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Playing with Choice:
Agency, Plot and Character in Telltale's
***The Walking Dead* Video Game Series**

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Agency and plot.....	6
2.1 Branching narratives.....	6
2.2 Satellites and kernels.....	9
3. Agency and characters.....	13
3.1 Embodying the cursor.....	13
3.2 Expressions of feeling.....	14
3.3 Interactivity meets Kuleshov.....	17
4. Agency as meaning.....	23
4.1 Game meaning <i>versus</i> player meaning.....	23
4.2. Game meaning <i>plus</i> player meaning.....	26
4.3. Commitment to meaning.....	27
5. Conclusions.....	30
Acknowledgements.....	33
Ludology.....	33
Bibliography.....	33

Abstract

Despite public and critical acclaim, Telltale’s video game series *The Walking Dead* has been widely criticized for its lack of player agency –“the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices”, according to Murray’s definition (1998)–. Traditionally, agency in video games has been materialized in plot changes determined by player choices. While these agency-based plot alternatives seldom exist in *The Walking Dead*, the aforesaid criticism restricts agency to plot. Using evidence taken from the game, I will highlight some triggers of agency that happen not in the realm of plot but in that of character creation, focusing on strategies exclusive to video games and how they intertwine with inherited tools. Hence, I will suggest that the series does not lack agency, but that agency applies only to character-related elements in order to foster the player’s image of the playable character’s identity. Special focus will be placed on Lee and Clementine, the two playable characters on *Season One* (2012-2013) and *Season Two* (2014-2015), respectively. Finally, by assimilating plot and character management of agency to different views on game and players as authors of meaning, I will propose that the choice of this type of agency has a meaning in itself, a meaning aligned with the ultimate theme in *The Walking Dead*’s franchise: how to stay human after the fall of humanity. Finally, as a consequence of this integrated meaning, I will refer to Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum’s notion of agency and connect it to *The Walking Dead* to explain how lack of agency can simply be a subtle form of agency.

Keywords

Game Studies, *The Walking Dead*, Telltale Games, narrative, agency, plot, character, zombie, ludology, determinism, voluntarism, procedural rhetoric, play theory

1. Introduction

Narratology was the first theoretical frame that scholars working in video games used to analyse the new medium. Authors like Janet Murray argued that games are narratives in the same sense that Literature works are, which led to the conclusion that they could be studied using pre-existent narratological methodologies (1998: online).

This view coexisted with what Gonzalo Frasca named *ludology* (1999: online), a concept which argued that games are not narratives, but simulations; therefore, they should not be analysed from a narratological point of view, because narratives are representative whereas simulations are not (Aarseth, 1997: online). Instead of showing a reality, games simulate the conditions needed to experiment it. In plain words, games offer options that players enact through gameplay. Nevertheless, by the time these points were made, games had already started to blur the frontiers that separated them from narratives. Choose Your Own Adventure books, among other interactive fictions, combined literary storytelling tools with player options (Irigoyen, 2015: 36).¹

Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* video game series (2012-2017, referred to as *TWD* henceforth) combines traditional narrative with interactive simulation just as extensively as Choose Your Own Adventure books do, while intertwining them with strategies derived from audiovisual media like cinema or TV. Its plot, structured by means of seasons and episodes, is set in the zombie apocalyptic universe created by Robert Kirkman in the eponymous comic books (Image Comics, 2003), which also inspired the TV series (AMC, 2010). In spite of this, the game does not share their characters or stories to the point that Rick Grimes, the protagonist in both the comic books and the TV show, is not even mentioned.

¹ The genre Choose Your Own Adventure, also known as CYOA, is named after a collection of physical gamebooks published from the middle 1970s onwards by Bantam Books in the US. These allow the reader to make decisions which influence the plot, resulting in prewritten alternative events.

The plot of the game starts when Lee, an Afro-American college teacher convicted of murdering his lover's wife, finds himself unexpectedly free at the beginning of the zombie apocalypse. He soon finds Clementine, an eight-year old girl whose parents have disappeared, and from then on, his main purpose in life will be to protect her. At the end of *Season One*, Lee is bitten by a zombie, but he eventually manages to get Clementine to a secure place. She will become the main character during *Season Two*, thus taking the reins of her own survival.

At the beginning of each episode, the player is directly addressed by a narratorial voice with a promise of narrative agency: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play". Even in the "Key Features" section of the game's store page on Steam, the promise is reaffirmed: "Live with the profound and lasting consequences of the decisions that you make in each episode".² As the game progresses, the player will find reminders whenever she makes a new choice: "You chose to help Kenny. He'll remember that", "Clementine noticed that you lied", "Jane will remember that".

Nevertheless, even though the series has garnered an enormous amount of praise, many players feel that the promises regarding agency were not fulfilled. The following is just one telling example among many user comments that complain about it:

Unfortunately, it's a big lie, whenever you can make an impactful decision, the game will just correct course so it will go in purely linear fashion. Refuse to go somewhere? The group will outvote you (even though they normally never vote on anything). Have a situation which can result in a character living or dying? If you saved that person, that person will die very soon anyways. A choice between saving character A or character B? You can consider the character that you saved dead anyways.³

As I will show, this criticism –that the game does not adapt to the player because its plot ignores her choices– is right as long as we equate agency to choice. While this is true, I will also

2 TWD's store page on Steam can be visited at http://store.steampowered.com/app/207610/The_Walking_Dead/.

3 The original comment, uploaded by Steam user Wojciech on March 11th, 2017, can be retrieved from <http://steamcommunity.com/profiles/76561198116374115/recommended/207610/> (accessed April 7th, 2017).

argue that *TWD* uses choice to let the player alter her characters' personality. By controlling Lee during *Season One* and Clementine during *Season Two*, the player decides who they really are.

It follows from this reasoning that *TWD* uses choice and agency as a game-exclusive way of generating meaning. In order to unravel this meaning, I will draw two different parallelisms between *TWD*'s agency and diverse game theories. On the one hand, I will assimilate plot-based agency to determinist views on agency and to procedural rhetoric. On the other, I will compare character-based agency with voluntarist views on agency and with play theory. Finally, an integrated view of agency will account for the ultimate theme behind *TWD*: even if we as humans lose the ability to make decisions that affect the world around us, we still have the choice to hold on to our own humanity.

In order to argue these points, I will primarily focus on the first two seasons, each one comprised of five episodes with two hours of gameplay each. I will also use evidence from the third season, *A New Frontier*, when directly connected to examples from the previous ones.



