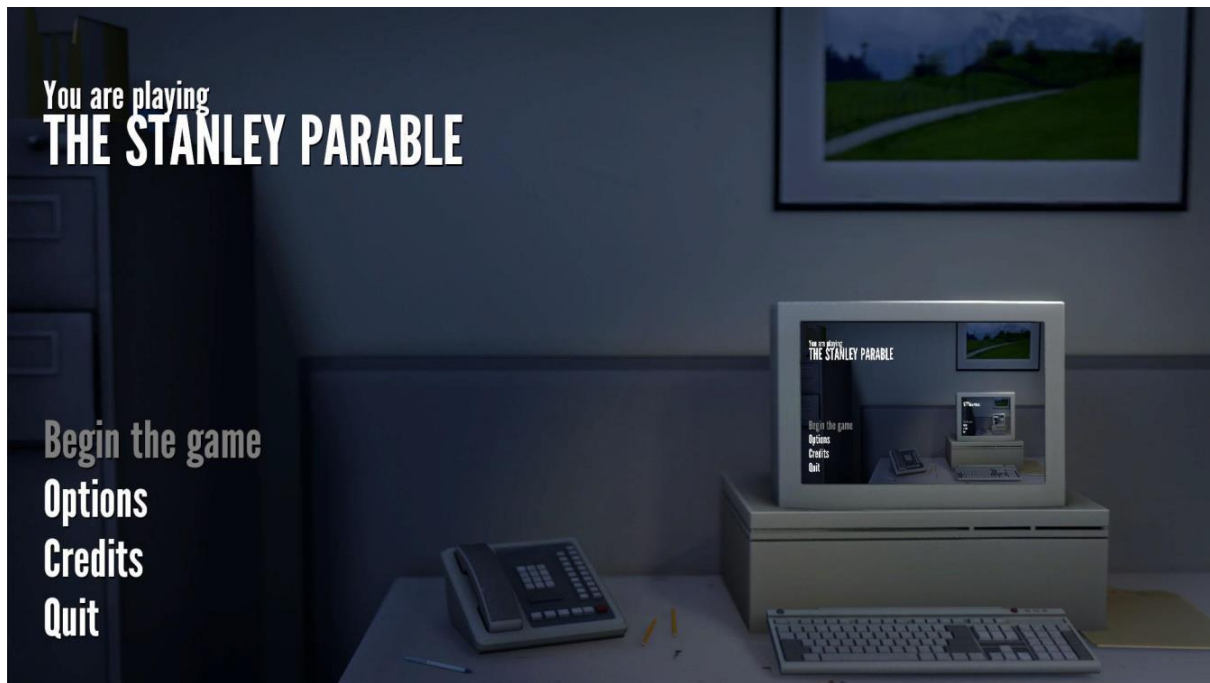


# Postmodern Play-An analysis of emergent self-reflexivity and metafiction in videogames

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## Abstract

This dissertation will put forward the argument that metafiction, and the development of postmodernist styles of fiction are crucial to an artistic medium's development utilising Waugh (1984) and Hutcheon's (2007) theories of postmodernist fiction. Furthermore, it will argue that the development of metafiction is a common factor in all artistic mediums and represents the tipping point between being regarded by society and the cultural elite as a legitimate form of self-expression, not simply a curiosity. My dissertation will focus on this theory applied to the medium of videogames, showcasing how the trajectory of their perception in popular culture mimics that of film and the written word. It will also feature a close-reading of three highly-influential videogames, *Bioshock* (2007), *The Stanley Parable* (2013) and *Undertale* (2015). Each of these videogames have had a profound impact on the works that proceeded it, and have been vital in transforming videogames into a metafictional medium, and thusly one in the process of garnering artistic respect. It shall also look in close detail at these three games to outline how and why they are metafictional and what effect this has had upon the medium as a whole and how both players and designers view videogames.

In order to do this, I will draw upon several notable game design figures as well as designers such as Brown (2016), Hideo Kojima (2006) and Johnathan Blow (2007) for commentary on the growth of the medium over the last decade and thoughts as to what changes will occur to videogames in the future as they continue to adapt and grow.

## **Introduction**

The last three decades have seen the meteoric rise of videogames from a small-scale hobby to a multi-billion dollar industry that captivates audiences of millions every day, yet mainstream artistic respect eludes them. Much like videogames, other artistic mediums: the novel, cinema, theatre, poetry and others were at one time, during their inception, not accepted by the artistic community at large. Originally, they were dismissed as a curiosity or even a dangerous perversion yet gradually became accepted by the artistic elite and society in general. The question remains, what caused these mediums to move from cultural outsiders to pillars of artistic study with entire schools of study dedicated to them?

First of all, we must define what, exactly, is meant by ‘metafiction’. Hutcheon (1980) describes it simply, as “fiction about fiction- that is, fiction that contains within itself a commentary on its own narrative or linguistic identity” a metafictional work is inherently self-reflexive, analysing the fundamental components that make up its own form. Self-reflexivity in texts can take many forms, parody, stories about writing, etc. but it ultimately coalesces to a text that wilfully “flaunts its own condition of artifice” Alter (1975). Metafiction also takes on a variety of uses, to critique an established cultural norm, to reflexively analyse the previous works of an author or the works of another, or simply pointing out the absurdities of a medium that have been taken for granted for comedic effect. All of these factors emerge in all mediums, from the novel to film, upon which I will be focusing, just as they reach public acceptance, and this is no coincidence.

I would argue that the emergence of self-reflexivity and metafictional narratives signify the crucial shift at which point a growing artistic medium begins to become respected.

Furthermore, I shall attempt to prove that videogames are in the middle of this very same

landmark shift, and may very well have already begun to pass it. Not only that, I believe that videogames hold a unique position as an inherently postmodernist medium, with a greater capacity than all other genres that preceded them to engage self reflexively with their own content.

I believe that the significance of metafiction is twofold, firstly, that it escapes the curse of adaptation stories from other mediums. Postmodernist narrative theory tells us that there are no new stories, simply old stories seen in the real world, or more commonly from texts already produced, readapted. The earliest videogames were adaptations of influential narratives from other mediums, most notably film, *Donkey Kong* (1981) is to *King Kong* (1933) what *Space Invaders* (1978) is to sci-fi classics such as *War of the Worlds* (1898). This, of course, leads to comparisons between the new work and the original, with critics dismissing it as pastiche, and supporters praising it for a new take on a recognised story. Crucially, however, both of these comparisons are defined around the film, not the videogame adaptation, thus relegating videogames, as well as all other nascent artistic mediums to parody and imitation of more established mediums.

Just as the earliest written works of written fiction, such as the Christian Old Testament, a canonised compilation of previously auditory folk stories and legends, (Blenkinsopp, 1998) emerged in the historical consciousness long before they became accepted, so do all new artistic mediums begin life as parasites, adapting the works of more entrenched mediums.

Secondly, metafiction is representative of a complete understanding of a medium's history, structure and context within the greater artistic sphere. Waugh (1984) states that metafiction is a fiction that "self-consciously reflects upon its own structure as language". In order for a

truly great artistic work to be created, the artist must understand the tools they are working with, and only when a large enough area of study is available can one analyse the medium and begin to deconstruct the tropes and patterns that make it up.

Take the example of the novel as a medium, transcribed folk stories such as those contained within the bible or *The Tale of Gilgamesh*, could be argued to be the novel in its infancy. If not them, then perhaps *The Tale of Genji*, written in the early 11th century can be considered the first novel, described as “written with an almost miraculous naturalness, and what interests us is not the exoticism—the horrible word—but rather the human passions of the novel. Such interest is just: Murasaki's work is what one would quite precisely call a psychological novel” by Borges (1939). *The Tale of Genji*, whilst arguably fitting the classifications for a novel, is not considered to have had a particular effect on Japanese culture. I would argue that because of the lack of extant novels or a culture of novelisation in Japan, there was little desire to expand upon *The Tale of Genji* through merging of texts, spiritual successors and responses to the ideas contained within it, relegating it to the status of a novelty, if a historically significant and popular one.

