ZOMBIE-BASED CRITICAL LEARNING – TEACHING MORAL PHILOSOPHY WITH THE WALKING DEAD

Tobias Staaby
Nordahl Grieg High School
Steinsvikvegen 430
Bergen, Norway
tobiasstaaby@gmail.com

"Today, I'm sitting in front!"

The rain taps gently on the classroom windows, the countryside of suburban Bergen slightly distorted by the accumulated drops. "Lars" eagerly takes a seat in the front row. He is a bright young man, although his attention is pitted against the alluring opportunities of web-based procrastination, or he relies too much on his wits and too little on keeping up with the curriculum. Today, however, "Lars" is *on*. He is engaged and ready to learn, because for the next three weeks, we are going to spend time with *The Walking Dead*.

Good ideas often inspire more a sense of discovery rather than invention. Such was the case when I came up with the idea of using *The Walking Dead* by Telltale Games as a learning tool in my unit on moral philosophy. I had my intuitions confirmed after an initial trial run late on the second semester of my first year of teaching. When I later started building the curriculum for

the final unit, it was like putting together a jigsaw puzzle that assembled itself.

At its heart, *The Walking Dead* is a game about how humans cope with difficult decisions in a world where the safety of modern society is torn apart and altruism is a virtue few can afford. The game's dilemmas synergize well with teaching moral philosophy, as its setting excels at exposing the inherent differences between deontology and teleology – whether an action is good in and of itself, or if the value of an action is dependent in its outcome. It robs us of the luxury of an "easy way out" or "doing what is right"; it demands that we make deep sacrifices on order to preserve our humanity and hold on to our moral virtues.

While none but the severely deranged would kill and steal for the right to take a selfie – the epitome of self-realization in the modern world – the primal need for food, water and safety can quickly devour humankind's civil side. In the fight for survival in the lowest levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the moral codes of justice and good become collateral damage.

There are no win-win scenarios in the world of *The Walking Dead*; reality is a zero-sum game at best, where one man's gain is another man's loss. The game constantly puts the player in dilemmas that inevitably have both good and bad outcomes: someone *will* starve, no matter how badly you wish there was enough food for everyone; choosing to save one person *will* result in the death of another. In a world where the walls separating good from evil are torn down, white will mix with black, and humans are left picking between different shades of grey.

The dead return

The Walking Dead by Telltale Games is a post-apocalyptic dystopian action-adventure game with a big emphasis on non-linear storytelling. The game comes in ten episodes across two

seasons, with two to three hours of gameplay per episode. Its cartoonish graphical art style has an almost euphemizing effect on the violence and brutality, where limbs are hacked off and skulls bashed. It gets its pedigree from the point-and-click adventure games of old, like the *King's Quest* and *Monkey Island* series. You control Lee Everett, the game's main protagonist, by clicking the mouse cursor on the object or person with which you want Lee to interact. You can also move Lee directly with the WASD-keys, or using a game pad. So-called quick time events sometimes interrupt gameplay, where on-screen prompts tell the player to press the indicated buttons as quickly as possible. These may appear when the player has to run away from a zombie, cave said zombie's head in with a hammer, or move a heavy object, and so on, allowing for a wide array of actions that gameplay mechanics do not necessarily support, giving the player a more cinematic experience.

Apart from these quick time events and moving around exploring an environment, the main gameplay mechanic is making various choices and decisions. These can be simple, like choosing what questions to ask, or more difficult, like choosing who to save in life-or-death situations. When the player has to make a choice, the game presents the available choices in two to four dialogue options. The variety and number of possibilities open to the player vary between situations and dilemmas, and options that will result in an action rather than a line of dialogue are marked in brackets, like [Hit him] or [Save Doug]. In certain instances, the player has limited time to make a choice, like when danger is approaching or other characters are having a conversation. A bar at the bottom of the screen indicates the time available to the player, shrinking in size as the window of opportunity closes. Failing to act within this window often results in the player, and Lee, not taking any action.

Gameplay wise, The Walking Dead is less complicated than many other games out there, although certain parts, especially the

quick time events, can prove difficult to players not used to such gameplay tropes. One of my colleagues who also teaches religion and ethics and whom I introduced to the game early last year, gave a slightly exasperated retelling of her first hours of the game, most of which consisted of her desperate efforts of running away from zombies, trying her best not to get bitten, followed by repeated failures of doing so. Fortunately, the teacher is not required to become a master zombie slayer, as students with more gaming experience can take care of most, if not all, of gameplay.

