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THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ART GAMES AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

EXAMINING DAVEY WREDEN'S THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE THROUGH JOHN DEWEY'S AESTHETIC FRAMEWORK

The Beginner's Guide to Art Games as Aesthetic Experiences:

Examining Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* Through John Dewey's Aesthetic Framework

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2019

Abstract

This master's thesis explores how, if video games can be classified as experiential media, John Dewey's framework can be utilised to determine whether or not such games can constitute an aesthetic experience and, by extension, be labelled art. The thesis relies on its own comprehensive framework, drawing on aesthetic philosophy, cultural studies, literary studies, and video game studies to set up a dichotomy between mainstream games and art games, where the latter is postulated to have the ability to facilitate an aesthetic experience; thus, allowing to characterise such games as art. Through an analysis of Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* (2015), this study has shown how the game's self-reflexive and self-conscious nature allows for an immersive gaming-experience that causes positive and negative emotional reactions in the player that cannot be named during the experience itself but can only be reflected upon once the experience has been consummated. Furthermore, *The Beginner's Guide*'s use of avant-garde strategies makes said game resemble postmodern and high modernist art; wherefore, by virtue of the game's powerful inherent aesthetic qualities, *The Beginner's Guide* should be considered art.

KEY WORDS: John Dewey, aesthetic experience, art as experience, aesthetics, Davey Wreden, *The Beginner's Guide*, metafiction, metareferentiality, video games, avant-garde, art.

Acknowledgements

As part of the most significant and challenging process we have ever had to conquer academically and personally, we would like to extend our gratitude to a number of people, who have made this journey worthwhile.

First and foremost, we would like to thank Brian Russell Graham for his excellent supervision of our master's thesis and for our shared working relationship over the years. We have had the pleasure of being supervised by him more than any other professor at Aalborg University, to which he deserves appraisal for helping us emerge stronger and more capable than we would have otherwise. We are truly grateful for his guidance, encouragement, support, and patience throughout this endeavour. Thank you.

We would also like to thank the women in our lives for their eternal love and support. They have lent their ears and hearts in times of hardship, and we appreciate every hug and kiss they have provided over the past five months. We love you very much.

To our wonderful families, we would like to extend our deepest thanks for understanding the importance of this endeavour. We are eternally thankful for their supportive and encouraging nature. We love you all.

To our dear friends, thank you for the support and interest in our work, and for understanding our absence during the past few months.

A great deal of appreciation is also owed to Studieboxen for providing us with our "second home", our office, during this entire process. We are grateful for everything, they have done.

It is to each other that we owe our final thanks. The time we have shared together during this process has certainly strengthened our minds and skill, but most importantly, our friendship. We have been there for one another when things were difficult, we have shown each other complete trust, and we have had one amazing experience. Thank you for an "aesthetic" journey.

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1. Introduction

> Why are gamers so intensely concerned, anyway, that games be defined as art? Bobby Fischer, Michael Jordan and Dick Butkus never said they thought their games were an art form. Nor did Shi Hua Chen, winner of the $500,000 World Series of Mah Jong in 2009. Why aren't gamers content to play their games and simply enjoy themselves? (Ebert, 2010a, Para. 23).

The quote above is taken from Roger Ebert's article, *Video games can never be art* (2010a), wherein he argues, as the title suggests, that video games can never aspire to become an artistic medium; however, this was a position he slightly reevaluated a couple months later, admitting that one should never say never despite holding onto his first statement (Ebert, 2010b, para. 1). Ebert's articles and debates sparked a fiery discussion of video games' position within the world of art, and while Ebert's articles may have fallen out of the contemporary debate regarding this particular subject, one would still be hard pressed to find a conclusive answer on the matter. However, that has not stopped one scholar, Brian Schrank, from firmly stating that "Videogames are art." (2014, p. 1) as the very first line in his book, *Avant-garde Videogames: Playing with Technoculture*. Schrank, however, is one of the only scholars willing to claim video games as art, whereas many others either stay on the fence or, as Ebert does, dismiss it entirely. As such, the refusing attitudes towards video games as art live on through various theorists who contend that video games do not constitute art per se. In his book *Work of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art* (2015), John Sharp presents three different categories of artistic engagement with video games: game art, art games and artists' games. Of these three, art games is of greater interest as game art refers to the act of removing a game from its original context and reappropriating it; in other words, it refers to "art made from games" (Sharp, 2015, p. 78). Meanwhile, the artists' game often refers to the act of trying to embed games into a cultural context by adding game-like elements to art installations (Sharp, 2015, pp. 80-81). Art games, however, bare a closer resemblance to the category of video games that this master's thesis seeks to engage with. Sharp finds three trends in art game development to hold artistic value: autobiographical, referring to video games created as a mode of self-expression and self-discovery; complicity, referring to the

expressive element of player agency in the game, whereby they become complicit in the message at hand; and, lastly, a mode of knowledge, wherein the player is challenged by the game to learn its system (2015). Despite coming up with these categorisations of how games can be art, Sharp concludes that

> In the four years since [he] began [his] book, a great deal has changed about the intersections of art and games. The artgames movement has more or less ended, and game art is even more a cul-de-sac inside the marginalized world of media art than it was before. Indeed, as [he has] worked on [his] book, [game art] and [artists' games] became art history. (2015, p. 115).

As such, while Sharp does recognise video games as aesthetic objects and has found a series of games to be worth characterising as "art games", he considers such games to be a closed chapter in the history of video games. However, more theorists have attempted to contribute to the debate at hand. Among these, we find Felan Parker (2013), Tiffany Holmes (2003) and Aaron Smuts (2005), all of which see video games as being able to produce works of art. Parker, much like Sharp, attempts to establish a characterisation of the art game genre through the following non-universal traits:

> Common features of artgames include: a distinctive or highly stylized audiovisual aesthetic; small (or entirely individual) development teams with identifiable author figures; and an existential-poetic 'point' or 'message' that the player is intended to discover and ponder, however obscure or ambiguous. (2013, p. 2)

The reason he poses the above set of characteristics as non-universal is that "for any supposedly defining characteristic of artgames, exceptions can be found"; wherefore he concludes that "Artgames, then, can be productively approached as a genre or cultural category not due to any essential shared characteristic" (Parker, 2013, p. 2) – a viewpoint which this project shares with him. Holmes uses the same overall argument structure as Parker, in that she establishes multiple topics or areas with which art games can engage in order for the player to perceive it to hold a deeper meaning. In essence, she finds that video games are able to engage with subjects such as race, war and feminism in an engaging manner, making them a "vitally important emerging art form that encourage exploration of new spatial models of interaction" (Holmes, 2003, p. 51). Smuts makes use of a broader approach, and while not necessarily concluding that video games *are* art, he concludes that they *can* be in the future; wherefore he "[provides] several reasons for

thinking that some video games may be art. Clear thematic continuities tie video games to the history of western literature, and games share expressive goals with other recognized art forms." (2005, para. 48). For example, Smuts argues that video games present more complex narratives than the "most sophisticated *noir* plots" as video games can "take upwards of 20 hours to complete" (Smuts, 2005, para. 31). Furthermore, video games are becoming institutionally accepted as an increasing amount of galleries and museums have featured exhibitions that focus on the medium (Smuts, 2005, para. 35). Similarly to Sharp, Graeme Kirkpatrick's book, *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (2011), also considers video games to be aesthetic objects and argues that traditional aesthetic theory should be used to gain a deeper understanding of their appeal and function, a notion shared by Sarah Cardwell who also identifies how particular perspectives from philosophical aesthetics can be "beneficially carried across and considered" in relation to popular media (2013, p. 29). Yet, Kirkpatrick writes that: "[a]n aesthetic approach finds itself in the, perhaps unfortunate, position of seeming to claim that video games are art. The book does not claim video games for art, although in some ways it does claim art for video games." (2011, p. 3). However, 'claiming art for video games' can be seen as somewhat in line with the goal of this thesis, as it does not seek to claim that *all* video games are art, but instead that *some* video games are. As Kirkpatrick further notes, "[t]he fact that we play video games and in so doing produce experiences of sufficient coherence and attractiveness that it seems natural to refer to 'game worlds' suggests that they have powerful aesthetic properties." (2011, p. 13). The inherent powerful aesthetic properties of video games have been discussed in many different ways – especially in contemporary game studies. Kristian A. Bjørkelo wrote a chapter, *"It Feels Real to Me": Transgressive Realism in This War of Mine*, wherein he explores, what he dubs, "transgressive realism", meaning that games can push past the player's boundaries and makes them feel uncomfortable (2018). Bjørkelo further describes his playthrough of *This War of Mine* as a "*positive negative experience*: an experience that is distressing but gratifying because it provokes reflection [...]." (2018, p. 180). He considers this type of realism to be a cornerstone of one of the more instrumental tools in video games' experiential arsenal, whereby it allows players to explore serious subjects without the negative impacts of their non-digital equivalents. As such, as "[*This War of Mine*] provides insight into a reality that we do not want

to consider but that we now no longer can ignore [...] playing the game becomes a transgressive experience in a greater way than just making the player feel bad." (Bjørkelo, 2018, p. 181). To a certain extent, Bjørkelo's point mirrors Sharp's category of art games as complicity, in that

> [t]he ethical challenges and experiences in This War of Mine—including murder, starvation, and sex trafficking—are intended to make the player feel bad. No matter what happens, the player is complicit in the wartime tragedies that occur. The worse the player feels about them, the more real the game feels. (Bjørkelo, 2018, p. 184).

As such, the player feels like they are a part of the narrative at hand or have an impact on its course and, in the case of *This War of Mine*, act as the source of the consequences of the dilemmas presented in the game. By letting the player become a complicit actor in the narrative, they allow themselves to be aligned with their in-game character – a topic further explored in the first chapter of Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox's book, *Philosophy Through Video Games* (2009). Through their exploration, they cover a multitude of philosophical approaches to work towards the question: "When the *World of Warcraft* player says "I killed nine goblins last night," is she really using the word "I" in exactly the same way as the player of *Second Life* who says "I watered my garden last night" or the *Facebook* user who says "I made three new friends yesterday"?" (Cogburn & Silcox, 2009, p. 15). In essence, the question would seem easily answered to the sceptic or self-proclaimed realist with a resounding 'no', since none of the people mentioned truly, in the real world, necessarily *did* what they claim to have done. However, to Cogburn and Silcox, the question is slightly more nuanced. As such, as opposed to the sceptic, "[...] the Humean about personal identity who accepts something like the Clark/Chalmers "extended mind" hypothesis can say something much more interesting and intuitive here. What each of these speakers is doing with the word "I" is referring *truthfully* to different parts of the puzzle that constitutes her own self." (Cogburn & Silcox, 2009, p. 15). With the player so deeply embedded in the game, so as to see their action within its world as impactful, it seems almost logical to suggest that the video game medium, through its aesthetic form, can enable players to have powerful, memorable, and personal experiences.

As such, returning to Ebert's assertion, most gamers would, arguably, be quite content simply enjoying their video games without thinking twice about how it is labelled. However,

some of these gamers' fascination with video games being art stems from feeling a deeper connection with the medium, as opposed to what they may have experienced in relation to other works, they have interacted with. Being members of the latter group of gamers, we (the authors of this master's thesis), have since childhood watched as the medium we know and love has evolved from tiny pixelated images of entertainment to complex works that, seemingly, attempt to accomplish something else than to merely keep players entertained. As such, when we found ourselves coming up with a topic for our master's thesis, we wanted to examine if we could find an alternative way of approaching the question that so many before us have asked: whether or not video games can constitute art. However, we do not postulate that every video game can be art, but instead, we are confident that certain video games deserve this title. As established above, the different views on the matter of video games as art has given rise to a number of interesting aspects and exciting debates where, unfortunately, not every view can be dealt with in this master's thesis. However, in particular, Tad Bratkowski (2010) has suggested that by exploring if video games can constitute an aesthetic experience, such a notion might prove an interesting aspect that can contribute to the debate of video games as art. Bratkowski's argument is based on his work with John Dewey's aesthetic framework, *Art as Experience* (2005 [1934]), that seeks to expand on the concept of art by defining it through experience and, by extension, interactivity. Since we hold the contention that some video games are more than mere entertainment and can constitute certain experiences, transcending their assigned cultural role and position, we align ourselves with Dewey's notion of art and Bratkowski's approach; wherefore, this master's thesis will explore if video games can facilitate an aesthetic experience. However, where Bratkowski utilises the game, *Rock Band* (Electronic Arts, 2008), to examine Dewey's definition of an aesthetic experience, this project does not consider this game a suitable candidate that is capable of providing an aesthetic experience due to its mainstream nature. This contention also builds on the fact that Bratkowski concludes that the aforementioned game can only be perceived as an aesthetic experience under rather specific circumstances. As such, in order to defend the arguments made above, this project will instead be working with Davey Wreden's video game, *The Beginner's Guide* (2015). Wreden's game is particularly interesting because it harbours a great deal of meta-aspects that present the player with a distinctive

gaming-experience that sets itself apart from a great deal of other games, including *Rock Band*. Through its metafictional nature, *The Beginner's Guide* also has the ability to affect its players in unique ways by inducing emotional responses that range from positive to negative emotions. Although it is a fact that video games are able to cause players to feel certain emotions through gameplay is, granted, nothing new, especially, since the medium can be utilised to explore "fun" as well as rather serious topics, counting mental illness, violence, and moral dilemmas (cf. Campbell, 2013; Dougherty, 2013; Isbister, 2013; and Begley, 2014). However, this master's thesis will argue that the ability to affect players emotional state, making them contemplate those feelings, is not just a quintessential quality but also a part of games' aesthetic potential. As such, it is worth examining if the qualities surrounding certain video games can help facilitate an aesthetic experience; thus, allowing this master's thesis to label such games as art. As a result, this master's project will attempt to answer the following problem formulation:

> If video games can be classified as experiential media, how can John Dewey's framework be utilised to determine whether or not such games can constitute an aesthetic experience and, by extension, be labelled art?

To answer this research question, this master's thesis will examine Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* by analysing the game's experiential qualities in order to establish it as an art game. Furthermore, the game's inherent metafictional qualities will also be taken into consideration and analysed in terms of its aesthetic expression as well as discussed in terms of whether metafictionality is even commensurable with the idea of aesthetic experience.

In order to accomplish the goal set for this master's thesis, the project is structured in the following manner: Section 2 is divided into three segments that will, respectively, account for the chosen theories and terminology within the areas of aesthetics and entertainment, metafiction, and video games. As such, section 2.1 will start by introducing a number of views that pertains to the field of arts and aesthetics in order to establish an academic context, in which to embed John Dewey and his aesthetic framework. In contrast to the former, section 2.1 will also establish an understanding of the term entertainment by looking at this concept from a cultural, industrial and academic perspective. Section 2.2 will start by introducing metafiction as it relates to literary studies in order to establish how characteristics of such types of fiction can be applied to a visual,

interactive medium such as video games. Section 2.3 will present different ways of perceiving the video game medium by considering how said medium is defined and approached from an academic, aesthetic, and cultural perspective. The inclusion of the aforementioned aspects and concepts will, in section 2.4, culminate in a comprehensive framework designed to create a dichotomy between mainstream games and art games; thus, allowing this project to argue that the latter game type harbours specific qualities that can help answer the problem formulation. After accounting for the theoretical framework that will be utilised in this thesis, section 3 will present an analysis of Davey Wreden's video game, *The Beginner's Guide*, by focusing on said game's use of meta-aspects, avant-garde strategies, and how the game's aesthetics affect the player's experience. Based on both the theoretical material and the findings from the analysis, section 4 will discuss *The Beginner's Guide* as an aesthetic experience from Dewey's point of view. In doing so, the discussion will also take into account the status of aesthetic experience today, the issues pertaining to calling video games art, Dewey's significance, how meta-phenomena function in relation to having an aesthetic experience, and how the notion of *The Beginner's Guide* as an aesthetic experience can be seen in a larger context that deals with video games and art.

2. Theory Section

Since this master's project seeks to examine certain video games' potential for providing an aesthetic experience, it will rely on its own comprehensive framework that will be constructed from different theoretical approaches that pertain to art and aesthetics, aesthetic experience, entertainment, and video games. However, the framework utilised in this project is comprised of theoretical concepts and aspects that are subjects to a variety of definitions; therefore, the following section will start by defining the different components chosen for this project and, lastly, establish the framework that will be employed in the analysis section.

2.1 Aesthetic Experience & Entertainment

The section will present the chosen theory and terminology within the areas of aesthetic philosophy and entertainment.

2.1.1 The Field of Aesthetics

Before delving into the field of aesthetics, a few acknowledgements need to be made in this regard. The field of aesthetics is vast and can, therefore, be difficult to comprehend as well as to expound in a satisfying manner. As noted by Andrew Edgar and Peter Sedgwick, aesthetics is "ill-defined" as well as a "highly disputed area of philosophy" (2008, p. 4). One of the reasons for this is that art, even as a concept shaped through aesthetics, can hardly be defined before it changes its characteristics. As such, the relationship between art and aesthetics is one of ever-evolving attempts at naming the universally present traits of a given art form, if not the entire field of art itself. As a consequence, the philosophy of aesthetics has undergone a myriad of changes through history and, therefore, has been subject to a variety of definitions and traditions, most of which this project cannot engage with in a manner that would be sufficient. Not only because that would constitute an entire thesis in and of itself, but because the goal of this project, as expressed in the introduction, is not to prove or disprove any theory in particular, rather, the objective is to synthesise select theories both within the field of aesthetics as well as video game theory. As such, the following section aims to provide an introduction to some of the

changes that the philosophy of arts and aesthetics has gone through by giving a short introduction to the ideas of a curated list of theorists. This will be done not just in order to provide historical and academic context for the introduction to John Dewey and his aesthetic framework but also to demonstrate the variety of theories, from which John Dewey's was deemed the most applicable.

According to Gordon Graham, it would be no exaggeration to claim the field of aesthetics, as it is commonly understood, to be founded by Immanuel Kant (2005, p. 223). As such, Kant's philosophy of aesthetics will act as the starting point for this condensed exploration of said field. Kant's aesthetic theory centres around beauty and the pleasure derived from it. However, beauty is not simply a superficially visual quality judged from the subjective opinions of the person viewing it but rather a practically universal function, which can be shared by others (Pillow, 2014, p. 157; p. 160). Kant recognized that culture shapes one's perspective, which in turn affect their opinion of beauty, however, Kant saw beauty as disconnected from such conceptual judgement and that beauty was instead judged from a point of *disinterest* (Graham, 2005, pp. 18-19; Pillow, 2014, pp. 156-158). Disinterest in the perceived object, in this context, refers to how they do not seek a specific quality or concept in it; wherefore, one can take a certain "free appreciation" in the judged object (Pillow, 2014, pp. 156-157). Furthermore, beauty is seen "as a *purposiveness without purpose*", meaning "[to] find beauty in [...] well-shaped form of something so much that it seems it could only be intentional, despite our not really attributing any fixed purpose to it." (Pillow, 2014, pp. 161-162). In essence, beauty is found, according to Kant, "when we find that something is pleasing to us by virtue of its form" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 23) through the perception of an object, which has purposiveness without purpose, with disinterestedness. Since this would mean the object's beauty would be judged without personal opinions, said object could be assumed to be found beautiful by others as well - hence, a subjective universality can be attributed to it (Pillow, 2014, p. 160). However, as Graham argues, the value of art cannot simply be summed up as beauty, since many other emotions than pleasure can be derived from beauty as well as objects created with the purpose of expressing such emotions (2005, pp. 29-30; p. 50). Therefore, it is relevant to explore art as a means of expression of emotions.

Since expressionism is its own artistic branch of painting history, Graham refers to this dynamic, encompassing both the expressed emotions of the artist as well as the emotions received by audience across all types of media, as 'expressivism' (2005, p. 31), which he explores through Robin George Collingwood's theory of art. According to Collingwood, the emotional experience of the artist in creating a work is merely a *psychic disturbance*, an "indefinite experience [...] gradually identified and refined in the process of creating the work" (Graham, 2005, p. 42). As such, "neither [the activity of feeling nor the activity of creating] can be isolated or identified without the other" (Graham, 2005, p. 42). Through imagination, then, the artist engages himself in a process of self-discovery and, by extension, self-knowledge by letting their emotions guide them through the activity of creating a work of art which others, in turn, would presumably identify with emotionally. Hence, said artists will create art, not just to express their own feelings, but in an attempt to express the feelings of the community (Graham, 2005, p. 42). However, there is a difference between a work being 'an expression' of a feeling and a work being 'expressive' of the same feeling, as explained by Graham:

> 'Being an expression of emotion' implies that there is someone whose expression it is. 'Being expressive of' does not imply any possessor, either artist or audience. For instance, someone can cry 'Aahh' in pain. This is an expression, but being largely inarticulate is not expressive. Later when the pain is gone, it might be described as 'climbing to a crescendo' before the cry. This is expressive of the pain but not an expression of it since the pain is now gone. (Graham, 2005, p. 46).

It follows, that for a work to be expressive of a feeling, "[the experience] would consist of being brought to a heightened awareness of that emotion" (Graham, 2005, p. 47). However, this is not the same as experiencing the actual emotion - it is simply the person recognizing the feeling of the artist present in the work, meaning that any feeling the viewer experiences from the artist's work is merely a causal connection, not a direct one (Graham, 2005, p. 47). However, as Graham notes, since art is an expression of emotion, it might incite a causal connection in the perceiver, the understanding of art as a mean of emotional expression, and the recognition of such emotion on the side of the perceiver, works better as an understanding of human experience than one of art (Graham, 2005, p. 51). As such, an emotional expression cannot be the sole purpose of art

either (Graham, 2005, p. 51). Art as a source of knowledge and understanding will, therefore, be the next theme of exploration.

To explore this area of aesthetics, Graham makes use of Hegel's philosophy of art. Unlike many philosophers of his time, Hegel did not see philosophy "as the intellectual study of a set of universal and timeless problems", but rather as "a progressive development over time in which the human mind comes to understand itself more adequately." (Graham, 2005, p. 53). Since "the essential nature of human beings is subjective not objective", it is important to acknowledge that "[human] knowledge and understanding is really self-knowledge, because it is knowledge of the animating spirit that constitutes our true nature." (Graham. 2005, p. 53). This development of knowledge is separated into three periods starting with art, moving into religion and then ending with philosophy; as explained by Graham,

> All three are modes of knowledge and understanding, art no less than philosophy. Whereas philosophy is a conceptual grasp of the truth, art is the presentation and apprehension of truth by means of sensuous images, that is images of sight and sound and touch. But these three modes of understanding are developmentally related such that art is a more primitive mode than religion and religion finds its ultimate expression in philosophy. (2005, p. 53).

By moving through these modes, Hegel thought it would lead to the end of art since art would eventually become an obsolete source of knowledge (Graham, 2005, p. 54). Later interpretations of Hegel suggest that he did not mean art would cease to exist, but rather that art would have to perpetually reinvent itself in order to keep up with the current modes of understanding (Graham, 2005, p. 54). However, the knowledge or understanding of the human experience gained from art cannot be entirely perceived as the truth of a structured argument based on a level of proof, but rather as a directing of the mind through the literary formal tools such as the rhythm of poetry or music (Graham, 2005, pp. 64-65). However, in essence, art cannot serve the purpose of relaying knowledge in the form of facts; art is an imaginative representation of experiences or understandings, which, while valuable, means art cannot build its value on this aspect as it is just that - an aspect of art on level with beauty, pleasure and emotional expression (Graham, 2005, p. 74). However, art having to reinvent itself in order to stay relevant seems in line with more modern lines of thought, wherefore the next section will concern itself with modernism and postmodernism.

During the modern era, Adorno found recognition not only for his theory of aesthetics, building on the work of both Kant and Hegel (Wilson, 2014, p. 149), but also through his work with Horkheimer concerning the *Culture Industry*. His theory of the culture industry concerns itself, in essence, with "[how it] produces commodities which generate false needs." (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975, p. 230). By *false needs*, Adorno meant that the culture industry creates formulaic products intended for mass consumption by people who seek to escape their everyday lives, feeding them unrealistic presentations of life in order to make them heave for more of said products, since their own lives cannot reproduce them – in the end pacifying the consumers into conformity (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975, pp. 230-231; Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 38). His aesthetic theory is connected to the above account of the culture industry, as he argues that anyone who truly appreciates art cannot give an account of such appreciation through a list of qualities they thought positively of, as this would mean the work was "merely consumed [...], rather than adequately engaged with even when they in fact merit such engagement" (Wilson, 2014, p. 152). Modern art, then, can be seen as the attempt to break away from form in order to work against the effects of the culture industry as well as to challenge the established order between *high* - understood, from Bourdieu, as "a privileged class of objects [having] more form than others" (Crossley, 2014, p. 94) - and *low* art (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 29; p. 39). Adorno sees the modern work of art as "an expression of the residual presence of the truly human in a culture that is hovering on the edge of an abyss of barbarism", meaning that art must resist the urge to become easily digestible and instead become increasingly complex. In the end, Adorno believed that the break away from easily discernible meaning to the viewer through established forms and structure would eventually mean that art ultimately could not "support the kind of theological 'meaning', or transcendence of ordinary experience that people looked to it to provide". As such, it would ultimately have to reinvent itself to stay relevant by giving up the aesthetic altogether (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 40). This leads into the main concerns of the postmodern movement. Starting with the post-structuralist movement, Derrida argued that the language used by structuralists would have to be replaced by using language differently and, by extension, necessitate the invention of a new way of reading (Graham, 2005, pp. 238-240). In contrast to older traditions, this new way of reading would not constitute a search for one true interpretation

of the text in particular, but rather would allow the reader to "'play' upon it" (Graham, 2005, p. 241). Derrida makes use of two definitions of interpretation, which closely resemble Barthes' definitions of the lisible (readerly) and the scriptible (writerly), as follows:

> In the former, the reader is expected to be passive, to 'receive' a reading of the text and hence absorb an established view of the world. In the latter, the writer and the text itself (for it is not just a matter of intention but of style) acknowledges its malleability and involves the reader's interpretation as part of the creation of the work. Barthes seems to think that the most we can hope for from 'readerly' texts is pleasure, whereas from 'writerly' texts, which invite our active participation, we can expect something much more exhilarating – jouissance – a term deployed by the Marxist/post-structuralist theorist Lacan – something similar to Derrida's 'joyous affirmation of play'. (Graham, 2005, p. 241)

The essence of the above is that abandoning structure is the abandonment of the idea of an inherent meaning within a text, leading to a freedom of endless interpretations of it, liberating the concept of 'beauty' for it to apply to all things, not just works conventionally deemed as *artistic* (Graham, 2005, pp. 241-242). This is also the essence of postmodernism, which can be read from Barthes' iconic essay *The Death of the Author*, often misunderstood as being harshly hostile towards art (Payne, 1997, pp. 1-2), wherein he essentially argued that the author of a given work has little to no presence in the text other than writing it, as in, their person cannot be read from the text (except in criticising said text) (Barthes, 1967, pp. 3-5). Instead, the reader is the one who constructs the meanings of the text (Barthes, 1967, p. 6) - at least if they can be considered written in a writerly fashion. Upon consideration, the problem with the postmodern take on art is the apparent erasure of the aesthetic, whereby all objects can be found artistic as long as the viewer finds meaning in them. As such, if everything can be art, then hardly anything can be argued to have distinct aesthetic qualities setting them apart from other objects - a sentiment which seems hard to fully agree with as some items will, broadly, be considered art and some non-art, wherefore not everything can be so.

Having now provided a rudimentary historic exploration of the field of aesthetics, a few common themes become apparent. Most of the chosen theorists characterise aesthetics as being some kind of experience as well as having to do with some level of affect experienced by both the creator and the observer of a given piece of art in trying to construct - or reconstruct - its meaning. Similarly, this experience can have qualities which lift it above other experiences,

primarily a type of aesthetic character inherent to the arts, be they emotional, purely pleasurable or means of self-exploration.

2.1.2 John Dewey & Art as Experience

In order to examine and contemplate the concept of aesthetic experience, both in relation to mainstream games and art games, it is possible to consider the work by the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational consultant, John Dewey (1859-1952). He is considered one of the greatest thinkers of all time in terms of pedagogy and education, and philosophy in terms of arts and aesthetics, to which, his work still remains influential in the 21st century (Shook, 2010, pp. 3-6). In particular, Dewey's work and philosophical line of thought regarding the field of art and aesthetics, in which he focused on the role of experience, became a foundation for an alternative approach to said field, presenting new ways to perceive and consider notions that are, still, widely debated (Shusterman, 2010, pp. 26-28). Based on a number of lectures presented at Harvard University in 1931, concerning the philosophy of art, Dewey formulated his view on art and aesthetics in his book, *Art as Experience*, which explores the philosophical approach of perceiving art as an experiential process (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. vii). However, after the publication, *Art as Experience* has for a long time been heavily criticised for not meeting the standards of philosophy due to the lack of adequacy as well as for not demarcating itself to the concept of art in a common perception (Shusterman, 2000, p. 42). Furthermore, much like Hegel, Dewey wrote in a comprehensive fashion, making it rather difficult to explicate the central concepts introduced in *Art as Experience*. As noted by Arthur Efron,

> The book has an almost eerie capacity for generating speculation about the whole field of inquiry
> in aesthetic experience, and for regenerating itself continuously [...] The density of detail and
> concept guarantees that there is no possibility of summarizing *Art as Experience* in any useful way
> (the summary would start to grow as long as the book itself). (1995, pp. 322-323).

Taking this into account, there are definite issues in terms of recounting Dewey's philosophical approach to art, however, despite such potential challenges, this project will, nonetheless, attempt to provide reasonable explications of the main concepts in Dewey's work.

Addressing the application of Dewey's aesthetic framework to video games, the following can be said: as a still-emerging medium, the significance of video games, in general, has been discussed for a number of years, wherefore, working with this particular medium could help further the notion that video games are significant in many aspects. In relation to this point, there is a growing body of literature that recognises video games as art (cf. Smuts 2005; Bratkowski, 2010; Sharp, 2015). Hence, there appears to be an increasing need for explorations of how to examine such cases where video games are, arguably, no longer mediums of entertainment but instead thought of as artistic objects with the same or similar value as the artforms we characterise as 'fine arts'. As a philosophical framework, Dewey's notion of art as experience is concerned with many a thing, amongst which the idea that art can be found everywhere as opposed to being exclusive material objects in museums or galleries, as will be elucidated later. Furthermore, Dewey foregrounded interactivity as a central part of having an aesthetic experience when engaging with art, wherefore, video games, as an interactive medium, can help further this particular concept by not only proving the usefulness of Dewey's framework, but also how video games can be perceived as art. As such, by utilising a philosophical framework, despite its potential overt comprehensiveness, that allows for the inclusion of popular arts into the discussion of aesthetic experience, it appears possible to expand on several fields of study such as aesthetics and ludology.

With this in mind, delving into the field of arts and aesthetics, one will discover that various prominent scholars have theorised about these concepts both before and after Dewey, hence, a myriad of similar or contrasting viewpoints have developed over time. The different approaches to the field of art and aesthetics by academics such as Kant or Hegel may, on one hand, have contributed to an area of research by providing different perspectives. However, on the other hand, they remain part of a still growing group of scholars who either have attempted or is attempting to leave their mark on the map of this difficult field, causing issues when it comes to approaching arts and aesthetics from a contemporary standpoint. If one is willing to grant this position, it is safe to say that Dewey too is but a drop in an ocean that does not seem to provide many agreeable answers to the majority of the main concerns within the field of art and aesthetics. For one, a general issue that Dewey and other scholars faced is the apparent mismatch

between the act of defining art and using aesthetic theory to do so. In the words of Richard Shusterman, "[a]rt's definition has proved so resistant to theoretical resolution that several philosophers have suggested abandoning the project as altogether futil. And some contemporary pragmatists [...] have gone so far as to deny the value or possibility of theory altogether." (2000, p. 42). Dewey also pointed to this concern in the first chapter of his book: "By one of the ironic perversities that often attend the course of affairs, the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an esthetic (sic) theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them." (2005 [1934], p. 1). Therefore, despite being somewhat of a cornerstone in the endeavour of producing this particular master's thesis, this project also acknowledges that Dewey's philosophy is not a work that can be seen out of context or as a separation from past work, especially, since his line of thought was modelled on some of Hegel's theory in terms of "holism, historicism, and organicism" (Shusterman, 2000, p. 21). Dewey's philosophy is, however, but one way of approaching a field that is already complex to navigate and, therefore, his work will not be treated as the ultimate or pure truth.

