

ABSTRACT

BELL, KRISTINA WILMA FRANCES. "Growing Up in a World Like This": Interpretations and Performances of Intersectional Parenthood in Telltale's *The Walking Dead*. (Under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Taylor & Dr. Sarah Stein).

This dissertation is a multi-layered and multimodal qualitative exploration of how players interpret and co-construct performances of parenthood, gender, and race within and through Telltale's *The Walking Dead (TWD)* (2012), a graphic adventure game with a compelling choice-based narrative and non-stereotypical characters that transform in response to difficult, often ethically ambiguous player choices. This examination, which is rooted in intersectional feminist game studies and science, and technology studies (STS), looks at the influence of *TWD*'s diverse, non-stereotypical characters and moral decision-making with an increasingly widening scope. I utilized three different methods, each its own chapter, preceded by an introductory chapter and followed by a conclusion. My first chapter is an introduction to the study. My second chapter is an interactive autoethnography built in Twine that explores how I interpreted and played the game as a new mother, with consideration to the various gatekeepers that limit/permit my technological use and mastery. My third chapter is a microethnography that seeks to understand how two very different players transform or resist the game's messages and themes. My fourth chapter is a qualitative interpretive content analysis that explores the extent to which the game's themes circulate in the broader online communities that play and discuss the game. Finally, my fifth chapter provides a conclusion where implications and limitations are discussed. In all, this project works towards a holistic understanding of the influence of an award-winning, narrative-driven game about parenting in a world of emotional and moral crisis.

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“Growing Up in a World Like This”: Interpretations and Performances of Intersectional Parenthood in
Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*.

by
Kristina Wilma Frances Bell

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APPROVED BY:

Nicholas Taylor
Co-Chair of Advisory Committee

Sarah Stein
Co-Chair of Advisory Committee

Devin Orgeron

Christopher Poulos

DEDICATION

To my son, Jamie Bell Dee, who was born at the start of my writing. Your life and love have been my primary source of inspiration and motivation. I write this for you.

To my mother, Phyllis Johnson Bell, my biggest supporter. You have always believed in me.

To my late father, Charles Allison Bell, for instilling a lifelong appreciation of technology and learning in me. I know you always loved me.

Finally, to my husband, Timothy Andrew Dee, for all your support, love, and sacrifice.

BIOGRAPHY

Kristina Bell spent the first eighteen years of her life in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in a small brick house with a dogwood tree in the front yard and a vegetable garden in the back. It was there she fell in love with punk rock, feminism, storytelling, film, veganism, and video games. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Filmmaking, with a specialization in Editing and Sound at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, and her Master of Arts in Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). In 2008, she started as a full-time instructor at High Point University (HPU) in Communication. She began the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media doctoral program at North Carolina State University in 2011 as a part-time student and worked as an instructor for the entirety of the program while commuting from two hours away. In 2018, she was promoted to an Assistant Professor in Game and Interactive Media Design and the Director of the Media Fellows at The Nido R. Qubein School of Communication at HPU. She lives in Winston-Salem with her husband, two-year old son, and German Shepherd named Conan.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Walking Dead (TWD) is an award-winning, episodic, interactive-drama adventure game that tells the story of a young Black girl, Clementine, as she grows up during a zombie apocalypse in the American South. The games are part of a larger *The Walking Dead* franchise which originated with a series of graphic novels by Robert Kirkman. The first season of *TWD* tells the story of a Black history professor, Lee Everett, who was arrested for the murder of his wife's lover. At the start of the series, he stumbles upon Clementine who was recently orphaned during the zombie epidemic. After the cop car transporting Lee crashes, the two mismatched survivors find each other: Clementine leaves the safety of her treehouse to save Lee from the bite of her babysitter-turned-walker and Lee responds by becoming her surrogate father, struggling to protect her from the dead and the living while helping her understand the strange new world they live in.

The game creates a “tailored” experience around the choices you make throughout — there are major narrative plot points that are unchangeable, but the manner in which characters trust you, support you, and survive are modifiable through your actions. Gameplay involves a large amount of group communication and conflict resolution; players choose what to disclose to others, who to trust, and whether to co-construct¹ Lee as friendly, aggressive, or non-communicative. Characters notice and “remember” your choices; their personalities and reactions towards Lee change based off your decisions. Players must also make emotionally and ethically challenging choices, such as who to save during a zombie attack and whether to shoot a small boy who has been bitten and will inevitably change into a zombie. The game provides a limited amount of time to make these decisions; not acting in the time provided can cause Lee to remain silent and inactive — although not acting is an acceptable choice in itself. Throughout your play, the game reminds you that your choices have impact; the words “Clementine will remember that”, or “Kenny will remember that”, etc., appear after significant interactions or fraught choices. Telltale's system documents the major choices made by each player and at the end of the game, reveals the percentage of people who agreed/disagreed with your played actions. At the end of Season One, Lee is dead, and players go on to play as Clementine in Season Two. The choices you make in season one carry over into each game; as Clementine grows up, you see how your influence on her, first through Lee, and then as her player, shapes her into adulthood.

¹This work recognizes that video games are a representational and experiential medium mutually shaped by the game and the player (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Voorhees, 2015). The term “co-constructed” includes an understanding that players' interpretations, in-game actions, and physical world needs influences the moment of play. This is demonstrated in depth in Chapter 2.

The portrayal of Lee as a devoted, caring father, breaks the common stereotype of a Black father as a “deadbeat dad” (Connor & White, 2007), and moves away from the recent trend of games that feature a father protagonist who is violent, negligent, and selfish (Voorhees, 2016), and whose children only exist in the narrative to trigger the protagonist’s transformative change (Brice, 2013). The game’s choice-based mechanics, with emphasis on Clementine’s reactions, work to encourage players to perform masculinity in a manner that is nurturing and loving, and has been shown to help players unlearn hegemonic masculine gaming practices (Bell, Taylor, & Kampe, 2015).

The aim of this dissertation is threefold. First, I want to gain understanding of the complex assemblage through which players make sense of and react to this game. This work builds off prior research (Voorhees, 2015; Caldwell, 2000) that discusses gameplay as an “economy of desire”; an understanding that play is created, retold, and retooled through an interaction between the game and player, and contributes to an emergent movement which recognizes the value in studying video games through a notion of gameplay as a ‘push-pull’ between players and games (Voorhees, 2015; Kennedy, 2012, Giddings & Kennedy, 2008). Second, I want to contribute to understandings of how different experiences of identity are performed and ‘re-tooled’ through *TWD* play. I utilize feminist intersectionality theories to aid me in understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between player identity and gameplay. This includes a consideration of the influence of the players’ identities and prior experiences with games, narratives, and technologies, as well as the influence of the game’s narrative, representation, aesthetic, mechanics, and the larger culture the game is situated within. Third, I want to explore the larger communicative practices shared by players within Telltale’s gaming forums in order to gain a more multifaceted understanding of the player, the game, and the community than what is found in most studies of gameplay. Together, the answers to these three questions will help me to understand how different readings, interpretations, and experiences are mediated through gameplay across three distinct platforms: Twine, microethnographic video-recording of play, and online forums (Bell et al., 2015).

I incorporate three separate studies to examine the influence of each of these different platforms. I first present an autoethnography about my personal play within Twine; second I present a microethnography that involves video-recording of play, and finally I include an interpretive content analysis of online forums. Each individual approach pushes a bit deeper into the understanding of the game’s co-constructed experiences, in total portraying a more holistic (but inherently less systematic) discussion of gameplay than what can be done with one study on one platform alone. This includes not only a consideration of experiences surrounding *TWD* that are co-constructed between different players and

the game, but whether/how the players' communication surrounding their *TWD* experiences are co-constructed by various mediums (Twine, video-recording, and online forums) because, as Marshall McLuhan (1964) pointed out in his seminal work, consideration of the medium is essential to understanding a message and its influence. Every medium uniquely limits/enables what can be communicated through it and how audiences engage and understand those messages.

This project encompasses multiple field sites (Burrell, 2009; Marcus, 1998), including both online and offline spaces, and considers how the participants lives and their online communication are mutually "embedded" (Hine, 2007). This produces a "bricolage" of the gameplay— a messy, complex, ongoing co-construction, built between researchers and participants of the various representative pieces that are relevant to the project (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This structure remains flexible to change, and is shaped through the addition of new techniques, interpretations, tools, and approaches.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by various feminist theories and frameworks for understanding and interpreting media and gendered behavior; this includes (but is not limited to) media representation (Higgin, 2009; Shaw, 2009; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009); posthumanist theories of attraction (Taylor, Kampe, & Bell, 2015); understandings of masculinities including troll (Phillips, 2015; Massanari, 2017) and nerd (Kendall, 1999) enactments; and social linguistic work in d/Discourse (Gee, 1990 & 2015). There are three theoretical understandings, each from different disciplines, that serve as keystones for this entire body of work: feminist media studies understandings of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Puar, 2011), games studies work on player/avatar identification (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, et al., 2015), and feminist science and technology work concerning gatekeepers of technological use and mastery (Cockburn, 1992; Wajcman, 2009). I introduce each of these keystone theoretical frameworks in the subsequent sections.

Intersectionality

First and foremost, my entire study is informed by an understanding that identities are intersectional; this includes a consideration of "overlapping structures of subordination" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 249), such as gender, race, class, sexuality, culture, ability, etc. Intersectionality looks past the experience of the white, middle-class, female previous feminist work examined (Crenshaw, 1989) and seeks to understand how race, class, sexuality, nation, age, and being gender-queer (Meyer, 2012) shapes lived experience.

I apply understandings of intersectionality carefully, in the vein of Puar's (2007; 2011) description of intersectionality as an assemblage, which is a recognition that the components (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) cannot be disassembled and analyzed independently. Puar criticizes how prior work by white feminists apply the term "intersectionality" only when discussing Black female bodies, re-engaging the 'othering' that the term is intended to mitigate against (Puar, 2011). This work strives to include consideration of all intersectional identities, including whiteness and masculinity, and the subsequent discussions will not serve as simply a means of labeling differences between black female and the white, or the gay gamer and the straight, but rather it will look at each player's play through analysis of all the interwoven parts that shape, silence, and resist their identities. I apply this understanding of intersectionalities as an assemblage in order to understand how a player's intersectional identities influence their play, including (but not limited to) how they are impacted by the various structural and individual systems of oppression unique to their own identities and how they interpret a character's intersectional representation.

Representation/player avatar identification

This work applies theories of textual analysis, which includes discussions of stereotypical representation (Higgin, 2009; Shaw, 2009; Williams, et al., 2009) and symbolically annihilated identities (Tuchman, 1978), but recognizes the limits of studying representation when applied to "a representational and experiential medium" such as games (Kennedy, 2002). The representation of cultural difference within games is reflective of problems within our broader media landscape; however, a player's experience of a game is unique; their choices change the representation of the characters and the overall experience. While the game's representations, rules, and mechanics may encourage certain interpretations and performances, there are other factors — cultural and individual — that impact the manner in which the player interprets and performs the represented identity (Kennedy, 2002). For example, different players respond to symbolic annihilation of their own identities differently. Symbolic annihilation is an acknowledgement that consistent underrepresentation of the stories and experiences of marginalized groups perpetuates a cultural norm that the missing groups are of little consequence. When faced with playing games that have little to no representation of LGBTQ+ identities, some LGBTQ+ players will "queer" a text and invert characters and relationships that reflect their own experiences and worldview (Shaw, 2009), others may ignore the lack of representation and play "despite the game" (T.L. Taylor, 2003; Shaw, 2009). For some players of certain types of games, representation is of little consequence. Newman (2002) observed that new players tend to choose characters based off considerations around

representation, but expert gamers choose characters with skills/traits best suited to help them achieve their goals.

Players may engage with an avatar in a variety of different ways, and while they may experience identification, they do not need to identify or become the character to play, enjoy, or win the game (Taylor, et al., 2015; Newman, 2002; Giddings, 2007). Players may also use avatars as a tool to achieve goals and explore possibilities (Linderoth, 2005; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, et al. 2015); as a role, an outlet for the player to act and perform as a fictitious character (Linderoth, 2005); or as queer desire; a fluid, wavering connection that ranges from homosocial to homoerotic (Voorhees, 2014). For example, Giddings' (2007), in his analysis of his children playing *LEGO Racers*, found that the boys' identification shifted as the game and their needs/desires changed — they were the Lego men, the Lego car-driver, the constructors of the men, and children playing with Lego men, among other positions. In a previous study of *TWD* (Taylor, et al., 2015), we also noted that players shifted between states of identification which was apparent in our discussion of their play; the participants would often use “Lee” and “I” (or me) interchangeably, sometimes within one sentence. Therefore, within this project, I view particular relations between player and avatar — or between player and other virtual and physical aspects of the game — as opportunities for qualitative exploration that can not be determined *a priori*.

Situated knowledges

This project is framed through a lens of “situated knowledges” (Haraway, 1988), which includes a discussion of *TWD* that is ‘situated’ — bound in constructions of race, class, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, etc. and is in context with the larger historical and cultural norms and practices surrounding technologies and video games. This approach, which is aligned with the interpretivist tradition, embraces an understanding that scientific objectivity is not possible in the way it is conventionally understood — as a distancing/technological removal from the site of study. Instead, data collection and analysis should be a “conversation” between researcher and subject. Through this project I work towards de-privileging my position and maintaining an openness to “surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production”, because, as Haraway points out, “we are not in charge of the world” (p. 594).

Method

Throughout this dissertation, I rely on interpretive qualitative methods, primarily ethnographic methods, which requires description and analyses of cultural phenomena — in this case, gaming culture and player experiences — on a deep, complex, and meaningful level. Ethnography is well equipped to shed insight

on the diverse participants' experiences of inequality and performances of intersectional identities. I include the addition of qualitative content analysis in order to inform the ethnographies' discussion of the players' experiences of *TWD* outside of the gameplay. For my specific project, I utilize autoethnography, microethnography, and qualitative content analysis.

Autoethnography

I incorporate autoethnographic data collection and reflection to systematically analyze my personal experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) of playing *TWD* in order to understand how my identity shapes in-game decisions and how the gameplay experience (the consequences, character reactions, etc.) in turn shapes identity/perceptions. Autoethnography is a useful tool to reflect upon my gameplay through an informed critical-cultural lens. This method allows me to seamlessly explore the manner in which my in-gameplay experiences overlap with the physical world — the “meatspace”, something hard to note/observe in other players. I act through a dual role, as both researcher and participant — my reflections do simply rely on my personal experiences, but are grounded in theoretical work within game, film, and feminist studies. Acting as a researcher-as-participant allows me to explore player motivations, experiences, and backgrounds more deeply and thoroughly than through traditional ethnographic methods. I play through the game series and pause the game occasionally to journal about my experience to provide in-depth reflection. Upon analyses, I borrow from the journals as needed to form my discussion.

Whereas autoethnography permits me to achieve a great amount of depth in understanding a solo experience, the reflections are limited to my experiences. Microethnography will provide an opportunity to understand the game differently, via different media (e.g. video recording and observations), showing whether/how themes and experiences that I encountered get engaged — or not — by players from backgrounds different from my own.

Microethnography

I use microethnography, which involves video-recording of observed phenomena (Giddings, 2008), to document and analyze eight different participants' (WD1 – WD8) gameplay, interviews, and group discussions of *TWD*. I collected the data with Nicholas Taylor and Christopher Kampe during summer of 2014 in North Carolina State University's Circuit Studio. Participants completed the study in pairs, each through three sessions. First, we conducted an in-take interview to discuss their backgrounds and experiences with gaming and *TWD* franchise, immediately followed by the playthrough of season one,

episode one. We audio-recorded recorded their gameplay and their verbal utterances during their play. Second, participants returned to the lab to playthrough the second episode of season one, which we also recorded. We then asked participants to reflect upon the most meaningful moments of their play, which we considered when cutting together a highlight reel of their play that was played for them during the third and final session. In that session, we video recorded participants as they reflected on their play through a facilitated discussion about their decisions and thought-processes. We ended with an end-take interview.

Our method of data collection was adapted from traditional microethnographies (Mehan, 1979; Streeck & Mehus, 2005) to reflect a more interpretive approach. Participants were given the opportunity to interact with the researchers during gameplay, and the researchers led reflective discussions between players after the play sessions were complete. In our project, we believed it to be impossible to remove all distractions and capture a “true” “objective” moment of play — the very presence of the camera (and the researchers, for that matter) contribute to the gameplay — so we, in turn, embraced our blurred role as participants and reflected upon our impact and asked participants to do so as well. In terms of gameplay research, this interpretive adaptation is particularly useful because participants often don’t remember many of their in-play decisions after lengthy play-through sessions, they often don’t speak much during solo-sessions, and it could be potentially detrimental to stop them during play to ask them to reflect or explain their choices. Recording plays gives researchers the ability to, at a later date, replay the gameplay footage to encourage participant reflection and discussion. While, you still risk losing some interesting data through memory loss, it is the hope that the footage evokes participants’ memories enough to provide meaningful exploration of the overlapping worlds.

What unifies autoethnography and microethnography is their careful and detailed attention to subjectivity, social construction, and thick descriptions. Within each approach, I reflect upon my own subjectivity and how it may influence the findings; my data essentially will be my “own constructions of other people’s constructions” (Geertz, 1973). I detail the observed events and phenomena using “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973), a style of writing that is driven by narrative — the studied moments will be described in a detailed, visual manner, and placed in a larger historical, cultural, and theoretical context. Through these efforts, my work in turn will resist against notions of objectivity and embrace the value of critical interpretation.

Interpretive qualitative content analysis

Lastly, I rely on interpretive qualitative content analysis to understand the communicative practices surrounding Telltale Game's *TWD message boards*. Interpretive content analysis is a latent approach to documenting and categorizing observable phenomena in which material is thematically organized and data-grounded inferences are made about the motives, actions, and symbolic meanings of the authors (Ginger, 2006; Drisko & Maschi, 2015). In my analysis, I discuss the d/Discourse (Gee, 2015) of those participating on the forums, which includes an attention not only to their verbal language, but to the emojis, memes, gifs, and user-created fan videos and images that were shared on the forums. This method is classified as interpretive because I recognize that this process is essentially an interpretation of others' interpretations, and I consider my own perceptions and biases that may influence my analysis within my discussion.

The prior interviews and observations from the prior auto and microethnographic studies helped guide my search. I selected Telltale's message boards because I explored it often during my autoethnographic play, and I selected themes and topics important to my play, and the play of my microethnographic participants. The insights taken from the previous studies surrounding the experiences of the players help shaped the themes pulled and the websites explored through online qualitative content analysis.

Chapter Summaries

The following chapter is an interactive, autoethnographic analysis of my experience playing *TWD* series. The autoethnographic analysis is built into Twine, an open-source, interactive narrative creation tool that has been previously used by independent (and often marginalized) designers, like Anna Anthropy (2012) to create experiences different from what you would find in traditional games (Harvey, 2014). My autoethnographic reflections include (but are not limited to) my rationalization for in-gameplay decisions and my interpretation of parenthood through play of Lee Everett, viewed through multiple lenses associated with my multiple social locations — such as my personal experiences as a daughter and new mother, my academic knowledge of feminist literature and media studies, and my enthusiasm for *The Walking Dead*, adventure games, and zombie-based media. I use feminist theories commonly found in textual analyses, such as symbolic annihilation and intersectionality, to frame my experience.

The third chapter is a microethnographic analysis of two participants' gameplay experiences. Previous work (Bell, et al., 2015) found that two of our participants, both black males, adapted their gameplay to be less "hegemonic" (Connell, 1995) so they could play Lee as a "social father" to Clementine, a non-biological father-figure who provides emotional and ethical support (Coley, 2001; Connor & White,

2007). I expand this research to understand whether/to what the extent different players respond to the game's cues surrounding Clementine, and how their personal experiences/perspectives influence their interpretation of fatherhood. I focus most of my analysis on the playthroughs of WD3, a white male, self-identified "gamer" who shares characteristics of a "nerd" masculinity (Kendall, 1999), and WD4, a bi-racial (Korean & American) woman who plays games "casually" (Chess, 2017). For this analysis, I rely heavily on the theory of attraction between players and elements of gameplay (Taylor, et al., 2015) to study, on a micro-level, the various affiliations between player and in-game elements that are activated during and in reflection of a play experience, coupled with work on fatherhood and masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell, 2014).

The fourth chapter uses interpretive qualitative content analysis to explore the d/Discourse practiced and perpetuated within Telltale's *TWD* online forums in order to understand *TWD* players interpret/perpetuate *TWD*'s themes regarding parenthood, interpersonal/group communication, and the impact of race, sexuality, and gender on social structures and politics.

