Spring 5-2017

Metagames: Postmodern Narrative and Agency in the Video Games of Davey Wreden

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Postmodern Narrative and Agency in the Video Games of Davey Wreden

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of English

May 2017

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Abstract

This study aims to determine how contemporary video games utilize self-reflexive narrative techniques to explore the strengths and weaknesses of video games as an artistic narrative medium. This study combines emergent digital game theory with established literary theory about self-reflexive narrative (also known as 'metafiction.') This synthesis is further informed by observing first hand player interaction with self-reflexive gaming platforms. A focus on the problems of ontology and epistemology for both gamers and readers allows comparison between treatments of these problems in both digital game theory and metafictional studies. My study compares these concepts and applies them to the operations of two contemporary self-reflexive games by Davey Wreden: *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (2015). These games exhibit several metafictional techniques: [1] they assume and undermine widely accepted and arguably transparent conventions of mainstream video game narratives; [2] they deconstruct notions of agency as free will in a binary, preprogrammed system; [3] through self-reflexive logic, they anticipate the process of artistic criticism to pose larger epistemological and ontological questions.

Key Terms: metafiction, postmodernism, ontology, epistemology, agency, hyperreality, video games, narratology, ludology

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"Stanley was already dead from the moment he hit start."
— Female Narrator: *The Stanley Parable*

"If the role of the player is not to understand, then what is it?"
— Davey Wreden: *The Beginner's Guide*

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the relatively brief history of video game studies, scholars have analyzed games from various disciplinary viewpoints, most notably ludology and narratology. Researchers in each of these two disciplines have debated on how one should view video games in relation to other narrative mediums. In simplified terms, ludologists such as Gonzolo Frasca believe that researchers ought to treat video games not as narrative texts but instead as rules-based systems structured around gameplay mechanics rather than representational narratives (Frasca 222). Games, including physical ones such as soccer or chess, are purely based on rules, with the player's enjoyment stemming from their interactions with the game's rule set and challenges. Rather than being representational, video games are simulations, allowing the player to form narrative interpretations of the rules instead of the game developer providing the whole story for the player. On the opposite end of the spectrum, narrativists view video games as a medium inherently predisposed to telling stories. Narrativists such as Janet Murray argue that researchers ought to analyze games using pre-existing theories and methods relating to traditional narrative media (Arsenault 476). The rules of the game are much like the lines one acts out, though less strict so as to allow a certain degree of improvisation or agency.

According to Oliver Laas (2014), contemporary video game studies are trending towards utilizing more holistic approaches to studying games, adopting theories that accommodate both the ludologist's focus on rules and the narrativist's focus on symbolic representation (Laas 30). Such theories are certainly taking game studies in a good direction; however, many of these

theories are strictly focused on defining digital games in general from a purely theoretical foundation.

The purpose of this study is not to propose a broad definition for games or a universal method of studying games; this study proposes a coherent theoretical framework for criticism on player agency within self-reflexive narrative video games. Because formal scholarship on digital gaming and narrative is relatively new and incomplete, no studies have offered a fully articulated theory of player agency for self-referential games, or games that are heavily self-referential or subversive to enhance the intended narrative. In the absence of such a theory, my study combines emergent digital game theory with established literary theory about self-reflexive narrative (also known as 'metafiction.') This synthesis is further informed by observing first hand player interaction (those of the researcher's) with self-reflexive games. This study's focus on the problem of free will for both gamers and readers allows comparison between treatments of agency in digital game theory and metafictional studies. My study compares these concepts and applies them to the operations of two self-reflexive games: Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide*. These games exhibit several metafictional techniques: [1] they assume and undermine widely accepted and arguably transparent conventions of mainstream video game narratives; [2] they deconstruct notions of agency as free will in a binary, preprogrammed system; [3] through self-reflexive logic, they anticipate artistic criticism to pose larger epistemological and ontological questions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the scarcity of literature on metafictional games, this study intends to utilize literature written on the various metafictional elements of traditional postmodern literature and

the various theoretical frameworks for studying video games in general, including those derived from ludology and narratology.

In *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012) called "Postmodernism and Experiment," Brian McHale tackles the question of whether postmodernist fiction is experimental; in the process, he lists and defines several postmodernist theories proposed by scholars such as J.F. Lyotard as well as metafictional devices found in various postmodernist works. McHale discusses the development of different sub-genres of postmodern literature such as historiographic metafiction, avant-pop, and the literary mashup. Beyond the review of sub-genres, he emphasizes the significance of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which in postmodern literature is the juxtaposition of two or more separate spaces or worlds related to each other through specific themes or characteristics. Postmodern literature experiments with the presentation and intermingling of these different worlds through several devices, each falling under one of two types of heterotopias: horizontal (end-to-end juxtaposition) or vertical (layered juxtaposition). McHale makes distinct postmodernism from modernism and all previous literary movements by declaring a shift in what he calls the "dominant," from a focus on epistemology in modernism to ontology in postmodernism

This study will apply McHale's description of the postmodern philosophy to the primary works, using it as a guide in exploring how self-reflexive games exhibit postmodern awareness. McHale's overview of various postmodern devices such as "strange loops" and "trompe l'oeil" will be referenced when analyzing the metafictional elements of the primary works. This analysis will also apply postmodern genres and devices to self-reflexive video game narratives to further our understanding of literary influences on the developers when writing their narratives and study.

Also *from The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* is Astrid Ensslin's chapter called "Computer Gaming." Ensslin examines what she calls the "paradox of literary gaming," (497) which refers to the supposed incompatibility between literature and the ludic nature of video games. She establishes a spectrum between literary games and ludic games, with experimental, narrative-focused games near the former end and more playful, rules-based games near the latter end. The defining characteristic of literary games is their adoption of literary and poetic devices "in order to explore the affordances and limitations of rules" (499). Another characteristic of a literary game is their attempts to force the player to think about the game deeply by distancing the player from the often-sought-after mental state of immersion and instead examine the game from a more objective and critical perspective. Ensslin's criteria for what constitutes a "literary game" will be considered when analyzing the literary elements of the primary works.

In "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" (2003), Gonzalo Frasca defines and discusses the strengths and limits of ludology. Frasca compiles and comments on various theories on games posited by other researchers such as Espen Aarseth, author of *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) and, most importantly, Roger Caillois, author of *Man, Play, and Games* (1961). He uses these researchers' work as the foundation upon which he defines the tenants of ludology. Understanding the core concepts of ludology is vital to better understand the more contemporary theories that incorporate it. One could argue that discourse on game studies truly began with Frasca's work and the responses by other researchers.

Frasca claims that the simulative nature of games allows games to be capable of having stories and storytelling techniques vastly different from traditional mediums. The same point is

made in Dominic Arsenault's chapter on narratology in games simply called "Narratology" in the book *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (2014). Arsenault's review of game narrative criticism is much more recent than Frasca's article, resulting in a much more complete view of game narrative criticism filled with several dissenting theories and philosophies. Arsenault's survey of theoretical works by authors such as Celia Pearce, Jesper Juul, and Andre Gaudreault brings him to the conclusion that although video games are effective at integrating traditional storytelling conventions from film and text, the unique gameplay mechanics enabled by the interactive nature of games allows them to tell stories in entirely new ways not possible in other media. Arsenault asserts that researchers should not only apply traditional narrative frameworks from other disciplines in their studies of game narratives, but also consider how the unique interactive and spatially-focused design aspects of video games affect the developer's narrative or enable players to form their own.

This study will take Arsenault's advice and consider video games not just as texts but as multimodal narrative experiences. Although I will analyze the metafictional mechanics and narrative conventions of games as digital extensions of traditional postmodern techniques, I will also analyze how video games enhance these techniques through spatial exploration, environmental design, player choice, and fail states. The delicate relationship between authorial intent and player agency, which Arsenault also mentions in his chapter, serves as one of the core focuses of this study, and the mechanics that enable the former over the latter and vice versa will be analyzed.

