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SEEING BEYOND PLAY: THE IMMERSIVE WITNESS IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

Ian Bogost's 2011 book *How to Do Things with Video Games* seeks to "reveal a small portion of the many uses of video games and how together they make the medium broader, richer, and more relevant (p. 7). I aspire to join Bogost's conversation by offering another use for video games—the video game as a site of immersive witnessing. To showcase how witnessing can be meaningfully utilized in video games, I present case studies of two vastly disparate games: commercial entertainment game Telltale's *The Walking Dead* and not-for-profit game *Half the Sky Movement: The Game*. My method of analysis traces rhetorical and design forms (including narrative, duration, immersion, choice, and reflection) that contribute to my conception of an immersive witnessing experience. Achieved through games' immersive and agentic properties, witnessing through games involves different emotional and thought processes than other media. This model not only potentially appeals to new audiences but also engages those audiences in a distinctly different way from media of the past.

SEEING BEYOND PLAY: THE IMMERSIVE WITNESS IN VIDEO GAMES

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THESIS

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degree of Master of Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	
Introduction and Theoretical Framework.....	1
Chapter 2	
‘Clementine Will Remember That’: Immersive Witnessing in Telltale’s <i>The Walking Dead</i>	29
Chapter 3	
“A Story you Play to Change the World”: True Immersive Witnessing in <i>Half the Sky Movement</i>	51
Chapter 4	
Implications and Conclusion.....	76
Works Cited.....	87
Vita.....	95

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Though video games are now respected as an area of study, much research errs on the critical side, decrying the violence and inactivity some games seemingly promote. However, there is an emerging body of research lauding the positive *possibilities* the medium presents and currently even mainstream, profit-driven video games do much more than entertain. Ian Bogost's 2011 book *How to Do Things with Video Games* outlines twenty different ways to conceptualize the possibility of the medium, chiefly in an effort to fulfill the book's goal of "reveal[ing] a small portion of the many uses of video games and how together they make the medium broader, richer, and more relevant (p. 7). I seek to join Bogost's conversation by offering yet another use for video games—the video game as a site of immersive witnessing.

Witnessing no longer refers to the singular experience of a person or group of people in the same space and time of an event. Much in the way that Sue Tait (2008) reconfigures witnessing and calls for a reconsideration of "the ways in which differing spectator positions impact ourselves and our cultures" (p. 109), I seek to also extend witnessing to be considered in new arenas, specifically witnessing in the immersive environments of video games. As new technologies emerge and existing forms mature, many scholars have sought to determine how such evolutions impact acts of witness. For example, Wendy S. Hesford (2011) engages a number of media in her statement: "Witnessing atrocity has come to mean not just the experience of the survivor but a more generalized mass-mediated experience, which...can function in ways that regenerate nationalist scenes of recognition and rhetorical address" (p. 56). While Hesford refers to more thoroughly explored areas (such as television news) and how they can work upon viewers, urging them to action, other scholars such as Lisa Parks (2005) investigates technological forms of witnessing such as the less widely acknowledged satellite image.

Inspired by these scholars, I seek to further enrich this line of research by proposing the *immersive witness* as a potential subject position from which people can view events. As such, this argument also has implications for subjectivity and both the epistemological and ethical affordances computer games can offer their players. By explaining the mediated witnessing produced in the best-selling fiction title, Telltale's *The Walking Dead*¹ and comparing the game's affordances to that of a serious game, *Half the Sky Movement: The Game*, I will suggest how witnessing in narrative-based games creates opportunities for players to experience a form of witnessing through video games that feature agentic vicarious experiences, what I call *immersive witnessing*.

To showcase how witnessing can be meaningfully utilized in video games, I present case studies of two vastly disparate games: Telltale's *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement: The Game*. Both games present players with opportunities to experience the vicarious witnessing that mass media normalizes and the eye witnessing that demands immediate responsibility. The thesis will examine *The Walking Dead* as an important mainstream example of an artifact with implications for witnessing and I then delineate how *Half the Sky Movement* both succeeds and fails to attain the same type of immersion and witnessing capacities as *The Walking Dead* through a completely different gamescape, namely one that reflects the material circumstances of the world we live in. At the outset, these two games could not seem a more arbitrary match. However, comparing *The Walking Dead* to *Half the Sky Movement* is meaningful precisely because the narratives, overall game experience, and intentions of developers are drastically dissimilar.² My analysis shows how two games from contrasting genres with completely

¹ This study only covers events and gameplay present in Season One of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2012) even though since then a second season that acts as a sequel is currently in the process of being released episodically.

² In the case of *Half the Sky Movement* the game seeks to raise awareness about some of the problems women worldwide face and suggest some ways in which both the women in those circumstances as well as advocates can help. Witnessing, though it is

different intended outcomes (a good gameplay experience and profit vs. education, awareness, and ultimately action) both encompass aspects of immersive witnessing as an effect of equivalences in game mechanics and rhetorical choices.

The goals for my project are two-fold. First my project will demonstrate how video games utilize the medium's capacities to fully take advantage of what witnessing in digital game spaces offers rhetorically. By using such a diversity of sources, I seek to engender a more comprehensive understanding of how witnessing comes about as an aspect of gameplay, what it means to do so, and where it can go in the future as the technologies advance. I conclude by assessing how forms used to facilitate immersive witnessing may contribute to ongoing disciplinary conversations about mediated witnessing and rhetorical subjectivity.

1.1 Methods

My method of analysis will be to trace rhetorical and design forms that contribute to the immersive witnessing experience. The study of form dates back to Aristotle but can enrich contemporary gaming literature in significant ways. While the meaning of form has long evolved from referring to a genre, mode, or type of oratorical text, as per Aristotle's three original forms—deliberative, forensic, and epideictic—what form can mean in contemporary times has yet to be explored in regard to digital games. Whereas classical treatments of form focus on argument organization so far as they fit into generic categories, present-day rhetorical theory illuminates form as a widespread heuristic-forming technique, meaning it informs the way we address formally similar arguments or situations. Game studies can draw from this contemporary understanding of rhetorical form to influence the ways in which games present and contextualize

not called such is a primary objective. In contrast, *The Walking Dead* does not intend to achieve anything other than entertain but witnessing is residual effect.

in-game events and experiences for players. Ultimately, this could influence the future use of games' persuasive capacities.

Contemporizing rhetorical approaches to form, Kenneth Burke (1951) describes the “difference between the ‘old rhetoric’ and the ‘new’” as a divergence from focusing on “deliberate design” and a move toward “‘identification,’ which can include a partially unconscious factor in appeal” (p. 203). By defining “unconscious factors” as integral to persuasion, Burke troubles the previously taken-for-granted concept of audience. He places increased responsibility for interpretation into the hands of the audience, rather than creators of texts. This is evidenced in Burke’s (1968) definition of form as “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (p. 31). This “appetite” suggests expectations and longings in the mind of readers of texts. Burke extends form beyond oratory and finds it in literary texts: “Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of expectations” (p. 217). These expectations, however, cannot be present without some previous interaction with the form. Thus, the audience must be able to connect the experience presented in the form to something they already have experience with for it to be appealing and make sense. By Burke’s description, audiences interpret the content of messages by calculating how its form fits into knowledge and experiences they already have. Burke considered form foundational to identification and argued that literary form could function as “equipment for living” (p. 293). This “equipment for living” can be understood as the lessons or advice audiences draw from fictional narratives through means of identifying the similarities between their own life experiences and the situations and ideas presented in the form.

Considerations of form shifted again in the late 20th and early 21st century as Barry Brummett (1985, 1988, 1991, 2004) extended the breadth of formal “equipment for living,” to

popular culture narratives found in such places as TV and film. Brummet (1991) characterizes form as persuasive in such contexts because viewers' identification with depicted experiences allows them to interpret their own experiences as parallel and therefore legitimated. Calling attention to the rhetorical homologies, or "formal resemblance[s]" (p. 1) inherent in such texts, Brummet (2004) asserts that "The role of homology [is to] link disparate orders of experience by way of the same form" (p. 6). For example, the TV viewer can develop a shared understanding of meaning between their world and what is depicted in TV shows by means of an understood formal equivalence in truth spanning the two worlds. Thus, Brummet largely conceives of form in the 21st century as applicable through homologies acting as "bridging device[s]" between "different dimensions of experience" (p. 4) that share respective sets of formal qualities. Brummet (2013) even goes as far as to argue that form is the ideal equipment for living because it is "how we generate lived experience" noting that experiences are "always discursive, always formally patterned" (p.7) and we cannot have them without form.

The increasingly more mediated modes through which we undertake communicative experiences including chatting on Skype, streaming videos, and yes—playing video games brings about questions of not only what "counts as real" experience but how form affects and influences the way we experience these events.³ In his work on genre, Charles Bazerman (1997) answers: "When we travel to new communicative domains, we construct our perception of them beginning with the forms we know" (p. 19). In essence, as we encounter new forms we attempt to make sense of them by comparison to the forms with which we are familiar and act accordingly. Narrative-based video games present an interesting challenge when considering

³ There is scholarship from rhetoric that explores the role of form in digital contexts. Collin Gifford Brooke offers a rhetoric of new media in his 2009 book *Lingua Fracta: Towards a Rhetoric of New Media* but this is less applicable in my case studies as he deals with navigating interfaces inherent to digital texts.

form because they simultaneously fall very much in line with traditional understandings of experience (they often depict life-like simulations) yet are also highly mediated experiences, conveying information through digital audio and visuals, and tactile feedback.

As games are rarely studied through a rhetorical lens, there exists no theory of rhetorical forms in gaming scholarship. However, Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric parallels in many ways the faculties of how forms make games persuasive. Bogost (2010) defines procedural rhetoric as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (p. ix). Game experiences occur through no singular text, visual, audio, or some combination but rather the amalgamation of these communicatory modes. The interactive stories they create in which players must make choices and complete series of events and challenges reveals that forms in video games are nothing if not procedural. They are chains of events that affect other events; rhetorical forms in games are provided through the affordances intrinsic to the medium. It is through these technological affordances unique to the video game that I evaluate rhetorical form in an effort to elucidate how witnessing in games allows for the potential of training in/mediates a mode of witnessing that differs from previous incarnations.

1.2 Justification of Games

I will explore immersive witnessing through two case studies of dissimilar games: a commercial fantasy/horror multi-platform endeavor, *The Walking Dead* and the not-for-profit social change Facebook game, *Half the Sky Movement*. The games do share an important similarity in that they are both components of larger transmedia projects originating in other media and, thus, seek additional audiences for their cross-platform storytelling worlds. The games were chosen, however, for the key differences in the ways witnessing takes form.

Specifically, my analysis will compare how rhetorical choices are embedded in game mechanics, the lessons imparted through player interactions with game narratives, and the impact of each game's genre on the witnessing forms used.

1.2.1 The Walking Dead: Season One

Released episodically between April and October 2012, Telltale's *The Walking Dead* game is a narrative-based, point-and-click adventure game playable across multiple video and computer gaming platforms including PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, iOS, and the PlayStation Vita. The game follows the story of former college professor Lee Everett as he attempts to survive the American zombie apocalypse with his young companion, Clementine. Lee must survive and protect Clementine by any means possible (which generally includes maiming zombies, making tough, literally split-second decisions, and strategizing) as he traverses the United States in search of a safe place to settle while meeting—and losing many other survivors along the way. The game takes place within the same fictional universe as Robert Kirkman's extremely popular *The Walking Dead* graphic novel and television series though most of the game characters are unique to the game. The game resulted from production company Telltale Games approaching Kirkman with a proposal to create the now best-selling title.

Selling more than 8.5 million episodes within the first nine months of the game's release (Lynley, 2013) and winning more than ninety 2012 Game of the year awards (Telltale Games, 2013), the release of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* was met with unprecedented success, especially for an adventure title. In fact, the game has been cited as reviving the adventure genre (IGN, 2013) and beat the latest installations of long-established series such as *Halo 4* and *Hitman Absolution* for game of the year, despite it having the least amount of traditional gameplay compared to the other nominees.

The Walking Dead resembles an interactive story more than the typical zombie game. The strength of the game's narrative is widely praised for its power and complexity. *New York Times* video game reviewer Chris Suellentrop (2012) notes: "moments have more sadness and subtlety in them than other games muster in 40 hours." The game's strong narrative foundation was purposeful as Kirkman is quoted in a *Gameinformer* interview (2012) lauding Telltale's ability to work with narratives in games, stating: "I thought they were more focused on telling a good story, and I thought they were good at engaging the player in the narrative... The only thing that's really special about *The Walking Dead* is the human characters and the narrative that they exist in." Narratives in story-based games are what give player actions meaning. Knowing that players' choices have consequences that affect their avatar's (typically fictional) futures and even the lives of other characters give players purpose (Journet, 2007) and a reason to think carefully about their in-game choices. *The Walking Dead's* narrative is foregrounded as gameplay is often interrupted by cut-scenes and some of the most interesting moments come from the times when players make choices that affects the trajectory of the story. These moments come often and typically with literal in-game life or death consequences. In an article from leading games industry magazine, *Edge*, *The Walking Dead* is described as "[not] a game about guns. It's arguably not even about zombies. Instead, its core is emotion, morality and player choice." (Edge-online, 2013). This fact matters as those aspects of *The Walking Dead* are what both makes players care about the characters and their fates within the narrative structure of the game and allows them to be immersed, though that is not the only reason players become immersed in this or any game as I will explain.

Aside from the game's narrative, some of *The Walking Dead's* strengths lie in its unique immersive capacities. For example, players make timed choices for Lee. The game rules only

allow for about a 3-5 second response time, forcing players to react instinctually. These choices may be in response to other characters dialogue or in defense of a zombie attack. The immediacy of the action puts real stress on players and creates an affective response of panic. Also the large array of choices players make throughout the game whose results follow players throughout the entirety of the story (the results of which may or may not be starkly different if different decisions are made) position players to seriously consider their decisions. Players are afforded ample opportunities to carve out their post-apocalyptic identities through making morally ambiguous choices that continuously appear throughout the game. The realism of interactions and consequences promote immersion.

The game's immersion and agentic aspects are a given as *The Walking Dead* is a narratively driven game. However, witnessing plays a large role in the game as many difficult decisions must be made based solely on what players/Lee have seen or what other witnesses convey to Lee. Players' decisions make a difference in the outcome of the game and even players' best intentions do not always go as planned. Though this game is entirely fictional and could arguably be accused of promoting violence, the way it positions community and witnessing formally models the processes inherent to witnessing in the physical world. Making difficult decisions and the process of making such decisions are a primary mechanic. Due to the design of the game, players must act upon what they witness, even if their action is inaction, just to keep the storyline of the game moving. As such, *The Walking Dead* employs multiple layers of witnessing meaning that players witness the events of the game while witnessing/controlling Lee's actions as he is simultaneously witnessed by the NPCs (Non-playable characters). This structure allows players to recognize the outcomes of their morally ambiguous choices as part of an economy in which managing social capital is paramount. In effect, the choices matter because

they affect the NPCs, Lee's relationships with them, and even the person Lee becomes as a result of his relationships. Formally this mirrors physical world circumstances and allows space for players to understand their witness as an integral part of a community effort.