Contrast this with one of the first written works in the western hemisphere *The Canterbury Tales*. Unlike *The Tale of Genji*, *The Canterbury Tales* is explicitly metafictional, using the fabliaux form to parody not just conventional high-society morals, but also the form as a whole. At the end of the tales, Chaucer breaks the tale within a tale, itself another metafictional element, to repent for creating *The Canterbury Tales* in the first place: “translaciouns and enditings of worldly values”. Whilst the effects the Canterbury tales created in the world of literature are wide-reaching, its existence is indicative of a far wider change, the beginning of metafiction within books. Howard (1976) challenges the notion that

Chaucer even thought of his work as a book, stating that the lines “here taketh the makere of the book his leave... here is ended the book of the tales of Canterbury.” were added in later editions by scribes, illustrating that not even Chaucer thought to compare his work to the books of the time, almost always theological and academic treatises.

Without a wealth of written stories, both poetic and religious, for the Canterbury tales to reference and parody, it loses a large portion of its appeal amongst those already familiar with these works, and thusly would have never inspired similar stories. Had *The Canterbury Tales* not been written, another metafictional text would have likely been written to fill this space, what it represents is the written medium reaching a critical mass, and starting its transition into mass appeal. Whilst *The Canterbury Tales* was not itself a novel, it began this shift and set the stage for the emergence of the novel in the form of *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe*, both metaphysical works and additional examples of this shift taking place.

A similar shift can be spotted in cinema. Towards the start of cinema's life, it was subject to much of the same rejection and misconception that videogames face today. In the late 1910's and early 1920's during the rise of the Nickelodeon cinemas critics of cinema were quoted as saying the Nickelodeons represented a “fundamental shift in values of American civilization” and lead to creating a “intense ocular and cerebral weariness, a sort of dazed ‘good-for-nothing’ feeling, lack of energy or appetite, etc” (Czitrom, 1982). Not only that, Nickelodeons and cinema in general were portrayed as something exclusively for the lower, less educated classes, despite some 31% of new Yorkers attending the theatre every week.

This sentiment was not limited to film, even long-established mediums such as the written word have had their historical opponents. Plato said of writing in roughly 370BCE “For this

invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them.” Not only that, the invention of the printing press, the piece of technology that popularised the novel and secured the dominance of the written word as the popular mode of storytelling over oral for centuries, incited many members of the religious and academic elite to speak out against it. Notable amongst them was Abbot Trithemius who said “For among all the manual exercises, none is so seemly to monks as devotion to the writing of sacred texts.” and “He who ceases from zeal for writing because of printing is no true lover of the Scriptures.” These worries and complaints of laziness or impact to health, unfounded though they may be (Desai, Krishnan-Sarin- 2010), can be seen levelled at videogames even today. It can be observed that there is backlash when any new mode of communication and artistic expression begins to rise to prominence. The trend of first rejecting and fearing a medium until it can develop and gain artistic respect not isolated to videogames and cinema, and it only abates when that medium can develop and stand on its own as an artistic medium. The Entertainment Software Association (2016) shows a significant rise in game playing adults as well as a rise of parents who believe that videogames “are a positive influence” on their child’s life year-on-year since the annual study was founded in 2006.

The rumours that plagued film only started to be dispelled during the golden age of Old Hollywood in the 1920’s to 40’s. During this time the most successful and influential films were adaptations of stories from existing mediums. Most notably, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Snow White*, two of the most successful films of the age, and both are adaptations of existing stories from other mediums. Sarris (1973) observes that, despite being held around the world as the “single most beloved entertainment ever produced”, *Gone with the Wind’s* relentless



commitment to accurately replicating its progenitor fails to give it any real merit beyond the strength of the source material.

The fact that these two films were so tethered to their sources limited their potential to advance cinema artistically, but did serve to popularise it and cement it in the public consciousness, setting the stage for the metafictional works that were to follow them. Of the films of “Old Hollywood” only *Citizen Kane* stands out as a true work of metafiction, consciously utilising authorial metafiction in the form of the self-conscious narrator, a technique which it popularised and can be seen in many later metafictional works such as *Fight Club*, and *Sunset Boulevard*. After Hollywood's fall and subsequent resurgence in the 60's-80's, it was accompanied by a surge in metafictional cinema. With many of the directors of New Hollywood having been brought up on the films of twenty to thirty years prior, many of their works referenced the very texts that inspired them to be directors and screenwriters and their own works play against the tropes started by the works of Old Hollywood, creating an intertextual dialogue with audiences, and thus, metafiction.

As previously stated, metafiction only arises when those producing texts in a medium understand the medium itself enough to begin self-reflexively analysing it and incorporating elements of meta-textuality, these elements can be seen emerging in the works of new Hollywood. Two examples of this are *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Blazing Saddles*, two very disparate films that use metafiction and intertextuality to great success, changing the face of their respective genres. *Blazing saddles*, a response to the western genre as a whole, by that point a dying genre, capped the end of the western with a ironic genre-spoof that subverts and makes pastiche all of the most recognisable tropes of the genre. For example, having a black sheriff in an all-white town as the main character highlights the rampant racism present in

many classic westerns. Not only that, *Blazing saddles* contains many deliberate anachronisms, such as the presence of Nazi soldiers as minor villains and self-aware meta humour, wherein the characters destroy the fourth wall. The use of these devices allowed *Blazing Saddles* to capitalise off the films that had come before it, and owing to its huge popularity, paved the way for other western revival films, such as the critically acclaimed *Django Unchained* which also comments on racism in the setting with a black protagonist.

Kubrick's *2001* is not intertextual in of itself, beyond obvious influences and improvements upon the works of old Hollywood such as *Forbidden planet* or *Destination Moon*, and being an adaptation of a book. It is, however, intertextual within Kubrick's own canon. For example, the record bar shot in *A Clockwork Orange* ends with a copy of the *2001* soundtrack in view and In *Full Metal Jacket*, the composition of the shots for Joker's discovery of the bodies in the pit recollects the scene in *2001* in which Dr. Floyd discovers the Tycho Monolith.

These details may seem small and insignificant compared to the more sweeping changes to the form in *Blazing Saddles* but they are indicative of Kubrick's intricate understanding of the cinematic medium. These small similarities and parallels tell the observant viewer that Kubrick's works deal with similar themes throughout, and in small ways, each work is connected. Prior to the emergence of both postmodernist sensibilities and the rise of the auteur director these connections, whilst they would have likely been spotted, would never have been examined so as to create the idea of Kubrick's single metafilm.

Evidently, only when there were enough examples of the film medium for artists to begin analysing film as a standalone entity rather than an adaptation of an existing medium does metafiction emerge.

With the available evidence, the same pattern can be seen unfolding in videogames over the last few decades. The medium began mimicking the established forms of film and books until it faced a massive crash in 1983. This crash was in fact caused in a large part by the glut of poor-quality film adaptation games flooding the market, most notably the videogame adaptation of *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* for the Atari 2600, a lesson that Harnetz (1983) described as something that “has not been lost on the industry”. Only in 1986 did the industry begin to recover with Nintendo’s Nintendo Entertainment system and by the year 2000, those who had grown up playing the games of the 70’s and 80’s were now heading their own development studios, analogous to New Hollywood.

Only under these new developers could metafictional gaming thrive as they reference the traditions that inspired them as well as more contemporary ones, exhibiting a complete understanding of the medium.

