2022

The Last of Us Part II (2020): Queerphobic Discourse in Video Game Reviews

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Mémoire de Maîtrise universitaire interfacultaire en humanités numériques

The Last of Us Part II (2020): Queerphobic Discourse in Video Game Reviews

Présenté dans la discipline anglais

par

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Session d'hiver 2022

Abstract

The Last of Us Part II (2020) has received numerous negative reviews on Metacritic, some of them containing queerphobia. Video game culture has been shaped to become heterosexist, and the game contains queer characters. In addition to this, some of the game's content was leaked before its release, raising negative reactions from numerous people. This study aims to determine how queerphobic discourse is formulated in *The Last of Us Part II* by analysing discourses surrounding queer slurs and neutral queer terms. It is done with corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, applied to two corpora of reviews written in English on Metacritic, written by people who scored the game, in one corpus extremely positively, and extremely negatively in the other. The results showed an alarming amount of queerphobia and especially transphobia, largely addressed to Abby, a muscular cisgender character, from reviewers who seemingly did not play the game but based their criticism on the content of the leaks. Results also showed a significant amount of discourse associating queer representation to political matters. Although it necessitates a further study of the topic, it can be connected to communities online harassing people for the sake of a supposed neutrality in video games.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jennifer Thorburn and Isaac Pante, my supervisors. Their availability and advice helped me keep a critical eye on my work. Their support and trust throughout this work kept me on track and motivated me to complete this study.

Thanks also to Ronald Lázaro Cuevas for his valuable dataset and his availability to answer my questions, Frazer Heritage who was eager to share some of his research with me, Elvis Coimbra Gomes who kindly opened his course on discourse analysis to me, and Pablo Andrés Diaz Venegas for his help on data ethics.

Finally, a special thanks to Juliette Vuille who helped me figure out my thesis's topic with patience and kindness, as well as Déborah Corboz, my sister, and Marijn van der Meer, for their moral support throughout this work and their precious proofreading.

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1. Introduction

The Last of Us Part II (2020) is a third-person action-adventure video game published by Naughty Dog, a large and popular American video game developer. Before its release in June 2020, some of the game's content was leaked in April and revealed major events to future players. Following this, the developers and some actors were harassed on social media (Young 2020). Possibly in the continuation of this wave, numerous negative reviews were published on Metacritic, a major reviewing website, right after the game was released (lazaro97 2021b). This created a strong divide of opinions in the public, as it opposed a relatively equivalent amount of extremely positive reviews. As I observed antisemitic and queerphobic content in some of the Tweets that were posted after the leaks, I felt that the issue was alarming. Having personally been positively affected by the game and its representation of queer characters, I decided I wanted to explore the reasons why people disliked the game and whether it was related to queerphobia with corpus linguistics and critical discourses analysis.

The Last of Us Part II is set in a postapocalyptic world and contains three queer characters: Ellie, a lesbian woman, Dina, a bi- or pansexual woman, and Lev, a transgender young man. During the first half of the game, the player controls Ellie, who quickly goes on a revenge journey to try and kill Abby, the other playable character. Her motive is that Abby killed Joel, Ellie's father figure and the main character of the first game of the series, *The Last of Us* (2013). The player learns during the second half of the game, while controlling Abby's character, that she killed Joel to avenge her own father, killed by Joel at the end of *The Last of Us* (2013). The two main characters are thus Ellie and Abby, two cisgender women, the first being lesbian and the second heterosexual, as far as she is presented. Dina and Lev are both secondary characters.

While the characters of Joel and Abby are not presented as queer, they still are of interest to study queerphobic discourse. In this study, discourse "refer[s] to all forms of talk and texts" (Gill 2000: 174). Since Joel is the first game's main character and is deeply appreciated by numerous players, and because his death is part of the content of the game that was leaked, it can be a major reason for people to rate the game negatively and can serve as a point of comparison to estimate how significant queerphobic content is in the reviews. Abby, on the other side, was misread by numerous people as being transgender with the leaked content, mainly because of her muscular body and thus it is interesting to study transphobic discourse in the reviews.

Video game culture is a sociocultural system (Peterson 2016) that has been built on sexist discourses throughout the 1980s (Kirkpatrick 2015). Today, geek masculinity (Salter 2018) is nourished by and nourishes this culture. Sexism and queerphobia are hateful discourses and behaviours that are often connected (Capezza 2007), and video game culture is an example of it, as geek masculinity is not only sexist but also heteronormative (and racist, although this is a topic that will not be covered in this work) (Condis 2018). Consequently, this work aims to evaluate if and to what extent queerphobic discourses are present in the reviews of *The Last of Us Part II* and investigate if those discourses' presence is shaped by video game culture. After an exposition of the data used – two files containing extremely positive and negative English reviews of the game on Metacritic – and the method applied – corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (ch.2), a theoretical background (ch.3) is built with literature to better understand the sociocultural context surrounding the game's release and its reception. Then, the results of my research on the data are presented and analysed (ch.4). Finally, a brief conclusion of what can be taken out of these results and what limitations of this work are developed (ch.5).

2. Data and Method

2.1. Data used

The dataset I use comes from Kaggle, a website where users can share and use datasets and code. The dataset was made by user lazaro97 in 2021 and contains reviews from the website Metacritic for three games by Naughty Dog: *The Last of Us* (2013), *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). The code made to create the dataset is openly accessible on GitHub (Cuevas 2021). The dataset consists of csv files both for reviews from critics and from players, for each game. I will only use the file named *user_reviews_g2.csv*, containing the reviews of *The Last of Us Part II* made by users. This file contains eight columns (Table 1).

Table 1 - Content of dataset

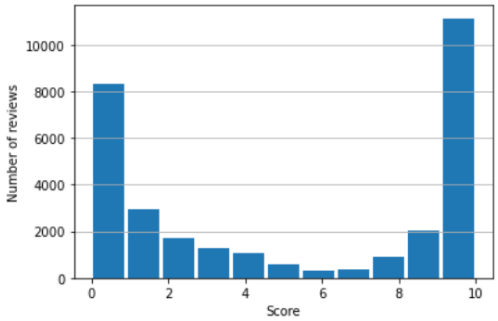
Column name	**Content**	**Type of data**
id	Pseudonym of the reviewer	Textual
review	Text of the review	Textual
type_review	"expanded" for long reviews or if they contain spoilers, "standard" for the others	Textual
date	Date of publication of the review	Numerical
language	Name (in English) of the language in which the review is written	Textual
views	The number of votes to the question "was this helpful?" on the review	Numerical
votes	Number of those votes that were a "yes"	Numerical
score	Score the reviewer gave to the game when they posted the review, on a scale from 0 to 10	Numerical

While the corpora I will analyse will only contain text from the "review" column, the others are useful as metadata. For example, it appears that there are 30,655 pseudonyms, which corresponds to the total amount of reviews, as they are unique, but there are 30,592 unique values for the review column (lazaro97 2021a). This means that there are 63 reviewers who posted a review whose content is the same as someone else's. It is possible that users have copied other reviews and posted it as their own. Another explanation, particularly for very short reviews, could be that several reviewers wrote the exact same text unknowingly.

The language column will serve to select only English reviews, and although this diminishes the representativity of the analysis, 79% of the dataset, that is 24,209 reviews out of 30,665, falls under English (lazaro97 2021a). There may be cultural differences in the reception of the game that will be overlooked by this restriction, but since English reviews cover such an important part of the data, the overall reception of the game should still be evaluable by this analysis. The date of publication will not be directly used but can serve as an indication that some people may have reviewed without playing or finishing the game, as it takes around 25 hours to complete (Glennon 2020), and users reviewed the game the day it came out (19 June 2020).

The score of all reviews shows how divided users have been (Fig.1). Since the majority of users rated the game with extreme scores (8,353 gave a score of 0 and 11,148 gave a score of 10), the analysis will focus on both ends of the spectrum, to try and understand why the opposition is so strong. For each view of a review, someone specified whether they found it useful or not, and for each vote, this specification was positive. Votes could be interesting to look at more closely, as the reviews with the most votes would indicate that their content is the most valued by the readers. However, 22,304 reviews (73% of the dataset) have three votes or less, while the greatest number of votes is 3,415, and these number do not consider the number of views (for example, this review with the most votes has 5,646 views in total, so only 60% of people who evaluated it found it useful). This component will thus not be included in the selection of the reviews, as keeping only the popular reviews – e.g., starting at 10 votes – would remove a significant number of reviews from the analysis without a guarantee of the global appreciation of the reviews selected. Whether a review is expanded or normal is irrelevant here. Even though expanded reviews suggest more thorough feedback from the user, standard reviews should not be ignored, as they represent 46% (14,230 reviews) of the dataset: it would leave too many reviews and thus opinions unobserved. Finally, the pseudonyms will not be considered as they may contain personal information.

Figure 1 - Repartition of reviews based on the score of all the reviews of the dataset



The large size of this dataset (30,665 reviews) makes it possible to consider it as representative, even though it may not be exhaustive. In addition to this, its size allows for a quantitative analysis, an essential element to evaluate the room that potential queerphobia – a term including "homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia" (QMUNITY 2018: 17) takes in the reviews. Additionally, the dataset contains substantial metadata to complement the analysis of the reviews' content. However, it is not flawless. For example, I did not collect the data myself, so there might be reviews missing or collected in a way that would be lacking information. I have no absolute guarantee of its quality, although the risk that the dataset is completely unreliable is minimal as it has a silver medal on Kaggle. Medals are assigned to datasets when other users upvote the dataset, thus stating they consider it is a quality dataset. To obtain a silver medal on a dataset, at least 20 people who contributed sufficiently to Kaggle to obtain a certain status, must upvote it. While its size has strong advantages, it is also a limitation. Because of its size, I will search for specific words and analyse them in their context, but it is possible that some reviewers discuss queer themes without using these words. My analysis thus probably does not contain the entirety of discourses on the game's queer characters. Finally, as people can review the game without playing it, it is possible that some reviewers did not finish the game or did not play it at all.

2.2. Ethical Data

It is necessary to have an account on Metacritic to post reviews. This account is under a unique id chosen by the users themselves; they can thus insert personal information such as their name, surname, birth year, and so on in their pseudonym. The latter are then completely publicly available. Diaz (2019) gives advice on how to use data ethically, as exposing personal information could affect the people concerned. For this reason, the dataset is not completely anonymous and, as Schneier (2007) explains, with sufficient information and context,

supposedly anonymous data can be traced, and identities uncovered. Since the dataset contains users' ids, it is possible to access a user's profile on which all their reviews are gathered. If they share personal information in their pseudonym, it would then be possible to connect the account to others on different websites and, ultimately, discover their identity. While the risk of personal information being visible exists, no supplementary information than the openly accessible data is gathered in the dataset. In addition to this, the pseudonyms are not looked at in this work, although anyone could find them with a bit of research. No supplementary information that could help uncover their identity is shared either in the dataset or in this work. Consequently, this paper keeps users' identity as safe as possible.

2.3. Data handling

The aim of this paper is to compare queer-related discourse in positive and negative reviews to find whether queerphobia could be a factor in the divided appreciation of the game. As this opposition is central to this work and to simplify the comparative work, moderate scores have been ignored. The creator of the dataset made a sentiment analysis on this dataset, in which he observes that most negative reviews were given just as the game came out, a hint that reviewers may have formed their opinion of the game even before it came out. In his conclusions, the author suggests that since medium ratings had similar results, an analysis should be made with only ratings of 0 and 10 (lazaro97 2021b). Following this, only the content of the reviews in English rated 0 and 10 from the original file are directly used for the analysis.

To proceed with such a comparative analysis, the original file needed some pre-processing. This has been done in a Jupyter notebook with Python. I have relied on Davydova's "Text Preprocessing in Python: Steps, Tools, and Examples" (2018) for this procedure. For better readability, I started by selecting only the columns with the id, the review's content, the language, and the score. In this first step, I have seen that a review was classified as Russian but was written in English. As the size of the dataset is large, I have decided to ignore the English reviews that would be lost because of an incorrect classification, and I have removed all reviews whose language was not English. At this point, it appeared that the dataset contained id duplicates: even if all pseudonyms on Metacritic are unique, some lines of the dataset appeared more than once. For every duplicate found in the file, I have kept the first one and removed the others. In total, this procedure removed nine reviews. Regarding the 63 lines of the dataset mentioned earlier, whose review content appears more than once, the

same process has not been followed: the cases in which reviews are identical but published by different accounts, even if it means that someone possibly made several accounts to post the same review or that some reviewers copied others, each of these reviews exists on Metacritic and is not a consequence of a mistake in the dataset. For this reason, they are kept and considered for the analysis. Once this cleaning was done, I have created two dataframes, one with the reviews with a score of 0 and the other with those with a score 10. Removing moderate reviews was a rather significant loss, but as explained, these are not relevant to this work. The number of negative and positive reviews with this procedure is relatively balanced, with 6,893 negative reviews and 8,120 positive ones. Finally, I have transformed both dataframes into two strings containing only the reviews' content, with each review on a separated line, so that both could be saved as text files, one containing the text of all reviews classified as English with a rating of 10, without duplicates, the other the containing the same for reviews with a rating of 0. Although the final result contains some non-English text, such as Chinese, it is in reviews that mix other languages with English. The parts of reviews written in other languages will simply be ignored in the analysis. For further details on the data cleaning, the notebook is shared on a public GitHub repository, along with the two text files that resulted from it and the data table taken from Kaggle containing all the users' reviews (Corboz 2021).

2.4. Method

To proceed to the analysis, I will rely on Baker's definition and use of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis (CDA). As he explains, "web language […] is a variety [of language] in itself" (Baker 2010: 13). The objective is not to compare this variety to other forms of written or spoken discourses but rather to compare two "specialised corpora together" (Baker 2010: 14), limiting myself to highly positive and negative reviews from *The Last of Us Part II*.

