

**A Critical Analysis of the Role and Significance of Player Choices Within Videogame
Storytelling**

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the importance of player choices to a videogame narrative. I will consider how choices may affect the way these stories are structured, and what might be learned from this in order to create better videogame stories in the future. Through a consideration of the history of both digital stories and player choice, as well as a close analysis of two examples of narrative driven videogames, this paper will seek to gain a greater understanding of videogame narrative, and the essential role and input of the player.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter One: Introduction

When a player is asked in a videogame to make a choice (such as between two or more offered actions), they engage directly with the digital text by wielding a degree of authorial control over their videogame experience. This relationship of engagement between a player and narrative-driven videogames is an intrinsic part of the gaming experience. After all, if a player wants to experience a narrative journey without interacting with the text at all, then there are other more 'passive' mediums, such as film, television, and literature, with which they could do so. Admittedly, current videogames still possess limitations in storytelling, falling short of the procedural narrative freedom that Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* describes in its early chapters. For Murray, *Star Trek's* fictional Holodeck provides the kind of total immersion and agency over a storyworld that digital interactive narratives may aspire to: 'a vision of the computer as a kind of storytelling genie in a lamp'.¹ Whilst the current state of technology limits videogame storytelling from reaching the full capabilities of the holodeck, choice remains an important and intrinsic part of their storytelling. The interactive element of videogames, or more specifically the opportunity for the player to impact the story world, provides a new tool by which creators can tell stories. Story-driven games are thus often constructed with choice in mind, designed end to end with the intention of including at least a few key moments of choice for their players.

In view of this importance of choice in story-driven videogames, my research question is: how does choice affect the way a story is constructed? The sub-question is: what can we learn from the inclusion of choices in order to craft better videogame stories?

In this thesis, I answer my research question through thinking about the role and significance of choices in videogame storytelling, and the ways in which the inclusion of these choices affect the crafting of stories in videogames. I will argue that choice becomes a tool to not only provide the player with a sense of authorial agency, but also enrich videogame narratives by enhancing their emotional impacts. Choice also forces players to think more critically about the key themes and ideas presented within the videogame's story, and to more deeply connect the player to their digital avatar. Through these arguments, I will demonstrate not only the way in which choices can be used to elevate story experiences, but also come to a deeper clarity and understanding of how choice may be deployed as a tool for constructing game stories. In the process, I will further draw insights into the construction of game stories themselves and understand the fundamental building blocks of videogame narratives.

¹ J. H. Murray, *Hamlet On The Holodeck : The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017. Print p. 17.

1.1 Methodology

I will support my argument through a review of relevant theory and two case studies. I first identified relevant theoretical concepts by researching the broad history of the narratological study of videogames and interactive media. I used Google Scholar as my primary search engine, whilst also searching particular search terms within the JSTOR database. These search terms consisted of keywords such as 'narratology', 'interactivity', 'meaning', and 'agency', most often paired with 'videogames' or 'interactive media'. I then gathered a shortlist of journal publications, articles, and digital presentations informed by reading through their abstracts to ensure the contents of each would be relevant to my research. From this reading, I was able to identify a range of sources concerned with interactive media theory, user agency, and meaningful choice. I also identified literature relating to the structure and capabilities of digital stories through the online university library catalogue.

To select my case studies, I first drew upon my own personal knowledge of critically acclaimed and popular story-driven videogame titles. I also researched the credentials of these games as choice-based narrative experiences through web reviews and articles by both videogame critics and players to establish the extent to which they were generally considered to be effective narrative experiences. I then narrowed down my choices to a shortlist, which included the episodic *Life is Strange*, the text-based adventure *Emily is Away*, *Undertale*, and *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*. I made this shortlist by examining the ways in which each game approached choice, and identifying which ones incorporated a range of different choices that would allow for depth of exploration into how they utilised user choice. Examples of such range of deployed choice include those with broad reaching narrative implications, those with little effect on the story, or choices clearly geared toward the emotive aspect of impact.

After playing through each shortlisted game, I finally selected the two games I will examine in this thesis -- *The Stanley Parable*² (hereafter "*TSP*") and *Oxenfree*.³ To study these two games, I played through both games multiple times, paying close attention to the different story paths, and noting examples where my choices affected the narrative progression of the game. With this information, I then used my review of existing scholarship surrounding digital media to engage with how choices are presented and executed within the two works, and how choice benefits their respective narratives.

Some elaboration and justification for my choices: an independent game that won several awards and accolades upon its original release in 2011, I chose *TSP* due to its prominence as a prime example noted and praised for its wry meta commentary on choice, agency, and free will.⁴ It is a self-referential work which deconstructs game narrative itself, and in which the designers

² *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

³ *Oxenfree*, Night School Studio, 2016.

⁴ B. Fest, 'Metaproceduralism: The Stanley Parable and the Legacies of Postmodern Metafiction' in *Wide Screen* Vol. 6, No.1, September 2016, p.2.

interrogate the very meaning of what it is to be a player engaging in acts of play and the extent to which that individual has control over the game space. Furthermore, *TSP* encourages multiple playthroughs by design, with some choices resulting in the player having to start over, or to retrace their steps through the level in the hope of ‘winning.’ In the end, in a game that is more about the meaning of choice and free will, there is really no state of winning. *TSP* thus has no true ending in that sense. I believe this is an interesting and novel approach to thinking about story in videogames, in the sense that videogames usually provide a sense of player satisfaction and closure from overcoming the challenges posed by the game. *TSP* subverts this expectation in favour of its commentary on game narrative and the player’s place within the story. As such, I found it a fascinating candidate for my case study.

My second case study is *Oxenfree*, a short horror game where the player must navigate an apparently haunted island whilst protecting both themselves and their group of friends. *Oxenfree* engages with the emotional aspect of the player making choices with their avatar bearing the consequences of that decision; they thus ‘unlock a new set of emotional possibilities.’⁵ My reasons for choosing *Oxenfree* are twofold. Firstly, the idea of choice informs the entirety of the game’s dialogue, without requiring a pause or break in gameplay whilst the player decides which option to choose. This is because if the player fails to decide within a relatively short time window, NPCs will respond as if they have ignored the question (which the player technically has). It is an interesting and clever piece of design that elevates choice as a key component of the game, as it prevents the player from causing extended periods of silence during gameplay, which would likely break their immersion. Secondly, as I will argue, *Oxenfree* heavily utilises emotion and empathy in order to engage their players. As I progressed through the game, I could not help but start to care deeply about the characters who populate *Oxenfree*’s world. Whilst there are a number of games that use dialogue to allow players to engage with choices, I found *Oxenfree*’s dialogue system to feel relatively naturalistic when playing, with conversations flowing organically around the choices I made. While still scripted and limited to three or four choices, the dialogue options presented to me thus felt freer than other dialogue-centric choice games I had played, and allowed for a more immersive experience in the game story.

I thus present critical analyses of these two videogames as case studies which explore two distinct approaches to player choice. Whilst *Oxenfree* is primarily concerned with wielding choices for emotional and dramatic effect, *TSP* is more interested in deconstructing the notion of choice itself within videogames. The player is presented with several choices, whilst being asked to reflect on the nature and implications of the choices they make. By contrast, *Oxenfree* invites players to make choices and therefore draws players into the story world, ensuring full emotional immersion in the game. In my analyses, I extrapolated unusual ways in which they include player choice, and analysed their narratological advantages. My aim is to use these analyses to better understand the effectiveness and role played by key choices in the games. This will inform my

⁵ K. Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion By Design*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2017, p.2.

understanding of the basic construction of game stories, and allow me to draw conclusions on the significance and role played by the inclusion of the choice mechanic.

By studying player choices and observing the role of choice within the case studies above, my thesis thus reports insights with which to answer my research question by understanding how the inclusion of player choices has a bearing on story, and using this information to gain a deeper understanding of videogame narrative structures.

1.2 Significance of Research

The significance of my research in this thesis lies in understanding more fully the implications of player choices in relation to story. Branching narrative structures in contemporary storytelling and games with narratively compelling side quests and missions are now mainstream. For example, in 2018 Netflix released *Bandersnatch*, a ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ style episode of the television series *Black Mirror*. Whilst interactive viewing experiences predate *Bandersnatch* by over half a century (the history of which I will discuss in section 2.1), *Bandersnatch* was a viral success for Netflix. Ng argues that *Bandersnatch*’s strength lies in its ability to harness modern technology for the purpose of storytelling, where Netflix’s programming allows *Bandersnatch* to deliver a ‘seamless experience of processing and presenting branching story paths for individual viewing experiences’.⁶ It is clear that, particularly with advancement of technology and distribution systems, the ‘choose-your-own-adventure’ format continues to flourish, providing more compelling and complex stories than ever before. Despite this trend, there has been little written specifically on *the act of choosing* within videogames specifically. As game narrative becomes a discipline of game development that is respected in its own right, it becomes important to engage more critically with ideas pertaining to choice in order to better understand the games that we make and play.

I have thus elected to explore this research area to shed light on the fundamentals of choice in game narrative, and to better understand the meaning and construction of compelling choices in meaningful videogame storytelling.

1.3 Thesis Outline

My thesis will proceed as follows. In Chapter 2, I turn to the history of interactivity in media, with a focus on screen-based digital texts. In this discussion, I lay a foundation for understanding the principles of choice and interactivity in media, and the way that these can be applied to videogame choices specifically. I also explore how videogame choices have evolved and

⁶ J. Ng, ‘Bandersnatch is just the start – the next big thing in interactive media is AI storytelling’, *The Conversation*, 2019 <https://theconversation.com/bandersnatch-is-just-the-start-the-next-big-thing-in-interactive-media-is-ai-storytelling-109830> accessed 12/1/2021.

developed to be a fundamental element of play. I will then discuss videogame choices more broadly, exploring what renders player choices as 'meaningful', and what players may come to expect from a so-called story driven or narrative based game.

Once this groundwork is laid, I will then turn to my two case studies in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. Chapter 3 focuses on agency and autonomy within a scripted game environment, and deals with the questions raised by *The Stanley Parable's* metacommentary. I will engage with the impact that this has upon the player experience, and explore the relationship between the player and the videogame text. In Chapter 4, I will give consideration to the role of choice in constructing an emotional experience, as well as how choice may be employed in order to drive or alter narrative progression. Chapter 5 concludes.

Chapter Two

The Role and Mechanic Of Choice in Interactive Media

In this chapter, I explore the extent to which player choices provide a means by which players may become co-participants, and lead into a discussion of when and how games may employ the use of choice to strengthen the narrative experience. Specifically, this chapter aims to define what “choice” might mean in narrative-driven videogames, and discusses the architecture of these playable stories and the role that interactivity occupies within them.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In 2.1, I will look at the history of choices in screen media, including the notable examples of *Kinoautomat* and *Bandersnatch*. The aim is to examine how these different media formats approach choice in storytelling in comparison to videogames. In 2.2, I focus on the significance of choices in videogames, and discuss what it means to view a choice as ‘meaningful.’ Leading from this, 2.3 will focus on how choice can function as a compelling narrative building block in videogame design.

2.1: A Brief History Of Choice In Screen Media

Invitation for audience participation in mediated choices can be seen in public spectacle and performance as far back as the Roman era, where an audience would vote by *pollice verso* in order to pass judgement on a gladiator after combat.⁷ In literature, the publication of the first ‘choose your own adventure’ novels in 1979 proved hugely popular, with the publisher Bantam selling over 250 million copies in the following 20 years or so.⁸ Readers would navigate the book, written in the second-person, by choosing from a set of options presented to them and skipping through the text to the page number corresponding to said choice.

Audience choice also appears in live theatre and performance. For instance, in contemporary theatre, Augusto Boal’s radically political ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ terms audience members of Forum theatre as ‘spect-actors’ due to their ability to both observe and drive dramatic progress.⁹ These ‘spect-actors’ are given agency to both stop and change the play at will, thus making them fundamental to the performance. Even modern pantomime encourages audience participation by way of jeering at the villains and shouting answers to questions posed by the performers.

With the advent of projection, broadcast and computer technologies, creators bring interactivity and choice out of theatre and literature, and onto the screen via cinema, television,

⁷ Juvenal "Juvenal and Persius/The Satires of Juvenal/Satire 3", translated by George Gilbert Ramsay (1839–1921), *Wikisource*, 27 Jul. 2021. accessed 14 Dec. 2021.

⁸ S. Lodge, "Chooseco Embarks on Its Own Adventure". *Children's Bookshelf - Publishers Weekly*, 1/18/2007 <https://web.archive.org/web/20071009094529/http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6408126.html> accessed 25/06/2021.

