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Introduction

In the third installment of the point-and-click adventure game series *The Walking Dead*, gamers are interrupted in their attempts to lead the playable character and protagonist Lee Everett out of a street filled with zombies by the disturbing, bone-chilling screams of a young woman, described as “a girl” in the in-game text. As the cutscene continues, zombies surround, attack, and bite the woman in the neck; this is tantamount to infection and certain death in the narrative universe of *The Walking Dead*.¹ The gamer now has to make a timed decision: *either* shoot “the girl” to release her from her ghastly fate of being eaten alive, which would also result in attracting the zombies’ attention and possibly lead to a game-over, *or* cause Lee to walk away and escape the zombie-infested street, but then be forced to endure the continuing screams for the remainder of the scene.² In terms of the game’s narrative, this decision is relatively inconsequential (because Lee will eventually leave the street and the female character will die either way). But in terms of the immediate gameplay situation, the heat-of-the-moment decision involves gamers in a tense moment that not only increases their immersion in the interactive storyworld but in fact places them at a crucial juncture in that world’s overall transmedial serial unfolding.

In this paper I analyze the game series *The Walking Dead* as a case study in the specific production and reception practices that games and game cultures foster in the digital environs of what has been described as convergence culture (Jenkins 2006) or analyzed in terms of digital storytelling (Alexander 2011), immersive narratives (Rose 2012), and spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). By focusing on the example of the cross-media franchise *The Walking Dead*, my contribution seeks to illuminate both the commonalities and differences between digital and non-digital forms of seriality, as outlined by Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2013).³

Pointing us towards the serialization of action and narration in the game and the larger franchise, the example of “the girl in the street” is just one among many similar scenes in the series. On multiple occasions in each installment of the game, gamers are given a timed duration within which to choose between several different options. These options concern possible actions or dialogue, many of which involve a dimension of moral dilemma, such as deciding which characters to rescue in life-threatening situations or whether to be honest or lie to other characters.

The game foregrounds the mechanic of decision-making, opening each installment with a black screen featuring the words: “This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play.” This rhetoric of tailor-made game experience, or narrative of choice and consequence, is further enabled by the serial

production and release of the game, which allows the game's producers to adapt subsequent installments on the basis of players' experience and feedback. While these modes of production and release seem reminiscent of serial texts in other media forms,⁴ the *Walking Dead* game series and its gameplay mechanic of decision-making and variable consequence enables very specific practices of reception, which I argue are central to the game's media-specific form of digital seriality.

To explore these specific practices and strategies of digital seriality, in the first section I will focus on the "inter-ludic seriality" (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p.11, pp. 13-15) of the game's release schedule, as well as the game's position within the cross-media franchise of *The Walking Dead*. As I will show, the specificity of digital games is not only evident in the cross-medial marketing, production, and reception of the game series but also in the strategies of transmedia storytelling employed. Thus, in an analysis of the "para-ludic seriality" that connects gameplay with larger contexts of serialized reception (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013, p.11, pp. 16-21), I will look at how the game series provides gamers with an alternative take on the theme of parenthood—a theme which occupies a central position in all extensions of the franchise—thus involving players not only in an intermedial process of hermeneutic activity but also in a serialized process of community.

In the following section, I turn to cultural forms and practices of community—or what Denson and Jahn-Sudmann call "collective serialization"—in an analysis of players' descriptions and discussions of gaming experiences in online forums, gameplay walk-throughs, and interactions in social media. This analysis explores how the game actively encourages certain types of engagement by asking gamers to recall significant moments and to remember the decisions they made. I call these instances of "intra-ludic seriality" (Denson and Jahn-Sudmann 2013) *meta-moments*, because their appeal lies in a mode of self-reflexive reception that highlights both an awareness of the game's mechanics as an "operational aesthetic" (Mittell 2006) as well as the gamer's position within the game.⁵

Finally, before embarking on these analyses, let the reader beware: this paper is, unavoidably, brimful of spoilers for the game series.

"This is more like a TV show than a video game, I love it! :D" – The Game Series as Part of a Cross-Media Franchise⁶

The Walking Dead comic series was created in 2003 by Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Chris Adlard; as of now (July 2014), 129 comic issues have been published. Starting in 2010, the cable network AMC developed a TV series based on the comic series; the fifth season is scheduled to air in fall 2014. Both TV and comic series brand themselves as "stories of survival horror" and focus on the social interactions among communities of humans formed to survive the hostile surroundings after a zombie apocalypse. Extending the franchise into gaming, the California-based company Telltale Games has developed a commercially successful video game series in association with Robert Kirkman's company Skybound Entertainment; since April 2012, they have released installments for iOS, Mac OS X, Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.⁷ The game is released first in monthly or bi-monthly installments similar to the publication rhythms of comic books

or television, and then again in a retrospective collected edition resembling trade paperbacks or DVD boxes. As one of Telltale’s story consultants points out, this release rhythm promotes the sustained engagement of gamers: “You get these multiple bites of the apple and you sustain the conversation about your game over an entire year, not just over the release window of a \$60 game” (Edge Online 2013). Clearly, the statement reveals the commercial interests that, here as elsewhere, serve as central motors of serialization (cf. Kelleter 2012b). Significantly, this mode of production also allows for parallel, overlapping processes of production and reception, such that gamers’ responses are able to influence the ongoing development of the game while developers, in turn, are able to fine-tune their bids for gamers’ continued attention and commitment.

