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## Rewriting the Story: Videogames within the Post-Gamergate Society

*“Begin like this: If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions.”*

- Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture, Alexander Galloway

Staring through the scope in *Call of Duty Modern Warfare* (2007), as you navigate through the boggy swamps of some exotic jungle, there is never any doubt that you are in control. The operator’s thumbs roll over the toggles of the controller signaling to the consul how the character on screen must move. By enacting actions within the real world, players affect the actions of the avatar within the game world. To any well-versed videogame player, this is common knowledge; when one plays a videogame it is to be engaged within the world of the game and to ultimately achieve the programmed goal of the game.

Up until the creation of the videogame, mediums of entertainment were largely spectator based. While reading a book you may turn the page, but you do not affect the ending of the book. When viewing a movie you may be actively watching, but you are not able to change the ending of the movie. But when playing a videogame the decisions made within the game determine whether the goal is reached, or if it is not, game over. In Alexander Galloway’s essay, “Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture,” he defines videogames as a medium based upon action; “There has emerged in recent years a whole new medium, computers and in particular videogames, whose foundation is not in looking and reading but in the instigation of material change through action.” It is this

action that appeals to players--the level of interactivity and agency. However, in recent years, with games like *Kingdom Hearts (2002)*, *Heavy Rain (2010)*, and *God of War (2005-2010)* videogames are making a large push towards story driven games. Story driven games are strongly centered on plot; these games are designed to interest players because they care about the characters and the outcome at the end of the game. One plays to complete the story. On an imagined spectrum of game design, story driven games would be placed on the opposite end of from "gameplay driven games." Gameplay driven games are focused on the available actions within the game, whether it is *Gran Turismo (2013)* where the player drives a racecar on different tracks, or *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance (2002)* where players participate in a duel to complete various gory melees. This is not to say that a game is either story driven or gameplay driven, but rather to note that videogames can have a certain affinity for stronger story, or stronger gameplay. According to Gabriel Lievano, an *ex-Immersion* game developer, the two styles of game differ in the characteristics of the mechanics, as well as intention when beginning to create the game:

There are two common ways in which a game idea is born. There is the one where someone says: "I have an idea about a game where X character wakes up in a place and does this and that and is driven into Y adventure" (story driven game) or the one where someone says: "I have an idea about a game where X character must jump and throw stuff in this manner in order to achieve stuff (gameplay driven game).

Lievano continues in his article, “Story Driven vs. Gameplay Driven Game Design,” to state that story driven game design does have cons regarding mechanics, but no style particularly is better than the other. Despite this, casual players, (what Lievano defines as “players that just like to play for the sake of doing something fun,”) play more gameplay driven games, seeking combat unburdened by story. When these players feel that they are being attacked with the threat of “too much story” within their beloved medium, the consequences have showed disastrous effects to creators behind the game.

The level of “story” belonging in a videogame historically has been regarded with no small amount of mistrust concerning its place in the medium. Players have followed the belief that the presence of story takes something away from the combat, the action, and the gore of the videogame. But the “story” within a videogame is much more than simple plot lines and dialogue choices. It is the veins that are threaded through a game’s structure; it can neither be pinpointed to a specific place, nor separated from the whole. In this essay I will detail the gender bias associated with narrative in video games within Gamergate society, and study the new importance of story in videogames as a driver for player motivation, in a post-Gamergate society. I have found evidence within the cut-scene, as well as the newly termed “super-show format” found within *Telltale’s The Walking Dead* (2012).

While many videogames in recent years have developed complex stories that have gained the admiration of players and developers alike, I have chosen to study Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* not only because of the high narrative quality but also because of the developers’ newly featured format, which has garnered the company wide recognition. Its unique narrative structure is unprecedented. But first I will start by detailing the violent

event, known as Gamergate, which highlighted misogyny within the video game industry that led to demands for more inclusion of female developers and stronger narrative. I then turn to the role a cut-scene plays within a game that details the industry's change, and then delve into how *The Walking Dead* uses the cut-scene in its "super show format" to heighten the narrative experience. Issues regarding Telltale's "super show format" must also be addressed, mainly regarding episodic release dates that game critics have pointed out cause continuity issues with this new level of narrative in Telltale's work. I end with the future storytelling possibilities of the videogame through virtual reality.

