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"This Is The Story of a Man Named Stanley": Narratology, Authorship and Agency in The Stanley Parable

Rebeccah Rose Bassell
Bates College, rbassell@bates.edu

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“This Is The Story of a Man Named Stanley”
Narratology, Authorship and Agency in *The Stanley Parable*

An Honors Thesis
Presented To
The Faculty of the Department of Rhetoric
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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By:
Rebeccah Rose Bassell
Lewiston, Maine
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I remember formally starting this project back in May of 2015, as I submitted a six-page thesis proposal to the Rhetoric department. In that submission, my years of casual interest in games and the ways in which they create and share meaning finally became a legitimate academic query. A new subject matter, which I had previously viewed as nothing more than a fringe interest to distract me from my other academic obligations as a student, was now able to become the focus of a full year of study. In that small moment, the inner-nerdy (or I can be honest and say outwardly-nerdy) part of me began to cheer. Thanks to the classes I took, faculty and students that I learned from, and the department that I was supported by at Bates College, I was able to write about my passions of rhetoric and technology for a full year. I couldn’t wait to begin.

Now, as I end this year-long romp through the “wonderful” world of ludology books, narrative theory tomes, and late night chapter editing sessions in the Bobcat Den, I find myself at a loss of where to begin the end of my thesis: my acknowledgements. The list of people, places, and things that I owe thanks to for helping this thesis be where it is today could be its own smaller thesis. Luckily for my readers, I am only allowed to submit one honors thesis to my panel. As such, I will have to truncate my “thesis of thank yous” here.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Jonathan J. Cavellero, for not once losing faith in my ability to investigate this topic (despite what “I-stayed-up-until-3-A.M-last-night-questioning-my-entire-argument-yet-again-Rebeccah” may have sometimes thought about the process). Professor Cavellero has not only served as my research guide, intellectual interlocutor, and last-check revisions editor throughout my process, but has also worn other important hats in our thesis meetings. Professor, I am equally grateful for your other occasionally
appearing roles of stand-in therapist, cheerleader, fellow Star Wars: The Force Awakens fanatic, Hamilton: An American Musical appreciator, and introducer of great films, such as The Godfather and Goodfellas. In short, I guess all I have to say is “Thanks for takin’ care of that thing for me.”

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I would also like to thank my loving family for always supporting me in chasing after my interests, be they academic, artistic or simply for my own entertainment value.¹ My parents, Don and Sharon Bassell, have always set wonderful examples for my younger sister and I, emphasizing the values of genuine love, enthusiasm, and curiosity in tackling all pursuits. Mom and Dad, thank you for encouraging me to explore the weird, the uncomfortable, and the

¹ These projects included but were not limited to: a nine year old Rebeccah’s exploration of physics via the pursuit of the optimal rubber band brand for Barbie bungee jumping, as her subjects bravely flew off the balcony of her family home. Thank you for encouraging the often incorrigible, Mom and Dad. Knowledge is always worth it (broken tea cups and all).
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Finally, in a last ditch effort to try and thank all other people, places, and things that don’t necessarily fit into the previous categories of friends, family and teachers, I would now like to
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EXPANDING OUR RHETORICAL STAGES: AN INTRODUCTION

The concept of interactivity, or the relationship between an outside agent and a system as that agent affects change, is one that, on face, doesn’t meld well with classical conceptions of rhetoric. In an Aristotelian framework, the study of rhetoric most often gives emphasis to examining the strategies and tropes utilized by the speaker. The rhetor would utilize approaches “x, y, and z” to appeal to this certain subset of people, and for a different scenario, the rhetor would utilize approaches “a, b, and c” to appeal to that certain subset. In simpler terms, classical conceptions of rhetoric focused less on how an audience could respond and affect change on the rhetor, and more so focused on how the rhetor could affect change on an audience. However, what happens with the consideration of a scenario where the audience is able to manipulate and respond to what the rhetor is presenting in real time? Should equal clout then be given to this audience response? In what new light does this place the role of the audience in a rhetorical situation?

Fast-forward in time several hundred years, to our present day; a world that no longer limits rhetorical study to examining the speeches of the great orators of Greece. As a collective society, our public stages for expressing ideas and persuading others have taken forms previously unfathomable by our rhetorical predecessors. Advancements in technology have allowed us to explore the strange, the taboo, and the uncomfortable in ways that not only encourage audience participation, but can only function through it.

The form that I will be focusing on in this thesis is the interactive medium of a video game via an exploration of authorship, agency and narratology within the game, *The Stanley Parable*. Before introducing this text and outlining how I aim to investigate it, I would first like to provide an analysis of a shorter game called *Elude*. In doing so, I hope to acclimate the reader
to the idea that game systems can be expressive in their construction, and how rhetorical messages can emerge from the act of play: the testing and the learning of a system.

**Games and Rhetoric: A Mini-Case Study in *Elude***

“Life is a never-ending struggle, full of rising and falling moods. *Elude* mirrors this struggle against the rising tide of depression, and the search for a path to happiness. Yet happiness remains elusive.”

“About The Game” – (Singapore-MIT Gambit Game Lab, 2010)

In the summer of 2010, the Singapore-MIT Gambit Game Lab released a Flash game made by its students called *Elude*. As seen above in the game’s online “About” section, *Elude* hoped to educate audiences about the ups and downs of living with clinical depression. What is particularly significant about this game, which only runs for less than ten minutes each time through, is that within those ten minutes, a complex and engaging representation of living with depression is told. How the game finishes depends entirely on the player, allowing for varied conclusions to be reached or missed. What’s even more significant about this is that individuals who play the game engage in the discussion of mental health representation through an activity seemingly relegated to frivolity: the activity of play.

In order to portray the never-ending struggle of rising and falling moods, *Elude* has players start off in the middle of a dark forest, where your character is given a simple goal: reach the treetops by jumping on the branches of the trees around you. As the game progresses, the player learns that when you finally do work your way up to the treetops, it is incredibly difficult to remain there. The spaces once available for you to jump on begin to disappear, forcing your character to plummet to the ground floor, without any indication of being able to make it back
up. Examining just this element of the game already tells us so much about the rhetor’s view of what it’s like to live with depression. The system itself (i.e., the game and all of its encompassing play dynamics that emerge through interacting with it) becomes expressive, using orientational metaphors understood within its audience culture to convey a message about emotional highs and lows. The design is predicated on the idea that players will understand the comparison of happiness related to the state of “up” in the game, and sadness related to the state of “down” in the game (à la popular idioms such as “down in the dumps” or “up in the clouds”). Through this one, simple play dynamic, the player is meant to ascertain that living with depression means that you will experience highs and lows in your happiness, and that these moments are fleeting in nature. This is taught not through telling or showing on the part of the rhetor (as is within film, literature and speech), but by the player enacting and doing, a feat now possible through the performance of play.

Through traditional formats like books or speeches, there’s only one main form of communication to analyze: the physical text itself. The content of what is being addressed and the ways in which it is verbally spoken or physically written are the main modes of analysis to consider what is rhetorically happening within a text. With film analysis, new modes of meaning come into play. The film’s treatment of the subject matter is valid in considering what argument it’s trying to make, but the mise-en-scène (the encompassment of everything that physically appears in a film shot - i.e. the use of color schemes, location, and lighting) adds a new consideration to the mix. Extending Elude’s subject matter to this example, the usage of a continually dulling color palette could be used in the scenes of the movie as it progresses to express visually what it means for someone to experience depression (i.e., the slow loss of interest shown through the slow loss of animation and color throughout the movie). Visual
representation now becomes a form of rhetoric and a way for the filmmaker to add to her argument.

With a game, as seen in the example of *Elude*, this concept is taken one step further, and considers the actual system itself as an expressive, persuasive form. By system, I mean the actual constraints of a game space (i.e., the mechanics, the physical space that the player is allowed to interact with, and what is and is not possible to do within the space). What a player is and isn’t allowed to do within this system, as well as how they can be encouraged to behave, and what patterns emerge as a result of these constructs, are expressive and have rhetorical meaning.

My previous analysis is only one small component of *Elude*’s larger argument, but the main takeaway from this discussion is simply that the gaming medium allows for a multitude of modes for rhetorical analysis. With this new interactive rhetorical situation, the intended meaning and goals of the rhetor can manifest themselves visually, orally, through written word and procedurally, allowing audiences to view the bounds and allowances of the game as expressive. What seems to complicate the totality of the game designer/ rhetor’s authorship, however, is the consideration of the player. Without the player and their input, the game could not function – it relies on interactivity and player input to allow messages to be created. However, without the designer, there isn’t an actual game to interact with. So emerges the problem of confused authorship and question of “Who’s really in charge of developing an argument?”

**Finding Meaning In *The Stanley Parable***

Moving forward in this discussion is the consideration of player and designer reconciliation. My intended focus of investigation will be to examine the relationship of the Narrator in *The Stanley Parable* and the game’s player, as the Narrator comments on their
actions taken in the game. By examining how both rhetor (represented by the character of the Narrator) and audience (the player, as embodied in the game as the character of Stanley) function as the driving forces of authorship and control, I aim to investigate the similarities and dissimilarities between the powers of rhetor and audience. Drawing upon the works of Ian Bogost, Michel Foccault, Roland Barthes, Jesper Juul and other leading academics as they relate to narratology, authorship, agency and games studies, I wish to consider audience involvement with these systems. I aspire to explore the idea of what it then means to be a co-creator of a game’s meaning - an author, of sorts. Do players of these games become more attached to the specific results and narratives that they have created simply by way of manipulating the game’s system? Do they feel less attached to the results, simply because every single possible outcome has already been anticipated by the system because it would not exist if it were not programmed in the first place? Does this have any relevance at all to what the game is attempting to do?

Conclusively, I aim to provide a new voice to the discussion of authorship and agency within video games through an examination of the struggle of audience and rhetor in The Stanley Parable.

**Personal Rationale**

As far back as I can remember, I have always had an interest in computers and technology. Even from the age of four, my dad made it his personal mission to get me just as excited as he was about our family’s new Gateway 2000 home computer. He took the time to find out everything he could about the various aspects of the computer and what new programs and processes he would able to run on it. If there were issues with the computer, he would take the time to research the proper course of action. I shared his fascination with understanding
systems and figuring out how things worked, and often found myself playing all sorts of educational games on our desktop. My parents most likely saw this as increasing my ‘digital literacy’, a common buzz-phrase amongst educators in the early 2000s in response to the sudden rise of public fascination with computers. The importance of being able to use a computer predates this time, and the cultural fascination with “the magic of technology” has not ceased with the coming of a new millennium.

