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Thinking About What Can Still Happen: Character Death, *The Walking Dead*, and Transmediality's Effect on Creator Autonomy

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A Thesis in the Field of English

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

The past few decades have seen a rapid increase in the popularity of transmedia (or multi-platform) models within all spheres of pop culture. Building on the work of scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Mel Stanfill, this thesis seeks to explore the way modern fans respond to texts and attempt to leverage their newfound participatory power. By analyzing specific case studies of character death in *The Walking Dead* and other works, I argue that the proliferation of the transmedia model has gradually broken down barriers in the creative process, resulting in writers and creators facing more external pressure than ever to take their stories in a certain trajectory. This trend is, in consequence, driving the realm of entertainment media into a process whereby narrative development is communal and collaborative on a societal scale.

Frontispiece



From *The Walking Dead*, Issue #100 (Kirkman, Moore, and Adlard)

Dedication

For Nathan, without whom none of this would have happened.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter I.

Introduction: Convergence Culture, Transmediality, and Today's Pop Culture Climate

The entertainment media world has been taken over by franchises. Marvel, DC, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, and even Minions are everywhere we look. We see their characters in books, movies, video games, mobile apps, and websites and see their branding and logos on t-shirts, hats, toys, board games, and theme parks. This, Henry Jenkins tells us, is a part of convergence culture, "where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways…In the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms" (*Convergence Culture* 2-3). At the core of convergence culture is transmedia, a concept through which a story is told across multiple media platforms. With each module in a transmedia model functioning more-or-less independently and "making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (97-98), audiences are free to consume however much or little they so desire, allowing for both world-building depth and a personalized audience experience.

While the focus of transmedia scholars tends to deal primarily with narrative-building across books, movies, television, etc., it is worth noting that traditional storytellers are not the only ones who have taken advantage of this concept. Fast food

chains, boy bands, and even religious institutions[1] often make use of transmedia strategies to reach potential or current consumers, and it is hard not to see why. On an obvious, economic level, the more content that there is to consume, the more opportunities companies have for profit and to pull new consumers in. While experts originally expected the internet and the resultant trends of the technology boom and new media to break up mass media conglomerates into smaller niche markets (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 5-6), entertainment producers have instead used new media advantages to essentially saturate markets cross-medium with branding and advertising, helping contribute to the development of pop culture phenomena such as those mentioned above. Combined with the preference of younger generations towards transmedia consumption (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 133-134, 255), cross-platform models have, in essence, become the standard.

The economic benefit may have been a driving force of transmedia's rising popularity, but it has often also given way to creative benefits as well. Henry Jenkins, performing a case study of transmedia pioneer *The Matrix*, explained, "Increasingly, movie moguls saw games not simply as a means of stamping the franchise logo on some ancillary product but as a means of expanding the storytelling experience…They wanted to use games to explore ideas that couldn't fit within two-hour films" (*Convergence Culture* 8-9). Herein lies a foundational idea behind transmedia narrative: taking advantage of each medium's specific strengths. Like *The Matrix*, numerous film franchises have sought to utilize television, video games, or other long-form media (e.g.

[1] Fast food giant Taco Bell promoted a limited time experience in 2019 allowing fans of the chain to stay at a Taco Bell-themed hotel (Lucas); Korean pop band BTS has largely risen to global fame on a wide range of content, including music videos, webtoons, immersive gaming apps, and more; and numerous churches have created media content such as music videos and video games in order to engage their followers.

book series, comics) for the purpose of story expansion. With the imperative for individual modules within a transmedia narrative to be able to function independently (lest a new consumer get confused), the opportunity to expand past a story's original medium drives the creation of new characters, settings, etc. In consequence, while previous narrative franchises may have centered around a specific character (e.g. *Indiana Jones*), today's transmedia stories take on what Mel Stanfill calls transmedia dimensionality "because this provides depth and breadth as well as a sense of the existence of more beyond a single object…[including] both world-building and travelling-character varieties" (92-93). This potential for growth therefore fosters the building of narrative detail to an extent that would not be possible when limited to a single medium.

Just as transmedia opens up these new avenues for creators, it likewise opens up a new depth of experience for audiences and consumers.[2] As previously mentioned, the ability to pick and choose which transmedia modules to consume consequently allows for a more individualized experience, running parallel to near identical trends in television viewership whereby streaming has also allowed for a customized viewing slate. Audiences are consequently having more asked of them as these narrative and economic models are designed to invite both casual viewers and hardcore fans[3] to engage more directly with texts. In observing these trends, Jenkins writes, "Cult works were once discovered; now they are being consciously produced, designed to provoke fan

[2] Stanfill notes that there are debates surrounding the linkage of fans to the idea of consumption due to the negative connotations associated with it (77-78). However, the term seems appropriate here given the economic drive behind the idea of transmedia encouraging audiences to consume as much media as possible.

[3] There is some debate around how fans are defined and approached in the academic imaginary (Hills, *Fan Cultures* 8-11). Given the recent pulling of fandom into the mainstream and for the purposes of this paper, I consider a fan to be anyone who engages with a text or franchise on a regular basis.

interactions" (*Fans, Bloggers, Gamers* 145). While the dawn of the internet had some speculating that new media would overtake old media entirely, research instead showed that, "while hours spent on the net fluctuate, television viewership remains steady, suggesting that despite the interactive potential of the cyber age, most media viewers prefer to be 'captivated' by stories on the tube" (Sconce 94-95). Furthermore, instead of perceiving these new digital technologies as a threat, media channels including print, television, and film chose to use these new capabilities to their advantage in order to expand upon and integrate both cross-medium production as well as interactive experiences. This has happened both overtly—i.e., through the development of playable tie-in video games and theme parks—and more subtly—i.e., through digital advertising.

This shift towards interactivity has simultaneously driven audiences away from passive viewing and towards active viewing. The incorporation of social media, in particular, has bolstered these trends, turning the accumulation of and interaction with content into a social activity by allowing fans easy access to other viewers with whom they can share both content and ideas (hence the proliferation of "watch parties," whether mediated in person or online through a platform such as Twitter).[4] While industry-mediated spaces (such as websites) "allow the viewer-user to weigh in with critical analysis and dialogue on the given series…solicited both through fan chat rooms and with contests and polls" (Caldwell 53), fan-run spaces (e.g. unofficial fan sites) and non-industry-mediated platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) have broken down barriers between creators and audiences and allowed viewers to develop a certain degree of power.

[4] Jenkins notes that these social practices are oftentimes crucial to fans' development of meaning, not only in terms of directly interpreting the text but also their emotional connection to the work (*Textual Poachers* 75-77).

The development of such spaces has allowed for a direct line of communication between fans and creators (as has the growing popularity of fan conventions) as well as opened up outlets for fans to discuss and spread content in ways that were previously impossible in the pre-digital era, often with direct economic consequences. For example, the development and circulation of memes and hashtags by viewers across social media essentially function as free advertising and incentivize non-watchers to become audience members for context and to "get in on the joke," so to speak. Furthermore, while audience campaigns of the late 1900s often fell flat in their attempts to get their shows renewed (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 28-30), recent trends have shown growing success on the part of fans to leverage content-creation, with series such as *Firefly, Chuck, Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *Community*, and *Veronica Mars* managing to get more TV seasons or even feature films produced on the backs of fan campaigns.[5] However, while Stanfill notes that, "fans are more important to media industries than ever, and they are increasingly seen as a resource to be managed whenever possible" (3), this focus on managing is crucial, as the gradual integration of fans into the development process has also led to tensions with creators.

In spite of audiences' newfound power and ability to consume media in a more "democratic" manner, there is still little doubt that the industry has continued to maintain ultimate control (Stanfill 6; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 3). Jenkins writes, of this relationship:

> While fans display a particularly strong attachment to popular narratives, act upon them in ways which make them their own property in some senses, they are also acutely and painfully aware that those fictions do not belong to them and that someone else has the power to do things to those

[5] *Veronica Mars* is a particularly significant case as a fan funding campaign (run through Kickstarter) was used to directly finance a sequel film. This is explored further in Chapter Four.

> characters that are direct contradictions to the fans' own cultural interests. Sometimes, fans respond to this situation with a worshipful deference to media producers, yet, often they respond with hostility and anger against those who have the power to 'retool' their narratives into something radically different from that which the audience desires. (*Textual Poachers* 24)

While this quote was originally written over two decades ago, its general sentiment still holds true. It is also worth noting, though, that the channels of communication between creators and (angry) fans are undoubtedly less obstructed than when Jenkins initially published this. With fan communities so numerous and sitting further in the mainstream at this point in time, it is far easier for angry audiences to let creators hear it when a narrative moves in a direction counter to audience desires. Oftentimes, it is not terribly hard to find an irate fan in a comments section threatening to give up on a show and take their attention (and money) elsewhere—yet another side effect of convergence culture and the ability for a personalized audience experience. With the media industry bombarding consumers with content at every turn along with the rise of fragmented streaming services, it is unsurprising that viewers have started to feel like their favorite books, shows, and movies are easily replaceable.[6] So while "the playing field remains tilted in the industry's favor even as the rules of the game have changed" (Stanfill 6), it will be interesting to see if these power dynamics continue to break down as Jenkins writes that, "it is the interplay—and tension—between the top-down force of corporate convergence and the bottom-up force of grassroots convergence that is driving many of the changes we are observing in the media landscape" (*Convergence Culture* 175).

[6] Jenkins aptly describes fans as nomadic, "not constrained by permanent property ownership but rather constantly advancing upon another text, appropriating new materials, making new meanings" (*Textual Poachers* 36).

Stepping back from the social and economic repercussions, the industry's shift towards mass amounts of content release—both generally and transmedially—means that, narratively and concept-wise, there is now an inherent pressure to diverge and differentiate from other projects, lest a text not stand out and fail to draw in audiences. Within a transmedia narrative model especially, there is a need to keep storylines and characters fresh as new waves of content are released cross-medium. Jenkins explains, "Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption. Redundancy burns up fan interest and causes franchises to fail. Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty" (*Convergence Culture* 98). When moving a story across mediums, a creator must not only consider how fans of the original text will react to its adaptation and/or expansion, but also how it will be received by new viewership since every new format presents the chance to draw in new audiences. Audience variation and diversification cross-medium serves to complicate this as, in the case of adaptation, the question of faithfulness versus deviation begins to form. While original fans may push for at least some semblance of adaptive accuracy, new viewers with no frame of reference might have different desires. Add in pressures from networks and publishers who may have their own expectations, and the shape of a story can change drastically.

