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Issue 10 (2019)

articles

"How video games changed my life": Life-Changing Testimonies and *The Last of Us* by Heidi Rautalahti, 1

Indie and Dōjin Games: A Multilayered Cross-Cultural Comparison by Mikhail Fiadotau, 39

Decoding Fantasy Football: A Ludic Perspective by Aditya Deshbandhu, 85

interview

Interview with Matthias Kempke on *Ken Follett's The Pillars of the Earth* by gamevironments, 117

"How video games changed my life": Life-Changing

Testimonies and The Last of Us

Heidi Rautalahti

Abstract

In the following article, I explore YouTube videos and forum discussions on Reddit with content related to the theme or titled "How video games changed my life", focusing especially on the mainstream video game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013/2014). My aim is to understand how players use and follow an emerging and shared narrative describing a positive life-change. Through communal sharing online, the narratives afford a testimonial format or model. I see that the life-change narratives – or, in other words, transformational speeches – serve both as individual identity reflections, affirmations, and testimonies. Furthermore, through the act of public sharing on video platforms or through forum discussion, they can bring together an emerging community. Following Tuija Hovi's (2007, 2016) conceptualisations of religious narrative, the article shows how the argued testimonial tone underlines a unified and newly formed *The Last of Us* fan community. In addition, it presents a case study of how meaningful connections are built through shared narratives in today's online spaces. The article joins the scholarly conversations examining active meaning-making in popular culture.

Keywords: video game, actor-centred, player reception, *The Last of Us*, religion, meaning-making, narrative, gamevironments

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Introduction

"The Last of Us wasn't just a game for me. It was an inspiration, a reminder... to 'endure and survive'. The game changed my life forever." (DanielOceanVideos 2016)

The above lines are written across on a YouTube video in combination with music,

images and other references to the video game The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013/

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

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

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

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

concept of a testimony as comparison. Observing the community's usage of the narrative complements the understanding of the narrative model itself. Even though the number of videos lags behind the amount of discussion threads on the game, the videos highlight a dramatic arc, the climax, of the specified life-change narrative. The videos visualise, preform, and speak out more publicly than the discussion threads. Therefore, the videos may be argued to emphasize a confessional and declarative element of style to the life-change narrative. While the declarative style is shared in the threads, a noticeable parallel emerges in relation to the style model of testimonies – a point of focus for this study and chosen material.

Following the tone of testimonies, the located life-change narratives are reflected and discussed in the latter part of this article in terms of Tuija Hovi's formulations of religious speech (Hovi 2016, 185). Arguably, the confessional content and narrative tone of the videos and forum discussions pose an interesting structural analogy to other types of confessional talks where a life-change has a similar focus, mediating self-transformation. Hovi's (2016, 185) recent research on neo-charismatic Christians' everyday confessional talks regards these spoken narratives as "performatives of faith". By following this line of thought, considering the sample videos and life-change narratives as testimonies establishes a similar functional frame for examination and comparison.

However, while life-change narratives and *The Last of Us* might not be considered directly linked to issues of religion, the studied narrative models share a common ground. Based on Hovi's (2007, 2016, 185) work on her concept on narratives of "performatives of faith", life-change as a transformative testimony of faith is a common narrative for the dynamics of religious communities. Hovi attributes the concept to J. L. Austin's classic speech act theory of precise pronounced meanings as

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state-altering performatives, where, simply put, an uttered speech is already an action itself (Hovi 2006, 2, 5, Austin 1975, 25–29). In addition, the transformative element of life-change narratives is understood in this study in terms of Bruno Latour's (2013, 70–74) formulations on transformative talk. Latour comprehends specific communicated information as self-transforming for the speaker, and the narratives located on YouTube or Reddit accordingly function as shared, transforming testimony. The comparison of testimony and transformation is used here to explicate the meaningfulness and meaning-making processes of the emerging *The Last of Us* fan community.

As Gordon Lynch (2007) has argued, research in popular culture and religion should not only find its form based on substantive understandings of what religion is or be compared through the narrow world religions paradigm. However, discussions formulating popular culture fandoms "as religion" are again problematic, creating juxtapositions that may impose religious concepts or meanings upon secular activities (McCloud 2003). It is vital to point out that in this study I am not making any claims of the material or community observed, but using scholarly discussions in the fields of religion and popular culture to operate on and examine the material. The profound experienced change that the forum discussions and videos narrate or otherwise express aesthetically is related to re-negotiations of identity, meaning-making and changed views on life. While popular culture is a versatile arena through which myths, beliefs and values are processed and understood (Ostwalt 2003, 154), it additionally provides or affords functions, communities and emerging traditions for these processes, as this study shows. Popular culture – in this case video games – facilitates a space for making sense of the world.

