Translation at Play
Approaching *The Stanley Parable* as a theoretical object

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Abstract
This thesis approaches the videogame *The Stanley Parable* from the perspective of translation as characterized by George Steiner. This approach considers in which way the process of translation, which Steiner compares to the process of interpretation, could be connected to the act of playing a videogame. Various layers of translation within *The Stanley Parable* are discussed and analysed, which ranges from the implied script the game’s Narrator uses to frame the game and influence the player’s decisions, to the process of inscription visible in the attempt to shape the digital environment after the linear narrative of the script.

In order to do so, *The Stanley Parable* is approached as a theoretical object as described by Hubert Damisch. This allows for a broader theoretical reach, as well as a critical consideration of both the object and the theory applied to it. Roland Barthes’ notion of intertextuality and his five intertextual codes are utilized as a method of analysis, which leads to a wide-ranging discussion of concepts such as postmodernism, postcolonialism, environmental storytelling, linear versus non-linear narrative, interactivity, responsibility, artificiality and the notion of agency in relation to predetermined code. Throughout this discussion, various intertexts ranging from the film *Groundhog Day* to Franz Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* are connected and compared to what happens within the branching paths of *The Stanley Parable*. This thesis also reflects on the ludology-narratology debate and considers how this debate can be recognized within *The Stanley Parable*. It discusses how the process of translation can be compared to the act of playing due to its experimental approach and active attitude toward the unknown. Thus embedding the notion of translation as a way of thinking into the act of gaming, the process of play is likened to a more interactive process of interpretation.
‘The man was named Stanley.
This was his real name: Who on earth would want to change
his name to Stanley unless he planned on becoming a dentist?’

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Introduction

*The Stanley Parable* (TSP) is a videogame developed by Davey Wreden and William Pugh under the name Galactic Café. Previous to its official release, TSP existed in 2011 as a mod\(^1\) for the ‘FPS’ *Half Life 2*, which received so much attention and praise that in 2013 it was expanded and released as a standalone video game. The fact that the game is difficult to characterize is apparent in the summary it has on the online gaming platform Steam. *The Stanley Parable* is listed as follows:

> ‘The Stanley Parable is a first person exploration game. You will play as Stanley, and you will not play as Stanley. You will follow a story, you will not follow a story. You will have a choice, you will have no choice. The game will end, the game will never end.’\(^2\)

This listing of contradictions seems conflicting and confusing at first, but it actually emphasizes some of the main themes of the game: the concept of identity and identification in videogames, non-linear narrative structure, the question of agency and the absence of definitiveness. While this does not clarify the concrete structure and premise of the game, it does allude to the reason why public opinion, if the Steam player reviews are any indication, call for discretion regarding this game, suggesting that any discussion of its contents would ‘spoil’ the experience for others. Hopefully, it is clear that this thesis will not attempt to maintain this discretion, as remaining ‘spoiler free’ would lead to an impossibly vague analysis. The main message that can be taken away from the game’s reputation is the notion that this game is grounded in individual experience; encouraging thought and reflection, varying from the question of identity to the artificiality of video game environments.

As a game, *The Stanley Parable* functions differently from most popular narrative videogames such as RPG’s (Role Playing Games) and FPS’s (First Person Shooters). TSP is controlled through an altered FPS-system with restricted controls. Whereas FPS games usually allow (even emphasize) fast-paced navigation through the game-environment, combat, an extensive interface and the possibility to keep an inventory, TSP offers a more dialled down version. It maintains the same navigation controls and first-person perspective, but foregoes game ‘essentials’ such as a map, interactive and moveable objects or health bar. The game’s menu screen (*Figure 1*) further sets the game’s tone with a mise-en-abyme, which shows a computer monitor with the same menu which also mimics the player’s mouse movement. This presentation of the game’s menu foreshadows the game’s emphasis on framing and self-reflectivity.

The menu screen also starts the implication the player taking Stanley’s place, which is further implied through the opening monologue. Starting the game launches the first bit of narration, in which a voice credited as the Narrator introduces the player with the main character of the game; Stanley.

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\(^1\) ‘Mod’, in this sense, is short for modification, and refers to the process of *modding*, in which either players or developers add in extra elements or options into either single-or multiplayer game-modes in order to alter gameplay or experiences. These bits of code are referred to as ‘mods’ or ‘modpacks’, which are to be installed in order to influence the base game with extra accessible area’s, items, characters, texture packs and other visual modifications. The game *Gary’s Mod* has made of this practice of modding its base premise, offering a completely blank slate *sandbox* game which can be modified however players might want to.  

\(^2\) [https://store.steampowered.com/app/221910/The_Stanley_Parable/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/221910/The_Stanley_Parable/) Accessed: 5-4-2019
'This is the story of a man named Stanley. Stanley worked for a company in a big building where he was Employee #427. Employee #427's job was simple: he sat at his desk in room 427 and he pushed buttons on a keyboard. Orders came to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order. This is what Employee #427 did every day of every month of every year, and although others might have considered it soul rending, Stanley relished every moment the orders came in, as though he had been made exactly for this job. And Stanley was happy. And then one day, something very peculiar happened. Something that would forever change Stanley; Something he would never quite forget. He had been at his desk for nearly an hour when he realized that not one single order had arrived on the monitor for him to follow. No one had shown up to give him instructions, call a meeting, or even say 'hi.' Never in all his years at the company had this happened, this complete isolation. Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses, he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office.'

This introduction opens the game as a first-person perspective of the office appears on screen, which from then on is navigable by the player. With only directions offered by the Narrator, who comments on everything Stanley encounters and also seems to focalize Stanley’s own thoughts and interpretations of what happens, the player navigates as Stanley through the environment. These directions begin to become interesting once a choice seems to be offered to Stanley, since not one, but two doors open when the Narrator instructs him to take the door on his left, though the instruction is coded to sound like a representation of Stanley’s own thoughts. The player now has the option to disobey the Narrator’s ‘story’, and pick the other door, after which the Narrator adjusts his story in order to rationalize Stanley’s ‘mistake’. He then proceeds to guide the player through the

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3 ‘This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well. Perhaps he wanted to stop by the employee lounge first, just to admire it.’ […] ‘But at last, he had enough of the amazing room, and so he took the first open door on his left to get back to business.’
building to get the story ‘back on track’ by taking a different route. As the player navigates the spaces, more and more opportunities to disobey the Narrator manifest, and in return the Narrator will go to greater lengths to make the player follow his story. This even goes as far as the Narrator dropping the third-person narration, directly addressing Stanley and even addressing the player directly out of sheer frustration, or confusion, fabricating increasingly silly and insulting explanations in order to coax the player into obedience. TSP offers a multitude of paths to take, each accompanied with narration which vary from villainous dystopian threats in the Bomb ending to sincere humility and humanity in the Confusion ending, ironic parody in the Art ending and very self-aware criticism in the Museum and Game endings.

The Stanley Parable consists of nineteen different ‘endings’ in total. Whether the player is supposed to uncover and explore all these is portrayed as unintentional, though this exploration simultaneously seems to be the essence of the game. Following the Narrator’s directions would leave one to finish the game within approximately ten minutes. The following monologue and cutscene with which what is typically named the Life ending ends (Figure 12), imply that there is more to the game:

‘Yes! He had won. He had defeated the machine, unshackled himself from someone else’s command. Freedom was mere moments away. And, yet, even as the immense door slowly opened, Stanley reflected on how many puzzles still lay unsolved. Where had his co-workers gone? How had he been freed from the machine’s grasp? What other mysteries did this strange building hold?

But as sunlight streamed into the chamber, he realized none of this mattered to him. For it was not knowledge, or even power, that he had been seeking, but happiness. Perhaps his goal had not been to understand, but to let go. No longer would anyone tell him where to go, what to do, or how to feel. Whatever life he lives, it will be his.

And that was all he needed to know. It was, perhaps, the only thing worth knowing.

Stanley stepped through the open door.

Stanley felt the cool breeze upon his skin, the feeling of liberation, the immense possibility of the new path before him. This was exactly the way, right now, that things were meant to happen.

And Stanley was happy.5

These last few lines of monologue suggest that this alleged ‘freedom’ is yet another path within the game, along with a heavy emphasis on the lack of knowledge the player has of the so far unexplored game. After this outro, the game reloads and places Stanley back at the beginning of the game, in his office, which suggests that somehow the player has not succeeded in winning the game even though he followed directions, and ultimately, that there might be no chance at winning this game at all.7

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4 See Appendix A for a flowchart of all paths in TSP. See Appendix B for a synopsis of all possible endings.
5 Throughout all citations from The Stanley Parable used in this thesis, all italics are my own.
6 Except for a few paths in which multiple restarts are implied, there is no over-arching structure in TSP which keeps track of which paths have been explored by the player. While other narrative decision-based games, such as The Walking Dead series by Telltale, offer stats and keep track of decisions, once an ‘ending’ is reached in TSP one is sent back to the blank-slated beginning. TSP thus relies on personal experience and memory when it comes to references between endings, allowing for the possibility of multiple play-throughs of the same path; no actual progress is saved at any point.
7 Esslin & Fuchs (2015) p. 63
Translation and deconstruction

The diversity in the various paths and the complicated narrative structure of the game, which is influenced with relatively minimal though essential ludic elements, make *The Stanley Parable* into a multi-faceted object of study. The research into *TSP* so far shows a diverse range of perspectives, not only proving to be an interesting case-study but offering new insights in both new and already existing theories about video gaming and the experience and structure of (interactive) narrative. This shows how *TSP* can function as more than a case-study, as it fulfills the requirements of the **theoretical object** as characterized by Hubert Damisch. Approaching *TSP* as a theoretical object allows for broader theoretical consideration, to which this thesis will add by approaching the game through the lens of **translation**. The choice for this specific perspective is based on the identification of a specific defective cornerstone, based on which the entire game could be interpreted.

These hints at translation occur at multiple instances throughout *TSP*, depending on which path the player decides to take. Some of these paths lead to parts of the game which seem to be unfamiliar to the Narrator, as he can be heard frantically rustling through papers in order to find at what point of his planned out story Stanley currently finds himself. For example, the **Choice ending** offers the following scene:

‘Wait, oh goodness. Stanley, did you just unplug the phone?
No, *that wasn’t supposed to be a choice*. How did you do that? You actually chose incorrectly? I didn’t even know that was possible.
*Let me double-check.* [papers rustling]
No, it’s definitely here, clear as day.
Stanley picks up the phone. He’s taken to his apartment where he finds his wife and the two pledge themselves to one another. *Music comes in, fade to white, roll credits.*

This rustling of papers implies the presence of a written script for the entirety of the game, as the Narrator reads out events which reflect (almost) every path Stanley takes. This suggests that all the Narrator’s description of what Stanley experiences, the implicit choices he is presented with and all other textual input the narrator provides, is scripted, and therefore of textual origin. *The Stanley Parable*, in this case, consists of a translation from script into videogame, or at least, it is presented this way. This reasoning shows, or at least suggests, how the game is a consequence of linguistic acts. Linguistic acts (in the sense of translation and the Narrator’s interference) are shown to cause changes to the digital environment of the game, emphasizing the world-altering power behind language. Aware of this power, the game demonstrates the difficulty of translation by showing how the purveyor of these linguistic acts, the Narrator, does not always get his intended results. This leads to frustration on his part, but lays bare the inherent need for translation when it comes to the code of language, and how dodgy this process can be.

This thesis will follow the deconstructive approach of intertextuality in order to better understand *The Stanley Parable*, and generate new meaning to it. In order to add to research on *TSP* from a not yet discussed perspective, this thesis will discuss the game through the lens of **translation** as the term was defined by George Steiner in 1975. *TSP* will function as a **theoretical object** rather than a case-study, which means that instead of functioning as an example of certain theory, it will instead consider, reflect on- and generate theory by itself, and thus offer more general insight in the medium of videogames. This approach, combined with Roland Barthes’ notion of **intertextuality**, will allow for an analysis of the possible relationship between the process of playing videogames and the interpretative process of translation. Multiple endings of *TSP* in which translation occurs will be

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8 Ironically, this romantically described ending can not actually be experienced in *TSP*. However, there is a credit-sequence added to the game, in which the Narrator realizes he can no longer be heard by his .
discussed and analysed in order to distinguish if the acts of translation and play can be unified. In order to do so, the following questions have been formulated:

In what ways could the process of playing a game be considered as engaging in translation? How would this alter the process of interpretation, how does it influence the nature and mechanical process of interpretative transfer, and how does this manifest in *The Stanley Parable*?

Since *TSP* is so aware of its own conditions of possibility, along with its own materiality and procedural nature, it offers more concrete insights in its ongoing processes, both regarding code and interpretation (and as this thesis intends to prove, translation). Due to the intertextual nature of *TSP*, it lends itself for easy connection and association to multiple other manifestations such as postmodernity, interactivity, gaming and narrative conventions. Its awareness of its own diversity makes *TSP* into a great object for the study of fickle processes such as translation and interpretation.

Before diving too deep into the game itself, a *status questionis* will offer insight in both the state of research into narrative video games and the perspectives which have already been applied to *TSP* so far. This overview will also show where the perspective of *translation* can contribute to existing analysis. Then, the concept of the *theoretical object* as utilized by Hubert Damisch and Mieke Bal will be discussed, along with George Steiner’s definition of translation. While *translation* as a perspective and way of thinking will be at a central position within this research, *translation studies* will not. The decision to utilize Steiner’s approach to the term will be substantiated through the notion of intertextuality as described by Roland Barthes lateron in this introduction, as well as in the theoretical framework.

Once the theoretical framework has been delineated, *The Stanley Parable* will be discussed from three different angles, which will all reflect on how the process of interpretation is influenced by the interactive nature of the medium. First of all, the relationship between protagonist Stanley, the player and the concept of ‘reality’ will be considered. Then, the central figure of the Narrator will be discussed: his direct implied relationship to the supposed script will be analysed, as well as his function within the narrative and hierarchy of the game. Finally, the digital environment of the game will be discussed through the perspective of *environmental storytelling*, since the medial translation from script to videogame is one of the most radical transition the *Parable* seems to have undergone.

**Intertextuality**

The main method that will be utilized within this thesis is that of *intertextuality*, which consists of a way of thinking that considers the text as a ‘mosaic of quotations’ without any specific origin, ultimate meaning or final authority. Cultural theorist Roland Barthes’ deconstructionist approach to intertextuality will mainly be referred to when discussing this concept:

‘The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read: they are quotations without inverted commas.’

Barthes’ approach to intertextuality is much less structured than those of structuralist thinkers such as Gérard Genette, whose categorization of intertextuality is interesting to keep in mind, especially since he classifies *translation* as a form of *hypotext*, by which he refers to a connection between two (or more) works that is created through its transformation from one language to another. Due

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9 Allen (2000) p. 73
10 Allen (2000). p. 69
11 Ibid. p. 107-108. Genette defines the relationship between *intentional* intertexts as much more structural and restrictive. Moreover, these connections are approached as chronological, in which the earlier text is
to the deconstructive nature of this thesis, however, Barthes’ emphasis on plurality and equality lends itself much more to the cause, which is why the deconstructive approach to intertextuality will be utilized in this research. According to Barthes,

‘A text is [...] a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations [...] The writer can only [...] mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner ‘thing’ he thinks to ‘translate’ is itself only a ready-formed dictionary [...].’

In Barthes’ deconstructive approach to intertextuality, the various connotations found within a text no longer have a primary signified, and therefore no singular implied meaning. Instead, *connotation* in intertextuality is part of the *readerly text* ‘which allows meaning to break free from a linear, consecutive order’ towards an approach of plurality as main characteristic of the text. Despite his poststructuralist perspective, Barthes establishes five different ‘codes’ to register the intertextuality of the text’s connotative meanings. This way of approaching the text allows for multiple interpretations depending on which *codes* within the text are activated during its encounter with the reader. Which and how many codes are activated depends on the *repertoire* of the reader, or frankly, how many other texts he or she is familiar with, which influence their experience of the text in question.

An important nuance to this approach is that meaning is generated between text and reader, disregarding the more classical status of the author as ‘originator’ of, and ultimate authority on, the text. These codes are not definitive or set in any way; ‘rather they are the reader’s own way of registering the intertextual avenues of meaning which break into the text’s apparent sequential order.’ The process of ‘reading’ in Barthes’ terms concerns an infinite production of meaning, which continues beyond the physical reading of the text, since codes can be activated subsequently, and no definitive meaning can be determined. While one can ‘close’ a book or game, the Text remains ‘open’ in this regard.

Barthes’ five codes all have different markers, and are activated depending on the reader’s (or player’s) repertoire. The *hermeneutic code* concerns ‘various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed’. All empty spaces and elements which raise questions can be considered hermeneutic code, since they form questions the reader (or player) will want answers to. In the case of *TSP*, the questions regarding Stanley’s identity and the location of his co-workers are part of the hermeneutic code. The *semic code* concerns signifiers which carry referential meaning. The fact that Stanley is referred to as characterized as the influential *hypotext* and the later text as the influenced *hypertext*. While the term *hypertext* is still used often within the digital sphere characterizing non-linear connectivity between texts, Genette’s approach of the hyper- and hypotext is much less utilized within the field of intertextuality. See De Pourcq & De Strycker (2013) p. 45 and Allen (2000) p. 111-113 for a more thorough consideration of the hypotext.

12 Barthes (1977) p. 146
13 Allen (2000) p. 79: ‘The readerly text is oriented towards representation and [...] leads the reader towards a meaning, it creates the illusion that it is produced by a singular voice and underplays the force of the intertextual (Barthes, 1974: 41).’
14 Allen (2000) p. 84
15 Allen (2000) p. 85: regarding these codes, Barthes proclaims how ‘they are so many fragments of something that has always been already read, done, experienced; the code is the wake of that already’.
16 Pint (2013) p. 91
17 More on this shift in authority can be found in Barthes’ essay *The Death of the Author* (1977)
18 Allen (2000) p. 84
19 Pint (2013) p. 81
21 Pint (2013) p. 85
employee number 427 implies that he is not very important within the company, both due to the height of the number and the fact that he is referred to by number at all. The proairetic code concerns the sequential elements of action occurring within the discussed text. This element adds suspense to the text, as it covers expectation patterns and narrative conventions, whether they are followed or broken. TSP offers multiple deconstructed versions of narrative conventions, such as the role of the narrator as onlooker and not-intervener, as well as his authoritative status within the ‘text’ he narrates. The symbolic code ‘involves all the recognizable symbolic patterns, including traditional oppositions such as male–female or light and dark.’ One of the most important oppositions in TSP is the one between reality and artificiality: a binary which is never completely resolved. Finally, the cultural code depends on the repertoire of its reader, consisting of everything they have read or experienced before, on which the reader calls to interpret the text. The cultural code present within the text depends on the already-read and knowledge of each reader, and can change as the reader encounters more texts. Like the author, the reader cannot claim authorship over the text, even if it is considered writerly, in which case the reader ‘rewrites’ the text as they are reading it by inscribing it with their own cultural codes and repertoire. Both author and reader are considered an effect of the text and the meaning they have produced. Along the lines of this cultural code, Steiner’s presence in my repertoire has lead to the selection of his theory as the theoretical approach to translation for this thesis.

Method

At the start of this research, information on the game has been gathered both by playing The Stanley Parable itself and consulting recorded playthroughs and transcripts. References to the Narrator’s script, implied ownership and the game’s artificiality were noted specifically, which lead to the association with translation as a process. Having gathered information from the theoretical object, mainly Barthes’ cultural codes were utilized to embed TSP in an intermedial narrative tradition of literature, film and videogames, as each activated cultural code lead to more insight into the game itself. Specific implications regarding the processes of interpretation and translation which are implied to occur throughout the game were analysed, as they proved to reflect regularly on proairetic codes, which were simultaneously often deconstructed. The hermeneutic and semic codes are less emphasized on in this research due to their implied nature, though their influence within the reasoning of the Narrator are quite apparent at some instances. Finally, identifying symbolic codes in TSP has been proven difficult due to the game’s deconstructive nature. Additionally, this code has proved less essential when it comes to the process of medial translation, which is why it is less reflected upon in this thesis. Whereas symbolism and metaphors do occur in TSP, they have mainly been approached as intertextual references, thus rather categorizing these instances as activation of cultural code instead. These cultural codes have been analysed in relation to TSP in order to not only make sense of the various ‘endings’ offered to the player, but also to offer more insight as to how the process of translation influences narrative structure, allowing for more general considerations of the relation between translation and the act of playing.

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22 This specific element will be discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis, which concerns the game’s name in regard to Stanley’s character.
24 Pint (2013) p. 86
25 Pointing out these codes most of the time seems redundant due to the clear questions or characterizations they signal: therefore they will not be pointed out as much in this thesis, though their presence within TSP is hereby acknowledged. Instead of signalling the presence of a certain code, its connotations will be analysed in order to make for a clearer reading experience.
Exemplifying this way of thinking, encountering TSP activates the cultural codes of Franz Kafka’s literary work. In order to be able to discuss this connection, but not dive into Kafka’s entire oeuvre, the novella *In the Penal Colony* has been selected for this approach. The short story follows a traveller on his visit to a penal colony, where grave punishments are served by the means of a horrible Machine, which physically inscribes its victims with the rules they have broken. Whereas the reliance of both narratives on mechanical authority could be flagged as symbolic code, which would lead to its own interpretation and conclusions. However, this thesis rather interprets this connection as cultural code, allowing for further comparison between the two narratives as *In the Penal Colony* offers ways to further interpret and understand *The Stanley Parable*. This specific novella was again selected based on the activation of cultural code, since multiple narrative elements, tropes and themes coincide with those of TSP, which will be discussed further in chapters 3 and 5.

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26This is also referenced in other discussions of TSP, such as Bradley Fest’s characterization of the game as Kafkaesque. Fest (2016) p. 20: ‘This is a lonely hero, wandering the nightmarish, Kafkaesque halls of the world’s most existential office building, depopulated except for an unseen British man describing Stanley’s actions and berating him when he chooses incorrectly.’ A similar characterization of TSP as Kafkaesque can be found in Esslin & Fuchs (2015) p. 61.
Chapter 1 – Status Questionae

This chapter will offer an overview on the status of existing research on two different topics which are relevant in this thesis. The first status questionis discusses views on video game theory; especially regarding discussions concerning the balance between the narrative and the ludic elements of contemporary video games. The second one will more thoroughly discuss appearances of The Stanley Parable within academic literature. Both these overviews offer a series of perspectives which might not correlate to one another in a specific order, though they all concern the larger question of narrative video games and The Stanley Parable in general. They serve as a referential framework, which will be called back to throughout this thesis in order to embed the discussed further into the existing field of research. Moreover, this broad though segmented overview will further emphasize the diversity and compatibility of The Stanley Parable to multiple perspectives.

1.1 - Status Questionis: Video Game Theory

The Ludology vs. Narratology Debate

When discussing what is conventionally called a narrative video game, the most important discussion that needs to be taken into account is the Narratology versus Ludology-debate. This debate concerns a schism between literary and videogame studies, and the question whether literary theory is fit to be applied to such a radically different medium. The ludologists, as they call themselves, argue that what is unique to the medium of videogames should be at the centre of analysis, and that narratology would be insufficient and even disrespectful towards the medium, since it consists of more than its narrative element. This is opposed by narratologists, who claim that the narrative structure in videogames is just as fit to be analysed through narratology as any other medium. On the webpage on ‘Narrativity of Computer Games’ in The Living Handbook of Narratology, Britta Neitzel characterizes ‘The Ludology vs. Narratology Debate’ as follows:

‘Common to both positions is that they one-sidedly isolate one single dimension to the exclusion of all others, an approach which fails to acknowledge the specifics of the computer—namely, the fact that the computer is a hybrid medium that integrates various forms and media—and in so doing dissolves distinctions between them (cf. Thomsen ed. 1994).’

