METAPROCEDURALISM: *THE STANLEY PARABLE* AND THE LEGACIES OF POSTMODERN METAFICTION

Bradley J. Fest

Abstract: Most critics of contemporary literature have reached a consensus that what was once called "postmodernism" is over and that its signature modes—metafiction and irony—are on the wane. This is not the case, however, with videogames. In recent years, a number of self-reflexive games have appeared, exemplified by Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (2013), an ironic game about games. When self-awareness migrates form print to screen, however, something happens. If metafiction can be characterized by how it draws attention to its materiality—the artificiality of language and the construction involved in acts of representation—*The Stanley Parable* draws attention to the digital, procedural materiality of videogames. Following the work of Alexander R. Galloway and Ian Bogost, I argue that the self-reflexivity of *The Stanley Parable* is best understood in terms of action and procedure, as *metaproceduralism*. This essay explores the legacies of United States metafiction in videogames, suggesting that though postmodernism might be over, its lessons are important to remember for confronting the complex digital realities of the twenty-first century. If irony may be ebbing in fiction, it has found a vital and necessary home in videogames and we underestimate its power to challenge the informatic, algorithmic logic of cultural production in the digital age to our detriment.

The Stanley Parable (2013) is a videogame about videogames. Originally released by Davey Wreden in 2011 as a *Half-Life 2* modification, the game was developed into a standalone commercial release with modeler William Pugh using Valve's Source game engine. Since its successful debut on Steam in 2013, *The Stanley Parable* has received significant popular and critical attention. It has been discussed at length by the considerable media apparatus that covers the videogame industry; it has sparked ongoing online debates about whether or not it is really a

game; and, with the appearance of videogames such as *Dear Esther* (2012) and *Gone Home* (2013), it has perhaps once and for all put to rest the debate about whether or not videogames are art.[1] Pugh and Wreden's self-referential metagame has also quickly attracted attention from a variety of academic fields and from a large number of bloggers.[2] Taking its cue from self-referential postmodern forms, *The Stanley Parable* is a complex, historically self-aware metafiction that dwells critically on the generic, formal, and cultural conventions of videogames. Through mechanics that adapt and repurpose the material self-reflexivity of twentieth-century metafiction, Pugh and Wreden's experimental game raises important questions about the end of postmodernism, its legacies, and the digital realities of the twenty-first century.

Crucially, *The Stanley Parable* has appeared at a historical moment when it seems apparent that, after twenty years of critics declaring its end, a rough consensus has emerged that considers United States cultural production to have finally moved beyond postmodernism. Though there have been a variety of reasons for the proclamations and general agreement about the waning of postmodernity, the shifting landscape of US fiction has been, for many, evidence of a transformation in the aesthetic regime of the present. The contemporary novel, we are told, has

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[1] Rather than "video game," following the usage by scholars such as Ian Bogost, Patrick Jagoda, and others, I purposely use the term *videogame* throughout this essay because I think that we need a distinct term for the procedural, actionable, aesthetic artifacts native to digital environments. As one word, videogame stresses neither the computational, narratological, nor ludic aspects of such objects, but conceptually and elegantly unites the many possible qualities digital games might have, allowing that even games without play and games without narrative can still be understood as part of a single, coherent medium defined by the relationship between user action and digital processes. I would like to think that the term *videogame* can cover texts such as *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home* as much as *Braid* (2008), *Call of Duty* (2003–15), *Mass Effect* (2007–12), *Microsoft Solitaire* (1990), or *Tetris* (1984), even if the former lack the ludic elements of the latter. Just as we do not sit around complaining that a lyric poem lacks a story, and thus argue about why poetry should be excluded from the category of literature, I am doubtful how productive or even necessary it is to ask whether or not *The Stanley Parable* is a game. But I do hope it will be productive to think about how it is a *videogame*, that is, as an example of a now fully emerged, culturally dominant art form.

[2] For a discussion of *The Stanley Parable* by communications scholars, see Malte Elson, Johannes Breuer, James D. Ivory, and Thorsten Quandt, "More Than Stories with Buttons: Narrative, Mechanics, and Context as Determinants of Player Experience in Digital Games," *Journal of Communication* 64 (2014): 521–42; by computational scholars, see Michael James Heron and Pauline Belford, "All of Your Co-Workers Are Gone: Story, Substance, and the Empathic Puzzler," *Journal of Games Criticism* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–29; by education scholars, see Ioanna Iacovides, Anna L. Cox, and Thomas Knoll, "Learning the Game: Breakdowns, Breakthroughs and Player Strategies," *CHI 2014* (April 26–May 1, 2014): 2215–20; for a Foucauldian reading of the game, see Lars de Wildt, "Precarious Play: To Be or Not to Be Stanley," *Press Start* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1–20; and for some of the better popular reactions, see Alex Cowan, "The Stanley Paradox: A Postmodern Parable," *Medium*, December 19, 2014, https://medium.com/@alexcowan2/the-stanley-paradox-a-postmodern-parable-36a4fb8cdad7; linehollis, "Esther and Stanley and Fate," *Nightmare Mode*, March 17, 2013, http://nightmaremode.thegamerstrust.com/2013/03/17/esther-and-stanley-and-fate/; and Miguel Penabella, "An Ode to Stanley and Esther," *Medium Difficulty*, November 20, 2012, http://www.mediumdifficulty.com/2012/11/20/an-ode-to-stanley-esther/.

moved away from the metafictional, ironic experimentation of surfiction and the Black Humorists.[3] Realism and sincerity, affect and direct communication—these are the dominant modes of contemporary fiction. Such an account owes much to David Foster Wallace's influential essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction" (1993). Diagnosing a 1990s culture industry that had absorbed the lessons of postmodern metafiction—"TV's institutionalization of hip irony"[4]—Wallace concludes his essay with a prescient prediction about the emergence of a sincere, earnest generation of fiction writers who may "have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles."[5] A glance at some of the most visible contemporary US novelists—Jennifer Egan, Jeffrey Eugenides Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan Franzen, Donna Tartt, and many others—seems good evidence of what Adam Kelly has importantly called a "new sincerity" in contemporary fiction.[6]

