Sarah Stang

Player Agency in Telltale Games' Transmedia and Cross-Genre Adaptations

Though severely understudied, video game adaptations have become a highly popular and lucrative transmedia business. Film-to-game adaptations are now standard for many big-budget Hollywood productions, and video game developers have also turned to other media for inspiration: from comics to television series, game adaptations of popular franchises are proving to be productive areas for both profit and creativity. Founded in 2004, Telltale Games is an American independent video game developer and publisher best known for its adaptations of popular licensed products. Telltale focuses on digital publications which are released episodically, and most of its productions are point-and-click adventure-style games which centralize narrative, character development, and player choice. Telltale has adapted from various media, including comic books (*Sam & Max, The Walking Dead*), a web cartoon (*Homestar Runner*), multiple film series (*Wallace and Gromit, Back to the Future*), a television series (*Game of Thrones*), and other video game franchises (*Borderlands, Minecraft*). In this article, I will discuss Telltale's most successful adaptations and explore how their artistic approach and particular source material have determined their level of popularity and acclaim. Most of my discussion will focus on *The Walking Dead* (2012), Telltale's most successful adaptation. I will argue that because its main characters are unique to the game, rather than adapted from the source material, *The Walking Dead* fosters an incredibly realistic illusion of player agency, which sets it apart from other Telltale adaptations and most video games in general.

In her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon describes adaptation as "thematic and narrative persistence [combined] with material change" (4). Telltale follows this persistence in their adaptations while also centralizing player choice, an element unique to interactive media. Within *The Walking Dead* and its sequel, *The Walking Dead: Season Two* (2013-2014), player choice is the basis for most of the gameplay. The unique selling point of these games is that "the story is tailored by how you play." After the player makes a choice, the games often remind them that "this action will have consequences." Despite these looming repercussions, players only have a matter of seconds to make morally-heavy or completely ambiguous decisions. Other characters will certainly voice their opinions, but the games offer little moral guidance and no reward for playing the games as selfish and antagonistic or as kind and heroic. Rather than the game superimposing an evaluative system, players make their decisions based on the limited information available to them; the opinions of other characters, who are written to be flawed or even untrustworthy; and their gut reactions to each situation.

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Beyond providing a compelling initial experience, offering multiple choices and multiple endings to the player is also a wise marketing tactic, as it encourages players to play the game multiple times. Telltale's games follow a branching decision tree format in which the narrative splits based on player choice and then converges again at specific points in the game. This format cleverly facilitates giving the player the feeling that every decision they make matters significantly while not expending excessive resources on narrative content that the players might not encounter. As such, while the sensation of agency is cogent in these games, many of the decisions offered to the player are false choices because the different options eventually lead to (mostly) the same outcome. Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps point this out during their analysis of *The Walking Dead*:

> The narrative branches that the player does not travel down but perceives as possibilities are just as important to their understanding of the story as the events that actually play out on the screen. One could reasonably field the argument that this overarching antinarrative or phantom narrative is even more powerful than the narrative itself, since it colludes with the player's imagination to create might-have-beens that the game's developers could not possibly have anticipated or included in the game (15).

This kind of trick is only possible in an interactive medium like video games, in which the player believes that the narrative is responding to his or her actions. By allowing the player to make morally-heavy decisions and making it seem that those decisions shape the narrative outcome, Telltale's games foster an incredibly realistic illusion of player agency.

The discussion surrounding agency and video game play can be traced back to Janet Murray, when she defined video game agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices," and pointed out that players desire this subjective experience of authority and control (126). The feeling of being in control of the game world can also foster the illusion that the experience is unmediated: players often refer to their characters in the first person and identify with their actions (Jenkins 31-32). The appeal of video game adaptations, then, is in the pleasures associated with entering into the familiar world of the film, comic, book, show, etc., and exercising control over the characters and events therein.

