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Choosing to Choose: The Impact of Technology on Choice

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Abstract

The development of modern technology has increasingly focused on efficiency over expression. Interfaces limit and scale down human choice and expression. Entertainment and communication now use interfaced technology for even basic human expression, artificially limiting the number of potential choices to the options presented by the interface. The logic of technology has become a totalizing phenomenon, bringing all areas of human life under its purview. According to Heidegger, Ellul, and Flusser, the result of this development is a different way of being-in-the-world for humans. The traditional man has been the constant in production and communication, which the medium and technology have been the variable. The modern man has reversed his orientation towards technology, the man is the variable and the machine is the constant. Building machines no longer appears to serve humanity, but instead has become an end in itself. Due to the methods of technology and quantification of nearly every decision, free choice is becoming more and more difficult to comprehend. As a case study for these arguments, *The Stanley Parable* examines how media can be used to limit possible choices, and can also be used to encourage new forms of play that counteract the predictability of machines and technical communication through human expression and increased computer literacy.

Keywords

Choice, technology, media ecology, new media, ontology

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Choosing to Choose: Technique and *The Stanley Parable*

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Introduction

Societies' work, free time, and relationships depend upon electronic devices that connect people instantaneously to a global network of communication. Modern technique has become an unquestionable, totalizing phenomenon. From capitalist markets to the phones they create and the jobs they automate, technology is no longer an assistant to humanity. Technology is an end in and of itself. In this world, the most efficient way of completing a task is the correct way of doing that task, regardless of the ethical or aesthetic value of the method. The modern man lives his life through screens and interfaces that limit the possible tasks he can complete because it saves him time. Modern entertainment is driven by profit-based, computer-generated imagery. Media ecologists warned of a day when technology would compromise freedom and when the need for technology would rule society instead of the other way around.

This paper will examine the ontological impact of the ideology of technique, exposing its dangers and implications as laid out by Vilém Flusser and Jacques Ellul. It will make the case that the dialogue of play as well as increased computer literacy is key to maintaining human freedom in a technocratic world. This paper will analyze the text of *The Stanley Parable* as a case study in modern technique and as an illustration of the power of play to challenge the monolith of technological thought.

Overview to Media Ecology

Media ecology is an area of communication theory first explicitly defined by Marshall McLuhan and his mentor Harold Innis (though Postman technically coined the term). The theory says that the dominant media of a society is the key factor in determining cultural values. Technology, best understood, is an extension of the physical faculties of people. Flusser (1993) explained that "Machines are simulated organs of the human body. The lever, for example, is an extended arm. It increases the ability of the human to lift, but ignores all the other functions of the arm has" (p. 55). Machines are not value free; they prioritize specific functions of humans. Writing prioritizes the ability to speak in a linear fashion while ignoring the other functions of the human voice like singing. The factory prioritizes the ability to function efficiently while neglecting other aspects to human fulfillment like love or spirituality.

Technology is inevitable, and it can improve human existence in many ways. But the dominant technology of a culture influences how that culture views the world. Marshall

McLuhan argued that the “medium is the message,” suggesting that the technological medium significantly influences what people find important. McLuhan (1967) explained:

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak. Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways. The alphabet and print technology fostered and encourage a fragmenting process, as process of specialism and detachment. Electronic technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of working of media. (p. 8)

Technological advancement prioritizes human senses. The values of technology also become the values of society.

The lens of media ecology is rarely used in media analysis today. Abstinance from this model may be explained by the communication field's disdain for technological determinism, which they mistakenly conflate with the theories associated with media ecology. While many media ecologists clearly are influenced by determinism, they would not describe themselves as technological determinists. McLuhan (1967) stated, "there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening" (p. 25). The future world that McLuhan and Ellul imagine was based on the culture's current trajectory, but through their writing they sought to change that trajectory. Media ecology, like most theoretical lenses, has a tendency to reduce complicated interactions to one cause. This is not the intention of this paper. The lens of media ecology, however, helps illuminate the framework of modernity and challenge the precepts of technique's dominant ideologies through discussion.