## **Rapture, Rand and the illusion of choice in *Bioshock***

Arguably one of the first instances of commercially-successful metafiction in videogames is 2007's *Bioshock*, published by 2K games and written by Ken Levine. From the outset, *Bioshock* bucks the trend of the first person shooter genre by having explicitly political themes, utilising clear metatextual references in nearly all Andrew Ryan's philosophies. Andrew Ryan is a clear reference to Ayn Rand, both are ultra-capitalist libertarians and are of russian-american descent. Andrew Ryan is also related to Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* in other respects, such as his repeated use of the word "parasites" to describe those who do not conform to his capitalist utopia, in the same way that Rand uses "looters" to describe opponents of her ideology.

*Bioshock* walks the line between simply paying lip service to Rand's work and outright copying it, firstly by expanding on *Atlas Shrugged*'s seeming dichotomy of heroic Nietzschean titans and snivelling parasites under them through the audio diaries of characters such as Bill McDonagh "I never killed a man, let alone a mate. But this is what things come to. I don't know if killing Mr. Ryan will stop the war, but I know it won't stop while that man breathes. I love Mr. Ryan. But I love Rapture more. If I have to kill one to save the other... so be it.", Secondly the game distances itself by allowing the player to experience the fall of Rapture through exploring the environments and listening to the audio diaries that detail the events that caused it to transition from capitalist haven to anarchist dystopia. It is in this sophisticated intertextuality that *Bioshock* is unique, it adds to the overall cultural discourse rather than simply parroting it, engaging with videogames as a medium to do it. By leveraging the inherent interactivity of videogames, *Bioshock* allows players to explore

Rapture at their own pace, immersing them into the setting gradually rather than presenting them with all of the information at once.

By far the most famous of *Bioshock's* metafictional elements engages with the notion of player choice and interactivity directly, and is also a reference to Ayn Rand, namely the character of Atlas, or as he is later revealed to be, the nemesis of Andrew Ryan, Frank Fontaine.

Atlas represents *Bioshock's* most substantial commentary on the nature of games, and their unique interactive nature. From a gameplay perspective, Atlas speaks over a radio to the player and serves the role of a tutorial character, presenting a sympathetic, friendly voice in the oppressive insanity of Rapture, becoming your only reliable source of information in the game: "I don't know how you survived that plane crash, but I've never been one to question Providence. I'm Atlas, and I aim to keep you alive. Now keep on moving... we're gonna have to get you to higher ground. Take a deep breath and step out of the Bathysphere. I won't leave you twisting in the wind." Atlas also introduces the player to the world and its concepts, such as the superpower-imbuing plasmids "Plasmids changed everything. They destroyed our bodies, our minds. We couldn't handle it. Best friends butchering one another, babies strangled in cribs. The whole city went to hell."

In many games of the era that draw inspiration from Navi from *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, the game that popularised this particular trope, the tutorial character converses directly with the player via the player character, condensing the details of the world down to easily-understandable objectives "Now, would you kindly head to Ryan's office and *kill* the son of a bitch? It's time to finish this." This often translates into a large

arrow in the top portion of the screen that always points the player in the direction of Atlas' next objective for them. Normally this serves as a simple reminder for players, but it serves a metafictional purpose in *Bioshock*.

An observant player of *Bioshock* will notice that Atlas has a catchphrase of sorts, the phrase "would you kindly" precedes almost all of his requests of you, and as the player finds out towards the end of the game, this is no coincidence. Atlas, or Fontaine, controls Jack, the protagonist subconsciously using the trigger phrase "would you kindly" as evidenced by the player's brutal killing of Andrew Ryan. In many games, this would simply be taken as a given, but this unique story element is woven into not only *Bioshock's* story but its mechanics too. The objective reminders and directional arrow are such staples in the first person shooter genre that players familiar with them will unquestioningly follow the arrow from objective to objective, ticking off the missions as they are given, mimicking the effects of Atlas' subliminal mental grip over Jack.

By playing against the established cornerstones of the genre the eventual reveal of Atlas' true nature is made that much more shocking as the player realises that all they had taken for granted was actually being used against them as control is wrested away from the player and they much watch themselves kill Andrew Ryan, only to be taunted later by Atlas- now Fontaine. During this scene, Ryan repeats to the player a catchphrase of his own, whilst abusing the "would you kindly" trigger phrase to get the player to kill him and prove his point: "A man chooses, A slave obeys". This phrase is often spouted by his propaganda in the ruins of Rapture, yet it has a double meaning. Ryan's dogma is both a rallying cry to the individualist dream that Rapture represents, but also a subliminal warning to the player, their actions are not their own, the player is a slave to the game, just as Jack is a slave to Atlas.

This theme of choice, or lack thereof, is expanded upon with *Bioshock's* “little sister” characters. Genetically engineered young girls designed to harvest the plasmid raw material, ADAM, from the dead, watched over by huge diving-suit wearing monstrosities called Big Daddies. At various points in the game the player may choose to either “harvest” a little sister for their ADAM supply or save them, gaining far less ADAM and forgoing a critical resource used to upgrade your abilities. Legendary designer of *Braid*, Johnathan Blow, looks back on *Bioshock*, saying "It's supposed to be a big ethical dilemma... As it turns out, it doesn't matter whether you do either — the game throttles the rewards either way." *Bioshock* purports that making players wrestle with the morality of killing a child versus Atlas' desire to deconstruct Ryan's empire and Ryan's philosophy of self-interest is a gut-wrenching and difficult choice, but that isn't the case. Rescuing all the little sisters in a level rewards you with a cache of ADAM that more than makes up the difference, simply for acting ethically. Ken Levine, designer of *Bioshock* said in an interview with *Rolling Stone* that he wanted players to “really feel” the choice that players had to make, and that he suffered pushback on the idea, stating that a branching path that punishes the player was “design anathema” to publishers and so had to be levelled out. However, this issue does not seem to be so simple when *Bioshock's* commentary of player choice is considered. Choosing the “save” option over the “harvest” option delays your acquisition of ADAM but is mechanically identical or more often superior in terms of total ADAM gained (depending on which version and which difficulty of the game you play). The little sister choice is another example of false player agency, in of that there is only really one choice, to save the little sisters. Doing so nets you more ADAM, the “best” ending to the game, where Jack survives and defies the two villains of the game. This is another example of the ways that *Bioshock* tricks the player into thinking they are making their own choices, when in reality they are being subconsciously manipulated from the outset. Once the player has found out the truth behind Fontaine's

scheme and begins to fight back, they feel as if they are finally in control. Just as Ryan says, however, “A man chooses, a slave obeys” and even when they break free of his control, Atlas’ objective marker remains, telling the player that whilst Jack may have been under the control of Atlas, the player is just the pawn of Ken Levine.

This metafictional dialogue between the developers of *Bioshock* and the player is highly prevalent in the level “Fort Frolic” inhabited by the mad artist Sander Cohen. During their time in this area, the player is cut off from Atlas and Andrew Ryan, replacing their radio communications with Cohen himself. A subtle detail during this transition is that the waypoint arrow disappears until the area is finished, representing the player’s temporary freedom from Atlas. The individual objectives that Cohen gives the player also line up with this philosophy, a large portion of the level is spent chasing down Cohen’s protégés and art projects, which are spread throughout the large, open-plan level. These can be tackled in any order, and Cohen gives the player little direction to find them, a far cry from Atlas’ at times overbearing instruction. Not only that, the player is given the choice of whether or not to kill Cohen, who serves as the end-of-level boss of Fort Frolic, the only time a choice like this is offered. Killing Cohen rewards a powerful upgrade, but should the player not think that Cohen deserves to die, they are welcome to leave him to his creations, avoiding a difficult fight in the process. The key aspect here, Cohen stresses, is not which option the player chooses, but that they play their crucial role in the artwork that is *Bioshock* by making a choice at all. “Yes. I’ll send you to Ryan, but first, you must be part of my masterpiece.”