But I would like to suggest in this essay that the emergence and adaptation of what Wallace would call "postmodern irony" in contemporary videogames is evidence not of a regression to a cold war poetics, nor just more of the same old postmodernism—the exhaustion of forms, the institutionalization of irony, the hypercommodification associated with the cultural logic of late capitalism—but evidence of an emergent twenty-first-century mode of textual production. I will call this *metaproceduralism*, a self-reflexive videogame technique that responds to and attempts to exploit (rather than resist or unveil) the informatic, algorithmic logic of cultural production in the digital age. In a time dominated by computational processes and procedures, by algorithmic objects that should be principally defined in terms of their *actions*, something different has

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[3] For a recent discussion on postmodernism being more or less over, see Jason Gladstone and Daniel Worden, eds., "Postmodernism, Then," special issue, *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, nos. 3–4 (Fall/Winter 2011). The issue contains essays by a number of important scholars of the postmodern, including Hillary Chute, Ursula K. Heise, Andrew Hoberek, Adam Kelly, Mark McGurl, Brian McHale, Walter Benn Michaels, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and others. For a book-length development of some of the claims about irony, sincerity, and post-postmodernism, see Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). And for Fredric Jameson's recent reflection on the period and the difference between postmodernism and postmodernity, see Nico Baumbach, Damon R. Young, and Genevieve Yue, "Revisiting Postmodernism: An Interview with Fredric Jameson," *Social Text* 34, no. 2 (June 2016): 143–60.

[4] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 63.

[5] Ibid., 81. For my further discussion of Wallace and irony, see Bradley J. Fest, "'Then Out of the Rubble': David Foster Wallace's Early Fiction," in *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing": New Essays on the Novels*, ed. Marshall Boswell (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 85–105.

[6] See Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), 131–46; and Adam Kelly, "Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace," *Post45*, October 17, 2014, http://post45.research. yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/.

happened in the development of videogames during the period after postmodernism than in literature. One of those differences is how we understand formal play in written as opposed to action-based forms. Another difference is how *The Stanley Parable* enacts how desperately we still need irony—and particularly what I will call *procedural irony*—in contemporaneity.

I should begin, however, by noting the obvious point that neither irony nor reflexive self-awareness are unique to late-twentieth-century literary fiction, nor can such tropes easily disappear from the landscape of contemporary cultural production just because novelists may be turning away from irony. Rather, it might simply be the case that the metafictional experimentation of John Barth and Thomas Pynchon has shifted venues to media at different historical stages of development more conducive to the rewards of self-referentiality than the well-established and now receding novel. This is the case, I suggest, with videogames. At least since the fabulously self-aware *Earthbound* (1994) and Hideo Kojima's fourth-wall-breaking *Metal Gear Solid* (1998)—when a boss battle with Psycho Mantis famously saw the game read the player's memory card and incorporate this extra-diegetic information into the diegesis of the game—videogames have incorporated thoughtful self-reflexivity to a considerable degree. Though still a rather limited list, it is clear that in the twenty-first century, metafictional games are appearing with increasing frequency from both AAA and independent developers. Games such as *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013), *Borderlands 2* (2012), *Deadpool* (2013), *Eternal Darkness* (2002), *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* (2013), *Goat Simulator* (2014), *Jazzpunk* (2014), *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), *No More Heroes* (2010), *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003), *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), *Sunset* (2015), and others, draw productive aesthetic and procedural attention to their status as videogames *and* as objects worthy of serious critical attention. These games are not embarrassed or apologetic about their diminished cache as "low" culture, but rather relish in the specific material processes of their medium, drawing metatextual attention to the uniqueness and formal possibility of videogames.

Further, I think it is important to note that self-reflexive videogames do not seem to be evidence of aesthetic exhaustion, but rather (if I may be so bold) of exuberance, novelty, and possibility. In a famous 1967 essay on the literary avant-garde of his time, Barth called the (as-yet-named) postmodern metafiction of the postwar era a "literature of exhaustion": "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subjects of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities—

by no means necessarily a cause for despair."[7] In contrast to a clear line of genealogical development from the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges to *The Stanley Parable*—a line that would place Pugh and Wreden's game in a tradition of narrative fiction where it would come very *late*, an untimely moment where metafictional techniques themselves could be considered used-up, exhausted with exhaustion—I think we might more productively compare the emerging self-reflexivity in videogames to *early* experiments with the novel. Books such as Miguel de Cervantes's *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) seem like appropriate and productive historical touchstones for self-reflexive videogames. Like *The Stanley Parable* and other metagames, these novels explore the possibilities of a form still in its infancy (rather than its dotage). When Cervantes and Sterne were using the novel to interrogate its own conventions, it was an emergent rather than, as it is today, a residual form.[8] The novel was also still trying to justify itself as serious literary art when *Don Quijote* and *Tristram Shandy* were initially circulating, defending itself from criticisms about its aesthetic value just as *The Stanley Parable* stages an encounter with contemporary critics who readily dismiss videogames on artistic grounds. Though many of the formal and generic conventions seem to have been established in videogames and may have, in some cases, ossified through overuse, there is still too little we know about their possibilities, partly due to the transforming technological and material means for making, distributing, and playing them. The host of interesting, ambitious, and surprising games released in the last few years demonstrate that videogames are a long way from formal exhaustion. If anything, the increasing presence of self-reflexivity in videogames should be read as a sign of their aesthetic maturation. Creators are asking important questions about what videogames can do and about what they can do with videogames, and this has resulted in a flourishing of compelling and successful experimentation.

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[7] John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1984), 64. On the history of the term "postmodernism," see Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998).

[8] For a discussion of the novel using Raymond Williams's idea of emergent, dominant, and residual forms, see Jonathan Arac "What Kind of History Does a Theory of the Novel Require?" *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 190–95. For Williams's original formulation in 1973 of emergent, dominant, and residual cultural forms, see Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (1980; repr., New Yok: Verso, 2005), 31–49.

