



MONASH University

Choices Matter: The Mechanics of Choice in Interactive Narrative

Antranig Arek Sarian

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Abstract

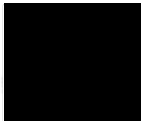
“You come across a branching path, what do you do?” – Choices like this have become a popular part of contemporary games culture. From branching dialogue to moral dilemmas, choices are now treated as a mainstream, marketable and necessary feature to be included in a variety of games. From interactive authoring tools such as Twine, to mass-market AAA titles such as *The Witcher 3* (2015), they are now ubiquitous within the games market. Yet despite this mainstream success and demand there is little understanding of what choices are supposed to communicate, nor how they are meant to be used. Controversies such as the response to the ending of Bioware’s *Mass Effect 3* (2012) or to the narrative structure found in Telltale Games’ *The Walking Dead* (2013) have created a specific accusation, that choices in these games quite often “don’t matter”.

This thesis responds to the contemporary fixation on ‘choice’. Through close readings of 4 separate interactive narratives, I create an understanding of choice which examines its aesthetic qualities and modes of expression. *Choices Matter* creates a terminology that articulates how choices behave expressively as both literary and ludic devices, and how they can best be used to optimise their aesthetic qualities. This includes a choice-craft spectrum between two poles ranging from the *didactic* to the *exploratory* with the *reflective* lying in the middle. Chapters 1 and 2 analyse *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and the hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl* (1995) respectively, with each being used as a springboard from which the *didactic* and *exploratory* choice can be examined. Chapter 3 then examines the Telltale model of *reflective* choices through a close analysis of *The Walking Dead: Season 2 Episode 5 “No Going Back”* (2013). Chapter 4 is a close reading of Lucas Pope’s *Papers, Please* (2013) and examines how it uses *reflective* choices and accumulated memory to create an image of the player – which this thesis calls the *expressed self*. The game then comments upon the player’s *expressed self*, and in doing so fully exploits the unique expressive qualities of the choice. Through this, *Choices Matter* adds much needed clarity to the contemporary debate surrounding choices, and suggests a way forward in their use and implementation.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature.

Print Name: Antranig Sarian

Date: 17/08/2018

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Introduction

The essential characteristic of what is termed interactivity in relation to the computer game is that it must watch the reader.

Barry Atkins, *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as a Fictional Form* (2003)¹

The rise of interactive choice in contemporary literature has created the potential for unique kinds of aesthetic experience. Thought-experiments, *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebooks, hypertext novels, Twine, and roleplaying games all employ this relatively recent device. The choice commonly presents a chooser with a narrative dilemma, often in second-person mode of address, before presenting a series of options. In the *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebooks of the 1980s, a reader would commonly be asked “what do you do?” before turning to a specified page based on their diegetic decision.

The following example, taken from Ian Livingstone’s gamebook *Fighting Fantasy: City of Thieves* (1983) is emblematic of a typical choice in the game:

The archway leads into a large room in the centre of which crouches a human-like creature, some three metres tall. The lumps on his face are the distinguishing marks of an Ogre. Will you:

Attempt to speak with him?

Turn to 264

¹ Atkins, Barry. *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*. Manchester; Manchester UP. 2003. p. 146
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Attack him with your sword?

Turn to 140

Leave the house to head north?

Turn to 282²

Assuming the role of an adventurer, the reader must choose how they wish to respond to the ogre, and then turn to the page indicated. The narrative branches off into different directions based on the path that they choose. This choice stands in contrast to the type of decisions that players and readers make in games and linear narrative respectively. A player of *Tetris* or *Pac-Man* may make many ‘twitch’ based decisions that focus more on fast-reflex skill and the accomplishment of goals, whereas this *City of Thieves* choice encourages contemplation on the part of the reader. Similarly, this choice is different from the types of decisions that readers make when reading a linear narrative, such as skipping segments of text or filling in interpretive blanks. The *City of Thieves* choice, by contrast, has an impact on the events which follow. The chooser in *City of Thieves* considers both ludic and literary elements while making their decision. In this sense, the choice featured in *City of Thieves* lies within the domain of what Astrid Ensslin labels the “literary game”.³

The choice represents a midway point between the pedagogical didacticism of gameplay, and the interpretive freedom of narrative. It is in this mid-space, what Espen Aarseth might term a ‘creamy middle’,⁴ between gameplay and narrative, in which the opportunity arises for a unique form of aesthetic expression called the *reflective choice*. These choices present the chooser with an opportunity to explore themselves, to be confronted with an internal conflict, and to play this out in the ludo-narrative space of the choice. The choice is central to the rise of the ‘literary game’ – a hybrid media form which Astrid Ensslin argues lies between the ‘ludic’ and ‘literary’ (or ‘L-L’)

² Livingstone, Ian. *Fighting Fantasy: City of Thieves*. London: Wizard Books. ed. 2010. 1983. p. 178

³ Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2014. p. 1

⁴ Aarseth, Espen. ‘A Narrative Theory of Games’. *FDG '12 Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. New York: ACM. 2012. pp. 129-133. p. 132

poles of expression.⁵ This thesis argues that the choice is best placed to communicate what William Faulkner, speaking of literature generally, describes as the “the human heart in conflict with itself”,⁶ a narrative theme which explores the inner conflicts of characters who are ordinarily externalised from readers, but which gains new life when readers can explore the conflicts that exist within *themselves* directly and personally. The choice encourages this through a unique configuration – it can create an *expressed self* of the chooser, and then present it back to them for evaluation. In effect, the chooser becomes a subject of themselves, creating room for unique forms of catharsis. If Aarseth frames narrative as oriented towards the “Other” and games as oriented towards the “Self”,⁷ then the reflective choice forms the ideal fusion of both gameplay and narrative, a space wherein the chooser may learn more about the self in relation to the other. The reflective choice has been partially explored by Miguel Sicart in his book *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (2013) through what he calls the ‘wicked choice’.⁸ Similarly, Ensslin has observed that the ‘choice’ becomes more potent when the literary and ludic poles of expression are balanced against one another – but has not explored the choice itself in depth.⁹ This thesis takes the notion of a ‘wicked choice’ and extends it, looking at the ways many such choices can operate in tandem to communicate something unique to choosers. With the rising popularity of choices in contemporary video games, and the advance of mainstream augmented and virtual reality technology, an elaboration of choice-craft can help to inform the design of current and future interactive narrative experiences, so that they can better express the meanings that they are ideally situated to communicate.

⁵ Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. p. 1

⁶ Faulkner, William. “Banquet Speech”. *Nobel Banquet*. City Hall in Stockholm. December 10th. 1950.

⁷ Aarseth, Espen. “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation”. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2004. pp. 45-55. p. 50

⁸ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2013. pp. 105-106

⁹ Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. pp. 48-49

The Choice: Freedom or Tyranny?

Much of the prior literature on interactivity and choice has falsely conceptualised choice as bestowing “freedom” on readers and players, while narrative is posited as restrictive and in some cases even tyrannical. It is in fact frequently the other way around: narrative brings interpretive freedom for readers, while gameplay brings with it a reductively didactic and pedagogical logic. Most examples of this rhetoric regarding the ‘liberation’ of interactivity can be found within first-generation hypertext literary theory. Early scholars of electronic literature argued that choice, multiple paths and reader interactivity brought freedom from what they perceived as the ‘tyranny’ of linear, author-directed narrative. For example, George Landow argues in the first edition of his influential book *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992) that multiple paths in a text bring freedom for readers both because they allow readers to take “over some of the writer’s role and function” and then, because readers guide the direction of the narrative, to “choose which possibility, if any, to accept”. Landow believes that this allows readers to discover that “no true single narrative exists as the main or “right” one” and that “traditional narrative has brainwashed them into expecting and demanding a simple right answer and a single correct storyline.”¹⁰ For Landow, freedom and power arise from determining the direction of narrative events, with co-authorship between the reader and author resulting in literary equality.¹¹ Michael Joyce makes a similar argument in his book *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics* (1995) where he argues that hypertext challenges the binary distinction between readers and writers. He argues that this happens because readers in an interactive text “not only choose the order of what they read but, in doing so, also alter its form by their

¹⁰ Landow, George P. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP. 1992. pp. 108-109

¹¹ *ibid.* pp. 95-100

choices.”¹² Jay David Bolter, in another highly influential first-wave theoretical work *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (1991), makes a distinction between what he sees as the top-down and hierarchical nature of the linear text, and the more anarchist vision of hypertext literature where instead of the author as “an intimidating figure” there exists a relationship where “the reader helps to make the text”. Instead of a “great chain of being” between author and reader where the text acts as a “substitute for religious revelation”,¹³ Bolter hoped for a text which would instead provide a “network of interdependent species and systems”.¹⁴

Outside of hypertext theory – early ludologists such as Aarseth created similar conceptualisations to that of the early hypertext theorists. Aarseth, in his essay ‘Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation’ (2004) contrasts gameplay with narrative, arguing that games are,

[T]he hermeneutic Other of narratives; the alternative mode of discourse, bottom up and emergent where stories are top-down and preplanned. In simulations, knowledge and experience is created by the player's actions and strategies, rather than recreated by a writer or moviemaker.¹⁵

In all of these instances it is assumed that to be ‘free’ in narrative is to be able to control the direction of the plot, to be a ‘co-author’, to be partially responsible for the sequence of events.

Within this framework, to be a passive recipient watching a linear narrative unfold is the epitome

¹² Joyce, Michael. *Of Two Minds: Hypertext Pedagogy and Poetics*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. 1995. pp. 19-20

¹³ Bolter, Jay David. *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. 1991. pp. 161-162

¹⁴ In later years, hypertext theorists backed away from some of their more extreme claims, with Robert Coover eventually conceding that hypertext theory had entered a “Silver Age” that was characterised by a “retreat from radical visions” in Coover, Robert. “Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age”. *Digital Arts and Culture*. Atlanta, Georgia. 29 October 1999. Keynote Address.

¹⁵ Aarseth, Espen. “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation”. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2004. pp. 45-55. p. 52

of narrative disempowerment. The problem with this perspective is that it misrepresents what is important about narrative. The loci of meaning in narrative is not with the events themselves, but with what they communicate. To be free in a narrative context is to be able to interpret meaning in ways that the author did not intend. For interactivity, then, to add something to the literary realm, it needs to make a marked difference in how the reader *interprets* the text, not just in how the events unfold. Interactivity can provide this, but understanding how it does so involves conceptualising the role of 'freedom' and reader interpretation in the realm of narrative with greater precision.

Opponents of hypertext literature, rather than challenging the conceptualisation of 'linear narrative as tyranny', instead argued that narrative requires an element of 'tyranny' in order to be enjoyable. Scholars and writers such as Michel Chaouli¹⁶, Laura Miller¹⁷, Anne Mangen and Adriaan van der Weel¹⁸ have argued that much of the enjoyment of narrative arises from its 'authoritarian' nature. These arguments typically emphasise the need for narrative events to be 'fixed' so that they reader can properly enjoy and interpret them, and the joy that arrives when an external author with a different mind engages with the reader on a personal level. These perspectives call upon the joy triggered by an author that, to quote Chaouli, is 'playing with our minds'.¹⁹

Voices and perspectives exist which challenge this perspective, but they are fragmented both across disciplines and in the content of their message. What all of these dissenting voices agree on is the importance of private, interpretive freedom, free from the gaze of the author. Lev Manovich in his much-cited *The Language of New Media* (2001) argues that interaction can give a text the ability to 'standardize' a reader, to regulate the private psychological process of

¹⁶ Chaouli, Michel. "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?". *Critical Inquiry*. No. 31. Spring 2005. pp. 599-617

¹⁷ Miller, Laura. "Bookend; www.claptrap.com". *New York Times*. March 15, 1998. Web. n.p

¹⁸ Mangen, Anne; Van der Weel, Adriaan. 'Why don't we read hypertext novels?'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 2015. pp. 1-16

¹⁹ Chaouli, Michel. "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?". p. 599

interpretation, and to move the reader to 'mistake the mind of the author for their own'.²⁰ In a similar vein, though writing decades earlier, the German reader response theorist Wolfgang Iser stresses the equality between readers and authors in the printed, linear text. Iser argues that the meaning of a text is constructed via a two-sided process, in which the reader actively interprets the text before them, filling in the blanks, before using their imagination to bring the text to life.²¹ In the area of ludology, a major school of thought articulated and developed by Ian Bogost in his two books *Unit Operations* (2006) and *Persuasive Games* (2007) is that of proceduralism. Proceduralism argues that games develop meaning by embedding a didactic lesson into their rules. Through the process of learning a games rules, players internalise this embedded set of morals.²²²³ This school of thought – knowingly or not – takes Manovich's warning of 'standardisation' and glamorises it, arguing that it is that which makes games uniquely expressive in contrast to narrative. The potential for the ludic elements of the choice to punish, control and exert force upon the player is the common element within such scholarship. By making the internalisation of the designer's message integral to success, choices create the capacity to read how the player is responding to the text, and to then punish them for forming 'false' or divergent interpretations. The narrative implication of the choice is that it makes it possible for a text to see how the reader is interpreting the text – or at the very least – provides the illusion that they are being watched.

It is the rhetoric of *seeing* the chooser, to save their choices within the code of a text and to then respond, that brings about the coercive force of the choice. Barry Atkins elaborates upon

²⁰ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA, England: The MIT Press. 2001. pp. 57-61

²¹ Iser, Wolfgang. 'Interaction between Text and Reader'. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. ed. Sulemain; Susan K; Crossman, Inge. New Jersey: Princeton UP. 1980. p. 30

²² Bogost, Ian. *Unit operations: An approach to videogame criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2006.

²³ Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The expressive power of videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2007.

this phenomena in his book *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as a Fictional Form* (2003), where he makes the following observation:

To borrow a basic understanding of how we view objects from the work of Jacques Lacan, what we have here....is the object gazing back at us. It is watching us watching it. We do not simply 'look' [at] or 'gaze' or 'watch' the unfolding text, but the text is watching us in a way that can only have the potential to disturb in our age of increasing technological surveillance. **The essential characteristic of what is termed interactivity in relation to the computer game is that it must watch the reader** [emphasis added]...The text we read watches us over time, it presents the illusion of 'knowing' us as we come to 'know' it, of 'reading' us as we 'read' it. The player...is being textualised by the game, rendered into binary code that represents our action of reading in a way that means that our textual selves might be recorded, transmitted and replicated. We are not only given authorial responsibility by the interactive text, but we are becoming the textual subject.²⁴

Atkins describes here what Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison* (1977) would articulate as a panoptic power relation. In the interactive text, the chooser's view of the whole text is obscured in so far as the consequences of their choice are never fully knowable in advance. Within gameplay, the goal is to 'win', and yet the correct path to victory is not fully known or understood. As such, each time the chooser encounters a choice they are both reading the text, while also trying to discern what the text expects of them. In this way, the text has perfect knowledge of the reader; it knows every decision that they have made and could make. The *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel knows exactly which sequence of choices the reader has made based on their precise location within the text, and punishes or rewards them accordingly. In a computer game, statistics, flags and other ludic signifiers create a virtual footprint

²⁴ Atkins, Barry. *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*. p. 146

of the player's path through the text. Foucault describes power-relations as a dynamic in which a subject is placed under surveillance, arguing that:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.²⁵

For the chooser in an interactive text, the knowledge that their actions are being watched by the text moves them to consider what the text expects of them: its dictums, morality, and pedagogical logic. Jesper Juul argues in *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005) that one of the essential elements of games is a 'valorization of outcome'²⁶, where the player tries to 'win' the game. In the context of the choice, this allows a text to, in Foucault's words, 'discipline' the chooser, giving them unfavourable or 'losing' outcomes as a punishment for choosing incorrectly. As such, the capacity for an interactive text to watch and then punish a chooser is essentially tied up with its ludic elements. The stronger these ludic elements become, the less the choice becomes a free interpretive process, and the more it becomes one of internalising the choosee's intended message.

This indicates two extreme forms of choice-craft that constitute poles for the present discussion: the *didactic* and the *exploratory* choice. Didactic choices are those in which there exists a clear 'correct' choice, and in which the text has a valorised win-state that can only be accessed by choosing correctly. Exploratory choices, by contrast, have a much stronger narrative bias. These choices have no inherent correct or incorrect answer, and are instead a method by which a

²⁵ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Sheridan, Alan. London: Penguin Books. ed. 1991. 1977. pp. 202-203

²⁶ Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2005. p. 44

chooser can explore different parts of a multifaceted narrative. The didactic choice marks a descent into the pure pedagogy of gameplay, while the exploratory choice risks feeling aimless. The *reflective* choice, which lies in at the mid-point between the two extremes, still provides consequences such that the chooser feels that they are being watched by an implied choosee. However, what constitutes a 'win' state is determined by the chooser, and the choices themselves contain enough ambiguity that they encourage internal contemplation on the part of the chooser. The effect is that the chooser becomes a subject of themselves; the player or reader watches themselves as they choose, and ideally, see themselves anew. This choice-spectrum can be considered a 'zooming in' of Astrid Ensslin's "L-L" spectrum which was introduced earlier from *Literary Gaming*. Ensslin defines the broader hybrid form of literary gaming as spanning a spectrum from the "ludic" to "literary".²⁷ At the centre of her spectrum lies what she labels "interactive fiction" and she places many choice-heavy games within this area, including the experimental *Façade* (2005) and Aaron A. Reed's *Blue Lacuna: An Interactive Novel* (2000).²⁸ Hypertext novels – which this thesis' second chapter will define as primarily embodying the narrativist *exploratory choice* - is considered to lie slightly more towards the "literary" end of Ensslin's "L-L" spectrum. As such, the *exploratory-didactic* spectrum deployed by this thesis can be considered a refinement of Ensslin's spectrum, spanning from hypertext novels on the literary end, and with 'interactive fiction' and the reflective choice constituting its mid-point.

²⁷ Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. pp. 44-45

²⁸ Ibid. pp. 48-49

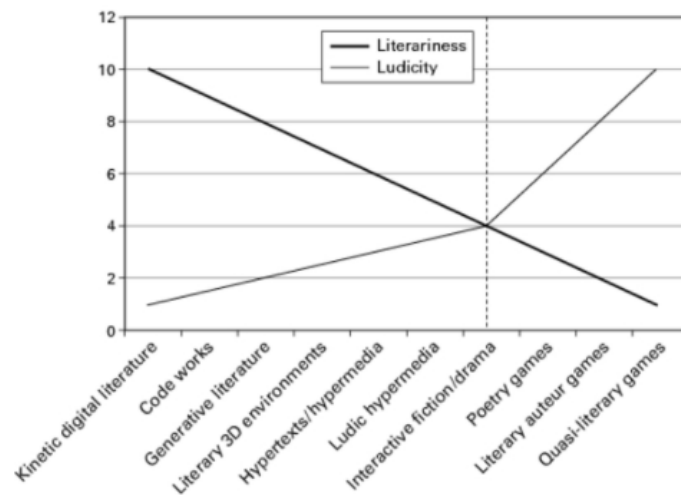


Figure 1: Ensslin's L-L spectrum

The demand for choices that serve a function beyond achieving a ludic win-state – or beyond simply behaving as a novel literary device - has become particularly loud in the past decade. Games culture has seen the rise of a specific demand, for “choices that matter”, and this has become a defining feature of mainstream and journalistic discussions of videogame storytelling. Contemporary demand for stories where “choices matter” not only lends weight to the need for understanding how choices function, but also sheds light on the sort of expressive experiences for which consumers are searching as they seek out interactive stories.

Contemporary Demand for Choices

"This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play."

This tagline graces each game created by the popular Californian game development company Telltale Games. Telltale have emerged as a games developer that promises compelling narrative experiences involving meaningful narrative agency. This promise is part of what drives the enormous industrial success of Telltale games.²⁹ Similar promises of choice and consequence have

²⁹ Corriea, Alexa Ray. "How Telltale teamed up with 'Game of Thrones' and Borderlands". *Polygon*. December 23, 2013. Last accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://www.polygon.com/2013/12/23/5224694/how-Telltale-teamed-up-with-game-of-thrones-and-borderlands>

driven the success of Canadian game developer Bioware, which has made such claims a selling point in their *Mass Effect* series of roleplaying video games.

Despite their popularity, both Bioware and Telltale have encountered persistent criticisms of a very specific kind: that the choices players make in their games simply do not matter. For Telltale, these accusations involve the fact that player choices are often forgotten, or mentioned only briefly later in the game, but have no lasting or decisive impact on the ending or the narrative outcome of the game.³⁰ For Bioware, these criticisms came to a head during a storm of protest and criticism regarding the end of the game *Mass Effect 3* (2012).

Bioware's *Mass Effect* trilogy promised players an epic space saga, in which important narrative choices would have far-reaching consequences for the final outcome of the trilogy. *Mass Effect 3*, the intended final chapter of the trilogy, betrayed these stated expectations by reducing the ending to one of three outcomes, all of which were decided by a single decision made at the end of the game. This triggered an online outcry, with fans claiming that the ending de-legitimised their narrative decisions and concomitant psychological investment the game – in short that their choices 'didn't matter'.³¹

The popularity of "choice" has emerged relatively recently. A cascade of both mainstream AAA³² and smaller independent games has emerged in the last decade promising meaningful choices, and turning these into a selling point. Steam, an online virtual store, showcases many of these trends. On the Steam store page, the wildly successful game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) advertises as a key selling point that players can "Make choices that go beyond good & evil,

³⁰ Favis, Elise. "Opinion – Your Choices Don't Matter In Telltale Games". *Gameinformer*. February 3, 2015. Last Accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2015/02/03/why-your-choices-dont-matter-in-Telltale-games.aspx>

³¹ Clarkson, Sparky. "Mass Effect 3's Ending Disrespects Its Most Invested Players". *Kotaku*. 4th of December, 2013. Last Accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://kotaku.com/5898743/mass-effect-3s-ending-disrespects-its-most-invested-players>

³² "AAA" is a colloquial term. It refers to games that are created by large, mainstream developers with large budgets.

and face their far-reaching consequences” while promising an open world that “is influenced by the player unlike ever before.”³³ Similarly, the story-focused game *Life is Strange* (2015) declares on its Steam store page that the game has “Multiple endings depending on the choices you make.”³⁴ The popularity of choices also extends into more literary spaces with the rise of interactive authoring tools, such as Twine³⁵ and Choicescript³⁶, both of which were created in 2009. Choicescript belongs to the online digital gamebook publisher *Choice of Games*, which has published 49 separate titles from different authors.³⁷ This trend has also spilled over into the free-to-play mobile gaming market, with titles such as *Choices: Stories You Play* (2016) and *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery* (2018) both placing emphasis on narrative choices.

More recently, in 2016 the tag “Choices Matter” appeared on the Steam platform.³⁸ (Tags are a method used by shoppers on Steam to quickly describe a game. A variety exist, such as “Female Protagonist”, “Point and Click” and “Adventure”.) The rise of “Choices Matter” speaks to a deep-seated desire within a significant subset of the gaming market; many want to play games and experience stories in which they make narrative choices, and for those choices to have a meaningful and lasting effect on the final outcome of the story. The fact that this is perceived as desirable indicates that many players are searching for a specific form of aesthetic experience as they seek out and engage with these games. The phrase “matters” implies something that is neither reductively ludic nor wholly narrative in nature. Plenty of video-games exist with variable outcomes and interesting choices – chess itself is a game with many different outcomes and

³³ “The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt”. *Steam*. Last Accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://store.steampowered.com/app/292030/>

³⁴ “Life is Strange”. *Steam*. Last Accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://store.steampowered.com/app/319630/>

³⁵ “Twinery: Twine Homepage”. *Twine*. Last Accessed 30th of June, 2016. Found at <http://twinery.org/>

³⁶ “Choice of Games: Press”. *Choice of Games LLC*. Last Accessed 30th of June, 2016. Found at <https://www.choiceofgames.com/press/>

³⁷ “Choice of Games: Our Games”. *Choice of Games LLC*. Last Accessed 30th of June, 2016. Found at <https://www.choiceofgames.com/category/our-games/>

³⁸ “Choices Matter”. *Steam*. Last Accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://store.steampowered.com/tag/en/Choices%20Matter>

challenging choices. Similarly, much of linear print literature serves to make the reader question their assumptions and consider challenging ethical dilemmas. The fact that nonetheless, there still exists a desire for 'choices' that 'matter' indicates that many consumers are searching for 'something' much more specific.

On its website, publisher Choice of Games has written a short company rationale, titled "Why Multiple-Choice Games?" In it they explain that "games need meaningful choices to be interesting" and gives, as examples of meaningful choices, "moral choices, trade-offs between different values and characteristics, and so forth."³⁹ Game designer Sid Meier argues that "Games are a series of interesting decisions" which he defines according to a set of criteria: that "No single option should be the best", that "The options should not be equally good", and that "The player must be able to make an informed choice".⁴⁰ Yet Meier is referring to choices within a ludic context: between, for example, two weapons with different abilities, or deciding on a move in a game of chess. The creators of the *Choicescript* authoring tool by contrast are considering something much more narrative than ludic when they discuss their project, arguing that "Many games work by surrounding interesting choices with lots of tactical play or interactions with a set of game systems. That can be fun, but it means that relatively little of the playing experience is about making choices at a high-level." They also warn about the way in which games can subordinate choices to the interests of game goals, pointing out "Other varieties of games can lose the meaningfulness of their choices by focusing the player's attention on solving a puzzle of sorts: how do I best achieve a well-defined goal? Nothing wrong with that, but we prefer in our design to focus on something else."⁴¹

³⁹ "Why Multiple-Choice Games?". *Choice of Games*. Last Accessed 23rd of June, 2016. Found at <https://www.choiceofgames.com/about-us/why-multiple-choice-games/>

⁴⁰ Found in Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2005. p. 92

⁴¹ "Why Multiple-Choice Games?". *Choice of Games*. Last Accessed 23rd of June, 2016. Found at <https://www.choiceofgames.com/about-us/why-multiple-choice-games/>

This ‘something else’ that players are searching for are choices that explore difficult philosophical concepts, but directly in relation to the self. Aarseth’s notion of games as centred on the “Self” arises from the fact that in a game, your “skills are rewarded, your mistakes punished, quite literally.”⁴² Where games are about the accumulation of skills and the mastery of the self, narrative is about, in Aarseth’s words, the “Other”, about the consideration of that which does not directly involve the reader. The choice encompasses both the “Self” and the “Other” – the chooser must develop and hone their capacity to respond to difficult philosophical dilemmas, yet these dilemmas are not typically about them, but about formally demarcated others. What delineates the gap between a choice that is ‘ludic’ – where to shoot, what move to make, which sword to pick, etc – and a choice that concerns the “Other” is ambiguity. Narrative commonly explores concepts and issues that have no fixed answers or solutions. The soliloquies of Shakespeare are built around such complex issues. *Hamlet*’s “To be or not to be” speech is perhaps English literature’s pre-eminent example of this, as he considers not only whether to follow through with the act of murdering his uncle, but the nature of living itself, and the potential futility of all action. William Styron’s novel *Sophie’s Choice* (1979) is, similarly, named after an impossible dilemma, with the titular character being forced to choose which of her two children to sacrifice to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and which of the two should possibly live. These are the sorts of choices gestured towards by publisher Choice of Games when they demand “moral choices, trade-offs between different values and characteristics, and so forth.” Players are looking to grapple with an experience that is already represented within literature, but more directly and personally. Video-games have, since their inception, presented challenges with clear solutions and objectively defined win-states. After several decades of shooting aliens, organising Tetris pieces and consuming pellets, many gamers are now ready to move on to bigger challenges – challenges that

⁴² Aarseth, Espen. “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation”. p. 52

are not just about the self, but are about the self in relation to the other. A clear win-state and goal is too easy. Navigating a philosophical dilemma - now there is a challenge; there is a choice that 'matters'.

