FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

THE MECHANICS OF INTERACTIVE STORYTELLING

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TELLTALE'S *THE WALKING DEAD* AND *BANDERSNATCH*

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A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Linguistics and Literature (Dutch – English)

Academic year: 2018 - 2019

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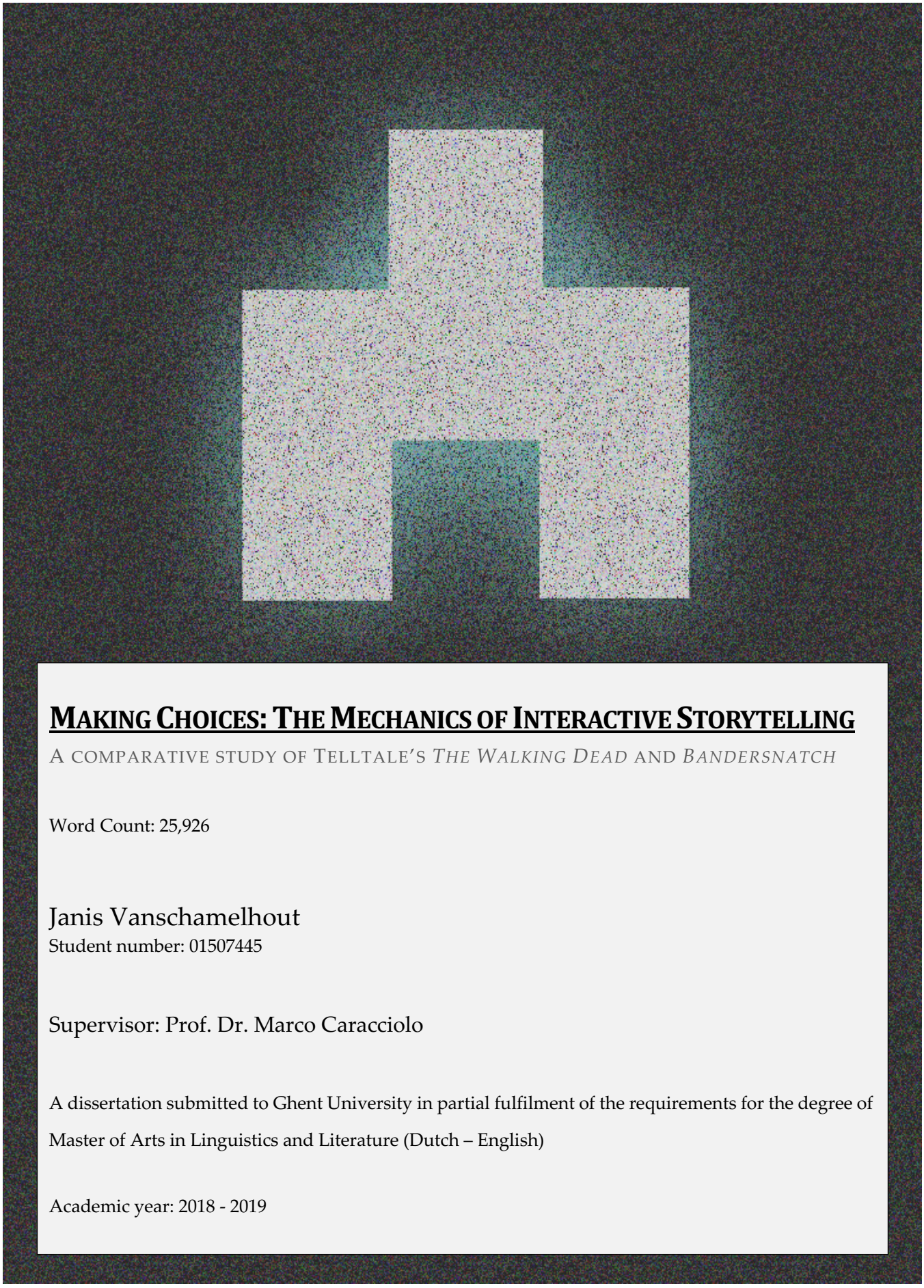

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Making Choices: The Mechanics of Interactive Storytelling

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Introduction

Even though digital games have been around for only a few decades, they are taking over the entertainment industry by storm. By now, the game industry even surpasses the movie and music industry in terms of profitability. With computer game graphics becoming increasingly realistic over the years, video games have moved from a focus on gameplay to a stronger focus on story. The relationship between game and story has long been a hot topic in video game studies. Meanwhile, titles such as Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012), T*he Last of Us* (2013), *Gone Home* (2013) and many more have proven that games are able to tell complex and emotionally gripping stories. Now, researchers are no longer wondering whether video games *can* tell stories, but whether they *should*, and whether those stories are not better told through a different medium. Ian Bogost (2017) is one of these researchers. He claims that there is no reason these stories need to be told interactively and that we should abandon the dream of interactive storytelling. With this thesis, I hope to invalidate Bogost's claim. I would like to demonstrate that interactivity can be more than just a gimmick and that it can add something to the experience of the story. I hope to show that the medium of interactive storytelling, while it certainly has its limits, deserves to be studied and developed further.

I will analyze two instances of interactive storytelling, namely Telltale's adventure game *The Walking Dead* (2012) and Netflix' interactive movie *Bandersnatch* (2018). I opted for a transmedial approach for a couple of reasons. Firstly, because I would like to know whether a video game and an interactive movie might approach interactive storytelling in a different manner and whether one of them is more successful in combining interactivity and story. Secondly, because both of these instances are blurring the boundaries between game and film. *The Walking Dead* is a game with many film-like qualities. For instance, there is a strong emphasis on story and character

development, whereas gameplay is rather limited. The movie *Bandersnatch* on the other hand, has some typical game-like qualities. For instance, viewers have agency over the main character and are able to make decisions for him. However, the makers of *Bandersnatch* insist that it is first and foremost a movie, but a movie with "game-y elements" (Streitfeld, 2018). Finally, because for about fifty years, filmmakers have tried and mostly failed to popularize the interactive movie format. In this light, I find it interesting that Netflix is spending time and money in order to revive a genre that has flopped many times before. To produce *Bandersnatch*, Netflix had to develop new technological tools and programs and the movie required twice the budget and production time of a regular *Black Mirror* episode. So far, Netflix has released four interactive experiences, most of which were targeted at children. The company has stated that they will continue to explore the format. In the future, we will either look back at *Bandersnatch* as the movie that revitalized the genre, or as yet another false start.

My thesis is structured as follows. In **Chapter 1**, I will situate my research within a larger theoretical framework. When the academic study of video games emerged, the field was largely dominated by the ludology vs. narrativism debate. This debate centers on the question how and by whom video games should be studied. I will give a concise overview of some the most prominent researchers on either side of this debate. An extension of this debate is the question whether narrativity and interactivity are compatible with each other. Again, the academic field is divided over this question. Some researchers view interactive storytelling as a *fait accompli*, others view it as an impossibility. In this section I will also explain the concept of interactivity in more detail, as some authors have argued to replace the term with concepts such as ergodicity and agency, because varied application has made its meaning quite vague. Finally, I will briefly look at some past attempts at interactive storytelling in literature, movies and video games.

In **Chapter 2**, I will present my corpus. I will give a short plot summary of both *The Walking Dead* and *Bandersnatch*, as well as some background information about these works.

In **Chapter 3**, I will analyze and compare my two case studies of interactive storytelling. I will try to uncover their affordances as well as their limitations. For my analysis, I decided to work with Gordon Calleja's *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (2011). In this work he builds a model for understanding the different dimensions of player involvement in digital games. Calleja's Player Involvement Model consists of six dimensions, each considered relative to two temporal phases: the macro and the micro. The six dimensions of the player involvement model are *kinesthetic involvement, spatial involvement, shared involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement,* and *ludic involvement*. For this thesis I will limit myself to the dimensions which are most relevant to my case studies, namely macro-involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and to a lesser extent kinesthetic involvement. I decided to use Calleja's model because he provides a clear framework for analyzing different forms of player involvement. However, I will also refer to many other scholars who have described similar concepts in different terminologies to support my arguments.

In the first part of my analysis I will examine the dimension of "**Macro-involvement**". According to Calleja, macro-involvement includes all forms of involvement with the game when one is not actually playing. I decided to link Calleja's dimension of macro-involvement to transmedia storytelling, because both of my case studies are embedded within a franchise. I will argue that players' familiarity with this larger fictional universe might affect how they interpret the story as well as the choices they make within that story. I will discuss how *The Walking Dead*'s use of crossover characters might have a positive or negative impact on the players' sense of agency. I will also consider how the source material glorifies a particular ethical stance and how players'

familiarity with this might determine how they make their choices. Next, I will discuss how *Bandersnatch* fits in with the *Black Mirror* franchise and how being acquainted with the tone and reoccurring themes of this series might change how viewers interpret the story.

In the second part of my analysis, namely "**Narrative Involvement**", I will analyze the extent to which players' choices alter the plot. I will examine the narrative architectures of both *The Walking Dead* and *Bandersnatch* and reveal their strengths as well as their weaknesses. At first sight, *The Walking Dead* seems to offer a great deal of narrative agency to its players. However, multiple playthroughs will reveal that the plot is mostly linear and that different choices lead to approximately the same outcome. But while the game may not provide any real agency over the plot, it does provide agency over character. Through their choices, players can decide what kind of person characters will become. By contrast, the narrative architecture of *Bandersnatch* is largely nonlinear, and the choices offered to viewers can lead to vastly different endings. However, some paths end prematurely and sometimes the movie will force viewers in a particular direction. The movie also provides a fair amount of false choices and non-choices. I will demonstrate how *Bandersnatch* uses some interesting strategies to justify its limits in agency, such as altered dialogue and formal support of thematic content.

A final dimension I will analyze in this thesis is the dimension of "**Affective Involvement**". In this section, I will illustrate how each work takes advantage of its interactive format to emotionally engage its audience. I will explain how the experience of agency makes players feel responsible for what happened. This feeling of responsibility might make players feel guilty, if they feel as if they have made the wrong choice, or victorious, if they feel as if they have made the right choice. In this thesis, I will mainly focus on how the interactive format induces feelings of guilt and regret. Both my case studies use fascinating strategies to intensify these feelings in their audience. *The Walking Dead* does this by providing ethically ambiguous situations in

which there is no morally right option. For instance, the game will often make viewers decide which out of two characters to save. These moral dilemmas divide players and affect them emotionally because no matter what choice they make, the consequences will be grim. At times, other characters will openly judge the players' decisions. Particularly Clementine's disapproval of Lee's actions will evoke guilt in players. *The Walking Dead* also reminds players of their earlier choices to further intensify the feeling of guilt. I will also briefly consider Calleja's dimension of kinesthetic involvement. I will demonstrate how *The Walking Dead* makes use of this dimension to add another layer of emotional engagement.

At first sight, the dimension of affective involvement appears to be less developed in *Bandersnatch*. For instance, the movie seems to offer no real moral dilemmas, as there is always a clear morally right option. The movie also doesn't remind viewers of their earlier choices. However, *Bandersnatch* uses some other interesting strategies to induce the feelings of responsibility and guilt in viewers. Firstly, at certain points the movie deliberately strips viewers of their agency by offering them non-choices. At times, the movie capitalizes on these kinds of choices to emotionally engage the viewers. Secondly, there are certain moments in which the movie breaks the fourth wall by directly addressing viewers. By doing this, the movie exposes the viewers as the invisible force controlling Stefan's life, hereby making their responsibility for him explicit. For instance, at a certain point Stefan openly questions who is controlling him. Sometimes he will defy the viewers' control, other times he will explicitly ask the viewers for help.

I will end my thesis with an overview of the most important results of my research. I will provide some concluding thoughts as well as some suggestions for further research. With this thesis, I hope to establish the interactive format as a valuable medium for storytelling. I can only look forward to the future of interactive stories.

1 Theoretical framework

Before I begin with my analysis, it is necessary to establish a theoretical framework. In what follows, I will give a short overview of video game studies, while focusing on the debate between ludologists and narrativists. Subsequently, I will examine whether interactivity and narrativity are compatible with each other. Finally, I will look at some past attempts of interactive storytelling, most of which failed to become popular.

1.1 Video game studies: Ludologists vs. Narrativists

Games have been around for about as long as humans have been around, but *video* games are a relatively young form of entertainment. The first electronic games started being developed during the 1950s. Now, only a few decades later, video games have become the most popular and profitable form of entertainment. The gaming industry is even more profitable than the movie and music industry combined.

During the last two decades of the 20th century, as the medium was quickly gaining momentum, an interest in the academic study of video games emerged. Juul (in Lemmens, 2017: 9) stresses how fast everything went: "This brief history has been something of a gold rush and a race toward being the first to point out special aspects of games, to format the field, to define words and to point to similarities and dissimilarities between games and other cultural forms." Early academic studies on video games tended to focus on their potential to induce violent behavior in players, but academics steadily moved away from this and grew to acknowledge the cultural relevance of video games (Frasca, 2003b: 1). What has been an oft-recurring subject among video game academics is how and by whom video games should be studied, which brings us to the debate between the so-called ludologists and narrativists.

The **ludological position** focuses on game mechanics and rejects the analysis of games as a narrative form. Ludologists believe that games should be studied as games, not as stories. Situated on the ludology side of the spectrum, are scholars such as Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, Markku Eskelinen and Jesper Juul. Eskelinen, for instance, refers to stories as nothing more than "uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings" for games and says that studying these "marketing tools" would be "a waste of time and energy" (in Ryan, 2006: 183). Juul's (1999) opinion on the matter is that you *could* combine computer games with narrative, but that this combination inevitably leads to a number of conflicts. He states that it is the strength of the computer game that it doesn't tell stories.

The **narrativist position** on the other hand, is said to use "narrative and literary theory as the foundation upon which to build a theory of interactive media" (Mateas, 2002: 32). Janet Murray is often considered a narrativist - even though she has never explicitly claimed to be one - because she approaches games in the context of storytelling. For instance, in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray argues that even abstract games such as *Tetris* contain a narrative, in this case a narrative about labor in capitalism (in Thorne, 2018: 30).

However, most scholars chose not to pick a side in this debate, and instead opted for a **middle-ground position** that combines both ludic and narratological elements. Among these scholars are Henry Jenkins, Marie-Laure Ryan and Michael Mateas. Most of these scholars emphasize that games are able to tell stories, but because they are games, they tell stories in a very unique way. Eric Zimmerman (2004: 161) states: "It's not a question of whether or not games are narrative, but instead how they are narrative (…) We need to ask how games can be narrative systems in ways that other media cannot." A game scholar who agrees with this is Gordon Calleja (2011: 117): "The central question for game designers is not whether games are stories, but how best to convey stories through games." In *Avatars of Story*, Ryan (2006: 203) proposes a

functional ludo-narrativism approach for the study of video games. She explains that "by connecting the strategic dimension of gameplay to the imaginative experience of a fictional world, this approach should do justice to the dual nature of video games." Other scholars that can be situated within this middle ground position are Henry Jenkins and Michael Mateas. Jenkins (2004: 119) states: "I hope to offer a middle-ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists, one that respects the particularity of this emerging medium - examining games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility." Mateas (2002: 35) has a similar opinion: "I reject the notion that games and stories are fundamentally irreconcilable categories, that providing the player with an experiences of both agency and story structure is impossible." Sarah Thorne is a researcher who will be referred to many times throughout this work. I would also situate her in the middle of the ludologist/narrativist spectrum. She states: "Neither the ludological nor the narratological perspective is wholly adequate to provide a comprehensive analysis of video games as a cultural object**.** Both the formal properties of the game and its narrative must be understood as interacting elements within a system, and not as mutually exclusive components of the user's experience" (2018: 27).

However, some scholars, such as Gonzalo Frasca and Janet Murray, argue that there never was a debate between ludologists and narrativists to begin with. Frasca is often credited with having coined the term "ludology". He himself denies this (2003: 1), but he agrees that the expression seemed to have gained acceptance after he published his article "Ludology meets narratology" in 1999. In this article Frasca used "ludology" to refer to a then yet non-existent discipline that would focus on the study of games and videogames: "It was a call for a set of theoretical tools that would be for gaming what narratology was for narrative" (2003: 2). He explains that the word took a life of its own and that it now has two separate definitions, one referring to the "study of (computer) games" and one referring to "the study of game structure or gameplay as opposed to the study of games as narratives". Frasca states that he doesn't subscribe

to the second definition (Frasca, 2003: 2). In his article "Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place", he claims that ludologists never explicitly rejected narratology, but opted to use ludology alongside it. He says: "I clearly stated that my main goal was to show how basic concepts of ludology could be used along with narratology to better understand videogames" (Frasca, 2003: 3). Janet Murray also believes that there never was a debate. In her article "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology" (2013) she explains that this debate never took place because there were never any narratologists claiming that games were nothing more than a subset of narrative studies: "No one has been interested in making the argument that there is no difference between games and stories or that games are merely a subset of stories." She instead opts for an interdisciplinary collaboration: "Game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving."

Whether there was a debate or not, storytelling is becoming a big deal in game design today. Marcello Picucci (2014: 5) mentions that since the mid-1990s, presenting cohesive stories became a strong drive in game design (2014: 4). Nowadays, the medium has proven itself as an innovative platform for telling complex and emotionally engaging stories. Titles such as *The Last of Us* (2013), the *Mass Effect* trilogy, *Life is Strange* (2015), Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012), *The Stanley Parable* (2013), *Gone Home* (2013) and numerous others are pushing the boundaries of storytelling in games.

However, some scholars are still revolting against narrative games. While they do not deny that some games *can* tell stories, they are debating whether they *should* and whether these stories are not better told through other media, such as books or movies. In 2017, Ian Bogost rekindled the debate with his article "Video Games Are Better Without Stories." In this article, he reflects on the adventure game *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017) and wonders why this story had to be told as a video game: "The game is pregnant with an unanswered question: Why does this story need to be told

as a video game? The whole way through, I found myself wondering why I couldn't experience Edith Finch as a traditional time-based narrative." Bogost continues: "Yes, sure, you can tell a story in a game. But what a lot of work that is, when it's so much easier to watch television, or to read."

1.2 Interactive narratives

A discussion that can be viewed as an extension of the debate between ludologists and narrativists, is whether interactivity and narrativity are compatible with each other and whether interactive narratives – be it video games, interactive movies or interactive literature – are achievable.

