



# AGENCY AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE WALKING DEAD

In an attempt to evolve the video game medium on an aesthetic level, Telltale's post-apocalyptic vision in *The Walking Dead* steps away from competitive combat and lays strong emphasis on meaningful narrative choices. Gerald Farca explains how such choices can make the player feel, think and reflect on his actions.



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The sky above Savannah has darkened, reflecting not only the hordes of dead that roam the streets below, but also a world bereft of hope. Death has followed Lee Everett to the final moments of his journey. He was bitten and is gathering his last ounces of strength to save Clementine, the young girl he has been taking care of ever since the plague's outbreak. The narrative culminates in the last playable scene of the game, when Lee, on the brink of death, bids farewell to Clem. And while he has done all that is humanly possible to protect her from a world gone awry, there is one last choice he has to make: ask Clem to shoot him in the head in order to prevent him from turning, or urge her to step away, leaving him behind to die. This last choice demonstrates what the previous hours of playing Telltale's fictional post-apocalypse «*The Walking Dead*» were all about: taking responsibility for a child that has lost her parents and now has to be brought up in a world full of terror and despair. But Clementine is not as much the responsibility of Lee Everett as she is the player's. Because in the end, it is our decision.

In video games, players experience the pleasure of agency, as Janet Murray puts it, »the satisfying power to take meaningful action and to see the results of our decisions and choices« (Murray, page 126). Combined with subsequent cognitive transformation into the player-character – we usually refer to our PC as I and not as Gordon Freeman, Booker DeWitt, or Lee Everett, etc. – this leads to a kind of emotional response that differs from the one we enjoy in non-participatory media like literature or film. As players, we are directly involved in the fiction, which makes our response to it more personal. In the case of *The Walking Dead*, this personalized emotional response primarily expresses itself in the form of personal responsibility, and above all, the responsibility for Clementine.

## It's all about Clem!

The narrative in *The Walking Dead* mainly revolves around the relationship of Lee Everett, a former history professor and convicted murderer, and Clementine, a girl that has lost her parents and now depends on Lee to survive. In playing Lee, the player assumes the role of a surrogate father and steadily builds up a

**Warning!**  
Major spoilers ahead!

relationship with Clem. Not only does he protect her from the constant threat of the dead – and indeed, the player experiences the perpetual urge to put Clementine out of harm’s way –, but the game demands more of him. One scene has Lee cut Clem’s hair to make it more difficult to be grasped by walkers. In addition, he will teach the young girl how to shoot a gun and together they will take a look at a map of Savannah in order to make plans of how to proceed. From an aesthetic point of view, this chain of events bears a strong similarity to one of video gaming’s most picturesque moments, the giraffe scene in *The Last of Us*. Here, Joel and Ellie can, for a brief moment, escape the horrible world they are in and, more importantly, discern a glimpse of hope in between all the terror. Such events underline the importance of narrative to a video game and, in the instance of *The Walking Dead*, tighten the bond between the player and Clementine. Most importantly, the player’s tender treatment of Clem reinforces his feeling of personal responsibility.

In fact, Clementine is of vital importance to Lee and, metaphorically, to the world of *The Walking Dead* as a whole. Within the context of the dystopian and uninhabitable post-apocalypse the player finds himself in, a world reduced to one principle only, the survival of the fittest, Clementine represents a symbol of hope, not only for Lee, but for the whole of humankind. She represents the slight utopian hope of a better world, one that is not deprived of human compassion and is not reduced to the unconscious forces and the primitive instincts of the post-apocalypse. While other symbols of hope, such as the boat on which the group tries to get away, turn out to be disappointments, Clementine survives the events of *The Walking Dead*, a fact that underlines her symbolic significance. In an emblematic scene at the very end of the game, where the young girl finds herself in a beautiful field colored in a golden brown, the dream of a better future is clearly maintained. However, the prospect of hope also depends on another variable: the player and his choices. Before we actually look into these, let us take a brief detour and have a look at what it means to make a choice and how the ability to act cognitively merges player and player-character.

### Choice, Agency and Transformation

Generally speaking, a video game is a procedural and dynamic system the player can interact with. Gameplay – how we play the game – functions according to a set of rules that predefine the player’s options of choice as well as their possible outcomes. At any point in a game, the player is able to choose between at least two different options that each will lead to different events – as slight as this difference might be: move the camera to the right or to the left, take cover or do not, blow up Megaton or refuse to

do so (*Fallout 3*), take the food left behind in the car or leave it for other survivors, etc. Sebastian Domsch calls these points of choice nodal situations and declares a situation to be nodal »if it allows for more than one continuation« (Domsch 1). Players, however, do not perceive their actions as choices within an abstract system of rules only. As Domsch correctly notices, we tend to fictionalize the worlds we encounter in video games and endow them with meaning. »[P]layers of a game tend to semanticize it existents, to regard them as parts of a more or

less consistent storyworld [...]. This also means that players regard their own choices - since they are concerned with elements of the storyworld and will effect changes to the storyworld’s state – as narrative events once they are made, or as feeling of narrative agency when contemplating their potenti-

ality« (Domsch, page 148).