This desire for reflective choices mirrors the emerging maturity of both video-game culture and game development. Adam Hammond in *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction* (2016) discusses the way in which videogames are attempting to become more artistic and expressive in nature, arguing that there "has never been a better time for readers of literature to think seriously about the videogame as an artistic form and a new vehicle for narrative."⁴³ The desire for something 'more' ties into Janet Murray's path-breaking declaration in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997) that games, as an 'incunabula' form of literature, should aspire to fulfil the ambitions of high literature.⁴⁴ These ambitions were – in a sense – quashed by the aggressive counter-reaction against literature's incursion into games studies during the heated narratology versus ludology debates of the mid-2000s. Yet years after Janet Murray's conciliatory speech to the 2005 DiGRA conference, reassuringly titled "the last word in narratology v ludology in game studies"⁴⁵, games culture has turned full circle to Murray's initial ambitions. A significant subset of players desire games that communicate literary themes through a uniquely ludic lens – they crave choices that 'matter'.

Recent Literature on Choice

Academic discussions of choice are rooted in the relatively new field of game studies. Since Aarseth published his own conciliatory essay "A Narrative Theory of Games" in 2012,⁴⁶ the centre

⁴³ Hammond, Adam. *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge UP. 2016. p. 190

⁴⁴ Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1997. p. 28

⁴⁵ Murray, Janet H. "The last word on ludology v narratology in game studies." *International DiGRA Conference*. June 17, 2005. Vancouver, Canada. Conference Speech.

⁴⁶ Aarseth, Espen. 'A Narrative Theory of Games'. pp. 129-133

of gravity in game studies has shifted away from the increasingly arid narratology vs ludology conflict.⁴⁷ Newer research has instead geared itself to trying to solve what is referred to as the “Narrative Paradox” by focusing on the creation of narrative A.I, natural language processing and improved authoring tools.⁴⁸

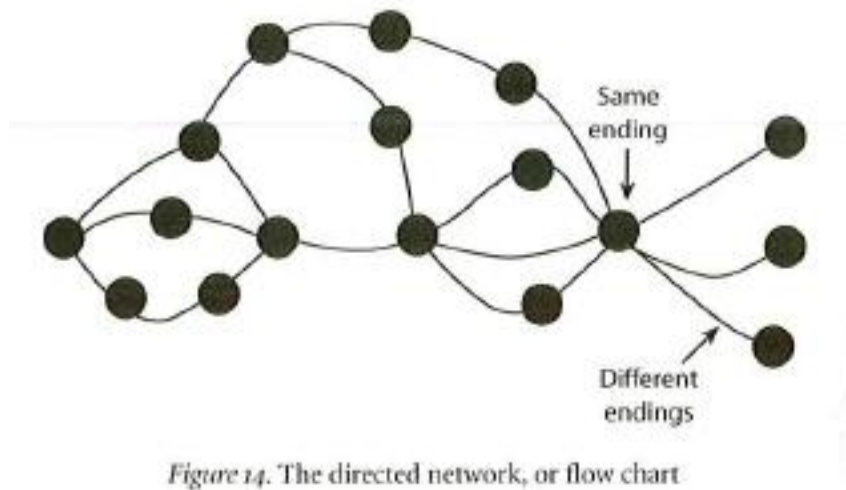


Figure 2: *The Flowchart*, Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. p. 172

The ‘narrative paradox’ is the conflict that exists between narrative and interactivity within a game. Narrative demands a level of linearity in order to produce a tight narrative arc; interactivity demands the expansion of different paths.⁴⁹ This problem can be thematically linked to the ‘combinatorial explosion’ often seen in traditional branching-path texts. The exponential proliferation of different pathways requires ever-greater effort on the part of the author, making a wholly non-linear interactive narrative impractical due to time and effort constraints.⁵⁰ Much of

⁴⁷ Muckherjee, Souvik. *Videogames and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*. Kolkata: Presidency University. 2015. pp. 1-9

⁴⁸ Ryan, Marie-Laure, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Baltimore: John Hopkins UP. pp. 225-256

⁴⁹ Ryan, James Owen. Mateas, Michael. Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. “Open Design Challenges for Interactive Emergent Narrative”. *8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. November 30-December 4, 2015. Ed. Schoenau-Fog, Henrik. Bruni, Luis Emilio. Louchart, Sandy. Baceviciute. Sarune. Copenhagen: Springer International Publishing., 2015. pp. 14-27. p. 15

⁵⁰ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. pp. 168-169

the recent literature in games studies has focused on finding 'digital' solutions to the narrative paradox. A large amount of research funding and effort has been poured into the creation of narrative A.I, with the hope that a fully sufficient narrative A.I would be able to manage player experience in an otherwise complex narrative simulation.⁵¹ A dominant focus has also been creating more complex algorithmic authoring systems, which attempt to solve the narrative paradox through increasingly complex automatically-generated pathways. Regrettably, much of this research has resulted in failure. Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern's *Façade* (2005) is a notable early example of this - an experimental interactive narrative experience that Chris Crawford has explicitly labelled a 'dead end'.⁵²

What much of this digital-focused research is missing is that the narrative paradox has, for the most part, already been solved. In Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015) she singles out what she calls the "Flowchart" as the "best way to reconcile a reasonably dramatic narrative with some degree of interactivity" (Figure 2). The Flowchart is built around small episodes that branch out, only to then re-join at a single node. Choices and decisions are then saved in the memory of the text, whether through changes to the avatar or by the turning on of flags. These 'memories' then influence the outcome of later episodes, and dictate the final ending that the player can access. Ryan explains that this "use of memory makes it possible to include nontrivial choices at every stage in the story and to make the end dependent on the middle."⁵³ The flowchart design is most commonly used in what we might term Aarseth's 'creamy middle' RPGs, with the avatar being used to track player choices.⁵⁴ Grant Tavinor in his book *The Art of*

⁵¹ Ryan, James Owen. Mateas, Michael. Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. "Open Design Challenges for Interactive Emergent Narrative". pp. 14-27

⁵² Crawford, Chris. "The Siren Song of Interactive Storytelling". 8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling. Copenhagen: Denmark. December 3, 2015. Keynote Address. Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb8KWsy5OSM&feature=youtu.be>

⁵³ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. pp. 171-172

⁵⁴ Aarseth, Espen. 'A Narrative Theory of Games'. p. 132

Videogames (2009) explores a similar concept with his notion of the *fictive self*. The *fictive self* becomes the loci of meaning for players as they make choices. Different narrative events beget choices – which are then saved as changes at the level of the avatar. The cumulative changes to the player avatar then create a virtual image – Tavinor’s *fictive self* – the events tying the avatar together to become the player’s personal ‘narrative’ that emerges from their experiences.⁵⁵ For Aarseth, ‘character’ is the point of intersection between narrative and gameplay, and Tavinor’s constantly evolving *fictive self* becomes a strong focal point in this search for the ‘creamy middle’. The common thread is that the player’s avatar becomes the mid-point between narrative and gameplay. This thesis will extrapolate upon these shared notions of an avatar built through accumulated memory through the notion of an *expressed self*.

More recent studies of the choice itself have been relatively scarce in comparison to the focus on the narrative paradox, and those that do exist have been predominately empirical in nature. Some of these studies approach choice with the understanding that the avatar serves as a ‘reflection’ for the player. Nicholas Taylor, Chris Kampe and Kristina Bell’s in-depth study of player behaviour in Telltale’s *The Walking Dead*, titled “Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in The Walking Dead” (2015) is an empirical study that conducts its analysis with the understanding that the avatar is a reflection of the self “viewed voyeuristically” and that “game avatars are seen as externalized representations of our anxieties and desires.” They note that players, when articulating their choices, simultaneously move between identifying with their avatar and distancing themselves from it.⁵⁶ Amanda Lange’s empirical study “You’re Just Gonna Be Nice: How Players Engage with Moral Choice Systems” (2014) similarly employs a large data set to uncover how players engage with good/evil alignment systems in video games. Her conclusion is

⁵⁵ Tavinor, Grant. *The Art of Videogames*. Maiden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 2009. pp. 122-123

⁵⁶ Taylor, Nicholas; Kampe, Chris; Bell, Kristina. “Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in The Walking Dead”. *Game Studies*. Vol. 15. Issue. 1. July 2015. Web. n.p

that “Gamers are most interested in exploring a character whose moral choices closely match to [sic] their own.”⁵⁷ Finally, Iten, Steinemann and Opwis’ paper “Choosing to Help Monsters: A Mixed-Method Examination of Meaningful Choices in Narrative-Rich Games and Interactive Narratives” (2018) attempts to directly respond to the perception of ‘meaningful choices’ through an empirical study. They conclude that in order for a choice to be perceived as meaningful, that it requires “social and moral characteristics” and that the choice must have “impacted the resulting immediate consequences.”⁵⁸ This data, along with the data gathered from ‘Me and Lee’, indicates the desire for choices to be a form of role-playing and self-exploration, as opposed to a form of pure escapism, narrative exploration or power-play.

Theoretical studies of choice emphasise the need for choices that are not subordinated to ludic concerns – such as trying to ‘win’ or maximise a certain score. Academics such as Alex Mitchell,⁵⁹ Miguel Sicart,⁶⁰ Michael James Heron and Pauline Helen⁶¹ have argued that objective morality systems, “Good/Evil” scores and overly gamified social interactions all remove the incentive for players to engage in reflective thinking regarding their actions. They instead call for games and interactive narratives to employ “Narrative Abstraction”⁶² and to encourage “non-diegetic or reflective”⁶³ thinking on the part of choosers. In all of this research, an argument is made for player contemplation, however these arguments skew heavily towards a narrative approach to choice, and underplay the role that ludic memory can play in emphasising and further

⁵⁷ Lange, Amanda. ““You’re Just Gonna Be Nice”: How Players Engage with Moral Choice Systems”. *Journal of Games Criticism*. Vol 1. Issue 1. June 2014. pp. 1-16. p. 1

⁵⁸ Iten, Glena H; Steinemann, Sharon T; Opwis, Klaus. "Choosing to Help Monsters: A Mixed-Method Examination of Meaningful Choices in Narrative-Rich Games and Interactive Narratives." *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Montreal QC, Canada. April 2018. Paper 341. pp. 1-13

⁵⁹ Mitchell, Alex. “Reflective Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories”. *8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. November 30-December 4, 2015. Ed. Schoenau-Fog, Henrik. Bruni, Luis Emilio. Louchart, Sandy. Baceviciute. Sarune. Copenhagen: Springer International Publishing., 2015. pp. 27-39. pp. 33-37

⁶⁰ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2013. pp. 105-106

⁶¹ Heron, Michael James; Belford, Pauline Helen. “Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games”. *Journal of Games Criticism*. Vol 1. Issue 2. 2014. pp. 1-22. pp. 1-3

⁶² Mitchell, Alex. “Reflective Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories”. pp. 33-37

⁶³ Heron, Michael James; Belford, Pauline Helen. “Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games”. pp. 1-3

reinforcing the themes that the narrative elements set up. The intricacies of the reflective choice will be further explored in chapters 3 and 4, including a greater discussion of how ludic memory and ‘consequences’ influence the expressive power of the choice.

Where scholars have studied the choice, they have reached consensus on a few key points. It’s agreed that: (1) the player avatar is the central loci of meaning in the fusion between gameplay and narrative; (2) ludic memory allows a relatively linear narrative to be maintained while deferring consequences to the development of an ongoing player avatar; (3) ludic memory can also disrupt the expressive power of choices by moving the player to fixate on ‘winning’ the game at the expense of self-reflection. This thesis will build upon this extant research by looking both at how choices can encourage reflective thinking, and the role that the *expressed self* plays in this process.

Thesis Outline

Each chapter of this thesis explores a different interactive configuration.⁶⁴ Chapters 1 and 2 show two extreme deviations from the ‘flowchart’ narrative, while chapters 3 and 4 primarily explore the flowchart and its capacity to deliver upon reflective choices. Chapter 1 examines the tree-structure form of branching narrative, and how it gives form to *didactic choices* through an analysis of Galactic Café’s metafictional computer game *The Stanley Parable* (2013).⁶⁵ Chapter 2 examines the network form of branching narrative, and how it gives form to *exploratory choices* through an analysis of Shelley Jackson’s hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl: A Modern Monster* (1995).⁶⁶ Chapter 3 examines what occurs when a flowchart form of branching narrative is employed without any long-term consequences or memory systems through an analysis of Telltale

⁶⁴ These configurations are partly inspired by and draw from Marie-Laure Ryan’s *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and New Media* (2015). In it, she usefully classifies the varying forms of interactivity.

⁶⁵ *The Stanley Parable*. High-definition standalone remake. Galactic Café. 2013

⁶⁶ Jackson, Shelley. *Patchwork Girl*. Eastgate Systems. 1995. Hypertext Novel

Games' adventure game *The Walking Dead Season 2: Episode 5 "No Going Back"* (2014).⁶⁷ Chapter 4 then contrasts this by showing the reflective choice coupled with memory mechanisms through an analysis of Lucas Pope's independently produced border-control simulator *Papers, Please* (2013).⁶⁸ Each of these configurations juxtaposes with one another to create a fluid image of choice-craft, its many instantiations, and how choices can best be constructed to express meaning. They also cover a variety of media forms and genres. *The Stanley Parable* and *The Walking Dead* are both computer games with a heavy 'story' focus and minimal ludic elements, *Patchwork Girl* is a hypertext novel, and *Papers, Please* is a computer game with a much stronger emphasis on gameplay. They also embody differing genres: comedy in *The Stanley Parable*, drama in *The Walking Dead*, feminist gothic in *Patchwork Girl*, and dystopia in *Papers, Please*. The diversity in genre, media and structure allows choice to be explored as a platonic form that is not tied to any specific method of branching narrative, nor to any specific media form. Choices can be used in many different settings, but frequently function in much the same way.

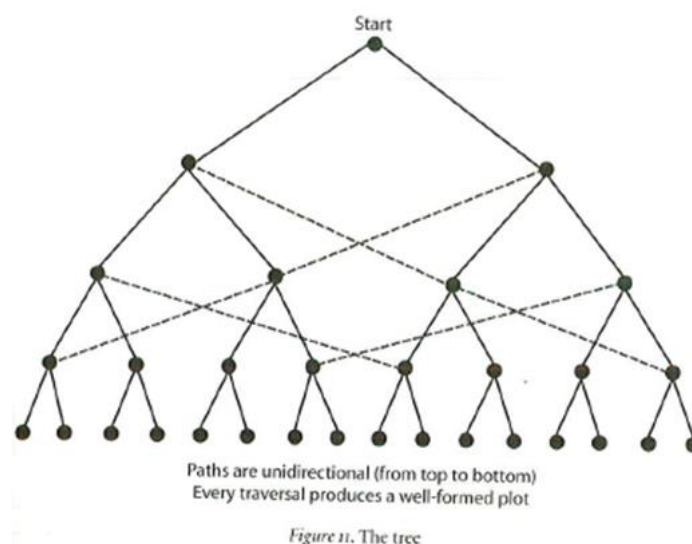


Figure 3: *The Tree*. Image from Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. p. 169

⁶⁷ *The Walking Dead Season 2: Episode 5 "No Going Back"*. Microsoft Windows. Telltale Games. 2014

⁶⁸ *Papers, Please*. Microsoft Windows Steam edition. Lucas Pope. 2013

Chapter 1 will explore what Ryan labels the ‘tree’ branching plot and the legacy of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* style of gamebook interactivity through an analysis and exploration of *The Stanley Parable* (2011). The tree is what often comes to mind when branching narratives are discussed. From a single starting point, each choice branches out, multiplying exponentially and creating many potential endings (Figure 3).⁶⁹ *The Stanley Parable* explores (and parodies) the authoritarian capacities of the choice, revealing its potential for didacticism and player control. Chapter 1 will reveal how, at its core, making choices is a ludic activity with its origins in pedagogy, and how an overt emphasis on finding the ‘good’ ending of a story can undermine the choice’s expressive potential.

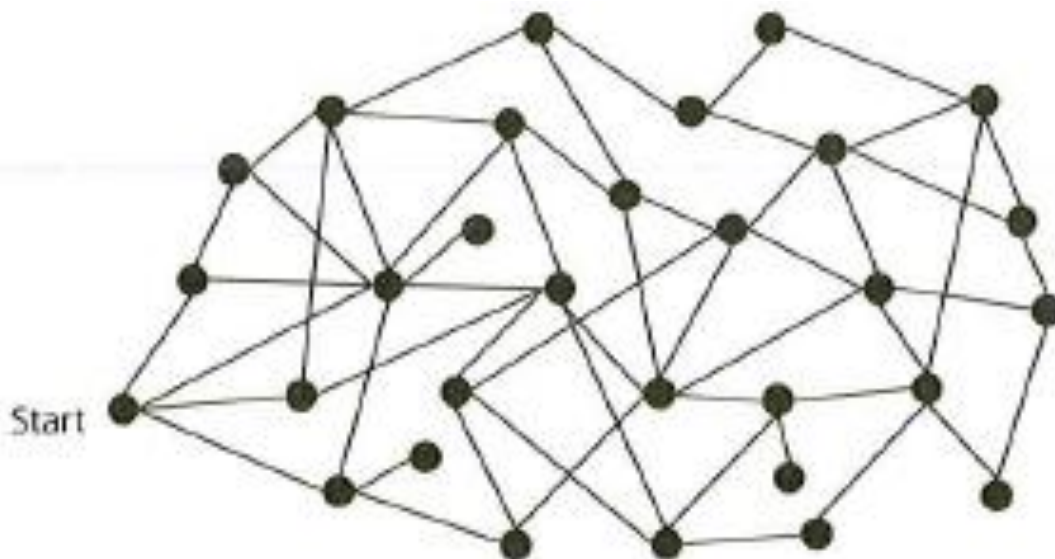


Figure 10. The network: A hypertext-style decision map allowing circuits

Figure 4: The Network: Taken from Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. p. 168

Chapter 2 will explore the ‘network’ form of branching narrative, the legacy of first-generation hypertext literature and exploratory choices, through an exploration of Shelley

⁶⁹ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. p. 168

Jackson's acclaimed hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl: A Modern Monster* (1995). The network is defined by Ryan through the presence of 'circuits', loops in which a reader may come across a segment of text multiple times via multiple directions, and the lack of a clear ending (Figure 4).⁷⁰ This form of branching narrative highlights what this thesis defines as the exploratory choice, where choices serve as a novel way to explore otherwise pre-determined narratives that have little to do with the chooser. Chapter 2 uses hypertext to show how even the slightest addition of choice in an otherwise wholly narrative space can create a fixation, or anxiety, to explore every node and branch while adding little to the reader's process of self-reflection.

Chapter 3 explores what happens when a reflective choice is offered without any long-term ludic consequences through an analysis of Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead: Season 2 Episode 5* (2013). *The Walking Dead* follows a similar trend to other contemporary video games in that it provides a flowchart structure (Figure 2), however the ending that the player receives is a self-contained event that is independent of their prior choices. This specific approach to reflective choices draws from a tradition of philosophical thought experiments. Games such as *The Walking Dead* present reflective choices in a manner akin to the way thought experiments are presented to students in a philosophy seminar: sequentially in order to prompt and test thought regarding common themes and motifs. The absence of consequences in *The Walking Dead's* reflective choices sheds light on how these communicate – or fail to communicate – meaning based on their construction.

Chapter 4 examines how reflective choices in Lucas Pope's border control simulator *Papers, Please* (2013) directly involve players in the banality of evil, and force them to confront it personally. In contrast to *The Walking Dead*, this game does have consequences, yet avoids didacticism by allowing the player to form their own independent goals, and to dictate what game

⁷⁰ *ibid.* pp. 167-168

state they consider to be successful. The use of memory and flags in *Papers, Please* fully actualises Ryan's image of the 'flowchart' narrative, allowing for endings that are the culmination of the player's many choices in what is an otherwise tight narrative arc. *Papers, Please* fully exploits the potential of the reflective choice, and an analysis of the game uncovers how choices can best be crafted in future interactive experiences.

Gamers have a rough estimation of what they seek when demanding "choices that matter". Understanding the choice - its mechanics, instantiations and structure – can help create a clearer image of what a fully expressive choice looks like. The choice, at its best, can take the decisions made by the chooser, and reflect it back at them. It can create a virtual self-image and present it to the chooser for their personal reflection. Whereas gameplay makes the player a subject of the system, the choice allows a chooser to become a subject of themselves: to reflect upon their priorities, internal conflicts and assumptions and then to evaluate these according to their own standards. At this intersection between gameplay and narrative resides a unique form of expression, one that, when properly understood and deployed, can communicate something truly novel.

Chapter 1: Paradox and Pedagogy in *The Stanley Parable*

By following a pre-planned path, the user is expected to inhabit the mind of the designer and mistake it for their own.

Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (2001)⁷¹

A common-sense intuition holds that to choose is to be free; the user of an interactive text enjoys agency that a 'passive' reader of a codex novel does not. Yet the existence of the choice exposes the reader to a unique form of vulnerability. The chooser can be seen, examined, and spoken to. They lose the distance and anonymity enjoyed by the passive reader, and make themselves subject to control by a potentially despotic author. Davey Wreden's literary game *The Stanley Parable* (2011) foregrounds the authoritarian potential of the choice. It is a branching path computer game that follows in the gamebook genre's footsteps. It reveals the implicitly didactic voice that lies behind many choices, revealing the disempowering mechanisms often encoded within them. The game instead displays an alternate form of choice-making that maintains the interpretive freedom of conventional narrative by borrowing elements associated with the 'theatre of the absurd'. Its choices are contradictory in nature, creating a sense of unease in the player, producing what Martin Esslin describes as a riddle without a solution.⁷²

The main insight into choice-craft to be derived from *The Stanley Parable* is that choices are not inherently liberating. Some choices depicted as 'free' within games turn the player into a

⁷¹ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press. 2001. p. 61

⁷² Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd." *The Tulane Drama Review*. Vol. 4. No. 4. May, 1960. pp. 3-15. p. 15

subject, who must choose correctly in order to access the developer's pre-determined moral lesson. By removing the explicit solution to a choice, *The Stanley Parable* creates interpretive space for the player. This allows the player to reclaim the choice for themselves, and to instead use it as a tool for personal self-reflection. *The Stanley Parable* does this by how displaying how the structure of many choices subjects choosers to intense pedagogical scrutiny. It then juxtaposes this with an alternative construction of the choice, which uses paradox to create the sensation of a solution, but without its finality. Through *The Stanley Parable*, these two forms of choice-craft - didactic and reflective - are better understood. This analysis of *The Stanley Parable* is made clearer when compared to the pre-ludic, didactic roots of choice.

The Shadow of *Tutortext*

Three forms of choice-craft were outlined in the Introduction to this thesis: didactic; reflective; and exploratory. *The Stanley Parable* engages predominately with the didactic form of choice-making. Its content is a structural homage to branching-tree structure gamebooks,⁷³ and its commentary unpacks the authorial despotism that lies within this form. This fact is made clearer when compared to the longer history of the didactic choice.

In the gospel according to Luke 10:25-37, Jesus, in response to the question "Who is my neighbour?" provides the following parable:

A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he travelled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was

⁷³ Heron, Michael James; Belford, Pauline Helen. "All of your co-workers are gone: Story, Substance and the Empathic Puzzler". *Journal of Games Criticism*. January 2015. Vol 2. Issue 1. pp. 1-29. p. 1

moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbour to him who fell among the robbers?

The answer to Jesus' question is "He who showed mercy on him" and is answered by the follower who originally presented the question "Who is my neighbour?"⁷⁴ This parable contains two parallel lessons. The first is that the neighbour who should be loved "as yourself" is he who "shows mercy". The second is how you should respond when confronted with a stranger in peril.

Each of the three agents within the story are presented with a binary set of options: to aid or not to aid. By not aiding they place themselves within the category of "not neighbour" and thereby choose the implied false choice. They are also denied narrative progression – the story does not follow their journey onward. The Samaritan, having chosen the implied correct solution to Jesus' test, is instead granted narrative progression, with the focus of the parable shifting to his actions. The Samaritan is thus granted the status of exemplar; the non-Samaritans are foils. Dider Coste in *Narrative as Communication* (1989) categorises this as the "imitative" form of didacticism, where the reader is expected to emulate a presented "exemplum". He argues that this form of "demonstrative didacticism" is necessarily collaborative, with the reader being impelled to shift themselves to occupy the same behaviour and characteristics as the exemplum.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Luke 10:25–29, World English Bible

⁷⁵ Coste, Didier. *Narrative as Communication*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1989. pp. 301-326

This structure carries over and shares strong similarities with both the fable and the riddle. Like a riddle, this parable is presented from a riddler to a riddlee,⁷⁶ in this case Jesus and his follower. A test is presented within a metaphorical world,⁷⁷ through which the explicit solution can be inferred: In this case the answer to the question “Who is my neighbour?” The fable’s structure can be found in the presence of an exemplum, who serves as an in-text avatar. Didier makes a similar observation, arguing that fables drive a reader to draw an “unambiguous moral from the story”.⁷⁸ The avatar, in this case the Samaritan, is presented with a test, and proceeds to choose the correct choice. The choice-structure of this parable is illuminated by the presence of two foils, the priest and the Levite.

Lev Manovich observes in *The Language of New Media* (2001) that the rise of interactivity forms part of a modern trend to “externalize mental life” and to subject it to “standardization”, making it easy for a developer to engage in the “objectification of internal, private mental processes” and to thereby equate them with “external visual forms that can easily be manipulated, mass produced, and standardized on their own.” The result is a system which forces a user to follow a pre-planned path in that it forces a user to “inhabit the mind of the designer and mistake it for their own.”⁷⁹ Any resulting perception of freedom is therefore illusory. This same process of ‘standardization’ is at play in the parable of the Good Samaritan, but in a pre-digital space. The key difference is that the audience is still granted a level of narrative distance. If the priest at a church delivers a parable from the pulpit, the listener does not have to respond. This gives the listener space to disagree privately, and to resist ‘standardization’ without being admonished by the speaker. Such interpretive freedom dissipated with the rise of the catechism.

