

You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Have I mentioned that I'm a Batman fan? Maybe a half dozen times? For years, I've been playing the Arkham video games where you get to be Batman in this very cinematic universe. But as a player, your options are limited beyond whether you skip the side missions or just stick to the main plotline.

But in 2016, I started hearing about this new Batman game by a company called Telltale. The design of the game wasn't very CGI. It looked more like a graphic novel come to life. And the game was broken up like a TV show, with episodes that you download periodically as part of a limited series.

Now what really stood out about the Telltale game is that you have a lot of choices. Some of the choices are big, like whether you decide to save Selina Kyle or Harvey Dent – which could delay his transformation into Two-Face.

*BATMAN: Mr. Dent.*

*HARVEY: Thanks.*

But the choices that really fascinated me were smaller ones, especially when you're playing Bruce Wayne, and all you have to work with are your dialogue options – where you can try and diffuse the tension or make a stand. And I could never predict how the characters would react.

*BRUCE: You were the fiercest DA the city ever had – someone who fought for people's dreams! So much for a safer Gotham.*

*TWO-FACE: You're right, this isn't me! Go! Get away!*

Telltale also got critical acclaim for their *The Walking Dead* games – where your need to survive is in conflict with your moral principles. They also took on *Game of Thrones*, where your sense of dignity and honor are on the chopping block as often as your head. I loved every Telltale game I played. The game felt almost intimately real. Whenever a new episode of a game was released I couldn't wait to play it.

I really wanted to talk with the game developers – but Telltale was going through turmoil. Long story short: they expanded too fast. That led to huge

**managerial issues. And in the fall of 2018, the company folded. It was upsetting not just for the people who lost their jobs but also for their fans. So many awesome games they were working on will never get finished.**

**Ironically, the company's implosion allowed me to have access their game developers – who are now ex-employees. But I'm not going into why the company folded. That's been covered in the gaming media.**

**I wanted to talk about the thinking behind these games. Why were they so effective? Why did I get so much pleasure making impossible, gut-wrenching choices? And why did I care so much about these digital people?**

**Alyssa Finely worked as a creative director at Telltale. She said their approach to choice-based storytelling really came down to a lot of trial-and-error.**

**ALYSSA: So a lot of times we would do that kind of iteration where we would something up and we'd try it and try it until we found one that was sufficiently gut wrenching.**

**Now Telltale did not invent choice-driven video games. The early PC-games that were text-based with no images allowed players to have a lot of leeway. And when it comes to big budget CGI games -- the real groundbreaker was BioShock in 2007.**

**The choice you had to make in BioShock had to do these little girls that were made of a substance called Adams that you need to survive. There was a way to rescue these girls without taking the atoms for yourself.**

*GIRL: Thank you mister.*

**Or kill them for your own survival.**

*VOICE: That Adam should do the trick! You did the right thing*

*VOICE #2: How can you do this thing to a child?!*

**Alyssa began her career working on that game.**

ALYSSA: So it's a tough moral choice and in a world that's very dangerous there's motivation to do the awful thing. On the other hand, these are little girls, they're adorable they're good people so you go maybe I don't want to do the awful thing but what does that mean for me as a person? So this game is asking this question of who are you and how do you deal with danger to yourself versus danger to others?

**BioShock and other role-playing video games like Mass Effect or Dragon Age were a long time coming. Players had been complaining for years that the stories in video games felt like they were on rails – like a railroad track you couldn't deviate from.**

**So companies like Telltale started thinking about stories using a different metaphor. The stories could be like trees. The roots of the tree would be the theme that the game developers wanted to explore. The trunk of the tree could be the main storyline. The branches are the choices the player makes.**

**However, a lot of people who played Telltale games complained that the branches sometimes converged in the end no matter what you choose. Alyssa wished they didn't have to do that.**

ALYSSA: We always wanted to give the player as much agency as we could but one of the challenges of making episodic games and branched games is that branches can be expensive – every time you do offer a choice you have to support two content paths for a scene, episode or season and the bigger that branches are the more expensive the choice are. So it was always a push pull of decision making of how much can we afford to offer without making the baseline story unacceptably short.

