TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVES IN POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION:
The Case of *The Last of Us*

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Transmedia Adaptation Video game Literature TV series Cinema Fiction	*The purpose of this article is to analyse the transmedia relationships between the video game The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013) and its respective adaptation as a television series produced by Sony Pictures Television and Play Station Production (2023); it also establishes links with Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road (2006) and its film adaptation directed by John Hillcoat in 2009. From the perspective of Comparative Media Studies, the analysis focuses on the transmedia processes that occur between the video game, the television series, the novel, and the film.*

1. Introduction

In the process of creating new technologically supported fictions, literature has not lost its privileged place, as it continues to be the greatest generator of fictional universes. However, it is necessary to understand how literature interacts with those other narrative universes that, from the birth of cinema at the end of the 19th century to the new forms of virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence and the immeasurable development of the video game world of the present century, have made storytelling more complex precisely because of the technological means they use.

From the final decades of the last century to the present, various theoretical and critical approaches have been proposed to address this phenomenon. In recent years, the concept of adaptation is resurfacing in the framework of *Adaptation Studies*, due to the anti-canonical and interdisciplinary approach they have given to the study of the interrelationships between literature, cinema, and critical theory (Leitch, 2017). It seems that this encounter between literature and other media such as cinema, and more recently, video games and, eventually, television series, has not always been satisfactory in the adaptation process, given that each medium uses different languages, although this does not prevent them from sharing common narrative elements. However, it is important to highlight the primacy of words in literature and images in cinema and television as differentiating elements (Sánchez-Noriega, 2000); and in the case of video games, interactivity. Added to this is the narrative nature of some video games, especially those linked to the literary world.

In this article, we will reflect on transmediality, which occurs in four artistic manifestations of a literary, filmic, playful and televisual nature. Specifically, we will focus on the novel *The Road* by American writer Cormac McCarthy, which was originally published in English in 2006. The novel was well received by critics, earning the author the Pulitzer Prize in 2007. It was adapted for the cinema in 2009 by director John Hillcoat under the same name. Both the literary and cinematic narratives depict a post-apocalyptic world that has been devastated, in which a father and son seek to survive. In addition to this film adaptation of the novel, there is also the video game *The Last of Us,* developed by the American company *Naughty Dog* in 2013 and considered one of the best video games for its narrative and approach to female characters. This transmedia narrative also includes the television series *The Last of Us*, produced by Sony Pictures Television and Play Station Production in 2023 and broadcast on the cable channel Home Box Office (HBO). In this case, McCarthy's novel and Hillcoat's film served as inspiration for the development of the narrative video game and its subsequent adaptation into a television series.

2. Theoretical framework

There is a broad semantic network that has to do with the relationships between the different media that have emerged from the development of technology and communication over the last two centuries, which have been called intermedial processes or intermediality, which in turn encompasses three other related categories: multimediality, remediation and transmediality, which form part of what is known as *Comparative Media Studies*. Although intermediality has been associated with Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and Julia Kristeva's intertextuality, current media studies do not refer to intertextuality (Rajewsky, 2020).

Multimedia is related to the direct co-presence of several media in the same text or medium, producing a combination of media and hybridisation; remediality has to do with the indirect presence of one medium within another, giving rise to intermedial references and remediation; and transmediality is understood as the passage from one medium to another, enabling the transposition of media and adaptability (Gil and Pardo, 2018). Therefore, transmediality is an appropriate concept when analysing film adaptations, as cinema draws on codes used by other art forms and complements them, not only in literature, but also in theatre, photography, etc. (Gómez, 2010).

Precisely in this semantic universe of relationships between media, one of the oldest concepts is that of adaptation, since from its inception, cinema has turned to literature in search of stories. It should be noted that the adaptation of a work involves a complex process, which falls mainly on the screenwriter. As Baltodano points out, "the term *adapt* refers to adjustment, rearrangement; that is, the transfer of an object through two different circumstances, a change in its nature" (Baldotano, 2009, p. 22). This adjustment implies that changes will be made not only to the plot, but also to other aspects. For his part, Corrigan (2017) clarifies that the term adaptation is understood from three perspectives: as a process, describing how texts are reconfigured or related; as a product, an adaptation can designate the entity

that results from that relationship between two or more activities; and as an act of reception in which the reading or viewing of that work is actively adapted as a specific form of enjoyment and understanding.