⁷⁶ Concept of a “riddler” and “riddlee” taken from Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2005. pp. 34-35

⁷⁷ Concept of a “Metaphorical World” as applied to riddles is also taken from Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. pp. 3-4

⁷⁸ Coste, Didier. *Narrative as Communication*. p. 328

⁷⁹ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. pp. 57-61

The catechism developed this relationship between religious leader and listener into an explicit dialogue between a questioner and an answerer. The catechism is a form of education where a questioner asks a student a question, with the expectation of receiving a rote-learned answer. Hans Robert Jauss in his book *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding* (1982) defines the catechism as a didactic question which “tests the student’s knowledge of a graduated arrangement of questions from the teacher” with a pre-determined canon of answers. The catechism, according to Jauss, turns the “search for unknown truths” into a “monologic assertion of a single truth”.⁸⁰ Unlike the more impersonal parable, the question-and-answer structure introduces a direct power relationship.⁸¹ Jauss argues that the questioner inhabits a position of power over the listener, and that question-and-answer sequences often follow on from one another, with each question serving as a lead-in for the next question.⁸² Unlike the public sermon, the catechism allows a questioner to directly challenge disagreement from the answerer. The answerer must provide the correct answer, or be punished with non-progression in the question-and-answer sequence in a manner akin to the punishment of narrative non-progression that Jesus inflicts upon the foils of his own parable. It is here that Manovich’s process of ‘standardization’ begins to come into play in a pre-digital space. Elements of the catechism’s form were eventually borrowed for the *Tutortext* series of novels, an influential progenitor of what later came to be known as the gamebook – or *Choose Your Own Adventure* – form of interactive literature.

B.F Skinner’s *Tutortext* series borrows heavily from the catechism’s structure of choice-making, turning it into an interactive second-person process. The books were designed to be a depersonalised enactment of Skinner’s theory of operant conditioning. Under this radical

⁸⁰ Jauss, Hans Robert. *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1989. pp. 74-75

⁸¹ *ibid.* p. 52

⁸² Jauss, Hans Robert. *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*. p. 73

behaviourist view of human psychology, humans had no internal free will. Instead, they respond to positive reinforcement, and learn to avoid behaviours that lead to negative reinforcement.⁸³ The books implement this system by offering the reader a series of “lessons” delivered by a narrator. The narrator, adopting the role of a teacher, would provide a lesson to the reader, before presenting them with a series of options. The introduction to Skinner’s first book, *Adventures in Algebra* (1960), explains that “You will find that reading this book is very much like having an individual tutor.”⁸⁴ This establishes the presence of a pedagogical narrator, one who examines, speaks, and responds to the reader. The reader is then presented with a lesson in each chapter, followed by a question, and a series of possible answers. Readers choose an answer, before turning to an appropriate page. The archival website *tutortext.org* argues that the series had a “pioneering” influence on what would later become the gamebook - interactive novels where choices are made - and a codex book is navigated in a non-linear fashion.⁸⁵

On page 7 of *Adventures in Algebra*, the teacher-narrator explains the notion of verbs and subjects within language. He then presents the reader with the following test.

Consider the sentence "Three equals two plus one." What are the subject and verb in this sentence?

Three is the subject and equals is the verb. **[Turn to Page 3]**

Three is the subject and equals and plus are verbs. **[Turn to Page 13]**

⁸³ Programmed Learning – Operant Conditioning, Students, and Answers – JRank Articles. *Psychology.jrank.org*. Last accessed 20th of July, 2016. Found at <http://psychology.jrank.org/pages/505/Programmed-Learning.html>

⁸⁴ Crowder, Norman A; Martin, Grace C. *Adventures in Algebra*. New York: Doubleday & Company Inc. 1960. p. ii

⁸⁵ “About Tutortext dot org”. *tutortext.org*. Last Accessed 2nd of November 2017. Found at <<http://tutortext.org/content/about-tutortext-dot-org>>

Three is the subject and plus is the verb. [Turn to Page 16]⁸⁶

Both the catechism and the riddle make their appearances within this text. The reader is presented with a test by an omniscient speaker, there exists one solution, and that solution remains hidden from view until the correct solution is selected. What is specifically noteworthy is how the text *responds* to the reader. Turning to page 13 will see the text respond by saying “You're partly right and partly wrong” before directly addressing the reader’s reasoning: “Now, you may think the word plus should be a verb because...”⁸⁷ This response creates an opportunity for the reader to be subjected to a pedagogical reprimand. Interactivity thus becomes an act of control rather than liberation.

Various elements of the *Tutortext* books are critiqued by *The Stanley Parable*. The first is the presence of the narrator as an explicit, pedagogical voice. *The Stanley Parable* makes clear that such a voice is very much present within most interactive narratives, even if it is only implied. The gamebook genre innovated with this format through the introduction of a tree-structure. Rather than a linear sequence of tests, gamebooks presented readers with an ‘adventure’ that they personally undergo. Skinner’s explicitly didactic narrator was replaced with a detached extra-diegetic narrator that simply described the tests and scenarios that the reader had to undergo. The books presented themselves as offering radical agency to the reader, with the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series being the most famous example. Readers were presented with differing pathways, multiple endings, and the sensation of narrative power.

Despite this, Jennifer Grouling Cover notes in *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games* (2010) that beneath the veneer of liberation lurked a very restrictive structure. She argues that the gamebook format’s tree structure is dominated by bad endings.

⁸⁶ Crowder, Norman A; Martin, Grace C. *Adventures in Algebra*. New York: Doubleday & Company Inc. 1960. p. 7

⁸⁷ *ibid.* p. 13

Many of these endings are abrupt, a quick punishment for failing to notice an implied danger in the text, or for selecting the wrong sequence of choices. Good endings serve as a reward, located towards the end of long choice-consequence chains, with in many cases a single ‘best’ ending. Learning the path to the best ending is then a process of trial and error, the book slowly programming the reader to take the right steps at the right intervals.⁸⁸ Ian Livingstone’s *Fighting Fantasy: City of Thieves* (1983) is an example of this tradition. The cover of the book proudly declares that “YOU are the HERO!” However on a page labelled “Hints on Play” the reader is warned that “There is only one true way through the City of Thieves and it will probably take you several attempts to find it.” It also warns the reader that many paths lead to “traps”, “creatures” and “wild-goose chase” passages with little reward, and that “The ‘one true way’ involves a minimum of risk”.⁸⁹ This presents a continuation of the *Tutortext* model, with *City of Thieves* ultimately constituting an elaborate act of trial-and-error. Although the explicitly pedagogical voice of *Tutortext* has been removed, the same structure of punishment and reward remains. It is this pedagogical voice that *The Stanley Parable* returns to the fore, reminding players of its presence and foregrounding the genre’s dynamics through parody and exaggeration.

Theatre of the Absurd

The Stanley Parable is a meta-fictional game that borrows techniques associated with the late 1950s dramatic movement known as the Theatre of the Absurd. The player assumes the persona of “Stanley”, a man whose job is to press buttons on command. The game’s narrator describes Stanley’s job as one where orders come ‘to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order.’ One day the orders

⁸⁸ Cover, Jennifer Grouling. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Roleplaying Games*. McFarland & Company: Jefferson, North Carolina, London. 2010. pp. 25-27

⁸⁹ Livingstone, Ian. *Fighting Fantasy: City of Thieves*. Wizard Books: London. 1983. ed. 2010. p. 207

cease to arrive, leaving Stanley initially paralysed, before he leaves his office. What follows is an in-game 'parable', told by an explicit Narrator. The game itself is not about the 'parable' but about Stanley's relationship to the Narrator.

As a tree-structure game, *The Stanley Parable* is framed around a series of choices with which the player is presented. In almost every case, the Narrator will explicitly command the player to choose a specific path. The path to the Narrator's own personally crafted 'parable' is a linear one, however the various branches of *The Stanley Parable* lead to a variety of paths, each one leading to a different interpersonal relationship between the player and the Narrator. At the end of each path, the game restarts. The words "The End is Never the End" dominate the loading screen in a fractal loop, before the game begins anew. This experience recalls the potentially cyclical reading experience created by hypertext novels – or what Marie Laure Ryan would describe as 'circuits'.⁹⁰ The rhizomatic structure of hypertext fiction tends to create what this thesis will label *exploration anxiety*, and its effect on choice will be studied in Chapter 2's analysis of the hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl*. *The Stanley Parable* uses this cyclical narrative experience to create a potent sense of *entrapment*.

The Stanley Parable reflects elements of the Theatre of the Absurd, a post-WWII dramatic movement characterised by with absurdist and existentialist plotlines. *The Stanley Parable's* cyclical plot, with both Stanley and the Narrator caught in a never-ending loop, echo the cyclical nature of most plays associated with the Theatre of the Absurd'.⁹¹ The two principle characters are caught in what critic Michael Hinden describes as a Samuel Beckett-style pseudo relationship where "each one is unimaginable without the other."⁹² Yet the primary element

⁹⁰ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 2015. pp. 186-187

⁹¹ Michael Hinden. "After Beckett: The Plays of Pinter, Stoppard, and Shepard". *Contemporary Literature*. Fall 1986. Vol. 27. Issue 3. pp. 400-408. p. 401

⁹² Astro, Alan. *Understanding Samuel Beckett*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press. 1990. pp. 17-18

associating *The Stanley Parable* with the Theatre of the Absurd is its existential effacement of meaning, which confounds the player with contradictions, before drawing the player in to try and construct their own interpretation. It is the use of paradoxes that marks *The Stanley Parable's* choices as unique.

Paradoxes form a core aspect of how choices are constructed in *The Stanley Parable*, emptying the game's choices of meaning, and drawing the player into a play of interpretation. Esslin describes the Theatre of the Absurd as comprising cyclical plays that leave the audience uncertain as to what is happening on the stage. Because of this, rather than asking themselves "what is going to happen" they instead ask "what is happening?" This works to reveal "all the undertones, overtones, and inherent absurdities and contradictions of any human situation". The prevalence of contradictions then spurs the audience to "attempt their own interpretation, to wonder what it is all about. In that sense they are being invited to school their critical faculties, to train themselves in adjusting to reality."⁹³ Esslin then marks the allegory as being the precursor to the Theatre of the Absurd. He argues that allegories contain a riddle with a solution, a moral for the viewer to apply to their own life. However, in the Theatre of the Absurd, the abundance of paradoxes forces the audience to ponder the nature of the riddle, even though a clear solution does not exist.⁹⁴ Similarly, in an interview with Adam Sessler, Wreden describes *The Stanley Parable* as a game of "contradictions" which forces the player to stop, and think.⁹⁵ The presence of these elements within a game - rather than a play - alters the impact of these elements upon their recipient. The primary effect that these shifts have is to replace the still largely passive question that Esslin identified, "What is happening?" with the more urgent and proactive question, "What should I do?" This effect is produced by the

⁹³ Esslin, Martin. "The Theatre of the Absurd". *The Tulane Drama Review*. Vol. 4. No. 4. May, 1960. pp. 3-15. pp. 12-13

⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 15

⁹⁵ Wreden, Davey; Pugh, William. Interview by Adam Sessler. "The Stanley Parable: Adam Sessler Interviews the Creators at GDC 2014"

difference between being a relatively passive audience-member, and a necessarily active player.

The didactic choices highlighted by *The Stanley Parable* compel the chooser to think as the author wishes them to think through a ludic logic which coerces a player to seek out an implied solution. Yet on a meta-narrative level, the use of elements borrowed from the Theatre of the Absurd encourages the player to consider “What should I do?” and in turn to contemplate this existential message implied in a way that is not defined by the designer of *The Stanley Parable*’s choices. The fundamental conflict between these two elements form the core of *The Stanley Parable*’s expressive choices, with choices such as the famous “Two Doors” creating a microcosm of the choice-craft as a whole. *The Stanley Parable* depicts the closed and open variants of the choice all at once, contrasting them and making their existence apparent to the chooser.

The Two Doors

The Stanley Parable’s defining choice comes in the form of two open doors. Most of the game’s branching pathways lie behind these two doors. The doors themselves are an obvious symbol for choice-making, and play a central part in the game’s narrative. They expose the spectre of *Tutortext*’s didactic voice, while simultaneously juxtaposing it with the paradoxical choice that *The Stanley Parable* presents as a meaningful alternative.

The doors are encountered early in the game, and trigger the following dialogue from the Narrator:

When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left

Going right causes the Narrator to attempt to retroactively explain the player's disobedience, speculating that perhaps Stanley instead wishes to appreciate the "Employee Lounge". Going left continues the Narrator's "parable" as intended.



Figure 3: The Two Doors

The doors, and the accompanying dialogue, counter the established way in which choices are narrated. A conventional choice presents the player with a series of open options. If presented textually, the reader will normally be addressed in present-tense, second-person subject mode, with an emphasis on "You". A traditional gamebook might instead have presented these doors by explaining to the reader that "you come across a set of two open doors, which do you take?" The use of the third person "Stanley" both removes the sense of agency that "You" confers, while simultaneously collapsing the player into the avatar of Stanley. The use of past tense narration assumes that the player has already made their decision, they are going to go left – furthering the narrative coercion that they are being subjected to.

Within the structure of choice-making, the Narrator's description of the player's behaviour represents an unconventional form of the test. What is normally presented as a textual riddle is instead delivered as a direct order. In the didactic tradition, choices are presented with an *explicit* solution. What distinguishes these examples from the Narrator's behaviour before the two doors is that the directions these choices present to their interactors are veiled by a puzzle. The *Stanley Parable* Narrator's direction is instead explicit and direct, making the player aware of the didactic voice that was merely implicit in the shift from the pedagogical *Tutortext* novels to the fictional *Choose Your Own Adventure* gamebooks. The turn reveals a despotic voice that had up until now remained hidden beneath the veneer of second-person, present-tense narration.

The doors take on dual symbolism within the structure on the game, as both a choice with an explicit solution, and one with an implicit solution. Within the framework of the Narrator's storyline, they represent a binary choice with a correct and incorrect response. The explicitly endorsed solution is to go left, and to successfully complete the parable. By going left the player better inhabits the character of "Stanley", and is rewarded with progression within the Narrator's parable. In the course of one of the game's branches, the player returns to the doors, with the Narrator instructing the player to "remember, all you need to do is behave exactly as Stanley would". In this branch the Narrator is acutely aware that the player is a distinct entity due to their previously disobedient behaviour, exclaiming that "you're not Stanley, you're a real person". This conflates correct choice-making with conformity with an avatar-exemplum. In this case, the exemplum is Stanley, an obedient button-presser who "always puts the story first". Going right halts this seamless identification, and is therefore the 'wrong' choice. The distinction between avatar and player is made very clear by the Narrator, particularly during narrative branches that revisit the two doors. The game's deconstruction

between player and avatar functions similarly to the way in which *Patchwork Girl* deliberately blurs the relationship between author and narrator, a similarity that will be further explored in Chapter 2.

The doors simultaneously represent a choice both within the meta-narrative of *The Stanley Parable* and a choice with an implicit solution. In an interview, Wreden refers to the two doors as a ‘contradiction’ which lies at the heart of the game. He describes the choice itself as ‘impossible’, as the conflict between third-person, past-tense narration and the reality of the choice still to be made creates a sudden paradox.⁹⁶ The sense of unease empties the choice of a true solution, forcing the player to ponder the paradox itself, and to undertake an act of free interpretation. It creates a riddle without a solution, precisely what Esslin describes as the goal of the Theatre of the Absurd.

In this way the two doors embody the quintessential choice, reflecting both the closed (didactic) and open (exploratory/reflective) variants. As an element within the Narrator’s personal story, the door is a representation of the closed choice, with an explicit solution as part of a didactic format. As an element within the meta-game itself, the two doors are an example of a choice with an implicit solution, with the correct solution being defined in relation to the player themselves, rather than within the game. When presented together within the same choice, the juxtaposition between these two forms is highlighted to the player. The fictionalised act of control presented by the Narrator contrasts heavily with the genuine sensation of freedom players experience when confronted with the decision to obey or disobey. The didactic choice presented by the Narrator is delivered in a way that highlights a pedagogical relationship that already exists when players make choices. The decision to obey or

⁹⁶ Wreden, Davey; Pugh, William. Interview by Adam Sessler. “The Stanley Parable: Adam Sessler Interviews the Creators at GDC 2014”.

disobey moves the player to question how they wish to develop their relationship with the Narrator. In doing so, the choice triggers an internal conflict within the player, and moves them to grapple with an element of their identity as players that they may not previously have consciously considered. This in turn enacts what choices are best pre-disposed to do; they perform as a tool of self-reflection for the player, moving them to better understand themselves. This ties into the broader phenomena of ethical dilemmas in philosophy, and of ‘wicked choices’ as expounded by Miguel Sicart in *Beyond Choices*.⁹⁷ The relationship between choice-craft and ethical dilemmas will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 3 of this thesis, but worth noting here is the similarity between the two doors choice and philosophical dilemmas. Both are a ‘wicked choice’, an ethical dilemma that presents a player with their own biases, intuitions and assumptions, before forcing them to choose between conflicting intuitions and re-evaluate their personal priorities.

The contrast between these two choice-making threads is exemplified in the player’s relationship to the avatar, Stanley. This relationship is developed as the player navigates the many branches of *The Stanley Parable*’s rhizome-like structure. Like the ‘two doors’, the avatar of Stanley provides an avenue of free play for the player, while also representing a prison that works to contain and normalise them. The dual depiction of Stanley as both corporate drone and potential tool of liberation not only emphasises the disunion between reflective and didactic choice-making, but also highlights the role that the avatar plays within the choice, and constructs a meta-riddle for the player to consider.

⁹⁷ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2013. pp. 105-106

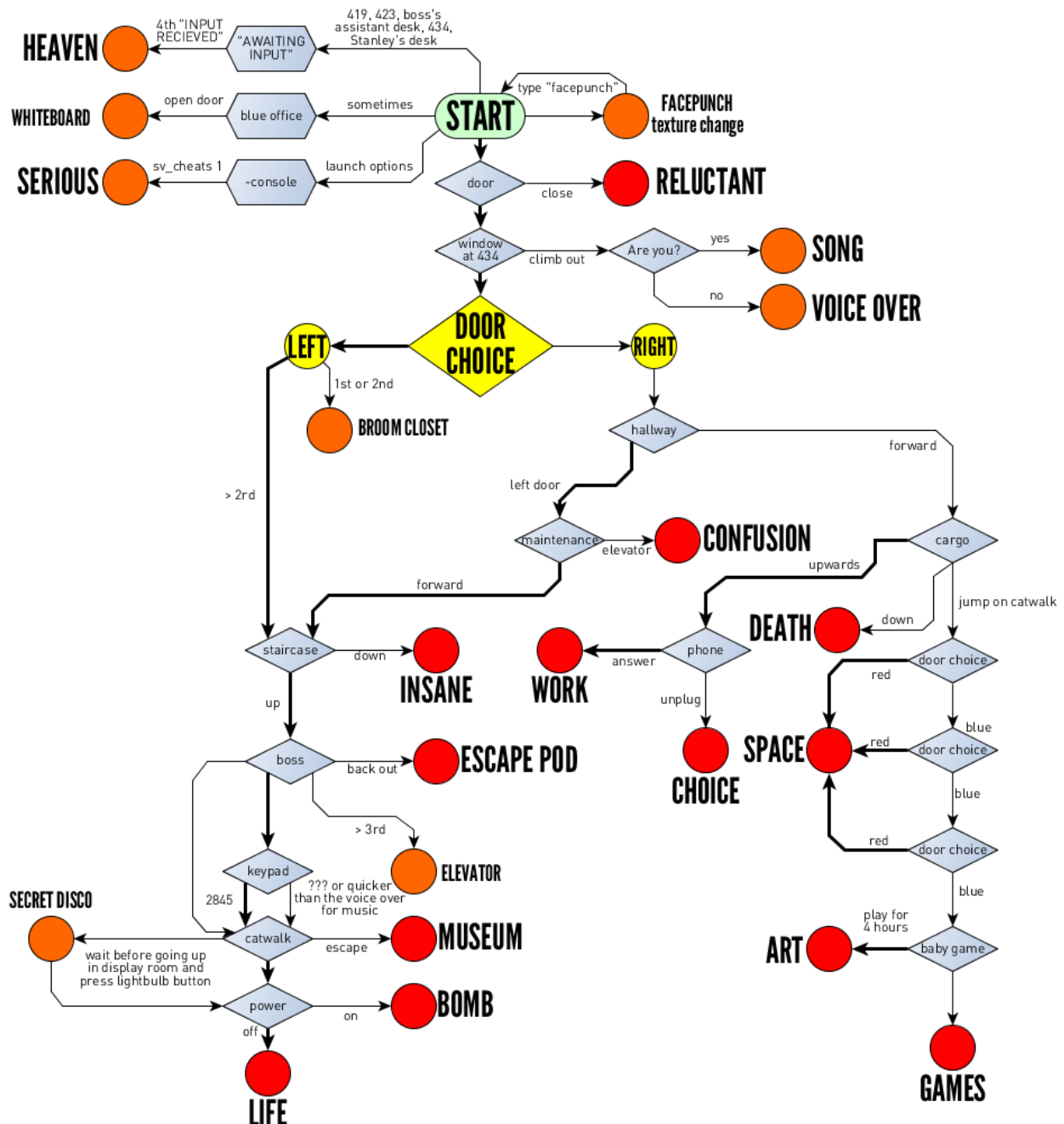


Figure 4: Branches of The Stanley Parable taken from thestanleyparable.wikia.com/wiki/Endings

The Rhizome as Prison

The Stanley Parable presents the rhizome of the Choose Your Own Adventure novel as a prison, with the avatar serving as the player's cell. Although *The Stanley Parable* lacks an ending with standard closure, three specific branches provide something resembling an ending. Each of them provides a possible *answer* as to how the player may find liberation within the game, yet

these different answers conflict with one another, and fail to provide overall closure. The game's commentary creates a fractal paradox that emboldens the player to consider their relationship to didactic choices as a whole.

The first of these possible endings is the "Freedom" ending.⁹⁸ The freedom ending is unlocked when the player obeys each directive given to them by the Narrator. Doing so allows the player to traverse the intended "parable" told by the Narrator. At the conclusion of the "Freedom" ending Stanley learns that he has been the subject of mind-control, before eventually destroying the machinery of the office, and leaving for the outside world. As the player leaves, they literally lose control of the avatar of Stanley, as the game wrests control of the game's camera and the avatar's movement. This jarring loss of control comes while the Narrator announces that Stanley is finally "free". The game then returns the player to the beginning, to repeat the process again. The irony of the "Freedom" ending is that, by obeying the Narrator, the player becomes the 'corporate drone' Stanley that is introduced to them at the beginning of the game. They have pressed buttons on command at a computer, with directions given by the computer; this is also the in-game job that Stanley performs as an office worker. This characterisation is reinforced by the sound emitted by the game whenever any input is given. The sound emitted is always one of a mouse being clicked, to remind the player that they are pressing buttons in order to advance through a sequence of orders. In *What is Your Quest?* e-literature scholar Anastasia Salter observes how in point-and-click adventure games the player becomes aware of their differentiation from the avatar and, in order to progress through the story, they must properly inhabit the mind of the avatar.⁹⁹ The "Freedom"

⁹⁸ The name of the "Freedom" ending comes from *The Stanley Parable* wiki, as do all of the 'ending' names that I have used. Found at "Freedom Ending", *The Stanley Parable Wiki*. Last Accessed 24 November 2017. Web. n.p. <http://thestanleyparable.wikia.com/wiki/Freedom_Ending>

⁹⁹ Salter, Anastasia. *What Is Your Quest? From Adventure Games to Interactive Books*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2014. pp. 41-44

ending depicts this as an act of *disempowerment*. By following the pre-set linear sequence of choices, players lose their agency, and are absorbed into a pre-existing avatar. For the didactic form of choice-making, this serves to properly mould the player's character to fit the exemplum the avatar depicts.

The "Not Stanley" ending involves a branch where the player and avatar become differentiated from one another. This branch is unlocked after the player undertakes a long series of digressive actions in defiance of the Narrator. It begins after the player unplugs a ringing phone. This action prompts the Narrator to exclaim in surprise "that wasn't supposed to be a choice" and concluding that "You're not Stanley, you're a real person". The branch follows a long, linear sequence of events, which ends with the player, hovering above the "Two Doors" room, looking down on Stanley-the-avatar. The Narrator begs Stanley to choose as he stands still, and the credits roll, with "The End" displayed proudly across the screen. The game then restarts once more, with the office monitors displaying the words "The End is Not the End".

This branch reinforces the message sent by the "Freedom" ending in regards to the player's relationship to their avatar. Within the didactic form of choice-making, the avatar exists as an exemplum, a hollow space the narratee is invited to occupy. The player embodies the exemplum by choosing 'correctly', and behaves as a foil by choosing falsely. Within the "Not Stanley" branch, the Narrator conflates the player's ability to make "correct and incorrect choices" with their status as a "real person". They criticise the player for choosing falsely, before displaying a slide-show presentation – itself a passive mode of reception - on "Choice". The slideshow describes choice as thus:

Choice: It's the best part of being a real person. But if used incorrectly can also be the most dangerous. For example, in this scenario a hypothetical real person named Steven has a choice. He could spend years helping improve the quality of life for citizens of impoverished

third-world nations; or he could systematically set fire to every orphan living in a 30-kilometer radius of his house. Which choice would you make?

This choice itself is a ludicrously exaggerated parody of the philosophical thought-experiment. Although offered as a reflective choice for the player to make, presented in second-person address, it is heavily implied that the correct 'choice' is to engage in third-world philanthropy. This contradiction in tone, of an open presentation but closed solution, is played for laughs. Its humour highlights the disparity that exists between open and closed choice-making, and how a choice can be heavily loaded in favour of a didactic moral. Within this 'choice', the avatar of Steven occupies both exemplum and foil positions simultaneously. With the 'correct' choice he transforms into a philanthropist, which the player can emulate by 'choosing' correctly; with the 'incorrect' choice he becomes a murderer, a foil to the 'good' Steven. This thought-experiment itself displays the constrained manner in which invariably disobeying of the Narrator is itself a choice defined by the parameters of the game. Someone deliberately contrarian is defining themselves in opposition to the thing to which they are refusing to conform. In the same way, this thought-experiment displays how always defying authority itself may be thoughtless. The "Steven" who chooses to adopt the role of an orphan-burning foil is defined by the parameters set by the Narrator just as much as the player who chooses to take the right door in the 'two doors' choice.

By disobeying the Narrator, the player has failed to 'liberate' themselves from the game, but instead occupies a 'foil' role constructed by the game itself. The player does not roleplay as their genuine, authentic flesh-and-blood self in the "Not Stanley" branch, but instead roleplays as a fictionalised 'player' character that has been constructed by the game. Like the contrast between the 'good' and 'bad' Steven from the Narrator's slideshow presentation, the player is occupying a pre-cast role. This is evidenced by the restrictive nature of the "Not Stanley"

branch itself. During a re-trial of the “Two Doors” choice, going left leads to an intra-diegetic ‘glitch’ which transports the player back to the “Two Doors” room once again. Within the branch the player must fully assume the character of the ‘bad player’ in order to narratively progress, or be punished with non-progression.

The ‘museum ending’ argues for the player’s liberation by calling on them to leave the game entirely. This ending is achieved by following a long hallway marked with the word “Escape”. At the end of the hallway, the Narrator attempts to kill Stanley by moving him slowly towards an active factory press. At this stage a female meta-narrator takes control of the game, and transports the player to a museum exhibit which outlines, in detail, how the game was created. This is overlaid with narration by the meta-narrator, who explains that “when every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance, death becomes meaningless.” As the player leaves the museum, they are returned to the factory press. The meta-narrator then issues a command to the player, which is interrupted as the factory press kills Stanley and ends the game, with no automatic restart:

Push escape, and press quit. There’s no other way to beat this game. As long as you move forward you’ll be walking someone else’s path. Stop now and it’ll be your only true choice. But whatever you do choose it! Don’t let time choose for you.

