

Meaningful Play: Empathy, Choice and Uncertainty in Video Game Experiences

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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## Abstract

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Play is a crucial way in which we relate to the world around us, how we interact with it, and how we learn from it. '*Meaningful play*' resonates with us as an experience that inspires growth and change in us, and through video games as a medium, designers are capable of offering those experiences to players. Games such as 'The Stanley Parable' and 'Portal 2' offer unique insights as to how game developers use empathy, choice and uncertainty in order to create meaningful and long-lasting games. This thesis explores such topics in relation to contemporary video games and the impact they have on the player. In particular, this thesis looks through the lenses of the construction of these games, as well as the psychology behind the thought process of the player.

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# Introduction

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Play behaviour is widely observed in humans and a notable number of animals, it can be considered a free activity in which we immerse ourselves in. It is also something that is integral to our culture. How we play has developed over time, leading us to a medium we are all familiar with, and has become a normal part of many peoples' lives – *video games*. Marya Franz notes that digital game history and research is not a wide field as of now, however, due to the growing popularity and cultural affect video games have on our contemporary world, this topic of research is ever-growing in emerging scholars for its educational and scientific potential (30).

With the expanding influence video games have on us, it can be questioned as to the lasting effects they have on the player. When players initiate this form of play, they are conforming themselves to the games' suspension of disbelief, and willingly immersing themselves into the game-world. There are many reasons why people engage in video games, some for recreational purposes, educational, or even a form of escapism from the real-world. Traditionally arcade-style games were to be enjoyed as a once-off immersion, and many still hold nostalgic value such as Pac-Man or Space Invaders. However, video games as a medium are inherently experimental, and many contemporary video games have gained large popularity to their narratives or memorable and unique experiences after the activity of play.

The reason video games achieve this immersive and lasting effect on the player, is largely due to their interactivity – this is what sets them apart from other story-telling mediums such as literature and films. Despite many video games having an overarching narrative, they do not need to have a story in order to function or to have an impact on the player. People can still derive pleasure from video games when there is an absence of a story (Costikyan). Whilst narrative is largely a crucial part of other media that have memorable impressions on the viewer, video games offer the player a sense of control over the in-game decisions. This interactivity allows them to feel they are capable of making '*meaningful choices*' that have an impact on the game-world, characters, or narrative (if any).

It is these meaningful choices that sets video games apart: but this raises the question as to how game developers achieve in giving the player the sensation of freewill and control, when games intrinsically are bound by rules and game paths set up by the designers. This thesis explores this question, and analyses the many psychological,

sociological, and mechanical ways in which game designers use to craft memorable games. I will be using the games *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* (2022) and *Portal 2* (2011), as case studies to illustrate and demonstrate the argument of the thesis. Many of the topics I reference have had extensive research done behind them individually, and it is out of the scope of this thesis to delve into them thoroughly here. This thesis does not set itself to be a psychoanalysis of the human condition regarding the questioning of freewill, the psychology of choice, or connections humans have developed towards machines, but rather to examine and propose the impact aspects of these concepts have had on video games.

The Stanley Parable, initially released in 2013 on PC, was created by Davey Wreden and Willaim Pugh, and re-released for console in 2022, titled ‘The Stanley Parable: Deluxe Edition’ – in which new content was added to the original game. The summary of the game on its website states the following:

*“When a simple-minded individual named Stanley discovers that the co-workers in his office have mysteriously vanished, he sets off to find answers.*

*You will play as Stanley, and you will not play as Stanley.*

*You will make a choice, and you will have your choices taken from you.*

*The game will end, the game will never end.*

*Contradiction follows contradiction, the rules of how games should work are broken, then broken again.*

*You are not here to win.*

*The Stanley Parable is a game that plays you.”* (The Stanley Parable).

The game offers a unique and experimental gameplay, and delves deeply into the themes of choice, autonomy, and the subversion of the rules of the game, in its non-linear approach to storytelling. The second game which will be examined is *Portal 2*, a sequel to the original *Portal* (2007) game that premiered in 2011 and became widely acclaimed for its creative gameplay and puzzle-solving aspects. Both of these games have become cult classics and have gained notable followings, as well as being

praised by game reviewer sites such as NPR and Giant Bomb (Larchuk 2) ('The Stanley Parable Review'). With regard to these games, their success and impact on the player will be examined through the lenses of empathy, control and choice, and lastly, uncertainty, where these emotions and mental challenges are used throughout the game in order to create meaningful experiences for the player.

## Chapter One

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### *Empathy*

“Empathy” has become a buzzword within video games of the last decade. According to Bonnie Ruberg in her article delving into the rhetoric idea of empathy in games, it is used to describe the ability of allowing players to connect and experience the emotions of others within the game world (55).

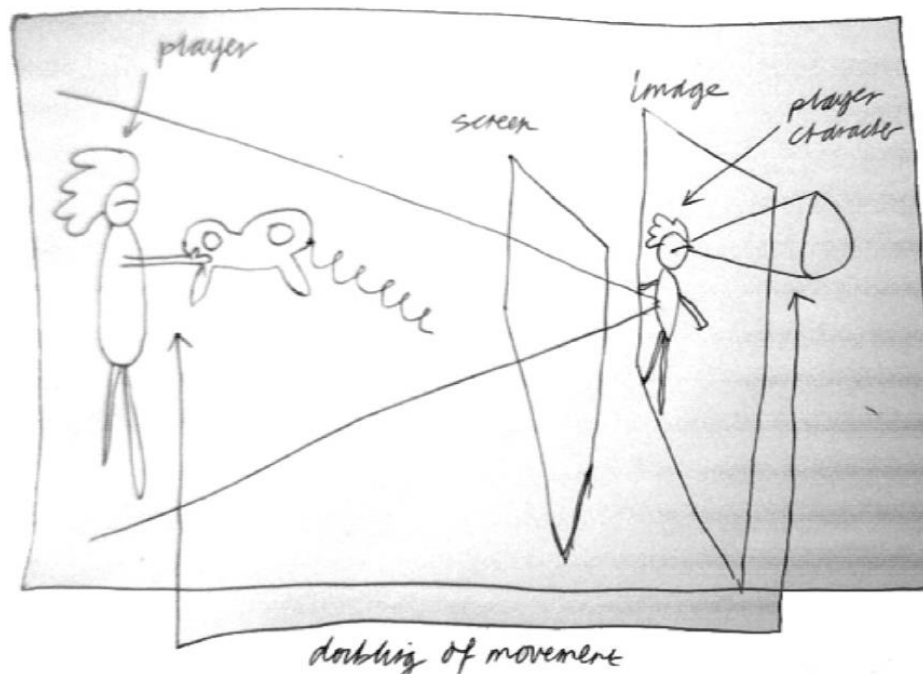
To define *empathy* further, Suzanne Keen describes it as “a spontaneous sharing of affect, [which] can be provoked by witnessing another’s emotional state, [or] by hearing about another’s condition.” (208). If empathy is a tool used by game developers, it begs the question whether it has an impact on freewill within these games? In this chapter, using *The Stanley Parable* and *Portal 2* as my case studies, I will examine how empathy may manifest within the player when playing video games and if empathy further dictates their experience of choice within the game.

