# "Insert Your Soul to Continue": The Self-Reflections of Metafictional Digital Games

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**ABSTRACT:**
Metafiction is a self-reflective narrative form that examines and critiques its own themes and structure, serving as a mirror that reflects both its creator and its audience. Within this context, metafiction in digital games breaks through the artifice of narrative to address the players directly as the facilitators of the story and collaborators whose play patterns, personal experiences, expectations, and habits shape game narratives. With the application of both game theory and literary analysis, this paper will examine a selection of metagames: Lovecraftian horror game *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* displaying meta-mechanics as a form of disempowerment, satirical walking simulators *The Stanley Parable* and *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* deconstructing the established game tropes, self-aware characters of games *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* presenting the developer as a metaphorical adversary, and fictional nonfiction *The Beginner's Guide* dissecting the parasocial relationship between developers and players, and the mentally taxing nature of game development. This paper will showcase the meta mechanics and disruptions in such games as wholly unique forms of metatextuality. Ultimately, this paper aims to establish a metagame canon, suggest a typology, and acknowledge metafiction's place as an essential and inseparable mirror for the storytelling medium of digital games.

# Introduction

All well-established traditions of storytelling eventually turn inward to examine their own machinations and engage in self-reflection. As experimental anti-novels with such reflections gained traction in the world of literature in the 1970s, Gass (1970) coined the term *metafiction* to refer to this new, introspective narrative form, defining it as "the capacity of fiction to reflect on its own status as fiction" (Neumann & Nünning, 2014, p. 204). These narratives "pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality ... providing a critique of their own methods of construction" (Waugh, 1984, p. 2), achieved through *defamiliarization* as "the laying bare of literary devices in metafiction brings to the reader's attention those formal elements of which, through over-familiarization, he has become unaware" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 24). This unmasking is facilitated through the deconstruction of not only narratives, but also the specific language and building blocks of mediums, the tools through which stories are told such as metafictional literature which pulls the focus "away from the story told to the storytelling" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 35), metatheatre which "break[s] the imaginary fourth wall" (Bell, 2008, p. 38) to call attention to the fabricated division between the performers on stage and the audience, and metacinema which utilizes "the showing of the process and machinery of film production and presentation" (Siska, 1979, p. 286). These metanarratives do not simply dissect the stories told, but also how they are told.

The medium of digital games has also engaged in similar forms of self-reflection to create metagames which present "an increasing awareness of their own mediality, their inner workings, and how they function" (Schubert, 2021, p. 212). It is important to note that the term *metagaming* has been widely used as a verb to refer to "the consideration of other players' habits and previous play styles in the strategy decision making process" (Carter et al., 2012, p. 3) in competitive games or the distinction between "what a player and what a player's character does or does not know" (p. 4) in role playing games. However, we will be interpreting the term as described by Waszkiewicz (2024) pertaining to *metareferentiality* that utilizes the specific language of digital games to create unique iterations of metatextuality. Similar to the specific machinations of metafictional literature, metatheatre, or metacinema, metagames also achieve metatextuality by not only deconstructing their narrative but also their unique language of game mechanics, the very structures and codes that make up the game itself, in order to "produce a self-reflexivity specific to their medium, a metatextuality distinct from the achievements of postmodern art" (Fest, 2016, p. 9). In order to achieve this, metagames also engage in defamiliarization, which Mitchell (2016) refers to as *poetic gameplay*:

> that draws attention to the form of the game, and by doing so encourages the player to reflect upon and see that structure in a new way [while] working both within and against structural constraints, with the player engaged in a process of discovery and interpretation. (Mitchell, 2016, pp. 2-3)

This method disorients players, dismantles expectations, and provokes visceral emotionality and self-reflection through a unique breaking of the fourth wall by dismantling the magic circle that constitutes both the game playground and the shield that protects "the fantasy world from the outside world" (Castronova, 2005, p. 147).

These metagames utilize such disruptive and defamiliarizing mechanics to explore certain themes specific to their medium. They examine not only narrative traditions, tropes, and the culture surrounding games, but the players themselves as "thematized parts of the narrative situation, acknowledged as having a co-producing function" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 35). Such games acknowledge players as collaborators, as essential parts of the narrative, as facilitators without whom the narrative literally would not progress. In doing so, they dissect the play patterns, habits, and expectations of players as fundamental parts of the emerging narrative. Lastly, metagames include creators and developers, reflecting upon themselves, examining the creative process, the difficulties of game development and the relationship between creators and players. They are the players who absorb what gaming culture has to offer and transform it into a self-reflective metanarrative.

