[Inhaltsverzeichnis]

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»Come, Stanley, let's find the story!« On the Ludic and the Narrative Mode of Computer Games in *The Stanley Parable*

Abstract

The concept of multimodality, originating from social semiotics, appears to be a very promising one for computer game research, as the relatively new medium employs many different modes on many different levels. This quality of computer games may even be a main reason for the difficulties of digital game studies to properly define their object, prominently exemplified by the notorious dispute between ludologists and narratologists. By now there is the consensus that the terms *narrative* and *ludic* do not define computer games as such, but rather describe two of many modes which coexist in most games and are generally of equal importance (cf. NEITZEL/NOHR 2010: 419), just as the modes of human communication are described as coexisting and equal by social semiotics (cf. KRESS 2010).

While the respective forms and functions of the ludic as well as the narrative mode have already been discussed elsewhere (cf. THON 2007), this paper focuses on the self-reflexive potential of their specific combination and conflation as it is applied in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013). This game is implicitly built upon the aforementioned consensus and the conflict that preceded it, as it exposes the problematic combination of coherent narration with a player's freedom of choice. It takes advantage of the different levels of representation and interpretation involved in playing computer games (cf. SCHRÖTER/THON 2014) to put common ludic and narrative game conven-

tions into the guise of the respective other mode, thus undermining player expectations as well as challenging player behavior. I discuss those self-reflexive operations using two prominent examples from the game that present, firstly, a narrative ending sequence in disguise of an (insoluble) ludic challenge in the game's countdown room, and, secondly, a parody of the often used promise of narratively relevant player choice in the player-avatar's presumed quest for the game's story. Both sequences highlight different functions of the narrative and the ludic mode, while making them blur into one another on the edges between the game's representation and the player's interpretation.

1. Introduction

Multimodality is a multifaceted issue which is especially true in the case of computer games. Besides the different sensorial modes involved in playing a digital game and that which is often mistaken for multi*mediality*[15], there is the equally fundamental distinction between the ludic mode and the narrative mode of digital games, which will be the concern of this essay. To examine the respective characteristics of the ludic and the narrative mode of gaming, and to illustrate how they depend on the player's interpretation, I will discuss the highly self-reflexive game *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013), which challenges or at least exposes many computer game conventions. This is achieved by including a deliberate confusion of the ludic and the narrative mode. Before going into detail, though, I would like to contextualize my approach in the field of multimodality studies.

2. Multimodality in Social Semiotics and the History of Digital Game Studies

Although this essay is not concerned with social semiotics, some of the basic principles of this field that initialized research on multimodality can give important clues on how digital game studies should confront the issue, even though they are not in any way directly connected to computer games and may actually seem rather trivial to some.

The first underlying assumption of multimodality studies I would like to highlight is addressed right at the beginning of Gunther Kress's *Multimodality* (2010). Kress' starting point in this case is an everyday encounter with traffic signs showing supermarket car park directions which use both written

[15] Multimediality in this sense refers to the combination of, for example, moving audiovisual images, written text and stationary images in a computer game, which should rather be comprehended as different *modalities* inherent to the medium (ELLESTRÖM 2010: 24).

language and visual image to convey the intended information to the driver. As you can see from even such a mundane example, rather than the exception, there is a reasonable argument in »taking ›multimodality‹ as the normal state of human communication« (KRESS 2010: 1). This would not be of relevance for this essay, were it not for the delicate history of digital game studies that were often prone to forgetting the inherent multimodality of their subject matter—though of course in a notably different way from what Kress was writing about in his book. I am referring to the notorious debate between so-called ›narratologists‹ and ›ludologists‹, that has fortunately been shelved since. With varied attempts to understand computer games either as playable simulations without any relevant narrative information (cf., e.g., ESKELINEN 2001), or as representations that could easily be interpreted in the same way as for example narrative film or literature (cf., e.g., HOROWITZ MURRAY 1997), the early stages of digital game studies highly sensitized later research to that seemingly conflicting nature of computer games. Thus, today »it can be held as accepted within *Game Studies* that the fact of computer games being games does not exclude them from having narrative qualities as well«[16] (NEITZEL/NOHR 2010: 419; original emphasis, translation M.H.). Analogous to Kress' argument then, ›multimodality‹ should be considered ›the normal state‹ of computer games.