1.2.1 Interactivity

Before we can answer the question of what an interactive narrative is, we first have to consider what can be understood as **interactivity**, because it is quite a vague term and has been approached by scholars in many different ways. Eric Zimmerman (2004: 158) states: "Interactivity is one of those words which can mean everything and nothing at once." Because of this ambiguity surrounding the concept, some scholars have expressed their desire for a more precise terminology.

Espen Aarseth proposes replacing the concept of interactivity with "**ergodicity**". In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required from the reader to navigate the text. Aarseth introduced this concept in *Cybertext* (1997), a quintessential work which would shape electronic text and video game studies to come. A cybertext is a specific type of ergodic literature. The term is used to refer to dynamic texts that are organized is such a way that the medium becomes as much an integral part of the message as the message itself. To obtain the message in a cybertext, nontrivial work on part of the user

is required. The cybertext user strives for narrative control and must participate actively in the construction of the text. Aarseth notes: "A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. (…) Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, (…) but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence: 'Let's see what happens when I do *this*'" (1997: 4).

Janet Murray wants to replace the term interactivity with "**agency**", which she describes as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices." She warns that agency is not to be confused with mere participation or activity. She states: "Activity alone is not agency. For instance, in a tabletop game of chance, players may be kept very busy spinning dials, moving game pieces, and exchanging money, but they may not have any true agency. The players' actions have effect, but the actions are not chosen and the effects are not related to the players' intentions" (1997/2016: 124-125). Murray poses the question whether we can "imagine a compelling narrative literature that builds on these game structures without being diminished by them" (1997/2016: 125).

In *Avatars of Story*, Marie-Laure Ryan (2006: 99) argues that when the term interactivity is used in relation to narrative, its meaning becomes absolutely clear: she equates interactivity with **choice**. She states: "The term has been under attack by cybertheorists for being too vague, especially after advertising language fell in love with it and started promoting everything under the sun as interactive, but when interactivity is associated with narrative, its meaning is unambiguous. (…) It mandates choice for the user. Every interactive application must give its user a reasonable amount of choice. No choice, no interactivity. This is not a rule of thumb, it is an absolute, uncompromising principle."

1.2.2 Interactive narratives

Mateas (2002: 20) describes interactive narratives as strongly authored stories whose path and outcome depend on player interaction. However, there is some disagreement in the academic field over the existence of interactive narratives. Ryan (2011: 36) rightly raises the question: "Is there such a thing as an interactive story?" A first group of scholars answers this question positively. They view interactive storytelling as a *fait accompli*. Such scholars include Carolyn H. Miller and Mark Meadows. They refer to a wide variety of interactive texts that involve a story, such as computer games, interactive movies and hypertext fiction (Ryan, 2011: 36). A second group of scholars answers the question negatively and views interactive storytelling as an impossibility. For instance, Jesper Juul claims that "you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time" (in Calleja, 2011: 115). There is also a third group, which believes that interactive storytelling is possible, but has not yet been accomplished. Lev Manovich for instance, refers to interactive narratives as the holy grail of new media. Brenda Laurel calls it "a hypothetical beast, an elusive unicorn we can imagine but have yet to capture" (in Frasca, 2003b: 7).

Most of the critiques on interactive storytelling focus on the essential incompatibility of story and interactivity. Many believe that where there is interactivity, there can be no coherent story, and where there is a coherent story, there can be no true interactivity. For instance, Gonzalo Frasca states: "The biggest fallacy of 'interactive narrative' is that it pretends to give freedom to the player while maintaining narrative coherence" (Frasca, 2003b: 7). Ryan (2006: 196) confirms this observation: "The root of the conflict between narrative design and interactivity lies in the difficulty of integrating the bottom-up input of the player within the top-down structure of a narrative script: if the player's choices are too broad, there will be no guarantee of narrative coherence; if the choices are too narrow, the game will be boring."

1.2.3 Past attempts at interactive storytelling

Many media have made their attempt at interactive storytelling. As Thorne (2018: 43) states, "the development of a truly dynamic and adaptive narrative has been an aspiration of storytelling long before its popularization in games."

In the late 1980s, Michael Joyce wrote "Afternoon: a story", one of the first works of **hypertext fiction**. The short story consisted of branching paths that the reader had to navigate through by clicking on textual links. In hypertext fiction, the reader co-creates the story. Each user may get a different story based on the choices they make. Unlike traditional fiction, the hypertext reader is not required to read the story from beginning to end. There is no real ending, no sense of actual closure. Joyce states in his introduction: "Closure is, as in any fiction, a suspect quality, although here it is made manifest. When the story no longer progresses, or when it cycles, or when you tire of the paths, the experience of reading it ends." With hypertext fiction, it seemed that nonlinear storytelling had finally found its medium.

But even though Michael Joyce might have been the first to build a branching-path narrative in digital form, a few writers had already attempted this through regular print. One out of many examples is Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963). This book has quite a remarkable format. It is divided into 56 regular chapters and 99 "expendable" ones. Readers may choose to read from chapters 1 to 56 and ignore the expendable chapters, or they may "hopscotch" through the entire set of 155 chapters by following the numbers left at the end of each chapter telling the reader which one to read next. While there is a "preferred path", Cortázar invites readers to read the chapters in any order they like. A more pop-culture example of this would be the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books from the 1980s. These so-called game-books are formatted in such a way that at certain points, the reader is faced with two or three options to continue the story, each of these options leads to even more options and eventually, to one of many

endings. The reader has to skip to certain paragraphs or pages in the book to continue the chosen path.

While Netflix might be hyping its interactive movie format as a newly emerging form of entertainment, people have been trying and failing to popularize this format for over fifty years. **Interactive movies**, also referred to as movie games, laserdisc games or full motion video games are a hybrid form between video games and movies. They present their gameplay in a cinematic, scripted way, through the use of full-motion video of animated or live-action footage. The genre came about with the invention of laserdiscs, which allowed users to jump through chapters nonlinearly. This meant that games could be created where branching plotlines allowed for different outcomes and multiple possible endings.

Kinoautomat (1967), directed by Raduz Cincera, was the world's first interactive movie, and arguably one of the first video games. At pivotal moments the film would pause, and a moderator would appear on stage, asking the audience to choose between two scenes to continue the story. While *Kinautomat* didn't have all the typical features of a traditional video game, it did involve player choice. In this sense, it could be considered the first game that allowed players to influence the plot. A similar experiment occurred in 1992, when Loews Theatres equipped their seats with remotes which allowed the audience to vote on the decisions made by the main character. Movies like *I'm Your Man* were meant to showcase this new interactive technology. However, the experiment was a total failure and not much later, the equipment was removed from theaters. Interestingly, expensive failures like this still didn't stop filmmakers from trying to achieve the interactive movie and today, new technology has made the idea seem more accessible than ever.

The idea of the interactive movie gradually entered the medium that suited it best: video games. During the 1980s, arcade games such as *Dragon's Lair* started to focus on

storytelling at the expense of gameplay. In *Dragon's Lair*, gameplay consisted of watching an animated video and then pressing the correct button at the correct time to avoid seeing a losing a life scene. Meanwhile, video games such as *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Until Dawn* (2015) and *The Walking Dead* (2012) and many more have successfully blurred the lines between film and game.

Current trends in the gaming industry reveal a desire to hand over narrative control to the players. Thorne (2018:2) states: "While technical limitations do not yet allow players to fully author their own experiences, features like complex decision systems [and] branching narratives (…) allow players to shape the story and its conclusion." The genre that first capitalized on this possibility was the **adventure game**. An adventure game is a type of video game in which the player takes on the role of a character in an interactive story. The first ever adventure game was called *Colossal Cave Adventure*, often referred to as *Adventure*, which was released in 1976. The genre's popularity peaked in the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, but due to the popularity of first-person shooters in the early 2000s it became a niche genre. Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is often considered to be a key title that rejuvenated the genre and made it mainstream again. Essential features of the adventure game include storytelling, exploring the environment and puzzle solving. Puzzles are often embedded in a narrative framework, where players unlock the story piece by piece. Fight or action sequences are rather rare. More than any other genre, adventure games depend upon their story and setting to create a compelling single-player experience. Adventure games feature strong and significant dialogue. Players are able to talk to a non-playable characters by choosing a particular line of pre-written dialogue from the menu. Talking to non-playable characters may reveal clues on how to solve a particular puzzle, or they might reveal more of the story.

2 Corpus

In this thesis I will analyze two instances of interactive storytelling, namely the adventure game *The Walking Dead* and the interactive movie *Bandersnatch*. In what follows, I will give a brief summary of the plot and some background information about the works I will be analyzing.

2.1 Telltale's *The Walking Dead*

Unless otherwise indicated, for this analysis I will focus on the five episodes of the first season of Telltale's *The Walking Dead*. I do so because this season tells a self-contained story that can be analyzed separately.

2.1.1 Background

The Walking Dead: Season One is a video game published in 2012 by Telltale Games. Telltale, founded in 2004, is well known for its video game adaptations of popular media franchises. They have adapted from various media, such as comic books (*The Walking Dead*, *The Wolf Among Us*), television series (*Game of Thrones)* and other video games, such as *Borderlands* and *Minecraft*.

The Walking Dead is an adventure game based on Robert Kirkman's comic book series of the same name, of which the first issue appeared in 2003. Like Telltale's other video games, the game has an episodic release schedule. The first episode of *Season One* appeared in April 2012, the last one in November that same year. The game was a critical and commercial success, winning numerous Game of the Year awards and selling more than 8 million copies by the end of 2012. Reviewers typically praised the highly emotional content of the story and its memorable characters. Three more

seasons and a few spin-off games followed. The game is often credited to have revitalized the adventure game genre (Stang, 2016: 21).

2.1.2 Plot

With over ten hours of gameplay and many branching storylines, giving a concise summary of the story of *The Walking Dead* is not an easy task. In what follows, I will give an overview of the major events that occur regardless of player choice.

The Walking Dead: Season One tells the story of Lee Everett, a history professor turned criminal after being convicted for the murder of his wife's lover. Just as he is being transported to prison by a police officer, a zombie apocalypse breaks out. Trying to avoid crashing into one of the zombies, the police car swerves off-road and crashes. When Lee regains consciousness after the accident, he awakes to a changed world.

While looking for help, Lee stumbles upon a seemingly abandoned house. He discovers through the voice messages left on the answering machine that the house owners had left for a trip to Savannah, leaving behind their eight-year-old daughter Clementine with a zombified babysitter. Luckily, Clementine was able to survive by hiding out in her treehouse and Lee promises to take care of her and to help her look for her parents.

Along their way, Lee and Clementine run into multiple other survivors and seek shelter in various places. One of these places is Hershel Greene's farm, where they meet another family, Kenny, Katjaa and their son Duck. They all help fortify the fence around Hershel's farm in exchange for food and a safe place to sleep. Unfortunately, things go wrong, and Hershel's son, Shawn, is killed in a tragic accident. A furious Hershel kicks all of them off the farm.

Kenny is planning to travel back home, and he offers Lee and Clementine a ride along to Macon, which is Lee's hometown. Upon arrival at Macon, they find shelter in a drugstore where they meet yet another group of survivors: Carley, Glenn, Doug, Lily and her ill-tempered father Larry. A heated argument arises between the survivors because Larry suspects that Duck, Kenny's son, is bitten and he wants to get rid of him. The argument gets interrupted when Larry collapses due to his heart problems. The group has to work together in order to find medication for him. At the drugstore, Lee discovers the fate of his own family. All of them are dead, and he has to kill his zombified brother.

Eventually, the drugstore gets overrun with the dead, and the group has to find a new place to stay. They hole up in a motel, but after three months, their food supply is decreasing dramatically. They come across the St. Johns, two brothers who own a nearby dairy, and make a deal to exchange gas for food and shelter. The dairy of the St. Johns seems like a safe place, but Lee soon discovers that the meat that the St. Johns are feeding them is human meat. After a confrontation between Lee's group and the St. Johns, the farm also gets overrun by zombies. They hurry back to the motel. On the road, they come across a seemingly abandoned car and decide to steal the supplies in it.

No place appears to be safe, because soon enough the motel is attacked by bandits and the group has to flee again. They stumble upon a stranded train and after getting it to work again, they decide to head to Savannah. Along the way, Duck appears to have been bitten during the commotion at the motel. Duck dies and a grief-stricken Katjaa commits suicide. On the train, Lee teaches Clementine how to shoot a gun and cuts her hair, so zombies cannot grab onto it. On the road to Savannah, two other survivors join the group, namely Christa and Omid.

Upon arrival in Savannah, the group decides to look for a boat, assuming the water will be safe from the zombies. The city turns out to be overrun with zombies, and the group has to seek shelter in a house. Kenny and Lee go out to look for a boat, but much to their despair, they discover that all the boats are already gone, and that whatever supplies that were left in the city have been taken by a fortified community called Crawford, a place where they don't accept children, older people or sick people. Suddenly, they are surrounded by zombies and Lee gets separated from the group. He ends up in the sewers and while looking for a way out, he stumbles upon yet another group of survivors. This group consists of mostly older people, all of them cancer survivors, who were not allowed within the walls of Crawford. One of them, a doctor named Vernon, offers to help Lee find his way in the sewers. When Lee and Vernon get back to the house, they find out that Clementine has discovered a boat in the garden shed. They still have to find fuel and a battery for it, but at least now they have a chance at escaping. The group decides to sneak into Crawford to get these supplies. Much to their surprise, they discover that Crawford is also overrun by zombies and that all the people that belonged to the community are dead. They find a battery, fuel and some medical supplies and leave. At the house, Vernon makes Lee an offer to have Clementine stay with him, because he believes he would be a more suitable guardian for her.

When Lee wakes up the next day, Clementine is gone without a trace. He hurries outside to find her. In his distressed state, Lee is surprised by a zombie and he gets bitten. Lee suspects that Vernon was the one who kidnapped Clementine and he goes back to the sewers to confront him, but Vernon's people stole Lee's boat and have already fled the city. Suddenly, Clementine's walkie-talkie goes off and she reveals that she is at the hotel where her parents were staying. On the way to the hotel, the group has thinned out dramatically. Kenny and Ben are gone, supposedly dead, and Omid and Christa get separated from Lee. Lee eventually arrives at the hotel and finds out the man who took Clementine is not Vernon, but the owner of the car from which

Lee's group stole supplies. Apparently, this act resulted in the death of the stranger's family. He met Clementine through her walkie-talkie and she told him everything that happened to their group. After the stranger is killed, Lee and Clementine cover themselves in zombie guts to pass through the horde outside undetected. While walking through the horde Lee faints, weakened by his infection, and Clementine has to drag him into a nearby shelter. Depending on the player's choice, Lee either instructs Clementine to shoot him or to leave him behind.

2.1.3 Gameplay

In true adventure game fashion, there is a heavy emphasis on story, interpersonal relationships, mediating conflicts, solving puzzles and making difficult decisions. Players can interact with their surroundings by picking up items or talking to non-playable characters. Occasionally, a quick time action sequence[1] occurs where players have to perform a particular action, such as fighting off a zombie, but for the most part, the game seems to be focused on the characters and the story rather than on the action tropes more typically seen in zombie-based games.

In *The Walking Dead*, player choice is the basis for most of the gameplay. The choice-driven narrative and branching paths became the ultimate selling point of the game. This becomes clear by taking a look at the Steam page for the game, where they mention as one of the game's key features: "A tailored game experience – Live with the profound and lasting consequences of the decisions that you make in each episode. Your actions and choices will affect how your story plays out across the entire series."

[1] A quick time event is a method of gameplay in which players are instructed to perform a particular action by on-screen prompts. Most prompts require the player to push a particular button with precise timing or repeatedly pressing it. If the prompt is performed wrong or not all, it typically results in a game over. The general use of QTEs has been criticized by players.

When players first launch the game, it even appears on their screen: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play."

What is the nature of the choices players can make? There are two types of circumstances in which players can choose how the narrative proceeds: conversation sequences and action sequences. In conversation sequences, players can choose what to say by means of conversation trees. For instance, players can choose to lie or to tell the truth, to side with one character or another, to be rude or to be understanding. If players choose none of the available options, Lee will remain quiet. When the "choice notification" option is enabled, the game's interface will often tell players how their choice affected other characters (e.g. "Carley will remember you trusted her", "Hershel believes you", "Christa didn't appreciate you prying into her business").

There are also more action-oriented sequences in which players have to make a split-second decision. These sequences often include moral dilemmas with unpredictable consequences. Each episode contains five major moments in which players must make an important decision, choosing from two available options. The options that are given are almost never explicitly good or bad but rather ethically ambiguous. This provides an interesting dynamic for players. As Stang (19) states: "Rather than the game superimposing an evaluative system, players make their decisions based on the limited information available to them; the opinions of other characters, who are written to be flawed or even untrustworthy; and their gut reactions to each situation."

There is no scoring system in *The Walking Dead*, the game can be completed regardless of the choices made by players. But what is interesting is that through Telltale's servers, the game tracks how many players selected a particular option and confronts players with these statistics at the end of each episode. While this does not exactly qualify as a scoring system, players might feel disappointment or might feel as if they

made the wrong choice when they see that the majority of players chose the other option. By contrast, players might also feel pride at having made a "minority" choice.

2.2 *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*

2.2.1 Background

In December 2018, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, directed by David Slade and written by Charlie Brooker, was released worldwide on the streaming platform Netflix. However, *Bandersnatch* is not a typical Netflix experience. In this interactive movie, viewers are able to affect the storyline by making decisions for the main character. These choices might result in completely different endings. This is not the first interactive movie that Netflix has made. The company has experimented with this type of project before. The experiment started in 2017, when Netflix released *Puss in Book*, an animated series within the *Shrek*-franchise wherein the viewer is able to decide how the narrative should proceed. Not long after, in November 2018, they released the interactive series *Minecraft: Story Mode*, which was originally made by Telltale Games. While *Bandersnatch* might not have been the first interactive movie on Netflix, it was Netflix' first interactive movie targeted at an adult audience. *Bandersnatch* was not the first of its kind, and it certainly will not be the last. In April this year, Netflix released another interactive series, called *You vs. Wild*, featuring survivalist Bear Grylls.

Reviews for *Bandersnatch* have been mixed. Many people found it a fun and entertaining experience, with some even praising it as the future of entertainment. However, some believe the movie to be a failure. Most of the negative reviews focus on the movie's illusion of choice, the forced course correction, and the at times incoherent story.

2.2.2 Plot

Because of the sheer multitude of different storylines and branching pathways (according to the creators, there are over one trillion possible paths for the viewer to take), giving a linear synopsis of the plot is simply not feasible. In what follows, I will try to give a concise overview of the main story elements.