"First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win": this quote from Gandhi is an apt description of women's activism in the face of a sexist gaming industry. Women have historically been regarded with either mocking amusement, or anger while seeking inclusion within this male-dominated industry. The Gamergate conflict, which started in 2014, exposed extreme biases against female developers, and especially the way women are stereotypically associated with strongly narrative and text-based videogames. A minority of vocal, misogynistic gamers seemed to think that the presences of these female developers posed a threat to combat-based games. The "the Gamergate movement" was a conflict that started around 2013, when a female developer named Zoe Quinn released a game called *Depression Quest* that detailed the story of an adult's depression. It is textually based, and has none of the combat that casual gamers would expect within the videogame medium. These radical gamers were restless over the format of the videogame to begin with, but when Quinn's ex-boyfriend released a series of blog posts accusing Quinn of cheating on him with several men involved in the gaming industry to leverage in her career, the Internet

exploded with gamers' rage towards Quinn. Hackers then released Quinn's address, as well as intimate photos, that opened up Quinn's life to public degradation on the Internet, and led to numerous death threats that eventually forced Quinn to move. The campaign that started with Zoe Quinn then expanded into an unlawful war against women in the gaming industry. Caitlin Dewey, of *The Washington Post*, in her article "The only guide to Gamergate you will ever need to read" attempts to explain the issue to outsiders of the gaming industry. She describes a general profile of both the sides on the Gamergate:

On one side are independent game-makers and critics, many of them women, who advocate for greater inclusion in gaming. On the other side of the equation are a motley alliance of vitriolic naysayers: misogynists, anti-feminists, trolls, people convinced they're being manipulated by a left-leaning and/or corrupt press, and traditionalists who just don't want their games to change.

Dewey sides strongly with women game designers, and I am inclined to agree with her. These gamers' hyperbolic reactions over women in the industry are a result of the unfounded fear that women will take away combat games. Susan Polo, a writer for *The Mary Sue*, describes this phenomenon surrounding the belief system of the radical gamers: "I think what this is actually about is some gamers violently reacting to a perceived scapegoat that they can blame for a trend in games towards a greater measure of inclusivity, a topic that is related in a number of ways to the acceptance of women into gaming, both as fans and creators." This fear is an unfounded one. The majority of women do not take issue with combative games; rather they take issue with the blatant sexual representation of women within videogames. In 2015, a study done by E.S.A

(*Entertainment Software Association*), found that 47.4% of games created are Action/Shooter games. Approximately half of all video games made are centered on combat. This means that women developers are definitely not impeding combat games, but work on/contribute to combat games because these are the largest ratio of games made. However, despite these games being the majority, the representations of women within them are not diverse even though women developers work on the projects. Often women characters will be the damsels in distress, or the bikini clad warrior that somehow miraculously fails to take damage despite the lack of armor coverage.



(*Bridgeman/Jung*)

Anita Sarkeesian, the founder of *Feminist Frequency*, released a video series titled “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” detailing this blatant sexist representation that female characters historically had in videogames. In this she goes over the tropes of:

“The Lady sidekick:” a woman that is a support character to the main male lead, essentially a tool, or the “Damsel in Distress” that is the object to rescue during a game. Incidentally, her criticisms on the narrative roles women play in game storylines caused her to also receive death threats during the Gamergate conflict. However, one instance stands out, where a particular female developer was attacked specifically for the reason that gamers assumed that she was putting story as precedent over combat.

