

Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game

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Abstract

Just as books and films about traumatic events have become part of Western popular culture, so the theme of trauma and its accompanying tropes have been seeping into video games over the last two decades. In spite of the discernible trauma trend within video games, however, and the potential they exhibit for representing trauma in new ways, they have received very little critical notice from trauma theorists. In this article, we argue that a trauma-theoretical study of games has much to offer our understanding of the ways that trauma can be represented, in addition to giving game studies scholars further insight into how games manage to elicit such strong emotions and difficult ethical quandaries in players. We demonstrate this by performing a close reading of one recent and much-discussed game, *The Walking Dead: Season One*, analyzing how it incorporates psychological trauma in terms of inter(re)activity, empathy, and complicity.

Keywords

trauma studies, empathy, complicity, interactivity, the walking dead

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Trauma and Video Games

In *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Videogames*, Jesper Juul recalls that in the early 2000s, the incorporation of distressing subject matter into games seemed inconceivable to him: “As fiction theorist Marie-Laure Ryan put it, who would want to play *Anna Karenina*, the video game? Who would want to spend hours playing in order to successfully throw the protagonist under a train?” (p. 27). However, in the same text, Juul admits that by 2013, game designers had proved him wrong. As games such as *Dear Esther* (2012) and *Papers, Please* (2013) demonstrate, games with traumatic themes and tragic endings, even those which include the suicide of the protagonist, can find critical and commercial success. Indeed, the last few years have seen the release of big-budget video games that acknowledge trauma by using it as a trope or characterization method (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, 2011, for instance), allow the player to step into the shoes of a traumatized character (*Trauma*, 2011 and *Max Payne*, 2001), incorporate the structure and aesthetics of trauma into the mechanics of play (*Limbo*, 2011 and *Braid*, 2009), or put the player in traumatizing situations and require them to make near-impossible choices (*Spec Ops: The Line*, 2012 and *Lone Survivor*, 2012). The designers of these games demonstrate a level of engagement with trauma on par with that of their counterparts in more established media such as books, films, and photography.

In the same way that creators in other fields have exploited the particular characteristics of their respective media in order to achieve unique rhetorical effects, game developers use the specific qualities and capabilities of games in order to represent the symptomatology and cultural significance of psychological trauma in their own way. This involves harnessing the mechanical (ludic) and aesthetic (narratological and audiovisual) qualities of games together in order to produce an experience that must be analyzed holistically, as something greater than the sum of its parts. Indeed, at the beginning of 2014, Brendan Keogh (2014) hammered the final nails in the coffin of the narratology/ludology debate with his impassioned plea for video game critics to consider “mechanics and audiovisuals [as] symbiotic, a singular and irreducible component of videogame play.” Similarly, in a recent attempt to define the genre of “art games” (a category in which many of the games mentioned previously could easily be included), Sharp (2012) argues that the “experiential and formal characteristics of videogames—rules, game mechanics, goals, etc.” are just as important as their aesthetic trappings in terms of how they constitute an “expressive form,” much as the texture of brush strokes contributes to the overall meaning of a painting (p. 28). Sharp’s assertion is corroborated by Bogost’s (2007) concept of “procedural rhetoric”—a mode of persuasive expression founded on the formal capabilities of computers to manipulate symbols according to rules, programs, procedures, and user input. As these theorists show, game developers have a considerable toolkit at their disposal when it comes to expressing difficult and complex themes.

In spite of the discernible trauma trend within video games, however, and the potential they exhibit for representing trauma in new and interesting ways, they have

as yet received very little critical notice from trauma theorists. At the same time, valuable recent work by Juul (2013, *The Art of Failure*) and Miguel Sicart (*The Ethics of Computer Games*, 2009 and *Beyond Choices*, 2013) to describe the emotional, tragic, and ethical features of video game play has not made a connection with the substantial theoretical apparatus created by trauma studies in order to examine similar elements within literature and film. It is this blind spot in games and trauma studies that we aim to address. We argue that games work with the concept of psychological trauma in ways that are unprecedented in other media. As such, a trauma-theoretical study of games has much to offer our understanding of the ways that trauma can be represented, in addition to giving game studies scholars further insight into how games manage to elicit such strong emotions and difficult ethical quandaries in players. In this essay, we demonstrate this by performing a close reading of one recent and much-discussed game, *The Walking Dead: Season One* (2012), analyzing how it incorporates psychological trauma mechanically and aesthetically, in ways that differ from or resonate with attempts to represent trauma in more traditional media. For this close reading to work, one must first establish what it is that differentiates games from narrative forms such as films and books. For the purposes of our analysis, there are three main, interlinked facets of games that warrant discussion: inter(re)activity, the way they create empathy, and how they make the player complicit with in-game events. As we will show, these concepts are just as debated in other media studies as they are in game studies, although each field uses the terms in rather different ways.

Inter(re)activity

For better or worse, the interactivity of games is probably the most commonly referenced characteristic marking them out as different from other media. In a six-part definition of games, Juul (2003) includes “player effort,” which is “another way of stating that games are challenging, or that games contain a conflict, or that games are ‘interactive’” (“The Game, the Player, the World”).¹ Simply put, games are commonly understood to require active engagement from an external agent (player) in order to function, since they gate their content behind manual skill- and/or puzzle-based challenges that ask the player to perform significant actions in order to progress through them. This is typically contrasted to films, which one can simply sit and watch, or books, which require the reader to merely turn a page. However, as video games have become increasingly heterogeneous over the last few decades, and as other media forms have come to adopt or at least tinker with certain traditionally game-like elements in the name of “gamification,” the ontological usefulness of the term “interactive” has waned. Much like the term “trauma,” it tends to be applied in a scattershot way which weakens its impact and blurs its meaning. As early as 2002, Newman argued that its application “in a variety of contexts as qualitatively and experientially diverse as video-games and DVD scene access menus has rendered it meaningless and of use only to

the marketer.” Given how massively different games can be from one another in terms of their scope, style, genre, and mechanics, it is inevitable that some of them can be labeled as more or less interactive than others, if we are to measure interactivity by how much player effort is necessary for the game to work.

