New Sincerity, the Weird, and the post-ironic turn in contemporary indie video games

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA in Cultural and Critical Studies, Birkbeck College, University of London

September 2020
contents

abstract ................................................................................................................................................. 2

0: introduction .................................................................................................................................. 3

1: ‘The Princess is in another castle’: ironic parody and weird distortion .............................. 16

2: ‘To get out, all you have to do is be sincere’: ironic metafiction and complicating of authorship ................................................................. 29

3: ‘I can’t feel at home in this world anymore’: alienation, late capitalism, and weird transformation .................................................................................................................. 45

4: conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 60

5: references .................................................................................................................................. 64

  5.1: figures ...................................................................................................................................... 64

  5.2: bibliography ........................................................................................................................ 66

  5.3: filmography ........................................................................................................................ 71

  5.4: gameography ...................................................................................................................... 72
abstract

This dissertation examines how contemporary indie video games use elements of the Weird as part of a post-ironic, New Sincerity aesthetic. By comparing three contemporary indie games against earlier cinema and television texts, I argue that over the past decade of the 2010s indie games boom video games emerged as an important medium in the post-ironic turn associated with New Sincerity.

In the first chapter, I compare Braid (2008) with the original two seasons of Twin Peaks (1990–1991) to examine how both texts use ironic parody to draw the player/viewer in and then use the Weird to distort their parody and invert their ironic affect to produce sincerity-in-irony. In the second chapter, I compare The Beginner’s Guide (2015) and My Winnipeg (2007) to look at how the ironic distancing of metafiction and the complicating of authorship via narration combine to reveal sincerity amidst the irony of textual hyperreflexivity and to position sincerity as an escape from the metaphorical prison of cultural irony. Finally, in the third chapter, I compare Kentucky Route Zero (2013–2020) and Lost Highway (1997) to put the alienation of cultural irony into the context of late capitalism and to show that both texts use weird transformation of characters as a way to transform their ironic affect into sincerity.

Through these readings, I show how the Weird’s breaking down of boundaries and crossing of thresholds enables New Sincerity’s breaking down of the boundaries between irony and sincerity and briefly look at the influence of these three games on subsequent indie video games developed over the past decade.

keywords

Braid | The Beginner’s Guide | cultural irony | David Lynch | Guy Maddin | indie games | irony | Kentucky Route Zero | Mark Fisher | New Sincerity | post-irony | sincerity | video games | the Weird
In Act III of *Kentucky Route Zero* (2013–2020), at the midpoint of the game, the characters looking for 5 Dogwood Drive enter a rundown bar on the side of the road.¹ The bar is empty apart from the player characters and the surly bartender, Harry. Junebug and Johnny, a pair of disaffected hipster musicians (implied by this point in the game to be androids), pressure Harry into letting them perform despite the lack of audience. They get on stage in their dishevelled punk clothes and the player clicks on Junebug to start the performance. Stage lights go down and when they come back up, Junebug is wearing a luminous blue gown and Johnny is holding a keytar and wearing a red jumpsuit. As Junebug starts to sing, the roof of the bar flies away to reveal the night sky (see figure 0.1), the stars and the Moon wheel overhead, and, as the player chooses which lyrics Junebug will sing, a synth-driven dream-pop song plays.

Junebug and Johnny’s unexpected performance of Too Late to Love You is one of the most powerful scenes in the game. A sincere and beautiful musical moment bursts through the irony and arch disaffectedness that the android hipsters have previously brought to the narrative. The music’s ethereal dreaminess unexpectedly juxtaposed with the rundown dive bar evoke Rebekah Del Rio’s appearance in Club Silencio at the turning point of *Mulholland Drive* (2001) or Julee Cruise’s performances at the Roadhouse bar in *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991). In all these moments, beauty and sincere expression suddenly appear and are allowed to play out in full amidst narratives that have, to this point, had an ironic and knowing tone.

However, as G. Christopher Williams points out, the performance in *Kentucky Route Zero* is not merely witnessed by the audience. The player participates in the writing of the

---

song by choosing the opening line for each verse as Junebug sings. The interactivity of the video game medium allows for an additional level of engagement in the sincerity of the musical moment while also keeping the player aware of the game as a game that requires player input. It’s a complex moment of challenging the cultural irony in Kentucky’s narrative while acknowledging and troubling the boundary between the player and the fictive space of the game.

Over the past decade, indie video games like Kentucky Route Zero have emerged as a key site for discussions of cultural irony and responses to irony. Video game culture is an ironic culture: a culture formed around various online groups and suffused in the irony, sarcasm, and detachment of the “extremely online”. The Gamergate campaign in 2014 was a wave of abuse and harassment directed towards women in video games and is a good example of irony being weaponised to undermine progressive activism in the cultural space of games and gaming. 4 Far-right figures like Steve Bannon, Donald Trump’s former Chief Strategist, and Milo Yiannopoulos co-opted Gamergate as part of the emerging alt-right movement which took over swathes of internet culture in the late 2010s and influenced alienated young people towards the political right. 5 Video game culture served as a vanguard for the ironic culture of the alt-right as the movement went on to exert lasting political influence over the cultural West.

Despite this pervasive irony in mainstream video game discourse and in mainstream AAA games, indie gaming has emerged since the late 2000s as a site for artistic responses to cultural irony. 6 Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux refer to the indie games boom of the

---

6 ‘AAA’ (pronounced ‘triple-A’) is an informal classification for video games developed by major development studios and AAA games are typically the bestselling games on the market.
2010s in which the availability of new digital distribution platforms and an emerging market for small-scale games led to a lot of small studios and single auteur developers releasing challenging and experimental games. Jordan Erica Webber echoes this referring to a ‘resurgence in independent videogames’ in the late 2000s enabled by increased internet speeds and digital distribution platforms like Steam and Xbox Live Arcade. Many of these indie games blend irony and sincerity in a way associated with the New Sincerity aesthetic. These games use techniques previously used by earlier cinema and television to trouble cultural irony and to formulate New Sincerity responses. In this dissertation, I examine how indie video games use elements of the Weird to mix irony with sincerity as part of the New Sincerity. I look at how video games have built on techniques used earlier in cinema and television to encourage sincere engagement enmeshed within irony and how, despite their suffusion in cultural irony, video games have emerged over the past decade as an important medium in the post-ironic turn associated with New Sincerity.

In each chapter, I contrast an indie video game text against an earlier cinema or television text to look at how those two texts use the Weird to trouble elements of irony as part of their New Sincerity aesthetic. Texts are thematically grouped based on how they complicate irony: the cinema and television texts are reflective of what they achieve in the New Sincerity rather than how they reflect the time period of their production. The first chapter looks at irony as a function of parody through Braid (2008) as a parody of early platforming games and Twin Peaks’ original two seasons as a parody of American primetime soap operas. This chapter examines how both texts use ironic parody to draw the player / viewer in and then use the Weird to distort their parody and invert the irony to reveal a dialectical mix of irony and sincerity. The second chapter focuses on metafiction and how

---


9 Number None, Braid (Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3) (Redmond: Microsoft Game Studios, 2008).
textual reflexivity is used to express New Sincerity. Through examining The Beginner’s Guide (2015) and My Winnipeg (2007) as two postmodern texts that draw attention to their own constructedness, I look at how both texts visualise cultural irony as a cage from which sincerity offers an escape and how the ironic distancing of textual reflexivity and the complicating of authorship via narration combine to reveal sincerity amidst the irony of metafiction’s reflexivity.  

The third chapter places irony in the context of late capitalism and concentrates on the alienation engendered by cultural irony. Kentucky Route Zero and Lost Highway (1997) both show the alienation of cultural irony in the American capitalist context and both use weird transformation of characters as a way to transform their ironic affect into sincerity. The release dates of Braid, The Beginner’s Guide, and Kentucky Route Zero span the 2010s indie games boom and in each chapter I will briefly look at the influence that these games had on other indie games exploring irony and sincerity over the decade.

These texts all represent and problematise various elements of what I’m referring to as “cultural irony”. This refers to a cultural, attitudinal, and existential sense of irony whereby, as Allard den Dulk writes, ‘individuals—or almost an entire society, even—liv[e] their lives through the perspective of irony.’ This sense of irony has the same foundation as rhetorical irony: where rhetorical irony is ‘a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the antithesis of the literal meaning of the words used’, cultural irony refers to a broad inversion of meaning throughout culture where people’s actions, behaviours, and speech acts are antithetical to how they really feel. Den Dulk links this inversion of meaning in people’s actions to postmodern hyperreflexivity writing that ‘[c]onstant self-reflection leads to never being able to fully stand behind one’s actions, for one is constantly reconsidering them, and this awareness is expressed through irony: by not taking those actions seriously,

---

11 My Winnipeg, directed by Guy Maddin (Buffalo Gal Pictures, 2007).
12 Lost Highway, directed by David Lynch (October Films, 1997).
not fully claiming them as one’s own.’ 14 He ties cultural irony to the contemporary postmodern context. Similarly, Ian Bogost identifies irony as a contemporary affliction of framing cultural irony as a barrier between ourselves and the world:

Irony is a hedge, an insurance policy against further affliction. It erects boundaries that we hope will protect us from the world by forbidding it access to us. Or, differently put, we double the world, creating a safe, fictional version atop the real one—whether in our heads or on the Internet. 15

In this quote, Bogost formulates irony as a defence mechanism against the mistrust of the world engendered in the cultural West. He argues that this defence has become ubiquitous especially among the ironic online and video game cultures that he examines. 16 His formulation is similar to Lewis Hyde's:

Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage. This is why it is so tiresome. People who have found a route to power based on their misery—who don’t want to give it up though it would free them—they become ironic. 17

Hyde poetically conceives of irony as a cage and Adam Kelly identifies this conception as a significant influence on David Foster Wallace’s ideas of the tyrannizing ‘pervasive cultural irony’ that informed his literary work and subsequent New Sincerity interpretations of his

14 Den Dulk, Existentialist, p. 60.
16 Bogost, pp. 35–42.
work. ¹⁸ For these theorists, cultural irony is enfeebling and tyrannizing rather than liberatory: it is a cynical stance ‘hold[ing] everything in between welcome embrace and sneering mockery.’ ¹⁹ Bogost, Hyde, and Wallace all frame cultural irony as a negative affect and one that erects boundaries between self and world.