These meta experimentations have borne fruit to countless metagames within the gaming landscape. Early examples offered brief nods towards the players but did not comprehensively interact with the game mechanics. For instance, Sonic impatiently taps his foot while waiting for the player to move him in *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sonic Team, 1991), Cranky Kong references the old single-screen games he used to play in *Donkey Kong Country* (Rare, 1994), and Lara Croft shoots the screen to prevent the player from seeing her in the shower in *Tomb Raider II* (Core Design, 1997). The metagame boom, starting in the 2010s, brought along games that built their foundations on metatextual gameplay, such as *The Magic Circle* (Question, 2015), *Undertale* (Fox, 2015), *CALENDULA* (Blooming Buds Studio, 2016), *IMSCARED* (Ivan Zanotti's MyMadnessWorks, 2016), *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato, 2017), *There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension* (Draw Me A Pixel, 2020), and *Alan Wake 2* (Remedy Entertainment, 2023).

In this paper, we will analyse a specific selection of metagames within this massive and ever-growing genre; *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002),

*The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013), *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* (Crows Crows Crows, 2022), *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2016), *Inscryption* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021), and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited, 2015), with each example selected for its unique and specific take on metatextuality. We will be applying a three-pronged approach that encompasses ludic analysis that situates gameplay mechanics as the language of gaming, narratological analysis that explores the story elements, and a form of formalist analysis that emphasizes the "aesthetic experience that emerges from playing a game [that] allows the player to make a meaningful connection between the work and their own lived experience" (Mitchell & Van Vught, 2023, p. 108). The paper aims to establish a canon of metafictional digital games and showcase a wide range of metacritical instances. The primary examples include *Eternal Darkness,* which utilizes metagame mechanics as a form of disempowerment within the horror genre, *The Stanley Parable* and *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe,* which deconstruct the established tropes and expectations of digital games, *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* both of which present the developer as a metaphorical adversary within the narrative, and *The Beginner's Guide*, which comments on the potentially parasocial relationship between the players and developers. With the examination of these games, we aim to create a thorough account of meta-reflective games that demonstrates that this collective metagame canon has emerged from the need to reflect upon digital games as an ever-growing medium of storytelling. This established canon mirrors the evolution of the digital game landscape itself, thus becoming an essential part of the medium.

# Terror Beyond the Fourth Wall

While metagames may utilize metatextuality for various effects such as humour, empowerment, or cynicism, one of the most striking effects that can be accomplished through the use of meta-aspects is disempowerment. Games are often perceived by players and constructed by developers as a medium of empowerment that grants players miraculous abilities and places them in wish-fulfilling scenarios where they can use these abilities to their fullest. As such, dismantling these game conventions by taking players' powers away in stressful moments and engaging in defamiliarizing poetic gameplay by "undermining player expectations for control" (Mitchell, 2016, p. 1), directly questions the prevailing idea that digital games serve as power fantasies. In fact, one of the first prominent games to utilize metagame mechanics does so in order to disempower players. In *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998), the mind-reading boss Psycho Mantis' abilities are showcased with his ability to read the player's PlayStation Memory Card and list the players' other Konami games if they do have any save files on their card. He then proceed to utilize the rumble on the controller to showcase his psychic abilities. Furthermore, the boss battle with Psycho Mantis becomes impossible due to the establishment of this psychic link and the only way to overcome this battle is to plug in a different controller to sever the link. This early example of metatextuality in digital games not only emerges as a significant step towards the incorporation of game mechanics into the metanarrative, but it perfectly displays metagames' potential to unsettle the player by interfering with their control of the game.

However, the example of Psycho Mantis is but a brief meta moment of disempowerment in an otherwise action focused game. As such, a genre that allows for raw vulnerability, such as the genre of horror, would prove more conducive to the creation of

a more comprehensively disempowering metagame experience. According to Krzywinska (2015), horror is extremely compatible with the defamiliarization aspect of metafiction as it "play[s] with, and against, game media's normative expectations of mastery" (p. 293), actively taking power and agency away from players in order to isolate and terrorize them, "generat[ing] a strong and direct sense of loss and vulnerability" (p. 296). While meta disruptions in digital games may be considered "a risky effect to use, because [they] will either remove control or perception from the player" (Haahr, 2018, p. 201), this disorienting and unexpected effect transforms them into powerful methods of disempowerment or defamiliarization in horror, as they allow the game to assert its own autonomy and control. They contest the conventional perception of a piece of software as "a docile and pliable entity" and the assumption that "we are in control … that machine has no personality or consciousness of its own" (Conway, 2010, p. 149). Breaking the fourth wall in a horror context removes the final barrier that shields players against the terrors of the narrative by creating the illusion that the source of horror can acknowledge and even affect real life.