Figure 1. Marketing asset: *TWD*'s *Season Two*

2. Agency and plot

2.1 Branching narratives

The first well-known attempt at defining agency in interactive media was made by Janet Murray, who defined it as a “satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (1998: 324). While this means that agency is fundamentally based on choice, Salen and Zimmerman point out that it is restricted by the game system, which allows the player to perform a limited number of actions within a limited number of choices (2003: 670). Furthermore, the game system also provides reactivity, that is, the ability to adapt to the actions undertaken by the player so she can feel agency (Smethurst and Craps, 2015: 273). An example can be found in many CYOA games, from which *TDW* draws extensive elements, where players are presented with choices that shape a branching narrative. Figure 2 shows a typical branching narrative:

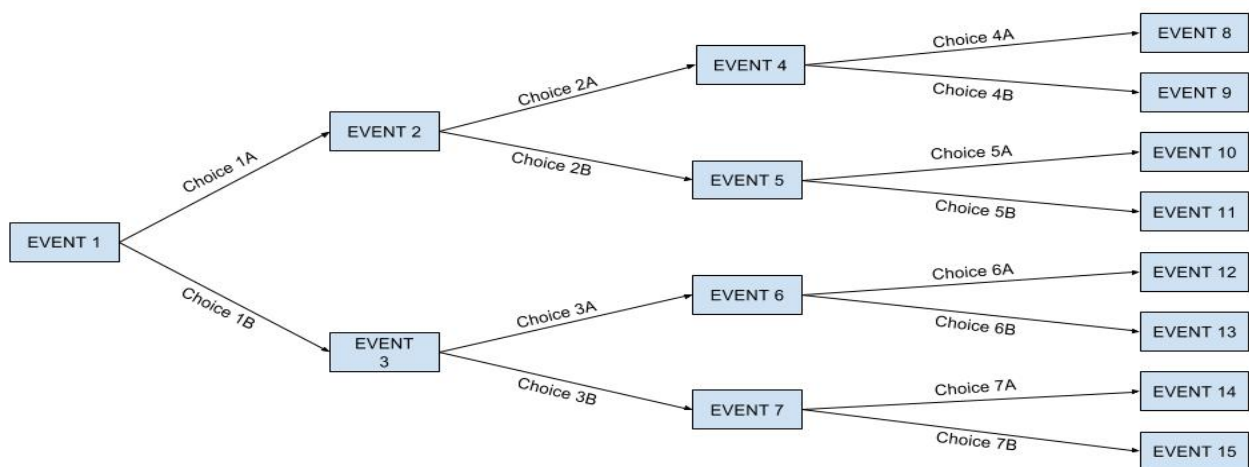


Figure 2. Flowchart: classical branching narrative

This is not necessarily what can be found in *TWD*. In the game's first scene, Lee is handcuffed in the police car that will take him to prison. The cop doing the driving asks him an indirect question that the player must answer in real time: "Well, I reckon you didn't do it, then". The available answers taken by the player provoke different outcomes in the dialogue, as figure 3 shows:

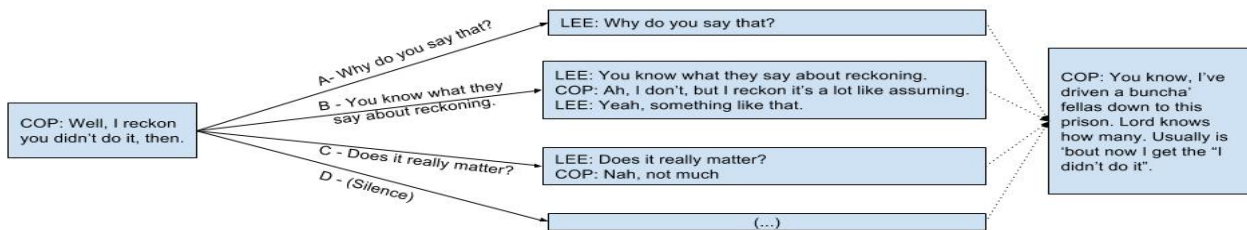


Figure 3. Flowchart: first dialogue in *SIE1*

Evidently, the game is tailored by the player's choice, in the sense that both Lee and the cop react accordingly to it. Only for a short time, though. Seconds later, the game unifies all options and proceeds as if nothing had happened: "You know, I've driven a buncha fellas down to this prison (...)". The game does not even save a variable to remember which option the player chose.



Figure 4. Screenshot: first dialogue in *SIE1*

Notwithstanding this, the point can be made that since this is inconsequential dialogue, the outcome must be inconsequential as well, in the sense that it does not go beyond itself, leaving the plot unaltered.

While this is true, the game abounds in transcendent examples. During the climax of S1E1, zombies rush into the abandoned store where Lee and Clementine are hiding. Carley and Doug, two members of the group they travel with, are grabbed by some zombies. The player, controlling Lee, has just a few seconds to decide who to save. As expected, the one not chosen by the player dies while the chosen one survives. This consequence fosters a strong sense of agency, even more so when the player starts the second episode and confirms that her choice still matters. If she saved Carley, there she is, and Lee can even talk to her about how much they both miss Doug. On the other hand, if the player saves Doug, there he is, happy to be alive but wondering whether Lee should have saved Carley instead. Telltale Games, in an effort seldom seen in video games, doubled the animations, the dialogues, the voice-overs and their implementation to meet the player's whim. Unfortunately, they missed out on several details to provide a full-fledged sense of agency.

First, all throughout S1E2, Carley and Doug occupy the same places in the scenes, do roughly the same things and even have similar dialogues and animations. They provide the very same information to the player and their functional roles, both playable and narrative, are basically the same. The game certainly adapts, but to what extent?

Second, no matter who you let die, the survivor dies during S1E3, too, in the same place, during the same conversation, shot by the same character. Logically, this enraged some players, like the one quoted before: "A choice between saving character A or character B? You can consider the character that you saved dead anyways". In addition, the short span of the game's reactivity in this example contradicts the marketing line already mentioned: "Live with the profound and lasting consequences of the decisions that you make". We may agree on *profound*, but what about *lasting*?

2.2 Satellites and kernels

When compared to Lee's conversation with the cop, saving either Doug or Carley strikes us as a more transcendental choice. However, it is so in an emotional sense only, not in a structural way. Like previous examples, it falls under what Seymour Chatman calls a *satellite*, "an event that can be deleted without altering the logic of the plot" (1978: 54). The problem that this poses for agency is not only that the game does not adapt to the player's choices, but also that the choices offered are not important or meaningful plot-wise.

In contrast to satellites, Chatman defines kernels as "narrative moments that give rise to cruxes in the direction taken by events (...) branching points which force a movement into one of two (or more) possible paths" (1978: 53).⁴

The most important kernel in *Season One* takes place during the epilogue of S1E2. Upon finding a car full of food, part of the group wants to take the food, arguing that it is abandoned, whereas Clementine acts as the player's conscience: "What if it's not [abandoned]? What if it IS someone's?" (original emphasis). The player, as Lee, must decide whether to back her or not, but then, regardless of the player's decision, the group decides to take the food. As a result of the theft, the owner of the car follows the group and eventually kidnaps Clementine during S1E4, two episodes later. When Lee finds him in the season finale, the kidnapper accuses him of being a bad father. He wants to raise Clementine the right way. It is only fair that, if the player chose to steal the food back in S1E2, Lee is accused of theft and that the plot shapes around this hubris, Lee's original sin. However, if the player chose not to steal, she will be punished anyway and the plot will be structured upon a decision she did not make. Therefore, the game does not adapt to the player's actions, since its

⁴ It should be noted that Chatman is not talking about interactive narratives like video games, but about traditional linear storytelling, even though his definition includes "branching points" and "possible paths".

plot coils around a non-existent hubris. Although in this case the game displays long-term reactivity, it does not take into account the player's choice.