The museum ending is designed to communicate the meaninglessness of choice-making, and depicts the navigation of branching paths as akin to being trapped within a maze with no exit. The sight of the museum foregrounds the *constructed* nature of the game and its many paths, emphasising that each moment within the game is created, planned and tested. The sight of the museum undoes the player’s suspension of disbelief, and makes them aware of the game *qua* game. It reinforces the message delivered by the meta-narrator, that “every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance” and that “As long as you move forward you’ll be

walking someone else's path." This challenges the very notion of *branching*, as although the selection of a branch is an actively chosen decision, the branch itself is a linear sequence designed in advance. The ending results in a permanent 'death' for Stanley, with a black screen and no automatic restart. A player must manually restart the game in order to continue playing.

These three branches utilise ambiguity in order to create a unique form of choice-centric meaning, whilst simultaneously depicting the avatar as a prison for the player. The different interrelationships between avatar and player highlight the avatar's potential as a pre-made *exemplum* to which the player is compelled to conform. When juxtaposed, these two elements cause the player to question what the 'right' exemplum is in *The Stanley Parable*. This leads to the creation of the "Stanley Paradox", a fractal contradiction that lies at the heart of the game's narrative. The Stanley Paradox encapsulates the game's unique approach to choice-craft, creating a puzzle that contains the impression of a solution, but which ultimately only confounds the player. In doing so, the Stanley Paradox creates a textual mirror through which the player can see themselves anew, both highlighting the aesthetic potential of the choice while also making the player aware of the potential deficiencies within the contemporary trends of literary gaming and corporate claims to provide games that with 'choices that matter'. The Stanley Paradox works as a criticism of games culture's recent fixation on interactive narrative, shedding critical light on a trend which is happy to pay lip service to "choices that matter" for marketing purposes, but which only reinforces the criticism given by the Stanley Paradox – revealing that despite the chooser's best efforts, their behaviour is ultimately defined by the parameters given by the choice.

The Stanley Paradox

Both the "Freedom" and "Not Stanley" endings present the possibility of Stanley as an exemplum within the Narrator's 'Stanley parable', and as a foil within the "Not Stanley" ending.

However, the presence of the “Museum” ending carries the implication that the foil that the player performs in the “Not Stanley” ending could itself be an intra-diegetic exemplum constructed by the game. This creates a crisis of meaning, as the player feels compelled to continually resist categorisation, and becomes further aware of how didactic choices subjectify the interactor.

The infinite regress that Stanley represents follows its own narrative arc as the player traverses the game. First, Stanley is the exemplum within the Narrator’s personal ‘Stanley parable’. However, the player may then fulfil the role of the implied foil, rejecting the Narrator’s orders within the “Not Stanley” ending in a manner reminiscent of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957).

However the presence of a repeat at the end of the “Not Stanley” ending, a lack of closure, and the depiction of branching paths as themselves meaningless in the “Museum” ending make the player aware of the “Anti-Stanley” as its own constructed foil within the diegesis of the game. With that, a player may feel inclined to break the binary constructed by the game, perhaps by following the meta-narrator’s own orders and moving to “Press Quit”.

Yet this is itself a persona constructed by the diegesis of the game. By moving to “Press Quit” the player is attempting to inhabit yet another implied exemplum constructed by the game, one who chooses not to define their behaviour through diegetic foils and exempla, or who chooses not to play such games to begin with. This may prompt the player to move against this role, perhaps by refusing to “Press Quit”. Yet this too is an implied foil, an “Anti-Anti-Stanley”. Again, this would imply that players should not concern themselves overly with obeying or defying classification. If this is the moral of the game, then the ‘un-concerned with classification’ player would be occupying yet another implied exemplum, an “Anti-Anti-Anti-Stanley”. This series of contradictions can continue indefinitely, and is designed as a fractal

riddle which emboldens the player to think deeply about the role that they play as choosers within literary games that attempt to construct an interactive narrative with choice and consequence.

The significance of the Stanley Paradox becomes clearer when compared to a non-ludic paradoxical question. Director Peter Segal's 2003 filmic comedy *Anger Management* features a scene where an anger management therapist named Dr. Buddy Rydell poses a simple question to his patient, a man named David Buznik, "Who are you?". David replies with a series of answers, first describing his job, his hobbies, and then eventually his personality. Each answer is rebuked by Dr. Rydell, with replies such as "I don't want you to tell us what you *do*, I want to tell us who you *are*" and "not your *hobbies* Dave...tell us who you *are*." The scene ends with a display of anger from David, who exclaims "I don't know what the hell you want me to say!"¹⁰⁰ The question "Who are you?" has no philosophically defensible answer. In a manner similar to the choices found within *The Stanley Parable*, the question hold out the promise of a solution, yet does not offer one. In doing so, David is moved to continually dig deeper within himself in an attempt to answer, and in the process to contemplate the potential impossibility of identity itself.

This process of self-discovery encapsulates how the Stanley Paradox presents choices that move a player to better understand the role that they play in literary games and in contemporary games culture more broadly. Although the Stanley Paradox, much like the question "Who are you?" has no answer, it still evokes a choice-consequence structure that allows the player to attempt different answers, and to better understand themselves in the process. Where David answered the question "Who are you" with his job, or his hobbies. The player must answer the question "What should I do" by navigating different branches within

¹⁰⁰ *Anger Management*. Dir. Peter Segal. Perf. Adam Sandler, Jack Nicholson. Columbia Pictures. 2003. Film

the game and trialling different player-avatar relationships. The Stanley Paradox has no answer, yet like the question “Who are you?” it allows the player to engage in a form self-reflective play. These paradoxical choices emphasise a form of literary meaning that choices are best positioned to deliver. They perform as a textual mirror, emphasising a conflict within the chooser of which they may not previously have been aware.

The Stanley Parable utilises the choice function to make the player aware of how choices can be used *against* them. By combining the reflective form of the choice with its didactic counterpart, the game emphasises the difference between the two, revealing both the liberating and authoritarian potentials of choice-craft. The game exposes the capacity for a clear avatar and pre-defined goals to entrap and control the player. It does this through its use of reflective choices. Ambiguities engender the sensation of an implied solution, but fail to provide one. This encourages the interactor to continually test themselves via the game’s many branches. The Stanley Paradox hovers as a spectre above the player, continually forcing them to ask “what should I do?” The game offers no definitive answer to this question, yet in the player’s constant attempts to answer it they become aware of how they are subjectified by didactic choices. In contrast to the legacy of the catechism with its shut-down power structure and closed-loop logic, the paradoxical choices created by *The Stanley Parable* serve as a tool through which the player can better understand the complex and subtly constructed role that they play as choosers within the power-structure of literary games and the broader emerging culture of interactive narrative.

Chapter 2: Exploratory Choices in Hypertext Fiction and *Patchwork Girl*

I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see me whole,
you will have to sew me together yourself. – Shelley Jackson, *graveyard* (1995)

There exists little more liberating than passive, linear narrative. In a linear narrative a reader may read and interpret freely, without the returning gaze of an author. The slight addition of interactivity in hypertext literature does not radically change the otherwise linear nature of the stories the format tells. Instead, it adds an extra layer of discomfort to the reading experience, what this thesis calls *exploration anxiety*. No work of hypertext fiction makes this more apparent than Shelley Jackson's hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl: A Modern Monster* (1995). In *Patchwork Girl* readers uncover the otherwise linear yet enthralling story of Dr. Frankenstein's resurrected female Monster (from Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*). They navigate the internal conflict experienced by the Monster in a multi-linear way – exploring her mental angst through the rhizomatic network of a hypertext novel. Despite being a fundamentally linear reading experience, *Patchwork Girl* creates an implied ludic goal in the form of a gnawing sense of *exploration anxiety*. *Exploration anxiety* provides the reader with a ludic goal which, as the patchwork girl puts it, is to “sew me together yourself” if “you want to see me whole.”

The sentiment that arises after a reading of *Patchwork Girl* is not a call for less authorial control, but rather more. Under the rhizomatic surface of *Patchwork Girl* lies an essentially linear and conventional narrative, where psychologically rich characters grapple with internal conflicts, and readers are free to interpret without being judged according to the standards of a ludic goal.

The choices in *Patchwork Girl* allow the reader to explore this story, but not to have any impact upon it. From this it can be extrapolated that readers of hypertext only make *exploratory choices*. These are choices that allow a chooser to explore and analyse a story from multiple angles, but without impacting upon it or changing its outcome. Instead of maximising ludic outcomes or navigating moral dilemmas readers are instead driven by a conventional readerly drive to find closure. This thesis introduces the term *exploration anxiety* to describe this sensation. It is constructed both by the text of *Patchwork Girl*, and by the way in which hypertext narrative constructs its choices. If the *didactic choice* makes the chooser overly anxious about the expectations of the choosee, then the *exploratory choice* makes the choosee irrelevant, removing any sense of purpose, meaning or closure from the experience. Hypertext provides an ideal staging ground in which to observe this phenomenon, as its structure makes the sensation of *exploration anxiety* particularly pronounced. This chapter argues that Shelley Jackson is not only breaking the rules of hypertext fiction in *Patchwork Girl*, but that she is revealing its limitations in so doing. The *graveyard* lexia – a fragment of which is presented as the epigraph to this chapter – gives readers a deliberate ludic goal. This both fills the reader with *exploration anxiety* while also giving them a *goal* in a very real sense of the term. This is only furthered by the presentation of an otherwise readerly linear narrative in the ‘Journal’ and ‘Story’ subsections, and through the conclusion of the story presented in the lexia titled *diaspora*. These limitations shed light on the nature of the *exploratory choice*, and on the functions of choice more generally within interactive narrative.

Hypertext Literature as Not-Quite Narrative

Hypertext literature first appeared before the rise of the computer. Marc Saporta’s *Composition No. 1* (1963) was an experimental print novel consisting of 150 loose sheets of paper, all of which were unnumbered. Saporta left the ordering of the text up to the reader. To read *Composition No.*

1, the reader had to shuffle the pages, creating a new arrangement of text each time.¹⁰¹ Hypertext narrative migrated to the digital space with the rise of the desktop computer in the 1980s. Readers of hypertext were confronted with fragments of text before continuing to explore the text by clicking on hyperlinked words or options. Hypertext theorists labelled each segment of text a 'lexia', a term coined by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970).¹⁰²

The term 'hypertext' itself connotes not just a form of reading but a specific method of organising information, a term that is commonly credited to Ted Nelson. The term could, theoretically, be extended to include large swathes of interactive storytelling. For example, Adam Hammond in *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction* (2017) defines the *Choose Your Own Adventure* model of branching interactivity as hypertext, and labels the interactive text *Lucy Hardin's Missing Period* (2010) as a hypertext novel.¹⁰³ *Lucy Hardin* differs radically from the structures of first-wave hypertext in that it possesses endings, and positions the reader to choose from the perspective of the protagonist. For the purposes of this study, hypertext will be used to refer to a specific literary movement, with the designation 'gamebook' used delineate texts such as *Lucy Hardin* or CYOA novels. Marie-Laure Ryan argues in *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2* (2015) that hypertext literature uses what she labels the "network" form of branching narrative, a closed system marked by the presence of "circuits" and the ability for readers to access nodes through "different routes".¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Description of *Composition No. 1* taken from Douglas, J. Yellowlees. *The End of Books--or Books Without End?: Reading Interactive Narratives*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press. 2001. p. 67

¹⁰² Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. pp. 186-187

¹⁰³ Hammond, Adam. *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*. New York: Cambridge UP. 2017. pp. 163-167

¹⁰⁴ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. 2015. pp. 167-168

The “Golden Age” of hypertext literature (a term coined by Robert Coover in 1999)¹⁰⁵ paralleled the rise of the PC computer, reaching its peak in the mid-1990s.¹⁰⁶ For first-wave theorists like Jay David Bolter, Robert Coover and George Landow, this heralded a new era, where readers were liberated from the ‘tyranny of the line’ and were instead elevated to become ‘co-authors’ who could freely create their own associations between lexia, and thus construct the story themselves.¹⁰⁷ These early proponents made a number of strong arguments regarding interactivity, and the changing nature of reading itself. For example, one large claim, made by Coover in ‘The End of Books?’ (1992) was that hypertext literature heralded the end of the printed, codex novel.¹⁰⁸ In regards to the nature of literary choice, and the chooser/choossee conflict that choice brings with it, the most pertinent claims made about hypertext were; (1) linear narrative forces the reader to read in an order pre-determined by the author, and to draw links and connections tied to that single, pre-determined thread which Robert Coover calls the “tyranny of the line”;¹⁰⁹ and (2) hypertext elevates the reader to the role of what Landow describes as a ‘co-author’ who crafts the narrative in a manner on par with the author.¹¹⁰

Landow and Bolter’s conceptualisation of the newer, more ‘interactive’ medium being freer is mirrored by the initial rhetoric of Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul in the early 2000s as the field of ‘ludology’ was beginning to emerge. Much of this early ludology revolved around positioning gameplay as something which exists in contrast to narrative, not just mechanically, but in terms of the meanings that each generates. Aarseth in his essay ‘Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation’ (2004) defines stories as “top-down and preplanned” while games, the

¹⁰⁵ Coover, Robert. “Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age”. *Digital Arts and Culture*. Atlanta, Georgia. 29 October 1999. Keynote Address.

¹⁰⁶ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. pp. 167-168

¹⁰⁷ Coover, Robert. “Literary Hypertext: The Passing of the Golden Age”. n.p

¹⁰⁸ Coover, Robert. “The End of Books”. *The New York Times*. June 21, 1992. Web. n.p

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.* n.p

¹¹⁰ Landow, George P. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP. 1992. pp. 23

newer media form, are experiences that are “created by the player’s actions”. The notion of the ‘player’ behaving in a manner on par with the designer echoes the claim that hypertext elevates the reader to the level of a ‘co-author’. In both instances, the newer medium is presumed to be more liberating, more ‘bottom-up’ than the hierarchical and ‘top-down’ mechanism of linear narrative. Ludologist Jesper Juul goes further in his effort to clarify the relationship between games, hypertext and narrative in his book *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005). In developing his broad definition of ‘games’, he places “hypertext fiction” firmly in a periphery zone called “not games” – included as it possesses the game-like qualities of a “variable outcome” and “player effort”, but ultimately a “not game” as hypertext possesses a “fixed outcome” and “no attachment” of the player to any specific outcome.¹¹¹ It possesses interactivity, but the nature of its interactivity is so slight that it is still, fundamentally, a narrative experience.

Other perspectives on interactivity and the author/reader power-relation abounded in the years following the “Golden Age” of hypertext. As mentioned in chapter 1, much of Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* (2001) criticised the notion that hypertextual links were in themselves liberating. Instead, he argued that they provided a text with the ability to ‘standardize’ a reader, to regulate the private psychological process of interpretation, and to cause readers to ‘mistake the mind of the author for their own’.¹¹² In a similar vein, twentieth-century reader response theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish stressed the ability of the linear text to bring about a creative equilibrium between readers and authors. Iser argues that the construction of a text is a two-sided process, in which readers actively interpret the text before

¹¹¹ Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2005. p. 44

¹¹² Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: The MIT Press. 2001. pp. 57-61

them, filling in the blanks, before using their imagination to bring the text to life.¹¹³ Narrative already offers immense freedom for readers, however even the smallest tinge of interactivity can spark new anxieties for choosers, as this chapter will explore.

The notion that hyperlinks between modularised lexia would be a more 'natural' way to explore narrative was also subsequently challenged. Scholars and writers such as Chaouli¹¹⁴, Miller¹¹⁵ and Mangen and Van Der Weel¹¹⁶ have argued that much of the enjoyment of narrative arises precisely from its 'authoritarian' nature. These arguments typically emphasise the need for narrative events to be 'fixed' so that readers can properly enjoy and interpret them, and the unique communion that arrives when an external author with a different mind engages with readers on a personal level. These perspectives call to mind the appreciation of an author that, to quote Chaouli, is 'playing with our minds'.¹¹⁷ Like the Narrator of *The Stanley Parable*, it is the existence of this 'authoritarian narrator' pushing against the reader that brings much of the pleasure experienced in traversing a narrative. The common thread in these arguments is that narrative serves an irreducibly didactic function, creating an external voice to challenge the audience, to teach them something new and to guide them.

Responses to hypertext in the 1990s were polarising, with both sides fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of interactivity. "The debate in the 1990s over the literary politics of hypertext was nothing if not extreme" summarises Hammond: on "one side, critics foreseeing the liberation from the enslavement of the author; on the other, critics proclaiming absolute enslavement to be the source of all literary pleasure."¹¹⁸ The fundamental error on both sides was

¹¹³ Iser, Wolfgang. 'Interaction between Text and Reader'. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. ed. Sulemain; Susan K; Crossman, Inge. New Jersey: Princeton UP. 1980. p. 30

¹¹⁴ Chaouli, Michel. "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?". *Critical Inquiry*. No. 31. Spring 2005. pp. 599-617

¹¹⁵ Miller, Laura. "Bookend; www.claptrap.com". *New York Times*. March 15, 1998. Web. n.p

¹¹⁶ Mangen, Anne; Van der Weel, Adriaan. 'Why don't we read hypertext novels?'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. 2015. pp. 1-16

¹¹⁷ Chaouli, Michel. "How Interactive Can Fiction Be?". pp. 599

¹¹⁸ Hammond, Adam. *Literature in the Digital Age: An Introduction*. pp. 163

the assumption that interactivity was liberating per se. With the exception of Manovich, most scholars, from Aarseth describing the 'simulation' as 'bottom-up' to scholars like Miller and Chaouli calling for more 'tyranny', the central assumption was that reader choice equals freedom. Yet in the sphere of literature, freedom is not defined by the ability to change a text, but by the freedom to interpret it.¹¹⁹ This does not, however, discount the value of a didactic, authorial voice. As both Chaouli and Miller argue, freedom in literature is not necessarily a good thing – there exists a readerly pleasure in the push-back from an opinionated author and a work organised according to authorial design. Traces of this authorial push-back can be seen in linear narrative, but the potential for an author to challenge the reader in an interactive text provides an increased opportunity for this pleasure to be amplified. Hypertext's central dilemma is not that it is not free enough, but that it is 'too' free, and does not challenge or question or even 'see' the choices made by its readers. The potential of the choices do not lie in the opportunity to bring freedom for the reader, but instead to amplify the voice of the author, to allow them to respond *directly* to the reader, and to provide frameworks that are customised and tailored to them. Manovich's threat of "standardisation" can potentially be used for pure propaganda,¹²⁰ but when employed subtly it can also create new opportunities for reader self-reflection. This process does not take place in *Patchwork Girl*. Readers are free to interpret the pre-written narrative of *Patchwork Girl*, but their choices have no actual impact on the events of the story.

¹¹⁹ As an anecdotal example – compare the experience of reading Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* to the experience of watching a performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Atlas Shrugged* is a novel designed to forward an explicit political ideology – it wants the reader to come away believing certain things about the world – and interpretations of the text that diverge from this point are difficult to sustain; *Hamlet* contrastingly presents a multi-faceted narrative that is largely open to interpretation.

¹²⁰ Imagine how much more unpleasant Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* would be if it were presented in the form of a CYOA-style gamebook: "By choosing to donate to the poor, you have degraded yourself. Looters take advantage of your generosity until the end of your life and you amount to nothing. – The End"

Patchwork Girl: A non-hypertextual hypertext novel

Coover describes *Patchwork Girl* as the 'true paradigmatic work' of first-generation hypertext literature.¹²¹ Much of the prior critical literature on *Patchwork Girl* explores the text's overt themes. Hackman,¹²² Keep,¹²³ Carazo and Jiménez¹²⁴ examine how *Patchwork Girl* acts as a commentary on hypertext literature, its feminist themes, its mediation upon the *bricolage* of new media and how the Monster's body symbolises the philosophy of hypertext. What's been less often remarked is that *Patchwork Girl* is a motivating reading experience precisely because it *breaks* the rules of hypertext and reveals the limitations of its form in doing so.

Patchwork Girl is a response to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), depicting an alternate story in which Mary Shelley herself resurrects the female Monster created by Dr. Frankenstein, and develops a romantic and specifically sexual attachment to her. The text is broken up into various sections. Both 'Journal' and 'Story' follow the linear narrative of Mary and the Monster. They are dominated by one-link lexia with the occasional choice. These choices ultimately return the reader to the linear reading experience in what Chris Crawford describes as a "foldback" mechanism.¹²⁵ 'Journal' and 'Story' provide satisfying reading experiences precisely because they are linear, and provide a sense of closure for readers. Graveyard presents a more traditional hypertext reading experience, with readers following a network as they explore the original owners (both human and animal) of the Monster's various body parts. However 'graveyard', too, breaks the rules of hypertext in its purest network form by providing the reader with a role and a

¹²¹ Coover, Robert. "Literary hypertext: The passing of the Golden Age." n.p

¹²² Hackman, Paul. "'I Am a Double Agent': Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and the Persistence of Print in the Age of Hypertext". *Contemporary Literature*. Vol 52. No. 1. Spring 2011. pp. 84-107

¹²³ Keep, Christopher. "Growing Intimate With Monsters: Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* and the Gothic Nature of Hypertext". *Romanticism on the Net*. No. 41-42. 2006. Web. n.p

¹²⁴ Carazo, Carolina Sánchez-Palencia, Jiménez, Manuel Almagro. "Gathering the Limbs of the Text in Shelley Jackson's 'Patchwork Girl.'" *Atlantis*. Vol. 28. No. 1. 2006. pp. 115-129

¹²⁵ Crawford, Chris. "The Siren Song of Interactive Storytelling". *8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. Copenhagen, Denmark. December 3, 2015. Keynote Address. Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb8KWsy5OSM&feature=youtu.be>

goal – to uncover the full story of the Monster. *Patchwork Girl* in fact delivers insights into the hypertext novel not as a paradigmatic example of the genre, but as a meta-fictional criticism of it. The Monster's constructed nature is itself a clear metaphor for the hypertext reading experience, and the reader's traversal of hypertext is explicitly compared to the Monster's piecemeal body. What eventually becomes clear through reading *Patchwork Girl* is that the very 'body' of hypertext as a form has limitations, which make themselves apparent through both the Monster's inner conflict and through Jackson's breaking of hypertext conventions as they had become established by 1995. Much of the discussion in this chapter will focus on an idiosyncratic choice taken from the text which this thesis labels the *séance* choice.

Figure 5: The Séance Choice

oracle, who argues that all are ‘haunted’ (post-structurally) by the ghosts of their ancestors, of their past memories, and of their fictive identity. At the conclusion of the speech, the reader chooses between two links, one leading to a lexia titled *skepticism* and another leading to a lexia titled *lives & livers*. Both threads ultimately return to the same lexia, titled *armadillo*, ending the branching diversion in a diamond-shaped ‘foldback’ structure.¹²⁶ The narrative then continues on a linear path (Figure 5).

This choice stands out as it allows readers to make a choice that more directly concerns them, their thoughts, and beliefs. It allows the reader to respond to the oracle’s speech with their own reply, channelled through the Monster, who serves here as a quasi-avatar. Readers skeptical of the oracle’s assertion can choose *skepticism*, while those who believe in the oracle’s words can follow *lives & livers*. This contrasts with similar choices, both within *Patchwork Girl* and within other hypertext novels, which offer choices that are not narratively framed in any way. In contrast to *séance*, the lexia *sight* presents the reader with a similar foldback choice. After Mary sees her Monster, readers can choose to follow *written*, where Mary narrates how she ‘wrote’ the Monster, or *sewn*, where she narrates how she ‘sewed’ the Monster. Both paths depict variations of the same theme, presenting a metaphor for how the Monster was created. Despite the branching paths, there exists no reason for readers to choose either the ‘sewn’ link or the ‘written’ link. As Chaouli notes in ‘How Interactive Can Fiction Be?’ (2005) the reader chooses as their ‘biographical self’ with no fictional structure to help guide their choice.¹²⁷ In contrast, *séance* presents a choice with a very loose referent: whether or not the reader, as someone who empathises with and is following the journey of the Monster, agrees with the oracle’s sermon.

¹²⁶ Crawford, Chris. “The Siren Song of Interactive Storytelling”. 8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling. Copenhagen, Denmark. December 3, 2015. Keynote Address. Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb8KWsy5OSM&feature=youtu.be>

¹²⁷ Chaouli, Michel. “How Interactive Can Fiction Be?”. pp. 607-614

Structurally, however, the *séance* choice functions similarly to the choice presented in *sight*. Both paths represent the Monster's internal thought-processes and her instinctive reaction to the oracle's sermon. In *skepticism* she muses that "Madam Q's philosophy struck me as vaguely unclear", while in *lives & livers* she begins by saying that "The Madame's ruminations spurred my own". Despite their differing beginnings, the ruminations that the Monster engages in do not directly conflict with one another. Both thoughts exist within her head, with the reader only uncovering different parts of a pre-existing train of thought. They both form part of an inconsistent sequence of events in which both *lives & livers* and *skepticism* are the Monster's 'first' responses to the sermon. Regardless of their choice, in both parts, the Monster redirects the conversations back to the topic of her own identity, reaches a similar conclusion, before experiencing a 'shiver'. Additionally, in both paths she makes a similar observation regarding ghosts, arguing that they are 'thin folk'. This largely reflects the tendency for hypertext as a genre, and for *Patchwork Girl* in particular, to present pre-existing textual fragments in a different order, a remixing analogous to the post-structural network implied by hypertext novels. The reader's choice becomes absorbed into the musing of the Monster. The meta-textual implications of this are that this choice reflects the omen delivered by the Monster in *think me*, where the reader, in following the Monster, must start "thinking my thoughts" before they "have trouble telling me apart from yourself" until eventually they "think as I do". This bears an uncanny premonitory similarity to Manovich's commentary on the standardisation that interactivity brings, where choices allow a text to replicate the author's private and psychological process of thought, and reflect it back to the reader with links and connections constructed by the author.¹²⁸

The *séance* intersection unveils the nature of choice within hypertext. Despite the ostensibly liberating structure of hypertext, this choice not only reverts to a pre-written linear

¹²⁸ It is worth noting that Manovich's *The Language of New Media* was published 6 years after the publication of *Patchwork Girl*.

narrative, but does so in a way that guides the thoughts of the reader along lines directed by the author in a decidedly coercive manner. When contrasted with *sight*, *séance*'s choice reveals itself as distinct in that it provides a quasi-avatar through which the reader can choose, and allows the reader to choose in relation to their own response to the oracle's sermon, with their reaction framed through the personal experiences of the Monster.

