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Play It Again, Stanley: *Mise en Abyme* and Playing with Convention and Narrative in *The Stanley Parable*

Video Games and Authorial Works[1]

Humanistic reflection on video games seems like a necessity nowadays, due to the enormous popularity of digital entertainment and the influence it exerts over modern culture. This need for a deeper reflection also stems from the fact that, increasingly, video games give their players various pleasures – created by spectacular visual effects, exciting plot or an opportunity to solve logical puzzles. Electronic games are progressively becoming a tool of artistic pursuits and intellectual experiments that would be impossible in analogue media.

An example of such phenomenon, and a game especially worthy of reflection, is *The Stanley Parable* [Galactic Cafe, 2013]. This game is especially saturated with irony, utilizing original, self-referential devices, questioning existing genre conventions and, above all, being an interesting expression of intellectual experimentation undertaken by its two authors. It is true that most modern commercial games are produced by large teams consisting of a few dozen, or even more people. As such, it is often problematic to speak of an individual authorship[2]. However, *The Stanley Parable* is an entirely different case. Here, we have a work created by two designers (Davey Wreden and William Pugh, who co-run the Galactic Cafe studio and are responsible for the whole game) who experimented with game structure to achieve the intended effect. Wreden and Pugh introduced into their game elements that often question genre conventions in a surprising manner, comment on schematic solutions, and contest the conventional rules of video games. They also employed one particular method of playing with the narrative: not only by designing a plot structure that makes it possible to finish the game in many different ways, but also (above all!) by subjecting this structure to self-reference. Finally, they employed figure of a narrator, whose status during the game appears ambiguous. He undergoes numerous metamorphoses, his role in the story is fluid, allowing us to invoke the category of the unreliable narrator, borrowed from the literary theory[3].

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[1] Project funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education as part of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities between 2014 and 2016.

[2] It is, however, not entirely impossible. Sometimes authorship is assigned to the main producer/director of the game, who – just like a movie director – controls the whole project and gives it an individual character and a recognizable style.

[3] The category of an unreliable narrator was introduced into the narrative studies by American literary scholar Wayne C. Booth. See: W.C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago 1983, pp. 158–159.

Importantly, employing a narrator whose reliability appears dubious carries different consequences in a game than it does in a literary work[4].

Thus, we could say that *The Stanley Parable* authors act against many fundamental rules which are the basis for modern commercial games. They direct the player's attention to both the plot, and *the way in which* it is presented and told[5]. Even more, the game does not have any classically-understood challenges (which in the case of *The Stanley Parable*¸ is a deliberate act): reaching various endings is (with few exceptions) not dependent on overcoming actual obstacles solving logical puzzles[6]. Therefore, the true challenge is not finding a particular (by implication: the best) ending, but getting to know the game as a whole, noticing and interpreting its structure, and revealing the tension between the elements of the storyworld.

Screen as a Key

Before moving on to the analysis of individual scenes and devices used in *The Stanley Parable*, we should focus our attention on the element of the game, which I am inclined to see as a key to hermeneutic interpretation of the whole work. This element is the splash screen, viewed even before starting the gameplay. When the player starts up the game, a typical list of available options ('Begin the game', 'Credits', etc.) is displayed on the left side of the screen. This list is set up against a backdrop of an office space – we can see a desk with a computer monitor on the right side of the screen. However, it is surprising that the depicted monitor duplicates the entire picture displayed on the player's screen, so on the left side of the screen there is the list of options, while on the right – the next monitor, which in turn contains another one, etc. Obviously, the limitation in the size of displayed graphics does not let us see consecutive looped pictures, but the logic of a screen is constructed in such a way as to suggest that this loop could potentially last infinitely (see Figure 1).
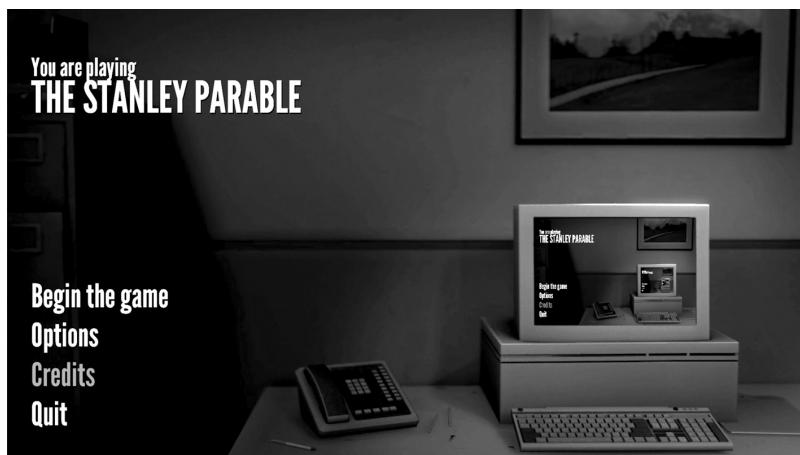