Then again, there is a piece of evidence that casts a doubt on my argument so far: *Season Two* has five different endings.

Clementine, now in charge of a baby, has only two friends left: Jane and Kenny, two unstable characters who hate each other. They quarrel. Kenny outfights Jane and is just about to stab her in the head with a hunting knife. Then Clementine grabs a gun and aims at him, but the ultimate choice is left to the player. Shoot Kenny? Look away? In addition to this choice, other tough decisions pile up during this climax.



Figure 5. Screenshot: S2E5 climax

On the one hand, if the player kills Kenny, she can decide to stick to Jane or to leave her and part with the baby. If she decides to stay with Jane, a family finds their shelter and pleads them to let them in. Once again, their fate is the player's call.

On the other hand, if the player decides not to shoot Kenny, he stabs Jane to death. Then the player is confronted with three options: abandon Kenny, shoot him, or stay with him. If the player chooses options one or two, Clem leaves with the baby. If she chooses the third one, though, they find a fortified town that will only accept Clem and the baby, not Kenny. The player must choose whether to go inside the town for the sake of the baby or leave with Kenny.

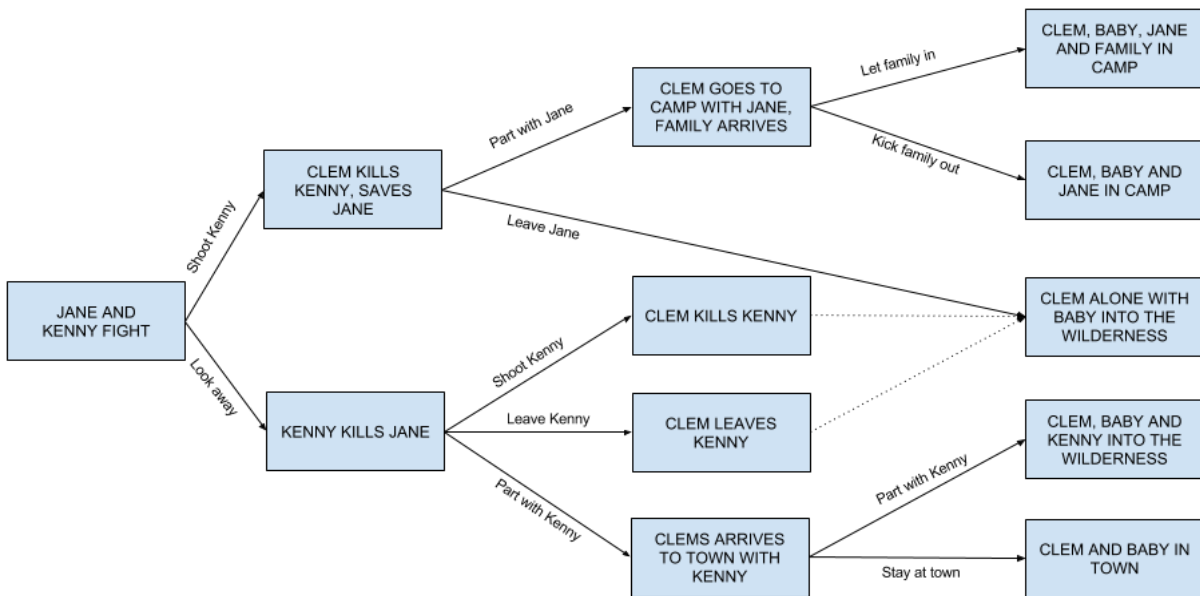


Figure 6. Flowchart: Season Two endings

As figure 6 shows, the player gets choices that directly influence the game's outcome. Hence, even though *Season One* and *Season Two* lacked agency, this seems like the real thing, *namely*, downright reactivity with both profound and lasting consequences. In addition to this, the first episode of the third season, *A New Frontier*, lets the player bring her own saved games from the previous seasons and load them into the new one. This way, the game will be able to acknowledge the choices made by the player and shape the new story after them. What is more, if the player is not able to provide her own saved games, the system offers the chance to manually reproduce those decisions in a questionnaire, that, among others, includes *Season Two's* final ones.

Unfortunately for player agency, the new season starts several years after the outcome of *Season Two*. Clementine, now a teenager, lives on her own, no matter what ending the player chose. There is no Jane, no Kenny, no pleading family, no baby. As a compensation, the game includes part of the elided time in short flashbacks where whomever the player saved or stayed with at the end of *Season Two* gets killed. Lasting consequences seem to last only as long as the player is absent.

In the flashback corresponding to the scenario where Clementine goes into the wilderness with the baby and Kenny, the latter is injured in a car accident. When zombies start coming, he realizes he cannot walk. Then the player must choose whether she wants to try to save Kenny, which would endanger the baby. If Clem leaves Kenny and runs for her life, a zombie bites his throat. If she tries to save him, the game displays one of its agency-awareness text strings, “Kenny will remember that” just seconds before a zombie bites his throat and Clem runs for her life. It is, possibly, the most evidently broken promise in the whole series.

Like most of their kind in the genre, zombies in *TWD* do not remember their previous life.⁵ Thus, since the promise of agency implied in “Kenny will remember that” is followed by his turning into a zombie, then maybe the kind of agency that we can find in Telltale’s series is a zombie, too: an animated corpse that does not remember a thing, that tears apart every single decision that the player makes. Like a zombie with a one-track mind, *TWD*’s plot will keep on walking the only path it has been programmed for, no matter how much the player strives to change it.

All in all, this story is *not* tailored by how you play.

5 At least in the video game series. The TV show, even in its first chapter, hints that they may keep some memories.

3. Agency and characters

3.1 Embodying the cursor

Traditional storytelling classifies characters in many different ways: the Greeks used their function in the story to talk about protagonist and antagonist, while Vladimir Propp coined categories like giver, princess, helper, aggressor or hero. Forster referred to psychological complexity to talk about round and flat characters. Other taxonomies refer to their ability to fit in pre-established categories like types, archetypes and stereotypes, whereas some others focus on their evolution through time, which results in them being static or dynamic (Garrido, 2007: 91-103).

Needless to say, all these taxonomies can be successfully applied to the characters in *TWD*. In *Season One*, Lee is a hero and Clementine a princess. Kenny and Jane are round characters, whereas the cop in S1E1 is archetypically flat. Clementine is definitely dynamic, while Lee is somehow half dynamic, half static, and zombies are as completely static. Given that situation, it is not an overstatement to say that all these classifications can be useful to describe video game characters.

However, as Games Studies have argued since their very beginning, theories used to describe previous areas of investigation do not fully account for the complexity of video games and the new challenges that they pose for the researcher (Frasca, 1999: online). For this reason, games must find a new way of looking at characters. This new way, once again, derives from interactivity.