Bandersnatch takes place in England in the year 1984. We meet Stefan Butler (played by Fionn Whitehead) just as he wakes up. Stefan is a young programmer who dreams of creating a revolutionary video game consisting of branching pathways. He is inspired to try this because of a Choose Your Own Adventure book written by Jerome F. Davies (played by Jeff Minter), also called *Bandersnatch*. Davies apparently went mad while creating this book. He became obsessed with the possibility of branching pathways and multiple realities. He felt like his life was being controlled by an outside force and this eventually drove him to kill his wife.

Stefan visits the video game company Tuckersoft to share his ideas, hoping for help with the production of the game. At Tuckersoft he meets company leader Mohan Thakur (played by Asim Chaudry) and the famous game developer Colin Ritman (played by Will Poulter). Stefan can either choose to accept help from the company in creating the game, or to reject it and develop the game on his own. Either way, Tuckersoft will produce and sell the game. The deadline to finish the game is tight, because Tuckersoft wants to publish it just in time for the Christmas sales.

While working on his game, Stefan is growing increasingly frustrated as he fails to fix reoccurring bugs. His anxiety flares up and he becomes more and more hostile towards his dad Peter (played by Craig Parkinson). A few times in the movie, Stefan has to visit his therapist Dr. Haynes (played by Alice Lowe). Through a therapy session, viewers may learn that Stefan's mother died in a train accident when he was

only five years old. The night before her fatal accident, Stefan's mother and father had a fight over a stuffed rabbit toy that Stefan got from his mother. His father believed that Stefan was too old to carry such toys around, so he stole the rabbit and hid it from Stefan. The next morning, Stefan and his mother were supposed to go visit the grandparents, but when Stefan couldn't find his rabbit, he refused to leave. Because of this, his mother had to take a later train. Unfortunately, this train derailed and she was killed in the accident. Stefan feels responsible for her death, and he resents his father over it. Earlier in the film, it was mentioned that the *Bandersnatch* book was previously owned by Stefan's mother, so it is possible that Stefan sees his adaptation of *Bandersnatch* as a way to commemorate her.

At one point, viewers have the option to follow Colin to his flat, where he lives with his girlfriend Kitty and their baby daughter Pearl. Stefan and Colin take LSD and share a conversation about mind-control, alternate timelines and branching paths. At the end of this scene, Colin wants to prove his theory on alternate realities and viewers can decide which one of them has to jump off the balcony. If Stefan jumps, the movie ends with his death. If Colin jumps, Stefan wakes up, leading viewers to believe the scene with Colin was just a dream. However, the following days Colin is strangely absent from work.

At one point, Stefan discovers a locked safe belonging to his dad. Depending on the choices viewers have made so far, the safe either contains Stefan's old toy rabbit, or documents which reveal that all this time he was being monitored as part of a psychological experiment on the effects of trauma induction.

Stefan breaks down mentally and begins to feel as if outside forces are controlling him, which is similar to what was happening to Davies. Viewers have a few options to explain to Stefan who has been controlling him, one of them being that someone from

the 21st century is making decisions for him through Netflix. Either way, Stefan quickly descends into insanity and paranoia.

This leads to multiple potential endings. In one of the endings, something straight out of an action movie happens, namely Stefan engages in an epic fight with his therapist and his dad. In another ending, it is revealed that Stefan is actually an actor called Mike who got a little bit too carried away with playing Stefan. In yet another ending, Stefan travels back in time to his five-year-old self and goes along with his mother on the train that will kill both of them. This causes adult Stefan to suddenly drop dead in the present timeline during his therapy session. Viewers can also choose to have Stefan kill his father and in some cases, they can choose to kill Colin or Thakur as well. Stefan either goes to jail before ever releasing his game, or he successfully releases the game (and receives a five-star rating for it), but is soon afterwards convicted for murder, which results in his game being pulled from the shelves. In another potential ending viewers are catapulted to the present day, where they meet a grown-up Pearl (Colin's daughter), who is now working as a programmer for Netflix, and is attempting to adapt the game into an interactive film. Yet again, viewers are given the opportunity to make Pearl's decisions for her, and she starts experiencing the same things as both Davies and Stefan. The cycle continues.

2.2.3 Gameplay

For the most part, *Bandersnatch* plays out like any regular movie. However, at crucial points in the story, the typical movie experience is interrupted as a black letterbox enters the screen to introduce the "choice interface". Most of the time, viewers are able to choose one out of two options. They have about ten seconds to make their choice. While the time is running, the lighting changes, the aspect ratio gets narrower and there is an ominous, crescendo sound in the background. All of this is designed to create tension and to pressure viewers into making a quick choice. If viewers do not

respond within the allowed time, the movie will select a predetermined default choice. If one were to watch the movie without selecting any choices, the most basic version of the story will be presented.

Once viewers get to one of the possible endings, they can choose to either let the credits roll, or to go back and explore other options. Eventually viewers will arrive at the end credits, which means that they have seen almost anything there is to see. The option to go back and pick a different option is only possible when viewers have reached an ending point. Viewers cannot go back and alter a choice immediately after they have made it, or they have to restart the movie from the beginning.

3 Analysis

In what follows I will analyze both instances of interactive storytelling and investigate the nature of player involvement. By discussing this, I hope to find out whether the interactive format adds something to the experience of the story or if it is merely a gimmick.

I decided to base my analysis around Gordon Calleja's player involvement model, which he established in his work *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (2011). In this work he considers one of the most regularly discussed concepts in game studies: **immersion**. According to Janet Murray (1997/2016: 99), immersion refers to "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place". However, Calleja considers the term to be too imprecise as it has suffered from varied application. Instead, he proposes the term "**incorporation**" as a more appropriate metaphor. According to Calleja, incorporation emerges from the combination of several forms of involvement. He organizes these various different forms of involvement by means of the **Player Involvement Model**. This model consists of six dimensions of involvement, each considered relative to two constituent temporal phases: the macro phase, representing offline involvement, and the micro phase, representing moment-to-moment involvement during gameplay. The six dimensions of the player involvement model are: *kinesthetic involvement*, *spatial involvement*, *shared involvement*, *narrative involvement*, *affective involvement*, and *ludic involvement.* Calleja explains that these dimensions are experienced not in isolation but in relation to each other.

I will limit my analysis to a selection of Calleja's six dimensions of player involvement. I chose the dimensions which I believe to be the most relevant to my case studies. The dimensions I will analyze in this thesis are: macro-involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and to a lesser extent kinesthetic involvement.

While I mostly focus on Calleja's model, I will also refer to other scholars who have described similar concepts in different terms to support my arguments.

3.1 Macro-involvement / Transmediality

As I previously pointed out, Calleja looks at the dimensions of player involvement through two temporal phases, namely micro- and macro-involvement. **Macro-involvement** encompasses all forms of involvement with the game when one is not actually playing. This includes initial attraction to the game, reasons for returning to it, participation in the community it fosters, and other offline thinking (Calleja, 2011: 4). According to Calleja, these thoughts and expectations both prior to and following the game experience can shape the player's opinion and disposition toward the game (2001: 39).

In 1980, Julia Kristeva introduced the term **intertextuality** in her work *Desire in Language*. In this work she claims that each text is a permutation of other texts, which implies that the meaning of a text is in continual production (in Ecenbarger, 2016: 36). **Transmedia storytelling** is a contemporary subset of intertextual theory. It refers to the telling of a story across multiple platforms. Jenkins defined transmedia storytelling as follows: "A process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" (in Beil & Schmidt 79).

I would like to propose that intertextuality and transmediality are forms of macro-involvement. They might attract players to the game, and they might influence the player while interacting with the game as well. Both of my case studies exist within a larger franchise and provide clear intertextual links to this franchise.

3.1.1 The Walking Dead

I mentioned earlier that Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is based on the comic book series by Robert Kirkman. However, this is not the only transmedial connection. Telltale's *The Walking Dead* is part of a huge media franchise, which presently consists of comic books, novels, video games, board games and two existing TV series. A third tv-show and a movie trilogy were recently announced and are currently in development. I believe that it is safe to assume that many if not most of the players of *The Walking Dead* will also have read the comics or have seen the tv show. I will argue that this transmedial aspect of the game influences how players interpret the story and how they make their choices.

There are several ways in which the game evokes transmedial connections. Firstly, the game is aesthetically reminiscent of the comic books. For instance, the logo and the font of the in-game text are very similar to the font that is used in the comics. More importantly, the visual style of the game is reminiscent of its comic book origin as well. This style is referred to as cel shading, which Ecenbarger (2016: 37) describes as "a type of non-photorealistic image rendering where artists use specific tools to make 3D models look more like hand-drawn images". Secondly, transmedial connections are being evoked through story as well. While the main characters of the Telltale game are original to the game and do not appear anywhere in the comics, there are some interesting parallels between the main characters of both media. For instance, Rick is a police officer and Lee is a convict being transported to jail by a policeman. Rick is in a coma when the apocalypse breaks out, Lee is rendered unconscious after a car crash. Both of them wake up to a changed world. Rick's wife Lori has an affair with his good friend Shane. Lee was convicted for the murder on his wife's lover. In the comics, Carl is often seen wearing his father's sheriff's hat. In the game, Clementine wears a baseball cap given to her by her father. Rick and Lee both frequently use a hatchet as a weapon. These references are just details, perhaps easily missed by many players.

However, there are some more explicit references as well, such as cross-over characters that appear in the comic book series, the TV series and the Telltale game. These characters are Glenn Rhee, Hershel Greene and his son Shawn Greene. The reappearance of these characters might be very exciting for players. Some might know Glenn from when he meets Rick's group in the comic book and TV series, but they don't know anything about his story before that. The same thing is true for the character of Shawn Greene. When Rick's group arrives at Hershel Greene's farm, Shawn is already dead. It might be interesting for players to try and find out what kind of person he was and what happened to him before his death. I believe that this transmedial knowledge may influence players' experience of the story and the choices they make within that story.

For instance, in *Episode One*, when Lee's group arrives at Hershel Greene's farm, Hershel is a bit suspicious about Lee and asks him a series of questions. Players can choose between telling Hershel the truth about Lee's identity or lying. Perhaps, players are more likely to trust Hershel and to confide in him, because despite his grumpy demeanor, they know him from the comics as a gentle, kind-hearted man. Also, as I previously pointed out, in the comic book series Shawn is already dead when Rick's group arrives at the farm. In the game however, he is still very much alive. Lee and Clementine encounter him at the beginning of *Episode One*. He offers to take them to his father's farm, where it's safe. At the farm, while Shawn is fortifying the fence, an accident happens and players have to choose between saving Shawn or Kenny's son Duck. Players' pre-existing knowledge about Shawn might influence their choice in two different ways. On the one hand, players might choose to save Shawn because they want to find out what else might happen to him before his death. On the other hand, their knowledge that Shawn will die sooner or later anyway, might convince players to try and save Duck instead. Sarah Stang (2016: 20) argues that pre-existing knowledge about the story and characters is a negative thing, because it hinders their experience of agency. She states: "Players familiar with the source material know

which characters will survive and which will not, as well as much of what will happen within the story. While this does not necessarily make the player's experience less enjoyable, it does make his or her choices feel less meaningful, and therefore weakens the sense of agency he or she experiences."

There is another way in which the transmedial aspect of the game might influence players. Many of the situations offered in *The Walking Dead* are ethically ambiguous. However, if players are familiar with the comic book or TV series, they might be more acquainted with the kind of behavior that is acceptable and encouraged in a post-apocalyptic world. I believe that the source material forces a particular ethical ideology, and players' awareness of this ideology might influence how they make their choices. For instance, both the comic book and TV series foreground a "hero narrative". This is most evident by looking at the main character Rick Grimes. Rick is a father, a leader and a good friend. As a former police officer, he puts the safety of others above his own. The sheriff's uniform Rick wears is symbolic of his status in the group. Players who are familiar with the source material, might base their choices on trying to be like Rick. When looking at the statistics provided at the end of each episode of Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, we see that this hypothesis is confirmed. Most of the time, players chose to do the right thing. According to Sarah Thorne, the game itself also forces this "hero narrative" through its choice design. For instance, while players can choose for Lee to be rude, dishonest, selfish or violent, it is not possible to villainize him. To exemplify her statement, she refers to the encounter with the St. Johns cannibals. No matter how disgusting their actions are, the St. Johns provide pragmatic and utilitarian reasons for killing and eating people. They explain that they only kill people who would have died anyway, and that they should not be wasteful in times of famine. Thorne (2018: 76) notes: "In response, the player may choose from a number of dialogue options: the player can threaten the farmers or demand to be let go (…) Players are not, however, given the opportunity to agree with the utilitarian approach of the farmers. This example highlights the limitations that are placed on the player's

agency and the kinds of characters that can exist in this universe; as a result, the game forces a very specific kind of ethics."

However, Thorne (2018: 68) also reveals an irregularity in my hypothesis. She discovers an instance in which most players diverted from the morality pushed by the comic book and TV series. She explains how revenge is an important motif in the source material. Whenever another group threatens or endangers any of the people Rick cares about, he delivers revenge in full. For instance, both the comic book and TV series have a storyline where Rick's group is threatened by cannibals. In both cases, the cannibals eat one of the members of Rick's group. Afterwards, an infuriated Rick spurs the rest of the group into violent retaliation. They hunt down the cannibals and brutally execute them. In the Telltale game, Lee's group also runs into cannibals, namely the aforementioned St. John brothers. After discovering that the meat the St. Johns have been serving is human meat, players can choose to kill or spare both brothers. Statistics from this episode revealed that 82% of players chose *not* to kill both of the St. John brothers, which is in heavy contrast with the comic book and TV series. Any explanations as to why players decided to spare the St. John brothers can only be speculative, but maybe it was because Clementine was watching. Further in this thesis, I will elaborate on how Clementine functions as a moral compass and how she might influence players' choices.

3.1.2 Bandersnatch

The interactive movie *Bandersnatch* contains a lot of interesting intertextual references as well. For instance, the themes of being monitored and controlled, as well as the 1984 setting, are reminiscent of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The movie also includes several references to the works of Lewis Carroll, namely *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel T*hrough the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). For instance, the term "bandersnatch" refers to a fictional monster created by

Carroll, which he mentions in his poem *Jabberwocky*. The lion-like design of the demon Pax as he is featured in Stefan's game and pictured on the drug Colin offers to Stefan, is similar to an illustration of the bandersnatch made by Peter Newell (annex A). When Stefan travels through time by going through a mirror, he is literally going "through the looking glass". The figure of the white rabbit is evoked by Stefan's toy rabbit. Colin's wife Kitty's flamboyant appearance is somewhat similar to Johnny Depp's Mad Hatter as he was featured in the 2010 movie (annex B). These references are interesting because once again, they support some of the main themes of the movie, namely parallel dimensions and time as a construct.

The most important intertextual references however are those that allude to *Black Mirror*, the science fiction anthology series that *Bandersnatch* is a part of. In an article published in The Guardian, creator Charlie Brooker (2011) pitched the series as follows: "If technology is a drug (…) then what, precisely, are the side effects? (…) The 'black mirror' of the title is the one you'll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone." The series takes place in the near future or in an alternative present. At the center stands humanity's relationship with technology and how humans lose control over this relationship. *Black Mirror*'s vision of the future is often disturbing and happy endings are very uncommon. However, *Black Mirror* doesn't operate solely on technophobia. The series also provides chilling commentary upon our society and most importantly, on ourselves.

Bandersnatch's dark and depressing tone, its unhappy ending regardless of what choices viewers make and its overarching themes of being monitored and controlled, are consistent with other *Black Mirror* episodes. Viewers who are familiar with the source material might notice some more explicit references to past episodes of *Black Mirror* as well. For instance, the "branching path" glyph that consumes both Davies and Stefan first appeared in the episode *White Bear*. One of Colin Ritman's games is

called Metl Hedd, which is a reference to the episode *Metalhead*. The poster for Colin's game even depicts a robotic killer dog just like the ones that appear in that episode. Colin's latest game is called Nohzdyve, which refers to the episode *Nosedive*. There are many more Easter eggs such as these included in the film. These details might entertain a few attentive viewers, but they don't seem to add anything to the story. However, there are two references that receive more attention than others. I believe that these references might suggest how viewers could interpret the story of *Bandersnatch*.

Firstly, the "branching path" glyph is depicted multiple times throughout the film and is an important part of the story. *White Bear*, the episode the symbol originated from, is thematically comparable to *Bandersnatch*. In this episode the main character is forced to relive the same agonizing day over and over again while an audience willingly watches her suffer. The intertextual link to this episode adds an interesting interpretative layer to *Bandersnatch*. It frames viewers of the film as sadistic voyeurs who force Stefan to relive the same moments again and again, torturing him with each decision they make, all for their own personal entertainment. This interpretation is further encouraged when, at a certain point throughout the film, Stefan confronts viewers with the fact that they are controlling him, and even starts revolting against their control. I will elaborate on this further in this thesis.

Secondly, Colin Ritman's game Nohzdyve is also featured quite prominently in the film. For instance, there is a fairly long scene of Colin playing the game and there is even one specific ending in which viewers can discover a QR code that allows them to download and play the game themselves. In the *Black Mirror* episode that this game alludes to, namely *Nosedive*, the main character lives in a society where everyone rates each other on a scale from one to five. The main character desperately attempts to boost her rating but ends up unhappy and alone because of this. Only when she decides that she doesn't care about ratings anymore, she finds happiness and is able to truly

connect with someone. Viewers of *Bandersnatch* might believe that the ultimate goal in the film is to help Stefan release his game and receive a five-star rating for it. However, the ending in which Stefan's game gets a good rating is arguably the most horrific ending of all, as it includes him killing someone and ending up in jail. I believe that the reference to *Nosedive* might suggest that the happiest endings for Stefan can only be achieved once viewers stop caring about ratings. For instance, when viewers decide that Stefan should take his medication, his newfound sanity hinders his creativity. In this ending, his game gets a mediocre rating, but at least everyone is still alive and Stefan is sane. There is a another ending in which viewers can choose to wreck Stefan's computer, which leads to his game never even being released. This path ends with Stefan being hugged and comforted by his dad.

3.2 Narrative involvement / Agency

In this section, I will analyze how the interactive format influences the story of *The Walking Dead* and *Bandersnatch*. I will examine the extent to which players have control over the narrative. Gordon Calleja (2011: 44) refers to this kind of player involvement as **"narrative involvement"**. By this he means the player's attentive engagement with the story elements, both those that have been written into a game, and those that emerge from players' interaction with the game. I would like to refer back to Janet Murray's (1997/2016: 123) notion of **agency**, which she describes as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices", and in the context of this analysis, rename it "**narrative agency**".