⁹ A. Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, London, New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 243.

and videogames. Whether by a democratic audience vote or an individual decision to be made between two or more presented options, onscreen interactive narratives place some degree of narrative agency in the hands of the audience, allowing them to participate in or co-author a text. Nash's research on the purpose of interactivity in web-documentary supports this notion. In her work, she discusses Carpentier's framework¹⁰ for thinking about how audiences may engage both 'in and through documentary, seeking to achieve their own social goals through participation'.¹¹ Namely, interactivity is 'not as determined by technology, programming, production, and authorial "permission" to alter the text, but [...] as a means or desire to co-participate in the textuality of the text, in its narrative.'¹² On this similar theme of the audience's co-participation, Weinbren argues that 'one of the aspirations of an interactive cinema is to return the medium to an earlier state, where the fact that the audience can affect the performance is a given.'¹³ For Weinbren, 'risk of variability is an essential ingredient of the thrill of "live" performance', and theatre audiences are aware of the power that they possess (consider pantomime, or the audience loudly declaring their belief in fairies to prevent Tinkerbell's death in stage performances of *Peter Pan*).¹⁴ Weinbren thus argues that integrating choices specific to the structure of stories in cinema and computer systems and thereby introducing the element of variability means that Aristotelian ideas pertaining to narrative forms must therefore be re-thought.¹⁵ The addition of a user who can impact a story - an unpredictable variable - means that traditional concepts such as crisis and conflict resolution, or even of a linear beginning, middle, and end, may no longer apply.

The earliest documented example of presented choices in screen media reflect precisely and ironically these ideas of audience power. I refer to the 1967 interactive film delivery system *Kinoautomat*, created in then-Czechoslovakia by Radúz Činčera and noted as the world's first interactive film. The term 'kinoautomat' refers generically 'to the combination of live actors, electronic voting buttons, a display board surrounding the projection screen (to show the truthfulness of the voting results) and the projected film itself.'¹⁶ Whilst traditionally 'the filmgoer cannot do anything to actively change the story' when observing a film, *Kinoautomat* presents a new type of cinema experience.¹⁷ Audiences would watch Činčera's film, *One Man and His House*, in which the protagonist faces a number of moral dilemmas and choices, and vote on

¹⁰ N. Carpentier. 2011. 'Contextualising Author-Audience Convergences.' *Cultural Studies* 25 (4 – 5): 517– 533, as cited in K. Nash, 'What is Interactivity For? The Social Dimension of Web-Documentary Participation,' *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (2014), p.384.

¹¹ K. Nash, 'What is Interactivity For?', 2014, p. 384.

¹² R. Cover, 'Audience inter/active: Interactive media, narrative control and reconceiving audience history', *New Media & Society*, 2006;8(1), p. 141.

¹³ G. Weinbren, 'Navigating the Ocean of Streams of Story', *Transmedia Frictions: The Digital, the Arts, and the Humanities*, ed. M. Kinder and T. McPherson, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

¹⁶ C. Hales, "Cinematic interaction: From kinoautomat to cause and effect", *Digital Creativity* 16:1, 2005, p. 58.

¹⁷ Ng, 'Fingers, Futures, Fates: Viewing Interactive Cinema in *Kinoautomat* and *Sufferosa*', in *Screening the Past*, Issue 32, 2011

<http://www.screeningthepast.com/issue-32-screen-attachment/fingers-futures-fates-viewing-interactive-cinema-in-kino-automat-and-sufferosa/> accessed 12/12/2021.

their preferred decision. With *Kinoautomat*, there is ‘the ability (or, at least, so perceived) to intervene and change the images *to produce an alternatively meaningful text* and to have that text reflected back to us.’¹⁸ Interactivity is integral to the very experience of the delivery system. The story of the film itself may be about a man and his apartment building, but the experience of *Kinoautomat* is structured around engaging with the idea of choice, and, being a work out of then-Communist Czechoslovakia, satirising the democratic process itself. Like a ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ novel, the significance of audience participation is immutable. Without an audience, *One Man and His House* is an incomplete text. The film requires audience participation in order to make sense.

For a contemporary example, the 2018 Netflix interactive film, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (hereafter “*Bandersnatch*” and as already mentioned above) harnesses the medium of choice to further drive home the narrative’s messages of individual autonomy and the concept of free will. Audiences are able to navigate through a series of different endings by choosing specific story paths on their respective viewing devices, and thus exert a degree of control over the narrative progression. For the creators of *Bandersnatch*, the decision to make the film an interactive piece with which their audience could engage was not a simple marketing gimmick. More importantly, the intention was to make their audience consider more deeply the messages and core themes of the narrative. In the same way that the audience were vital to *Kinoautomat* in order to arguably draw attention to the film’s commentary on then-Communist Czechoslovakia and the need for democracy, *Bandersnatch*’s audience are essential to the film’s handling of personal agency and free will.

What *Kinoautomat* and later interactive media brought to screen audiences was the irrevocable act of *choosing*. Interactive cinema presented its audience with a choice, and then rendered that choice irreversible. The audience could not simply go back and replay the scene differently by making different choices if the outcome was not to their liking, unless it is by design. Moreover, in the case of *Kinoautomat*, those choices had been made by democratic vote by the cinemagoers as a whole. Instead, their choice became a concrete and defining part of the cinema experience. Even if there was really only a set number of fixed outcomes, the act of choosing, as such, could not be dismissed as unimportant. To ‘do over’ would undermine the purpose of incorporating choice in the first place. It is the act of choosing, and not the literal narrative result of the choice itself, that is important here.

2.2: Choice as part of the videogame player’s experience

How then, might choices be employed to elevate a story? On its most basic level, choice presents the player a way of influencing the story in a way paramount to the nature of interactive storytelling. As Laurel writes, ‘designers and interactors co-create the whole action in intricate

¹⁸ Ng, “Fingers, Futures, Fates”, 2011.

ways, even though they are not literally co-present.¹⁹ I will now examine seven ways in which I argue choice becomes not only a significant part of the videogame player's experience, but also a means by which videogame creators can tell better and more compelling stories.

Firstly, I argue that the moment of decision is what is intrinsically important to the experience of viewing these works, and it is the making of those decisions that are meaningful in terms of the audience's experience of the story. As Salen and Zimmerman write, 'meaningful play emerges from the interaction between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played'.²⁰ In the same way, *Kinoautomat* and *Bandersnatch* (as mentioned) revolve around *the act of choosing*. The 'meaningfulness' of choice in videogames thus does not lie in how the choice will affect the way in which the player will progress through the game space. Rather, it is in how the player uses the choice to hold a conversation with the game itself, during which they surrender a degree of agency in order to undergo an emotive experience. This idea of conversation resonates with Jon Ingold's, founder of narrative games studio Inkle, position that rather than creating a 'blank slate' (such as an RPG, where the player is free to craft their character's appearance, personality and sometimes their motives), it is far more interesting to create a dialogue between player and game, and then unfold key plot points within these interactions.²¹ Ingold's aim is thus not to have the player be in control, an idea which he finds inherently flawed. Rather, according to Ingold, story games require the player to give up a little of their agency in order to experience the narrative the way that the creators intended. For this reason, the player's ability to choose a story path in a videogame does not always mean a complex narrative needs to be scripted with multiple strands and narrative branches. Instead, moments of tension and anticipation in these narrative games come from risk, whereby the player has no idea where their choices will lead. They may not create a whole new branch of the story, tailored to that specific individual's playthrough. However, unlike an RPG where it is fairly easy to identify the 'friendly', 'antagonistic', and 'ambivalent' choice, presenting story paths in a more subtle manner can create a richer story experience.

Secondly, videogames may interrogate questions surrounding the meaning and importance of the choices themselves, presenting choice as ideas beyond simplistic interactions across the game's interface. An example is *Undertale*,²² where a player who chooses to use violence in order to overcome enemies will have a dramatically different experience compared to a player who chooses peace. The former choice -- the so-called 'genocide' route -- defers 'most of the rewarding aspects that are present in neutral and pacifist routes'.²³ Instead, 'the genocide route punishes the player by making the game repetitive and boring: most of the dialogues

¹⁹ B. Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison-Wesley, 2014, p. 110.

²⁰ K. Salen and E. Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003, p. 33.

²¹ Writers Guild of Great Britain, 'Making Choices Matter in Videogames', *Youtube*, commentary by Jon Ingold, Feb 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHIBzdVpfNw> accessed 12/12/2021.

²² *Undertale*, Toby Fox 8-4, 2015.

²³ F. Seraphine, 'Ethics at Play in Undertale: Rhetoric, Identity and Deconstruction.' DiGRA Conference. 2018. p. 7, shorturl.at/wBZ29, accessed 14/11/2021.

disappear, the player spends their time only killing every character they meet, and many nonplayable characters (NPCs) have fled by fear of what the player might do to them'.²⁴ *Undertale* thus demands a kind of philosophical consideration of what it means to possess choice, and what it means to wield power and violence over a weaker enemy.²⁵

Thirdly, videogames may use choice to heighten a player's emotional involvement to a particular character. An example is *Emily is Away*.²⁶ *Emily is Away* allows the player to make several dialogue choices in holding a conversation with a close friend, who is the titular Emily. Over the course of the game, Emily drifts emotionally from the player, and the presentation of choice for the player makes the game all the more gut-wrenching when it transpires that the player is unable to preserve their relationship with Emily. Thus, I argue that the choices for the player are meaningful not because they open a new narrative route, but that they reveal the futility of recovering a relationship. This relationship is not restricted to that between the player and their character, but also between characters in the game. For instance, in the gameplay of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* ("TWD"), the player is often asked to choose how to interact with NPCs, or decide which of two NPCs to save in a given scenario. Notably, the game claims to remember the player's choices. On making certain choices, the notification appears: 'Clementine [a non-player character] will remember that'. The player's decisions thus influence other characters' perceptions of the player's character, changing the way in which the player's character forms relationships with NPCs around them, and in some instances even altering the narrative of future episodes. Returning to Salen and Zimmerman, choice and its meaning becomes 'more about the emotional and psychological experience of inhabiting a well-designed system of play'.²⁷ This idea lends further support to the argument that the extent to which videogame choices are meaningful need not be limited to choices which affect the narrative outcome. Instead, what we consider to be 'meaningful' can be the emotional effects out of character relationships that arise from the inclusion of choice events.

Fourthly, videogame creators may incorporate choice to create tough moral dilemmas that players will face, or to force players to choose between two equally heartbreaking options. One example is the choice presented to players in *The Walking Dead*²⁸ where Clementine, the player's avatar, is forced to either kill Lee (established in the first season as her father figure and friend), or allow him to turn into a zombie. Players are in effect being asked to consider which of the two choices are 'kinder'; there is no saving Lee in this scenario, and the player knows his fate is sealed either way. They do, however, retain some control over how his storyline is to end. In the face of such 'tough' choices, choice can thus be meaningful in how it evokes in a player feelings of pity, remorse, or regret. Marie-Laure Ryan writes that

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7.

²⁵ The enemies in *Undertale* are ultimately always weaker than the player character, and will always allow the player to defer violence if they choose the correct dialogues.

²⁶ *Emily is Away*, K. Seeley, 2015.

²⁷ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 2003, p. 34.

²⁸ *The Walking Dead*, Telltale Games, 2012-2018.

narrative has a unique power to generate emotions directed toward others. Aristotle paid tribute to this ability when he described the effect of tragedy as purification (catharsis) through feelings of terror and pity inspired by the fate of characters.²⁹

Choice in videogames can thus present these 'feelings of terror and pity' from players, heightened by players' knowledge that it was themselves that had a hand in the characters' said fate.

Fifthly, videogame designers may indeed include choices that lead the player down alternative narrative paths, such as *The Stanley Parable* (to be discussed in section 3). Or, players may retain choice over the order through which they explore the game's narrative. For example, in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the player unlocks their avatar, Link's, memories by completing various quests. In this way, they are able to uncover the details of what happened during the 'Great Calamity' one hundred years before, and understand Link's role and purpose in the overarching narrative. There is no set route that the player must traverse in order to unlock the memories. Yet, because the story revolves around Link piecing together his past, the order in which the player collects these memories does not affect the narrative experience. The inclusion of player choice always results in a definitive shift in the structure of the narrative. In giving the player a degree of control over the narrative, however small, the game creators invite them to fulfil a role as co-author of the narrative experience. In the same way that players relinquish certain autonomy in order to better inhabit their role within the game, as per Hocking's Ludic Contract,³⁰ so too do game creators give up a degree of narrative control over their creation. In including choices in videogames, creators accept that choices made by the player, however small, will mean a narrative experience that is unique to that player alone.

