

Playing Dead: Transmedia Pathos and Plot in *The Walking Dead* Board Games

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Abstract

In a rapidly converging media environment, the relationship between games as ancillary products to a narrative core franchise generally problematizes conceptions of transmedia coherence. Almost by definition, media-based board games cannot influence transmedia narrative development. If games are not narratively consequential, can they even be considered transmediated?

In this article, I argue that to integrate board games into a transmedia franchise requires a more inclusive view of the concept of transmedia storytelling. Previous analyses of transmediation, most taking their cue from Henry Jenkins canonical 2003 definition, articulate the term as a plot-based aspect of narrative. However, integrating games into a transmedia franchise means opening up the term to include affect and pathos as additional components of narrativity. I conclude that the affect of individual audience members generated via character pathos is an important and relevant aspect of game/story transmediation. Using *The Walking Dead* board games as case studies, I extend research into transmediation as it portends a more affective transmedia environment.

Keywords: Transmedia, Transmediation, Adaptation, *The Walking Dead*, Board Games, Graphic Novels, Television, Pathos, Narrative.

In 2011 both Z-Man Games and Cryptozoic Games released board games based on *The Walking Dead*; one for the graphic novel series (Kirkman 2003) and one for its television adaptation (AMC 2010-present), respectively. Both games reference their core text in the artwork and style, and both develop from an explicit association with the requisite text of each medium. The game based on the comic, *The Walking Dead – The Board Game* (Z-Man) is a complex game using multiple dice, cards, and character options to develop a play experience that, I argue, *transmediates* the emotional pathos experienced by the characters in the graphic novel. Pathos itself is generated by affective actions occurring to a character in a media text. In this sense, the graphic novel board game (GNBG) generates unique player affect, opening up the definition of transmedia storytelling to include player affect as a constituent element. In contrast,

The Walking Dead Board Game (Cryptozoic) is a relatively simple board game played to mirror the narrative experience of the show. The fact that the television board game (TVBG) reflects the narrative trajectory of the television show presents an *adaptation* of the narrative rather than a transmediation. In other words, each game based on *The Walking Dead* franchise takes a different approach to the source material, GNBG taking a character-centric approach, and the TVBG taking a narrative-centric approach. In the former case this is realized in the gameplay as a transmediation of pathos and in the latter it becomes an adaptation of narrative. This seemingly minor shift heralds a major change in studies of transmediation.

The existence of two board games, each based on the same core text but developed via two different media, offers a relevant opportunity to investigate

alternate versions of transmediation within nominally similar media texts. As I will go on to show in this article, transmediation (the spread of unique narrative information throughout multiple media texts) and adaptation (the mirrored translation of one media text into a different medium) both reflect similar concerns when it comes to board game versions. Transmediation of games requires both the active participation of the audience as well as recognition of key attributes of the core medium. In other words, the players of the game must actively generate narrative meaning, but that meaning becomes based on the particular affective experience of experiencing the original text. This process relies on a conception of transmedia that develops interactively from both author and audience, both creator and player.

In literature about transmedia, we are encouraged to see it through a thoroughly plot- or story-oriented perspective. Yet, a structural analysis of narratives reveals that different aspects of a narrative can be transmediated in different ways. Some of these aspects include static existents, like character, setting, or plot. Other aspects would fall under what Marie-Laure Ryan (2012) calls dynamic categories, including the development of character relationships. For example, Christy Dena (2004) notes that a 'storyworld' role in cross-media franchises might develop a character more thoroughly than a core text would have time for. Television scholar Jason Mittell (2012-13: 48-56) has shown how different types of transmediation can function in television texts, including what he terms 'What Is' and 'What If' transmedia on television. 'What Is' tend to focus on expanding the storyworld through augmentation, while 'What If' tends to deepen the world as it already exists through paratextual media context. Although both *The Walking Dead* board games exemplify Mittell's conception of 'What If' transmedia stories, the comics-based game deepens the world through *pathos* while the TV-based game deepens the world through *plot*. Both games play on their connections to their core text, but do so in radically different ways.

By participating in the game, the player/character experiences the level of pathos engendered by *The Walking Dead*. In this article, I'm using the term 'pathos' to refer to the emotional appeal that a text can make to its reader. Both *The Walking Dead* texts,

television show and graphic novel, create specific appeals to audience emotion. But each game based on those texts approaches this level of pathos differently, and the relationship between the players and the characters become less invested in the overall *Walking Dead* narrative and more invested in the relationship between the players/characters themselves. To be an effective survivor, one must be part of and apart from the group. The players find themselves discovering that same sense of purpose. This is transmedia, but it's not a general transmediated narrative – it's a transmediation of affect, of deep and experiential emotion.

I will argue, through analyses of the games' mechanics, character interaction, and artwork, that to exist in a transmediated relationship with the core text, board games must not adapt *plot*, but rather must transmediate *pathos*. First, I will discuss transmediation as it has traditionally been applied to narrative. In trying to transmediate the television narrative, the TVBG ends up relegating the character-based affect generated by the television series in favour of focussing on plot-driven narrative adaptation. Then, I will discuss what I term 'transmedia pathos', an emotional connection between transmediated texts, as it applies to the graphic novel and the game based on it. In its attempts to transmediate pathos, the GNBG develops gameplay affect. I am defining 'affect' here as the way that emotions are generated through the game. In other words, the game based on the comic does not replicate a narrative situation, but rather places the player in the same situations and with the same type of pathos as the comic book characters.

