Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year Submitted: December 2015

Game Title: The Stanley Parable
Genre: Interactive Fiction
Release Date: July 27, 2011
Developer: Davey Wreden
Publisher: Galactic Cafe
Game Writer: Davey Wreden

Overview

The reader opened the document, right away noticing that something was very strange. They had picked up the narrative review, only to find that its overview had two paragraphs side by side on the page, one marked with a green arrow, and the other, a red X. Confused, but nevertheless diligent, the reader chose to read the column on the left.

The Stanley Parable is an experimental game about a man named Stanley. Stanley is an office worker, who spends every day pressing buttons without once questioning why. Stanley always did as he was told, without ever questioning the meaning of his actions. The Stanley Parable is about him, or maybe, it's about you.

The Stanley Parable is a video game about a selfish man named Stanley, who refuses to follow directions. You could even say he is so caught up in his own agenda, that he is more concerned with being different, than he is with making much sense. Stanley, the awful man, would go leagues and bounds out of his way to sabotage MY PERFECT NARRATIVE REVIEW. **ahem** …Sorry. I get flustered about these things. Just read the paragraph on your next left so we can get this essay back on track.

The Stanley Parable began as a Half Life mod in 2011, and was made by solo developer Davey Wreden. It was unique in that it explored a very fascinating concept that has plagued video games for many years; the illusion and duality of choice. It has the player assume the role of Stanley, a mindless office worker who one day realizes that his co-workers have mysteriously disappeared. It then becomes his task to find out what happened to them. The way in which this is explored is in a branching path-type narrative, which very cleverly combines the use of interactive fiction with an innovative and immersive narrative, to appropriately critique narrative and choice in games.

So, you're still adamant on refusing to read this review how it was intended…are you. *Fine*. It's not like you'd like it anyhow. It's crude, unrefined, a bit too novice if I do say so myself. I mean truly, did the author even bother touching up with a thesaurus? Using words like *the*, and *it*…for goodness sake, it hardly takes an expert to think of something better than that. Anyway…what was I saying? Ah yes. The Stanley Parable. It's a video game. There. What more do you want? Hold on, let me check.

Sounds of papers ruffling

Yes, as you state in the template; *"The overview is a brief detail of the storyline of the game."*

…Well that's brief is it not?

Characters

- **Stanley:** The main character of our narrative is Stanley. He is an office drone who follows the directions of his boss, and consequently the player. Despite the game being named after him, we are not given very much insight on who he is as a character, but it is very clear he is meant to act as an avatar and analogue for the player. However, he and the player are not necessarily the same.

- **The Narrator**: The entirety of the game's narrative is told aurally through the voice of an omniscient narrator, who seems to have insights about Stanley, his thoughts, his life, and the world around him. The narrator, of whom is most likely an analogue for the game's designer, just wants Stanley to follow his directions, and in doing so, follow along with a story which he is telling. This story unfolds though gameplay as the player makes choices.

- **The Player**: The person playing the game; interestingly enough, is considered a character in the story. Though often mentioned through snide remarks from the Narrator when they refuse to follow directions, they are ultimately the one at fault when Stanley has his missteps, or the narrative goes awry.

- Stanley: The *"main character"*, though I'd hardly give him the honor of that title. To be honest, Stanley only cares about himself. He's the main character of *his* story, not mine. Though to be honest, I couldn't care less. He can do whatever he wants for all I care…

- The Narrator: *Me* of course! I would really like to tell you the story I've been working so hard on. Really. You should see it, it's quite impressive.

- The Reader: That's right. YOU. Why are you making this review so complicated to read for yourself? Stop reading the column on the right! *Sigh* Fine. I'll make it easier for you from now on. **No more columns. I promise.**

Breakdown

When Stanley approaches a room with two open doors, which does he choose? The door on his left, or the door on his right? Or perhaps the real question is, does it really matter? The brilliance of Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* is demonstrated in its fundamental deconstruction and parody of common interactive fiction and video game tropes, and how it does so to comedic effect. The Narrator represents the narrative or game designer of any given game in which a story is present, while Stanley is the player. The designer is trying to tell their story, but is constantly battling with the player's actions; especially when the player is not particularly interested in the narrative being told. *The Stanley Parable* makes this a part of its experience by having different narratives unfold when the player intentionally goes against the designer's wishes, and acknowledges a great number of possible outcomes as a result of these choices.

