

Teachin' Books Episode 1.6 - Interview with Catherine Nygren / *The Stanley Parable*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:10 Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature... and also sometimes other texts of the video game sort.

I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode I am talking to a very dear friend of mine, Catherine Nygren. Catherine is a course lecturer at McGill University and Champlain Regional College St. Lambert, where she teaches courses introducing students to literature. So yeah, today we are talking about our very first video game on this podcast. I'm sure that there will be more. I hope that there will be more. When I asked Catherine to come on, I asked her really because I've learned a lot about teaching from her over the years, but she came up with the topic or the idea to talk about this game that we're going to talk about today, and I was so excited because I had really hoped that we would get a chance early on in the podcast to talk about a video game and about teachin' video games in literature classrooms. So yeah, actually, for those who don't know, video games are another kind of cultural text that some English instructors, instructors of literature, do incorporate into their classes. So even though game studies is a whole other thing, it's a whole 'nother field, sort of apart from English and literature, which is something that Catherine mentions in the chat. They are also sometimes taught in English classrooms as another kind of cultural text.

I haven't actually taught a video game before. Video games are generally quite scary to me. I hate fighting in video games. So, so I haven't done much in the way of instruction with video games, but I do tell Catherine at the end of this chat, as you'll see, that I am very inspired and feel empowered to teach this particular game. And I'm inspired because she frames her teaching of it so accessibly and so effectively.

02:16 So this is a game called *The Stanley Parable*, which is a "walking simulator" -- language I did not have before Catherine told me about that term -- developed by Davey Wreden and William Pugh. I'm not going to say much about the game here because we go into details about it in the chat. But in the show notes I will throw a couple of links to more info about the game, including a link to a demo that you can download or a trailer that you can watch if you like. The game itself is available on Steam if you want to play for real for real before you sort of get into this chat.

Personally, I thought that the best way to play it was not knowing anything about it ahead of time. Like, I did very little other than watch the trailer. I didn't spoil it for myself at all the first time I played in preparation for this podcast chat. That's the best way to play it, I think, if I can say so myself as a non-gamer. So, this is just a spoiler warning I guess for the upcoming chat and for everything Catherine and I talk about, because even in the very next thing I'm going to say right after the sentence ends, there is a definite game spoiler, so if you care about that kind of thing and you want to play the game unspoiled, stop this track. Stop. Stop it. Just hit the stop button.

Okay so yeah I do want to give a little bit of a content warning. The video game does include a character who, in some playthroughs of the game, dies by suicide. The game itself is a mix of seriousness and humor and tragedy and playfulness and all sorts of feelings. And at some points, it's not even really clear if this character is a character at all, or has a body to sort of die in this particular way, but I still wanted

to give you a heads up, nevertheless, before we get into my chat with Catherine about teachin' The Stanley Parable.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Catherine 4:25

How many times did you play the game when you played through it?

Jess 4:30

So, I was gonna ask you about this. So the first time I played it, I played it just once through and it took me honestly I think it was almost two hours, which now that I've played it twice more only -- so three times in total -- I'm like why did it take me so long? But the reason is is because I had no idea what this game was about, I didn't look up anything I just watched the trailer ahead of time, I was totally trying to get into it spoiler-free. And so I thought in every room there must be something. So I did exactly what the narrator sort of comments upon which is touching every single thing in the room, and I went through so slowly room by room, and then at the end of my, I think almost two hours was my play time that night, at the end of the two hours I actually got stuck. And maybe this is jumping ahead of it, but that's fine: I actually got stuck in in a big black circle. It's like when you, I decided to jump off of the control, sort of like the platform in the control room, or the mind control room, and I couldn't get out of it and then I actually had to look it up and say like is there, like, I looked up, "is there a way to get out of here Stanley Parable." And, at least on the wiki I consulted it said, there's also one last ending that some people get with The Stanley Parable and that is Stanley gets stuck in this dark bottom of the control room and you can't get out and nothing resets and no matter how long you're there, apparently, nothing happens so I was like, of course I would get that after coming through for like almost two hours every room trying to do this carefully. And then I got stuck in that final little just I don't know it's like a dark room. Have you have you done all the endings or are there even a certain amount or is there like infinite or...?

Catherine 6:10

I think there's 19 accepted endings and there's a few other ones that are kind of endings but not really. And they can range from, I think the fastest playthrough that I've done it's like two minutes or less. And the longest one, I have never done this one but it takes four hours. So there's a button that you have to push to stop a baby from crawling into a fire, and you have to do that for two hours.

Jess 6:34

Oh my gosh. Yeah I now remember that, seeing that on the wiki, but... Um okay well I mean, we've already started talking about the game which is awesome but before we get even more into it, do you want to just tell the listeners a little bit about yourself who you are and... yeah?

Catherine 6:49

Yeah. So, yeah, Catherine Nygren. I was born and raised in Saskatchewan and I did both my undergrad and my Master's in the English department at the University of Saskatchewan. And then in 2013, I moved to Montreal to do my PhD at McGill, where I'm still kind of trying to finish up. And my research focuses on 18th century travel writing and digital humanities methods, because I really enjoy that kind of collaborative team-building work, which I think is what also has drawn me to teaching, so I'm actually transitioning now to teaching full-time long term at a CEGEP, which is cbeacs public college system. So it's a kind of combined grade 12 and first year of university. So I'm transitioning out of academia into a primarily pedagogically focused role of being an instructor teaching there.

Jess 7:45

Yay! I don't even know if I actually knew that but that's, that's great. I'm glad to hear about that, and I'm also thinking about how if you're drawn so much to collaborative work and collaborative research, and teaching as collaboration, somehow to me that really speaks to like video games. Like because you know just video games as a text that's especially interactive, maybe? Or as a text that invites collaboration with the gamers to sort of make meaning. It just seems like that's fitting.