**Ryan Kaufman struggled with that problem as well. He used to be a narrative designer at Telltale. He was very proud of the Batman game he worked on which was called The Enemy Within. It was about the evolution of The Joker. When we first meet The Joker, he's a relatively harmless inmate at Arkham Asylum, who's called John Doe. And he's infatuated with Bruce Wayne.**

*JOHN DOE: I knew the moment we met -- friends for life!*

**Ryan wanted there to be a real possibility that your actions as Bruce or Batman could create a different Joker than the one you were expecting.**

RYAN: The producers were scared of what that would mean in terms of branching, because the team wanted to branch last episode, make huge difference and producers were like I don't know if we can afford that and maybe it could be a subtle version. That got into a contentious thing where the creative team had to be adamant that look, if you're going to set up this thing with Joker who is beloved character, it should be meaningful and if we have to spend the money that's where you're going to spend money that's where you should be spending it.

**Another option is to scale down the production design, so you have the bandwidth to just focus on the choices the players can make. That's what Adam Hines did when he left Telltale to co-create an indie game called Oxen Free.**

*ALEX: Didn't you hear me calling for you?*

*JONAS: Jesus you scared me!*

*ALEX: I scared you? You scared me!*

**In the game, you play a teenager girl named Alex. She and her friends are stuck on an island that's haunted by ghosts that can manipulate time.**

*ALEX: What do you want?*

*GHOSTS: (distorted) For the first time...for the first time..*

**In making this game, Adam and his team wanted to eliminate "cut scenes," which is a common occurrence in games where you don't control the character anymore because you need to watch a scene of exposition.**

ADAM: That just isn't a thing that we've ever seen a game do before – and that's not the sexist goal! But it was just the idea that would feel really fulfilling in a weird way. And to try and get away from what I consider -- at times these story based games can feel like you're not the actual character, you're more like Jiminy Cricket on the character's shoulder giving them suggestions of what to do and not actually being the character the whole time. So we really wanted to back away from that and really make you feel like you're controlling her, you can interrupt yourself and interrupt other people, and really divert the conversation if that's what you want to do.

**Oxen Free is less cinematic than Telltale games. It looks more like a flat illustration come to life. But going that simple allows the player to control Alex's speech and movements all the time, all at once.**

ADAM: It sounded easy and of course when we started making this, this is why nobody ever does this because there are some conversations that you have to hear and there are some beats that you have to know that the player is paying attention to and understanding because in a movie you can kind of half fall asleep for a few minutes, or zone out and come back, and the main character isn't going to not know what he has to do – he's going to know what he needs to do and he'll catch up, and if you do that in a game, you'll be like wait, I missed it. Should I be going to the door now or getting the key?

**But they managed to pull it off, and the game has been critically acclaimed. The other cool thing about OxenFree is that if you try to play it again – you don't get a fresh start. The game remembers what you did. Other games have pulled off that trick before, but it works thematically with Oxen Free because the game is about time loops.**

ADAM: If you load up your save and jump back into the game, you get brand new choices to same conversations you had because now you're playing a version of Alex that remembers already being through this whole night so she'll say things like man, I remember having this conversation, or I really feel that last time we did this before, maybe we should do something else. And your friend will react to you like you're insane but the ghosts will more than kind of anything because they're aware of timelines, what can happen, and they've seen the world born and die again infinite amount of times, so they've seen the ways this night can play out, they will respond to you and be able to remember last time you did this, and maybe you should try this now.

**There is a genre called open world games where you have unlimited movement. The most popular open world game right now is Red Dead Redemption 2 -- which takes place in the Old West.**

**Ryan Kaufman likes those kinds of games, but he prefers the more narrative games he worked on at Telltale – even if the players complained that their choices were limited.**

RYAN: Player feedback is oh, I wish my choices really mattered, and I look at games where that's true, and open world games are a great example. You can run around endlessly in Grand Theft Auto, making really impactful choices but at the same time, there's no story, it doesn't mean anything there's no narrative thread pulling you through. So I think that ultimate freedom is something people, fans talk about wanting but I think sometimes it's more satisfying to get that, there's an authored story and you sense a theme and you feel a very specific emotion and brings you through an emotional journey that is so much more meaningful than just freedom.

