

***Retracing Negative Images of the Black:
The Racial Reading of the Walking Dead through its Adaptations***

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Abstract

In contemporary culture, video games, like other media, have played an impactful role towards players' societal perceptions and influenced their impressions and understandings of social groups. Despite the increase of African Americans figures in video games, these characters are usually portrayed in negative, racially stereotypical ways. This paper offers an analysis of the representations of black characters in Telltale's *The Walking Dead*. It explores the text through Sanders' adaptation and appropriation which allows new perspectives on a character who is marginalised and disenfranchised by the original work. The study shows that the video game adaptation of *The Walking Dead* retraces the positive images of black men by emphasising the father-and-daughter relationships between Lee and Clementine, thus, puts a new light into the gaming industry. This aspect of the game, when compared to the television series of the same name, challenges the white hegemony of parenthood, contrasts the empathetic paternal characteristics of the African American protagonist to the intolerable and unstable ones of the white male character.

Keywords: The Walking Dead, Video Game Studies, Adaptations, Race, Fatherhood

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Introduction

“The world is ending out there. Who cares who I am?”
Lee Everett from *Telltale’s The Walking Dead*

In this century, things seem to be getting better as people put more awareness on race issues, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement caused by the brutal abuse of the black man by the white police. However, if you take a closer look back into this, the portrayals of black men in the media have been widely distorted still; some aspects have been exaggerated, some omitted. According to the report from The Opportunity Agenda in 2011 entitled *Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys*, many researches have been conducted on how black males are presented in media, such as, TV shows, fictions, films, advertisements, and video games. The study shows that black males are stereotypically and distortedly portrayed as domestic violators towards black women, criminals, and drug users.

Creighton, Walker, and Anderson have conducted a study comparing how black and white males are presented in Omaha’s television news. The result indicates that nearly 70% of crime stories reported in television involved figures of black males even though they are finally proved innocent (2014). Dallis, an African American journalist, proposes an interesting point of argument saying that mainstream media is white dominant. These white media figures are reported to have no social connections with any black people at all. That is, therefore, the reason why the images of black people circulated in media are usually portrayed negatively (Dallis, 2020).

In contemporary culture, video games, like other media, have played an impactful role towards players’ societal perceptions and influenced their impressions and understandings of social groups (Comstock and Cobbey as cited in William et al., 2009). The protagonists in many video games are represented through the images of white men. William et al suggest that even though black characters in video games are gradually increasing, the actual ‘playable’ characters are still underrepresented meaning that they are usually designed as the side or minor characters (2009). Accordingly, Dickerman, Christensen, and Kerl-McClain point out that despite the increase of African Americans figures in video games, “these main characters are also portrayed in negative, racially stereotypical ways” (2008, p. 25). African Americans protagonists are usually designed as the criminal gangsters (i.e., *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, 2004; *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, 2005; and *True Crime: New York City*, 2005). Presumably, these representations of black people in video games, therefore, reproduce negative impacts to the society, and underpin people’s misleading perceptions towards black communities.

In April 2012, Telltale Games had launched a new episodic adventure game called *The Walking Dead (TWD:VG)*, and, soon after, the game hit an enormous success guaranteed by many Game of the Year awards from several gaming publications. *The Walking Dead* is the second adaptation of the comic book series with the same name. The first adaptation of this hugely popular comic book is the AMC series *The Walking Dead (TWD:AMC)*; the first season premiered in October 2010. The story of *TWD:VG* Season 1 begins with the story of Lee Everett, a black male, who is being transported to a prison by a white policeman. Unfortunately, the car crashes a walking zombie (or a walker), the police officer dies, and Lee escapes the scene. After having escaped, Lee met a young black girl named Clementine being left alone in the house. Clementine seeks help from Lee to find her parents in Savannah. So, their adventures

start here. A player of *TWD:VG* is assigned to play as Lee Everett controlling him by following the point-and-click approach as the story progresses through several scenes.

TWD:AMC Season 1 tells a story of Rick Grimes, a police officer who, after being shot and hospitalised for over two months, woke up in a hospital and found out that the world has been invaded by zombies. In episode three “*Tell It to the Frogs*”, after a few episodes of crawling his way to Atlanta and fighting innumerable packs of walkers, Rick finally reunites with his family – Lori, his wife, and Carl, his beloved son. The paternal figure of Lee towards Clementine is an intertextual reminiscence of Rick’s to Carl. This aspect is, therefore, comparable and needs closer analysis. Since the video game version of *TWD:VG* was released during the season two of its TV series, this paper, therefore, will limit the comparison and discussion based on the first and second seasons of *TWD:AMC*. Also, the original comic book version of the game will not be discussed here because there is no significant difference to the TV series version in terms of characters and settings.