Sarah Thorne poses an important question concerning the nature of the choices offered to players (2018: 37): "It remains unclear exactly what it means to have agency by making choices. (…) Must the choices offered be meaningful, and, if so, how does one determine what qualifies as meaningful?" Sarah Stang (2016: 20) offers a partial answer to Thorne's question. She believes that simply offering the player a choice is not enough to make the player experience agency or control. The choice offered must be **meaningful**: "Although branching narrative trees are a popular design technique for games, they are not enough to satisfy the player if they do not feel that the choices offered are meaningful. (…) if the choices offered seem significant within the game world (…) the player can maintain a feeling of control and agency." Thorne's question of *what* makes a choice meaningful is answered by Brice Morrison (2013). In his analysis of what constitutes as a "meaningful choice", Morrison mentions four necessary components: Awareness, Consequences, Reminders and Permanence. In what follows, I will focus on the "**Consequences**" component. According to Morrison, a choice is meaningful when it has gameplay consequences. Amanda Lange (2013) confirms this: "Gamers seemed to feel happiest when their choices affected the story

and upset if they perceived their choices did not." In *Rules of Play* (2003: 63), Kalen and Zimmerman created their "anatomy of a choice", where they identified results and effects as necessary building blocks for choice design.

In the following analysis, I will look at the narrative consequences of the choices in both *The Walking Dead* and *Bandersnatch*. Do the choices alter the plot and if so, how?

3.2.1 The Walking Dead

Thorne (2018: 60) mentions that the choices offered to the player in *The Walking Dead* matter, but not always in the way that players expect: "Rather than creating diverging storylines as players expect, decisions shape the personality of their character, Lee Everett, and his relationships with other characters." I will explore and exemplify this statement in the sections below.

3.2.1.1 Plot-based agency

As I already mentioned before, *The Walking Dead* constantly reminds players that the story adapts depending on their choices. It is mentioned at the beginning of the game ("*This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play*"), it is cited as a key feature on the store page of the game on Steam ("*Live with the profound and lasting consequences of the decisions that you make in each episode*") and even while already playing, the game consistently reminds players that their choices might have consequences ("*[Name of character] will remember that*"). Unfortunately, many players feel like this promise regarding narrative agency was not adequately fulfilled (Monchan, 2017: 4).

I previously said that each episode in *The Walking Dead* contains five major decisions. Let's take a closer look at a few of the choices offered to players in *Episode One*.

One of the first major decision-making moments happens at the farm, while Hershel's son Shawn is working on the fence and Kenny's son Duck is playing around on the tractor. Things inevitably go wrong, and players have to choose between saving either Shawn or Duck out of the zombies' grasp. No matter what option players choose, the end result will be the same: Shawn will die and a furious Hershel will kick Lee and the other survivors off the farm. At another point in the game, Lee comes across a distressed woman called Irene. He finds out that she has been bitten. Irene asks for Lee's gun, so she can kill herself before she turns into a zombie. Players can choose to give Irene the gun or not. If they choose to not give her the gun, she grabs it from Lee forcefully and shoots herself nonetheless. At the end of *Episode One*, players have to make yet another major decision. They must choose between saving either Carley or Doug. This choice affects the gameplay in a small way: whichever character players saved will appear in scenes all throughout *Episode Two*. However, whether players picked Carley or Doug doesn't alter the story that much. Carley and Doug occupy the same places in the scenes, do roughly the same things and even have similar dialogues and animations (Monchan, 2017: 8). James Monchan seems to be justified when he poses the question: "The game certainly adapts, but to what extent?" His point is further proven, when at the end of *Episode Three*, an irrational Lily shoots whichever character players chose to save.

The narrative architecture of *The Walking Dead* could be described by what Dechering and Bakkes (2018: 5) call a **branch and bottleneck structure**. This structure allows players to follow different narrative branches, but ultimately, the branches converge at certain points to maintain a general storyline. Gerald Farca (2014: 446) echoes their statement, describing the narrative architecture as one of **recombining pathways**: "Instead of the narrative bifurcating into entirely different directions, Telltale chose to employ the method of recombining pathways. As the name suggests, recombining pathways do not branch the narrative into an indiscriminate amount of plotlines, but

cleverly reunite paths at certain key points of the narrative." Smethurst and Craps (2015: 20) also confirm this, but mention yet another term for it, namely **bending stories**: "Even seemingly important decisions (…) only bend the story rather than redirect it (…) The game will then proceed on its predetermined path." In the annexes, I included a visual representation of the narrative architecture of *The Walking Dead* that clearly illustrates these statements (C).

While I only gave a few out of many possible examples, the examples indicate why players of *The Walking Dead* might feel cheated and might get the sense that the choices they made are ultimately pointless. The conclusion seems to be that the choices offered in *The Walking Dead* do not have long-lasting consequences and hence are not very meaningful. Peter Mawhorter et al. (in Smethurst and Craps, 2015: 22) refer to these kinds of choices as **false choices**: "A false choice is a choice where all of the different options lead to the same outcome. This can literally be a single outcome for all options, or it can be minor variations on an outcome where the variations are disproportionately small in relation to the expected variation engendered by the options. False choices can be used to create the illusion of a richly branching story without spending the resources necessary to do so."

However, while agreeing that the choices offered in *The Walking Dead* are not meaningful in terms of altering the story, some authors have argued that this doesn't matter as long as players are under the impression that their choices were significant. This is certainly the case for players who only play through the game once. They can only imagine what the consequences would have been had they made a different choice. Smethurst and Craps argue that this baits players into thinking up "**what-if" scenarios** (2015: 21): "The player might well wonder what role Shawn would have gone on to play in the story had they chosen to save him instead, not realizing that the game would never have allowed this to happen anyway." Smethurst and Craps go as far as to say that the narrative roads not taken but perceived as possibilities by players

are just as important to the story as the events that actually happen on screen (2015: 23). Dechering and Bakkes (2018: 4) seem to agree with this. They claim that agency particularly depends on the player's **perception** of having different options. This statement is also confirmed by Stang (2016: 23): "Player choice is necessarily limited. While this is true, many players do feel that they are in control, and that they have agency in the game. This perception is important because, (…) players make games meaningful, make their meanings, as they play them, talk about them, reconfigure them, and play them again." Jan Simons (2007: 2) even refers to it as a **trick** of game design: "The trick of the trade of game design is indeed to make the player *believe* she is in control."

According to these sources, agency is less about the possibility of narrative control, and more about the player's perception of their ability to manipulate the story. This allows game developers to provide their players with an interesting experience, without having to spend an enormous amount of time and money to build a complicated narrative structure around player-choice. In this sense, I agree with Simons that the perception of agency might prove a helpful trick, but it is one that is immediately exposed when players decide to play through the game a second time to explore the other options, which leaves them feeling frustrated and cheated.

3.2.1.2 Character-based agency

As I established in the analysis above, narrative agency is mostly an illusion in *The Walking Dead*. But while it is true that the choices players make don't alter the course of the story, it does alter the characters involved in the story and their disposition towards the main character Lee. James Monchan (2017: 4) states: "The series does not lack agency, but that agency applies only to character-related elements in order to foster the player's image of the playable character's identity." He says that "by controlling Lee during *Season One* and Clementine during *Season Two*, the player

decides who they really are." Many times throughout the game, the conversation trees will give players the opportunity to either lie or tell the truth about something, to react in an aggressive or rational manner, to step up as a leader or to remain a team player. For instance, players can choose to lie about Lee's criminal past or not. When Lee has to convince Kenny to stop the train in *Episode Three*, players can choose to talk him down calmly or to overpower him using violence. By making these choices for Lee, players don't alter the story, but they are able to define what kind of person Lee is.

However, the choices players make do not only influence Lee's personality, they also influence his relationship with other characters. There are multiple opportunities in which players can choose to side with one out of two characters. In *Episode Two* for example, the group is trapped in a meat locker at the St. John's dairy. Larry suffers a heart attack and drops to the ground, supposedly dead. His daughter, Lily, believes he might still be alive and wants to wait it out to see if he wakes up. Kenny on the other hand is certain that Larry is dead and is afraid that he will turn into a zombie. Lee has to pick a side. Again, this choice doesn't alter the story. If players choose to side with Kenny, Kenny will finish off Larry while Lee holds Lily back. If players choose to side with Lily, Kenny will finish off Larry alone. Either way, Larry ends up with a crushed head. What this choice does alter is Lily and Kenny's disposition towards Lee. If players choose Kenny's side, Lily will despise Lee for it, and when later in the episode Lee calls for Lily's help, she will look the other way. This doesn't mean that Lee dies or gets seriously injured though, he just ends up saving himself. Almost the same thing happens when players choose to side with Lily. When Lee is attacked by a zombie in a convenience store at the beginning of *Episode 3*, Kenny will not help him and Lee has to save himself.

Kenny is one of the central characters with whom Lee is able to build a strong bond, but this is only possible if players make the right choices for Lee. These choices will determine whether Kenny addresses Lee in a friendly or rude manner. At the end of

Episode One for example, Larry punches Lee to the ground, attempting to leave him behind for the zombies. Kenny steps in to save Lee, even if players decided not to side with Kenny during his argument with Larry earlier, but he will either call Lee "a good friend" or "an asshole" while doing so. There are many more moments in which players can make a choice to get on Kenny's good side, such as choosing to save his son Duck instead of Shawn back at the farm, choosing to give food to Duck when Lee has to ration the food supplies, choosing to help Kenny finish off a supposedly dead Larry, choosing to have Lee shoot a bitten Duck instead of letting Kenny do it himself and finally, choosing to let Ben fall to his death (since Ben was the indirect cause of Duck's bite).

At the end of *Episode Four*, Lee has been bitten and Clementine is kidnapped. Players can choose to have Lee go search for her on his own, or to ask the others for help. Omid and Christa, Ben (if players didn't let him fall to his death) and Kenny all can choose to go with Lee, but it is just as much a possibility that some of them or none of them choose to go along. This climactic moment is the culmination of the players' choices and reveals the extent to which Lee's actions affected each character. Whether players were able to build a strong relationship with Kenny throughout the game is crucial during this moment, because it will determine whether he goes with Lee or not. There are many possible outcomes for this scene, of which I will only give a few. One of the outcomes is that Kenny joins Lee in his search for Clementine. The dialogue following this outcome varies depending on the choices players have made. For instance, Kenny may say things like "*Bitten or not, I'm with you to the end. You can count on me*" or "*No way I'm letting you do this alone*". If players were able to form a very strong bond with Kenny, he will give a heartfelt speech: "*You've always been there for me Lee, always had my back when it mattered. What kind of friend would I be if I wasn't there for you now? You and Clementine are the only family I got left, I'm with you to the end*". However, if players weren't able to get on Kenny's good side, the character will not join Lee in his search for Clementine. The dialogue for this outcome varies as well. Kenny may turn Lee

down in a rather gentle manner ("*All I remember is you picking Lily's side over mine. Time and time again. You were never there for me when I needed you. You can't expect me to be there for you now. I'm sorry, but that's just how it is*") or he may shout at Lee and scold him ("*Family? You're gonna talk to me about family? You're lucky I don't knock you on your fucking ass right now, you selfish son of a bitch. You can do whatever the fuck you want, but you'll be doing it on your own*").

Arguably the most important character that is influenced by Lee's personality, is the young and impressionable girl he takes under his wing, **Clementine**. By making choices, players can decide how to present the world to Clementine, and ultimately, what kind of person she will grow up to be. There are many moments throughout the game where players can choose to be honest with Clementine and involve her in everything that is happening, or to keep her in the dark and keep her sheltered from the harsh reality. Farca (2014: 448) agrees with this statement: "As a role model for Clem, it is the player's responsibility to choose how to present the world to the little girl: either from a completely negative perspective (…) or he may choose to paint a somewhat brighter picture not entirely bereft of human compassion and mercy."

There is one choice that is particularly significant in this matter. In the last episode of the season, a bitten Lee is slowly running out of time. He and Clementine end up in a storage unit together. He explains to her that he has been bitten, and players have to choose between having Lee ask Clementine to shoot him or to leave him behind. The last choice players can make, is what final piece of advice Lee should give Clementine, right before she shoots him or leaves him behind. All of the options are great tips for survival. For one, Lee can tell her to stay out of the cities. This is a very important lesson that they have learned throughout this season. Cities are dangerous places because they contain a great number of people and this means that they now may contain a great number of zombies. Another option is to tell her to keep moving, which is a sound advice as well, given that all through the season it has been proven that no

place is safe, at least not for long. The drugstore in Macon, the motel, the dairy, Crawford, all these places ended up being overrun with zombies or inhabited by bad people. As a final option, players can choose to tell Clementine to keep her hair short. This is yet another great tip for survival, because zombies or bad people can easily grab hold of long hair and cost Clementine her life. However, there is another, more emotional dimension to this advice as well. It refers back to a particular scene in *Episode Three*. While the group is traveling by train to Savannah, there is what I would like to call a father-daughter bonding moment between Lee and Clementine. During this scene, Lee teaches Clementine how to shoot a gun to protect herself. He also cuts her hair, because she had previously been grabbed by it a few times. During this scene, the pair has one of their first deep conversations together. For the first time, they talk about the fact that Lee killed a man before the apocalypse. The cutting of Clementine's hair is also a very comforting, calming scene and a heavy contrast with all the horrible violence players had to witness in the scenes just before. Therefore, if players choose "keep your hair short" as a final advice to Clementine, though it certainly counts as a safety precaution, Lee isn't solely focusing on the dangers this new world brings, instead, he reminds Clementine of the moments of peace and happiness that can still exist within this world. It may even add a little bit of humor and lightheartedness to Lee's death. With this final choice, players decide who Clementine will become: someone who knows what she has to do to survive, but who doesn't lose her heart, her humanity in the process.

This emphasis on the defining nature of the players' choices on Clementine's personality is also apparent in Telltale's marketing. Thorne (2018: 62) refers to a particular trailer for *Season Two* which ends on the question "Who Will You Become?" and directs fans to the Twitter hashtag #MyClementine. Thorne says: "The advertisement makes clear that the player's choices will influence who Clementine will become as she grows up in the midst of the zombie apocalypse." This emphasis is reaffirmed at the end of *Season Three*, where players are presented with a screen titled

"Your Clementine Became" followed by the choices the player made that led her to become this type of person. There are many possible outcomes, for instance Clementine can become "a balanced thinker", "a dedicated friend" or "a hardened survivalist".

The ability to have agency over character, rather than to have agency over story, supports the overarching theme of the game. In a world gone to hell, you are not able to influence what happens, but you can decide what kind of person you will be. Will you prioritize survival above all else, or will you try to hold on to your humanity no matter what?

3.2.2 Bandersnatch

3.2.2.1 Narrative agency and its limits

In *Bandersnatch*, the matter of narrative agency is more complicated than in *The Walking Dead*. There are several kinds of choices viewers can make in this movie. Firstly, there are some **trivial choices** that do not influence the storyline in any way. For instance, at the beginning of the movie, viewers have to choose between two brands of cereal. Not much later, they have to decide which out of two songs Stefan has to listen to on the bus. At another point, viewers must choose whether Stefan should pull his earlobe or bite his fingernails. These choices don't have any kind of narrative consequences at all, except that the brand of cereal viewers chose will later return in an advertisement on TV. However, these kinds of choices can be ignored, as they simply serve to familiarize viewers with the interactive format. Secondly, there are some **impactful choices** that influence the storyline in such a way that they result in vastly different endings.

It is important to distinguish between two types of endings in *Bandersnatch*: hard endings and soft endings. When viewers reach a **soft ending**, the movie doesn't proceed to the credits being rolled, but instead offers viewers the opportunity to go back to the previous checkpoint to alter their choice. There are many choices which lead to the movie ending prematurely. In the simplest and perhaps most anti-climactic ending, Stefan accepts the job at Tuckersoft, which leads to his game getting a very poor rating. Another premature ending involves viewers forcing Stefan to continue taking his medication. His game ends up being released but is again reviewed terribly, because his sanity prevented him from making a creative game. In yet another early ending, viewers cause Stefan to jump off a balcony and kill himself. His game is released posthumously but is again unable to receive a good review. These endings are contrasted with the more definitive and complicated **hard endings**. Viewers will know that they have unlocked a hard ending when a "Exit to Credits" option appears in the top right corner of the screen. However, viewers can still choose to go back to previous choices and explore other narrative branches, without having to restart the movie from the beginning. According to Netflix, there are five main endings to the movie, all with multiple possible variations. For instance, there is an ending in which Stefan kills his dad and ends up in jail, there is an ending in which Stefan travels back in time and ends up dead himself and there is even a metafictional ending which reveals that Stefan was actually an actor called Mike. There are even some secret endings that are only achievable by following a very particular sequence of choices, for instance, picking the same option two times in a row.

This multiplicity of endings seems to suggest that viewers have a great deal of agency over the storyline of *Bandersnatch*. The movie appears to provide what Morrison (2013) calls "meaningful choices", as the choices have narrative consequences and lead to entirely different endings. This is very different to *The Walking Dead*, where all players witness the same main plot points and reach more or less the same ending. This difference in narrative architecture is strikingly evident in the visual representation I

included, which illustrates how *Bandersnatch* is much more nonlinear than *The Walking Dead* (annex D). This might lead us to believe that the movie is one of the most technically successful interactive stories thus far. However, this is not completely true. In what follows, I will give a few examples to illustrate the movie's **limitations in agency**.

There are several moments in which *Bandersnatch* forces viewers to follow a particular path, otherwise the story just ends right then and there. This is exemplified by the **soft endings** I described earlier. It seems that, while *Bandersnatch* does give viewers some type of narrative freedom, not all narrative branches are equally well developed. I would like to look at one of the soft endings more closely. This ending occurs right after viewers can make their first meaningful choice, namely whether Stefan should accept the job at Tuckersoft or not. Most viewers (73%)[2] chose to accept the job at Tuckersoft. It is not very surprising that the majority of viewers chose this option. While Thakur is making the job offer, Stefan's whole face lights up with a huge smile. This makes it seem as if Stefan really wants the job. For this reason, I believe it is highly unlikely that viewers will perceive the option to accept the job as a wrong choice. However, if you accept Tuckersoft's offer, Stefan's enthusiasm immediately fades as Thakur informs him that they will have to cut down on the story, because "they can't fit a breeze block of a book into 48k". The camera shows Colin with a disappointed look on his face. He gives Stefan a sympathetic pat on the back as he says "*Sorry mate, wrong path*". The story fasts forward and five months later Stefan's game is released. Unfortunately, the game gets an awful review, earning zero stars out of five. The reviewer says: "*This is one of the first team-created games from Tuckersoft and I think that's given it a very designed-by-committee feel. Almost like they rushed out the simplest, quickest cash-in they could*." Immediately, Stefan declares that he will try again. The movie loops back to the first scene of the film and plays out a montage of the same events: Stefan

[2] Statistics provided by Netflix on their Twitter account (@netflix)

waking up, eating breakfast, going to Tuckersoft and receiving the offer. If this time the viewer chooses to refuse the offer, the story will continue.