Cultural irony becomes more than an affect and leads to negative actions when it results in irony poisoning. Piia Varis refers to irony poisoning as an affliction caused by the excessive irony of online culture in which ‘online ironic memeing starts having offline consequences such as being violent towards foreigners and setting houses on fire.’ ²⁰ This leads to the alt-right’s use of irony whereby, as Rosalind Gill explains, irony becomes a way for someone to express sexist or homophobic statements while claiming that they don’t actually mean it. ²¹ Video game culture, embedded in this kind of irony-poisoned online culture, has largely adopted this ironic affect and, as campaigns like Gamergate demonstrate, has led to harassment, abuse, and serious harm to individuals in the video game industry.

In contrast to irony’s inversion of meaning, sincerity is defined by Lionel Trilling as ‘a congruence between avowal and actual feeling’. ²² Den Dulk echoes this idea of inner and outer as well as adding the idea of ‘connection with the world’ in his definition of sincerity based on Charles Guignon: ‘modernity gives rise to a split between the (inner) self on the one hand, and the (outer) totality of the world on the other [...]’. As inner and outer are no

---


¹⁹ Bogost, p. 10.


longer seen to coincide, the self has to be (re)connected with the world by being sincere.'

Den Dulk positions sincerity against hyperreflexivity and endless irony by conceiving sincerity in terms of selfhood, external engagement, and ‘the virtue of wanting to form a stable self in the world’. Sincerity is framed here as the self connecting and engaging with the world positioning sincerity against cultural irony’s erection of boundaries and cages between self and world.

Following Adam Kelly, my understanding of New Sincerity comes from ‘various online manifestations during the mid-to-late 2000s’ rather than earlier foundational writers such as Wallace whose works were later interpreted as precursors to New Sincerity. In his “Manifesto for the New Sincerity”, podcast and radio host Jesse Thorn defines New Sincerity as ‘irony and sincerity combined like Voltron, to form a new movement of astonishing power.’

Kelly outlines how applying this dialectical sense of New Sincerity to Wallace’s fiction sheds light on the differences between his New Sincerity and Wallace’s understanding of sincerity. Wallace’s understanding of sincerity is outlined in his essay on cultural irony expressed through American television in which he describes:

some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” born oglers who dare to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue.

---

24 Den Dulk, Existentialist, p. 194.
Key to this quote is the idea of ‘backing away’ from irony and returning to an ‘old untrendy’
pre-ironic state. Jim Collins has a similar approach and uses ‘new sincerity’ to refer to films
that move back from irony to a pre-ironic age of cinema citing films like Kevin Costner’s

The New Sincerity theorised by Kelly does not ‘back away from iron[y]’ as in Wallace
and Collins. 29 Rather, it looks forwards to an aesthetic synthesis of irony and sincerity like
that outlined by Thorn. It does not look backwards to a pre-ironic age to ‘recover a lost
“purity”’ but deconstructs the very ideas of “pure” and “contaminated” in artistic production. 30

Writing about New Sincerity in cinema, Warren Buckland criticises Collins for using the term
‘new sincerity’ incorrectly:

The *new* of new sincerity signifies it is a response to postmodern irony and nihilism:
not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a
dialectical move, new sincerity incorporates postmodern irony and cynicism; it
operates in conjunction with irony. 31

Buckland’s rejection of nostalgic return and his emphasis on the dialectical mixing of New
Sincerity aligns his formulation with that of Kelly and Thorn. Kim Wilkins echoes the
importance of New Sincerity’s dialectical mixing of irony and sincerity when she refers to it
as a cultural mode in which ‘irony is employed with sincerity’. 32 She writes that New
Sincerity ‘is not a simple return to earlier traditions but a dialectical modality wherein the

264.  
*Dances with Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner (Orion Pictures, 1990).  
29 Collins, p. 245.
writer or artist acknowledges that, despite the assurance of sincere intentions, they are bound by textual limitations.' 33 I use the term “New Sincerity” to refer to this dialectical sense of the term rather than the pre-ironic conception of Wallace and Collins. New Sincerity here refers to an aesthetic mode in which irony and sincerity are dialectically enmeshed and entangled. 34 It can also involve an interrogation of what it means to be sincere in a contemporary neoliberal context: Kelly emphasises how New Sincerity texts raise and scrutinise questions around sincerity rather than offer definitive answers about either sincerity in general or the author’s own sincerity expressed through the text. 35

As well as adopting a New Sincerity aesthetic to interrogate irony, my chosen texts all use elements of “the Weird” as part of their approach. Roger Luckhurst outlines how Mark Fisher’s The Weird and the Eerie ‘delineate[s] a spectrum of sensibilities, the nuances of feeling that span the uneasy or unnerving: that feeling of being off-kilter, of wrongness or free-floating angst.’ 36 My chosen texts fall on this spectrum of sensibilities inclined towards the point that Fisher refers to as ‘the Weird’. The Weird is a broad mode for texts which, for Fisher, includes some modernist experimental works and certain aspects of the surreal and formal Surrealism while excluding more explicit aspects of fantasy and the fantastic. 37 Writing on the game Bloodborne (2015), Oliver Langmead refers to ‘the Weird’ as a ‘sub-genre of the Gothic’ and, like Fisher, identifies H. P. Lovecraft as a foundational writer for the Weird. 38 Fisher defines the Weird as a mode that explores the boundaries between inside and outside. He writes:

33 Wilkins, p. 9.
34 Wilkins, p. 23.
It [the Weird] involves a sensation of wrongness: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object is here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. 39

The sensation of wrongness that Fisher points out in this quote comes from the breakdown of pre-existing conceptual boundaries and the thresholds that we unthinkingly acknowledge between worlds. The Weird explores the intrusion of ‘real externality’ into our existing world in a way that disturbs us and strikes us as wrong, strange, or invalid. 40 H. P. Lovecraft’s writing and David Lynch’s films are Weird because their sense of wrongness exists in a world that is recognisably our own but in which there is an ‘interplay, an exchange, a confrontation and indeed a conflict between this world and others.’ 41 This is distinct from fantasy and the fantastic which is set in or predominately rooted in a clearly distinct world as in Tolkienesque fantasy universes, superhero settings like that of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or science-fiction universes separated from our world either spatially in the case of the Star Wars franchise or temporally as in the Star Trek franchise.

My chosen texts all occupy the Weird, sharing a preoccupation with worlds and forces outside our own imposing themselves on our world in ways that create a sense of unease. They all deal in some way with thresholds between worlds, with ruptures in the fabric of existence, with the in-betweenness of the Weird sub-genre. 42 Braid and Twin Peaks, for example, are both recognisably Weird texts and act as a useful illustration of how thresholds between worlds can be represented in the Weird. Fisher notes the frequent use of curtains in Twin Peaks as a visual motif marking the division between worlds and

39 Fisher, p. 15.
40 Fisher, p. 16.
41 Fisher, p. 19.
constituting an ‘egress to the outside’ (see figure 0.2). 43 Braid uses clouds in the same way as Twin Peaks uses curtains. Travelling from the hub world to puzzle worlds in Braid requires crossing a threshold in which clouds border the screen evoking the curtains of a theatre stage or cinema screen (see figure 0.3). In these texts, curtains and clouds act as a visual signifier for the weird transition between worlds: between the world recognisably our own and other worlds where time and

![figure 0.2: still from Twin Peaks S02E22, 00:18:42](image)

2. TIME AND FORGIVENESS

What if our world worked differently? Suppose we could tell her: “I didn't mean what I just said,” and she would say: “It's okay, I understand,” and she would not turn away, and life would really proceed as though we had never said that thing? We could remove the damage but still be wiser for the experience.

![figure 0.3: screenshot from Braid, World 2](image)

43 Fisher, p. 53.
speech move backwards. This weirdness is used in both *Braid* and *Twin Peaks* to distort ironic parody in a New Sincerity aesthetic as I explore in the next chapter.
1

‘The Princess is in another castle’

ironic parody and weird distortion

At the end of each world in *Braid*, the player reaches a castle and a dinosaur emerges. In the first world, the dinosaur tells the player-character, Tim, 'I’m sorry, but the Princess is in another castle' (see figure 1.1). This operates as a clear signal of *Braid*’s ironic
parody by referencing well-known dialogue from the classic platforming game, *Super Mario Bros.* (1989) (see figure 1.2). However, as the game continues, this straightforward parody becomes increasingly weird and distorted. The friendly dinosaur character becomes more distant and confused with each world. At the end of World 3, the parodic quotation is distorted into ‘Oh, uhh, the Princess… Princess who? She must be in another castle’ as if the dinosaur is forgetting what’s going on. By the end of World 6, the dinosaur is actively questioning Tim by asking if he’s sure

---

45 *Braid*, World 3-8.
that the Princess exists and bringing the player’s perception of the story into question (see figure 1.3).

This chapter explores *Braid*’s ironic parody and how the weird distortion of its parody is used, like in the television series, *Twin Peaks*, to invert the player’s understanding of the narrative and invert the game’s ironic affect into a sincerity-in-irony.