It is no coincidence that *Bioshock*’s most metafictional area is one ruled by a mad artist, Fort Frolic is a direct appeal to the game’s fundamentally artistic nature. After killing the third and final of Cohen’s protégés and delivering a picture of the body to Cohen as proof, he becomes



enraged and sends a group of his minions dressed in masquerade clothing to fight you. These enemies pose no threat relative to this late stage of the game and often die in just a few hits of your basic wrench as “*The Waltz of the flowers*” from *The Nutcracker* temporarily replaces the game’s regular foreboding soundtrack. As Mark Brown of Game Maker’s Toolkit states “You realise that you’re putting on a show for Cohen, performing a twisted ballet” what appeared to be a battle with generic enemies is given more depth as the player realises this is just another level of Cohen’s sick masterpiece. Lead designer of Fort Frolic, Jordan Thomas (2015), explains that the level was changed during the design phase so that players “did pick up on the joke and, despite being creeped out by it, would time their wrench strikes with each crescendo, recognising that they were being asked to dance.”

The metafiction of Fort Frolic extends beyond Cohen’s studio hub, however, the player is made acutely aware of the artifice of their experience through two additional gameplay quirks added specifically in this level. Firstly is the addition of near-omnipresent spotlights throughout Fort Frolic that automatically track the player, constantly reminding them that they are the star of the show, and neither Sander Cohen’s art nor *Bioshock* itself could exist without their input. The other is the unique enemy type of plaster splicers. Splicers, the main foe of *Bioshock*, are usually talkative, and constantly taunt the player. The plaster splicers, on the other hand, are regular splicers that Sander Cohen has encased in plaster and are completely silent, serving to add an additional layer of fear to a basic enemy that has become routine by the time the player reaches Fort Frolic. What is interesting about the plaster splicers is the way that the game spawns, or creates, them, each plaster splicer is placed by the game in areas the player have already been to, deliberately in areas in which the player has seen, but has not spent a long time looking at. The splicers remain immobile until

approached, blending in with inanimate non-enemy versions that dot the level, forcing the player to constantly re-evaluate their surroundings as Cohen and *Bioshock* toy with them.

This dialogue between the audience of a text and the text itself is the bedrock of metafiction, and an idea that *Bioshock* consciously engages with. Not only is an awareness of the medium itself core to metafiction but also an awareness of how a medium fits into wider cultural spheres. Ken Levine says of *Bioshock* and *Atlas Shrugged* “But we wanted to tell the story of a world where there are very imperfect creatures under the rigours of this ideology, and what would actually happen.” it is not *Bioshock*'s metafiction itself that serves to be one of the few videogame contributions to the artistic sphere, but this sentiment. Ken Levine and the *Bioshock* development team understood what makes the videogame medium different from that which came before it, videogames can simulate entire worlds, and are fundamentally interactive in nature, connecting inherently with Ranciere's (1991) theory of emancipatory learning. Despite not being from an academically respected institution, players can connect with not only Rand's political philosophy but also wider videogame theory simply through play, owing to *Bioshock*'s subjective nature. As I have previously argued, *Bioshock* is emblematic of a deeper, more fundamental understanding of videogames as a medium, and once that milestone is met, metafiction begins to emerge.

*Bioshock* revolutionised the culture of gaming, and its influence can be seen in more modern games, such as *The Stanley Parable*. However, where *Bioshock* is an exploration of the player as a fundamental part of the videogame experience, *The Stanley Parable* turns a metafictional eye on the designer.

## Narration, narrative and authorship in *The Stanley Parable*

*The Stanley Parable* (2013) puts the player in the shoes of Stanley, a worker in a nameless office environment who is tasked with inputting commands into a computer when asked.

When the player starts the game they are told by the game's omnipresent narrator that all of Stanley's co-workers are gone, and are led by the narrator through the office and the bowels of the building to deactivate a sinister mind-control device that has been controlling Stanley and his co-workers, finally earning him his freedom. *The Stanley Parable* appears to be a simple parody of overly linear videogames, but in reality, the game is far more complex than this. The narration ironically makes this fact clear in the first of many 'endings' to *The Stanley Parable*, the 'freedom' ending: "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."

It is at this point most players start the game again, as the first playthrough takes roughly ten minutes. They begin to defy the directions of the narrator, going right instead of left when presented with a choice and are met with the voice line "This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well." if they defy the narrator again after they are led back to the 'correct' path they are told "Stanley was so bad at following directions it's incredible he wasn't fired years ago. " It is with the realisation that *The Stanley parable* invites the player to go against what they are told to do that the game reveals its true scope and its commentary on game design begins to become apparent.

Key in this discourse is what is referred to as the "reluctant Stanley" ending, where the player chooses to simply stay in Stanley's starting office, refusing to play the game. The Narrator must, of course, justify Stanley's actions, saying: "Stanley simply couldn't handle the

pressure. What if he had to make a decision? What if a crucial outcome fell under his responsibility? ... No, this couldn't end up anywhere except badly ...the thing to do now, Stanley thought, was to wait. Nothing will hurt me...nothing will break me...and in here, I will be happy...maybe if I wait long enough, the story will happen...I can almost see it now...here it comes.” Whereupon the game restarts. Bassel (2016) states “Not interacting with the game halts the progression of this narrative, and (so this ending argues) results in the creation of a new narrative: a tale about the co-creative power of both the game designer and the player to co-construct a text.”

It is this symbiotic relationship between designer (narrator) and player (Stanley) that *The Stanley Parable* engages with. A designer may want to force players down the ideal path that they envision for the players, but to do so ignores the interactive, co-creative nature of videogaming, which is why *The Stanley Parable's* meta-commentary is only revealed when the player willingly defies their instruction. One such example of this is when the player chooses to disobey all of the narrator's instructions, prompting the player to venture into an area of the game the Narrator has yet to finish. This causes him to ask the player to rate his game, *The Stanley Parable*, owing to their apparent distaste for it. He then puts the player through several prototype amended games, the first is a simple game requiring the player to keep pressing a button to prevent a cardboard-cutout baby from walking into fire. Should the player inevitably fail, the narrator derides the player for not appreciating the sophisticated moral nature of his game and then places them in copies of *Minecraft* and *Portal*, two critically acclaimed games, before resolving to try again and restarting the game. This ending in particular explores the intra-medium reflexivity that creates metafiction to begin with. *The Stanley Parable*, directly engages with the mechanics behind the construction of a text, from unfinished levels, to the videogame medium's iterative growth to its most fundamental

components, the designer and the player. In many ways, *The Stanley Parable* touches on many of the same notes as *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, (Fowles, 1969), dealing with authorship, having multiple endings and using a far more conventional form, that of the Victorian romance and “walking simulators” such as *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* respectively to hide more metafictional subject matter.

In the ‘Not Stanley’ and ‘Confusion’ endings, this relationship is explored more fully. The first sees the player corrupt the game by forming a narrative contradiction, ending with the player’s perspective shifting to outside the geometry of the level, where the player hears the narrator plead with an unresponsive Stanley to “please do something” as the credits roll, showcasing that, despite his often oppositional nature, the Narrator, and thusly the game designer needs the player for the game to function. The latter sees Stanley and the Narrator work together as the Narrator gets confused, forgetting which of the many stories in the game he was supposed to be telling and getting frustrated that the player isn’t following directions. At various points he congratulates the player for winning out of exasperation “Well, do you know what, since I've completely forgotten what we were even supposed to be doing, how about this: You win! [children cheer] Congratulations! I know you put in a lot of hard work, and it really paid off, so, good job!” and employs *The Stanley Parable Adventure Line™* a parody of far more linear games of the same type that force you to stay on the designer’s intended path. Eventually the player and narrator find a room with the entire script for the confusion ending and a timer showing how long the player has been on this particular path. It is at this point that the narrator chooses to defy the script “Why don't I get a say in all 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!” resulting in the game breaking and it restarting anyway.

