Start with the guts, go for the head: A Well-Played paper on *The Walking Dead*

Abstract: This paper is meant to serve as a close reading of the dialog system in *The Walking Dead* (2012). Specifically, it explains how the developers grafted principles of good learning onto the ethical dilemmas written into the game's narrative. By reviewing the literature on games and learning, media enjoyment, and moral judgment, it is shown that the game's dialog system fosters reflective awareness of moral agency. The mechanics of the dialog system rely on moral intuitions for quick choices, but the branching-path narrative and episodic design encourage reflection and development of moral reasoning skills. This is explicated further in a series of examples. Then, this learning is analyzed in relation to more traditional teaching goals. The paper concludes with suggestions for future games in this vein, as well as applications for society.

Introduction

Videogames are a unique medium, in that they resemble many other forms of media and activities. Genres like online shooters and MOBAs (multiplayer online battle arenas) are more like sports and less like movies or television shows. Through engagement with the game, players create their own meta-game narrative around matches—but there is no in-game story, at least not one that is centrally motivating to the gameplay. Action-adventure games, like those in the *Metal Gear Solid* series, feature a lengthy story mode, but the narrative unfolds through highly-scripted mission sequences or completely out of the player's hands, in non-interactive cutscenes. Recently, though, there have been several high-profile games with storylines impacted by increasing degrees of player agency. In role-playing games like *Fallout 3* (2008), quests have multiple potential outcomes. Players are often given bipolar choices— prosocial versus antisocial—but, despite the limited and exaggerated range of such choices, many players still feel the moral weight of these decisions (Weaver & Lewis, 2012). With *The Walking Dead*, developer Telltale Games has crafted a narratively focused game with more ambiguous choices and outcomes.

The Walking Dead is different from most games in that half of the game's dynamics are based solely on a branching-path narrative system; instead of framing overall gameplay, interacting with the story is the primary motivation for playing the game. Telltale featured dialog choice as the primary mechanic in *The Walking Dead*; it was a design choice contingent on our inherent enjoyment of identification with and moral assessment of characters. This mechanic forces players to rely on their moral intuitions to make split-second decisions but, over time, the game fosters reflective awareness of moral agency. The game's procedural rhetoric positions players in a unique space: embedded as the protagonist, players are subject to reactions from every character in the game; yet they are immune from strategic disadvantage. Because dialog choices do not impact the more traditional puzzle-solving gameplay— and the narrative will progress no matter what choices players make—players are free to make moral judgments, rather than strategic decisions. Those judgments are, at least at first, likely to reflect players' moral intuitions, rather than their moral reason. However, over repeated instances of decision-making in similar situations across multiple episodes, Telltale implements good learning principles (Gee, 2003) that demand transactive engagement between the player and the game (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010).

People are constantly assessing all incoming stimuli and most of those assessments make use of moral foundations (Haidt, 2001), a subconscious form of judgment. It is therefore theoretically possible to have a lifetime of experience in moral judgment without having expertise. A true expert is a reflective practitioner: someone who is aware of their behavior within the domain of some craft, and can actively assess his or her performance (Schön, 1987). Through layered feedback systems, players are made aware of the choices they make and the outcomes they cause. By practicing through repetition, players are able to explore alternate choices and realign their moral standing in the game, becoming self-aware of their own moral judgment. In this way, *The Walking Dead* teaches reflective awareness of moral agency. Educators should consider this design structure as a means to foster reflective awareness in other skill areas where practice has heretofore been subconscious or otherwise beyond the purview of a traditional classroom setting. Additionally, society at large can benefit from games that act as practicums for moral agency, since increased expertise in moral judgment can potentially yield more self-aware, prosocial behavior from its citizenry.

