

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** The Stanley Parable  
**Platform:** PC, Mac  
**Genre:** Interactive Fiction  
**Release Date:** July 27, 2011  
**Developer:** Davey Wreden  
**Publisher:** Davey Wreden  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Davey Wreden

## Overview

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*The Stanley Parable* is a short experimental game created in the Source game engine by Davey Wreden. In this work of interactive fiction, as the player begins, they are informed by the Narrator that they are taking control of Stanley, a dutiful, diligent, and unambitious office worker. The player joins Stanley as he goes about his tedious, menial job, which involves watching a screen, and responding in turn to what appears on the screen. Until suddenly, for the first time in Stanley's career, the screen goes blank. This, as well as a nudge from the Narrator, spurs Stanley (and the player) to action, as Stanley sets out to find out what happened. He quickly discovers that his screen going blank is far from the only strange occurrence, as all of his fellow employees appear to have gone missing, while all the while Stanley's (and the player's) actions are being narrated.

From here, the story can go a number of different directions, with a total of six possible endings, all significantly different in tone and outcome.

More recently, *The Stanley Parable* has even received a new touched up remake and expansion, released on Steam under the same name, as Wreden considers this to be the definitive version of *The Stanley Parable*. Even the demo for this new version of the game is unique; containing little if any of the game itself, the demo is composed of a completely original set of circumstances, designed to not spoil the game itself, but still give the player a feel for what the game will be like.

## Characters

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*The Stanley Parable* has a very small, focused cast of characters, and an unusual one at that. In fact, there are as few as two (or three, depending on the story path you embark upon) characters in the entire game.

- **Stanley**, the protagonist, employee number 427. This mild, largely ordinary character serves as the player's character. Going about his work at his desk, as he does day after day, Stanley suddenly finds the screen he follows instructions from has gone blank. This, as well as a prompt from the Narrator, sets Stanley, and the player, off in search of answers. Due to the first person nature of the game, you never actually learn what Stanley looks like.
- **The Narrator.** The disembodied voice of the Narrator of *The Stanley Parable* does more than simply recount what you are doing; in fact, the Narrator is one of the key players in all of the multiple story paths. Depending on the path you choose, the Narrator can lead Stanley to a happy conclusion, guiding you through a well-rehearsed story and leading you every step of the way. However, should you deviate from the Narrator's instructions, the Narrator will show his true colors. Much in the way that some players may fight the indicated "correct" path in front of them, the Narrator will fight back against the player by trying to push the player back along the intended path.
- **The Female Narrator.** There are at least two characters that only show up briefly, and in only one of many story paths, but this one I think bears pointing out. Right at a moment where one might assume Stanley to be killed by the Narrator, this female Narrator steps in, and give Stanley both a way out, and a bit of insight. She reveals the illusion of true agency for Stanley and the player by pointing out that every possible outcome had been designed for them, long before the player started the game, and Stanley set out. And she talks about the interactions of Stanley and the Narrator from an outsider's perspective, pointing out that while the Narrator seemed in control, really the Narrator had as little power over Stanley as Stanley had over the paths he has to choose from. She even begins to break the fourth wall, explaining that no matter what path Stanley chooses, he'll be walking a path set before him by someone else, and breaks the fourth wall as she implies that the only true choice you, as the player, has, is whether or not to play at all.
- **The Player.** Yes, the player, as in the person playing the game. You yourself are the driving force behind the story, controlling the protagonist and moving the narrative forward, as is the case in nearly every game. However, in *The Stanley Parable*, you play a role in the story itself, and are even addressed directly by the Narrator in some story paths.

## Breakdown

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A parable is defined as a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. *The Stanley Parable* is appropriately named, as Davey Wreden sought to make a game

that explored what it would be like to build a narrative that allows the player to fight against the intended path, as most games force the player to play by the rules of the game.

To this end, Davey Wreden created this interactive work of fiction, one that gives the player considerably more influence over the story than most games. It does this by having a large number of extremely varied paths the story can ultimately take, with the player being encouraged to play through multiple times thanks to the game's intentionally short length, with a single play through taking around ten minutes. This short length also allows for the wider variety in endings, as a player will not feel cheated should they get an unusual or silly ending, as the time invested to reach it wasn't gruelingly long, and if unsatisfied the player can earn a different ending easily.