The game series highlights its position within the cross-media franchise of *The Walking Dead* in its references to these release rhythms, in the packaging of installments, and in its borrowings from the aesthetics of other media forms. Thus, the game’s visuals allude to the artwork of the comic books and draw heavily on what has been described as a motion comic or graphic novel aesthetic (Carlson Draper and Carlson 2009, McBride 2008). The game’s visual surfaces are clearly influenced by the drawing styles of comic artists Tony Moore and Chris Adlard, yet the color graphics of the video game contrast noticeably with the images of the *Walking Dead* comics, which, in the style of independent or alternative comics, are presented exclusively in black-and-white. The game can thereby cater to desires for a colored version of the comic books, as expressed by readers on several occasions in “Letterhacks,” the comic books’ letter column. Seen as a transmedial response to fans’ feedback in the letter column, the game series exemplifies the types of feedback loops that serial processes of production and reception generally tend to generate, and that in this paper interest me with respect to the specific digital environments of game culture and collectivity.

Regarding the structure of the game series, Telltale labeled the first five installments—which are played from the point of view of Lee Everett—as “Season One,” while the current set of episodes—featuring Clementine as a playable character—are referred to as “Season Two.” Each installment is identified as an “Episode,” and it is divided not into individual levels but “Chapters.” The game further alludes to the structuring devices of TV series, in that each episode is framed by a “Previously on...” clip and concluded with a black screen indicating “To be continued...” as well as a “Next time on...” teaser, all of which denote individual installments as part of a larger, serial and cumulative narrative, as well as evoking a close connection between game, comic and TV series. This connection is further intensified by the release of accompanying paratexts, such as “Playing Dead,” a series of videos released on Telltale’s YouTube channel that, following in the mold of AMC’s aftershow talkshow *Talking Dead*, feature interviews with writers and designers of the game.

Besides referencing comics and TV series in these formal-structural and aesthetic manners, the game series also employs various strategies of intertextual referencing, for example inviting comparisons between protagonists in their various iterations across the franchise (e.g. between game and TV or comics), highlighting differences between established characters’ outward appearances in the various media, or offering alternative takes on important themes explored by the franchise. To account

for these references, allusions, and comparisons – along with and as part of the larger context in which the game is marketed and played alongside the comics and show – I will draw on the concept of transmedia storytelling as described by Jenkins for *The Matrix* franchise (Jenkins 2003a, 2007) and by Evans for the industrial practices of television (Evans 2011).

As the first episode of the game begins, Lee Everett is introduced as a point-of-entry into the narrative and the character (avatar) to be navigated by gamers. As an African American character, the choice of Lee as protagonist seems to respond directly to viewers' and readers' criticisms of the early deaths and low narrative impact of characters of color in early installments of the comics and TV series (Devaga 2012, Pajiba 2012). Lee is not on the "right" side of the law when the zombie apocalypse hits, in sharp contrast to the comics' and TV series' protagonist, police officer Rick Grimes. Instead, Lee is a convicted felon on his way to prison. The comparison is further evoked in the course of the game, as gamers find out that Lee, once a university professor, was convicted for murdering his wife and her lover. Rick's unfaithful spouse Lori, who sparked heated discussions among audiences of the TV series and comics, is probably the most disliked character in the franchise; however, Rick forgave her infidelity and tried to save their relationship, much to the displeasure of many fans.

While these cross-media references are rather subtle in form, the first episodes of the game also feature Lee meeting two of the most beloved characters of the TV series, Hershel and Glenn. One of the game's most poignant transmedia pleasures is provided in this context: Hershel, a character that audiences of the TV show and comics know and are likely to trust because of his positive, fatherly portrayal in these familiar narratives, is placed in a mentor position and gives gamers advice on how to play the game. Similarly, Glenn appears in episode two, and the game firmly establishes him as an ally and confidante and not as antagonist to Lee/the gamer.

When confronted with the first of several "Save character A or B"-type scenarios in episode one, gamers face what has turned out to be one of the closest, least straightforward decisions in the game series, with gamers equally divided between the two given options: either to save Hershel's son, Shawn, and possibly stay on Hershel's farm, or to save the child Duck, and continue to travel with him and his family. Interestingly, the death of Hershel's son and the zombie attack on the farm contradict the narratives of the TV and comic series, so that the events depicted in the various media cannot obviously coexist in one and the same narrative universe. However, Glenn's announcement that he will leave the group and head to Atlanta to find his friends at the end of episode two effects a sort of "retcon" that enables the temporality of the game series to be seen as preceding that of TV or comic series.