This question of fidelity versus innovation is a riddle that modern adaptation must grapple with. When his hit comic book series, *The Walking Dead*, was adapted to television, series creator and writer Robert Kirkman said, "The understatement of the decade, I think, is that *The Walking Dead* is has outgrown me…*The Walking Dead* isn't just my baby anymore. There's an army of writers, artists, directors, musicians, sculptors,

animators, set designers, costume designers, editors, producers, and actors involved in the various productions based on my original idea" (Ruditis 8). As Kirkman indicates, with cross-medium expansion comes the introduction of numerous creative minds, all of whom have their own visions and intentions for the series. Combined with the aforementioned pressures of old fans, new fans, networks, and the need to keep things fresh, narrative change becomes not only inevitable but necessary. However, the integration and motivation of fan participation is yet another hand in the pot that has heightened tension between audiences and creators, with fans gradually seeking more and more input into the creative process in addition to all of the aforementioned players. In this thesis, I argue that the natural elements of the transmedia model—including cross-media audience transitions, the imperative for fan participation, and economic motivators of franchise expansion—have begun to restrict the creative freedom of writers, breaking down control of the creative process with direct narrative consequences.

Chapter II.

The Walking Dead and Cross-Media Movement

When a transmedia narrative system is developed, it is important to note that there is no singular model to follow. While each module is expected to function independently—in such a way that each could act as an adequate gateway to the rest of the content (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 98)—the overall significance of each segment can vary. Centralized projects, which feature "a core and a periphery" (Stanfill 91), may feel more common and intuitive. This is the case for franchises such as *Star Wars*, with the feature films (specifically Episodes I through IX) functioning as the core text and the numerous spin-off movies, TV shows, video games, novels, etc. acting as periphery texts. However, other transmedia models can operate under the assumption that all segments function and contribute to the narrative universe equally, as is the case for Marvel, DC, and their respective multitude of heroes. Considering the vast expanse of certain media franchises, there is also the distinct possibility that one narrative universe might make use of various transmedia systems housed within one another. Transmedia franchises which choose to adapt texts cross-medium will often make use of a core/periphery model, whereby a core text will be adapted to a different format and both texts will go on to serve as central pillars of the narrative canon. This kind of model has been utilized

perhaps most noticeably by franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.[7]

Building upon this last type of model, *The Walking Dead* has taken a distinct approach to transmedia world-building and adaptation, making a conscious effort to incorporate fan interaction into the narrative experience. The series began as a comic book developed by Robert Kirkman in 2003, originally starting off with a six-issue run before taking off as a fully-fledged series published by Image Comics. Comics' unique form naturally lends itself to a participatory format, "[deriving] movement from stillness—not to make the reader observe motion but rather participate imaginatively in its genesis" (Gunning 40). In other words, the necessity for readers to fill in the gutters between panels with their own imaginations makes the reading of comics inherently participatory, with Scott McCloud framing the reader as an accomplice to all that goes on (68-69). As the comics continued, Robert Kirkman proceeded to foster outside-of-the-text participation from fans as well, ending each *TWD* issue with a written column which allowed him to answer fan questions and build a direct relationship with his audience (Jenkins, "Adapting Comics" 374).

This relationship-building paid off when *The Walking Dead* got picked up by AMC Networks for a television adaptation which premiered in 2010, a natural progression given comics' and televisions long-form similarities—both allowing for in-depth diegetic expansion and cultivation of character (Sconce 95). Looking to capitalize on fans' newfound ability to make use of social media channels for the purpose of word-

[7] Some fans of these series would likely argue against this generalization, citing narrative and creative differences between, say, the book canon and the film canon and the fandom's own determination of value. However, my discussion here is strictly considering unique plotlines, the central of which is typically shared by both.

of-mouth advertising, Kirkman strongly encouraged his fan base to do just that. The result was a record-breaking debut on basic cable, with those same records once again getting broken with the premiere of Season Two (Jenkins, "Adapting Comics" 375-376). Such results show the power of the fan at work, as well as validate Mel Stanfill's concept of the fan commodity since incentivizing current viewers to draw in new viewers can pay out twofold: not only can those new viewers also pull in more, potentially increasing audience numbers exponentially, but the greater the viewership, the more advertisers will pay for commercial slots. Both of these outcomes can spell success for a television show and so, as Stanfill puts it, "[fans] are the product, and their value is gauged in advertising dollars" (135). Stanfill has similarly argued that the media industry has attempted to "domesticate" its overly-fervent fans as a response to this new dynamic (18, 82-84, 103). While *The Walking Dead*'s success in cultivating fan activity for its own gain certainly points to certain attempts at domestication, it also demonstrates that these audience bases do hold a certain amount of potential leverage.

Recognizing the role that fans had played in ensuring the television adaptation's success, AMC launched *Talking Dead* in 2011, corresponding with the premiere of *The Walking Dead*'s second season. Airing after each new *TWD* episode, *Talking Dead* takes on a talk show format with the host, Chris Hardwick, moving audiences through a variety of segments, including live polls, viewer call-ins, and interviews with writers, producers, actors, and even celebrity fans. The show also features an "In Memorium" segment paying tribute to that night's episode fatalities (yes, even the zombies). By positioning the reaction show immediately following the premiere of new episodes (commercials for the program typically air during the show, encouraging viewers to stick around afterwards),

fans are distinctly persuaded to rapidly begin interacting with the material in a way beyond passive viewership. Building this relationship beyond the text itself not only serves to further viewer investment—making them feel like they are part of an interactive community and therefore heightening the chance that they come back each week—but it also allows the producers and network some control in managing fan activities and response. For example, encouraging viewers of *Talking Dead* to use specific hashtags on Twitter means that AMC gets to point the social media conversation around the show in a certain direction. Likewise, the more people use a certain hashtag, the more visibility it gains which is a strategic advertising move in itself (and at little cost to the network).

The usage of fan labor to promote or further a media product is a concept which has certainly warranted critical attention. Stanfill describes media strategies like these as essentially "[inciting] fans to make their own free lunch and make doing audience and data commodity labor more enjoyable" (143), and there is no doubt that audiences are being asked to do this kind of fan labor. In addition to participating in fan activities such as those featured on *Talking Dead* (e.g. polls, social media discussion, etc.), viewers are also asked to do "the work of being watched" through practices such as Nielsen ratings and data collection (Stanfill 141). So while this turn towards the commodification of audiences and data has led to heightened viewer engagement in such a way as to appeal to said audiences, attention must also be paid towards the potential for philosophical and ethical conflict over labor within these models. In other words, if fans are doing part of the work to ensure the success of a project, then how much of a role does that buy them into the creative process, if they even deserve a role at all?

The incorporation of interactivity, it seems, is only good insofar as it can be moderated, again leaning towards Stanfill's concept of fan domestication. However, the usage of digital media to keep fans engaged has also proven to be a critical component of franchise-building, beginning with the growth of series websites after the launch of the internet, the most successful of which "[keep] viewer-users engaged long after a series episode has aired" (Caldwell 51). While websites for television shows, books, and movies are very much still utilized, there has been a noticeable shift of where interactive components are being integrated. Aside from *Talking Dead* and social media platforms, going onto *TWD*'s website ("The Walking Dead Universe") and clicking "Interactive" will present you with a variety of apps and video games available for purchase and/or download. These serve to function as additional revenue streams as well as immersive environments where fans can interact with the characters and story on a more active, direct level.

One transmedia module which offers a unique interactive experience within *The Walking Dead'*s narrative universe is Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, a series of choose-your-own-adventure-style video games. Taking place within the narrative canon of the comic books, the Telltale games feature their own individual set of characters but occasionally intersect with people, settings, or events from the root series. While the character of Clementine (a young girl who grows up over the course of the video game series) is presented as the series' central protagonist, the player gets to take control of a variety of characters, occasionally being prompted to make decisions which dictate the path the story will take. The game, therefore, becomes something of a metaphor for the current culture of fan involvement—though the player's direct participation and decision-

making create the illusion of control, there are ultimately a finite number of possible story paths and endings, echoing creators' final decisions on the narrative. Still, this new tendency towards providing fans with outlets with which to exert (or provide the illusion of) some form of narrative control has snowballing implications, which is further discussed in Chapter Four.

The transition of *The Walking Dead* from comics to television furthermore brought with it a set of challenges that came with the shift in medium. Acknowledging that the television show would open the series up to a more diverse viewership than that of comic books,[8] executive producer Frank Darabont wrote the following in the foreword of the series' book companion:

> Even Robert [Kirkman] himself has expressed concerns about how certain twists and turns in his comic book would play out for a wider audience in a different medium over the course of, say, five years. Getting the tone right and maintaining it will be a very challenging and delicate balancing act. (Ruditis 6-7)

The prioritization of tone was echoed by Kirkman himself, with him not only emphasizing that *TWD* was always about the physical and emotional journeys of its human characters (not the zombies, which are merely a backdrop) (Ruditis 23; Jenkins, "Adapting Comics" 375), but also expressing to fans a commitment to ensuring that that purpose would be maintained throughout the adaptation (Jenkins, "Adapting Comics" 375-376). This was why, when studios approached him wanting to make *TWD* into a zombie-action film (or something likewise out-of-touch with the comic book's tone), he turned them down and waited for someone whose vision matched his (Ruditis 9). The

[8] Though there is some debate as to the validity of prior studies on the demographics of comics readership, comic book readers are often believed to be largely comprised of young Caucasian males (Hionis and Ki 561-562).

attitudes of Darabont and Kirkman demonstrate an ideology centered around conceptual identity but also show willingness to bend to the needs of the medium.