The most obvious segregation of game characters in their relation to interactivity distinguishes playable characters from non-playable characters. In other words, characters that the player can embody and control or not, respectively. Although establishing a full taxonomy is not the goal of this dissertation, it may still benefit from a second level in the classification of playable characters: the extent to which the *player* can change the *character*, that is to say, the amount of agency that the player has over character building. In most games, this amounts to zero:

If you watch a movie, you become the hero - Gilgamesh, Indiana Jones, James Bond, whomever. The kid says, I want to be that. In a game, Mario isn't a hero. I don't want to be him; he's me. Mario is a cursor. (Fullop, 1993; quoted in Frasca, 2001: online)

Another trait of these characters is that the player cannot express feelings through them, for she controls their bodies, not their emotions: “The player just moves the joystick and the character jumps (...) [she] is not trying to convey any feeling through the jumping” (Fullop in Frasca: online).

Playable characters in *TWD*, though, are far more dynamic and able to express feeling at the player's command than cursor-type characters.

3.2 Expressions of feeling

One of the strategies used by the game in order to let the player express feelings through characters consists in not allowing the player to create a new character from scratch, but just to build upon an existing one and explore their tensions. At the beginning of *Season One*, Lee is not a clean slate: he is introduced as a quiet, reflexive, patient man. However, we are also told that he committed a crime of passion, a murder, evidence that he can be quick-tempered on certain occasions. His animations, even in the ‘I didn't do it’ cop scene, tell us that he is full of remorse. Shortly afterwards, when he meets Clementine, the redemption tale starts and the player quickly understands her mission: to redeem Lee by saving Clementine. These are the coordinates that the player accepts, the ones that she cannot escape from. Leaving Clementine to her fate is out of the question and, consequently, the player will be allowed to choose only between variations on *which* is the better way to fulfil Lee's quest.

As we have already seen, when the group finds the abandoned car full of food at the end of S1E2, the player, controlling Lee, must decide whether she votes for taking it or endorsing Clementine's plea that they cannot take it because its owners may still be alive. As we saw earlier, no

matter what the player decides, the rest of the group takes the food, which diminishes plot-based player agency.

However, something different happens when we consider the capacity of this example to deliver character-based agency. If the player decides not to steal, Kenny empties the car's trunk and finds a child's hoodie that Clem could use. When asked if she wants it, she holds Lee's hand, looking up at him and shaking her head, until Lee tells Kenny that she will not take it, while the camera shot emphasizes the connection between them. In the opposite scenario, if the player decides not to listen to Clementine's reluctance, it is Lee himself who empties the trunk, finds the hoodie and offers it to her. She is a bit reluctant but, after a player-chosen sentence, she takes it, apparently convinced. Then she turns her back to him, arms folded, evidently crossed. Lee is behind her, regretfully looking at her.



Figure 7. Screenshots: alternate outcomes of player's choice during the abandoned car event in S1E2

Right after that, both paths merge, just like we saw when analysing plot decisions. Here, though, the emphasis is not on *what* the player does, but on her reasons *why* and on *how* they affect characters. Just before paths merge, the player gets a new chance to explain herself:

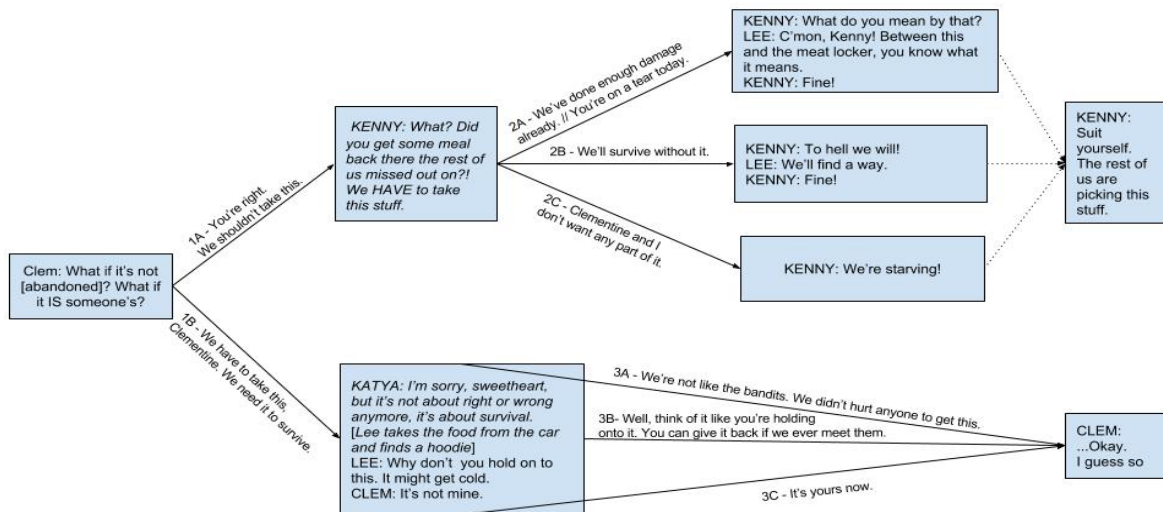


Figure 8. Flowchart: choices and outcomes during the abandoned car event in SIE2⁶

Options 2A, 2B and 2C stand for how Lee cares for her –something, as we already said, indisputable, beyond the player’s call–. However, the focus changes. Option 2A provides a moral alibi, so Clementine –and Lee, and the player– can still feel good about taking the food, while establishing a clear line between right and wrong. Option 2B drives Lee closer to a cunning, diplomatic father who tricks his kid in order to preserve her innocence, whereas option 2C depicts a more authoritarian father figure. In all three cases, as we have already seen, the camera shot in which Lee looks at crossed-armed Clementine shows that he –that is, the player– has done this for her, no matter if she does not like it.

A similar process happens if the player chooses not to take the food. Option 3A is born out of remorse for previous decisions, while option 3B shows a more quiet, fate-will-provide version of Lee. Finally, 3C emphasizes Lee’s strong sense of morality, even radical in his sense of justice. It is important to notice that, regardless of which option the player takes, Lee always looks at Clem before answering, telling the player once more that the previous choice has drawn them closer. Just

6 This player option depends on a previous decision. While they were locked in a meat locker, a member of the group has a heart attack. Kenny smashes his brain while he is still alive to prevent him coming back from the dead and killing them all. Here, the player gets a different option depending on whether she encouraged Kenny to do it or not.

like in the scenario where the player takes the food, she can now choose how she sees Lee, but she cannot change that everything he does, he does for Clementine.⁷

We have just seen several short-term consequences of player's choices related to character building, but what happens in the long run? Regardless of whether Lee backed Clem or not, she, like most kids, does not keep hard feelings for long. When the next episode starts, there's no sign that her trust in Lee has decreased. However, the player can feel the consequences of her decisions through time even if the game does not specifically adapt to match them. Here, agency does not lie on how the game twists to meet the player's whim. Actually, it works on a complete different level: agency depends on how the player sees herself, on how she sees Lee and on how his relationship with Clem is built as a consequence of her decisions. Provided that all of this is just an internal vision on the player's side, the game does not need to actively show the changes: it just needs not to interfere with the player's vision, not to do anything that goes against it. Luckily enough, this is exactly what the game does: nothing. For once, interactivity works better when the game remains passive. Reactivity as re-passivity.

However, even when the game does not show the consequences of player's choice, it finds alternate ways to allow the player to see these consequences on her own.

