

WALKING THE DEAD THE MAKINGS OF A GAME WITHIN A SUCCESSFUL TRANSMEDIA FRANCHISE

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ABSTRACT: This study is an analysis of the transmedia project *The Walking Dead*. A very successful franchise at the moment, with a lot of products in multiple media, it offers a very good opportunity to identify the position and specific characteristics of videogames in comparison to other media, and to see the relationship between them. Looking at the main three products in the franchise, the comic book, the television series and the adventure game, the research applies an analysis grid meant to bring out the way in which similar contents behave differently when translated across media, the way in which media can communicate between themselves and what the role of the consumer is in each instance. This paper concentrates on the experience of the adventure game in the context of the other products in the franchise, and on how the specific means of expression overlap.

Keywords: video games, transmedia, immersion, gameplay, engagement, agency

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The Walking Dead franchise is one of the biggest media properties that exists today. It includes the most viewed cable television drama series, one of the best sold comic book series, genre-defining video games and a lot of other products such as supporting TV shows, mobile games, board games, art books, action figures etc. It also has, as of April 2016, the biggest Facebook fan base of any TV show, totalling up to over 34 million people. Starting with this large extent and popularity of the franchise in mind, the purpose of this study is to analyse video games as a communication medium, taking as an example *The Walking Dead* franchise, in the context of cultural products that extend beyond the boundaries of specific media to maximize the narrative and commercial impact of different intellectual properties.

Narrative transmedia products do not, as of yet, benefit from a set of established research methods. Transmedia projects are a relatively new phenomenon, and their study even more so. The term itself was coined in 2003 in an article by Henry Jenkins (2003) and later detailed in a book (Jenkins 2006). In this context Renira Rampazzo Gambarato puts forward a model on analysis founded on the basic principles outlined by Jenkins at the *Futures of Entertainment* conference at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2009 (Gambarato 2012, 6-7), but also on the works of other researchers, such as Janet Murray, Jeffrey Long or Robert Pratten. The analysis consists of a set of questions grouped under ten central themes, which is basically a flexible qualitative analysis grid that can be applied to a majority of transmedia projects and can be adapted and extended for specific situations.

In the following, we will apply this grid to *The Walking Dead* transmedia project. This subject was chosen for its relevance in the current media landscape. The three main products in the franchise, the comic book, the TV show, and the adventure game are at this time, or were at the time of release among the most successful popular, critical and commercial successes in their respective areas.

The TV show is the fictional show with the highest audience of all cable shows in the USA, and some episodes have even surpassed broadcast shows or the most viewed non-fiction shows (football games and reality shows).

The comic books have held the top of the sales charts for years. From July 2012 to April 2014, two issues (nos. 100, and 115) held the title of the most sold individual issue of any comic book of the decade, being taken down by an issue of the Amazing Spider-Man and then several issues of Star Wars comics, in the marketing push for the new 2015 (Comichron.com 2016b). In January 2016 it held again the first place in monthly sales, and was the only non-Marvel or -DC title in the first 25 (Comichron.com 2016a).

The adventure game reached impressive sales numbers, especially considering the genre it represents. The first season was the best-selling game on Xbox Live Arcade for two weeks (Hryb 2012) and on the PlayStation Network and Steam for a week (Moriarty 2012) and in July 2014 Telltale announced they had sold 28 million copies of game episodes (Ohannessian 2014). But beyond this, the first season of the game received very high critical acclaims, being named game of the year 2012 by almost 100 institutions (professional institutions, specialized and general media – e.g. Metacritic, Wired, USA Today, gamesradar.com, Spike Video Game Awards to name just a few). It has also given rise to a new wave of adventure games that are often referred to as being “in the style of *The Walking Dead*”.

The analysis loosely follows Gambarato’s previously mentioned question grid, condensed and adapted to the specificities of the project in view.

Premise and purpose

The narrative of the project is centred on the outbreak of a pandemic that reanimates the bodies of the people who die from it, with minimal brain activity and a continuous hunger for flesh. From this point of view it is not substantially different from most “zombie”

productions. The difference is in the “realistic” approach of this fictional event. The creators raise the question “what would people really do in this situation?” From this position they attempt to move away from the tropes of the genre (establishing others in the process), the result being a narrative focused not on the physical struggle for survival, but on the human drama that surrounds it.

The project is dominantly an entertainment one, with a hint of an educational role given by the constant ethical dilemmas presented, if we consider the moral principles supported by the fictional narrative as translatable to real life in any shape.