Continuing with the theme of authorial intent versus player agency, Bernard Perron discusses the apparent paradox of the interactive movie in his article for *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003) called "From Gamers to Players and Gameplayers: The Example of Interactive

Movies." He challenges the supposed disparity between the linearity of film narratives and the nonlinear nature of player interactions. He claims that the attitude of a gamer, derived from the gamer's understanding of the medium, allows the gamer to create a new belief system relative to the game that enhances its reality and narrative, even if the game provides little agency to the player. He also argues that a game's narrative becomes fun and engaging when the player feels they are a part of it. Perron does admit, however, that interactive movies such as *Tender Loving Care* (1999) explicitly separate the gameplay aspects from the narrative, film-styled aspects, making the game and the narrative two separate entities; thus, the interactive movie fails on a ludological level. With this in mind, I will examine if and how contemporary games make form match function--how gameplay mechanics influence and enhance the narrative and vice versa. Thus, in this study, gameplay mechanics and narrative are integral rather than separate.

Similar to Perron, Marco Caracciolo, in his article "Playing *Home*: Videogame Experiences between Narrative and Ludic Interests" (2015), discusses the potential conflict found in video games between ludic and narrative interests; in other words, the player's desire to interact with and alter the game and the player's desire to make cohesive sense of the game's narrative. Caracciolo gives a brief overview of several theoretical views of game studies, then he goes on to perform a content analysis of Benjamin Rivers's video game *Home*. Caracciolo finds that *Home* simultaneously satisfies the player's ludic and narrative interests by providing the player with a narrative that begins in a linear fashion but eventually branches out into multiple conclusions based on the player's choices. Caracciolo's work is significant to this study because it not only presents theoretical frameworks for the study of narrative games but also demonstrates how researchers can utilize these frameworks by fully analyzing a game himself.

The form of this study will take influence from Caracciolo's model when discussing games directly.

Another example of an analysis of a game, one with a more narrativist focus, appears in Johansen Quijano-Cruz's article, "Using Literary Theory to Read Games: Power, Ideology, and Repression in Atlus's *Growlanser: Heritage of War*" (2008). Quijano-Cruz argues that contemporary video game criticism lacks true literary analysis, for much of the criticism on games either utilizes a ludological set of theories involving play and rules, or criticizes general concepts or gameplay elements in several games rather than analyzing the narrative content of specific games. Quijano-Cruz wishes to prove that literary theory can effectively be applied to games by doing a literary analysis of a game himself. Quijano-Cruz applies the ideas of power, ideology, and repression theorized by Foucault and Althusser to Career Soft's fifth installment in *Growlanser*, their role-playing game series, *Growlanser: Heritage of War* (2006). He pays special attention to an organization in the game called the Peace Maintenance Brigade (PMB) and its role in the game world's ruling government. Quijano-Cruz finds that, by applying Foucault's and Althusser's literary theories on power, the presence of the PMB and the player's role in support of the organization suggest that a powerful, ideological, and oppressive form of government is ultimately effective in achieving societal unity.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study will analyze the form and content of the primary works for postmodern elements and metafictional intent. I will define each of the postmodern devices as they become relevant to the discussion and proceed to apply them to specific narrative or gameplay moments in each of the games studied. I will place emphasis on four different aspects of each moment: [1]

the narrative purpose of each of the metafictional devices, [2] the effects of interactive form, [3] how these devices alter the relationship between the player and the game, and [4] how these devices are vital to the effective development of each game's core themes.

This study will focus on two different metafictional games designed by Davey Wreden. I chose these games for several reasons: [1] I consider these games contemporary, for each was released in or after 2014, and as such lack analytical discourse beyond journalistic articles and fan-created reviews, [2] both games share the same designer, thus they share several similar metafictional techniques and apply them differently for unique purposes, [3] each game places great emphasis on their narratives, even prioritizing narrative presentation over ludic engagement by utilizing simple and conventional first-person gameplay mechanics, and [4] based on this author's limited knowledge of each game, which I derived from collecting pre-release information found in trailers, journalistic previews, and anecdotes of players' experiences, these games exhibit a significant amount of subversive and metafictional content and do not attempt to obscure it (arguably not at the cost of nuance). I suggest game researchers consider at least the last two criteria when selecting games to study.[1]..

Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (2011) features a near-omnipotent, third-person unreliable narrator who attempts to guide the player (who plays Stanley) through the game. Wreden provides the player with several opportunities to stray from the narrator's story and make their own choices, forcing the narrator to directly address Stanley and, by extension, the player. This study will focus on the relationship between the narrator and Stanley, which develops through several metafictional moments and ultimately, I argue, represents the relationship between Wreden and the player. Themes that I will emphasize in my analysis of this game include the existence of postmodern agency in a video game, the paradoxical relationship between linear

narratives and choice-based gameplay, and the ontological argument over the reality of a simulation.

The second game by Wreden will be *The Beginner's Guide* (2015), as it also features a near-omnipotent narrator that claims to be Wreden himself. The fictional Wreden narrates the life of his friend named Coda and Coda's experiences developing experimental narrative games. Wreden guides the player through several interactive environments that Wreden claims to be each of the games that Coda created. Each environment and its unique mechanics represent Coda's philosophies on life and games and also serve as tangible proof of his accomplishments. With Wreden serving as the narrator, the player avatar lacking any qualities separating it from the player, and the seemingly biographical nature of the narrative, the game takes no effort to hide its metafictional intent which ironically allows it to trick the player into believing what is fictional as real, drawing on the hyperreal literary devices prevalent in historiographic metafiction among other genres. Themes that I will emphasize in my analysis of this game include the hyperreality of virtual reality and the epistemological problems of video game criticism.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE STANLEY PARABLE

The Stanley Parable is a video game developed and published by the studio Galactic Café. It originally began as a modification of the first-person shooter *Half-Life 2* by Valve Corporation, but was later released as a standalone game on October 17, 2013 for Windows. Wreden, the lead developer and writer of both the modification and standalone version, said in an interview with gaming news website *Shacknews* that he wanted to create a game that "broke player expectations, that delivered a familiar experience in a new way" (*Shacknews*). This

inspiration to create a game with innovative storytelling came from his experience playing games and "asking 'what if' over and over while playing." When elaborating on the significance of asking "what if," Wreden claimed that modern game developers utilize various assumptions about their potential audience and the games that audience enjoys when designing new games. Games have been getting made and played for several decades now, and throughout those years well-established conventions and expectations for how developers should make games and how gamers should interact with those games have cemented themselves within gaming culture.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "convention" as "A rule or practice based upon general consent, or accepted and upheld by society at large; an arbitrary rule or practice recognized as valid in any particular art or study; a conventionalism" ("convention"). In literature and games, conventions are most often associated with genres, for conventions are the characteristics through which readers and authors define certain genres. The conventions of the science fiction genre, for instance, include an emphasis on futuristic technologies such as robots or supercomputers and their effects on the setting and conflict of the work, the exploration of either a futuristic society or intergalactic civilizations, an exploration of various philosophical implications revealed by the evolving relationship between humans and technology, et al. These elements do not constitute strict rules on how one must write science fiction, they are simply commonalities between the majority of existing science fiction works that, through general agreements between readers and authors, have been accepted as the conventions of science fiction and thus are often expected to be included in all works of science fiction.

Video game genres follow a similar path of commonality, convention, and expectation; and video games as a whole have their own set of cross-genre conventions. Most video games that place emphasis on its narrative, for instance, often develop that narrative through a

combination of player interaction and nonplayable cinematic cutscenes. Narrative-game developers carefully choose when to grant the player control over their character and when to take that control away depending on the narrative context of each situation. For example, in a situation where the player confronts a major antagonist, or "boss," the player usually retains control of their character during the struggle, allowing the player to feel as if they are overcoming an obstacle. However, once the boss is defeated, the game may momentarily seize control from the player and present them with a scripted cutscene of the player-character having a final moment with the boss. Although this convention is effective at telling pre-written stories, it interrupts the player's agency by placing them in the role of an observer and temporarily creates a divide between the player and the player-character.

This loss of agency seems problematic in theory, but because it is caused by a well-established convention, most gamers accept it as the norm. According to Bernard Perron's analysis of interactive movie games, the terms "gamer" and "player" refer to two different types of people that interact with games, and what distinguishes them is the attitude with which each type of game player approaches video games (Perron 241). Players are those who approach games with the simple goal of having fun or finding entertainment regardless of the game's explicit win conditions; it is a term that encompasses both those that have never played video games before and those that have potentially played games for years. Gamers, however, are a subset of players who approach a game with the intent of completing the game according to the stated win conditions, believing themselves to be an active participant in the game's diegetic world rather than an outsider observer. I argue that a gamer's familiarity with the video game medium allows them to achieve this state of immersion and adopt a specific attitude when playing games based on the expectations they derived from playing other, potentially similar,

games. This attitude involves accepting many of the unique conventions of games and game narratives such as moments of decision and uninteractable cutscenes; it enables the gamer to create a new belief system that enhances the reality of the game being played as well as the game's narrative, for the gamer will refrain from questioning the methods with which games tell stories. It is a belief system similar to Coleridge's concept of suspension of disbelief: gamers forget that they are staring at a computer screen while sitting in a chair in their bedroom and instead place themselves in the game world as active participants. With this in mind, I will refer to the player of *The Stanley Parable* as a gamer, for it is only with a gamer's familiarity with the medium that one can understand the numerous metafictional messages the game conveys.