Neitzel emphasizes how the division between the two binaries has become less extreme since the debate first arose, allowing for both fields to enrich each other instead of creating conflict. Acknowledging the video game as a product of the ‘hybrid medium’ of the computer allows for some space in both directions: not disregarding the unique qualities of videogames compared to other narrative media, but still allowing room for narrative study. As Neitzel emphasizes: ‘The fact that computer games are games by no means excludes them from having narrative qualities.’

Another interesting voice in this debate is Henry Jenkins, who reflects on the debate in his text Game Design as Narrative Architecture. He debunks arguments as to why games cannot function as stories with a broad view of both sides of the discussion, and states that ‘Increasingly, we inhabit a world of transmedia storytelling, one that depends less on each individual work being self-sufficient than on each work contributing to a larger narrative economy.’ Instead of all media having to tell a story on their own (or not, according to ludologists), multiple manifestations of a concept can add to the same ‘world’ without each of them having to tell the exact same narrative. Jenkins argues that

27 Neitzel (2014) paragraph 8: ‘The Ludology vs. Narratology Debate’
30 Following Jenkins’ example, A Star Wars game can enrich the experience of the Star Wars narrative as it is consumed in text or film. Not by constantly duplicating it, but by expanding the world in which those stories take place.
these narrative systems can create vast storyworlds, with each medium doing what it does best in order to convey bits of story information. The power of games, in this case, ‘almost certainly centre around their ability to give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the storyworld, creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with.’

It is striking to see that, in the examples Jenkins shows of voices that strike out against the narrative study of videogames, the definitions of ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ that these voices utilize are outdated. It is therefore understandable that they are loath to fit videogames within such a narrow and restricting structure they believe narrative theory to be. As Neitzel already mentioned, the isolation of one dimension of the game leads to an outright exclusion of the others, resulting in such a focus on the debate that the actual analysis of the subject suffers. Many of the binaries presented in this debate have actually already moved much closer together than is generally assumed. The restricting ‘storylines’ that theorists such as Costikyan and Adams imagine are only the traditional concepts of narrative, with an entire non-linear literary tradition existing next to it proving how diverging and diverse narrative can be. Awareness of this has been growing recently, allowing for a milder theoretical climate concerning the contradictions and similarities between the two approaches.

Jenkins also takes the example of ‘spatial stories’ in order to illustrate how narratives (both in games and other media) can function as ‘episodic’, with each part being captivating on their own without the need for a constant drive towards one climactic ending. The privileging of spatial exploration over plot development also very much occurs in TSP. Whereas the narrator does attempt to steer the player back towards the ‘story’, it seems clear that on the level of game, the player is never really meant to truly understand what that story is about. Instead, the game encourages spatial exploration by suggesting alternate paths to the player which seem just a little bit forbidden, leaving The Stanley Parable as a digital cookiejar, begging to be plundered. Each cookie is just as good, and there is no such thing as ‘the ultimate cookie’, even if it says so on the lid.

Players and readers
In his text Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature, Espen Aarseth laid the groundwork for videogame theory through the concept of ergodic literature. While he did not specifically write with videogames in mind, but rather discussed an interactive literary form in which ‘nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text’, his work is often referenced in videogame studies. Aarseth refers to these literary texts as hypertexts, but also counts adventure games and multi-user dungeons, including tabletop RPG’s such as Dungeons and Dragons, Fighting Fantasy novels and early videogames in this definition. Aarseth insists in his text how players are not readers, which is mainly due to the ‘nontrivial effort’ required to traverse the ergodic text, while the mere act of reading qualifies as trivial. Aarseth’s distinction between players and readers draws from this same ergodic basis of commitment and effort:

‘A reader [...] cannot have the player’s pleasure of influence: “Let’s see what happens when I do this.” The reader’s pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent. The

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32 Ibid. p. 118-120 See these pages for some examples of ludologist statements regarding narrative, and Jenkins’ reflection on them.
33 Allen (2000) p. 83: ‘Barthes’ approach shatters the illusion that narrative can provide an ultimate meaning.’
34 Aarseth (1997) p. 1
35 This concerns a different definition of ‘hypertext’ than the one Genette utilizes for his intertextual characterization. Aarseth’s hypertext refers to the interconnected text without Genette’s implied hierarchy, and thus connects closer to Barthes’ notion of intertextuality.
36 The difference between ‘trivial’ and ‘nontrivial’ is characterized as follows: trivial effort concerns ‘no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages’. Aarseth (1997) p. 1-2.
cybertext reader, [...] is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. [...] The tensions at work in a cybertext, while not incompatible with those of narrative desire, are also something more: a struggle not merely for interpretative insight but also for narrative control.37

Through the interactive nature of the cybertext, which ‘focuses on the mechanical organization of the text by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange’, the reader becomes a player.38 The potential of losing, but at the same time of gaining more individual importance within the narrative motivate a more invested attitude from the player. In return, the potential of loss is presented as less threatening or unpleasant in games than it would be in ‘reality’. Games, as Johan Huizinga already suggested in 1938 in his book Homo Ludens, can be seen as ‘magic circles’ in which a certain set of rules apply: rules which do not usually correlate with reality.39 While Huizinga wrote this metaphor before the emergence of video games they are known today, the broader concept of ‘play’ is still very much applicable to videogames. It shows a first nod towards the acceptance of games functioning in slightly different realms, with different rules, and therefore with a different language to reality. The notion that these rules need to be translated in order to be properly conceived by a player has been at the centre of this thesis’ attempt at bringing the acts of play and translation closer together.

Homo Ludens, which translates to Playing Man or Man who Plays, suggests that people ‘play’ when they appear in cultural, social space. ‘Play’ is in this case associated with make-belief: the assumption and portrayal of certain behaviour as is expected in a certain environment or culture.40 This suggests a certain distance between behaviour and the individual performing this behaviour, as well as a sense of insincerity.41 Despite this sense of insincerity, the expected active attitude from the player towards the experience of any game requires genuine personal investment. They are required to step into the magic circle in order to participate and experience it, acknowledging a certain dependability on the game’s structure and rules which need to be followed in order for the game to be enjoyed.

The Popularity of Interactivity
Interactive narratives are gaining a lot of popularity and media attention lately, both inside and beyond the videogame genre. One example is the resurgence of tabletop RPG’s through online streaming (i.e. Dungeons and Dragons streams such as Critical Role) popularizing the idea of narratives that are constructed through the creativity of multiple people. The idea of taking part in the creation of characters, making decisions based on personal input that actually influences the larger plot of a constructed world is also recognizable in other media. There is an increasing diversity in choice-based narrative games as well, in which playing with the direction of the narrative through the main character’s decisions is equally, or even more important than skill-based ‘play’. Many of these games have such an emphasis on story that they have turned out more as cinematographic narratives (such as the various gameseries by Telltale), combining traces of point-and-click-adventures (Dear Esther and other First Person Walkers) and thought experiments in an interactive form, such as the recent game Detroit: Become Human. Through a layered discussion of elements

37 Aarseth (1997) p. 4
38 Ibid. p. 1
39 Lemmens (2017) p. 9
40 Hellemans (2017) P. 152
41 Use of the term performance in this case refers to the associated term performativity, a concept which covers the process of exhibiting and internalizing certain behaviour based on certain expectations, roles, tropes or societal conventions as a way of constructing one’s identity. For more information on performativity I refer to the works of Judith Butler for a gendered interpretation of this, and to Erving Goffman’s work for a more general societal perspective.
such as artificial intelligence, humanity and programming, this game combines detective work with decision-making based on clues, moral orientation and pure curiosity.

The plot of videogames has become a much more central element in the evolution of videogames. This development shows a need for players to be involved in the narrative, which is accommodated through instances of choice, which allow players to influence the course of the narrative. The awareness of possible outcomes highly raises the replay value of these games, allowing players to navigate the same narrative multiple times with drastically different results.

While the predetermined nature of these choices seems to be self-evident to most players, leading to comparison and reflection on experiences of certain walkthroughs, this ‘illusion of agency’ is something that is often reflected upon both within and beyond such game’s narratives. An important nuance when it comes to this concept in videogames is that its players are almost always aware of the artificial nature of the digital environment and the choices they make. Or at least: they are fully aware that they are playing a videogame, and therefore aware of the magic circle around them. One of the most clear examples of this is the possibility to load an earlier saved game, and to start over if one wishes to do so. Such mechanics diminish the threat of failure, which leads to a braver and more creative navigation of the narrative world, and to experiments which one might never attempt outside this magic circle. While not every player might not realise where the exact border between agency and pre-programmed choice lies, its existence as a digital artificial environment seems to be evident. This is the case to such an extent that in certain videogames, the various narrative outcomes are recorded and uploaded to websites such as Youtube, so that people who do not own the game can still experience the multiple possible narratives. This shows how, while narrative and ludic experiences are deeply entwined, they can be experienced separately as well.

This consideration of agency within narrative is spreading toward other media, showing further interest for interactivity in the current public popular sphere. The interactive film Bandersnatch, as a part of the popular series Black Mirror, balances between a narrative decision-making game and an interactive film, fitting very well next to cinematic games such as the aforementioned Telltale games. Both of these instalments show how there is not only demand for interactivity in media, but also show how the consumers of these media are interested in investing their own morality and responsibility in their experiences. The Stanley Parable reflects not only on the popularity of these interactive manifestations, but also on the question whether actual responsibility is what a player would or should want.

1.2 - Status Questionis: how has The Stanley Parable been interpreted?
The Stanley Parable has been discussed in multiple papers and articles already. While these perspectives each bring their own insights to the table, they rarely approach TSP as art, but rather as a case-study to apply theory on or to compare with other games within a certain frame of characteristics. Below, the most prominent and diverse perspectives on TSP will be discussed briefly in order to give an overview of how the game exists in the academic sphere.

Narrative format
From the narratological angle, The Stanley Parable has mainly been approached as a more unconventional, non-linear narrative. Esslin & Fuchs favour the term unnatural narrative in their discussion of TSP. This concept is mainly defined as narratives which ‘violate physical laws, logical principles, or standard anthropomorphic limitations of knowledge by representing storytelling scenarios, narrators, characters, temporalities, or spaces that could not exist in the actual world.’42

Esslin and Fuchs emphasize how ‘[...] not every definition of unnaturalness is useful for close game analysis, but if we take anti-mimeticism and defamiliarisation [...] as a starting point, we can

42 Alber, Jan (2014) Paragraphs 1 and 2. Most unnatural narratives also contain ‘natural’ components, some of which have been conventionalized to such an extent that they have become familiar narrative tropes, such as the concept of talking animals in fables.
begin to make sense of the kinds of “unnatural structures” that feature, for example, in meta-games like The Stanley Parable, or generally in games that push the boundaries of ludo-narrative design.\textsuperscript{43}

The term ‘meta’ is used to characterize an artform’s awareness of its own existence and medium; something which is recognizable in TSP. Esslin and Fuchs offer an analysis of instances of unnatural narration in TSP by considering the unlikely presence of the Narrator and associating this notion to the illusory agency of the player.\textsuperscript{44} They discuss the Narrator as figure of authority in the Life ending, Real Person ending (referred to here as the Choice ending) and the Museum ending by seeing them as separate stories, drafting a scheme of diegetic levels for each path.\textsuperscript{45} This analysis of narrative framing leads to their conclusion of TSP as an educational allegory, intent to making players aware of their illusory agency, their willingness to relinquish this control in exchange for entertainment and the escape from this powerlessness in the shape of ‘cheating’.\textsuperscript{46}

In this thesis, the Narrator will be approached through the perspective of translation to further question his implied authority. An attempt will be made to approach the plurality of the game not as separate paths, but intertwining strands of the same tapestry, in order to see how the various endings relate to one another. Esslin & Fuchs’ established binary between implied author and player in TSP will also be questioned, since the intertextual approach opens up the possibility for the text containing inherent elements which cannot be ascribed to a specific ‘player’ within the text.

\textit{Game genre and -structure}

When it comes to game genre and -structure, The Stanley Parable straightforwardly tells us what it is, as the Narrator refers to the \textit{parable} as a \textit{narrative video game}. Since most videogames nowadays have some kind of narrative entwined into gameplay, even when it concerns mobile puzzle games such as Candy Crush, a more specific characterization is needed. Heron and Belford characterize The Stanley Parable as a ‘graphical choose your own adventure-game’, focusing heavily on the choice-based gameplay and taking less note of the theoretical nature of the game.\textsuperscript{47}

This characterization refers rather to The Walking Dead Telltale games, which are also discussed in Heron and Belford’s article, or larger-scale RPG-series such as Mass Effect and The Witcher. However, the looping and branching structure can also be recognized in The Stanley Parable, though the endings of The Stanley Parable (which is a much shorter game than traditional RPG’s) don’t have a ‘final irrevocable’ decision anywhere: instead the various threads loop back to the beginning constantly. The game’s replay value does not refrain them from categorizing The Stanley Parable as a spiritual successor to the adventure-game-books, mainly due to their comparably twining narrative structure. While they do acknowledge the self-referential nature of the game and its awareness of its materiality of game, something Bradley Fest goes into much deeper, the true depth of the connotations implied by some of the game’s endings are not really discussed by Heron and Belford. Their approach is clear from the article’s name: diverging from the original phrasing of the game, it is called All of Your Co-Workers are Gone: Story, Substance, and the Empathic Puzzler. The way this diverges is interesting, since it moves away from the characteristic third-person narrative ‘All of his co-workers were gone’. Removing some of the characteristic narrative framing also implies a direct and apparently self-evident identification of the player and the protagonist as

\textsuperscript{43} Esslin & Fuchs (2015) p. 68
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. p. 61
\textsuperscript{45} These endings will also be referenced throughout this thesis. However, to avoid too much repetition other not yet discussed paths will also feature, depending on their applicability.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. p. 67-68
\textsuperscript{47} Heron & Belford (2015) p.13: ‘The focus within these games is on structured exploration of a narrative through the use of decision points where the story can split into multiple new branches, all of which are exclusive. Sometimes these decisions may feed back into previous decisions, creating loops that can be repeatedly explored until the player arrives at a final irrevocable decision. These choices then feed into future choices and change the texture, if not the overall structure, of the story presented.’
the same person. This approach is striking in this specific game, since TSP hints at a distinct distance between the two entities, and encourages an investigation of this possible distance. The use of this specific altered line of monologue for the article’s title says much about the writers’ interpretation and approach, even before their argumentation begins.48

It is noteworthy how Heron and Belford emphasize how the introduction of more ludic elements into games can cause a loss of emotional (and theoretical) resonance: a statement which would substantiate TSP’s minimized ludic elements.49 This notion reoccurs in Muscat et al.’s research into the genre of the First Person Walker as opposed to the First Person Shooter genre, in which this much-used system is reduced to much simpler controls, directing more focus towards the exploration of the game’s environment.50 Restricted movement and minimized interaction lead to an ambiguous narrative, ensuring a more intense and focused audio-visual experience. Ambiguity and encouragement of interpretative thought are identified as the main driving forces of both narrative and player motivation. This interpretative freedom of FPW’s ‘encourage[s] players to fill in the gaps with subjective, imaginative thought, and contemplate more deeply towards their relationship;’ a process which associates heavily with the concept of the narratological concept of the implied reader. This term ‘designates the image of the recipient that the author had while writing or, more accurately, the author’s image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs.51 The implied reader exists in relation to the empty spaces within any narrative, and consists of the expectations of both implied and real author that the implied, ‘intended’ reader will fill in these gaps with their own knowledge, context, and interpretation.52

Metaproceduralism and postmodern irony

A more thematic interpretation of The Stanley Parable can be found in Bradley Fest’s Metaproceduralism: The Stanley Parable and the legacies of Postmodern Metafiction. Fests text does an excellent job at discussing some of the ironic, postmodern concepts and paths which appear in The Stanley Parable, to such an extent that covering postmodern theories such as panopticism in this thesis would be redundant. The term metaproceduralism, which Fest coins in order to describe games reflecting on their own existence as ‘game’ by emphasizing their dependence on procedures and systems, is based on the postmodern notion of metafiction.53 Fest argues that whereas postmodern strategies in literature have been exhausted, metaproceduralism in videogames is actually refreshing, as it grants the player insight into the essence of ‘the video game’.54 TSP is an ace example of this, since it reflects on its own existence as a game and reflects on the procedural nature of videogames in general. However, the fact that TSP reflects on its materiality of game does not directly exclude it from also reflecting on narrative materiality.55 Traces of metafiction are very apparent in The Stanley Parable, especially concerning the Narrator’s obsession with what he calls ‘the story’ of the game, and his determination to make Stanley follow it. It is perfectly possible for a narrative game to reflect on both its own procedural and its narrative materiality, and while both naturally influence one another, TSP’s ‘story’ is emphasized on too much for it to be ignored. This last consideration lacks in Fest’s work, and therefore will be discussed further in this thesis.

Fest mentions Paul de Man’s characterization of innocence and authenticity and how it is

48 Especially since The Stanley Parable does not really qualify as an ‘empathic puzzler’, according to Heron & Belford, which is partly due to there not being an actual solution or definitive outcome to the game, it is puzzling as to why this excerpt was chosen as a title.
49 Heron & Belford (2015) p. 22
50 Muscat (2016) p. 13
52 Ibid. paragraph 2 – 3.
53 Fest (2016 p. 4
54 Fest (2016) p. 4-5
‘unravelled’ as soon as one questions it (approaches it ironically). This shows the irreversibility of irony, as well as an example of a deconstructive reading, in which the realization of a small inconsistency can influence one’s overall experience of a medium forever. Fest claims that TSP introduces irony into the logic of the computer, turning the video game into a medium of possibility, thus allowing it to become ‘art’. Though the process of consumption is similar to what it criticizes (namely continuous button pushing), it becomes meaningful. He claims that ‘the button pushing regime of Stanley’s that has been interrupted by the operator’s choice to start the game’ is the result of the developers reflecting on the medium itself, with irony again as its most important factor. Fest suggests that Stanley is interrupted because the Operator (by which he means the player), decided to start the game, suggesting that all the time the player is not logged on, Stanley just sits there waiting, pushing his buttons. One of the most important questions Fest discusses in his article is the notion of videogames as art, and how irony enables TSP to become just that. The nature of art is discussed in TSP as well, which Fest not only considers and interprets, but takes into account when characterizing how videogames could be considered ‘art’. This varied approach to The Stanley Parable shows not only how many different theoretical approaches can be applied to the game, but how the game also encourages new theoretical thought, as it seems to need theoretical thought in order to be processed and interpreted by its players. This qualifies TSP as a theoretical object, which opens up new possibilities to interpret the game in its complexity.

56 Fest. p. 21
57 This interpretation is substantiated by something the Narrator says during the Bomb ending: ‘I turned off the machine; I set you free.’ This remains an ambiguous statement, mainly due to the contradictory speeches the Narrator gives on this subject, along with the complicated definition of ‘freedom’. This passage and its additional dilemma will be discussed further in Chapter 5, which delves deeper into Stanley’s character.
58 Fest (2016) p. 14
59 Fest (2016) p. 15
Chapter 2 – Theoretical framework

2.1 The Theoretical object

The theoretical object is a term most associated with Hubert Damisch, a French philosopher who mainly utilized it in his discussions of visual art. In this thesis, the interview conducted with him in 1998 will be used as the main source for his characterization of the theoretical object. In addition to this, Mieke Bal’s use of the term will be discussed in relation to Damisch later on, as an example of how it can be used in practice when discussing art. When asked the specific nature of the theoretical object as opposed to other kinds of objects, Damisch offers the following explanation:

‘It is not enough to write a history of a problem for that problem to be resolved. A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory [...] Second, it’s an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. Thus, if you agree to accept it on theoretical terms, it will produce effects around itself. While I worked on perspective I began to have aperçu with regard to the history of science that are not at all traditional; I began, that is, to produce theory. Third, it’s a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms, it produces theory, and necessitates a reflection on theory.’

As Damisch argues, the theoretical object needs further thought in order to be processed and understood. The object offers its own perspectives and suggestions as to what thought-processes would be most fitting. Thus, the theoretical object offers approaches to it through the experience of ‘it being theoretical’. By accepting a work of art as a theoretical object, the ‘effects’ produced around itself manifest not as hints towards what it ultimately means, but offer insights as to which approaches towards the object might offer its reader a deeper understanding of the object. This emphasizes the first point Damisch makes concerning these objects, namely how a theoretical object ‘obliges you to do theory’. It suggests that there is no intrinsic, ultimate meaning to these objects. Instead, these objects imply that the they have something more to them, that there is information missing or that the observer simply does not possess enough background information to understand the work properly. While this is a familiar reaction to much contemporary art, this sense of incompleteness (and the awareness of it) are part of its qualification as a theoretical object.

This poses the question: is there something intrinsic ‘missing’ from the work, such as context or exposition towards the audience, intentionally remaining abstract in its message, if it even has any? Or is it the missing concrete referral to theory that creates this sense of not seeing the entire picture? Following Damisch in his approach, both are partly correct. Suggesting that there is something ‘missing’ in a work of art is always a complicated statement, since its existence under specific circumstances usually define it. Qualifying the object as theoretical is necessary in order to recognize the object’s production of theory, which consequentially necessitates reflection on said theory on its nature, contents and validity.

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60 Bois, Hollier, Krauss and Damisch (1998) P. 8
61 The term ‘observer’ has been chosen in order to utilize a more general term for those who experience a theoretical object. When it comes to the specific theoretical object discussed in this thesis, the term ‘observer’ would be faulty, since the term implies a more passive attitude. Due to the required ‘nontrivial’ input in order to progress the narrative, as it is characterized in Aaserth’s discussion of ergodic literature (see page 1), would specifically not qualify the role of ‘observer’ as applicable. However, for the sake of this more general discussion and theory, the term ‘observer’ is chosen to generalize the type of encounter that would take place between the subject and a theoretical object in a still somewhat accurate way. Additionally, this was done to evade awkward terms such as ‘interactor’, inaccurate ones such as ‘interpreter’ and abstract ones like ‘subject’.
The three facets of the Theoretical Object

The approach of a theoretical object it can be divided in three distinguishable facets. After the initial encounter with the theoretical object, the subject, be it a reader, player, or any other kind of ‘observer’, will recognize the need for theory in order to fully understand the object. The theoretical object does not simply point out what it means, but affirms that it has deeper layers of meaning. This is the first facet of the theoretical object: it is *posed in theoretical terms*. It shows how it needs a participatory external influence in order to be understood, and that this process of theorizing is part of its status as art, and as theoretical object. As theoretical objects usually encourage theoretical consideration, once this is brought to attention, it can be recognized to be offering tools which might help an observer to interpret it properly.

Next to the necessity for theoretical thought, something else is intrinsic to the theoretical object. This qualifies as the second facet: it intrinsically offers the perspective and toolset that facilitates its theoretical approach, thus producing and offering theory from within. This could be seen as follows: the enigmatic theoretic object offers a language that can be used to translate its meaning, as soon as one accepts the notion that a specific language would be necessary to try and understand it. This further shows how the first facet, theoretical thought, is a prerequisite for the second facet, the production of theory. Simultaneously, consideration of the nature of this language and of languages in general is encouraged, both on the plenary view as to why theory is needed and on the level of a specific theory, or language. This critical consideration of theory manifests as the third facet of the theoretical object, which Damisch characterizes as ‘necessitating critical reflection on theory’. Studying theoretical objects is therefore a healthy approach for any theorist, and on a larger scale for any theoretic field as well, as it keeps refreshing and re-affirming the soundness of theory and challenging possible shortcomings. A critical approach of the validity of theory is something that can easily be overlooked for the sake of brevity, since emphasis is easily laid on the actual application of theory. Damisch’ concept of the theoretical object closes the gap and, to some extent, the hierarchy between the object and the theory it concerns.