Figure 1. The Stanley Parable – the splash screen

The Stanley Parable splash screen could be described as a fractal construct. The distinctive loop observed by the player on the screen is created by placing in a picture an element that duplicates the whole image. A category which we could use to describe this particular device is *mise en abyme*, which – as Przemysław Pietrzak points out – when used in a literary context:

> … describes an artistic construct, where an internal text is inserted into another, outer literary text, and the former stays in various relationship with the structure that surrounds it. A discernible analogy between the two levels causes the inner text to resemble a reduced copy of the outer one.[7]

According to literary scholars, *mise en abyme* is "one of the most distinctive devices of the postmodern novel with an ontological dominant"[8], In such works, *mise en abyme* structure – according to classical findings by Lucien Dällenbach – shapes the meaning of the whole work, which thus becomes a key to decoding it[9].

The Stanley Parable example proves that a like mechanism can successfully play a similar role in a video game as well. The choice to employ a self-referential structure in the splash screen – even before the start of a proper gameplay – is a clear signal of what the player might expect in the main part of the work. This indication allows us to place *The Stanley Parable* in a wider catalogue of postmodern artistic strategies that function on the meta-textual level.

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[7] P. Pietrzak, "Opowiadanie w opowiadaniu. «Mise en abyme» i narratologia", in: *Opowiadanie w perspektywie badań porównawczych*, ed. Z. Mitosek, Kraków 2004.

[8] J. Frużyńska, *Mapy, encyklopedie, fraktale. Hipertekstowe opowieści w prozie XX wieku*, Warszawa 2012.

[9] L. Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. J. Whiteley and E. Hughes, Cambridge 1989. See also P. Pietrzak, "Opowiadanie w opowiadaniu", op. cit.

At the same time, we should stress that the *mise en abyme* method employed in the splash screen of the game is characterised by a particular craft. The multiplied image (the desk and the computer screen on it) is, after all, a multiplication of the player's situation – the viewer is also looking at a screen. The effect of an image designed that way is similar to what Pietrzak described in the article quoted above. The scholar notes there that "*mise en abyme* – especially when it mirrors the act of reading – is an artistic tool that allows the text to «leave» its own borders"[10]. In case of *The Stanley Parable*, *mise en abyme* references not so much the act of reading, as the act of using a computer, and similarly allows the work to leave its own borders, or rather – to pull the player and physical reality across these borders.

The Narrator's Voice

It appears an almost impossible task to provide a concise summary of the plot in which *The Stanley Parable* player participates. During the game, the player is faced with a series of alternatives, which can take the plot in different directions and result in over a dozen different endings (it is worth noting that choosing one option prevents us from choosing another). The player controls a hero named Stanley through whose eyes he/she sees, and the game takes place in an unspecified office, where Stanley is worker number 427 (rooms and worker's stations are labelled with yellow numbers). However, at the beginning of the game it turns out that there is no trace of other employees anywhere – and the protagonist embarks on a journey around the office in search of an explanation.

Although Stanley himself does not utter a word, his actions are constantly commented upon by the Narrator. At the beginning, the voice explains the situation the player finds themselves in, as well as the hero's motivations and thoughts, which are not available to the player in any other way. The Narrator often invokes free indirect speech. For example, at the beginning of the game he says: "All of his co-workers were gone. What could it mean? Stanley decided to go to the meeting room; perhaps he had simply missed a memo?". This quote displays a special kind of knowledge possessed by the narrator, as in the beginning he does not disclose exactly how much he knows about the storyworld – instead, standing behind the hero (which changes dramatically later). At the beginning of the proper gameplay we encounter a situation that Gerard Genette would describe as internal focalization: a narrator's perspective that is restricted to the hero's consciousness[11].

Using a narrator's voice in video games is not unprecedented; it is utilised, to name just one example, in the game *Bastion* [Supergiant Games, 2011]. However, it is unusual that while narrators in games usually fulfil a hyponarrative, hypodiegetic function – they are not a part of the diegetic world and do not influence the events – the role

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[10] P. Pietrzak, "Opowiadanie w opowiadaniu", op. cit., p. 194.