Jennifer Hepler, a previous employee from *BioWare*, became a targeted developer by Gamergate aggressors. Hepler was a developer behind BioWare’s series *Dragon Age*, a videogame that follows a role-playing format. In role-playing games players assume the role of a chosen character, and then create their personality and relationships with other characters as the game goes on through the action of different dialogue selections. The first installment of the series received raved reviews welcoming players’ ability to adapt the storyline. But the creation of *Dragon Age II* stirred conflicting responses among fans as rumors circled about the change in combat featured in *Dragon Age II*. In an interview with *Polygon*, a website that covers games and their developers, Hepler described the reaction of fanatical fans over the rumored changes regarding combat: “A lot of hardcore gamers lost their collective minds about it, they spewed a ton of vitriol, most of it aimed at me. It was really horrific. But I’m not the first person to be targeted like this. Bullying is an epidemic.” *Polygon* then continued to investigate the range of the threats to BioWare’s employees, and why there was particular animosity against Hepler:

After *Dragon Age 2* came out in 2011, Hepler told *Polygon*, many of the people involved in the game’s development received angry emails, abusive

forum posts and petitions calling for them to be fired. About that time, someone dug up an old interview Hepler participated in six years earlier. In the interview Hepler mentioned that her least favorite part of working in the game industry was playing through games and combat. Some of the interview was put in the official forums as evidence that Hepler was to blame for changes in the game's combat.

Hepler then received death threats to both her own life and the lives of her children, and was judged to be “the cancer that was killing BioWare.” This all based upon an interview conducted six years before the incident, where an out of context excerpt of Hepler’s interview was posted on a website called *4chan*. The interview question that prompted the quote that would haunt Hepler was, “What is your least favorite thing about working in the industry?” To which Hepler responded:

Playing the games. This is probably a terrible thing to admit, but it has definitely been the single most difficult thing for me. I came into the job out of a love of writing, not a love of playing games. While I enjoy the interactive aspects of gaming, if a game doesn’t have a good story, it’s very hard for me to get interested in playing it. Similarly, I’m really terrible at so many things which most games use incessantly — I have awful hand-eye coordination, I don’t like tactics, I don’t like fighting, I don’t like keeping track of inventory, and I can’t read a game map to save



my life. This makes it very difficult for me to play to the myriad games I really should be keeping up on as our competition. (Polo)

Even years after the interview players still felt warranted to start issuing threats. Though many game developers have received threats over the years, there is a particular animosity directed not only at female game developers, but also female game critics as well. Fortunately, after wide media coverage from within the gaming industry, as well as outside the industry, the spotlights placed on developers have caused them to take a firmer stance against fanatical fans and make reforms regarding game creation. Since Gamergate there has been more accountability for representation of women within the videogame industry. The result has been stronger female characters, which thankfully do not parade around in bikini armor as much, as well as a stronger mind towards the narrative quality of the games. With the increase in narrative quality the extent the cut-scene is used in video games has increased by correlation and allowed developers, like Telltale, to use it more creatively.

The storytelling that happens during the cut-scene is a part of the visceral experience of playing a videogame. Players' suspicion directed at a videogame's heavy level of cinematic story is often misguided, and misdirection for any imagined issues that may be found within a game. The "cut-scene" in a videogame can be described as a cinematic scene that develops the story where the player does not have control of the character. Cut-scenes have often been used to show a character's death, intimate scenes between two characters, or even a player leveling up. In Paul Cheng's article, "Waiting for Something to Happen: Narratives, Interactivity and Agency and the Video Game Cut-

scene,” Cheng discusses the function of the cut scene within videogames. “Often, the cut-scene gives narrative shape to the game experience, moving the player along through a series of events culminating in the story's end.” (1) Cheng then continues to point out the paradoxical existence of the cut-scene within a videogame; the interactive medium containing enactive periods that arguably progresses the videogame’s storyline further than the player’s actual completed actions. “Since cut-scenes often follow cinematic codes of representation, current theory often renders the cut-scene as passive and non-interactive, as opposed to the interactive nature of gameplay.” (1) Though cut-scenes have been historically regarded as a “non-game element,” because of the lack of player agency that occurs within them, I would argue that there is still an active role for the player during these cinematic episodes. Cinematic episodes are strongly comparable to film and still engage players to watch unfolding action, though it may be out of their control. In Linda Williams’ article, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” she discusses the visceral reaction that happens to a person’s body while watching a film: “There is the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion.” (4) This visceral reaction transitions over to the cut-scene within a videogame as well, though players may not be outwardly performing actions, there is still emotional manipulation that occurs acting as a participatory element for players as they watch a cut-scene unfold. “The success is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen.” (4) Williams’ statement holds true to the videogame cut-scene, a good example being within Telltale’s episode of *The Walking Dead* “Starved For Help.”