Adaptation is also linked to transmediality, in which the resulting narrative is different in each new medium that disseminates the story (Albaladejo-Ortega and Sánchez-Martínez, 2018). In other words, the meaning of adaptation cannot be understood without relating it to the concept of intermediality, as these types of adaptive movements tend to emphasise the manipulation, appropriation, and transformation of source materials as they become 'samples', "remixes", "reboots" and "mashups", terms that now form a central part of the adaptation lexicon (Corrigan, 2017), and which enable us to speak more accurately of transmediality or transmedia narratives, which in turn are characterised by the existence of a macro-story that is expanded mainly through four channels: the creation of interstitial micro-histories, the creation of parallel stories, the creation of peripheral stories, and content generated by users or prosumers (Scolari, 2009).

Finally, we must consider that certain types of adaptation can also be considered a form of transmedia expansion (Scolari, 2013). It was Henry Jenkins (2003) who, at the beginning of this century, proposed the concept of transmedia narrative, referring to media convergence. Carlos Scolari further refines this idea of convergence by arguing that it is a narrative form that expands across different systems of meaning, such as cinema, comics, television, video games, theatre, etc. (Scolari, 2013). Literature itself, in its various narrative genres such as novels, short stories, theatre, etc., has participated in this convergence, most often without intending to.

3. Methodology

This study is exploratory in nature. The methodology employed takes a qualitative approach. In the first instance, this research consists of a literature review, which basically involves a three-stage process: information search, information organisation and information analysis (Gómez-Luna et al., 2014). Secondly, this work should be viewed within the framework of *Comparative Media Studies,* which analyses the processes of intermediality and transmediality, which allow objects from different media to be addressed (Jenkins, 2008; Ryan & Thon, 2014; Scolari, 2013).

Several models for analysing transmedia narratives have been proposed, which not only include video games, but also other fictional universes such as cinema, literature, comics, etc. The model proposed by García-Carrizo and Heredero-Díaz (2015) was partially followed, which proposes a four-stage analysis model: a) identification and analysis of the macro-story; b) identification and analysis of the extensions of the macro-story that make up the transmedia narrative (official and unofficial elements of the universe); c) mapping of the official and unofficial transmedia universe; d) creation of a timeline of the evolution of the transmedia universe.

Similarly, the analysis model was applied to establish links between different media by Navarrete-Cardero et al. (2023), who propose four ludo-fictional arrangements to link mainly literature and video games, but which can also be applied to other media. The first arrangement refers to works whose protagonists become heroes in sagas, with the freedom to expand the story. The second arrangement corresponds to the exact remediation of the video game. In the third arrangement, the characters and the story can be dispensed with, and only a space or an atmosphere is rescued. Finally, in the fourth ludofictional arrangement, "it is not a single work that is remediated, but an architext, that is, a text—or several texts—with genre value that appears absent, but has become an imitable model" (p. 439).

4. Adaptation of a post-apocalyptic fiction

The term post-apocalyptic refers to the events following a central event or crisis that generates profound and drastic changes in people's lives and causes significant losses, both material and human (Espinoza-Rojas and Méndez, 2015). The novel *The Road* by American writer Cormac McCarthy is a post-apocalyptic representation of a world after a global catastrophe. It presents us with a father and son in a world of survival. The path the characters travel leads them to a continuous struggle to survive in a chaotic civilisation, where most human beings have become a horde of cannibals. In this regard, Chen & Chen (2024) find that the father-son narrative is a form of literary cartography, that is, an effort to alleviate spatial perplexity and construct meaning between humans and place through storytelling.

It should be noted that film adaptation involves a long process, but there are certain resources such as flashbacks, dreams and voice-over narration that are used as explanations in Robert McKee's terms, according to which there are two objectives for explanations: "the primary one is to deepen the immediate conflict. The secondary objective is to convey information." (McKee, 2011, p. 252).

In the case of the novel *The Road,* there are gaps in the information that require explanation. From the beginning of the novel, we see the journey of a father and his son, but we do not know exactly why they are making this journey. Later on, some clues are given as to what is happening. However, in a film narrative, there is usually a greater explanation of the story through different resources such as flashbacks and voice-overs.

In relation to the use of flashbacks, this cinematic device is mainly presented through the man's dreams. A general aspect present in these devices is that the mother figure is always present in them. Unlike the book, the film develops the character of the mother more, precisely through the use of flashbacks. Hernández Ruiz says that McCarthy's narrative focuses on the protagonist's memories through an extradiegetic narrator focused on the figure of the father who remembers his previous life with the mother of his son.

