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“No Going Back”: The Telltale Model as Thought Experiment

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> It’s not what happens to you, but how you react that matters (Epictetus)

This quote was produced in a 2014 discussion article hosted on the pop-culture website *The A.V Club* as a tentative defence against the claim that choices in games produced by the prominent game development company Telltale Games “don’t matter” (Gerardi 2014).The Telltale ‘model’ has gained notoriety since the original publication of *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (2012) for its novel approach to interactive storytelling—with each episode opening with the phrase: “This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play.” In reality, choices in the Telltale model have no significant impact on the trajectory of the story. This paper will show how the Telltale model still expresses its own kind of meaning—despite its noticeable flaws—through an analysis of *The Walking Dead Season 2: Episode 5 “No Going Back”* (2014). Choices in the Telltale model are still reflective. However, the choices found within the Telltale model function more akin to those found within the tradition of philosophical thought experiments. As a result, scholars such as Alex Mitchell argue that the Telltale Model functions as an “ELIZA effect” (Mitchell 2015, p.29).

The ELIZA effect is a term coined by Noah Wardrip-Fruin in *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games and Software Studies* (2009). It was named after an early natural language computer program named ELIZA which could maintain conversations by taking whatever a user inputted and then repeating it back to them as a question. For example, the question “How are you?” returns the response “Why are you interested in whether or not I am?” This allowed many users to believe that ELIZA was a complex machine that could sustain a conversation, when it fact it was only repeating modified words back at the user. With ELIZA as an inspiration, Wardrip-Fruin defines the ELIZA effect as:

> [The] well-known phenomenon in which audience expectations allow a digital media system to appear much more complex on its surface than is supported by its underlying structure … during playful interaction … the illusion breaks down rapidly. (Wardrip-Fruin 2009, pp.15-16)

The ELIZA effect is central to the operation of The Telltale model. The model only works when the player is unaware of how inconsequential all of their choices are. Once consequences are removed from the equation, the choices within the Telltale model can still provide some level of reflection for the chooser; however they are limited in their expression as the player knows that it can only comment on the player’s short term behaviour, rather than developing a holistic response to the player’s behaviour as a whole.

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For most of its history Telltale has been an adventure game development company with a strong 'puzzle' focus. Their popularity exploded following the release of *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (2012). As time has progressed, games culture quickly became alert to the model's flaws. Alex Mitchell in his paper "Reflective rereading and the SimCity effect in interactive stories" (2015) argues that the Telltale model embodies the "ELIZA effect", stating that the game implies "a complex system underlying the game, a belief that initially encouraged rereading to explore different endings. However, It quickly became evident that the game has a simple branching system, and that there is very little underlying complexity to this system" (Mitchell 2015, p.29).The growing animosity towards the "Telltale Model" has since seeped into games journalism, with Elise Favis of *Gameinformer* stridently criticising the company in 2015 with her online piece labelled "Your Choices Don't Matter in Telltale Games" (Favis 2015).

This paper will not focus at length on the 'illusion of choice' in the Telltale model, as that has already been covered. Instead, this paper will build upon the implications of the Telltale model as a form of choice-craft. In the absence of strong consequences, any meaning that a Telltale choice can express is to instead be found within the dilemma it poses. Because of this, Telltale's choices perform in a manner similar to thought experiments. The primary function of both thought experiments and Telltale's choices are to prompt the chooser to consider specific scenarios or dilemmas that they may not have otherwise considered. Thought experiments, drawing from a philosophical tradition, are commonly used as an argumentative tool, or what Daniel Dennett refers to as an "intuition pump" (Dennett 2013, p.6). The argumentative context of the thought experiment carries over into the Telltale model, and Telltale's choices are presented in a sequential manner that begets a line of reasoning, followed by a conclusion. Similarly, thought experiments are often placed into thought experiment/counter-thought experiment pairs which aim to provide a series of conflicting intuitions that are designed to prompt the intellectual development of the reader (Brown and Fehige 2014). *No Going Back* concludes this process with a climactic choice in which the player is forced to choose whether or not to shoot a major series character. In doing so, the game is testing the player—trying to see if they have internalised the implied logic of the game's many choices.

The Telltale Model

The Telltale model has been used in almost all of the company's titles since the success of *The Walking Dead: Season 1*. Gameplay in the Telltale model primarily takes the form of ongoing cinematics, with player dialogue interspersed throughout. During each of these dialogues, silence is always an option. Occasionally players will need to navigate an environment or take part in several "quick time action" events.[1] However, for the most part the game is a cinematic narrative punctured with branching choices and dialogue. Some of these elements have been named and categorised by Maria Sulimma in her study of Telltale titled "Did you shoot the girl in the street? – On the Digital Seriality of *The Walking Dead*" (2014), and this paper will employ Sulimma's terminology when discussing the Telltale model.