When a person decides to take on the role of a player within a video game, they are willingly immersing themselves into the shoes of the protagonist of the game world “for the experience of relating to a fictional being” (Lissa et al. 43). Within games, the protagonist becomes an avatar for the player, where an avatar is how the player experiences the world of the game.

However the avatar’s personal qualities are reflected in the limitations and the freedom that is possible for the player to perform. Katherine Isbister describes the avatar as a ‘prosthetic’ or extension of the player within the game, and that “the players move through the game world taking actions as this person, adopting his or her concerns and struggling toward his or her goals” (11). It is also worth noting, that within *The Stanley Parable* and *Portal 2*, both games are set in a first person point of view, meaning the player sees through the avatar’s eyes. They cannot see their own face as we cannot see our own. This furthers the experience of immersion and allows the player to project onto the avatar.

The avatar is a “vehicle for action” (Isbister 11) and plays a key role in allowing the player to empathise with the protagonist, and further, the other characters that appear within the game world (Isbister). In Marco Caricciolo’s essay ‘Narrative Space and its Reconstruction’, he grounds the basis of his work in studies by Elaine Scarry, and implements them into the virtual world where he suggests that “the [player’s] real and

virtual bodies are linked” (118). Not only does the player mentally project themselves onto the avatar through their perception and decision-making, but, in the act of gaming there is a cognitive level of projection through the hand movements of the player. The avatar replicates these movements from the controller, so that the avatar body in the virtual world can move (Isbister 13). This feel of movement can also be intensified when the controller device reacts to extreme force that the protagonist feels in the game. For example, in *The Stanley Parable*, when Stanley makes a big jump and lands hard on the ground, the controller vibrates so that ‘impact’ is felt by the player.



(Fig 1.1) Doubling of Movement (Westecott)

Emma Westecott explores this link between avatar and player through the concept of ‘doubling of movement’ (Fig 1.1); the player experiences both the action of play on a cognitive level and as the results of this “imagined life” displayed within the game. Thus, the player acts as both puppeteer and puppet (Westecott). This “illusion of control” (Westecott) the player exerts over their avatar creates a synthetic bond between player and player character. It engages the player in this act of play in the lived experiences both parties witness in the gameplay, allowing a deeper emotional connection between player and avatar.

Whilst player empathy towards the protagonist is important for immersing them in the gameplay, it is also important to consider the impact of empathy players may feel towards other characters in the game world, especially when the protagonist may lack such feelings of empathy.

Morality can be tested within games. Within society we follow strict personal and moral social codes, but games allow the player to deviate from such codes that would otherwise carry severe social or legal consequences (Banks 117). Within *The Stanley Parable*, there are a multitude of endings to the game, and for this I'll be examining the one known as 'Zending'. Stanley acts as the perfect avatar to the player, as he never speaks, and he never formulates his own thoughts. Any feelings, thoughts or goals he may have are being projected onto him by either the player or the Narrator. Within 'Zending', the idea sets Stanley as being restless and wanting to desperately escape his office space. The narrator tries to convince him otherwise, offering him peace and happiness, particularly in this one zen room (Fig1.2), and all he has to do is stay there.



(Fig 1.2) The Zen Room (*The Stanley Parable*)

As pleasing and calming as this room may be, it does not offer finality for the player. The game does not end if you stay in this room, no matter how long you stay in it, and there is only one other room available for the player to explore. The room contains a tall staircase, that the player almost knowingly jumps from in an attempt to take

Stanely's own life (Fig.1.3). There is a sadness here, in that there is a rooted need for an end, and that the player would kill their own avatar to achieve it. Within this ending, I think that there is disconnect of empathy between the player and avatar, valuing finality over the life of the protagonist. But perhaps that lack of content for the zen room is projected onto Stanley as well. Where empathy is absent between player and avatar in this part of the game, there is an empathy created towards the Narrator of the game. Every attempt Stanley makes at taking his own life, further saddens the Narrator, who wants peace more than the player. The voice performance of Kevan Brighting also really heightens this moment. As an oral storyteller, he takes advantage of the human tendency to share feelings through voice (Keen 209). The Narrator is aware if Stanley dies, the game resets, and tries to persuade both Stanley, and the player, to stop. The player feels bad for taking these actions, for making the Narrator more and more miserable, and yet, they continue until the game ends, and Stanley dies.



(Fig. 1.3) Staircase in 'Zending' (The Stanley Parable)

In projecting their own desires and goals onto the protagonist this allows the player to connect with their emotions. Within The Stanley Parable, the Narrator is often antagonised in the game, and so, in the 'Zending', by going against the Narrator's wishes, it creates a sense of freewill. Stanley and the player feel this due to their own goal to 'end' the game, rather than that of the Narrator's, even if that means Stanley dies. However, this creates a tension of empathy between the actions they must perform in the game for a sense of completion, and the sympathy the player has



towards the dejected and pleading Narrator. Miguel Sicart mentions this kind of tension in his discussion about 'Beautiful Escape: Dungeoneer' and the protagonist of that game, called Verge. "Players are driven by their empathy toward the main characters, and they root for the underdogs, and Verge is all of these. However, Verge is also a sadist, torturer, and killer" (117).

While I would argue that Stanley would not be considered 'a sadist, torturer or killer', this thought brings up the interesting idea of morality into the player experience. When players are given freewill, or the illusion of it, it introduces questions as to how a player can allow their morality to bend in an environment whilst making choices in game, where there will be no consequences to their real life. I think this section of the game illustrates the importance and impact the presence of the Narrator has. Keen states as part of narrative theory, that an internal perspective can provide insight to characters who enhance an empathic view between reader and character, or player and player character within video games, especially those who do not have strong outwardly good characteristics to support them otherwise (Keen 219). However, Stanley has no internal monologue within the game, let alone any dialogue. The only internal thoughts that the player experiences in regards to Stanley, are their own in which they project onto his avatar.

Instead of the presence of an internal perspective from Stanley, the player is accompanied by an authorial narration that moves alongside him throughout the game in the form of the Narrator. Keen also notes how the person of the narration has a tendency to affect the player's responses to fiction and its inhabitants (Keen 220). This creates an intriguing dilemma, where the player has an established bond with the avatar, from which they project their own thoughts and goals onto Stanley – to explore, escape, and find an ending to the game – and will carry out their playthrough to achieve these goals. But, with the presence of the Narrator, the player will antagonise his desires in how to play the game, in order to achieve their own goals and give Stanley autonomy. Despite this, there are moments such as in 'Zending' where it feels as if the player's morals are being tested, and in their pursuit of Stanley's autonomy, they hurt the Narrator, and one can only feel sympathy or pity for him.