Even *The Stanley Parable*'s status as a full game made from a modification of an existing game is inherently metafictional. Hutcheon (2013) states that "like parodies, adaptations have an overt and defining relationship to their prior texts, usually revealingly called "sources". Unlike parodies however, adaptations usually openly announce this relationship". *The Stanley Parable* is both a parody and an adaptation, starting its life in 2011 as a mod for Half-life 2, which also features a mute protagonist and omniscient expository figure (in the form of 'The G man'). *The Stanley Parable*'s 2013 remake is still programmed in the source engine, and includes references to it such as the inclusion of the first level of *Portal* and stock source assets in the 'unfinished' portions of the game. In acknowledging its roots, *The Stanley Parable* lays clear its intent to expand upon and react to many of the games that allowed it to come to be.

Where *Bioshock* uses metafiction in order to manipulate the player and give its third act twist more punch, *The Stanley Parable* uses metafiction in a far more fundamental respect. Whilst the game obstinately states that it is about Stanley at the beginning of each playthrough, "this is the story of a man named Stanley", in reality it is a dialogue with the player about how a videogame is made and the frustrations of being a designer. This is reflected clearly in the unlockable achievement "Unachievable". This achievement is impossible to obtain under normal circumstances without manually altering the game via the developer console. Trying to get this achievement by typing 'cheat \_u' in the console will show an error message "hey don't you even try". No matter how much a developer may try to restrain a player, their capacity for editing and changing the game is only limited by their coding ability, much like the Stanley Parable's original status as a mod. This message of player agency versus

developer intent is seen most clearly in one of the most simple endings to get, the explosion ending.

To attain the explosion ending, the player simply has to follow the narrator's instructions until the very final moment, when Stanley is asked to deactivate the insidious mind control device permanently and step outside, the player instead chooses to turn it on. This baffles the narrator "After they kept you enslaved all those years, you go and you try to take control of the machine for yourself, is that what you wanted? Control?" and this begins one of *The Stanley Parable's* most pertinent deconstructions of game design philosophy. One the player presses the button, the narrator says "Stanley suddenly realized that he had just initiated the network's emergency detonation system. In the event that this machine is activated without proper DNA identification, nuclear detonators are set to explode, eliminating the entire complex. How long until detonation, then? Hmm...let's say, um...two minutes." This begins a two minute timer until the level explodes and the game begins again. The player is allowed full control during this time to examine the room they are in as the timer slowly ticks down.

In other non-metafictional videogames, when the player is treated with a supposedly inescapable room and a countdown to destruction, this is an invitation to perform a thrilling escape or to thwart whoever put you there through your wits and skills. *The Stanley Parable* however turns this notion on its head, oddly, by making it more realistic. The player is given complete freedom to interact with the variety of computer terminals and gadgets in the soon-to-explode room. Each of these interactable objects seem to convey information, for example, there are differently-coloured buttons labelled 1-5 in the room which can be pressed, or a simplified Tower of Hanoi puzzle on some screens that hint at a solution to stopping the Narrator, who taunts the player throughout this event "But here's a spoiler for you: that timer

isn't a catalyst to keep the action moving along. It's just seconds ticking away to your death. You're only still playing instead of watching a cutscene because I want to watch you for every moment that you're powerless, to see you made humble. “

In reality, however, the explosion cannot be stopped or even delayed, and the interactable objects simply exist to remind you that you are playing a game that is acutely aware of itself and what players expect of it. Müller (2009, pg 53) talks of interactive media as “necessarily confirming ideological stance” through repetition and rehearsal of the mechanics interpolating audiences into a specific ideological framework. Videogames as a burgeoning artform have also done this to their audiences, subliminally conditioning them into holding certain things as fact such as the notion of a game always being possible to ‘beat’ without cheating. It is in this way that *The Stanley Parable* truly contributes to the wider scope of videogames as a medium. It challenges the established trends of the medium, previously based in mimicry of other mediums such as film. This lineage can be seen in the prevalence of cutscenes and non-interactive, linear storytelling. In breaking these patterns and embracing the medium of videogames, this frees developers to create videogames that establish their own identity. Games like *The Stanley Parable* and *Bioshock* have set the stage for not just more metafictional games such as *Undertale* but also videogames securing a position as an artistic medium on par with the likes of the novel, film and theatre.

Without *The Stanley Parable* analysing and deconstructing the nature of the creation of games, *Undertale* could never have come to be. Unlike *The Stanley Parable*, however, *Undertale* deals not with the creation of a game, but the playing of one, and how a player is just as responsible as the developer for the game, and their choices can drastically change their own experience.



## **Skeletons, Saving and the morality of play in *Undertale*.**

*Undertale* is perhaps the culmination of the trend I have previously outlined, *Bioshock* was without doubt metafictional but this was ultimately in service of its more traditional features than a focus. *The Stanley Parable*, on the other hand, is explicitly metafictional, but never reached *Bioshock*'s mass appeal. Both games, however, were both incredibly influential on the growth of videogames of the last decade, and the foundations of postmodern and metafictional gameplay that they laid down allowed *Undertale* to become the popular and artistic juggernaut that it is today.

*Undertale* sees the player take on the role of a child fallen into The Underground, a subterranean land populated by monsters that were banished by humanity after they lost an ancient war. Within the first minute of gameplay, *Undertale*'s first big metafictional twist appears in the form of Flowey the Flower, who initially appears to be the game's friendly tutorial figure, but in an Atlas-esque twist, attempts to kill you before being chased away by the real expository introduction character, Toriel (a bastardisation of 'tutorial'), and later becomes the game's primary antagonist.

Flowey's recurring catchphrase, again echoing Atlas' 'would you kindly', is "kill or be killed", countered by Toriel's plea for the player to be friendly to the monster denizens of the underground. It is in the choice to fight or talk to the many monsters of the underground that *Undertale*'s mechanical morality begins to shine.

In every fight, the player has three main choices, fight, act or run, they may also use items to restore health and gain other helpful effects. Unlike the many RPG's (role playing games)

such as *Earthbound* that it draws inspiration from, monsters in *Undertale*, if killed, will die permanently. Choosing to act rather than fight begins a complex puzzle-like dance as you utilise simple commands and interact with the monster as it tries to attack you in order to pacify it. A simple example is the foe Snowdrake, who the player learns from battle-dialogue is an amateur comedian. In order to pacify him, the player must choose to laugh at his joke when he tells one in-between attacks. Another example is Greater Dog, an armour wearing dog foe which can be pacified by petting it or throwing a stick, your starting weapon, for it to fetch.

However, whilst pacifying or killing a monster will reward you with gold to spend on items and equipment, only killing your foes will reward you with EXP used to gain LOVE, which increases your health and attack power. Therefore, it is easy for a player to justify killing foes instead of befriending them as coming from a place of disempowerment and fear, echoing Flowey's "Kill or be killed" mantra. The first boss fight, against Toriel herself, who attempts to stop you leaving the safety of her home in the ruins, is a key example of this. Toriel is a formidable adversary, but can be killed through combat and many players will kill her out of frustration owing to her difficult pacifist victory condition that involves doing the same action multiple times as a show of your determination, a recurring theme throughout the game. Regardless of how you resolve the fight, afterwards, Flowey will reappear and taunt you, either mocking you as weak for sparing Toriel or likening you to himself if you killed her, whilst also hinting that she could have been saved. If you reset the game and get a different resolution to Toriel's fight, Flowey will have different dialogue, scolding you for abusing the power to SAVE, hinting at his meta-knowledge that becomes crucial at the game's climax.