Secondly, we have the issue of voice-over narration. This is one of the most striking changes in the adaptation. As Linda Seger (1994) points out, "Sometimes film scripts use a voice-over or narrator to express inner conflicts. Unless used very carefully (...), it can turn into a spoken story" (p.154). The narrator in the film is in the first person. It is the father who narrates everything that has happened to them. He expresses his fears and regrets, as well as his love for his son. However, in McCarthy's novel, the narrator is a third party, an extradiegetic or impersonal narrator, who lends his voice to the characters on certain occasions. In this case, the voice-over allows us to internalise the character of the father, whom we have already established as the focaliser of the film and the novel. Through these narratives, we can understand the father's relationship with his son and his various concerns.

McCarthy's novel, in its first scene, forces readers to confront a post-apocalyptic space and completely annihilates the natural, green world as it was known, except in memory. The film, on the other hand, begins with detailed shots in warm colours of trees and flowers, and only then moves on to a scene where the man and his wife witness the fires, a sign of calamity. Penhall, the screenwriter of the film adaptation, in an interview with Bledsoe (2009) indicates that it was very important to show what the protagonist had lost, the fact that there had once been a beautiful woman and the life he had had; therefore, the flashbacks in the film are vital.

For his part, director Hillcoat uses two contrasting types of staging to capture the gloomy mood that McCarthy conveys in his novel through his economical use of language. The film alternates between bright colours for scenes set in the past, before the catastrophe occurred, and sepia tones for scenes set in the present. This dichotomy is one of the most striking aspects, as it is "in the mind of the man , the textures and colours of his wife (...) that work against the grey, lifeless landscape that surrounds him" (Carr, 2012, p. 586).

5. Transmediality in the video game and television series *The Last of Us*

The video game *The Last of Us* was released in 2013. Its narrative universe was later expanded with the DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind*, which recounts the experiences of one of the protagonists, Ellie, before the post-apocalyptic events depicted in the initial video game. Subsequently, in 2019, *Sony Computer Entertainment* released *The Last of Us Part II.* In 2023, HBO aired the first season of the television series based on the video game. Recently, in April 2025, the second season was aired, expanding on the initial story. Surrounding them is a world of fans who have been inspired by the characters and have recreated the story, as in the case of the short film *Stay (*2021), directed by American Yoshua Toonen and filmed during the coronavirus pandemic, which constitutes a transfictional expansion. Added to this is the intention to remake *The Last of Us* for PS5 consoles, as the first version in 2013 was produced for PS3 consoles. Other transmedia elements include the official eleven-episode podcast, the official playlist on Spotify, live broadcasts on YouTube and Twitch, and documentaries on how the video game was made, etc. (López-Delacruz, 2024).

In the particular case of the initial video game, it cannot be said that it is a strict and faithful adaptation of McCarthy's novel and its corresponding film adaptation, but rather that the novel and the film have been some of its primary sources of inspiration. On the other hand, the television series can

be considered faithful to the video game, especially with regard to the dialogue and audiovisual narrative (Higueras-Ruiz and Pérez-Rufí, 2024).

The video game *The Last of Us*, produced by Naughty Dog in 2013, presents us with a world in which a pandemic is unleashed by the *Cordyceps* virus, which attacks the human brain and causes people to turn into zombies. In this scenario, Joel Baker and his daughter Sarah try to survive, not only the victims of the virus, but also the new social context that has been established, one where chaos reigns. After a fruitless effort, Joel loses his daughter, and the story takes us twenty years later. Joe becomes an arms dealer who, together with his partner Tess, goes after the trail of a stolen shipment. Their investigations lead them to a group called *The Fireflies*, who act as resistance to the ruling authorities. One of its members, Marlene, makes a deal for Joel to fulfil the mission of escorting a teenager named Ellie, who has the ability to be unaffected by the virus. From there, the protagonists of the story are these two characters: Joel and Ellie, between whom a filial bond develops, like father and daughter.

The most important mission in the game is the search for *the Fireflies'* laboratory, which is looking for a vaccine for the disease. To do this, the two characters embark on a long journey that takes them to the opposite end of the starting point and overcome a series of difficulties, especially the confrontation with the zombies. As the story progresses, the characters constantly question the necessity of the mission (Radchenko, 2020).

From a ludonarrative perspective, *The Last of Us* is an action-adventure video game that features various gameplay mechanics such as *shoot-em-up* mechanics, where the protagonists must face zombies or other enemies; stealth infiltration, where the characters must traverse scenarios plagued by zombies; the use of survival tools; the mechanics of hunting with a bow and arrow to obtain food, among other mechanics (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2016). It is also possible to perform a narratological analysis of the video game emotions that emerge from the two protagonists of the video game, Joel and Ellie, through changes in point of view and action, as well as the focus of the character-player (Anyó & Colom, 2021).