I consider my findings with other work that examines the hostile, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, and troll-like behavior within online communities surrounding other games and game-related platforms, such as Pulos' (2013) discussion of LGBTQ communities within *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), Salter & Blodgett's (2012) harrowing look at hypermasculinity on Penny Arcade's website, Gray's (2011) description of racism within in Xbox Live, Massanari's (2017) analysis of misogynistic subreddits, and Phillips (2015) work on internet trolls, a subculture of anonymous users who are motivated to exploit and harass others for their own enjoyment and entertainment (Phillips, 2015).

The final chapter provides me with an opportunity to connect the pieces of insight/knowledge gained in each of the previous chapters to better understand how players interpret and co-construct performances of parenthood within and through *TWD* play. I will discuss my overall findings, implications, and possibilities for future research. It is my hope that I end this project with a holistic understanding of the influence of an award-winning game that broke stereotypes and pulled at heartstrings through its complex storytelling and diverse characters.

CHAPTER 2: INTERACTIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Artist Statement

This serves as an introduction to my next chapter, an interactive autoethnographic exploration of how motherhood influences my enjoyment and interpretation of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012). I utilize an autoethnographic approach to allow me to read my in-game decisions and rationale very closely, in order to help me understand the unique and personal factors that influence my experiences surrounding *TWD*.

The chapter has been built into Twine, a free text-based game-making program that has historically been used by designers from historically marginalized communities to resist mainstream gaming norms and tell stories that are personal and underrepresented (Harvey, 2014). I chose Twine because of its ease and accessibility, and to align myself with those who have used Twine as a means towards social and personal transformation. Readers will “play” through my gaming experiences and interpretations; they may choose to explore certain themes in greater depth than others. There are videos to watch (or skip) and images and sounds to build an academic experience that is immersive and unique.

As I play through *TWD*, I reflect upon how my intersecting identities, personal experiences, and interpretations influence my understandings of the game, and how the game's narrative and mechanics influence my self-identity and perceptions of the physical world. I analyze these experiences of co-constructed play through intersectional feminist understandings of media representation and feminist science and technology studies (Cockburn, 1992; Wajcman, 2009) work which examines who has access to technology and the various gatekeepers that limit/permit technological use and mastery.

This work furthers previous explanations of identification and play as complex and in flux, dependent on a player's prior experiences, beliefs and values, gaming abilities, and current physical state (Taylor, Kampe, & Bell, 2015). I illustrate how I move in and out of positions of identification fluidly throughout play, switching focus between my own values and identities, the character's appearance and personality, and the utilization of my character as a tool to end the game quickly to attend to physical world needs.

Twine as a tool of resistance

Twine is a free, open-source interactive-narrative building tool, first created in 2009. Users may build a simple interactive story using the program's defaults, or employ HTML, CSS, Javascript, to add photos,

effects, sound, video, and modify the overall design of the story. Many users have created various guides, wikis, and templates available on the web, to help inexperienced users customize their stories. Twine provided an outlet for those who lacked advanced coding skills but had interactive stories they wished to tell. Many Twine game designers do not seek commodification and do not wish to break into mainstream industries, but instead, they create non-profit or “pay-what-you-can” games on the periphery, out of an intrinsic motivation to connect with others and express themselves.

At the time of Twine’s 2009 release, few games told the stories of characters who were non-white, non-male (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009) and game companies were reluctant to include homosexual relationships in games out of fear that the majority of gamers are homophobic (A. Shaw, 2009). The lack of representation of diverse characters and their stories contributed to a “symbolic annihilation” of these groups (A. Shaw, 2009); the selective exclusion communicated that the voices, lives, and culture of these under-represented groups are insignificant to American culture.

When marginalized groups were represented, they were often portrayed in stereotypical and problematic ways. Female characters’ stories were told through the perspective of the male player, the “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975). They were sexually objectified background characters, “damsels in distress”, enemies, or completely invisible (Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Sarkeesian, 2012). Black characters were rarely portrayed outside of the stereotypical athlete/gangsta binary (Leonard, 2006; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009); showing young black males that their only options are to pursue athletics or crime (Leonard, 2006, Higgins, 2009). White male characters, who are overrepresented, are portrayed as having stereotypically hyper-masculine features and behaviors (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), glorifying aggression, heterosexuality, and dominance.

These problematic and symbolically-annihilated representations are partially the result of a lack of gender diversity within the mainstream game industry. A 2015 survey of game developers by the International Game Developers Association found that 75% of all game developers identify as male, and 76% are white. Game team leaders revealed they are less likely to hire women because of their lack of experience gaming (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter 2006), and the women who do get hired within the game industry are often faced with sexual harassment and sexism in the workplace (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006; Fron, Fullerton, More, & Pearce, 2007). Furthermore, the intense schedule and required, unpaid overtime required by various companies is oftentimes impossible for women who are typically responsible for the majority of the domestic duties (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006; Fron, et

al., 2007). Because AAA games are less appealing and the industry is inhospitable to women, AAA gaming companies design games that primarily appeal to other white male gamers (A. Shaw, 2009; Fron, et al., 2007).

Twine provided an outlet for marginalized players who sought interactive experiences beyond the normative mainstream experience provided by AAA titles. Anna Anthropy, a queer, transgendered, DIY (do it yourself) gamemaker and author has been credited for promoting Twine and creating a “Twine Revolution” among independent, marginalized game designers (Harvey, 2014). Anthropy wrote of her desire to create games outside of the “single culture” of the games industry. She wanted to make a game that was about something different than “men shooting men in the face” (Anthropy, 2012, chapter one, para 9). One of the games she created, that is neither about men or shooting, is a self-published Twine game titled *Queers at the End of the World* (2013). After beginning the game, players have 10 seconds before the game’s world ends. They can choose to kiss their partner, hold her, take her hand, or tell her “I love you”. Each of their choices will give them subsequent choices until eventually, they run out of time and everything is wiped away. There is a sense of urgency as players race against the timer to do and communicate as much as possible before the end of the game. The combination of a timed and choice-based mechanic speaks to the universal, fleeting, and unpredictable nature of love. No matter what the player chooses, the world still ends — but the way the player/characters experience that end differs.

Independent game designer and critic Mattie Brice (2014, June 28) writes in her discussion of the text games, that *Queers at the End of the World* and most other text-based games are not really about the choices you have, but rather, how the games “aim to train your perception, get you to understand the architecture of your thoughts, the reason why you chose the things you do” (para 7). It’s not so much the outcome of the choices that matter, but rather what happens to the player during the process of making those choices - the game encourages players to analyze their rationale behind their decisions, shedding insight into their hidden beliefs and values, and their past experiences and privileges that inform those ideologies. *TWD*, with its ambiguous decision-making and choice-based mechanics, works in much the same way as *Queers at the End of the World*. While your decisions do help shape the characters and impact many outcomes, there are many important moments that will happen no matter what you choose, but this “illusion of choice” is not obvious unless you play/watch the game multiple times, or find it elsewhere (news articles, forum posts, walkthroughs, blogs, conversations). Therefore

the significance and meaning of each choice is interpreted by the player. This process works to “train your perception” and deepen self-awareness.

I utilized the “illusion of choice” mechanic when designing my interactive nonfiction narrative experience. Readers had agency over what topics they read, and how much in-depth they explored those topics, but they were not able to control the outcome of my playthrough or thoughts on the game. But rather, I hoped that this process of choosing paths and options helped “train their perception” (Brice, 2014, para 7) to help the audience understand not only why I made the choices I did, but to provide insight into what types of information and knowledge they prioritize, and how their past experiences and privileges inform their interpretation of the game and the playthrough of my analysis.

My work has been informed by other Twine games, most notably Zoe Quinn’s *Depression Quest* (2013), and Michael Lutz’s horror games *The Uncle Who Works at Nintendo* (2014) and *My Father’s Long, Long Legs* (2013). Each of these games, like many games created in Twine, can be classified as “personal games” (Harvey, 2014, p. 99), which are games that involve personal stories and independent, DIY production. Quinn’s *Depression Quest* is designed to illustrate the consuming struggle that people with depression face to help people better understand depression and to help those who are suffering feel connected. *The Uncle Who Works at Nintendo* explores themes of misogyny within video game culture and child abuse. *My Father’s Long, Long Legs* explores family secrets and the depth of darkness that dwells within a seemingly normal suburban home. My chapter borrowed thematic and stylistic elements from these prior works. Like these stories, I utilize Twine to weave a personal story containing elements of abuse, misogyny, secrets, and emotional states. My interactive narrative’s structure was also similar - I included hyperlinks within the story’s text that allowed readers to explore asides, as well as hyperlinks at the bottom of sections (labeled as “next” or “continue”) prompting readers to click to move forward with the story. Like Lutz, who used thunder, clock chimes, and dogs barking in *The Uncle Who Works at Nintendo*, and a digging and humming sound effect and a flashlight lighting effect in *My Father’s Long, Long Legs*, I incorporated sound and lighting effects to help set an ambience and build a more immersive experience. As readers explore my game, they may hear various blends of sounds of the game and my life relevant to the discussion - my son snoring, zombies screaming, the pump “wah-wah’ing”, and gunshots firing. The background color also changes, becoming darker as the reader journeys beyond the main story and delves into darker material.

It is also important to mention that the structure of my interactive narrative, like the examples I discuss above, has roots in early interactive narratives from the 1970s and 1980s, including print-based interactive narratives, such as *Choose Your Own Adventure Books (CYOA)*, that required readers to make a choice and turn the page to discover the repercussions of that choice, and early digital text-based adventure games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* and *Mystery House* which required users to type in a series of commands to explore a world and solve puzzles. As text-based adventure games developed into graphical adventures, eventually, the text-based commands were replaced with dialogue and action options that players could click, birthing their new categorization of “point and click adventures”. That newer system of selecting predetermined choices shortened the player’s learning curve and made the game accessible to a larger audience. I incorporated the predetermined choices within my interactive experience because my audience is largely academic; I did not want the user interface and the player’s lack of experience with interactive narratives to limit their exploration of the text.

This design of this interactive experience was modeled after adventure games characteristic of providing “freedom within constraints” (Salter, 2014, p. 35), which balances structured storytelling with interactive play (Salter, 2014). As Salter (2014) explains, successful interactive narratives manage to play within the confines of this tension, “adventure games succeed not at the limitless interactivity of this pure definition, but at the limited interactivity demanded by narrative.” (Salter, 2014, p. 35). The more structured and linear a story is, the less agency can be given to the player, and in turn, if too much freedom and exploration are given to the player, the designer risks losing narrative coherence and story structure. Through my process of game-making, I went through and eliminated multiple branches and player choices out of a concern that it lacked structure and was too easy for readers to get lost in the branches.

My style

Most academic writing is ill-suited for game-making; its sober prose and topical organization would make for a story that is dull and uninspired. Thankfully, there is an approach to research writing that incorporates creative writing and storytelling to craft texts that are personal, emotional, and provocative: autoethnography (Berry, 2006).

Autoethnography, at its core, is a blend of biographical creative writing and research. It is designed to emotionally connect and heal audiences (Bochner & Ellis, 2006), to help us understand and reevaluate the identities constructed by and for us, and provide a means “to write about the poetics of

living” (Goodall, 2004, p. 188). Autoethnography has the potential to “re-create the interpretive anchors that so powerfully shape how we constitute ourselves and experiences” (Berry, p. 10, 2006).

Autoethnographers consider stories “gifts to the world” (Poulos, 2006, p. 64), and believe in the power of stories to heal their authors and audiences. Because of its reliance on art to communicate and reach audiences, autoethnography supports the merging of artistic style with rigorous research: texts are grounded in data and observations and incorporate non-traditional poetics and visual design.

I find autoethnography to be a natural fit with a deeply personal interactive experience via Twine. Twine’s interactivity and customization serve autoethnography’s goals of immersive storytelling well, and its ability to structure stories nonlinearly helps me structure a story that merges topical organization (common in academic research) with narrative story structure. Through building my story in Twine, with its choice-based mechanics and branching narratives, I am able to serve two different audiences: academic audiences may choose to skip branches that focus on personal reflection and storytelling, and those who are outside academia may choose to only stay on the surface of academic thought; only diving into its complexities if desired. And lastly, because Twine has been historically embraced as a tool used to queer traditional texts, creating more “radical, experimental, and non-normative development, stories, and mechanics” (Harvey, 2014, p. 99), it will serve as an appropriate tool for building a non-traditional, avant-garde chapter of my dissertation.

Limitations of a non-traditional dissertation chapter

From a personal and academic standpoint, this has been the most challenging chapter to write. I have had to publicly disclose deeply personal information without hiding under a fictional guise, merge two styles of writing together: (academic research and creative), utilize technical skills to build an interactive experience which required quite a bit of trial and error, and have had to negotiate the production of a non-traditional chapter with my committee, who, while wholly supportive of my quest, are admittedly not unaffected by the academy’s strict traditions surrounding dissertation writing. This experiment has also raised questions regarding its archival presence. While it is possible to submit the HTML file, thus preventing me from making future changes to the chapter once published, the multimedia used through the chapter, the sound effects, images, and video clips, are all hosted on separate sites - Imgur, YouTube, and SoundCloud. While I made sure to only link to uploads owned and operated by me, at any point the companies could close and destroy the links, or I personally could decide to take down and “break” my project, thus changing the dissertation experience. And finally, because an interactive experience is co-constructed by the player and the designer, it is impossible to duplicate one committee member’s

experience. An interactive narrative places importance on the reader/player's interactions, thus making it harder to judge than a static text.

But despite these limitations, I found this to be a worthy experiment. Within academia, we struggle to make our voices heard outside of the ivory tower or even beyond our disciplines.

In particular, dissertations tend to be rarely read by anyone outside of one's committee. Most are stored in dusty old cabinets and untapped databases, representing a decade old journey of work and research. But some doctoral students have pushed these traditional boundaries by creating work that is creative and more accessible. A.D. Carson, a rhetorics, communication, and information design doctoral student, developed a **34 song rap album** for his dissertation (Young, 2017); Nick Sousanis, an interdisciplinary studies doctoral student, **created a comic book** about visual thinking; **Amanda Visconti**, an English doctoral student, created an interactive digital dissertation to enable readers to annotate Joyce's *Ulysses*; and **Jesse Merandy**, also in English, built a location-based mobile game about Walt Whitman (Patel, 2016) for his dissertation. Even a doctoral student in mathematics, **Piper Harron**, incorporated creative writing/humor and sections designed for "the layperson". In the same vein as these prior works, I work to merge art with research into one, packaging it in an interactive form that appeals to those I write with and about, through an autoethnographic style that works towards evocation and immersion.

So I declare: In this piece I align myself with the misfits, the rebels, the silenced, and the oppressed. I stand with the gamers who are women, queer, or of color, and the academics that embrace interpretive and feminist approaches to research. I support the academics who have been shunned and criticized for their idealistic goals of speaking to and moving those who are outside of academia's clique, and for the gamers who have been harassed, bullied, and forced into silence. It is not my expectation that this foray into interactive dissertating will break walls and bridge barriers. But it is my hope that it will continue forward as another baby step into a new world of academic writing, and may ignite an idea in the mind of another, and another, and together we can continue on our shared mission to construct a new reality.

CLICK TO PLAY: A New World: An Autoethnographic Telling of Motherhood and Telltale's The Walking Dead (2012). <http://philome.la/krrris/a-new-world>

CHAPTER 3: MICROETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

This chapter moves the examination of the communicative practices co-constructed within and through *The Walking Dead (TWD)* a step further, expanding from the subjective experience of the researcher as player to a microethnographic exploration of the experiences and interpretations of two very different participants as they play and discuss the first two episodes of the series. This study seeks to understand the degree to which players' previous experiences and intersectional interpretations of media influence their experiences surrounding a game that works to encourage critical thought and self-reflection. To unpack this, I utilize a posthumanist theory of attraction between players and elements of gameplay (Taylor, Kampe, & Bell, 2015) to study, on a micro-level, the various affiliations between player and in-game elements that are activated during and in reflection of a play experience.

This furthers the work from Chapter 2, in which I unpacked the various ways a game that subverts tropes and raises moral quandaries encouraged me to critically evaluate my beliefs and experiences surrounding parenthood. This study seeks to fill a gap left by a limitation in this research: as an intersectional feminist game studies researcher, I seek out critical thought and reflection which I furthered through long sessions of writing, recollection, research, and analysis; but how will players that may not be as invested, if at all, in critical understandings of play respond to the game's cues?

I view this as a continuation of not only my second chapter, but of two previous articles (Taylor, et al., 2015; Bell, Taylor, & Kampe, 2015), based off a microethnographic study I co-authored with Nick Taylor and Chris Kampe, completed in the summer of 2013. We found that *TWD's* ambiguously moral decision-making, its branching narrative, and adaptive characters created a compelling opportunity to explore whether and to what extent players felt identification with Lee, the Black male playable character. This chapter utilizes unpublished data from that study of 8 participants (WD1 – WD8), primarily focusing on the experiences of WD3, a White male self-identified gamer and WD4, a biracial female who plays casually and infrequently, to further our understandings of the findings from the previous articles.

In a continuation from the discoveries found in that previous work, this examination considers the relationships between the player and in-game elements (including, but not limited to, the avatar), as not stable, fixed or universal, but as shifting in moment to moment and can only be understood through the context/description of the player and the player's experiences surrounding and in-relation to the game

(Taylor, et al., 2015). Our previous work (Taylor, et al., 2015) found that player's in-game decisions are a result of "an entanglement of conflicting forces" (para. 7), and offered a theoretical framework, designed from DeLanda's (2011) interpretation of Deleuzian "attractors", to help identify and understand those various forces. We proposed the following categories of attractors: 1. *simulated*, derived from the game; 2. *lived*, derived from the players' own life outside of the game; 3. *conventional*, derived from past experiences with media, narratives, and/or myths; and 4. *situated*, derived from embodied responses to the act of play (i.e. reacting slowly because you did not get much sleep the night before; playing quickly because you have to go to the bathroom).

This piece expands upon the attractors framework to include an attention to intersectionality on a molecular level: an examination of how the 'macro' categories of gender, race, socioeconomic status, able-bodiedness, sexuality, etc. interact with 'micro' interactions of the game to reinforce or transform player subjectivities. This allows me to explore the shifting affiliations of two demographically different participants including a thorough consideration of the players' intersectional identities and privileges.

Literature Review

Avatar identification

This work is aligned with the area of qualitative scholarship that recognizes that the relationship between a player and an avatar/playable character in a narrative game is more complex than the identification believed to be associated with other forms of narrative media, such as film and television (Giddings, 2007; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008). Previous work has shown that while a character's identity, representation, and personality can work in junction with the game mechanics, hardware, and aesthetics to influence how an individual player views and connects with a character (Bell, et al., 2015), there are other categorizations of player/avatar relationships. Players can engage with avatars as technological tools, a means to achieve goals and explore possibilities (Linderoth, 2005; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, et al. 2015); as a role, an outlet for the player to act and perform as a fictitious character (Linderoth, 2005); or as queer desire; a fluid, wavering connection that ranges from homosocial to homoerotic (Voorhees, 2014).

Players move in and out of these positions fluidly throughout their play, sometimes focusing on their own values and identities, sometimes the character's appearance and personality, sometimes the character's abilities, and sometimes all simultaneously. The catalysts for these shifts are different for

each player, and are unique to each play session; a player's prior experiences, beliefs and values, gaming abilities, and current physical state are all some of the many factors affecting the relationship.

Where Nerds Rule

This paper explores the gaming experiences of one participant who identifies as a gamer and is very much a part of gamer and nerd culture, and another who plays games only casually, and therefore has limited exposure to the culture and its members. Our player who is situated in nerd culture is playing from a more privileged position because gaming culture is somewhat dominated by "geek" or "nerd" masculinities. A "nerd" is typically thought of as a White, middle-class, educated man who dominates through his intellect but is "subordinated" (Connell, 1995) because of other attributes (i.e. attractiveness, size, lack of sexual experience and athletic ability). (Kendall, 1999) The nerd moniker brings a degree of status and respect within certain social circles (Kendall, 1999). Despite their considerable privilege from being white, male, and technologically advanced, nerds view themselves as marginalized (Massanari, 2015; Ging, 2017), and certain subsections of nerds, such as self-identified "betas" and "incels" (involuntary celibates), blame women for this marginalization. Incels and betas, who are part of a larger group of misogynistic online interest groups referred to as the "manosphere", have declared revenge on women, feminists, political correctness, social justice warriors (SWJs), and "alpha males" (Ging, 2017). They are associated with GamerGate, a massive, misogynistic harassment campaign, and many consider mass murderer Elliot Rodger, perpetrator of the 2014 Isla Vista killings, a hero. His killing spree motivated Alek Minassian to pledge himself to an "incel rebellion" and murder 10 people by running them over with a van on a busy Toronto street in 2018 (Beauchamp, 2018, April 25). Incels view Minassian's terrorist attack as being as justifiable response to their subjugated societal status; one man wrote on incels.me "I do not blame Alek Minassian for what he did. I blame society for treating low status men like garbage. There will always be more rampages because of the way society treats us" (qtd. in Beauchamp, 2018, April 25, para. 15). These groups have weaponized elements of nerd masculinity in increasingly dangerous misogynistic ways, but it's important to note that not all nerds are misogynistic or violent, and there are women who identify as being "nerds" or "geeks", although many feel they have to hide their nerd-like interests (Bisset, 2018 March 2).