The illusion of agency is also illustrated by the **false choices** the movie offers. For instance, at one point in the movie, viewers can choose whether Stefan should flush his pills through the toilet or throw them away. This is a strange choice to offer, as both options lead to the same outcome: Stefan will not take his medication. The offering of this choice might be motivated had there been a storyline in which Stefan's dad finds the pills in the trash, which would lead to an argument, whereas if viewers flush them, Stefan's dad never finds out that his son hasn't been taking his medication. However, such a storyline never takes place. It doesn't matter whether viewers flush the pills or throw them away, so why does the movie provide this choice at all? This scene can be altered though, if – during an earlier scene – viewers chose to go visit Stefan's therapist instead of following Colin down the street. If viewers chose not to follow Colin, Stefan will never hear his drug-induced rant on how the government puts drugs in our food to control us. Afterwards, when the scene occurs where Stefan has to take his medication, viewers do get the option to take them instead of throwing them away. If viewers chose to follow Colin, they are presented with yet another false choice. Colin offers Stefan LSD and viewers have the choice to take it or to refuse it. Colin will even emphasize Stefan's (or the viewers') freedom in the matter ("*Do you want it? It's your choice. Totally up to you!").* However, if viewers refuse the drug, Colin will slip it in Stefan's drink and viewers will have to watch the ensuing hallucination scene anyway.

In addition to false choices, the movie offers a fair amount of **non-choices** as well. Whereas false choices are choices where different options lead to the same outcome, non-choices are choices where both options are essentially the same. An example of a non-choice happens when viewers reveal to Stefan that they are controlling him through Netflix. Stefan doesn't understand what Netflix is, and viewers can choose to "tell him more" or "try to explain". Both options are very similar to each other, which

might confuse or frustrate viewers. Another instance of a non-choice occurs when Stefan's tells his therapist that he is being monitored and controlled by someone on Netflix. The therapist replies that if his life was meant to entertain someone, it should be more interesting. She then asks: "*Wouldn't you want a little more action, if you were watching this now on tellie?"* Viewers can choose between two similar options, either "Yes" or "Fuck yeah". Again, this is not really a choice. However, in this case, stripping viewers of their agency might be experienced as fun and entertaining, instead of confusing or frustrating.

In addition to the limitations in agency, there is a second problem with *Bandersnatch's* interactive format. At times, the **narrative coherence** suffers because of it. For instance, when Stefan visits his therapist, she asks him whether or not he wants to talk about his mother. Many viewers will choose to talk about Stefan's mother, because they want to uncover more of the story. On the off chance that viewers do refuse to talk about Stefan's mother, the therapist will simply ask the same question again, stressing that "you might discover something new". If viewers refuse a second time, the therapist will let it go. Throughout the movie, viewers will be offered various opportunities to return to this crucial point. It seems that the movie really wants viewers to learn about Stefan's mother. This is because the death of Stefan's mother is the reason behind his anxiety disorder as well as the reason for the difficult relationship he has with his dad. It might even be the reason why Stefan is so hell-bent on finishing his game, as it is based on a Choose Your Own Adventure book that belonged to his mother. If viewers refuse to talk about her, they will miss an integral part of the story.

3.2.2.2 Formal support of themes

The forced course correction and false choices might make it seem as if *Bandersnatch* is a failed experiment in interactive storytelling after all. While it does provide narrative agency to viewers by offering several substantially different endings, often choices

lead to the same outcome or are not really choices at all, and when they are, the overarching story suffers because of it. However, this statement is yet again not completely true. The movie has a very interesting way of handling the limitations of interactive storytelling. It capitalizes on some of its major **reoccurring themes** to justify the limited agency provided to viewers.

One of the central themes is the existence of many **parallel timelines and realities**. Colin refers to this during his LSD-induced rant: "*People think there's one reality, but there's loads of them, all snaking off, like roots. And what we do on one path affects what happens on the other paths. (…) Time is a construct. People think you can't go back and change things, but you can (…) We're on one path. Right now, me and you. And how one path ends is immaterial. It's how our decisions along the path affect the whole that matters, do you believe me*?" I will demonstrate how *Bandersnatch* uses this overarching theme to justify some of the false choices it offers to viewers. To illustrate this, I would like to refer back to the scene where Stefan gets a job offer from Tuckersoft. As I previously established, accepting the offer leads to a dead end. The movie loops back and viewers must choose to refuse the job in order to proceed with the story. However, once viewers go back, the pathway has been altered. At first sight, it appears as if the movie is simply repeating the exact same scenes, but there are some dialogue changes. The first time the scene is presented to the viewers, it goes as follows:

> At Tuckersoft, while Colin is showing Stefan his latest game called Nohzdyve, the game crashes. When Thakur asks what just happened, Colin explains that it was a buffer error. After this, Stefan is allowed to present a demo of his game Bandersnatch. In his game, players must choose between worshipping the demon Pax or denying him. Colin chooses to worship him, but Stefan stops him ("*No, don't do that, he's the Thief of Destiny!*"). Stefan explains to Colin that his game is based on a book by Jerome F. Davies, to which Colin replies that he owns a copy of the book but that he never got around to reading it. Stefan

then tells him that he should, because Jerome F. Davies was a genius. In turn, Colin asks: "*Didn't he go bonkers and cut off his wife's head*?"

The second time this scene plays out, some details have been changed. When Stefan is first introduced to Colin, the latter wonders "Have we met before?" When Colin wants to show him the new game he has been working on, Stefan immediately knows that the game is called Nohzdyve before Colin tells him. Again, the game crashes, but this time it is Stefan who informs us that the reason for this is a buffer error. This time, when Stefan shares the demo of his game, Colin chooses not to worship the demon Pax, emphasizing that he is the thief of destiny. Stefan looks at him with a confused expression and asks Colin whether he has read Bandersnatch. Colin answers that Jerome F. Davies was a visionary. This time it is Thakur who asks "*Was he that bloke who went cuckoo and cut his wife's head off*?" These dialogue changes make it seem as if the characters are to a certain extent aware that this is not the first time they are experiencing this moment. They remember events from alternate realities, even if these events technically haven't happened in their own timeline. So even though viewers essentially made the "wrong" choice by accepting Tuckersoft's job offer and have to go through what seem to be the exact same scenes again to alter their choice, they are rewarded for this extra effort by altered dialogue, dialogue that supports one of the central themes of the movie. This is a narrative layer that viewers may miss out on if they had chosen to refuse Tuckersoft's offer on the first try. This might be the reason why the makers of *Bandersnatch* made Stefan look so happy when receiving the offer, because they wanted viewers to accept it. I previously pointed out that if viewers decide to not make any choices, the film makes choices for them. The fact that the film also selects the option to accept the job, even though it is essentially the "wrong path", further proves my claim. The makers of *Bandersnatch* wanted viewers to experience this added narrative layer.

There are several other examples where viewers are rewarded with altered dialogue for going back on a choice and repeating a particular scene. For instance, when viewers decide that Colin should jump off the balcony to prove his theory on alternate realities, Colin tells Stefan right before he jumps that he will see him around. Each time viewers decide to go back on a previous choice, they are presented with a quick montage of the previous events in Stefan's life, including the moment when he meets Colin for the first time at Tuckersoft. This time, Colin from the past will say to Stefan "*We've met before. I told you I'd see you around, and I was right!"* Another instance of this happens when Stefan visits his therapist instead of following Colin. During this scene, Stefan will explain to the therapist how he feels as if he is no longer in control. His therapist tells him that he is probably stressed out because the anniversary of his mother's death is coming up and she decides to increase his dosage of medication. When viewers loop back to this scene for a second time, the dialogue will be altered, and Stefan will even start finishing the therapist's sentences. He frustratingly exclaims: "*We've talked about this before. I'm sure we have! And you tell me I feel guilty about my mom and you up my dose. And yes, I am taking my medication, okay? So just write me the fucking prescription*." A final example of this occurs after Stefan has killed his dad. Viewers have to choose whether to bury Stefan's dad or chop him up. Suddenly, the phone rings. The first time viewers see this scene, Stefan will pick up the phone and Thakur will tell him that he needs the game to be finished by the end of the day. When viewers loop back to this scene, Stefan picks up the phone and before Thakur is able to say anything, Stefan grumbles "*Yeah, yeah, end of the day*" and puts the phone down.

A second central theme throughout the movie is **the illusion of free will and choice**. This theme is used to justify some of the non-choices offered to viewers. During a flashback scene, viewers are taken back to a crucial moment in Stefan's childhood: the day his mother died in a train accident. We see a five-year-old Stefan, frantically looking for his lost toy rabbit, while his mother is waiting for him because they are supposed to take the train together. When his mother asks Stefan if he is coming with

her, the familiar choice-interface appears. However, instead of having two possibilities like in the rest of the movie, viewers now only get one: "No." Whatever viewers do, click the option or wait for the time to run out, young Stefan will refuse to go with his mother. This is the first and only time this happens in the movie. This non-choice might confuse and frustrate viewers. Why would the movie offer a choice interface, if viewers are not able to make a choice? Why not just play out the scene regularly? There are several other instances in the movie in which viewers do get two options, but both options are essentially the same. For instance, when they have to choose between flushing Stefan's pills or throwing them away, or when they have to choose between destroying Stefan's computer or pouring tea over it (and also destroying it). I believe these kinds of non-choices are offered to viewers to reinforce the theme of the illusion of control and free will. Whatever Stefan does, he cannot choose his fate, because he is not in control. He has no free will. By suddenly stripping viewers of their ability to make choices, they might feel the same frustration Stefan feels: the choices are made for them, they are not really in control.

3.3 Affective involvement / Emotional engagement

The final aspect of interactive storytelling that I will analyze here, is how it can influence the extent to which a player is emotionally engaged with a story. Calleja (2011: 44) refers to this as the dimension of **affective involvement**: "The affective involvement dimension encompasses various forms of emotional engagement (…) either purposefully designed into the game or precipitated by an individual player's interpretation of in-game events and interactions with other players."

Naturally, traditional media, such as literature and film, can certainly emotionally engage their audiences as well. However, games and other participatory media are said to do so in a very unique and perhaps more effective manner. Calleja (2011: 135) states: "One reason for the intensely absorbing nature of digital games is the potential they have to affect players emotionally. Although other media also achieve this (…) the player's active input creates the potential for a more intense emotional experience, whether satisfying or frustrating, than non-ergodic media provide."

Game designer Joerg Friedrich (2012) also stresses the difference between passive media and participatory media in the way they create empathy. To illustrate this difference, he refers to a very famous scene from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). At the end of this movie, Darth Vader reveals to Luke Skywalker that he is his father during a climactic fighting scene. The moment had a huge emotional impact on viewers. Friedrich invites us to imagine this same scene in a game. He notes that while playing, the player has no time to empathize with Luke, because he is too busy fighting and coming up with ways to defeat Darth Vader. Friedrich concludes that if developers attempt to create empathy in games in the same way that movies do, they will inevitably fail. But if they try a different approach and capitalize on the

affordances of the game medium, he is sure that game stories can evoke emotions way stronger than passive media ever could.

When playing a game, the player is in control of his or her actions. This agency provided to the player might be a challenge for writers, but it might open up opportunities to intensify the emotional experience. Friedrich claims that the experience of agency changes the way players empathize with the game characters. Not only does the player feel with the characters, he feels like them. In this way, games have the power to make players feel responsible for what happened. This responsibility is a direct consequence of player agency. Smethurst and Craps (2015: 13) confirm that a game can make players feel personally responsible when something bad happens to the characters. They refer to this concept as **complicity:** "Complicity is founded on a combination of interreactivity and empathy. Simply put, due to the unique ways in which players engage with them, games have the capability to make the player feel as though they are complicit in the perpetration of traumatic events."

Michael Sicart (2009: 156) refers to a player as an **ethical subject** and states that some games have the capacity to make players reflect on their actions and question their values. He concludes that "Most computer games do not challenge those values: the player is the hero (…) there are no moral dilemmas, no need for a deep reflection on means and purposes." However, as I hope to demonstrate in the analysis below, some games do challenge those values.

3.3.1 The Walking Dead

As I previously established, the choices that players make in *The Walking Dead* don't really influence the story. However, making choices and being confronted with the consequences of those choices, may affect players on an emotional level. Gerald Farca (2014: 446) confirms this: "Clearly, choices in The Walking Dead serve a different purpose than moving the game's narrative into completely different directions: they are designed to affect the player on an emotional level and to direct his reception of the narrative."

In opposition to many games, *The Walking Dead* uses no evaluative system that reveals to players whether they have made the right choice. Moreover, the choices in this game are designed to be ethically ambivalent, so there are no morally right or wrong choices either. However, I believe that the game uses some other strategies to make players reflect on their choices and to make them feel either guilty or satisfied about them. In what follows, I will establish four ways in which the game does this, namely through choice design, through the open (dis)approval by other characters, through reminding players of their choices and through kinesthetically involving them in the execution of their choice.

3.3.1.1 Choice design

Game critic and designer Amanda Lange reveals an interesting pattern in the way that most gamers make choices. In 2014, she conducted a research in which she surveyed over 1000 gamers to find out whether they, when offered the choice, opted for a "good" path or an "evil" path throughout a game story. She found out that most players will take the moral high ground, with only a mere 5% of players choosing an "evil" path on their first playthrough. Peter Molyneux, a game designer who worked on *Fable*

(2004), also takes note of this pattern and expresses his frustration with it: "My prediction is: all you guys, you're just gonna be nice. (…) And it makes me sick, because (…) we spent hours; we spent months, months and years crafting the evil side of Fable, and only ten percent of people actually did the evil side" (in Lange, 2014). Sarah Stang (2016: 23) confirms the pattern as well and juxtaposes it with the idea of a magic circle: "While some scholars have suggested that video games provide a safe space in which players can engage in deviant behaviour, delineated by a 'magic circle' that keeps it separate from reality, statistics (…) suggest that when available most players tend to prefer to take the moral high ground."

An interesting feature of *The Walking Dead* - and Telltale games in general - is that at the end of each episode, players receive an overview of the most important decisions featured in that episode. By means of statistics, players can see how their choices stack up against those of other players. Statistics from *Season One* show that most of the time, the majority of players chose the morally good options, and hereby confirm the discoveries of the aforementioned researchers. For instance, 62% of players decided to tell the truth to Hershel instead of lying to him, 85% of players decided to chop David's leg off in an effort to save him, rather than leaving him to die and 68% of players decided to attempt to revive Larry instead of killing him in the meat locker. This last result is particularly interesting, because since the very start, Larry has been portrayed as a dislikeable character and by trying to revive him, the player has to go against Kenny, a character who many consider to be a good friend to Lee. It appears that most of the time, players choose to take the moral high road, even if this means that Lee might lose a good friend. In this way, players of *The Walking Dead* act as what Miguel Sicart would refer to as **moral agents**. These kinds of players rely on their moral stance rather than on logic or strategy (in Stang, 2016: 23). Telltale's marketing director Richard Iggo confirms this observation: "Some of the stats we've seen coming back from player decisions have created a perception that even in dire times (…) the majority of people will try to do the 'right' thing if they can (…) It's fascinating because

even when we offer players a decision where the apparently darker option might make sense from a purely logical point of view, they'll often try to choose the 'higher' ground at personal cost even if that means being put in danger or having a relationship with another character suffer because of it"(in Stang, 2016: 23).

The dilemmas I illustrated here are referred to by scholars as "**easy decisions**" (Sulimma, 2014: 89) or "**uniform choices**" (Dechering and Bakkes, 2018: 6). These are the kinds of choices that have the largest margins between options. This statistical majority reveals that in some cases, players must have had a clear sense of what was the right choice and what was the wrong one. In the conclusion of her research, Amanda Lange (2014) calls for morally ambiguous games that offer a more nuanced choice design, with choices that are not so easily identified as either right or wrong. She says: "Most players want to make 'the right choice' when it's easy, marked, and clearly labeled. But a future of more nuanced choices may point to a stronger direction for the medium. If gamers are not interested in being evil, we can get more traction by instead questioning what they believe to be good."

When focusing on the aforementioned "easy" decisions, it seems that *The Walking Dead* fails to meet Lange's demands for a morally ambiguous gaming experience. However, the game's developers never intended to provide such easy choices. Instead, they wanted to create morally ambiguous situations where it wasn't easy to differentiate between right and wrong. These kinds of dilemmas are referred to as "**tough decisions**" (Sulimma, 2014: 90) or "**ambivalent choices**" (Dechering and Bakkes, 2018: 6). These are the decisions where the statistics revealed that players were more or less evenly divided between different options.

Throughout the game, there are many moments that emotionally and morally engage players by avoiding clear-cut decisions that are explicitly good or bad. Farca confirms this (446): "Most of the time, the player is presented with a moral dilemma in which

there is simply no right choice." For instance, in *Episode Three*, while Lee and Kenny are on a supply run, they notice a girl who's surrounded by zombies. The girl is clearly already bitten. Players can choose to either shoot the girl to put her out of her misery, but hereby risking to attract even more zombies with the gunshot, or to follow Kenny's advice and to walk away safely, taking advantage of the fact that the zombies are distracted by the girl. In a narrative sense, this choice doesn't make a difference, because the girl will die either way. But in a moral sense, it puts players in a difficult position. According to the statistics, the majority of players (59%) chose to walk away and were forced to listen to the gruesome screams of the girl being devoured by zombies for the remainder of the scene.

Most of the moral dilemmas featured in *The Walking Dead* are moments in which the player has to choose to save one out of two characters. This is the case in *Episode One*, where the player has the choice to save either Duck or Shawn. The game offers no moral guidance to the player whatsoever. Both characters are in immediate danger. Moreover, the game sets a time limit which puts extra pressure on players and prevents them from weighing the pros and cons of each choice rationally. One could perhaps argue that players should save the child and that Shawn, as an adult, should be able to save himself. However, one might just as well argue that a child might prove to be a liability in this post-apocalyptic world, while Shawn could prove helpful. Shawn is also the son of the owner of the farm the group is staying at. There is no right decision in this situation, and there seem to be convincing arguments for saving either character. This choice clearly divided players: 49% decided to save Duck, 48% tried to save Shawn and 3% tried to save neither.

