

Editorial

Interview: Acclaimed Game Designer Ryan Kaufman Discusses Telltale Games, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and How Video Games Can Transform Us

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1. Introduction

Ryan Kaufman—whose rich body of work often centers on video games adapted from movies or TV shows—has had a profound impact on video game designers, writers, and players alike. He is currently Vice President of Narrative at video game developer Jam City; previously he served as the Director of Narrative Design at Telltale Games, Creative Lead at Planet Moon Studios, and Content Supervisor at LucasArts Entertainment. He has contributed to many titles since joining the game industry in 1995, including *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*, *The Wolf Among Us*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead*, *Star Wars: Republic Commando*, and *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron*.

The following interview has been edited for clarity.

2. Interview

Christian Thomas: I'd like to start with a question from one of the Special Issue's contributors, Matt Barr, who's at the University of Glasgow. He starts by saying that there have been many *Star Wars* video game adaptations, but that some of these captured the feel of the franchise better than others. He's interested in how and why the best of these adaptations were successful, and for him, these are games like *KOTOR* and the *Rogue Squadron* series. He asks, "Is it capturing the feel of the *Star Wars* universe that makes these games stand out? Or are they simply very well-made games?"

Ryan Kaufman: That's a great question. And it's something we used to talk about too because we were aware that certain games that we were creating really just had that *Star Wars* feel or felt like you were being immersed in the universe. But you could also create games that were mechanically really satisfying and maybe weren't as immersive in the story, but gave you the feel. I'm going to go all the way back to one of the first *Star Wars* games I ever played, which was in the arcade and it was the vector graphics *Star Wars*. Do you remember that one?

CT: Yeah, I do.

RK: So, that's a game where there's no skill to it or anything like that. But it felt like you were there; it felt like you were piloting an X-wing and it gave you the first sense of what it would be like to live in that world, or to live and die in that world.

It was always a balance. Of my own favorites, *KOTOR*, is probably the number one on my list. Ironically, that game was well out of the way of any timeline that we knew; it didn't feature any major characters but it felt incredibly like *Star Wars*. I've often cited also *Bounty Hunter*. Which was the Jango Fett game from around 2002.

CT: I've heard a lot about that one, but I haven't played it, unfortunately.

RK: There may be some personal bias because I helped write it. Actually, to me it felt like *The Mandalorian* feels to a lot of people. It was an adaptation of the



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Spaghetti Western, but set in the *Star Wars* universe. The lead creative on that was Jon Knoles and he was a massive fan of Sergio Leone, and so was I. We talked a lot about that influence.

And that's of course something that's in the DNA of *Star Wars* too. It didn't feel like too much of a reach. Anytime you're talking about Spaghetti Westerns or samurai movies or *Flash Gordon*, you're only really a couple of steps away from *Star Wars*. But that doesn't explain the success of *KOTOR*. I think *KOTOR* is just an achievement in terms of world building and story building.

CT: You've pointed out the influence of the Spaghetti Western and Leone, and about bringing that element into the world and amping it up. That's an interesting way to go—it's doing something more than just trying to create a faithful world, but also taking it deeper into some "new" direction. Like *KOTOR* did, I think, especially when it was exploring the Force, in ways that weren't done by Lucas. That's one of the things that made that game emotional and important for me. Going in these directions that are new, while still having a faithful feel. I guess that's always what's difficult to balance with adaptations, right?

RK: Yeah. I think you may have hit the nail on the head there. You need to have something new that you're saying about it. And I think it has to be something that you care about. Much in the way that I think George was wanting to evoke the serials of the '30s, but he had all these other influences that he wanted to drag into it. The samurai movies, the Westerns and all that stuff.

And then finally the modeling on the Joseph Campbell thing, that put it all together. And that new hybridization of that DNA is probably one of the reasons why *Star Wars* feels so original and so interesting, even after all this time. It's like an alchemy.

And, yeah, I think *KOTOR* gave us this sprawling story, which was very well handled. But I think also at the center of it, it's an identity story, obviously. And that was something new, too. It's an offshoot of the questions that Luke Skywalker has to ask himself about who he really is. It's a clever way to put that in the player's hands, of saying well, "What if you had the same dilemma?" Framed slightly differently, but it's a way to feel familiar but then fresh and new at the same time.