Sixthly, the meaningfulness of choices can also be about extending the game experience beyond a single instance of consuming the interactive text. For instance, game designers can show Player A metrics about how Players B, C, and D chose, implying another set of endings or options available to Player A, should she choose to replay the game. An example of such a videogame is *The Walking Dead*, which lists the choices made by the player in each episode just before the final credits, and informs them of whether they had chosen similarly to the majority of players or not. Similarly, the game *Life is Strange* records all the choices that the player is free to make and displays a list of all the choices players could have made throughout the game.³¹ This

²⁹ M. Ryan, "From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative", *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* Vol. 1, 2009, University of Nebraska Press, p. 56.

³⁰ C. Hocking, "Ludonarrative dissonance in Bioshock: The problem of what the game is about." *Well Played 1* (2009), p. 256.

³¹ Another episodic, story driven game, *Life is Strange* follows protagonist Max as she discovers she has the ability to rewind time. This is an interesting narrative choice, as it is also a mechanical decision. The game is designed for choices the player makes to be reversible. In fact, in some instances that game will not allow you to progress without rewinding time and 'fixing' something that Max witnessed (for example, the attempted murder of a girl in the bathroom early on in the game). If the player fails to reach the hammer and then the fire alarm before the attacker pulls the trigger, time will simply rewind over and over until Max manages to prevent the tragedy. In this case, player inaction ceases to be really meaningful - they can allow the girl in the bathroom to be killed, but the experience will not and cannot progress if that is the decision they make.

list also includes data informing the player of which choice they made, and whether those choices aligned with the majority of other players. These range from inconsequential (yet infuriating), like realising there was a thirsty plant I could have watered in Max's dorm room, to decisions that inform other characters' opinion of Max and are therefore consequential by way of affecting how NPCs treat Max throughout the game.

In both cases, I argue that the games' choices do not always matter in the context of altering the narrative paths. There will always be a finite number of possibilities in the story, so the player's ability to choose will always be constrained by these parameters. However, by listing out player choices and encouraging comparison between how others may have chosen differently, it is clear that the importance of choice lies in the action of choosing in itself. It does not matter that there was no narrative impact, or that all narrative branches often pinch back to the same path. By including metrics detailing the actions of other players, designers remind players that the combination of choices they made throughout culminate in an experience unique to themselves. Players are made to understand that there is more to explore within the world, variations of the same experience, even if subsequent playthroughs may only result in one or two alternative endings.

Finally, a 'meaningful' choice can also be about immersing the player in the videogame world, and forging an emotional connection between the player and the world of the videogame. In relation to interactive cinema, Weinbren argues that 'the interactive narrative will be in the form of a story space laid out for exploration', rather than a linear format where the audience observes a narrative from beginning to end.³² I argue that the same idea of presenting a story space for exploration applies to videogames. For example, in *Life is Strange*, the whole crux of Max's ability is that it often results in her (and by extension, the player) realising that while she has the capability to 'do-over' certain events, the outcome is not always an improvement. The player is reminded that though they have the ability to make choices throughout the game, they are ultimately futile. Instead, choice and interactivity serves as a means for the player to explore the story world, rather than solely to advance the narrative.³³ One such choice is where the player can choose for Max to hide or reveal herself to Chloe's stepfather. Both choices, however, result in an argument between Chloe and her stepfather. Laurel writes that 'affordances for interaction are the most intimate level of collaboration between designers and interactors in the sense that they circumscribe the means, manner, and scope of the interactor's creative contributions and provide the tools whereby interactors can influence the action.'³⁴ Whilst Laurel refers to more impactful user choices where the interactor becomes a co-author of a narrative, I argue that choices do not need to register on this scale in order to be effective. Many choices in *Life is Strange* may be small-scale, but they remain a meaningful part of the game's narrative

³² Weinbren, "Navigating the Ocean of Streams of Story", 2014, p.12.

³³ There are, of course, one or two choices in each episode that lead to a different ending, the largest being the final choice Max/the player has to make at the end of the final episode: to save her friend and potential romantic interest, Chloe, or to save the town which results in Chloe's death.

³⁴ B. Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*, p. 112.

experience by drawing the player deeper into Max and Chloe's world and creating an emotional and sometimes heartbreaking experience. By making choices for their avatar, the player is encouraged to identify with Max. The inclusion of Max's ability to rewind time into the narrative also enables players to undo certain decisions whilst preserving narrative immersion and 'flow', or 'the ease with which players can enter a pleasurable, optimal performance state.'³⁵

It is important to note that choice mechanics are not the only way to create compelling stories, nor even the most productive. Rich gaming experiences also occur when the focus is not so much about putting the player in the driver's seat, so to speak, but instead inviting them to come along for the experience. One example of such a game is *Kentucky Route Zero* (hereafter "KRZ"), a single player adventure game filled with literary references, and a mysterious journey which the player character is invited to undertake. There are few choices in KRZ that extend beyond affecting a single scene. Most of the choices available in the game pertain to how the player's character feels about a particular NPC, or a particular instance within the narrative. One reviewer puts it succinctly: the game 'stages itself like theatre with its acts and scenes, casting the player as director'; they may have the control over the mood or tone of the scene, but ultimately the story is the writer's.³⁶ There is only one ending, because according to the creator, KRZ is 'a tragedy, and every tragedy ends the same way.'³⁷ The player is ultimately powerless to avert the ending, but this does not make it a weaker game, because KRZ never claimed to be about allowing the player to write their own story into the game experience. The player has not been sold any illusion in terms of the extent to which they will have agency and control over the narrative progression and the story outcome. Instead, *Kentucky Route Zero* 'is the opposite of a power fantasy. You cannot stop it, because at that moment you have no control over what happens.'³⁸

In conclusion, choice lends itself to a broad range of meaningfulness. Whilst some videogame designers incorporate choice to present a player with the opportunity to explore multiple narrative branches, I have argued that choice can be more subtle in its meaningfulness. Increased immersion in the story world, heightening emotional investment, or to create moral dilemmas for the player are all examples of meaningful choice. So, too, is the use of choice to remind players of their role and significance within a videogame, or as a tool by which designers can interrogate the very meaning of choice itself.

Thus, in discussing the meaningfulness of choice in videogames, we must consider more than simply the observable effect of that choice upon a narrative. To illustrate this deeper

³⁵ K. Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, p. 4.

³⁶ S. Greer, "Games want to offer us many roads but Kentucky Route Zero is the one road that matters", *Eurogamer Online*, 2018, <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-07-05-games-want-to-offer-us-many-roads-but-kentucky-route-zero-is-the-one-road-that-matters>, accessed 29/11/21.

³⁷ L. Hudson, "The Tragedy and Mystery of the "Best Game of the Decade" *Wired Digital*, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/kentucky-route-zero-5/> accessed 22/07/21.

³⁸ L. Hudson, 'The Tragedy and Mystery', 2020.

consideration and to better understand how choices build story rich game experiences, I will now turn to close readings of my two case studies - Night School Studio's *Oxenfree* and Galactic Cafe's *The Stanley Parable*. Through both readings, I will deconstruct and better understand the ways in which successful game stories combine compelling plot with player engagement.

Chapter 3

An Analysis of the Role and Significance of Player Choices in *The Stanley Parable*

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a close reading of *TSP* as a case study to interrogate ideas surrounding player agency in relation to choice-making in the videogame and their impact upon the videogame as a consumable story text. Davey Wreden, the creator of *TSP*, was concerned with unpacking and deconstructing the notion of choice and agency within videogames. How and why are players given degrees of authorial control? Indeed, why choose videogames as a storytelling medium at all? He comments on *TSP* as commentary on these ideas:

'You have to critique the things that you love for them to be better,' says Wreden, a USC film school graduate. 'I wanted this to be kind of a slap to the face [to videogame developers], to say, "Hey, take a look at what you've been doing so far." I wanted to ask the question "Why are we doing this?"³⁹

Through close analysis of the text, I will argue that *TSP*'s narrative must be studied by discussing the meaning and purpose of player choice. Choice in *TSP* -- to conform to instructions or not, to choose the door on the right rather than the left, even whether to continue replaying in the hope of finding answers versus walking away from the game entirely -- is a fundamental part of its gameplay. Every progression route hinges on choice. By making choices, the player uncovers the closest thing to a reward system the game offers.⁴⁰

In particular, I explore how choice in *TSP* relates to two ideas: self-referentiality, and the role of the narrator. On the former, I argue that *TSP* uses self-referentiality in its mechanic of choice to subvert traditional expectations of a narrative game, which are [...?]. One example of such self-referentiality is using choice to encourage players to pause for thought about their own role and agency. As such, *TSP* is a fascinating example of digital metatext in which frequent self-referentiality reminds players that they are playing a videogame. The game further encourages the player to compare themselves against Stanley, and thereby asks players to determine 'whether the possibilities available to [them] in the game are genuinely significant or meaningful', and thus reflect on the 'extent to which we may feel alienated from even acts of [their] own volition'.⁴¹

³⁹ J. Schreier quoting D. Wreden in 'Brilliant Indie Game *The Stanley Parable* Will Mess with your Head' *Wired Digital*, 2011, <https://www.wired.com/2011/08/the-stanley-parable/> accessed 18/07/2020.

⁴⁰ I use 'reward system' here to mean the addition of further information to the player's experience, rather than loot, customisation, or a congratulatory UI screen. There is one instance in the game where the player will see a UI screen emblazoned with the phrase, 'YOU WIN!'. It is a sarcastic digression on the part of the narrator who, frustrated with the player's constant attempts to 'thwart' the story by making an incorrect choice or continuously restarting, responds by displaying this particular UI element.

⁴¹ Zhu, 2020, p. 117.

On the latter idea of the narrator, I argue that the narrator is integral to the entire experience of the game, and is thus the dominant vehicle through which the mechanism of choice is unpacked in *TSP*. Aside from 'Stanley', the narrator is the only other character who is present in every ending and eventuality. There is no explicit goal or progression in *TSP* without him (or her). Specifically, I will study the significance of the narrator's role in *TSP*, and consider how the narrator's relationship with 'Stanley' highlights broader questions around the importance of choice, such as whether the player possesses any true agency or influence over the story.

In this analysis, I will first present a brief introduction to the game, before examining three separate routes through the game -- respectively, what I will call 'the life ending,' 'the museum ending,' and 'the confusion ending.' Through my study of these three endings, I present these routes as representative examples of the questions that *TSP* invites the player to consider in relation to ideas on the importance of narrative voice, the execution of meaningful choices, and the idea of the player as protagonist. I will then unpack how these ideas may give better insight into the construction of the videogame's narrative through the inclusion of choice, and thus assist me in answering my research question.

3.2 A Brief Introduction to *TSP*

Following the game's original release as a mod for *Half-Life 2* in 2011, *TSP* was an immediate success and, within the year, its creator had announced that work had begun on a remake. In *TSP*, the titular character (and the player's avatar), Stanley, works a menial job, pushing buttons on command. When his co-workers mysteriously vanish, an unseen narrator in voiceover instructs the player to discover the reason why ('Stanley works in an office, but one day everyone disappears. Join him on his quest to find out why!'). This evolves into an increasingly confusing quest in which the player must repeatedly restart the game -- either by their own choice, or seemingly at will of the narrator -- to discover multiple endings and routes through the game levels.

Long acclaimed by critics as a groundbreaking exposition of game narrative, *TSP* harnesses elements of metafiction to make its players think about choice and narrative in videogames. For example, the game creators wield a third-person narrator, a device more commonly seen in traditional literature, to create 'a complex, historically self-aware metafiction that dwells critically on the generic, formal, and cultural conventions of videogames.'⁴² In implementing this self-awareness, the game asks the player to question the nature of their role within the game space, and whether or not they possess any agency over the game's eventualities. In turn, these questions of agency enable *TSP* to begin the process of articulating answers to criticisms that have plagued narrative videogames since their inception, such as whether games have the capability of telling stories at all, or whether games should be

⁴² B. Fest, 'Metaproceduralism: The Stanley Parable and the Legacies of Postmodern Metafiction' in *Wide Screen* Vol. 6, No.1, September 2016, p.2.

understood and studied from a narratological perspective.⁴³ *TSP* does not supply its story in a prescriptive 'choose-your-own-adventure' format, a genre Jenkins admonishes as being 'noted for its lifelessness and mechanical exposition rather than enthralling entertainment.'⁴⁴ Instead, the creators ask the player to recognise the weight of their choices within the game space. Ultimately, *TSP* demands the player to consider how far they are allowed agency, given that there is no 'final destination' or ultimate ending they can hope to reach.