Catherine 8:13

Yeah, I mean games that are almost just like movies are often heavily criticized because they're like "well if you're not doing anything if you're not, as a player, if you're not performing an action, then, oh you're just seeing cutscenes, it's just a movie." So there's always kind of that interactive element. And I think that that's especially heightened now with so much attention to multiplayer games, and so many people even who aren't typically gamers playing multiplayer games like even like AOC was playing Among Us. So you know, drawing in like a younger audience, encouraging people to get involved in politics perhaps, to vote. But I think there's something that's really unique about games that people have been setting and questioning for a long time, even like the old when I was first kind of getting into game criticism and and research and things like that, there used to be this debate well are games art? Are games literature? And I think that's mostly kind of old now. Like, yes it is. But that's, yeah, it at least in typical literature classrooms, I don't know if games are taught as often as say poetry or short stories or other elements like that.

Jess 9:29

Yeah I think it's kind of better if we can just start from the assumption that they are a text like any other text, and then what? Where do you go from there, sort of thing? So we talked a little bit about this game already but can you give us a rundown of The Stanley Parable? I myself had not heard of it, I think, unless maybe you've mentioned it to me in the past, but I don't think I'd heard of it and it seems to me as a non-gamer, just putting that out there right now -- you have a non-gamer here! It seems to me... Or at least I play the Sims in Harvest Moon, but not really other games, it seems very unique to me. So could you give us a rundown of The Stanley Parable?

Catherine 10:07

Yes. So I would say that The Stanley Parable kind of falls into a more experimental meta genre of games. So it's not a game like Call of Duty or Fortnite or or kind of these very action based games. If you read about it sometimes it'll be called a "walking simulator," because you're just walking around. And the basic premise of it is that you open the game, and there's this narrator, And he says, "This is the story of a man named Stanley." So you're playing as Stanley and the camera kind of zooms down into Stanley's perspective, and the narrator says, "oh, and you realize you haven't gotten any orders for a while so you stand up and you go try to figure out what's going on." And then, as you experienced, you walk out the door, and then the narrator is constantly saying kind of how you're feeling and where you should go and so you can follow the narrator, and then this really interesting moment happens where you come to a room with two doors and the narrator says, "Stanley took the door on the left." And this is where kind of the crux of the game comes in. Do you go through the door on the left, or do you go through the door on the right? Do you follow what the narrator is saying? And then depending on what you do, there's all these branching endings, you know at least 19 of them, where depending on what you do the story will have a different ending. And the the narrator often refers to it sometimes as being a game but also sometimes as being a story, as well, so it's playing with ideas, overall, about what is a game, what is a story, what, what makes a story effective. Yeah, so the way that I teach it is actually live in class.

Jess 11:50

Oh okay, great, yes. Talk about that because I did wonder that. I think I sent you that in the emails, whether you play it as a group or... yeah.

Catherine 12:00

Yeah. So let me first talk about the structure building up to playing it. So the classes that I teach are typically first-year classes, introduction to literature. So, all the way along we're doing often canonical often more traditional forms that students are familiar with them. So things like short stories and poetry and I build in some variations like Instagram poetry and slam poetry and things like that but we kind of stick to those more traditional forms. And basically on the last day of content for our class, in the syllabus I just say readings going to be done in class. So you know students get a little break, they don't have to prepare, etc. And when they come in, I start our discussion with, well what else could we have studied in this class? So, you know, they'll say things like advertisements or newspapers or movies and

sometimes they'll say manga or Dungeons and Dragons, once or twice students have suggested that. But in the five times that I've taught this game, only once as a student to ever suggested video games.

Jess 13:04

Wow.

Catherine 13:05

As something worthy of study, which I thought is, I'm always kind of struck by because so many of my students play some form of game. So, when they come in I talk about video games very briefly, being like okay so that's, you know, a huge industry, and today we're going to play a video game in class. And sometimes students are like yeah and they're all excited and then some of them, especially in my, in my McGill class which tends to be all English majors and they're there to study literature. So sometimes they're like, why? Okay. Sure. Weird instructor. We've come a long way from Milton, I guess.

So then I have it on my computer, I just hook it up to the monitor, and then I hook up a controller and I asked people to volunteer to play the game. And I emphasize for them that if you have never played a game before, then this is a great opportunity to try it out so I've had people who are expert gamers and you know they're running around and like, they know exactly what to do, right? They're like oh I'm going to tap all these buttons, I'm going to try like do the little crouching thing, and there has to be something in this game, whereas other people are just like you know they might struggle a little bit with the controls at first and they're kind of figuring their way around, but because it is a quote unquote walking simulator, it is really accessible to people who haven't played that many games before, so it really does let multiple perspectives of games and of texts kind of come into the classroom in this interactive environment.

So, we'll play the game. It's interesting because students tend to fall into the same patterns of playing, where usually they do just follow what the narrator says. I try to encourage them, especially in my McGill classes which are only 50 minutes, so it's quite short... my CEGEP classes are almost two hours. So I have more time there, but I emphasize for them, I basically kind of spoil it a little bit for them like don't go look at every single, I hate Mondays mug or try to hit codes on the computers like don't do any of that, at least in this setting, because there are endings, you can get that depend on them, but I kind of encourage them to explore, rather than looking at a lot of the fine, the fine details.

Jess 15:27

That makes sense because the pressures of time in a classroom will also play into what kind of reading you can do a bit or what kind of experience you can have of the text.

Catherine 15:36

Yeah, it's interesting because for the first run the rest of the class tends to be pretty quiet too, or there might be gasps or laughter or that kind of emotional response. In the second and the third run, people tend to comment more, especially when people hesitate. So when the second time, when a new person gets up to play the game and they walk up and they're like, oh door on the right or the left, sometimes people will say go, go to the right. They'll encourage people to kind of make those decisions, which I think is another fascinating layer of if we're thinking about agency and choice of player on the game. And then from audience on player is adds kind of another layer on to it.

