Episodic Gaming: Interactive Narrative and Immersive Development

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**Abstract**

Since the success of Telltale Games’ *The Walking Dead*, episodic gaming has emerged as a powerful tool for interactive narrative. CEO Dan Connors believes “A lot of the best storytelling in the past 10 years has been episodic storytelling, from *The Sopranos* to *Game of Thrones,*”.By adopting an episodic narrative structure and constructing a development style to work with it, video games are able to utilize this style to craft not only a potent story, but a successful business model. Episodic gaming embraces interactive narrative and a ‘live development’ philosophy to bring seasonal storytelling into the digital media. It has the potential to both craft captivating original content as well as evolve existing franchises, creating an ‘appointment gaming’ culture. This appointment design philosophy aims to integrate episodic gaming as much into the lives of consumers as the television shows they watch on a weekly basis. Through the use of innovative development processes and narrative structures, episodic gaming is able to deeply immerse its players and more easily introduce mechanics and systems to do so. Thanks to the unique method of repeat deliverables and live development, this process is able to utilize feedback received from previous episodes while going forward. Episodic gaming is based around building an on-going experience, keeping players engaged with the product, and coming back weekly to relieve the tension of the wait since they last saw, “Next time, on...”. In this paper I will detail the narrative structure and development process of episodic games such as Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*, as well as their natural immersive properties. I will conclude by theorizing over where episodic gaming is going next, and the implications it has for both the evolution of franchises as well as transmedia possibilities.

**Key Words:** episodic gaming, appointment gaming, live development, the walking dead, telltale games, immersion, video games, narrative structures, transmedia

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**1. Introduction**

Games employing the use of an episodic design and narrative structure have undergone major evolutionary changes in the past decade, and have taken leaps and bounds since their origins. Beginning with the first episodic game, Epyx’s *Dunjonquest*,1 and growing to the current level of Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*,2 we can see that the episodic style has become more than just iterating games in the same universe. The style has adopted not only a compelling narrative structure unique unto itself, but has developed a successful new business model that is centered around an experience over time.3

**2. What is an Episodic Game?**

In an industry full of sequels, remakes, iterations, and downloadable content, it is curious to see the practical and narrative difference between the previously mentioned development practices, and a design philosophy that embraces the episodic style. Though, with the prevalence of those development practices, we must first answer the question: what is an episodic game? How do we differentiate an episode from a sequel?

I will be focusing on two key factors that Dan Connors, CEO of Telltale Games, believes really capture the essence of what it is to be a game like *The Walking Dead* – the current gold standard of episodic gaming.

The first of these factors is a focus on narrative and storytelling following an episodic television model. Episodes are contained within and follow along a ‘season’, which serves as the overall narrative. This focus on narrative stems from the belief that in a game where episodes are being regularly released, “you better really care about those characters, and you better be really interested in their situation, and you better be really into the story.”4

The second qualifying factor is development and distribution. Episodic games are released and distributed quickly, usually monthly, and are released on regularly scheduled dates, further following the model of television storytelling.

**3. Narrative in Episodic Gaming**

In her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*¸ Janet Murray noted that the advent of the computer age would not just shape our knowledge, it would also ‘reshape the spectrum of narrative expression’, allowing us to tell our stories and craft literature that have never before been experienced. However, contrary to popular belief, it would not do so by replacing the novel or the movie, but by ‘continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework’.5

This journey of digital media narrative has been an evolutionary process begun by text adventures such as *Colossal Cave Adventure*6 and refined by graphical adventures like *The Secret of Monkey Island*7. The adventure genre has innovated upon storytelling by adding that unique, core factor of digital media – interactivity. Books and stories have been successfully translated into digital media since the inception of the adventure game. *The Walking Dead* and episodic gaming is the next step in the evolutionary chain of adapting narrative structures to digital frameworks.

The narrative structure of *The Walking Dead* and episodic gaming follows the model of television storytelling, delivering an overarching narrative across a “season”. The episodes contained in that season communicate plot points, progress the story, and show character development. Dan Connors asserts that “a lot of the best storytelling going on in the past ten years or so” occurs in popular television shows from *The Sopranos* to *Game of Thrones*.8 These television shows illustrate that a strong connection to characters and a building tension to see what happens to them is what brings viewers back week by week.