Regardless of what the gamer decides, Lee is unable to save Shawn, and he has to leave the farm anyway—much to the disappointment of many gamers and fans of the franchise, who have taken to discussion boards and social media to express their desire to remain on and explore Hershel's farm, a location they have long been familiar with from both the comics and the second season of the TV series. This speaks to some of the basic desires animating ludic engagements with transmedia franchises—desires which Jason Mittell has described for the franchises of *Lost* and *Portal* in terms of "the lengths that fans will go to in the name of exploring the

transmedia storyworlds of a beloved franchise, extending the time spent engaging with texts with forensic detail and ludic imagination” (Mittell 2012, p. 11).

Yet in the *Walking Dead* video game, Telltale does not provide gamers with one-to-one adaptations of the TV/comic storyworlds.⁸ Instead, while the game indeed references other parts of the franchise, it adds a distinct exploration of established themes, as I will illustrate presently with regard to the thematic cluster of parenting/parenthood/childhood.

In the *Walking Dead* franchise, the theme of parenting is often explored via the narrative topos of a struggle between helpless, “innocent” embodiments of childhood and capable yet morally questionable “children as killers.” The game’s rendering of the theme of parenthood explores new aspects of its implication within the franchise, at the same time continuing to provide “the melodramatic payoff fans expect from *The Walking Dead* in whatever medium” (Jenkins 2013, p. 279). The central question that parent figures raise in these narratives is whether they should try to protect and shelter children or teach them to survive on their own in an apocalyptic world—an undertaking fraught with morally ambiguous consequences. In the game series, this set of questions—What does it mean to be a parent or child in these surroundings? What does parenting entail now?—is introduced when Lee finds Clementine, a young girl whose parents have unfortunately left for a trip on exactly the weekend that the apocalypse hits. Lee quickly becomes a guardian and a sort of father figure for the girl. It is noteworthy, though, that neither Lee nor Clementine refer to their relationship as a father-daughter relationship, and for large parts of the game Clementine is driven by her motivation to find and reunite with her parents. During the course of the first season, the character Clementine and concerns over her well-being continue to shift towards the narrative center of the game. At the time of its initial release, gamers responded very strongly to her character: “But Clementine is not as much the responsibility of Lee Everett as she is the player’s. Because in the end, it is our decision. [...] It’s all about Clem!” (Farca 2014, p. 444).

Throughout the five episodes of the first season, other characters repeatedly approach Lee to talk about Clementine, offering parenting advice, advising caution, or praising Lee and/or the gamer for the impact their decisions have for Clementine. New characters immediately inquire about their relationship and the status that Lee has with respect to Clementine. If gamers select those dialogue options that claim Clementine as Lee’s daughter, an in-game text informs gamers that these new characters will remember this answer and mistrust Lee as a result of it. The inherent assumption seems to be that as a man of color, Lee could not be father to a child like Clementine, who is often read as either white or Asian-American.⁹ By thus “punishing” the player’s choice, the game evaluates surrogate fatherhood (especially in connection to race) as intrinsically less legitimate than biological fatherhood, as is evident in a dialogue with a character named Vernon in episode four:

Vernon: “I know you think you’re doing what’s best for her. And if you were her real father we wouldn’t be having this conversation. But you’re not. And staying with you is not what’s best for her.”

Throughout the first season of the game, white male characters who are older than Lee continuously tell him (and/or the player, who may very well be a female) what to

do with Clementine; this comes in the form of very specific, very firm advice or commands, and sometimes these characters even threaten to take her away from him. Female characters, who are often younger and not always white, express only vague warnings or say that they hope Lee knows what he is doing.¹⁰ The older white men, who stand for pre-apocalypse patriarchal hierarchies and privileges, present themselves as rivals to Lee's status of surrogate father, as they claim to know better how to provide for Clementine. The stranger who abducts Clementine in episode five turns out not to be a cruel mastermind but a traumatized father who has lost his family and only wants Clementine in order to be a father again: "I'm not some cannibal, Lee. Some killer out in the woods. Some v...villain. I'm just a... dad. I coach little league."¹¹

It is after a tragic scene involving the death of a child that Chuck, a newcomer to the group, warns Lee that Clementine might not survive in this new world if Lee does not change his parenting approach. After the player chooses what they feel is an appropriate level of anger to express, the game continues in a point-and-click sequence in which Lee follows Chuck's advice to give Clementine "a plan, a haircut, and a gun." Cutting Clementine's hair represents a much more significant moment in the game series than teaching her to shoot, unlike similar situations in the TV and comic series. In the latter narratives, the question of whether to teach children how to use weapons is ultimately what the topos of "childhood innocence versus child killer" boils down to.