Such an attitude would not be possible if game developers regularly surprised gamers, if they continuously innovated the methods with which games tell stories, but the relative safety of successful narrative formulas, formulas resulting from several years of trial-and-error experimentation, offers developers a lower-risk alternative. This alternative is what Wreden referred to when he said in the *Shacknews* interview that developers "make assumptions based on how we've already been doing things." Those assumptions are based both on how developers have already been making games and how gamers have already been playing them. Wreden seems to imply that game development and game playing have both become systematized to the point of triteness. It is with this understanding of a gamer's general expectations that Wreden could set about creating a video game that he wanted to continuously surprise the player by subverting all of those expectations, even the ones that a gamer may not even be aware of.

In *The Stanley Parable*, the gamer assumes control of the silent titular character Stanley. According to the opening narration, Stanley works in an office building for a nameless company, and his only job is to sit in his office, stare at a computer, and push the keyboard buttons his

computer prompts him to push. On the day that the game takes place, all of Stanley's coworkers suddenly disappear, and the narrator dictates that Stanley endeavors to find his coworkers or at least an explanation for their disappearance. I emphasize that the narrator dictates this, for once the game begins, the gamer gains control of Stanley and may choose to go along with what the narrator says or diverge from the main narrative to explore other parts of the office building. The game's mechanics only allow the gamer to navigate Stanley around the environment and perform simple tasks with specific interactable objects such as pushing a button or closing a door.

The whole game takes place from the first-person perspective of Stanley, and since Stanley never speaks and the gamer never sees his face, he effectively acts as the player's avatar: a character that represents the gamer in the virtual space. Even Stanley's backstory of being an office worker is vague and common enough for many typical citizens of developed countries to relate to, making Stanley an ideal blank-slate avatar. The gamer will learn later, however, that their relationship with the character of Stanley is not as simple as it initially appears.

To offer a clear introduction to the game, I will treat Stanley as nothing more than the gamer's avatar, a representation of the gamer controlling him. This will be useful for my analysis of the surface-level interpretation of the game's narrative. In order to reach this interpretation, I will give a brief synopsis of what happens when the gamer follows the narrator's directions from beginning to end, but before that I must explain the significance of the narrator. While the game proceeds from Stanley's point of view, the narrator frames the action, acting something like a free indirect narrator in literature. A literary free indirect narrator is one that exists outside of the narrative yet often speaks with the voice of the characters they are describing. By doing this, the voices of the narrator and the characters merge, enabling the narration to seem more authentic while also making it difficult for the reader to distinguish

whose thoughts and judgements are being shared. The narrator in *The Stanley Parable* does something similar: he seems to exist outside the narrative and often shares Stanley's thoughts with the gamer. However, he blurs the line between narrator and character in ways beyond that of a free indirect narrator. Rather than adopting the voices of his characters, the narrator abandons his impartiality in favor of possessing stricter control over the narrative, like a god that takes an active role in his creation's development, thereby becoming a character himself.

The game provides the gamer with numerous opportunities to make decisions on what to do, and at these moments of decision, the narrator usually pushes the gamer towards making the decision that conforms to the narrator's version of the story. The narrator begins the game acting like a transparent medium, a distant observer whose only job is to recount what happens. However, if the gamer disobeys him, the narrator reveals his metafictional nature. For example, one of the first decisions the gamer can make is to go through one of two open doors. Before the gamer decides what to do, the narrator claims that "Stanley went through the left door" as if the decision was already made (*Stanley Parable*). If the gamer disregards the narration (or actively rebels against it), the narrator will attempt to steer the gamer back to the intended path without breaking character. If the gamer continues to disobey the narrator, the narrator directly addresses Stanley and commands him to do what he says, intruding on the narrative in an effort to correct it. The simple act of speaking directly to Stanley, and by extension the gamer, is the first sign of the game's metafictional intent, for it makes both Stanley and the gamer aware of the narrative frame behind the action. It also transforms the narrative into a comedic struggle between Stanley and the narrator, and it only gets funnier and more absurd as the game goes on.

A screenshot of *The Stanley Parable* showing the room with two doors, one of the first choices the gamer can make in the game (Two Doors Screenshot).

The opportunities for narrative decisions described earlier allow the game to adopt a branching narrative with multiple endings all dependent on the gamer's choices. The game boasts eighteen different endings, an exceptional number for any work of fiction. Galactic Café balances this abundance of endings by making it easy to achieve each ending, and the paths to each ending are fairly short, usually lasting no more than fifteen minutes. The short length of each play-through encourages the gamer to replay the game several times in an attempt to discover all of the endings. Another way the game draws attention to itself is through this act of replaying: each time the gamer resets the game after getting an ending, small details about the beginning section will change, such as the placement of computers and what doors are open. Even the narrator will summarize parts of the narration because he assumes the gamer has already heard it several times before and is getting bored of it. *The Stanley Parable* is not only aware of when the gamer makes a choice but also when the gamer replays the game, further foregrounding the act of playing games and bringing attention to the game's nature as a game.

For the sake of brevity, I will only use a few of *The Stanley Parable*'s endings as evidence of metafictional intent for there are simply too many endings to cover in one chapter.

Each reveals the metafictional message of the game in different ways, for each is themed around a different topic that I will use as the names of each ending. The most obvious and simple ending one can achieve, for instance, is called the Freedom ending, for it ends with Stanley destroying his employer's mind-control facility--which was used to control all of the employees including Stanley--and escaping into a grassy field towards freedom. On the path to this ending, the gamer must submit to the narrator entirely and do everything the narrator tells them to do. This ending comprises the grounds for the surface-level interpretation of the game's narrative. Almost every interpretation of the game's themes involves the concept of choice, and this interpretation specifically involves the power of choice one has in the corporate world. According to Malte Elson in his article "More Than Stories With Buttons: Narrative Mechanics, and the Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games" (2014), "the game 'shows . . . how structures like office architecture, hierarchies, or work routines reduce the experience of autonomy at work'" (534). Nowhere is this more apparent than on the path to the Freedom ending, for the mind-control facility is a clear symbol of the lack of individuality and free will one has in a corporate environment. One could simply stop there and claim that *The Stanley Parable* serves principally as commentary on how the oppressive conditions of capital-driven labor suppresses or outright revokes one's free will by comparing office work to slavery, but such an interpretation actually serves a greater purpose.

If one thinks about the Freedom ending on a metafictional level, one would examine the gamer's actions as they relate to the narrative. This path is actually the least metafictional, for the narrator never directly addresses Stanley or the gamer, but it is the most ironic. Although the story says Stanley is free after destroying the mind-control facility, the gamer must abandon all semblances of agency and do exactly what they are told to achieve this ending. Without resorting

to any explicit metafictional techniques, the game uses a combination of the office setting and the mind-control facility as an allegory for the lack of free will one has when playing a video game. The office building is the game space, the hierarchal system represents the rules that the gamer must follow, and the boss is the developer of the game. According to this interpretation, the gamer is much more similar to Stanley than they may have initially thought, for both of them spend their time doing what the 'boss' intends.

But what about the other endings? The game provides several opportunities to make choices, and each choice has a direct effect on what ending the gamer receives. Does this not go directly against the idea that gamers lack freedom? Indeed, the ability for the gamer to influence how the narrative progresses does suggest that gamers can make meaningful choices that express their agency, but upon closer examination of the other endings, *The Stanley Parable* proves consistent in its message. Although the narrator reacts surprised if the gamer disobeys his narration, the fact that the narrator acknowledges the gamer's decision is itself proof that the game expected the gamer to disobey. Wreden confirms this in his interview with *Shacknews* when he states, "The very first thing I asked with the game was 'what would happen if you could disobey the narrator?'" (*Shacknews*).

