not a part of the video game and it was added in the TV series. This part mainly got a broader view because of Henry and Sam (minor characters who Joel and Ellie met on their journey to meet FireFlies). Kathleen is shown as the leader of a revolutionary organization that destroyed FEDRA’S authoritarianism in Kansas City. While she claims that she is fighting for justice and liberation, her actions are mainly driven by personal rage and revenge and she only cares about herself. Her duality questions how far can one person go to achieve personal justice which does not even include the people of her resistance but only her. In episode 04, Kathleen says to her followers, “You think the whole world revolves around him? That he’s worth everything? Well, this is what happens when you f** with fate (Ibid., 2023).” Here she is talking about Henry who she blames for her brother's death. This shows her prioritization of personal vendettas over the collective good. She justifies hunting Henry down no matter what because she needs justice and lures her followers into something which is not going to bring any good for their resistance. This example also highlights moral ambiguity which was altered in the

TV series. The examples discussed above show that this change in traditional adaptation strategies utilized transmedia storytelling strategies. Today's media adaptation is all about alteration, which does not allow copy, instead it enriches the narrative across different media.

4.4 Interactive to Passive Engagement:

The narrative of the game is strongly intertwined with players' interaction. On the other hand, the TV series maintains a more episodic style where each episode slowly unfolds a path of Joel and Ellie's trip in the story. The episodes are organized in a manner which emphasizes certain story elements. The interactivity creates a sense of agency which is replaced by traditional narrative mechanics like dialogue, pacing, cinematography, and character development in the TV series and it helps with audience engagement. By omitting gameplay mechanics, the TV series focuses on cinematography, acting, narrative development to keep the audience invested in the series.

For example, in the video game, Joel's path unfolds through player interaction. Players control his actions throughout the whole game such as, his interactions with Ellie, combat, stealth, explorations in the storyworld and interactions with the non-playable characters. Combat and stealth decisions are controlled by the player. To be more specific, when in a part of the game Joel (main character-controlled by player) and Tess (a side character) was moving from one place to another they had to avoid some zombies to make their way out of a certain area and in that part if they make any sound or not be careful enough the main character would die because of zombie attack. So in that case players have to use stealth mechanics in order to clear the path for Joel and Tess both so that they can go through the area without alerting all the zombies in that area. In the process, they also come across killing a few zombies using stealth in the process (Naughty Dog, 2013). This is an interactive element which is used to go further into the game

with exploration. On the contrary, in the TV series, this exact whole scene was portrayed in a single episode which is episode 01 of the series. In that episode, when going through this area Tess and Joel only avoids the zombies instead of killing them using stealth mechanics because it is not necessary to be exact, the episode shows zombies in the distance making sounds which gives the viewers an idea of the risk of the situation Joel and Tess is going through. It builds a tension within the characters and also gives the audience a chance to understand the horrific scenario of the situation (Mazin et al., 2023).

When a book is portrayed as a source text, the audience's relationship with the story, the characters and the world moderates through the author's prose. As for the film, the audience can only be a part of passive viewing but for video games interactivity is a must. The player interactivity also ensures the pace and progression of the game. The plot or narrative part of the game which unfolds with interactivity is the main contribution of the game to the TV series adaptation. For this, the audience is getting a more controlled and focused narrative episode by episode which unfolds the story with passive viewing style. Here, the video game contributes to the intact narrative and the transmedia storytelling experience is changed in the manner that the game unfolds story with interactivity where the series portrays the narrative episode by episode. This shift from interactivity to passivity highlights transmedial strategy where different forms of media complement each other instead of copying the same experience across multiple media.

To conclude this section, through alteration and changes, the series creates a different yet extraordinary storytelling strategy. These changes reflect broader transmedia strategies, where different media platforms are used not just to retell the same story but to expand its emotional, thematic, and narrative complexity. The flexibility and creativity of adapting stories across multiple media adds to today's media adaptation by going beyond fidelity. The alteration in

thematic depth, worldbuilding, moral ambiguity and passive engagement shows that adaptation in today's world allows extensions and additions which contributes to today's media adaptation where adaptation is not just a replica of the source text but it is all about enriching the narrative across different media platforms. Alterations and additions made in the TV series employ transmedia storytelling strategies and expand the narrative universe across different media platforms. The changes highlighted the advanced nature of contemporary media adaptation showcasing their potential to reimagine and create beyond fidelity to the source text.