***It's so funny, I agree what you're saying, you don't hear people say something is more important than freedom, in our culture freedom is supposed to be the best thing in the world.***

RYAN: Yeah, freedom can be – especially when you watch people try to play games – freedom is really confusing to people, they don't know what to do with it. Even in an open world game, you have to teach them and bring them along so they're comfortable with what they're doing. And I think it's the same with story, a completely story is confusing even to the person who's trying to work their way through it or tell it. They become the storyteller and I don't know that everyone has the power or ability to sit right down and say I'm going to tell myself a great story.

***Well, it's funny, life is obviously the real open world we all live in, and that freedom is confusing and so we come with stories anyways about our own lives.***

RYAN: Yeah, absolutely, we map random events with some narrative explanations to get our heads around it.

**Telltale games were often compared to the Choose Your Own Adventure books from the '80s, But Ryan thinks they really should've advertised themselves as Chose Your Own Emotions, because the real story in these games isn't what you do, it's who you choose to become.**

**That's what I found so compelling about their Batman games. There are so many different versions of Batman from the comics and the movies – and their games allowed you to chose which Batman you wanted to be, not in terms of his costume but his personality. And the other characters would react to you accordingly.**

RYAN: The main axis was kind of that are you going to be the forceful vengeful Dark Knight who will break people's arms to get what you want – but who cares?

They're bad guys – all the way to a more – a compassionate crime fighting! And is there a third version of that?

***I found when playing Batman and Bruce Wayne when I was kinder, gentler more compassionate crime fighter I got advantage of, but whenever I chose brutality to keep people in line, Alfred was always there to say, you're losing it. I don't know if I want to stick with you, there were consequences either way, there didn't seem to be a right way, which I really liked.***

RYAN: Yeah and that was something we always, always tried to promote the idea there is no right way to play, there is no winning or losing, it's all about what you wanted to try and whether you could accomplish it or tolerate it.

**As you're playing a Telltale game, the game keeps track of your choices, and when you're done, you'll see what percentage of how many players made the same choices that you did.**

**And since the games were released episodically, that information is sent back to the game developers while they're working on the next episode. So they can adjust their storylines as they're developing.**

**Most of the time, the choices were split 50/50 – which they considered to be a success. I asked Alyssa if let's say 10% of the players choose to do something, did she worry they made the choice too easy? She said no -- quite the opposite.**

ALYSSA: Sometimes we get these hard split, 90/10% split where everyone made the same choice with a character, like with the Walking Dead season I worked on, we were surprised by one of those hard splits to the extent to where we said, wow, let's lean into this and give that 10% of people who made what was obviously a difficult choice and pay them off and give them something special for their investment, there was this live or die moment, most choose for him to die, for the 10% who chose for him to live, they got a much more detailed story with that character and several more live or die moments with that character for the season.

***That's interesting 10% of players choose something you'd think most cost effective thing to do is if 90% going in this direction give them more to work with but that's interesting you wanted to reward that 10%.***

ALYSSA: I think we tried to do both, at some point Telltale, we would lean into 90% more but the people in the 10% side were like my choices don't matter, so sometimes we'd flip the script and try to do the unexpected instead of the expected.

**Ryan says he often surprised by the data that he got from the players.**

RYAN: I was always surprised by how kind people were in contract to how they would sometimes conduct themselves on the Internet or the forums – people can be harsh! People would generally take the more compassionate option when they could, and that was surprising to me because when you're playing a video game you're free to – you're somewhat anonymous, you can do what you want, you can be a shit to people, and they're just video game characters, so what's the problem? But even though people would be generally more kind than I expected them to be.

***It's interesting you always try to make sure the choices were more gut wrenching as possible, was there a way you thought, hmmm, I wonder if there's a way you can use this against them?***

RYAN: Oh yeah, absolutely, yes. At every opportunity we'd use people's compassion against them.

***Laughs***

RYAN: That was like what you were describing no matter what I tried to do, someone would complain about it, or I'd be taken advantage of, and yeah, that was part of how we hooked players in, it never felt resolved, even if you were compassionate you never got a nice resolution, you always got a little bit of a stinger because if we ever gave you a nice resolution you might set down the controller and be like, I'm good, story's done.

***Yeah, its almost reminds me of the speech Agent Smith gives in the Matrix, they tried to create perfect world and people rejected it, so they had to create a deeply flawed world and everyone insides the pods was willing to accept that.***

RYAN: Yeah! That's such a great analogy. Yes! Yeah.

