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# All of Your Co-Workers are Gone: Story, Substance, and the Empathic Puzzler

Michael James Heron & Pauline Helen Belford

## Abstract

*Narrative games such as The Walking Dead, Gone Home, Dear Esther and The Stanley Parable are difficult to situate into the general framework of game genres that are popularly, albeit informally, understood by mainstream audiences. They are too unabashedly contrarian with reference to the generally accepted definitions that the field uses—indeed, questions have been raised as to whether or not they can even truly be considered games at all.*

*In this paper, the authors argue that these games are properly differentiated into two key categories. The Walking Dead and The Stanley Parable are branching narratives that are spiritual successors to the Choose Your Own Adventurer style game-books. Dear Esther and Gone Home are freeform narratives that are best understood as tools for generating, interrogating and integrating empathy through the exploration of characterisation through situated spatiality within an emotionally resonant environment. It is the very lack of narrative structure in any linear or branching format that argues for these to be considered as a game genre of their own—one we have termed the “empathic puzzler”. They are related to more engi-*

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## Author Biographies

Dr. Michael James Heron is a lecturer in computing at the Robert Gordon University. His research work focuses on accessibility, video games, accessibility in video games, and issues of choice and morality. He is also the lead developer and administrator of the online text MMO Epitaph Online. His personal webpage may be found at <http://michael.imaginary-realities.com>.

Pauline Belford is a lecturer at Dundee and Angus College, a researcher, and an indie game developer with over a decade’s experience in education. She is also a director of the company Imaginary Realities. Her work focuses on ethics and issues of accessibility in video games. She has worked in both further and higher education as an advocate and a curriculum designer for the inclusion of game development topics as a core part of teaching issues of computing and software development.

*neered narrative structures, but their design offers unique opportunities for emotional reflection.*

*This paper argues for an encompassing definition of game that is appreciative of the different intentions that may be perceived in structure and freeform narratives—that the substance of such titles is found in the largely unparalleled opportunities they present for exploring issues of choice, agency, and empathy within video games.*

## Introduction

Video games as an entertainment product have rarely been lauded for their ability to effectively tell stories (Heron & Belford, 2014a; Jenkins, 2004; O'Brien, 2014; Houghton, 2013), to the point that their inability in this dimension has been a subject of mockery (for example: Hornshaw, 2012). While there do exist several games with a very strong narrative focus and tremendous depth in their storytelling, these remain a comparative rarity. The reason for this may perhaps be found, in part, in the history of the medium itself. Many of the first commercially successful titles came with no obvious narrative at all within the gameplay, focusing entirely on games as ludic artefacts. Story, such as it was, had to be interpreted by the player with little or no formal structuring (Juul, 2001; Rubens, 2013; Extra Credits, 2012). Some games attempted to offload story into instructional material or novellas in an effort to provide players with some degree of context for the actions they would be expected to undertake. For example, consider the following extract from the instruction manual to Bug-Byte software's *Manic Miner* (1983):

Miner Willy, while prospecting down Surbiton way, stumbles upon an ancient, long forgotten mine-shaft. On further exploration, he finds evidence of a lost civilisation far superior to our own, which used automatons to dig deep into the Earth's core to supply the essential raw materials for their advanced industry.

After centuries of peace and prosperity, the civilisation was torn apart by war, and lapsed into a long dark age, abandoning their industry and machines. Nobody, however, thought to tell the mine robots to stop working, and through countless aeons they had steadily accumulated a huge stockpile of valuable metals and minerals, and Miner Willy realises that he now has the opportunity to make his fortune by finding the underground store.

A casual player encountering *Manic Miner* for the first time would be hard-pressed to tell any of this backstory given how the game itself consists of simple platform action against comical, often Pythonesque roaming enemies (Latorre, 2013). This dearth of narrative is partially a consequence of the limited capacity of computer systems at the time (Granade, 2011), but it was also a direct choice by the developers of many games to treat narrative as a secondary, largely optional, element (as discussed in Koenitz, Haahr, Ferri, Sezen, & Ibrahim, 2013).

However, as the capabilities of computer systems increased exponentially over the years, story became not only something that was *possible* to include within a game but increasingly viewed as something inherently *desirable* (Frasca, 2003; Tavinor, 2008) for at least a subset of gaming genres. Many role-playing games for example made use of printed text, adventure journals and other associated ‘feelies’ (Roberts, 2010; Holmes, 2010; Groppo, 2013). This was to compensate for the lack of memory available within computer systems and a way of implementing low cost copy protection (Karhulahti, 2012). Costly narrative and exposition could be referenced with a simple piece of text exhorting the reader to, for example, “read journal entry 38” in their adventurer’s handbook. While this permitted a more involving story than could otherwise be presented, it was not without its limitations—most such journals came complete with dummy entries that were never intended to be part of the story proper. They were provided to dissuade players from simply reading all the entries sequentially and thus spoiling their own future enjoyment of the game. They also served a useful role as copy protection, ensuring that those who casually copied software packages would also have the burden of replicating packaged materials as well as the cassettes or disks.

Such limitations were necessary in an environment where a small novella of text could easily overload the ability of a developer to store it in memory or disk (Anderson & Galley, 1985; Granade, 2011), but as time went by the narrative became easier to embed within its game context. The evolution of the game story went from player assumption, to written backstory, to written narrative context, and eventually to text, graphics, and movies integrated directly into the game experience.

In this paper, we will focus on two specific types of narrative game. One type is that of the purely free-form exploration game, typified by titles such as *Gone Home* (Fulbright Company, 2013) and *Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012). The second category is characterised by structured branching within a highly contextualised ‘story tree’. Titles which exemplify this kind of structure include *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) and *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012). We will discuss the way in which game narrative has become an end in itself for many game players and outline how the design of the game itself influences the emotional and narrative payload experienced by those who encounter the titles. We argue that these narrative structures lend themselves to games which stress different parts of our mental acuity, and that this is a direct consequence of the structures employed. When games incorporate puzzles, they test our logical thinking. When they offer us finely-grained interaction choices within tight time constraints, they test our fluid intelligence and our reflexes. However, those games that offer free-form exploration within a narrative can be said to test our empathic understanding and awareness of social and physical context.

### **The Evolution of Game Story**

The evolution of early computer games was characterised by a focus on ludic and graphical elements at the expense of storytelling. The early titles most cited as being seminal works of video game history commonly include *Pong* (Atari Inc., 1972), *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978),

*Asteroids* (Atari Inc., 1979), *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), *Missile Command* (Atari Inc., 1980), and *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) amongst many others. Each title was marked by an increase in its graphical fidelity, in its ludic sophistication, and the balance of its game design. However, few real evolutions in terms of story-telling are seen in these titles. For many games, setting the context of our actions is treated as a chore to be grudgingly completed before the fun can begin.

However, running parallel to the evolution of these games was a family of explicitly, unashamedly narrative titles. *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther & Woods, 1977), *Zork I* (1980), and *Adventureland* (Adventure International, 1978) have equal importance in the evolution of video games, but rarely receive the same kind of general, mainstream popular cultural appreciation as their graphical rivals. These games focused almost entirely on the story and the characters within the game world, although this was usually bound up in a ludic context where puzzles, mazes and syntactic difficulties served to artificially elongate the experience (Metzler, 2008; Scott, 2010). Many of these titles were text-based—the limitation of computer systems at the time was such that it was difficult to tell a truly compelling story using the graphical representations available. Those titles that focused on exploration and puzzles were typically known as “text adventures.” Those looking to focus more on the story and characters tended to self-identify as “interactive fiction” (Plotkin, 2011).