In his book, Dewey raised a number of issues related to the field of art, from which, his own approach sprang. In particular, he regarded art as a being in a state of perpetual control by practices that hinder development. He stated that "[t]he factors that have glorified fine art by setting it upon a far-off pedestal did not arise within the realm of art nor is their influence confined to the arts. [...] the forces at work are those that have removed religion as well as fine art from the scope of the common or community life." (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 4-5). In this sense, art has become detached from the world it used to inhabit, a world where art could be accessed and formed by all and not by a *force* that holds a monopoly on the right to dictate what constitutes art. Although not presented in a concrete and elaborated manner, the forces referred to in *Art as Experience* can be seen as an institutionalised practice that combines the act of relocating objects of artistic expression as well as a disregard for other art forms than those recognised from an elitist point of view.

In particular, the aspect of art and location, or context, is a key concern in Dewey's philosophy. He dedicated a considerable amount of space in his book to highlight how fine art is considered as such due to spatial conditions. Dewey pointed to the fact that art is primarily

located in museums or galleries, however, from his point of view, "once [an art product] attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequence it engenders in actual life-experience." (2005 [1934], p. 1). In a sense, letting museums or galleries be perceived as a place for the fine arts "illustrate[s] some of the causes that have operated to segregate art instead of finding it an attendant of temple, forum, and other forms of associated life." (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 6). Thus, presenting any artistic product in a setting collectively recognised as pertaining to art is to rob said product of its origin and purpose. Dewey exemplified this by stating that,

> [by] common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. Yet it has esthetic (sic) standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being. [...] The one who sets out to theorize about the esthetic experience embodied in the Parthenon must realize in thought what the people into whose lives it entered had in common, as creators and as those who were satisfied with it, with people in our own homes and on our own streets. (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 2-3).

By this, he meant that people might enjoy products that are considered art, such as the Parthenon; however, it was not conceived as art because the temple served another purpose than being created to become part of art history. Similarly, Dewey pointed out that theatres and museums have never been the original structures governing paintings, music or dancing. These were instead present in caverns or functioning as part of religious rites (2005 [1934], pp. 5-6). Dewey further highlighted how it is not merely the act of placing art in a specific space that contributes to a sort of malpractice within the field of art and aesthetics. "The growth of capitalism has been a powerful influence in the development of the museum as the proper home for works of art, and in the promotion of the idea that they are apart from the common life." (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 7). As Dewey saw it, capitalism created changes in the art industry, rendering artistic practices to change as well. Artists have to compete with mass production, forcing them to explore alternative approaches to art design, resulting in often exaggerated and eccentric pieces that take on a degree of separateness that is esoteric (2005 [1934], p. 7-8).

To further expand on the notion of institutionalised practices that, according to Dewey, pose issues in the field of art, Dewey also identified the work of scholars as part of the reason why the field of art is in a problematic state. He argued that

> [even] when favored arts came out from under patronage and control of priest and ruler, the distinction of kinds remained even though the name "official" is no longer a fitting designation. Philosophic theory concerned itself only with those arts that had the stamp and seal of recognition. Popular arts must have flourished, but they received no literary attention. They were not worthy of mention in theoretical discussion. (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 194-195).

By limiting themselves to the fine arts, the scholarly practices, in Dewey's opinion, hinder the field of art from flourishing by disregarding the popular arts. In essence, the combination of disregard for the origin, context and purpose of artistic products and the inattention to other art forms than those recognised as fine art are problematic in Dewey's opinion. Through *Art as Experience*, Dewey both directly and indirectly critiqued the field of art and the practices pertaining to said field. On the basis of the views presented above, Dewey's reason for approaching art and aesthetics with an experiential mindset can be seen as harbouring several purposes: one, to define a way of perceiving and characterising art through interaction; two, to assign relevance and importance to his approach by pointing to issues within the field in question; and lastly, to allow expansion in terms of what can be characterised as art on the basis of his theoretical framework.

Having provided an insight into Dewey's thoughts regarding the field of art and aesthetics, his notion of art as experience can, arguably, be rendered more comprehensible. As made apparent through the segment above, Dewey did not agree with the many of the common practices in terms of arts and aesthetics, wherefore, his approach to the field needed to begin in the "raw" (2005 [1934], p. 3). Dewey acknowledged that "[in] common conception, the work of art is often identified with [a] building, book, painting, or statue" (2005 [1934], p. 1), however, his philosophy of art as experience is concerned with the notion of how common things and aspects are able to capture the attention of man[1] and how these, in turn, can be aesthetic as well as part of an experience:

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[1] The reader is asked to note that throughout *Art as Experience*, Dewey switches between the use of the words *man*, *creature*, *live creature*, or *living creature* when describing the relationship and interaction between humans and art. For the purposes of outlining this particular theory, the same discourse will adopted in this section.

> The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of
> the ball infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants,
> [...] the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting
> flames and crumbling coals. These people, if questioned as to the reason for their actions, would
> doubtless return reasonable answers. The man who poked the sticks of burning wood would say he
> did it to make the fire burn better; but he is none the less fascinated by the colorful drama of
> change enacted before his eyes and imaginatively partakes in it. He does not remain a cold
> spectator. (2005 [1934], p. 3).

Here, there is a general focus on scenarios found in everyday life that may not be considered art, nor even aesthetic. However, this notion is a key aspect of Dewey's philosophy because it encapsulates the essence of how he sought to define experience in relation to perceiving art. This is also evident in how he defined art, himself: "[a]rt denotes a process of doing or making. [...] Every art does something with some physical material, the body or something outside the body [...] with a view to production of something visible, audible, or tangible." (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 48). As a result, Dewey's framework broadened the mental scope for what can be considered art by including aspects that were not considered as such at his time. This definition is, further, vital to Dewey's philosophy because it allows for his theory to flourish due to its wide span. As noted by Shusterman, "[o]pposing the dominant Kantian tradition that rejects functionality for the appreciation of pure form, Dewey affirms art's wide-ranging functionality, while equally affirming the pleasures of its immanent experience." (2010, p. 28). In essence, as also made apparent by Martin Ejsing Christensen, the way that Dewey regarded arts and aesthetics was "rooted in his conception of experience" (2018, p. 9), however, *experience* can vary in meaning, depending on the context the word is utilised in.

Experience carries a vital significance to Dewey's philosophy, yet, he operated with a variety of definitions and modes of distinction in terms of *experience*; therefore, it is important to explicate his reasoning. As Dewey stated in *Art as Experience*,

> [experience] occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing (sic)
> conditions is involved in the very process of living. Under conditions of resistance and conflict,
> aspects and elements of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify

experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges. Oftentimes, however, the experience had is inchoate. Things are experienced but not in such a way that they are composed into *an* experience. There is distraction and dispersion; what we observe and what we think, what we desire and what we get, are at odds with each other. We put our hands to the plow and turn back; we start and then we stop, not because the experience has reached the end for the sake of which it was initiated but because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy. (2005 [1934], p. 36).

From this statement, it is possible to extrapolate two variations of *experience*. Firstly, if one looks at *experience* as a verb, *to experience* can be understood as a process that happens to all living creatures on a regular basis, hence, the act of experiencing something does not necessarily carry any particular significance. Secondly, it is possible to consider *experience* as a noun, thus, it becomes *an experience*. However, as pointed to in the statement above, the live creature may experience various things but due to interrupting elements, either internal or external, said creature will not necessarily have accumulated enough of the experienced in order to have *an experience*. This means that the verb form of *experience* is a deciding factor in terms of establishing whether or not one has had *an experience*. As characterised by Shusterman, "[an experience] can refer to a completed event (or product) but also to a continuing process of experiencing; and that process can be interpreted either as something actively generated by the subject or something that happens to her." (2008, pp. 79-80). On the basis of this, the question of what the requirements for *an experience* are arises. Having an experience stands out from the general flow of consciousness, which a given person has throughout their everyday comings and goings. Dewey exemplified this through the following:

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal [...] or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. (2005 [1934], p. 37).

Such *moments* or *events* are characterised by a sense of fulfilment, allowing for consummation, thereby, rendering the experienced into *an experience* (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 36). As such, *an*

experience is characterised by a beginning, middle parts, and an end, however, an important point here is that *an experience* does not cease to exist, but instead, it is an accomplished "unity" that "flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks" (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 37-38). In order to make these notions comprehensible, Dewey elaborated this concept by using a river as an example:

> A river, as distinct from a pond, flows. But its flow gives a definiteness and interest to its successive portions greater than exist in the homogenous portions of a pond. In an experience, flow is from something to something. As one part leads into another and as one part carries on what went before, each gains distinctness in itself. (2005 [1934], p. 38).

In this example, the still pond is everyday life and the river is an experience. They are both parts of the same mass. However, the river is constituted by a flow and a course between the more homogenous ponds. As Tad Bratkowski notes, "each part of the river flows as a continuous whole. [...] a river is flowing constantly along its course. Its path may take many twists and turns along this course until its eventual culmination at its mouth. *An* experience [...] has this sense of motion and continuity" (2010, pp. 84-85). In essence, *an experience* stands apart from the homogeneous until its eventual fulfilment, thereby, becoming a distinct segment in the everyday flow of 'experiencing'. Furthermore, the unification of experience into *an experience*, which Dewey speaks of, is further characterised by "a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts." (2005 [1934], p. 38). The *quality* referred to here is something that cannot be addressed during the experience but can only be interpreted, or contemplated, afterwards. As Dewey formulated it, "This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it. In discourse *about* an experience, we must make use of these" (2005 [1934], p. 38). Essentially, for the live creature to have *an experience*, they must be able to reflect on said experience afterwards in a manner that provides satisfaction because the particular experience was characterised by some or all of the adjectives above. As a result, a particular experience will, in turn, become and remain part of a living creature's memory and will, from that point on, be part of the ways, in which,

said creature measures or evaluates potential future experiences (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 37-39; pp. 45-46).

The aspects outlined above are further significant because it allows for an examination of the aesthetic element related to these. Hence, it is possible to distinguish between *an experience* and *an aesthetic experience*. Dewey stressed the act of contemplation as relevant because being able to reflect on a train of thought can be *an experience* in and of itself due to the emotional satisfaction of thinking through a series of ideas into a fulfilling conclusion, making this practice imbued with "esthetic (sic) quality." (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 38-39). Dewey's notion of *esthetic* refers to "experience as appreciative, perceiving, and enjoying. It denotes the consumer's rather than the producer's standpoint." (2005 [1934], p. 49). Here it is important to note that perceiving, in this context, refers to one of two modes of observation, the other being recognition. Recognising something or someone is a superficial level of "label-fixing", whereas perceiving refers to the deeper practice of acknowledging an object or person in its full individuality (Kaminsky, 1957, p. 327). In order for *an experience* to be considered an aesthetic one, there is a need for interaction, including perception, and immersion, which Dewey addressed in the following manner:

> [t]he esthetic (sic) or undergoing phase of experience is receptive. It involves surrender. But adequate yielding of the self is possibly (sic) only through a controlled activity that may well be intense. [...] To steep ourselves in subject-matter we have first to plunge into it. When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to *take* in. (2005 [1934], p. 55).

In essence, the characteristics concerning *an aesthetic experience* involve the living creature remaining continuously active and perceptive in their interaction with art. In doing so, the creature will be subject to input from the piece of art, whereto, their perception will guide the interpretation or understanding of said input, hence, leading to a state where the perceived can be consummated, resulting in a sense of emotional fulfilment. However, it is further important to note that for an experience to be aesthetic, the live creature cannot participate in this if he finds

himself in emotional turmoil, for instance, being "overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, [or] jealousy" (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 51).

In order to further comprehend the characteristics of *an aesthetic experience*, it is relevant to consider the object[2] that initiates said experience. As already noted, *an experience*, whether common or aesthetic, unfolds as a progression. However, the commencing factor of *an aesthetic experience* is an *impulsion*. Dewey formulated this aspect as something that "designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary [...] Impulsions are the beginnings of complete experience because they proceed from need" (2005 [1934], pp. 60-61). In turn, the impulsion will cause a reaction that demands settlement in the form of *an experience* that requires completion. Therefore, the aforementioned *need* can be interpreted as a bodily urge, a sort of curiosity, that cannot be characterised in detail, nonetheless, it drives the living creature to seek out the object. In this regard, Dewey describes this need as the beginning of an adventure, which the creature needs to explore in the search for answers (2005 [1934], pp. 60-62). The impulsion is, thus, a characteristic of the expressive object, one that furthers the live creature's need to interact with it.

In comprehending *an expressive object*, it is an inherent characteristic that meaning is expressed in some way or form. This notion may seem rather obvious since meaning is often said to be expressed through art and the experience that follows. However, there cannot only be one type of meaning. This notion can be exemplified through a comparison between art and science: "[s]cience states meanings; art expresses them. [...] The poetic as distinct from the prosaic, esthetic (sic) art as distinct from scientific, expression as distinct from statement, does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one." (Dewey, 2005, [1934], pp. 87-88). Therefore, it is crucial that meaning can be extrapolated from a work of art in order to have an aesthetic experience. This can, for instance, be done by perceiving art's way of creating meaning as a language. As Dewey formulated it, every art form has its own language, from which, the living creature can derive meaning. Here, one should be concerned with "*what* is said and *how* it

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[2] The reader is asked to note that the use of the word *object* does not necessarily constitute a physical entity since Dewey's theory regarding art as experience extends beyond that of the substantial.

is said" (Dewey, 2005 [1934], pp. 110-111). The language of a particular expressive object is, then, important to consider in order to evaluate how an aesthetic experience is initiated and consummated. For instance, the communicative aspect, or "intent", of a given expressive object may or may not be a purposely executed idea in terms of the object's artist, however, once allowed to be encountered, the object can communicate various ideas based on experience (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 108). Thus, an expressive object will communicate differently, depending on the individual perceiving it, a concept popularised by Barthes in his theory regarding the death of the author. In essence, an expressive object may be constructed with a specific purpose or intent, however, the creator or artist cannot control the outcome of the experience had by other individuals. Furthermore, it is possible to consider the notion that a work of art can communicate differently to the same creature. As Dewey stated, the material of which an artwork is made may be the same, however, it is "recreated every time it is esthetically (sic) experienced." (2005 [1934], pp. 112-113).

Contemplating meaning-making in relation to the interaction between creature and works of art, one must also ponder the concept of form. In the words of Dewey, "[f]orm in the concrete can be discussed only with respect to actual works of art", however from a position of "formal conditions", it is possible to mention the significance of "cumulation, tension, conversation, anticipation, and fulfillment" in relation to defining the aesthetic experience (2005 [1934], p. 150). Furthermore, the form and formal conditions mentioned above are, in Dewey's words, part of a "rhythm" that is essential because "[u]nderneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art there lies [...] the basic pattern of the relations of the live creature to his environment." (2005 [1934], p. 156). These characteristics of a given art's form, as well as the relationship it shares with the overall notion of an aesthetic experience, are, hence, more generalised as opposed to the concrete formal definitions of an established medium - as will be explored in relation to video games later on. Therefore, such artistic characteristics are important to note in terms of examining the form of a given expressive object and the aesthetic experience it provides.

Having attempted to provide a general insight into Dewey's philosophy, it is possible to present the following summary of how to understand his general notion of art as experience, more specifically, *aesthetic experience*: For an aesthetic experience to occur, a living creature, referring to the artist as well as potential perceivers, must feel an impulsion, hence, they feel the urge to create or interact with an expressive object. On the basis of the creature's interaction with the expressive object, said creature will achieve immersion, thereby, allowing for perception and interpretation to take place. In order for the experience to become an aesthetic one, the creature must have a non-extreme emotional reaction on the basis of their interaction with the object both during and after, leading to a sense of fulfilment, whereby, the experience is consummated within the living creature.

As with all aesthetic theory, arguably, the question of validity arises despite acknowledging that no individual holds the pure and only truth regarding a particular subject-matter. In the case of this project, rather than validity, the matter of applicability is more apparent here. As mentioned earlier, John Dewey's philosophy may have been heavily critiqued for a variety of reasons. While his line of thought in *Art as Experience* may at times be difficult to comprehend, the philosophical framework provides several different and interesting aspects and concepts that can help reach the goal set for this master's project. Therefore, Dewey's concepts regarding experience, both common and aesthetic, and the expressive object will be utilised to define subsequent terminology as well as be main tools for distinguishing between the experiences provided by art games and mainstream games, respectively.

2.1.3 Entertainment

On the surface, entertainment may appear easy to define, however, this depends on the perspective one wishes to adopt. As argued in their article, Alan McKee et al. are concerned with how entertainment will take on different characteristics and be significant in various ways depending on the lens one chooses to adopt (2014, p. 18). This means that there is not necessarily a definitive way to align an understanding of entertainment from an industrial point of view with that of a consumer's; therefore, it becomes a matter of suggesting approaches to understanding

the term in question. With this in mind, the following section will establish an approach for understanding entertainment in order to apply this term in the establishment of mainstream game characteristics later on. This will be done by considering the following aspects: origin and development in order to determine the cultural significance as well as the purposes of entertainment; the construction of entertainment from an industrial point of view; and how entertainment is consumed. Furthermore, the observations made in regards to experience, as defined in the section concerning John Dewey's philosophy, will also be utilised to examine entertainment. From these perspectives, a synthesised definition of entertainment will be made at the end of this segment.

Looking at entertainment from an etymological standpoint, it has arguably always existed in some way. Rooted in Latin, entertainment means "to hold the attention of", hence, it serves the purpose of drawing in an audience for specific purposes (Sayre & King, 2010, p. 4). This is evident through history, in which, entertainment has manifested itself in various forms such as festivals, carnivals and circuses, amusement parks and others that all serve the purpose of bringing people together for various reasons (Zerlang, 2015, pp. 669-671). According to Martin Zerlang, the idea of entertainment relates to mankind's pursuit of happiness and, therefore, he characterises entertainment as having "no other aim than to please" (2015, p. 669), although, Adorno would argue that this pleasure is derived on the basis of falsehood. No matter how one might feel about any form of entertainment, it will, at the very least, in theory, be associated with something of positive character, or something that is supposed to cause a positive outcome, no matter the product form. Acknowledging the premise that humans have always searched for something that will, in Zerlang's words, be "uplifting" to counter unhappiness and/or boredom (2015, p. 669), it seems obvious why entertainment has, in some sense, become "trade goods", spawning major industries that are concerned with making people invest in products of entertainment.

Contemplating this latter observation in a contemporary notion, most people today would arguably also associate that of entertainment with a certain culture or entire industries, presumably because they have at one time or another paid for entertainment. As stated by Shay

Sayre and Cynthia King, "[o]ver the years [entertainment] has come to refer to a constructed product designed to stimulate a mass audience in an agreeable way in exchange for money." (2010, p. 4). Being a source of revenue for entertainment industries, it makes sense to establish how entertainment is defined as a product for consumption. In this regard, it seems safe to assume that entertainment must, at the very least, from a design perspective be associated with something positive at all times. No matter the product, entertainment cannot move beyond that which will not provide consumers with a pleasurable sensation because that would contradict its very purpose. In keeping with this notion, Sayre and King formulate the following: "entertainment is created on purpose by someone for someone else. Entertainment is easily located, accessed, and consumed. And of course, entertainment is also attractive, stimulating, sensory, emotional, social, and moral to a mass audience." (2010, p. 4). To exemplify this, it is possible to perceive, for instance, a tragedy as entertainment because enjoyment can be derived from any kind of theatre (Zerlang, 2015, p. 670) even when presented with a narrative that does not contain a happy ending.

On the accounts above, entertainment operates under certain and specific conditions in order to ensure enjoyable outcomes for consumers. Seeing as entertainment today is highly associated with a capitalist practice intended to make money off of people wanting a sense of pleasure, Sayre and King have identified six characteristics for constructing entertainment:

> [1] Entertainment is provided by highly trained experts and experienced professionals who act with a team of contributors. [2] Most entertainment products are the result of multiple inputs from a range of people. [3] Entertainment is usually controlled by a single dominant person or central figure such as a producer, director, writer, and so forth who organizes and makes decisions. [4] Entertainment is a web of symbols that are shaped, molded, and polished to add to the audience's experience. [5] Most entertainment products rely on technology to maximize their effectiveness. [6] Finally, marketing promotions tell audiences how to experience entertainment before they actually access the product. (2010, pp. 5-6).

Acknowledging that the characteristics above apply to a business model, dealing with the creation of products, experiences, or other forms of entertainment, Sayre and King go on to further define entertainment by what is not:

> [1] *art*, although it may aspire to and attain the level of art at times [2] *ordinary life*, it has a different feel, time, and emotion associated with it [3] *truth* because it uses whatever will be more

> stimulating and whatever will make for a better experience [4] *intellectual thought*, rather it is more like simple and familiar thought with a touch of surprise [5] *moral* because entertainment won't be judged as good or bad for people, just entertaining. (2010, p. 6).

From the two sets of characteristics above, entertainment, in some sense, occurs in a way that is supposed to attract consumers, making them want to leave behind reality for but a moment (Sayre & King, 2010, p. 6), meaning that there is a level of agency involved in the meeting between consumer and product.

The notion of agency in terms of indulging entertainment raises a few interesting points to consider, especially, because entertainment needs to be consumed. First, an individual needs to accept entertainment; it is not possible to force entertainment upon anyone, it has to be an active choice to engage in any form of entertaining products. This has given rise to the following categories of entertainment:

> [1] Passive entertainment occurs when people simply absorb an experience through their senses without much participation; listening to music on an iPod or reading a novel are passive experiences. [2] Educational entertainment requires active engagement of one's mind, the type of engagement that occurs with problem solving. Dedicated television channels and public broadcasting combine entertainment with learning about our world. [3] Escapist entertainment experiences involve much greater immersion than other types of entertainment or educational experiences. Intended to provide a respite from real life, escapist experiences are offered by theme parks, casinos and virtual reality games. [4] Esthetic entertainment occurs when we immerse ourselves in a cultural experience with a visual component, such as standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, visiting an art gallery, or lounging in a Starbucks café looking at passers-by. (Sayre & King, 2010, pp. 15-16).

Here, two facets are important to ponder: first, all of the activities contained in the categories above are possible ways of entertaining oneself if this is actively decided; secondly the aspect of voluntary engagement in entertainment is further interesting due to the notion that the idea of *being entertained* can occur in two ways: a consumer can, on one hand, engage in entertainment that does not require any self-based action due to the already created product, for instance, music. On the other hand, a consumer can also engage in entertainment that requires self-involvement to achieve the feeling of being entertained, for instance, by playing a game.

Now, the aspect of playing, or *play*, is also relevant in this case since a lot of entertainment today involves a form of play. In his book, *Homo Ludens* (1980 [1949]), Johan

Huizinga argued that play is a fundamental part of existence that serves a specific purpose: "In play there is something "at play" which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. [...] However we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself." (1980 [1949], p. 1). If entertainment can be based on play, and play can be entertaining then it seems appropriate to propose that the very thing *at play* when playing is the pursuit of happiness that Zerlang refers to. To further this notion, one could look at the main characteristics of play and compare these with the entertainment categories introduced earlier. Sayre and King abridge Huizinga's characterisation of play in the following manner:

> Play: is a voluntary activity—no one forces us to play[;] is set apart from reality—it is an interlude in the day that provides temporary satisfaction[;] is limited in terms of its locality and duration—it has a beginning and an end[;] is controlled or governed by rules[;] has a sense of persistent social community—sports fans are such a community[;] promotes a sense of symbolic secrecy—it is different from everyday life[;] is a sacred and profound activity—it involves rituals, ceremony, and a venue for symbolic representation. (2010, p. 9).

Although Huizinga's theory of play may not fit a modern notion to the letter, this definition can be considered relevant because the traits pointed to by Huizinga are compatible with those of entertainment. For instance, the definition of play above fits the idea of escapist entertainment experiences due to the notion of immersing oneself in experiences that offer an alternative to everyday life. Furthermore, the *escape* from reality can be accompanied by benefits such as joyful emotional responses and/or social interaction. Hence, Huizinga's definition of play and Sayre and King's definition of entertainment can be seen as two parts of a whole due to their shared qualities and characteristics.

Considering the relationship between recipient and entertainment, be this from a business point of view or not, it is further possible to draw on John Dewey's definitions of experience to highlight said aspect. Already now, entertainment cannot be an aesthetic experience, at least not in terms of Dewey's philosophy and Sayre & King's definition of entertainment, as presented earlier. However, this does not mean that entertainment cannot possess any aesthetic qualities, just not enough to constitute an aesthetic experience. Nonetheless, it is possible to experience entertainment as well as to have an entertaining experience. These observations are made on the

basis of entertainment products being widely available, thereby, rendering the living creature able to interact with and experience them. Furthermore, certain products of entertainment can have a distinctive course of action with a clearly defined beginning and end; the latter being able to provide the live creature with, as Zerlang puts it, pleasure, thus, heightening the happiness of said creature.

Taking the presented aspects above into account, this project will regard entertainment as a term pertaining to a certain product, either commercially produced and/or freely available, voluntarily engaged or interacted with or experienced in order to attain a sense of positive emotion. Furthermore, a product of entertainment has the ability to stand out as an experience, although, it cannot be art, aspects of everyday life, truth, or intellectual or moral in its composition.

2.2 Metafictionality & Metareferentiality

In order to establish Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) as a text that harbours meta-phenomena, thus, allowing for an examination of such potential qualities in relation to Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience, this section will introduce the terminology utilised for this purpose. However, metafiction has been subject to scholarly engagement for a considerable amount of time now; wherefore, to obtain terminology that can be applied in the work with *The Beginner's Guide*, an introduction to research on metafiction is needed for clarity's sake.

Being rooted in the study of the novel, especially postmodern texts, the academic work concerning metafiction by prominent meta-scholars such as William Gass, Robert Scholes, or Patricia Waugh are, therefore, mainly concerned with metafiction in relation to literary studies (Funk, 2015, pp. 80-82). As such, novels like Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), and Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) are often highlighted to explicate the characteristics of metafiction (cf. Scholes, 1970; Waugh, 2002 [1984]; Abrams & Harpham, 2008; Neumann & Nünning, 2012). Gass and Scholes are, although separately, considered the

coiners of the term (Wolf, 2009, p. 3), to which they would respectively highlight various aspects in terms of characterising this type of fiction. Gass identified how some novels began as sources of voyeuristic entertainment for the "nosy" middle-class women (1980, p. 2) and, instead, tended to develop a sense of self-consciousness, thus, becoming a piece of metafiction:

> [metafictions] are works which contain, one way or the other, explanations and references to themselves. They are fictions about fictions; not in the obvious sense in which one of the characters is a writer […] Rather metafictions are fictions in which the content of the work being structured is the structure of traditional fiction (1980, p. 7).

Similarly, Scholes made observations regarding metafiction, to which he would label such types of fiction as "experimental" that sought to be self-conscious for the purposes of establishing the means to present critique because they did not conform to the traditional ways of categorising fiction (1970, p. 107); therefore, he would characterise metafiction in the following manner: "[m]etafiction assimilates all the [perspectives] of criticism into the fictional process itself. It may emphasize structural, formal, behavioural, or philosophical qualities, but most writers of metafiction are thoroughly aware of all these possibilities and are likely to have experimented with all of them." (Scholes, 1970, pp. 106-107). As such, Gass' and Scholes' coinage and popularisation of the term, metafiction, has lead to a number of explications by several scholars, who have also focused on the aspects of self-consciousness, self-reflexivity, or otherwise self-awareness in literature. Contemplating Scholes's argument regarding metafiction's potential emphasis on certain media-aspects, Waugh constructed a rather explicit list of things to consider in relation to postmodern metafiction:

> the over-obtrusive, visibly inventing narrator [...] ostentatious typographic experiment [...] explicit dramatization of the reader [...] Chinese-box structures [...] incantatory and absurd lists [...] over-systemized or overtly arbitrarily arranged structural devices [...] total breakdown of temporal and spatial organization of narrative [...] infinite regress [...] dehumanization of character, parodic doubles, obtrusive proper names [...] self-reflexive images [...] critical discussions of the story within the story [...] continuous undermining of specific fictional conventions [...] use of popular genres [...] and explicit parody of previous texts whether literary or non-literary [...] In all of these what is foregrounded is the writing of the text as the most fundamentally problematic aspect of that text (2002 [1984], pp. 21-22).

Thus, Waugh attempts to highlight traits of metafiction in order to further the notion that metafiction, much like [...] "metatheatre", is an example of what has since the 60s been "a more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the world. Metafiction pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration" (2002 [1984], p. 3). As such, the self-consciousness that metafictional texts display is of certain significance when engaging with such fiction. Examining Lionel Abdel's work on the metaplay, Susan Sontag emphasises Abdel's view on how self-consciousness is part of making fiction believable: "The Western playwright is unable to believe in the reality of a character who is lacking in self-consciousness." (2009 [1966], p. 133). Thus, the incorporation of self-conscious is part of providing a text with a specific expression that is meant to appear realistic, arguably, allowing for receivers to feel more engaged. As such, with all of this in mind, these aforementioned academics are obviously not without significance in relation to the purpose of this section, however, since this project seeks to work with video games rather than literature, the academic endeavours made by Werner Wolf will be considered below.

In the two books, *Metareference Across Media* (Wolf, 2009) and *The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media* (Wolf, 2011), a number of things are interesting from the perspective of examining metafiction beyond literary studies, however, for the purposes of this project, only a few concepts will be dealt with here. Wolf has identified a tendency in Western culture, in which, a significant amount of texts have come to embody some form of metafictional practice, a phenomenon that he has dubbed a metareferential turn. Although Wolf's cultural observation will not be a main focus in this master's thesis, one could think of several text examples that display metafictional tendencies, ranging from David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), in which the narrator recognises the presence of the audience; Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), wherein the lines between reality and fiction in the main character's life are blurred and reversed; *Deadpool* (Miller, 2016) and *Deadpool 2* (Leitch, 2018), which both breaks the fourth wall and includes commentary directed towards themselves as well as their own fictional universe and genre; to television series such as

House of Cards (Willimon, 2013) and *Rick and Morty* (Roiland & Harmon, 2013–), both in which characters will defy the ontological level and address the audiences in a direct manner that recognises the fictionality of said television series

As Wolf notes, there has been "a remarkable change in the degree and quality of metareferentiality in a number (if not all) of (the) media and arts over the past few decades." (2011, p. 1). Wolf's observations above could have merit to it if Waugh's notion above is acknowledged, thus, it plausible that what started as a general interest in human beings and their perception of the world has spread as to affect a variety of media. As such, the aforementioned books are Wolf's attempt to reconceptualise the notion of metafiction as to make it applicable to other media than that of literature (2011, p. v), wherefore, to explicate his notion of a metareferential turn, two concepts are worth examining here: metaization and metareference. Wolf denotes metaization as a process, in which, a text presents "movement from a first cognitive or communicative level to a higher one on which the first-level thoughts and utterances, and above all the means and media used for such utterances, self-reflexively become objects of reflection and communication in their own right" (2009, p. 3). As such, text harbouring meta-aspects will gradually expose this. However, to contemplate such a process in any regard, the movement mentioned before needs to be furthered by something. As mentioned, Wolf seeks to establish a reconceptualization of metafiction, wherefore, he does not operate with this exact term, instead, he utilises the concept of metareference. Wolf acknowledges that metareference is "a particularly topical theme, which will be familiar, albeit mostly under the name 'metafiction', to literary scholars [...] In fact, metareference has hitherto mostly been explored within [...] contemporary postmodernist novels" (2009, p. v). However, his definition of metareference is supposed to act as "transmedial concept" that denotes any aspect within a given medium that "issues forth from a logically higher 'meta-level' within a given artefact or performance, and denotes any self-reflexive reference to, or comment on, media-related aspects of the given medial artefact or performance, of a particular medium or the media in general." (Wolf, 2011, p. v). Although, despite Wolf's attempt to reconceptualise the notion, the

framework is met with certain limitations. As acknowledged by Wolf, "'Metareference' is a particularly topical theme, which will be familiar, albeit mostly under the name 'metafiction', to literary scholars [...] In fact, metareference has hitherto mostly been explored within [...] contemporary postmodernist novels" (2009, p. v). Thus, Wolf recognises that the research done in relation to metafiction has been with regards to literature, wherefore, a set of analytical terms for the examination of other media than literature are in short supply. As Wolf notes, "[t]he monomedial focus on literature has led to a highly differentiated, albeit neither uniform nor complete conceptual 'toolbox' for analysing meta-phenomena in verbal texts" (2009, p. 4). However, despite this particular notion, by using metareference as an umbrella term, it is rendered possible "for the first time to systematically compare analogous phenomena in individual media" (Wolf, 2009, p. 16). As such, it appears possible to borrow concepts from other studies and make these function in the context of analysis. Hence, a video game can be examined via various approaches to establish how potential aspects can be considered as meta-phenomena within a given text.