Audience and market

Target audience

The products that are part of the project have widely intersecting target audiences, when looking at the socio-demographic make-up, but with several specifics for each medium. The TV show (Darabont 2010) is the most visible element of the project. It is the show with the highest ratings among adults in the 18-49 age range and, as the first cable entertainment show to reach this status (15,2 million viewers for the midseason finale of season 3)(AMC 2012) and, while its audience is declining, every episode of the latest season of the show (season 6) up until the writing of this paper has beaten other scripted shows (including broadcast) in the US. The biggest number of people reached by the show on average was 18 million for season 5, dropping to 13.3 million for the first half of season 6 (Kissel 2016). Most of these are 18-49 adults (the show is rated TV-14), the most important group for advertisers, because of their consumption patterns and their purchasing power (Sinha-Roy, Kelsey, and Osterman 2013).

The comic book (Kirkman and Moore 2003) is rated for a mature audience because of the intense violence, profanity, nudity and sexual themes. Despite this, the age of the audience reached by the comic books may reach below that of the TV show. This is partly justified by the fact that the overall age for consumers of comic books is lower than for TV dramas, but also because of the fact that the impact of drawn images is not considered to be as strong as filmed images. In addition to this, the lower overall consumption of comics as a medium attracts less attention from the civil society at a larger scale and from parents considering their children's media use, at a smaller scale.

Despite the smaller audience when compared to the show or the game, compared to other comic books *The Walking Dead* is often at the top of the charts. Issue no. 100, from July 2012 held the record for most copies sold, with 384800 copies, until April 2014 (Comichron.com 2016b). The leading title is now the first issue of a Marvel Star Wars series in January 2015 (simply called *Star Wars*), with over 1 million copies sold.

The adventure game (Telltale Games 2012) is published with a mature audience in mind, as also rated by the ESRB and PEGI. With 28 million episodes sold worldwide by 2014 (10 episodes had been released by the time these figures were published) but no clear socio-demographic data about the buyers, we can assume that the main audience of the game demographically overlaps that of the show, with men of ages 18 to 49 being the principal target, an assumption that can just as well translate to other media in the property that do not provide clear audience numbers (such as the action game, the webisodes and the novels).

A 2013 report about the American Facebook fans of all the pages linked to *The Walking Dead* property (comics, TV shows, games, books, characters) showed that there were more fans of *The Walking Dead* than of comic books overall on Facebook (Schenker 2013). Out of

these, approximately 605 are male, but the proportions get equal as we get to the 45-50 age range, and changes in favour of women at around 60. But the fans that are above 50 are fewer than half a million, i.e. less than 4% out of the total. About 60% of the fans had declared on Facebook that they are in a relationship, half of which are married. Just 5.5 out of the 12.8 million have declared their education level, but out of these 77% have graduated a form of higher education, 16% are students and the remaining 7% are still in high school. The real ratios are probably more balanced, as Facebook users tend to project a positive image for themselves, and as such people with a lower level of education are less likely to declare it. Also, the actual numbers may vary considerably, as some users may not declare their interest in the property or otherwise falsely declare it. We also have to take into consideration the representativeness of Facebook for the entire population. Despite its huge popularity, there are still a lot of people who do not use it, for various reasons, such as personal safety, lack of technical abilities or intellectual reasons (Meza 2015, 103).

Types of use

The audience that enjoys *The Walking Dead* products are *reflective consumers*. *Real-time* consumption is excluded by the episodic nature of all the products, episodes that, though they each have a satisfying narrative structure, are part of a larger narrative structure themselves. The main narrative threads are usually resolved in a medium and long timeframe, rather than on short term. Because of this, real-time viewing can actually be frustrating, creating a tension that doesn't get resolved. The content in all the media is built on long-term tensions that keep a consumer interested for a longer period, awaiting a resolution, unlike a formulaic sit-com, in which most of the active tensions are resolved in each episode, re-establishing the status-quo.

Navigational consumption is also limited by the fact that the narratives in different products are either only tangential or they overlap. The tangential connection refer to the fact that most of the narrative threads are parallel and so the information from one is not particularly useful in the other. The relationship between the adventure game and the TV show is a good example for this, as the only two characters that are present in both are Hershel and Glenn, and their role is so small in the game that very little extra information is presented about them that would not be in the show. Otherwise, the characters and events in the game are independent and their evolution does not affect the other media in any way.

