Comic Books, Video Games, and Transmedia Storytelling: A Case Study of The Walking Dead

Charlie Ecenbarger, Ball State University, Muncie, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

This article illuminates the transmedia storytelling techniques in The Walking Dead comic book and video game. Telltale Games’ The Walking Dead localizes itself within the comic book world of The Walking Dead by acting as a transmedia storytelling device and using intertextuality comics to assist game players with meaning-making. By participating in the game, Telltale rewards players with additional information about The Walking Dead universe, as well as creating a contingent but separate narrative that expands upon the existing Walking Dead world. This exploration of The Walking Dead offers insights into the specific methods that are being employed by creators to further engage the audience in the transmedia storyworld.

KEYWORDS
Comics, Convergence, Intertextuality, Paratext, Transmedia Storytelling, Video Games

INTRODUCTION

Transmedia storytelling is becoming an effective way to engage audiences (Jenkins, 2007). Transmedia storytelling, sometimes referred to as transmedia narrative, is the technique of telling a single story across multiple platforms (Rutledge, 2015). For example, Marvel has tied together their recent movies with their television show, Agents of S H I E L D (2013), and players of the new online role-playing game, Defiance (2013), can influence events in the television show (SyFy, 2015). Another example, and the focus of this essay, is The Walking Dead comics and video games. The franchise began as a comic series in 2003 and since has spawned video games, TV shows, board games, and more. Much of this media acts as its own autonomous entity; however, the comic series and Telltale’s The Walking Dead (2012) have adopted the use of transmedia storytelling to further the narrative started by the comics. This essay will illuminate how The Walking Dead (2003) comics and Telltale’s The Walking Dead work in conjunction to create a multiplatform story.

Telltale’s The Walking Dead works to further the narrative originally presented, and still ongoing, by The Walking Dead comics. It does so by the strategic use of intertextual references and situating itself within the world that has been created in the comic book narrative. In other words, Telltale’s The Walking Dead borrows the comic book aesthetic, characters, and symbolic gestures in order to show the audience that this narrative expands upon that of the comic series. Furthermore, Telltale uses the transmedia storytelling technique of worldbuilding—“advancing fictional worlds that sustain interrelated characters” (Jenkins, 2007, para 5)—to introduce new but related characters to The Walking Dead narrative. That is to say, that while the game operates within the world created by the comics, it advances the narrative by focusing on new characters that exist in a different part
of the comic book world (Macon, Georgia oppose to Atlanta, Georgia). The purpose of this article is to critically explore these concepts in order to better understand the techniques deployed by Telltale Games and add to the body of work surrounding transmedia storytelling criticism.

The following article includes three sections. First, I will contextualize *The Walking Dead* by giving a brief history of the series and its rise in popularity. I will also provide enough information about the narrative of the comics and game to help illustrate this analysis. Next, intertextual theory will be employed to see how it can be related to transmedia storytelling; in particular, I will consider perspectives from Kristeva and Jenkins. Finally, I will offer insight into the intertextual methods employed by Telltale Games, such as aesthetic convergence and character convergence.

**THE WALKING DEAD**

*The Walking Dead* comic series debuted in 2003, seven years before it would win the Eisner Award for Best Continuing Series at San Diego Comic Con International. Since then *The Walking Dead* has been transformed into multiple media platforms, including television, video games, books, webisodes, and board games (Skybound LLC, 2014). The comic book and the television show have been recognized for their success and have also been critically acclaimed, and in November 2012, Telltale Games began releasing *The Walking Dead* episodic adventure video game.

**Transmedia Defined**

Transmedia storytelling is one of the most widespread business strategies of media corporations (Scolari, 2009). Transmedia storytelling helps producers extend their brand across multiple platforms to reach a wide variety of audiences and engage them further in the world. That is to say, those who have played the *The Walking Dead* video game may not have read the *The Walking Dead* comics, however, an additional audience was reached by extending the story and creating a transmedia artifact (the video game). In addition, the readers of the comic could be further engaged in *The Walking Dead* world by playing the video game. In the words of Henry Jenkins, “transmedia storytelling practices may expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments” (2007, para. 7). From a business perspective, creators of *The Walking Dead* franchise could argue that the demographic who is invested in their comic book and the television show is also the demographic that, by in large, plays video games, particularly as video games are a $7 billion business (Gray, 2010).

It is important to note that the television series and related webisodes do not operate within the same narrative as the comic book series and Telltale’s video game. Indeed, each piece of media locate themselves within the general franchise of *The Walking Dead*; however, the narratives for the television series and webisodes do not intersect or even take place within the same narrative universe as the comics and game. In other words, comics and the game are telling a separate story that is autonomous from the television show and webisodes.

**The Walking Dead Comics and Games**

I argue that *The Walking Dead* comic books and Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* video game are a transmedia storytelling experience that unfolds through an intertextual and paratextual relationship between the two narratives. The game provides additional narrative about the comic book world by following characters in Macon, Georgia oppose to the characters from the comic books who are in Atlanta, Georgia. Seeing that the game’s narrative operates within a pre-existing world that was built by the comics, the game acts as a true transmedia storytelling experience. Furthermore, Telltale
Modular Game Engine Design
www.igi-global.com/chapter/modular-game-engine-design/66327?camid=4v1a

Visual Analyses of the Creation of Avatars
www.igi-global.com/article/visual-analyses-creation-avatars/2163?camid=4v1a