Building on Wolf's framework, Fotis Jannidis has examined metareference in relation to computer games and found a number of different aspects to consider in this given context. As such, Jannidis identifies a number of issues related to the act of analysing computer games and their potential metareferentiality:

> in the context of computer games, it is difficult to determine the exact scope of metareference, in particular whether it should include references to any human artefact or only to medial products, to any fictional work or only to (fictional) digital objects, to any computer game, or only to the specific genre of computer games to which the referring work belongs, or whether it is merely a reference to that particular work itself, [...] a likely reason for this uncertainty rests in the very fact that we are not dealing with a homogeneous, static structure but with signification processes that are at any time individualized and share but one feature, namely that their results in one way or another show aspects of self-referentiality. One further aspect that complicates the analysis is the fact that the simulated world of computer games reduplicates – or at least potentially reduplicates – the whole world. Each object or activity in the simulated world can turn into a sign, which – in the case of metareference – can refer to itself [...] references are possible, via images, texts, films,

or spoken language, to artefacts etc., to genres of computer games, and also to the respective game

itself. (2009, pp. 544-546).

Thus, Jannidis is not able to present an analytical toolbox for computer games and metareferential analysis due to the, arguably, intricate system that a computer game can constitute. Despite this notion, Jannidis does introduce a couple of ways, in which, one could approach the task of analysing metareferentiality in games, to which, for the purposes of this project, only a few will be mentioned here. For instance, Jannidis emphasises how certain computer games can contain either or both direct and indirect metareferences; direct references being any aspect in a given game that references something that pertains to that particular text (2009, p. 544; p. 546); indirect references, being references pointing to other aspects that are not concerned with a particular text but instead peripheral notions, for instance, genre or general critique of game-related aspects (Jannidis, 2009, p. 544; p. 546). Examples of both these types can be found in another game by Davey Wreden, *The Stanley Parable* (2013), in which the author makes commentary on the fictionality of its own composition by pointed to in-game actions while, simultaneously, drawing parallels to the gaming-community and general video game tropes. Hence, both direct and indirect metareferences can further several things in terms of experiencing a computer game, be it to humour players via the use of references to similar game conventions or approaches or to offer a more intellectual experience (Jannidis, 2009, pp. 555-557).

To further explicate Jannidis's approach to the analysis of metareferentiality in computer games, he identifies how the presence of metalepsis is a recurring aspect that can be considered in this regard. Metalepsis, in this context, is redefined in order to cover as many phenomena as possible (Wolf, 2009, p. 51). Wolf denotes metalepsis as "an intentional device" that appears in various media and their narratives, however "it exclusively occurs – or seems to occur – within representations and thus representational media" (2009, p. 51). Additionally, Wolf defines how his reconceptualisation of metalepsis is concerned with ontological considerations:

> [m]etalepsis presupposes the existence of at least two different 'worlds' or (onto)logical levels, at
> least one of which must be inside the representation or be the representation itself. It is helpful to

postulate 'levels' or 'worlds' as a minimal condition in order to be able to accommodate metaleptic phenomena that do not only involve the classical case of a transgression between the 'vertically stacked' levels of the representation and the represented within a representational work but also the following phenomena: a – seeming – transgression between a work and the world of the author or recipient outside it, transgressions between parallel or 'horizontal' subworlds within a work [...] and transgressions between a representation and a non-representational sub-level (2009, pp. 51-52).

Metalepsis can, thus, be understood from a dimensional standpoint, to which, one level will be grounded in the fictionality of a given narrative, for instance, the representation, thereby, rendering it possible for another level to expose the fictionality of a given text, thus, invoking the notion of 'fiction vs. reality' due to, what Jannidis calls, an "overlap" between such two levels (2009, p. 551). As such, it seems reasonable to assume that, at the very least, one level should always seek to maintain the fictionality of a text, whereas another level will continue to introduce elements that seek to reveal such fictionality, however, the latter will be performed to a point that does not necessarily convince but instead creates an ambiguous state for the receiver. As such, on the basis of his work, Jannidis concludes that metareferences, including metalepsis, within computer games can further a rich experience that has the potential to entertain players, thus, encouraging them to replay games with such qualities (2009, pp. 562-563). However, despite the notion of such capabilities to provide entertainment, the aforementioned aspects also have the potential to break the aesthetic due to the disclosing of fictionality (Jannidis, 2009, p. 546). Thus, an analysis of metareferentiality in video games can be examined on the basis of the ways, in which, video games draw attention to themselves as a medium. As such, the components that make up video games can be taken into account in order to establish how and why certain games can be seen as self-reflexive, self-aware, or otherwise self-conscious, and how this has an aesthetic impact on the player.

With the concepts above in mind, it is possible to address the aesthetics of metafiction. As presented by Erin J. Vachon, metafiction constitutes "constant movement in reciprocity – a continuous reversal of reading and being read – in order to catch the reading itself." (2006, pp. 3-4). This is also where, according to Vachon, the beauty of metafiction is found. "It

defamiliarizes the familiar act of reading (and writing) by exposing the act of reading as the in-between which produces doublings, at once splitting the reader from and unifying the reader to the text." (2006, p. 4). This defamiliarisation of the reader comes as a function of the reader attempting to make meaning of the text. As explained earlier, the post-structuralist and the postmodern movement, as seen through Derrida and Barthes, have a similar focus upon the reader as the centre of meaning-making despite the author being the creator of the text being read (Vachon, 2006, p. 6). The 'I' of the text, then, according to Foucault, does not necessarily signify the author. Instead, it signifies "a 'second self' whose similarity to the author is never fixed and undergoes considerable alteration within the course of a single book (129)." (Vachon, 2006, p. 8). As such, the relationship between the reader and the text is of slightly greater interest when talking about the aesthetic of metafiction. As pointed to by Vachon, Wolfgang Iser "locates aesthetics within this relationship, and almost entirely ignores the idea of the author […] [b]ut he recognizes that we are not predetermined readers" as "there can be no denying the importance of what happens to us through these texts"; wherefore "[o]ur responses are unprecedented, aesthetic experiences" (Vachon, 2006, p. 10). In other words,

> Such a meaning must clearly be the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension. And, equally clearly, the reader cannot detach himself from such an interaction; on the contrary, the activity stimulated in him will link him to the text and induce him to create the conditions necessary for the effectiveness of that text. As text and reader thus merge into a single situation, the division between subject and object no longer applies, and it therefore follows that meaning is no longer an object to be defined, but is an effect to be experienced (Vachon, 2006, p. 11).

As such, the interaction consists of the reader attempting to make meaning of the text through the aforementioned splitting and unifying of them. An example of such a splitting could be the use of the author, narrator and character in *The City of Glass* by Paul Auster, wherein Paul Auster, the actual author, has written a story wherein the narrator, also named Paul Auster, tells a story about a character, also named Paul Auster (Vachon, 2006, p. 16). As such, the reader is frustrated as they attempt to figure out where the "real" author in the text as he is present in it on multiple levels and, thereby, also present as multiple versions of himself – some more influential to the

text and its expression than others. As such, "Just as the character of Paul Auster is constructed through the language which Paul Auster wields, so too are we, the reader, encoded through signs outside of the text", wherefore the reader is the also pushed to ask themselves "At what point am I inside or outside of the text?" (Vachon, 2006, p. 16). Linda Hutcheon, as quoted by Vachon, expands upon this, writing that:

> Reading and writing belong to the processes of 'life' as much as they do to those of 'art.' It is this realization that constitutes one side of the paradox of metafiction for the reader. On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the 'art,' of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be part of his life experience (5). (Vachon, 2006, p. 16).

By taking the power away from the author of the text, the power of the text is given to the reader in the sense that the meaning now lies in their hands – one could even argue that the author becomes the reader once they no longer serve their function as the actual writer of the text (Vachon, 2006, pp. 17-18). This power enables the reader to experience the text – a text that, through metafiction, decentres itself in order to force said reader to interpret upon it, "to participate in reading" (Vachon, 2006, p. 20), as it deviates or plays with the expectations of the reader, in some cases depriving them of the characteristics they seek or expect from it (Vachon, 2006, p. 18). However, even with this power, the reader does not become the centre of the text as "the self gets dispersed in the process of reading" (Vachon, 2006, p. 24). As the reader attempts to "find the familiar in the unfamiliar" (Vachon, 2006, p. 28), they are, in essence, searching for the cliché, or kitsch, of the text, which has to be a present within it "whether [in] its form, its pattern, or its language" (Vachon, 2006, p. 28). The aesthetic of metafiction is, then, found in the dynamic, of splitting and unifying, between the reader and the text. As the reader searches for meanings in the text through recognisable characteristics, they are met with the deviation or direct opposition to these. The reader is then forced, in order to comprehend the text, to interpret upon the text as it unfolds or challenges the reader's expectations of it, wherefore the reader is pushed to interact with the text, to participate in reading. In other words, "the reader is both

being and becoming, just as the text itself is both object and process. We find beauty in these juxtapositions, these sites of movement and instability. To read is to change, and thus, to make it new [...], whether the "it" be the text, the reader, or reading itself." (Vachon, 2006, p. 31).

Having provided a general outline of characteristics to consider when working with texts that harbour meta-aspects, this master's thesis will be utilising the vocabulary established through the exploration of metafiction, as it pertains literary studies, and Wolf's and Jannidis' theoretical approaches and reflections in synthesis to achieve an accurate characterisation of the meta-phenomena in *The Beginner's Guide*.

2.3 Video Game Theory

This section will account for the video game related theory and terminology that will be utilised to analyse *The Beginner's Guide* and in synthesis with the previous sections to establish the comprehensive framework for distinguishing between mainstream and art games.

2.3.1 Defining Video Games

While video games have been around for decades, it has developed in multiple directions stylistically to encompass an extended range of different characteristics. Therefore, due to the amount of variety in styles, defining video games' exact formal qualities could prove to be a challenging undertaking. Nonetheless, a working definition of video games as a medium is in order. To that end, the following section will examine a selection of formal definitions regarding video games to obtain an applicable set of characteristics that can be utilised in the establishment of mainstream games and art games.

This section will begin with a look into the most general notion of a game – not a video game, but simply a game. In this context, Huizinga once again proves relevant with his theory of play. His concept of the "magic circle" is an oft-discussed concept in this context, since it defines games as an area of life disconnected from the "outside world", surrendering oneself to a system wherein action has little to no consequence on said world (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2013, p. 29). For example, if "you begin a game of chess [...], you are submitting to a formally

defined experience with rules that are clearly distinct from those we follow outside this special activity" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 29). In other words, the activity is only important within the system set up within the game's magic circle (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 29). To critique this theory, however, it does not seem entirely arguable that games have little to no real-world consequences – they take time, they affect moods and behaviours and can act as a means of communication. As such, the magic circle ignores major parts of the context within which the games are played (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 30). As quoted by Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, Brian Sutton-Smith posed that "a game is what we decide it should be; that our definition will have an arbitrary character depending on our purpose" adding that games are "finite, fixed, and goal-oriented" (2013, p. 35). Such games emerge as societies mature - the more mature the society, the more complex the games (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 35). This definition adds to the aspect of the participants surrendering themselves to the game's system of rules as they interact with each other to reach some form of goal or end-state. However, the above definitions of games are arguably too broad to establish what constitutes a video game, although certainly related.

In terms of defining video games, Henry Jenkins stated in the early 2000s that "games are about player control and [how] the best experiences arise when players perceive that their intervention has a spectacular influence on the game" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 37). However, while video games, according to Jenkins, can be "banal, formulaic and predictable" in their form, they are also capable of carrying the torch of the popular art forward due to their aesthetic qualities which, in turn, has the ability to incite strong emotional responses in the player (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, pp. 36-37). Defining video games by their possible aesthetic qualities does, however, still seems too broad of a definition. Formalists within video games studies have attempted to name the more inherent mechanical attributes of video games. Chris Crawford made a list in the early 1980s of four characteristics which all video games feature: Representation, Interaction, Conflict and Safety (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). Firstly, *representation* refers to the subset of reality which video games aspire to simulate, however, this is not to say they try to do so truthfully, but rather that video games attempt to create a subjective representation of a given reality (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.

questions this notion, as not all video games involve something comparable to the real world; however, Crawford posits that even if the game in question has no basis in reality, "the player [still perceives] the game to represent something from his private fantasy world" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). Secondly, *interaction*, according to Crawford, is essential to the appeal of video games as it is the part which engages the players in the aforementioned representation of a subset of reality to gain "meaningful responses" from them (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). Thirdly, *conflict* refers to the challenge of the game, as in, the obstacles, "whether human or electronic", which the player interacts with to reach their goals (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). Lastly, *Safety* refers to the same lack of severe real-world consequences as referred to by Huizinga. However, Crawford's idea is slightly more nuanced as it does not exclude all real-world consequences; "For instance, losing a war game may be humiliating, infuriating and even costly, but it does not mean that your actual home is destroyed." (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). As such, video games are "safe ways of experiencing real situations" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 39). Many have continued to work within the same field of inquiry as Crawford; however, according to Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., two definitions stand out as given by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in *Rules of Play* and, later, by Jesper Juul (2013, p. 39). Salen and Zimmerman define games as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." (2004, p. 80). Similarly, Juul, as quoted by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., defines games as "a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable." (2013, p. 40). While similar in nature, these two definitions differ in terms of player-centricity. They agree that games have a quantifiable outcome, but while Salen and Zimmerman's definition centres around the artificial conflict of the game, Juul focuses more "on the player's attitude towards the activity" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 40). Juul's definition then lies somewhat closer to that of Jenkins than that of Salen and Zimmerman. However, the myriad of definitions ranging from Huizinga to Juul all have a few key things in common.

If contemplating the various aspects covered in the section above, it appears reasonable to suggest that the overlapping sections concern themselves with the interaction between player and the game, and how this relationship finds its place within the real world. Therefore, a video game allows the player to submit themselves to a system of rules inherent to a given video game, whereby they disengage from the real world to emotionally attach themselves to the goals of the video game, framed by the video game's representation of its subset of reality. In their submission to the video game's system, the player immerses themselves, exerting effort to apply their personal influence on the game-state in order to see said video game to one of the various ends, determined by their own interest. Within such a context, the consequences of failure are primarily internal to the video game, as in, they have little to no actual impact on the player's life outside the emotions tied to success or failure of a personal objective.

2.3.2 Analysing Video Games: Introducing MDA & 6-11

Having provided a running definition of video games as a medium, it is also relevant to present ways, in which one can approach such a medium in terms of analysis. Since this thesis seeks to examine if video games can facilitate an aesthetic experience, an extended terminology is needed.

Over the years, many approaches to game analysis have been formulated; however, one of the more renowned methods for examining games is the MDA framework by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek (Dillon, 2010, p. 1; Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 43). As stated in the paper, *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research* (Hunicke et al., 2004), MDA stands for *Mechanics*, *Dynamics*, and *Aesthetics*. The purpose of this approach is to create a language for game designers, scholars, and consumers alike, enabling them to engage in analysis of, for instance, video games based on the three aspects that make up the abbreviation (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 1). The three aspects concerned in this framework are described in the following manner:

> **Mechanics** describes the particular components of the game, at the level of data representation and algorithms. **Dynamics** describes the run-time behaviour of the mechanics acting on player inputs and each others' outputs over time. **Aesthetics** describes the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system. (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 2).

In this sense, MDA allows for an examination of how games operate, or function, as well as how they can affect individuals who interact with them, thereby, permitting a way for this master's thesis to comment on potential differences in experience when playing any video game. However, to do so, a closer look at the three dimensions offered in the MDA framework is needed, wherefore, these will be explicated below.

As "the particular components of the game", mechanics are the game's rules governing "the various actions, behaviours and control mechanisms" that a player can perform, encounter, or both within a particular game (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 3). In essence, when examining a game's mechanics, one could, for instance, consider the interplay between game progress and equipment, skills, or appearance. As a result of applied mechanics, dynamics, then, make up the gameplay that is supposed to create "aesthetic experiences"[3]; for instance, one can think of dynamics in terms of either punishment or reward, or how it furthers a particular behaviour (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 3). Lastly, the game aesthetics are concerned with the game experience, or how games are "fun", which is then measured in the emotional response triggered in a player. However, to discuss the effect of games as more than "fun", the MDA approach operates with eight aesthetics:

1. Sensation
Game as sense-pleasure

2. Fantasy
Game as make-believe

3. Narrative
Game as drama

4. Challenge
Game as obstacle course
(Hunicke et al., 2004, pp. 2-3)

5. Fellowship
Game as social framework

6. Discovery
Game as uncharted territory

7. Expression
Game as self-discovery

8. Submission
Game as pastime

Hence, the aesthetics presented here allow for categorisation of games as well as for describing "gameplay dynamics and mechanics" (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 3); thus, making it possible to describe differences in affect as well as experience when comparing game genres. Furthermore, a central concept in the MDA approach is, then, also to understand and consider how the interplay

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[3] The reader is asked to note that any mention of *aesthetic experience* in the section regarding the MDA framework and the 6-11 framework does not refer to John Dewey's notion of *aesthetic experience*.

between mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics function from the perspectives of both the creator and the consumer, respectively. From a game designer's perspective, they will construct mechanics and dynamics in order to achieve an aesthetic goal. From a consumer's perspective, however, this model is reversed: a player will have an experience caused by the dynamics and mechanics of a given game due to interaction (Hunicke et al., 2004, p. 2). By contemplating these two perspectives, it further becomes possible to gain a more in-depth insight into how games operate, hence, making for a more in-depth analysis regarding the potential differences between certain game types.

Since, especially, the notion of game aesthetics allows for examining the impact of different games on players, it appears an essential aspect to consider in terms of identifying elements that can cause aesthetic experiences, as seen from Dewey's perspective, as well as potential differences in experience between mainstream video games and art video games. As just presented, Hunicke et al. operate with a variety of video game aesthetics; however, these can be considered somewhat broad, thereby making it more challenging to remain precise. As pointed to by Simon Niedenthal, there appear to be three "main clusters of meaning" when it comes to game aesthetics, in particular digital games, which he outlines in the following manner:

1. Game aesthetics refers to the sensory phenomena that the player encounters in the game [...]

2. Game aesthetics refers to those aspects of digital games that are shared with other art forms [...]

3. Game aesthetics is an expression of the game experienced as pleasure, emotion, sociability, formgiving, etc (2009, p. 2).

The first point of game aesthetics is, according to Niedenthal, concerned with sensory phenomena that are "visual, aural, haptic, [and/or] embodied" because these are relevant in terms of how a game is perceived (2009, p. 2). His second point covers how "certain forms, aims, content, themes and design practices" are the same for games as they are for "other media and art forms" (Niedenthal, 2009, p. 2). In the third and last point, Niedenthal points to an approach to games and aesthetics that is concerned with the ways, in which, games have the potential to facilitate "an aesthetic experience", based on sensory input, perception, or both (2009, pp. 2-3). As a result, a more extensive game aesthetic vocabulary is needed for this project's analysis work to become as specific as possible in terms of naming the potential affect involved in playing video games.

Based on the MDA framework, Roberto Dillon has expanded on that particular video game aesthetic vocabulary by introducing his own framework, *The 6-11 Framework* (2010). As stated by Dillon,

> "[a]esthetics" are the most challenging aspect to analyze, as they can be extremely variable and personal. The MDA model faces this issue by proposing the "8 Kinds of Fun" [...] This classification, while insightful and fascinating, provides only a very high-level description of what is happening inside the players' mind at an emotional level. In the end, it may not be very straightforward to relate a particular "kind of fun" to a specific in-game dynamic, especially for beginning game designers and students. The "6-11 Framework" [...] tries to address these issues by providing a new taxonomy for game aesthetics (2010, p. 1).

Thus, Dillon does not reuse any of the aesthetic definitions found in the MDA framework; however, he goes on to list six primary emotions and eleven "core instincts" in an attempt to cover how an individual can react based on interaction with a game (2010, pp. 1-2). Arguably, Dillon's listing of emotions, being that of *fear, anger, joy/happiness, pride, sadness, and excitement*, appears self-explanatory, wherefore, these will not be explicated further. Dillon's eleven instincts, however, need to be elaborated upon:

> **Survival (Fight or Flight)**: the most fundamental and primordial of all instincts, triggered when we [...] are faced with a life threat. [...] **Self Identification:** people tend to admire successful individuals or smart fictional characters and naturally start to imagine of being like their models. **Collecting:** a very strong instinct that can link to a variety of different emotions [...] **Greed:** often we are prone to go beyond a simple "collection" and start amass much more than actually needed just for the sake of it. Whether we are talking about real valuable items or just goods and resources we need to build our virtual empire in a strategy game [...] **Protection/Care/Nurture:** arguably the "best" instinct of all: the one that pushes [...] every person to feel the impulse for caring and helping those in need. **Aggressiveness:** the other side of the coin, usually leading to violence when coupled with *greed* or *anger*. [...] **Revenge:** another powerful instinct that can act as a motivational force and is often used in games to advance the storyline or justify why we need to annihilate some bad guy. **Competition:** deeply linked with the social aspects of our psyche and one of most important instinct in relation to gaming, e.g. leaderboards. Without it, games would lose much of their appeal. **Communication:** the need for expressing ideas, thoughts, or just gossip, [...] can be used to great effect in games too, while seeking information by talking to a non-playing character (NPC) or while sharing experiences with other players [...] **Exploration/Curiosity:** all human discoveries [...] have been made thanks to these instincts that

always pushed us towards the unknown. **Color Appreciation:** scenes and environments full of

vibrant colors naturally attract us, including the more and more detailed and colorful graphics we

see in modern games. (2010, pp. 2-3, [bold highlights added]).

According to Dillon's framework, games can cause the mentioned emotions and instincts within a player when engaging in a form of gameplay. Furthermore, the 6-11 aspects further each other, meaning that acting on instincts can result in feeling different emotions, while, particular emotions can cause one to act based on instinct (2010, pp. 3-4). Therefore, it is possible to analyse how emotions and instincts are part of creating a given gaming experience.

Granted, both of the approaches to game analysis presented above may not be able to cover every particular aspect of how humans perceive games. However, this project will utilise the terminology found in both frameworks, being the dimensions of mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics, in order to establish a definition of both mainstream games and art games as well as for analytical purposes when determining the potential difference between said game types. Furthermore, despite Dillon's critique of the MDA approach's limited aesthetics, this project will, for the purposes of being able to provide as detailed of an analysis as possible, utilise the 6-11 framework in conjunction with the MDA approach.

2.3.3 Avant-garde & Mainstream

Brian Schrank proposes that "[in] order to value videogames as art, or a cultural force, we need to understand how the videogame avant-garde works." (2014, p. 1). This is because the avant-garde pushes the boundaries of the mainstream as well as what can be considered art in the first place – it "opens up and redefines art mediums." (Schrank, 2014, p. 1). To work with such a new medium, the avant-garde can make use of a myriad of strategies "ranging from radical to complicit in degree, formal to political in nature, and local to global in scope." (Schrank, 2014, p. 1). However, the following will focus on the formal side of the avant-garde, as the political side concerns itself with more external socio-cultural aspects of video games, such as political movements and social change. Since this thesis focuses on the experience of engaging with a given video game, the following section will explore select parts of the formal concepts: the radical formal avant-garde, from which an understanding of mainstream games will become apparent as well, and the formal narrative avant-garde; however, the complicit formal

avant-garde will be left out as it concerns itself with creating art games in the loosest possible sense (Schrank, 2014, p. 85). As such, much like in the case of the political avant-garde, the complicit formal avant-garde does not necessarily concern itself with the type of video games defined earlier. The radical formal avant-garde, following the common understanding of the historical avant-garde movement, aims to "both [deconstruct] and [develop] artistic mediums", meaning that the "artists play with a medium beyond easily consumable formulas" in order to "collectively advance a medium" (Schrank, 2014, p. 27). By breaking the boundaries of the established formulas, the avant-garde artist can create art which could end up being adapted into said formula, thereby helping it develop (Schrank, 2014, p. 27). The strongest point of comparison between the perspective one takes to understand a painting and the perspective taken when playing video games is the concept of 'flow' (Schrank, 2014, p. 32). Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, as quoted by Schrank, sums up flow as the

> sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous. (Schrank, 2014, p. 32)

Csíkszentmihályi further exemplifies the above understanding through activities ranging from "playing chess" to "religious prayer" (Schrank, 2014, p. 32). Such experiences are understood by many developers to be the overall goal of producing a game, to leave the player in a perpetual state of flow and that breaks in flow should be removed through playtesting (Schrank, 2014, pp. 32-33). Turning towards mainstream video games as "situated in popular culture" (Schrank, 2014, p. 34), flow finds even stronger footing. Schrank proposes that the mainstream video game is built as a genre based on being kitsch, a concept defined as "a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy." (Schrank, 2014, p. 36). Universal literacy, understood as media universally consumable, does not come without certain drawback - the biggest one being the "drastic oversimplification" of the medium at hand (Schrank, 2014, p. 36). As such, consumers of kitsch "know exactly what to do and how to feel" (Schrank, 2014, p. 36), an understanding

congruent with the account of entertainment given earlier, wherein it does not necessarily invite intellectual thought, but rather something recognisable with a touch of surprise. Furthermore, according to Schrank, the concept of flow through gameplay blends well with Michel Foucault's theory of it being people's universal fantasy to be "perfectly subjugated" within a given system of rules:

> When a system is designed with optimal flow, people forget that they are being subjugated: their doubts and distractions are kept to a minimum, and all human labor is positively absorbed into the system. [...] We want stern and solid constraints, but we do not want them to feel like constraints (Foucault and Gordon 1980, 97). We want the illusion of freedom — freedom to question the rules, but not the actual freedom to break and rewrite the rules of the systems in which we live, love, work, and play. (Schrank, 2014, p. 34)

In essence, mainstream video games can be summarised as the formulaic kitsch, an easily recognisable system of rules as they aim to create universal literacy by way of "standardizing formulas" (Schrank, 2014, p. 38) through which the player can then subjugate themselves to a solidly constraining system, which then guides them through a series of emotions. As such, mainstream video games can hold a cathartic power, referred to by Schrank as "catharsis on cue" (2014, p. 38).

Returning to the radical formal avant-garde, this type of avant-garde artist will aim to break such boundaries set upon the medium, thereby "reclaiming the diversity and richness that universal kitsch strips away." (Schrank, 2014, p. 38). One way of reclaiming such diversity would be to challenge the flow of video games purposely. Schrank exemplifies it through the video game *Space Giraffe* from 2007 (2014, p. 38), a game which would be considered a part of the 'bullet-hell'-genre of games, relying on a virtual barrage of enemies to challenge the player to stay alive[4]. In such a game, the player achieves a state of flow by adapting to the challenge of staying alive as they begin to recognise the patterns of different enemies. *Space Giraffe* disallows this method "because it is meta-challenging and deconstructs gameplay in real time" (Schrank, 2014, p. 39). If the state of flow is induced once the player finds themselves challenged by a task which is neither too easy nor too hard, then *Space Giraffe* allows no such state. Instead, it "creates a strange alchemy in which the play experience is simultaneously too hard and too easy"

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[4] Read more about the bullet-hell genre on Giantbomb (n.d.).

as it abstracts the features of the genre to the point where "reviewers have complained of 'trouble getting to grips with the basics of playing the game'" (Schrank, 2014, pp. 39-40). As such, "*Space Giraffe* frustrates the player who is seeking a traditional game experience, much as modernist painting frustrates viewers, past and present, who seek the traditional structures and dependable interpretations of traditional painting" (Schrank, 2014, p. 40), making it a work of art from the perspective of the radical formal avant-garde. However, the mechanics and flow is not the only part of video games which they can abstract to push the boundaries of the mainstream - they can also abstract the narrative.

The narrative formal avant-garde concerns itself with "the narrative affordances of art" across media, where it can be either radical or complicit depending on to which degree the work conforms to the established mainstream characteristics of its chosen media (Schrank, 2014, p. 135). As such, it follows the idea of Russian formalism, as in, the narrative formal avant-garde artists try to "blur the line between a heightened art experience and the experience of everyday reality", whereby they elucidate how "the experience of art affects the shape and structure of reality" (Schrank, 2014, pp. 135-136). As such, the receiver of a given text is expected to fully immerse themselves in said text "in order to experience its total force." (Schrank, 2014, p. 136). By challenging the structures and language of a given work, the receiver is made fully aware of said structures by the work not conforming to them so as to defamiliarise the receiver to such a degree that "[their] perception churns and adapts to meet the challenge." (Schrank, 2014, p. 136). From this point of view, video games can be considered an "inherently narrative form", which enables a compressed view of the world and the common experience (Schrank, 2014, p. 137). The narrative formal avant-garde then aims to compress it to such a degree that "artistic conventions bend and break, and the world glows anew in deformed caricature." (Schrank, 2014, p. 137). Schrank exemplifies this type of video games through the category of interactive fiction, referring to a category of video games akin to text adventure games. Such video games grapple with the established form of storytelling insofar as the reader creating their personal interpretation of the story (Schrank, 2014, p. 138). However, interactive fiction involves the player as a type of co-author of the narrative before them by reconstructing the pieces of the underlying structure, whereby "[authorship] is distributed throughout the entire system of

engagement. Rather than detracting from the experience, distributed authorship adds more dimensions through which authors can participate and collaborate via the computer." (Schrank, 2014, p. 138). Such interactive works can, however, run into the problem of story limiting the interactive properties of the game and vice versa – an issue outlined by Michael Mateas, as quoted by Schrank:

> Interactive drama foregrounds the tension between interaction and story: how can an interactive experience have the experiential properties of classical, Aristotelian drama (identification, economy, catharsis, closure) while giving the player the interactive freedom to have a real effect on the story? (2014, p. 154)

However, the expression "real effect on the story" seems insufficient at best. If a game features multiple endings, or simply numerous ways to accomplish the same end-state, the player can then arguably be said to have had an impact on the direction of the narrative as the events of said narrative were led by the choices of the player – even if such choices were authored to begin with. Such a notion harks back to the concept of wanting to subjugate oneself to a system of rules to reach a state of flow as seen through the radical formal avant-garde. As such, the issue of story and interactivity being opposing concepts comes down to how the player chooses to interpret it. Should they decide to overlook it as merely "an artful abstraction", then it has little impact on whether or not the player feels that they can impact the system at hand (Schrank, 2014, p. 155). In essence, the formal narrative avant-garde aims, much like the radical formal avant-garde, to break away from the formulaic kitsch constraints of the mainstream. While the radical formal avant-garde does so by disrupting the player's state of flow, the narrative formal avant-garde does so by abstracting narratives, "[making] the familiar seem unfamiliar again." (Schrank, 2014, p. 156). As such, the subset of reality portrayed in a given video game, if not conforming to mainstream narrative structure, will push the player "adrift" in its world, leaving them to attempt to regain their "place and familiarity" within its unfamiliar structure, wherefrom they can then co-author the narrative at hand (Schrank, 2014, p. 156).

2.3.4 Video Games as Art

Even though the popular arts, counting video games, may have been somewhat neglected by philosophers, other scholars have engaged in the discussion on whether or not video games can

be considered art. This debate has caused a divide within both the academic world and the gaming industry; hence, it is highly controversial to claim that video games can or cannot be thought of as art (Smuts, 2005, para. 2-3; Gee, 2006, p. 58). Therefore, the following will explicate how video games can be considered art by delving into the art game genre.