The presentation of the theoretical object as neither a puzzle that needs to be solved or an ‘object that wants to make you think’, but rather one that elicits and generates theoretical consideration and calls attention to its materiality, turns the relation between the object and theory into a two-way road. The object can influence the experience of theory (and expand on it), just as theory can influence one’s experience of the object. Approaching the object theoretically does not physically change the object in any way. Therefore, signs of how the theoretical object intrinsically

62 An important nuance in this instance is that this does not imply that ‘meaning’ stands for ‘understanding or extracting the narrative that exists somewhere within the work’, as anyone could turn anything into narrative; Bal specifically criticizes this overdose of narrativity in her 1999 article. The theoretical object she discusses there shows how a laid-out narrative is not always the end goal (and message) of art, but rather can be used as a *tool*: ‘a mediator, not a solution’. (see Bal (1999) p. 103)

63 This need can arise due to there not being enough pronounced narrative for a proper contextualization, as in the case of Mieke Bal’s theoretic approach to Louise Bourgeois’ statues. However, her analysis shows that the sculptures actually contain deeper meaning, which has no need for emphasized and formulaic narrative in order to be experienced. She claims that the sculptures are imbued with *memories* instead of more outspoken narrative; a more abstract shape that still contains traces of storytelling, but requires another kind of investment from the observer in order to properly experience them.

64 The use of the word ‘properly’ suggests that there would be a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ way in approaching and exercising this process of interpretation, but considering the state of literary and narrative theory at the time of Damisch’ interview, the concept of there being one ultimate interpretation of a theoretical object is out of the question. The tradition of intertextuality, combined with the (postmodern) dismissal of truth as a concept and the nature of the theoretical object as a thought-encouraging power (with a broadening, rather than narrowing purpose) allow for a broader theoretical framework in which Damisch’ concept fits very well.

65 It is striking to see how much the process of translation can already be recognized in the approach of the theoretical object: something which will only aid the plight of this thesis.
portrays and generates theory need to be actively considered, instead of be passively observed. Only then does the object also reflect on theory itself, offering new perspectives by implementing it in new contemporary situations or associating or juxtaposing it with other theories.

This approach shows how cultural manifestations such as videogames can influence theory, and vice versa. For example, by approaching The Stanley Parable as a theoretical object, the Mind Control Facility can be considered as something that needs to make sense for a player as to why it is there. In order to understand the Mind Control Facility beyond its formulaic and strange existence within TSP (which, in a full-fledged narrative, might have had more narrative build-up and a less simplistic way of resolving the conflict), the observer needs a theoretical framework. This framework would likely be the concept of the Panopticon, characterized by Michel Foucault (among others) as a prison-system in which the inmates would structurally behave due to the possibility of them being watched at any time. The necessity for them to actually be watched would lessen significantly, due to the potential watcher posing enough of a threat without physical manifestation.66 This framework places the Mind Control Facility within a theory where not only the digital space makes more sense, but where the Narrator is also awarded a more ambiguous role, influencing the player’s interpretation and experience of him.

Only when accepting that without the use of theory certain interpretation would not be possible, do these associations manifest.67 While the appearance of the panopticon in TSP has already been thoroughly discussed by other theorists such as Fest, it is one of the signs which mark The Stanley Parable as a theoretical object in its entirety. The panopticon is one of the more obvious references to postmodern theory, opening the proverbial box of pandora in regard to theoretical consideration. Those who are familiar with the postmodern will recognize The Stanley Parable as a translation not only of the Narrator’s implied script, but as a digitalized translation across media of certain postmodern concepts. Damisch’s description of the theoretical object does not require the produced or considered theory to be groundbreaking new; it might as well be existing theory that is generated by the experience of the theoretical object, introducing the player to theory through a more immersive medium than theoretical text.

Mieke Bal’s Theoretical Object: transcending media

Mieke Bal has used the concept of the theoretical object in multiple projects. Like Damisch, she primarily utilizes the term when discussing visual art, though she also mentions how approaching art as a theoretical object can help in the interpretation of complicated, hard to understand works which seem to exist beyond the defined borders of medium. One of her most emphasized approaches of the theoretical object can be found in her article ‘Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object’, where she writes the following:

‘[…] only by tackling this aspect, which seems the systematic counterpart of architecture, is it possible to articulate its effect beyond a rigid division of media.’68

By ‘this aspect’, she refers to her approach of the highly architectural sculptures by Louise Bourgeois, which she approaches as theoretical objects through the question of narrative. Her characterization of the theoretical object is very useful in arguing why The Stanley Parable would be suited for the approach as a theoretical object. The emphasis on the evasiveness of the classification of medium, which in the case of Bourgeois’ Spider qualifies them as a theoretical object in Bal’s eyes, is also applicable to The Stanley Parable. It actually helps deal with the ludology-narratology debate, which

66 Foucault (2007) p. 278
67 Though this specific element of The Stanley Parable is difficult to properly interpret beyond its trope-like nature, for it has been used so much in popular media that it has almost become a cliché, ranging from The Truman Show where one person is watched by everyone to The Matrix, where everyone is being watched by an automated system.
68 Bal (1999) p. 103
sometimes make it hard to discuss such objects without first ‘picking a side’. Bal shows in her article how art which seems to exist between multiple disciplines is ideal as theoretical object. Their diversity encourages what at first seems confusion due to its ambiguity, making it ‘more difficult to read’. Both Spider and The Stanley Parable can rather be seen as objects which encourage more thought and theoretical consideration due to this same ambiguity and lack of familiar structure. One is encouraged to think beyond conventions, and to consider that it might rather be a certain style of storytelling which lacks in these works, rather than an entire lack of narrative. As Henry Jenkins suggests, the construction of videogame narrative might be better compared to architecture than to literary narrative, thus implying how other theory might prove more useful concerning less conventional or ‘clear’ artforms.69

The in-between state of art such as Spider shows its message in its complicatedness. Bal actually takes a similar approach to Spider as Jenkins does to videogames, since she considers ‘the way this work does not tell a story, but builds one [...] in a multiplicity of ways, matters.’70 The emphasis on construction contributes a certain materiality to both art, narrative, and their interconnection, showing how narrative is constructed, both in the sense of artificiality and of structure. Specifically because of this awareness of structure, and the process which is shown rather than a polished and finished product, one is made to reconsider more general assumptions about art. The theoretical object questions itself, and turns to its observer for an answer.

‘Here, I will consider these works as conceptually self-reflexive. Their concept makes a statement about this art that is between sculpture and architecture, which hinges on ambivalence toward narrative. In other words, the Cells are, among many other things, richly theoretical in their conception and impact; so much so, that the first word that came to mind when I was groping to grasp their impact was the term theoretical object. [...] that term refers to works of art that deploy their own artistic and, here, visual, medium to offer and articulate thought about art.’ 71

The theoretical nature of Cells is key in this characterization, since it is in their conception and impact that they are theoretical. This emphasis on the object both offering and articulating thought about art instead of only inviting theoretical approach is what makes the theoretical object such an interesting concept. The self-reflexive nature of Spider correlates with that of The Stanley Parable, which has its nature as a game as one of its main themes. However, there is more emphasis on its artificiality in TS: even more so than in other narrative games. This is (ironically) mainly due to its emphasis on literary tropes, with the very present and demanding Narrator as one of the best examples. The Narrator’s clear focus on the main character following his predestined path instead of exploring the game space contradicts the interactive orientation of most games as opposed to literature, as it shows how this narrative element clashes with TSP’s mechanics. Approaching the game as a theoretical object somewhat evades, or at least postpones the necessity to choose a side in its categorization or its theoretical approach. By focussing on the object itself, all applicable theory is considered ‘fair game’ as it can help to further one’s understanding of the game. The narratology-ludology debate is thus not entirely evaded, though it is neither the centre of attention it often ends up being. The theoretical object is approached first and foremost as an object, not specifically as a narrative, a game, or any other specific category. Bal shows how, even when Bourgeois’ sculptures are decidedly not narrative in nature, approaching it through narrative can still lead to fruitful insights. Utilizing narrative theory to find new paths of meaning in a videogame (as Bal does with

70 Bal (1999) p. 106
71 Bal (1999) p. 103
visual art) does not dismiss its status as a game. Whereas Bal chose narratology as her approach to her theoretical object, this thesis will follow the perspective of translation.

2.2 Translation and inscription
When discussing translation, the text that will be mainly utilized is George Steiner’s After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation. Since translation is such a broad and often used term, it is important to first stress how Steiner characterizes the process and concept of translation. Steiner presents translation as closely linked to communication and interpretation, as it deals with the relatively non-transparent medium of language. The reference to the tower of Babel in the title of his book already alludes to the complication of crossing borders of language, whether that be towards another language or another medium, such as a digital environment.

Translation is usually recognized as a way to morph a certain ‘input’ into a system of signs that one is familiar enough with to be able to interpret, and take meaning from. The most familiar way this happens is when one language is translated into another language, mostly by finding synonyms and similarities in the other language, in order to get to the abstract meaning behind the strictly semiotic signs and cross the barriers between languages. George Steiner characterizes this process of encoding and decoding as interpretative transfer. He emphasizes, however, that “exactly the same model—and this is what is rarely stressed—is operative within a single language”, suggesting that even without this clear linguistic barrier, this process occurs in each attempt at communication. Other elements, such as time and context, are mentioned by Steiner as crucially influential on any kind of message, especially when it is interpreted by someone with a different repertoire.

The instability, or even unreliability of language as an ever-changing system makes it into a slippery form of communication, though the idea of language as constantly changing makes for a compelling argument when it comes to the necessity of translation in order to be able to interpret anything at all. Language, in itself, exists as a ‘linguistic barrier’, even without other linguistic systems with which an exchange is required. With Steiner defining ‘interpretation’ as “that which gives language life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription”, and subsequently pointing out that “Interprète/interpreter are commonly used to mean translator”, the conclusion that “Inside or between languages, human communication equals translation” might not be as surprising as it might have been. Translation, then, seems to be the process of reterritorializing, or ‘fitting’, any kind of message into a system that is known to the subject in question, so that its underlying meaning can be interpreted. Therefore, translation is a central issue to any form of art, not just literature, since “the existence of art and literature, the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious, act of internal translation”.

Translation in Videogames
Steiner’s concept of internal translation can be associated with what Jenkins calls ‘emergent narrativity’ in videogames. He uses this term to describe how ‘interaction with the coded interface [of games] produces as many stories as there are players and playthroughs’. The multiplicity of meaning that Steiner’s theory suggests also fits very well with the broader concept of intertextuality, in which the activation of certain codes depends on the repertoire of the reader, adding meaning (and influencing decisions) through their ‘already-read’ experiences and expectations. Barthes’ view of intertextuality consists of an interwoven collection of references to other texts, from which each element can be picked as its center. This deconstructive approach, in which one aberrant detail acts

72 Steiner (1975) p. 28
73 Ibid. p. 27
74 Ibid. p. 28
75 Ibid. p. 47
76 Ibid. p. 30
77 Jenkins (2004) p. 128
as defective cornerstone, elicits an entirely new experience and interpretation of the object, depending on which inherent codes are activated by its reader.\(^7\)

When it comes to videogames, Jenkins’ concept more concretely characterizes the multiplicity of subjective experience of narrative. He argues that every player experiences every possible path differently, and that the uniqueness of each story is created not through the mechanical decision-making, but through the interpretation of their outcomes. Therefore the process of interpretation, or rather, \textit{transcription} differs per player and per playthrough, which leads to an unending amount of possible stories. By approaching the experience of the player as translation instead of as interpretation, its varying outcomes are made much more understandable, since the subjective context \textit{and process} of translation is more self-evident than the abstract term of interpretation. The fact that translation is no instant happening, but a process that is influenced on all sides, illustrates how these different interpretations (or translations) can exist. The emphasis on language as systems makes it easier to qualify videogames in this context, as it shows how close the two media can be at their core. The way the code of a game manifests in a digital, navigable environment offers insight in how one approaches literature; as information that manifests itself in signs which the player or reader interprets through internal translation.

Steiner’s specific definition and approach of translation justifies use of the term ‘translation’ instead of approaching \textit{TSP} as an \textit{adaptation} of the imagined script. By approaching \textit{TSP} from a more language-based point of view, the two media can be discussed despite their different natures. Additionally, the approach as translation emphasizes the \textit{text-oriented} transition towards a less language-based medium, which pronounces its connection (whether this is dependence or liability) to the text much more than is customary in adaptation. The presence of the Narrator further shows the formulaic nature of the script he is imprinting, or even inscribing onto the game-world and its main character. His presence concurrently indicates the presence of multiple layers of translation within the game. After all, before the player encounters any part of the story it has already been translated from script into code, or game, by the Narrator. Finally, Steiner’s broad definition of translation also allows for a clearer emphasis on the interpretative process, rather than focusing on the comparative analysis of adaptation: especially since no referable ‘source’ for adaptation (i.e. the ‘script) actually exists.

\textit{Inscription and interactivity}

A subsequent phenomenon which comes paired with the process of translation is \textit{inscription}. One of the motivations for including Kafka’s \textit{In the Penal Colony} in this thesis is the metaphor of the ‘machine’, which illustrates this connection. The concept of language \textit{inscribing} a certain idea, ideology or discourse into society fits within Steiner’s image of translation as a cognitive process. This process is complicated, since the means of translation and the object of translation are of the same matter, \textit{language}.\(^7\)

Experiencing language is experiencing a certain message, which has to be \textit{internalized} to some degree in order to understand it. Thus it is not us who ‘create’ language, but it is language which steers and determines us, leaving every action that is taken afterwards to be influenced by the \textit{inscribed} discourses of language. The choice for \textit{In the Penal Colony}’s Machine as a metaphor for this comes from the graphic and physical procedure of inscription, which illustrates how thorough and life-altering such a process can be. The maniacal fascination the Narrator has with his ‘story’ and the lengths he is prepared to go to is reminiscent of the Officer in Kafka’s story. This character breaks boundaries to uphold the structure of the Machine, much like the Narrator changes the game’s code in order to facilitate his story. In both cases, language physically shapes and distorts the ‘body’, whether this is a subjective body or environment, thus showing the force behind translation. Kafka’s Machine is lifted to an almost godly status within the Officer’s consciousness, and could thus not only be seen as a structure of language, but also as one of (God-like) authority, which physically inscribes rules into its subjects and brings peace once they have been ‘assimilated’ into the system. The term \textit{inscription} will, with this metaphor in mind, be utilized when considering the discursive and implicitly commanding nature of language in \textit{The Stanley Parable}. This complicates the

\(^7\) Allen (2000) p. 85

\(^7\) Steiner (1975) p. 18: ‘When we think about language, the object of our reflection alters in the process.’
process of translation, which becomes much more violent in nature, though a distinction must be made between translation and inscription, for the latter is mainly an optional consequence of the former. While translation, which Steiner considers to be closely connected to interpretation, can vary in intensity, inscription is something that exists within language without it intently manifesting as such.

The way Steiner characterizes interpretation as translation allows for a broader application of the term beyond the general barriers of language. The actual interaction with the game, which consists of the player’s input in relation to the code’s output, could be considered translation as well due to his description of the process as ‘encoding and decoding’. The simplest example of translation in videogames could be recognized in the explanation of any game’s controls as ‘spacebar means jump, the arrows mean moving in a certain direction’, etcetera. Playing videogames, then, concerns the translation of signs which the game sends towards its player into their own world of signs. The player’s reaction consists of actions and process of decision-making, which in turn lead to the program of the game translating their actions, their ‘input’, into a certain output: movement through the environment and location-triggers, which elicit dialogue from the Narrator. This constant back-and-forth of input and output exists at the centre of any game, since its code only reacts to certain signs from the player. Subsequently the signs communicated by the game are constantly translated by the player in order to be able to react fittingly. Assuming that playing a game is a constant process of translation, just as reading is, shows where the actual differences and similarities between reading and playing can be recognized. Whereas in literature, the input and output of signs is one-directional, when it comes to gaming, the player’s interaction influences the output produced by the game. Thus the code has to perform some kind of ‘translation’ by itself, for it has to ‘read’, or interpret certain input in order to make the game react accordingly. While the game is coded beforehand, this shows a process of translation, even if it is a simulated and pre-calculated one.

Based on this reasoning, practically any game could be recognized as a more interactive system of translation. This offers the player not only the intellectual exercise of translating when interacting with the medium, but also of experimenting with how their own actions might be ‘interpreted’ by the game. Thus they ‘play’ with a system of understanding, exploring how thorough the code they interact with is, and which signs elicit certain responses. This exploration of code can be compared to the exploration of the rules any game world might have, and refers again to Huizinga’s ‘magic circle’. The notion of a game as a closed-of environment in which certain rules apply, which are to be followed in order to successfully navigate through this environment fits very well with the system of language as Steiner characterizes it.
Chapter 3 - Stanley’s Parable

Before discussing the narrative framing of *TSP*, along with the environmental design and its influence on the player’s experience, one essential element of *The Stanley Parable* deserves consideration: Stanley himself. In this chapter some cultural codes and other in-game statements will be discussed in order to offer some insight and help answer the question of how any player is supposed to approach Stanley’s ambiguous character, and moreover, how this particular kind of protagonist might influence a player’s experience.

3.1 The end is never the end

![Figure 2 The Stanley Parable’s loading screen](image)

In between restarts of *TSP*, the corresponding loading screen shows the constantly looping text ‘the end is never the end is never the end’ (*Figure 2*). This sentence can be read in multiple ways, like ‘the end is never’, ‘the end is never the end’ or even ‘the end is loading’. This loading screen emphasizes the branching structure of the game and implies not only the artificial nature of this game’s environment, but also hints at the time within *TSP* being framed very strictly, as it seems to be the same fragment of time which is relived constantly, instead of a linear accumulation of time as the game progresses. While many other narratives deal with the concept of time-loops, one specific cultural code which may be activated is that of the film *Groundhog Day*. Its main character, Phil Connors, experiences the same day over and over again until he learns to reflect on his own behavior and view of the world. After experimenting with the possibilities of isolated time, he alters his behavior to become less selfish, which breaks the loop and allows him to continue his now bettered life.\(^8\) The film’s connection to concepts like save-games, respawns and walkthroughs fits the videogame-genre in general, as it shows how the protagonist’s decisions change as he realizes that he cannot die, thus altering his behavior as it would in a magic circle. Phil’s gaming tactic to ‘level up’ within the small ‘level’ of Groundhog Day until his skills are impressive enough to move up to the ‘next level’, allow him to eventually escape this unnatural environment a changed, and happier, man. Relating this to *The Stanley Parable*, a similar proairetic code is implied, where Stanley can move through the environment however he wishes, as it ultimately returns him to the same beginning position.\(^1\) These codes, along with the game’s name, would lead to the expectation that if Stanley ‘learns his lesson’ like Phil has done, he will be set free from this loop.

The name of the game

When considering the name of *The Stanley Parable*, the word ‘parable’ implies the presence of a certain educational value, since the word is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as ‘A simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson’.\(^2\) However, compared to *Groundhog Day* it is less clear what the protagonist, whether that is supposed to be Stanley or the player, has to learn in order to

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\(^1\) The presence of the Narrator activates the cultural code to another film, namely *Stranger than Fiction*, in which an ordinary protagonist suddenly realizes how his entire life is being narrated, as the viewer simultaneously follows the writer of his story suffering from writer’s block, blending narrative framing together.

\(^2\) [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/parable](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/parable). Accessed on 6-12-2018
break the loop. In the case of Phil, this lesson is framed through montage and other characters’ reactions to his behavior. Stanley’s character, however, is entirely framed, voiced and represented by narration, making it difficult to recognize what his ‘lesson’ would be. The self-reflective tone of the narrative (and game mechanics) would imply it has something to do with the perception of reality, artificiality, responsibility, the potentially futile pressing of buttons, or maybe even happiness, though it is never pronounced specifically.

The word parable also associates closely with the word ‘parabole’ or ‘parabola’, which is ‘a symmetrical open plane curve formed by the intersection of a cone with a plane parallel to its side’. This visual seems difficult to associate with The Stanley Parable, since there is no inherent repetition visible which would represent the various paths. However, it does show how, assuming that every path of the game is a separate curve, no matter what happens throughout the playthrough, the player (and Stanley) always end up exactly at the same point where they started. The parabola demonstrates how nothing that happens in between the two points in which the curve touches the x-axis (which represent the start, and ending of a playthrough) influences the conclusion of the curve at all, implying that the choices or decisions made during the walkthrough are inconsequential to the outcome of the narrative. Esslin and Fuchs interpret the parable of TSP as follows:

‘[…] the impossibility of meaningful play in The Stanley Parable can be seen as an allegory of illusory agency (McCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007) in gameplay more generally.’

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83 Similarly it is left mainly unclear whether Stanley is aware of the looping nature of the narrative, since (for a few exceptions) he hardly references past experience. One could argue that the player’s situation is more reminiscent of Groundhog Day’s Phil than Stanley’s is in that regard.


85 Esslin & Fuchs (2015) p. 52
While the phrasing of ‘impossible meaningful play’ is a bit precarious (the Narrator himself points out that the human player can make meaningful choices), the reflection on agency and actual influence on plot is very present within TSP’s gameplay. Looking again at the parabola, its shape shows that there is horizontal progression between the two points, therefore meaning is generated in some way. The returning to the starting point as the parabola comes back down might represent the impossibility of meaningful play, but there technically has been movement, even if that is not the linear progression one would associate with ‘progress’ in a gamified world. The vertical movement which takes place also stimulates horizontal progress, even if it seems to go ‘back to square one’. This implies that something does happen; it is this added height, or, if we flip the diagram over, added depth, which influences the horizontal line as well. This added depth through experience of the environment and story influences the experience of the beginning of the game in relation to the first time a certain situation is encountered: just as in Groundhog Day the protagonist’s past experiences of each day influence his experience and behavior in the current walkthrough of the same situation. The parabola could also be interpreted as a reference to the digitally constructed nature of TSP in general, since it in a way consists entirely of threedimensional graphs and statistics, both in the sense of the visual and in the sense of the branching nature of the narrative of the game.

Comparable parables

Approaching Groundhog Day through the concept of translation, Phil’s release from his proverbial time-prison could be interpreted as a reward for assimilating into the system around him. Through the constant repetition of the time-loop, the rules of the world around him are inscribed into him. Adhering to social norms is something he clearly does not do at the beginning of the film, which seems to trigger the ‘Groundhog Day’-loop to envelop him until he has thrown his ‘tantrum’. Once he is stuck in Groundhog Day, he realizes that he has no choice but to eventually assimilate into social discourse, learning that that is better for everyone, including himself. This process seems reminiscent of the process convicted people undergo in In the Penal Colony, in which the machine physically inscribes the convicted with rules they should follow, which leads them to enlightenment and inner peace until their death. The novella only refers to this result, since the process shown to the traveler is disturbed. The subject, namely the Officer, already follows the Machine’s rules, which results in a complete mechanical breakdown and violation of the body. By the description of the machine’s assimilating procedure, however, it would seem that Phil’s experience has a similar result. The dark nuance in Kafka’s tale implies how once people are inscribed and fully integrated into the system, they are as good as dead, which manifests as actually dead in the novella. The underlying concept of confirmation as death-sentence can also be drawn back to TSP, where it is mentioned multiple times that Stanley is in fact already dead, which might either refer to a similar process as mentioned above, or imply that the parable is some digital manifestation of purgatory.86

Through the activation of this film’s codes (and other films on similar topics), The Stanley Parable is imbedded within the postmodern collective of stories that deal with stretching the concept and experience of time and reality, and more important, of social discourse. They emphasize how society can function similarly to a game’s programming in the sense that it forces certain behavior, and disables or dismisses contradictory decisions by simply not enabling them in gameplay, or punishing players who decide upon such paths. Through the design of such magic circles, anyone who enters is inscribed with its rules, thus thoroughly influencing the behavior and reasoning of the player. Other postmodern narratives which consider these influences include The Truman Show and The Matrix. They discuss the possibility of artificially influenced reality, and generally come to the same conclusion: this is something no-one should wish for. The Stanley Parable asks the questions which aren’t really addressed in these narratives: what toll do such responsibilities take on any individual, are they worth the envisioned idealized freedom; might there be an explanation behind

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86 This interpretation is further substantiated by there being a Heaven ending, which manifests as a white space with countless floating colourful buttons, which can be pressed infinitely without any apparent consequences. This ending also alludes to the message of the parable being about responsibility, since heaven does not require any; simultaneously it can also simply continue the Narrator’s mocking attitude towards Stanley’s apparent addiction to pressing buttons.
the existence of these artificial realities? The clue of it all is of course that no real answer is given in order to relieve the player from inscription; yet at the same time they are confronted with their secret wish for it, since it makes interpretation and understanding so much easier.