We first meet Lee, the game's main protagonist, sitting in a police car, presumably on his way to jail. A conversation with the officer at the wheel serves us bits and pieces of Lee's past – he has committed a serious crime, murder, by the sound of it. In this sequence, the game introduces us to its dialogue system, and we are given control of most of Lee's responses. As the car drives along the highway, a row of police vehicles driving in the opposite direction serve as an ill omen of what is to come, their numbers rapidly increasing, frantic messages sounding over the radio. A few minutes later, Lee's journey takes a turn for the worse – much worse.

After falling down the rabbit hole – the hole being the car colliding with a zombie and running off the road – Lee wakes up, dazed, confused and hurt in the back seat of the police car. The officer lies face down a few feet from the car, a trail of blood giving little doubt regarding his fate. The player now has more control over the protagonist, but still restrained by the handcuffs around Lee's wrists. After getting the keys from the (un)dead police officer, Lee is quickly cornered by zombies appearing from the surrounding trees. He makes a desperate dash over the forest floor, dodging zombies, rocks and branches, before clambering over a wooden fence and into a small suburb. When exploring a nearby house, Lee stumbles upon the game's second protagonist, a young girl named Clementine. Her parents are out

of town, their fate unknown, and her babysitter now among the living dead, Lee promptly takes Clementine under his wing, and they to become an inseparable pair for the most of the game's first season. From here, we follow Lee and Clem on their journey in a desperate struggle to survive in a world where the dead rapidly outnumber the living and choice always comes at a cost.

Zombie based critical learning

There are several advantages to using a game like The Walking Dead to teach a subject like ethics. These are not necessarily limited to this exact game or subject, and can with some modifications be made applicable to other educational situations. As Gee (2007) notes, critical learning requires learners to innovate and think about the domain at a "meta" level. In my experience, it is more difficult for my students to innovate and, equally important, formulate individual, original and independent solutions and answers to the tasks given to them when they have a strong conception that there is a "correct answer", or if they are working with material that simply doesn't allow or have room for individual interpretations. Enter the concept of zombie based critical learning.

We humans learn best when we learn through experiences. Stories help us remember and learn. Games let us experience the world though others' eyes, a trait that they share with other forms of media like books and films. However, video games also let us *act* through the voice, hands and feet of others, and thus creates an element of agency that other media cannot provide. Video games offer embodied experiences – through mechanics, aesthetics, dynamics, or any combination of the three – that let us ask questions that we would not be able to otherwise, or that would be less meaningful in a different contexts, and this is what makes them exciting learning tools. A tool is as interesting as what you can do with it. The premise and educational value of being able to ask "what happens if I do this?" should not be

underestimated. Of course, other learning tools and methods display similar experiences; role-playing, hypertexts, excursions and field trips, and experiments, but the wide array of different experiences that games can offer, as well as their many modalities and rich variety, enables me as a teacher to do things together with my students that would be impossible otherwise.

Learning does not come from gameplay alone. Jonas Linderoth (2012) points out that one should not assume that gameplay automatically results in new skills or knowledge. Guided instruction is important, also when using video games. In *TWD*, the player uses the same buttons to talk to people as to kill them. This vast amplification of input makes it impossible for learning to come from the mechanics alone. Rather, there is much more utility in the aesthetics: the way *TWD* simulates human interaction in complex moral dilemmas. Playing the game is therefore only part of the learning process.

"A game isn't automatically fun just because it's about pirates" (Squire, 2011), and the same goes for games about zombies. What separates the good games from bad lies in the polish of the game experience, not in the content (Squire, 2011). Games should not be substitute for guided instruction, as they are not as adaptive or sensitive to the individual student's educational needs and questions. Rather, games can provide a narrative framework aiding the construction knowledge. For games to be good learning tools, it is important for teacher and students to clarify and implement this knowledge though a debriefing, and together draw connections from the experiences from the game into genuine, real-world contexts. Nicola Whitton (2014) explains the benefits of using games as starting points for learning: "The framework of a role-playing or adventure game, for example, creates a setting in which challenges make sense and become meaningful within the context of the game". Using The Walking Dead as such a framework, learning becomes "not […] a set of abstract and unconnected tasks but as a meaningful and

purposive series of activities leading to an end goal" (Whitton, 2014). Rooting instruction and discussion in the dilemmas of TWD, learning becomes an interconnected whole, with the narrative of the game forming the framework of learning about ethical theories, as opposed to "abstract and unconnected tasks".