First of all, it is important to note that not all video games can, or should, be considered art (Smuts, 2005, para. 47). A reasonable assumption would, therefore, be that if video games can be considered art, then only some possess the characteristics, allowing them to take on this particular notion or title. Since the popularity-level of video games has continued to rise since they first became publicly and commercially available, mainly in the United States of America, at the beginning of the 1970s (Newman, 2017, pp. 1-2), the medium's success has "inspired droves of artists to create new works that appropriate a game-like format to explore new structures for narrative and cultural critique." (Holmes, 2003, p. 46). If one accepts this notion, then it seems appropriate to assume that game developers have attempted to push the boundaries for what games can be and, herein, made it possible for academics to pursue video games as art because the medium has continued, and probably still will continue, to develop even further. As a result of the scholarly engagement with video games, a particular categorisation of certain video games has emerged, *art games*. In particular, Tiffany Holmes (2003), Felan Parker (2013) and John Sharp (2015) have theorised about this genre of games; however, as with most discussions pertaining to anything art-related, the concept of an art game is neither universally defined nor understood, which is also the case in terms of Holmes, Parker, and Sharp. Therefore, exceptions are possible and can occur in an attempt to provide a definition of this particular game genre (Parker, 2013, p. 42). Despite this notion, aspects such as history, construction, content, experience and entertainment, and aesthetics are relevant to consider in terms of achieving a set of characteristics that can be utilised in order to create a comprehensive framework.

In terms of the production and content of art games, there are several informative remarks to be made. As stated by Sharp, the creation of art games was instigated by "the artgame movement, a group of game makers in the independent games community that produced work

from the mid-2000s until the early 2010s." (2015, p. 49). This movement counts creators and games like Jason Rohrer's *Passage* (2007), Rod Humble's *The Marriage* (2007), and Jonathan Blow's *Braid* (2008) and *The Witness* (2015), where the latter is considered to be "the best known and most commercially successful creator of art-games" (Parker, 2013, p. 41; Sharp, 2015, p. 55). The notion that art games are created independently is significant for a number of reasons. As argued by Parker, "[i]ndie games […] are a necessary precondition for artgames (sic). With only a handful of exceptions, games identified as artgames are independent productions, produced by individuals or smaller companies understood to be outside of the mainstream games industry." (2013, p. 46). This notion is, arguably, part of the reason why art games, as opposed to mainstream games, are not necessarily made to be commercial or widely available (Holmes, 2003, p. 47; Parker, 2013, p. 42). This can be furthered by the notion that the art games mentioned above are mostly designed for computers as opposed to both computers and consoles. In their respective works, both Holmes and Parker mention a variety of, what they consider to be, art games; however, most games mentioned are mostly browser-based or created for computers (2003, pp. 46-48; 2013, pp. 41-43). By limiting a game to a particular technological device or machine-function, for instance, a browser, the possibility of reaching a wider audience decreases. Another reason for the medium-specificity can, undoubtedly, be attributed to the economy, as major game companies have "hordes of developers" (Holmes, 2003, p. 47) and, herein, more money to both design, create and distribute games faster on to more computers, consoles, or other devices.

Pondering the above, the difference between the two company types, arguably, also means that there is a noticeable difference between the games developed and released by such two companies. As pointed to by Sharp, "[a]rtgames used the innate properties of games–among them interactivity, game mechanics, and player goals–to create expressive play experiences that explore metaphysical questions around life, ethics, and aspects of human condition." (2015, p. 49). From this, it is possible to extrapolate several relevant notions that can be elaborated upon. First, art games do not forsake the characteristics of their medium, meaning that art games can be

operated as many other video games because they require interactivity to unfold before the player. However, art games, as opposed to mainstream games, appear to offer fewer mechanics that do not necessarily serve the same purpose as they would in mainstream games. As pointed to by Holmes, "[t]raditional videogames offer serious challenges to hand-eye coordination; art games tend [to] challenge one's mental focus in that the player needs to maneuver in the game and simultaneously figure out its conceptual message." (2003, p. 46). Furthermore, the appearance of art games will still be that of video games. If one considers the majority of the art game examples utilised by Holmes, Parker, and Sharp, these look like the early video games with their pixelated and arcade-like graphics. In her article, *Arcade Classics Spawn Art?* (2003), Holmes focuses on art games that are "retro-styled" or "retro-kitsch", meaning that the games in question "borrow either graphical sensibility or play strategies from the arcade classics." (p. 46). It would be easy to think that since art games, for the most part, are created by independent game creators, then they do not have the skill or time to develop games with life-like graphics, grand narratives, a broad set of mechanics and so on. However, in Holmes' case, she states that art games "creatively subverts the format of an arcade classic to support a conceptual creative agenda." (2003, pp. 46-47).

This latter point allows for a return to the last part of Sharp's statement above. The "creative agenda" that Holmes writes about can be compared to the "metaphysical questions" that Sharp refers to in his book. In their work with art games, Holmes, Parker, and Sharp are concerned with how games within this particular genre harbour content that can be thought of as "academic or theoretical" (Holmes, 2003, pp. 46-47), or how art games carry "existential-poetic" messages (Parker, 2013, p. 42), which the player needs to decode. As Holmes states it:

> Thomson and Craighead's *Trigger Happy* (1998), is one example of a retro-styled art game based on Space Invaders […] players must atomize words instead of aliens. When the game begins, sentences excerpted from Michel Foucault's essay, "What is an Author?" descend. In bombing the phrases, the player metaphorically deconstructs Foucault's text which itself deconstructs the idea of the author. (2003, p. 47).

Here, it can be argued that the academic aspect of art games are dependent on how academia is incorporated into the game. Meanwhile, the player must possess academic knowledge in order to

realise the irony in this meta-game. In terms of Parker's notion, he exemplifies this through the use of Jason Rohrer's game, *Passage* (2007):

> *Passage* lasts exactly five minutes […] The player controls a male avatar who ages gradually over the course of the game's short timeline, and is able to explore a procedurally-generated maze of obstacles and treasure chests, which increase the player's score. The score also increases gradually the further 'forward' (left) the avatar progresses. The game also includes a computer-controlled female 'companion' who, if found by the player, moves along with the male avatar. Finding the companion limits access to certain areas and treasure chests, but doubles the number of points gained by moving forward. […] After four minutes and twenty seconds, the companion dies, followed shortly by the player's avatar, and the game ends, returning to the title screen. *Passage* renders this fixed time limit visually by showing the 'past' and 'future' areas of the game world distorting and condensing on the left and right sides of the screen; at first this visual effect dominates the right side of the screen, but it gradually shifts to the left (behind the player) over the course of the game. (2013, p. 43).

Thus, *Passage* can be seen as a game that revolves around life choices, in which the notion of existentialism becomes apparent. Furthermore, the "two-dimensional graphics; short play sessions; lack of typical game goals; [and] simple game mechanics" (Sharp, 2015, p. 55) allows for players to focus on interpreting the game instead of being occupied with, for instance, learning complicated tactics, as one might do when playing some mainstream games. As also pointed to by Sharp, "seldom do shooting, fighting, or literal simulations of real-world systems appear in artgames. Instead, challenge is often found in their unconventional themes and the mechanics used to explore them." (2015, p. 51). Therefore, the significance of art games is that they can "[challenge] cultural stereotypes, [offer] meaningful social or historical critique, or [tell] a story in a novel manner." (Holmes, 2003, p. 46). In essence, where the gaming industry will create and release video games for entertainment purposes, creators of art games will use the medium for "artistic expression and experiential understanding" (Sharp, 2015, p. 15). As such, it also seems reasonable to suggest that art games can contain a level of avant-garde in its expression. If challenging the stereotypical is an inherent characteristic of art games, then both the radical formal and narrative formal avant-garde can be utilised to examine how such games oppose the formulaic characteristics that are associated with mainstream games. Furthermore, utilising the aforementioned avant-garde types to explore art games can, arguably, also provide

an insight as to how art games can constitute an aesthetic experience due to the experiential nature of game design practices pertaining to art games in terms of flow and immersion.

Outlining the ways, in which, art games can be characterised, it is also relevant to contemplate how these games are experienced when interacted with. Since an art game is per definition a game, despite any content that potentially distinguishes it from other game types, it would be folly to suggest that these cannot be entertaining at all. In Holmes' framework, she utilises the notion of an art game to describe an "interactive work" that is "usually humorous" (2003, p. 46). Suffice to say, it seems reasonable to suggest that while entertaining the player might not be the main priority of art games; they do possess qualities that allow for a sense of entertainment. However, if one contemplates the apparent nature, or general characteristics, of art games; then, arguably, they will offer their players something more than mainstream games can. As Sharp argues, "[a]rtgames tend to be about something and, more specifically, about a particular rhetorical perspective on the something" (2015, p. 54), as also pointed to earlier. Accepting these arguments, art games will, arguably, stand out as an experience due to the way they differ from mainstream games. However, art games, arguably, have the potential to offer an aesthetic experience.

If John Dewey's philosophy of art as experience is to be transferred onto the theoretical framework concerning art games, then the following can be postulated. For an art game to grant an aesthetic experience, the expressive object, being the art game, must make the living creature, being the player, feel an impulsion; thereby, making the player feel an urge to interact and experience said game. The player's interaction with the art game must then create a level of immersion that, when finished, allows the player to perceive and interpret the game based on the emotional reaction derived from this experience. Lastly, this emotional response from playing the art game must lead to a sense of fulfilment, to which, the experience can be consummated within the player.

If one accepts all of the notions above, it also seems relevant to contemplate the player-game relationship further. As the majority of the art games mentioned by Holmes, Parker,

and Sharp are all single player games, it seems reasonable to suggest that art games are supposed to be experienced as an individual and not in groups. This is an interesting assumption since one could imagine that playing a game as a group can cause distractions; thereby, rendering it harder for the individual player to achieve an aesthetic experience. Furthermore, as Holmes states it, "[u]nlike *Grand Theft Auto III* or *Final Fantasy X*, […] retro-styled art games do not offer players hours of play possibilities" (2003, p. 47). Arguably, the combination of limited gameplay, both in terms of mechanics and temporal aspects; and the notion that art games are a single player experience, further suggests that art games are often meant to be played once. Although the latter may be a rather crude way to describe an important characteristic of the art game genre, it seems appropriate to assume that, for the most part, art games will offer one particular aesthetic experience that cannot be entirely altered by replaying the game.

Considering the different characteristics pertaining to art games, in particular, the notion that art games can cause an aesthetic experience, it is essential to consider how this genre of games affects players, at the very least, from a theoretical point. Presumably, mainstream games will be able to contain or provide all the different aesthetics presented in both the MDA framework and the 6-11 framework; however, since art games are constructed with other purposes than that of providing entertainment, this must be apparent if one examines the aesthetics of such games.

Based on the characterisation of the art game genre provided above, it seems reasonable to assume the following. In relation to the MDA aesthetics, art games: can provide *sensation* since the act of consummating an aesthetic experience can be seen as sense pleasuring; may be *fantasy* since make-believe can, arguably, be an element of achieving an aesthetic experience; can concern *narrative* since stories are often part of furthering the game's message; can contain an element of *challenge* because the player will have to move through the game with some obstacles to overcome; largely does not revolve around *fellowship* because the majority of the art games out there are single player experiences; can focus on *discovery* since the act of exploration can help further the point of a given game; can be concerned with *expression* since the

conceptual messages in art games can lead to self-discovering conclusions; cannot be considered *submission* since art games are not meant to be played as a means to pass the time.

Similarly, art games, in relation to the aesthetics in the 6-11 framework, can be considered in the following manner. Art games can, presumably, cause all six emotions listed in Dillon's framework; however, it is important to remember that none of these must cause emotional turmoil, for instance, extreme anger, because that would be the end of the aesthetic experience, as described by Dewey. Moving on to the eleven instincts listed in Dillon's framework, art games cannot concern *survival* because art games rarely involve fighting or scenarios, in which the choice between fight or flight is an issue; can involve *self identification* because players can align themselves with their avatar and gain meaning from playing an art game; can involve *collecting* since this aspect can be part of completing a particular art game; can cause *greed* if a given art game allows for looting; can arouse a feeling of protection, care, or nurture since this can be sparked by an art game's narrative or parts of the challenges faced. Art games can cause *aggressiveness* in relation to completing the game, however, if aggressiveness arises, it must not cause emotional turmoil; can promote a sense of *revenge* as a result of the narrative; cannot bring about a sense of *competition* because art games more often than not lack the social aspects, wherefore, the purpose of most art games is to promote conceptual messages, more so, than promoting competition; cannot generate *communication* while playing an art game because most of these do not possess a social aspect, however, it is possible that the urge to discuss the game will arise after finishing; can produce *curiosity*, leading to exploration of the world within art games; can arouse *color appreciation* because the visuals can capture the player's attention and leave them infatuated. Of course, it is important to still keep in mind that exceptions can be made in relation to the observations made above, the same way Parker pointed to any of his characteristics of art games being non-universal.

2.4 Towards a Comprehensive Framework

This project contends that the experience of playing an art game differs from the experience in relation to playing mainstream games. Therefore, arrays of terminology and theoretical concepts have been introduced in order to construct a comprehensible framework in order to examine this particular point of interest. By drawing upon and synthesising the presented theory, the following section will define how this project will, henceforth, characterise the differences between art games and mainstream games and how this project aims to utilise these in the analysis section.

As established earlier, it is possible to distinguish between an aesthetic experience and an entertaining experience. As such, products of entertainment will usually be formulaic and utilise any aspects that do not pertain to art, ordinary life, truth, intellectual thought or moral in order to provide their consumers with a positive experience. On the other hand, the aesthetic experiences, in the form of expressive objects, are not necessarily bound by particular requirements in terms of form or content. However, as formulated earlier, having an aesthetic experience is constituted through a series of parts that need to be undergone to reach fulfilment. In essence, both art and entertainment possess the power to affect anyone who chooses to interact with them; however, the experiences drawn from each of these categories will differ in terms of form, content and emotional response.

If the points above are, then, contemplated in relation to the theoretical considerations made in section 2.2, it is possible to characterise a video game as either a product of entertainment or expressive object. However, despite this distinction, both game types are part of the same medium, meaning that they contain a similar inherent formal structure, meaning a system of rules constructed to have the player reach some sort of quantifiable goal. Nonetheless, that does not mean that these two game types are played or experienced the same way.

Since a mainstream game is, usually, constructed by a major game company, it is a product designed to create revenue. However, art games, commonly produced by independent creators, either one person or few people, are vessels for expression. The differences between

these are, then, that mainstream games tend to offer formulaic experiences; hence, potential players know what to expect, what to feel and when to feel it. Therefore, most mainstream games allow for a more passive, flow-centered type of engagement due to aspects such as longer playtime, more replayability, or a set of mechanics that may seem overly complex when compared to the characteristics of the given game's genre - all aspects which could lower or exhaust the emotional immersion before reaching a fulfilling consummation of the experience. Such aspects make sense from a fiscally driven point of view, wherefrom both the producer as well as the consumer aim to get their money's worth in terms of playtime. Art games will, usually, challenge some of these conventions. They will, generally, be constructed in a manner that makes them appear as if they were mainstream games, affording them a reference point for consumers to get an idea of what they are buying. From this point of reference, art games could perhaps make use of a level of avant-garde strategies - such as the ones seen in the radical formal avant-garde, by abstracting the established form found in mainstream video games, or in the narrative formal avant-garde, by abstracting the established narrative conventions found in mainstream video games.

Similarly, metafiction makes use of the same type of referential method, whereby it serves to abstract the work with which one is familiar in order to reach something new. These strategies can, presumably, enable the video game to provide the player with an aesthetic experience as they invite said player to be thrown off balance in such a way that the player does not necessarily know what to expect, much in the same fashion as the splitting and unification of the reader and the text as seen in the exploration of the aesthetic of metafiction or, as mentioned, through avant-garde strategies. These aspects or strategies has the ability push the game beyond the formulaic kitsch, whereby the player can then be emotionally immersed and engaged with the game on a deeper level than they might otherwise – perhaps to explore metaphysical questions or the human condition as explored earlier. Additionally, some art games can also involve a less complicated mechanical learning curve through limited in-game options to let the player effortlessly explore, for instance, metaphysical questions or the human condition of the game at

hand. As such, art games will often be able to cause a variety of emotional responses in the player. As was suggested in section 2.3.4, mainstream games have the potential to contain or produce every video game aesthetic introduced through the MDA framework and the 6-11 framework, while, art games, if able to provide an aesthetic experience, cannot. However, this project acknowledges that the pairing of a game type and particular video game aesthetics, as seen through the MDA framework and the 6-11 framework, can be flawed. It is the overall experience of a given game which dictates if a player can have an aesthetic experience with said game, wherefore one arguably cannot dictate which emotions a given player can or cannot have an aesthetic experience through as long as they are not extreme in nature. However, with that being said, it seems reasonable to assume that some emotions are more prone to an immersive experience than others, as accounted for in section 2.3.4.

2.4.1 Table of Characteristics

As a result of synthesising the various theoretical concepts and terminology, the differences between art games and mainstream games can be depicted, as shown in the table of characteristics below.

	Mainstream Games	**Art Games**
Production	Mainly created by major game companies	Mainly created by independent creators
Form	Formulaic, kitsch	Avant-garde, metafictional or metareferential
Mechanics	Can range from a few easy mechanics to an extent complex system that takes considerable amounts of time to maser.	Will mainly have a limited set of mechanics in order to further the aesthetic experience.

Aesthetics	Can pertain to sense-pleasure, make-believe, drama, obstacle course, social framework, uncharted territory, self-discovery, and pastime. Can also cause the player to feel fear, anger, joy/happiness, pride, sadness, and excitement, meanwhile, the player can be affected as to rely on the instincts of survival, self identification, collecting, greed, protection/nurture/care, aggressiveness, revenge, competition, communication, exploration/curiosity, and color appreciation.	Can pertain to sense-pleasure, make-believe, drama, obstacle course, uncharted territory, and self-discovery. Can also cause the player to feel fear, anger, joy/happiness, pride, sadness, and excitement, meanwhile, the player can be affected as to rely on the instincts of self identification, collecting, greed, protection/nurture/care, aggressiveness, revenge, competition, exploration/curiosity, and color appreciation. However, none of these must cause emotional turmoil which will end the aesthetic experience.
Content	Can feature any type of content.	Can feature content that explores metaphysical questions and the human condition.
Entertaining experience	Mainly focused on entertaining the player.	Can contain humorous or entertaining content.
Aesthetic experience	Mainstream games may aspire towards it but will, by definition, not succeed.	Yes

With the above characteristics in mind, this project will, henceforth, be utilising these to analyse Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* in terms of establishing whether the game can facilitate an aesthetic experience, whereby it distinguishes itself from mainstream games. This is not to say that the above table of characteristics will act as a checklist of properties for art games or mainstream games to be defined by, but rather as points of reference for qualities which have been observed by other scholars of video game aesthetics to possess higher aesthetic qualities than their mainstream counterparts. As such, the following analysis will attempt to conclude not only whether or not *The Beginner's Guide* can be seen as an art game, but whether or not *art games as aesthetic experiences* is a workable definition.

3. Analysis

This section will contain the analysis of Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide*, in which the the following points will be touched upon: how said game employs different meta-aspects, how the game utilises avant-garde strategies, and how it embodies a variety of aesthetic qualities. Throughout the analysis section, this master's thesis will reference *The Beginner's Guide* in a comprehensive fashion; therefore, the reader is encouraged to consult appendix A, the playthrough of *The Beginner's Guide*, and appendix B, the list of levels, before progressing any further. Otherwise, a short summary of *The Beginner's Guide* is included below in order to provide context for subsequent points of analysis.

3.1 Summary of *The Beginner's Guide*

The Beginner's Guide is a first-person game, narrated by Davey Wreden, that tells the story of a fellow game designer called Coda who stopped producing video games for reasons unknown. As such, Wreden will walk the player through a collection of games that Coda produced over a three-year period but never released. During the exploration of Coda's games, Wreden will comment on these, presenting his interpretations of said games, in hopes of making Coda's work know, thus, encouraging him to start producing games again. However, as *The Beginner's Guide* progresses, the game's narrative will make it increasingly apparent that Coda was struggling to create video games due to a loss of passion for video game development, deducting that he became isolated and dealt with mental health issues. Towards the end, however, *The Beginner's Guide* will contain a twist, revealing that the player has been mislead. As it turns out, throughout *The Beginner's Guide*, Wreden has repeatedly modified Coda's games in order to gain some sort of meaning from them as well as distributed said games without Coda's consent. As a result, Wreden turns out to be the one struggling with personal issues, rendering him the reason why Coda stopped making video games; wherefore, to apologise for his actions, Wreden made *The Beginner's Guide* for Coda (Wreden, 2015).

3.2 All About the Different Levels: Examining the use of Meta-Aspects in *The Beginner's Guide*

As has become apparent through the theory section, video games constitute a versatile medium with features that can be examined in numerous ways – Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) is in no way an exception. As a game, *The Beginner's Guide* harbours a great deal of interesting aspects that are all worth addressing; however, a majority of said video game's expression lies in the use of meta-aspects in relation to narratology. Therefore, both the narrator and the narrative will be analysed in relation to the metafictional and metareferential framework established earlier. As the headline suggests, when examining *The Beginner's Guide*, one will find that there are a number of levels to consider. As was mentioned in the summary of the game, the narrative in *The Beginner's Guide* involves the exploration of different games, more precisely 18 different mini-games, chapters or levels. Being a video game about other video games, *The Beginner's Guide* openly displays its status as a text with a meta-level, something that becomes apparent from the moment of initiating the playthrough – *The Beginner's Guide* opens thusly:

> Hi there, thank you very much for playing The Beginner's Guide. My name is Davey Wreden, I wrote The Stanley Parable [...] today I'm going to tell you about a series of events that happened between 2008 and 2011. We're going to look at the games made by a friend of mine named Coda. Now these games mean a lot to me. I met Coda in early 2009 at a time when I was really struggling with some personal stuff, and his work pointed me in a very powerful direction. (Wreden, 2015, Introduction).

Through this introductory part of *The Beginner's Guide*, several aspects are significant in terms of looking at said game's meta-content. The player is assigned a source of meaning-making in the form of a narrator, Davey Wreden, who will guide said player in completing Coda's games as well as explain his thoughts on said games as the player progresses. However, Wreden's significance is more complex than just narrating the overarching narrative. Throughout the game, Wreden's presence and narration will almost flaunt the metareferential, or metafictional, nature of *The Beginner's Guide*; thus, looking no further than to the quote above, several things are relevant in this regard. Firstly, Wreden defies the ontological levels by addressing the player

directly, hence, recognising that there are two different worlds: the reality of the player and the reality within the game. As such, *The Beginner's Guide* employs metaleptic elements through a transgression of levels of representation – the use of metalepsis will, as such, be a pervasive feature that will continue to be present for most of the game as Wreden will address the player throughout most of Coda's games. Simultaneously, Wreden acknowledges that *The Beginner's Guide* is but a video game, hence, he lays bare the medium's nature, being a self-conscious artifact to be interacted with. Secondly, by introducing himself as Davey Wreden, the narrator also establishes a connection with the reality of the player by pointing to past work, *The Stanley Parable* (2013); thus, he becomes a character that transcends the confined space of *The Beginner's Guide* as a video game – a point that will be elaborated on later. Lastly, Wreden discloses the structure of *The Beginner's Guide* by introducing the notion that said game is concerned with the exploration of other video games, to which he will tell a story about his friend, Coda. Despite the fact that the player will not be able to predict the outcome of the game experience, Wreden's utterances are part of establishing a sense of defictionalisation as to make *The Beginner's Guide* appear as a true story; thereby undermining traditional fictional conventions. As such, through the use of both direct and indirect metareferences, *The Beginner's Guide* draws the player's attention to the fact that said game contains a meta-level while simultaneously attempting to affect the ways, in which, the player will perceive the gameplay, which will also be touched upon later. A key feature in *The Beginner's Guide* is, thus, that the player will be able to understand that said game plays by its own rules, meaning that it will not offer an experience similar to those found in mainstream games, but instead it sets itself apart from the formulaic and establishes its significance from the very beginning.

Before examining the narrative further, contemplating the aspects mentioned above, it seems fitting to characterise the narrator as harbouring particular traits similar to those found in metafiction. Thus, by drawing on literary concepts to further elucidate Wreden's role as narrator in order to determine his metareferential nature seems appropriate. Borrowing M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham's terminology pertaining to narratives and narrator types[5], it is possible to make the following characterisation of Wreden. The narrative is told from a first-person point

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[5] See Abrams and Harpham (2008, pp. 208-210; pp. 271-276)

of view, in which Wreden will introduce his interpretation of Coda's games in relation to Coda as a person. As such, parts of his narration will also maintain a character focus that is oriented towards how Coda acts, creates, thinks, and feels; hence, *The Beginner's Guide* establishes a complex mode of narration that is reminiscent of that found in epistolary novels, as will be elaborated upon below. Furthermore, as already established, Wreden flaunts the fictionality of *The Beginner's Guide* in the face of the player from the moment of instigating the gameplay, wherefore, he stands out as self-conscious[6]. As such, the combination of the given point of view and the self-conscious nature, Wreden will appear as an authoritative source of knowledge in terms of playing through *The Beginner's Guide*. However, as has also been touched upon in the summary of *The Beginner's Guide*, through the exploration of Coda's games, Wreden will tell a story that is designed to mislead the player; wherefore, his role as narrator cannot be trusted. However, the unreliable[7] nature of the narrator is part of the experience offered by *The Beginner's Guide*; thus, this particular aspects and the self-consciousness, displayed through Wreden's narrator role, are part of making said game metareferential. In accounting for the aforementioned traits, using Abrams and Harpham's terminology, one will find that characteristics commonly associated with the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective, as they relate to literature, can be utilised to characterise a video game narrator due to the combination of the narrated and the experienced in terms of playing. As such, it is possible to utilise literary concepts to examine video game contents; however, there are certain issues in terms of the narrator categories and their respective traits. Thus, in order to further the presented characteristics above, despite potential issues, the following will provide evidence to sustain the aforementioned claims and introduce other meta-aspects found within *The Beginner's Guide*.

As mentioned before, *The Beginner's Guide* harbours a narration technique that is similar to that found in epistolary novels which, in turn, is part of the text's metareferential expression. As defined by Abrams & Harpham, epistolary novels are "conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters." (2008, p. 228). Where this type of novel is often regarded as less important in relation to the study of the novel, according to Joe Bray, this creative form of writing has the potential to

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[6] See Abrams and Harpham's definition of self-conscious narrator (2008, p. 275)
[7] See Abrams and Harpham's definition of unreliable narrator (2008, p. 275)

represent consciousness of characters involved in narratives (2003, pp. 1-2; p. 28). As such, where the epistolary novel would use letters as means to drive the narrative forward, *The Beginner's Guide* can be seen as employing a similar narrative structure through the use of Coda's games. If one grants that the structure of the epistolary novel and the structure found in *The Beginner's Guide* are somewhat identical, it seems appropriate to assume that the purpose of such tactics is to further a similar way of portraying aspects that pertain to the mind or consciousness. Furthermore, *The Beginner's Guide* will, at various points throughout the game, have Wreden mention the exchange of games between Wreden and Coda. An example could be Wreden's narration from chapter 7, Down, in which the player is informed about a game design of Coda's where a prison door will stay shut for an hour before opening, thus, allowing the player to progress:

> we just got into heated arguments over [whether or not a game should be playable], and there was one time that after one 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 these just to find out if there was a gag hidden somewhere. There wasn't. (Wreden, 2015).

The exchange of games referred to in this example is similar to how letters would appear to be exchanged in an epistolary novel. Furthermore, the metareferentiality of said game's structure is found in the activity of reenacting the exchange of games between Coda and Wreden where to the player will experience it from Wreden's perspective. As such, the particular structure found within *The Beginner's Guide* is exposed in a manner that is self-aware.

With this is mind, it is worth looking further into said structure to form a better idea of how the narrative in *The Beginner's Guide* operates both in and of itself but also in terms of meta-phenomena. Considering the narrative in relation to the different mini-games, these are arranged in a manner that supports Wreden's narration, thus, the combination of the spoken and the played are supposed to influence the player's perception. It is, thus, possible to categorise the purposes of all 18 game-chapters of *The Beginner's Guide* in a more concise manner. *The Beginner's Guide* can be divided into three strands that all seek to accomplish different objectives while also flaunting its metareferential nature in the face of the player.

From chapters 0 to 6, *The Beginner's Guide* is concerned with establishing a long line of conventions; wherefore, the first seven mini-games function as introductory or tutorial levels. As explicated by Casey O'Donnell, players "need a tutorial or introduction because without a primer, the player [...] is left with no idea of what they can or are expected to do/learn." (2014, p. 4). Thus, *The Beginner's Guide* employs a variety of tactics to further its metareferential and metafictional components and, by extension, its aesthetic expression. From a narratological and metareferential point of view, the aforementioned chapters primarily deploy a number of metareferences to underline the notion of *The Beginner's Guide* as a game about games. For instance, chapter 0 presents the player with a mini-game that resembles a game-map found in the popular, online shooting-game, *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation, 2000). Here, the player will be informed of the following:

> This is I think the first game [Coda] ever made. It's a level for [Counter-Strike] [...] and mostly it's just Coda learning the basics of building a 3D environment. But what I like is that even though he starts from the simple aesthetic of a desert town, he then scatters these colorful abstract blobs and impossible floating crates around the level, and of course it destroys the illusion that this actually IS a desert town. And instead this level becomes a kind of calling card from its creator, a reminder that this video game was constructed by a real person. And it kind of makes you wonder: What was going through his head as he was building this? This is what I like about all of Coda's games. [...] they are all going to give us access to their creator. I want us to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is, and that's exactly what we're going to do here. So it's 2008, Coda starts making these games, and he never releases any of them. [...] he just makes them and then immediately abandons them [...] And I think he really understood this image of himself as a recluse. [...] In 2011 that was it, he made his last game and then he hasn't made another one since. And that's why I've taken this opportunity to gather all of his work together. [it's] because I find his games powerful and interesting, and I'd like this collection to reach him to maybe encourage him to start creating again. And if the people like you who play this also happen to find his work interesting, then I'm sure it'll send that much stronger of a message of encouragement to Coda. (Wreden, 2015, Introduction).

Similarly, chapter 3, Backwards, and chapter 5, Puzzle, also focus on how Coda's game design works, to which the former only allows the player to walk backwards, and the latter involves puzzle solving in order to progress. Besides teaching the player the available mechanics and

affordances[8] in terms of playing *The Beginner's Guide*, a few aspects are significant here. For one, by utilising a map with similar graphical design to *Counter-Strike*, *The Beginner's Guide* relies on the player's level of recognition in relation to mainstream games to keep them engaged for the game-levels that follow. While the player may not be able to fire any weapons or otherwise battle other players; in and of itself, the appearance of this particular level acts as an indirect metareference. As such, the purpose of chapter 0 is not to have the player engage in invigorating gun or knife battles; instead, the player must learn to understand how the game's expression works. Therefore, the meta-level is to be found in the narrative and, by extension, the narrator, and in the in-game surroundings.

Screenshot 1: The beginning of chapter 1, Whisper.

Furthermore, the aspects mentioned in relation to chapters 0, 3, and 5 are part of maintaining the illusion that the game is merely an exploration of other games. However, in doing so, *The Beginner's Guide* creates a structural build up, from which it will later deviate – a

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[8] In this context, the term *affordances* is to be understood as John Sharp defines it: "affordances can [...] include subtle but important expectations [in terms of] what one can and cannot do with a cultural form, and what they should or should not expect from the experiences that the form's artifacts provide." (2015, p. 5).

significant aspect that will also be addressed in the section regarding the aesthetic expression of *The Beginner's Guide*. Thus, the player will at points experience how their expectations will not be accommodated due to *The Beginner's Guide*'s self-conscious nature. An example of this is chapter one, Whisper, in which the player will find themselves in a game that appears to be a mainstream shooter-game (see screenshot 1). This particular mini-game emulates the sort of tense scenario that one might find in mainstream space or sci-fi games such as *DOOM* (id Software, 1993), *Half-Life* (Valve Corporation, 1998), or *Halo* (Bungie Studios, 2001); thereby, encouraging the player to rely on their survival instinct to play the level properly due to said level's aesthetic. Here, *The Beginner's Guide*, once again, takes advantage of the player's ability to recognise gaming-elements by placing them in a context that urges them to rely on their knowledge and experiences with other games that contain similar aesthetics. However, despite Whisper's space-shooter appearance, the player will eventually realise that their potential emotional response is misguided, because the level does not contain any enemy NPCs[9] to fight. This becomes evident to the player through Wreden's commentary:

> It kind of looks like this game was abandoned mid development. For instance you have this gun which you'd think would indicate that there are supposed to be monsters and enemies somewhere, but then clearly there are no enemies anywhere. But ultimately we don't really know, maybe Coda thought that actually it was complete the way it is and I think we should talk about his games for what they are rather than for what they're not. (Wreden, 2015, Whisper).