This potential of metafiction is utilized deftly in the Lovecraftian horror game *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*. One of the many horror elements the game makes use of is the Sanity Meter, which tracks the player character's health and exposure to monsters and causes hallucinations if the meter is too low. Many of these effects break the fourth wall to directly distort not only the reality of the character, but also the reality of the player, such as a message alerting the player that controller one is not connected, volume decreasing as the game mutes itself, the screen going black while the sounds of the game continue, the game pretending to reset and displaying the starting screen, a blue error screen imitating an operating system, the player character shooting the screen, the game pretending to abruptly finish by displaying a screen that suggests the story will continue in a non-existent sequel, and the most notorious effect, the game going to options, selecting the player's save file and pretending to delete it. These metamechanics create "a palpable sense for players of helplessness, their hands no longer able to enact will through the suddenly lifeless controlling device" (Krzywinska, 2015, p. 294). The fact that these effects are not solitary examples but repeatable patterns that are directly connected to the player's ability to manage their sanity makes them a fundamental and consistent part of the game mechanics.

Furthermore, these meta mechanics are harmonious with the game's narrative of cosmic horror. Rooted in Lovecraft's (1987) distinction between "literature of cosmic fear" and "the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome" (pp. 367-368), cosmic horror is a grander spectacle that examines the inconsequential and irrelevant nature of humans in the face of unknowable entities. These tales often feature a protagonist who, upon seeing horrors beyond comprehension, is driven mad by the realities their mind cannot contain. This particular strain of horror is rife with the potential of meta referentiality with characters teetering at the edge of forbidden knowledge which may lead to the realization of the artifice of the fictional world. Within this context, *Eternal Darkness*' narrative emphasizes "the loss of a controlling grasp on the nature of reality (nothing is what it seems) and the concomitant 'reality' of occulted forces" (Krzywinska, 2015, p. 295). As such, meta disruptions of game mechanics become a vital part of both the story and the disempowering atmosphere of the game. The incomprehensible awareness of absolute reality leads to the metatextual awareness of constructed reality to reveal the terror beyond the fourth wall, and the consequent state of insanity reveals the border crossing, jarring nature of metatextual realization. While *Eternal Darkness* emerges as an early example of this type of reach through the screen via consistent meta mechanics, many later games followed in its footsteps and utilized the foundation established in this game to build further transgressions of the game mechanics. Meta disruptions of the game

mechanics can be found in many later entries into the horror genre such as *IMSCARED, Doki Doki Literature Club!, Inscryption,* and *Alan Wake 2.* Furthermore, the through line of peering into the unknown and discovering absolute reality has continued to be a major part of later Lovecraftian digital games such as *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Headfirst Productions, 2005), *The Sinking City* (Frogwares, 2019), and *Dagon: by H. P. Lovecraft* (Bit Golem, 2021). All of these elements of disempowerment, which have become a popular method of horror not simply in metagames but in the larger genre of survival horror, owe their development to the revelations derived from the internal reflections of metafictional digital games that were able to acknowledge their conventions and carve a path for their deconstruction.

# A Game That Plays You

In her examination of metanarratives, Waugh (1984) posits the question: "Why do metafictional [narratives] so frequently concern themselves with the problem of human freedom?" (p. 119). At the base of the concept of metafiction lies the desire to break the rules, free oneself from the entrapment of the narrative and see behind the curtain, stemming from "a concern with the idea of being trapped within someone's else's order" (Waugh, 1984, p. 120). While all forms of metafiction may concern themselves with such ponderings, metagames in particular have a vested interest in a possible examination of this entrapment as a play medium featuring platforms and adventures with specific, predetermined designs hidden under the illusion of choice. Although *Eternal Darkness* certainly invoked the feeling of such entrapment to horrify players, its metatextuality was more of an examination of fictional cosmic forces. As more and more self-reflections accumulated, the landscape of gaming was gearing up for a more comprehensive examination of common gaming conventions, possibly examining multiple genres and determining the larger expectations of players and developers alike.