So maybe that's part of the key to it, really knowing you want to say something and then saying it within *Star Wars*. As opposed to trying to do a faithful recreation, or the worst games, and I won't name them, but the worst games. They would just literally take a gameplay mechanism from something else and slap *Star Wars* on top of it. And those often just didn't work.

CT: Right. What kind of player decisions or what kind of choices do you want to offer the player? What kind of gameplay actually works?

You're working on *Harry Potter* now, and with that, you're working with books and you're also working with films. You're working with all sorts of things because people play in that world in so many different ways. What are the challenges when you're thinking about what you want to offer players to give them an experience of *Harry Potter* in a game, with things to do in that world?

RK: With *Harry Potter*, one of the interesting things to me has been that the adaptation not only involves us as Jam City creators, but also of course JK Rowling's property and her thoughts on it and her company's thoughts on it. But then there's this third energy, which is the fans. And what the fans want to see and what they get attached to in the story is actually quite influential on the creative process.

For instance, as these kids move through school, they are growing up and they're starting to develop romantic feelings for each other, which is in the books and it's something we wanted to have in the game as well. It's fun. We have to be respectful when the fans are feeling like these two characters should have a relationship, or those two characters shouldn't have a relationship. And they can have really strong opinions.

It's not that you want the fans to drive the game, but they have opinions. And it's almost . . . sometimes it feels like you're trying to be a really good *maître d'* at a restaurant and you want to know what your customers like. But you also want to introduce them to something a little bit new, so that they can be spreading their wings and enjoying a new flavor.

CT: I like that analogy. It makes me think of ordering wine, because when you're asking for a sommelier's recommendation on what to drink, they'll throw it right back at you: "Well, what do you like?"

RK: Yeah. What have you had before? What do you like? What are you in the mood for? And then try to take that and then "yes and . . ." it a little bit.

CT: That's a fun way of looking at how you handle the fans. Especially when you can look at what they're saying online: things that frustrate them, or things that they love that you can tell they want more of, or they want certain threads to be explored more.

So, when you're looking to explore certain things, in terms of the IP, do you have to go to JK Rowling or her people and say, "Hey, we want to do this thing . . ." What's the exchange like? Or do you already know what the boundaries are, so you don't have to be bouncing every idea off them?

RK: It's a pretty steady back and forth correspondence. As you can imagine, she has really specific ideas about her universe and how it all operates. And so, we send literally everything that we're proposing and all the scripts to her company. And with some ideas, they're like, "Yeah, this is fine". And it's not controversial. And then some other ones they'll flag and say, "Well I don't know about this one. Maybe we should talk about how it might come out".

But the flow of information back and forth is quite voluminous. Because there's a lot of stuff going on in the game and they want to review it all. But it's great because I think at this point, the game [*Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery*] has been out over a year. And they're pretty comfortable now with that process. And when they review things that aren't controversial, they say, "This looks great". And then things that are a little bit more worth a discussion, we'll have a back and forth and try to figure out, "Well, how would this work?" Or, "What are we trying to do here?"

It's been really good with them. They're great partners.

CT: Do they give your ideas, too? Do you riff off each other?

RK: They're good at bouncing ideas back: "Well, what if you tried this? Or what if you did that?" Or alternative ways that we might have it work.

CT: Okay. I was wondering, too, how the business model for that game, and also for *Vineyard Valley*, how that affects the shape of the game, and the narrative, and the kinds of things that players do. Because you have to make money. In *Vineyard Valley*, you get these challenges interspersed between narrative sections—I think of them as a kind of *Candy Crush*-type of interlude. And if you end up failing the challenge and don't have enough points to keep upgrading your vineyard manor house and continue the narrative, then you have the option to buy your way into that.

I imagine you've got millions of things you're trying to balance here, including the difficulty level of those challenges. The business model is playing an important role here, like in every other game. What are the challenges involved with incorporating that?

RK: Well, it informs the kind of storytelling that you're going to do or the kind of storytelling that is going to work, I should say. And so, *Vineyard Valley* is a good example, knowing that we would have this game loop of, play the puzzle, earn a star, spend a star, play another puzzle. And the game is designed to have a mounting difficulty level so that players feel things aren't just going along on a straight line. They climb and then they fall and then they climb and fall.