The most dominant element of the Telltale model is the appearance of interactivity through what Sulimma describes as "meta-moments" (Sulimma 2014, p.88). While

players are making choices or speaking to other characters, a small prompt will appear in the top-left corner of the screen indicating that their action will have future choices: “X will remember this” is the most common, X being whichever character they are currently speaking to. For the most part these prompts are never referred to again. Occasionally, these prompts will result in a throw-away line made further in the game. For example, in an episode prior to *No Going Back*, the player can choose to watch the character Kenny violently beat up and kill an earlier antagonist. If, then, the player chooses to prevent Kenny from hurting another character, he remarks about the way in which that choice conflicts with the earlier one. These flashes of memory are momentary, and have no lasting impact on the overall trajectory of the narrative. What the meta-moments ultimately seek to do is to defer the meaning of the player’s choices to some unforeseen event in later in the narrative (Sulimma 2014, pp. 84-86). Players take their choices seriously because they expect—as the game encourages them to believe—that these choices will have serious consequences in the future.

Part of the reason why Telltale model presents choices that ‘don’t matter’ is its reliance upon the remediation of television tropes. Games released by Telltale Games are produced in ‘seasons’, with the company publishing 3-5 hour long ‘episodes’ at a time. The company does not release original intellectual property, but instead produces creative re-imaginings of established franchises and content. *The Walking Dead*, for example, is based upon the fictional universe of the AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (which itself is based upon a series of graphic novels). Other titles that have been released under the Telltale model include *A Game of Thrones: A Telltale Series* and more recently, *Minecraft: Story Mode*. This presents games produced under the Telltale Model as being less games as much as they are ‘interactive television’—or television shows in which the player is also a major character. They also prey upon the serial nature of television. The consequences of a player’s choice are forever delayed to some unforeseen future in each ‘show’s’ history – if this choice does not matter in this season then it may in the next (Sulimma 2014, pp.84-86). At the same time, in order for Telltale to be able to produce constant seasons of each of its ‘shows’, the narrative needs to have a certain degree of linearity in order for the serial nature to be viable—it is not practical to create 10 alternate “seasons 2’s” to accommodate for potentially dozens of exploding branches. As such The Telltale model’s reliance upon television remediation also commits it to a structure of choice-craft that ensures that its choices ‘do not matter’. This, in a sense, reflects the triviality of narrative progress in television itself. The television producer Dan Harmon, in a series of blog posts created for *Channel 101*, argues that television needs to avoid change and constantly keep its viewers watching, arguing that “Television's job is to keep you glued to the television for your entire life.” He argues that in order to continually produce more seasons of the same specific television show, the plot of a television show needs to avoid dramatic change, and to always return characters to where they began. This is to “save money on sets and keep scripts relatively modular” (Harmon, 2013). Telltale have inherited this cost-saving mentality. Linear storytelling and the constant deferment of potential consequences means that there could always—potentially—exist another season of *The Walking Dead*. In order for the constant serialisation to continue, interactivity under the Telltale Model is always performed while any consequences can then be reabsorbed back into the linear narrative by the end of each episode.