Choices in *TSP* also uncover the different threads of the story. Even as the narrator rebukes the player for choosing the wrong door or diverting from the prescribed path, the game rewards the player with a new area, dialogue, or perspective. Thus, whether the player obeys the narrator's instructions or not, the game deems them to have taken the 'correct' action. Choice thus becomes the mechanism through which the bigger picture, or the full story, is slowly revealed. Hence, the eventual narrative that emerges out of *TSP* (after a number of playthroughs, of course) is not centred around what happened to Stanley's coworkers and superiors as is suggested by the narrator's establishing monologue. Rather, it is a reflection on game stories and the significance of the player's interactions within the game space.

I now turn to explore the implications of player choice within *TSP* through the three said routes, in the process thinking through what they may mean for videogame storytelling more generally.

3.3 The Life Ending

This route is perhaps the simplest way to progress through *TSP*: choose as instructed. At each instance where there is a potential choice, the narrator will recount a course of action, thus acting as an omniscient third party guiding the player through the presumed story of *TSP*. For instance, the first choice for the player is to choose between 'two doors', where the narrator explicitly asserts that 'Stanley chose the door on his left', although the player technically still has the freedom to enter through either door. Conforming to the narrator's instructions at each turn enables the player to progress quickly through the game, eventually arriving at a secret mind control facility before escaping the building to 'freedom'. I argue that this route results in what is perhaps the closest thing to a traditional 'ending' that *TSP* offers, by which I refer to the three (or five act) structure that is typically identifiable in most stories.⁴⁵ That is to say, an ending akin to the 'Hero's Journey' where the protagonist (Stanley) undergoes a quest (exploring the office building to find his missing coworkers), only to have to overcome adversity (realising he has been brainwashed and controlled by his boss) to attain his freedom (resolution of conflict).

⁴³ H. Jenkins, "Game design as narrative architecture." *Computer* 44.3 (2004) pp. 118-119, https://blogs.bgsu.edu/honors1120/files/2013/08/Jenkins_Narrative_Architecture.pdf accessed 12/12/2021.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119

⁴⁵ J. Yorke, *Into the woods : how stories work and why we tell them*, London: Penguin Books, 2014, p. 25.

Whilst this ending fulfils the Aristotelian ideal of narrative structure (exposition, complication, crisis, denouement), it leaves many questions left unanswered and is therefore unsatisfactory. Even as the narrator describes Stanley's happiness at escaping the mind control facility, he reminds the player that there is more to learn, and more narrative threads to uncover. 'Where had his coworkers gone? How had he been freed from the machine's grasp?'⁴⁶ are some of the questions the narrator poses as the player waits for the rest of the ending to unfold. Whilst completing 'The Life Ending' unlocks the achievement of 'Beat The Game,'⁴⁷ the narrator reminds the player that they are not yet done with *TSP*, and that there is more to be discovered should they hit the restart button.

Hence, what initially begins as a third-person exposition by the unseen narrator evolves into a means by which the game's metatextuality is revealed and encouraged for consideration. While the narrator is the primary conduit through which *TSP* introduces choice to the player, it is clear through playing 'The Life Ending' that his existence is not simply to instruct. Rather, the narrator's allusions to questions left unanswered after the completion of 'The Life Ending' affirm that there is more to be discovered in *TSP*. Players are left wanting more from *TSP*'s story and are therefore likely to replay the game to discover what they missed. In this sense, *TSP* encourages the notion of the player as the agitator. 'The Life Ending', and the narrator's implication of the mysteries still to be unravelled, is therefore a catalyst for additional playthroughs. The narrator's purpose, even as he relays careful instructions to the player, is therefore established as a reminder of routes not taken, and a suggestion that by playing again, there is more to discover. Through the medium of the narrator, *TSP* thus challenges traditional three/five act story structures, and reveals how obedience in videogames sometimes is not the only valid choice for narrative progression. Choice is thus presented to the player as a simple decision to obey or to rebel, with both routes uncovering new narrative paths. I have already mentioned how Weinbren, in his exploration of narrative in interactive cinema, argues that interactive media 'will not have the shape of narrative as we have come to understand it', but rather will reshape traditional Aristotelian notions of what constitutes narrative at all.⁴⁸ I argue that *TSP* supports this idea by presenting a story which does not truly have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but instead utilises the player's ability to choose to explore the strands of the game's narrative in no particular order.

Player dissatisfaction with 'The Life Ending' (and indeed, with all endings throughout *TSP*) is further sowed through the narrator's use of narration in the third person and in past tense which dictates the player's course of action as if it had already occurred. While a common narrative voice in written fiction, it is jarring to find it within a medium that usually champions player agency and creativity. However, the decision to use a third-person omniscient narrator

⁴⁶ *The Stanley Parable*.

⁴⁷ *TSP* has 10 listed achievements that players can unlock, ranging from the absurd (an achievement that is unachievable) to the amusing (an achievement that is unlocked after the player doesn't play the game for five years). 'Beat the Game' is, by contrast, relatively simple and all you need to do is obey each of the narrator's instructions to get the 'Life Ending'.

⁴⁸ Weinbren, 'Navigating the Ocean of Streams of Story' p. 2.

allows the designers to overcome certain issues relating to player progression and knowledge (or lack thereof) of how to overcome barriers. For example, when the player reaches the office of Stanley's boss, the narrator describes how, 'by sheer luck', Stanley was able to guess the code to a hidden door that the player discovers.⁴⁹ I read the third-person narration in this instance as a tongue-in-cheek allusion to one of the challenges posed by allowing player agency in game narrative, namely, that the player can never have information that their character cannot possibly know. 'Sheer luck' is not a satisfying explanation as to how Stanley was able to crack the code, particularly when the player has been given the answer. But it works in this context. In revealing the code to the player in this way rather than having them explore the office in hope of finding a clue to the obstacle, *TSP* further dismantles the player's sense of immersion in Stanley's story. The player expects to have the opportunity to explore and uncover clues at their own pace. By removing this particular opportunity for the player to *choose* (between exploring the office in search of the code, or to simply give up), *TSP* wittingly or unwittingly reveals the importance of choice in constructing a believable and immersive experience. That is to say, the ability to make choices is key to maintaining narrative immersion within this videogame.

Successful interactive texts, such as videogames, generally provide at least an illusion of choice and agency. A 'bottom up' input on the part of the player is intrinsic to the definition of interactivity.⁵⁰ The design of a third person narrative voice, such as that in *TSP*, is important because, in the command of the narrator, it implies a lack of agency on the part of the player. The presence of the narrator may even encourage the player to make 'incorrect' choices in order to test the boundaries of their agency. For example, where the player is told that 'Stanley' did one thing, they might very well be intrigued as to what will happen in the narrative if they do the other. I argue that this invitation to conform or rebel, to choose between any number of given paths, is a central point of *TSP's* capacity for its story. Although the narrator's words are scripted, he is not really there to instruct the player on the correct path. Instead, his primary purpose is to encourage narrative exploration from the player, as well as call attention to the narrative structure as a whole and then ultimately, to deconstruct it. In this way, *TSP* is continually asking its player to start over, and discover another branch of the narrative. There is always an 'implicit encouragement of the player to exhaustively seek out multiple endings by laboriously combing through the game'.⁵¹

Finally, I note how choices made in *TSP* do not lead to a linear ending. In interactive media, the fundamental building blocks of linear story structures -- exposition; conflict; resolution -- can no longer be applied as it becomes difficult to control the order in which players discover narrative threads.⁵² *TSP* attempts to rectify this by crafting a game with no goal, other than to continually play it through making different choices in an attempt to find one. It could be argued,

⁴⁹ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe.

⁵⁰ Ryan, *Avatars of Story*, p.99.

⁵¹ Zhu, 2020, p. 122.

⁵² Ryan, 'Narrative, Videogames, and the Split Condition of Digital Textuality' in *Videogame, Player, Text*, ed. B. Atkins and T. Krzywinska, Manchester University Press, 2007, p. 11

perhaps, that the 'goal' of *The Stanley Parable* is to unravel the mystery, but there is no answer to the questions posed in the narrator's introduction. We can never learn what happened to Stanley's coworkers. Rather, *The Stanley Parable* wants its players to think about what it is saying, rather than come to a satisfactory narrative conclusion. If the purpose of interactivity, as contended by Ryan, is that 'the user's involvement is a productive action that leaves a durable mark on the textual world,' then *TSP* succeeds even as it demolishes narrative convention.⁵³

3.4: The Museum Ending

The Stanley Parable constantly reminds players that they are inextricably tied up to the narrator, the narrative's progression, and the very existence of the game itself. In this section, I will take a closer look at the relationship between the triad of narrator, the narrator's presented choices to the player, and story, and present how a compelling story relies on the whole triad working together.

My second chosen path, 'the Museum Ending', sees the introduction of a second narrator (hereafter the 'meta-narrator'). This meta-narrator subsequently digresses into a pensive monologue on the symbiotic relationship between the player and the videogame. Prior to discovering the mind control facility, the player is able to divert from the original narrator's suggested route down a corridor marked 'escape'. The narrator warns Stanley that he is 'making a conscious, concerted effort to walk forward, and willingly confront his death.' This is confirmed as it appears that the player (and thus Stanley) is on a conveyor belt taking them towards an enormous crushing machine. However, Stanley is (temporarily) 'rescued' at the last moment by the interjection of the meta-narrator, a female voice who freezes the gameplay and begins to describe the actions of both the original narrator and Stanley. She describes, as her predecessor did, events unfolding in real time using the past tense. For example, she states: 'in a single, visceral instant, Stanley was obliterated as the machine crushed every bone in his body.'⁵⁴ However, rather than finding themselves back at the beginning of the game as is the convention on the death of an avatar, the player is removed from the game space and placed onto another level of the game, where various game assets are displayed as if in a museum or gallery. Walking through this set of rooms reveals a diorama of the level design (fig. 1) for the first few choices the player is asked to make, and a small plaque that reveals the game to be an exploration of the contradiction posed by the very first choice (i.e. the choice to choose the door on the left, or the right).

The meta-narrator essentially steps outside the limits of the game's narrative, encouraging reflection from the player that they have the ability to ignore at will the instructions presented to them by the original narrator in the game. This ending also alludes to the scale and complexity of choices and branching paths, and thus implies that both the core gameplay loop and the central

⁵³ Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, p.205.

⁵⁴ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

narrative thread revolve around player choice. The significance of player choices is underscored by the replacement of the male narrator with the female, who swiftly breaks any illusion that the player is seeking answers to Stanley's story that was laid out in the very opening sequence. What the original narrator heralded as a route leading to Stanley's demise is thus revealed to be a deeper look at the questions that *TSP* is asking the player to consider.

I thus argue that this route encourages the player to question what it means to play and progress through a narrative when all its possible endings have already been determined. Choices are thus central to the story of *TSP* both for what they can reveal about the game itself and for what they represent. As mentioned in 3.2, *TSP* cannot function as a coherent game without the player. Without the player's decision of choice, the branching endings are simply empty possibilities that will go unexplored. Yet these choices simply lead to an opportunity to restart and try again. Each loading screen between restarts bears the repeated phrase, 'the end is never the end is never the end'.⁵⁵ The futility of choice is clearly communicated in 'The Museum Ending' in particular, as the emergence of the meta-narrator explicitly reveals that, just like Stanley, the original narrator 'can't see the bigger picture. He doesn't know the real story.'⁵⁶ Both player and narrator are a part of a larger whole, in which there is no winning or beating the game short of quitting and walking away.⁵⁷

Why was *TSP* designed to reveal its inner workings to the player at all? I argue that one reason may be because the story is not about Stanley, as the original narrator states in the opening monologue. Rather, it is about the relationship between the player and the game, and the notion of choice afforded to the former. The museum space decisively shatters any remnants of the player's suspension of disbelief by removing the player from the context of the narrative. As the player wanders through the interconnected rooms, the female narrator continues to lecture on the utter meaninglessness of the desire to choose: 'when every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance, death becomes meaningless, making life the same. Do you see now? Do you see that Stanley was already dead from the moment he hit start?'⁵⁸ Here, the meta-narrator encourages the player to reflect upon the construction of the game itself. She asserts that there is no meaning in walking a path that has been created for the player. Yet following a predetermined design is in the very nature of all game stories; videogames as a whole are *designed* experiences. The story of *TSP* thus becomes less about Stanley and his missing coworkers, and more about how the player chooses within the game itself. In repeating the criticism commonly levied against game stories that there is no such thing as a truly

⁵⁵ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

⁵⁶ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

⁵⁷ One of the achievements the players may unlock during play is named 'Go Outside'. It is only attainable once the player has not opened the game in five years. This further supports the notion that there is no way to fully 'beat' *TSP*, except to stop playing altogether. This serves as a reminder that all game narratives are dependent to some degree on active player participation. Players are not simply 'told' a story the way that readers or consumers of traditional cinema are. Rather, they are invited to become a part of the narrative experience.