Player Agency in a Transmedia Adaptation

Although branching narrative trees are a popular design technique for games, they are not enough to satisfy the player if they do not feel that the choices offered are meaningful. While players are aware developers have pre-determined the game's possible choices and subsequent outcomes, if the choices offered seem significant within the game world, that awareness can fade and the player can maintain a feeling of control and agency. However, when that game world is part of a larger franchise, with its own lore and existence outside of the video game, the concept of player control and agency is complicated.

The events in *Game of Thrones* take place concurrently with the fourth season of the television series. While the player controls characters who do not exist in the show, they often interact with the show's main characters. Because the show's characters exist outside of the game world, the player's control over the in-game events is necessarily limited. While the game tells the player that his or her actions have consequences, the player knows that no matter what choices he or she makes, the game cannot go against the show's canon. Similarly, another Telltale adaptation, *The Wolf Among Us*, based on Bill Willingham's *Fables* comic book series, is set as a prequel to the series and, more importantly, is canon with the comics. As such, the player knows that his or her choices, no matter how seemingly relevant, cannot contradict anything within the established series. From the beginning of each of these games, players familiar with the source material know which characters will survive and which will not, as well as much of what will happen within the story. While this does not necessarily make the player's experience less enjoyable, it does make his or her choices feel less meaningful, and therefore weakens the sense of agency he or she experiences.

Tales from the Borderlands, a rare example of a game-to-game adaptation, is a narrative sequel to the *Borderlands* first-person shooter series. A cross-genre adaptation, Telltale turned a fast-paced game with a shooter mechanic and limited character interaction into a point-and-click adventure heavily centralizing character interaction and

development. The character-heavy aspect of Telltale productions is central to their appeal, because, as Telltale Games' Steven Allison observed, "[w]hen properties become a franchise, people fall in love with the characters" (Corriea para. 6). Since this is a sequel, rather than a prequel or concurrent event, *Tales from the Borderlands* gives its players the sense that anything could happen, that his or her choices could have consequences on established characters. While this feeling of control is also an illusion, since the game's system of false choices and periodic convergences limit narrative flexibility, players are not already aware of what will happen and so the sensation of control is powerful. Additionally, the main series' developers have announced a future title and it is possible that they could base particular elements of that new installment on Telltale's statistical data about its players' choices. After completing each episode of the Telltale games discussed, players are shown the statistics of other players' decisions at major moments in the game. Although it is common for players to go back and replay certain situations to change events and consequences, the data of what players choose to do is a gold mine of information for developers. Due to their prioritization of this information, developers grant players a degree of agency over the future development of the series as a whole. Telltale has created one other cross-genre game-to-game adaptation, entitled *Minecraft: Story Mode* (2015-2016). Although similar in its choice-based episodic style, audiences met *Minecraft: Story Mode* with lukewarm reception whereas *Tales* received critical acclaim. This differentiation is perhaps because *Tales'* source text is a franchise with characters and a clear, if minimal, narrative. *Minecraft*, however, is a sandbox-style game, with no story or characters, in which players can construct nearly anything with virtual building blocks. Designing a character-based, narrative-heavy adventure game based on such a franchise proved far less successful than designing one adapted from established narratives with fleshed-out characters. This difficulty inherent in crossing genres, combined with strict copyright laws, might explain why companies prefer to produce sequels and to "port" existing games to other consoles, rather than attempt game-to-game adaptations.

Telltale's first attempt at this type of decision-based episodic adaptation, *The Walking Dead*, remains its most commercially successful and critically acclaimed production. The adaptation won numerous Game of the Year awards from several gaming publications and is credited with revitalizing the point-and-click adventure game genre [1]. Critics praised the game for its morally-heavy emotional content, difficult decisions, and the realistic relationships between its characters. These characteristics are essential reasons behind T*he Walking Dead*'s success as an adaptation and are dependent upon the player's lack of pre-existing knowledge. Although the world is adapted from an existing comic book franchise, almost all the characters are entirely unique to the game. In this way, unlike *Game of Thrones* and *The Wolf Among Us,* the player does not already know what will happen to most characters and is not already aware of events which will occur in the game. Telltale worked closely with the creator of the comic series, Robert Kirkman, whose only stipulation was to avoid mention of the comic's main character, Rick Grimes, as Kirkman has long-term plans for the character [2]. According to Dan Connors, CEO of Telltale, Kirkman's guidance helped them to craft a unique story with new characters, allowing them to avoid working with those already established from the comic. As Connors stated, "[i]f it's something that's free and clear, like Lee and Clementine, who we've created, we can do whatever we want" (Grayson para. 5). By building a world adapted from the comic series, but mostly avoiding the implementation of pre-existing characters, Telltale kept creative freedom over those that populated its game.