In another ending, known as ‘Not Stanley’, the Narrator picks up on Stanley making “meaningful choices” (The Stanley Parable), and deciphers that it has not been Stanley within his story, but a player controlling Stanley and making choices in the game. The Narrator gets angry at the player for deviating from his narration and who is accused of provoking ‘death of the author’ in regards to *his* game. He tries to fix this, insisting that the player ‘make choices as Stanley would’, but ultimately, Stanley is no more than an extension of the player. If they continue to deviate from the laid out game, it creates a more subversive gameplay as the world begins to corrupt due to ‘narrative contradiction’. This ends with the game shoving the player out of the game, leaving no one to control Stanley, and the player can only watch on (Fig. 1.4).



(Fig. 1.4) Out of Stanley (The Stanley Parable)

The Narrator is unaware that no one is no longer controlling Stanley, and pleads for him to make a choice, any choice, even if it’s not the one he wants him to follow. Suddenly, without the player, the Narrator has become extremely isolated and desperate. In spite of the fact that it’s the player’s actions which caused this outcome, again there is a feeling of sympathy for the Narrator who is left alone with a shell of Stanley. In her talk about her study on ‘How Games Move Us’, Isbister speaks of Will Wright, creator of the Sims games. Wright explored the effect an avatar has on the player within the game ‘Black and White Creature Isle’ in which the player’s choices have a subsequent consequence on the gameplay. From Wrights play-thought of the game, Isbister observes that “when the choices have to do with engaging with

something which seems to be a living being, then the consequences can really tug at our heart strings” (*How Games Move Us* 11:01).

Through playing *The Stanley Parable*, it becomes evident that the Player will form an empathic bond with Stanley as he, as an avatar, is one’s virtual body in the game world, something they can project onto in order to immerse themselves into the game, and will base their choices around this fact. It is true that a player’s morality can be tested within video games when there is a lack of consequence compared to that of real life, but when there is an empathic bond created between player and avatar, the player’s choices will dictate in chasing an outcome they wish for their avatar. However, through game progression, the Narrator begins to feel like a real person to us too, one who’s thoughts and emotions are expressed to the player verbally, unlike Stanley who remains silent. As a result in pursuing outcomes that offer autonomy for Stanley, the player is ultimately left with the consequence of pity or regret for the Narrator due to the affect these choices have on him and his story.

## **Chapter Two**

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*Control and Choice*

Empathy, as discussed in the previous chapter, can have a significant effect on a players' choices within a game. However, the extent to which players have control over their choices, regardless of their level of empathy, must always be considered in a medium that has been constructed with their potential decision-making in mind.

In order to examine this further, we must look into the theory behind decision-making. Decision-making has its roots in economics but it can be described as a 'rational model for choice behaviour' (Ajzen 297). There are more relevant studies of the idea of decision making that deals with choice in a more general context, as a means to explain human behaviour rather than to predict statistics. The social psychological paradigm studies behaviour behind choice, and can be as simple as the initiative to make a choice, or, to take no action and remain in the present state. Intention and attitude play key elements behind behavioural decision making: "The stronger the intention, the greater the likelihood that the person will engage in the intended behaviour" (Ajzen 298).

Decision making is based on personal beliefs, which represent the subjective foundations of our knowledge, and each belief can be associated with a certain outcome. This is known as the 'Expectancy-Value Model' – a person's overall attitude towards a decision is determined by our own subjective values of the outcomes associated with that decision. This can be summed up as 'risk and reward' – where a person will have an internal dialogue weighing the risks and rewards of the outcome of the decision. Of course, this leads to biases which may have an effect on a choice; judgements can be distorted by our own motivations, needs and personal preferences (Ajzen 302). If someone is on a determined path for a certain outcome, they will be more likely to make whatever choices are needed in order to get to that outcome, regardless of the other options that are presented to them.

It's also worth noting that when it comes to decision making, people have an underlying need to feel in control of their outcomes (Ajzen 304). Autonomy over one's actions is so sought after that it's easy to subconsciously become blindsided to surrounding factors that may influence a person's choice without them knowing. It's better to feel like you have full control rather than recognise subtle guides that can lead you to that decision. This idea of control and how it factors into choice will be relevant later in the chapter.

Overall, people's beliefs and attitudes are directed by the available information around them, which allows them to form judgments and intentions that they can dictate themselves by. The idea of control and consistency play a part in one's decisions - people will make a choice in search of an outcome that aligns with their own values. However, as already mentioned, there is a level of unconscious influence over any decision from surrounding information that the brain does not cognitively recognise (Ajzen 315).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine an extensive exploration of the theory behind decision making, but, with the given information and parameters we can use this to review choice based in a video game medium.

Decision making can vary throughout different mediums – in literature the reader is often a passive viewer, while as in video games the player is an active participant. Jesper Juul studies surrounding the act of game playing led to the discovery of four categories in the types of play: Submission, Constrained Freedom, Subversion and Creation. Juul also proposed the question “Is game playing a free activity, or is it determined and controlled by game rules?” (Juul). The first two categories are Submission and Constrained Freedom, in which the game designer's put more thought into the game's design in order for the player to enjoy it throughout the activity. While as the latter, Subversion and Creation, relies more on player contribution and what they bring forward through the act of playing.

When it comes to video games as a medium, there is no set genre for games, especially as contemporary video games become more experimental in their mechanics, gameplay and storytelling. A player may only be presented with a decision when it is a relevant story beat in a narrative based game, while as in open-world games, the player controls their avatars and is constantly making minute choices that allow their avatar to interact with the game world.

Within *The Stanley Parable*, it can be presumed that the main character, Stanley, has been living his life in a state of sphexishness. The Narrator tells us that he lives his day in and out of repeated tasks – he presses whatever buttons his computer tells him to press with content: “and he was happy” (*The Stanley Parable*). This mindless state is

broken as soon as the player gains control of Stanley, offering him a new consciousness, and to quote Daniel C. Dennett – “freedom hinges on consciousness” (41). Dennett asks the question ‘why do we want freewill?’ in his book *Elbow Room*, and unlike many video games, *The Stanley Parable* indulges the player in this chase of autonomy through its subversive gameplay.

The notion of *The Stanley Parable* is built around the idea of contra-casual freewill, which is when a person believes they could have done things differently in life (Arrazola). Within the game, the player is given the option to try things differently. This is the principle of *The Stanley Parable* – that there is never one ending, but instead a multitude of corridors to be taken in order to see how each small action can lead you down a different path. This is how the player is immersed into the game, that they believe their choices matter, creating the shimmering illusion of freewill. Sabine Hossenfelder argues however, that we all live in a reality where there is an absence of freewill, by which she clarifies her statement under the presets that:

- Any decision you make is influenced by the actions you’ve made in the past.
- If your future decisions are determined by random events, you cannot have any influence over them. (Hossenfelder).