[11] For more on types of focalization by Gerard Genette, see: G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Levin, Oxford 1980. At the same time, we should add that Genette's concept has been criticized and reformulated by Mieke Bal, see: M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto 2009.

of the Narrator in *The Stanley Parable* quickly becomes ambiguous: he does not restrict himself to simply narrating and explaining events that are happening on screen, he also speaks directly to the hero (in the present tense, not the past tense) and attempts to influence his decisions. As such, he escapes the convention entirely.

The Narrator plays a certain kind of game with the protagonist (and, as a consequence, with the player). The way his story is told allows the player to directly contradicts the Narrator's words. For example, in one of the crucial moments Stanley finds himself in a room where he encounters two open doors. The Narrator comments: "When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left". With that, he unambiguously suggests what should be the proper course of action for the player. However, because the door on the right is open as well, the player faces a choice: either to be obedient, or contradict the Narrator's words and force him to change the story (see Figure 2).
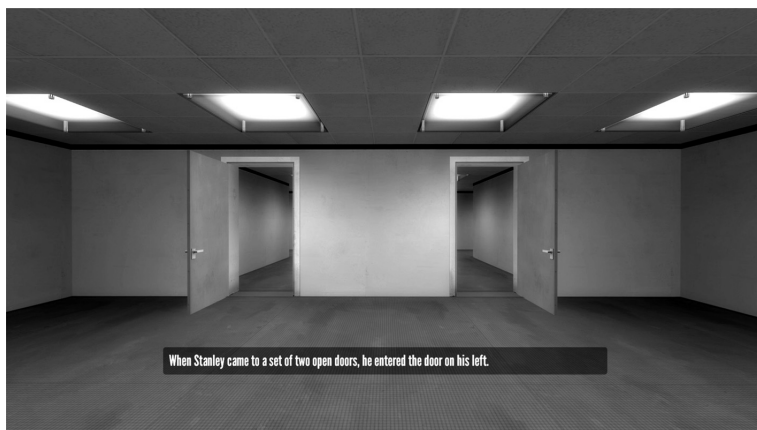

Figure 2. *The Stanley Parable* – the choice of doors; The Narrator tells which door the hero decided to choose, even before it happens

We should note that such a situation is possible due to the manner in which the narrative is conducted. The Narrator uses the past tense to describe events that have yet to take place. This allows the player to enter a peculiar dialogue with the Narrator, testing the story's flexibility – which makes attempts to derail the plot[12].

Before I move on to analyse such situations, we should briefly introduce the sequence of events in the gameplay where the player adheres to the Narrator's instructions.

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[12] If the player in the above-mentioned situation (against the Narrator's wishes) chooses the door on the right, the Narrator will say: "This was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well. Perhaps he wanted to stop by the employee lounge first, just to admire it." In this short statement, we can witness the Narrator's flexibility as he attempts to shape the story in such a way that it makes sense despite the player's truculence. There is also apparent mockery, suggesting that the player indeed has no reason to be insubordinate (the social room is a completely normal space and there is nothing to admire there). This is another example of the game between the Narrator and the player.

If the player decides to follow the Narrator's words, Stanley will leave his room and – noticing that all his co-workers have vanished – will reach the conference room which will also be empty. In that case, he will go to his boss' office, hoping to discover some explanation. The office will turn out to be empty as well. After that, the Narrator will describe the situation in the following words: "Shocked, unraveled, Stanley wondered in disbelief who orchestrated this, what dark secret was being held from him! What he could not have known was that the keypad behind the boss' desk guarded the terrible truth that his boss had been keeping from him, and so the boss had assigned it an extra secret pin number: 2–8–4–5".

The ambiguity of this situation rests on the fact that, as a result, the player can easily use the code and open the lock. By revealing to the player facts that the hero has no way of knowing himself, the Narrator influence the events which presumably he should merely narrate. Thereby, he reveals his ambiguous status.

After opening the electronic lock, a secret passage is revealed with an elevator that leads to an underground complex. If the player remains obedient to the Narrator and does not leave the path when an opportunity appears, Stanley will find a hall marked as a "MIND CONTROL FACILITY", where the walls are filled with a few hundred huge monitors used for surveillance of Stanley's co-workers. After that, the hero makes his way to a control centre, where – with the Narrator's suggestion – he decides to turn off the whole machinery, so that it will never control human minds again. If, standing at the main console (where there are two buttons: on and off), the hero controlled by the player decides to follow the Narrator's suggestion and turn off the facility's power, the screen will go black, and after a moment an exit will appear, which will allow him to safely exit the building. This ending can be described as "happy": after all, the hero manages to leave the place of surveillance, sets himself free and, as the Narrator claims, "is happy" ("And Stanley was happy").

