# Game Narrative Review

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**Your name (one name, please)**: Tyler Kahn
**Your school:** Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
**Your email:** kahnt@rpi.edu
**Month/Year you submitted this review:** November 2019

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**Game Title:** The Stanley Parable
**Platform**: PC
**Genre**: Comedy, Mystery
**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 a first-person interactive storytelling game which primarily uses comedy and mystery to color the game world. Stanley is an office worker who does monotonous, repetitive work, until one day all his co-workers disappear and he stops receiving instructions from his computer. Stanley must make choices for himself now that he no longer is being given work. Aided by an omnipotent, tongue-in-cheek narrator, he sets out to discover the true nature of his life and world.

   Throughout the game, the choices Stanley makes affect his fate, and the player uncovers various clues about what might have happened. There are various routes and endings which highlight different aspects and elements of the game world. Though filled with comedy and irony, there are many moments in which Stanley and the player are uncomfortable, or even fearful. *The Stanley Parable* effectively combines limited gameplay with an interactive environment to tell a meta-story about stories. Beyond questioning the game world, the player may come to question the nature of choice and narrative structure itself.

## Characters

- **Stanley** - The player avatar, Stanley, is an office worker who lives a monotonous, uneventful life as "employee 427," until one day being forced to make choices for himself. Beyond making choices and walking around, Stanley does not do much; he is silent throughout the game and presented as a generic person. Given the lack of information, Stanley's personality can largely reflect whatever the player would like via their actions during the game. He does not appear to know too much about his life, as the narrator often relays relevant details to him.

- **The Narrator** - The diegetic voice that guides Stanley on his uncertain mission, and the only character with significant voice acting. The narrator fills many roles during the course of the game, including the mentor, comic relief, the antagonist, and of course, the narrator. A witty, sarcastic character who enjoys making fun of Stanley, but also shows interest in his life and well-being. He knows a significant amount about the game world and seems to relish the knowledge disparity between him and Stanley at times. While he often seeks to connect with Stanley, and his stated goal to to help, he can become angry and pointed on occasion, leading to some tense or uncomfortable moments.

## Breakdown

After an opening monologue sets the scene for Stanley's parable (parables if you play through multiple times), the player is allowed to explore Stanley's office and uncover pieces of the game world. The narrator describes what is happening has you begin exploring, but there is no interaction yet. After a short time, you come to a set of two doors, where the narrator says "he entered the door on his left." This is a turning point, as it is the first instance of choice which affects the narrator, and sets up one of the main themes for the game. If the player listens to the narrator, the game continues as expected. However, if Stanley chooses to contradict the narration, the narrator is forced to come up with a new story which explains why Stanley made the choice he did. This conflict between the narrator and the player is the core of the game.

Gameplay is relatively simple, primarily consisting of walking around and clicking on objects. However, most of the time is spent walking around and taking in the surrounding environment, with the narrator's voice serving as the soundtrack. The endings are usually determined by one choice, but the game presents many other choices throughout, so the player is uncertain of when they actually have control. The limited gameplay contributes to the confined feeling environment, reinforcing the player's lack of control, even with the abundance of choices.

As the game is a narrative about narratives, it can be quite dense at times, with the environment and the narrator supplying plenty of irony, comedy, and philosophy to take in. This is another reason the simplified gameplay and condensed story are complementary to the narrative. A longer or more complex game could potentially confuse the player, and would diffuse the impact of many of the jokes and ironic moments.

One of the most compelling parts of *The Stanley Parable* is the ability of the player to control the flow of the narrative in a more immediately noticeable way. Given that the game is a narrative following narratives, it follows that each action's impact is made explicit by the narrator, as they are forced to explain it in the context of the game's narrative up to that point. While many games have actions which might have a payoff much later in the game, *The Stanley Parable* works with a limited timespan, so the action-reaction sequences need to be condensed. Each ending is made up of several of these short sequences, culminating in a revelation of some sort, with the game containing 17 distinct branches in total.

As a result of the branching narrative, the game can be considered a commentary on many ideas, as each of the endings adds something different to the game. One ending questions the nature of free will and independence, another plays with human curiosity, while a third breaks down not only Stanley's world, but the narrator's as well. Some of the branches could be more fleshed out, but for the most part they explore the themes and ideas presented successfully. Connecting all of these branches is the struggle for power. Stanley is essentially a blank canvas, and the narrator and player are both trying to paint their own picture. The player's ability to choose is always brought up in some way, although sometimes in very different contexts.

A good example of this is the "freedom" and "blue door" endings. The freedom ending is reached by always listening to the narrator. He guides Stanley through a story in which he discovers he is in a mind control facility. After shutting off the power, Stanley is able to escape to the outside world and utilize his newfound independence (ironically obtained by blindly following instructions). On the other hand, the blue door ending is achieved by constantly contradicting the narrator, including making the same wrong decision three times in a row. Fed up, the narrator has Stanley play test other games in the hopes that the player will be satisfied with his story. These other games resemble *Minecraft* and *Portal,* which reinforce *The Stanley Parable*'s themes in interesting ways (but not discussed in this review). Both of these endings involve Stanley successfully escaping from his office world, but in very different ways, and with different takeaways.