At the end of *Episode One*, players have to choose between two characters yet again, namely between Doug and Carley. Again, neither of these characters is privileged in any way. Players have known both of them for approximately the same time. They have spent some alone time with both Carley and Doug. They are both rather friendly

towards Lee. Carley as well as Doug are attributed both negative and positive qualities. For instance, Doug is described by Lee as "not great around zombies". However, a few moments later, Doug proves himself very resourceful. As a former IT guy, he is able to use his technical knowledge to manipulate a remote so they can switch on the TVs in a nearby shop to distract the zombies. Carley on the other hand, is described as "a good shot". However, while she is trying to get a radio to work, she isn't able to correctly put the batteries into the radio. Carley also knows about Lee's crimes, because she was a reporter before the apocalypse, but she promises not to tell the rest of the group. This moment could potentially be interpreted as a bonding moment between Carley and Lee, but players might just as well view Carley as a threat and might choose to let her die to protect Lee's secret.

One might expect that players were just as divided over this choice as they were over the choice between Duck and Shawn. However, interestingly enough, the statistics revealed a problem with the choice design of this particular dilemma: 75% of players chose to save Carley. Telltale was confused by this result and attributed it to the fact that players had slightly more opportunities to interact with Carley (Thorne, 2018: 68).

3.3.1.2 "Clementine will remember that"

There are many moments throughout the game where non-playable characters will try to influence players into making a particular choice. The most important character that does this is Clementine. She will often act as a moral compass and will influence Lee's - and the players' - choices. Beil & Schmidt (2015: 82) confirm this: "She acts like a moral compass, questioning the player's decisions throughout the whole game from the perspective of an eight-year-old and showing either signs of affection or disappointment." It is interesting to note that at times when players have to make an important decision, the screen will show Lee looking at Clementine expectantly, as if

he wants to see what kind of effect his actions are having on her. Seeing Clementine's reaction might influence the kinds of choices the players make.

This is the case for instance in *Episode Two*, when the group is locked in the meat locker with a potentially dead Larry, and players have to choose whether to crush Larry's head or to try to revive him. Kenny will try to persuade Lee to kill Larry and he will provide convincing arguments to do so. Lily on the other hand, will try to convince Lee that her dad might still be alive, and that they should try to reanimate him. All three of them are arguing what to do and the tension is running high. If players decide to help Kenny finish off Larry, Clementine will exclaim "*I don't wanna see*!" and she will run to face the corner, with her hands covering her ears. When the deed is done, Clementine will start sobbing uncontrollably and as Lee approaches the girl to console her, she cries "*Why Lee? Lily said he wasn't dead*!" If players choose to try and save Larry instead, Clementine will also start crying, but she will not openly question the players' decision, she will simply ask in a quivering voice "*Is it over?*"

In the scene immediately following this, a confrontation ensues between Lee and Danny, one of the cannibalistic St. John brothers. Players have the option to kill Danny with a pitchfork or to spare his life. If players choose to kill Danny, a distressed Clementine will appear behind Lee, screaming "*No*!" On top of this, players will receive a notification that reads "Clementine witnessed what you did". As Lee tries to approach her, she will cower behind Lily and look at Lee with a scared expression on her face. In turn, Lee will look horrified that he frightened the little girl. However, if players choose to spare Danny's life, a notification will come up "Clementine will remember you spared his life", and if players previously also attempted to revive Larry, she will even shoot Lee a small, reassuring smile.

Finally, at the end of *Episode Two*, the group comes across a seemingly abandoned car filled with supplies. Players have to decide whether to steal the food and supplies or

to leave all of it behind. The group will try to encourage Lee that they need the supplies to survive, while Clementine will try to convince Lee of the opposite, by saying things like "*This stuff isn't ours*" and "*What if it's not abandoned? What if it is someone's*?" If players choose to take the food, Lee will try to offer Clementine a hoodie, but she will not take it, insisting that it isn't hers to take. After Lee manages to convince her to take the hoodie anyway, Clementine stands with her back turned to Lee with her arms crossed, a seemingly disapproving look on her face. Lee will look back at her sadly. By contrast, if players choose not to take the food, the rest of the group will take it anyway, but Clementine will shoot Lee a sympathetic look and grab his hand. When Katjaa says "*Lee, there's a hoodie here that might fit Clementine*" he looks at Clementine as she shakes her head and replies "*She's good, thanks*."

It appears that, even though the game claims to offer no explicitly good or bad options, Clementine offers some moral guidance as to which choice is the right one. Players might get the sense that they made a wrong choice if it results in disappointing Clementine, whereas they might be satisfied if Clementine agrees with their choice. Stang (2016: 22) confirms this: "The quality of the writing is such that the feelings of protectiveness and concern for Clementine, as well as the guilt felt for frightening her, are real sensations experienced by many players."

The Walking Dead reinforces this idea of explicit judgement of the players' choices by showing close-ups of the characters' **faces and expressions** at key moments, hereby demonstrating the impact the players' actions is having on them. According to Jamie Madigan this is one of the reasons why the game is so emotionally engaging. Madigan draws on the theory of mirror neurons, which claims that when one sees the face of an emotional state, be it joy, shock or fear, one subconsciously imitates that emotion (in Smethurst and Craps, 2015: 24). Thorne (2018: 73) confirms this observation: "Facial expressions are a key aspect of Telltale's approach to storytelling in games and, although difficult to measure, there may be a link between players' responses to these

expressions, their familiarity with the heroic narrative of *The Walking Dead,* and their tendency to avoid choosing evil paths."

3.3.1.3 Reminders

Another way in which *The Walking Dead* emotionally engages its players is through reminding them of the choices they made throughout the game. I would like to refer back to Brice Morrison's (2013) definition of a meaningful choice. Previously, I have already established how narrative consequences can make a choice meaningful. Now I would like to focus on a different component of a meaningful choice, namely "**reminders**". By reminding players of the choices they made, the game forces them to reflect on those decisions. This reflection might induce guilt in players, if they feel like they have made the wrong choice, or it might induce pride, if they feel like they have made the right choice. Morrison argues that if a choice doesn't come up again later in the story, players might forget about the choice, which renders it essentially meaningless. He states: "By sprinkling reminders through the game of what choices the player made previously, the choices take on more and more weight."

There are many moments in *The Walking Dead* in which certain characters will refer back to a past choice. For instance, at the St. Johns' dairy, if players choose to spare Danny St. John's life, but chose to kill Larry in the meat locker earlier, Lily will say "*Fuck you, Lee. You and Kenny murder my dad, but you leave this piece of shit alive? You're a fucking asshole*." A particularly telling example in this matter takes place during the final episode, namely the scene in which Lee meets the stranger who has kidnapped Clementine. It is during this scene that the players' decisions come under close inspection. The stranger is revealed to be the owner of the "abandoned" car from which Lee and his group stole supplies at the end of *Episode Two*. The stranger explains that he has kidnapped Clementine because he believes he will be a far more suitable father figure to her than Lee has been. Lee finds out that the stranger has been stalking

Lee's group for quite some time and that he was able to uncover everything that happened to their group through Clementine's walkie-talkie. The stranger sits down with Lee and proceeds to give him an overview of every ethically questionable action he undertook so far. For instance, if players chose to save Carley instead of Doug in *Episode One*, the stranger will say "*You let a boy get yanked out of a window and into the night so you could protect a pretty girl with a gun!*", but if players chose to save Doug, the stranger will still reprimand Lee: "*You let a woman who knew who you really were die to protect your secret.*" If players chose to kill Danny St. John at the end of *Episode Two*, the stranger will say "*You killed a man with a pitchfork right in front of a little girl!*" If players chose to steal food from the stranger's car in *Episode Two*, the stranger will say "*The sweatshirt she's wearing was my boy's. You stole that from us*!" In *Episode Three*, after an irrational Lily shoots Carley/Doug in the head, players can choose to leave her behind on the side of the road, or to keep her in the group. If players chose to leave her behind, the stranger will judge Lee for this: "*You abandoned a defenseless, grieving woman*." No matter what choices players made throughout the story, the stranger will find something to critique.

These reminders are clearly meant to guilt trip players and to make them reflect on their past decisions. Farca (2014: 447) confirms this: "To further fuel his uncertainty, 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. It makes him feel responsible for his actions."

3.3.1.4 Kinesthetic involvement

A final way in which *The Walking Dead* emotionally engages its players that I will discuss here is through kinesthetic involvement. This is another dimension from Calleja's player involvement model. He describes the dimension as follows:

"Kinesthetic involvement relates to all modes of avatar or game piece control in virtual environments" (2011: 43). The game provides kinesthetic involvement by allowing players to move their avatar (Lee) around, to click on objects or other characters to engage with them, or through quick time events in which players have to follow instructions to perform a particular action. There are two instances of kinesthetic involvement that I would like to mention here, because they are of particular importance to the dimension of affective involvement.

A first example occurs at the beginning of *Episode Two*. Lee, Mark and Kenny are in the woods hunting for something to eat, when they come across some other survivors, the two high school students Ben and Travis and their teacher David. David has his leg caught in a bear trap. David's screaming has attracted several zombies that are now approaching the group. Players can try many things to free David. For instance, they can try to cut the chain attached to the trap, or they can try to pry it open, but it will all be to no avail. If Lee takes too long to try to free David, Kenny and Mark will stop him and urge him to leave David behind, because the zombies are getting too close. Alternatively, players can choose to chop David's leg off to free him. Interestingly, players can't just click the option "cut leg" and be done with it. They can't sit back and watch Lee perform the action. Instead, they have to do it themselves through a quick-time event. Each time players click, Lee brings down his hatchet. During this process, players are confronted with David's piercing screams, the horrifying visuals of his semi-removed leg and close-ups of his face, contorted in pain and fear. After about four clicks, David's leg is finally removed. By kinesthetically involving players, the emotional engagement is enhanced. Not only do they have to choose the option, they have to execute it as well. Smethurst and Craps (2015: 26, 27) refer to this as online and offline states of engagement: "What is particularly interesting about *The Walking Dead* is how it plays with online and offline states of engagement in order to involve the player in traumatizing situations. (…) As Lee swings the axe, the player is offline (since they are no longer in control); when the player targets and clicks on the leg, they are

online, giving input to the game. By switching between these two states during this scene, *The Walking Dead* encourages the player to reflect on what is happening. Between each hit, the reality of what they are doing comes back, and they must re-commit to the action in full knowledge of what it entails, almost as if the game is asking, 'Are you sure about this?'"

Another instance of kinesthetic involvement reinforcing affective involvement takes place at the end of *Episode Two*, when players are able to kill or spare both of the cannibalistic St. John brothers. Before players are given the option to kill Andy, a fight breaks out between him and Lee. Lee will overpower Andy and will start punching him in the face until Carley tells him to stop. However, players cannot simply sit back and watch Lee perform the action. If players don't do anything, Andy will overpower Lee and start to beat him. Players have to punch Andy to keep him down. Each time players click on Andy's face, Lee punches him. They can choose how many times Lee should punch Andy, as well as which side of Andy's face he should punch. With each click, Andy's face becomes more and more disfigured. Through this moment of kinesthetic involvement, players might feel as if they are punching Andy themselves. Depending on how emotionally invested they are in the story, some players might get a sense of pleasure out of this, because they feel as if they can personally punish Andy for his heinous acts.

This dimension also brings to light an interesting difference between *The Walking Dead* and *Bandersnatch*. There is much less kinesthetic involvement in *Bandersnatch*. Most of the time, viewers just have to select one out of two options. For instance, there is one ending in which viewers can choose to chop up Stefan's dad after he has killed him. Theoretically, this option is equally horrifying as cutting off David's leg, however, viewers of *Bandersnatch* can just watch Stefan do it. It might have been interesting had the viewers been more kinesthetically involved in the chopping up of Stefan's dad. There is one moment of increased kinesthetic involvement in the movie. It involves a

scene in which a panicked Stefan wants to call his therapist after he has killed his father. Stefan can't remember the therapist's phone number and viewers have to type in the numbers themselves. The five-digit number is given to viewers through a quick montage of a few scenes. Hidden within these scenes is the phone number 20541. These numbers are revealed through fragments of the therapist's sentences ("to", "oh", "you were five years old", "all for one"). While this moment of kinesthetic involvement does not particularly emotionally engage viewers, I wanted to mention it nonetheless because this moment of puzzle solving might be reminiscent of an adventure game. Hence, this moment further blurs the distinction between a game and an interactive movie.

3.3.2 Bandersnatch

The nature of affective involvement in *Bandersnatch* is very different from *The Walking Dead*. In contrast to *The Walking Dead*, the choice design in *Bandersnatch* is much less nuanced, the characters don't openly judge viewers for their decisions and the film doesn't use any strategies to remind viewers of their earlier choices and to make them feel guilty about them. This said, the movie does emotionally engage its audience through its interactive format in other ways.

3.3.2.1 Choice design

In contrast to Telltale, Netflix released only a few **statistics** of the players' choices in *Bandersnatch*. For instance, they revealed that 60% of viewers chose Frosties for breakfast, that 73% of viewers chose to accept the job at Tuckersoft, that British viewers were less likely to deliberately spill tea over Stefan's computer, and that out of the five main endings, the one where Stefan goes along with his mom on the train was the path least traveled. This lack of statistical data is unfortunate, because it prevents me from

comparing the nature of the viewers' choices in *Bandersnatch* to those in *The Walking Dead*. I would like to know whether most viewers of *Bandersnatch* also tended to pick the **morally good options**. Luckily, while we do not have any exact data, there is another way to answer this question. Immediately after the release of *Bandersnatch*, many viewers took to Twitter to discuss the film, the choices they made and the endings they got. I previously described some of the main endings to *Bandersnatch*. All of these either included Stefan's game getting an awful review, or Stefan losing his sanity and killing people**.** A happy ending might involve Stefan being able to travel back in time to save his mother from dying in the train accident, or at least Stefan being able to release a five-star video game without having to kill anyone to do so. However, neither of these options is possible. While Stefan is able to go back in time, he can't save his mother, instead he dies with her. Contradictory as this may sound, this is probably the "happiest" ending one can achieve in the film. On Twitter, many viewers expressed their frustration with this (see annex E). The viewers' desire to make Stefan happy and their tendency to make choices which they believe would lead to this hypothetical happy ending coincide with Amanda Lange's (2014) research in which she states that most of the time, players will try to do the right thing. In this way, viewers' choices in *Bandersnatch* are similar to players' choices in *The Walking Dead*.

However, in terms of choice design, I believe *Bandersnatch* to be less successful than *The Walking Dead*, particularly in providing **morally ambiguous situations** in which viewers are offered **nuanced choices**. There are several kinds of choices viewers can make in *Bandersnatch*, ranging from trivial choices to more significant ones, and from false choices to non-choices. The more trivial choices, such as choosing the kind of cornflakes Stefan should have for breakfast or the kind of music he should listen to on the bus, can be ignored because they are merely present to familiarize viewers with the interactive interface and hence provide a very limited kind of emotional engagement. It might perhaps be amusing for viewers to watch the scene play out under the soundtrack they chose, or to see an advertisement on TV for the cornflakes

they picked, but other than that, these choices are inconsequential and not very emotionally engaging. Other, more meaningful and consequential choices, such as whether to accept the job at Tuckersoft, whether to take drugs with Colin and whether to talk about Stefan's mom at the therapist, might emotionally engage viewers more strongly , because they know that these choices will have an impact on Stefan's life, his relationships with other people and the game he is creating. By making these choices, viewers will steer Stefan's life in a particular direction, which heightens their sense of responsibility. However, these choices, though meaningful in terms of story, are not moral dilemmas such as those offered in *The Walking Dead*. Not even the most drastic choices, those that involve life or death situations such as the options to kill Stefan's dad, Colin or Thakur, are moral dilemmas, because there is still a clear distinction between the morally right and the morally wrong option. For instance, when given the option to kill Stefan's father, viewers can also choose to back off and when viewers are offered to kill Colin, they can choose to let him leave. Neither Stefan's father nor Colin are essentially bad people, therefore Stefan's growing insanity is the only justification viewers receive for killing either of them. There is one narrative path which reveals that Stefan's whole life has been a psychological experiment and that his father is not actually his father, but rather a scientist studying the effects of trauma induction. In this P.A.C.S scenario, the choice of whether or not to kill Stefan's father is more of a moral dilemma. Viewers might choose to take revenge on Stefan's father for his lies or they might choose to be the better person and back off. In any case, Stefan has a solid reason for lashing out at his father and viewers are somewhat justified if they choose to kill him. However, on all other narrative paths, this choice is not a moral dilemma because Stefan's father is not a bad person. Throughout the movie, we see that Stefan's father, while at times a bit awkward, tries his best to maintain a good relationship with his son. For instance, during the breakfast scene, he tries to show interest in the game his son is creating, even though he doesn't understand much about it. When Stefan's game fails after he accepted the job at Tuckersoft, his father reassures and consoles him. When Stefan locks himself in his

room for days on end, without eating or sleeping, his father brings him tea, tells him he is worried about him and invites him to go for lunch. The only reason viewers are given for Stefan's difficult relationship with his father, is that Stefan considers him to be responsible for the death of his mother. However, if viewers chose not to talk about Stefan's mother at the therapist, they never find out what happened and there seems to be no reason at all why Stefan appears to hate his dad. Moreover, on the narrative path where Stefan goes back in time, viewers find out that Stefan's dad is actually not responsible for his mother's death, because even if Stefan is able find his toy rabbit in time, his mother still has to take the later train. In conclusion, the question whether to kill Stefan's father or not, is not a moral dilemma. There is a clear morally good option. This is not to say that viewers might choose to kill Stefan's father nonetheless, out of curiosity or because they want some more action in the movie. Unfortunately, Netflix hasn't released any statistics for this particular choice, but it might have been interesting to know how many people decided to kill Stefan's dad.