Transmedia and Adaptation

Licensed board games based on or adapted from previous media entities tend to be perceived negatively. David Parlett, author of *The Oxford History of Board Games* (1999: 7), describes them quite pejoratively: 'essentially trivial, ephemeral, mind-numbing, and ultimately [of a] soul destroying degree of worthlessness'. Botermans, Burrett, van Delft, and van Splunteren, in their encyclopaedic *The World of Games* disregard the entire genre, writing that 'they are readily available commercially and rules of play are always included in the game' (1987: 180). Often

perceived as synergist means of capitalising on the popularity of a blockbuster film or popular television show, board games based on media products exist in a more complex relationship with the main text than other ancillary products do – they both problematise and exemplify the relationship between media culture and reception strategies surrounding the main text. Derek Johnson (2013) argues that while this type of media franchising, an industrial process by which a media text may be replicated across multiple cultural contexts, may be looked down upon at times, it is also the result of longstanding economic concerns: the existence of a popular media text makes it ready-made for franchising through ancillary products like board games. Johnson's analysis of media franchising investigates these industrial and economic shifts; in contrast, I hope to explicate some aesthetic and textual concerns of ludic franchises.

Specifically, by examining the tension between transmediation and adaptation within board game franchising, I hope to develop new ways of understanding instances of ludic variation of a media text. Transmediation describes the spread of unique narrative information throughout multiple media outlets. That is, one story is dispersed across multiple outlets, so that only by encountering multiple media can one story unfold completely. The two *Walking Dead* board games overtly problematise narrative coherence, but they also expand, deepen, and augment the narrative world through individual player associations with the core text. Yet, narrative is itself composed of many attributes, and detailed investigation of those attributes may reveal the many and varied ways that texts can cohere in a transmediated fashion, for example, through audience participation, emotion, and interactivity. As Edward Branigan (1992: 17–20) notes, viewer emotional response to a narrative often develops from interpreting multiple (and nonlinear) associations between these dynamic elements. For example, in *The Walking Dead* graphic novel, the character of Jim becomes emotionally relevant (and thus using affect to generate pathos) because the story of his family – killed in front of him by zombies at the start of the outbreak – deepens and extends his past into his present (see also Zakowski 2014). As I will show, the two *Walking Dead* board games use different mechanisms, including game

mechanics, character identification, and aesthetic connection, to generate narrative affect through the gameplay and increase player pathos.

In traditional interpretations of transmediation, media scholars have tended to examine these outlets' relationships as based in narrative storytelling. Although often associated with digital media (Booth 2010; Clarke 2013; Evans 2011; Gillan 2010; Jenkins 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green 2013), transmediation can also be traced to Greek myths and Biblical stories as well as literature like Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Ryan 2012) and Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos (Price 2009). The term 'transmedia storytelling' was first posited by Henry Jenkins (2003: 3) to describe a narrative network where 'integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience'. As he later (2006: 95–96) writes in his influential definition:

In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics, and its world might be explored and experienced through game play. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained enough to enable autonomous consumption. That is, you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice-versa.

Narrative scholar Marie-Laure Ryan (2012: 3–4) has described two different types of transmedia storytelling. 'Snowball' storytelling consists of a core narrative that becomes so popular – e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* – that it inspires multiple products to be created after its release. *The Walking Dead* as a franchise fits into this schema, as the original comic (first published in 2003) was not designed as a transmedia from the get-go, but slowly added additional products as it developed. Robert Kirkman's comic *The Walking Dead* (2003–present) details a post-apocalyptic world from the vantage point of a number of survivors of a zombie plague. The comic's popularity was ensured in 2010 when Frank Darabont developed it into the highly-rated cable television series (2010–present). *The Walking Dead* television series is quite deliberately an adaptation of the graphic novel, as evidenced by the first season which follows the first

few issues of the comic relatively closely, although as Fischer (2011) describes, there are important differences, like the development of Shane's character, that shape our understanding of each (see also Jenkins 2013). As it has progressed, the show's narrative has diverged from the comic's more and more.

Transmedia narratives that are deliberately designed to use multi-media from the start, or what Ryan calls 'system' storytelling, often are versions of alternate reality games, which depend on active player interaction (see also Abba 2009). Both types of narratives involve transmedia extensions, or 'elements ... dispersed across media and which fans have to collect in order to recreate an encyclopaedic knowledge' of the story (Bourdaa 2013: 5). *The Walking Dead* board games are complicated extensions to transmedia franchises, as they play what Christy Dena (2004: 10) might call a 'storyworld role', or the sense that they do not provide a 'primary source of information about characters, setting' nor does it 'play a direct role in the unfolding plot'. Rather, these storyworld texts 'allow ... the fictional world to be accessed in the real world through character identification'. In short, *The Walking Dead* games generate affect towards characters through player interaction, developing the world rather than the original narratives.