Working with AntConc, I searched for queerphobic slurs and neutral terms regarding sexual identity such as *gay*, *lesbian*, and *trans* in both negative and positive reviews and proceeded to a collocational analysis of these words to find what other terms are associated to them. As Baker states, collocation "indicates a relationship, but we may need to carry out concordancing work in order to identify exactly how the relationship is manifested in language" (2010: 24). Following this, I used concordance tables to see in which "linguistic context" (Baker 2010: 21) the neutral word *lgbt* and its variants are used in the reviews. To

complete this analysis, I looked at the frequency and collocates of the queer characters' names as well as Abby – because her character is often misinterpreted as transgender - and Joel, the main character of *The Last of Us* (2013) to estimate whether his death can be a major reason to dislike its sequel. The creator of the dataset notes that more than half of the reviews mentioning Joel's death were negative ones, with the emotions standing out being sadness, fear, and anger, suggesting that this event was a significant element for people to dislike the game (lazaro97 2021b). Since queer-related words appeared often connected to political terms, a quick overview of political words and their collocates concluded the analysis.

Regarding CDA, Paltridge (2006: 186) explains that it

> might commence with an analysis of the use of discourse and move from there to an explanation and interpretation of the discourse. From here, the analysis might proceed to deconstruct and challenge the texts, tracing ideologies and assumptions underlying the use of discourse, and relating these to different views of the world, experiences and beliefs.

This is what I aimed for in this work, exploring the reviews to find queerphobic discourse in them and understanding them in the broader sociocultural context potentially shaping reviewers' ideologies.

Lastly, Baker affirms that if "we want to fully carry out CDA […] the political biases of the analyst must come into play" (2012: 253). More precisely, O'Halloran (2011: 446) states that CDA is "drawn to texts where the marginal and relatively powerless are (mis)represented by the powerful", which leads authors' "political persuasion (usually left-liberal) [to be] often evident in their reflection and interpretation". I position myself strongly against any form of queerphobia and cannot separate myself from my opinions on the topic. Furthermore, I am highly biased in favour of a stronger representation of queer identities in video games and am personally affected by queerphobic discourse. Nonetheless, I want to make this study as objective as possible. I want to use this discourse analysis to expose if and how the resistance of a part of the game's audience to the game is rooted in the heteronormativity of gaming culture. Rather than criticising queerphobic discourse, I aim at trying to measure its presence and form in the reviews.

3. Theoretical Background and Previous Works

3.1. Queerphobic Discourse

Queerphobia is understood as a "term used to include all forms of homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia and transphobia" (QMUNITY 2018: 17), these phobias being a "fear or hatred of, aversion to, and discrimination against [the sexual identity and question and its associated] behaviour" (2, 10, 12). This can be expressed through language as well as other acts, openly and indirectly. To introduce this topic, some queerphobic discourse analyses are overviewed to find various ways in which queerphobia can be formulated.

Russell's (2019) analysis of online publications of the Hommen, a French group who was strongly opposed to the instauration of gay marriage in France, explores how they frame queer people as a threat. He explains that by "co-opting discourses of oppression […], the Hommen position themselves, and emblematically the French male, as the ultimate victims of the [legalisation of gay marriage]" (Russell 2019: 112). He notes that "all actions contrary to their will are framed as undemocratic" (Russell 2019: 114). Overall, the Hommen frame themselves as not only victims but also defenders of French values and "Children and Family" against "the Administration, LGBT groups, and Feminists" (Russell 2019: 101). As Russell (2019: 116) affirms, there is an implicit "presumption of male hegemony" within "any crisis of masculinity". This is striking in the violent reaction of the Hommen to gay marriage, who straightforwardly frame queer people as threatening. This study can serve as a source of comparison with the discourse regarding queer characters in *The Last of Us Part II*. Indeed, both The Hommen's revendications and the presence of queer characters in *The Last of Us Part II* can be considered as a threat to heteronormativity.

Peterson (2011), on the other hand, observes more subtle and indirect homophobic discourse, shaped by the context in which it is formulated. He affirms that "generalizing all forms of homophobia as overt expressions obscures the often complex ways in which homophobia works covertly" (Peterson 2011: 743). Looking at a speech concerning the place of homosexual recruits in the US military given by Sam Nunn, a US politician, he explains that "structural systems – including language –" and the social context are highly significant for the meanings of discourse (Peterson 2016: 63). For this reason, then, "homophobic formations need to be understood in terms of the social practices that produce them" (Peterson 2016: 65). Peterson (2016: 77) finds that Nunn's speech has no direct homophobic discourse and that he is rather avoiding mentions of the topic of homosexuality and, when it is talked about,

it is often in abstract terms. Nunn, then, is relying "on the social practice's shared values to avoid the necessity of referencing the queer subject" (Peterson 2016: 81). Peterson (2016: 80) further notes that frequent references to the socio-cultural context "legitimates and ensures the continued exclusion of queer subjects from that practice [US forces] as the practice itself is already configured to exclude". In another article (Peterson 2011), he analyses how the US Family Research Council defined family to exclude homosexual parents from it. He finds that most aspects of their discourse articulate the concept of family not through the idea of a loving family but rather in terms of functionality, as the former notion includes homosexual couples. Here again, homophobia is not overtly formulated. It is present in a way that avoids any straightforward mention of excluding queer people from families but makes it clear that it is functionally impossible e.g., by saying that "'marriage' is a union of one man and one woman" and later that they "discourage alternative 'family' forms" (FRC 2008, as quoted in Peterson 2011: 747).

The various ways in which queerphobic discourse is formulated comes from the influence of the structural systems and sociocultural context shaping discourse. From his observations, Peterson (2011: 754) suggests that the "discursive shift away from biblical admonition indicates the extent to which such language has been delegitimated and how social change has caused the [Family Research Council] to seek new forms of homophobic messaging". Peterson (2016: 86) further argues that "shifts in structural systems can enable shifts in social practices, and shifts in social practices, particularly in terms of how those practices get represented homophobically […] or antihomophobically […] can help produce shifts in structural systems". This would not only explain that the move from overt to covert queerphobia in discourse comes from change in social practices but also encourages people to change, where they can, structural systems and social practices to deconstruct and, hopefully, remove homophobia from culture and discourse. Indirect or hidden queerphobic discourse can and must be explored in consideration of the sociocultural context and larger structural systems influencing it. Understanding gaming as a practice defined through its broader sociocultural context and as a structural system is central to an analysis of queerphobic discourse in the reviews of *The Last of Us Part II*.

3.2. Critical Discourse Analysis

To proceed to a critical analysis of queerphobic discourse in those reviews, critical discourse analysis, just like queerphobic discourse, must be defined. It is a form of discourse analysis, which Paltridge (2006: 2) presents as focusing "on knowledge about language beyond the word, clause, phrase and sentence that is needed for successful communication":

> It looks at patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysis also considers the ways that the use of language presents different views of the world and different understandings. It examines how the use of language is influenced by relationships between participants as well as the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations. It also considers how views of the world, and identities, are constructed through the use of discourse. (Paltridge 2006: 2)

Following this definition, my analysis will focus not only on the textual context in which queer-related terms are used but also on the broader context of video games and how this context shapes the reviewers' discourse. Gee's (1999: 4) definition of discourse analysis complements this understanding, as he presents it as "one approach" among others, that is "the analysis of language as it is used to enact activities, perspectives, and identities".

More precisely, Gee (1999: 82) presents five "inextricably connected components" to paint the context – "situation" – of the discourse studied. Since the reviews are a particular form of discourse, not every element can be considered. The "*semiotic* aspect" is the "sign system" that contains all ways of communicating and expressing meaning, not only through language, and it is our only "access to 'reality'" (Gee 1999: 82-83). Although the reviews taken from Metacritic are purely textual, the score reviewers gave to the game is a form of meaning that is considered in the analysis. The "*activity* aspect" is the "specific social activity or activities in which the participants are engaging" (Gee 1999: 83). The reviews being pseudonymous, the only activities that can be considered are the fact that reviewers possess an account on Metacritic, have knowledge of *The Last of Us Part II* (whether having heard of it or played it) and any other information they might display in their reviews. The "*material* aspect" is the "place, time, bodies and objects present during interaction" (Gee 1999: 83). The information here is limited as accounts are pseudonymous but there is the certainty that reviewers have access to internet and speak English. The reviews are understood as a form of interaction, as they are read and sometimes respond to different topics discussed elsewhere. That reviewers are playing video games is only hypothesised, as it is possible to post reviews for games without having played them. The "*political* aspect" is the distribution of 'social

goods' in the interaction, such as power, status, and anything else deemed a 'social good' by the participants" (Gee 1999: 83); Gee (1999: 2) considers "anything and anyplace where human social interactions and relationships have implications for how 'social goods' are or ought to be distributed" as political. In this sense, the political aspect of the reviews that will be analysed is highly relevant, even if there are no direct interactions. Finally, the "*sociocultural* aspect" is "the personal, social, and cultural knowledge, feelings, values, identities, and relationships relevant in the interaction" (Gee 1999: 83). This aspect is central to this work, since determining whether queerphobia can be a motive for people to review the game in a certain way cannot be done without considering the sociocultural background that could explain such a discourse.

Gee (1999: 83) explains that "these aspects together constitute a system (an interrelated network) within which each of the components or aspects simultaneously give meaning to all the others and gets meaning from them". While some of these aspects cannot be observed or confirmed here, the reviews will be analysed in consideration with all information that can be considered and with a special attention to the sociocultural aspect, who shape the space in which the discourse is performed as well as the reviewers, who in turn shape the context in which they produce meaning (Gee 1999). By doing this, the aim is to deconstruct heinous discourse in the broader context of video games. This work thus falls under a subcategory of discourse analysis: critical discourse analysis. As Baker (2012: 247) explains, "critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context". This work aims to study "the way in which situations [or contexts] produce and reproduce institutions, and are, in turn, sustained by them, [which] is an important part of discourse analysis" (Gee 1999: 83-84). Leap (2015) insists on the importance of context in critical discourse analysis, stating that the power structures must be considered to uncover queerphobia in language. Queerphobia is reproduced in insulting discourse, and it is fought against by people acknowledging these inequalities and the necessity to change dynamics. Both of these types of discourses are precisely what will be investigated in the reviews of *The Last of Us Part II*.

3.3. Video Game Culture: Heteronormativity

The sociocultural and political aspects of the context in which the reviews of *The Last of Us Part II* have been produced must be investigated for this critical analysis of queerphobic discourse to be done. Shaw (2010a: 404) points out that video game culture should not be addressed through the stereotypes of gamers but rather through how these stereotypes have been created. Kirkpatrick (2015) looks at the creation of a gaming culture through video game magazines in the UK between 1981 and 1995; part of his analysis is based on their game reviews. While these reviews are written by critics and not players, Kirkpatrick (2015: 55) explains that since there was "no established way to discuss or assess games", a "vocabulary of game evaluation was something the magazines had to invent", and this most probably has an impact on how players assess games today. In addition to this, Kirkpatrick (2015: 64-66) notices that the "invocation of comparisons with other games becomes increasingly common in reviews'', "technical considerations drop out and playability extends to all kinds of game", and the term 'gameplay' emerges and becomes the main characteristic, opposed to all the others, which are considered secondary and praised when they enhance the gameplay. Kirkpatrick (2015: 69) also mentions that in the 1990s, "reviews actually get shorter and more prone to expletives and meaningless hyperbole". Knowing that the notion of gameplay is central to game evaluation will help to understand how reviews are constructed. That reviews tend to be exaggerated could explain – without justifying – the extremes to which some reviews can go in their aggressivity as well as their praise.

Kirkpatrick (2015: 24) states that

> to comprehend video games we need to attend to the discursive constructions that have embedded them in the lives of human individuals. How they were framed discursively and the ways in which they were incorporated into peoples' lives, becoming part of the repertoire of daily experience, are historical questions,

highlighting that game reviews are historically and culturally rooted, built in and influenced by a broader context. The reviews he looks at were not made online or published pseudonymously by players, so the reviewers and the public of their reviews are not directly comparable. It does not mean, however, that Kirkpatrick's observations have nothing in common with our data.

Indeed, Kirkpatrick's discourse analysis not only gives insight on how reviews were first written but also on how video game culture was constructed. Using Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* and observing how people interact with video games

> enable us to approach the prism through which games stand out as special objects, programs charged with a special significance for the people who are invested in them. A gamer habitus was formed first in connection with arcade games and then through activity with home computers. This environment was not initially coded in a way that made sense of that activity as something discrete and new – as anything more than just a strange 'fad'.
> The magazines in this study give us a perspective on the interaction of burgeoning gamer habitus and efforts to make sense of the activities involved in playing games. (Kirkpatrick 2015: 22-23).

This *habitus* has undergone a serious shift during the second half of the 1980s. If, at first, there are a few comments in magazines about the absence of female representation in videogames and in the magazines themselves, these comments are progressively answered by "sexist banter" (Kirkpatrick 2015: 117). Surveys indicate that some magazines' readers were largely male and adolescent (Kirkpatrick 2015: 117), confirming "the basic assumption of all the magazines in the last few years of the [1980s]", that is "that all their readers are young males", although it is bidirectional: it is not only because they had few female readers that they focused on a male public. The progressive disappearance of comments regarding the lack of female representation in magazines most certainly stems from the choice of discourse of the magazines. After this shift, it becomes "extremely unusual to find any kind of critical reflection on the question of gender at all" (Kirkpatrick 2015: 117). Finally, "by the end of 1988 gaming has become firmly colonized, in a symbolic sense, by an aggressive masculinity" (Kirkpatrick 2015: 118), meaning that there is a dichotomy between an "authentic, male player and his intuitive appreciation of the real value to be found in games" and a "feminized, weak player who is seduced by frippery" (Kirkpatrick 2015: 122). Kirkpatrick (2015: 123) explains that the formation of such "a community of taste" was formed "around a specific and easily interpreted set of values – those of the insecure teenage boy", a construction that has been influenced by changes of technology that pushed companies to opt for strategies that would guarantee most financial success.