3.3 Interactivity meets Kuleshov

The first alternate strategy used by *TWD* is based on the Kuleshov effect, one of the first techniques that helped create the syntax of cinema during the 1920s. Russian cinematographer Lev Kuleshov affirmed that the spectator creates the relationship between two unrelated shots when edited one after the other. His example included a shot with a plate of steamy food, followed by a

⁷ Even at the end of the game's third season, the most productive hashtag used by both Telltale Games and the series' fan base to talk about the game is *#forclementine*, as the following Twitter query shows: <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23forclementine&src=tyah> (accessed May 25th, 2017).

close-up of an expressionless man. Then a shot of a girl in a coffin, followed by exactly the same close-up of the expressionless man. Finally, a woman in a divan and the man's close-up again. As Kuleshov showed, viewers interpret the close-up in three different ways depending on the shot preceding it: the man was subsequently hungry, sad or aroused (Noriega, 2002: 225). Since *TWD* is so rooted in the language of cinema, it is only normal that it should use the Kuleshov effect to create meaning.

During S1E1, the player explores a pharmacy that belonged to Lee's dead family. Among other items, she can examine a picture. Lee picks it up and the camera changes to a detail shot of the picture, depicting both his parents, his brother and himself. Then it cuts to Lee's face, who closes his eyes and exhales. Lee's "closing eyes plus exhaling" animation is used many more times throughout *Season One*: when Kenny's kid gets bitten by a zombie, when Lee is about to smash the head of his zombie brother and even when he tries to open a locked door. Meanings range from "This is so sad", or "I've lost everything" to "I don't wanna do it" or "Damn, it's locked" and more.

However, the game does not restrict itself to just stitching shots hoping that all players, like cinema-goers, extract the same meaning, but it also uses it in a playable way, combining it with interactivity so each player can create different meanings depending on her previous decisions. This way, the Kuleshov effect is used to foster agency.

At the beginning of S1E3, Clementine is using a dead walkie-talkie to pretend she talks with her parents. Lee looks at her, they chat a bit about nothing in particular and, when Clementine turns away, Lee just closes his eyes for a moment. The meaning of Lee's animation is ambiguous. Is he being a good father? Should he stop Clem from fooling herself about her parents? The weight of these and other questions is different depending on whether the player remembers how he deceived her or not during the abandoned car dilemma or during other in-game decisions. Later on in the same chapter, when Clementine asks "Do people get mad when they're scared?", Lee's closing eyes

animation changes its meaning depending on whether the player has made Lee mad in previous tough decisions.

One of those decisions takes place during S1E2, when Kenny wants to smash Larry's head, a member of the group who is having a heart attack, so he cannot come back as a zombie. The player can make Lee back Kenny or protect Larry but, in both cases, Kenny kills the dying man by dropping a huge salt brick on his face. Also in both cases, Clementine starts crying. When Lee becomes aware of this, the camera focuses on a close-up of his face as he turns to face Clem, while displaying a variation of Lee's closed eyes animation. Finally, the turn of the head is completed in a foreshortened shot of Lee looking at Clem. Even though its main meaning has to do with her loss of innocence, Lee's expression has a different connotation depending on the decision made moments before by the player: if she protected Larry, Lee's closed eyes stand for "I don't dare *face* Clementine's loss of innocence", whereas if she contributed to Larry's death, it means "*I've* just broken Clementine's innocence". When an onscreen image and a previous player decision come together, they can create meanings as powerful as the player's image of her own playable character's identity.

We should note now that, in order to create agency-based meaning, there is no actual need to stitch two shots together, because it is not two shots that the player is fiddling with: after Kenny smashes Larry's face, the player is actually combining Clementine's reaction –which could take as many or as few shots as necessary– with her own past decisions, which are not onscreen but inside her mind. So, strictly speaking, this is no longer the Kuleshov effect, but an exclusive video game syntactic structure. Therefore, it should have a different name, be it 'interactive Kuleshov effect', 'playable Kuleshov effect' or even '*Kulechoice* effect'.



Figure 9. Screenshots: interactive use of the Kuleshov effect in S1E1

Another way of providing the player with character-based agency lies in a fair use of choices that do not affect the plot. It does so by displacing the playable character from the role of protagonist and turning her into a secondary character so her actions do not affect plot events. Paradoxical though it may be, in this case agency is achieved by stepping aside from the most suitable role to change events, the role where agency ought to be found more easily.

A clear example of this strategy takes place in S2E3, after Kenny has been tortured by a villain. When the tables turn and he decides to torture him back, the player must choose whether she wants Clementine to watch the torture or not. If she decides to leave, the camera follows Clem out. Sarita, Kenny's partner, complains that he has changed, which means she has failed at trying to save him. This is an elegant form of rewarding the player, who has just saved Clem from becoming like Kenny. On the contrary, if the player chooses to stay, the camera alternates shots of Kenny's savage destruction of Carver's head with close-ups of Clem's face: she tries to look, closes her eyes in disgust, opens them again with a resolute look, then feels some guilt and, finally, a tiny spark of rage. The player gets her reward too: Clem is getting tougher, which is just what she needs to survive.

It should be noted that, because Clementine is not an active agent of this event, whatever the player decides does not change the plot one bit. Nevertheless, it radically changes Clem's image for

the player. From a character building perspective, this is a point of no return that will influence her in subsequent decisions.

So, how come lack of reaction –or even a subtle reaction– to a choice from the game’s side was considered a decrease in agency during my analysis of plot and now I state the opposite? First, because the outcome of the torture choice is fair. Unlike plot-based ones, it delivers exactly what it promises, never betraying player’s expectations with unforeseen twists that render all her decisions useless. Second, because it is powered by the player’s perception of her own actions and how she sees the playable character; whereas plot-based choices demand changes in the game world that call for visual changes. Here, what you want is what you get and what you feel is what you see.⁸

Besides short-term active strategies and long-term passive techniques, it is worth mentioning that the game also uses long-term active ways to foster character-based agency. For example, if the player chooses to take the food from the abandoned car and gives Clementine the hoodie, she will wear it for the rest of *Season One*, that is, during three complete chapters. Even though it is no big deal from a technical point of view,⁹ it means a great difference in terms of agency. Every time the player sees the hoodie, she will be able to remember her decision and the consequences that it had on Lee and Clem’s personality. *Lasting* and *profound* consequences, at last.¹⁰

A final piece of evidence of the strong sense of agency that *TWD* provides by means of character development can be found in the questionnaire at the beginning of the third season. Out of its eleven questions, six are related to character building (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) and three to plot (9, 10, 11)

8 A serious criticism to this theory could just say that the real plot of the game is not the external story, but Clementine’s coming of age. However, none of the character-based player decisions have an influence on the game’s kernels. On a plot level, they are no more than satellites.

9 On the technical side, this means little extra work for Telltale’s 3D team, unlike what happened when they had to redo all animations, texts and recordings for a whole chapter depending on whether the player had saved Doug or Carley. The only difference here is the hoodie itself. The 3D artist in charge of Clementine just had to add a new layer to the character, the hoodie, so the game engine displays it (or not) at all times.