*The Stanley Parable*, created by Davey Wreden and William Pugh, and featuring a character named Stanley, who finds himself in an empty office only accompanied by a narrator guiding him with his instructive narration, hinges on Waugh's (1984) idea of being entrapped under the watchful eye of an overlord. The game's branching, massive narrative "draws attention to the digital, procedural materiality of digital games ... a complex, historically self-aware metafiction that dwells critically on the generic, formal, and cultural conventions of digital games" (Fest, 2016, pp. 1-2). This overt examination of player patterns is distinctly separate from the meta elements of *Eternal Darkness* which simply acknowledged the fact that it is a game while *The Stanley Parable* starts the trend of acknowledging gaming culture, from the expectations of players, to game mechanic models. The existence of a narrator in an interactive medium is already a problematic framework as "it would subvert or hinder the player's decision-making process in the game world, as well as their individualised emergent experiences" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 60). As such, it is crucial that *The Stanley Parable* creates a narrative voice which is engaged in an ever-present conflict with the player. Thus, the friction between the narrator's instructions and the player's decisions "exposes the problematic combination of coherent narration with a player's freedom of choice" (Herte, 2016, p. 30), allowing the game to explore the concept of predetermined paths, linear narratives, and intended play that make up traditional digital game narratives and the player's urge to break these rules.

Under this friction and disobedience lies the illusion of choice. If the player was truly rebelling against an oppressive, rigid set of rules, these decisions would result in errors

or game crashes. However, while the Narrator berates the player for not obeying him, the game does account for these decisions as it reveals new paths, dialogues, and narrative beats after each supposed divergence from the suggested path. Critic Dan Olson calls this contradiction *intentional disobedience*, stating: "If there is crafted content on the other side of your misbehavior, then it's not actually misbehavior" (Folding Ideas, 2017). This disobedience lays bare the dissonance between predetermined and necessarily limited options offered by digital games and the increasingly ambitious expectations of accounting for players' every whim, good or bad faith decision, or habit. As these claims of endless play and content increase, players may become more judgmental and suspicious, eager to poke holes in such narratives. *The Stanley Parable* emerges as a probable culmination of this culture of abundance. While it is initially presented as a game with seemingly endless paths, as the narrative collapses in on itself, it becomes apparent that such promises are either impossible or incredibly draining on the developers. This friction allows a complex relationship to emerge between the narrator and Stanley which becomes the crux of the narrative. This is a type of relationship that will eventually become a familiar pattern in further metagames; the specific ways developers connect to and are influenced by players. The game demonstrates "an experimental battle between would-be omniscient narrator and player-character" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 61) as the narrator's overwhelming directions inform Stanley's erratic behaviour and his erratic behaviour informs the creative decisions of the narrator in return. The narrator is presented as the creator of the story who is agitated by Stanley's specific methods of navigating his story, asking, "Was it worth ruining the entire story I had written out specifically for you?", and constantly trying to decipher "these strange and unknowable desires of yours" (Galactic Café, 2013), what the player may want out of his game. There are also instances where the narrator abandons the role of the anxious storyteller desperate for approval to assert his authority: "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. This is not a challenge. It's a tragedy" (Galactic Café, 2013). He mocks the player's completionist efforts in chasing all endings such as spending a significant amount of time in a broom closet, jumping to their death in the hopes that something different might happen or staying in rooms with nothing to do in search of more dialogue. The narrator sees these efforts as futile attempts at creating a meaningful narrative, ultimately stating: "[Stanley] needs me. Someone who will wrap everything up at the end, to make sense out of the chaos, and the fear, and the confusion" (Galactic Café, 2013). However, the game also demonstrates the mutual nature of this relationship, stating: "How they wish to destroy one another. How they wish to control one another... Can you see how much they need one another?" (Galactic Café, 2013). The notion that a narrator needs an audience to receive his stories, and a story needs a witness to experience it in order to be complete becomes especially crucial in digital games which need players to progress their narratives. Thus, players in *The Stanley Parable* become "inevitably part of the game world" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 63) as collaborators and essential, non-negotiable parts of the story. No matter how much the narrator bemoans the player's unpredictability, and the players might bemoan the frustrating presence of the narrator, they are locked in an inevitable bond.

This complex relationship returns in full force in the DLC continuation of the game, *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe*. While the original game weaves a narrative that critiques larger trends and patterns in the world of gaming, it also inevitably becomes a part of these larger trends and as it gains fame, its metanarrative is reworked into the larger gaming world. *Ultra Deluxe* explores this legacy, as the original game's immense popularity and acclaim place the expansion in a unique position to reflect on itself as an important and groundbreaking part of gaming history. In this new narrative, the narrator takes the