Before explaining the ludic and the narrative modes of games themselves, I would briefly like to point out a second presupposition of multimodality in social semiotics. According to Kress, all modes of communication are conceptually equal, i.e., no mode is essentially more important than any other. He reminds his readers that the often perceived predominance of certain modes is mainly socially formed and thus not absolute but conventional (cf. KRESS 2009). The customary example of social semiotics in this regard would be the often falsely assumed predominance of language, whereas computer games researchers are immediately reminded of the aforementioned monomodal approaches of ›ludologists‹ and ›narratologists‹ respectively. Nevertheless, there more often than not *is* a hierarchy of modes in computer games as well that, among others, may be due to genre conventions. Examples range from simple arcade games like *Pacman* (Namco, 1980) on the ludic side to interactive movies like *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) at the narrative extreme. Hence, it is only natural that different studies are interested in the two modes to varied degrees, depending on their research question and the type of games they analyze. Yet, there is no denying that most contemporary games involve both modes, and this essay aims to show the deep interconnections of the ludic and the narrative elements in digital games and how undermining conventions can lead to a confusion of the one with the other in players' interpretations.

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[16] My translation of the German »[...] kann als in den *Game Studies* akzeptiert gelten, dass die Tatsache, dass Computerspiele Spiele sind, sie keineswegs davon ausschließt, auch narrative Qualitäten zu haben«.

3. Ludic and Narrative Modes of Computer Games and the Levels of Representation and Interpretation

My emphasis on conceptualizing ludic and narrative elements of computer games as *modes* is preceded by Christy Dena's essay »Beyond Multimedia, Narrative, and Game. The Contributions of Multimodality and Polymorphic Fictions«. Here she not only clearly distinguishes »narrative and game modes« (DENA 2010: 183) but also already bemoans the »monomodal perspective« (DENA 2010: 193) of narratology as well as ludology. As Dena focuses on a fruitful combination of the insights of multimodality with the issue of ›polymorphic fiction‹[17], she is more interested in narrative and ludic modes as conflicting parties in game studies, rather than providing a description of the modes themselves. Fortunately, this has already been done by other scholars like Jan-Noël Thon, who clearly distinguishes spatial (which will not be discussed further in this essay), ludic and narrative levels of computer games and their respective functions (cf. THON 2007). According to him, »the level of ludic structures is essentially concerned with the realm of the game rules and their effects [while t]he level of narrative structures then refers to the question to what extent storytelling is part of the illustration of the fictional world«[18] (THON 2007: 43; translation M.H.). Typical examples of elements that are primarily connected to game rules and goals would be information about the avatar's health status and inventory as well as quests, fights or navigation within a labyrinth, i.e., more or less complex challenges for the player to overcome. In contrast, characteristic narrative elements could be cut-scenes, scripted dialogue and diaries or audio logs giving background information on the storyworld. An additional level of the narrative mode can be found in overall structures such as the overall plot of a game.

While this list does not claim completeness, the distinction between such ludic and narrative elements seems more clear-cut than it actually often is, as

> the distinction between rulegoverned simulation and predetermined narrative representation as two fairly different modes of representation does not necessarily imply that only prototypically narrative elements such as cut-scenes and scripted sequences of events are contributing to the representation of a video game's storyworld and its characters. (SCHRÖTER/THON 2014: 47)

For example, dialogue can be used to initiate quests, hence stating a temporary game goal (e.g., to obtain a specific object and deliver it to the quest-giver) more or less explicitly embedded in ›merely‹ narrative information.

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[17] Dena defines her term ›polymorphic fiction‹ rather vaguely as referring »to fictions that are expressed across multiple forms« (DENA 2010: 185). A better understanding of the phenomenon can possibly be gained from her own analogy of her term to, for example, Henry Jenkins' better-known concept of ›transmedia storytelling‹ (DENA 2010: 185).

[18] My translation of the German: »Die Ebene der ludischen Strukturen bezieht sich im Wesentlichen auf den Bereich der Spielregeln und ihrer Wirkungen. Die Ebene der narrativen Strukturen schließlich bezieht sich auf die Frage, inwiefern die Vermittlung einer Geschichte Teil der Darstellung der fiktionalen Welt ist«.

This is a well-known procedure of most role-playing games (RPG), but non-RPGs make excessive use of it as well, as is the case in my upcoming example *The Stanley Parable*, in which the voice-over narrator states at the beginning: »Stanley decided to go to the meeting room. Perhaps he had simply missed a memo«. Here the player simultaneously picks up her next assumed destination as well as bits of information about the storyworld and the main character Stanley. Examples like this one demonstrate why it is reasonable to consider both the ludic and the narrative mode as parallel and interweaving levels of meaning in computer games (cf. NOHR 2014).