This perspective extends to the analysis of transmedia story-scapes, as media differences and external factors must be considered. Benjamin Beil and Hanns Christian Schmidt, who have done previous work on the role of *TWD* video games in relation to the franchise at large, argue for "an analysis of transmedia storytelling techniques [requiring] an intermedial perspective, which emphasizes different media aesthetics (i.e. the interactive nature of video games)" (74). I am inclined to agree with this assessment—if working cross-medium is at the definitive core of transmedia modeling, and with creators demonstrating hyperawareness of the formal differences that must be taken into account, then it only stands to reason that a critical perspective would very much benefit from taking on a similar lens in order to understand the ramifications of this type of narrative decision-making. Likewise, I furthermore argue that, when approaching transmedia texts, the external and economic factors (including fan pressures) which can directly influence the way narratives play out must also be considered. Television, in particular, is an especially volatile medium as evidenced below:

> In the era of postnetwork instability that defines television in the age of digital, staying immersed inside of a show's lock-tight diegesis is a luxury, one that many new shows simply cannot afford. To stay afloat ratings-wise, to earn critical distinction, to attract Emmy award nods, and to secure and enhance the position of a show and its producers in town—these factors mean that backstory, corporate relations, and self-conscious reflections on critical status and aesthetic hierarchy (of stars, the series, the producers, or the network) will continue to stand as viable onscreen story matters as well. (Caldwell 64-65)

So while creators such as Kirkman and Darabont can aspire to the highest ideal to maintain the tone and identity of the show, alterations are ultimately inevitable. *The Walking Dead*, at least, was able to benefit from AMC Network's dedication to the

source material (Ruditis 51; Jenkins, "Adapting Comics" 374). However, there is no doubt that, from a creative standpoint, adapting *TWD* from comics to television also gave the writers a chance at something of a "do-over" for elements of the story. For example, the character of Shane Walsh (protagonist Rick Grimes' police partner who gets pulled into a love triangle with Rick and his wife after Rick is presumed dead at the story's start) was promptly killed off by Rick's son Carl after just six comics issues. In the television show, Shane long outlives his comic book counterpart, making it through nearly two seasons before being killed, this time by Rick himself. Kirkman said of this change, "In hindsight, knowing that I would have been able to do the [comic] book for a good long time, I might have stretched that stuff out. With the show we're actually able to do that" (Ruditis 99). The television writers took a similar approach to Morgan who, like Shane, took on something of an extended role in the transition from the comics. Playing a highly functional role in the books—orienting Rick to his new, apocalyptic setting—Morgan's emotional dilemma of whether or not to put down his zombified wife acts as a pivotal moment in the television pilot, again giving the show new areas to explore with Kirkman's noted "hindsight" (Ruditis 60). Therefore, while the post-apocalyptic subgenre has been noted as "a fresh start—a chance to reimagine what humanity can or might be in the not-so-distant…future" (Turner and Perks 656), adaptation is likewise a fresh start for writers on a metacontextual level—not just applying to the story's thematic purpose but also to the possible reshaping of the narrative itself.

The following case studies center around decisions that were made on the writers' part, exploring not only how the story of *The Walking Dead* was adapted from comics to television but also why transmedia movement influenced its transition and how the

integration and proliferation of fan participation has aggressively complicated the landscape of pop culture. Chapter Three explores instances of character death in *The Walking Dead* television show which garnered varying degrees of backlash, either due to dissatisfaction with the way the death was adapted from the comics and/or objection to the character being killed off in the first place. The chapter asks why fans reacted so strongly (especially considering one death's accurate adaptation from the comics) as well as which transmedia elements may have motivated the show's writers and producers to make certain narrative choices. Chapter Four then looks at *The Walking Dead* and beyond, identifying moments in the past few decades where fans were invited to intervene directly in a project, leading to issues centered around creative control and audience entitlement.

Chapter III.

Character Death and Fan Response

While setting and concept may seem to be the obvious foundations of transmedia world-building, the development of strong core characters is often a key part of ensuring a narrative's popularity and longevity (Hoffner and Cantor 63). As previously mentioned, separate transmedia modules may choose to center themselves around different sets of characters, allowing different aspects of the narrative world to be explored. However, the intersection of characters and/or character cameos are often utilized as a narrative tool to play on previously established character-audience relationships and keep viewers interested. In other words, the chance to see more of a favorite character can drive audiences outwards from the core transmedia text to the periphery texts. *The Walking Dead* has frequently made use of this strategy—for example, with characters such as Morgan and Dwight appearing in both *TWD* (both comics and TV) and *Fear the Walking Dead* and characters like Glenn and Hershel making interactive cameos in the Telltale video game. Franchises including *Spider-Man* and *Harry Potter* have also used the promised appearance of a fan favorite to generate viewership for peripheral and spin-off projects.[9]

With characters playing such an important role as it pertains to gaining and maintaining viewers, it comes as no surprise that the rise of digital technology has led to

[9] *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) featured a slew of character cameos (Dockterman) that produced a great deal of both fan and media buzz around the movie's release. Likewise, the *Fantastic Beasts* movies have returned characters from the *Harry Potter* universe, though a brief cameo by Minerva McGonagall ironically drew the ire of fans due to its perceived timeline inaccuracy (Wade).

the strategizing of audience-character attachment. One such concept which has developed over the past several decades is the progression of parasocial relationships, defined by James Blake as "the emotional and psychological relationship that some viewers develop with people and characters on television" (37). These relationships are traditionally one-sided, and while this definition is television-specific, it should be noted that this phenomenon is not limited to the television industry. Thanks to the social media boom allowing consumers frequent look-ins into the lives of creators and public icons, parasocial relationships can develop across a variety of media, including books, film, television, music, and video games. These relationships are oftentimes encouraged by creators, networks, and publishers given the implication that fans who are emotionally invested are more likely to stick around. *The Walking Dead* has looked to capitalize on this concept with Robert Kirkman's initial Q&A forum giving readers a kind of pseudo-direct line of contact to him. Likewise, the creation of *Talking Dead* surely had parasocial motivators as well, with the talk-show format allowing audiences to gain further insight into and from the writers, producers, and—especially—the actors. Given that actors are the literal faces of the characters, dissolving barriers between actors and audiences is becoming common practice as a means of fostering such relationships. This is evidenced by the growing popularity of fan conventions, where the possibility to meet, take a picture with, and/or get an autograph from series actors is oftentimes marketed as a central draw. Taking these connections and emotions into consideration, it can then become tricky to navigate instances of character death as such events have an increased chance of drawing an intense fan response.

Strong reactions to character death may seem counterintuitive when discussing works of apocalyptic horror and science fiction, which oftentimes position the promise of onscreen death as a potential audience draw. This is unsurprising given the rising fascination with death in American and Western culture, possibly connected to the rising popularity of Halloween as a cultural event (Khapaeva 56-59). Like Halloween, part of the morbid appeal of television—and especially horror media—is that it allows viewers a safe space in which to explore and confront the idea of death (Tamborini 309). In writing about the regular viewing of "dead" bodies as part of the ever-popular forensic crime shows, Ruth Penfold-Mounce writes that "experiencing 'death by proxy' is a safe and acceptable way to explore death and the dead in contrast to actual death and corpses which continues to be inappropriate and uncomfortable viewing" (20). Shows like *The Walking Dead*, then, are typically expected to showcase a certain amount of characters dying as a means of facilitating, feeding, and satisfying these morbid curiosities on the part of the audience. After all, with zombies as a central antagonist, it is virtually promised that at least one character, whether high-profile or not, will fall victim to their grasp.

Though this naturally high character turnover rate may make it seem counterintuitive for fans to be angry over a character getting axed, the fostering of elements such as parasocial relationships ensure that some kickback is, at times, bound to occur. This puts writers in a precarious position: in an apocalyptic context, to not kill off characters would minimize risk and, by relation, dramatic effect—suspense theorist Dolf Zillmann actually encourages that "liked protagonists must be selected as targets for negative outcomes so as to make these outcomes feared and dreaded" (282). On the other

hand, killing off too many characters, especially fan favorites, runs the risk of isolating the fan base and losing viewership. In attempting to gauge how audiences may react to the deaths of specific characters, theorists tell us that seeing "good" characters survive and "bad" characters face negative consequences is typically the focal point of a viewer's desire for what they would determine to be a positive resolution (Oliver and Sanders 250; Tamborini 317-319; Zillmann 285). However, with such a diverse cast of characters as well as a diverse fan base, determinations of who is "good" and who is "bad" are often not perceived as absolutes. The audience's perception of a character as well as a character's overall appeal can be influenced on an individual viewer basis by a multitude of factors, including physical appearance, context, prior knowledge (on the part of the viewer), long-term emotional involvement, etc. (Hoffner and Cantor 65). Moral foundations theory can likewise play a particular role in apocalyptic narratives where the audience "apply a logic that is contextually adapted" (Tenga and Bassett 1283) and which may be interpreted differently between viewers.

Ultimately, this makes it virtually impossible to please everyone, and so writers may choose to prioritize their own desires for the narrative. For *TWD*'s creators, who have prided themselves on unpredictability and the idea that "any character could die at any moment" (Jenkins, "Adapting Comics" 376), this has largely meant not hesitating to kill off major characters in spite of the potential for fan backlash, instead prioritizing a suspenseful tone and high risk factor.[10] It is also worth noting that when working with television media, certain circumstances outside the writers' control can also inform

[10] Kirkman actually believed so strongly in keeping *The Walking Dead* unpredictable that even the comics' end was designed as a surprise, going so far as to have artist Charlie Adlard mock-up covers for "future" issues to keep the abrupt ending a secret (Wigler and Goldberg).

narrative decisions. For example, the character of Dale being killed off in *TWD* television show was reportedly related to actor Jeffrey DeMunn's desire to leave the show following the departure of producer Frank Darabont (Dawidziak). Such events show that storylines—and, by extension, who lives and who dies—are not always at the complete mercy of creators and can be influenced by external circumstances. This is particularly important to understand in the context of transmedia narrative which tends to continuously add people with each new project who can potentially affect a story's trajectory. Audiences, though, will most likely not take these determinants into consideration if a fan favorite is killed off, with such instances having the same potential viewership impact regardless of the reasoning behind the decision.

This chapter concerns itself with instances of controversial character death, analyzing why they happened, what they meant to their respective stories, and the intense fan responses which arguably defined them.