To complicate matters further, it has also been argued that the act of reading a book or watching a film already constitutes an interactive process that is not dissimilar from interacting with a game, since the reader/viewer must actively interpret the text in order to make sense of it. In his discussion of *Dear Esther* (2012), a game that encourages the player to imaginatively piece story fragments together, Rouse (2012) quotes Judge Richard Posner, who suggests:

Maybe video games are different. They are, after all, interactive. But this point is superficial, in fact erroneous. All literature (here broadly defined to include movies, television, and the other photographic media, and popular as well as highbrow literature) is interactive; the better it is, the more interactive. Literature when it is successful draws the reader into the story, makes him [*sic*] identify with the characters, invites him to judge them and quarrel with them, to experience their joys and sufferings as the reader's own.

Rouse uses this quotation as a jumping-off point to suggest that “[w]e should extend our notion of interactivity to warmly embrace any experience requiring interpretation and construction between audience and creator.” If we accept this, then it becomes clear that another term is needed when games are discussed in particular. Happily, Rouse provides one. For him, what marks games as truly different is not interactivity but *reactivity*—“the procedural *responses* characteristic of the majority of video games” (emphasis added). This has to do with the manipulability of the game world and the way it changes in response to input from the user. The texts of novels are static, and the circumstances and stories that take place within them cannot be affected by the reader. They can be *interpreted* differently, and the cultural status of the text is subject to change over time, but the individual reader proceeding through a novel is powerless to affect how it turns out, beyond the questionable expedient of skipping chapters or prematurely putting down a book in order to avert a sad ending. Games, on the other hand, do allow the player varying measures of agency within the fictional world. Juul's (2003) definition agrees with this: “It is a part of the rules of most games [. . .] that the players' actions can influence the game state and game outcome” (“The Game, the Player, the World”). The game reacts to the player's input both on a moment-to-moment basis (e.g., the protagonist immediately responds to the player commanding them to move left or right) and in the long term. The latter is evidenced most simply with a Game Over and/or a high score screen that reflects the player's performance (as in *Pac-Man*, 1980), or, at the other end of the scale of complexity, with repercussions that only become apparent further down the line, as other paths through the game are opened or blocked off due to the player's earlier decisions (as in

Planescape: Torment, 1999 or *Long Live the Queen*, 2012). The player's strategy can then be modified in response, with the game offering a different set of outcomes based on their renewed efforts. That is, both player and game react to one another in a feedback loop. In order to acknowledge the fact that during gameplay, it is not only the game that reacts to the player but also the player who reacts to the game, we amalgamate interactivity and reactivity into a third term: interreactivity. This is contrasted with the more one-sided form of interactivity experienced by readers interpreting a work of literature.

It is important to note that this concept of interreactivity only applies when the player is actually *in control* of the game, and this occurs less often than many game critics suppose. As Newman (2002) points out, the experience of playing a game involves many moments during which the player is not actually capable of influencing the game state: unskippable scripted or prerecorded cutscenes, for instance, or loading screens. Newman describes these as drawing the player into what he calls "off-line" engagement, since they are still attentive to the game, but in a more passive way than when they are "on-line"—that is, when they are taking significant action within the game world.² Newman also cautions that on-line and off-line ought not to be thought of as a binary opposition but as a continuum across which the player moves back and forth over the course of play. Some moments of the game are more interreactive than others, while still being largely nonmanipulable by the player: quick-time events, for example, that allow the player to intervene in cutscenes in very specific, scripted ways by inputting a predetermined sequence of button presses. Conversely, some moments that are supposed to afford the player a high level of agency are essentially no more than glorified cutscenes. It is not surprising that when discussing games, game studies theorists tend to focus on highly interreactive on-line segments, while sidelining sections of the game that allow the player less agency by reacting to their actions in a lesser way, if at all. Without taking account of these less interactive, and frequently more "filmic" sequences, however, one can only ever incompletely describe how one experiences a game, since they are no less part of the medium—a "messy [hybrid] of a variety of previous media forms" (Keogh, 2014)—than the more celebrated and "game-like" sections which tax the player's skill and demand the entirety of their attention. As such, when analyzing games, it is important for one to take account of both on-line and off-line sections, as well as the rhetorical effects that can be achieved by games that alternate between these two states of engagement in order to represent some of the symptomatology of trauma (on which more later).