The interrelatedness of the two modes may sometimes be attributable to what Dena terms ›transmodal principles‹, i.e., underlying, mode-independent principles such as ›cause‹, which would characterize the ludic element ›quest‹ as well as the narrative element ›plot‹ (cf. DENA 2010: 195–197). However, these principles do not lead to a conflation of the modes, but are rather conceptualized as an aid to identify similarities between instances of different modes, such as in the quest-plot-example. Thus, they may in certain cases underlie, but do not establish confusions of modes such as I am interested in and which are purposefully created in *The Stanley Parable* by a distinct (ab)use of media conventions.

An understanding of such modal confusions requires considering both the level of representation and that of interpretation of computer games. In their theoretical concept of video game characters, Schröter and Thon conceptualize such a distinction as, on the one hand, »three modes of representation« as compared to, on the other hand, »three ways of *experiencing* video game characters« (SCHRÖTER/THON 2014: 41; emphasis M.H.), both of which include a ludic (or simulative) and a narrative mode as well as experience respectively (cf. SCHRÖTER/THON 2014: 48f.).[19] They also emphasize that the relations between those levels

> are far from clear-cut and should not be conceptualized as being overly stable. While there certainly is an emphasis on ›ludic experience‹, the interactive gameplay that characterizes the mode of simulation usually also contributes to the representation of video game characters as fictional entities. (SCHRÖTER/THON 2014: 50)

This ambiguity as well as the instability hint, again, at the co-presence and basic equality of modes, while it furthermore enables the confusion of modes arranged in *The Stanley Parable*.

[19] While Schröter's and Thon's actually nine-dimensional concept is far more elaborate than what has been mentioned so far, the other aspects of their theory (a social dimension of each representation and experience and a third basic distinction of three ontological dimensions) are simply not necessary to understand the purpose of this essay.

4. *The Stanley Parable*. A Conflict of Ludus and Narration?

The Stanley Parable is an independent game that originated as a modification (*mod*) for the popular First Person Shooter (FPS) *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004). After the success of the *mod* the developer Galactic Café decided to remake the game as a stand-alone product which was then published in 2013. The game was critically acclaimed for its dominating self-reflecting humor and its undermining of typical gaming conventions as well as player expectations. As can be anticipated from its origins, the game is played from a first person perspective, however the typical FPS mechanics are boiled down to simple horizontal movement and rudimentary interaction with specific objects (e.g., doors or buttons).

The game's story is about a seemingly simple-minded man called Stanley who enjoys his rather dull job in an office building, where he has to push buttons on a keyboard in the exact way he is told until »one day, something very peculiar happened«, as the narrator of the introductory sequence remarks. On that day, Stanley is all alone in the office building and has not received any order for him to follow. This is the beginning of the game, and solving the narrative conflict of Stanley not knowing what happened at his workplace is staged as the ludic goal of the player, who is in control of Stanley as his avatar.

As the player begins to explore the environment of the office building, she is constantly accompanied by the voice of the nameless narrator who initially appears rather conventional, giving additional narrative information, for instance about Stanley's thoughts, as well as ludic hints, e.g., for taking the left of two doors to get to the meeting room like Stanley supposedly wants to. The only peculiarity seems to be that the voice is narrating upcoming events in the past, thus seemingly anticipating the players' actions. For example, when the player enters the room of the first decision to make, facing two doors at the far wall, the narrator says »When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left«, irrespective of whether the player has even made another move, yet. The implicit ludic (or perhaps better: *paidiic*[20]) challenge is to play against the voice-over narration. This,

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[20] According to Roger Caillois, *ludus* and *paidia* define, broadly speaking, two inherently different types of games, namely strictly rule-based and goal-oriented games (*ludus*) and rather free, curiosity-driven play (*paidia*) (cf. CAILLOIS 1960; BACKE 2008: 165–168). The definition of a paidiic challenge is, hence, arguably a paradox in itself. Nevertheless, *The Stanley Parable* stimulates players' curiosity and the paidiic form of play, rewarding the setting's exploration with secrets to uncover, even if those are merely more unexpected and funny comments of the narrator. Thus, the paidiic desire for free exploration is tied to a goal, though a vague one of ›seeing what may happen‹. For example, the player can leave the office through a window which involves tricky ascension to a desk, as jumping is not included in the control options. Outside the building there is only white nothingness, but the possibility of getting here is not due to a glitch, as another of the narrator's mocking comments makes clear. Hence, what would typically be regarded as a paidiic break-out from game rules and goals is intentionally included in *The Stanley Parable*'s ludic structure. As the difference of *ludus* and *paidia* is therefore not crucial in this game, it is mostly disregarded in this essay.

actually, is the essence of *The Stanley Parable*, and in neglecting the narrator's instructions, the player soon finds out that the voice accompanies her also outside of the planned route, commenting on Stanley's actions and further breaking the laws of fiction by directly addressing him or even the player herself.