Furthermore, video games have a certain disarming quality about that take the "schoolness" out of school, which in turn creates a risk free, playful environment where there is not one right answer and the students are free to form and express their own hypotheses and opinions. This can be of special benefit for students normally afraid of raising their hands in class. When teaching with *The Walking Dead* (and other video games for that matter), I often find the class as a whole is more actively participating in discussions. Stig Andreassen, a master student at the University of Bergen, also reports similar findings in observing our classes play *The Walking Dead*. One of the teachers Andreassen interviewed reported that "the students had already started to use the philosophical terms within the field correctly in the first class, which she had not expected" and that "students who normally remain silent and disinterested spoke up and was engaged in the class" (Andreassen, 2015). Whether this is due to the novelty of commercial games in school, as discussed above, or the fact that *The Walking Dead* quite simply is a good game is difficult to conclude – my guess is that it is a combination of both.

Now, the key element to zombie based critical learning is this: the game provides an experience that is inherently different from what the student would expect in everyday life. This may seem counterintuitive at first, but this mismatch provides the student with acres of fertile, unbroken ground in which he or she can grow their own knowledge; it creates a wide space in which the student and innovate and become producers of new knowledge. Coming back to *The Walking Dead*, the game presents the students with dilemmas they most likely have not thought of

before, and this creates room for the innovation that is so crucial for critical learning. The game's post-apocalyptic setting lets us focus in the dilemmas and ethical theories themselves, rather than worrying about the moral implications of discussing abortion or capital punishment. Moreover, dilemmas like the latter two often come so heavily laden with baggage, having been discussed *ad absurdum* in the news media, to the point where there is little space left for innovation; the earth barren and unfertile.

In order to reach what Gee (2007) refers to as critical learning, learning how to "think about the [semiotic] domain at a "meta" level as a complex system of interrelated parts", they have to be able to abstract the core concepts of moral philosophy and apply them to other, real-world situations. In other words, they have learn how to connect the meanings of utilitarianism, relational ethics etc. from instances in the game to new instances in other contexts.

We can carry this concept over to other subjects – you do not need zombies to teach moral philosophy, or indeed other subjects – but the core if it remains. The mismatch between the contents of the game and the final learning goals of the subject is a productive mismatch, since this creates more space for the student to formulate creative and innovative solutions to a problem.

There is one final, important step to this learning process: debriefing what students learn during gameplay, and implementing this in real world scenarios. This is where critical learning comes in. Here, knowledge gained though or alongside gameplay is implemented in the real world, evaluation focusing in to what degree the student is able to abstract and implement this knowledge in contexts that are separate from the video game context.

Teaching with zombies – The Walking Dead and ethics

The basic structure of my *TWD*-class is like so:

The unit starts with a short presentation of the four ethical theories I want my students to learn: consequential ethics, ethics of virtue, relational ethics, and ethics of duty. Gameplay follows short, displayed on the classroom projector. Students do the actual gameplay, passing a wireless controller around among the class. Upon encountering a dilemma, we pause the game, and for the first four dilemmas, I give a short lecture on each theory, linked to a suitable dilemma demonstrating the nuances of the theory at hand. I then ask my students to discuss how to solve the dilemma based on the theory just introduced. I talk to the individual groups and summarize the various arguments before we put the solution to a vote. I create a poll using an online survey tool called *Kahoot* (getkahoot.com), which allows each student vote anonymously with their cell phones or laptops. Whatever alternative gets the most votes is the one we act on in the game. When we have gone through all the ethical theories and the students have "unlocked all the skills", as it were, and they are free to use any theories they find suitable for each dilemma.

It can take as much as thirty minutes from the moment the game starts to the point we encounter the first dilemma. Some teachers (and indeed some students) might object to spending this much time without any actual learning taking place. However, I find this a necessary investment for the experience to become meaningful, and to develop a close bond to Lee and Clementine. Without such a bond, relational ethics becomes all but irrelevant, and players will probably treat the two protagonists with less empathy than they would after getting to know them over the initial minutes of the game.

After a dramatic encounter with the living dead, Lee and Clementine arrive at the farm of an old man, Hershel Greene.