***Although I was going to say, people picked the more compassionate choices even though they're assholes on line it could also be a sad commentary that they're compassionate towards video game characters than they are towards other human beings but those human beings are only represented as lines of text or avatars rather than characters that they know.***

RYAN: Yeah, maybe it's just purely because the NPCs have eyeballs so they're look at you and you'll feel bad for what you did.

**That actually raises an interesting question because for many years, the big media story about video games was that they were desensitizing the youth to violence or morality.**

**And there are some video games where all you do is kill everyone on screen, but to me those games are so cartoonish or impersonal, I think of them more like a high tech version of dodge ball. For the players who like role-playing video games – they want the conflicts to be really gut wrenching.**

**In fact, psychologists have found these games to be really useful to studying morality. Like here's they psychologist Jamie Madigan.**

JAMIE: Like nobody thinks about the morality of Pac Man as he goes around the maze, gobbling up dots and eating ghosts and such. But Joel from the Last of Us is very much somebody you think about the morality of what you have him do and what he's doing on the screen.

**Jamie writes about the psychology of video games. And he says there are players who can dissociate themselves, and don't care about killing characters, or at least hurting their feelings. But studies have shown that's rare – at least in the kind of games that Telltale makes.**

JAMIE: People do an evil play through but they generally do that second after they've played through according to their own moral compass.

**We tend to think of morality as black-and-white, but psychologists break down our moral framework into five components: care vs. harm, fairness vs. cheating, loyalty vs. betrayal, authority vs. subversion, and purity vs. degradation.**

JAMIE: You know people vary – like individuals vary, you and I can vary on these five. So I could be sensitive to morality around fairness and purity and you may be low on those but care a lot about caring and authority.

**In life we often think people are acting irrationally when they're just very heavily weighted towards one end of that spectrum. And the same is true when we judge characters in video games. And that affects the choices that we make.**

**And in one study, psychologists tested gamers beforehand to see where they fell along this moral spectrum. Then the psychologists observed them playing a video game.**

JAMIE: They actually a modified version of Never Winter Nights, which was a single player role playing game from a few years ago, and they had created these little quest lines within that game, and each one was designed to present moral quandary around each of those five -- care, fairness, authority, loyalty and purity. And they found that people's attitude towards those types of moral infringements outside of the games somewhat predicted what they would choose within the games.

**That doesn't mean games only reinforce what we already believe. Psychologists have been able to heighten player's sensitivities to moral issues that were not high priorities for them.**

JAMIE: So that if you highlight something about fairness in the game, or make the player think about that concept of fairness, and you can temporally make them more sensitive to transgressions against fairness and you can give them a moral quandary related to that and they'll take it more seriously or find it more stressful to make a decision about.

**That's what the Telltale games did. They would often focus on one particular moral dimension for thematic purposes -- like Their Game of Thrones games were about authority vs. subversion. The Walking Dead games were all about loyalty or betrayal. The Batman games challenged you on care vs. harm. Even BioShock -- the groundbreaking RPG game I mentioned earlier -- tapped into purity vs. degradation. And Oxen Free dealt with fairness, because the ghosts on the island are angry about their fate, but if you take control their time loops, you can cheat death for some of the characters.**

**Jamie Madigan wishes someday we could create a system that would tailor-make a video game that would challenge each person's specific moral framework.**

JAMIE: You know, I joke this is how you know I'm a psychologist, I want to put multiple choice surveys into video games (Laughs) and have players fill out these measure so we could have this data on them. But if you could do it some way that would be super cool and everyone's experience would be a little different and everyone would feel important in their own way for making those decisions and shaping that game.

