

# Game Narrative Review

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**GameTitle:** The Walking Dead Season 2

**Platform:**Microsoft Windows, OS X,PlayStation 3, Xbox 360,iOS, PlayStation Vita,Ouya, Android,PlayStation 4, Xbox One

**Genre:** Graphic Adventure

**ReleaseDate:** December 17, 2013

**Developer:** Telltale Games

**Publisher:** Telltale Games

**Game Writer/CreativeDirector/NarrativeDesigner:** Nick Breckon,  
Andrew Grant

## Overview

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*The Walking Dead* series is an episodic game set in the post-apocalyptic world within Robert Kirkman's comic series *The Walking Dead*. In this world, the dead gets reanimated into the undead, often referred to as walkers or lurkers, and characters band together in hopes of surviving. The player interacts with the world through the main character by choosing from a set of choices which can be actions or verbal responses.

Specifically in season two, the protagonist is a young girl named Clementine who acts as a moral compass for a group of survivors. By allowing players to choose how to respond in different situations, the game gives the player freedom to determine how to approach each conflict. In the game there are three types of choices given to the player: a response to a single person, a response to multiple characters, and a decision to save someone. A response to a single character aims to show how Clementine helps that character deal with internal conflicts. This is

usually given in the form of four different response styles, allowing the player the freedom to respond to different situations. Likewise, a response to multiple characters will prompt the player with four different choices, all of which aims to allow the player to choose how to best keep the group from tearing themselves apart. Finally, the game creates tension by putting two characters in danger but only allowing Clementine to choose one to save. This not only makes the game more engaging, but also brings Clementine and the survivors closer. By putting Clementine in the shoes of the survivors, the game forces the players to face the same conflicts that exist within each character.

## **Characters**

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### **Clementine**

The protagonist of this game. She is a mature young girl who survived a series of events in the first season. In this game, she acts like a moral compass of the group, guiding the members through their internal conflicts.

### **Luke**

A male in his mid-20's who usually assumes the role of the leader position. Although he is a compassionate person, he is capable of distancing himself from anyone who he feels may be a threat to the group.

### **Kenny**

A quick-tempered person who also showed up in the first season of the game. His frequent emotional outbursts causes conflicts with other group members and although his intentions are good, he often proposes plans that cause more harm than good. Such recklessness could come from his previous traumatic experience of losing his wife and child, making him eager to protect everyone without enough consideration.

### **Bonnie**

A sympathetic person who tends to trust people too much. She tries to see the best in other people even when they have demonstrated to be evil in nature. However, she is still able to see her own mistakes and correct them through the guidance of Clementine. These two characteristics are why she always seems on the fence about staying in a group or following a leader.

## **Rebecca**

Most of the time a gentle and considerate person. However, due to the pregnancy, she is very protective against strangers. Furthermore, since she had an affair with the group's previous leader, Carver, she could not be sure if the father of her child belongs to Carver or her husband. This makes her even more insecure and thus she hold strong enmity against unknown survivors.

## **Sarah**

An immature character who is sheltered by her father from knowing the truth of the post-apocalyptic world. This disjoints her from reality and makes her unable to accept her father's death.

## **Jane**

A resourceful survivor who seems to be a lone wolf. She would have been a caring person if it were not for the death of her younger sister. Her sister's death is partially due to Jane's failed attempt at convincing her to have the courage to escape the walkers. Such traumatic experience makes Jane unwilling to join other groups, fearing that the same thing could happen again.

## **Nick**

He is a relatively immature and emotional character. Such characteristics majorly come from the death of his mother, uncle, and from his envy of Luke's ability. Depressed by his inability, Nick sometimes tries to prove himself and thus make reckless moves, which eventually leads to failure and further depression.

## **Breakdown**

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On the surface, the Telltale Games series, *The Walking Dead*, seems to have a narrative unlike the traditional perception of the hero's journey. However upon closer inspection, the hero represents a group of survivors and the journey is the process of how they resolved their internal conflicts. The Walking Dead uses sophisticated narrative tools in order to tell the archetypal story of the hero's journey; psychological characterization (defined by nested masks), authentic conflicts and choices (personalities compared with the mentor's character diamond, defined as being trusting, pragmatic, mature, and selfless), and player immersion (player having to make tough choices as the Mentor). In order to analyze the problems the group faces, tools such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a character diamond and nested masks (defined by Andrew

Glassner, the author of *Interactive Storytelling: Techniques for 21st Century Fiction*) can be used to analyze how the complexity of the characters' personalities enriches the storyline. Glassner describes the nested masks (true self, conscience, self-image, world mask) as a hierarchy that is a useful tool when describing the personal issues a character faces. The character diamond is used when developing a personality for a character by describing four traits all of which relates back to the nested masks. The game's unique approach of telling the story about a hero overcoming adversity makes *The Walking Dead* series memorable. The use of nested masks creates complex characters, the mentor's character diamond helps define each character's internal conflicts and difficult choices the player has to make as the mentor create dramatic moments all of which serves to show what the hero must do before transcending to its true-self.

