The Walking Dead - A Disasterclass in Ludonarrative Design

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August 11, 2026

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Author's Note: This essay intentionally uses a strongly critical and occasionally satirical tone to emphasize its arguments. The criticisms presented are directed toward the game's design, writing, and implementation rather than the developers or players themselves. The purpose of this analysis is not to dismiss *The Walking Dead* as an objectively bad game, but to critically examine specific design decisions that I believe weaken its ludonarrative experience. Some statements are intentionally exaggerated for rhetorical effect and should be understood within that context.

Introduction

Let's talk about an overrated game – a game that some would claim received more praise than it objectively deserved with rising game design standards. If you're a gamer, you've almost certainly heard of *The Walking Dead* developed by Telltale. It's well known for its emotional storytelling and deep character relationship between Lee and Clementine. Despite this game's story taking the gaming world by storm in the early 2010s, there are several major design flaws that severely impair players' narrative experience. The core loop forming a slow paced progression, incompatibility between the world building and the gameplay mechanics, and poorly designed levels create a memorable disasterclass in ludonarrative design.

What is ludonarrative?

Ludonarrative is the blend of a video game's gameplay mechanics and its story elements. It represents how the active experience of playing a game works alongside the plot, dialogue, and cutscenes to deliver an overall message or experience. For example, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* features a game mechanic in which the player must use both joysticks on a single controller, each of which controls a brother. This masterfully complements the narrative aspect of the game showing the brothers' cooperative bond and shared journey. However, *The Walking Dead* fails to craft a solid ludonarrative, alongside other poor design choices that further take away from the narrative experience.

Illusion of agency

The most commonly criticized flaw of TWDG is its illusion of agency. Despite UI indicators in the top left of the screen claiming your decisions have consequences, to put it simply… they don't. Your past choices do not branch the story in the short term nor long term. A short term example where the outcome is the same regardless of which decision you make can be seen in the farm ambush. Shawn and Duck are in the far back of the farm about to be attacked by a swarm of walkers. Shawn is unable to move because his leg is pinned under the

tractor tire and Duck is… well… there was nothing physically stopping Duck from just running. No matter, Lee has to choose between saving Shawn or saving Duck. If Lee chooses to save Duck, then Duck lives while Shawn dies. If Lee chooses to save Shawn, then Shawn… still dies. The only difference in the outcome between those two choices are the dialogue and an impact on the relationship between Lee and his close ally Kenny.

Well, if Lee's choice in that moment affects his relationship with Kenny, surely that means there's a "Kenny trust" variable being incremented that affects the story later down the line… right? After all, we get a UI indicator in the top left noting, "Kenny will remember that." Guess what? Regardless of how negative Lee's and Kenny's relationship was before the former's death, in Season 2, Kenny still expresses deep sadness over Lee's death and explicitly states that he wishes Lee was still alive to help guide them. Well this is some meaningless state tracking, isn't it?



Dozens of similar examples can be found across the rest of the game. Despite the seemingly meaningful choices challenged to the player, it's still just an illusion of narrative agency. No matter whose life you choose to save, major plot milestones and character deaths happen anyway to serve the linear script disguised as a branching narrative. Now we'll dive into some less commonly discussed flaws that hinder the narrative experience.

Slow paced gameplay

The core gameplay loop is essentially a walk and talk simulator. There is nothing wrong with this kind of loop… if this game wasn't about aggressively high stakes survival in a post-apocalyptic world. If this loop was used for a game in a social environment like *Life Is Strange*'s academic story setting, it would be fitting. However, when a story takes place in a world about survival in a desolate wasteland, a more appropriate loop to complement that narrative to then shape stronger ludonarrative would be RPG, shooter, or combat mechanics,

much like that of *The Last of Us* or *Left For Dead*, both of which feature intricate combat and stealth mechanics to complement the survival narrative aspect. Lee's fatherly relationship with the young Clementine whom he must protect is narratively suggested to the player as a high-stakes responsibility. But, the gameplay itself does very little to make the player feel this stake due to its lack of true survival or combat mechanics. The best we get are occasional point-and-click or QTE button prompts to shoot incoming enemies. The act of walking around in a barricaded store where you expect dangerous walkers to tear their way in at any minute, yet they don't no matter how long you take to complete the required task, can be compared to the ludonarrative dissonance in *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*; The world ends in three narrative days, but the core loop features a leisure 20 side quests to complete under no mechanical time constraint. Wow, such an adrenaline inducing time sensitive experience am I right?