Hershel is immediately suspicious of Lee, and proceeds to inquire about his past. This faces the students with two options: Should Lee cloak his past in the veil of a white (grey?) lie, or come clean and confess? In this dilemma, I introduce them to ethics of duty and Kant's categorical imperative. We judge the moral value of the act based on whether the act is good in and of itself. Most of my students concluded that it is not in keeping with ethics of duty to lie, since lying in and of itself is regarded as morally wrong.

In the next dilemma, the player has to decide whether to save Duck, a young boy, or Shawn, a young adult. Here, I introduced my students to consequential ethics and utilitarianism, asking them to base their decision on this ethical theory. Here, many of my students argued that Shawn is much more useful than Duck, since Duck is a young boy who is physically weak (and, according to some of my students, really *really* annoying), while Shawn is strong and of much more use. On the other hand, other students argued that we should save Duck, since we're depending on his family to give us a ride away from our current location, thus arguing from an egotistical consequential perspective.

An important part of the unit is analyzing the overview of how the player choices look in comparison with other players worldwide, presented at the end of each episode. Consider the following figure, which is a screenshot of what my latest class of students decided to do in each dilemma of episode 1. Notice that while most players, along with my students, have chosen not to lie to Hershel and to save Carley, the three dilemmas in the middle are much more evenly balanced. What can we conclude from this? My class and I agreed that the first and last dilemmas are a bit easier than the others: we have little to gain from lying to Hershel, and Carley got chosen over Doug simply because she is more useful than him; she is a good shot and physically fit, while Dough is a tech geek who is a bit on the heavy side. The three dilemmas in the middle, however, present the player with

having to choose between different shades of grey, as the values in each dilemma are very evenly weighted. My class also noted that the different ethical theories gave widely different solutions, depending on whether the given theory was deontological or teleological in nature. This led my class to conclude that there isn't necessarily an obvious right or wrong answer to an ethical dilemma, it all depends on your moral standpoint.

Figure 1: The result of my class' latest playthrough of The Walking Dead episode 1

My students sometimes expressed frustration over the fact that some of the dilemmas in TWD results in the same outcomes no matter what you do. To this, I answer that the actual consequence is not as important as the reflection the dilemma itself provokes. As Stephen Beirne points out in discussing saving vs. harvesting Little Sisters in Bioshock: "the fact of the dilemma as a (effective) framing device establishes it as meaningful, as impactful on narrative, regardless of consequences" (Beirne, 2014).

The final element in the unit is the last part of zombie-based critical learning: the debriefing and implementation of the learning goals of the subject matter. In this part, the game is no longer a part of the learning process. Instead, I arrange the

students into groups, and ask them to pick from a list of real world dilemmas, or choose their own. Now that the core knowledge is in place, the students are prepared to tackle contemporary issues with the right toolset, like abortion, capital punishment and euthanasia, for instance. I evaluate them based on how they are able to abstract knowledge of ethical theories acquired during gameplay and apply these models and theories, how they compare and contrast the theories against each other, and how independent they are in doing so.

Too many mouths

Venturing deeper into the ethical and pedagogical possibility space of TWD, I wish to spend some paragraphs exploring one of my favorite dilemmas from the games. In this particular conundrum, taking place in the beginning of episode two of season one, Lee, Clementine and the rest of the surviors have taken shelter in an abandoned motor inn. Cars, dumpsters, bits of plywood and rusted sheet metal serve as impromptu walls, lining the perimeters of the inn. Bringing back two survivors from the episode's first encounter, Lee and his companions, Mark and Kenny, are greeted by a shocked and frustrated Lilly, scolding Lee and the others for bringing two more survivors, one badly injured, back to the safe house. The groups' supplies are already stretched thin, and they simply cannot cope with any more survivors, especially if they are dead weight that cannot contribute to the group's survival. A heated argument breaks out, and an exasperated Lilly, who until now has been in charge of handing out supplies, hands this responsibility over to Lee, refusing to bear the burden this time around.