That some of this experimentation shares certain obvious affinities with literary metafiction—even if coming from a place of possibility rather than exhaustion—should probably come as no surprise, particularly since videogames raise a number of issues vis-à-vis *representation*. Though there has been much significant writing about metafiction since William H. Gass coined the term in 1970, Patricia Waugh's slim book, *Metafiction* (1984), remains one of the best overviews of self-reflexive postmodern literature, both in terms of the considerable international breadth of fiction she surveys and in terms of her book's rich conceptual range. Like many other scholars, Waugh emphasizes metafiction's relationship to representation:

> The metafictionist is highly conscious of a basic dilemma: if he or she sets out to "represent" the world, he or she realizes fairly soon that the world, as such, cannot be "represented." In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to "represent" the *discourses* of that world. Yet, if one attempts to analyse a set of linguistic relationships using those same relationships as the instruments of analysis, language soon becomes a "prisonhouse" from which the possibility of escape is remote. Metafiction sets out to explore this dilemma.[9]

Or consider Larry McCaffery's discussion of mimesis with regard to the work of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Gass:

> Fiction cannot hope to mirror reality or tell the truth because "reality" and "truth" are themselves fictional abstractions whose validity has become increasingly suspect as this century has proceeded. Consequently we find that these works usually include a reflexive irony which mocks the realistic claims of artistic significance and truth; they also insist that the reader accept the work as an invented, purely made-up entity.[10]

It is tempting to make similar points about self-referential videogames, perhaps even going so far as to harness Jean Baudrillard's theories about simulation in order to emphasize that videogames emerge from a cultural moment in which "reality" is not accessible in any strict sense, and that videogames' prodigious and unavoidable virtuality—the ways in which they *simulate* rather than

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[9] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 3–4, emphasis in original. For the first use of the term "metafiction," see William H. Gass, "Philosophy and the Form of Fiction," in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Boston: Nonpareil, 1971), 25. For other early discussions of metafiction, see Robert Scholes, "Metafiction," *Iowa Review* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1970): 100–15; Raymond Federman, ed., *Surfiction: Fiction Now . . . and Tomorrow* (Chicago: Swallow, 1975); and Edward W. Said, "Contemporary Fiction and Criticism," *TriQuarterly* 33 (Spring 1975): 231–56. Said's essay is of especial note because of the relationship he suggests between French theory and US metafiction: "speculations on language and writing that begin with Mallarmé and continue in the French New Criticism have their American analogy in the formal speculation of certain writers of fiction. . . . For such novelists as Thomas Pynchon, John Barth (particularly in *Chimera*), Donald Barthelme, fiction is a language with its own field and play, its own internal system of reference, its own sense of the opportunities available for inventiveness. Fiction is viewed not as an intervention into reality, nor as addition to it—as was the case with classic realist fiction—but rather as an intervention in other fiction, or in other writing" (236–37).

[10] Larry McCaffery, *The Metafictional Muse: The Works of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and William H. Gass* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 5.

merely represent worlds—always already frustrates any claim they might have to realism, making them ripe for the structural play and reflexive irony that were such markers of postmodern literature.[11] But though mimetically realistic games have appeared with increasing frequency—to the point where a game such as *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014) uncannily includes the voice and likeness of actor Kevin Spacey—it is difficult to look at *E. T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), *World of Warcraft* (2004–), *Flow* (2006), or *Candy Crush Saga* (2012), and suggest the medium traditionally has much at stake in accurately representing some stable referent outside of itself. Subject to technological and graphical limitations, the frequent subordination of narrative to play, and a need for coherent game mechanics, videogames frequently abjure accurate mimesis in favor of abstraction and ludic simulacra. If we are to locate how videogames adapt metafictional strategies, it might be productive to first look elsewhere than in graphical or linguistic mimesis.[12]

For critics such as Gass, McCaffery, Waugh, and others, one of the principal features of metafiction is how it draws attention to its own *materiality*, to the language and other materials (novels) out of which it is made, and principally to the fact that it is *written*. Gass writes: "The novelist now better understands his medium; he is ceasing to pretend that his business is to render a world; he knows, more often now, that his business is to *make* one, and to make one from the only medium of which he is master—language."[13] Or Edward W. Said: "an unavoidable primary fact about fiction is that it is written and that much of its play may occur precisely because it cannot be spoken."[14] Though videogames frequently incorporate written and recorded language, unlike the postmodern novel, the stuff out of which videogames are made is different. Rather than primarily a mimetic medium like film, photography, or writing, as Alexander R. Galloway argues,

> *Video games are actions*. Let this be word one for video game theory…. Consider the formal differences between video games and other media: indeed, one *takes* a photograph, one *acts* in a film. But these actions transpire before or during the fabrication of the work, a work that ultimately assumes the form of a physical object (the print). With video games, the work itself is material

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[11] See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[12] For a broad discussion about further intersections between literature and games, see Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014). For a reflection on *The Stanley Parable*, unnatural narratives, and the literariness of other contemporary videogames, see Astrid Ensslin, "Video Games as Unnatural Narratives," in *Diversity of Play*, ed. Mathias Fuchs (Lüneburg, Germany: meson press, 2015), 41–70, http://meson.press/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/978-3-95796-076-4-Diversity-of-Play.pdf.

[13] Gass, 24.

[14] Said, 240.

action. One *plays* a game. And the software *runs*. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move…. The video game, like the computer, [is] an *action-based* medium.[15]

Consequently, following the lead of how early critics of metafiction focused on written language, I am encouraged to start with the material specificity of videogames when seeking to understand what might be unique about their self-reflexivity.

In this, I think Ian Bogost's work on procedural rhetoric is quite useful. Bogost locates the particular kind of mimesis unique to the action-based medium of the videogame in what he calls *procedurality*. He writes: "Procedural representation takes a different form than written or spoken representation. Procedural representation explains processes *with other processes*. . . . [It] is a form of symbolic expression that uses process *rather than language*."[16] For Bogost, though videogames can certainly build arguments and produce meaning through narrative, language, and images, their processes make them different from other forms. Consequently, when locating the particular kinds of meaning specific to the medium, videogames' material processes should be privileged.[17] As Galloway develops in his theory of gamic action, there are four domains where such processes take place: diegetic and nondiegetic operator acts, and diegetic and nondiegetic machine acts.[18] When a game runs, a variety of actions take place. The player or operator of the game acts in the diegetic space of the game; they manipulate nondiegetic menus and icons; machine actions occur in the diegetic world of the game; and the running processes of the machine affect gameplay nondiegetically. The intersection between operator and machine, between the gameworld's diegesis and the nondiegetic acts of menus, pauses, and glitches, are where arguments are made and where meaning occurs in videogames. Thus it is at the intersection of machinic and player

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[15] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2, 3, emphases in original.

[16] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 9, second emphasis mine.

[17] For a further methodological formulation of proceduralism, see Michael Mateas and Noah Wardrip-Fruin, "Defining Operational Logics," in *DiGRA '09—Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice, and Theory* (2009), http://www.digra.org/digital-library/ publications/defining-operational-logics/. For a critique of proceduralism (that in some ways rehearses the old "non-debate" between ludology and narratology in videogame studies), see Miguel Sicart, "Against Procedurality," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 2011), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap. For a response to Sicart and a further refinement of Bogost's ideas, see Mike Treanor and Michael Mateas, "An Account of Proceduralist Meaning," in *DiGRA '13—Proceedings of the 2013 DiGRA International Conference 2013: DeFragging Game Studies* (2014), http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/an-account-of-proceduralist-meaning/; and Charles J. Pratt, "Players Not Included," *Game Design Advance* (blog), January 11, 2012, http://gamedesignadvance.com/?p=2409.