⁵⁸ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

meaningful choice,⁵⁹ I argue that the player is encouraged to reflect upon the validity of these criticisms.

In encouraging this reflection, *TSP* comes more closely to reflect absurdist and metatextual stories. Sarian draws parallels between *TSP* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, stories where two characters exist together in an uncomfortable yet symbiotic relationship with each other, waiting and re-living the same events with no apparent purpose.⁶⁰ *Godot*, however, never shows up and the reader is left to draw their own conclusions as to the absurdity and meaninglessness of two characters waiting eternally in a temporal loop. In *The Stanley Parable*, the meta-narrator makes this observation of absurdity on the player's behalf: 'How they wish to destroy one another. How they wish to control one another. How they both wish to be free.'⁶¹ In doing so, the female narrator highlights the codependent relationship between the player (represented, of course, by Stanley) and the game (in this case, the narrator). The player must interact with the narrative in order for it to have any meaning at all. Choices in *TSP* therefore become meaningful precisely because they allow for a continual exploration of this relationship, and therefore shift the narrative focus from the story outlined by the original narrator in his opening monologue to the importance of this relationship to crafting game stories.

Sarian's literary comparison of *TSP* to Beckett's *Godot* may not be perfect, but he does accurately identify what I believe to be an integral tenet of *TSP* and in particular, 'The Museum Ending', which is the freedom to explore within the parameters of the game, and the space to reflect upon what this artificial freedom really means.⁶² The player and the narrator exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other -- one cannot exist without the other -- and it is the dialogue between the two in terms of instruction and choice that so eloquently allows Wreden to create a game which is so successful at self reflection. The player is dependent on the narrator for both instruction *and* the opportunity to disobey these instructions. The narrator, and as a consequence the game story, depends on the player for its very existence. It is the ability the player possesses to make a choice that enables them to truly engage with this idea. Choices within *TSP* therefore give the opportunity and space to explore these ideas and reflect on a deeper level what it means to choose, if ultimately all that is to be gained by these choices is another opportunity to make a decision.

3.5: The Confusion Ending

My third chosen path, 'the Confusion Ending', begins after the player unplugs a ringing phone rather than answer it. In doing so, they make what the narrator terms 'an incorrect choice'. In

⁵⁹ T. Amini, 'The Choices We're Given in Games are Still Ultimately Meaningless', *Mashable*, 2017 <https://mashable.com/2017/05/26/choice-in-games/?europa=true> accessed 10/10/2021.

⁶⁰ A. Sarian, 'Paradox and Pedagogy in *The Stanley Parable*', *Games and Culture* 15.2 (2020), p. 185.

⁶¹ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

⁶² Sarian, 'Paradox and Pedagogy', pp. 194-5.

response, the narrator plays a short film on making responsible choices. After playing the film, he and Stanley attempt to 'find the story' together by following a bold yellow line dubbed 'The Stanley Parable Adventure Line'. If the player continues to follow the line through a series of doors and corridors, they will discover a room where everything that has happened and will happen within 'The Confusion Ending' is written out on the wall in list format (fig. 2). This includes an article that suggests the game will restart once the player and the narrator come to discover the wall. The narrator however, refuses to reset the game, claiming he doesn't want to have to follow what is written out. Regardless, the game eventually restarts anyway.

Writing on the relationship between Stanley/the player and the narrator, Backe and Thon dub this moment that at first seems to be a moment of solidarity between the two as yet 'another turn of the metareferential screw.'⁶³ Following this moment, the narrator will force the game to restart several times out of frustration that the story is not unfolding as it should. *TSP* thus makes it clear that both player and narrator are on the journey together, undermining the narrator's position as a guide for the player. Indeed, Backe and Thon identify that *TSP* 'represents both the 'freedom of choice' of Stanley / the player and the supposed 'authorial' control of the narrator as mere illusions of agency, as two sides of the same coin.'⁶⁴

I argue that the Confusion Ending presents a complex commentary on the interdependency of designer and player, and how this relationship can be manipulated to tell a better story. As mentioned, *TSP*'s story is neither about Stanley nor even the narrator. Rather, the story is about the player, as in the physical person sitting in front of a screen. A number of moments within *TSP* support this conclusion. For instance, from the outset of the game encourages comparison between Stanley's job, and the role of the player. Even as the player 'beats the game' at the end of 'The Life Ending', the narrator drily observes that 'he had done it! He had beaten the machine.' This acknowledgement from the narrator reminds the player that they *are* Stanley, at least while they are engaged in play. Like Stanley working his meaningless job in the office, the player pushes buttons as and when instructed. In consistently highlighting the similarities between the player and Stanley, The Confusion Ending reveals the inherent importance of the player to the story experience. For Michelle Herte, 'the main conflict of [*The Stanley Parable*] can be understood as one between the ludic and the narrative mode of computer games in general.'⁶⁵ She equates 'the narrator's contempt for any digression from the predetermined track' with 'a contempt for players that are more interested in playing a game than in finishing its story.'⁶⁶ To some degree, this is true. However, I have already discussed how following the narrator's cues leads to an unsatisfying story experience, although the player has technically completed the game story (in the sense that they have followed the game's

⁶³ H. J. Backe and Jan-Noël Thon, 'Playing with Identity Authors, Narrators, Avatars, and Players in The Stanley Parable and The Beginner's Guide.' *DIEGESIS* 8.2 (2019), p.12

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 12.

⁶⁵ M. Herte, "'Come, Stanley, let's find the story!' On the Ludic and the Narrative Mode of Computer Games in The Stanley Parable' *IMAGE*, 2016, p.36 <http://www.gib.uni-tuebingen.de/own/journal/pdf/IMAGE%2023.pdf#page=30> accessed 17/12/2021.

⁶⁶ Herte, 'On the Ludic and the Narrative Mode of Computer Games in The Stanley Parable' p.36.

instructions to a conclusion of sorts). It is important to remember here that the narrator serves a more complex role than simply a verbal game guide. Instead, his dialogue throughout The Confusion Ending, and his invitation to Stanley/the player to accompany him to ‘find the story’ serves as a reminder of the importance of the relationship between player, designer, and the narrative experience.

Thirdly, *The Stanley Parable* also invites questions as to whether the choices happening in game, and the fact that the player has the ability to make them, hold any meaning at all. For example, after the player refuses to obey the narrator’s instructions to answer the phone, instead choosing to pull the cord from the wall, the narrator asks in a tone of bemused wonder;

‘I don’t understand. How on earth are you making meaningful choices? What did you- Wait a second did I just see...no, that’s not possible. I can’t believe it. How had I not noticed it sooner? You’re not Stanley, you’re a real person. I can’t believe I was so mistaken. That’s why you’ve been able to make correct and incorrect choices.’⁶⁷

However, whilst the narrator ascribes value to these choices (correct versus incorrect), all of these choices are hardwired into the game’s design. Domsch posits that ‘some degree of information about a given choice seems to facilitate the feeling of agency , as agency is experienced as pleasurable especially when we are able to make meaningful decisions within the story/game universe.’⁶⁸ It is therefore interesting that *TSP* engages so strongly in unpacking this idea, rather than to simply allow the player to experience these choices and discover the narrative in their own time. However, while Domsch is correct in his assertion that agency equals pleasure when it comes to making choices, these choices are necessary for *TSP* to reveal that it is in fact the player, and not Stanley, who is the protagonist.

So what does this imply for storytelling? How does *TSP* harness and unpack these ideas in order to integrate player choice with narrative? The answer: by making the story about the player themselves. *TSP* uses choice, and the exposition of the mechanics behind these choices as in the example given above, to remind the player that they are taking part in a story that is about them. Each choice may be embedded into the game’s code, but without the player the game and therefore the story could not exist. Bassel argues for the consideration of ‘player-authored meaning’ or ‘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.’⁶⁹ For Bassel, ‘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.’⁷⁰ Earlier in this thesis, I argued that it is the choice itself that is important,

⁶⁷ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

⁶⁸ Domsch, ‘Storyplaying: Agency and narrative in video games’, *De Gruyter*, 2013, p. 60.

⁶⁹ R. R. Bassell, ‘This Is The Story of a Man Named Stanley’: Narratology, Authorship and Agency in *The Stanley Parable* (2016), Honours Theses, <http://scarab.bates.edu/honorsthesis/161> p. 55.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 56.

rather than the specific outcome of that choice. Bassel corroborates this argument, stressing that by drawing the players attention to the notion of ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ choices, the narrator reveals the inherent importance of the inclusion of that particular choice moment.

At times, both the narrator and the player search for meaning, for their purpose, within the shared experience of the videogame. That the narrator is a figment of the designer’s imagination, several lines of code, and excellent voice acting, does not detract from this experience. Instead, the game embraces its own medium to remind the player of the question that lies at the centre of *The Stanley Parable*; what is the purpose of Stanley’s, and therefore the player’s choices, and what does it mean to exist within the confines of a story where all possible outcomes are determined and planned to the most microscopic degree? According to Bassel, *TSP* ‘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.’⁷¹ To some degree, this is true. *TSP* doesn’t set out to answer these questions explicitly, but rather to ask the player to consider possible answers. However, I would argue that the game is less invested in academic discourse than it is in encouraging players to explore the limitations to their own agency.

Player decisions and actions are always a fundamental part of game storytelling, as they become a co-author of the experience of playing; a game designer can guide the player down certain routes, but the player must actively engage with the game to draw out the story. ‘The Confusion Ending’ underscores the significance of the relationship between player and game story, as the narrator begins to address not Stanley as he has done previously, but the player themselves. Zhu highlights that throughout the various endings of *TSP*, the player must continuously decide the lengths they will go to in order to exert their agency upon the story, and in any case, whether it is even possible that they have ‘made a genuinely free choice to do so’.⁷² In asking these questions, the story that *TSP* is telling shifts from being a quest to discover what happened to Stanley’s coworkers (and indeed, why they were all trapped within the mind control facility to begin with) to being a story about game creation itself. As referenced in the introduction to this analysis, creator Davy Wreden is a firm believer that ‘You have to critique the things that you love for them to be better’.⁷³ If *TSP* is his critique, then the outcome is the creation of a compelling story through which the player comes to better understand the interdependency of designer and player. The success of *TSP*’s story is in the way that it embraces this relationship, as in ‘The Confusion Ending’, and manipulates it to its own success.

⁷¹ *ibid* , p. 20.

⁷² F. Zhu, ‘The freedom of alienated reflexive subjectivity in *The Stanley Parable*’, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Vol. 26 issue: 1, 2020, p. 128.

⁷³ J. Schreier quoting D. Wreden in ‘Brilliant Indie Game *The Stanley Parable*’ Will Mess with your Head’ for *Wired Digital*, 2011 <https://www.wired.com/2011/08/the-stanley-parable/> accessed 18/07/2020.

3.6 Conclusion

The Stanley Parable is thus a compelling case for the argument that the introduction of player choice in game stories marks a definitive shift in the structure of the narrative. The game neatly unpacks some of the key questions pertaining to player agency and autonomy within the game space, and explores what it means for a third party (the player) to be given an excessive degree of control over the direction, pacing, and outcome of a creator's story.

It is a game that explores the relationship between the player themselves and the virtual story world with which they are engaging. Choice in *TSP*, the choice to obey or rebel, to go left or right, is what really matters to the story experience here. There is no traditional story structure as such. The player is given a little back story into *why* Stanley is alone in his office building, but the fate of his boss or coworkers is never answered. This is because that story is not really the one that *TSP* wants to tell. Instead, *TSP* unpacks what it means for players to have autonomy over the narrative, highlighting the tensions that this can bring through the role of the narrator and his instructions. It is a convincing argument in favour of my earlier point in Chapter 2.2; that choices can be inherently meaningful in and of themselves, and that meaning is maintained regardless of narrative outcome.