The fact that discourses in video game press target young men, notably with sexist comments, has a direct incidence on the queerphobic aspect of this environment. Capezza (2007: 248) states that "sexism and homophobia are related concepts in that both stem from

a gender hierarchy social structure and that similar types of individuals tend to be the oppressors of both (namely, men with traditional gender role beliefs)". Indeed, Capezza (2007: 249) explains that the division of labour between men and women contributed to create a social hierarchy in which any person who would act outside of their expected gender role would face "various forms of oppression" and suggests that, consequently, "homosexual men may be viewed as a threat to heterosexual male power and privilege". Capezza (2007: 249) affirms that the combination of those "traditional gender role beliefs" and the hierarchy created from them generates not only sexism but also homophobia. Since "gender role violations are more threatening for men", as they have more to lose in that hierarchy, "men are pressured to assert their masculinity by endorsing such beliefs" (Capezza 2007: 249). Although Capezza highlights the importance of distinguishing sexism from homophobia, they nonetheless share a common root in male hegemony, which is present in the discourses Kirkpatrick (2015) analyses: by adapting their magazines for a potential insecure male youth, the editors and writers highly value a traditional conception of masculinity composed of "agentic traits such as assertiveness and competitiveness" (Capezza 2007: 249), building an atmosphere encouraging forms of discrimination such as sexism and queerphobia.

In addition to video game magazines vehiculating heteronormativity and sexism, the content of games themselves contributes to their heterosexism. Heritage (2021: 12) states that language around gender in video games "is a way of normalising what is seen as acceptable for talking about gendered characters". He (2021: 13) also affirms that ideologies can shape discourse and discourses can express ideologies. Consequently, video games find themselves in a vicious circle in which numerous video games contain heterosexist discourses influenced by the ideologies present in video game culture, and by doing so, reinforce the ideologies that influenced them. As Heritage (2021: 235) notes, even if representations do not entirely shape identities, they have the power to do so and must considered. *The Last of Us Part II*, with discourses on gender issues and representing queer characters, proposes something opposing what is described of video game culture by both Kirkpatrick (2015) and Heritage (2021).

Salter (2018) and Condis (2018) give examples of how this context leads to certain behaviours. Salter (2018: 248-250) explains that women were progressively less present in computing fields and hobbies with the rise of geek masculinity, "a formation of gendered subjectivity in which boys and men claim technological knowledge and aptitude as a basis for

masculine identity" that is an "alternative pathway to masculine identification" (250); it extends to video games, as they are part of this broader picture. This, combined with the structure of certain platforms on internet (Salter 2018), has enabled violent behaviours online such as #GamerGate. #GamerGate is a movement of cyberbullying that started in 2014, after Eron Gjoni published a long text falsely accusing his ex-girlfriend Zoë Quinn of having used sexual favours to help her with her game *Depression Quest* (2013). As he advertised for his text on different webpages such as 4chan, users caught up on this and harassed Zoë Quinn and, later, other people – mostly women, claiming that they fought to keep video game journalism neutral (Salter 2018, Condis 2018: Ch. 4). This misogynistic violence can be linked to queerphobia:

> #GamerGate is just as much a product of mainstream gender politics as it is of video game culture. It is merely one of several reactionary outbursts arising out of the cultural backlash against feminism, antiracist activism, and gay rights activism; it is just one of several reactionary factions that essentially live online in a collection of blogs to collaborate. (Condis 2018: 97)

As discourses around *The Last of Us Part II* started not on Metacritic/reviews but earlier, due to the leaks, and notably on Twitter - just like Gamergate - suggests that the reactions to the game can potentially share a common root with #GamerGate in geek masculinity. Even though the term *masculinity* is associated to men, it is not assumed that all cisgender heterosexual male players correspond to the image of geek masculinity, nor that all players behaving along those lines are necessary cisgender heterosexual men.

Condis (2018: ch.3) studies discourses on a video game forum around the question of banning the words *gay* and *lesbian*. Several people on the forum considered that it should stay banned to avoid politicised discourses on identity to take place on a video game forum, as the latter should focus on video games only. Condis (2018: 74) argues that "[w]hat was often framed by participants as a benevolent desire to prevent political and ideological conflict from leaking into gaming and ruining its unique attractions wound up ultimately manifesting as a way to maintain a heterocentric power structure". Participants thus became themselves politically and ideologically engaged and Condis (2018: 81) explains that these discourses arise from "straight culture [being] seen as normal, natural, and nonideological, while queer culture is seen as aberrant, artificial, and hyperpoliticised", which allows these participants to criticise the political aspect of discussing queer identities while ignoring how necessarily political their

ideas are. Finally, Condis (2018: 76), observes that “community members, regardless of which side they find themselves on”, are strongly engaged in the debate: queer matters are of interest, whether people are in favour of them being discussed or wanting them to be invisible.

The #Gamergate movement’s violent discourse and harassment (Salter 2018) and the forum debates on the ban of *gay* and *lesbian* (Condis 2018: ch.3) exemplify Smith and Shin’s (2014: 941) affirmation that

> discourse of heteronormativity exercises power over its social subjects, engendering heterosexual and cisgender privilege for those who subscribe to dominant sexual and gender norms, while concomitantly fomenting the invisibility, devaluation, and marginalization of those who transgress”.

The heteronormative culture of computing and video games is hurtful to people transgressing the norms through cyberbullying, as with #GamerGate, but also in more subtle ways such as ignoring issues that non normative people face. For the erasure of queer issues, Smith and Shin (2014: 951) coined *queer blindfolding*, which they describe “as a discursive strategy that fosters a form of social invisibility that serves to repress the painful acknowledgment of queer oppression”. They also state that it “position[s] subjects to minimize heterosexual privilege”, “eschewing the egregious negative effects of heteronormativity” and “buttressing the invisibility of queer identities” (Smith & Shin 2014: 942). Without being overtly queerphobic, such discourses are damaging and reinforce heteronormativity; they are thus considered as covertly queerphobic in this work.

Although video game culture has been shaped around sexist and heteronormative values, it is crucial to highlight that the public addressed by the press and the communities fighting to maintain “heterosexual and cisgender privilege” (Smith & Shin 2014: 941) does not represent the entirety of people playing video game. As Shaw (2010b: 7) asserts, the gamer identity as conceived by the press – “insecure teenage boy[s]” (Kirkpatrick 2015: 123) – is not representative of actual gamers, which are a much more varied group of people. She proves it by interviewing queer gamers through queer forums dedicated to videogames who, although they use their own alternate ways to communicate and gather, are definitely present in the larger community of gamers (Shaw 2012). In her overview of how video game culture is perceived and understood, Shaw notes that “in both press and academic discourses, [it] is framed by descriptions of who plays, what they play, and how they play” (2010b: 12). She

affirms that looking through these elements rather than seeking a definition of a "gamer identity allows us to see that popular discourses actually offer a much more diverse view of what gaming is than they are generally given credit" (Shaw 2010b: 12). Thus, there is a strong dichotomy between the actual diversity of people playing games and the discourses around video games. Romero (2015) highlights that such online queer forums and communities are meant to offer a safe space to *gaymers*, which would not be necessary if queer people were not suffering from harassment online in video games communities. In addition to this, the general category of gamer does not necessarily consist exclusively of people enacting their expected roles in it. For example, a member of the *gaymer* forum Shaw (2012: 73) investigates is a heterosexual man who joined as a gamer and because the "site reflected his own interests and social network". My work focuses on discourse from individuals. The large and general social structures described in this section are considered as potentially influencing individual's discourse. There is however no assumption that individuals are constantly representative of the context in which they produce their discourse. The heteronormativity that permeates video game culture, in addition to being unrepresentative of the community, is harmful to any person transgressing the norms, even if they are cisgender heterosexual men.

3.4. Queer Representation and Queer Gamers' Appreciation

The impact of the heteronormative climate in video games goes beyond press discourse. First, queer representations are mostly absent from video games. For example, Heritage (2020: 7) analyses the scripts from several games from a restricted group of video games: all are "first-person narratives […] published between 2012 and 2016" aimed for an audience of 16 and older and considered 'AAA', "meaning that they were published on high-end consoles, rather than on mobile phones". Heritage (2020: 7) explains that this restriction is to avoid influence from external elements "such as variation across genre and register". He observes that gender stereotypes such as violent and strong male characters are highly present. More particularly, Heritage (2020) notes that non-binary characters are not significantly mentioned in the games' text, highlighting the heteronormativity that surrounds most video games. Although *The Last of Us Part II* came out in 2020 and is played from a third-person point of view, the other criterion used by Heritage matches. It thus seems safe to consider that, at least to some extent, by portraying characters that challenge gender stereotypes and the fact that the game

has a transgender character, *The Last of Us Part II* contrasts significantly with games from similar categories.

Some developers have tried to incorporate queer elements in their games, though as hidden and avoidable. James (2018) presents several queer "easter eggs" in games, i.e. bonus elements of a game that are usually found only if actively sought. He states that if "AAA game studios wish to represent queer identities, then they must not be content to simply offer queerness as an option." Indeed, he considers that "representing queerness means coping with queerness; it means projecting directly into the world of possibilities the discomfort between its often straight, cisgender gamers and queer experiences." This call for queer elements and identities to be presented in the open in video games with large budgets, answered by The Last of Us Part II, is representative of this serious lack in large and popular games.

However, when queer characters are present in video games in a way that cannot be avoided, it can still appear as problematic, as they fall into questionable stereotypes. Arltoft and Benkö (2019) give an overview of queer characters' representation in games through tropes (3-5) as well as the latent straightwashing – reading queer characters as straight – in games and their community (8). They focus on how queer players place themselves in this context (Arltoft & Benkö 2019: 5-7) and their opinion on queer representations in video games. They asked queer people to comment on their appreciation of two queer characters and their tropes. They conclude that tropes perceived as negative – such as "Bury your gays" i.e., killing queer characters early in a story – are asked to be removed, while this is less striking with appreciated tropes (Arltoft & Benkö 2019: 30), suggesting that queer players are more negatively affected by representations they dislike than positively by the ones they appreciate. In *The Last of Us Part II*, "Bury your gays", the most disliked trope observed in this work, is absent as the three main queer characters survive until the end of the game. Even more so with the death of Joel, the trope is somewhat reversed into a "Bury your typically masculine, cisgender, heterosexual, male character" trope. In addition to this, the queer identity of characters in the game cannot be ignored or straightwashed, which could explain the intensity of queerphobic discourse against this game.

Shaw and Friesem's (2016) study of archives of queer game content shows how unconventional *The Last of Us Part II*'s queer representations are. In what they observe, playable characters that are explicitly queer are rare (Shaw & Friesem 2016: 3880). They claim

that lesbian relationships are more clearly shown than gay ones (Shaw & Friesem 2016: 3881), in which *The Last of Us Part II* does not differ, as Ellie and Dina are shown kissing in a scene implying they have sex right after, while Dina's bisexuality is shown only implicitly with Jesse, her ex-boyfriend, and no gay couples are presented in this game. However, the lesbian couple shown consists of a playable character, Ellie. In addition to this, the game also depicts Lev, a transgender man. If Shaw and Friesem (2016: 3882) note that "transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and intersex characters are less common in games than of homosexual and bisexual characters", who are already rarely represented, "explicitly transgender male characters are" even less common. Finally, "independent game development is identified as a key site for creating new forms of LGBTQ representation" (Shaw & Friesem 2016: 3878) while James (2018) has highlighted the lack of queer characters, at least positively or overtly depicted, in games from large companies, which includes Naughty Dog, the developers of *The Last of Us Part II*. Shaw and Friesem (2016: 3885) comment that the archive they base their study on "includes only games with LGBTQ content. A more complete accounting of all homophobic and transphobic content in games would likely present a much more comprehensive, if distressing, account of how LGBTQ content appears in this medium". Without even considering overtly queerphobic games, they find numerous problems arising regarding queer content in video games. Considering this general context and the type of game that it is, *The Last of Us Part II* thus offers significant queer representations and stands out.

3.5. Impact on Queer Gamers

Perhaps not so surprisingly, Shaw (2012) finds that queer players do not necessarily express a need for a larger representation of queer characters in the games they play.

> Finding a space to express this identity was more important to members of this community than the existence LGBTQ video game characters. The gaymers I interviewed expressed ambivalence towards in-game representation that reflected: an understanding of inadequate LGBTQ representation in other media; the importance of play experience, over game representation; and diversity among gaymers (Shaw 2012: 69).

She explains how complex notions of identity can be, as the *gaymer* identity is "intersectional" (Shaw 2012: 75) as it crosses gamer and queer identities. The complexity arises from the lack of internal coherence in "gay, GLBTQ and queer communities (or any social group for that matter)" (Shaw 2012: 73). It is crucial to keep in mind that, even though tendencies are

observed, the people we can categorise as *gaymers* are a large group of individuals that cannot be entirely generalised. Even if a majority of *gaymers* do not prioritise or care about queer representation in games, these observations are only limited to members of online forums, who do not represent the entirety of queer players. Numerous queer communities have formed online, since "gay gamers have little options" and can "either appear 'normal' and well adapted in this heteronormative culture or be forced to create their own communities- one of acceptance and void of threats and bullying" (Vitali 2010: 5). As noted previously, not all queer players are members of queer forums and not all members are queer (Shaw 2012: 73), indicating that categories are not clearly defined and that cisgender heterosexual men online are not necessarily conforming to geek masculinity.