Many if not most of the narrator's utterances are attempts to lure the player back to the path where the ›story‹ is supposed to unfold, or complaints about her not doing so and thus rejecting the narrator personally. As nearly the only interactive element in *The Stanley Parable* is the ability to decide between different paths, and the narrator—the main source for narrative information—tries to prevent the player from making her own decisions, the main conflict of the game can be understood as one between the ludic and the narrative mode of computer games in general. It involves two competing layers of representation, namely the verbal representation of the narrator, who contributes mainly to the narrative mode, versus the audiovisual representation of the setting, which generally foregrounds the ludic mode, for example by presenting a choice of paths. While a similar setup of narrative and ludic representations is characteristic of and unproblematic in many contemporary games, *The Stanley Parable* exposes its potential for conflict by the use of the narrator's contempt for any digression from the predetermined track, which could be equalized with a contempt for players that are more interested in playing a game than in finishing its story.

There are other conflicts of narrative and ludic mode in *The Stanley Parable* that transcend the level of representation by undermining conventional interpretations, resulting in modal confusion on the part of the player.

5. Ludic and Narrative Modes Turned Upside Down. A Narrated Final Encounter and a Quest for Story

If the player of *The Stanley Parable* has followed the narrator's instructions up to the last possible decision, she navigated the avatar to a huge »mind control facility« apparently designed to brainwash Stanley and his co-workers, at least according to the narrator. The facility is off power and it is up to the player to follow the narrator's plan to destroy it once and for all in order to escape to the outside, or rather to turn it back on again. If she decides for the latter, the power in the control room is activated, but the narrator is so irritated that he ›spontaneously‹ (of course this is a scripted event) introduces a self-destruction device that will lead to an explosion of the whole building after a few minutes. Accompanied by a huge countdown screen and the gleeful voice of the narrator, the player is still free to move the avatar through the control room with its many screens and buttons that can be pushed now that the power is on. The whole situation conforms to the conventions of final encounters in computer games and is thus recognized as a challenge to the

player, operating primarily in the ludic mode. There are at least three distinctive elements that almost impose this ludic interpretation (or ludic *experience* in Schröter's and Thon's terms): first, there is the countdown, a conventional method for intensifying a challenge through a temporal dimension. Second, there is the now clearly malevolent narrator who, with his confession of telling the story over and over again to let Stanley and his co-workers die in multiple ways, meets typical expectations of an evil adversary.[21] Finally, the control room itself suggests a complex puzzle to be solved, as many differently colored and labeled buttons can be pushed and often actually trigger a reaction on near screens, including the appearance of an ›incorrect‹ label that seems to imply the existence of a ›correct‹ screen as well. Thereby the possibility for interactivity even seems enhanced compared to the rest of the game. Nevertheless, what appears to be a characteristically ludic sequence really operates in the narrative mode, as all the interactive devices are mere decoys and there is nothing the player can do to prevent the facility from exploding. The narrator even openly mocks the player's hectic search for a solution near the end of the sequence:

> Oh, dear me, what's the matter, Stanley? Is it that you have no idea where you're going or what you're supposed to be doing right now? Or did you just assume when you saw that timer that something in this room was capable of turning it off? I mean, look at you, running from button to button, screen to screen, clicking on every little thing in this room! »These numbered buttons! No! These colored ones! Or maybe this big, red button! Or this door! Everything, anything, something here will save me!« Why would you think that, Stanley? That this video game can be beaten, won, solved? Do you have any idea what your purpose in this place is? But you really believe there's an answer! How many times will you replay this bit, looking desperately for a solution? Ten? A hundred? A thousand? I look forward to finding out, and to watching the bomb go off each time you fail.