Game Overview

For the last several years, Telltale Games has been one of the few bastions of classic-style adventure games. Founded by former employees at LucasArts, the studio that defined graphic adventure games through the 1990s. Telltale's games prior to *The Walking Dead* have been standard fare for the genre—focused more on environmental puzzle-solving, as opposed to character interaction. *The Walking Dead*, however, focuses more on a branching-path conversation system—more choose-your-own-adventure than room-to-room puzzle-solving. The game was released in 2012, bi-monthly from April to November, as a five-episode series in the vein of the classic point-and-click adventure genre. First available as downloadable episodes on PC, Xbox 360, and PlayStation 3, the episodes were subsequently bundled and sold at retail as a standalone disc-based game. It has since been ported to handheld and mobile platforms. *The Walking Dead* was well received, both critically and commercially. It has an average score of about 90 on Metacritic and, by the time the second season was announced—a little less than a year since the initial release of the fifth episode—Telltale announced via press release that it had sold over 21 million episodes to date (Kubba, 2013). Each episode takes about three hours to complete and the narrative follows, among other survivors of a zombie apocalypse, the two primary protagonists: escaped convict and former professor, Lee, and his ward, an abandoned girl named Clementine. As Lee, players are charged with taking care of Clementine, solving environmental puzzles, and negotiating interpersonal tensions among an ever-changing group of survivors as they search for a haven in the deep South of the United States. Zombies, known as walkers, are incurable and must be avoided or eradicated.

Puzzles span a wide array of activities, from starting a train to solving the disappearance of medical supplies. Players must collect items, read maps and ciphers, and interact with buttons and switches in the correct sequence in order to activate solution states. Puzzles must be solved the same way every time, but conversations are always multiple-choice scenarios where players can judge, mediate, and act on the decisions of others. The disclaimer before each episode reads: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play." While major plot points are unchangeable, there are many opportunities for Lee to align himself with various characters, and quite a few instances where he—and by extension, the player—is forced to choose between saving one of two individuals, where the non-chosen character will usually die. Decisions do not change where the party goes or the overall pacing of the story, but characters' dialog will change depending on Lee's interpersonal exchanges with each one of them. Most conversation choices are timed. Easy decisions, like choosing how best to explain difficult realities to Clementine, are given a long, slow-burning timer—whereas intense fights between group members must be mediated in just a couple of seconds. During puzzle-solving segments, non-player characters (NPCs) are available for non-essential conversations about their backstory or their perception of current events; dialog choices in these encounters are not timed.

When playing with a controller, the player uses the left joystick to guide Lee around environments and the right joystick to scroll a cursor over objects to scan them for potential interaction cues. If a person, item, or other object is available for inspection, conversation, or physical interaction, then a cross-shaped diagram will appear with choices corresponding to one of the four face buttons. There are very few moments of player-controlled action, like running, shooting, or hiding—and all of those moments are easy and brief; they are meant for immersion, tension, and pacing, only. There are no twitch-based skills to master. Lee's life is never at stake; he can die, but these are unlike the plot-afforded instances where other characters can (or will) die. Sometimes, players will have to rapidly press buttons on the controller that correspond to context-sensitive actions, like holding a door shut or kicking a walker in the head. These are commonly known as quick-time events (QTEs). When the player fails a QTE, a game-over screen is presented and the player must start from the most recent checkpoint. Furthermore, since Lee must survive for all five episodes, decisions about taking or leaving supplies, saving food or sharing it with others, and other such survival-relevant issues do not impact gameplay—except in how other characters perceive him. Many conversations take place while engaging in non-stressful, yet plot-essential activities, like cutting wood planks or pushing defeated walkers off an electric fence. These scenes of dialog-action-dialog are meant to embed conversations in the world and to foster a more cinematic pacing of events.

Teaching Awareness of Moral Agency

The Walking Dead teaches reflective awareness of moral judgment because most of the game's primary systems are rooted in an abstract simulation of social interaction. These systems result in emergent narratives that foster transactive engagement between in-game feedback and the player's self-perception. This engagement is made possible by the mechanics of the dialog system, which

leverages players' moral intuition for fast, gut-reaction decisions. Then, through feedback systems and multiple opportunities, the game makes players aware of their moral reasoning skills. In this manner, *The Walking Dead* is a practicum in which players become reflective practitioners of moral judgment.