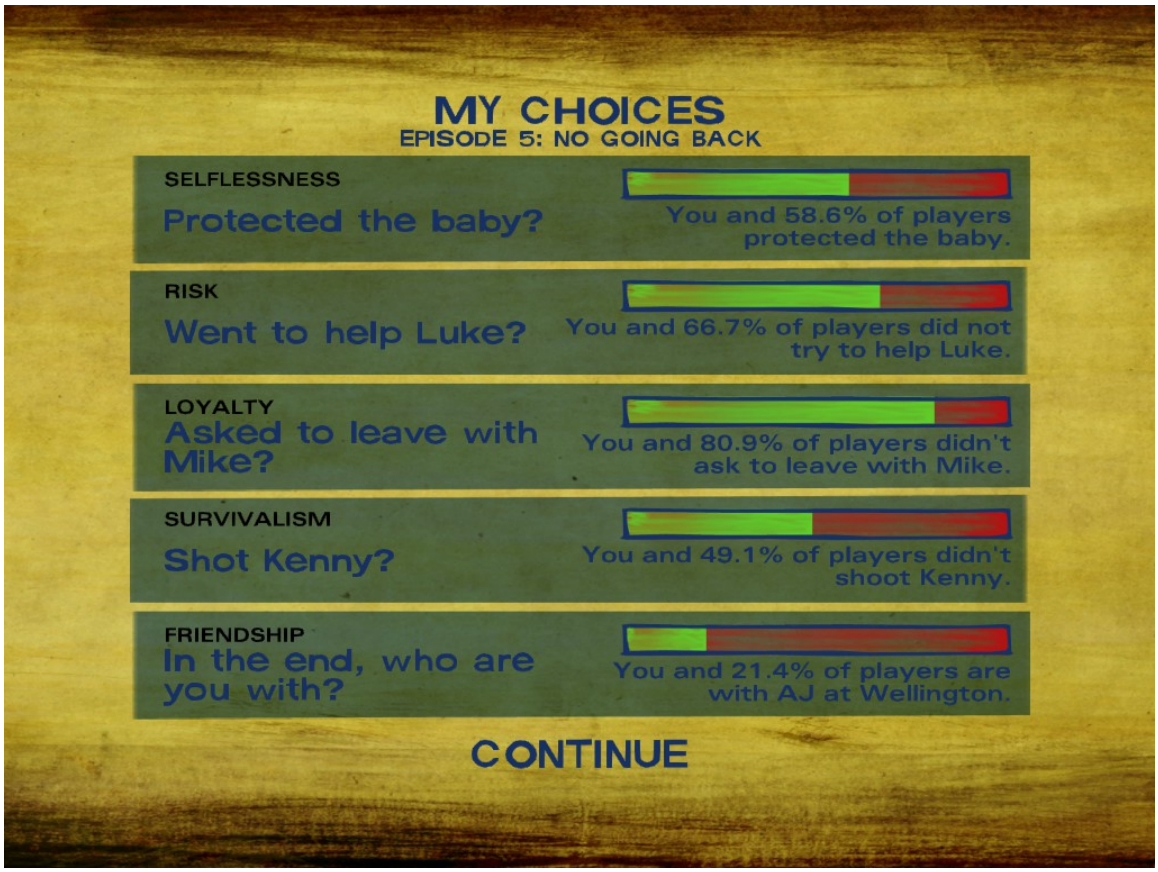

Figure 1: Survey at the end of No Going Back

There are largely three types of choices available in the Telltale model. The first are ludic-didactic choices which appear occasionally in self-contained bursts. An example can be found in *No Going Back*. At one stage, the player and their group are huddled around a fire, while the two polarising figures of the group—Kenny and Jane—sit in isolation. The player is tasked with speaking to them separately, and convincing them to join the group. If the player understands a character's internal mental state well enough, then they can choose a sequence of dialogue options that will convince them to re-join the group. This is rewarded with a 'meta-moment' informing the player that "You convinced Kenny to join the group" and "You convinced Jane to join the group" respectively. This exists to test the player's knowledge of these two characters, and to reveal to them whether or not they understand how they are feeling. As such this event can be treated as a microcosm of the Telltale model itself, providing the player with a test to see whether or not they have learned about the internal state of these two characters, and then giving then testing them on their knowledge. It is comparable to the attempted suicide of Kate Marsh in Don't Nod's *Life is Strange* (2015) or the side-plot to forge a peace between the warring Quarians and Geth in Bioware's *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007-2013). In all of these cases a side-plot allows the player to make a series of meaningful choices which can lead to either an objectively 'good' or 'bad' outcome. The small, self-contained nature of these side-plots allows for strong consequences to flow on from

player choices before being largely ignored in the grander narrative trajectory of their respective game’s arcs.

The second type of choice is the many exploratory-narrative choices that litter the game. These allow the player to role-play a persona and participate in the story. At the beginning of *No Going Back* the group takes a hostage and then immediately argues about what to do next. The outcome of the argument is pre-determined, but the player can join in by choosing phrases and adding their voice to the cacophony of shouts and cries. This provides the experience of participating as a character in the group conversation. A player might also add their voice in the expectation that their voice might influence what the group decides to do—although this implies having not yet uncovered the Telltale model’s ELIZA effect. The final—and most significant—group of choices is what Sulimma refers to as “Decision points”.

“Decision points” appear a few times in each episode and determine the narrative’s short-term trajectory. These choices are ultimately re-absorbed into the largely linear narrative of the game, but provide a short-term consequence that feels significant. These are major moral dilemmas, which move the player to consider the themes that have been communicated to them over the course of the episode (Sulimma 2014, p.83-84). At the end of each episode, the player’s choices are compared to the game’s online community for that specific episode as they are shown an online survey of how all players acted during each of the episode’s major reflective choices (See: Figure 1). The survey screen acts similarly to the one found in Pippin Barr’s *The Trolley Problem* (2011). Barr’s game is a very direct example of how *The Walking Dead* expresses its values. In it, the player must respond to a variety of different “trolley problem” thought experiments. At the end, the player is presented with a summary of how they responded to each “Trolley Problem” with no judgement or commentary on the part of the game. Miguel Sicart in his book *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (2013) commends this approach, arguing that the game “presents ethical gameplay not in choices but in how these choices are interpreted” and that players “are left alone with their choice to make sense of them and what they say about them. They are left alone with their principles” (Sicart 2013, p. 7). The survey screen effectively builds upon this, providing other people for the player to compare themselves to.

The primary way in which player self-reflection is encouraged in the Telltale model is not through consequences or authorial pushback, but through the choices themselves. In season 2 of Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*, players assume the role of a young girl named Clementine who is trying to survive a zombie apocalypse. During her journey, she is accompanied by adult characters, all of whom have conflicting perspectives on what it means to survive. The two most fully developed characters—Kenny and Jane—offer wholly conflicting viewpoints on survival, and attempt to assume a surrogate parent role for Clementine, providing lessons and attempting to guide her moral development. Each episode then ‘tests’ the player, forcing them to consider the themes of the episode and then commit to a side through their choice. Sulimma argues that the game’s narrative offers an “alternative take on the theme of parenthood” (Sulimma 2014, p.84). Although there may not be consequences, these momentous choices perform in a manner akin to the philosophical thought experiment. Their meaning does not arise from their ability to communicate to the

chooser after the fact, but by moving the chooser to consider important themes by presenting them with a complex dilemma.