Glenn Rhee: Adaptive Fidelity, Spoilers, and Testing the Waters

First appearing in issue #2 of the comics and Season 1, Episode 2 of the television show, Glenn Rhee was part of *The Walking Dead*'s foundational group of characters. Defined by his youthful charm and sarcastic brand of comedic relief, the Asian-American pizza-delivery man-turned-zombie fighter quickly became a fan favorite. Progressing from resourceful survivor to a core member of Rick Grimes's group, he eventually met his end in issue #100 of the comics and in the Season Seven premiere of the television show after being brutally beaten to death by Negan, leader of the rival Saviors group. While readers of the comics were not pleased with Glenn's demise, the outrage over his killing at the beginning of the show's seventh season coincided with a massive ratings

drop (Otterson), leading some television critics to mark his death as the point at which the show lost its footing (Lee; Murray). This audience response was something of a curiosity, considering the finale of the sixth season ended on a cliffhanger regarding the identity of Negan's victim, and media speculation over the next few months that Glenn would meet his comic book fate was relatively widespread. Given prior instances where fans clamored over fidelity to base texts (e.g. *Eragon*, *Percy Jackson*), the desire for deviation certainly suggests a new attitude towards adaptation. Likewise, the differences in the comics versus television mediums may also offer insight as to why Glenn's death was so vehemently rejected by television audiences.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, a central tenet of the transmedia model is the economic motivation behind the potential for audience expansion with each new installment. Differences in audience demographic therefore factor heavily when moving cross-medium, something which *TWD* must have considered when adapting the comics to television. In recent years, comic books and graphic novels have seen an uptick in popularity, gaining interest from a more diverse group of readers and growing to be more accepted overall into mainstream pop culture and academia (Chute 4-6). This lies in contrast to their role in the latter half of the twentieth century, when comics had an underground/niche type of readership, driven in part by the attempt of trade groups to impose restrictions on the form (Chute 12-13). The growing popularity of comics, however, is still no match for the wide audience afforded to the television medium which lies far superior to comics in terms of popularity and accessibility. The general demographics of television viewership consequently tend to be much more diverse across gender, age, socioeconomic status, etc., which makes adaptive and/or transmedia

expansion into this medium potentially lucrative in the form of a wider range of viewers but also trickier in regards to viewer satisfaction. In other words, what appeals to a comic book audience may translate differently to television and impact viewer reception.

Stylistically, *The Walking Dead* comics appear in black and white, a decision that was part economic (costing less than printing in color) and part homage to zombie pioneer George Romero (Ruditis 20).[11] Robert Kirkman also said of the color choice that, due to the level of gore, printing in color would have made it "that much more offensive…By doing it in black and white, the gore recedes into the background so it isn't quite as jarring and doesn't really take center stage" (Ruditis 20, 23). Glenn's death is certainly one instance in which the lack of color serves to make the visual confrontation of the violence on display more tolerable; the five-page-sequence in which Negan continually smashes his head with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire contains several images of Glenn's body in various stages of gory trauma. Signs that the producers likewise took into account the repulsiveness of the gore when adapting the scene to television are also present since, unlike the comics, the show did not have the benefit of black-and-white and the addition of audio further served to ramp up the tension and emotion of the scene. Consequently, while it has been said that, "One of the hallmarks of AMC's *The Walking Dead* is its unflinching portrayal of grisly violence" (Tenga and Bassett 1280), Glenn's death in the television show is almost surprisingly toned down in comparison to the comics, with most of the violence occurring out of frame or in silhouette. Henry Jenkins detailed in his "Adapting Comics" essay how Amy's death was

[11] William Proctor argues that, direct adaptations aside, even texts viewed as "original" source material can be viewed as adaptations of given "discourses, tropes, quotations, and allusions alongside narrative components and generic features" (6), in essence making *The Walking Dead* as a collective whole a remake of Romero's work.

given a prolonged moment in the television show, primarily due to the wider range of facial emotions available for live-action as opposed to the comics form (377). The adaptation of Glenn's death was handled, in comparison, somewhat oppositely, being shown in more graphic detail (at least visually) in the comics, demonstrating how narrative movement between the two mediums can be limited in some ways and given wider range in others.

In spite of the considerations that were paid in mitigating the violent circumstances of Glenn's demise, it was also clear to the series' writers and producers that there was a high chance that fans would react strongly to his death due to his role as a fan favorite. To gain some insight as to how unpopular the decision to kill off Glenn would potentially be, the writers endeavored to gauge fan response to the idea about a year in advance of Glenn's actual death. The concept of gauging audience reaction before writing a plot point into the narrative canon is relatively common practice. However, these experiments typically take place in online fan forums and communities, whereby producers may plant potential ideas in order to research how they are received (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers* 2). Perhaps recognizing that such trials are limited to the small population of fans who are involved in these online community forums, the producers of *TWD* instead chose to write their plot experiment directly into the show, with Glenn presumably dying after getting trapped on top of a dumpster by a horde of zombies with fellow Alexandria resident Nicholas in Season 6, Episode 3 ("Thank You"). After Nicholas commits suicide by shooting himself in the head, his body drags Glenn down into the horde where blood and guts are shown being torn apart by the zombies.

Though somewhat ambiguous given the presence and positioning of Nicholas's body, the ploy was clearly intended to make it seem as though Glenn had died, and fans reacted strongly. Executive Producer Greg Nicotero disclosed during an interview that following the airing of "Thank You," his Instagram account was filled with outraged and expletive-laden comments from fans who were heartbroken at the idea that Glenn had been killed (Potts). Interestingly enough, however, in spite of the fans' vehement reaction to the idea of Glenn being written off the show, the writers proceeded to kill him off anyway in the Season Seven premiere. The "Thank You" experiment, in consequence, became somewhat illusory—though Glenn's subsequent "revival" gave the initial impression that fan preferences were being given high value, Glenn's eventual killing reinforced the reality that the writers maintain ultimate control as well as *The Walking Dead*'s dedication to unpredictability and the idea that no character is safe.

In a way, going against fan preference is what made Glenn's television death—though an accurate adaptation of the comics—unpredictable. *The Walking Dead* writers made a similar move by killing off Abraham, who outlived his comic counterpart, before Glenn in the same scene, providing the brief illusion that Glenn had dodged his comic book fate. This mix of loose adaptation and faithful adaptation, fan desire and fan disservice demonstrates an ultimate dedication on the part of *TWD*'s creators to maintaining tone and what they view as narrative integrity, not choosing to instead craft the plot to meet the inclinations of fan preferences. This is a choice that industry professionals are needing to increasingly make, as the valuation of fan input has become thoroughly integrated into industry practice (Stanfill 142). From a creative standpoint, a triangle-shaped model winds up developing as different forces exert their pressure on the

crafting of the text: the writers' own intentions, the consumers' desires, and the economic implications of the chosen form, e.g., the transmedia model. At times, these forces may align, but it is the moments of conflict that push creators to make a decision in skewing one way or the other. In this case, the writers' dedication to thematic uncertainty seemed to align with the transmedia need to keep the audience guessing and "expecting the unexpected" as a means of keeping them engaged cross-medium, especially for those fans who were familiar with the source text (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 28). While Glenn's death was arguably predictable in its faithful recreation, the show's prior deviations from the comics as well as Glenn's post-"Thank You" resurrection very likely gave the impression that his fate was uncertain.

As media and technology have progressed over the past few decades with the rise of the internet, developments in online information sharing have also made it more difficult to keep surprises under wraps. The proliferation and sharing of spoilers in both niche fan communities and mainstream media outlets has gradually become commonplace (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 55), further breaking down the barriers between fans and the creative process. Following Glenn's pseudo-death in "Thank You," *TWD*'s post-episode talk show strategy actually wound up working against it, as fans found it suspicious that Steven Yeun, the actor who portrayed Glenn, was not a guest on that night's *Talking Dead*—an established tradition for actors whose character had been killed off. Likewise, photos of Yeun on set in costume were circulated after the airing of "Thank You," fueling speculation that Glenn had actually survived the dumpster incident (E. Taylor). With *TWD* aiming to maintain a certain level of unpredictability, the spreading of spoilers is an audience activity which actively works against the producers'

goals.[12] As it pertains to these conflicts, Jenkins tells us that "spoiling is empowering in the literal sense in that it helps participants to understand how they may deploy the new kinds of power that are emerging from participation within knowledge communities" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 29). Just as Stanfill and Jenkins stress the fact that the industry is still the one who holds the utmost power, fans are still figuring out how to seek and exert influence over their favorite franchises, series, and projects.

Still, even with spoilers circulating the web and the comic book canon being what it was, Glenn's death was still received in an overwhelmingly unfavorable manor by *The Walking Dead*'s audience. There are two concepts that this result consequently supports: 1) audiences for television and film adaptations still significantly exceed in number those who are familiar with the source material; and 2) narrative fidelity is no longer the single measure for adaptive success as fans look to poke and prod their favorite stories into more favorable forms. In other words, adaptation becomes a second chance for writers to "get it right" in the fans' eyes, either for those who are familiar with the original text and want to see the correction of a perceived wrong or for new audience members to experience the outcome that they prefer. Then, as opposed to an adaptation asserting itself as merely a repetitive reiteration of an old work in a new form, it is able to transcend the original material and "offer new insights and new experiences" (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 107). This is somewhat of a departure from what has been seen in the past, where adaptations which dramatically deviated from the source material were

[12] In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins describes a sub-community of *Survivor* fans who made it their mission to uncover as much information in advance of the new seasons as possible, often going to extreme lengths to do so. Needless to say, this caused a great deal of tension with producers (25-58).

rejected and shunned by both fans and their original writers alike.[13] While collective attitudes on adaptive preference can certainly vary from fan base to fan base and medium to medium, these points of audience dissent—Jenkins describes them as fan frustrations over their sense of a work's "potentials" being thwarted (*Textual Poachers* 103), e.g. the potential to give Glenn second life in the television show—are still worth noting as transmedia trends continue to develop.

