Game Narrative Review

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Month/Year you submitted this review: November 2018

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Game Title: The Stanley Parable

Platform: PC

Genre: Interactive Storytelling

Release Date: October 17, 2013

Developer: Galactic Cafe

Publisher: Galactic Cafe

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Davey Wreden, William Pugh

Overview

The Stanley Parable is an interactive storytelling, walking simulator. The game takes place in the office building, where the eponymous player character works. Stanley, a mindless drone, goes to work one morning expecting a regular day at the office. He soon is disappointed however, when he arrives to an empty workplace. This unfamiliar situation sits rather poorly with Stanley, as it thrusts upon him something he never wanted to make, a decision.

Gameplay begins here as the player, now completely in control of Stanley, is free to wander the labyrinth of offices that await him. As dull as the setting might seem, the player learns quickly the nature of the game; that being the myriad of plotlines they can choose to explore. Once a particular ending is reached, the player is sent back to the beginning, the previously mentioned point at which they control Stanley. The entire game then, is composed of a

loop, interminable by any means of participation. With every iteration, the player gains just a bit of insight into Stanley's life, and the curious world he inhabits.

The Stanley Parable serves as an exhibition and commentary on the nature of video games. At its core, the game has a uniquely branching story, and for this reason serves as a lesson mostly for implementation in game narrative structure.

Characters

Stanley

The player character. Stanley's defining characteristic is his lack of defined characteristics. Stanley, really, is whoever the player wants Stanley to be. Galactic Cafe took a note from Valve in the creation of a protagonist; like the *Half-Life* and *Portal* series, Stanley is nonspeaking. This choice in character design is meaningful in two regards: Most significant is its capacity for player investment and empathy; they can project themselves onto the character. The less obvious reason is the reinforcement of Stanley's status inside his world, a cog in the machine.

The opening cutscene tells the player that Stanley is satisfied with his lot in life. That, in spite of his dead-end job, he is happy pushing buttons all day. While correctly establishing Stanley's lack of ambition, the narration can have the unintended effect of portraying him as dim-witted, something which he is certainly not. Stanley is, simply, mediocrity.

the Narrator

Stanley's guide. The unnamed Narrator, is the omniscient non diegetic voice chronicling Stanley, and by proxy, the player's actions. His presence is paramount to the game's effectiveness, and in many ways, could be seen as more important than Stanley. In third-person voice, the Narrator documents and the current plotline as it unfolds, and suggests a choice when the player is presented with a decision. In this regard, the many game endings could be distinguished by the points at which Stanley followed or strayed from the Narrator's preferred path.

The inclinations of the Narrator are vague. A new player might be wary of their suggestions, especially those familiar with *Portal*, in which a similar all-seeing, immaterial voice, GLaDOS, would have them killed. Despite speaking in the third-person, the player can never be sure if the Narrator truly is external or uninvested in the outcome of Stanley's actions. These suspicions held by the player are crucial to maintaining their engagement with the story. Whether they strive to humor the Narrator, or to defy him at every turn, the player might soon realize that their only reason to play is only to hear what the Narrator has to say.

Breakdown

The Stanley Parable has a story to tell, but is unsure whether you'll like it. Narrative can unfold in a number of ways, and is entirely dependent on player decision at certain, glaring forks in the road. Whichever path Stanley chooses to take however, is inconsequential; he will soon learn that his world, his workplace, is indifferent to his actions.

The game has an unconventional story structure to say the least. Despite this, the narrative can be itemized as a finite set of endings. The choices made at a fork determine the ending the player sees. It's important to note that these are the *only* choices Stanley has. The game does not allow for any other player agency, and even labelling this as agency is a stretch, because experiencing the game as a whole demands that every choice be explored, meaning that a decision made at any point is ultimately meaningless. However winding the path to an ending, Stanley will always be sent back to the beginning, his desk.

Upon starting the game for the first time, the player is presented with a cutscene. The visuals and narration during this opening set the premise, and the tone of the game. One morning, Stanley goes to work to find that he is all alone. His coworkers have vanished, and, more important to him, he has yet to receive any sort of task. This unfamiliar situation does not bode well with Stanley, who is content with pressing the buttons his monitor tells him to press. All of this exposition is explained in this brief cutscene. This opening does a great job in succinctly alluding to the player, the motivations behind their player character as well as the inciting incident for the situation. But as soon as the player controls Stanley, they control where the story flows.

Walking around the deserted offices, Stanley arrives at his first clear choice, two doors. Up to this point, the Narrator, as his name implies, has narrated Stanley's thoughts and actions. The player, who previously had no obvious chance to deviate from narration, is now presented for the first time with the fundamental concept of *The Stanley Parable*, the traversal of its narrative "tree." Will the player choose to heed the Narrator and choose the left door, or carve their own path with the right door?