Unravelling the series of events compatible with the Narrator's expectations takes about ten minutes. Yet, when the Narrator summarises this ending, he himself notes that Stanley leaves behind a lot of unanswered questions. What is even more important – after the ending, the game automatically restarts. Both facts are a clear incentive for the player to explore other versions of events, to *play it again*… It means that the correct way of using *The Stanley Parable* is not reaching one of the endings, but observing tensions that appear between different variants of the story. Attempts to derail the narrative, actions contrary to the will of the storyteller are thus not a form of deviation in the narration, but pre-meditated by the designers and are expressly desired behaviour on the part of the player.

In turn, this allows us to ask a question about freedom – both that of the hero and the player. The first impression of the player can be that a chance of confronting various alternatives and opportunities to act contrary to the narrator's story creates a situation of unalloyed freedom. However, since this "rebellion" against the Narrator's discourse is predicted, and even designed by the authors, we cannot speak of a genuine freedom.

Obviously, such a semblance of freedom is characteristic of video games in general, as they usually provide a player with simulations where freedom is determined by the programmed possibilities – in case of *The Stanley's Parable*, however, the problem of false freedom becomes one of the central issues of the game.

We could say that the player's attempts to contradict the Narrator's orders are manifestations of the will to leave the role imposed by the game, that they express a desire to contradict and forge 'their own path'. However, the more the player acts against the words of the Narrator, the more they yield to the prime rule of the gameplay, which encourages them to do precisely this. This is clearly stated by the Narrator, who, in one of the game's variables, opens multiple doors at the same time and allows the player to choose the path they will follow. But this choice turns out to be completely meaningless – no matter what decisions the player makes, further gameplay consists only of roaming the office labyrinth without a clear goal. It turns out to lack any purpose, as the Narrator is silent throughout this wondering. After a short while, he states "I'll say it: This is the worst adventure I've ever been on.", and after a short consideration, he restarts the game. Therefore, when the Narrator falls silent, his role in giving meaning to the whole gameplay is made apparent. At the same time, the scene contains a suggestion that the player's choices are meaningless if they are not accompanied by the sense-making commentary of the Narrator[13]. This makes the notion of freedom – both that of the protagonist and the player – illusory.

The question concerning the autonomy of the player's decisions is constantly present in *The Stanley Parable*. We can evoke two excellent examples of this. Above all, the introductory movie is full of meaning, where we find out the main character's occupation. According to the Narrator, Stanley used to sit in front of a computer the entire day and 'push buttons. "Orders came to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them, and in what order", says the Narrator, adding that although the work might appear boring, it made Stanley happy. Therefore, the introduction not only introduces the issue of freedom (the hero has been listening to orders his whole life – it seems that he should obediently fulfil the Narrator's orders), but is also an example of *mise en abyme* saturated with irony. After all, the situation of Stanley looking at the monitor and fulfilling orders on the screen can be applied to the situation of the player – who is also looking at a monitor and fulfilling orders of the game[14]. Thus, if we treat the introduction as an ironic commentary, a metaphor of playing *The Stanley Parable*, it will result in creating a distance between the player and the game, and approaching it in a more critical manner.

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[13] In another version of events, the Narrator says a similar thing: "He needs me, someone who will wrap everything up at the end – to make sense out of the chaos and the fear and the confusion".

[14] We should stress again here that even if the player acts "contrary to the Narrator's suggestions, they still act in accordance with the script. Thus, the more they attempt to leave Stanley's role, paradoxically, the more they consolidate themselves in a role predicted by the game. It is reminiscent of situations known from various texts by Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, where heroes, attempting to get rid of their own mug, gain even more mug.

Playing with Convention

The ambiguity of the Narrator's role is also apparent in other situations. In certain moments in the course of the plot he reflects on his own status and on the functions of the story itself, as well as point out genre conventions and typical video game mechanisms used in *The Stanley Parable*. One out of numerous examples of such self-referential moments is the moment when the Narrator states the following:

> And then perhaps the strangest question of them all entered Stanley's head, one he was amazed he hadn't asked himself sooner: 'Why is there a voice in my head dictating everything that I'm doing and thinking?' Now the voice was describing itself being considered by Stanley, who found it particularly strange. 'I'm dreaming about a voice describing me thinking about how it's describing my thoughts', he thought!

Through that, the Narrator places the spotlight directly onto his bizarre role in the game. It is a paradoxical situation, as on one hand, the Narrator simply expresses Stanley's anxiety by using direct and free indirect speech. However, on the other hand, the Narrator's discourse itself is thematized here (the discourse speaks of itself), and it is the source of the hero's anxiety. In this perspective, the storyteller's words are simultaneously the result and the reason for Stanley's doubts.