Empathy

The second important difference between games and "traditional" media is in how they create empathy in the player and the nature and extent of this empathy. Of course, empathy is by no means exclusive to games. Indeed, literature in general, and trauma literature in particular, has a long history with the concept of empathy. In

their boldly titled study “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind,” Kidd and Castano (2013) contend that “literary fiction [. . .] uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters’ subjective experiences,” thereby encouraging the reader to practice empathy.³ Interestingly, Kidd and Castano also draw on Roland Barthes’s distinction between “readerly” and “writerly” fiction to suggest that it is *only* literary—that is, writerly—fiction that has the capacity to do this, since literary texts “engage their readers creatively” by presenting them with “complicated individuals whose inner lives are rarely easily discerned but warrant exploration.” Readers of literature are therefore encouraged to fill in gaps in the narrative and work hard to interpret characters’ feelings and motivations, as opposed to readers of popular fiction, which instead tends to “portray the world and characters as internally consistent and predictable” and requires little creative engagement. After a series of five experiments in which test subjects were asked to read “literary” texts, popular fiction texts, or no texts at all and were then tasked with examining pictures of people’s faces in order to determine their emotional state (the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test), Kidd and Castano found that subjects’ success rates were consistently higher after reading so-called literary texts, in contrast to nonfiction or popular fiction, which had little to no effect. Though the researchers conclude that the findings support their hypothesis “that reading literary fiction enhances ToM,” the experiment has several drawbacks. Kidd and Castano not only struggle with the age-old difficulty of identifying what counts as “literature” in the first place (they settle on using texts by “award-winning or canonical writers,” thereby letting others make the decision for them), they also admit that more tests are needed and that their work marks “only one step toward understanding the impact of our interactions with fiction.” Nevertheless, their study does go some way toward validating the many assertions by proponents of literature that a good proportion of its value lies in its capacity to foster empathy and a greater understanding of other cultures and human beings.

Unsurprisingly, empathy is a hot topic in game studies discourse as well, although it tends to be theorized in very divergent ways. One school of thought pulls a definition of empathy from the cognitive sciences and/or analyses of literature and older media and attempts to map it onto games. Another looks empirically at the moment-to-moment experience of playing games and questions whether the player actually does feel any empathy for characters, and even whether game characters can be said to exist at all in any traditional sense of the word. These two approaches may seem at odds with one another, since the latter contradicts the former. However, if one considers games in all of their complexity as syntheses of previous media forms (literature, film, music, and performance), with interactivity thrown into the mix as well, these two theories of empathy sit more comfortably side by side, in the sense that each of them explains a different mode of engaging with games, between which the player shifts time and again over the course of play. In other words, the nature of the empathy (or lack thereof) that the player feels for characters within the game world—and which of the above two models of empathy

is most applicable—varies depending on whereabouts the player’s current mode of engagement is situated in Newman’s off-line and on-line continuum.

Representing the first school of thought, which correlates with off-line engagement, Belman and Flanagan (2010) draw on psychoanalysis, conflict resolution studies, and social science in order to construct a definition of empathy that can be applied to game design. In line with current research, they differentiate between cognitive and emotional empathy. The former “refers to the experience of intentionally taking another person’s point of view. For example, an American executive trying to understand how her Chinese business partners will perceive a negotiating tactic is engaging in cognitive empathy. Doing this successfully will likely require the executive to become somewhat familiar with her partners’ personal and cultural norms, values, and beliefs” (p. 6). Cognitive empathy requires that one consciously and rationally attempt to put oneself in another’s shoes, which can be a difficult exercise, requiring real intellectual effort and/or research. Emotional empathy, by contrast, describes a more visceral, instinctual reaction to the feelings of others. It can be subdivided into two further types, namely, parallel and reactive empathy. The former is “roughly equivalent to the lay understanding of empathy as the vicarious experiencing of another’s emotional state” (e.g., feeling embarrassed oneself on witnessing another’s embarrassment). The latter, on the other hand, “describes an emotional response that is unlike what the other person is experiencing” (p. 6) (e.g., feeling pity for the one who is embarrassed). In general, emotional empathy can be described as more passive than cognitive empathy, since it suggests that one does not actively attempt to understand the other, but instead responds to the other’s emotions subconsciously, either by mirroring them or by experiencing consequent but different emotions. Flanagan and Belman go on to propose the concept of “empathetic play,” a state in which players are encouraged to actively “infer the thoughts and feelings of people or groups represented in the game (cognitive empathy), and/or [...] prepare themselves for an emotional response, for example by looking at similarities between themselves and characters in the game (emotional empathy)” (p. 10).

This explanation of empathy, however, does not take satisfactory account of what games do in particular compared to other media. As helpful as it is, Flanagan and Belman’s distinction between cognitive and emotional empathy could easily be mapped onto more passively consumed media, such as films, since that is more or less where their ideas are drawn from anyway. Watching a film, the viewer also connects to the characters by vicariously experiencing events *through* them, either as the result of conscious effort or an unconscious emotional reaction. The same is essentially true for book reading, too, although in this case, the reader must also do the work of picturing what characters and scenes look like. It is for these reasons that this school of thought regarding empathy can be said to describe off-line engagement with games, since it is during periods of off-line engagement—when the player cannot intervene—that games are most similar to passive visual media. This is not to malign the work of those who draw on these ideas in analyzing

games; however, any theoretical conception of empathy that relies *only* on this model can only ever tell half the story. No matter how incisive that half of the story may be, it ought to be supplemented by a description of what happens to empathy when the player is on-line.

According to Newman (2002), when the player is on-line, that is, when they are actually in control of the action taking place in the game world, they not only stop empathizing with characters, but the characters as such cease to exist entirely, at least as far as the player is concerned. For Newman, “[t]he primary-player-character relationship is one of vehicular embodiment.” Newman suggests that while the player is most invested and involved in the action on-screen—when the game is as interactive as possible and the feedback loop between player and game at its most complete—what they focus on the most is not the identity of the character(s) under their control, but the capabilities and performance of the character(s) which allows them to inhabit and progress through the game world. It is in this sense that the character no longer exists, since all of their representational traits are stripped away while the player focuses on achieving their goals. Newman suggests that at least outside of marketing campaigns for the *Tomb Raider* games, it does not matter one whit that their protagonist, Lara Croft, is a young, attractive, British woman in hot pants. While the player is *playing* the game rather than perusing its paratextual elements (the manual, adverts, etc.) or attending to its off-line sections (cutscenes), the important thing is what Lara can *do*, not who she *is*. As an extension of this, games as played are characterized by how they feel, not what they are ostensibly “about,” since this is not on the player’s mind when they are fully engaged.