Because of its status as a video game and the particular apocalyptic environment in which the game takes place, *The Walking Dead* allows players many opportunities to experience multiple levels of witnessing including in-game eye witnessing and the immersive mediated witnessing for which I argue. Taking place in the fictional zombie apocalypse, a scene ripe for witnessing devastation and horror, players exist in a game-world where most family members, loved ones, and even enemies have been compromised, an especially horrific thought because as film and game studies scholar Tanya Krzywinska (2008) notes: "Zombies are like us but not us—in other words, not entirely radically other from us" (p.165). The game puts players in situations where they must watch the deaths of cherished companions or even kill them themselves, putting the player in a layered witnessing position, that of player and in-game agent bearing responsibility. The fact that *The Walking Dead* takes place in a zombie apocalypse scenario makes the game a perfect environment in which to experience and train witnessing faculties.

1.2.2 Half the Sky Movement: The Game

Launched on March 4, 2013, *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* is journalists Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's third prong in their tripartite media plan to bring attention to what they consider the "greatest moral challenge of our time," women's oppression across the globe (Games for Change, 2013). Teaming up with the non-profit Games for Change, Kristof and WuDunn designed the game for the social media platform, Facebook. The game, a point-and-click adventure, revolves around the life of playable character Radhika, an impoverished Indian

woman trying to make changes in her community, and eventually communities around the globe. *Half the Sky Movement* is designed to teach a wide audience about these issues as Kristof wishes to introduce knowledge about the real conditions women face to those who may not otherwise encounter such information. He says: "And really the point of the game is to reach skeptics, and we hope that by getting them to play...they'll become exposed a bit" (Prois, 2013). Within the first six months of its debut *Half the Sky Movement* drew more than 547 million press impressions and one million unique players (Games for Change, 2013). Collectively, these players have unlocked nearly half a million dollars' worth of donations that go toward fistula surgeries, vaccinations, mosquito nets and more for underprivileged women (Games for Change, 2013).

As *Half the Sky Movement* is a social change Facebook game intended to be played sporadically and had a much smaller budget, the narrative immersion in this case is different from the way it manifests in *The Walking Dead*. Dialogue is limited to discussions only relevant to issues at hand and the animations are partial in that facial expressions change and bodies show movement but intermediate actions (moving from one place to another) and larger actions (flying to Kenya, building an extension to Radhika's house, etc.) are not shown, just confirmed as complete through dialogue. There is a clear story that provides a framework for the choices players make within the game and thus the lack of an extensive game world does not hinder the game's impact as a tool for social change. Jesper Jull (2011) illuminates the reason why meticulously detailed stories are not necessary in games: "Games project fictional worlds through a variety of different means, but the fictional worlds are imagined by the player, and the player fills in any gaps in the fictional world..." (p.121). The lack of detailed animations does not hinder players' understanding of the narrative for this reason, and further the game is

purposefully set in what is meant to represent the real world. Players as Radhika strive to make change in their communities as they deal with domestic abuse, human trafficking, and travel safety among other serious physical-world issues. The verisimilitude to life in the game's narrative is important because the game's ultimate goal is to make material change by increasing awareness among players, ideally transforming them into advocates. Being immersed in the game's narrative is different from the immersion found in *The Walking Dead*, primarily because it collectively represents stories occurring in the physical world.

For this reason the immersive affordances such as the game affectually gives players the smallest experiential glimpse of what living as a woman in a developing country is like.⁴ The basic game mechanics largely consist of clicking on various icons to begin some small or large quest. Players earn points through completing quests that correspond to various areas of concern for women including health, security, education, and economy. Affordances unique to this particular game include moments when Radhika as the character/player must make tough decisions and waiting in real time for up to 24 hours (multiple times) to find a predetermined number of volunteers to complete projects. These game mechanics procedurally emulate the reality of the decision making and scarcity of volunteers for projects while viscerally making players feel frustrated at having no easy choice or having to wait. The game often incites affective moments of real frustration for players at waiting for volunteers, not having enough money or supplies to start or finish projects, or most often: not having enough energy to carry out tasks. Each task requires between 10 and 20 energy points which are finite and replenish only through resting in real time. Interestingly, the real-time waiting for energy to replenish or to find

⁴ I acknowledge that, no, what the player experiences cannot possibly compare to anything like what the lives of women in the character Radhika's position actually experience. Players have the choice to play or not, while women like Radhika do not have that choice in the same way. However, being able to make context-specific choices while under similar (though admittedly fictional within the game context) constraints brought about by game rules creates a different, arguably closer experience within which players gain understanding of the material conditions such women must live within.

volunteers can be easily skipped if the player wishes to contact their real-life social network for help or buy more energy, supplies, or in-game currency with real currency. Just as in real life, having access to resources moves most tasks along faster and more easily.

The dynamics of duration and verisimilar consequences to choice immerse players to place them in situations where they have limited agency. Much like the women Radhika is based on, players lack control in many instances and these occurrences, as M.-Niclas Heckner (2013) asserts, can contribute to inspiring “reflection upon passivity and its political implications in the player” (p. 184). Heckner believes losses of control in games can represent control limitations found in the physical world that he views as opportunities for reflection. This reflection is paramount to understand the implications *Half the Sky Movement* has for immersive witnessing.

Players can take part in some type of witnessing (to varying levels of success and usefulness) in most narrative-based games, whether they be educational or not, but *Half the Sky Movement* extends witnessing by actually giving players opportunities to make change in the physical world. They see representations of material conditions, learn facts and unlock opportunities, including providing fistula surgeries and donating books, to help real people in need. Kristof states the intention of the game saying: "The game play blurs lines between what's happening in the virtual world with what's happening in the real world...So you collect books in the virtual world and a real book will go in the hands of a real girl somewhere" (Prois, 2013). This game allows players to immersively experience and witness a representation of the life of a woman from a developing country and the daily struggles she must overcome to make changes in her life and that of her community. However, as the game is also based on fact (and this is very apparent throughout due to continual text-based reminders) players literally witness the

events of Radhika's life and the people she tries to help.⁵ After many in-game challenges are overcome, players are greeted with a screen asking for donations to causes for women as well as short texts telling players how they can help in other ways and what these women's larger stories are. Players are bombarded by various types of strategies to urge them to act on what they've witnessed or in the very least consider it.

1.3.1 Overview of Key Concepts: Witnessing in the 21st century

Surviving an atrocity, testifying in court, and making religious claims demarcate the most traditional understandings of witnessing. Even current layman definitions of what constitutes a witness typically describe a privileged insider who has authentic proximity to the facts about an occurrence (Peters, 2001). These traditional characterizations of witnessing are synonymous with testifying (Lyon & Olson, 2011). To testify in a court of law as a witness or spread religious messages through describing one's witness of God's miracles exemplify this narrow understanding of the concept. The legal and/or religious undertones native to that definition limit the possibilities of witnessing in contemporary times because even though it is a contested issue, today's witnessing entails multitudes of nuance. Importantly, physical immediacy to an event is no longer a requirement to witnessing in the media-saturated world.

The nuances of the verb, "to witness" are varied but I aim to expand its scope by offering evidence to make my context clearer, I primarily understand witnessing to imply an obligation to respond. Witnessing asks seers to *do something*. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's (1992) definition of bearing witness complements my understanding. She delineates it as "not merely to narrate, but to commit oneself and . . . the narrative to others: to take responsibility for history or

⁵ While Radhika and her story is fiction, her story and circumstances were carefully designed to represent an amalgamation of real women's stories. These stories were largely taken from the non-fiction book portion of Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn's campaign. The 2010 book is titled: *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*.

for the truth of the occurrence . . . [it is] an appeal to community” (p. 204). Responsibility to others is a key feeling that witnessing evokes as it, by its nature, involves the self and another—the witness and the witnessed—who co-exist within the larger context of a situation. Barbie Zelizer (2002) underscores an emphasis on the community by describing how “bearing witness moves individuals from the personal act of 'seeing' to the adoption of a public stance by which they become part of a collective working through trauma together” (p. 698). The concept and importance of community-creation in a larger context within which the act of witnessing occurs permeates my understanding of immersive witnessing as a rhetorical mode of seeing.

The terms bearing witness and eye-witnessing, often used interchangeably but in fact distinct concepts, are two major forms of the act. Tait (2011) and John Durham Peters (2001) emphasize that “bearing witness” goes beyond mere seeing and also sanctions a performed responsibility. Peters offers that eye-witnessing puts a witness in the time and place of an event while “to bear” can mean many things including “to produce, endure, suffer, or be burdened” (p. 1222). It is this implied responsibility that sets witnessing apart from other types of seeing, though as this list of definitions grows longer it is clear there are disparities within the nature of witnessing itself. What it means to witness and what the act asks of a person is contested as are its implications.

Beyond terminology, most types of witnessing can produce many of the same effects and bearing witness may in some cases even be the same as eye-witnessing. Carrie A. Rentschler (2004) argues that bearing witness entails that witnesses learn that violence can only continue with a lack of intervention from bystanders. Similarly Zelizer (2002) asserts that when people assume responsibility for events through bearing witness, the collective can begin their first moves toward recovering from the traumatic event. What these definitions share is an intricate

interaction between witness and event that suggests an outcome of change within and/or without the person. However, the extent of responsibility to act is what remains unclear.

Debate exists about what can justifiably be considered witnessing, since it has been established there is some level of implied responsibility in such an act. After all, ubiquitous technology increases access to traumatic events (Zelizer, 2002) thus allowing people to view more physically and temporally distant acts of violence or wrongdoing than ever before in history. So the concern appears that as witnesses become more distant from an event that their feelings of responsibility also wane. Mass mediated witnessing differs from traditional witnessing in that witnesses are no longer in the same time and place of the event. As witnessing through new technologies becomes more pervasive, opportunities arise to assess how effective media is as a disseminator of experiences that garner action or change. Particularly, since the rise of television, the internet, and video games as mass media, conflicting research problematizes what constitutes witnessing and the effectiveness of various manifestations.

The process of witnessing is changed through the perspectives of being viewed through different media. Peters (2001) argues for a narrow definition of witnessing, excluding mass mediated forms as weak duplications at best, and perpetrators of violence at worst. He holds that the “presence at a distance” (p. 717) that mass media iterations of witnessing allow cannot be claimed as witnessing. Using the factors of time and place, Peters outlines the four relations one can occupy to an event and be considered a witness. He privileges being present in both space and time during an event as the “paradigm case” (p. 720) of witnessing but concedes that being present in time but removed from space or vice versa are also acceptable. Finally, Peters emphasizes the difficulty in relating to an event out of space and time. At such a distance from the original event, there is little difference between witnessing and spectatorship (Tait, 2001).

Spectatorship is, in many cases, a less desirable standpoint in that it does not imply any responsibility to act on the event. However, I see little difference between spectator and witness from a baseline perspective since both positions imply a mode of seeing that encompasses the potential for action. Spectators are only such until they make a choice—which may be inaction—wherein they become witnesses. Rentschler (2004) positions mass-mediated witnessing as potentially even worse than spectatorship, providing evidence of the ways in which “witnessing may actually not be about empowering citizens to act so much as it enables them to passively support state violence and the selective (and non-existent) commitment to humanitarian aid” (p. 301). While this view may be extreme, it underscores the impact that mass-mediated witnessing can have as a moral force. If witnessing invites responsibility to an event, the capacity for change multiplies as witnesses evaluate their individual accountability and act accordingly. But conversely, if witnesses become passive, the overall importance of witnessing could be diminished.

Because of its potential as a mediator of change, there is a developing consensus to understand witnessing as inclusive of many types of mass-media. If conceptualized well, the responsibility inherent in imagined witnessing experiences could conceivably manifest and have material effects in present time. Such witnessing could even extend to certain types of fictions, such as movies based on true stories or as I will argue some video games. Medium should not be a defining characteristic of witnessing, as John Ellis (2000) suggests all acts of witness are mediated. He contends that audio-visual representations provide a new form of witness that gives us a different type of experience. Peter Frosh (2006) agrees that “media can expand our capacity to witness” (p. 271). He poses an example of how even recorded events from hundreds of years ago may constitute witnessing. Explaining how the Passover Haggadah text instructs readers to

“become first-hand witnesses to the events it describes...allow[ing] participants to make themselves imaginatively present at the event (p. 272), Frosh makes a case that distant witnessing is “an imaginative act of experiential construction” (p.273). What is important to Frosh’s (2006) definition is not the medium or proximity to the actual event but individuals’ understanding of a witnessing text as coherent within the expected norms of a genre. Similar to Walter Fisher’s (1989) narrative fidelity, if the witnessing account “hangs together” with what we know to be true, even if it is fictional, we assess it as true. Though it comes with resistance, by broadening the conception of what constitutes witnessing, not only can more people potentially bear the responsibility implied by acts of witness, but, I will argue, new outcomes become available.

As I delve into witnessing in video games, what I call immersive witnessing, I will foreground its rhetorical characteristics as it is the affordance of agency, or in the very least the *feeling* of agency that primarily gives computer games their power as rhetorical objects. There is a precedent for approaching witnessing as rhetorical though not in the realm of gaming. Hesford (2011) describes the rhetoric of witnessing: “a rhetorical approach to witnessing requires that we keep in view the scenes of recognition and address through which memory is constituted” (p. 53). While this does not shed light directly onto a conception of video games as sites of witnessing it does reveal the many interlocking forces that play into witnessing to make it a rhetorically powerful event. In the case of Hesford, viewing the event, recognizing, remembering, and enacting agency to create discourse to address the event constitutes much of what witnessing encompasses. Similarly, Wendy Kozol suggests, “understanding witnessing as a historically contingent rhetorical act, which is implicated in and mediated by sociopolitical relations, discourses, and technologies” (Kozol in Hesford, p. 56). In essence it forms a system

with agency in its center, which is a defining aspect of digital games as a uniquely powerful medium: they model systems of interaction where the effects of choices can immediately be seen. Emily Cram, though only tangentially alluding to video games since her work generally refers to photographs, also engages witnessing as process: “witnessing contributes to an inquiry of visual rhetoric as a process, rather than a product defined solely by a visual grammar” (Cram, p. 415). Thus, as video games allow players to engage with the multifaceted process of witnessing in a meaningful context, video games may be the perfect venue in which to carefully simulate witnessing.

There exists a small sub-genre of games known as “documentary games” that seek to recapture historical events for players to move through. Through studying documentary games, Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Robert Schweizer (2010) argue: “games also have the ability to reconstruct personal emotional experiences rather than just describing them” (p. 75). However, where documentary games such as *JFK: Reloaded* or *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* fail is in the outcomes of their stories: they depict historic events, the outcome of which are already widely known and unchangeable. In the video game *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* players are “witness to history” (Fullerton, 2008, p. 6) but have little agency in that they cannot change the past. It is here that a fictional game like *The Walking Dead* or the quasi-fictional *Half the Sky Movement*, can allow a mass mediated audience to experience witnessing and the inherent responsibility therein because the future is, by default, unknown. This may be a bold statement as Peters (2001) aptly points out: “Facts are witnessed, fictions are narrated. Fictions may indeed inspire us to action, but the beholder’s responsibility is diffuse” (p.722). However, in a medium like video games, players can enact responsibility in response to events, and in fact often must in order to proceed in the game. Despite Peters’ assertion that by its very nature, fiction lacks the necessary

components to comprise witnessing (2001), immersive and well-designed video games like *The Walking Dead* and especially *Half the Sky Movement* could allow players to explore the dynamics of witnessing and trudge through the responsibilities therein in a very real way.

Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweizer's work lays the foundation for my study of how quasi-fictional witnessing in *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* can impact and change how instances of real mediated witness could be effective in games, breach the gap between truth and fiction, and compel players to incite change. The key to this as well as the rhetorical hinge point is in-game agency, provoked through feelings of immersion, that allows players to make context-specific choices based on both their in-game character and physical-world subjectivity.

1.3.2 Social Capital

Players of both *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement* are afforded the opportunity to experiment with the accrual and balancing of social capital. Social capital was established as a notable concept by three major scholars: Pierre Bourdieu, James S. Coleman, and most recently and widely known, Robert Putnam. For the purposes of this study Bourdieu's (1986) conception of social capital entrenched in Marxist nuances and intricately entwined with classism is less relevant than Coleman (1988) and Putnam's (1995) understanding of how social capital affects democracy and the well-being of citizens. Robert Putnam (1995) defines social capital as "refer[ring] to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (p. 66). Thus, social capital is a type of resource exchanged between people that allows networks to be built and efforts to be coordinated to achieve ends that benefit all involved in some way. This means forming friendships, acquaintanceships, and working relationships with various peoples can create a type of capital in itself that can be leveraged and used to meet goals. In Coleman's words social

capital acts as a “resource for action” (p. 95). For him, relationships that nurture social capital are at the foundations of social change movements because they are what allows people to feel responsibility for others. This concept is specifically relevant to witnessing in that it is through social ties that we come to feel empathy and responsibility toward others. For witnessing to occur in such a way that motivates people to act upon what they witness rather than spectate, some knowledge of and mastery of operating within an economy of social capital is necessary.

1.3.3 Immersion

Just as witnessing updates as emerging technologies advance, so too does immersion. The concept of immersion does not begin with new media nor even with video games specifically. In fact, it has been addressed in past discussions about the qualities of well-designed books, movies, television shows, and activities. Across diverse media and disciplines, what I call “immersion” has been referred to as engagement (Fine, 1983), transportation (Green & Brock, 2000), and presence (Lee, 2004) among other terms. While these terms are certainly related and capture aspects of what immersion entails, for the sake of clarity I will use the single term “immersion,” while at times referring to the alternate vocabulary in quoted literature. I choose immersion as it most accurately describes the sensation video games offer their players: the deep mental involvement in an activity that can give gamers feelings of actually existing in another state. To clarify, digital media scholar Janet Murray (2001) defines immersion as “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus” (p. 98). This sensation can be evoked in numerous ways and video games are a unique medium that draws on multi-layered immersion tactics to engage players with a unique experience.

Games produce immersion in players through multiple tactics including narrative and various aspects of interactivity such as agency through choice, duration, and feedback loops that produce affect and flow. Flow is defined by positive psychology scholar Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (p. 4). The concept is often talked about in conjunction with games as scholar Jane McGonigal (2011) notes it often occurs during the “state of working at the very limits of your ability” (p. 24). This immersive and satisfying feeling is only possible as a result of the tight feedback loops created by the interactive aspects of video games. Players push buttons and immediately see the results of their efforts: the avatar moves/jumps/strikes, etc. Further, games are purposefully designed to be constantly challenging to players: difficulty levels rise in tandem with player skills and knowledge as the game proceeds. The directly interactive features of video games are the primary component that differentiates them from other types of media since narrative, duration and affect do exist as immersive features in other media such as TV or film. Visual culture theorist Andrew Darley (2000) argues computer games offer more intimate contact with images than other media, and contributes this to the “sense of agency” offered by the medium (p. 163). This sense Darley references is largely the result of the interactivity that computer games afford players. After completing an action, players see the consequences almost immediately, showing them their decisions made a difference in their story. Murray (2001) draws attention to “the experience of using the objects and seeing them work as they are supposed to in our hands that creates the feeling of being a part of the...world” (p.112). Being a part of the world necessarily insists players exist there and as such make choices that affect their story.

It is important to mention the significant role narrative plays as an agent of immersion and maker of meaning in video games. In fact, by offering a narrative overtop the game interactions, other immersion tactics can potentially operate more effectively. Game studies scholar Eric Zimmerman (2004) states how, “games can signify in ways that other narrative forms have already established: through sound and image, material and text, representations of movement and space. But perhaps there are ways that only games can signify, drawing on their unique status as explicitly interactive narrative systems of formal play” (p. 162). In effect, the feedback loops give agency to players within the particular story the game presents. Journet (2007) describes agency in games as only possible within a narrative structure as without it games would only be a series of meaningless tasks. Thus, the interactive gameplay elements at their best heighten the immersive experience by complementing the narrative elements, though as Jesper Juul (2011) notes, the ludic (referring to game mechanics) and narrative elements can also clash and disrupt the immersion; game design is after all not science but an art. Game studies scholar Chi-Ying Chen (2013) sums up the serendipitous conundrum of computer games in stating: “Video games, with their unique characteristics of interactivity and embodiment are unlike other narrative media” (p.7). Here embodiment can stand in for immersion but despite syntax, what agentic immersion means for players witnessing as subjects has yet to be established.

1.3.4 Subjectivity

Many narrative-based games afford their players the ability to play with new roles and identities, ultimately challenging them to make decisions from new points of view (Squire, 2006; Gee, 2008; Lee & Hammer, 2011). This ability to encounter contexts entirely different from one’s own and be able to make decisions that affect outcomes is the primary reason for which I

argue immersive witnessing can have impacts on subjectivity. Though subjectivity in computer games has not been thoroughly explored yet, many game studies scholars admit that when people play computer games they are simultaneously the player and the character-in-context (Juul, 2011). Players must draw from their subject positions both outside the game and from the character's within to solve game problems and successfully proceed through it. In computer games players are forced to operate the freedom of their agency within the limits that the game imposes. When game studies scholar Barry Atkins describes his experience playing *Half-Life* he states: "I cannot be alone in thinking that 'I' would respond to experience of the events that occur in Black Mesa in a somewhat different fashion than 'I' do when I adopt the role of [protagonist] Gordon Freeman" (p. 84). While in game, Atkins realizes he must respond from Gordon Freeman's position, which may not coincide with how he as Atkins would respond in the same context. No other medium allows subjects to not only immersively engage with unfamiliar contexts but actually grants some level of agency to them.

By witnessing in-game violence scenarios as partially player and partially character, I contend the subjectivities players inhabit while immersed in-game flow through and within their own subject positions, thus adding possible subjectivities from which to draw from in future circumstances, especially when they are formally equivalent. The ethical responsibility absorbed by witnessing in this context can both be enacted in game and outside too depending on what type of game the player chooses to play.

These arguments fit well within existing subjectivity research that confirms subjects call upon various, continually shifting identities depending on the situation and these discrete identities are not congruous with any core self (Hall 1996a, 277 cited in Phillips, 2006). Kendall Phillips notes: "The movement of individuals among and between subject positions is essential

to conceive of subjectivity as fluid and dynamic...Crucial to understanding [this] is the conception of subjectivity as the taking on of various forms” (p. 313) There should be no constraint on how this form comes into being whether through interpolation by any ideological state apparatus or the constraints created by the ludic/narrative experience to create a human as a player in a game, and therefore the player-subject who not only takes on the role of game player but experiences the events in the game and adds them to his collection of subject positions. Switching between the subjectivity of the game character and the player as a whole individual or overlapping the two, as is common, opens moments for reflection. Similarly Barry Brummet (1976) argues: “Things are not defined objectively but are defined by their *contexts*. Yet, since contexts are made up of other things which are also defined or given meaning by the context, it follows that everything in turn defined or gives meaning to other components of its context” (p. 29). When playing a computer game players enact agency as a certain character within the game’s immediate programmed context as they are also an individual player via their own personal subjectivity context. By this I mean players constantly shift between several identities, both ones inherent within their out-of-game self and the ones the game provokes as players take on the roles of in-game characters.

1.4 Preview of Chapters

My thesis will be comprised of four chapters. The preceding introduction established my argument, methods, texts, and conceptual foundation for the project. The second chapter will focus on *The Walking Dead* and address how the game’s narrative format and gameplay mechanics immerse players and lead them to gain a sense of responsibility, accountability, and ethics regarding their actions within the game’s fictional community. Narrative and other immersive capacities such as rapid decision-making, accruing and exchanging social capital are

cemented as contributing to the overall success of the game's immersion and feelings of agency in players. Witnessing is a major theme in this game as players inhabit a multi-layered witnessing environment in which the in-game character and the player who controls the character must witness and be aware of being witnessed by the game's other characters. The successes and failures of this game as a model for immersive witnessing in video games will be defined as well as some preliminary implications for subjectivity.

Closely mirroring the format of chapter two, the third chapter will analyze *Half the Sky Movement* to determine how a game meant to reflect conditions present in the physical world can persuade players to take action through the manufacture of immersive witnessing. Immersion in *The Walking Dead* differs since the game is based on current events and presents players with tangible problems to which they can provide relief by donating money or helping through other tactics. Further *Half the Sky Movement* employs a rhetoric of failure in that players must operate within a strict economy of various type of capital⁶ and resources⁷ and often feel a loss of agency, which formally underscores the direness and of the true state of affairs in the world for women that the game seeks to impress upon its players.

The final chapter will draw from the analyses of *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement* to outline the implications for subjectivity and immersive witnessing in the future for theorists, game designers, and players. By comparing *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement*, this chapter will act as a discussion of the benefits and drawbacks of both blockbuster games, those popular games designed to primarily entertain players, and serious games, those games designed with the intention to educate or train in some way, in conversation with each other. I will support a proposition for what could be achieved if the most effective aspects of

⁶ I largely deal with social capital, but monetary capital and others come into play.

⁷ Resources include time and energy.

both games merged. Lastly, I will offer a clear delineation for what this means for witnesses as subjects.

CHAPTER 2

‘Clementine Will Remember That:’ Immersive Witnessing in Telltale’s *The Walking*

Dead

In many ways *Telltale's The Walking Dead* does not fit the profile of the typical blockbuster video game. In the past eleven years, a majority of best sellers and *Spike TV* "Video Game of the Year" winners have been action-packed shooters in the vein of *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*⁸. These best-selling and award-winning mainstream games are often targeted at the traditional market of gamers, in general younger men.⁹ While *Telltale's The Walking Dead* embodies some of the qualities common to popular commercial games, such as fictional violence¹⁰ and a male protagonist,¹¹ the game stands out as a commercial success for its distinctive status as not only being a single aspect of a transmedia leviathan but also a game that relied more on interesting characters than action to entice players. These unique game characteristics paired with adroit marketing choices enabled *The Walking Dead* to both reach a massive audience and provide a type of gameplay accessible to a diversity of skill-levels.

The television series' popularity paired with the mass availability of the game across multiple platforms (including mobile devices) expanded the possibility of who could both play and enjoy this game. Not only was the potential audience expanded through the choice of releasing the game on mobile devices but also the format of the game invited gamers possessing a variety of skill levels to be able to find pleasure in playing it. Further the type of gameplay—namely point-and-click adventure—works in the game's favor in terms of mass appeal as it allows a wider variety of players to succeed in the game space. The gaming skills required to

⁸ In the past eleven years, seven winners of *Spike TV's* Video Game of the Year award were primarily shooter-type games. These include: *Grand Theft Auto V*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *BioShock*, *Resident Evil 4*, and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (*Spike TV*, 2011).

⁹ According to the Entertainment Software Rating Board's survey from 2010, 60% of current gamers are men. The average gamer's age is 34.

¹⁰ Of these *Spike TV's* Video Game of the Year award winners, nine contained fictional violence as a primary gameplay experience (*Spike TV*, 2011).

¹¹ Of these *Spike TV's* Video Game of the Year award winners, nine also featured a male protagonist/player character (*Spike TV*, 2011).

find enjoyment and success in this genre are less specific to excelling at a particular skillset, making the game more accessible to audiences exhibiting a range of video game playing skills.

The game's overt story-telling nature is another aspect that helped to draw in players who might not have been interested in a *Walking Dead* video game otherwise; Telltale's game excels in this sense. Narratives employ a distinctive power to provoke emotions focused on others. As narrative scholar Marie-Laure Ryan (2009) notes, these emotions encourage feelings of immersion in players as they actually care about outcomes of the story and want to see resolutions. This was an intentional effect in *The Walking Dead* game. In an interview, Robert Kirkman explains how *The Walking Dead* relies much less on action and more on the story to engage players. He says: "One of the key aspects of *Walking Dead* is it focuses on characters and the emotion, and that theme is very much alive in the game" (Hibberd, 2011). This more narrative-based approach to game-making allows players to become immersed in the game through more than just interactivity but also through game-specific narrative forms. Well-developed characters such as Clementine, who Lee/players must protect throughout the game, evoke these types of guardian and responsibility feelings which encourages players to consider their choices seriously. By becoming emotionally attached to characters within the story, players are more likely to feel immersed and thus care about what happens to them. This immersion, or more personally invested type of understanding of the game-world and the events that happen within it, is a primary mechanism which allows players to train in immersive witnessing through the formal elements of the game.

2.1 Overview of Argument

TellTale's *The Walking Dead* offers training in mediated witnessing through having players proceed through situations and processes that are formally equivalent to those inherent

within both witnessing in the physical world as well as ‘true’ instances of immersive witnessing as will be outlined in the next chapter. Formal equivalence is what I understand to be the basis of Brummet’s (2004) homology: “When the content of a mediated text, the experience of the medium, and certain rhetorical situations faced by the audience are *homologous* [emphasis original], the rhetorical effect of the text is enhanced” (p.103). In other words, when content-specific forms derived from various types of experience match-up or resemble one another they create a rhetorically powerful effect wherein people understand any experience fitting into that particular category of form to be a legible example of such an experience. These can then inform the way a person might carrying out formally similar tasks in the future.

The Walking Dead contains three major devices that create in-game moments where players can experience knowledge about the form of witnessing. These include: 1) the choice/reflection mechanism as displayed through interactions with NPCs and especially Clementine, 2) The role of time as it influences choices, and 3) practice in working within a witnessing economy, in this case largely influenced by accrual and exchange of social capital. I intend to describe how the interconnected lives of Lee and the non-playable characters (NPCs) and partially-playable character of Clementine build the need for players to achieve a sort of awareness within the game’s structure achieved through fictionally experienced witnessing, from which players can potentially gain deeper understanding of the responsibilities inherent in witnessing, mediated or otherwise. The intertwining of community and choice permeates *The Walking Dead*, becoming an integral part of influencing players’ engagement with the game. As such, it employs multiple layers of witnessing in that players witness Lee as he is witnessed by the NPCs. This structure allows players to recognize the outcomes of their morally ambiguous choices as part of an ecosystem in which balancing social capital is paramount. In effect, the

choices matter because they affect the NPCs, and thus Lee's relationship with them and even the person Lee becomes as a result of his relationships. In essence, I seek to understand how witnessing events in the immersive space of a video game complicates our traditional sense of witnessing as a practice, how it works and what it can achieve.