In other words, players perceive the worlds they encounter in video games as living and breathing fictional worlds inhabited by characters, in which the most diverse events may happen. We can roam and explore these worlds and often have considerable influence on them. Domsch calls these narrative forms »future narratives«, a form of narrative that has not yet been actualized and which lays emphasis on the potentiality of events – in contrast to past narratives as we know them from literature or film (cf. Domsch, page 1). Indeed, through the fact that a player is granted agency, the ability to influence a game’s storyworld and narrative arch in a meaningful way, and, consequently, enjoys the feeling of participating in a story, video games express one of their prime aesthetic characteristics.

Yet, the feeling of being present in and having a meaningful influence on a storyworld is accompanied by another aesthetic feature of the video game: the player’s cognitive transfor-

»In playing Lee, the player assumes the role of a surrogate father.«



The last choice the player has to make in *The Walking Dead*’s fifth episode »No Time Left«: Ask Clem to shoot Lee in the head in order to prevent him from turning, or urge her to step away, leaving him behind to die.



mation into the player-character. Janet Murray expresses this phenomenon very well: »[e]nacted events have a transformative power that exceeds both narrated and conventionally dramatized events because we assimilate them as personal experience« (Murray, page 170). In the same context, Joshua Tanenbaum compares playing video games to method acting and underlines the »paradox of dual consciousness« (Tanenbaum, page 58), where an actor's personality is constituted by two competing parts: his own and the one of the fictional character he performs. Both seem to merge into a unified whole. In video games, so Tanenbaum, the relationship between player and player-character is of a similar kind. Although this synthesis is not complete and fictional distance remains – we are still aware of sitting in front of a screen –, video games excel at this cognitive feature. The tendency to speak of what I have done, instead of what Lee Everett has done, clearly underlines this point. The effect of cognitive transformation, then, is simple: we share our player-character's agenda and emotions – at least to a certain degree. In *The Walking Dead*, this entails the shared responsibility between Lee Everett and the player: for both their actions and for Clementine.

### Choice and the Player

*The Walking Dead* cannot be considered a truly interactive story where a player has complete control over the narrative arch. We all experience the game's major events: meeting Clementine, the St. John's dairy, the train, the dystopian microcosm of Crawford, Lee's trial, etc. And in the end, the game will invariably conclude with the death of Lee Everett. Instead of the narrative bifurcating into entirely different directions, Telltale chose to employ the method of recombining pathways. As the name suggests, recombining pathways do not branch the narrative into an indiscriminate amount of

plotlines, but cleverly reunite paths at certain key points of the narrative (cf. DeMarle, page 76f.). In *The Walking Dead* this works as follows: depending on how the player chooses at important branching points, the game will trigger one of mostly two possible events, in order to then recombine its pathways and continue with the main plotline. Each choice, however, might entail some long-term consequences which

may include varying dialogue, different characters in your group, or minor event changes; none of which decisively influence the chain of main events. Clearly, choices in *The Walking Dead* serve a different purpose than moving the game's narrative into com-

pletely different directions: they are designed to affect the player on an emotional level and to direct his reception of the narrative.

Reception theory – or reader-response theory – is a branch of literary theory whose main focus lies on deciphering what fiction does to readers, how it affects them, on both an emotional and aesthetic level. Interactive media, then, like the video game, have the power to reinforce said response by making the player reflect on his own actions and choices, thereby triggering a kind of personal response not to be found in non-participatory media. As Ciccoricco points out: video games make you »think about what you've done after you have done it [...]« (Ciccoricco, np.). In the recent past, games like *Heavy Rain* or *Spec Ops: The Line* utilized this potential of interactive media and created situations in which a player's actions and choices aimed at evoking the feeling of discomfort. In his GDC Europe 2012 talk, Jörg Friedrich from Yager emphasized this tendency of »making the player feel bad«: tough choices that face the player with a moral dilemma, so Friedrich, will make the player feel responsible for his own actions. As a result, »it doesn't just make you feel with the character, it makes you feel like him« (Friedrich, GDC Vault). Similarly, *The Walking Dead* uses this kind of directed player response to trigger strong emotions in the player, in a manner unprecedented in video games.

