Research Article

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Choices and Consequences: The Role of Players in *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Game Series*

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Abstract: One of the most important features in a transmedia structure, as Max Giovagnoli argues in his book *Transmedia: Storytelling e Comunicazione* [*Transmedia: Storytelling and Communication*], is the development of the user's decision-making power, defined by the author as "choice excitement." In this, every choice of the user should have a consequence in the fictional universe of a specific franchise. Consequently, a narrative universe that wants to emphasize choice excitement and the active role of people can focus on video games, where the interactive approach is prominent. This essay will discuss a specific video game, based on the famous franchise of *The Walking Dead*. This brand, which appears in comic books, novels, TV series, Web episodes and video games, is analysable not only as an exemplary case of transmedia storytelling, where every ramification of the franchise published in different media is both autonomous and synergistic with the others, but also by focusing on the choice excitement of users in the first season of the video game *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Game Series*.

Keywords: agency, transmedia storytelling, episodic video game

The purposes of this essay are to observe that the famous franchise of *The Walking Dead* is an exemplary case of transmedia storytelling, and then to take a closer look at the video game *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Game Series* in order to underline the relevance of one of the most important features in a transmedia experience: the user's decision-making power, called by Max Giovagnoli "choice excitement." This is manifested when a user can influence some elements of a narration integrated into a specific medium and correlated to a larger fictional universe (88-90).

Before the introduction of the case study, it is important to identify the term *transmediality*. One of the most relevant contributions comes thanks to Henry Jenkins, who has stated that transmediality is a phenomenon favoured by contemporary media convergence. In 2006, Jenkins talked about convergence as "the flow of content across multiple platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost everywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (*Convergence Culture* 2). This means that a brand that wants to capture many people should divide its ramifications among various media and that it sometimes can exploit this convergence to distribute parts of a story to multiple entertainment sectors. Therefore, Jenkins also introduces the concept of transmedia storytelling, which is a narrative structure where "each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" ("The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn:

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Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling"). This statement has been underlined in other circumstances by different authors. For example, Jeff Gomes has said that transmedia storytelling "is a kind of subset of cross-media content. It is the technique of conveying messages, themes and storylines across multiple media platforms in a way that is both artful and coordinated with care" (Baage). More recently, Tom Dowd, Michael Fry, Michael Niederman and Josef Steiff have stated that transmedia storytelling is a process in which a fictional universe is "carefully designed and built to allow multiple iterations, expressions, and platforms simultaneously and sequentially" (3). It is now important to underline that a transmedia model must have a synergic narrative that can host users independently of their previous knowledge about the story of a specific franchise. A way suggested by Jenkins to attain this objective is the principle of "worldbuilding." This means the construction not only of a fictional universe that must be coherent and credible, but also of a large world able to include multiple stories based on the different adventures of the various characters in each ramification of a franchise. Every single story can represent a new potential point of entry for a new consumer, thanks to the independent narrative structure, and at the same time each story can be interesting for a long-term fan, thanks to possible references to other parts of the narrative known from different media. Jenkins writes that "transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"). This statement again emphasizes the role of users, who must take an active approach in order to discover all the secrets hidden in a complex story world. This activity can be reconducted to one of the modes belonging to a multivalent model of interactivity stated by Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman inside a consistent framework based on game design fundamentals, which is also useful in this essay for the next focalization on choice excitement in *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Game Series*. The two authors stated in 2003 that interactivity can be seen in four different modes: cognitive, functional, explicit and beyond the object (69-74). Cognitive interactivity is the emotional and intellectual activity during the initial experience of a single designed entertainment sector, and functional interactivity is physical action with objects in which the contents are materially distributed. Explicit interactivity represents the multitude of real-time information that passes between the user and the fictional world, which provides the constant active role of the first, followed by constant responses of the second, in a continuous alternation of inputs and outputs mutually influencing each other. Beyond the object interactivity refers to interaction outside the initial experience, in order to explore a narrative universe more deeply. This last mode is the one that reflects the encyclopaedic impulse of users mentioned by Jenkins after the knowledge of a single branch included in a larger set. This impulse manifests a necessary cognitive and functional interactivity, which can become explicit in the specific case of video games. The freedom of choice for a person is effectively present when worldbuilding is coherent, because every single part can become an entry point for him/her, who can decide the order of his/her movements through the transmedia scheme. Nevertheless, the choice can effectively become choice excitement only inside a formal structure in which a person can interact explicitly with a narrative ramification of the transmedia scheme, able to reflect dynamically and dramatically his/her choices, emphasizing his/her "agency." This term, according to Janet H. Murray, is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (126). The importance of agency will be a key to understanding the choice excitement of *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Game Series*, which is part of a larger, complex transmedia universe formed by comics, TV series, Web episodes and novels, all linked together by interesting narrative ties (Warning for readers: spoilers are inevitable!).