*Braid* is a platforming puzzle video game developed by Number None studios under auteur developer, Jonathan Blow. *Braid*’s gameplay is structured around manipulating time and solving puzzles by reversing time, advancing time, or pausing time. The game’s narrative is presented largely through blocks of text in the cloud-filled interstitial areas between worlds and involves Tim trying to find and rescue the Princess after having made some kind of mistake in their past relationship. Along with *Super Meat Boy* (2010) and *Fez* (2012), *Braid* was prominently featured in *Indie Game: The Movie* (2012) as an exemplar of indie game development. 46 Boluk and LeMieux point out how the documentary positions *Braid*, released in 2008, as the successful forerunner of the other games featured in the documentary and as a forerunner of the indie games boom of the 2010s. 47

The three indie games featured in *Indie Game: The Movie* are all what Boluk and LeMieux refer to as ‘metagames’: ‘a metagame […] represents, references, or otherwise cites the graphics and gameplay of other games.’ 48 *Braid* parodies early platforming games specifically referencing the significant historical platforming games, *Donkey Kong* (1981) and

---

47 Boluk and LeMieux, p. 28.
48 Boluk and LeMieux, p. 29.
*Pitfall!* (1982). Braid’s most prominent parody is of *Super Mario Bros.*, one of the bestselling games of all time and a game that continues to influence popular culture and video game development through its creation of formative platform gaming mechanics and its establishing of Nintendo’s mascot, Mario. *Braid*’s Tim is a clear analogue for Mario: both are small men characters who are controlled by the player to run, jump, and ultimately, find a princess. The enemies in *Braid* are deliberately similar in design and motion to the Goomba and Piranha Plant enemies in *Super Mario Bros.* (see figure 1.4).

![figure 1.4: cropped screenshots from Braid and Super Mario Bros.](image)

Parody—particularly the postmodernist parody of *Braid*—is a mode that uses irony as part of its critical engagement with the texts being parodied. Dan Harries points to parody’s straightforward rhetorical irony in ‘simultaneously say[ing] one thing while saying another, always acting as an ironic tease.’ Kim Wilkins defines parody as ‘imitation characterized by ironic inversion—repetition with a critical edge.’ Linda Hutcheon’s work on parody emphasises parody’s role as a critical form of engagement with the past writing that

---


Activision, *Pitfall!* (Atari 2600, Atari 5200, Atari 8-bit, ColecoVision, MSX, C64, Intellivision, Apple II) (Santa Monica: Activision, 1982).


51 Wilkins, p. 72.

postmodernist parody as in Braid is 'a value-problematising, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representation'. 52

Braid's parody initially serves this function of critical engagement with the past. In the initial stages of the game, the parody is an ironic reminder of video games history and, as Patrick Jagoda argues, a contemplation and historicization of the video game form. 53

Jagoda writes:

The game demonstrates the ways in which videogames (including Braid itself) are entangled in complex late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century histories of media, computing, weapons technology, ethical responsibility, and subject formation that are both broadly geopolitical and uniquely American. As Braid reminds the player, videogames are historical outgrowths of a modernity specific to an informatic, postindustrial society. 54

Jagoda points out here that parody functions as a way for Braid to remind the player of video games as historical objects, the cultural, political, and geographic context in which games are produced and played, and Braid's own contemporary position as postmodern metagame. Robin J. S. Sloan delves into Braid's parody of Super Mario Bros. specifically to look at how Braid uses similarity and difference for critical imitation: similarities in core gameplay mechanics balanced against differences in narrative style, representation of the player-character, and art style. 55 This balancing of similarity and difference creates a tension for the player between their familiarity with gameplay elements—and, for many players, their

53 Jagoda, pp. 746–747.
54 Jagoda, p. 747.
childhood memories of playing similar platforming games—and the ironic distancing established by the game’s distortion of narrative and tonal elements.

*Braid’s* use of ironic parody as a critical form of engagement with the past is similar to that of *Twin Peaks*. The original two seasons of *Twin Peaks*, co-created by Mark Frost and David Lynch, operate as a parody of American primetime soap operas like *Dallas* (1978–1991) and *Dynasty* (1981–1989). In its initial guise as a show about a young woman’s murder in small-town America, *Twin Peaks* uses long-running arcs like a soap opera and embraces soap opera tropes such as fraught love triangles, villainous businessmen, scheming femme fatales, explosive cliffhangers, and a small-town setting in which every character has a secret. The irony of *Twin Peaks*’ parody is emphasised by its show-within-a-show, *Invitation to Love*, a soap opera watched by many of the characters in Twin Peaks. Snippets of *Invitation* appear in the background of *Twin Peaks*’ first season often paralleling the events happening in the episode in which they appear. *Invitation to Love* more overtly embraces the clichés of primetime soap operas and thus acts as a knowing commentary on the tropes that *Twin Peaks* itself was ironically parodying. The meta-parody of *Invitation* adds a layer of knowingness to *Twin Peaks*’ soap opera parody and signals its overall ironic edge.

Though both *Braid* and *Twin Peaks* initially use ironic parody to critically engage with the past in their respective media, both use the Weird to distort their parody as part of a technique to bring sincerity into a dialectical mix with irony. Wilkins links parody to the Weird’s troubling of boundaries between worlds writing that ‘[p]arody is a textual doubling of

---

unification and reconciliation and differentiation, which highlights irreconcilable conflicts both between texts and between texts and the “world”. 58 Twin Peaks introduces elements of the Weird in a way that distorts the initial soap opera genre parody. Special Agent Dale Cooper’s (Kyle MacLachlan) exploration of the Black Lodge and the Red Room breaches spatial and temporal boundaries between worlds with, as discussed in the introduction, curtains acting as a symbol for the thresholds between these worlds. As the show becomes weirder and the boundaries between worlds are increasingly troubled, characters begin to transcend their clichéd parodic roles. Ben Horne (Richard Beymer) emerges as not just a parody of villainous businessman J. R. Ewing in Dallas but a man who cares about his younger brother, who wants to see his daughter succeed, and who, at one point, believes himself to be Confederate General Robert E. Lee; Albert Rosenfield (Miguel Ferrer) starts as an ironic parody of the cynical big-city detective frustrated with small-town life but emerges as a sentimental pacifist with a philosophy of universal love.

Over the fullness of Twin Peaks’ narrative, the Weird is particularly used to distort the audience’s perception of Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee), the young woman whose murder acts as the inciting incident of the whole show. As the series progresses into Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me (1992) and Twin Peaks: The Return (2017) and David Lynch takes more creative control, the narrative becomes more interested in Laura Palmer and in turning her, in David Foster Wallace’s terms, from ‘dramatic object to dramatic subject’. 59 Laura is initially presented as an object, a dead body wrapped in plastic, used to bring the (male) investigators together to drive the narrative: as John Thorne writes, ‘[s]he embodied the mystery that motivated other characters to action.’ 60 However, through weird elements such as dreams, travel to other worlds, and, in Fire Walk with Me and The Return, travel across

58 Wilkins, p. 72.
Twin Peaks: The Return, created by Mark Frost and David Lynch (Showtime Networks, 2017).
time, Laura emerges as a dramatic subject: a subject who does not necessarily match the audience’s preconceptions of the murdered small-town beauty queen from the start of the show. The irony of the show’s initial parody is distorted to present a sincere and unpleasant reality of emotional and sexual abuse.

This weird distortion of ironic parody in *Twin Peaks* is part of Lynch’s complex understanding of irony. Mike Miley writes:

Lynch’s ironic overtures disarm cynical viewers, luring them into the very emotional engagement that they thought they were too sophisticated to succumb to. Lynch courts viewers’ desire for “ironic kitsch consumption” only to guide them past their comforting ironic defenses toward “a less self-conscious emotional involvement” with the characters and the material (Ayers 103). Lynch’s “happy ending is not a knowing wink at happy endings, but rather a sincere invitation to an actual happy ending” (Rombes 72).

Miley explains how Lynch’s work like *Twin Peaks* draws in the viewer through the comforting familiarity and ironic overtures of the parody form only to use the Weird to distort the parody into emotional engagement and a sincere ending. The viewer is led to sincere engagement with Laura Palmer as a subject, for example, through the inversion of the ironic parody that initially drew them in. Nicholas Rombes refers to this as Lynch’s ‘sincerity-in-irony’ and argues that it shows the difference between Lynch’s work and other postmodernist work:

---

61 Wallace, *Supposedly*, p. 211.
63 Miley.
Lynch’s work offers a glimpse of what possibly lies ahead, after postmodernism.

Lynch’s films fully enact, rather than reflect, the postmodern […] but with none of the high seriousness of modernism, nor the ironic, ‘in-crowd’ detachment of postmodernism.  

Rombes argues that Lynch uses postmodernism and irony as part of his strategy for expressing sincerity. Lynch’s sincerity-in-irony has the dialectical enmeshing of irony and sincerity characteristic of New Sincerity and Miley argues that this approach was a significant influence on Wallace and his New Sincerity literature.

*Braid* uses this same technique, drawing in the player through its ironic parody of classic platforming games and the comforting familiarity of its gameplay mechanics and then weirdly distorting the parody to reveal sincerity-in-irony. *Braid* expresses its position in the Weird through its blurring of boundaries between worlds: the player starts in a hub world consisting of a house with several doors. Each door sends the player through a threshold of clouds to a different world where time functions differently. Jagoda writes about the weird nature of *Braid*’s time-manipulation gameplay mechanic and how it ‘juxtaposes incongruous temporal realities’ to promote an unsettling feeling rather than a sense of empowerment in the player. Whenever the player manipulates time, this unsettling feeling is visualised through an uneasy discolouration of the game’s colour palette and a strange distortion of the game’s soundtrack.

This weird distortion intensifies as the game continues and the time-manipulation puzzles become more complex. As shown at the start of this chapter, the game’s parody

---

65 Miley.
66 Jagoda, p. 749.
67 Jagoda, p. 749.
becomes more distorted with the dinosaur character calling Tim’s pursuit of the Princess into question. This culminates in the game’s final world where Tim finds the Princess and runs with her as she escapes a monstrous figure. At the point where Tim finally reaches the Princess, the game’s time-reversal mechanic kicks in, breaching the temporal boundaries we thought we knew. This inversion reveals that the Princess was not running alongside Tim to escape a monster but was running away from Tim into the arms of a figure who saves her (see figure 1.5). Writing about this climactic inversion, Sloan writes:

[...] *Braid* uses irony to transform and critique the narrative of *Super Mario Bros*. This use of misdirection changes not only how we interpret the story and themes of both games, but also how we perceive the player-characters (Mario and Tim) as protagonist-heroes. ⁶⁸

**figure 1.5:** screenshot from *Braid*, World 1-1, showing the Princess running away from Tim

Sloan points out how this inversion of the saving-the-Princess trope inverts its parody of *Super Mario Bros.* and the often-unquestioned heroism of the player-character in video

---

⁶⁸ Sloan, p. 40.
games. The recontextualization made possible by *Braid*’s time-reversal gameplay mechanic inverts not only the flow of time that we had accepted but Tim’s (and the player’s) role as the hero. The weird breaching of temporal boundaries via the gameplay allows the intrusion of the game’s real narrative: Tim’s role as a stalker and possible abuser of the Princess. What Fisher calls ‘real externality’ intrudes on our pre-existing conception of the game world and the game’s sincere messages about relationship breakdown and abuse become clear. As with Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*, the weird distortion enables the Princess to adopt a role as more than a dramatic object by stripping away the irony to show the sincerely horrific reality of emotional abuse and male obsession. As George Toles writes with regards to Lynch, the player is ‘suddenly at the mercy of a sincerity hatched at the very core of artifice.’