If Phil’s experience in *Groundhog Day* can be interpreted as a successful inscription by the machine, how can Stanley’s process be characterized? The emphasized distinction between Stanley and the human player is very significant in this instance. When it comes to the player, in-game references to the prerequisite knowledge regarding ‘narrative video game tropes’ show how the player goes into the process of translation (the parable) while already partly assimilated into the system. This leads to a conflicting translation throughout the process which can be compared to the officer’s situation in *In the Penal Colony*. His decision to get ‘translated’ himself fails entirely since it destroys his beloved machine. Similarly, the more the player, familiar with gaming tropes and conventions, tries to ‘play’ *TSP*, the more it seems to break down. As it shows defects, irregularities and contradictions, destroying any sense of insight into its purpose or message, it calls back to the officer’s plight, who is not compensated with the ethereal insight that was promised and experiences a much more violent procedure than expected. This way, *TSP* shows how translation within the same language (i.e. interpretation) can be destructive and violent toward multiple interpretations of the same world. Stanley’s own place in this situation is troubling, since neither of these two interactions with the machine really apply to him as a character. He rather seems to be an exploring onlooker, taking up the role of the traveler in this allegory.

This is just one way in which *In the Penal Colony* can be connected to *TSP*; the various roles can be identified within the *parable* very differently when the game is approached from the ludic perspective. This shows how such stories and roles can function as a revolving door, in which each alternating of roles or functions can offer more insight into the connection between the two texts. These two texts are not as similar to each other that only one comparison can be made or qualify as ‘valid’. Due to the slightly differing roles within both texts the connections between characters offer insight, but *do not* signal a structuralist ‘hypo-hypertext’ relationship.

3.2 - Stanley, the Faceless Hero

Themes such as the inability to win and malfunctioning, confusing rules, along with the bland, nondescript and confused character of Stanley, have lead to *The Stanley Parable* being considered *Kafkaesque*. It is interesting that the player is invited to identify with such an abstract character as Stanley, who has no own voice, no face, and only an inscribed identity which he seems to *perform*: even better, which the player is *asked to perform in lieu of Stanley*. The presentation of his identity is even changed throughout the many paths the game offers; by the Narrator, by another *female narrator*, and (eventually) by the player’s decisions. Despite the interactive element, a sense of ‘not being in control’ always remains, which refers heavily to Franz Kafka’s work. Fest, in his characterization of *TSP* as Kafkaesque, describes Stanley’s position as protagonist as follows:

‘[...] in *The Stanley Parable* there is no messianic figure who can unironically overturn this logic and heroically change the course of history. [...] It dispenses with the hero with a thousand faces and gives us one without any face at all.’

Stanley is thus presented as the opposite of *The Matrix*’s Neo. Instead of a predetermined Chosen One, *TSP* follows ‘just a guy named Stanley’, who might not even be an actual person, but rather a

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87 This prerequisite is mentioned multiple times throughout the game, such as in the *Out of Map ending* and the *Broomcloset ending*.
88 While ‘Stanley’s’ in narrative culture seem to be relatively rare, one of the few protagonists named Stanley appears in 1994’s *The Mask*, in which the clumsy and awkward Stanley Ipkiss finds a mythological mask which, when wearing it, brings out an much more active and radical alter ego. This example is interesting considering how someone else takes over the initiative and responsibility from both Stanley’s, though sadly, it seems that ‘our’ Stanley will not get to kiss Cameron Diaz.
89 Fest (2016) p. 20
digital simulation of an unimportant human being. The heroic journey characters like Neo usually find themselves in is generally nowhere to be found in TSP. There is no clear main antagonist, despite Esslin and Fuchs’ attempt to place the Narrator in this role. Though there is a main conflict and an oppressing system to rebel against, Stanley finds no mentor-figure, no secret weapon, and no allies, except maybe for the player, and in some rare cases the Narrator. This, along with the discovery that the actual making meaningful decisions originates from the player, and not from Stanley, shows how he is in fact the least likely ‘hero’ in a story like this. He even realizes that he does not even manifest physically, since he cannot see his own feet, turning Stanley not only into a hero ‘without any face at all’, but into one whose presence is simultaneously defined by a constant absence. Nevertheless, the faceless, impotent hero is another trope recognizable from Franz Kafka’s literary work, and definitely something worth considering when Stanley’s identity is concerned.

In his book Play Redux David Myers discusses the close connections between film and narrative videogames, and indicates the trope of a blank slated protagonist, in which Stanley’s ‘absent’ situation could be recognized:

‘A great many digital adventure games [...] are designed around problems associated with Leonard (out of Memento)-like character who doesn’t know who (or what) he is, or a robot that has had its memory wiped, or something similar. And then the whole purpose (or theme, or narrative) of these games is to recover missing information.’

This narrative trope also appears in TSP, though there is no genuine ‘detective’ process, since the larger structure of the game has such an emphasis on relative truth and unreliability that it is impossible to reach. Similar to Myers’ example of Memento, TSP offers a narrative that is corrupted by its own creator to such an extent that if a truth existed within the narrative, it is too scattered for the subject or protagonist to track down. The term ‘creator’ refers to the diegetic creators in both cases: in Memento this refers to Leonard, in TSP the Narrator manifests as creator, though the Work ending implies that Stanley also has a hand in obstructing the implied ‘quest for truth’.

3.3 - Defining the Kafkaesque

Technically, the term Kafkaesque has no distinct, concrete meaning, since its existence is mainly due to people associating certain situations or feelings with a certain author’s work. As Claire Fallon, journalist at the Huffington Post, paraphrases Noah Tavlin: ‘Any time an author’s oeuvre becomes the basis for its own descriptor, the meaning of that adjective depends completely on the interpretations of the original work.’ This makes the term Kafkaesque dependant not only on if, but which texts one has read when defining the Kafkaesque. The most prominent association with the Kafkaesque, however, is that of office-related, ineffective bureaucracy. The Oxford Dictionary stays quite safe with its definition of ‘kafkaesque’, describing it as ‘Characteristic or reminiscent of the oppressive or nightmarish qualities of Franz Kafka’s fictional world.’ The Kafkaesque, then, is certainly a negative connotation, often associated with illogical bureaucracy, an uncanny and vulnerable sense of self and a lack of control over one’s situation. Author Ben Marcus is quoted on his characterization of Kafka’s work, which quintessentially is mentioned to encompass Kafkaesque quite well, as “affecting use of language, a setting that straddles fantasy and reality, and a sense of striving even in the face of bleakness — hopelessly and full of hope.” This characterization fits with what Espen Aarseth refers to as aporia, which can be defined as ‘a feeling of confusion or

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90 This realization occurs during the Insane ending: ‘[...] why couldn’t he see his feet when he looked down? Why did doors close automatically behind him wherever he went?’ However, in other instances in the game, such as the opening sequence and the credits, Stanley does have a physical body, though it is very nondescript.
91 Myers (2010) p. 83
92 Fallon, Claire (2016)
helplessness among players’, which can both apply to players’ individual connection towards the narrative and the mechanics of any game.

This helplessness manifests in Kafka’s work in the fear of making decisions or standing up for oneself, since the sense of self is usually ambiguous: especially in the face of authority.94 This manifests in In the Penal Colony in the absent, though present, authority of the old and new Commandants of the colony. A constant struggle between the want for and fear of responsibility is recognizable in In the Penal Colony:

‘The traveller reflected: intervening in other people’s affairs is always fraught with risks. He wasn’t a citizen of the penal colony […] he was travelling with the desire to see things for himself, and not at all to meddle in foreign notions of justice.’95

A similar train of thought is entertained by Stanley during the Reluctant ending:

‘What if he had to make a decision? What if a crucial outcome fell under his responsibility? He had never been trained for that! No, this couldn’t go any way except badly.’

This somewhat bureaucratic reasoning of rejecting responsibility correlates with Kafka’s work and also indicates the negative influence this bureaucracy has on Stanley. His lack of sense of adventure is so palpable that he won’t even leave his office to check why he is the only one in the building. This is framed as a negative trait due to the patronising, ironic tone the Narrator uses:

‘But Stanley simply couldn’t handle the pressure […]
The right thing to do now, Stanley thought to himself, is to wait. Nothing will hurt me. Nothing will break me. In here, I can be happy, forever. I will be happy.’

Happiness does not generally fit the bill of the Kafkaesque. The implied escapist nature of the game in the Work ending, on which more later, is enforced here with a strong denial of responsibility. This instance implies knowledge of other paths within the game, since the statement ‘nothing will break me’ seems quite intense if it only concerns a computer-malfunction or missed memo. This statement concerning happiness within a confined space without human interaction also refers to a more conventional societal disapproval of stereotypical videogaming, which is often associated with solitary confinement from reality, showing a preference for digital interaction and escapism instead.

Drawing this refusal of responsibility back to In the Penal colony, one might be inclined to try and align Stanley with the protagonist of the novella. Both wander around an environment they are not comfortable in and do not own all the information to. However, the player would fit this role much better, especially when considering the traveller as a temporary guest in the ‘magic circle’ of the colony. A character in the Penal Colony which fits Stanley’s predicament much better is the condemned man: the person who is sentenced to death by Machine due to a minor break of protocol. The condemned man is characterized as a native who cannot understand the traveller and officer’s language, since they both belong to the colonizing party of the island. Throughout the entire narrative the condemned man is not awarded his own voice; his presence exists solely through mention of him within narration and interpretation by the traveller, and his actions rarely divert from the direct orders he is given, along with base instincts.96 Along with a lack of voice, the condemned man is also burdened with a lack of understanding, and is incapable of translating anything for himself. Interpreting Stanley’s situation as similar to the condemned man, the hostile environment of the game and the Narrator’s schemes are made more evident, and the description and focalization of

94 Kafka’s Metamorphosis offers an example of this oppressed image of self.
95 Kafka (2008) p. 162
96 Kafka (2008) p. 149: ‘[…] it really seemed as if one might allow him to roam the slopes freely, and only need to whistle when it was time for the execution, and he would come.’
Stanley’s experiences through the Narrator gain a more oppressive nature, as well as substantiating Stanley’s reliance on the player. Thus the evident distance between observer of the narrative and its protagonist are reminiscent of the Kafkaesque, since it creates some of the alienation and uncanny atmosphere his work is known for, along with demonstrating the very different roles they fulfil within the hierarchy of the narrative.

This interpretation does pose the question: if Stanley is a condemned man as well, then what is his punishment? Provided one foregoes the question why Stanley has been condemned in the first place, this again calls to the interpretation of TSP as purgatory, or even hell. In a very Huis clos-esque manner Stanley’s office could reverberate with the insignificant, boring room in which the condemned are confronted with their own reality, their shortcomings, their weaknesses and their sins. In Stanley’s case, it is not ‘others’, but a Narrator (in some way a more powerful Other) who confronts Stanley’s fears and forces him to reflect. Stanley’s lack of voice is made even more significant in this instance, since it disables him from any retort or reaction, always remaining passive, though thankfully, the player can remain somewhat active within this potential hellscape, and is at least offered an escape by quitting the game (though achievement Go Outside, which can only be achieved by not playing the game for five years, implies that true escape is impossible).

3.4 - Is this the real life; is this just Stanley?
The question of reality is one that features heavily within TSP. Especially considering how all of Stanley’s thoughts and sensations are being focalized by the Narrator, and have therefore been ‘translated’ already before they reach the player, some caution could be ushered in general when it comes to Stanley’s described experiences. This also influences the concept of reality as it is considered by Stanley, since the Narrator is able to filter and portray Stanley’s sensations, or, depending on one’s interpretation, this filter manifests as the script. This sometimes leads to inconsistencies within the narrative. For example, once Stanley’s heroic position regarding the Mind Control Facility is announced, and the ‘terrible truth’ about the facility is exposed, the Narrator mentions how Stanley saw all of his co-workers on the various numbered screens within the space. However, the entire office was claimed to be empty only a few moments earlier, making this exposition practically impossible. The narrative seems to override more than just game-mechanics, but also ignores earlier instances of itself, all to create an illusion of heroism around Stanley.

Stanley’s reaction according to the script, which consists of the Life ending, also makes less sense in this regard, since he is expected to turn off the machine and then walk off into the proverbial sunset, without any further regard for his co-workers. The Life ending thus shows empty narrative without character: only plot drives this narrative forward, caricaturing the conventions of its postmodern genre. Inception-esque allusions to dreaming are referenced during the Insane ending as well as conceptions of madness and the questioning of one’s own existence:

‘Stanley began screaming. “Please someone wake me up! My name is Stanley! I have a boss! I have an office! I am real! Please just someone tell me I’m real! I must be real! I must be! Can anyone hear my voice?! Who am I? Who am I?!”’

And everything went black.’

During this part of the Insane ending, Stanley becomes aware of the artificiality around him, or at least, the Narrator describes him encountering such signs. The fact that this is narrated very calmly,

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97 Ibid. p. 155 shows the condemned man referring to the traveller as he is strapped to the machine: ‘did he approve of the process, he appeared to be asking.’

98 Though this might be alluded to in the Wife ending, in which the Narrator hints at Stanley’s escapism and loss of grasp on reality, implying he distanced himself from his wife and his job, preferring pushing buttons and imagining a world without consequence.

99 The unreliable factor of the Narrator will be further discussed in Chapter 4.
except for Stanley’s own phrases as they are narrated by the Narrator, makes this existential crisis problematic. The casual demeanour of the Narrator suggests that this follows the script, or at least does not in any way interfere with his intentions for the game. Meanwhile, Stanley’s existential conflict escalates rapidly, leading to him going mad and dying in the streets, where he is then found by a woman named Mariëlla, who feels slight pity for ‘the crazy man’ but refuses to let his appearance interfere her ‘happy life’. This description, again narrated very neutrally, mirrors to how Stanley had been convincing himself of his reality moments before.¹⁰⁰ Caricaturing the unassuming way Mariëlla assigns value to life activates codes within TSP which refer to similar reflections on mundane, career-driven life, such as Fight Club and The Matrix. During this ending, Stanley realizes signs of metareflection and metaprocedural reflection which TSP offers on multiple levels. He even becomes aware of the Narrator’s voice, and dares to reflect on it:

‘Why is there a voice in my head, dictating everything that i’m doing and thinking? Now the voice was describing itself being considered by Stanley, who found it particularly strange. [...] Was Stanley simply deceiving himself? Believing that if he’s asleep he doesn’t have to take responsibility for himself?’

This pondering leads to his eventual doubt concerning his own humanity and reality, as his artificial surroundings start to crowd him. Again, the Narrator remains calm as he describes Stanley’s thoughts, implying that these realizations did feature in his script. Even Stanley’s attempt to justify the Narrator’s presence ‘This voice was a part of himself too, surely[…]’ is narrated by him without any unrest at being ‘found out’ someway, sounding entirely in control even during the epilogue, which concerns Stanley’s death. Stanley’s madness only occurs once he becomes ‘aware’, and thus attempts to actually translate the signs around him, which implies again how damaging translation within one’s own language, and therefore interpretation, can be to one’s worldview. Sadly, though somehow thankfully, Stanley gets to start over again after this horrible realization into a world (or office, really) which holds more mystery, but less devastating truth. Much like the Kafkaesque hero, all Stanley can ultimately do is follow whatever (or whichever) path is laid out for him, without any hope of overcoming the situation. For that would lead to a much heavier realization; a ‘level’ he might never be ready for. Much like the traveller in the Colony, all he can really do is jump ship and try to leave, whether that means picking the Life ending or quitting the game entirely. neither of those actions would really free him, however, from the responsibility of having witnessed it, just like the traveller cannot truly escape his responsibility regarding the machine.

Artificial decision-making
This responsibility, while it is placed on Stanley’s shoulders during the Work ending, is claimed by the Narrator during the Bomb ending. During this ending, the Narrator suggests that he has erased all of Stanley’s co-workers, implying that they are ‘erasable’, and therefore not ‘real people’, since such a phrasing would rather apply to data or code. By extension, this suggests that Stanley himself also does not exist as a human person:

‘Alright. I’m in a good mood, and you’re going to die anyway. I’ll tell you exactly what happened to them: I erased them. I turned off the machine; I set you free.’

¹⁰⁰ ‘He was obviously crazy; this much she knew. Everyone knows what crazy people look like. And in that moment, she thought to herself how lucky she was to be normal. I am sane. I am in control of my mind. I know what is real, and what isn’t.’
This citation has a few problematic elements to it when it comes to the apparent rules of TSP’s magic circle so far. At first the Narrator refers to Stanley’s impending death, suggesting that he is, in fact, real; however, this undermines what he says moments later, when he lists the countless times Stanley appears to have already died. Allegedly, Stanley’s death has become inconsequential, just like that of his co-workers. The implied causal relation between erasing them, turning off the machine and setting Stanley free even suggests that the co-workers being erased are a prerequisite for Stanley being freed. It also implies that the Narrator has actually played the game himself, since he claims to have performed one of the actions in the game, namely turning off the machine. Rules of framing and the various roles ascribed to certain entities seem to shift in this small citation, since before the player decided to press on the ‘On’ button which triggers the Bomb ending, the Narrator wants him to press the button which would turn off the machine. Only to reveal here that the machine was already turned off, leaving the presented ultimate ‘blue pill–red pill’ dilemma of the narrative, namely whether Stanley will turn off the facility, void of actual consequence. This is further emphasized due to the weighty tone with which the Narrator announces how Stanley would turn off the machine, despite it being the player’s choice whether they do this or not. Along with the Narrator’s claim that he turned off the machine, the question that should be posed is whether the machine was ever actually turned off, or if there are maybe multiple active machines, or procedures, working within the parable. This illusion of agency, control and, ultimately, truth, exists in constant flux within The Stanley Parable. Each ending seems to offer another interpretation to the surroundings, to the purpose of the game, and to the hierarchy which decides its proceedings. It constantly alters the attitude the player is required to assume in order to proceed, showing how, if anything, The Stanley Parable functions as a thought-experiment; a theoretical object which has no one message, but rather offers a multitude of truths which all undermine each other, daring the player to try and make sense of it all.

The Work ending attempts to ultimately frame the entire narrative as a figment of the protagonist’s imagination, placing responsibility entirely at Stanley’s door and turning him into a sad though sympathetic figure. The Narrator simultaneously attempts to draw sympathy towards himself, though he has lost a lot of credibility up to this point in the game, making this explanation for the parable’s existence somewhat untrustworthy:

‘This is a very sad story about the death of a man named Stanley.
Stanley is quite a boring fellow. He has a job that demands nothing of him, and every button that he pushes is a reminder of the inconsequential nature of his existence. [...] And so he began to fantasize about his own job. [...] He imagined that he came to two open doors and that he could through either. At last! Choice! It barely even mattered what lay behind each door. The mere thought that his decisions would mean something was almost too wonderful to behold! [...] And he called it; The Stanley Parable.
It was such a wonderful fantasy, and so in his head he relived it again. And then again, and again, over and over, wishing beyond hope that it would never end, that he might always feel this free. [...] Surely, there’s an answer down some new path! Mustn’t there be? Perhaps if he played just one more time.... But there is no answer. How could there possibly be?
In reality, all he’s doing is pushing the same buttons he always has, nothing has changed. The longer he spends here, the more invested he gets, the more he forgets which life is the real one.
And I’m trying to tell him this, that in this world, he can never be anything but an observer, that as long as he remains here, he’s slowly killing himself. But he won’t listen to me. He won’t stop!’

101 As the Narrator calls it in the Bomb ending: ‘This is not a challenge. It’s a tragedy.’
This framing implies that it was ultimately Stanley who designed the Narrator’s script, and who therefore ‘created’ the Narrator as well. The emotional peril Stanley encounters throughout several endings make this less likely, though for someone as bored and insignificant as Stanley is described to be, a Kafkaesque imaginary world might count as a way of escapism that correlates with the sentiments toward capitalist mundane society in other postmodern narratives such as Fight Club. The fact that both narratives show an imagined character guiding the protagonist toward a more desired life further exemplifies reflective postmodern cultural codes within TSP, as well as hints at another dimension to the character of the Narrator. A lack of responsibility and agency merging for the sake of ‘freedom’ is another concept which can be recognized in both texts, as well as, interestingly, a wish for play.

The TSP-time-loop is described as voluntary in this ending, breaking Stanley’s situation further away from Groundhog Day’s Phil. The Work ending raises more questions than it unreliably answers, though, since the question as to what Stanley is supposed to learn within a self-imposed parable is a very hard one to answer. The Work ending also announces how Stanley’s never-ending pressing of buttons will lead to his death. A very straightforward lesson, in this case, would be a rejection of his escapism, since it leads to isolation and distance from reality; something which is valued throughout the game by both Stanley and the Narrator. The irresistibility of buttons is warned for in the Work ending, which also might call for a lesson in responsibility and awareness of the consequences of agency. Another lesson that might be learned from TSP is actually Roland Barthes’ Death of the Author, in the sense that any text, as soon as it is written, will develop influence and meaning beyond the intentions of its creator. This lesson would disqualify the question of authorship or ownership of TSP as a relevant question, though it does necessitate further consideration of the question of translation within TSP from a broader perspective.102

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102 TSP presents the script as a source of authority which is translated into another medium, while it was in fact created simultaneously and specifically for the game, since no separate publication of the script ever took place. This would qualify The Stanley Parable as a pseudo-translation, which implies an external influence presented as a translated source, while in actuality it was created simultaneously to the ‘result’ of the implied translation. For more on the concept of pseudo-translation, I recommend Vanacker & Toremans’ article Pseudotranslation and Metafictionality (2016).
Chapter 4 – The Narrator: Narrative structure and inscription

As was mentioned in the introduction, the motivation for this deconstructive reading of The Stanley Parable is mainly based on its origin being presented as a translation from script to videogame. These implications occur when the player chooses to diverge from the path the Narrator lays out for them, leading to a few moments where he himself gets confused. In these instances, he can be heard rustling through papers and reading aloud some lines of intended script, which does not always correlate with what happens within the game. This frustrates the Narrator, leaving him to angrily reflect on this discrepancy and admonishing Stanley for not following his instructions, ergo, not following the script. There are, however, also some traces of uncertainty and fear in his voice during some of these moments. This chapter will discuss the character of the Narrator in relation to Stanley, the player and the larger structure of the game. It will reflect on Esslin and Fuchs’ decision to appoint him as the antagonist of TSP, and attempt to debunk this notion by painting a more ambivalent and nuanced image of the Narrator.

4.1 - Humanity and artificiality

The Narrator’s commitment to the narrative which he calls ‘his story’ is one of his most important characteristics.103 The amount of power the script holds over the game differs per ending: sometimes manifesting as the ultimate authority, and in other cases being fairly easily overridden by either player, narrator, or something within the videogame itself. While the Narrator seems to play a large part in its translation from script to videogame, some elements turn out to not ‘work’ as intended. Unbeknownst to the Narrator at some instances, the game resists the script’s inscription by either filling in narrative gaps through its environment, or by adding new ambiguous elements to it. This illustrates the difficulty which can occur during remediation, in which, when transferring one medium to another, not everything can be translated one-on-one due to medial differences.