The Walking Dead made its debut in 2003 upon the publication of the first issue of the comic series set in a world in decomposition owing to a mysterious invasion of the living dead. Drawing from the consideration established on the cinema screen by George Romero, who painted these beings as physically horrendous monsters lacking any conscience and moved by the sole desire to eat meat, creator Robert Kirkman managed to fashion a world articulated over a vast narrative span, not restricted to the comic series but continually evolving into other entertainment sectors so as to involve an increasingly varied public. Without doubt, one of the most curious aspects of the brand lies in its ability to paint a world invaded by horror, not so much because of the zombies, who are often placed on the sidelines, but because of the human beings, who have gone mad in an emergency that has brought out the most dismal aspects of their personalities. The dubious

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morality linked to the characters' actions recurs in every ramification of the franchise, and it is one of the main hinges on which the forthcoming video game in question is based.

The comic series, brainchild of Robert Kirkman, launched in 2003 and still ongoing today, formed the basis for all the success built up around the world of *The Walking Dead*. The story begins with sheriff's deputy Rick Grimes looking for his family in an Atlanta invaded by the living dead. During the series, Rick meets many people and establishes more or less collaborative relationships with them. What is more, he undergoes an interior transformation, making him increasingly cynical towards strangers and more and more tied to his loved ones, whom he is willing to sacrifice his life to save. Indeed, in a world like this, every character is in constant danger, and readers are well aware that every page could be the character's last. As already said, the true protagonists are actually the imperfect human beings, who often have to face the consequences of their moral choices. Obviously, readers can interact emotionally and functionally during the reading of comics, accepting or refusing the choices made by the characters in the readers' personal points of view, and eventually, they can interact beyond the object if they are interested in exploring the fictional universe more deeply. However, real choice excitement is absent because there is no effective agency. This is true not only for the comics but also for the TV series, Web series and novels. Agency can not exist because these are all media whose formal structure can not allow explicit interactivity with the narrative universe.