American culture today does appear to believe that the most efficient way to do something is always the better way to do something. Our drive to automate industry, the rise of “micro-blogging” platforms like Twitter, and the general movement to more and more efficient means of communication through the world wide web demonstrate this cultural tendency. That more efficient means are superior means is an unexamined assumption that has dangerous implications for human expression and choice. By studying Flusser and Ellul's analysis of modern society, this paper will show the dangers of passively accepting the mechanistic social order and make the case that increased technological literacy and human dialogue may help to solve the problem.

Ontology

Ontology is the study of existence. Thinkers from Aristotle to Augustine to Descartes attempted to answer the question “what does it mean to exist?” But it wasn't until the twentieth century when Heidegger published his treatise *Being and Time* that academia started to understand human existence clearly. The battery of questions that Heidegger laid

out in *Being and Time* is referred to as the existential analytic. Rather than answering the question of *being* directly, the existential analytic elaborated a way to think about how one might ask the question “What does it mean to exist?” Although Heidegger wrote before modern technology was developed, his writing is central to helping us understand how technology is affecting the human mode of existence in a primordial sense.

Being-in-the-world is an important part of the analytic. For Heidegger, *being-in-the-world* referred to the *activity* of existing. Heidegger (1927) explained:

Dasein is never ‘proximally’ an entity which is, so to speak, free from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a ‘relationship’ towards the world. Taking up relationships towards the world is possible only *because* Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is. This state of Being does not arise just because some entity is present-at-hand outside of Dasein and meets up with it. Such an entity can ‘meet up with’ Dasein only in so far as it can, of its own accord, show itself within a *world*. (sec. 12: 84)

The term *Dasein* refers to a being who is capable of questioning its own being, suggesting humans only. Here, Heidegger made the case that part of human *being* was the environment in which people dwelt. Part of human existence is defined by the world around them and how humans relate to that world. In other words, human interaction with the world cannot be separated from their mode of existence. In modernity, much of how beings relate to the world is communicated through screens and interfaces. This is a different mode of existence and thus should be examined to see how it is changing the human way of being.

The nature of being is always finite. For Heidegger, authentic living is the *Dasein* living toward its own possibilities. Because humans are finite, humans live within time. They live in the present oriented toward their future, attempting to conquer where they have come from. Heidegger offers two possible modes of existence (Wheeler, 2015, Sec. 2.1). Authentic living requires that *Dasein* project themselves onto their environment and choose to make their own choices; inauthentic living occurs when people allow themselves to be dragged along in the flow, doing what *one* might do.

The one or *the they-self* refers to people choosing not to choose anything and instead do what they perceive others around them are doing. The one-self is illustrated in social media in which the feedback loop of observing how others live encourages humans to emulate each other rather than forge their own paths. People do the expected and thus live inauthentically by ignoring the human’s power to choose (Wheeler, 2015, sec. 2.2). Humanity can allow itself to be swept away in a crowd and never truly make a choice for themselves.

Midzein, which means being-with or present-at-hand, is important to the technological investigation. The term *Midzein* is typically used when discussing dwelling in the environment. For Heidegger, you lose something of the ontology of a tool when you change its use. The way *Dasein* frame their tools affects both their ontological function and the

human ability to live authentically (Wheeler, 2015, Sec. 2.2.3).

With these terms in mind, it is necessary to clarify the distinction between tools and *technique*. For Heidegger, tools help people relate better to the environment, whether that tool be a bridge or a hammer. Tools are not only part of the human ontological analytic, they are an essential part to human flourishing. This is evident in Heidegger's *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* where he discusses how humans relate to the environment around them. The act of dwelling for humans is a defining part of their being-in-the-world. It is a feeling of being at home in the world. Humans only find dwelling by means of building. Homes are buildings in which Dasein dwell. Buildings, like factories or bridges, are not dwelling places, but they improve dwelling. These types of buildings let Dasein dwell in spaces that extend beyond a simple shelter. Bridges turn the barrier of a river into an approachable phenomenon since the human can now cross the bridge and therefore interface with a previously unreachable space. In other words, the primary purpose of building is to ensure humans' dwelling-in the environment. In its original conception, the internet helped humans dwell in a global environment and share research and ideas across the world quickly. But in many ways, the internet can hinder authentic living through addiction and dependence.