Telltale produces their videogames in a style that is adapted from television, hence, the term “super show format.” Just as T.V. networks will air a new episode of a show every Friday, Telltale releases “episodes” of their games on a monthly basis. This means that the videogame is divided up narratively as T.V. show would be. In Telltale’s series, *The Walking Dead*, players follow and control the main character Lee, starting at the beginning of the zombie apocalypse. Lee starts out in a cop car, as he is transported to prison for what is found out later to be manslaughter. Lee observes from out the window a group of cop cars racing the opposite way into the city as well as helicopters flying ahead, the first hint that things are beginning to go awry for this world. After a few more conversations with the sheriff a grotesque person, what will be known later to be a walker, wanders out into the middle of the road colliding with the sheriff’s car sending it into a spiral off the road. The car crashes in a forest outside a neighborhood, and Lee loses consciousness. Upon waking up Lee finds the body of the sheriff strewn outside of the car with his gun out. Lee then kicks out the window of the car, and stumbles towards the sheriff’s body to get the handcuff key that is precariously placed on the sheriff’s unmoving body. Lee unlocks his handcuffs and then is startled back as the sheriff then lunges up towards Lee, the first close interaction of a walker in the game. Lee then must stumble back and grab the gun and shoot the sheriff. After shooting the sheriff in the head, Lee spots the silhouette of a little girl standing on the fringe of the forest. He attempts to follow her out of the forest, calling for help, but attracts the attention of more walkers that were idly wandering the forest. Lee stumbles up a hill and jumps a fence just in time, putting him in a residential area. It is here that he meets the young Clementine. Lee begins to piece together, as he searches for clues inside Clementine’s house, that her

parents have been killed and the world is no longer what he knew it to be before his loss of consciousness. Lee takes the girl under his wing, both of them no longer having any family or friends left, and the two begin their long journey of survival. As the episode continues Lee and Clementine gain temporary companions that join them in their effort to survive.

In the episode “Starved For Help” Lee and Clementine, along with their newly gained companions come upon a dairy farm whose occupants seem kind enough to “help” the group. As Lee investigates the farm he discovers items that put the dairy farmers in a doubtful light. During dinner that the farmers have for their visitors, Lee decides to explore the upstairs of the farmhouse. Lee then discovers his previously injured friend, Mark, is upstairs with a leg sawed off the “meat” is currently being served just downstairs at the dinner table.



To explore this cut-scene, we can turn to Linda Williams’ insight about horror genres: “There is the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion. Carol Clover, speaking primarily of horror films and pornography, has called films which privilege the sensational ‘body genres.’” (4) Body genres are when the audience of a movie, or in this case a videogame, has a physical reaction to what they see

on screen. In this particular scene the realization that Mark, Lee's companion, is being served as a home cooked meal in the dining room below is enough to send Lee and by extension players stomachs' rolling. Players are meant to feel recoil equivalent to Lee's in this cut-scene, falling into a reaction that Williams would categorize under one of her "body genres," horror. "We feel manipulated by these texts an impression that the very colloquialisms of 'tear jerker' and 'fear jerker.'"(5) Cut-scenes within *The Walking Dead* act as a participatory element through the reactions that are elicited from players. Even though players may not have direct control of characters, players are still active during cut-scene sequences. Active watching can be considered a participatory element of movies as well, but where the two mediums differ in the level of involvement is the ability to make choices. While watching a movie the audiences' body feels compulsion to preform actions; in a horror movie the heart rate rises and adrenaline rushes the system, and one feels the urge to run, yet the audience is left prone and must passively keep watching. But in a horror video game, the player is able to complete actions that enable the character to survive. *The Walking Dead* in particular makes interesting uses of the videogame cut-scene when stressing players to fight to survive.