The located life-change narratives are regarded in this article especially as making sense of the self or as individual identity negotiations, along similar lines argued by Sean McCloud (2003, 188) that contemporary popular culture facilitates "late modern 'projects of the self'". In a societal sense, the idea of cultural self-projects align in addition with Michel Foucault's notion on "technologies of the self", where a certain state of self-knowledge or self-content is always pursued using the aid of others, or alone (Foucault 1982, 16–49). Identity in general is understood in this study following Anthony Giddens' (1991, 5) and Stuart Hall's (2005, 20) formulations, where identity is a reflexive understanding of one's self in a fragmented society in which identities are contested by various aspects and relations; here this especially considers the sphere of popular culture and video games.

Researching the (Positive) Meanings of Video Games

Video games as a part of popular culture have received their share of critical discussion in popular media (Laycock 2015). For example, different writers have questioned the morality of playing violent games (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, 14). Contradicting these popular media opinions is a slowly shifting discourse on viewing digital games as art or meaningful entertainment (e.g. Kuorikoski 2018, Oliver et al. 2015). For this article, video games are seen as providing an important and profound platform for players to achieve agency to construct their identity through meaning-making processes, understood here in relation to the data, namely, transforming narratives of life-change.

Meaning-making is another central concept in this study, which is understood as comprehending the process behind the life-change narratives; as such, they represent efforts to make sense of one's own identity by reflecting on the game. In addition,

individual meaning-making is understood as externalized efforts of communicating self-reflections in online spaces. Regarding research frames of approaching players (actor-centred) rather than reading games (game-immanent) (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014), common denominators are often concepts of reception or impact, underlining the player's active role. Both concepts contribute to explicating cultural *meaning-making* as an active process between media artefact and audience, also understood as *decoding* cultural meanings (Hall 1980). Aligned with Hall, this study assumes the individual player as a reflexive participant, not only receiving but reflecting, creating and connecting. While a great deal of work on video games and religion has focused on approaches of reading how religion or the "Other" is represented in games (see, e.g., de Wildt and Aupers 2018, 4–5), an actor-centred approach also deserves attention. Collecting testimonies from videos and forum discussions, in addition to approaching gamer-made videos and forum comments as gamer artefacts, calls for an actorcentred approach (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2014, Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe and Zeiler 2014). In recent studies where concepts such as players' meaning-making are the focus, the chosen research questions often relate to religion and video games. Investigations of how identity is negotiated among Christian gamers (Luft 2014), how gamers self-manage religious roles or identities through role play (de Wildt and Aupers 2018), or how religion is present in social online game communities, such as MMORPGs (Bainbridge 2016, 147), reflect actor-centred approaches. This study's premise is to broaden the scope for plausible areas of research, where the "peripheries of religion" are in focus rather than explicitly visible (Love 2010, 193).

As this study shows, the application of Hovi's (2016) theoretical formulations usually examined in relation to explicitly religious speech or narratives may give new understandings not only of gamers' meaning-making processes, but for operational

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

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

The receptive and actor-centred approach in the fields of popular culture and religion is also discussed within fandom studies, specifically in regard to how fandom provides meaning-making analogies and features similar to lived religion, underlining again the significance of popular culture in society (Blom 2013). Even though the approach of focusing on a player's receptivity is also present in this article, which means that it could easily also be included under fandom studies, here the questions of locating life-change narratives and examining an emerging (fan) community are 7____

treated as a micro example and dissection of a meaning-making process within one emerging community. The basis for all the examined players' reflections are the story and play experience of *The Last of Us*.

The Last of Us and the Ultimate Dilemma

The story of *The Last of Us* is quite dramatic. The game begins in the middle of an eerie post-apocalyptic city milieu where the so-called *infected*, once healthy humans, hunt survivors and spread infection. However, many players regard the game as more than just a horror survival story and third-person shooter with zombie-like creatures. The impressive cinematic atmosphere and use of drama have not remained unnoticed by players or critics, since *The Last of Us* has become one of the most awarded games of all time (Dutton 2014). The game developer Naughty Dog is also the creator of popular and mainstream games such as the *Uncharted* series (2007–2017).