Judgment and Media Enjoyment

The Walking Dead is unique in that it teaches reflective awareness of moral agency, but the morally-tinged content is standard for dramatic entertainment. Affective disposition theory (Raney, 2006; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976) asserts that viewers like to watch dramatic entertainment because they derive enjoyment from seeing outcomes that reward and punish the characters according to their morally-justified side-taking (Raney, 2003). In order to assess characters and their behavior, viewers behave as "untiring moral monitors," continuously judging the morality of the narrative (Zillmann, 2000). Once the viewer decides a character's morality aligns with their own, the viewer begins to empathize with the character and the enjoyment derived from desired outcomes is amplified in relation to the level of empathy (Raney, 2004). At least in part, people enjoy narrative entertainment because it provides a setting for empathy, perspective-taking, and morality-based justice that activates and gratifies our moral emotions (Raney, 2001; Haidt, 2003). Even seemingly aversive content that is defined by negative affect like tragedies—or, in this case, zombie-apocalypse dramas—are enjoyable because of the moral virtues that are displayed in adverse conditions (Oliver et al., 2012). The gameplay in *The Walking Dead* is enjoyable because people enjoy moral judgment. The interactive nature of videogames confounds and complicates the issue of morality and enjoyment, but does not curb the appeal of moral judgment as a form of media enjoyment.

Judging characters in non-interactive narrative media is much safer than exercising moral agency in videogames. Most videogames are based on dynamics that involve skill-building practices to control or reduce noise in environments, which typically translates into mechanics that are based on aggressive—often violent—acts (Koster, 2005). These aggressive acts are performed against virtual characters but, since mediated communication is processed the same as non-mediated communication (Reeves & Nass, 1996) and players perceive in-game characters as quasi-social entities (Hartmann, 2008 – in H&V 2010), it should be presumed that most traditional forms of gameplay would elicit guilt from players. Indeed, players recognize their actions as being in conflict with their real-world morality and try to deal with the resultant concerns of this discrepancy (Klimmt et al., 2006). However, just like in reality, people are quick to "reframe their wrongdoing and regulate their dissonant state," (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010), a practice known as disengagement of moral agency (Bandura, 1990, 2002). Indeed, Klimmt et al. (2006) found that players consciously rationalize in-game actions that conflict with their moral code, while Hartmann and Vorderer (2010) found support for the proposition that many common design tropes (wartime settings and alien enemies, for example) help players diminish their moral concern. Most importantly, when players are given the choice of being prosocial or antisocial in games that explicitly feature moral choice, they are more likely to exercise their moral code and to choose prosocial actions (Weaver & Lewis, 2012).

Acting on (Moral) Intuition

Adding a timer to the conversation system forces players to make quick decisions. Instead of deliberating over each of the (usually) four available choices, the game encourages players to make intuitive, snap judgments about crises and characters. This is not a learned skill and the game does not attempt to teach it. Instead, Telltale relies on what Haidt (2001) calls moral intuition. According to Haidt (2001), we are all moral agents that constantly judge our experience and the other agents that take part in them. Haidt (2001) argues that people are "emotional dogs" with "rational tails." That is, we take moral action based (much) more on moral emotion than moral reason. The reasoning process is more like a post-hoc justification for intuitive judgment. When assuming a rationalist stance on moral judgment, we falsely conclude that changing someone's stance on a moral issue is simply a matter of rebutting their argument. But, as Haidt (2001) points out, "such a belief is like thinking that forcing a dog's tail to wag by moving it with your hand will make the dog happy" (p. 823). In other words, to change someone's moral judgment, it is hypothetically more effective to address people's moral emotions than their moral reasons. Then, once their emotions have been made clear, they can be tempered with reason. Moral emotions are essentially unchangeable but, over time, exposure to moral reason can theoretically influence how an individual acts on those intuitions. In order for a game to teach the conscious practice of moral judgment, it is necessary to begin with moral emotions, to leverage people's natural ability to intuitively assess moral behavior. In *The Walking Dead,* this happens at the granular, moment-to-moment gameplay in the multiple-choice conversation system. Over the course of the five episodes,

the NPCs react to players' choices and make explicit the social implications and consequences. In this way, the game starts with players' 'guts' and then 'goes for the head.'