In order to be accepted within nerd culture, one typically needs to prove mastery over digital technologies (Kendall, 1999 & 2011) or other accepted topics to that particular group (i.e. knowledge about video game history or game lore, comic books, anime, science, etc.) (T.L. Taylor, 2012) In addition to proving an extensive, specialized knowledge, one must also prove their passionate commitment,

otherwise they may likely be excluded by the group (T.L. Taylor, 2012; Kendall 2002). These cultural norms limit participation from groups who have not had the same access to technologies and information. Low-income individuals are unable to stay up to date with latest games and technologies and therefore excluded. Women, who game less as children as a result of cultural norms that discourage women from play and industry practices that market gaming products primarily to boys (Carr, 2005; Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007) are also unable to prove their prowess.

Many games marketed and designed for women, i.e. those with a feminine “designed identity” (Chess, 2017), are not accepted within nerd gaming groups and are stereotyped in a derogatory manner as being “casual”. These games, such as *Diner Dash* (GameLab/Play First, 2003), *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) and *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012) are inexpensive, can be played for short bursts, and have a quick learning curve; many women are more easily able to play games in this manner because of their additional domestic responsibilities (Chess, 2017). My own analysis in chapter 2 confirmed this; by the time I booted the software on my PC and troubleshooted errors, I had already eaten through 25 minutes of my 30 spare minutes to play. Because I had not yet reached a save point, that five minutes of play (and 25 minutes of associated labor behind it) was lost. Casual games are often dismissed by “hardcore” gamers and critics as “stupid”, and “insignificant”, largely because they are associated with female players (Anable, 2013). The players of these games are commonly referred to as “filthy casuals”, a term conceived by “hardcore” gamers on 4chan’s /v/ (video games) board in 2008 and was popularized by a meme (knowyourmeme.com, 2013). “Hardcore” games, which are predominately marketed towards men and boys, are action games in sci-fi and fantasy worlds and are expensive, time-consuming, and challenging (T.L. Taylor, 2012; Chess, 2017).

It is important to note that many women play casual games in ways similar to hardcore gamers and other women enjoy playing hardcore games in casual or hardcore ways. (Consalvo, 2009; Chess, 2017). We should also be careful not to assume that women are not included in hardcore/nerd gaming spaces because of their gaming preferences; previous work by Carr (2005) has shown that preferences are fluid, are affected by various factors, and can change depending on their access and the context of their play.

One factor limiting women from nerd and “hardcore” gaming spaces is that many prove to be inhospitable spaces for women, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Hypermasculinity, sexism, and racism is prevalent throughout video gaming culture; there have been many reported cases of women who were belittled, verbally assaulted, and harassed by hardcore gamers (Consalvo, 2012,

Salter & Blodgett, 2012) and women of color who were linguistically profiled and harassed because of their color and gender (Gray, 2012). When women are allowed in hardcore gaming spaces, they are forced to play subordinate roles, such as ‘booth babes’ or cheerleaders, and are punished if they step outside those boundaries (Taylor, Jenson & de Castell, 2009). The alienation of women from gaming spaces is particularly problematic because it perpetuates the myth that masculinity is associated with computer competence and femininity with a lack of competence (de Castell & Bryson, 1998; Kendall, 1999; Jenson & de Castell, 2011; Fisher & Harvey, 2013). Our subsequent analysis considers the ways our players’ assumed or ascribed identities of ‘gamer’, ‘nerd’ and ‘casual’ intersected with their other identities to influence their choices and interpretations within the game, their interactions with each other, and our discussion about their play.

Theoretical framework: Attractors defined

To further understand the catalysts behind the players’ shifting identifications and motivations, I apply the attractors framework utilized in Taylor et al.’s (2015) microethnographic study of players. The framework defines four different categories of attractors: *simulated*, *lived*, *conventional*, and *situated*. It’s important to note that the examples I include in each category are not universal, but are unique to each player and play experience. For example, one can not assume that all female players identify more with female characters, or that players will perform the character’s assigned gender. Players may either invert or ignore certain representations to reflect their own worldview or needs. Some female and queer gamers have reported in interviews that they attempt to ignore the stereotypical and lack of representations and play “despite the game” (T.L. Taylor, 2003; A. Shaw, 2009), others have chosen to read heterocentric texts as queer, yet other still avoid heterocentric texts altogether and instead play games with lead characters that are positive representations of the player’s own gendered, sexual, and racial identities (A. Shaw, 2013).

Simulated

Taylor et al. (2015) defined *simulated* attractors as cues derived from the game. These could stem from narrative, aesthetic, audible, procedural, and mechanical components and are made obvious when the player references diegetic choices when justifying their actions. One example, was my playthrough of *TWD Season One* from chapter 2; I mentioned that the game encouraged my playthrough of Lee as a sensitive loving father figure by providing options to hug Clementine and say “I’ll miss you”, as well as including a “Clementine will remember that” mechanic after these heartfelt moments. The game’s design of Clementine — an adorable girl who was brave despite her vulnerability and mature beyond her

years — made it easy for me to bond with her quickly and intensely. I often wondered how I would have played the game if the child protagonist was replaced with Duck, a young boy who was described by his father, Kenny, as being as “dumb as a bag of hammers” and whose poor choices and hyperactive behavior caused many problems for the group of survivors. This speaks to how my lived experience worked with the simulated to inform my decisions; I related to Clementine’s tomboyish/genderqueer ways, such as her decision to wear a red hoodie and baseball cap over a dress. This increased her likeability and possibility influenced my choices to please her.

Lived

Lived attractors, as Taylor et al. (2015) explained, occur when players justify their actions by their past experiences and their own personal beliefs and values. In our previous study, (Bell, et al., 2015), we asked WD1, an African-American & Native American former professional gamer, about his decision to not have Lee harm a character in the game who had killed his friend, he said “I feel like I put a really good layer of humanity in who he was as a person... because as much as we want the characters in the game to be invincible, no matter how hard I play it out, the overall Karma system...he’s still vulnerable as a player. I feel like I did the best job as I could...I feel like I saved Lee in the eyes of people around him and in the game later on.” Here he is assessing Lee through his own beliefs on morality, and making assumptions about how characters viewed Lee without referencing any in-game cues to justify those assumptions. This case also highlights that this attractor is often found in conjunction with another attractor — i.e. something that occurs in the game (simulated) may trigger a reaction from a memory/similar experience. WD1’s choice to walk away from the man occurs shortly after Clementine’s shock and horror after he killed another — the two attractors, simulated and lived, work together in influencing WD1’s choice. A player’s own predisposed beliefs concerning others’ may influence their play decision. For example, one character in the game, Kenny, makes some racial microaggressions. Players who have experienced racism personally, or who are educated about racial microaggressions may become less trustful of Kenny than others who are oblivious to issues of racism and identity.

Conventional

Conventional attractors are derived from previous experiences with media, narratives, and/or character representation. For example, WD1 explained that it was really important to be the best Lee possible, because Black characters are often portrayed as stereotypical in games, and they’re usually the first to die: “I just had big expectations for him to be the best survival character while being the best group leader, because usually in games like that, the African American dude is never the leader. He’s always the

first to die, or he is the fastest, he can jump all high. Have you ever played *Crackdown*? They should have chose a different character for that game. You can play as an African American dude as one of the characters, and I couldn't play as him...it was so stereotypical I just couldn't take it." Here WD1 shows that he made decisions in the game in resistance to mediated representations of Black characters in other games he's played.

Situated

Situated attractors result from physical or mental factors affecting a participant's play style, enjoyment, or interpretation of the game. For example, WD3 recalled that he struggled for an hour to solve a puzzle and became frustrated. He had been playing for roughly 3 hours, so we ended the session. Immediately upon the start of the next session, he solved the problem that he deemed impossible the week before. "I might have just needed that break", he suggests. Taylor et al. (2015) explain that players may make "*in-game actions which are purposed towards achieving out-game effects*", in the case of WD5, she rushed through the second episode because she had just gotten off work and was exhausted and wanted to go home. A participant's intersectional identities certainly influence these attractors — as detailed in my autoethnographic chapter, the fact that I have limited moments of play impact how and when I am able and willing to invest time into play. At times, I was not able to continue until a save point, so I had to replay scenes over, rushing through the bits I had already played. At other times, I would hurry through parts I hadn't played in order to get to a save point. Eventually, I found myself playing *TWD* less and less because the experience became less enjoyable.

Microethnography

Microethnography, an ethnographic method that utilizes video recording, was originally designed for education (Mehan, 1979), but has more recently been adopted by games researchers as a means to map the "choreography of human and technological actors" that occur during gameplay (N. Taylor, 2011; Taylor et. al, 2015). Prior microethnographic work within games have explored the cybernetic circuit of agency and play between human and nonhuman agents; (Giddings and Kennedy, 2008); how controllers impact learning in group play (de Castell, Boschman and Jenson, 2008); and the masculine performances of professional Halo players at e-sports tournaments (N. Taylor, 2011). Each of these works used microethnography to capture small (micro) events that occur during gameplay and analyze them through the "technological construction" of the experience (Giddings, 2014). Physical reactions to games are often subtle, such as an intake of breath, and in game actions are easily forgotten shortly after the play session. The microethnographic strategy of recording in-game and physical world interactions help

researchers catch and note these easily missed but not insignificant events.

Microethnographic studies, such as the ones previously mentioned, traditionally focused on the observations of researchers and did not consider the subjectivities of the participants (Streek & Meehus, 2005). We adapted our study to incorporate perception-checking and participant reflection by playing the recorded videos of the gameplay to the participants who in turn commented and reflected upon them.

These adaptations allowed us to generate a study that is rooted in the interpretive belief that there is not a “universal, fixed reality,” and “understanding is co-created through dialogue and experience” (Angen, 2000, p. 383). What follows is a descriptive, retelling of events that provide insight into the participants’ play, but can not be generalized to other players or experiences of *TWD*.

Description of Study and Players

The study was conducted in the summer of 2013. Eight participants (four male, four female) between the ages of 20 – 35 were recruited via personal connections and social media and offered Amazon gift cards for their participation. This paper focuses mostly on the experiences and responses of two of those participants, WD3 and WD4.

WD3 & WD4 participated in three sessions, each a week apart. During the first session, participants were interviewed about their demographic information and their history and experiences surrounding video games and zombie narratives. Then they immediately played Episode 1 of the five-episode game. Nick Taylor, Chris Kampe and I screen-captured their play and verbal reactions and took notes on a shared document about our observations. During the second session, participants played through episode 2 of the game. Like in the first session, their play was screen-captured and notes were taken.

In between sessions two and three, researchers asked participants to compile a list of moments they considered to be memorable, important, and/or interesting. Researchers created a highlight reel of participants’ play, comprised of moments significant to the players as well as ones important to the narrative, or noted in the researchers’ field notes.

In session 3, participants returned to the lab, watched the highlight reel, and were asked questions

about their in-game decisions, their physical reactions, their reasoning behind their choices, and theories and interpretations of the characters and events.

Neither WD3 or WD4 knew each other but were both personally connected to me. WD4 is one of my closest friends, and at the time of the interview, we had known each other for over 20 years. WD3 is a former student of mine, and was 21 at the time of this study. I previously taught him in two classes, and he was my current advisee. He studied game design and would often stop by my office to chat about games or his latest game idea. Our personal relationships influenced their participation in the game and the study, which I will discuss later in the chapter. First, I will provide a snapshot of each player's history, gaming preferences, and intersectional identities at the time of the study.

Participants

WD3 is a White male gamer from North Carolina who plays a lot of *Super Smash Brothers* (Nintendo, 1999) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). He is a fan of Nintendo games, particularly those within the *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1983) and *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986) franchises. He met most of his friends while playing *Super Smash Bros.*, a Nintendo crossover game series he has been playing since he was 7 years old. He likes exploring environments and solving problems in games, but more than anything, he enjoys socializing through play, as long as those around him do not "take games way seriously". He would rather play games with others and considers *World of Warcraft* to be a "second Facebook", using it to connect with online friends and organize online social events outside of the game. He enjoys watching his friends play games and regularly watches online playthroughs with commentary, including games that he does not personally play. This enjoyment of watching others play possibly extends from his play experiences as a young child. His sisters didn't play many games and he had a hard time finding friends to play with, so he would "bug" his parents to play with him. He also would ask his dad to beat level bosses for him, because they scared him.

WD3 said that his avatar can influence his play; for example, he's more talkative and more rambunctious when he plays as a dwarf, and more stoic and polite when he selects a Tauren. He enjoys playing as atypical characters, such as Princess Peach and Jigglypuff when he plays *Super Smash Bros.* (Nintendo, 2008). He says this adds surprise and variety to the game, because they are perceived to be weak characters but his play proves otherwise, "Then you hit them with her instant kill move and they wonder what just happened", he explains. When asked if he has played any games with an African-American

protagonist, he cited several games he's played that allow you to play as a minority race or a dark skinned character, but not an African-American.

WD3 has never watched or read anything in *TWD* franchise. He doesn't enjoy "urban zombies" or supernatural horror but likes psychological horror, like *Shutter Island* (Scorsese, 2010) and *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999).

WD4 is a 31 year old biracial female student from North Carolina. She grew up as an "Army brat" and moved between four different U.S. states and Korea before settling in North Carolina when she was 10 years old. Her mother is from Korea, and the only one of nine siblings to marry an American. Her father is from the American South. She claims his family is slightly racist, but mostly against "Blacks and Japanese"; they are prejudiced against the Japanese because his father fought in World War II.

She started playing video games when she was five years old when her parents bought her and her younger brothers a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). When they first moved to North Carolina, she and her brothers shared a room with the NES. One night her mom stayed in their room playing NES until 2:00am, and then woke them up to show them she had beaten the game.

She was introduced to first-person shooters (FPS), her favorite genre of game when she was in college. She returned home for summer vacation and started playing *Halo* (343 Industries, 2001), a FPS, with her younger brothers and mutual friends who had a 6 month advantage on her. She was frustrated by her lack of skill and vowed, "one day I'm going to come back, and I'm going to kill you all". She practiced and became quite good. She lost interest again when she returned to school because she did not own her own system. Now she primarily plays mobile games, and only owns dancing and exercise titles, which she says are not 'game' games.

WD4 doesn't like playing games by herself. She plays mostly with others or online, but doesn't like to use voice when playing online because she gets "embarrassed by some of the stupid things I would say... I don't "trash talk", I would just scream."

WD4 has not played as an African American or minority protagonist and does not care about her character's identity, only their weapons, except when given the option of "cute" characters, such as toadstool from the *Super Mario Brothers* franchise. She notes she hasn't experienced much

discrimination because of her gender or race, beyond online players saying “Ooooh, I just got killed by a girl”, but that hasn’t detracted her from playing.

She enjoys zombie narratives and when asked how she knows about *TWD*, she responded, “My best friend is a big nerd”. She has watched the television series and knew a bit about the game from me and other friends. She says *TWD* series has made zombies better. “A lot of the older zombie movies, the zombies just weren’t that scary. They were slow. Zombies have sped up over the years. *TWD* has made them more scary, more real.”

When asked what she was most looking forward to in regards to the study, she responded “The Amazon gift card”.

Together, the two participants did not develop a rapport. They did not speak to each other while gaming and did not look at each other much during our conversation, preferring to directly address me, even if responding to the other participant’s interpretation. WD3 was a very extroverted, outspoken participant and WD4 was much more quiet, preferring concise, short responses.

Analysis

The following sections contain thematically organized moments from the playthrough sessions that best illustrate these two players’ situated experiences and highlight the ways the players resisted or transformed in response to the game. To understand the intersection of the ‘macro’ (the players’ identities) and ‘micro’ (interactions of the game), I label and analyze the influence of the various combination of attractors that were made visible/audible during my observations and interviews with the participants. I’d like to note that while this theoretical framework could be employed to unpack every small moment in the game, including analysis of every game asset and intake of breath, it is not possible or helpful to label them all — therefore there are hundreds of thousands of moments this analysis skips. Out of necessity, I narrowed them down to the attractors that were made obvious to me, either during the observations or subsequent discussions.

Ignoring the game’s moral compass

In the previous chapter, I noted that I was very invested in my relationship with Clementine, the young orphan girl that Lee adopted. This relationship was one of the driving forces for my decision making. Not only was I concerned with her care and well being, but I was deeply attuned to her reactions and allowed

her to guide me through many of the overwhelmingly tough moral decisions the game asks the player to make. Similarly, most of our other participants in the study formed a quick bond with the brave and capable girl and found their approach changed as they responded to Clementine's words and actions. In our previous study, we found that WD1 shifted away from a zombie-killing machine to a nurturing father figure (Bell, et al., 2015). As WD1 made morally gray decisions, the game cut to Clementine's horrified reaction, and the words "Clementine will remember that" appeared under the screen. He responded to these cues by toning down his aggressive behavior and making decisions that appeased the young girl. WD1 and I changed our play in response to *simulated* cues which are derived from the game, choosing actions that the game registered as evoking a more positive reaction in Clementine. In an interview with *Informer* magazine (Wallace, 2012), Art director David Sakai explained that this was the developers' desired result. They decided the game needed a moral compass and designed Clementine, a *simulated* attractor, to fulfill that need. Writer and creative lead Sean Vanaman said Clementine was "literally the first idea" (Wallace, 2012, para. 3), and they designed the entire game and characters around her. One of the *situated* moments designed to bond Lee and Clementine was their first interaction, at the beginning of the game, "We needed you to instantly like her, so she saves your life," Vanaman explains, "We needed her to be resourceful, so she brings something very specific to save your life. We needed her to be vulnerable, so she's afraid while you're killing her babysitter" (Wallace, 2012, para. 12). They were also careful to not make her annoying, and cut out most of her dialogue to encourage the player/character bond, "The less my kids talk, the smarter I think they are" (Sakai, qtd. in Wallace, 2012, para. 8).

These *simulated* attractors seemed to work on WD4, our female player, in the manner the designers intended, WD4 spoke of feeling sorry for Clementine, "being left there, all alone, in the treehouse, scared" and wanting to help her. When Clementine saved her from a zombie, that sympathy turned into a stronger sense of obligation to keep Clementine safe. WD4 said, "I know that the way that I was playing Lee, I was looking out for her mostly. And you know, I don't know the other people so I can't trust them to do the same." But despite the efforts of the studio, for our self-identified gamer WD3, his *lived* and *conventional* experiences caused him to completely ignore the game's designed compass.

WD3 diverged from the game's preferred path from the very start, interpreting Clementine and Lee's relationship differently from what the designers intended. He recognized that because Clementine was the first person Lee encountered, they had a connection and needed to stick together. However, instead of assuming the role of a father-figure, he viewed Lee as her "big brother", or her reluctant caretaker,

comparing his relationship to Clementine to a *lived* experience in his life when he was responsible for his sister's dog:

I knew she wasn't mine, but she was my responsibility. The situation was the same when I was watching the house this weekend and my sister's dog was still there. I can't stand that dog. She's a moron, but when everyone else is gone, I'm like, okay, I'm going to take care of you, and we're going to be cool until we get out of here, and then you can go off and do your thing and I can go off and do my thing, we had a mutual understanding. She would listen to me, she would do what I asked her to, but when everyone else was around, that would never happen.

Here we see many *lived* attractors at work. WD3 was young, in his early twenties, a traditional college student. He had never experienced fatherhood, and his only frame of reference for caregiving were situations, like he described above, in which he unhappily cared for another. He has two younger sisters, but they didn't have much in common and weren't close. They were bound by circumstance, not by choice. Later in our conversation, WD3 compared Lee & Clementine's relationship with the *Lost* characters John Locke and Walt, two very different characters also bound by circumstance, showing that his perspective was also partially influenced by a *conventional* attractor.