The Narrator's reflections on his own narrative becomes opaque and abandons any semblance of neutrality. It becomes even more apparent when, in one of the versions of gameplay, the Narrator's voice is substituted by another voice – this time a female voice. The accent in which the words are spoken is also clearly modified. Despite such a dramatic change, the story itself does not suffer any ruptures. It remains consistent, conducted in the same way. It is almost as if his (her) identity remains the same, in spite of the apparent change in the sex and accent of the storyteller. And yet, as a matter of fact, we have grounds to believe that a separate sender (addresser) appears, distinct from the previous Narrator. It is because the female voice speaks of the Narrator in third person ("'Farewell, Stanley,' cried the Narrator"), which allows us to all describe this sender as a meta-Narrator.

With this surprising turn of events, the player's attention is once again directed not to the story, but to the very fact that *it is being told* – that the voice narrating these events is not neutral, but possesses certain qualities (tone of voice, accent, intonation, etc.), which influence reception. Obviously, these qualities can be found in every video game in which the player hears a narrator. However, in *The Stanley Parable* this is self-conscious, and undergoes particular thematization.

This episode is not the only moment where the game refers to its subdivisions or recognizable genre conventions. Similar meta-commentaries are numerous and they stress the artificial and creational character of the events being depicted on the screen every time. An expressive example of this tendency is the scene where the hero goes through a closed window and finds herself / himself in an empty, white room. The Narrator says:

"At first Stanley assumed he had broken the map, until he heard this narration and realized it was a part of the game's design all along. He then praised the game for its insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of structural narrative tropes." In this short statement, the game not only reveals that it is indeed a commentary about itself and about video games in general (so it reveals itself to be a meta-commentary), but also comments on this fact (thus becoming a meta-metacommentary).

Creational character of the game is especially evident in the scene where Stanley finds himself in *The Stanley Parable* game museum. The space he enters is reminiscent of a museum or an art gallery. Exhibits related to the game the player is playing at that very moment are displayed on walls and pedestals. There are also small plaques with information about functions of respective objects in the game, as well as about the way they changed while the game was still in development. For example, one of the plaques that describe a mock-up refers to a place we have already mentioned, where the player encounters two open doors. The writing says: "The path from Stanley's office to the two doors was the first part of the game that was built. Sections have been added and altered throughout the development through the core layout remains almost identical to the first iteration." Among dozens of pieces in the museum, there are, for example, plaques with information about the authors of the game, conceptual art from different stages of production (also depicting abandoned versions and projects) hung on the walls, whilst in the projection room one can watch the real game trailer, which had indeed been released online before the game's premiere (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. *The Stanley Parable* – the scene in the game museum; In the front, there is a mock-up of the office where the action takes place; On the opposite wall, there are three plaques with information about the game's authors reminiscent of the end credits

Placing a game museum directly in the game is not only an example of a distinctive auto-commentary, but of *mise en abyme* as well. It is, of course, true that a place designed in such a way allows the player to learn details concerning consecutive stages of creating the game or better understanding its concept, but another function is much more important. Through this function, the message expresses its creational character, depicts the game as a construct, a result of someone's work – a project that has been evolving over time. After all, the player witnesses the part of the creative process that is usually hidden[15].

Emersivity of *The Stanley Parable*

Revealing the creative process and continuous use of auto-commentaries allows us to ask the question about the kind of participation that becomes part of the player's experience. As I have pointed out in other texts[16], video game designers often aim for the player to achieve an impression of a direct (unmediated) participation in the events depicted on screen. Some scholars (and often gamers and designers as well) describe this experience as an immersion, or an immersive experience[17]. Game designers possess a whole catalogue of narrative devices that aim to increase the immersive effect of the game. For example, they want the story to be coherent, navigation to be fluid and intuitive, and the user graphic interface to be as transparent as possible[18]. According to this model, the highest level of immersion would be a state where the player forgets they are playing a game (that they are interacting with a machine, that they are looking at a monitor) and would be under the impression that they are really participating in the depicted events.

In case of *The Stanley Parable* we can speak of an attempt to achieve an opposite situation. Different variants of the plot do not create a coherent whole, and the fact that the story is accessed through a medium (in this case, a video game) – is not hidden, but brought to the foreground instead. The best proof of that is the fact that already on the splash screen there is a large text reading "You are playing *The Stanley Parable*", reminding us that we are indeed playing a game. In this completely superfluous "reminder" and in the direct communication with the player one can detect an important compositional rule of *The Stanley Parable*. Game designers are no longer aiming to create the abovementioned illusion of directness. Instead, they remind the user at every turn that they are

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[15] Of course, authors often publish concept art in separate albums, and so-called developer journals are placed on the internet, which describe consecutive stages of game development. In some games (e.g., in *Epic Mickey* [Junction Point Studios, 2010]) the player is even allowed to access such materials as a reward for successes in the game. Usually, however, such material is not part of the storyworld.