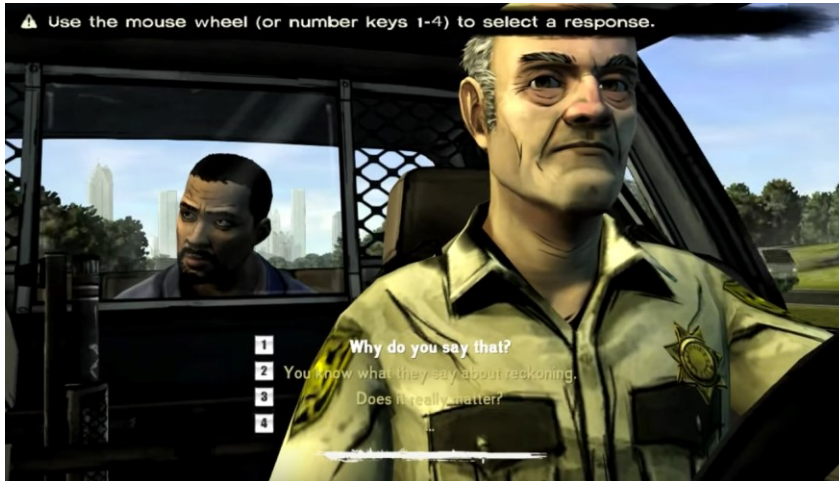
Telltale's "super show format" further blurs the lines between a videogame's periods where players can complete actions, and its cut-scenes. Often mini cut-scenes transition so quickly to action that it is hard to tell where the cut-scene ends and the action begins. This becomes glaringly evident at the very start of the game, an opening title card reading: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play." The start of the game eases players into what feels like a cinematic scene; the credits appearing in the corner of the screen, and several shot changes from a

scenic long shot of the city, to a point-of-view shot from the perspective of Lee. But despite the fact that it feels like a scene taken right out of a T.V show, players are immediately reminded that they are indeed playing a videogame as soon as the opening dialogue of the entire game hits the screen.



“Well, I reckon you didn’t do it then.”

Action from the players is immediately needed following the Sheriff’s line of dialogue, lunging players immediately out of an assumed cut-scene. Control must be taken of Lee; his decisions, and his actions decided through out the game affecting relationships with other characters, and the outcome of the episode. After the sheriff’s ice breaking comment, several dialogue options pop up at the bottom of the screen.



Whatever choice players make has an immediate effect on the interaction with the sheriff, as well as the sheriff's perception of Lee; often script will appear in the corner of the screen reading: "[character] will remember that." This style of narrative interactivity is unique to the videogame medium, Telltale backing new a dialogue centered experience to gameplay: "Telltale is developing a 'Super Show' format, creating an unprecedented gaming and narrative experience through the combination of interactive content and television-style scripted entertainment." (Telltale) This new "episodic" form of gaming was widely embraced by players; *gameinformer*, a magazine that is a leading contributor to game journalism, cited it as "one of the best games of the year." Ben Hanson, a reviewer for *gameinformer*, stated: "Carried on the back of the game's excellent writing, this episodic adventure grabbed the attention of gamers across the globe and garnered Telltale Games their first runaway hit." Interestingly enough it was the writing that attracted players to the franchise, the videogame mechanics itself being puzzle based with only a few occasional chances to shoot/hack some zombies. It seems Telltale's

developing style and Robert Kirkman's graphic novel series, *The Walking Dead*, were a match made in heaven: the content of Kirkman's novels adapted into Telltale's strong story structure became a creation that stunned the gaming world with the presentation of the narrative in Telltale's super show format, and then paired intense tale of survival of Kirkman's graphic novels. In an interview with *gameinformer's* Ben Reeves, Kirkman was asked what first inspired him to pair in videogame collaboration with Telltale *Games*. Kirkman responded:

I like their approach to puzzle-based storytelling. I thought they were more focused on telling a good story, and I thought they were good at engaging the player in the narrative. That's what interested me in making a Walking Dead game. They came to me with a proposal that involved decision-making and consequences rather than ammunition gathering or jumping over things; I was impressed by that. The only thing that's really special about The Walking Dead is the human characters and the narrative that they exist in. It's all about drama and loss, so I felt like doing a game with that focus, but that wasn't something that I knew was really possible. When Telltale came and told me about the way that making decisions changed the game and the way that players would be forced to choose between two bad decisions and how the survival aspect of The Walking Dead would actually be brought to the forefront – that's when I was sold on the game.



Kirkman's hopes for the game were realized with the first season release of the videogame; each episodic release drew more players and recognition to the game. Kirkman's theme drawn from the source text and from the television show was carried over into the videogame, being that it's the other survivors you have to worry about, not the zombies. This placed unusual importance on the social/textual aspect of the game, which originally was criticized by radical gamers. However, as the initial novelty of the game wore off, players became more critical of the game's "choice effecting" abilities. While some decisions made in game select a branch of story that the main character follows, the biggest critique that players had is that the main character ultimately ends up with the same fate at the very end. Elise Favis, a critic from *gameinformer*, points out:

Various choices make one or two changes in dialogue and can alter how other characters treat you, but it does not change the main plot significantly. I can stand by the idea of Telltale adventure games being pieces of interactive fiction, because the player actively participates through dialogue and action. However, the term 'choose your own adventure' is pushing it, because major decisions often don't have lasting consequences.

With this new embrace to game narrative in a post Gamergate era, players' concern no longer lies with the mechanics of combat but a new critique to the strength of a game's narrative.

This phenomenon has only recently emerged. Historically games have not been regarded as mediums that can have literary strength. In 2013, *The Verge* conducted an interview with George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, the men behind the creation of Star

Wars and Indian Jones. Both men remain critically opposed to video games as a story telling medium, staying loyal to their preferred mode of storytelling, film. When comparing the two mediums of film and videogames the main concerns that both directors had was the factors of character and plot. Lucas is quoted as saying frankly: "It's not going to be Shakespeare." (Bishop) But with this recent narrative development in the gaming industry, plot and character are gaining more importance as well as critical eyes from players and developers.

With Telltale's episodic release dates and time-consuming storytelling creation, the company has begun to receive criticisms from videogame journalists in regards to Telltale "biting more off than it can chew." In 2013, Telltale announced the intentions of producing a *Borderlands* and *Game of Thrones* video game series. Since 2013, Telltale has produced over seven new series of episodic gaming ranging from the promised *Game of Thrones* series, to a *Batman* Telltale series. While this may sound doable to outsiders of the gaming industry, one should keep in mind that many of Telltale's series are still ongoing. So, on top of producing new games series the company must keep up with continuing previous games series as well. This has already proven to be an issue, when Telltale began producing new series, *The Wolf Among Us* (2013), an ongoing project suffered; a period of three months passed from the release date of *The Wolf Among Us* episode two, before players to be able to access episode three of the series.

When I watch a TV show, I know that the next episode is only a week away. When I buy a comic book, I know its story will continue in the issues next month. I love serialized storytelling, but I hate not knowing

when I'll be able to pick up a story again. Episodic gaming could be really cool, but it needs a schedule. Don't start a series and then leave us hanging. Anticipation is only fun when you have something to count down to.

The following is from game critic, Ben Reeves, who in his article "Where I Think Telltale Has Room To Grow" states his concern with the company's ability to keep up with their release dates, and the harm that it has on a storyline when production falls behind. Reeve's biggest concern is the way the story suffers when players have to wait a long period of time to continue the series; after a long wait interest is lost, and the game series no longer feels like a cohesive piece. While Telltale may be the original company to air the unique narrative style of closely interwoven actions and cut-scenes, it has fallen behind in players' eyes due to its inability to keep up with production demands. The super show format that at first dazzled players with its storytelling was now bringing into question the ability to keep the story going. Fortunately, other developers have been able to pick up this new format of gaming easily and transfer it to their own platforms, *Until Dawn* (2015) being a prime example of a successful formatted adaptation.

If Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is a model drawn from a T.V. show format, then *Supermassive Games' Until Dawn* is a movie model. The *Until Dawn* title screen opens with the text: "The Butterfly Effect: A tiny butterfly flapping its wings today may lead to a devastating hurricane weeks from now. The smallest decision can dramatically change the future. Your actions will shape how the story unfolds." This is a similar warning to *The Walking Dead's* title screen: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play." Both convey the meaning that the choices you make

in the game, will affect the ending. *Until Dawn* adopts clichés from horror movies, starting out with a group of teens in a secluded mountain lodge. The intro to the game begins with a prank gone awry, based on the horror cliché that girls who attempt to explore their sexuality will be punished with death. This is a phenomenon that Williams points out in her analysis of the horror body genre: “The sadomasochistic teen horror films kill off the sexually active ‘bad’ girls, allowing only the non-sexual ‘good’ girls to survive.” (8) The group of teens then tricks the naïve Hannah into meeting the typical jock Mike, who she has a crush on, in the second floor guest bedroom “alone” to make out. The poor girl is about to take her shirt off when the rest of the cruel teens burst from out of their hiding spots, laughing at her foolishness. Hannah then flees the cabin in embarrassment, running into the raging blizzard. Her sister, Beth, was placed downstairs at the time and acts as a tutorial character for players to learn how to control actions through the exploration and clue hunting around the environment. While players explore the first floor, they are ultimately made to look out the window, where they see through Beth’s eyes Hannah’s figure running past outside. The first choice of the game is then offered: to go check it out, or go get the others. No matter the decision Beth ends up bracing herself against the blizzard to go in search of her sister. A snowy path, with only a phone light, players must search for clues of Hannah’s whereabouts. At one point players encounter a forked path and must again make a choice: to follow footprints on one path, or a noise that comes from the other. No matter, Beth eventually finds Hannah, but a mysterious off-screen foe ensues a chase scene with the girls at the lead. The girls then fall off a snowy cliff, pushed over the edge by fear of what was coming. Their deaths confirming Williams’ phenomenon of “bad girls” being punished; Hannah’s

sexual exploration, which is subliminally signalled to audiences, causes her death. It is the death of the two sisters that ultimately starts the spiraling mystery, and horror story of *Until Dawn*.

Thinking critically, the opening intro to the game doesn't enforce the idea that player decisions matter. Just as most critics pointed out with *The Walking Dead's* decision tree, the characters still ultimately die no matter what decisions were made. But the game itself points out that from that point forward *decisions will matter*, the deaths of Hannah and Beth are a necessity for the beginning of the tale. And indeed the game keeps its promise; decisions made in the next chapters decide which of the large group teens will live, or how they will die.



In a review done by game critic Jeff Marchiafava, he points out that similar to Telltale's series *Until Dawn* "is more story than game." But where Telltale has left some doubts as to how much the decisions really matter, *Until Dawn* completely alleviates any doubt.

But Supermassive's improvements aren't just superficial; *Until Dawn* redefines the importance of player choice in story-driven adventure games. Gone are the closed-loop decisions showing you the immediate

repercussions of your choice before funneling you back onto the main path with everyone else. Instead, your decisions in *Until Dawn* continue to reverberate, impacting later events in complex and unforeseen ways; alienate a friend with your dialogue choices or actions, for instance, and they may not be there to save you hours down the road. (Marchiafava)

It is believed that there are over 100 possible story branches to follow in *Until Dawn*, with each play through and decision, a variety of ways to determine who will live and how they will do it. Telltale pioneered the narrative style of the choice system videogame, and *Supermassive Games* took it to its full potential.