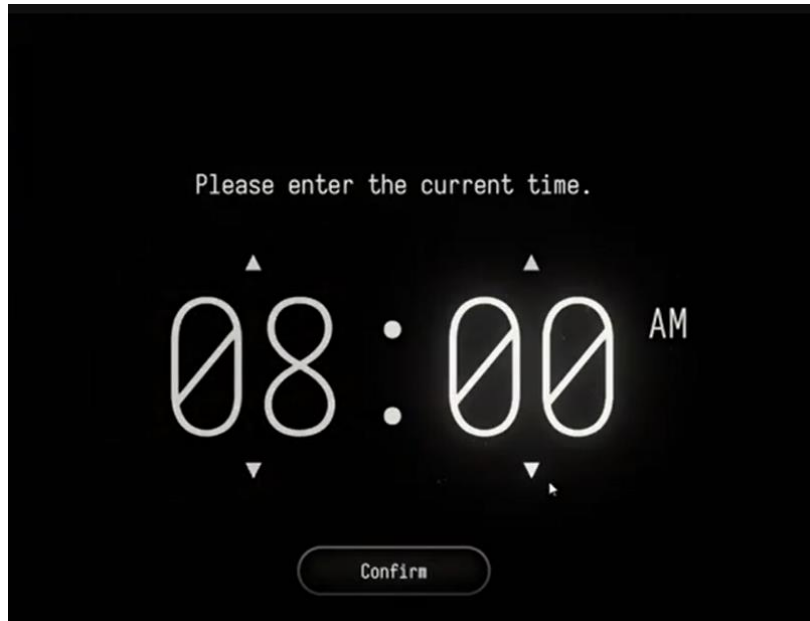
One thing Hossenfelder does state, that should be noted, is that in the case that freewill is absent from our lives, it does not mean we cannot make meaningful decisions, or, have a lack of responsibility over the decisions we do make. There is a misconception that the lack of freewill creates the concept that we are hindered by an evil force inhibiting us from making decisions – this is untrue. Our brains are processors; they receive inputs (influences from past actions and experiences) and use those inputs to create decisions that it believes will best reflect our behaviour and intended goal – and in that sense – you do not have freewill over your choices. Similarly, she states that “if your actions are problematic for other people, you are the source of the problem.” (Hossenfelder). This brings us back to Dennett’s proposition as to why freewill is sought after: it secures us our dignity and responsibility (167). Freewill does not give us dignity nor responsibility, but we commonly believe it does. We believe that freedom and autonomy grants us the ability to make meaningful choices, and without it we cannot; this is why it is so important for game developers to create a lens of freedom in

their games, so players feel a sense of control and ultimately enhance the immersion of the game – to quote Dennett, “believing one has freewill is itself one of the necessary conditions of having freewill” (183).

This is what is so enticing about *The Stanley Parable*, it allows the player to indulge in their contra-casual freewill, their ‘what-ifs’ and hypothetical scenarios. There is no ‘one ending’ in the game, and each small choice, or lack thereof, the player makes does have an effect on your experience and outcome of the game. This is why I believe *The Stanley Parable* could be classified under Subversion in Jesper Juul’s categories of play. Subversion within a game is when the player overcomes the limitations set out by the game designer, they recognise the game’s limitations, and instead bring their own perspective and intention to the game; the player becomes the enabler of the play activity (Juul).

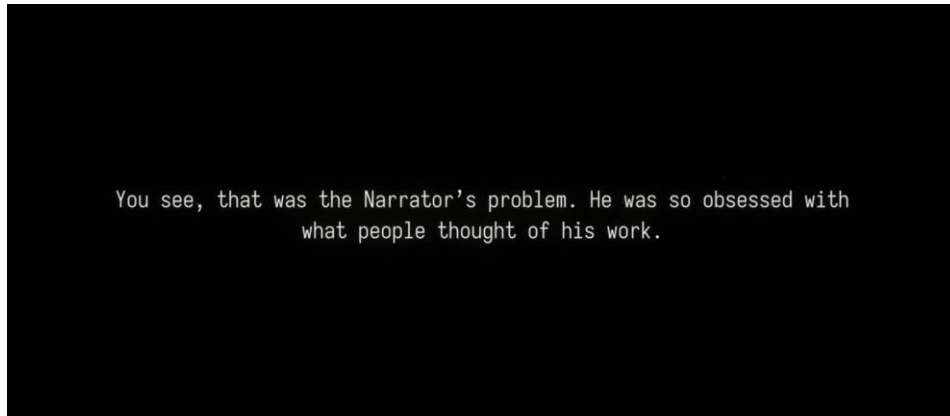
The best example of this within the game is the Epilogue, which becomes available on the home screen after a certain amount of play-throughs and endings. Within the Epilogue, Stanley is traversing through a desert wasteland, directionless. Eventually he comes across an abandoned building that the Narrator introduced in another ending of the game. The player can explore the inside of the building where there are remnants of various negative reviews about ‘*The Stanley Parable: Deluxe Edition*’, breaking the fourth wall of the game. The final room Stanley is led to has a single computer monitor in it, where text greets the player. This person can be called the ‘Settings Person’, they’re separate from the Narrator, and the only other time the player is introduced to them is when they open the game; text appears asking the player to input their local time and adjust their screen brightness (Fig 2.1).





(Fig. 2.1) The Settings Person – Time Adjustment (The Stanley Parable)

The Settings Person offers you to break the limitations of the game. They state that the Narrator was so obsessed with making a perfect sequel to *The Stanley Parable*, so to counteract this, the Settings Person wants to run its legacy into the ground, and for the player to have fun in the process (Fig. 2.2). To do so, every time the game reboots, the number of the sequel will advance, and the player can choose a new subtitle for *The Stanley Parable* (Fig. 2.3). The content of the game will remain the same, but the player is given full control over this aspect. Even though this could be counted as part of the game designer's intention, the player is actively pushed to explore the limitations of *The Stanley Parable*. This is the core experience of the game, the player's pursuit of curiosity is what engages them to enact the activity. Jesse Schell expresses that "when people play games, they have an experience. It is the experience that the designer cares about. Without the experience, the game is worthless" (10). So, it is the player who is the most important person to the designer, and the experience they have with the game; the experience or challenge they bring to the activity, is the thing that makes the game itself memorable.