While WD3 did feel like Lee and Clementine were connected, he did not rely on her to guide him through his decisions. For example, in episode 2, Lee is faced with fighting two men who murdered his friend. If a player kills the first one, Clementine reacts, and the player can then decide whether to kill the second. As described earlier, WD1 felt remorse after Clementine saw him kill the first man, and he left the second man alive to avoid hurting Clementine further. WD3 also killed the first and not the second, but unlike WD1, he did not cite Clementine as a deciding factor. He explained that the reason he killed the first was simply because the fight was more violent, with weapons, and only Clementine was there to see the murder take place. During the second fight, the entire group was watching. When we asked if Clementine was a factor in his decision-making, he said, "No, she's already seen so much already." To WD3, Clementine has already been exposed to death, violence, and trauma and had adapted to it. He didn't feel the need to shelter her from anymore. This case highlights that each player's choice is informed by a series of complex, unique combination of attractors. Even when players (like WD1 and WD3) make the same decision, different types (or combinations) of attractors influenced their choice.

Reliance on other forms of guidance

While Clementine didn't influence much of WD3's choices, he was very much concerned with the opinion and happiness of another character in the game, a white, middle-aged, father, and husband

named Kenny. Kenny is a polarizing character. He has a quick temper and makes hasty decisions, but to those who support him, he is loyal and caring. To WD4, Kenny was just “okay.” Someone she had to “keep in line” and “put up with”. Before the apocalypse, Kenny worked as a commercial fisherman in Florida. His wife, Katjaa was a veterinarian. Together they had a young son, Kenny Jr., whom they nicknamed “Duck”, because the trauma of the apocalypse rolls off him “like water off a duck's back”. Duck was quite naive and became the source of a few conflicts and challenges in the game. Kenny was a fierce protector of his son and only tolerated other characters who followed suit. One of our players, WD2 said,

I think that at any moment Kenny could betray me. Not that he could straight up backstab me, but in a situation he could save me or his family, he would save his family and I understand that but I’m also going to be conscious and aware of that.

An example of this is in episode one when Duck is attacked by a zombie outside a pharmacy and is covered in blood. One man, Larry, accuses him of being bitten and almost gets into a fist-fight with his father. Lee can choose to take sides or remain neutral. Kenny, like Clementine, is sensitive to your choices, but unlike Clementine, he will become your friend or near foe depending on your actions.

WD3, our male player, however, did not interpret Kenny as being unreliable. He bonded quickly with Kenny, whom he cited as his favorite character. He consistently supported him and was enthusiastic about their relationship. When Kenny wanted to kill another character who had just suffered from a heart attack, WD3 did not hesitate, despite the cries from Clementine and the victim’s adult daughter. Kenny, as WD3 explained, was “his boy”, and extended his love to Kenny’s entire family. “That whole, that five, was a family to me.” When we probed deeper into his love for the character, he spoke to his *lived* experience:

I wish I could pinpoint a moment when I decided ‘this is a guy I would stick with’. Um, my best friend at school told me this story about how he met me. He saw me in the arcade once playing games with some people and decided ‘I like him, I’m going to be his friend’, so he just showed up, it wasn’t really an event, it was just an unspoken mutual understanding that we were buddies. And I feel like it was a kind of similar situation with Kenny — in retrospect, I didn’t really talk to him that much. I barely talked to him. But I backed him up all the time and he backed me up too. So, I don’t know, there was something there I didn’t understand but I acted on it. It might have been that similar dynamic that [my best friend] and I have. Probably.

If WD3 had made different decisions early in the game, ones that disagreed with Kenny, Kenny would have become a different character, changing the *simulated* attractor. The new *simulated* attractor would

not have activated that same *lived* attractor. This illustrates that players' relationships with various characters result from a continuous, push-pull influence of attractors, informing and shaping as the game progresses.

WD3 also cited that many of the choices he made were because he was trying to complete a "paragon run" of the game which is a conventional attractor, in reference to another game he played, *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007), which included a system that awarded "paragon" points for 'good' decisions, and "renegade" points for 'bad' decisions. During our discussion he explained,

I knew going into the game that it's a decision-making game. It's a role-playing game. The decisions you make in the game don't necessarily reflect the decisions you make in real life, so I wanted to try to do the "paragon run", to try and be the most accessible, well-liked, well-trusted person. The most valuable member of the group.

In this moment, WD3 reveals that he considered Lee to not an extension of himself, or a tool, but as a role to perform and experience. An opportunity to live as someone else, something familiar to him through his time playing *World of Warcraft*, *Mass Effect*, and other role-playing games. However, in contrast to *Mass Effect*, *TWD*'s ambiguous choices are not easily categorized as 'good' and 'bad', well-meaning decisions may prove disastrous later in the season. A paragon run, as defined in *Mass Effect*, is not possible. A 'good' *TWD* playthrough is not revealed through points and happy endings, but solely dependent on the player's own satisfaction, resulting from their interpretations. So instead of relying on the game's designed moral compass, WD3 slotted the moral quandaries into another game's *simulated* moral framework — thus evading the game's encouragement towards transformation.

An acritical play

WD4 did not have the same investments and resources as WD3, having more limited experiences with games, and instead mostly cited her interpretations as motivation for her decisions; however, like WD3, she was largely unaffected by the game's encouragement of critical thinking, but for a different reason entirely. WD4 did not particularly enjoy the game, partially because the narrative-driven, puzzle-filled genre was very different from the first-person shooters and turn-based strategy games she was used to playing and was primarily motivated to finish her sessions to receive the free gift cards. She was typically a console and mobile player, but was forced to play *TWD* on our lab's PC computer, and the transition to the new control system was not easy for her. "it took me a while to get used to it. I don't play any games on the computer. Ever.", she explained. A few times during her play, she called me over to help her figure

out how to navigate the game, and it wasn't until our second session, after hours of playing, that she realized she had the option to walk diagonally.

While WD3 was "enthralled" with the game; WD4 said "it was okay". When we asked her why she didn't enjoy it more, she said, "I just don't like not being able to figure out how to do things, like finding the damn key." This comment was in reference to a particularly difficult puzzle from the first episode. Players were tasked with finding a way to unlock the pharmacy gate, and can't solve the puzzle unless they first talk to one of the characters, something that players unfamiliar with this completionist requirements of the genre are likely to miss. As WD4 tested solutions through trial and error, she became increasingly frustrated. At one point, WD3 and my co-researcher, Nick, left the room and we were alone. As soon as the door shut, she turned to me and said, "Tell me where the fucking keys are." I refused. She grunted and continued playing. A few moments later, she explained a particularly clever failed solution which involved luring over the walker with the keys and stabbing him with a screwdriver. "That's smart", I said, trying to be encouraging. "Not smart enough," she stated. Eventually, after several declarations of frustration, I gave in and offered her some vague hints, "Maybe you should go this way," I suggested. She glared at me. "Goddammit Kris".

Here we see another interworking set of attractors at play: the game's control system and challenging puzzles affected WD4's enjoyment, a *situated* attractor, but it is her *lived* inexperience with those mechanics and interpretations of the puzzles that had the largest affect. Our players who played PC games did not have problems playing with the standard WASD controls used in the game, and because I am a puzzle gamer, who has a long history of playing games of the same genre, I appreciated the challenging puzzles found in the first season of the game. But finally, the *situated* and *lived* attractors together, triggered frustration in WD4, and it was that *situated* frustration that inevitably clouded her memory and enjoyment.

These frustrating moments spoiled the gameplay for WD4, and this lack of enthusiasm extended into our discussion sessions. She was reserved and quiet, preferring short, concise answers. We struggled to get her to expand on her answers. WD3 was very enthusiastic about the game and presented himself in a very extroverted and gregarious manner. He openly discussed his choices, at length and in quite some depth, providing us with lots of points of analysis. There was evidence that WD3's dominating presence influenced WD4's participation. WD4 became more vocal when alone with myself in the room, and talked more openly about the game and experience during our drive home. WD3 interrupted WD4 often

during the conversation — at least seven times. WD4 would typically provide a one sentence response, and before she was given a chance to elaborate or explain her reaction, WD3 would interject his perspective. WD3 may have had extra pressure to “perform” for me, his professor — in my classes I encourage discussion and reward them for their participation, so the power differential could have contributed to his eager, lengthy responses. My friend does not feel that same pressure, as we’ve been best friends for over twenty years and are very comfortable being quiet around one another. Because of this, much of the conversation centered around WD3’s interpretations, based primarily on *conventional* attractors. When discussing characters and relationships, WD3 commonly compared them to characters from the television series *Lost* (ABC, 2004), but occasionally mentioned other forms of media, like the short story *The Most Dangerous Game* (R. Connell, 1924), and the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). WD4, who was unfamiliar with all of these forms, stayed silent.

But there may potentially be another factor in play contributing to each player’s participation in the discussion, specifically, one that concerns their varying degrees of privilege. WD3, as a white male and self identified “gamer” is involved in a gaming culture that places a higher degree of respect on the opinion and perspective of those who have “proven” their authenticity within the culture — a system that inherently limits the participation of those who don’t fit or conform to acceptable norms of the culture. WD4 is a biracial woman who does not identify as a gamer, and instead games “casually” on her phone or when a system is available to her, therefore she is not accepted in the gamer community and is subjugated when placed beside someone who is accepted and asked to contribute to knowledge of the other’s “expertise”. Their *lived* experience, particularly their personality, degree of privilege, and cultural associations influenced their participation in the study and deterred our goal, as investigators in the study, of encouraging critical thought and discussion, to aid with our analysis.

In all, WD3’s focus on *conventional attractors*, specifically other narratives and game systems, and his *lived* experience which deterred a close relationship with the game’s moral compass prevented him from being influenced by the game’s designed *simulated* attractors. For WD4, it was her *situated* need to finish quickly, and the lack of *lived* experience with PC adventure games and *ascribed* identity as a casual gamer that largely influenced her lack of enthusiasm for the game and disinterest in participating the critical unpacking of the game. Essentially, despite the game and the researchers’ best efforts, our participants performed an *acritical* play.

Conclusion

In summary, this microethnographic analysis explored the shifting affiliations of two demographically different participants including a thorough consideration of the players' intersectional identities and privilege. It illustrates how our 'nerd gamer' with roots in fantasy, sci-fi, and role-playing games was able to co-opt the game into a framework that is familiar to him, and how our 'casual' female gamer was shut out of the game through an unfamiliarity with controls and a lack of interest, and was subsequently dominated and silenced during the conversation.

To end this chapter, I suggest this work makes two contributions to game studies research. First, it reveals that despite *TWD*'s transformative potential, as illustrated in Chapter 2 when I discussed how the game helped me 'unlearn' my privilege, and through our prior work with other players (Bell et al., 2016), *TWD* can only truly be transformative if the players are committed and capable of reading it in a certain way. Despite the game designer's well-planned efforts, the game is essentially sent to the player unfinished, who is then tasked with aiding in shaping the final experience. This individual co-construction process is influenced by a complex series of attractors. Even during synchronous moments, when these two players responded to the games' prompts similarly, the motivation behind their actions differed; each player's choice was sparked by a unique set of attractors through a continuous, push-pull process from start to finish. Some players responded to Clementine as a moral compass, and learned from her shared perspective of the undead world. For other players, different factors — *lived*, *conventional*, and *situated* overpowered the game's *simulated*, changing the themes and lessons of the game. This lesson can be applied to the body of work on educational and serious games — which are often designed primarily for learning with less consideration for "fun" (de Castell & Jenson, 2003). In de Castell & Jenson's (2003) op-ed on serious gaming, they discuss Maria Klawe, senior developer of Electronic Games for Education in Mathematics and Science's complaint that "most common problem with educational software is that students don't pay attention to or learn the way that designers intended" (Klawe, 2000, qtd. in de Castell & Jenson, 2003, p. 656); successful commercial game design companies don't complain that players don't play their games correctly, rather they develop their games with consideration of "what the design enables or prevents" (de Castell & Jenson, 2003, p. p. 656). This is a more realistic approach to evaluating the educational promise of games; as this chapter shows, a game's lessons may be ignored or reappropriated for individual and cultural reasons. Second, this study offers a theoretical contribution, by showing the ability to adopt the "infralanguage" (Latour, 2005; Taylor, et al., 2015) we offered in our last paper to examine play on a molecular level, including an attention to how players' 'macro' categories of identity, gender, and race, intersect with the game.

This study highlights that the messages and themes of *TWD* were not effective, despite the game's and researchers efforts to promote critical reflection through gameplay and subsequent discussion. More work needs to be done to determine how we can further encourage transformation, critical thought in games, like *TWD*, that provides all the tools for reflection but can still be assimilated into an entirely acritical framework, including an application of these findings to the body of work on educational and serious gaming. Essentially, future work should explore the various ways designers, researchers, and players can make these important gaming messages stick. I hope my next chapter will help shed some light on this conundrum, where I extend my search to the online community surrounding the game, to determine to what extent the game's encouragement of critical thought and cooperation is reiterated and what factors are encouraging or discouraging this type of discourse.

CHAPTER 4: CONTENT ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter uses interpretive content analysis to explore the manner in which *TWD* players navigate online *TWD* gaming forums. My exploration in Chapter 2 found that *TWD* encouraged critical thought and self-reflection surrounding parenthood, and prior work found that the game encourages players to perform as nurturing parents and cooperative group members (Bell, Taylor, & Kampe, 2015). In contrast, my microethnographic observations in Chapter 3 illustrated that not all players are affected by this encouragement, and some may resist or ignore these messages. This study seeks to understand to what extent the game's encouragement of critical thought and cooperation circulate in the broader online communities that play and discuss the game, in light of the reports of misogyny and sexual harassment within gaming communities (Gray, 2011; Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Pulos, 2013).

Discussions surrounding gaming communities have well documented the long, ongoing harassment, sexism, racism, and homophobia women, people of color, and LGBTQ gamers have faced within online communities for years (Gray, 2011; Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Pulos, 2013), but it was not brought to the public's attention until 2014 during Gamergate, a massive misogynistic online harassment campaign that targeted female game critics, journalists, designers, and players. These aggressive performances within games and games-related platforms have been labeled as "toxic" (Consalvo, 2012), "hypermasculine" (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), and most recently as "hegemonizing masculinities" (Healey, 2016). The latter, which is an extension of Connell's (1995) notion of "hegemonic masculinity", refers to masculine performances that limit or enable others' participation; this could include the various ways men display dominance in online gaming forums through aggressive and sexist language when traditional dominating factors (such as strength and size) cannot be utilized (Healey, 2016). I rely on this understanding throughout my analysis.

This work also embraces an understanding that play is created, retold, and retooled through continuous interactions between the game and player and extends beyond the moment of gameplay into experiences within the game's online community, and often, increasingly, across multiple platforms from online forums (Pulos, 2013; Condis, 2015) to player-created websites (Bergstrom, 2013) to Twitch and YouTube broadcasts (Johnson, 2018). To understand these co-constructions, I incorporate the theory of "big D" Discourse (Gee, 2015) to unpack how participants authenticate their position in social groups through their use of language, images, memes, emojis, and action. This work also recognizes that the

intersection of gender with other identities (race, sexuality, socio-economic class, religion, and able-bodiedness) is important to consider when examining gendered performances (Crenshaw, 1989).

I want to bring attention to conversations surrounding issues of identity and explore to what extent these discussions make a more or less inclusive and congenial place for gamers from historically marginalized communities, furthering our understanding of the larger influence of a game that portrays diverse, unsterotypical characters and encourages critical thought, self-reflection, and a nurturing and cooperative playthrough of the game.

To determine this, I first explored to what ways discussions of identity (i.e. sexuality, race, and gender) were discussed in Telltale's forums, such as whether those discussions were cultivated and given permission and space to develop, and whether gender non-normative viewpoints were protected from muting through hegemonizing behaviors. Second, I examined to what extent concerns around parenthood were continued from the game-space into the online community (i.e. did others speak of Clementine in loving, nurturing ways, as if she was their daughter), and to what effect was conflict handled; such as whether trolls were allowed to belittle or harass users or whether conflict was generally cooperative or confrontational. Finally, I explored to what extent the game and Telltale's forum guidelines influenced the behavior observed within the online space.

Literature Review

History of Online Toxicity in Gaming Communities

GamerGate, a massive "multiplayer" campaign of misogynistic harassment which originated on Twitter in 2014, brought to light the frequent harassment, sexism, homophobia, and racism, marginalized players face in online communities. GamerGaters thinly veiled their abuse through a declaration of war against "unethical game journalism practices" including unfounded claims of collusion between female developers, feminists, and journalists. Their choice of targets, marginalized gamer designers and critics, and oppressive methods, harassment, bullying, and usage of sexist, homophobic, anti-semitic, and xenophobic language, indicates their motivations are rooted in prejudice. Women were doxxed, slandered, and threatened. The harassers reported their victims for terrorism, ordered pizzas to their home, Photoshopped their faces on nude bodies and circulated it to their families and bosses, and attacked them with misogynistic, xenophobic, and racist slurs, death, and rape threats.

It is important to reiterate that this phenomenon is not recent. Othering and oppression have dominated gaming culture for many years before Gamergate; studies have documented the harassment marginalized groups face and the manner in which they are muted in certain games and gaming platforms since at least 2011 (Gray, 2011; Consalvo, 2012; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; & Pulos, 2013). While some of this muting takes place in gameplay, it can also be perpetuated within online forums through moderators and forum guidelines (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, Pulos, 2013). Sexual harassment, misogyny, homophobia, and racism have been documented in the Penny Arcade community, a comic devoted to video games (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), Xbox Live (Gray, 2011), World of Warcraft (Pulos, 2013), Bioware's *Star Wars*, (Condis, 2015), gaming subreddits (Massanari, 2017) and E3 (Williams, 2012).

Characteristics of trolls and their victims

Some hegemonizing behavior, such as what was displayed during Gamergate, can also be categorized as “trolling” which is defined as behavior/action that causes conflict and disruption for the troll’s own amusement (Hardaker, 2010; Gray 2011). Trolling behavior is so widespread that recent research recognizes trolls as part of a subculture (Phillips, 2015). Its users frequent 4chan /b/ board with a “spectrum of behaviors”, ranging from aggressive attacks that last for months (i.e. Gamergate) to playful one-time occurrences (i.e. Rickrolling). Trolls are typically men (Citron, 2014) and in contrast to their claims, trolls disproportionately target women, people of color, and LGBTQ+ people (Phillips, 2015).

This particular form of aggressive bullying is an online phenomenon, largely because the dissociative and anonymous nature of online communication releases one’s inhibitions, making it easier for someone to become a troll. Online anonymous users typically separate their online actions and communication style from their ‘meatspace’ (aka physical world) selves (Hopkinson, 2013). They feel “invisible” (Gray, 2011) as they go in and out of chat rooms and message boards. They do not physically see each other’s nonverbal cues (i.e. solipsistic introjection), and interact asynchronously, over spans of days or months and are therefore more likely to dehumanize each other.

While online posters are likely sharing their own perspectives and opinions (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002), deindividuation effects (Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012), cause them to respond in a more aggressive and insulting manner than they would in face-to-face interaction. This behavior is worsened if the users experience “dissociative imagination”, from viewing the online environment as a “make-believe space” (i.e. a game), and if there is a “minimization of status and authority”, such as little or no presence of moderators (Gray, 2011, p. 415). In Gray’s (2011) study of oppressive behaviors towards women of

color In Xbox Live, she pointed out that moderators did not have a strong presence; authority figures only engaged if a user files a complaint, and even then, they didn't respond to every one, thus increasing deviant behavior.

The majority of troll's victims are people belonging to marginalized groups. The WHO@ (Working to Halt Online Abuse) receives 50 – 75 cases of online abuse and harassment per week; from 2000 – 2013, 70% of cyberstalking/harassment victims were women (WHO@, 2015). Trolls perform through a crafted hegemonizing masculine (Healey, 2016) identity designed to oppress others by feminizing male victims through the use of gay slurs and by belittling women through objectifying language and evoking gendered stereotypes (Citron, 2014), such as “go make me a sandwich”. Examples of the sexualized, violent, and stereotyping can be found on the website **fatsluttyorugly.com**: “So you play games? You must be Fat, Ugly, or Slutty”, which has been documenting the harassment of female players since 2011. Women of color face more harassment in particular; in a study of 992 undergrads, 53% of the women of color revealed they had been harassed, in comparison to 45% of women, 40% of men of color, and 31% of white males. Gray's (2011) study of Xbox Live showed that women of color were linguistically profiled and oppressed differently from white women. White women contributed to the POC's oppression by remaining silent when witnesses harassment and gaslighting them when they discussed their experiences of sexism and racism. People who identify as LGBTQ+ are also at an increased risk for sexual harassment, over twice as much as a heterosexual individual (Finn, 2004).