In “Making Gamers Cry: Mirror Neurons and Embodied Interaction with Game Sound,” Collins (2011) adopts a similar tack when she argues that players relate with characters

through the extended, technological body. Scientific evidence shows that the areas of the brain related to sensorimotor activity will treat a tool such as a game controller as an extension of the hand or arm. With this view of tools, it is easy to conceive of the game controller as becoming an extension of the body—we do not view the controller as part of our body, but we can experience the virtual world through the controller. In other words, we may extend our bodily representation without altering our body schema.

From here, it is a small step for Collins to view game characters in a similar way to game controllers, since “[t]he character is the tool through which we experience the virtual world—through which we bump into walls, get shot, dig holes and talk to other characters.” Though Collins does not go quite as far as Newman in arguing that empathy ceases to exist entirely at certain moments of play, she says more or less the same thing by pointing out how players objectify and instrumentalize characters in order to get things done. No matter how much one might anthropomorphize it and make believe that it has a personality of its own, it is hard to imagine feeling much empathy for a screwdriver while one is using it to put up shelves.

This also explains why players have no problems in controlling nonhuman characters or even nonsentient objects.

When one puts these two ideas about empathy together—cognitive/emotional off-line, and zero empathy, vehicular embodiment on-line—they appear less contradictory, even complementary. What distinguishes games from other media in terms of how they evoke empathy is not only that the on-line form of (non-)empathy exists in the first place, but that the player switches between that and the more traditional, off-line form of empathy time and again over the course of the game, often many times in the space of a few minutes. If games are an amalgamation of on-line and off-line sequences, then when we discuss the type of empathy they foster, we refer to it as the sum of a complex interaction between “traditional” empathic response (off-line) and characterless, on-line engagement. Since there are no characters with whom the on-line player might identify, one could also suggest (as indeed Newman does) that the player identifies instead with the entire space of the game world, using the controller and/or instrumentalized protagonist in order to become telepresent in the game, and therefore part of the interreactive feedback loop described previously. As the next section of this essay demonstrates, it is games’ ability to involve the player in the game world through interreactivity, and the type of empathy and/or identification that they foster, which makes them particularly suited to exploring issues of guilt and complicity.

Complicity

The third aspect of games mentioned previously—complicity—is founded on a combination of interreactivity and empathy. Simply put, due to the unique ways in which players engage with them, games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events. The interreactivity of the game fosters the sense that players have a responsibility for what happens on-screen, since they often have direct control over on-screen events and a vested interest in keeping the protagonist alive; after all, they are the vehicle or tool that permits the player to extend their bodily representation into the game world. Because of interreactivity, when something bad happens to a game character (e.g., death), in most cases, it is because of something the player has done or failed to do. By playing a game—by putting their hands on the controller and becoming part of the player/game feedback loop—players become complicit with the events portrayed therein. If Mario falls to his death, it is because of the player’s malign intentions or their lack of skill; if he succeeds, it is because the player has navigated him through the game’s levels adroitly. As the player is directly responsible for the outcome of the game and the success or failure of the protagonist(s), it is possible for games to exploit empathy in order to make the player to do things which they know are wrong from the beginning, but which they must go through with in order to successfully complete the game; to perform actions which they believe to be morally right, but which are later shown to be wrong; or to temporarily but completely

sideline morality in pursuit of their goals and then face the stomach-churning realization afterward of what they have done. In many cases, these rhetorical tricks rely on carefully situating the player in various places on the on-line/off-line continuum, making (empathy for) characters vanish and reappear where appropriate.

To illustrate this: the player might be told that they must kill an innocent character in order to complete the game. This will happen in a cutscene, or a briefing screen, or be related as a pop-up at some period of relative calm. At the point they are told of what they must do, the player is engaging with the game off-line. In-game characters are fully “present” to the player as potential anchor points for empathy. As such, they might well question the morality of what the game is asking them to do, since they care about the characters at this point. They then face the choice of either turning the game off (and wasting the money they spent on it, in addition to sacrificing their chance of finding out how the story ends) or committing the act anyway and becoming complicit in the protagonist’s crime (though the player might contest that because they were not offered a choice to continue the game by *not* committing murder, they cannot be held truly responsible for their actions, since they were only following orders). What is important to note is that while the player is virtually carrying out the murderous act—while they are on-line, pushing buttons, making things happen—empathy is suspended. Admittedly, since on-line/off-line is a spectrum, and not a binary, it is possible that the player experiences some level of empathy for nonplayer characters *at the same time* as they view them as manipulable game pieces or obstacles, leading to difficult ethical conflicts (especially in games that go out of their way to humanize nonplayer characters).⁴ Usually, though the player’s primary concern during fully on-line engagement, as we mentioned previously, is with how the game *feels*, what they must do to succeed, and what abilities they are granted based on the character under their control. The game might then choose to depict the player-character feeling remorse in cutscenes or dialogue (i.e., off-line) in order to encourage the player to do the same, calling into question the acts they performed during preceding bouts of amoral, on-line engagement.

As the next part of this essay shows, through the combination of these three affordances—interactivity, empathy, and complicity—games are well equipped to draw the player in, to make them feel for characters who may be traumatized, and to make them feel responsible for the traumatic events portrayed within.