Whatever choice Stanley makes, he always ends up where he first started, his office. A new player who perhaps expected their alternating obedience to the Narrator's direction to end in climactic fashion can be put off. They did not expect the game to have them retrace already seen locations, or rehear the Narrator's musings. Perhaps the player believes that they took a wrong turn somewhere, and were sent to the start to find the "correct" path. But eventually, they learn that the course they took is only one of many. *The Stanley Parable* then, does not restrict itself to a single type of plot.

The entire narrative of the game is composed of multiple story segments, the endings. Each one branches from sometimes unseen decision points, so, in this regard, the entire narrative becomes tedious to explain. But what is important to state, is that the endings vary greatly from each other in terms of plot type and tone. The "Freedom ending" for example, which demands that the player obey the Narrator's every word, is consistent with that of an "Overcoming the Monster" plot.

In this ending, Stanley follows a conventional story arc. Concerned over the absence of coworkers and assigned tasks, he goes to his boss' office only to find he is missing as well. A nearby keypad, the code of which is given by the Narrator, grants Stanley access to a hidden passageways inside the building. Eventually, he enters the ominous "Mind Control Facility," revealing to him that the company he works for has been surveilling and influencing its employees. Determined, he oughts to shut off the system's power, effectively unshackling himself from his job. Now, this plotline is conventional because it maintains key principles of a narrative, particularly conflict, revelation, and resolution. But this is the extent of narrative convention. The "Freedom ending" is, again, only one of many, but despite its banality, stands out as the odd one in the bunch. All the other deviations share an aspect not found in the "Freedom ending," that being meta introspection.

It is not wrong to view *The Stanley Parable* as more a of a "commentary" than an actual game. Truly, the only agency the player has is the power to direct the direction of the narrative. In doing this, the audience becomes privy to what fundamentally separates games from every other narrative medium, that being choice. But the game slowly erodes this requirement too, should the player continue unbothered by its anticlimax. By looping endlessly, the game invites the curious player to experience every single story it contains, and to hear every word of the charming Narrator. But after exhaustively wringing the game of all content, Stanley's situation remains unchanged, regardless of the order of chosen endings.

Strongest Element

The Stanley Parable's unique narrative structure is its strongest feature. There are many flavors of traditional plot types and structures. But however different they can be, all structures share something fundamental, an ending.

Video games truly are spectacular creations, and wherever someone's tastes may lie, all can agree that the marriage of interactivity and storytelling was nothing short of a breakthrough for the arts. Games remain a medium still very much in its infancy, so it is unsurprising that audiences are regularly astonished by the projects of ambitious developers. It is due to the power of interaction that games can capably push the boundaries of storytelling and vice versa. And, as

the tried and tested narrative tenets of film and literature grow ubiquitous to game story, so to does the urge to tinker with the formula.

Now, branching narrative structure is nothing new to game design. The adoption of nonlinear storytelling was a logical step for a medium eager to give its audience a say in how the plot unfolds. But what is unique to *The Stanley Parable* is its execution. More often than not, games with branching narratives tend to merge deviations in the story at certain points. Of course not all games do this, those with a focus on story often have different endings depending on past player choices, but these all contain definitive endings. Furthermore, these branches will rarely build upon themselves, and most likely collapse into each other before presenting a new option to direct narrative. *The Stanley Parable*, which has a total of 19 distinct endings, is defined by its sprawling, treelike, narrative structure. It intricately layers decision upon decision, which compels players to wonder the breadth of stories available to them.

Unsuccessful Element

There is a problematic consequence with branding some facet of *The Stanley Parable* as "unsuccessful." This is apparent from the game's commentary, and in part from authorial intent. Simply, the game flaunts unsuccessful elements as a reinforcement of its message.

Frustration is a feeling not uncommon when playing this game. Stanley is frequently surrounded by doors, chairs and other objects that should be dynamic in this world. Yet, the player is severely limited in his interactions. Manic attempts to open doors will only end with a flurry of poignant, insulting sound effects, that of the locked door. Chairs that seem to be able to roll around are static, unmoved by the player character's collision. Any player familiar with any game made by Valve, have an intuitive sense about the physics systems of the Source Engine. *The Stanley Parable*, which uses this engine, looks, on the surface, like a Valve game, but there, the similarities end.

Jumping is neat. It is a fundamental movement mechanic of many games, including Valve's. But, however hard the player smashes their spacebar, they will never set foot off the ground. This restriction is uncomfortable. Players, especially those who play other Source games, want to jump in first-person games, on this there is no counter-argument. Freedom of movement is crucial when perspective is forced to simulate a person's point of view. Sluggish, or otherwise awkward action is a game design sin. Of course, jumping is not a mechanic that is necessary to progressing in the game, but neither is crouching, and *The Stanley Parable* will let you crouch as long as you want. This come across as a cruel joke to the player, who pines for less restriction but receives one that is useless.