As a result of this, I’ve found myself drawn to exploring the cultural place of games and technology, as well as how we can use them to communicate and express ideas. I find it incredible that we are able to create entire worlds and systems of understanding within game spaces, and that those worlds can help us to explain our own world around us. It’s a way of understanding and interaction that is unparalleled in any other artistic medium, a way of understanding that not only encourages outside involvement but thrives on it. Although it is a relatively young field (with scholarly work generally beginning to appear in the 1990s), I find this to be yet another reason why I am so excited to be writing about rhetoric in this respect.
On July 27, 2011, 22-year old Davey Wreden, a then recent USC film school graduate, released a free-to-download modification (also known as a “mod” in gaming communities) for the popular computer game, *Half Life 2*. Made available on the game distribution platform, Steam, this mod used artwork, objects and environmental textures from the original game now reconfigured in Wreden’s version to tell a completely new story from *Half Life 2*. As written on the modification’s host page in the “About” section, Wreden told audiences that this mod was “… an experimental narrative-driven first person game… an exploration of choice, freedom, storytelling and reality, all examined through the lens of what it means to play a video game. You will make a choice that does not matter. You will follow a story that has no end. You will play a game that you cannot win” (Wreden, 2011). This mod was called *The Stanley Parable*.

Having begun development on the game two years prior in 2009, *The Stanley Parable*’s release marked Wreden’s first foray into the field of making games. Despite his amateur status, Wreden’s game mod rapidly spread across the Steam community, taking the online gaming community at large by storm. Within two weeks of the game’s release, it had been downloaded more than 90,000 times, a feat previously unheard of by other games made using *Half Life 2*’s Source engine (Schreier, 2011). Davey Wreden, previously an unknown in the game development community, became an overnight celebrity with his newfound success. He also became a new voice in the ongoing discussion of the future of games, pushing the potentialities of the gaming medium as a form of storytelling and persuasion.

So what exactly was this little game mod that grew to be a powerful piece of commentary about games, and later, a full game of its own in 2013? To provide a brief introductory context, *The Stanley Parable* takes players through the story of a man named
Stanley, whom players assume the role of. A disembodied narrator begins the game by telling the player that Stanley, despite doing the same monotonous office job every day, is happy with his existence and sees no need to question it. This all changes one day when he comes into the office to see that all of his co-workers have gone missing, and Stanley decides to investigate. The game itself has no singular ending. There is no real way to tell when the game is over. This is precisely the point of *The Stanley Parable*.

When asked about the design ethos for *The Stanley Parable*, Wreden said he wanted to test the capabilities of storytelling in games. “‘I wanted this to be kind of a slap to the face [to videogame developers],’” Wreden told *Wired* magazine in an interview three weeks after the game’s initial launch, “‘I wanted to ask the question ‘Why are we doing this?’” (Schreier, 2011)

Wreden’s question pinpoints why *The Stanley Parable* was revolutionary in the first place - it was one of the first games of its kind to acknowledge the physical limitations of choice in storytelling (i.e., only being limited to storylines that have been pre-created by the developer).

In discovering the historical context of *The Stanley Parable*, I provide explanations of past approaches to theorizing how story is told through the gaming medium, as well as how *The Stanley Parable* specifically responds to these approaches. This uncovers what pre-established expectations of interactive storytelling exist, forcing game auteurs and game players alike to reflect on the medium as a vehicle for storytelling. In exploring this history, I will begin by providing a basic, modern definition of the interactive storytelling genre at large, highlighting several games that exemplify conventions of the genre to show where *The Stanley Parable* draws its inspiration from. Following this, I will then place *The Stanley Parable*’s struggle to define itself in form (i.e. viewing the text as a “game” or as an “interactive story”) by providing a brief history of the debate between narratologists and ludologists in game design history, as
well as how *The Stanley Parable* aims to work against this simple binary definition.

Conclusively, I will summarize how *The Stanley Parable* represents a direct response product of all of these larger forces and events present within this past understanding of developing games.

**Interactive Storytelling**

In the same *Wired* interview, Wreden stated that with designing a game like *The Stanley Parable*, he hoped “...to leave players talking about the nature of videogames — and thinking about ways to take interactive storytelling to the next level” (Schreier, 2011). In discovering how *The Stanley Parable* took interactive storytelling to a new level, I will first explore the traditional conventions of the interactive storytelling genre as a whole.

The term “interactive storytelling” came into popularity with game developer Chris Crawford and his definition of the term. Interactive storytelling, he posits, is..."a form of interactive entertainment in which the player plays the role of the protagonist in a dramatically rich environment” (Crawford, 2004). Defining the form as such unpacks two key elements in defining what makes an interactive storytelling experience markedly different from simply a game with a story. These elements are ‘the role of the player as the protagonist’ and the definition of a ‘dramatically rich environment.’

The way in which the player interacts with the story that has been pre-established by the game designer not only helps inform the player of who their character is, but how the character fits within the story’s progression. The role of the player and the way in which they interact with the game system thus becomes a way for the story itself to emerge, as opposed to being told what will happen next through cut scenes or character dialogue. Rather than an individual simply being informed of whom the protagonist of the story is (as is the way with traditional media like
film, print, and television), the designed protagonist of a game is revealed to the individual by the process of the individual interacting with the game. The game’s player learns about the identity, goals, and wants of the game’s protagonist simply by playing as the protagonist, thereby learning how the game expects the protagonist to behave within the specific context of the game.

One particularly famous example of this can be seen in the beginning sequence of *Half Life* (Valve L.L.C., 1998). Wreden cited this game in particular as inspiration for *The Stanley Parable* in an interview with ShackNews (Mattas, 2011). In *Half Life*, players assume the role of Gordon Freeman, a scientist who works at a remote government-testing lab. In the opening fifteen minutes of gameplay, Freeman is asked to complete a series of busy-work tasks by his supervisor at the lab, making him walk past his fellow scientists as they discuss their daily work. The scientists indirectly contextualize Gordon’s role at the lab, as Gordon’s backstory emerges through overheard dialogue. By having players move Gordon through the lab, as well as perform insignificant tasks (in that they do not directly move the plot forward), Gordon’s role at the testing lab is revealed to the player. This form of exposition lets the story emerge on its own, simply through participating in your role as the player, operating the character of Gordon.

Specific to the player’s capabilities of interacting with their given space is also the consideration of context (i.e., the world and physical environment in which the story is set). In Crawford’s definition, interactive storytelling contains “a dramatically rich environment,” by which he means the inclusion of an environment that allows for elements of a game’s story to emerge. In this sense, parts of the story’s setting and game environment (i.e., interactive objects, non-playable characters who share information, and the ways that the buildings, structures, and decorative elements are placed and constructed in a particular way) are just as informative of the
story as the events within the story itself. They are specifically included to provide context to the actions that the player can take or is prompted to take by the constraints of the game.

Citing another design inspiration of Wreden’s, this same trend is prevalent in the 2007 game *Bioshock*, which sets the dramatic tone of the game’s story simply through its environment (Mattas, 2011). In this instance, the game’s story is not told through the simplified idea of event-based storytelling, in which the story solely consists of events happening to the character to form the narrative. *Bioshock*’s story is told through collective inferences drawn from the environment, giving equal narrative weight to the game’s environment as an informant of story, working in tandem with the events that happen within the plot (Take-Two Interactive, 2007).

Taken to an underwater dystopia based on the philosophical writings of Ayn Rand, players assume the role of a nameless man who walks through the fictional city of Rapture. The story of what has happened to this once mighty utopia is revealed to the player through a series of audio-diaries that the player comes across, detailing personal accounts of events that occurred in the specific environments the player enters. These, in conjunction with the literally decaying memory of a once prosperous society (in the form of ripped posters advertising various luxury products) inform the player of their character’s backstory, as well as provide context as to why the player’s character is currently in the city of Rapture. The environments of *Bioshock* then serve to be both responsive and dramatic, in that their compositions inform the player of the story’s tone and allow the player to draw inferences about the ways in which they should or should not be behaving within the game’s story.

It is the presence of these environmental elements (audio diaries or torn posters on the walls of the rooms that players move through) in conjunction with the freedom of the player to control the pacing of the story (their ability to chose whether or not they interact with elements
of their environment) that truly defines interactive storytelling, separating it from more traditional forms of storytelling that do not rely on interactivity.

So, does *The Stanley Parable* fit into the genre of interactive storytelling? Many elements of interactive storytelling are present in the game, such as the importance of the role of the player, and a dramatic, responsive environment. The role of the player is highlighted in the player’s ability to control the blank-slate character of Stanley, thus enabling players to be directly involved in the actual progression of the story (by manipulating a character). In addition, *The Stanley Parable* also provides a rich, responsive and dramatic environment that invites players to forward the story in a way that balances both play and storytelling conventions (i.e., the order of events that the player takes Stanley through is also part of the story – the story itself cannot exist unless the player wills its progression, in the form of having Stanley interact with the game environment).

Despite these similarities and drawing its design roots from the conventions of interactive storytelling, *The Stanley Parable* goes beyond generic expectations of interactive storytelling, because there isn’t a singular resolution to the game. The introduction of a game like *The Stanley Parable*, which does not provide any explicit answers about what type of game it actually is or the singular story that it wishes to tell, parallels a superficial debate between game scholars about how our interactive experiences should be analyzed. This debate has become an infamous (and mostly made-up) war in the game design world, and it is truncated within the gaming scholar community as the “Ludology vs. Narratology Debate.”

**The Debate That Never Happened: Narratology vs. Ludology**

As a caveat to this discussion, I would first like to acknowledge this this “debate” was not actually one that sincerely took place, but has been over-blown by early theorists of a
ludological approach to understanding meaning making in games. Despite being “made-up” to serve as a dramatic form of comparing and contrasting approaches that were not meant to be totalizing, this debate is one that has become countlessly talked about with regard to storytelling strategies within games.