(Fig. 2.2) The Settings Person – Epilogue (The Stanley Parable)



(Fig 2.3) Creating a New Sequel (The Stanley Parable)

In comparison to The Stanley Parable, Portal 2 could be argued to reside under the ‘Constraint Freedom’ category within Jesper Juul’s types of play (Juul). Portal 2 follows a more narrative storyline compared to the explorative approach of The Stanley Parable. Choice within Portal 2 appears in the form of crafted puzzle rooms which the player must figure out how to escape using a set of two portals, physics and interactable objects. There is less room for psychological conundrums in comparison to The Stanley Parable, nonetheless the game designer still provides the feeling of freedom through indirect control. By limiting the choices that are presented to the player, whilst still providing them the liberty of what option they themselves want to choose. Schell mentions that “too much freedom can be daunting” (344), it can create decision paralysis in a player. To combat this, the designer will create subtle guides to assist a player in making a decision and help them solve a puzzle in Portal 2.

The visual design of the game plays a highly important role in crafting these guides for the player, whilst they are still under the assumption that every choice they make is of their own. If the designer can craft space which can control where the player looks, ultimately, they can then control where the player is going to go (Schell 347). Portal 2 very simply achieves this by using different coloured surfaces to distinguish where the player can place portals in order to pass the puzzle. The player themselves still has to evaluate their space and the physics needed in order to complete it, but with the guides implemented in the room, they are given the tools to figure it out (Fig 2.4). The game also achieves this through game dialogue, where both player and character are taught how the puzzle rooms are created. It is discovered that the white surfaces in which portals are created on, are made of moon dust; within the finale boss battle, a hole is created in the ceiling, revealing the moon for the first time in the game. The player needs no time to *know* where they have to create a portal in order to beat the boss (Fig. 2.5).



(Fig 2.4) Puzzle Room (Portal 2)



(Fig 2.5) Portal to the Moon (Portal 2)

The last method of indirect control that is worth mentioning, is characters – this links directly back to the effect of empathy on a player. The characters within the game can act as guides and give various motives for both the character and the player to make certain choices in the game (Schell 351). Empathy is certainly one factor that may affect a player’s choices, but characters such as antagonists, can equally drive a player to choose certain paths in a game.

“What we want when we want free will is the power to decide our courses of action, and to decide them wisely, in the light of our expectations and desires. We want to be in control of ourselves, and not under the control of others. We want to be agents, capable of initiating, and taking responsibility for, projects and deeds.” – Daniel C. Dennett (184).

The quote above perfectly encapsulates the reasonings as to why players want to be in control of their choices in video games. But in truth, video games are a medium where players lack a great deal of freewill. They are guided by the designers and any choices that are given to them are usually constrained options that line up with various story or narrative beats. That does not mean there is a total absence of freedom of choice in games. Players bring their own experiences to this activity, and those experiences are varied throughout every person; not every player walks away from a game with the

same impression from it, even if they made similar choices. As long as the designer allows the player to feel in control, they can believe that they truly are.

## Chapter Three

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### *Uncertainty*

As concluded in Chapter Two, choice and control highly affect a player's perception of their freewill and engagement within a game. Following this concept, another major factor that attributes to player engagement in video games is uncertainty. Uncertainty is something that no-one enjoys. Yet there is a terrifying abundance of uncertainty within our lives and it seems that the only way we can process it, is within an insane amount of optimism which we are almost oblivious to (Costikyan 2). This creates a strange paradox, in which uncertainty and the concept of the unknown is something that terrifies us as a species, and yet it has such a profound influence on us culturally. So much so, that through this culture, we have created games that subject us to this concept of uncertainty in a "fictive and non-threatening" environment (Costikyan 2).

Curiosity is a 'desire to know' as described by Ilhan Inan in his book 'The Philosophy of Curiosity', but surprisingly he notes that not much research has been done on the state of curiosity itself. It is often an untouched subject, despite how intrinsic it is in the field of research and philosophic matters. One of the reasons for this anomaly, he speculates, is how often knowledge is held in higher esteem, even by philosophers such as Aristotle, rather than the state of wonder (Inan 17). Inan defines the condition of curiosity as "when such an awareness of ignorance is coupled with an interest in the topic, it motivates curiosity" (15) – this 'awareness of ignorance' is what presents curiosity as such a fascinating trait about humans. Over the last millennia we as a species have discovered the unimaginable through the driving notion of inquiry and search for understanding and knowledge of that is unknown to us (Inan 15). As it stands today, there is still a lot of research to be done on curiosity as a driving force, but this innate wonder about what is uncertain to us – which is the subject of this chapter – is what helps engage our interest with video games today.

The risk and reward theory, as discussed in Chapter two, often presents an unknown outcome to which the player must weigh up their options in order to try achieving a result that would be most desirable to them. In linear gameplaying, sometimes the outcome is perceivable, for example to get from A to B – the player knows that they will end at B, they just need figure out how to get there. However, in many video games that incorporate choice in their gameplay, become "strongly non-unilinear in

their design” (Domsch 53). Often the outcomes of these choices are unknown to the player, and whatever result they receive may affect their player character or the storyline of their game. The uncertainty involved in their decision making is what maintains the player’s intrigue in the game. Whatever outcome they receive may have a certain consequence for both them and their player character, and if there is a level of empathic bond the player shares for their avatar, it heightens the negative risk of experiencing a ‘bad’ outcome.

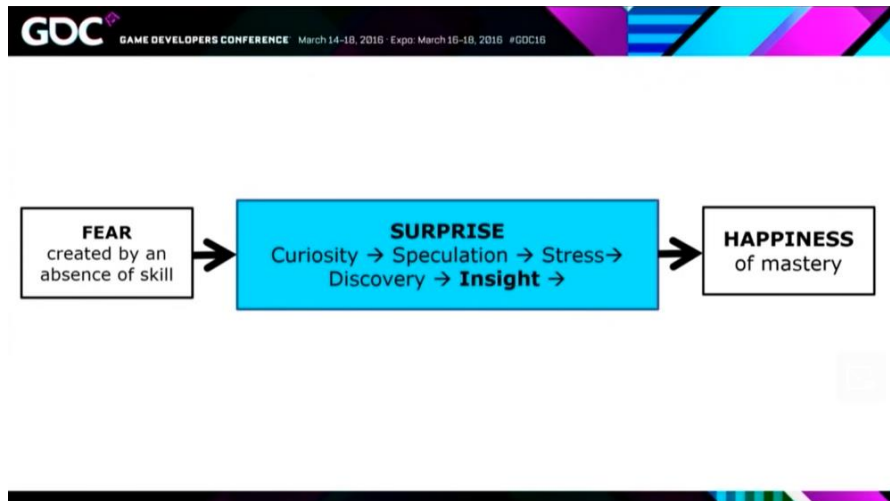
What happens when a player receives a result that dissatisfies them? When playing a video game, and your character dies or you fail at a puzzle, why is it that the player continues on? Failure within video games will either produce one of two outcomes: frustration or resilience. Unlike Aristotle’s term of *catharsis*, where experiencing unpleasant emotions in a fictitious setting purges us of them, video games have quite the opposite effect, as they produce the emotions in the first place (Juul 4). And when failure persists over and over again, it creates a block for the player, as they cannot resume with their game, leading to intense frustration – in some extreme cases ‘gamer rage’. This extreme emotional reaction is specifically evocative because the player has direct influence over the choices that led to such an outcome, unlike other mediums, where viewers have no direct input to the character’s choices.