By deploying such game-tactics, *The Beginner's Guide*, first of all, utilises recognisable in-game elements as metareferences to make the player feel engaged. Furthermore, the tactics indirectly signals to the player that it will contain content that is meant to regress despite what the player might expect. On the basis of this and the aforementioned aspects, the first of the three structural parts of *The Beginner's Guide* will make the two following things. The game will make both direct and indirect metareferences that pertains to its fictionality, despite attempting to appear realistic; and teach the player how to navigate, operate and perceive when engaging with the gameplay, thus, playing with expectations that will not be accommodated.

Keeping in line with the observations made above, the second strand of *The Beginner's Guide*, more specifically, chapters 7 to 13, will change as to present the player with a different

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[9] *NPC* stands for *non-player-character*, which can act as enemies and are controlled by the game system (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2013, p. 152).

perspective and objective. Granted, the exploration of Coda's games will continue to be the only reliable structural part, also in the last structural part, however, the player's perception will change due to the alteration in the metareferential expression of the aforementioned levels. It is, thus, possible to see the second structural section as a transition period. Playing through chapters 7 to 13, the narrative is concerned with creating associations that are designed to make the player interpret the mini-games as elements that mirror Coda's person and his state of mind. Thus, *The Beginner's Guide* generates a new way of telling the narrative by deviating from what was first established. This particular shift in perspective also has a specific effect on the way Wreden narrates. In the first structural part, Wreden would comment on the choices made by Coda in relation to the design of his games. However, as is apparent in chapter 8, Notes, Wreden goes on to interpret Coda's design, the inclusion of the notes in the level, in an almost autobiographical way as opposed to doing it from a game-design perspective:

> to me [the notes] convey a sense of loneliness, I see this person who's filled with thoughts and feelings and beliefs, and has no way to express them except as scattered and unheard voices in a game that wasn't meant to be played. But it's ironic, isn't it, that in playing this game and seeing how alone Coda often felt, that we get to know him better, and actually kind of connect with him. And I have to be honest with you, this idea is really seductive to me! That I could just play someone's game and see the voices in their head and get to know them better and have to do less of the messy in-person socializing. I could just get to know you through your work. I think this is why I always liked Coda's games so much, [it's] because it felt like they let me have that connection. I felt as though he was inviting me personally into his world. And then I feel less lonely too. (Wreden, 2015).

The shift in narration style is significant because it furthers a different purpose, being the manipulation of the player as to perceive Coda and his games as connected entities. Thus, this is a sign of *The Beginner's Guide* arranging Coda's mini-games in a way that will spawn the notion of Coda dealing with personal issues. Hence, contemplating the first and second structural part in tandem, what could at first glance be seen as a video game that explores how a particular game designer designed games becomes altered as to explore how a person may be struggling with personal issues. As such, this narrative approach stands out as an indirect metareference that relates to the potential of video games, in this case, how they are able to provide players with an insight into the creator's psyche. The directions taken in *The Beginner's Guide* are, in fact, many

since the game will deviate from its traditional trajectory. The game will do so by introducing narratological elements that sets up certain expectations only to deviate from these and explore the deviations instead. As such, *The Beginner's Guide* will progress, regress, process, only to repeat this pattern.

As the player completes chapter 14, they are supposedly under the impression that *The Beginner's Guide* is revolving around mental health issues. As such, through chapters 7 to 13, Wreden will paint a picture of Coda as a recluse in order to create a foundation for delving deeper into Coda's state of mind. However, though unbeknownst to the player, levels 14 to 17 are also structured as to create a build up for the plot twist. As was mentioned earlier, the narration in *The Beginner's Guide* is employed as a metaleptic tactic that defies the confines of the reality of the game. It does so by adopting a mode of narration that addresses the player in a direct fashion; however, reaching the final chapters, this will change. Throughout most of *The Beginner's Guide*, Wreden's narration will be directed towards the player; however, as the narrative reaches the plot twist, the narration will be altered and become utterances that stand out as both an inwards reflection and an addressment to Coda, both of which can be exemplified through the last part of chapter 16, Tower:

> I just felt so strongly that if I could have connected with [Coda], that if I could have somehow made his work my own, that I would finally be once-and-for-all happy. I needed to see myself in someone else. I needed to be someone other than me. But he stopped [making games], and left, and it felt somehow like I had failed. Where did I screw up? I'm the reason that you stopped making games, aren't I? [...] I poisoned it for you. I don't think I ever told you this, but when I took your work and I was showing it to people, it actually felt… It felt as though I were responsible for something important and valuable. [...] I felt good about myself. Finally. [...] That's why I'm releasing this collection of your work, [it's] because I haven't been able to find any other way to reach you. I've tried everything. (Wreden, 2015).

Both Wreden's reflection on his situation and the speech directed towards Coda are self-conscious tactics that are deployed; however, it is interesting to consider how the metaleptic aspect changes from being concerned with the player to a point, in which they are somewhat disregarded. The narration directed towards Coda, as if he was present within the game or sitting next to the player, changes the expression to such a degree that *The Beginner's Guide* becomes a video game that said player can reflect on in terms of the feelings expressed by Wreden. As such,

the narrative is rather complex, both due to the change in different structural parts but also in terms of its metareferential content. As a result, the narratological tactics employed in *The Beginner's Guide* are meant to cause a transgressive experience that alters its intentions along the way in order to affect the player's perception and emotional state. Thus, the experience of playing through the game becomes a matter of balancing knowledge and the few mechanics and affordances that make up most of *The Beginner's Guide*.

To further the complexity of *The Beginner's Guide*, several aspects pointed to above are relevant in terms of explicating a higher degree of the game's meta-level. Having touched upon the narrator and narrative structure, Wreden's position in *The Beginner's Guide* serves a variety of purposes. However, the complex nature of his presence can be furthered even more. As was pointed to in the theory section, Paul Auster's work, *The City of Glass*, contains an interesting author-reader-text dimension that can be applied to *The Beginner's Guide* as well. In *The City of Glass*, as pointed to by Vachon, Paul Auster serves a threefold function as the author, the narrator and a character in the story being told:

> If we were to say provisionally that the narrator is {Paul Auster} (bracketing, for now, his ontological status), we could say that the story {Auster} tells has been invented for him by some concerned friends, presumably a real-life Quinn (who would parallel Sancho Panza) and the Stillmans (who would parallel the other three friends). Presumably, {Auster} has been having difficulty with his sanity, and his friends have concocted City of Glass to hold up a mirror to his madness. However, continuing to follow the lines of the Quixote argument, we could argue as well that {Auster} has engineered the entire enterprise and chosen Quinn and the Stillmans as his "saviors," so that he could spew out lies and nonsense for people's amusement. Hence, Paul Auster, the writer in City of Glass, is a character invented by {Paul Auster}, narrator, the same way that the character "Don Quixote" was engineered by Don Quixote. Of course, Don Quixote never existed, but was invented by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra of Spain. By association, {Paul Auster} never existed, but was an invention of the "real" Paul Auster, of Manhattan. Hence, we have three Austers, not two: author, narrator, and character, each ontologically distinct. (Vachon, 2006, p. 16).

In *The Beginner's Guide*, Wreden can be seen as working on similar ontological levels. Davey Wreden, as mentioned earlier, is the author of *The Beginner's Guide*. The game's narrator is also voiced by him, as seen through the earlier exploration of the introductory level, wherein

{Wreden}[10] introduces himself. These two functions are fairly obvious, while Wreden's third function, as a character in the game, may be less so. However, said function is salient through his narration of the chapters 7 and 8, Down and Notes. Here, Wreden begins to become characterised through his own narration, through which he also misleads the player. Up until this point, {Wreden} has mostly referred to his present self, the narrator, barring the introduction, wherein he mentions that Coda's games pointed him in a powerful direction (Wreden, 2015, Introduction). In Down, the characterisation begins with a short reference to a discussion, mentioned earlier, between Wreden and Coda about whether or not video games need to be playable to be meaningful. However, in Notes, {Wreden} refers to himself as a character more concretely as he tells the player about his first meeting with Coda:

> This was actually the first game of his that I ever played, this was shortly after I met him at a weekend game jam in Sacramento [...] I saw him working on this very level, and it was just so different from anything that anyone else was doing so right away I was like, I have to be friends with this person. In retrospect I think I was probably a bit too pushy trying to get his attention. I was overenthusiastic. But he was very gracious about it and very patient with me. And I cooled off eventually. (Wreden, 2015)

This is truly the first moment wherein {Wreden} refers to his former self, whereby he begins to establish himself as a character. Similarly, these levels are, unbeknownst to the player, also the moment Wreden cements his role as an unreliable narrator, as the ending of Down is the first time he outright lies to the player about the meaning behind the level and – more specifically or, even, importantly - the meaning behind the lampposts in the levels. As such, this split between Wreden as a character and {Wreden} as a narrator becomes an important narratological tool to establish the narrator's unreliability. Furthermore, the aforementioned relationship between the narrator and character also becomes the driving force behind the splitting and unifying qualities of *The Beginner's Guide*'s metafictional aesthetic. As such, the player struggles to comprehend the difference between the three positions that Wreden embodies, as the split between these positions seem insignificant or non-existent in the beginning but becomes increasingly obvious as the game progresses.

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[10] The reader is asked to note that the narrator-distinction made by Vachon in her analysis of *The City of Glass*, symbolised through the use of the curly brackets, will also be utilised to distinguish Wreden's role as narrator for the remainder of section 3.2.

The complexity of Wreden's three roles in *The Beginner's Guide* is apparent throughout the game and will challenge the player's understanding to a higher degree from the middle to the end of the game. After Notes, {Wreden} subtly references his role as an unreliable narrator through his analysis of most of the mini-games – usually as one of the very last comments. Thus, {Wreden} begins to increasingly and overtly refer to his former self as a character of the story, simultaneously hinting at the big reveal of his aforementioned role. In House, {Wreden's} analysis of the level seems in line with the analysis of its mechanics, as will be explored later in the analysis of the experience of *The Beginner's Guide*. As {Wreden} puts it: "After the intense set of prison games, this housecleaning level almost feels like cleansing. It's the moment after a particularly difficult or traumatic experience where you just need to let it sit and digest inside of you and eventually cohere into something meaningful." (Wreden, 2015). However, at the very end of House, he subtly hints at being aware of having misinterpreted said level, as he mentions that "[he] really thought that was the point of [the game]" (Wreden, 2015). Through his analysis of House, {Wreden} comments that the game was made during a period, wherein Coda was very happy and that he is "glad [Coda] made this. [He is] glad [Coda] found some peace." (Wreden, 2015). However, {Wreden} finds the game to be analogous to Coda's puzzle presented earlier in Puzzle, in that it is two doors with a dark space in between (Wreden, 2015, House). As such, he concludes that the point of the game is that "it can't last. The music stops, your companion is gone, it's time to leave! [You] can't stay in the dark space for too long. You just can't, you have to keep moving, it's how you stay alive." (Wreden, 2015, House). However, {Wreden} later, in Tower, reveals how the end of House was his modification and that Coda's original version would actually loop forever (Wreden, 2015). Furthermore, {Wreden} presents his analysis as an understanding he has as his present self, yet the final comment cements it as an understanding seen from the point of view of his former self, as in the character of himself that he is characterising. The idea of the level can be seen simply as Coda trying to portray how deep the connection between one's environment and one's mental health can be, as well as how pleasurable it can be to align the two through simple, yet effective activities. However, Wreden, as the character of the story referred to by the narrator, cannot see these points as he approaches them in the mindset of trying to see it as a work of self-expression from Coda in line with the

meaning he found in Escape at that time. However, in reality, House may have no such meaning – especially since Wreden modified the level to attempt to make it hold the meaning he found in it at the time. As such, Wreden, the character, seems to have misinterpreted both Escape as well as House, which would explain why he found Coda to be "grossly happy"; because he expected him to be feeling bad. Similarly, in Lecture, {Wreden} speaks of his former self, the character, when saying that he thinks about that level a lot, since it presents "one of the most relatable experiences that you can have, to assume that some other person is perfect and totally fulfilled in every way, and completely miss all of the little flaws that make them painfully human." (Wreden, 2015). As such, {Wreden} subtly hints at how he, in the past, mistakenly used to perceive Coda as being "perfect and totally fulfilled"; wherefore he thinks about the game a lot in the present as this interpretation has turned out to be wrong - and, to a certain extent, harmful to both Wreden and Coda. Furthermore, in Theater, {Wreden} explains how he thinks the ending sequence of going down the dark hallway is Coda isolating himself, adding that "And to be honest I didn't consider it very healthy, when I first played this game." (Wreden, 2015). Once again, {Wreden} hints at how, after playing the games again, he has come to another understanding of the level. In Island, {Wreden} tells the player how he concluded that Coda needs someone to talk about his creative frustrations, but to a more extreme degree than shown in earlier levels:

> Because from my perspective at the time and just what I knew of him, this was a result of how isolated he was. He was in his own little bubble, sitting at his own computer all day, not really showing his games to anyone, not releasing them onto the internet, and so he didn't have anyone outside of himself to connect with. He had no outlet to ground himself on. (Wreden, 2015).

Wreden further explains how he felt "rotten" after playing the level and that he "wanted it to stop more than anything", since he felt game development was not worth this much pain and interprets the scene as self-destructive, later concluding that Coda needed to have people respond to his creations in order to break the cycle (Wreden, 2015, Theater). Once again {Wreden} points to his former self, himself as a character in the past, simultaneously referring to having reached a new understanding of Theater later on. As such, it is becoming increasingly evident that Wreden, the character, misinterpreted the games at the time he played them, which is what drives Wreden to wrongfully assume that Coda wanted acknowledgment for his creations since that would have

been in Wreden's own self interest. After playing *Machine*, Wreden concludes that what Coda needs is to get feedback on his games, so that he can get out his own head and stop having these self-expressed conversations through his work and instead have them with others. As such, Wreden starts showing the games to other people since Coda, evidently, would not do it himself. The response from the people he showed it to was overwhelmingly positive, which made Wreden feel ecstatic. This also marks the characterisation of his character, as when he talks about how much happiness it brought him, the music crescendos intensely, akin to the sound used in horror films before something bad happens. This gives the expression sinister undertones, as there is not any indication as to how it made Coda feel, which may further the understanding that this was a selfish action, not one made with Coda in mind (Wreden, 2015). As such, {Wreden} characterises his former self within the narrative as someone who did not understand the levels when he first played them, but that the present {Wreden} has come to a deeper, or more correct, understanding of them. This characterisation of his former self starts out ambiguously but becomes increasingly evident as the game progresses towards its reveal. This also serves to frustrate the player as they, presumably, assume the narrator and character to be the same person, since {Wreden}, in essence, speaks of himself throughout the narrative. However, as the divide between Wreden as a character and {Wreden} as the narrator becomes wider, the player begins to struggle with their established perception of them being the same. Said player will, therefore, become defamiliarised with the story at hand as it starts to confuse the player on where in the story the author is to be found, as he is present to a certain extent on all three levels – author, narrator and character. This means that the player is then left to attempt to figure out the connection between the narrator and the character of Wreden, but also the connection between the author and the narrator. This becomes especially apparent after the reveal of Coda's letter to Wreden in Tower. Once the player enters the room and sees the first line of text addressing Wreden and telling him not to contact him, it stops seeming like {Wreden} is talking to the player anymore but is speaking *past* them to Coda. The player is now made an unwilling spectator, a proponent of a message which they did not agree to take part in as it becomes increasingly clear that they were not supposed to be there to begin with, but that, much like Wreden, they have been lead to violate Coda's trust in some of the same ways Wreden

has. Tower ends with Coda's puzzle; however, once the player closes the door behind themselves, there is no lever to open the exit. Once this happens, {Wreden} begins a rant while the walls of the room begins to close in:

> 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 a 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 will 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 okay with myself again, and I always felt okay as long as I had your work to see myself in. I mean, is something wrong with me? Because I know I did an awful thing, and I'm doing it again right now, I'm showing people your work, but I can't stop myself from doing it, that's how badly I need to feel something again, like I'm an addict. There has to be something wrong with me! Can I apologize? What if I tell you I was wrong, will that work, will that fix it? I-I don't know! I don't think it will, but there's nothing else that I can do! Just tell me what you want! I'm...I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Please start making games again, please help me, please give me some of whatever it is that makes you complete, I want whatever that wholeness that you just summoned out of nothing and put into your work, you were complete in some way that I never was. I want- I want to know how to be a good person, I want to know how not to hate myself. Please! I'm fading. And all I want is to know that I'm going to be okay. (Wreden, 2015)

As {Wreden} becomes increasingly desperate and distressed through his rant and the walls close in around the player, it can induce a sense of anxiety and fear in the player. As said earlier, the player is now taking part in an experience or a message, which was, presumably, not their intention to begin with nor now. {Wreden} himself acknowledges the irony of trying to contact Coda by the exact method he expressly does not appreciate and, by extension, also acknowledges his role in purposely misleading the player to this end. As such, the player is left in a confusing emotional state, because they were, for most of *The Beginner's Guide*, lead to believe that {Wreden} was there to serve a noble purpose. As such, the player will likely feel an intense rush of emotions from being overwhelmed with information pertaining to {Wreden's} need for validation, and his envy of Coda due to Coda embodying a great deal of particular qualities and values. Through his use of the word "you", {Wreden} no longer refers to the player, but instead, speaks directly to Coda. Thus, {Wreden's} position takes on an ambiguous state, in which the defiance of the ontological level is upheld to a certain degree due to him addressing Coda, while,

simultaneously, said addressment is directed outwards, out of the screen, which is both meant and not meant as to be directed at the player. As such, the player once again struggles to figure out where {Wreden} is situated, as he no longer seems to be the narrator, but instead seems closer to being the author.

As explored in the field of aesthetics as well as in the metafictional section, the author cannot be wholly present in the work, as they cannot be read from the work itself. However, the player could still struggle to make meaning of their relationship with the text, as the metafictional elements begin to defamiliarise them from it – manifesting the aesthetic dynamic of splitting and unifying the reader with said text, as they are pushed to interpret the text and make sense of it. This tool, in turn, also makes the final reveal of {Wreden} as an unreliable narrator all that more powerful. Since the player begins to attempt to place {Wreden} within the game as he increasingly, obviously alludes to his interpretations being mistaken, they may not see the twist coming, that in reality Wreden was the problem all along. As such, the division between Wreden as a character, the narrator and the author becomes one of the driving forces behind the splitting and unifying of the reader as it progressively pushes the player towards an interpretive mindset, not only of the games they are playing, but also of how Wreden is present within the narrative.

3.3 Losing All Control: Examining the Avant-garde Strategies of *The Beginner's Guide*

The following section will concern itself with how *The Beginner's Guide* employs avant-garde strategies as part of its expression. As such, this section will focus on said game's use of narrative formal avant-garde and radical formal avant-garde.

Through section 3.1, Wreden's role as the narrator, author and character within the narrative of *The Beginner's Guide* was explored, wherein, this examination showed that Wreden holds a great deal of power within the game. Starting with the very first level, Introduction, besides presenting metareferences to other video game franchises, it also serves to establish the power that the narrator wields within the different levels of the game. In Introduction, the player is only able to walk around and explore the level, which for its purpose is more than enough, but,

structurally, it differs radically from the narrative structure one would find in a mainstream game. Most video games would, mechanically, centre the narrative around the player's actions, whereby they are given a task to fulfil to progress – even more often, a task which tests their hand-eye coordination; however, in *The Beginner's Guide*, the narrator holds this power. There are few tasks for the player to do beyond exploring the levels shown to them, and in doing so, the end of the levels are not necessarily predicated upon the player's ability to close them out. In effect, it seems more like the narrator *allows* the player to play them, more so than the player actually actively choosing to play the level. Coda's games end when the narrator has had his say or wants to show the player something different. Similarly, the narrator holds the power to alter the levels being played, should they choose to do so, which Wreden does at several points throughout the game. The first time is in Whisper when Wreden skips the player past the labyrinth at the end of the level as he does not find it to be necessary for the player to play through. Similarly, Wreden allows the player the ability to press a button in order to eliminate the slowness in Stairs, and he removes the walls to let the player see the scale of the level in Puzzle. However, his presence is especially strong in two levels in particular – Escape and Tower. In Escape, Wreden's power as the narrator to control the levels is especially obvious as he quickly switches the player through a myriad of prison levels to show all the variations Coda created. As such, Wreden entirely removes the player's agency within the level and explores the variations by simply flashing them before the player with a short description of what makes them different from the ones shown before that. Lastly, Wreden alters the level to allow the player to pass the frustrating puzzles found in Tower. As such, not only does Wreden's ability to alter the different levels become one of the central tools to shaping the narrative structure, but, in addition, his choice and ability to make these levels meaningful to himself becomes a central plot point as well. Wreden's alterations function in a manner that makes Coda's games not only 'playable' but also 'meaningful' by placing lamp posts throughout *The Beginner's Guide*. By doing so, Wreden exercises the power he holds both within the narrative but also within the game itself, as the author of it, so to speak, to push the player through the story and to certain conclusions in a similar fashion to the one he used on Coda's games. In essence, this dynamic of the narrator holding the power of how the story progresses, creates an abstracted narrative

structure dissimilar to the ones found in mainstream video games, wherein the player has to hold the literal physical ability to coordinate their hands and eyes in a manner which reaches the goals the game sets for them. Instead, the player is led through levels and their action is largely decided by the narrator, in the sense that he can decide when a level has been played to satisfaction or to understanding its conceptual message. This dynamic furthers the idea of the player not only struggling to place Wreden within the work, but they also struggle to come to terms with their seeming lack of agency within *The Beginner's Guide* as Wreden grabs the reigns of it and leads the player down the path that he wants them to take, leaving the parts that Wreden himself has little interest in behind. By doing so, the narrative is splitting the player from the work, before letting them unify themselves with the game by playing the different levels and attempting to gain their own interpretations of them and of Coda's perceived mental state, thereby also furthering the aesthetic of metafiction.

From the above, it seems clear that *The Beginner's Guide* harbours narrative formal avant-garde qualities. Additionally, the following section seeks to explore the radical formal avant-garde qualities of the game. *The Beginner's Guide* is by no means a mechanically intensive game, as shown in the very opening of Introduction where the few main controls are listed. Besides the basic controls, there are simply the buttons used to interact with the dialogue mechanic. Despite the mechanics above being used to different ends and to further *The Beginner's Guide*'s aesthetic through different means, through the different levels, these overall mechanics are rarely used for anything which requires hand-eye coordination. Similarly, these are neither meant to be a mechanical challenge akin to the ones found in classic platformers or to challenge them mentally in the way puzzle games or point-and-click adventure games might attempt to. As such, it may seem somewhat redundant to explore how these mechanics are abstracted, as there are limited mechanics to abstract upon. With that being said, Coda is established very early on to be a developer who does try to experiment with video game formats and a couple of levels stand out as still managing to abstract the aforementioned mechanics or generally be abstract in their expression, namely Backwards, Mobius and, to a certain extent, Tower.

In Backwards, the level establishes itself as an experimental game through its abstraction of mechanics. Commencing with this particular level, the player will find themselves only having the ability to walk backwards. As the player has to look behind them in order to walk in their target direction, they will find text on the walls of the game map (see screenshot 2). As Wreden narrates it,

> It's a short and relatively minimalistic experiment combining motion and narrative. It is less advanced than the previous game, but it actually seems to be more focused, more complete. Coda's trying to give it a unique voice rather than simply basing it on a pre-existing trope. It's a short little though, it says what it wants to say, and then it ends. Didn't need anything more than that. (Wreden, 2015, Backwards).

From Wreden's analysis alone, it is clear that Backwards harbours a lot of characteristics pertaining to the radical formal avant-garde. Much like the rest of the game, Backwards is rather simplistic in its construction: it is a rather short level, wherefore the player will not end up losing track of the message due to hours or days of gameplay; its mechanics only allows the player to move through the map by walking backwards and turning to see; the dynamics of the game will reveal writing on the walls as the player moves along; and, as such, the aesthetic of the game-map will encourage the player to seek meaning in their affordances as well as the bits of text scattered around the map.

Screenshot 2: Backwards

Finding all pieces of text, they will collectively read: "The past was behind her. But the future could not be seen. Why does the future keep changing? When she stops and looks it becomes clearer. But if the future is always behind her. How will she find the strength to confront it?" (Wreden, 2015, Backwards). The level in question is an example of abstracting the mechanics of the game in order to further a message. By forcing the player to walk backwards, they are simultaneously forced to look behind them in order to progress and, in looking behind them, they are presented with a textual exploration of metaphysical questions of time and people's relationship with it – that one can only look into the past, not the future, nor can they necessarily predict what is going to happen in it. As such, by restricting the possible movements of the player, they are pushed towards a deeper understanding of the level - even if they need the help of Wreden to fully understand the conceptual message, as this level is presented early enough in the overarching narrative that the player is still being introduced to the necessary mindset of analysing the levels. Mobius has the same goal of using abstract mechanics to further its message. However, while Backwards does so by restricting the mechanics of the player within the game, Mobius does so by introducing an optional restriction 'outside' the game by telling the

player that the game is supposed to be played with one's eyes closed (Wreden, 2015, Backwards). Once the player presses the button to start the game, dramatic music begins and the player is faced with the task of stopping a spaceship from crashing into a massive door similar to the one used in Coda's puzzle. The only way to stop the crash from happening is to tell a mannequin something true – this truth being that the main character, presumably an extension or expression of Coda, does not feel fulfilled by creating video games anymore. This situation can be seen as a representation of the moment, in which, one has to face the truth, they fear; the act of realising or accepting a harsh truth, which one does not necessarily want to face – in this case, the fact that creating video games has become an unfulfilling activity to Coda. This could also be the reason why the player is urged to play the game with their eyes closed at the beginning of the game, as to understand the frustration of trying to solve an issue which one either cannot see or is attempting to stay willingly blind to. This can also be seen as Coda once again making use of radical formal avant-garde strategies by abstracting the controls of Mobius in order to further the message of said game. However, in order for the game to be conceptually cohesive, the player has to be able to recognise the fact that they will not be able to finish the task of the game if they are unwilling to open their eyes to it. As such, the game could not force the blindness on the player by, for example, simply making the screen black until the player has failed a couple times and still maintain the same expression. Even if the player does not heed the opening instructions, the opening situation is only marginally less confusing in terms of how clear it is for the player in terms of what they need to do to avoid crashing into the massive door. As such, the game attempts to embody the feeling of having to face a problem before it becomes big enough of an issue that it can 'crash'. As such, Mobius stands out as another example of Coda abstracting the mechanics of the game by restricting them further than the game does to begin with. Lastly, the penultimate level of the game, Tower, shows some radical formal avant-garde qualities as well. After the opening hall, the player reaches a large open floor to which they are informed by Wreden that there is a maze "[except] that all of the walls of the maze are invisible." (Wreden, 2015, Tower). When the player walks into the maze, they will eventually hit an invisible wall which will produce, in Wreden's words, "this awful flashing and noise, so the experience is really miserable" (Wreden, 2015, Tower), referring to a stark flashing red color covering the

screen and a high pitched sound. However, the frustration of attempting to get through the maze is short lived, as Wreden lets the player pass over the maze by covering it with a bridge if they do not want to attempt to finish it. Next, the player is met with another puzzle, wherein they have to guess a random six digit code. Once again, Wreden expresses confusion at the frustrating nature of the puzzle; wherefore, he writes the code for the player on the ground in front of the puzzle. After that, the player is lead towards a hallway with a hole in the ground at the end. When the player walks into the hole, they drop into a room, in which there is only one way to get out, a door. However, as Wreden says "The switch to open this door is actually on the other side of the door, meaning that it's literally impossible to solve from this side" (2015, Tower); therefore, Wreden allows the player through said door. These puzzles, despite Wreden not seeing the point in them, have radical formal avant-garde qualities that lie elsewhere than seen in both Backwards and Mobius. Where Backwards restricted the control the player had over their character, and Mobius lets the player physically restrict themselves, Tower restricts the playability of the level itself. In a manner of speaking, Tower is not designed in a way that it can be completed during a normal game-session, because one would have to cheat in order to make it through. Thus, the playability, or lack thereof, of Tower is in line with its overall theme since Tower is meant to inform Wreden about the consequences of his actions, namely, giving away Coda's games away when they were not his to give.

Having recognised that *The Beginner's Guide* makes use of both narrative formal avant-garde to further its metafictional expression by letting the narrator hold the majority of the control over the game, and radical formal avant-garde by abstracting the mechanics of the game to align the experience of playing with the conceptual message of both Coda's games and *The Beginner's Guide*, the game can safely be classified as an avant-garde game. Therefore, despite its straightforward epistolary narrative structure and simple mechanics, both can still be abstracted, through the video game medium, in such a way that the game's expression becomes avant-garde in nature. As such, *The Beginner's Guide* can be seen as harbouring qualities similar to those found in postmodern art or high modernist art as it tries to frustrate the receiver of the work through the bending of norms and expectations or by defamiliarising said perceiver by way of methods such as metareferentiality, thereby, furthering the dynamic of splitting and unifying

as explicated the above section. In essence, the avant-garde elements recognised through the analysis helps further aesthetic of the metafictional core of the *The Beginner's Guide*, whereby the player is driven to immerse themselves in, and also analyse, the game as it works towards the reveal of Wreden's role as the unreliable narrator.

## 3.4 Player, Meet Aesthetic: Examining How *The Beginner's Guide* Produces Aesthetics

By now, it should be apparent that *The Beginner's Guide* is a versatile text that utilises a variety of techniques and tactics as part of its meta-expression. Thus, since this project seeks to discuss the possibility of *The Beginner's Guide* as an aesthetic experience and, by extension, an art game, it is relevant to consider how said game furthers different aesthetics. In the theory section, it was introduced how Hunicke et al. operates with a game aesthetic called 'expression'; however, it would be both unproductive and redundant to merely rely on such a classification to explain how *The Beginner's Guide* operates aesthetically. Thus, this section will start by examining how the meta-aspects in *The Beginner's Guide* can be approached in terms of determining the aesthetic expression of said game, and how the meta-aesthetic is part of furthering other types of aesthetics.

As presented earlier on, the meta-aspects in *The Beginner's Guide* are utilised to create a rather complex game-experience in terms of narratology and the sheer act of playing the game. As such, the aforementioned aspects must, arguably, also make up a significant part of *The Beginner's Guide*'s aesthetic. However, determining the aesthetic of a metareferential video game like *The Beginner's Guide* comes with complications as opposed to doing so with a mainstream video game. Where Hunicke et al. can take games such as *Quake* (id Software, 1996) or *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), games which this project would characterise as mainstream games, and with ease assign particular aesthetics to these (2003, p. 2), a similar approach in terms of *The Beginner's Guide* does not seem feasible. Wolfgang Funk states, in relation to metafictional texts, "[b]y exposing the premises and conditions of its own discourse, critical self-reflective art not only problematizes its own aesthetic [...] but also opens up a new perspective on the conditions, limitations and possibilities of the basic human need of

representation." (2015, p. 80). As such, Funk's view correlates with the points emphasised in the theory section regarding the metafictional aesthetic. Thus, examining the aesthetics involved in a given meta-text is, seemingly, a task that can provide different outcomes, depending on the text. Arguably, one will find that any potential issue related to the establishment of aesthetics in terms of self-reflexive text may also allow for rethinking the aforementioned aspect.