Beth Greene, "Team Delusional," and Niche Communities

Of all of the character deaths on *The Walking Dead*, the killing of Beth Greene provoked what was probably the most bizarre fan response. Not appearing in the comics, Beth was an original character created for the TV show as Maggie Greene's lone sister (Maggie had multiple siblings in the comics who were all cut for the adaptation). After developing a small fan following due to her youthful presence and hopeful outlook, Beth was killed off in Season Five during a conflict with another group, prompting said following to react dramatically. A petition was started to bring Beth back to the show, and plastic spoons were even sent en masse to AMC headquarters—a reference to Beth's finding of a collectible spoon during an earlier episode (T. Taylor). When it became clear that Beth would not be returning to the show, a small community of fans formed online, named their group "Team Delusional," and dedicated themselves to proving that, in spite of Beth clearly getting shot in the head at close range onscreen and Daryl carrying her

[13] The *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* movies were widely regarded as an adaptive failure, and the series was very recently picked up for a television show "redo" by Disney+ (Holub). Likewise, the *Eragon* movie has also been shunned by fans, with author Christopher Paolini encouraging them to direct tweets at Disney to pick up the series for a remake as well (Ortiz).

dead body out of the building, there were clues in the show indicating that she had survived and would eventually come back.

The possibility for the proliferation of communities such as Team Delusional poses an interesting dilemma for creators as such groups essentially function as an outright rejection of what the text is presenting to them. Jenkins notes that, "Fans have little to say about what happens to their characters…but fans claim the right to protest and protest loudly decisions contradicting their perception of what is desirable or appropriate" (*Textual Poachers* 119). The internet and social media have certainly given fans the platform through which to loudly voice their opposition, but, unlike the reaction to Glenn's death (i.e. primarily complaint-based coinciding with viewer drop-off), Team Delusional's assertion of Beth's survival reflects a direct imposing of will upon the text, bending textual elements and interpretations in order to meet fan desires. This response is not entirely unpredictable as suspense theory demonstrates that audiences "should be inclined to intervene and prevent the deplorable outcome that they are unable to sanction and accept," but, at the same time, an adult viewer should be able to curb this impulse as they have the capacity to understand that intervention is impossible (Zillmann 289). This is no longer necessarily true as social media and fan participation have made the impossible possible. As communication has opened up and fans begin attempting to exert powers of influence over writers, the potential for narrative intervention is now a distinct possibility, even if, in the case of Team Delusional, it is not necessarily met with successful results.

Oftentimes, these pockets of loud fans are small, niche, and stigmatized, with creators and networks largely ignoring them on account of the belief that such groups are

too small to be representative of the wider audience and "therefore unreliable as a basis for decisions" (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 279). *Lost* showrunner Damon Lindelof, when questioned on fan criticism, once said in an interview,

> When the fans rise up, they have a high-mind approach. There is an empirical belief that, oh, 'the *Lost* finale sucked,' or, 'We are putting together a petition to demand X, Y, and Z.' That's not all fans. That's some fans. What they [comprise] in proportion to the overall fandom is anyone's guess. We are living in a culture where online [people] dictate what the zeitgeist is saying. (Hibberd)

The belief that the loud voices of a few does not represent the majority of a fandom is a relatively common idea echoed by showrunners and writers in order to dismiss particularly strong fan reactions (and usually ones that skew negatively). For *The Walking Dead*, such a standpoint may seem contradictory when considering the own writers' testing of the waters in regards to Glenn but can also explain why the ultimate decision was to kill him off anyway—a risk which clearly did not pay off due to the dramatic ratings drop. In the future, it is very possible that producers leaning into audience pressures may become more commonplace as fans are only growing bolder. Following what was largely regarded as a disastrous final season, *Game of Thrones* fans started a petition calling on the writers to rewrite and reshoot the episodes (Bella). While perhaps unrealistic due to the costs that would have been incurred by the network, these demands don't seem entirely implausible when considering Paramount Studios' reanimation of Sonic for the *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie, whose initial design also prompted fans to petition for a redo to which the studio acquiesced (Alexander). Like *Game of Thrones* and Sonic fans, Team Delusional and the response to Glenn's departure illustrate how difficult it can be to navigate character death within a system that is

designed to get viewers attached to characters (both due to participation and the nature of long-form narrative itself) but also a genre for which death is an expectation.

Violence Against Children, Carl and Judith Grimes, and the Passing of the Torch

As discussed in Chapter Two, *The Walking Dead'*s producers knew that shifting the series from comics to television would not be as simple as merely copying the storylines exactly between the two mediums, as certain elements of the plot and content might not be well received by the wider television audience. Indeed, there is often a range of different content taboos when moving from medium to medium, where factors such as audience and regulating organizations can affect what is seen as acceptable. Comics, because of its smaller market and history of underground production (Chute 15), typically has looser rules when compared to television; though cable networks like AMC are not held to the same standards as public access channels, it can sometimes pay to be conservative lest a segment of the potential audience feel isolated by extreme violence, sexual content, language, etc.[14] This toning down is clearly seen in *The Walking Dead* as several plot points from the comics—for example, the serial raping of Michonne and her subsequent torture of the Governor—were cut from the television show, likely due to their extremity. In this way, *The Walking Dead* comics are far more graphic than their TV counterpart.

Another taboo topic which *The Walking Dead* takes on differently between comics and television is violence against children. Like the aforementioned subjects, the comics do not hesitate to include this explicitly as some early plotlines involve scenarios

[14] *Game of Thrones* is one series which has defied this logic, oftentimes presenting extreme content while simultaneously enjoying a great deal of success.

such as a young boy's murder of his even younger brother (and subsequent killing by a young Carl[15]), the graphic beheading of the Greene twins, and the mention of another group of survivors cannibalizing their children. The latter two scenarios were cut entirely for the TV show, while the former was modified for the television audience. In one of the show's heaviest episodes, "The Grove" (Season 4, Episode 14), a girl named Lizzie kills her younger sister, Mika, with the intention of proving that zombies are still people and suggests that she would have done the same to a baby Judith had Carol and Tyreese not interrupted her work. Mika's body is only shown briefly in the background of the scene with a single quick shot of her face showing closed eyes and some light blood splatter—a relatively tame image when compared to that of the comics and the violence of the rest of the show. Lizzie's death then, like Mika's, takes place off-screen, with Carol shooting her in a field after deciding that she is too dangerous to live. While this instance in particular demonstrates a willingness on the part of the show to take on emotionally troubling and taboo topics, the manner in which it does so still supports a toning down of content from the comics which are decidedly more explicit.

The television show, however, does not draw a line at the appearance of child zombies, with some of the show's most iconic scenes featuring zombified young girls. Indeed, *The Walking Dead's* pilot episode opens with Rick Grimes confronting and shooting a zombie girl through the head, the reveal of Carol's daughter Sophia as a zombie emerging from Hershel Greene's farm (a significant deviation from the comics) is a pivotal moment in Season Two, and the Governor's keeping of his zombie daughter is a key point in his character arc. Still, the girls' deaths do not take place on camera and,

[15] While there is a storyline involving the moral implications of Carl killing a man in the television show, Carl's killing of this other child as well as him shooting and killing Shane were edited out of the adaptation.

with very few exceptions, children are almost never killed on-screen in *The Walking Dead*.[16] This is, perhaps, a reflection of the show's recurring theme on the zombies' humanity (or lack thereof) as addressed at different points by both Hershel and Lizzie as well as the "desensitization of the consumer" as it pertains to the viewing of the corpse on television (Penfold-Mounce 30). If the zombies are not perceived as truly human, then this could create a certain amount of emotional buffer which makes this violence against childlike figures (as both child zombies are shot) more tolerable for a television audience, hence their presence in the series even as direct violence against human children is avoided.

It is also possible that, just as with Glenn's death, the difference in taboo between comics and television, especially currently, is at least partially due to the difference in realism. To reiterate, the hand drawn, cartoon style of comics along with Kirkman's conscious decision to render *The Walking Dead* in black-and-white as a means of downplaying the gore by nature offers a certain degree of separation between the content and audience imagination, making it somewhat easier to swallow. Though McCloud argues that part of the intimacy of comics is the ease with which the reader can impress themselves upon the characters because of the cartoon style (36-37), the realism of live-action television and its inherent asking of the audience to confront certain stressful situations as if they were really occurring in front of them can help to explain why heavy topics and storylines such as those involving violence and sexual assault are more easily navigated in comics than on TV.

[16] Arguably the most grisly exception involves Sam Anderson getting devoured by a hoard of zombies in "No Way Out," an episode which also saw his older brother Ron get stabbed and killed by Michonne and Carl lose an eye. The violence against children in this episode was considered so intense that the producers felt compelled to address it directly, citing a loyalty to the tone of the comics (Goldberg).

The consequent toning down of content as it pertains to children likely affected the way arcs were adapted for arguably the two most important child characters in *The Walking Dead*: Carl and Judth Grimes. Judith (actually the daughter of Lori Grimes and Shane Walsh) only appears very briefly in the comics, being born in issue #39 and only surviving a short while before being killed off just nine issues later in issue #48. Her death is arguably one of the comics' greatest tragedies as she is crushed to death by Lori after the latter is shot while the two attempt to escape the Governor's attack on the prison where they were staying. In the television adaptation, Lori dies during childbirth instead while Judith survives the Governor's invasion and is still alive on the show today—now a preteen due to the time jump. While there is no concrete answer as to why the adaptation chose to take Judith's path in a different direction, Robert Kirkman reportedly stated that he begged the network to allow him to kill off Judith numerous times, only to be told no (Acuna, "*The Walking Dead* creator…"). Given the way the show handled adapting other plotlines involving children, it seems highly likely that Judith's death was deemed too gruesome and taboo for television, allowing her to be granted a reprieve. However, Judith's survival also likely impacted the character arc of her brother, Carl, leading to his death in Season Eight.

While Rick Grimes is most distinctly positioned as the primary protagonist of *The Walking Dead* comics, it could be argued that the story is really about Carl, who grows up through the apocalypse and survives well into adulthood. In partial support of this theory, the comics' epilogue is centered on an adult Carl, taking place a couple of decades after Rick is murdered at the Commonwealth and Carl has taken on his role as a leader in the community. Judith's survival in the television series did not automatically

render Carl's character meaningless if the writers did decide to keep his arc accurate to that of the comics. However, it did give the writers a "back-up Carl," allowing them to maintain the essence of his comics arc, albeit in the form of passing it along after his death (Tassi). Though the show is still ongoing—it is currently airing its final season—so there is not yet a guarantee that Judith's final outcome will match exactly with Carl's comics counterpart, the general intention seems to be there as preteen Judith is frequently seen wearing Carl's iconic sheriff's hat—an heirloom originally owned by Rick.

