

The Stanley Parable

Choice. PS4 or Xbox One? Should I read this review? Will I go for a run or watch the next World Cup match? Pepperoni or cheese? Life is full of choices, some trivial, some profound, and indeed endless. As humans, it is our agency in this world that defines our existence. Through our cultural institutions we are implicitly and explicitly taught norms and values (in sickness and in health; do unto others; etc...). The hope is that we will be equipped with the tools we need to inevitably face life's most difficult decisions.

For its part, art helps us to reflect about what is and what should be. Art has a way of changing our feelings and attitudes, even long held beliefs. In regards to both movies and video games, it is through the independent scene that we often see the best examples of art. Ironically it was my intention to review *Watch Dogs* this month, a Triple A title from Ubisoft. I purchased the game, and played it quite a bit. It is loaded with content, an all-you-can-eat buffet of a game, yet, like most buffets, it leaves you feeling bloated, yet inexplicably unsatisfied. So rather than dwell on my mistake and write a bad review, I turned to the independent scene. \$5.99 and a short download later I was playing *The Stanley Parable*.

If *Watch Dogs* is a buffet, *Stanley* is a single, delectable dish of artistic self-reflection. There are number of fantastic reviews that you can find online, including especially good ones from IGN and NPR, and I encourage you to read them. The main thing you need to know is that this game is comprised of equal amounts of choose-your-own-adventure story, witty british commentary, and self reflection about what a game *is*. It is a waltz between the designer, Davey Wreden, and you as the player. And it without a doubt adds to the conversation about what games are and what agency players actually have within them. The description from their website says it well:

The Stanley Parable is a first person exploration game. You will play as Stanley, and you will not play as Stanley. You will follow a story, you will not follow a story. You will have a choice, you will have no choice. The game will end, the game will never end.

Contradiction follows contradiction, the rules of how games should work are broken, then broken again. This world was not made for you to understand.

But as you explore, slowly, meaning begins to arise, the paradoxes might start to make sense, perhaps you are powerful after all. The game is not here to fight you; it is inviting you to dance.

The demo is free to play, although the game is layered like an onion, so you almost have to purchase the full version to appreciate its depth and beauty. So save yourself the money, wait for *Watch Dogs* to hit the bargain bin, and for \$14.99 download a copy of *The Stanley Parable* today. You won't be disappointed (or will you?).

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Dr. Anthony Betrus, The Game Connoisseur