The Thought Experiment

When a reflective choice presents a dilemma with narrative ambiguity, but no ludic consequences, it expresses meaning in a way similar to that by which thought experiments communicate with their readers. Although not an interactive form of narrative, the thought experiment commonly presents readers with a choice, before encouraging them to consider how they would respond. Consequences exist metaphorically, and are implied by the thought experiment itself. The focus, then, is not on trying to achieve a certain ludic outcome, but on trying to understand the dilemma posed by the thought experiment.

The thought experiment's history reaches back to the Pre-Socratic era of ancient Greek philosophy, and was largely developed by Greek natural philosophers—particularly Aristotle. It is heavily used as a form of argumentation and pedagogy in contemporary philosophy and academic physics, and primarily relies upon moving the audience to consider an imaginary scenario that draws out their underlying intuitions. Daniel Dennett's famous description of the thought experiment as an "intuition pump" helps to elaborate on the fundamental function of a thought experiment: to concretise intuitions of which an audience may not have previously been aware. A good example of this is how the "Transplant" scenario follows on from the "Trolley Problem". In both cases, two different intuitions are revealed, and the contrast between the two scenarios reveals an internal contradiction in the intuitions of the audience.

The "Trolley Problem", originally conceived by Philippa Foot in 1967, is a staple in the teaching of the philosophy of ethics. It's most iconic formulation is given by Judith Jarvis Thomson in her paper titled "The Trolley Problem",[2] where she describes it:

> Suppose you are the driver of a [railway] trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don't work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. Unfortunately, Mrs. Foot has arranged that there is one track workman on that spur of track. He can no more get off the track in time than the five can, so you will kill him if you turn the trolley onto him. Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley? (Thompson 1985, p.1395)

Several elements of the thought experiment can be gleamed from this, and re-appear in the choices of *The Walking Dead*. In this formulation, Thompson has deliberately used the second-person subject mode and has emphasised a personal dimension for the audience. This is designed to reinforce the imaginative dimension of the thought experiment, moving the reader to mentally construct the model of the thought experiment within their own mind and thereby directly implicate themselves within the thought experiment's proposed dilemma. This ties into the history of the use of second-person subject mode narration in interactive narrative, from the personal

narratives of *Choose your Own Adventure*-style books, through to the text-based adventure games emblematised by *Zork* and *Colossal Cave Adventure*. Unlike the choices presented in more ludic narratives, however, the consequences are known well in advance of the choice being made. As such there exists an implied—rather than direct—consequence of the reader’s decision. The choice is then distilled to its purest elements—the conflict between two intuitions and the decision as to which intuition triumphs over the other—the aversion to killing one person as counterpoised against the desire to save multiple lives. The final question—“Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley?”—is an authorial call to action, akin to the “What do you do?” that signals the choices of many *Choose Your Own Adventure* papers. This reinforces the personal element given by the initial sentence “Suppose you are the driver of a trolley” making the thought experiment inescapably personal.

The strong implication of the thought experiment is that yes, it is morally permissible to turn the trolley. This speaks to the thought experiment’s role as a form of argument. In this case, the trolley experiment persuades, through moral self-reflection, that it is permissible to kill one person to save many more. This is because the intuition to avoid five deaths outweighs the intuition to avoid killing at all (Thompson 1985, p.1395). Thompson proceeds to contradict this moral lesson with a few counter-examples. These include the “Transplant” scenario—in which you are a doctor who can kill an innocent patient who arrives for a routine check-up so you can harvest their organs and use it to save the lives of five other dying patients – and the “Bystander at the switch”—in which the trolley can be halted by using the body of a fat bystander (Thompson 1985, pp.1395-1415). Thompson uses these to *complicate* the initial reading proffered by the “Trolley Problem”. In doing so, she presents a sequential evolution of ideas, where each new and conflicting intuition builds upon the last. It is this sequential build-up of ideas that *The Walking Dead* attempts to emulate by continually presenting the player with choices which follow a similar theme—but with variations. As per Thompson’s varying trolley problems, *The Walking Dead* presents a series of choices where the choices have no impact—and yet a clash of intuitions still remains. The player of *The Walking Dead* is being challenged to consider the ethics of each choice in regards to themselves. As with “The Trolley Problem”, the actual consequences are non-existent; the dilemmas posed by the choices themselves are what matters.

“Newcomb’s Paradox” is notable for containing a contradiction within itself—it is a thought experiment that is chiefly designed to reveal an internal conflict of intuitions to the reader. In Robert Nozick’s formulation of the thought experiment he begins by asking—again using the same phrasing as Thompson in her description of the “Trolley Problem”: “Suppose a being in whose power to predict your choices you have enormous confidence…that almost certainly this being’s prediction about your choice in the situation to be discussed will be correct”. He then poses the following scenario to the reader.