player on a nostalgic journey through the development process of the original game, followed by positive reviews by high profile digital game critics, only to be confronted by negative player reviews on Steam. Disheartened by these critiques, the narrator proceeds to change the game, trying to add what the players found lacking in the original game in order to appease them, such as a jumping mechanic, a skip button that skips his own narration, and even an object called the Reassurance Bucket which becomes an object of affection through the narrator's intense personification as a direct reference to the similar use of the Companion Cube in the game *Portal* (Valve, 2007). Trapped between praise and criticism, the narrator slowly transforms the game to fit all possible game genres to the point that it barely resembles *The Stanley Parable*, dismantling his own narration in the process in a critique of modern game development trends that favour maximizing content and playtime instead of distilling the narrative into perfected mechanics. The expansion takes on nine years of discourse and critique of the original game and the growing gaming culture as a whole, self-reflecting from every imaginable angle and ultimately creating, as the Narrator exclaims while repeating praising reviews, a game that embodies "Every game ever created!" (Crows Crows Crows, 2022). While the mechanics of *The Stanley Parable* do not reflect the vast variety of existing gameplay options, the way it reflects on the pitfalls of gaming conventions and player expectations creates an all-encompassing, layered, and evergreen metacritique that successfully simulates the feeling of playing every game ever created.

# The Developer as the Adversary

While *The Stanley Parable*'s self-aware character was a well-meaning but rigid guide through the narrative, developer Daniel Mullins' self-aware characters in his games *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* are direct adversaries, transforming the gaming space into a terrifying prison from which player characters are desperately trying to escape. While *Pony Island* starts off as a simple platformer with a cheery disposition, it soon becomes apparent that the game itself is designed by Satan himself, toying with the player character who is a trapped soul with dreams of freedom. The core mechanic of the game is the way various game settings refuse to work as they are supposed to, forcing the player to dig around the code and make changes to progress. As Mullins states in an interview: "A big part of what *Pony Island* was, was about taking the expectations you have about games…and flipping them upside down" (Muncy, 2016, para. 17). Such deconstruction of the game's interactive language "empower[s] the player to move through 'cracks' in the façade of the fictional world by acting as a metaphorical programmer, manipulating game files" (Edrei, 2018, p. 112). This unravelling of the game's inner workings is accompanied by the game becoming more and more corrupted and unstable, raising suspicions regarding possible damage to the game's code or even the player's hardware. This mechanic "alienate[s] the player from the cybernetic system that makes up gameplay" (Barkman, 2021, p. 2), disrupting the players' conventional perceptions to put the player in a constant state of uncertainty, but also invoke a sense of mischief and rebellious progression. The truly unsettling metafictional elements of the game take inspiration from *Eternal Darkness* but adapted to a modern setting such as the game sending a fake friend message on Steam or displaying a fake crash screen, blurring the line between "what takes place inside and outside the game's diegesis" (Barkman, 2021, p. 10). The game also

establishes itself as a game within a game, with ever-present visual elements such as the screen presented as a monitor and the player character's hand shown. However, these elements are gradually rendered near-invisible by their constant presence as the players are drawn into a false sense of security.

*Pony Island* utilizes the player instinct to dismantle game codes as an essential part of the mechanics. Paired with the presentation of the developer as Satan intent on trapping souls, the game creates a dynamic that is much more contentious than the relationship between Stanley and the Narrator, casting the developer of the game as the ultimate adversary and asking: "What's the role of the creator in his own creation?" (Muncy, 2016, para. 8). At the same time, the game utilizes the same intentional disobedience *The Stanley Parable* uses as Lucifer constantly orders the player to cease their efforts while the game needs to guide the player towards disobedience, creating "the feeling of playing something that feels like I wasn't supposed to play it" (Couture, 2016, para. 4). Ultimately, through the use of metafictional narrative and mechanics, the game perfectly achieves that sense of forbidden peeking behind the curtain.

With these reflections in mind, it is easy to recognize that Mullins' next game, *Inscryption*, is a culmination of these themes, taken to higher extremes and woven into a metagame experience that is mechanically and aesthetically much more complex. On the surface, *Inscryption* is a roguelike deck-building game where the player competes against a mysterious rival. In reality, the game exists on multiple layers: 1.) the card game, 2.) the mysterious cabin the player character is trapped in where they are playing the card game, 3.) the character of Luke Carder, a streamer who finds the game on a buried floppy disk and starts playing and recording the footage we are watching as players, and lastly, 4.) the players themselves in the real world. Interweaving all of these layers is the true crux of the story, self-aware characters in the game toying with the player and trying to escape the confines of the game, creating games within games and layered realities within the game universe. Similar to *Pony Island*, the opening title screen establishes the meta elements right away, with the new game selection greyed out and the player only being able to access "Continue Game" as a sign of the game's second-hand status. Upon continuing, the player will find themselves in a cabin where they will be playing the card game with the option to occasionally get up and explore. Despite this limited interactivity that might give the initial impression of freedom, the player character is indeed trapped here at the mercy and amusement of their opponent in the shadows which "turns the 'magic circle' into a 'magic prison', whereby the notion of voluntary, rule-bound, separated play becomes threatening" (Ford & Thorkildsen, 2023, p. 2). Players will need to free themselves from the cabin to physically find the New Game option, restore it to the main menu, and progress in the hopes of eventual freedom.

