

Game Narrative Review

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NAME: **NIKHIL KASHYAP**
SCHOOL: **CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY**
EMAIL: **nikhilkashyap1990@gmail.com**
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GAME TITLE: **THE WALKING DEAD**
PLATFORM: **PS3**
GENRE: **INTERACTIVE GRAPHIC ADVENTURE**
RELEASE DATE: **04-24-2016**
DEVELOPER: **TELLTALE GAMES**
PUBLISHER: **TELLTALE GAMES**
WRITERS: **SEAN VANAMAN, MARK DARIN, GARY WHITTA**

Overview

As the granddaddy of all apocalypses, ‘The Walking Dead’ charts the course of Lee Everett (protagonist/player), Clementine and their ragtag group of survivors in a zombie apocalyptic setting. The game opens with Lee in custody for undisclosed reasons being driven off to prison by an overly chatty sheriff. In a typical television styled opening scene, the narrative begins by posing an instant dramatic question - ‘Why has Lee been convicted?’ However, the scene is not constructed to take this question too seriously, leaving sufficient room to doubt Lee’s guilt and prevent early antagonization of the protagonist. The scene pokes and teases the question however, by mentioning Lee’s wife amidst a torrent of seemingly tertiary information being spouted by the sheriff. All the while, a larger dramatic question is looming in the background and emerges slowly through gameplay cues and environmental details such as the radio. The scene ends abruptly with the car crashing into a humanoid creature that appears only fleetingly, but just long enough to be recognized as not entirely human.

The rest of the narrative pans out in much the same way as the game’s masterfully constructed opening scene; by couching character and narrative progression in the context of the horror of the world. Lee narrowly survives the crash and is instantly confronted by a zombie revealing the terrible fate that has descended on the world. Lee manages to escape the approaching zombies by retreating into a house where he meets the second most important character in the narrative; a nine year old girl named Clementine. The context for the foundational relationship in the game is established amidst Lee discovering the probable death of Clementine’s parents through a walkie talkie. This instantly sets up Lee’s relationship with Clementine as a protector and mentor for the rest of the story, forcing the player to make narrative decisions either shielding Clementine from the world or forcing her to confront reality.

The relationships between most characters are similarly focused and established very early with circumstances creating immediacy. Through a series of events, the remaining members of the core group coalesce into an uneasy gang held together only by the need to survive. The world drives circumstances that surfaces character differences and the game forces the player to make decisions that impact not only Lee and Clementine, but the group as a whole. After establishing uneasy relationships, the party gratefully receives shelter from a family who turn out to be cannibals eating human meat to sustain themselves. Returning to their makeshift motel fortress they are forced to deal with disappearing supplies. Before the culprit can be identified, an onslaught of gangsters and 'walkers' (zombies) forces the player to abandon their *stronghold* and flee. Charting the entirety of the narrative would be out of the scope of this essay; suffice it to say that the core narrative element in the 'Walking Dead' is gritty survival with a focus on circumstances affecting a *group*, not just the protagonists; but not the entire world either.

Characters

- **LEE EVERETT** - 'The Walking Dead' establishes consequence based on player decisions masterfully, but unlike 'Dragon Age' and 'Skyrim', the game is very much Lee Everett's story; not *yours*. The main protagonist's character therefore is an interesting balance between leaving personality gaps for the player to fill in, and establishing a base set of characteristics. This balance is crucial as it directly impacts the mindset of the player. The base set of characteristics needs to be wide enough to :
 - Establish character goals that in turn translate into gameplay goals
 - Justify moments where player agency is limited to narrow set of options.

However, it also has to be narrow enough for the provision of meaningful choices where the player believes that he/she is making decisions that fit the character. The premise of The Walking Dead assists in mitigating this problem as many of the decisions to be made are morally ambiguous and under high pressure.