One aspect that is not present in the video game is the *flashback*, which works very well in the novel and the film, as it helps to better understand the story by introducing the absent figure of the mother. However, for the interactive narrative of the video game, the main story dispenses with the constant use of this technique. Moreover, to introduce the main avatar, an entire narrative is constructed at the beginning of the video game, such as the chaos in which the city is plunged and the painful loss of his daughter Sarah. When there is a need to return to the past, the developers resort to *the racconto,* that is, the insertion of another story within the main story, to learn about Ellie's past and give her prominence while Joel is unconscious. This led the developers to create a downloadable expansion (Downloadable Content, DLC) called *The Last Of Us: Left Behind (*Naughty Dog 2014), which explains how Ellie discovered she was immune to the virus and her romantic relationship with Riley, a former companion with whom she would have spent her last hours had she become infected. This is a way of continuing to exploit this character trait in the second part of the video game, and in turn, this constitutes a form of transmediality.

In relation to the television series launched by HBO based on the video game, several differences can be seen at the narrative level. The game follows a linear plot, which begins with a cinematic scene in which the characters appear and learn of the spread of the virus, and then immerses players in facing that post-apocalyptic world through a series of challenges and violent actions that the player must perform. In contrast, the television series introduces a series of flashbacks and subplots that heighten the dramatic atmosphere of the visual narrative. For example, the opening episode flashes back to 1968, where a scientist is interviewed and predicts a pandemic, and then jumps forward to 2013 and later to 2033. This makes the narrative non-linear. However, there is a convergence in some settings, such as the Boston Quarantine Zone, although set in different ways. In the case of the series, there is a very strong presence of military control over the civilian population.

The game belongs to the adventure genre with elements of *survival horror*; in contrast, the television series adaptation only retained the action and horror sequences necessary to preserve the plot, so it could be considered a *road-movie* type drama (Mago, 2023). Likewise, the game's design, from the main characters' costumes to the fictional movie posters and the appearance of the world destroyed by the infection, was very effective, captivating the audience.

On the other hand, Higueras-Ruiz and Pérez-Rufí (2024) argue that the video game and the television series correspond to the concept of "dual-core industrial franchises" (p. 4), where narrative components

and brand elements are common, but there is a difference between the two narrative forms, since "the video game does not constitute a canon that must be respected in its expansion into serial fiction" (p. 5). This is precisely what happens in the second season of the television series, as there are narrative situations that were not contemplated in the initial video game, such as the death of the protagonist, Joel, which does occur in the television series.

6. Convergences and divergences between video games, series, literature and film

The first similarity that stands out between the novel and film *The Road* and the video game and television series *The Last of Us* is obviously the fact that these stories are set in post-apocalyptic worlds that have been devastated. The first two stories are produced by what appears to be a nuclear cataclysm, and the other two by the spread of an infection caused by the *Cordyceps* virus. These worlds are devoid of rules and institutions, with anarchy reigning supreme, which makes survival much more difficult as each person is solely responsible for safeguarding their own integrity. By showing us this post-apocalyptic world, the video game may represent a vain and utopian desire to change the world (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2016), and the worlds represented in other media could also go in that direction.

To achieve this in the literary and film versions of *The Road*, one must travel south, hoping to find a climate more favourable to life, evading groups of cannibals and, in general, any strangers. The difficult situation in which people subsist ends up moulding them into beings who distrust each other. Lodoen (2021) points out that the novel is pessimistic in its essence, not only in terms of the narrative itself, but also in its representation of key themes of time and progress in Western culture, which are often presented in a purely positive light.

In the video game and television version *of The Last of Us,* the situation is not very different, as survivors must protect themselves from the infected, who transmit the disease through bites. The spread of this infection has been so immense that there are only a few places free of these creatures, such as unpopulated areas, fortified settlements, and quarantined zones. The only way to protect oneself from the monsters is with weapons, which is why they have become essential for survival.

The filial relationship is another similarity between these four stories. While in the novel and film, the relationship between the main characters is strictly that of father and son, in *The Last of Us,* despite the absence of a blood tie, Joel's experience of losing his only daughter ends up being decisive in establishing a filial relationship with Ellie. Thus, in both stories, the heroes have the mission of protecting the life of a more fragile being, in whom they have placed all their affection and for whom they feel responsible. But due to the unfavourable circumstances of these two post-apocalyptic worlds, the heroes will at some point face the moral dilemma of choosing between the life or death of their protégés. Fortunately, in both cases, they choose life.