Chapter Four

An Analysis of the Role and Significance of Player Choices in *Oxenfree*

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that player choices in *Oxenfree* affect the game's narrative development in two ways. The first way is the visible consequences choices have upon the game's ending in the context of the characters escaping from the island. Moreover, the player's choices have repercussions not only during their current gameplay, but also beyond their initial playthrough of the game. The second way is the enhancement of the player's emotional investment in the game. I thus argue that choice functions as both a means to open up new narrative branches, as well as to encourage emotional investment on the part of the player.

I will first introduce the game briefly (section 4.2). My analysis of *Oxenfree* will then proceed in three parts. In the first part (section 4.3), I will explore how player choices impact upon the narrative itself, specifically in relation to alternate endings. In the second part (section 4.4), I explore how the player's choices cause recurring implications within subsequent playthroughs of the game (I term these subsequent playthroughs as "New Game+", hereafter "NG+"). I will isolate examples whereby the player's choice has a visible consequence on the story's conclusion in the context of which characters accompany the player character back to the mainland at the end of the first playthrough. This is because this is one of the most visible and obvious examples whereby choice directly changes the outcome of the story. Through examining such instances, I will identify the extent to which these choices are integral to the game's overall design, and thus work towards revealing a framework for crafting compelling story based games.

The third part of my analysis (section 4.6) will focus on choices within *Oxenfree* which have relatively little bearing on the final destination of the story. These are normally related to how the player chooses to respond to questions posed to them by NPCs in the game. I argue that these choices are significant as representational of what Weir terms 'emotional agency', which is a feature of game storytelling that exists separate to narrative agency. Weir defines emotional agency as '[providing] a startlingly effective way of making the player feel empowered while not requiring a complex story design.'⁷⁴ Through this approach in considering the significance of both narrative and emotional agency in *Oxenfree*, I can better understand the ways in which games harness the power of player choices in order to tell a compelling story, and reveal further insights into the roles of both meaningful and incidental choices within the framework of game narrative, and the extent to which they both contribute to the strength of narrative game design. This argument thus supports my earlier point about choices in videogames being meaningful in and of themselves, and thus there is meaning inherent in a creator asking a player to make a choice, regardless of narrative outcome.

⁷⁴ Weir, G., 'Analysis: Incidental Character Choices in *Balloon Diaspora*', *Gamasutra*, May 2011 https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/124604/Analysis_Incidental_Character_Choices_in_Balloon_Diaspora.php accessed 19/10/2020.

4.2 A Brief Introduction to *Oxenfree*

Night School Studio's *Oxenfree* is a graphic adventure game in which players control the character of Alex, a teenager. Reviewed as 'an experience that thrives on the ignorance of the person playing it,'⁷⁵ *Oxenfree* is a narrative mystery/horror game that contains unexpected plot twists and provides a fresh take on games dubbed (perhaps unjustly) 'walking simulators'. It is played with very simple mechanics and minimal button inputs -- most interactions in the game can be completed with a single button push or mouse click, depending on the player's gaming platform.

The player engages with the game by being given a choice of three text bubbles that appear above the player character's head. The player may choose any of those text bubbles, or they may also choose to do nothing. NPCs in the game may respond to the latter either by remarking on the player character's silence, or filling the conversation gap left by the player's choice to not answer. Within the game, 'speech events inform, inquire, influence, cultivate, and entertain in exceptionally natural ways, supported by time limit and interruption mechanics.'⁷⁶ It is a naturalistic dialogue system, which although simple, enhances player immersion by maintaining believability of conversations. Whilst many games include the option to skip through dialogue, this usually causes awkward breaks and cuts in conversation, shattering immersion as no NPC will ever react to being brusquely interrupted or cut off by the player character. In *Oxenfree* however, the NPCs react and respond to the player character's choices seemingly organically. They might, for example, make a quip about Alex's surly silence if the player chooses not to answer, causing an NPC's question to go unanswered. In its dialogue structure and writing, *Oxenfree* thus creates a rich and immersive narrative world.

The game begins with the player character, Alex, on a ferry ride to a mysterious island off the mainland. Alex is accompanied by two NPCs: her childhood friend, Ren; and her newly acquired step-brother, Jonas. Jonas's presence on the ferry is an important narrative point, as the end of every playthrough culminates in the ferry ride back to the mainland, with Alex again accompanied by the NPCs. However, depending on the choices the player makes, Jonas may be missing from that final scene. To serve as visual reminders, the game is designed with an NPC taking polaroids throughout the game showing the number and combination of characters in each scene, culminating with a final polaroid photo of the characters leaving the island, showing that not everybody in the initial polaroid taken at the beginning of the game makes it home.

⁷⁵ J. Griggs, "Oxenfree Is The Best Game You Should Know Nothing About Before Playing", *Screen Rant*, April 2021, <https://screenrant.com/oxenfree-best-game-play-without-knowing-anything-story/> accessed 12/12/2021.

⁷⁶ J. Martin, 'A Functional Model for Dialogic Speech in Game Design', *Between Drafts*, 2019, p. 4 <https://betweendrafts.com/justdrafts/Academic-Papers/J-Martin-A-Functional-Model-for-Dialogic-Speech-in-Video-Game-Design.pdf> accessed 10/12/2021.

Upon arrival at the island, Alex, Ren and Jonas meet with two other friends on the beach, Nona and Clarissa. Clarissa and Alex are visibly uncomfortable with each other, with Clarissa quickly becoming antagonistic towards Alex. It is later revealed that Alex's brother, Michael, was previously Clarissa's boyfriend, and had drowned while swimming in the lake. His death caused a rift between the two girls. This will later become a major narrative point, with the player able to make choices to either further antagonise Clarissa, or to attempt to repair their relationship. As *Oxenfree* deals with time travel (or rather, a mysterious 'time loop' on the island), Michael also becomes an important figure within the narrative. Throughout their night on the island, the group of teenagers are haunted by mysterious entities or ghosts with a sinister motive. These entities often cause issues for the player, possessing various NPCs and threatening the safety of Alex and her friends. As the player explores to attempt to solve the mystery of the entities existence, they must also attempt to protect the group. Player choice in *Oxenfree* is thus often concerned with helping out NPCs over the course of the night, and attempting to unravel the origins of the island's sinister entities.

Oxenfree ends, regardless of the choices made, with a ferry ride back to the mainland. However, depending on choices the player made, the relationships between Alex and the other NPCs may be altered. In some narrative branches, characters are missing; Clarissa may have been erased from existence (the choice leading to this ending will be discussed in due course), or Jonas is not present as the player has been able to save Alex's brother Michael, thus preventing her from ever having met Jonas. Again, this will be discussed in due course. During this ferry ride home, there is a short epilogue in which Alex discusses the events that unfolded on the island; she may express regret at choices the player made, or wonder if the outcome could have been different, depending on the choices the player made throughout.

4.3 The Narrative Implications of Player Choices

In this section, I will discuss two instances in which the player's choices impact either narrative progression, or the way in which NPC's behave towards the player character. The first instance is the player's choice of saving either Alex or Clarissa. The second choice is whether they should ask Michael to go or stay. These two particular choices were selected for examination because of their visible impact on the game's final scene. Not every choice the player makes in *Oxenfree* will have an impact upon the direction in which the narrative unfolds. However, on some occasions, the player's decision definitively determines how the game ends for them. There are ten possible endings in all. These two choices are examples of choices which determine different endings, manifest in the number and combination of characters who accompany Alex on the ferry journey back, depending on the outcome of these two choices.

4.3.1 Choice 1: Saving Alex or Clarissa

Towards the end of the game, the player is offered a final choice after entering one of the game's many time portals to search for Clarissa: to either save Alex (i.e. themselves), or try to save

Clarissa (who has been possessed by sinister entities on the island). The player is offered the following choice by the entities; Alex's other friends will be saved, and they will all get to return to the mainland together if she agrees to leave Clarissa with the entities. Alternatively, Alex can stay trapped with the entities, and Clarissa goes free. If the player chooses to save themselves/Alex, the story continues, but with no sign of Clarissa anywhere, except for a small epilogue voiceover by Alex, during which she wonders if she made the right choice leaving behind Clarissa. The player's actions thus have an observable impact on the narrative: as the characters reminisce about the night on the ferry home, the player may observe how the course of their history with the island and the NPCs has been rewritten. This is most evident in how Clarissa is not present on the ferry home, having effectively been scrubbed from existence within the game world. Furthermore, when Alex/the player prompts the other NPCs about Clarissa, they have no recollection of her at all. She is also missing from the photo Nona, another NPC, takes of the group on the journey home. This serves as a visual reminder of the change for the player, since Clarissa was present in other photos taken by Nona earlier in the story.

The player may also choose to close the portal in order to save everyone but themselves. The entities continue to warn Alex that by closing the portal, she is dooming herself to remain trapped with them. If the player does not heed their warnings, they find themselves trapped on 'the other side'. There are flashbacks to several moments throughout the game, where the player can make suggestions of choices to make at key moments (these suggestions are then broadcast to other players, something that I will touch on in due course). However, eventually Alex does wake up on the ferry home with everyone, and the characters discuss their night on the island. The epilogue plays as usual, with Alex explaining what each NPC went on to do with their lives (including Clarissa, who is present). The epilogue glitches however, and ends the game the same way it began; with Alex heading out to Edward's Island for the beach party. As Alex mentions after the glitch that she has to pick up her new step brother, Jonas, it is clear that time has 'looped', and that perhaps the ghosts were right and Alex is trapped forever.

Cole and Gillies refer to this type of choice - the player's choice to save Clarissa, or to save themselves - as Actual Fictional Agency (AFA). Namely, the ability of the player to have an observable impact on the course of the game or affect the development of characters within the diegesis.⁷⁷ The impact of this will evidently depend on an individual player's immersion in the story, and how closely they feel connected to both their avatar, Alex, and her friends and rivals within the game. That being said, the impact of Alex's choice to save herself, neatly removing Clarissa from the narrative all together, is a means by which *Night School Studio* embraces player choice to the success of their narrative. After all, stories are meant to make us feel.

⁷⁷ T. Cole and M. Gillies, 'Thinking and doing: Challenge, agency, and the eudaimonic experience in video games.' *Games and Culture*, 16.2 (2021), <https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/27089/1/mainAPA.pdf>, p. 11.

4.3.2 Choice 2: Michael to Go or Stay

The second instance of a consequential choice, revolving around Alex's putatively dead brother, Michael. During a flashback, the player may choose to encourage Michael to stay in town rather than go away to college. This choice is made by the player selecting every possible dialogue option that either implies or outright states that Michael should stay in town. If the player makes enough of these dialogue choices, the story timeline is altered - Michael agrees to stay in town rather than go away for college, and as a result, his fate is altered. Rather than drowning during one last day out with Alex at the lake, that outing never happens and thus Michael never dies. In this ending, Jonas is replaced by Michael on both the ferry ride home, and in the polaroid photos taken throughout. In the game's epilogue, Alex expresses that Michael sometimes regrets his decision not to leave town, and wonders if life may have been different had he left. Like the choice to erase Clarissa from existence, there is no way to undo the decision to persuade Michael to stay once the choice has been made.

4.3.3 Discussion

Ryan notes the problematic nature of incorporating a narrative arc with a situation in which the player is totally free of constraints (as Murray discusses in relation to *Star Trek's* Holodeck).⁷⁸ As such, she explores digital texts that serve as a compromise between this fictional 'ideal', and simple interactive texts where the audience simply clicks through a number of options.⁷⁹ This compromise is most videogames by nature, which introduce the player to a world in which they can influence and control a character and thus impact the story world. Videogames thus provide the player with a degree of agency and immersion whilst still enabling the game developers the space to convey a fixed narrative. In advertising campaigns and promotional material, the role of the player's agency is considered essential to 'good' game stories. For instance, in Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* series, the player is greeted with a splash screen announcing: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored to how you play."⁸⁰ The implication here is that the player's narrative agency is a desirable unique selling point of the game. Thus, designers strive to create experiences where the player can exercise their own agency over the story world.

My consideration above of the two story choices in *Oxenfree* demonstrates how these choices visibly and non-reversibly affect the way narrative is constructed in *Oxenfree* and therefore how these choices are meaningful (i.e., choices that produce an observable effect on the main storyline while operating within the limitations of the game space). *Oxenfree* approaches the idea of narrative freedom and agency both in terms of the ending the players work to

⁷⁸ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 17.

⁷⁹ M. Ryan, 'From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative', *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 2009, Vol. 1, Published by: University of Nebraska Press Stable (2009), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/25663007> p. 43-45.