As games scholarship began to develop into an academic discipline around the 1990s, two schools of thought began to form about how we ought to both analyze and construct meaning within games. These two approaches were those of narratology and ludology, and their supporters called narratologists and ludologists, respectively (Wong, 2013). Although these theories were never in direct opposition to one another, a host of misconceptions surrounding them amongst game scholars appeared to situate the two as such. In order to understand where the misunderstandings arose, it is important to look at what both ludologists and narratologists believe.

A ludologist approach is one that advocates for “…the study of game structure (or gameplay) as opposed to the study of games as narratives or games as a visual medium” (Frasca, 2003). What this means is that in order to convey messages from the game’s designer in the optimum fashion, reader of a game text must consider the mechanics (i.e. the physical options that the player has in order to interact with a game system, such as having your game character “jump” or “walk”), dynamics (strategies that the player is encouraged to develop in response to the limitations and allowances that a game’s designer has made, present within the mechanics), and aesthetics of a game (emotional responses invoked by a player) (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek, 2004). While ludologists consider a game’s story as part of its way to convey meaning, they believe that the crux of designing meaningful play experiences within games centers on the game’s actual physical design. Within the opportunities for play within a game (i.e. the moments
in which a player learns about a game’s story through testing the bounds and affordances of a game’s system), so comes the most impactful form of meaning making.

Supposedly, on the opposite end of the spectrum, is the narratologist approach, which advocates for an analysis of text that utilizes “a set of theories of narrative that are independent of the medium of representation” (Frasca, 2003). This meaning, taken from literary criticism, is then incorrectly cross applied to understanding video games, as it seems to reject any consideration of understanding game structure in conveying meaning. In the context of this specific debate, narratologists are then seen to advocate for the understanding of games as independent textual artifacts, their meanings and meaning creation completely separate from their medium. More emphasis is then put on the content of the game’s story in order to develop its meaning. As previously stated, this is an incorrect definition of the approach, however this is the definition that began to circulate amongst supporters of a ludological approach.

In an effort to generate a unified approach to how games should be understood, these two approaches found themselves “at war” with each other for the past decade of game scholarship, wrongfully interpreted by game scholars through a misguided version of “academic telephone.” When talked about more colloquially, the two schools of thought are taken farther out of their context than need be and are made to appear incompatible with each other. The severity of this debate, while superficial among game scholars, raises an interesting point of contention about the different methods through which games should be interpreted in players. Despite the fact that this debate never actually happened, game scholars still feel the reverberations of the misunderstanding today. Should focus shift on to the narrative content of the stories in the games in order to ascertain meaning, or to the physical form of a game space as an important mechanism for creating meaning and conveying narrative?
This struggle for balancing elements of story and the form of gameplay is one of the core rationales for the initial design principle of *The Stanley Parable*. Its creation marked one of the first times that a designer had forced players to turn their gaze inward to the actual gaming experience, and ask if the choices they were making in the game provided substance to the narrative. *The Stanley Parable* shines in that it finally asks its players to consider the meanings of their actions within the game, and if these actions have meaning to the narrative or overall message that the game is trying to convey, if there’s any meaning to convey at all.

**Conclusion**

Going back and examining both the time frame in which *The Stanley Parable* was created (situated in the era of the great “Narratology vs. Ludology” design debate) as well as the roots for its design (the principles of interactive storytelling), *The Stanley Parable* emerged as a direct result of its foundational aspects. *The Stanley Parable* not only adds to the ongoing conversation of narrative structure in interactive media, but it also creates a reflective surface for audiences and game designers alike to ask what their individual roles are in the process.
“DID YOU REALLY MAKE A MEANINGFUL CHOICE, STANLEY?”
A LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the great joys (as well as great headaches) throughout the process of discussing the rhetorical significance of a game like the *The Stanley Parable* is the only recently growing development of materials available on the topic. Video games and interactive systems, let alone *The Stanley Parable*, have only been popularized in the past forty years as a form of entertainment. As a consequence, scholarship specific to the medium and methodologies for analysis of these texts have only started to circulate in the past twenty years.

In attempting to formalize the roles of narrative, authorship, and agency within games and *The Stanley Parable* more specifically, these newly minted games scholars aim to determine how meaning is created and expressed specifically in this new interactive medium. In existing as a meta-text about the nature of choice and agency in games, *The Stanley Parable* and its surrounding literature opens up insight to the ways in which scholars talk about this specific text, as well as methods for invoking and creating meaning across the medium of games generally, as a collective.

In this chapter, I aim to examine the literature concerning the methods of presenting meaning and making arguments both in *The Stanley Parable* and through games as a collective medium. The two popular points of investigation within the game involve highlighting the ‘power struggle of control’ between the player and the game developer, as represented by the Narrator (i.e., paralleled in rhetoric as the audience and author) and understanding how processes within the game help to develop its arguments (i.e., through content of the narrative, through rule systems, and through interpellation). Critically analyzing the leading voices in the field more broadly allows for the contextualization of past approaches to understanding games like *The
Stanley Parable, while also coming closer to new conclusions about the nature of meaning making in games and other interactive system.

Making Meaning In Video Games

One of the central concerns that sparked the formulation of this thesis was an interest in the ways in which interactive systems specifically make and share meaning. As previously mentioned, there seems to be a historical “divide” between those who view game analysis as strictly based on narrative content (the narratologists) and those who believe it should be done through an analysis of a game's mechanics (the ludologists). I put “divide” in quotation marks in order to downplay the severity of the separation of the two schools of thought in the academic world, seeing as most of the academics who write on the topic find the divide to be superficial, exaggerated to show how different the methods of analysis are.²

Foundational in the line of argument that systems can be expressive is the work of Ian Bogost. In his book, Persuasive Games, Bogost introduces the term “procedural rhetoric” to describe the type of work being done in games where the expressive power of the game is by “…understanding and engaging in processes within the game...just as verbal rhetoric is useful for both the orator and the audience, just as written rhetoric is useful for both the writer and the reader, so is procedural rhetoric useful for both the programmer and the user, for the designer and the player” (Bogost, 3). In simpler terms, Bogost advocates for a game’s meaning and the expressive arguments of the designer to be found in the choices made within the bounds of the game itself. The expression is thus found in the player’s interaction with the game’s mechanics (defined as its bounds and rules which are the building blocks of operating within the game) and its dynamics (the sorts of strategies and behavior trends that arise out of necessity/interaction

² For these perspectives, see Frasca, 1999; Bogost, 2009; Juul, 2005
with these rule sets). While Bogost makes many compelling points, procedural rhetoric does not seem to fully account for a few independent factors in the process of meaning-making; all of them concerning the player. These independent factors include individuality of the player as well as the legitimacy of the expression being made by the individual’s interactions with the game.

Within procedurism, the person interacting with the machine is simply limited to existing as that: a person interacting with a machine. Under Bogost’s theory, meaning has already been pre-established within the system by the designer, and would not drastically change from person to person. This theory does not account for the specific identity/individual will of the player in meaning making presenting a limited, singular view as to what is “allowed” to be taken from an analysis of the game’s meaning. Following this line of thought, Bogost’s theory then also seems to undercut the legitimacy of other interpretations, since these interpretations are each dependent on the individual interacting with the game and what sorts of messages they glean from it. By saying that the transmission and creation of meaning is found solely within the bounds that a game’s designer created, Bogost presents a theory that seems incompatible with individual will and agency, causing us to ask what the purpose of interaction within a game is in the first place (i.e. as opposed to a robot to run the program for us).

Bogost’s critics argue that procedurism does not encompass player experience or individuality, as discussed above. The most popular voice in this academic camp is that of Miguel Sicart, who wrote his article “Against Procedurality” several years following the publication of Bogost’s book. Sicart argues that the theory of procedurality in games is limited since it does not account for the individual will or interpretation of a player. By undercutting this capacity, Sicart argues that the player, under the theory of procedurism, simply becomes “...a

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3 For a similar discussion about the multitude of meanings a text can have, See Hall, 1993
configurator of the system, which is the implicit position taken by many proceduralist theorists and developers” (Sicart, 2011). Instead, Sicart advocates that the player should be viewed as “a living, breathing, culturally embodied, ethically and politically engaged being that plays not only for an ulterior purpose, but for play’s sake” (Sicart, 2011). Through this assertion, Sicart is highlighting the player’s interpretations of their individual gaming experience, thus placing more weight on the choices of the player as they react/interact with the program.

Sicart’s view then seems to address previous issues with Bogost’s theory of proceduralism...but only to an extent. While Sicart makes valid points about the importance of considering the player and their individual interpretation of the game, his argument undervalues much of Bogost’s argument by failing to acknowledge the thought that game systems can persuade and create meaning through rules and boundaries to a certain extent. While Sicart builds upon Bogost’s argument in saying that the act of play (i.e., the process of the individual interacting with a system) has meaning, he then disregards the notion that an initial framework of understanding can be presented through the game itself entirely. Under Sicart’s view, the stronger method of deciphering meaning from an interactive system is dependent on the individual interacting with the system.

While new literature concerning the process of meaning making within games is working towards a reconciliation of the viewpoints, the issue of who creates meaning within a game is still contested. Different from the discussion of meaning making, this discussion concerns questions about control, the importance of player agency, and player authorship (if any exists) within a game’s meaning. In discussing this issue, I now shift the focus to discussing how literature about The Stanley Parable specifically addresses this question.
“Who’s in Control?” Reconciling The Originating Agent(s) of Meaning Within a Game

*The Stanley Parable* is a meta-text that is acutely aware of its struggle to develop meaning both within itself as a separate experience, and with regard to the medium of games as a whole. The running ethos throughout the game is the struggle between the character of the Narrator and the player, who is sometimes addressed as separate from the character of Stanley or as one in the same. Throughout the game, the Narrator teases Stanley for his “futile” attempts at establishing meaning by making choices that are (oftentimes) ultimately irrelevant. This battle within the game parallels discussions of scholarship about the true owner of meaning within games as a collective. The literature surrounding this notion, with respect to *The Stanley Parable*, often involves looking at the nature of choice, since this is the primary means of establishing ownership of meaning within the game.