Titles such as those developed by Infocom, Adventure International, Sierra Online, Magnetic Scrolls and Level 9 Software, during the early to late 80s, found their genesis in the merging puzzle elements within a narrative context. As graphical capabilities grew over time, text games themselves branched into three main categories—text games that retained their “purity” regardless of the growing graphical capability of their platforms; hybrid games where graphics were provided alongside some form of text parser; and fully graphical adventures. Text adventures as a commercial market collapsed in a period of two or three years in the early eighties (Heron, 2013). Hybrid adventures, such as the *King's Quest* series (1980—1998) and *Space Quest* series (1986—1995) eventually evolved into purely graphical games. Graphical adventures themselves eventually spawned off a successful sub-genre of point and click adventures—a niche that Lucasfilm Games (now known as LucasArts) dominated for the better part of a decade (Cifaldi, 2013). All of these different evolutions of the form focused primarily on the narrative as delivered to the player as a reward for mastering the provided challenges. Games such as *Zak McKracken* (Lucasfilm Games, 1988) and the *Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990) are compelling examples of this—much of the fun and humour in these games is to be found through deeply exploring the various dialog options that were presented. Other titles, such as *Loom* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990), abandoned traditional point and click puzzle design entirely in favour of a more atmospheric and evocative musical magic system so as to better harmonise the theme and the gameplay (Svelch, 2009).

When the commercial text game market collapsed, a dedicated core of hobbyist developers (Montfort & Short, 2012) worked to develop new titles, port old titles to virtual machines

running on new platforms, and expand the available player-base for their games. It should be noted here that the word ‘hobbyist’ is not intended to be pejorative, but largely to differentiate authors of these texts based on their expectation, or lack thereof, of financial return for their investment of time. As time went by, the hobbyist titles became more explicitly experimental in their design, largely eschewing puzzles to explore the rich narrative space that evolving text-based parsers made available (Douglass, 2007). With this experimentation came a vibrant community dedicated to challenging the conventional design patterns of text-based games by freely inverting, subverting, and rejecting historical conventions. Lacking the commercial obligation to artificially extend gameplay through puzzles and mazes, this new hobbyist community was able to focus on the inherent value of text as an interaction medium (Heron, 2013). Many such games still exist (c.f., Townsend & Heron, 2013) and the field of text gaming is itself undergoing something of a renaissance as it has shed its commercial obligations (Alexander, 2013).

Outside of the realm of the computer, but running parallel, the same time period also saw an explosion in popularity for various ‘choose your own adventure’ gamebook series (Piehl, 1987). Popular examples of these include Jackson and Livingstone’s *Fighting Fantasy* books (Costikyan, 2000) and the critically admired *Lone Wolf* books from Joe Dever (Logas, 2004). These books permitted the player to progress through a game story by choosing set branches at particular junction points in the narrative. While these lacked the sophistication of an equivalent piece of interactive fiction, they introduce the concept, if not the terminology, of the *ergodic cybertext* (Aarseth, 1997) to an appreciative audience. Several attempts were made to computerise particular titles, but these failed to generate excitement amongst computer users more driven by a desire for fast-paced graphical experiences. The *Choose Your Own Adventure Software Series* managed a scant two titles from a library of around 50 books available at the time. Similarly the *Fighting Fantasy* books managed only six games from a contemporary library of thirty. Modern adaptations, such as *Sorcery!* (Inkle Studios, 2012), have found an audience on mobile devices, but experimentation within the contemporary software market was not successful.

Part of the complexity of finding a market for both computerised game-books and interactive fiction titles came in the difficulty of convincing an increasingly mainstream audience that the experience they provided was actually a game. Providing a coherent, acceptable definition of what constitutes a game is notoriously difficult—the debate stretches from Wittgenstein (2010) writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the modern era, and encompasses definitions that overlap but contradict each other in different places.

Caillois (1958) defined a game as a *fictitious* activity, governed by *rules*, which is *fun*, conducted in a *separate* time and place, with *uncertain* and *non-productive* outcomes. Crawford (2003) offered a definition that focuses on the use of interactivity to accomplish goals against active agents looking to thwart your progress. Suits (1967) emphasised the use of fixed rules to modify a starting state to some desired end-state. Many other definitions exist and each has its adherents and detractors (1).



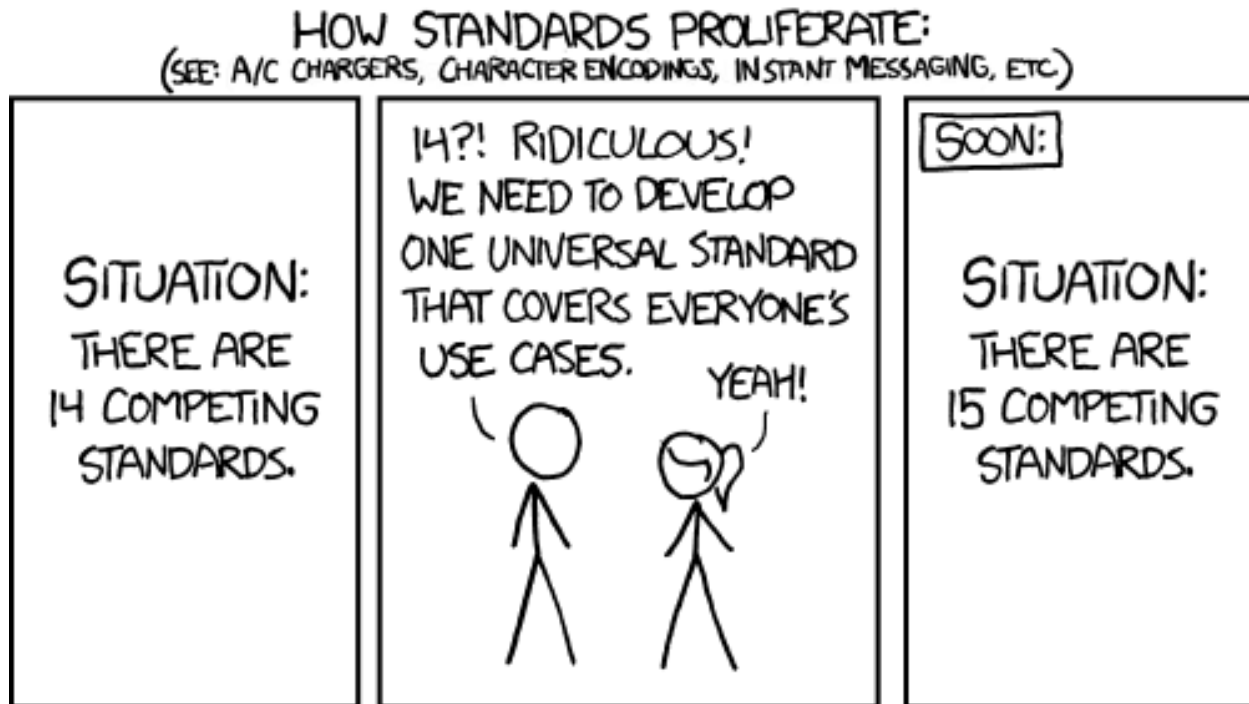


Figure 1: Proliferating Standards. Reproduced from “Standards” by xkcd, July 20, 2011, [xkcd.com](http://xkcd.com). Copyright 2011 by xkcd.com.