Preventing trolling

Within my study, I explore whether or not users display behaviors typical of trolls (i.e. hegemonizing performances of masculinities including conversational “hijacking”, personal attacks, and a quick escalation of conflict), and how the community and moderators respond to hegemonizing behavior, including whether or not community administrators prevent trolling or, at the very least, halt it before it becomes severe. Community administrators can influence a community's Discourse by setting strict rules concerning discourse and behavior and by enforcing rules through moderation. Moderators can not only discourage troll-like behavior and block trolls quickly but also set guidelines that teach users how not to trigger trolls, such as how to recognize and avoid “bait” that trolls set (Hopkinson, 2013).

One approach that has proven to be effective is to completely ban any troll ‘breeding grounds’, spaces where trolls congregate as indicated by their use of hate speech and misogynistic/racist discourse. One study of *Reddit* (Chandrasekharan, et al., 2017). found that this approach will limit the amount of trolling

discourse across the entire site. Another effective approach is to carefully moderate all forum posts, with close attention to those who are new members of the online community. *Hoyden About Town*, an Australian feminist blog, practices strict moderation and their site “rarely gets trolled now” (F. Shaw, 2013, p. 14). The first time someone comments under a new profile, it is automatically moderated. After the initial comment, the user’s comments are immediately published unless their profile is flagged for inappropriate behavior/discourse. All comments that are misogynistic or contain discourse patterns typical of trolls are removed.

There is evidence that the creation of an inclusive, gender-supportive, protected online forum encourages confidence and identity of all participants (Richard, 2013), these findings are similar to Jenson & de Castell’s (2011) work that found that girls placed in all-girl gaming groups become more confident and competent players. However, it is complicated and time-consuming to develop, cultivate, and moderate, inclusive spaces. The Facebook feminist group *Girl Army*, requires careful moderation (Clark-Parsons, 2018); it is secret/unsearchable, and only friends of group members can join. Each new member is carefully vetted, and each post is approved by a moderator before publication. While this approach is successful in the prevention of trolling, there is concern that it limits democratizing discourse (Clark-Parsons, 2018), and these moderation processes would be harder to replicate on a larger scale, such as what you see in a gaming forum. Many game forums do not have the capability of this thorough vetting, and if done half-heartedly, more problems could arise. In an analysis of the *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) community, Pulos (2013) documented how Blizzard did not moderate the homophobic discourse commonly found within the boards, and instead attempted to create a “safe space” for LGBTQ+ members by limiting discussions of LGBTQ+ topics to one dedicated board, moving all posts about sexual identity from other locations to that board. While Blizzard may have been motivated out of a need to protect users from trolls, it communicated to the community that those topics were unacceptable in everyday discussion, fostering a heteronormative culture of users.

Another approach is to train moderators to act as facilitators of productive discourse about difficult topics. The feminist blog *Hoyden About Town* works to facilitate and promote different voices (F. Shaw, 2013) within their discussion and the *NPR* show *CodeSwitch*, when they permitted comments, made considerable effort to keep the online community open, inclusive, and focused on productive discussion (*Code Switch* Discussion Guidelines, 2013). Moderators not only removed comments that were offensive/rude but also comments that did not “add to the conversation” (*Code Switch* Discussion Guidelines, 2013), including questions that ask why users bother talking about race at all (Demby, 2013).

But once again, this approach is difficult, time-consuming, and it's easy for sites to become overwhelmed.

Many online news and magazines websites have decided to shut down commenting altogether because they are unable to maintain the moderation necessary to make a space inclusive and free from harassment. *Reuters*, *The Verge*, *Recode*, *USA Today's FTW*, *The Week*, *Mic*, *Popular Science*, and *NPR* no longer allow comments on their websites. In a 2016 statement, *NPR* explained that they chose to close comments because of the high cost and time to moderate comments effectively (Jensen, 2016). Only a small percentage of *NPR* readers were dominating the board, and they were not representative of *NPR* listeners; commenters were 83% male (listeners are only 52% male), and most used desktop computers to comment (younger listeners access the site via mobile). They kept fielding complaints that commenters were harassing others and the harassers were complaining that their comments were being removed. In all, they felt it best to shut it down.

Despite that prevalence and dominance of hegemonizing performances of masculinities within games and game-related platforms, this work recognizes that not all games (and their 'official' media platforms) contribute to this culture, and many show or encourage performances that resist oppressive behaviors (Bell, et al., 2015). *TWD* has been found to encourage a gentler, more nurturing form of masculinity, one that is rooted in cooperation and care as opposed to competition and self-service; this work expands on the previous study to uncover whether such dispositions are perpetuated outside of the game into the gaming community.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is informed by the understanding that social identities can be performed through language choices — i.e. through “big D” and “small d” discourses (Gee, 2015). d/D-discourse theory requires a recognition and understanding that the words we use in context (i.e. small d discourse) with our nonverbal behavior and actions authenticates our participation in social group(s) or personal intersectional identities (big D discourse). Small-d discourse refers to our linguistic choices, while Big D Discourses can be thought of as “identity kits” (Gee, 1990, p. 142), containing rules pertaining to appearance, speaking, and writing. They are kits that, if you follow the enclosed (but rarely explicit) instructions, provide acceptance into the associated group, although it's important to note that the various discourse practices necessary for situatedness within a particular identity are not separately defined, rather, their edges are blurred and overlapping. Primary Discourse is the larger social group one

has been socialized into, and Secondary Discourses are the smaller subcultural groups one belongs to (Gee, 2001). A person may acquire several secondary Discourses in addition to their primary Discourse and will essentially code-switch their discourse from one identity group to another. A white middle-class American woman may belong to a secondary Discourse at work, utilizing necessary discourse (such as work-related jargon) and behaving in a manner acceptable to her work environment, and may utilize different discourse within a social group (i.e. gaming group). Each of these utilized secondary Discourses contributes to the persons' enactment of her primary Discourse as a white, middle-class American woman. Her primary Discourse as a white woman may affect her discourse when communicating within her various secondary Discourses or with someone of a different Discourse.

It has long been documented that we perform our various identities through our language choices, and these choices signify our connection with others. Philipsen (1975) explored the manner that the language-choices of blue-collar male teamsters in Chicago's South Side changed as they spoke to different social and demographic groups. When the teamsters spoke to a man of a parallel identity, it was considered appropriate behavior to speak often and assert dominance through language. The opposite was true if they spoke to someone who did not share all of the same intersectional identities — a woman, child, a superior, someone outside of their community, or someone belonging to a different ethnic group. When they spoke with someone of an "asymmetrical" identity, they spoke less and asserted dominance through nonverbal behavior or action.

Other studies have explored how our various identities influence our communication online. In a study on emoticon (i.e. emoji) use, Wolf (2000) found that women use different emojis for various reasons within a majority female online community vs. a mixed-gender community. In the predominantly female community, women used emojis mostly to indicate humor, show solidarity, or express thanks to others. But while women in the mixed-gender community still used emojis most often to express humor, the next highest usage was for teasing/sarcasm; a usage common for men within all-male and mixed-gender spaces. Men also changed their emoji use somewhat in a smaller way; a small percentage (7%) of their emoji use in the mixed space was reserved for apologies; something not found in the all-male group.

Lastly, many gaming communities have limited participation of marginalized players and constructed themselves as straight, white, middle class, and cis-male through discursive practices (Healey, 2016; Condis, 2015; Pulos, 2013). Online communities are constructed in this manner through "rites, rituals, and repetitions" (Burrill, 2008, p. 21), including the use of "othering" language (Healy, 2016) to exclude

and include particular identities. Terms such as “fag” and “gay” are used pejoratively to lower the status of homosexual masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995; Healy, 2016). While communities that permit this type of discourse limit LGBTQ+ participation, it is not enough to block discussions of identity altogether. BioWare, in an effort to limit homophobic language, applied automatic filters to block all uses of the terms “gay” and “lesbian”, regardless of the context (Condis, 2015). Because of this automatic filtering, not only was the use of “gay” and “lesbian” banned when used in homophobic/harassing ways, but lesbian and gay players who wanted to use the terms to talk about their sexuality or form lesbian/gay groups were also blocked from doing so. This act not only prevented the harmful use of the terms but also essentially closeted lesbian and gay players through preventing them from discussing their sexual identity (Condis, 2015).

I apply this understanding of D-discourse to understand how certain discourses are enacted and silenced within the online forums, as a means of understanding how *TWD* players interpret/perpetuate *TWD*'s themes regarding parenthood, cooperation, and the impact of race, sexuality, and gender on social structures and politics.

Methodology

This study places emphasis on understanding subjective, non-generalizable, intersectional experience and requires an approach of data collection that is in preparation of a complex, multilayered analysis. Quantitative methods would require a fractionation and normalization of identities, and intersectionality cannot be reduced to single characteristics. Therefore intersectionality is antithetical to conventional positivistic approaches. So instead, for this chapter, I turn to an approach that is rooted in the exploration of phenomenological standpoints and therefore better-equipped for understanding the experiences of marginalized groups: Interpretive Content Analysis.

Interpretive Content Analysis provides an opportunity to conduct an in-depth, qualitative exploration of texts rich with complex connotative meanings. It involves a thematic organization of material and data-grounded inferences about the motives, actions, and symbolic meanings of the authors (Ginger, 2006; Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Instead of focusing on simply whether or not something happened, this approach goes more in-depth to explore the “why” and “to what effect” (Krippendorff, 2013). This approach of latent coding, which is firmly situated in the interpretive paradigm, equips researchers to understand meaning co-created through interpretations of the participants and researchers, dependent on culture and experience (Angen, 2000). While positivistic approaches focus on ensuring reliability and

validity including minimizing researcher bias, interpretive works embrace the understanding that objectivity is impossible and instead should be understood and shared. Interpretive works include ethical validation, an evaluation of ethical implications, substantive validation, an evaluation of content, and rigorous self-reflexivity (Angen, 2000).

This work seeks to bring attention to conversations within the gaming community surrounding issues of identity, such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and parenthood and explore whether or how these discussions make a more or less inclusive place for gamers from historically marginalized communities. These goals satisfied ethical validation, a requirement that research should be equitable, should work to unmute silenced voices (Caputo, 1987; Flax, 1990; Angen 2000), recognize our “shared humanity” (Heshusius, 1994; Angen 2000), and should push towards transformation (Morgan, 1983; Angen 2000).

This project acknowledges that meaning is co-constructed and is a reflection of both the text’s originator and readers’ cultures, attitudes, experiences, and interpretations. Because it is impossible to modify our perceptions and remove these various factors, this work recognizes that this analysis is essentially an interpretation of others’ interpretations, and in turn, I will note and examine all factors that may influence my perceptions of their words. This involves careful and thorough reflexivity in order to pinpoint my contributions, such as selection of the search terms, the theories applied, and the meaning-making. In addition to a detailed description of my own interpretations, it also involves an application of theoretical understandings to fully explore the data’s various historical, cultural, and intersubjective situated meanings (Gadamer, 1994; Angen 2000).

Description of data collection

The most recent forum threads about *TWD* were collected from the official Telltale Games forums in spring of 2017. The 213 threads were organized thematically, and the first 50 posts under each thread were qualitatively analyzed and read in their entirety, totaling 5068 posts in total.

Threads were coded thematically until saturation was reached. Threads unrelated to this chapter’s topic were discarded and those related to *ethical decision-making*, *parenting* and/or *identity* were thoroughly read and analyzed. In a few cases, I read beyond 50 posts so I could determine what ended a conversation (i.e. moderator presence, apology, etc.).

For the purposes of my qualitative analysis, all threads with three or fewer comments were removed from analysis, and threads pertaining to technical issues and live streaming, issues not relevant to this project, were also eliminated, leaving 149 threads for analysis.

Telltale Games

To further understand the discourse community surrounding *The Walking Dead*, I chose to explore the discussion boards hosted by its publisher, Telltale Games, and most likely to contain a high concentration of dedicated fans. This forum was selected for analysis because of its active, ongoing discussions about the game, and because of its strict rules regarding harassment. It is also the forum I most often explored during my personal playthroughs of the game series. While video games have been historically marketed to and largely played by male players (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007), interactive dramas, like *TWD*, have a higher percentage of female players (37%) when compared to more popular genres such as first-person shooter (7%), sports (2%), MOBA (10%), open world (14%) and action adventure (18%) (Yee, 2017), thus providing a more diverse player pool than typically found. This opens up to the possibility that their online community will also be more diverse than ones surrounding *Penny Arcade* (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), *World of Warcraft* (Pulos, 2013), *Call of Duty* (Healey, 2016), and Xbox Live (Gray, 2011), discussed previously in this text. In contrast to gaming communities previously discussed, Telltale Games maintains **strict policies** regarding trolling, harassment and sexist/racist comments. One of their rules as of March 2017, found under “Forum Guidelines” (which has since been updated) states,

We have a diverse body of Community Members of different backgrounds — please be respectful of that. Do not make bigoted comments (including sarcastic use of slurs) about different genders, races, sexualities, cultures, religions, disabilities, etc. This also extends to bigoted generalizations, insinuations, or scapegoating. If you have personal disagreements relating to certain groups, frame your arguments in a constructive way with the intention of genuinely thoughtful and civil discussion.

Moreover, their very first rule under the guidelines concerns “Respect, Civility and Organization”; it asks users to respect each other and not to post “gross stuff”, i.e. things that are offensive or NSFW (not safe for work). They have rules that work to prevent harassment, by banning users from posting two or more times in a row, “destroying” topics one may find uninteresting, using the forums to harass or bring to light “personal drama with other members”, trolling other users, and creating more than one forum identity/account. They also have rules to limit behaviors most users find annoying, therefore minimizing

conflict; they ask users to label and hide spoilers, to avoid being overly negative/critical, and to use special text formatting, animated gifs, and images sparingly. Users can flag posts that break any of the forum's rules, and they can also mark posts they find helpful/interesting as "awesome". Users who are caught breaking rules may be subject to warnings or timeouts (temporary bans). While the site says that most bans are temporary, it leaves open the possibility that users may be given a lifelong ban.

Overview of Message Boards

The 213 threads collected during March 2017 contained a total of 49,768 comments and 3,222,751 views. In general, threads about opinions/theories had the most views, posts about technical questions were second, and fan art/fiction had the least amount (with the exception of fan art/fiction posts that were humorous). There were more posts about opinions/theories than any other category. The top three posts (in regard to comments and views) were "The Walking Dead Meme and Fun Thread", a post dedicated to fan art/humor; "Details that people might forget, don't notice, or just don't know about The Walking Dead", a post designed for discussion about obscure details, most of which were narrative; and "Episode 3 Waiting Thread - Ep 3 releases March 28th, Rated by Australia", a thread for fans to discuss an episode not yet released. There were some threads with a lot of views and not a lot of comments, particularly posts regarding technical questions, but there was one thread, "Stay with Kenny or Wellington", which discussed an ethical choice in season 2, that had many more views than comments (31,900 to 124). The top ten threads contained a mix of different topics, including discussions about opinions/theories, fan art, technical questions, and discussion about obscure details.

Observations

As I read through the posts, I had two goals. First, I wanted to know to what extent Telltale's focus on cooperation and teamwork continued into the discourse on the forums. To understand this, I examined the posts to see if there was evidence of trolling/bullying behavior going unmoderated and took a close look at the discourse surrounding conversations that have been silenced/problematicized in other gaming communities (i.e. conversations about gender, race, sexuality, etc.) to see if these difficult conversations were permitted to occur. Second, I wanted to explore to what extent the game's emphasis on fatherhood as nurturing extended into the game. To determine this, I largely focused on conversations surrounding Lee's adoptive daughter, Clementine, and any other conversations about parenting.

Evidence of cooperative discourse

Overall, the conversations were congenial and lighthearted, with some exceptional comments. Users spent considerable time discussing their different interpretations of characters and plot points while avoiding hate speech, trigger words, and loaded language. I found very few arguments within the posts, and I saw several instances when people preemptively apologized even though no one had shown offense (in all cases the other person wrote back that they were not offended). There were only two lengthy conflicts, but in both cases, name-calling was minimal. In one case, a forum participant accused the original poster (OP) of being a troll and wrote, “shame on you.” The OP told her to “grow up” and said she was “inconsiderate and rude”, but in contrast to other communities documented by Consalvo (2012), Gray (2011), and Salter & Blodgett (2012), the language was mild and the insults tame. In what follows, I select for closer analysis interactions between users that I viewed as emblematic, rather than exceptional, instances based on my exhaustive coding.

It was common to see open sharing of differing perspectives surrounding the game’s narrative choices and character relationships. Typically when posters disagreed, the conversations remained polite. Most debates avoided personal attacks and were framed around the designer’s decisions and the game’s content (i.e. who did you save, or if you could bring back one person who would it be). To illustrate the cooperative discourse typically found, I point to a post by user GodisanAwesomeGod during a debate on whether or not romance is acceptable in video games.

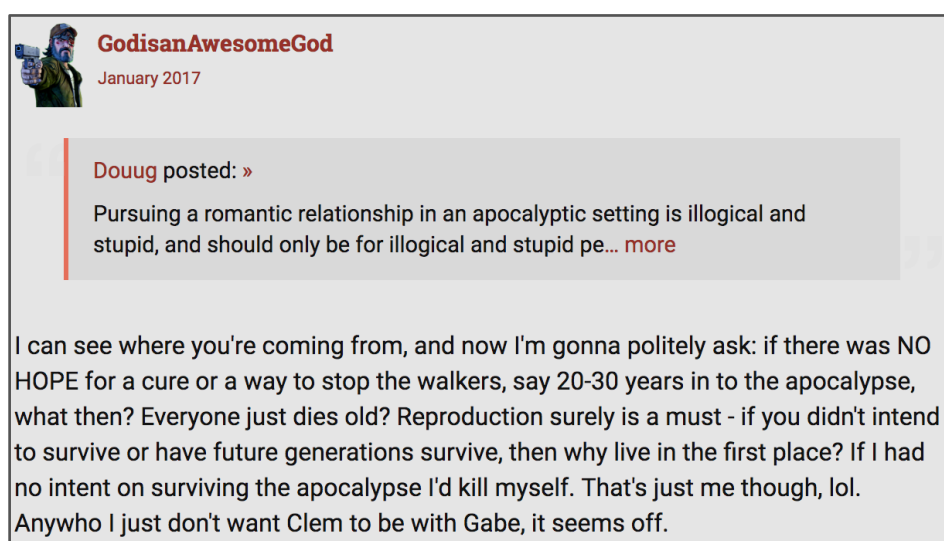


Figure 4.1. Cooperative discourse

GodisanAwesomeGod framed his counter-argument by recognizing the other person’s point-of-view: “I can see where you’re coming from, and now I’m gonna politely ask:...”, and then asked some follow-up

questions as a way to challenge the other's perspective (i.e. 'if this were the case, what then?'). GodisanAwesomeGod's inclusion of "That's just me though, lol...", served as a recognition that not everyone would share their perspective. This approach of recognizing another's viewpoint but then politely challenging them was quite common throughout the boards and pointing that forum participants largely tried to abide by the forum's rule of "frame your arguments in a constructive way". This discourse seemed to keep more conflict at bay and helped encourage further self-reflection and analysis of the topic at hand.

Humorous discourse through language and memes was peppered throughout the posts to break tension and create bonding; often times this humor was related to the game and its characters. User Douug (whose avatar was the *TWD* character Doug) made a humorous reference to Kenny, a character who becomes unhinged and dangerous each time he loses a family member; Douug wrote, "...Chances are you'll lose them and consequently become suicidal and distressed (**cough** Kenny **cough**).". The community largely responded to humor such as this favorably. For example, one user MosesARose wrote, "Romance in games turn grown adults into school children who can't say the word penis without giggling...". Ultimate Tobi responded with two words: "Penis. **giggle**." MosesARose replied, "Lol, I knew someone was going to type something like this. You get a like from me".

The discussions were largely cooperative and constructive, but there were instances of hegemonizing discourse. Some users objectified and belittled female characters or posters, but typically when this occurred, other users expressed distaste and disapproval. Funny memes were often used as a means to police microaggressions/questionable comments. One example occurred when DabigRG, an active forum member with 19,308 posts, remarked a female character looked "kissable" and longlivelee, who has 1524 posts, responded with the animated gif (figure 4.2 below), prompting the original poster to respond with a half-hearted apology.

DabigRG's use of the pet name "love" subjugated longlivelee. The pet name "love" is common in England, but like "honey", and "sweetheart" in the United States, it can be considered patronizing in certain contexts. DabigRG did not consider, however, that longlivelee may not have actually been expressing disapproval at his sexualization, but rather, may have been communicating sexual disgust at the character who DabigRG considered to be "kissable". It is interesting that DabigRG's discourse, which presented as a heterosexual male, contradicted his female avatar, yet DabigRG assumed that longlivelee was a heterosexual female because of her female avatar and image containing a female actress.