2.2.1 Agency in the Horror Genre

Throughout Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, players make decisions based on what they witness and those decisions impact other characters. The game's narrative-based focus brings up questions of how specifically the horror narrative impacts both the story and gameplay. *The Walking Dead* differs from most other horror games in that its identity as a game from the adventure genre relies primarily on narrative rather than action to provide intrigue and compelling gameplay. This is not to say that traditional types of horror games have not seen success.¹² Narratives in the horror genre often place players in extremely vulnerable positions. Several scholars including Krzywinska (2008) and cinema scholar Bernard Perron (2009) note that feelings of powerlessness are a veritable requirement of the generic conventions of horror narratives. In terms of player agency, video games are often lauded for their ability to offer seemingly unlimited agency. Quite the opposite, horror games often place players in positions of very limited agency, leaving them with few 'good' choices and many 'bad' ones. For example in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* players must often choose between which of two characters should be saved in life or death situations. Players know their choices will likely result in the death of some character, thus the question becomes one of morals and ethics, rather than power and agency. The vulnerability that the horror genre affords players formally resembles our everyday limited agency in the physical world, a fact that is principal in understanding *The Walking Dead*

¹² Notably the *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* series saw much commercial and cult success, however these games better fit the shooter profile typical to popular commercial video games.

as a text that simulates and normalizes a particular form of witnessing in that a witness rarely has many good choices in what they can do in response to witnessed acts.

2.2.2 Zombies and the Apocalyptic Environment

Additionally, the specific villain of zombie within the genre of *The Walking Dead* makes a difference to how players/characters understand events. Krzywinska (2008) asserts: “Zombie-based games...raise issues of autonomy, identity, power/ powerlessness, and control” (p.156). This affects witnessing in that when people respond to a witnessed event they do not often have infinite choices. This makes the horror narrative and apocalypse setting in *The Walking Dead* ripe for analysis in terms of identifying homologies to how witnessing occurs in both the physical world and video games. This enhances the witnessing capacities available within the game because it is formally equivalent to what we know to be true in life. The game exists in the alternate reality of an American zombie apocalypse, so there is much gore to be witnessed and loss to feel as virtually everyone Lee knows is dead, or in mortal peril, as are all survivors. The state of the world in the game itself is particularly effective for drawing attention to the differences between humans and the monstrous ways in which they can act. The game poses questions of how one retains humanity against an unnatural version of humanity. Cinema scholar Kevin Wetmore (2012) describes the way zombie transformations comment on the human condition: “Zombification represents a loss of Self, a loss of social self and a loss of all relationships that existed with that person” (p. 160). Because they *are* humans, zombies exist as antagonists well-suited to rise against in a witnessing capacity. Therefore, zombies simultaneously provide a direct comparison for what people do not want to be both physically or psychologically. They do not care for one another or act in any meaningful way other than to selfishly consume—in the case of witnessing, the exact opposite of what witnesses ought to do.

Because they are inherently viewed as evil or in the very least dangerous, there is less guilt in killing zombies as an enemy than other foes. Krzywinska (2008) offers “Game zombies provide the ideal enemy: they are strong, relentless, and already dead...” (p.153). However, trouble arises in that they bear a strong resemblance to humans and in some instances can be a relation to the person who needs to kill the zombie in self-defense. Unlike many commercial games such as those in the *Call of Duty* franchise, where players kill countless relatively nameless and faceless enemies at a rapid pace, *The Walking Dead* leaves room after characters die for players to think about the death and what it means, in essence how it fits into their story.

Because of the immense death and devastation, any survivor of the apocalypse is a witness and has often lost their entire family and community as well as the conveniences of modern, civilized life. Zelizer’s (2002) stance on how witnessing helps the collective rebuild sheds light on why a game occurring in such a setting invites witnessing:

The act of bearing witness helps individuals cement their association with the collective as a post hoc response to the trauma of public events that, however temporarily, shatter the collective. By assuming responsibility for the events that occurred and reinstating a shared post hoc order, bearing witness thus becomes a mark of the collective's willingness to move toward recovery. (p.701-702)

As Lee/ players, together with the other survivor NPCs, live among masses of deviant versions of humankind, they must deal with what they witnessed and find ways to move forward within the game world to make a living under the new constraints of life in a zombie apocalypse. By witnessing, effectively inscribing the traumatic events into their memories, Lee and the other survivors can evaluate the new constraints and consequences of their existence and make choices based on those assessments.

2.3.1 Training in Witnessing through a Blockbuster Game

As a commercial game, *The Walking Dead* is exemplary for its manufacture of witnessing. The presence of witnessing, though few call it by that name, is unmistakable as the game constantly positions the player in circumstances where they are affected by and need to make quick choices based on acts of witness. These in-game situations formally mirror what we understand as witnessing scenarios in the physical world and this realism is what gives the game such unique persuasive influence. The positionality players of this game take on demonstrates the possibility for popular, commercial video games to create opportunities for learning about what witnessing entails. This is achieved through connecting in-game experience to out-of-game experience through homologies, as unlikely as that might seem in this case. It is in fact this unlikeliness that makes the study of this game paramount to inspiring new conceptions of where witnessing may be found as Brummet (2004) indicates: “the more disparate[the orders of experience are], the more interesting and insightful is the homology” (p. 2). Through seeing the linkages between the experiences in the game and experiences in the physical world, players potentially receive training in witnessing—both as a representative homology to how witnessing plays out in the physical world and as practice for immersive witnessing through social change video games that depict material problems.

Because of its affordances as a video game and the particular apocalyptic environment in which the game takes place, *The Walking Dead* presents players with an opportunity to experience both the vicarious witnessing that mass media propagates and a fictional simulation of the eye-witnessing that demands immediate responsibility. The game puts players in situations where they must watch the deaths of cherished companions or even kill loved ones themselves, putting the player in a layered witnessing position, that of player playing a game and in-game

agent bearing responsibility. It is this responsibility that gives players opportunities to bear witness in multiple ways through their choices, which ties in-game fictional witnessing to the training of both eye witnessing and mediated immersive witnessing. Since the forms of witnessing inherent to this game take on a synergistic relationship to one another they are difficult to describe in isolation and can most easily be understood when discussed as a system. As the following analysis shows, the quick-response choices foster in-game reflection and impact social capital in the game world and, in so doing, simulate immersive witnessing moments.

2.3.2 Immersion

Immersion can be triggered by narrative, interactivity, flow, or some combination of the components and by its very nature cannot last for extended periods of time. It is not a long term position; immersion can be broken by a hiccup in any immersive aspect. For example, in moments of frenetic gameplay whereupon players face pressure to make decisions quickly, they are likely to experience a state of flow. When players are no longer working at the peak of their ability in a flow state, commonly the immersion ends. The immersion is broken because the difference between the flow and post-flow state is so stark. It is specifically the moments when immersion is broken that reflection upon the recent events can take place. This happens often in *The Walking Dead* as many immersive moments occur through time-sensitive choices and actions, as I will discuss in detail later in this chapter.

2.4. Formal Elements of Witnessing Inherent to Games

To begin, I must distinguish between the witnessing of Lee and that of the player. The nature of gaming implies that players witness what Lee witnesses, because they control him; but Lee is the constrained character who players act through to make decisions that will affect Lee's

in-game life. Sometimes what Lee and the player witness and the following decisions are the same but other times this is not because Lee is programmed to enact certain deeds when certain options are chosen. For example, after certain interactive decisions are made, a cinematic cut-scene may take over wherein players have no control over what Lee does. Further, not all of the choices Lee makes are related to witnessing, but after time many become related to his memory of witnessed events due to the buildup of experiences throughout the game. This is evidenced in an early scene where Lee must decide whether to take supplies from a seemingly abandoned car or not. This relatively inconsequential moral choice becomes a major factor in the game's finale.¹³ Because players make so many choices that dictate how events unfold, how players perceive and feel toward Lee, and—the most important factor in how the story progresses—dictate what dialogue and future choices appear. In many instances the dialogue is specific to a certain chain of events dependent upon previous choices, so not every player will necessarily encounter every example that I present within this study. However, the chosen examples are representative of the larger gameplay experience and the effects it enables.

2.4.1 Choice

The game affords ample opportunities for players to experience witnessing and refine skills associated with the process such as making the morally ambiguous choices that dominate gameplay. There are no particularly obvious outcomes written into the choices, creating a space in which there is no 'right' or 'wrong' choice. This allows room for a more realistic decision-making process to arise in contrast to the many games that provide player choices wherein there are clear, binary 'good' and 'bad' choices that will lead a player down a 'dark' or 'light' path in the story. In such games a karma-meter or other such tool is used to track the choices and

¹³ In the final chapter players discover to whom the supplies belonged. A man kidnaps Clementine as revenge for Lee or Lee's companions (depending on which choice players make) taking the supplies from the car.

provide players with feedback about how their choices match-up with the predetermined ethical spectrum the game prescribes. This model rewards players who follow a strict ethical path by making choices based on which answer they think best fits whichever side of the binary ‘good’ or ‘evil’ spectrum they are trying to follow. In his work on ethics in video games, Karl Babij (2013) argues that when games are set up this way players are discouraged from considering a range of choices and encouraged to foreground “extreme ends of the ethical spectrum rather than a combination of different actions on which the player may reflect” (p. 168). When player-choices are designed in this way players are less likely to make decisions based on what they think *ought* to happen in the situation or how they think the character might react. Without the karma-meter or equivalent metric, players can confer with their own thoughts and opinions rather than lazily rely on game mechanics, which Babij (2013) notes is unhelpful in allowing players to explore their own ideas about ethics in games. What this means for this study is that players who play a game like *The Walking Dead* where choices do not fit into predefined categories will be more likely to make personal choices rather than choose responses that would likely help them unlock the storylines that coincide with those on the “good” or “evil” track as defined by the game. Indeed, all video games are, by nature of being programmed experiences, disseminators of predetermined sets of morals and ethics. However, since *The Walking Dead* does not employ a visual gauge or provide any fixed evaluation of players’ morals to inform them that their decisions made them ‘good’ or ‘evil,’ players are freer to interpret the morality of their decisions through their own deductions and feelings. Players determine the effects of their choices through the rise and fall of social capital and enthymematic connections that take context into consideration rather than being told what the morality of their choice is.

2.4.2 Reflection

Attention to choice, whether players initially realize they are making decisions or not, is reinforced by the in-game text that appears near the top of the screen noting that whichever character the player interacts with at the time “will remember” his/her action. Additionally, players are reminded of some acts immediately after they are committed. These reminders are one of the most crucial aspects of the game and have two primary consequences related to how the game trains in witnessing. First it highlights the fact that player actions have effects on the characters around them. Therefore, it achieves what it was designed to do: it presents useful information to players about the status of their character. Even if a player doesn’t realize they were making a decision, perhaps they were simply answering questions without realizing what they were inherently condoning or agreeing to, the reminder text will reinforce the fact that decisions were made. Second, the in-text reminder triggers reflection, forcing players to *consider* the decisions they made for Lee and how they affected the other characters. In contrast to other popular games such as *Infamous 2* (2011) that draws attention to moments when choices will affect a karma meter, *The Walking Dead* notifies players *after* the choice has been made. Since so many decisions are made throughout the entirety of the game, one never knows which choices will have significant impacts on the plot, allowing players to weigh decisions based on their own ethical guidelines, rather than rely on those the game dispatches. Overall, having an opportunity to consider the effects of the choices made in-game effectively allows players to notice the homologies, whereas in games where the events barrage players without pause, as in most shooter-style games, players are not afforded this prospect.

The reflection mechanisms are what affords players to receive training in witnessing. Reflection is paramount to fostering learning in video games as gamification scholar Scott

Nicholson¹⁴ (2012) delineates in his lecture video: “The idea of reflection is it’s a time to really build that meaning to connect what you’re doing [in the game world] to the real world, to connect the action with yourself, to think about what is important to [you]...to really understand what was gained and appreciate how you gained in competence.” Thus the reflection points that define *The Walking Dead* are precisely what makes the game effective as a training ground. Players make choices relevant to witnessing and then are given opportunities to decide what that choice meant in context. Together, what these effects achieve is an awareness that decisions matter and even inaction is action. Formally, this contributes to player understanding of witnessing and how their actions in such situations make a difference in the game-world.

2.4.3 Duration

To complicate the choice mechanism in the game, all choices are time-sensitive, meaning players only have between 3-5 seconds to make decisions. Being rushed makes player decisions more instinctual and thus formally equivalent to how decisions must be made in the physical world. Players make timed choices for Lee, only allowing for about a 3-5 second response time, forcing instinctual player-reactions. These choices may be in response to other characters’ dialogue or in defense of an imminent zombie attack. The immediacy of the action puts real stress on players and creates an affective response of panic. The large array of choices players make throughout the game (whose results follow players throughout the entirety of the story¹⁵) position players to seriously consider their decisions. Grappling with the game’s continually

¹⁴ I trained with this professor directly, taking two graduate level classes at Syracuse University’s iSchool of Information Studies with him. The first was a theory-based class mainly focusing on gamification, or the making of non-game processes into games for the purpose of increased motivation, advertising exposure, understanding of a theme/concept, or training. The second class was a project-based class in which we actually created meaningful games for change or education using various game design and education theories. The cited video is part of his lecturing and the content presented within it is planned to become part of a book-length study on meaningful gamification.

¹⁵ The results of in-game choices may or may not be starkly different if certain decisions are made. Some choices make a significant impact on the game’s narrative while others merely change dialogue for a few exchanges.

appearing morally ambiguous decisions allows players to construct the type of person Lee becomes as he changes through these experiences. The realism of interactions and consequences not only promote immersion but mirror the procedure of how these choice-bound situations could likely play out in the physical-world.

Depending on the situation, the game reminds players what their choices were, immediately as they occur or soon after. For example, in the first episode of the game a young boy named Duck is bitten by a zombie and transformed into one. Though both choices result in the same end, players can choose to let Kenny (his father) or Lee euthanize him. After players make their decision a text prompt appears giving players a visual/verbal reminder of their choice. Which character commits the act may not seem as important as the final outcome (Duck's death) but in a homologous moment, who chooses to act and who chooses to witness/allow it to happen matters. The text reminders force players to face the choices they make by seeing them repeated back to them. Sometimes the choice does not matter so much to how the events play out but how the people will react to Lee/players afterward.

The Walking Dead excels as an example of mediated witnessing in that the way the NPCs feel about Lee affects game outcomes, perhaps not always in kind but in degree. In some in-game situations, Lee/player's choices (however well-intentioned they may be) do not achieve the intended outcome. Sometimes Lee/players must make unthinkable decisions such as choosing between helping two people who are equally in mortal danger, as occurs in an event during the first "episode" of season one. Lee and Clementine arrive on a farm owned by a man, Herschel, and his family. Lee explores the farm where he meets a nuclear family comprised of three people: Kenny, Katjaa and their son, Duck. Shawn, Herschel's son, repairs a fence to fortify it against the then unknown enemy forces of the zombies and Duck, Kenny's son, is sitting on the

nearby tractor attempting to help. Zombies break through the fence and manage to target both boys. The player is then faced with a time-sensitive choice: save Duck or Shawn. In this case no matter what players think may happen or who players pick to save, Shawn dies, but who players picked changes Lee's relationship with both Kenny and Hershel. Despite player choice, Duck lives, whether it is through Kenny saving Duck and fleeing or Lee and Kenny working together to save him. Lee witnesses Shawn die and, in one instance he saw Kenny save Duck, and flee without attempting to save Herschel's son. The following dialogue occurs:

Herschel: [Leans over dead son, rises] GET OUT! GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!

