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“Infinite Time and Just a Little Bit of Mystery”:
Time, Theme, and Playability in *1776* and *The Stanley Parable*

by

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Digital works are revolutionizing art and literature, creating and exploring new user experiences. Digital works have an entirely new myriad of techniques and devices from which to communicate their commentaries and themes, one of the most essential being the use of time. Time in regards to e-literature can often be difficult to qualify within a work. However, when time is considered an aspect of playability, new exploration of the use of time as a mechanic as well as time as a vehicle for theme can be opened up.

Playability, as described by game theorist Katie Salen, is a term used to denote video games (and by extension many interactive digital works) as “interactive systems” and that “parts in that system have relationships to each other and that relationships change over time”. As digital works vary widely, the “parts” that make up the system that Salen describes can constitute any number of elements in a digital work. These elements can include the on-screen visuals, whether they are stable or animated, the progressional structure of the work, the narrative itself, and so on. As Salen points out, these elements are not individual in nature, but are relational and together make up the system from which players can interact with and take in the content of a work.

In close relation to Salen’s conceptualization of playability, e-literature theorists, such as N. Katherine Hayles have established that aspects of a work, such as time and playability, are just as fundamental to constructing theme and meaning as narrative elements. Hayles denotes that a digital work’s materiality can represent any number of “physical properties and dynamic processes” (71), ranging from the interface to the interactive modes and mechanisms. She goes on to argue that these elements “should be understood as existing in complex, dynamic interplay with content” (71). Hayles’ theory of analysis allows for the player’s interaction with the ma-

chine not simply as the delivery system for content, but as an active and essential aspect of that work. From these established modes of thought, time itself should also be considered an essential mechanic that derives unique and foundational meaning within a digital text.

In digital works, time can be used to deeply connect with the player and work to create the most experiential aspect of the work. The incorporation of time based mechanics creates a bridge between the emotional experiences of the main characters, allowing for an intimate emotional identification between the player and the characters. Thusly, time can become one of the most uniquely human parts in the system of playability and therefore is a perfect vehicle for thematic expression. The works *17776* and *The Stanley Parable* are compelling examples of this concept in action. Both works use manipulations of time as a part of their playability in order to foster emotional reaction from the player through which they work to advance both experience and awareness of the work's thematic arguments. Over the course of this essay, I will illuminate not only how time is used as a mechanic in these works, but I will also argue for time as a fundamental aspect of playability that intricately builds the work's thematic commentary.

Floating Through Space and Time in *17776*

17776 or *What Football Will Look Like in the Future*, is a speculative fiction multimedia narrative, written by Jon Bois and published by the sports blogging website SB Nation. Bois had previously written similar multimedia projects such as *The Tim Tebow CFL Chronicles*, where an alternate-universe Tim Tebow is let go from the NFL and takes up the quirky Canadian version of football with humorously unique adaptations of the game. The work quickly became a web sensation, garnering over 2.3 million views within its first five days on the site (Crouch). As a

work of speculative fiction, *17776* explores a wide range of intimate and uniquely human themes, ranging from the development of fully sentient and empathetic artificial intelligence to the foundational root of the drive for human knowledge production. The work primarily takes place in the year 17776, where life has fundamentally changed for humanity, while managing to stay almost exactly the same. Thousands of years prior, in 2026, all human births and deaths ceased. The aging process screeched to a halt for many, and even reversing for the older populations. Everyone alive at that exact moment in time was suddenly faced with immortality and must find a way to continue onward, without the meaning the cycle of life provides. Using this as a premise, Bois creates a sense of time that works critically both as a theme and a mechanic to deeply explore an incomprehensible future where all creativity is channeled towards alleviating the mundane condition humanity must now face. However, as a stagnant work (as opposed to a film or game) *17776* engages with time without relying on a sense of “real time” as experienced by the player. To achieve this, *17776* uses a number of devices and mechanics, such as calendar motifs, sequential art techniques, and infinite canvas methodology. Through these types of interactivity and playability, *17776* creates a sense of time that is both vast yet excruciatingly slow, in both the work’s narrative and play time, which through play experience, allows the player a glimpse at how time is experienced by those in the narrative.