Glassner's nested masks are helpful when creating authentic characters because it allows players to relate any internal conflict to a combination of masks which symbolizes physical, emotional, mental and spiritual issues. The true-self mask represents the character's ultimate potential at the end of the journey, the conscience mask embodies social values, the self-image mask equates to the character's deepest desires and the world mask is expressed through physical actions. For example, Luke and Rebecca are characters who have trust issues and as a result, show a conflict between their conscience and self-image masks. The root of their suspicious nature comes from their previous encounter with an ex-group member, Carver, who forced them to join his dictator-style community. This causes Rebecca to be suspicious of any stranger she meets and causes Luke to easily detach himself from anyone whom he feels may be a threat- a reflection of their conscience mask. This can be seen when Rebecca first meets Clementine and is overcome with fear, causing her to vote to kill Clementine. It is also worth noting that Rebecca may actually bear Carver's child, making her worry that someone may find out. Likewise, we see Luke's conscience mask while carrying the injured Clementine, but proceeding to drop her after seeing her bite mark. These behaviors conflict with the characters' self-image mask which is illustrated by Rebecca's kind nature towards her friends and Luke's desire to trust others, expressed in several conversations with Clementine. On top of being trusting, it equally as important to be pragmatic, and the group members who struggle with this the most are Bonnie and Kenny who show conflicts between their self-image and conscience. Bonnie's self-image mask portrays her as someone who is attracted to male dominance and we can see this not only in *The Walking Dead Season 2* as Carver's follower, but also in a separate episode titled *400 Days* where she flirts with a married man. The conflict with her conscience

arises when she meets Clementine and attempts to justify the murders Carver had committed were just, but realizes in the process that Carver was evil all along. Similarly, Kenny's self-image and world masks are in conflict, with his self-image desiring to be the protector of the group and his world mask representing his reckless actions. His need to be the protector comes from the numerous times he has lost his loved ones; in season one it was his son Duck and his wife Katjaa and in season two it was his girlfriend Sarita and his friend Rebecca. As a result, he feels their lives are in danger and he comes up with plans which do more harm than good. An example of this is when he comes up with a plan to escape from the back of the van after being captured by Carver. He plans on getting out of his restraints and attacking Carver's people when they open the door despite everyone telling him it's not worth it. Clementine attempts to help him resolve his conflict whenever she advises him not to do anything rash, but whether he comes to terms with his problems is not known until the end of the series. In addition to being pragmatic, being selfless is another characteristic which is important for surviving as a group. Jane is a clear example of someone who lacks selflessness and as a result, causes the group to distrust her and assume she may leave at any moment. Although Jane keeps to herself a lot, she eventually opens up to Clementine, telling her that she had a sister who had lost the motivation to live. Jane's attempts at saving her sister became more difficult each day and eventually realized she had to leave her. This was the beginning of her conflict between her true-self (she needs companionship), and her self-image (she is safer alone). In fact, Jane suggests at one point that Sarah's lack of maturity is reminiscent of how her sister was like. Similar to Sarah, Nick suffers from immaturity and is conflicted between his self-image and his world mask. Due to his uncle's brutal honesty and often condescending approach with raising him, Nick lacks maturity and self-esteem, making him unable to handle stress in the best way. Being an ex-business partner with Luke, Nick looks up and desires to be just like Luke (his self-image mask), but more often than not, his actions put the group at risk (the world mask). For example, when Luke and Clementine decide to check out a bridge, Nick offers to tag along but is told by Luke to stay back. Feeling like Luke thinks he may be a liability, Nick secretly follows them from a distance. In an attempt to prove himself, he shoots a stranger who he thinks is threatening Luke while the stranger was offering them shelter instead. Similarly, Sarah's immaturity comes from how she was raised; her father shelters her from the post-apocalyptic world which forms her self-image. The consequence of this is not clear until Sarah's father dies from a lurker attack which causes her to be constantly paralyzed by fear. Her self-image mask represents her desire to go back to a life away from danger, but her mind is tested as the physical world tells her she can no longer be shielded by her father. The characters in *The Walking Dead* all deal with issues that are

relatable on a certain level with players. The use of nested masks helps achieve this and with this device, we can view how each character's psychological personality is constructed in a believable way.