[18] See Galloway, *Gaming*, esp. 1–38.

actions where the art unique to videogames happens. If videogames produce a self-reflexivity specific to their medium, a metatextuality distinct from the achievements of postmodern art, it follows that it will be found in the ways their machinic and operational procedures reflect upon themselves, in their *metaproceduralism*.

The Stanley Parable is a clear example of a game that is about its own processes. It opens with a narrator telling the player that "this is the story of a man named Stanley. 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."[19] Before the game even begins, the game's dry, witty narrator informs the player that the protagonist's job is procedural. Like the player herself, Stanley sits in front of a computer terminal pushing buttons when "orders came to him . . . telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order." By pushing certain buttons in certain ways based upon machinic input, Stanley's job, like his operator, is to play a videogame (albeit a rather boring one).

> And then one day, something very peculiar happened, something that would forever change Stanley, something he would never quite forget. He had been at his desk for nearly an hour when he realized that not one, single order had arrived on the monitor for him to follow. No one had shown up to give him instructions, call a meeting, or even say hi. Never in all his years at the company had this happened, this complete isolation. Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time, but as he came to his wits and regained his senses, he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office.

The crisis underlying the narrative gambit of *The Stanley Parable* is a moment of systemic breakdown. The normal actions Stanley takes day in and day out cease, and the consequences of this, the narrator tells us, are not only existentially devastating to Stanley, threatening his very *raison d'être*, but they cause the entire community of workers around him to disappear. In moving between nondiegetic machine actions—the narrator's opening monologue, the booting and loading screens, the camera movement into the first person point of view (POV)—and the possibility of diegetic player action, the game enacts a transition between labor and play, between one type of procedure and another. The failure of Stanley's automated labor opens up the space for something else. As so many in the overdeveloped world use computers for more and more of life's activities, from labor and communication to leisure and entertainment, the game encourages reflection on the

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[19] *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013). Hereafter, when it is not obviously clear from the context of the quotation, this work will be cited parenthetically as *TSP*.

ubiquity of computational procedurality, the frequency with which people in the twenty-first century *push buttons*, and, ultimately, the possibility for other types of button pushing, for (critical) play. *The Stanley Parable* also acknowledges its *own* processes and machinic actions. As the operator is probably using their laptop—the same device with which they send emails, write essays using Microsoft Word, view portable document files in Adobe Acrobat, et cetera—the opening scene establishes a transition in the machine itself. The dull everydayness of using the computer as a tool dissolves, and its aesthetic and imaginative capacities assert themselves.

But the game does not allow us to linger for long in this space of utopian free play and imaginative possibility. Rather, as the player begins to wander through the empty office, the "immaculate, beautifully constructed" (*TSP*) employee lounge, and a meeting room cleverly satirizing office life, it becomes apparent that *The Stanley Parable* questions whether there is really any difference between digital labor and play, and if anything like a real "choice" can exist—and thus a real "action"—within the algorithmic confines of a videogame. Having navigated the first few rooms of the game, the narrator informs the player, "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors he entered the door on his left." Here, it seems, is a moment of choice, a *peripeteia* where the actions of the player will be, in some way, meaningful. The player can choose to follow the narrator's directive, obeying the call of the story and be its proper protagonist. Or the player can choose the door on the right, disobeying the past tense indicative of the narrator by following their own whims and desires, participating in that common rebellious urge to play videogames in ways other than they were intended, asserting their free will to explore the boundaries of the game's architecture. The choice, of course, is a false one. The game's mechanics allow Stanley to wander through the right door and to keep disobeying the narrator as Stanley's operator sees fit, just as much as it allows for the "correct" choice (but not, say, jumping through the ceiling). As so often throughout *The Stanley Parable*, the game's simple processes are presented as a choice between one action and another, which serves to put the game's proceduralism front and center in all of the game's scenarios.

Consequently, the game subtly emphasizes that choice is possible only because of the game's narrative architecture. (The game has even anticipated the Bartlebian stance of choosing not to, of actively deciding not to play the game: if a player stops playing for five years and returns, they will earn the achievement, "Go Outside.") The narrator could just as easily say, "Stanley chose fish," in terms of the mechanics of choosing one door or another, but drawing the player's

Figure 1. "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors he entered the door on his left" (*The Stanley Parable*, [Galactic Cafe, 2013]). Screen capture.

attention to their control over Stanley's actions makes it seem, at the level of narrative diegesis, that within the game's code, free will, play, rebellion, and other unforeseen actions are possible. As the player begins to be shuttled from one set of choices to another, however—each branching decision tree following a narrative line to a different ending and then restarting to the beginning of the game—it quickly becomes apparent that the myth so many contemporary videogames sell themselves upon, the seeming ability to do *anything* (e.g., in *Grand Theft Auto V* [2013] or *Fallout 4* [2015]), is just that, a myth.[20] *The Stanley Parable*, by paring down the possibility for action, draws procedural attention to the limits of its form. Just as metafiction plays with the limitations of language to represent or project a world, the game plays with the procedural limitations of videogames to *enact* a world. The game also makes clear that, for meaningful play to occur, there must be coherent boundaries within which action can take place. Just as a sonnet achieves its power through the limitations of lineation, meter, and rhyme, so too does a videogame achieve aesthetic

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[20] For Pugh and Wreden's response to the demand for total freedom to exist in videogames, see stanleyparable, "*The Stanley Parable* 'Raphael Trailer,'" YouTube, July 29, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZ-IcS7mRSk.

complexity by the decisions it makes to draw boundaries within which play can occur.[21] (To ask for an unbounded videogame, a game in which any and all actions are possible, is to fundamentally misunderstand the materiality of the medium, or indeed, of any medium.)