There is one way in which *Bandersnatch* successfully emotionally engages its audience through its choice design: by offering viewers **non-choices**. As I previously pointed out, there are several moments in the movie where viewers are deliberately stripped of their agency. There are a few instances in which the movie capitalizes on these kinds of choices to emotionally engage the viewers. I will discuss one particularly interesting example of this. I previously described the non-choice offered to viewers in the flashback scene where Stefan's mom asks him whether he's coming with her on the train or not. During this scene, viewers are presented with the typical choice interface, yet they cannot make a choice, as they are only given one option. Stefan refuses to go with his mother because he can't find his toy rabbit. His mother has to take a later train and she dies in an accident. I already mentioned how this non-choice might frustrate viewers, but that it supports one of the main themes of the movie, namely the illusion of free will. Interestingly, later in the movie it is possible for Stefan to travel back in time to this crucial moment and to put his toy rabbit back in its usual place. The next

morning, the scene where Stefan's mother asks him if he will come along with her is repeated. Interestingly, the movie now offers two options. Stefan can choose to go with his mother this time. However, instead of allowing viewers to save Stefan's mother from death, they are offered a different choice as Stefan's father says that they will still have to take the later train. I believe this scene to be one of the strongest in the movie, and the choice offered here to be especially emotionally engaging. The cruelty of this choice is that for the first time in the movie, viewers know what the outcome of each option will be. They know that the train will crash. If viewers choose for Stefan to go with his mother, they are essentially sending him to his death. However, if they choose for Stefan to stay behind, they know that he will be traumatized by his mother's death, that it will ruin his relationship with his father, and that he will have a very unhappy life. This choice can certainly be considered as a moral dilemma.

3.3.2.2 "Who's doing this to me?"

Netflix employee Todd Yellin (Streitfeld, 2018) explains the motive behind the interactive format of *Bandersnatch*: "If bad things happen, you'll feel even more crestfallen, because you were responsible (…) If the character is victorious, you'll feel even more uplifted because you made that choice." What Yellin doesn't point out here is that there are very few moments in *Bandersnatch* where Stefan is victorious. The main emotion the interactive format of the movie seems to evoke is guilt. On their first playthrough of *Bandersnatch*, viewers don't know yet that Stefan's life is terrible no matter what choice they make. They might think that it was their specific choices that led him to such miserable situations. This might make them feel responsible and guilty for the emotional distress they are causing Stefan. *Bandersnatch* uses some unique strategies to intensify the feelings of responsibility and guilt in viewers.

Firstly, these feelings are intensified by Stefan openly wondering whether he is being controlled and who is controlling him. During a visit to his therapist, Stefan explains how he feels as if he is not in control of his own body and decisions. Later in the film, a despairing Stefan turns his glance towards the ceiling and yells "*Who's doing this to me? I know there's someone there! Who are you?*" During this scene, viewers are offered two choices. They can choose to reveal themselves to Stefan by telling him that someone is controlling him through Netflix, or they can purposely further his insanity by feeding him lies and showing him the "branching pathways" glyph, the same symbol that drove Jerome F. Davies mad. While this breaking of the fourth wall might be fun and might get a good laugh out of viewers, there is a darker interpretation of this scene as well. Stefan directly addressing the viewers might be an extremely strange and uncomfortable experience for them. Their relationship with him changes as they are pulled from their position as covert observers and suddenly become active characters in the story. They are exposed as the unseen force controlling Stefan. By making viewers aware of their role in Stefan's life, the experience of watching the movie has moved from harmless entertainment to some sort of sadistic experiment in which viewers are the puppet masters and Stefan is the puppet. By making viewers' responsibility for Stefan explicit, their experience of guilt is intensified as Stefan's life seems to get worse with each choice they make.

Secondly, the feelings of responsibility and guilt are further intensified when, at a certain point in the film, Stefan begins to question and even defy the choices viewers are making. The process of Stefan resisting the viewers' control starts gradually. For instance, when viewers choose that Stefan should refuse the job at Tuckersoft, his face will fall and he will frown at himself, making it seem as if he is surprised by his own answer. Later at the therapist, viewers can choose whether Stefan should bite his nails or pull on his earlobe. Whatever viewers choose, Stefan will resist the action by forcefully stopping his hand from moving. When Stefan is growing increasingly frustrated with fixing the bugs in his game, something similar happens. Viewers can

choose to either slam the desk or to destroy Stefan's computer. When viewers choose to slam the desk, Stefan will perform the action, but afterwards he will look at his hand confusedly. However, if viewers choose to destroy the computer, Stefan resists the action completely, probably because it would ruin all his hard work and derail the story. While Stefan will resist the viewers' control at first, gradually he will accept it and even turn to them for help. Towards the end of the movie, after Stefan has killed his dad, he will turn his eyes to the sky and ask viewers "*What should I do*?" Viewers can choose to bury him or to chop him up in pieces. If viewers choose to bury Stefan's father, Stefan will numbly reply "*Okay*". If viewers decide that he should chop up his father, he will scrunch his nose in disgust and he will ask viewers "*Oh God, really*?" Stefan clearly isn't satisfied with the viewers' choice, but will perform the action nonetheless.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have compared two instances of interactive storytelling, namely Telltale's adventure game *The Walking Dead*, and Netflix' interactive movie *Bandersnatch*. I subjected both of these works to Calleja's Player Involvement Model, from which I selected a few dimensions in order to examine the intricacies of the interactive format.

Firstly, I discussed the dimension of "**Macro-involvement**". In this section, I examined how pre-existing knowledge about the source material might influence the kinds of choices that are made as well as how the story is interpreted. I explained how prior knowledge of the larger fictional universe might limit the experience of agency, as it does in *The Walking Dead*, or might provide added interpretative layers, as it does in *Bandersnatch*.

Secondly, I discussed the dimension of "**Narrative Involvement**". In this section, I looked at the narrative architectures of both of my case studies to examine the extent to which players' choices alter the plot. I demonstrated how *The Walking Dead* utilizes a narrative structure of recombining pathways. The game claims to offer a uniquely tailored experience, but multiple playthroughs reveal that this agency is mostly an illusion as most choices lead to approximately the same outcome. Moreover, all players witness the same main plot events and get more or less the same ending. However, *The Walking Dead* allows players to have agency over character rather than over plot. While players cannot change the story, they can decide what kind of person their character will be. By contrast, *Bandersnatch*'s narrative structure is much more non-linear and offers many different endings. However, the agency in *Bandersnatch* also has its limitations. For instance, some narrative branches are strikingly less developed than others and lead to premature endings, and sometimes the movie forces

viewers into a particular direction. At times, the narrative coherence suffers due to the interactive format as well. *Bandersnatch* justifies its limitations in agency through its thematic content, as one of the central themes in the movie is the illusion of free will. Also, when players reach a dead end and have to loop back to a previous checkpoint to continue with the story, the movie will reward them for repeating certain scenes with altered dialogue that supports the theme of parallel realities.

The final dimension I analyzed in this thesis was "**Affective Involvement**". In this chapter, I illustrated how each work takes advantage of its interactive format to emotionally engage its audience. I illustrated how both of my case studies use some interesting strategies to induce the feelings of responsibility and guilt in their audience. I discussed how *The Walking Dead* emotionally engages players by providing them with ethically ambiguous situations in which there seems to be no morally right choice. The game uses reminders and explicit judgement by non-playable characters to further intensify the feeling of guilt in players. The game also enhances emotional engagement through kinesthetically involving players. At first sight, *Bandersnatch* seems to be less successful than *The Walking Dead* in terms of emotionally engaging its audience. First of all, the movie's choice design is much less nuanced as there generally is a clear morally right path. The movie also doesn't judge viewers or remind them of earlier choices to intensify their feeling of guilt. However, the movie uses some other interesting strategies to emotionally engage its audience. Firstly, at times the movie capitalizes on the non-choices it offers to emotionally engage viewers. Secondly, the movie induces guilt by openly addressing the viewers. For instance, at a certain point Stefan starts questioning who is controlling him. Sometimes he will visibly disagree with the viewers' choices or even start defying them. Through this, the viewers' responsibility for Stefan is made explicit, which intensifies their experience of guilt as Stefan's life gets progressively worse with each choice they make.

Through this research, I have discovered the strengths and weaknesses of both instances of interactive storytelling. Overall, *The Walking Dead* appears to be more successful in telling a well-developed, emotionally gripping story with strong characters, whereas *Bandersnatch* seems to be more successful in providing real agency. These somewhat counterintuitive results prove my claim that these instances are blurring the distinctions between games and movies. Through my analysis, I believe I have established interactive storytelling, despite its limitations, as a valuable form of entertainment. I have demonstrated that interactivity is not merely a gimmick but is able to add something to the experience of the story. With this I hope to have at least partly answered Bogost's question of why some stories need to be told interactively. Without the (illusionary) agency provided, *The Walking Dead* might not have been as emotionally engaging. Without the interactive format, the thematic content of *Bandersnatch* might not have been as effectively actualized.

As technological innovations are constantly creating new possibilities, I can only be curious about what the future of interactive narratives will bring. It might be interesting to see how movies that are less meta than *Bandersnatch* will take advantage of the format. Maybe we could imagine an interactive love story and let the viewers decide which love interest the main character should pick. Or maybe we could imagine an interactive horror movie. Should the characters go investigate a strange noise? Should they split up? This idea has already been executed by the video game *Until Dawn* (2015), which is an interactive version of a slasher movie. Further research might investigate whether some genres are more successful than others in telling an interactive story. In any case, the medium of interactive storytelling deserves to be studied and developed further.

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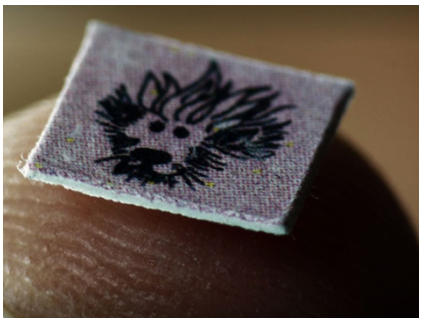
Annexes

Annex A

The bandersnatch creature as illustrated by Peter Newell and the Pax demon in Bandersnatch

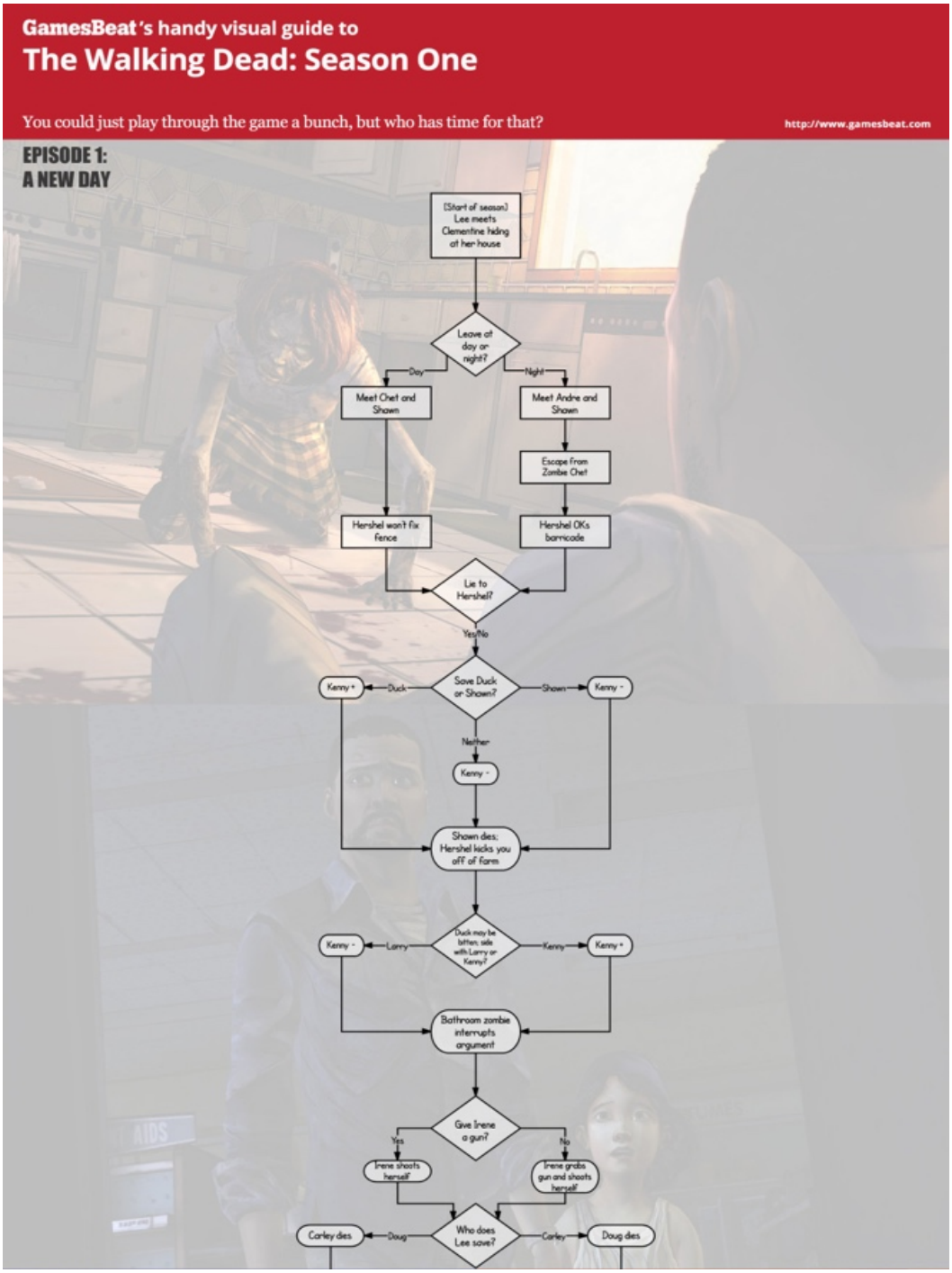




Annex B

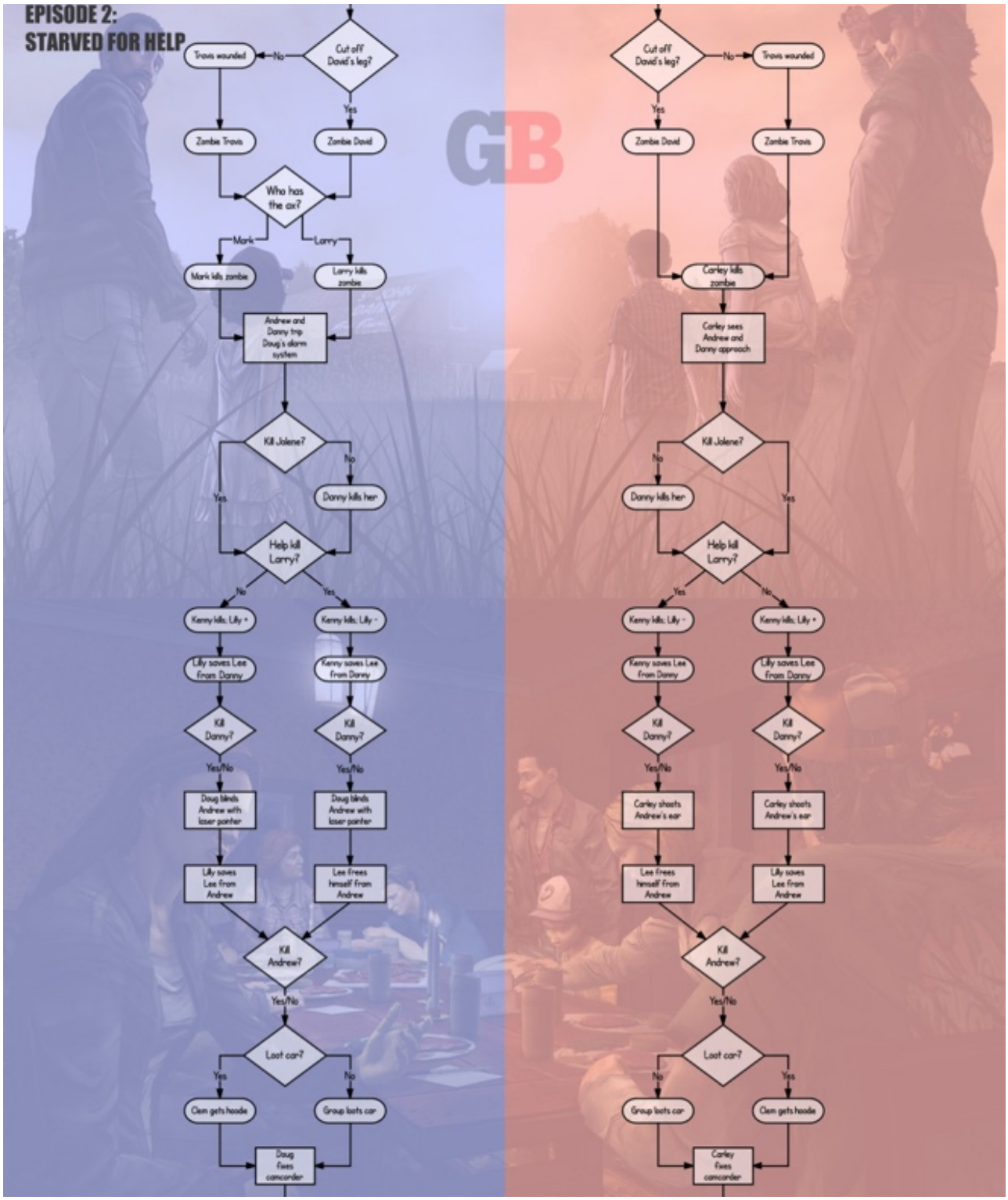
Kitty Ritman and Johnny Depp's Mad Hatter