Considering Steiner’s definition of translation, this irregularity between script and videogame can be explained relatively easily, though it also raises new questions. Steiner reflects on translation as follows: ‘inside or between languages, human communication equals translation’.104 The presence of a human party is thus presented as a prerequisite for interpretative transfer. In relation to the Narrator’s attempt at translating the script into the videogame, this is an interesting factor, for it is never established whether the Narrator qualifies as human. He certainly does not consider himself as such, considering his tirade in the Broomcloset Ending:

‘HELLO!? ANYONE WHO HAPPENS TO BE NEARBY!! THE PERSON AT THIS COMPUTER IS DEAD!! HE OR SHE HAS FALLEN PREY TO ANY NUMBER OF YOUR COUNTESS HUMAN PHYSIOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES. IT’S INDICATIVE OF THE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY OF YOUR SPECIES.
PLEASE REMOVE THEIR CORPSE FROM THE AREA AND INSTRUCT ANOTHER HUMAN TO TAKE THEIR PLACE AT THE COMPUTER, MAKING SURE THEY UNDERSTAND BASIC FIRST-PERSON VIDEO GAME MECHANICS, AND FILLING THEM IN ON THE HISTORY OF NARRATIVE TROPES IN VIDEO GAMING, SO THAT THE IRONY AND INSIGHTFUL COMMENTARY OF THIS GAME IS NOT LOST ON THEM.’

103 Esslin and Fuchs determine him as an implied author, emphasizing the binary relationship between the narrator and Stanley; he is even flagged as the game’s main ‘villain’ since there ‘aren’t really any further major obstacles or enemies to overcome’ (2015) p. 62. This interpretation overlooks the enigma of the game itself, which is what occurs as soon as one takes the linear authorial approach to any text. Barthes’ intertextual approach allows us to look at the body of text as it exists, and locate the conflict that seems inherent within the structure of the game itself.

104 Steiner (1975) p. 47
This excerpt, which is displayed in capital letters since the Narrator raises his voice considerably, illustrates his clinical consideration of the game and its player, as well as his reliance on hermeneutic and cultural codes. It emphasizes his awareness of the game’s artificiality, along with the distance between the game’s avatar, Stanley, and the player who ‘plays’ him. This is further elaborated upon in the Choice ending, where the Narrator realizes that Stanley is controlled by a human being, implying that this humanity is the explanation for Stanley’s ability to make ‘meaningful choices’.

‘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. *sigh* I can’t believe I was so mistaken. This is why you’ve been able to make correct and incorrect choices.’

Not only the Narrator’s humanity is questioned in this excerpt, but Stanley’s as well. Another example of Stanley’s debateable humanity occurs when the player decides to stay in the employee lounge for too long:

‘The lounge was grand, majestic...perhaps too majestic. [...] It all made Stanley uncomfortable, and he started to bleed a little. This made him smile. At last... proof that he was human.’

Before this specific statement, the question as to whether Stanley is human or not has not been posed at all. This shows how the game takes into account that multiple playthroughs may have preceded this one. However, did this seedling of doubt not yet exist in a player’s mind, then it is sown at exactly this moment, further enriching other future playthroughs with this hermeneutic, enigmatic code through the use of semic code: by differentiating Stanley from a ‘real person’, it is implied that Stanley is not real.

It is controversial that the Narrator decides to draw attention to Stanley’s humanity, especially since he also repeatedly mentions how Stanley is not human whereas the player clearly is, thus creating distance between the player and the protagonist.\(^{105}\) He seems to be aware of the intertextual impact a ‘real person’ might have on his story, since he mentions in the Choice ending how letting a real person ‘run around the game’ for too long could have lead to it being ‘negated entirely’. This results into the Narrator starting in an instructional video about the responsibility of decision-making, which thoroughly differentiates in-game decisions from real-life decisions:

‘Remember that unlike here, the real world makes sense and at no time should you make a choice that does not conform to rational logic. If you find yourself speaking with a person who does not make sense, in all likelihood, that person is not real.’

At one point, when Stanley is entering some dangerous surroundings, the Narrator reflects differently on Stanley’s situation now that he is aware that he is ‘human’, or has a ‘real person’ controlling him, mentioning that he has to get him ‘out of here’, and pressing him not to do anything dangerous.\(^{106}\) The consideration of Stanley’s possible inhumanity, or even non-existence, becomes more uncanny in the Insane ending, in which Stanley’s self-awareness suddenly breaks through a certain suspension of disbelief most players assume when playing games:

‘None of it made any logical sense. And as Stanley pondered this he began to make other strange observations. For example, why couldn’t he see his feet when he looked down? Why did doors close automatically behind him wherever he went?’

\(^{105}\) This happens in the Broom Closet and Choice endings.

\(^{106}\) This occurs after the Narrator realizes the presence of the player during the Choice ending.
This realization shows a sudden awareness of the ‘magic circle’, and the artificiality of the game, without any trace of the metaproceduralism Bradley Fest coins. Instead, this fragment shows more signs of metafiction, in the sense that there is no awareness of underlying processes which regulate the goings on. It rather shows a fictional character realising the artificiality of his surroundings and his own existence. This sudden awareness is of a much more existential nature, and the accompanying gameplay offers an extension to this alienating experience due to the looping surroundings, which only show the same short path over and over again. This adds to the experience of this ending, in which Stanley goes ‘mad’ and is eventually found dead in the street. However, it is Stanley’s humanity which shown in an ambiguous light here. This humanity is discussed here, and not in chapter 3, because of Steiner’s characterization of translation: human communication is the prerequisite for interpretative transfer. Stanley’s implied artificiality suggests that he cannot interpret anything for himself; therefore both Stanley and the Narrator need a player to do the interpreting for them. This reasoning also points to another ambiguity, which feeds further into the approach of TSP as scripted and textual: all Stanley’s narrated thoughts and sensations cannot truly be ‘his’, if he is not considered human. He cannot interpret his predicament, therefore his sensations must be scripted. His feelings, then, are simply narrated and fed to the player at the right moments to create an illusion of life: of Stanley’s humanity.

An important detail regarding ‘humanity’ in TSP is the alienated wording the Narrator chooses when characterizing the human race. By emphasizing ‘your countless human physiological vulnerabilities’ and calling for ‘another human’ to take place at the computer, he implies distance between the human race and himself, hinting at his own inhumanity. In addition to this choice of words, a physical manifestation of this narrator is never shown, except for sounds of him rustling through papers, which at least implies the presence of a physical body. Unless, of course, the whole script-element is supposed to function as a ruse, and the Narrator exists only as a digital program which utilizes these physical sounds to create the illusion of a physical manifestation. This presentation of a Narrator as a ‘real person’, while simultaneously creating distance between them and the world in which the narrative takes place is a familiar one, considering the narrator in literary tradition.

Delving even deeper into the concept of translation, one might consider if the Narrator himself has been translated into the game as well. His presence and contributions resemble a vast portion of the game, after all. This would move the Narrator further from the non-diegetic into the diegetic sphere, though his position remains one in which he has reach both within and outside the narrative of the game. Interpreting the Narrator as a part of the game which has undergone the process of translation has a few implications. First of all, him having been translated himself would explain some of his imperfections, since interpretative transfer requires another enactor of ‘human communication’ to accomplish this translation. It would mean that the version of TSP which the player experiences has already been translated twice: first by this unknown translator or game developer and then later, in-game, by the Narrator himself. Connecting this situation to Kafka’s In the Penal Colony, the Machine is shown to actually work less efficiently once it tries to inscribe and ‘translate’ one of its own followers.107 This could be what has happened in The Stanley Parable as well, which would explain the inconsistencies within the gameplay, as well as the Narrator’s insecurities.

Seeing translation as the Narrator’s conflict with the game offers some interesting insight, as there are multiple explanations which could all fit the bill when trying to justify the irregularity and in-game conflict. The implied lack of human interference in this specific process of translation might

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107 Kafka (2008) p. 177: ‘[…] it was evident that the machine was falling apart; its smooth operation was an illusion; he had the sense that he had to look after the officer now, as he evidently could not fend for himself.’
have lead to conflicted space, in which the written progression of events cannot function properly in the digital space of videogames. In that case, the transformation of the written matter (the script) has not been drastic enough to fully fit the new medium, leading to an unstable narrative structure, which cannot carry the interactive element in this digital environment, resulting in crashes and ambiguity. The Narrator’s influence on the way the game functions is confirmed by his announcements of certain in-game changes he decides upon and the game suiting to his new intentions, such as the removal or addition of doors and pathways. However, multiple instances also show how the Narrator is not aware of the entirety of the game either, putting clear doubt on the accuracy of the supposed script he follows.

4.2 - The Value of choice, and choices
One of the clearest moments of insecurity on the part of the Narrator can be found in the Confusion ending. This ending is one of the longer paths of the game, in which multiple restarts are initiated by the Narrator in order to regain control, which only leads to more dissonance in the digital environment. It also contains the Stanley Parable Adventure Line, which will be discussed in chapter 5. The Confusion ending concerns one of the more sympathetic encounters with the Narrator, who intends to team up with Stanley to find out why the game is ‘behaving strangely’. This leads eventually to a familiar choice of two doors, which turn out to both lead to the same room, in which an uncanny schedule is found on the wall (Figure 4).

This schedule seems to disturb the Narrator deeply, as can be seen in the following commentary:

‘Oh, hold up, what's this? Hmm...hmm...the confusion ending? You're telling me...that's what this is? It's all one giant ending? And we're supposed to restart the game...what...eight, eight times?

That's really how all this goes?! It's all...determined?

So now according to the schedule I restart again, then, what...am I just supposed to forget?

Well, what if I don't want to forget! My mind goes blank simply because it's written here on this...this...thing! Wall!

Well, who consulted me? Why don't I get to decide? Why don't I get a say in all of this! Is it really-

No, it can't be. I don't want it to be. I don't want the game to keep restarting. I don't want to forget what's going on. I don't want to be trapped like this. I won't restart the game. I won't do it! I won't do it! I won't do it. [whooshing sound, Confusion Ending timer stops]’

First of all, this text reflects on the conception of games as completely ‘predetermined’ and therefore proof of illusory agency, as Esslin and Fuchs approach it. The implied message in this text, and also in the actions which lead to this point, show how the pre-coded nature of these choices are not what ‘matters’. After all, they still have to be ‘made’ in order to further progress in the game. ‘The decision to make a decision’ therefore always exists along with the actual decision itself, and shows how even though the question is ‘closed’, it still requires an answer. This reflects clearly on Esslin and Fuchs’ notion, which focusses on the illusion of agency in games as a hoax to make players feel powerful.
When in fact they’re not. TSP shows how coding does not discredit the experience of the game, since it still requires the participation of a player. This concerns Barthes proairetic code, which deals with sequential narrative action. Whereas on the level of Esslin and Fuchs’ approach, the proairetic code implies a lack of agency since all action is predetermined, the decision to engage with these codes by letting them play out is proairetic in itself. Distinguishing the various codes from these complicated narrative structures prove quite difficult due to their deconstructive nature, though one could argue that since the proairetic code concerns expectation-patterns and narrative conventions, all actions by the player would qualify as such, along with several decisions by the Narrator, and possibly something beyond him as well.

This is emphasized during the Narrator’s reaction to this situation. It shows a great argument for the theory of TSP being completely scripted, since the Narrator begins to narrate something he seems to be unfamiliar with, since he interrupts himself and questions what he is narrating. This discredits the claim of the Narrator as the author of the script, though he might have written ‘a’, or even ‘the’ story. The Narrator’s realization of his lack of control is very emotional, and again shows how the story progresses as soon as one makes a decision, even when that decision is to not do anything. The decision to participate by investing time and attention into the game is more important than the actual substantive decision, since it is through the participation that codes are activated and interpretation can take place. This situation, on a larger scale, implies how the Narrator is playing TSP as well, though from another perspective, as his goal is not to escape the game, but to steer a stubborn entity into his intended direction. The irony of the Narrator refusing to go along with the intended plan and refuse the linear path is clearly there, and implies on an ideological level how encountering a restrictive, linear story justifies an act of rebellion and grasp for freedom. The Narrator now ironically encounters what he has been laying out for Stanley throughout the game, and seems to learn a lesson for himself: maybe this parable is not always directed at the player, but at the Narrator as well. Though of course, this would indirectly also be aimed at the player, with the extended message which strangely pleads for sympathy towards the Narrator.

As soon as the Narrator decides to not go along with the Confusion schedule (much like the player by triggering this path) a whooshing sound hints that something has been turned ‘off’, as the projected timer stops. The overarching power which had been controlling his experience so far seems to have been turned of, which does not leave him relieved, but instead very insecure as to what to do next:

‘And the timer...uh, stopped? Does that mean...did we do it? Did we break the cycle? The, um...whatever it is that made this schedule?
How would we even know? Will someone come for us? Will something happen?
So...okay. *sigh*
I guess now we just wait. You know, I suppose in some way, this is a kind of story, wouldn’t you agree? I’m not quite sure if we’re in the destination or the journey,

108 This is critically reflected upon during the Death Ending, where Stanley jumps off a platform and the Narrator reflects: ‘[...] in his eagerness to prove that he was in control of the story and no one gets to tell him what to do, Stanley leapt from the platform and plunged to his death. Good job Stanley, everyone thinks you are very powerful.’

109 An ironic reflection on the relevance of agency can be found in the instruction video on real-life decision making, which consists of the following: ‘And finally, if you begin to wonder if your choices are actually meaningful and whether you’ll ever make a significant contribution to the world, Just remember, that in the vast infiniteness of space, your thoughts and problems are materially insignificant and the feeling should subside.’ This is accompanied by an image of space, in which a small arrow points at a small speck indicating ‘you’, ironically trivializing not only the posed question but also the discussion of agency in its entirety.
Though, they're always saying that life is about the journey and not the destination, so I hope that's where we are right now. We'll find out, won't we? Eventually. Well, in the meanti- [loud buzzer cuts him off, screen goes to black]

As soon as this very humanized, sympathetic Narrator tries to formulate an authentic thought which diverges from the direct mystery at hand, he is cut off in a very violent manner. A loud, faltering sound is heard as the screen abruptly cuts to black, and the loading screen is presented as the game reloads. While deciding not to go along with the game seems to have been allowed, diverging from it and creating something authentic is not allowed within the premises of the game. The Narrator seems to have become too human, too sympathetic, to fit within the panoptic game-structure; therefore his power is negated to almost non-existent. Before this happens, the Narrator tries to translate the current situation into that of a linear story-structure, seemingly to find comfort. The Narrator also briefly considers the existence of another entity influencing the game, which he appoints as ‘whatever it is that made this schedule’. While this element seems to have less to do with the translation of implied script, it does emphasize Barthes’ view on text ‘ownership’ and intertextuality, emphasizing how this writerly text has influences beyond the frame that is visible to both player and Narrator. The concrete origin of this ending is difficult to ascertain, for it seems not to be created through a player’s interpretation, nor by the Narrator, whereas there is mention of it in the implied script. This either suggests that during the translation process the game has become sentient, revolting against the Narrator’s narrative emphasis over its ludic elements, or that the Narrator has less control over the script than he claims, flagging him as unreliable.

4.3 - Mutual dependency and unreliability

Unreliability is described in the Living handbook of Narratology as ‘a feature of narratorial discourse. If a narrator misreports, -interprets or -evaluates, or if she/he underreports, -interprets or -evaluates, this narrator is unreliable or untrustworthy.’ Signs indicating a narrator’s unreliability range from emotional outbursts, misinformation which does not correspond to the reality of the narrative and biased interpretation of situations to uncertainty, ramblings and inconsistency. Most of these elements can be recognized in the Narrator’s character; mainly his altering views and opinions, emotional reactions and personal involvement in the narrative are semic codes which imply his statements are untrustworthy. The most important reason why the Narrator is unreliable is his claim of contradicting facts in each separate ending, demonstrating how there is no one truth to ‘detect’, which ultimately imply that he does not know the full truth himself, either. Since the Narrator sometimes reacts emotionally to changes within the game, and does not always succeed in fulfilling his intentions, doubt concerning his claims of control and authorship arise. With questions of reality and agency as important themes in the game, the function of this unreliability has both an estranging and bonding nature. The unreliability of the Narrator, when it concerns his power, is estranging, as he seems to lack a moral code and claims to have no problem ‘erasing’ all of Stanley’s co-workers. Simultaneously, his imperfections and uncertainty make him more human, and thus more sympathetic. This places him to some extent on the same level as the player, who also seems to have some control, and who is also confronted with the fact that they do not seem know everything there is to The Stanley Parable.

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110 Simultaneously, another hypothetical script is offered in this schedule, though it is one that is never completely followed through. This could function as a hint towards the inefficiency and lack of authority the Narrator’s script has as well: not everything intended in written word is adhered in this digital environment. Thus the omnipotent power of the linguistic act is deconstructed.


112 Ibid. Paragraph 11-13


114 See the Bomb ending for this instance.
The Narrator’s refusal to accept his wavering control over the game make him less pleasant toward Stanley, while he is at his most likeable during moments where he somewhat accepts his subjectivity within the game, for example when he decides to side with Stanley during the Confusion ending. This behaviour is fitting for the playing style which would fit the narrative adventure game best: accepting one’s responsibility and connections to the digital environment, without attempting to control everything constantly. It is telling how, the more the Narrator seems to lose control over the game, the more willing he is to take responsibility for the player’s and Stanley’s wellbeing and their own experiences of the game.

There is a distinct nod towards the ludology-narratology debate in the Narrator’s struggle, who represents the more narrow interpretation of an author who keeps pulling at their reader (or player) to have their story heard. Something which would clearly diminish the playing-experience, considering the Life ending as a direct result of this perspective. This does not imply that The Stanley Parable takes the side of ludology over narratology, since it also presents the Narrator as essential for the game to have a sense of purpose and direction.115 Without the plot and the Narrator’s interruption, Stanley would not have left his office at the first place. It seems that the Narrator’s act of translation is what gives Stanley’s life meaning within the game, offering him the role of protagonist. Moreover, it is within the branching narrative structure that meaning is derived from certain situations and speeches, which show ironically that there would not be much of a game in TSP if there was no narrative framing it. The necessary merging of these two elements in order to create an enjoyable gaming experience is demonstrated most clearly in one of the interjections by the rare female Narrator, who uses the Narrator and Stanley as a metaphor for this co-dependability:

‘Oh, look at these two.
How they wish to destroy one another. How they wish to control one another.
How they both wish to be free.
Can you see? Can you see how much they need one another? [...] But listen to me, you can still save these two. You can stop the program before they both fail. Press ‘escape’ and press ‘quit.’ There’s no other way to beat this game.
As long as you move forward, you’ll be walking someone else’s path. Stop now, and it’ll be your only true choice.
Whatever you do, choose it! Don’t let time choose for you! Don’t let time to–’

This interference by the female Narrator could be interpreted as a metaphor for the Ludology-Narratology-debate. Stanley could, in this case, represent the ludic element, and the Narrator as the narrative element. They both struggle with the concept of predetermination by code: a familiar struggle when it comes to gaming and the consideration of authenticity. Her conclusion, if this metaphor rings true, is in line with Jenkins’ and Neitzel’s work as she emphasizes how futile this struggle is, since they concurrently need each other as well. ‘Beating’ this game is impossible, if authenticity is its goal. However, the unclear goals of The Stanley Parable make it questionable if that was ever its purpose. Relating this to the postmodern theory of the panopticon, which has been characterized earlier as a structure of power, Foucault mentions how the panopticon’s power lies in its ability to automate and unindividualize Power.116 Traces of this process can be found in the Narrator’s ambivalent character: the less humanity he shows, the more he can align himself with the automated authority of the game, whereas showing personal attachment lead him to lose this power. As a few endings show moments which imply that during the translation process the game

115 See the Game ending conclusion: ‘He’ll understand soon what I was trying to tell him. He needs me, someone who will wrap everything up at the end - to make sense out of the chaos and the fear and the confusion. That’s who I am. That is what I mean to this world. Oh, yes. Yes, I’ll be back. There’s no other way. Once this ends, after it all comes to a close, then I’ll be back.’

116 Foucault (2007) p. 279
has developed some kind of sentience. One which communicates nonverbally, but still rebels drastically against the Narrator’s plan and story by offering Stanley alternate choices and, apparently, violently cutting off the female Narrator’s call to action. The ambiguity between what is part of the Narrator’s narrative, and what is part of the ludic element, whether it has grown a sentience or not, shows how much the two are intertwined, and also need one another to function. Just as the Narrator and Stanley need one another; after all, a game needs to be played in order to progress, just as a narrative needs to be experienced by an audience.

At some instances, an initial loss of control leads to an emotional response instead of the other way around. This loss of control by the Narrator originates from the player’s behaviour instead of the game’s code, showing how the Narrator is confronted with two opposing fronts. Foucault implies how, in order to exert the unindividualized Power of the construction, its highest authority becomes completely intertwined with it, binding themselves to those they watch: something which seems to be the case in TSP as well.\textsuperscript{117} When the Narrator moves closer to Stanley than to the faceless structure of the game, he becomes more human, and therefore less reliable as the coordinator of a narrative structure; however this makes him more reliable on a moral level, and more sympathetic in his relationship with Stanley.\textsuperscript{118}

The other appearance of the female Narrator consists of similar self-reflectivity. This happens when Stanley ‘accidentally’ dies, which results in the following monologue:

‘And yet it would be just a few minutes before Stanley would restart the game, back in his office, as alive as ever.

What exactly did the Narrator think he was going to accomplish?

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?’

This reflection on the processes active within the game, and the lack of room for alleged ‘free will’, are utilized in order to encourage the player to produce theoretical thought. The game is presented as a completely predetermined experience, with a nihilist perspective suggesting that no matter what the player decides, it is all already programmed, and therefore not only impersonal, but meaningless.\textsuperscript{119} It shows metaproceduralism, where the game is not only aware of itself being a game, but of the way it functions; calling attention to the pre-coded body of work that it is. This interpretation disregards the subjective experience of gameplay, even though theorists like Jenkins have emphasized how being a player does not eliminate their ability to read, or, in other words, to interpret. If anything, Aarseth emphasizes how players have more influence on their own experience of the game compared to readers. Play seems to correlate closer to the process of translation than reading might, since the interpretative transfer seems more circumstantial due to the game’s

\textsuperscript{117} Foucault (2007) p. 282

\textsuperscript{118} This complicated relationship is reminiscent of what J. Hillis Miller describes in his article The Critic as Host (1977) in which he closely analyses the relationship between a parasitic factor such as a critic in relation to literary work, which leads to a characterization of this relationship as more equally beneficial than conventionally thought. This reasoning would be an interesting perspective to relate to the various parties within TSP, since the mutual dependency is insinuated throughout the game multiple times.

\textsuperscript{119} The female Narrator’s last few sentences presents a distinct contradiction: while at first the meaninglessness of the binary of life and death is emphasized, the following sentence confronts the player with the fact that Stanley was already dead from the moment he hit start. While, first of all, it is ambiguous whether it is Stanley, or the player, who physically presses start, there is a gap in this rhetoric. Once the binary of life and death is disregarded, Stanley death does not matter either, making him as much alive as dead at the same time. He simply ‘exists’ within the Parable, where he experiences things, sometimes remembering, and sometimes not. Moreover, since Stanley’s humanity is questioned to such an extent that it is presented as a direct contrast to the ‘actual person’ who plays the game, it seems unclear whether Stanley can actually die at all.
interactive mechanics. The act of engaging with the game’s code by interacting with it and making decisions exists at the core of TSP, emphasizing more active interpretative transfer and placing the concept of agency within code on a lower level of priority. The following excerpt further emphasizes this priority, showing the true vulnerability and dependency of the Narrator, and finalizing TSP’s emphasis of responsibility over agency in the Choice ending:

‘When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.
Stanley? Hello? Are you- Is everything okay?
*Stanley, please, I need you to make a choice. I need you to walk through the door.*
Are you listening to me? Can you hear me? Is everything alright?
Stanley, this is important. The story needs you, it needs you to make a decision. It cannot exist without you. Do you understand me?
Whatever choice you make is just fine, they’re both correct, you can’t be wrong here. We can work together. I’ll accept whatever you do, I simply need you to take that step forward.
Please, choose! Do something! anything... *This is more important than you can ever know. I need this. The story needs it.*
So you hear me? Are you there? You’re listening to this, Stanley, are you there?
I- Okay. It’s okay, I can wait. You need time to decide, time to make sure your choice is correct, that is the best choice. That’s all right.’

