Colonized Morality Mechanics: The Struggle to Be Good in Telltale's The Walking Dead

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Abstract

Zombies have a long and fraught history in the media as products of colonial rule. They have frequently represented white anxieties about slave uprisings, the Orient, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, socialism, and more. Telltale's The Walking Dead *game introduces an element to the zombie narrative that we rarely see: Black and brown protagonists. With protagonists like Lee, Clementine, and Javi, the narrative shifts from one in which a white hero beats back hordes of colonized subjects to one in which the nonwhite protagonist must fight back against and survive attacks from the colonized self while also contending with non-zombie antagonists. On the surface, these narratives look like they're about survival as a nonwhite person in an apocalypse brimming with racial tension and subtext. However, if we look more closely at the role of Telltale's signature gameplay and choice mechanics, it becomes clear that players—in the shoes of marginalized protagonists—are not actually striving to survive; they are striving to be good. The players' choices are expressive, and players are often forced into moral dilemmas that serve as pivotal story beats, suggesting that morality is what the characters involved should be concerned with. The only means that players have of evaluating their own goodness are the in-game judgment of other characters and the out-of-game comparison of their choices to those of other players. Telltale puts players and protagonists in a uniquely oppressive situation, in which the struggle is not simply in staying alive, but in being good while nonwhite and suffering.*

Author Biography

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Zombies are everywhere in the U.S., especially in our visual media, and few zombie franchises have been as iconic as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012). These monsters have a long and fraught history in our country as products of colonial rule, and a long and often overlooked archive of criticism and scholarship has followed zombie stories, exploring the ways in which the figure of the zombie operates as a stand-in for the colonized other in various contexts that primarily serve the uses of white creators.

The concept of the zombie as we know it originated in Haitian slave communities prior to the 1800s. To many of these Caribbean slaves, a zombie was a "mindless slave risen from the dead by evil magic," and often it was thought that these soulless bodies were raised from the dead to perform labor in the fields (Moreman & Rushton, 2011). Over time, this concept evolved and became tied to Vodou beliefs and culture (which itself emerged as a combined product of various African beliefs), which have oft been co-opted and misrepresented by white America. Initially, the zombie was a symbol of the suffering of subjugated slaves, but that symbol was quickly stolen and repurposed to serve the uses of colonialist artists. As a colonial construct rather than an element of slaves' internal culture, the figure of the zombie disempowers the colonized subject, which Raphael Hoermann asserts in an issue of *Atlantic Studies*: "The figure of the zombie seems to re-enslave the Haitians [...] The zombie embodies the slaves' utter alienation, their total lack of freedom and the loss of all their rights" (Hoermann, 2016). A distorted version of the Vodou zombie eventually found its way into the first ever mainstream zombie movie in 1932: White Zombie. Since then, white creators have been using this monster as a metaphor for their anxieties about Black revolutions, slave uprisings, the Orient (Hamako, 2008), international conflict, and more. Media in the U.S. has a long history of using zombies to represent a marginalized, animalistic other and pitting them against a white hero who represents dominant culture.

Protagonists of color disrupt the mainstream colonial horror/fantasy in which a white protagonist quells an uprising of zombies and perhaps finds a way to stop the zombie virus from spreading. This is part of what makes Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series so compelling; with protagonists like Lee, Javi, and Clem, the story becomes one about navigating a battle against the symbol of the colonized self instead of solely the colonized other. With this premise come weighty, absorbing questions: What does it mean to kill the colonized self? What does it mean for the undead colonized self to kill the living? What happens if non-white protagonists are forced to struggle against the undead, who may symbolically resemble themselves more than their living white counterparts do? These are questions we rarely grapple with in mainstream game narratives (though films like *28 Days Later* and *Night of the Living Dead* have explored this territory before), and the *Walking Dead* franchise gives us an opportunity to explore them in a substantive way. It would be both possible and fascinating to follow these questions to their many conclusions, but there's another key component at play that Telltale has established for their Black and brown protagonists in the game, and it's the thing that sets it apart from the franchise's comics and TV shows: interactivity.