[16] See P. Kubiński, "Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames", in: *Video Games and Gaming* Culture, ed. M.J.P. Wolf, London 2016.

[17] See e.g. *ibidem*; J. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge MA 1997.

[18] For more on the strategy of creating graphic interfaces in video games see: P. Kubiński, "Niwelowanie emersji. Strategie estetyczne w projektowaniu graficznych interfejsów użytkownika w grach wideo", *Nowe Media*, 2014, no 5.

playing a game. Because this effect is contrary to the pursuit of immersion, it can be described as emersive[19]. Here, emersion comes to mean the experience of increasing the player's distance to the reality depicted in the game, which is caused by them being aware of the materiality of the medium through which the game is mediated.

In this case – when emersion is a deliberate design choice – the experience is transferred to the level of a critical play with the medium and its rules. Abovementioned examples clearly show that it does not necessarily mean lesser involvement. This involvement simply gains a different, critical character located on the "meta" level.

The Unreliable Narrator

I have already mentioned that the category of unreliable narrator, first introduced into literary theory by Booth, proves helpful in better understanding the role of the voice speaking in *The Stanley Parable*. In Booth's view, the factor deciding the specificity of such a narrative would be "the degree and kind of distance that separates [narrators] from the author, the reader, and the other characters of the story"[20] as well as the fact that the narrator does not speak in accordance with the norms of the text and the author written into it[21]. The result of this discrepancy would be distrust of the recipient and the resulting urge to verify a "true sequence of events". Seymour Chatman puts it a different way, saying that in case of unreliable narrative "the story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by "reading out", between the lines, that the events and existents could not have been "like that", and so we hold the narrator suspect"[22]. This particular proposal seems to aptly describe *The Stanley Parable* mechanism. In a situation where the player acts in defiance of the Narrator's words, they aim for the plot to undermine the narrative discourse.

However, in the case of the game in question, this problem seems particularly interesting, as the Narrator's credibility is not only uncertain, but also negotiable, as it depends on the player's decision. It is apparent in the previously noted scene, where Stanley stands in front of two open doors. Because the Narrator informs the player about the chosen door *before* the choice is made, in this instance it is the player's choice whether the storyteller tells the truth or is mistaken. If the player defies the Narrator's orders, at first the storyteller tries to save his credibility, adjusting the discourse to the actions of the unruly hero. However, in other situations he completely leaves his role as an objective voice outside of the plot, and speaks directly to the hero

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[19] For more on this category see: P. Kubiński, "Immersion vs. Emersive Effects", in: *Engaging with Videogames: Play, Theory, and Practice*, ed. D. Stobbart and M. Evans, Oxford 2014.

[20] W.C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 155.

[21] I choć wielu późniejszych badaczy krytykowało tak zaproponowaną definicję (głównie ze względu na kategorię autora wpisanego w tekst), to jednak waga tej propozycji jest trudna do przecenienia z perspektywy badań narratologicznych. Na ten temat zob. np. A. Nunning, "Unreliable, compared to what? Towards a Cognitive Theory of Unreliable Narration: Prolegomena and Hypotheses", in: *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext / Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*, red. W. Grünzweig, A. Solbach Tübingen 1999.

[22] S.B. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca 1980, s. 233 [tłum. moje – P.K.].

– and sometimes he even aims his words squarely at the player. Traditionally understood, "unreliability" is no longer a commensurate category in such scenes, as the Narrator's main goal is no longer reporting, which he would fulfil more or less diligently. The most important aspect in these scenes is his agential and persuasive character.

The persuasive activity of the Narrator in *The Stanley Parable* is evident in the fact that he uses various arguments to convince the hero/player to make certain decisions. For example, he attempts to demonstrate the invalidity of the choices made previously, tries to conduct the story in a way that would still allow the player to amend his errors (e.g., "The door behind him was not shut. Stanley still had every opportunity to turn around and get back on track."). When this is no longer possible, the Narrator directly demands subordination, invokes emotions, accuses the hero of not appreciating the work put into the script ("Ugh! It's ruined! You- I can't believe after everything we talked about you… my story… you've destroyed my work!"). He even resorts to verbal abuse ("Stanley was fat and ugly and really, really stupid. He probably only got the job because of a family connection; that's how stupid he is.").