As corollary of transmedia storytelling, adaptation describes how one narrative is translated from one medium to another. In other words, it is not one narrative told through multiple channels, but rather one narrative mirrored in a different medium. In effect, the narrative is doubled (with the caveat that any shift in medium signals some original material). An adaptation, as film critic Dudley Andrews (1984: 96) describes, remakes and matches an original text's 'sign system to prior achievement in some other system'. Adaptation is the translation and reproduction from one system to another, what Linda Hutcheon (2013: 3) describes as 'stories ... taken from elsewhere, not invented anew'. But just because the story may be borrowed, doesn't mean the adaptation necessarily lacks originality: according to Cartmell (2010: 20), adaptation will 'rewrite the story for a particular audience'. Part of the pleasure of adaptation comes, Hutcheon argues, from 'repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise' (2013: 4). In other words,

adaptation differs from transmediation in the fact that an audience member of an adapted story may find new elements to a familiar plot, but with transmediation, will find new elements with each medium shift.

In the case of *The Walking Dead* board game, for example, the pleasure of adaptation lies in noting specific aesthetic similarities as well as recognising moments of balance between adherence to a narrative and departure from it. We recognise familiar characters and scenes – an image of Carl on a card or a scene of the protagonists attacking zombies – as an aesthetic connection to the original text, but the game play mechanics allow us to play with that narrative world in ways unanticipated in the original storyworld. In the GNBG we can ever travel to locations, like the airport, that the characters in the graphic novel haven't. A ludic adaptation can never reproduce precisely the 'sign system' of the original narrative but this does not have to be a limitation; rather, elements within that sign system that themselves signify larger narrative developments can be adapted. Indeed, Scolari (2009: 587) notes that transmedia storytelling 'is not just an adaptation from one media [sic] to another. The story that the comics tell is not the same as that told on television or in cinema'. And as Brookey (2010) argues, the adaptation of film to a video game rarely matches the style and tone of the original. Board games make adaptation even more difficult – while a board game can include the same representations of characters, locations, and props as the original text, it will rarely match precisely the events as they occurred on screen or on the page, given the fluidity of gameplay. And the two *Walking Dead* games make this adaptation more different still, as the TVBG is itself an adaptation of an adaptation.

Board games are rarely analysed in terms of transmediation, although many canonical definitions of transmedia describe video games as one of the main nodes in the storytelling network (Jenkins 2006; Gray 2010; Johnson 2013). Video games fit into a transmedia paradigm because they 'fit within a much older tradition of spatial stories' (Jenkins 2004: 122). This hyperdiegetic sense of narrative – that there is a sense of more world than can be experienced in any one text (Hills 2002) – fits the spatial organisation of video games. As a text with vast environments and

worlds for the characters (and the audience) to explore (Gwenllian-Jones 2004), *The Walking Dead* franchises have featured video game transmedia extensions and adaptations. Indeed, in 2012 Telltale Games' video game based on *The Walking Dead* franchise was released as a hyperdiegetic extension to the series: it details the first few weeks of the zombie infection (scenes both the television series and the graphic novel have left deliberately vague). In contrast, the physicality of board games tends to limit them to non-hyperdiegetic roles in narrative, as the expansive world of video games (or of cult narratives generally) are difficult to replicate in physical spaces.

As Montola (2012: 314) notes, citing Pearce (2009), video games and other 'virtual worlds have more in common with ordinary life than with board games'. As Zagal, Rick, and Hsi (2006: 26) have shown, while video games involve complex interaction with multiple technologies, contexts, and mechanics, 'the nature of board games implies a transparency regarding the core mechanics of the game and the way they are interrelated' – a transparency that makes unique changes to external narratives difficult. Yet, Zagal, Rick, and Hsi (2006: 28) actually use board game mechanics to generalise about video games, and it's relevant that they focus specifically on an analysis of *The Lord of the Rings* board game – not seen in a transmediated relationship with the core text, but rather as a 'themed' spin-off of the books. As seen in a connective relationship with a core text, board games can generate new dynamics within narrative interaction; as Wilson (2007: 91–92) illustrates, focusing on things that board games are good at, like face-to-face communication and tactility, allows board game designers to give each game a unique identity, 'a certain feel'. Transmediation allows individual texts to develop sections of the storyworld, each one 'contributing to a larger narrative economy' (Jenkins 2004: 124).

For Ryan (2012: 6), a storyworld transmedia franchise develops through a 'static component that precedes the story, and a dynamic component that captures its unfolding'. These static components include characters, existent items, rules, or other underlying existents. The dynamic components include physical events that change the existents or mental events that give those existents significance. Static

elements remain stable from one text to another; Rick and Carl are two characters that will be in all versions of *The Walking Dead*. Dynamic components can change the trajectory of the particular iteration of the narrative within the specific text; in the comic, antagonist Shane dies very early on in the narrative, but in the TV show, Shane survives far into the second season. The dynamism of Shane's existence clarifies and separates the two iterations, lending weight to Shane's death in both.

