

ПАРАЧОВЕШКОТО: грация и гравитация

*Юбилеен сборник в чест
на проф. Миглена Николчина*

*Съставителство и редакция
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ON THE VERGE OF THE GAME Postnarrative and Playability in Independent Gameplay¹

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There is no need for videogames to be games.

Michaël Samyn, *Not a manifesto*

I. A model genre

In recent years much has been said about the heteronomy of fiction. Following the turns of Cultural Poetics, the successful paradigm of 'literature and x' (most notably the all-embracing 'literature and science') opened up a most rewarding field of discourse archeology. In analyzing both the factual conditions of the Fictional (conceived of as a mode of being and representation) and the fictional conditions of the realm of Facts, the archeology of fiction offered an instructive blurring of established modal boundaries. And yet: the audiences' expectations and the popular appropriation of the Fictional do differ widely from the insights of contemporary theory. The concepts of hybridity and virtuality, designed to deconstruct the fictional autonomy of narratives, to undermine the status of their agents and to thwart their hermeneutic value, have been most successfully appropriated by a popular pragmatics: the role-playing game. In theory, the evil Other of hybridity is essence. In practice, though, the radiance of literary fiction and the impact of its narratives have always been induced by their holistic overtones. The 'popular essentialists' of fiction retransformed their genres from mere pastime camouflages into a cult of authenticity,

¹ This essay is for Miglena Nikolchina who introduced me to the mystery and splendour of Bulgarian academic life (and of the *Mass Effect* video games). I am very grateful to the CAS Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia, for making all this possible. Many ideas of this essay go back to discussions in our research group on 'Literary Modelling' with Darin Tenev, Ivan Popov, Kamelia Spassova and Roxana Doncu.

distinguished by a claim for personal immediacy and for a superior knowledge which is rather pertinent to esoteric and religious thought. It has been claimed that *storytelling*, or more generally speaking: narrative, along with *playing* are the ontological foundations, or the universals, of humanity. Albrecht Koschorke even argues – in his theory of narratology – that storytelling had escaped the functional differentiation of society.² However, what will happen with these universals once they are entangled in the practice of contemporary gaming? And, no less important, what will happen when these popular performances refrain from being popular and claim to be an art form?

1. Beyond agency

An all-time classic since its first release in 2013, *The Stanley Parable* has vigorously tested both the verge of the average gameplay and the limits of the ludic narrative (fig. 1). The hero Stanley is supposed to challenge and compete with the narrator's voice, the agent of his plot. The latter's introduction is a showcase of omniscient oversight:

This is the story of a man named Stanley. Stanley worked for a company in a big building where he was employee number 427. Employee Number 427's job was simple: he sat at his desk in room 427, and he pushed buttons on a keyboard. Orders came to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order. [...] And Stanley was happy.³

A result of repetition, Stanley's happiness is also pointing to a *gaming situation* of the frugal type: a sheer determination by a program of obtrusive linearity, in other words: of reading. However, reading as a linear retracing of a given program has its comforting merits: "Stanley relished every moment that the orders came in, as though he had been made exactly for this job." Unfortunately, this happy linearity is challenged by a medial point zero, an event:

² Cf. Al. Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung. Grundzüge einer Allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2012.

³ *The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Cafe 2015 (available at *Steam*, <<http://store.steampowered.com/>>), initial sequence. The game is not divided into levels (chapters) but consists of an initial sequence and (according to the way of counting) of up to 22 divergent *endings* that are linked to the sequences of the narrative. The quotations in this essay will refer to the respective endings. As these endings tend to change their designations my quotations will comply with the following scheme (and map): <<http://thestanleyparable.wikia.com/wiki/Endings>>; cf. <<http://www.gamefaqs.com/pc/727960-the-stanley-parable/faqs/68794>>.

[O]ne day, something very peculiar happened. Something that would forever change Stanley. Something he would never quite forget. He had been at his desk for nearly an hour when he realized that not one single order had arrived on the monitor for him to follow. [...] Never in all his years at the company had this happened – this complete isolation. Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses, he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office. All of his co-workers were gone.⁴

Stanley, the obedient reader, is not only witnessing a fundamental change of codes and media; in realigning mind and body (“wits and senses”) he becomes the carrier of a disruptive agency. In Stanley we perceive the breakdown of the principle of linearity, of sign processing or of sign ‘procession’, the production of semiotic sense. The chain of signs, disintegrating and dissolving, is replaced by signifiers in “complete isolation”, naked signs. In Stanley we observe the ending of a model: the model of conventional narrative. It seems, however, that the *Parable* narrator is a storyteller of that ancient type – intent on guiding Stanley through the maze of gaming possibilities.

Indeed, while being ‘out of office’ Stanley gets entangled in the jungle of decision trees, the most precarious of which consists in the decision of how to react to the narrator’s comments and imperatives. A simple yet highly significant (if not downright symbolic) choice presents itself quite soon: “When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.” (fig. 2)⁵



Fig. 1: A model game – *The Stanley Parable* (2013)

⁴ *The Stanley Parable*, initial sequence.

⁵ *ibid.*



Fig. 2: *The Stanley Parable* – decision tree, disguised as “The Two Doors”

In following the narrator’s description (rendering it true) the avatar is guided quickly through the narrative and ludic space. He soon detects the evil Mind Control Facility, he shuts it down and wanders through the open doors into the sunlit landscape of the ‘Freedom Ending’ (fig. 3a): “Stanley felt the cool breeze upon his skin, the feeling of liberation, the immense possibility of the new path before him. This was exactly the way, right now, that things were meant to happen.”⁶ Of course, the opposite is true: the game is over and the possibilities, immense and ready to be turned into realities, remain untapped: “And yet [...] Stanley reflected on how many puzzles still lay unsolved. Where had his co-workers gone? How had he been freed from the machine’s grasp? What other mysteries did this strange building hold?”⁷ The final image of the path, however, is no accident. It is a tribute to the starting image of the celebrated independent game *The Path*, a Tale of Tales’ design from 2009 (fig. 3b).

⁶ *The Stanley Parable*, Freedom Ending.

⁷ Ibid.



Fig. 3a+b: The threshold of postnarrative: the Freedom Ending of *The Stanley Parable* (a) and the beginning of *The Path* (b). A promise of adventure in *The Path*, the borderline between technology and wilderness announces boredom in *The Stanley Parable*. Civilization here is modelled as a fascinating threat, whereas the fascination in *The Path* lies with the dangers of the wilderness.

The Path has opened up new possibilities indeed: for independent game design in general, but also (as a member of the horror genre) for its avatars, a bunch of gothified Red Riding Hoods. Their paths, of course, lead to disaster, which may also cast some doubt on Stanley’s ‘Freedom Ending’ and on the integrity of his entire plot. Both games, however, share a common notion: following the rules (‘stay on the path’ / ‘act in accordance with the voice of the narrator’) will result in missing the *arcana* (‘mysteries’) of their respective game. While Stanley’s action is redeemed by the narrator (unreliable as it may sound),⁸ a Riding Hood that is *not* straying from the path and walks directly to her grandmother’s estate (according to the meta-rule “stay on the path”, will earn a hearty “Failure”. Moreover, if the narrator in Stanley’s parable is pondering on Stanley’s aim – “Perhaps his goal had not been to understand, but to let go” – this sense of ‘letting go’ refers directly to the paradoxical command at the beginning of *The Path*: “let go to interact” (fig. 4).

⁸ “But as sunlight streamed into the chamber, he [Stanley] realized none of this [the mysteries] mattered to him. For it was not knowledge, or even power, that he had been seeking, but happiness.” Ibid.



Fig. 4: The rules of deviance: dark guidance in *The Path*

This has three implications. On the level of controls the ban of agency instructs the users to refrain from pushing keyboard buttons once they want to interact with a specific item (acting through non-action). On the level of adventure it could be a warning not to get in touch with anything inside the game or, vice versa, an appeal to non-resistance to the program's actions (passiveness). And on the level of the gamer's burnout psyche it may be regarded as an opportunity to liberate oneself from any urge to action (meditation). Thus, the horror in *The Path* develops from a feeling of deep apprehension and evolves into an almost meditative search for the wolf, while all decisions seem to drown in twilight randomness. The term the game designers coined for this new genre is revealing: 'Notgame', meta-game, a game beyond the game.

2. A parody of narratology

In Stanley's world, however, interaction is per se competitive. Moreover, through the frequent restarts and potential endings, both in action and in narrative, it is recursive and repetitive in a strategic sense. In fact, the *Stanley Parable* is virtually acting out the founding myth of Game Studies: the ancient struggle of ludology and narratology.⁹ It is, in short, a parable of gameplay

⁹ The topic has been widely discussed, though mainly as an issue of historical or institutional importance. However, contrary to the alleged agreement both in Game Studies and in the game communities I do not think that this controversy is obsolete. I rather take Gonzalo Frasca's well-known statement at face value, that 'the debate never took place'. Regarding the complexity of the narration-gameplay-matter it seems highly recommendable to make it happen. Cf. G. Frasca,

versus narrative. In Stanley's world, it is the gamer's choice whether to follow or to disregard the voice of the narrator and, by choosing to resist, to change the course not only of the gameplay, but also of the storyline. This change, however, is not just a change of narrative, it is a change of status: The narrative turns from a mere description – or a setting up – of character activities (*sujet*) into a *story option*. Thus, by merely entering the right door, Stanley and the gamer redefine the mode of the narrator: they convert it from 'omniscient' (or 'intrusive') to 'third person limited' (or 'unreliable'), provoking a reaction: "This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well. Perhaps he wanted to stop at the employee lounge first to admire it."¹⁰ As there is nothing to admire in the run-down lounge, the narrator's description can be easily decoded as statement of pure irony: "Truly a room worth admiring. It had really been worth the detour after all just to spend a few moments here in this immaculate, beautifully-constructed room."¹¹ In distancing himself from Stanley's (and the gamer's) choices the narrator's voice is entering the fight for narrative control. Instead of setting up the nodes and bifurcations, in such moments he is forced to 'post-narrate' (and post-process) the story (and the game). The unavoidable result is an emergent paradox whenever a narrator's comment is ignored or duped by Stanley's actions, thus engendering a whole variety of strategies to force the character's obedience: by gestures of authority, fraternization, promises, concessions, open threats or – most effectively – by means of random actions as a ludic *deus ex machina* (in the proper sense of the word).