There is a difference between technology as tools and as the *technological*. It is unreasonable to condemn the use of technology entirely. Heidegger (1966) explained, "For all of us, the arrangements, devices, and machinery of technology are to a greater or lesser extent indispensable. It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil" (p. 53). Instead, Heidegger levels his critique at the technological or *technique* in Ellul's work. The technological is a way of framing the relationship between a person and technology. It is not an independent concept but instead an orientation toward technology.

For clarification, consider the lingual construction of the relationship. A thought is made up of a subject, object, and predicate. The subject is the agent, the object is being acted upon, and the predicate is how the subject is acting or relating to the object. In this case the subject is Dasein, the object is tools, and the predicate is technique. Technique is a way of approaching technology; it is the formation of technology as a means of mastering nature and holding it in reserve for human use. Rather than dwelling-in the environment, humans seek to master it through increased efficiency and technological dominance (Godzinski, 2005, p. 6). This way of framing technology obscures the essence of good tool use and its proper relationship to the world-compromising choice and authentic human expression.

Technique

Media ecologists often overlook the ontological question in favor of more practical theories with clear scientific application. But to ignore how communication technology and humanity's being-in-the-world intersect would be a mistake. The theorists Flusser and Ellul covered this intersection best. Ellul is valuable because he analyzed the broad societal implications of misunderstanding technology and demonstrated how technique shifts

human being-in-the-world. Specifically, Ellul showed how an enslavement to efficiency changes the manner in which humans build their places of dwelling.

Flusser focused on similar questions but delved deeper into the existential battle of techno-imagery. Flusser asked how the electronic medium and interface influences everyday existence. Media ecology reveals the connection between questions of human existence and how humans interface with the world around them. By situating the technical phenomenon and isolating its impact of human ontology, Flusser and Ellul contributed to the essential dialogue of modernity's technological condition.

Although there are a number of factors to the human mode of existence, technique has become one of the primary influences on modern life. Technique does not simply refer to the existence of technology. Technique refers to the essence of technology—in other words, Heidegger's technological mode. It is a mindset which privileges efficiency and mechanization. Ellul (1964) defined technique as, “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity” (p. xxv). But technique is not machinery. Indeed, technique arose from machines (p. 5) but has become far larger than them. Ellul (1964) made the case that technique affects all aspects of human life:

Technique integrates everything. It avoids shock and sensational events. Man is not adapted to a world of steel; technique adapts him to it. It changes the arrangement of this blind world so that man can be a part of it without colliding with its rough edges, without the anguish of being delivered up to the inhuman. Technique thus provides a model; it specifies attitudes that are valid once and for all. The anxiety aroused in man by the turbulence of the machine is soothed by the consoling hum of a unified Society. (p. 6)

Technique is a way of being-in-the-world. The logic of technique brings Dasein in line with what is best for machinery instead of placing machinery in line with what is best for Dasein. Heidegger himself made a similar argument about technology. Heidegger (1977) said that, “We will, as we say, ‘get’ technology ‘spiritually in hand.’ We will master it. The will to mastery becomes all the more urgent and more technology threatens to slip from human control” (p. 2). The will to master technology is dangerous in many ways. Technology becomes part of the ontological discussion at the point where technology is a fundamental part of the human relationship to the environment and to other people.

Electronic technology has radically shifted the human's being-in-the-world. They write electronically, not by hand. Their clothes and products are produced by machines in factories. Their primary means of connecting with other humans becomes increasingly based on smart phones and personal computers rather than dwelling in the same spaces with one another. Ellul pointed to two primary areas where technique is shifting cultural expectations of living: work (or *building*) and free time (or *dwelling*).

Technology and technique have become an all-encompassing part of work. Ellul's *The Technological Society* supplied a chronology of technique's impact on work throughout the

ages. At the beginning, technique assisted work. The worker could get better tools and therefore produce more quickly. Technique did not define the worker's existence. Work was seen as an unfortunate necessity rather than an activity virtuous for its own sake (p. 65). Ellul (1964) explained that, "The time given to the use of techniques was short, compared with the leisure time devoted to sleep, conversation, games, or, best of all, to meditation. As a corollary, technical activities had little place in these societies" (p. 66). Human work was an effort in building a better dwelling rather than an effort unto itself.