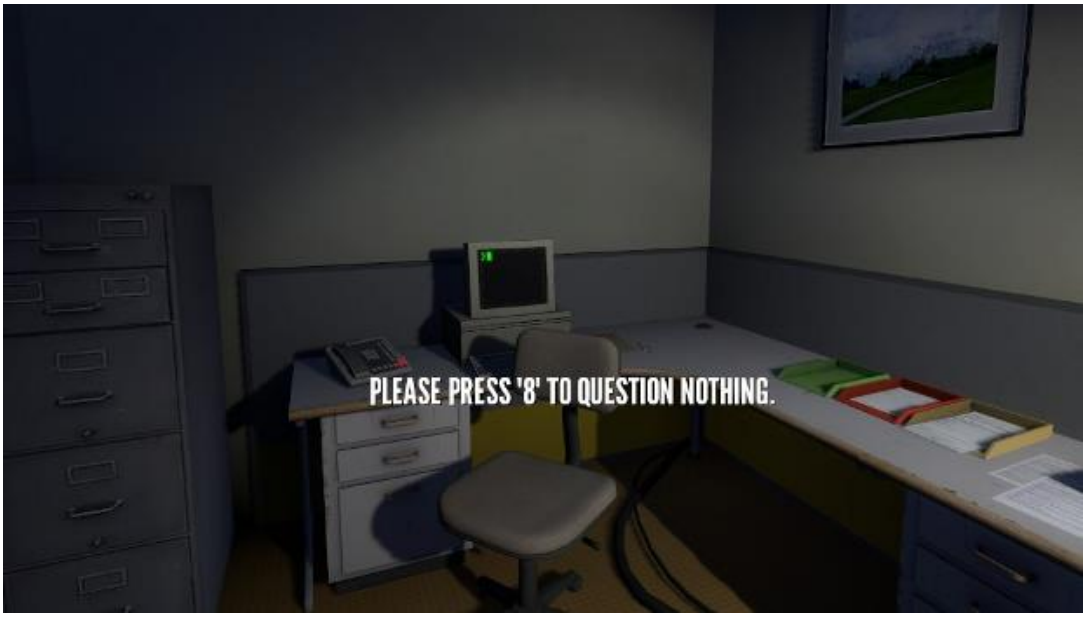
This is *The Stanley Parable*'s greatest metafictional strength: how it both acknowledges the expectations the gamer has and subverts almost all of them to make the gamer feel powerless in a game that ironically gives plenty of choices. The game expects the gamer to disobey the narrator in an attempt to assert their agency, and the game portrays the narrator as the author surprised at the notion that he lacks control over his own character. The author losing control over their characters is itself a metafictional convention, but *The Stanley Parable* takes it further by only pretending to lack control in order to encourage the gamer to keep disobeying. The

narrator's expression of his constant surprise and gradual frustration at the gamer's actions suggests to the gamer that they have taken control of the narrative from the narrator, but this could not be further from the truth.

Many of the game's possible endings convey this theme of the powerless player. The Explosion ending, which the gamer achieves by activating the mind-control facility rather than destroying it, results in the gamer activating the facility's self-destruct protocol. The narrator mocks Stanley's attempt at gaining control over his coworkers and allows Stanley to try and stop the facility from exploding by, ironically, pushing buttons. None of the buttons do anything, and the narrator mocks the gamer for thinking that they can beat the game.

In the Explosion ending, the narrator takes away all control from the gamer, and he does so again in the Apartment ending. To achieve this ending, the gamer must disobey the narrator several times until they are told to answer a ringing telephone. Upon answering the phone, the gamer is transported to Stanley's apartment where the narrator recounts a story called "The Story of The Death of a Man Named Stanley" (*Stanley Parable*). If the gamer attempts to leave the apartment, the narrator creates a wall so the gamer cannot escape, sinisterly stating, "sorry, but you're in my story now." As the narrator recounts the story, the game prompts the gamer to press specific buttons to perform arbitrary actions such as "Watch TV" and "Question nothing," effectively mirroring Stanley's job and once again foregrounding the act of playing a game. Like the Explosion ending, this ending also takes control away from the gamer. It also mocks the gamer's desire for control and agency by telling the gamer to push buttons to advance the story, reducing meaningful actions down to simply pushing buttons when prompted. By assigning actions such as kissing one's wife and going to work to buttons on a keyboard, the game becomes a simulacrum of real life, a cheap imitation of the outside world. This segment of the

game parodies the idea that video games are capable of providing meaningful choices to gamers as if programmed software had the complexity and nuance of the world that it simulates.



Stanley in his apartment, with a prompt on the screen that says, "PLEASE PRESS '8' TO QUESTION NOTHING" (Question Nothing Screenshot).

To narrow the major theme of *The Stanley Parable* further, I propose that the game is arguing for the existence of what I call the Stanley Paradox. The assumptions that define the Stanley Paradox are thus: [1] video games, as a medium based on a binary programming language and limited by the technologies that power it, are incapable of letting gamers act beyond the scope of the game's rules; [2] games that focus on conveying a pre-written narrative (story-games) are inherently more restricted than simulation games due to a story-game's relatively linear narrative; [3] despite espousing the concept of shared authorship, a story-game paradoxically provides less agency and more strict rules to a game player. *The Stanley Parable* argues for this paradox by making itself an example of a story-game that ironically leaves the gamer feeling incapable of making any meaningful narrative choices. Other story-games such as Telltale's *The Walking Dead* provide players with various "false" choices, or choices that have

almost no impact on the game's narrative. This game and games like it attempt to convince the player that their choices matter by frequently emphasizing the supposed significance of their choices, either by clearly indicating to the player that they are about to make an important decision with environmental cues or wait until after the player makes the decision before notifying them that certain characters will remember that decision.

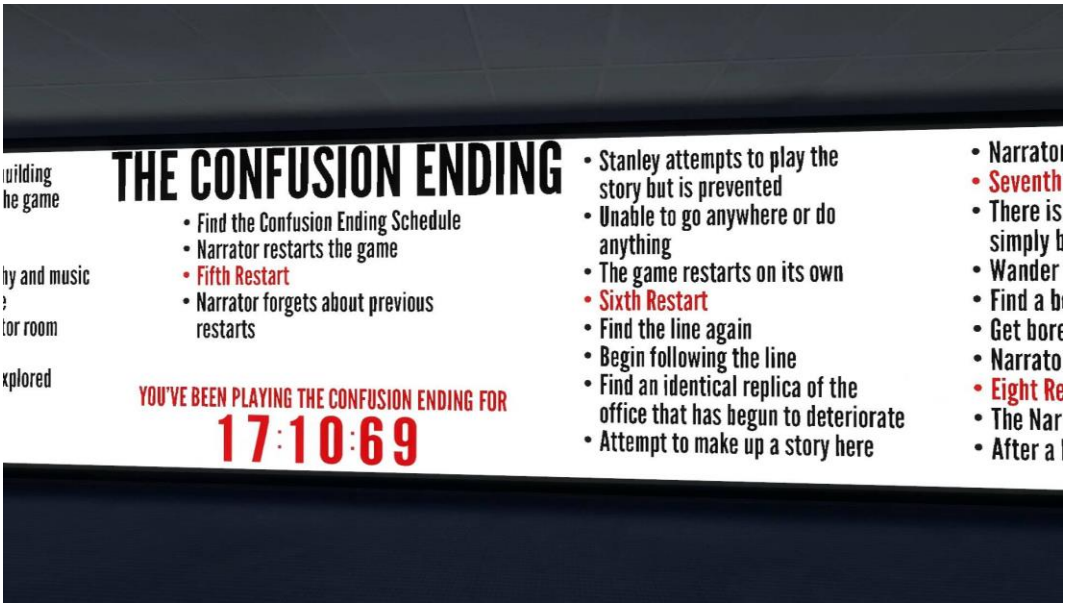
A screenshot of Telltale's *The Walking Dead*. After the player makes a choice, the game notifies the player that Clementine, the girl on the right, will remember their choice. Such an obtuse message suggests severe narrative consequences, but in reality it only adds a few inconsequential lines of dialogue, and her overall attitude towards the player remains the same (Packwood).

Despite its emphasis on player choices, *The Walking Dead* only has one ending, and many of the game's plot developments happen in the same way no matter what the player

chooses. *The Walking Dead* is a clear example of a story-game that prides itself on providing player agency yet fails to make the player feel in control of anything. *The Stanley Parable* endeavors to show how the paradoxical narrative structure of *The Walking Dead* is not a unique phenomenon but rather something that plagues the whole medium due to its digital nature.