Jess 16:21

Yeah, and that's actually like even more, like I was already talking about video games as collaborative in some way because the player, and in this game in particular, the player makes meaning by choosing certain things. But then, yeah, if the player is influenced by others around them like classmates, that's a whole 'nother layer of collaboration. It actually reminds me of the ending, or it's not an ending it's just part of the middle, when you are in the broom closet. So there's a blue broom closet in the game; it's labeled "broom closet." I went in there yesterday when I was playing, and I was checking out every little thing in the broom closet and the narrator sort of comments upon that and is like, you know, you're really going to just sit here in this broom closet and check out everything even though there's nothing here and there's nothing to see here and, eventually, after the narrator's sort of egging you on while you're in this broom closet for so long, the narrator says something like, "okay, clearly, you're dead" -- meaning the player playing Stanley -- "clearly you have died, and somebody else in your home needs to find you and take your place." Then when you exit the broom closet, the narrator actually says, "Well hello player two! Like, you obviously took over for player one because they died at the keyboard because they were in this broom closet for so long." So, even that kind of moment reminds me and brings to the foreground like the sense of collaboration. Like the narrator in a game is not only sort of, in a meta way, commenting on me the player and what I'm doing and the fact that I've been in this broom closet for so long, but he's also commenting on the fact that I may have others around me in my household also playing, so it's just such a strange but awesome recognition of the collaborative and contextual factors that go into gaming built into the game itself and the text of the game and the narrative of the game.

Catherine 18:04

Yeah, for being so old, the game, like the game came out, originally in 2011, most versions that we're playing are the 2013 kind of updated version, which is great because it means that students haven't played it or heard of it. I've had maybe two students out of the few hundred that I've taught with this game who were like, oh yes I've heard of this game or I've played this game before because it's kind of a weird cult experimental game.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 18:40

Okay so I think I sidetracked us but you were... so you're in the classroom you're playing this game as a group, which actually I have to say because I was thinking that you assigned it as a sort of individual game and I was going to ask about issues of like access and technological literacy and that sort of thing. But this is a really cool way, like doing it in the classroom all together, feels like a really cool and productive way to sort of sidestep access issues that might be a problem especially since like you said, there's a wide variety of gamers and non-gamers in the classroom, those who... Like, oh, I'll just say for me. I was playing with a controller that my partner gave me to help play the game. But I'm not, as I said, a gamer so I didn't realize like that Stanley could look all around. So like for half of the first time I was playing -- it's partly because the controller wasn't working properly and I had to use my mouse to to change the perspective that was just like a tech issue -- but for the whole first half of the first time I played it was like, I thought I could only look one way. So I really missed a lot of stuff, even though I was trying to trying to check out every single thing. So that kind of literacy aspect I guess is circumvented when you, when you do it in class or when you play the game all together.

Catherine 19:53

That's one of the challenges this year teaching distance is. I haven't decided if I just remove this game from my syllabus, or if I, if I try to do my own twitch stream, where students can like tune in and watch and like type, "Oh, go here or go there." Or, if I just switch to more text-based games that are easier for students to access, which are tend to be more like Choose Your Own Adventure type games but are then even more textual than this one.

Jess 20:27

Had you long played this game before you started teaching it, or when did you first encounter it?

Catherine 20:33

I had played it before I taught it, but I don't remember how I initially found it. I had experience with this game, so when I was trying to figure out, okay, how can I teach literature in a new form to my students as kind of like a capstone, like a final summary exploration of what literature can be? This was the first game that came into mind, and in part is because students haven't played it. They typically haven't heard of it, so it's new and fresh to them. It's also a text-based game in many ways that you can have the narration on and captions, so that students can read it, which is an important accessibility issue. You can... it's easy, ish, for students to figure out how to play. It has very low technological requirements.

Yeah, it can actually be kind of difficult to find a game to fit into a traditional literature course because games are not literature, in some ways, like game studies is its whole separate thing about, you know,

player choice and visuals and all of these other things. So I was really looking for a game that had a lot of text, but wasn't like an RPG that students would take 80 hours to play. So this is, this game kind of hits the sweet spot of being very focused on text, very focused on these literary devices like narration and a sense of closure or lack thereof and characterization, all filtered through different perspectives and the kind of the distance that students would have from it but it's still familiar enough to them that they'd be like, oh yes this is a game.

Jess 22:21

Just thinking about myself in my own experience of the game that aspect the fact that it even starts with "This is a story about a man named Stanley," the fact that it's called The Stanley Parable, like there are these cues right away, and if you watch the trailer or you see some of the paratextual elements like on Steam, it all feels like you're about to enter into like a storybook. And so that that for me as a non-gamer is helpful to bridge that gap between literature and games, literature, literary study and game studies which, as you say is, its own whole unique thing.

Um, what you're saying right now does remind me of the handout that you sent to me that I think you use in class which you could speak to, but I'll just say what I loved about the handout is that it made this game so legible from literary studies perspective.

Catherine 23:07

Yeah, the handout lists elements like okay, and you can feel free to share this handout, just so people know what the handout looks like: it has kind of divided into six categories, so things like setting, plot or story, narration and point of view, characterization, form, and then kind of like theme and extras, where people can comment on extra other little things.

And the point of the handout is to give students the opportunity to focus on particular elements and basically do miniature close readings of moments in the game. So, when the narrator gets furious at you and says, "This is my story. What do you think you're doing? Get out of my story! That's it. I'm restarting the game." Like, what is that doing for narration ways. So it encourages students to not just be passive watchers of someone playing a game, but to actually think about the mechanics of how these literary elements of the game are working, and then it's kind of a nice transition because while someone else is coming up and getting ready to play the next run of the game, you can have a little discussion about like, "Well, okay, what did you guys think of the narrator? Do you trust the narrator, after this first run through of the game? Or what's going on with the setting?" Things like that. So you can have those almost miniature debrief sessions inbetween each playthrough.