This use of technique shifted with the invention of steam-powered production in the nineteenth century. Steam-powered machinery changed the nature of tools and the worker's relation with them. Flusser (1999) described the change saying, "The industrial machine differs from the pre-industrial one, in that it is based on scientific theory. . . pre-industrial machines are empirical; industrial ones are produced by technology" (p. 51). The modern machine has reversed the relationship between the tool and the human. Humans were once the constant; their tools the variable. But in the work environment of technique, the opposite is true. Machines are the constant, and the human is the variable (Flusser, 1999, p. 45). This changes how humans exist in the world. Ellul (1964) described the modern impact, saying:

Technical progress today is no longer conditioned by anything other than its own calculus of efficiency. The search is no longer personal, experimental, workmanlike; it is abstract, mathematical, and industrial. This does not mean that the individual no longer participates. On the contrary, progress is made only after innumerable individual experiments. But the individual participates only to the degree that he is subordinate to the search for efficiency, to the degree that he resists all the currents today considered secondary, such as aesthetics, ethics, fantasy. (p. 74)

Human expression in their work does not exist in the same way. People don't own their labor and are not encouraged to find pride in what they produce. This may seem like a rash generalization, but a 2014 study conducted by Stuart Elliot found that machines could replace nearly eighty percent of jobs in the next few decades. This is an ontological shift for humans being-in-the-world. The workman does not own their work. Instead, s/he is replaceable completely by a machine. If an economy is not growing, it is seen as failing, even if its production is healthy. Art and design are produced at a mass scale to fuel the wheels of capitalism. Technique brings human minds into line with its own end goal of mechanization and efficiency.

This logic is not limited to mass production either. Election cycles are driven not by principles but instead on the perception of polls conducted by the media through quantitative analysis. The academy has transformed from a place of intellectual inquiry into a place of efficiently educating the masses, a movement that started with urbanization in the nineteenth century. Some of those results have been good. At least in America, literacy has increased by a significant margin.

But the larger issue is the psychological situation. Societies' qualifiable attributes are increasingly quantified. This is the orientation toward technology that Heidegger feared, as

it obscures the authentic way of life. In the constant barrage of efficiency, humans' relationship to the environment in which they dwell has become complicated and difficult to comprehend. When someone cannot understand the world they have been thrown into, they cannot easily live authentically and avoid the trap of going with the flow. Thus, many beings accept the new order of the world in which a designer somewhere has decided how they will communicate and live.

Technique is also fundamentally shifting the modern human lifestyle. The term *sensorium*, coined by Walter Ong, refers to the prioritizing of senses that results from changing communication media. Different communication mediums prioritize some human senses above others. The shift in modernity's lifestyle correlates to the shifting sensorium of technique. *Automatism* refers the process by which technicians determine the one or two possible choices and assert them as the best.

We can observe automatism in a variety of modern technologies. The primary method of social existence comes through interfaces. Whether it be the television screen, internet browser, or phone applications, a designer structures the possible choices one can make. Humans now manipulate their free time through the manipulation of interfaces. According to Ellul, such a technical choice is automated. Television stations determine programming based on what will be most profitable rather than what they believe is genuinely good. Popular music experiences a similar automatism. The concept of good in media is now driven by capital.

Ellul says capitalism is a stage of rather than the cause of technique. Because the choice between good and bad is no longer driven by humanity's desires or needs, capitalism will inevitably fall to the automation of a future society (Ellul, 1964, p. 82). Ellul (1964) summed up his fear, saying:

There is nothing left to do but wonder at a mechanism that functions so well and, apparently, so tirelessly. But, above all else, no finger must be laid upon it, nor its automatism interfered with. It is in this that the headway of technical progress becomes automatic; when modern man renounces control over it and cannot bring himself to raise his hand against it so as to make the choice himself (p. 82).

Technique has automated choice, and the modern man no longer desires to make choices for himself. The modern orientation toward technology has allowed the technical domain to invade all aspects of life. The decisions humans make appear to be more and more often structured for them rather than determined by their own preferences. Humans live inauthentically, because living toward their own possibilities doesn't fit into a system that seeks to force the most efficient possible choices. There is little room for individual expression in such a society. The cause of the changing mode of dwelling is a system of ethics based around utilitarian calculus of efficiency and progress.