10 Unfortunately, it is not a perfectly balanced resource, since any player who chose not to take the food will never get this kind of reminder. So, if we focus on those who did not choose to take the food –45% of total players according to in-game statistics–, we will see that they have less resources that activate agency than the rest.

—all three of which have to do only with *Season Two*'s ending, in order to trigger the corresponding flashbacks in *A New Frontier*—, while the two remaining questions (2, 3) can be assigned to both categories. Eventually, after two seasons, the game itself acknowledges that what really matters is not the agency-less plot, but its agency-full character development on the player's side.

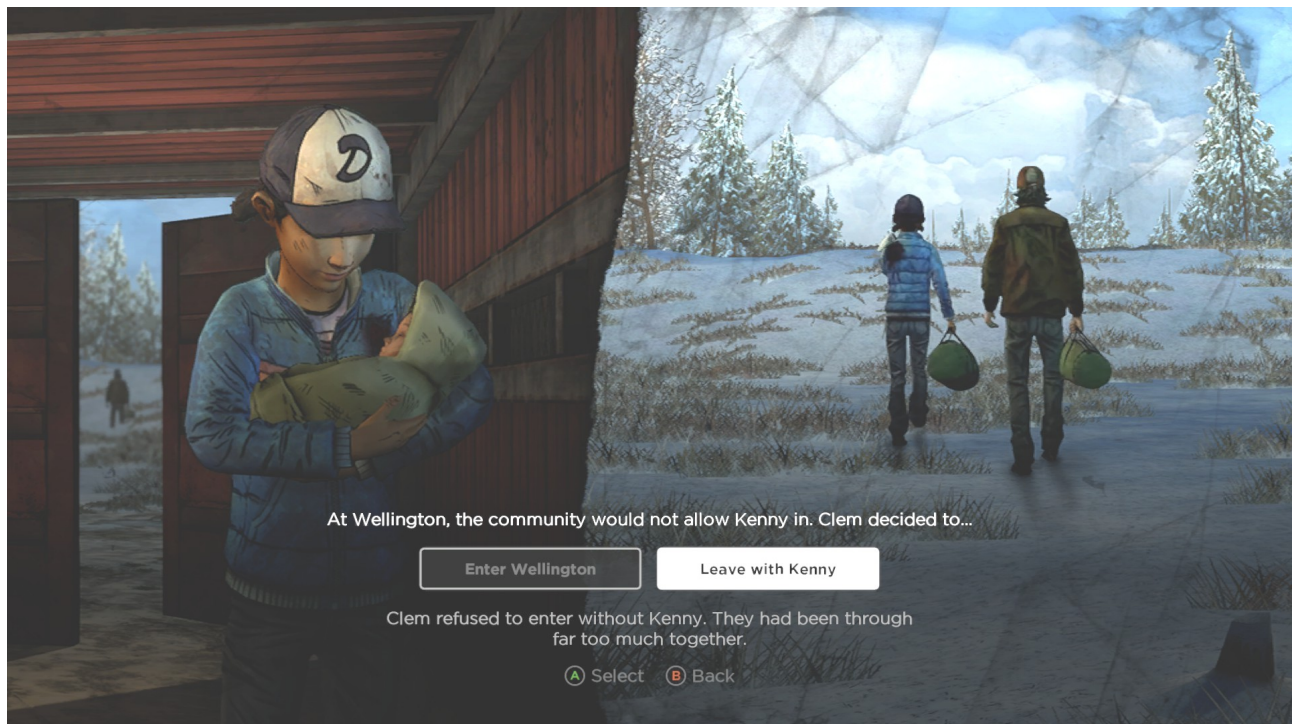


Figure 10. Screenshot: questionnaire at the beginning of S3E1

This section has shown how *TWD* succeeds in providing player agency by means of character building, a task endorsed to the player that, more often than not, does not require an active feedback on the game's side. We have also seen how cinematographic techniques, when combined with interactivity, can provide an important sense of agency, and how video games can use parallel but genuinely exclusive syntactic techniques to enhance its language.

4. Agency as meaning

4.1 Game meaning *versus* player meaning

As I stated when discussing the Kuleshov effect, games can use storytelling techniques inherited from other media in order to create meaning. Just as well, they can use their own genuine interactive, agency-based tools to let the player create her own exclusive meaning: in this case, the playable character's personality. This could suggest that game developers use techniques from non-interactive media just like creators from those media do, that is, in order to author meaning; whereas new features like interactivity and agency are restricted to allow the player to create her own meaning. Actually, that is not necessarily the case. In this section, confronted views on agency and the tensions between game and play will help me argue how *TWD* uses interactivity and agency to create meaning not only thanks to the player, but also regardless of her interaction.¹¹

In his taxonomy of the different points of view that game studies hold on agency, Markus Schulzke distinguishes between determinism and voluntarism. The first one suggests that players are passive receivers of information: "The scope of player agency is therefore severely restricted. The constraint on agency is imposed by a game ideology that is described as being extremely powerful, almost to the extent that the ideology seems to be a more autonomous and powerful actor than the player" (Schulzke, 2012: online). Determinism goes parallel to one of the most important current trends in Game Studies, procedural rhetoric, that finds its most representative scholars in authors like Ian Bogost or Mary Flanagan. As Sicart paraphrases in his extensive study of proceduralism:

[A] game means what the rules mean, and understanding what games are is to understand what their rules describe. (...) Games, procedurally understood, convey messages and create aesthetic and cultural experiences by making players think and reflect about the very nature of the rules, in the way the rules allow them to. (2011: online)

11 We could argue, following Reception Theory, that readers and spectators create their own meanings too. While this is true, the difference between them and the player is that they can interpret fixed signifiers in order to create signifieds, but cannot manipulate the actual signifiers. In video games, the player can actually manipulate or even create signifiers and extract signifieds from them. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the concept *meaning* to express the combination between both signifier and signified. Hence, 'the player creates meaning' should be read as 'the player creates signifieds out of signifiers that she has previously created or modified'.

According to this school, the player is just the activator of an already established meaning, contained by the rules, by the mechanics. This way, the game imposes its meaning on the player, who is exposed to it and assimilates it by playing, but does not create her own meanings.

It seems legitimate, then, to establish a direct relationship between determinism, proceduralism and one of the ways in which *TWD* handles plot agency. By not letting the player alter the overall plot and its kernels, the game imposes on her a fixed, unchangeable, pre-created pair of signifier and signified, which fully matches the deterministic agency views and proceduralist approaches to games as meaningful systems. Plotwise, the game frustrates every chance the player has to express herself and create meaning, but implications go further than that.

The sole fact that the game *could* give the player the chance to modify the plot but *does not*, creates an extra layer of meaning. In this sense, a formal aspect of the game system, namely, its lack of plot-based agency, is acting as a symbol, as a metaphor. This matches the proceduralist notion that rules, which set what the player can and cannot do in a game, are meaningful by themselves. If the plot focuses on the fall of humanity, its lack of agency introduces another idea, namely, that we –as players, as humans– can do nothing to prevent or put an end to it.