The distortion of the game’s initially ironic parody reveals, as with Lynch’s work, sincerity-in-irony, New Sincerity’s dialectical mix of irony and sincerity.

The effect of *Braid*’s New Sincerity is amplified by the player’s ludic engagement with the character of Tim. In a 2007 study, Hefner, Klimmt, and Vorderer found that video games offer a different identification process with the game’s player-character than the kind of empathy-driven identification with protagonists in cinema or television: the process of controlling a character’s actions interactively leads to a stronger sense of identification with video game protagonists. Ludic engagement offers a kind of shortcut for the luring of viewers into emotional engagement which Miley identifies as key to Lynch’s sincerity-in-irony. The familiarity of the video game form, *Braid*’s critical engagement with earlier platforming games through its parody, and the monadic identification process that Hefner, Klimmt, and Vorderer discuss lead the player to strongly identify with Tim as a heroic

---

69 Fisher, p. 16.
protagonist. The game’s weird distortion and the revelation that Tim is not, in fact, a hero is highly impactful as the player’s strong identification with the player-character forces them to sincerely reckon with Tim’s probable emotional abuse of the Princess as if Tim’s actions were their own. Strong identification with video game protagonists heightens the sense of sincerity revealed when the ironic parody is distorted.

*Braid* and *Twin Peaks* both offer early examples in their respective media of using ironic parody to lure players/viewers into a sense of sincere emotional engagement enabled by weird distortion of their initial parody. Released at the start of the 2010s indie games boom, *Braid* is an early example of expressing New Sincerity through video games and the distortion of ironic parody that *Braid* picks up from *Twin Peaks* was an influence on indie games developed over the next decade. Toby Fox’s *Undertale* (2015) parodies another video game genre, the role-playing game (RPG), and similarly draws the player in through irony before distorting its parody to present a sincere exploration of violence in video games and ludonarrative dissonance. 72 Maddy Thorson’s *Celeste* (2018) builds on *Braid*’s parody of platforming games by using classic platforming mechanics to symbolise the struggles of mental health issues and sincerely express messages about coping with anxiety. 73 *Braid*’s developer, Jonathan Blow, went on to develop *The Witness* (2016), a game which both parodies and deconstructs puzzle games to explore the nature of game-playing and how puzzles are used to build knowledge. 74

Davey Wreden’s *The Beginner’s Guide* also uses ironic parody in its representation of first-person shooter (FPS) video games. In one of the compendium of games presented in


73 Matt Makes Games, *Celeste* (PC, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) (Alberta: Matt Makes Games, 2018).

The Beginner’s Guide, the player is given a gun. Familiar shooting mechanics are immediately distorted, however, as the gun’s only purpose is to destroy the fabric of the game world around the player leaving blank spaces where bullets hit. This explicit deconstruction of the game world is part of The Beginner’s Guide’s larger ironic strategy of commenting on games and game design in a metafictional and self-reflexive way as discussed in the next chapter.
‘To get out, all you have to do is be sincere.’

ironic metafiction and complicating of authorship

In Chapter 13 of *The Beginner’s Guide*, the player is on a spaceship staffed by human figures whose heads are cubes with the word ‘BLIND’ written on every side. The player is only able to say ‘HELP! I’m blind!’ and ‘What’s going on??’ to the blind crew members. Outside the ship’s forward window, a giant wooden door is approaching through space and collides with the ship after about 20 seconds which causes the level to start again. It’s a surreal moment and one which highlights many of the recurrent themes of *Beginner’s*: removing players’ agency; weird and Surrealist visuals; doors as a recurring motif. Where *Braid* uses clouds and *Twin Peaks* uses curtains, *Beginner’s* uses the same recurring wooden door to represent thresholds between worlds. To save the ship and end the level, the player needs to find a human figure with the word ‘TRUTH’ on their head. This character tells the player that ‘The only way to stop it is to speak something that is honest’ prompting the player with dialogue options that express creative exhaustion or anxiety (see
As it will be throughout the game, sincerity is positioned as an escape—the only way out of an impossible situation—and, in an otherwise absurd and ironic environment, the author’s own creative anxieties push themselves to the fore.

This chapter looks at how *The Beginner’s Guide* expresses New Sincerity through ironic metafiction and the complicating of authorship and how the game draws on techniques of ironic narration and sincere self-insertion used in the film *My Winnipeg*. In both texts, irony is visualised as a cage with *The Beginner’s Guide* positioning sincerity as an escape from that cage.

*The Beginner’s Guide* was released in 2015 in the middle of the 2010s indie games boom. The game was written and directed by Davey Wreden following the success of his first game co-created with William Pugh, *The Stanley Parable*. Hans-Joachim Backe and Jan-Noël Thon discuss how both games problematise authorial identity self-reflexively:

---

Both games are generally attributed to lead designer Davey Wreden as a highly visible author figure (i.e., a videogame auteur), prominently feature narrators (i.e., narrating characters to whom extensive voice-over narration can be attributed), and explicitly comment on the relationship between player and avatar (as part of their respective metareferential gambits).  

We see this in Beginner’s with Wreden’s high visibility as an author figure central from the start: the game begins with Wreden introducing himself and continues with Wreden serving as narrator guiding the player through a series of video games ostensibly created by a developer named Coda. These short game vignettes are presented as prototypes of puzzle games or interactive experience games (often perjoratively called ‘walking simulators’ for their lack of traditional gameplay elements and their focus on players walking around within an environment built to express a narrative). The vignettes often involve elements of the Weird with the player passing through different worlds and, as mentioned, doors serving as a recurring on-the-nose motif for crossing thresholds. In each ‘game’, Wreden-as-narrator offers commentary in terms of design and what he interprets the game to say about Coda as an artist and as a person. He says in the introductory game:

This is what I like about all of Coda’s games. Not that they’re all fascinating as games, but that they are all going to give us access to their creators. I want to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do here.

---

78 Backe and Thon, p. 15.
This introduction serves on a metatextual level to tell us what Beginner’s will do for the player and Wreden-as-creator. As the game progresses, Coda’s work becomes more complex and more self-destructive ultimately revealing a conflict between Coda and Wreden and ‘giv[ing] us access’ to Wreden as a creator by highlighting his own creative insecurities.

As a game presenting and commenting on fictional video games and explicitly commenting on game design, Beginner’s is even more of a metagame, in Boluk and LeMieux’s terms, than Braid and positions itself in a tradition of postmodern metafiction from literature and cinema. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as ‘fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.’ Den Dulk points to the authorial voice becoming part of the fiction itself as a standard technique in metafiction: Beginner’s uses this through Wreden’s voice as narrator which, as Backe and Thon discuss, is not necessarily identical with Wreden-as-author. The game further positions itself through allusions to other works in the metafiction tradition. Chapter 10 presents a game in which the player enters a house and cleans it in an endless loop until Wreden-as-narrator breaks the loop to end the game. During this sequence, the player tidies a bookcase in which the covers and titles of a few books are visible amidst the lower-quality textures of other books. The visible books include Italo Calvino’s postmodern novel If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller, Susan Orlean’s The Orchid Thief which was loosely adapted into the metafictional film Adaptation (2002), and a cover that resembles Mark Z. Danielewski’s postmodern metafiction novel House of Leaves (see figure 2.2). By alluding to these

---

81 Boluk and LeMieux, p. 29.
83 Den Dulk, Existentialist, p. 90.
Adaptation, directed by Spike Jonze (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002).
literary and cinematic works of metafiction, *Beginner’s* signals its intentions to the player familiar with these works.

*figure 2.2*: screenshot from *The Beginner’s Guide*, Chapter 10, showing Calvino in the lower-left corner and Orlean in the upper-left corner of the bookshelf

Metafiction is used in the game as a way to express irony. There is a basic rhetorical irony in *Beginner’s* representing its vignettes as the work of the fictional Coda even though the player knows that this is a conceit as part of a game developed by Davey Wreden: the game is literally saying something that it does not mean. A sense of ironic detachment appears throughout the game such as in the house-cleaning chapter just discussed where a character refers to sharing a personal insight as ‘cheesy’. 85 This ironic detachment is also represented by the distancing effect achieved by metafiction. Den Dulk refers to this distancing effect of postmodern metafiction:

The reflexive-ironic nature of postmodernist metafiction is clear: its essential operation is a constant ironic self-distancing through the self-conscious unveiling of

---

its own structures. This strategy has an idealistic purpose: it wants to unmask the illusions that we regard as reality. 86

Bogost echoes den Dulk’s point about the ironic nature of metafiction and self-distancing when he argues that ‘going meta’ in contemporary online discourse ostensibly appears to move away from irony but actually pulls one further into cultural irony through further inversion of meaning. 87

Den Dulk’s discussion of metafiction’s ironic self-distancing ‘unmask[ing] the illusions that we regard as reality’ ties in with the Weird mode and its troubling of boundaries between worlds. Waugh similarly points out how metafiction can explore the ‘possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text’: in other words, how metafiction can explore the boundaries between the fictional world of a text and the world we recognise as our own in a weird way. 88 Beginner’s adopts what Fisher calls a ‘literary-metafictional register’ to explore the Weird’s confusion of worlds. 89

Guy Maddin’s My Winnipeg operates in a similar ironic metafictional register using the Weird to explore the boundaries between fictional and non-fictional worlds. My Winnipeg is a metafictional mock-documentary film—a ‘multilayered docu-fantasy’ in the words of one review—in which Maddin presents the ostensible history of his home city and his attempts to escape it: to ‘free myself from the heinous power of family and city and escape once and for all’. 90 Winnipeg shares some striking similarities with Beginner’s. Both trouble the idea of authorial voice by using narrators who are not necessarily identical with the authors: Maddin provides voiceover narration for the film but is physically played by an actor, Darcy Fehr, and

86 Den Dulk, Existentialist, p. 92.
87 Bogost, p. 45.
88 Waugh, p. 2.
89 Fisher, p. 45.
Simon Bowie

New Sincerity, the Weird, and the post-ironic turn in contemporary indie video games

is not identical with Maddin-as-director. Both are structured as a collection of short vignettes with the narrator guiding the viewer/player from one to the next. Where Beginner’s is a metafictional game about game design, Winnipeg is a metafictional film about making a film. Maddin-as-narrator describes his method of ‘film[ing] my way out of here’ whereby he stages a cinematic re-enactment of his childhood as an attempt to reconcile with his past and escape Winnipeg, his family, and his mother (Ann Savage). 91 The first shot signals the film’s metafictional intentions: a clapperboard appears on screen and the viewer hears a director helping Ann Savage (playing Maddin’s mother) with her lines thus immediately taking the viewer behind the process of making a film (see figure 2.3).