The Walking Dead

The Walking Dead is an ongoing point-and-click adventure game series, developed and published by Telltale Games from 2012 onward. The game’s setting and art style are based on the comic book series of the same name, written by Robert Kirkman and illustrated by Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard, which has also inspired a popular television series, once again titled *The Walking Dead*. Like the television show, *The Walking Dead* game is currently being released serially as a collection

of episodes, organized into seasons. The first season of the game consists of five episodes, plus one “special” episode released later. Each episode takes about two or three hours to play through, depending on the player’s skill, and how much time they devote to exploring the game world and taking in background detail. As such, a whole season takes roughly the same amount of time to play through as it takes to watch a season of a television show. *The Walking Dead: Season Two* comprises the same number of episodes as the first season.⁵ Unless otherwise specified, we will mostly discuss the five nonspecial episodes of *Season One*, since they tell a more or less self-contained story that can be analyzed independently.

The Walking Dead: Season One (2012) is set in present-day Georgia, USA, which, as the game’s title suggests, is in the process of being overrun by zombies of indeterminate origin.⁶ The player takes control of Lee Everett, a thirtysomething former history professor who must weather the zombie apocalypse by banding together and cooperating with other survivors in order to secure food and shelter. As one might expect, the game contains action scenes, but these are not the primary focus. For the most part, gameplay revolves around managing interpersonal relationships and mediating conflicts, solving environment-based puzzles, making difficult decisions regarding survival (whom to take and whom to leave behind on scavenging missions, who should receive food rations, and so on), and trying to preserve the lives of as many of the other survivors as possible. In much of the best zombie-themed media (e.g., *The Walking Dead* TV series, George A. Romero’s *Dead* series, Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*), the undead are not necessarily the primary antagonists but can instead function as a catalyst for conflicts between the survivors, thus exposing the barbarism of human beings toward one another when they are put in life-threatening situations. *The Walking Dead* game follows in this tradition: much of its drama hinges not on the threat of death from the so-called walkers (zombies) but on the tension caused by the survivors’ clashing personalities and goals, which the omnipresent walkers exacerbate. On top of this, near the very beginning of the first episode, Lee meets Clementine (Clem for short), an 8-year-old girl whose parents are missing and later revealed to be (un)dead. After the two escape from Clem’s family home and her zombified babysitter, Lee dedicates himself to looking after Clementine, becoming a father figure toward her for the rest of the first season. This adds an extra layer of complexity to interpersonal negotiations, as the player must continually weigh the individual (and very different) needs of Lee and Clementine against the needs of the group.

In spite of the game’s cartoony visual style (or perhaps because of it, since the comic book aesthetic arguably allows it to get away with more), it does not shy away from depicting mutilation and gore. More importantly for this essay, it also pulls no punches when it comes to displaying the psychological reactions of the characters to the traumatizing situations in which they find themselves. In this section, we will demonstrate how the three concepts discussed previously—interactivity, empathy, and complicity—are used by *The Walking Dead* in order to (1) draw the player into the game by giving them a stake in how the story turns out, (2) make them care

deeply about the characters, and then (3) make them feel personally responsible when something bad happens to those characters. We argue that it is these uniquely game-like qualities that enable *The Walking Dead* to represent trauma so compellingly by having the player interact with traumatized characters, by allowing them to virtually experience traumatizing situations, and by having them play through sequences in which they could potentially be viewed as the perpetrator of the trauma. In order to develop this argument, we will look at interreactivity, then empathy and complicity, explaining how the game uses each, and how these concepts interact with and enable one another.

Bending Stories: Interreactivity

At the opening of each episode, *The Walking Dead* announces: “This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play.” The idea of a game that allows the player to fully customize their experience—to go anywhere, do anything, and be anyone—is a long-standing one. *The Walking Dead* does not come anywhere close to providing this. What it does do very well, however, is provide the player with “free movement within limited space,” to draw from Salen and Zimmerman’s (2003) definition of games (p. 304). That is, the general trajectory the player takes through the story is always the same: Lee and Clementine meet at the beginning, encounter other survivors, partner up with them, and journey together to Savannah, Georgia, where Clem is kidnapped and subsequently rescued by Lee, who then dies right at the end of the last episode. The same characters will eventually die or go missing by the end of the series no matter what the player does, and no matter how many times they play through the game. The same locations will be visited, and the same set pieces encountered. This is the “limited space” referred to above. The “free movement” given to the player within this space comprises their ability not to prevent predetermined deaths or to choose to leave Clem behind, for example, but instead to influence the fine details of how these inevitable sequences of events will play out, and how Lee will react to them. In an article about the game’s structure on *Ontologicalgeek.com*, Adrian Froschauer (2014) refers to (*Heavy Rain* game designer) David Cage’s concept of “bending stories.” Froschauer writes:

Most of the time, the story stays on a fixed path, but occasionally jumps to different moments. In many cases, the exact outcome of a scene doesn’t depend on a single decision, but is a combination of different lines of dialogue and actions that react to decisions you made during the course of the game. So, you don’t have to imagine the story as a series of solid branches, but as a single, more flexible branch that, at certain points, bends into a different shapes [*sic*] every time you play the game.