All of the definitions provided by researchers and thinkers in the field are compelling and broadly encompass a large bulk of what we might automatically consider to be games. However, there are edge-cases in each where we may, or may not, agree with the inclusion or exclusion of specific titles and genres. Caillois (1958) for example would not encompass games such as *FoldIt* (University of Washington, 2008) or *Play to Cure* (Guerilla Tea & Cancer Research UK, 2014) as these both involve *productive* outcomes. Crawford’s (2003) definition does not accommodate games which have no active agent competition (he terms these as *puzzles* instead), which would exclude the popular category of cooperative games, such as *Rock Band* (Harmonix, 2007) or *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) which he terms instead as a *toy*. Suits’ (1967) definition would not incorporate freeform role-playing games such as might be found in a MUSH (Clarke, 2011; Bartle, 2004), or in a roleplaying system where rules are optional and to be discarded if doing so would result in a better experience for everyone. The common understanding of what the term ‘game’ means in turn is an issue that extends beyond the academic literature. It is not the intention of this paper to resolve the issue as it is unclear to the authors as to what benefit another competing definition of the concept of a ‘game’ may add to the discussion at this juncture, as is humorously noted in Figure 1.

Suffice to say that the three exemplar definitions discussed above have elements which would seem to disqualify purely narrative titles from the general category of games. Certain highly narrative titles stretch to breaking point the definition of *fun*—we continue because

we are compelled, not because we are *enjoying* the story. Similarly, the outcome of such a title may be *certain*, although viewed through multiple different perspectives that serve to offer competing, perhaps even contradictory lenses on an experience. There may not even be anything as definite as an outcome to be found—just a story that unveils the same way each time the game is played. The definition proposed by Caillois then is not one that accommodates pure narrative as a game experience.

Crawford's (2003) definition excludes those titles with no active agent competition, which would include several of the titles we will be discussing later in the paper. Sometimes the role of the player in a narrative game is not to beat their opponents, but instead to expand or explore a perspective. Even the definitions of "puzzle" and "toy" given by Crawford (2003) don't really encompass these kind of titles—they may not classify as a puzzle if they have nothing to solve, but they may come with a particular end-goal that is to be reached, which disqualifies them as toys.

Suits' (1967) definition is not applicable in environments where we have no rules because we have no ludic mechanics. While a video game will always place limitations on a player, the majority of the titles we discuss later in this paper have no formal rule systems that can be manipulated.

None of the definitions discussed above are sufficiently expansive to incorporate all four of the titles on which we will focus, but each will accommodate a (different) subset. The best we can say is that they are all games to *someone*. However, this difficulty of definition is one that can serve as a conceptual barrier. To approach titles such as *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), *Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012) and *Gone Home* (Fulbright Company, 2013) within the field of game criticism, we must first address the objections that they are not games at all. Other categorisations, such as "visual novels" or "electronic literature" would offer a more instantly coherent definitional structure, but would simultaneously put effective critique and analysis of the titles outside the scope of many of those who would most benefit from the investigation. Similarly, the distancing created by such terms serves to create a conceptual barrier and dissuade individuals from experiencing the titles.

In this paper we argue that this lack of an easy fit into the general category of "game" does not invalidate the titles but is instead a consequence of the narrative structures which create a new *kind* of gameplay experience. On a casual investigation, they may seem very similar to other kinds of games. We argue however that this initial impression is misleading. To understand the virtue of these games, we must first appreciate the context of the narrative and the structure through which that narrative is followed. In this, we can examine where several of these games subvert and invert our expectation, and why that makes them interesting as a new genre of game.

The four games we will discuss in detail in this paper are *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012), *Gone Home* (Fulbright Company, 2013), and



*Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012).

All four of these games are highly focused on the narrative. All four games focus on the implications of choice, either through the locking off of game branches based on previous decisions or through the ordering of the narrative that is to be presented to the player. All four games focus heavily on characterisation, either through the development of relationships with NPCs, such as in *The Walking Dead*, or through the gradual evolution of understanding we gain as to an external party, such as in *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*. All four games then cluster closely together in terms of the initial impression they make. However, we argue that these games actually break into two separate genres based primarily on their narrative structures.

All four games largely eschew formal ludic conventions with regards to the provision of standard mechanics such as gameplay feedback, score, or the provision of escalating challenge. Of the four, only *The Walking Dead* has anything approximating a coherent framework of game mechanics, and even these are limited mostly to quicktime events. Even the object puzzles contained within are rarely genuine puzzles—our ability to juxtapose or think laterally through the consequences of item interaction is not stressed. *The Stanley Parable*, *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* offer only a freeform sandbox through which the player can explore—interaction, where it is permitted, is only for the verisimilitude of experience and not as part of offering an intellectual or physical challenge to players. Within *Gone Home* for example we often encounter doors and light-switches, but there is no challenge to be had in manipulating them. Within *The Stanley Parable* we encounter computers, doors and occasional buttons, but it is outside our ability to make them do anything that isn't already a pre-determined part of the narrative.

All four games are considerably shorter than other titles in their price-range—a natural result of the fact there are no ludic considerations that serve to slow down progress through the title. However, this is not a facet that is necessarily integral to the structure of the titles and instead simply a consequence of either economic necessity or the natural conclusion of a self-contained story. A good story is whole in and of itself, and not artificially lengthened. That is not to say that long form games with strong story elements cannot exist, but where the game experience within such games is lengthened, it is primarily through the use of ludic elements to create pacing, obstacles and challenge. If we were to experience the *Mass Effect* series as narrative alone, it would be a fraction of the play-time of *Mass Effect* with the RPG and shooter elements. To create the 100-hour long experience that the combination provides within a purely narrative context would greatly impact on the story, with what would likely be intensely negative effect.

All four of the games we discuss in this paper reward the player primarily with narrative. Both *The Walking Dead* and *The Stanley Parable* have moments where timing constraints can trigger a deep, visceral reaction to the scenario unfolding on the screen. This is accomplished not through the desire to comfortably master an interactive challenge but instead

through the emotional need to either succeed or prevent a certain narrative outcome. Compare this, for example, to gaining an achievement for accomplishing a difficult goal (Hamari & Eranti, 2011) or accumulating score as a result of sustained mastery of a high-engagement task (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

All four games, then, are predicated on emotional and intellectual engagement with an unfolding narrative rather than participating in an inherently satisfying game mechanic. We play them because we want to find out what happens, and not because we want to show how finely honed our skills are. While these games are interactive in a technical sense, our agency is strictly limited—we can move within the world. We can sometimes use objects within the world, but we have no ability to rely on a toolkit of abilities that allow us to *shape* the world. We may not even have the ability to perform standard game actions such as jumping.

In this respect, we might think of these titles paradoxically as interactive yet passive entertainment. The script is written before we arrive in the game world, and while we may drive the car, we don't get a chance to change the destination. At best we can change the order in which we may experience the waypoints.

And yet, each of these games has achieved a considerable degree of critical success although this is not always matched by a corresponding degree of commercial distinction—*The Walking Dead* is the sole example of a truly successful title (Kubba, 2013), although the others have attained modest sales figures of their own (Peel, 2013; Matulef, 2014; Hinkle, 2013). The other three are perhaps too far away from what we might typically consider to be mainstream games. They are perhaps too unabashedly artistic in their aspirations (Singal, 2013; Yang, 2012; Zak, 2013). They are difficult to pigeon-hole, and this has a corresponding impact on how difficult they can be to effectively market. Similarly, their short length may act against them as they may be perceived in lacking value for money (2). While they may offer more story per pound spent than a movie, they offer less game per pound spent than most of their contemporary rivals. Here again, the uncomfortable relationship between admirable economy of literary expression and the question of what is a game acts against the potential of titles in this rather niche specialist field.