17776’s construction of time in the work begins right away as it transitions from the trick article on SB Nation’s website (“What Football Will Look Like in the Future”) to a set of calendar pages that take up the entire screen, marking the beginning of the narrative. Ranging from bright neons to pastels and futuristic fonts to vaguely greek fonts, each calendar year ranges quite drastically from the next, thus making each year’s calendar designs visually distinct from each

other. By using a calendar based model, the passage of narrative time is presented in a very passive and easily accessible way. Bois uses this to his advantage by creating a hybrid narrative space through the visual representation of the calendars. By presenting messages on a day-to-day basis, the wide expanse of time becomes apparent through the visual construction of the monthly calendars, which is then compounded upon between the perpetual progression of the player and the scarcity of messages between Pioneer Nine and Pioneer Ten.

The way time, space, and messaging are all compounded in this section is absolutely vital to the playability of the work, especially as the introductory section of the work. The stark, black, lines that rigidly define the days makes each empty day visually haunting due to their definitive emptiness. For Nine, these days are filled with nothing, only a waiting and a desperation for connection to the voice that has called out to them from the darkness, only to disappear as quickly as it appeared. The feeling of waiting for the next message then becomes a part of the player's own interaction with the work, as they too are scanning and waiting for the next message to appear. The desperation Nine feels as their messages become more and more frequent and distressed is palpable to the player in these moments. A deep connection is forged between the player and Nine as together they simultaneously wait for the next message to arrive.

One of the most noticeable instances of this happens on the pages between September '43 and March '44. In the middle of September, Nine resumes trying to contact Ten, sending two messages: "You need to answer. Please answer" and "Please answer." In October, Nine sends three messages, eleven days apart (the exact number of days it takes Nine to charge enough power to send a message), each standing out clearly against the pastel green of that year's pages. These messages are all the same, a matter-of-fact "[p]lease answer." November and December

are notably blank, marking Nine giving up for the time being. The end of January '44 marks a shift in Nine's tone. Their message is reserved, condescending even, saying that only this will be their last attempt at contacting Ten. This is, of course, incredibly short lived, as they then break their cordiality by March, saying "Please answer me. Please fucking answer me. Fucking answer me. Fucking answer me." Nine then resumes sending "[p]lease answer me" every eleven days for another month straight.

Here, we can see the way that narrative time becomes a vehicle for the emotional experience and connection between Nine and the player. The frequency of the messaging, especially in that it happens as often as Nine is physically capable of doing so, clearly conveys their desperation to the player. Because of the nature of the narrative and play in this section, the player is just as on the hook as Nine is, desperately waiting for each message, as reading the messages is the only thing the player can do in this section. This then makes each month where there is an equal silence from Nine disturbing to the player. When the only action the player is invited to perform is scanning for messages, each absence of a message to read is more impactful to the reader. Seeing a blank calendar becomes more than empty space, in *17776*'s playable systems, it becomes silence and nothingness. Through structural and narrative juxtaposition, those empty calendars then go on to speak for Nine's experience by themselves, the loneliness that is all around them. This creates space for Nine's desperate reaching out for contact to resonate with the player. The visual representations of narrative time reinforce Nine's feelings and create experience on the part of the player.

In addition to the complex visual and narrative elements of the calendars, *17776* builds a sense of time through the navigational nature of the work. Theorist Janet Murray notes that "only

digital environments can represent space we can move through” (96). “[T]he digital domain... [has] its own geography” (96). In many ways, it is *17776*’s spatiality from which a sense of time is communicated to the player. In the first chapter, the player is moving spatially through the narrative time as they scroll through the calendar sequence. Through the pairing of spatiality and month calendar pages, the work creates a sense in the player that they are moving through time. The way spatiality and navigation function in *17776* closely adheres to comic theorist Scott McCloud’s theory of the infinite canvas (222). The infinite canvas describes the ability for digital works to advance the abilities of sequential art beyond the limitations of print.