However, failure in games is actually extremely common, and Jesper Juul explores how failure affects a player in his essay ‘The Art of Failure’. Despite failure being an unpleasant emotion that leaves the player feeling somewhat defeated, it offers the player a chance to learn. Success can lead the player to feel complacent, while as failure gives the player an opportunity to consider why they failed (Juul 59). It also acts as a motivator for the player to desire winning even more, but the true enjoyment of the experience can only be achieved through the act of learning *how* to win.

Uncertainty in video games invokes a challenge, and curiosity plays a role in overcoming that challenge through the act of exploration and discovery. In her talk at the 2016 GDC conference, Jolie Menzel presents this challenge specifically in relation to puzzle design for games. She uses Erin Hoffman’s concept of the Sophia Loop (Fig 3.1) to illustrate how problem-solving works on a psychological level within players. When presented with an unknown, the player undergoes an emotional journey in



order to search for the knowledge they need to proceed with their game. First, they are presented with a problem which creates the feeling of fear, as they do not have the immediate skills to overcome it. They then cycle through an array of emotions (as shown in Fig 3.1) which eventually leads them to the insight they need to solve the puzzle, resulting in the feeling of happiness over the mastery of the situation (*Level Design Workshop* 5:32).



(Fig 3.1) The Sophia Loop (Level Design Workshop, GDC 2016)

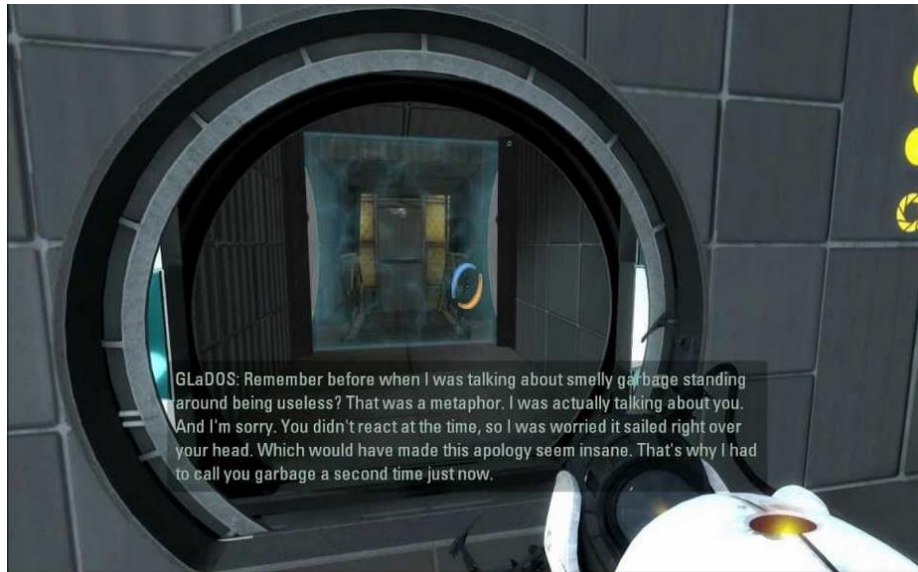
Menzel classifies puzzle mastery as that key element of finding insight, and the only way a player can achieve it is through trial and error, and assessing their already known knowledge to piece together the answer (*Level Design Workshop* 6:11). As outlined in the previous chapter, there are a lot of hidden guides game designers use to help subtly guide players, and it is these subtle guides that aid the player in their mastery of insight. The Sophia Loop is a tactic that Portal 2 utilises over and over again throughout the game within each puzzle room. In doing so it creates that sensation of exploration and discovery that keeps the player invested in the game. Even if the player fails to figure out the puzzle on first try, through experimentation and learning imbued from earlier puzzles, the player is given the tools to succeed, leaving them both content and eager to continue playing.

With an understanding of the Sophia Loop, it could be argued that it plays an important role in regard to the function of ‘the flow state’ otherwise known as ‘*the zone*’. The flow state was popularised by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in the 1960s, when

observing how painters who were so absorbed in their work disregarded fatigue, hunger and discomfort, whilst having a higher interest in their preoccupied activity (Synder and Lopez 89). ‘The zone’ is the result of such phenomena when the person immerses themselves in the “intrinsically motivated activity”, where the end goal or results of such are set apart from the activity itself (Synder and Lopez 89). The most important aspect of the flow state is that the enjoyment of the activity is the main reason for pursuit of it, and the conditions for flow to occur are:

- “Perceived challenges, or opportunities for action, that stretch (neither overmatching nor underutilizing) existing skills; a sense that one is engaging challenges at a level appropriate to one’s capacities.” (Synder and Lopez 90).
- “Clear proximal goals and immediate feedback about the progress that is being made.” (Synder and Lopez 90).

The “immediate feedback about the progress that is being made” is interesting to note as Juul outlines an aspect of feedback sometimes used in gameplay where the narrator or npc (non-player character) ‘abuses’ the player with harsh critique. This is usually used as a means of humour or to antagonise the speaking npc, whilst giving the player and player character more of a motive to continue on with the game and prove them wrong. He uses the example of GLaDOS in Portal 2 – a cruel computer who is the original antagonist of the game, who calls Chell (the player character), “smelly garbage” (Fig 3.2), to show her dislike and disgust towards Chell, despite the fact she is the one making her complete the puzzle rooms in the first place (Juul 54-55). This gives both player and player character motive (even if out of spite) to progress and beat GLaDOS’ future puzzles.



(Fig 3.2) GLaDOS Insult (Portal 2)

It is in my belief that the ‘perceived challenge’ within the flow state, has its heart in the Sophia Loop. In his famous book, ‘Les jeux et les hommes’, Roger Caillois defines play as an “uncertain activity” (7), and goes on to further state that:

“Every game of skill, by definition, involves the risk for the player of missing his stroke and the threat of defeat, without which the game would no longer be pleasing. In fact, the game is no longer pleasing to one who, because he is too well trained or skilful, wins effortlessly and infallibly.” (Caillois 7).