Lars de Wildt, and his extensive work concerning interpellation theory in *The Stanley Parable* addresses the idea of split subjecthood. In an abbreviated article of his master’s thesis, entitled “Precarious Play: To Be or Not Be Stanley,” de Wildt explores the duality of motives behind the choices players made within a game. He argues that the player plays as himself or herself, an independent person who has their own agenda, as well as the character of Stanley. He analyzes this duality with the frame of the theory of interpellation, focusing in on how the choices made by the player are dictated by playing *as the character of Stanley*, who has his own agenda built within the creation of his character by the game’s designer. With this creation comes the assumption, from the game’s designer, that a player will act in a certain way. de Wildt asserts that “...the player appears to have a merely precarious position over the played, ready to lose control at the whim of the game” (de Wildt, 2014). de Wildt’s theory asserts that the process of meaning making within the game is split between the dictation of what *The Stanley Parable*
wills the player to do (the goals of the designer) and the need for the player to express their own opinion and assert their own meaning (the goals of the individual).

This position seems to resolve the previous problems with the process of meaning making in games by asserting that both designer and player are in a constant battle with each other to dictate meaning within an experience. What this position seems to lack, however, is a consideration of the inherent meaning of the actual process of choice making, and how this process in and of itself can express ownership of meaning. The mere act of making a choice, which can only be exerted by the individual interacting with the system, has its own independence, despite being within the bounds of a game. Differing from traditional games, The Stanley Parable attempts to dismantle the need to justify a player’s choice as a logical means to an end, isolating the process of choice to see if that interaction in and of itself can have significance. de Wildt’s thesis addresses ownership of meaning as split, but it still defines this ownership within the context of asserting will/not asserting will toward an end goal designed by the game’s designer. By framing designation of ownership in this particular fashion, his theory disregards the separate importance of the actual choice making within the will of the player, invalidating the types of ownership of meaning that can be asserted when one does not need to strive for a particularly designed end goal. In simpler terms, de Wildt’s consideration of who creates meaning within a game is dependent on a player’s choice to interact within the bounds of which choices can and can’t be made as set by the designer. This does not account for the significance inherent within the process of making a choice - that by engaging in making a choice, a new type of ownership arises: one that is simply validated by its process being enacted.

Another popular line of thought that discusses the ownership of meaning within The Stanley Parable is one that was presented by the game’s designers themselves in a talk at the
Game Developer’s Conference (GDC) in 2014. Within this talk, Davey Wreden and William Pugh, the head designers of *The Stanley Parable*, weighed in on the issue of navigating choices within games, which I argue is equal to the process of creating meaning and deciding within what bounds that meaning exists. Within this talk, Wreden advocates for a new way of looking at choice navigation - an approach which lessens focus on the idea that a choice made by a player is one that must directly relate to a challenge that the player is trying to face (i.e., interacting with the pre-designed narrative arc of the game’s story and/or affecting the pre-designed path made by a game). Wreden suggests that choice navigation separate from a desired end designed by a game’s developer is possible. By divorcing the act of making a choice and the bounds of a game’s challenge (where the choice making traditionally lies), players are then able to create their own stage for which their choices have meaning. The ownership of the meaning no longer becomes limited to the types of projected outcomes anticipated by the game’s designer, (which previously made the designer the de facto owner of meaning, simply by virtue of creating the possible outcomes).

In order to demonstrate this, Wreden provided a visual aid to explain what these sorts of choices would look like. As seen in Figure 1 below, Wreden presents a crude representation of how most game designers think about choice negotiation relative to the challenges presented by a game’s designer. In the image, the red and blue circles with “A” and “B” written inside represent the usual binary choices that are available to game players within a game, as presented by the game’s developers. What’s important to notice is that these choices only exist within the pink box surrounding them, with the word “Challenge!!” encircling them. This is meant to represent the specific end goals that players are forced to reach, and that by negotiating between choices “A” or “B”, their choices become meaningful as a means to defeat *that* set challenge:
Under this model, it becomes irrelevant what choice is made, simply because the choice becomes a means to a developer-designed end. What Wreden now suggests is that by engaging in choice negotiation simply for the act of making a choice, not as a means towards an end goal projected by a game’s designer, the player can take on the formation of meaning. In doing so, players are able to divorce themselves from the projected meaning of the designer and create their own meaning to their choices. What this would look like, following the same visual metaphor, is show in Figure 2 below:

In this manifestation of the same visual metaphor, the box of “Challenge!!” no longer exists, and the choices are presented as ends in and of themselves. The meaning making then becomes attributed to the act of negotiating choices, providing ownership on the part of the player and the game’s designer for authoring an experience (as the two rely on one another).
What Wreden argues for is actually an approach to game studies that changes perspectives on what it means for someone to either control or be coerced into discovering the meaning of a game. While this appears to solve all of the previously discussed problems we have about creating and owning meaning within games, this stance still has a few issues as well. What the majority of the criticism comes down to is that in order for this assertion of complete player control to be true, the player would effectively need to be able to make any decision conceivable, which is beyond the bounds of current technological capabilities (i.e. a completely responsive A.I.).\(^4\) The reality of the matter is that all of the end choices within *The Stanley Parable* are ones that are contained within the bounds of the game, no matter how contrary the choices themselves may feel to the wishes of the game designer. Even though the player is the one initiating the choice by interacting with the text, there is still some degree of ownership of meaning that belongs to the game designer as the two work with each other.

**Conclusion**

Scholarly debate about the exactitudes of how meaning is made within video games and who is in control of that meaning bring the game studies and digital rhetoric communities closer to understanding how these artifacts work differently to create and express meaning. While also being a subject of the very issue it addresses, *The Stanley Parable* has sparked conversations of the rhetorical capabilities and limits it has by virtue of being a computer game. By analyzing the literature surrounding the game, voices in the gaming academic community are able to converse with one another, deconstructing and rebuilding new frames of mind with which to analyze an artifact like *The Stanley Parable*.

\(^4\) For further reading, see Murray, 1997
THEORETICAL APPROACHES FOR UNDERSTANDING AUTHORSHIP, AGENCY AND NARRATIVE IN THE STANLEY PARABLE

“But as you explore, slowly, meaning begins to arise, the paradoxes might start to make sense, perhaps you are powerful after all. The game is not here to fight you; it is inviting you to dance”

- “About The Game” (Galactic Café, 2011)

As stated on the game’s official website, the creators of The Stanley Parable assert that the game does not make explicit claims about the ‘black and white’ nature of how the audience/player creates meaning within the context of an interactive experience. The game asks its players to consider what would happen if you were to rebel against what the narrator of a game, or a game’s designer, wanted you to do. What would happen if you decided to forego the traditional narrative structure in which you are being told what should come next? What would happen if you were not simply an audience member, viewing a story unfold in front of you, and you were able to make significant choices, possibly altering the authorial intent of the story’s creator? Are those choices that have you made even significant in the first place? Rather than offering the answers to these questions, The Stanley Parable acts as an experiment for traditional expectations of story form in the context of video games; an experiment that invites players to ask questions of the video game medium and of their own expectations of what a game is supposed to allow them to do. The Stanley Parable frustrates attempts to ascertain a single, direct meaning from actual storyline(s); rather it challenges that ways that various media and literary studies understand narrative, audience and agency.
As such, *The Stanley Parable* marks one of the first explicitly focused explorations in understanding narrative structure, authorship and agency within interactive experiences. The game achieves its self-reflexive design goal without providing surface level answers to these inquiries, but it represents varying academic perspectives and opinions on the questions it raises.

In this chapter, I aim to present the popular academic voices on narrative function, structure, and authorship within literary and film studies. Through this review, it is my intent to truncate the varying perspectives on my central questions of investigation in this thesis. In addition, I aim to justify why studying *The Stanley Parable* within this framework adds to a new understanding of storytelling made possible through the medium of video games specifically. This understanding aims to provide an expansion for the ways that people can share and tell new types of stories and abstract ideologies, now able to be done through the medium of a video game.

**What is Narrative?**

Before delving into the significance of *The Stanley Parable*’s narrative form, it is essential to first understand how various scholars define narrative. This multi-modal approach to defining narrative makes it easier to draw parallels between traditional definitions of the term and what interactive interfaces/games like *The Stanley Parable* offer in regards to the subject. In addition, this examination helps us recognize why the questions asked of the game’s narrative are important in understanding how they shape ideologies, transmit meaning, or are simply persuasive.
In beginning to understand narrative and narrative function, I will first begin by establishing a definition of narrative and its components. Famed scholar Roland Barthes refers to the concept of narrative as “…international, transcultural, and trans-historical…it is simply there, like life itself” (Barthes, 1977). Narrative theorist Hayden White refers to narrative as “…a mode of verbal representation so seemingly natural to human consciousness” (White, 1984). Conclusively, scholar Seymour Chatman truncates the exactitudes of narrative, beyond previous vague descriptions, into an abbreviated collection of ideas. In following “….such French structuralists as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov, (he) posit(s) that a narrative is the melding of a a what and a way. The what of a narrative (he) call its “story”; the way (he) call its “discourse” (Chatman, 1978).

A narrative forms as a result of the collection of various stories (events of who, what, and when) in addition to the consideration of how these stories are told through discourse (narrative order, frequency, duration, voice and mode).\(^5\) The discourse of a narrative, or the way in which stories are told within it, then helps to solidify the narrative itself, as it provides contextualization for the stories it contains. Thus, two separate parts of narrative are established: that of ‘story’ and ‘discourse’. As a quick point of clarification, it is also important to note that the terms ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ are often used interchangeably (and incorrectly) with one another, despite the fact that a narrative contains story as well as discourse.

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\(^5\) For further explanation of these elements, see Genette, 1983.
This definition and modern day Narratology as a discipline finds its roots in the Russian Formalists of literary criticism and their explorations of narrative meaning. Among this group of theorists was Vladmir Propp, whose work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, was one of the foundational accounts in documenting the importance of separating story and discourse, thus defining narrative. In asserting this difference, he tracked the content trends of over 100 Russian folktales, introducing the academic world to two new units of literary analysis: *fabula* and *syuzhet*. The *fabula* is a straightforward telling of accounts as they occur (story), where the *syuzhet* refers to the way a story is organized and elements surrounding its formation (discourse) (Propp, 1928). In identifying this important distinction, Propp discovered that the majority of Russian folktales shared similar *fabula*, but varied in their presentation, *syuzhet*, thus providing varied messages in theme while maintaining the same elements of story. In isolating this difference, emphasis is given to the variations in the telling of stories that define discourse, and how these tools can affect the different formations of specific narrative experiences.