The stories from the comic books and the show, on the other hand, overlap at the very beginning, but then they split into alternative narratives, presenting a different evolution for the same characters. For this reason, they cease to coexist in the same narrative universe, but they do allow for navigational consumption, but only as a meta-consumption, as exploration of the differences between the media and of the creative process.

Business model

The Walking Dead franchise is based on a classic premium business model. Consumers can use the products only for a fee. The TV shows can only be seen by paying a cable subscription or through paid streaming or download services. The comics are sold for \$3.99 per printed issue or \$1.99 per digital issue. The official price for a full season of the game (six episodes) is \$24.99, but they can often be found much cheaper in sales.

For a mobile game, a price of \$4-5 is considered high in comparison to the price of most mobile applications. The more popular models for these devices are free or freemium, but seeing as

the standard approach for the traditional platforms (PC, Mac, Xbox, PS) is premium, it makes sense to use the same approach for the mobile platforms. As a compromise for mobile users, starting with October 2012 Telltale have been offering the first episode of both seasons for free on iOS and Android versions of the game. In a similar fashion, comiXology gives away the very first issue in a digital format for free.

Financial success

The popularity of the franchise has also led to financial success. For the fourth quarter of 2012 AMC reported a 16% rise in revenues from advertising, supported by *The Walking Dead's* high ratings (Lauder 2013). The AMC Network's financial report for 2014 showed a 15.4% net increase in advertising revenues. "Advertising revenues increased \$101,821 across all of our networks, with the largest increase at AMC. This increase resulted from higher pricing per unit sold due to an increased demand for our programming by advertisers at all of our networks, led by *The Walking Dead*." (AMC Networks Inc. 2015)

The single-issues and collection of *The Walking Dead* volumes have continuously been in the top ten of the sales charts, occupying lower positions in the last couple of years. From 2010 to 2013 there has always been an issue of the comics at the very top of the charts and in 2012, *The Walking Dead* books took up 7 of the first 10 places on the best selling graphic novels list (Miller 2013). While in 2014 TWD was just in second place, the best position TWD issue was no. 145 on the 133rd place, Star Wars comics taking a size-able part of the sales, followed by the Marvel and DC universes (Diamond Comic Distributors 2016b, c, 2015). Despite this fall, Image Comics, the publisher of the comics, is still rising in market share from slightly over 3% in 2009 (Magnett 2014) to around 7% in 2012 and to 10% in 2015 (Diamond Comic Distributors 2016a, 2013). It is the third

publisher, from this point of view, far behind DC's 25% and Marvel's 40%. Still, this market share brings the publisher estimated revenues of over \$70 million/year. The sales of issue no. 100 of the comics alone got close to \$1.5 million.

At the beginning of 2013 "The Wall Street Journal" estimated sales of over \$40 million for the first season of *The Walking Dead* adventure game starting from Telltale CEO Dan Connors' declaration that they had sold 8.5 million episodes (Lynley 2013). By June the number of episodes sold had doubled (Telltale 2013) and was still rising. For an adventure game these are very big numbers, even though the game with the most copies ever sold (Nintendo Wii Sports, according to VGChartz.com) has sold 82.71 million copies from 2006 to date. But taking into consideration the market segment on which this games is competing, it can safely be said that the Telltale series has a great success and is a leader.

Structure

Transmediation

The Walking Dead project is a retroactive transmediation project, not having conceived from the beginning as a franchise. All the products are based on the comic book, launched in 2003, the next product being the 2010 TV show followed by the adventure game in 2012. From this perspective, the independence of each product, and even narrative divergence, are acceptable. In a franchise "each media platform involved is independent except that they cover different narrative spaces" (Rampazzo Gambarato 2013, 85), while in a *portmanteau narrative* the platforms contribute together to the same experience².

² „In a franchise approach, I advocate that all the platforms carry equal weight while with the Portmanteau approach the content may well be jigsaw pieces that need to be connected to form a whole experience." (Pratten 2011, 18)

The autonomy of each story allows the consumer to get into the universe through any entry point, regardless of the chronological positioning or the popular success of the product. The TV show is the main entry platform, due to the fact that the medium has the highest accessibility, and this can be seen by the number of viewers.