The group faces numerous arguments during its journey and it is a result from its internal problems which leaves Clementine's character diamond (trusting, pragmatic mature and selfless) acting as a reference point for the different kinds of conflicts each character deals with.

- **Rebecca** - Her trust issues are put to the test when Clementine is first introduced to the group. After Luke and Pete saves Clementine from walkers, the group debates what to do with her after learning she has been bitten. Although some of the members believe her alibi that she was bitten by a dog, Rebecca follows her conscience and votes to kill Clementine. Rebecca's conscience also leads her to suspect that Clementine is a spy for Carver. It is not known that Rebecca's conflicts lie between her conscience and self-image until much later when Clementine saves the group from being discovered by Carver leading Rebecca to apologize to Clementine for not trusting her earlier.
- **Nick** - The first episode ends with Nick and Clementine being trapped in a shed. Nick's desire to be treated like a mature adult conflicts with the result of his actions, which is best shown after Nick finds whiskey bottles in the shed; Clementine's attempts at convincing Nick to leave the shed represents his self-image opposing the desires of his world mask to drink himself away from reality. Although he never resolves his issues, his death serves to show that in order for the group to survive, it has to rid itself of the weak.
- **Kenny** - In episode three, Carver captures the group which infuriates Kenny, causing him to make reckless plans to escape which conflicts with his fear of losing more loved ones. Kenny reaches his lowest point in the series after the group escapes from the Carver compound and sees his girlfriend Sarita die from a walker bite which brings him to an unstable emotional state. This causes the group to fear what he may do next. However, after Rebecca goes into labor and gives birth to AJ, Kenny seems to pull himself together to protect the newborn. Unfortunately after the death of Rebecca, Kenny snaps and once again becomes violently emotional. Interestingly, whether or not Kenny comes to terms with his demons is determined by the choices the player makes in

the final episode.

- **Sarah** - Despite being older than Clementine, Sarah struggles with accepting the reality of the world she is in. In the past, her father would shelter her from the violence of the world and let her live in a relatively carefree environment. However she gets her first taste of reality when Carver orders her father to “discipline her” by slapping her. Sarah’s inability to cope with her physical world is shown after witnessing the death of her father while trying to escape the Carver compound. This makes it incredibly difficult for her to let go of her self-image, which is her desire to live in a carefree world, and accept the world she is living in. Fear paralyzes Sarah and she even puts the group in danger while the group try to save her from walkers. The pressure becomes too much for Sarah when she eventually gets killed by walkers despite her friends’ attempts at helping her.
- **Jane** - Sarah’s battle between her desires and the physical world marks a striking resemblance to Jane’s experience with her sister. Jane’s sister loses the will to live and eventually Jane is unable to push her, which helps develop Jane’s self-image; it is better to go alone than to be pulled down by others. This contradicts her true-self’s desire for companionship and this shows whenever Jane opens up to Clementine. Events that put the group in risky situations confirms Jane’s belief in her self-image but her desire to stay with the group because of Clementine symbolizes her conflicting desires between surviving alone and having a partner. Just like Kenny, whether or not Jane gets to transcend into her true-self is determined by the player’s decisions in the final episode. Another instance which shows her desiring companionship is when she offers to have sex with Luke.
- **Luke** - His ability to trust the right people is tested through his initial encounters with Clementine, Kenny and finally Jane. Although we never see if Luke discovers his true-self before his death, his character implies that his true-self would exude traits worthy of a leader. However, we see him open up towards Jane when they decide to have sex with each other.
- **Bonnie** - Unlike Luke, Bonnie is more of a follower than a leader. Her self-image portrays her as someone who is gravitated towards male dominance. This is shown through her faith in Carver and when she reveals her interests in Luke. She questions

with her conscience when she learns from Clementine about the murders Carver committed. Her decision to betray Carver by escaping the compound symbolizes Bonnie resolving her conflicts and accepting that she needs a leader who is also not a murderer. If the player makes the correct choices, we see Bonnie leaving the group fearing that Kenny's emotional instability will get out of hand. This equates to Bonnie learning that she knows how to distinguish between who can be trusted and who is a risk to her survival.

The struggles the characters are faced with emphasizes the stark differences between their personalities and Clementine's character diamond. The story uses these obstacles to emphasize Clementine's role as the mentor and symbolize the characters' journey with accepting their problems.