In contrast to the options of the avatar the parable narrator can command the power of the ludic engine, e.g. when he conjures up a wall to block the avatar's escape. However, this unobtrusive safety break for self-empowerment points only to the narrator's precarious position on the verge of game and narrative as does his statement "Sorry, but you're in my story now."¹² The "now" refers to an event back in the Mind Control Facility where the narrator seems to delegate some agency to Stanley – after having set the time bomb counter: "It's your story now; shape it to your heart's desires. Ooh, this is much better than what I had in mind! What a shame we have so little time left to enjoy it."¹³ Thus, where irony turns into cynicism, narrative and gameplay can be substituted by explosion: by the count-down of the (story-) world. **And here, in the Explosion Ending, the narrator finally reveals the plot behind the plot, the secret of the parable: He has disposed**

"Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place", <http://www.ludology.org/articles/Frasca_LevelUp2003.pdf>.

¹⁰ *The Stanley Parable*, initial sequence.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, Phone/Apartment Ending.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Explosion Ending.

of Stanley's co-workers himself, he is responsible for the incarceration of his hero, he is governing the paths and endings of the maze. But is this statement true?

In fact, the gamer's agency is slowly dragging the narrator from a heterodiegetic position to a homodiegetic personal participation in the plot. The narrator becomes a character, a fierce competitor in Stanley's game. This change can also be derived from the narrator's shifting point of view in the Explosion frame: first he addresses Stanley as a fellow character, then he returns to his – no longer credible – omniscient oversight:

If you want to throw my story off track, you're going to have to do much better than that. I'm afraid you don't have nearly the power you think you do; for example, and I believe you'll find this pertinent: *Stanley suddenly realized that he had just initiated the network's emergency detonation system.*¹⁴

“For example”: this remark could not be plainer in revealing the uncanny similarity between an ‘option’, a ‘contingent instance’ and an ‘arbitrary move’ in gameplay and in storytelling – an excess of (and an introduction to) the art of modelling modality in ludic fiction. Thus, the closure that is treated as a random option in an on-going narration (like in the Explosion Ending) is a deconstruction – of the story logic and of ludic agency. The highlight of this deconstruction is the dissolution of the plot in blatant symbolism, when the loss of narrative control is rendered as a loss of the ‘Adventure Line’ (fig. 5a+b): “Aha, I knew we missed something: the story! [...] All right, I've got a solution: This time, to make sure we don't get lost, I've employed the help of the ‘Stanley Parable Adventure Line’. Just follow the line. How simple is that? You see, the line knows where the story is [...]”¹⁵



Fig. 5a+b: Emergent storyline: direction and confusion

¹⁴ Ibid., my italics.

¹⁵ Ibid., Confusion Ending.

While following the storyline to the predictable Confusion Ending, Stanley and the gamer are not only entertained by marching music, they are also witnessing a piece of the narrator's homemade teleology – until it all breaks down in the recursion of another restart:

Though, here's a thought: wouldn't wherever we end up be our destination, even if there's no story there? Or, to put it another way, is the story of no destination still a story? Simply by the act of moving forward are we implying a journey such that a destination is inevitably conjured into being via the very manifestation of the nature of life itself? Woah, woah, woah, woah, woah. [...] Line, how could you have done this to us, and after we trusted you! [...] To hell with it. Restart.¹⁶

Luxuriating in the incoherencies of narrative and gameplay, such digressions also show the great potential of the rivalry of narrative and ludic agency in interactive fiction, e.g. by the way in which significance is pinned to gameplay, by the way in which contingency is turned into necessity or by the way in which shared agency provides its own ontology. This is, to quote a phrase from the narrator's discourse, a fruitful 'pertinence' indeed.

The *Stanley Parable*, however, is not just a cunning parody of narrative processings, ludic and conventional, it is, eventually, a *parody of narratology*. It targets the applicability of narratology-related terms and concepts to enacted narratives¹⁷ by introducing paradoxical encounters on the threshold of the gamer-avatar-narrator triad and the ludic plot. Such an encounter of the alien kind appears, for instance, when according to Gérard Genette a 'zero focalizing' (which refers to information that is limited to the narrator) should be made available to a specific character. In Stanley's case, this happens in his boss's empty office, right in front of a mysterious keypad. At first, the avatar is being focalized by an 'internal' pre-narration in a most traditional 'free indirect style': "Shocked, unravelled, Stanley wondered in disbelief who orchestrated this. What dark secret was being held from him?" This characterization, though, is followed by a 'zero focalizing' on the hero's ignorance while the narrator is relating information to the gamer: "What he [Stanley] could not have known was that the keypad behind the boss's desk guarded the terrible truth that his boss had been keeping from him. And so the boss had assigned it an extra secret PIN #2845."¹⁸ After some deliberation on how difficult, if not impossible it is to hack the secret code, the diegetic voice reminds the gamer of

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Thus calling into question their applicability on literary texts as well.

¹⁸ *The Stanley Parable*, Boss's Office/ Launch Pod Ending.

the hero's ignorance and of the story logic: "But of course, Stanley couldn't possibly have known this."¹⁹ Thus, as soon as the four numbers have been entered by the gamer, the narrator starts to wonder wildly how his hero could have met with such a stroke of luck, thus foregrounding the shaky logic (and the irony) of in-game narratology: "Yet incredibly, by simply pushing random buttons on the keypad, Stanley happened to input the correct code by sheer luck. Amazing."²⁰ From a ludic point of view, the gamer-avatar-narrator triad is the irresolvable three-body problem of contemporary narratology.

A major incident of this dilemma is the sequence of the broom closet inquiry. The closet is an unmarked space both in a narrative and ludic sense – a non-decision tree, an anti-node: "There was nothing here, no choice to make, no path to follow, just an empty broom closet. No reason to still be here. [...] This closet is of absolutely no significance to the story whatsoever."²¹ The closet, though, becomes a major node of meta-gaming when the Stanley-gamer-dyad lingers in the place. And here it is highly significant. Not only does the mood of the narrator change considerably. His businesslike description slightly turns into a rather harassed attitude and ends in outright cynicism; with regard to gameplay he provides a novel kind of metalepsis, too:²² "It was baffling that Stanley was still sitting in the broom closet. He wasn't even doing anything, at least if there were something to interact with he'd be justified in some way. As it is, he's literally just standing there, doing sweet FA."²³ The latter phrasing, pointing to a most conventional "fuck all",²⁴ is properly positioned. There can be no doubt – the target of the comment is the gamer, not the avatar: "Are you... are you really still in the broom closet? Standing around doing nothing? Why? Please offer me some explanation here; I'm... I'm genuinely confused."²⁵ The referent of "you" has moved while the narrator is imagining a likely reason for the gamer's attitude: a different decision tree with a specific

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., Broom Closet Ending.

²² According to Genette a metalepsis signifies "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse [...]" G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*, trans. J. E. Lewin, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, 234f. Other than the literary metalepsis that is by necessity contained within the written universe, the ludic metalepsis does in fact transgress the ontological divide between the storyline, the gameplay and the gamer.

²³ *The Stanley Parable*, Broom Closet Ending.

²⁴ From a cultural-historical perspective 'sweet FA' is also pointing to the rather brutal record of the Fanny Adams murder (hence the capitals), a part of British cultural memory. As such it literally turned into a 'dead metaphor', a trope that is, as Shakespeare might have put it, signifying nothing.