This message matches one of the main points in the original *The Walking Dead* comic books and their TV adaptation. No matter how hard Rick Grimes and his group strive to bring civilization back, their efforts are always fruitless. The apocalypse is here to stay and humanity has little or no chance to change that. However, the whole franchise, including the video games, sets this deterministic perspective as a mere background for its real theme: how to “survive in a ‘world suddenly dominated by radical inhumanity’, not by giving up your humanity to survive, but by relying on your humanity to survive” (Meslow, 2012: online).

In order to explain how *TWD* adapts this idea to the game series, it can be helpful to resort to the second view on agency as described by Schulzke:

Voluntarism is characterized by crediting agents with the power to observe from a detached perspective, without being affected by new experiences. It is a very strong view of agency and a weak view of the power of games to affect players. From this perspective, games are a realm of self-expression in which players are free to create and act without the in-game experience exerting any influence on players. (2012: online)

While determinism emphasizes pre-created meanings contained within the game system, thus reducing to the minimum the player's competence to provide her own, voluntarism gives her the chance to create her own meanings while diminishing the game's ability to previously contain them.

If voluntarism is determinism's counterpart, the opposite of procedurality is to be found in play theory, one of the newest schools of thought within game studies. In his milestone article "Against Procedurality", Miguel Sicart stands for the player and her creative event, play:

Play is not only a performance. Play does not only include the logics of the game –it also includes the values of the player. Her politics. Her body. Her social being. Play is a part of her expression, guided through rules, but still free, productive, creative. Without the openness of play, the player cannot express or explore their ethics, their politics. (2011: online)

Sicart even argues that "play, the performative, expressive act of engaging with a game, contradicts the very meaning of authorship in games", and adds that players "don't need the designer: they need a game, an excuse and a frame for play".¹²

It should not surprise anyone that both voluntarism and play theory have much in common with our analysis of character-based agency in *TWD*. As we have seen before, its player is able not only to choose between a limited set of options offered by the game, but she can also provide her own meanings, that may not be contained within it. The player's image of Lee and Clementine's identity, while framed by dialogue options and moral choices restricted by the game, differs among

¹² Most current trends in Games Studies distinguish *game* –the set of rules and contents– from *play* –the act of a player playing the game–. For a more thorough definition of both, see Frasca (2001: online).

players –or even, paraphrasing Sicart, among *plays*–. Moreover, the meaning created by the player influences her subsequent decisions, detaching her even more from pre-created ones. By allowing a higher degree of character-based agency, *TWD* lets the player choose who she wants to be, in a quest for identity building that matches what lies within main character arcs in both the comic books and the TV show. Paradoxically, the game mechanic that allows the player to create her own meanings has a meaning in itself, that is, a game-centric meaning, not a player-centric one: if the player can change identity, the game means that, unlike in the apocalypse-focused plot, there is hope in self-construction, in individual human beings.

Thus, *TWD* manages to embody both opposing determinism/procedurality and voluntarism/play theory by the way it shapes agency in its plot and its characters, respectively.

4.2. Game meaning *plus* player meaning

In spite of this, we should also mention that, unconvinced by both determinism and voluntarism, Schulzke provides a third and more balanced way to consider agency:

The alternative to determinism and voluntarism is to learn from the strengths of each position while avoiding the eliminative reductionism of either of these extreme perspectives. The greatest insight of the determinist studies is that games may produce some effect on players. (...) The strength of the voluntarist view is the insight that in the search for gaming causation we cannot overlook the players' interpretive faculties, the role of past experience in constituting new meaning, and the power to filter information. A centrist view of agency should draw on these insights, but without making the more extreme assumptions about player agency that appear in determinist and voluntarist view of agency. (2012: online)

Since my analysis of *TWD* includes the determinism/voluntarism opposition, it should take into account that both views are partial, extreme and reductionist. Which leads to the conclusion that my segregated reading of agency, based on plot/character opposition, is partial, extreme and reductionist, too. Taking Schulzke's centrist view into account, we should merge both deterministic plot with

voluntarist character building, procedural plot with player-built characters. Once they are combined, the true meaning of *TWD* emerges: while humans have lost for ever the ability to decide about the world, they still have the choice to hold on to their own humanity.

Like our previous partial interpretations, this unified reading matches meaning already present in the fictional universe of Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*. Actually, it is the equivalent to the question powering his overall narrative: "How do we retain our 'humanity' in this (...) posthuman world?" (Hagman, 2017: 49). The only real difference is that the game conveys this meaning not only by means of inherited storytelling tools, like the Kuleshov effect, but also through genuine features that no other media cannot use, like player interaction and agency.

4.3. Commitment to meaning

The idea of agency as a meaningful tool has been broadened by Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, who affirm that agency is not restricted to choice: "Agency is not about selecting between options (...), but is instead about expressing intent, and receiving a satisfying response to that intent. Commitment in this sense might be a purely cognitive process, or it might involve player actions" (2009: online). According to this, agency does not feed on choice, but on player's commitment to meaning. Discussing QTE mechanics,¹³ which restrict player's choice to a higher degree than *TWD*'s plot, Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum add: "Rather than being an illusion of agency, then, such mechanics are in fact the vehicle for agency" (2009: online). In their opinion, agency is "the way by which player shares in the story creation with the game designer" (2009: online), regardless of whether choice disappears or just does not matter. In this light, *TWD*'s lack of a reactive plot should not be seen as a pitfall in agency, but as an agency-full feature because of its ability to provide a meaning

13 A QTE, acronym for Quick Time Event, "is a prompt that forces the player to make a split-second action or suffer usually painful or fatal consequences" (Rogers, 2010: 184). These mechanics, which offer no agency, do not even allow the player to make a choice, but just do what she is told when she is told.

that the player can commit to. All things considered, is there a better interactive way to express that your only agency lies in your identity than by neutralising every single choice that goes beyond yourself?

Besides plot, *TWD* shows further evidence that may confirm Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum's theory. At the end of S1E5, Lee finds the house where Clementine is retained, but the kidnapper sees him and aims a gun at him. Clementine, locked in a room, hears them talking and asks what is happening, which triggers three conversation options: "I'm here, Clem", "It's Lee" and "Let her out". However, no matter which option the player chooses, Lee will never utter a word, because the kidnapper will immediately put his gun on Lee's head and whisper him to stay quiet.