The Stanley Parable goes to greater lengths to give the appearance that narrator and gamer are equal collaborators. The Confusion ending is an example of the illusion's complexity. This ending parodies a story-game's obsession with narrative order. On the path to this ending, the narrator becomes muddled over the level design because it does not conform to the pre-written story that the narrator is attempting to tell. The narrator tries to get the gamer back on the correct path, but they become so lost that they skip ahead to rooms Stanley was not meant to visit yet, prompting the narrator to exclaim that "This is all a spoiler!" (*Stanley Parable*). He restarts the game thinking it will allow the gamer to find the story but then finds that the room with two doors now has six doors. He asks Stanley, "Did you move the story somewhere, or… Hold on, why am I asking you? I'm the one who wrote the story. It was right here a minute ago." The narrator has apparently lost control over the story, and his solution for finding it is to employ what he calls "*The Stanley Parable* Adventure Line™." The Adventure Line™ symbolizes a game's linear narrative experience. It is a parody of how several modern games such as Visceral Games's *Dead Space* and CD Projekt Red's *The Witcher 3* utilize lines that guide the player to the next narrative checkpoint, a convention that insults the player's intelligence and discourages exploration (*Dead Space* calls it the "Deck Nav" while *The Witcher 3* contextualizes them as stink trails) Later the narrator becomes dissatisfied with the Line™ and restarts the game so he and Stanley can go about "forging a new path, a new story!" without the Line™. Eventually they unwittingly come across the Line™ again, an encounter that represents the gamer's inability to

break away from the developer's intended path. Finally, after choosing to go through a specific door, a choice the narrator believes will give both him and Stanley control over the story, they enter a room with a large schedule of events detailing everything that happened on the path to the Confusion ending, including every time the narrator supposedly restarts the game. The narrator expresses shock over the idea that everything they just went through was predetermined and refuses to restart the game like the schedule says. The game then cuts-off the narrator mid-sentence and restarts.



The schedule for the Confusion ending, found on the wall of the final room of that ending's path (Sout).

Through this ending the game argues that the rules of a video game are unbreakable and thus do not allow true player agency to exist. Philosophers may continue to debate on whether people possess free will, but *The Stanley Parable* claims that even if free will did exist, people cannot exercise that free will in a video game. Because everything is predetermined and restricted by the game's rules, shared authorship between the developer and player is impossible, or at least limited to what the developer is willing to allow the player to do. This applies to all

games, but this claim is mostly targeted at story-games that tell a linear narrative and reduce the player's agency down to binary "choose-your-own-adventure" style choices.

Much of Wreden's goal with *The Stanley Parable* was to explore what I call the Stanley Paradox, and he does so in an unabashedly metafictional way. He takes full advantage of the various strengths and weaknesses of the video game medium to comment on those strengths and weaknesses, and he does so in such a playful yet serious tone that the gamer cannot help but laugh with uncertainty. By acknowledging and exploiting the limitations of games, *The Stanley Parable* succeeds in answering the question of what happens when the player disobeys the narrator.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

I began the last chapter by quoting from an interview Wreden participated in about why he made *The Stanley Parable* and what inspirations drove him to design the game the way he did. I am unable to repeat such an introduction for this chapter because, according to a review by the technology and gaming web publication *Motherboard,* Wreden did not accept any offers for an interview about his new game *The Beginner's Guide* (Maiberg). Those aware of the game's themes would conclude that, despite how unorthodox it seems, such a decision was the most appropriate post-release response Wreden could have made.

Released on October 1, 2015 for Windows, OS X, and Linux; *The Beginner's Guide* is similar to *The Stanley Parable* in many ways but different in many more ways. Like *The Stanley Parable*, it is a first-person exploration game that involves the gamer being guided through a series of interconnected environments by an omnipotent narrator. This time, the narrator is not nameless but rather claims to be the creator of the game himself, Davey Wreden. For the sake of

clarity, I will refer to the narrator as Davey and the real creator of the work as Wreden. Davey begins the game by thanking the gamer for playing *The Beginner's Guide* and explaining what they will be doing together: Davey will guide the gamer through a collection of games allegedly made by one of his friends named Coda in an attempt to try to understand Coda as a person and ultimately foster within the gamer an appreciation for Coda's unique style of game design.

Unlike *The Stanley Parable*, which emphatically prided itself on being an absurdist work of fiction, *The Beginner's Guide* frames itself as a very serious nonfictional account of a real event that transpired between two people, Davey and Coda, between 2008 and 2011. The game makes a great effort to convince the gamer that what they are experiencing is essentially an interactive memoir, a game about the true story of Coda as told through a combination of Coda's works and Davey's personal experiences. In his attempt to persuade the gamer of his story's factual nature, Davey recounts specific facts about Coda and his games, including how the first game Coda made is a map for the real-life video game *Counter-Strike* by Valve Corporation. Davey claims later in the game that he met Coda at a "weekend game jam in Sacramento" which is supposedly Davey's childhood home (*Beginner's Guide*). These details reference real-world games, authors, and events that further support's Davey's narration as genuine and truthful.

The most persuasive aspect of Davey's narrative framing comes from the interactive nature of video games: the gamer is not only told about Coda's games, they get to experience those games for themselves, as if they were learning about a great author by reading that author's original works. Allowing the gamer to directly interact with Coda's games provides *The Beginner's Guide* with a great amount of credibility which makes Davey's narration significantly more believable. By foregrounding the act of playing and directly addressing the gamer before the game even properly begins, the game utilizes metafiction to paradoxically provide the

narrative with a greater sense of realism. The gamer is left with few reasons to suspect Davey or the story he is telling because Davey readily acknowledges *The Beginner's Guide*'s artificiality; he invites the gamer to think of the game in a metafictional way, emphasizing that the point of playing Coda's games is not to experience something fun or immersive but instead to "see past the games themselves" and "get to know who this human being [Coda] really is" (*Beginner's Guide*). The environmental design of the games further corroborates Davey's sincerity, for all of the environments consist of boxy interiors and sharply polygonal architecture. These characteristics suggest both that these games are the work of an amateur and that they were developed with Valve's "Source" game engine, for "Source's" core strength is in the design of boxy play-spaces. Later in the game, Davey confirms that Coda used the "Source" engine, once again using metafictional details to enhance the story's reality. Davey even ends his introduction to the game by displaying his real email address and inviting the gamer to email him their interpretations and thoughts. I argue that the Davey's claims of biographical intent do not confirm his sincerity but rather obscure the work's true metafictional intent, yet to the gamer, Davey's ironic use of metafictional techniques actually enhance the reality of his story, blurring the line between fiction and history rather than making it more overt.

The blending of historical facts and fictional details creates a hyperreal scenario, one in which the gamer is potentially incapable of distinguishing what is real and what is fiction. This ontological problem of what is and is not real exists in many other games as well, such as Hideo Kojima's Cold War action stealth game *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (2004). Zoran Iovanovici wrote for *Gamasutra* how "[r]eferencing so many real life events consequently allows Kojima to intermingle and pass off fictional information as genuine real-world fact" resulting in a "clever form of political criticism, where it is nearly impossible for the average individual to

discern the truth regarding covert operations approved and initiated by political leaders and committees" (Iovanovici). A similar use of hyperreality is present in *The Beginner's Guide*, for it is clear from Coda's revelations near the end of the game that much if not all of Davey's story is either unreliable or outright false.

Before going any further, it is necessary to briefly recount the game's story chronologically to better understand how Davey is unreliable and how much of his story is fictional. Davey guides the gamer through several different levels, each of which Davey claims is a different game that Coda made over the many years they knew each other. As the gamer plays each game, Davey shares with the gamer his personal interpretations of each game, explaining what metaphorical meaning each game's mechanics may have, what each game's symbols potentially represent, and what motivations Coda may have had to make each game.

He claims that all of Coda's games share an overarching narrative that reveals things about Coda himself, equating Coda to a puzzle that needs to be solved through his art. Davey interprets that narrative to be one of a depressed game developer that makes games in a desperate attempt to create a sense of community that is lacking in his life. Davey claims that Coda never shared any of his games with anyone other than him, and because no one can give him validation for his work, Coda becomes incredibly lonely and creates games to express that loneliness. Coda begins to take very long breaks between making games, and eventually he stops making games altogether. Davey, in an attempt to encourage Coda to keep making games, decides to compile Coda's games together and share them with his friends without Coda's permission. Coda, feeling betrayed, stops talking to Davey for several months before emailing a copy of his last game to him. The last game, called "The Tower," proves impossible to beat regularly, so Davey must to

modify the game to make it completable. The end of the game presents a series of messages from Coda addressed to Davey.