Telltale has released two seasons at the time of writing this article, with each season divided into five episodes. Set in the same world as the comic book series, events in the first season take place in Georgia shortly after a widespread zombie outbreak. The player adopts the role of Lee Everett, an African-American university professor whom the state recently convicted for murdering a senator. The game opens with Lee being transported to prison though he quickly gains freedom due to the chaos brought about by the zombies. Shortly after, Lee encounters a young girl named Clementine and joins up with her to protect her and find her parents. The relationship between Lee and Clementine is one of surrogate father-daughter and the game makes it clear that Lee's primary motivation throughout the game is to protect Clementine at all costs. As Melissa Hutchison, the voice actor for Clementine, stated, "[t]he whole backbone of the story is the relationship between Lee and Clementine, and the choices Lee makes in order to protect Clementine" (Wallace para. 13).

The Walking Dead asks players to identify with an African-American man, an escaped convict, but Lee is not presented as a hyper-masculine or violent man – a refreshingly positive portrayal in a medium dominated by racist and sexist stereotypes. In fact, his relationship with Clementine, an African-American child, is compassionate and caring. The quality of the writing is such that the feelings of protectiveness and concern for Clementine, as well as the guilt felt for frightening her, are real sensations experienced by many players. Reports of "real-life" emotions in response to the

consequences of player choice in *The Walking Dead* have been explored in the microethnographic studies conducted by Nicholas Taylor, Chris Kampe, and Kristina Bell (2015a & 2015b). The authors observed the choices made by male and female players with different gaming experiences and backgrounds, and asked the participants why they made certain choices in sequences that were deemed challenging, stressful, or morally heavy. The authors observed that players entered into the role of protective, surrogate father-figure, stating that they were able to see an enactment of mature paternal identity in the play of their participants as they began to focus on Clementine and "express emotional openness, patience, compassion, and selflessness" (2015b, p. 15).

While violence is certainly ubiquitous in the game, it is never the central focus of gameplay. Rather, making difficult survival decisions, managing interpersonal relationships, and mediating conflicts are what this game is all about. This microcosmic focus follows the theming of the comic, as Kirkman observes of his creation, "[t]he only thing that's really special about *The Walking Dead* is the human characters and the narrative that they exist in" (Reeves, para. 3). This fits in well with the broader zombie apocalypse genre, as Smethurst and Craps point out:

> In much of the best zombie-themed media […] the undead are not necessarily the primary antagonists but can instead function as a catalyst for conflicts between the survivors, thus exposing the barbarism of human beings toward one another when they are put in life-threatening situations (11).

While some scholars have suggested that video games provide a safe space in which players can engage in deviant behaviour, delineated by a "magic circle" that keeps it separate from reality, statistics from The Walking Dead *suggest that when available most players tend to prefer to take the moral high ground.*

As Lee encounters other survivors and attempts to keep the group intact, the player is forced to make ambiguous or dilemmatic decisions about Lee's behaviour, which in turn influence how others behave, who survives and who does not, and what kind of a person Clementine becomes. The weight of the player's choices is especially heavy when the game informs the player that "Clementine witnessed what you did" and "Clementine will remember that." Clementine functions not only as a motivating factor but also as a moral compass, as she reacts negatively to anger and violence. The game grants the player the responsibility of deciding what kind of role-model he or she

wants Lee to be for Clementine, thereby placing culpability for Lee's actions solely on the player.