And we knew that the story would be a key part of why people were coming back, or why they would want to purchase part of the game—purchase something to help them get through the level or whatever. That's a key part: you have to make the game feel like it's worth it to spend money on. Because people don't want to just spend money, they want to feel like they're buying something of value. And so, offering a story that felt like it could be part of that value was part of the genesis of making *Vineyard Valley*.

I looked around at what was really interesting in terms of storytelling, and Netflix is a big thing that people just are integrating into their lives. And they're integrating this notion of binge watching and getting used to the idea that episodic shows end with a cliff hanger that leads you into the next thing. I thought that was a really interesting mode of storytelling that I hadn't really seen yet in games.

And so we set out to create a story that had that feel to it. That had Netflix-y episodes with little cliff-hangers in them and little story beats that would always hopefully lead you to wonder, "Well, what's going to come of this romance? What's going to come of this little mystery that I've uncovered? Is the vineyard Tangled Vines going to get shutdown by the mean guy?"

Some of that I'd seen in mobile. But packaging it up more like a Netflix product was definitely the inspiration. And that was done in consideration of players hopefully thinking—when they're spending two dollars, say, they're thinking, "I want more story. The story's worth it. I'm going to buy some boosters or power-ups or something like that. It'll help me get through, because I want to find out what happens next".

Of course, we did a lot of surveys and talking to players in the early stages of the game to make sure that we were right about that. And for the majority of them, they would often say, "Yeah, I want to find out what happens next". And that was a very encouraging sign.

CT: That's what's made me keep playing. I want to see what happens in the story. I also want to see what happens to the place. I care about the place and I think there's something that changes when you're renovating it: you feel some ownership over it. If you're not working on something yourself, you just don't care as much. Were you doing that consciously when you came up with the renovation aspect of the game?

RK: That was very much part of the mix. And thank you for calling out the renovations. That's the third key tripod leg on which the game stands. There are the puzzles and the renovation and then the story, in terms of the content—that's how it all works. And that renovation aspect is exactly as you said, it's really key because that's the place the player feels completely 100% of their investment, their time, their choices, their aesthetic. All that stuff becomes very important to them.

And so wrapping that into the story was also crucial for us, to make sure that whatever story we were telling was also about the renovation that was happening. So it felt like you couldn't pull them apart. That was a very conscious thing that we approached early on, to make sure that those were integrated and felt connected.

CT: That makes a lot of sense. And for me it also plays into this fantasy of having a vineyard. So I think the world you chose for it was an exciting one, too. I feel like so much of the fun in games is that they give you a place where you want to hang out.

RK: Yeah.

CT: Going back to player choices, one of the things that captivated me in Telltale games were the choices that involved things you and the other creators asked players to take ownership of. And the kind of things that you do in a Telltale game, which felt so revolutionary the first time I played *The Walking Dead*. You wouldn't expect these really difficult choices to be so engrossing. I can't say "fun" exactly, because it goes way deeper than that. It involves all these horrible feelings. Yet you really get into it. It's totally immersive.

The more difficult the better. The less powerful you are, the better. Which is another thing you all were always playing with. All these things that you normally think, “Oh, I don’t want to make difficult choices in my life!” All these things that you run from in your life, in the game you run towards and want more and more of. They’re incredibly emotional.

So I’ve wondered, why do we relish those kinds of choices in a game environment? Is it because they give us practice making the difficult choices that we face every day in our lives? Do you have your own theories as to why those things are so compelling?

RK: For me, I’ve always thought of it as similar to why people take personality quizzes. Taking a personality quiz about yourself is, on the face of it, bizarre. You are you—you know yourself. Why would you ever take a personality quiz to have something objectively reflect back what you are? But of course, that’s exactly it. We want to see ourselves objectively reflected and make sure that we measure up to, “Am I really the person I think I am?”

And that genre for *The Walking Dead* was the perfect storm. I think—especially at that time, but now, too—I think people run the zombie apocalypse scenario in their heads. “What would I do? What would happen if there was a total apocalypse and I had to save my family?” And that’s a little mental game a lot of us play in the disaster scenario. “How would I act? Or, “Could I measure up?”