Games must require uncertainty in order to keep the player’s engagement, and for there to feel like there are real stakes with regards to the outcomes of their decisions. Thus, when an element of surprise, shown as part of the Sophia Loop (Fig 3.1), is introduced, it offers new information which the player can use to gain new insight. This is where the concept of ability versus challenge comes into play. Within each puzzle or choice the game designer offers, the player gains insight which not only allows them to complete their current challenge, but they go on to carry this information to assist them in future puzzles and decisions. It is this ‘Mastery of Insight’ that “fosters growth” (Synder and Lopez 92) in the player, and with each challenge they overcome, the player develops a greater skill. If harmonic balance isn’t maintained between ability and challenge, the game ceases to be as involving as before, and the player’s flow is lost (Synder and Lopez 92). Using the Sophia Loop as

a basis for building puzzles, game designer's increasingly offer more complex challenges to the player in order to keep their immersion in the game-world, and make them feel like their choices and developments matter.

With an understanding of how uncertainty is used mechanically to craft immersive puzzles and invite the flow state of the player, the concept of the unknown can also be used to invoke emotional responses in the player. Fear and existentialism are core themes within *The Stanley Parable*. Emotion is such a key component to any narrative in order to create a compelling and immersive experience for the viewer. Empathy is one such example in how game designers' manipulate the player, and one way they achieve this is *emotional contagion*, which relies on a reaction to the narrative. This is a kind of automatic mimicry humans experience in response to a social or physical action of another person (Keen 209).

Whilst *The Stanley Parable* does utilise empathy of the player, the game excels in creating a unique atmosphere that facilitates the concept of the unknown, and the fear of being lost and directionless. *The Stanley Parable* is a single player game, so it is a game the player (unless in the company of others) experiences alone. However, it can be argued that within single player games, the player is not truly alone, as Greg Costikyan states:

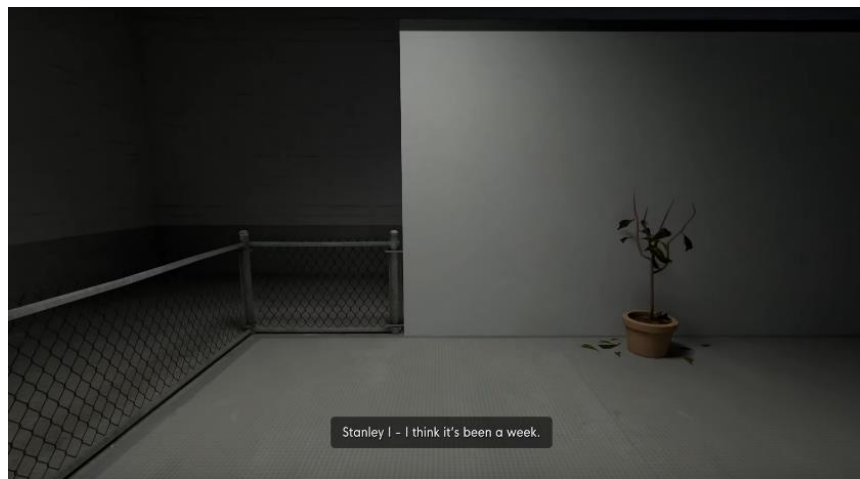
“Even solo-play games are “interactive,” albeit in this case the interaction is between a single player and some algorithmic system that responds to the player's actions” (15).

Even if the player is experiencing the game by themselves, they are often coupled with some other entity, and for *The Stanley Parable* both player and player character are accompanied by the Narrator, who acts as an omniscient observer of Stanley.

The Narrator is in fact an unreliable and intrusive element within the game “whose would-be omniscience is deconstructed by the player's subversive behaviour” (Ensslin 60). As previously established, *The Stanley Parable* falls under the subversion category of types of play (Juul), and so, despite the Narrator appearing as the one who directs Stanley and, by-extension, the player, he ultimately has no control

over his own narrative, which of course is the essence of the gameplay and has a leading effect on the game's narrative design (Ensslin 60). This lack of control the Narrator experiences is best shown in the 'Skip-Button' ending, which thematically leads into the existential fear of the game and the concept of the unknown.

The 'Skip-Button' ending is set up when the Narrator's ego is wounded from reading through reviews of the game; one review stated that the Narrator has too much dialogue and it should be skippable. The Narrator introduces a skip-button to Stanley (and the player), and encourages him to test it out. As prompted the player can skip whenever they please, and when they do so, Stanley is frozen in time, until they 'return'. At first the Narrator is delighted that his new mechanic works, but the more the player presses the button, the more time passes between each press, leaving the Narrator alone with a frozen Stanley (as can be seen in Fig 3.3 and 3.4).



(Fig 3.3) A Week (The Stanley Parable)



(Fig 3.4) A Year (The Stanley Parable)

Eventually, the more the player presses the button, the Narrator disappears. This is one of the few times in the game where the player is completely by themselves. There is an unnerving fear that couples this isolation as the player is stuck in this desolate and dark room, with only the skip-button to throw them into another time. There is almost a hubris that the player's curiosity has brought upon them, where the motivation to find out what's on the other side of the button leaves them void of the narrator. They are left to feel uncertain as to what happens next when there is no longer someone there to instruct them. It is clear that humans have physical limits, and as a species we test what these limits are – it is why there has always been the curiosity to seek the unknown, to gain new knowledge. The skip button serves as a function to enlighten this curiosity through the form of narrative anticipation. Even if the player sat and listened through the entirety of the Narrator's monologue, it eventually starts repeating – and the player is left wondering what will happen next if they press that button. Costikyan's book about uncertainty in games, addresses anticipation as a key element to immersive game narrative:

“In terms of narrative, anticipation is the key; this means keeping the player uncertain as to how the story, or play arc, of the game will evolve. Many games fail on this score ... At some point, it is fairly obvious who is going to win a Chess game; the endgame is dull. The game does not conform to the classic narrative arc of increasing tension followed by release. Rather, tension builds to a point, and then slowly declines...” (95).

This 'release' that Costikyan mentions is important for keeping the player's attention in the game. As this version of the game immerses the player in the feelings of disparity and solitude, it offers a moment of contrast, where after a jump forward, the player is greeted by a scene of new life, birdsong, tranquillity and hope (Fig 3.5). After another button press, the player is thrown back into darkness accompanied by ghostly winds, and that growth is taken away (Fig 3.6). That small moment of peace and light offered to the player, before their return to the otherwise horrible darkness, creates an extremely emotionally evocative moment for the player (*The Existential Fear of The Stanley Parable* 31:15). Mayra Franz compares game-playing to musical experiences, as a “non-linguistic” form of evoking feelings or conveying certain ideas (14). The 'Skip-Button' ending evokes such feelings of existentialism in the player

through its atmospheric use of space, lighting, and music. Emotions such as fear, loneliness, and the glimmer of hope, experienced in this ending become meaningful to the player as it was their choices that led them to this moment.