These messages reveal that Coda wants to cut all ties with Davey, for Davey did not just share his games without his permission. Davey, believing that Coda's games were not enjoyable and lacked meaning, modified all of Coda's games to have more symbolism as well as making each of them completable. He then shared the games with others and took credit for their creation, effectively claiming ownership of Coda's games to fulfill his own need for social validation. Coda's messages rebuked all of Davey's interpretations about his mental health, claiming that he was never depressed and that Davey had been projecting his own problems onto him and his games. The game ends with Davey overwhelmed with guilt and self-hatred over what he did, eventually leaving the gamer to explore the final level in silence.

Wreden, by placing himself within the story as a fictional narrator, invites the gamer to interpret *The Beginner's Guide* the same way Davey interpreted Coda's games: as a product of Wreden's own personal experiences through which we can understand his emotions and thoughts. To that end, one must view the game not as a memoir of real events nor as a straightforward fictional story but rather but rather as a metafictional allegory for Wreden's personal history and emotions.

The biggest question that arises when one views the story as an allegory is the true identity of Coda. Davey claims that Coda is a friend that he met at a local game jam, and that *The Beginner's Guide* is a collection of Coda's games intended as an apology for Davey's past transgressions. This explanation cannot possibly be true, for not only would releasing Coda's games to the public without his permission be illegal, it would be morally reprehensible to deceive the gamer into participating in his scheme without their knowledgeable consent. A

gamer that takes all of Davey's words seriously would likely feel as if they had unwittingly gotten involved in a shady feud that they want no part in and endeavor to either return the game or criticize Wreden for making it. Therefore, alternative conclusions about Coda's identity must be made.

One conclusion is that Coda is a fictional character. Coda's name, itself, is a hint at his artificiality, for it possesses significant potential for symbolic meaning. Phonetically, the name Coda is pronounced similarly to the word "coder," which suggests Coda does not represent a single person but rather a group of people associated with creating video games. This interpretation implies that the game is intended to make judgements on the wider world of video game development, for it generalizes Coda's games and thoughts to represent the thoughts of game developers as a whole. If Coda represents game developers, then Davey represents outside forces that influence the development of games, such as game publishers, critics, and fans. The conflict that arises between Coda and Davey draws parallels to the conflict between the artistic integrity of a game, as intended by the creator, and the voices of business and consumer expectations that risk compromising that integrity. In chapter seven, Davey explains how this conflict relates to himself and Coda, claiming, "This is something he and I used to argue about a lot, you know, whether a game ought to actually be playable, whether it means anything if no one can get through it, and I would always defend that, you know, all this work goes into the game, why not make it playable and accessible?" *(Beginner's Guide*). Unlike Davey, Coda believes that a game does not need to be accessible nor even enjoyable for it to be of worth, a philosophy that is made apparent through many of his games. This dichotomy of ideals is the source of a game developer's inner struggle to balance their original vision with expectations of those that will eventually consume the final game. Should a developer compromise their artistic

intentions to reach a larger audience? Coda deals with this problem himself, first creating a generic first-person shooter as shown in the first chapter, for such a genre is what many gamers are familiar with, and eventually foregoing the familiar in favor of the experimental. Despite Coda's temporary escape from outside pressures, Davey's eventual appropriation of Coda's work implies that the conflict between the coder and the gamer, between the artist and the critic, is impossible to avoid.

Instead of game developers in general, Coda could also represent one aspect of Wreden's own person, thus both Davey and Coda represent two sides of their creator. Details that support this interpretation largely come from a blog post Wreden wrote on the Galactic Café blog a few months after *The Stanley Parable*'s release. Wreden claims that he became depressed following the game's success, for although he received a significant amount of praise, he became dependent on that praise to sustain his self-esteem and his pride towards his work. Emails from fans, journalists, and fellow developers became so frequent that he was overwhelmed and ultimately isolated himself for a short time to recover. He explains his mental state at the time:

> "I tried, I did the best I knew how to do, but after a certain point the many little requests added up and their collective weight broke my back. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't talk to more people. . .. Every time I turned to someone else's opinion of the game, I felt less sure of my own opinion of it. I began to forget why I liked the game. I was losing the thing I had created" ("Game of the Year").

These self-conscious feelings, originating from his insatiable need for external validation, surface again once gaming news outlets began giving their game of the year awards, and *The Stanley Parable* was frequently nominated. According to a comic accompanying the blog post, Wreden feverishly monitored game journalism sites hoping to discover that his game won an

award; however, whenever the game did receive an award, rather than feel any sense of excitement or pride, Wreden only experienced temporary relief over not having failed to win. Wreden characterizes himself as an addict of validation, likening his actions to "drinking to solve the problem of being an alcoholic" (Game of the Year).

Wreden's post-release depression is largely personified by Davey and his own insecurities about external validation. In the epilogue of *The Beginner's Guide*, Davey claims that he does not understand how someone can live life without a constant need for external validation, he "actually cannot conceive of what that would be like!" (*Beginner's Guide*). Although many of Coda's game seem to indicate that Coda suffered through similar experiences, his messages to Davey at the end of the game reveal that Davey's interpretations represented Davey and his life more than Coda's. Coda claims that he was never depressed but instead simply experienced temporary difficulties while he made games. He tells Davey in the epilogue, "The fact that you think I am frustrated or broken says more about you than about me" *(Beginner's Guide*). Davey's apparent projection of himself onto Coda's work reveals how Davey was the one that experienced depression and acute loneliness; thus, Davey personifies Wreden's post-release mindset. Where Coda's characteristics do overlap with Wreden's, however, is when Coda struggles to retain ownership of his own games. Coda's messages reveal that Davey did not just share Coda's games, he altered their contents and took credit for their creation. The transfer of authorship from Coda to Davey mirrors the transfer of authorship Wreden felt when discussing *The Stanley Parable* with others, indicated when Wreden states, "I was losing the thing I had created" (Game of the Year). As more people told Wreden about what *The Stanley Parable* meant to them, he felt his grasp over the game loosen, as if he and his intentions became irrelevant after the game's release.

One can find similar interpretations on game community forums such as the game's community page on *Steam* and journalistic reviews of the game such as those on *Motherboard* and *Gamespot*. Indeed, one could argue that interpreting the game's many elusive messages is more fun than actually playing the game. However, just as *The Stanley Parable* expects gamers to disobey the narrator, *The Beginner's Guide* expects gamers to analyze and interpret it; the game expects gamers to follow Davey's example and try to solve it, despite Davey's failure acting as a warning against such an act. The game does not refute the validity of those interpretations, but rather it exploits the gamer's desire for meaning to make a larger, metafictional point about the act of interpreting itself.

A closer examination of Davey's role in the game reveals this deeper intent. Davey is not a simple narrator: he is an interpretive one. He not only guides the gamer through Coda's games and recounts his history with Coda, he actively manipulates the gamer's experience with the games by interpreting each of them for the gamer, as if he were giving the gamer the answers to the problem that is Coda. In doing so, Davey serves the role of a critic, analyzing each of the games as the gamer traverses through them and sharing his findings with the gamer whether they want him to or not. Rather than acting as a historian, he is fulfilling the same role that I am fulfilling right now by writing this paper: he is practicing literary criticism on games, and Coda does not appreciate it. Therefore, *The Beginner's Guide* is not just about a single game developer or the process of game development, it is about video game analysis and the unsolvable epistemological problems that plague it.