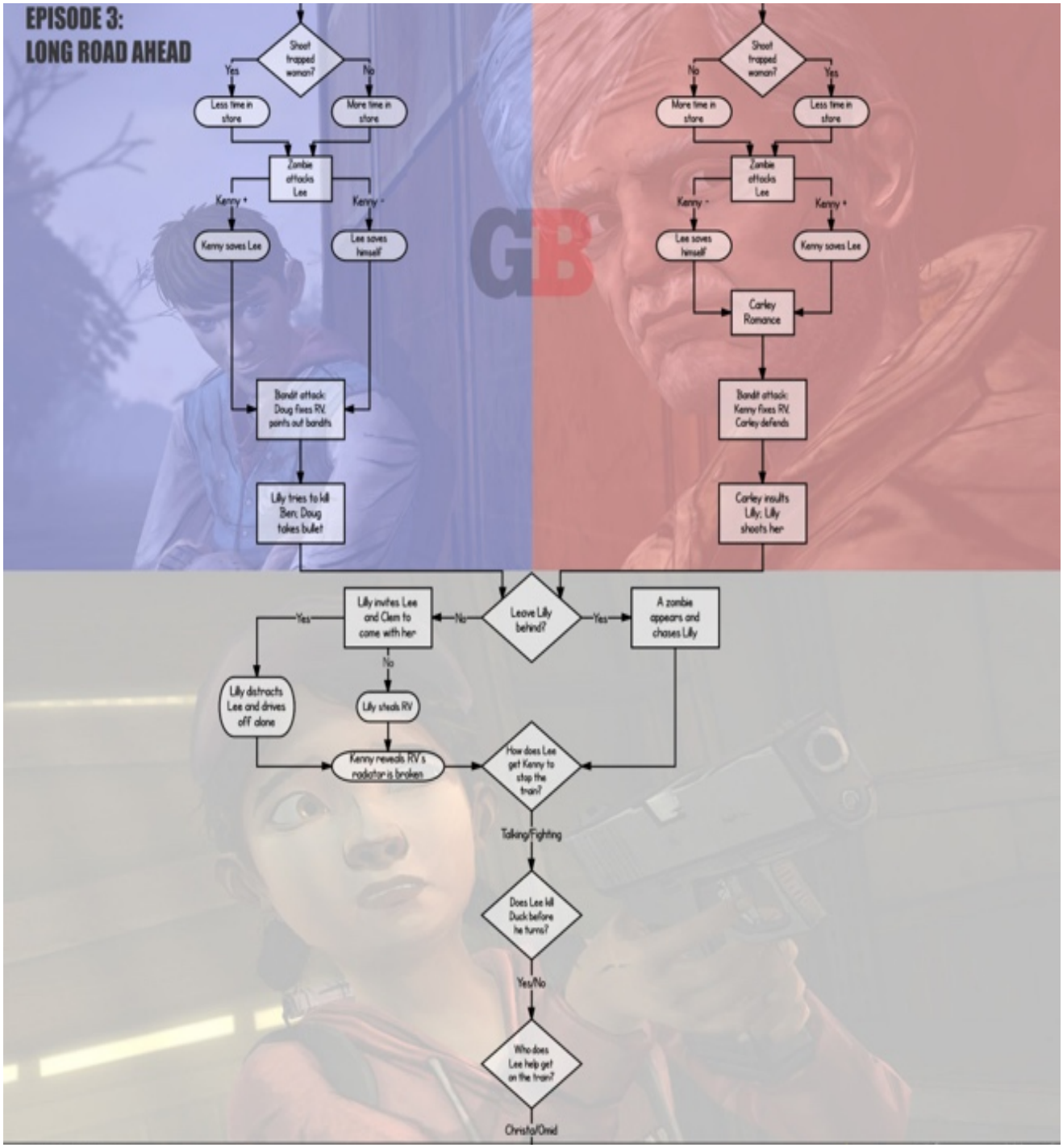

Annex C

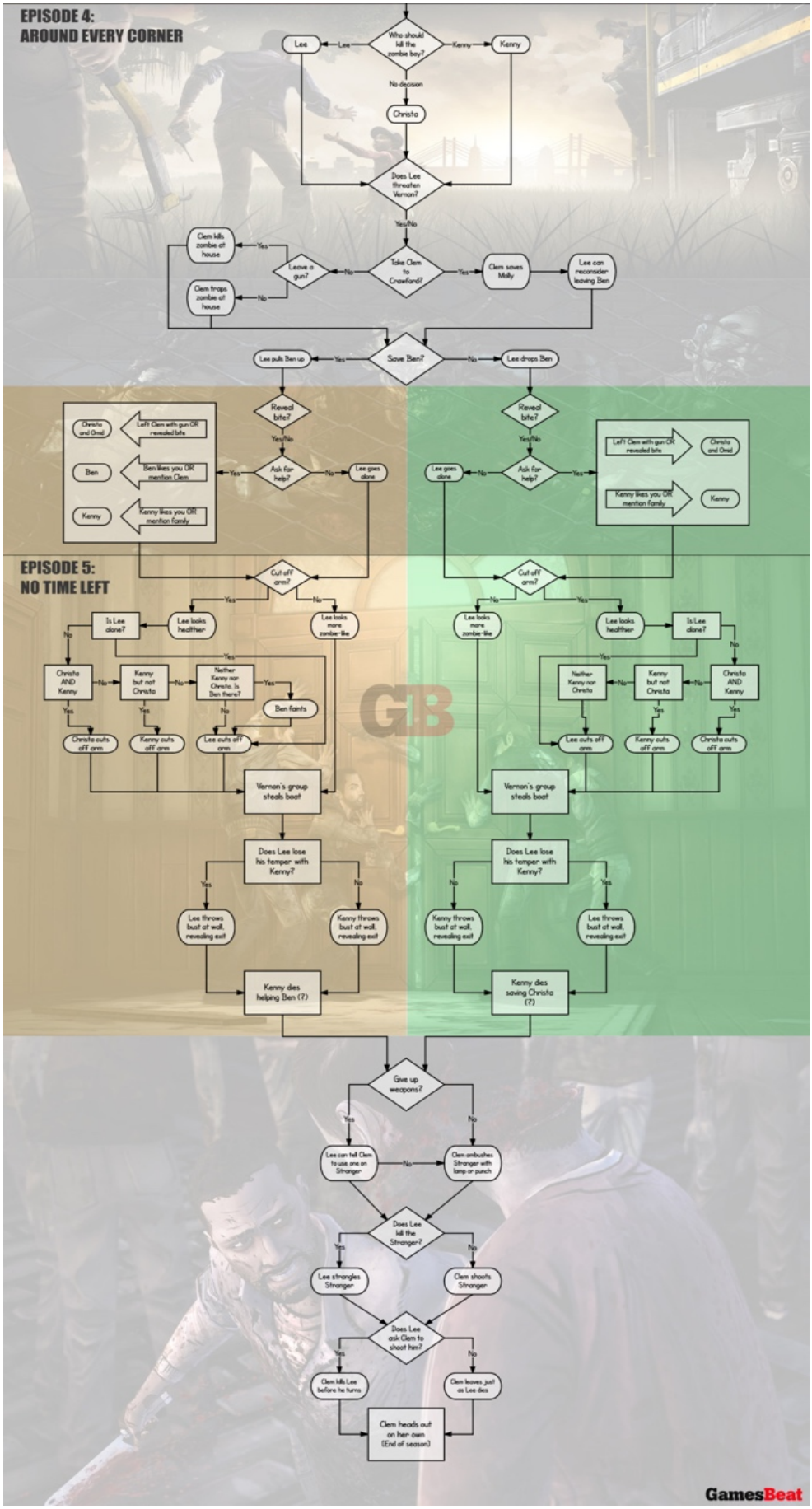
Narrative architecture of *The Walking Dead*[3] (recombining pathways)



[3] Retrieved from https://venturebeat.com/2013/03/31/the-walking-dead-season-one-plot-graph/

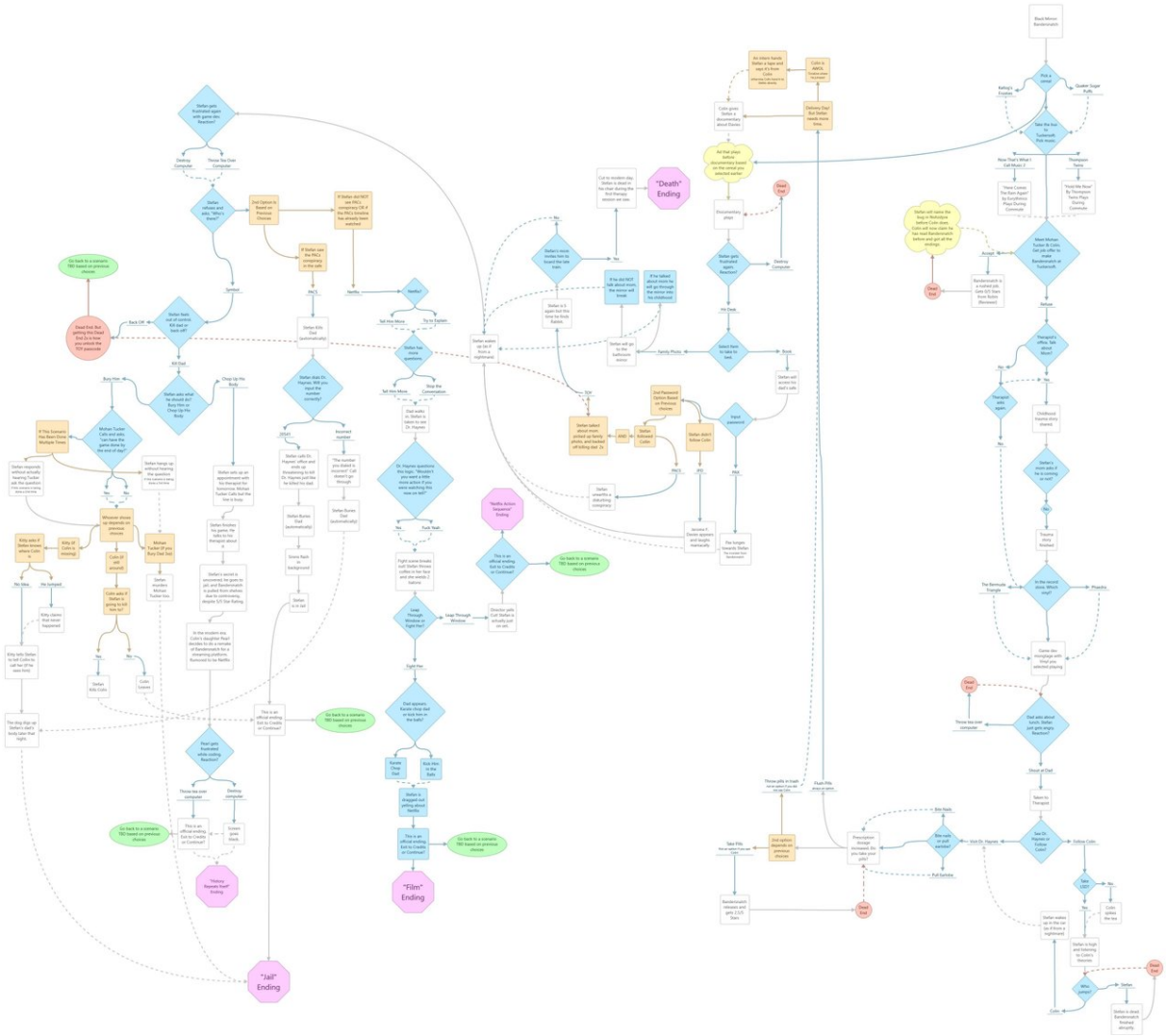

EPISODE 2:
STARVED FOR HELP
Cut off David's leg?
No
Travis wounded
Yes
Zombie Travis
Zombie David
Who has the ax?
Mark
Larry
Mark kills zombie
Larry kills zombie
Andrew and Danny trip Doug's alarm system
Kill Jolene?
Yes
No
Danny kills her
Help kill Larry?
No
Yes
Kenny kills Lilly +
Kenny kills Lilly -
Lilly saves Lee from Danny
Kenny saves Lee from Danny
Kill Danny?
Yes/No
Doug blinds Andrew with laser pointer
Lilly saves Lee from Andrew
Lee frees himself from Andrew
Kill Andrew?
Yes/No
Loot car?
Yes
No
Clem gets hoodie
Group loots car
Doug fixes camcorder
Cut off David's leg?
No
Travis wounded
Yes
Zombie David
Zombie Travis
Carley kills zombie
Carley sees Andrew and Danny approach
Kill Jolene?
No
Yes
Danny kills her
Help kill Larry?
Yes
No
Kenny kills Lilly -
Kenny kills Lilly +
Kenny saves Lee from Danny
Lilly saves Lee from Danny
Kill Danny?
Yes/No
Carley shoots Andrew's ear
Lee frees himself from Andrew
Lilly saves Lee from Andrew
Kill Andrew?
Yes/No
Loot car?
No
Yes
Group loots car
Clem gets hoodie
Carley fixes camcorder


EPISODE 3:
LONG ROAD AHEAD
Shoot trapped woman?
Yes
No
Less time in store
More time in store
Zombie attacks Lee
Kenny +
Kenny -
Kenny saves Lee
Lee saves himself
Bandit attack: Doug fixes RV, points out bandits
Lilly tries to kill Ben; Doug takes bullet
Shoot trapped woman?
No
Yes
More time in store
Less time in store
Zombie attacks Lee
Kenny -
Kenny +
Lee saves himself
Kenny saves Lee
Carley Romance
Bandit attack: Kenny fixes RV, Carley defends
Carley insults Lilly; Lilly shoots her
Leave Lilly behind?
Yes
No
Lilly invites Lee and Clem to come with her
A zombie appears and chases Lilly
Yes
No
Lilly distracts Lee and drives off alone
Lilly steals RV
Kenny reveals RV's radiator is broken
How does Lee get Kenny to stop the train?
Talking/Fighting
Does Lee kill Duck before he turns?
Yes/No
Who does Lee help get on the train?
Christa/Omid


EPISODE 4:
AROUND EVERY CORNER
Who should kill the zombie boy?
Lee
Kenny
No decision
Christa
Does Lee threaten Vernon?
Yes/No
Take Clem to Crawford?
Clem saves Molly
Lee can reconsider leaving Ben
Leave a gun?
Clem kills zombie at house
Clem traps zombie at house
Save Ben?
Lee pulls Ben up
Lee drops Ben
Reveal bite?
Ask for help?
Lee goes alone
Christa and Omid
Left Clem with gun OR revealed bite
Ben
Ben likes you OR mention Clem
Kenny
Kenny likes you OR mention family
EPISODE 5:
NO TIME LEFT
Cut off arm?
Is Lee alone?
Lee looks healthier
Lee looks more zombie-like
Christa AND Kenny
Kenny but not Christa
Neither Kenny nor Christa. Is Ben there?
Ben faints
Christa cuts off arm
Kenny cuts off arm
Lee cuts off arm
Vernon's group steals boat
Does Lee lose his temper with Kenny?
Lee throws bust at wall, revealing exit
Kenny throws bust at wall, revealing exit
Kenny dies helping Ben (?)
Kenny dies saving Christa (?)
Give up weapons?
Lee can tell Clem to use one on Stranger
Clem ambushes Stranger with lamp or punch
Does Lee kill the Stranger?
Lee strangles Stranger
Clem shoots Stranger
Does Lee ask Clem to shoot him?
Clem kills Lee before he turns
Clem leaves just as Lee dies
Clem heads out on her own (End of season)
GamesBeat

Annex D

Narrative architecture in *Bandersnatch*[4]



[4] Retrieved from https://www.ign.com/wikis/black-mirror/Bandersnatch_Endings

Annex E

Twitter responses: no good ending in *Bandersnatch*

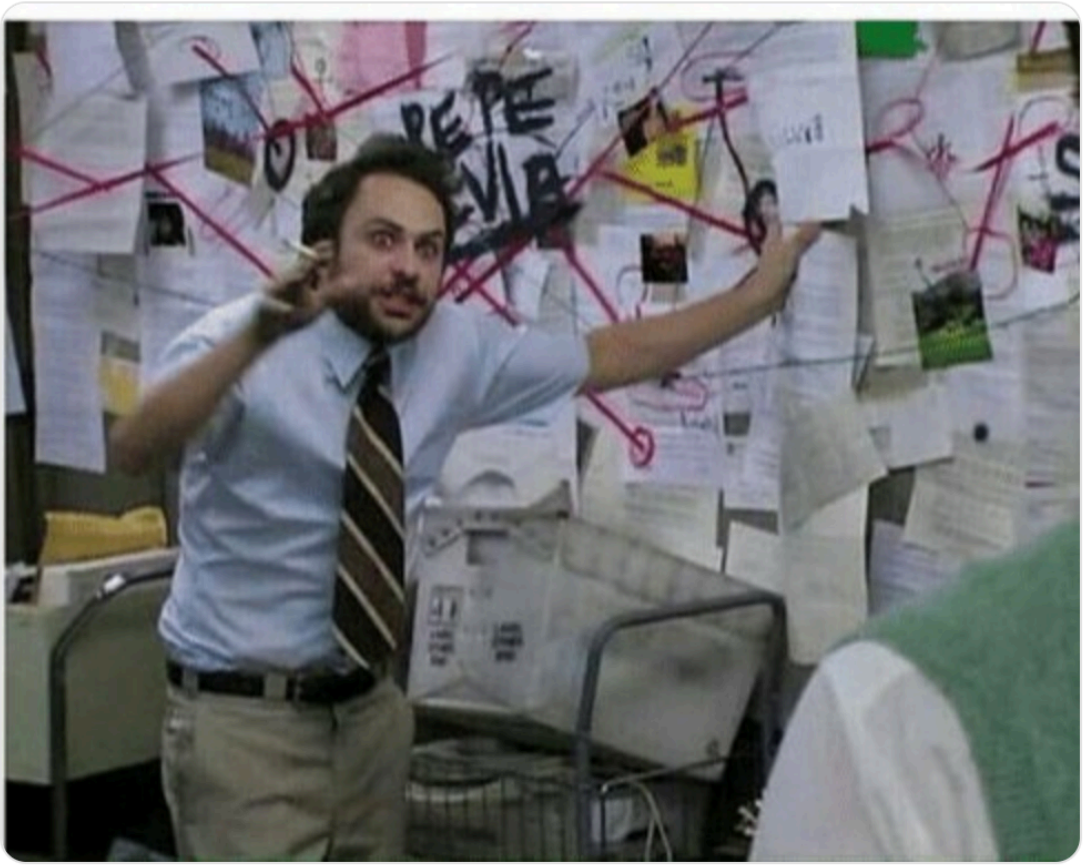

charl
@kennedywlsh
Volgen
black mirror @ me trying to give stefan a happy ending with no criminal record and a 5 star game #Bandersnatch
Tweet vertalen
meme searcher
0:01
111.991 keer bekeken
09:29 - 28 dec. 2018
916 retweets 2.983 vind-ik-leuks
12
916
2.983


Ellen Coyne @ellenmcoyne · 30 dec. 2018
If I'm so in control why can't I navigate Stefan through #bandersnatch and give him a HAPPY ENDING AND A NICE LIFE???
Tweet vertalen

Ahkwatic @ahkwatic · 30 dec. 2018

#Bandersnatch got me tryna find a happy ending like

Tweet vertalen



2 36 194

Lucy Ford @lovelucyford · 30 dec. 2018

I picked all the nice things on **bandersnatch** and I still ended up killing my dad like what are the other options

Tweet vertalen

5 9 84