Drawing on the comic's fame, in 2007 producer Frank Darabont began to plan a way to bring Kirkman's iconographic world to the television screen. In collaboration with two of the comic's other illustrators, Charlie Adlard and Tony Moore, he started to write the storylines for the television series, which made its debut in 2010 on AMC. The television series is an adaptation of the comic: the world is the same, with the same overall atmosphere and all the pivotal characters from the illustrated version. However, changes can be seen on several occasions in the TV series, because an adaptation "retells the story told in one medium in another, with applicable changes depending on the requirements of the new medium" (Dowd et al. 22). These differences are present in many ways during the seasons of the TV series, but they can be categorized in three different macro groups. First, there is the introduction of new important characters, such as the popular Daryl Dixon and Sasha Williams, and there is also the omission of other characters from the comics, such as some sons of the farmer Hershel. Second, there is a new consideration about the fates of some characters, which in some cases have the same outcome from different circumstances or, alternatively, sometimes completely change. One example concerns the brave soldier Abraham, who in the comics is one of the focal characters. He becomes one of the main allies of Rick's group, until he is murdered by an unexpected arrow fired by Dwight, one of the soldiers of Negan's army, a man who will become a dire enemy of Rick. In the TV series, Abraham is still the same brave soldier, and he has the same importance for the group, but he dies in a different way. He is not murdered by Dwight (who instead kills a girl named Denise with his arrow), but he is brutally smashed by Negan with a baseball bat. In this case, the fate of the character is still the same, but it is manifested in different circumstances between the comics and the TV series. Another useful example is the young girl Sophia. In the comics, she will become an adult and will be important during the volumes, while her mother, Carol, will kill herself after she shows weakness. In the TV series, the destinies of Sophia and Carol change radically. Sophia turns into a zombie during the second season and is definitively killed by Rick, while Carol becomes stronger and more skilled with weapons. In this case, the two characters' fates change radically between the comics and the TV series, and the characters' personalities also change. Third, in the TV series, there are several extended storylines, such as the explicit love relationship between Lori and Shane, respectively Rick's wife and "best friend." This complicated situation covers the first two seasons of the TV series, and it brings Shane and Rick into many confrontations. Shane goes insane, and the protagonist kills him in the penultimate episode of the second season. In the comics, the love story between Lori and Shane covers a smaller time frame, and Shane is killed by Rick at the end of the first volume. The television format potentially gave Darabont more time, and he made the most of it by inserting new characters, changing some elements and extending the plot, drawing from some narrative elements of the original source. The TV series began seven years after the comics, so the differences in the plot are necessary in order to maintain a high level of interest among the comics' fans, who can watch the adaptation on television driven by the curiosity to discover new characters

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and new storylines inside a familiar fictional universe. Besides, *The Walking Dead* is a potentially endless series, because there is no end to the characters or scenarios that can be slotted in. It is important to keep in mind that this is a transmedia franchise, so "it also has to be more than just adapting the same story to different media. Each expression has to tell a complete piece of a larger story" (Dowd et al. 4).

Mindful of this, in 2011, Greg Nicotero took on the directorship of a Web series called *The Walking Dead: Torn Apart*. Consisting of six three-minute episodes, this mini-saga concentrates on the last moments of Hannah, a young woman who would turn into a zombie after a desperate search for her sons and have the "honour" of being the first non-dead person to be killed by Rick in the first episode of the TV series, therefore assuming a certain degree of fame. It is an intense, dramatic moment that marks that, in this franchise, the murder of zombies is not always an act useful for salvation, but it can also be an act of pity.

Hannah's sad end underscores the need to stay focused even during the most delicate situations in this fictional world. Nicotero's second Web series came out in 2012. Entitled *The Walking Dead: Cold Storage* and comprising four mini-episodes, this short story, revolving around a young boy's journey in search of his missing sister, takes place in a parallel timeline to the events of the TV series. This second Web series underlines another focal element of the franchise: the real enemies are not the zombies but instead the human beings who have no sense of compassion. The third Web series under Nicotero's directorship is called *The Walking Dead: The Oath*, and it consists of three episodes focusing on a group of survivors who find refuge in a hospital very similar to the one where Rick woke up at the start of his adventure. In this case, the plot underlines the necessity to forgive deceased love ones in order to stay strong and face future adversities. Each of these stories emphasizes some key elements of the fictional universe created by Kirkman, where even a character who has very little presence could become the protagonist of another plot revealed in another medium. The Web series do not fail to include interesting links to the base that they draw from, even though they can be watched and understood as creations in their own right. These Web series, therefore, form interesting pieces of the puzzle that delve behind the scenes of Rick's adventure. Furthermore, thanks to their stand-alone narrative structure, they can be watched and understood both by new viewers and by those who already follow the franchise and are curious to find out more about the events within a potentially endless apocalyptic world.

Indeed, on the basis of this concept, another new television series has recently come out. Devised by Kirkman and Dave Erickson, *Fear the Walking Dead* is the prequel to Rick's adventure, focusing on a family's difficulties in dealing with the onset of the mysterious zombie epidemic. In this case, too, the storyline stands alone, and it is not necessary to be familiar with the other parts of the franchise in order to understand it because it explores a time arc before the one represented in the comics, TV and Web series.