### Graphical Choose Your Own Adventure Games

The Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) game-books that were popular, in various guises in the early eighties, shared a particular structure. We, as readers, were presented with a few paragraphs of text, and then provided with a choice which required us to turn the book to a particular passage and read on until we were given another decision to make. Figure 2 shows the branches for the CYOA game-book *Journey Under the Sea* (Montgomery, 2006) as mapped out by Michael Niggell of Hazard Creative:

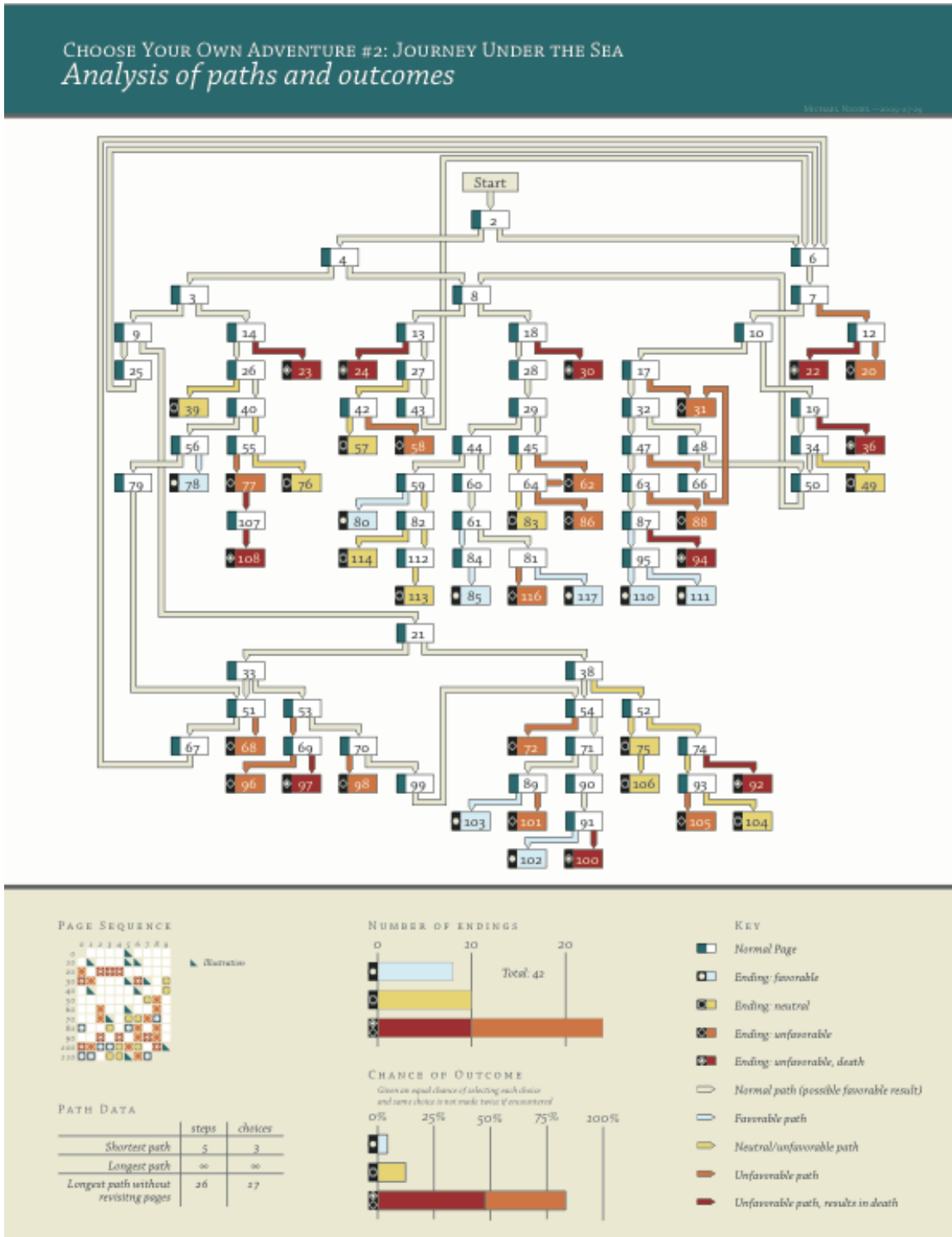


Figure 2: Branching Paths through *Journey Under the Sea*. Reproduced from “Choose You Own Adventure—Most Likely You’ll Die” on *Flowingdata.com*, August 11, 2009. Copyright 2009 by Michael Niggel.

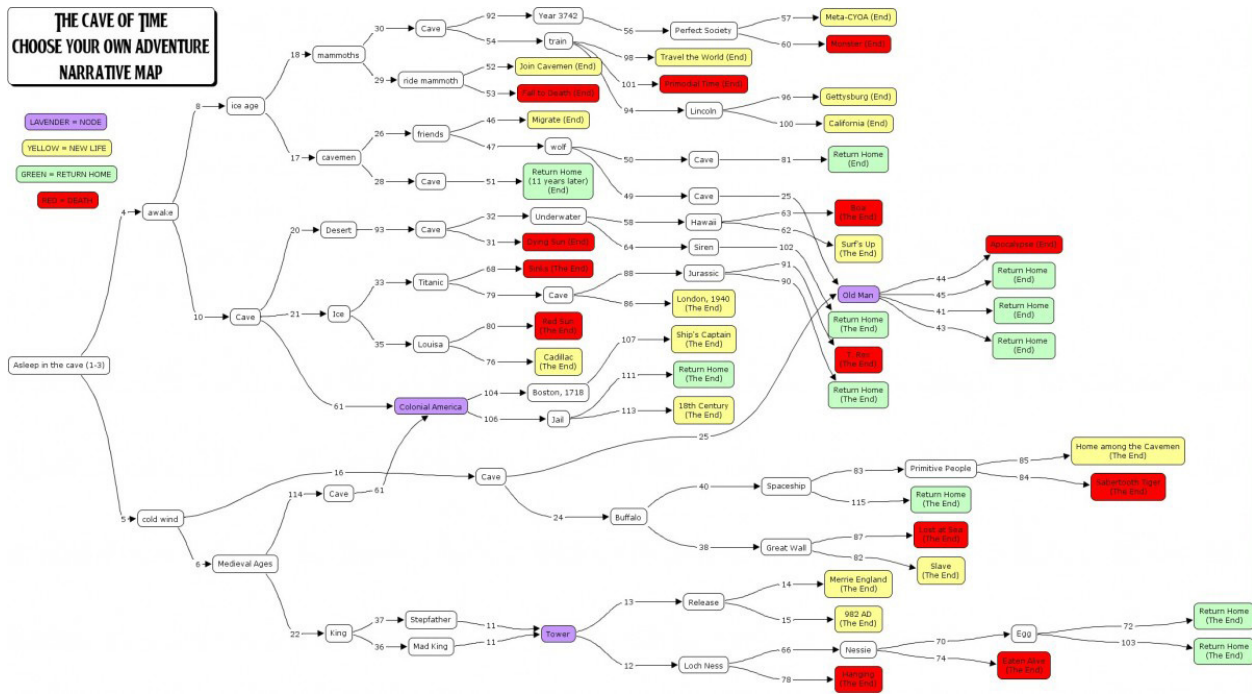


Figure 3: An Alternate View of Branching Paths through *Cave of Time*.  
 Reproduced from “A History of Choose Your Own Adventure Visualizations”  
 by M. Sample, November 11, 2009, *Samplereality.com*. Copyright 2009 by M.  
 Sample.

It is not the specific makeup of good versus bad endings that is important here, but rather the extent and amount of choice presented to the user when exploring the narrative. While some choices may loop back to earlier stages, and others still are shared amongst many paths (3), one single branching story allows for 42 possible endings. Figure 3 shows a network of choices for the *Cave of Time* (Packard, 1982) game-book as mapped out by Mark Sample.