Chuck warns Lee to cut Clementine's hair "before a walker [...] take[s] care of that." The explanation that Lee repeats to Clementine in another cutscene is that the haircut is "so you can't get grabbed so easily." Lee omits the reference to walkers or zombies in his statement, and he thereby broadens the scope of threats ostensibly protected against by a (short, more androgynous) haircut to include the possibility of sexual assault or sexualized violence against Clementine. Such an implication is further supported by the game's foregoing narrative: Earlier, in episode two, gamers encountered Jolene, a minor character who threatened Lee and another minor character named Danny when she walked in on them raiding her camp. The hysterical Jolene appears to be beyond all reason, severely traumatized following her young daughter's abduction, murder, and possible sexual assault, indicated in her exclamation: "You're not men... you're monsters. All men are monsters. Take what they want..."

Neither Chuck nor Lee explicitly acknowledges the gendered implications of the haircut, but Clementine is quick to point these out in a cutscene following the point-and-click sequence.

Clementine: "I'm going to look like a boy."

Lee: "But think how much safer you'll be."

Clementine: "I'd rather be dead."

Lee: "Shush now."

While Clementine's statement could be dismissed (along the lines of Lee's response) as childish, immature talk, it also firmly establishes her gender identity as female

despite the boyish, androgynous appearance that is further emphasized in the character design of season two. Unlike Carl, the child character of the *Walking Dead* comics and TV series, who very strongly insists on his masculinity and, in close connection with it, his ability to defend himself and to protect others, Clementine’s femininity is little explored yet never questioned.

As the threat posed to Lee’s fatherhood by the possible rivalry and interference from older males (and entrenched masculinities) illustrates, Clementine is presented in the first season as a character with little agency of her own. In the gameplay, she often follows Lee around while the gamer navigates him through the surroundings. Overall, Clementine seems to be the goal of the narrative, in the sense that she is an object to be protected by her surrogate father/the gamer very much along the line of what Anita Sarkeesian has described as the trope of a “Damsel in Distress” (Sarkeesian 2013). However, this conception of Clementine and her position within the game’s narrative is completely undermined with the shift from Lee to Clementine as protagonist and playable character in season two. Gamers continue to encounter authoritative men such as Carver or Carlos, but these characters now directly negotiate with Clementine on a more equal footing.

Statistics of the Dead and Collective Serialization

Each episode of the game series ends with a listing of all the choices you made in the game and how they relate to the percentages of other gamers (e.g. “Did you shoot the girl in the street?” “You and 40% of players shot her.”). To provide these statistics, Telltale monitors gamers’ decisions on a large scale, again allowing for an overlap between processes of production and reception.

In this section I will look at how the awareness of these statistics informs practices of collective serialization and contributes to creating pleasure in what I call the “meta-moments” of self-reflexive reception.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Killing a severely injured dog (Season 2, Episode 1: <i>All That Remains</i>; 84% of all players killed the dog, 16% did not kill it) 2. Not shooting Jolene, an aggravated, mentally unstable woman whose camp you and minor character Danny searched for supplies (Season 1, Episode 2: <i>Starved For Help</i>; 87% of all players waited until Danny shot her, 13% shot her themselves) 3. Attempting to save Christa from bandits attacking the camp (Season 2, Episode 1: <i>All That Remains</i>; 86.4% of all players tried to save her, 13.6% did not) |
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Table 1: The Three Easiest Decisions

Table 1 lists the “easiest” decisions that gamers have been faced with in the game series so far,¹² those decisions with the largest margins between individual options –

for instance, the decision to kill a whimpering, severely injured dog and put it out of its misery instead of leaving it behind. Another easy decision for gamers was the “Save Doug or Carley” scenario of the first episode (not listed in the table). The narrative had introduced Carley as a possible love interest for Lee, a plot development that many gamers were eager to see unfold. According to Telltale co-founder Kevin Bruner, these easy decisions were not viewed as ideal by the game’s developers, who would instead prefer even splits: “you want people to struggle with these decisions and not feel like there’s a right or wrong” (Klepek 2012).

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|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Telling Bonnie – a character known from the spin-off <i>400 Days</i> but who has betrayed our core group of characters to villain Carver – about the group’s escape plans (Season 2, Episode 3: <i>In Harm’s Way</i>; 50.3% of all players told Bonnie, 49.7% did not) 2. Which character to save from attacking zombies: The child Duck or Hershel’s son Shawn (Season 1, Episode 1: <i>A New Day</i>; 50% of players saved Duck, 47% saved Shawn, 3% saved neither) 3. Who did you side with in an argument (Season 1, Episode 1: <i>A New Day</i>; 52% of all players sided with Larry, 48% sided with Kenny) |
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Table 2: The Three Toughest Decisions

This second table lists the top three of the game series’ “toughest” decisions so far, those decisions that had gamers evenly split between different options of dialogue or action. Interestingly, most “Save A or B” scenarios are less obvious for gamers to decide on. Most gamers also struggled with the question of which other characters to trust in the narrative.