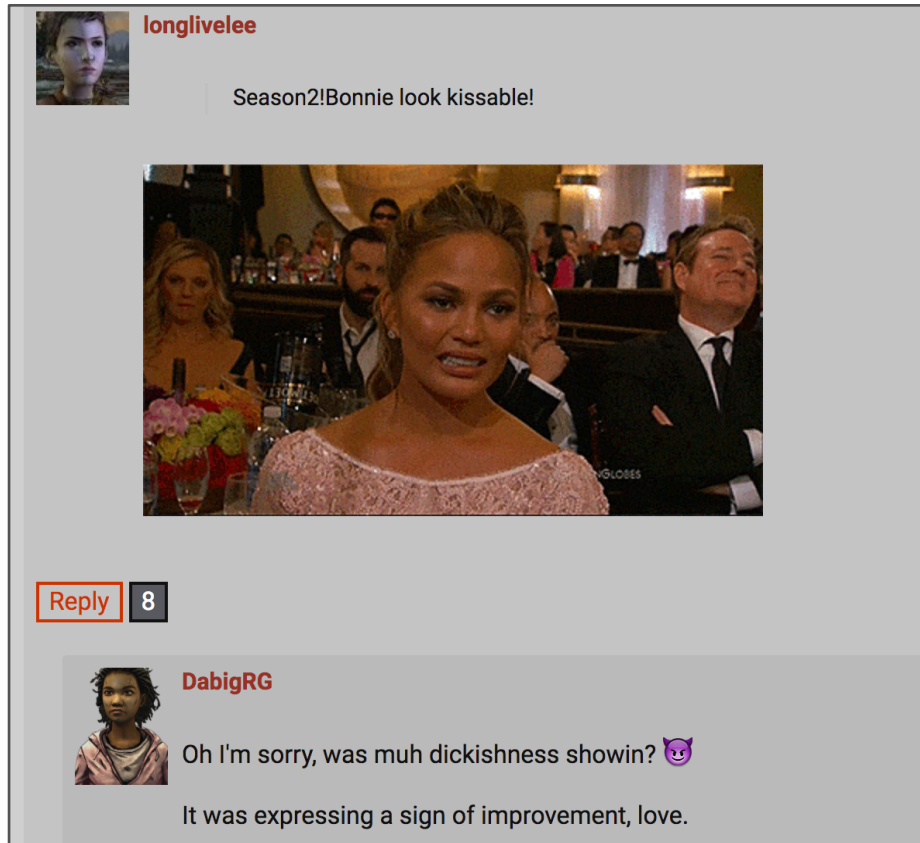


Figure 4.2. Bonnie look kissable meme

There were instances of users who managed to stop sexist or racist discussions. For example, there was a heated conversation about whether or not the player should save Carley, a female journalist who had a gun, or Doug, an out-of-shape, male IT specialist. Lee spends considerably more time with Carley so the player has more of an opportunity to learn about her character. At one point, Carley privately promises that she will not disclose to the rest of the group that Lee has been accused of murdering his ex-wife's lover, a fact she knows from her background as a journalist. This act of secrecy bonds the characters and encourages players to trust that Carley is their ally. One user claimed that those who saved Carley "either think with their dicks or make the 'gun' excuse", not considering the possibility that Carley was a more well-developed character and a more useful addition to the group. A few people responded with comments like "Point of order, not all gamers have dicks. To get at your point more specifically, not everyone chose to save her out of attraction."

Discussions surrounding difficult topics

I paid close attention to discussions surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and ability to determine whether discussions were open and promoted or silenced/policed. There were only two topics out of

149 in my sample that were dedicated entirely to identity issues. The first post dedicated to identity issues focused on LGBTQ headcanons, which is a fan's personal idea or backstory about a fictional character that is not reflected in the narrative's official canon (one user defined it as "something you'd like to think").

The OP, kittyterrific, started the conversation on December 2016 with the following prompt:

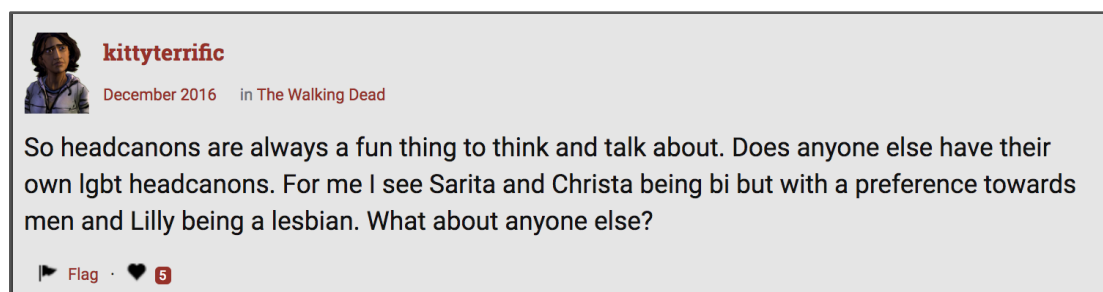


Figure 4.3. Headcanons OP

The discussion is ongoing and as of May 2018, it is currently 6 pages long. The conversational is largely congenial and conflict-free. Some posters discussed their theories about *TWD* characters being gay or bi, but most shared headcanons unrelated to sexuality or romance. One user's post indicated why the conversation largely steered away from queer-issues, despite the topic. They wrote "I prefer to keep my LGBT headcanons to my tumblr, for anxiety reasons.", There was not much resistance against LGBT topics; only one person wrote anything negative, and it was quickly retorted by the OP:

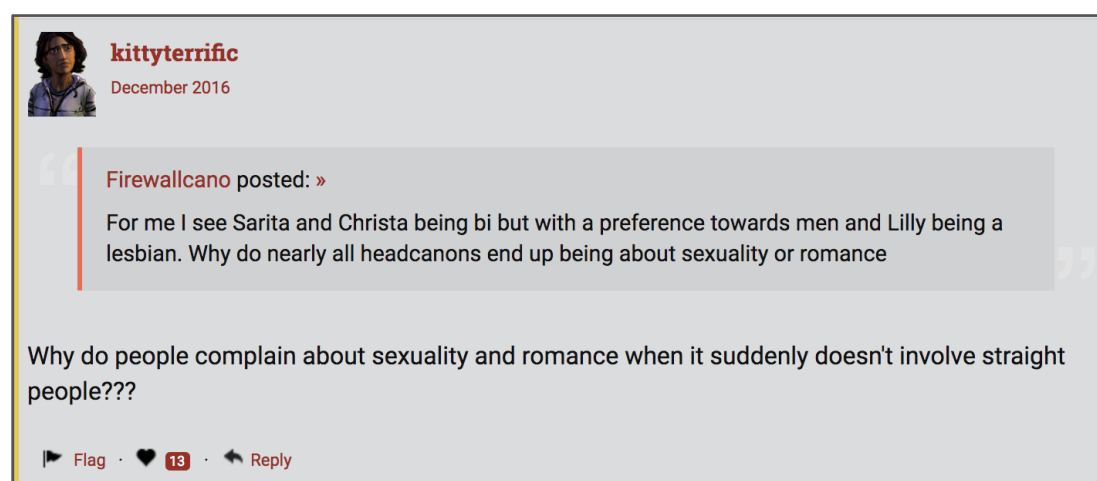


Figure 4.4. Headcanons retort

In addition to this practice of self-policing by forum participants, it was evident that the thread was being read closely by moderators. One user, DabigRG, had some moderated/removed posts, but there was no indication DabigRG had upset any of the other posters and was a very active participant on the thread.

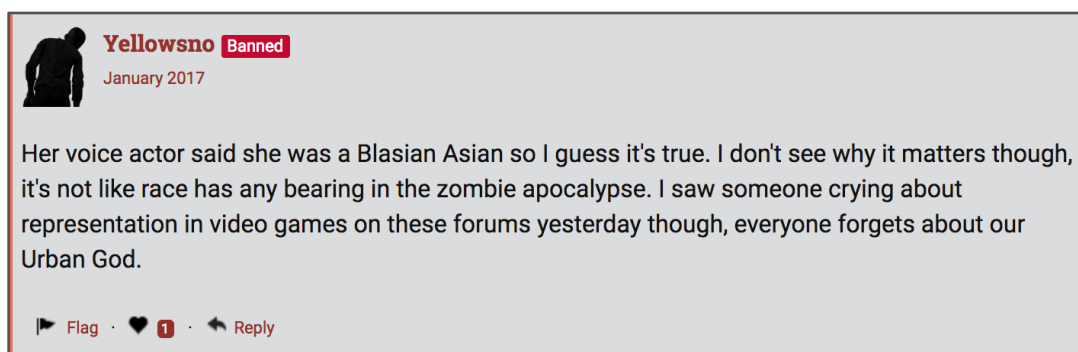


Figure 4.5. Urban God

Twice during the thread, moderators (Deltino & Blind Sniper) made a post, but only to contribute to the discussion by providing their own headcanon.

There was a 3 page (92 comments long) debate titled “Is Clem Afro-Asian (black and asian)?” that lasted between January and September of 2017. Some posters believed her to be Black, Asian, White, or a bi-racial mix of some/all those identities. Commenters justified their assumption of her race by referencing interviews with designers/voice actors, speaking to narrative points (i.e. characters thought Lee and Clementine were related), referencing their own identity/appearance (i.e. my dad is Black), and analyzing Clementine and her parents’ appearances, going as far as to make stereotypical assumptions based off their hair, eyes, skin tone, and facial structures. After forum participant Douug said her features appeared to be African American, Douug tacked on a disclaimer in order to block any objections to his assumptions: “but in this day and age anything said about race is taken out of context, so I’ll leave it here.” Some commenters questioned why her race matters, which, could have been an attempt at whitewashing her character, but could have also been said out of frustration to the pointless aim of the debate; because the context of the question/importance of knowing the answer was not justified by the OP. While Clementine is a character in a game, to many of the players, they speak of her as she is a person; some admitted to crushes on her, some view her as a daughter, and one participant stated they care about her more than “real” people in their lives. So for some of the participants, this topic could be interpreted as offensive and othering.

There were a couple comments with discourse typically seen perpetuated by Gamergaters who reject feminist understandings of games. In response to “Why do people care about her race”, TheMPerson said “Well the recent flood of Tumblinas suddenly do. **some of them are even here too.**” The term “Tumblrina” is a derogatory word for someone concerned with social issues, in the vein of “social justice

warrior". Yellowsno, who has since been banned, complained that people who complain about representation forgets about "our Urban God"(see figure 4.5 on the next page)

To unpack this comment, I need to first provide some context: **some of the forum participants refer to Lee as "Urban", "Professor Urban", or "Urban God" on the message boards as a response to the character Kenny's racist assumption that Lee, a history professor from Macon, Georgia, knows how to pick a lock. When Lee asks "Why would you say that?", he responds "Well, you're...you know...urban?"** The nickname is a humorous reference to how Lee was stereotyped as a Black man, by substituting Urban as a codename for "Black". Yellowsno utilized discourse which referenced a situation when Lee was stereotyped because of his race yet, in the same sentence, they argued that diversity in games isn't necessary and race does not affect interactions during a zombie apocalypse. These comments were ignored by other posters, including the moderators. If they were intended to be "bait", no one bit.

There was little to no discussion about how Clementine's race affects her interactions with other characters, leading me to believe the purpose of the conversation was less about how to understand how race influences social interactions and more to fulfill a need to know a specific detail of the game and to possibly authenticate themselves as being 'right' and deeply 'knowledgeable' about the game, a discourse reflective of a nerd masculinity (T.L. Taylor, 2012) and is commonly found in gaming communities.

At one point, one user, there76, became frustrated with the debate, specifically that others are assuming she can't be Black because she is fair-skinned. there76 wrote, "And apparently you are not black unless your skin is super dark. GTFO with this ignorant as fuck thinking." One user jumped in to defend the debate through turning the accusation around to there76, "Ahhh no one has said any such thing....just there is a question of if she has Asian blood...what you hate Asians?", and another suggested he detach himself from the conversation and deny that certain arguments are offensive "You really shouldn't take it that personally. If someone chooses to listen to the VA [voice actor] then that's okay, they most likely aren't saying anything about race", and another poster practiced defensive discourse, arguing that players had a right to debate her racial identity: "If both your parents are black and you come out with asian complexion, then it's pretty fucking weird. People are just questioning how that happened; I think they have a right to." At one point in the discussion, Deltino, a moderator stepped in out of a possible attempt to put an end to the debate. Deltino wrote,

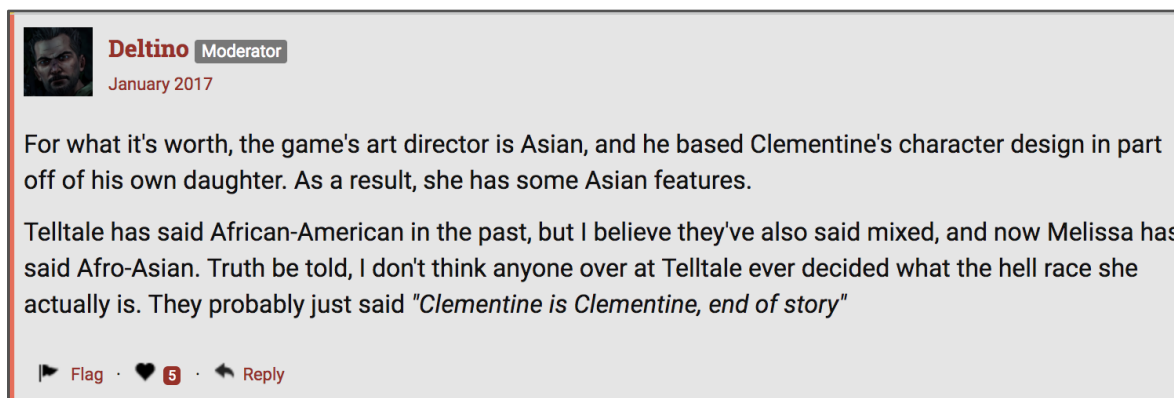


Figure 4.6. Deltino (moderator)

The debate, however, did not stop. It continued for another 39 comments until eventually another moderator, Blind Sniper, wrote “Just a reminder, please keep discussions civil and level-headed or we might close the thread. Thanks.” The comments just before Blind Sniper’s post were pretty mundane, so I’m not entirely sure why Blind Sniper made the post, unless it was in reference to an earlier post or an attempt to silence the entire debate which was becoming cyclical and had well reached saturation. After Blind Sniper’s post, the debate lasted 2 more comments, ending on “Why do I bother clicking on this thread at this point?”. This example points to the possibility that a moderator may be able to quickly end a conversation; in this case, the moderator’s presence wasn’t enough to completely stop the debate, but they were able to shut down the conversation through a more direct approach. This approach, of being direct, may be preferable to shutting down a thread altogether, because I did find one complaint that moderators shut down active threads even though people were discussing the topic “civilly”. If a conversation is just nudged to end/die out, it will likely cause less of a reaction.

Telltale’s moderation practices

Telltale’s moderators **are volunteers** and are not considered part of Telltale’s official staff. While there isn’t an official list of moderators, in February 2014, moderator Vainamoinen wrote in a forum post that there were six active moderators, and one of which primarily answers people’s technical questions. Moderators are given full control to invite participants to become moderator whenever needed; there is no application process, rather, moderators are chosen by their past behavior/participation on the boards. With one exception of a moderator who joined in 2009, people who ask to become moderators are never considered. Blind Sniper wrote in December 2016 that to become a moderator for Telltale’s message boards, “Mostly, you just gotta have a good posting history. We look for people to fill different niches, like being knowledgeable about Telltale, being civil and showing good potential for solving

disputes between members, etc.” Blind Sniper explained in February 2014 that he was likely selected because of his knowledge and research ability; Darth Marsden added that they look for people who are helpful and respectful, and “who know how to use proper punctuation and grammar...”. Through a series of back and forth posts, Darth Marsden and Blind Sniper developed a checklist for users who wish to become mods: 1. Proper grammar; 2. Helpful/respectful to community; 3. Don’t feed the trolls; 4. Don’t insult other users — even if they are trolling; 5. Don’t reply to spambots; 6. Don’t complain about not getting the next episode of a game once it has been more than a month since last episode; 7. Keep use of memes/gifs/YouTube video responses to a minimum; 8. Don’t discuss banned users — even if they were trolls; 9. Don’t spam the forums with 30 alternate accounts if you get banned. After one user replied with “challenge accepted!”, Darth Marsden wrote, “SHHHH. If we can get people to follow those rules, this place’ll be so much nicer...”. Moderators took advantage of this opportunity to further educate members about appropriate discourse within the forums, and explain ways they can hold themselves to standards beyond the requirements posted in the forum guidelines.

Case: Vote for Vince

I now turn to examine another discussion that also points to the possibility that a moderator’s presence impacts the discourse on the board. One of the longest conflicts was on a popular thread dedicated to humor, “The Walking Dead Meme and Fun Thread”. It centered around a character named Danny from the DLC content “400 Days”, who was convicted of raping a teenage girl. During a zombie attack, the player had to choose whether to shoot Danny, who was congenial and friendly, or a white-collared money embezzler who presented as uncaring and detached. Here is how it started:

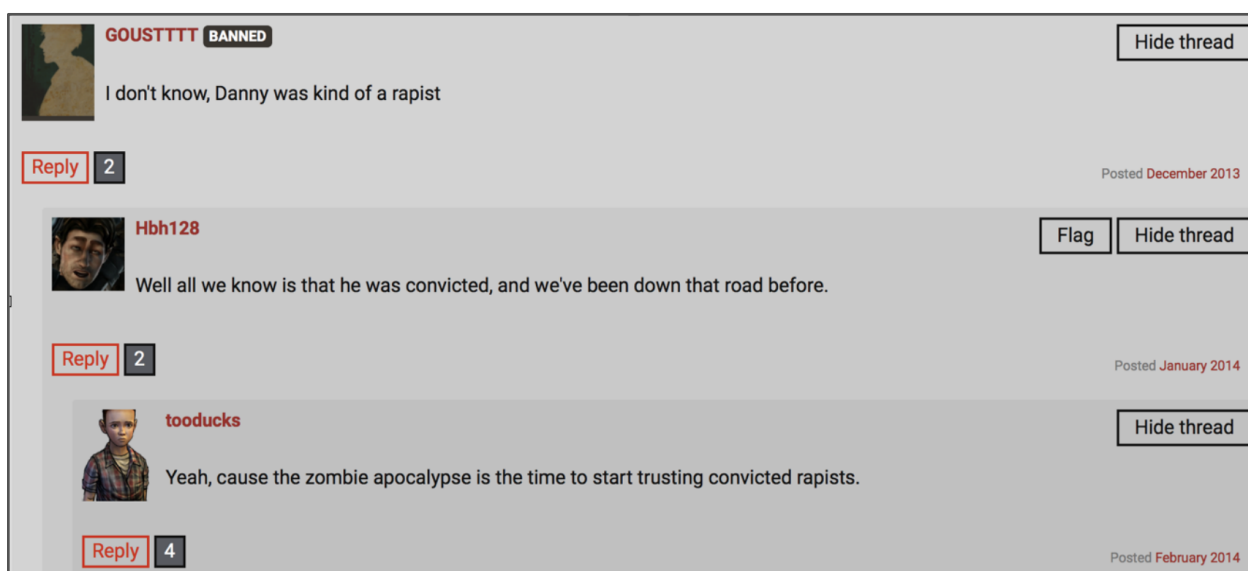




Figure 4.7. Vote for Vince pt. 1


 **Hbh128** Hide thread

Because if you were convicted of rape, well, despite what might be your attempts at turning a new leaf or atoning, it's your turned to get fucked, right?



At any rate, between a guy who admits to lying with no shame towards lying and embezzlement, and a guy from what I've seen is trying to do the right thing, every time I'm gonna go with the guy who does the right thing.

Reply 1 Posted February 2014
Edited February 2014

 **tooducks** Flag Hide thread

From what you've seen? Because the zombie apocalypse is the time to indulge good old fashioned naivety? I hope you don't have sisters.

And where do you get atoning from the five minutes you've known him.

Reply 4 Posted February 2014
Edited February 2014

Figure 4.8. Vote for Vince pt. 2

The conversation was primarily between three users who wrote lengthy posts (averaging approximately 200 – 300 words each), and went on for 56 posts over 100 pages, in and out/surrounded by other conversations about funny memes. They were discussing a controversial, sensitive topic and unpacking different perspectives. They discussed whether or not a rapist can be reformed, a player has a moral obligation to shoot the rapist because he may harm other people (even though you, as a man, are not at risk), if the good your character may cause others would make-up for helping him survive.