The narrative is delivered through a constant narration, both well written and well delivered, serving to both lend context to your actions, and give you suggestions as to what to do next. This is where things begin to get interesting; the player is by no means obligated to follow these suggestions, and in fact can deliberately fight against them. Should the player do so, the Narrator reacts in response to the player's actions, resulting in potentially radically different stories with each play through. This lends a strong sense of player agency, while at the same time imposes a feeling of struggling futilely against some omnipotent outside force.

Even should the player follow the Narrator's instructions exactly, a perceptive player might notice some very suspicious parallels between themselves and Stanley, and that while this ending results in Stanley becoming "free", the way that the Narrator explains this to you makes you begin to question just how free Stanley really has become. For example, the Narrator explains that Stanley was now free, no longer pushing buttons according to prompts on his screen, and no longer being told how he should feel. The Narrator then says that this makes Stanley feel happy. These statements begin to feel as much comments directed at the player as they are describing the story of Stanley.

In fact, as you continue playing through the different storylines, it begins to feel more and more like the narrative designer were speaking directly to the player through the narration, and your actions begin to feel more like responses. This creates a sort of surreal dialogue between narrative designer and player, one that brings to mind the struggles of narrative designers to deliver story to players that may not always be willing to play along.

The multiple different paths for the story explore several different aspects of this subject in interesting ways. For example, one story path connects the actions of Stanley and the player directly, with words and instructions appearing on the player's screen, telling them to press buttons. Not only does this directly reference Stanley's job of following instructions from a screen, it drives home the point that the player of the game is not much different. The Narrator even points out how detached the player can become from the actions they are performing, mindlessly following instructions for no other reason than they were being told to do it, never questioning their goals or instructions, as is often the case in many games.

At one point, the Narrator also addresses the topic of player agency, posing the question of had Stanley (and by extension the player) never been given the opportunity of choice, would Stanley's life still hold significance, and be interesting enough that the player would find it worth it to experience.

In yet another of the story paths, should the player continue fighting against the Narrator, the Narrator leads the player to a blank room, containing nothing but a skybox and development textures. The Narrator explains how no one had even built a room for this story path, since the player was never supposed to be there. He questions if this is what the player was looking for, this unfinished and sterile area, expressing frustration that if that were the case, why bother putting anything into the story at all. In a way, this is a pointed commentary on the frustrations narrative developers can feel towards players, when their hard work and carefully planned stories are so vehemently avoided by some players, who only want to see how far they can deviate from the intended path, or how badly they can break the world from within the rules of the game.

If taken to its ultimate conclusion, this story path can become even more interesting; Stanley eventually escapes the Narrator's influence, the Narrator protesting and warning him that he can't create a story without him. Stanley then reappears in the room he started the game in, but this time, there is no Narrator, no prompts or suggestions of where to go, nothing. The player is simply left to wander around for a bit, in silence, until the actual ending kicks in. This gives the player an idea of what the game might have been like had there been no narrative designer at all, no context, no direction, no story, only absolute player agency in an empty world. And the result is a sterile, hollow experience, not only lacking in context or story, but also in instruction, leaving the player completely at a loss what to do next. This experience of the game without narrative direction helps to drive home the importance of narrative design.

As far as gameplay goes, *The Stanley Parable* is very basic, giving the player an extremely limited set of actions that can be done, all in first person, which keeps the focus squarely focused on the narrative. Rather than a flaw, the limited range of actions works well for the nature of the game, and never becomes a problem. *The Stanley Parable* was created in the Source game engine, and takes full advantage of many aspects of the engine itself as elements of the story. For example, in one story path, the Narrator points out some of the peculiarities of the Source Engine, such as being unable to see the character's feet, and doors closing automatically behind the player, and uses them, coupled with some clever looping level design, as evidence of Stanley's potential insanity.