Lee's established character goal is to protect Clementine, and ensure she stands a fighting chance to survive in his absence. In addition, he is dependable, resourceful and is deeply empathetic towards his fellow party members. The gaps the player fills in are:

- a. How much of a leadership position he is willing to assume.
- b. His mode of communicating the world to Clementine - Does he shield her from the horror of everything unfolding or does he expose her to it?
- c. Individual vs Group - How much does he value individual characters when their goals are in conflict with the goals of the group?

His past is his biggest foe (other than the walkers) and the knowledge of being a murderer gives other characters power over him. In a sense the arc of his journey is exonerating himself from guilt by protecting Clementine.

- **CLEMENTINE** - Clementine is the single most powerful narrative device in establishing player goals, her welfare becoming the crux of many decisions. Her innocence as a nine year old girl adds to the dimension of considering her emotional growth, not just her physical wellbeing. Her journey is not so much a coming of age story. Instead it is her transition from depending on Lee, to instead him depending on her. This transition is coupled with the player's goals changing from 'How do I protect Clementine?' to instead 'How do I leverage Clementine?'
- **KENNY** - A family man through and through, Lee's relationship with Kenny is truly up to the player. His general likeability stems from his simple attitude and ability to call things out as they are. His primary goal is the protection of his family, prioritized well above the needs of the group or compassion. The occasional conflict between the two surfaces his stubbornness, volatility and short temper. His journey is a discovery of identity past the death of his family that manifests ultimately as a sacrifice of his own life to help Ben, a character who he treated badly throughout the course of the journey.
- **LILLY** - A natural leader, Lilly is steadfast, determined and capable. Her constant power struggle with Kenny is another driving source of player decisions. The death of her father at the hands of Kenny has a major impact on her. Her rationality tells her that it was a probable outcome regardless of Kenny's interference, but the circumstances around the event makes it difficult for her to grieve. Combined with the pressure she places on herself to lead the group, she becomes unhinged and collapses under the pressure.
- **BEN** - Ben is the ultimate goof up in a world that does not forgive mistakes. His unreliability constantly jeopardizes the safety of the group. Nevertheless his youth, sincerity and desire to help problematizes how the player perceives him.
- **MOLLY** - A weapon wielding badass, Molly is a breath of fresh air and pushes back against a world that grows constantly bleaker. The irony is that the only character that really mounts a fight against the world, does so because she has been defined by it, having lost her sister to the walkers. Nevertheless, underneath her hardened exterior there are hints of compassion and it is clear that she pushes away people only to protect herself.

Breakdown

The Walking Dead ultimately rests on the creating the *illusion* of consequence based on player decisions. The phrase 'illusion' is not being used being used pejoratively. It is a significant design challenge as no video game with branching decision trees can truly build in consequence based on every decision made. This illusion is created by forming a basis for players to be making decisions intelligibly and providing feedback mechanisms that convey consequence. This thought process is built into the creation of the story, its characters and gameplay. Each of these elements will be discussed piecemeal:

A. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Each episode of 'The Walking Dead' has a clear overarching narrative objective. The first episode establishes the scale and impact of the apocalypse, the main character's personalities and their relationships. The story events are accordingly structured with Lee being established as a Clementine's protector, leadership contention between Lilly and Kenny and a survival action sequence that culminates in deciding whether to put a bitten woman out of her misery. In the process, Lee and Clementine's starts to deepen with Lee discussing his family with her. However, minutes after this poignant moment, Carly reveals Lee's identity as a murderer and their relationship receives a setback. Lee is forced to explain the intent behind his actions. The fact that the explanation is against the backdrop of chaos and death that has descended upon the world makes this moment even more interesting. Throughout the course of the game, similar events occur wherein Lee, imperfect as he is to be a guardian, is forced to transition from simply a protector to someone who is helping Clementine reconcile the world.