And so, *The Walking Dead* provided a safe space to explore that. And I think people are naturally tempted to try and do, like, “I’m going to be a hard ass and just protect my family and make really tough choices. If everyone else can’t handle how draconian I get, too bad for them”. But what happens is, in reality, players find it really tough to actually do that. They tend to play as nice as they possibly can. Which I found a really interesting phenomenon. Over and over, whether it was *The Walking Dead* or any of our other properties, *Batman*, *Guardians*, whatever, people just would set out with this intention to make the tough, evil choices. And then invariably by the end of the game they were being as nice as possible to everyone in the game regardless.

So maybe it’s a brain exercise. It’s a little mental testing. It’s role-playing in a safe space, where you feel like you can privately make choices you wouldn’t make in your real life.

CT: It’s such an interesting model for a game. Making those really difficult choices—there’s no easy answer to anything and you’re going to have consequences that are going to be negative no matter what you do. Which is so often the truth in real life. And I feel like you all really dug deep into that space. And people wanted to explore that very much.

RK: And that was also really a conscious design choice on our part, was people often say, “Oh Telltale Games. It’s kind of like a ‘choose your own adventure.’” But it was actually the opposite of that because a “choose your own adventure” has a path through the story. And your job is to find the right path. With the Telltale games, we went the opposite direction and said there isn’t a path through the game. And your job is actually just to find your own way and create your own way. And that’s the point of the game.

And making sure that no choice had a “win” category. We really, really didn’t want people to feel like they made the right or the wrong choice. But if you continually feel like you’re making a *slightly* wrong choice, not like a devastatingly wrong choice, but a slightly wrong choice, then you can generate this anxiety in the players to do better next time, without crushing them to make them feel like they should quit. And so it’s like walking on a tight rope. Maintaining the feeling of slight anxiety about, “I need to do better—next time I’ll make a better choice”. But never quite giving them that carrot to say, “You did it, good job”.

That’s where we found that people would really engage and make choices that didn’t come from a strategy, like a meta-strategy. They weren’t thinking outside of their own

heads like, “How do I get through this?” They’re really thinking from their gut. Because we didn’t really give them any signs that they were on the right or the wrong path. So, they were just had to rely on themselves.

Anyway, that’s my long-winded way of saying the thing that you experienced was a very conscious aesthetic and design choice for the stories. To make them feel exactly that way.

CT: Right. You’re kind of at sea in those games. One of my favorites of the Telltale games is *Game of Thrones*. One of the reasons I like it so much—but I was always torn when I was in there playing, because it’s frustrating sometimes, too—is that you really explore depths of powerlessness in that game. I felt like you all as designers and writers took that to a new level. Because as Ethan, you’re playing as this kid, and of course you’ve gotten a glimpse of that playing as Clementine in *The Walking Dead*, too. You’re powerless—physically anyway—compared to all these adults you’re threatened by.

And then you’ve got Mira, who also has very strict limits on her power. You’ve got Rodrik, too, and his body’s been torn to shreds. Everybody that you’re playing, except for Asher in some ways, I suppose, is struggling to deal with these almost overwhelming challenges. It felt like House Forrester, when I was playing as any one of these members of that family, was under such massive fire. And you’re just barely struggling along. And your family’s destruction looks almost certain. There was a depth of powerlessness that I don’t think I felt as much in the other Telltale game.

Bigby in *The Wolf Among Us* has quite a bit of power, even though you as designers mitigate that in interesting ways, as he gets physically weaker throughout the episodes. And Lee in *The Walking Dead* is facing a lot too, of course, but, for me, these didn’t descend into the powerlessness, or hopelessness I felt in *Game of Thrones*. And it’s something that I thought was incredibly compelling. Mira’s death, I don’t want to make this a huge monologue, but Mira’s death is one of my favorite all-time moments in any game ever. Partly because it’s so surprising and partly because I went to my death so willingly . . . because what I was dying for mattered so much.

I don’t normally see things like that in games. How did you come to those moments? Did you talk about power issues a lot? And where you wanted that fulcrum to be?

RK: Yeah, those discussions all happened on a team level. But I can tell you that from my personal journey—I was on *The Walking Dead* team helping create it, but there was a creative team that was really the nexus of that. Like Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin and all those guys. And so I helped with the design for that and I had this lucky nine months where I was observing what they were doing, helping them but really soaking it up.