Jess 24:32

Right. Yeah I mean the narrator in particular is so interesting to me in this in this yeah just the contradictions, like you said, the trustworthiness of the narrator, and the contradictions between what the narrator is saying and maybe what you're doing. All of that contributes to the kind of player agency that you're talking about right? And that reminds me of just the ways that readers both do and don't have agency. Like, there's so much in this... I almost called it a novel, which is probably telling. There's so much in this game that really makes more concrete or almost like literalizes the relationships between narrators, characters, and readers and how complicated those relationships are. Because as readers, reading can seem passive and it can like seem more passive than playing a video game, but reading is also an active practice because you're always in an interpretive relationship with the text. You're always enacting some sort of interpretation, either through the narrator or against the narrator or if, if, with the characters and the novel. But that what this game really does is sort of literalizes that relationship, so it almost makes what we always do when we read or when we study texts, makes it more pronounced because there's always some reader agency, there's always player agency, and you're just sort of negotiating that and maybe bumping up against the boundaries that the narrative gives you, or the narrator.

Catherine 25:58

Yeah, and that ties in so well with the themes of The Stanley Parable right? Like for Stanley to have the perfect ending, he does not have any choice. You do not have any choice you have to follow exactly what the narrator says, but then is that a satisfactory ending? Does that actually give you a sense of closure?

Jess 26:19

Is that the most clear way to give Stanley a good happy ending is basically following the narrator's instructions the whole time? Is that what ends in a happy ending for Stanley, in the game?

Catherine 26:32

I think it's too foggy. Yeah, I'd have to I'd have to go through and kind of look at the endings, a lot of endings just end with with Stanley dying. But there are ones like where you can end up in the in like a museum that has old archival elements from the game like when the developers were first making it. There's one where you end up in, I think it's called the heaven ending, where if you put in a bunch of different codes, you'll be taken to heaven and then there's all these like wires, like these voices around you that you're singing like push the buttons.

So there are other kind of like happy endings, but I think most of them end with like death in some way or the, the one that I actually find most moving is the kind of most interesting is where basically you kind of keep rebelling against the narrator and then eventually there's a point where you lose control of Stanley and you kind of leave Stanley's body. You leave that first person perspective and you go up

above Stanley, and you can kind of hear the narrator pleading for Stanley to do something. And he says, "Stanley I can't do this on my own. You have to make a decision."

So, so much of this game I think quickly becomes that it's not about Stanley at all. Like, what is Stanley? Stanley, we don't know anything about him other than what the narrator tells us and kind of those brief glimpses that we get in the beginning. So much of it is making the player reflect on "well do I have choice? Do I have choice in this game?" Because games are really an illusion of choice, you don't have a choice. Even in an open world game only so many options are programmed in for you to be able to do or interact with. And I think that highlights for students, the choices that they have in their own lives. Like they quickly connect it to things like capitalism, and well what choices do I really have? So it works so well on both this scale of what can you do in a game, what can games do that literature can't, and vice versa, but then also just reflecting on our larger culture and do we have free will? All of these questions. And I usually just before this story I actually usually teach Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life," which also deals with issues of closure and free will and things like that. So students are kind of already primed to be thinking about well what what is freewill? What is choice? What is agency?

Jess 29:06

Right. And actually that does put it puts my comparison to literature in a different perspective because while readers always have agency and especially interpretive agency and agency over kind of the meanings that we make with the text, the author and the narrator and other other factors are always limiting that agency. It's sort of like the container within which the agency exists just like you're just like you're saying with the question of free will and are we ever making free choices and games having a certain combination of, sort of, features or a certain combination of endings that that readers can engage with.

I just wanted to ask you though because you, you started talking about the themes and then you mentioned capitalism. One of my favorite parts of the game was was called a meeting room, just the meeting room. And I spent so much time in there because more so not as a, not as a gamer I didn't actually think it would advance anything but just as a reader, and as somebody who's really interested in thinking about corporate culture and the logics of capitalism and that sort of thing, that room in particular was so interesting to me.

Catherine 30:10

So, that room I think mainly elicits laughter. So students are like they'll stop they'll like, look around, they'll look at the some of the charts where it's like, "make money, make charts, make charts for money." They'll, you know, laugh at it or watch a couple slides but then they're kind of ready to keep moving on, usually. So, when they connected to things like capitalism, or things like that. They usually place that within kind of the broader idea of everybody working for the man and you know in this it's everything's in this big corporate office building but there's like a secret bunker below so there's all

these hidden things that you can't see immediately. So I think that's the main connection that they kind of try to work through and connecting with things like setting. Like everything is so bland, colorless in the game, like you can get some of that visual aspect but I always push them on, like, How would you describe this if you were describing it only in words?

Jess 31:11

Yeah, I love that contrast between the... it's kind of what you just said combined where you have this sort of bland, benign seeming kind of scene of corporate culture, mostly in the cubicles, in the meeting room, in the office, in the desks, in the files, in the drawers. But then you have like the boss's place upstairs and the kind of dark cavernous areas downstairs that show how this bland facade is sort of disguising or is reliant upon these much more... I want to say insidious, but I mean these much more sort of dark places that prop it up, like boss's office which is kind of scary and then the like I said that down the basement that is also sort of scary. So this bland facade, this sort of capitalist satire or something that's going on, or this kind of commentary on corporate culture and maybe capitalism, is being connected to these dark underbellies of the very same thing, so.

So I guess you've kind of talked about your teaching method already, which is that it sounds to me you play the game as a group with different students coming up to, to take the controller, and then in the midst of that you sort of have your conversations or your debriefing throughout that class.