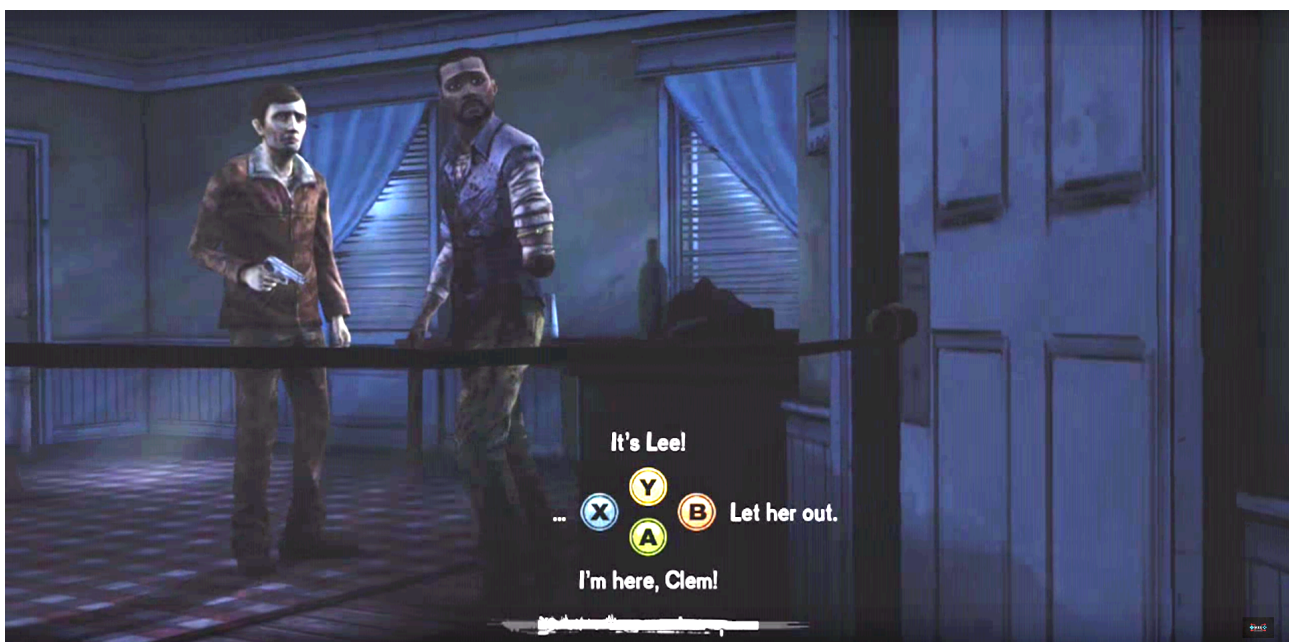


Figure 11. Screenshot: S1E5 climax

It should be easy to conclude that this is the most outrageous betrayal of player agency so far. However, following Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum, there is room to argue that it is not so. The player does not need the game to provide a consequent effect to her choice, but she just needs a meaningful effect for her compromise with Lee's and Clementine's survival. In the context given, a villain is in control of the situation, which means that Lee's ability to make decisions is limited. In other words,

Lee has lost his agency. For this reason, the most meaningful effect should transfer his lack of agency to the player, which eventually implies that the game must ignore her choice.

Moreover, it is possible to extend this idea to the overall plot. The fact that the game does not even care what the player has to say, or that agency-as-choice is absent from plot-based decisions, is a kind of agency too, only a subtler one: the direct effect of being unable to choose in a world that countervails every attempt that characters make to control it. Then again, as we have seen when talking about character-based agency, the player takes her own decisions into account in order not only to build her character's identity, but also to commit herself to the meaning resulting from that unchangeable situation. Regardless of whether the plot listens or not, the Clementine who decides to kill Kenny is not the same Clementine who spares his life. The Lee who decides to steal food is not the one who does not. The Lee who focuses on freeing Clem by saying "Let her out", is not the Lee who tries to say "I'm here, Clem" to calm her down. Agency escapes the restrictions set by the game's rules, because it lies within the realm of player consciousness, in the mental image that she has of her own actions, of how it is changed by them and how committed to it she actually is.

Maybe the game will not take this into consideration. Maybe it will just ignore and forget it all. Maybe it is not true that Lee, Clementine, Jane or Kenny *will remember that*, but that is not mandatory anymore.

The player will remember.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this dissertation I have used the theoretical frame of Game Studies to analyse how Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series uses player agency to create meaning out of plot structure and character building. As a starting point, I have taken Murray's definition of agency as choice (1998).

On the one hand, it has become apparent that agency as choice is not to be found in plot-based decisions. Instead of using a truly branching narrative, *TWD* provides outcomes to player choices that range from passive disregard to overt betrayal. Even when the game seems to be fulfilling its promise –“This game series adapts to the choices you make”– it quickly renders all previous player decisions useless. Moreover, most of these plot-based choices affect what Chatman called satellites, that is, narrative events that can be deleted from the plot without affecting its logic (1978: 54). The opposite kind of events, kernels, seldom include player's choice and, even when they do, the game does not take it into account. In spite of this, *TWD* keeps on telling the player that her decisions will eventually alter the plot. This is the reason why *Season Two* has five different endings, although they all merge in a single path almost immediately.

Character-based agency has proven more productive than its plot counterpart. To start with, playable characters in *TWD* allow the player to express feelings, unlike what Frasca called the cursor-type character (2001: online). These feelings are mainly expressed through choices that the player uses to build their identity. In order to boost player agency, the game uses a number of character-related strategies.

First, it does not let the player create new characters from scratch, but provides some basic personality traits and a clear, unmovable objective. During the first season, Lee (quiet and reflexive) is mainly concerned with Clementine's physical and moral safety. In the second one, Clem (innocent

and eager) is in charge of her own coming of age. Hence, the player will not decide what the characters goals are, but *how* they achieve them.

Second, its use of short-term consequences does not betray player choice, because what really matters here is the image that the player has of the character that she has built. In other words, character is a mental image: the result of her own choices, that will keep on affecting her subsequent choices, even when the game does not remember them.

Third, unlike what happens with plot-based choices, the game finds strategies to express agency that do not require an active reaction on its part. One of them is what I have tentatively called the *Kulechoice effect*, defined as the ability of the player to combine an ingame resource –common to all players– with her own previous choices –not shared by all players– to create her own personal meaning.

Fourth, *TWD* finds sustainable ways to provide long-term visual support to player's choices, by means of just modifying a layer in the 3D model of the player character, like when Clementine wears –or doesn't wear– a hoodie during three full chapters, depending on whether the player decided to steal from the abandoned car or not.

The evident contrast between plot-based and character-based agency has allowed me to set a parallelism with two different views on agency, as stated by Schulzke (2012: online) and two opposed theories on the subject of game, play and meaning.

On the one hand, *TWD's* agency-less plot fits determinist visions of agency and procedural rhetoric, in that they all affirm that a game's meaning lies within its system of rules. In this sense, I have implemented determinism and procedurality in my agency-based interpretation of the game's plot: no matter what humans do, the apocalypse has its own unmovable agenda.

On the other hand, the game's agency-full character-building mechanics allow us to assimilate it to voluntarist perspectives of agency and to play theory, that highlight the player's role as co-author and creator of meaning. Thus, I have argued that character agency in *TWD* stands for the ability of the human species to hold on to its humanity. Moreover, the way that agency differs in both plot and character is a symbol in itself, a meaningful formal resource that conveys the same message that both the original *The Walking Dead* comic books and their TV adaptation deliver.

Regarding to the close relationship between agency and meaning, I have used Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum's theory, for whom agency is not choice but player's compromise with meaning (2009: online). Therefore, I have offered an integrated view of the meaning behind both plot and character agency in *TWD*: even though humans have lost the ability to shape the world, we still decide about our own humanity. Furthermore, if agency is meaningful and plot uses it in a negative sense, then the plot is agency-full, because it fosters the player's ability to compromise with the game's meaning.

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