On the surface, Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series seems to be about the survival of nonwhite protagonists in a zombie apocalypse brimming with racial subtext, but survival is not exactly what the mechanical elements of the game are pushing players to strive for. While each episode certainly demands that players fight against or flee from dozens of zombies in order to preserve their characters' lives, the primary mode of interaction is Telltale's signature choice mechanics, which complicate interpersonal relationships and ethical standpoints within the game far more than they impact the characters' ability to survive. The result of the emphasis on moral dilemmas and interpersonal judgement is that the player spends most of their time trying not to survive, but to *be good*.

Telltale's choice mechanics are well known in the games industry and have become something of a touchstone for narrative interactivity in adventure games. At frequent intervals throughout each episode of *The Walking Dead*, a prompt for interaction appears, mapping several different dialogue options (and sometimes actions) onto four buttons. Much of the time, the prompt is accompanied by a timer represented as a rapidly shortening line—when the line disappears entirely, either a choice is made for the player or the protagonist continues in silence. In the opening hour or so of many Telltale games, including the first hour of *The Walking Dead*'s first episode, a prompt appears informing the player that "silence is a valid option."

This assertion, however, is a questionable one—in many cases, silence is not an entirely valid option when faced with dialogue options and a timer, because responding with silence often requires the player to restart from a prior checkpoint. "Valid" is the word doing most of the heavy lifting in Telltale's tutorial phrase, because while silence and waiting out the timer are almost always available choices, they sometimes result in the death (or undeath) of the protagonist. In the *Walking Dead* universe, any human who dies without experiencing severe brain damage turns into a zombie shortly after their death. The protagonists of these games can die in a number of different ways as a result of their silence. The most common of these is a bullet to the head (saving them from an undead fate), but several don't involve any head trauma at all. This means that when choosing silence and letting the timer run out in a given dilemma, the protagonist is risking not just death but also the possibility of turning into a zombie. If a player disengages from the series of moral quandaries by refusing to pick from the authored options provided to them and instead remaining silent, they may be punished harshly by the game's system. That harsh punishment may come in the form of a singular violent death, or it may come in the form of turning the game's nonwhite protagonist into an overtly racialized and colonized monster.

Silence is treated as a "valid" but potentially deadly path in many Telltale games, and another important element of this choice mechanic is the way that it is framed—in and of itself, the mechanic doesn't differ much from any other timed set of dialogue options in any other adventure game, but the emotional weight of each decision and its interpersonal impact does. In an article on player agency, Sarah Stang (2016) elaborates on the unique criteria players

use to make their choices in *The Walking Dead*: "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." This establishes that the player is trying to be good not just in their own eyes, but in the eyes of the other characters in the game, as those characters impose their judgment on your decisions. Because of this, the moral dilemmas the Black and brown protagonists are placed in force the player to essentially perform respectability politics.

The term *politics of respectability* was coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in 1994 to describe an assimilationist method that Black Baptist women employed to contest racism and sexism. In her book *Righteous Discontent*, she wrote, "By claiming respectability through their manners and morals, poor black women boldly asserted the will and agency to define themselves outside the parameters of prevailing racist discourse.". When these ideas are juxtaposed with the context of *The Walking Dead* games, it's easy to see how these politics come into play quite blatantly in the first season, as one of the ongoing tensions in the first episodes is the obvious and racially driven disdain that one character, Larry, has for Lee, the Black protagonist. In order to become "respectable" in the eyes of dominant society, one must accept the norms that dictate what is and is not respectable—for Black Baptist women, that meant aspiring to white, middle-class American ideals of morality, and for the Black and brown protagonists of *The Walking Dead* games, that means aspiring to the ideals of morality dictated by the NPCs in the game (and, by extension, the [mostly white] writers who created them). An article in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication called *Performing a Vanilla Self* supports the idea that respectability politics are essentially a tool of colonialism: "Respectability politics reinforce designations of appropriate or inappropriate behavior rooted in structural inequality" (Pitcan et al., 2018).