> There are two boxes, (B1) and (B2). (B1) contains $1000. (B2) contains either $1000000 ($ M), or nothing. What the content of (B2) depends upon will be described in a moment….
>
> You have a choice between two actions:
>
> Taking what is in both boxes

> Taking only what is in the second box
>
> Furthermore, and you know this, the being knows that you know this, and so on:
>
> If the being predicts you will take what is in both boxes, he does not put the $ M in the second box.
>
> If the being predicts you will only take only what is in the second box, he does put the $ M in the second box.
>
> The situation is as follows. First the being makes its prediction. Then it puts the $ M in the second box, or does not, depending upon what it has predicted. Then you make your choice. What do you do? (Nozick 1969, pp.114-115)

Once again, similar phrases are being used to indicate that this is not just an abstract concept, but an imaginative scenario that directly implicates the reader. Like Thompson's "Trolley Problem", the thought experiment begins with the phrase "Suppose" and ends with a directive to make a decision. In this case, that directive is identical to the directive given to players of the text based adventure game *Zork*, or the directive that lies at the end of many *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebook chapters—"What do you do?" This indicates that these forms of narration—second person subject mode and an imperative to choose—are an essential part of the choice, regardless of whether or not it is framed by a ludic structure.

Nozick presents the argumentative drive of this thought experiment by stating that it shows a conflict between two equally compelling modes of reasoning. To pick both boxes is rational as the predictor has already made their decision in the past—and so regardless of what you do the contents of box (B2) are set. You may as well, then, take both boxes so as to maximise your reward. Conversely, by picking both boxes you insure that the predictor would have predicted as such, and would consequently have placed $0 in (B2). Therefore "if I take what is in both boxes, I, almost certainly, will get $1000. If I take only what is in the second box, I, almost certainly, will get $M. Therefore I should take only what is in the second box." Both of these options are equally compelling, intuitive and rational yet imply that a different decision should be made—hence the paradox. "I should add" explains Nozick, "that I have put this problem to a large number of people ... To almost everyone it is perfectly clear and obvious what should be done. The difficulty is that these people seem to divide almost evenly on the problem, with large numbers thinking that the opposing half is just being silly" (Nozick 1969, pp.115-117). This is what Telltale are trying to achieve with their choices—polarising dilemmas that trigger discussion external to the game, but have no real bearing on the ludo-narrative universe in which they take place. In Newcomb's paradox the reader is encouraged to consider the clash between two conflicting principles. In doing so it acts as an "intuition pump"—encouraging the reader to confront aspects of their own decision-making they may not previously have been aware of.

Thought experiments thus share a number of qualities with "Telltale" style reflective choices. The first is that it is not their consequences where meaning is communicated. Instead, the decision made by the reader in response to a thought experiment is personal, with the consequences known in advance and part of a decision-making process built upon perfect information. The second is that thought

experiments are explicitly designed as "intuition pumps", drawing out otherwise unconscious beliefs or contradictions in the way in which the reader thinks or approaches such scenarios. The use of second-person subject mode narration and explicit directions to act and think ("What do you do?", "Is it morally permissible to pull the trolley?") personalise the dilemma, implicating the reader directly in the process. The third significant aspect is that thought experiments are primarily argumentative tools. They possess a clear answer as defined by their author. Tamar Szabo Gendler, in *Thought Experiment: On the Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases* (2000) defines the philosopher's follow-up elaboration on the thought experiment's meaning as forming part of the broader scenario (Gendler 2000, p.12). In the case of *The Walking Dead: Season 2* the game's choices are designed to communicate a common theme of survival.

The presence of complex moral dilemmas and 'thought experiments' within gaming is not unique to the Telltale model, but reflects a broader trend in a significant subset of games culture to not only provide entertainment for players, but also to inform and train them. In both of Miguel Sicart's books on video games ethics—*The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009) and *Beyond Choices* (2013)—he stresses the potential for moral choices to develop what Aristotle referred to as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. "By situating players in a virtual world*"* Sicart argues in *The Ethics of Computer Games*, "they can test their *phronesis* and improve it without suffering from the adverse consequences in the real world" (Sicart 2013, pp.105-106). Virtual moral dilemmas, for Sicart, present the opportunity for players to prepare how they would respond to real-life moral dilemmas. He takes this argument further in *Beyond Choices*, arguing that games ought to present "wicked problems" which lack an objectively 'correct' solution from the perspective of achieving a game's win-state, and instead spur the player to consider their own moral values external to the game (Sicart 2013, pp.105-106). Games such as *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) and *The Talos Principle* (2014) prioritise choices that have a *philosophical* dimension to them. *The Walking Dead*'s emphasis on a thought-experiment mode of interactivity, then, is part of a broader effort among game designers to not only entertain, but also to educate. In doing so it lives up to the expectations of 17th century literary critic John Dryden who argued that literature ought to "instruct delightfully" (Dryden, Ed. Draper 1980, p. 80).