Reflective Practice

Moral intuition can be seen as a sort of "knowing-in-action," a term which Schön (1987) uses to describe immediate, intuitive, embodied knowledge. "We reveal it by our spontaneous, skillful execution of the performance; and we are characteristically unable to make it verbally explicit" (p. 25). Descriptions of knowledge-in-action are necessarily post-hoc rationalizations that are often inaccurate or even contradictory to the performed knowledge (Schön, 1987). All of this description runs parallel to the analysis of moral intuition in Haidt (2001). Knowing-in-action is best assessed and altered during reflection-in-action: a state where performers evaluate moment-to-moment performance, as well as general models of practice (Schön, 1987). However, reflection-in-action implies 'awareness-of-action'—and, while Schön (1987) speaks mostly of professional practitioners of learned crafts, the vast majority of people are practicing moral agents without being reflectively aware of it. Reflection-in-action, much less reflection on reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987), is inaccessible to agents who have yet to link their performance to awareness (even though that awareness must not necessarily be verbal or explicit). So, counterintuitively, the practice of moral intuition must be accessed through reflection-in-action—which, in turn, must be triggered by reflection on reflection-in-action. Schön (1987) claims that the best setting designed for learning a practice is a practicum, "a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers" (p. 37). It has already been established in this paper that a videogame featuring moral choice could serve as such a practicum.

Procedural Rhetoric

Gee (2003) says that all games promote identity work but, according to the definition of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2008), a game should be more effective at teaching identity work if the game systems are directed specifically at interpersonal relations, as opposed to platforming, tile matching, or shooting. Not only does the conversation system comprise about half of the gameplay, this system does not interact with the other systems. Therefore, the player is not motivated to make in-game decisions amoral because of some strategic advantage (i.e, slaughtering orphans because it is the only way to get the most powerful weapon in the game). Lee's life is never at stake. If the player fails while guiding him to survival, the game resorts to a "game over" screen and resets as the nearest checkpoint. Furthermore, since Lee must survive for all five episodes, decisions about taking or leaving supplies, saving food or sharing it with others, and other such survival-relevant issues do not impact gameplay—except in how other characters perceive him. This creates a unique decision space, where the player is connected to the narrative through Lee, but Lee himself is given a special immunity from the weight of player choices. So, even though players are immersed in the game's narrative as moral agents, there is a practical distance between players' choices and many of the scripted plot points. You can leave a woman to be eaten alive so that you can sneak past a herd of walkers, or you can shoot her out of mercy and risk the resulting walker attack—but there is no real risk, since Lee will make it to the abandoned pharmacy, regardless. The only palpable consequence is your partner Kenny's reaction to you deed (and he is fine with letting her suffer). In this way, the game teaches players how to make decisions that define their moral code, rather than to act in a purely utilitarian fashion. The game is more about moral judgment, rather than moral decisions.

Identity Work and Transformational Play

According to Barab, Gresalfi, and Ingram-Goble (2010), transformational play—that is, play in which a player's identity is changed through transactive experience—is accomplished through three types of positioning. One of these is the positioning of players as intentional decision-makers charged with "the responsibility of making choices that advance the unfolding story line in the game" (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010, p. 526). In this game, players are forced to play as Lee, who is placed in the roles of survivor, guardian, leader, mediator, and problem-solver. Similar to Gee's identity principle (2003), it is this embedded action as a role-laden agent which causes change "both through dialogue with interactive game characters that they encounter subsequent to their decisions and through their reflections on themselves as the types of players who have made such decisions" (Barab, Gresalfi, & Ingram-Goble, 2010, p. 527). Almost inevitably, players will reflect on the similarities and differences between the three facets of the tripartite identity. If not, at the end of each episode of *The Walking Dead*, the five most story-influential decisions are posted onscreen—along with a constantly-updated display of what other players chose, broken down by percentage points. So, in addition to comparing the three

facets of the tripartite identity, players must also reconcile their decisions in a pseudo-social sphere, by reflecting on how their choices differ from the choices of other players.

Cinematic Empathy

Bogost (2011) claims that one of the ways games can communicate with players is by expressing empathy through the procedural rhetoric. The game forces players to experience the visceral social consequences of their choices, many of which are moral dilemmas—by definition, no-win scenarios. People will call you a monster. More impactful, though, is the purposeful drawing out of the mechanics required to fully enact some decisions. For instance, if you decide to free a man from a bear trap, without a key and facing a hoard of walkers, there is only one choice: chop off the man's leg. The leg does not sever on the first blow. It takes about ten swings of an ax, and it takes longer for the button prompt to reset each time. The camera angle slowly descends and focuses on the leg; the developers want you to live with the consequences and experience the extremity of your choices.