On the other hand, we can also point out some differences in relation to the use of names. In the novel *The Road*, both the father and son do not adopt a specific name, as they are referred to by general terms such as man, father, son, or the boy. Throughout the novel, proper names become dispensable because human relationships have reached a dangerous point; the less contact there is between them, the safer they will be. This is clearly reflected in the scene where the father and son meet the only character who is given a name, old Ely. In the dialogue between the father and this character, there is a lack of interest in the name when what matters is survival: "What's your name? / Ely. / Ely what? / What about Ely? (McCarthy, 2015, p. 85). The old man declares that the name he gave him is his own invention and that such things are unimportant. In response to the father's inquisitive questions, the old man replies: "I think in times like these, the less said the better" (p. 85). Later on, he is emphatic, even declaring his lost humanity: "I hadn't seen a fire in a long time, that's all. I live like an animal. I won't even tell you the things I've come to eat" (p. 85).

In the case of the video game, this mechanism proposed by the novel cannot be maintained, as more characters are added, the father-son dyad is changed to protector-protected, the man takes the name Joel, and the girl immune to the *Cordycet* virus is called Ellie. Another important aspect to consider is time in interactive texts. As Massimo Maietti (2013) rightly points out, the narrative of interactive text needs to construct a methodology rather than an ontology in order to explain itself, because in addition to this narrativity, another important aspect comes into play: the player's experience. He therefore proposes that "time in interactive media cannot be studied as a general structure of the text, but should be conceptualised solely as the result of the interaction between user and system" (p. 64); that is, unlike

cinema or literature, it is the player who determines, for example, how long or short the story will be or the fate of the characters.

In relation to the video game and the television series, Kitrar & Recalcati (2024) find that the television series delves deeper into character development and emotional drama, presenting them in a more humanised way. The game focuses on action and rapid progression, while the series takes a more deliberate approach, constructing the world and its characters in greater detail and emotional depth. This contrast in narrative techniques offers the audience two distinct experiences of the same narrative universe, each with its own strengths and unique immersive qualities.

Higueras-Ruiz and Pérez-Rufí (2024) refer to seriality to analyse the relationship between the video game and the television series. This seriality can take three forms: inter-ludic seriality, intra-ludic seriality and para-ludic seriality. In the case of *The Last of Us,* it encompasses all three forms: inter-ludic, given that the video game was remastered and the television series had a second part; intra-ludic, because it contains episodes; and para-ludic due to the transmediality involved in adapting the video game to a television series and expanding it to other media. (p. 8).

Considering the ludofictional arrangements proposed by Navarrete-Cardero et al. (2022) in the relationships between literature and video games, which can also be applied to links with other media, it could be said that in the adaptation of the novel to film, the second arrangement would occur insofar as the story of the father and son and their escape from the catastrophe is largely respected. Rather, of these two media, literary and cinematographic, the video game dispenses with the characters and the story, but retains the atmosphere, which in this case is a post-apocalyptic atmosphere caused by a virus. However, the television series also largely corresponds to the second ludofictional arrangement, given the intention of the television series' scriptwriters to preserve the narrative of the successful video game as much as possible. It should also be added that the four stories are post-apocalyptic, as they narrate extreme situations after the catastrophe and flee from it.

7. Conclusions

It is worth highlighting the relevance that the term adaptation is acquiring in establishing links between different means of narrative expression, such as literature, cinema and video games. The four stories articulate fictional worlds that may well be linked by a similar story and a post-apocalyptic backdrop, but with different media. This concept cannot be fully understood without relating it to others such as transmediality, which is used in the field of comparative media studies.

In the case we have presented, in relation to the novel and film *The Road* and its connection to the video game and series *The Last of Us*, we can speak in general terms of intermediality at the level of the four stories; and specifically of adaptation between the novel and the film, and of transmediality based on the extensions of the first version of the video game, even more so if we add the content generated by users, i.e. the players and fans of this video game resource and the television series.

The case of the video game is a little more curious, as its intention is to create a feeling of complete immersion. Players take on the role of the characters and actively participate in the construction of their destinies; however, the speed required by the game and the use of the controller end up limiting the part that allows us to fully identify with this type of artistic expression. In contrast, unlike the video game, the television series allows for the emotional drama to be expanded and delves deeper into the inner world of the characters, which can be seen in the two seasons and episodes that have been released to the audience.

In short, these four post-apocalyptic stories weave together threads that make possible not only convergences at the story level, but also divergences that make each of the media from which they originate unique.

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