Kenny: I'm sorry.

Herschel: Sorry? Your son is alive you don't get to be sorry. [To Lee] You tried to help him but this piece of shit let him die.

Kenny: [ashamed/remorseful facial expression]

Lee/player then gets a chance to answer to Herschel about how he understands Kenny's decision.

Has the options 1) It's my fault 2) It's Kenny's fault 3) It's nobody's fault 4)... [silence].

Dependent upon Lee's response, Kenny may feel more positively or negatively about Lee once the event is over. No matter who Lee defends, everyone is banished from Herschel's farm and thus the decision players make for Lee matters to the effect of the social capital that Lee gains or loses with Kenny. Lee and Clementine will rely on Kenny for a ride and though they do not know it at the time, venture forward on their mission together for the entirety of the first season.

If Lee chooses the third response, "It's nobody's fault" it prompts a text to appear stating:

"Kenny will remember that" as a reminder to the player about what they have done. Again this scenario readily represents 'true-to-life' conditions in that--despite intentions--things do not

always work out. The formal equivalence inherent to this in-game experience represents a moment in which players can look back on in a homologous fashion.

It is in the formally representative moments when players can reflect on what they saw/did and make judgments about the justness of their actions as Lee and the NPC's actions. The game itself will not provide judgment feedback on the seemingly moral rightness or wrongness of the choices. Allowing space for players to make those judgments themselves permits players to learn from each instance within the game, ultimately in an effort to apply the knowledge gained through the experience to affect how they will handle their witnessing capacities and choices in future occasions within the game. The game leaves room for players to make those connections. Such in-game mechanics and dynamics are homologous to how things do play out in witnessing situations in the physical world. Sometimes horrible undesirable and/or tragic outcomes cannot be prevented no matter how hard someone tries and good intentions are not always reciprocated with positive outcomes. However, intentions matter as the game shows through how the NPCs will act toward Lee after he makes decisions that affect them. However, aside from the fact that the choices Lee/players make have an impact within the game interpersonally between characters, they also do make a difference in some story consequences.

There are times when Lee/players choices do make a material difference in game world. Near the end of the game players are faced with a decision to either let a character die or rescue him. In this situation, players must weigh the knowledge of and witnessed events concerning this character against personal morals and social capital. Further this decision must be made within five seconds. To give more context, Lee and the other survivors seek to escape an incoming zombie horde by running to the top of a church bell tower. As the survivors escape through a window Ben, a cowardly character who has caused trouble in the past to the point where others

were killed because of his questionable decision making skills, is grabbed by a zombie and ends up hanging from the side of a railing. It is obvious that if he is not helped up he will fall to his death. The following dialogue occurs:

Lee: Ben, climb up! Come on, you can do it!

Ben: There's no time you have to go, now!

Lee: Quit fucking around, Ben! Come on!

Ben: Let go dammit! Get the others out of here!

Kenny¹⁶: Lee...

Ben: Lee, we both know...Let me go

Choice: [Pull him up] OR [Let him go]

No matter what players choose to do they are provided with a text reminder of the decision they made. Whether it be "You saved Ben" or "You let Ben fall." While situations as dire as these will rarely happen to a person in the physical world, it provides players with an experience of what it might feel like to be under that kind of stress. The quick-time decision combined with what past choices and experiences have been made in the game influence players' decision-making processes. The knowledge of social capital gained or lost paired with the reflection mechanism and encourages players to consider their actions. These are the moments when in-game events formally resemble witnessing activities in the physical world.

2.4.4 Social Capital

Managing social capital manifests as a formal quality inherent to the effects of witnessing in the game. Balancing social capital will drive some NPCs to help or hinder Lee/Players various plights. For example, there are many times when Lee/players' decisions do not affect the

¹⁶ Due to previous events which ultimately leads to the death of his son, Kenny dislikes Ben.

material outcome of an event, but the attitudes of the NPCs, which influence how they perceive witnessed events involving Lee. For instance, during “episode four” of the game Lee’s group encounters a young couple: Omid and Christa. To escape a dangerous situation Lee and Omid must jump from a bridge onto a moving train full of their companions. Omid is too frightened to jump so Lee can choose to yell: 1) Jump!, 2) Have it your way [push him], 3) You stay here and we’ll go with your lady, or 4)...[silence]. Whether players choose to push him or he eventually jumps himself, Omid seriously injures his leg on the landing. Though Omid’s partner, Christa, is angry with Lee if he pushes him, Omid later thanks Lee for the impetus, while the reverse occurs if Lee chooses not to push Omid. The material outcome is no different but characters’ attitudes—of which players are reminded by through textual prompts such as “Omid will remember you pushed him”—are. These types of decisions aggregate and shape the way the other characters view Lee: as a friend, foe, or neutral associate. These differences change dialogue and how players will want to interact with the other characters when they are in danger, thus providing groundwork for an interest in maintaining social capital to emerge.

In another example, the survivors make a settlement at a motel but are increasingly attacked by bandits. Lilly, a strong leader whose father becomes ill recruits Lee to help her look for clues. Lee/players find a bag of supplies in a hidden space near the outskirts of camp and hypothesizes that someone bribed the bandits to stay away. The bandits attack the survivors and as they drive away, Lilly interrogates the survivors; she accuses Carley, an ex-news reporter or Ben, an ex-IT Technician, depending on previously made choices. When she accuses Carley, Lee is presented with four options: 1) “Carley’s trustworthy,” 2) “Maybe it was her,” 3) “Why her?,” and 4) “... [silence].” Based on the evidence Lee collects previously, what he witnessed, and what Lilly claims to have witnessed, players/ Lee must decide whose side to take. As players/Lee

makes these decisions, players are constantly reminded that the decisions matter because other characters witness Lee's actions. At times it may be in Lee's best interest to side with one NPC over another, but it will not be forgotten, as the regularly appearing text reminds players.

2.4.5 Responsibility

The presence of Lee's companion Clementine acts as not only another mechanism that encourages reflection on choices and events but Lee's responsibility to Clementine encourages players to see how they have some responsibility to all NPCs. The young girl accompanies Lee through nearly every event in the game and seems to witness some of the most gruesome moments but she needs Lee's help in understanding them. Though Clementine ostensibly witnesses the events herself, as a young child she needs Lee's contribution to fully understand the situation and its consequences. Lee helps Clementine cognize what she witnesses by framing it in a particular way. In effect, he constructs Clementine's account. A demonstrative example of Clementine witnessing Lee's witness occurs within the same subplot as when Katjaa and Kenny's son, Duck, is bitten by a zombie and steadily worsening in condition. The NPCs and Lee know when he dies he will turn into a zombie so Kenny and Katjaa must decide whether to euthanize him or let him transform; either way they know he will die. Katjaa walks into the woods with the boy and Clementine tells Lee she thinks Duck is dying, he/players have the reaction options: 1) She's making sure he's okay, 2) She's putting him out of his misery, 3) She's killing him, or 4) ... [silence]. If Lee chooses the third option, players are cued to realize the magnitude of their decision with the text that appears in the top left: "Clementine will remember your honesty." Over time, she acts as type of conscience to induce player reflection on the passing events. Clementine's presence makes players think about what they witness in the game, how they should proceed, and how they understand events and their choices themselves.

Then they must choose how to reiterate the events to be understood and filed into Clementine's witnessing repository, a totally different procedure from understanding them on her own. This on-going process allows players to continually revisit their decisions and their corresponding consequences, to re-evaluate them as they move forward and make judgments in response to them.

2.4.6 Replay

As it has been established, within the narrative of *The Walking Dead*, game mechanisms exist to draw attention to player choices in such a way as to encourage players to reflect on the effects of their decisions. Another mechanism also achieves this, to underscore the choices even more and provide a reference for which to compare results. At the end of each "chapter" a screen appears that recaps every major decision players made throughout the past episode. Then the game reveals a numerical percentage of other players who made the same decisions as the player on that particular run-through. Players are encouraged to play again and see the differences this made. Additionally, the game was marketed in such a way as to draw attention to the branching stories that change based on player decisions. While some people felt betrayed because every choice they made did not make a material difference, the fact that characters felt differently toward Lee was revealed.

2.5 Conclusion

Though in the physical world we are not prompted with convenient text-based reminders to realize that the people with whom we interact will remember the ways in which we react to things or decisions we make, it is very much the case. By using the reflection mechanism of the prompt players start to take into consideration the fact that the choices they make have an impact on those around them and thus the social capital they will gain or lose as a result. The formal

resemblance to witnessing in the physical world as presented through the medium of a video game perfectly situates players to be able to play a serious game and better understand what is required of a witness through the medium. By drawing from elements of physical eye-witnessing and allowing players to experience them through the video game medium, players are exposed to not only a simulation of witnessing and what it entails but also become familiarized with how immersive witnessing can work in games where non-fictional information is presented. Game scholar Miguel Sicart (2009) reminds us of the importance of having these in-game experiences: “A game gives us the possibility of engaging without risk in ethical decision making in which we would otherwise never engage” (p. 44). Due to the design of the game, players/Lee must act upon what they witness, even if their action is inaction, just to keep the storyline of the game moving. Moments of induced self-reflection prompted by the appearing text: “‘NPC Name’ will remember this” lead players to contemplate the results of their choices and theoretically will help them as they make more choices throughout the game. Throughout *The Walking Dead*, players continually witness and deal with the repercussions of choices they have made in response to their witnessing of events.

The game’s immersive witnessing capacities, which encourages reflection on morally ambiguous situations, is made possible by the affordances of the medium, namely the quick-time decisions, reflection reminders, and management of social capital. Andrew Darley (2000) compares playing a game, *Quake* to viewing cinema, noting how players need to participate to keep the story going, for anything to happen. In contrast the film viewer’s necessary response is purely spectatorial, despite how active or passive that role may be per individual. He argues: “Such a viewer cannot alter the course of the action—hence the story itself—whereas the player of a game can” (p. 151). There is something larger at stake in the case of the game player, they

need to act if they want to encounter more of the story. With the constant interactivity between players and well-crafted characters, text-based reminders of past actions, and the way the consequences of Lee's actions aggregate, players experience some of the most troubling aspects of witnessing.

Few media allow a person to interact with an entire world the way video games do. Because of video games' abilities to cohesively build entire worlds, extremely unlikely events and environments can be convincingly presented as real (Bogost, 2011). In such worlds players can immerse themselves, at least momentarily, to fully exist in another circumstance. Video games' unique ability to provide constant feed-back on actions, and specifically the feedback system of *The Walking Dead*, encourages players to consider the effects of the decisions they make based on what they have witnessed. By playing games like *The Walking Dead*, players can pick up a social change games and understand what the game requires of them since they have been trained in the faculties of such games and know how to react in episodes where witnessing may be necessary.

By providing an array of formally equivalent witnessing scenarios to play through including ones in which material change in the game world is made, attitudes are changed, or even nothing is changed underscores the way witnessing works in both the physical world and in immersive instances as well. As Brummet notes: "form seems to be a property of the text that is realized in the audience's experience" (p.14) It is not until later when players are placed in physical world witnessing situations that they would draw from the formal equivalence found in the games they have played, thus stepping into subject positions that were not there until they played the games and not accessible and useable until the situation presented itself/was pressing.

CHAPTER 3

“A Story you Play to Change the World”: True Immersive Witnessing in *Half the Sky Movement*

Games have only recently (and irregularly) been accepted as serious teaching and training devices. Despite anxiety over the immorality and violence that series such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Saints Row* seemingly promote, an increasingly diverse group of advocates ranging from political candidates to transgender activists¹⁷ are testing the potential of the medium for purposes that exceed beyond entertainment. In fact, there is an emerging genre of games whose primary purposes are not to entertain but to educate, train, or raise awareness in some way. These types of games go by many names that match their varying goals. Adver-games seek to spread knowledge about a product, service or, in the case of candidate Howard Dean,¹⁸ garner support for an election. News games depict relatively current events in a procedural manner so as to bring about a realization about a particular cause/effect within the events such as in Gonzala Frasca's 2003 game, *September 12th*¹⁹ and Docu-games allow players to explore particular moments in history to varying ends as seen in *JFK: Reloaded (2004)*.²⁰ Collectively, all these types of games can be referred to as "serious games," though not all serious games fit particularly well into any one of these specific categories.²¹ Though these games differ from one another in terms of content, gameplay style, and even intended audience, they all help disseminate knowledge to various audiences in ways that broaden the scope of the campaigns and movements inspiring

¹⁷ See Anna Anthropy's 2012 game *Dys4ia*, an abstract game that guides players through some of the triumphs and challenges transgender peoples face as they transition. Accessible here: <http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/591565>

¹⁸ *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game* (2003) requires players to act as a Dean supporter in a virtual world. Using tactics comparable to those found in the physical world they spread Dean's messages. Accessible here: <http://www.deanforamericagame.com/>

¹⁹ Through simple mechanisms that ask players to bomb terrorists and watch as more terrorists are created as a result, this game asks players to consider the utility and morality of the War on Terror. The only way to "win" this game is not to play at all. Accessible here: <http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm>

²⁰ This controversial game tasks players to attempt to "get the shot" in the same manner as Lee Harvey Oswald in an effort to encourage deeper consideration of the validity of various conspiracy theories (Bogost, Ferrari, Schweizer, 2010). Accessible here: <http://www.fileplanet.com/192027/190000/fileinfo/JFK-Reloaded-v1.1-28Free-Game%29>

²¹ The term serious game covers a vast variety of game types that demonstrate diverse in-game methods, outcomes and even content. The term often also encompasses games used for job training, or educational purposes such as those used in school to teach topics such as math or science. However, for the sake of clarity I will largely use the term serious game in reference to any type of non-entertainment focused games, unless otherwise specified. In reference to *Half the Sky Movement* I will interchangeably use serious game and a term I find more specific to this particular title: social change game.

their creation. *Half the Sky Movement* is a serious game that not only fits this criteria but also seeks to satisfy a lofty goal: “to change the world” (*Games for Change*, 2013).

The game works to achieve this goal by affording players opportunities to learn about issues women across the globe face through playing a point-and-click adventure story. The linear narrative of the game provides a framework for players to witness and respond to various challenges through the main character Radhika. By progressing through Radhika’s story, players make decisions for her that range from banal dialogue choices to extraordinary solutions for life-threatening problems. Radhika travels to four countries to help tackle large scale, multi-tiered quests, including one where she must gather volunteers to repair apartments for girls freed from sex trafficking. These quests are at the core of the gameplay and build on one another to tell Radhika’s success story as she grows from an uneducated, disenfranchised woman to mayor of her town and even an invited speaker at The United Nations. However, many smaller ongoing objectives exist for players to work through. Often they involve the accumulation of resources such as cell phones or school uniforms to donate to women and girls Radhika meets. These resources are gathered through playing a timed *Bejeweled*²²-style matching mini-game where players click to draw lines that match like-objects to one another. These mini-games are infinitely replayable and often the items being gathered in-game represent goods that women in developing countries often require in the physical world like the aforementioned cell phones or school uniforms.