Choose Your Own Adventure games are *ergodic* in that they require the expending of effort to progress, and *cybertexts* in that they change their output depending on the inputs fed to them by the reader. The simplicity of their design is such that provided one can fully close off all paths with an ending then they offer considerable opportunities for implementing meaningful choice within otherwise restrictive contexts. The design is sufficiently adaptable that it can be incorporated into other media and gaming environments. For example, the game *Epitaph Online* (Imaginary Realities, 2013) has made use of a bespoke CYOA data format to offer dream sequences and exploration loops that allow for a “closed off” storytelling experience outside of the main game environment. The Open University has employed the paradigm for teaching issues of Philosophy in their Castle, Forest, Island, Sea open learning course (4). Cobbett (2013) wrote a retro review of the game *Lone Wolf: Mirror of Death* (Mr.



It is a lazy Sunday morning.

You are idly clicking around online as your phone rings. Sam, a coworker of yours that you're friendly with, asks how you are and makes hurried smalltalk with you. You typically only ever talk to him on the phone when one of you needs a shift covered, so it's slightly awkward. You're waiting in anticipation for him to ask you to come in on short notice when he veers the conversation in a completely different direction.

"How do you feel about cats?", he asks. "Mine had kittens a few weeks ago and I'm having an awfully hard time finding a home for the last one of the litter. You don't have any pets, right?"

It takes you a moment to process this new information, and you're caught off guard as he begins to earnestly try to sell you on the idea of taking the last kitten off his hands. It's not something that you had specifically considered before, and he seems fairly insistent.

"She's a real sweetheart, really loves people. She's got all her shots already taken care of and the vet said she's healthy as a horse. I can bring her over by your place tonight if you're interested."

You look around your apartment and try to picture a cat in it as he continues to tell you about how cute she is. You tell him that this is all kind of sudden, and that you don't have anything for the kitten set up here.

"Oh don't worry about that, I can bring over a litterbox and food and all that since you'd really be helping me out of a fix. It's the least I could do! I just don't want to have to put her in a shelter."

You can't help but feel like you're being guilt tripped, but you decide to give it some serious consideration. It DOES get awfully lonely around your apartment, and it might feel less empty with a cat around. However, since you've been feeling so down it might not be a good idea to take on the responsibility of a cat even if they are fairly low maintenance.

What do you do?

- 1: Take the cat, knowing full well that you can take great care of it.
- 2: Decline. Even though you'd be totally capable of taking care of it, you're not much of a cat person.
- 3: Become a cat owner. You could use the companionship.
- 4: Decline. You're not in a good enough place to be taking on more responsibility right now.
- 5: Decline. You don't like cats.

You are very depressed. You spend a large amount of time sleeping, hating yourself, and have very little energy or motivation.

You are not currently seeing a therapist.

You are not currently taking medication for depression.

Figure 4: *Depression Quest* and Locked Choices. Screen capture from *Depression Quest* by Z. Quinn, 2013.

Micro Ltd, Nelson, & Upton, 1991) in the style of a branching CYOA narrative. The editthis

website has made use of wiki software to allow for the collaborative creation of CYOA games using standard mark-up (5). Computerised versions of classic titles, such as *Sorcery!* (Inkle Studios, 2013), has likewise found new and appreciative audiences on mobile devices where people may be more willing to accommodate different conceptions of what constitutes a game.

All of these, however, are riffs on the classic format of “punctuated narrative”—chunks of written story with branches indicated by numeric or textual choices. While the exact mechanism by which the choices can be chosen may differ from platform to platform, they remain largely fixed in terms of the dominant paradigm. The only action a player can take is to pick a branch when a branch is presented. A player cannot proactively seek out choices by wandering away from the narrative options that are made available. Only a few even seek to offer any expansions or refinements of this format. The remarkably evocative *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013) is one of the few examples of a game that actively plays with the conventions—relevant choices are visible at all times, but not always possible to take. Your ability to actively make decisions within the game story was dependent on your emotional state at the time it was presented—it very effectively communicates the message that within a depressive state one may be intellectually aware of the “correct” thing to do, but not necessarily emotionally or physically able to make that choice as the screenshot in Figure 4 illustrates.

*The Stanley Parable* and *The Walking Dead*, despite the difference in tone, style, gameplay and narrative structure are both examples of what might be thought of as “graphical choose your own adventures.” 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. A subset of the branches available to players to choose across some of the episodic elements of *The Walking Dead* is shown in Figure 5, as mapped out by GamesBeat:

Similarly *The Stanley Parable* offers a looping and branching structure, but offers this within a recurring, cyclical structure that endlessly repeats and occasionally introduces a random element. Distinct from *The Walking Dead*, all endings in *The Stanley Parable* feed into another run through the game. There is never a true, terminal conclusion—each ending is just a pathway into a new beginning. Some of the endings are brief and perfunctory. Others are more complex and metaphysical. In both cases, it is your decision when reaching branches in the game world that determines your ultimate course through the world. Figure 6 demonstrates the pathways that can be taken through *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) as discussed on Stack Exchange’s gaming board.