At the core of the game series’ attraction, it would seem, lies the theme of survival. Because of the affordances of digital games, the narrative can explore the familiar “What would you do?” motif that all types of zombie narratives (and obscure associations such as the Zombie Research Society) intrinsically raise—a motif that, not incidentally, corresponds with neoliberal ideals of self-reliance, self-defense, and independence from social and political institutions.¹³ If this theme of survival is what initially made the game attractive for gamers, as well as for cross-media audiences waiting to explore this theme in ways they could not in other types of media, then it is not surprising that a major complaint against the game series concerns what Adrian Froschauer has described as “the illusion of choice the game constructs” (2014). This notion of an essentially illusory freedom of choice refers to the low narrative impact that players’ decisions have for the linear progression of the narrative as a whole.

In his article “Clementine Will Remember All of That,” Froschauer comes to the conclusion that “[t]he decisions you make in *The Walking Dead* don’t change *what* happens, they change *how* it happens. Your actions determine what kind of person Lee is, how he reacts to certain situations, and how the other characters see him” (2014). The “how” of action, as determined by an individual gamer, can also be understood as introducing variations into what remains essentially the same story,

variations on themes that are then related by gamers to the gaming community for the collective pleasure of finding and discussing similarities and/or differences in others' gaming experiences. It is in the appreciation of variation that specific practices of community-building and what Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2013) call “collective serialization” emerge in discussion boards, on social media, and in walk-through pages.¹⁴

The type of variation at stake here functions in a double register: it is at once the outcome or expression of gamers' individuality, but at the same time significant for serial practices of community. Detailed walk-throughs of the game almost seem to follow conventions of diary-keeping or life-writing instead of maintaining the distanced tone one might expect from an operational guidebook. Rather than merely providing step-by-step solutions to puzzles, the writers of these texts give detailed accounts of their sympathies or antipathies for certain characters, carefully explaining how these in turn affect their decision-making. As an example of how this process of community-building works via acts of narrating one's own gaming experiences, which are then set in relation to others' similar or varying experiences, consider the discourse surrounding how gamers approach Clementine as a playable character.

On the “Walking Dead Wikia,” a user by the name of Lukesbooty asked other gamers how they played their Clementine: “Do you play her strong and sassy, cold and unforgiving, or kind and sympathetic? Which do you think is best for her and which is most like her? (Also, you did watch Carver's death for you, or for Clem?).” Similar questions and discussions can be found on all the major discussion boards and social media.

Here is a selection of the answers that gamers gave:

NiksBrotha: “In the episode I decided to trust Bonnie and tell her, she reminded me of Ben, she was just as naive and needed guidance. I took the blame for the walkie talkie and holy fucking shit it boiled my blood when I tried to help Kenny and Troy smacked me. At that moment I decided Carver is fucking dead the next chance I get. [...] I played as the “good clem” I believe and made the better choices.”

Th3B1gCh33se : “I never trusted Bonnie with the information about Luke. But I think from now on I can trust her.”

ricearoni: “I tried to play it as Clementine. [...] She made the best possible choice in that situation. It'll just kinda make her look monstrous to other characters probably.”

Jelboo: “And besides, my Clementine [...] has become such a mature, cold-hearted girl, she'll do anything.”

GB&MF: “I played my Clementine as a disturbed little girl who is trying to regain her innocence back after Omid died. For example, I went back to prevent her from getting physically abused, [...] I know I made the right decisions, because Clementine is trying to become a normal little girl again which is what Lee and her parents would want to become proud of her [...] Also I don't want Clementine to become a monster like Carver or Carl.”

Nick007008009: “P.S. I think how i play her is what is best for her.”

These different approaches illustrate a point that Kristine Jørgensen has made for the complex relationship that exists between gamers and playable characters: “it can neither be seen simply as identification nor empathy” (2010, p. 319). The self-descriptions offered by these gamers go to show that gamers may simultaneously occupy a variety of positions with regard to a playable character—especially if that character is a child—and that these positions co-exist in complex forms of interconnection: players alternately identify as Clementine (saying, essentially, I did this: “I took the blame for the walkie talkie,” “I never trusted Bonnie”); or they may position themselves as gamers playing a character (I had my Clementine do this because this is what I wanted to do: “I played as the ‘good clem’,” “I played my Clementine as a disturbed little girl”); or they may see themselves as a sort of parental or protective instance, watching over a child (I had Clementine do this because it is best for her: “Clementine is trying to become a normal little girl again which is what Lee and her parents would want to become proud of her”). These affective and relational variations, we might say, serve at once to individualize the player’s experience and to collectivize it, to render it “comparable” (i.e. significantly similar and different from others’) and thus capable of insertion into the larger discourses of a community.