In particular, the analysis of Wreden's presence and role in *The Beginner's Guide* has provided interesting aspects to consider in terms of aesthetics. Wreden and his narration are fitting examples of how *The Beginner's Guide* keeps utilising tactics that aim to split and unify, thus, creating an experience, in which the player will encounter in-game elements that appear to provide several aesthetics but will instead deprive the player of such. An example of this is chapter 2, Whisper, which utilises recognisable video game elements as part of its metareferential expression, as already touched upon. However, by establishing a game scenario that caters to aesthetics such as sensation, fantasy, drama, or survival due to the player's expectations, said player will experience how their initial emotional response will not be accommodated, because there are neither enemies to shoot or a mini-game narrative to follow. Similarly, as explored in the analysis focussing on the narrative formal avant-garde, the player will towards the end of Whisper encounter a labyrinth that inspires the aesthetic of challenge. However, Wreden will dismiss it as a somewhat humorous element: "Apparently this space station has a labyrinth on it! I – heh (sic), sure, I dunno. There's really no reason for it that I've ever been able to discern so in the interest of time I'm just going to skip you on past it." (Wreden, 2015, Whisper). Acting as if it is completely without significance, Wreden will skip the player past the labyrinth, to which the player will once again lose any emotional response related to finding their way through the labyrinth and enjoying the overcoming of an in-game obstacle. Lastly, in Whisper, the player will eventually encounter, what Wreden expresses as, "the part that's interesting" because the player is asked to give their life to stop the whisper machine and save the space station by jumping into a blue beam (Wreden, 2015, Whisper). Upon doing so, Wreden will pause the game and says: "what you just experienced, stepping into the beam and then dying, is probably what Coda had initially intended when he was developing this level. But when he first compiles and plays it, something goes wrong, there's a bug somewhere,

and this is what happens instead." (Wreden, 2015, Whisper). Thus, entering the beam, the player will start to float and be able to see the entire level of Whisper from above as well as the space surrounding the space station (see screenshot 3).
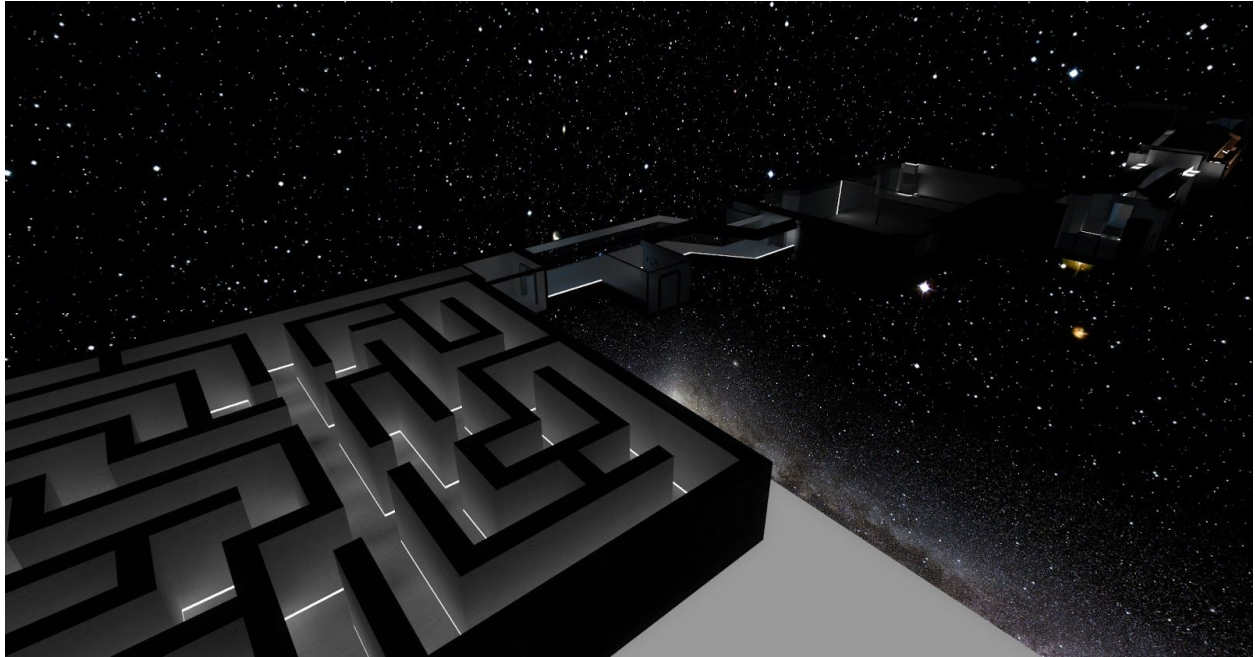

Screenshot 3: The player floats, making it possible to see the entire level in Whisper.

Here, Wreden will make the following comment:

> The beam causes you to start floating and this is an important moment for [Coda]. Because yes, this is technically a glitch, but Coda identifies something human about it, like how small it makes you feel in the face of this larger chaotic system, or this floating could be the afterlife, a peaceful place juxtaposed against all the hysteria you've just had to traverse. I don't even know. I have no idea what he was thinking, but what's clear is that after making this something lodges itself in his brain, he wants to do more of these really weird and experimental designs. (Wreden, 2015, Whisper).

As such, the player will be faced with the moral question of whether or not one could give one's life to save others. Despite this being a rather interesting thought to ponder, the player has been exposed to different aesthetics and game content that does not help further any particular emotional response due to the non-fulfilled aesthetics. As a result, progressing in Whisper involves the abandonment of any emotions or instincts related to what one might experience had they been playing an actual shooter game. Instead, Whisper changes aesthetic and expression in

such a way that the mini-game in question emphasises the experiential design of *The Beginner's Guide*.
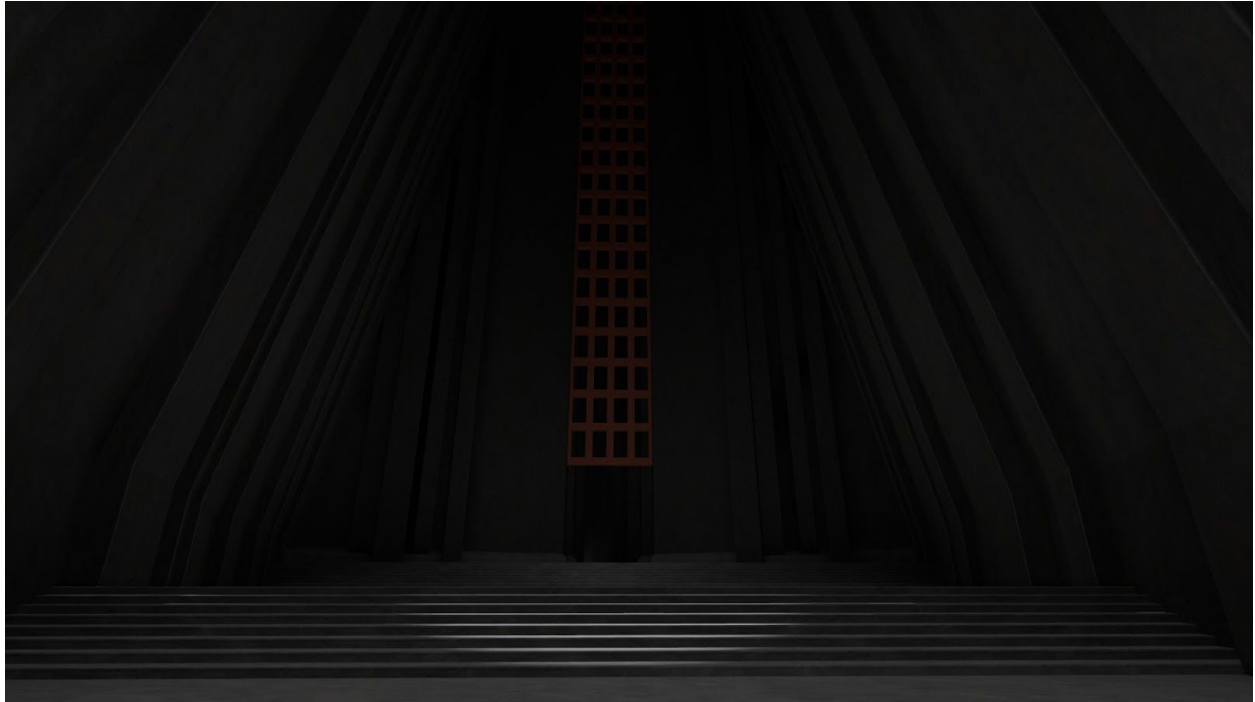
Screenshot 4: The beginning of Tower.

Other cases in point are the two final chapters, Tower and Epilogue. In Tower, the player will encounter a mini-game that is designed to have a negative impact on the player due to a combination of sinister game-design (see screenshot 4), deep bass-notes interspersed with sharp high pitched noises and the faint noise of voice, and flustering affordances. Thus, as explained earlier, the player will encounter an invisible labyrinth, an unsolvable code and the puzzle door without a lever, all of which make it nearly, if not, impossible to solve in order to progress. While the player may be able to proceed only due to Wreden's intervention and alteration of the aforementioned chapter, the player is not encouraged to face the challenges but is instead offered the easy way – a factor that takes away any aesthetic that would have been relevant to point out if the player had been forced to deal with said challenges in order for them to progress. In Epilogue, the player walks through several different sceneries, ranging from a train station to a mansion to a dark cavern, while Wreden tells the player about the lesson he has been taught from the journey through Coda's games:

More, more more more, more love, more praise, more people telling me that I'm good, always more more more. It's like a disease. Solution, solution, solution. I guess if someone had told me ahead of time that he just really enjoyed making prison games, maybe I wouldn't have thought he was so desperate? I wouldn't have told so many people that he was depressed. Maybe he just likes making prisons. Even now, the disease is telling me to stop, don't show people what a shitty person you are. They'll hate you. If I knew that my life depended on finding something to be driven by other than validation[,] what would that even be? Heh, it's strange, but the thought of not being driven by external validation is unthinkable. I actually cannot conceive of what that would be like! What now? I think I need to go. And I'm sorry, because I know that I said I would be here and I would walk you through this, but I'm starting to feel like I have a lot of work to do. I have a lot that I need to make up for. And so I'm just going to... Okay. (Wreden, 2015, Epilogue)

As such, the player is left to explore the last part of the game on their own and will finally reach a blue beam identical to the one presented in Whisper. Upon entering the last beam, much like in Whisper, the player will begin to float towards the sky, revealing a vast labyrinth that stretches all the way to the horizon, a peaceful song will begin playing and the credits will begin to roll. In a sense, Epilogue acts as a respite, a place to calm down after the events of the preceding mini-games. Epilogue does not contain any puzzles or people to talk to. It simply contains space for the player to walk through, presumably so as to not feel unproductive or like they are not progressing through the game while Wreden speaks his piece. The ending of the level, the blue beam and the maze, act as a peaceful outtro for the player to reflect on, allowing them to think about the game or simply letting themselves feel the emotions produced by the openness and honesty shown by Wreden after it was finally revealed that he was to blame for the issues Coda was working through. Looking at Tower, it turns much of *The Beginner's Guide* on its head upon the first playthrough. As such, this can deliver quite an emotional shock to the player, if they did not pick up on Wreden's hints up to this point. Many parts of Tower come together to discomfort the player. From the practically impossible puzzles to the sinister setting and music. The experience of Tower is in harsh contrast to a level like House, after which the player only delves deeper into the problem between Coda and Wreden. In Tower, it is further shown how Coda writes to Wreden, wondering whether he thinks Coda is making these games for him, implying that he does not. This could render the interpretations of some of the games, in terms of them reflecting the relationship, invalid. However, this project would argue that the games in question

could still be a reflection of the relationship between them – they just are not created with the expressed purpose of trying to convey it to Wreden, but instead for Coda's own self-discovery; thereby, creating a series of expressive objects, encapsulating the feelings he is trying to explore through the video game medium. If the player has been emotionally engaged up to this point in the story, it would be fair to assume that the game, even if it breaks their immersion as the player realises what Wreden is, still holds enough aesthetic qualities to produce emotions such as fear, shock, frustration or sadness in the players as they progress through the level.

However, despite the notion above, while Whisper may serve as part of the tutorial-levels, in which the player is taught how to comprehend the factualities surrounding the experience of playing *The Beginner's Guide*, and Tower and Epilogue may function as the "conclusion" of the game, the player will apparently not be able to achieve or experience a cemented aesthetic that can be fully named – a point that aligns with Dewey's notion of a pervading quality that can only be characterised after an experience is over. Instead, *The Beginner's Guide* appears as a game that contains fragments of video-game-related aesthetics due to the game's self-conscious, or self-aware, nature. As such, on the basis of this, the metareferential aspects in *The Beginner's Guide* provides the game with an unusual aesthetic expression compared to how mainstream games would be aesthetically characterised. As noted in this project's comprehensive framework, mainstream games will have the potential to be assigned any aesthetic introduced by Hunicke et al. or Dillon; however, when examining *The Beginner's Guide*, this is not the case due to the game depriving the player of such aesthetics in their "entirety". Therefore, in order to further address the aesthetics of *The Beginner's Guide*, one must consider the aforementioned deprivation both in and of itself as well as if this particular characteristic is able to produce certain aesthetics. As such, having attempted to evaluate what the significance and impact of the meta-aspects within *The Beginner's Guide* has been in terms of the game's aesthetic expression, it is, thus, possible to highlight a few particular forms of aesthetics that have become salient on the basis of this.

A case in point could be how the self-awareness or self-consciousness present within *The Beginner's Guide* furthers the aesthetic of colour appreciation. As mentioned in the theory section, Dillon notes how modern games attempt to captivate players by presenting exciting

environments during gameplay, which can also be applied in this case. Where a variety of mainstream games such as *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo Entertainment, 2017), and *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018) can be said to harbour impressive sceneries, players of these games will, arguably, stop paying attention to or appreciate these aspects once they get involved with the games' entertaining qualities such as battle or other forms of in-game activities. *The Beginner's Guide*, however, will often direct the player's attention to the design or construction of certain chapters; wherefore, said player will be able to take in the different sceneries in an alternate manner than they would have, had they been playing a mainstream game like the aforementioned titles. An example hereof is chapter 7, Down, in which the player will be exposed to a variety of different in-game environments that will all be able to spawn color appreciation, but, partly, also other aesthetics.

In Down, the player will start off in a white map with a cafe in the middle of it (see screenshot 5), to which Wreden will explain how Coda would use a game-engine called "Source" to design his games (Wreden, 2015); thus, drawing attention to the way that the environment is constructed. This notion is furthered by going through the small building: here, the player is able to descend to a black space with different coloured shapes (see screenshot 6) that is supposed to lead the player to the bottom where they will find a concrete-looking prison (see screenshot 7).

Screenshot 5: The café in the beginning of Down.

The difference in scenery is rather interesting to contemplate because the aesthetics produced by going through this level are contrasting. By encountering a house that is nicely designed and could be a graphical replica of something one might find in the city, the player can experience a joyable feeling due to the warm and vibrant colors. This emotional reaction is, thus, substituted with wonderment and player engagement as the player experiences the sight of the floating shapes. For one, the contrast between a well-designed house and the apparent experiential space beneath are meant to cause a sense of confusion which the player needs to contemplate. Secondly, this confusion is furthered by encountering the prison part, in which the appearance of Down has changed from comfortable to confusing to as sense of eeriness. As the player eventually makes "one final descend", they will encounter a lamp post in a courtyard, to which Wreden will say:

Screenshot 6: The coloured shapes in Down.
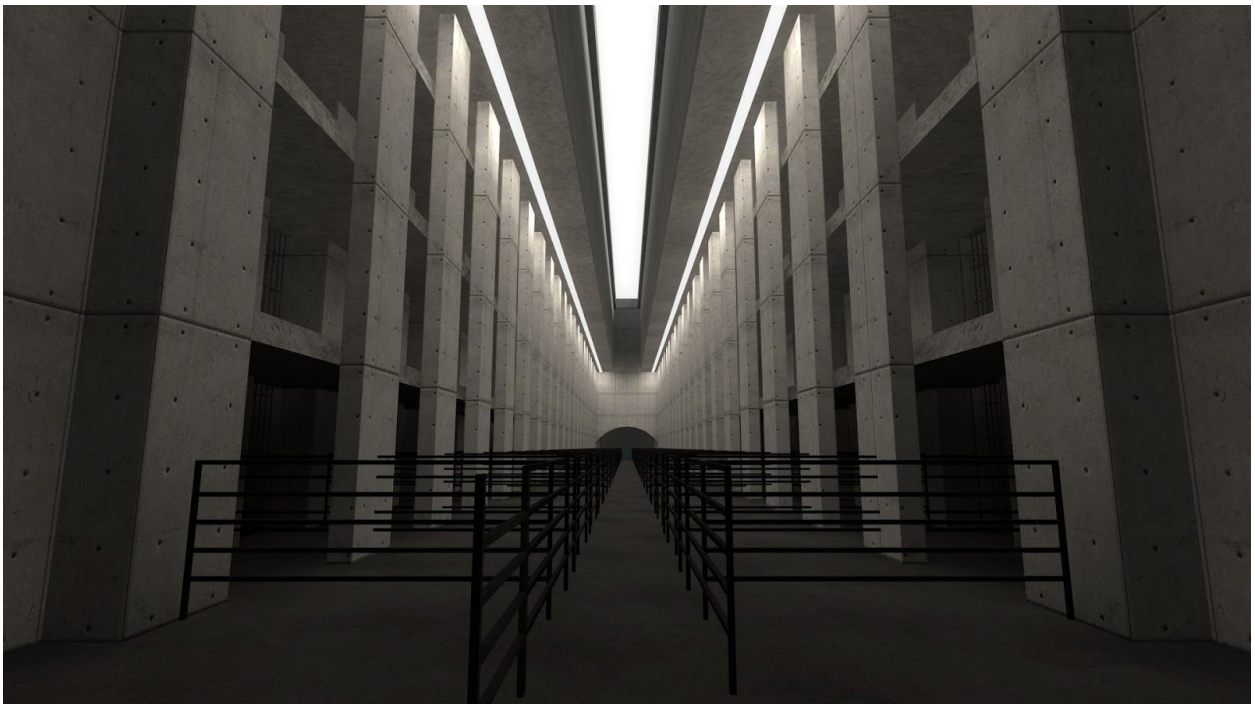
Screenshot 7: The prison-part in Down.

It's a lamppost. Okay, I can't tell you quite why but for some reason Coda fixates on this lamppost, it's going to appear at the end of every single one of his games from here on out. I'll tell

you what I think, I think up to this point he's been making really strange and abstract games with no clear purpose, and maybe you can only float around in that headspace for so long. Because now he wants something to hold onto. He wants a reference point, he wants the work to be leading to something. He wants a destination! Which is what this lamppost is, it's a destination. We're gonna see it in the work as well, his games are going to become a lot more cohesive, a lot more fully developed, with more of a clear idea behind them. And as we go, that idea will get clearer and clearer and clearer. (Wreden, 2015, Down)

By pointing to the relevance of the lamppost, the player will associate this with something significant, from which they will draw meaning and appreciation in relation to the rest of the gaming-experience, especially, because the lamppost will occur in different places where Wreden will disclose his theories regarding Coda's games. As such, Down is an example of how *The Beginner's Guide* is designed to raise the player's attention to a variety of in-game environments that, in turn, are meant to have certain effects on the player. Thus, through its self-reflexiveness, *The Beginner's Guide* will be partly responsible for the player having an emotional response to the different sceneries that they encounter as they progress through the different mini-games. In a similar fashion, House furthers the appreciation of the visuals of the levels. In this level, Coda has created a house on a snowy hillside with a door at the top of the hill (See screenshot 8). As the player enters the house, they are greeted by a static NPC and presented with a chat system to talk to them, similar to the scenes seen towards the end of Down. The gameplay of House consists of the player alternating between sections of being asked personal questions by the mannequin, who acts as the person tasked with cleaning the house, and helping said mannequin clean messy sections of the house, interspersed with conversation pertaining to the meaning of these actions while soothing music plays in the background. While simplistic in nature, this gameplay loop has aesthetic quality in and of itself. The act of cleaning up, the movement from something being a mess to it being cleaned up with the click of a single button, can act as a pleasurable activity. As such, the player is driven to appreciate not only the warm colour scheme of the level, but they could similarly appreciate the level moving from a state of mess to one of order. When put together with a deep conversation, in which the player can feel as though they are being both heard and responded to, the player can feel as though they have a level of impact on the state or direction of the game as they are moving the state of House from one which does not align with the values of the level to one which does. As such, House

presents the notion that cleaning one's home is an activity analogous to straightening out parts of one's life and how it, ultimately, is analogous to cleaning one's soul (Wreden, 2015, House). This conversation, and its overall message, can, mixed with the accompanying mechanically simple activities, let the player immerse themselves and, through their appreciation of the visuals of the level and their conceptual connection with its message, see these activities in an emotionally engaging way; wherefore, they can be seen as inhabiting aesthetic qualities.

Screenshot 8: The house on the hill in House.

Another relevant aesthetic that arises from the meta-aspects in *The Beginner's Guide* is, as has been pointed to earlier, the interpretive exploration of Coda's games. This action is the instigating factor for the entire experience provided by *The Beginner's Guide*. By this fact alone, it is possible to talk about the need for a form of player engagement that borders on academic work. If one contemplates chapter 0 once more, Wreden informs the player about the experience they are about to have, which is relevant in terms of the aforementioned engagement with *The Beginner's Guide*:

[Coda's games] are all going to give us access to their creator. I want us to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is, and that's exactly what we're going to do here. [...] And that's why I've taken this opportunity to gather all of his work together. [It's] because I find his games powerful and interesting. (Wreden, 2015, Introduction).

While this utterance, on the surface, may appear to provide the player with additional information about the objective of the game, or player-goals, as well as encite said player further in terms of playing, there are more interesting things at play here. In his narration, Wreden focuses on how Coda's games allow the player to understand Coda as a person. This can, in turn, be seen as a subversion of Roland Barthes' theory, concerning the death of the author. By gaining access to the games' creator through his games, Wreden seeks to make the player utilise their perceptive capabilities to gain an understanding of Coda; thus, the utterance above is an attempt to make the player biased by establishing an experience that pertains to an aesthetic of discovery and identification of a person before experiencing any other level in *The Beginner's Guide*. As such, by enticing the player to characterise Coda on the basis of his games, they will approach the subsequent game-levels with an analytical mindset, to which they will attempt to perceive and analyse every game explored and played as well as pay attention to their own observations in relation to the overall narrative.

Seeing as the aforementioned approach is a rather pervasive characteristic in terms of *The Beginner's Guide*; ultimately, it has an effect on the entire expression of said game. For one, the combination of characterising an author or creator on the basis of their work, and the self-conscious narrator allows for the player to affirm Barthes's theory; thus, disproving Wreden's approach. The player gets to do so in two ways: one, in chapter 15, Machine, the player is provided with a gun and is, thus, moved through previous levels: the stage from Theater; the room full of typewriters from Notes; the lounge from Stairs, wherein the player has to shoot the floor out from under them, revealing a massive open door similar to the door found in Mobius. As such, whatever the player shoots in the given sceneries is destroyed; thus, presenting a playable way to prove Barthes's sentiment because the player is able to destroy what they were supposed to interpret; hence, making it impossible to establish a clear picture of any creator or author. Similarly, Machine can be interpreted as Coda arriving at the conclusion that Wreden is the problem. The player-character can, in this context, instead be seen as a

representation of Wreden as he pushes for Coda to develop more games. Similar to Island, then, the destruction of the different scenes in Machine could also signify the same desecration of Coda's personal outlet, as seen in Island, by adding the lampposts to his games. The ending scene can be seen as Coda telling Wreden to stop changing his games, yet he does not. This interpretation also makes the lamp post found in the last scene somewhat ironic, as the addition of the lamp post is the very action Coda may be attempting to portray by destroying his levels. As such, right up until the point of revealing his own involvement in what began as a mystery, being the question of why Coda stopped making games, Wreden is constantly affirming the participation of the player in terms of interpreting the different mini-games. The player is, to some extent, forced to keep perceiving and interpreting Coda's games in order to achieve any meaning. An example could be the situation established in Tower, in which the player is informed that Coda finds it problematic that Wreden alters his games to fit his own interpretations. As such, Coda creates a game which practically forces Wreden to demonstrate that point by challenging Wreden's idea of games having to be playable, as referenced in Down. Furthermore, Wreden shows his true intentions in Tower, to which he may have cared for Coda, but his intention still seems inherently selfish as he, leading up to reading the first line of the message from Coda, says that:

> Was I a failure for not understanding this game? I mean I don't know why I would be, it's not like everything needs to have a solution, but I feel it somehow. I feel like I failed, and I don't understand why. I remember, it's June of 2011, I'm playing this for the very first time, and while I'm playing I'm thinking to myself: I don't know this person. I have no idea who this person is. It wasn't the guy I knew, it wasn't my friend. I had come to so many conclusions from looking at all of his work up until this point, and then suddenly none of them... I had been trying to though, that was the thing. For years I was trying to get to know him, to understand who he actually was and what he stood for. I asked him so many times to please just tell what his games mean to him. I asked him to please tell me what the 3 dots mean. And he wouldn't. I just felt so strongly that if I could have connected with him, that if I could have somehow made his work my own, that I would finally be once-and-for-all happy. I needed to see myself in someone else. I needed to be someone other than me. But he stopped, and left, and it felt somehow like I had failed. Where did I screw up?

Wreden, in the quote above, shows that he cared more about gleaning meaning from the games than about Coda, his friend, and that he wanted to become like Coda in his own search for

happiness since he needed to be someone other than himself. Wreden's journey through Coda's games can, therefore, also be seen as him unknowingly reflecting himself in them, rather than the reflection of Coda he seems to have been searching for instead. This is also where the idea of him trying to subvert Barthes' sentiment in *Death of the Author* becomes somewhat ironic. As Wreden alters Coda's games to try to gain a deeper understanding of him, he proves not only Barthes' theory in that you cannot read the author from the work, but he ultimately also confirms Dewey's point about the pointlessness of asking a creator of a work for meaning since they will find different meanings in it on any given day.

However, despite the ironic use of an approach like Barthes', this does not take away from the actual doing in terms of perception and interpretation of Coda's games. Thus, by enticing the player to engage with its content in an academic fashion, thereby allowing *The Beginner's Guide* to employ both metareferential and avant-garde strategies in its gameplay without necessarily frustrating the player, said game has the potential to stand out as an academic video game that is evident in its expression and, by extension, its aesthetic.

Lastly, a rather prominent feature that has become apparent through the analysis of *The Beginner's Guide* is the game's tendency to explore the human condition. Where this aspect can be perceived as a central element in an art game's conceptual message, this particular notion is relevant to contemplate in terms of *The Beginner's Guide*'s aesthetics. As such, it is possible to ponder some of the points that have been covered above, namely, how Wreden uses Coda's games to address relatable topics that can be considered an exploration of the human condition. As has been pointed to before, the player will be prone to consider narratological as well as ludological aspects in order to perceive Coda in the manner, the game wants them to. The four levels, Entering, Stairs, Puzzle, and Exiting operate with the shared purpose of providing an insight into Coda's personality in a manner that allows to perceive his mental state in a specific way later in the game. In Entering (see screenshot 9), the player can only move down a road surrounded by darkness until reaching a sign that reads "You are now entering" (Wreden, 2015). Due to the fact that the player is not able to see anything besides a small part of the road ahead, the atmosphere is somewhat eerie. Because the player does not know what to expect, especially when reaching the sign, Entering produces a feeling of anxiousness that creates tension as to

what follows. However, as is also disclosed by Wreden, this level is very short and does not serve a higher purpose or makes sense on its own (2015, Entering), wherefore the player is skipped on to the next level. Being promised that Entering will make sense once a few more levels have been explored, the player can experience a feeling of confusion due to the apparent indifferent nature of this short level. It could, however, be postulated that the puzzling nature of Entering is constructed as to keep engaging the academic mindset of the player.

Screenshot 9: The sign from Entering

The notion above can be furthered by looking at the next level, Stairs. Here, the player faces two different expressions: first, one has to climb a set of stairs; however, the game's mechanics will slow the player down halfway up the stairs, making it impossible to reach the top. Here, Wreden will comment on what could be a frustrating mechanic to overcome for the player:

> Once you've been slowed to absolute crawl, the door at the top of the stairs opens. So why, if Coda's not showing these games to anyone, why bother opening the door at all? Well, to show you I'm modifying the game here so that when you press the 'Use' key on your gamepad it'll bring you back up to full speed, so you can enter the door for yourself. (Wreden, 2015, Stairs)

As such, Wreden's assistance will allow the player to experience the second expression of Stairs. By entering the door at the top of the stairs, the player will find themselves in a room with sentences hanging in the air (see screenshot 10). Here, Wreden will also go on to characterise the room and present his interpretation of its significance:

> A room that's warm, and nice, and filled with little ideas for games. Coda would often tell me that he didn't mind if people thought of him as cold or distant, he said that he knew he was actually a vibrant and compassionate person, but that it takes time to really see that. It can be a very slow climb to get there.

As such, Wreden's narration is once again used as a means to influence how the player should feel and think about Coda. By being told what the room is like, the player is almost manipulated to a degree, in which the associations put forth by Wreden appear as if they were the player's own thoughts. Thus, the player will perceive the given environment as being a place of comfort; hence, creating a sense of joy.

Screenshot 10: The room at the top of the stairs in Stairs.

Furthermore, if one examines the many different game ideas, in the form of the floating sentences in the aforementioned room, some can appear rather humorous. Pondering Coda's ideas, the player will, therefore, also perceive this as part of the room's expression in a manner

that benefits the player in terms of feeling positive emotions. Via Wreden's utterances, it also becomes clear to the player that Stairs is supposed to act as a metaphor for Coda; thus, it can spark a moment, in which the player can mirror themselves in this aspect. As such, Stairs is part of providing *The Beginner's Guide* with an aesthetic pertaining to self-discovery or self-identity that does not only concern Coda and his games; however, the player might be able to identify with the notion of being perceived one way but, in fact, be the exact opposite. If this aspect can be acknowledged, then, it seems appropriate to suggest that such an element can help the player achieve a deeper level of immersion, one that is emotionally oriented that, in turn, helps keep the player engaged on a level that transcends that of the initial impulsion caused by the game.

The notion of self-discovery is also furthered in the following level, Puzzle. Here, the player will encounter a game that is supposed to act as a contrasting level to Stairs. Puzzle is comprised of a hallway with a puzzle at the end of it, which the player needs to solve in order to proceed to the ending. The significant part of Puzzle is the puzzle (see screenshot 11).