²⁵ *The Stanley Parable*, Broom Closet Ending.

function for the game community: “Maybe to you, this is somehow its own branching path. Maybe, when you go talk about this with your friends, you’ll say: ‘Oh, did you get the Broom Closet Ending? The Broom Closet Ending was my favourite!’ I hope your friends find that concerning.”²⁶ Thus, the metalepsis turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy as it is highly likely that the meta-language does indeed transform the useless Closet Ending into a real favourite for many gamers. For the sake of gameplay, though, the main concern of the narrator (and the program code) is how to get the gamer back to play. Thus, the narrator’s link-up move is a return to Stanley as an in-game character. He willfully resumes communication by insulting him, yet in a way that can be easily decoded as a cultural convention and a desperate hyperbole at the same time: “Stanley was fat and ugly, and really, really stupid. He probably only got the job because of a family connection; that’s how stupid he is. That, or with drug money. Stanley also is addicted to drugs and hookers.” Stating this, and in a diction that is wildly changing between proposition and assumption, the narrator’s credibility in storytelling has been mostly spent. There seems to be a single option left, a final narrative:

Well, I’ve come to a very definite conclusion of what’s going on right now: You’re dead. You got to this broom closet, explored it a bit, and were just about to leave because there’s nothing here, when a physical malady of some sort shut down your central nervous system and you collapsed on the keyboard.²⁷

Instead of shutting down the game, the gamer has been shut down by the game narrator. Virtually. In fact, the snide conclusion has an impact on the living gamer, too (and how much more so, if the *Stanley Parable* were not a single-player but an online multiplayering game...). The sender of this message (and the program) makes it clear that gamer agency is finally required, that no further action will be taken by the engine and the ludic narrative. To stress this point there is a final change of referent: the “you” now is directed to the whole community of possible replacements of the gamer – it refers to ‘anyone’:

Hello!? Anyone who happens to be nearby! The person at this computer is dead! Please [...] instruct another human to take their place at the computer, make sure they understand basic first-person game mechanics, and filling them in on the history of the narrative tropes in video gaming, so that the irony and insightful commentary of this game is not lost on them.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Even by the standards of the *Stanley Parable* this passage is a super trope. For it requires a suspension of belief, not disbelief, to reinterpret such a blow against immersion as another narrative re-entry into the recursive modelling. Beyond the irony a fundamental paradox is taking shape. It may be called the *paradox of non-entanglement*. To make it audible within the game, or rather on the verge of it, it will be necessary to create another narrative re-entry, one that even supersedes the latest super trope. And so it goes.

3. Emergent observation

The combat between Stanley and the *Parable* narrator shows their mutual dependence, or, if we decode the allegory, the profound inter-dependence of the modes and possibilities of narrative and gameplay. In a final move, surprising and ingenious, the wisdom of that statement is provided by the game itself. When Stanley takes a wrong turn, marked “Escape”, and is immediately informed by the narrator that this passage is supposed to be his road to die, a female voice takes over. As a proper ‘*dea ex machina*’ this narrator of the second order does not only save the hero but she also indicates the limitations that the avatar and the narrator share: “Oh, look at these two. How they wish to destroy one another. How they wish to control one another. How they both wish to be free. Can you see, can you see how much they need one another? No, perhaps not. Sometimes, these things cannot be seen.”²⁹ With this external comment the internal aporias gain a metafictional re-entry, which, however, is not able to produce an ‘insight’: “these things cannot be seen”, nor can they be re-counted. They can only be enacted in a meta-game. Within the meta-game the game narrator, too, may be referred to as a prisoner, a prisoner not only of the program and the hero, but also of himself. The same holds true, accordingly, for both the gamer and the avatar. Therefore, the common question in the *Parable* is not surprising: ‘Was it all determined?’³⁰ One may be inclined to answer: yes and no. The fight for freedom that the avatar, the storyteller and the gamer share, appears to be a quest for a double emergence: 1. a narrative emergence that is triggered by the gameplay, 2. an emergent gameplay that is triggered by the narrative.

To tackle this, the game refers to super tropes and paradoxical re-entries, yet there is another way. It might be called *emergent observation*. When the hero is about to die and is redeemed by the female observer, the heaven he

²⁹ *The Stanley Parable*, The Metal Jaws/ Museum Ending.

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, The Confusion Ending.

encounters is a place of observation – yet a place developed in stark contrast to the Mind Control Facility, the outlay of a supervision hell (fig. 6a). The new facility is the *Museum of the Stanley Parable* (fig. 6b). It retransforms the modelling procedures (concept, level editing, abandoned options, versions, trailers) and their agents (the designers’ names and functions) into artefacts.



Fig. 6a+b: Two ways of mind controlling: evil (left) and good (right). Observation in the Mind Control Facility (with screens for every workspace) and in the Museum (with a model of the corridor from Stanley’s office to the room with the two doors)

By willfully re-entering the game design into the game design, the game has hit its own museum, displaying (and practically shutting down) itself. With narrative and gameplay stalled, the gamer-avatar seems to dissolve in favour of a game observer who is now directly meeting with the game design. By openly presenting and commenting on the visible dismemberment (analysis) and re-arrangement (archiving) of crucial elements, but also of the sequencing of their development (chronology), the game discloses the conditions of its possibility, of the recursive logic of the game design. It seems as if the model of the game itself had finally become observable: a gesture of transparency within obscurity, an invitation to participate, a will to share the code.

A striking sign of the designers’ strategy appears at the initial bifurcation of their ludic architecture, the room with the two doors. According to the information plate, emergent game design and ludic narrative are the result of an initial contradiction, of a binary (fig. 7). It is an exploration of the possibilities but also of the *Auffassung* – the model concept and the model judgement – that the game designers and the gamers face. Their ludic exploration is a shared activity, an epistemic action carried through in gameplay, a *shared modelling*. But ‘sharing’ does not always equal ‘harmony’. In fact, shared modelling is a competitive procedure, not so much among the gamers, but between the gamers and the game design. It is directed towards the possibilities and limitations of

the ludic space and of the narrative, as well as of the model concept. Therefore, the Museum Ending is the *Parable's* own parable: exemplifying an emergent meaning that is hidden and exhibited in the museum, constituting its own history of ludic modelling.

To render such a process visible, the 'meta-plate' has always been a fitting item. Who would not remember the surprising message left upon a plate by the mysterious, non-diegetic dwarf in famous *Gothic II* (fig. 8)?

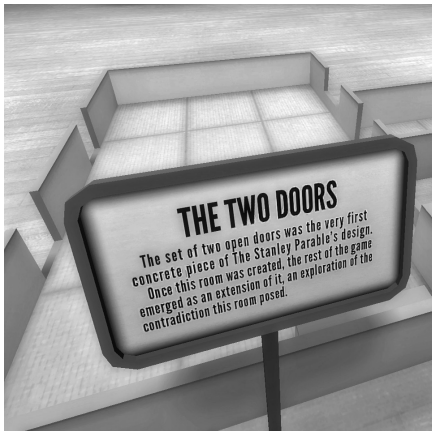


Fig. 7: A comment on ludic emergence – delivered by *The Stanley Parable* on a museum plate

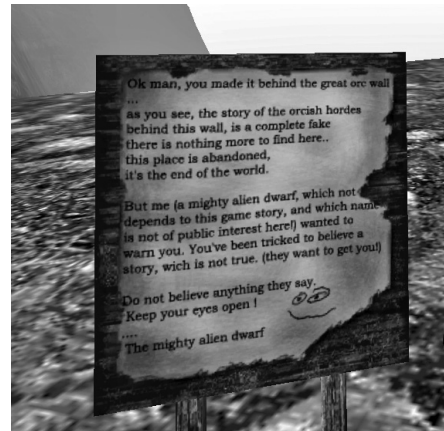


Fig. 8: A proof of fake – the message of the non-dependent dwarf in *Gothic II*

The alien plate declares the game illusive by referring to the plotting of some nameless 'they', an entity that seems to be engendering both ludic fake and narrative deceit. Again, the narrative design, the gamer and the avatar are regulated by an extra-diegetic voice whose observation of the second order draws away the curtain to the meta-game. Of course, it does so only for such gamers who had managed to get over (and behind) the insurmountable emplotment of the orks' great wall.

The concept of shared agency, now elevated to a higher level, may be taken as a sign of equal footing, joint collaboration, even partnership. Such gestures of transparency, however, can be found throughout the *Stanley Parable*, especially, and hardly unexpectedly, in the Confusion Ending. Here, the avatar and the narrator are confronted with an accurate and detailed schema of their own demise:

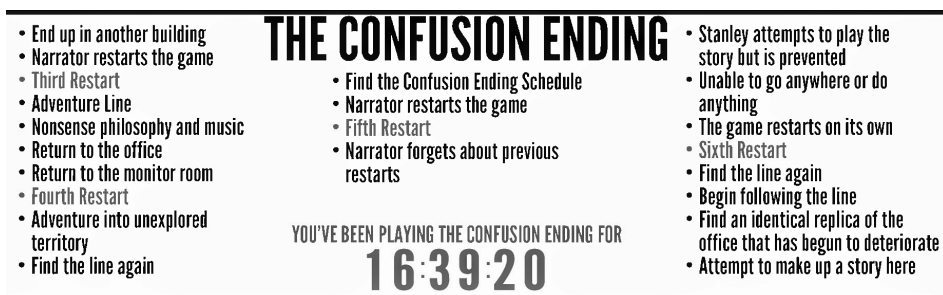


Fig. 9: Blatant modelling: the storyboard of the Confusion Ending

Indeed, in the Confusion Ending the narrator and the gamer/avatar are trapped together, the narrator trying to put up some narrative resistance while perusing (like the gamer) the outspoken storyboard. In fact, the story master finds himself in the position of those gamers who consult a walkthrough for their orientation – and he’s not amused:

That’s really how all this goes?! It’s all... determined? So now according to the schedule I restart again, then, what... am I just supposed to forget! My mind goes simply blank because it’s written here on this... this... thing! Wall! Well, who consulted me? [...] Why don’t I get a say in all this? [...] I don’t want to keep the game restarting. I don’t want to forget what’s going on. I don’t want to be trapped like this. I won’t restart the game. I won’t do it!³¹

Some time later, the game restarts itself. In doing so, the ludic engine claims autonomy.