The Narrator also proves that he possesses the power to not only describe and interpret reality, but to create it as well. In some scenarios, he himself decides to restart the game, while in others he moves the hero to an entirely different space. Sometimes this space even deliberately resembles another game: *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2009) or *Portal* (Valve, 2007). In this and many other examples it becomes apparent just how dependent the diegetic space is on the narrative discourse. However, this relationship turns out to be – which should be perceived as surprising and meaningful – bilateral, as the Narrator reveals himself to be dependent on the story as well. As a result of the player's actions (and the story told by him as well) the Narrator sometimes expresses regret, anger and sadness. In one of the scenarios, Stanley finds himself in a place which actually makes the Narrator happy ("If we just stay right here, right in this moment, with this place…. Stanley, I think I feel… happy. I actually feel happy."). In this moment of the plot the player can only choose two things: to stay in this place and, in accordance with the Narrator's will, refrain from any actions. Or, he can go to the next place, where he will find stairs leading to a high platform. The Narrator begs the hero not to jump off and commit suicide: "If you hurt yourself, if you die, the game will reset! We'll lose all of this! […] Please, no, Stanley, let me stay here! Don't take this from me!".

In a scene constructed in such a manner the Narrator seems to be dependent on the fictional world and decisions made by the player. We should note here that it is slightly contradictory to the aforementioned ability of the Narrator to freely modify the diegetic space. We can imagine, after all, that since the storyteller can change elements of the surroundings, that in the quoted scene he could do the same (for example, cutting off the hero's path to the platform).

Indeed, the Narrator can be caught lying: for example, he tells the hero to take a look at a fern encountered along the way ("Stanley, this fern will be very important later in the story. Make sure you study it closely and remember it carefully. You won't want

to miss anything."), although, despite his reassurances, it carries no particular meaning for the plot. However, the unreliability of the Narrator in *The Stanley Parable* is not only the matter of lying, but also of the fact that we cannot be certain of his status in the gameplay. His status is variable; the Narrator's approach to the diegetic reality is fluid.

Psychotic Narrative?

The ludicrous variability of the surroundings, the uncertain viability of the Narrator's words and the permanent loop of events, which, as if in a constant recurrence of déjà vu, forces Stanley to ceaselessly roam the hallways – all of this enables us to read the situation depicted in the game as a representation of a mental disorder. After all, one cannot eliminate with absolute certainty the option that the Narrator's voice is only a figment of hero's imagination – possibly a result of a split personality disorder. This theory regarding the psychotic character of *The Stanley Parable* narration can be supported by several elements of the game. The Narrator suggests several times that Stanley has a mental condition. In one of the scenarios he states "But Stanley simply couldn't handle the pressure.". In another, Stanley realizes that the storyteller's voice exists and notices that incomprehensible things are happening around him (doors are automatically closing behind him; when he looks downwards, he cannot see his own legs; rooms he crosses inexplicably enter into a loop). According to the Narrator, the hero wonders then whether he is crazy. To calm himself down, Stanley closes his eyes (the screen indeed goes black) and tells himself: "My life is normal, I am normal. Everything will be fine." However, when he opens his eyes, he realizes that the events in which he is participating are not a dream, that he is still in the looped space. The Narrator describes the next events as follows: "Stanley began screaming. Please someone wake me up! My name is Stanley! I have a boss! I have an office! I am real! Please just someone tell me I'm real! I must be real! I must be! Can anyone hear my voice?! Who am I? Who am I?!" When the hero – or, as a matter of fact, the Narrator – shouts out the last words, the screen goes red and disappears after a moment. After a short break, a completely new scene appears, the player sees from above a man's body lying on the sidewalk and a woman leaning over him (see Figure 4). According to the Narrator, the woman named Mariella has met a man on her way to work who was screaming to himself, and then fell dead upon the pavement: "He was obviously crazy; this much she knew. Everyone knows what crazy people look like. And in that moment, she thought to herself how lucky she was to be normal. I am sane. I am in control of my mind. I know what is real, and what isn't."
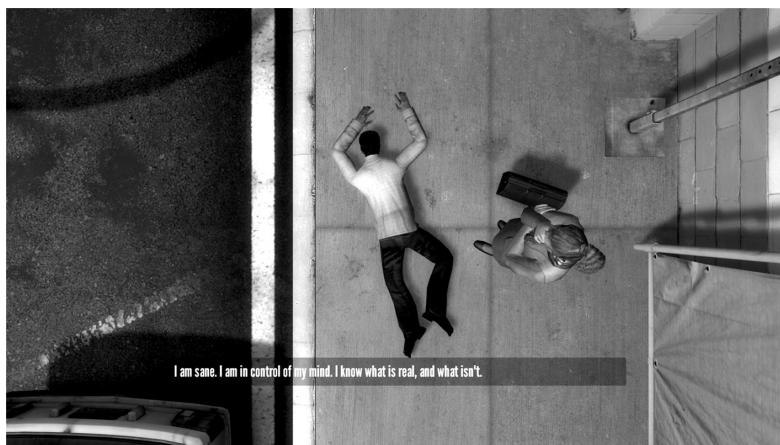
Figure 4. The Stanley Parable – the ending introducing Mariella