Blurring the distinction between the virtual and material world, the game tasks players with in-game quests and quandaries that mirror a broad range of experiences that women in developing countries encounter. Every in-game action contributes points toward meters that track

²² *Bejeweled* is a 2001 puzzle game that asks players to match sets of tiles to earn points.

specific areas of need that reflect those that require attention in the physical world, namely economy, education, health, and security. By leveling up these meters, players open new quests and areas to explore. Players' actions are constrained and regulated by various in-game currencies including coins and energy. Players must spend energy to work on tasks then wait in real time to replenish their energy stores. Last, a third type of currency called 'hope bonds' are available for purchase and are used to help facilitate in-game solutions such as the donation of goods or volunteer recruitment. All three of these currencies can be earned in relatively small amounts through accomplishing in-game actions but quests can be made somewhat easier by purchasing these in-game currencies with real money. Any money that players spend on in-game items goes to charity. 80% of this money goes directly to the game's NGO partners and 20% is managed by Games for Change and Tides Foundation and goes toward sustaining the game (Half the Sky Movement, 2012). These donations are used in addition to the direct donations players can contribute to *Half the Sky Movement* and their affiliates.

As players/Radhika work through the various in-game quests, they are given opportunities to take material action against inequalities through unlocking sponsored donations or 'real-world' facts about the women the game depicts. The larger movement behind *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* encompasses more than fifty partnerships with various corporations and NGOs. While playing the game, players have opportunities to donate to any of the following NGOs: The Fistula Foundation, Room to Read, World Vision, Gems, Heifer International, United Nations Foundation (UNF) Shot@Life, UNF Nothing but Nets, UNF Girl Up, and UNF Clean Cookstoves (Half the Sky Movement, 2013). Players can also donate to any number of these partner programs at any time during gameplay and are even prompted (though not

required) to after completing certain quests. Last, players can unlock two sponsor donations from Johnson & Johnson and Pearson just by achieving a predetermined amount of points.

Through its innovative use of the video game medium and generous sponsors, *Half the Sky Movement* aims to do something no other video game has done before—transform players into advocates. This chapter will delineate how *Half the Sky Movement* showcases many aspects of true immersive witnessing. This chapter unfolds in two major sections. I address basic characteristics of serious games, which include narrative, agency, choice, and immersion. I then turn to the formal aspects of witnessing. While limited in its mainstream appeal and replayability, *Half the Sky Movement* allows players to immersively witness the material conditions of women in developing countries through formal qualities unique to the video game medium. In comparison to mainstream entertainment games, in which witnessing becomes an unintended side-effect of the gameplay, *Half the Sky Movement* foregrounds many of the aspects witnessing entails, including awareness and ultimately action. There are multiple components to the game that have intimately linked formally persuasive qualities that work together to achieve immersive witnessing.

The game's narrative form immerses players in dire situations experienced everyday by women in India, Kenya, Vietnam, and even the United States. The structural inequalities faced by women is dramatized through game-specific affordances that facilitates the way the game narrative translates into material action. The standpoint from which players make their choices is through Radhika, a woman operating within a position of limited agency in an economy containing multiple types of capital that must be earned and spent wisely. Obtaining and using the various monetary, social, and energy-related currencies in-game has material consequences with affectual repercussions. By this I mean, when certain currencies such as energy or social

capital are depleted, players typically must wait in real time for up to several days before they may progress thus creating material frustration. Frustration is likely a common feeling players of this game experience as they see the consequences of their morally ambiguous decisions within a larger narrative framework. Players who control Radhika learn to counter problems that do not have easy solutions. Together, these game elements work as a system to represent physical-world conditions that allow players to immersively witness some aspects of the lives of women from developing countries.

3.1 Characteristics of Serious Games

In contrast to typical blockbuster video games, serious games are most often a single element within a larger transmedia framework that seeks to reach a new audience--gamers. This is the primary intention of *Half the Sky Movement*, which seeks to increase players' awareness about women worldwide and urges those same players to take action, therefore becoming advocates. Serious games often seek increased awareness and understanding as some of their primary outcomes. As such, *Half the Sky Movement* is a more typical example of a serious game that deploys witnessing as a major outcome (though again developers may not necessarily identify it by name). Though witnessing may not be an outcome explicitly identified by creators of serious games, awareness, education, and motivation often are.

Half the Sky Movement is a noteworthy example of emerging trends in serious games because it not only uses forms that typically define the genre but also has a unique advantage in terms of potential audience and resources. For example, the decision to use Facebook as the platform for *Half the Sky Movement* is a feature unique among serious games. The relevant outcomes of this are twofold. First, it encourages a specific game-play style to be used, namely the "click-and-wait" model popularized by games like *Farmville* (2009). What this means is that

gameplay is dominated by clicking on items to initiate actions that garner results only after an extended (real time) period of waiting. In the case of *Farmville*, it formally reflects the concept that crops require time to grow, in *Half the Sky Movement* it works to reflect the tedium and frustration of waiting for other reasons such as a lack of willing volunteers or being physically exhausted, which will be further discussed in the ensuing analysis. Secondly, the game receives a much wider visibility in comparison to other serious game titles because of it being housed on Facebook. The most unique advantage of being hosted on Facebook is the game can reach a wide and diverse audience as opposed to most social change games, which are hosted on independent websites thus making them less accessible since people would have to actively seek them. Through being hosted on Facebook, *Half the Sky Movement* creates more opportunities for Facebook gamers to serendipitously come across the game. Because of the sharing and networked capabilities inherent to Facebook, people may see game activity in their news feed, allowing them to encounter facts they may never have otherwise. Further there are no special downloads that need to occur to play the game; if a computer runs Facebook it should run the game²³.

3.1.1 Narratives

None of the various game mechanisms designed to enhance understanding or evoke empathy in players can succeed without a strong narrative to provide context for the action serious games seek to evoke. Narrative is not a required component of video games but, in the case of social change games, it functions as a conduit for action. In *Half the Sky Movement*, a strong narrative is essential to both creating an immersive experience and dramatizing the material conditions of the character's lives. For this chapter, I will explore the role of narrative

²³ Notably, this game does not work on mobile devices.

form as both a contextualizing device and formal component. Rhetoric and composition scholar Debra Journet (2007) argues that the potential for video games to create embodied experiences for players rests in their narratives. She states: “Video games narrate an imagined world in which the purposive actions of players’ characters have consequences, and it is in relation to this story that learning becomes situated. Narrative thus provides a contextual framework through which actions come to have meaning” (p. 93). As with traditional media, game narratives are not only expressed through environments, dialogue, and characters but also through affordances unique to games. For example, the narratives in *Half the Sky Movement* are also conveyed through challenges and choices rather than text or images alone.

In contrast to the ways documentaries or newscasts allow people to witness, games do not rely solely on words or photographs of events or circumstances to convey meaning. In other words, the formal capacities inherent within games allow players to see how individual elements of a system interrelate, releasing games of the limitations inherent to depiction of meaning through images and/or words alone. In their work on news games Bogost, Ferrari, and Schweitzer state:

Games excel at handling multitudes. The rules and parameters of game systems can be used to dramatically reveal information, to make concepts tangible, and to produce alternative scenarios for further exploration or comparison... The player of a procedural documentary game would come to understand not only the facts and outcomes of a story but also the underlying systems that caused it to come to pass (p. 70-71)

Instead of having to explain or show how an intricate process occurs, games can model them in such a way that makes complex interactions between various parts more comprehensible. Games have the ability to create patterns, feelings, or entire interactive experiences within narrative

structures through the deployment of innumerable game mechanics. For example, in rhetoric and composition scholar James Paul Gee's analysis of *The Sims 2: The Nickle and Dimed Challenge*²⁴ he finds that "the point [of the game] is not total fidelity to life, but fidelity to feeling...[The game's designer] has repurposed *The Sims* as a tool for the understanding of real life at the level of game play and not just story" (Gee 53). The procedural nature of the game conjures in players the feelings associated with being a struggling single mother. The game itself is not structured to exactly replicate the circumstances, yet it accomplishes a verisimilitude of feeling that promotes understanding of the situation. *The Nickle and Dimed Challenge* demonstrate how gameplay and story come together to create a space for people to safely live through vignettes of other people's lives and learn to empathize through those experiences.

Game narratives simply signify in ways that differ from those possible in documentary film narratives. In a 2003 report of U.S. social documentary production and use, Pat Aufderheide describes the social documentary film as a form that "openly address[es] power relations in society, with the goal of making citizens and activists aware and motivated to act for social justice, equality and democracy" (p. 5). Documentary games fulfill this definition and *Half the Sky Movement* stands out in that it embeds the power to act within the game's design. Aufderheide's study determined that most documentary films use "websites that link knowledge and action" (p. 18) as the primary way to facilitate advocacy. In *Half the Sky Movement*, players need not leave the game world to contribute to a number of affiliated NGOs. While the game is part of a media campaign that also includes a traditional film documentary, most people will not encounter every facet of the campaign, as is the nature of transmedia projects. Between the book,

²⁴ Created in 2008, the *Nickel and Dimed Challenge* was a set of rules designed to be followed by players of *The Sims 2* that would severely constrain the amount of income and money-earning opportunities of players to simulate the hardships impoverished single parents endure in their daily lives. It was created with the intention of promoting learning about poverty and empathy for the people whose lives inspired the rules for the simulation.

film, game and website, the latter examples are the only places within which material action in the form of donations can occur. *Half the Sky Movement* positions players to act by embedding opportunities for action directly into the game's narrative. After players overcome obstacles they should have a new perspective on the causes and effects relevant to that particular situation. By gaining that insight through an immersive environment, players are naturally positioned more closely to the subjects the campaign aims to help.

Media scholar Janet Murray (2004) conceives of a theory that describes the ways in which players can be changed through experiencing a game narrative; she calls this transformation. Game scholar Michael Mateas (2004) adds to Murray's conception by distinguishing how transformation in game narratives manifests in two primary ways including (1) "transformation as masquerade," where players take on roles of other people unlike themselves, and (2) "personal transformation," (p. 21-22) where the act of playing the game itself causes players to view the world in some different way. The potential for "personal transformation" allows one to consider how experiences in games can affect the ways players act in the physical world. The two types of transformation are related in that personal transformation is facilitated by transformation as masquerade. Murray (2004) indicates that feelings of agency allow players to undergo transformation because the connection fostered between players and characters occurs through role-play. Masquerades and role-play are at the core of narrative video games in that players rarely encounter games in which they play as "themselves" rather than a character. Journet (2007) asserts: "Masquerades allow players to try out different personae; personae are enacted through multiple varieties of experience offered by the game; deep engagement with diverse points of view and morphing story lines can lead to personal transformation" (p.108). Acting as characters who drastically differ from players' "real life"

identities forces players to take action in situations they might otherwise never encounter and act in ways they may never seriously consider otherwise.

Transformation through masquerade allows players a safe space to glimpse the lives of others in an immersive experience. Transformation allows serious games to provide players with unique mediated witnessing experiences inaccessible through traditional media. *Half the Sky Movement* situates players as Radhika in circumstances that are just not possible to experience materially without risk of bodily harm. By making decisions as Radhika in various difficult situations, players learn to identify with her. A 2010 study by Wei Peng, Mira Lee, and Carrie Heeter (2010) found that players need to think from the character's perspective to achieve success in roleplaying games. This is facilitated in one way through the shared goals of player and character. Players operate within the limited agency of the character Radhika to achieve community improvement goals. The game imposes limitations on players that are indicative of real systemic problems. Through creating a connection between the player and character Radhika and placing her in situations in which players face stalled or slow progress on projects, the game achieves a "fidelity to feeling." Playing as a character like Radhika may not be enticing because she has very limited agency as an impoverished Indian woman; however, being forced to identify with her (through performing in her role) enriches players' understanding of the women she represents.

Personal transformation is attainable through these means. Beyond contributing to charities, players of serious games like *Half the Sky Movement* can be changed through playing the game. This is made possible by the immersive, agential, and transformational properties that video games possess. These properties allow games to work as learning apparatuses, should designers seek to use them as such. Addressing the possibilities in video games to facilitate

learning, Gee (2008) argues: ‘Narrative based games involve players making decisions and taking actions whose results they must assess to prepare for future action toward their goals. Thus, such games contain both storytelling and the circuit of reflective action, as does life (p. 355). When in-game moments ring true with experiences that occur within the larger scope of a player’s experiences, they can be understood as homologous. When *Half the Sky Movement* players reflect on experiences they had in the game as Radhika, they may better be able to understand poverty or sexism because of working through those in-game problems related to those subjects. The experiences simulated through video games do not cease to exist after the console or computer shuts down. Despite whether players realize it, the events of a play-through, even if they do not ostensibly exhibit narrative qualities, are stored as narratives in the mind and made available for recollection and reflection in the future when they encounter formally similar situations that may require a particular response.

3.1.2 Agency and Choice

Agency is another necessary ingredient to making games persuasive, but it cannot exist in a meaningful way without narrative. Interactivity as a whole is indicative of player agency and as mentioned previously, *Half the Sky Movement* purposefully limits player agency in an effort to metaphorically simulate realistic conditions. The ways in which agency can be manipulated in games is integral to helping understand what makes it persuasive as a medium. Mateas (2004) sums up agency in video games as: “the feeling of empowerment that comes from being able to take actions in a world whose effects relate to the player’s intention” (p. 21). The agency aspect of an in-game narrative relates to how one can simulate agency within a game story to affect the story’s outcome, providing a player with feelings of empowerment in a multitude of in-game situations.

The linear narrative model used by *Half the Sky Movement* is designed to provide players with decisions that can help them progress through the game (win) and make tangible contributions outside the game world (take action); however, those opportunities are purposefully limited. This is useful to witnessing in the game because it allows players to adopt the role of a person whose agency is much more limited than their own. Some decisions include the most mundane things such as whether the best way to spend some in-game time and energy is through cleaning the barn to gather manure or milking the goat. These mundane choices add to the immersion of the narrative in that they draw attention to some of the daily tasks a woman like Radhika might complete. While basic, these choices demonstrate a verisimilitude to life that players can identify and relate to through seeing the similarity in form.

While many games afford players an outrageous amounts of agency, *Half the Sky Movement* limits the range of agency to choosing which activity to perform (providing players have enough energy to complete it) or choosing between very difficult binary options that garner similar outcomes despite player choice. For example, one relatively benign decision that occurs very early in the game requires Radhika/players to hire a taxi so they can bring her sick daughter to the hospital. She/players do not have much money but have the option to negotiate a deal and pay with either two mangoes supplemented with ten coins or fifty coins; the catch here is neither choice may be an actual possibility when players approach the driver. Despite which payment type players choose, Radhika procures the taxi. Nonetheless, by presenting players with a decision that reveals their finite agency outright, it creates an opportunity for them to become aware of the limited resources Radhika and the women like her have access to. Other player choices are more problematic and further highlight the dire circumstances faced by women in the developing countries the game depicts. One situation occurs where there are only ten mosquito

nets to be given to Kenyan villagers, and players must choose who the last one should go to: a pregnant woman, or hospitalized child? Another serious in-game choice focuses on the complicated nature of sex slavery. Players/Radhika must choose between separating a young girl from her family to prevent her from being re-sold into the industry or risk losing track of her if they contact authorities to handle the situation. While these most dire type of dilemmas do not occur exceedingly often, there are enough of them in the game to allow players to witness the serious choices that some women must manage.