The discussion was free of offensive language, and hate speech, but they did use dominating dominating discourse (Rahim, 2000) at times such as, “And where do you get off.” “I hope you’re not implying”, “All I’ve heard out of you”, “Don’t talk to me about morality when you’re..” There were also examples of compromising and integrating discourse (Rahim, 2000), including phrases such as “You’re right, let me rephrase that”, and “I understand why you probably did the opposite...”. One of the users in support of the rapist, Hbh128 practiced a more hegemonic masculine discourse, used primarily dominating language and images/gifs to communicate frustration, sarcasm, and anger; another user who argued in support of the rapist, Frostbite_Snipes, used integrating and compromising discourse. A third user,

tooducks, who argued against the rapist and practiced a more feminine discourse through her use of smiley face/winky faced emojis, used more dominating discourse with Hbh128 and more compromising/integrating with Frostbite_Snipes. Eventually, a moderator joined in and wrote:

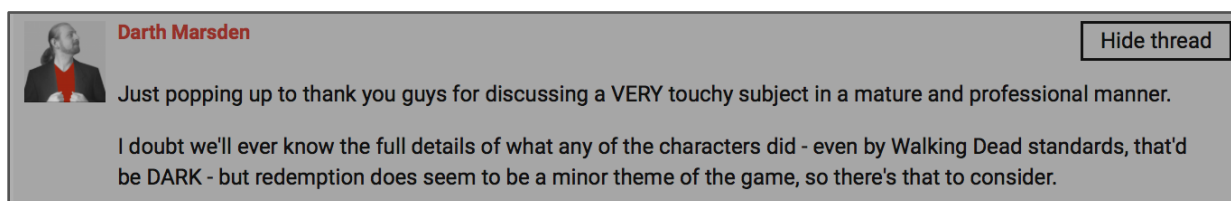


Figure 4.9. Vote for Vince pt. 3 - moderator

The conversation ended briefly after with smiling emojis and “it’s been fun”. The moderator’s comment, while it did not explicitly tell them to stop, did halt the discussion. Darth Marsden recognized both perspectives and while they did seem to favor one perspective over the other, they admitted that it was a question we could never possibly answer. While this may have provided closure to the argument, the moderator’s presence seemed to scare/silence them somewhat. One of them wrote, half-jokingly “I suppose one of us screwed up since a mod had to step in, huh? d:”. Darth Marsden’s comment worked to provide a sort of ending to the debate — his approach of recognizing there will never be a concrete, truly correct answer, i.e. “I doubt we’ll ever know the full details”, is similar to moderator Deltino’s attempt to close the Clementine race debate, showing that this could be a potential first step strategy to curbing controversial discourse.

In all, even when discussing difficult conversations such as rape, race, and sexuality, the conversations stay relatively nonemotional. Generally, it seems the moderators and forum members work together to try to deflate conflict and discuss ideas/concepts/theories in a depersonalized manner, but there was no evidence that they tried to minimize redundant viewpoints in an effort to balance the conversation. The moderators appear to be well-liked and respected and are able to manage many conflicts through their presence and gentle suggestions, minimizing closed threads and angry members. Because of these efforts, I did not witness any flame wars, or trolling beyond a questionable comment that was ignored. They do enforce fairly strict rules surrounding conflict, and members often tried to quickly resolve things/placate others. These strict rules are likely necessary in a post-Gamergate world, but there is some concern that they could marginalize players. Feminist and marginalized players who are drawn to *TWD* because of its diverse cast of characters and themes of race, class, and identity may feel the need to speak up when other posters are writing racial microaggressions and sexist assumptions, but because the forum activity works to minimize conflict, posters are quick to brush off racist and sexist accusations with “don’t take it personally”.

Performances of Fatherhood

Next, I move our attention to the discourses surrounding parenting, to determine to what extent the game's emphasis on nurturing and compassion extended into discussions surrounding Clementine who is a young girl in the start of the first season and grows up over the course of the game series. Clementine serves as the moral compass in the first season, a playable character in the 2nd, a secondary playable character in the 3rd, and is a common point of discussion in the message boards. Numerous posters referred to Clementine as if she were their daughter and expressed tension over her reaching maturity; there was much discussion about whether she should cuss and date other characters. This was most notable in a thread that discussed a budding relationship between Clementine and another teen character, Gabe, the nephew of Season 3's playable character, Javier.

Their comments were indicative of traditional gender roles, and the belief that teen girls must stay innocent and potential suitors should be chased off by dad; a display of gender rooted in masculinity, one that is indicative of conservative fatherhood, a mixture of gentle love and aggressive protectiveness. Some showed concern at a possible relationship with another teen character; when the topic was breached there was an uproar of memes rooted in pop culture (i.e. Homer Simpson strangling Bart, Macaulay Culkin in Home Alone holding a rifle with the caption "Stay away from Clem, you son of a bitch", which steered into a discussion about how horrible it would be if they were to date. Many users expressed anger/disgust regarding Clementine's sexuality, and argued for a need to contain it, "I'm not bothered about a relationship between the two but if it goes any further than a peck on the cheek then I'm turning into the daughter's over protective dad." and "I'm gonna pretend I didn't see this comment and keep assuming Clem is actually grossed out by kissing stuff", AronDracula wrote, "I swear to God, if he touches her.... I'll summon a goddamn Tsunami on him."

When someone asked "But what if she touches him?" AronDracula responded, "She better fucking not." When pressed further, "What how will you punish her, 'No shotgun for a weekend?'" AronDracula, "I'll just fail the QTE's (QuickTime Events) WTF". By failing the Quicktime events, that would put Clementine at risk to be killed or injured, a severe punishment for pursuing a romantic relationship. sialark, a user with a female character as a profile pressed back on this position, "Are you saying you'd rather have Clem be dead, than be in a relationship that she wants to pursue? Because if you are that's messed up." AronDracula's desperate suggestion was in response to the fact that Clementine is no longer the primary controllable character in Season 3 (you can only control her via flashbacks); so for him, it would be better to let her die than for her to make her own decisions. That lack of control bothered other users. Another

user wrote, “I get very anxious now that I can't control Clementine and I don't think my choices for her would have totally shut her away from having a relationship.”

This display of fatherhood, that of an aggressive, protective dad, is contrary to Clementine's adoptive father from the first season, Lee, who encouraged players to perform a masculine subjectivity “rooted in care, responsibility, and negotiation rather than aggression and domination” (Bell, et al, 2014). The game encouraged players to give Clementine agency and independence, by teaching her how to shoot a gun and protect herself. Instead, the users on the message boards presented a subjectivity of masculinity more aligned with the majority of video game fathers; one that is a “militarized” father whose goal is to “rescue, protect, or save women and children” (Voorhees, 2017).

A few users, in contrast, expressed support for Clementine's new relationship, noting that the relationships would likely be good for the both of them. DabigRG, who subjugated longlivelee by calling her “love”, supported giving Clementine free will, “Because she's mature enough to talk to him and not really care what the others think about that? If she and Gabe end up forming a genuine bond, that's their business.” This highlights the reality that gender is fluid and performances changed based on our interactions with those outside of our perceived social group; while one user may show hegemonizing performances in one context within one interaction (with longlivelee, who DabigRG assumed to be female), can show a more supportive role in another context (within a masculinized discourse).

Instead of being concerned with her budding sexuality, other users showed concern that the relationship was ill-timed, not right, or distracting. One wrote, “Clem is out of his league. She's too cool for him XD.”, another, “A relationship will only distract my daughter.” One user even recognized that she may not be heterosexual, “She could be asexual or sex-repulsed, you realize. Or possibly not into men. Maybe as her innate orientation or simply, you know, it's the fucking zombie apocalypse and nobody has time for “kissing stuff” except morons like Jane & Luke. (And they barely lasted a few minutes, so...)”

Players expressed confusing feelings about her relationship because they identified with more than one character; they played as Clementine's father in season 1, Clementine in season 2, and Javier, the uncle of Clementine's love interest in season 3. “I am sorta having this weird reaction. On one hand, I don't want my own nephew to do something with Clem. On the other hand, in character, as Javier, I shouldn't care that much. I am rather split and conflicted. It is weird.”, another user agreed, “Omg you are right, Clem is like our daughter, and Gabe is our nephew... I've seen worse in Game of Thrones, GO KISS CLEM

X GABE” and “Honestly I feel the same way. Playing as Javier with Clementine feel just so... Weird. Since I'm playing as her acquaintances and not her I feel like I am controlling Clem's story but all the while just controlling how everyone treats her = making everyone be nice to her, no matter how Clem treats me/ them.” This illustrates how identification in gameplay is complicated; players shift in and out of moments of identifying with characters, sometimes they may identify with Clementine, other times with Gabe, and sometimes they focus mostly on their own identity, disregarding the character’s feelings when making choices.

In contrast to the many performances of fatherhood observed, there were a few outliers who viewed Clementine not just as a daughter but as a peer. *TWD* was careful not to sexualize or objectify Clementine, but some gamers admitted to having sexual feelings towards the character. One user wrote that they feel conflicted because Clementine has physically matured and now they find her sexually attractive, “Thing that is getting me conflicted is that Clem is just so...Attractive this season, I mean like she's so cute. I'd date her if she was real. Relax, don't start calling me a pedo. I'm 15.” Another user in a separate post that has since been removed by moderators, asked if it was “weird that i care about Clem more than i do people irl?” In response, someone said “Clem is simply amazing and i can feel a stronger emotionally towards Clem than i do just about anybody i know other than my baby brother and my mother i fantasize over Clem occasionally which i hope isn't really weird because i am also a young teen”. These examples show that while the majority of players related to Clementine as a parent, which was the intention of the game, some were unable to shift into that perspective, likely because, according to their online self-reporting, they are too young or for other reasons are unable to empathize with people through that identity.

In summary, forum participants’ d/Discourse pointed to a performance of Lee that was more hegemonic than Telltale’s representation and more typical of what is found in the recent “daddening of video games” (Totilo, 2011). They expressed great care towards Clementine, but spoke of wanting to control her actions to ‘protect’ her and act on her behalf. They were frustrated by their lack of agency over her in season 3 and still viewed her as a child, even though she had reached maturity. They were upset she used cuss words, drank beer, and indicated romantic feelings. This behavior would be inappropriate for Season 1 or 2 Clementine, but not unusual for the independent young woman we meet in Season 3. For some of the forum participants, their relationship revealed a much more ambiguous nature; they disclosed their attraction to the older Clementine, despite that the game avoided the misstep of

positioning the daughter as a sexual object similar to what Voorhees (2016) found in *The Last of Us* and *BioShock Infinite*.

This points to the possibility that while a game can encourage players to interpret performances of fatherhood and masculinity in non-hegemonic ways, d/Discourses and interpretations firmly within gaming culture are not easily transformed.

Discussion

Participants in Telltale's online message boards avoided some of the more concerning forms of hegemonizing Discourse found in trolling communities. They largely avoided aggressive behaviors, and there was very little blatant racist, homophobic, and misogynistic content; I found no homophobic slurs or belittling language towards women (i.e. go make me a sandwich) commonly found within gaming communities previously discussed (Healy, 2016). I saw no evidence of users ganging-up on other members; nor did I see flame-wars or aggressive personal attacks. I contribute much of the congenial nature of the boards to the moderators' consistent presence and positive rapport because as Gray (2011) explained, a lack (and I would add a dislike) of authority contributes to trolling behaviors.

There are a few possibilities why Telltale's community avoided a lot of the oppressive and harassing discourse found within the communities previously discussed (Gray 2011; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). First, the large, active presence of moderators seen in Telltale's forums is a stark contrast to the limited presence within Xbox Live (Gray, 2011), and could possibly be one of the reasons Telltales' community seems to avoid a lot of the oppressive and harassing discourse Xbox players face. Second, it was difficult to make assumptions about a user's race/gender/sexuality through the conversations. In the case of Gray's study (2011), users communicated verbally over headsets and were linguistically profiled as women and people of color because of their pitch and accent. It is much easier to hide/conceal your identity within an online forum; users can only make assumptions based off profile photos (which are typically game related characters/images), their profile names (which are largely non-identifying), their self-disclosure (which is rare), and their discursive practices. Third, the community managers/and game developers did not support misogynistic, racist, and homophobic discourse and made a public stance against it in their community rules; this is in direct contrast to the Dickwolves case described by Salter & Blodgett, where Penny Arcade authority figures promoted sexist attitudes. Finally, it is possible that the messages within the game either attracts a particular type of player or extends beyond the game into the community.

The world of *TWD* requires a mode of interaction among characters within a group that focused on cooperation and conflict-reduction; this was generally extended into the message boards. Participants were cooperative with one another and generally polite, and some difficult conversations about race, gender, and sexuality occurred without major conflict, but there were still many unproductive discussions surrounding topics of identity, such as jokes about female characters' wrinkles, "tits" and skin color, and uninformed discussions about Clementine's race, and the refusal to accept that a woman of color can pass as another race. There were several instances of microaggressions going "unchecked" by group members, and in one case, when someone spoke out with: "GTFO with this ignorant as fuck thinking", other users were quick to neutralize their anger and end the conflict. Moderators were excellent at conflict reduction and facilitators of general discussion, but the emphasis on conflict-reduction may have homogenized discourse around problematic topics by limiting non-hegemonic perspectives from being shared, such as with Clementine's race debate.

It did not appear that all marginalized experiences and perspectives were shared, as evident by the one participant's hesitance to share lesbian headcanons on the message boards, citing Tumblr as a safer space. This indicates that the elimination of trolling is not necessarily enough to promote inclusiveness. This is unfortunate, because while I recognize that it is not the job of marginalized players to educate others' (Lorde, 1984), the sharing of others' perspectives and experiences do help to build empathy and bridge understandings, because we construct our perspective of the world not only from own experiences but also our interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). I did not see any protected spaces for marginalized perspectives, which could work towards further inclusiveness (F. Shaw, 2013); while players are free to start their own threads, I witnessed participants hijack a thread to write 'why does this matter' and turn the conversation about LGBTQ+ headcanons into heterosexual/general canon discussion. Furthermore, there were opportunities where moderators could have actively worked to encourage critical thought by crafting a space that allows members to fully unpack and refute problematic (i.e. racist/sexist) assumptions (Goldstein, 1997). They could have done this by eliminating comments that were repetitive/unproductive and pushed participants to think more critically through their facilitation.

A few months after I collected my data, Telltale added a **few new forum guidelines**, one of which states "No politics/religion/other inflammatory discussions". They link to Steam rules while explaining that this policy is found in other game-related forums. This new policy could potentially be used to block future conversations about rape, sexual identity, and race entirely. Trolls are more likely to attack

underrepresented groups and feminist discussions (Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002), so if these types of discussions are included in this ban, it is likely that trolling will diminish/less moderation will be needed. However, they lose the potential to facilitate understanding and bridge barriers — however, to follow NPR’s reasoning, it is better to close down comments if there are not enough available resources to maintain the space as productive and free from harassment. Forum moderators have to navigate the strict tension between “safe spaces” and “free spaces”; a well-balanced moderation facilitates difficult conversations by permitting certain discourses while limiting ones that are damaging or derailing (F. Shaw, 2013).

While participants practiced Discourse indicative of fathers, it was largely hegemonic; forum posters performed fatherhood in a more traditional and conservative manner than what was portrayed in the game. Forum posters expressed protectiveness towards Clementine, aggressiveness towards her fictional suitors, and frustration at their inability to control her behavior and choices. They showed great care and love, but much like the Black male players in Gray’s (2011) examination of X-Box Live, their behavior revealed a distaste when Clementine no longer performed a subservient role; they expressed concern and frustration because she was no longer an obedient child, and no longer an avatar they could control. While it is impossible to know how many forum participants are female, the board’s discourse was largely indicative of white hegemonic masculinity which dominates gaming culture and is enforced in other games such as *The Last of Us* and *BioShock Infinite* (Voorhees, 2016).

Lastly, this analysis showcases’ the ability of Telltale’s moderators to encourage cooperative discourse and foster a secondary Discourse that was inconducive to violent, hegemonic masculinities such as trolls, incels, and GamerGaters. However, at times, players’ primary Discourses (e.g. as White American Male), and other secondary Discourses (e.g. gamer, nerd), trump the culture fostered by Telltale and the Moderators, as evident in the discussion about Clementine’s desire to date. Players ignored the game’s message of the need to foster independence/self-survival and acted as if Clementine was incapable of making adult choices without their interference; this belief resonates more with American male Discourse than with the Discourse perpetuated in the game world. This indicates that hegemonizing behavior and attitudes within the larger gaming culture are deeply-rooted and difficult, but not impossible, to change.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation is to gain a holistic understanding of the cultural influence of *The Walking Dead*, a video game that encourages players to critically engage with a form of parenthood that is rooted in empathy, care, and cooperation, and which directly contrasts the more typical portrayal of a father as violent and ambivalent, such as what is found in AAA titles such as *The Last of Us*, and *BioShock Infinite* (Voorhees, 2016). To understand this, I explored my own interpretations and experiences surrounding the game through an interactive autoethnography, the experiences of two different players through a microethnography, and the communicative practices within Telltale's online message boards through a qualitative content analysis. Throughout my analysis, I relied heavily on feminist understandings of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), game studies work on distributed agency (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, Kampe, & Bell, 2015), gender studies work on masculinity (i.e. nerds and trolls) (Kendall, 1999; Massanari, 2015; Phillips, 2015; Ging, 2017), Gee's (1990 & 2015) work on Big/Small D discourse, and a utilization of Taylor et al.'s (2015) "attractor" framework to explore the manner in which players' interact with and around the game.

I consider this study to be *holistic*, a term that I do not intend to be synonymous with positivistic understandings of exhaustive or generalizable research. Instead, I use it in a manner that is more suitable for a "situated" (Haraway, 1988) project within the interpretative tradition and embraces an understanding that a player's gameplay experience is unique and not replicable. My analysis of TWD is *holistic* because it seeks and actively mines differences among players and their mediated experiences across different platforms. My goal was not to study player experiences until saturation was met, something that would be impossible for a choice-based, tailored game. Instead, what I present is a greater understanding of the types of experiences and interpretations TWD "enables or prevents" (de Castell & Jenson, 2003, p. 656).

Chapter summaries and limitations

Chapter 2

My examination began in my autoethnographic exploration of my own experiences surrounding my play of Seasons 1 – 3 of *TWD*. I reflected upon my personal experiences that influenced my interpretation and choices, such as how being a new mother impacted the temporal and affective constraints on my play, and in turn, I also looked at how the game encouraged me to think critically about parenthood and my

own choices and experiences. This experiment highlighted the complex ways I moved in and out of states of identification — my decisions at times were influenced by my parenting philosophy, other times it was because of my history/experiences of being parented when I was a girl, and other times I played out of consideration for the character's life/personality who I was playing with/through. And yet, there were times my decisions/actions were influenced by my real-world physical needs including pumping, nursing, and childcare, building a more disjointed, distracted, and therefore less immersive experience than what I was used to before becoming a mother. Despite these distractions, I found my postpartum play experience to be more emotionally intense, sometimes overwhelmingly so; I was much more disturbed by gore, violence, and death, particularly the death of a parent or child; I would cope by fast-forwarding through battle scenes and zombie attacks. This response has faded somewhat since I started collecting my data two years ago, but some changes remain. I quit watching the television show altogether. They recently killed off my favorite character, Glenn, in a gruesomely violent manner, just after he found out his partner was pregnant. I struggled to watch his partner mourn over his death and worried about her baby's future. Glenn provided a source of hope for the group; when he left, all I felt was despair during my subsequent viewings. My media consumption is so limited now, I prefer to engage in media that evokes more positive reactions. Recently, I learned that the protagonist's son, Carl, also died. I'm glad I avoided seeing it. This general distaste of visiting a world hopeless and tragic extended into my experience of playing the game. I still haven't played the episodes of season three that were released after I stopped data collection.

My choice of building the autoethnographic analysis in an interactive, online format, certainly makes it more accessible and interesting, but for users unfamiliar with the standard mechanics/user interface of text-based games, they may find this to be a confounding experience. It also raises questions about the permissibility of a chapter that can be altered (or removed) at any time. Yet, I found this to be a worthwhile experiment. Twine was uniquely well-suited for an autoethnographic study because both the software and the methodological approach share formal and historical similarities. They both have been involved in the creation of deeply personal, underrepresented creative nonfiction writing, and have historically been used to resist mainstream, oppressive practices. This approach allowed me to demonstrate the complex, interconnected ways the various attractors, including historical and cultural gendered perceptions of technology, play a role in a player's engagement with a game, but most notably, it gave me an opportunity to better understand the "illusion of choice" approach to storytelling used in *TWD*.