Although it has been observed that queer representations in games are not a priority for queer players, their absence or, when present, hidden or problematic portrayal has a negative impact on queer people's experience as gamers. Indeed, these representations (and their absence) are part of and reinforce the heteronormativity of the gaming sphere, and it is this strong heteronormativity which in turn impacts player experience. For example, Pulos (2013) studies how players of *World of Warcraft* (2004) react to some people's desire to create queer-friendly guilds through discourse analysis. He notices that queer players are accused of being the cause of their own discrimination (87-88) and other players use queerphobic insults like *gay* or *fag* (81) and legitimise it as part of gamers discourse without it being truly homophobic (86), blatantly exposing the queerphobic climate in the gaming communities. Nakamura (2012: par.4) relies on Scalzi's (2012) metaphor to explain privilege. It is a

> metaphor for explaining how race and gender confer automatic, unasked-for, mechanical advantages on players who are lucky enough to be born white and male. Just like the difficulty level one chooses while playing a game, these advantages gradually become invisible as the player becomes immersed in the game.

Although sexual orientation and gender identity are not mentioned here, this definition suits them as well. As with any other community, heterosexual male gamers have the advantage of finding their place easily if they go along the roles expected from them. The construction of such an environment can only disadvantage and affect the experience of non-normative people – queer, women, non-white and cisgender heterosexual men who do not embody geek masculinity. Overall, then, a global environment has been progressively built, which has let

discriminatory behaviours flourish among players, in turn reinforcing this heteronormative (as well as racist and sexist) environment, impacting gamers with a non-conforming identity.

The lack of queer representation in games is tightly linked to the surrounding heteronormativity. As Vitali (2010: 4) argues, “video developers and manufacturers attempted and often times succeeded in eliminating queer themes and culture from video games, afraid of the reaction from the heteronormative gamers, investors, and advertisers”. Such behaviours solidify the established structure and, by “removing all traces of queer culture from […] games, gay gamers are alienated not only from public spaces such as online video game communities but also private spaces such as their homes” (Vitali 2010: 4), thus extending the discrimination of non-conforming people even outside of video game communities.

4. Results and Discussion

Before engaging in the analysis of the results, some clarifications are needed. Using AntConc, I have used no regular expressions with the exception of the search for censored words. Instead, I have used the "Words" and case insensitive options. For some words, an asterisk is noted at the end; with *lgbt**, for example, all the words starting with *lgbt*, whether none, one, or more letters follow, are considered, allowing me to search for several variants of a word in a single search. Parentheses indicate that several searches are gathered in one line of results; they are used to include misspelled words, several words with same meaning that cannot be taken together without including other unwanted words (in the case of *trans((gender)(ed))(s)*, simply looking up for *trans** would count words such as *transformation*). In the case of *bisexual*, the plural is not written there was no result for *bisexuals*. Some misspelled words are certainly missed with this method of searching, but I believe that for each, the searches are sufficiently precise to offer a relevant indication of the place the words take in the corpora. Regarding numbers, I have measured the proportion of word frequencies based on the total amount of reviews in each corpus rather than the total of words. Although the percentages do not indicate the number of reviews containing the words, since reviews can contain more than one occurrence, this scale allows a better readability. Finally, when reviews are quoted, the reference contains *n* or *p* to indicate whether the review comes from the corpus of negative or positive reviews, followed by the review's number in said corpus.

4.1. Queerphobic Slurs and Vulgarity

4.1.1. Censored language

Estimating the place of queerphobic discourse in the reviews is limited by Metacritic's censorship of some swear words. Looking at the censored sentences, it appears that *shit* and *fuck*, for example, are part of the list of banned words. This severely compromises the possibility to quantify how widespread hateful discourse is in the reviews and thus thwarts the possibility of exploring the queerphobic part of this discourse. Additionally, Metacritic require in their terms of use that users shall not publish "information that is trade libellous, unlawfully threatening, unlawfully harassing, defamatory, obscene, explicit or vulgar, or otherwise injurious to us or third parties" (RedVentures 2021) but no details are given on what words exactly are censored on that basis.

From what I have observed, words censored by Metacritic are replaced by four asterisks, while some words are censored by reviewers themselves, like “f*ck” (n501). While trying to interpret every censored word to guess which are queerphobic slurs is unrealistic, looking at their frequency (Table 1) can help understand how vulgar reviews are in general. To select words both completely censored as well as those that have letters before and/or after asterisks, I have used the regular expression *[\w*]+*[\w*]+* to search in AntConc.

There are 531 tokens in positive reviews. Two are removed as they come from review p1281’s “********SPOILER ALERT********”. In negative reviews, there are 1,750 tokens, out of which 12 are removed of the total as they serve the same purpose as p1281’s asterisks. In total, there are 529 censored words in positive reviews, a ratio of 6.5% compared to the number of reviews, and 1,738 in negative reviews with a ratio of 25.2%. This does not mean that one negative review out of four contain vulgar words, as some contain more than a single censored word e.g., "**** naughty dog. **** abby. **** ellie. **** Dinah. **** random thug dudes” (n5219). Nevertheless, negative reviews contain significantly more censored words than positive ones.

Table 1 - Frequency of censored words

	Positive	**Negative**
[\w*]+*[\w*]+	529	1738
Total reviews	8120	6893
Ratio	**6.51**	**25.21**

Vulgar words are used in a variety of ways and not only in queerphobic discourse. For instance, someone swears in a positive way first and then emphasises their disappointment with another one*:* “The first game was so **** awesome.... But this.... This Is ****” (n4322). Sometimes, the meaning of censored words is completely indecipherable e.g., when several follow each other: “**** you, you just ruined my beloved game and characters. **** **** **** **** ****” (n4265). Some reviewers employ asterisks to censor words that are not vulgar, such as "n****** dog” for the company Naughty Dog (n3681). With this self-censorship, this reviewer classifies Naughty Dog as vulgar, expressing strong dissatisfaction with the company. Another reviewer asks, “why did you put a cringe fest and kill one of the best character right in the beginning ... wow f*** this game.. gameplay is sick tho... but f*** this cringe l**** fest...” (n3996). As words that are not entirely censored seem to be self-censoring from

reviewers, the first two instances in this review probably are of *fuck*, while the last could be *lgbtq*; in this case, the review would be queerphobic, but it can only be guessed. Overall, variety in the censored words and the difficulty to understand several of them renders the analysis of queerphobia in swear words impossible.

While measuring its breadth is impossible, queerphobia is overtly expressed around some censored words. For example, someone censored "L*BT" (n2721) framing the term *LGBT* as vulgar and problematic in a review claiming that the aim of *The Last of Us Part II* was to popularise the LGBTQ+ community and disliking the game for this reason. Even if the precise insult chosen is not visible, another review contains only queerphobic discourse: "LGBT is **** LGBT is **** LGBT is **** LGBT is **** LGBT is **** LGBT is **** LGBT is **** !!!!" (n4435). These examples show that for some people, the only element they decide to share in their review is their discontent with the presence of queer characters in the game or even just their disapproval of queer people in general. That they feel comfortable communicating queerphobia so openly, be it because of pseudonymity or otherwise, is alarming.

4.1.2. Uncensored Queerphobic Slurs

Some queerphobic slurs are not censored, leaving overt queerphobia completely visible in the reviews. Searching for all the terms in a list of queerphobic slurs (WikiMili 2021), some appeared uncensored in the corpus (Table 2). While WikiMili is originally offering content from Wikipedia with a different layout, the list itself is not available anymore on Wikipedia, possibly because of a desire to diminish visibility on those slurs as much as possible. For the same reason, finding several sources listing queer slurs was difficult, so this one, as it is extensive, is the only one I rely on here. Since the words from the list found in the corpus are not sufficiently frequent to proceed to a collocational analysis, all the concordances are analysed instead.

Butch and *dyke* are two offensive terms to refer to lesbians, and the only instance of those in positive reviews is a reference to the scene in the game in which Ellie is called a dyke by another character (GAim4A 2021, sec.8), affirming that if people are "emotionally threatened by that, it's [their] problem" (p7844), communicating contempt for people with queerphobic discourses. In negative reviews, someone states that the game is "more dyke nonsense, gross" (n565), two name Abby *butch* (n607, n3906), one even saying that she is part of "butch men pretending to be female" (n3906). Assuming that a woman with a muscular

appearance is necessarily transgender is transphobic, as it indicates a binary vision of gender characteristics.

Table 2 – Frequency of queerphobic slurs in corpora

	Positive	**Negative**
butch	0	3
dyke	1	1
trans(s)exual	3	12
tranny	0	3
shemale	0	2
sheman	0	1
trap	0	2
Total	**4**	**24**
Total reviews	**8120**	**6893**
Ratio	**0.05**	**0.35**

The last instance of *butch* is interesting to look at more closely. The reviewer expresses a strong frustration about the game and negative emotions going further than queerphobia. However, their feeling is that the "soul" of the game series has been replaced by a "weird liberal agenda of LGBTQ and feminism" (n3535). They stopped playing after Joel's death, which happens early in the game, and they consequently miss a good part of the story but still comment on the game's story, wondering why it focuses on "some butch ugly murdering heathen, and Ellie embarking on a lesbian journey" (n3535). This exaggerated place given to Ellie's homosexuality, as she goes on a journey of vengeance and grief, and to Abby, supposedly the *butch* mentioned, could come either from the lack of knowledge on the entirety of the game or from queerphobia. In the latter scenario, it is possible that, being strongly bothered by a non-traditionally feminine woman and a lesbian one, the reviewer sees their sexual orientation as more central to the game than it is. Even if Ellie's journey was centred on her homosexuality, the reviewer links their disappointment with the game to Ellie being a lesbian. Similarly, the focus on Abby, regardless of its importance in the story, bothers the reviewer because of her physical appearance. Whether the first or the second supposition

is true, then, does not impact the fact that it is homophobic and influenced by a strongly binary conception of gender traits.

The word *trans(s)exual* is classified as a queerphobic slur because, although it refers to people who "may change elements of their body through surgeries or hormonal treatments", "many folk feel that [it] has medical overtones or is used inaccurately and so prefer the terms 'transgender' or trans'" (QMUNITY 2019, 20). It appears 12 times in negative reviews and 3 times in the positive. In the latter, two are corrections, one saying that "Lev is transgender, not transexual" (p7138) and the other that "Abby is not transsexual" (p5232), responding to the interpretation that many people drew from the leaks that happened before the game came out, as will be discussed. The third reviewer offers a different perspective, saying they "tolerate" that there is "gay, lesbian, transsexual Talk Crap in the game" because they "understand we live in a Woke Social Justice Society Today" (p1667). While not being bothered by the presence of queer characters, the reviewer expresses contempt towards queer issues, considering the presence of them in the game as "crap". Despite their comment on queer characters, they scored the game 10/10, suggesting that their appreciation of the game is unimpacted by their queerphobia.

In the negative reviews, *trans(s)exual* is the most frequent slur, suggesting that, in insulting discourse, the presence of a transgender character caught more attention than homosexuality and bi/pansexuality. On a total of 11 reviews using the word, including a review containing it twice, only one uses it with a general meaning: after explaining they "don't really care about all this lesbian and transsexual stuff", the reviewer says the message of the game is "the possibility that despite all hatred one can find strength to forgive the opponent", which does not work for them (n441). Their frustration seems to come from the way the story unfolds, as the criticism does not stop at Joel's death nor does it mention any hate towards queer character. Despite a lack of knowledge on the preferred use of *transgender*, they do not express any queerphobia.

Out of the other instances of *trans(s)exual*, one refers to Lev but also says that Abby is a "Transvestic character" (n1164). This word is mostly linked to Abby's character, a cisgender woman, suggesting a strong transphobic view of transgender people, as she is muscular, a physical trait associated to masculinity. Someone states that the game contains "[t]otally forced LGBT propaganda in addition to being unrealistic dubbing of a transexual character by a woman when the voice is very different in reality" (n4822). In this review, there is both latent

queerphobia, as they understand the presence of queer character as forced propaganda and they also misinterpret Abby's character as transgender, as her character is voiced by a female actress, Laura Bailey (The Last of Us Wiki 2021). This reviewer expresses queerphobia through a lack of knowledge on transgender issues by interpreting a muscular female character as transgender, by criticising that a transgender woman would not have a feminine voice, and by labelling her as transsexual. Their assumption that a transgender woman would have a "very different [voice] in reality", meaning a masculine voice, is strongly transphobic, although not overtly, as they do not express disgust or hate toward transgender people. In addition to this, n387, n540, n3906, n1887, n4139 and n2593 all clearly associate *transsexual* to Abby, some by mentioning the sex scene between her and Owen, one review being especially aggressive, describing Abby as a "transexual cyborg created from Ronda Rousey and Arnold Swarzenegger" (n387), attacking her physical appearance. Review n5478 is slightly more ambiguous, as it talks about "transsexual propaganda". Since Lev is a secondary character, his presence is not as central as Abby's. For this reason, the reviewer possibly associated this "transsexual propaganda" to Abby, also misunderstanding her as trans, although it is not certain.