In order for the player to progress forward, Lee must walk around in an enclosed space such as a barricaded grocery store and interact with entities. Lee can act as a moral saint or a pragmatic survivalist in dialogue, but the mechanical loop remains identical: Click the ordinary object you never would've thought to be of any importance, push the directional prompt, then watch the cutscene. Trial, error, repeat. The player is rarely ever given visual or auditory indicators on what they must find or which NPC they must speak to. Progression criterion can be as trivial as finding a random remote control that you give to Doug, who then turns on noisy TVs from a distance, which will distract a group of walkers and buy the player time to do whatever.

Not only is this gameplay loop unfitting for the game's setting, it's also incredibly slow paced and uneventful. Slow pacing and frustrating delay in level or story progression are exceptionally effective ways to make players get bored and lose interest, regardless of the type of storytelling medium.

Poor level design

To make things worse, this mundane loop is further stretched and delays the player's progression thanks to poorly designed levels. Poor level design on mandatory levels that must be completed in order to progress the story creates frustration, confusion, and further slows down player progression. The levels are essentially closed-off theme park rooms. Exploration is highly restricted, usually by immersion-breaking invisible walls, and progression often boils down to pixel-hunting – moving your mouse awkwardly around a fixed area until it highlights the only interactable object that moves the story forward.

By far the most horrifically designed level in the game, and honestly one that would make a fantastic case study for professors teaching students how NOT to design levels, is the motel rescue mission. A character named Irene barricaded herself in a motel room, and the player must find a way to defeat or sneak past the walkers to reach her. Put yourself in the position of a player. Analyze the screenshots below:





Let's play a guessing game. Which of the following items from the parking lot must the player obtain to progress forward?

A. Cooking knife stored in the abandoned RV
B. Loose brick from the wall
C. Rope in the yellow suitcase

Lock in your guess.

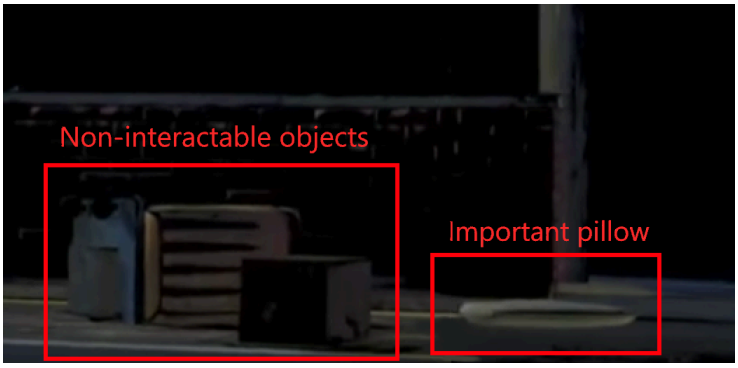
If you picked A, sorry, but you're wrong, because you can't even enter the RV. If you picked B, unfortunately, none of the bricks can be removed. If you picked C, congratulations… you're also wrong. The correct answer was…

D. A pillow that doesn't even look like a pillow resting on the parking lot asphalt

There are many things objectively wrong with this. Hundreds of thousands of players were unable to find this pillow until they presumably searched up a walkthrough on YouTube for a direct answer. This is not merely a case of "the player didn't see the obvious solution right in front of their face." Rather, this is a design flaw where a vital object is easily missed by the player due to the object's seemingly lack of usefulness, poor placement in the 3D space, the

perspective camera's lack of centered focus on the object, the player's attention being diverted elsewhere, and the lack of visual indicators to draw attention to the object.