Also important in this world-spanning several entertainment sectors is a cycle of literary novels written by Kirkman and Jay Bonansinga, an established author in the thriller genre, who combined forces to investigate further the backstory of the Governor, one of the most fascinating antagonists of the comics and television series. The books, called *The Walking Dead: Rise of the Governor*, *The Walking Dead: The Road to Woodbury* and *The Walking Dead: The Fall of the Governor: Part One* and *Part Two*, set out the reasons why this character has gone so mad that on one hand he has become the tyrant of the town of Woodbury, commanding with an iron fist, and on the other, he is a father who does not accept the idea of having lost his daughter and continues to show a touching fondness for his offspring, even though she has now turned into a zombie. In short, they look into the past of one of the core characters, also grasping the opportunity to explore the tensions with Lilly Caul, a member of the Governor's army, who will become the protagonist of the subsequent novels by Bonansinga: *Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead: Descent*, *Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead: Invasion* and *Robert Kirkman's The Walking Dead: Search and Destroy*. What makes these novels a success is their ability to maintain an original and, once again, stand-alone plot, which can guarantee the involvement of any consumer, regardless of what he/she may know either from reading the comics or watching the episodes on TV. Rick's antagonist, therefore, becomes the protagonist of a series of novels that manages to tickle the curiosity of the most diehard fans, offering them a different point of view on an already partly known world, while at the same time attracting new readers thanks to its internal coherence, which does not require any prior knowledge of the universe of *The Walking Dead* for its full comprehension. In this specific case, a television spectator who might be fascinated by the figure

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of the Governor can seize the opportunity to read the novels to find out more about the story behind this character, or, the other way round, a keen reader could start to follow the television series to find out what will happen to the character at the centre of the literary trilogy in another medium.

This brief analysis, leaving out the video game sector for the time being, highlights how the franchise is constantly being distributed over various entertainment sectors, each of which forms interesting narrative ties with the others. Specifically, if the fictional universe depicted in the comics and adapted to TV can be considered the original source, the Web series, novels and *Fear the Walking Dead* can be considered expansions, where an expansion "broadens the story, introducing parallel or companion narratives that often provide new perspectives, insight or clarity to the existing story" (Dowd et al. 23). The distinctive aspect of the brand created by Kirkman, however, lies in the fact that every sector into which this apocalyptic world has ventured can stand by itself perfectly well and is coherent in itself. All of the sectors maintain the familiar underlying atmosphere and highlight relationships with other ramifications. This makes the most loyal fans happy, but at the same time, it does not hamper the comprehension of readers or viewers approaching the apocalyptic world for the first time. Hence, the Web series can be viewed and fully understood without having seen the television series, and the novels can be read without having read the comics first. Each incarnation can stand alone, having its own narrative development that does not necessarily require knowledge of what has happened in the other sectors. This is precisely the key to the franchise's success, following Jenkins' theory of "worldbuilding," namely, creating a narrative universe spread out over various entertainment sectors, each time focusing on different characters moving in different spaces and times, but within the same fictional world. This is precisely what enables *The Walking Dead* as a whole to be read in the various media. As it spans out, it gives its users full freedom to serenely choose which door to enter and which one to then maybe exit during their exploration. Users do not have to explore various media to get a consistent view of the whole picture. The pieces of the puzzle refer to the same world in decomposition, one that, owing to its potential infinity, allows for a myriad of different stories that can each develop following a stand-alone narrative model. However, these pieces may potentially and effectively be linked together, reminding fans that they are still dealing with a creation that is part of the franchise, thanks to some common thematic characteristics, such as the aforementioned dubious morality concerning the choices of every character put in a corner.