Smethurst and Craps discuss complicity in video games as "founded on a combination of interreactivity and empathy," meaning that "the game fosters the sense that players have a responsibility for what happens on-screen" (9). While some scholars have suggested that video games provide a safe space in which players can engage in deviant behaviour, delineated by a "magic circle" that keeps it separate from reality, statistics from *The Walking Dead* suggest that when available most players tend to prefer to take the moral high ground. As Telltale's marketing director Richard Iggo claims:

> Some of the stats we've seen coming back from player decisions have created a perception that even in dire times — and when faced with no-win situations where each decision is morally grey — the majority of people will try to do the 'right' thing if they can, even if there's really no 'right' decision to be made. It's fascinating because even when we offer players a decision where the apparently darker option might make sense from a purely logical point of view, they'll often try to choose the 'higher' ground at personal cost even if that means being put in danger or having a relationship with another character suffer because of it (Keyes para. 4).

This data suggests that in *The Walking Dead*, players act as what Miguel Sicart would call moral agents because they react to dilemmas with a moral stance rather than with logic or strategy. The quality of the writing in *The Walking Dead* is such that the feelings of protectiveness and concern for Clementine, as well as the guilt felt for frightening her, are real sensations experienced by many players. Depending on how the player chooses to act, Clementine will learn to trust others, or to be wary of them. Choices do not matter on a grand scale in *The Walking Dead* – Lee will never save the world from its fate – however, the player's choices do influence what kind of person Clementine becomes.

In writing on video game adaptation, Moore claims that "[b]ecause video games are both modular and variable, each player creates her own adaptation as she plays through the game; individual agency supplants textual fidelity" (191). While this might be an ideal vision of video game

play, the agency that a player has in the game is minimal. Player input causes the game system to react in a specific, pre-coded way and, given our current lack of artificial intelligence that can adapt and generate content in reaction to unpredictable human behaviour, player choice is necessarily limited. While this is true, many players do feel that they are in control, and that they have agency in the game. This perception is important because, as Steven Jones points out, since play is a highly mediated, complicated, and social experience, "[p]layers make games meaningful, make their meanings, as they play them, talk about them, reconfigure them, and play them again" (9). Players, like readers and viewers, actively interpret the text and exercise agency over how it is received, discussed, and understood, though that agency is itself constrained by socio-cultural realities. This structuring is especially apparent in video game adaptations, as many players engage with the game text by connecting it to the original work. Players also exercise collective agency through participation in fan communities, which are generally much larger for transmedia products. The Walking Dead manages to engage players not only as fans of the comic or television show, but also by offering them a very convincing illusion of control. As I have demonstrated, this is primarily because *The Walking Dead* features a familiar setting but with entirely unique main characters whose behaviour is not constrained by the original work. Finally, player decisions not only shape the individual narrative, but since Telltale uses the decision statistics from each episode to determine future narratives, player choice also shapes the future direction of the series as a whole. This data collection, combined with the unique characters and emphasis on difficult choices, allows *The Walking Dead* to foster a much greater sense of player agency than other Telltale adaptations, and most other video games in general. Player agency, while understood to be illusory, is a popular concept within both the game industry and game scholarship. Telltale's approach demonstrates an effective way in which developers can entice players by offering them a sense of control over narratives with which they are already familiar.

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[1] For more on this, see Rob Manuel, "How adventure games came back from the dead," PCWorld, 5 Feb 2013 http://www.pcworld.com/article/2026802/how-adventure-games-came-back-from-the-dead.html

[2] For more on Kirkman's collaboration with Telltale, see Nathan Grayson, "Telltale On Walking Dead Season 2 And Beyond," Rock Paper Shotgun February 28th, 2013 https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2013/02/28/telltale-on-walking-dead-season-2-and-beyond/ and Ben Reeves, "Lord Of The Dead: An Interview With Robert Kirkman," GameInformer November 26, 2012 http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2012/11/26/lord-of-the-dead-an-interview-with-robert-kirkman.aspx