On a gameplay level (processes forwarding the story and actions), *The Last of Us* has a traditional storyline, lacking branching narratives. A branching story is usually built of various play paths possibly leading to alternate endings (Lebowitz and Klug 2011, 203–204). In *The Last of Us*, the player has the freedom to play strategically as they wish, but the story advances whether the player chooses certain options or not. The narrative *text* is the same for all players. From the point of view of the video game industry, some could argue that this gameplay trait, the absence of narrative alternatives, is an outdated convention, compared to popular branching-narrative games such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red 2015). In *The Last of Us*,

however, it is specifically the lack of options in the game that powerfully frames the limits of a possible end-of-the-world survival scenario, where some things in life are not in our – or the players' – control.

In the game, the main protagonist, the character operated by the player, is Joel, a survivor living in one of the last infection-free, army-managed quarantine areas. In the beginning cut-scenes that show when the infection first breaks out, Joel loses his only daughter. When the player begins the game, a few decades have passed and the infected have spread to the streets - and across the country. The nation is divided, imbalanced and inhabited by different interest groups looking for ways to survive, whether it be at the cost of others, by rebelling against the army, or through seeking independent rural communities. Over the course of the game, Joel ends up travelling across the United States with a teenage girl named Ellie. He is on a mission to deliver her to a rebel group called the Fireflies, who are developing a medical cure for the disease. It is believed that Ellie's blood may offer a possible cure, as she was previously bitten by an infected person but remained healthy. During their travels, the pair confronts hostile groups, many infected and some survivors. In the end, when Joel and Ellie reach their destination, an old hospital in ruins, it becomes clear that for a cure to be manufactured, Ellie will have to die. After Joel realises this, keeping Ellie alive becomes his ultimate goal, his way of surviving, and the purpose of his survival.

All in all, the game provides a mature and insightful encounter of and commentary on the concept of survival, as well as what it means to survive on a personal level. Proceeding in a third-person gameplay seat, the player becomes a survivalist companion for Ellie and Joel. Survival is not always about fulfilling direct necessities for living, such as food and shelter, but about emotional relationships and mental well-being through social connections. The game asks the player, how would you

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

Expressing Life(-Changing) Stories on YouTube and Reddit

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Last of Us and the Reformulation of the Self

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

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

Hovi (2016, 186) describes common religious speech and narrative conventions (among Pentecostal charismatic Christianity), such as social declaring and witnessing, also as "ritualized sharing of personal religious experiences". This article's focus is not to analyse the ritual aspect of sharing life-change narratives, although this presents an interesting possibility for future studies, but rather to offer an operational framework for assessing the impact that *The Last of Us* has had on players or for better understanding the different meaning-making processes within popular culture.

As an example of "faith performatives", Hovi (2016, 193) identifies "three types of performative utterance" connected with identity negotiations in neo-charismatic Christians' narratives about "healing and guidance". A "normative utterance" (Hovi 2016, 193) means that the narratives place the Bible as a staple denominator and authority for reflection; on the basis of that, the personal story is arranged. In a "confessional utterance" (Hovi 2016, 193), believers reveal their engagement with their community and doctrine by also defining what is not suitable. Finally, "legitimating utterances" (Hovi 2016, 193) confirm the decisions and arguments behind the believers' personal actions. As the following samples show, this triadic performative distinction is also visible in *The Last of Us* life-change narratives.

The narrative of a life-change generally begins with praise and giving thanks to the designers of *The Last of Us*, but it continues by reflecting on the game and the player's own life-change moment. A major notable theme in many of the narratives is the impressive impact the game has had on the player. The admiration of the game makers and the game itself is a default element of the whole narrative, which, following Hovi, can be seen as the *normative* element in the life-change narrative, indicating authority.

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

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

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

User AgonyTLOU (2018) created a thread on the topic named "*The Last of Us* – Changed my life". The commentator experienced the game by watching *Let's Plays* (gaming videos) made by YouTube professional PewDiePie:

"...after 10 days of watching the series of TLOU, I was feeling too damn different, all my talking accent, personality I was getting more sceptical... more intense in my life, more of overthinking, it just changed me so much, just a game. I feel that now they are just family to me. Am I weird or this happened to many other people too?"