Precisely thanks to the question of choices, it is now possible to introduce this essay's focus on the video game and the relationships between player and protagonist in the first season of *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Game Series*. (Henceforth, the abbreviation *TWD: SO* will be used in order to focus this analysis on season one of this episodic video game.) Once again under Kirkman's supervision, this time the creative team has taken the multi-award winning game in an original direction, coming up with a completely new basic plot and characters, except for one couple who are important in the comics—the young and courageous Glenn Rhee and the farmer Hershel Greene—who are already known. However, their role in the video game is marginal.

As stated before, choice excitement can subsist only when a user can interact explicitly with a fictional universe, which reacts to his/her choices and emphasizes his/her agency. The sense of agency in video games can be seen in three ways, correlated to what Ivan Fulco considers the three possible sides of a video game: the first is the "ludic side," where the user has to push buttons in order to perform quick actions and see immediate results, such as adopting the right strategy during a fight, within the limits of the game's mechanics. The second is the "narrative side," where the user is generally passive because he/she is seeing a cut-scene, a portion of narrative that generally interrupts the player's explicit interactivity. The third is a mix of the other two, which Fulco calls "ludic discourse," where the player has to take actions with repercussions not only on the progression of the play but also in the progression of the story (58-61). Nowadays, in the video game industry, the graphic adventure genre is one of the best for thinking about the relationship between players' actions/choices and their consequences in the virtual story-world, and an exemplary case study is *TWD: SO*.

In the specific case of this video game, developed by Telltale Games in 2012, it is possible to see some correlations with other branches of the franchise at various levels. First, it is drawn using cell-shading graphics, a technique that recalls the aesthetic style of the comic books. Second, it was originally divided

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into five episodes that were released on the digital market over various months in 2012, so it has the same structure of a serial product. Kevin Bruner, one of the co-founders of Telltale Games, has this to say about his company: "Telltale makes story games . . . they're very writing driven, so our games don't have mechanics like jumping or driving . . . it's more like a role playing in a narrative world." Dan Connors, the other co-founder, adds: "We always felt like story was the key to keep people engaged over five or six months, like comic books or television series" (Complex 01:00-04:30). Therefore, *TWD: SO* has various analogies with the common storytelling of a serial product, such as, for example, an increase in dramatic tension before the end of each episode, which tends to stimulate curiosity about what might happen next. Furthermore, the episodic progression, to be understood in this specific circumstance as "work in progress" in the months passing between the release of one part and the next, has allowed the game's developers to keep track of some choices/actions made by players and alter some successive parts. One example of this can be seen in episode four when the protagonist and his group find themselves face to face with a child who has been transformed into a zombie, and they have to decide what to do with him. This scene was defined along the way and is reminiscent of another experienced in episode three, of striking dramatic intensity for the public, especially owing to the agonising choice that has to be made in a few short seconds regarding the destiny of a suffering child (Klepek). As will be discussed more thoroughly very shortly, *TWD: SO* is based on an interesting narrative structure in which some of the choices/actions made have posthumous repercussions. What is more, these choices, which call into question the player's morality, often have no defined line between what can objectively be considered good or bad. Instead, they slot into a grey area where the player is never rewarded or penalised as a result of these complex choices but is nevertheless placed before different consequences all the same.

TWD: SO is set in Georgia, a state invaded by zombies, and it focuses on the adventure of Lee, a man with a criminal past, who meets Clementine, a little girl who has lost her parents. The two characters will meet some people during their journey, and the player, who controls Lee, will have to make some difficult choices in each episode, which could change some aspects of the overall plot and the relations with other characters, Clementine included. During Lee and Clementine's adventure through the state of Georgia, where they meet some survivors, the user gets to know them better, thanks to various moments where the action is interrupted to allow dialogues. In these sections, where the user can decide what Lee is going to say, he/she can learn almost everything about the characters' past, fears, thoughts and objectives for the future. Lee and Clementine can be defined as characters with a "three-dimensional personality," which means, according to Francesco Alinovi, that they have a complex psychology, which can be understood by their behaviour, personal backstory and thoughts (240-41).