4.4 - The Pleasure of the Text

In this chapter, the Narrator has lost the definitive characterization as main antagonist Esslin and Fuchs appointed him. His own struggles within the game, which mainly reflect on the function of narrative in videogames, offer another layer of meaning and theoretical consideration to TSP. In order to further investigate the game through this perspective, Roland Barthes again offers applicable theory. His work *The Pleasure of the Text* distinguishes two different kinds of narrative: texts of *jouissance* and *plaisir*. Texts of Plaisir, which can be translated to texts of pleasure, offer direct narrative gratification, and require little investment from the reader beyond their trivial act of reading. Textes de jouissance, or texts of ‘bliss’, require a more active attitude from their reader, as these texts are generally more difficult to understand. Within traditional terms, this would refer pulp-novels representing the texts of pleasure, i.e. direct gratification and linear narrative, as opposed to the blissful experience offered by (modernist) literature and poetry. While these concepts seem to correspond with the readerly and writerly approaches to intertextuality, in which the writerly is preferred over the readerly, Barthes associates the texte de jouissance with ennui and boredom. This is partly due to its inaccessibility, but also since its ‘new’, harder to digest ideas have somehow become clichés themselves.

In TSP, both texts of bliss and pleasure are presented to the player, engaging in the discussion of the nature of text in the medium of videogames. The text of pleasure could be recognized in the *Life ending*, which is reached by following every direction the Narrator offers to the player, enabling them to finish the game within ten minutes and rounding up the narrative swiftly with a seemingly happy ending. This ‘easy’ narrative requires little engagement from the player. The rest of the game offers a more complicated narrative structure, in which some signs seem to shift in their reality and trustworthiness. This kind of text, and the writerly way of reading, is activated by the

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120 These texts ‘depend greatly on intertextual codes which are so stereotypical that following them can create a certain boredom in the reader’ Allen (2000) p. 89
121 Allen characterizes *jouissance* as ‘the loss of unity and even identity experienced by the reader when confronted by the plural, polysemous, non-unified text.’ (89). This confrontation entails the conflict which leads to a more active experience of text, for it requires investment of the reader to reach some sort of resolution.
122 Allen (2000) p. 91
player’s decision to disobey the Narrator’s linear structure and choose a different path. As opposed to the linear Life ending, complicated paths such as the Work ending or Art ending do not lead to an easily consumable experience. They necessitate critical, theoretical thinking from the player, characterizing these endings as examples of ‘texts of bliss’. At the same time, these endings are harder to consume by the player, which is best illustrated by the monotonous four-hour long ‘Baby game’ in the Art ending. This ‘game’ requires the player to press a button whenever a cardboard cut-out of a baby nears a large fire, posing a ‘moral dilemma’ whether the baby should be left to die due to its continuous crying. At least, that is how it is presented by the Narrator, who claims the game represents the depressing monotony of every-day life. While the ironic Art ending offers a hilarious reward to those who manage to endure four hours of the tenuous game, parodying artistic enlightenment with text on a white screen accompanied by a black monolith, it illustrates how the text of bliss functions (Figures 5, 6 and 7).

The easily experienced Life ending offers a more comfortable player-experience along with a theoretical, though less heavy, consideration of how much a player should investigate or question the narrative they encounter. This shows how the plurality of the writerly can exist within the readerly, depending on the amount of investment the observer is willing to offer.\textsuperscript{123} In this case the text is less demanding of its player, as theoretical thought is no prerequisite to interpret the narrative, but rather optional. The chances a player will play TSP again after the enigmatic implications of the epilogue are higher than after four hours of playing the ‘Baby game’, emphasizing how, though the latter would seem more theoretical or writerly, the text of pleasure might in some cases encourage more theoretical thought than that of bliss.

The Stanley Parable thus offers insight into the relationship between the two approaches to text, adding a new dimension to the discussion by enlarging the interactive impact of the player’s decisions and approach. The Narrator, as ‘author’ of the proposed text of pleasure, poses the question why anyone would prefer a less linear story; especially if that story mainly focusses on the person experiencing it.\textsuperscript{124} This shows the Narrator defending the pleasure-text as simply pleasurable, though in other parts of the game, he shows preference for the text of bliss. This occurs, for example, when the player attempts to collect achievement 430, which, according to the Steam-achievement page, requires five clicks on a door with the corresponding number. The Narrator disagrees with the low prerequisites to this reward, and demands other trivial tasks from the player (like clicking on other doors in specific sequences) before granting the achievement. This illustrates how requiring more effort does not necessarily lead to more content or a richer experience, as the tasks are completely meaningless and have no further impact on the environment. Instead of picking a side on the ludology-narratology-debate, TSP offers insight into the discussion itself by letting the player experience them and illustrating how both sides’ views would function within a metafictional, metaprocedural narrative situation. Transferring these elements into the medium of videogames lays more emphasis on the element of interactivity. This leads to more insight in the position of the player, or reader, as translator, and through that a more theoretical approach. TSP encourages increased engagement from its player to the discussed dilemma, offering them a way to explore both sides of the argument on their own terms, while simultaneously illustrating the cost of their own interference. This further emphasizes TSP’s status as a theoretical object, as this discussion only ‘appears’ once one approaches the game theoretically, but it also offers insight and development to this distinction by transferring it to a more interactive medium.

\textsuperscript{123} Allen (2000) p. 80

\textsuperscript{124} Approaching the Choice ending, this following dialogue foreshadows the confronting revelation of the Work ending, which can be reached through this path: ‘I’m not your enemy, really, I’m not. I realize that investing your trust in someone else can be difficult, but the fact is that the story has been about nothing but you, all this time. There's been someone you've been neglecting, Stanley, someone you've forgotten about. Please, stop trying to make every decision by yourself.
FEAR ME MORTAL, I AM THE ESSENCE OF DIVINE ART.

Figure 5 First segment of the Art ending

KNOW THAT WHEN YOU DIE, I WILL PERSONALLY CARRY YOUR SPIRIT ACROSS VER BLXWN INTO MY GARDEN BUILT WITHIN THE EMOTIONS OF A FLOWER.

Figure 6 Second segment of the Art ending

THERE WE WILL LIVE TOGETHER, WE WILL DANCE AND EAT AND SIN AND YOU WILL DO IMPROV COMEDY BASED ON SUGGESTIONS FROM ME FOR ALL ETERNITY.

Figure 7 Final segment of the Art ending
Chapter 5 - Environmental storytelling: translation across media

The Narrator’s multiple humanizing and sympathetic moments strikingly usually coincide with his lack of control. This loss of control can be divided in two categories: loss of control due to interference by the player, or due to inconsistencies between his intentions (represented by the script) and the digital environment. Since his control over the environment often seems absolute, like in the Bomb ending and Game ending, this makes the instances in which the game-space diverges from his plans even more noticeable. TSP’s ludic elements are mainly focussed on three-dimensional navigation, which makes the act of translation tangible throughout the environment. The script’s format can only offer a textual description of the environment, leaving little concrete imagery on which visual space can be based. This leaves TSP to consist of a relatively bland environment, except for witty jokes such as the slideshow in the Meeting Room (Figure 8) and key plot-elements such as the Mind Control Facility (Figure 9).

The rest of the office is not exceptionally visually interesting; this is where its ludic elements are essential to the game’s experience. Referencing human interaction as Steiner’s prerequisite for translation, the ludic elements of TSP could be seen as a direct metaphor of this prerequisite for the space to manifest as existent and relevant. An example of this is the Broomcloset ending, which shows how something completely irrelevant to the narrative can become a place of interest due to the player’s actions; namely focus on it beyond conventionality (Figure 10):

‘Stanley stepped into the broom closet, but there was nothing here, so he turned around and got back on track. [Stanley remains in the broom closet] There was nothing here. No choice to make, No path to follow, Just an empty broom closet. [...] At least if there were something to interact with, he’d be justified in some way. [...]You do realize there’s no choice or anything in here right? If I said, "Stanley walked past the broom closet" at least you would have had a reason for exploring it to find out. But it didn’t even occur to me because literally this closet is of absolutely no significance to the story whatsoever.’

As the Narrator reflects on this behaviour, he shows disbelief, but simultaneously acknowledges the activation of cultural codes concerning videogame conventions such as searching for items and hidden chambers.125 Another important marker of this environment is its pronounced artificiality, which is acknowledged by the game itself due to the hard cuts and forced resets when the story gets ‘too far off track’. The swift cuts to black, appearances of loading screens and the acknowledgement of the game’s construction process by the Narrator all emphasize the digital, artificial nature of the environment. In his thesis on environmental storytelling in videogames, Pieter Lemmens mentions how loading screens and such negatively impact the player’s immersion of the narrative because the player is reminded of the artificiality of the medium.126 The ludic nature of the game, he claims, breaks through the narrative illusion. In TSP, a game which focusses on exactly this friction, this leads to the creation of some safe distance, both between the player and the game and the player and Stanley. Since some problematic suggestions are made concerning Stanley’s essence, existence and importance (in addition to the not always present differentiation between Stanley and the player) this distance allows for enough breathing room amongst the confronting themes to encourage the player to continue their exploration.127

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125 After following through the entire Broomcloset ending, during the next walkthrough the door to the broom closet is boarded shut.
126 Lemmens (2017) p. 34
127 The Narrator clearly prefers Stanley over the player, though, as can be seen after the instructional video of the Choice ending, in which he asks the player to ‘behave like Stanley would’.
Figure 8 Whiteboard and slideshow in the Meeting Room

Figure 9 Overview of the Mind Control Facility

Figure 10 Door to the Broomcloset Ending
The environmental artificiality is acknowledged in TSP, but not posed as an excuse to not take the space seriously. On the contrary: the Narrator emphasizes how the environment should be appreciated more because of all the hard work he put into it. This way, the environment is not only an openly manifested artificial space, but it also represents the constructed nature of the game, urging its players to reflect on its status as a product of translation instead of attempting to create the most immersive experience possible. This chapter will reflect further on the digital environment of The Stanley Parable, on how the environmental storytelling functions within it and how it manifests signs of translation from a purely textual medium to a multimedial one.

5.1 - Jenkins and Muscat: theorizing environmental storytelling

Environmental storytelling is a narrative strategy which occurs in most narrative media, though it is studied and utilized most fruitfully in visual media such as film, painting and videogames. While described environment can convey meaning just as well as visual environment can, the ‘show, don’t tell’ strategy that characterizes environmental storytelling is much clearer in visual media. Environmental storytelling gets more complicated, and therefore more interesting, when it becomes three-dimensional. This occurs to varying levels in videogames, as it becomes a navigable space through which a player can move to piece the implied narrative together. Esslin and Fuchs indicate how videogames possess narrativity, instead of ‘being’ a narrative, which implies, in their quote of Marie-Laure Ryan, that

‘They have the potential to evoke multiple, individualized narrative scripts through settings, characters and other elements that players interact with through choice and with the intention to solve problems and make progress.’

This occurs in videogames such as RPG’s (Divinity: Original Sin II prides itself for its densely narratized environment) and in what Muscat et al. (2016) call First Person Walkers. This term concerns a type of game that has similarities with RPG’s and First Person Shooters (FPS’s), but has a deliberate lack of points of interest, and offers slow pace and ambiguous atmosphere which encourages a more thoughtful consideration of the environment and the few elements that can be interacted with:

‘These overarching characteristics frame the player’s game experience as something not to be overcome, but of keen perception and close inquiry. Ambiguity is key to building interest and intrigue, playing upon the limitations of the first person perspective. With no in-game method for recording findings the player must rely on their own mental recollection or written notes; subjective, interpretive thought is encouraged as part of the process of exploration and discovery.’

While Muscat et al. define TSP as a walker, they simultaneously reflect on the game as more reminiscent of choose-your-own-adventure books than the environmental experience offered by games like Dear Esther, especially since the emphasis on exposition via (spoken) text and branching narrative is prominent. Still, the effects which characterize a FPW can be clearly recognized in TSP’s slow feed of information and use of location-based triggers, which consists of environmental navigation as the sole prerequisite of progressing narrative. This is the most prominent mechanic in TSP, with the pressing of large round buttons ranking as the second most used mechanic for

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128 See the beginning of the Confusion ending: ‘I haven’t even finished building this section of the map, because you were never supposed to be here in the first place. Broken rooms, exposed developer textures... is this what you had wanted? [...] Do you not think I put a lot of time into [the game]? Because I did.’

129 Esslin and Fuchs (2015) p. 44

130 Muscat identifies The Stanley Parable as a FPW as well. p. 4-5

131 Muscat et al. (2016) p. 13
narrative progression. The making of decisions by navigating the environment shows how the game space is imbued with and meaning, making the process of decision making more pronounced and ‘physical’ to the player: another element which characterizes the FPW.\textsuperscript{132}

\textit{Jenkins’ four kinds of environmental storytelling}

In his chapter on \textit{Game Design as Narrative Architecture}, Henry Jenkins describes four kinds of narrative which utilize space in order to convey information with the intention to steer, influence and decide elements of the overarching narrative. The first form he describes in his chapter is \textit{evocative space}, which has clear ties to intertextuality. As its name already suggests, evocative space calls upon its players’ repertoire in order to fill in certain ‘gaps’ in order to ‘make the narrative make sense’, combining Barthes’ cultural codes in order to engage the hermeneutic ones. These spaces either ‘remediate a preexisting story […] or draw upon a broadly shared genre tradition’, counting on their audience to complete or further embed the narrative through their repertoire.\textsuperscript{133} By associating the narrative with a popular genre (such as the expectations triggered by a horror-scene) or well known story (Jenkins refers to American McGee’s Alice as a remediation, or original interpretation of Lewis Caroll’s \textit{Alice in Wonderland}) the evoked tropes and expectations enrich the narrative, and foreshadow what the player might expect to happen. In the case of \textit{The Stanley Parable}, the Kafkaesque codes evoke expectations regarding Kafka’s work. The dilemma in the \textit{Coward ending} whether the protagonist should leave his room evokes the beginning of \textit{The Trial}.\textsuperscript{134} Other paths of \textit{TSP} also contain evoked space, referencing multiple other narratives, films and genres. One example is \textit{The Truman Show}, which is evoked in the \textit{Life Ending}, as an escape from the dystopic panoptic space promises a happy ever after (\textit{Figure 11}). However, \textit{The Stanley Parable} offers a less optimistic conclusion regarding Stanley’s escape than it does in Truman’s case. Whereas Truman’s escape represents agency and breaking free from a constraining artificial society, Stanley’s represents the exact opposite, as the Narrator forcibly steers Stanley into his proclaimed ‘freedom’ (\textit{Figure 12}). This concept further shows how videogames qualify for intertextual analysis, since they, maybe even

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure11}
\caption{Truman’s escape from artificiality in \textit{The Truman Show}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{132} Muscat et al. (2016) p.12
\textsuperscript{133} Jenkins (2004) p. 123
\textsuperscript{134} Kafka (2009) pp. 6-8
more than literature does, rely on already existing knowledge of their players due to their required initiative and interaction to progress the narrative. This is referenced multiple times by the Narrator as well, for example during the Out of Map ending:

‘He then praised the game for its insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of structural narrative tropes.’

*Enacted narrative* is another way in which environmental storytelling can function. With enacted narratives the story itself is structured around the player’s movement through space. Features of the environment may delay or accelerate their specific plot trajectory depending on localized choices. The enacted narrative often presents itself in an episodic structure, in which each space has its own intrinsic meaning without being completely cut off from the larger narrative and environment around it, which is often the case concerning levels in less narrative oriented videogames. Jenkins uses the term *micronarrative* to refer to these smaller, ‘localized incidents’ which the player can encounter (cutscenes in RPG’s for example) which intensify emotional engagement of the player, though these ‘memorable moments’ are not always essential to the progression of the main narrative.\(^{135}\) Since *The Stanley Parable* lacks a clear overarching narrative, all nineteen paths might be interpreted as enacted narratives, or episodic narratives, since while they are loosely connected, they all need specific *location based triggers* to activate them. Approaching *TSP* as an episodic game offers insight into the larger structure of the game, though the overarching narrative most experienced players might be searching for due to their recognition of this structure is far to be seen. This way *TSP* illustrates how evoked narratives can also be abused to misdirect players, or more likely, to confront them with their obedient confirmation to procedure.

\(^{135}\) Jenkins (2004) p. 125
This also occurs in embedded narratives, which establish game space as a detective-esque memory palace, whose content must be deciphered by the player as they try to reconstruct the narrative. A videogame which exemplifies embedded narrative is Dear Esther, in which the player has to look for clues and details in order to find a missing girl. The Stanley Parable, in comparison, has very few objects and ‘clues’ to interact with, which might put off players with experience regarding FPW’s, since their search will not lead to satisfactory result (which the Narrator gleefully holds over the player’s head). However, a more intertextual interpretation could recognize such clues as the activation of semic codes as implicit ways of offering the player more information as to what is happening in any certain ending.

Another interesting element from TSP regarding this concept is the Museum Ending, in which important objects and layouts from the various endings are displayed in a museum-like white walled space, along with small written signs from the developers regarding each ending (Figures 13 and 14). This shows a more literal interpretation of the ‘memory palace’, which might even spoil some endings the player has not reached by that point. However, this overview seems to not give much inclination of an overarching narrative, except for the existential consideration of agency, freedom and artificiality, which is accompanied by the female narrator pondering the futility of the tug-of-war between Stanley and the Narrator.

The last model of how narrative possibilities might get mapped onto game space are emergent narratives, which entail digital environments which are rich with narrative potential. In games which carry this quality, the environment is incredibly pliable, and therefore open to the construction of narrative by players themselves. Jenkins refers to games such as The Sims and Minecraft to exemplify how players can create and follow their own narratives. While TSP does not directly offer such a space to the player, emergent narrative is referenced throughout the Game Ending, in which the Narrator is so fed up with the player’s failure at the ‘Baby game’ that he (diegetically) shuts ‘the parable’ down and loads up other games: first Minecraft, and after that, Portal. The Narrator does this to show either Stanley or the player an alternative regarding the

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137 This ‘baby game’ requires Stanley to repeatedly push the same button for four hours to prevent a cardboard cut-out of a baby from being engulfed in flames. In the very likely case the player does not endure the full four hours, the following monologue is triggered: ‘You heartless bastard. Did you do it because you hate babies, or
amount of responsibility and freedom one experiences in certain games. Opening *Minecraft*, he decides to go ‘play for himself’ instead of trying to please Stanley, and the player can follow an invisible force manipulate the pixelated landscape. However, the Narrator quickly grows bored, needing more purpose than ‘simply building trivial things’. His self-imposed quest for diamonds quickly leads to him backing out due to the open-ended, unknown and possibly dangerous situations this quest might lead to.

‘Oh no no no no no. This is far too open-ended than I had in mind. I’m looking for something more narrow and linear, something that really makes you feel utterly irrelevant. [...] Okay, new game!’

The newly loaded game can be recognized as the puzzle game *Portal*, which is another game created by the same developers as *Half Life* and *TSP*. Immediately after loading it, the Narrator comments as follows:

‘Yes! I don’t even know what this game is, but I love it! You... trapped in a glass box, with no way out, listening to me talk.... Oh, it’s inspired. I couldn’t have done it any better myself.’

While the Narrator at first amusedly follows the player as they complete the first puzzle of the game, he soon grows bored again afterwards; apparently an entirely linear experience also does not fulfil his videogame aesthetic. Moreover, showing these two opposite approaches to gameplay show the intricate balance all developers have to consider when it comes to videogames, indirectly requesting a more sympathetic and respectful attitude from *TSP*’s players.

Figure 14 Larger overview of the Museum ending, which displays elements from multiple endings in the same space
5.2 - Environment as obstruction of narrative

Having discussed how the Narrator can manipulate the environment for his own purposes, there are also instances in which the environment rather obstructs the Narrator’s plans. These instances show the environment resisting the narrative direction as fervently as the player might do on some occasions, as mechanics are altered or removed entirely in order to waylay the Narrator’s directions:

‘Okay, fine. You’re not gonna do it? But you know what, it’s pretty humiliating to bring you this far. Only for you to suddenly decide you have better things to do.
I asked you for this one single thing, for your respect! The kind of respect Stanley shows for his choices. He knows what it means to take a story seriously.
If you didn’t want to see what I had to show you, then why did you come here? You had a choice you know. You could have gone through the door on the right!
You could have done whatever the hell you wanted over there! Why did you come this way?
Speak! Say something to me! Explain yourself you coward-[screen turns black]’

The excerpt solidifies any suspicion at the Narrator’s awareness of the possibility for multiple paths and endings, and of the player’s (not Stanley’s) disobedience. He pointedly distinguishes the player from Stanley by setting Stanley as the good example the player is straying from. Moreover, he acknowledges how ‘the door to the right’, which signifies the first choice and therefore the first chance at rebellion, is a familiar place to him: one he knows of and confirms as an integral part of the game, used to filter out disobedient players. The rebellious players are expected to take the right door, whereas players who want to know about the Narrator’s story take the door to their left as he instructs them to. This implies that the first choice of the game decides which side they take on the ludology-narratology-debate, with the left door representing the narrative experience, whereas the right ‘rebellious’ door signifies preference for a more ludic experience.

The twist in the citation above, however, is that the player has no choice but to disobey. They are asked to speak into a voice-receiver, though the game actually does not support this mechanic at all, thus restricting the player from obeying and, as we see the escalation in the Narrator’s reaction, completely disregarding him as a controlling force within the game. Thus, through the functionality of space and mechanics, the debate between ludology and narratology continues, with in this case the ludic mechanic element triumphing over the Narrator. However, since TSP never seems to offer straightforward messages, another ending contains the opposite situation. In the Work ending, the Narrator offers an elaborate explanation to the Parable’s existence, implying that Stanley created it himself to escape his boring life.138 The Narrator claims disapprovingly how Stanley has become addicted to button-pressing, and intents to demonstrate this compulsion by daring Stanley not to comply the next time a prompt appears on screen (Figures 15, 16 and 17). This challenge is rigged, however, since no input other than compliance will trigger any progress. For the narrative to continue, the button has to be pressed, forcing the player to concede to the Narrator.

138 During this ending, Stanley’s life beyond work is deconstructed as his wife is presented as a mannequin and the furniture of his office starts to overtake the environment of the apartment (Figures 15 and 16)
Figure 15 Stanley’s ‘wife’ in the Work ending, which is slowly taken over by the office, along with non-diegetic prompts.

Figure 16 Example of another prompt nearing the end of the Work ending as the office has taken over the apartment completely.

Figure 17 Final screen of the Work ending.
This ending shows a restricting grasp on the player by the narrative, which twists and abuses the mechanics of the player really has no choice to go along with this illusion of agency.\textsuperscript{139}

Referring back to Esslin and Fuchs’ consideration of \textit{TSP} as a game about agency, there is no denying that this theme is very clearly present. However, while it is an important theme within the game, there is no concrete conclusion offered anywhere. Instead, the game offers perspectives on agency, none of which are entirely conclusive (partly due to the unreliability of the Narrator), which encourages any player who interacts with it to reconsider their position in relation to the games and narratives they experience. This is how \textit{The Stanley Parable} functions as a theoretical object. Bradley Fest’s \textit{metaproceduralism} does not only manifest in its ironic reflection on the game as predetermined procedures reflecting on the coded nature of digital narratives; \textit{TSP} offers space for reflection on this concept through explorable environment.