The words *tranny* and *shemale* confirm that a significant part of the reviewers who talk about transgender characters discuss Abby rather than Lev. Only one reviewer comments on "how one character is a tranny, but wants him/her Mom to accept it", thinking that it is not something anyone cares about (n5356). The other instances of *tranny* occur in reviews that point out that Abby kills Joel and advise not to buy the game (n4062) while one of the reviewers compliments with sarcasm the "nice game design" of "Jewish lesbians and tranny sex" (n4477), referring respectively to Dina and Abby's sex scene with Owen. The two instances of *shemale* come coming from a single review (n321), unsurprisingly refer to Abby as well, as this slur designates a "woman who's had top surgery or breast growth from HRT, but not bottom surgery" (WikiMili 2021), just like *sheman*, appearing once in the corpus (n171). Finally, *trap*, meaning "someone pretending to be a woman in order to trick others" (WikiMili 2021) is used twice for Abby in a single review (n3222).

This interpretation of Abby as a trans woman appeared when the game's storyline was leaked a few months before the game's release. As Franzese (2020) explains in an article published at the time, the leak was under the form of a video that was quickly removed. As he states,

> Perhaps the biggest surprise is the revelation that Ellie isn't the only protagonist of The Last of Us Part 2. The other playable character is Abby, a woman who was introduced during the Paris Games Week 2017 trailer. Very little was known about her previously, but these new leaks reveal that she's the daughter of the surgeon Joel killed towards the end in the first game during his mission to rescue Ellie. The switch to Abby's perspective happens about halfway through the sequel, according to a level list also included in the leaks.

Glennon, Johnston and Francisco (2020: par.4) explain that "a narrow but distinct thread of commentary about Abby's appearance emerged: Broad shoulders and muscular arms sparked speculation that the character is trans despite a total lack of confirmation in the leaked game footage". The lack of information on the character and the broader context of knowing that Ellie is lesbian and the idea that "the game [is] trying to be diverse or 'woke'" (Morris 2020: par.4) were apparently sufficient information to consider that Abby is trans. Following the leaks, discussions started, notably on Twitter, where people talked about Abby being trans in a highly transphobic discourse and harassing the actress (Young 2020). Possibly, then, the reviews containing only mentions of Abby killing Joel and being trans can be reviews from people who were disappointed by the leak's content and did not play the game. Someone, for example, tweeted on April 30, 2020, that "if you are happy to play a game where a Trans woman kills Joel, then you play as that Trans woman to seek out and kill Ellie, then you never were a fan of TLOU and were asleep when you 'played' it" (mikeyjay008 2020). This is one example among many, whose discourse appears similar as some of the negative reviews from Metacritic. The supposition that a part of reviewers rating the game 0/10 share their hate of the game's storyline without having played it but base their opinion on the leaks is reinforced by the statistics shown by user lazaro97's (2021b) sentiment analysis, where he shows that most of the negative reviews were published as soon as the game came out. As mentioned in a previous chapter, *The Last of Us Part II* takes around 25 hours to be completed, so reviews posted this soon are probably written by people who did not play, or at least did not finish, the game. The quasi absence of remarks on Lev's gender identity, the only clearly transgender character of the story, supports this hypothesis, as transphobia is strongly present in those reviews but not regarding him. Based on the leaks only, someone would not have knowledge of Lev's character and his backstory as they are absent from them; the lack of comments about him could be explained by the fact that most reviewers who express queerphobia in the reviews have not played the game.

4.1.3. Summary

Although it is too complicated to quantify how much swear words are connected to queerphobia because of censorship, hateful discourse is present in negative reviews and appears in some cases to be connected to overt queerphobia. Some queer-related slurs are not censored and raise the question of how the list of the words censored on Metacritic, which is unavailable, is formed. That some highly insulting and queerphobic terms are not filtered is questionable. The reviews containing these slurs, even if not numerous, offer a striking example of queerphobia and, more specifically, transphobia. Most of the transphobic slurs are addressed to Abby rather than Lev. This hate towards Abby seemingly is related to the leaks of the game's content and suggests, combined with the absence of transphobia addressed at Lev's character, that most of those transphobic reviews are made by people who did not play the game. Peterson's (2011, 2016) observation that homophobic discourse, influenced and shaped by social practices and cultural context, can become more covert, does not apply here. Rather, insulting discourse is formulated freely by some reviewers, following the homophobic discourse Pulos's (2013) observed in some video game communities. This suggests that the fact that video game culture is heteronormative has some impact one reviewer's discourse, allowing, to some extent, overt queerphobia. To better understand the place of queerphobic discourse in the reviews, an analysis of neutral terms referring to queer people, who are more numerous than queerphobic slurs, will follow.

4.2. Neutral Words Referring to Queer People

4.2.1. Frequency

Words used to refer to queer people, as shown in Table 3, are proportionally more present in negative reviews. It would appear, then, that the presence of queer characters in the game is a topic of evaluation more important to players who disliked the game than those who liked it. *Homo(s(s)exual)(s)* in particular is 4.95 times more frequent in negative reviews. Even if *lgbt** and *gay* are not strikingly more present in negative reviews, they are the most frequent words in both corpora, indicating that queer people are possibly discussed as a general group or sexual identity, as *lesbian* and *bisexual* are less frequent and as *gay* can be used for queer people in general and not only for homosexual men.

*Gender** and *trans*(*gender(ed))* are respectively 2.42 and 2.03 times more present in the negative reviews than in the positive ones. This suggests that issues regarding gender

identity could be especially relevant to people who rated the game 0/10 in their evaluation of it, a supposition motivated by previous observations of transphobia surrounding Abby.

Table 3 - Frequency of neutral queer words in corpora

	Positive	**Negative**
lgbt*	193	333
queer	16	5
homo(s(s)exual)(s)	19	94
gay(s)	104	156
lesbian(s)	77	113
trans(gender(s)(ed))	69	140
bisexual	4	7
gender*	24	58
Total	**506**	**906**
Total reviews	**8120**	**6893**
Ratio	**6.23**	**13.14**

Queer is the only word with more instances in positive reviews, which could be explained by it being "a reclaimed term that was once and is still used as a hate term" (QMUNITY 2019, 17). However, the other words in the table are neutral and are used in negative reviews. For this reason, instances of *queer* are further investigated.

In the 16 instances in positive reviews, people essentially are satisfied of queer representation and encouraging it. Some talk about it as secondary but stating that it is great or at least that it should not justify hate towards the game (p66, p3090). A single person expresses regret and in a nuanced way. The reviewer is disappointed that "queer women never get happy endings", referring to Ellie leaving Dina and causing their relationship to end. However, the reviewer says it is "really nice seeing [herself] in a game for once" (p6607), thus identifying herself as a queer woman. The appreciation of queer representation is unanimously shared by the other reviewers using the word *queer*. One says that as a "queer, non-cis person", they liked the diversity (p4972), as does "a gay man" who highlights the difficulty of queer representation and says he is satisfied with the way it is done in the game (p1421). Another person says that "the queer representation [was] something [they] didn't

know [they] needed so badly" (p2705). While the reviewer does not clearly indicate it, the notion of need suggests a personal connection to the topic. It seems probable that they identify as queer in some way. With several reviews using *queer* twice, the number of reviews containing it is low but the proportion of people using it and identifying is queer is high. The word *queer* is used in a respectful meaning in this corpus and in a significant part by queer and potentially queer people.

In the negative reviews, *queer* appears 5 times in 4 reviews. Two reviewers agree on the fact that "[q]ueer is not the problem" (n4150), rather pointing at the story as the cause for the game's quality. One affirms that queer representation in video games is not new and that "gamers do not care or want to be represented in any way in a game" but rather "care for a story and character development" (n2079). These two reviewers' discourse is not hateful towards queer people, reinforcing the idea that *queer* is more prominent in positive reviews because of its reappropriation. One of the other two reviewers, "who identifies as queer", considers that the game "weaponizes gender identity to normalize violence against transnormative and homonormative people" and is a "gross misappropriation of LGBT culture" (n4868). The last reviewer states that the game is "a misery-porn story filled with all sorts of homophobic slurs, that exploits the suffering of queer people for profit" and advises readers to buy other games by "smaller developers" (n6859). These two reviewers' dislike of the game stems not from queer representation in general but the way queer characters in the game specifically are represented and used. The idea that queer characters in the story are used to harm straight and cisgender people is highly debatable; regarding the affirmation that the game is "filled with all sorts of homophobic slurs" (n6859), the only instance of a slur is that of Seth saying "dyke" (GAim4A 2021, sec.8). This criticism is thus overall extreme and suggests that, despite the lack of overt queerphobia and even one's identification as queer, these reviewers may be used to heteronormativity to the extent that it makes them experience the simple presence of queer character as excessive. The general lack of such representations in games from large companies contributes to their appearance being unsettling, although this does not change that these reviews can qualify as covert queerphobia.

The reactions of these four reviewers can be explored through the lens of queer blindfolding (Smith & Shin 2014). The erasure of queer experience can be outlined in the reviews stating that they do not care about queer representations. It is potentially true that

some reviewers do not care at all about characters being queer but this statement, in a game with both queer and non queer characters, show that the outlook on queer identities is different. Without expressing discomfort at being confronted with queer representation, the message hints at the idea that since being queer is nothing different, there is no reason to bring the topic forward. Ignoring that queer characters in video games are unusual and may elicit negative reactions from the public erases the queerphobia that permeates the whole structure of video games and their communities. In addition to this, contrary to the people interviewed by Smith and Shin, these reviewers rarely express being "well-intentioned" (940) towards queer people. More than erasing the issues queer people face, then, these reviewers criticise the changes in representation, silencing the fact that, if these representations stand out, it is because they are unusual. This criticism thus ignores the unequal relationship with representation queer people face in video games compared to heterosexual and cisgender people. One reviewer clearly exemplifies queer blindfolding:

> If I want to learn something politically correct I would go ahead register a social science or gender study class in college. It's not like I hate the LGBTQ groups; I support and understand their needs. However, I just don't want the gaming industries be an other area filled with these meaningless witch hunts. (n4719)

Whether reviewers state that queer representations do not matter, that it is too present or a problem, then, it does, to some extent, express some ignorance – voluntarily or not – from reviewers on queer issues. Even if they state that they exist, as in review n4719, the recognition of queer issues needing to be addressed is limited to academia and they consider it does not have its place in video games, an opinion that reduces queer issues to something theoretical. This lack of recognition of queer issues, which are not theoretical, is considered as covertly queerphobic.

4.2.2. Collocates

Table 4 shows the collocates for the neutral terms referring to queer people. For the results of Table 4, each word of Table 3 has been searched for both corpora. I have included only collocates with a minimum of five hits, in order to avoid misspelled words appearing as highly significant and to aim for a better representativity than with a lower collocate frequency. The sorting of the results is by statistical significance in AntConc and is based on the Mutual Information (MI) score. The table contains the most significant collocates separately for the

positive and negative reviews as well as the number of instances of said collocate and the MI score for both. For the words where frequency includes the plural form, only the singular has been considered, as it was the most frequent occurrence for each word. Plural words gave few to no collocates due to the low frequency of the main word and, contrary to the frequency tables in which I could combine different results, searching for the collocates of different versions of the words would have required regular expressions which give some unreliable results in AntConc[1]. In the case of *trans(gender(s)(ed))*, only *trans* had relevant collocates, so it is the only variant of the word appearing. The same happened for *homo(s(s)exual)(s)*, were the only form that gave results was *homo* in the negative reviews. There were no collocates for *bisexual* in the negative reviews and only "a" in the positive ones, so I argue that *bisexual* has no relevant collocates. The number of collocates shown for each word is based on several criteria: a maximum of five collocates are noted to have an overview of several collocates without having overly long lists and the list is limited when the next collocate is irrelevant or with a significantly lower MI score. While the arbitrariness of the table, due both to the criteria and the choice of using MI score rather than another one, leads to non-exhaustive results, it still gives an overview of the themes covered in each corpus with a possibility of comparative work.

For *lgbt**, the most frequent word in both corpora, the themes associated with it are highly similar both in positive and negative reviews with *representation*, *feminism,* and *propaganda* appearing on both lists. I would argue that the words *community* and *inclusion* overlap in their meaning as well as both probably relate to people in this case. These collocates can be used in different contexts; to have a more precise idea of how *lgbt** is used, an analysis of its concordances will follow.

[1] I did some searches for collocates with regular expressions, including the one for censored words and there were results whose frequency was higher than the actual frequency of the word itself in the whole corpus without being sufficiently surrounded by the main word to collocate more than once. I have checked my regular expression with a teacher who looked at AntConc with my data and confirmed that there was a problem. Consequently, I felt uncomfortable using regular expressions here to search for collocates.

Table 4 - Collocates for words referring to queer people

Word	Pos Collocates	Freq	MI	Neg Collocates	Freq	MI
lgbt*	feminism	8	11.9	community	39	11.24
	inclusion	8	11.14	feminism	15	11.15
	propaganda	9	11.13	feminist	10	10.65
	representation	20	11.07	representation	8	10.55
				propaganda	41	10.14
gay	trans	12	10.66	porn	6	8.81
	woman	5	8.98	trans	7	7.82
	agenda	6	8.83	lesbian	5	7.58
	man	6	8.25	sex	6	7.27
queer	representation	6	12.21	-	-	-
homo	-	-	-	awful	73	9.96
				care	74	9.87
lesbian	trans	6	10.32	transgender	5	9.53
				women	5	8.25
trans	gay	12	10.66	trans	20	9.85
	lesbian	6	10.32	woman	6	8.23
	lev	5	8.12			
gender*	sexuality	5	12.89	sexuality	8	11.1
				identity	8	10.42
				politics	15	9.37

As noted previously, the use of *queer* in negative reviews, while used by some critics of the queer representation in the game, did not communicate overt queerphobia. The word is not present enough in the corpus for collocates with a minimal frequency of 5 to appear, while in positive reviews, the words *representation* stands out, strengthening the previous observation that positive reviewers appreciated that queer characters were represented in the game.