Flusser addressed the issue of technical imagery and entertainment. Flusser (2011) argued that "what is currently happening is a mutation of our experiences, perceptions, values, and modes of behavior, a mutation of our being-in-the-world" (p. 5). For Flusser, technique

obfuscates reality so that people accept the dominant narrative of society that is technique.

Technical imagery is disconnected from reality due to its layered nature. A picture references a real image when someone looks at it. When an artist digitizes that image, it is no longer the same. There is an ontological difference between traditional images and technical ones (p. 7). The difference, Flusser (2011) explained, is that “The first are observations of objects, the second computations of concepts. The first arise through depiction, the second through a peculiar hallucinatory power that has lost its faith in rules” (p. 7). Flusser’s argument in his essay *Into the Universe of the Technical Image* is long and convoluted, but his conclusion is clear: In the modern world of electronic imagery, images now function to condition humans to accept the social order of modern science. The social reality people experience from media and the internet creates something entirely illusory. Because the modern man lives his life through pixels, his reality is constructed through mosaics and code, forcing him to question what is real and what is not. Mass communication is not benign but instead has influenced how humans exist in the world. Flusser (2011) concluded:

Perception theory, ethics and aesthetics, and even our very sense of being alive are in crisis. We live in an illusory world of technical images, and we increasingly experience, recognize, evaluate, and act as functions of these images. We owe these images to a technology that came from scientific theories, theories that show us ineluctably that “in reality,” everything is a swarm of points in a state of decay, a yawning emptiness. The science and technology that developed from it, these triumphs of Western civilization, have, on one hand, eroded the objective world around us into nothingness and, on the other, bathed us in a world of illusion. (p. 38)

For Flusser, technical imagery such as graphic design, electronic interfaces, and even photographs has stripped humanity of objective senses of truth while offering them the compelling alternative of passivity and entertainment.

Both Flusser and Ellul reveal the functions of the ideology of technique in modern society. And though their warnings may seem fatalistic, they do offer hope. Like McLuhan explained, nothing is inevitable if people simply pay attention to what is happening and find ways to deconstruct it and fight back. Flusser's alternative is *play*. Playing is an exchange of information that creates a new piece of information. The unpredictability of human play directly confronts the probabilities of technique and undermines them. Flusser (2011) explained this saying:

Dialogues are controlled games of chance. They allow information that is already stored to be combined in all possible ways to construct new information. The word dialogue originally suggests a game of chance in which each of two or more memories tries to synthesize the information stored in another. But there can also be inner dialogues, in which one memory plays with the information it stores. When it produces new information, such an inner dialogue characterizes what is called, in common usage, a “creative individual. (p. 90)

In choosing to play and engage in dialogue, people are able to combat the expected orders of technique. Play creates unpredictable information that can never be replicated by a computer. The formation of story and game are essential elements to challenging the monolithic power of the technocratic society. Consider how the development of collaborative play in children changes how they interface with each other and their environment. True imaginative play helps children develop empathy and decision-making skills. However, even child's play has been invaded by technology and interfaced entertainment. For Flusser, the exercise of dialogue in the telematic society is freedom because it allows people to exercise choice (p. 94). This freedom of play leads to creation that is not determined by what efficiency says is best.

One way of encouraging this form of dialogue is through computer literacy. Technology is not going away, and technology itself is not actually the problem. The problem is that a few designers and engineers alone essentially control others' possible choices and human potential. If everyone knew how to code, create, and design, humans could potentially take back the power of decision-making by creating their own programs. Open source projects already exist for precisely this reason. If children grew up learning how to build programs, they wouldn't have to answer to a corporation who designs their software; they would be able to build their own software. Collaborative efforts in software could reinstate both play and broader forms of dialogue to undermine technique through human choice. Flusser suggested this solution when he described the future factory. He argued that the authentic way of living with technology is to turn the factory into a school. When everything becomes automated, the human functions as a creator of programs (Flusser, 1999, p. 49). The factory of the future must be a place of dialogue and play, or else humans will simply become tools at the service of technicians—or worse, their technological creations.

