

Playing the ‘Game of Thrones’ Game Feels Just as Treacherous as Watching

By Phil Hornshaw

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“When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die,” Cersei Lannister tells Ned Stark. “There is no middle ground.”

It's one of those rare quotes—and getting rarer with every season—that occurs in both the show and the books.

There's a reason for that: Cersei's sentiment perfectly encapsulates HBO's *Game of Thrones* and the novels from which it's adapted, author George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The characters in the series' universe are constantly engaging in power struggles and political maneuverings that could, at any moment, either lose them their heads or lead them to great power.

The show creates a creeping dread that the wrong decision at a crucial moment could be lethal to any character, but that's a tough feeling to communicate in a video game, where death is almost always a momentary setback until you restart at the nearest checkpoint. Yet Telltale Games' *Game of Thrones* game, an episodic adventure currently on its fourth installment, perfectly captures the vulnerability that's so central to the show.

The game serves as both an adaptation of HBO's show and a side-story that expands on it. It's not always successful, but it's a testament to Telltale's storytelling that, four episodes through its six-episode game “season,” *Game of Thrones* manages to make you question every decision you make—and whether that dialogue option you just chose will end up being a character's last.

A STARK ANALOGY



Telltale's *Game of Thrones* concerns the Forrester family, a minor noble house in Westeros' North region. The game's opening scene shows a new angle on the Red Wedding, the grisly betrayal that took place in the show's third season, where the Forrester's patriarch is killed alongside thousands of others among the Stark forces.

The Forrester's lose most of their military strength in the betrayal and a young son, Ethan, takes over as lord of the house, a job for which he's not prepared. Meanwhile, the Lannister-loyal Boltons, now bosses of the North, install the Forrester's rivals, the Whitehills, as controllers of the lucrative ironwood groves the Forrester's have harvested for generations.

Then, at the end of the first episode, *Game of Thrones*' most lovable psychopath, Ramsay Snow/Bolton, murders Ethan—while you're playing as him.

It's a powerful moment that kicks the game off with a huge statement: everyone is vulnerable. That's a lesson that fans of the books and show already knew, but thanks to a number of factors—how early it is in the game, and the fact that you were playing as Ethan when it happens—it's jarring nonetheless.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN



Players who've seen the Telltale formula in action (the developer has adapted other series, including *The Walking Dead*, *Jurassic Park*, *Back to the Future*, and the *Fables* comics, to varying degrees of success) already know how the *Game of Thrones* game works. Telltale's games focus not on puzzles or action, but on conversations, story and decision-making. The game is much more about how you interact with characters, what you say to them and how you treat them than it is about traditional gameplay elements.

And yet Telltale's *Game of Thrones* is an unnerving, tense affair that becomes more uncomfortable the longer it goes on, even if you're able to peek behind the curtain and understand the tricks it uses to make you feel that way.

The main trick is presenting players with many more decisions than are actually “meaningful” in the sense of altering the story. Play a chapter of a Telltale game through twice and you quickly learn that the moments that seem pivotal—when you offend someone, or when you side with one character over another, or when you show an enemy mercy versus finishing them off—aren't actually totally different paths forward. Most of the time, major plot beats proceed just as they would have, regardless of what you chose, with slightly different dialogue.

The success of Telltale's games is that the choices work on you, the player, making you feel like you're shaping the world and your characters—even if the changes you enact are minor.

Ethan's death at the end of the game's first episode seriously shifts the dynamic of the game. In the moments preceding Ethan's murder, you can be defiant or deferential to the frightening Ramsay, and in a very real way it feels like how you choose to interact with him determines Ethan's fate. His death is on your hands.

It's not, really, since Ethan dies no matter what choices you make. But that feeling—maintained as long as you don't try to replay the chapter and change Ethan's fate—is essential to enjoying the *Game of Thrones* game.

GET SWEEP UP



Telltale excels at putting well-rounded characters into trying situations, and in making moments of rhetorical swordplay just as engaging as actual swordplay. The game is able to build a personal investment in characters and what happens to them.

In the most recent episode, “Sons of Winter,” the game's best moment is essentially a meeting in a medieval conference room. As everyone starts shouting and you're wondering how you let it get this bad, you can't help but worry about the crossbowmen standing around the edge of the room. An itchy trigger finger on one, a startled reaction to a dropped cup or the wrong word, and somebody ends up dead. Boop, there goes House Forrester.

You have only seconds to react, to say the right thing, to make a decision that might seal everyone's fate. It's intense. Whether or not you might actually be shot by a crossbowman—whether that's actually programmed into the game—is irrelevant, as long as you let yourself get swept up in it.

That's not to say the game is infallible, though. Telltale's formula for making you feel like Westeros is an incredibly dangerous place doesn't always work, and the game's actual gameplay has a tendency to undercut the narrative stakes at times. Its fight scenes, for example, require players to reflexively press buttons and rely on twitch reactions, but these sequences actually feel safer than most of the conversations, because if you die by screwing up in a fight, you simply restart the sequence to try again.

But like any work of fiction, *Game of Thrones* works on suspension of disbelief, and throughout the game's run so it's managed to pull off the trick of making you feel like its characters are never safe. That's as essential to the *Game of Thrones* experience as any setting or character.

You don't know if a flesh wound suffered during a fight scene will haunt a character. You don't know if choosing to show an enemy mercy will get you stabbed in the back. You don't know if defying an oppressive Whitehill will mean the Forrester's are slaughtered later on, or if such a story beat would be unavoidable no matter what decisions you make.

You win or you die in *Game of Thrones*, and both options are pretty exciting.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of “So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel” and “The Space Hero's Guide to Glory.” He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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