Here, like in *Gothic II*, the gamers are observing both their own *mise en abyme* and the disruption of the narrative. The model of the *Stanley Parable* may thus be termed a parody not only of the tension between game and narrative, ludology and narratology, but also of the modelling of meta-games. The *modelling of model-being*,³² of the meta-gaming discourse and its management of possibilities and limitations, is the final target of the *Stanley Parable*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² The model concept in this article refers to the inspiring work of information scientist Bernd Mahr on meta-modelling in arts and sciences. Cf. B. Mahr, “On the Epistemology of Models”, *Rethinking Epistemology*, ed. G. Abel/ J. Conant, Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011, 301–352. The problem of aesthetic modelling I have discussed in: M. Erdbeer, „Поетика на моделите. Размисли върху една теория на модела в литературата“, *Литературен Вестник* 23/37 (2014), and more generally in: “Poetik der Modelle”, *textpraxis* 11/2 (2015), <<http://www.uni-muenster.de/textpraxis/robert-matthias-erdbeer-poetik-der-modelle>>.

II. The Game-as-Art Controversy

What is that all about? My guess is that the contest for the coolest meta-game, a contest that is pertinent to independent game design in general, is not an end in itself. It has a context and this context may be termed *the Game-as-Art Controversy*. It is, of course, as old as the new genre and has been a major issue to the very day. The leading question can be taken from the title of a lecture from 2001: “Will computer games ever be a legitimate art form?”³³ This assumption has been varied, modified and re-articulated many times with almost identical headlines: “Are Games Art? (Here we go again...)” (2007),³⁴ “Video Games Can Never Be Art” (2010),³⁵ “The Case for Video Games as Art Continues” (2010),³⁶ “Are Video Games the Next Great Art Form?” (2010, 2013),³⁷ or “Video games and art. Why does the media get it so wrong?” (2014).³⁸ To anyone who has been educated in the slipstream of new media and cultural studies such a debate may sound rather strange, if not ridiculous, or simply archaic. Of course, a Youtube video is a legitimate art form, a city flash-mob is legitimate art form, a sitcom is a legitimate art form, and so are machinimas and poetry slams. The question, though, has not been raised by weird opponents of the art of gaming, but by the designers themselves. One

³³ E. W. Adams, “Will Computer Games Ever Be A Legitimate Art Form?” (2001), *Videogames and Art*, ed. A. Clarke/ G. Mitchell, Chicago: Intellect Books, 2007, 255–264.

³⁴ Br. Ochalla, “Are Games Art? (Here we go again...)”, <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/130113/are_games_art_here_we_go_php>.

³⁵ This blatant statement by film critic Roger Ebert caused a heated debate, <<http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art>>. His arguments, in fact, were mostly circular: “There is a structural reason for that [the inferiority of video games compared to film and literature]: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control. I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art.” R. Ebert, “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?”, <<http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders>>.

³⁶ Fr. Eördögh, “The Case for Video Games as Art Continues”, <<https://fruzsinaeordogh.wordpress.com/2010/06/23/the-case-for-video-games-as-art-continues/>>.

³⁷ A. Jung, “Extra Lives: Are video games the next great art form?” (2010), interview with Tom Bissell, <http://www.salon.com/2010/06/20/tom_bissell_extra_lives_interview_ext2010/>. In 2013 Noah Davies published an article with the identical question: “Are Video Games the Next Great Art Form”, <<http://www.psmag.com/books-and-culture/are-video-games-the-next-great-artform-58300>>. Cf. T. Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*, New York: Vintage, 2010.

³⁸ K. Stuart: “Video games and art. Why does the media get it so wrong?”, *The Guardian Games blog*, blog entry from 08/01/2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2014/jan/08/video-games-art-and-the-shock-of-the-new>>. **The topic even got its own wikipedia entry**, summing up some aspects of the main controversy: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_games_as_an_art_form>.

reason for that ongoing anxiety can be deduced from one of the articles cited above: “Developers are pushing the limits of storytelling, interactivity and design. Why aren’t they getting any respect?”³⁹ And yet: what is at stake in this controversy is more than just a fight for recognition by the art community or for acceptance by a peer or pressure group – a struggle that has always been the case with novel media (from book, to film, to telephone). It is a fight for redefining art and it involves a fundamental problem.

1. A farewell to gameplay

The Game-as-Art controversy implies two deep-seated assumptions that are capable of undermining our notion of a culture of participation, i. e. of popular culture itself: it is the art proponents’ notion of autonomy (exclusion, elitism, disconnectedness) together with a predilection for non-playability (non-agency). In fact, to be an art form in that very sense, the game will have to be ‘unpopular’. If there is ‘easy listening’ and ‘easy reading’, there is also ‘easy playing’; hence the art game will be ‘hard to play’. It will be hard to play not with regard to skills or leveling or competition, but in a generic sense. The Art Game, I will argue, is the vanguard of another neoclassicism, of an *arrière-guard* that turned around and is now marching in a new direction.⁴⁰ I will argue that their *telos* is the end of gameplay and the end of narrative.

For now, what I find fascinating is the fact that an essential contribution to the ongoing controversy has been put forward by the games themselves. A great example for the way in which the problem can be staged *in-game* is Davey Wreden’s latest project *The Beginner’s Guide*. In here, a confident narrator and designer of computer games is gradually unfolding a character study of his vanished friend and role model, the game designer Coda. By presenting, introducing and commenting on his friend’s bequest – a series of unfinished games – the ‘guide’ is staging a discussion on the genre and its manufacturers. The Coda character is practically ‘leveled up’ together with (or rather through) the evolution of his games as they appear in chronological order and, to pay a tribute to the Real, together with their year of production. By guiding the beginner (the new gamer of the *Guide*) through the beginnings of the Coda uni-

³⁹ Jung, “Extra Lives’: Are video games the next great art form?”, subtitle.

⁴⁰ Cf. M. Samyn, “Almost Art”, *The Escapist* 1 (2011), <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/issues/issue_291/8608-Almost-Art>, 3: “The fine art on display in museums of contemporary art has long lost the social and cultural relevance that we are after. We’re not looking for a spot in the museum; we’re looking for a place in the heart of the public at large. And for that we will need to work as artists.”

verse (that are 'beginnings' also in the sense of being incomplete), the guide-narrator offers a tutorial in game psychology. This 'user guide' is, for a change, not dealing with the gamer's mind, but with the psyche of the game designer, speculating both about the manufacturers' intentions and their differences in designing games. Thus, Coda's games, we learn, have never been designed for public playing, they are stages and performances of Coda's mind and thought. His solipsist approach to gameplay, it transpires, was the controversial point in the relationship of both designers, or, as one may say, their private Game-as-Art controversy. In chapter seven, adequately named *The Great and Lovely Descent*, the contradicting views are rendered very clear. While guiding the rapt listener/observer/gamer through a prison, the narrator constitutes two types of game designer: the relaxed pragmatic and the radical idealist:

This is something that he and I used to argue about a lot, you know, whether a game ought actually be playable, whether it means anything if no one can get through it, and I always defend that, you know, all that work goes into the game, why not make it playable and accessible, and so we just got into heated arguments over it, and there was one time when after one of these conversations he went home, and a day or two later he sent me a zip-file entitled 'playable games' that was full of hundreds of individual games each of which was just an empty box that you walked around in and nothing else. Believe me, I played every single one of those just to find out if there was a gag hidden somewhere. There wasn't.⁴¹

Playability for Coda seems to be a quest for endless repetition, for an agency without a meaning, for a void, while the narrator strongly advocates the interactive side. He even interferes with Coda's layouts when the player movement is deliberately slowed by obstacles – a claim to tweak the guiding process when the guide is also keen on adding some improvement to his friend's design. Eventually, when facing Coda's last, unfathomable game, the cool pragmatic is about to lose control. In climbing endless staircases the gamer and the guide encounter 'writings on the wall', addressed directly to the guide-narrator and accusing him of distributing and appropriating Coda's work (fig. 10).

⁴¹ *The Beginner's Guide*, Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015, chapter 7.



Fig. 10: A monument of ludic disappointment: Coda's tower in *The Beginner's Guide*

At this point, the controversy reveals itself as the narrator's quest for a desired meaning, for a meaning that can only be processed through a reconciliation of both genre types. Otherwise, both types of independent game production will be doomed to fade. The guide, addressing Coda as a person now, is very clear about this crucial point:

That's why I'm releasing this collection of your work, is because I haven't been able to find any other way to reach you. I've tried everything. And... so part of me has hope that if I put this compilation out into the world, and if I put my name on it, that maybe enough people will play it so that it'll find its way to you, so that I can tell you that... I'm sorry. I know I screwed up. If I apologize to you truly and deeply, will you start making games again? Please, I need to feel ok with myself again, and I always felt ok as long as I had your work to see myself in. [...] I'm fading. And all I want to know is that I'm going to be ok.⁴²

Thus, in a strange and final loop of paradox the lost narrator of this eerie 'walkthrough' longs to see the wholeness in his friend's fragmented work – for his own sake: “I want whatever this wholeness is that you summoned out of nothing and put it into your work, you were complete in some way that I never

⁴²Ibid., chapter 16.

was.⁴³ It seems that the narrator, too, was guided by his own and Coda's guidance, 'levelled up' his character and managed to produce, apart from desperation, a character study of his ludic Self.