Again, much of this is, admittedly, based in speculation as Carl's death wound up being highly controversial. The decision was largely unpopular with fans, especially readers of the comics, and both fans and reviewers alike deemed it to be a terrible decision (Bartleet; Kain; Tassi). Considering Carl's significance in the comics, some viewers had trouble rationalizing why he would be killed, resulting in speculation that Carl was written off because of the impending renegotiation of Chandler Riggs' contract once he turned eighteen (Tassi). This coincided with reports that Riggs had recently bought a house as well as enrolled in a college local to the set, suggesting that even he was shocked by Carl's sudden exit (Gennis). Producer and director Greg Nicotero, however, insisted that Carl's death was a strategic narrative move to both propel the story forward and make it clear what the stakes were in the war with the Saviors (Acuna, "*The Walking Dead* director…"). Though the reasoning behind killing off Carl will likely be a point of mystery for fans well into the future, Judith's survival seems to have made the move possible.

In spite of being something of a different situation as compared to Glenn Rhee and Beth Greene (though all evoked strong responses from certain populations of fans),

the adaptations of Carl and Judith demonstrate how audience variation between mediums—and the anticipation of differing responses—can influence story. This is of particular interest as transmedia models increasingly become the norm as it indicates another issue that writers and producers are going to continuously need to navigate. Movement between mediums not only means changes in form but also audience, regulations, taboos, etc., all of which have the capacity to impose underlying restrictions on the creative process and drive the narrative in different directions.

Chapter IV.

Character Death and Direct Fan Control

The technological advancements of the past few decades have allowed the media industry to develop modes of fan participation not just through social media platforms but through the mediums themselves. The gradual progression from remote controls to VCRs, which first allowed viewers to manipulate their television viewership (Blake 11-13) has been superseded by the on-demand powers of DVR, streaming, and multi-device (or multi-platform) viewing over the last several years. As media has metamorphosed, so too has the modern consumer, shifting from a passive role to a more active one. This new consumer "desires participation and has the will to change and influence media content" (Blake 32), driving fan responses like that of Team Delusional or the intense audience response to Glenn's death. However, as has been noted, these efforts are oftentimes met with little success. Instead, media producers consciously build in opportunities for participation into their narrative worlds (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 175), giving rise to the skyrocketing popularity of tie-in video games, apps, and board games. Certain franchises, including *The Walking Dead*, have even ventured into the newfound chance for virtual reality experiences,[17] something which will likely expand as those technologies continue to develop. In a transmedia system, these often tangential platforms are embraced for their interactive potentials, allowing for a more immersive experience, not only as part of the model as a whole, but as a text in itself. In other words, the industry is keen on using these forms to satisfy the audience's desire for participation.

[17] *Star Wars* and Marvel are just two notable franchises to date who have launched VR games through either PlayStation or Oculus.

While Chapter Three discussed instances of severe fan response to a plot decision, this chapter instead looks at situations in which narrative control was put into the hands of the fans themselves and the repercussions of such creative decisions.

Telltale's *The Walking Dead* and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*: Choosing an Adventure

First released in 2012, Telltale's *The Walking Dead* video game, again, follows its own unique set of characters with the occasional brief appearance from a comics/TV character mixed in. From a narrative standpoint within *TWD*'s transmedia model, the series of four games (labeled as individual "Seasons") functions as a way of not only providing an additional product for consumers but also as a means of exploring certain areas of plot which the core texts only lightly touch upon. For example, the death of Hershel Greene's son Shawn is only mentioned in the comics and television show as an event which occurred prior to the story's start; *Season One* of the Telltale series, however, has the player play through Shawn's death as protagonists Clementine and Lee stay at and help out on Hershel's farm for a brief period of time. In his book *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins presents a case study on the *Matrix* franchise and writes, "The animated films, the game, and the comics…[add] information and [flesh] out parts of the world so that the whole becomes more convincing and more comprehensible" (118). This can be said, too, for Telltale's take on *The Walking Dead*, as the developers took this opportunity to intersect the core texts at underdeveloped points as opposed to merely crafting a story that takes place in the same world but runs parallel. The crossover with familiar characters, to reiterate, also serves to draw in audiences from the franchise's main texts, encouraging them to consume these peripheral projects and, thus, providing the economic drive behind the transmedia model.

Video games are a particularly fascinating medium in this case and critical as media producers seek out opportunities for fan participation. While film and television have often been regarded as passive mediums, often used as background noise and approached with varying degrees of attention depending on program and situational variables (Anderson and Burns 5-6), video games require both focus and participation on the part of the player in order to progress. Without the player's direct intervention, the game would simply stagnate and so, just as Scott McCloud argues that comics readers must become an accomplice to the cartoonist in order to fill in the gutters, "gamers" must also become complicit in the narrative as active participants. The medium has also undergone a transformation itself: far from its origin as a platform for two-dimensional, "8-bit" gaming, video games now oftentimes feature complex narrative worlds, filled with a comprehensive set of characters, elaborate settings and maps, and expansive story plots (frequently including both central and B-plots, typically presented as "side quests"). The only real thing setting video games apart from film, then, is the interactive component and the necessary participation on the part of the player in order for the story to progress.

Telltale, a producer of primarily choose-your-own-adventure-style games, provides a rather unique interactive experience as a central draw of the games is the promise of the player's own choices shaping the narrative. It could certainly be argued from a theoretical standpoint that most video games contain a choose-your-own-adventure element as players often have the option of completing missions in a personalized order or manner, therefore shaping the way that the game plays out. However, the storylines and outcomes of these missions are usually fixed and linear, with

the player's individual style of gameplay having little to no effect on the end result plot-wise. Telltale, instead, essentially creates playable storybooks in which, while they may find a more limited range of motion, players are presented with narrative choices that affect how the story develops. Dialogue options are the most common choice-based component in these games, influencing how non-player characters (or "NPCs") may feel or evolve, but players are occasionally presented with more high-stakes choices that can dramatically alter the path that the plot takes. For Telltale's *The Walking Dead* game, specifically, these choices sometimes involve determining who lives and who dies. For example, in the first episode of *Season One*, Lee and Clementine find themselves bunkered down at a drugstore along with a small group of other survivors. When the store is attacked by zombies, the player is presented with a decision of whether to save Carley or Doug, both NPCs and members of the group Lee and Clementine are working with. Whichever character is saved by the player moves onwards in the story (though only to be killed suddenly by another character in the group, Lilly, in the third episode) while the other perishes in the attack.

This style of interactivity in narrative consequently allows for the intervention that Zillmann argues should be impossible, though, again, there is a certain level of futility involved as the player cannot ultimately save neither Carley nor Doug, only granting one a short reprieve before their murder at the hands of Lilly. Still, putting a certain amount of power in the audience's hands and allowing them to shape the story is significant, quite literally making the player an accomplice in the development of the plot as McCloud says, even more so than the typical video game. Telltale adds an extended element to this, allowing players to transfer their data between each game/season so that

their choices have long-term ripple effects across the series. For players, this style of game allowing for such narrative control has proven to be relatively popular, with games such as *Detroit: Become Human* and *Life Is Strange* also making use of the choose-your-own-adventure format. Others, on a smaller scope, have incorporated elements such as dialogue options or morality scales in order to provide players with a certain amount of personalization and control.

Still, it cannot be stressed enough that this level of player control only goes so far as a large chunk of these narratives are fixed into predetermined outcomes by the games' producers (e.g. Carley or Doug's eventual death, even after the player has saved them). This is, of course, partially due to the limitations of the form itself—it would be relatively impossible to create a true open-ended narrative when also relying on voice actors, artists, coders, etc. to build a comprehensive cinematic experience as many of these games do—but this finite limitation on what players can do is also in the interest of the producers. As Jenkins explains, "Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods—on their own terms—is something else altogether" (*Convergence Culture* 137). Video games which function in this manner are therefore the perfect model for media producers looking to expand their narrative universe transmedially, permitting creators to satisfy the desire for fan participation without having to give up too much control.

TV anthology *Black Mirror* made an experimental attempt at bringing the choose-your-own-adventure concept to television in 2018 with the release of *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. The playable film follows a young programmer named Stefan

who, due to his interest in an author of choose-your-own-adventure books, begins pitching and developing a game adaptation in that style. The viewer is given choices as to how Stefan should respond in different situations (Figure 1), and as the story progresses, in a meta twist, Stefan begins to recognize that he is being controlled by an outside force. Emphasizing the themes of free will and control, *Bandersnatch* addresses the issue of audience control head-on, making the viewer the cause and driving force behind Stefan's dramatic (and possibly violent) breakdown. This becomes a much more direct illustration of McCloud's theory on audience complicity as Stefan distresses over his loss of control, potentially committing violent and disturbing acts (one path has Stefan murder and dismember his father, if the viewer so chooses) in spite of his anguish over what he is doing. Viewers certainly felt the responsibility of this decision-making—albeit fictional—reacting strongly and often uncomfortably to manipulating Stefan through such morbid storylines (Yeates). As a result, *Bandersnatch*'s ultimate stance comes off as rather accusatory, almost seeming to slap the audience on the wrist for daring to intervene in Stefan's life and supporting Stanfill's theory of the domestication of the fan (11). In other words, the meta-film appears to desire to act as a deterrent, warning viewers not to meddle in story development in the future lest their actions again have unfavorable consequences.

This growing trend in choose-your-own-adventure style texts points to an increasing desire on the part of consumers to have more interactive experiences. Coupled with the expanding popularity of media formats such as virtual reality, there is a clear demand for immersion and control, allowing audiences a role in the navigation and

trajectory of storytelling. Over the past few decades, some creators have even dared to allow fans the chance to participate in an even more direct manner.

Batman and Jason Todd: Letting the Fans Decide

In 1988, decades before audience participation reached its current peak, *Batman* writers and editors dared to incorporate fans directly into their decision-making in such a way that would be dramatic even by present standards. Following the transition of Dick Grayson from Robin to Nightwing, a new character, Jason Todd, was introduced to take up the mantle of Batman's famous sidekick. Jason wound up being largely unpopular with fans, however, due to his sulking and often moody personality as well as his backstory being almost redundantly similar to Grayson's (Weldon 147). Recognizing that the character was at a crossroads and inspired by a 1982 *Saturday Night Live* skit (Weldon 147-148), the Batman writers, editors, and publishers decided to have Jason's fate decided by a fan poll. During the *A Death in the Family* series, Jason was kidnapped by the Joker in the midst of a plotline which saw him attempting to track down his birth mother. Between issues, fans were asked to call into a hotline to determine Jason's fate: calling one number would allow Jason to survive the ordeal, while calling a different number would result in the Joker killing him (Figure 2). In anticipation of either outcome, two different final pages of issue #428 were planned and designed (Figure 3), and with a final tally that separated the two results by only seventy-two votes (Weldon 148), the fans voted to have Jason killed off.