There are mandatory actions that do not have any long-term story-branching functionality, but exist simply to enhance the empathetic experience for players. In the second episode, Lee is tasked with handing out four food items—to ten hungry people. Players are required to consider the implications of such a decision, while free to rationalize the choices in an internal narrative built outside and on top of the game. There is also an extended sequence in one episode where Lee cuts Clementine's hair (to avoid it being grabbed by walkers) and teachers her to shoot a gun. There are not many moral choices in this segment, nor does is there any player agency in this segment that can affect the rest of the game; it exists to cultivate empathy in the relationship between Lee and Clementine and to reinforce the girl's dependency on her caretaker.

Multi-level Feedback

Feedback is given just-in-time, long-term, and in a post-hoc meta-analysis, all of which can help the player learn (Gee, 2003). One of the gameplay display options that is active by default is a meta-level feedback source during conversation segments. As players make decisions that affect NPCs' perceptions of Lee, notifications in the top-left corner of the screen make explicit what is implied in characters' reactions and the resultant social dynamics. (It is also interesting to note that this just-in-time, meta-level feedback is activated by default in the game menu.) Comments like "You chose to tell the truth" appear when you tell a farmer about your sordid past, or admit that you hid information from some group members for a short while. Some comments are more direct than others. If you choose to yell at Clementine, you might end up reading "Clementine's feelings are hurt." However, if you decide to tell only part of the truth to a newcomer, or judge someone's actions to their face, you might get an ambiguous comment like "[He or she] will remember that." This feedback does not eliminate the need for intuiting social dynamics, it merely provides some just-in-time learning mechanisms for properly assessing performance. These reminders do not appear again when they might be applicable; they are only a means through which the developers can made apparent what was and was not successful with different characters as those actions and reactions occur. Players can use this feedback, though, by assessing NPCs' personalities and temperaments in one conversation and modifying how they approach the same character or issue in subsequent interactions. NPCs' demeanors toward Lee can vary greatly, depending on the tone and tact of dialog choices—and, of course, the main storyline is also affected by player choice, as outline in previous sections.

In the fifth episode, Lee's story comes to a climax when he meets the mysterious man who has been communicating via radio with Clementine over the past couple of episodes. He reveals that he has been watching Lee since an event late in the second episode, and he begins to cite specific incidents and the choices that the player made during those situations. Each time the man mentions something, the player has a chance to explain, apologize, defend, or retaliate to the man's commentary. Players cannot finish the game without being forced to reflect on their major decisions throughout most of the game. Additionally, at the end of each episode, the game displays live, leaderboard-like charts with percentage breakdowns of the split in the binary choices of the five most significant decisions of that episode. This allows players to compare their decisions and to assess their moral judgment in a more social context. Many of the results are split fairly evenly, implying the dilemma-like nature of most of the major choices. This encourages players to reflect on the flexible nature of moral agency and spur further reasoning about their own choices.

Learning through Repetition

Good games makes use of what Gee (2003) calls the "practice principle," where players are given multiple opportunities to exercise their skills. Over the course of the five-episode season, the game offers several similar decisions. This allows players to practice the reasoning skills they have learned and to make different choices. Sometimes, similar choices also differ enough to test the parameters of the player's moral code. In the first episode, Lee encounters a survivor, Irene, who has just been bitten. She has abandoned hope and wants to kill herself before she turns into a walker. Without a gun, her death would be arduous and miserable, so she asks Lee to use his gun. Here, the player is first confronted with the moral dilemma of euthanasia. In the third episode, Duck, the son of Lee's friend Kenny, is bitten by a walker. Kenny decides to kill Duck before he turns into a walker, but the player is given the option to offer to kill Duck so that a father is spared the pain of ending his son's life. In the fourth episode, the group of survivors seeks refuge in an abandoned house, only to find an emaciated boy who starved to death in the attic and turned into a walker. Kenny pulls his gun, but finds this boy and his tragic circumstances are too similar to Duck; he becomes shaken and asks for help. So, again, the player is offered the opportunity to spare someone from suffering. Additionally, the game makes use of scaffolding; the back-and-forth of a group argument is used to fill time while the decision meter shrinks; this can actually inform players on different perspectives while deliberating between choices.