Perhaps the most procedurally complex moment in the game is also one of its most humorous and tedious. If the player chooses to continually ignore the narrator, jumping off an elevator onto a catwalk, departing from the obvious choices with increased abandon, the game will (unsurprisingly) begin to directly comment on its own status *as* a game, reflecting on Stanley's seeming dissatisfaction with following the narrator's scripted story. At one point, the narrator will try to construct a game Stanley might actually like, and then subjects him to perhaps one of the most obnoxious videogames ever created. The game is simple. To the right of the screen is a baby who is crawling toward flames on the left side of the screen. In the middle is a button that, if Stanley pushes it, will reset the baby to the right side of the screen. Most players, I imagine, spend a few moments pushing the button. Their affective heartstrings are briefly tugged by not wanting to let (an obvious cardboard cutout of) an infant painfully burn to death. Clearly, saving the baby is meant to draw upon the heroic pathos of one of the more common videogame scenarios: saving some innocent non-player character. But the baby is also loudly and annoyingly crying, and each push of the button is accompanied by its own grating sound, so after a few button pushes, rather than be subjected to a cacophonous racket, players probably happily (if grudgingly) sacrifice the child to the flames.

Here one might comment upon how the game procedurally enacts the inevitability of death, the futility of trying to ultimately keep one's child from harm, and the annoying reality of other people's children crying in public spaces. As the narrator tells Stanley, "It's a very meaningful game. All about the desperation and tedium of endlessly confronting the demands of family life. I think the art world will really take notice. But of course, the message of the game only becomes clear once you've been playing it for about four hours." And this is indeed the case. If the player

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[21] Indeed, for theorists of play, boundaries have long been important. For example, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1950; Boston: Beacon, 1955), esp. 9–10.
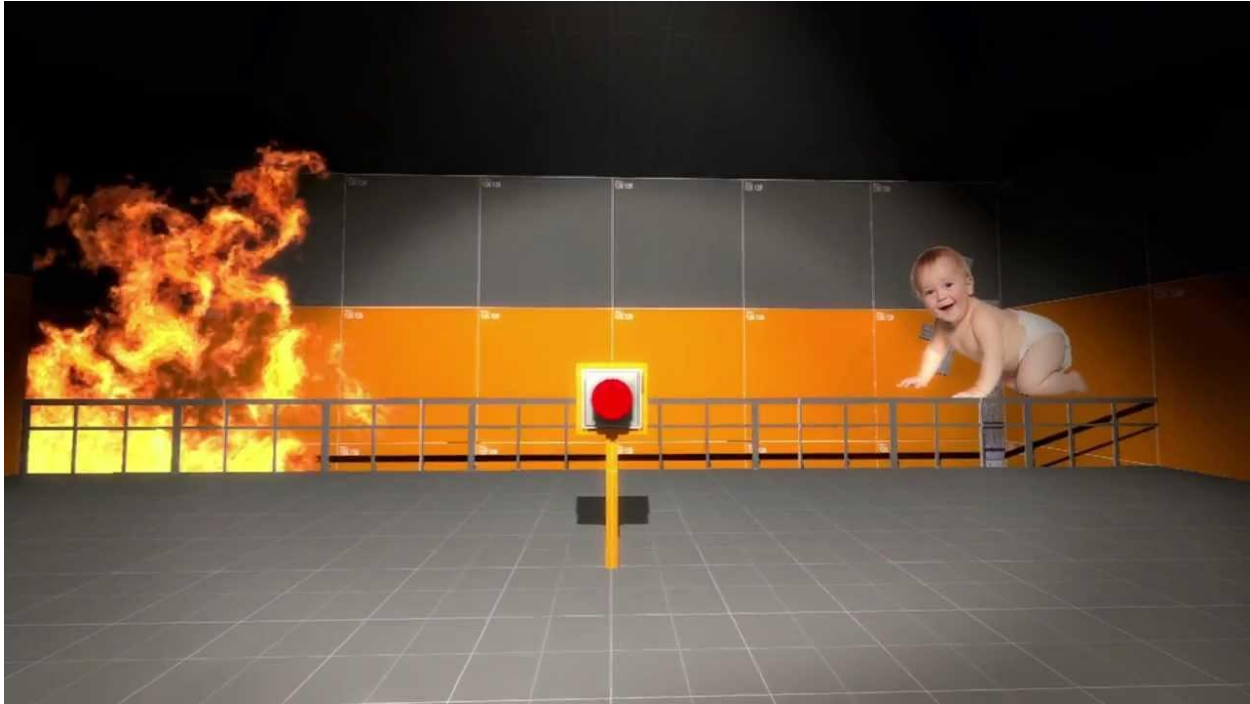
Figure 2. The baby game in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013). Screen capture.

pushes the button for *two* hours, two tedious, embattled, wretched, ear-splitting hours, then another button appears that prevents a cardboard cutout of a puppy from dropping into a tank of piranhas. The player then has to move back and forth, pushing one button and then the other, heroically saving infant and canine, over and over and over again for two more hours.[22]

During this entire process, the narrator eggs Stanley on. At first, he questions if the player is actually pushing the button: "I find it hard not to believe you're simply running a program to click the button over and over automatically. Which kind of ruins the point of the game, don't you think? Wouldn't that take the art out of it?" The game acknowledges that its procedures are so mundane and repetitive that they probably can and should be automated. But this would defeat the entire purpose of the game, according to the narrator, as it is clearly the *player's action* of pushing the buttons over and over—rather than any machinic actions that are taking place—which make this a meaningful task. At another moment, the narrator positively assesses the player's commitment to pushing buttons, saying, "You're here for the game! For the art! for the endlessly spiraling sense of pointlessness and despair! Yes, this is what drives your every action! Keep

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[22] For a dramatically shortened version of the four hour baby game, see dustily, "*The Stanley Parable*: Baby Game Ending," YouTube, October 19, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7GAtSIy4-w.

clicking that button! For hope! For freedom! For science! For love! Don't ever, ever stop!" And finally, upon introducing the puppy, "This is it Stanley, art! I did it! Video games are art! Ah, but you have a good two hours or so to go, so I'll just let you get to that."