The beginning of *The Walking Dead* includes a disclaimer: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play" (Telltale Games, 2012). Many have argued that Telltale has failed to follow through on that promise (Favis, 2015), but regardless of the truth of the quote, it nonetheless encourages players to take every decision seriously with the understanding that the narrative reacts to their choices; if the narrative reacts, then their choices must *mean something*, and it is thus possible for the player to believe that they can strive to be good.

Sometimes, when a player makes a particularly fraught or impactful decision using the mechanic described above, a popup like this appears on screen informing the player that one or several other characters will remember the player's choice: "Clementine will remember that" (Telltale Games, 2012). This phrase is especially effective in signaling to the player that a specific decision will be referred back to later in the story. However, the blurb has further implications—this handful of words makes players feel seen, and usually not in a good way. This text is what makes the game's circus of respectability politics so pervasive, by making

the player feel both watched and judged on an omniscient yet ambiguous level. When players read it, they come to realize what it means for the game series to adapt to the choices they make. They realize that not only is the game tracking their decisions, but the characters are as well.

The fact that the characters remember decisions, combined with the fact that they often later react to those decisions in volatile ways, communicates to the player that the other characters are passing judgement on the choices they've made. This effectively makes the player feel as though their choices are indeed shaping the progression of the narrative, but it goes further in ways that the player may not consciously recognize. The text says that a character will "remember that" but fails to clarify textually what "that" even is. The player reads the statement and may assume that, as an extension of the game, the characters are adapting to their choices. The ambiguity of the word "that" makes it seem that the characters are not only aware that the player is making a choice, but also that they may be aware of all the possible options the player is presented with. Within the game world, this is something that the characters cannot possibly know—do we, in the "real" world, have knowledge of the options available to those around us at any given time? Are we always aware of the times when momentous decisions are being made? The dynamic established by the simple disclaimer "[Name] will remember that" gives the player the impression that the characters in this story have some level of omniscience, that they are perceiving not just the choices that the player makes, but also the choices they are not making. This makes their judgement doubly powerful and additionally oppressive. The Black and brown protagonists of these games are being constantly watched and evaluated, not just by the game's systems but also by their in-game peers. This is a level of judgement that is entirely one-sided; the player and protagonist do have the ability to pass judgement on the other characters in the game, but not omnisciently—they are only ever aware of other characters' singular actions and not all the possible actions they could have taken at any given moment.

Something that compounds upon the pressure put on the player to be good is players' natural inclination towards "goodness" in choice-heavy games. Amanda Lange (2014) published an article with the Journal of Games Criticism that analyzed the way that players engage with moral choice systems in games based on a survey of over 1,000 gamers. There is a reason the article was titled "You're Just Gonna Be Nice," and it's because Lange consistently found that a majority of gamers chose to be "good" or "heroic" in games that allowed them to pursue "good" and "evil" routes. What's more, Lange also found that 69% of survey participants had ever felt guilty about an act they committed in a game. Players not only strive to be good, but also feel guilty about acts they may deem bad. When they fail in their pursuit of goodness, they recognize that there are emotional consequences to that failure. The player's drive to be "good" is a necessary foundation to enable the overtones of respectability politics to colonize the morality of the games' Black and brown protagonists, because they strive to be good by appeasing the NPCs around them.