These media experiences are structured in such a way that they occur over time and progress in instalments, which is where the huge break from large commercial titles comes in. When a player goes through a ten hour or longer game, they have that entire experience at hand, and then it’s done. Part of the excitement and the experience of the television narrative is the fact that you have a week or more to wait between episodes. Just as people meet during lunch breaks at work to muse over what’s going to happen to Ned Stark in *Game of Thrones* or Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, the same experience is had for Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*. Having played the episode and being able to discuss it is as much of an experience as the core game itself. When the player is met with the end of an episode and sees “Next time on *The Walking Dead*...”, the tension that builds in anticipation is what really shows the narrative involvement the player has with the characters of the game.

This feeling is what Dan Connors calls “appointment gaming”: the idea that, similar to how people have appointments with their weekly television shows, playing the latest episode of *The Walking Dead* or other episodic titles is something that people “need to do on a regular basis”.9 Bringing this narrative structure to digital media further increases the power of interactivity, as your “Next time on...” could be different from your friend’s.

Because of these similarities to television narrative, episodic gaming takes a further departure from both the adventure games of the 80s and 90s, and from standard commercial games. They focus on characterization, atmosphere, and storytelling, instead of challenges of skill and puzzle-solving. These games that center around narrative and storytelling – “ergodic literature”,10 as they are referred to by Espen Aarseth – work to merge player action with the progression of plot, resulting in powerful emotional bonds between players and characters. By removing many of the tactile, skill-based elements of gaming, developers are able to increase accessibility to their stories, as well as lower frustrations such as failing or rejection by the game. These frustrations are still present even in *The Walking Dead*, but are becoming less frequent and disruptive.

Recent Independent Games Festival entry *Kentucky Route Zero*11 takes an interesting approach to storytelling, with a huge focus on atmosphere, but a very minimalist approach to characterization. While progressing through the game, the main character Conway serves as a source of feedback for the things the player experiences, communicating numerous small stories, but remaining largely an enigma himself. This creates a strange place for the player, as there is little or no characterization to hold onto and bond with. As Ken Perlin says in *First Person*:

By some transference process we become that guy or gal for the duration of the story. His conflict becomes our conflict, his choices our choices, and his fictional changes of character seem, oddly, like a sort of personal journey for our own souls12

Thus, when we forsake a powerful bond between character and player, the merging of those identities, a source of emotional investment, is lost.

*Kentucky Route Zero* employs what Jakub Majewski calls the “string of pearls model”,13 which gives the player a large amount of freedom, but not in relation to the advancement of the plot. This works particularly well in the narrative structure of *Kentucky Route Zero* due to the presence of magical realism and unreliable information. The game borrows an anti-structure aspect of ‘inconsistent realities’14, and uses it to mask the linear nature of its literature within an illusion of an open, strange world. Cardboard Computer, the studio behind *Kentucky Route Zero*, has only released the first episode thus far, and it will be interesting to see if the minimalist nature of the game is conducive to episodic gaming. Due to its lack of character development and relations, the tension in waiting for the second episode is greatly lowered. It is yet to be seen whether or not Cardboard Computer’s approach to storytelling will fully utilize the narrative power of episodic structure. *amlm*

**4. Episodic Development and Distribution**

Much can be said about the decline of the blockbuster game, and the momentum being gained by smaller studios and indie developers. The episodic business model is a strong one, and as Dan Connors has said:

The days of the auteur bringing his revolutionary gaming vision to a major publisher and having a full product get funded are over, so innovation is going to come from these new models.15

The episodic development style has numerous benefits, and though it is not perfect, the episodic business model has shown great success for studios like Telltale Games. I will cover both the advantages and disadvantages of the development process for episodic games, as well as their distribution methods.

An immediate benefit of developing episodic games is the lower initial monetary investment, thanks to the smaller scope of a single episode when compared to a big blockbuster release. Monetary risk gets continuously smaller as well, assuming the first title is well received. With each episode released, developers gain feedback from their players on what elements were particularly effective. Through the practice of live development, studios are able to successfully capture what resounded most powerfully with their players, and build upon it.

This system is far from simple though, and even Telltale Games has yet to perfect it. CEO Dan Connors commented during his D.I.C.E. 2013 keynote that when working with live development, ‘we’re a little bit out there without a net, it’s certainly not easy’.16 Connors does however feel that the process is integral to what episodic gaming is – that the ability to respond quickly and go forward with their players in mind is an advantage that video games have over standard television.

Now this is not to say there is no risk at all – simply a lesser monetary investment. If the first or ‘pilot’ episode of a series fails, then it is likely the developer behind it will abandon the project, reneging on promises made to fans and supporters. This is an especially poor result with episodic gaming, since the consumers who purchased the first episode would not have a complete experience.