Screenshot 11: Coda's puzzle in Puzzle

In order to solve said puzzle, the player needs to pull the lever; step through door number one; press the same lever; let the first door close, revealing a lever on the backside; pull the backside lever, and let the second door open. This is by far one of the more complicated mechanics that

The Beginner's Guide has to offer; however, as is also pointed to by Wreden, the puzzle holds a certain significance: "Don't forget that solution, because we're going to see this puzzle again soon. We're going to see it a lot." (2015, Puzzle). As such, it is disclosed how the puzzle will appear again in other levels; however, this will, for the player's academic mindset, be perceived as an indication that the puzzle serves a purpose for both the other games but also for the overall narrative. Solving the puzzle allows the player to proceed to the end, being a room with nowhere to go. Here, Wreden will utter the following: "So that seems to be it, right? You walk down the corridor, you solve a puzzle, you get to the end. Simple enough. Alright, not I'm going to modify the game again so that when you press the 'Use' key on your gamepad it'll remove all of the walls from this room." (2015, Puzzle). Pressing the aforementioned key, the player will be able to see a myriad of tunnels surrounding the route that they have travelled through, themselves (see screenshot 12). Here, Wreden will continue his impression of what the level actually contains:

> How about that, there was more to it than we had any way of knowing. I actually find it funny that this game comes after the stairs game since they essentially convey the opposite idea. So in the stairs game a dull exterior concealed a rich interior and then in this level a dull interior hides a fantastic outer world. Either way I think the point is the same, [its] that most od the time you don't get to know what you're missing, or even that you're missing anything, that's not your role as a player. So if your role here is not to understand, then what is it? (Wreden, 2015, Puzzle)

Here, two aspects appear interesting to ponder: first, listening to Wreden's narration, the player's academic mindset is being challenged to identify answers to his questions by attempting to figure out the significance behind what they are being shown, and what has been displayed beforehand. Secondly, Wreden's power to control the game allows for him to foreshadow certain things that will happen but masking it in a manner so it appears to concern Coda rather than himself. As Wreden mentions, it is not the player's role to know what they are missing (Wreden, 2015, Puzzle). Now, this particular aspect may be true when playing mainstream games that are all about keeping their players entertained; if such games succeed in doing so, the player will not feel like they are missing something. However, in order for *The Beginner's Guide* to function the
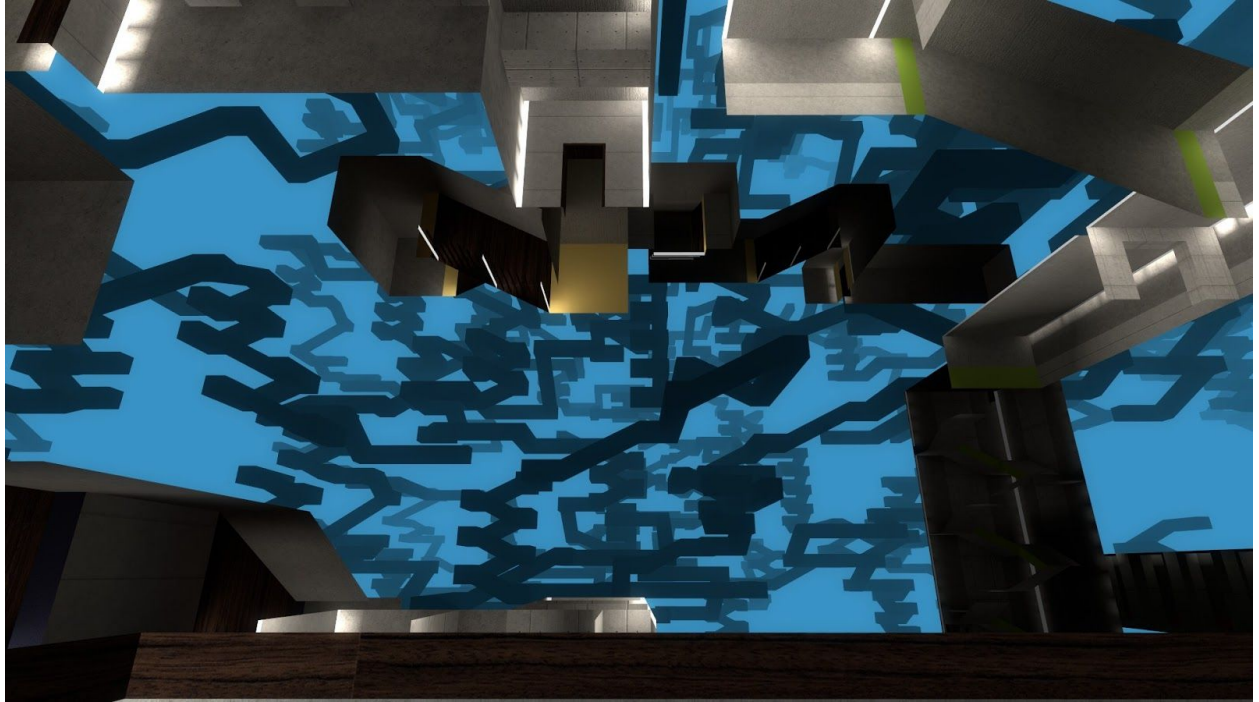
Screenshot 12: The view when removing the walls in Puzzle.

Screenshot 13: The sign from Exiting.

way it is designed, the player needs to be kept in the dark in order to ensure the desired emotional impact. Therefore, if the player is immersed in the gameplay of *The Beginner's Guide*, then, they will probably not spend time on second-guessing Wreden's role as narrator, or even suspect him of leading one astray. Instead, the player is constantly presented with new game aesthetics, designed to create some sort of impact in a manner that keeps them preoccupied with comprehending the game as a whole. As such, the player will only be able to make sense of it all by playing all of the games, to which they can consummate the experience in its entirety.

No matter if the player is able to come up with plausible answers for their own role while also trying to contemplate the relationship of all the games that Wreden has taken them through, *The Beginner's Guide* will help the player reach a form of comprehension. Upon completing Puzzle, the player will find themselves in a level similar to Entering; however, the sign will now read "You are exiting" (see screenshot 13). Here, Wreden will once again present his interpretation of the series of games that have just been presented:

> This combined with the Entering game from earlier tells us that Coda believes his games are connected somehow. It could even be that the stairs game and the puzzle game are literally connected in between this and the entering game. There's a bigger picture that all of his games are mean to to play a role in, some larger meaning that we won't be able to grasp until we've seen all of them and once we have we can step back and start to understand what exactly that bigger picture is. (Wreden, 2015, Exiting)

Where *The Beginner's Guide* started with an objective that seemed easy enough, the player is now assured that something larger is at play in the playing of the different games. Thus, this is once again part of directing the player's perception and analytical mindset in relation to figure out what *The Beginner's Guide* seeks to convey from both a ludological and narratological point of view. Furthermore, in the continuous explication of the in-game objective, the player is also kept engaged by the different points in the narrative of *The Beginner's Guide*; hence, they will not feel bored or unfulfilled, resulting in them leaving the game behind. These four games, collectively, can be seen as harbouring individual qualities, both in terms of affect and of perceiving Coda. If keeping in accordance with the way, in which, *The Beginner's Guide* wants the player to play, Entering and Exiting are almost framing what can be characterised as a doorway into and out of Coda's personal space or personality. As such, Stairs acts as a metaphor

for Coda's relationship, or lack thereof, with other people; he is not easy to get to know. However, once one gets to know him, they will find a warm, comforting, and interesting person. Similarly, Puzzle is meant to make the player ponder Coda's person by doing more than simply understanding his games – something else is at play entirely when the player plays Coda's games and in order to comprehend this, the player needs to sharpen their mental focus, as suggested by Holmes, and, then, attempt to see 'the bigger picture' that all of Coda's games apparently seek to establish. As such, these games could be *The Beginner's Guide*'s attempt to convey how Coda is as a person, how his mind works, and how he was feeling before introducing the player to the idea that he is struggling in life.

Screenshot 14: The eye in the back of the auditorium in Lecture.

To further the notion of *The Beginner's Guide* as exploring the human condition, Wreden leads the player through another two levels, Lecture and Theater, which feature a similar theme, namely a representation of social anxiety but portrayed through two relatively different approaches. Lecture starts with the player sitting in an auditorium with the only NPC present being a mannequin giving a presentation on how to be the perfect person, but it does not need the

player to respond in order to progress, signifying a monologue. The presentation opens as follows:

> Why did you come here today? Was it to improve your life? Was it to get a better job? Was it to make your relationship more meaningful? No. You came here to become PERFECT. This workshop is going to teach you how to be perfect. [...] I intend to make you into that person. Perfection IS within your grasp. And the question is not how do we do it, but how to de do it EFFORTLESSLY. This is easy. It is so easy. It is so easy. Being perfect is effortless. (Wreden, 2015, Lecture)

The player is, until the end of the speech above, not able to interact in any way other than looking around the room. Meanwhile, the game switches the player to different seats in the auditorium until they ultimately shift to the perspective of the NPC giving the speech. Once this happens, the player is shown the choices of the chat-function. However, only one of the options is marked in yellow, while the other two options are grey. The yellow option seems congruent with the speech given up to that point in both colour and sentiment, while the grey options are of a more personal or contextually inappropriate nature. This is a simple, yet effective, visual way of conveying the inner thoughts of the professor – thoughts such as "On the way to work I told an elderly person to start contributing to society", "Kids should not follow their dreams", "Thank goodness all of you perceive me as being wise and intelligent!", "Anyone want to do some ecstasy after this?" and "What if i'm not a good teacher?" (Wreden, 2015, Lecture). The player can now choose what the professor says to their audience. However, should the player choose one of the grey options, it will show up in the feed as grey as well; wherefore, one could assume it is not truly being said. Additionally, in the back of the auditorium, there is a massive black hole resembling an eye (see screenshot 14) that appears to be a visual representation of how the lecturer perceives his position in relation to the classroom – as if there is a constant gaze following him, taking in everything he says. As such, these simple mechanics once again are able to present the player with a representation of a part of the human condition. Many people will be able to recognise this type of social anxiety, wherein they have to present a version of themselves which is not congruent with their whole being and, therefore, have to hide their inner monologue. As such, the Lecture presents both anxious perspectives of the relationship with a "perfect" person and, on one side, the perceiver of the perfect being as anxious to learn how to be like

them since perfection hardly can be seen as an effortless state. On the other side, the perceived perfect being is anxious to meet the expectations of their audience, wherefore they present the parts of themselves they think others will perceive as such, and they can feel like they are in danger to be outed, which could be signified by the black hole in the back of the auditorium – the fear consuming one's entire perspective. This reflection of a level of the human condition can lead to self-discovery on part of the player as they get to reflect on whether or not they can recognise these perspectives of perfection and humanity, which could help maintain or otherwise cause an emotional immersion in the work; wherefore, the level can help facilitate an aesthetic experience.

Similarly, the level following Lecture, Theater, concerns itself with a representation of social anxiety. The level opens with a hallway with signs leading to the stage. When the player enters the stage, the lights turn on and another chat feed starts with an unseen director telling the player that "The performance is beginning!" and "In this scene, you will be playing as me." (Wreden, 2015, Theater). With this, the performance begins with the player being instructed where to stand and how they are going to realise their dreams: "The woman across the room, in this chair, is a professional photographer of animals. It's your dream to photograph animals professionally. This is your one chance to learn something from her, to gain something, to succeed. Go on. Say something to her." (Wreden, 2015, Theater). The player is then presented with three different choices of what to say to the woman, all of which will be met with similar responses from the director - the choice was wrong and the player should choose differently in future choices. The instructions are not particularly clear in terms of what the player should choose to say afterwards. For example, the player, after choosing to say "Hello." to the woman, is given instructions to "actually converse with her", whereafter they are given the choices to say "I'm super scared right now.", "I like you." or "Here are all of my hopes and dreams:" – none of which are obvious choices given the instructions to "actually converse" (Wreden, 2015, Theater). From that point onwards, the situation escalates and becomes increasingly bizarre. After the player's second choice, the stage gets filled with cones that bounce the player away from it if they touch them, which, according to the director, signifies the other people at the party. After the next choice of what to say, the director asks "Do you not realize how important this was to

me?", and explains that "I'll never get another opportunity like this again. Everything was riding on this!", whereafter, the player is told to step back from the stage (Wreden, 2015, Theater). When they do, they will start walking down a long dark hallway, wherein prison bars fall from the ceiling as the player progresses down said hallway (see screenshot 15), which the director finally says is a good decision (Wreden, 2015, Theater). As with most of the other levels of the game, this level could be interpreted as not being *just* about Coda, but instead reflects the perspective of Wreden in Notes, where he describes his first meeting with Coda:

> "I saw him working on this very level, and it was just so different from anything that anyone else was doing so right away I was like, I have to be friends with this person. In retrospect I think I was probably a bit too pushy trying to get his attention. I was overenthusiastic. But he was very gracious about it and very patient with me." (Wreden, 2015, Notes).
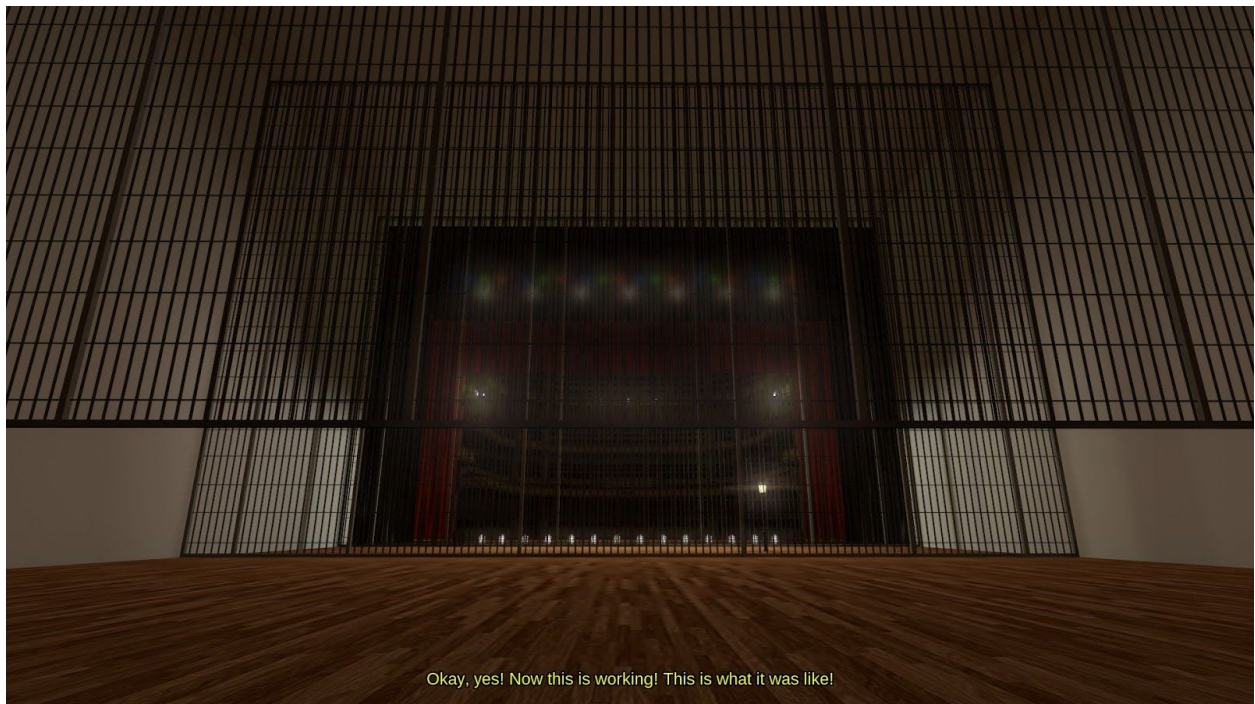
Screenshot 15: Prison bars falling from the ceiling as the player steps further back from the stage.

Theater could be a reflection of that moment, of Wreden introducing himself, anxious that it will not go well and therefore overcompensating and being "a bit too pushy" due to his inner monologue wanting the meeting to be perfect. As mentioned, the level can be interpreted as a representation of social anxiety. The instructor represents the inner monologue of the person who

is about to meet someone they idolise. They pressure themselves to try to come up with the right thing to say and end up obsessing over it until the situation seems like they only have one chance to do it correctly, otherwise their opportunity to get their dreams realised is lost forever – that everything is riding on it. This, of course, is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, the cones being representations of the people at the party, instead of them being mannequins, seems deliberate as the person being portrayed in the scenario does not care about any other attendees of the party than their idol, their one chance at success; wherefore, the cones also 'reject' the player when they try to interact with them – the attempt is not sincere but mere distraction before attempting to talk to the woman. Once they fail to do it, they could begin to isolate themselves in shame, if their inner monologue concludes that they have failed to approach their idol in a satisfying manner. Once again, this level can lead to a player reaching a level of self-discovery, which can be pleasurable, even if the area of exploration is one of anxiety. Should the player find such an exploration of human emotions to be relatable, it would once again be fair to assume that the level can help facilitate an aesthetic experience as the expressive object portraying a relatable emotion or situation can, presumably, let the player immerse themselves in it.

Mobius and Island, much like Lecture and Theater, centre around a similar theme. However, in this case, the two games focus on the realisation – and, by extension, the acceptance of the fact that Coda does not feel creatively fulfilled or otherwise feel the drive to create video games. As explored through the avant-garde analysis, Mobius also harbours avant-garde qualities which can be seen as furthering the feeling of having to not only realise, but face, a personal issue. In Mobius, the mechanics become aligned with the message as the player is encouraged to play the level with their eyes closed. In order to stop the spaceship from crashing into the massive door, the player has "to speak something honest." (Wreden, 2015, Mobius). In response, the player can choose "I am bursting with creative energy.", "I can't keep making these." and "My work is always fun." (Wreden, 2015, Mobius). Should the player choose the first or last answer, the mannequin will answer that it is not truthful (Wreden, 2015, Mobius). These two answers are also quite similar in nature, in that they are fairly positive, so this could naturally lead the player to choose the more negative answer of the three as it stands out among them. After choosing "I can't keep making these.", the spaceship will stop in its tracks and the

mannequin will exclaim that it is working and tell the player to keep going, whereafter more choices will appear, which follow the same line of honest statements, such as "It's draining me." and "I'm alone." (Wreden, 2015, Mobius). Such a moment is one of clear self-examination, as it takes brutal honesty to admit to oneself that things are not as they should be. As such, Mobius further such an aesthetic to hopefully make the player sympathise with Coda's predicament. Similarly, Island seems to attempt the portray the same feeling, but it approaches the issue a little differently. In Island there is no dramatic music, no impending crash or the like. It is a much more peaceful experience, opening on a completely white screen and a sighing voice, then revealing the chat function, used in almost all of the levels from House onwards, which contains three confused, inquisitive options. Choosing these speech options reveals more of the surrounding area, allowing the player to progress and, soon, an unseen ethereal being will answer the player. The player-character presents their plight from Mobius to which the ethereal person reacts sympathetically, asking why he cannot create games anymore. The player-character's answers centre around a machine not working anymore or missing, to which the ethereal being counters that they know where the machine is. In an attempt to reach the machine, the player is lead through a Torii[11] and reaches the puzzle Coda created, which they instructs the ethereal being on how to get through. The use of the puzzle door is significant, as it can be seen as the manifestation of his creative struggle, as he seems to continually return to using the door instead of moving on and creating something different. As such, the use of the puzzle door in Mobius can be a reference to Wreden and his presence in Coda's game development. By acknowledging that he does not enjoy creating video games anymore, he could hope to move past the door rather than crashing into it. The use of the door in Island goes beyond this, so as to practically demonstrate the issue with Wreden's presence in Coda's creative process. It is revealed in Tower that it is Wreden who is adding the lamp posts to the levels, not Coda. As such, the lamp post found in Island is of special interest. The player-character moves through two Torii, signifying the move from the ordinary to the sacred, after which they reach the puzzle door. As such, it seems fair to assume the area following the Torii is to be considered sacred, yet once the player

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[11] In Shinto religion, the Torii "signals the transition from the profane to the sacred, as it is usually located at the entrance to Shinto shrines, though it isn't rare to find them even at the entrance of Buddhist temples." (HubJapan, n.d.).

reaches the prison at the very end of the level, there is a lamp post next to it. This would require Wreden to go into the game files and change them, thereby practically breaking the game open in order to change it. This action can be seen as Wreden desecrating Coda's sacred space, the space for his self-expression, which hurts him, a theme further explored through the earlier analysis of Machine. Once the puzzle is finished, the player is lead through another Torii, which then leads to a room wherein the walls consist of the conversation lines of both Mobius and Island. The ethereal being then tells the player-character to "say that game development is simple and joyous and that you love it 100% of the time." (Wreden, 2015, Island). This, as the player-character points out, is not true, but they ultimately heed the instructions of the ethereal being. Every time the player chooses to say something in line with the instructions, the walls full of words get broken down, revealing more walls similar to the first. As they break down the walls, the sound of crying will become louder and louder until the player finally breaks through the third wall after which a prison identical to the one found in Escape is revealed with a woman sitting inside, who, presumably, is the source of the crying as it gets louder the closer the player-character is to her. In essence, Island seems to signify the need to dig deeper into oneself, one's sacred space, and face what is hurting them. As such, through Mobius, the door represented the impending crash and, as such, the impending culmination of the issue, if not addressed. In Island, passing through the door instead of crashing into it, could be interpreted as moving in to truly face the problem. The problem will be reached either way, so it is a matter of how one approaches it. This is also why the ethereal being has the player-character lie about their feelings around video game development; in order to actually make them feel it, to break down the walls to get to the deeper issue, which they have walled off behind the dialogue of the games. As such, both Mobius and Island can be seen as pushing the player towards deeper inwards reflection, as they show the player recognisable feelings of having to face an issue that one tried to look away from in the beginning, but have to face in the end.

On the basis of both the aesthetic and ludological observations made above, the conceptual message that *The Beginner's Guide* seeks to deliver is one that concerns itself with the ways, in which, people perceive not just themselves but also others, and how that perception may cause us to act in ways that, despite the best intentions, cause more harm than good. As

such, it is important to keep in mind that one's own perception or idea of certain aspects in life is not the only or pure truth, but that there are many which we may not be able to see before the damage has been done. Furthermore, arguably, *The Beginner's Guide* also wants to address how people's actions and general doings both can and cannot define the entire picture: Coda might have enjoyed making eerie prison games and still be healthy and happy, whereas Wreden's actions were harmful to his relationship with Coda despite wanting to help, which is also rather apparent if one contemplates the messages left by Coda for Wreden in chapter 16, Tower. In full, the messages read:

> Dear Davey, thank you for your interest in my games. I need to ask you not to speak to me anymore. I wonder at times whether you think I am making these games for you. You've so infected my personal space that it's possible I did begin to plant solutions in my work somewhere, hidden between games. If there was an answer, a meaning, would it make you any happier? Would you stop taking my games and showing them to people against my wishes? Giving them something that is not yours to give? Violating the one boundary that keeps me safe? Would you stop changing my games? Stop adding lampposts to them? Would you simply let them be what they are? When I am around you I feel physically ill. You desperately need something and I cannot give it to you. I literally do not have it. Struggling to come up with new ideas is not making me depressed. Low points are just a part of the process. The fact that you think I am frustrated or broken says more about you than about me. I realize that this doesn't make sense to you just yet. Which is fine, you're not my problem to solve. But I do hope that one day it clicks, and that you make peace with this thing you are wrestling. And when you finally see what I am talking about: don't say anything. (Wreden, 2015, Tower)

As such, our person and well-being are not necessarily defined by our actions, but actions can have consequences for our person. Thus, this interpretation of the game's message gives rise to the notion of *The Beginner's Guide* as harbouring salient aesthetics that pertain to self-exploration, self-discovery, and self-identification by using the narrative to address a variety of issues that can be somewhat relatable for anyone who decides to interact with *The Beginner's Guide*.

3.5 Part Conclusion

With the above analysis in mind, the following characteristics can be said to have been observed through the analysis in relation to this master's thesis' comprehensive framework:

Production	Created by independent creator, Davey Wreden.
Form	Avant-garde, metafictional and metareferential, epistolary
Mechanics	Has a limited set of mechanics in order to allow the player to focus more on its conceptual message. However, the mechanics will, at points, be abstracted to a minor degree.
Aesthetics	Primarily self-discovery. Can also cause the player to feel fear, joy, sadness, as well as push instincts such as self-identification, exploration/curiosity and color appreciation. Will at times introduce in-game components that further one emotion; however, the game will abandon this; thus, leaving the player deprived of a particular aesthetic. The player will be challenged mentally by the game's aesthetics, but none of the mentioned aesthetics will cause enough emotional turmoil for the player to make them stop engaging with the game for this reason.
Content	Features content that explores game design, metaphysical questions and the human condition.
Entertaining experience	Does contain humorous and entertaining content.
Aesthetic experience	Yes.

Through an exhaustive analysis, covering the metafictional expression of *The Beginner's Guide*, its avant-garde strategies and aesthetic properties, the video game has been found to feature many of the qualities proposed that art games could consist of in the theory section; wherefore, the game could be considered an art game as well. However, before being able to conclude anything, there are still a few problematic areas which are in need of discussion.

4. Discussion

As stated in the theory section, John Dewey attributed a great deal of importance to the notion of interactivity as part of his reconceptualisation of aesthetic experience; wherefore, his aesthetic theory appears especially interesting to consider in relation to video games as an interactive medium. However, since Dewey did not have the possibility to consider or include video games in *Art as Experience*, this project needs to contemplate a few things in this regard. Through the analysis of *The Beginner's Guide*, it was established how said game harbours meta-aspects that have great significance in terms of the text's expression, not only because these set the game apart from mainstream games but also due to the ways, in which, the player interacts with it and is affected by it. As such, in order to discuss both *The Beginner's Guide* and art games as capable of facilitating or providing an aesthetic experience, this project will take the concept of aesthetic experience from a contemporary standpoint as well as from a metafictional or metareferential perspective into account.

No matter what philosophy on art one subscribes to, arguably, one will find that criticism will be likely to address certain areas where a given aesthetic framework lacks the potential to provide answers in a manner that is satisfactory in all matters. Granted, this assumption is made on the basis of scholars, including the goals set for this project, seeking to examine the application of theoretical frameworks onto media that such frameworks do not take into account. However, in doing so, exciting new approaches have been made and are being produced in the moment of writing, hence, allowing for multiple ways of discussing an intractable concept such as art. For the longest time, the notion of art and the aesthetic theory that followed were made in relation to the 'fine arts', omitting the popular arts as they emerged; thus, spawning a long line of scholars who have attempted to rectify this apparent negligence (cf. Bratkowski, 2010; Kirkpatrick 2011; Cardwell 2013; and Sharp, 2015). John Dewey was also one such scholar, and his aesthetic framework has provided this project with the means to approach, arguably, one of the most popular mediums found in popular culture through aesthetic philosophy. Although not fully mimicking a Duchampian state, in which everyday objects, such as a urinal, could be art, Dewey sought to bring merit to the idea that art could encompass more than just the fine art.

Dewey did so by contemplating the role of experience or, as Shusterman would describe it, "[Dewey's] goal was to break the stifling hold of what he called "the museum conception of art," which compartmentalizes the aesthetic from real life." (1997, p. 33). Of course, when drawing on Dewey in this project, it is not a matter of merely having video games gain a spot in a museum; that would be unproductive since video games have been exhibited for years[12]. On the contrary, it has to be seen in a larger picture, in which video games, at least in this project's opinion, ought to be recognised for its potential and for what has been done with the medium despite the fact that it is mainly used to entertain the masses. As such, an aesthetic angle, being Dewey's notion of an aesthetic experience, on the matter at hand seems a fitting addition to the overall discussion.

However, as argued by Richard Shusterman, one might find that the presence of aesthetic experience in Anglo-American philosophy has declined during the twentieth century; thus, the concept may have faced its "demise" (1997, p. 29). For instance, Shusterman highlights how conflicting views have caused "deep confusion about this concept's diverse forms and theoretical functions." (1997, p. 29), causing a lack of coherency in terms of what has been considered a "univocal concept" (1997, p. 32). Furthermore, Shusterman identifies how art may be "*in extremis*", much like Adorno did in arguing that art needed to reinvent itself; wherefore, despite his assessment that aesthetic experience may have been somewhat abandoned, Shusterman also emphasises the importance of redeeming the concept's purpose as to not let it perish. Thus, by regaining confidence in the concepts qualities, aesthetic experience can "[restore] both our ability and inclination for the sorts of vivid, moving, shared experience that one once sought in art." (Shusterman, 1997, p. 39). This project acknowledges that it will neither be able to confirm the predicament put forth by Shusterman or procure a univocal definition of aesthetic experience to help solve the aforementioned issues. It is, however, still this project's contention that, even if aesthetic experience has reached a limbo state, said concept is of importance and should be held in high regard. This also appears to be the case for other scholars who, despite a potential terminological crisis, have continuously explored the applicability of aesthetic experience onto

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[12] See, especially, Sharp's chapter on Game Art in *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art* (2015, pp. 19-49).

other media than the fine arts to evaluate such media as art, despite doing so being a rather contentious matter.

In particular, television has, much like video games, been a central topic of academic engagement for some time now. Thus, what may initially have been designed for entertainment purposes has come to flourish over the years, sparking terms such as "Quality TV" (McCabe & Akass, 2007) or "Complex TV" (Mittell, 2015) that are all directed towards describing how the television medium has developed new forms of expression, and how audiences interact with these. Particularly, television has also been scrutinised in relation to its aesthetic capabilities, including that of aesthetic experience; wherefore, it makes a good comparative medium in relation to video games. As stated by Sarah Cardwell, "[s]ince the early 2000s, the term 'television aesthetics' has become increasingly conspicuous in television studies. It is used primarily to denote and demarcate both a particular attitude to the televisual medium, and a distinctive approach to the study of television programmes." (2013, p. 23). As such, as a popular medium, television is not held in high regard when it comes to applying an aesthetic notion that could assimilate that found in the philosophical branch associated with fine art. For instance, Cardwell highlights how the sceptic, Matt Hills, proposes that television scholars undertake "popular aesthetics" in relation to television instead of continuing on their current trajectory that borders on "aesthetics proper" (2013, pp. 24-25; p. 28-29). One of the main issues that Cardwell further addresses is "[t]elevision's commercial basis and its social function" because such notions work against aesthetic principles from a philosophical point of view (2013, pp. 29-30). As such, when Cardwell compares the television medium to a framework such as the one found in Collingwood's *The Principles of Art*, she must assess that television leans more towards "entertainment (or amusement) rather than art proper." (2013, pp. 30-31). As such, television can have aesthetic qualities; however, Cardwell is not able to definitively argue that television can offer an aesthetic experience (2013, pp. 30-31). Another reason for this, which Cardwell also points to, is the aforementioned issue of not having a univocal definition of aesthetic experience; hence, television scholars have attempted to "distinguish aesthetic experience from enjoyment gained from entertainment or other sources of pleasure." (2013, p. 32). As such, instead, there is a tendency among television scholars to evaluate certain popular media in terms of high or low

(Jaramillo, 2013, pp. 67-69), to which high "implies a level of art considered to have a superior value, socially and aesthetically"; and low implies an "inferior value." (Danesi, 2008, p. 5). Similarly, Jim Collins operates with the term high-pop, being "in large part, a reaction against the sordidness of aggressive mass-marketing and blockbuster entertainment" (2002, location 49-56[13]), to which, he identifies how high-pop "[transforms] *Culture* into mass entertainment." (location 115) through "appropriation not just of specific icons or canonical texts but entire protocols for demonstrating taste and social distinction." (location 122).

Contemplating the different aspects introduced above, the concept of an aesthetic experience may have been abandoned due to the lack of a univocal definition that can be utilised either exclusively for the fine arts or for both the fine arts and popular arts. However, as Shusterman argues, there are benefits to keeping the concept alive and attempting to rework it, because that would allow academia to keep assessing the value of both individual texts and, perhaps, entire media. Furthermore, video games seem analogous to television in many regards, for instance, being confined to a particular form of categorisation due to dominating characteristics such as its entertaining dimension. However, in this regard, it seems to be a fairly parochial attitude to disregard popular media in terms of their origins and main usage since this would, arguably, cause restrictions that could prove problematic in further discussion. Meanwhile, such a stance also appears to indicate that, especially, popular media cannot develop beyond their current form – a view that this master's thesis does not share. The analogy between video games and television also seems to highlight the same line of issues related to postulating either media as art, especially, if one seeks to utilise an aesthetic approach that involves aesthetic experience. However, the concept of high-pop may be worth pondering in terms of dealing with some of the aforementioned issues, mainly, because Collins's definition establishes a relation between high culture and pop culture that could be reworked in terms of aesthetic frameworks. Thus, in an attempt to come full circle, the following can be considered. Despite the critique of *Art as Experience*'s tendency to be partially equivocal in certain areas, Dewey's line of thought allows for, potentially, any work, should it hold enough aesthetic quality, to be *considered* art; however, that does not necessarily mean that a given work *is* to be considered art. Dewey's goal

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[13] In this context, "Location" is a system of reference in flowable, epub-format ebooks, in this instance, Kindle.

of bringing back art to a state where man can once more touch and mould the concept, as opposed to behold it as sacrosanct or merely beyond reach, appears somewhat needed if both art and aesthetic experience are on the brink of demise, abandonment, or some other critical condition. As the modernist or postmodern tendencies have managed to deteriorate the idea of the aesthetic through time, pushing it towards becoming increasingly abstract, the concept of art can be seen as having deteriorated with it. In other words, the attempts at pinning down the exact nature of art and the aesthetic has pushed it to reinvent itself to such a degree that it had to leave the aesthetic, or at least some of it, behind. However, as presented in the theory section, the idea of a more normative theory of art may be a more appropriate attempt at understanding it. Dewey's focus on aesthetic experience through interactivity as a key feature in his framework appears rather pertinent in terms of contemporary culture, in which many different media are interacted with in various ways, both in terms of the physical frame and how the living creature comes into contact with expressive objects. Furthermore, if one can accept Collins's notion that popular culture media are purposely reworking certain characteristics, traditionally attributed to art proper, then arguably, it seems pertinent to suggest that potential appropriations can cause popular media, such as video games and television, to provide players and viewers with aesthetic experiences. Thus, if one grants this premise, then, bringing Dewey into contemporary discussion may help further such a conceptual notion because his theory can be applied to the popular arts.