And so when I went onto *Wolf Among Us*, as a creative lead, one of the first things I did was devise that opening fight where Bigby and the woodsman fight each other. And that was a thing that I put in the story right away because I wanted to dispel the myth that in video games if you have power, that’s all you should care about. In most video games, all you want to do is level up your character and get more powerful. And I thought, what if we show this knockdown, slam-bang fight? They’re going to come out, burst out of the entire second floor, land on the street.

And then we’ll have all these consequences for doing that and show players the aftermath. Like, what happens after the fight? What comes out of power? And for me personally, power and the consequences of power is a totally interesting narrative question and I come back to it over and over. And then I was also creative lead on *Game of Thrones*. And as you noticed there, yes, we do a lot of things with power. Each one of those characters has a different relationship to their power.

With Rodrik, he was powerful, then we stripped his physical power away. And then playing as him, your arc is to find your moral power.

With Mira, she had social power as part of the Forresters and being connected to the right people. And then that was stripped away from her. So then it was, find your political power. And so she had to suddenly play this game in a nest of vipers, where she had to politically outmaneuver her opponents and find her own power politically.

Ethan was a real warning shot to the player that any one of these characters could die. So it was really, really important that Ethan had to die in the first episode, so that you would feel—

CT: I never paid for a second episode so fast, as after that ending. I wanted to get right back in there.

RK: Yeah—and then with Asher, it was more like, take a typical video game character, he's a badass mercenary. But now he has to take care of a family. And so you're stripping him of all that, the power of independence and the power of not being tied down and saying, reconnect with your family. What does that look like?

So for me it was lots of conversations about power. And for *Wolf Among Us*, lots of conversations about authority and, what does authority look like? And how do we give players—ultimately, how do we give players the tools to manage these questions, and solve these questions for themselves? We'll put the questions out there and then we'll give you the tools to try and navigate that quandary as best you can.

CT: I was going to ask you, too, about pacing with these games. With Telltale, you had the episodic format, where you have episodes that are maybe an hour and a half. So you could use a more traditional story arc, where you've got rising action and then you have your cliffhanger at the end. But with longer game formats, like you've got with *Vineyard Valley* and with *Hogwarts Mystery*, with these longer arcs, how do you handle the pacing? One of the games I've been revisiting recently is *Alien: Isolation*. And there are a lot of things I love about that game, but I feel the pacing is a real issue because you're involved in these shorter missions that don't feel totally connected to a larger goal. And the sense of building towards this larger climax of the overall narrative, since it's so incredibly long—you lose that to an extent.

How do you handle that in a really long game that's different from what we get in a movie or single episode of a TV show? Where do you put those climactic spikes?

RK: It looks more like a season of television where you would say, "Let's divide it up into X number of episodes. And we'll build an arc over those episodes". So each episode has its own arc and then you look at your season and say, "Okay, and that will also have a season arc". And so paying attention to all those little dramatic, like you say, spikes, is really important. The only tricky part is unlike television or even Netflix, we can't be totally sure that the player's going to play through that in a week or something, so that they would still have it all in their heads. We've got to do a lot of reminding to make sure that if someone's come back to the game and they haven't played it in a month or something, they can still remember where they were. We have to have these little internal reminders.

And in some ways it reminds me of, just personally, the old serials in the 1920s and 30s, where they would have these little episodic things. But they would also have to remind people every time who the characters were and what they were all doing. Because you never knew if someone was just walking into the theater and hadn't seen anything. I always keep a little bit of that in the back of my head, like you have to provide a bit of a mass market approach, where you have to remind people of who are the personalities, and what do they want? In the briefest of ways. So that you can get to that season arc and it'll make sense.

For *Vineyard Valley*, we also have a little graph at the top—it's like a progress bar. So players can watch that progress bar and map what they're seeing dramatically, too, like,

“Oh, I’m almost to the end!” So things are heating up. Or, “I’m about to solve this mystery ...”

CT: I hadn’t really thought about that challenge. Is there a way tech can help you with that? Maybe you know that somebody hasn’t logged in and played for a certain amount of time, so you could give more reminders? Or is that just getting overly complicated?

RK: Yes and yes. Tech can tell you exactly when they last logged in. And you can remind them—you can be fully up to date. But I think it can get unwieldy to create enough reminders.

One thing we did on *Vineyard Valley* was to actually put in an in-game character who pops up at the beginning of a season and says, “Hi, I don’t know how much you remember about last time, but I can tell you a lot, a little or nothing”. And then the player can actually just pick what level of reminder they want.