**I actually discovered things about myself playing the Telltale games. First, I didn't realize what a romantic I am because I ended up pursuing every romantic interest in ALL of their games.**

**But it was my violent choices that haunted me the most.**

**There's another Telltale game called The Wolf Among Us, which is based on a comic book series called Fables. In the game, you play the Big Bad Wolf or "Bigby" for short. He now walks around in human form keeping the peace among other fairy tale characters who are also living in this gritty urban film noir.**

**All the decisions you make as Bigby are about whether you use the proverbial carrot or the stick approach – which on the moral spectrum would be authority vs. subversion, with a little bit of care vs. harm.**

**But that gets complicated when your job as peacekeeper involves dealing with your previous victims, like one of the three little pigs – who won't obey your orders because he hasn't gotten over that whole blow your house down thing.**

*BIGBY: It wasn't murder I was hungry*

*PIG: Yeah, I'm hungry now, but you don't see me tearing the flesh off your bones*

*BIGBY: But you would if you could.*

*PIG: Yeah. Probably.*

**I found the game incredibly tense, which Alyssa says, was by design.**

*ALYSSA: The whole world of The Wolf Among Us, everybody who lives in that space has an opinion about Bigby that you're pushing against from moment one of interacting with them. I think in the introduction it says something like people still haven't gotten over what the Big Bad Wolf, and they're still reacting in this hostile way and you as a player have a chance to change that story or lean into it saying, that is who I am, thank you very much.*

**There's one scene early where there's this creature called Grendel, who was challenging your authority. And at the end of the fight, you have the option of ripping his arm off, or just letting him be.**

*(SFX Ripping arm)*

*BIGBY: I'm the lapdog huh?*

*GREDEL: You fucking monster!*

**I did it, but I told Ryan I felt disgusted afterward. I actually quit the game without saving, so I could redo the level and not pull off his arm.**

RYAN: Well, that was the intended effect, that was one of those moments where we thought, all right, like it's at the end of the fight, we put it there on purpose, your adrenaline was going, I'm in a video game, in video games you rip people's arms off, that's what you do! But the next beat pulls the rug off -- you don't feel good about it, you don't get any points for doing it. It's very real and people are like holy shit, you are terrifying. So yeah, so I'm glad you felt bad! (Laughs)

**But Alyssa says, I shouldn't worry that I'm deep down there is a big bad wolf inside me.**

ALYSSA: I think of it philosophically as it's practice, video games are practice what if I do the outrageous thing, how will the world react to me and how will I feel about that? A simulation gives you a chance to push outside the person you might be in every day life and how that makes you feel. I know that --- like I was playing Game of Thrones and my daughter was watching me and she was like, why are you being so mean?! And I'm like well because I'm generally not. I would like to role-play that for a while and that's the gift that video games give us and the branching stories give us, sit outside our own shoes, either I like that, or I don't like that, or I know something about myself I didn't know before about myself.

***Do you think that working behind the scenes and knowing how the sausage is made that you sort of – you felt more freedom to go out side what you would normally would do, you understood the artifice of it, you suspended your disbelief a little bit less?***

ALYSSA: Absolutely, I think I worried less about the long-term consequences of my decisions partly because I knew the space of the sausage factory.

*(Laughs)*

**But overall, I think these questions are touching on a bigger question we all wrest with. How much do our choices matter?**

**The nice thing about video games is that no matter how difficult the choices is, once the choice is made, it has an impact -- or it should have an**

**impact, if the game designers have the time and money to do what they want**

**Otherwise, the story is too predictable, unlike real life. Or if you make choices and it's not clear whether your choices had an impact, then, it's TOO much like real life. And the game of life isn't always satisfying.**

**That's it for this week. Thanks for listening. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. Special thanks to Alyssa Finely, Ryan Kaufman, Jamie Madison and Adam Hines. I'm very much looking forward to the next game Adam's working on -- called After Party -- where you have to out-smart the Devil with drinking games.**

ADAM: It hopefully feels like an actual night out where you think, if I drink whiskey, I'll become the kind of sleepy belligerent drunk, but if I stick to Vodka I'll get a little flirty and stay up. So of course that means with Oxen Free you had at most 3 choices per things you can have, in this game every choice, every moment you can speak has at minimum 6 to 7 choices, and can sometimes can be 11 or 12 depending on how many drinks are available in the bar.

**I hope to drink a lot of digital white Russians -- as long as they don't make me spacey and sleepy, like real alcohol.**

**By the way there are a lot of RPG games I didn't get around to mentioning -- let alone the Black Mirror episode Bandersnatch, which was not just about choose-your-own adventure games, it was a choose your own adventure game. Let me know what are some of your favorites. The show has a Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. If you want to support Imaginary Worlds, click the donate button the website imaginary worlds podcast dot org.**