![figure 2.3: still from My Winnipeg, 00:00:25](image)

Like in Beginner’s, there’s a basic rhetorical irony in My Winnipeg presenting itself as a documentary while actually being an impressionist and Surrealist exploration of Winnipeg, childhood, and autobiography. My Winnipeg also contains a degree of ironic detachment

---

91 My Winnipeg, 00:18:30.
characteristic of Maddin’s films: William Beard refers to the ‘thick sauce of irony’ in Maddin’s films and how this is expressed through their ‘unblinking eye for the ludicrous’ and their ‘ironic detachment and critical self-consciousness’. 92 Through Maddin’s arch narration and the film’s humorous tone, Winnipeg shares with Beginner’s the sense of ironic self-distancing in postmodern metafiction outlined by den Dulk and Bogost.

Most significantly for the treatment of irony, both texts use cages, prisons, and labyrinths as signifiers for cultural irony in a way that resonates with metaphors for irony used by earlier New Sincerity writers. As mentioned in the introduction, Hyde’s metaphor of irony as a cage—as ‘the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage’—was an influence on Wallace’s conception of cultural irony and later New Sincerity theorists. 93 Wallace uses Hyde’s metaphor in his novel Infinite Jest when Joelle van Dyne describes her ironic affect as ‘the cage that has entered her, somehow’. 94 Beginner’s and Winnipeg both represent this idea in different ways, ludic and cinematic.

In Beginner’s, many of Coda’s games are prison games. Chapter 9 specifically presents several variations on the theme of a prison from which the player must escape by performing various tasks. Wreden-as-narrator becomes frustrated at the prison games saying that Coda ‘really unloaded on this prison idea, there's nearly a dozen of them. Personally I think it's awful to watch this, to see a person basically unravelling through their work, and for what?’ 95 Wreden-as-narrator’s interpretation is eventually revealed to say more about Wreden’s own desire for external validation than Coda’s psychology. Coda ‘just

---

93 Hyde, p. 11.
likes making prisons’. The prisons in the game are positioned as Wreden’s own prison of constant self-reflection and hyperreflexivity, two traits linked to cultural irony by Bogost and den Dulk. Labyrinths and mazes also appear throughout the game as symbols for imprisonment and confining cultural irony. This image appears most prominently in the game’s final moments as the player starts to float through the ceiling of the game environment revealing a vast labyrinth stretching to all horizons (see figure 2.4). The labyrinth is a final metaphor for Wreden’s imprisonment in his own self-doubt, creative anxiety, and ironic hyperreflexivity.

In My Winnipeg, imprisonment and labyrinths are similarly signifiers for the cage of cultural irony. The film’s through line is Maddin-as-narrator seeking an escape from Winnipeg, his family, and his past. In the film’s opening moments, the narrator says ‘I must leave it. I must leave it. I must leave it now. But how to escape one’s city? How to wake oneself enough for the frightening task? How to find one’s way out?’ while blurry intertitles

---

96 The Beginner’s Guide, Chapter 17.  
97 Bogost, pp. 35–42.  
flash on-screen with the phrases ‘How to escape?’ and ‘Ways out!’ (see figure 2.5). Later in the film, Maddin-as-narrator talks about Winnipeg’s ‘great white ways, the snow labyrinths, mazes of ectoplasm which determine our paths through our lives here.’ Through these metaphors of escape and mazes, Winnipeg itself is positioned as a prison in which its inhabitants are confined and, as in Beginner’s, the city-as-prison is linked to cultural irony. Darren Wershler highlights how Maddin frames the city of Winnipeg itself as a form of irony. Wershler further links Maddin’s labyrinthine view of the city to that outlined by Michel de Certeau: the city is positioned as a prison of irony from which Maddin attempts throughout the film to escape; a ‘new configuration of the labyrinthine and the corrosive forces of the Real’.

---

98 My Winnipeg, 00:04:08.
99 My Winnipeg, 00:43:16.
100 Darren Wershler, Guy Maddin’s My Winnipeg (London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 66.
101 Wershler, p. 69, 82.
While both texts conceive of cultural irony as a prison or labyrinth, *Beginner’s* offers a potential escape. At the end of Chapter 9, in the last version of the prison game (and in a weird distortion of temporal boundaries), the player ends up in a phonebox in conversation with their past self, the self still trapped in the earlier prison games. After a short conversation, the game offers several dialogue options for the player, one of which says, ‘To get out, all you have to do is be sincere.’ (see figure 2.6). The player’s past self asks, ‘Sincere about what?’, and the player’s only dialogue option is ‘That’s exactly what you need to figure out in order to escape.’ Sincerity is presented as a route out of the succession of prison games, as an escape from the endless self-reflexivity signified by Coda’s continual creation of prison games. This message is reinforced a few games later in Chapter 13 in the spaceship level discussed at the start of this chapter where sincerity is once again positioned as an escape. Through this metaphor, *Beginner’s* argues for sincerity as an escape from the cage of cultural irony. The walking simulator genre is

---

*figure 2.6:* screenshot from *The Beginner’s Guide*, Chapter 9

---

especially appropriate for inviting the player to participate in this kind of interpretative gameplay. Writing about walking simulators, Rosa Carbo-Mascarell writes:

> Through their careful placing of objects and semiotic arrangement of space, designers create rich, interpretable data the player can immerse themselves in. Interpreting the story becomes a performative act in which the player must traverse and explore landscapes in order to experience its spirit. 103

In the case of Beginner’s, the performative act of interpreting the meaning behind the game’s metaphors creates a heightened degree of immersion—players enter what Carbo-Mascarell calls ‘an immersive trance’—into the game’s positioning of sincerity and irony. 104 This ludic engagement is an effective way of visualising New Sincerity’s use of sincerity ‘to escape from the apparent alienation of affectless irony’. 105

In addition to representing the metaphor of irony as a prison, Beginner’s draws on techniques used in My Winnipeg by combining the ironic self-distancing of metafiction with sincere intimacy in self-aware narration to trouble straightforwardly ironic readings. David Church identifies the tension between ironic and sincere affect in Maddin’s films:

> Making an emotionally eviscerating movie is one of Maddin’s stated goals, but contemporary ironic reading strategies drain much of the potential for melodramatic affect, allowing his aesthetic to be interpreted as merely an exercise in alienation and emotional flatness. Maddin claims, however, that contemporary irony and melodrama are not mutually exclusive, for he is often captivated as much by irony as pure

103 Carbo-Mascarell, p. 11.
104 Carbo-Mascarell, p. 10.
emotion […]. For Maddin, what is most important is sentiment, but even if tears do not result, it is enough to make contemporary audiences feel something—anything—in the chance that they might someday overlook the present historical moment’s aversion to melodrama […]. 106

In this quote, Church outlines Maddin’s complex approach to irony whereby, despite the ironic distancing of his style, his ‘dissociative sense of strangeness’, and his ironic repurposing of historic film techniques, his work nonetheless produces sentiment and emotional affect even if not as traditionally expressed through cinema as in the ‘new sincerity’ films described by Collins in the introduction. 107 Church also points to how Maddin explicitly produces sincere affect—‘mak[ing] contemporary audiences feel something’—in his films as a radical response to the present historical moment. This intent echoes New Sincerity’s position as a response to contemporary cultural irony: what Kelly identifies as the fundamental newness of New Sincerity fiction. 108

In My Winnipeg specifically, Maddin inserts himself into the work in a way that acknowledges and troubles the idea of authorship and narration by positioning himself as a Maddin-as-narrator who is not identical with Maddin-as-director. This confusion creates an ambiguity throughout the film as to the irony or sincerity of the narrator and hence of the film itself. Maddin provides no answers as to his underlying irony or sincerity and this ambiguity creates a tense dialectical mix where both occupy the same space. As Kelly writes, ‘New Sincerity fiction is defined by the way it raises and scrutinises questions like these, not by the way it answers them in support of the imagined sincerity of the author.’ 109 Winnipeg

107 Church, p. 11.
expresses New Sincerity through questioning the sincerity of the author while keeping irony and sincerity in tension throughout the film.