The word *homo* is not frequent enough to have collocates in positive reviews, while *awful* and *care* are collocating for the word in negative reviews. At first glance, it seems that negative reviewers associate *homo* and *awful*, which would be highly homophobic. However, all except one of the *care* collocates and the entirety of the *awful* one are from a single review repeating the sentence "I don't care if Ellie is homo, the story is awful. No more to say" (n3755). This review alone is causing *care* and *awful* – as well as the other collocates with a slightly lower MI score (*ellie*, *if*, *no*)) to appear as relevant, although these words are not appearing near homo in the other reviews. Beyond the collocates, this review is responsible for the high frequency of *homo* in the corpus of negative reviews with a statement that is not homophobic. In the positive reviews, out of 5 instances of *homo*, 3 are used to refer to homophobia with a spelling separating *homo* as a single word (p2196, p7219, p7358). In the negative ones, 6 instances of *homo* are not from review n3755 and 3 of those (n4240, n4677, n4761) are also a variation of *homophobic/homophobia*. They can qualify as covertly queerphobic, as they share the already observed discourse of not caring about queer issues, and the fact that they dissociate themselves from homophobia indicates an awareness of the problem being discussed. One of the three other reviewers claims that "there is homo propaganda and forced diversity" in the game that no one wants to see (p2190); the notion of propaganda is complex and will be discussed further. Another reviewer says the game contains "unnecessary globo-homo agenda propaganda" and associates this with "leftist degeneracy" (n2144), stating strongly that representing queer characters is degenerate; here, despite the complexity of politics joined to queer matters, the review is overtly queerphobic. The last negative review using *homo*, while hard to decipher because of the censored words, clearly communicates hate towards queer people: "This game is trash, you naughtydog **** homo LGBT, **** transgender, **** storyline, we wait for 5 years to get this trash come on man...." (n2597). These are only six reviews, but they contain patterns already observed, reinforcing the idea that they are present throughout the corpus of negative reviews; they also show overt queerphobia and an association of queer representations with propaganda and left politics.

Most collocates for *gender* are unsurprising: *sexuality* can be explained by both topics often going hand in hand, and *identity* is explained by the frequent phrasing of "gender identity". However, *politics* in the negative reviews follows the discourse of the three openly

queerphobic reviews in which *homo* was used. These cases show that the theme of politics is surprisingly present in the negative reviews, a topic that will be investigated later (ch.4.4).

The word *gay* collocates with *trans* in both corpora, which could be explained by a use of *gay* in a general meaning and not to refer to homosexual men. A brief look at the concordances indicates that they are associated in reviews that list together the characteristics of characters, saying that there are gay characters (Ellie and Dina) and a transgender one (Lev). It is similar for the negative reviews; people do not mix up *gay* and *trans* but rather use them closely together for a single statement about queer characters in the game. The collocates *man, woman*, and *lesbian* most certainly follow the same pattern, as do the collocates for *lesbian* (*trans*, *transgender* and *woman*). Consequently, these collocates cannot serve to concretely indicate any queerphobia.

The more surprising collocates for *gay* are *porn* and *sex* in the negative reviews. There are mentions of "gay porn" (n4826, n3304, n6430, n6841, n4551, n5752) and gay sex scenes, expressing a strong dislike for it. Without questioning the criticism raised, *The Last of Us Part II*'s only graphic sex scene is heterosexual, as it happens between Abby and Owen; Dina and Ellie are shown kissing with most of their clothes still on, proposing a scene quite distant from "gay porn". Possibly, the connection comes again from Abby being misinterpreted as a trans woman, thus qualifying the scene between her and Owen as "gay porn". In both cases, then, such a qualification is queerphobic, as it is either excessive and homophobic or the consequence of transphobia. The excessiveness of discourse here might be connected to Kirkaptrick's (2015: 69) observation that game reviews progressively became more and more "prone to expletives and meaningless hyperbole".

Trans collocates with *gay* and *lesbian* in the positive reviews for the already highlighted reason that the words are being used together to discuss the queer representations in the game. A single negative review explains the presence of *trans* as a collocate with itself: "The Trans of Us. The Trans of Us. The Trans of Us. The Trans of Us. The Trans of Us" (n4990). This statement is purely transphobic, as the reviewer gave a score of 0/10 to the game and criticises the game only by renaming it, suggesting that the presence of a trans character in the game is the only or at least the main reason for this score. The presence of *lev* as a collocate in the positive review and its absence in the negative, where *woman* is a collocate, suggests that in negative reviews, Lev is not associated with *trans*, while *trans woman* is a

recurrent phrasing. This is again a consequence of Abby being misinterpreted as a trans woman.

Several words could appear as queerphobic but once their concordances are observed, it shows that they are not necessarily so. Furthermore, some reviews contain the same statement repeated several times, thus impacting the relevance of the results. Nevertheless, some results are still indicative of overt queerphobia in negative reviews. The number of examples is low compared to the size of the corpus but already confirm that queerphobia is present, and overtly so. To try and grasp it more precisely queerphobic discourse, the concordances of *lgbt** will be analysed and, later, queerphobic slurs as well.

4.2.3. Concordances

All concordances of *lgbt** in both corpora have been looked at and classified to determine the contexts in which they were used. The aim is to evaluate the place of queer matters in the discourses as well as how they are discussed.

A single concordance has been removed from the classification as its meaning was unclear:

> A total disgrace and disappointment as if the character development lousy enough they killed off Joel and isnt redeemed by Ellie. This all felt like a complete waste of time. I'm glad I didn't actually pay to play this game I'm glad I didn't actually pay to play this game. Save your money naughty dog does not about their fans or characters just pandering to a small group. Feminist is GW's and LGBTQ . This game exists only to fit awful narrative. (n5028)

Although the general discourse is negative and matches some covertly queerphobic comments by saying the game is "pandering to a small group", supposedly queer people, the impossibility to know what exactly the reviewer meant by "GW" renders the classification of the use of *lgbt** here too complicated. For this reason, it is removed from the list, leaving a total of 332 concordances classified. This review also shows that some people review the game without having played it, reinforcing the idea observed earlier with the criticisms on Abby being supposedly trans.

I have classified the concordances of negative reviews into the following groups: concordances that are overtly queerphobic (OQP), covertly queerphobic (CQP), those saying that queer representations are problematic specifically in *The Last of Us Part II* (TLOU2), that consider queer matters as political matters, concordances saying that queer representations are not the problem (Not QR), that are neutral to queer representations (NQR) and positive

to queer representations (PQR). While in the final results overtly queerphobic concordances are the most frequent, covert queerphobia was originally more important and has been divided in several categories that are analysed first.

Table 5 - Concordances of lgbt* *in the negative reviews*

	OQP	CQP	TLOU2	POL	Not QR	NQR	PQR
Total	90	78	45	55	54	3	7
Ratio	27.11	23.50	13.55	16.57	16.27	0.90	2.11

***OQP** = Overtly Queerphobic, **CQP** = Covertly Queerphobic, **TLOU2** = Queer Representations Are Problematic Specifically in* The Last of Us Part II, ***POL** = Queer Matters as Political Matters, **Not QR** = Queer Representations Are Not the Problem, **NQR** = Neutral to Queer Representations, **PQR** = Positive to Queer Representations*

The category of covert queerphobia (CQP) was originally the biggest category in negative reviews, but it contained different types of discourses that have been separated. It now includes recurring comments that queer-related themes are absurd in a post-apocalyptic world e.g., “In a game where surviving and reproducing is the whole point, this simply just doesn’t work” (n4409) or “imagine people caring about the lgbt movement during the apocalypse” (n2238). The argument is debatable, as the beginning of the game shows Jackson as a relatively peaceful and flourishing town. In addition to this, the idea that non-heteronormative sexual orientations and gender identities would not appear outside of societies where survival is not “the whole point” suggests that they are a matter of choice and luxury, which is entirely wrong. For these reasons, such reviews are considered a covertly queerphobic. It also contains remarks such as “i feel like the game made only for LGBT people” (n4309) or “I don’t care about the LGBT story” (n526, n5993). Affirming that the presence of queer characters immediately limits the game’s public to queer people implies a serious separation of people based on their identity. If it was true, most games would be made exclusively for straight players as they portray cisgender heterosexual relationships and romances, which is untrue as there are numerous queer people and women playing video games whose main characters are mostly cisgender men. This logic also goes back to the pattern of ignoring and erasing queer issues. As already underling with Smith and Shin (2014), reviewers stating that they do not care about the queer part of the story indicate that they nonetheless noticed it and feel the need to communicate it, all while disliking the game; bringing these elements together, these concordances of *lgbt** are considered covertly queerphobic.

This category also includes reviews stating that queer themes are too prominent in the game. Although whether an element is too present or not in a game is highly subjective, *The Last of Us Part II*'s story is not centred on queer people's experience, although it is present, nor are characters represented exclusively queer, as seen with Abby, one of the two main characters, as well as several secondary characters like Jesse, Yara, Owen, or Tommy, to list a few. For this reason, I argue here that people stating that "lgbt and feminism [are] shoved down [their] throats" (n3063) have a covertly queerphobic discourse. They do not openly say they are bothered by queer representations but still complain about them. Arguably, some of these reviews could be considered as overtly queerphobic such as someone stating that they cannot "enjoy any game these days without a LGBTQ agenda" (n3778) but they do not clearly communicate hate or contempt towards queer people. This covert queerphobia is probably heavily impacted by the heteronormative culture surrounding video games, as previously discussed; queer characters being represented as they are in *The Last of Us Part II* is unusual and unexpected in such a context and can thus create a strong reaction, although this does not erase the covert queerphobia behind this reaction.

Two categories originally considered as part of the covertly queerphobic classification have been separated because they were frequent and stood out: the concordances written by reviewers saying they are bothered by the way queer people are represented in *The Last of Us Part II* specifically (TLOU2) and those associating *lgbt** with political matters (POL).

The reviews in the TLOU2 category were classified as CQP because the reviews sometimes follow a pattern of discourse saying that the queer aspects of the game take up too much space in the narrative. However, this category contains other elements. For example, some reviewers state that queer representations are a failure in the game after affirming that they do not have anything against queer people or queer representations. Some exceptions of this discourse are classified as OQP, such as the 223rd concordance: "I have no problems with LGBT ppl what so ever but in this game its force feed! A true abomination!" (n5299). Even though the reviewer says they do not have any hate towards queer people, naming their presence in a game an "abomination" is considered queerphobic. Other instances in the TLOU2 category are complaints of the way queer people are represented e.g., by saying that the developers are "pro trans but make a trans character that everyone will hate. seems like maybe they are trans phobic themselves" (n902). Several concordances of *lgbt** in negative reviews, like this one, criticise the choice of picturing Abby, the 'villain', as

trans, rather than one of the beloved characters. This indicates that some reviewers criticise the game with little information on it. By pointing at Abby's gender identity as a problem, these reviewers are considered as queerphobic.

Reviewers affirming that *The Last of Us Part II* does a poor job of representing queer people are ambiguous, although I would argue that they tend towards covert queerphobia. Some of these reviews, as seen above, are not necessarily made by people who played the game. They would then criticise its queer characters with a limited knowledge of them, either through videos or through the leaks. For reviewers who have played the game or at least not said otherwise, the complaints are usually that the presence of *lgbt** themes and characters is "forced into the narrative" (n3242) or "too much" (n736). In this case, it goes back to the tendency to see it as more than it is; considering the existence of queer characters whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not at the centre of the story as "an obsession with LGBT topics" (n736) is a strong reaction that is most probably a form of queer blindfolding (Smith & Shin 2014) as these reviewers do not complain about the cisgender heterosexual characters and relations shown in the game. This type of criticism, in addition to being bothered by queer representations with a limited knowledge of the story, a reaction previously observed, indicates queerphobia in discourse and represents a large part of the TLOU2 category.

The political matters (POL) category contains reviews mentioning the presence of words such as *agenda*, *propaganda*, *progressists*, *leftist* or *liberal*. In short, it gathers all instances of *lgbt** associating queer matters to political matters. This category is separated from CQP because political matters are distinct from queerphobic discourses in themselves and would require a new theoretical background. Whether the game is politically engaged or not is outside of the scope of this study. However, the geek masculinity that permeates video game culture (Condis 2018, Salter 2018) suggests that critiques regarding diversity in video games because it is too political and stating that video games should be focused on nothing but video games are critiques rooted in heteronormativity and sexism. To better grasp how frequent politics are included in critics of the game, a brief analysis of political terms will conclude this work (Ch.4.4).

Overt queerphobia (OQP), on the contrary, is straightforward: it solely contains uses of *lgbt** where disregard towards queer people and representations is clearly stated. For example, when a reviewer categorises "LGBT" as part of "other nonsense" (n6463), it falls

under OQP; even if there is no insulting discourse, the open negative judgement is sufficient to classify it as overtly queerphobic. Hateful discourse is present in the corpus as well and is placed in this category, with statements such as "I hate LGBT minorities and especially hate when developers cave in under them" (n2393). OQP represents 27.11% of the concordances. With covert queerphobia being debatable in the categories TLOU2 and POL, the most frequent use of *lgbt** in the negative reviews is in overtly queerphobic discourses.

The fifth category includes all reviewers affirming that their rating of the game is not connected to *lgbt** at all (Not QR). Many of them are saying that the problem is the story itself because it has "incomplete, unlikable characters" (n4571) and because of Joel's death. It could be argued that some of these reviews are or could be queerphobic, as the criticism of the characters in the game could be in part influenced by some of them being queer. However, this would require a much deeper analysis and some hypothesising to a degree too high to be considered. While knowing the possibility for queerphobia in these concordances exists, then, it will not be considered.