As stated before, the player, controlling Lee, has to make some tough moral choices and immediate actions that can change some aspects of the story and relations with other survivors. This essay will return to this important point later because it is important first to define what kind of avatar Lee is. According to Bruno Fraschini, video games are based on four different types of digital prostheses: "transparent," where players do not control a character; "vehicle," where players take control of a conveyance; "mask," where players take control of a character without any type of psychological characterization, in order to fill it with their own emotions and thoughts; and "personified," where players take control of a character whose psychological traits can be more or less defined. A personified character is, in any case, a figure with some personal aspects that can emphasize the differences in personality between the character and the players (110-117). Lee, with his three-dimensional personality, can be classified as a personified prosthesis, because during the adventure it will be possible to know even more aspects of his personal life and because he could be seen by the player as an alter ego, which literally means "other by me," so a virtual person with some specific personality traits. Furthermore, when situations are collapsing around him, and Lee has to make some crucial decisions, the player has the freedom to choose the alternative that he/she considers better in his/her own mind, and does not have to follow the hypothetical thoughts of Lee. As a result, the connections between Lee and the players can change a great deal during the adventure. This conclusion has been demonstrated by a study conducted at North Carolina State University in 2015 with two participants: in this case, the players described different experiences and different choices, referring to an intense moment of the second episode, where Lee has to decide if it is the right choice to kill a man after he has a heart

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attack in a small room (with the risk of his transformation) to keep the group safe. The two players made different decisions: one imagined what he would do if he had really been there in Lee's place, emphasizing the protagonist as a mask prosthesis; the other spoke as Lee within the reality of the game, emphasizing the avatar as a personified prosthesis with his potential ability to discern (Bell, Kampe and Taylor).

There is a constant sense of choice excitement and agency because *TWD: SO* is an adventure graphic game based on interactive storytelling, a narrative structure where, in Crawford's words, "the user must be able to make dramatically interesting choices" (262-263). During the five episodes, the player often has to make difficult decisions in a very short time, which call upon his/her sense of responsibility and moral values, such as deciding how to divide small rations of food among the group, whom to save and whom to sacrifice, whether to kill a dying child, how to tell some ugly truths to Clementine, how to manage quarrels and other similar situations. In all of these cases, it is very important to note that the consequences affect the fates of the other characters, and not Lee directly. In 2000, a game designer wrote an important online article on the representation of dramatic moments and the meaning of death in video games. The author posited that

> [t]he main character . . . is a sort of prosthetic limb. . . . If he dies before the end of the game, it's irritating, frustrating perhaps, but we know in our hearts that this was not the way things were Supposed to Be, and we restart the game and resurrect the character without any real sense of loss. When another character dies . . . we can't be sure that it wasn't the action of a cruel fate; that character might have been destined to die no matter what we do about it. . . . In real life we love others differently from the way we love ourselves, precisely because they are not ourselves. In games we mourn the deaths of others differently from the way we mourn the death of ourselves, again, because they are not ourselves. . . . To make death meaningful in a computer game, it is not the player who must die, but the player's friends. (Adams)

These words perfectly describe the emotional involvement of players in *TWD: SO*. While they might suppose that Lee's death is due to their possible errors, and they know that this type of death is not definitive, because it only refers to the ludic side, they cannot expect the same thing with other characters, whose deaths, caused by the user's choices, are definitive because they refer to the ludic discourse. There are various types of correlations between Lee's/the player's actions and their consequences. In some cases, the results of Lee's/the player's actions are immediate, as in the first episode when the protagonist must choose who save between two people, Doug and Carley, knowing that there is not enough time to save them both, and safety for one means death for the other. Another example of immediate correlation appears in episode four during a massive zombie attack, when Lee has to risk his life to decide the fate of Ben, a young boy who betrayed the group before but suffered from a lot of guilty feelings. In other cases, choices do not seem to be very important at the moment, but they will have consequences later on. For example: in various sections, the selection of some phrases during dialogues and also the selection of some actions will change the other characters' opinions of Lee. However, a more important example comes during the final scene of episode two, when Lee and his group find a car full of food in a forest, and he has to decide whether to steal or leave the food. In this scene, whatever the player's decision, the rest of the group, convinced that the vehicle has been abandoned, will steal everything. That action will cause the owner's rage, who will kidnap Clementine and fight Lee in episode five, after a dialogue in which the owner will underline that the theft of that food caused the death of his family. This highlights not only a delayed consequence but also that some events are inevitable. In fact, the last type of correlation might be seen in those moments when an apparently hard decision will not change anything in the overall plot. An example is at the end of episode three, when Lee has to choose which of two lovers, Omid or Christa, to help to get on a train during an escape. If the player decides to help Omid, Christa will reach the train with her own forces, and vice versa, because Omid and Christa will be key characters in the narrative side of the final episode.