The story dramatically concludes the hero's journey by forcing the player to make the tough decisions a mentor would have to make; specifically, which of the two group members to kill. Throughout the game, the player has been forced to make choices when a character's life is in danger, but none of those had as big of an impact on the storyline as the decisions in final moments of the game. Amongst the remaining survivors, Bonnie and Mike escape the group, fearing that Kenny's temper would eventually get out of control. At this point, only Clementine, Kenny, Jane and AJ remains in the group. During a freak snowstorm, the group separates, leaving Jane with AJ. However, when the survivors regroup, they see Jane has lost AJ. Enraged, Kenny attacks Jane despite Jane's attempts at explaining there was nothing she could do. There comes a point during the fight where Kenny has a knife held up to Jane's face and Clementine is holding a gun after which the player has to make a choice to not do anything (let Jane die) or shoot Kenny. Throughout the game, the choices the player makes only changes the dialogue in a minor way, but in this instance, the player's choice will determine how the game will end. For example, if you kill Kenny, the story branches further, allowing the player to either follow Jane or go alone and likewise if the player chooses to kill Jane. In both cases, if the player chooses to go alone, it represents that the hero never reaches its true-self thus requiring Clementine, the mentor, to leave to group. By choosing to continue the journey with Jane, the story takes Clementine, Jane and AJ back to the Carver compound where there is baby food for AJ. Upon their arrival, other survivors approach and beg for shelter, which branches the story yet again. By allowing the survivors into the compound, it represents Jane resolving her issues with her lack of selflessness thus transcending the hero into its true-self but by not choosing to do so

shows that the hero taking in Jane's unresolved problems and choosing not to help others. Likewise for Kenny, the story takes the group up north to a community of survivors Kenny had long been searching for. Unfortunately, the community does not have space for all of them which prompts Kenny to nobly suggest only letting Clementine and AJ into the community. By choosing to let Kenny leave, it allows Kenny to transcend into his true-self where he realizes that sometimes he has to let loved ones go if he wants to protect them. However choosing the opposite prevents Kenny to follow through with his intentions and encourages his bad habits. As the season comes to a close, the game changes direction and forces the player to make difficult decisions which dramatically alters the ending. This not only makes the game more fun, but also emphasizes the importance of the mentor in the hero's journey.

By showing the hero as a group of survivors, *The Walking Dead* sends a strong message of the importance of teamwork. The authentic personalities, and conflicts within the characters not only makes the mentor role more fun to play, but also shows how important Clementine is to the development of the hero. Clementine acts as the beacon of light for the group; aiding them throughout the multiple obstacles they face during their journey. Weaker characters who fail to resolve their issues face the consequences of death, but those who do survive move on for a chance to reach their full potential. Despite Clementine's attempts at helping group members, one thing is for certain: *The Walking Dead* teaches us that in order to fix a dysfunctional group, the individuals have to first fix themselves.

## **Strongest Element**

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The best part of *The Walking Dead Season 2* lies in its ending and how it signifies the transcendence of the whole group (just like how Odysseus losing all his men and ships symbolizes him reaching self-actualization). If the players choose to follow Jane, they can then choose to turn away the new survivors or accept them into the compound. If the player chooses the latter, one of the survivors gives Jane a big hug. Jane would gently respond to the hug signifying how Jane has accepted her true-self.

Alternatively, if the players choose to follow Kenny, he will nobly ask the guard at Wellington to take Clementine in and leave him alone outside. This also surprises the players, because they may expect to see him respond aggressively. Instead, he finally understands that sometimes he should just let his loved ones go.

There are many ways to handle endings in a game; some games choose to end with an epic boss fight, and some leave it open ended. In this game, however, it chooses to end the story by showing how the characters can change. It not only summarizes the story, but also emphasizes the image of the player being the mentor. Even when most of the members die, the player's efforts with guiding the group are not wasted. Instead, it makes the player feel their guidance throughout the story could actually change the characters' behaviors on a deeper level.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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One character who could have been developed better was Arvo. Arvo is a boy Clementine meets in while exploring for a safe place for the group. When they meet, Arvo carries a bag of medicine, and Jane suggests to rob him. At this point, players could choose to rob him or leave him alone. Unfortunately, these choices do not affect the endings at all. Regardless of the players' choices, Arvo will shoot Clementine in an attempt to escape. This behavior goes against the players' expectations, and it makes Arvo look like a mentally unstable and flat character. When the players notice this character is not mentally intact, they could hardly sympathize with him.

To improve, it may help if Arvo hesitate a little bit before shooting if the players did not rob him. Alternatively, Arvo could respond more calmly to Clementine in the group drinking scene instead of just shouting and crying, so players could know more backgrounds about him.