Catherine 32:37

Yeah, and I've had mixed results. I actually feel like what might work best would be maybe two classes on it because I kind of treat it as like, I mean it's still rigorous and thoughtful but kind of like a more fun capstone "here's a break" class. And basically what we do is, someone will get up and play it. And I ask, okay so what are your first impressions? Actually, let me back up. What I do first is I load it, and I ask what is your, what are your impressions based on like the title screen?

Jess 33:08

Mmm, nice.

Catherine 33:10

Where you have like the weird office sounds in the background, you have like the computer with the computer with the computer kind of mirrored inside it, and that never ending loop. Even the title, that's where we talk about well what is a parable? Why call it The Stanley Parable? And then we load it up, somebody plays it, after they die, inevitably, we get back together, and I ask "okay so what are your, what are your first impressions of the game?" And I usually ask something more targeted because otherwise if it's just the game people are kind of intimidated or expect they have to have a very literary

thesis about it already, which you can't on a first playthrough. We need that iterate that iterative process.

And then the next person will come up. In my larger classes which can be from 30 to 40 students, I tend to send around a little sheet so that students can sign up if they want to play. In my smaller classes, it's enough usually just to ask for volunteers because not that many people want to play. So I'll choose randomly the next person to come up, they'll come up and play and then yeah it's kind of just that cycle of debrief. And in, especially my CEGEP classes where students tend to have more breaks, students stay after the class often and play longer.

Jess 34:24

Nice.

Catherine 34:26

Yeah, and I've had requests from students be like well, "where can i where can I play this on my own?" And students have emailed me after being like, "oh I played it with my dad."

Jess 34:32

Oh nice! I was actually, that's one of my follow up questions was whether or not you've heard from students who... 'cause in the span of 50 minutes or even two hours, you obviously can only get to so many endings or to so many trajectories for Stanley and for the player. So I was going to ask about replayability.

I also love.... you know you said, you said that it's hard to kind of make meaning out of it on one play. And so this is a game that really lends itself to replaying because replaying creates new meanings and replay replaying creates different and more complicated variations on the themes and replaying does a lot of things. So, it reminds me again, I just keep on going back to reading because I'm so much more familiar with the process of reading than gaming, but it just reminds me of the process of rereading. Like how even a text that looks very linear, not like The Stanley Parable but a text like literary texts that seems like it starts at one place and ends at another, upon replay, or upon rereading, especially in the relationship to the reader, there will always be kind of new meanings created and new, new associations stirred up by rereading so in that way I think The Stanley Parable is like, again, such a parallel with, with just texts and literature and reading.

Catherine 35:48

Yeah, there's one playthrough, where the narrator is so frustrated that you can't find the story. So he puts in place. The Stanley Parable adventure line, which is literally just a yellow line on the floor, that you have to follow to find the story. So, and you'll be running along and all of a sudden the narrator's like "Stop, wait, look at this fern. This is going to be important in the story later, so you can stop and look at this fern." Which to my knowledge and experience never comes up in the story again, but the narrator is encouraging you to stop and take note of certain things that which inevitably kind of re influences how you're going to play the game again. Like, when I fired up the game this morning to play through it, and it had cleared all my previous data so I was playing from the very beginning and it's, you know, the narrator is so kind to start with, "oh yes like go to the terminal." Like, I know who you are! Like, I know what all your fears are narrator! Like it's like rereading the Yellow Wallpaper again and being like yes the narrator is not trustworthy they're hiding something from us. Like what do they want from us? So there's yeah as you say that rereading is, like, rereading and replaying are kind of so intimately connected in a sense.

Jess 37:10

And even as you're talking I'm thinking about the narrator as almost an authorial stand-in, I'm not sure if this is something you agree with, but like of course the narrator is a narrator stand-in. Just like you have a narrator and literature, there's a narrator here, the narrator wants you to find the story, behave in certain ways, follow a certain trajectory that will maybe help the narrator achieve his story dreams. But the narrator also reminds me of an author, and authors who are especially protective over their works and only want them to kind of want to control the discourse around their work, control the story through authorial intent, which is interesting in a literary literary classroom when we often will teach students like that, authorial intent is not the be all end all of texts and of our interpretations.

Catherine 37:59

Yeah, there are moments in this story where you hear the narrator like rustling papers be like, "Wait wait wait where was where was the story supposed to go after this?" And he'll flip through papers or he'll make some grand proclamations about what art is. Like, you can tell that this comes out, back when there were more debates about are games art because he's like, "Look, this art or this game is art! You are experiencing art right now!" as you're like running to hit a button to stop like the cardboard cutout cut out a baby going into like a fire for two hours. So, yeah, the, the narrator in this game is very, very deceptive. And I think that works with the whole ironic plans that the developers kind of did with, with the game and poking fun at, well what is what is game or art or literature anyway.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Catherine 39:01

I think some of the interesting things about game studies, and it's been a while since I've read much of it. But, you know, scholars like Ian Bogost who looks at how, even the mechanics of the game can influence a story. So if we're thinking about other literary elements to consider in a story. For something like, the idea of procedural rhetoric, so in Animal Crossing, if you are... It's basically the rhetoric of capitalism, that is literally embedded into the mechanics of the game. Right? "Pay off your debt, so you can buy a larger house, so you can get more debt."

Jess 39:31

Oh my god, yes! Why do I like those games so much? That's so true though, like Harvest Moon, Animal Crossing. Yeah, that the, the capitalist undergirding of these games is so clear once you look at it.

Catherine 39:44

I think it's because of achievements, like being able to complete something. And people have done really interesting work looking at how for people with mental health issues, for example, or anxiety, playing a game where there's no risks and failure can actually be really helpful in people learning to take risks and to try again and to put themselves out there, so to speak.

And I think that's one of the things that Stanley Parable puts a twist on, right. There's no real way to win this game. Like when I was playing earlier I got into a room and the narrator was like, "You know what, I give up. You know what, you win." And just like, "You win" went across the screen, and he's like "Yeah, whatever." And then he took it back! He's like, "You know what, you don't deserve it. You didn't do enough work for this."