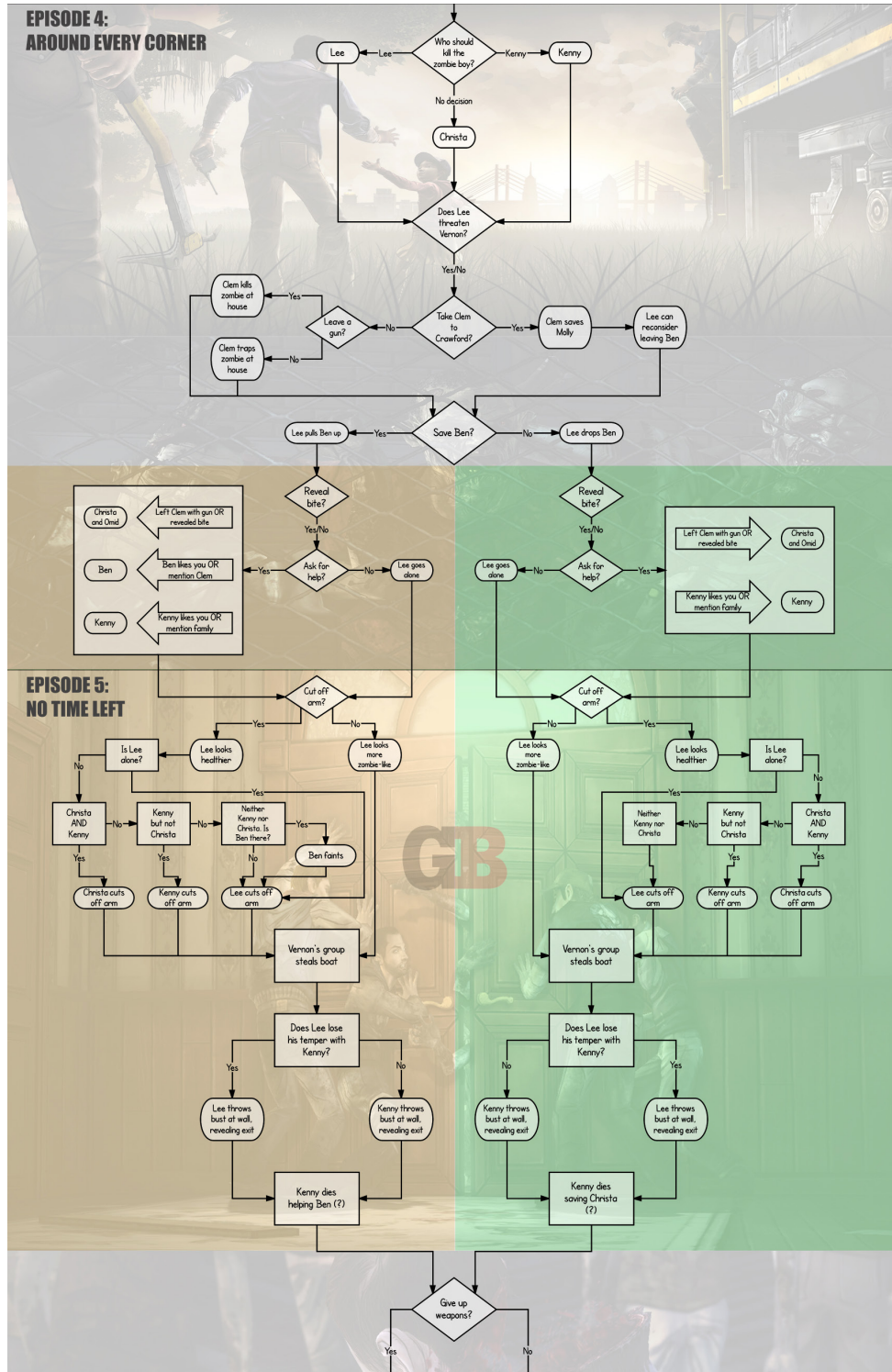


Figure 5: Branches through *The Walking Dead*. Adapted from “Here’s a chart of every choice in *The Walking Dead: Season 1* (image)” by E. Killham, March 31, 2013, *VentureBeat.com*. Copyright 2013 by GamesBeat.

There is a greater degree of freedom allowed within both these games than that permitted by the old fashioned CYOA game-books—branches, when they come, are organically integrated into the world, and the graphs show only those points where a decision results in a substantial change to the story. Within any given decision point, we may tarry (if permitted) or wander around or stand completely still before we choose which branch to take. While this is a shallow implementation of player agency, it is agency nonetheless.

*The Stanley Parable* in this respect offers the more significant divergence between game paths. By choosing one direction over another we will be presented with different locations, different commentary from the omnipresent Narrator, and wildly different conclusions to our exploration. As can be seen on the graph for *The Walking Dead*, choice where it exists is largely illusory. For example, the choice to “Take Clem to Crawford” will eventually lead to the decision whether or not to “save Ben”—while we may nuance the story told, ultimately we are simply exploring variations on a theme and we are not permitted to wander far from the main trunk of the story.

Such graphical CYOA titles are far more costly to develop than the equivalent written example—graphical assets, audio files, expository text and coding structures must be produced to go along with each choice. Too many choices with too little asset reuse becomes rapidly economically unsustainable (Heron & Belford, 2014b). Within *The Stanley Parable* for example, the office complex in which you begin serves as the main bulk of the environment and multiple endings will path and thread through these. Only a comparative handful of locations are unique to a single ending, although those that exist are sometimes remarkably detailed in and of themselves. Primarily, the reward is not new “content,” but rather new story. When we encounter old locales, it is usually in a new context.

What makes these two titles particularly interesting in this respect is how tightly coupled their story is to the method by which you explore it. *The Walking Dead*, for example, effectively communicates the futility of attempted survival within a zombie apocalypse through the game mechanics—no matter what choices you make things are going to go from bad to worse. The limited number of options with genuine meaning mirror the realities of the situation in which the characters find themselves. Ultimately the only outcome for all of them is an early death—on a long enough timeline, each will succumb to the threats that their new world presents them. Life in the apocalypse is nasty, brutish and short. The path for each character is a largely uncontrolled descent, and that is continually reinforced by the lack of real agency we have to influence the world around us or the trajectory our story will take.

Such meta-textual messages are not explicitly referenced within *The Walking Dead*, but they become especially effective on later playthroughs. A second run through the game, making different choices and favouring different relationships will still end up with us, eventually, making the decision whether or not we ‘save Ben’. Choice in such games is an illusion in which we willingly choose to engage. That illusion is fragile. However, the inevitability of our failure within *The Walking Dead* is such that the illusion actually powerfully reinforces the

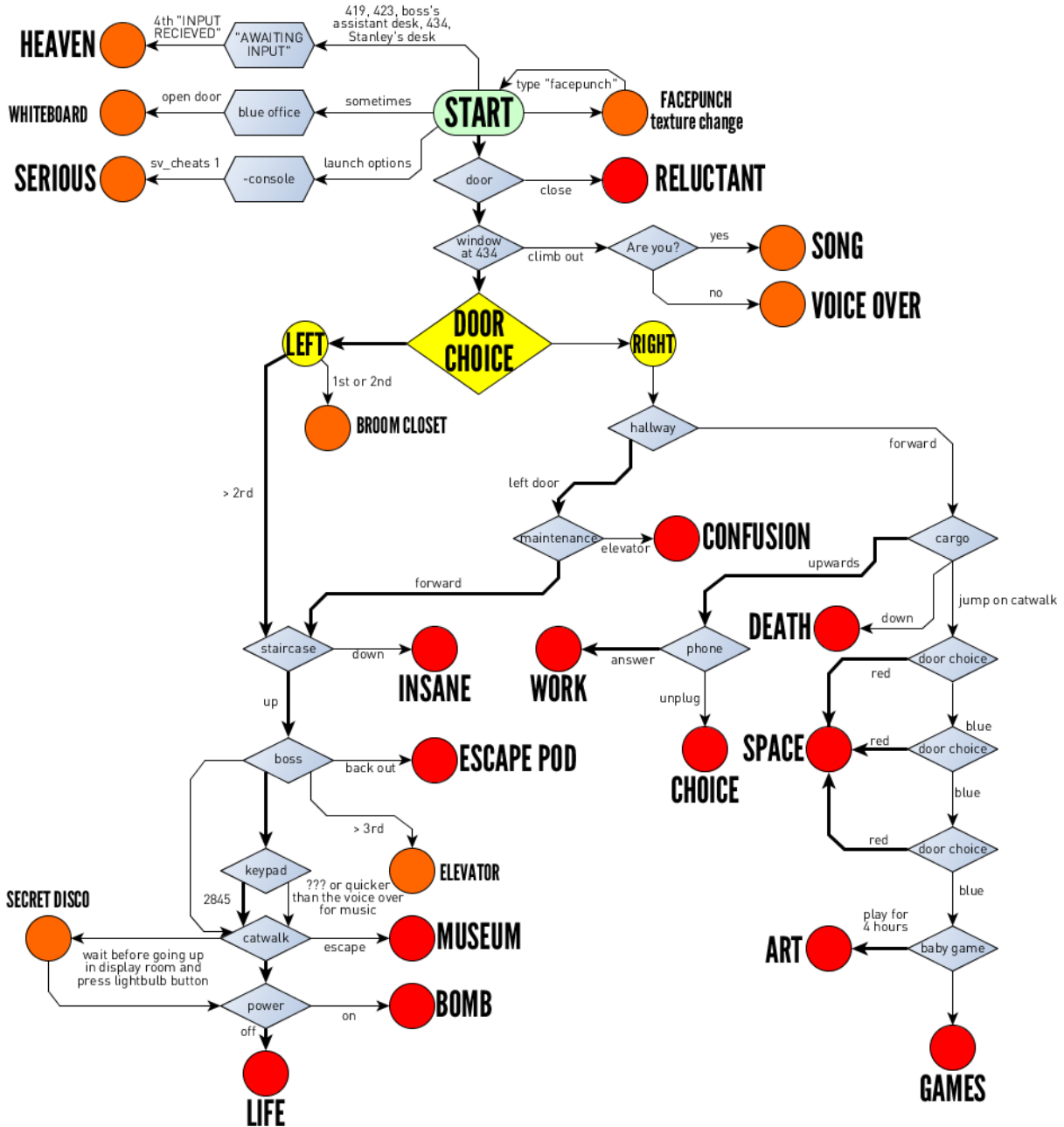


Figure 6: *The Stanley Parable* Branches (user1032613, 2013)

core message of that particular franchise—everyone can die, all safety is transitory, and you are at the mercy of an uncaring, malignant universe.