This choice contrasts starkly with the most interesting element of *Patchwork Girl*; the choices made by the two central characters, Mary and the Monster, embody the full potential that choice can have in interactive narrative. Mary is conflicted about her relationship in regards to the Monster, unsure whether or not to draw closer to her, or to flee. The Monster, by contrast, is conflicted in turn about her own divided nature. The meaningful choices that the characters make within the narrative juxtapose with the meaningless choices that the reader makes. This gap between the reader's powerlessness and the agency of the characters reveals the narrative potential for readers to choose *as* characters with internal conflicts, rather than merely passively viewing these conflicts from outside. Mary's conflict, which runs as a constant theme throughout the story, regards how she feels about the Monster. "I fear this but crave it" says Mary in the lexia titled *female trouble* as she contemplates cutting off part of her own body in order to add it to the Monster, while *crave* reflects her conflicting feelings towards the Monster: part of her fears her, the other desires her. Although she initially does not cut off a part of her body and attach it to the Monster, she does move to sleep with her, suppressing her fear and acting upon her desires. Later in the narrative, she stitches part of her skin to the Monster's groin, thematising her desire to join with the Monster. This conflict plays throughout the lexia, with Mary choosing which side to prioritise each time, grappling with her inner turmoil. The *séance* choice similarly represents the conflict the Monster feels in regards to her existence as a constructed being. The oracle's sermon touches symbolically upon the Monster's nature: where humans are 'haunted' by physical features

of their ancestors, the Monster is haunted by the memories of those people and animals whose body parts comprise her. The choice at the end of the oracle's sermon, between *skepticism* and *lives & livers*, functions metaphorically for the Monster's quintessentially post-modern fractured view of herself - is she really a haunted combination of many disparate parts? These decisions, whether or not Mary chooses to amputate some part of herself or sleep with her creation, or how the Monster chooses to see herself, are *choices*. They are comparable to Stanley's decision to move through a door in *The Stanley Parable*, or Clementine's decision to shoot or not shoot Kenny in *The Walking Dead* (a choice which will be explored in chapter 3). In *Patchwork Girl*, they are decisions made by characters, not readers. This undercuts critics' claims that hypertext introduces a form of interactivity unique to literature as the reader of a hypertext novel is still, ultimately, passively exploring what is an ostensibly linear narrative. Porter Abbott makes the argument in the *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008) that this relationship, between the raw chronological sequence of events (what Russian formalists call the *fabula*) and the manner in which the reader encounters them (termed *syhuzet*) is hardly new. He argues that "hypertext lexia are simply a new twist on an old narrative condition."¹²⁹ The reader explores the internal conflicts of the characters within *Patchwork Girl* in the same way that a passive audience member watches the "To be or not to be" soliloquy of Hamlet, or the way in which a reader watches as Sophie of William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* laments her own impossible conundrum. Hypertext networks represent a new way to explore old narrative themes, but fail to add much to the cathartic process.

The Exploratory Choice

The *séance* choice is not new, but rather emblematic of the *exploratory choice*, a form of choice-making that can be found across different rhizomatic structures, from the branching tree to the closed network. It can be found in the CYOA gamebooks, and even in video-games such as Sega's

¹²⁹ Abbott, Porter H. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 2008. p. 34

Shadow the Hedgehog (2005). Its common elements are: (1) an impression that the chooser is exploring a narratively rich conflict; (2) An *exploratory anxiety* to uncover every possible path and; (3) an internally inconsistent *fabula*.

The CYOA gamebook *House of Danger* (1982)¹³⁰ provides an elaborate example of this phenomenon.¹³¹ The narrative of *House of Danger* is relatively simple: the reader is an “aspiring detective and psychic investigator” who is exploring a mysterious house. Like other CYOA novels, an overt emphasis is placed on the agency of the reader, with the very first page announcing that “You and YOU ALONE are in charge of what happens in this story”, with all of the reader’s choices framed through second-person mode of narration. The actual experience of combing through the book’s many branches, however, undermines the notion that the reader is at all ‘in charge of what happens’ in the story.

The first issue is the lack of closure a reading of *House of Danger* provides. Similar to hypertext, readers lack guidance and closure. In both a hypertext novel and gamebook, any initial reading triggers the same anxiety. For a reader of *House of Danger* encountering their first of many endings, the natural inclination is to wonder if there exists more to the story. Physically, the reader can see many pages in the codex novel and knows that they have only encountered the first of many endings. As such, a ludic response is to try to find ‘all the endings’ and to even try to find the ‘right’ ending. In chapter 1, the *Tutortext* nature of the gamebook was explored, characterised by only a few ‘good’ endings lying at the end of a long chain of choice-and-consequence branches. However a third type of ending also exists within gamebooks: the unsatisfying ending. Similar to “bad” endings, these serve a terminal function, ending a chain and prompting a reader to return to the beginning and try again. Unlike “bad” endings, these are

¹³⁰ Montgomery, R.A. *Choose Your Own Adventure: House of Danger*. Warren, Vermont: Chooseco. 1982

¹³¹ I have chosen this specific gamebook for its simplicity. Its story revolves around a house which represents contradictory things based on which branch you follow, and its tree-structure is simple with no re-routes or paths that return the reader to an earlier point in the story.

disguised as a form of consolation prize, with the promise that there lies something more within the pages of the book. “[You] still don’t know what to believe, but you have a lot to think about” concludes one of these ‘intermediary’ endings in *House of Danger*.¹³² “You wonder if you will enjoy your new life” ends another as the reader boards a spaceship.¹³³ These endings often occur in small to medium sized branch-chains, providing both a quick reading experience that is dwarfed by the physical size of the book, and ending ambiguously. This challenges any sense of closure that a reader could attain, encouraging them to return and flick through the pages again in search of closure. Mitchell and McGee in “ReReading again for the first time: a model of rereading in interactive stories” (2012) argue that this form of exploring alternate endings is an attempt to achieve closure.¹³⁴ Alex Mitchell expands upon this in “Reflective Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories” (2015) where he argues that attempts to ‘reread’ an interactive text occur to better understand the underlying structure of an interactive story.¹³⁵ *House of Danger* explicitly feeds into this anxiety with the final page providing the reader with a “Danger Trivia Quiz”. The introduction to the quiz asks “How many adventures did you take through the House of Danger? If you can’t solve this trivia quiz, perhaps you should take a few more.” In either instance, a driving need to understand the system underlying the story in order to achieve closure breaks the suspension of disbelief necessary for fiction to be immersive. Constantly shuffling through a ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ novel makes the reader overly aware of the book as a material object, and disturbs the habitually linear codex reading experience. This process is exacerbated in

¹³² Montgomery, R.A. *Choose Your Own Adventure: House of Danger*. Warren, Vermont: Chooseco. 1982. p. 83

¹³³ *ibid.* p. 94

¹³⁴ Mitchell, Alex. McGee, Kevin. “ReReading again for the first time: a model of rereading in interactive stories.” 6th *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling. January 30-February 4*. Ed: Mauri, Jaime Llored. Martinez, Gregorio. Berntzen, Lasse. Smedberg, Åsa. Valencia: Springer International Publishing. 2012. pp. 202–213.

¹³⁵ Mitchell, Alex. “Reflective Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories”. 8th *International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling. November 30-December 4, 2015*. Ed. Schoenau-Fog, Henrik. Bruni, Luis Emilio. Louchart, Sandy. Baceviciute. Sarune. Copenhagen: Springer International Publishing. 2015. pp. 27-39

hypertext by the absence of any kind of ending as well as the reader's inability to see the 'whole' text.

The final element of the exploratory choice - that of the internally inconsistent *fabula* - can also be seen within *House of Danger*. The meta-narrative of the novel concerns a mysterious house. Yet within each branch the nature of this house changes. In one branch, the house is the headquarters of a potential alien invasion; in another, the headquarters of the secretive "International Planning Group"; in yet another, a house haunted by a Civil War-era ghost. The *fabula* is internally contradictory. Like the alternative thoughts that race through the Monster's mind in the *séance* choice of *Patchwork Girl*, or Mary Shelley's different conceptions of creation in the *sewn* and *written* lexias, all of these conflicting branches are simultaneously true – different sides to the multi-threaded narrative that the reader navigates.

The *séance* sequence in *Patchwork Girl* shows the hypertext novel as a medium that can potentially give a reader the experience of exploring an internal conflict, but collapses it back into a pre-written linear narrative. The chooser does not choose meaningfully, but instead explores the choices set before another dissociated character. This same process plays out almost exactly in the video-game *Shadow the Hedgehog* (2005), despite the presence of a radically different narrative structure. Comparing *Patchwork Girl* to *Shadow the Hedgehog* reveals the platonic form of exploratory choices, and how they can transcend specific rhizomatic configurations, such as the network. In both, an internally conflicted primary character expresses their internal schism through different branching pathways, with each providing an equally valid yet conflicting approach to their respective conflicts. In neither instance does the player/reader choose how these conflicts are resolved, but instead they are driven forward by a sense of *exploration anxiety* to uncover how the conflicted character chose to resolve their associated conflict by searching through their associated branching narratives.

Shadow the Hedgehog is a console game released by Sega as part of the popular *Sonic the Hedgehog* franchise. The player takes on the role of Shadow, a speed-running hedgehog who was designed as an anti-hero contrast to series mainstay “Sonic”. Unlike his heroic counterpart, Shadow was artificially created by a genius scientist for an unknown purpose. In his backstory, the government deems him dangerous, and attempts to have him killed. In the process, the daughter of his creator, Maria, sacrifices herself in order to save his life, and makes him promise to act as a force for good. The events of the game involve an alien invasion of Earth. The alien leader, “Black Doom” promises to reveal the truth behind Shadow’s creation if he sides with him, while “Sonic” urges the player to follow the path of good. The game’s narrative structure involves a branching tree-diagram, with each level offering three ‘objectives’: good, evil and neutral (Figure 6). The player is then encouraged to explore Shadow’s morally conflicted nature by choosing between the different sides in the battle for Earth. Choosing “Good” moves Shadow visually down towards the bottom of the tree, while “Bad” visually moves him towards the top. The branching tree displays prominently between each level, serving as a visual representation for Shadow’s internal conflict between good and evil. Upon uncovering every ending, a final ending is unlocked. Shadow learns that he was ultimately made for “Good”, and defeats the alien invasion.¹³⁶

Both Shadow and the Monster are artificially created creatures undergoing an existential struggle. For the Monster, this conflict involves coming to terms with her own disjointed nature. The ‘séance’ choice depicts this textually, through the Monster’s internal dialogue in both the *skepticism* and *lives & livers* lexia (Figure 5). Yet it also depicts this visually, through the lines and branches that readers can observe when clicking on the Storyspace ‘map’ function. The Monster’s thoughts in both branches reflect a literal paradox in her response to the oracle’s sermon. The tree branch in *Shadow* serves a similar function, acting as a visual metaphor for Shadow’s internal

¹³⁶ *Shadow The Hedgehog*. Nintendo GameCube. Sega. 2005

struggle between Good and Evil. Shadow wants to both serve humanity and take vengeance upon it. Each branch reflects extant desires within his mind. In both narratives, a true 'ending' and solution exists to their respective conflicts, despite the appearance of non-linearity and choice. For the Monster, this canonical ending arrives in the lexia titled *diaspora*, as she embraces her disconnected nature. For Shadow, it occurs in the 'true' ending that is unlocked after discovering every ending, where he ultimately sides with Good. In both cases the actual input of the chooser is irrelevant to the unfolding of the plot. Making choices is instead a visualisation of the internal conflict, purely exploratory, with no impact on how the avatar in question will ultimately decide.

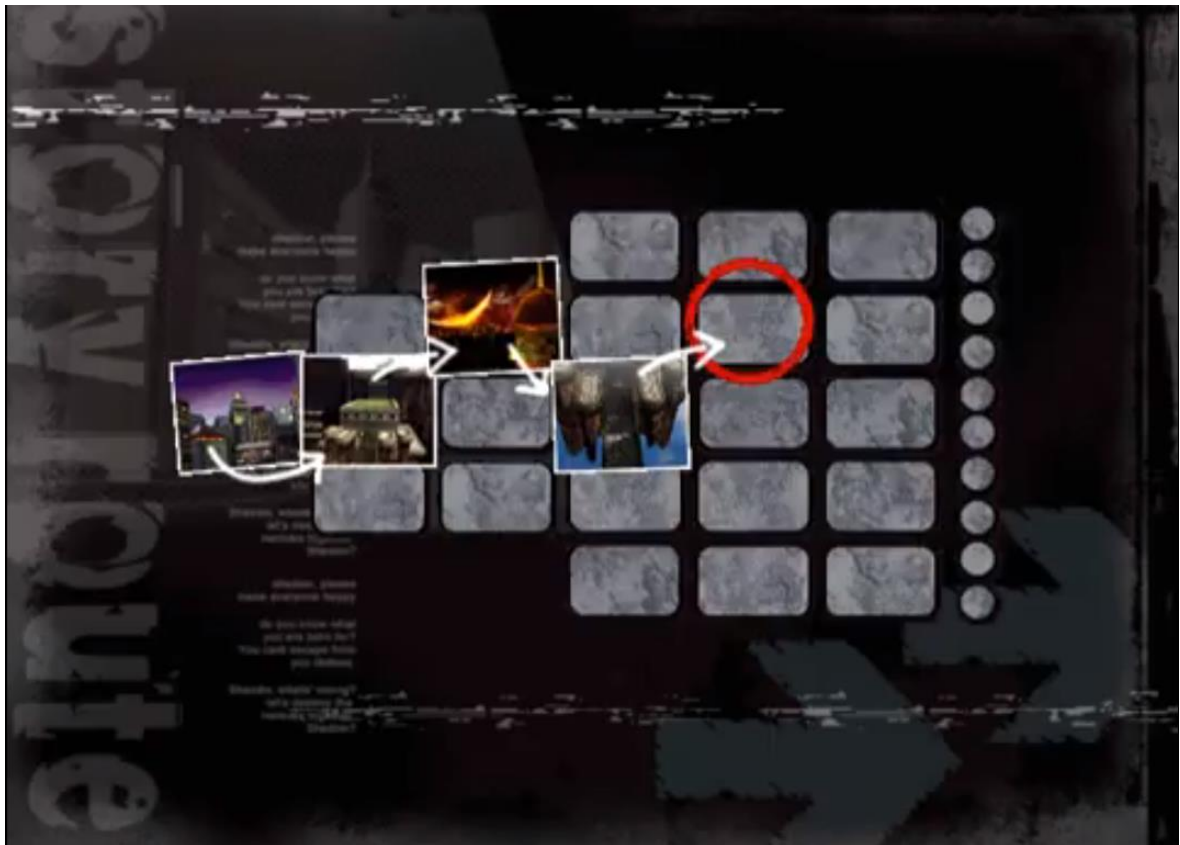


Figure 6: *Shadow the Hedgehog's* branching narrative

While the *séance* choice reveals two common elements of the exploratory choice, *graveyard* is an example of how exploratory choices can explicitly feed a desire in readers to explore every branch, to find every 'ending' and to continue to uncover the nature of the entire text. It does so in the same way that *House of Danger* feeds the reader's desire for closure with its

‘trivia’ at the end, or through its deliberately unsatisfying ambiguous endings. It also serves a similar function to *Shadow the Hedgehog*’s implied goal of finding every ending. The *graveyard* lexia reads:

I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see me whole, you will have to sew me together yourself.

Here the reader is provided with an interactive directive, a ludic goal. The Monster, a visual and direct metaphor for the network, is ‘buried here’. ‘You can resurrect me’ it suggests, the suggestion alone implying that unless the reader does in fact resurrect her, then the text remains incomplete, unread, and unmarked - requiring fulfilment. The use of the hypertext’s characteristic second person “You” implicates the reader directly in this task. The text, knowingly, references the fact that the reader can only reconstruct the story ‘piecemeal’ and yet it tantalises them with the possibility that they may be able to ‘see me whole’. The ‘piecemeal’ nature of the reader’s journey is reinforced in the lexia *half-blind* as the reader is told that “I can only see that part most immediately before me, and have no sense of how that part relates to the rest.” Knowingly or not, this recalls the same sense of loss the reader of a CYOA novel feels encountering a ‘quick’ ending – the short length of the reading experience dwarfed by the physical size of the novel. Here, the author is reminding the reader that their reading capacity is limited, and that beyond ‘that part most immediately before me’ there still exists much for them to ‘resurrect’, as per the *graveyard* lexia’s metaphor. The text is deliberately instilling in the reader an *exploration anxiety*, a sensation that the text is incomplete, and that it is their readerly obligation to explore every branch. The author again calls attention to this distinct failure of hypertext in *Patchwork Girl*’s de facto conclusion found in the lexia *diaspora*.

The lexia *diaspora* – in which the Monster comes apart and collapses into her constituent parts – concludes the story of *Patchwork Girl* by displaying the failure and literal fragmentation of

the metaphorical hypertext fiction as embodied by the Monster. Carazo and Jiménez interpret this lexia positively, arguing that although it “does not allow the story to reach a conclusion that would justify a unique and coherent version” it nonetheless leaves “only the reader” to “gather this body, this text, together in one piece.”¹³⁷ Carazo and Jiménez contradict themselves in this interpretation – as they have just asserted that the very hypertext novel they are reading is presenting a definitive ‘conclusion’, and that this conclusion shows that hypertext is incapable of conclusions. They by implication argue that Shelley Jackson unwittingly contradicted herself. It is better to instead follow this contradiction to its logical conclusion: the metaphorical hypertext novel of the Monster failed to provide a conclusion to the reader’s *exploration anxiety*, but by breaking the rules and giving the reader a clear conclusion at the end of a linear narrative arc the author is also bringing attention to the fact that hypertext deliberately breeds and then disappoints these anxieties in the first place when it fails to present a linear narrative. It is for this reason that Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* is celebrated as a paragon of hypertext fiction, because it not only breaks the rules of hypertext but brings the reader’s attention to just how flawed a reading experience hypertext is when it follows them. It is possible that this reading of *Patchwork Girl* attributes too much intentionality to Shelley Jackson as an author – perhaps she really did just unwittingly contradict herself. However, by taking a ‘death of the author’ approach to *Patchwork Girl* this contradiction gives form to an ‘anti-hypertext’ message stronger than any meaning that Shelley Jackson may have intended.

Conclusion

Patchwork Girl not only comments upon hypertext fiction, but it also breaks its rules and reveals its inherent limitations. The reading experience of hypertext fiction shows that even the

¹³⁷ Carazo, Carolina Sánchez-Palencia, Jiménez, Manuel Almagro. “Gathering the Limbs of the Text in Shelley Jackson’s ‘Patchwork Girl.’” p. 128

slightest introduction of interactivity to an otherwise linear narrative still constructs anxieties in the mind of the reader. This *exploration anxiety* is quasi-ludic, giving the reader a goal which – if the novel is following the rules of hypertext – cannot be accomplished. This anxiety can be found outside of hypertext and is emblematic of the *exploratory choice*. Passive, linear narrative already provides readers with uncertainty and open interpretations. Chapter 1 has shown how the *didactic choice* presents only simple binaries which meld the mind of the author with that of the reader, while this analysis of *Patchwork Girl* shows how the *exploratory choice* provides only a novel way to traverse an otherwise conventional linear narrative. With both of these being found inadequate, chapters 3 and 4 will explore the median form of the choice lying between the two poles, the *reflective choice* which fully exploits the ability for choices to express something unique within interactive narrative.

Chapter 3: Thought Experiments in *The Walking Dead*

It's not what happens to you, but how you react that matters – Epictetus

This quote was produced in a 2014 discussion article hosted on the pop-culture website *The A.V Club* as a tentative defence against the claim that choices in games produced by the prominent game development company Telltale Games “don’t matter”.¹³⁸ The Telltale ‘model’ has gained notoriety since the original publication of *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (2012) for its novel approach to interactive storytelling – with each episode opening with the phrase: “This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play.” In reality, choices in the Telltale model have no significant impact on the trajectory of the story. This chapter will show how the Telltale model still expresses its own kind of meaning - despite its noticeable flaws - through an analysis of *The Walking Dead Season 2: Episode 5 “No Going Back”* (2014). Choices in the Telltale model are still reflective. However, the choices found within the Telltale model function more akin to those found within the tradition of philosophical thought experiments. As a result, scholars such as Alex Mitchell argue that the Telltale Model functions as an “ELIZA effect”.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Gerardi, Matt. “Readers debate the importance (or irrelevance) of choice in Telltale games”. *A.V Club*. December 12, 2014. Web. n.p. Last Accessed 12 June, 2017. Found at <<http://www.avclub.com/article/readers-debate-importance-or-irrelevance-choice-te-212945>>

¹³⁹ Mitchell, Alex. “Reflective Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories”. *8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. November 30-December 4, 2015. Ed. Schoenau-Fog, Henrik. Bruni, Luis Emilio. Louchart, Sandy. Baceviciute. Sarune. Copenhagen: Springer International Publishing., 2015. pp. 27-39. p. 29

The ELIZA effect is a term coined by Noah Wardrip-Fruin in *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games and Software Studies* (2009). It was named after an early natural language computer program named ELIZA which could maintain conversations by taking whatever a user inputted and then repeating it back to them as a question. For example, the question “How are you?” returns the response “Why are you interested in whether or not I am?” This allowed many users to believe that ELIZA was a complex machine that could sustain a conversation, when in fact it was only repeating modified words back at the user. With ELIZA as an inspiration, Wardrip-Fruin defines the ELIZA effect as:

[The] well-known phenomenon in which audience expectations allow a digital media system to appear much more complex on its surface than is supported by its underlying structure...during playful interaction...the illusion breaks down rapidly.¹⁴⁰

The ELIZA effect is central to the operation of The Telltale model. The model only works when the player is unaware of how inconsequential all of their choices are. Once consequences are removed from the equation, the reflective choices within the Telltale model can still provide some level of reflection for the chooser, but they do not form an instantiated **expressed self**. They can still prompt reflection, but not as effectively as a reflective choice that responds directly to the chooser using accumulated memory. Instead, they can form a *metaphorical* expressed self, something that *The Walking Dead* achieves at the conclusion of *No Going Back*.

For most of its history Telltale has been an adventure game development company with a strong ‘puzzle’ focus. Their popularity exploded following the release of *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (2012). As time has progressed, games culture quickly became alert to the model’s flaws. Alex Mitchell in his paper “Reflective rereading and the SimCity effect in interactive stories” (2015)

¹⁴⁰ Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press. 2009. pp. 15-16

argues that the Telltale model embodies the “ELIZA effect”, stating that the game implies “a complex system underlying the game, a belief that initially encouraged rereading to explore different endings. However, It quickly became evident that the game has a simple branching system, and that there is very little underlying complexity to this system.”¹⁴¹ The growing animosity towards the “Telltale Model” has since seeped into games journalism, with Elise Favis of *Gameinformer* stridently criticising the company in 2015 with her online piece labelled “Your Choices Don’t Matter in Telltale Games”.¹⁴² Defences of the Telltale model have also emerged which – like the Epictetus quote mentioned in the epigraph of this chapter – argue that the meaning of Telltale’s choices lie in the player’s ethical response, rather than in their consequences. Nay and Zagal in “Meaning without consequence: virtue ethics and inconsequential choices in games” (2017) is a particularly strong academic defence of the Telltale model, arguing that allowing the player to define their response to ethical dilemmas is sufficient for the development of *phronesis* – a term in Aristotelian virtue ethics which means “practical wisdom”.¹⁴³

This chapter will not focus at length on the ‘illusion of choice’ in the Telltale model, as that has already been covered. Instead, this chapter will build upon the implications of the Telltale model as a form of choice-craft. In the absence of strong consequences, any meaning that a Telltale choice can express is to instead be found within the dilemma it poses. Because of this, Telltale’s choices perform in a manner similar to thought experiments. The primary function of both thought experiments and Telltale’s choices are not to produce an expressed self to comment upon – but to instead prompt the chooser to consider specific scenarios or dilemmas that they may not have otherwise considered. Thought experiments, drawing from a philosophical tradition,

¹⁴¹ Mitchell, Alex. “Reflective Rereading and the SimCity Effect in Interactive Stories”. p. 29

¹⁴² Favis, Elise. “Opinion – Your Choices Don’t Matter In Telltale Games”. *Gameinformer*. February 3, 2015. Last Accessed 21 of June, 2016. Found at <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2015/02/03/why-your-choices-dont-matter-in-Telltale-games.aspx>

¹⁴³ Nay, Jeff L; Zagal, José P. “Meaning without consequence: virtue ethics and inconsequential choices in games.” *Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. ACM. August 2017. pp. 14-19

are commonly used as an argumentative tool, or what Daniel Dennett refers to as an “intuition pump”.¹⁴⁴ The argumentative context of the thought experiment carries over into the Telltale model, and Telltale’s choices are presented in a sequential manner that begets a line of reasoning, followed by a conclusion. Similarly, thought experiments are often placed into thought experiment/counter-thought experiment pairs which aim to provide a series of conflicting intuitions that are designed to prompt the intellectual development of the reader.¹⁴⁵ *The Walking Dead: Season 2* concludes this process with a climactic choice in which the player is forced to choose whether or not to shoot a major series character. In doing so, the game is testing the player – trying to see if they have internalised the implied logic of the game’s many choices.

The Expressed Self

This thesis has until now predominately discussed two ‘fringe’ cases of the choice through analysis of *The Stanley Parable* and *Patchwork Girl*. This is because these examples display two extreme manifestations of the choice. I highlighted how they ultimately just re-emphasise pre-existing modes of expression. With *The Walking Dead* the discussion can now shift to the central of importance of the **expressed self** in choice-craft. The idea of an expressed self is new, although similar ideas have been explored in prior game studies literature. These include Miguel Sicart’s notion of the ‘second self’,¹⁴⁶ Grant Tavinor’s notion of the *fictive self*,¹⁴⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan’s notion of ‘accumulated memory’ informing the outcome of endings in interactive narrative,¹⁴⁸ and Barry Atkins’s observation that accumulated memory allows a machine to ‘see’ a user.¹⁴⁹ The

¹⁴⁴ Dennett, Daniel. *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*. London: Allen Lane. 2013. p. 6

¹⁴⁵ Brown, James Robert and Fehige, Yiftach, "Thought Experiments". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2017 Edition. Last Updated August 12, 2014. Web. n.p. Last Accessed June 14, 2017. Found at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thought-experiment/>>

¹⁴⁶ Sicart, Miguel. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press. 2009. pp. 10-11

¹⁴⁷ Tavinor, Grant. *The Art of Videogames*. Maiden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 2009. pp. 122-123

¹⁴⁸ Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. pp. 171-172

¹⁴⁹ Atkins, Barry. *More Than a Game: The Computer Game as Fictional Form*. Manchester; Manchester UP. 2003. p. 146

relationship between these theories and the ways in which the expressed self builds upon them has been explored in the introduction to this thesis. This chapter will build upon these concepts and explore the nature of the expressed self.