Jess 40:33

So is that lack of closure in some of the endings is that ever frustrating to your students? Or actually maybe what I really want to ask is whether you've had some negative responses to this game? Or if students have become frustrated with it?

Catherine 40:48

Maybe the biggest negative reaction has just been like disinterest, where what you would get with any text right? Like some people just aren't as interested in some stories as other people are. So sometimes students are just like whatever, class is done, I'm out of here. I'm never going to think about this again. Yeah, if they're going to react negatively to it I think it's just because of their own, like, kind of disinterest in the story or in in the game as a genre, less so like as a virulent reaction to the content of the game itself.

Jess 41:19

Right and I mean the game is, even though the narrator is so intense and can be like aggressive and can be other things too, not just aggressive, depending on what you choose the game itself is like kind of bland and benign, for a lot of the, a lot of it. If it is a walking simulator -- is that what you called it? Okay great, using the lingo! Then, that seems to me like a kind of benign sort of game where you're literally just walking through an office space right?

Although I have to say, despite that, I was terrified of the game like even from the moment I looked at the trailer and I saw sort of the paratexts that you said you start with, like the opening page and even the page before that just on Steam -- I don't think it's a page but again I don't know the lingo -- everything leading up to the game was scary to me. And then that's also partly why it took me I think an hour and a half or two hours to get to my first ending, because I was scared every time I like went around the corner. I was terrified even though it was this bland office space, or maybe because it was this bland office space, I'm not really sure. The narrator wasn't even that aggressive on my first time playing through because I probably followed a lot of the rules till the end when I got stuck in a black hole. But, um, but I was terrified like everything I touched I was just like, "Okay, this is gonna be the thing that will that will freak me out." So I would say that was my it's not a negative reaction just... I'm scared of Banjo and Kazooie so this is, this is also scary to me.

And then the other thing I wrote down for my own perspective, like if I'm asking you how students respond to this game I'm thinking about myself as a kind of student or learner here. I was frustrated that I couldn't interact with a lot of the stuff, and on in two ways I guess. First way: I thought it was a problem with me, being a non-gamer I was like okay clearly I'm just not like near enough to it or I'm not lined up with these things, but then I slowly realized like, no, I actually can't interact a lot of this.

Then on the second point, I was thinking, thematically about that and how that seems to me important to the game's larger themes. So even though it was frustrating to me in the moment that I couldn't interact with a lot of the story world, this mug this desk this piece of paper, this drawer I couldn't like touch it or anything or I seemed not to be able to. That obviously seems to have a point. It's like, no matter what I or what Stanley does. I can't affect my, my surroundings. I can't even close this drawer -- that's how helpless I am in this story. So I think thematically it works. But it was just frustrating to me realizing so slowly that I couldn't effect change.

Although it was weird to me that I could jump on things I think? I'm not even sure honestly but I could, like, I really don't know what happened but I could get on a desk or like I could climb up onto the railing that then I jumped off of. So Stanley has this ability to climb, which I find strange when I think about that metaphorically, but then Stanley or me the player can't do anything else, like I can't even pick up a mug or like Close the door. There's something there.

Catherine 44:22

That's interesting. Yeah, the crouching, in particular, like, I think there's only a couple moments where crouching is relevant at all. Yeah, like that moment where you can climb on the desk. I think that's one of the endings where you can climb out of the window.

Jess 44:36

Jumping out a window or jumping off a ledge and jumping off a platform, those are all ways that Stanley either dies or reaches a kind of bad ending -- at least the ending I was in where I was trapped in the black hole -- and so, that action seems significant for some reason there. It's like being able to climb off of things so that he can then jump, jump to freedom or jump to his death, or some other variation.

Catherine 45:05

Yeah, that's actually something that I haven't flagged for students in the past, but one of like one of the only ways for Stanley to have agency is to commit suicide. Right? Which is kind of it's it's an it's I think it's built into the themes of the story really well, but it's still, for me, one of the most distinctly uncomfortable moments in the game where sometimes students like fall by accident. Sometimes they're like, "Wait, can I jump off here?" And I was like "well you can try." And then they do it and then they're like, "oh," because of course they thought they'd be playing for longer and it's like within 30 seconds like their, their turn is kind of done. But yeah, I think that the story does like for all this kind of like land, and you have this weirdly generous, but very moody British narrator, like talking to you, it's still kind of affects some students like really deeply like, like, even just this this pressure to perform or pressure to take action, even though taking action doesn't make a difference.

Jess 46:10

So yeah, is there, I guess. Are there any other particular challenges you would flag in terms of your teaching of this game that you've had to overcome?

Catherine 46:20

I think, weirdly enough the biggest challenge is I would say a mixture of time -- so like I said, getting like you ideally you want to play at least three times. So sometimes that means I only have time for two students to play and then I'll be like well I'm doing the last run and I'll just go do one of the really fast runs, just so they can see a different example.

So, time, and then, encouraging students to have fun, because they're they seem, they're like they're like, "oh, something new, I have to take this really seriously, I have this handout that I have to fill out" -- that you know it's it's basically just for participation marks and to help their own notes. But to kind of

encourage students to like give advice to the person who's playing, or to just react. You know they can react analytically but also, like, you can say that something was fun. Or you can say that something wasn't fun, and I think that that idea of play is so important to games, and I think important to literature and and such as well. But, for if your students are kind of coming at this after a long term of literature, they might not be ready to shift into that mode of thinking about play like right off the bat so that can sometimes take some, take some encouragement, especially at the end of the term when students are kind of tired anyway.