The bending that the story undergoes is manifested by the game in many different ways. For instance, in the second episode, “Starved for Help,” the player is tasked

with portioning out the survivors' dwindling food supply. Although they could satisfy the objective and move on to the next part of the game simply by giving the food to the first few nonplayer characters Lee comes across, they are strongly encouraged to turn it into a moral conundrum by having Lee wander around the encampment and talk to the other survivors in order to evaluate whose need for the food is greatest or who has the most to offer Lee in return. The choice the player makes might come up later, as characters either remember Lee's kindness or give him the cold shoulder, although this will not ultimately determine whether those characters live or die. The game also consistently reminds players that their decisions may have unforeseen consequences. For instance, in conversation with the other survivors, an ominous note will often pop-up at the top of the screen when something particularly dramatic has been said: "[The character Lee is talking to] will remember that." The exact messages vary, but the implication is always the same: the player's actions will carry weight later on. Just as often, the player cannot be sure whether or not their decisions will be remembered: the game sometimes misleads them by flashing the above message even when the conversation has no bearing on later events, and sometimes no message shows even when the player is making consequential choices, thereby leaving them guessing (daring players also have the option to turn off these notifications altogether in the game's settings screen). The uncertainty this generates serves not only to unsettle the player and keep them on their toes but also to convince them that, as stated, *The Walking Dead* is constantly reacting to their choices, reinforcing the feedback loop between player and game.

The game also frequently serves up weightier moral quandaries in which there is no obvious "right" choice, and it does this in much more immediate and stressful ways, since these decisions usually must be made within a very stringent time limit. Lee is often thrown into the uncomfortable position of having to take a side in arguments between characters who have equally valid grievances, or into even more agonizing situations in which he has to choose between saving one character's life or another's, based on very little information, and with absolutely no inkling of how events will actually play out. One of the earliest choices, for instance, is between saving the life of Carley, an attractive, gun-toting reporter with whom Lee quickly forms a bond, or Doug, a friendly, resourceful IT technician and self-described geek. The player is given only a few seconds to decide, precluding a long decision-making process and forcing them to go with their gut instincts without any certainty of how the choice will play out.⁷ Even seemingly important decisions like this, however, only bend the story rather than redirect it: whichever character the player saves will stick with them through the next few episodes, until they are shot by another character, regardless of the player's actions. The game will then proceed on its predetermined path.

The fact that the outcome of the story is ultimately unchangeable actually ties in well with the game's setting and the identity of its main character. Lee is not a typical video game protagonist (and not only because he is black—a rare thing for

a game's main character). He is not a hero or a villain; he is not the one responsible for the zombie outbreak, nor will he be the one to contain it. He is a victim of circumstance: a relatively ordinary man moved by forces that are in no way under his control. Moreover, he is only one voice among a group. The other survivors have their own agendas and motivations that frequently bring them into conflict with one another and with Lee. Kenny, for instance, a headstrong, frequently ill-tempered family man from Florida, is concerned first and foremost with the safety of his wife and child, and he is often the loudest and most insistent member of the group when it comes to deciding on a plan of action. Since he is the owner and driver of an RV which the survivors depend on for transportation, he often ends up calling the shots regardless of the group's feelings, and the player's decision of whether or not to agree with Kenny might affect the relationship between him and Lee, but it will not ultimately change his mind. For the most part, Lee is neither literally nor figuratively in the driver's seat but is merely along for the ride.

Despite *The Walking Dead* limiting Lee's, and therefore the player's, ability to make significant changes to the plot, however, it manages to avoid feeling excessively constrictive and linear, at least on the first playthrough. The game achieves this by not allowing the player to see what the consequences of major choices would have been had they chosen differently, thereby encouraging their imaginations to fill in the blanks. The first episode provides a particularly good example of this. Lee and Clementine, having escaped from the zombie-ridden town in which they met, have found shelter at a nearby farm, owned by an old local man, Herschel Greene, and maintained with the assistance of his twentysomething son Shawn. Kenny and his wife Katjaa, and their 10-year-old son Duck, are also hiding out on the farm. The survivors resolve to reinforce the fence around the farm in order to keep the undead at bay. While Shawn and Duck are working on one area of the fence, however, they are surprised by several walkers. Lee runs to assist the pair, and the player is presented with two options—help Duck or help Shawn—while a timer ticks down at the bottom of the screen. If the player chooses to save Duck, Lee lunges toward him and pull him away, while Shawn is killed by the walkers. Should they choose to try to save Shawn, he still dies, and Kenny runs in to rescue Duck instead. Making no choice and letting the timer tick down gives the same result. In each case, Duck lives and Shawn dies, leading a devastated Herschel to kick the other survivors off his farm. For players who choose to save Duck, however, the inevitability of Shawn's death is not immediately obvious on their initial playthrough, since the game only shows the outcome of the choice they actually make and not the alternative. This provides tantalizing bait for the construction of "what-if" scenarios, especially since Duck goes on to become an important character—at least until he is killed off two episodes later. The player might well wonder what role Shawn would have gone on to play in the story had they chosen to save him instead, not realizing that the game would never have allowed this to happen anyway.

The Duck/Shawn dilemma is an example of what Mawhorter, Mateas, Wardrip-Fruin, and Jhala (2014), in “Towards a Theory of Choice Poetics,” refer to as a “false choice”:

A false choice is a choice where all of the different options lead to the same outcome. This can literally be a single outcome for all options, or it can be minor variations on an outcome where the variations are disproportionately small in relation to the expected variation engendered by the options. False choices can be used to create the illusion of a richly branching story without spending the resources necessary to do so.

The narrative branches that the player does *not* travel down but perceives as possibilities are just as important to their understanding of the story as the events that actually play out on the screen. One could reasonably field the argument that this overarching antinarrative or phantom narrative is even more powerful than the narrative itself, since it colludes with the player’s imagination to create might-have-beens that the game’s developers could not possibly have anticipated or included in the game (this is somewhat akin to horror movie directors choosing not to reveal the monster, instead relying on the viewer to conjure up a more terrifying creature than the filmmakers could ever actually create). The medium through which the story is told is absolutely crucial to this process, because the player needs to believe that the narrative has the potential to respond to their actions in realistic ways. This is something that games, as an interreactive medium, can do extremely well. Readers in the midst of a novel can anticipate the narrative’s impending twists and turns, but having reached the end, they cannot look back and imagine how the story might have turned out had they only read the book differently.