Video Games as Dialogue

Communication media tends to move from gimmicky to intellectual given enough time. Silent movies were far from the masterpieces of cinema like *Citizen Kane*, *The Passion*, or *Its a Wonderful Life*. The silent movie could not hope to comment on the conditions of modernity in the way the *In Bruges* did. In a similar fashion, video games have long been seen as an empty entertainment medium. But *Bioshock: Infinite* was written by a highly awarded novelist. The game was a commentary on the frontier myth and American exceptionalism. *Spec Ops: The Line* condemned the representation of war and violence in video games through the mechanics in the game and the story in the game play. Video games have come a long way since the 1980's and are an important medium for reaching younger audiences. The act of playing a game invests the player into a story in a compelling way. It offers the player control over their own destiny in a story.

Video games are also capable of telling stories with multiple endings based on the players' decisions. The player has a stake in the outcome of their decisions, and they are therefore open to the message the game is communicating. This power of the game makes it a double edged sword. Games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty* have desensitized many players to violence and death. But much like books or movies, it makes little sense to condemn a

medium because it has been used poorly in the past.

The video game is an excellent medium to analyze with a media ecologist lens. The illusion of choice in the game mirrors the same illusion of choice that Ellul and Flusser argued exists within broader society. Obviously, game designers typically control possible outcomes of the story, but they entertain possibilities in their stories that can comment on ideas. Some of these games can be used as propaganda. *America's Army* is a good example of a game that exists to put forward a specific view point. The game is a recruiting tool for the US military and normalizes the ideals of American exceptionalism and patriotism.

Additionally, games are the first interactive form of mass media. According to Stanley Baran (2014, p. 221), games are set to have 174 million players by 2020. This medium is not going away. The structure of the game is a unique opportunity to critique culture through creative gameplay mechanics combined with self-aware storytelling. For this reason, this paper will use the video game *The Stanley Parable* to illustrate the modern condition. The game challenges the assumptions underpinning technique and exposes the dangers of passively accepting technology without critical thought. It accomplishes this feat in a self-referential way, understanding that the medium it uses does not escape the critique the game puts forth.

Case Study: The Stanley Parable

The Stanley Parable features a mindless drone named Stanley. Pushing buttons all day for his job, his work requires no creativity or thought. The game opens with the mysterious absence of Stanley's coworkers and the equally mysterious appearance of a narrator who tells Stanley his possible paths forward. Stanley is presented with a series of choices, each one allowing him to either obey or disobey the narrator. Each series of choices results in a different ending. *The Stanley Parable* reveals the illusion of freedom within the interfaced society and demonstrates the manner in which the activity of play is able to deconstruct the probabilities of technique.

Interfaced Media

The first thing the player notices about *The Stanley Parable* is the unique style of gameplay. Unlike most games, which require skill or creativity to advance a story or win the game, *The Stanley Parable's* only functional element is walking and operating basic interfaces like doors or buttons. Not only does this expose the nature of video games as a series of decisions made by manipulating an interface, it also points to something broader about modern society. Since the inception of the typewriter, Western society has increasingly technified decisions. People write emails, create power-points, and operate machines. This society is what could be described as an interfaced society. In many ways, human technology is human existence. At the World Economic Forum's 2011 meeting, Dr. Ian Goldin (2011) discussed the double edged nature of technology. He said, "The interface of technology and society is absolutely key to what we do. Technology will provide many solutions, but it could also be the most dangerous thing we bring to the world" (30 Seconds). Technology is always value-laden. The technological media people use will

always impact the product or message they create. And modern technology is all encompassing. Every task of modern life uses technology in one form or another.

In his essay *Why Do Typewriters Go Click?* Flusser (1999) exposed the hierarchy that results from mechanized communication. The question is not simply “why do typewriters go click?” but also what impact that has on the user of the typewriter. The reason they go click is because machines stutter; they aren't organic and fluid like humans (p. 62). Machines stutter because they must quantify everything. The world of cold calculations does not allow room for the same type of creativity that formerly permeated culture. Everything is determined by what machines can or cannot do in the same way that the player's actions in *The Stanley Parable* are determined by what the narrator and game will allow the player to do.

Technique is a defining influence on life in the modern era. Even mundane communication is now defined by text messages and computer key boards. Quantitative analysis demands conformance (Flusser, 1999, p. 64), much like all communication on some level. But technological conformity leaves little room for challenging the dominant medium. It is a zero sum game.