This leads to three distinct experiences in playing *Undertale*. Brown (2016) says that “the rewards for pacifism are far greater than stats, you get to make friends with the monsters, get a more interesting story, and even get to go on a date with a skeleton.” Whereas the ‘genocide’ route punishes players for killing monsters until they no longer appear with harder bossfights, emotional appeals to the player to stop what they doing and a deliberately unsatisfying, vague ending. Killing some characters and sparing others gives the player the neutral ending, where you’re encouraged to play through again to get the pacifist ending, though as it is revealed, the pacifist ending is just another part of Flowey’s ploy. As the game’s original ending comes to a close, a defeated Flowey appears, assuming the player chose to spare him, and instructs the player on what to do in their next playthrough of the game order to get the pacifist ending. As well as being a unique way to encourage players to reach the best parts of the game, Flowey’s plan was to unite all of the monsters in one place after your reset. When the monsters of the underground come to save you from the king of monsters, Asgore, only doable by completing a difficult pacifistic playthrough of the game, Flowey appears and steals all of their souls, not just the 7 human souls he would in the neutral ending and gains total control over the world. "And you know what the best part is? It's all your fault. It's all because you MADE THEM love you. All the time you spent listening to them... encouraging them... caring about them... Without that, they wouldn't have come here. And now, with their souls and the humans' together... I will achieve my REAL FORM”.

Characters having meta knowledge is used in *Undertale* for a variety of effects, firstly, humour, in the case of Papyrus the skeleton “The internet! I’m quite popular there.” acknowledging Papyrus as a would-be fan-favourite character even before the game had come out. Characters having knowledge of the power to SAVE and RESET is key to the plot

of *Undertale*, with the existential torture of reliving the same events over and over again through the use of resets driving Flowey to become the sociopath the player knows him as, until they take it away from him by starting the game. When Flowey absorbs the seven human souls at the end of the game (human souls are more powerful than monster souls, and seven could turn a monster into a godlike being capable of freeing the monsters from their imprisonment), he crashes the game, then changes the intro video, and overwrites the player's save with his own until he is beaten and the game ends.

When Flowey's true nature is revealed, the mysterious thought-dead son of Toriel and Asgore, Asriel, his motives for everything he's done are revealed "'Huh? WHY am I still doing this? Don't you get it? This is all just a GAME. If you leave the underground satisfied, you'll 'win' the game. If you 'win', you won't want to 'play' with me anymore. And what would I do then?'. Flowey/Asriel's entire motivation is to take control of or attempt to escape the horrifying reality of being a character inside a videogame. At the end of the pacifist run, if the player opens the game after the credits have rolled, Flowey appears to ask the player to not restart the game, telling the player that the characters have had their happy ending and to restart the game would deprive them of that.

The other major character to display metafictional knowledge is Sans the skeleton, brother of Papyrus. Sans gives hints to the player that he knows more than it seems throughout the game, such as, whenever he makes a joke, the Sans' sprite turns to face the screen and winks. His most notable metafictional moments occur in the Judgement hall, which takes place just before the player faces Asgore and begins the final sequence of the game. Sans reveals that "You will be judged for every EXP you've earned. What's EXP? It's an acronym. It stands for 'execution points' A way of quantifying the pain you have inflicted on others." he also

explains "When you have enough EXP, your LOVE increases. LOVE, too, is an acronym. It stands for "**Level Of Violence**." A way of measuring someone's capacity to hurt."

Experienced players of RPG's will automatically assume that EXP means "experience points" and LOVE is a standin for "level" two near-ubiquitous features of the genre.

*Undertale*, however plays with player expectations of the game and challenges their preconceptions much like *The Stanley Parable*. Where *Undertale* differs is that the player is given no indication that they will be judged, whereas *The Stanley Parable* is fairly overt with its metafictional nature. Sans has unique dialogue and reactions for the different LOVE scores of the player, from congratulating them if they successfully completed a pacifist run, to being progressively greater levels of disappointed in the player as their LOVE increases. If the player has completed a genocide run, in what he acknowledges as a doomed attempt to stop the player, not the player character, in their tracks, Sans will attack in what is easily the hardest boss battle in the game. Sans' difficult bossfight is an attempt to get the player to give up playing the game, thereby sparing what is left of The Underground. He even says upon killing the player by pretending to become pacified, make friends with the player and be spared "if we're really friends, you won't come back."

Sans, as well as some other foes, notably Asgore, are inherently metafictional in their battle sequences. Sans attempts to attack the player during their turn, *Undertale* is modeled after turn based role playing games, and this comes as one of many shocks to the player in this fight. Another example is Sans, despite having only a single healthpoint, having the ability to dodge your attacks, something no other foe can do, saying "What? you think I'm just gonna stand there and take it?". Asgore, the only boss in the game the player must fight, if not kill, destroys the "Mercy" option on the screen (used to end battles with pacified monsters) with

his spear as the fight begins, communicating to the player that this isn't a fight that they can talk their way out of.

Another large factor of *Undertale*'s metafictionality is its embrace of fan communities and the world beyond the game. In the finale of the genocide route, Flowey tells the story of how he came to be, filling the place of the cast of monsters who would normally tell the story of how Asriel and the first fallen child died, as the player has killed them. Flowey speaks about how both he and the player started down their murderous path out of curiosity, but states “ At least we're better than those sickos that stand around and WATCH it happen... Those pathetic people that want to see it, but are too weak to do it themselves. I bet someone like that's watching right now, aren't they...?” In reference to the culture of watching playthroughs of games on youtube, especially as a way of seeing a game's alternate content without having to play through the game themselves. Of course this is both financially and artistically motivated, people watching the ending may not have purchased the game, so encouraging them to do so makes fiscal sense, but it also serves as an appeal to experience the game as it was intended to be, interactively.

In the file responsible for holding the game's text and dialogue, the opening lines are “Part of this game's charm is the mystery of how many options or secrets there are. If you are reading this, please don't post this message or this information anywhere. Or doing secrets will become pointless.” A direct appeal to the game's fan community, which was large even when only the demo and a crowdfunding campaign existed to represent *Undertale*, acknowledges not only the fact that people will delve into the game's files to find out secrets to the game's plot, but also that they will share those secrets on social media. In appealing to the people who would do this, Toby Fox not only enhances the metafictional aspect of the game, but

also serves to maintain the game's mystique for those who have yet to play it, as to reveal *Undertale's* twists before they happen would drastically reduce their effectiveness.

Ultimately, these metafictional segments serve as a dialogue between *Undertale* and the player, much like its predecessors, *Bioshock* and *The Stanley Parable*. Where *Undertale* differs, however, is that it doesn't bring into question the realities of game narratives, or game creation, but questions a player's own interaction with the medium. *Undertale* is unique in of the fact that its commentary isn't critique of gaming itself, or those who made it, but of the player. *Undertale* encourages the player to recontextualize their actions not just in *Undertale* but all other games. *Undertale's* commentary not just of the gaming medium but of how players interact with it is the apex of metafiction, just as *The Canterbury Tales* discusses the nature not just of telling stories, but also listening to them and how they are spread.

## Conclusion

Videogames in the present day have undergone a massive shift in popularity, and are currently realising their metafictional potential, as I have illustrated. However, the question remains, what does this mean in the wider scheme of our culture as a whole?

Barthes (1977) says that ‘where politics begins is where imitation ceases’, politics by its nature cannot be imitated, as it is the ideological bedrock that underpins all art. When an artistic medium begins to reach acceptance in the wider community, those creating are becoming aware of that medium’s characteristics and how best to utilise them. With an understanding of the medium comes the capacity to make more nuanced commentary, thus bringing that medium into the Althusserian ideological framework. When a medium, in this case is understood to the point that it no longer has to imitate and can produce metafictional works, it also gains the capacity to be political.