When approaching the infamous room with two open doors, the narrator instructs Stanley to take the door on the left. In doing so, you as the player have made the conscious choice to be told a specific story. This story is one about a man named Stanley who discovers that all of his co-workers have mysteriously disappeared, allowing him to discover the true purpose behind the office in which he works. This deadly secret is the fact that it contains a facility that is used to mind control him and his peers. It is a place where "*Freedom means nothing*", and his life is in someone else's control. Stanley eventually escapes by shutting down the facility, and leaving to the outside world. Without a doubt, this is Wreden criticizing many modern video game narratives, especially those which revolve around making arbitrary choices. In a game in which the player gallivants from spectacular-cinematic-set-piece A, to fantastic-over-the-top-escort-mission B, the game designer may as well be reading them a script. The fact of the matter is, if a player truly does not have agency over a game's narrative, what is the purpose of it being an interactive story at all? Wreden answers this question bluntly; "There isn't one".

Though, this hardly is where *The Stanley Parable* shines the most. Taking the door on the right, the player is making a statement of sorts. They are deciding to tell their own story, not the one that has been provided for them. However, the unique twist of *The Stanley Parable* is that all outcomes are in fact intended outcomes, even those which may not seem so at first. In this way, all outcomes are equally valid. The narrator also gives Stanley several chances to get back on track if the player chooses to continually neglect their responsibilities. Each time this chance is turned down, the game world begins to break apart both narratively and visually. When a player decides to run off the narrative path in most games, this quickly leads to dissonance between gameplay and story. Wreden further uses *The Stanley Parable* in this way as a talking point to critique many modern games. In the game *Assassin's Creed*, players are given free reign of movement during story moments as non-player characters monologue at them. During these critical story moments, players are free to spin around in place and jump every-which way, completely ruining any semblance of 'mood' or 'tone' in the cinematic scene. By letting the story be completely dictated by player actions, Wreden very smartly dodges and makes use of this bullet by bending narrative convention with player choice. Literally, having the mechanics direct the narrative, instead of vice versa.

In addition to the critique of narrative versus mechanics, the game also pokes fun at the illusion of choice that is present in many interactive experiences, especially those who claim to have significant narrative emphasis. Perhaps the worst offender of this trope is *Telltale Games*, who claim to have games which tell stories with branching narratives, though more often than not, user choices only offer minor deviations from an already outlined plot. There are reasons however why games like *The Walking Dead* and *Tales from the Borderlands* are shackled to these limitations, and they mainly lie in asset management. Having a truly interactive story based game would exponentially increase needed assets, though there are always ways around limitations. Very cleverly, by having a short game where player's choices literally define game events, Wreden is able to deliver on what is effectively a narrative game

whose choices truly *do* matter. This comes at a cost however of each individual story branch being relatively short in comparison to most games. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing given the cyclical nature of the game's narrative, mechanics, and world. By incorporating the need to replay the game into the mechanics and narrative, the game more or less encourages players to play the game over and over in an attempt to experience all of the possible endings and outcomes.

Though not a wholly original concept, the game employs these themes to discuss the multi-verse theory, or hypothesis that there are an infinite number of possible outcomes, resulting in an infinite number of alternate universes. In a game whose major purpose is to explore different possible outcomes, this gives Wreden the perfect platform to discuss parallel universes, or worlds that exist in the same time and place, with slight differences that become larger and more noticeable as time passes. For example, certain in-game choices change the aesthetic look of Stanley's boss' office, as well as small dialogue quips the narrator has to say about certain things in the game world. The fact that certain changes are small makes players feel perceptive and smart when they notice them upon replaying the game. As well as the multi-verse theory, specifically in one of the game's paths, it is suggested that Stanley may be mentally ill, perceiving a literal "voice in his head" narrating his life. This suggestion and interpretation of the game is interesting because it suggests that there are different interpretations of what the game actually means, and due to the *multi-verse* theory, it can be assumed that all different interpretations can be canon in the game's universe at once. In the "Stanley is crazy" path, he ends up stuck in an endless loop of hallways, in which he is able to alter reality for a short amount of time. Eventually, he finally goes mad and is found dead on the street by an onlooker. This path is interesting because it further suggests and proves that the game is more likely than not open to interpretation as to what exactly it means, or what the context of the story really is. It is assumed that the main storyline is a pipe dream of a bored office worker, but it could very easily be actually happening, or actually not happening. Wreden very cleverly makes all outcomes equally valid.