The most significant aspect of Telltale's choices are their shared persuasive attributes. As with Thompson's sequential pairing of thought experiments and counter-thought experiments, *The Walking Dead* presents its choices to the player in such a way as to get them consider the theme of *survival* in certain ways. The final, major choice in Season 2 of *The Walking Dead* serves as a test—to see if the player has fully internalised the themes and messages *The Walking Dead* has been attempting to communicate over the course of their gameplay. What then follows is an outcome that is reflective of how the player responded to the narrative themes overall. *The Walking Dead* is a thought-experiment generator that encourages the player to engage in most of their reflection external to the game itself. As such, the ludic dimensions are almost entirely unimportant—the reflective choices in *The Walking Dead* and in Telltale Games' other products are defined by their narrativity.

The Theme of Survival

Which is more important—community or individual survival? Season 2 of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* prompts the player to consider this theme over the course of five episodes, before providing the player with a penultimate choice that embodies this conflict. The game presents this dilemma in two weighty trade-offs, the first is the choice to either: a) endanger yourself in order to save another; or b) refrain from saving someone if it is not worth the risk. The second trade-off emphasises: a) the necessity to use violence to protect a community; or b) showing mercy in order to preserve the community. These themes are presented to the player repeatedly over the course of the series, before being embodied within the respective personas of "Jane" and "Kenny". Jane embodies the individualist logic of survival—cold, calculating and rational—while Kenny personifies the communitarian ethos of mercy—emotional, instinctive and familiar. Both Jane and Kenny also represent an inversion of traditional gender roles: Jane embodies traditionally masculine values of self-sufficiency and pragmatic logic; Kenny emphasises stereotypically maternal values of care and empathetic concern. The gender inversion is most salient regarding how the two characters behave around the infant "A.J"—Jane fails to value A.J's life while Kenny behaves with great solicitousness towards him. The penultimate choice of the season forces the player literally to choose between Jane and Kenny as they fight to the death, committing the player to pick a side and nail their ethical colours to the mast.

Survival recurs as a theme over the course of many critical choices, with *Episode 5* providing a pertinent example of this during the ice-lake choice. At a certain point in the episode, the player's group must slowly cross a frozen lake while zombies (labelled 'Walkers') approach from a distance. Luke, one of the characters, suddenly falls through a weak patch in the ice. Another character named Bonnie encourages the player to run across and pull him out. Luke argues that this would only make the situation worse, and encourages the player to instead shoot at the incoming zombies while he tries to pull himself out. Regardless of the player's decision, Luke freezes to death. In one branch, the player fires at the zombies, only for Bonnie to risk herself by trying to save Luke, eventually making things worse and falling in herself. Alternatively, the player can try to save Luke themselves, also making the situation worse by falling into the ice. In the branch where they stand back and provide cover, the player has the additional option of trying to break Luke out of the ice while Jane discourages them, saying "It's too late". If they continue attacking the ice, they fall in and see Luke already dead, before being rescued by Jane. Here, the ethical trade-off is embodied through a disagreement over logistics between Luke and Bonnie. Bonnie's instincts are for camaraderie—to aid another in the community by any means possible, even if it endangers the self. Luke's instincts prioritise practicality—to minimise the number of losses to the group even if it means behaving in a seemingly callous manner. As is the pattern of the season, this reiterates the enduring conflict between mercy and pragmatics that the season's major choices have been devised to emphasise.

Shortly after the ice-lake incident, Jane provides the following educational anecdote to the player.

> I was running with some people a long time ago, down near DC. Some guy got trapped in the middle of a crosswalk. Can't remember his name. He used to call

> me Mary Jane. He was a douchebag. Anyway, the dick got stuck under a car hiding from a dozen walkers. One after another they went down there trying to save him. Lost four people before we got him out.

This aside is strikingly reminiscent of the “Trolley Problem” thought experiment and comparable to the ongoing ‘survival’ choices that have been presented to the player up until now. As with these other scenarios, the anecdote presents a trade-off in which one can either: a) show mercy and camaraderie by rescuing a community member; or b) exercise restraint, allowing someone to die so as to minimise risk of further community losses. Like the “Trolley Problem”, a clash of values is presented: you can be merciful or utilitarian, but not both. This anecdote also serves to illustrate Jane’s own survivalist philosophy, one that she repeatedly reinforces throughout the season. As per the “Trolley Problem”, Jane phrases the anecdote in such a way that it heavily implies that saving many people is preferable to risking greater death for the sake of solicitousness.

The ice-lake choice synergises with similar choices throughout the season. In the previous episode, the player must struggle to rescue, repeatedly, an anxiety-ridden girl named Sarah who frequently endangers herself and struggles to pull herself out of danger. In each instance, Jane warns the player about trying to rescue her. She inevitably dies by the end of the Episode 4. The “Luke” decision echoes the “Sarah” choices, and reinforces a similar trade-off. On one hand, membership of a community entails a degree of selflessness and camaraderie—if a member of your group falls behind, you do everything necessary to save their life. Conversely, survival requires pragmatism—if the danger posed by trying to care for another is excessive, then you leave them behind. One requires an instinctive, familiar mode of reasoning that involves valuing care over rationality; the other is harshly utilitarian, favouring a rational cost/benefit approach to survival that dehumanises members of the community for one’s personal benefit.