Episode 2 begins with the world driving conflict between characters. The opening scene demonstrates a tonal shift of character's adapting to the world, with Lee hunting down a walker in pursuit of food and supplies. The introduction of a new character adds to the rising arc of obstacles faced by the group, amplifying the shortage of resource. This also presents a story opportunity to deepen conflict between Lilly and Kenny and in turn pose decision points to the player. In this manner, the story of The Walking Dead functions as a well-oiled machine with a clear chain of causality between events.

When the set of obstacles for the current story problem cannot rise any further, a solution is presented. A couple of passers offer a trade between food and supplies, going further to offer shelter. This signals a turning point to transition environment and resolve (in part) one story problem while introducing another. The next theme in Episode 2 is demonstrating how people are forming new ways of living. Here the game unveils the story problem over time rather than presenting it directly as before. This causes a gradual reduction of the emotional high via a rising arc of suspicion (crazy lady in the forest, locked room in the barn etc.) In the manner, the game transitions seamlessly in environment, theme and plot.

One area that the game struggles with is participation and disposal of secondary characters. Once their narrative function has been served, they simply hang around without really participating or adding any real value; until they are killed off, always at the hands of a walker.

B. BRANCHING NARRATIVE

Decision making is the primary game mechanic in 'The Walking Dead'. In given situations, the player is presented with a maximum of four options that he must typically pick from. There are three types of branching scenarios in the game, each serving specific narrative purposes:

- **Timed Decisions** - The most important mechanic in the entire game and what makes it uniquely different. The player is presented with options and must select one within the expiration of a countdown timer. The UI design for the timer consists of a shaded bar placed subtly underneath the options. It immediately draws the player's attention without distracting from the options and the action unfolding. Another aspect of the feature is that the scene continues with dialog as the meter is ticking down. This adds to the tension of the scene, keeps the player under pressure and makes the transition smooth once the option has been selected. On most occasions the game manages to nail the time for each decision giving the player some breathing space for important ones.
- **Untimed Decisions** - Certain decisions outside of cut scenes are untimed and are typically utilized when the game wants you to contemplate an action. The juxtaposition of timed and untimed decisions further prompts players to consider the latter critically. The game ensures untimed decisions are placed in scenarios where Lee could realistically spend time considering his options. For instance, a pressure encounter where Lee must choose to save one character over another will NEVER be an untimed decision.
- **Gameplay Dialog** - Conversations with characters during puzzle/click through sequences are constructed differently, wherein the player can *exhaust* the dialog options as opposed to *select* from them. These typically tend to serve as opportunities for exposition and character backstory that problematize future decisions the player will need to make.

The selection of dialog options is meaningful only when the player has a basis to *predict* the consequence of each option. Giving the player this basis allows him/her the ability to make brief evaluations of the different options at hand, instead of simply selecting by instinct or predisposition.

Example 1: Decisions representing distinct emotional reactions to a situation. This allows the player some authority over Lee's personality while trying to assess the best emotional response to solve the story problem at hand.

Example 2: Decisions that yield answers to different questions. This forces the player to ask himself what he wants to know about a character or situation, to solve the given story problem.

For the most part the game successfully provides a basis for selection. However certain options that deal with long term actions sometimes fail this test. For example, one question the game asks on multiple occasions is whether to stay at a motel or leave once an RV is fixed. The player doesn't really have any basis to evaluate the outcome of each. The fact that the decision also impacts Lee's relationship with Kenny and Lilly makes it even less satisfying. On the other end of the spectrum providing an incorrect basis for decision making can leave the player feeling dissatisfied. For example, I chose to save Doug over Carly when they were both confronted by walkers because Carly was holding a gun. Therefore, I thought that there was a possibility of saving them both, an option that was never on the table.

C. GAMEPLAY

The crux of gameplay is puzzle solving either in a point and click setting or a real time setting. Typically the puzzle/gameplay challenge is couched within the current story problem at hand. Example - How do we distract the walkers to steal the key to the pharmacy? Gameplay decisions the player makes, also serve narrative purposes. For example, being tasked with rationing food to the different characters forces the player to prioritize which characters they want in good standing.

