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The Freedom of Alienated Reflexive Subjectivity in *The Stanley Parable*

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Abstract. The full article has been omitted due to journal review. It is available upon request from the author.

On the official site for the game, *The Stanley Parable* (2013), it is described as “an exploration of story, games, and choice. Except the story doesn’t matter, it might not even be a game, and if you ever actually do have a choice, well let me know how you did it” (Mularczyk, n.d.). *The Stanley Parable* is a first person exploration game that draws heavily upon narrative content to delve into the themes of freedom and choice in games, the nature of game constraints, putative player transgression from authorial intention through glitch exploitation and console cheats, player subversion of narrative direction, psychological manipulation of in-game decisions, and the limits of player expression, among other things.

The explicit stance of the in-game narrative is that there is no real freedom or choice in computer games - or at least not in *The Stanley Parable*. However, the official site suggests that “as you explore, slowly, meaning begins to arise, the paradoxes might start to make sense, perhaps you are powerful after all. The game is not here to fight you; it is inviting you to dance” (Mularczyk, n.d.). This paper will examine that claim. It will analyse *The Stanley Parable*’s commentary about the possibility of freedom and meaning, and using Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, argue that it is novelistic in its fomenting of antinomic semantic ambiguities, giving rise to the production of an elusive meaningfulness via the alienated reflexiveness of the player who is made to reflect upon the apparent meaninglessness of their choices

This paper will eschew precise, analytical definitions of freedom, but will instead propose that it is necessarily imbricated with and dependent upon contextual issues of subjectivity and meaning. The first pertains to the kind that inhered in Georg Lukács’s mythic Homeric subjectivity, which inhabited a telic world of “ready-made, ever-present meaning” (Lukács, 1971, p. 32), where “life and meaning were present with perfect immanence in every manifestation of life” (Lukács, 1971, p. 80). This subject cannot be at odds with themselves, and the meaning of what has been done and what needs to be done is never in question. This is radically different to self-reflexive, self-conscious modern subjectivity, in which arises the doubt as to whether we are authentically who we are, and has been the concern of thinkers from Rousseau to Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre (Pippin, 2005, p. 307). Whilst this modern subjectivity can be experienced as being at odds or even alienated from oneself in those instances where one questions the meaning or purpose of one’s actions, it also importantly indicates the existence of a complex interiority that we may deem to be crucial in what it means to be a free subject.

If it is only with meaning that we can find identification, escape alienation, and Lukács’s analysis of the impossibility of doing so in a condition of transcendental homelessness is correct, then an endlessly reflexive alienation is the only possible state of affairs. On this analysis, can it be true that the subject with no interiority actually enjoys a greater freedom than the subject who sees only the problematic insubstantiality of the world? Playing *The Stanley Parable* explores this

question, as the player is made to reflect upon whether their own struggles through the game evince the actions of a Stanley that is any freer than the Stanley that had been happily brainwashed to relish the meaningfulness of every moment of his button-pressing. Perhaps the player is able to find meaning through their own alienated reflexive subjectivity.