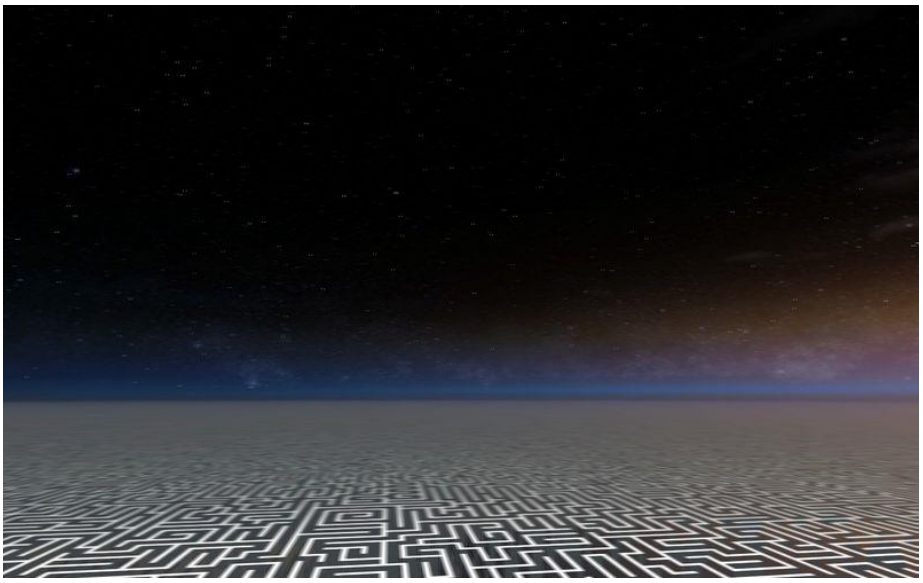
With Coda's revelation that Davey's words cannot be trusted, suddenly the hyperreality of the game works in the opposite direction. At the beginning of the game, Davey's forthcoming tone towards the gamer allowed the metafictional intent of the game to paradoxically reinforce

the reality of his narrative. Davey effectively mixed fictional elements with historical details to obscure the fictitiousness of his story; fictional elements bled into historical details so seamlessly that the gamer is likely to confuse fiction for reality. With Coda's messages comes a new perspective, one that perpetuates the indistinguishable relationship between history and fiction but in a way that paints Davey as wholly untrustworthy. Suddenly the gamer is compelled to distrust everything Davey has said throughout the game, including the allegedly true historical details about his relationship with Coda. The gamer is now likely to confuse reality for fiction, for the gamer is incapable of knowing how much of Davey's story is true and how much he fabricated or altered; Coda does not destroy the game's hyperreality, he reverses it.

With this new perspective, the game focuses on the epistemological problem of the gamer: how can someone make any meaningful conclusions about a game when there is so much about the game that the gamer is incapable of knowing? Davey jumped to conclusions about Coda's person that ultimately resulted in Davey ruining their friendship. This detail suggests that the game is warning the gamer to avoid making the same mistakes Davey did when making their own conclusions about *The Beginner's Guide*. Although the game warns against making incorrect interpretations, it also does not provide any hint to the existence of a single correct interpretation. On the contrary, the game actively argues that there is no correct interpretation that the gamer can come to because the very act of analyzing games to discover a deeper meaning is an incomplete and ultimately fruitless endeavor.

The most significant symbol related to this argument comes in the form of the various labyrinths found throughout several chapters of the game. The game is separated into seventeen chapters, and each chapter focuses on one game made by Coda. The sixth chapter of the game, named "Puzzle," involves the gamer walking down a small corridor, solving a door puzzle, and

reaching a dead end. Davey then modifies the game to remove the walls of the corridor, revealing a vast labyrinth of corridors that would be otherwise inaccessible to the gamer. Davey ends the chapter by sharing his interpretation of the game, stating, "most of the time you don't get to know what you're missing, or even that you're missing anything, that's not your role as a player. So if your role here is not to understand, then what is it?" (*Beginners' Guide*). A similar labyrinth appears at the very end of the game's epilogue, however this time it is a two-dimensional labyrinth that stretches into the horizon (see figure 2). Two other labyrinths of less significance also exist, one in chapter one and another in chapter sixteen. The first labyrinth is easy to solve, while the one in chapter sixteen is not only invisible but also impossible to solve.



The labyrinth at the end of the game that stretches out into the horizon (Chapter 17).

The repetition of labyrinths throughout the game emphasizes the gamer's role of not understanding. When Davey asks what the role of the gamer is if it is not to understand, he is unwittingly answering the question by asking it: the role of the gamer is to not understand. Coda and the game as a whole argues that not only is this the gamer's role, it is the only mode of

thought a gamer can possibly have. Extending this thought beyond games and into the literary world, I must bring attention to Roland Barthes and his famous critical essay "The Death of the Author." Barthes's critical attitude towards an authorially-centered approach to criticism mirrors the attitude Coda communicates in his messages to Davey along with the labyrinths.

Two aspects of Barthes's original argument are present in Coda's own philosophy on games and game design. First, a reader or gamer's interpretation of a work will always be incomplete, for the work's accessible content only conveys a small fraction of the ideas and thoughts that went into the development of the finished work. The labyrinths mentioned earlier represent this idea most clearly: beyond the small confines of the game's playable space is a much larger, inaccessible exterior world that provides the larger picture of the game and its creator. No matter how much a critic may discover about a work or its author, there will always be many more details that would potentially change a critic's conclusions if only those details were accessible. The situation is like Plato's allegory of the cave, except the gamer is never able to leave the cave that is the playable space without directly modifying the game's rules (and even then, the gamer would still have only a fraction of the game's whole history, for artifacts of the game's development are often absent in the final game's complete contents, accessible or not).

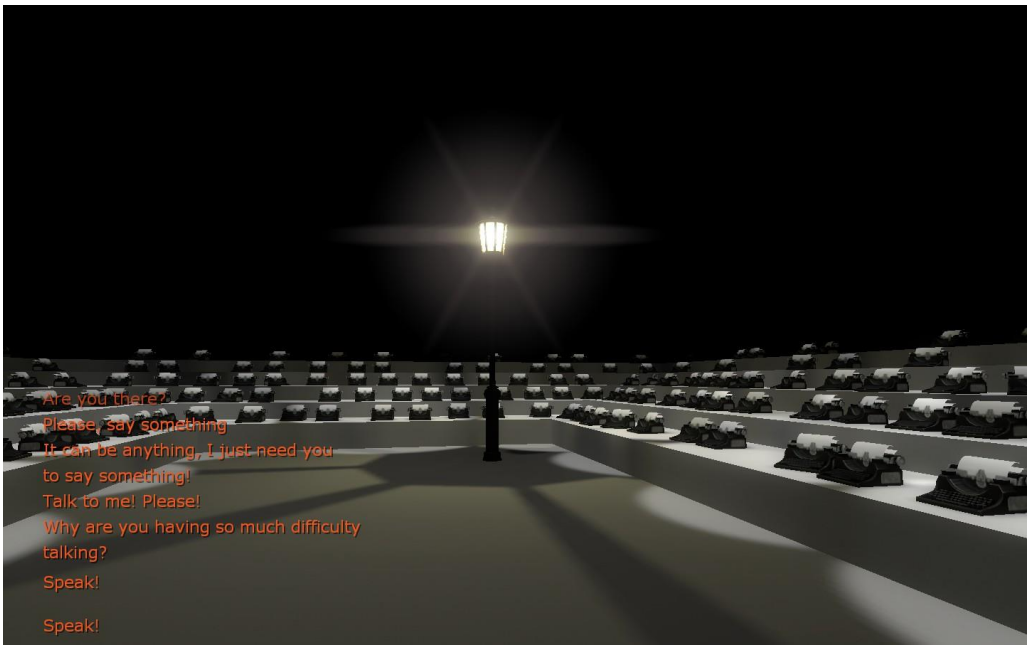
This inability to know comes from the second aspect of Barthes's original argument, that of the critic's obsession with authorial intent. Rather than seeing a work as a medium through which one can develop meaning on a personal level, Davey perceives Coda's works as a means to understand the person behind it, and thus he endeavors to discover what Coda may have intended each game to mean. The autobiographical conventions tempt gamers to pursue this "metaphysics of presence." Critics like Davey argue that the only correct interpretation is that of the author's, for no one can know a work and its themes better than the one that created the work

in the first place. Critics like Davey use the author's biographical information and psychological profile to determine the "true" meaning behind a work's various metaphors, symbols, and motifs. The problem, however, is that the critic potentially risks overanalyzing and misrepresenting the work, ascribing meaning to symbols and objects that may not have had any intentional purpose, or making presumptuous conclusions about the creator. In Davey's case, he observed that Coda seems obsessed with prisons, for he created several games all set within different prison environments. Davey interpreted these prisons as symbols of Coda's depression: the prison represents Coda's feelings of being trapped in a space of isolation and loneliness, a space also devoid of the creativity and passion he once had for making games. After reading Coda's messages at the end of the game, Davey contemplates whether Coda was ever actually depressed, wondering aloud in the epilogue, "Maybe he just likes making prisons" (*Beginner's Guide*). Davey believed in his own interpretations so much that he told his friends that Coda was depressed, demonstrating just how fully Davey believed in his incomplete thoughts.