Previous Analysis of *the Walking Dead*

Since *TWD:VG* is highly successful in the gaming industry, many aspects of the game have been studied (i.e. players’ response and empathy, zombies and society, post-apocalypse world). Racial issues in *TWD:VG* is also another aspect many scholars have put the light on. Russworm (2017) suggests that the video game adaptation of *The Walking Dead* is a progressive pace in representing race and diversity in the gaming industry. She theorises a critical racial dystopia to analyse dialogues between Lee and other characters in the game. She finally points out that Lee’s death at the end of the game, unlike other deaths of black men in media, emotionally affects players’ empathy. She insists that the other sacrifices of black people seen throughout various kinds of media are just the revelation and resolution of the dystopia narratives in which, at the end, glorify the white protagonists’ denouements. *TWD:VG* is, therefore, a progressive narrative of black men in contemporary media. Russworm also mentions the Lee-Clementine parental relationship, but rather ignores this aspect for deeper analysis. Pressnell (2017) conducts a multimodal discourse analysis focusing on challenging the myths of white masculinity. He argues that, in *TWD:VG*, race has been deconstructed and challenged in both the TV series and the video game versions. Little does Pressnell compare the paternal figures of Lee and Rick; his main argument of this aspect focuses on Larry, a figure of white father who seems to dislike Lee, and his overprotective fatherhood. According to the previous studies of the text, the parental relationships between Lee-Clementine, and Rick-Carl, have not yet been carefully explored, and, therefore, are the subjects of this paper.

Methodology

This paper employs Julie Sanders’ adaptation and appropriation approach as the main approach to read both the season 1 and 2 of *TWD:AMC* and the season 1 of *TWD:VG*. Sanders, a professor of English Literature and Drama at Newcastle University, specialises in early modern literature and adaptation studies. Her current research is on Shakespeare and Social Justice and on early modern material culture. Her publications include Ben Johnson’s *Theatrical Republics* (1998), *Novel Shakespeare* (2001), *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2005), *The Cambridge Introduction to Early Modern Drama, 1576-1642* (2014), and *The Cultural Geography of Early Modern Drama* (2014) to name a few.

Sanders defines adaptation and appropriation as a practice of intertextuality. Not only does adaptation aim to foster new versions of texts, but it also aims at giving new interpretations to

them (Sanders, 2006). Sanders discusses many of Shakespeare's plays which have been adapted into different versions. She points out that the purpose of adapting Shakespeare's plays is to make them "fit for new cultural contexts and different political ideologies" (p. 46). The adaptations of Shakespeare's plays also allow new perspectives and put a spotlight on a character "who is marginalised and disenfranchised by the original play, be this for reasons of social status, gender, or race" (p. 57).

TWD:VG, then, serves as a good example of an ideological adaptation of its original mediums (*TWD:AMC* and comics). The major change of the protagonist from a white police officer to a black professor and convicted murderer could be marked an important shift of the gaming industry, game players, and general people for putting more concern about racial issues. Therefore, Sanders's theory of adaptation, even though it focuses on texts related to postcolonialism, postmodernism, and gender studies, can possibly be applied to read the representations of African American masculinity in Telltale's and AMC's *The Walking Dead*.

Ideological Adaptation and Textual Analysis

The paternal authority of Rick has been initially challenged in *TWD:AMC* Season 2. Comparatively, throughout *TWD:AMC* Season 1, Rick is stereotypically portrayed as a heroic, devoting white man; after having reunited with his family, he and other survivors escape Atlanta and finally reach CDC where they hope to find supplies and medicine. This season ends with the explosion of the CDC building after its last fuel has been consumed. Rick and the rest of the group, then, have to find another place to live.

TWD:AMC Season 2 was the beginning of Rick's authority being challenged. What had happened when Rick was hospitalised is unknown. However, it can be noticed that Carl, Rick's son, has developed his trust toward Shane. Shane is Rick's close friend who, once thought Rick was already dead, helps Carl and Lorry escape from the town when the zombie apocalypse broke out. Shane is an ambitious, hot-headed white man who always speaks his mind and is never afraid to follow his own intuition. In the last two episodes of season 2, Carl has witnessed Rick trying to shoot Rendall, a boy whom Rick captures as a hostage. Seeing Carl around, Rick decides not to shoot Rendall. This event marks an important, yet negative impression of Rick on Carl's perception. Later on, Carl chooses to confess to Shane that he has stolen Rick's gun and decides to tell Shane that, after he accidentally has found a zombie in the woods, he himself is not brave enough to shoot it. This secret conversation between Carl and Shane shows a fragile intimacy between Carl and Rick who is actually his own father. This can be analysed as the result of him witnessing Rick's indecisiveness. The final episode of season 2 is a major change in Rick's ideal white male characteristics. After knowing that Shane plans to kill him, he stabs and kills his close friend. This event is, again, witnessed by Carl making him lose more trust in his father. Later on, after the zombies have invaded their shelter, Rick reveals a heart-breaking secret that everyone has already been infected by the virus, and, after being asked about Shane's death, bursts out his anger showing his dictatorial character to the rest of the survivors including Carl.