Obviously the game suggests that the narrator's declaration about the player's profound aesthetic button-pushing achievement—and the subsequent ending where the player will encounter a white screen and a black monolith, "the essence of divine art," with whom they will "dance and eat and sin and . . . will do improv comedy based on suggestions from [it] for all eternity" (*TSP*)—to be read as sarcastically as possible. At the end of the day, videogames, these fantasies of heroism, dominance, and violence, are really just repetitive, pointless button pushing; they provide false and empty goals of narrative completion, primarily played by the emotionally and intellectually stunted. No matter how shiny any particular title may be, or how thoughtfully constructed, a game's operator is really doing nothing more than mindlessly pushing buttons within the confines of an arbitrarily constructed sense of an ending (when, I mean, let's face it, they could be doing something else). How absurd would it be to call such an activity *art*? How absurd that people who play videogames pour in such repetitive hours of gameplay in order to reach some usually rather disappointing "end"? In other words, the sarcasm of the "Art Ending" signals a familiar culturally conservative response to videogames. As Roger Ebert and others used to think,

> I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.[23]

Though he never comes out and explicitly says it, Ebert dismisses videogame creators from the pantheon of writers, directors, and musicians on *procedural* grounds. Because videogame creators make games, because they make something whose primary goal is to occupy and entertain through repetitive action, they do not fit within Ebert's modernist aesthetics. Ebert values drama, fiction, television, film, and music, forms that require phenomenological attention, objects whose

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[23] Roger Ebert, "Why Did the Chicken Cross Genders?" *Movie Answer Man*, November 27, 2005, http://www. rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders. Ebert later revised his dismissal slightly, in "Video Games Can Never Be Art," *Roger Ebert's Journal*, April 16, 2010, http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art, and "Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn," *Robert Ebert's Journal*, July 1, 2010, http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/okay-kids-play-on-my-lawn.

representations must be passively perceived over a period of time. Ebert fails to understand that games are not primarily visually or linguistically mimetic, and the most interesting questions about them may have little to do with traditional mimesis at all. The "Art Ending," through proceduralism more than representation, achieves what Ebert demands of art. For instance, it allows players to think about the monotonously annoying banalities of adult life and parental responsibility. Further, I know *The Stanley Parable*, in whatever small degree, has increased *my* capacity for empathy: I will maybe give people a bit more slack the next time I hear a crying baby or a barking dog.[24] I also perhaps feel a bit more cultured because I have had a chance to dwell upon what art is or might be and compare videogames to great novels (and how the baby game's difficulty might also be making fun of the vaunted "difficulty" of modernism).

In many ways, then, *The Stanley Parable* allows its operator to aesthetically inhabit proceduralism, to metatextually get inside how meaning is made through even the most simple of gamic actions: pushing buttons. Discussing other art games such as *Braid* (2008), *The Marriage* (2006), and *Passage* (2007), Bogost argues that what he calls proceduralist games—as distinct from procedural rhetoric—do "not argue a position but rather characterize an idea. These games say something about how an experience of the world works, how it feels to experience or to be subjected to some sort of situation."[25] *The Stanley Parable* has something to say about how an experience of *videogames* feels, about how videogames work. For Ebert, of course games cannot be meaningful because pushing buttons cannot be meaningful. Perhaps for a conservative, modernist, pre-digital consciousness, games cannot help but seem mindless. The very thing that defines the material specificity of the medium—the fact that videogames depend on *action*—formally negates any aspiration videogames would have toward art; in Ebert's view, the best *Super Mario Bros.* can aspire to be is *craft*. (This is also the perspective that leads culturally conservative politicians to blame mass-shootings on violent videogames rather than easy access to guns.) But viewed metaprocedurally, and despite *The Stanley Parable*'s sarcastic, self-aware narrator, button pushing in the game *is* aesthetically meaningful. Four hours of obnoxious repetition, of screaming and barking and the constant threat of failure cannot help but evoke considerable affect from players, and can potentially inspire in them care, empathy, and intellectual contemplation (and

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[24] In this, I think *The Stanley Parable* shares something with David Foster Wallace's "Keynote Commencement Address," Kenyon College, May 21, 2005, http://web.archive.org/web/20080213082423/http://www.marginalia.org/dfw_kenyon_commencement.html.

[25] Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 14.

perhaps even some powerfully negative feelings). Such an aesthetic perception, somewhat like meditation, can only be achieved in the player at a kinetic, bodily level, the level of thumbs pushing buttons over and over and over. Thus, even though the narrator drips sarcasm when he claims that videogames are art, we should also take him seriously: repetitive actions between the machine and player are where the art of videogames occurs.

But I should also be clear, even more than it creatively inhabits proceduralism, *The Stanley Parable* encourages players to critique and question it. Because of the recursive nature of metafictional irony, postmodern literature excelled at calling itself into question. Like books such as Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler* (1979), Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), or Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), *The Stanley Parable* questions its own forms in a variety of ways. It directly and cleverly references other experimental videogames such as *Minecraft* (2009) and *Portal* (2007). It also ironically addresses a number of videogame conventions: it exposes the overwhelmingly widespread banality of typical videogame narratives in the "Life Ending"; it makes fun of the contemporary obsession with leaderboards; it dispenses with the need for a coherent narrative storyline; it challenges the illusion of choice within proceduralism; it questions the link between the operator and Stanley until it dissolves; it parodies the silliness of endings where pushing a button will shut down a machine; it visualizes the panoptic surveillance of massively multiplayer games; it complexly explores the convention of the unreliable narrator; it lampoons entering secret codes; and it treats the notion of videogame "achievements" as absurd. *The Stanley Parable* is the contemporary independent videogame avant-garde's most clear critical reflection on itself. Its autocritique lays bare the medium and its conventions in what can often be unflattering ways, treating videogames with a merciless yet playful irony.

This is most clear in how *The Stanley Parable* understands *play*, the activity where metaproceduralism most significantly departs from metafiction. Waugh says that for metafiction "play is a relatively autonomous activity but has a definite value in the real world. Play is facilitated by rules and roles, and metafiction operates by exploring fictional rules to discover the role of fictions in life. It aims to discover how we each 'play' our realities."[26] Metafiction reflects on

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[26] Waugh, 35.

mimesis and how we go about representing our realities with language in different ways, which means that play, within its scope, is always already tied to language and particularly to *writing*. One of the clearest realities that much metafiction responds to, like *The Stanley Parable,* is "to the sense of oppression by the endless systems and structures of present-day society—with its technologies, bureaucracies, ideologies, institutions, and traditions," and in the face of such postmodern systems, metafiction constructs grammatological systems, "a play world which consists of similar endless systems and structures."[27] What Tom LeClair calls the "systems novel" exceled not only at playing with and within linguistic signs, but at creating endless systems itself.[28] For much late-twentieth-century thinking, seen perhaps most clearly in Jacques Derrida's famous discussion of the endless play of signs in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1967), play was something to celebrate, one of the few positive aspects of poststructuralism and postmodernism alike, with critical powers that include expanding consciousness, critiquing ideology, and rubbing history against the grain.[29] As David Foster Wallace suggests, metafiction's ironic free play (before it was institutionalized by television and the culture industry) was capable of "explod[ing] hypocrisy" in the postwar US.[30] Sprawling systems novels such as William Gaddis's *J R* (1975), Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), or Wallace's own *Infinite Jest* (1996), all mobilize the technological sublime to critique the enframing of humans, American exceptionalism, and the brink of technological suicide the species teeters upon (among many other things). That this was done ironically through reproducing systemic,

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[27] Ibid., 38.