*Beginner’s* uses the same technique through its metafiction and self-insertion narration. The irony of the metafiction’s distancing effect is complicated by Wreden’s self-insertion and the game’s framing of sincerity as an escape from ironic self-reflexivity. Wreden’s complex position between Wreden-as-narrator and Wreden-as-author troubles the idea of authorship in video games as Backe and Thon discuss but this self-insertion also creates a degree of emotional intimacy. 110 This intimacy creates a sense of sincerity by breaching the boundaries between the fictional world of the text and the world we recognise as our own. In a discussion of the game, Jake Muncy highlights this weird troubling of boundaries and the sincere emotive aspect of that:

Anytime you put yourself into a work like that, it’s inherently fictional. But it also reads to me as an attempt to push against the boundaries of that? Like, an appeal to emotion and to sincerity—to the sheer raw emotive aspect of the game—is still there, and that still points toward a degree of intimacy that I can’t really separate from Wreden choosing to self-insert. 111

For both *Beginner’s* and *Winnipeg*, the irony of the narration is complicated by the pushing against the boundaries of the fictional world of their narrative self-insertion. As Muncy points out, the intimacy of the narration and the autobiographical nature of the game brings in a degree of sincerity and raw emotional appeal. The textual reflexivity of the narrator—their ability to transcend the boundaries of the fictional world of the text and intrude upon the real world of the player / viewer—opens a space for the breaching of boundaries around irony

110 Backe and Thon, p. 19.
and sincerity enabling the dialectical mix of New Sincerity. *Beginner’s* and *Winnipeg* both ultimately express New Sincerity by keeping the ironic detachment of their metafiction in tension with the sincerity of their self-insertion and autobiography. Wershler articulates this with regards to *Winnipeg*:

> The point isn’t to enumerate and evaluate the anachronisms and continuity errors, deliberate or otherwise, but to consider how such claims and, in many cases, their opposite counter-claims together create a film that is psychologically and affectively true without being historically accurate. ¹¹²

It is precisely this tension in both texts between ironic claims and sincere counter-claims that creates their New Sincerity aesthetic: they are both ‘affectively true’ and ironically inaccurate; sincerity can be positioned as an escape while the prison-labyrinth of cultural irony is all-encompassing.

Gareth Damian Martin argues that *Beginner’s* represents an accelerated attempt to explore the real in the medium of video games through the weird transgressing of fictive boundaries:

> There are countless writers who share the same project, who were born into the desert of the real and are desperate to find reality wherever it may exist: the humans-in-systems of David Foster Wallace, the many-layered ephemera of Mark Z. Danielewski, the appropriative readings of Vanessa Place. All have been mislabelled as postmodern; all are exploring existence as a fictional process. [...] With *The

---

¹¹² Wershler, p. 6.
In this quote, Martin places *Beginner’s* in a tradition of writers exploring the boundaries of metafiction and of New Sincerity. He also points to *Beginner’s* position beyond postmodernism echoing Rombes’ positioning of Lynch’s sincerity-in-irony.  

Martin’s prediction that *Beginner’s* represents the start of a process of exploring the real and sincerity in video games is borne out by games that followed *Beginner’s* release in 2015 and similarly use metafiction techniques to express New Sincerity. *Undertale*, mentioned in the previous chapter, uses textual reflexivity and a sense of self-awareness of itself as a game to disrupt the boundaries between the fictional world and the real world.  

*Dr. Langesov, The Tiger, and The Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist* (2015), developed by William Pugh, the co-creator with Wreden of *The Stanley Parable*, similarly uses ironic metafictional narration to drive the story although it doesn’t reach for the same sincere affect as *Beginner’s*.  

*Control* (2019), a AAA action-adventure game, incorporates a sense of knowing self-awareness and weird transgressing of boundaries both in its text and in its metafictional breaking of the fourth wall. As a AAA game exploring metafiction, *Control* perhaps represents a breakthrough of these metafictional techniques from indie games to mainstream games and could indicate the post-ironic turn moving from the outskirts of video game culture to the centre.

---


114 Rombes, p. 75.


116 Remedy Entertainment, *Control* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X) (Milan: 505 Games, 2019).
In *My Winnipeg*, Maddin recounts a story about eleven horses fleeing their paddock and getting caught in a freezing river. The image of the frozen horses’ heads poking out of the ice is another of the film’s signifiers of imprisonment (see figure 3.1). *Kentucky Route Zero* starts with a similar image: an immense horse’s head poking out of the ground overshadowing a rural American gas station as if Andy Scott’s sculpture The Kelpies had been repurposed to house a petrol station (see figure 3.2). Horses recur as a visual motif throughout the game appearing whenever characters pass from above-ground Kentucky to the mysterious underground Route Zero. In *Kentucky Route Zero*, horses signify not imprisonment but the weird threshold between worlds: the start of a process of transformation that takes characters from one world—from one state of being—to another.
In this chapter, I look at how Kentucky Route Zero uses the Weird to depict the alienation of cultural irony and positions irony and sincerity in the late capitalist context with sincerity acting, like in The Beginner’s Guide, as something like an escape. By comparing
New Sincerity, the Weird, and the post-ironic turn in contemporary indie video games

Kentucky to David Lynch’s 1997 film, Lost Highway, I show how both use the weird transformation of characters to transform irony into sincerity as part of their New Sincerity aesthetic.

Kentucky Route Zero is a magical realist point-and-click adventure game which was published in five acts from 2013 to 2020 following a successful Kickstarter campaign in 2011. 117 This protracted release schedule spanned the 2010s indie games boom and allowed the developers to draw on other games’ exploration of New Sincerity and the Weird during this period as well as to influence the development of other games. Kentucky is structured like a play: the major gameplay element is selecting lines and stage directions to shift the narrative’s direction or tone. The V&A Museum’s 2018 exhibition on video games acknowledged Kentucky’s literary heritage and diverse influences describing it as ‘a literary work that draws influences from experimental film, ergodic literature, brutalist architecture and scenography.’ 118

Kentucky evokes a contemporary sense of alienation with lost characters drifting through lonely and haunted places which have been abandoned by capital. Williams refers to the game’s bleak and broken world ‘in which people feel alienated from one another, incapable of maintaining anything, a relationship or otherwise, in a crumbling and decaying reality.’ 119 The game’s main character, Conway, is a driver trying to deliver antiques to an address in Kentucky: he’s a drifter and an alcoholic, estranged from his family and in debt to his employers. As he journeys to the Zero, a weird non-Euclidean underground highway, he meets a range of other characters: Shannon, a struggling TV repairwoman evicted from her workshop; Ezra, a young boy abandoned by his parents and left with his brother, Julian, a

119 Williams.
giant eagle; Junebug and Johnny, mining androids who ran away to become itinerant musicians after the mine was closed. Every character has lost something. Every character is alienated from the world in some way leaving them to wander the highways of Kentucky and the liminal space of the Zero. Jeff Reichert highlights this sense of loss and alienation when he writes, ‘[w]hat lingers about Kentucky Route Zero is the deep hurt and loss in its heart: loss of family due to disaster, loss of dignity due to drinking, loss of livelihood due to changing economic times.’

Den Dulk ties the kind of alienation depicted in Kentucky to hyperreflexivity and endless cultural irony writing that ‘the ironic-aesthetic life-style is characterized by an extreme alienation from other people’ whereby ‘permanent ironic-aesthetic distancing [...] causes a detachment from others.’ Den Dulk describes the alienated characters in Wallace’s Infinite Jest as masking themselves in irony:

Irony serves to mask oneself. The addicted characters avoid taking responsibility for their actions, or committing themselves to anything. [...] Infinite Jest describes it as the ‘coyly sincere, ironic, self-presenting fortifications they’d had to construct in order to carry on Out There, under the ceaseless neon bottle’.

Kentucky’s characters similarly mask themselves in irony and express this through their detachment (at least initially) from other people. Conway in particular matches den Dulk’s description of an addicted character as he avoids taking responsibility for his alcoholism and maintains his detached, ironic façade to carry on Out There.

---

120 Jeff Reichert, ‘Lost Highway’, Film Comment, July–August 2017, pp. 20–21 (p. 21).
121 Den Dulk, Existentialist, p. 116.
Kentucky’s game world is also characterised by irony through the distancing of its magical realism. The world contains underground highways, animatronic mammoths on boats, giant eagles that carry houses to the forest, and distilleries run by glowing skeletons. In relation to cinema, Wilkins refers to this kind of world as an ‘eccentric world’: ‘narrative worlds that both reveal their nature as constructs and facilitate deeply affecting narrative trajectories.’ 123 She specifically ties eccentric worlds to ironic distancing:

These film world "boxes" function to [...] provide critical, ironic distance between the sincere and troubling thematic elements of these films and the reflexive artificiality of their diegeses. Eccentric film worlds are impossible simulations of reality that encourage the audience to immerse themselves in their affective qualities while simultaneously participating in their referential gameplay. 124

Kentucky’s game world uses its reflexive artificiality in this way to provide ironic distance from its sincere elements of alienation, addiction, and debt. The game’s eccentric, magical realist world and the wry humour of its script serves as a way to encourage the sincere affective immersion that Wilkins describes.

Further, Kentucky links its alienated, eccentric world of cultural irony to the context of late capitalism. Austin Walker’s review focuses on the game’s depiction of debt and shame and how capitalism hollows out places leaving them lonely and haunted. 125 The colonising power of capitalism is expressed in the game through the ubiquitous Consolidated Power Co. whose traces are found throughout the game but not as an active presence: instead the player finds small businesses gutted by the company, closed-down manufacturing structures, and communities abandoned in the name of cost-effectiveness. In Act I, the

123 Wilkins, p. 145.
124 Wilkins, pp. 148–149.
125 Walker.
player explores several haunted places emptied out in capital’s wake: an empty church with a tape-recorded congregation left behind, an insurance company office rotting with fungus and decay, and an abandoned mine flooded because of the mining company’s lax safety regulations. As will be discussed, Conway’s tragedy also hinges on his debt and how debt alienates him from himself and his friends.

*Kentucky*’s depiction of cultural irony as linked to the late capitalist context visualises Bogost’s description of irony as the aesthetic mode of late capitalism:

The source of ironic detachment comes from the fear of taking an object as something in its own right. That capacity is weakened by neoliberal austerity even as it’s simultaneously strengthened by unbridled consumerism [...]. When the possibility of home equity, health care, gainful employment, and other guarantees melt away as they have done in large part since the financial crisis of 2008, any vestige of future tangibility becomes seductive. Irony is the aesthetics of the new Gilded Age, which also happens, not coincidentally, to be the Internet age.  