## **Strongest Element**

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By far the most memorable element in *The Stanley Parable* is the Narrator. Voiced by Kevan Brighting, the Narrator is absolutely crucial to everything about the game, providing context to your actions, suggestions of where to go or what to do, and serving both as a foil for your decisions and interactions, and as Stanley's antagonist and captor. And perhaps most importantly, and certainly most uniquely, the Narrator serves in a way as a conduit between narrative director and player, almost becoming a medium through which the two can communicate, the director speaking through the Narrator's words, and the player speaking through their actions and decisions.

Another thing that should be brought up is how the way *The Stanley Parable* handles its narration helps avoid some of the weaknesses of similar meta-referential works of the past. Around the 60s through the 80s, there was a postmodern movement in other forms of media such as books, radio, and movies. These books about books and

movies about movies sometimes received criticisms for being bland and sterile, with little actual story, their self-reflexivity being their only draw. However, *The Stanley Parable* avoids this risk by using an excellent sense of humor throughout, which combined with the excellent delivery of Kevan Brighting's charismatic voice helps to keep the audience engaged and interested throughout.

However, I'd be remiss if I failed to mention the branching story paths as one of the strongest elements as well, as the narration and branching story are inexorably linked. Without the branching story, the narration would be nothing more than a charming way of delivering a linear, but otherwise unoriginal story, and the game as a whole would amount to little more than an audio book or radio drama. However, with the inclusion of strong player agency, the story becomes something entirely more memorable and unique, giving it much more depth while also making not only the player's participation in the story necessary, but the player decisions begin to have an enormous impact on the direction the story can take. Conversely, the branching story would be little more than a small, meaningless maze of a few hallways without the narration, removing any incentive for the player to play at all, as well as any context to any of the player's actions or decisions.

It is the combination of these two elements that make *The Stanley Parable* truly interesting, and what make it really shine as an example of one way to do interactive narrative.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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While the game has a strong and satisfying story no matter which path you were to take, there's always the possibility of a player following the instructions all the way through, and quitting the game, having only experienced one possible ending. While this default ending is still fairly entertaining, if somewhat less interesting, the player would be missing out on most of the game, as most of the more creative and unique parts of the game happen when the player starts to fight against this default ending.

Not everyone might enjoy this narrative focused approach, either, and for the players only looking for a visceral experience to test their skill against, the game would quickly fail to deliver. That said, this isn't so much a flaw; it is extremely difficult to please everyone, and by not trying to cater to all kinds of gamers, *The Stanley Parable* allows itself to maintain its tight focus, and not dilute itself with shoehorned in elements, like shooting mechanics or platforming.

## **Highlight**

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One of the most powerful moments is the storyline that results in the female Narrator stepping in and lending an outside perspective of events, speaking more to the player than to Stanley, and pointing out that despite the feeling of freedom to fight the intended story, in actuality it is still, as is the case in all games, only the illusion of choice. She states that the only real, true independent choice you have as a player is not just this, but in any game, is whether or not to play; otherwise you're always working within someone else's world and set of rules. This was probably one of the more direct

breaches of the fourth wall, and to great effect, as it suddenly and intentionally distances the player from the events happening in game. Breaking the immersion like that is something rarely done intentionally, and in most games something to be avoided at all costs. Here, however, it is used to great effect as a narrative element in itself. Interestingly, for all the breaching *The Stanley Parable* does of the fourth wall, the game never addresses the player explicitly, only implicitly.

## Critical Reception

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*The Stanley Parable* has received much attention and praise for being a very thought-provoking, unique experience. Within two weeks of being released on moddb.com, a website focusing on video game mods, *The Stanley Parable* was downloaded over 90,000 times, and currently has an average community rating on that website of 9.3 out of 10, with 1,820 votes submitted. It also received high praise at the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Independent Games Festival, where it was listed as an honorable mention for the Seamus McNully Grand Prize, as well as for the “Excellence in Narrative” award. In addition, *The Stanley Parable* also was a showcase nominee at the 2012 IndieCade, where it received the Special Recognition award.