Hence, the structure of *TWD: SO* allows some modifications to be made that can change some, but not all, of the trajectories of the main story, because every single video game is based on various mechanics and correlated dynamics, which are translated into rules that players cannot modify with their interactions in the storytelling schema. This is not a limit, because in the whole video game industry not one product exists that gives total freedom to players. In the case of *TWD: SO*, players can modify some branches of the ludic discourse, but they can not do anything with regard to the progression of the narrative side, which

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is independent of their explicit interactivity. Some examples: if a player saves Carley's life in episode one, he/she can not do anything for her in episode three, where she will be killed by an insane woman after a quarrel; if a player saves Ben in episode four, he/she can not do anything for him in episode five, when he will be impaled by a piece of iron after a fall. A final and crucial example could be the game's epilogue, where players can not do anything to prevent Lee's death, after an inevitable zombie bite in episode four. This moment, where players have to decide if Clementine will shoot Lee or leave him to a slow death, is probably one of the saddest scenes in video gaming history, and it is inevitable because it is part of the narrative side and does not depend on the player's interactive actions. Jesper Juul argues for use of the term "fictional failure" to describe moments like this when a character dies regardless of the user's performance (27-29). In the specific case of *TWD: SO*, Lee dies for a narrative cause, namely, Clementine's safety. Hence, his fictional failure is not devoid of meaning or a source of rage for players, because it arrives after a long adventure where the users, in Lee's role, have experienced many moments in which to manifest their agency in the virtual world, changing the fate of many characters. In Adams' view, this must be very important in creating a sense of responsibility during the act of play.

In conclusion, this essay has explained that the franchise of *The Walking Dead* is an exemplary case of transmedia storytelling, where a single world invaded by zombies gives the opportunity to create various independent stories based on different characters who have to face a world in decadence, where their morality is often under pressure. This essay also described the specific case of the video game *TWD: SO*, which emphasizes the agency of players, thanks to many moments where they have to perform actions and make moral choices with correlated, sometimes futile consequences, and they must do so regardless of their empathy with Lee, because at all times the users feel a strong sense of responsibility to save not only Clementine but also the other characters. Hence, in *TWD: SO,* choice excitement is always present, and it underlines the curiosity to observe the consequences after a delicate choice, considering that there is not a clear line between good and evil. These moments recall the entire fictional universe created in 2003, where the distinction between a good or a bad action sometimes is very tiny. That distinction also depends on the personal point of view of the user, who can interact emotionally and functionally with a ramification of the transmedia scheme if he/she is reading comics/novels or watching a TV/Web series but can become an active part of it only with the video game. *TWD: SO* allows the player to live virtually in the universe ideated by Kirkman while exploring a parallel storyline that is partially determined by how the user decides to play. In fact, *TWD: SO* provides users with the effective autonomy to choose inside a flexible narrative schema, despite some moments that are inevitable, owing to the very nature of video games, based on users control in a virtual simulation that cannot be totally modified by them. The video game medium has grown up incredibly in the last few decades, not only in a technical sense but also in its ability to explore complex narratives based on morally complex themes. This maturation can potentially provide ways for transmedia producers to depict important ramifications inside larger narrative schemes and to stimulate moral engagement among users, thanks to explicit interactivity.

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