The most obvious interpretation is obviously that the dead man lying on the street is Stanley[23]. If we follow this lead, then all the previous events should be treated as projections of a sick man, who had been wandering the street, believing that he was in an office. Because in this last sentence we conspicuously cannot see the action through the hero's eyes, instead seeing him from a third-person point of view, we can assume that this is the only moment when the player perceives reality through a perspective untroubled by delusions. Any other change of perspective would indicate objectification.

Does this mean the whole game, with its numerous loops, paradoxes and use of impossible spaces should be treated as a projection of mental illness? Possibly, Stanley and the Narrator are one person, suffering from a certain kind of schizophrenia? This interpretation would explain the particularly ambiguous status of the narrative voice, which on one hand can modify what the hero can see, but on the other – remains susceptible to events on screen. Mental illness would not only explain the bizarre course of action, but it would also correspond to *mise en abyme* – a motif of an impossible-to-leave loop: just as the hero cannot escape the game, which after every ending automatically starts anew (just as the hero cannot escape the trap of madness).

Yet it is possible to pinpoint two weak points of the psychotic interpretation. Firstly, when the sequence with Mariella standing over the dead man ends, the game restarts. This means that it was not the final, best sequence of events, but merely one of many equal endings[24]. Secondly, arguments in favour of mental illness are shared by the Narrator, which would be symptomatic of the illness in question as well.

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[23] It should be noted here that it is the player that makes this interpretation – it is not directly disclosed by the game. After all, the narrator is not saying that it is Stanley that is lying on the street. In light of the previous words and pictures, however, this interpretation appears to be strongly justified.

[24] It is true, as I have already mentioned, that in other sequences of events the Narrator suggests from time to time that Stanley has mental problems, but these are clearly weaker signals.

The Narrator, who has often deceived the player, cannot be treated here as a completely trustworthy source of knowledge.

Conclusion

I think that the strength of *The Stanley Parable* resides in the problem depicted above – the game escapes unambiguous interpretation. In the course of learning about different endings we are prone to subscribe to different interpretations of the game as a whole. These interpretations are not (and cannot be) fully consistent, as coherence is not an imperative for the designers. Rather than creating a coherent simulation, Wreden and Pugh offer the player a world looped, paradoxical and full of contradictions, where the main character can only wander the office hallways ceaselessly, in never-ending recurrences[25].

The devices that makes *The Stanley Parable* special are obviously a source of amusement. However, apart from the comical function, they play an even more important role. They are an expression of a postmodern artistic strategy that wants the art piece to contest its own material, dispute the limitations caused by the very nature of their medium, thematize genre conventions. Due to a regular, not one-off, use of such emersive techniques, *The Stanley Parable* becomes an unusual commentary about video games in general – even more unusual, as much as it is a game itself[26].

The most important concept that allowed such a construct to exist is the original manner in which the narrative voice is used. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it not only lies to the hero, but also makes the player play a particular kind of game, where one can never be certain what is the current status of the Narrator. A consequence of such narrative structure is explicitly seeking the player's attention, pointing to the fact that they are dealing with a construct, a sort of fiction, not with real events. It makes the player focus on a different kind of pleasure than is the case with the model reception of games – this pleasure is definitely more critical, emersive. It is in large part due to a consistent use of *mise en ebyme*, which in a video game – a medium both audiovisual and interactive – is particularly effective.

The analysis of some of the mechanisms used in *The Stanley Parable* presented in this article is an excellent argument for games being currently an equal (whilst different, due to their special qualities) space for artistic pursuits and intellectual experiments. They are also a field for experimenting with narrative, enabling it to exist in a manner that would be unattainable in non-interactive environments.

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[25] There are various texts on the loading screens. One of them is repeated numerous times "THE END IS NEVER THE END", which is another signal suggesting that Stanley's journey is never-ending.

[26] I have also pointed it out in another article: P. Kubiński, "Emersja – antyiluzyjny wymiar gier wideo", *Nowe Media*, 2014, no 5.

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Play It Again, Stanley: Mise en Abyme and Playing with Convention and Narrative in The Stanley Parable

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