This very fact can be observed in *Bioshock*. It is no coincidence that one of the first metafictional videogames uses its newfound scope to comment on politics as well as the nature of play. Similarly, *Undertale* engages intimately with the internet culture that spawned it, through use of repeated memes, a staple of internet forums, and appeals to the game’s own fans.

Unlike the mediums that preceded it, Videogames could not have existed, and therefore came to be, in the era of computing and global communications. In many ways, videogames are a postmodern medium, both born in the heyday of postmodernity, but also fundamentally postmodern by nature. Videogames constantly engage with their own artificiality as they



teach the audience how to engage with themselves. Every videogame has different rules and controls, and explaining the way to play a videogame immediately shatters the illusion of immersion that other mediums keep intact with their more intuitive and consistent methods of engagement.

It is for this reason, that videogames may be the medium of postmodernity. This is why games such as *Bioshock*, *The Stanley Parable*, *Undertale* and others have appeared so early in the lifespan of videogames, as the culture of individualism and cynicism they were invented in, their fundamentally audience-acknowledging nature and their ease of editing and intra-medium adaptation relative to other genres has allowed metafiction in videogames to flourish.

Videogames are beginning to cross the threshold of metafiction and become accepted within artistic circles, as can be seen through the rise and surge in popularity of the BAFTA Games awards. Not only that, landmark legal cases such as *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011) have paved the way for videogames receiving the same legal protections as other artistic mediums. With the genre moving out of its adolescence into a fully-realised and understood artistic medium, what changes can audiences and critics alike expect of it?

Videogames, much like cinema, will continue to evolve as technology improves, most notably in the form of virtual-reality hardware, allowing a sense of total immersion into the gameplay experience. This will be a landmark development as 1:1 motion control schemes will not only be a completely new method of presentation, but may very well be able to take videogames from the medium that is most honest with its artificiality, to one that may be able to convince audiences, if only temporarily, that it is real through manipulation of our senses.

Whilst videogames may be approaching artistic acceptance, they still have a long way to go before they can be considered on the same level as cinema, novels or theatre. Pearson (2013) sees the continued artistic progress of videogames as in the hands of small, indie developers which can truly embrace auteur theory and produce narrower-focused games focused on very human stories, as opposed to the grand blockbusters that many of the largest games studios put out. It is no surprise, then, that two of the games I have touched upon are indie titles, *The Stanley Parable* and *Undertale*, the latter in particular was produced almost solely by Toby Fox.

In his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” David Foster Wallace warns of the over-reliance on irony and postmodernism in television, "I want to convince you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat." If Videogames are to avoid the same fate, they must acknowledge metafiction, but not substitute it for actual content and commentary. *Bioshock Infinite*, spiritual sequel to *Bioshock* was criticised by many writers for being far more overt with its metafiction, with characters openly acknowledging that the game and its many simultaneous playthroughs are little more than superficially different and ultimately without merit, but failing to make any nuanced commentary beyond speaking to this artificiality. EDGE magazine (2013), damningly says of the ending, which involves the death of the main character to prevent the game happening at all in a recursive time-loop "...these third act disclosures don't render Infinite incoherent, they do take the story to a place where notions of coherency and

consequence no longer seem to matter, before backtracking and then attempting to offer a finality that doesn't make sense within the universe the game has created."

Not only do videogames need to continue to grow, evolve, and not become complacent with their newfound mainstream popularity, they could look to other genres to secure long-term artistic success in the form of an image change. Many mediums, during their metafictional growth, underwent a change of name, often coined internally as opposed to by society. This trend can most notably be seen in cinema and graphic novels, previously (though still to some extent) referred to as "movies" and "comic books" respectively. It was during the metafictional renaissance of both mediums in the 1970's that both of these new terms were coined. Whilst a change of name seems like a small detail, it belies an emergent maturity in the mediums, "movies" is slang, and comic books implies specifically comedic intent, lacking the nuanced artistic commentary of its literary cousin. The emergence of cinema and graphic novels as popular terminology communicates sophistication and artistic potential to unfamiliar audiences, graphic novels in particular distancing themselves from the stigma of "comic books", placing them on a level comparable to the novel, not just a mere imitator.

Similarly, videogames are often dismissed owing to their perceived status as "games" and therefore not suited to more nuanced artistic expression. Perhaps the coming years will see a change in the terminology used to describe videogames as they mature into a more artistic medium.

The final obstacle to videogames becoming artistically respected, surprisingly, comes from within the industry itself. Highly-regarded designer behind the *Metal Gear* franchise, Hideo Kojima (2006) says "If 100 people walk by and a single person is captivated by whatever that

piece radiates, it's art. But videogames aren't trying to capture one person. A videogame should make sure that all 100 people that play that game should enjoy the service provided by that videogame. It's something of a service. It's not art.”

Despite his assertions that videogames are not an artform, many of Kojima’s games have been praised for their intricate stories, commentary on the military-industrial complex and now-iconic character arcs. The final game in the series was nominated for 4 BAFTA awards. One could be excused for thinking that it is people like Kojima, who create games with entertainment in mind rather than high minded art that is the final barrier in the way of videogames being truly accepted. However, in reality, it is this very assumption: That, with our new metafictional understanding of videogames, creators of videogames must use this to create interactive art, rather than simplistic entertainment. Not every work of theatre must channel Brecht’s metafiction and linguistic tact, nor does every director have to aim to replicate Kubrick's multi-reel metafilm, neither of these things delegitimize other, less artistically minded examples of their respective mediums. In the same vein, videogames will find acceptance when artists realise the fullest potential of the medium through metafictional exploration, enhancing their ability to create thought-provoking pieces such as *Her Story* or *Journey*, as well as broad-appeal blockbusters such as *Call of Duty*, just as the mediums before it have done.

In fifty years, veterans of the videogame art world will look upon the latest revolutionary form of artistic expression, and dismiss it as a culturally bankrupt waste of time, the scholars of each other medium, from poetry to canvas will nod and agree. Only then, will we know that videogames have truly become a respected artistic medium, and the cycle of invention, rejection, metafiction and finally acceptance will begin again.

## Self-Reflexive Commentary

My dissertation project was a highly illuminating one, and by far the longest nonfiction writing project I have ever done. Over the course of writing it I have not only reinforced my expertise on writing about videogames but also learned a great deal of academic rigour that will serve me well in future nonfiction writing.

My first hurdle in writing the dissertation was choosing what, exactly, to write it about. For this, I drew upon my love of videogames and desire to work in the field for a career, but was faced with the issue of how to write an academic essay on the subject. I eventually settled on a broad theoretical overview, tying in postmodernist theory, in which I also have an interest in. Whilst considering these two, the worry of covering videogames, which are not covered in english literature and also have a very shallow pool of critical writing to draw from began to become apparent, but this eventually became the cornerstone of my topic. Videogames for many years had not been respected in artistic circles, but were now beginning to be, why was this?

After some research I discovered several games which acted as examples of the burgeoning 'art game' scene, amongst them were *Bioshock* and *Undertale*, two games I had previously played and enjoyed for their metafictional stories. This led me to consider that perhaps metafictionality had a part to play in the evolution of an artistic medium, and by looking particularly at the novel and film, I discovered that a correlation could indeed be made.

My first step was to pick the games I would be covering. *Bioshock* was an obvious first choice, being the first major game to receive widespread critical appeal for its use of

metafictional ideas in the form of Atlas and his interactions with Jack and the player. It could be argued that *Bioshock*, despite a pervasive metafictional theme, it fails to qualify as “a game about games”. Whilst partially metafictional, *Bioshock* is more a standard shooter than an indepth analysis of the medium, it but it does serve as an important first-step for videogames into the world of postmodernism and metafiction. To start covering metafictional games with, for example, *The Stanley Parable* would ignore a crucial part of their development, it would seem as if *The Stanley Parable* was completely revolutionary with its narrator-player dialogue, when in many ways it could not have existed were that ground not broken by *Bioshock*.