The Illusion of Choice

In *The Stanley Parable*, the player discovers that the company Stanley works for has a room called *mind control facility*. What is interesting about this mind control facility is that it doesn't appear to have any operational use. Nothing is directly inserted into the minds of the employees. The machine there functions as a *Panopticon*, a prison described by Jeremy Bentham. The cells are arranged in a circular pattern around a watch tower. Guards can see the prisoners from the watch tower, but the prisoners cannot see the guards. In this way, prisoners internalize the watchmen. Foucault (1978) used the Panopticon as a metaphor for modern life. He explained, “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201). Individuals within a Panopticon-like institution continue to do what social norms expect them to do because they never know whether or not they are being watched. For Heidegger, this is the epitome of the they-self. People regulate their own behavior according to the expectations of the watchmen (in the modern case technicians and managers) and do not make their own choices.

The Stanley Parable makes a not-so-subtle reference to this same concept, critiquing the modern state of constant supervision and implying that this practice strips agency from individuals. The facility is a circular room with monitors on the wall that are visible from a central interface. The facility does two things: First, it sends instructions to employees telling them what to press. Second, its camera watches the employees work in their cubicle. The mind control of the Stanley Parable is not so different from the modern work environment. Employers can track how their employees are using computers and require that they use them for the job, creating a Panopticon-like environment. Although the Panopticon may indeed increase efficiency, for the makers of the Stanley Parable, efficiency is not the end goal; agency is.

The question of choice is also brought up in a multitude of ways through the gameplay. The narrator tells the player what to do, and the player can either obey or disobey. When players reach the first set of doors, the narrator says, "Stanley went through the door on the right." At this point, Stanley can enter through either the right door or the left door. But regardless of which door he takes, the narrator is prepared to respond to what he does. Each story line is pre-determined. The only choice the player maintains is which story line s/he will be forced to follow. Here, the medium of the game allows a special type of critique other mediums cannot offer. Stories in books and movies are typically monolithic. Games are linear, but they give the player a variety of options. They create the illusion that the player's choice has an impact even though developers already wrote the possible stories. In *The Stanley Parable*, the narrator responds immediately to glitches or exploits in the game's engine. There is no real way to disobey; there is only the illusion that the player can disobey. In a similar way, society is constructed so that "rebellion" only plays further into the hand of the technological society. Ellul describes this society saying, "Today technique has taken over the whole of civilization. Certainly, technique is no longer the simple machine substitute for human labor. It has come to be the intervention into the very substance not only of the inorganic but also the organic" (p. 128).

The logic of modern technique is one of objective truth. Machines either work, or they do not. Businesses are either efficient, or they are not. This lack of a middle ground corrupts choice because it says there are not multiple legitimate paths. Indeed, the paths that humans are allowed to follow will always be legitimate ones because technicians have designed the structure of society. They choose what paths people can or cannot follow. Technology functions as the they-self Heidegger described, obscuring the Dasein's ability to make free choices and therefore dwell authentically in their environment. Much like the typewriter limited the writer to thirty or so possible characters, technique limits the human to the successful options it has created. One may be able to leave the society, withdrawing into something outside the system. But attempts to challenge or change the system are difficult. As the narrator in *The Stanley Parable* said:

After being enslaved all these years you go and try to take control of the machine for yourself, is that what you wanted? Control? Oh...Stanley. *sigh* I applaud your effort, I really do, but you need to understand; there's only so much that machine can do. You were supposed to let it go, turn the controls off, and leave. If you want to throw my story off track, you're going to have to do much better than that. I'm afraid you don't have nearly the power you think you do. (The Stanley Parable)

Someone can choose a life without a phone, without email, without any number of the interfaces upon which the technological society is built. But s/he cannot easily change what that society has become because those interfaces are the foundation of modern reality. Ellul (1964) explained:

Civilization no longer exists of itself. Every Activity – intellectual, artistic, moral – is only part of technique. This fact is so enormous and unpredictable that we are simply unable to foresee its consequences. Most of us, blinded by traditional and well-established situations, are unable to grasp its meaning. Henceforth, there will

be no conflict between contending forces among which technique is only one. The victory of technique has already been secured. (p. 130)

The Stanley Parable points to this technological truth. The values of technique have invaded the human economic, social, and political life, and unseating it is unthinkable. Everything is being standardized. Even for *The Stanley Parable*, a critique of technique, the only ending that leads to “freedom” isn't true freedom. The door of the factory opens, and Stanley steps out; but as soon as he does, the player loses control of Stanley's movement. The sequence continues in such a way that the player cannot make decisions. This pattern illustrates the danger in the interfaced society. As people become increasingly dependent on their phones and computers, functioning without them grows increasingly difficult.