[28] See Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and *The Art of Excess: Mastery in Contemporary American Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989). Or consider McCaffery on Barthelme, Coover, and Gass: "We find that all develop basically the same pattern: a central character is presented who is lonely, alienated, disaffected, skeptical; these characters also feel themselves victimized by a repressive, cold social order to such an extent that their lives seem meaningless, drab, fragmented; in response to this powerful sense of personal isolation and violation, these characters decide to create or invent a system of meaning which will help to supply their lives with hope, order, possibly even some measure of beauty" (McCaffery, 4). This, to my mind, seems like it describes *The Stanley Parable* quite well.

[29] Recall Derrida's discussion of play: "But nontotalization can also be determined in another way: no longer from the standpoint of a concept of finitude as relegation to the empirical, but from the standpoint of the concept of *play*. If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions" (Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], 289). For a thorough discussion of the intellectual history of play and the intersection between games and literature, see Ensslin, *Literary Gaming*, esp. 19–36.

[30] Wallace, 66.

hyperarchival documentation and representation was the whole point of such encyclopedic tomes.[31] Consequently, it is tempting to suggest that *The Stanley Parable*, in its systemic play, its critique of bureaucracy, and its exposure of the mechanical underbelly of semiotic systems, revives postmodernism's utopian possibility of free play in videogames, as well as the possibility that they might be leveraged against, rather than continue being symptoms of, the informatics of life in the digital age. In other words, *The Stanley Parable*'s self-reflexivity relies upon the feeling that when a player boots it up, they have left the repetitive, reifying space of machinic labor and entered the anarchic space of play and utopian possibility.

But of course the "Art Ending" resembles *labor* far more than it does play, as does most of the game, truthfully. Whether we are talking about metafictional or about poststructural play, as Galloway points out, "although it is one of his most prized pieces of terminology, Derrida doesn't as much say what play is as use the concept of play to explain the nature of something else, namely, the structure of language."[32] Consequently, when we talk about play in an action-based, procedural medium, it should not be surprising that play, and thus self-reference (and perhaps even irony), work differently than in written language. Play in videogames more fundamentally serves to shed light on other structures, namely a game's processes. Furthermore, as "play" is the word most often used to describe the simple act of operating a videogame, play should not only be understood in terms of possibility, but in terms of *control*. Videogames, at their very heart, work differently than novels because code *runs*, it is *actionable*, which is materially different from written or spoken English.[33] Though it is certainly celebrating play in a variety of ways, *The Stanley Parable* also notably succeeds in demonstrating and critiquing the relationship between labor and play in the overdeveloped world of the twenty-first century. To follow Waugh, of course the game "plays" with "reality" to make us think about the mimetic correspondence of the virtual game to the real world—i.e., games more and more resemble real life—but its metaprocedural play also makes

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[31] On the encyclopedic novel, see Mark Greif, "'The Death of the Novel' and Its Afterlives: Toward a History of the 'Big, Ambitious Novel,'" *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 11–30. For my discussion of the large postmodern novel, and particularly *Infinite Jest*, see Bradley J. Fest, "The Inverted Nuke in the Garden: Archival Emergence and Anti-Eschatology in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *boundary 2* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 125–49; for further discussion of massive textual objects, see Bradley J. Fest, "Toward a Theory of the Megatext: Speculative Criticism and Richard Grossman's '*Breeze Avenue* Working Paper,'" in *Size and Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg (forthcoming).

[32] Galloway, *Gaming*, 27.

[33] For more on this issue, see David Golumbia, "Code Is Not Speech," *Uncomputing* (blog), April 13, 2016, http://www.uncomputing.org/?p=1716.

clear that the reverse is becoming increasingly true: in twenty-first-century control societies, the real has transformed into what McKenzie Wark calls *gamespace*. In the digital age,

> Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play. Play outside of work found itself captured by the rise of the digital game, which responds to the boredom of the player with endless rounds of repetition, level after level of difference as more of the same. Play no longer functions as a foil for critical theory. The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life.[34]

No matter how playful and ironic, irreverent and silly, *The Stanley Parable* never lets the player forget how play and labor have become blurred within the ubiquitous contemporary logic of computation and the spread of endless microlabor to every corner of their online existence. In so many ways, the game rigorously resists the ideological fantasy of perceiving videogames as limitless utopian sandboxes. It understands that to approach the form in such a way, unintentionally or not, endorses an exceptionalist view of the world that unproblematically values the new creative and "slash" economic realities of the twenty-first century and perpetuates a neoliberal fantasy of a world with infinite natural resources.[35] And to its unending credit, *The Stanley Parable* emphasizes how the player herself is problematically complicit with the production and maintenance of the algorithmic logic of the present, what Gilles Deleuze famously calls the "control society."[36]

For it is no accident that one of the "central" rooms of *The Stanley Parable* is a vast panopticon and that to "win" the game Stanley must turn off a Mind Control Facility.[37] Stanley is a digital subject, an individual constructed by how he is plugged into the distributed networks of contemporaneity. He is algorithmically measured and controlled by the ubiquitous informatic surveillance systems surrounding him. Just as the big data projects of Apple, Amazon, Google, or

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[34] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), §16. For more on the gamification of twenty-first-century life, see Patrick Jagoda, "Gamification and Other Forms of Play," *boundary 2* 40, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 113–44. And for a discussion about the divergence of labor and play in contemporary videogames, see David Golumbia, "Games without Play," in "Play," special issue, *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 179–204.

[35] For further commentary on videogames and neoliberalism, see Bradley J. Fest, "Mobile Games, *SimCity BuildIt*, and Neoliberalism," *First Person Scholar* (forthcoming December 2016).

[36] See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," in *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughlin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 177–82. For one of the most fully developed analyses of the internet vis-à-vis Deleuze and control, see Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004). For my own reflections on control and the work of Galloway, see Bradley J. Fest, "Poetics of Control," review of *The Interface Effect*, by Alexander R. Galloway, *b2 Review*, July 15, 2015, http://boundary2.org/2015/07/15/poetics-of-control/.