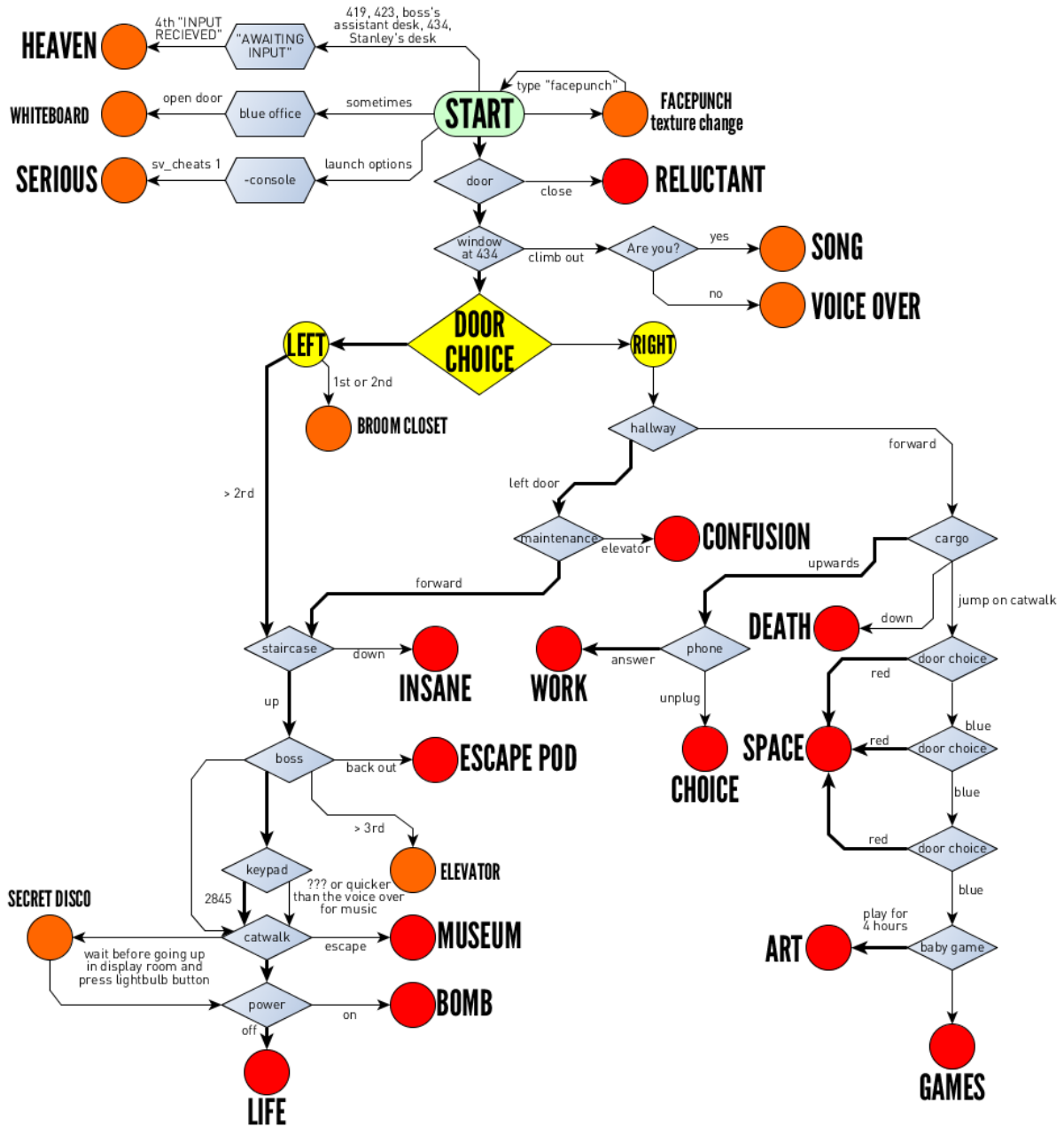
The Stanley Parable does not feature the complex causal mechanisms and interrelations between quantifiable units that characterise most ‘flow’-inducing computer games, but this paper will argue that it aptly comments upon the aforementioned subjectivities of telic ‘identification’ and reflexive ‘alienation’. There is no “distanceless” (Lukács, 1971, p. 68) that can make authorial absence possible; the subjectivity of the narrator is ever-present in order to attempt to induce the almost paralysing criticality that is antinomic to ‘flow’ like game states, but which is requisite to the invitation to another kind of engagement – the ‘dance’ hinted at on the official site. It foregrounds the monistic subjectivity of the happily brainwashed Stanley, and aims to have the player consider the similarities and differences between their life and his.

The Stanley Parable boasts eighteen different endings (fig. 1). Whilst it is unusual for a game to have to cater for so many branching outcomes that respond to players’ decisions, it also encourages the player to exhaustively seek out multiple endings through the use of different devices. Therefore, the game is arguably not completed until all the endings have been explored. So on the one hand, it appears responsive to player choice; on the other, it seems that the player is expected to explore all the endings. The counterfactual state of unchosen decisions within a discrete, as opposed to emergent, branching structure subsequently becomes factual.

Many of the different endings invoke different conceptions of freedom so that collectively, when taken together, they can be understood to constitute a meta-commentary that denies the possibility of player freedom and the meaningfulness of the in-game choices, thereby promulgating an alienated reflexiveness in the player. This paper will have scope to examine three of the endings. The ‘bomb ending’ puts the player in a position of helplessness, and so refers to a sense of freedom as the capacity to make meaningful differences to one’s own fate, which is denied to the player. The ‘art ending’ challenges the player’s willingness to play or work repetitively for the mere promise of instrumental reward, asking whether freedom can inhere in the willingness to accept such inducements or arrangements. The ‘life ending’ calls into question the player’s compliance with the narrated story, but perhaps also queries whether compliance can be compatible with freedom and happiness.

It will be concluded that *The Stanley Parable’s* own ambiguous status between interactive narrative and game brings out the dissonance between two objectives: to give the player freedom and room for expression (to be a ‘good’ game), and to be a tight and cogent work that provokes reflection about freedom and the possibility of meaning with criticality (to be a ‘good’ Lukácian novel/work of art). Interestingly, *The Stanley Parable* is not a novel that uses the tools and techniques of the novel alone to make a claim about computer games, but a game that eschews many conventional gamic foci - complex causal connections, proliferating emergent structures, for example - to embrace a novelistic reflexiveness. It is a game as a Lukácian novel that foregrounds the player’s alienated reflexive subjectivity over that of the author/designer’s or the protagonist’s, in the effort to grasp at both freedom and meaning.

Fig. 1



(Source: <http://guardianlv.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/The-Stanley-Parable-endings-tree-chart.png>. Image by James Fenner.)

List of Illustrations

Fenner, James. *Diagram showing the complex nature of The Stanley Parable endings, plotted into a flow chart*, n.d. viewed 1st Aug 2014, <<http://guardianlv.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/The-Stanley-Parable-endings-tree-chart.png>>.

Gameography

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