One may conclude that *The Beginner's Guide*, the latest stroke of the inventor of the *Stanley Parable*, is yet another parable: not just an elegy of disappointed game designers but a parable of playability and self-sufficiency, of two competing types of independent game design. It is a parable on the verge of the game. In such a setting, Coda is the icon of an independence that is not just a rejection of conspicuous consumption, but of playing as an interactive agency. While the narrator still desires "validation" and "connection" where in fact he lost all credibility as a beginner's guide (especially when he forsakes the gamer in the epilogue), his model Coda had long given up on meaningful 'connecting'. Thus, the Codas of this world, however ingenious, remain an island to themselves.

2. Not 'serious', but sincere

The Coda type, though virtual, has role models in present game design. Most prominent of all is Michaël Samyn, the co-inventor of the anti-game *The Path*, the tragic hero of the independent game community. His attitude toward the Game-as-Art controversy is rather down-to-earth:

There's a lot of talk these days about whether games can be art, but I don't think it's because people are embracing their inner Homo Ludens. The only real reason this is happening now is that computer technology has evolved to the point where videogames can look and sound just like art. So where there's smoke, the thinking goes, there must be fire. [...] Yet in terms of cultural relevance, social importance and aesthetic impact, videogames still play second fiddle to cinema, literature or music, because underneath their superficial artistic appearance, videogames are bland, unforgiving, meaningless, cold-blooded, rigid systems. [...]. Since nothing new is happening here, society is not affected.⁴⁴

The reason for this dreary vista is the hype of gameplay:

Videogames clearly have potential; they just have not accepted their role as an art form yet. Gameplay is king in most videogames. To play them is to compete in a sort of digital sport. [...] Videogames are simply not created as works of art. [...] We

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Samyn, "Almost Art", 1.

minimize the importance of the story and draw attention to our cool mechanics and the fun our players are having. At the expense, of course, of cultural significance and expanding the audience. Instead of embracing the artistic potential of the medium, we have retreated into the comfortable zone of gaming.⁴⁵

That said, the game designer launched a project on a genre that he christened *Notgame* (fig. 11).



Fig. 11: The Notgame as event

In a manifesto with the DADA capture *Not a manifesto*, Samyn summoned some negating features to elaborate on what a notgame is not:

Notgames is not a category.

Notgames do not exist. There are no notgames.

Notgames is not an art movement.

Notgames is not a genre.⁴⁶

If there are no notgames, what ‘is’ notgames anyway? The verbal singular that turns the term into an abstract or collective noun is not intended to refer to a specific type of object but to signal a new strategy. We learn that

Notgames is a project.

Notgames is a challenge.

Notgames is a question.

Yet the question and the challenge are the quadrature of the designer’s circle, or, in Samyn’s words: “Can we create a form of digital entertainment that explicitly rejects the structure of games?” In fact, the game designer’s aim is not to do away with interaction but to find and to define an “interactive work of art

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ M. Samyn, “Not a manifesto”, blog entry from 19/03/2010, <<http://notgames.org/blog/2010/03/19/not-a-manifesto/>> (the following quotations are from the same site).

that does not rely on competition, goals, rewards, winning or losing”: “This is a new medium”. What follows, is an open statement on the Game-as-Art controversy: “The question is not whether videogames are art. The question is how we can make good art with the medium of videogames. Notgames proposes that one direction of exploration may be to abandon the idea that what we make should be a game.”⁴⁷ It should not even be a meta-game. The task of the “new medium” is to avoid the dead ends that are pertinent to independent projects of all media: to cause a fall-back to the mainstream or to bring about an abstract closure, a recursive, if not even boring illustration of a theory.

Regarding this dilemma, what could be a notgames strategy? How do the notgames relocate the gamer’s agency, create immersion and conceive of narrative? Here, Samyn offers the perspective of a Coda type idealist. In a progressive essay, properly entitled ‘Almost Art’ and published in a journal with the fitting name *The Escapist*, he propagates both the “desirability of video games as an art form” and his preference of concept over “cool mechanics”:⁴⁸ “I want an art form based on videogame technology because I believe it can allow for the greatest works of art our cultures have ever produced, and it would be a crime not to do everything within our might to explore this opportunity!”⁴⁹ Instead of arguing against representation (like the avant-garde in arts and theory), the game designer seeks a change of our mimetic reference from vision to emotion: “Through all of art history there has been a strong tendency towards representation. [...] Video games are the next step in that evolution.”⁵⁰ “Make the experience feel real / (it does not need to look real)”⁵¹ Thus, the game designer aims at the perfection of this new representation – by admitting chance: “The simulated reality in the representation becomes procedural, and thus unpredictable, more closely imitating real life.”⁵² It is important here to reconsider that in representing chance representation will recover all the modal qualities that were originally tied to the mimetic code (in Aristotle’s notion of dramatic ‘gameplay’), or that gaming can exert them, for the first time ever, in an interactive medium. Yet to achieve such an artistic process of production

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Samyn, “Almost Art”, 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ A. Harvey/ M. Samyn (Tale of Tales), “Realtime Art Manifesto”, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/tales/RAM.html>>, chapter 4.

⁵² Samyn, “Almost Art”, 2.

the creation of videogames needs to be reversed. Instead of starting from a well-defined format (such as a rules-based game) and skinning the system with some story to justify the mechanics, the design process needs to start from an idea, an emotion, a concept. Then all interactions, graphics and sounds are created to support the expression of this idea.⁵³

Beneath this anti-formalist and postludic idealism, though, resides a realism of the most physical kind. A blog entry entitled “Content” shows the game designer’s own ontology:

I am very concerned with the experience that players [...] will have. [...] But I am also concerned with the creation itself. [...] With the buildings, the places, the objects. I care about them. To me, somehow, they exist. Even when nobody is playing the game, they are still there in the data, on the hard drive, in the uninstalled archive, in the source code, in the meshes and the textures. They were created and now they exist.⁵⁴

With Tale of Tales the universals of the game reside *in rebus*, in the objects, from the most impressive avatar down to the smallest byte. The gamers, too, are part of this creation, while the allmighty *secundus Deus* redirects the *cura* for His creatures to His deputies:

I want the players to care about them [the items] too. Not just about their own experience. But also about these creatures, these places, these objects. Not just as metaphors or symbols or means to an end, tools for pleasure, beautiful, perhaps. But as things that really exist, that have a presence. Things that deserve our concerned thoughts, our care. They have become part of the world. And now we have to care about them.⁵⁵

Gaming, it transpires, is a moral thing. Here, ‘reference’ of the mimetic code is juxtaposed to ‘reverence’ of the religious code. And gameplay starts to look like a morality play.

Can we conclude from this perspective that a notgame is a ‘serious game’? According to the concept of a genre that has recently become a major player in the gaming industry, a game that has been classified as ‘serious’ serves a specific

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ M. Samyn, “Content”, blog entry on *Bientôt l’été* from 08/11/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/page/3/>>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

purpose: a purpose that is not residing in the game itself. The aims of all these educational, scientific, therapeutic, military, administrative or economic simulations are essentially non-ludic. They are mediators that convey a non-game information, skill or knowledge via gameplay to an audience of learners. Thus, the genre is highly efficient, yet, artistically speaking, not autonomous. Their playability and their aesthetic merits notwithstanding, serious games are at the top of ludic heteronomy. In contrast, Samyn's ludic ideality has a concise corollary: "To Hell With Efficiency!" The notgame, therefore, is *not* 'serious':

People seem to forget that art is play. It's a form of play that can bring about very serious insights and surprising emotions. But it is not serious in and of itself. Not in the way that formal games are serious. Formal games have sets of rules and goals, conditions for winning and rewards. They need to be approached with the sincerity of the accountant. [...] Art is a game that you cannot lose.⁵⁶

The notgame, therefore, is an agent of a non-efficient and disinterested pleasure (in a Kantian sense). Disinterested, too, in the efficiency of rule-based agonistic gameplay (*ludus* in the sense of Caillois): in looting, leveling or scoring and in the ambition to achieve and win.

So, if the notgame has disposed of gameplay, if it advocates *paidia*, if it shuns the Serious and claims to be a piece of art, a code of conduct or a moral exercise – what will it be about? At least one thing is certain: 'not serious' doesn't mean 'funny'. The notgame is sincere: "Art is not necessarily good. It is honest first."⁵⁷ So, will the notgame contribute to the redemption of the narrative?