To Play

Having recognized the technological reality of the twenty-first century, what does *The Stanley Parable* suggest people do? Is it simply critiquing society, or does it offer a solution? Perhaps the alternative is found in the game's being-in-the-world. What is the world of the game? It is the activity of play. The designer of *The Stanley Parable*, Davey Wren, made this point directly when he spoke at the 2014 GDC Game Narrative Summit. Wren (2014) explained:

Even if there is a binary set of inputs, even if the game is mechanically only two things that you can do, I'd really love it if the player felt as if there were lots of different ways that you could go about choosing between those two things. . . What we are doing is creating a stage, and choices are props on the stage. And even you have the same stage and the same props, if you put multiple people in front of those props they are going to do totally different things with it, right? Giving two people the same prop doesn't mean we expect the same choice out of them. We will find out something new based on every single person who comes to those props. We want a variety of player expression, that every player who comes to it can see something new about themselves. It's not about the outcome. It's not about the challenge you are trying to overcome. It's about when I was on stage with those props, I chose something that's a reflection of me. (5:00)

The ultimate problem with technique that *The Stanley Parable* reveals is the problem of probability and expression of choice. The inevitability of decisions and the lack of the unpredictable strips Stanley of his agency. But players *are* able to express something about themselves in the game's form of dialogue. The alternative is to play.

The dialogue of the game happens in the mind of the player as they slowly realize the inevitability of the game's progression. This dialogue is different for each player. It is unpredictable. The act of playing a game introduces an element of change because the player cannot predict precisely what another player will do. Similarly, chess has a determined outcome; the game can only play out so many possible ways. The structure of the game is predetermined, but the other player is not. Through exploring the possible outcomes of the game, chess players engage in a unique form of dialogue that is often

entirely new to both players. The creators of *The Stanley Parable* may have scripted each ending, but the process of discovery is still entirely new to the player each time.

Games like *The Stanley Parable* encourage human expression. In one sense, the player is telling the story they choose as they express their cooperation or non-cooperation with the narrator. Technology in this case is serving human expression, not stifling it. This returns technology to its rightful place: as instruments for human benefit. Moreover, the creation of a video game that challenges the precepts of technology deconstructs the role of the designer. The writers and creators of *The Stanley Parable* understood that players could not make choices completely and that they themselves could. But the writers designed the mechanics of the game around allowing their game play to serve as expression for the player. This same choice could be available to Western society more broadly. If the West wishes to return to a time of expression and choice, its citizens must begin the process of taking back the technology.

Through computer literacy and creative storytelling, ordinary people can design their own interfaces and choose for themselves how they will use technology and live their lives. Technology could be designed to assist humans in creativity rather than replace the need for human creativity all together. When everyone can code and software is available for everyone to adapt and use, the power of corporate developers and engineers will decrease. True liberation in *The Stanley Parable* is not found inside the game. It is found in the game designers who created a game that challenged their industry and encouraged player expression.

Conclusion

Although computers and networking exacerbated the problems this paper describes, they also provide the solution. The structure of computer coding allows for nearly unlimited creativity that is not inherently fettered by media or corporate interests. No one person owns the internet. Western culture must reassert its own empowerment through computer literacy, a sharing of open source code, and a renewed interest in its ability to decide for itself how it shall live. Humans were created to create. After the introduction of technique, human building no longer functioned for better dwelling. Building became the goal. However, with the right priorities, society could return to a time when it built industry to improve quality of life rather than allow technicians and their interfaces to control life. The human being-in-the-world is constantly changing, and it is up to humans to change the trajectory of how they use technology. Right now, society is trending toward an orientation of technology as existence when its proper role is assistant to existence. But nothing is inevitable so long as people are aware and willing to work to change both their personal and communal orientation toward technology.

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