3.1.3 The Rhetoric of Failure in Games

Serious games are often simulations of real-world events or processes, meaning the gameplay mirrors material conditions or processes. This feature is what allows players to witness but it can (understandably) constrain the way content is presented. Although serious games can be entertaining, their main purpose is to train or educate users²⁵ and entertainment is not the primary focus of the game's design. In fact, serious games sometimes deliberately forego entertainment value or intentionally add exceedingly difficult or frustrating moments in order to achieve a desired feeling of understanding. In some cases, lack of fun in a game is used to provoke a particular feeling in players.²⁶ Many games employ this tactic, notably including *Darfur is Dying* (2009) and *Spent* (2011).²⁷ *Darfur is Dying* (2009), which has effectively defined the genre thus far, allows players to immersively experience a day in the life of a Darfuri as he/she attempts to gather water without getting caught by the Janjaweed. Further, *Spent* (2011), takes an entirely different approach, using a resource management model of gameplay to simulate the limited decisions available to a low-income single mother in the Durham, North

²⁵ Though they may also have alternative training or education purposes, such as for use as marketing or advertising tools.

²⁶ This can be explored more fully in a 2006 article by game designers David Michael and Sande Chen (2006).

²⁷ I use these games as primary examples because they more accurately depict best practices of using this tactic. As I will discuss somewhat in the next paragraph and more fully in the conclusion of the paper, *Half the Sky Movement* does not make best use of this affordance for justifiable reasons.

Carolina area. Both games draw from the various affordances available in games to disseminate their messages to create a gameplay experience that simulates in some way or another conditions that people in the physical world face daily. The people who live in these contexts cannot easily escape their situations and the games both highlight that point by being relatively frustrating and unwinnable. The games employ a procedural rhetoric of failure.

A rhetoric of failure is often used in video games to underscore losses of agency or lack of choices in particular circumstances or situations. Bogost (2010) articulates that failure in games can make “claim[s] about given topic[s] by showing how things *don't* work.” (p. 85). The primary concept behind this line of thinking is that by playing serious games, where winning is extremely difficult or impossible, players can be inspired to think critically about a particular topic, situation or system. Interestingly, there is no way to lose *Half the Sky Movement*, although making certain choices allows players to achieve goals sooner than if they had made another choice. Creator Michelle Byrd characterizes this as an intentional choice: "There is no wrong answer that is going to penalize you. Again, that's trying to focus on the opportunity that there is hope, and that sometimes you just need a different path" (Holpuch, 2013). So although players cannot fail entirely at the game, evoking the most extreme version of the rhetoric of failure, the conditions within which the player must achieve goals are prohibitive,²⁸ even as the goals themselves underscore the failures of the current system. This is shown through the ways in which the game constrains players' agency but generally does not allow for the harshest version of the rhetoric of failure, namely actual failure at the game to occur. There is one quest in which Radhika fails to achieve her goal, though it does not result in outright failure in the game but is

²⁸ There is one notable narrative flaw the game commits. This occurs as Radhika has access to free, unlimited air travel to four countries. While this does not fit within the rest of Radhika's narrative its effects can be explained more fully in the conclusion of this paper as it relates to how players typically interpret disparities between game narratives and rules.

framed more as a stumbling block. The quest requires Radhika to gather support for a vote on women's property rights in Afghanistan. Even though players are successful in their recruitment of the required number of supporters, the law does not pass. Afterward a conversation occurs between Radhika and her Afghani friend, where the final outcome is justified as the natural outcome of years of staunch and powerful ideologies. Within the larger scope of the game, these type of failures help highlight that not every problem has a gratifying solution and some issues are deeply ingrained in culture making them even more difficult to overcome.

However, on the whole players are generally successful at their tasks so as to motivate players for future action. The tasks themselves must be carried out in very particular ways that the narrative guides and often depict the start of a change rather than the results of long-term campaigns. For example, when players/Radhika need to find a particular number of mosquito nets to supply a Kenyan village, they face extremely limited options. It would be unfeasible for players/Rhadika to be able to earn enough money to buy them so instead players must gather fishing nets and sewing kits to make them. By working through this process, it demonstrates to players that limited agency fosters a necessary resourcefulness while offering alternative solutions to physical-world problems. The game uses tactics of limited agency in more subtle ways than past serious games have offered.

In an effort to make the game accessible to as many different kinds of players possible, the creators of *Half the Sky Movement* intentionally gave the game a relatively lighter tone than such content usually receives. Some decisions and storylines that players face in the game deal with exceedingly serious subjects such as the sex trafficking of young women and girls in Vietnam and The United States. In stark contrast to this serious content, the game features vibrant colors and an overtly cartoonized art style. This was noted as a calculated choice meant

to relieve some of the burden the content places on players. As Byrd notes: "[The game is] definitely dealing with difficult subject matter...It's trying to do so in ways that are engaging and light and provide [players] with tools to go deeper into the subject matter" (Holpuch, 2013). So rather than concentrate on the dire circumstances some women in the world must live in, the creators took a calculated risk on using a relatively hopeful narrative game structure and aesthetic. *Half the Sky Movement* contrasts the serious content derived from events documented by the larger transmedia project and elements of gameplay that force players to wait and perform tedious tasks with a bright and hopeful art style and near-guaranteed success in completing tasks.

When Radhika witnesses injustice in her community, she actively seeks ways to change the circumstances for the better. In one ongoing quest, she realizes women in her community have very little economic power so she helps to form a coalition and get access to a microloan. Together, Radhika and some other women from her town buy a goat to start making money from selling milk and collecting the manure for fertilizer. Players have little choice in what tasks they carry out since the storyline is so linear but, through playing as Radhika and operating within these constraints, players not only see the unfair conditions many women live under but also learn about the ways in which circumstances can be changed. Through Radhika, players witness both problems and contingent solutions that work to help as many people as possible.

3.1.4 Immersion

Because the game is based on events and circumstances currently going on in the physical world, it is naturally more immersive because it reflects true-to-life conditions. *Half the Sky Movement* draws attention to the fact that much of the game content represents some women's current circumstances. The game opens with a series of slides orienting players to its

content and scope by showing images²⁹ of the game's cartoon protagonist, Radhika involved in various in-game situations. The first slide features an image of Rhadika surrounded by her family (a husband, son and daughter). The text says: "This is the story of Radhika, a simple woman from India who wants to make things better...For Both Herself and Women Worldwide." Another slide shows a still image of a mango gathering mini-game with accompanying text: "A journey full of discoveries, choices and meaningful actions. A STORY YOU PLAY TO CHANGE THE WORLD." The game starts by orienting players to start forming homologies to the physical world as the images and texts on the slides tell players the actions they make in-game can have physical-world consequences. The last slide of the series reinforces the point as it shows an image of Radhika and her doctor in contrast to a photograph of child being helped by doctor with button indicating players can donate vaccines. Text in all caps states: "Any action you take in the virtual world, you can also take in real life!" The button players must choose to continue in the game says: "Start Helping!" These initial teasers allow players to understand from the outset that things depicted in the game reflect physical world conditions and they will have opportunities within the game to make meaningful changes that closely resemble changes that can affect the physical world.

The blurring of the distinction between what takes place in the game-world and physical world troubles the way immersion in games has previously been considered. Presenting players with tangible problems to which they can donate money or otherwise help provide relief through material change are among the most immersive moments the game offers because such opportunities facilitate action in the physical world. Naturally, this would seem like a disruption

²⁹ Bogost (2011) finds that realistically rendered graphics are less important to a game's persuasive effects than the clarity of its processes. He argues: "Reducing the player's obsession with decoration underscores the experience of processes while still allowing image, sound, and text to meaningfully clarify the fiction of the game's theme" (p. 15).

of immersive witnessing. Since the game mediates depictions of material conditions, however, such interruptions actually enhance feelings of connection to both the characters and their plights as well as the peoples the game seeks to help in the physical world. Conventional types of immersion are also evident in the game such as those induced by feeling of flow that occur in the matching mini-game. Resources in this game (ranging from mangoes to stove fuel) are gathered for various story quests. Notably, in at least one case, books gathered through this mini-game results in the donation of a book sponsored by Pearson to the Room to Read foundation. This in-game immersion also has materials effect in the world, changing the way immersion can be used as a rhetorical tool. After witnessing various events through Radhika, players can see the changes she makes to her community and better understand how such changes occur in the physical world too. In other words, because players know the game depicts true-to-life conditions, they are more likely to be immersed in the stories because they know they are real.

3.2.1 Formal Elements of Witnessing: Duration

Traditional documentary forms often conjure a plethora of emotions directed toward the subjects being documented, a useful tactic in garnering support. However, *Half the Sky Movement* takes advantage of the formal qualities inherent to games that allow players to feel frustration alongside the subjects. This is created by simulating actions that a woman would conceivably struggle with when living in a developing country. Through the game mechanism of “click and wait,” players are asked to wait in real time for varying durations. In order for certain actions to take place, Radhika must gather volunteers to help her. In the aforementioned example in which Radhika rallies support for votes on a property rights issue, players must wait for seven hours, seven different times to gather supporters for the cause, complete the task, and move onto the next quest. Players, in other words, wait 49 hours (the equivalent of two days of real time) to

complete this task and that is *if* they completed the quest in the most efficient way.³⁰ While this cannot possibly even come close to mirroring the struggle and frustration women face, it purposefully creates an affect that helps players to see the homology between their game experience and the experience of the women the game depicts. For context, an average entertainment game takes about 50+ hours for players to complete the primary story mode. During this play time, a multitude of game experiences are worked through, covering events that may exist over an in-game time span of months or even years. While *Half the Sky Movement* players are not spending that time doing literally nothing in their physical lives but waiting, each time they come back to click, they may encounter annoyance and frustration at such minimal progress. This mechanism also serves to provide another motivation for players to buy in-game currency, which will be discussed in the section that follows. The real time waiting makes players frustrated at the fact that they cannot be instantly gratified in the ways that games normally provide. The creation of this frustration in players provides an embodied idea of the frustration underprivileged women certainly face.

3.2.2 Social Capital

The role of social capital in *Half the Sky Movement* manifests through the events for which Radhika/players must recruit volunteers. This process can be expedited through making various choices that become available through having strong social capital. Players are prompted at the top of the screen to recruit volunteers: “Ask your friends to give you a hand, hire workers [using in-game currency that one would purchase using real currency], or wait for free volunteers to show up! TOGETHER, MAKE THIS POSSIBLE.” This formally works on several levels. First, it underscores the role social capital plays in making meaningful change by making players

³⁰ This could be possible if players contacted a new in-game supporter at the precise moment after the previous seven-hour wait period ends. This is largely not feasible unless the player set external timers and has no other obligations that need tending.

wait to find volunteers. It mirrors the difficulty it takes to find volunteers for projects and shows that it often takes time because volunteers are hard to come by. The in-game process connects the game events to the physical world by encouraging players to draw from their own social capital to supplement Radhika's social capital in the game. It also shows that there are multiple ways to achieve goals and some are easier for people with access to different forms of capital. For example, players who have ample social capital in their physical life can invite their friends to have in-game tasks accomplished quickly. In contrast people with little social capital but spare money can pay for in-game currency to have the task completed for them. Last, players who lack proficient amounts of either monetary or social capital must wait for free volunteers to arrive and complete the task. Players who choose this option must wait for varying lengths of time for volunteers (as previously mentioned), which makes it the most frustrating option. This last option also reproduces the state of being wherein a player has the fewest options and, thus, the least amount of agency.

In *Half the Sky Movement* players must also balance their energy resources, which become depleted when players work on any task. There is a distinct frustration that comes from not having enough energy to complete tasks because it means more waiting for the player. The homology here is clear: The way to restore energy in the game (which is formally equivalent to the way in which people's energy in the real world must be replenished through resting) is through waiting in real time. Waiting for one minute adds one energy point to players' reserves and players can earn up to one hundred energy points in this way. However, a menu bar at the bottom of the screen shows every Facebook friend who also plays the game and players can click on friends to send them a free gift of five energy points once per day. Alternatively, players can also purchase more energy with real money. This method both emphasizes the ways in which

energy is a finite resource and that having social capital aids movement through quests. It also works to motivate people to donate because they want to enjoy more of the game without the frustration of waiting for volunteers. By blending the uses of various forms of in-game capital with that of social and monetary capital outside the game, playing *Half the Sky Movement* allows players to experience how social capital affects communities and that through empathy and feelings of responsibility toward others, problems can be solved more efficiently.

3.2.3 Reflection

The reflection mechanism that disrupts immersion but allows room for players to consider their in-game actions occurs through a number of apparatuses in *Half the Sky Movement*. Popups appear after the completion of missions presenting players with tangible problems to which they can donate money or provide relief in other ways. These screens usually provide some fact or statistic about the lives of women in one of the countries the game represents. A relevant photograph also appears on the screen with a chance to donate some monetary value toward one of any number of affiliated causes for women and girls (see image 1).

The quests that players complete often parallel the work done by the various partnership charities. For example, when Radhika obtains medicine for her ill daughter in the game, players are offered the opportunity to donate twenty dollars to Shot @ Life, a real-world charity that provides vaccines to children. An in-game popup appears after the scene ends with the bolded title “Give a gift to change a life!” This popup features a screenshot from the game with text “Radhika spoke up to get medication for [daughter] Aditi.” Alongside this image is a photograph

of a young girl being checked by a doctor with accompanying text “Give life-saving immunisations³¹ for girls in the real world!” A relatively large button rests just below this image



and that asks for a \$20 donation for vaccines to be facilitated by sponsor, Shot @ Life. If players choose to donate, they are thanked, receive fifty economy points as an in-game reward for their generosity and are prompted to share the story of their generosity with their Facebook friends. Despite what choice the player selects, another popup follows and informs players: “Play to Give! Every quest you complete, every game you play, every gift you send increases your Help Meter...” The game prompt remind players that doing good deeds in the game adds points that not only help players progress in the game but also helps them unlock new charities to which to donate and sponsor donations. As no other game has embedded donation opportunities into the gameplay before, this is an affordance unique to *Half the Sky Movement*. This direct conduit to

³¹ Spelling original

action does more to emphasize the action required of a witness than not only other witnessing media but also other serious games.

These actions work between the mediated experience and physical world to enhance witnessing. In other words, players witness real lives through the game and the game affects real lives through donations. Aside from proceeds earned through the purchase of in-game currency, players are encouraged to donate money to nonprofits as a means to move through the game faster since donations are rewarded as in-game resources. Players are never required to donate but opportunities to donate arise often in the game. Overall, these popups function to remind players that the game content reflects material conditions and provide those integral moments of pause where players break immersion and can reflect on their actions and the events occurring in the game. By showing a visual comparison of how in-game events parallel material conditions, the popups in *Half the Sky Movement* underscore the message that in-game actions can translate to the physical world. These also help to demonstrate that action is an integral part of witnessing.