Bogost’s formulation of cultural irony as a contemporary affliction is specifically tied to the context of Western late capitalism and its neoliberal austerity, social and economic precarity, and recurrent financial crises. *Kentucky* visualises this formulation of cultural irony as the aesthetic-affect of late capitalism through its ironic magical realist world, detached and alienated characters, and all-consuming corporate entities.

Lynch’s *Lost Highway* similarly depicts alienation in cultural irony and capitalism. Where *Kentucky* shows a rural American alienation, *Lost Highway* depicts an urban American alienation using the city of Los Angeles as an eccentric world in itself. *Lost*

---

126 Bogost, p. 51.
Highway ties alienation to cultural irony, like Kentucky, and goes on to complicate this irony in a New Sincerity aesthetic through Lynch’s sincerity-in-irony. Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), the film’s central character, shows the characteristic detachment of cultural irony: he drifts from room to room in his empty but opulent house (see figure 3.3); he is disengaged from his beautiful wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette); he appears alienated from the world around him. When questioned by detectives about owning a video camera, Fred evasively says ‘I like to remember things my own way. [...] How I remembered them. Not necessarily the way they happened.’ 127 Martha P. Nochimson describes this as Fred’s ‘perverse choice of cultural illusions’ in a way reminiscent of den Dulk’s definition of cultural irony as not fully claiming one’s actions as one’s own. 128 Fred is the film’s representation of living ironically, inverting meaning through choosing his own memories and turning his back on reality. His alienation and ironic denial of his own actions peaks when he finds a videotape of him murdering Renee and, when arrested, denies the act of murder on the tape.

Kim Newman’s review highlights the film’s depiction of alienation and links it to the capitalist context of ‘American success’ describing the film as ‘a horror story where an

---

127 Lost Highway, 00:23:44.
Den Dulk, Existentialist, p. 60.
ordinary life can be pulled apart because of a stray thought and none of the trappings of American success can offer more than illusory comfort.’ 129 Fred’s ironic affect is linked to capitalism through his status symbols and outward signifiers of capitalist success.

Nochimson interprets Lost Highway through the lens of Vedic philosophy using the term ‘the marketplace’ to refer to the material level of reality in which culture promotes illusions of stability. 130 She writes:

> Miserably stuck in the marketplace, with its fabricated certainties, Fred takes a turn towards the Kafkaesque. [...] As with the prescient works of Kafka, Lynch’s provocative pictures of the uncertain material world in Lost Highway enable him to speak vividly and piercingly to his audience of a particular kind of trauma, the problems of a culture lost in the illusions of how we are supposed to see things and bodies and how we are supposed to manage them. 131

Although derived from Vedic philosophy, the term ‘the marketplace’ has capitalist connotations equating base reality with the day-to-day of trade and commerce. Nochimson writes above of Fred’s embeddedness in the marketplace in a way that equally applies to Fred’s embeddedness in capitalism and an ironic culture ‘lost in the illusions of how we are supposed to see things’.

As the film continues, Fred as representation of irony is transformed in a way that also transforms the affect of the film. Fred transforms in his jail cell into Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty), a young mechanic who seems to have no relation to Fred Madison. Nochimson’s interpretation ties Lynch to the Weird and its interplay between worlds by arguing that the surreal, unexplainable, and otherwise ‘wrong’ elements of Lynch’s films

---

130 Nochimson, p. 5.
131 Nochimson, p. 32.
represent other worlds or states of reality intruding on our own rather than, as is commonly interpreted, representing dreams or psychological states. She describes this particular scene in terms of the Weird’s crossing of thresholds and boundaries whereby ‘[t]he metamorphosis of Fred into Pete is a threshold experience on a grand scale.’

Fred / Pete’s weird transformative threshold experience enables Lynch to transform the ironic affect of the first section of the film into sincerity-in-irony. Where Fred is a representation of irony, Pete is a representation of sincerity. Freed from jail, Pete becomes involved with gangsters and pornographers but maintains an approach of almost naïve innocence as he tries to protect the angelic blonde, Alice (also Patricia Arquette), from the villainous Mr. Eddy (Robert Loggia). Where Fred was ironically distanced from others and his own actions, Pete is engaged with the world: he works with his hands at the garage; he is close to his parents to the extent that they even dress alike; he becomes so closely entangled with Alice’s life that he risks his life to save her. Wallace highlights how Lynch’s films deploy their elements in ‘an old-fashioned, pre-postmodern way, i.e. nakedly, sincerely, without postmodernism’s abstraction or irony.’ Pete has an unself-consciousness similar to Jeffrey Beaumont in Lynch’s earlier film, Blue Velvet (1986). He doesn’t have the hyperreflexivity or constant self-reflection that den Dulk points to as indicative of cultural irony and so does not express the same sense of alienation as Fred.

Wallace goes on to write that Lynch’s films are ‘fundamentally unironic’: ‘I submit that Lynch’s lack of irony is the real reason some cinéastes—in this age when ironic self-consciousness is the one and only universally recognized badge of sophistication—see him as a naïf or a buffoon. In fact, Lynch is neither [...]’ This quote fails to acknowledge the

---

132 Nochimson, p. 18.
133 Nochimson, p. 41.
134 Wallace, Supposedly, p. 198.
135 Blue Velvet, directed by David Lynch (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).
137 Wallace, Supposedly, p. 199.
complexity of Lynch’s work. Although Lynch’s films express sincerity as Wallace points out, they are not unironic. As discussed in chapter one, there is a persistent sense of irony in Lynch’s work expressed through what Rombes calls sincerity-in-irony: not ‘pre-postmodern’ but ‘a glimpse of what possibly lies ahead, after postmodernism’.\textsuperscript{138} Pete differs from Jeffrey Beaumont in that his sincerity is entangled in irony. In a complex entanglement, Pete is Fred and Fred is Pete. The sincere is within the ironic. Lynch’s work does not have a ‘lack of irony’ as Wallace contends but rather sincerity-in-irony: a New Sincerity aesthetic that Miley argues was a significant influence on Wallace’s own later work.\textsuperscript{139}

The hybrid nature of Lynch’s irony and sincerity is expressed through a further weird transformation at the end of Lost Highway. Pete is transformed back into Fred who enacts bloody vengeance on Mr. Eddy and escapes with the police chasing him. In the film’s final moments, Fred starts transforming again and the film ends with him caught in a state in-between ironic Fred and sincere Pete (see figure 3.4). He is struggling to be both at once: to be the dialectical mix of irony and sincerity. Fred / Pete’s weird transformation and its unresolved in-betweenness at the end of the film ultimately represents the dialectical entanglement of irony and sincerity in the New Sincerity.

\textbf{figure 3.4:} still from Lost Highway, 02:04:42

\textsuperscript{138} Rombes, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{139} Miley.
Kentucky similarly uses a weird transformation of one of its characters to transform its ironic affect into sincerity in a New Sincerity dialectical mix. In Act II, Conway visits a doctor to deal with a leg injury. As he falls under the anaesthetic, the doctor starts talking about the cost of the medical care and repayment plans for the debt. Conway wakes in Act III with his leg transformed into glowing bones, a symbol of how he now feels alienated from his own body (see figure 3.5). Conway’s tragic debt is compounded when he is pressured into taking a dram of whiskey from glowing skeletons who resemble his glowing leg. He finds himself in debt to the distillery like all the other skeletons and is forced to work there to pay it off (see figure 3.6). After drinking the whiskey in Act III, the player never controls Conway again. Throughout Act III and Act IV, as Conway relapses into alcoholism and falls deeper into debt, more of his body parts are transformed into glowing bones.

*figure 3.5:* screenshot from Kentucky Route Zero, Act III, introduction
The transformation of Conway into a debt-ridden skeleton serves the same function as the transformation of Fred into Pete: the weird transformation in the narrative allows for the affective transformation of irony into sincerity. Kentucky prepares the player for this dialectical effect through previous weird instances where seemingly mutually exclusive categories are mixed and held in a state of in-betweenness. For example, in Act II, Shannon
asks of the Bureau of Reclaimed Spaces, ‘This is weird but... do you think we’re inside or outside right now?’ (see figure 3.7). \(^{140}\)

Conway gradually transforms into a full skeleton and leaves the group to pay off his debt. Shannon is left alone and, in an affecting musical moment, we hear the song This World Is Not My Home. Lines like ‘This world is not my home / I’m just passing through’ and ‘And I can’t feel at home / In this world anymore’ sincerely express the game’s message about alienation and detachment. Shannon is surrounded by the weirdness and irony of the game’s eccentric world—as the song plays, she’s on a floating restaurant on an underground river where one table of food has been shellacked to preserve it as an aide memoire for the chef—but the tragic loss of Conway to debt and detachment is sincerely felt and expressed like the sincerity-in-irony of Lost Highway.

Where cultural irony was linked to late capitalism in the game’s first four acts, Act V following Conway’s transformation brings the game towards sincerity and ties this affect to community organising outside the capitalist context. After Conway is lost, the group emerges from the eccentric underground world of Route Zero into a small community devastated by a flood and, before that, by economic deprivation. In this act, the game’s script has less wry humour and fewer weird elements. The player hears about how the community was abandoned by the Consolidated Power Co. and the tone is one of mournful sincerity for the people left behind by capitalism. The group decide to settle and rebuild: to become embedded in a community rather than continuing to drift alienated along the highways of Kentucky. Sincerity is positioned as a salve to the alienation of cultural irony and late capitalism. Sincerity is tied to building community and the creation of something new. In the game’s final scene, the characters gather together at a funeral for some horses that were

\(^{140}\) Kentucky Route Zero, Act II, Scene I.
drowned in the flood. The game buries its symbol of the weird threshold between worlds as the characters embrace the sincerity of a small community working together.

*Kentucky* offers a different political perspective to most video games and video game culture which, Alfie Bown argues, tend to function as ‘supplement to capital, a kind of ally of the workplace structure and of new state and corporate methodologies of control designed to regulate a restive population.’ *141* *Kentucky* depicts cultural irony as linked to late capitalism and, by extension, links the prevalent cultural irony of video game culture to capitalism. Through the kind of weird transformative threshold experience depicted in *Lost Highway*, *Kentucky* transforms its initial irony into the sincerity-in-irony of New Sincerity and offers a sincere satiric critique of capitalism and capitalist alienation.