In his analysis of the first season, Gerald Farca focuses on the emotions the series is capable of producing in the gaming experience. He argues that gamers are affected on emotional levels by the choices they make, especially if these choices are retrospectively reflected or commented upon in “adjusted dialogue”: “the game employs adjusted dialogue that, in the aftermath of the choice, scrutinizes and questions the player’s course of action. Obviously, the emotion triggered by this sort of directed player response is one of strong discomfort, leaving the player behind devastated and reflective” (2014, p. 447). But whereas Farca sees such retrospective reflections on the previous gameplay as necessarily triggering discomfort and uneasiness with the ethical implications of decisions, players’ variable positionality with respect to characters enables a wider range of responses. More fundamentally, because players can either identify with the playable character and his or her moral dilemmas or regard the avatar in a more objective (which is not to say dispassionate) capacity—and *because the player can occupy these various positions simultaneously*—the ethical/affective dimension is much less straightforward than Farca imagines. At root, there is a complexity in these situations that calls upon us to read these moments as self-reflexive “meta-moments” in which the game not only comments on our choices and their ethical significance for the inhabitants of the diegetic world, but in which the game actually comments on its own mechanics.

In these moments, the game places gamers in a position to reflect upon, appreciate, and enjoy the game’s mechanics and its storytelling in a mode of reception that Jason Mittell has described as “the operational aesthetic” for narratively complex TV series (2006). Drawing on Neil Harris’s work on the audiences of P.T. Barnum and their enjoyment of the mechanics of Barnum’s shows in a reflexive, aware manner, Mittell describes the operational aesthetic as a sort of “narrative special effect” in contemporary TV series: These “moments push the operational aesthetic to the

foreground, calling attention to the constructed nature of the narration and asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off” (2006, p. 58). *The Walking Dead* game series exemplifies a similar mode of reception as part of gameplay; as implemented in the game series, however, this mode is tuned to the media-specific differences of digital games from television series. The operational aesthetic becomes visible in those moments of “adjusted dialogue” that either reflect on gamers’ individual choices or provide them with dialogue that, besides making sense within the storyworld, can also be taken to refer to the general experience of playing the game. An example of this kind of meta-talk can be found at the very beginning of the first episode of the first season: A police officer drives Lee to the prison in which he is to serve his sentence. In various dialogue options, gamers can find out about the previous events in Lee’s life, thereby getting to know their playable character while also becoming acquainted with the game’s navigation. When the officer says “You will have to learn to stop worrying about things you can’t control,” besides the obvious implications this has for Lee’s situation, it also can be read as an instruction to gamers to concern themselves with the time limits regulating their freedom to choose between various options, and to react nimbly in quick-time events, but not to worry about the numerous, lengthy cutscenes that the game series employs. Similarly, when in the second season’s second episode the charismatic character Walter gives Clementine the advice that in this world she (and by extension the gamer) doesn’t “have” to do anything, this also reminds gamers that the storyworld of the game is different from the “real world” outside of the game, and in it they are free to make their own choices as to how the narrative should progress.

The strongest meta-moment of the first season occurs during the final dialogue with the “stranger.” The scene consists of cutscene elements during which the stranger recalls several of the past choices the player has made, insinuating that they were bad choices. The gamer then gets to select dialogue options for Lee to respond and defend his decisions. For instance—and now I am falling into the complex rhetoric of narrating my gaming experience as described earlier—because I, like 77% of all gamers, chose to save Carley instead of Doug in hopes of seeing a possible romantic sub-plot develop, the stranger sarcastically remarked: “You let a boy get yanked out a window and into the night so you could protect a pretty girl with a gun.” The meta-element of this scene continues in the possible options for answering the stranger. I can either have Lee reply “It was impossible to save them both,” because of course the game’s design does not allow for saving two characters, or I can say “I wouldn’t do that again,” expressing my frustration at the game’s refusal to deliver the desired romance plot – and also acknowledging the possibility of rewind or replay as a practice that would enable me to change my previous decision. This incentive of replay accounts for another aspect of what Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2013) refer to as the “intra-ludic serialization” of the narrative: a gamer may find the pleasure of variations not only in the online collective of other gamers but in her or his own (repeated) gameplay.

A specific type of intra-ludic seriality that is connected to meta-moments and the retrospective remembering of past choices they entail has to do with the reminders of previous gaming decisions that are visible in the game’s own surfaces—e.g. in the onscreen appearances of characters’ bodies. Similar to the mutilated body images of war films, the *Walking Dead* franchise shows the bodies of its post-apocalyptic survivors as bandaged, bruised, scarred, amputated, and otherwise physically injured

or impaired bodies. Being injured and learning to cope with injury are central themes of the franchise's survival narratives in all of its media formats. However, while the comics and the TV series also explore processes of narrative remembering as inscribed in characters' bodies, the game series is able to negotiate physical injury as an interactive mode of remembrance.

Similar to protagonist Rick Grimes, who wakes up in comic issue 28 (*The Best Defense* story arc) to find his hand missing, gamers in episode five of season one are faced with the decision to cut off Lee's infected hand and possibly save him from a zombie bite. Depending on various choices, Lee will either have to perform the surgery by himself or have another character amputate the lower arm for him. If gamers choose not to cut off the arm, Lee will continue along the same narrative trajectory in the game, but with his body intact; he will, however, pass out several times due to the quick spreading of the infection. Because this decision changes the surfaces of the game for the rest of the episode, the impact is made visible and remembered on the game's surface.