Despite the large number of choices that the player must make, the game's overall themes and messages are still present and clearly communicated across all endings. The ability of successive playthroughs to feel cohesive, yet still contain distinct experiences is an impressive feat of game design.

The characters are a large part of this experience. As previously noted, *The Stanley Parable* makes heavy use of meta-commentary and fourth wall breaks to drive the story forward. This is successful in large part because the main protagonist is arguably not the player avatar. While the titular Stanley is presented as the player avatar, he is less a character than a tool for the player to use to interact with the game world.

By making the character of Stanley so unobtrusive, the game makes it easier for the player to connect with the game world. While many games try to make characters relatable in order to elicit a connection with the player, *The Stanley Parable* attempts to immerse the player in the environment by removing personality or background which could be distracting. The result is a game where the focus is not the playable character, but the actions he takes. The narrative is less about Stanley, and more about the narrative around the telling of Stanley's story.

This bland characterization also serves to direct the player's focus onto other characters, which in this case, is the narrator. The narrator is more of a main character than Stanley (at least in the meta-narrative), becoming the primary object that the player is trying to manipulate. As the player gets to know the narrator, they become more adept at manipulating the narrator into performing the desired narrative. However, this is not always the case, as the narrator's many hats allow him to still surprise and confuse the player until the very end. The core conflict between the narrator and the player is never explicitly resolved by the game, leaving it up to the player to decide who was victorious. The game has no "win" condition, although the narrator mockingly congratulates the

player on their "success" in some endings for their choices which ruined the story for him. Perhaps the player feels that they successfully played puppet master in Stanley's story, or maybe they are frustrated by the lack of control yielded to them, despite the game's illusion of choice. Either way, the complex narrative that presents that conflict is an experience shared among players.

In summary, the core narrative of *The Stanley Parable* is constructed via the telling of many short stories involving Stanley by the narrator and the player. The environment, dialogue, and themes in these short narratives complement the meta-narrative that encompasses them. While the individual endings are plenty funny on its own, more complex comedy and irony emerges when viewing them in context of each other. In other words, the themes and narrative are only realized fully when playing through the multiple branches in series — in this sense, it is a linear game which leads the player to believe they have choice by presenting a branching story. The entire game experience forms the true narrative.

## Strongest Element

The strongest element of the game is the character of the narrator, the diegetic voice which accompanies you everywhere. As mentioned before, throughout the game, there is little, if any, character development of Stanley, so the primary development is seen in the narrator. By limiting the character development to one character, the game allows you to focus on how your choices affect the narrator. In essence, character interaction is shifted beyond the screen to include the player and the narrator.

Beyond appearing to be slightly witty and comedic, the narrator is a relatively unknown character at first, but his personality is constantly expanded on via dialogue. His sarcastic, dry personality provides a nice contrast to the rest of the world, which feels empty (from a personality standpoint). While the abundance of details in the environment is interesting, the narrator provides another perspective on the physical world, making the dialogue and environment complementary elements of the game. As you interact with the narrator more and more via your choices and his responses, the sarcasm and playfulness can turn to anger and jealousy.

The "countdown ending" in particular exemplifies the traits that make the narrator such a compelling part of the game. The narrator gives you instructions regarding a choice, but when you intentionally disobey him, he decides to alter the game so that the choice you made kills you (setting a countdown until the building explodes). As you watch your time tick away, the narrator laments the story that wasn't realized because you didn't listen (ironically, the story would've been about uncovering free will and making your own choices). The narrator is unable to accept his own lack of agency, a confrontation which is brought about by the player's actions, so he feels the need to spitefully assert his power. This struggle between having a vision but needing someone else to make it a reality is the conflict which makes the narrator such an interesting character.

While the various endings, the setting, and the dialogue are all well designed and executed, the narrator ties the components of the game together, and without them, the narrative would be significantly less interesting.

## Unsuccessful Element

A common issue with games which feature narratives built on loops is that it can be hard to discern between the branches of the game, particularly when the game truly branches. A choice you make in one branch could significantly impact the narrative, but in another branch, that same choice might be inconsequential. Trying various combinations of choices can potentially be time-consuming, repetitive, and confusing.

For example, in one of the routes, a yellow line appears to guide the player. Once you've reached this point, you're locked into this route, which includes multiple restarts. The choices you make can no longer shift you to another branch. While previous "playthroughs" impacting the current narrative are important to *The Stanley Parable,* this recursive design can make it difficult when the player wishes to actually restart the game. Players may waste time trying things that may or may not have an effect on the narrative, which can become redundant.

The game did a good job of mitigating these issues for the most part, blocking paths to other routes when needed, and making the crucial branching points distinct enough from each other that it was clear when different paths were being taken. The different endings are not particularly long either (all 17 endings can be reached within 3 hours reasonably, with any given one not taking more than 15 minutes), so getting a true reset does not take too long. Perhaps adding some more clarity to the game restart mechanic, whether through writing or more likely through the narrator's dialogue, would help minimize the confusion. Of course, confusion is also part of the game, so even aspects of gameplay like this that might detract from the game for some people can add to the experience for others.