Another interpretation, of which is actually mentioned in-game in several of the paths, is that *The Stanley Parable* is a video game. Yes, you read that correctly. When taking a long enough detour off the main game path, the narrator will become frustrated with Stanley, and even the player of the game, saying that he will have to "restart the game". He does so on several different game paths, resetting the game back to its effective beginning state, albeit altered slightly as a result of your choices up until this point. Though breaking the fourth wall can at times be frustrating and break immersion, in *The Stanley Parable* it further improves Wreden's sense of satire by calling out his own flaws. Effectively, by being self-depreciating, he is doing the same to many similar games who refuse to be as self-aware. Further emphasizing the point that *The Stanley Parable* exists in a game world which is self-aware, several other endings allow the player to be placed in entirely different games. As the Narrator explains, they are better off playing an entirely different game if they refuse to play this one. In this specific instance, Stanley finds himself in the first level of *Portal*, as well as a simplified version of *Minecraft*. According to the narrator, since Stanley refuses to play the game he was assigned to, he might as well be playing a different one entirely.

What perhaps is one the more defining moments of clarity in the game is the "escape ending". To the left of the mind control facility is the word "escape", scrawled in red graffiti. If the player follows this path, they are told by the narrator to turn back or face their death. Foraging on, the player is launched onto a conveyer belt towards a seemingly unescapable demise at the hands of a giant trash compactor. Just before the metal jaws collide, they stop. A new narrator, never heard until now, interrupts the scene. She breaks the narrator's broken forth wall by describing what may as well be the armature, or major theme Wreden was shooting for. She explains that the narrator's commentary is meaningless, and that even if Stanley does die, he will simply restart the game. She is self-aware of the cyclical nature of the narrative and mechanics, the only thing the omniscient narrator is not quite clear of. The fact that Wreden is willing to step outside his game, then also step further to comment on his own commentary, is truly incredible.

When Stanley reaches a set of two open doors, which does he choose? Or *does* he choose? In addition to Wreden's exploration and parody of different game tropes, especially those relating to user choice, lies perhaps the most interesting facet of Wreden's exploration. This is the inclusion of the third choice, or *'non-choice'*. As the film *Wargames* infamously put it, "Not to Play". This non-choice is represented in several different areas, though the most notable is the broom closet. There are several opportunities in which Stanley passes by a broom closet throughout the game, which when entered causes absolutely nothing to happen but provide humorous dialogue the longer you stay inside of it. That's it. There is nothing to be gained from staying inside this closet. The narrator even comments that the player has deliberately chosen not to take part in any branching narrative at all, and is now simply sitting in a room doing nothing. After waiting a long enough period, the Narrator assumes that the player is dead, and instructs a second player to take their place.

This dialogue opens up a conversation about how in an interactive medium, there is essentially always a non-choice, meaning there is also non-choice in any interactive narrative. This choice is not playing the game. It may sound simple, but it is genuinely something that we as designers need to consider, especially in games with narrative aspects. If a player is in the middle of any given pivotal cinematic scene or mechanic climax, and suddenly has to use the restroom, this fundamentally changes their experience. The choice of not playing during any one instant of gameplay may cause the player an in-game death, or missing some crucial story detail, or both! Usually, this is why we as designers like to implement a *pause* feature, however stopping in the middle of something only to resume later similarly effects players, for better or for worse. The fact that Wreden even opens this line for discussion, proves that *The Stanley Parable*, while an openly hilarious and well-made narrative experience, is in and of itself a successful talking point for narrative in video games as a whole.

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Strongest Element

Without a doubt, the strongest element of *The Stanley Parable* is by far its sense of humor. Because the game is as self-aware as it is, it is able to properly open up an honest line of discussion about narrative in games without taking itself too seriously. The game lets you laugh at itself, poking fun at video game tropes and narrative clichés, while also presenting a genuinely fun and humorous experience. At times, media that claims to be of satirical nature eventually devolves, becoming that of which it is

trying to critique. Perhaps the strongest and most unique quality which sets *The Stanley Parable* apart is its total apathy towards this aforementioned philosophy. It does not step down from its pedestal of honesty and clarity, which allow for its message and humor to truly shine through.