CT: That’s a cool way to do it, to give them some control of that, instead of just forcing them to watch an extended clip or something like that, that they have no control over.

Speaking of watching something, although I did have control over it—I saw a really good GDC talk by Chris Shroyer about the adaptation process that you all went through when you were creating *Wolf Among Us*. And one of the things that he says is that after you created the first iteration of the game, you had some people playtest it, and you felt that it didn’t reach a high enough emotional level with players, the level that was set by *The Walking Dead*.

And so there was a redesign. What was the process like, of going in and doing what you could to make it as emotional an experience as possible for players?

RK: Well, the first generation of the game was way more aimed at a plot-heavy, mystery-heavy adventure game. Where you have characters in the game, but really the characters in the game are there to create mystery and puzzle aspects, so that the whole story feels more like a little mystery box that you’re unpacking. And the narrative satisfaction is much like in an Agatha Christie novel, getting to the end and going, “Okay, now I understand how everything happened. And all the things that were confusing to me earlier have been explained”.

Which, like I say, is very narratively satisfying if that’s what you want. But we’d just come out with *Walking Dead*, which was an incredibly emotional approach to storytelling. Each one of those characters represented some kind of love, or fear, or selfishness. So what we did was, we took all the characters and said forget the mystery plot, let’s look at what they all want. Why is this a messed-up world for them? What are they dealing with? What would be really interesting to put on screen?

For Bigby, I was really interested in creating a very lonely character, because I hadn’t seen a lot of that in video games. I wanted to create someone who’s just absolutely lonely and can’t make connections. And get that—what’s the word I’m looking for? It’s excruciating as a human being to feel like you’re not wanted by your group. You know what I mean?

CT: I sure do.

RK: Yeah. And I thought that’s a place where we could begin and see what kind of story we could tell that would really bring that up, over and over. And then the lead writer on it had this—it was really just a sketch of an idea about people who were getting their heads chopped off. And that mystery of who was killing people became such a lesser concern, in terms of what the story was really about.

That’s when we turned the corner into, well, we’re really telling an emotional story about the problems Mr. Toad is having and the problems he causes and the problems of the business office and how they’re ignoring the people who can’t afford to live. And the things that those people are then going to do to survive. And how that debases them.

That became much more like, “Let’s tell that story,” and less of, “Let’s tell a traditional adventure-game type of mystery”.

CT: I think it really worked. It’s interesting to hear that you switched the focus from what a game would normally do, which is make the mystery central, where people care most about who the killer is, and they’re going to find the clues, and that’s going to be the narrative they’re interested in. But switching the focus to the difficulties that these characters are having that you, as the player, must navigate, that grounds the game in real issues, in reality, even though you’ve got this fantasy world where it’s all happening.

When I think about my experience playing that game, I don’t think about the mystery nearly as much. I think about Toad, I think about the farm. And I think about burning the tree. I think about all these things that you can do, all these things that affect people and their often miserable, realistic-feeling lives. When you and your team are designing that—you’re working with adapted material—the comics, that are in turn adapted from the old fairy tales, but they’re being brought into our modern world, where we are lonely in our modern, disconnected way. Where we’re dealing with these really difficult, everyday decisions.

It’s interesting material. Was that one of the reasons you were drawn to it, to adapt into a game? Because of those kinds of elements?

RK: I think it was the other way around, for me at least. Because I wasn’t familiar with the *Fables* comics until after they’d signed the game and the game had been in development for a while. And then I was brought on for that reboot. And I had to quickly familiarize myself with the comics and the characters.

There are a lot of plot-heavy things that are running underneath Willingham’s work. But for me, I was really attracted to the characters. And his personalities feel really Bill Willingham—the personalities that he writes are so strong. And I thought, “I don’t know about anybody else, but that’s what I’m interested in about this comic”. It was like, this comic’s about how much these fables hate each other. Which I thought was great drama.

CT: You’ve explored all sorts of territory throughout your career so far. What’s next for you? Where—for you or for games in general—where do you think the interesting places are to go from here?

RK: I’m really interested in the ways that games can help people explore their own psychology. And we scratched the very surface of that at Telltale. And I wish that we could push it further. Even to the point where I know certain types of interactive stories are used to help people with PTSD or addiction issues. And that’s fascinating to me. And I think how great would it be to actually have these games teach people about not just the personality quiz thing that we did at Telltale, but really ask, “Who are you, and what motivates you?” And actually get people to learn things about themselves that they didn’t know.