### Impossible Choices

Choices in *The Walking Dead* are never clear-cut decisions between good and bad, and indeed, quite the contrary is the case. The game's branching points put the player on the spot, having him decide between alternatives that are both devastating and terrifying in their consequences. Most of the time, the player is presented with a moral dilemma in which there is simply no right choice. One example is the scene when the player comes across an infected woman who hasn't turned quite yet. Desperate and confused, she sees the player's gun and asks, first gently, then aggressively, whether she could borrow it. Her intentions are obvious: suicide. But do we choose to give

»We share our player-character's agenda and emotions.«



Clementine represents a symbol of hope. In an emblematic scene at the end of the game, the dream of a better future is clearly maintained.



The bond between Clementine and Lee, and thus the player, tightens by apparently simple things like cutting the little girl's hair.

her the gun, or do we refuse? Besides being a tough decision on a basic level – after all, we are going to decide over a woman's life –, the interpretive blank this situation creates on a philosophical level is a confusing one, as both alternatives are ambiguous in their meaning.

While, on the one hand, handing over the gun implies surrendering to a grim and desolate world, an abandonment of hope, in a way, it also underlines the sort of realism essential for the survival in a zombie-infested post-apocalypse. After all, the woman is infected and could become a severe threat. Moreover, committing suicide would mean a way out and lead to a more »humane« death than turning into a walker. »It's not Christian«, the woman says – however this represents an issue prone to discussion. The player's second option is to not give the woman the gun. And while this, as implied above, may suggest an act of rebellion, a preservation of hope, so to say, it represents hope riddled with naiveté and illusion. One might even argue, a naiveté that reflects the player's lack of initiative and refusal to take on responsibility. As we see, the answer to the question is ambiguous and no matter how the player chooses, he will, in retrospect, question his decision. To further fuel his uncertainty, the game employs adjusted dialogue that, in the aftermath of the choice, scrutinizes and questions the player's course of action. Obviously, the emotion triggered by this sort of directed player response is one of strong discomfort, leaving the player behind devastated and reflective. It makes him feel responsible for his actions.

Choices like these underline the importance

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of narrative to a video game. Deciding over the woman's faith not only emphasizes the player's struggle to do the right thing and his burden to take on responsibility, but also presupposes a reflection of the storyworld and its circumstances. It presupposes imaginative reflection

of a post-apocalyptic, zombie-infested world in whose context the player has to act. From a ludic perspective this choice – like many others in *The Walking Dead* – is quasi irrelevant. No matter how you choose, the infected woman will die, the different branches recombine, and the game continues – if you

don't give her the gun, she will overpower you, take the gun and shoot herself in the head. What it does to the player on a narrative level, however, deserves utmost credit.

### Food and Starvation

The issue of food is of big concern to the fictional world of *The Walking Dead*. Humans find themselves on the brink of starvation, the dead feast on human flesh, and even mankind dines on their fellow species. Food, it seems, has gained a philosophical dimension. And while the all-consuming zombie certainly implies a severe critique on contemporary mass-consumerism – imagine the crowds of people that on a weekend storm the supermarkets or the hundreds of bargain hunters who cannot wait to enter the electronics store –, the player has to ponder about other, more present issues. It is first and foremost the lack of food that presents a severe threat. In the second episode of *The Walking Dead*, entitled »Starved for Help«, the player is not only forced to deal with



Do we give Irene the gun or refuse to do so? No matter how the player chooses, he will, in retrospect, question his decision.



the St. John cannibals, but also faces the task of distributing scarce amounts of food among his group. Not everybody will receive their ration and they will express their consequent anger and incomprehension.

Food is of essential necessity, and at the end of the episode we are confronted with one of The Walking Dead's major choices, the implications of which will stretch until episode five, where Lee is due to stand trial on his previous actions. At the brink of starvation, the player encounters a supposedly abandoned car filled with supplies and also the food so desperately needed. Although it is not clear whether the car's owner will return, the group urges you to take the food. Again, the game leaves the decision to the player: does he take the much-needed supplies and food? A decision that under the current circumstances seems logical. Or does he leave the food for the car's owners? But this will jeopardize his group. It is Clementine who expresses her concerns about taking the food and who might convince the player to leave it. Again, this choice aims to affect the player on an emotional level and makes him reflect on his actions. No matter how you choose, your group will take the food anyway. Your decision, nonetheless, will be of ethical importance to yourself.

### A Glimmer of Hope?

Another important issue of the post-apocalypse is the question of hope. Or, can there be any hope in a world like this? In a world where the distinction between the categories of right and wrong has receded into oblivion, where our actions never remain untainted, and where people are on the edge of despair: can we ever do the right thing in such a world? The example of The Walking Dead clearly illustrates that choices in the post-apocalypse almost entirely boil down to decisions between bad or bad, or bad or worse. On closer inspection, though, the prospect of hope is maintained

in some instances. We've already addressed the symbolism of Clementine, but have left unanswered the question of how some of the player's actions will make the world appear slightly brighter. It is especially down to the way the player presents the world to Clementine that the prospect of hope will either be maintained or not.