There is no doubt that Telltale's advertisements proclaiming that *TWD*'s 'choices matter', is truthful. Characters live, die, or transform, endings change, and Clementine's perception of the world is shaped in response to player input. However, not every choice has a determinable or obvious effect; for example, no matter your choices, Lee will always die at the end of *Season One*, and Clementine will always leave him, alone and heartbroken. *TWD* (and a great deal of interactive narratives in Twine) are rooted in literary conventions; each provides players with a satisfying (but not always happy) ending complete with character transformation and a story that follows a traditional narrative arc. Both limit player agency out of necessity; too much player interaction/control can water down and 'cheapen' the narrative (Brice, 2014). What matters in the case of *TWD* and my autoethnographic chapter, is not the game's end state, but how the players got there and how the experience shaped them and the characters they interacted with/through.

I mirrored this approach within the interactive autoethnographic experience I built into Twine. As in *TWD*, my intent as the designer was not to create an ergodic experience (Aarseth, 1997) that enables players to win points and achieve a 'perfect play' or build a story that permits audiences to sit back and be spectators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), but rather to enhance the "dialogical" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) nature of autoethnographic work and make readers active participants in the conversation and experience. Similar to narrative games such as *Queers at the End of the World* (Anthropy, 2013) and *TWD*, and autoethnographic works by authors such as Poulos (2008a, 2008b, & 2017), Tillman-Healy (1996), and Olson (2004), my goal was to "re-create the interpretative anchors that so powerfully shape how we constitute ourselves and experiences" (Berry, 2006, p. 10); I utilized evocative narrative writing, intersectional & critical feminist theory, and interactive elements to encourage self-awareness through reflection and critical thought and disrupt certain interpretative positions to push towards transformation.

This close read of my personal experience provided an in-depth look at one player's interpretations and experiences around a game; however, to gain a more full understanding of the socio-cultural significance of *TWD*, I needed to broaden the study to include a multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations to better represent the wealth of meaning that arises between different configurations of player, game, and context. This leads me to my next chapter.

Chapter 3

The next layer of my study, a microethnography, involved the consideration of the game-based interactions of two very different players, ones who were not nearly as invested in the game and critical understandings of play. This study revealed that although this game presents opportunities to encourage personal transformation and growth, gameplay is too complex of an experience, affected by too many attractors to be generalized. TWD can provide players with the tools and the resources, but can't make them use it in expected and predictable ways; we don't always "learn the way that designers attended" (Klawe, 2000, qtd. in de Castell & Jenson, 2003, p. 656). Game makers design games with the consideration of what the experience "enables or prevents" (de Castell & Jenson, 2003, p. 656); Telltale has designed a game that enables (and even encourages) a transformative, critical play and experience of masculinity that is non-hegemonic, but as demonstrated by our microethnographic players and the conversations surrounding fatherhood on the message boards, this path is not always the one players choose. Just as easily as I slipped into critical thought and intersectional feminist analysis of TWD during my autoethnography, WD3's understanding of TWD was informed and shaped by his experiences with prior media (conventional attractors), such as the video game *Mass Effect* and the television series *Lost*. On the flipside, WD4 was essentially shut out of the game and the study by her lack of experience with the controls, her lack of interest in the study, and WD3's more gregarious participation. This points to the possibility that even the most critically designed games' transformative potential may be limited by the baggage players bring to the play sessions, a reality that may be particularly useful for those who create or study games designed to educate, persuade, or inform.

In regard to limitations, while we worked to recruit diverse participants who are not typically studied in games research, we were limited by those who were willing to devote several hours towards video gameplay. This essentially eliminated those who were parents, who would have added insight to our understanding of the game's influence. We also only included people in our study who had not played *TWD*, a game that had been out for a year at the time of our study, therefore none of our participants were Telltale game fans who had familiarity with their gaming system or participated in their online forums. It would have been interesting to study the play of a participant who was actively engaged on the message boards.

Chapter 4

My last round of the research took me to the game's online community, to determine the extent the game's themes and messages were being reinforced or subverted within the forums. Through analysis of

the forum's moderation policies and practices, and the discourse I encountered on the message boards, I found that while the forum reflects the cooperative, congenial behavior encouraged within the game, participants, who spoke of Clementine as if she was their daughter, embodied fatherhood in a manner that was less like Telltale's Lee, and more like the aggressive, hegemonic fathers found in other mainstream, AAA titles (Voorhees, 2016). Many of the forum participants spoke of their desire to control her and aggressively protect her from suitors, despite her intentions, wishes, or needs. However, Telltale's active moderators and forum policies limited certain performances of hegemonizing masculinity that have been weaponized in dangerous and violent manners, including (but not limited to) troll-like aggressive displays of misogyny, racism, and homophobia that has been documented in Xbox Live (Gray, 2011); Reddit (Massenari, 2017), Twitter, (Consalvo, 2012), and World of Warcraft (Pulos, 2013). This points to the potential that moderation does impact and influence a game forum's Discourse, but we don't yet know the limits of their interference; that is something worth studying in future research.

When I originally planned this project, I had hoped to analyze a 'network' of online communities/field sites within my content analysis because most people engage with a game through a multitude of different sites/platforms, connected through hyperlinks and google searches. However, I had to confine my content analysis to only one chapter to allow me to explore other engagements with the game (including the act of play), and in light of online harassment, I felt that it was necessary to spend considerable time understanding/unpacking the influence of moderation. Therefore, I chose to limit my data collection to only one online gaming website, Telltale games. Future studies could explore a network of online field sites, possibly in connection to one player's experience of play. Researchers could track a player's online interactions surrounding the game and interview them about their experiences.

In keeping with the interpretive nature of the study, I would have liked to have connected with the moderators I mentioned in the content analysis to get their perspective on my interpretations of their discourse and their overall thoughts/reflections on the culture within Telltale's community. A future study that interviews moderators about their work/experiences would add worthwhile knowledge to our understanding of moderation and online communities.

Final reflections

I end this chapter with some final thoughts on this dissertation, including a discussion of the collective insight gained from the three studies pertained within, including both methodological and theoretical contributions.

The insights from each of the studies demonstrate that our reactions and in-game decisions are heavily informed by our own experiences and beliefs shaping our ethics, and contributes to our fears and emotional responses. Furthermore, as much as our background shapes our in-game interactions, the game, in turn, influences us within the physical world (aka meatspace). The first episode of the game was released six years ago, four years before the birth of my first son. The last season is set to start in August 2018, when my son will be two-and-a-half years old. This game gave me an opportunity to consider parenting before becoming one and provided opportunities for me to reflect upon and further develop my parenting beliefs and practices. It also provided opportunities for me to craft my critical thought processes, helped me better understand theories and methods, and provided a means to hone my research and creative writing abilities.

This experiment also highlighted that an engagement with the game is ongoing, existing across multiple sites/platforms. To further illustrate this, I point to an experience I had while writing this in summer 2018, when a former student tagged me in a Facebook post promoting the newly released trailer for *TWD* season four, *The Final Season*, which was hosted on YouTube. In the trailer, Clementine is singing “Row your boat” to a preschool-aged A.J. on a small wooden bridge as she fishes with a spear. The moment is picturesque; they are surrounded by lush trees, the sun is warm and golden, and the only sound outside of her singing is a soft trickle of water as a leaf floats down the small river and beneath the bridge. She encourages him to sing with her, “If you see a crocodile, don’t forget to scream”, A.J. stares at the water, silent for a moment. “Come on, you love this one”, Clementine says. A.J. lowers his head, “It’s a bad song, you shouldn’t scream. Ever. Screaming brings monsters.” Clementine turns and approaches him, “You’re right, kiddo. The song was written before, when kids didn’t have to worry about monsters. A.J. responds, sullen, “I don’t remember a time without monsters.” “I know”, Clementine says, as the camera pans to reveal what had captured A.J.’s attention: a zombie lying just beneath the surface of the water. My eyes well with tears. I sniffle as I watch Clementine systematically quiz A.J. on how to handle a zombie attack, where to shoot them, and what to do if she is bitten by a zombie. I cry because of the infallibility of life, and at the realization that this girl that I parented, who I shaped through my actions and lessons, will inevitably die. I cry at the loss of innocence, and at the deep-rooted fear of the

monsters surrounding my son — the mass shooters, police brutality, and suicidal thoughts that lurk all around, and wonder, was there ever a time that kids didn't have to worry about monsters?



Figure 5.1. Facebook post

This moment, along with a six-year-old Facebook post I wrote that my friend recently re-shared (see Figure 5.1 above), illustrates that a player's experience with a game is not confined to a single screen or to one individual moment of active play. It is one that is converged through a network of game-related moments in a "vast terrain and complex intermingling of cultural spaces" (Burrell, 2009, p. 184). Play is only one of the ways we encounter, make sense of, and embed games in our everyday lives. People may engage with a game as a spectator either in-person (N. Taylor, 2016a & 2016b) or through watching a streamed or pre-recorded game via Twitch.tv or Youtube (Smith, Obrist, & Wright, 2013; Johnson, 2018); as professional game coaches and commentators, academics and critics (N. Taylor, 2016a); as promotional models (Taylor, Jenson, de Castell, 2009); and through the creation or participation in fan websites and discussion forums (Bergstrom, 2013; Pulos, 2013; Condis, 2015). This dissertation is one more contribution to the rich tradition of work that decenters (and therefore complexifies and contextualizes) the player/game relationship that conventional game studies have remained so steadfastly concerned with.

Furthermore, this dissertation discussed many *different* gendered performances of parenthood permitted/limited within and around *TWD*. The game has the potential to transform players and encourage critical thought and reflection, however only in players who are open to that possibility. While the game certainly can be co-opted into other frameworks, as demonstrated in *WD3*'s discussion of a paragon play, the game limits the player's re-positioning. The game's world does not present options/consequences that neatly fit *Mass Effect*'s black and white, paragon and renegade player paths. In *TWD*, choices that first appear as paragon may prove otherwise, and the player may experience negative outcomes that are outside of the player's control. For example, in Season Two, Clementine encounters a hungry dog. If she feeds him some of her food, the dog will attack her and she will have to kill him. If she doesn't feed him food, he will still attack her, resulting in the same outcome; but in this scenario, she gets to keep all the food to herself. This is a world designed to show players that ethical quandaries are complex and repercussions are often hard to predict. So while players may be resistant to this worldview and are insistent on making decisions informed by other understandings, the game never relinquishes full control and perpetually pushes back through its narrative, character design, and game mechanics "i.e. Clementine will remember that".

This sort of tension between player and game is also reflected in the message boards. Forum posters are not free to practice any form of discourse; the forum moderators successfully block trolling and prevent hegemonizing behavior from dominating the boards. While we do see enactments of fatherhood that are more traditional and controlling than encouraged by the game there was also evidence of other participants pushing back and challenging these performances. There was also clear, targeted resistance to racial microaggressions and objectifying, belittling language towards women. Forum participants resisted these messages either directly, through confrontation/discussion, indirectly, through flagging comments for moderators, or passively, by ignoring bad behavior (i.e. don't feed the trolls). What I found was not a gaming community full of open incels, trolls, and GamerGaters, nor did I find a community full of feminists; but what I found was something more complex, positioned in the middle of those two extremes. Often studies focus on gamers who are "hypermasculine" (Bell, et al, 2015) and gamers who are marginalized (A. Shaw, 2009); what this study offers is an insight into those who fall between those two positions.

In regard to theoretical potential, this multi-layered project provided an opportunity to apply a multidisciplinary theoretical understanding to my analysis; I relied on feminist media studies theories concerning representation; science and technology studies work on technological access and mastery;

game studies theoretical understanding of player/avatar relationships; and linguistic work on d/Discourse. This allowed me an opportunity to analyze the narrative, the mechanics, the play experience, the player, and the culture surrounding the game. This experiment is a reminder that games studies researchers MUST become multidisciplinary; we have a foundational responsibility to engage with the conversations happening outside of our own narrow discipline boundaries. There are rich resources in a variety of different disciplines, each providing different layers of understanding to the influence of an actional and representational medium on its associated players.

Furthermore, not only has this study demonstrated the need to be multidisciplinary within game studies, but it also points to the benefit of applying multiple methods to studying one game in order to understand experiences/interactions within and beyond the moment of play. Each method contributed different understandings of player experiences of *TWD*, resulting from the inclusion of different players, field-sites, and media platforms. Autoethnography allowed me to study the personal/political experiences surrounding the game in-depth, including discussion of memories and experiences from my past and present that informed my gameplay decisions and interpretations. Microethnography's approach of audio-visually recording the moment of play allowed me to catch "micro" moments that are easily overlooked/forgotten; these clips also helped refresh the players' memories during the facilitated discussions about their play. Finally, content-analysis helped me to consider how players continue to reflect and experience the game outside of the play in online forums, speaking to the influence of the game's culture. Together, each approach provided me with different experiences which contributed to a more holistic understanding of the game.

Engagements with games are mediated

Finally, I propose that the most important contribution of this dissertation is its qualitative & theoretical discussion of the multiple ways our engagements with games are *mediated*. This study shows that not only is gameplay mediated by gaming technologies and our own affects (including, but not limited to our prior experiences and bodies), but our research processes/methodologies are also mediated. To end this final reflection, I will explore how the various gaming platforms and mediated research tools/processes allowed me to collect and explore different engagements with *TWD*.

My engagement with Twine shaped my reflections on my *TWD* experiences, including the moments of play and attractors I considered to be relevant, and the manner in which I wrote and organized my data/analysis. I modeled my autoethnography after *TWD* and other Twine works like *Queers at the End of the*

World (Anthropy, 2013), *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013), *My Uncle Who Works at Nintendo* (Lutz, 2014) and *My Father's Long Long Legs* (Lutz, 2013); similar to each of these games, I included frequent and consistent interactive elements to avoid the text-based equivalent of the frustratingly too-long "cut-scene". I also adapted my writing for an online narrative, avoiding clunky and cumbersome long paragraphs. These two strategies resulted in an interactive experience with a lot of short 'asides' that players could choose to read or skip altogether. I wanted to include a traditional narrative arc, but also needed to address several topical points, and therefore ended up within an organizational pattern somewhere in-between a story and a research paper. This resulted in the creation of an experience that resembled more of an unwieldy mosaic than a concise, linear, research study or an evocative, strong narrative.

As I mentioned earlier in the conclusion, the act of recording participants' play within my microethnography allowed me to analyze their play on a 'micro' level; documenting moments that are easily forgotten or overlooked. It is important to consider that the act of recording participants and their play influences how they play and act (N. Taylor, 2006b). They may have made decisions and responded to things out of a need to impress/perform for the camera, the researchers, or each other. However, I do not consider this to be a limitation, but simply a *different* experience of play. While gameplay can be a solitary activity, oftentimes it is not (N. Taylor, 2006a). There are ways that players engage with video games outside of playing them. Players may choose to use video games as a means to connect/bond with their family members, make new friends, develop rich social worlds online, feel connected to a subculture, and/or compete with others in tournaments. For many players, spectatorship is a necessary part of gameplay (N. Taylor, 2006a). I had already documented a solo experience of play in my autoethnography, so I believed it to be necessary to be one that considered and promoted spectatorship. Therefore, I asked players to play the game in pairs as the data-collectors performed a dual role of researcher and spectator, and then we asked the players to be spectators of each other as they watched each others' reactions to decisions and discussed each others' reasoning in the third session of our data-collection.

My data-collection on online forums allowed me to understand the various ways players engage with the game outside of the gamespace. For the first time in the study, I was able to collect data "invisibly"; however, even though the participants were unaware of my presence (as I read their comments long after they posted them), as with any research study, the data was not unaffected by my influence. I selected the themes/topics related to my research and eliminated conversations that I felt were

saturated or not relevant. I interpreted their intent and made research-driven (but not infallible) assumptions about how their discourse is indicative of whether they are included/excluded in the community. This allowed me to fully understand the ways forum participants 'perform' for each other and authenticate themselves within the forum's dominant Discourse. This last process of data collection affected my own personal engagement with the game. Even though I had read the forums before, I felt a bit like an interloper, and completely over-saturated myself in conversations I would normally avoid/ignore, which made for a very tiresome experience. This made me less enthusiastic about forum participation, and I have less interest in reading online player opinions/thoughts on the forums (outside of research purposes) in the future.

It is also worth noting that each round of data collection included experiences of gameplay on different gaming platforms. I purchased *Season One* and *Two* directly from Telltale and played it through applications on my iMac; I purchased *Michonne* from Steam and played it on my MacBook Pro out of convenience and comfort so I could pump/be near my sleeping son (but it is less powerful and therefore I experienced more lagging and reduced graphics); and because Telltale stopped releasing Mac-versions of their recent titles, I purchased the iOS version of *Season Three* and played it on my phone, in bed with headphones on while nursing my son and in a car while my family travelled three hours with me so I could present at a conference. Each of these individual platforms changed the way I experienced the game physically because the controls, graphics, and size changed, and each set different limitations on the various times/locations I could play them in. The players in the microethnographic study experienced the game in an entirely different way from me. They were not given a choice of platform because of financial limitations; they both played the game via Steam on a PC in our lab and wore headsets so we could better record their utterances. At one point, WD3 asked if we could turn off the lights so he could become more absorbed in the story, but we could not control the lights in the lab without affecting the lights in the adjacent doctoral student cubicles; the bright lights likely served as a reminder to him that his play was being watched/observed. But as I mentioned earlier, this is not a limitation, only a catalyst of difference. Lastly, the message boards likely contained a mixture of gaming preferences/experiences even beyond those I previously documented, as the game is available on twelve different platforms.

Conclusion

In all, I leave this dissertation with the notion that gameplay is not confined to a single moment, a single screen, or to a single player. A player's interaction with a game is a complex intermingling of many experiences across many platforms and field-sites. It is mediated by the players, the culture(s) and

histories surrounding them and the game, the technologies required to operate it, and any researchers who seek to study it. Game Studies as a field is multidisciplinary. It spans the social sciences and the humanities, including (but not limited to): media studies, gender studies, technology studies, fan studies, human communication, rhetoric, and mass communication. Projects that limit their methodological and theoretical frameworks and conversations to a single discipline are forgoing a foundational responsibility to provide a more well-rounded, holistic discussion surrounding their findings.

In the last few weeks of writing my dissertation during summer of 2018, The World Health Organization (WHO) classified a new mental health condition titled “gaming disorder” in their 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD–11). This disorder can be applied to someone who has impaired control over gaming and prioritizes it over other activities/interests despite negative consequences. This classification directly contradicts a 2017 report released by a different arm of the United Nations, UNICEF, which discusses at length the lack of evidence surrounding negative effects of children/teen’s excessive use of technology and the potential problems of labeling it as an “addiction”. Psychologists (Ferguson, 2017, December 28; Scutti, 2018, June 18;), gaming organizations (Wade, 2018, June 18), gamers (Pesce, June 18), and game studies researchers (Aarseth, et al., 2017; Bogost, 2018, June 28) have challenged this classification as being reductionist and stigmatizing. Dr. Anthony Bean, Psychologist and Executive Director at the Telos Project, argues that those who game excessively despite negative consequences likely have other underlying causes such as anxiety and depression, and he worries that physicians may accidentally diagnose someone with this because they “don’t understand the world of video games” (qtd. In Scutti, 2018, June 18, para 26). In an open letter criticizing the classification, 28 researchers from game studies, psychology, public health, and communication argued that there was not enough hard evidence, that the criteria was borrowed from gambling addiction and not contextualized within games and gaming culture, the “moral panic” surrounding video games may cause medical professionals to act prematurely, and the vast majority of healthy gamers will be further stigmatized (Aarseth, et al, 2017).

We must not be quick to ascribe generalized moral judgements surrounding technologies such as a video game based off a small amount of player experiences. This study offers an understanding of many different experiences surrounding one video game that is a continuation of a long list of rich, nuanced ethnographic work that explores complex experiences of gameplay in-depth (Carr, 2005; Sanford & Madill, 2006; T.L. Taylor, 2006 & 2012; N. Taylor, 2006b; Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Gray, 2011; Jenson & de Castell, 2011; A. Shaw, 2013; Taylor et al., 2015; Bell

et al., 2015). These studies bring forth an understanding of gaming that is not polarized; while they certainly bring to light hegemonizing and oppressive behaviors, they also reveal that gaming has many social and emotional benefits. They connect people to one another. They provide a safe space to work out problems, practice complex interpersonal and group communication, and emotionally connect and empathize with other players and characters. They challenge us. They help us better understand our identity and may destabilize or shift our interpretive assumptions about the world around us. Furthermore, players (and games) do not exist in a vacuum. The benefits of a game can possibly extend into the larger community. Games, including *The Walking Dead*, may transform us as parents, as children, as neighbors, and as community members (online and off). We co-construct them, and they, in turn, influence us and everyone we touch.

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