Games are such a great Trojan Horse for sneaking in insights about who you are and how you act. Because they’re fun and they’re engaging and you can just kind of play them and not be thinking too hard about trying to behave yourself. How great would it be if we could then turn that around and use it to give you a real reflection of who you are?

I don’t know what form that takes exactly. But it’s something I’ve always—when I look at the horizon, that’s where I look.

CT: You’re talking about something that’s very interesting to me too, partly because I’m in education. And you’re talking about a very specific kind of education, which helps people explore their own psyche.

Normally educators think more like, we have things we want to teach students. We want to teach them things that matter in different disciplines, but when I think of what games can teach . . . Okay, I’m going to return to *Alien: Isolation* for a minute here. I was

thinking one of the cool things about *Alien: Isolation* is that—have you ever played that game, by the way?

RK: I played the very beginning and I got killed so many times I couldn't finish it, sadly.

CT: It's totally brutal.

RK: It's so hard.

CT: It's so hard and it's so long. But one of the things you do, as you know, when you get to the Alien part . . . you can't kill the Alien. And it's scary. They really make it scary in there. And your impulse is to run. And if you run, then you have your heavy footfalls and then the Alien hears that and it kills you for sure. And so you always have to be sneaking around very quietly, and hiding.

And my thought was that one of the things this does—and I think other survival horror also does this—is that it teaches you impulse control. It also exposes you to a lot of fear. There's this guy named Mathias Clasen—he's at Aarhus University in Denmark, and he does research into horror media. And his idea is that when you're watching horror movies, playing horror games, reading horror novels or whatever, all this fear you're experiencing is helping you to learn to manage, or calibrate, your own fear response in real life.

But that's still approaching it from the outside. If I say something like, certain teens should play *Alien: Isolation*, for example, to help with impulse control, and to help manage fear in their lives, that's approaching it from the outside. I have an educational goal that I think will be beneficial, and I'm going to teach that to you, or find a game or something else to do that. But you're saying something different, which is, you want to create something where people can explore and learn more about themselves. And grow in a way that's going to help them in some way. Which is a different way of looking at it, with an openness, a sense of agency that not many educators are able to achieve in their work.

Do you know how you might create a game like that? You were saying you felt Telltale had scratched the surface. How might Telltale, if it was still around, or a reincarnation of Telltale, keep pushing that boundary into this almost educational, or health-related game space?

RK: I had an idea that it might be interesting to do a squad-based thing, a game about being in the military. One that used a place that was really problematic, like Afghanistan or Iraq or something like that. And weave a story around that, that had you making these moral choices that you might see in *The Walking Dead*, but in an increasingly realistic setting. So that instead of shooting zombies, if you're in this realistic moral world and you're shooting humans, people you encounter who've had collateral damage from military bombings or other things that weren't played as fantasy as much as—maybe it's a fictional yet realistic story—the way things have really happened, and are still happening.

I always thought that might be a really interesting way to keep pushing into that area of choices in the game. But it could feel very real. Like this might've happened to someone at some point. And what does my behavior teach me about me? And how would I, as you say about impulse control, did I display a lack of empathy that maybe I need to work on in my life?

That kind of thing fascinates me. We didn't really get an opportunity to do that at Telltale. But I would've loved to have gone that direction.

CT: There's a guy named Skip Rizzo at USC—the Institute for Creative Technologies. He's done work on exactly what you're talking about. He's created a couple of things. One is similar to what you're talking about, which is meant to be an inoculation against PTSD—it was developed to train soldiers about to deploy to Iraq and Afghanistan. It's called *STRIVE*, and it's this series of interactive episodes based on real scenarios that vets have gone through. Skip has also put a lot of energy into working with vets who have come back, who are dealing with

PTSD by taking them through guided experiences in VR environments. He's also been working with soldiers around trauma from sexual assault, creating, as I understand it, some very visceral scenarios that invoke horror, in a sense, that are designed to help people who have undergone similar experiences. This kind of exposure therapy sounds wild, but according to Skip, it definitely does not retraumatize people. In many cases, it's the only thing that actually helps.