Chapter 05 Conclusion

This chapter summarizes the findings and takes a look at the future of video games as a source text. The TV series adaptation of *The Last of Us*, which was initially a video game, offers a compelling case study in transmedia storytelling. By analyzing how the series expands, omits, and alters narrative elements from the original game, the study can explore how the changes make use of transmedial storytelling strategies to enhance narrative universe across platforms and emphasizes the developing nature of today's media adaptations, demonstrating their capacity to recreate and innovate beyond fidelity to the original text. The findings were thoroughly discussed in two chapters by textual analysis.

As described, the expansions, omission and alterations truly contributed to it reaching the full potential of the adaptation. As mentioned in the first research question, the expansion, omission and alteration has been explored by looking closely into scenes and dialogues from the series. Expansion in character relationships, side characters' back story and emotional depth, omission in game mechanics and alteration in thematic depth, worldbuilding, moral ambiguity and shift in interactive to passive engagement has been thoroughly examined from the original video game. A prime example of good transmedia storytelling and adaptation is that it preserves narrative design, pacing and themes and also provides the character authenticity. Both the TV series adaptation and the video game as source text offers a cohesive narrative experience that attracts the viewers of different mediums by maintaining crucial story arcs, key dialogues and Joel and Ellie's main character arc.

The series adds more scenes and depth in the backstories of side characters whose characters were improved and as well as given a meaning to it. These improvements deepen the story by providing a more thorough examination of the post-apocalyptic world and its people. This

strategy highlights the ability of transmedia storytelling and transmedia adaptation of how it can change the experience in both media platforms to a new level for both players and viewers. It enables a wider and diversified audience engagement.

These expansions, omissions and alterations contribute greatly in bringing significant changes in the contemporary media adaptation. In transmedial storytelling strategies expansions, omissions and alterations are welcomed because in today's media adaptation it is not necessary for adaptation to be exactly like their source text. *The Last of Us* TV series adaptation utilizes transmedia storytelling strategies to expand the narrative universe across different media platforms. Additionally, these changes reveal that today's media adaptation is about reimagining and creating beyond fidelity. Traditionally, adaptation was to retell the same story in different media. But as discussed in the literature review section, scholars have introduced a new type of adaptation in today's world. And adaptation in today's media world is all about enriching the storytelling experience when keeping the source intact. The changes help with broader audience engagement and the findings are proof that *The Last of Us* TV series adaptation has successfully done expansion, omission and alteration which falls under contemporary media adaptation.

As Joseph Gordon-Levitt mentioned, "video games will be the future of storytelling as opposed to feature films when it comes to immersive technology. I don't really think it's really gonna be filmmakers who figure out how to do that. But it (games) feels like the most groundbreaking storytelling. Storytelling that's like, completely in a whole different realm than anything we've seen before. I don't think it's necessarily going to be the feature film form (Wald, 2020)." As a person who played many video games, I personally felt like it could be true because I have been mesmerized by the way video games tell a story rather than any films or shows. So, if a video game serves as a source text for a series or film it's going to get more attention than a film or

series serving as a source text, which is completely my personal thought. Other viewers and players might have different opinions, and this is a discussion for the wise that still needs a lot of research and scholarly engagement in this sector.

Lastly, *The Last of Us* serves as a benchmark for Transmedia Storytelling which maintains the source text of the story while expanding and enhancing the characters and storyline from the game to the series which serves an original and fulfilling experience for the players and viewers. The case study highlights the possibility of more game-centric adaptations which have potential to serve genuine transmedia storytelling experiences like *The Last of Us* that preserves the true nature of the source material while serving fresh aspects to the narrative. This would add to the complexity of this relatively fresh and developing field of transmedia storytelling and adaptation.

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