[37] For an interesting take on panopticism and videogames, see Tom van Neunen, "Playing the Panopticon: Procedural Surveillance in *Dark Souls*," *Games and Culture* (February 2015): 1–18.

the National Security Administration attempt to track our every digital activity, such entities also want to be able to accurately predict how we will push buttons. *The Stanley Parable* begins in the dystopia so many games (and novels and films) have imagined: a world where humanity has become nothing more than reified automatons acting in the service of their nonhuman overlords,

Figure 3. Panopticism in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013). Screen capture.

batteries in a digital matrix, a world where every day a corporation *tells* Stanley "what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order." But unlike most videogames, in *The Stanley Parable* there is no messianic figure who can unironically overturn this logic and heroically change the course of history. Nor does there seem to be much room for collective action in the game either. It dispenses with the hero with a thousand faces and gives us one without any face at all. This is a lonely hero, wandering the nightmarish, Kafkaesque halls of the world's most existential office building, depopulated except for an unseen British man describing Stanley's actions and berating him when he chooses incorrectly. In a world of ubiquitous, rhizomatic, and free floating power and control, of distributed networks tracking our every movement through the decision-space of the real, *The Stanley Parable* asks what happens when the informatic logic of contemporaneity breaks down, what happens when a possibility might open up, a place where the procedures of

digital networks might be *exploited*, played with in a different way. Most importantly, the game asks how such things might occur.

Paul de Man once said, echoing Friedrich Schlegel, that

> The moment the innocence or authenticity of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart. The whole process happens at an unsettling speed. Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute.[38]

I think this is how we are encouraged to read Stanley's initial situation (and really, all the ways the game unravels tiny threads in absolute dimensions): the systems tying together the fabric of the meshwork of Stanley's digital environment fail *because of the introduction of postmodern irony and its historical transformation across different media*. William Pugh and Davey Wreden have adapted modes from cold war metafiction for use in videogames, and something happens when those modes make the tropological leap to a different, procedural medium. Oversimply, when one starts *The Stanley Parable*, the game not only introduces irony into videogames, but *enacts* irony into the logic of the computer. The game attempts to get action to do something other than what it is doing, code to run other than it is supposed to run, systems logically responding to input in ways other than designed. Of course, these kinds of things are impossible, except metaphorically, except in the *aesthetic* space of videogame action. Considered as a medium of possibility, the computer ceases to be a mindless, laborious, button pushing machine when *The Stanley Parable* is executed, and becomes "art," something else that, though it still involves endless button pushing, maybe will be not so mindless. In short, *The Stanley Parable* suggests that though the technological hyperspace of postmodernity may not be able to be represented without new modes of cognitive mapping, as Fredric Jameson once claimed, perhaps the gamespace of contemporaneity can be enacted differently because irony cannot be foreclosed in even the most algorithmic and process-based cultural artifacts.[39]

The button pushing regime of Stanley's that has been interrupted by the operator's choice to start the game is the result of Pugh and Wreden turning their eyes on the materiality of the

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[38] Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, rev. 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 215.

[39] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), esp. 37–38 and 44–54. For more on the (un)representability of the postmodern sublime and contemporary networks, see Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), esp. 19–29.

medium itself (something Wreden also does in the differently metaprocedural *Beginner's Guide* [2015]). And I think what has resulted is a notable achievement. *The Stanley Parable* aesthetically exploits the computational logic of contemporaneity; remarkably, it imagines other ways of being through using what, in another medium, seems a tired mode. We might say, then, that the adaptation of metafiction to techniques and processes unique to videogames results in *procedural irony*, allowing us to view videogames as not only symptoms of the US military-entertainment-industrial-complex, which they certainly are, but as potentially powerful vehicles for ironic engagement with contemporaneity.[40] I think *The Stanley Parable* also emergently signals that we need such artifacts, more objects capable of enacting what I have elsewhere called a "poetics of control."[41] The game's use of procedural irony encourages us to exploit the protocological systems of the present, to imagine the tools around us being used in different ways. That such a commentary on procedurality is also found in a richly complex game—about which there is more to say, not only about issues of representation, choice, subjectivity, and aesthetics, but about gender, class, intertextuality, history, game culture, Deleuzian control, et cetera—is a significant formal achievement. As it turns out, videogames have *a lot* (more) to learn from postmodern metafiction. They have learned that irony is a powerful tool for fighting implacably massive systems, for exploiting the flaws in those systems against themselves in endless recursive narrative feedback loops (which, of course, postmodernists originally learned from computers). But they have also learned about *fun*, and a different kind of fun than videogames traditionally claim to participate in and perpetuate. This perhaps cannot be overstressed. In a world where gamespace has permeated everything, the emergence of the metaproceduralist game may not only allow us to imagine the world differently, but at last also to have some fun doing so, to play in a way that, perhaps for a brief, dangerous flash, does not also feel like work.

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[40] I follow Terry Smith in his use of the term *contemporaneity* to describe the present moment after postmodernism. This is partly because I find it to be a nice "big tent" or "umbrella" term that is more elegant than "post-postmodernism," and partly for how it allows me to think about the impossibility of periodization in the "world as it is now. It is no longer 'our time,' because 'our' cannot stretch to encompass its contrariness. Nor is it a 'time,' because if the modern was inclined above all to define itself as a period, in contemporaneity periodization is impossible" (Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006], 9).

[41] See Fest, "Poetics of Control."

About the Author: Bradley J. Fest teaches at Carnegie Mellon University. At present he is working on *The Nuclear Archive: American Literature before and after the Bomb*, a book investigating the relationship between nuclear and information technology in twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States literature. His essays on contemporary literature have been published in *boundary 2*, *Critical Quarterly*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing"* (Bloomsbury, 2014), *The Silence of Fallout* (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), and *Studies in the Novel*; and new work on videogames and digital culture has appeared in *The b2 Review* and is forthcoming in *First Person Scholar*. He is also the author of a volume of poetry, *The Rocking Chair* (Blue Sketch, 2015), and a chapbook-length portfolio, "The Shape of Things," was selected as finalist for the 2015 Tomaž Šalamun Prize and is forthcoming in *Verse*. Other recent poems have appeared in *Empty Mirror*, *Masque & Spectacle*, *PELT*, *PLINTH*, *TXTOBJX*, and *Small Po[r]tions*. He blogs at *The Hyperarchival Parallax*.

Contact: bradfest@gmail.com