Highlight

The novel branching narrative structure of *The Stanley Parable* allows for a great deal of paths begging to be explored. So, while singling out a particular moment proves challenging, the "Phone Ending" sequence is exemplary.

While the Narrator initially tries to lead Stanley towards a revelatory path that culminates in his freedom, this plotline exists as its antithesis. Doing the opposite of whatever the Narrator suggests leads Stanley towards this ending. After being consistently defied, the Narrator finally cracks and decides to show Stanley who *really* is in control. He leads him into a room containing a ringing phone, on the other end of which is Stanley's wife. If the player should choose to pick up the phone, they are teleported just outside Stanley's apartment. Inside, Stanley can hear her voice. She sounds excited to hear about her husband's day, and has even baked a fresh loaf of bread just for him.

Except, when the door is opened, it is clear that the Narrator has just played a very cruel joke on Stanley. The wife is revealed to be a featureless mannequin, and his apartment a depressing dump. Insults only continue to mount however, as the Narrator becomes unrelenting in berating Stanley. He forces the player to press buttons specified by messages on the screen, which is exactly Stanley's job. Piece by piece, he then turns every part of the apartment into the familiar dreaded office. The torture only ends when Stanley dies, trapped in the office by the very same Narrator that wanted to free him.

Critical Reception

Polygon - Philip Kollar - 9/10 - Polygon praises the game's sense of humor, as well as its ability to teach players about linear game narratives. Kollar remarks on the "never-ending conflict" between designer and player, and who really holds control of narrative, but the review focuses more on the comedic aspects of the game. In his conclusion, Kollar states that the game gives the player little reason to return once they've "explored all of its paths and heard all of the jokes," a bold opinion that proves hard to counter. It justifies this by citing its lack of mechanics as deterrent for replayability.

IGN - Keza MacDonald - 8.8/10 - IGN's Keza MacDonald calls the game "funny, self-referential, surprising, and sometimes uncomfortable to play." A great point made by MacDonald is her statement about the game's limitations. She writes, "what's impressive is how limited environments and apparently limited choices lead to so many different outcomes," an acute observation. A remarkable feature of *The Stanley Parable* is its ability to maintain player entertainment while lacking in these departments.

PC Gamer - Phil Savage - 90/100 - PC Gamer's review is insightful in its mention of the game's third character, its level design. Savage observes how

the level design is "equally petulant" to the Narrator. The environment, and its labyrinthian trails can be easily anthropomorphized as, despite aesthetic simplicity, can become incredibly complicated depending on the particular path chosen. "The map can warp, glitch and double back on itself, load into something new, or restart into a false opening," Savage writes. An unpredictable setting can inspire the player to invest more time into the game, if not for the story, then maybe just to see how crazy it can get.

Lessons

Games are experimental, so experiment! - It's easy for developers to be so caught up in the covering the "essentials," that they forget about the nature of the format. To many, it seems that the more mechanics they give players, the more enjoyable the experience becomes. *The Stanley Parable* is the contradiction of this very notion. It manages to create a fun game all the while removing the parts that make games fun. Crucial to the art form, is experimentation, without it, games become repetitive, and their heaps of mechanics expected.

Innovations on narrative structure. - Branching narrative structure is a resource owned solely by the medium. The possibilities for crafting stories with flow tailored by the audience does not exist in film or literature. So, it is imperative that games explore creativity in this field. However, *The Stanley Parable* has only given audiences a taste of what games can conceive regarding narrative. Its unique, and cyclical structure really stands as an achievement for the implementation of storytelling in games, especially with a small team of developers. The game was realized by only a handful of people, which begs the question, "how intricate can a game story be?"

Trials,….elixirs? - Principles of narrative demand that a story contain some crucial parts. These concepts in most cases only help to improve a game as a whole, all the while producing a compelling tale. Dramatic resources like the trials or elixirs of the hero's journey lend itself well to games, in which they become key components such as enemies or weapons, respectively. From this tried and tested formula, arise fantastic game stories. But, as a platform for drama, game story writers should always find new and effective ways in its execution. In this regard, Galactic Cafe exceeds expectation. Mastered by the team is the power to weave a narrative tapestry while lacking fundamental threads of convention. Unrivalled in this ability, the team stands alone, truly, as the Beckett of video games.

Summation

As games continue to grow in scope, and become ever more complex and interactive, *The Stanley Parable* sits still, as an oddity. Woven within the

suffocating hallways and the well-written banter of the Narrator is a statement about what it means to be a video game. There are no challenges here, no character development, no choice. Yet, *The Stanley Parable* is a game like any other. By showing us how pointless choice can be, we are forced to compare implementations of choice in other games, only to realize that they are both equal in this respect. *The Stanley Parable* is a game that merits close analysis not due to superfluous gameplay mechanics or incredibly detailed artwork. It deserves attention because of its ability to captivate players while completely lacking in these two departments.