⁸⁰ *The Walking Dead*, Telltale Games, 2012-2018.

achieve, and the implications of choices even beyond that achieved ending. This kind of irreversible decision making is unique to interactive digital stories. A reader of a choose-your-own-adventure novel, for example, may make a decision that leads them to an unpleasant scenario. However, they are able to simply flip back to the page they were reading previously, and make a different choice. In *Oxenfree*, those decisions are not so easily reversed, short of quitting the game and starting over from the “last saved” file. Per my example in 4.3.1, in choosing to save Alex, Clarissa is effectively removed from the story, and there is no opportunity to bargain or bring her back once the decision to leave her behind is made. By placing the onus of that choice exclusively on the player manipulating the story world, story designers may impart a significance upon these choices that is weightier than decisions made in any ‘choose your own adventure’ novel.

I thus argue that the existence of a limited number of choices with observable effects on the narrative ensures a compelling experience. In other words, game stories do not always require a significant degree of player agency to be compelling. As and when designers are able to incorporate instances of player choice carrying significant bearing on the course of the diegesis, these choices can complement the unique capabilities of game stories. One particular example of how choices may enhance a game narrative lies within the critically acclaimed JRPG style game, *Undertale*. During this game, the player’s choice (as also mentioned earlier in the section 2.2) of benevolent or violent gameplay has an irreversible impact on how the game’s story unfolds. As in *Oxenfree*, this choice is woven into the fabric of the game design, and resides at the very core of the game experience.

Players must operate within the framework presented to them by the game itself. Alex cannot choose to simply stay on the ferry and return to the mainland at the very beginning of *Oxenfree*. Likewise, the player cannot wait for Toriel (their parent figure and guide who materialises early in the game to protect them) and avoid entering the dangerous underworld in *Undertale*, because the game requires them to do so in order to provide the intended experience. The narrative in each instance would simply stall if the player was to choose not to engage in the way the game intends them to.⁸¹ I posit that total agency and ultimate player freedom are perhaps not as essential to creating compelling game stories as the opportunity to make a smaller number of choices within a more limited framework with ‘Actual Fictional Agency’,⁸² and which have an observable impact upon the narrative. Murray corroborates this viewpoint, outlining that game stories provide players not with the ability to fully author a narrative, but instead to execute certain decisions within the confines of the story. Similarly, Laurel refers to total narrative freedom as an ‘existential nightmare’ and argues for the continued existence of certain constraints upon players in improving their immersion in game stories.⁸³ For Laurel, ‘Any human computer system, no matter how elaborate, cannot be expected to

⁸¹ C. Hocking, ‘Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock’ in *Well Played 1.0 : Videogames, Value And Meaning* ed. D. Davidson, Pittsburgh PA, Etc. Press, 2009, p. 256.

⁸² Cole and Gillies, ‘Thinking and Doing’, p.11.

⁸³ Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*, p. 129

comprehend all possible worlds simultaneously'.⁸⁴ She gives the example that an interactive fantasy version of Sherlock Holmes should set certain constraints, restraining players to the customs and technologies of nineteenth century London, and would not be a lesser story because of those restrictions.

To conclude this discussion: the ability of the player to make observable and impactful choices that affect the story does not necessitate complete agency in the style of the Holodeck.⁸⁵ Writing in 1997, Murray saw the interactor in digital narratives as 'the author of a particular performance within an electronic story system, or the architect of a particular part of the virtual world'.⁸⁶ She argues that it is important to distinguish this 'derivative authorship' of influence over a digital text through participation from the authorship of the text's original creator.⁸⁷ That being said, and as I have argued in this section, the opportunity to affect stories through the inclusion of player choices remains a way in which designers can craft and create meaningful story experiences for the player.

4.4 Player Choices Beyond The Ending - Ng+ And Alternate Timelines Narrative

Player choices within *Oxenfree* are not limited to impact just individual playthroughs, but may also have an effect upon alternate timelines, and even help sway other players' decision making. Regardless of the choices made and which ending the player discovers, completing the game reveals that Alex and her friends are trapped in a time loop, during which they will return to the island again and again, presumably forever. *Oxenfree* explores the concept of alternate timelines in a couple of unique ways, through incorporating the choices and gameplay experiences of other players and Alex's radio, which is an important mechanic in the game.

In several instances during the game, the player will see a distorted reflection in mirrors and bodies of water that attempts to communicate to them which choice they should make. It is important to note here that there are no 'correct' choices in *Oxenfree* as such, and the experience can be read as being more about understanding how choices and communication impact possible outcomes. More importantly, the 'voices' coming through the mirror aren't suggestions placed there by the game designers, or even randomly triggered suggestions, but are in fact the decisions that other players made during their own playthroughs. Their gamertags will be visible to those paying close attention to the words in the reflections. The player will have their own opportunity to make suggestions for other players later in the game; during a flashback sequence for example, mirrors reveal scenarios from earlier in the story, and the player can give prompts on how to respond.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 129

⁸⁵ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 1997, p. 187

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 187

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 187-188

Oxenfree as an experience is elevated by continuing to play, as this is where greater development of the player's understanding of the main narrative is formed. With the release of the extension New Game+ in 2016, replaying the game again reveals moments of déjà vu, where Alex remarks that she has said or heard something before, as well as the opportunity to unlock a new ending, and the creation of a game environment that essentially 'remembers' your previous playthrough. Without incurring too much expense, the developers of *Oxenfree* establish the idea of choices as being at the very core of the game, and thus the narrative itself. Players are encouraged to continue exploring the game space, observing the different impacts their choices have upon the space through tantalising lines of dialogue that imply there is more to discover.

The opportunity for one player to influence another is relatively unique, and places the importance of choices at the forefront of *Oxenfree*. I already mentioned the allusion to the existence of the time loop that Alex and her friends are unable to escape. However, the decision of the developers to include the opportunity to make suggestions that will then be broadcast to other players gives the impression that the player is a part of a far broader universe, in which there are multiple versions of Alex each trapped in her own individual loop, fighting to save her friends in each of them.

The suggestion that there is more to discover beyond an initial playthrough is a clever choice. One of the major drawbacks of creating multiple branching narratives is that the majority of players will only see a tiny portion of the story. This can result in the many hours of work necessary to craft these experiences being an expensive choice from a business perspective, and may explain why so many high budget and AAA games tend to create more linear main narratives, with smaller side quests that can be carried out in any order to complement the experience. The suggestion of alternate timelines, and the frustration of an ending that implies the game has not actually been 'won' (as in *The Stanley Parable*) is a means by which players are encouraged to return to the game, playing again and again in order to uncover further narrative details.⁸⁸

In *Oxenfree*, choices thus shape both the world around the player themselves, and also the experience of others playing the same game. It serves as a means by which one of the major plot points (the time loop Alex and her friends are revealed to be trapped in) can be further explored, and prompts players to explore this further. Choice becomes highly significant as a mechanic, not just in allowing the player to craft their own story, as choice based games often advertise, but also in strengthening the story at the game's core through driving emotional investment in the outcome of the narrative.

⁸⁸ And, in the case of *Oxenfree*, break free of the time loop that the characters are trapped in.

4.5 Emotional Agency And The Importance Of Non-consequential Choices

For Murray, the capability of games to elicit an emotional response is tantamount to their transition from puzzle gaming to ‘an expressive narrative art.’⁸⁹ The ability of a game designer to provide an experience that is not merely entertaining, but also emotionally charged, ‘demonstrates that the potential for compelling computer stories does not depend on high tech animation or expensively produced video footage but on the shaping of such dramatic moments.’⁹⁰

I argue that the presentation of such choices provides significant emotional repercussions for the player, and thus makes *Oxenfree*’s narrative so compelling.

It is as important to consider the role of a player’s potential emotive response to a story as it is to discuss agency over the plot itself when considering the way in which game stories may be constructed and designed. Videogames, according to Janet Murray ‘They involve us in intense identification with the outcome of an adventure or the fate of a character.’⁹¹ Whilst Murray goes on to argue that ‘we do not particularly care about the people or events except as targets or opponents, wins or losses’,⁹² I would argue that here she overlooks a broad swath of videogames designed to do the opposite; to make the player feel for the digital world they are engaging with, rather than simply considering a competitive objective. Arguably, emotional attachment is not even unique to these types of games alone. There certainly exist sandbox games whereby the player has more freedom to engage with the world around them, usually in terms of construction or world building, but also with side quests and smaller missions that allow the player to build a familiarity with the game space and in game relationships with NPCs, building an emotional attachment to the game world whilst not changing anything significant about the major narrative thread.

The ability to make emotional choices in games isn’t necessarily new or groundbreaking. Some of the simplest forms of interactive narrative, such as text-based games created in the Twine engine, depend almost solely on engaging the player in emotional choices. In these games, there is little to be gained from making one decision over another. Take for example, Anna Anthropy’s *Queers in Love at the End of the World*.⁹³ The player is given clickable interactions which will take them to the next prompt, whilst a 10 second timer displayed to the left of the text indicates how much time is left before ‘everything is wiped away.’ Whilst the player has the freedom to choose how they will interact with their fictional partner, there is no option or combination of options that will allow them a different ending. The result is the player scrambling

⁸⁹ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 60.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 60.

⁹¹ Murray, J. ‘Did It Make You Cry? Creating Dramatic Agency in Immersive Environments’ in *International Conference on Virtual Storytelling*, 2005, p. 84.

⁹² Ibid. p. 85

⁹³ *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, A. Anthropy, 2013, <https://w.itch.io/end-of-the-world> accessed 12/08/2021.

to interact as much as physically possible with their partner before time runs out, and the experience is highly emotionally charged. Whilst the decisions the player makes during the course of the game have no narrative implications (there is no combination of choices that will result in the world not ending), their significance is in their emotional power.

Similarly, albeit without the same time constraints as *Queers in Love*, *Oxenfree* asks the player to respond to questions posed by NPCs not for the purpose of attempting to influence the narrative's outcome, but to create an emotional attachment with the story by exploring and building relationships with these characters. As before, it is helpful to refer briefly to Gillies and Cole's exploration of agency in game experiences, if only to borrow from their definitions of the broad variations of agency a player may experience. 'Interpretive Fictional Agency' (hereafter IFA) is a term coined by the pair to refer to the way in which a narrative framework is provided to the player, and they are subsequently encouraged 'to build their own understanding of the fiction, story, and characters.'⁹⁴ Indeed, learning more about the backstories of Alex and her friends is as important within *Oxenfree* as seeking answers to the mystery of the haunted island and the motivations of the ghostly inhabitants.

One significant example is Alex's relationship with Jonas, her new step brother. The opening dialogue between Ren, Jonas and Alex reveals that the latter two only met when their parents decided to remarry. The result of this is a slightly strained relationship between the pair, as both are awkward and unsure of how to negotiate the sudden existence of a ready made step sibling. The dialogue in *Oxenfree* is well designed, flowing in a manner as close to a natural pattern of speech as is possible within the constraints of pre-scripted choices. If the player selects an option quickly, cutting off a line of NPC dialogue, they will often return to that line of dialogue a few moments later, much as we would expect one to do if they were interrupted in real life. These smaller choices that pepper the dialogue don't have much bearing on the core plot of *Oxenfree*, but the way in which the player chooses to interact with Jonas does have a bearing on the way their relationship develops over the course of the game. The result of this is an emotional investment, one way or another, in watching this relationship play out. An antagonistic player for example, may choose more argumentative dialogue options just to see how it causes NPCs to react. The choice becomes important not for the bearing it will have on the overall story, but in building the player's relationship with the characters within the story world.

Similarly, Alex's relationship with Clarissa, and her history with Alex's dead brother, Michael, may be of interest to players, regardless of whether they are merely curious about the backstory, attempting to antagonise Clarissa, or hoping to repair the relationship between the two. Clarissa does become fairly important to the plot later on - I have already discussed the significance of choosing to leave her behind in order to save Alex earlier in this discussion. However, the dialogue choices the player makes with regard to Clarissa are not particularly

⁹⁴ Cole and Gilles, 'Thinking and Doing' p. 13.

important to the narrative; even if a player attempts to show understanding and patience towards Clarissa throughout the game, there is no real reconciliation between the pair at any point. In this case, as with Alex's relationship with Jonas, the dialogue choices are significant not for their narrative implications, but for building up emotional investment with the characters in *Oxenfree*. Earlier, I made reference to Isbister's argument that choice provides a means by which players can be made to feel.⁹⁵ *Oxenfree*'s creators have pre-scripted the relationship between Alex and Clarissa, and nothing the player does can really repair the damage, save for in one ending out of the ten (the player must be nice to Clarissa for the entirety of the game, and then choose to save her at the end). Still, even if the player is unable to make up with Clarissa, the fact that they have the ability to *try*, to engage with choices that feel conciliatory and kind, deepens the players emotional attachment to the game long before any meaningful decisions are made.