The user feels that the game is responsible for creating a change in their being. The videos and forum discussions express similar themes combined with life-change, although there are differences. In the videos, especially two themes come up in explicit association with life-change: parenthood or becoming a parent (specifically becoming a father) and not giving up on life or giving up one's self. The forum discussions mirror the same themes, but also add the subjects of sexual identity and accepting yourself as who you are. The narrative themes all suggest a process of newly awakened critical thinking towards oneself and seeing life's surroundings in an unexplored way, finally resulting in the formulation of a life-change narrative. I call this process the reformulation of the self.

In the following section, I present samples of the most prominent narrative themes corresponding to the previously introduced performative distinctions (Hovi 2016, 193). The four main narrative themes are straightforwardly correlated with the game story, play experience, and especially the characters of Ellie and Joel, including their mutual relationship. As found by Oliver et al. (2015), video game characters tend to become central focal points of appreciation in connection with meaningful gameplay encounters reported by players; this is supported by the samples here. In addition, shared narrative themes serve a purpose of building a communal life-change

narrative to socially verify one's self-reformulation. Hovi argues that social context (here the community) turns shared life stories into performatives (Hovi 2016, 192). In other words, the player's self-identified theme of life-change is brought up for the emerging community's evaluation, as well as to testify to one's transformation.

Parenthood

The game is driven by the characters of Ellie and Joel, who share no biological relation. Nevertheless, they act as a father-daughter pair, and this is visible throughout the game story. In the first major narrative theme of parenthood, the social relationship of the characters serves as a powerful motif for life-change discussions.

"The Last of Us has – I've said it before, and I've said it in the description – changed my life. The Last of Us made me think of my future tremendously. I want to figure out if I want a daughter, if I want a son, if I want some person to basically count on me, and after seeing The Last of Us do I want to become the father figure that Joel is, and has took Ellie under his wing?" (mattattak1124 2015)

Many of the video contributors and forum discussions similarly share that the parental aspect of taking care of someone has changed their thinking on parenthood. The confessional tone in Hovi's (2016, 193) formulation is explicitly linked to the game story.

"Three quarters into the game and I came to a realization that one day I would like to maybe have a child of my own. Now that's crazy for some people to think about that. How can a game influence your decision on having kids or the fact that having kids is such a big decision?" (Shubs 2017)

User Shubs (2017) carries on, reflecting on how the game affected them to imagine being a parent.

17____

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

The game as a normative element can change one's views on life, as Shubs puts it. The game is held as the authority for "legitimatisation" and a reason for one's altered life views (Hovi 2016, 193).

Do Not Give Up on Life

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

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

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

"This is a grim story that I never thought would see the light of day, but I think the time has come upon to share it. The Last of Us asks a single question, which I was asking myself for a long time: is love worth losing your humanity? I lost someone very important to me three years ago and buried myself within a fabricated reality to escape this tragedy. [...] Long story short, as the relationship of Joel and Ellie progressed, so did my wellbeing. I realized in the end that this game was a god-send and that the narrative reflected my maturation. I learned to move on and believe. I didn't necessarily have somebody like Ellie, but my family and friends were the exception." (u/deleted 2017) In the above samples, the players confess by placing the game as the normative element that inspired change in them (Hovi 2016, 193). The realisation of the importance of not giving up in life extends from the game to one's own relationships, establishing a life-change narrative.

Sexual Identity

In this narrative theme, players usually describe *The Last of Us* side by side with its dlc (downloadable content) playable game episode *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (Naughty Dog 2014), where players are taken to a short story in an earlier timeline before the main game. Here Ellie is the main protagonist, and players learn that she used to have a girlfriend named Riley.

User brittany16691 (2017) begins a thread under the topic: "Here's another '*The Last* of Us changed my life' post for you all!":

"One of the most life changing things for me that was brought on by this game is that after I played Left Behind, I started to find myself. It took me four years before I realized that I was bisexual. There was something inside of me that was screaming at me after I played the DLC that was more than just loving the fact that Ellie might in fact be a lesbian, and it was that I can relate to her and her sexuality on a completely different level because I'm not as straight as I thought I was! [...] And last but not least, I have had the chance to join this sub and become close to so many of you! You guys all rule! In the words of our old fart who will find this post soon enough, Joel and Ellie would be so proud of us for showing our love for this game!"