- Real Time Gameplay - One seemingly insurmountable design challenge that manifests from the branching narrative system is the death of the protagonist not being a possible consequence. Naturally the game cannot proceed with a dead protagonist; something that the player is potentially aware of. This eliminates the ability for the game to present decisions that jeopardize the protagonist. However, death being such an important part of the universe, the game is forced to introduce this risk in gameplay. Gameplay includes real time elements where Lee's life is in jeopardy unless certain actions are performed on a time bound basis, failing which Lee dies and the game resets to the previous checkpoint. Example - Shoot the walkers in the right order to protect group and yourself. These sequences tend to be short and the game uses them sparingly to jolt the player into action, breaking out of potential point and click monotony.
- Point and Click - In these sequences the player is typically presented an environment with a set of interactable elements. Interacting with the right elements triggers progress and furthers the narrative state. The design challenge here is ensuring the player feels like he is *solving* the scene instead of randomly clicking through. Generally the game ensures the player has enough information to be making informed guesses on which elements to interact with. The game conveys what the player *needs* instead of simply stating what is to be done. However, there are several occasions where characters simply blurt out solutions to a problem. For example, Kenny stating outright that a screwdriver is needed to unlock the door in the barn. This could just as easily have been stated as a hint, such as 'something sharp' or 'a tool'. Even less subtle clues to the player is when Lee talks to himself stating what he needs to do.

Strongest Element

The strongest elements in the game are sub textual hints in the narrative, through which theme is communicated. The poignant moment of the group petting a cow in the barn for the first time serves as a reminder that humanity still exists in the world. On the opposite end of the spectrum, irony is a constant sub textual element connecting story events. In Episode 3, Kenny is broken when he is forced to kill his own son to prevent him from turning to a walker. This is viscerally reminiscent of the moment he so willingly kills Lilly's father because the situation demanded it. The player's mindset to this moment is primed brilliantly through Lee's dream of Clementine turning into a walker. Another sub textual element is moral ambiguity and the consistency of human behavior. For example, in Episode 2 the group escapes the barn disgusted at the idea of resorting to cannibalism to survive. Moments later they stumble upon an empty vehicle filled with supplies and are presented with the option of taking the supplies for themselves, effectively killing the group it belongs to should they still be alive.

Unsuccessful Element

Several decision points have the option of remaining silent. This option does work in certain scenarios, particularly sequences where the player does not wish to interrupt a conversation between two other characters or is waiting for more information to come forth before forming an opinion. For example, the sequence where Lilly is in meltdown mode trying to identify the culprit behind the disappearing supplies, there is legitimate value in remaining silent watching how the other characters react to assess if there is truth to Lilly's claims. Silence works when it is an *equally legitimate course of action*. However, for the most part the game treats it as a "none of the above" option the player can utilize when the other responses are not appealing. Generally speaking the most satisfying moments in the game are when it presents you with an option that was exactly what you intended. Therefore using silence as a last resort is mostly unsatisfying.

Highlight

The final thirty minutes of gameplay is contrasted by two phenomenal scenes, Lee conversing with Clementine's captor and Lee's death either through gunshot at the hands of Clementine or reanimation. I would pick the former as my favorite moment as the scene is the ultimate demonstration of ironical consequences and the consistency of human behavior. The scene presents the player with a mirror, asking him/her to reflect on whether the two men in the conversation are really all that different in their actions. The player is forced to stomach the ripple of a consequence made three episodes earlier when Lee decides to take the supplies from a seemingly abandoned vehicle. It turns out that the vehicle was not abandoned and the supplies that Lee decide to steal effectively killed the stranger's wife and daughter, sending him on a path for revenge. The moment truly drives home the horror of the world by demonstrating the impact of the suffocating necessity to simply survive; a horror that transcends the physical dangers the walkers pose.