The Structure Itself

All three main products in the franchise have an episodic structure. This allows them to have a similar narrative construction, despite the specifics of each medium. The TV show and the game are explicitly divided into seasons and the season into episodes. In the case of the comic book each issue can be equated to an episode and, usually, 6 or 12 issues which are collected into a volume represent a resolved narrative arc, and may be assimilated to a season. This structure allows for narrative threads co-existing at three different levels.



Figure 1. The integration of narrative arcs in the episodic structure.

The story at the highest level is closely linked to the overall theme, the appearance of the zombies, their nature, the possibilities for destroying them, the survival of humanity. The resolution of these themes would lead to the depletion of the narrative potential of the entire franchise. At a lower level, the seasons have extended narrative threads that crop up in all the episodes throughout the season, tying them in one coherent unit to be resolved in the end. These, as opposed

to the higher level, are more concrete. In the first season of the game, for example, there are two such recurring narratives: the journey towards the ocean to find salvation, and the search for Clementine's parents (both resolved in the last episode) that support and motivate the other events in the season. At the lowest level there are also story threads that are introduced and are resolved in a single episode, that are the building blocks that give strength to this structure and allow each episode to exist as an individual entity.

There can also be story arcs that cover several episodes without overlapping with any other structure unit. Also, television season can also be divided into two by the winter holiday hiatus. Some shows (including TWD) have an intermediary unit consisting a half a season that is built into the narrative structure of the season overall. So there is a midseason finale, which is in many ways similar to a season finale in that it resolves some of the storylines, but usually ends in a cliff-hanger to set up the midseason premiere after the hiatus. This helps maintain interest in a show through the break. Practically, as can be seen in Figure 1, the arc of each structure unit is actually introduced in the previous unit. An episode does not just resolve the tensions it initiated (or that had been there before), but also introduces new ones for the following episode, to create anticipation and rising interest. At the end of a season, after concluding the story, the last moments of an episode are used to offer a short teaser for the next season, to leave consumers with an unresolved memory, even if they will forget the specifics in the months between the seasons.

Experience

The role of the player and levels of engagement

In the case of the comics and the TV show we are dealing with a detached viewer who is not involved in the action, an external observer. The involvement is exclusively at the narrative level,

through emotional connection to the characters and maintaining the audience interested about their evolution. The game, as expected for this medium, engages the player more through interaction, but at the same time, tries to maintain a cinematic quality. For this reason, the perspective in the game is constantly shifting. The point of view of the player is, therefore, constantly changing. This leads to a lack of consistency in identification in favour of more auctorial control over emotional involvement and control over the information.

In the moments of maximum tension, the perspective is a first person one. Quick time events, where the player needs to have fast reactions to on screen events, are introduced to make the genre more dynamic, and are often viewed from a first person point of view. The player sees the world through the eyes of the character and identifies more closely with him, in situations of imminent danger. Otherwise, the third person perspective is used, in which the camera follows the main character, Lee, from behind, from a distance that can vary the shot from an over the shoulder one to a long general shot. The distance from the camera also affects the degree of player engagement in the action. Wider shots denote a more detached attitude and come up in moments when the player is left to explore and gather information. The camera closes in as the action gets more intense. In certain moments the camera does not follow the character around at all, but stays fixed to establish the scene and to offer easier access to information in the environment and to ease exploration.

The unfolding of the narrative is based on the same principles as in other media. In this case we can talk about an alternation between moments of tension and moments of relaxation, but also a gradual rise in tension followed by a final resolution. This structure can be observed in the game in the behaviour of the camera. In moments of relaxation, the camera is detached, the shots are wide, the movement is smooth and slow, but in moments of tension the camera moves in, the movement becomes more erratic and twitchy, the shots are narrower and as they close in, they eventually move to a first person POV:

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In the following sequence (Figure 2) one can observe this transition, from the moment of maximum tension (a), where Lee has to shoot a policeman after he becomes a zombie, and the camera perspective is in the first person, to the partial relaxation that follows (b), seen from the outside, a detail shot (c), then closing back in on the character (d), and setting up another tense moment by settling into a third person perspective that is very close to the character, an over the shoulder shot (e).



Figure 2. Camera perspective in *The Walking Dead* adventure game as tool for player engagement.

Dialogues among characters, arguably the most important part of the game, where the influence of the player over the narrative is the strongest, and where relationships between characters are established, are also treated in a standard cinematic way from the point of view of shot composition (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Standard cinematic framing for dialogue scenes: over the shoulder shots, single close-up shots and two-shots, used in *The Walking Dead* game.