Infinite Canvas methodology, is one of the fundamental building blocks of both time and playability in Chapter One of *17776*. The canvas, or the digital space, has been taken up entirely width wise by one month of the calendar, inherently altering the scale of time. The player is experiencing one month’s narrative time with a simple glance at the screen, which takes approximately 1-2 seconds of play time. This creates a fundamental tension between the narrative time and play time, in that they are happening on vastly different scales. In addition to this, there is an incredibly vast amount of narrative time being navigated by the player over the course of the chapter. Because of the time disparities, scrolling becomes the mechanism of navigating the infinite canvas becomes the navigation and progression of narrative time as well as the the instrument that then creates play time. Thusly, in *17776*, the infinite canvas allows for the calendars to visually construct and relate the passage and scale of time to the player, while the navigation of the infinite canvas through scrolling changes the scale and passage of time for the player.

For instance, play time dramatically shifts between the initial silence from Ten to when she is heard from more regularly. In the first almost year and a half of narrative time the narrative

mostly consists of Nine getting more and more anxious about hearing back from Ten. Nine sends message after message, while cycling between defensive and desperate emotional states. However, there is a shift in the number of messages Nine sends in June '44, after Ten explains to them that it takes over a full year for a message to get to her and then for her response to make it back to Nine. After Nine learns this, their messaging behavior and attitude shift dramatically. They will send a handful of messages right after receiving a new message from Ten, but this ends quickly and the months they have to wait for a new message drag on around them.

It is this behavior shift that makes the connection between the player's time and Nine's time not only more apparent but becomes an important aspect of playability. In the first year, Nine is still constantly messaging, often at least once per month. This keeps the passage of interactive play time at a high for the player, as they have something to look for each (or at least every other) one of the calendar pages. Because of the visual nature of the calendar set up, the player is scrolling at a relatively fast pace while scanning for the next text box to read. Once a box has been spotted, movement (likely) has to halt as the eye focuses to read for a brief moment.

However, as Nine speaks with Ten more and more, the experience of play time changes. Nine becomes more patient with Ten and the scale of time they are in, which means fewer messages to look at, leaving the player expectantly searching for more. The span between messages becomes longer and longer, meaning more and more empty calendar pages to scroll through. There are a significant number of times in the chapter where the calendars are empty for an extended period of time. No messages. Silence from both of them. Here, we can see that just as the nature of waiting and time are changing for Nine, they are changing for the player. In these sec-

tions the elements that make up playability create their brief, yet truest experience of waiting all those months must be like for Nine. In this way, play experience, as created by time mechanics, become the vehicle for the thematic exploration of time and the experience of time in the work. Playability in this section creates an intimate and simultaneous experience of time between the player and Nine. The emptiness of the calendars leaves the player as alone as Nine is floating out in space by themselves. The player has to experience extended narrative and play simultaneously with no dialogue from Nine to keep them occupied from moment to moment. The player is experiencing the same anticipation and frustration with time as they transverse the extended period of nothingness. There is only the continuous advancement of time, knowing that there will be contact (and thus content) soon, to keep the player moving forward.

The playability and using time as a mechanic to create the experience of time in the work builds the foundational theme of the text, that infinite time for humanity is vast yet excruciatingly slow. The first hand experience of the player of this phenomenon establishes a deep connection to the exploration of time that continues to take place over the duration of the work. In a world where humans can no longer die, time has fundamentally changed for them as well. That feeling the player briefly experiences, that feeling of waiting, anticipation, needing to know, how to deal with that feeling every day, forever, that is what this work is so desperately trying to communicate and explore.

Time and Repetition in *The Stanley Parable*

As the game will repeatedly remind you, *The Stanley Parable* is a game about a man named Stanley who works in a bleak corporate office where his only job is to press buttons all

day, sent to him through his computer. One day, everyone in Stanley's office disappears mysteriously, leading him on a hunt to solve the mystery of to where they have disappeared to. However, answering the question of where Stanley's coworkers have gone is quickly revealed to be of very little concern to the game. After the player's initial run-through, *The Stanley Parable's* true genre as a multiform story is revealed. It is through its core feature of being a multiform story, and thus repetitive and time based by necessity, does *The Stanley Parable* come to life and shapes its argument and identity. This primarily occurs through the game's extensive use of time-based mechanics. The game manifests this in many different ways, all reliant however, in the ways the game is a never-ending loop. Using time and looping as a mechanic, the game actively fosters specific emotional states in the player, often frustration and anxiety, in order to craft its broader conversation about narrative structure, freewill, and game design.