Davey may be correct in his assertion that a developer's games are reflections of their character, for even if Coda simply enjoyed making prison games for no reason other than enjoyment, the gamer at least comes away from the game learning that much about him. Where Davey failed, however, was in how overly confident he was in his interpretation's accuracy to what Coda originally intended. Without direct access to the creator's mind, or without discussing the works with the creator, a critic cannot make any interpretations with any amount of certainty over its accuracy, thus defeating the point of searching for the most correct, most intended interpretation. The game's labyrinth imagery underscores this epistemological frustration that poststructuralism calls "mise en abyme:" to be a gamer here is to be in a labyrinth without

beginning or end, to be placed, as it were 'into abyss." Such is the postmodern search for authenticity.

Yet despite all of this evidence that seems to suggest Coda's support of "The Death of the Author," Coda's actions also imply that he directly opposes it. Coda's frustrations with Davey stem largely from Davey misinterpreting his games; Coda claims in his messages that Davey would only be satisfied with his games if he could discover some greater meaning behind them, and he admits that he may have included solutions to his games not for himself but because of Davey's influence. Coda seems to be content making games without solutions or thematic meaning, and it is Davey's insistence that such games were not good enough that drove the two of them apart. As stated earlier, in chapter seven Davey explains that his philosophy on games demands that a game be both accessible to the gamer as well as meaningful, otherwise games are neither entertaining nor useful. Davey is uncompromising in his philosophy on game design, so much so that he takes Coda's games and adds elements to them that make them more playable and meaningful, the most obvious example being the lamppost that signifies the end of each game after chapter six (see figure 3). By modifying Coda's games to be more meaningful, Davey effectively claims ownership over the games, betraying Coda's own philosophy and going against his wishes.



One of the lamppost Davey adds to Coda's games that acts as a goalpost (Chapter 8).

By interpreting Coda's games, and by modifying them to reinforce those interpretations, Davey ironically practices Barthes's teachings: he separates the author from his work so completely that he claims himself to be the new author. By attempting to understand Coda through his games, Davey paradoxically obsesses over the author's intentions while also acting in direct opposition to those intentions. Coda does not want people to understand his games: he designs many of them to be completely unbeatable or incomprehensible. Several times throughout *The Beginner's Guide*, Davey must modify the games to make them completable in a reasonable manner; one game requires the gamer to wait in a locked jail cell for over an hour before being released, and Davey simply lets the gamer out immediately. Coda's games were originally only intended to be played by himself, and instances like the jail cell make this very apparent. To Coda, the role of the gamer is to not understand, so Davey's insistence on understanding Coda and his games directly conflicts with Coda's intentions. If Davey truly cared

about authorial intent, he would have refrained from searching for any deeper meaning behind Coda's games, for he never intended for anyone to find meaning in them in the first place. Conversely, if Coda truly believed in the death of the author, he would not take issue with Davey's interpretations and instead allow Davey to freely ascribe meaning to whatever he wanted.

Although the game fails to reconcile its seemingly contradictory attitude towards video game criticism, one could argue that such a lack of understanding actually serves to enhance the themes of the game. The game's refusal to provide the gamer with any clear, universal answers mirrors Coda's attitude towards meaning. Just as with Coda's games, *The Beginner's Guide* is a game that actively fights against interpretation, or at the very least, it fights against the idea of one "true" interpretation grounded in authorial intention. Its metafictional layers, hyperreal narrative, and unreliable characters all serve to befuddle the gamer and dissuade from any definitive interpretation. One would have to be in an odd state of mind to try to make sense of this game, for it is a game that argues for all sides simultaneously. Coda's condemnation of Davey for his erroneous interpretations both supports and defies the death of the author. Davey claims that he wants to share the true story of his relationship with Coda, yet he deliberately leaves out details concerning his modification of Coda's games, compromising the entire story's veracity. Davey's failure to understand Coda implies that video games are not an effective medium of communication, yet *The Beginner's Guide*'s success at arguing for both sides, effectively conveying the merits and drawbacks of various warring ideologies, proves that video games are perfectly capable of communicating ideas. The game actively fights against interpretation, yet Wreden's refusal to take any interviews leaves the game wide open for interpretations to proliferate.

The game's lack of a consistent identity is perhaps its most important tool for communicating its themes. By revealing its own lack of understanding about itself, a decision potentially inspired by Wreden's own lack of understanding of himself and his past need for external validation, it embodies the themes that it argues and expands them to go beyond the confines of video game criticism into art criticism and even one's personal identity. It is a Janus-faced game arguing for the Janus-faced nature of interpretation, communication, and identity.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Wreden's games tackle serious ontological and epistemological questions in playful and personal ways, not only in service to the world of postmodernist thought but also in service to the advancement of video games as an artistic medium. *The Stanley Parable*, by burying the gamer in a mountain of choices, reveals the limitations of games attempting to simultaneously deliver a linear narrative and cater to a gamer's desire for personal agency. The game argues for what it considers the ontological reality of free will: when presented with a choice, although a gamer may perceive themselves as having a meaningful impact on the game's narrative, those perceptions are ultimately deceitful, for the pre-programmed nature of computer software along with the scripted nature of linear narratives restrict games from allowing narrative free will. Greater degrees of free will, in the form of long-lasting cause and effect sequences, are ironically only possible in games with less of an emphasis on narrative, however even these games can never allow a level of freedom only possible in reality: to be in a video game is to be the subject of an inescapable determined system, and an acknowledgement of this limitation is necessary to provide stronger gaming experiences. *The Beginner's Guide*, on the other hand, buries the gamer in a mountain of contradictory messages in order to raise questions about the epistemological

limitations of video game criticism. What a gamer can know from a game's content is necessarily insufficient to satisfy their desire to understand a game and its intended purpose. The game's emphasis on this problem of not knowing reveals how gaming culture is following a similar path to preceding artistic media, a path defined by a crisis of identity largely explained in postmodernist and post-structuralist texts such as Barthe's "The Death of the Author." Thus, the game focuses not on the limits of games themselves but rather of gaming culture, limits that must either be solved or accepted in a similar fashion to other art cultures.

Wreden's games are just two small examples in a much larger movement of metafictional video game narratives. Metafictional games have existed since the earliest years of the medium's existence, with Warren Robinett's 1979 game *Adventure* containing arguable the first instance of a metafictional moment in the form of hidden credits that the player must discover (Consalvo 152). Other notable examples of early metafictional games include Remedy's *Max Payne* (2001), Konami's *Metal Gear Solid 2* (2001), et al. However, in the past two years metafictional games have experienced a significant surge of popularity and prevalence within gaming culture, a surge largely caused by experimental independent video game developers that were previously unable to easily develop or publish their works in the 2000s. Excluding Wreden's games, notable examples of contemporary metafictional games include Toby Fox's *Undertale* (2015), Question's *The Magic Circle* (2015), Daniel Mullins's *Pony Island* (2016), Shanghai FantaBlade's *_iCEY._* (2016), et al. I encourage researchers of metafictional or postmodern games to play and study all of these games; not only do they pose interesting questions about various aspects of their own medium, they are also simply fun to play. More importantly, these games have collectively enabled current gaming culture to exhibit a greater sense of postmodern awareness, one that leads to questions of how video games are defined and what limits they have

as artistic forms of expression. These questions lead consumers, developers, and publishers to a greater understanding of what video games do well in terms of both entertainment and art, allowing for the development of better games and game narratives. They also expose the current limitations of games, facilitating developers' efforts to innovate and experiment with what games can be, both by playing with those limitations in interesting was such as with *The Stanley Parable* and player choice, or by finding ways to solve those limitations with new technologies, systems, and narrative techniques. Advancements such as these serve to greatly benefit the video game industry and its consumers, and it is through metafictional games such as Wreden's and the study of those games that these advancements may come much more quickly than in years past.

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[1] I exclude the first criterion from my suggestion because, although studying the potential metafictional elements of older games would undoubtedly prove useful in furthering our understanding of video game narratives throughout gaming's whole history, such an ambitious goal is beyond the scope of this study.