Translating a television series or a graphic novel to board game form requires what Ryan (2012: 3) notes is 'transmedial adaptation' – the use of those static elements combined with interactively generated dynamic components. Both *The Walking Dead* board games make use of static elements adapted from the prerequisite text: main characters who have to find supplies and clear locations of zombie infestation, encounters with the undead along the way. The GNBG dynamic component is original to the game; it places those characters in new situations that further develop the affective relationship between the player of the game and those characters, transmediating that text's pathos. In contrast, the TVBG's dynamic component – the situations that each character/player encounters – mirrors moments from the television program. The TVBG does not develop its dynamic elements, instead focussing on reflecting the plot of the show.

It is not my intent here to get mired in the 'narratologist/ludologist' debate within game studies (see Aarseth 1997; Frasca 1999; Frasca 2003; Jenkins 2004; Pearce 2004), which (in simplified form) tends to examine games as either narratively-based or inherently play-based. Rather, I agree with Zimmerman (2004) in noting the ways both narrative and play are deployed within games as being instructive in and of itself. As Ryan (2012: 25) writes about the transmediation of *Star Wars* from film to game, 'its plot is one of countless stories that tell about a fight between good and evil. What makes the *Star Wars* storyworld distinctive is not the plot but the setting'; in essence, transmediating board games replicate setting but at the expense of plot altogether. As I will show with *The Walking Dead* board games, such replication can indicate either transmediation or adaptation, depending on the relationship between the

game mechanics, character interaction, and appearance of the game.

Walking Dead Zombies and Playing *Walking Dead*

To analyse both *The Walking Dead* board games, we must look at the participation of the game players as part of the game experience. This is an inherently difficult proposition, as Montola (2012: 313) suggests:

play is a temporary and ever-changing social process that can only be analyzed as a whole in retrospect. Participants obtain different pieces of information during the play, and no participant can ever accumulate all the information related to a game.

Yet, it is necessary to assume standard 'play' attributes in order to generalise about the mechanics of the games for the players. There are some standard elements in *The Walking Dead* that make this analysis slightly easier. *The Walking Dead* relies on audience affect, what Bishop (2011: 10) terms 'dramatic pathos', to engender a connection to the characters. Both the comic and the television series reflect this, as Bonansinga (2011: 55) notes: 'the spiritual centre of the comic series – a human story laying out amid all the gore – translates well to the intimate confines of television'.

On the surface, it would be relatively easy to ascribe value to one or the other games – it's a 'good' game because it is only sort of like the TV show, but a 'bad' game if it is too much like the TV show: the 'uncanny valley' of transmediation, or the 'pasted on theme'. Such determinations might be useful for a critical conversation about ludology and the 'ludological dissonance' (Hocking 2007) that narrative-based games engender. However, it's not my intention to argue that one game is 'better' than the other; rather, evaluative judgments allow us to probe deeper in the mechanisms of transmediation itself. After all, the effectiveness of transmediation as a concept must somehow relate to the effectiveness of transmediation as a narrative form, at its heart an evaluative construct.

The generative process of game-based pathos emerges from player empathy for character.

Empathy, itself a term reliant on the lexicographical development of 'pathos', is what allows players to feel emotion within a fictional world and for fictional characters. As Salen and Zimmerman (2006: 27) show, the complex relationship between game player and game character generates affect in game players by giving them 'permission to play with identity'. This pathos translates particularly to the GNBG. Indeed, while many of the same characters are present in both games, only the close connection between the player and the character in the comic-based game engenders a transmediation of affect. In other words, the GNBG generates *transmedia pathos* through the character attributes and the player investment in the unfolding of the game.

In order to examine the salient differences between the two games, I will focus this analysis on three elements: the gameplay mechanics, the player/character interactions within the game, and the artwork of the game. Through an investigation of these elements, I'll show how the GNBG functions through transmedia pathos and how the TVBG functions through plot adaptation. The point of this comparison is to illustrate how transmediation can be enacted through board games, but only by tapping into what Pearce (2005: 3) describes as 'Aristotelian notions of empathy'; in other words, how the player/viewer's pathos connects to the characters'.

Mechanics

The game mechanics of the GNBG allow for creativity in how one plays the game through more random elements and more freedom to choose options, in contrast to the TVBG, which focuses more on replicating story experiences from the show. Through the gameplay mechanics, the GNBG's individual player actions can affect the outcome of the game. This allows players to become invested in their own choices while not remaining tethered to the plot of the comic. In contrast, the TVBG offers a more closed system that limits player interactivity through forced choice. This allows players to experience a set narrative, akin to watching a television episode. The freedom to make complex decisions within the GNBG encourages an affective relationship between players and characters, highlighting a transmediated connection with the original text. Conversely,

the TVBG features a more static, less interactive game; players have fewer options and follow a more pre-determined route through the game. While not unusual for a mainstream board game, such dynamics encourage passivity in the players and engender a closer reflection to the original text.