Jess 47:47

It's actually like a sad reality that we have to almost -- and I think I had to fight this impulse in myself too -- but fight against that embedded assumption or idea that what we do in a classroom is only worthy or rigorous enough if it's not fun, or our learning has to be serious and not playful and joyful. And yeah I think there's so much to be learned in the act of play, like you're saying just in the very basic act of playing, or embracing play as a learning practice. So it's hard to fight against that, and even, like I said in my own experience, thinking about academic rigor and what kind of scholarship I'm producing and if it's in a fun voice or involves laughter, then surely it can't... it can't be serious scholarship. Well no obviously not because play and joy and pleasure, I'm thinking of adrienne maree brown's book *Pleasure Activism* here, but all of those things can be transformative conduits for learning and making relationships and other things like that too. So that's a really cool... I like that you brought that up as a challenge.

Catherine 48:58

Yeah, I mean I think like the game itself is so almost overwhelmingly literary, which is maybe why some more quote unquote hardcore gamers, like aren't as into it or haven't heard of it is because it is so intensely literary in its devices, but... So that makes it easy to teach in one sense. So the challenge then can sometimes be getting students to embrace that or to figure out how to work within that within that expectation, I suppose.

Jess 49:29

Totally. Have you ever done any assignments based off of this or is it mostly just the in class and the handout?

Catherine 49:36

It's mostly just the in class and the handout. Because I do it at the end of term, that's usually when they have their final essays due shortly after that, which I tend to have based on more traditional writing, because of the, the larger constraints of the institutions that I'm at.

But I could, like if I was going to teach, like a dream course would be like a video games literature course. And I could easily imagine having this as like "Okay well this is the text," quote unquote text, "that you have to write your final essays on," because yeah there's so much material in there that connects well. And there's also so much written about it insofar as actual text that they can find so one challenge with games is sometimes, like if you don't have a transcript. And you don't train your students how to take screencaps of important texts that they want to quote or things like that. So, because there's already this body of knowledge around The Stanley Parable, although it doesn't seem like people have taught it very often... there are two posts by other people who kind of mention teaching it. As far as other material I could find online, it doesn't seem like there's, or at least people haven't really published that much about teaching it, so to speak. But in any case, I think this would work really well for a larger, more in depth assignment where students could actually like analyze, like "okay well what, choose one literary device from this story, and like write about it and how is it working?"

Jess 51:08

Yeah, even the handout you gave like we didn't, we didn't go into detail about it but if you, if you're giving me permission I will share it. But there's so much, there's so much richness, not just in the game -- this is a very rich, like richly filled game -- but there's even so much richness in your handout. Like so many areas where I could see assignments coming out strongly on these topics like, you know, asking them if there's a climax like thinking about so in one of your boxes here you have plot slash story, and not just what is the plot but is there a climax? So thinking about if there's any way in which this game goes through sort of the traditional narrative trajectory and asking them to argue for a certain climactic point or not arguing that there is no climactic point or...

Oh yeah, I don't think we even talked about this in detail but the paratext of the title like why is this called The Stanley Parable? So is there a moral? Like do you do talk about whether there's a moral?

Catherine 52:09

Yeah, it's often how I end the discussion on it. So, yeah, I'll often wrap up and be like okay so what. Like, I often ask at the beginning okay "so what is a parable?" And then that's kind of how I bring the conversation back is thinking about because "why is this game called a parable?" And students will talk about, they connect it to things like choice, or kind of just kind of larger themes, because there is so much that they can draw out. A lot of students aren't familiar with the idea of a parable, so that is something to, I mean I had to look it up before before teaching it as well just to have a clear sense of it. So that's the thing definitely to foreground before you teach it is the idea of a parable but students tend to forget that when they're playing, because they're so into it and into what's what's happening in the text that's appearing there so bring it, bringing it back around to ask well, "So what is a parable?" Which is basically another way of asking "what is the point of this game?"

Jess 53:10

Mmhmm, which is such a big question, especially for such a complicated game that replays in so many different ways. But when you said that students often forget that, that it's even called The Stanley Parable or that it is a parable in between when they're playing, it reminds me of how you know framing devices for literary texts written texts such as a title are so easily forgotten when you're in the midst of the novel, too. Like you might not remember that yeah, that the novel has a particular name that really frames it in a certain way. So again I just I keep on coming back to the parallels between this text and any other sort of literary texts that that students might engage with in the same way. Yeah.

Jess 53:54

So is there anything else that you wanted to touch on regarding this game, and the teaching of this game but you didn't get a chance to say?

Catherine 54:03

I have found it so fulfilling and fun to teach games and to try and expand students' conceptions of what literature can be because they can come into our classes and then we can kind of box them in and feel they can sometimes start feeling, at least in, especially my kind of general education classes that everybody has to take, where they're like "oh great when am I ever gonna read a short story again? When am I ever gonna read a poem again? This is irrelevant," and I'm like, "oh but you can use it when you're navigating everyday life," et cetera, et cetera. But to make it into something that they have a vested interest in, like games, or what have you, it's just so energizing. It's such a privilege to be able to kind of explore these things with them, especially because for me, it's a genre that I am really deeply interested in as well.

But I think even if you're coming to games for the first time, then you get to experience that kind of excitement, alongside your students, kind of, for the first time so I think that can be an equally valuable kind of perspective, to bring to this game. Like if you were going to teach this game. Jessica, like, I can imagine the kind of energy like you, it's certain kind of accessibility that you would bring to the game and a different perspective. And all of those I think are really vulnerable in the same way that people bring different things to teaching the stories that we teach.

Jess 55:24

And actually I totally feel by the way empowered to teach this game so thank you because... Not just from you giving me the experience of playing it, like I wouldn't have played it had it not been for you, but also through like looking at your handout and this conversation, I can just see, I hope others can see that are listening to this, ways that this would fit so well into a lot of the things I already teach, such as when I teach this reading narrative course and we always talk about plot and that kind of thing. So yes, I already you've done your duty and promoting the teaching of this game even to a non-gamer.