RK: That kind of research and that kind of therapy is absolutely fascinating to me. Any time I see any mention of it, an article, whatever, I'll read it. It's like you say, it's horrifying how powerful it is. But also fascinating too: could we create therapies that could help people by going to these places that are considered too frightening? But maybe that's what we need to examine.

And video games are a way to do that without having it be real.

CT: *STRIVE* is very Telltale-like, in the sense that there are no simple answers, no easy ways to win. You're just faced with a horrific situation and you're going to have to navigate it as best you can. But there's really no—you don't feel like you can win this thing at all.

STRIVE teaches breathing techniques and other practical ways to sort of decompress and reduce stress, but it's also meant, I think, to familiarize soldiers with horrible situations they may actually encounter, but in a VR environment first, before they deploy. So that when, or if they see it in real life it will come as less of a shock, and they can learn, at least a little through the VR experience, what to expect, and ways to get through it.

You can't just be the good guy in these situations and everything's going to be fine. You've got all these things that you're going to have to balance. In the first scenario, you're in a Humvee and you see this man in the middle of the road—he's tied up and he's bleeding and he looks like he's dying. Your impulse, as the player, is to help. And other soldiers in the Humvee are saying, "We got to go out and give him water at least". Because it's in Iraq and the heat is blazing. But then you're conflicted because you think he might be wired with a bomb.

RK: Yeah.

CT: So you've got to wait for the bomb squad to show up. And there's one guy who's saying, "No, no, no. I'm going to go out to give him water". And then they talk about it after—you have a conversation with a captain after the scenario is over—and he basically says that sometimes, you're going to have to do the opposite of everything you were taught as a kid, in terms of your values. You want to help people in need, you want to protect people who are, or at least seem to be, innocent. All those good things you were taught—you're going to have to do the opposite of sometimes to protect yourself and your fellow soldiers.

RK: That's interesting that you said you have to do the opposite of what you were taught to do as a kid. To be altruistic and to help others. There were many moments during the Telltale times, *Game of Thrones* was a classic example, where we would basically put you in a situation where if you did something that was the nice thing, to help somebody, it would end up screwing you.

There's this scene with Rodrik, when he gets beaten up. And if he rises to anger, it will get worse for his family. And it's like actually training you to maintain your composure and maintain your objectivity, even though you're getting beaten up by somebody that you absolutely hate.

CT: I'll never forget that.

RK: And so, again I feel like that's just scratching the surface. What if we could teach people and inoculate them, so to speak, just against the normal pressures of life? Why shouldn't everybody know how to calm themselves down or take a deep breath? And why shouldn't everyone know how to negotiate an argument and instead of getting emotional and trying to lash out at someone, stop and

figure out what they're trying to tell you. Why shouldn't everyone have those skills?

CT: I totally agree. People call the games you worked on at Telltale games for entertainment, but I feel like they did so much more than that. I feel like it was training. That was one of the things all of us who played them got out of them. We were trained in those skills. We just didn't think of it as training. We thought of it as entertainment because we were doing it by choice.

RK: Yeah.

CT: This is the area where most educational games fall down. They come with these lofty goals. And they are important goals: we're going to teach you how to do all these things that are important. But yet they aren't engaging to play, most of them, because they're made by educators. And it's just not most educators' forte to know how to really engage players because they don't have expertise in storytelling, or in creating exciting game mechanics. I wish that academics and industry people like you could work together on these sorts of things, because again, I think that Telltale games did teach people important things. Have you thought that about the games you worked on at Telltale? About how players may have been changed by them?

RK: No, I never looked at it quite through that frame. But I think you're right. We didn't really look at it that way either at the time, but just had an inkling that there could be something more there.

CT: I think at some level that's what's behind their power. As you were saying, the Rodrik moment, that's the kind of moment that as you play it, you think, "Wait, that's something I could really do in my life, too".

Ryan, thank you so much for taking the time to talk. I think people who are reading the Special Issue will really have fun hearing from you, and getting some of your perspective. It's been wonderful getting a chance to talk to you, after enjoying and learning so much from your work over the years.

RK: This was my pleasure. Talking like this, it's kind of rare that you get to have a quite deep conversation about what games could be and how they operate. A lot of what you usually end up talking about with games is more just about salesmanship. So it was really nice to sit with you and talk more about the impact these games have on us as humans.

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