## Highlight

The best moment in the game was the ending with the credits (the credits don't play for every ending, as this would get redundant, particularly in a game as short as this one). While the order of endings is not dictated, assuming the player gets this ending after at least some of the others, it provides a moving conclusion to the narrator's character development.

This ending begins when Stanley makes a choice that is not supposed to be possible in the narrator's game. This causes the narrator to realize that Stanley is not Stanley, but a real person (the player), which is why he has agency. As the game world deteriorates due to "narrative contradiction," the narrator is forced to confront themselves about what they are looking for in this game. The route ends with the player being separated from Stanley, watching as the narrator pleads with the now empty Stanley to make a choice, even if it is the "wrong" one.

This ending highlights the desires and emotions of the narrator, whom the player has connected with throughout the game. While intentionally disobeying and subsequently angering the narrator is funny, it is hard to not empathize with him as his creation is destroyed. Watching him plead hopelessly with Stanley is a touching and apt representation of one of the main themes of the game — that narrative is built not on the content experienced in the choices, but on the existence of the choices themselves. When

the struggle between player and narrator stops, the narrator finds himself lost, and the narrative can no longer continue.

## Critical Reception

*The Stanley Parable* has consistently received reviews around 9/10, indicating a generally favorable impression of the game. The comedy and strange narrative are raised as the strong points of the game, with many players finding that the game offers a novel experience which subverts their expectations.

**IGN - Keza MacDonald - 8.8/10:** IGN notes that despite having a limited environment and number of choices, the game is able to provide a diverse set of experiences. However, these experiences are complementary to one another, resulting in an "intensely strange experience." The review praises the game for its ability to make the player uneasy, trapping the player in the story they thought they were creating. It also complements the game script for its comedy, and mentions that the narrator's shifting character helps contribute to the experience. Overall, MacDonald was impressed by the surreal narrative, which takes advantage of game conventions and expectations to surprise, confuse, and entertain the player.

**Polygon - Philip Kollar - 9.0/10:** Polygon praises the execution of comedy and storytelling within the game. The review pays particular attention to the ability of the game to avoid the narrative feeling redundant, despite having to replay parts. Kollar also notes that the overall length of the game and each route is short, which is well-suited to the story being told. He also mentions the narrator's dialogue as a strong component of the comedy, which is posited at the main strength of the game. Overall, the simplicity of the game means it is not difficult and lacks replay value, but the simplicity is part of what makes the game successful.

## Lessons

- **Details Matter:** The game has limited diversity in interactions, but that does not mean it is devoid of detail or interesting things to discover. The heaven ending is reached by interacting with various computers in the office throughout multiple playthroughs, and is a reward of sorts for the player's curiosity. However, even simple interactions like pushing buttons or opening doors which don't lead anywhere are additions which help color the game world. By including so many details, players likely can find something new on every playthrough, which helps reduce any feelings of redundancy or boredom. Details like writing on the walls or pictures in people's offices reinforce the comedic and meta themes of the game. The game might not be large or long, but by putting thought into its environment, the player experience is still deep and fulfilling.
- **Tell Done Well:** While "show/do don't tell" is an important part of games and their design, *The Stanley Parable* shows how telling can be done in an engaging and effective manner. The choices and environment provide plenty of show/do opportunities throughout the game, but much of the information is conveyed via

the narration. Part of this is due to the narrator's significant role in the game, but the result is still an exposition dump which is well-paced and entertaining. For example, the game even notes that the first hallway you walk down is designed so that the narration is paced well. By making the information complementary to the environment, the player remains engaged and interested, even when the information itself is not particularly interesting. The game rarely feels static during exposition, which is something many other games could benefit from.

- **Content vs Context of Choices:** When designing a narrative, inserting a choice at the wrong time can interrupt the player experience. However, giving the player a choice (or at least the illusion of it) at the right time can create an impactful connection between the player and the narrative. For example, the very first choice in the game is a simple choice between two doors, yet this choice sets the tone for the relationship with the narrator — an important component of the narrative. Similarly, not giving a player a choice can also be a powerful tool, especially when used to emphasize the powerlessness of the player. When Stanley watches his death approach in the countdown and escape endings, the player might believe that they can change the outcome. However, despite being able to interact with the game world, death is inevitable, and is made more impactful by the player's loss of control. While the content of choices is important, *The Stanley Parable* shows how even simple choices, when used in the right context, can be meaningful additions to the narrative.

## Summation

*The Stanley Parable* is many things, but at its core, it's a narrative about choices, and in a broader sense, narratives in general. Whereas many walking simulators and other similar games use choice as a game mechanic, *The Stanley Parable* uses comedic monologue and interactive storytelling to make your choices the focal point of the game. However, the narrative proves to be just as thought-provoking as it is funny, touching on some profound ideas in the short time it takes to complete. The game is an excellent example of simple gameplay combined with a well-designed environment and a unique cast to tie them together. No matter what the player is looking for, in all likelihood, *The Stanley Parable* has something for them.