With its release schedule spanning the 2010s, *Kentucky Route Zero* was a significant influence on other indie games during this period of growth and experimentation for the medium. *Night in the Woods* (2017) and *Donut County* (2018) both mix ironic humour and sincere affect to depict capitalism’s abandonment of small-town America and the emotional devastation caused by economic deprivation. *142* Scott Benson, one of the developers of *Night in the Woods*, acknowledges its influence and highlights how ‘KRZ has always celebrated outsiders and artists and how they flit through the multiplying cracks in the giant crumbling structure of capitalism.’ *143* *Inside* (2016) offers a similar weird critique of capitalism expressed through the kind of body horror that Mark Stevens links to capitalism’s grotesque assemblage of the body without organs. *144* *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* (2016)

---

142 Infinite Fall, *Night in the Woods* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) (Grand Rapids: Finji, 2007).
143 Ben Esposito, *Donut County* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) (West Hollywood: Annapurna Interactive, 2018).
145 Playdead, *Inside* (Xbox One, PC, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch) (Copenhagen: Playdead, 2016).
is less of a Weird text than *Kentucky* but uses its science-fiction setting to talk about precarity and the gig economy under late capitalism. By drawing on other expressions of New Sincerity and the Weird in cinema and earlier indie games and by influencing indie games development throughout the seven years of its release, *Kentucky* stands as an important video game text for the development of post-ironic indie games during the 2010s.

---

As discussed in the introduction, video game culture is an ironic culture. Alex Pieschel points out the straightforwardly ironic conceits behind several mainstream AAA games and series such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997–), *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), and the *BioShock* series (2007–2013). BioShock in particular is notable for its exploration of what game designer Clint Hocking termed ‘ludonarrative dissonance’—a conflict within a game between narrative elements and ludic (gameplay) elements—and how it precipitated a preoccupation in mainstream games with ludonarrative dissonance for the next decade. Pieschel argues that ludonarrative dissonance is fundamentally the idea that ‘a game is not saying what it means or meaning what it says because its story layer is undermined by its

DMA Design, *Grand Theft Auto* (PC, PlayStation, Game Boy Color) (BMG Interactive, 1997).
2K Boston, *BioShock* (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) (Novato: 2K Games, 2007).
game mechanics (or vice versa) and is thus another form of irony: a form that, as Chris Plante argues in an essay on *The Last of Us Part II*, has been prevalent in mainstream games for 13 years.¹⁴⁸

Despite the prevalence of cultural irony in AAA video games in the form of narrative irony and ludonarrative dissonance and in video game culture in the form of the alt-right and the irony poisoning of the “extremely online”, indie video games developed during the 2010s to challenge the cultural irony of the medium. Over the past three chapters, I have examined how several indie games developed throughout the 2010s indie games boom have drawn on the Weird and built on techniques from earlier cinema and television to express the dialectical mix of irony and sincerity of the New Sincerity. *Braid*, *The Beginner’s Guide*, and *Kentucky Route Zero* all demonstrate the complicating of irony and sincerity characteristic of New Sincerity and they all, in some way, use sincerity-in-irony as a response to cultural irony. I’ve also shown the influence that these games had on other video games developed during this period. As Wilkins suggests of ‘American eccentric cinema’, I suggest that the 2010s indie games boom should be considered as part of the broader post-ironic turn associated with the New Sincerity.¹⁴⁹

I have also argued that the use of what Fisher identified as the Weird mode is central to how these texts transform irony and mix it dialectically with sincerity. *Braid* draws the player in through the comfort of ironic parody and uses the Weird to distort that parody and invert meaning thus luring the player into sincere emotional engagement in the same way as *Twin Peaks*. *The Beginner’s Guide* uses the ironic distancing of Weird metafiction and

---


¹⁴⁹ Wilkins, p. 181.
narrative self-insertion to transcend the boundaries of the fictional world and the boundaries of the narration’s ironic detachment in the same way as *My Winnipeg*. *Kentucky Route Zero* draws on *Lost Highway*’s weird character transformation as a means of transforming ironic affect into sincerity and to ultimately offer a sincere critique of cultural irony and late capitalism.

Fisher writes of the Weird in terms of the thresholds between worlds, of the boundaries between inside and outside. As we saw with *Kentucky*, the troubling of inside and outside is used as part of the text to anticipate the troubling of boundaries between irony and sincerity that occurs later in the game. The Weird allows for the breaking down of boundaries and the crossing of thresholds which, to some extent, prepares and enables the texts to break down the boundaries between irony and sincerity in the New Sincerity aesthetic. This use of weirdness can be seen in Wallace’s foundational New Sincerity literature through the ghosts that haunt *Infinite Jest* and in the allusions to unexplained psychic powers in *The Pale King*. Fisher points out how new or experimental work often strikes us as weird with the weird elements operating as a ‘signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete.’ The Weird enables the post-ironic turn of New Sincerity by signalling that the cynicism of cultural irony is obsolete and by encouraging us to re-examine the irony and alienated detachment encouraged by late capitalism.

Contemporary indie video games are among these weird new and experimental works challenging the cultural irony of video games and exploring the expression of New Sincerity in this medium by drawing on the techniques of earlier visual media. As part of the V&A Museum’s 2018 video games exhibition, curators Marie Foulston and Kirstian Volsing

---

150 Fisher, p. 16.
wrote about how emerging independent developers were challenging expectations of the
discipline and pushing games beyond the stereotypes and cultural assumptions of the field.

As discussed in chapter two with regards to *Control’s* recent exploration of metafiction,
AAA games are now starting to draw on the experimental work of earlier indie game
developers. The 2010s indie games boom and the post-ironic turn that it represents for video
games may prove foundational for the video games to be developed over the next decade.

---

153 Foulston and Volsing, p. 10.
5

references

5.1: figures

figure 0.1: screenshot from Kentucky Route Zero, Act III, Scene III

figure 0.2: still from Twin Peaks S02E22, 00:18:42

figure 0.3: screenshot from Braid, World 2

figure 1.1: screenshot from Braid, World 2-4

figure 1.2: screenshot from Super Mario Bros., world 1-4

figure 1.3: screenshot from Braid, World 6-7

figure 1.4: cropped screenshots from Braid and Super Mario Bros.

figure 1.5: screenshot from Braid, World 1-1, showing the Princess running away from Tim

figure 2.1: screenshot from The Beginner’s Guide, Chapter 13

figure 2.2: screenshot from The Beginner’s Guide, Chapter 10, showing Calvino in the lower-left corner and Orlean in the upper-left corner of the bookshelf

figure 2.3: still from My Winnipeg, 00:00:25

figure 2.4: screenshot from The Beginner’s Guide, Chapter 17
figure 2.5: still from *My Winnipeg*, 00:04:13

figure 2.6: screenshot from *The Beginner’s Guide*, Chapter 9

figure 3.1: still from *My Winnipeg*, 01:03:25

figure 3.2: screenshot from *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act I, Scene I

figure 3.3: still from *Lost Highway*, 00:19:21

figure 3.4: still from *Lost Highway*, 02:04:42

figure 3.5: screenshot from *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act III, introduction

figure 3.6: screenshot from *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act III, Scene XII

figure 3.7: screenshot from *Kentucky Route Zero*, Act II, Scene I
5.2: bibliography


New Sincerity, the Weird, and the post-ironic turn in contemporary indie video games


Pieschel, Alex, ‘On Irony and Praise in Videogames’, Medium, 5 September 2013  

Plante, Chris, ‘The Last of Us 2 epitomizes one of gaming’s longest debates’, Polygon, 26 June 2020  


<https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2004.58.1.2>


VanDerWerff, Emily, and Caroline Framke, ‘Twin Peaks, decoded for novices and obsessives alike’, Vox, 21 May 2017  

Varis, Piia, ‘On being diagnosed with irony poisoning’, diggit magazine, 14 March 2019  


5.3: filmography

*Adaptation*, directed by Spike Jonze (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002).

*Blue Velvet*, directed by David Lynch (De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, 1986).


*Dances with Wolves*, directed by Kevin Costner (Orion Pictures, 1990).


*Lost Highway*, directed by David Lynch (October Films, 1997).

*Mulholland Drive*, directed by David Lynch (Universal Pictures, 2001).

*My Winnipeg*, directed by Guy Maddin (Buffalo Gal Pictures, 2007).


*Twin Peaks: The Return*, created by Mark Frost and David Lynch (Showtime Networks, 2017).
5.4: gameography

2K Boston, *BioShock* (PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) (Novato: 2K Games, 2007).

Activision, *Pitfall!* (Atari 2600, Atari 5200, Atari 8-bit, ColecoVision, MSX, C64, Intellivision, Apple II) (Santa Monica: Activision, 1982).


DMA Design, *Grand Theft Auto* (PC, PlayStation, Game Boy Color) (BMG Interactive, 1997).

Esposito, Ben, *Donut County* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) (West Hollywood: Annapurna Interactive, 2018).


Fox, Toby, *Undertale* (PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Nintendo Switch) (self-published, 2015).


Infinite Fall, *Night in the Woods* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch) (Grand Rapids: Finji, 2007).

Matt Makes Games, *Celeste* (PC, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One) (Alberta: Matt Makes Games, 2018).


Number None, *Braid* (Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3) (Redmond: Microsoft Game Studios, 2008).
Playdead, *Inside* (Xbox One, PC, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch) (Copenhagen: Playdead, 2016).

Polytron Corporation, *Fez* (Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita) (Montreal: Trapdoor, 2012).

Remedy Entertainment, *Control* (PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X) (Milan: 505 Games, 2019).

Sundae Month, *Diaries of a Spaceport Janitor* (PC) (Bellevue: Steam, 2016).

Team Meat, *Super Meat Boy* (Xbox 360, PC, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Wii U, Nintendo Switch) (Team Meat, 2010).