Within *The Stanley Parable*, we have a different message being reinforced by the game branches. *The Stanley Parable* does not try to hide the fact that we are making decisions within an artificial and fragile network of choices. In fact, if *The Stanley Parable* could be said to have a central thesis it could very much be that “choice in video games is an illusion.” To quote the game’s own blurb:

You will make a choice that does not matter. You will follow a story that has no end. You will play a game you cannot win.

This is a theme that is not only invoked as part of meta-textual contemplation, but explicitly within the game dialogue itself. Most of the game story, such as it is, is presented through the voice of the Narrator, who serves to annotate each of the decisions you make within the game with condemnation or congratulation. When we begin a loop through *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2012), we are (usually) greeted with the following remarks:

**All of his co-workers were gone.** What could it mean? Stanley decided to go to the meeting room—perhaps he had simply missed a memo.

One of the first choices you can make within the game is to go through one of two doors. Before you have made your decision, the Narrator announces:

When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.

We may choose to take the door on the left, or the door on the right. If we choose the latter, the Narrator will begin to “retcon” the narration:

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.

Ignore the next set of instructions and his commentary becomes a sarcastic insult:

Stanley was so bad at following directions; it’s incredible he wasn’t fired years ago.

Continue to reject his insistent instruction and this in turn becomes gentle cajoling:

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.

The relationship the player has with the Narrator is expressed in conversational snippets like these, and the Narrator’s response to the actions you take within the game. In a very

real sense, this is all that the game is about. Exploring all the various possible endings in the game does not take very long, but various endings spend a considerable amount of time exploring the philosophical implications of both the game and our choices within it. One part of the game involved the Narrator being briefly supplanted with another, unidentified voice, who explained:

“Can you see? Can you see how much they need one another? No, perhaps not. Sometimes these things cannot be seen. 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 will be your only true choice.”

The implication of choice in an artificial environment is a core part of the narrative experience, and as above it is constantly referenced in-game, out-of-game and even in the achievements that the game makes available as shown in Figure 7. In particular the achievements “Go Outside” and “Unachievable”.

This commitment to expressing the message is ideally implemented through the branching structure the game presents, and reinforced by the fact that each ending is a new beginning. The ‘beat the game’ achievement is awarded from simply following the Narrator’s instructions, and yet that represents only one of over twenty possible endings and can be done with a game investment of only five or so minutes. The rest of the game is about the impact and futility of choice delivered as the philosophical ramblings of an ethereal interlocutor responding huffily to the decisions you make in a world that has been engineered for that very purpose. As game mechanics go, the Choose Your Own Adventure paradigm is ideally suited to that goal.

### **Freeform Unstructured Narrative as Tests of Empathy**

As distinctive as the parallels are between choose your own adventure games and branching narratives, such as within *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) and *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), the comparison falls down when we address the growing catalogue of purely free-form narrative games. Two titles in particular in this category that have managed to attract considerable critical attention are *Dear Esther* (Chinese Room, 2012; see Walker, 2012) and *Gone Home* (Fulbright Company, 2013). More than *The Stanley Parable* and *The Walking Dead*, the question of their validity as games has been questioned on account of them offering only a vehicle for the exploration of an unstructured story. *Dear Esther* incorporates randomised elements into its narrative, meaning that certain presented monologues will differ on a replay, while *Gone Home* is a static, unchanging story. Both however adopt the same relationship to the player.

Both games are significant in the way in which they construct the ambiance which envelops us as we step into the world. Lacking a ludic framework or any gameplay elements, excite-







slightly threatening through subverted expectation and the explicit engineering of the environment.

*Dear Esther* presents a deserted Scottish island, dotted with dark caves and abandoned buildings. *Gone Home* on the other hand presents the player with the unnerving proposition of exploring a vast, silent house in the dead of a stormy night. *Dear Esther's* environments would not look out of place in a *Fallout* game. *Gone Home* on the other hand relies on years of association in the mind of the player between the fragility of safe places and the horror of solitude. Without needing to focus on accomplishing in-game goals, the player is permitted opportunity to simply drink in the atmosphere, and that in turn becomes a powerful vehicle for communicating emotional cues.

Both games work as a kind of audio-visual novel where the narrative is chopped up into discontinuous elements. As we explore the environments, we are presented with small auditory and visual vignettes. Their chronology is something we must construct for ourselves, as our wanderings may result in us encountering the elements out of order. Many of these elements are spatially fixed—upon encountering a particular room, or passing a particular piece of scenery, we may trigger a passage of text contemplating its significance. Both games incorporate elements of mystical representation—not in terms of offering an explicitly supernatural narrative, but instead to invoke a vague sense of otherworldly dread. *Dear Esther* extemporizes on the harsh island environment and the relationship of its occupants to an unforgiving God. *Gone Home* references teenage experimentation with the occult through the use of Ouija boards. Neither of these elements are core to the story that is told, but both play into the sinister implications of loneliness in an unfamiliar place. *Dear Esther* in particular adopts a literary style that has echoes of Lovecraft, although it stops short of invoking cosmic horror to underline its tale.

Both games also make use of situated objects to help tell the story. The environment itself is as much a source of information as the clues that we find as we wander around. In *Dear Esther* we encounter scrawled sigils and Bible verses on stone walls and discarded medical equipment within stables. We find books and photographs strewn around decaying tables and chairs.

In *Gone Home* we can pick up and manipulate pens, snacks, photographs and all manner of other domestic mundanity. Very little of it has any real use, but we are permitted to interact with it. Its original placement in context has meaning and helps build characterisation. Cables strewn around cabinets are suggestive of electrical goods, and these goods themselves are not there. We find out their fate later, but this helps build our sense of understanding of the motivations and desperation of the individuals involved in the tale. Cassette tapes containing music are also located around the house, and these can be played to create links between the stories told in diary entries and the home which has recently been abandoned.

These games, despite falling neatly into the category of highly detailed narratives, lack the

branching structure of the titles discussed earlier. We do not make decisions within these games—instead, our explorations gradually fill in the narrative blanks of the story. Within *Gone Home*, we tease out the implications of the letter on the front door we find at the start. Within *Dear Esther* we piece together the motivations and history of our unnamed narrator, although the perspectives of each of the named characters eventually merge into something less distinct as time goes by. Both are designed to allow us to fill in the blanks in the order we choose, although our insight into which paths through the environment relate to which parts of the story may be imperfect. Each of the story's revelations is packaged up into a context and an interrelationship between the other parts. In this sense, they follow the structure of a CYOA in which narrative elements are held in isolation from others. A standard CYOA however will enforce a top-down narrative order. It is this *ordering* element which is de-emphasised in *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther*. That is not to say it is not present at all—there are certain parts of both that are accessible only if you have passed through previous parts of the environment. It is just to say that the ordering is occasional rather than a core element of the design.