In addition to overt and covert queerphobia (OQP, CQP), complaints about queer representation only in *The Last of Us Part II* (TLOU2), and reviewers affirming that their frustration with the game has nothing to do with queer representation (Not QR), 3 concordances are neutral regarding queer representation (NQR) and 7 are positive (PQR). Concordances were classified as neutral when no discourse in favour or against queer representation was expressed but rather that queer representation being in the game or being discussed by other people was acknowledged. In the 7 instances of reviewers being positive about queer representation in the game, two were entirely positive reviews (n72, n5030). In one case (n72), it seems that the reviewers may have accidentally given a negative rating. In the other, although it cannot be determined, it is possible that they have written sarcastically, as they only comment on queer representation with the choice of using *ideology*, a strong word, possibly associating this with the score of 0/10: "Hype was huge! Result is fine, but nothing special! Hopefully in next part will be more LGBT+ ideology!!" (n5030). If that is not sarcasm, like review n72, the reviewer may have accidentally given a negative score. The 5 other reviewers share satisfaction with queer representations in the game or in general but otherwise disappointment with the game.

Review n4726, containing two concordances of *lgbt**, highlights two recurring patterns in negative reviews. First, the reviewer affirms they are very supportive of queer people,

assuring they “have good friends who are LGBTQ” and are “very liberal”. More than saying they are not bothered by the presence of queer characters, which is a category of its own (Not QR), this reviewer presents themselves as an ally. It does not mean, however, that this person cannot be queerphobic. The reviewer then asks people not to “try to diminish and paint [their] opinion as fake or misplaced because [they] happen to not like this game” (n4726). By framing themselves as an ally to queer people, they distance themselves from queerphobic reviewers and state that, for this reason, their criticism of the game is legitimate. That someone has queer friends does not inherently mean that they are better placed than someone else to comment on queer representations. In addition to this, the reviewer admits that they “give this game a 0 because [they] don't want to ever play it”, confirming what has been raised in other reviews criticise the same elements of the story as this reviewer and depicting an incomplete image of the game: some people rate the game without having played or finished it. The contradictory discourse of the review n4726, seeking legitimacy in their criticism while not having the expected background to raise criticism, hints at the fact that the hate expressed, despite them affirming otherwise, does not solely come from the game’s story, since they barely know it. This example, in addition to the previous ones of reviewers who have not played the game, highlights the complexity of fully understanding reviewers’ intent and thus their opinion on queer matters.

In total, then, 27.11% of concordances of *lgbt** are overtly queerphobic and 23.5% of them are covertly queerphobic. The number of covertly queerphobic concordance goes up to more than half of the concordances if the reviewers stating they are bothered by queer representations in this game specifically (TLOU2) and those considering that *lgbt** is political (POL) are counted as covertly queerphobic as well. The fact that more than a quarter of the instances of *lgbt** were written by people who felt comfortable openly sharing their queerphobia is already alarming. Combined with covert queerphobia, more than a half of these instances convey some hate or disregard towards queer communities, a number that can potentially be even higher with the categories TLOU2 and POL. Overall, queerphobic discourse surrounding the word *lgbt** in negative reviews is highly significant. It strongly supports the idea that heteronormativity is heavily installed in video game communities and allows hateful discourses towards minorities (Kirkpatrick 2015, Condis 2018, Salter 2018, Heritage 2021).

The classification of the concordances of *lgbt** in the positive reviews highly contrasts with these results. The categories of OQP, CQP, POL, NQR and PQR are reused, with a new one for the use of *lgbt** in comments reacting to the negative reviews and criticism of queer representations in the game (RNG). A concordance has been removed from the classification because the sentence is unclear: “Story so dark and tragedy,Yeah I wouldn't like to see LGBT eliminate But still it's so awesome and fun” (p7957). The reviewer possibly wrote “wouldn’t” instead of “would”, with a message suggesting a preference for the absence of queer representations while saying that despite the presence of queer characters, they liked the game. This, however, is only a hypothesis than cannot be verified. For this reason, the review is removed from the list, and Table 6 contains the 192 other concordances of *lgbt**.

Table 6 - Concordances of lgbt* *in positive reviews*

	OQP	**CQP**	**POL**	**NQR**	**PQR**	**RNG**
Total	2	12	20	28	41	89
%	1.04	6.25	10.42	14.58	21.35	46.35

***OQP** = Overtly Queerphobic, **CQP** = Covertly Queerphobic, **POL** = Queer Matters as Political Matters **NQR** = Neutral to Queer Representations, **PQR** = Positive to Queer Representations, **RNG** = Reacting to Negative Reviews*

Overt queerphobia is almost absent from the corpus, with a single instance coming from a short review: “Good game. Great plot. 8/10 minus the ball for feminism and minus the ball for LGBT. I put 10 because of unreasonable 0 and 1” (p3081). This reviewer openly admits that the game containing queer characters is a problem to them.

Covert queerphobia is more present, although not as highly as in negative reviews. Except for a single instance of someone completely disliking the game and advising people not to buy it, possibly having rated the game 10/10 accidentally, this category contains different types of positive reviews: some are of people thinking the game takes “advantage” of “LGBT-trends” by representing queer people and that it is “superfluous” (p1746), that it falls under “obsessive propaganda” (p6902) and that “LGBT stuff” is “right in [their] face” (p4764). Several say that they would not rate the game 10/10 but do it because “the game deserves a better rating” than it has because of the numerous negative ratings (p1746). It thus appears that some people, despite their prejudices against queer people and their disapproval of queer representations, dearly appreciate the game. Regardless, such statements communicate negative feelings towards queer people and are thus classified as CQP.

Reviews being neutral regarding queer representation constitutes the third most frequent category with 14.58% of the concordances of *lgbt** in the positive corpus. These instances are from reviewers noting that there are queer representations in the game without commenting on them and moving on to other aspects of the game to develop in their reviews. It also includes reviewers that comment on *lgbt** in the game without expressing clearly that they are happy about it e.g., saying that they "never had the feeling [queer characters] were forced into" the story (p3438) or that they are "not pro lgbt" but that Ellie being lesbian is "not a problem for" them (p5129). While this could arguably be queerphobic and I read it as such, this reviewer does not say that they are against queer people, only that they do not actively support them, so I decided to classify it as neutral.

The reviewers reacting positively to queer representations in the game are significantly higher than in negative reviews with 21.35% of concordances. This category contains concordances of *lgbt** where the appreciation of queer characters being represented in the game is clearly stated, such as "[a]nother thing the game does an amazing job at doing is it's LGBTQ representation, it is very rare for video game characters to be LGBTQ and it is very rare for those characters to be well written" (p1592). This appreciation can either be about queer representations in general or of how it is done in the game, without a discourse especially supporting of queer people but saying that they found it well done in the game.

The most frequent category is the instances of *lgbt** used to react to the negative reviews and the criticism of queer representations in the game after the leaks (RNG). This category contains almost half of the concordances (46.35%), showing that positive reviews, when mentioning queer content, often do so as a response to negative reviews. In addition to the reviewers deciding to rate the game 10/10 only to compensate the negative ratings, it indicates that the system of reviews, although being originally a set of individual reviews that are written separately, works as a whole system in which people, in a way, communicate and distance their discourse from their original point i.e., evaluating the game they have played and rated.

The RNG category mostly contains reviews insulting people who disliked the game because of its queer characters or at least noting hate from the people with opposite opinions and affirming it is illegitimate. If this covers most of the reactions, there is also a rare occurrence of understanding towards the opposite opinion: "I understand rage because of lgbt and feminism propaganda and I understand that TLOU 1 fans (which I am) Didnt liked the

twist in the middle but still I really feel sad for naughty dog cause I can just imagine how much effort and soul they put in this game" (p1473). This person, unlike numerous others in the category, does not attack those whose point of view differ but rather expresses sadness at the situation.

Finally, the POL category is reused here. It is related to RNG as these reviews are also reactions. POL concordances represent a large part of reviews reacting to negative reviews: there are at least 20 comments reacting to negative reviews that mention politics. Some reviews not included in this category could be considered to be covering the topic, but these 20 instances show a direct link between both topics. They generally either state that the game is indeed highly political or that it is not at all; sometimes, reviewers also admit that there are some politics implicated but only lightly. As discussed above, whether the game's choices of representations are political or not are not in the scope of my study. Without being further investigated, it is worth noting that it takes an important place in the discussions regarding the presence of queer characters in the game.

Out of the 193 concordances of *lgbt** that appear in the 8,120 positive reviews, minus the unclassified one, a small amount of queerphobia appears, while slightly more than a fifth are positive comments on the queer characters represented in *The Last of Us Part II.* Combining RNG and POL, which is a variant of RNG, more than half of these concordances are reactions to the content of negative reviews rather than comments on the game itself. Since the number of words referring to queer people is lower in positive reviews than negative and a significant part of these instances are not actual reviews of the game but rather reactions to other reviews, it confirms that the presence of queer characters in the game is much more an issue for negative reviewers than it is a factor for positive reviewers to like the game. Certainly, some of them are happy about it and communicate it, but queer representations seem to be an element to ground the rating of negative reviewers much more than positive ones. Even though 16.22% of concordances of *lgbt** in the negative corpus are affirmations that it is not the reason they dislike the game, negative reviewers proportionally discuss the presence of queer characters in the game and their opinion on it more than positive reviewers. This nourishes the idea that negative reviews are influenced by latent queerphobia: if the presence of queer characters in the game was as excessive as some say it is, it would be discussed more in the corpus of positive reviews.

Concordances of *lgbt** thus show that queerphobia is both expressed overtly and covertly in negative reviews and that, although some reviews comment on it in a neutral or positive way or to say it is not the reason they dislike the game, most of the concordances express queerphobia in some way, some by stating that the way queer people are represented in the game is problematic. The results for the positive reviews indicate that the queer theme present in the game is not the main factor for reviewers liking the game, as queerphobic reviews generated more debate there than queer representations in the game directly. It also reinforces the idea that people's negative reaction to it in the negative reviews stems from queerphobia.

4.2.4. Summary

The frequency of neutral words designating queer people supports the hypothesis observed with queerphobic slurs that matters related to gender identity were more prominent in the corpora. The words' collocates suggest that negative reviewers are potentially more preoccupied by gender identity than sexual identity, and that queer, while originally used as a slur, has been mostly reappropriated, as it is not used in an openly queerphobic context in the corpora. The concordances of *lgbt** showed that negative reviewers have a high tendency to convey queerphobic discourses when using the word, while positive reviewers tend to use it to react to queerphobic discourses from negative reviewers. In addition to this, more reviews appear to be published by people who did not play the game and stopped either at Joel's death in the game or at the leaks of the game's content, reading Abby's character as transgender and communicating strong transphobia. More than half of concordances of *lgbt** in the negative corpus being used in queerphobic discourses, whether overtly or covertly. In the positive reviews, more than half of the concordances are reactions to negative reviews containing queerphobic discourse, supporting the idea that the presence of queer characters, even if appreciated by some, is far from the main reason people liked the game and rated it 10/10, while it seems to play a significant role in the criticism raised by people who rated it 0/10. Indeed, these neutral terms referring to queer people can be found in 6.23% of positive reviews and 13.14% of negative ones. While these numbers indicate that the topic is important to reviewers, especially the negative ones, there are other themes covered by players in their reviews and, consequently, the presence of queer characters is not

the only reason people rated the game 0/10. The main suspected issue being Joel's early death, an analysis of the mention of character names in the reviews follows.

4.3. Character Names and Joel's Death

4.3.1. Frequency

To estimate the importance of Joel's death in the negative reviews, the proportionality of his name is compared to that of the queer characters and Abby (Table 7), as they represent the main and some secondary characters that are frequently on screen during the game. In the negative corpus, one review contains "Abby" 34 times with nothing else and has been counted as a single token for the result that was originally 1,247 hits for *Abb**. It is possible that some reviews contain more than one instance of a name, I only verified this one as it was obvious and contained a large number of instances.

Table 7 - Names of the characters in corpora

	Positive	**Negative**
Joel	2423	2080
Abb*	2489	1214
Elli*	2916	1541
Lev	245	38
Dina	288	81
Total	**8361**	**4954**
Total reviews	**8120**	**6893**
Ratio	**102.97**	**71.87**

In total, characters' names are proportionally more frequent in the positive reviews, suggesting that positive reviewers discuss the characters more than the negative ones. In the positive reviews, Joel is only the third most used name, while it is by far the most mentioned name in the negative ones. These numbers reinforce the hypothesis that Joel and his place in the story are a major source of frustration for those who disliked the game. Frequencies here support the idea that Joel's death by Abby is a significant element of reviewers' dissatisfaction with the game. This, like Abby being interpreted as transgender, can be linked to the leaks; as several reviews were published by people who did not play the game, it is possible that, similarly, critiques around the narrative choice of Joel dying are recurrently made by the same

people, although it will not be verified here. The aim of this section is to have an overview of how frequently characters are discussed and with what words.

Table 7 also shows a contrast with the previous observation that words referring to queer people are more frequent in the negative corpus, as the names of the queer characters – Ellie, Dina and Lev – are more frequent in the positive corpus. This could mean that, while negative reviews discuss the representation of queer characters more generally, positive reviews tend to focus on the characters themselves rather than their sexual orientation or gender identity, reinforcing the idea that negative reviewers are more focused on the presence of queer characters than the positive ones are.

4.3.2. Collocates

The aim of looking at collocates here is to observe whether Joel is discussed in specific ways, and find what words collocate with the names of queer characters and Abby, who is often misread as a queer character. Surprisingly, with the exception of *homo* being a collocate of *Elli** in negative reviews and *trans* collocating in positive reviews with *Lev,* no mention of characters' sexual orientation or gender identity appears in the collocates, only mentions of their partners (*Dina* for *Ellie*, *Jesse* for *Dina* and *Owen* for *Abb**), rendering any new observations impossible here.