Journalists gave *The Stanley Parable* a fair amount of praise as well. Jim Rossignol of rockpapershotgun.com describes *The Stanley Parable* as a “peculiar story-driven, non-linear, thought-provoking, brilliant-constructed, acutely clever, well-written” game.

Another journalist, Kyle McColl of indiegamemag.com, gave *The Stanley Parable* a 78/100, mentioning that “this isn’t a mod for the trigger finger – this is a mod for the mind.”

In another article on kotaku.com, Kirk Hamilton points out that “The Stanley Parable certainly raises more questions than it answers – and many of the questions it raises are about game design and video game ‘meaning’ itself.” Similarly, Shannon from cultgeek.com explains “There’s a great theme underlying this of personal choice and free will, and if you start to stare into it too deeply, you may begin wondering about other things you do in life just because ‘it’s the norm’, or ‘that’s how it’s always been.’”

One of the strengths of *The Stanley Parable* is the ambiguity of it. The many story paths can be interpreted in just as many ways, depending on how a player chooses to interpret them. Filipe Salgado of killscreeendaily.com puts it aptly, in his article examining the game:

“All interpretations exist at once, all of them equally valid. By sacrificing a single, focused ideology, Davey Wreden, the designer of the game, exposes what’s problematic and exciting about game design: the ongoing negotiations between author and player. They are given a voice in the Narrator’s pleading and threatening and reassurances, and how we choose to react and rebel against him. Wreden’s best joke, in a game already filled with dark laughs, is a self-deprecating one. His Narrator, a stand-in for himself, is only interested in delivering Stanley, us, the player, to the blandest-possible ending. It’s only in contradicting the narrator that we get to the interesting stuff. Ultimately, Wreden is undermining himself, shrugging his shoulders and saying, ‘What the hell do I know?’”

As for my own impression of the game, *The Stanley Parable* is a difficult game to appraise. From a gameplay standpoint, it falls far short of most games. However, this

allows the game to keep its focus, without shoehorning in game elements that don't mesh with the point it is trying to make. From a conceptual and experimental narrative standpoint, *The Stanley Parable* excels. Understandably, not everyone will view *The Stanley Parable* fondly. Books and movies that have attempted to analyze their own medium have sometimes been accused of being very sterile and bland, and there will likely be people that level similar accusations against *The Stanley Parable*. However, I think *The Stanley Parable* is an experience worth having, and is a thoroughly interesting and wholly unique experiment in narrative design, and I can only hope developers can learn from it, and perhaps even be inspired to attempt a new approach to game narrative of their own.

## Lessons

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- Indie games, as many indie game companies have found, are a perfect place for experimental game design, as they're able to take much greater risks.
- If you have an idea, don't be afraid to approach it yourself. There are many resources tools for any budget, and plenty of online learning resources with which to teach yourself.
- Given the right amount of thought and preparation, games with very unorthodox or experimental ways of approaching narrative design can be successful.
- Negative space can be used very effectively; you don't necessarily have to answer every question the game poses to the player. Sometimes letting the player make their own interpretation is the way to go.
- Making a game very responsive to player's actions can go a long way to increasing immersion, and goes a long way towards making the player's actions feel meaningful.
- Work with your limitations, and when possible make them work for you instead of against. Think creatively, and you can turn a glitch into a feature.
- You don't need to please everyone. Rather than forcing things into the game in an attempt to reach all audiences, keep your focus sharp on the aspects that make the game enjoyable in the first place.

## Summation

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Davey Wreden started working on *The Stanley Parable* when he noticed that most games today confine a player to the game's rules, and set out to build a narrative that would challenge this concept. The result was certainly a success, not only achieving his

goal of creating a non-traditional game narrative, but also inspiring thought and conversation about narrative design in general in many of the people that play it.

*The Stanley Parable* is a truly unique game, one that provokes thought, and does more than just pose questions for the player, but inspires the player to come up with their own questions. It encourages players to question the paths laid out before them, something many games struggle to do. *The Stanley Parable* is an excellent example of the strengths of shorter, independent games, and of ways traditional narrative design in games can be challenged.