In the above post, Ellie and Joel are accorded authority as agents who evaluate users' behaviour. Kimberly1234 speculates that they "would be so proud of us", the forum community ("sub"), for sharing and supporting one another.

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

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

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

Accept Yourself as Who You Are

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

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

The fourth theme regarding life-change narratives defines the player's selfrepresentation and gives a reason to accept oneself as one is. In this process of selflegitimization, a confessional tone in the narratives is present. User horacemtb (2017) begins a thread on a topic named "Call me a freak but I have this *The Last of Us* fad I'm so proud of. Is it just me or...?" The writer describes their own "ritual" (horacemtb 2017) for playing *The Last of Us* while on holiday. They stay inside, eat snacks, and play the game through in solitude. "...I feel all charged up as I know I'm gonna have the best ritual in my life yet again." (horacemtb 2017).

Even though the writer above does not explicitly name a typical life-change theme, the everyday life they have constructed around playing the game hints otherwise. The user seeks acceptance and belonging by confessing to the emerging community and seeking legitimatisation, as does the writer below.

User Aucielis (2017) writes on a thread:

"So... in short, I guess you could say TLOU has made me learn to appreciate a lot more in life-- friends, family, the little good things--and has helped me keep moving and to be a little less afraid. I dunno. It's just all around a comfort in its own way."

"One of Us" – Community Confirming the Reformulation of the Self

Life-change narratives or transformation stories may be seen as signals of developing membership and participation through shared narrative performances in an emerging community. Brenda S. Gardenour Walter (2014, 92) has called fans of the video game *Silent Hill* (Konami 1999) "player-pilgrims". This can be seen in terms of Johan Huizinga's understanding of how play in society may be associated with ritual, a tool for reaching the sacred (Huizinga 1950, 19). Walter notes that the player-pilgrim also finds meaning through sharing experiences in communal fandom (Gardenour Walter 2014, 92), which is aligned with this study's focus on the paralleled dynamics of religious communities and online gamer communities.

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

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

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

Other typical community-constituting conventions especially visible in the forum discussions relate to topics on helping and comforting one another, such as when a fellow commentator perhaps feels embarrassed expressing their life-change story or has endured hardships in their life. Occasionally when a commenter declares the game to have changed their life and stresses the comfort brought by replaying it, other commentators join in, agreeing and affirming that *The Last of Us* is all one needs in life. In this sense, the community uses an educational utterance as a reassuring performative to build in an attitude of trust towards the game.

Hovi (2016, 190) describes faith performatives also as "faith maintenance", a function which may be seen in this case study as maintaining the life-change narrative topical. In discussions sometimes the moment of the initial experience of life-change is recalled by joining commentators, and encouraged to seek after again by changing gameplay difficulties. Difficulty change in the game would challenge the player in fresh ways, presumably to relive the original feel of newness, awe, even transformation. In addition, the return to the memory of the life-change moment or narrative usually receives immense positive reaction from others. I have found that the *One of Us* name is in these cases given to a community member in relation to this conversational convention, in order to reassure, affirm and unite; build a communal social bond in the online space.

Another theme present in unifying the emerging community is the collective wait for the second part of *The Last of Us*, as a sequel was confirmed to be released in 2019. This waiting brings the community together, which may serve a purpose to help pass time and not wait alone.

The Testimony – Transformation, Reformulation and Belonging

The life-change narratives in the data stand also as examples of how deeply players invest themselves emotionally in a video game. The realisation of this impact is created into a performance through ordinary and popular online outlets.

"I'm not afraid to admit it. The Last of Us was more than a game to me, it was an absolute emotional rollercoaster with phenomenal characters and one of the most gripping stories I've ever had the pleasure (and pain) of experiencing. When characters are portrayed so realistically, it doesn't matter if they're human or digital." (OldWorldNomad 2016)

The prominent narrative themes described above, represent self-identified turning points in a player's life that would not have been possible, without the experience that the game, as a catalyst, provided.

The narratives of life-change may also be seen as a speech form of selftransformation. Latour's concept of transformative talk (versus information talk) describes speeches that are intended to convey the altering of the speaker (Norton 2016, 117–119 Latour 2013, 70–71, 74). In this sense, transformative talk would be content expressed in religious speech or simply present in the sentence "I love you", as it changes or transforms the speaker and presents them to the "addressee" in a certain way (Norton 2016, 117–119).