Now it is up to Lee and us as players to decide: who gets to eat, and who has to go hungry for another day? There are nine survivors, eleven if we include the two newcomers (one who is passed out and unable to eat on his own), but only food enough to feed four. Who should get to eat, and why? Should we feed

the young and innocent kids? Should we feed Larry, the grumpy old man who carries a deep grudge against us? Larry may be old, but he's built like an ox and is responsible for maintaining the lair's defenses, and will need to keep his energy up. Or should we feed his daughter Lilly, to see if we can't get him to come around? What about the adults who are on hunting duty, shouldn't they get a bite to eat, so they'll have the energy to provide for the rest? Or should we use the food to forward our own selfish motives? Carley sure seems to have taken a liking to Lee, after all…

While most require the player to choose between two to four alternatives, this has a far greater range of solutions, and one can argue for and against feeding each survivor using all the different ethical theories. We can take the utilitarian approach and feed the ones who need energy to be the most useful to the group, such as Larry, Mark and Kenny. A common deontological norm is to provide for the women and children first – Clementine and Duck, and Katja and Carley. Relational ethics would also argue in favor of Clementine, her safety and well-being is Lee's and our responsibility, after all. Lilly has been under a lot of pressure lately; the virtue of fairness would certainly dictate that she gets to eat. Mark surely also deserves something, it was he who shared his food in the first place. It's possible for Lee to feed himself as well, although, wouldn't that be committing the vice of selfishness? "Gotta keep my strength up too…", Lee mutters, as he pockets the last piece of jerky.

The list goes on and on, and many of the survivors stand on equal ground when all the arguments and moral theories have been considered. So who did my students pick? Let's have a look at the statistics. This table displays the voting results in five of my classes. My students discussed in smaller groups, and each group voted on the four survivors they decided deserved to eat.

Table 1. The result of five classes voting on the second dilemma of TWD episode two, season one.

Who gets to eat?	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
Lee	50 %	23,10 %	47,10 %	50 %	50 %
Clementine	70 %	100 %	76,50 %	80 %	88,90 %
Carley	60 %	76,90 %	41,20 %	20 %	55,60 %
Mark	40 %	69,20 %	76,50 %	50 %	38,90 %
Larry	5 %	7,70 %	0 %	10 %	5,60 %
Duck	55 %	69,20 %	47,10 %	40 %	72,20 %
Kenny (Duck's father)	40 %	23,10 %	70,60 %	50 %	22,20 %
Katja (Duck's mother)	15 %	0 %	41,20 %	30 %	27,80 %
Lilly (Larry's daughter)	20 %	23,10 %	17,60 %	50 %	55,60 %
Stranger #1 (Ben)	0 %	7,70 %	5,90 %	10 %	5,60 %
Stranger #2	15 %	0 %	0 %	10 %	0 %

One survivor stands out like zombie in a cornfield: Clementine came out on top in all five classes. Other lucky winners are Duck, Carley and Mark, but poor Larry is as unpopular as the two strangers (one who, remember, is mortally injured)!

It would seem that relational ethics takes precedence over all the other theories, even consequential ethics, which arguably is of

most utility when one's survival is at stake. Ethics of virtue and duty can explain why Carley, Mark and Duck get such a high ranking as well, while possible justifying why Larry has to go hungry for another day.

Long Road Ahead

In conclusion, I will remark that basing learning on an immersive, engaging experience that is immediate and accessible to a majority of the students is a great benefit for many types of learners. Being able to practice recent knowledge in meaningful, interactive environments is an opportunity our students get all too seldom. Having played *The Walking Dead* together gives us an experience we can always come back to, talk about and reflect upon. Moreover, the knowledge that my students have gained in tandem with a gaming experience seems to stick a bit better than facts without such an experience – it seems to promote learning retention. More research is required to conclude if my anecdotal claims have any validity.

Good video games are all about the experience, and I postulate that the same goes for good learning. Video games, when used correctly, can provide a context that makes for just that, and can be a great benefit for students and teachers alike. Preferably, the gaming experience and the learning experience should be interwoven, but one should not replace the other, and I can't stress enough the fact that learning does not end then gameplay does; rather, the gaming experience is the *beginning* of learning.

I still bump into my old students from time to time, and they all tell the same story: "keep playing The Walking Dead in your classes, that's the one thing we remember!". While I certainly hope that more of my teachings stay with them after they graduate, the stories they and the excitement they tell them with does more than warm the heart of a young teacher who's only been in the game for three years.

Good games make for good experiences, and I delight in sharing these with my students. I do not know if my students learned "better" than they would with more conventional methods, but to me that's not the point. To me it's all about creating good learning experiences for my students, and to make sure that what I teach my students stay with them for the years to come. And if zombies truly are the ultimate tool for learning about moral philosophy, then so be it.

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