Critical Reception

In his IGN review, Greg Miller awards a 9.3 rating for 'The Walking Dead' saying that it has "woven its way into popular culture". He praises the "choose your own adventure" aspect of the game and the fact that the game favours dialog selection over dialog exhaustion. He highlights the "decisions you're making in the moment have ripples that go throughout the entire adventure". He says that what makes the game beautiful is that even though the game has only one ending, it can be experienced in many ways. With regards to the writing he says it manages to be "funny, tense and scary" at the right moments. The only criticism that is levied in his article are the technical glitches that are disappointing but ultimately do not break the experience.

Bryan Ertmer from Gaming Trend echoes a similar note, saying that the fact that decisions do not affect the outcome of the game is for the best. He says the decisions the player makes affects not only the world, but the player himself, by giving him a sense of who he is in the world. The characters are described as bearing enough weight to make the player care for each and every one of them. A similar critique is levied on the tech, calling the game "unpolished"

Lessons

- **FOCUSED RELATIONSHIPS** - The player's ability to track relationships are an important part of making informed decisions. The game presents the context of character relationships with laser sharp focus and in their very first meetings. For example, in Episode 1 the player forced to side with either Lilly or Kenny on multiple occasions. In their very first meeting in the pharmacy the two begin a power struggle that is reinforced at every possible juncture.
- **STREAMLINING DECISION TREE** - One inevitable challenge that pops up in branching narratives is how to construct story when the plot state is dependent on the player. The game utilizes several techniques to streamline the decision tree and maintain the illusion of consequence :
 - Deferred Story Events - It is impossible to deliver a compelling narrative without knowing whether characters are alive or dead. However, death or the possibility of death is the biggest antagonist in the game. The game resolves this by simply delaying character death based on decisions. For example, the option of saving Carly or Doug is ultimately inconsequential as either will die at the hands of Lilly one episode later.
 - Manifestation of Consequence - The outcome of a decision does not have to match the exact manner in which the question was presented. For example, there comes a point where the player needs to choose between Shawn and Duck in a walker attack. Regardless of who the player picks, Shawn is killed. Instead the consequence manifests in the character's *reactions* to the player's choice, and their relationship with Lee being affected differently.

- **FAVOR EXPLICIT OVER NUANCED FEEDBACK** - An interesting mechanic the game employs on occasion is explicit feedback through flashing text on the screen. Example: “Clementine will remember that”. This is clearly a manifestation of a design concern of communicating to the player how their decisions are affecting game/narrative state. While the requirement is understandable, it still feels slightly lazy. In an ideal world, all consequence is communicated visually or within the narrative. Nevertheless this runs the risk of a player who hasn’t fully comprehended the significance of his actions. Overall, it seems like a forgivable sin seeing that the crux of the game is giving players informed agency over the narrative.
- **MEANINGFUL PLAYER CHOICE** - Branching narratives provide meaningful player choice only when there exists a basis to *predict* the consequence of each option. This is also an opportunity to allow the player to project into a character rather than roleplay. All the information being fed to the player to make decisions must be scrutinized for validity to avoid players feeling cheated based on inaccurate feedback. Example - As stated previously in the article, the decision to save Carly and Doug is affected by the former holding a gun.
- **MEANINGFUL POINT AND CLICK MECHANICS** - Ensure that the game conveys what the player *needs* instead of simply stating what is to be done. This will create scenarios where player are making educated guesses on the items that needed to be clicked through.

Summation

Critics of ‘The Walking Dead’ sometimes belittle the experience as ‘interactive fiction’ for its lack of gameplay mechanics. While the label of ‘interactive fiction’ or ‘game’ is irrelevant, ‘The Walking Dead’ faces all the design challenges that a traditional game does in utilizing agency to deliver a unique experience. The game is responsible for revitalizing adventure point and click games, which had been in decline since the mid-1990s. In conclusion, the game is the perhaps a crowning achievement in narrative games. In an industry where story by necessity takes a back seat to other disciplines, Telltale Games places narrative in the driving seat and crafts an experience around it.