While the coded procedures may be closed off to individual agency as opposed to sandbox games, FPS’s and RPG’s, there is still room for agency in which path the player decides to follow, and how they decide to interpret and frame their experiences. The larger question \textit{TSP} poses by deconstructing the relations between the ludic and the narrative is rather whether true agency is something a player should really wish for, since the complementary responsibility might way heavier than accounted for.

\section*{5.3 - Environmental artificiality: The Stanley Parable Adventure line}

One specific part of \textit{TSP} involves the Narrator becoming so frustrated at Stanley for not following his instructions, that he attempts to manifest the actual visual \textquote{plotline} of his story within the environment, which Stanley is supposed to follow. This large yellow line is ironically called the \textit{Stanley Parable Adventure Line™}, despite its purpose of putting a stop to Stanley’s (or, the player’s) ‘adventuring’ and straying from the Narrator’s intended story (\textit{Figure 18}).\textsuperscript{140}

The effort the Narrator puts into trying to get Stanley ‘back on track’ poses the question whether getting back to his story would actually make for a more enjoyable experience than the protested exploring Stanley has been doing. Once the \textit{Adventure Line} starts, new considerations regarding linear and non-linear storytelling come to the surface, which manifests in the slow decline in stability of the yellow, \textit{reliable} Adventure Line, until it starts to cover ceilings and break through walls as it slowly becomes impossible to follow (\textit{Figures 19 and 20}). As the line runs haywire and starts to create confusion, it results in the opposite of its intended purpose.

\textsuperscript{139} Multiple instances of this exist within the game: the moment where the Narrator \textquote{narrates} the code Stanley has to enter into a numberpad in order to open a secret door is similarly \textquote{rigged}. In case the player enters different codes instead of obeying directly, the Narrator loses patience and overrides the mechanics for the door to open anyway, prioritizing the narrative over game-mechanics. If the player immediately enters the right code without listening to the corresponding narrative, the Narrator chastises him as follows: \textquote{Stanley was in such a rush to get through the story as quickly as possible; he didn’t even have a single minute to just let the Narrator talk! That kind of anxiety isn’t healthy, so he relaxed for a few minutes, with some calming new age music.} The aforementioned music actually starts playing after this. In this small instance in the game, both the preference for narrative and for play are critically reflected upon, pleading for balance.

\textsuperscript{140} The irony of this name is emphasized by the trademark sign, the most blatant display of ownership the Narrator could have used. The way the Adventure Line turns out to start to lead a life of its own and unintentionally works against the Narrator’s intentions could even be seen as a metaphor for what Roland Barthes poses in his essay \textit{The Death of the Author}, which suggests that once an author releases a text into the world, he no longer has any control or authority over it.
clear that it is no longer a game.

Figure 18 The start of *The Stanley Parable Adventure Line*

Creating more confusion within the digital environment

Figure 19 *The Adventure Line* creating more confusion within the digital environment

ends up damaging the environment instead of creating the structure the Narrator intended

Figure 20 *The Adventure Line* ends up damaging the environment instead of creating the structure the Narrator intended
Through the lens of translation, this illustrates the difficulties of translating a scripted story into a non-linear narrative structure. By inscribing a written story onto a digital space, the general difficulty many game developers encounter is demonstrated. The story needs to be clear, but not so clear that it is no longer a game. While at first view, one might be hesitant to call this overemphasized *Adventure line* a part of environmental storytelling, it does show a narrative, though it might not be the one the Narrator alludes to: it shows the struggles of translation itself in a physical form. Another unconventional example of environmental storytelling in *TSP* occurs in the *Out of Map ending*. This part of the game can only be reached by what at first qualified as a glitch, which allowed players to climb through one of the office windows into a vast white nothingness. This consciously ‘destroying’ the game by finding glitches and engaging them alludes to a deconstructive approach, though within videogaming this is more associated with hacker-culture. This practice is generally not seen as an interpretative one, but rather a more malicious approach associated with vandalism. Instead of fixing this glitch by removing it, *TSP*’s developers included it into the game and added extra monologue. This shows how much the game depends on script, since it can absorb even mistakes that weren’t supposed to be there into itself.

The internalization of this glitch into *TSP* shows self-awareness, and emphasizes how *The Stanley Parable* is a game which above all encourages exploration. Therefore, players finding the glitch are not ‘punished’ by the developers, but rather rewarded for their curiosity with extra monologue, a few jokes and ironic self-reflection regarding the faultiness of the game (*Figure 21*).

Potential malintent is thus dismantled though humour, since the supposed victory those who might want to break the game might experience is immediately framed, and diffused peacefully by the diplomatic reasoning of the Narrator:

‘At first, Stanley assumed he had broken the map, until he heard this narration and realized it was a part of the game’s design all along. He then praised the game for its insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of structural narrative tropes.

So now that you’re here, what do you think? Isn’t this a fun and unique place to be? Why don’t we take a minute just to drink it all in! Okay I’m over it now. What do you think, are you sick of this gag yet?’

This ending shows again how seemingly meaningless, artificial space can be imbued with meaning through subjective interaction. Not only the player as interpreter, but also the developers can subsequently add meaning through patches and updates. This is actually an instance in which the Death of the Author might be bypassed by the programmer, since most games nowadays are open for adjustment by its ‘author’ after release, which allow them to tweak content and have a more direct line of communication concerning their work. On the other hand, the consumer’s influence on games has also become more pronounced through modding and cheating, allowing players not only to subjectively interpret but to actively create alternative elements by altering the code themselves. The *Out of Map ending* thus offers a reflection on a deconstructionist playing style, which the game encourages through its implied approval of disobedience. This behaviour is rewarded with increasingly angry but humorous outbursts by the Narrator as the main path is diverged from. This results in a paradoxical situation in which the *game* seems to want the player to defy the *Narrator*, thus acknowledging tension between the ludic and the narrative side of the game.¹⁴¹ This specific

¹⁴¹ Instances where gameplay and story come into a mutually detrimental conflict with each other have been criticized by game developer Clint Hocking under the term *ludonarrative dissonance*. This mainly concerns contradictions between in-game message and consequential reward, in which the narrative might plead for one cause of action, whereas the game mechanics do not substantiate this ideology with appropriate reward; instead encouraging contradictory behaviour through mechanical progression. Hocking referred to *BioShock* as an example of this, and characterized it as a generally negative trait in videogames. Reflecting on *TSP*, its
ending, however, shows the consequences of resisting narrative and deliberate attempts to break the game: there is nothing left to play with. Through too rigorous defiance of the Narrator’s script, the exploratory element is annihilated, leaving the player in an empty space without anything to explore. This ‘nothingness’ could very well reflect on a too fanatical deconstructive attitude towards art: if one only deconstructs for the sake of destruction and disenchantment, only an empty wreck of the game will remain. It shows how constructed space can be easily ruined; especially if one interferes with the core of the game: its code.

A more pronounced awareness of the coded nature of the game occurs whenever one tries to enter cheat codes. This immediately triggers a transportation to the *Serious Room*: a bland, closed off room with only a table at the centre, where the Narrator sternly addresses the player. This isolated room is described as a ‘time-out’ area, in which the player has to remain for a certain amount of time to reflect on their bad behaviour and disrespect toward the game. Repeated ‘misbehaviour’ instantly sends the player back to the *Serious Room*, offering increasingly offended commentary from the Narrator (Figure 22). The unexplorable nature of this room, which offers no interaction or other interesting elements, illustrates how much the rest of the game relies on environmental exploration.\(^{142}\) By posing a lack of interaction as punishment, free exploration of the environment is presented as the more favourable condition, which is only allowed provided the player adheres to the rules of the magic circle. Thus the *Serious Room* illustrates how games educate their players through systems of reward and punishment: a process which might be compared to the inscription of certain values and codes of conduct. Behaviour which is tolerated by one game (for example the practice of modding in *Gary’s Mod*) is heavily restricted by another, forcing the player to adjust their behaviour if they want to experience the game. Simultaneously, though, *TSP* offers an ironic reflection on this educational function, since the player is actually *rewarded* for showing creativity and testing the game’s boundaries with the Narrator’s witty monologue.\(^{143}\) That way, the disobedience which is encouraged throughout the entire game is ‘rewarded through punishment’.

The close connection between in-game narrative and the game’s coded nature can be recognized when the player returns to the game after finishing the *Choice ending*. In this case, the formerly boring office-space looks ravaged and partly destroyed. As soon as the image starts in, the Narrator is heard saying the following:

> “Ah welcome back! You may have noticed that this room has begun to deteriorate as a result of narrative contradiction.”

*ludonarrative dissonance* is not only one of its main ‘gimmicks’, or rather themes of the game; it is also what makes *TSP* so compelling. While *ludonarrative dissonance* is generally criticized and dismissed, it stars in *TSP* prominently, showing how it can also be a delicate tool to manipulate players’ experiences and thought processes. For more on *ludonarrative dissonance*, see Kuznetsova (2017) p. 80-81.

\(^{142}\) If one attempts to open the only door to the room, they are met with a solid wall directly behind it, further emphasizing the closed-off nature of this room and the thoroughly controlled nature of the environment. Concurrently, this can be seen as a reference to *The Matrix*.

\(^{143}\) Esslin & Fuchs actually suggests that the only way to escape from the implied illusion of agency is to ‘cheat’ by undermining the game’s rules. (p.67-68) *The Serious Room* reflects on – and dismisses- this concept, since anytime the player tries to do something ‘funny’ he is berated for it and asked whether he wants to destroy the story, and why he would want to disrupt the game in such a way. Not only does this turn the concept of cheating into a moral one, but it also shows how, at least in *TSP*, cheating does not offer an escape, since it has been integrated into the game as well. Another approach is offered by David Myers in his book *Play Redux*, in which he suggests that ‘To play is to explore and destroy borders set up by rules’ (p. 75) This perspective includes the destructive approach towards the game as part of the playing process of interpretation. Engagement with game environment and the magic circle in general goes deeper due to the interactive, ergodic nature of the medium, which leads to a more pronounced presence and clearer fingerprints of the player within the text.
The narrative progression of the Narrator’s story turns out to be closely connected to the environment, since they all exist within the code of the game. The player’s interpretative transfer is shown to influence the structural integrity of the environment. The environment, then, is more than just a visual framework through which the narrative is presented; it closely connected to the narrative, and therefore also subject to translation whenever a player interacts with it. Since at this point of the game, the Narrator has become aware of the player’s humanity, he approaches them as though they do not belong in this digital environment, and even shows a sense of responsibility to keep the player safe. The casual tone he uses concerning the ‘narrative contradiction’ is somewhat confusing, since he reacted so emotionally to other inconsistencies of the game earlier. However, the tone can also be interpreted as dejected as the Narrator prioritizes the player’s safety over the structural integrity of the environment. This hints at the importance the player has within both narrative and environment. As has been concluded from the Broomcloset ending, the player is essential for infusing the environment with meaning, triggering the location based triggers and thus progressing the narrative.

5.4 - The Stanley Parable as Kafkaesque space

While traversing the environment of The Stanley Parable, the question of who should take responsibility for what happens throughout each walkthrough remains ambiguous. At some points, the Narrator takes full ownership and responsibility for what happens, while at other moments he calls out either Stanley or the player on their actions, transferring responsibility to them. The functions of environmental storytelling have already been discussed through Jenkins’ theory, and the player’s interpretative approach toward digital environments offer additional insight when it comes translation. The ludic, responsible position of the player regarding the game environment and translation will here be discussed in direct relation to an intertext, namely Franz Kafka’s In the Penal Colony. This might further justify why, with all Kafka’s work to choose from, this thesis does not focus on texts which actually take place in offices like Stanley’s (of which there are actually quite a few). Instead, the colonial environment from this specific novella offers additional meaning to the game’s environment, as well as sheds some light on the hierarchy within the game.

In the Penal Colony follows a traveler who visits a (French) penal colony, and who is invited to attend an execution and eventually make a verdict concerning its utility. From the beginning of the story, the traveler’s doubts concerning his responsibility and duty to interfere is palpable, as he wonders if the same rules and laws he is familiar with apply here. The environment, along with the
the moral stability of the colony, is presented as ambiguous: familiar on one hand, but simultaneously strange and uncomfortable. The searing heat, which especially bothers those who wear the uniforms of their colonizing nation, is constantly mentioned throughout the story to emphasize a continuous discomfort, especially for the invading, inscribing colonizers.\footnote{The uncomfortable experience of wearing a colonizer’s uniform in the environment of the colonized can be seen as implied discursive disapproval of colonialism, or even refer to the moral ambiguity which is constantly felt by those of the colonizing party. Like the heat, the wrongdoings of colonialism are seen as unavoidable like the weather: despite the discomfort it offers, the discourse which reigns here is adhered entirely.} Their position of power neither appears comfortable or entirely effective. This could be compared to the Narrator’s position within \textit{TSP}: while his authority is presented as unanimous in the more conventional paths, the presence of his literary nature does not entirely fit in the digital medium. The Narrator could be interpreted as ‘colonizing’ the game’s environment, in the sense that he tries to inscribe the (literary, authoritative) script onto another medium, which leaves traces of friction, inconsistency and attempted translation everywhere in the environment.\footnote{This could be traced back to the many of colonization in previously colonized nations, whose own history has been permanently influenced and changed by these external forces.}

During playthroughs of \textit{TSP}, the definitive nature of the player’s decisions are emphasized by the sound of a door slamming shut whenever a path is chosen. This emphasizes how diverging from convention and making individual decisions requires the player to take responsibility for their actions, especially since they can be damaging to the environment. At the end of Kafka’s novella, the traveler decides to leave the island (and with that, his responsibility) by literally jumping ship, without resolving any of the underlying conflict. Ultimately, responsibility is rejected in both narratives; in Stanley’s case due to the distance created by the concept of the magic circle and the game’s artificiality. In Kafka’s story, it might simply be defined as the uncanny; the recognizable which has been twisted \textit{just} enough to be frightening as well, mainly due to that same recognizability. Similarly, some of the Narrator’s suggestions might come a bit too close to reality for some players, confronting as his statements are concerning the mindless addiction to button-pressing the player is currently performing, without any real consequence or result.

Applying a colonial reading to a game like \textit{The Stanley Parable} offers extra headway considering how the Falkland Islands’ capital carries the name of our protagonist, ‘Stanley’. The Falkland Islands, with their diverse colonial history, consist of many small and a few larger islands,
which have been settled by multiple colonizing nations, though as a whole they still fall under British overseas territory. Even if there is no direct political message regarding postcolonialism within TSP, the intertextual connection with In the Penal Colony activates codes which allow postcolonial theory to be applied: it certainly illuminates the more violent side to the process of translation. This does not only occur in the shape of the dreaded Machine in In the Penal Colony, in which unreadable scripture created by the ‘old commandant’ is used to imprint certain commandments onto its convicts. Kafka’s story illustrates the authority of language; even language one cannot understand. Comparing this to how the Narrator inscribes the space and Stanley’s every thought through a source of language neither player nor Stanley has access to (and therefore cannot read), translation can be seen as an act of oppressive destruction.146 The Stanley Parable shows how the visual dimension of the game is repressed and dictated by language: it is not only shaped for the purpose of the narrative, but altered and destroyed in cases the space does not fit the narrative. The most concrete example where the environment is inscribed by the narrative appears in the form of the Adventure Line, in which narrative is made physical in the shape of a diegetic line which deconstructs the immersion the player might have had in the game-space. This physical manifestation of narrative does not seem to be able to fulfill its purpose, however, as the adventure line becomes more and more crooked as it continues on. Much like the officer breaks the machine in Kafka’s text, does the digital environment derail the linear narrative the Narrator aims for. While Neitzel characterized the videogame as a ‘hybrid medium of the computer’, this does not simply function as an excuse to bypass any binary characterization: it also imbues the medium with a certain crisis of identity. TSP, with its deconstructed self-reflective environment and narrative, offers insight into this integral conflict, which does not always manifest as a conflict in the experience of other, less self-reflective games. By presenting awareness of its own conditions of possibility, TSP shows both the strengths and vulnerabilities of its own medium, and invites any player to ponder not only its, but also their own existence in relation to it.

The process of interpretation takes a much more experimental and practical turn, then, when it comes to videogames such as TSP. Boundaries are encouraged to be pushed and even crossed, and multiple explanations are offered for the unconventional or unexpected situations which may occur during the crossing of narrative and environment, or narrative and play. Thus the effectiveness of play as an interpretative tool is demonstrated, as it shows a more physical and influential way of connecting with a digital, narrative-imbued environment. An interaction in which, as Aarseth already mentioned, the player has more to lose than a reader might have in the encounter with the text, but also much more to gain as a result of that.

146 Myers (2010) p. 75
Conclusion
Throughout this thesis, a multitude of theoretical perspectives and ways of thinking have been applied to, and in turn distilled from, the videogame *The Stanley Parable*. The game’s status as theoretical object has been discussed and tested as it offered insight through various perspectives. Steiner’s concept of *translation* in relation to interpretation has been at the forefront of this analysis, which has lead to new insights into TSP and also offered new approaches to theory regarding the act of interpretation and video games in a more general sense.

The Stanley Parable as self-reflective hybrid
Encouraging an intertextual approach, *The Stanley Parable* comes clean with its own ‘faults’: its artificiality, its predetermined nature, and its coded, language-based existence. Instead of camouflaging this, *TSP* confronts its players directly with it, encouraging them to engage with these notions. By deconstructing both narrative and ludic videogame-conventions, the game presses for players’ awareness of their own desires and poses the question what freedom is, whether one should desire it, and what the consequences and responsibilities this desire would entail. By *TSP*’s postmodern standards, a perfectly rounded narrative seems to no longer ‘work’; at least, it is no longer the end of the interpretation process. Bradley Fest’s article already exemplified this quality, which lead to his characterization of the term *metaproceduralism*, which is certainly recognizable in the game, though its predecessor metafiction also reared its head.

While *TSP* does not directly offer a concrete answer to the narratology-ludology debate, it does level the playing field. By deconstructing and critically reflecting on both elements separately, and illuminating the instances where their meeting causes friction, their interaction is made palpable and more importantly, the delicate balance they need to maintain in order to function within the hybrid medium of videogames is highlighted. Whereas Heron and Belford indicated how ludic elements can interrupt player immersion and identified *TSP*’s interactivity as solely a branching narrative reminiscent of choose-your-own-adventure-books, this thesis has shown that by levelling the ludic and narrative sides of the game, they compliment each other, which leads to a more immersive, thought-inducing experience. Simultaneously, a closer consideration of these ludic elements shows how they can both disturb and strengthen the experience and immersion of players, depending on their function and framing, and whether they work alongside, or against the game’s narrative structure. Thus, on a larger scale, *TSP* urges for reflection on contemporary consumption of media in more general terms. Not only on aesthetics and the relationship between multiple forces within narrative videogames, but also on gaming in general. It offers reflection on the ‘pushing of buttons’ and escapism into digital environments, but also more generally considers what people designate as ‘important’ in life.

Interpretation, translation and play
At the centre of this lays the process of interpretation, which is reflected upon throughout the game as the Narrator sometimes aids, though more often interrupts the player’s own attempt at interpretation. The connection George Steiner identifies between interpretation and translation puts more emphasis on the process of *interpretative transfer*, which is characterized as a two-way stream of information in which non-trivial interaction with the object is necessary to derive information from it. Playing a game such as *TSP*, in this sense, is reminiscent of the interpretative transfer which occurs during the process of translation, once this process is characterized as an exchange of input and output interacting with one another. Referring back to this thesis’ research question, the act of *play* can, in this sense, be aligned with *translation*, since both processes require similar investment and engagement from the observer, along with interpretative interaction to experience what the object offers, as well as instilling it with meaning themselves. Through the concept of Barthes’ *writerly text*, translation could be seen to represent the ludic element of *The Stanley Parable*. This complicated and often messy process, which carries the risk of failure throughout the game, is reminiscent of
Aarseth’s distinction between player and reader. By approaching interactivity and ludic elements in games as a concrete manifestation of the impact and engagement of (human) interpretative transfer, the term translation could qualify as a description of the playing process.

By approaching translation as a representation of ludic elements and interactivity, thus equating interpretation with play, the large impact this process has on the player’s experience is made much more tangible than a more conventional conception of interpretation would. The large impact of this process is made clear in TSP, but also grants insights in player’s experiences in more fledged-out narrative games. In the other direction, approaching the concept of interactivity and play of videogames as translation shows the nature of the relationship between player and videogame as very intricate and co-dependent, and more important, essentially aimed toward exploration and experimentation. In the case of videogames such as TSP, it is not only the player who translates; the game has to process the player’s input as well in order to react correctly. The aforementioned required human communication is produced through artificial, though man-made, means; creating some kind of proxy to humanity within its code. This demonstrates the artful way videogames and their codes are created in order to interact with players; to translate their actions into in-game consequences. It also signals the procedural nature of translation, of gaming, and of narrative, tying all three together throughout this concept. Experiencing play as translation emphasizes above all else how even media which are not primarily language-based still depend on it, since translation manifests as the prerequisite for players to internalize any external artistic experience, whether narrative predominates the medium or not.

However, that does not imply that all has been said in regard to translation as interpretative play. The approach of translation as a comparison to the playing process could be applied to other video games of other genres in order to see in what capacity this perspective would offer new insights or interpretation. While this thesis proposes a compatibility of translation and playing as two disguised processes of interpretation, this does not imply that the two processes are identical, or that this connection does not require further nuance. More experimentation as to how the approach as translation influences the playing process, and the significance of player actions, would be required in order to substantiate it. Especially comparing how translation as way of thinking influences the interpretation of videogame genres other than the FPW would be fruitful, and moreover, would more concretely demonstrate where the benefits and disadvantages of this approach lie. While dependency on the initial knowledge of the individual player is somewhat self-evident due to the intertextual nature of this approach, one of the dangers of comparing translation to ‘play’ lie in the implied lowered sincerity often associated with ‘play’. This clashes with the high level of responsibility Steiner associates with translation and interpretation, though it also allows for more experimentation. This dynamic would benefit from a closer consideration and further discussion in relation to other theoretical objects, possibly both in videogames and literature.

Moving beyond binaries

By posing The Stanley Parable as a theoretical object, a broader consideration of theory and interpretation was made possible, free from the constrictions of debates concerning the approaches of certain media or genres. When it comes to the ludology-narratology-debate, this approach enabled interpretation to bypass the initial binary this debate offered. This allowed for a more effortless intertextual analysis, in which possible connections and frames could be connected to TSP without reservations regarding this binary. By initially distancing itself from it, instead placing the object itself at the centre of attention, reflection upon how the debate could be recognized within the various layers of the game occurred on multiple instances. Thus the theoretical object does not simply try to evade categorization or binary classification, but through its own generation of theory it offers insight into the broader context: insights which might not have come to light if a ‘side’ had been picked initially.

When it comes to the topic of transcending the boundaries of media in pursuit of meaning,
the use of intertextuality in relation to Jenkins’ categorization of environmental storytelling has already alluded to a close possible connection between the various codes Barthes identifies when it comes to literary intertextual analysis. Throughout this thesis, cultural codes other than literary ones have contributed significantly to the analysis of TSP, which implies that among intertexts, no qualitative distinction exists in regard to the medium the intertext appears in. The analysis of an object which has already been characterized as a product of the hybrid medium of the computer further illustrates what Jenkins has already implied: that transmedia storytelling is developing larger narrative structures, in which the strengths of each medium is enabled to manifest and influence others. This does not only occur in the telling of these narratives, however: the same concept works during the process of interpretation, as this thesis has attempted to illustrate.