Interactivity and play in *The Stanley Parable* are arguably quite limited. The game uses simple keyboard controls for movement and a mouse-based camera system. There is no jump function (the game gives you an achievement for this, titled "You can't jump: No seriously, we disabled it"), while still having a crouch function that only becomes necessary for a gag ending about the player trying to break the game. In order to keep gameplay quickly paced, the game pushes the player forward as they progress through the map by closing doors behind them seconds after entering. As the player makes decisions about where to go in the game by either obeying the narrative direction or outright disobeying the narrator, the player will find different endings to the game. For our purposes, I will be discussing endings as the resolution of a certain path, where the player is sequestered in an area of the map, and a narrative issue or commentary is briefly presented, then explored either by the narrator or through choices made by the player.

For instance, in the “first” ending of the game (provided that the player did not immediately rebel against the narrator, the Freedom ending, it is revealed that the building he works in is a mind control facility. The player must guide Stanley forward, while the narrator reveals the horror of this ending, that Stanley’s happiness and satisfaction with his life and job were merely a false construction of the facility. In this ending, the player chooses to turn off the facility and progress forward once more towards a wide-open natural space. The narrator then details how Stanley is not free to make his own choices (while quite ironically removing all playable actions once Stanley has entered the field), but then goes on to vaguely question the other parts of the building and brings up that they never found his coworkers. This is a fairly common blueprint for the rest of the endings, in the sense that the player is transitioned out of the office environment through a narrative leap and into a new narrative possibility, question, or commentary.

In order to support this narrative structure, *The Stanley Parable*’s fundamental glue is the time-based respawning mechanic. Once an ending has come to its conclusion, the game always respawns the player back into Stanley’s office. The respawn mechanic is vital to the game, especially in the way that it is an in-universe process, rather than the game officially ending each time the player makes it to a narrative conclusion. The game does not send the player back out to the menu, but instead creates this mechanic as a fundamental aspect of play. It is also kept at the front and center of the player’s attention as the narrator is frequently very aware of it and will reference it often. In this way, the repetition of time via the respawn mechanic becomes the mechanism that both creates and communicates the theme of the game to the player.

In the Insanity Ending, repetition is kicked into a higher gear as the player experiences this section of the game. This ending explores the idea of Stanley questioning his own existence

and coming very close to the realization that he is, as the player knows, a character created for a game. While the game's narrative resolves the tension by referring back to traditional narrative structure and explanation, this ending uses both anxiety and temporal repetition in order to foster both continued anxiety and curiosity in the player while actively exploring the game's thematic social commentary.

This ending of the game is an example of the game's social commentary on the crushing nature of corporate culture. The narrator frames this ending as Stanley's inability to face his boss with the delusional idea that his coworkers had completely vanished out of thin air and that he might be fired for leaving his post during work hours, which he then indulges on by continuing to wonder if he really has gone crazy. The narration then continues to build on this while seeing Stanley back and forth between reasonable explanations and continuous intrusive thoughts driven mostly by the narrator. As Stanley finally cracks under the pressure, yelling into the void about how badly he wants to wake up and how he is real, it is revealed to the player that Stanley has been stumbling around yelling these things in the street, and has now fallen over dead.

Layered in with the narrative elements of this ending is an amalgamation of mechanics that work together to form an intricate system of playability. In this section of the game, the player's only movement options are to keep moving forward through a cyclical series of four rooms. Backward movement of any kind has been eliminated as doors close automatically behind the player. This new limitation of play space can be quite claustrophobic and anxiety inducing for players, especially as the rooms continue to repeat, one after another, for a significant amount of time. While it is possible to simply stop and wait out the narration, it is unlikely that

the player would choose to do so. In many games, it is a staple mechanic that spatial progression is tied to narrative progression. From this prior knowledge, it can be assumed that if the player continues forward far enough, the game will also continue, thus driving the player forward. *The Stanley Parable's* temporary subversion of this trope can augment the player's anxiety because the expected path towards the end, and by extension winning, have been removed. This leaves the player in a perpetual state of anxiety and unease, as there is no way to know when the looping will end.