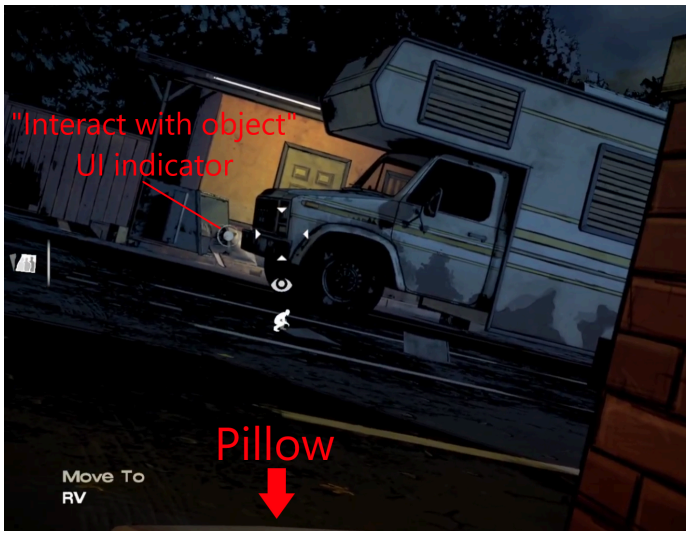
Firstly, when you're a survivor in a zombie apocalypse, in what scenario would you ever think a pillow would have any practical use as a tool for combat, survival, or stealth? Due to a pillow's perceived uselessness for this level's objective, no player would be consciously nor subconsciously keeping their eyes peeled for a soft rectangle used for snoozing. Instead, they would be on the lookout for something that can be used for a stealth kill, such as a sharp blade or a rope for strangulation.



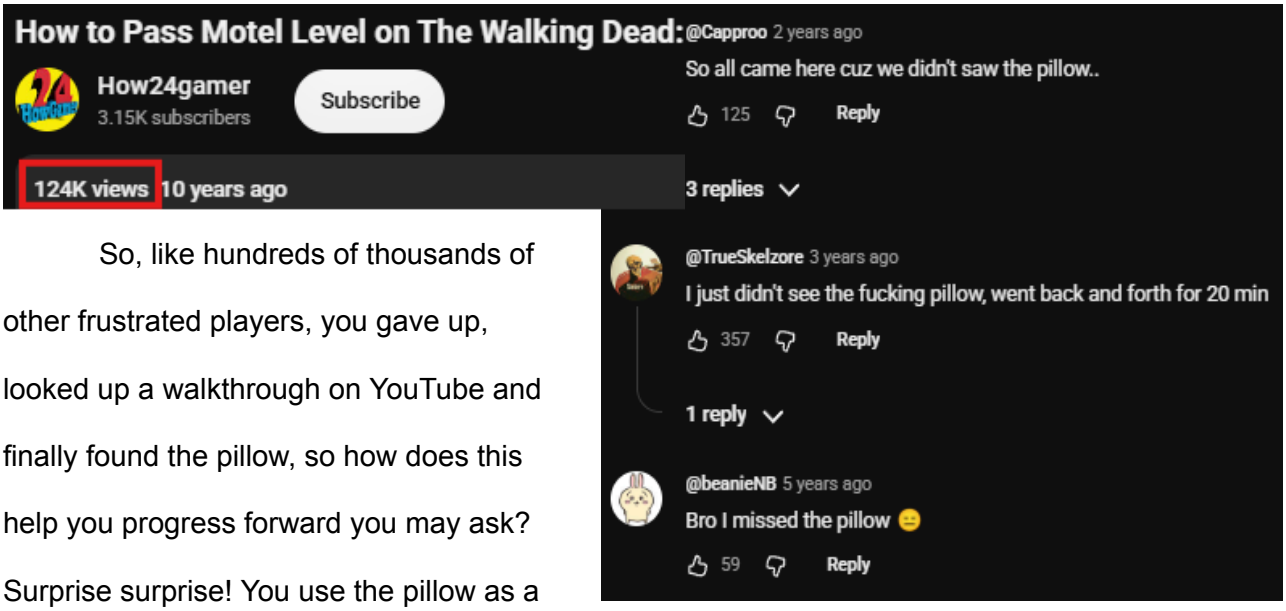
Second, the pillow is placed in close proximity to another pile of other seemingly ineffective objects. The objects on the left, which appear to be a small cart, yellow suitcase, and microwave, are non-interactable objects merely placed there for worldbuilding. This conditions the player to disregard any potential mechanical importance of this cluster, including the pillow, during the few seconds these objects are in view of the camera. A far better item placement can be seen in a different area in the level, where Lee notices a screwdriver resting alone in a locked vehicle. This placement makes the screwdriver's importance to progression immediately apparent, as it has clear practical value as a melee weapon, is centered in the camera's focus, and is not buried among a pile of otherwise useless objects.