It's worth noting here that "good" or "heroic" and "bad" or "evil" have no clear definitions in the present article or Lange's, though Lange does describe at length the general kinds of acts that might fall into categories of "good" or "evil." Telltale games are also particularly interested in this moral ambiguity, however (as Sarah Stang and many others have pointed out), and often force the player into moral dilemmas with no clear "correct" or "good" answer — thus making it difficult for the player to follow any natural inclination they may have towards niceness. A simple example of this takes place in season one of *The Walking Dead*: In the shoes of Lee (the protagonist of the first season, a Black man who was on his way to prison when the zombie outbreak disrupted everyone's plans), players must decide to save one of two characters from a zombie attack—it is impossible to save both. One is Carley, a news reporter from Atlanta, and the other is Doug, an IT technician. Both have travelled with Lee for some time prior to this decision point in the game. In choosing whom to save, there is no clear "good" or morally pure answer. Saving a life is generally perceived as good; letting someone die is generally perceived as bad. The player must do both in order to proceed, which brings us to another unavoidable fact of playing *The Walking Dead* and any other moral choice system (and of life itself): It is impossible to act in a way that is entirely morally pure or good. The series is full of impossible choices like this, and Telltale is known for putting players in the midst of moral dilemmas in many of its titles, including their *Game of Thrones* (2014) series and *The Wolf Among Us* (2013). And, in fact, the developers themselves acknowledge that they situate the player in "no-win situations where each decision is morally grey" (Keyes, 2012).

The tension of each choice the player makes and the pressures of respectability politics in these games are further heightened by the knowledge that other players are making different choices. At the end of each episode, the player is able to view the percentage of players who made each choice at critical moments in the game. This means that, after playing through an episode and making the choices that they deem most appropriate for the situations they encounter, players can compare their own decisions alongside those of others, contextualizing their own moral logic within the choices of the masses. These choice recaps are an even more direct tool for respectability politics than the judgment of in-game characters. Players' actions and choices in moral dilemmas are literally compared to those of others, and they can see when they have gone against the moral majority, so to speak.

The Walking Dead games enforce colonial ideas of morality on players in both diegetic and nondiegetic forms, through semi-omniscient NPC judgment and display of choice percentage breakdowns, respectively. And as previously established, if the player chooses to disengage from impossible moral dilemmas by having the protagonist remain silent, they risk death and the possibility of turning into a monster borne from colonial rule.

What's worse is that, even having done everything possible to be "good" in the eyes of other characters and dominant society and the self, all the player's attempts appear to ultimately be futile. At the end of the first season, players must make one last tragic decision: let the

protagonist turn into a zombie, or tell his surrogate daughter to put a bullet in his head to escape. Those are the only two possible endings to Lee's story. To make it to the end of the game, the player must engage in trials of respectability politics that are relentlessly judged, only for the protagonist to become a racialized monster or die. In the end, it is impossible for the Black protagonist to win.

The choice mechanics in this series reinforce aesthetics of respectability politics and belabor the moral value of oppressed characters' actions instead of that of the forces that are oppressing and threatening them. *The Walking Dead* is far from the only series to do this, though its setting against the backdrop of the zombie apocalypse and its Black and brown protagonists make it particularly ripe for analysis when it comes to race and colonialism. Other prominent adventure games like *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015) and *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018) are equally intent on putting players in control of marginalized protagonists and then forcing them into moral dilemmas where they inevitably face judgement for their choices. This focus on the marginalized individuals' struggle to "be good" in constructed moral dilemmas prevents these games, which seem to be concerned to some extent with identity and politics, from making larger and more comprehensive critiques on the systems of power with which they often engage.

However, I would be remiss not to discuss the ways that *The Walking Dead* developers chose to grapple with its history of moral dilemmas and judgement in its final season. As short-sighted as it is to focus on judging characters' and players' ability to navigate fabricated trolley problems, it would be equally short-sighted of me to only critique the ways in which *The Walking Dead* fails its Black and brown protagonists without exploring the moments in which it introduces complexity to that dynamic, particularly in its final season.