The negative white paternal portrayal in the TV series is drastically patent when compared to *TWD:VG*. In *TWD:VG*, the Lee-Clementine relationships are totally different from the Rick-Carl one. According to Russworm (2017), the adaptation of *TWD:VG* inverts racial power dynamics from a white, authoritative male Rick Grimes to a black college professor and convicted murderer Lee Everett. According to my playthrough, right from the beginning, Lee sounds very gentle when talking to Clementine; there is no harsh response for players to choose

– even though I want to try – whenever Lee interacts with her. Clearly, Lee’s gentleness towards Clementine is special; swear words and rude options are available to Lee (players) when he interacts with other characters – especially white males. Compared with Rick, Lee balances his responsibility quite well; he always finds time to look after Clementine after talking and helping everyone else. This can be seen from the event in Macon where he, with Kenny and his family, meets other survivors. Lee is having a fight with the new group of survivors, when Clementine is attacked by a zombie. He instantly rushes to the scene and kills the walker. Once again, when Clementine hurts her finger while helping Lee with the table, Lee finds her a bandage right away. Pallavicini (2020) makes a notice of the Lee-Clementine relationship that “Lee dedicates himself to looking after Clem (shortened for Clementine), becoming a father figure toward her...” (p. 9). Lee’s fatherly figure shows again when his group arrives at the St. John farmstead. Clementine asks Lee to push her on a swing. This request of her is indeed difficult to refuse. This scene, then, is a reminiscence of an ideal father-and-daughter relationship. There are also extra conversations going on with a remark on the top left: “*You shared hope with Clementine*”. In many crisis situations going on later in the farm, Lee tries to comfort Clementine after she has witnessed him killing other people. Lee is still so reasonable and calm when explaining what is going on to her. No matter how furious and startled he is during the crisis, it is always Clementine who brings back his consciousness. There is also a remarkable scene, after they have escaped from the farm, Lee holds Clementine around his arm and says, “I’m glad I have you”, and “me, too” she replies.

The father figure of Lee is emphasised again when he decides to teach Clementine how to shoot as he is aware that he may not be able to help her at some point (The remark shows “*You taught Clementine to protect herself*”). It is obvious to claim that the parental bond between Lee and Clementine, unlike Rick and Carl, is gradually strengthened as the game progresses. Even in the heart-breaking ending of TWD:VG Season 1, the fatherly side of Lee is still stable. Lee asks Clementine to shoot him because he has been bitten and will probably turn into a zombie soon after. Even though Clementine refuses to do so, his care of her remains; “No matter what happens, you’re safe then”, and “You have to. It’ll keep you safe”.

Critically looking at the aspect of fatherhood from Sander’s theory of adaptation, the video game version of *The Walking Dead* is an ideological adaptation of the texts in which the African American, as a main character, is portrayed in positive and heroic ways. It also creates empathy towards the character of Lee and his status as a black father figure challenging the aggressive, violent figures of black fathers in the media. This game, in sum, challenges the white hegemony of parenthood when compared to the TV series version emphasizing the kind, empathetic paternal characteristics of Lee, and the intolerable one of Rick through its ideological adaptation.

Conclusion

To summarise, Sanders’ adaptations and appropriation, in terms of ideological aspects, can possibly enable us to read visual texts. As black representations in video games are gradually more concerned of their cultural appropriations in the gaming industry, the video game adaptation of *The Walking Dead*, therefore, puts new light into the industry and gives the positive images of black men. The father-and-daughter relationships between Lee and Clementine have deconstructed stereotypical perspectives of black father figure and black men in general. These positive aspects are extremely highlighted when compared with the TV series version of the same title. *TWD:VG* retraces the negative images of black men and their paternity yet, when compared with *TWD:AMC*, emphasizes the failure of white fatherhood. Therefore,

it can be said that the ideological adaptation of a text is able to draw attention to the marginalized and disenfranchised of the original one. Video games are, in summary, one of the mediums which provide public space for the ideological adaptation of texts.

The limitation of this paper is, however, considering the mechanic of choice in *TWD:VG*. Since video games are interactive mediums, when we make a choice for Lee, it is almost as if we are making the choice as Lee. This distinction is marked important as our role in *TWD:AMC* is just a watcher not a player. However, I must argue and emphasise that even though players of *TWD:VG* try to act harshly to Clementine, the game mechanic does not allow us to do so. According to this, it can be assumed that the success of *TWD:VG* on promoting positive images of race and gender roles is because players can make a decision and play as Lee, not just watch him via the screen. Video games, therefore, bring on their own societal impacts as interactive mediums.

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