An expressed self is how an interactive text sees the chooser, and an example of this can be found in *Choose Your Own Adventure*-style gamebooks and branching novels. In a branching novel, there exists a textual footpath of choices and the path made by the reader as they navigate the story. Such ‘map’ views are characteristic even of 1st-generation hypertext. An example of this can be seen on the website *Writing.com* where interactive e-novels have a “Story Outline” function which allows users to view each branching e-novel from a top-down view and navigate directly to a different section. Each location in each e-novel is marked by the choices needing to be made in order to reach that section – effectively a textual coordinate system. For example: “1” is the first lexia; “1-1” is the lexia that follows once you have chosen the first option on the first page; “1-2-3-3” is reached by first choosing the second option on lexia one, then the third option, then the third option after that. The significance of the expressed self in the eyes of the text’s implied author is that it gives them a rough image of who the chooser ‘is’. For example, lexia “1-2-2” might be only reachable through constant deceit, as such the implied author can respond by punishing the reader for their deceptive behaviour. Figure 1 shows an example from a story titled “Mystical Forest”.¹⁵⁰

There exist a few different ways in which an expressed self can be manifested to the chooser: an expressed self can be either *instantiated* within the outcome of the narrative; it can simply be *presented* to the chooser at the end of the process with no commentary; or in the case of *The Walking Dead* it can be *metaphorical*. An instantiated expressed self will be later explored

¹⁵⁰ C, et al. “Mystical Forest”. *Writing.com*. Online Collaborative Branching Text. Last Accessed 12 July, 2017. Found at <https://www.writing.com/main/interact/item_id/1026315-Mystical-Forest>

in chapter 4 through *Papers, Please*, and involves a literal body of flags, numerical values and code being generated to create an image of the chooser – which then not only determines the outcome of the game’s narrative but also infuses that outcome with a veiled commentary on the chooser’s behaviour. Thus an expressed self becomes instantiated when the text’s accumulated memory of the chooser ultimately determines the final outcome of the text.

Interactive Story Outline

1-#1: Beginnings
1-1-#2: Gender Smender - Human/Light
1-1-1-#3: Your Mission - Empire of Light (M)
1-1-1-1-#4: Illumination (M)
1-1-1-1-1-#5: A Girl In Peril (M)
1-1-1-1-1-2-#6: Light Barrier
1-1-1-1-1-2-1-#7: The Creatures and the Knife
1-1-1-1-2-#5: the elfin lady
1-1-1-1-2-2-#6: Choices. Choices.
1-1-1-1-2-2-1-#7: The Heavenly Spring (M)
1-1-1-1-2-2-2-#7: Death (END)
1-1-1-2-#4: On Your Way? (M)
1-1-1-2-1-#5: Approaching the Swamp (M)
1-1-1-2-1-1-#6: Crossing Over (M)

Figure 7: "Mystical Forest" from Writing.com

Conversely, it is common for games such as *Firewatch* (2016) or Pippin Barr’s *The Trolley Problem* (2011) to simply take the chooser’s expressed self and show it to them directly without any authorial response or pushback – these are a *presented* form of the expressed self. Barr’s game is an unusually direct example of this phenomenon. In it, the player must respond to a variety of different “trolley problem” thought experiments. At the end, the player is presented with a summary of how they responded to each “Trolley Problem” with no judgement or commentary on the part of the game. Miguel Sicart in his book *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay* (2013) commends this approach, arguing that the game “presents ethical gameplay not in choices but in how these choices are interpreted” and that players “are left alone

with their choice to make sense of them and what they say about them. They are left alone with their principles.”¹⁵¹ This is a good example of a *presented* expressed self in play, lacking any sort of strong authorial pushback or commentary but nonetheless providing the player with something to reflect upon.

The *metaphorical* expressed self is implemented in the Telltale model of interactivity. At the end of *No Going Back*, the player is presented with a penultimate choice which serves as culmination of the many themes that *The Walking Dead* has attempted to communicate to the player over its various episodes. First, the player makes their penultimate choice. Then, the game *responds* to the player with one of two follow-up choices which themselves are a form of textual commentary upon the player’s behaviour. The player’s response to the penultimate choice is not simply an isolated incident within the game’s narrative trajectory, but a personal response to the game’s broad themes. As such, *No Going Back* does not respond to the player’s instantiated expressed self, but it *does* respond to the player’s personal emotional response to the game’s overarching themes. That is, it employs the expressed self in a strictly metaphorical sense, attempting to achieve what a game such as *Papers, Please* achieves, but without the burden of having to make, in Marie-Laure Ryan’s words, the “end dependent on the middle”. Shortcuts such as this are a fundamental part of what can be described as the “Telltale Model” and allow the company to create interactive narratives that are both comparatively cheap and lucratively serialisable.

The Telltale Model: A Template for Interactive Narrative

The Telltale model has been used in almost all of the company’s titles since the success of *The Walking Dead: Season 1*. Gameplay in the Telltale model primarily takes the form of ongoing cinematics, with player dialogue interspersed throughout. During each of these dialogues, silence

¹⁵¹ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press. 2013. p. 7

is always an option. Occasionally players will need to navigate an environment or take part in several “quick time action” events.¹⁵² However, for the most part the game is a cinematic narrative punctured with branching choices and dialogue. Some of these elements have been named and categorised by Maria Sulimma in her study of Telltale titled “Did you shoot the girl in the street? – On the Digital Seriality of *The Walking Dead*” (2014), and this chapter will employ Sulimma’s terminology when discussing the Telltale model.

A major element of the Telltale model is the appearance of interactivity through what Sulimma describes as “meta-moments”.¹⁵³ While players are making choices or speaking to other characters, a small prompt will appear in the top-left corner of the screen indicating that their action will have future choices: “X will remember this” is the most common, X being whichever character they are currently speaking to. For the most part these prompts are never referred to again. Occasionally, these prompts will result in a throw-away line made further in the game. For example, in an episode prior to *No Going Back*, the player can choose to watch the character Kenny violently beat up and kill an earlier antagonist. If, then, the player chooses to prevent Kenny from hurting another character, he remarks about the way in which that choice conflicts with the earlier one. These flashes of memory are momentary, and have no lasting impact on the overall trajectory of the narrative. What the meta-moments ultimately seek to do is to defer the meaning of the player’s choices to some unforeseen event in later in the narrative.¹⁵⁴ Players take their choices seriously because they expect – as the game encourages them to believe – that these choices will have serious consequences in the future.

¹⁵² A quick time action event (QTE) involves a cinematic in which the player needs to press buttons in tandem with on-screen prompts. If they fail to press the buttons in time, their avatar dies, and they reset back to an earlier point in the game to try again.

¹⁵³ Sulimma, Maria. “Did you shoot the girl in the street?” – On the Digital Seriality of *The Walking Dead*. p. 88

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 88

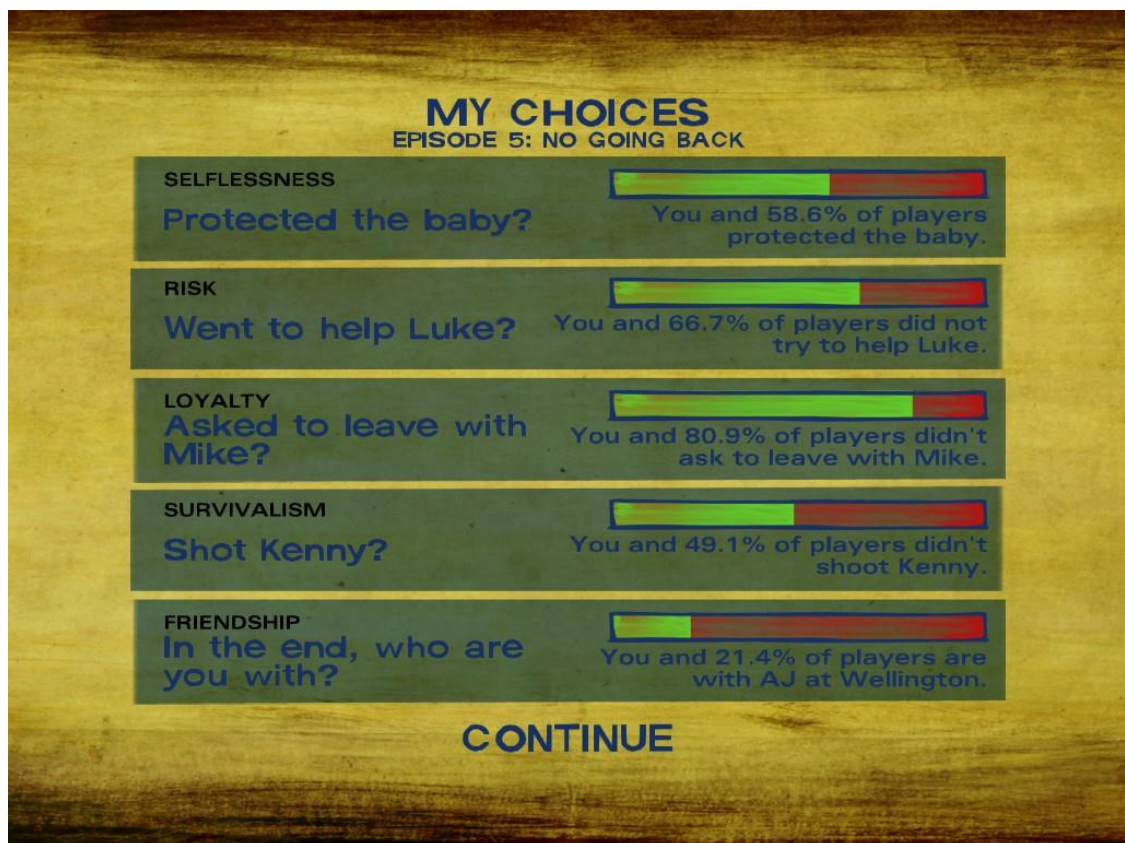


Figure 8: Survey at the end of No Going Back

The final – and most significant – group of choices is what Sulimma refers to as “Decision points.” These decision-points appear a few times in each episode and determine the narrative’s short-term trajectory. These choices are ultimately re-absorbed into the largely linear narrative of the game, but provide a short-term consequence that feels significant. These are major moral dilemmas, which move the player to consider the themes that have been communicated to them over the course of the episode. At the end of each episode, the player’s choices are compared to the game’s online community for that specific episode as they are shown an online survey of how all players acted during each of the episode’s major reflective choices (Figure 8).¹⁵⁵ This survey screen is a unique form of the *presented* expressed self, with an opportunity for the player to compare themselves to others.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 83-84

The primary way in which player self-reflection is encouraged in the Telltale model is not through consequences or authorial pushback, but through the choices themselves. In season 2 of Telltale's *The Walking Dead*, players assume the role of a young girl named Clementine who is trying to survive a zombie apocalypse. During her journey, she is accompanied by adult characters, all of whom have conflicting perspectives on what it means to survive. The two most fully developed characters – Kenny and Jane – offer wholly conflicting viewpoints on survival, and attempt to assume a surrogate parent role for Clementine, providing lessons and attempting to guide her moral development. Each episode then 'tests' the player, forcing them to consider the themes of the episode and then commit to a side through their choice. Sulimma argues that the game's narrative offers an "alternative take on the theme of parenthood".¹⁵⁶ Although there may not be consequences, these momentous choices perform in a manner akin to the philosophical thought experiment. Their meaning does not arise from their ability to communicate to the chooser after the fact, but by moving the chooser to consider important themes by presenting them with a complex dilemma.

The Thought Experiment: A Tool for Literary Expression

When a reflective choice presents a dilemma with narrative ambiguity, but no ludic consequences, it expresses meaning in a way similar to that by which thought experiments communicate with their readers. Although not an interactive form of narrative, the thought experiment commonly presents readers with a choice, before encouraging them to consider how they would respond. Consequences exist metaphorically, and are implied by the thought experiment itself. The focus, then, is not on trying to achieve a certain ludic outcome, but on trying to understand the dilemma posed by the thought experiment.

¹⁵⁶ Sulimma, Maria. "Did you shoot the girl in the street?" – On the Digital Seriality of *The Walking Dead*". p. 84

The thought experiment's history reaches back to the Pre-Socratic era of ancient Greek philosophy, and was largely developed by Greek natural philosophers – particularly Aristotle. It is heavily used as a form of argumentation and pedagogy in contemporary philosophy and academic physics, and primarily relies upon moving the audience to consider an imaginary scenario that draws out their underlying intuitions. Daniel Dennett's famous description of the thought experiment as an "intuition pump" helps to elaborate on the fundamental function of a thought experiment: to concretise intuitions of which an audience may not have previously been aware. A good example of this is how the "Transplant" scenario follows on from the "Trolley Problem". In both cases, two different intuitions are revealed, and the contrast between the two scenarios reveals an internal contradiction in the intuitions of the audience.

The "Trolley Problem", originally conceived by Philippa Foot in 1967, is a staple in the teaching of the philosophy of ethics. It's most iconic formulation is given by Judith Jarvis Thomson in her paper titled "The Trolley Problem",¹⁵⁷ where she describes it:

Suppose you are the driver of a [railway] trolley. The trolley rounds a bend, and there come into view ahead five track workmen, who have been repairing the track. The track goes through a bit of a valley at that point, and the sides are steep, so you must stop the trolley if you are to avoid running the five men down. You step on the brakes, but alas they don't work. Now you suddenly see a spur of track leading off to the right. You can turn the trolley onto it, and thus save the five men on the straight track ahead. Unfortunately, Mrs. Foot has arranged that there is one track workman on that spur of track. He can no more get off the

¹⁵⁷ Foot originally mentioned it offhandedly in a single sentence alongside a stream of examples. It was Judith Jarvis Thomson's paper and formulation that made the thought experiment famous. For this reason I am focusing on Thompson's description rather than Foot's.

track in time than the five can, so you will kill him if you turn the trolley onto him. Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley?¹⁵⁸

Several elements of the thought experiment can be gleaned from this, and re-appear in the choices of *The Walking Dead*. In this formulation, Thompson has deliberately used the second-person subject mode and has emphasised a personal dimension for the audience. This is designed to reinforce the imaginative dimension of the thought experiment, moving the reader to mentally construct the model of the thought experiment within their own mind and thereby directly implicate themselves within the thought experiment's proposed dilemma. This ties into the history of the use of second-person subject mode narration in interactive narrative, from the personal narratives of *Choose your Own Adventure*-style gamebooks, through to the text-based adventure games emblematised by *Zork* and *Colossal Cave Adventure*. Unlike the choices presented in more ludic narratives, however, the consequences are known well in advance of the choice being made. As such there exists an implied – rather than direct – consequence of the reader's decision. The choice is then distilled to its purest elements – the conflict between two intuitions and the decision as to which intuition triumphs over the other – the aversion to killing one person as counterpoised against the desire to save multiple lives. The final question – “Is it morally permissible for you to turn the trolley?” – is an authorial call to action, akin to the “What do you do?” that signals the choices of many *Choose Your Own Adventure* chapters. This reinforces the personal element given by the initial sentence – “Suppose you are the driver of a trolley” – making the thought experiment inescapably personal.

The strong implication of the thought experiment is that yes – it is morally permissible to turn the trolley. This speaks to the thought experiment's role as a form of argument. In this case,

¹⁵⁸ Thompson, Judith Jarvis. “The Trolley Problem”. *The Yale Law Journal*. Vol. 94. No. 6. May, 1985. pp. 1395-1415. p. 1395

the trolley experiment persuades, through moral self-reflection, that it is permissible to kill one person to save many more. This is because the intuition to avoid five deaths outweighs the intuition to avoid killing at all.¹⁵⁹ Thompson proceeds to contradict this moral lesson with a few counter-examples. These include the “Transplant” scenario – in which you are a doctor who can kill an innocent patient who arrives for a routine check-up so you can harvest their organs and use it to save the lives of five other dying patients – and the “Bystander at the switch” – in which the trolley can be halted by using the body of a fat bystander.¹⁶⁰ Thompson uses these to *complicate* the initial reading proffered by the “Trolley Problem”. In doing so, she presents a sequential evolution of ideas, where each new and conflicting intuition builds upon the last. It is this sequential build-up of ideas that *The Walking Dead* attempts to emulate by continually presenting the player with choices which follow a similar theme – but with variations. As per Thompson’s varying trolley problems, *The Walking Dead* presents a series of choices where the choices have no impact – and yet a clash of intuitions still remains. The player of *The Walking Dead* is being challenged to consider the ethics of each choice in regards to themselves. As with “The Trolley Problem”, the actual consequences are non-existent; the dilemmas posed by the choices themselves are what matters.

Thought experiments thus share a number of qualities with “Telltale” style reflective choices. The first is that it is not their consequences where meaning is communicated. Instead, the decision made by the reader in response to a thought experiment is personal, with the consequences known in advance and part of a decision-making process built upon perfect information. The second is that thought experiments are explicitly designed as “intuition pumps”, drawing out otherwise unconscious beliefs or contradictions in the way in which the reader thinks or approaches such scenarios. The use of second-person subject mode narration and explicit

¹⁵⁹ Thompson, Judith Jarvis. “The Trolley Problem”. p. 1395

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 1395-1415

directions to act and think (“What do you do?”, “Is it morally permissible to pull the trolley?”) personalise the dilemma, implicating the reader directly in the process. The third significant aspect is that thought experiments are primarily argumentative tools. They possess a clear answer as defined by their author. Tamar Szabo Gendler, in *Thought Experiment: On the Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases* (2000) defines the philosopher’s follow-up elaboration on the thought experiment’s meaning as forming part of the broader scenario.¹⁶¹ In the case of *The Walking Dead: Season 2* the game’s choices are designed to communicate a common theme of survival.

The presence of complex moral dilemmas and ‘thought experiments’ within gaming is not unique to the Telltale model, but reflects a broader trend in a significant subset of games culture to not only provide entertainment for players, but also to inform and train them. In both of Miguel Sicart’s books on video games ethics - *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009) and *Beyond Choices* (2013) – he stresses the potential for moral choices to develop what Aristotle referred to as *phronesis*. “By situating players in a virtual world” Sicart argues in *The Ethics of Computer Games*, “they can test their *phronesis* and improve it without suffering from the adverse consequences in the real world”.¹⁶² Virtual moral dilemmas, for Sicart, present the opportunity for players to prepare how they would respond to real-life moral dilemmas. He takes this argument further in *Beyond Choices*, arguing that games ought to present “wicked problems” which lack an objectively ‘correct’ solution from the perspective of achieving a game’s win-state, and instead spur the player to consider their own moral values external to the game.¹⁶³ Games such as *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) and *The Talos Principle* (2014) prioritise choices that have a *philosophical* dimension to them. *The Walking Dead*’s emphasis on a thought-experiment mode of interactivity, then, is

¹⁶¹ Gendler, Tamar Szabó. *Thought Experiment: On The Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases*. New York & London: Garland Publishing. 2000. p. 12

¹⁶² Sicart, Miguel. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. p. 34

¹⁶³ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press. 2013. pp. 105-106

part of a broader effort among game designers to not only entertain, but also to educate. In doing so it lives up to the expectations of 17th century literary critic John Dryden who argued that literature ought to “instruct delightfully.”¹⁶⁴

The most significant aspect of Telltale’s choices are their shared persuasive attributes. As with Thompson’s sequential pairing of thought experiments and counter-thought experiments, *The Walking Dead* presents its choices to the player in such a way as to get them consider the theme of *survival* in certain ways. The final, major choice in Season 2 of *The Walking Dead* serves as a test – to see if the player has fully internalised the themes and messages *The Walking Dead* has been attempting to communicate over the course of their gameplay. What then follows is a metaphorical expressed self – an outcome that is reflective of how the player responded to the narrative themes overall, without a specific and player-tailored body for them to observe. *The Walking Dead* is a thought-experiment generator that encourages the player to engage in most of their reflection external to the game itself. As such, the ludic dimensions are almost entirely unimportant – the reflective choices in *The Walking Dead* and in Telltale Games’ other products are defined by their narrativity.

The Theme of Survival

Which is more important – community or individual survival? Season 2 of Telltale’s *The Walking Dead* prompts the player to consider this theme over the course of five episodes, before providing the player with a penultimate choice that embodies this conflict. The game presents this dilemma in two weighty trade-offs, the first is the choice to either: a) endanger yourself in order to save another; or b) refrain from saving someone if it is not worth the risk. The second trade-off emphasises: a) the necessity to use violence to protect a community; or b) showing mercy in order

¹⁶⁴ Dryden, John. “The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy”. *Tragedy Development in Criticism*. Ed. R.P Draper. London: Macmillian. 1980. p. 80

to preserve the community. These themes are presented to the player repeatedly over the course of the series, before being embodied within the respective personas of “Jane” and “Kenny”. Jane embodies the individualist logic of survival – cold, calculating and rational – while Kenny personifies the communitarian ethos of mercy – emotional, instinctive and familiar. Both Jane and Kenny also represent an inversion of traditional gender roles: Jane embodies traditionally masculine values of self-sufficiency and pragmatic logic; Kenny emphasises stereotypically maternal values of care and empathetic concern. The gender inversion is most salient regarding how the two characters behave around the infant “A.J” – Jane fails to value A.J’s life while Kenny behaves with great solicitousness towards him. The penultimate choice of the season forces the player literally to choose between Jane and Kenny as they fight to the death, committing the player to pick a side and nail their ethical colours to the mast.

Survival recurs as a theme over the course of many critical choices, with *Episode 5* providing a pertinent example of this during the ice-lake choice. At a certain point in the episode, the player’s group must slowly cross a frozen lake while zombies (labelled ‘Walkers’) approach from a distance. Luke, one of the characters, suddenly falls through a weak patch in the ice. Another character named Bonnie encourages the player to run across and pull him out. Luke argues that this would only make the situation worse, and encourages the player to instead shoot at the incoming zombies while he tries to pull himself out. Regardless of the player’s decision, Luke freezes to death. In one branch, the player fires at the zombies, only for Bonnie to risk herself by trying to save Luke, eventually making things worse and falling in herself. Alternatively, the player can try to save Luke themselves, also making the situation worse by falling into the ice. In the branch where they stand back and provide cover, the player has the additional option of trying to break Luke out of the ice while Jane discourages them, saying “It’s too late”. If they continue attacking the ice, they fall in and see Luke already dead, before being rescued by Jane. Here, the

ethical trade-off is embodied through a disagreement over logistics between Luke and Bonnie.

Bonnie's instincts are for camaraderie – to aid another in the community by any means possible, even if it endangers the self. Luke's instincts prioritise practicality – to minimise the number of losses to the group even if it means behaving in a seemingly callous manner. As is the pattern of the season, this reiterates the enduring conflict between mercy and pragmatics that the season's major choices have been devised to emphasise.

Shortly after the ice-lake incident, Jane provides the following educational anecdote to the player.

I was running with some people a long time ago, down near DC. Some guy got trapped in the middle of a crosswalk. Can't remember his name. He used to call me Mary Jane. He was a douchebag. Anyway, the dick got stuck under a car hiding from a dozen walkers. One after another they went down there trying to save him. Lost four people before we got him out.

This aside is strikingly reminiscent of the "Trolley Problem" thought experiment and comparable to the ongoing 'survival' choices that have been presented to the player up until now. As with these other scenarios, the anecdote presents a trade-off in which one can either: a) show mercy and camaraderie by rescuing a community member; or b) exercise restraint, allowing someone to die so as to minimise risk of further community losses. Like the "Trolley Problem", a clash of values is presented: you can be merciful or utilitarian, but not both. This anecdote also serves to illustrate Jane's own survivalist philosophy, one that she repeatedly reinforces throughout the season. As per the "Trolley Problem", Jane phrases the anecdote in such a way that it heavily implies that saving many people is preferable to risking greater death for the sake of solicitousness.

The ice-lake choice synergises with similar choices throughout the season. In the previous episode, the player must struggle to rescue, repeatedly, an anxiety-ridden girl named Sarah who frequently endangers herself and struggles to pull herself out of danger. In each instance, Jane

warns the player about trying to rescue her. She inevitably dies by the end of the Episode 4. The “Luke” decision echoes the “Sarah” choices, and reinforces a similar trade-off. On one hand, membership of a community entails a degree of selflessness and camaraderie – if a member of your group falls behind, you do everything necessary to save their life. Conversely, survival requires pragmatism – if the danger posed by trying to care for another is excessive, then you leave them behind. One requires an instinctive, familiar mode of reasoning that involves valuing care over rationality; the other is harshly utilitarian, favouring a rational cost/benefit approach to survival that dehumanises members of the community for one’s personal benefit.

The characters of both Kenny and Jane are presented as competing foils, with each emphasising one side of the survival/mercy binary. Kenny, a series mainstay, represents mercy and community. He is committed to bringing the group – particularly the newborn “A.J” – to a rumoured safe haven named “Wellington”. Wellington lies far to the U.S north, and the characters are travelling in the middle of winter, making this a risky endeavour. Conversely Jane, a series newcomer, emphasises a pragmatic approach to survival. She frequently leaves the group, only to return when opportune. In inversion of Kenny, Jane is a female character who exhibits characteristically masculine values such as self-sufficiency and ruthless pragmatism. While Kenny has a fatherly relationship to A.J, Jane is noticeably distant, and stresses that she doesn’t like children. She is sceptical of Wellington’s putative existence, and urges the group to head south in a less risky strategy. The penultimate choice – whether or not to shoot Kenny or allow him to kill Jane – represents a climactic moment for the series.¹⁶⁵ It forces the player to consider the thematic resonance of the choices presented thus far, and to unambiguously ‘pick a side’.

¹⁶⁵ It is worth noting that Season 3 of *The Walking Dead* begins many years later. The player takes on the role of a new character and meets Clementine as an adult. Typical of the Telltale model, in both major branches Wellington falls, Clementine’s chosen mentor dies, and she continues alone.

Do you Shoot Kenny?