That many players actually reacted just as the narrator predicted, is confirmed by internet users that have discussed possible solutions to the ›countdown room‹ online. Yet, despite the fact of the narrator's decreasing reliability throughout the game, players would be better advised to take him seriously in this case, as the website *The Stanley Parable Wiki* by now confirms that there is simply no secret ending to unravel in the countdown room:

> Several players have decompiled the map to figure out what the buttons are and what they do. They have no entities tied to them that would stop the countdown. In other words, despite player folklore, the countdown cannot be stopped in any way, shape, or form, unless through heavy map editing.[22]

The unwillingness of players to accept the non-ludic nature of the countdown sequence demonstrates the power of computer game conventions on player interpretation. Hence, given the aforementioned signals for a final challenge, especially the feigned possibility of interactivity, on the level of interpretation

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[21] To be sure, the narrator's speech belongs to the narrative mode, but regarding that computer games more often than not rely on open conflict and, thus, defeatable opponents, his changed demeanor in this sequence has a ludic function as well which should not be underestimated.

[22] »Explosion Ending«, in *The Stanley Parable Wiki*. http://thestanleyparable.wikia.com/wiki/Explosion_Ending [accessed April 13, 2015].

the ludic mode seems to be the primary one in this sequence, whereas on the level of representation the game here is mainly functioning in the narrative mode. During the narrator's speech, the timer and all the devices in the control room shape the storyworld and advance the storyline, while the ludic mode is maximally reduced to avatar movement without any interactive potential.[23] What would be a crucial element of the ludic mode in most computer games—i.e., the final challenge—is twisted into a key narrative scene without any characteristic use of narrative conventions of game endings, for example a cinematic cut-scene. In other words: during the countdown sequence, what seems to be a quest turns out to be nothing more than plot.

While the confusion of the narrative with the ludic mode is quite an obvious result of this part of the game, there is no comparably plain example for a reverse confusion of the ludic with the narrative. I attribute this lack to the inherent characteristics of the modes: players can be rather easily tricked into considering inconsequential ludic decoys as effective interactive devices, because it takes at least some time to figure out their uselessness. In contrast, a hypothetical masking of ludic elements as narrative ones would simply discourage any required player activity and so obstruct any further progress in the game. Possibly the only way of evoking the narrative mode as predominant during a primarily ludic sequence is by posing narrative elements as the game goal. Indeed such a structure can be found in *The Stanley Parable* during a sequence which also, once again, involves misinterpreting the plot for a quest. Hence, a confusion of modes here is relevant on two different levels.

The sequence occurs after an early deviation of the narrator's favored path, in which the player ends up at the surveillance room of the mind control facility through a different entrance. The narrator bemoans this as being too early and a »spoiler« and eventually restarts the game. Whereas restarting, i.e., beginning the game again in Stanley's office, is common during a game session of *The Stanley Parable* to allow the exploration of different paths, it is usually connected to reaching the end of one path or initiated by the player herself and typically results in a (nearly) clean reset of the game world. But not in this case, where the chosen path, that leads to the so-called »confusion ending« when followed thoroughly, involves multiple dead ends and restarts by the narrator. In the first instance of those restarts the player finds the room of the game's first decision warped: where she previously could choose between two doors, there are now six doors, excluding the one she came through. The narrator seems to be taken by surprise and first attributes the change to Stanley, before reminding himself that *he* is the one in charge of the storyworld. However, he cannot seem to ›find‹ his story and thus turns it

[23] In fact, it does not matter if the player kept Stanley running around pushing buttons during the countdown sequence, or if she completely withdrew her hands from mouse and keyboard. Neither the outcome of the scene nor the monologue of the narrator are affected by this in any way. In contrast, during most parts of the game, avatar movement is not only one but the main and often only device for the player's interactive exertion of influence on the game world.

into the object of a quest: »Okay then, it's an adventure! Come, Stanley, let's find the story!«

On the one hand, the narrator's invitation emphasizes the exploration of his planned narrative—a coherent and linear story leading from Stanley's office into freedom that the player can explore by following all of the narrator's directions—as the main goal of the game, which obviously has not been the major interest of the player so far, as she deliberately ignored the narrator's instructions before. Maybe staged as an attempt to arouse the player's interest in the story, the narrator repeatedly identifies its retrieval as an interactive act, even treating Stanley as a fellow storyteller along the way: »What do you want our story to be? Go wild! Use your imagination! Whatever it might be, Stanley, I'm ready for it!« Yet, besides the narrator's commentary, there is not even the illusion of interactivity beyond movement down a linear path in this late stage of the sequence, so that the aforementioned basic conflict between ludus and narrative in *The Stanley Parable* is turned upside down, with the narrator reassuring the game's ludic potential, while the setting submits itself to the linearity of the predetermined narrative.