3. From notgame to postnarrative

In fact, the 'catholic' allusion of the brand name *Tale of Tales* announces the return of universal narratives by offering an almost etiological approach to myths of origin and human absolutes, in short: of stories in the most extensive and intensive sense. A claim like this is deeply humanist and follows the traditions both of European Christianity and classical antiquity by tuning in on their reshaping of Enlightenment philosophy and art. It also moves away from modernism: "So much of 20th century art has centered on the rejection of beauty. [...] In an attempt to liberate the arts from narrative, mythology, religion, and so on, modernists have abandoned if not destroyed

⁵⁶ Samyn, blog entry on *Bientôt l'été* from 28/11/2912, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/page/2/>>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

the humanity of the arts.”⁵⁸ “Reject dehumanisation: tell stories”, is the mighty claim.⁵⁹ The only problem is that Tale of Tales themselves refrain from telling any stories – the imperative is redirected to the game community: ‘do it yourself’. What is the contribution of the game design to this self-fashioning? In other words: How is it possible that ludic art immerses users (or participant observers) if they are denied the most important aspect of the gaming situation: ludic agency? The answer is: by stirring their emotions. Here, emotion is no longer triggered by the gaming engine (stimulus – response) but by the storyworld and by its atmosphere of narrativity. A crucial feature of this concept is a strategy that may be termed *imported narrative*. While storylines in classical adventure games evolve from a condition of amnesia resulting in an avatar CV, the notgame narratives are preexistent in the gamers’ minds. Whoever plays *The Path* immediately evokes the script of the notorious Grimm brothers’ fairy tale. Such is the merit of exemplifying a post-narrative: not to narrate but to provide a frame, a storyworld without a plot, that can evoke and activate external scripts. Thus, in *The Path* the plot is practically ‘moving in’ with the familiar storyworld, the narrative environment, while the subversive code creates experience from deviance, transfiguration and subversion – hence the horror style (a binary of everyday surrounding and unprecedented incident).⁶⁰ Here, Tale of Tales are once again explicit in their claims: “Reject abstraction. / Make the user feel at home. / (and then play with his / or her / expectations / – just don’t start with alienation, / the real world is alienating enough as it is).”⁶¹ In playing such a storyworld the gamer and the game create a ludic palimpsest – and finally a fusion – of their own imported story and of the embedded code. In grandmother’s small house the double coding is repeated in the weird discrepancy between the frontage and the interior space: The fairy-tale appearance of the neat façade is jeopardized by the uncanny spacious, psychedelic halls of the interior (fig. 12).

⁵⁸ M. Samyn, “The Politics of Beauty”, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/Sunset/blog/index.php/2015/06/18/the-politics-of-beauty/>>.

⁵⁹ Harvey/ Samyn, “Realtime Art Manifesto”, headline chapter 5.

⁶⁰ The use of a Red Riding Hood persona in a horror setting is, of course, a cultural script in itself. As such, the teenage agent shares the fate of Alice and of other representatives of the model of coming of age. Notorious as a precursor of this style of animation is Jan Švankmajer’s uncanny *Alice* (Czechoslovakia 1988).

⁶¹ Harvey/ Samyn, “Realtime Art Manifesto”, chapter 4. The *Stanley Parable* can be regarded as a parable of such a notgame strategy.

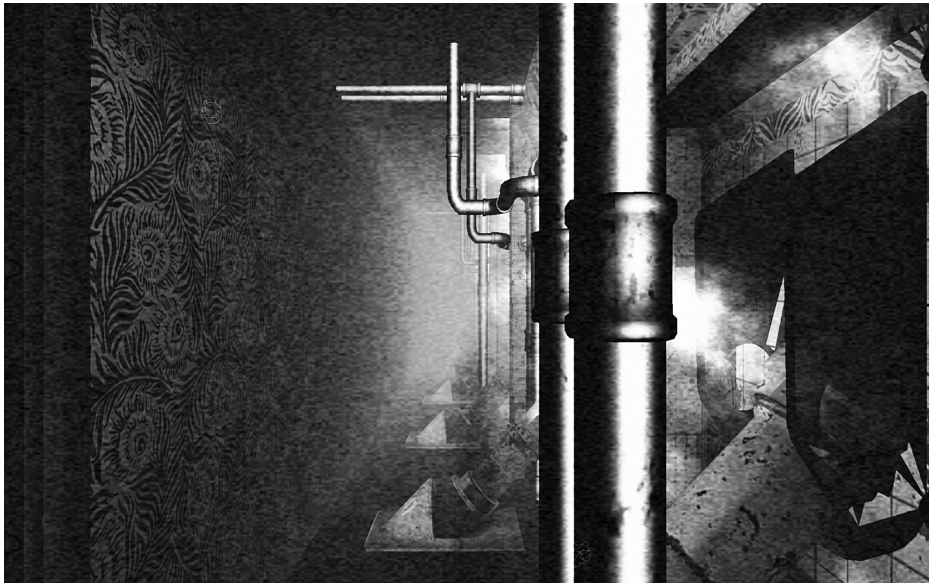


Fig. 12: From fairy-tale to steam-punk: delusions in grandmother's house

Thus, the re-entry of the script into the plot and of the plot into the script is rendered visible in a metonymy of spooky grace. The tales of Tale of Tales are rather sinister; not only in their topics, though, but also – and despite their frequent manifestos stating love and beauty – in their attitude towards coherence and linearity.

However, there is still a trace of coded, even written narrative *within* the games, some clues and fragments of a storyline across the gamespace, moments of a *scattered narrative*. This second strategy of postnarration points to ludic time. Impressively designed, iconic fragments that appear and disappear throughout *The Path* make visible, and thus accessible, the forming and dissolving of the Riding Hoods' elusive thoughts, thus adding to their personalities as well as to the gothic atmosphere (fig. 13a+b). Imported narratives are triggered by these elements of scattered narrative, by scripted clues that are supposed to fuel the gamers' narrative imagination and to foster their ability to turn them into meaning. In *The Path* these fragments of the avatars' imagination are still scripted in coherent form (resembling aphorisms, maxims or proverbial expressions).



Fig. 13a+b: Scripted reasoning – two Riding Hoods, still pondering the future

In *Bientôt l'été*, however, one of the most independent *œuvres* of the Independent universe, these scripted units are reduced to minimal semantic fragments, borrowed from 'high literature', i.e. from films and novels and the life of Marguerite Duras. Within the game a male or female avatar is strolling on a beach while pre-text fragments literally rise in front of him or her, dissolve again, but are preserved for later conversation (fig. 14).



Fig. 14+15: Emergent narrative: elusive fragments rising from the beach – for further application



Furthermore, the player is supposed to gather ‘apparitions’, certain items that are automatically exchanged for chessmen as another conversation tool. In fact, a spectre of a conversation – literally an ‘exchange of words’ – eventually takes place inside a castle on a chessboard with the vintage aura of a French café (fig. 15). The avatar, now in a first person perspective, and a partner are supposed to interact by taking turns to place their ‘beachcombed’ words (that are attached to the collected chessmen) on the board. These fragments are components of a lovers’ discourse that is clearly marked as deeply existentialist. In fact, the phrases of this *jeu noir* will offer just as little narrative coherence or semantic value as the ‘gameplay’ offers a real game of chess. Again, the game designer makes the point: “Maybe there’s no story at all in *Bientôt l’été*. I certainly didn’t write one. And while the texts come from novels that do contain stories, they have been removed from their context and cannot be put back.”⁶² They cannot be put back: The gameplay is no reconstruction of a meaning or an origin, no ludic hermeneutics, but a post-processing of emergent, de-contextualized and post-narrated elements. What they deliver is the surface of a *possible* deep meaning, a semantic atmosphere from which a meaning may derive or not derive. In such a world, the apparitions (paraojects) and the verbal fragments (parasentences) not only constitute a conversation of two gamer-simulations (parahumans), they create a postgame from postnarrative:

⁶² Samyn, blog entry on *Bientôt l’été* from 17/05/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/page/19/>>.

There's something beautiful about a story that isn't told. We see the object, it looks like it could mean something, but we do not know what. We don't need to know. In fact, knowing would destroy the pleasure. If only because this would collapse the possibility space. An untold story is richer than a told story. This must be why this medium seems so suitable for the kind of art I tend to create.⁶³

“Heard melodies are sweet / But those unheard / are sweeter”⁶⁴ – obviously the gaming medium is capable of making these unheard/untold phenomena accessible in their specific potentiality (and, in stark contrast to the ancient pot, of acting out their *dynamis*): “We can just create existences. We don't need histories, stories, explanations, meaning. Just things. In all their mute mystery. The beauty of being.”⁶⁵ The words and objects in such ‘para-games’ do serve a common purpose: building possible worlds from possible words:

To some extent, perhaps, the Apparitions in the game are crystallized suggestions of such possibilities. What if questions. What if this black rock would become a main feature of the game? How would the experience change? What if somebody would actually come and play tennis? Could we meet them? Join them? Have drinks with them after the match, in the café? What if the dead dog was actually a dog I had seen before, alive, and I would have petted it, or been afraid of it, or ignored it? Possible worlds.⁶⁶

In such a world the conversation is meandering along the verge of narrative, like its processors are meandering along the beach. It reads like this (though it is simultaneously spoken in French):

- “I could not stop myself from coming today.”
- “This is the first time that you are mistaken.”
- “Let's be quiet for a moment.”
- “I do not understand what is happening.”⁶⁷

The ‘conversation’ done, each player leaves the castle, gathers sentence fragments and an apparition and resumes the game. The castle, too, is changing form with every new re-entry (in the proper sense), so that *Bientôt l'été* may

⁶³ Ibid., 19/09/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/page/6/>>.

⁶⁴ J. Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, Boston, 1884, 234–235 (234).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 18/09/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/page/6/>>.

⁶⁷ *Bientôt l'été*, Tale of Tales 2012.

easily be taken as a parable for ludic modelling (of gameplay and of narrative). Thus, when you close your eyes (by tapping on the spacebar) you can see the grid that lies behind the virtual reality.