Thanks to the tricks described previously, *The Walking Dead* generally manages to convince players that they have a real hand in determining how the story plays out. As such, it fulfills the prerequisites for interactivity. The game changes in response to what the player does, and in turn the player responds to the game by changing their strategy, creating a feedback loop. However, what is more interesting—and more relevant in terms of trauma—is what happens to empathy and complicity once this relationship between player and game has been established.

“Are You Sure About This?": Empathy and Complicity

The Walking Dead: Season One (2012) fosters empathy in the player through a variety of means. In our discussion of empathy mentioned earlier, we distinguished between empathy in off-line and on-line states, where the former is broadly similar to empathy in films and novels, and so on, and the latter is a form of (non-)empathy found especially in games, consequent to their interactivity. Unsurprisingly, there are many off-line moments in *The Walking Dead* during which the game works hard to make the player feel both emotional and cognitive empathy toward the characters. In “The Walking Dead, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy,” Madigan

(2012) draws on Marco Iacoboni's research into mirror neurons to suggest that one of the reasons the game is so emotionally engaging is because "it frequently shows us the faces of the characters and lets us see all the work put into creating easily recognizable and convincing facial expressions. And so it's not the zombies that elicit dread in us. Instead, it's things like the face that Kenny makes when Lee tells him to make a hard decision about his family." According to theories about mirror neurons, when one witnesses the face of someone caught in an emotional state such as joy, shock, or suspicion, one subconsciously emulates that emotion, sometimes even mimicking the expression in order to feel it more strongly. This is one of the ways in which the game represents trauma: by showing us its impact on the faces of characters who are suffering through the shock of losing loved ones in harrowing situations, and the numbing and disbelief brought on by the complete dissolution of society as they know it. However, though this idea applies particularly well to *The Walking Dead*, which features numerous close-ups of characters in various states of alarm, relief, or consternation, it can be said of other visual media just as well.

The medium becomes more important when one considers cognitive empathy, or, more specifically, how *The Walking Dead* challenges the player to try to understand the motivations of the other characters in order to make good choices. Players who attempt to see things from Kenny's perspective, for example—knowing that he places the welfare of his wife and child above all else—gain a distinct advantage compared to players who do not, since many of the game's puzzles require the player to skillfully manage his emotions. In the aftermath of Duck and Katjaa's deaths, when Kenny exhibits signs of shock and post-traumatic stress disorder, this becomes especially important. Kenny becomes extremely despondent and begins to drink heavily; he feels guilty both for the deaths of his family members and for the death of Shawn (on Herschel's farm), the former of which he views as punishment for the latter. The player is given many chances to either berate Kenny for his behavior by telling him to snap out of it, or to show compassion based on his clear signs of deep emotional distress. Should the player treat Kenny too harshly, he will refuse to accompany Lee to try to rescue Clementine later on in the series.

On top of this, the player is also encouraged to cognitively empathize with Lee. As games journalist Ryan Smith (2013) writes:

Lee is an African-American man convicted of murder, a marginalized minority in our society. [...] and the writers don't let Lee off the hook for his crimes. He is unequivocally guilty of killing his wife's lover, and he's headed to prison. In our society, Lee would typically be seen as a "bad guy," the type of character we'd likely be shooting down without mercy in another video game. [...] [However,] Lee is presented as neither sinner nor saint but a complex vessel we pour ourselves into.

Indeed, Lee's character was purposefully designed to make the player cognitively empathize with him, at least according to a presentation by the game's creative director, Jake Rodkin, and its director/writer, Sean Vanaman. According to them,

one of the conscious design choices made about Lee was that “[h]is difficult past would help the player build a relationship with him, making [him] someone you could root for” (Concepcion, 2013). The player is also given a more pragmatic incentive to try to put themselves in Lee’s shoes: in off-line situations, he operates as an autonomous agent. His actions and the gist of his words may be chosen by the player, but there is no telling the exact manner in which he will perform them. In order to perform as well as possible in the game, the player must make decisions informed by what they know about Lee’s background, and which take account of his predilections and values—a form of role play.

What happens, however, when the game switches between off-line and on-line engagement? Several things. The most interreactive moments in the game—when the player must take significant actions with a greater frequency—tend to occur when Lee or the other survivors are in mortal danger. At these times, the player is given little chance to think but must act quickly in order to ensure a successful outcome: helping Clem to escape from a walker by bashing its head in, for example. At these points, as we suggest previously, Lee’s character fades into the background. In subsequent moments of calm, the player might reflect on the experiences they (and Lee) just underwent, contextualizing them and filling them with meaning afterward. At the time, however, he is no longer seen by the player as a complex emotional being but instead as a vessel whose capabilities give agency to the player in the game world. What is particularly interesting about *The Walking Dead* is how it plays with on-line and off-line states of engagement in order to involve the player in traumatizing situations. For instance, at the beginning of the second episode (“Starved for Help”), Lee, Kenny, and Mark (one of the other survivors) come across a group of high schoolers and their teacher, David, whose leg has been caught in a bear trap. As walkers begin to close in, the player is given two options: have Lee attempt to break the bear trap with an axe, or use the axe to chop off David’s leg. Chopping David’s leg off, however, is not simply a matter of choosing that option and then sitting back and watching Lee perform the grisly action. Rather, the player must target David’s leg and then click repeatedly on it, with each click causing Lee to bring the axe down again. It takes four hits to fully remove the limb, and in the process the camera alternately zooms in on David’s increasingly brutalized leg and his face, as he screams and writhes in pain and disbelief. As Lee swings the axe, the player is off-line (since they are no longer in control); when the player targets and clicks on the leg, they are on-line, giving input to the game. By switching between these two states during this scene, *The Walking Dead* encourages the player to reflect on what is happening. Between each hit, the reality of what they are doing comes back, and they must recommit to the action in full knowledge of what it entails, almost as if the game is asking, “Are you sure about this?”

