

Rebel Girls and Consequence in *Life is Strange* and *The Walking Dead*

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INTRODUCTION

This piece seeks to take the new representations of women within Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead: Season Two* (2013) and DontNod Entertainment's *Life is Strange* (2015) and critically analyse the normative gender roles they promote. Within the genre of the adventure game, a number of titles are dedicated to producing significant and moving narratives by relying on a mechanism of player choice between multiple outcomes. This mechanism often appears as a difficult choice between two mutually exclusive situations that are usually framed as an ethical tension. These ethical tensions are representative of the popular thought exercise, the Trolley Problem (Foot, 1967), where 'active' and 'inactive' choices are made in order to save 'less' or 'more' lives. Both *The Walking Dead* and *Life is Strange* seem to promote the social independence of their avatars, Clementine (*The Walking Dead*) and Max Caulfield (*Life is Strange*), yet continue to show ethical bias in the consequences of their actions. Many times Clementine and Max are punished for preferencing their 'individuality' as if they were placed against the 'good of the community', which is exaggerated by the presentation of morality in games being frequently split into a binary of 'good' and 'evil' choices (Consalvo et al., 2016, p. 4-5). This paper will examine the end game scenes for *The Walking Dead* and *Life is Strange*, where the final choices given to players regard the demise of certain entities so utterly entwined with the narrative that the gameworlds themselves must also be terminated (Fordyce, 2013).

The Trolley Problem sets up a relationship between utilitarianism and binary choices in games, by encouraging the option of 'killing the one in order to save the five' as the 'greater ethical action'. To 'prevent the most harm from occurring' echoes the utilitarian doctrine to minimise pain and maximise pleasure (Mill, 1861/2001, p. 10). Thus, the utilitarian framework of the Trolley Problem presented in such game endings suggests

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that the moral imperative is to save the greater amount of lives. Utilitarianism also structures the binary choice as one with a definitively ‘ethically good’ choice, against another ‘alternate’, less ‘ethically good’, or even ‘immoral’ option. For these videogames, the presentation of the infamous Trolley Problem and its inherent utilitarian framework is an incendiary moment which mark rebellious women as necessary sacrifices for ‘the greater good’ and the continuation of the community. This article explores these two specific moments of sacrifice at the conclusions of *Life is Strange* and *The Walking Dead: Season Two* and engages with tensions between the status quo and the resistances that challenges these norms.

The poor treatment of women is an equitable tension when placed in the context of the historically poor representation of women in games (c.f. Sarkeesian, 2013; Summers & Miller, 2014; Williams et al., 2009; Jenson & De Castell, 2009). To meet the call made by Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014) for game studies to move the discussion of representation beyond how women are physically depicted in games, in this article we will focus on how the lives of these women are treated. The final choices in *Life is Strange* and *The Walking Dead: Season Two* were selected as case studies for the reason that they represent the sacrifices of rebellious women as fated, natural, and for ‘the greater good’. In our case studies, when the lives of women are placed against ‘the greater good’, the bias towards utilitarianism in these games palpably underscores sexist attitudes. The fates of these women in turn reflect the two prominent representations of women in games of ‘damsels in distress’ and ‘hostile’ forms of sexism (cf. Grimes, 2003; Sarkeesian, 2013; Summers & Miller; 2014). This paper will critique the Trolley Problem and its utilitarian biases, reproduced in the endgames of *Life is Strange* and *The Walking Dead: Season Two*, and unpack their problematic nature by situating these games in specific historical and cultural contexts.

Ironically, in a genre which advertises the autonomy of the playstyle in ‘choosing your own adventure’, the naturalisation of women sacrifices as being either incidental, fated, and ultimately chosen by the player, removes the autonomy of these women characters. Notably, the notion of a gender bias within the presentation of these games (promoting the community), but also in the player’s choices of these actions (how many people went along with this bias) can be seen in the publishers’ statistics for both games. Ultimately, this research inserts the conversation of the empowerment of women amidst the complex tensions of traditional ethical dilemmas which have ignored gender while pivoting on gender-relevant questions of autonomy and social morality.

OPTIONAL BIO

Mahli-Ann Butt is a Ph.D. candidate in Media & Communications and Gender & Cultural Studies at The University of Sydney. She is the student officer for DiGRA and DiGRA Australia, and an editorial board member of *Press Start Journal*. Her background is in philosophy and media studies, with a particular focus on game studies intersecting with political philosophy in gender, intersectionality, and cultural studies. Her current research investigates affective networks, affordances, and gender dynamics in gaming.

Daniel Dunne is a master’s student at Swinburne University of Technology. He is an editorial board member for *Press Start* and has previously written about paratext, multimodality and narrative within videogames. His last publication was *Paratext: The In-between of Structure and Play*, regarding the role of paratext in videogames.

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