Throughout the dissertation project I had some doubts about including *The Stanley Parable* over some other excellent examples of metafiction in games. In particular, the *Silent Hill* franchise and the japanese visual novel *Umineko When They Cry* were in consideration. I ultimately chose *The Stanley Parable* as it gave a unique insight into the production of games with the character of the narrator and his interactions with the player that has yet to be replicated. This leads on excellently from *Bioshock* by tackling metafictionality that deals with the production of games as opposed to the playing of them, leading onto *Undertale* which utilises both. The other games, whilst certainly influential in their respective genres, were not as focused on metafictionality as *The Stanley Parable*, using metafiction to support their narratives and interactions with the player. I felt that this would lead to me saying many of the same things that I said about *Bioshock*, which was first and foremost a commercial shooter, and an “art game” second.

Finally, I chose to cover *Undertale*, a game I had recently completed when I first begin to consider my topic for my dissertation. In many ways it is the perfect candidate to sum up my

argument, being both a commercial and critical success, having a huge variety of highly interesting metafictional elements and also dealing with a number of postmodernist subjects such as fan-authorship. In my chapter about *Undertale* I used examples from the *Stanley Parable* and *Bioshock* to show the metafictional trajectory of videogames over the intervening 10-year timeframe I analyse, over which videogames have taken many steps towards artistic respect.

Writing the introduction to the dissertation presented a unique set of issues to tackle. First and foremost was one that I had considered before, the issue of a lack of critical sources. After discussing this with my dissertation tutor, we agreed that focusing on close "reading" of the texts and citing relevant postmodern and metafictional sources where appropriate would be a good way to circumvent this issue. As such, most of my critical material can be found towards the introduction and conclusion to my dissertation. In my initial draft, both my dissertation supervisor and I felt that I didn't have enough critical sources in my introduction, nor did I explain my stance adequately. Originally, my introduction made several glaring assumptions about how I was defining postmodernity as well as not citing sources when it came to statements regarding public attitudes about written literature when the printing press was invented and when writing was first popularised in antiquity.

I later corrected this oversight, drawing on several historical sources that more than back up my claim, but finding these was not without issue, my initial search for quotations and opinion all focused on opinions towards the novel itself, and I failed to find any relevant information. For a time, I was concerned that the foundation of my dissertation was a historical misapprehension until I decided to look not at novels and movies, but the means of producing those materials. After looking for historical opinions on the cinema and

print/writing technology the results completely lined up with my expectations, just as people are not necessarily dismissive of games as a concept, but the means of producing videogames, the computer.

In terms of postmodernist critical material, my two largest gaps were in the inclusion of Patricia Waugh and Linda Hutcheon, both echoed many of my arguments, particularly on the subject of adaptation and the politics of metafiction. Whilst my dissertation is not a critical response piece, I feel that it was greatly improved by the addition of critical sources throughout.

Once my introduction was complete, I started work writing on *Bioshock*, a game that presented a very important issue, how would I explain the metafictional nature of the game to someone who had likely never played it? *Bioshock*'s metafictional nature hangs on the Atlas reveal plot twist and the player's confrontation with Ryan. After several drafts I decided to first of all lead into the literary background of the game, Ayn Rand's writings, before tackling the game proper. I found that, instead of revealing the twist, which felt arbitrary and confusing, I would be honest with it and explain how Atlas works from a game-design perspective rather than a narrative one. By explaining that Atlas, whilst ultimately an antagonist, actually mimics several established game design tropes and manipulates the player before dismantling the player's assumptions of the game, and the wider genre I made a far more convincing postmodernist point rather than simply pointing out an interesting story twist. I did however make special mention of "a man chooses a slave obeys", Andrew Ryan's mantra, as its subtle mockery of the player is too great of an example to fully pass up.



As previously stated, *The Stanley Parable* was chosen over other potential games because it rounded out my argument rather than covering many of the same points as *Bioshock*. A large part of this was its original status as a modded game. This lines up excellently with Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as a way of artists understanding the makeup of their own work, as well as what came before it in the same way disassembling a car and putting back together again teaches you how even the parts you can't ordinarily see work. *The Stanley Parable* also filled the role of an excellent gap-filler to explain the industry's progression from early metafiction in *Bioshock* to more nuanced games like *Undertale*. A great way to illustrate this was in looking at player address in all three games. *Bioshock's* player address is incidental, with the actual narrative being about Atlas' control over Jack, any comparisons between Jack and the player are never fully expanded upon. The Narrator in *The Stanley Parable* speaks mostly to Stanley but in some routes addresses the player directly and is also acutely aware of the game as artifice in a way the characters of *Bioshock* are not. *Undertale* on the other hand is almost entirely direct address to the player, especially from Flowey, and illustrates the progression of the medium from simply dipping its toes into metafiction to creating a game which has an almost entirely metafictional plot that could not make sense without it.

My chapter on *Undertale* ran into many of the opposite problems of the previous one in of that there is simply so much to talk about regarding the game's metafiction. In my initial draft for this chapter I wrote over 3500 words, meaning that a large amount needed to be cut. I'm fully confident that I could have written the entire dissertation on *Undertale*, though at the expense of any wider commentary. Amongst the parts I cut out was a section detailing *Undertale's* embrace of gender identity and sexuality politics with its inclusion of a androgynous main character an an allegory for transgender issues in Mettaton, a ghost, who is

built a new body that he finally “feels beautiful in”. The character who builds this body, Alphys, also enters into an explicitly lesbian romance with another character, Undyne, during the pacifist route. Unfortunately, whilst *Undertale*'s engagement with its audience is a large part of its metafictional appeal, this wasn't completely relevant and I decided to focus more on Flowey's direct address to the player and those watching on youtube as it was more in line with speaking to the game's metafiction.

My conclusion to the dissertation was somewhat of a struggle, as my main argument is difficult to sum up beyond “looking at the observable evidence, videogames are becoming more metafictional and this correlates positively with their continued commercial and artistic respect”. Instead of simply reiterating this over more words, I looked into the consequences of the trend I outlined, the obstacles of the way of videogames becoming a respected art form and what can be expected of the future. I made an effort to touch on Hideo Kojima, creator of the *Metal Gear* franchise as an example of an auteur who opposes the notion that his videogames are artistic as I feel that offering a counterpoint to my argument, whilst also taking an opportunity to expand upon it is a great way to add some depth to my commentary.

I briefly tied my dissertation into the wider political sphere, drawing specifically on Barthes and Hutcheon to give some scope to my argument, this was important in order to lend some context to what I was saying and also act as a potential discussion point in the event anyone were to respond to my dissertation. I also explored the potential implications of technology upon videogames that may very well change the face of the medium, or perhaps be the final push they need to break through into the artistic mainstream, if they haven't already. My dissertation ends on a light hearted acknowledgement of the cyclical nature of the pattern that I have outlined and a resignation that soon videogame writers will occupy the same spot as

the very writers dismissing them, only to fall into the same pitfalls. I decided against writing at length about how to 'break free' of this metafictional cycle as my original drafts of this ended up sounding more like a new-wave reactionary call to arms than any sort of reasonable academic discourse.

Overall my dissertation has been a success, I feel, though not without its difficulties. My conversational tone has been a point of issue throughout but I feel I've managed to strike a balance between my own style and a more professional one. Writing this dissertation has more than prepared me for a future either in journalism or in writing for videogames of my own and is a useful first step into that industry as well as being a fascinating look into my favourite medium of artistic expression that has re-ignited a love for several classics.

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