In light of Latour's (2013) formulations on transformative talk, the material in the forum discussions and videos may be said to express and perform a selftransformative speech, in this case acting as a social renegotiation of one's identity by constructing a narrative of life-change in the context of the video game. In light of Hovi's previously discussed formulations, the videos and forum discussions may therefore be considered as testimonies of identity change and transformation, a form of speech or narration that is not only limited to religious communities. The lifechange that the videos speak of would then represent a meaningful performance for both the makers and their possible audiences. Moreover, the shared repetition of the narratives emphasises the importance of the life-change event (Hovi 2016, 193), as it perpetuates how the narrative model functions as a testimony. In addition, as Hovi 2016, 192) describes, a religious "confession" is usually a positive narrative. Regarding the material here, the life-change narratives, even though they also express past misfortunes, are shared and met in a positive and upbeat manner, as the above samples reveal.

Transformation, reformulation and belonging accentuate the meaning-making process behind the formulation of the life-change narrative, as well as how it functions as a testimony. It is noteworthy, of course, that these types of life-change discussions are not unique in the larger context of other fandoms, where meaningful connections with and expressions regarding popular culture products are shared and renewed, as discussed previously (Blom 2013).

Conclusion

The Last of Us game is positioned to create a need, reason and explanation for the life-change narrative, for something to actually be changed in life. Usually the life-change is seen by players as an identity change, a reformulation of the self. The emerging narrative is used as a testimony to perform transformation, and belonging in the community.

The self-made videos and forum discussions of life-changing experiences may be seen to act as testimonies of the aforementioned change. The located narratives work

as a self-reflection for the individual, but also as a testimony that joins them to a larger discursive community of other players expressing similar life-change narratives associated with the same game. The functional parallel that may be seen between the proposition of The Last of Us community's life-change narrative as a testimony and religious communities' use of narration as a performative of faith (Hovi 2016) raises questions. For example, why do they look alike (McCloud 2003, 203)? Matt Hills (2002, 117–119) argues that one explanation for these similarities in popular culture is that fans use discourses and practices familiar to religions in their activities. As suggested by McCloud (2003, 203) already a decade ago, popular culture facilitates identity negotiations that are sometimes expressed in religious language, because religious language is perceived as the "most serious" way of expressing gravely meaningful life events in society. Today, this article concurs that *The Last of Us* fan community can be seen as appropriating faith performance models - or practices - to convey how a tremendously important life event has happened for them. The narrated reformulation of the self is then expressed and declared in a shared emerging lifechange narrative that additionally signifies belonging in a newly forming community.

Religious identity narrations step over into the realm of popular culture identity narrations. Through video game play, identity and self-understandings are processed and reflected, and later shared as meaningful encounters – even as events that changed one's life. If we understand present times as reflecting a *ludic era* (Zimmerman 2013), the presented case study may be correlated with the larger societal phenomenon of games and play as tools for comprehending the world and the self. One's placement in the world is understood through the act of play, but also important in this specific case are *The Last of Us* story and characters.

This study's material confirms that video games, as exemplified by *The Last of Us*, are perceived in a positive manner. The online discussions and videos provide material – in other words, digital artefacts – representing fans' efforts to testify and communicate their own reflections on life-changes to the outside world. The players construct their own personal life-change narrative and identity reflection by building their life story and placing it in relation to the video game.

On a societal scale, regarding the emerging discourse of the value of video game play as a medium producing meaningful encounters, the research material reminds us that it is increasingly less and less of an issue whether something experienced online or in a virtual world is a *genuine* experience or not (Hine 2000, 118 Carrington 2017). Differentiating from phenomenon- or substance-labelling concepts such as hyperreal religion (Possamai 2012, 1–2), where terms such as "fiction" and "real" are conflated, I see the material here as rather representing social functions unravelling an emotional meaning-making of the self, whereby connection can be regarded as a "fan-text affective relationship" (Hills 2002, 212). Playing, being immersed in fictive game worlds, and creating meaningful "affective relationships" with video games does affect players to an extent that these aspects are carried into everyday life, as the videos and forum discussions show. Self-identity is constructed regardless of the cultural expectations of what reality is.

To conclude, the YouTube videos and Reddit discussions produce and perform a type of meaningful transformative speech, a model of testimony, where the video game *The Last of Us* is a central point for reflection. Naming the located life-change narratives as testimonies, where the players tell and perform a socially shared

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

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ⁱ The spelling of the threads is original.