Depending on how intense or personal a conversation is, or the direction in which it is evolving, the shots can change from wide shots that include both (or all) involved characters, to over the shoulder shots, in which both speakers still appear, but the camera moves behind one of them, close to their head. Lastly, the two-shots are replaced with close-up shots, and the viewer or, in this case, the player, gets more immersed in the conversation, and more personally and emotionally involved. This can also be taken a bit further, to detail shots that can emphasise the connection between characters. So *The Walking Dead* adventure game uses visual procedures that are standard in other media and adapts them to its own set of procedures, especially given the different relationship between the player and the game when compared to that of a viewer to a film or a reader to a comic book, for example. In the case of the player, the potential to create the illusion of spatial presence, or even presence of the self, is much greater because of the potential to observe the effects of one's own actions in the game world, connecting the real world including non-diegetic movement (such as using a mouse and a keyboard) directly to events in the on-screen fiction.

Engagement

Player engagement is achieved in two ways – on the one hand through video game specific means (gameplay elements, goals, missions), and on the other hand by developing emotional involvement. The narrative structure is made up in such a way that it favours social presence. The player ends up empathizing with their avatar or assuming the social relationships the avatar has with the other characters in the game, be they positive or negative. The fact that the relationship statuses are determined by the player's actions, who has the power to direct them through deeds and dialogue choices contributes to this level of empathy.

There are two main strategies for initiating engagement in *The Walking Dead* adventure game: creating emotional connections, and creating functional connections. Emotional connections refer to the fact that the player develops a certain relationship with the characters, from a narrative point of view, in a social presence situation. This relationship can be a positive one, of sympathy, or a negative one, of antipathy. Functional connections have as determining factor the role which the characters play in the mechanic economy of the game. Thus, players can become attached to characters, even if they dislike them, because of the benefits a positive relationship with these characters can give towards the fulfilling the goals of the game, while they can rid themselves of sympathetic characters that may not contribute to the progress through the game's structure.

The difference between the two types of connections is not always clearly obvious, but they can intersect or influence each other. An emotional connection can determine the preference towards one character or another in the case where they are functionally equivalent or, on the contrary, if the emotional connection is strong enough, the players may choose a functionally inferior character. From the other point of view, players may develop sympathy towards characters due to their mechanical utility.

The narrative can be built in such a way as to force players into a decision that is disadvantageous regardless of the chosen path (e.g. there is no character that can support both an emotional and a functional connection, so players must give one up), creating narrative tension. IF this tension is too great, it can lead to frustration of ludo-narrative dissonance, a situation in which the story or the events in the game lose their narrative logic because of the mechanics.

In *The Walking Dead*, the engagement of the players uses both strategies in different ways. Firstly, the emotional nucleus that supports the entire game is the relationship between the main character, Lee, and

Clementine, a little girl who lost her parents and whose protection he takes upon himself. The two are connected by a relationship of dependency imposed upon the players from the start. Players have no real choice in Lee deciding to protect the girl. Still, the narrative is built in such a way that this imposed relationship is quickly accepted and assumed by the player, if it does not lead to game-breaking ludo-narrative dissonance. The players who do not accept this situation will not find any pleasure and will probably stop playing it, but once accepted, this virtual responsibility becomes one of the main goals in the game, together with personal survival. From the point of view of the gameplay, Clementine brings no advantages, but rather complicates the process of reaching the goals, but the paternal relationship which develops cancels out the disadvantages, integrating them in the narrative.

From a functional point of view, the player is more connected to Kenny, who survives until the last episode of the first season, so is present almost constantly in Lee's group. So while it is possible to maintain a relationship of antipathy from the very start, by deciding in the very first episode to save Hershel's son instead of Kenny's son, Duck, it's more advantageous to keep Kenny on Lee's side, making certain tasks easier. For certain types of players this can seem an arduous task, seeing as Kenny often has a contradictory position to the player's character.

The Walking Dead is built in such a way that there are a multitude of alternatives in ending the game, the success being given by the player's preference towards one of these alternatives. If the players have a specific ending as a goal (out of the possible ones), the main purpose of playing will become reaching that goal, and reaching a different ending might mean losing the game, even if it is, in itself, a valid ending. Some possibilities are taken away from the players from the start by the writers of the game, regardless of the player's actions,

being set as fixed elements of the narrative (or being completely dismissed as choices). These usually exploit the connections between the players and the characters to wrench out strong emotional responses. For example, Lee's (and other character's) deaths cannot be avoided just potentially postponed or modified in the details.