This type of agency is unique to interactive forms of media. Whilst a reader may identify and empathise with a character in a novel, or a filmgoer may see themselves reflected in the protagonist of a Hollywood blockbuster, their emotional investment only goes as far as reacting to what they are shown on screen or page. In videogames, there is a pervasive sense of being responsible for the outcomes of a narrative. Players of *Oxenfree* who were unable, for example, to repair the strained relationship between Clarissa and Alex, may regret this fact and wish that they had made different conversational choices in the hope of a better outcome. Likewise, a player may strive to create a familial trust between Alex and Jonas, having learned of the tragic drowning of Alex's brother Michael. Whilst Laurel argues that 'the distinguishing feature of the emotions that we feel in a fictional context is that there is no threat of pain or harm in the real world,'⁹⁶ and that 'empathy is subject to the same emotional safety net as engagement - we experience the characters' emotions as if they were our own, but not quite,'⁹⁷ this does not make the elicitation of emotion in videogames less impactful, only more 'enjoyable' as players experience the catharsis that comes from their being no real world implications from the narrative.

This 'emotional immersion', branded by Ryan as problematic due to its requirement for the creation of 'interpersonal relations between the player and computer-operated characters' sits at the core of the narrative experience of *Oxenfree*.⁹⁸ Ryan is correct in her observations that 'narrative interest regards characters as persons, [whilst] ludic interest regards them as means to an end', I do not believe that this takes away from the importance of the dialogue options in building an emotive narrative experience for players.⁹⁹ The reason for this is twofold. Firstly, *Oxenfree* has fewer traditional game mechanics than may be expected when one initially thinks of what comprises a videogame. There is no combat involved, and no skill or dexterity required in manipulating a controller. In doing so, the player's sense of achievement or reward in *Oxenfree*

⁹⁵ Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*, p. 140.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 145.

⁹⁸ Ryan, 'Storyworlds', p. 56.

⁹⁹ Ryan, 'Storyworlds', p. 56.

becomes less about successfully mastering the game, and much more about exploring both the physical space of the level design, and the story driving the game forwards. This serves to reduce any potential conflict between ludic and narrative interest, as the core gameplay revolves around exploration and choice making.

Secondly, assuming the existence of conflict between ludic and narrative interests comes from the assumption that players approach videogames from the position of wanting to be challenged by the game they are playing. Without delving too deeply into the rabbit hole that surrounds how we might define videogames, games like *Oxenfree* that can be broadly categorised alongside other 'walking simulators' can also be expected to draw upon a player base less interested in the challenges commonly associated with games, and more invested in games as unique narrative experiences. It therefore becomes important to consider that the 'ludic interest' of such games is very much intrinsically linked to narrative interests.

Agency can therefore be utilised as a significant benefit in game stories, and this does not need to mean an endless array of possibilities for players to explore. Well designed narratives can harness emotional agency as a mechanic, strengthening their success at creating a convincing narrative world, whilst not requiring significant additional cost in development (i.e. the creation of a great number of story branches, which may not be seen by all players). In recognising that 'the greater effort made by the player to understand what is going on in the diegesis leads to a nuanced and more personalized engagement with the game,' developers may reach a better understanding of a simple framework to apply to the design and creation of game stories.¹⁰⁰ Writing, and an understanding of how to craft an emotionally compelling story, is what successful narrative game design in *Oxenfree* hinges upon. Simply throwing opportunities for players to make choices, without much understanding of how to craft an emotive experience, does not automatically elevate a videogame to have a better narrative.

4.6 Conclusion

Analysis of *Oxenfree* reveals the importance of agency to crafting good game stories, but also suggests that not all instances of agency need be as costly or complex as previously thought. Indeed, some of the most compelling instances of choice within the game are not a means to explore a new branch of story, but rather an encouragement to the player to continue to explore and emotionally invest in the story and their experience.

The choices in *Oxenfree* are both impactful in terms of affecting the story branches, with ten unique endings for the player to discover. There are also choices designed not to lead the player down yet another story branch, but instead to further build their emotional connection with the characters and world of *Oxenfree*. Realising you have made a choice that hurts another

¹⁰⁰ Cole and Gillies, 'Thinking and Doing', p.13

character's feelings, or failing to repair a strained relationship elicit emotions from the player even if they do not lead to a unique ending in themselves.

We can learn much about the fundamental building blocks of narrative games from Oxenfree. Cost, effectiveness, and seamless integration with the gameplay are all key tenets here. Thus, the importance of considering the narratological framework of these stories cannot and should not be understated. Narrative is a key design component for videogames, and must be understood through the lens of story building.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Presenting media audiences with a choice is, admittedly, nothing new. Theatre, film, and television have all participated, to a certain extent, with using audience choice to develop their respective narratives or underline major themes in their work. Overwhelmingly however, they remain fairly linear and closed texts, with set outcomes and an intended way for their audiences to progress through the story. By contrast, videogames bring a unique perspective to ideas pertaining to user choice, and in some cases rely deeply on the mechanic of choice in order to fulfil their narrative promise. Indeed, choice is so intrinsic to games that it is one of the fundamental building blocks of game stories.

In *TSP*, the building blocks of the story itself hinge around player choices. Very early in the game, the player is presented with a choice; to take the door on the left, as instructed, or to divert from the intended path and turn right. From the outset, *TSP* is clear that this is a game in which the player's ability to choose is paramount to the experience. It makes the argument that the very existence of choice within game stories inherently changes the narrative structure. Choice after all lends itself to branching paths, with the story splintering in different directions based upon choices the player makes. In *TSP*, there is an added mechanic whereby the player, upon finding themselves 'reset' back to an earlier point in the game, may attempt to retrace the steps of their previous playthrough only to find that the very layout of the level itself has changed.

TSP also engages with questions of what it means for the player to hold authorial control over the game space. The narrator, in disbelief remarks upon Stanley' ability to make meaningful choices, before realising that they are in fact not Stanley, instead they are a real person able to make correct and incorrect choices.¹⁰¹ In this way, *TSP* becomes much more than a simple story of what happened to its titular character's coworkers. Instead, it delves into a self aware and self referential work which allows its creator to engage with the very meaning of player choice in game narrative, and uses this to its advantage by forcing the player to reflect upon their own role within the game space. This meta analysis of choice has much to say about the ways in which games may incorporate choices, and the ways in which these choices affect player, story, and gameplay.

By contrast, *Oxenfree* is a game about immersion. Choice in the context of this game is about immersing the player deeper into the game world through choices driving emotional investment. Whilst choice is also important in allowing the player to explore the branching narrative structure of the game, it is also a tool through which the game's creators can elicit strong emotional investment on the part of the player, and therefore enhance the narrative experience. After all, the more invested we are in a story, the more we care about the outcome.

¹⁰¹ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe, 2013.

What do these games then tell us about how choice affects the fundamentals of game storytelling? We know that games must be crafted with a player in mind, and that the player has the expectation of giving up total agency in order to undergo the experience of playing. After all, all games have limitations in their code that prevent a player from being able to do whatever he or she likes. We are still quite far from the kind of AI capabilities that would allow for a truly immersive, holodeck type experience. However, the inclusion of choice as a specific kind of interaction does something quite special. Rather than simply taking a player from point A to point B, giving them various objectives to complete along the way, choice shifts the story experience from a linear one to something more organic. Using choice to tell stories means that as the player must give up expectations of having total agency over the game world, so too must the creator give up having complete control over their narrative. Instead, they are inviting the player along to participate in a form of storytelling that is more collaborative in design; the creator may decide upon the final destinations, but it is up to the player how they get there.

Through careful analysis of my two case studies, as well as a broader consideration of narrative games more generally, it is clear that there is a blueprint emerging for how to tell better game stories. The solution is not as simple adding quick time events as interactions to allow the player to slow a chase sequence, as seen in David Cage's *Heavy Rain*. It is simple to add such events, but ultimately doesn't add much narrative depth if all the player is being asked to do is press a button without any true repercussions or thought behind the action. Instead, it is clear that adding interactive elements should contribute something to the narrative; the player should be asked to make choices to enhance the medium's storytelling capabilities. For Isbister, this is weaving a layer of emotional investment for the player into the design of the game itself.¹⁰² For Murray, the future of game stories lies in the continuing advancement of technology that allows for new and groundbreaking experiences in storytelling.¹⁰³ In the case of game stories, there is no one size fits all approach, as evidenced through my case studies analysing two vastly different games. Choice can be employed as a design mechanic in a range of ways to elevate the narrative, whether this be to affect a player's emotional state during their game experience, or force them to reflect more critically on the material itself.

Whatever the *narrative* impact of choices, it is abundantly clear through my research that choice is always *meaningful* in videogames, whether or not that choice results in the player discovering a new story branch or ending. It is instead pertinent to weigh up the value of game choices by evaluating how the act of asking a player to choose alters their individual experience of a videogame. This is not to say that choices never need to matter from a story perspective; indeed, it is a unique capability of videogames and interactive media to put the player in the driver's seat of a story, and grant them some degree of agency over how that story unfolds. However, whilst many contemporary narrative videogames place great emphasis on how player choices matter to their stories, I believe it can be enough for choices to be incorporated for a multitude of reasons, the least of which is altering a narrative or unlocking a particular ending.

¹⁰² Isbister, *How Games Move Us*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰³ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 17.

Choice can be about emotion, or greater immersion in a story world. It can force players to think critically about the systems with which they are engaging, as in *The Stanley Parable*, or to consider what they might do differently in a subsequent playthrough. It can simply be about making a greater connection with the game world, such as players being able to select which name to give the player character's dog at the start of *Kentucky Route Zero*. Such choices are not any less significant for having no relevance to how the story unfolds, not if *making* the choice itself has significance to that individual player. To conclude, choice is a fundamentally important part of game storytelling for a great multitude of reasons, and designers would do well to place their focus on how incorporating choice can enhance a videogame story experience.

Figures:



Fig. 1

“The Museum Ending” in *The Stanley Parable* showing a diorama of the level design for the first few key choices in the game (centre).

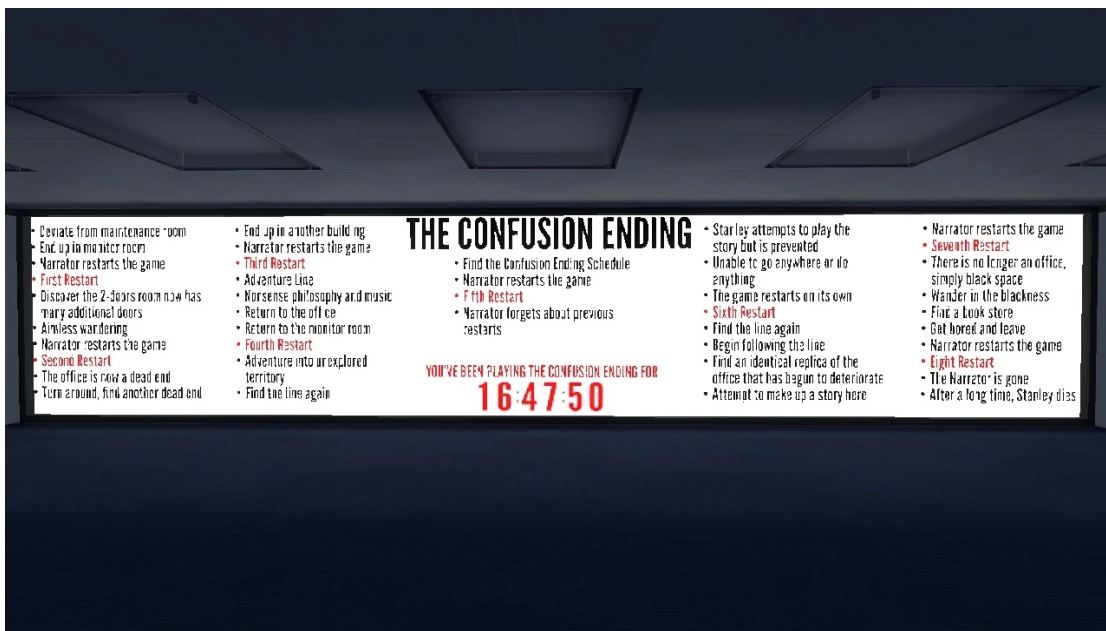


Fig. 2

“The Confusion Ending” in *The Stanley Parable* showing a list containing the players choices and the outcomes of those choices up to that point.

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