Within the large industry of videogames, stories are starting to make a larger appearance, on a more grandeur scale. With Telltale's series utilizing the super show format, players learned to embrace narrative quality over the typical zombie game format where one would machine down a horde of zombies. Instead it became a game about the characters, the interactions between people being what mattered, just as Robert Kirkman the creator of the original source stated: "They came to me with a proposal that involved decision-making and consequences rather than ammunition gathering or jumping over things. The only thing that's really special about *The Walking Dead* is the human characters and the narrative that they exist in." (Reeves) Then in 2015, with the premier of *Until Dawn*, players were shown what the strength of videogames as stories could really be. In an interview with Jeff Marchiafava the creative director of *Until Dawn*, Will Byles discussed the narrative goals that developers had when creating the game:

We were keen to try some story-telling techniques not often used in games. We wanted to use a narrative perspective shift in order to keep the story vital over nine hours. Narrative perspective shift can only be done in a branching storyline if you cannot go back to a previous save, effectively undoing your last decision.

This “shift,” as Byles terms it, removes the possibility of fake decisions being made within game, such as the case of *The Walking Dead* where player’s choices don’t really matter because the story is set in stone from the beginning. But in the case of *Until Dawn* if you kill a character in a certain chapter the whole plot shifts, the player having chosen a certain branch to follow. There’s a certain ultimate finality of decisions made within *Until Dawn*, it means life or death for the characters. Within *The Walking Dead*, even though the decisions are regarded as “fake” at the end of the game, there is still the same sentiment of “life or death” during the gameplay. This “life or death” stakes can be considered mechanics of the horror genre.

Interestingly enough, both these developers chose stories within the horror genre to fit within their format. Despite horror being regarded typically as a form of “cheap” entertainment. But regardless of the surface perceptions of the genre there is something to horror that makes it easily adapted to multiple mediums, the video game being no exception. In an essay titled “Match Made in Hell: The Inevitable Success of the Horror Genre in Video Games” Richard Rouse, details the relationship of the horror genre and the video game: “Since horror works best the less that is explained and the more that is left up to the imagination, it maps well to game storytelling.” (16) With developers

exploring more with the extent that the player can be put “into the story” it’s no surprise that they utilize the horror genre to do so. Just as the case with Telltale and *Supermassive Games*’ pieces, horror was used to spearhead the new dialogue centered, interactive format. “As the video-game genre most tightly linked to a cinematic tradition, survival horror upsets some of the assumed differences between cinema and games. At its most basic, the difference is that cinema spectators just watch (or cower), while gamers actively manipulate the action.” (Chien) Horror video games trace back to the very root of the medium, the ability of action being the difference between life and death for a character. And with new advancements of virtual reality players are now physically placed in the shoes of the characters, allowing for them to play through a game as though they were in a movie. *Supermassive Games* took strides in virtual reality gaming with *Until Dawn: Blood Rush*. *Blood Rush* is a point-and-shoot game where players ride on a rollercoaster within a haunted amusement park, and kill evil clowns along the way. Other developers have opted for horror genre in VR as well, due to the adaptability of the genre, the easily elicited responses of fright from players and the mechanics that can be simplified with just having to move around and point a flashlight. As virtual reality develops more and more, players only get closer to the story.

Pre-Gamergate videogames were a simple structure of combat and the occasional cut-scene to guide a loosely told story. The thought of a game that was textually based, with little combat, was marked as “not a game.” And upon the creation of one, *Depression Quest*, it led a large majority of the videogame community to persecute several developers, and send death threats forcing them out of their homes. With the past few years, and time passing since Gamergate, the industry has seen new strides in the



development of game narrative and story based games: the increased acceptance of women within the industry concurrent to the advancements of narrative structure, particularly through the use of the cut-scene. With the production of Telltale's super show format the way was paved for a videogame with a central focus on story, and little mind towards combat. The seamlessness of action interwoven with cut-scenes put players directly into Telltale's own setting in the world of *The Walking dead*, the dialogue interaction with characters was on a level never seen before. Then with *Until Dawn* the format of Telltale's games was upgraded with a movie-like flow, a narrative structure bragging over 100 different branching storylines. With the continued development of games centered in this narrative design and the horror genre spearheading advancement in virtual reality, players continue to get closer and closer to the story.

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