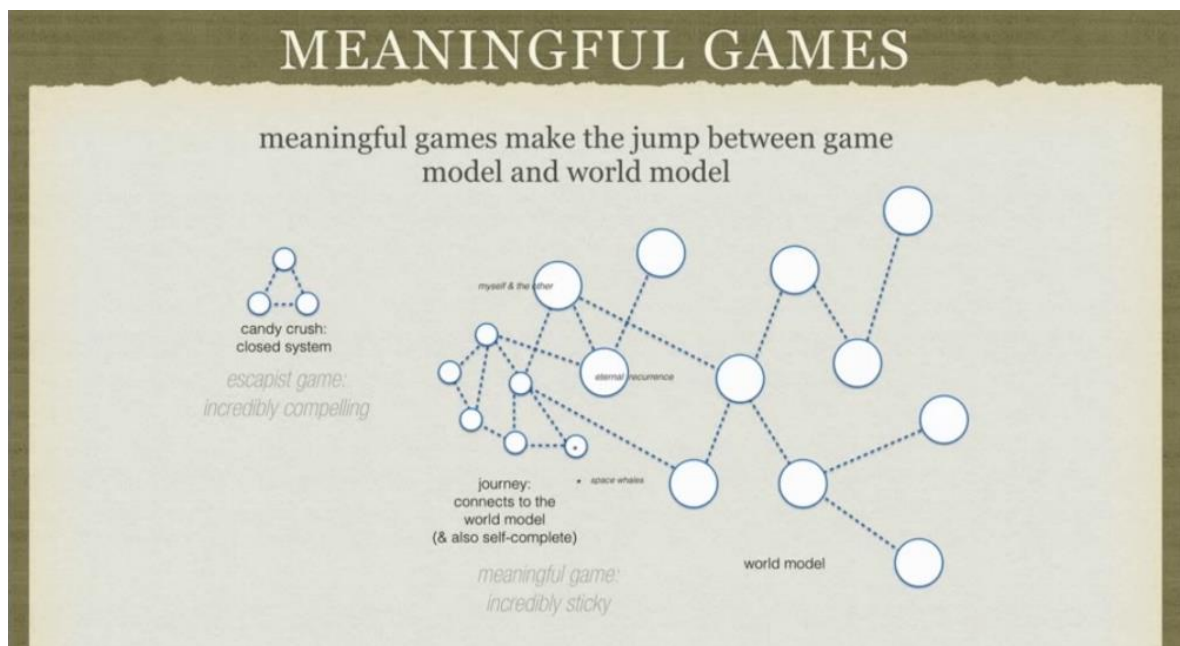
(Fig 3.5) New Growth (The Stanley Parable)



(Fig 3.6) Decay (The Stanley Parable)

Erin Hoffman proposes that the reason games have a lasting affect on us and feel meaningful, is because they are able to bridge the game model and our world model (*Precision of Emotion* 9:30). In her talk, she compares the models of Candy Crush and Journey (Fig 3.7) – Candy Crush is a fun game to play as it serves as an escape from

the real world, however the game Journey had a lasting affect on her, due to how it's system changed her as a person and how she viewed life after playing the game (*Precision of Emotion*). Games do not have to be 'realistic' in order to feel relevant to our world. Rather it is the core emotions embedded into the narrative, design, and meaningful choices which make them impact the player.



(Fig 3.7) Meaningful Games (Precision of Emotion, GDC 2015)

What allows video games to stand out among other mediums, David S Heineman suggests, is “their ability to create a more intense emotional response than other media due to their representational and interactive qualities” (194). Games, which utilise the idea of uncertainty as something we face as part of our everyday lives, allow a connection between player and game as a sense of familiarity is introduced to them. This offers the chance for the game to become meaningful to the player. The player’s active choices in which they make or the emotions evoked in them immerses them into the game world, so that their experience of game will continue to stay with them, even after play.



## **Conclusion**

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This thesis set out to explore how the player can curate meaningful choices within video games, and how games, such as *The Stanley Parable* and *Portal 2*, have successfully immersed and impacted the player with the worlds and stories they offer. Through the lens of my research, it became clear that the game designers' key element in making games which feel meaningful to the player, is through the evocation and manipulation of emotion. *Play* can be understood as a free activity one part-takes in, and we are aware that games are capable of emotionally affecting us – thus consenting to these creative illusions of other worlds, and other lives (Juul 56). The player willingly gives in to suspension of disbelief in order to heighten their experiences of the video game.

From the conclusions of each chapter, it can be understood that there are many ways in which game designers allow this synthetic connection between player and game – one of which is through the use of avatars. Avatars play an important role as acting as the player's virtual body – it is how they influence the world of the game. And, if an empathic bond is created between player and player character, the player will most likely have a greater interest in how the events and actions that occur in game impact the player character. The avatar is a 'vehicle for action' for the player and invites the player to project their own motives and feelings onto them, which contributes to how they make decisions within the game.

Regarding the player's decisions, they want to *feel* that they have control over the choices they make – that they have a sense of autonomy in how their decisions will impact the game. Of course, if the player had absolute control over the game, they would become directionless and bored. Games are defined by rules, but these rules can create motives and intention in the player. So, the creators offer an *illusion* of freewill to the player, which abides them to the rules of the game, and yet, allows them to feel that they are capable of making meaningful decisions within the compounds of the game. Of course, by understanding these rules, one can subvert them. Even though games are a constructed medium, players are still able to bring their own experiences and ideas to this virtual world.

The curiosity to seek the unknown is an innate trait shared among humans. Uncertainty brings a discomfort to us, which the designer uses to entice the element of surprise and insight in gameplay. To keep the player questioning as to what will happen next, maintains engagement in the activity, and invites the player into the flow state. Uncertainty can also aid in invoking an emotional response in the player, and it is these reactions which lead way to meaningful experiences that resonate deeply with the player.

“Experience is not simply about reproducing the world as if from a detached, observer position. It is an online, engaged, embodied evaluation of “what is at stake” in the world for creatures like us. Accordingly, conversational narratives extract contextually valuable information from the world, and put it together in a contextually valuable way.” (Caracciolo, 52).

Caracciolo’s book on experientiality in narrative suggests the role familiarity plays in storytelling, I would also argue that it has importance in the success of video games as a medium. Hoffman further explains that games which are capable of bridging the game model and world model ultimately are able to feel meaningful to the player – they walk away from the experience of the game changed in some way. This is what Caracciolo reiterates; that the adventures which the player embarks on actively involves them in the world they get to explore. Their choices feel meaningful because they are the ones making them – the player is offered the chance to learn from these experiences, to *grow*. It is without a doubt that video games possess the ability to change us, and my thesis confirms the significant ways in which a player can be affected. However, the field of video game research is still growing, as it is a fairly new area of study, and there is much more to be understood in the ways people are capable of change after the exposure to the evocative experiences games like *The Stanley Parable*, and *Portal 2*, have to offer. Storytelling is a big factor of modern video games but it is not necessarily essential to their effectiveness. Rather, game developers offer the player experiences they would not get to explore in the real-world. It is these moments we share with games that can alter our behaviour and perception of our lives.

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