## **Highlight**

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The best moment in the game is when Walter forgives Nick and saves him out of the grasp of walkers. The survivors' group meet Walter along with Kenny. Before they meet, Nick has accidentally killed Walter's best friend, Matthew. Walter is a gentle and kind teacher. Even in this post-apocalyptic world, he believes in humanity. However, his belief is put to test when he finds out Matthew was killed by Nick. In this scene he confronts Nick, asking if he killed Matthew. If the players choose to defend him, Nick will confess to Walter about the accident. Then in a later scene when Nick is attacked by a bunch of walkers, Walter will help to shoot the walkers despite being mad at Nick.

It is a powerful scene because it shows that humanity still exists in the ruthless world, and this is what separates a human from a walker. The Walking Dead series could easily be made into a horror series, while the studio make it into something more. It is these moments of humanity that relax the player from the tension of zombie chase, and allow them to think deeper about the characters in the game.

## Critical Reception

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Much like the different choices in the game, the reviews of The Walking Dead seem to vary and often contradict each other. For episode one, some reviews state that players were left questioning where their decisions were leading to giving them a sense of excitement. Although this may be great for a seasoned player to the series, a new player may be left confused or worse, disinterested. Episodes two and three were the rated the best episodes of the series; it provokes strong emotional responses from players due to the weight each choice carries and the introduction of a menacing character. Episode three focused more on the group's development which was something some reviewers disliked as it stunned Clementine's growth and used her purely to help get the group out of sticky situations. Similarly to the first episode, episode four's reviews were mixed; some sites saying this episode was intriguing because it was clear that the story is building to something bigger, while other reviews felt conflicts were inconsequential and story progress was weak. Likewise for the final episode, some reviewers praised the writing as brilliant while others criticized the ending as ridiculous.

## Lessons

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### Turning the Expected Into Something New

As seen from the analysis of the game, *The Walking Dead* successfully tells the story of a hero's struggle with overcoming adversity by representing the hero as a group of survivors. As a result, the game manages to use the hero's journey, which some argue to be overused, and disguise it to tell a story in a more interesting way. This technique could be extrapolated and used in other ways, for example, representing the hero as a nation where the conflict exists between tribes or having the hero be depicted as a specific culture where traditional and modern mindsets act as constant opposing forces.

## **Playing As the Mentor**

In most games that adopt the hero's journey structure, the protagonist is usually the hero. However, by allowing the player to mentor the hero, it gives the players the freedom to make choices while allowing them to sympathize with other characters. The misconception is that as the mentor, the player will not develop an emotional connection to the hero because the player is already controlling a character who has reached enlightenment. On the contrary, *The Walking Dead* proves this to be incorrect; by imposing the conflicts characters have onto the mentor, it puts the responsibility of making tough decisions onto the player, creating conflicting desires within the player and creating an emotional bond between the mentor and the group members. This can be seen clearly whenever Clementine is faced with the tough choice to save one character's life while letting the other die. The freedom of choice is not only fun but also stresses the player to analyze the weight of each decision.

## **Various Types of Choices**

Allowing players to make different types of decisions can greatly alleviate the monotonous gameplay. The most common type of choices given to the player is the different ways to respond to another character. The type of responses can vary between compassionate, aggressive or even neutral and these represent the different approaches the hero can take while mentoring the group. Another type of choice allows the player to respond to multiple characters in the same manner. This serves as a way for the player to observe all the conflicts at once and allowing the player to either choose a side, disagree with everyone, or remain unbiased. The final type of decision is one where there is no right answer. This acts as a quandary which the player is faced with; often times deciding to save one of two group members. Despite the simplicity of the choice mechanics, these types of choices serve to allow a branch in the linear storyline, maintain the tension and enable the player to deeply explore other characters at the same time.

## **Summation**

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Playing as a mentor who is supposed to know all the right answers still, interestingly enough, conjures up the same conflicting feelings that any survivor would feel. Revisiting the game once more reinvigorated my love for the story while giving me a newfound appreciation for the effort put into the series. Clementine not only acts as the voice of reason for the group, but also allows me to play as the ideal survivor I would like to be. *The Walking Dead's* story is amazing and unquestionably deserves to be written about, but what enticed me the most to pick

this game was the questions it made me ask about myself. Obviously in the same situation we would all like to think as clearly as Clementine, but how many of us could do the same? Although the story makes it a point to include characters with disruptive personalities, it also paints a picture of how far humans would go in the face of desperation. It's these moments of reflection that this game evokes which makes this series so memorable.