Applications and Conclusions

As stated above, this game's design is more about judging than deciding, more about identifying with a code of ethics than simulating a post-apocalyptic survival scenario. By adopting a character's persona and engaging in social problem-solving, players can probe other characters for facts and opinions, make a moral choice, and reflect on the meaning of that choice in relation to themselves, other characters' reactions, and general social mores. Jurors should play these sorts of games before observing a case. Children should play a moral-judgment game that teaches them to adopt others' perspectives, to avoid unjustified judgment. Politicians should play this kind of game to remind them that relinquishing moral agency is a choice, that stepping back from an issue is itself a morally-tinged act. Frankly, everyone should use interactive narratives to reflect on their moral selves.

Morality games could be used in the classroom—perhaps to gain multiple perspectives on historical issues, like slavery—or during after-school programs, perhaps specifically targeted at students with behavioral problems. Traditional discipline only hardens troubled youth and encourages repeat offenses. Where negative reinforcement fails, positive engagement with empathy-focused design principles can encourage bullies to stop tormenting their peers. Essentially, the curriculum would involve playing the game, then seeing what choices everyone else made, just like in *The Walking Dead*. Students would keep a journal reflecting on the choices they have made, which they would bring to class discussions. There would be some significant obstacles to overcome. Designing a branching-path game is an exercise in meticulousness and tedium. Furthermore, each choice must be given significant consideration. Maybe they will not be equal or ambiguous, depending on what the learning goals are and the instructor's comfort with weighting choice for the sake of having players experience a particular route but, regardless, every decision must be thoughtfully crafted and placed in perspective with all of the subsequent choices players can make. Some paths would eventually need to be closed off to the player; second-chance opportunities might be offered to those who show a shift in decisions.

Playing a game like *The Walking Dead* engages players' moral intuition, creating a history of snap-judgment decisions that can be analyzed in subsequent social encounters. The conversation mechanics force players to make intuitive decisions and the feedback systems inform players about the consequences of their actions. This method starts with the guts, *then* goes for the head. Starting with moral intuition is an alternate approach; it differs from most prior attempts at moral education, which start with a top-down view of morality through post-hoc rationalization. The method does not necessarily stand in contrast to those who advocate for a rationalist stance on analyzing and teaching moral decision-making processes. Once an individual's moral behavior is articulated—in this case, through the form of emergent, game-based identity—then a practicum-like setting with top-down discussion is still a useful tool. However, it does demand an acknowledgement that educators need to initiate moral engagement before they are able to address moral reasoning.

Morality is a form of personal and social regulation. We are all moral agents and we are constantly judging our experiences and the agents that take part in them (Haidt, 2001). Moral decision-making should be a perpetually-refined practice, since it impacts many facets of life, from schoolyard socializing to international politics. "To become skillful in the use of a tool is to learn to appreciate, directly and

without intermediate reasoning, the qualities of the materials that we apprehend *through* the tacit sensations of the tool in our hand" (Schön, 1987, p. 23). Fortunately, by the definition of skill in Schön (1987), we are all skilled users of moral assessment. Unfortunately, because morality is intuited (Haidt, 2001), we did not have to learn its practice or develop a reflective awareness of our moral behavior—and so it is difficult to talk about it, much less alter it. Even more difficult to overcome is our natural predisposition toward snap judgments. While moral intuition is unassailably quick at basic attitude formation, *actions* based on moral intuition are usually placed through models of social and personal feedback, including reflection on reason and the reason of others. Ultimately, people's behavior is the result of social learning based on feedback about actions rooted in intuition. Especially with morality, it starts with the guts but, by processing social feedback, people are able to reflect on their intuition and adjust their behavior. *The Walking Dead* uses a conversation mechanic that is rooted in moral intuition, making the game accessible and enjoyable to players—but, by listening to NPCs' rationalizations and seeing the consequences of choices over the course of multiple episodes, players are encouraged to reflect on their moral judgments and develop expertise in moral reasoning.

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