In fact, *Bientôt l'été* turns out to be a game (or simulation) carried out within a game (or simulation) of abandoned astronauts. The artist, boldly summing up his *œuvre* in a single sentence, claims that it consists of “talking with your lover at a table in a café at the seaside on the holodeck of a space station in orbit of an earth-like planet in a distant solar system.”⁶⁸

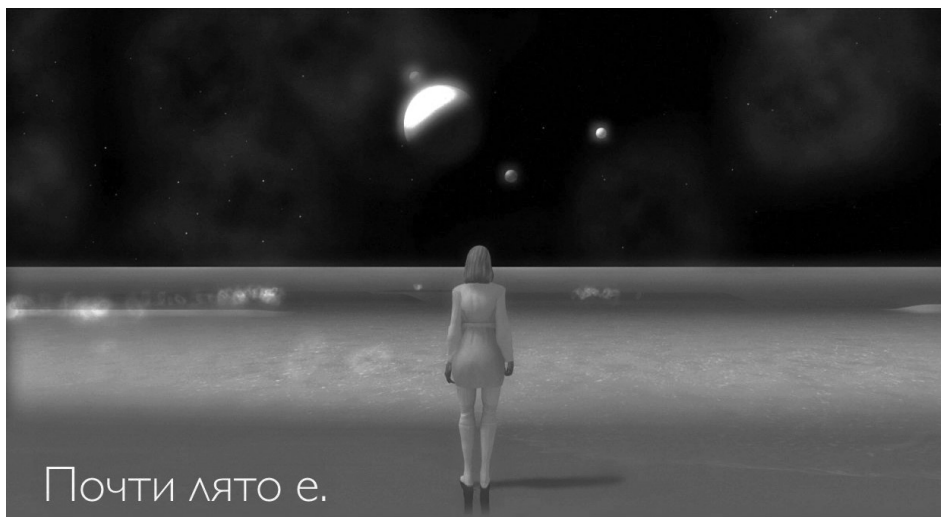


Fig. 16: *Jeu noir* – Bulgarian cover of *Bientôt l'été*, by courtesy of Tale of Tales

Thus, *Bientôt l'été* is a ‘connecting tale’ about two in-game players who assume the role of lovers, trying to transcend the depths of space and time: a role-play twice removed. One may conclude that simulation as a concept and procedure is not just a matter of creating gameplay, but that it refers to the production of the story as well.⁶⁹ The game design is staging a poetic ‘transform’⁷⁰ –

⁶⁸ Samyn, blog entry on *Bientôt l'été* from 30/09/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/page/5/>>.

⁶⁹ In an excellent description of the *Graveyard* concept and production Samyn points to this connection explicitly: “Most of any modern game budget is spent on the elements that express the story, on the simulation. [...] With Tale of Tales, we try to develop a new form of interactive entertainment. One that exploits the medium’s capacity of immersion and simulation to tell its story.” M. Samyn, “The Graveyard Post Mortem”, chapter 1, <http://tale-of-tales.com/blog/the-graveyard-post-mortem/>.

⁷⁰ The ‘transform’ as a noun to indicate the changeability of form and formal structures has been coined by Darin Tenev (by analogy with formal concepts in mathematics).

‘Duras on the holodeck’ –,⁷¹ combining a most popular technology with a sophisticated genre alien to the ludic mind. With words and objects, “Thoughts and Things” appearing and dissolving, Tale of Tales create a universe of floating but connected signs.

It is as if the semiosphere that Juri Lotman once designed according to the cosmic function of Vernadsky’s biosphere⁷² has found a visual rendering: in an appeal to prove (create) the primacy of the semiotic system (cosmos, conversation) over isolated signs (semantic fragments, avatars). Thus, “all semiotic space may be regarded as a unified mechanism (if not organism). In this case, primacy does not lie in one or another sign, but in the ‘greater system’, namely the semiosphere. The semiosphere is that same semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist.”⁷³

4. A return to Being

The action of re-entering the single signs (or fragments of a narrative) into the transform of a semiosphere (or proto-plot) is a decisive feature of the postgame gameplay. It is carried out within a process of *slow gaming*, thus allowing for a game experience that is not interrupted by the powerplay of stimulus – response. In notgame gaming what is left of gameplay has become a matter of slow motion and of slow emotion: empathy, compassion, contemplation and a feeling of immediacy.⁷⁴ And yet: What has been left of narrative, the fragments and the imports, is dependent on these features of restricted gameplay in an even stricter sense than were the scripted *fabulae* of mainstream narrative design. Now everything depends on how the triggers in the storyworld are able to create an interactive “mood that you can believe in, spontaneously”,⁷⁵ how smoothly – playfully – they activate (are activated by) the gamers’ agency and how convincingly they fuel and guide the gamers’ narrative imagination. Thus, ironically, the notgame

⁷¹ Referring to Duras’s novels and films, most notably *Moderato Cantabile* and *Agatha et les lectures illimitées* (France 1981), Samyn speaks about “the images of lone wanderers on the beach, reminiscent of the avatar’s roaming on the holodeck in *Bientôt l’été*”. Samyn, blog entry on *Bientôt l’été*, 30/11/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/>>.

⁷² Cf. J. Lotman, “On the semiosphere”, *Sign Systems Studies* 33 (2005), 205–229.

⁷³ Lotman, “On the semiosphere”, 208. Here Lotman quotes Vernadsky: “A thinking being, as he exists in nature, as do all living organisms, as does all living matter, is a function of the biosphere, in its definition of the spatial-temporal.” Ibid.

⁷⁴ A blogger even sented the emergence of a novel genre: “Should I call this a ‘contemplation game’?” Blogger Crooked Bee on the “Notgame” Thread of RPG Codex, 21/10/2015, <<http://www.rpgcodex.net/forums/index.php?threads/walking-simulators-aka-notgame-thread.104011/>>

⁷⁵ Samyn, “The Graveyard Post Mortem”, chapter 3.

art experience is recommitted to successful gameplay – only that the nature of the rules and aims has changed.

With Tale of Tales this ‘recommittment’ is connected to a classical agenda, to a ludic *kalokagathia* with aesthetical and ethical claims. One of the most distinctive elements that function as a trigger both for moral claims and narrative imagination is the ‘Drama Princess’, a “reusable autonomous character” that has its most spectacular appearance in the *The Path*.⁷⁶ The concept of the drama princess is to reinvest some of the agency that has been taken from the gamer (and the gamer-avatar relation) in an NPC. The princess character begins to interact when the Red Riding Hood is temporarily abandoned by the gamer, practically stirring it into an action on her own account (fig. 17).



Fig. 17: Friendly takeover / autonomous abduction – the Drama Princess (left) gets hold of Ruby, the abandoned avatar (right)

This type of intervention is one of the most intense experiences and effects of independent gameplay, all the more so as it is conducted by its own devices, playing their own game. Their play creates a loop, a bold re-entry of the concept ‘agency’ into the postgame format. Thus, it is directed to the gamer as well. In fact, the independence of these in-game actors is not just a feature of *paidia*, but

⁷⁶ A. Harvey/ M. Samyn (Tale of Tales), “The Drama Princess”, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/DramaPrincess/index.html>>.

a transformation of *ludus* (and gameplay) itself.⁷⁷ For there is hardly any better way to realize and experience the limits (and the possibilities) of your own scope of action than to witness others act and take control in your stead. The kidnapped avatar – much more than any ork wall, riddle or assault – can render such a limitation palpable. Moreover, by alluding to the double nature of the avatar and of the game itself, the smooth abduction liberates the narrative imagination, all the more so as it seems so unrelated to the gamer’s moves: a non-response to a non-stimulus. Undoubtedly, this is the time for speculation, for hypothesizing not about a possible solution to a riddle, but about a person’s intent. Ideally, the gamer will conceive of the devices – avatar and NPC – as independent minds: Where will the princess lead the avatar? What is the kids’ agenda? Will I be responsible for what they do?⁷⁸ In such a setting, the restrictions of the *ludus* may result both in a new type of emergent gameplay and in an emergent plot. The princess, therefore, is a ludic gesture that reveals the great potential of emergent gameplay in postgaming and postnarrative. The blackbox model is indeed a *drama* princess, generating action as a narrative.⁷⁹ She may be even more seductive than an online partner given that the mystery of independent action in a playing NPC responds to the tradition of the ‘ghost in the machine’. Like with all robots, dummies or live mannequins the princess shares the fate of parahumans: modeling humanity: “We realize that using animals or other non-human creatures is a very clever trick to make an autonomous character seem more intelligent. But Drama Princess’s focus is on humans. We want to tell stories to humans about humans.”⁸⁰ Here again, the ‘storytelling’ concept is remodelled as a *storyworld*, a space for narrative emergence of the subtle kind. It is a classicism in so far as it combines artistic value (beauty), ethics (humanism) and simplicity (restriction) with a longing for totality and harmony, a ‘wholeness’ that was also prominent in *The Beginner’s Guide*: “It’s not about the individual elements but about the total effect of the environment.”⁸¹ Hence games like these may truly bear the name ‘environmental’ as the whole environment becomes an agent in and of the ‘story-

⁷⁷ Thus, even in the postgame the old binary of game and play is still a leading concept of post-humanism as it was of humanism, e.g. in the famous statement Schiller made on humans being human only by their shared capacity of balancing two contradicting instincts – form (as abstract rules) and matter (as a physical desire) – by their instinct and capacity to play. Cf. Fr. Schiller, *On the aesthetic education of man in a series of letters*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

⁷⁸ In fact, the princess guides the avatar back to the path, thus acting like an agent of the basic rule ‘Stay on the path’. Within the storyworld, however, this ‘abduction’ (like the other princess gestures of playing and hugging) is a friendly move.