Other instances involve the red sweatshirt that one might or might not decide to give Clementine in the second episode of season one, or the scar that she receives if she tries to interfere with villain Carver's torture of one of her fellow survivors.

The intra-ludic serial change of the game's surfaces as a meta-moment that remembers the gamer's past decisions functions as a moment of memory, such as Henry Jenkins has described with regard to the narrative architecture of games: these moments are "micronarratives within games as spaces that shape narratively memorable or emotionally meaningful experiences" (Jenkins 2003b). In these moments, gamers step outside of the immersive narrative to appreciate the mechanics of the game, but they also remember the decisions made and the narrative outcome of these decisions. This might—but need not necessarily—culminate in the feeling of personal responsibility and guilt described by Farca (2014), yet it also has the effect of highlighting one's choices in an imaginary sea of options. Meta-moments, intra-ludic serial changes of surfaces, inter-ludic continuations and transmedial comparisons, online discussions and the gaming statistics that take gamers beyond the ludic and narrative universes: all of these factors conspire to create an awareness of one's own experience as a single possibility among a range of possible variations, an awareness that functions simultaneously as an affirmation of individuality and of para-ludic collectivity.

In the game's aggregated playing statistics as well as in meta-moments, practices of individuality and collectivity are enabled through the game's operational aesthetic as well as gamers' serial appreciation of variation as a narrative outcome of the choices made. And, as my investigation above of gamers' responses to the child character Clementine illustrates, all of this is channeled through the complex relationship of playable character and gamer in serial texts, in which multiple, shifting positions of identification, empathy, responsibility, and versatility can be simultaneously occupied (and will continue to grow more complex, in this example, as Clementine "grows up" in the narrative and might be characterized less as a child and more as female teenager).

“Keep that hair short”—Or How to Conclude a Discussion that Has Just Begun

In the last conversation between Lee and Clementine, just before the male character's death, gamers can select among dialogue options for Lee's last words of advice to Clementine. Not surprisingly, most gamers decided to end their relationship on a lighter note and advised the girl to keep her hair short—a statement that spiraled in the reception and promotion of the second season and has since become a mantra of the gaming community. Taken as a sort of a meta- or even meta-meta-moment for our critical reflection on the game series, Lee's advice about keeping it short—which refers not just to the girl's hair but also responds somewhat perfunctorily to a sprawling constellation that includes gendered identities, parent/child relations, player/avatar configurations, transmedia references, and the negotiation of fan communities—contains what might be seen as a fitting piece of advice for wrapping up my consideration of digital seriality in *The Walking Dead* as well: for as we have seen, the formal, aesthetic, affective, and social ramifications of serialization in the game series' production, reception, and gameplay continue to multiply, with no apparent end in sight; this, it would seem, is the natural tendency of serial forms, which have little interest in keeping things short, but if left to their own devices will go on and on and on indefinitely. Alas, however, series too must offer some moments of respite, lest they overwhelm their audiences—they must offer at least the illusion that one might contain their multileveled proliferations, might make a clean break, and cut things short. It is, of course, by means of this illusion that the segmentation of series into seasons, episodes, chapters, and installments is effected, but the purpose of such incisions is to enable the series' continuation in yet another segment. And so it is, then, with our observation of serial forms: as these forms continue to proliferate and grow in complexity we are forced to find a stopping point, but its precise location is rather arbitrary, as a conclusion serves merely as a prelude to a continuation, an entry-point into a further exploration, and the basis for further discussion and perhaps even the establishment of a scholarly sort of para-ludic community.

Let us end, then, on this meta-moment and cut it short, realizing full well that both the media we are analyzing and our discourse of analysis are designed expressly “to be continued.” We have seen, in the investigation of the *Walking Dead* game series, that the various levels of ludic seriality in game entries to cross-media franchises are connected in complex manners with the serialized collectives of gamers invested in them. In this context, the discussion of self-reflexive meta-moments is subject to a self-reflexive perspective on itself, so that in the end the discussions of digital serial texts, their para-ludic serial implications, and their potential for processes and practices of collective serialization must be seen not as detached observations, but as invitations to join an ongoing conversation – a thoroughly serialized conversation that is indicative of our present inability to clearly distinguish between discussions in and about digital media. Good luck, then, keeping it short...