Specifically, the differences in the gameboards themselves offer a useful heuristic by which we can evaluate the mechanics of the game. In the GNBG, the gameboard is expansive and multi-spaced. Each space is hexagonal and players can move in any of the six directions (see Figure 1). Players can choose to move up to three spaces at a time, or additional supplies allow more movement if deemed necessary. After moving off a space, however, zombies populate that space, and the board gradually becomes filled with the undead. The game is highly randomised, both in terms of objectives and in terms of gameplay. The players have thirteen objective locations, only four of which are open at a time. As soon as one location is cleared of zombies, another is randomly selected. When encountering zombies, players roll multiple dice – sometimes as many as ten – in order to defeat or survive the attack. Supplies can be found

throughout the game, and can be used in multiple ways. Additionally, players can interact with other players in various ways – some randomly selected cards force player interaction, either through fighting or through ethical decision-making. In one memorable moment from a game I recently played, my opponent drew a card that asked him to decide whether or not I gained supplies – if I did, he would also get supplies but I might be closer to winning. Players, however, can also cooperate, working together to defeat massive numbers of zombies, especially useful when walking past the hoards created by the ones that spawn on vacated spots. In short, at each point in the game, players are encouraged to make decisions that not only impact their own character's survival, but the survival of other players as well. Players can follow multiple paths, and become invested in what others are doing. In no way does this mirror the *narrative* of the graphic novel – the specific scenes and adventures that take place in Kirkman's books are not mentioned, and only the static elements of the series exist in the game. The dynamic elements are those created by the players themselves, using their own decision-making to affectively design their play



Figure 1: Section of hexagonal gameboard for *The Walking Dead* graphic novel board game. Image by Paul Booth

experience.

The GNBG encourages players to revel in their own created world of *The Walking Dead*, effectively transmediating the feeling that one gets from the comic. Following the exploits of the survivors of the zombie apocalypse, the graphic novel is more akin to a melodramatic soap opera than to a horror story (Fischer 2011). For example, protagonist Rick is knocked unconscious before the zombie apocalypse, and awakens as it has already reached its zenith. Set out to find his family, he eventually finds them in the woods with a group of other survivors – his wife having had an affair with his best friend, Shane. Although some of the narrative involves killing zombies, the majority of the graphic novels' violence depicts characters fighting against each other, as the character Negan demonstrates with his barbed wire wrapped baseball bat. Other scenes depict characters falling in love with each other like Rick and Andrea (Bishop 2011), having intense sexual relationships, like Tyreese and Carol (Vossen 2013), and raising children, like Rick and Carl (Steiger 2011). For example, the characters of Glenn and Maggie provide a lot of melodramatic story to follow, as they meet, fall in love, and eventually must deal with Maggie's depression and Glenn's eventual death. As Bonansinga (2011: 60) notes, *The Walking Dead* graphic novels tell the story 'from inside the characters, and the power comes from an accumulation of detail'. As McCloud (1993: 63–69) describes in his critical work *Understanding Comics*, the nature of comics as a medium invites audience connection. This feeling of being connected to the characters and situations, of having an emotional stake in their survival, is what is transmediated in the board game. As a component of narrative, this describes a participatory and interactive element of pathos, rather than a specifically formalistic element of plot.

The gameboard for the TVBG is quite different from the GNBG, and illustrates how the TVBG attempts adaptation rather than transmediation. In contrast to the hexagonal spaces of the GNBG, the TVBG has a linear board – squares connected in a particular path. Players can move forward or backwards, but must progress in one direction or its reverse. The objectives of the game are also static – at each corner of the square board are four locations

that must be traversed. At each objective, characters must defeat zombies, a task that relies on the 'supply cards one has drawn in the past. Supply cards have numbers on them, and players must play a higher number than the number of zombies that are attacking, itself generated via drawing an 'encounter' card.

The TVBG encourages players to follow situations that exist in the TV show. For example, encounter cards have specific scenes described from the show written on them, and so each encounter references a specific event from the show. The 'Out of Reach' card features an image of Merle stretching to grab a gun, just out of his grasp. This card alludes to a scene in the first season of the show when Merle is handcuffed to a pipe and attacked by zombies. In this, the TVBG does not present the game as 'new narrative'; rather, it adapts narratives that already exist on the show. The static nature of the game, and the relative inflexibility of player choice in how the game progresses, means that players are not particularly emotionally connected to the story – it has already played on television, and we are just playing it on the tabletop. The TVBG functions as adaptation, not transmediation, through its particular game mechanics.

Character

The GNBG generates emotional connection to the text through the application of pathos in character development. This connection helps to engender a sense of transmediation within *The Walking Dead* comic franchise. In contrast, the TVBG subordinates character development in favour of narrative progression. This subordination helps to develop a sense of adaptation within *The Walking Dead* television franchise.

In an online interview (Morgan 2011b), Keith Tralins, creator of the GNBG, reveals how he designed the graphic novel game to focus less on narrative and more on character interaction and empathy:

Our approach to the game was really focused on creating an experience based on 'The Walking Dead'. It's Robert Kirkman's world, and this is a chance to play in his world, with his rules. It's actually about finding a safe haven from the zombies... Just like in the book...[characters are] usually

only fighting zombies to defend themselves, get to where they have to go, or secure a location.