Player agency

Agency in a game refers to the possibility of players to exert their abilities in order to execute actions that affect the state of a game. The possibility to influence the course of events in *The Walking Dead* universe is at the same time great and limited. Depending on their actions, players can radically affect the destinies of the characters, up to making life and death decisions. This being considered, the narrative threads are largely pre-determined and events are fixed, or flexible only in the details. The way in which the action develops is presented in such a way as to give the players the illusion of control even when their decisions do not substantially affect the flow of the narrative. If, for example, at Hershel's farm in the first episode a player chooses to save Shawn Greene instead of Duck, the fact that Shawn is killed anyway does not seem like a lack of control, but a lack of the necessary abilities of the character to fulfil the task of saving him.

A scene that has raised several controversies from this point of view is the moment in which Lilly kills Carley (both survivors from the Macon drug store in the first episode) without any previous build up or hints towards this, in the third episode. It can be assumed that players have created either an emotional or a functional connection with Carley because, if they reached this point they have previously already chosen Carley instead of another character (Doug) to be killed in a previous episode. Lilly shoots her after she accuses Carley of

being a traitor, without giving the player the means to react. This lack of control is shocking for players, used to be given at least an illusory option to intervene, and creates frustration. The effect might be intentional from a narrative point of view. The character is not an omnipotent hero so his vulnerability is emphasized, but there is a dissonance between narrative and mechanical control. Mechanics should be consistent and predictable. Up until this point, the player is used to a large degree of control, which is temporarily limited without explanation or precedent. Thus, the inability of the character is interpreted as the inability of the player.

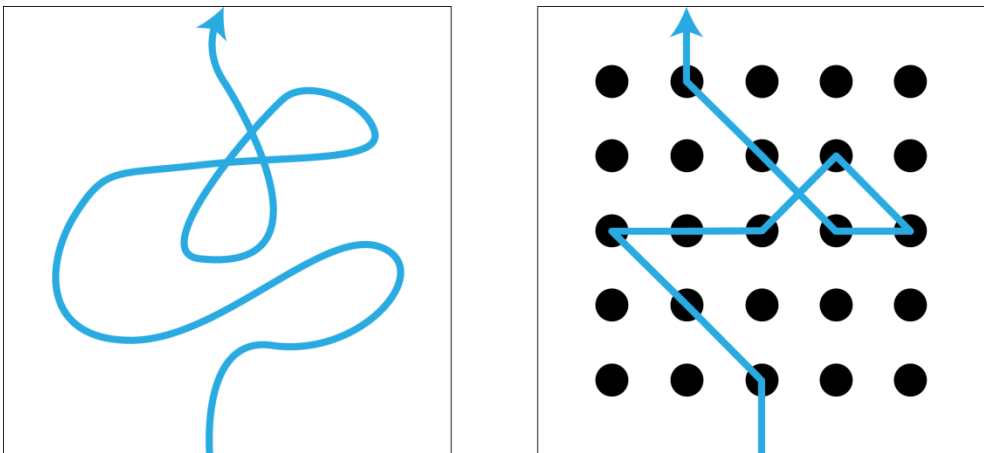


Figure 4 The difference between the player's path in a continuous decision field (left) and in a discrete decision field.

In comparison to most games, *The Walking Dead* gives the player considerable freedom of choice and of influencing the narrative, hundreds of significantly different scenarios being possible. Unlike agency in action games, where most actions have mechanic effects, and in which the pleasure of acting is more important than the

joy of following and influencing a narrative, in *The Walking Dead* (and adventure games in general) every gesture of the player has non-trivial consequences, affecting the game world and the potential for development of the following events. If in a game such as one from the *Halo* series destroying an enemy alien (from the hundreds or thousands that are attacking you) isn't necessarily significant (from a semiotic point of view) as an individual gesture, in TWD each action contributes to the meaning of the entire product. There are, in fact, also trivial actions, such as the movement of the character in the virtual space, but the ratio of semiotically meaningful and non-meaningful actions is greater than in other genres.