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Notes

- ¹ Unlike zombie bites to external limbs, whose immediate amputation can prevent death, as several gruesome scenes repeated in the various media forms of the franchise illustrate.
- ² The game series typically employs four types of scenes or modes of gameplay: 1) point-and-click scenes in which the gamer can navigate Lee (season one) or Clementine (season two); 2) timed choice-of-dialogue scenes in which gamers are typically given up to four options of what to have the playable character say to other characters, often resulting in 3) corresponding reactions in cutscenes; and 4) quick-time-events which often entail killing attacking zombies but may also provide gamers with two options of action (i.e. "Save A or B" scenarios).
- ³ In the following paper, I am interested in digital seriality as an aesthetic-formal but also a cultural practice of collective serialization within game cultures as outlined by Denson and Jahn-Sudmann (2013, p. 8). For my case study of the *Walking Dead* game series, I follow their distinction between the "inter-ludic seriality" of development, publication, and marketing rhythms, the "intra-ludic seriality" of narrative or design developments within games, and the "para-ludic

seriality” of cross-media or transmedia spreads of games (2013, pp. 10-16). My research and the conceptions of seriality presented here are indebted to the work developed and discussed within the interdisciplinary research unit “Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice” (www.popularseriality.de/en/). I especially thank Bettina Soller, Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, and Shane Denson for their productive feedback, corrections, and support of my research on the game series and earlier versions of this paper.

- 4 For a conceptualization of serial texts as “moving targets” whose production and reception significantly overlap and manifest themselves in texts themselves, see the work of the aforementioned research unit “Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice” (see, in particular, the contributions to Kelleter 2012a).
- 5 In his work on TV series, Mittell demonstrates the usefulness of the “operational aesthetic” for the analysis of processes of storytelling. Due to the media specificities of television, he is not concerned with technical implications of the “operational aesthetic” which are relevant for the gaming experience as I will explore later.
- 6 Quote taken from a YouTube comment that the user “The Lazy Hustler” posted on May 14, 2014.
- 7 Telltale Games’ series is not the only extension of the franchise into gaming. At the time of writing, the extensive fan-run “The Walking Dead Wiki” lists up to seven different game extensions of the *Walking Dead* franchise. Among them are the first-person shooter *The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct*, two different Facebook “Social Games,” the online *The Walking Dead: Dead Reckoning*, the mobile game *The Walking Dead: Assault* (iOS, Android), and most prominently the *Walking Dead* Video Game that this paper focuses on.
- 8 The game is set in the same general fictional world of rural Georgia after the zombie apocalypse, but the group of survivors never travels to the Atlanta of comic or TV series, instead visiting the cities of Macon and Crawford.
- 9 The tension between biological fatherhood, race, and surrogate fatherhood is further explored in episodes two and three of season two, when Rebecca, a pregnant woman of color in Clementine’s group of survivors, is worried what the white villain Carver would do to her if he found out that the baby is not his but the African American Alvin’s child.
- 10 The game series includes very few characters who are mothers, such as the traumatized Jolene and the cannibal mother of the St. John brothers. It does feature several pregnant women (Christa, Anna, Rebecca). None of the female characters ever threatens to take Clementine away from Lee. They caution Lee to do what is right for Clem, but they never directly question his “authority” as father figure to Clementine.
- 11 Again, the game provides gamers with a pleasure based in para-ludic seriality or transmedia storytelling. The stranger lost his son during a hunting accident, which then results in his family breaking apart and dying. In issue 9 of the comics

(*Miles Behind Us* story arc) and in the second season of the TV series, Rick's son Carl is shot and rescued by the veterinarian Hershel. By building the traumatized, nameless "Stranger" up as an antagonist to Lee, the game allows for the transmedia pleasure of speculating whether Rick would have behaved similar to the stranger if his son had died.

- ¹² In the context of female characters on the TV series *Lost*, Frank Kelleter similarly argues about the militarization of female bodies (forthcoming 2014).
- ¹³ As of June 15, 2014, the game series consists of five episodes in season one, the spin-off 400 Days, and three episodes of season two. The next installment of season two is to be released in July 2014.
- ¹⁴ For this paper I have analyzed the following online discussion boards that either focus solely on the game series or focus on the entire franchise but provide subsections for discussions of the game series: Telltale Games Community > The Walking Dead <http://www.telltalegames.com/community/categories/walkingdead>, Reddit: THEWALKINGDEADGAME <http://www.reddit.com/r/TheWalkingDeadGame/>, IGN: The Walking Dead <http://www.ign.com/boards/forums/the-walking-dead.25214/>, The Walking Dead Wiki > Video Game Discussion Board http://walkingdead.wikia.com/wiki/Board:Video_Game_Discussion, The Walking Dead Forums > The Games <http://thewalkingdeadforums.net/forum/3570176/>, Walking Dead Forums > The Walking Dead Games <http://www.walkingdeadforums.com/forum/f63/>, Roamers and Lurkers – The Walking Dead Community > Walking Dead Games Discussions <http://www.roamersandlurkers.com/forum/43-the-walking-dead-games/>, Steam Community > The Walking Dead <http://steamcommunity.com/app/207610/discussions/>. I have also included tweets from Telltale Games' twitter account (<https://twitter.com/telltalegames>) or that feature the hashtag #IamClementine, which Telltale used to promote the second season, (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/IamClementine?src=hash>). Other sources are the comments made on Telltale's YouTube Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/TelltaleGames>), as well as the Facebook page "The Walking Dead: The Game" (<https://www.facebook.com/TheWalkingDeadGame>, which at the time of writing has 1,060,744 likes).