Unsuccessful Element

Due to the nature of the narrative and mechanics, each individual path is not in and of itself very deep. The depth is found in playing a multitude of different paths, as well as beginning to understand and draw connections between them. It would be very difficult to create a game in which depth could be provided in this format, however it would ultimately be much more interesting if it were present. Perhaps *The Stanley Parable's* biggest flaw lies in this lack of depth in any one isolated play-through. This is especially true once the formula for each path has been "discovered", and the game devolves into attempting to reach each ending. More likely than not, most players use an online walkthrough to accomplish this feat. Such is the boon of most interactive fiction, as it constantly struggles a very fine line of becoming too narratively complex, at the risk of mechanical depth.

Highlight

The strongest singular moment of *The Stanley Parable* is hard to pinpoint, given that its true brilliance shines through in the parallels it draws. Though if one had to be chosen, it would most likely be the ending of the "escape path". At this moment, when the metal trash compactor stops and the new narrator is introduced, a profound sense of clarity and realization is provided that had not yet been previously seen in the game. This is the only point during the entirety of its narrative that Wreden decides to break character. He allows himself to stop being witty for a moment, literally stepping outside of himself to say that it doesn't matter. Your choices fundamentally do not matter. Stanley can always restart the game, no matter what happens. In this explanation, as the female narrator comments on Stanley and the male narrator's actions, Wreden is spelling out the major themes the game is trying to convey in a powerful way that sticks with players for a long time.

Critical Reception

The critical landscape surrounding *The Stanley Parable* may be one of the more interesting ones to be seen in recent history. Though generally receiving positive reviews, many outlets simply tell readers to "Play the Game" without offering very much context, or by being extremely vague. The reason for this is that many believe that one of the best parts about *The Stanley Parable* lies in the joy of discovery. Going into a game like this blind often leads to the best player experience, appropriately allowing players to be surprised by the game's hilarity. In *Destructoid*'s official review, journalist Jim Sterling awards the game a perfect score. His reasoning? Simply stating; "How do you discuss it, analyze it, and recommend it? That's quite simple. You don't." [1] Some outlets however did give it the standard treatment, [2]*Polygon* being one of them. In a review written by Philip Kollar, he states that "The Stanley Parable is the most hilarious ten minutes I've spent with a game all year." By saying this, he is of course

[1] Sterling, Jim. *Stanley Parable Review. http://www.destructoid.com/review-the-stanley-parable-263731.phtml.* Destructoid. 2013.

[2] Kollar, Philip. *Stanley Parable: The Soul of Wit.* http://www.polygon.com/2013/10/17/4849998/stanley-parable-review. Polygon. 2013.

discussing the only boon to *The Stanley Parable's* impeccable wit, its brevity. Standing at an 88 out of 100 on *Metacritic*, *The Stanley Parable* is generally beloved by many critics and players alike, despite its flaws.

Lessons

Wreden has a lot to teach us in his masterwork on meta-narratives, and ludic storytelling in general.

- **Lesson 1:** Don't be Afraid to Break the Rules

  As fun as it is to write a paint-by-numbers "Hero's Journey" story, it has been done to death. Rules were made to be broken! If anything, *The Stanley Parable* teaches us to always question standard narrative conventions. By presenting a branching narrative whose parts each individually are equally valid, *The Stanley Parable* teaches us that there is more to writing games than Joseph Campbell's *Hero of a Thousand Faces.* In fact, a more accurate comparison is instead *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler.

- **Lesson 2:** You are a Designer, not a Director

  Always ask yourself why the story you are telling needs to be in a video game. If it could be told better elsewhere, why present it in an interactive format at all? By crafting a narrative based solely on player decisions and actions, *The Stanley Parable* presents a unique narrative that could only be told through a ludic format.

- **Lesson 3:** Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

  Let's face it, we are making games. You can tell your dark narrative about life struggles, but at the end of the day you still have to laugh a little. Let the player have fun, and do not take that away from them at the expense of telling your magnum opus. *The Stanley Parable* has a lot to say about narrative in video games, but also laughs at itself as much as it laughs at us.

Summation

   The Stanley Parable is a game that stands beside itself, laughs, then stands outside of itself laughing and laughs again. It is a game that showcases simple mechanics and elegant interactive story telling at its finest. It makes fun of all video games, while simultaneously celebrating them. It is a beautiful contradiction so hilarious that it hurts. In its brevity, it reaches places not many other games can, and not many others games will. It goes where others choose not to, and isn't afraid to rattle the industry's cage in doing so. The true value in *The Stanley Parable* lies in its breaking of standard conventions. Its creativity is truly its point of honor.