**The Function of Narrative**

With all of these considerations about the structure and meaning of narrative, I then turn to investigate what the significance of this study is in constructing meaning in general. In short, my next question to answer then becomes “what is the function of narrative?” The function of stories, narrative and storytelling are, within themselves, a completely different matter involving an understanding of the most basic way that individuals communicate. The

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6 It is important to note that Russian Formalism was a diverse, academic movement and did not have a singular, unified doctrine. In this instance, it is more appropriate to talk about the Formalists as individuals. For further reading, see Victor, 1973.
exact function of these phenomena and the development of narrative in general have varied explanations in what purposes they serve in larger community groups.

The function of narrative relates the function of communication itself. One of the oldest and most well known formal models of communication is the transmission model, which was developed by scholars Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver in 1949. What this model proposes is a simple process of communication, and is accepted as the foundational seed of communication studies (Fiske, 1990). What this method involves is a linear chain of communication as formalized in this sequence of events: information source, transmitter, signal, received signal, receiver and destination (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). This simple model gives rise to three levels of problems in the study of communication. These are: “Level A: Technical Problems, questioning how accurately the symbols of communication can be transmitted; Level B: Semantic Problems, questioning how precisely these transmitted symbols convey the desired meaning; and Level C: Effectiveness Problems, questioning how effectively the received meaning affects conduct in the desired way” (Fiske, 1990). The consideration of how an intended meaning is transmitted, through the tools and components of narrative, seems to be a function of the orchestration of narrative. With this theory of communication, in relation to narrative, the purpose of narratives then seems to be to inform and transmit ideologies to others.

In opposition to this transmission mode of communication, which relies heavily on words like “imparting” and “convincing” to signify control over a message through narrative, there is the function of narrative, story and story-telling as a means to strengthen the bonds of community. This mode of communication is what scholar James Carey refers to as a ritual form of communication. Carey describes this as “…a view of communication (that) is
directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (Carey, 1989). He further explains this view by likening the purpose of a transmission mode of communication to a ritualistic mode of communication. “If the archetypal case of communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purpose of control,” argues Carey, then “…the archetypal case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality” (Carey, 1989). Ultimately, the purpose of understanding communication in this sense is to establish the bonds of a group, rather than to persuade or inform.

The function of narratives, then, seems to be multi-faceted, encompassing the transmission, ritualistic, and self-informative modes of communication. Narrative helps to shape and inform the personal as well as with respect to the collective, while also able to act as a bonding agent among individuals. In respect to a transmission mode of communication, this is done implicitly through characterizations, usage of metaphor, and designations of significance, to inform an audience about how its subject ‘should’ and ‘shouldn’t be’ viewed. Popular stories and their assignments of value become so freely passed on, that these associations are then are assumed to become innate within a society’s value system. It is because of this pervasive nature of stories and narrative that studying them becomes important, as well as essential to understanding how a societal group learns about itself.

Having all of this been said, how does this change when a story is told through an interactive medium? Within a classic understanding of story, with respect to time and space and structure of understanding story, there becomes the assumed structure of a beginning, middle and end, with discrete symbols and ideas that are presented in one way: that which is
written in the text, shown in the film, and so on (Bordwell and Thompson, 1979). What happens when the audience or reader of these traditional narrative forms is then asked to participate in the formation of these narratives, as seen in video games? Do games account for the possibility of a narrative changing when put into the hands of players? Or does it even change at all?

**Video Games and The Co-Creative Process of Narrative**

In narrowing down how these understandings of narrative, authorship and agency are understood across media, asking how these elements can then be cross applied to the video game medium at large is the next step. The most obvious difference between the structure of narrative in classic media versus narrative structure in video games is the latter medium’s defining characteristic: interactivity (Zimmerman, 2010). Within the previous understandings of narrative in classic media (i.e. books, films, and television), the audience or reader of a narrative reacts to and creates individual interpretations to an already constructed narrative arc. However, with the ability to (supposedly) manipulate a narrative’s outcome in a way that feels significant, scholars are now beginning to understand the importance of examining narrative structure in video games.

In order to demonstrate this point, I would like to highlight why I specifically chose to say that interaction “supposedly” changes the way narrative is thought about in the previous paragraph. There are competing voices in the academic world that posit a multitude of ways to think about how involved players can actually be in constructing a game’s narrative. On one end of the spectrum, there is the imagined ideal of technology that would allow players to enter a fictional world, make significant choices and have intelligent AI
justify those choices (Murray, 1997). On the other, there are those that argue video game stories are only functional when the player is allowed limited capability, able to adjust pacing as opposed to the actual content of their narratives, thus their choices wouldn’t truly have a significant impact on the actual story development (Ryan, 2009). Unless the user’s choices are severely restricted, there is the fear that possible player choices would not make logical narrative sense, thus disrupting the intent of the game’s designers and making the overall game experience confusing.

The importance of this balance is crucial to understanding how narrative, in general, is structured and understood in games. In his master’s thesis describing the specific nature of video game narrative, Jesper Juul operationalizes “a classical narratological framework of two distinct levels” in order to explain narrative structure. He identifies these structural components as the difference between “story” and “discourse”, denoting “…the events told, as they are detailed individually... (and) denoting the telling of events, in the order in which they are told” respectively (Juul, 1997). With the introduction of an interactive story and the freedom for individuals to manipulate certain aspects of the story, one foundational element of a narrative seems to vanish: its discourse. In composing a narrative, especially a narrative based on memory (i.e. a retelling of a story), individuals will usually try to represent “how things came to be what they are,” with the end prefigured in the beginning (Simmons, 2007). Taking away this element of story construction does allow the player more supposed freedom in their experience, but it also potentially undercuts some of the messages that a game’s designer anticipates to be transmitted, in their aim to formulate a cohesive story.
Viewing all of these elements of narrative, then, reveals a struggle between player agency and a game creator’s wish to properly tell a story in a way that makes clear narrative sense. This is not to say that all games ultimately fail at constructing a cohesive story when player input is involved. Of particular interest is how to design an engaging story while requiring designers to consider the ways in which the player may or may not manipulate the story, and to what effect that manipulation can have on the narrative itself. Scholars Ruth Aylett and Sandy Louchart formulate the following paradox on the subject of controlling narrative within a game to further explain this phenomenon: “On one hand the author seeks control over the direction of a narrative in order to give it a satisfactory structure. On the other hand a participating user demands the autonomy to act and react without explicit authorial constraint” (Aylett and Louchart 2004). While this isn’t new in reception studies within classical media (i.e. not everyone will view a movie or read a book and get the same messages), games provide a new look at this theory. The gaming medium and the act of playing a game from person to person provides the physical manifestation of change – they allow an individual to actually exert force onto a system and inflict change through the act of play each time the game is run.

Ultimately, these discussions of intention and manipulation lead the conversation concerning freedom and narrative in games to one about one of the most basic elements of constructing any sort of text: the author(s) of a piece. Not only is it one of the core foci of how scholars view narrative construction, but the topics of authorial intent and freedom are at the core of The Stanley Parable itself, evolving into a metanarrative about its form as a game, only allowing players the idea of choice.

7 See Hall, 1980
In order to understand this dynamic, the meanings of authorship across media studies must be engaged, and then cross-applied to what this may mean for the function of stories and narrative as a way of knowing.

**The Meaning(s) of Authorship**

*The Stanley Parable* is considered to be a postmodern commentary on the ideas of freedom and narrative agency within video game storytelling, since it holds a mirror up both to popular tropes in gaming titles and to the players interacting with the game themselves. In investigating this claim, I will begin by providing an understanding of what concepts of authorship and agency the game is commenting on, by providing understandings of authorship across forms of media theory. Understanding the relationship between author and audience provides the necessary base to a conversation about the relationship between a game’s creator and a game’s player, if that game is one that touts “choice” as a focal point for building its narrative. Beginning from this more traditional standpoint of authorship within classic media (i.e., that which does not rely on interactivity to build its story), it is then easier to understand how player agency can be associated with authorship of a story/interactive experience.

Criticism and scholarly conversations concerning postmodern views on the relationship between authorial intent and reader reception were already happening several decades prior to the invention of video games. One of the most famous roots of this was Roland Barthes’ 1967 essay “The Death of The Author”, which argued against popular literary criticism at the time concerning authorial intention. Barthes maintained that the

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8 See Duncan, 2014; Cowan, 2014; Egan, 2013
writing and the creator were unrelated, and that to give a text an author and assign “...a single, corresponding interpretation to it is to impose a limit on that text” (Barthes, 1967). In this sense, Barthes is arguing that assigning a singular interpretation to a text unnecessarily restrains that text from any and all other potential meanings. As such, individual interpretation is just as valid as that of physical author of the text’s interpretation. Regardless of whom the author might be or the extent to which the author reveals themselves in the text, Barthes argues that it is the actual language that “acts” and “performs” (Barthes, 1967). Despite being willed by the physical author, the text exists outside of that individual’s will, existing after it is made public as a new property of the reader (closely mirroring reader-reception theory). Thus, according to Barthes, the text – not the author – performs its meaning within the time and space that the reader engages with it, thus creating its meaning.

Cultural theorist Michel Foucault then responded to the claims made by Barthes, in his 1968 lecture “What is an Author?” Ultimately, Foucault and Barthes reach similar conclusions on the role of an author in respect to a text, but Foucault approaches the subject from a more general perspective about authorship in fiction. He claims that the author is not the indefinite source of significations about a given work. Rather, the author “…is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction” (Foucault, 1968). Foucault also introduces the idea of “author function,” which asserts that the designation of the author serves as an effective way to organize texts, and nothing more substantial than that. “Nevertheless,” he provides, “…these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less
psychological, of our way of handling texts: in the comparisons we make, the traits we extract as pertinent, the continuities we assign, or the exclusions we practice” (Foucault, 1968). Foucault asserts that the author of the physical text does have some amount of bearing on the actual discourse of the text, but not a totalizing amount.