I just wanted to quickly go back to one thing you just said, which was. You said something about students can come to class, or classrooms and sort of feel boxed in or we box them in with the way that we teach and what we teach, well that really reminds me of Stanley, and this this brings up the question of Stanley-player parallels again because Stanley too is sort of boxed in by his repetitive jobs, much like students and and other folks who go to the classroom, again and again and again and might be feeling similarly unfulfilled or might be feeling similarly disempowered by the structures that disempower them .So it really feels like I'm not sure what you what your conversations with students have been like but it feels like this, Stanley figure, whoever he is, if he exists, would have such parallels to students coming into class maybe feeling a little bit like "does this really matter? does my typing matter? does my pressing of this button matter?," as you were saying,

Catherine 56:59

Yeah, especially for students who are also working at the same time, especially if they're working like you know service or kind of lower-wage type positions, those students get it, like really quickly. And they like the game as we discussed doesn't really have a happy ending. Right, like in a lot of games you know you finish the game you're the hero, you did it, you're the champion you're the winner. And because you can't win at this game, it can kind of be a bit of a downer. But I think especially for students, I think because Stanley is like a middle-aged office worker. I think that they, in some ways, feel encouraged that they can still make differences in their own life like they're not as kind of embedded in it as long-term as our poor Stanley is. So I think they come out of it kind of just reflecting more on their own experiences however briefly that might be maybe they forget it. As soon as they're into their next class but I like to think that for that little moment of time they're like, "well, thank goodness I'm not Stanley but what does it mean to not be Stanley?"

Jess 58:08

And as much as the game doesn't have a happy ending or even closure in some sense, there is some pleasure in, for me, taking choices or making choices or taking actions that are like, "fuck you!" to the narrator, or that are really like kind of sticking it to the person who's trying to control the story. So that like to me, I hesitate to pull out the R word, "relatable," but to me that aspect of the game is relatable from my perspective, and I would assume students' perspectives too, just this idea of pushing back against that force that's trying to contain you, even if it doesn't work out in the end. And even if you end up like in a dark hole, you at least kind of pushed back to the, the forces that are trying to pressure you into certain choices, which is always comforting, just to know that you've pushed back.

Catherine 58:58

Yeah, absolutely.

Jess 58:59

Okay, so thank you so much for coming on. This was a great chat! At the end here, is there anything else you'd like to plug, or a place where listeners can find you or?

Catherine 59:10

Yeah so people can follow me on twitter @broomgrass. I think that's the easiest way to kind of find me right now, at least. I don't have anything else to plug but I will say that, as someone who didn't get a lot of formal pedagogy training during my multiple graduate degrees, you know, learning, learning through watching is one thing but I didn't get much formal training. I'm so incredibly thankful to the Twitter community, and to many other colleagues, but, you know, when you're kind of separated from many different communities, Twitter has been so valuable for influencing so much of my pedagogy and so, sharing so many resources. So, I'm just kind of glad to be able to give back and I'm thankful to you for having me on and kind of giving me the opportunity to kind of give back in some small way to this larger discussion and ideas idea forming about teaching and ways to do it because I love learning about it so this has been great. Thank you so much.

Jess 1:00:11

Yeah, thank you too and I love -- I'm seconding the Twitter plug...

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 1:00:21

Thank you so much to Catherine for joining me to chat about The Stanley Parable, for empowering me to teach with this game in the future, and for really teaching me a lot over the years about teaching. We've had some great conversations and I've learned a lot even from the kinds of things that she tweets about.

Jess 1:00:40

This episode was recorded on Treaty Six territory and the Homeland of the Métis. If you've played and enjoyed The Stanley Parable or if you think maybe it's the kind of game that you would like as a walking simulator that's really narrative driven, I want to tell you about another game, or another sort of interactive novel, more language that's kind of unfamiliar to me, made by Tonia Laird, a Métis writer of video games and other forms who is actually based here in Saskatoon on Treaty Six. The game or the interactive novel or the choose your own adventure story, it's called Poster Girl, and it's available through FableLabs Tales app. Here's the description of the game, or the novel, I'm still not sure what to call it, but the game novel from the website: "A privileged young colonist learns life is not as it seems on

her new planet as conspiracies unfold around her. In her gut, she knows there's something wrong, and she's going to do everything in our power to find out what."

I started playing this today and I found it really easy to play again as a non-gamer. You just sort of choose dialogue options along the way, depending on what kind of character you want to play. So for example, you might have a character that responds more negatively to what she's being asked or more positively. You can sort of choose between, at least in one part of the game that I got to today, you can choose between responding with empathy or responding with humor, and I really liked that feature of the game or the interactive novel, that it's really built around the complexities of conversation, how we dialogue with one another, how we respond to one another, the multiple ways in which we can respond, all of that sort of thing. Not to mention that the plot is very intriguing and I'm really curious to find out how it unfolds, as I go along and sort of make decisions in these conversations. I'll link to the Tales website in the show notes, and you can check out the game Poster Girl. And if anyone teaches with this game, has taught or plans to teach with it in the future. I'd be very curious to know how it goes. Because just on first play it seems to me like it would be a very teachable text.

Jess 1:03:05

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics, which include a little video game reference they include I think a picture of a Gameboy I, I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure it's a Game Boy. Hold on, I'm gonna check. Okay. Yes, it's definitely a Gameboy also I just have to clarify, I know what a Gameboy is like I'm not that far gone. I just wasn't sure if that was what was in the graphics but yes indeed it's a Gameboy.

You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod. To chat about the podcast use the hashtag #TeachinBooksPod, like my friend Claire recently did on Twitter, woo! You can also get in touch with me via email at TeachinBooksPod@gmail.com. You can send me a longer note to tell me what you think of one of the episodes, if you have something you want to add, too. You can also send me your episode ideas or topics that you'd like to see covered on Teachin' Books.

Okay listeners, goodbye for now, but please join me -- I think I usually say join us, but it's kind of mostly just me -- join me again next week on Teachin' Books, no "g" in the teachin'.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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