The characters of both Kenny and Jane are presented as competing foils, with each emphasising one side of the survival/mercy binary. Kenny, a series mainstay, represents mercy and community. He is committed to bringing the group—particularly the newborn “A.J”—to a rumoured safe haven named “Wellington”. Wellington lies far to the U.S north, and the characters are travelling in the middle of winter, making this a risky endeavour. Conversely Jane, a series newcomer, emphasises a pragmatic approach to survival. She frequently leaves the group, only to return when opportune. In inversion of Kenny, Jane is a female character who exhibits characteristically masculine values such as self-sufficiency and ruthless pragmatism. While Kenny has a fatherly relationship to A.J, Jane is noticeably distant, and stresses that she doesn’t like children. She is sceptical of Wellington’s putative existence, and urges the group to head south in a less risky strategy. The penultimate choice—whether or not to shoot Kenny or allow him to kill Jane—represents a climactic moment for the series.[1] It forces the player to consider the thematic resonance of the choices presented thus far, and to unambiguously ‘pick a side’.

Do you Shoot Kenny?

The Walking Dead: Season 2 concludes with a dramatic 'penultimate choice' designed to test the player, and to force them to commit fully to one of the major frameworks of survival presented by the season. The game foregrounds this with a flashback. The player's character awakens to see an influential past mentor and surrogate father-figure named Lee. In this flashback Lee reappears to explicate the didactic moral of *The Walking Dead.* The event is placed right before the penultimate choice, making it clear that Lee's message is meant to be applied to it. Within the flashback, Lee mentors the player's avatar. He references a choice made in season 1—about whether or not to kill a rogue member of the group. Commenting on whether or not his choice was the correct one, he makes a statement which implicitly comments on the nature of decision-making itself. "Well" begins Lee, "it's not like math, Clem. Sometimes there just isn't a right answer". He ultimately ends his lecture to Clementine with the following advice: "part of growing up is doing what's best for the people you care about … even if sometimes … that means hurting someone else."

If the player elects to ask if they can avoid hurting someone that they care about, Lee deflects the question after a momentary pause, before saying, "Everything's gonna [sic] be all right". The implication is clear—in order to 'grow up' the player must be prepared to hurt someone they care about. Kenny, as the only character in the game to remain a constant and close companion to the player since the beginning of the series is, clearly, that character. The penultimate choice which follows then 'tests' the player, checking to see if they have internalised the game's message.

Caught in the middle of a snowstorm, Jane argues that Kenny is mentally unstable, that Wellington is not real and that the party should turn back. Kenny argues that Wellington is the best chance that A.J has for a normal life, and that they should push ahead regardless of the risks. Jane then provokes Kenny by claiming that she killed A.J as he was a liability (the player later learns that this is a lie). This triggers a fight to the death between the two, with the player caught in the middle. Kenny quickly overpowers Jane, before moving to kill her. A gun lies near the player, and they are provided with the following choices—"[Shoot Kenny]" and "[Look Away]".

By choosing to "Look Away" the player chooses sentimentality over practicality, the potential for a harmonious community over the *Realpolitik* of shooting and killing a compromising member of the group. When they "Shoot Kenny", in contrast, the dying Kenny proudly proclaims to Clementine that "You made the right choice". In his last moments Kenny regrets his erratic behaviour, before passing away. Similarly, allowing him to live leads to the realisation that Jane's provocation—that A.J was dead—was a lie, and that the killing of Jane was unjustified, with Kenny expressing strong remorse. The sense of dissatisfaction produced in one branch, contrasted with the sense of finality provided in the other, signals authorial intent. From this it can be surmised that the developers intended for the act of shooting Kenny to be the correct one, a "test" to see if the player had learned the lessons that each choice leading up to this one was supposed to communicate. In this way—the Telltale formula embodies the worst aspects from both the didactic and exploratory forms of choice-craft—their choices not only have no lasting impact upon the narrative, but they are ultimately designed to test the player and persuade them of a didactic moral. This

does not necessarily empty the Telltale model of value, but it does suggest that it has strong aesthetic limitations.