A more direct confrontation between the player and their choices occurs toward the end of the season, in the final episode, “No Time Left.” When Lee faces off with the stranger who kidnapped Clem, the stranger is revealed to be a victim of theft by

Lee's group, who looted his (seemingly) abandoned, supply-laden station wagon in the second episode, unaware of whom it belonged to. This led to a chain of events in which the stranger lost his wife and both of his children to the walkers. Since that point, the stranger followed and kept tabs on the survivors, directly blaming them for his downfall. In dialogue with Lee, the stranger, now clearly unhinged, harangues him based on the decisions made by the player throughout all of the previous episodes, including lying to Clementine about Lee's past, allowing the other survivors to plunder the station wagon, and/or allowing Clementine to inadvertently consume human meat. Although this conversation has the potential to come across as a somewhat overscripted "gotcha!" moment, it nevertheless hammers home the point that Lee and his group are responsible, to some degree, for the traumatization of an innocent man, and this is something that the player, by dictating Lee's decisions, is complicit in. In other words, from the stranger's perspective, Lee and his group have been the bad guys all along.

Conclusion

As the previous discussion has shown, there are many places where the theoretical concerns of game studies and trauma studies intersect, particularly with regard to inter(re)activity, empathy, and complicity. There is valuable knowledge to be gained by both disciplines if they are put into dialogue, especially when it comes to performing close readings of particular games. Since these are both already highly interdisciplinary fields, moreover, they are a natural pairing when it comes to discussing the sorts of emotionally charged play experiences delivered by games such as *The Walking Dead*, which demands insights from psychology, social science, design, media studies, and so on. What this article has also shown is that in order to appreciate a game as played as a rich entanglement of rules and audiovisual elements, activated by a player through playing, it is important that researchers not be afraid to amalgamate methodologies from many different sources. These need not necessarily be peer reviewed and published (sometimes painstakingly slowly) through academic journals and presses. Much of the most insightful and up-to-date dialogue on how games work and what they do actually comes from outside of the academy, in the form of articles on games news websites, blog posts, interviews with game developers, and pieces written by game journalists. Often these are the *only* sources available to researchers wishing to write about certain games. It is the responsibility of the researcher to take these sources seriously, as we have done here, while also recognizing their limitations and grounding them within broader theoretical frameworks where appropriate.

As mentioned previously, there are also many other games that incorporate trauma mechanically, aesthetically, or both, in a variety of creative and interesting ways, and these have gone almost entirely unregarded by the academy. The so-called empathy game genre, for instance—consisting of titles such as *That*

Dragon, Cancer (2014), *Dys4ia* (2012), *Mainichi* (2012), and *Depression Quest* (2013)—encompasses many games that refer to an assortment of personal and collective traumas. These too can benefit from the methodology used here, in which the well honed but occasionally abstract or out-of-date theories offered by trauma studies are tempered by game studies' acknowledgment of the practicalities and complexities of gameplay. No doubt more games of this nature will continue to be produced, confronting players with difficult experiences, putting them in precarious circumstances, making them empathize with a variety of characters both good and bad, challenging their ethics, upsetting their prejudices, and making perpetrators of them. The combination of game studies and trauma studies presented here is only one example of how different disciplinary approaches can be combined in order to produce a methodology that is attendant to the complexities of games such as these. It is hoped by the authors that as games continue to grow and diversify as a medium, trauma studies will begin to address them seriously and recognize the potential they have to explore the subject of psychological trauma in innovative and exciting ways.

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Notes

1. This definition is reminiscent of Espen Aarseth's (1997) idea of "ergodic literature"—a hypertextual medium in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (p. 1).
2. Off-line engagement also applies to the experiences of those to whom Newman (2002) refers as "secondary" players who observe the "primary" or controlling player and offer input in the form of advice, commentary, and warnings, instead of directly controlling the game themselves.
3. Kidd and Castano (2013) define Theory of Mind—or ToM—at the beginning of their article as "the capacity to identify and understand others' subjective states," which "allows successful navigation of complex social relationships and helps to support the empathic responses that maintain them."
4. For an analysis of how one game in particular does this, see Toby Smethurst's (2016) article, "'We put our hands on the trigger with him': Guilt and Perpetration in Spec Ops: The Line" (Criticism, forthcoming).

5. At the time of writing, Telltale Games has announced that they will be producing a third series of the game.
6. The title, incidentally, carries a double meaning. The walking dead can refer either to the zombies, who are literally dead and walking, or to the survivors, who are figuratively already dead (i.e., doomed to die very shortly), as in the phrase “dead man walking.”
7. When examining the data concerning what percentage of players saved whom, Telltale Games were apparently surprised to see that 75% of players saved Carley and only 25% saved Doug. According to Wallace (2013), this is because “Telltale realized Carley had way more relationship-building moments [...] Doug on the other hand was a passive observer through the rescue of Lee and his group and only worked with [him] once to hatch an escape plan.” The apparent ease of this decision for a majority of players led Telltale to go back to the drawing board in order to make subsequent choices even more difficult, as they strove to achieve a 50/50 spread in future conundrums.

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