3.3.1 Conclusion

Through careful application of the formal elements inherent to games, *Half the Sky Movement* creates the conditions for true immersive witnessing to occur. The narrative containing the game's stories, problems, and solutions moves between the physical world and virtual game world so that players actually witness material conditions through playing a game. The lines between what can distinctly be called reality and fiction are continually blurred by the strategic employment of the formal elements available in games. By giving players a semblance of agency in a virtual world to play through the life of an exceptional witness, players can both witness conditions they may never had otherwise, and do so in such a way that makes some material difference. *Half the Sky Movement's* purposeful use of game mechanisms facilitated

affectual feelings of frustration to foster an appetite for action. The choices and calculated lack thereof in a traditionally choice-plentiful medium underscore the lack of agency various women across the globe live with and help emphasize the impact that accruing various forms of capital and resources has on transforming witnessing into advocacy. Together these affordances work rhetorically to facilitate immersive witnessing by allowing players opportunities to encounter the subjectivities of others and not only perform fictionalized solutions for a myriad of problems but also take action in the form of monetary donations. Thus, games that include mechanics conducive to immersive witnessing provide access to a type of training in witnessing and can also affect the physical world if games' designs include direct conduits to action.

CHAPTER 4

Implications and Conclusion

Through the study of *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement*, I detail how the formal properties inherent to video games not only allow video games to be a vehicle through which witnessing occurs but the medium also encompasses unique possibilities for advocacy. The immersive narratives paired with formal properties of duration, social capital, and choice make games a uniquely persuasive medium through which players evaluate possibilities from the subject positions of others in interactive virtual worlds. In essence, due to affordances intrinsic to games they contain the potential to transform their players. Speaking on behalf of the transformative properties in games, Bogost (2011) argues: “When games invite us inside them, they also underwrite experimentation, ritual, role-playing, and risk-taking that might be impossible or undesirable in the real world...they act as portals to alternate realities” (p. 117). When players enter game worlds they are forced to use their character’s abilities to navigate worlds based on context-specific rules and structures. These rules may proffer realistic representations of particular situations or circumstances. By struggling through these situational worlds players can step away from games with perspectives enriched by the experiences that transpired during gameplay. In the case of *The Walking Dead*, players understand their agency differently through the recognition that silence and inaction are choices that have repercussions. Through witnessing violence and reacting to other people who have witnessed similarly, players learn to reflect and act on behalf of what they witness. These experiences can then be drawn upon in future witnessing situations. Similarly, in *Half the Sky Movement*, players learn about material problems through assuming the agency of a woman in a developing country. The clever connection of in-game challenges to physical effects resulted in a virtual experience that encouraged players to begin their journeys to advocacy without leaving the game space. These outcomes are possible through the affordances unique to video games. In what follows I will

discuss my findings in order of importance to rhetoric as my analysis can be useful to a variety of audiences including rhetoricians, video game players, and serious games designers. First, I compare the findings of my case studies to describe the strengths and limitations of each game. I then outline what a game should encompass to enable immersive witnessing. Next, I discuss what immersive witnessing asks of players and then move into my unexpected finding about social capital. With these elements established I convey immersive witnessing's implications for subjectivity and how immersion and duration can be best utilized by designers of serious games to achieve greatest impact. Last, I look to the future of immersive witnessing to describe why now is the time in which we should study immersive witnessing.

4.1 Comparing Blockbuster and Serious Games to Design an Ideal Immersive Witnessing Experience

My thesis identifies formal similarities between *The Walking Dead* and *Half the Sky Movement* but three key differences exist that hinder their efficacy including narrative, budgetary constraints, and material effects. While the games allow players to encounter forms of duration, choice, and social capital, each functions through different means due to the games' divergent natures. *The Walking Dead*'s primary hindrance in achieving true immersive witnessing arises in that the game takes place in entirely fictional circumstances. The game offers valuable training in witnessing transferable to the physical world via homologies. However, the formal aspects deployed specifically in *The Walking Dead* would stand out in a true immersive witnessing experience. Players made choices to act on their witness of events under realistic time conditions. Moreover, the way duration, choice and social capital were buttressed against each other through narrative created a game in which players care about the well-being of Lee and his community.

One of the biggest reasons the witnessing experience in *The Walking Dead* is more engaging than that in *Half the Sky Movement* stems from budgetary constraints. Operating from a much smaller budget than *The Walking Dead*, *Half the Sky Movement* relied on a rather linear narrative and simple game mechanics as a result. In essence, *Half the Sky Movement* had to be careful with their resources, making their gameplay necessarily very different from that in *The Walking Dead*. Moreover, *Half the Sky Movement* faces ethical constraints that oblige NGO organizations who might utilize serious games to focus their funding on direct advocacy their rather than creating a better experience for players. The only way it might be justifiable would be if the game were proven to cause a majorly significant increase in advocacy, and this would only be knowable post-hoc. However, understanding the way games can depict persuasive narratives through interactive affordances precludes the necessity of visually lifelike images and richly detailed textual stories.

While the gameplay is not always as exciting as that found in *The Walking Dead*, players of *Half the Sky Movement* know their in-game efforts translate to action in the physical world, giving the game a powerful opportunity to enlighten and encourage. Through both witnessing the events Radhika witnesses as well as acting via her agency, players experience an ideal witnessing experience where nearly everything works out in their/Radhika's favor. While this is not necessarily realistic, it fulfills the designers' goal of sending a message of hope. The game's text narrative itself is compelling but comparatively thin in comparison to many other games on the commercial market today. If the game did not continually remind players that the game is based on true events and that players can affect real change, *Half the Sky Movement* might not be a very interesting game at all. The moments when players are most fully invested occur largely as a result of the game-specific narrative affordances such as those created through the click-and-

wait volunteer gathering quests. While it can be potentially problematic sometimes I do not think the mediocre textual narrative affects the witnessing capacities overall. The game may be unrealistic in that there are rarely negative outcomes, but the game's overall message is one of hope and helping those in need. When Radhika witnesses circumstances that can be changed for the better, she takes action.

If the formal aspects of *The Walking Dead* existed in the narrative world of *Half the Sky Movement* I think a very effective immersive witnessing experience could result. *Half the Sky Movement* excels in that it ties in-game actions to out-of-game solutions and underscores the emphasis on action from multiple levels within the game. Players make choices in the game that directly translate into action. However, pairing the game's click-and-wait mechanism with *The Walking Dead*'s quick action mechanisms could underscore the direness of some situations while giving players the added benefit of branching storylines to explore. This would also make the game more repayable than *Half the Sky Movement* currently is and could both extend the topics covered in the game and benefit those players who question the implications of their choices and would like to see how situations may have played out differently. In my estimation a game that employed these formal aspects with a strong, real world narrative could successfully allow players to not only witness but act on behalf of it.

4.2 Who Should Immersively Witness?

An unintended implication garnered through my analysis arose when it became apparent that immersive witnessing was suited to be most effective to particular types of people, namely those who already have gaming experience. To state the obvious, it makes sense that witnessing through games would appeal to those who already play games on a regular basis. However, understanding the details as to why this makes gamers better suited to witness through the

medium is paramount as it has implications for the design of serious games and their intended audiences.

The forms possible within video game spaces work best when they are familiar to players. In other words, if gamers are experienced they should be used to the norms of the medium. To many people who do play regularly, standard game logic may not make as much sense. For example, when overarching game narratives do not cohere with an in-game action, seasoned players defer to game rules to explain the discrepancy (Juul, 2005). For example, in *Half the Sky Movement*, Radhika can take unlimited plane trips between India, Kenya, Vietnam, and the United States of America to help various characters, or transport goods. Inexperienced players may not understand that certain game components need to be in place despite the narrative. In a *New York Times* article *Half the Sky Movement* producers cited “how much to simplify complicated issues, how much fun to include and how much to focus on positive solutions versus grave challenges” as some of the greatest challenges in the development process (Jenson, 2013). In this case, rather than adding cost or another game mechanism to narratively explain how Radhika travels to these destinations (which could feasibly dramatically change the gameplay), designers decided not to draw attention to it.³² The fact that Radhika is underprivileged may not come through as strongly to new players who do not habitually defer to rules during times of narrative incongruity. While this quality inherent to seasoned gamers has limitations, immersive witnessing may not be as effective to players who are relatively unfamiliar with how games work. New gamers may not have the same instincts to allow the narrative to cohere despite inconsistencies, compared to people who play narrative-based games like *The Walking Dead* or numerous other titles more often.

³² In fact, I would offer by not drawing attention to her mode of transportation by making it cost money or energy designers had hoped players would defer to the rule-based interpretation.

4.3 Social Capital

Social capital in video games has largely been looked at in terms of online player groups, primarily focusing on how groups of players manage social capital.³³ To my knowledge there have been no studies on how the social capital from NPCs affects players in narrative games. My analysis garnered a surprising correlation between how social capital affects witnessing and advocacy. While playing video games that focus on communities of people social capital influences the way witnessing events unfold or are understood. Immersive witnessing puts social capital in the forefront so players must confront issues that are made easier with help from friends and peers. Games can influence people to feel more responsibility to those around them by bringing attention to social capital as the mutually beneficial resource it is.

Video games develop these motivations through various formal qualities such as designing particular durational and reflection mechanisms. In *The Walking Dead* players are urged to consider who watches their witness as well as who can be affected by their choices. *Half the Sky Movement* takes a different approach in that players can draw from their physical-world social capital to influence in-game social capital. This not only blurs the lines between being immersed in the game and taking material action but also allows players to experience the consequences of solving problems without resources. These experiences underscore the importance of social capital both inside and outside the game as it influences the way witnessing occurs. As mentioned previously an ideal immersive witnessing experience would employ both mechanisms to achieve the greatest impact.

³³ See Mark Chen's 2011 book *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft* for a paradigm example.

4.4 Form and Homology

Through video games we can broaden the scope of what form encompasses. Considered through this medium it can be looked at in terms of its potential as a force of change. As Brummet (2013) brings to our attention:

Where does real change ever come from if we are always using socially available forms to structure experience, societies, and ourselves? From great artists and political visionaries. These change agents can bend form and plot in ways that remain connected to life's patterns but still introduce new ways of organizing experience. (p. 9)

As Brummet indicates, real change is difficult to facilitate using currently available forms. Video games are a medium through which both types of change makers that Brummet mentions, artists and political visionaries, can and do collaborate; *Half the Sky Movement* is a testament to this fact. My analysis reveals that through harnessing the power available in forms found in video games, new options for advocacy are possible.

These forms are not bound to non-fictional content alone. In fiction games like *The Walking Dead*, players can make connections between the game worlds and their physical lives should in-game material be formally equivalent. For example, the ethical quandaries which players have encountered during in-game experiences can be compared to their lived experiences. Further other homological material presents itself in games such as the quick-time choices in *The Walking Dead* which allows for players to attempt challenges under pressure. The ability to experience events from other subject positions enhances immersive witnessing's potential for advocacy since players can work through problems as other characters, Radhika for example. Through playing video games that exhibit these forms players can draw from the subjectivities of others to make homologies. Brummet (2004) asserts that homologies assist

primarily textual experiences to become extratextual, meaning no longer bound to its original incarnation. The most effective forms in any game, serious or commercial, emulate forms found in the physical world and as such players can act on behalf of them. For example, when players/Lee only have five seconds to make a decision in the midst of a stressful situation, this formally mirrors how the same situation might play out in the physical world if it were to occur. While it is a stretch to argue that players might be facing a real zombie apocalypse anytime soon, having the experience of making tough decisions that may have serious consequences under pressure simulates a feasible experience witnesses may have. This identification of a realistic physical world parallel creates a homology. These homologies in turn become part of gamers' experiences and can be drawn upon in future situations that require guidance from such "previous experience."

4.5 Immersion

Immersion in games has been analyzed in terms of generating engaging and entertaining game experiences but never before investigated in terms of how it can affect advocacy or activism. While immersion is not unique to games, its distinctive manifestation in this medium is facilitated through the way narratives and interactivity coalesce. Immersion helps players to exist more fully in game worlds and thus enhances the level of transformation temporarily available to players. My analyses explores how immersion is paramount to taking on roles in-game. However, for players to gain new perspectives in immersive witnessing experiences the interruption of that immersion, where reflection can be prompted, must occur. As my second chapter explores, immersion is a finite state of being. Accordingly, the immersion must be interrupted in order for players to be trained in witnessing via video games. It is the tacking back and forth between the immersive states of acting through the character's subject position and the

player's own subjectivity that ultimately gives video games their persuasive power. When immersed in a game situation, there is a distinction between what the player would do if they personally encountered such a situation and what the player can do within the confines of both the character's agency and the game world. Working through in-game problems as a character and having that thought process disrupted allows space for reflection to occur. However, this is less likely to occur without in-game mechanisms designed to prompt players to do so. In the case of social change games this process is useful in the manufacture of immersive witnessing. The moments of reflection encourage players to consider the positions and perspectives of other people inside and potentially outside the game world. These considerations paired with other game affordances helps facilitate the transition from players to advocates.

4.6 Duration

I consider my findings on how duration can evoke certain actions or feelings in a player to be this document's most important implication for game studies literature with minor implications for rhetoric. The manipulation of time cannot be experienced through any other medium and as such it is a form unique to games. One of the most tangible ways in which game faculties enhance the training of witnessing or true immersive witnessing is through manipulating the way time affects the game to work a certain way within the narrative world. Time is something that we instinctively react to in a certain way and so duration is one of the formal capacities so unique to games that helps motivate players to various ends. For example when games deploy click-and-wait mechanism they encourage frustration at having to face delayed gratification for something we've worked toward and seek to relieve that frustration. Equally as strong a feeling, when people are faced with serious dilemmas that require quick

decisions they panic and fail to think things through as clearly as they should; This is the case with the quick time decisions in *The Walking Dead*.

4.7 Looking to the Future

The proliferation of immersive technologies such as the Oculus Rift virtual reality headset will transform and expand the role of video games. Games are only becoming more immersive and realistic, expanding their potentials greatly. Witnessing is just one way in which these immersive technologies can allow people to experiment with acting in a greater variety of experiences and train in ethical decision making. McGonigal (2011) argues “The more we help in games, the more we help in life. And so there’s good reason to believe that the more we learn to enjoy serving epic causes in game worlds, the more we may find ourselves contributing to epic efforts in the real world” (114). As with any new technology, immersive gaming is not an inherently good or bad thing but depends on how it is used. Admittedly, there are problems with this model of witnessing in that it could potentially feed the controversial ‘slacktivism’ debate that asserts online campaigns allow people to passively “support” movements without any real investment. Though I think immersive witnessing has great potential to become an effective method I do not claim that it is a necessarily better way of witnessing. Immersive witnessing is another, different way to raise awareness about issues because game mechanisms have the ability to model interactive systems of experience. Witnessing through games involves different emotional and thought processes than other media through games’ immersive and agentic properties. This model not only appeals to new audiences but also engages those audiences in a distinctly different way from media of the past.

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