The exploration of the cabin and the revealing of further, distinct games establish the games-within-a-game dynamic while the existence of *Inscryption* as a game in this universe is established through live-action sequences that tell the story of Luke Carder acquiring the game. It is eventually revealed, through certain interruptions in the gameplay such as camera effects or Luke's voice reacting to certain thresholds and victories, that the player's playthrough is in fact Luke's recording of his own playthrough which positions the player as Luke. His entanglement with this powerful piece of software leads to initial intrigue, further obsession, and eventual death in his efforts to uncover the truth. The game also utilizes meta-malfunctions that directly interact with the player's reality as one boss utilizes the player's Steam friend list to name cards, while another accesses the player's actual hard drive, listing their real files, asking the player to choose personal files, even threatening to delete them if the player fails in a boss battle. Here, instead of a meta effect that happens on the screen without the player's control, *Inscryption* forces the

player to become an accomplice in their own terrorization. The uncertainty over whether the size of the file would be a benefit or a detriment to the player or if the game would actually be able to delete the file further enhances the effect. These meta game mechanics which "directly comment on the idea of how a game interacts with the lives of those who play it" (Howard, 2024, pp. 37-38) paired with the eventual murder of the player stand-in character of Luke serve as the ultimate culmination of the ever-present threat of a self-aware digital game reaching through the screen and affecting real life.

Narratively, the use of a competitive card game between two players in an intimate and isolated space invokes the trope of "playing chess with Death" (Caldwell, 2021, para. 14). Much like Lucifer in *Pony Island*, *Inscryption* also presents the player with characters who both construct the game and play it against the player. However, while these characters put the player through a harrowing gauntlet, the game also creates a complex dynamic between the player and the adversary they spend hours trying to beat. The opponent in Act 1, Leshy, starts as a terrifying captor and slowly turns into a more nuanced entity. The very last card game with Leshy has a nostalgic and bittersweet atmosphere with the game acknowledging the strange kinship that develops between him and the player during their hours of play as Leshy laments and begs: "Shall we play one more game? ... For so long I thought I would never play again" (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021). Compared to the strictly adversarial dynamic between the player and the developer in *Pony Island*, *Inscryption* takes a more nuanced approach, finding a balance between the necessary antagonism of a fight and the bonding experience of a common goal; the player and the developer trapped in the universe of the game together, but this time allowed to occupy the same space, sit at the same table, and see eye to eye.

# The Developer as the False Ideal

While the metanarrative may cast the creator of the narrative as the ultimate gatekeeper that withholds the truth underneath, it may also take the opposite stance and present the creator as a seeming friend and confidant with whom the player assumes a connection. Developed by Davey Wreden, the creator of *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide* utilizes a games-within-a-game approach to examine this false and potentially dangerous narrative through the eyes of an unreliable narrator. The story features creator Davey Wreden as himself, guiding the player with his narration through a series of mini-games made by a developer named Coda. These experimental games vary in genre, mechanics, and aesthetics with the emerging narrative showcasing Coda's evolution as a developer. The player navigates these games under Wreden's guidance and analysis as he constantly posits the question: "What was going through [Coda's] head as he was building this?" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). The game's unconventional presentation and narrative have led to speculations regarding its nature, sparking various definitions such as "a game-flavored monologue" (Moulthrop, 2020, p. 91) and a "ludographic essay" (Fassone, 2018, p. 67). These interpretations emphasize the game's nature as a reflective, nonfictional narrative, established by Wreden's open identification of the narrator as himself. Naturally, this identification is a half-truth as developer Wreden creates "a fictionalized author narrator, or autofictional narrator" (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 14) by interweaving his personal feelings with an embodiment of fandom culture. This hybrid fictional nonfiction narrative "represents its own production and the idea of game designer

as 'auteur'" (Jørgensen, 2017, p. 1), highlighting both the internal workings of the medium in general and the internal workings of its creator and narrator in specific.