Jason's death was met with shock, not only because of the writers' actual follow-through on the threat to kill him if the fans so asked, but also because of Jason's young age and the manner of death—the Joker beat Jason with a crowbar in a sequence which

The Walking Dead would eerily parallel with Negan's murder of Glenn (Figure 4) before setting up a bomb that would deliver the final blow. *Batman* #428 was consequently met with a wave of media frenzy fervently dismayed that the writers had actually killed off Robin—a backlash which took the *Batman* writers by surprise due to Jason's unpopularity—and acclaimed DC writer Frank Miller called the move "the most cynical thing [DC] has ever done. An actual toll-free number where fans can call in to put the axe to a little boy's head" (Weldon 149-150). Miller's comments put the onus of the killing on DC for making it possible but seem to neglect the fact that fans then made the active choice to put that figurative axe to Jason's head. In looping back to McCloud's theory on reader compliance, the murder of Jason Todd moves beyond the gutters and takes this idea quite literally, making the readers who called in not only complicit but directly responsible for Jason's death even if, oddly enough, the *Batman* writers wound up taking much of the heat for following through.

The case of Jason Todd certainly makes use of some elements that have become more widely utilized since it occurred, e.g. the possibility for multiple endings (Telltale) and fan polls (*Talking Dead*), but what really sets it apart as a unique case study is the fact that fans were allowed to directly determine the narrative canon. The use of fan polls especially has been oftentimes implemented as a means of getting audiences involved, but such polls are typically superficial with little to no tangible effect on plot. Instead, the killing of Jason Todd was a rare instance where the industry temporarily gave up its power and let the fans decide how to progress. It may be argued, of course, that this still does not represent a total loss of control by the writers and publishers as they surely would not have conducted such a stunt unless they were prepared to move forward with

either storyline.[18] However, with the media industry actively working to maintain control over texts and keep fan power limited, willingly letting fans determine the outcome of a story is significant in that there is a considerable amount of risk involved in giving audiences that (illusion of) power lest it be taken as a precedent and subsequently become an expectation. It must also be noted that in determining the direction of the canon, the fan vote had repercussions not limited to issue #428 but moving beyond it as well, helping to propel *Batman* into a new era of gritty noir (Weldon 150).

Considering the risk associated with a stunt like this, the question is then raised of why creators would choose to do it. In this case, the economic factor—using the resultant media buzz to generate interest—definitely played a role as the *Batman* editors admitted that they didn't want to "waste" their idea for a fan poll on something insignificant (Weldon 148). Threatening to kill off Jason instead created a high stakes situation for fans to get involved in, tying into Mel Stanfill's idea of the industry "[inciting] fans to make their own free lunch and [making] doing audience…labor more enjoyable" (143). Like Telltale's model of allowing the reader to choose the path of the story, the Jason Todd poll provided the same kind of novelty experience with longer-lasting and large-scale ramifications. The poll also conveniently allowed the *Batman* publishers to write off the unpopular Todd without having to bear full responsibility for killing a teenaged character. In other words, they had the fans do their dirty work for them in a way that also made the process fun. The results of the fan poll were, of course, an additional reminder that it is virtually impossible to make everyone happy, given both the media response to Jason's death as well as the narrow margin separating the two options. Still, for the

[18] *Batman* editor Denny O'Neil, though partially responsible for the fan vote plot, actually voted to save Robin as he believed allowing Jason Todd to die would complicate his job too much (Weldon 148).

readers who were ultimately unhappy with Jason's death, the fan poll format inherently suggests that their frustration should have been directed at their fellow readers as opposed to the *Batman* writers.

From a fan labor perspective, involving audiences to such a high degree creates complications which Stanfill outlines as follows:

> First, fan activity adds value to the media object it works on. Second, fans do this work without receiving equivalent monetary value in return, producing a net benefit to industry. Third, this means fan activity produces what Marxist theory calls surplus value, and therefore it makes sense to view the recruitment of fan work as incitement to exploitative labor. (131)

The ethical implications of Stanfill's ideas may seem somewhat extreme for a simple call-in campaign, but the undertones of his message are still present. Encouraging audience members to participate in a stunt which adds value to the text by generating media buzz (with the goal of an economic uptick) and a lack of reciprocated value, only the satisfaction of their participation, is certainly a form of fan labor. This is especially true as fans were charged fifty cents to call in and vote on Jason Todd's fate—a small fee but a fee nonetheless on top of the already existent costs associated with consuming a text. The costs of media consumption can be qualified anything from the obvious cost of the media itself (e.g. books, DVDs, cable television, tickets) to the more auxiliary costs of, for example, buying gas to drive to the movie theater or convention (Stanfill 84, 87); with the extent to which fans are being asked to consume and participate these days, with transmedia franchises spanning books and movies and board games and merchandising and theme parks, these costs can quickly add up. Fans are, in consequence, being asked to participate in greater terms not only in the case of time and labor but financially as well, gradually increasing their role in what it means to both produce and consume media.

DC's killing of Jason Todd ultimately set a precedent for fan involvement and began to push the limits of how deeply fans may be asked to participate. While the ethics of directly asking fans to be collaborators on the building of canon is still up for debate, the incorporation of a larger body of people into the creative development process only serves to complicate the question of authorship. Speaking from a theoretical standpoint, the dilution of a plot's origination moves meaning away from the individual and onto the collective population. In other words, a text's interpretation can be directly linked to or altered by being a product of society at large as opposed to a single person pulling the strings. It is still too early to fully measure the effect that fan participation will have on the realm of literary criticism, but as transmedia continues to blur the lines between mediums, creators, and audiences, such considerations will likely need to be paid in the near future especially as fans get more and more involved in production. The recent case of the *Veronica Mars* Kickstarter bears similar resemblance to fans' involvement with the Jason Todd poll but with a different set of implications.

Veronica Mars, Kickstarter, and the Logan Echolls Dilemma

As these breakdowns in barriers between creators and audiences have proliferated, blurring the boundaries of creative control, the issue of entitlement has only grown more complex as fans attempt to throw their weight around while producers oftentimes resist. Scholar Kevin Roberts has posited the theory of "lovemarks," suggesting that such pieces of works become the emotional property of the people who love them in contrast to the "cold, impersonal world of brands" (Hills, "*Veronica Mars*…" 185). Though legal and economic ownership almost always falls to the writers, producers, etc., the recent trend in audiences attempting to influence narrative trajectory

often comes with an underlying assumption that fans are essentially "owed" something and so should have a say in dictating how plotlines play out or characters are treated. The thought here is that without audience viewership and support, such projects would be unable to succeed in the first place, though creators who have resisted fan influence have often downplayed this idea (à la Damon Lindelof) even as others embrace it. However, perhaps no series has tested the limits of fan boundaries and participation in the past decade more than teen drama *Veronica Mars*, as producers pulled a stunt in 2013 rivaling even the Jason Todd incident in terms of fan involvement.

Premiering in 2004, *Veronica Mars* ran for three seasons on both UPN and The CW before being cancelled in 2007. Six years later, creator Rob Thomas and Kristen Bell, who starred as the show's titular private-eye-slash-high-school-student, launched a Kickstarter campaign to revive the show in movie form. The campaign quickly exceeded its original goal of $2 million, concluding its run with over 90,000 donors and a final tally of more than $5.7 million (Rappaport). The resultant film, released in 2014, returned several of the original cast members and was met with enough success that Hulu eventually announced in 2018 that they would launch a television series revival (Respers France).[19] Following the release of Hulu's "Season Four" in 2019, however, fans were outraged after character Logan Echolls was killed in the final episode, mere minutes after marrying the show's main character. A fan favorite who had been around since the original pilot episode, the on-again/off-again relationship between Logan and Veronica was a central plot point—and draw—of the series (Navar-Gill 219), and his death was met with immediate widespread backlash (a petition, unsurprisingly, was started to bring

[19] The *Veronica Mars* franchise's other transmedia projects include a series of novels as well as a digital spin-off series centered on the character of Dick Casablancas.

him back). Thomas attempted to justify the decision by explaining that his aim was to write a true "noir detective show," and in order to do so, Veronica's happy ending had to be cut short (Rodman).

Public response largely disagreed, with even a handful of online reviewers deeming the move "unfair to fans" (Stark) and "a curveball that cheapens the evolution of one of the show's most fascinating characters" (Li). Fans, meanwhile, reacted in a variety of ways that ranged from trying to argue that Logan was not, in fact, actually dead (claiming the stunt was merely a misdirection) to attempting to convince others who had not already watched Season Four to disregard it entirely (Lawrence). The most problematic reactions, though, came from those who expressed regret over contributing to the Kickstarter. After all, if not for the success of the fan fundraising campaign, the dominoes would not have fallen for the producers to develop both the movie and subsequent Season Four. In other words, the fans' financial support of the series had unintentionally led to Logan's death, leaving many feeling deceived (Holmes).

Similarly to Jason Todd, the situation surrounding the death of Logan Echolls becomes vastly more complicated considering the fans were, in essence, asked to become literal investors in the series during the Kickstarter campaign and seemed to feel as much (Holmes). One could argue that the merchandise awarded at certain tiers of fan donation count as an adequate return on investment,[20] but some rewards, such as invitations to the movie premiere or the chance to make a cameo, seemed designed to give off the impression of the fans being direct partners in the making of the film—as did the many videos and written statements from the cast and crew posted to the official Kickstarter

[20] Many fans who were offered a digital copy of the movie for their donation actually wound up receiving refunds after a high number of complaints about the quality of the stream they were provided (Grow).

page, stressing that the movie could not be made unless the fans rallied together to raise the money. Rob Thomas's history of maintaining a close, personal relationship with his fans throughout the show's initial run all the way through the Kickstarter campaign, positioning himself in the role of "showrunner-fan" as a means of combating the typical detached showrunner perception (Hills, "*Veronica Mars*…" 186-187), only served to compound the issue. While the fostering of this parasocial relationship between Thomas and fans meant that many expressed a deep trust in the writer, shunning the concept of "fan service" (i.e. plot decisions or callbacks in a text clearly meant to please fans) in favor of the preservation of Thomas's "vision" (Navar-Gill 216), others felt betrayed that Thomas would make such a predictably unpopular decision after years of seeming to put the fandom first.