For example: the player may show compassion for characters like Ben or Lilly who have made dubious decisions, to put it mildly, and have endangered your group. He can either leave them behind – a decision which would cause their certain death, at least for Ben – or show compassion and let them stick around

anyway. Another example of potential player mercy is illustrated in the incident of the St. John cannibals. After having tricked you into their dairy with the promise of food, dinner is not only ruined by the fact that the St. John family is serving human meat from one of your own people, but also by their attempt to butcher the rest of your group. The player, however, manages to escape and

in the course of the action has the possibility to kill either one or both of the St. John brothers. He may also kill none, however. Especially in the potential killing of Andy St. John, in cold blood and while the rest of your group, including Clementine, are watching, the player may portray the world of The Walking Dead in its cold and ugly brutality, displaying a complete lack of humanity and compassion.

As a role model for Clem, it is the player's responsibility to choose how to present the world to the little girl: either from a completely negative perspective – in accordance with the principles of Crawford, a dystopian microcosm and district of Savannah which is governed by strict rules and the principle of the survival of the fittest; weakness, that is, children and elderly people, is permitted by no means. Or he may choose to paint a somewhat brighter picture not entirely bereft of human compassion and mercy, despite the fact of being stranded

»As a role model for Clem, it is the player's responsibility to choose how to present the world to the little girl.«



Do we take the food in the abandoned car or do we leave it behind? The group will take it no matter how you choose. Your decision, however, will be of ethical importance to yourself.



Our decisions are of vital importance in how we present the world to Clem. Especially in the potential killing of Andy St. John, we may portray the world of The Walking Dead in its cold and ugly brutality.



At gunpoint, Clementine's kidnapper blames Lee and thus the player for his supposed wrongdoings. The scene clearly serves to reinvigorate the player's reflections on his previous actions.

in a world corroded by terror. At the end of the episode, Andy is no longer a threat to the player and his group. Despite having tried to kill you, it seems heartless to kill a man that, kneeling on the ground and in desperation, has lost his mother and, potentially, his brother – if the player has previously decided to do away with him. Again, from a ludic perspective this choice is pointless, from a narrative one it decides how you choose to present the world to Clementine.

### The Trial

Up to this moment, the player had to deal with some tough situations and has faced terrible choices, all of which have made him reflect upon his actions, some more and some less. In the game's fifth episode, called »No Time Left«, those decisions and actions come under close scrutiny. A psychopathic stranger who has followed your group for a while now has kidnapped Clementine in the belief that he would be a better »father« to her than Lee. Face to face and at gunpoint, the stranger puts Lee – and thus the player – on trial and blames him for his supposed wrongdoings and the dangers he has exposed Clementine to. The scene clearly serves to reinvigorate the player's reflections on his previous actions and makes him question his decisions. As such, it reinforces his emotional response and makes him reflect on his responsibility for Clem. Additionally, the revelation of the stranger will come as quite a shock to you.

When I first played *The Walking Dead*, I chose to take the food from the car in episode two. During the trial, the stranger revealed that it was his car and that he has followed our group ever since in order to seek revenge. Also, he told me about the consequences of my theft for him and his family, which were

horrible. In an instant, I was completely stunned and shocked at what I had done. My emotional response was not only one of surprise, but also of guilt. The encounter with the stranger made me reflect on my previous actions, my relationship with Clem and on my role in the narrative as a whole. As with many other situations in the game, the trial clearly illustrates how video games can make the player feel, think and reflect on his actions, in a way unprecedented in fiction.

### Conclusion

The beautiful thing about video games is their diversity. While some players enjoy the competitive gameplay of modern first-person shooters, others seek for something more and prefer a more narrative-driven, meaningful experience. In the recent past, especially indie game productions catered to this taste.

Games like »Journey«, »Gone Home«, »The Stanley Parable«, or »Papers, Please« have paved the way for a more narrative-focused experience and have offered their players entirely new and fresh experiences. But also AAA productions, like »Bioshock Infinite«, »The Last

of Us« and »Grand Theft Auto V«, in its harsh satirical critique on the contemporary United States, pay homage to the power of fiction and narrative. The example of *The Walking Dead* clearly illustrates that video games can be more than games: they can be meaningful narrative experiences that affect their players on both an emotional and aesthetic level. As Andrew Stern, the creator of *Façade*, once said: »[a]s a new form of experiencing narrative, digital interactive story has the potential to become a premier art form of the 21st century« (Stern, page 1). But the way there, to put it in the words of *The Walking Dead*, is still a long road ahead. **Gerald Farca**

»Games can be meaningful narrative experiences that affect their players on both an emotional and aesthetic level.«

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