All these possibilities of affecting the game world through meaningful actions are, however, predetermined and converge to a limited number of possible outcomes. If in action games the movement, even if trivial, happens in a continuous field, giving the player a great freedom of choice, in *The Walking Dead*, decisions are discrete, individual units, determined by the writers and designers of the game, fixed points among which the player may choose and between which they can navigate. These two main types of agency, a flexible one, but with low semiotic significance, and one with a limited number of options, but with non-trivial consequences, represent two different types of experience, neither intrinsically superior. There are also hybrid models, which take elements from both. Modern adventure games solve the problem of limited options by reaching an adequate *narrative resolution*. If the discrete decision elements are considerable in number or have a high density, an illusion of continuity can be maintained, partially avoiding the disadvantages specific to this model. TWD gets close to this ideal situation, offering the player enough choices so that the holes in the decisional field almost pass by unnoticed, giving a strong illusion of agency.

The project as cultural attractor/activator

The term cultural attractor is used by Pierre Levy to denote cultural products around which clusters of fan and critical activity are formed, who see in the opportunities for creating meaning and evaluation (apud Jenkins 2006, 283) attracting people with similar interests. Cultural activators are defined by Henry Jenkins as “texts that function as catalysts, setting into motion a process of shared meaning-making” (Jenkins 2006, 283), projects that offer the audience forms of meaningful participation. Given the success of *The Walking Dead* franchise, it may be said that its role as cultural attractor is fulfilled. The fact that it has become a cultural phenomenon known by millions offers the members of the audience new ways to interact with the content, but especially with each other. The element that contributes most to establishing the franchise as a cultural attractor is the universal theme of exploring human nature, exacerbated by its extreme setting.

Beyond discussions with friends the day after the broadcast of each episode or after playing the game, fan communities have cropped up. Their presence is most easily identified by the websites they create, the fan pages on social networking services and discussions on forums, or the large amount of fanfiction and fan art. The intense activity of the communities developed around TWD and the big quantity of user-generated content that can be found online (parodies, fanfiction, fan art, FMV, mash-ups, etc.) is an indicator of the fact that the series is a success from the point of view of cultural activation. In addition, the social effect of the media products is reconfirmed, obvious here in their ability to attract people in building new communities.

Applicability

In what concerns the possibility of taking narrative elements and applying them to real life, *The Walking Dead* is faithful to its status as a fictional product, despite the illusion of realism which it attempts to project. The applicability of the information in the franchise is reduced because of its very premise. This being considered, there are communities that take inspiration from the contents of the franchise to prepare for catastrophic events, leading down from imagining a potential outburst of a pandemic of reanimated corpses to earthquakes and other natural disasters or a nuclear attack. The Discovery Channel has produced a series called *Zombie Apocalypse* to present ways of surviving a disaster, relating the information to popular culture and taking advantage of it to get bigger ratings (Discovery Channel 2012). Several professors from University of California Irvine have started offering a course inspired by TWD called *Society, Science, Survival: Lessons from AMCs The Walking Dead* (Schwartz 2013). The course provides information from physics, mathematics, social sciences and public health, analysing mathematical models of spreading epidemics, humans' reproductive rates, biological camouflage or elements of ballistics.

Conclusions

As apparent from the paper, video games are a medium of synthesis, bringing together characteristics of other media and adding specific elements. The previous analysis shows that a large part of the content of games is built using devices developed in other media. The visual presentation is borrowed widely from video production, with framing conventions, camera movements and blocking and their

effects being similar to what can be found in films. What is specific, though, is the attention a game places on the position of the character/player, and the effect the camera has on the experience of the game. When it comes to writing, the game is based on the same structures as those used for film scripts and almost exclusively uses dialogue to move the story forwards, but the script of the game does not have a linear structure, but a hypertextual one, a network of connections between otherwise fixed events, among which the players can choose to create their own paths. Practically, even if most of the pleasure of the game consists of making choices and in the cause-effect relationship between player actions and game response, the player only goes through one chain of events, the rest remaining just potential.

The potential of variability is what makes a two hour gaming session different from a two hour film. Beyond the technological means used for creating immersion (high definition graphics and sounds, realistic animations, visual representations of the player, etc.) the responsibility of the players is what most contributes to integrating them in the fictional world. Through interaction, a quality specific of video games as a medium, they become the more important element in the game, a source of dynamism in an otherwise static world expecting action.

Through interaction, a fluid product is created, one that is always subjected to external modelling forces. For this reason, video games as media products cannot be analysed as standard cultural texts, as an independent product, just a collection of potential elements, but only as an experience. This has to be taken into consideration by anyone who studies video games and suggest new approach paradigms.

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