In the past, debates of whether or not fans are "owed" something purely for their viewership have typically fallen flat due to the lack of concrete, tangible value that would be needed to make such an argument, but in this case, the five million dollars raised by *Veronica Mars* fans puts an exact value on their support along with the insistence that the movie sequel could not have been made without it (Hudson). Annemarie Navar-Gill has thus argued that the growing trend of fan funding has moved certain pockets of the media industry back towards a patronage model whereby admirers of an artist may provide the financial backing required to fund said artist's projects (213). Though historical instances of patronage have traditionally coincided with patrons "disavow[ing] the idea that their patronage has influence on the creative process" (213), Navar-Gill likewise acknowledges that modern patronage, both financial and symbolic, "provides one measured example of a way in which audiences now have a greater ability to influence

production and industry decision-making" (223). This becomes strikingly apparent in the debates surrounding fan service and its place in the creative realm. Even as fan service is oftentimes accompanied by a negative connotation and shared feelings of uneasiness for both creators and fans alike (Navar-Gill 216; Scott 179), the current industry pressure to keep fans pleased means that writers are still inclined to cave into such influences more often than not. Thomas acknowledged that the fan-funded movie was largely designed to function as fan service as a means of fulfilling the financial stipulations of the crowdfunding campaign (Scott 174), neatly wrapping up several arcs and character storylines, but that the cleanliness of the plot needed adjusting once the series got extended for the Hulu revival (Holmes). With fans clearly disagreeing, however—or at least disagreeing with Thomas's solution to this problem—the implications of fans as investors and the tempering of their consequent expectations will surely develop into an issue to be explored further should creators seek to follow in the steps of the *Veronica Mars* franchise and continue to turn to crowdfunding campaigns to directly fund or generate interest in their projects.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

The situations discussed in this thesis exhibit a very limited view of the power that fans have been able to wield through transmedia channels. Though not given extensive attention here, it should be also noted that there are certain phenomena such as breakout characters which present further instances in which fans can push writers in one way or another when it comes to character screen time and development. This can look like anything from Felicity Smoak going from guest star to series regular on *Arrow* (Haithman) to fan favorite characters such as Angel from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* being given a spinoff. Furthermore, although rarer, fan response has even seen certain characters get brought back to life, as was the case of Han Lue in the *Fast and the Furious* franchise (Lam). As convergence culture continues to develop and audiences are progressively utilized as a sounding board, it seems likely that such cases will begin to become even more commonplace.

In spite of Jenkins's and Stanfill's insistence that the industry still holds the brunt of the power, pop culture does seem to be moving towards a tipping point, especially as younger generations demonstrate a preference towards having a certain amount of influence over their media of choice (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 255). As audiences continue to exert their voices over online channels—whether it be through online fan communities, social media, or any number of industry-curated methods designed to get fans involved—the media entertainment industry will likely not be able to have it both ways forever, actively encouraging audiences to both consume and participate (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 137-138; Stanfill 86-87) while also trying to restrict what that looks

like. This has already been seen in certain cases where "fan desire…does not necessarily want what industry wants fans to want," such as a cartoon intended for boys but garnering a large female viewership getting cancelled because it did not match the network's desired audience (Stanfill 82). Surely, these outcomes become a lose-lose situation for both fans and creators alike, and it will be interesting to see if these cases take a turn in the future, whereby projects may be more inclined to adapt to a new audience rather than face outright cancellation. In a similar vein, Stanfill argues that the industry attempts to domesticate and control fan participation by "making the path of least resistance that much more rewarding and fulfilling desires through consumption. By the domestication model, this is a bid to accustom fans to eating out of industry's hand rather than finding their own food [e.g. fan-created content like fan fiction]" (101). Assuming that Stanfill is correct, the media industry may have determined that this strategy benefits them for now, but, given the previously discussed cases, it seems that if that desire for control is there, pushing fans away from fan-created content outlets may likely drive them inwards towards an attempt to impose their will on the canon texts instead. This is especially true if the modes of fan domestication create the illusion of control (e.g. *Talking Dead*, fan polls, etc.) and may explain the trend in fan petitions when storylines do not go their way.

All of these examples, when viewed as an aggregate, testify to the compromisation of the creative process, which occurs when transmedia models are employed and fans are invited to have a hand in the pot. Compromisation in this context means that writers are facing direct external pressures from networks, audiences, and even the restrictions of the individual mediums, each of which attempt to push the

writers' narrative decisions down certain paths and thereby taking agency away from the writers themselves. Now more than ever, society has moved towards a direction in which stories are truly a product of their time as a collaboration between writers and readers (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 98), and these developments and trends in media technology have also meant that more groups are getting a seat at the table. In the past, who got to participate in fan activities was often influenced by factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, etc., but the changes in technology and distributor focus over the past few decades have expanded media accessibility and, consequently, diversified fan production and markets (Stanfill 83, 130). This has coincided with a push towards transformational fandom (in which the text is reshaped and reimagined through creative fan work and often associated with female, queer, and racial minority identities) as opposed to historically affirmational fandom (in which the text is glorified as is and typically linked with white, male, and heterosexual identities) (Navar-Gill 212). Diversification and accessibility has, in turn, been a key factor in propelling participatory fandom from the outskirts of cult status, from a time when "nerding out" over a program was stigmatized and viewed as bizarre (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 9-12), into the mainstream of pop culture (Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, Gamers* 142). While diversification has certainly given way to more robust fan communities and representation, the overall effect of fans leveraging their way into the creative process—whether positive or negative—still remains to be seen. With participatory practices becoming more normalized, these issues surrounding creative liberty and authorship will likely only become more complicated as time goes on, though some scholars have already argued that the solution to creator/fan tensions will be a hybrid model which blends

transformative fandom practices and participation with more traditional industry standards (Booth 156; Scott 171).

Moving forward, and as discussed in Chapter Four, critics and theorists may be inclined to keep external pressures and economic motivators in mind when analyzing a text. Fan studies is in itself a relatively new field—with Jenkins raising it to prominence in the early 1990s—and the idea of fan participation and activity qualifying as economic labor is an even more emergent topic (Stanfill 132-133). Still, fans and their involvement are not going anywhere anytime soon, with the trends only suggesting that these issues surrounding audience participation will continue to become even more prominent as time goes on. I am therefore inclined to agree with Stanfill when he writes, "If fans are a vital part of the economy, then it is important to take the economy part as seriously as the vital part" (131). Economics is not always incorporated into critical thought on the literary spectrum, but we are coming to a point in entertainment media where it is becoming near impossible to separate the business from the text. With all of the external pressures that creators are now facing, the bleeding of economic factors and fan presence into the creative process must be understood as critical motivators of plot.

Appendix 1.

Images

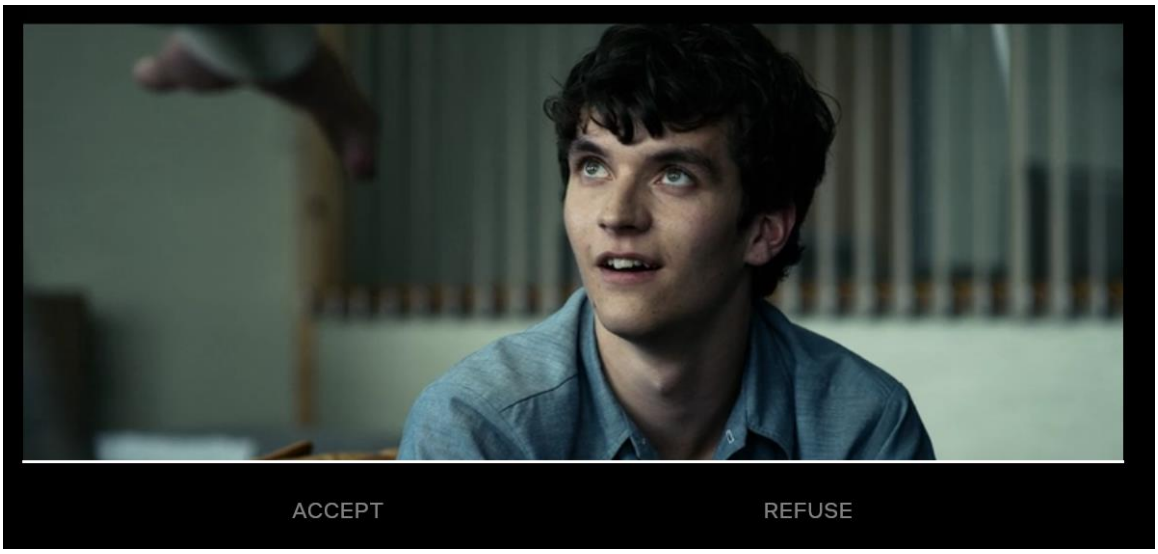


Figure 1. *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* Screen Capture

In the Netflix special Black Mirror: Bandersnatch, *the viewer is given the choice between two options which will affect how Stefan responds to the given situation (McLean and Brooker).*



Figure 2. DC's Jason Todd Call Campaign

Prior to Batman *issue #428, fans were invited to call into one of two phone lines to vote on whether or not Jason Todd would survive his ordeal with the Joker (Starlin et al.).*



Figure 3. *Batman* #428's Two Endings

On the left is the final page of Batman *#428 which was published following the Jason Todd call campaign. On the right is the alternate final page which was prepared in case the fans had voted to save Todd (Starlin et al.).*



Figure 4. *Batman* and *The Walking Dead* Visual Parallels

The top series of panels shows the Joker violently beating Jason Todd out of frame in Batman *#428 (Starlin et al.). The bottom series shows Negan beating Glenn to death in silhouette in* The Walking Dead *#100, echoing the Joker's killing of Todd (Kirkman, Moore, and Adlard).*

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