The business model of episodic gaming is focused around an initial pilot release, establishing a consumer-base and retaining them throughout the production process. There is a moderate risk in the sense that if at any point the episodes start doing poorly, the money stops coming in, thus more than likely development will be at risk of halting. However, that risk is still present in the majority of studios without very wealthy publishers. As Connors said in an interview with Develop:

In the digital economy everyone is looking at building on-going experiences. MMORPGs, freemium games, DLC – they are all about keeping a player engaged with your product. To release a single product that gets half a million paying customers engaged takes either a large investment or a lot of luck. Once you have that many players engaged it’s more effective to provide the next episode than to try to build that experience again with a new product.17

Connors believes that generally, the game business has always been risky, with ‘publishers and studios going under even before the economic collapse, because it was always 3200 products at Christmas, and ten winners...and the losers lose big money’.18 Episodic gaming is a way to avoid at least that one element of risk – the idea of years of development and large amounts of money on a single investment, all to let the dice roll against all the other games out there.

Additionally, there is a solid amount of insurance built into the episodic model’s ‘pilot release’ system, through the concept of a ‘season pass’. Instead of buying episodes one at a time as they are released, customers have the option of purchasing the entire season at once – which Connors says accounts for ‘about 65-70 percent of our business’.19

Accessibility is also a large concern for episodic gaming and studios like Telltale. Thanks to its focus on interactive narrative and powerful storytelling, many of the mechanics that require some cursory knowledge of gaming or tactile skills to complete have been removed from the formula. The elements of skill and frustration still exist, but in much more subdued amounts, which allows episodic narrative games to reach a wider audience.

However, accessibility is not all about the game itself. One common element of episodic narrative games is their distribution method – digital download. The cost of shipping physical copies of each episode to every customer would be monumental, and thus games like *The Walking Dead* and *Sam & Max*20, the latter of which has over a hundred episodes, would suffer financially. Because of its initial distribution in digital format, many who have slow internet connections or similar tech issues are not able to buy the games immediately.

The development and distribution of episodic games has its share of flaws, but the amount of risk reduction, powerful narrative tools, and live development that stem from the episodic model seem to far outweigh the negatives. Time will have to show that, as future episodic titles are released.

**5. Episodic Immersion and Agency**

In digital gaming players are given a level of interactivity and influence that drastically colours their experience in ergodic literature. Storytelling no longer becomes an aspect of turning pages or simple reading – players move through the space and propel the narrative forward themselves through nontrivial effort. Espen Aarseth defines what would be considered nontrivial effort as any ‘extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages’.21

Often in video games, players either encounter the ‘designed narrative’ of the game world, or the ‘personal narrative’ of their own experiences.22 Episodic gaming, using the narrative structure of seasonal television, along with the interactive storytelling elements of digital media, is able to combine the designed and personal narratives to create a highly immersive experience. One example of this in *The Walking Dead* is when in the first episode, Lee Everett first enters Clementine’s home. As Lee, the player is able to listen to a recording machine, but still walk around the house. The player can inspect personal objects, explore, and do everything they want to do while the recording is playing in the background. *The Walking Dead* does an admirable job of not stripping away control from the player entirely. The concept of control or ‘executive function’23 is critical to immersive attention. A player’s total attention is flexible, ‘and thus can be divided between all concurrent tasks’.24 The amount of attention allocated to a task depends on the importance given to each one of them,25 and this is largely why scenes like that in *The Walking Dead* work so well. Players dedicate the majority of their attention to the most important thing going on in the narrative, but by granting them the illusion of choice and freedom, players are able to craft their own personal experiences while simultaneously progressing through the narrative of the developer.

This freedom of action, or illusion of such, takes place on many levels in *The Walking Dead*, and the type of agency encouraged by these moments is that of ‘agency play’.26 The key element to take away from the scene of Lee Everett in Clementine’s home, as well as the general ability of the player to interact with the game world, is that:

Agency play is not merely strategically limiting user control. It focuses on leveraging the relationship between the user and system in order to create a story world that is meaningful and engaging for users to participate in.26