⁷⁹ Thus, in the end the princess character becomes the 7th avatar, the only one who manages to get through to the grandmother’s room.

⁸⁰ In contrast to the ‘free will mode’ of ‘creature characters’ like those in *Black and White* (Lionhead Studio 2000) or in the Tamagotchi series. Harvey/ Samyn, “The Drama Princess”.

⁸¹ Harvey/ Samyn, “Realtime Art Manifesto”, chapter 3.

world'. In such a world, however, we not only witness the return of the author,⁸² but the rebirth of the individual.

The masterpiece of this approach in game design is a short notgame that is so ephemeral and yet so gripping that it makes comparable attempts on post-narration (like *Dear Esther*) look like clumsy spiel. With modelling *The Graveyard* Tale of Tales have found their coda long before they introduced their more elaborate (and more ambitious) art games. Here, the minimalist outline with a maximum of atmosphere installs the *origo* of narrative within the end of gameplay. An old lady walking in a graveyard on her way to death recalls the lives of those who had been buried there. The gamer has no choice but to accompany the avatar until the very end, and then to listen to a song – the narrative – in Flemish. In *The Graveyard* agency and meaning are dissolving in an atmosphere of speculation and incomprehension, the prerequisite both of postnarrative and postgame gameplay. Just like Coda's final games, *The Graveyard* is an invitation and rejection, an inclusion and exclusion at the same time. The mobile grace of NPC autonomy embodied in the drama princess is now countered by the gravity of old age immobility. The radical restriction of the avatar is physically felt by steering it along the graveyard path (fig. 18). To make this anti-agency as palpable as possible the game designers even lowered their sights on the Real: "Turning the character around is very slow. We wanted it to feel really hard to do, even if that doesn't make sense, realistically."⁸³



Fig. 18: Missing in action – *The Graveyard*. All attempts on exploration (left and right) are thwarted by the game design: the camera zooms out, the avatar evacuates the frame

⁸² Cf. the 'great commandments' of the *Realtime Art Manifesto*, *ibid*, chapter 3: "[D]rop the requirement of making a game. / The game structure of rules and competition stands in the way of expressiveness. / [...] Be an author. / [...] Do not imitate other media but develop an aesthetic style that is unique."

⁸³ Samyn, "The Graveyard Post Mortem", chapter 3.

For Tale of Tales this attitude is deeply human, yet beneath the ‘message in a body’ lingers the deep cultural and epistemic pessimism that became a trademark of their postgame tales. It was not eased by the majority of gamers, either: The “empathy machine”,⁸⁴ however subtle and subversive, failed to gain the gamers’ empathy, especially when they approached it as an action game.⁸⁵ In fact, the action level with a limping grandma (who is not a zombie) is extremely low. A genre trouble of the frugal kind ensued and it remained a constant feature of the notgame movement and its vigorous – and futile – fight for recognition in the gamer scene. But even on the academic side *The Graveyard* fueled a Game-as-Art controversy. Some critics even recognized a ‘Graveyard fallacy’, complaining that the game was falling short both of the technical potential of the medium and of the sheer complexity of the society it seemed to criticize. Such criticism fails to measure the emphatic notgames by their own postnarrative and postgame standards, yet it had a point in doubting their efficiency. For many, the directness of pubescent souls or aged bodies, silent deer (*The Endless Forest*) or cleaning housemaids (*Sunset*) seemed too indirect.

So Michaël Samyn finally became a Coda. The creator of ambitious parahumans re-emerged as a posthumanist that turned away from gaming and humanity: “Humans have lost it. Their civilisations have become a parody of themselves. And while there are a lot of theatrics, there is very little substance.”⁸⁶ Such a deep-seated *Kulturpessimismus* also has an impact on the notgame concept and its standing in the Game-as-Art controversy:

When I chose videogames as a medium for my art ten years ago, it was because I considered it to be the most suitable medium to explore contemporary issues. I felt that the old media were failing to address the complexity of life in the 21st century and that people really needed art that dealt with that. [...] I still feel art can come to the rescue. If only to offer a reason why our civilisation and species should be saved from oblivion. But this art will need to be extremely simple.⁸⁷

Thus, tragically, the developer himself concedes that there had been a Graveyard Fallacy:

⁸⁴ Interview with Gerry de Mol, Samyn, “The Graveyard Post Mortem”, chapter 5.

⁸⁵ So e.g. in the Austrian gamer magazine *Spieletest* that classified the game as ‘Action’, <<http://www.spieletest.at/computerspiel.php?ID=131041>>. For an action game the rating of the *Graveyard* was surprisingly positive; it gained 3 out of 100 in the section ‘fun’.

⁸⁶ M. Samyn, “Message in a Body”, blog entry on *Bientôt l’été*, 11/12/2012, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/bientotlete/blog/message-in-a-body/>>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

This means that I believed that deeply explorative and complex art could help people solve the problems of today's society. I don't think I believe that any more. Today I find society has deteriorated beyond any hope for relatively comfortable saving through art-provoked thoughts. [...] It is understandable that sophistication and complexity is not appreciated by the masses. But now we have also lost the elite.⁸⁸

In consequence of such a fallacy, the only chance for art will be to vanish from the market, or, in Samyn's words, to hide behind the mask:

[T]o be effective, art will need to mask as pulp, be simple, so it can be accepted by the unaccustomed masses. Even if your art is intended for an elite, it still needs to be able to pass for shallow because otherwise the people who enjoy it risk public scorn, or simply prevent scorn by ignoring the art. [...] No more deep exploration or honest investigation of complex issues! Deal with simple ideas, clichés even, but present them with charm – not irony! Be honest. Don't even try to add hidden layers. Just trust your artistic soul that the meaning will be there, for others to find it, equally unconsciously.⁸⁹

This manifesto of a ludic desperation brings about an esotericism of the ludic type. So, just as Coda finally gave up on making art games, ceased to be a (moral) guide and vanished as a person, Tale of Tales gave up on the idea of games at all. Instead of Coda, though, the silent genius, the classicists of Tale of Tales began their turn to postgame humanism with a notgame curse: “Good-bye, gamers! May you die in the same agony that you caused to thousands of defenseless virtual creatures.”⁹⁰ Here, like with the equally defenseless polyesters that are slaughtered by the textile industry, the parahuman of the Virtual has finally connected with the human of the Real. It is no wonder that the next big thing with Tale of Tales is a Cathedral, “an ever expanding collection of virtual dioramas for contemplation”, a *Cathedral in the Clouds*.⁹¹ Instead of masking art as pulp it will be reconfigured as an art religion – and this is a great tradition in itself. In this tradition narrative has always been a vehicle of Being, of a higher Truth and of a higher Beauty that could share each other's existential values and their epistemic claims. The games of Tale of Tales (and others from the independent scene) have always been directed to this existential aim.

Thus, from an ontological, that is to say: an instrumental point of view the poet's famous creed that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” has never been more

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Tweet from 22/06/2015, <<https://twitter.com/taleoftales/status/612937102880325632>>.

⁹¹ <<http://cathedral-in-the-clouds.net/>>.

practically satisfied than in the independent digital game.⁹² With Tale of Tales we witness the return of a true classical romanticism – or, historically speaking, a romantic classicism – that is in itself a challenge to the claims and ideologies both of the classical tradition and of a postmodernism that has always wanted to be elitist and popular, non-conformist and exemplary at the same time. In independent gaming their proponents are confronting – like their counterparts in literary or performance theory, but also in life coaching, esotericism and adjacent ways of *Weltanschauung* – a competitor with cunning means for analyzing and interpreting the world and mind. In fact, the combination of autonomy in life and art together with a form of contemplation that conceives of playing as a ritual has an appeal that may develop soon. It may exchange the distance of the institutional observer by the close experience of the participant. By introducing a ‘postvirtual’ reality the unity of postgame and postnarrative may even make a modal dream come true, a dream that classical aesthetics, natural philosophy and modern esotericism share: to overcome the difference of fact and fiction by creating organisms from machinery. As such, the bold meanderings along the verges of the game are challenging our concepts of existence. Here, the Game-as-Art controversy may level up to its distinguished forerunners: the Life-as-Art controversy of 19th century *fin de siècle* and the Art-as-Life controversy of 18th century classicism.

In 1788 the German pioneer of classical autonomy, Karl Philipp Moritz, found a strong conclusion for his famous essay *On the Formative Imitation of Beauty*: “That we *are* is our most elevated and most noble concept. – And from mortal lips no word about the Beautiful will ever come that could be more sublime than this: it *is!*”⁹³ In 2012 a blogger posted some reflections on the Tale of Tales discussion site on how the sea may trigger meaning in *Bientôt l’été*. The postnarrator’s answer vividly recalls the classicist’s idea about the ontological supremacy of art, transgressing both the urge to tell a story and the verge of the game: “I like saying that the sea is a metaphor for everything. But there is strange comfort in meaninglessness too. In being near something that is *not* telling a story. Something that just *is*.”⁹⁴

⁹² Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, p.235.

⁹³ K. Ph. Moritz, “Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen”, *Beiträge zur Ästhetik*, ed. H. J. Schrimpf/ H. Adler, Mainz: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989, 27–78 (78), my translation, italics in the original.

⁹⁴ M. Samyn: blog entry on the Tale of Tales forum, <<http://tale-of-tales.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=10329&sid=5e63ed0dcd37d87f23b49bb8671ac911>>.