Given that *The Walking Dead* was Telltale's flagship game, finding a way to end the series was a monumental task, and the developers met the challenge by introducing new elements and ideologies to a series that had previously been relatively set in its ways. They did this primarily by introducing A. J., a six-year-old Black boy protagonist who was born after the zombie apocalypse began and a key focus of the game (though not a player character). In the shoes of the iconic protagonist Clementine, players choose how to raise him and shape his values throughout an ongoing struggle to survive. This may sound familiar, as season one put the players in the shoes of Lee as he tried to raise and protect Clementine, but the dynamic is drastically different this time around—unlike Clem (and the player), A. J. has no preconceived notions of normalcy outside of his apocalyptic landscape, nor has he inherited cultural notions of morality outside of those communicated to him by Clementine. He is (at times) mercifully free from the respectability politics that *The Walking Dead*'s characters are constantly enforcing upon one another. A. J. sincerely questions the truths that the series has held for so long: Is it bad to enjoy killing someone that is intent on doing him harm? Are Clementine's own ideas of good and bad still relevant or practical in this state of the world? Do they really matter?

A. J.'s pragmatism and disinterest in guilt surrounding his drive to survive offers a breath of fresh air to the series, and the presence of his attitude begins to deconstruct some of the cultural norms that had been integral to the series. While A. J. advocates for the necessity of violence, he is balanced out by an advocate for radical pacifism: James. James was living in D.C. as a young boy when the zombie outbreak began, and he later joined a violent survivalist community that disguised themselves as zombies to survive. However, when Clementine and A. J. meet him, he lives in isolation and refuses to participate in violence against humans or zombies. He spends most of his time communing with "walkers" and still disguises himself as one of them, using their skins as masks and gloves, while also taking action to protect the zombies and guide them out of harm's way. Beyond that, he offers the player an opportunity to see them as he sees them, letting Clem take on his disguise and mingle with the zombies in the barn that he maintains for them. James's affection for zombies also pushes back against some of the colonial conceptions of the monstrous figure—he encourages the player to question whether zombies are inherently worse than the humanity they know and recognize, or if perhaps they are better and more honest than the living in their way of existence.

Of course, both of these new ideological stances are met with judgement by other characters and sometimes the player as well, depending on their choices, and James and A. J. come into conflict with each other regularly. In addition, other characters still pass intense judgement on Clementine, and by extension the player, based on A. J.'s actions and hold her accountable for the violence he commits—*The Final Season* questions and adds nuance to the game's existing frameworks, but it doesn't stray far from its roots.

However, in its conclusion, it does imagine a less morally tortured future for its Black protagonists, and Telltale writer Mary Kenney articulated part of the intent behind *The Final Season*'s happy ending:

> AJ needed to learn that there's joy to be found and protected, too. The way to do that was to let him keep Clementine, and to let Clementine finally build the home that had been denied to her since we found her hiding in a treehouse. (Kenney, 2021)

Unlike every other season's ending, this one is not morally fraught; it was not intended to force the protagonists to confront the bloodshed caused by their choices. No matter what Clementine or the player choose, both get to walk away from the carnage with some semblance of peace and even joy after a journey full of suffering.

Telltale took a relatively common theme in choice-based adventure games—a fixation on morally grey choices and consequences—and built a series around it that brought colonialist attitudes toward race to the forefront. *The Walking Dead* is a textually rich subject for criticism because of the many ways that moral judgement, racialized monsters, and nonwhite protagonists intersect and interact, albeit largely to the detriment of characters of color. In

the world of *The Walking Dead*, colonialism is inescapable for nonwhite protagonists thanks to a relentless pressure to be good in the eyes of the game's systems, its characters, and the player. Until the final chapter, these protagonists' only options are to strive to assimilate, become a colonized monster, or die.

However, it is worth extrapolating beyond this single example to address the rising wave of adventure games featuring marginalized protagonists. The industry would do well to resist the urge to put players in the shoes of underdogs and then demand that they agonize over whether they meet an external or internal standard of moral goodness, a tired means of policing the way that they fit into dominant culture, and instead look toward futures where marginalized protagonists are free to explore their choices without constant judgement and punishment.

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