

THE STANLEY PARABLE

PHIL J. DOUGHERTY III

University of Wisconsin – Madison
Computer Sciences & Statistics
1210 W Dayton St
Madison, WI 53706
pdougherty@wisc.edu

Stanley looked patiently at his empty screen, awaiting further instruction.

The Stanley Parable is a game that often elicits the discussion “what IS a game, really?” among the kind of people who tend to miss the point.

That isn’t to deem discourse on the subject an unworthy endeavor, but Stanley really isn’t the type of person to get involved with that sort of thing.

Lucky for us, Stanley wasn’t there. He, well...he didn’t show up (quite unlike Stanley).

Now there’s no need to worry. Stanley is perfectly fine – content in the life composed of the decisions he has made, compliant ONLY to his own will.

When no further instruction came, Stanley began to feel anxious. People had expectations.

“Player Choice!” the crowd chimes, united at the prompt to recite where why and how “games” excel.

Player Choice is how individuals express agency! Action without alternative isn’t compelling! How can choosing option “C” be particularly meaningful if not for the presence and possibility of an option “B”?!

“Choosing C” then might well be the same as “being shown C” or “being told C”!

And so, choice we were granted. At least, it did seem that way.

Stanley would wait. In the mean time, he could take a sip of his water. Or maybe twiddle his thumbs.

But what of option “D”? Or “E”? Or “H”, “K”, “Q”, and everything between? Does the mere existence of each alternative in turn somehow amplify the meaning of our chosen “C”?

Ah, but alas, a game can only do so much. What if we just *pretended* there was an “E”?

Maybe it’s just the *belief* of an alternate – the *illusion* of choice that begets meaning...

Maybe a player need only *think* she could have done otherwise – that the judgment she commands bears consequence...

...maybe?

No! Stanley would not sit idle. He would take control of the situation. He would let his will be known!

So there he stood. Confronted with the very real consequences of his very real choice.

But that didn't really matter. Not with respect to "what could have been", anyways.

More than any significance derived from choosing one thing as opposed to another was delight from the affirmation of the very thing we chose! Reassurance of progression towards a distinctly non-existent goal. Cooperative exploration of the deterministic space set in front of us. Play.

Things were going well for Stanley.

The Stanley Parable IS a game, and it DOES employ choice. But to tout it (and games in general) on account of the wonderful "Choice" within is to do it a great disservice. When presented with a door to your left and a door to your right, one can't help but find excitement in the speculation of what lies behind the door inevitably left unchosen.

But this excitement is fleeting – we'll just come back and try that other door next anyways.

Stanley was free.

In performing music, satisfaction isn't drawn from the knowledge that at any moment you might decide to play off-key. Instead it obtains from the enforced state of *resonance* with respect to intent and action that is required for the song to continue.

It is not the agency to choose one door over another, but instead the permission to linger in a place of consequence free entropy until you are ready to be the driving force behind the interaction. You can pace back and forth, become familiar with the expectations set before you, warm up to your surroundings until comfortable. Only when satisfied, you continue onward – you *choose* the door on the left, intent and action aligned in enchanting synchrony.

Free to engage with the delight that our narrator has planned for us – on our own terms.