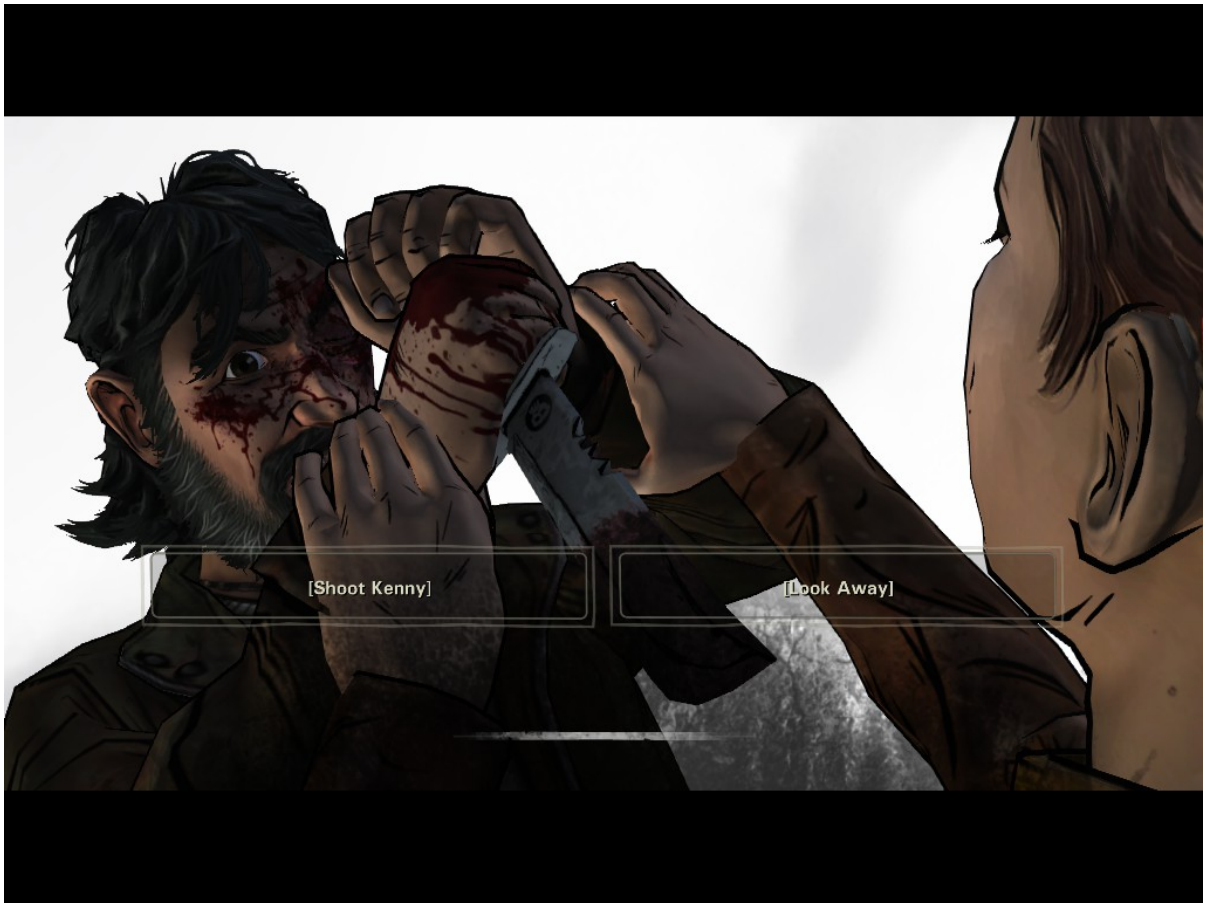

Figure 2: The Penultimate Choice

The game ends with a ‘response’ to the player based on whether or not they chose to accept the game’s implied message. If they let Kenny live, then they can follow Kenny to Wellington, which is indeed a real place, but is almost at capacity. The player must then make a choice—abandon Kenny to join Wellington or abandon Wellington. This choice is designed to mock the player, reminding them that yes, they do in fact need to make sacrifices if they want to survive. The alternative path with Jane has Clementine living with her in a relatively safe base to the south. A travelling family, with a child the age of Clementine, appears asking for entry and refuge. Jane strongly suggests that the player should turn them away. If the player allows them in, then a gun can be seen holstered in the back-pocket of the father figure while the son remarks—menacingly towards Clementine—“nice hat”. This punishes the player, implying that they have not fully internalised the lesson of harsh survival that their prior choice to kill Kenny was supposed to personify. Turning them away still reveals the holstered gun, along with an expression of pride from Jane. Here the game expresses to the player that they have learned what it takes to survive, and have properly absorbed the game’s implied moral.[3]

Conclusion

Although the Telltale model's ELIZA effect has been well documented, the implications of their model of choice-craft have rarely been explored in depth. One of the consequences of a system in which choices 'don't matter' is that a significant part of their choices' interpretive burden is placed upon the dilemma itself. Choosers are instead left to ruminate on the specifics of each choice. This lends itself to a thought-experiment mode of expression, in which each choice is really a philosophical thought experiment style of argumentation. It is easy to dismiss the Telltale model once its ELIZA effect has been uncovered, however even knowing its ELIZA effect one can still garner meaning and a sense of moral developments. Although it is not as effective as an interactive narrative that takes advantage of different endings based upon the player's long-term choices—such as Lucas Popes *Papers, Please* (2013)—It is still useful as a thought-experiment generator, one that elicits thought and generates discussions. Just don't think too hard on whether or not your choices mean anything.

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Notes

[1] A quick time action event (QTE) involves a cinematic in which the player needs to press buttons in tandem with on-screen prompts. If they fail to press the buttons in time, their avatar dies, and they reset back to an earlier point in the game to try again.

[2] Foot originally mentioned it offhandedly in a single sentence alongside a stream of examples. It was Judith Jarvis Thompson's paper and formulation that made the thought experiment famous. For this reason I am focusing on Thompson's description rather than Foot's.

[3] It is worth noting that Season 3 of The Walking Dead begins many years later. The player takes on the role of a new character and meets Clementine as an adult. Typical of the Telltale model, in both major branches Wellington falls, Clementine's chosen mentor dies, and she continues alone.