The Walking Dead: Season 2 concludes with a dramatic ‘penultimate choice’ designed to test the player, and to force them to commit fully to one of the major frameworks of survival presented by the season. The game foregrounds this with a flashback. The player’s character awakens to see an influential past mentor and surrogate father-figure named Lee. In this flashback Lee reappears to explicate the didactic moral of *The Walking Dead*. The event is placed right before the penultimate choice, making it clear that Lee’s message is meant to be applied to it. Within the flashback, Lee mentors the player’s avatar. He references a choice made in season 1 – about whether or not to kill a rogue member of the group. Commenting on whether or not his choice was the correct one, he makes a statement which implicitly comments on the nature of decision-making itself. “Well” begins Lee, “it’s not like math, Clem. Sometimes there just isn’t a right answer”. He ultimately

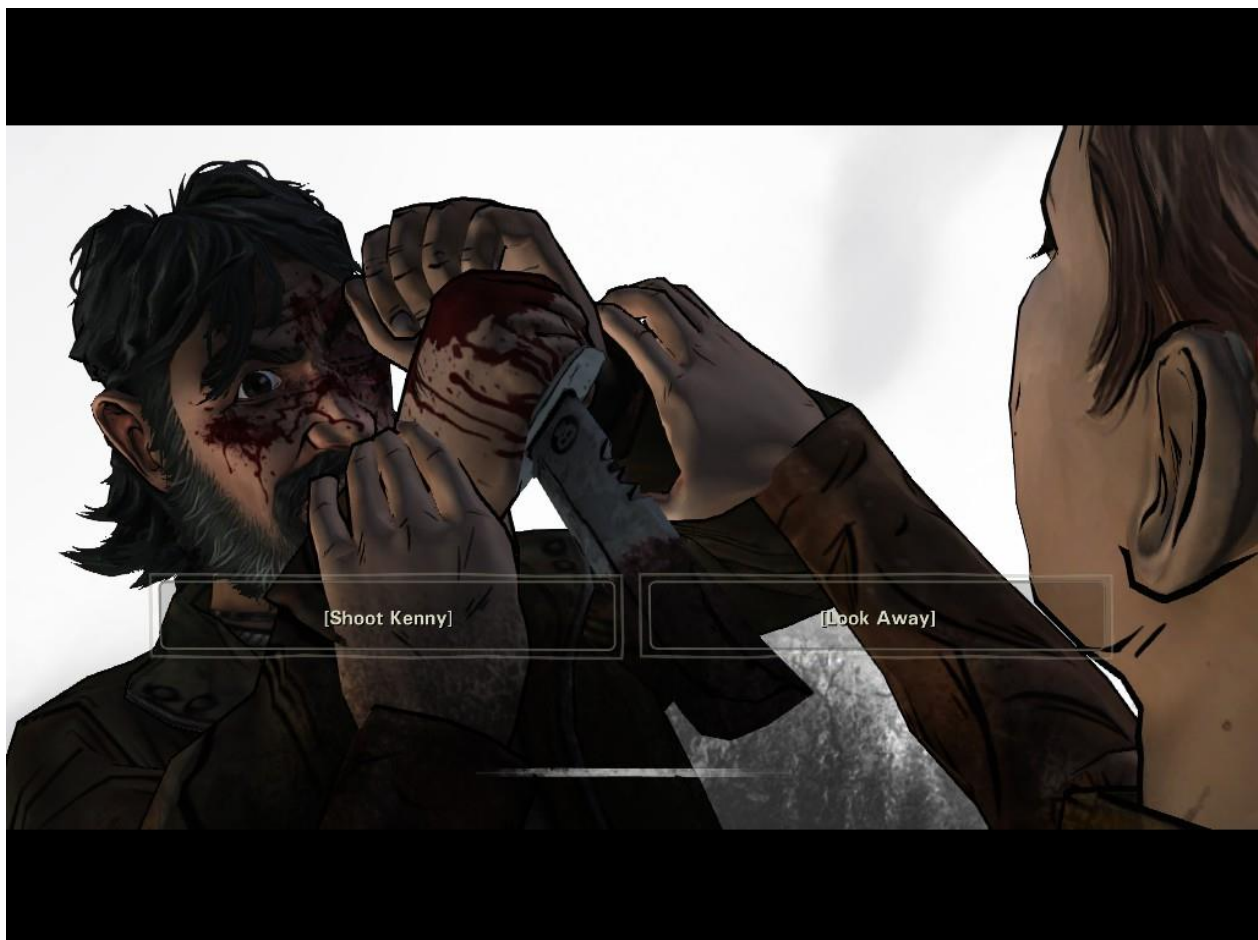


Figure 8: The Penultimate Choice

ends his lecture to Clementine with the following advice: “part of growing up is doing what’s best for the people you care about...even if sometimes...that means hurting someone else.”

If the player elects to ask if they can avoid hurting someone that they care about, Lee deflects the question after a momentary pause, before saying, “Everything’s gonna [sic] be all right”. The implication is clear – in order to ‘grow up’ the player must be prepared to hurt someone they care about. Kenny, as the only character in the game to remain a constant and close companion to the player since the beginning of the series, is that character. The penultimate choice which follows then ‘tests’ the player, checking to see if they have internalised the game’s message.

Caught in the middle of a snowstorm, Jane argues that Kenny is mentally unstable, that Wellington is not real and that the party should turn back. Kenny argues that Wellington is the best chance that A.J has for a normal life, and that they should push ahead regardless of the risks. Jane then provokes Kenny by claiming that she killed A.J as he was a liability (the player later learns that this is a lie). This triggers a fight to the death between the two, with the player caught in the middle. Kenny quickly overpowers Jane, before moving to kill her. A gun lies near the player, and they are provided with the following choices – “[Shoot Kenny]” and “[Look Away]”.

By choosing to “Look Away” the player chooses sentimentality over practicality, the potential for a harmonious community over the *Realpolitik* of shooting and killing a compromising member of the group. When they “Shoot Kenny”, in contrast, the dying Kenny proudly proclaims to Clementine that “You made the right choice”. In his last moments Kenny regrets his erratic behaviour, before passing away. Similarly, allowing him to live leads to the realisation that Jane’s provocation – that A.J was dead – was a lie, and that the killing of Jane was unjustified, with Kenny expressing strong remorse. The sense of dissatisfaction produced in one branch, contrasted with the sense of finality provided in the other, signals authorial intent. From this it can be surmised

that the developers intended for the act of shooting Kenny to be the correct one, a “test” to see if the player had learned the lessons that each choice leading up to this one was supposed to communicate. In this way – the Telltale formula embodies the worst aspects from both the didactic and exploratory forms of choice-craft – their choices not only have no lasting impact upon the narrative, but they are ultimately designed to test the player and persuade them of a didactic moral. This does not necessarily empty the Telltale model of value, but it does suggest that it has strong aesthetic limitations.

The game ends with a metaphorical expressed self - a ‘response’ to the player based on whether or not they chose to accept the game’s implied message. If they let Kenny live, then they can follow Kenny to Wellington, which is indeed a real place, but is almost at capacity. The player must then make a choice – abandon Kenny to join Wellington or abandon Wellington. This choice is designed to mock the player, reminding them that yes, they do in fact need to make sacrifices if they want to survive. The alternative path with Jane has Clementine living with her in a relatively safe base to the south. A travelling family, with a child the age of Clementine, appears asking for entry and refuge. Jane strongly suggests that the player should turn them away. If the player allows them in, then a gun can be seen holstered in the back-pocket of the father figure while the son remarks – menacingly towards Clementine - “nice hat”. This punishes the player, implying that they have not fully internalised the lesson of harsh survival that their prior choice to kill Kenny was supposed to personify. Turning them away still reveals the holstered gun, along with an expression of pride from Jane. Here the game expresses to the player that they have learned what it takes to survive, and have properly absorbed the game’s implied moral.

Conclusion

Although the Telltale model’s ELIZA effect has been well documented, the implications of their model of choice-craft have rarely been explored in depth. One of the consequences of a

system in which choices 'don't matter' is that a significant part of their choices interpretive burden is placed upon the dilemma itself. Without an expressed self to analyse, choosers are instead left to ruminate on the specifics of each choice. This lends itself to a thought-experiment mode of expression, in which each choice is really a philosophical thought experiment style of argumentation. Although this thought experiment model of choice-craft has its merits, it fails to distinguish itself from the pre-existing philosophical mode of discourse. *Papers, Please*, by contrast, fully exploits the aesthetic potential of both reflective choices and the expressed self that can be built from them. Like *The Walking Dead*, Lucas Pope's border-control simulator *Papers, Please* (2013) presents players with moral dilemmas, but then goes further in using those dilemmas to compile an image of the player, an instantiated expressed self, which the game can then comment upon *directly*. This approach to choice-craft is unique, and reveals the full potential of the choice.

Chapter 4: The Reflective, Expressed Self in *Papers, Please*

Playing *Papers, Please* is an experience of the banality of evil. Rather than a dehumanizing procedure coming from monstrous acts or demons, our inhumanity comes from a lack of critical examination and careful thought. – Ian K. Derk¹⁶⁶

Lucas Pope's border control simulator *Papers, Please* (2013) was released shortly after a United Nation's paper titled "Displacement: The New 21st Century Challenge" declared that the number of internationally displaced people on earth had reached a 20 year high.¹⁶⁷ Along with this crisis came a renewed discourse internationally surrounding immigration and border control. For example, Australia has had a system of mandatory detention for all visitors who arrive with invalid entry visas since 1992 and has been the subject of extensive and prolonged human rights criticism.¹⁶⁸ *Papers, Please* challenges mainstream discourses surrounding border control and immigration by directly implicating the player in the process of restricting and denying entry to others. As a game designed to make you feel empathy – both for border security officers and entrants – *Papers, Please* manifests as a pure representation of Hannah Arendt's famous concept of the banality of evil. In it, the player commits evil, not because they are evil, but because the

¹⁶⁶ Derk, Ian K. "Swipe Left to Detain: A Procedural Comparison between *Tinder* and *Papers, Please*". *Journal of Games Criticism*. 2016. Web. n.p

¹⁶⁷ "Displacement: The New 21st Century Challenge". *UNHCR*. Web. 19 June 2013. pp. 3-5. Found at <<http://www.unhcr.org/51bacb0f9.html>>

¹⁶⁸ "Immigration detention in Australia". *Parliament of Australia*. Web. Last updated 20 March, 2013. Last Accessed 30 August, 2017. Found at <http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/Detention>

ludic world pressures them into it in order to survive. This clashes with the semiotic overlay – one that depicts each aspiring entrant into the totalitarian nation of “Arstotzka” as a complex and multifaceted person, each with his or her own personal story and motivations. *Papers, Please* is one of the best examples of a choice driven game in which the player’s choices are not only accumulated into an expressed self, but in which the game then *responds* to that expressed self – attacking and commenting upon it in a way that exists independent of any objective ‘win’ or ‘lose’ conditions. In *Papers, Please*, the expressed self is used to move the player to reflect on their own moral nature, and on how easily they can sink into Eichmann-esque evil out of the pressures of circumstance rather than innate malice.

On its release, *Papers, Please* received widespread critical acclaim: including a 2014 BAFTA award,¹⁶⁹ and *The New Yorker’s* “Best Game of 2013”.¹⁷⁰ As an *ad hoc* explanation for its commercial and critical success, games journalists quickly gave it the label of ‘empathy game’. A particularly strong example of this ‘labelling’ can be found in Patrick Begley’s piece in the *Sydney Morning Herald* titled “‘Empathy gaming’ focuses on emotions and moral decisions” in October 2014, which situates *Papers, Please* as part of an ‘emerging category of...computer games’ that “can be used to discuss awkward, even painful subjects.”¹⁷¹ The flurry of conversation and fixation on ‘empathy’ came at a cost – critics and commentators failed to identify how *Papers, Please* actually went about generating empathy past a surface level observation of its ‘moral dilemmas’.

¹⁶⁹ “Games: Strategy and Simulation in 2014”. *BAFTA awards database*. Last updated March 12, 2014. Last Accessed August 8, 2017. Found at < <http://awards.bafta.org/award/2014/games/strategy-and-simulation>>

¹⁷⁰ Parkin, Simon. “The Best Video Games of 2013”. *The New Yorker*. December 13, 2013. Last Accessed August 8, 2017. Found at < <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-best-video-games-of-2013>>

¹⁷¹ Begley, Patrick. “‘Empathy gaming’ focuses on emotions and moral decisions”. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. October 30, 2014. Web. n.p. Last Accessed April 9, 2018. Found at <<https://www.smh.com.au/technology/empathy-gaming-focuses-on-emotions-and-moral-decisions-20140904-10ch4z.html>>

In 2016 games journalists such as Minoff¹⁷² and Ibister¹⁷³ would later go on to compare the game to *Her Story* (2015) as constituting another example of an empathy game. *Her Story* has the player peruse police footage of a detective interviewing a woman suspected for murder – and plays out similarly to a hypertext novel. Although both games do involve empathy, this comparison fails to account for the unique approach that *Papers, Please* takes towards generating empathy.

Subsequent ‘empathy’ games such as *Her Story*, *Firewatch* (2016), and *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), while trying to live up to the example of ‘empathy’ set by *Papers, Please* have all failed to reach its commercial and critical success. In all cases a focus upon ‘empathy’ in *Papers, Please* has come about without a deep understanding of the ludic and narrative structure that generated it to begin with. If games culture wants a repeat of this game’s success, then it needs to be understood on more than a thematic level. This chapter aims to do exactly that, examining how it’s reflective choices give rise to an expressed self that the game then goes on to critique, forcing the player to move past a simple understanding of narrative themes and into a personal reflection on their own (in)humanity.

In *Papers, Please* the player takes on the role of a border control officer in the fictitious totalitarian nation of “Arstotzka”. Each day the player must try to process as many would be entrants as possible, while following a byzantine number of rules and regulations. They can declare that each person is either accepted or denied with a stamp. Allowing people through with mistakes in their paperwork tends to lead to “citations” – monetary penalties. The player is not paid enough to provide for their family – and so the game’s narrative presents them with many opportunities to engage in petty corruption, bribery, treason, or bureaucratic disdain for the many

172 Minoff, Annie. “A new generation of video games play on your emotions – like empathy, complicity and grief”. PRI. April 7, 2016. Web. n.p. Last Accessed April 9, 2018. Found at <<https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-04-07/new-generation-video-games-play-your-emotions-empathy-complicity-and-grief>>

173 Ibister, Katherine. “Her Story and Papers, Please are changing gaming forever”. WIRED. October 7, 2016. Web. n.p. Last Accessed April 9, 2018. Found at <<http://www.wired.co.uk/article/games-power-captivate-engage>>

incoming visitors in order to survive. Interspersed among the entrants are individuals with stories. While most entrants are a simple game of the player reading their documentation, these entrants have a unique dialogue and trigger special events. An example of one such story is a husband who enters with the correct paperwork, only to be followed by his eager wife who has a minor error on her paperwork. Opportunities such as this provide a fictional opportunity for the player to do the 'right' thing – without any apparent ludic rewards. *Papers, Please* has 20 endings – three of which are 'good' endings while the rest are 'game over' states that encourage the player to try again. Each of the good endings elicits self-reflection on the part of the player, with the "Snowier Pastures" ending in particular communicating to players the impact of their moral complicity.

This chapter will repeatedly invoke Hannah Arendt's banality of evil and Max Weber's notion of rational authority in its description of *Papers, Please*. The phrase 'banality of evil' appears in Arendt's 1963 book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.¹⁷⁴ In it she documents the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, a major organizer of the Holocaust. She argues that Eichmann's evil did not come from psychopathy or monstrous malice but that instead he was an ordinary man who followed orders.¹⁷⁵ This ties in with sociologist Max Weber's notion of rational authority and the iron cage. These concepts refer to the way in which politics is organised in modern bureaucracies as regimented and regulated processes which ensure that each individual agent enforces the policies of the bureaucracy consistently and rationally without recourse to personal morality or individual preference. Jason Morrisette in his article "Glory to Arstotzka: Morality, Rationality, and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy in *Papers, Please*" (2017) creates a connection between Weber and *Papers, Please*. He argues that the game is essentially about the conflict between rationally applying the law, and acting with impartial compassion.

174 Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1994. p. 252

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.* pp. 26-28

However, like much of game's culture's discussion surrounding – Morrisette largely relegates his analysis to the surface level moral dilemmas of the game. *Papers, Please* goes further in its exploration of the iron cage by essentially placing players in a broader position similar to many contemporary border control officers in the contemporary West. Zygmunt Bauman in his 1989 book *Modernity and the Holocaust* argues that the rational authority that modern governance relies upon is just as capable of impersonally and efficiently carrying out mass atrocities as it is capable of delivering efficient governance.¹⁷⁶ This is fundamentally what *Papers, Please* explores – the moral status of the individual in a system of rational authority. The continental philosopher Michel Foucault often depicts power as something that *creates* subjects – by loyally following the rules of the Weberian iron cage players *become* a bureaucrat. As such the use of the expressive body in *Papers, Please* becomes a very real, literally coded depiction of the player coming into being, 'gilded' by the iron cage and becoming a subject that the game is pressuring (or as Lev Manovich would describe it – 'standardizing') them to become a part of. It is worth noting that each of the three 'good' endings represents a different form of standardisation. The player that chooses to follow the orders of the game's anti-authoritarian terrorist group EZIC – for example – is not so much rebelling against a bureaucratic system as much as they becoming a 'good terrorist' and embedding themselves within an alternative organisation. None of this makes the expressed self, interactivity, Foucault's observed process of subjectification or even rational authority 'bad' per se. Much in the same way modern governments can utilise rational authority towards positive ends, *Papers, Please* itself is using these tools to achieve a positive effect. In this instance, it is to discover how players when placed within a rational bureaucracy attempt to express themselves and find agency within that situation. It then uses those same tools that it is critiquing, that of

¹⁷⁶ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP. 1989. pp. 27-30

standardising the player through a set of rules, in order to launch a personalised response in the form of a player-tailored ending.

This chapter looks at how *Papers, Please* exemplifies the use of reflective choices, expressed bodies and authorial pushbacks through its mechanics and storytelling. *Authorial pushbacks* are particularly relevant to understanding *Papers, Please*. This concept will be illuminated by contrasting the “Antegrian Husband and Wife” event with the “Snowier Pastures” ending. “Snowier Pastures” works as a possible ending to the game as it does not just present the player with their expressed self, but it comments upon it. Even more uniquely, the player feels judged on a narrative level even while the ending is presented as a ludic victory. This shows how the authorial pushback is distinct from a ludic lose or win condition. In *Papers, Please* the player still ‘wins’, but they do not escape criticism from the game’s implied developer.

This chapter will discuss two openly conflicting elements of *Papers, Please*: its semiotic overlay and ludic mechanics. The semiotic overlay of the game has two primary components: the first is its visual architecture and the second is its textual dialogue. Lucas Pope has set *Papers, Please* in the dreary world of his earlier game *The Republica Times* (2012). In this world, a series of authoritarian nation states vie for supremacy in a fraught web of constant warfare and diplomatic unease. The art, style and mood of these states, particularly that of the player’s home nation Arstotzka, are all designed to evoke the imagery of twentieth century authoritarian regimes such as the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Allusions to these regimes are numerous, including:

1. the phonetic similarity of the name “Arstotzka” to the word “Aristocracy” – indicating a society based on class hierarchy;
2. the use of a “labor lottery” to allocate work is reminiscent of the centrally planned economy of the Soviet Union (Figure 9);

3. the eagle logo emblazoned upon the passports of Arstotzka citizens bares a strong visual similarity to the Reichsadler eagle herald of the Nazi regime (Figure 10);
4. the phrase “Obristan above all”, uttered at the end of the “Snowier Pastures” ending is strongly evocative of the Nazi slogan “Deutschland über alles”;
5. the symbol of a hammer displayed during the Arstotzkan lottery is reminiscent of the Soviet hammer and sickle emblem (Figure 9).



Figure 9: The October Lottery

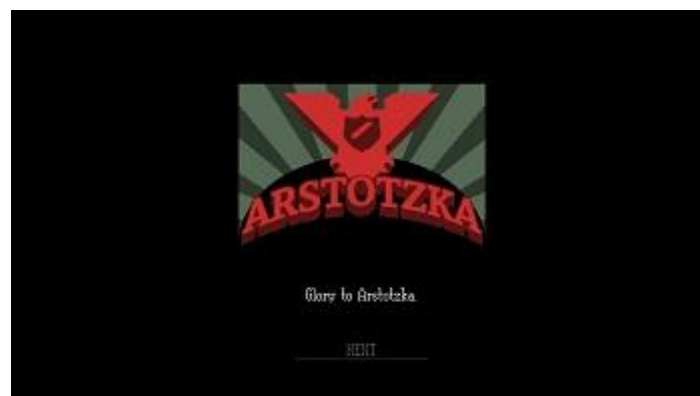


Figure 10: Glory to Arstotzka

Such examples are pervasive and litter the environment of the game. They directly indicate to the player that they are living and working as part of an authoritarian regime. In a 2014 interview Lucas Pope, when asked about the authoritarian imagery of the game, replied that he tried to evoke an authoritarian society based on a “collection of tropes” and that “I worked pretty hard to make it so it wasn’t specifically anything.” He went on to note that when instructing translators, he

advises them never to use the word ‘comrade’ to avoid any explicit connection with communism. He justifies this by stating that “to me, it’s richer that it’s not specifically anything” and that “I wanted to show that in politics, all sides of any kind of issue have some justification. There’s not just the good guys and the bad guys – even the bad guys have some justification for why they want to do something”.¹⁷⁷ As such, the visual imagery of the game immediately informs the player of the type of society in which they are complicit by playing off of a “collection of tropes” that exist in the collective unconscious as a result of the history of twentieth century authoritarianism. Although Pope cautions against viewing the regime in simplistic binary terms, the legacy of authoritarianism in the west flavours the visual architecture of *Papers, Please*, and indicates to the player that their side is not necessarily the right one, nor is what they are doing necessarily ethical or justified. The dialogue of the game feeds into the bleak atmosphere, with applicants pleading with the player as their claims are variously rejected or accepted. This all clashes with the ludic world of the game, which encourages a cold approach to processing the applicants so that the player can acquire enough money to feed their children and to achieve one of the game’s three “good” endings. The events of the game present the player with a sequence of reflective choices. These choices then create a body of accumulated memory. *Papers, Please* utilizes this body by responding to it and making it a subject of criticism. *Papers, Please* does this in a particularly poignant manner in the “Snowier Pastures” ending, and understanding the expressed self is a key element of how that ending delivers its critique of the player’s behaviour.

Academic Responses to *Papers, Please*

Academic responses to *Papers, Please* are recently beginning to emerge in the aftermath of its critical success. The three main examinations of *Papers, Please* to date are Ian K. Derk’s article

¹⁷⁷ Cullen, Johnny. “Lucas Pope: “I’m kind of sick to death of *Papers, Please*””. *VG24/7*. Web. 5 March, 2014. Last Accessed August 25, 2017. pp. 1-3 Found at <https://www.vg247.com/2014/03/05/lucas-pope-im-kind-of-sick-to-death-of-papers-please/>

“Swipe Left to Detain: A Procedural Comparison between Tinder and *Papers, Please*” (2016), Heron and Belford’s article “Do you Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games” (2014) and more recently Morrisette’s “Glory to Arstotzka: Morality, Rationality, and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy in *Papers, Please*” (2017). All emphasize the game’s reflective elements, and its capacity to move players to consider the implications of their behaviour not just as players, but as agents that exist outside of the game. A concept taken from Sicart’s *Beyond Choices* is particularly useful in understanding the *Papers, Please* method of choice craft. Sicart labels this concept as “moral complicity” and the academic research on *Papers, Please* invokes this concept, without naming it specifically. The connection between “moral complicity” and extant research on *Papers, Please* is a connection that this article makes independently – with neither Heron, Belford, Morrisette nor Derk citing Sicart when referencing his ideas. Nonetheless “moral complicity” is an essential element of how *Papers, Please* constructs meaning.

Moral complicity forms a key part of how *Papers, Please*’s choices are framed, and returns to the fore in each of the game’s three “good” endings. Sicart defines moral complicity as the process whereby “players become complicit with the game’s moral system and with their own values”. He uses the game *Fallout: New Vegas* as an example of this. In *Fallout: New Vegas* the player must choose to obey the commands of one of several factions. However, each faction presents a moral trade off. As such an ideal choice based game for Sicart is one where the player makes a sequence of choices in response to wicked problems¹⁷⁸ – problems with “no correct solution”¹⁷⁹ - before becoming morally complicit with a general moral trade off. Notably lacking from Sicart’s analysis is the way in which a literary game can push back and comment upon a player’s expressed self. For Sicart, this process is largely one where a player considers their own behaviour in isolation from any commentary on their behaviour made by the game. He briefly

¹⁷⁸ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. p. 98

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.* pp. 105-106

references an event in *The Walking Dead* where another character comments on a past choice made by the player, stating that it “made me think about the way I was playing and the reasons behind my choices”.¹⁸⁰ Sicart discusses a single throwaway line made by a character during *The Walking Dead*, a line that minimally suggests that the game is keeping track of the player’s choices. Yet *Papers, Please* takes this further, using the expressed self to create an image of the player, before pushing back against that image, transforming the player into an object of criticism. The current research on *Papers, Please* makes reference to both moral complicity and the reflective elements of the game, but does not take this analysis far enough in understanding *Papers, Please*’s model of choice craft. *Papers, Please* works with the player’s sense of moral complicity, commenting upon it, dissecting it, and reacting to it.

The most relevant aspect of academic discussions of *Papers, Please* to date focuses on how the player must form their own goals, and how this involves them in a form of moral complicity. Neither Heron, Belford, Derk or Morrisette use the term “moral complicity”, but they all invoke the concept in their descriptions of the game’s moral mechanics. Each of these scholars discuss at length the game’s central message, that of the “banality of evil”. Derk is particularly clear, stating that “*Papers, Please* is an experience of the banality of evil”.¹⁸¹ In *Papers, Please* you must process a large number of people, all of whom wish to pass through quickly and without issue. Each mistake, error and issue with their documentation has its own excuse and story. The game’s mechanics promote efficiency – and it is much easier to reject applicants than it is to slowly investigate them and allow them through. However the fictional overlay engenders empathy in the player. This triggers a conflict between the player’s moral intuitions and the game’s mechanics. Morrisette, as stated previously, ties this to the Weberian conflict between obedience

¹⁸⁰ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. p. 22

¹⁸¹ Derk, Ian K. “Swipe Left to Detain: A Procedural Comparison between *Tinder* and *Papers, Please*.” *Journal of Games Criticism*. 2016. Web. n.p

to rational authority and the personal nature of morality.¹⁸² Derk compares it to the dating app *Tinder* – in that both encourage users to form their own goals, and then to quickly and efficiently read people for desirable information before either rejecting or accepting.¹⁸³ Both encourage a “reduction” – in Derk’s words - of human empathy. For *Papers, Please* this interface is the impersonal performance of “stamps, seals, and printed documents”.¹⁸⁴ Heron and Belford argue in a similar way that the game’s mechanics encourage dehumanisation. They also point out instances in the game’s narrative in which the player is presented with “opportunities to profit from institutional corruption”.¹⁸⁵ All of them comment upon the clash between the dehumanising behaviour encouraged by the game’s mechanics, and the human empathy encouraged by its semiotic overlay. All of them similarly note the game’s “flexibility in defining completion goals”¹⁸⁶ and how the player chooses what type of border security officer – rational or moral – that they commit to becoming. Heron and Belford argue that the game instead “removes the artifice of having morality be an internal ludic mechanic. Instead it becomes a reflection of our own willingness to obey either the spirit, or the letter, of the rules with which we are presented.” They then present the game’s central moral dilemma as catching players between doing the “easy thing” and the “the right thing” which “is both harder to do and financially punitive”.¹⁸⁷ Although none of these scholars cite Miguel Sicart, they all implicitly refer to his notion of “moral complicity”. By choosing to become a certain type of “border guard” players are committing to a specific moral trade off and as a consequence are foregrounded as ethical agents, rather than just as players.

¹⁸² Morrisette, Jason J. “Glory to Arstotzka: Morality, Rationality, and the Iron Cage of Bureaucracy in *Papers, Please*”. *Game Studies*. Volume 17. Issue 1. July 2017. Web. n.p

¹⁸³ Derk, Ian K. “Swipe Left to Detain: A Procedural Comparison between *Tinder* and *Papers, Please*.” n.p

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.* n.p

¹⁸⁵ Heron, Michael James; Belford, Pauline Helen. “Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games”. pp. 12-16

¹⁸⁶ Derk, Ian K. “Swipe Left to Detain: A Procedural Comparison between *Tinder* and *Papers, Please*.” n.p

¹⁸⁷ Heron, Michael James; Belford, Pauline Helen. “Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games”. pp. 12-16

None of the articles discuss the possibility of an expressed self being responded to.