The only information about Coda and how their games came to be is provided by Wreden himself. As Fejes (2021) argues: "while the implied player is interacting in some way with Coda's 'persona' and the works he made, this interaction is only illusory as the implied player can only gather narrative information through the narrative acts of Davey" (p. 255). Wreden's sole, unchallenged voice as a constant presence, his authoritative interpretations, and his assurance that he is personally acquainted with Coda all serve to manipulate the player's own impressions by encouraging them to absorb his assertions as absolute truths. In his overbearing analyses, "fuelled by an urge to define a coherent, stable identity of both Coda's work and person" (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 16), Wreden takes certain themes too literally or tries to ascertain Coda's life from the art they produce. He does so by constantly asserting assumptions about Coda's artistic vision ("Coda believes his games are connected somehow"), the presumed intentionality of bugs in the games ("Coda identifies something about [the glitch]"), their thematic intentions ("weird for weirdness sakes") and most importantly, their inner psyche ("I think it's awful to watch this, to see a person basically unraveling through their work") (Everything Unlimited, 2015). As the game's narrative becomes increasingly overwhelmed by his interpretations, it soon becomes apparent that Wreden is an unreliable narrator.

Wreden's initial self-presentation as an aspiring developer and friend at the beginning of the game grows ever more inconsistent, slowly revealing that he is not as close to Coda as he initially claimed to be. He misinterprets not only Coda's perspective as a developer, but the true nature of their relationship and Coda's mental state as his ever-present commentary starts to evoke "an unpleasant feeling of emotional colonialism ... as though something owed has not quite been delivered" (Hudson, 2015, para. 7). In addition to these interpretive transgressions, Wreden also begins to force his own interpretations into the games' codes, not content with simply speculating. He modifies a game about slowly crawling up stairs so that the player can go up at a normal speed. He removes walls from a puzzle game to show the assets on the other side. The most egregious example of this is the lamp post seen at the end of every game, which Wreden initially claimed was Coda's signature, only for the story to reveal that it was Wreden himself who inserted this asset into the games. In hindsight, his explanation of the lamp post that he himself put into the game is very telling: "[Coda] wants something to hold onto. He wants a reference point, he wants the work to be leading to something. He wants a destination! Which is what this lamppost is" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). As the false nature of Wreden's insistent interpretation is revealed, the game's "initial assumption– that a work allows the recipient to know the individual who created it – is exposed as a romantic hermeneutic power fantasy tantamount to imprinting a work with one's own projected meanings" (Backe & Thon, 2019, pp. 18-19). Wreden's interjections, clearly rooted in projection, create conflicting feelings in players who have been relying on his commentary and identifying with his perspective, leading to doubts regarding "not just what [the game] means, but whether [they]'ve been looking for meaning in games in the wrong way altogether" (Hudson, 2015, para. 3). Even the personal information Wreden shared about Coda becomes dubious. Coda may be a confidant or a stranger, a man as he claims or a different gender altogether. While Coda and their artistic vision are seemingly the focus of this narrative, the player has no means of truly getting to know Coda as Wreden is the true focus and protagonist of the game.

All of this culminates in Coda's final game, filled with impossible obstacles that can only be overcome by changing the game's code as Wreden has been doing. This final game ends with a striking level, a simple room with walls covered in personal messages from

Coda: "Would you stop taking my games and showing them to people against my wishes? Violating the one boundary that keeps me safe? Would you stop changing my games?" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). This finale lays bare the true parasocial nature of Wreden's relationship with Coda. Defined as "the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215), parasocial relationships are an ever-present part of all mediums that tell intimate stories and invite spectators to engage with them, creating the misconception that the creator has a close relationship with the audience. While this connection is genuine to some degree and crucial for art, the phenomenon of parasocial relationships specifically refers to overbearing and false perceptions which may reach critically dangerous levels depending on the fame of the creator. *The Beginner's Guide* explores this concept within the context of gaming culture, with fans distorting the original intent of their favourite digital games and projecting their own personal problems onto creators who do not know them. Through Wreden's interactions with Coda's work, we can see him engaging in what Camus (1992) calls "the inauthentic fictionalizing of others" (p. 226) as he is trying to use Coda's art as a way of accessing the person themselves, stating: "I want us to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). This approach is rooted in Wreden's personal interactions with fans of *The Stanley Parable*: "I had emails from people who told me I had forever changed the way they saw the world [and] from people who wanted me to know I was a spineless coward who should hate himself" (Wreden, 2022, para. 3)*. The Beginner's Guide* weaves these anxieties into the narrative, projecting them onto Coda with Wreden positioned as the enthusiastic fan who transforms his excitement into a codependent, one-sided relationship. As the character of Coda is fictional and their games are indeed created by Wreden, it is easy to recognize that the dynamic between the implicitly metaphorical entity of Coda and Wreden embodies a "psychomachia, the struggle between halves of a divided self" (Moulthrop, 2020, p. 93). Wreden fictionalizes the artistic part of himself as Coda while the character who shares his name becomes a conduit through which he attempts to process the anxieties and ambitions of his fans.