Unfortunately, the same thing happens regarding Joel's death: his name collocates with *dies* in both corpora, but for verbs indicating that someone actively kills him, *murdered* is the 5th most statistically significant collocate for *Joel* in the positive. Joel being killed by Abby thus does not appear as more prominent in the negative reviews than in the positive one. Consequently, it is impossible to determine a difference in discourse surrounding Joel between the positive and negative reviews based on the collocates.

It is possible that hate regarding Joel's death is expressed in various ways and not always with his name being written. In any case, the differences between both corpora are not strong enough to draw conclusions about how negative reviewers comment on Joel's death; only that it is commented upon in both corpora, confirming that there are a variety of topics addressed in positive reviews and that queer representations in the game is not the only topic covered in negative reviews.

Table 8 - Collocates for characters' names

Name	Pos Collocates	Freq	MI	Neg. Colloc	Freq	MI
Joel	miller	6	8.24358	howdy	5	8.03228
	adventures	5	8.24358	miller	6	7.48796
	porch	8	7.78415	flashing	5	7.44732
	dies	51	7.45657	elli	9	7.29532
	murdered	24	7.33669	dies	67	7.10402
Abb*	spares	13	8.15283	prompts	6	9.03344
	spare	6	7.84471	fruitless	6	8.03344
	drowning	9	7.84471	establish	6	8.03344
	spared	15	7.64307	saves	18	7.76042
	saves	7	7.60767	owen	11	7.73798
Elli*	dinna	5	8.32477	vows	5	8.49336
	forgives	13	7.70328	homo	73	8.05748
	farmhouse	6	7.58781	theater	5	7.68601
	bracelet	5	7.51742	abandon	5	7.68601
	spares	9	7.36541	dina	44	7.29101
Lev	yara	38	11.27388	abbys	6	12.48479
	sister	6	10.67505	life	5	7.75687
	saves	5	10.41201			
	trans	5	8.11656			
	herself	11	8.07821			
Dina	bracelet	6	11.09384	jesse	11	10.39287
	jj	30	10.97519	loses	7	10.29333
	jessie	5	10.17873	tommy	10	8.7606
	farm	18	10.05989	between	13	8.55415
	jesse	27	10.00503	relationship	7	8.15583

While the way Joel's death is discussed cannot be investigated here, the hypothesis that the uproar it caused is linked to ideals of masculinity and heteronormativity being attacked – especially contrasted with the presence of main characters being women and one

even being a lesbian, can be discussed. Joel is not an example of a queerphobic person: he is not negatively represented, he intervenes when Seth overtly expresses his queerphobia towards Ellie and Dina (GAim4A 2021, sec.8), and he never shows any negativity regarding Ellie's lesbianism. However, he is white, heterosexual – as far as is presented – and cisgender and he represents heteronormative thinking: we learn through a conversation between Jesse and Ellie that Joel believed Ellie was romantically interested in Jesse, having automatically assumed her to be heterosexual until he learned otherwise (GAim4A 2021, sec.4). Since Joel's only stance regarding queer issues is defending Ellie when she reacts to a queerphobic slur (GAim4A 2021, sec.8), he does not incarnate an opposition to queer characters. Consequently, hating that Joel was killed is not an expression of queerphobia in and of itself. However, coming back to Arltoft and Benkö (2019), who observe that killing queer characters early in stories is a popular trope, the early death of Joel, who is cisgender and heterosexual as far as the player can tell, proposes a reversal of the trope, further challenging the expectations of the public. Consequently, the strong reaction to Joel's early death in the story by negative reviewers can be paralleled with the covert and overt queerphobia in reviews protesting the overabundant presence of queer characters: both reactions are extreme and rooted in the highly heteronormative structure of video game culture and customs. This would need further investigation, but whether the negative reactions to Joel's death are highly impacted by geek masculinity, sexism and heteronormativity or are mostly the consequence of reviewer's affection for the character is outside the scope of this study.

Although the aim of this analysis was to compare whether Joel's death was a more important element of criticism than the presence of queer characters in the game is inconclusive, some interesting elements have appeared. Despite the lack of insight into how Joel's death is discussed, Joel is frequently mentioned in both corpora and proportionally the most mentioned character in the negative corpus. Collocates show that his name is often associated with his death in both corpora. That Joel's death is important to negative reviewers is possibly influenced by the geek masculinity present in the context in which the game has been published. Both Joel's death – as a previously main character – and the presence of queer characters are unusual and can be unsettling to reviewers. As Joel's death was one of the main information released in the leaks, it is also possible that reviewers reacting strongly negatively to it expressed it based on the leaks and without knowing the story in its entirety, similarly to the transphobic criticism and insults raised at Abby's character. The hypothesis that both

criticisms are rooted in the same geek masculinity mindset that is both transphobic and hypermasculine could be explored through a more thorough study of the language used when Joel's death is discussed, although this is outside this work's scope and will not be deepened.

4.4. Politics and Queerphobia

The concordances of *lgbt** show a strong connection to the notion of an agenda and propaganda in the negative reviews. This observation is confirmed by a wider search for the frequency of politics-related words (Table 9), as they are much more frequent in the negative corpus. Proportionally, *politic** is the search with the biggest difference of frequency between positive and negative reviews. A possible explanation could be that positive reviews, as observed in the concordances of *lgbt**, are mostly comments on whether the game is political or not by reacting to negative reviews that state that game is too political. The word *sjw* is an abbreviation for *social justice warrior*, "an often mocking term for one who is seen as overly progressive or left-wing" (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary 2021). *Sjw* has 314 occurrences in Table 9 for negative reviews and 54 instances in the positive reviews and it respectively includes 14 and 2 instances of *social justice warrior(s)*, which are not included in the collocates table. As observed with the concordances of *lgbt**, some of the instances are a direct reaction to the content of negative comments, refuting their statements; it is possible that the use of words such as *sjw* in the positive reviews, then, are in comments opposing those using the word in the negative reviews. To better grasp how these words are used in both corpora, a collocational analysis is necessary.

Table 9 – Frequency of words related to queer representation as a political choice in corpora

	Positive	**Negative**
politic*	105	588
agenda	96	443
sjw	54	314
propaganda	25	191
Total	**280**	**1536**
Total reviews	**8120**	**6893**
Ratio	**3.45**	**22.28**

The collocates for *politic** (Table 10) are relatively similar in both negative and positive reviews. Possibly, the fact that the word has a general meaning causes this similarity. In the

case of the collocates for *agenda*, some interesting words appear. In the positive reviews, it collocates with *sjw* and *political*, suggesting that the reviewers are reacting to negative reviews stating there is such an agenda e.g., "people talking about the SJW agenda of the game" (p3510), "the so-called 'SJW agenda' of the game" (p6022) or "The SJW agenda. Its there, but […]" (p252). In negative reviews, *agenda* collocates with *liberal*, once again suggesting a disapproval opinion of this political orientation: "It feels like a weird liberal agenda of lgbt and feminism shoved down our throats" (n3063).

Table 10 - Collocates for politics-related words

Name	Pos Collocates	Freq	MI	Neg Collocates	Freq	MI
politic*	correct	6	11.3398	correctness	43	11.19356
	agenda	15	10.72062	correct	40	10.84306
	social	5	10.51117	identity	37	10.81805
	pushing	6	10.3398	statements	5	10.70813
				views	24	10.56907
agenda	pushing	14	11.06469	pushing	34	9.30073
	political	14	10.62109	push	49	8.91323
	sjw	6	9.78572	pushes	7	8.8639
	push	5	9.63816	pushed	9	8.45595
	gay	6	8.82794	liberal	7	8.3664
sjw	anti	5	11.20075	pander	5	8.30227
	agenda	6	9.78572	propaganda	32	7.87455
				pandering	10	7.84855
				bs	7	7.63883
				crap	19	7.562
propaganda	lgbt	8	10.95966	leftist	9	9.68833
				feminism	8	8.93344
				feminist	5	8.33783
				lgbt	33	8.20524

Variants of the word *push* are recurrent in the collocates of *agenda*, expressing the idea that the political views mentioned are forced upon players. If these instances of *agenda* follow previous observations and are linked to queer matters, it is open to debate whether such an agenda is pushed on players. However, the words are strong, especially considering

that there is no mention of Abby and Owen's heterosexuality being pushed on players, for example.

That *pander* and *pandering* are collocating with *sjw* is interesting; the verb *pander* means to "minister to the immoral urges or distasteful desires of another, or to gratify a person with such desires." (OED Online 2020). It suggests that the choices made for the game by the creators go against a supposed correct choice. *Bs* and *crap* show a clearly negative opinion of *sjw*, which is explained by the pejorative sense the word has taken on, confirming its use as an insult.

Lastly, the word *propaganda*, by collocating with *feminism* and *leftist,* suggests that reviewers using those word place themselves opposite to feminism and left-wing politics. As feminism is often associated with queer issues (Capezza 2007) and combined with *agenda* that collocates with *liberal* in negative reviews, it can be deduced that these reviewers are queerphobic.

Collocates of queer and political lexicon indicate a significant presence of both in the corpora, especially for negative reviews, and a connexion between both. While political matters are not the focus of this study, it is crucial to highlight that politics are often invoked to argue against the choice of representing queer characters, while throughout my searches, I have not seen a single instance of people complaining about the representation of heterosexual characters. Video game culture being highly heteronormative, it is symptomatic of a latent and possibly unconscious queerphobia from reviewers who are offended by the queer agenda and propaganda of queer matters they see throughout the game, as Condis (2018: 74) explained that when people are used to a certain ideology and adhere to it, it is experienced as apolitical while opposing opinions are felt as highly politicised. Even more so, that numerous negative reviews complain about this without having played the game must be considered as well: if it is hard to estimate the place queer characters and their stories around their queerness takes, it is simply impossible to do so without playing the game.

Consequently, reviewers criticising the place of an element in a game they have not played is rooted in a strong and fixed opinion on a related topic, as they believe it is too present without knowing how prevalent it is. It is possible that such discourses are rooted in geek masculinity and similar to the #GameGate movement by being produced by people who claim that video games should stay neutral and decided to gather and publish reviews in a large number to counter those they call social justice warriors (Condis 2018: ch.4). As Condis

(2018: Ch.4) highlights, #GamerGate is to some extent connected to highly conservative politics. As it appears, politics are significantly present in the reviewers' discourse, and it is possible that it is related to movement such as the one behind #GamerGate. This, however, would require theoretical research and a deeper analysis of discourse related to political topics in the reviews to be better understood and verified.

5. Conclusion

This study's aim was to analyse *The Last of Us Part II*'s reviews on Metacritic in order to find if they contained queerphobic discourse and, if so, to what extent and how it was formulated. Since vulgar language in the reviews is limited by censorship on Metacritic, the analysis of insulting queerphobic discourse was limited but some queerphobic slurs are uncensored. They appeared mostly in negative reviews and show overt queerphobia from some reviewers. The few instances in positive reviews showed no queerphobia. Transphobic slurs were particularly frequent and mostly associated to Abby, a consequence of people misinterpreting her gender when the game was leaked because of her muscular physical appearance. This was the first hint that some people reviewed the game without having played it.

Words referring to queer people appeared more frequently in negative than positive reviews, and their collocates showed examples of queerphobic reviews, both overtly and covertly. The analysis of the concordances of *lgbt** showed that, in negative reviews, 27.11% of instances of the word were used in overtly queerphobic discourse, while at least 23.50% were covertly queerphobic. This number can be considered higher if instances of people criticising queer representation specifically in *The Last of Us Part II* (13.55%) and reviewers associating queer representation to political matters (16.57%) are considered as covertly queerphobic. I argued that these two categories are mostly queerphobic: the former contains numerous comments suggesting people did not play the game, implying they would criticise queer representation without actually knowing how queer characters are represented, and the latter, as developed in ch.4.4, seemed to be rooted in geek masculinity, which is heteronormative, sexist and queerphobic. The concordances of *lgbt** in positive reviews were, for more than a half, cases of people reacting to negative reviews, generally (46.35%) but also often relating to politics (10.42%). Queerphobia was almost absent from this corpus and a part of the instances were positive comments regarding queer representations (21.36%).

The brief analysis of the names of queer characters did not indicate any clear queerphobia. The low frequency of Lev's name and high frequency of Abby's in the negative reviews however reinforced the hypothesis that most transphobia was connected to Abby's character. Joel's name was proportionally more frequent in the negative corpus compared to the positive corpus, suggesting that his character is more often mentioned in the negative reviews. The original aim of this section was to compare whether negative reviewers complained more about Joel's death or queer characters. While this was inconclusive, as it

would require a more thorough analysis, since Joel's name can be used in numerous different contexts in the reviews, it still indicates that his character is discussed more than the others in negative reviews, which is not the case in positive reviews.

A final look at some political terms indicated that it was affiliated to criticism of progressist politics. This part of negative reviews can be linked to communities such as the one behind #GamerGate. However, to confirm such a supposition, another study focusing on the political discourses of the reviews is necessary.

Even if a large part of queerphobia present in the reviews can be explained by people who came because of the leaks and does not come from actual players, it does not cover the entirety of queerphobic discourse. In addition to this, no matter the source of it, there was a significant amount of queerphobia in negative reviews, both overt and covert, which is alarming. The heteronormativity that permeates video game culture clearly has an impact on the content of the reviews as reviewers are comfortable using queerphobic discourse. As many people publishing queerphobic reviews did not play the game, it suggests that people who actually played the game were less bothered by queer representations than it appeared at first. However, queerphobia is present in the reviews and is an issue connected to video games and their communities. Video games are played by numerous people and form large communities. The fact that queerphobic discourses are highly present in them is a serious issue. It must be handled and deserves to be investigated further e.g., by analysing the politicisation of queer matters.

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