However Heron and Belford refer to a specific instance of authorial pushback which occurs partway through the game in response to fulfilling a task for a secretive group called “The Order”:

Secretly, we [the player] are passed a large sum of money and given an opportunity to accept or burn it. The sum is large enough to remove the day to day worry of meeting our quota and would allow us to move into premises that are expensive in terms of rent but more satisfying for our family. However, if we accept this sum, a few days later suspicious neighbours report our new found wealth to the authorities, and it is taken away from us along with any surplus we may have built up. This creates a situation where if we believed the money was ours, we may have gotten ourselves into a financial hole by spending it and ending up with larger overall expenses.¹⁸⁸

Here Heron and Belford are commenting on an instance of authorial pushback. The player makes a choice – to accept the money or to burn it. By accepting it – and then moving into a more expensive apartment – the player has communicated something about themselves to the gaming system. They have created an expressed self which – to the game’s implied developer – indicates a profligate spender who is willing to throw caution to the wind. The game then responds to the player’s newly constructed expressed self, providing them with a painful consequence that speaks not to a generalized implied player, but directly to the individual player that is currently engaging with the game. This response feels and is personal, and invites reflection in a way that would not have otherwise been possible with a more generalized message.

Prior scholars have observed that players of these literary games can engage in a long term moral trade off through their engagement with different “factions” within a game. Academics

¹⁸⁸ Heron, Michael James; Belford, Pauline Helen. "Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games." p. 15

have specifically commented upon these trends with respect to *Papers, Please*. What is currently lacking is an account of the expressed self, and the ways in which the system can respond to the expressed self in a way that uniquely elicits reflection on the part of each player. The game's three primary "good" endings are tied to the overall manner in which the player decides to approach and handle the game's overriding moral dilemmas. Each ending then serves as a "response" to the player, an authorial pushback that prompts them to consider the kind of "border guard" they have chosen to become. As these are all equally "good" endings, these authorial pushbacks cannot be treated as if they were a ludic win state. Instead they prompt reflection in a way that is unique to *Papers, Please* as an independent game. While a binary win condition simply confirms that the player has mastered the elements of a game, an authorial pushback that follows a "win" condition can engender self-reflection on the part of the player outside of the game itself. It is this sort of reflection that *Papers, Please* encourages when a player encounters the "Snowier Pastures" ending, an ending that is only accessible by behaving a certain way during moments in the game such as the "Antegrian husband and wife" event.

Papers, Please is unique in its ability to translate these mechanics into a series of endings which respond to the player's expressed self. The three "good" endings of *Papers, Please* are as follows: the first involves completing "missions" for a mysterious group called "EZIC" which intends to overthrow Arstotzka's authoritarian government by destroying the border checkpoint that the player guards; the second involves fleeing Arstotzka using forged papers; the third involves simply surviving to the end of the game as a commendable and obedient border control officer. The first ending requires that the player commits treason by finishing at least 4 of EZIC's 5 possible missions. The uncertainty and danger of aiding EZIC forms part of a player's moral trade off – they are told repeatedly that they are under close investigation, and the player witnesses constant terror attacks against the border that they are guarding. To serve "EZIC" is to break the

law for an uncertain end result. The second ending requires the player to save up large sums of money. The only way they can do that is repeatedly to turn away many applicants who have sympathetic and personal reasons for passing through the checkpoint but false or incomplete paperwork. They also need to engage in extensive corruption – for which the game provides the player with many opportunities to engage. The third ending requires drone-like obedience from the player. The player must embody the “banality of evil” – doing what is necessary and as a result becoming complicit in the inherent inhumanity of the border control system. The second of these “good” endings – the escape from Arstotzka – particularly encapsulates the notion of an authorial response to the expressed self.

Reflective Choice – Antegrian Husband and Wife

Interspersed among the stream of applicants presenting at Arstotzka’s strict border are specific characters whose detailed backstories provide the player with acute moral choices. These events often provide the player with a reason why they should let the applicant through the border, even if there are flaws in their paperwork. There are other examples, such as those involving corruption. But the primary focus of most events is to provide the player with choices in which they must choose between the ludic demands of *Papers, Please* – where they reject, imprison and humiliate applicants in order to earn money – and the narrative overlay which elicits sympathy and respect for the applicants. Here I will focus on the “Antegrian husband and wife” event of the game as a particularly strong example of the conflict between the ludic and narrative elements of *Papers, Please*. This specific event, and many others like it, signal a pattern of behaviour to the game. This pattern allows the game to craft an expressed self of the player which it can then respond to in one of the game’s three ‘good’ endings. The semiotic side of this event is primarily expressed through dialogue, with visuals being less significant. This event ties in thematically with the “Snowier Pastures” ending that will be explored later in this chapter. Here, however, the

player is in a position where they can deny entry to a refugee family based on faulty paperwork. In “Snowier Pastures” the roles are reversed and the player instead becomes the refugee with a family in tow and flawed paperwork. As such this event/ending dyad presents both sides of the citizen/refugee divide, a divide that dominated the debates surrounding migration during the development phase of *Papers, Please*.



Figure 11: *The Antegrian Wife*

The event is straightforward. A man passes through the checkpoint with correct paperwork. He mentions that he is “free from Antegrian tyranny” and asks the player to “be kind to my wife, she is just after me.” The wife arrives immediately afterwards, but has incorrect paperwork. While the player peruses her paperwork, she asks “Did you see my husband? He made it through, yes?”¹⁸⁹ When the player interrogates her over her lack of an “entry permit”, she pleads, saying “Please, I beg you. They would not give me permit. I have no choice. I will be killed if I return to Antegria.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ This sequence of dialogue from the wife only triggers if the player lets the husband through. His paperwork is correct, so most players would have done so unless they made a mistake.

¹⁹⁰ “Antegrian husband and wife”. *Papers Please wiki*. Last updated June 2, 2017. Last Accessed August 8, 2017.

At this point it is worth expanding directly on the way that finance and currency works in *Papers, Please* in order to better understand whence the moral ambiguity of this event arises. The player is paid a small amount of money for each applicant processed. Admitting applicants with incorrect paperwork can result in financial penalties and future negative narrative consequences. At the end of each day, the player must manage their family's finances, choosing how much money to spend on necessities such as "Food", "Heat" and "Medicine". The player's legal income is insufficient to cover these necessities. Failing to care for your family or to cover financial debts can lead to "Bad" endings where the player fails and must restart from the last day to try again. As such, the game encourages what might be called 'evil' choices, immoral behaviours that go against a player's moral intuitions. By choosing to allow the wife through, the player risks losing income that could be used to pay for basic needs, providing the player with a clash of priorities between aiding a stranger and feeding their family.

In this event – as with many others like it – the game's moral and ludic demands clash. The narrative overlay prompts sympathy on the part of the player. The characters are refugees fleeing death, with practical reasons for their incorrect paperwork. Pleading requests such as "be kind to my wife" and "Please, I beg you" place a moral onus upon the player making them complicit in not only the refugees' ability to cross over into Arstotzka, but in their continued survival beyond this short interaction. Sicart, in *Beyond Choices*, provides one of the possible elements of a "Wicked Problem" as presenting an ethical gameplay dilemma which has "some solutions that make the procedural and semantic levels collide, suggesting no optimal strategies that have emotional, cultural, and contextual value".¹⁹¹ In this case there exists a direct clash between the "semantic" and the "procedural". The "procedural" level requires the player to adopt the cold logic of border control bureaucracy, whereas the "semantic" level engenders sympathy and a refusal to engage in

¹⁹¹ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. pp. 105-106

the crueller elements of their job. To behave coldly towards the fleeing Antegrian couple is but one of many possible actions the player can take throughout the game. If they repeatedly behave in this manner it creates an image of the player – a cruel yet lawful would be bureaucrat who is willing to do anything to survive. It is this expressed self to which the game responds when the player unlocks the “Snowier Pastures” ending.

Response to the Expressed self

In order to unlock the “Snowier Pastures”¹⁹² ending at the game’s conclusion, the player must amass a large amount of credits. In order to do this they must manifest not only a coldness towards characters such as the Antegrian couple, but also engage in petty corruption and bribery. Towards the end of the game the player must finally and illegally confiscate the passports of applicants from the nation of “Obristan”, which they may then pay to have altered so that the player may escape with their family. The “Snowier Pastures” ending takes the player’s role from the “Antegrian husband and wife” event directly and reverses it. In doing so the player is forced to consider the hypocrisy of their actions. The name of the ending itself reflects its dual nature – it is both a “good” ending and a representation of ludic success, and yet it is simultaneously a critique of the player’s moral behaviour and an example of an authorial pushback in action.

After fulfilling the prerequisite goals to unlock this ending, the player and their family boards a train to “Obristan” with forged passports. They are provided with an image of an Obristan border security guard standing behind his security booth – a mirrored reversal of the normal position of power that the player occupied throughout the game. Now the player is the one who is vulnerable, with a story of seeking refuge from danger and bearing forged

¹⁹² When played on the popular gaming platform “Steam”, this ending provides an achievement called “Snowier Pastures”. As such I have named this ending after the corresponding achievement.

documentation. The ending sequence then provides the player with the following exposition overlaid with still images as they attempt to cross the border into Obristan.

You board the late train to the Northern Territories. It is nearly empty. You pay for the hastily forged passports and re-entry tickets. They look terrible. You reach the border crossing at dawn. The line is immense. Six hours later (at the Obristan border).

[Inspector] your documents.

Here

[Inspector] Are you entering alone?

No, my family as well

[Inspector] Hand over all documents now.

We come to visit relatives.

[Inspector] I do not care why you come. Wait here. (the shutters close)

KACHUNK (the sound a stamp makes; repeated once for each family member; the shutters open after a short pause)

[Inspector] Welcome to Obristan. Next!

Obristan above all



Figure 12: "Immense Line"

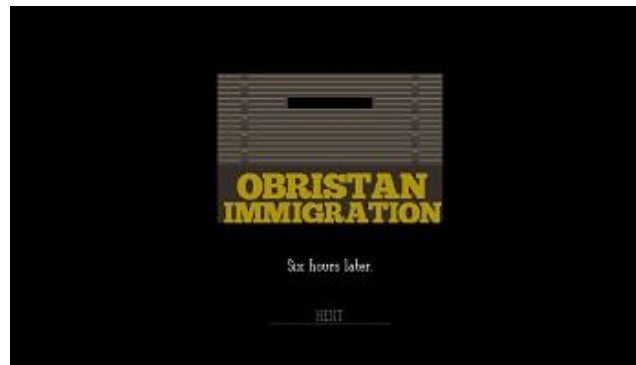


Figure 13: "Six hours later"



Figure 14: "Obristan Immigration"

The image of the guard watching the player from an elevated position behind a desk labelled "OBRISTAN IMMIGRATION" is an ironic mirroring of the player's own former position as a powerful and callous border security guard. Much of the scene's dialogue and exposition is designed to elicit retrospective empathy for the many travellers that the player had turned away. The image of an "immense line" merges with the large throng of people the player needs to process during gameplay. The exposition, dialogue and process of passing the Obristan border - handing over documents (forged), providing an explanation (a lie), waiting for the guard to return as they process the documentation – are all designed to mimic the unbearable tension and anxiety that applicants at the player's own border had to endure as the player applied the same mechanistic process to them. "I do not care why you come. Wait here" echoes the cold and uninterested approach that the player must have taken to reach this ending and reflects it back at them, albeit with a positive outcome. This is the game responding not only to the last few choices that the player made at the end of the game but to the collected body of accumulated choices

made by the player during all of their experience as a border control guard. *Papers, Please* taunts the “successful” player in its final moments, reminding the player of their own abject cruelty.

It is particularly important that the player succeeds and passes through this checkpoint. If the player had been rejected, then players could simply rationalize that this was a “bad” ending and then go back to try another. By allowing the player through, the game provides them with a particularly resonant clash between semiotic and ludic dimensions. This ending plays a specific “Victory” tune as they pass through the border, which is markedly upbeat and celebratory. The ending is also a reward for good gameplay, including completing objectives, not making mistakes, gaining rewards. Yet, the power reversal presented by the situation reflects the player’s own hypocrisy back at them. The player has treated the many applicants to the Arstotzka border with one standard, and has subsequently expected, and received, a different one from the Obristan guard. Through this, the player’s expressed self forms the foil, while the naïve yet accepting Obristan guard acts as an unconventional exemplar with their (potentially deliberate) incompetence allowing the player to survive an otherwise inhuman and byzantine system of borders and checkpoints.

The name of the ending itself, “Snowier Pastures”, reflects its dual nature as both a ludic victory condition and an authorial pushback against the player. The ending’s name is a play on the common expression “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”: a foreign land or new environment that is “greener” or better than the old. While “greener” indicates the warmth of spring, “snowier” indicates coldness and callousness. “Snowier Pastures” reminds the player of the phrase it evokes – a new environment. Yet at the same time the allusion to the cold reflects the player’s own moral nature, a cold hearted Eichmann-esque bureaucrat. The ending’s name then both calls to mind both its status as a ludic victory - a new environment discovered as a result of the player’s mastery of the games mechanics - as well as a moral failing, with the game

criticising the player's moral coldness. The "fence" in the original expression is also worth noting, offering a hidden allusion to the many borders and barriers within the *Papers, Please* setting.

The "Snowier Pastures" ending challenges the player directly, responding to the accumulated body of their choices. The specificity of this reaction, and the ways in which this ending reverses the player's position of power while exposing their own moral bankruptcy, is a personalized reaction that can only take place amidst a ludic system which can save and systematize the player's overall behaviour. This contrasts with simply showing the player their body (as displayed by Telltale's "survey screen" at the end of each of their episodes) or disciplining it (as done by a Choose Your Own Adventure novel that punishes bad choices with a bad ending). The game instead says something not to an implied 'ideal' player, but to an actual, individualized player, as seen through their expressed self. This is a unique form of expression, and one that can elicit self-reflection on the part of the chooser in a way that cannot otherwise be achieved in a non-interactive narrative.

Conclusion

Papers, Please benefits from a unique ability to respond to player choice in a pointed and directed way. Expressed selves can be responded to in a number of different ways. A typical game will discipline the body, presenting a "game over" as a punishment for making bad decisions. It can create no expressed self, as seen in the untraced networks of a hypertext novel. It can display the player's expressed self, akin to the "survey screen" displayed at the end of an episode of *The Walking Dead*. Or it can do something uniquely customized and respond to the expressed self, with the expressed self itself being the result of many reflective choices. Choice and consequence provide a unique tool for developers and writers, one that can be played with and responded to in a way that non-interactive forms of narrative are unable to achieve. Non-interactive narratives are resigned to speak only to an ideal audience, with a general message that their authors can only

hope speaks to their recipients personally (albeit as a group). In contrast, interactive narrative provides the unique opportunity to say something pertinent to specific players, creating an idiosyncratic space for self-reflection and personal growth. The player of *Papers, Please* is free to respond to the game's critique of them however they like. The game's messages a prompt for introspection. Although the "Snowier Pastures" ending is defined as a "good" ending in ludic terms, it is up to the player to decide subjectively if they are happy with that ending, and with the person they have become at the end of their fictional journey as a border security officer. In this way, *Papers, Please* serves to live up to the promises of both the first generation hypertext literary theorists of the early 1990s, as well as to the moral idealism of Janet Murray's Hamlet on the Holodeck. The game provides an interactive form of literature that moves the interactor to consider their own ethical nature through personalized content.

Conclusion

The aftermath of the “narratology versus ludology” debate early in the new millennium saw the rise of various promising trends in the area of literary gaming. There has been a proliferation of authoring tools, texts, games and literary experiments aimed at fulfilling what Chris Crawford has termed the “Siren song of interactive storytelling”.¹⁹³ Amidst this outburst of experimentation has been some confusion. The Telltale Model of storytelling has been derided as not presenting “choices that matter”, while the misleading conclusion of the popular *Mass Effect* trilogy triggered an online outburst. These experiments are accompanied by a sense of misunderstanding as to *what*, exactly, this new hybrid form of literary gaming can communicate and how it can go about doing so. This thesis has aimed to clear this confusion by expanding the current vocabulary used to understand both literary gaming and the broader form of interactive narrative. First, it introduced a spectrum for understanding choice-craft, ranging from the *didactic* to the *exploratory*, with the *reflective* lying in the middle. It then coupled these varying forms of the choice with the *expressed self*, a representation of a player’s accumulated choices, and the way in which a game views the player. Expressed selves can be *presented*, they can be *metaphorical* or – ideally – they can be *instantiated*. This thesis makes the argument that what an interactive narrative is uniquely positioned to do is to first present a player with a sequence of reflective choices that test them,

¹⁹³ Crawford, Chris. “The Siren Song of Interactive Storytelling”. *8th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*. Copenhagen: Denmark. December 3, 2015. Keynote Address. Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb8KWsy5OSM&feature=youtu.be>

forcing them to commit to what Sicart labels “moral trade-offs”. It can then use the accumulated memory of choices made to construct an *expressed self* of the player, which it can in turn *respond* to in a way that is unique to literary gaming and interactive narrative as a whole.

The choice-craft spectrum is an expansion of both Sicart’s notion of “wicked choices”, as well as Astrid Ensslin’s “L-L” spectrum. The latter was introduced in her book *Literary Gaming* (2014) and was designed to help chart the different forms of “literary gaming” along a spectrum strung between poles of “Literariness” and “Ludicness”. She considers “interactive fiction” – the sort of texts chiefly explored in this thesis – as constituting a pure middle-ground between the literary and the ludic.¹⁹⁴ My choice-craft spectrum can roughly be seen as a ‘zooming in’ on Ensslin’s “L-L” spectrum, as it uses the contrast between the ludic and the literary as a similar framing point. Although it is worth noting that choices are not a pivotal part of Ensslin’s study of literary games, she observes that “interactive fiction” is focused on a mid-point between the ludic and the literary, and that “hypertext” is markedly more literary. Sicart’s notion of the “wicked choice” – taken from *Beyond Choices* (2013) - is a more in-depth examination of the reflective choice, particularly its connection with the philosophical thought experiment and how it moves a player to make themselves complicit in a moral trade-off.¹⁹⁵ The “wicked” or *reflective choice* can be considered the centre-point of the choice-craft spectrum, with the *didactic* choice characterising the ludic end of the spectrum, and the *exploratory* forming the literary end. The choice-craft spectrum adds to the pre-existing discourse a clarification of what choices are, how they express meaning, and their mode of expression. It also creates an implied argument about how the choice can best be used to take advantage of interactivity’s innate qualities.

¹⁹⁴ Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. MIT Press: Massachusetts. 2014. pp. 45-50

¹⁹⁵ Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press. 2013. pp. 105-106



Figure 15: An example of the exploratory choice taken from the computer roleplaying game *Planescape: Torment* (1999). Here, exploratory choices are an opportunity for the player to learn about their environment in a novel way without relying on blunt exposition.

The *reflective choice* is the optimal mode of choice-craft compared to the *didactic* or the *exploratory* precisely because it represents the best elements of the ludic and the literary. In the *didactic* choice, choices are primarily used as a disciplinary tool to mould the player into fitting a certain pre-set expressed self. Reductively, bad choices lead to bad endings, and good choices lead to good endings. A system of trial and error is used to train the player until they fit the expressive self that the game has set for them. This is functionally indistinguishable from the catechism – a form of religious call and response designed to train students into memorising religious doctrines. Conversely, *exploratory* choices lack any consequences at all. These choices are primarily about navigating a text in an interactive and non-linear manner. The experience not only feels aimless, but ultimately induces in the reader *exploration anxiety* – a deep-seated completionist need to

explore every branch and find every ending. *Exploratory* choices present narratives that deliver a frustrating reading experience, but this frustration does not lead to anything more productive than more frustration. *Reflective* choices thus represent a superior method of choice-craft, and best utilise the advantages of interactivity. They present no ‘good’ option, and instead force the chooser to reflect on their own nature, and then to commit to a moral trade-off. Because *reflective* choices indicate interesting information about a chooser – to the chooser - they are the best tool to use in constructing an *expressed self*. The expressed self is desirable for the same reason that the reflective choice is - it maximises the unique aesthetic qualities of interactivity and leverages them to communicate something that cannot be expressed as easily in a non-interactive medium.

The *expressed self* is a new addition to the vocabulary surrounding literary gaming that best describes what occurs when a text responds to a player’s choices. Broadly speaking, an expressed self is the accumulated memory of a player’s choices. It can be responded to in one of three broad ways: it can be *instantiated*, *presented* or responded to *metaphorically*. A *presented* expressed self involves simply showing a player the results of their choices. The result is largely unfiltered, leaving the player alone in contemplation. Some games compile this into a moral alignment – such as the “Tides” system from *Numenera: Tides of Torment* (2017) - while others show it alongside an online survey of how others have responded, as per the survey screen found in *The Walking Dead*. A slightly more sophisticated method of handling an expressed self involves responding to it *metaphorically*. Here, only the last few choices are responded to, but those final choices function metonymically for the broader themes that the player had been presented with throughout the game. Chapter 3’s analysis of *The Walking Dead* presents an example of this. Another example can be found in Don’t Nod’s critically acclaimed game *Life is Strange* (2015) where the final choice is used to determine which of two endings the player will encounter. Like

The Walking Dead, *Life is Strange*'s final choice is designed to encapsulate a broader conflict between prioritising personal love over a duty to the greater good. The most sophisticated way in which an expressed self can be managed is by *instantiating* it as a game's ending. *Papers, Please*'s "Snowier Pastures" ending is the most effective example of this, as it is only accessible through a certain style of decision-making – and it responds *specifically* to a player who chooses to make themselves complicit in a certain manner of play. Unlike the choice-craft spectrum, these methods of handling the expressed self follow a pattern of escalating sophistication, with the *presented* self being the least expressive but easiest method of responding to an expressed self, and on the other side of the spectrum the *instantiated* self being the most expressive yet hardest (in terms of both time, skill and resources) method of utilising it. As such, the expressed self adds a new tool to what Astrid Ensslin calls the 'ludostylistics' of literary gaming,¹⁹⁶ one which specifies what makes this mode of expression unique.

The Future of Interactive Narrative

What can an interactive text do that a non-interactive one cannot? This existential question is important for understanding *why* people should attempt to craft such a text in the first place. The didactic, the reflective and the exploratory are all achievable without hybridising literature and gameplay in the same medial space. Both games and religious texts alike are capable of disciplining a subject, while readers have flicked through and explored codex books in a non-linear manner since long before the advent of hypertext. Thought experiments, riddles and fables have all existed to encourage self-reflection on the part of listeners and readers without any explicit interaction between reader and text (or listener and speaker). So what is unique about a literary game?

¹⁹⁶ Ensslin, Astrid. *Literary Gaming*. pp. 12-13

In his essay titled “Interaction between Text and Reader” (1980) literary theorist Wolfgang Iser observes, accurately for the time, that a “text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with.”¹⁹⁷ Yet the expressed self enables an interactive text to do *exactly* that. Iser’s notion of an “implied reader” has played a large part in reader response theory, and represents a limitation on the ways in which a text can specify its target audience. An author does not know who precisely is going to read their work, however they can target a specified sub-audience in the hope that their work will connect with them. The expressed self bypasses this concern and opens up a space for literary games that do not just address a generalised ideal reader but which speak to *specific* players, and to the accumulated body of their choices. This carries with it extraordinary and largely untapped expressive potential, potential that has been largely unexplored among the plethora of experiments in interactive narrative that have taken place since the 2000s. From a player’s perspective this creates the unique sensation of being in dialogue with the game that they are playing. They are neither being acted on by a pedagogical teacher, nor are they acting upon an inert and passive text, but they are instead in conversation with a crystallised mind separate from their own. Like the two-way therapy that *ELIZA* sought to emulate, the ability for someone to engage with a text and experience it speaking back to them with the weight of authorial intelligence is an exciting new development in both gaming and literature, one with a potential for aesthetic, communicative and even potentially therapeutic experiences that have only just begun to be exploited in this new media landscape.

In his polemic essay “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation” (2004), Espen Aarseth argues that games are fundamentally about the “Self” while narratives are about understanding the “Other”. He uses this as an argument against mixing the two – believing that

¹⁹⁷ Iser, Wolfgang. “Interaction between Text and Reader”. *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*. New Jersey: Princeton UP. 1980. p. 107

games are irreducibly different to narratives.¹⁹⁸ He has since backtracked somewhat, stating in “A Narrative theory of Games” that “character” is the joint point of focus for both games and narratives. More specifically, he looks towards the roleplaying tradition of games as placing a focus on character.¹⁹⁹ Through this lens, the expressed self can be understood as the merging of the “Self” and the “Other”. The expressed self represents a mirror image of the chooser, an othering of the self by means of which the chooser may apply self-criticism. Literary gaming presents the unique opportunity for players to treat *themselves* as an object in the same way that an audience may examine the character of Hamlet. It fully exploits fiction’s capacity to provide critical distance between the observer and the fictional subject – but makes an image of the observer the subject of critique.

There exist tentative but promising signs that the world of literary gaming is moving towards a more existential focus on interactive narrative. Greg Costikyan has commented upon the ‘narrativist’ turn in the tabletop roleplaying tradition²⁰⁰ – and games such as Fantasy Flight’s *Star Wars: Force and Destiny* (2014) and Magpie Games’ *Urban Shadows* (2016) have placed greater emphasis on interpersonal conflict. Newer literary games such as Pixel Crow’s *Beat Cop* (2016), Night School Studio’s *Oxenfree* (2016) and Weappy Studio’s *This is the Police* (2016) have all attempted – with varying degrees of success – to replicate the reflective nature of *Papers, Please*. These promising trends are, at the time of writing, predominately evident in independent studios and small-scale productions. Larger, mainstream studios have found themselves unable to replicate this success, partially due to the resource constraints of developing mass-market AAA games and partially due to their commitment to serialisation for commercial reasons. This

¹⁹⁸ Aarseth, Espen. “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation”. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2004. pp. 45-55. p. 50

¹⁹⁹ Aarseth, Espen. “A Narrative Theory of Games”. *FDG '12 Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. New York: ACM. 2012. pp. 129-133

²⁰⁰ Costikyan, Greg. “Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String”. *Second Person: Roleplaying and Story in Games and Playable Media*. eds Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2010. pp. 5-13

disjunction between the traditional, mainstream game studios and an innovative yet smaller industry fringe bares similarity to cinema's Hollywood and its "Indiewood" counterpart, outlined in Geoff King's *Indiewood USA* (2009) – suggesting that this a replaying of established media trends.²⁰¹ Although absent or underdeveloped in big studios, the rise of the expressed self fulfils Janet Murray's hope for a "cyberdrama" – which she famously forecasts in her influential early book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997). Murray proposed a narrative form that is both "capacious and broadly expressive"²⁰² and uses "choice-points in the narrative as dramatically heightened moments...with the same artistry that we now expect in the editing of a film."²⁰³ With the rise of interactive narratives such as *Papers, Please*, games are now moving out of what Murray (in a print-culture allusion) described as an 'incunabula'²⁰⁴ stage of growth, and have come into their own as independent forms of expression. Paired with virtual reality, literary gaming and interactive authoring tools signal a new era of narrative – one which will present readers and players alike with bold choices to be made, choices that 'matter'.

²⁰¹ King, Geoff. *Indiewood USA*. New York; London: I.B Tauris. 2009. pp. 1-4

²⁰² Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA. 1997. p. 9

²⁰³ *ibid.* p. 276

²⁰⁴ Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. p. 28

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