In contrast, the appearance of the multiple doors at the beginning of the ›confusion ending‹ sequence, as described above, at first seems to realize the ludic potential of the verbally given quest. Hence, on the other hand, the scene involves a modal confusion very similar to that of the countdown sequence, evoking the ludic mode as the primary one on the level of interpretation while it is actually marginalized in the representation. Besides the explicit quest-giving by the narrator, an accentuation of the ludic mode is given through the seemingly increased scope of interactivity that is suggested by the six opening doors that stand out against other relevant ludic choices in *The Stanley Parable* which rarely involve more than two options. In contrast to the countdown sequence, though, it is hard even for inexperienced players to misinterpret the multiple-door sequence primarily in the ludic mode for a long time, as the choice turns out to be fake: the corridors behind all six doors are interconnected and invariably lead back to the initial room. The only way to escape this trap even requires no activity at all, as the player simply has to wait for the narrator to get bored and restart the game again.[24]

Albeit, even the initial confusion of modes here has a very different effect from the one in the countdown sequence, as its underlying idea is not misdirection of players but rather a parody of the idealized vision of interactive storytelling popularized especially in the 1990s (cf., e.g., HOROWITZ MURRAY 1997). The narrative conventions invoked here are not necessarily specific to the medium of the computer game, but games are often expected to be able to transform them into ludic elements. Thus, in this sequence, the player of *The Stanley Parable* may expect at least some influence on how the story about Stanley will unfold, depending on her choice of door. Such an expecta-

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[24] This is again similar to the countdown sequence, with the exception that an early restart by the player herself would make a difference, as it would lead to a clean reset and thus abort the remaining sequence of the ›confusion ending‹.

tion would even be in line with the player's prior experiences, as the game's story clearly evolves differently with each choice made. Hence, an at least partial transformation of the narrative element ›plot‹ into the ludic element ›quest‹ has already been part of the game from its start. The player would of course only be aware of that if she has tried other paths before.[25] However, if she did, she would also have grown accustomed to the game's self-reflexive and mocking nature, therefore probably suspecting the situation as not being what it pretends to be. As players of computer games are somewhat used to shallow promises about interactively shaped stories,[26] it would not only have been much harder but also less desirable for *The Stanley Parable* to keep up the confusion of the narrative with the ludic mode in this context any longer. An effective choice of story progress in the described sequence would run contrary to the game's overall purpose of reflecting on and parodying established computer game conventions. This purpose is better achieved by the revelation of the notorious shallowness of choice by the exaggeratedly obvious interconnection of the doors as well as the later minimization of interactivity during the narrator's call for unrestrained creativity.

6. Conclusion

A multimodal analysis of *The Stanley Parable* first of all confirms the need for a distinction between a narrative and a ludic mode in computer games, as they involve different forms of realization and fulfill clearly distinct functions. Their co-presence and general equality in most contemporary games, initially conceptualized following principles of social semiotics' multimodality studies, are exemplified by *The Stanley Parable*'s self-reflecting use of conventions of both modes. The discussed game sequences show that such conventions are crucial for interpretation and, hence, player behavior in as well as their expectations of a game in general. Nevertheless, the example sequences reveal that critical undermining of computer game conventions by unexpected modal conversion, as is exerted in *The Stanley Parable*, is not universally applicable, as it proves far easier to mask non-interactive elements as interactive ones than vice versa. In the context of this essay, however, it can be no more than a hypothesis that this is a basic difference of the narrative and the ludic mode.

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[25] Alternatively, she could of course assume the possibility from experiences with other computer games.

[26] A recent example would be the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2007–2012), which involved a promise of diverse choices shaping the narrative over the course of all three games that in the end was widely regarded as reneged on. A short characterization of players' frustration with the not so interactive shaping of the story of *Mass Effect* is given in Dave Thier's Forbes blogpost »Why Fans Are So Angry About the Mass Effect 3 Ending« (cf. http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2012/03/14/why-fans-are-so-angry-about-the-mass-effect-3-ending/ [accessed April 22, 2015]).

Multimodality is certainly not the only and maybe not even the best way to substantiate the dual nature of computer games, as it is just as easily possible to speak of narrative and ludic elements, functions or levels rather than modes. Yet, in my opinion the term *mode* is specifically fitting, because it encompasses most aspects of the other concepts as well as such important notions as convention and a differentiation of representation and interpretation with its etymologically given emphasis on *how* such distinct aspects of a medium are designed and perceived.

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