HBO’s The Last of Us is skipping to the cut scenes, and it’s for the best

Watching episode six of *The Last of Us* I was filled with dread. I’d played the game years ago (despite a very rational and healthy fear of all things zombie) and I knew where this episode was headed and what kind of fights Joel and Ellie would be forced into. But then the show didn’t spend hours in one location as Joel and Ellie snuck around trying to avoid getting murdered and doing a little murdering of their own. Instead, the episode moved breezily along and got right to the good stuff—which in video games usually means the cut scenes.

This article contains spoilers for the first six episodes of The Last of Us*.*

The way *The Last of Us* motors through hours of combat to get straight to the point has been one of my favorite parts of the show. It’s not an action show, but a horror one punctuated by moments of action. We do not spend our time marveling at the characters engaging in cool feats of heroism or neat “gun fu” a la *A Better Tomorrow* and *John Wick*. More like real life, the action is a means to an end and meant to be horrible, and maybe a little upsetting, instead of awe-inspiring.

That was intentional. Game creator and show producer Neil Druckmann, has spoken extensively about his desire to make sure the violence in *The Last of Us* has impact. “[O]ne of the easiest decisions we made was like to say, ‘Let’s strip all those out. Let’s only have as much violence in this story as is required and no more,” Druckmann told Variety earlier this year. “That allows the violence to have even more impact when

you see it on screen than in the game.”

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Craig Mazin, showrunner for *The Last of Us*, has also spoken about the very different approach to violence the show has versus the game. “Watching a person die, I think, ought to be much different than watching pixels die,” he told the New Yorker back in January.

People quickly hopped onto the quote as an example of Mazin denigrating one art form (video games) to prop up another (live-action TV). But Mazin was referring to the way the carnage in video games can sometimes diminish the emotional response rather than heighten it. If you’re in a tricky part of a game—say dealing with a university hospital full of murderous raiders—and you have to replay the sequence over and over and over again because you keep getting killed, then the emotional impact of the sequence is going to change.

As a person who sucked at playing *The Last of Us* I tend to agree with Mazin. Nothing, and I mean nothing, is more miserable than getting killed in a big fight that’s intended to have a lot of emotional weight and having to replay it. The characters I was battling stopped being characters and became obstacles, their cries of pain simply became a soundtrack of annoyance. When you have to play the same sequence multiple times it stops being harrowing and can just become irritating.

And every time the TV series *The Last of Us* has skipped one of those big fights it hit my brain with dopamine like when I find out the last boss is just a quick time event. It feels like I, a mediocre gamer, am getting away with something every time it happens. When I realized the third episode would simply be a touching exploration of love in an apocalypse and that I wouldn’t have to watch characters infiltrate a school full of infected and battle a bloater I’m pretty sure I softly

cheered from my seat on the couch. I might have been crying because this loving couple had just chosen to end their lives together, but I was terrifically happy I didn't have to sit through an adaptation of a fight scene I found miserable.

The same thing happened at the end of episode six, when Ellie and Joel quickly realize the university hospital they've traveled to has been abandoned and they should leave. It was like an invisible force (Craig Mazin and company) were hitting the X button to skip the action. I felt like I used codes to avoid an entire level I'd never been a fan of.

I'm not the only one who likes to skip to the cutscenes in a story-rich video game. Youtubers have been paring games down to their essential stories for years, including *The Last of Us*. Here's a more than 5 hour cut of the remastered *The Last of Us* with nearly a million views.

And here's a nearly 11-hour video doing the same for *The Last of Us II*. Whose length is… making me realize why the next game might be split into a second and third season instead of condensed into a single season. That video has more than three million views.

There are a lot of reasons people like to watch the cutscenes. Maybe they want to know the whole story before they devote hours of their life to playing through it. Maybe they want to revisit part of the game without the hassle of playing it. Maybe they, like me, have a near-crippling fear of zombies and would prefer to avoid the spookiest bits of a game they've heard a lot about.

In the earlier days of cutscenes, they weren't just there to move the story along but were treated like a reward. Beating a boss in *Final Fantasy VIII* meant you got to watch a fully rendered Quistis take out a robot with a giant gun, or you got to watch Rinoa and Squall fall in love on the ballroom floor as the music swelled. These tiny super pixellated characters

were literally fleshed out when rendered in a cut scene. This is why skipping the gameplay bits in *The Last of Us* feels so good. It’s like I’m cheating. I hope future, hyper-faithful video game adaptations take note. When the story is strong enough the good bits aren’t necessarily the fights, its the moments in-between.

https://www.theverge.com/2023/2/20/23607238/hbo-the-last-of-us-episode-6-cut-scenes