Furthermore, on the path node the player is expected to pick up the pillow, their attention is diverted elsewhere on the screen. The camera focuses on the RV trailer and its “Interact with object” UI indicator, drawing the player’s attention away from the pillow barely visible at the bottom of the screen. As a result, the game conditions the player to perceive this node as serving the singular purpose of “Move To RV,” eliminating any suspicion that the node might also contain a vital object the player is expected to notice.



Lastly, unlike the RV in the same screenshot above, the pillow’s UI indicators are not displayed on screen until the player pans the perspective camera all the way down to focus on the pillow. Only then does the “Interact with object” UI indicator appear on the pillow. The initial lack of visual indicators to signify the pillow as an interactable object, much less an important object, further cements it as a hidden affordance.



So, like hundreds of thousands of other frustrated players, you gave up, looked up a walkthrough on YouTube and finally found the pillow, so how does this help you progress forward you may ask? Surprise surprise! You use the pillow as a

pistol silencer… because that's obviously the most intuitive and logical way to stealth kill a zombie in fiction. Don't even get me started on the fact pillows do nothing to suppress gunshot sounds. Even if you use the "it's just a game" excuse, there are still plenty of items that the developers could've scattered in the motel parking lot that would've made for a far more believable stealth kill.

Thinking versus confusion

In the realm of gaming, it's perfectly normal if a player struggles now and then. However, when "now and then" crosses the line into "hundreds of thousands needing a walkthrough," then that's a clear indicator of failure on the designers' and playtesters' part. Rule of thumb: If an abundance of players spend excess time and sanity searching for a solution, and resort to looking up a walkthrough, then that's a sign the designers should make revisions.

It's important to understand the difference between struggle from thinking versus struggle from confusion. In puzzle games like *Little Nightmares II*, the player interacts with objects, finds keys, and figures out how to open blocked paths while using stealth to avoid



enemies. Struggling to solve these puzzles is an intended part of the gameplay, because the player must take time to think and problem solve. Struggle from thinking in video games comes from solving clear, intricate puzzles or planning tactics against a challenge. Struggle from confusion happens when game rules, goals, or paths are unclear. Good design uses thinking to create fun, while confusion wastes your time and ruins the fun. The motel pillow puzzle doesn't test the player's

problem-solving ability. It tests whether they can randomly discover what the designers hid from them.

When confusion due to poor level design wastes time and delays the player's progression in the story, the player's narrative experience is hindered, thus further weakening the game's ludonarrative.

Characters forcing catalysts

Now let's put mechanics and levels aside, and switch to the writing itself. In a narrative, a catalyst is a major event that disrupts a character's normal world. It forces the protagonist to take action, setting the main plot or plot change into motion. Without this irreversible turning point, the story cannot move forward. For example, Harry Potter receiving his invitation letter to Hogwarts is a catalyst, because it begins the next major chapter in his life and the series. Catalysts can be initiated by character actions, environment, deaths, etc. It's important that catalysts should be written naturally rather than forced, such as Harry's gradual and inevitable realization of his parents' deaths. Unfortunately, TWDG's catalysts rely heavily on extremely forced catalysts driven by poorly written character actions and dialogue.



The game constantly initiates anger-filled shouting matches between two or more NPC characters in order to create interpersonal conflicts as the core mechanic, which is used to drive the narrative, force player engagement, and create the illusion of meaningful choice. This irrational shouting match between side characters is a very common theme in Telltale games, including *Minecraft: Story Mode*. Allies get into a heated argument, so the protagonist with their unwritten

leadership status in the group steps in as the third party moderator, whom the group obeys no matter what. Character A argues X, Character B argues Y. The player agrees with Character B, thus the story branches off into path Y. Oh yeah, turns out path X and Y were the same path anyway.

Not only do shouting matches between characters become extremely stale after some time, it also demonstrates shallow character depth. Sure, we have the moralistic Hershel and the pragmatic Kenny, but the writing for these characters don't go beyond surface level personalities and values. Those values are merely existing in order to justify interpersonal disagreements that Lee must defuse. The persistence of these verbal fights across the span of the entire game also demonstrates a lack of character development and personal growth.