As Morgan (2011b) elaborates:

the game's mechanics encourage player actions that are in line with the subject matter and theme. This is what separates rich gaming experiences from abstract strategy, and where the label 'pasted on theme' is applied to games which fail in the endeavor.

The idea of a 'pasted on theme' reflects a pejorative reading of games that are created simply for synergistic reasons. In contrast, the creator of the TVBG, Cory Jones, notes how the TVBG was developed to capture the narrative tension of the television series: 'The goal for me was to play up tensions, because it seems the drama lives in the tension' (Morgan 2011a). Character pathos seems less the focus than following a series of events to structure a single narrative. It's not that affect is completely effaced in the TVBG as opposed to the GNBG, but the emphasis on adapting static narrative elements of the television series precludes the transmediation of the dynamic narrative elements. The TVBG seems focused on constructing an adaptation of the series while the GNBG seems to develop a transmediated approach to character affect.

As audiences feel emotional attachment to characters, the empathy for those characters can translate as the character is displaced from one medium to another. Characters are what Ryan (2012) calls static elements, but the particular pathos engendered by characters can be dynamic; indeed, one element that Ryan elides in her structural analysis of transmedia narrative is the audience, and the particular affect generated by audiences of a cult program. Jones (2007: 74) notes the pleasure that audiences can feel at piecing together a transmedia 'puzzle':

part of the allure of such cross-platform 'intermediation' is the viewers' or players' pleasure at following the 'hacks' or media repurposing created by the game, seeing different media crossed and re-crossed in order to use the network as the platform for a larger, unstable, paratextual structure.

But Jones is here writing about the affect experienced

non-diegetically, the 'pleasure in experiencing the media crossings in real time and physical space'. Rarely is affect itself discussed as an element of narrative that itself can be transmediated.

One exception to this narrative affect is the aforementioned *Lord of the Rings* board game. Designer Reiner Knizia (2004: 22) created the game as a way of articulating, describing, and emulating the character-based pathos within Middle Earth rather than the narrative of Tolkien's books. As he describes 'more important [than the story] was the feeling of the world. The true focus of the book was not the fighting, but more personal themes – the development of each character's sense of self as they attempt to overcome adversity'. In this game Knizia (23) generates feelings of transmedia pathos via the cooperative mechanics of the gameplay; that is, players have to cooperate instead of compete.

To understand games as part of a transmedia franchise, then, game characters need to do more than just tell the story; they must illustrate relationships as well. In *The Walking Dead* comic and television series, many characters interact differently when paired with other characters. In both texts, Rick tends to be more protective when near his son Carl; in the comic, when Carl is kidnapped and threatened with rape, Rick kills all of them and in the show he avoids letting Carl enter into violent fights. This characteristic is mirrored in the GNBG, as each character has a special ability that is only tuned when a relationship is shown. For example, if the player holds the character card for Rick, he/she only gets her special power (an extra roll of the die and an ability to experience additional fatigue) if Carl is also part of the players' team. This focus on character-dependent traits illustrates a particular complexity in the pathos of the GNBG, and the fluid mobility of character types across the game.

In contrast to the GNBG, the TVBG does not devote as much attention to character development as it does to narrative fidelity. For example, the TVBG features only the six main characters from the show, and no special relationships are revealed in the gameplay. In an online interview with Morgan (2011a), TVBG creator Cory Jones describes the: 'interplay between the characters themselves ... that's a hard abstraction in some ways and very dependent

on who plays what character. I didn't want to create a situation where I pick my character because you picked a certain one'. The creators of the TVBG seem to have adapted the semantics of the show as a way of generating corporate synergy (see Brookey 2010). Characters are given less 'freedom' in the TVBG than in the GNBG; they have fewer attributes and players have less of a chance to make decisions based on those attributes. Fewer creative interactions with the characters reify the character's original nature from the television series, rather than augment it through player collaboration. Players invest less in characters they have less control over. Although each character has a unique trait, this special ability can only be used once per game, and thus limits the perception of difference between characters.

The TVBG includes an attribute not in the GNBG: Players commonly lose their encounters before securing all the objectives. When this happens, the player's character is turned into a zombie for the rest of the game. The play changes and the zombies attempt to attack the other players. When two players are turned into zombies, the game shifts again as all players form two teams – Team Zombie and Team Survivor. The objective for Team Zombie is to defeat the other players. The objective for Team Survivor is to secure the corner locations. Because of this fundamental switch of character, the reliance on any one particular character isn't as meaningful as it is in the comic game. Jones describes the character shift as:

When you die, you become a zombie. You are still playing on the board, but your hand goes away and is replaced with new zombie cards ... You are playing against the remaining players and trying to kill them, so we emulate the strange dynamic from the show where some of the characters do die and they have to be put down.

The TVBG forces a change in characterisations, reducing the engagement a player has for a character. A zombie loses all the cards, abilities, and powers gained throughout the game – to play as a zombie means giving up the character one has worked for. If you're playing as Rick and you change into a zombie, you no longer care if the character Rick wins because he no longer exists in the game. The disappearance

of identity may be a good philosophical debate for zombie-themed media, but it reduces the level of investment one might have in their character. If all the attributes disappear, there is no incentive to develop. In other words, although both games have you playing as a character, the time spent becoming emotionally invested in the GNBG character reveals closer ties to winning the game while the TVBG reduces incentive for viewing the character in a more complex way.