In addition to this intimate character study, Coda's final words also touch on larger gaming trends such as "the relationship of videogame players and videogame authors" (Backe & Thon, 2019, p. 18) through the examination of an intimate and contentious connection between a developer and a fanatical player. Fans' constant demands shape the content of games as the open channel of communication facilitated by social media amplifies their voices. Horton and Wohl (1956) argue that "the more the performer seems to adjust his performance to the supposed response of the audiences, the more the audience tends to make the response anticipated" (p. 215). As such, just as the Narrator reconstructed his games to please Stanley and critics, so did Coda alter their own games, stating: "You've so infected my personal space that it's possible I did begin to plant 'solutions' in my work somewhere, hidden between games" (Everything Unlimited, 2015). This amplification of parasocial interactions extends beyond demands for content changes to include expectations of personal validation and emotional intimacy. As Coda states, "You desperately need something and I cannot give it to you" (Everything Unlimited, 2015), it becomes apparent that Wreden has used this camaraderie between him and Coda not only as a professional connection, but a personal one, seeing Coda as a reflection of and a solution to his personal struggles. As Coda leaves Wreden with a final message that exudes both best wishes and a finality, Wreden's fictionalized self-narrative crumbles, resulting in a passionate plea that is both poignantly introspective and toxically presumptuous:

I'm the reason that you stopped making games, aren't I? ... when I took your work and I was showing it to people...It felt as though I were responsible for something

important and valuable. … Please start making games again … Give me some of whatever it is that makes you complete. (Everything Unlimited, 2015)

As Wreden takes his own anxieties to their worst conclusion possible, putting himself in the shoes of his parasocial fans, he also lays bare the contradictory nature of storytelling, the freedom and burden it brings, and the power it has to draw others in for better or worse.

# Conclusion

As the medium of digital games has accumulated a substantial body of work, metafictional games have emerged as a way of reflecting on decades of repeated patterns, tropes, and conventions, creating a reflective voice that has become an inseparable and permanent part of the gaming landscape. These metagames utilize both narrative reflections and meta disruptions of game mechanics to critique gaming conventions, player expectations, and the specific hardships of developing games. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*'s defamiliarization effect directly challenges the notion that empowerment is the ultimate aim of digital games. By utilizing meta disruptions of game mechanics, it disempowers players and invokes a deep sense of vulnerability and fear which is befitting of the Lovecraftian cosmic horror of the unknown that the game's narrative invokes.

After such early meta referential attempts, *The Stanley Parable* emerges as a more comprehensive exploration of digital game conventions as the game is presented as an experience with countless paths and endings under the guidance of an ever-present narrator. The presence of narration in interactive medium lays bare the illusion of freedom and the predetermined nature of even the most abstract and avant-garde gameplay decisions. Within this context, the narrator and Stanley are positioned as figures in conflict and harmony, collaborating on the creation of the story together. This complex relationship between developer and player continues in *Pony Island* and *Inscryption* which establish the two figures as direct enemies. The self-aware developers of both games become adversaries who manipulate players to escape the game world, their influence reaching beyond the universe of the game and into real life. *Pony Island*'s fictional developer is a direct villain with the visage of Satan while *Inscryption*'s Leshy occupies a more nuanced position, with the common goal of an intimate card game being utilized to bring the two figures to equal footing.

Lastly, *The Beginner's Guide* engages in a further deconstruction of this dynamic with its unreliable narrator putting the developer figure of Coda on a pedestal as the idealized confidant and weaving a manipulative narrative for the players. The fictional nonfiction character of Wreden utilizes this constructed self to comment on the parasocial relationship between players and developers, putting himself in the shoes of his fans whose reaction to his previous game *The Stanley Parable* was overwhelming and at times, intimidating. Through a divided self, Wreden and Coda, the developer is able to present a complex and nuanced metacritique that both acknowledges the dangerous nature of such a dynamic and the intimate realities of storytelling. Ultimately, while this selection of corpus provides commentary on specific aspects of digital games such as game design, narrative, player interaction, and the relationship between players and developers, the constant search for subversions signifies that the storytelling medium of digital games and its growing canon require and generate an ever-present voice of self-reflection.

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