Along with illustrating how translation can function as a process of interpretation in relation to videogames, this thesis has touched upon various other perspectives and concepts which would lend themselves for further research. One of these concepts is closely related to Hubert Damisch’ work; especially his concept of /cloud/ which has not really been discussed or utilized in this thesis. Damisch’s theory of /cloud/ is based on the appearance of clouds in (mainly Baroque and Renaissance) paintings. Damisch sees them not as one specific motif with standard connotations, or as a representation of a realistic element, i.e. the clouds recognized from real-life weather. Instead, they function as ‘signs’, signifying something else depending on what they achieve in each painting.\(^{147}\) /Cloud/ as a phenomenon is regarded by Damisch as a theoretical object: while known and recognizable on the one hand, it can also raise various kinds of questions depending on the ‘system’ (painting, videogame, etc.) it appears in. Considering this concept further might lead to a possibly very useful notion of /game/, which would similarly evade concrete definition: something this thesis has already hinted at.

**The end is never the end is never the end is never the end is never the end is never the end is never**

When it comes to *The Stanley Parable* specifically, there are also multiple approaches which have not been discussed thoroughly here, but might prove fruitful as well. The postcolonial approach as was briefly considered in paragraph 5.4 would benefit from further consideration. Especially in relation to the more forceful manifestation of translation as a process, this perspective offers insight into the strict hierarchy which exists in videogame environments as well as in other narrative environments. Franz Kafka’s work proved to be an important intertext in this analysis: further consideration of his work in relation to TSP would also be interesting.

In relation to video gaming in general, the concept of performance and performativity has already been much discussed, especially when it comes to the construction of identity. By approaching the literary concept of performativity through the lens of translation, however, an interesting question arises: what happens when readers or players become aware of the responsibility which the association with translation adds to the process of interpretation and play? This awareness and more active attitude alters the relationship between players and the media they consume, possibly leading to developments in how players and readers identify even outside the diegetic sphere of any narrative, since their actions, even if this mainly consists of interpretation, have turned out to be more influential due to this comparison to the process of translation. Aarseth’s term *aporia* might be useful when considering how the consumer of media identifies their own role differently once they are made aware of their own actions of translation.

A possible further research avenue concerning *The Stanley Parable* would be to consider the concept of the *pseudo-translation*. TSP has been approached as a translation in this thesis, though it seems actually quite clear that the implied script does not function as an autonomous text at all; it

\(^{147}\) Damisch (2002) synopsis. Additionally it is very interesting considering the technological developments since Damisch’s work leading to the existence of the digital, online database that is also referred to as ‘the cloud’, retroactively affirming Damisch’s theory even more and adding even more meaning and depth to it. Just as a theoretical object should, it continues to generate theory and encourage reflection on its various incarnations.

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might not even exist in this capacity. It would add to the understanding of the game’s framing to consider why there is an implied script in the first place. Vanacker & Toremans’ article *Pseudotranslation and Metafictionality* (2016) would be a good starting point for further research into pseudo-translation in *TSP*, and might by extension offer more insight in how the process of playing a videogame might correlate to the process of translation.

Another approach which might prove fruitful is to consider *The Stanley Parable* through the concept of *ludonarrative dissonance*, which consists of inconsistencies between the message of the narrative and the implied message offered by the game’s mechanics. This would allow for an even closer analysis of the friction in *TSP*, and simultaneously might influence the generally negative connotations which accompany the term.\(^{148}\) *TSP*’s status as theoretical object would do well to be maintained during such an approach, since it allows for multidirectional critical consideration of both the object and the theory applied to it.

As for the perspective of translation regarding *The Stanley Parable*, despite the length of this endeavour, certainly not all has been said on the subject. It has proven, however, that this perspective, along with the approach of intertextuality, offers a multitude of experiences and interesting elements, some of which have started to develop beyond the game itself. For example, reading Kafka’s *The Trial* without imagining the Narrator’s voice describing the puzzling situation and internal struggles of Joseph K. has proven to be quite impossible. This further confirms what the achievement *Go Outside* already implied: once you’ve played *The Stanley Parable*, even quitting the program does not stop you from playing the game.

\(^{148}\) The video essay ‘Lego Star Wars II: What is Ludonarrative Fidelity?’ by Full Fat Videos exemplifies how in some cases, despite ludic elements deriving from narrative continuity, ‘one could argue that this is a more satisfying translation of the original work’ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E67QrH6XRxA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E67QrH6XRxA) 15:58. The distinction between ‘accurate’ and ‘satisfying’ translations imply a less authoritative position to (textual) narrative, prioritizing the entire ludo-narrative experience as a balanced whole. Ludo-narrative dissonance, through this perspective, would rather emphasize the player’s dilemma’s and work in the favour of overall experience, instead of creating ‘discrepancies’ which need to be fixed in order to perfect player immersion.
Sources

Bibliography


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Ludography

Half Life 2 (2004) Valve Corporation/Marc Laidlaw
Portal (2007) Valve Corporation/Kim Swift

Filmography

Appendices

Appendix A: The Stanley Parable flowchart

This flowchart illustrates all possible paths in The Stanley Parable, and simultaneously illustrates the discrepancies regarding the naming of some of these endings in academic spheres. For example, what Esslin and Fuchs refer to as the Real Person ending here manifests as the Choice ending. In order to maintain a somewhat clear sense as to which endings are referred to in this thesis, the titles used in this chart have been assumed throughout this thesis as well.

Other information in this flowchart concerns optional cheat-codes which could be entered, leading to the Serious Room, and the several achievements which the game might offer and how they can be ‘achieved’.

\(^{149}\) This image has been found on The Stanley Parable Wiki, on the Endings page: https://thestanleyparable.fandom.com/wiki/Endings Last accessed: 7-4-2019
Appendix B: Synopsis of all endings

Though most of the endings which are further analyzed in this thesis are described within the analytical chapters, below follows a brief description of all possible endings of *The Stanley Parable*, in order to offer a more concrete overview of the entire game. Since a linear order of endings cannot really be found, the endings have been alphabetized for easy navigation. An important question regarding this list is when something qualifies as an ‘ending’. Not all endings contain an automatic restart: some of them require a manual reset by the player: these paths qualify as ‘ending’ in both the flowchart above and the list below. However, the *Broomcloset ending* does not have a definite ending, since Stanley leaves the closet afterwards and continues as normal. This is still referred to as an ending by the Narrator himself, though, and thus it is mentioned here as well. The same goes for the *Whiteboard ending*, since after encountering it, the player is able to continue on through the game without restarting, though it is mentioned as an ending. The *Secret Disco*, however, is not dubbed as ending, and therefore not counted as one, though it is still mentioned in this list since it is still a part of the game. The *Out of Map* path is not mentioned separately in the flowchart, but is characterized as ‘ending’ in this thesis since there is no turning back once it is triggered. Whereas the flowchart mentions the Song and Voice Over ending separately, both are discussed here as part of the *Out of Map ending*. For similar reasons, the *Facepunch* mentioned in the flowchart does not qualify as ending since it simply changes the texturepack of the game, and thus mainly influences its visuals, and does not trigger a different player experience. This accumulates to the total of 19 actual endings as referred to in this thesis.\(^\text{150}\)

**Bomb ending**

This ending occurs after Stanley has followed all directions up to the very last one, where he decides to turn on the *Mind Control Facility*, instead of shutting it down. This results in a very displeased Narrator, who mocks Stanley for his assumption that he has any ‘real power’ within the game. The Narrator shows his control over the environment by setting up a two minute count-down, which he connects to a nuclear self-destruct mechanism within the facility. The larger control room, which contains a multitude of differently numbered and colored buttons, can be navigated and these buttons can be pressed if Stanley wants to attempt to stop the timer, though the Narrator only mocks Stanley again for his assumption that he could ever ‘win’. As the Narrator admits to erasing Stanley’s co-workers, he is amused by Stanley’s desperate attempts to stop the timer, which he extends just to see him run around for longer. As the timer ends, the game restarts and Stanley presumably dies as all monitors display the text ‘goodbye employee 427’.

**Broomcloset ending**

The *Broom closet ending* is triggered as Stanley leaves the meeting room and opens the door to the broom closet and enters it. The Narrator is puzzled as to why Stanley would want to enter it, and the longer Stanley remains in the closet, the Narrator grows more annoyed and frustrated, not understanding why Stanley remains there, first assuming he does it to spite the Narrator or to be original by ‘Getting the Broom closet ending’, which implies that the Narrator is aware of the game’s materiality and gaming culture. Eventually, he concludes that the player must have died behind their computer, and calls for another human who is aware of narrative computer gaming and narrative tropes to take their place. After this, he remains silent until Stanley leaves the Broom closet, and during the next playthrough, encountering the Broom closet will show the door roughly boarded up with planks, denying Stanley entry.

\(^{150}\) The *Secret Disco* is the only entry on this list which does not qualify as actual ‘ending’: it is only mentioned due to its appearance on the flowchart. The *Broomcloset and Whiteboard* ending would not qualify as such either, if it were not for the game’s literal characterization of these parts of the game as endings.
Choice ending
The Choice ending occurs when Stanley chooses the door on his right, moves through the Employee Lounge, enters the Shipping and Receiving area and does not jump off the cargo lift across. When he encounters a room in which a phone is ringing on a small pedestal, instead of answering it, he pulls the plug. This leads to the Narrator realizing the presence of a ‘real person’ behind Stanley’s behavior, who then shows a video about real-life decision making in order to make the player choose responsibly. After this, Stanley is returned to the original two-doored room, where if he takes the right door again, he is faced with a distorted environment due to what the Narrator calls ‘narrative contradiction’. Furious and disappointed in the player as the Meeting room is shown to be completely destroyed, the Narrator restarts the game, though the environment is not reset. The Narrator attempts to point Stanley toward his story responsibly. Obeying and taking the left door will lead to conflict in the Boss’s office, since the number pad is replaced with a voice-receiver Stanley cannot interact with due to the game’s mechanics, leading to a final outburst from the Narrator. Taking the right door again will restart the game instantly, transporting the player’s viewpoint above the ceiling of the room with two doors, where the Narrator can be heard pleading an unresponsive Stanley to ‘make any choice’ while the credits roll.

Confusion ending
The Confusion ending is reached by initially picking the door on the right, then follow the corrected path the Narrator indicates through the Employee Lounge. After this, Stanley takes the door to his left and then enters the elevator, which moves down. Leaving the elevator, the Narrator hesitates which of the two doors in this basement is the right one, first opening the left, then shutting it again just before Stanley reaches it and indicating the right door, closing that one as well as he rustles through his script, ultimately opening a garage door. Following through, Stanley ends up on a small balcony above the platform in the Mind Control Facility, where the Life ending’s plot twist is revealed prematurely. Annoyed that the story has been spoiled, the Narrator decides to restart the game.

Coming to the two-doored room, four additional doors have appeared in this room. Expressing his surprise, the Narrator decides to play along and open all five doors for Stanley to explore. No matter which door Stanley picks, after a long labyrinthine experience each door leads back to the same room. Annoyed, the Narrator restarts the game.

Progressing again toward the room which usually holds the first choice of the game, this room is now a dead end, with no doors at all. Puzzled, the Narrator directs Stanley to another, longer route, which also proves to be a dead end. Going back the way he came leads Stanley into an unknown wooden building, with the entrance to this environment disappearing once he moves through it. Exasperated, the Narrator seems to give up as he does not recognize the new environment at all, proclaiming that Stanley has won the game as cheering children can be heard in the background. However, bothered by this ‘easy win’ which took not enough effort in his eyes, and also ‘weirded out’ by the unfamiliar environment, he decides to restart the game.

As Stanley leaves his office again, he is presented with the yellow Stanley Parable Adventure Line™, which is supposed to prevent Stanley from getting ‘lost’. As Stanley follows the line, the Narrator philosophizes about the destination journey’s, and if a destination is required for a story to exist. As his thoughts become more complicated, the Line starts to become less stable and creates strange patterns across the floor and walls of the office. To compensate for his complicated thoughts, the Narrator plays loud, ‘adventurous’ music, only to disrupt the music to call attention to a fern in the office, which he claims will be important later on, though it is never actually revisited. The Line then leads Stanley back through the office and toward the same balcony overlooking the Mind Control Facility, after which the Narrator restarts the game again.

After the restart, the Narrator decides to discard the Adventure Line and create a new story together with Stanley. The Narrator opens a random office door and enthusiastically anticipates adventure, which is interrupted soon after by the Line, which seems to have crashed through the ceiling. The Narrator simply suggests to ignore the line altogether. The long winding hallway eventually leads to a circular room with two doors in it: a choice the Narrator reacts enthusiastically.
to, claiming the story is now in their control. As the Narrator picks a door and Stanley moves through it, turning around proves that both doors would’ve lead to this same room. On the far wall, a schedule is demonstrated titled the *Confusion ending*, which lists a total of eight restarts, the first four of which correspond with what has occurred previously. The Narrator is very upset at the discovery of the schedule, and refuses to acknowledge his lack of control and follow the schedule, which leads to a strange sound and the timer of the schedule stopping. Uncertain, the Narrator wonders what will happen next now that the structure has been broken, though just before he can suggest anything new, the game violently cuts to black and restarts. This is the definitive end of the *Confusion ending*.

**Death ending**

After taking the door to his right, Stanley continues toward the cargo lift, and jumps off the platform, killing himself. As he falls, the Narrator reflects as follows:

‘Stanley was so bad at following directions it’s incredible he wasn’t fired years ago. But in his eagerness to prove that he was in control of the story and no one gets to tell him what to do, Stanley leapt from the platform and plunged to his death.

Good job Stanley, everyone thinks you are very powerful.’

**Elevator ending**

After at least three walkthroughs of *The Stanley Parable’s Life ending*, his Boss’s office contains a painting of a panda with a gun to its head, along with an elevator. Pressing the button will open the door to the elevator. The elevator does not really move anywhere, despite the soft mechanical humming sound. Along with this, the Narrator can be heard humming, coughing and making other slight noises as if he were waiting in the elevator as well. Pressing the button within the elevator will open the elevator and allow Stanley to get out and proceed. However, ‘spamming’ the buttons within the elevator will lead to it continuing to ‘move’, never opening its doors again and requiring a manual restart to escape.

**Escape pod ending**

Following the Narrator’s instructions by choosing the left door and continuing on to the Boss’s office, Stanley enters the door slowly and then immediately moves backwards out of the room again. This disables the Narrator’s voice. Backtracking through the environment, door 428 will now be accessible, leading to several sets of stairs which lead to floor 760, where the only door leads to a long room in which at the end, an escape pod can be seen. However, before Stanley reaches the pod, the game restarts, as a poster can be seen on this floor which presses for the Narrator and player both to be there for the escape pod to work. This contradicts the mechanics of the game again, since the Narrator’s voice needs to be disabled in order to trigger this ending, leading to the conclusion that no escape is possible after all.

**Game ending**

Stanley takes the door to his right, continues toward the cargo room, where he jumps onto the catwalk, which mortifies the Narrator. After this, he takes the blue door three consecutive times, which finally leads to a room which still shows source textures and clearly has not been entirely finished yet. Angered, the Narrator asks Stanley what he wishes in a game, since he clearly is not happy with what the Narrator offers. The Narrator changes the game slightly a few times, requesting feedback from Stanley afterwards. These changes include extra doors and the addition of a leaderboard containing fake statistics. After this, the Narrator leads Stanley into a room where a cardboard cutout of a baby constantly moves toward a large fire, claiming that it is art. Stanley is to press the large button in front of him in order to save the baby, though he must do so continuously in order to succeed. The Narrator asks Stanley to play this for four hours, taking notes in the meantime. If he succeeds in doing this, the Narrator adds in a puppy which is sinking into a vat of piranha,
leaving Stanley to alternate between two buttons for the next two hours. If he completes this as well, the ‘essence of divine art’ presents itself.

If the player fails to do this, the Narrator transports Stanley to Minecraft and decides to go enjoy himself, disregarding Stanley and building a small hut out of dirt. As he sets himself a more challenging quest, he soon realizes the open-endedness of this action, and starts up another game instead.

This next game shows the first level of Portal, which the Narrator applauds immediately due to its linear structure and Stanley’s inability to escape. However, the Narrator soon grows bored of watching Stanley puzzle his way through and decides that he does not need Stanley’s appreciation in order to make games, or even art. As Stanley is left in Portal, he then continues on to a small level within Half Life 2, from which he is able to enter the environment of the original mod of The Stanley Parable. Meanwhile, the Narrator can be heard pondering what ever became of Stanley, and if he ever found what he was looking for. After this, the game restarts.

Heaven
Instead of following the Narrator’s instructions, Stanley navigates the office spaces in order to activate the only five active computer screens scattered throughout the building, resetting the game manually after each computer has been activated. Having activated all five, Stanley is transported into a white environment where he is presented with the sounds of monotonous voices repeatedly singing what sounds like ‘push the buttons’, while a large amount of multicoloured buttons float in circles around him. These buttons can be pressed infinitely and freely, without any repercussions in the environment or story. As this new environment first appears to the player, the words ‘Welcome, Stanley, to Heaven’ appear on the screen.

Insane ending
Initially taking the left door and following the Narrator’s instructions, Stanley then decides to descend the stairs after the Meeting Room. This leads him into a loop of the same four rooms and connecting corridors as Stanley becomes aware of his peculiar situation and of the presence of the Narrator, which first leads to him deciding that he is dreaming. As he imagines himself flying through space as he tests this theory, the screen adheres to this illusion, though after deciding to wake up, Stanley remains within the looped office. Realizing that he is not dreaming, Stanley begins to scream, pleading for proof of his own reality as the Narrator describes how he goes insane and the screen takes on a red hue until it cuts to black. The Narrator then starts telling ‘The story of a woman named Mariëlla’, who finds a deceased, ‘crazy-looking’ man in the middle of the street, briefly ponders his and her own existence, and then leaves him where she found him. During this narration, a non-moving picture of a man reminiscent of Stanley based on his brief image during the opening cutscene of the game is laying flat on his stomach on the pavement, with a woman standing over him. As Mariëlla decides she has more important things to do with her life than wonder about Stanley, the game restarts.

Life ending
In the Life ending, Stanley follows all instructions given by the Narrator in pursuit of finding his missing co-workers, moving through his boss’s office, not choosing the escape route and continuing into the Mind Control Facility, where he finds out he and his colleagues have been mind-controlled. Heroically, Stanley presses the button to turn off the machine, and follows the platform to where a large door slowly opens to an idyllic natural landscape, which he enters as the Narrator describes his careless joy and blissful happiness, dismissing all the mysteries which still laid unsolved. After this epilogue, the game reloads and Stanley is in his office again, wondering where his co-workers might be: maybe he had simply missed a memo.
**Museum ending**

Taking the door to his left and following the instructions of the Narrator eventually lead Stanley to the *Mind Control Facility*. Instead of continuing on, he can take a left, where the word ‘escape’ is spray-painted onto a wall. Following this hallway leads to the Narrator warning Stanley that this path will lead to his death in an attempt to steer him back to his own story. Reaching the end of the hallway causes Stanley to fall into a large crushing machine as the Narrator tells Stanley ‘goodbye’. However, just before Stanley’s actual death, a female Narrator takes over the story, offering Stanley entry into a bright, museum-esque space. As she ponders how Stanley might have been dead from the moment the game started, Stanley can observe all elements and endings of the entire game displayed as museum exhibits, complete with signs written by the developers and even some elements which were not added into the finished game. A large banner which says ‘*The Stanley Parable*’ can be found in the back of the museum, along with a lever which can be switched between ‘off’ and ‘on’. As the female Narrator reflects on the way the Narrator and Stanley actually depend on one another, she calls to the player to quit the game in order to save Stanley and win the game, since in-game winning is impossible. If this plea is not obeyed, her speech is abruptly and violently interrupted as the screen cuts to black, Stanley dies in the crushing machine and the game restarts.

**Out of Map ending**

The *Out of Map ending* can be reached by climbing on top of one of the desks in the office and climbing out of the window. This is only possible at this one select place, and exiting through the window leads Stanley into an entirely blank and empty space, with only two windows floating above. As the Narrator describes how ‘Stanley thought that he had broken the game until he heard this narration’, he reflects on ‘videogame structure and the examination of structural narrative tropes’ and how the game reflects on this. He then asks Stanley if he is ‘sick of this gag yet’, implying that Stanley could press escape and restart the game at any time. If Stanley does not answer, or answer ‘Yes’, a guitar starts playing and the Narrator recites a limerick about Stanley, after which the guitar music continues indefinitely. Choosing ‘No’ results in the Narrator wondering if the player really meant this, or just wanted to hear more narration. He builds up the other choice (‘yes’), thus tempting and simultaneously mocking the player for either remaining there and listening to the narration, or restarting in favour of another ending.

**Reluctant ending**

Instead of leaving his office to follow the Narrator’s instructions and look for his co-workers, Stanley closes the door and simply remains there, implicitly until he dies. This ending is referred to elsewhere on the Wiki as the *Coward ending* or *Cold Feet ending*.

**Secret Disco**

Following the Narrator’s instructions all the way into the *Monitor room* of the *Mind Control Facility*, Stanley presses all buttons he can find, but abstains from entering the elevator offered to him. After a while, the doors reopen. By then pushing the button closest to the entrance all monitors are turned into disco lights as difficult to read texts float throughout the room and the song ‘Who likes to party’ by Kevin McLeod can be heard.

**Serious Room**

Whenever the player attempts to enter cheat code `sv_cheats 1` at any point in the game, the player, along with Stanley, is transported to a room with only a ‘very serious’ table in it, as the Narrator tells Stanley off for disrespecting the game. He proclaims this *Serious Room* to be akin to a ‘time-out zone’, where Stanley must reflect on his misbehaviour: the room only has one door, which when opened turns out to have a brick wall behind it. Attempting to enable cheats again will return Stanley to the *Serious Room*, as the Narrator wonders if his stern admonishing was not stern enough and if his table is serious enough. Doing it again after this will have the Narrator checking some notes and
tables, after which attempting to cheat will still trigger the *Serious Room*, though no new monologue is provided. It requires a manual restart of the game to escape from the *Serious Room*.

*Space ending*
Is also referred to as the ‘zending’ or suicide ending. The Narrator, after fruitlessly trying to pull Stanley along for quite some time, steers him toward a ‘starry dome’, which offers ethereal light and music, and the Narrator claims this could make him happy. However, another door opens to Stanley, and as he walks through it, he encounters a staircase which leads four storeys up, after which a ledge offers the opportunity to jump off. If Stanley jumps off this platform four times, ignoring the pleading, sad protests of the Narrator, who contemplates how much Stanley must hate him to actually want to kill himself ‘to keep [him] from being happy’, he manages to commit suicide and the game restarts, as the Narrator timidly wonders: “Is it over? It’s going to restart, isn’t it?” Interestingly, this is the only time in the game where the Narrator is saddened by Stanley’s death.

*Whiteboard ending*
After some random restarts of the game, the office is presented with a slightly blue filter. During this instance, Stanley is able to open room 426, in which a small whiteboard hangs on the far wall, which says ‘Welcome to the.. Whiteboard Ending!’. In a corner of the screen, is the non-diegetic code ‘Console>bark’ can be seen, which leads to a barking sound whenever the player uses the ‘Use’ key (usually mouse and ‘E’ button on the keyboard) for the rest of the playthrough.

*Work ending*
Also known as the ‘Wife ending’, this ending is triggered once Stanley picks up the phone he encounters in the warehouse. He is immediately transported to what seems to be his and his wife’s apartment. A female voice is heard, though the Narrator soon reveals that Stanley does not actually have a wife, as he is presented with a faceless mannequin. Once Stanley is in his apartment, the Narrator claims that Stanley has created the entire parable himself as an act of escapism, experiencing this heavily artificial environment and -agency as ultimate freedom. Throughout the Narrator’s monologue, prompts appear on screen, which assimilate the pushing of buttons with social actions such as ‘press … to hang out with the boys’ and ‘press ‘O’ to tell your wife you love her’. As Stanley completes these prompts, the environment of his office slowly takes over that of his apartment, and once this transformation is complete, white letters on the screen continue to state ‘PLEASE DIE’ until the Narrator’s monologue finishes and the game restarts.