As Riley (2011: 82) suggests, the work of any zombie text lies in defining what it means to be a person; a key component of media-based board games is the way that character and player interact in a form of avatarism. That is, zombies themselves always straddle the line between 'human' and 'in-human'. The horror of the tale isn't just that hoards are attacking, but the intimate loss of humanity such zombie hoards represent. In the GNBG, the players are people - the living, the survivors. In the TVBG, in contrast, the endgame loss of humanity is adapted literally – the players *are* zombies, blindly following the formulated rules and randomly generated cards. Essentially, each character is the same in the TVBG, making the game an adaptation rather than transmediation.

Art Work

Within each of the games, artwork functions to connect the game to the core text. For example, in the GNBG, all the art was commissioned and newly created by Charlie Adlard, the same artist for the majority of the comic books (Dietsch 2011). All the art draws on the same aesthetics as that in the comic. The presence of new artwork within the game builds player affect, encouraging greater consumption of the elements (cards, gameboard, inserts) of the game as an addition to the storyworld of the comic, not a replication of it. As Morgan (2011b) notes, all the artwork:

stays true to the look and feel of the comic book. The first and most obvious way it goes about this is by embracing the black and white color scheme. While not completely devoid of color, the game's style is a bit jarring for the average gamer. However, for fans of the comic, it is a spot on design choice.



Figure 2: Scrounge Card: *The Walking Dead* TV Board Game (TVBG). ©Cryptozic Entertainment; ©AMC

Conversely, all the artwork of the TVBG is constructed of either advertisements for the show or still images from the show. For example, on an 'scrounge' card (which players draw frequently), there might be a still image of Darryl holding an axe, although Darryl is not available to 'play' as a character (see Figure 2). The artistic elements of the game (mainly on the cards, but also on the character information boards as well) encourage players to reconnect to the original text by reflecting the original text. Each image adapts scenes from *The Walking Dead* television show through replication, not through origination.

Character quotations from the series are added to the images, further reifying that connection. Players aren't creating their own stories; they're reliving stories that already exist within the world of the television series. In this way, the TVBG adapts the television show; it does not transmediate.

Additionally, the cover of each game mirrors the other, both seemingly based on an advertisement for the AMC TV Series (see Figure 3). The advertisement helps to sell the connection between the graphic novel and the series, showing not only the similarity between them (characters share clothing, poses, and diagrammatic relationships) but also that one 'reflects' the other. Notably, however, the antagonist zombie at the centre of the image is from the television program – both groups of survivors appear to be aiming at the televisual undead, reifying the television series as the more viscerally authentic (as would benefit an advertisement for the television series). Yet the connection between the comic and the television show is made explicit through the direct reflection of the two images (see also Jenkins 2013).

The image from the TV series that graces the cover of the TV game was created in 2010, as described by Woerner (2010). Bringing together all the main characters from the first season of the television show, it prominently features protagonist Rick Grimes, pointing his gun towards the left, his son Carl behind him to his right, and his wife Lori behind Carl (see Figure 4). Further characters – including Rick's best friend/rival Shane, sensible everyman Dale, sharpshooter Andrea, her sister Amy, and master scavenger Glenn – are also depicted.

The two board games came out in 2011, a coincidence noted by Morgan (2011b), writing on the



Figure 3. Original 2010 Advertisement for *The Walking Dead* TV Series. ©AMC.



Figure 4: *The Walking Dead* TV Board Game (TVBG). ©Cryptozoic Entertainment.

MTV Geek! Blog, and the comic version features the inverted, mirror image of this cover as taken from the television advertisement (see Figure 5). Protagonist Rick is holding his gun in his left hand (in the comic, his right hand has been severed from his arm) while his son Carl peeks from behind Rick's back on his left. Shane, separated from the group slightly on the far right, mirrors his distance from the group on the left in the TVBG image. An exception to this mirror image is Amy. In the original advertisement (Figure 3), she is mirrored on both sides; she is the closest character to the centred zombie. In the TVBG image (Figure 4), Amy is placed identically, on the far left of the box. In the GNBG image (Figure 5), Amy has been moved, now also on the far left of the box. Crucially, then, Amy is the only character placed similarly on both images – and Amy is the only character that dies at the same point in both the comic and the television series. Canonically, she is mirrored in text as well.