Beyond just dialogue, characters' actions often demonstrate an immense lack of common sense and unrealistically poor decision-making skills. Honestly, TWDG characters fit the universal trope, "Characters in horror movies are stupid." An example of this is stated by a Reddit user, "A zombie grabbed [Carly's] ankle and she needed saving? Give me a break. [...] A person has a ton more strength in their leg than their arms, she could have just yanked herself out of his grip. Instead, apparently, the grip of a half rotten hand is like that of a vice." (mattahorn, 2012).



Another example is the walker ambush on the farm where Lee must choose between saving Shawn whose leg is pinned under a tractor, or Duck who is physically unable to get off the mower and run because the writers forgot to give Duck a brain. Instead, he sits on the mower screaming for 10 seconds while the zombies slowly approach him and grab his leg. First of all, how did Shawn's leg get pinned underneath the tractor tire? How does one

find themselves in that position? Second, why did Duck just sit there and wait to get grabbed? There could have been more realistic explanations for why both of them required external help to escape. You can almost compare TWDG characters' poor writing with 10-year-old Jason in *Heavy Rain*, who wanders all the way from the second story of a mall down to a highway where he gets hit and killed by an oncoming car, which forced the biggest plot catalyst in the story.

These poorly written character events and overreliance on characters actions to initiate catalysts weaken the story itself. As a result, the flow of events and catalysts feel forced and unnatural, which impairs the ludonarrative as a whole.

Problems and comparison

The major problem with creating a true branching narrative adventure game where your choices genuinely matter is they require an exponential amount of writing and asset creation for content most players will never see, causing budget needs to skyrocket. Even the renowned *Detroit: Become Human* is not truly branching. It relies heavily on merging, bottlenecking, and state tracking. This is why text-based games like *80 Days* are able to support branching without merging, because they don't require high fidelity art assets, voice acting, or large budgets. All you need are your fingers and a keyboard.



By comparison, Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012) shares similar themes, characters, and release times as Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013). TLOU experienced significantly more success than TWDG. However TLOU had a significantly larger, AAA-tier budget and team size compared to TWDG, which was developed as a low-to-medium budget, episodic indie-style game. This massive advantage in budget size

allowed Naughty Dog to produce higher quality graphics and program real-time third-person action, stealth, and survival combat. But, is budget constraint a justifiable reason for weaker ludonarrative?

Absolutely not. Plenty of indie games in history have served as a masterclass in ludonarrative design despite extremely low budgets. Take for example *Papers, Please* (2013) developed by independent developer Lucas Pope, which had a budget of only $10,000. Lucas financed the nine-month development cycle using his personal savings and severance pay while working from home. The gameplay loop centers around repetitive border-inspection document-checking puzzle mechanics. As for the ludonarrative impact, the repetitive, stressful, and frantic gameplay makes you feel the crushing weight of a bureaucratic totalitarian state, where human empathy becomes a value you must suppress. Lucas did not have money or numbers on his side, yet he shipped a ludonarrative masterpiece by navigating around his limitations and cleverly used what he had at his disposal.

A harsh truth is that the ludonarrative for TWDG was doomed from the very start. Telltale didn't have the budget to create sufficient game mechanics to support the high-stakes survival narrative and apocalyptic setting. Budget constraints also do not justify poor level design, like the motel level as discussed before. An idea is only as good as its execution. The idea of a hardened survivor protecting a helpless young child is a fantastic story, but the mechanics required to execute the idea were insufficient.

The lessons

No matter how strong a narrative is, it cannot compensate for gameplay that contradicts, obstructs, or fails to reinforce the experience the story is trying to create.

1. Gameplay should reinforce the narrative. If the story says survival is difficult and dangerous, the mechanics and core loop should make the player feel that pressure.

2. Players should struggle because they are thinking, not because the game failed to communicate the goal.
3. Level design should communicate importance through visual language. Important objects should be distinguishable from environmental clutter through placement, interaction cues, or contextual relevance.
4. Dev teams with budget constraints must work within such constraints instead of designing around an experience their resources can't support. Simple mechanics aren't a weakness because they were deliberately designed to reinforce its narrative.

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