Both Barthes and Foucault agree on the idea that signifying one individual as an author of a given text with one interpretation is incorrect, and more so focus on how the work functions in the overall discourse about itself in a given context. In simpler terms, what theorists of postmodern authorship believe is that the author is more than just the person who made the physical text. The author is an ideological variable, which is not defined by rigid attributions of creation credit, but simply by way of how the audience/reader interprets the text, encompassing its place in discourse within a given group.

Conversely, on the opposite side of this conversation, there are those scholars who find value in strict authorship studies. One such theorist is film studies scholar Janet Staiger, who co-authored and co-edited Authorship and Film alongside David Gerstner in 2003. The book’s introduction advocates for the reemergence of significance placed on the author of a film (also known as the auteur). Staiger advocates for seeing the auteur as an “origin,” “personality,” “signature,” and “reading strategy” (Stagier and Gerstner, 2003). She also comments on Foucault’s conception of author-function, saying that it is not that “…the author does not exist. The author…existed to the extent that the concept upheld bourgeois sensibilities of art and circulated as an operative of that ideology” (Stagier and Gerstner, 2003). Instead of addressing the specific function of the author and their effect on producing meaning, Staiger asserts that Foucault is only addressing the discourse surrounding the notion of authorship.
Similarly, James Naremore advocates for the resurgence of the recognition of the author and, through the examination of designating of auteur within film, finds that it is crucial to constructing a film’s meaning. Naremore’s argument has similarities to Stagier’s, in that he argues that the author isn’t necessarily gone altogether. However, his argument differs in the specific contextualization of why individuals ought to study auteurs in the first place. He examines the discourse surrounding the particular fixation on specific authors, and how this construction of celebrity in and of itself is telling about the sort of associations that auteurs project when associated with owning a text. He concludes his discussion concerning auteurship in film by saying that “…auteurism always had two faces. It mounted an invigorating attack on convention, but it also formed canons and fixed the names of people we should study” (Naremore, 1990). Still, Naremore advocates for authorship recognition in that, within this specific study, his readers may glean importance and partial meaning of a finished project from the designation of the author, as stylistic elements and thematic emphasis are particular to each auteur’s product.

While the significance of the author as well as the designation of a text’s authorship, is important within the context of whether or not the rhetor has full control over an unchanging text, a new problem seems to arise with the introduction of a fully responsive and “adaptable” rhetorical environment. This new environment is the realm of the video game: a space in which player and system interact with one another to create meaning of experience.

As free and adaptable as one may perceive the realm of story building and authorship to be in a video game environment, there are still theories of strict auteurship and designer authorial intent that seem to negate player authorial intent and agency. In exploring how games specifically negotiate this issue, I assert that individuals come closer still to
discovering the relationship of the player and the character of the Narrator in *The Stanley Parable*, and how this relationship intends to mirror the struggle between player and designer to own the creation of meaning.

**A System of Authorial Intent: A Brief Introduction to Procedural Rhetoric**

Crossing over to an examination of authorial intent within games, a recently new theory within game development has emerged in respect to a game’s inherent ability to persuade. This theory postulates that meaning and ownership of meaning can be expressed simply through the affordances and constraints, which are and are not allowed within the bounds of a video game. This theory is known as procedural rhetoric, as coined by Ian Bogost in his book, *Persuasive Games*.

The basic definition of procedural rhetoric is the idea that systems and procedures can be expressive in their construction, which help to mirror real life systems (Bogost, 2008). This type of rhetoric is tied to the core affordances of computers: running processes and executing rule-based symbolic manipulation or “procedures.” By utilizing spaces that contain particular bounds and affordances, players can ascertain messages and make judgments about these specific systems. It is a unique power of procedurality, in that it offers representation “…through rules, which in turn create possibility spaces that can be explored through play” (Bogost, 2008).

Procedural rhetoric seems to both advocate for the authorial intent and composition of the designer (in that they themselves are the controllers of the specific bounds and affordances that the player can explore) while at the same time, offering some consideration to the player and their authorial control (in that the game cannot exist without the
manipulation of the player). However, what does this “control” really mean, if the player is only acting within the bounds of what the author has expected the player to do? Is the designer still in control of the overall narrative (including its discourse and story) and the player is only allowing it to emerge? Or is there still some significance on the part of the player because they are the *individuals* initiating these processes?

**Conclusion**

Moving forward in understanding authorship and narrative within interactive experiences such as *The Stanley Parable*, emphasis of inquiry is placed on why understanding these questions of authorship and proper narrative structure are so important in the first place. As I have shown from my discussion about the varying voices of narrative meaning and function, authorship meaning and function, and the place of player agency with respect to a games system which (in and of itself can be argumentative), I’ve demonstrated that focus on the relationship between player and game is one of tumultuous importance. The obsession with control, with respect to dictating discourse, sequential story, or even exerting ownership over meaning through authorship in the game is topic of which the Narrator constantly reminds the player, being sure to tell players that their choices only exist within the scope of the game’s physical boundaries. However, as seen through the explorations of literature concerning narrative and authorship, the definitions of the two are not as clear cut and rigid as they are used colloquially. By this, I mean to argue that there does not exist a complete amount of control on the part of the player within a game experience, and there also does not exist a complete amount of control on the part of the game designer, as the player can frustrate expectations of the designer’s system. This physical manifestation of this
opposition (both through *The Stanley Parable* itself and the medium of video games as a whole) highlights this frustration, moving us closer to understanding the rhetorical importance of player versus designer.

By analyzing *The Stanley Parable* through the theoretical frameworks of opinions on narrative structure and authorship, I aim to showcase a theoretical thought battle concerning the nature of audience and narrative, with particular respect to the interactive medium of video games. Moving forward now into analysis, I highlight the dualities of popular thought concerning the meanings of player agency, authorship and narrative power and game developer agency, authorship and narrative power.
THE STANLEY PARABLE: AN ANALYSIS

“The Stanley Parable is an exploration of story, games, and choice. Except the story doesn't matter, it might not even be a game, and if you ever actually do have a choice, well let me know how you did it.”

- “Introduction” (Galactic Café, 2011)

In the center of my discussion of theories of narrative, authorship and agency within interactive texts, the difficulty to explain what players are supposed to expect from playing *The Stanley Parable* becomes a unifying call to action from the game’s designers. The call is one that pits classical expectations of singular authorial intent, control, and story arcs with clear resolutions against audience agency and free will. It is a call addressed to every player of the game, which intends to force each player to reflect on one of its central questions; the question being: “Who’s really in control here?” and the action? To figure it out.

Intending to toy with player expectations of convention (as well as patience, at times), *The Stanley Parable* is an exploratory look at the establishment of traditional narrative tropes and expectations, asking its player to reflect on the choices made within the interactive space that the game system affords, and if these different affordances themselves matter in the first place. Through an examination of various possible endings of *The Stanley Parable*, I aim to highlight what conversations emerge on the topics of authorship, agency and narrative structure in interactive storytelling as a result.
In order to first provide context for these different endings, I will provide a summary of the “core” storyline leading up to the first major decision within the game. Due to the fact that there is not a “singular” storyline to follow, I will attempt to include as much of the game’s plot that does not differ from one player experience to another, as this serves as the primary branching off point/central game premise. Following this, I will examine several possible endings in *The Stanley Parable* and the structure of the initiating events surrounding them (if they are relevant to the argument within the ending). Following this, I will organize their meanings with respect to my central questions of investigating authorship, agency, and narrative structure. It is through this examination that I argue that the construction of meaning and rhetorical significance within *The Stanley Parable* is mostly within the jurisdiction of the game’s designers, creating the illusion of player agency. However, the content of these endings advocate for a reconsideration of this practice, outwardly looking at video games as a whole, to consider the will and discretion of the game player to co-create meaning in other experiences.

**Premise**

“This is the story of a man named Stanley,” says a disembodied male, British-accented voiceover to a black screen, as the game begins its first cut scene sequence to provide context. The camera then reveals the setting to be a generic-looking office space, as it tracks down a hallway at mid-level, toward a door with the number “427” written on it. The voiceover, which will later be identified as the Narrator, continues speaking. “Stanley worked for a company in a big building, where he was employee number 427. Employee number 427’s job was simple. He sat at his desk in room 427 and he pushed buttons on a keyboard,” the Narrator explains, as the camera cuts to a high camera angle shot from a
corner inside Stanley’s office, zooming in on a man, Stanley, sitting in the office, staring at a computer screen. As the camera slowly zooms on Stanley from this view, the Narrator explains that “orders came to [Stanley] through a monitor next to his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order.” The camera then cuts to a medium close-up shot over Stanley’s shoulders, as he continues to type away at his computer. “This is what employee 427 did everyday of every month of every year” says the Narrator, as the camera begins to pull back and up through the ceiling, “and although others might consider it soul rending, Stanley relished every moment that the orders came in. As though he had been made exactly for this job. And Stanley was happy,” the Narrator assures the player. The camera zooms out to reveal Stanley’s office to exist only within a blank, gray plane, without the rest of his office attached, visually suggesting that Stanley exists only within the bounds of this singular, predesigned box, mirroring the Narrator’s remark that Stanley was made “exactly for this job.” With this final remark, the camera cuts to a black screen.

A shift from this previous set-up, Stanley’s normal routine, begins when the Narrator informs of us of one day when “something peculiar happened.” Time passes, and Stanley, waiting patiently at his computer, does not receive any orders of what to do. In addition, all of his co-workers have gone missing, leaving Stanley to become frightened by their disappearance. Shocked at this discovery, “Stanley felt himself unable to move for the longest time,” the Narrator intones, “But as he regained his wits and came to his senses, he got up from his desk and exited his office.” With this final remark, the player then takes on the persona of Stanley, able to move around and view the environment from Stanley’s first person point-of-view.
Now having this control, the player is able to walk into the office space down a hall, until they reach a simple room with two doors. Before moving toward either of the doors, the Narrator’s voice is heard once again. “When Stanley came to a set of two open doors,” the Narrator explains, “he entered the door on his left.” It is from this moment that the player is faced with their first “real” decision. They may either listen to the Narrator and take the door on the left or disobey him. It is from this moment that the “game” of this experience then begins, as the player is encouraged to test the bounds and affordances of the game. This choice provides an opportunity for the player to engage with the character of Narrator in some way, either listening to him and becoming compliant with his planned narrative, or opposing him thus providing their own input that deviates from the expectations of Stanley, the character. The player, operating as Stanley, has control over which processes will and won’t be enacted within the system of the game in their specific play-through of it (i.e. how Stanley will move, what Stanley interacts with, and how Stanley will view his environment through the player’s manipulation of the game’s camera) as well as the larger motions which impact other possible outcomes pre-set by the game’s designer. It is within these moments that the player takes on some part of ownership in creating the story and narrative direction within the game; a process that occurs each time that an individual person plays The Stanley Parable, whether it be a choice such as “Where do I look know?” or “Which door should I chose?”