Together the amalgamation of the time-based mechanics and visual repetition to create the essential experience of this ending which works as a vehicle for the thematic elements. The endless spatial time loop the game traps the player in closely resembles Stanley's endlessly repetitive job. When his work suddenly stops, he emotionally and psychologically unable handle the lack of direction and he thusly cracks under the mindless corporate pressure of it all. The anxiety of Stanley's situation is then communicated to the player through a temporal break in the game's structure. There has been a stall of play due to a stalling of spatial progression while the narrative progression drives forward relentlessly. The elements at play here actively foster a simultaneous emotional experience between the player and Stanley. These systems of playability communicate to the player the experience of uncertainty and existential questioning that Stanley is going through by creating a setting where the player experiences it (on a much smaller scale) themselves.

However, this is not the game's only tactic in regards to using time as a mechanic for the communication of theme. In the Zen Ending, the game again shifts thematic commentary once more to the conflict the game is illustrating between the curiosity of the player and the needs of the

narrator to tell a story. After navigating firmly away from the story as dictated by the narrator and using a little bit of creativity and drive to get to a more difficult area of the map, the narrator finally gives up and confesses that they want to “help [Stanley]...to show [him] something beautiful”. If the player relents, the narrator opens a new room for the player. The room takes you up a platform to a circular stage-like space which then suddenly surrounds the player in colorful, soothing animations and ambient new-age music. The player can choose to stay in this space for as long as they like, but the game will not initiate the respawn from that room. There is a period of time where the player is left to explore the room and to see if the narrator will come back at any point to advance the story, only to deduce finally that nothing else will happen in that room and that is time to move on.

Time is being used as a mechanic in a very passive way, in order to bring the player's attention to what happens when the game lacks narrative structure. The game has temporarily resolved the tension between Stanley and the narrator by allowing the narrator to give Stanley this room, almost as a gift. However, in this calm space, the game communicates its theme through an extended period of nothingness. There is no narrative in this moment, only the player's experience of space. This works to the game's benefit in two ways here. As the player has demonstrated some desire to push back against the duration of the game by actively subverting it through exploration, this ending functions as a temporary place of peace. The game is giving the player a space to be free of the task of playing the game where they can choose to stay there for as long as they want. In a way, this acts as a way to center the player back on the goals of the game if they are inspired to keep playing. By providing an in-game space where nothing is happening, the game demonstrates finding a balance between using frustration and anxiety as a

driving mechanism, while demonstrating that a lack of narrative structure is not a catch-all solution either.

Putting play time and narrative time into the player's hands advances the game's argument about the need for both. In the Zen Ending, there is no story, only sensory experience. As a digital work, experience is an essential element, but the game is demonstrating here that experience is important, but so are narratives and driving goals. While the Insanity Ending builds anxiety and a need to get out, the Zen Ending is about finding a feeling of peace but still needing a way out and to move on eventually. In many ways, the contrast between these two endings demonstrate the way the game is arguing for a sense of balance between narrative progression and play experience. Narratives can be intense explorations of a topic, as in the Insanity Ending, but at the risk of quickly losing the player's interest or disengaging them from the content due to narrative rigidity. Between the Zen Ending and the Insanity Ending, acknowledgement of the game as a system and managing player experience through that system emerges as an essential feature of any successful digital work.

Across both *17776* and *The Stanley Parable*, time is a fundamentally important mechanic that is both instrumental in creating player experience through playability as well as acting as a vehicle for commentary and messaging. In *17776*, time is used as a hook and fosters an intimate connection between the player and the work's protagonists. This connection is then used by the work to enhance the narrative significance of the speculative world Bois has created. Through playability, *17776* has created a space where not despite of, but because of massive temporal differences, the player is able to momentarily experience through play time, the same excruciating slowness and anticipation that is being conveyed through the work's narrative time.

The Stanley Parable functions similarly to *17776* but in a different capacity. While *17776* is using time to create mutual experience between the protagonists and the player, in many ways *The Stanley Parable* uses time to illustrate its own arguments, towards both existing social systems as well as the balance between player control and exploration and the narrative elements of the game. While both of these works approach time as a mechanic differently, they are both essential elements to the game's playability and thematic exploration. Time enhances nuance, as it adds a complex and incredibly diverse factor to the digital work, while remaining highly accessible as an experience that will quickly and easily resonate with players.

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