

Returning to *The Last of Us*: The Aesthetics and Contexts of Remaking & Remastering *The Last of Us* Franchise

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the industrial contexts, textual characteristics, critical reaction, and player culture of three entries in the *The Last of Us* franchise - *The Last of Us Remastered* (2014), *The Last of Us Part I* (2022), and *The Last of Us Part II Remastered* (2024), in an effort to analyse the nature of remastering and remaking in videogames in general and how these particular entries contribute to the *TLoU* franchise by creating 'definitive versions' of the original games.

Identifying that the three games represent, in terms of some of the key research on remakes - 'direct remakes' (Druxman, 1975), 'true remakes' (Leitch, 1990), and 'acknowledged, close remakes' (Greenberg, 1991) and by applying theory on videogame horror (Krzywinska, 2002; Perron, 2009; Rouse, 2009) and both film (Horton & McDougal, 1998; Klein & Palmer, 2016) and game remakes (Brown, 2023), insights can be gleaned into the effects of alterations in game design elements such as cut-scenes (Howells, 2002; Klevjer, 2008), sensation, game feel, and accessibility. The approach to remastering and remaking employed by the developers was to modernize features such as graphical textures, character models and accessibility, while preserving the 'essence' of the originals in terms of the power of the gripping, affecting narrative, sensation, game feel, and environmental storytelling.

Adapting the conceptual framework from Verevis's 2006 study of film remakes, this paper investigates the network of relationships between developer, text and game culture using developer accounts, critical analysis of the games, reaction of game critics, and player responses via forum discussions and YouTube videos.

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The study will attempt to identify the motivations and goals of Naughty Dog in creating these remasters/remakes (Francis, 2014; “TLoU devs...”, 2014; “Rebuilding TLoU Part I”, 2022), considering such ideas as the creation of ‘definitive’ or ‘special’ editions including supplementary materials (Barlow, 2004), in addition to the role of the concept of ‘prestige games’ (Parker, 2015) and legitimisation as well as the relationship of these franchise remasters to Sony’s console release strategy.

A discussion of the textual qualities of the *TLoU* remasters/remake in relation to the original games opens up questions about the nature of videogame remakes/remasters in terms of overall approach, remake strategies, modernisation, and deviation from the original works in relation to a variety of formal characteristics.

Questions regarding the position of the *TLoU* remasters/remake in game and player culture will be investigated such as the perspectives of *TLoU* fan culture and their implications – as some players saw the games as an opportunity to revisit a classic franchise and a chance to return to a beloved story, while others disagreed with their release and aligned with the ‘don’t mess with a classic’ attitude. Further questions regarding how game critics responded to the remasters/remakes and how their responses impacted the reputational position of the franchise in game culture are examined, as well as how reception of new players entering the franchise via the remasters/remake compares with players familiar with the original versions of the games. Finally, what are the implications of continual updates of classic games such as the *TLoU* franchise as ‘new’ versions appear with each subsequent console generation.

Keywords

The Last of Us, remakes, remasters

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