This singular initiating event causes the game to evolve in a multitude of different ways, as Figure 3 shows. These end points are only final to a certain degree. However, as the game then restarts itself from this initiating situation after the player has reached one of the endings. As a result of this, the game’s story functions as a continuous loop, never truly
ends, having finite story time until the player decides to quit out of the computer program itself; the only choice that the game designers cannot dictate themselves.

In highlighting these possible endings and various initiating events for these endings, competing statements about the nature of the game and of games as a narrative medium at large begin to emerge. Therefore, through an analysis of several different endings within *The Stanley Parable*, I examine the relationship between rhetor and audience through the characters of the Narrator and Stanley.

Figure 3: The Stanley Parable Endings Map (Plutamo, 2013)
Narrative Structure

As seen in the flowchart above, there is not a “correct” or “definitive” ending to *The Stanley Parable*. As a result of this, there’s no definitive end point until the individual interacting with program decides to quit out of it on their machine. This feature is precisely what makes a game like *The Stanley Parable* so significant, as it is a feature that is uncommon within traditional academic understandings of literary story structure as a general practice (i.e., familiarity with stories having a beginning, middle and end). It engages with discourse (previously defined by Propp as *how* the telling of events is done, or ‘story’, is done) within a narrative, and does not concern itself with always adhering to an expected histrionic telling of events that, because of its format of constantly restarting itself, does not make coherent sense in linking all of the possible storylines together.

One of the endings within the game that highlights the importance of this practice (maintaining an organized telling of events that makes sense) in narrative analysis is the “choice” ending, sometimes referred to as the “narrative contradiction” ending. In order to reach this ending, Stanley must disobey the Narrator’s instructions in the beginning, as he urges him to proceed along to the office meeting room. Instead, Stanley finds himself in a large warehouse as the Narrator continues to berate him for not listening to his previous instructions. Moving onto a platform that carries him up to a new part of the warehouse, the Narrator tries to reason with Stanley, urging him to listen to what the Narrator has been trying to do for him from the beginning:

“Look Stanley, I think perhaps we’ve gotten off on the wrong foot here. I’m not your enemy - really I’m not! I realize that putting your trust in someone is difficult, but this story has been about nothing but you all this time. There’s someone you’ve been neglecting
Stanley, someone you’ve forgotten about. Please, stop trying to make every decision by yourself. I’m not asking for me - I’m asking for her.”

Here, the Narrator begins hinting at a possible romantic interest that the character of Stanley had prior to the player entering into the game’s world. He urges you, acting as Stanley, to listen to him, in hopes of not interfering with his projected storyline, as well as the wishes and wants of Stanley, a character independent (so argues the game) of the actual person playing as Stanley. As the Narrator finishes his dialogue, the platform that Stanley has been standing on reaches a new part of the warehouse, leading him into a room with a telephone ringing on a table. “That’s her, Stanley,” the Narrator dramatically compels the player as the phone continues to ring, “You need to be the one to do this - to reach out to her. If you can truly place your faith in another, please pick up the phone!”

It is from this moment that the player, operating as the character of Stanley, has two options in direct relation to the phone ringing to prompt further narration (excluding the option of quitting the game): the first being that they chose to pick up the phone, and the second being that they chose to simply unplug it. In order to activate the “choice”/ “narrative contradiction” ending, Stanley must unplug the phone, much to the dissatisfaction and “surprise” of the Narrator. “WHAT?! How did you do that?! That wasn’t even supposed to be a choice at all!...not picking up the phone is actually an incorrect course of action” exclaims the Narrator, shocked at the improbability of the situation within the course of the projected story he had for the character of Stanley. It is at this moment that the Narrator acknowledges the presence of the player who is controlling Stanley, saying “…You’re not Stanley, you’re a real person! That is why you have been able to make correct and incorrect choices…and to think, I’ve been letting you run around in this game for so long! If you had
made anymore wrong choices, you might have negated it entirely! It’s as though you’ve completely ignored the most basic protocol for decision making.” By saying this, the Narrator is arguing that the player’s actions are not telling of ‘Stanley: the character within a fixed story’ that he has constructed for Stanley, but more so telling of ‘Stanley: the character as operated by an independent human being, separate from a story.’ As result of this narrative contradiction, the surrounding environment begins to deteriorate, as seen in Figure 2a.

Figure 4a: The Result of Narrative Contradiction (Galactic Café, 2013)

This ending highlights what happens when an intended direction or story crafted by an author of a work is disrupted by an outside agent attempting to manipulate the meaning of a narrative, which is partially attributed to the consideration of the story, not just the discourse. The Narrator, representing the “author” of this story of Stanley, becomes agitated when the intended direction of the story becomes almost irrelevant to the player since he sees this as an act of disrespect to the sanctity of logical story structure and build up. Under the
Narrator’s wishes, Stanley would have behaved in a certain way that made sense to the pre-established storyline developed by the game’s designer, expressed through the pleas of the character of the Narrator.

Despite the fact that this ending appears to be “un-anticipated” by the character of the Narrator, the simple fact remains that the ending was pre-designed by the game’s designers: they are still in control of creating that experience. The struggle to come to terms with this realization and the consideration of player power to disrupt projected narratives, however, is at the core of that ending itself. The illusion of complete authorship is presented on the part of the game to the player through this ending, with the Narrator’s exclamation that Stanley could have ruined the whole story if the Narrator had not stepped in (despite the fact that the Narrator was always going to step in anyway – he had been programmed that way). While the player is not completely in control, there still appears to be small elements of player authorship through their negotiation of choices that the game advocates for.

This creation of player-authored meaning lies in seeing each of the player-motivated moments as significant in and of themselves, not only valued in respect to whether or not they match up with the pre-anticipated endings the game designers have made. The player can manipulate the execution of these events (the discourse), despite being unable to change the content of the events themselves (the story). While not specifically available in The Stanley Parable itself, this ending advocates for this possibility in the medium of games at large. In this approach, actions taken by a player are valid even if those actions don’t align with the projected meaning a game’s designer intends (referring back to my previous discussion of Wreden and Pugh’s theory of choice negotiation independent of designer challenge constraint in the literature review). Those actions can be just as valid if they are not
working in opposition to go against a pre-determined end goal. Rather, meaning can also be found in the enactment of these moments on the part of the player, thus providing her some part of authorial control. Despite this ending being pre-planned and pre-designed, its content warns players of the dangers of interfering with a rhetor’s projected direction of narrative. It provides the illusion of player agency, while also addressing the potential impact of a player’s choices in a more open-ended game.

This disagreement and subsequent unraveling of the story (both metaphorically in the sense of the Narrator’s intended vision being destroyed and physically since this contradiction manifests itself in the non-sensical placement of colors, shapes, and words within the environment as seen in Figure 2a) shows the importance of this structure within *The Stanley Parable*, since a lack of it renders these messages intended to be received ultimately irrelevant. This ending argues that there appears to be no story left to analyze if a player interferes with a game designer’s wishes. Within the context of *The Stanley Parable*, this sense of power on the part of the player is illusionary – however, the content of this ending demonstrates the power that the player has in other formations of story and narrative within other interactive texts without set ‘challenges’ to face. Player authorship can still exist, if only to a small degree.

**Agency and Authorship**

Further highlighting this relationship between the narrator and the player is the topic of agency within the game, which arises out of one of the fundamental design aspects of what makes a game a game in the first place: interactivity (Zimmerman, 2010). The ability for one agent to manipulate another and affect change in some way is the most basic operating
definition of interaction. When an individual, interacting with a system, is able to affect change in such a way that re-shapes a previously projected path of action, or they are able to exert their own desires, is it then that a player within a game has agency to a certain extent. To what degree interacting with a game in such a way affects the designer’s intended meanings of the game’s story and direction of game narrative is an issue that *The Stanley Parable* constantly addresses through various endings in the game and moments throughout the game itself.

One ending that addresses this relationship between the player and the game system is called “The Reluctant Ending,” seen in the Figure 1 flowchart. In order to achieve this ending, Stanley must not leave his office from the original premise point, where the Narrator allows Stanley control. Instead of taking this opportunity to move out of the office, Stanley shuts the open door to his office, remaining inside. The Narrator then begins to justify the course of action taken by Stanley, saying he:

“...simply couldn’t handle the pressure. What if he had to make a decision? What if a crucial outcome fell under his responsibility? ... No, this couldn’t end up anywhere except badly ...the thing to do now, Stanley thought, was to wait. Nothing will hurt me...nothing will break me...and in here, I will be happy...maybe if I wait long enough, the story will happen...I can almost see it now...here it comes.”

The game then quickly cuts to black, starting over once again from the premise point. In this ending, the Narrator provides commentary about the assumed nature of a player within an interactive text, highlighting the apparent reluctance on the part of the player to interact with the game, in fear of damaging a pre-constructed story arc that the game designer wants the player wants to discover. This can only be discovered, however, if the player
participates and performs the expected story elements that the game designer has planned, as symbolized by the Narrator’s dialogue above.

Having this new ‘freedom’ to explore one pre-designed narrative, potentially affecting both its story and discourse, and the potential dangers that come with it, result in a stalemate on behalf of the player. This ending highlights the paradox of agency within an interactive text, arguing that, “...on one hand the author seeks control over the direction of a narrative in order to give it a satisfactory structure. On the other hand a participating user demands the autonomy to act and react without explicit authorial constraint” (Aylett and Louchart 2004). Not interacting with the game halts the progression of this narrative, and (so this ending argues) results in the creation of a new narrative: a tale about the co-creative power of both the game designer and the player to co-construct a text. This is co-creative in the respect that the significance of the player’s contribution to the text’s narrative lays within the act of enacting the process themselves, regardless of whether or not that particular ending is pre-designed. Without the player within the game, the varying pre-built stories and pre-designed narrative arcs would not emerge, nor be challenged. With the consideration of the player and their actions, the Narrator then must justify the actions on the part of the player (or, in some cases, won’t be able to justify, as the designers did not anticipate specific actions as moments necessary of commentary).