Examining the aesthetics of each of these board games allows us to not only interpret how the games are being marketed and sold to audiences, but also how they are being positioned within the media franchises themselves (Johnson 2013). The TVBG reveals a close connection to the television program, mirroring images that already appeared or

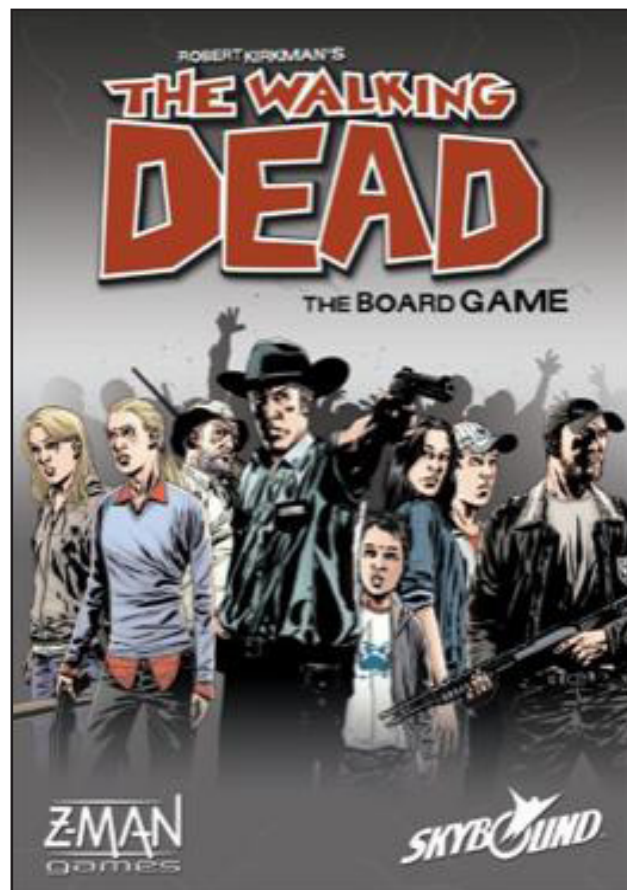


Figure 5: *The Walking Dead* Graphic Novel Board Game (GNBG), ©Z-Man Games

re-appropriating those that might have referred to different elements within the show (e.g., the Scrounge cards illustrate characters engaged in activities that appeared on the television program but the cards' copy narrates a different intent). Similarly, the GNBG hews close to the aesthetics of the original graphic novel, but augments those aesthetics with original drawings, as if the game reflected the spirit of the comic.

Conclusion: Playing the Dead

If transmedia storytelling is becoming a major marketing and creative aspect of television entertainment (Clarke 2013; Evans 2011; Gillan 2010; Johnson 2013) and the digital media environment (Booth 2010; Booth Forthcoming; Jenkins 2006), then it behoves us to examine other avenues it begets as well. This includes both focussing on ancillary products that are not normally considered narratively significant, like *The Walking Dead* board games, as well as delving more deeply into the aspects of narrative that constitute narrative storytelling. As we refine our understanding of transmediation, it becomes a more critical foundation of contemporary media studies, allowing new opportunities and creative potentialities in media production.

Board games can become part of the transmediated media environment, but must be designed to augment more complex aspects of the media franchise than just plot. Remediating the plot of a television series, *The Walking Dead* board game based on the show becomes an adaptation, an ancillary product that, at least in appearance, seems to exist as promotional material rather than expansion of a storyworld. In contrast, *The Walking Dead* board game based on the graphic novel series becomes part of a transmediated experience, drawing on the pathos of the characters' adventures as depicted in the comic. The game, while drawing on the aesthetics of the comic, maintains a unique identity that focuses on player affect and emotionality.

In other words, transmediation occurs not just when narrative elements are dispersed throughout multiple media, but when emotional connection is as well. In this analysis, I've shown that adaptation highlights the repetition of key narrative elements from one medium to another, whereas

transmediation highlights encounters with new narrative elements across multiple media outlets. Splitting transmedia narratives into their constituent elements reveals multiple ways that stories could be spread across outlets. As Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013: 133) describe, this split allows producers of transmediated stories 'to prolong audience engagement with media texts in order to expand touch-points'. On one hand, media producers find transmediation to be a lucrative franchising endeavour. Derek Johnson's analysis of media franchising points out that this 'inter-industrial franchising ... across the social and industrial context of multiple media industries' helps to fuel the production of multiple ancillary products across media (2013: 45). The media industries find within transmediated products a profitable structure.

On the other hand, it's not just the media industries developing transmedia outlets: audiences are an integral part of transmedia franchises as well. Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013: 140) see transmediation as intimately tied to viewer engagement, stressing 'the importance of relationship building' between producers and audiences. When audience pathos is removed from the game/text transmediation, more than just empathy is lost. The potential to deepen and enrich the storytelling world does as well. In any cross-media transition, according to Cover (2010: 71):

an audience might take bits and pieces from several related narratives told in multiple media in order to form a full view of a particular story. As audiences, we increasingly decide which versions of stories to accept...while each medium gives us certain advantages, certain affordances that shape the telling of the story, texts work together to form a more complete view of a storyworld, characters, and even plotlines.

In this view, transmediation isn't about the renegotiation of storytelling elements, but rather the interactive mechanisms by which audiences construct and develop those stories outside the realm of authorised interpretations. Integrating board games into this interactive space allows more empathy and pathos to grow within transmedia franchises. For a board game to emulate the plot of another text is adaptation; for a board game to produce emotional connections akin

to those of another text is transmediation. Board games can transmediate, but not through story; rather, they transmediate through pathos.

Notes

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