Having discussed the relevance and possibility of an aesthetic experience in contemporary society, the logical next point of discussion is to look at whether or not an aesthetic experience is possible through a work with metafictional qualities to it. As explained in the theory section, the aesthetic of metafiction lies in its ability to split and unify the reader with the work, defamiliarising them from said work. However, if, as according to Dewey, the aesthetic experience is founded upon an immersive experience with a pervading emotional quality, it poses the question of whether the act of being split from the work one is interacting with is inherently at odds with the notion of emotional engagement. As such, it is important to discuss whether or not the aesthetic experience is able to embrace metafictional qualities.

Looking back on the theory section, it is possible to see both areas of difference and of overlap between aesthetic experience and metafictionality. In essence, Dewey's idea of the aesthetic experience comes down to the interaction between the living creature and an expressive object, one which holds a pervading quality, which can be reflected upon once the experience has been consummated. Conversely, the aesthetic of metafiction, as presented by Vachon, lies in its ability to make the reader aware of their presence in said work or make them aware of the act of reading. As such, the reader is defamiliarised with their normal way of reading or their role as the reader of the text; whereby, they are split from the work. For this dynamic of splitting and unifying to work, however, the splitting has to be weighed with the unifying factors, meaning that the reader can, in essence, only be split from the work if they were unified to begin with. Furthermore, if the work at hand simply pushes to split the reader from the work without ever unifying them with it, then, it seems safe to assume that the reader will either have to push to try to understand or interpret the work, or simply give up on this task; wherefore, the unifying factor of the dynamic seems instrumental in metafiction. Said unifying dynamic represents the recognisable characteristics of the text, with which the text allows the reader to immerse themselves, only to then make metareferences that will make the reader aware of the fact that these characteristics are present and working. Much like in the narrative formal avant-garde, described by Schrank, the reader is then set adrift as they are defamiliarised from the work and will attempt to gain footing again by interpreting upon the text. However, setting the reader adrift in this way would seem to logically go against the idea of immersing them in the text, as they are being made distinctly aware of the fact that they are attempting to immerse themselves in an object which is purposely structured. Laying bare these structures, revealing them to the reader, could then abruptly break the immersion or challenge the readers expectations in such a way that it would ruin the elements in which the reader identifies themselves or otherwise immerse themselves, as they now become explicitly aware of the tools, with which, the text aims to induce feelings in the reader. Speaking of such a narrative structure as well as postmodern literature, Morten Kyndrup writes that

> Italo Calvino's *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* is a beautiful example. The scepticism towards representation which had apparently forced the greater parts of high modernism, to not only turn its back on representation by cancelling any straight representational connection between the

artefacts and our world – but furthermore, to frenetically insist on the demonstration of this "impossibility" of representation again and again, through intrusive experimental deplorations in the scale of 1:1 – that scepticism was seemingly gone. (2016, pp. 28-29).

In *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, the reader is made sharply aware of their presence in the text, as it speaks directly to the reader attempting to narrate what the reader should do: "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. [...] Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!"" (Calvino, 1981, p. 3). This type of opening to a work will, practically inevitably, frustrate the reader as they attempt to make meaning of what they are actually about to read, as very few works are as direct in their addressment of the reader; wherefore, they will also struggle to find their place within this narrative. This frustration, upon superficial reflection, would also seem to inherently clash with the idea of aesthetic experience since Dewey put forward that an aesthetic experience cannot consist of extreme emotions. As such, should the work prove sufficiently frustrating for the reader, then, it would seem that an aesthetic experience would not be possible, as the reader would be split so far from the work that they either cannot get emotionally immersed in it, or they might abandon reading it altogether. However, the frustration found in reading metafiction and the frustration referred to when speaking of extreme emotions are not the same in the least. One refers to a mental state of attempting to produce meaning in a work which actively resists the act of immersion, while the other refers to a level of anger. As such, the different characteristics of the frustration brings two different scenarios to mind. It comes as no surprise that if a work proves sufficiently anger-inducing so as to emotionally frustrate the reader, then an aesthetic experience will not necessarily be feasible. Conversely, the frustration of attempting to find meaning in a text that tries to hold the meaning out of mind's reach could actually be seen as helping to facilitate such an experience. By doing so, the text forces the reader into a state of interpretation as they attempt to grasp its meaning, and where it is going next. This activity in and of itself can be seen as holding aesthetic quality as long as the reader is still engaged with the work at hand. While they may seem dissimilar, the experience of reading a non-metafictional work and a metafictional one may simply differ in the areas of meaning the reader tries to get to grips with. While the non-metafictional work may hold meaning through its narrative content or structure, the

metafictional work can hold meaning not only the same narrative content or structure, but furthermore on a self-reflexive level above that structure. This self-reflexivity challenges the reader as they attempt to grasp not only the meaning of the narrative itself but also its structural properties and traditional narratological tools as they are turned inside out so as to make them clear to said reader. Bruno Trentini presents a similar point about trying to make meaning of a painting within a painting or a picture within a picture:

> Drawing a two-dimensional representation in a picture allows the artist to exploit the medium and manages to highlight the difference between representation and presentation. Therefore, painting metapictures means managing to create pictures with a reflective approach. Herein lies the difficulty: the ''meta'' seems to deny the characteristics of the picture as a picture in order to relegate it as a proto-text; but, simultaneously, it seems to be an efficient way to achieve an understanding of what a picture is.[...] Thus, when one is looking at a metapicture, does one apprehend it as a picture or as something dealing with a picture? [...] Thus, once the ''metapicture'' quality of a picture nesting another picture is perceived, its quality as a picture fades away to the benefit of the picture to which it relates. This is not anymore a picture, but this is like a speech. Conversely, since a picture does not provide speech, its qualities of meta vanish if the metapicture is seen just as a picture. However, the appeal of the interpretation of a metapicture precisely lies in the fact that the interpretation concerns a picture and does not concern something else. Therefore, to apprehend a picture both as a picture and concerning a picture, it has to be a self-referential picture. (2014, p. 4)

In essence, when one perceives a metapicture, they attempt to understand said picture as either a picture or a picture about pictures, but the appeal of trying to interpret a metapicture lies in the latter understanding of being about them. In the same way, *The Beginner's Guide* can either be seen as a game or a game about games, the latter being the more engaging approach to it; wherefore, the game also has to be self-referential or self-reflexive. Attempting to then interpret the work would entail a level of metacognition, further described by Trentini:

> The metacognition involved in the aesthetic experience of metapictures takes a different form. Its cognitive act not only involves the so-called high-level processes, but also explains why an aesthetic experience is possible: the metacognition does not occur ''intellectually, through the consciousness of our intentional activity,'' but ''through the mere inner sense and sensation.'' (2014, p. 7)

While Trentini makes use of Kant, not Dewey to arrive at this conception of the aesthetic experience, the two concepts are not too different in nature. Much like the quotes, Trentini uses

from Kant, Dewey is also of the understanding that the aesthetic experience is emotionally led, not necessarily intellectually led. However, Dewey instead describes these as the pervading quality of the experience, which can only be named upon reflection once the experience is over. As such, Dewey's idea of the aesthetic can still be seen as applicable when discussing metafiction and the metacognitive mindset one enters when trying to make sense of a work of metafiction. This leaves one with the final question of whether or not the idea of being split from the metafictional work would inhibit the facilitation of an aesthetic experience. However, once again the openness of Dewey's theory proves useful. In his description of the aesthetic experience, he also defines how pauses have instrumental value in how an aesthetic experience runs its course, as it helps define the experience overall:

> In ordinary life, much of our pressing forward is impelled by outside necessities, instead of an onward motion like that of waves of the sea. Similarly, much of our resting is recuperation from exhaustion; it, too, is compelled by something external. In rhythmic ordering, every close and pause, like the rest in music, connects as well as delimits and individualizes. A pause in music is not a blank, but is a rhythmic silence that punctuates what is done while at the same time it conveys an impulsion forward, instead of arresting at the point which it defines. In looking at a picture or reading a poem or drama, we sometimes take the same feature in its defining and closing quality, sometimes in its transitive office. (Dewey, 19XX, ~p. 149)

In this context, being split from the work can be seen as a way to pause and reflect upon the structure or characteristics of a work or, in other words, it is the space wherein there is room for the metacognitive mindset to truly take hold as the reader is split from the work, made aware of their presence in the work and thereby pushed to interpret the work as more than a work, but a work about works. Looking back upon Dewey's analogy of experience as a river, the homogenous ponds between the sections of rivers signify the spaces or pauses in an experience, whereby the rivers can be seen as signifying the unifying sections of the metafictional work, wherein the reader is attempting to find their place after having been defamiliarised. As such, the ponds can be seen as the moments wherein the reader is split from the work, set adrift and grasping for something to understand or reflect upon in terms of the metafictional elements and their meanings. In essence, one is trying to grasp how the work is reflecting other works within it. The ponds function as a means of letting the reader not only reflect upon the river through which they have just travelled, but also reflect on what may be coming next, pushing them to

dive back in. As such, "[however] paradoxical it may seem, apprehending a [metafictional work] means experimenting with the [work] in an aesthetic way. ''Aesthetic'' because individuals become aware of their own perceptions: their experiences are reflexive ones." (Trentini, 2014, p. 8). In conclusion, the aesthetic of metafiction and the aesthetic experience as seen from Dewey's perspective are not incommensurable despite superficially seeming so.

Thus, having provided argumentation not only for Dewey's relevance today but also for the possibility of an aesthetic experience through a metafictional work, it begs the question of whether or not a video game, in this context *The Beginner's Guide*, can provide an aesthetic experience. As such, this subject will be explored through questions such as whether or not the game possesses enough 'gameness' in order to be classified as a video game, how Dewey's aesthetic framework allows for a characterisation of *The Beginner's Guide* as an aesthetic experience.

According to Jesper Juul, "video games are the art of failure, the singular art form that sets us up for failure and allows us to experience and experiment with failure." (2013, p. 30). When asking whether or not *The Beginner's Guide* can be considered a video game, this take on the video game form could be seen as the main argument against it. The video game medium can be seen as uniquely structured around its ability to let the player fail and process this failure in a context which does not carry the same tangible consequences as failure in other tasks outside of games − a notion akin to the conception of games found in Huizinga's theory of the magic circle. Juul, however, exemplifies what the player seeks from the games they play by saying that "Apter claims that we seek low arousal in normal goal-directed activities such as work, but high arousal, and hence challenge and danger, in activities performed for their own sake, such as games." (Juul, 2013, p. 61). As such, it seems safe to assume that Juul sees the core of video games being that the player seeks to be challenged, to overcome an obstacle and either reap the rewards of it or otherwise be considered to have 'won' the game. One could assume that such a structure would be largely attributed to, or expected of, online competitive multiplayer games, but Juul says the following regarding failing in singleplayer video games:

> The explanation may be that we think of single-player games as designed experiences that we
> expect to be correctly balanced without having to seek additional challenges ourselves. [...] To
> decide to play a linear single-player game is to decide to seek high arousal and unnecessary work.

> While playing the game, players tend to seek the easiest path and try to avoid failure. This matches the view of the paradox of failure as the combination of a short-term goal of avoiding failure and an aesthetic goal of engaging in an activity that includes failure. The task of the game designer is to balance these short-and long-term goals by making sure that the path of least resistance is also the most interesting one. (Juul, 2013, p. 62).

The Beginner's Guide can hardly be said to pose such a challenge. As has been covered previously, the game features what can, at best, be considered a minimal amount of mechanics as the player is simply allowed to walk around and interact through the use of a single button, with a few extra buttons added to control the oft used chat system in the game. As such, *The Beginner's Guide* cannot be said to feature many, if any beyond Mobius, moments featuring a concrete fail-state wherein the player has failed to reach a given goal. Instead, the player is presented with rather straightforward mini-games, which simply explore a thought or an expression of the artist. From this point of view, then, *The Beginner's Guide* would not be considered a video game, as it does not feature the necessary rules and systems to facilitate the tense or goal-oriented atmosphere of a concrete fail-state. This point of view on what constitutes a video game seems to stem from their connection with the common game played by children or the more classic board games, wherein the competitive elements are very pronounced, whether speaking of a game which pits the players directly against each other, like *Monopoly* (Hasbro, 1935), or pits them against the game itself, such as *Pandemic* (Z-Man Games, 2008). However, as covered in the video game theory section, the player emotionally attaches themselves to the goals of the game – a point somewhat furthered by Juul in *The Art of Failure*: "The goals of the player are thus aligned with the goals of the protagonist; when the player succeeds, the protagonist succeeds. In games with no single protagonist, the player is typically asked to guard the interests of a group of people, a city, or a world." (Juul, 2013, p. 27). While it still largely refers to the formal understanding of video games as closely related to other common types of games, as Juul later writes that "[w]hen the player is happy to have completed the game, the fictional protagonist tends to be equally happy because the protagonist has also fulfilled his or her personal goals; when the player fails, both player and protagonist are unhappy." (2013, p. 91), he is, by extension, referring to a win-state and a fail-state, respectively. However, while it does refer to games which feature these states, the statement of player aligning themselves with

the game's protagonist becomes no less true of more mechanically restrictive games. As such, in the case of *The Beginner's Guide*, while it does not carry the mechanical depth some would expect of a video game aimed towards a tension of winning or losing, it does, however, have the narrative depth to not make this seem out of place. As explored in the theory section, many video games recognised by some critics as art games due to the metaphysicality of the subject matter they approach are mechanically simple so as to allow the player to focus their intellectual energy on the dilemmas the game is working through. As such, *The Beginner's Guide*'s metafictional narrative of its author speaking directly to you, the player, makes the alignment of the player and in-game character an easier transition as the player, in essence, takes on the role of themselves within the narrative; wherefore, they can expect to be led by their own thoughts when being shown the games, Wreden wishes to show them. As such, they can help facilitate an immersive experience through the feeling of complicity. As pointed to in the introduction, Sharp and Bjørkelo share the idea that the player's feeling of complicity is one of the instrumental tools of video games in making the player feel engaged with the activity at hand – a point which Juul agrees with, as he explains:

> "Brathwaite has described the experience as one of complicity: 20 players suddenly realize that they have been working toward an abhorrent goal. As it turns out, this use of deception and revelation opens up a whole range of new experiences, where the discomfort of having worked for something unpleasant turns out to be a strong emotional device unique to games. The experience is not one of trivialization, but of feeling painfully involved in an event in a way we do not experience in merely fictional representations such as cinema or literature." (2013, p. 109)

While not necessarily a purely narratological tool, the player feeling complicit with the actions they have made within the game cannot be solely tied to the mechanics of the game at hand either. Both parts of the game have, to a certain extent, equal opportunities of expression in terms of complicity in video games, simply due to the fact that the game, as per the definition provided in section 2.3.1, has to contain both in at least some capacity. Throughout the analysis of *The Beginner's Guide*, the expressive power of the few mechanics, the game *does* contain, aligns most oft with the short message that the level is trying to present, a few times even abstracting or restricting, these mechanics in order to change their expression within the given game presented in the level. As such, the player is drawn into this game world wherein they can let themselves

become complicit within the game, yet it does not carry any real-world consequences, a point which Juul once again corroborates: "Such is the fundamental duality of failure in games: games can by their very definition be played without any tangible consequences, but they give us a license to care about playing even when it has no obvious benefits." (2013, p. 121). While this statement, once again, is directed towards games that feature a win- and fail-state, the latter part of it is no less true for games in general as seen from the perspective chosen in this thesis. Through both the theory section as well as through the analysis, it has become increasingly apparent that *The Beginner's Guide* fits with the general notion of a video game, as it presents a subset of reality with a set of rules for the player to subjugate themselves to. Simultaneously, *The Beginner's Guide* allows players to have the agency, they would, presumably, find appropriate for the story at hand - in this context being fairly little, as said game is structured around the player being presented with a series of levels by the narrator. As such, the challenge of the game does not consist the player's innate ability to coordinate their hands and eyes with precision but instead lies in presenting a more cerebral challenge to them. In essence, the depth of the mechanics of the game at hand, while important, do not solely decide whether or not a work can be called a video game. The interplay between the mechanics, their expression and the ways, in which, they allow the player to engage with the game world and, by extension, the narrative presented through it, plays a much greater role in this regard. In conclusion, *The Beginner's Guide* should not be considered as lacking the interactivity or mechanics necessary for it to be classified as a video game.

Contemplating the playing of *The Beginner's Guide* in relation to Dewey's notion of having an aesthetic experience, conversely, it is possible to see how said video game fits this concept. In order to arrive at such a conclusion, one must recall some of the main characteristics that Dewey highlighted in his aesthetic framework. For one, Dewey focused on the aesthetic experience as an interactive process, in which the living creature will have to interact with an expressive object. Such a course of action may involve moments and pauses, think the river metaphor, which allows the creature to contemplate the process. Furthermore, said process is characterised by a specific quality that can only be addressed after the aesthetic experience is over. As such, once a potential aesthetic experience is over, the creature can reflect on it until

reaching a state of satisfaction or fulfilment. Thus, the following can be stated: As an expressive object, *The Beginner's Guide* presents an interesting case. The game's loose, puzzle-like structure, although constructed with a specific purpose, combined with the unreliability and complex presence of the narrator, pose a rather interesting gaming experience to undertake. In commencing with *The Beginner's Guide*, the player will likely find the game easy and understandable. *The Beginner's Guide*'s controls are fairly easy, thus, the mechanics are not really an issue for the player, perhaps, with the exception of Backwards. Playing through Coda's games do not possess challenges similar to those found in mainstream games. Hence, there are no actual obstacles to tackle; however, the player will be presented with a challenging use of their ability to comprehend. Whether or not the player pays special attention to the actual meta-nature of *The Beginner's Guide*'s, despite the fact that it is present from the beginning of the game, said player is forced to use a high level of recognition and perception in order to attain some form of clarity in their playthrough. Although, as touched upon earlier, meta-phenomena can cause a splitting-and-unifying relationship between player and game, thus, it can result in the player experiencing emotional turmoil due to them being deprived of the full aesthetic experience. However, as argued, meta-phenomena combined with the notion of an aesthetic experience can function in tandem; wherefore, when engaging with *The Beginner's Guide*, the player will need to keep interacting with the game without being overcome with extreme emotions, such as irritation or anger, that could result in them abandoning the game altogether. As such, if the player sticks with the game and is able to achieve a sense of immersion, despite the complexity of *The Beginner's Guide* and the appearance of meta-phenomena, they will likely aspire towards making sense of the game by playing it through to the end, maybe even because video game players are, to some extent, used to experiencing failure, and that such a notion may drive them to decisively complete the game in question.

The analysis of *The Beginner's Guide* has pointed to a variety of emotional reactions that a player may experience as a result of playing. In arguing that *The Beginner's Guide* constitutes an aesthetic experience, one might believe that the emotional response gained from playing is an overly positive one; however, this is not the case here, and, arguably, anyone who has ever tried *The Beginner's Guide* will probably concur. In order to elucidate this point, one could consider

Northrop Frye and his work on art as a process. Frye distinguished between the Aristotelian and the Longinian point of view on literature, to which he denotes the former as "literature as product", and the latter as "literature as process" (2000 [1957], p. 66). The Aristotelian view – an aesthetic view – deals with catharsis, "[implying] the detachment of the spectator, both from the work of art itself and from the author", and, through which "emotions are purged by being attached to objects; where they are involved with the response they are unattached and remain prior conditions in the mind" (Frye, 2000 [1957], p. 66). One the other hand, the Longinian view is concerned with how "the external relation between author and reader becomes more prominent, and when it does, the emotions of pity and terror are involved or contained rather than purged." (Frye, 2000 [1957], p. 66). Frye further defined how said feelings occur as "ecstatic moments" that are absorbed and individually responded to (2000 [1957], p. 326; p. 67). As such, contemplating this in terms of *The Beginner's Guide*, two points, in particular, can be made from the Longinian view. For one, the player will likely feel a form of empathy, sympathy, or both towards Coda as Wreden's story seeks to establish a character falling apart through his work. As such, it is possible to see certain narrative points and metareferential comments as designed to cause a sense of pity towards Coda, thus, making such points ecstatic. Secondly, upon completing *The Beginner's Guide*, the player will, arguably, have a difficult time sorting out their feelings. The game does not offer a happy ending where forgiveness and restoration of friendships are foregrounded; in actuality, the game leaves the player without a decisive ending. This radical choice is, certainly, part of *The Beginner's Guide*'s experiential design; however, the player is left to ponder a great deal of emotions that vary between pity and a sense of sadness due to how the narrative ends. Here, the potential sense of pity or sympathy is not directed towards Coda, but Wreden; wherefore, the players will likely find themselves in an emotional state that is mostly characterised by negative feelings or a general ambivalence. As a result, the consummation of the aesthetic experience may not be immediate due to the negative emotional response, one might experience upon completing the game. However, just as a tragedy can facilitate an aesthetic experience for theatre audiences, so can *The Beginner's Guide*. Once the game is finished, the player can start pondering and, eventually, find fulfilment in the various features that said game has offered through its gameplay. For one, the player can acknowledge

the creative aspects of *The Beginner's Guide* as one could with potentially any other game, or, if contemplated thoroughly, take notice of many of the aspects that this master's thesis has also pointed to. An example of this could be the notion of *The Beginner's Guide* as promoting an aesthetic that pertains to self-discovery, not only for the characters involved in said game, but also potentially for the players, who may be able to mirror themselves in the different views expressed throughout *The Beginner's Guide*. As such, the combination of both positive and negative emotional reactions gained from playing *The Beginner's Guide* can facilitate an aesthetic experience that can be consummated as a course that not only sets itself apart from everyday life but also can cause the player to consider it a game that has affected their emotional and intellectual state.

As such, concluding that *The Beginner's Guide* can be seen as an aesthetic experience through the Deweyan lens may be the overall goal for this master's thesis; however, it also begs the question of what to do with such findings were they to be considered in a larger context. Since this master's thesis would never argue that all video games can constitute art, it will, however, hold the contention that some video games are capable of providing an experience that can match other works of art. As such, if one can identify video games that hold the same aesthetic expressive power as *The Beginner's Guide*, whether it be mainly through its depth of mechanics, depth of narrative content, or both, it seems fair to assume that other video games would be able to provide an aesthetic experience as well. Therefore, despite Sharp's assessment that there has been an art game movement, which has since ceased to exist, writing the obituary on the notion of video games as art may seem premature. Arguably, the video game industry will keep producing games that are meant to entertain the masses. For as long as people will seek the formulaic kitsch, the video game industry will continue to produce them. However, there will be video games that defy this practice and seek to accomplish something beyond such a goal, as an increasing amount of developers seek the aesthetic structure inherent to video games in order to create an expressive object. Thus, to also provide an answer for Ebert's question of why one would want video games to be classified as art, this master's thesis holds the contention that any medium that has the ability to provide a form of aesthetic experience should not be dismissed

because of their origin in the entertainment industry, but should instead be evaluated on their progress as an expressive medium with unique capabilities setting apart from other art forms.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this master's thesis was to assess whether or not certain video games could constitute an aesthetic experience and, by extension, be labelled art by utilising John Dewey's aesthetic framework to analyse Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide*. To answer the given problem formulation, this master's thesis has relied on its own comprehensive framework that establishes a dichotomy between mainstream games and art games in order to postulate that the latter is capable of providing an aesthetic experience; thus, making it possible to perceive such games as art. To construct said framework, this master's thesis has drawn on traditions of aesthetic philosophy, cultural studies, literary studies, and video game studies to create a diverse way of categorising games.

As such this project started by establishing a broad introduction to the field of aesthetic philosophy, giving short understandings of a myriad of aesthetic philosophers and theorists, ranging from Kant's idea of beauty to Barthes' theory of the death of the author. Through this exploration of different aesthetic approaches, this thesis found Dewey's theory to be the most applicable to the case at hand. In order to establish the categorisation between mainstream games and art games, the latter was chosen to be defined by its ability to provide the player with an aesthetic experience. As such, Dewey's focus on the interaction between the living creature and the expressive objects, as well as his open definition that allows for the inclusion of popular arts along with fine art, made him a prime theorist to draw upon in order to define the aesthetic experience provided by art games. Similarly, by splitting the concept into three parts, *to experience* as a verb, *an experience* as a noun and, of course, *an aesthetic experience*, Dewey's theory has contributed a deeper understanding of the process through which something comes to be remembered as not only an experience but as one with such aesthetic quality that it helps define future aesthetic experiences.

A natural counterpart to art is entertainment, to which the latter concept was included in order to postulate that mainstream games cannot transcend beyond this. From a cultural, industrial and academic perspective, this master's thesis has been operating with a definition of entertainment, in which it is an experience that one voluntarily engages with, either as a commercially produced product or in a freely available form. However, entertainment cannot be considered art, everyday life, truth, intellectual or moral, but it will instead induce positive emotions in those who experience it; thus, feeding mankind's need for happiness.

Beyond entertainment, kitsch media produced merely to amuse its viewer, one finds media which reflects upon these conventions and, thereby, also reflects upon its own structures. To work with *The Beginner's Guide* as a meta-video game and, simultaneously, postulate its capabilities to be considered art, the comprehensive framework has utilised theory pertaining to metafiction as a literary tradition, drawing on the perspectives of William Gass, Robert Scholes, and Patricia Waugh to establish the main characteristics of this type of fiction. The terminology gained from examining the literary tradition concerning metafiction was paired with the work of Werner Wolf and his transmedial notions, metareferences and metalepsis, as well as Erin Vachon's interpretation of the aesthetic of metafiction. On the basis of this, the framework considered the various points raised by scholars within all the respective fields to gain an extended vocabulary for use in the analysis of *The Beginner's Guide* and the discussion on aesthetic experience.

With all of the above in mind, through this thesis' engagement with video game studies, a series of crucial realisations were made. Starting with the general definition of what the video game medium consists of, theorists such as Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., Crawford, Juul, and Salen and Zimmerman were instrumental in establishing a definition of the medium in such a way that it did not become bogged down by any one characteristic in particular. As such, they helped this thesis establish an understanding of video games, which took both the player as well as the game itself into consideration, accounting for the goals of both interactors, so as to establish the open essence of the interactive medium. Next, Hunicke et al. and Dillon provided a comprehensive, yet simple, framework to be used for video game analysis and, additionally, gain a deeper understanding of the interaction between the game and the player. However, this thesis further

used their collective frameworks in order to establish a vocabulary of feelings the player could be expected to feel in different contexts, depending on the genre or goal of the game, which also helped deepen the understanding of the capabilities of the art game category. As such, the only thing left was to explore the artistic possibilities of video games as examined by theorists such as Schrank, Holmes, Parker and Sharp. These theorists provided this thesis with invaluable approaches to understanding how video games have been perceived as art, ranging from the perspective of the avant-garde movement and how they can push forward the video game, to more classic understandings of video games as art. These include the idea of classifying them as art due to the subjects they are able to engage with, the ways in which they engage with them or none of the above, as an art genre will be inherently amorphous and any characteristics attributed to it will be non-universal. With the above as its foundation, this thesis proposed a comprehensive framework consolidating not only the terminology built from the video game studies but incorporating them into the established understanding of both entertainment as well as aesthetic experience. While the framework would never be meant to cement a definition of what art games are, it does seek to provide a working category of characteristics that art games *can* be.

On the basis of the comprehensive framework, this thesis has identified how *The Beginner's Guide* contains a variety of qualities that support the notion of it being, not only a metafictional video game but an art game. *The Beginner's Guide* employs a complex use of narratological and ludological components that are characterised by the ways, in which, they flaunt the game's self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. *The Beginner's Guide* introduces a narrator that defies the ontological levels through direct addressment of the player and by using metareferences that draw the player's attention to the game's own structure and general game composition. Furthermore, in and of itself, the narrator in *The Beginner's Guide* functions on a meta-level by embodying three different roles as author, narrator, and character, establishing a splitting and unifying relationship between the player and itself. Thereby, the player is defamiliarised with the text and pushed towards an interpretive mindset, as they attempt to make meaning of a game that actively attempts to confuse the player. This way of interpreting the game can, as seen through the train of thought analogy used by Dewey, hold powerful aesthetic

qualities. Similarly, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study was how *The Beginner's Guide*'s harbours qualities similar to those found in postmodern or high modernist art. Through *The Beginner's Guide*'s self-conscious and self-reflexive nature, it employs avant-garde strategies through abstraction of both its narrative and its mechanics. By not adhering to the mainstream video game narrative structure, centred around the player, it instead centres its narrative around the narrator and lets him hold the power of progression. This also works to further the frustration felt by the player as they attempt to make meaning of the different metaleptic levels that Wreden is present on. In terms of its limited set of mechanics, the game makes use of radical formal avant-garde strategies in order to occasionally restrict the player's controls in order to further the conceptual expression of the level at hand, deepening the experience of play. The results of examining the meta-aspects in *The Beginner's Guide* show that such qualities are part of furthering the game's aesthetic expression. While the player may experience confusion due to *The Beginner's Guide*'s self-conscious and self-reflexive nature, the player will also experience how said game furthers aesthetics that pertain to colour appreciation, academic engagement and self-discovery. These aesthetic qualities may help the player immerse themselves in *The Beginner's Guide*'s game world; thus, leaving them with emotions to reflect upon finishing the game, whereby they may be able to achieve an aesthetic experience through consummation.

The findings in the analysis has further raised a number of important questions regarding aesthetic experience in the discussion section. Here, the study suggests that the concept of aesthetic experience may be experiencing a form of crisis due to the lack of a univocal definition; however, said concept should be redeemed since it plays an interesting part in the ways cultural phenomena are characterised and categorised. The discussion has further explored the notion of the aesthetic-depriving metafiction in relation to an aesthetic experience. Here, it is suggested that despite metafictional characteristics or use of metareferentiality in the context of video games, these can prove to cause a deeper level of engagement as opposed to quitting the game. This is due to video game players being used to handling game-scenarios that involves winning or failing, as pointed to by Juul in *The Art of Failure*; thus, the inclusion of meta-aspects in video

games may not be able to frustrate the player enough to a point of abandoning the game, allowing the aesthetic experience to eventually conclude.

As such, this thesis has provided a deeper insight into the understanding of certain game types, whereby it has posed a categorisation of mainstream games as well as art games. Thus, this master's thesis has addressed the following problem formulation:

> If video games can be classified as experiential media, how can John Dewey's framework be utilised to determine whether or not such games can constitute an aesthetic experience and, by extension, be labelled art?

This thesis has presented an exhaustive analysis of Davey Wreden's *The Beginner's Guide*, to which it can conclude the following. By utilising this thesis' own comprehensive framework, *The Beginner's Guide* is an aesthetic experience due to its self-reflexive and self-conscious nature. Not only does *The Beginner's Guide* allow the player to immerse themselves in a gaming-experience that causes positive and negative emotional reactions that cannot be named during the experience itself but can only be reflected upon once the experience has been consummated; the game also promotes the use of avant-garde strategies that makes said game resemble postmodern and high modernist art. By virtue of the video game medium's powerful inherent aesthetic qualities as well as the aesthetic of metafiction, whereby the player is split and unified with the game, *The Beginner's Guide* pushes the player towards an interpretive mindset, not only in terms of trying to comprehend the game but also in trying to comprehend the game *about games*. As such, the player not only sees the benefit of trying to determine the expressive power of the different levels presented by Wreden, but they are also presented with an overall experience of a metafictional work. Thus, *The Beginner's Guide* should be considered art, a work which holds such aesthetic quality that it allows the player to immerse themselves and reflect themselves within it through their interaction and eventual consummation. By categorising *The Beginner's Guide* as an art game, both through its individual qualities as well as its inherent medial qualities, it does seem reasonable to conclude that if other games make use of the same inherent qualities to further their own individual expressions, they too can facilitate an aesthetic experience in the player; wherefore, one could also speak of a broader cultural category of video games which would be considered art games.

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