By leveraging that player-system relationship, players become emotionally invested in their interactions with the ergodic literature. We have to ask though, what causes this emotional response? For this I will use Brenda Laurel’s two forms of causality as described by Wardrip-Fruin27 as well as Kevin Veale’s ‘affective phenomenologies’,28 which refers to the difference between ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’. The first of the two forms of causality is the formal model, which follows a descending hierarchy. Thus, the substance of a drama such as *The Walking Dead* is the formal cause of the characters, which are the formal cause of thoughts ‘e.g., emotion, cognition, intention, and so on’.29 Taking the reverse causal hierarchy for the player, the events of the game and actions of Lee Everett are the material cause of the player’s perception of patterns, language, and character thoughts.30 So how does this affect the player and immerse them in the story world? According to Veale, ‘affect functions through an economy of *cathexis*, whereby an individual becomes *invested* in something, regardless of what that something may be,’.31 Affective investment occurs within a ‘Heideggerian world-of-concern’,32 which is a space shaped by human engagement.As Laurel describes agency being ‘the power to take action’, 33 action becomes the focus of agency play. So through interaction, players become invested in a story world due to the relation of causality between their thoughts, and the projection of those thoughts onto a character such as Lee Everett of *The Walking Dead*.

**6. Episodic Games Going Forward**

Episodic narrative structure and development have emerged in just this past decade as powerful tools for storytelling and a viable business model. The success of titles like *Sam & Max*, *Jurassic Park* and *The Walking Dead* show that established licenses have a place in episodic gaming. Dan Connors believes that Telltale and this narrative and development style are the place to be for ‘anybody that’s sitting in a franchise and wondering how to evolve it into the future’.34 It will be interesting to see what happens with titles like *Kentucky Route Zero*, as well as the upcoming titles from Telltale. Episodic gaming is still a burgeoning new method of design, and it has the potential to change how we tell stories in games.

**Notes**

*Dunjonquest: The Datestones of Ryn.* (Epyx, 1979).

2 *Walking Dead, The.* (Telltale Games, 2012).

3 Elliot, Phil. *Telling Tales.* (GamesIndustry International, 2009).

4 Elliot, Phil. *Telling Tales.*

5 Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (p.10)

6 *Colossal Cave Adventure*. (Crowther, 1976).

7 *The Secret of Monkey Island.* (LucasArts, 1990).

8 *The Masters of Episodic Gaming Speak* (Game Informer, Issue 234)

9 Connors, Dan. “Episodic Gaming”. Keynote Speech, D.I.C.E. Summit 2013. Las Vegas, NV, February 7th, 2013

10  Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

11 Kentucky Route Zero: Act I. Cardboard Computer, 2013

12 Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, and Pat Harrigan. *FirstPerson: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. The MIT Press, 2004. (pg 13)

13 Majewski, Jakub. "Theorising video game narrative." PhD diss., Bond University, 2003. (p.62)

14 Ibid. (65)

15 Lee, Aaron. “Telltale Games on Adventure Games and Episodic Content” *Develop Online.* 7th April, 2011, accessed March 28, 2013. http://www.develop-online.net/features/1237/Telltale-Games-on-adventure-games-and-episodic-content

16 Connors, Dan. “Episodic Gaming”. Keynote Speech, D.I.C.E. Summit 2013. Las Vegas, NV, February 7th, 2013

17 Lee, Aaron “Telltale Games on Adventure Games and Episodic Content”

18 Elliot, Phil. *Telling Tales.*

19 Ibid.

20 Sam & Max. 2006. PC. Telltale Games.

21 Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*

22 Calleja, Gordon. "Revising immersion: A conceptual model for the analysis of digital game involvement." *Situated Play* (2007) (p. 87)

23 Cohen, Asher. "Selective attention." *Encyclopedia of cognitive science* (2003)

24 Ferreira, Emmanoel, and Thiago Falcão. "Through the looking glass: Weavings between the magic circle and immersive processes in video games." *Breaking new ground: Innovation in games, play, practice and theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009* (2009).

25 Ibid.

26 Harrell, D. Fox, and Jichen Zhu. "Agency play: Dimensions of agency for interactive narrative design." In *Proceedings of the AAAI 2009 Spring Symposium on Narrative Intelligence II. Menlo Park: AAAI Press*, pp. 44-52. 2009.

27 Ibid.

28 Wardrip-Fruin, Noah, Michael Mateas, Steven Dow, and Serdar Sali. "Agency reconsidered." *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009* (2009).

29 Veale, Kevin. ""Interactive Cinema" Is an Oxymoron, but May Not Always Be." *Game Studies* 12, no. 1 (September 2012). Accessed October 21, 2012. http://gamestudies.org/1201/articles/veale.

30 Wardrip-Fruin, Mateas, Dow, and Sali. “Agency Reconsidered.”

31 Ibid.

32 Veale, Kevin. “”Interactive Cinema” Is an Oxymoron, but May Not Always Be.”

33 Wardrip-Fruin, Mateas, Dow, and Sali. “Agency Reconsidered.”

34 Elliot, Phil. *Telling Tales.*

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