Lack of agency is the core reason why these titles are often excluded from the category of “games.” They are “visual novels,” or “audiovisual poems,” or “interactive movies” (6). There are no challenges to overcome, only scraps of information for us to mentally put in order. And yet, the interactive element is core to the experience. It serves to pace revelations in a way that a written journal could not accomplish, and this creates natural pauses for contemplation. It serves to devolve the order in which we have experiences to the player, which sets it apart from a movie. It allows for the invocation of explicit spatiality which few other forms of recreation are able to manage.

In one branch of *The Stanley Parable*, the player encounters a museum of art assets used to make *The Stanley Parable*—this self-referential aspect is one of its common themes. In many ways, *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home* are more akin to museum exhibits—artistic installations, rather than stories. However, it is in this area where the last benefit of interactivity becomes important—interactivity allows for the persistence of individualised context. *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* offer something akin to an *unguided tour*—we can wander the environments, appreciate the atmosphere, and learn of the exhibits. Importantly, once we have done so the game will remember our path through the narrative. We are never presented more than once with story unless we explicitly make an effort to seek out repetition. We have no need to cognitively process the novelty of revelations—if we are presented it, it is novel. It likely has import, and it likely opens up parts of the story that have, until now, been dark.

Despite the fact they allow for the exploration of fictional stories, *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* should perhaps be considered a distinct genre of game—empathic experience simulators. The interactive element ensures that we have a sense of presence within the world, and this in turn opens up opportunities for deep engagement with the stories of the characters that previously inhabited it. We do not simply skim over the emotional resonance of the characters in these games because we are not permitted that choice—we encounter their personal

battles in vignette form and then contemplate the implications as we explore the environment.

This resonance would be lost were these games to offer more ludic elements. Humans have hard limits for cognitive processing and our minds are cost-averse (Kahneman, 2011). When focusing on solving puzzles, defeating enemies and navigating spatial complexity the mental processing to do so must of a necessity come from somewhere else. That cost in many cases is in an appreciation of the depth of the environmental story-telling. It is often argued that Valve's *Left 4 Dead* (2008) has no story. To say this is to discount all of the many and varied clues as to the break-down of society that are embedded in the context. We can tell much from the way in which art assets are deployed—when we see abandoned cars on the street, we can tell that the apocalypse has not been raging long. How else could the headlights on the cars still be lit up? We can tell that there is still some power flowing to the electricity grid, because we pass televisions that show only test patterns. From that, we can tell that there are at least some television channels that are no longer in a position to broadcast. By aggregating all of these small individual clues we can tell a lot about the world around us as we progress from one frantic battle to another.

However, *Left 4 Dead* is also a fast-paced zombie shooter—it is unsurprising that the action does not encourage players to deeply contemplate the significance of small clues in their surroundings. We have other priorities—there are zombies everywhere! The people who stopped to think about such things became the massed ranks of the undead that we are now being relentlessly forced to combat.

The natural pauses built into *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home* are more effective in allowing us to think deeply about the things we are experiencing. They invite us to consider the meaning of ultrasound photographs on a table, or the placement of a sign in front of a door. In return, what we get is a fuller appreciation of a story told in multiple different dimensions—not simply audio, sound and text but in spatial significance.

Koster (2004) provides a definition of 'game' that is relevant here—a game is an engine for generating interesting opportunities for learning. While this brief restatement misses out much of the nuance of his original definition, it captures the heart of what makes *Gone Home* and *Dear Esther* so compelling. They are not tools for helping us master a task, but instead tools for helping us understand a network of relationships. They require us to engage parts of our mind that traditional games rarely exercise. They present a challenging environment that stresses the understanding of association and the often deeply interlinked elements of meaning. Judging by Koster's definition, they are tremendously effective games.

We can think of the 'challenge' that these games set us as challenges of sympathy. They challenge us to step into the shoes of another person, one with pre-existing but not necessarily explicit relationships to an environment and a set of characters, and attempt to unravel the meaning of the changed context in which they find themselves. For example, within *Dear*

*Esther* we understand more of the context of the island and its symbolism as we encounter clues within the world. In the process, we understand more of the character we play, and our relationship *with* the character. Our understanding is never complete, as mysteries remain, but we begin to develop the necessary sympathetic relationship to feel something of the pain and anguish that characterise the experience. Within *Gone Home*, our gradual exploration of the house and the narrative elements left for us to discover give us a disjointed insight into an absent character's struggle with their own sexuality and identity. Our job isn't to solve a problem, but instead to understand a situation or connect with a character. We do not win when we complete the game, we win when we *understand* the major players within the narrative. In the end, we are the ones who decide if we won or lost, not the game, and the result of analysis of our understanding is an almost entirely emotional deliverable.

In this respect, they are puzzles of empathy. They stress emotional intelligence rather than fluid intelligence or physical reactions. As befits understanding as subjective as empathy, they eschew ludic conventions such as score, levels, stats or attributes. While they may lack these surface elements of gameplay, they offer instead an avenue for exploring parts of the human condition that other games simply ignore. They are, to coin a phrase, 'empathic puzzles'.

## Conclusion

Excepting *The Walking Dead*, which had a large degree of critical and commercial success, it can be difficult to convince mainstream gamers of the value of what might be considered experimental narrative gameplay. While all the titles discussed in this paper have seen sales sufficient to commercially justify their development, much of this has occurred as a result of the natural glut of activity and curiosity that tends to accompany a Steam sale or a Humble Bundle (Griffiths, 2013; Peel, 2013). For many gamers, these titles remain esoteric and psychologically inaccessible. They are too unusual. They're too unabashedly indie. They're pretentious, or they're just 'not games'.

However, within this paper the authors have argued that these four games, despite their similarity in style and intention, fall into two distinct but valid gaming categories. The first of these, in which *The Walking Dead* and *The Stanley Parable* are situated, are spiritual successors to the game-book series that were popular during the eighties. *Dear Esther* and *Gone Home*, on the other hand, are successors of the purely narrative interactive fiction that blossomed after the commercial death of the classic text adventure. The former explore the implication of choice and the illusion of agency within video games. The latter offer an environment in which the player can explore an emotional connection with an environment and its characters and allow an opportunity for a player's emotional intelligence to be stretched and strengthened.

The battle to convince the mainstream of the value of purely narrative games might be unwinnable in a marketplace driven by AAA titles and franchise shooters. However, those who

wish to experience a different perspective on what games can be and what they can teach us about ourselves will find much to appreciate in the titles discussed in this paper. In many ways these games offer a new lens through which to view not just gameplay itself, but what constitutes challenge within video games. Emotional and empathic skills are seldom truly stressed in games, and a fuller understanding of the games discussed within the paper offer a potential way to extend the toolkit of challenges that a game may present. This offers a route to additional depth and variety for game developers, as well as a new avenue for critics and scholars connected to the analysis of ludic and narrative works.

### Endnotes

1. See Wikipedia's "game definitions" page for example at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game#Definitions>
2. For examples, see the Steam and Gamefaqs fora here: <http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2565449>, <http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/656674-dear-esther/reviews/review-154987>, <http://steamcommunity.com/app/232430/discussions/o/666827315430982852/>, and <http://steamcommunity.com/app/221910/discussions/o/792924412447538097/>
3. For example, section 6 which is the outcome of sections 2, 25, 43 and 67.
4. <http://www2.open.ac.uk/openlearn/philosophy/castle-forest-island-sea.html>
5. [http://editthis.info/create\\_Your\\_Own\\_Adventure/](http://editthis.info/create_Your_Own_Adventure/)
6. For examples, see the messages and reviews here: <http://forums.steampowered.com/forums/showthread.php?t=2547158>, <http://garrysgamingblog.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/dear-esther-worlds-first-interactive.html>, and <http://www.pcgamer.com/uk/review/gone-home-review/>

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