The ability to exert this sort of control, and to have any sort of interaction have meaning within the context of the story and the game’s structure, leads itself into a discussion about authorial intent and the role of the author at large. As discussed thus far, *The Stanley Parable* prides itself on being doggedly self-aware of its limitations in both player freedom and game designer freedom; each player will not always behave in the ways that a game
designer will anticipate and a player will not be able to control every aspect of a game if a game’s designer has set rigid boundaries in that specific iteration. In doing so, the game provides commentary on the nature of this supposed rigid dichotomy in narrative analysis, as opposed to providing stringent answers for whether or not complete ownership exists on the part of the player or the narrator. Rather, the game’s narrative is one that mocks the limiting idea that only the game designer or the player can have complete control.

One ending in particular that highlights the potential rewards of reconciling the will of both the authorial intent and the player’s own free will is called “The Life Ending.” In order to achieve this ending, the player must comply with everything that the Narrator prompts them to do, eventually leading the player to reveal the true reason behind Stanley’s compliance with his soulless office job: he had been under the influence of the company’s mind control facility, as shown in Figure 4b.

Figure 4b: The Mind Control Facility (Galactic Café, 2013)
Shocked at the dark secret behind his company’s ways, the Narrator continues to inform us of Stanley’s reaction to this discovery, saying that “...as the cold reality of his past began to sink in, Stanley decided that this machinery would never again exert its terrible power over another human life. For he would dismantle the controls once and for all.” Upon approaching a set of two buttons labeled “On” and “Off”, selecting the “Off” button to shut down the power to the machine prompts “The Freedom Ending,” in which the walls of the building slowly open to reveal a sunny, green outside world. The Narrator then begins his concluding monologue about Stanley’s eventual fate:

“He had won! He had defeated the machine! Unshackled himself from someone else’s command!...And yet, as the doors began to open, Stanley reflected on the uncertainty of it all...on how many puzzles still remain unsolved...but as sunlight streamed into the chamber, he realized that none of this mattered to him. For it was not knowledge or power that he had been seeking, but happiness. Perhaps his goal had been not to understand, but to let go. No longer would anyone tell him where to go, or what to do...whatever life he lives, it will be his. And that was all he needed to know...This was the exact way, right now, that things were meant to happen. And Stanley was happy.”

The screen then fades to white, signaling the end of this particular cycle of the game’s play through. While it seems as though this ending makes both the player and the narrator satisfied, it is important to notice the boundaries and circumstances to which this harmonious agreement can be reached. The peculiar part of this entire exchange is that the Narrator is still dictating everything that Stanley is doing, and Stanley does not disobey him, despite the Narrator prompting Stanley to go after his own free will. The paradox arises in that Stanley is able to still assert his own free will and gain “control,” thus authoring his own experience,
but it is only within accordance to what the Narrator (acting as the symbol of a text’s true author) has specifically dictated will occur. Thus, in this ironic set of circumstances, Stanley’s character is only able to achieve freedom and happiness through the dictation of another. It is only under the illusion of freedom that Stanley becomes free.

However, the core message of this ending advocates for the cooperation of both the will of the “author” (or the creator of the physical text) and the will of the player. In proceeding towards a common goal: Stanley’s freedom and the Narrator’s desire to control the story, both rhetor and audience have a say in the discourse and story of the narrative. While this division isn’t exactly balanced 50/50, some part of authorship and ownership is still given to the player manipulating Stanley since they are invoking the processes (i.e. movements toward this end) to achieve this result. In allowing both the Narrator and Stanley to act in accordance with their own desires, thus providing their own contribution of authorship to a given textual experience, the two forces reconcile and provide the best possible outcome for both parties. In doing so, the ending dismantles the idea of sole “authorship” on the part of the game’s designer, shown through the relationship between the Narrator and Stanley. Both individuals are provided the opportunity to participate in multiple constructions of meaning, and have of those interpretations be recognized as valid, thus lending a piece of authorship to the player.

**Conclusion**

In examining the various endings to *The Stanley Parable*, varying answers to popular questions raised with respect to authorship, agency and narrative structure, and even contradictions about their nature surface. They have evolved from the bounds of classical literary settings to settings that account for direct audience involvement. Rather than
providing definitive answers about the nature of these topics and whether or not they are properly reconciled within each ending the game has, *The Stanley Parable* provides situations which tease out these popular voices on ownership within interactive experiences, and assure players that it is okay that these topics do not have clear cut answers.

In being able to create situations in which expectations of narrative structure, agency and authorship are turned on their heads, questioning the establishment of totalizing practices in the first place, *The Stanley Parable* contributes to a larger discussion on why these elements of storytelling are formalized in this way in the first place. The game ultimately advocates for the co-operation of the Narrator (meant to be representative of the game designer/the rhetor) and Stanley (meant to be representative of the audience) as both authors of a virtual experience, being that they require one another. While this exact nature is not present within the bounds of the game itself (in that *The Stanley Parable* only provides the illusion of authorship), the content of the game’s endings advocates for a reconsideration of the authorial power, to be extended to both player and game designer (not equally divided at all times, but constantly shifting dependent on the rhetorical situation). While not exactly equal in their power, they still cannot exist with the other, and rely on their individual agencies to exert their own agencies in the first place.
THE PURPOSE IN THE PLAY: CONCLUSION

This discussion of narrative structure, authorship and agency still leaves the original question of investigation: So what? What is said about the relationship of Stanley and the Narrator, meant to mirror the real life relationship of the game’s designer and the game’s player, within the game? What does this statement mean in the general context of rhetorical theory and criticism? What about this argument can be applied to the developing field of digital rhetoric? Why does this matter at all?

In my discussion of the importance of narrative structure and discourse, I have shown that within fixed rhetorical texts (i.e., film, speech, and written texts), control and pacing of specific key points to an argument are within the dictation of the rhetor. Within a film, a speech or even a book, interpretations of the same text will change over time, but the manipulation of the discourse is still within the original control of the author or auteur (at least outwardly). With the emergence of artifacts like The Stanley Parable, where stories and counter-stories exist side-by-side, dependent on the player to enact them, interactive mediums provide systems for endless meanings and narratives to be created with some player ownership, despite having the same characters, environments and designated tasks each time. Whether or not you chose to engage in those tasks is up to you, as a player, engaging in the act of play.

While The Stanley Parable isn’t perfect in allowing complete freedom of expression (i.e., having a fixed number of endings and interactions the player can have with the Narrator, and operating under the illusion of player authorship), the beginnings of a new form of rhetorical power begin to be hinted at by the game’s structure as well as the Narrator’s constant commentary: a new form which acknowledges the will and creative power of the
player as well as the game designer to help co-author new forms of discourse to some extent, working as an active participant in argumentation in other forms of digital rhetoric. Players/audience members and their input are now allowed to come into an audio-visual and digitally represented form thanks to the introduction of the gaming medium. To better explain this phenomenon through a theater metaphor, *The Stanley Parable* advocates for a new form of rhetorical ownership in which the designer creates “the stage” for individual argumentation, not the “play’s script” about a specific argument, even though the game itself is not constructed in this way. There are suggestions for following the script of the game (as represented by the Narrator, or as the intention by game designers), but the process of the individual having the power to play through only one of the many endings of *The Stanley Parable* is what makes the medium unique. Each person’s experience of the game is different, as no one player can have the same experience as another.

Through this form of digital rhetoric, both rhetor and audience serve as the co-creators of meaning. They exert forces to co-author arguments within interactive systems, despite the balance being uneven at times. Agency and authorship become terms that are in constant conversation with each other, where some parts of meaning of an argument are only available through the designer’s specific creation/authorship of the initial rhetorical situation itself (i.e., the designer making the actual game and its parameters, independent of what the game’s player wants to be able to do within the game), and other parts are emergent only through the actual process of a player’s selection to act in a certain way (i.e., the player’s actual choice making, which is both partially dependent and partially independent of the game designer’s will).
Still the resounding question remains: how can this be cross-applied to a new form of rhetorical text? The biggest revelation in this new form of rhetoric is simply the fact that our arsenal of persuasion is growing. The ways in which individuals and their audiences can engage and express ideas are becoming far more nuanced than imagined in the days of Aristotle. Both rhetor and audience are now able to influence one another in the process of meaning making through play. Through the constant give and take of rhetor and audience, our methods of learning and sharing arguments become a cooperative process in their presentation. Rhetors can anticipate several types of responses that audiences may have to an argument, as shown through the character of The Narrator in *The Stanley Parable*. At the same time, audiences still have the power to affect some change and go against the influence of the rhetor, as shown through several interactions that the player can have as Stanley in the game.

Extending farther than just *The Stanley Parable* and its commentary on the nature of game structure itself, the understanding of this new form of persuasion can lend itself to co-creating and facilitating arguments about a range of topics, even those deemed too taboo for regular discussion. In taking on some ownership of argument, the player can then become in charge of developing their own stance on an issue, making the argument itself more deeply ingrained within the individual. Allowing a person to develop their stance on an issue or argument partially on their own, by virtue of their interacting with a system, puts more emphasis on the power of that person’s individual experience.

Ultimately, the questions within *The Stanley Parable* become the questions that we must constantly ask ourselves in our own construction of our arguments; whether or not we are in control of these decisions and how we work with others to develop stances and
opinions about the world around us. In analyzing *The Stanley Parable* in this way, and viewing the ways in which discussions of authorship, agency and narrative are tied to arguments within it, I assert that individuals learn more about the ways in which they construct themselves: through the constant give and take of our outside surroundings and our personal assertions; through the testing of rules and boundaries to see what is and isn’t possible; through the act of play, allowed by the medium of video games and interactive systems alike, allowing us to critically examine why rules and systems are constructed the way they are.

It is through this act of play: an act of curiosity that allows arguments to emerge through the presentation of rule sets, triggered by individuals. When we engage in play, we co-create, learning about the world around us and informing the world of us.
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