The First Door: Gender, Authority and Choice in *The Stanley Parable*

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INTRODUCTION
Videogames, like other media, have deployed the device of a narrator to fill backstories, welcome player characters to the game world, create levity and humour, advance between game episodes, and act as antagonistic deceivers. While many videogames do this (*Portal, Prince of Persia, Bioshock*, etc.), little is known about the effect the narrator has on player experience. That said, advertising and computer-based learning research demonstrates that people respond to social cues such as gender in narrator speech. Studies going back several decades concluded that both men and women were perceived to be more credible if they have lower voices (Klofstad, Anderson, & Peters, 2012; Nass,

Moon, & Green,1997; Tigue, et al., 2011). Further studies suggest that advertising is most effective when the sex of the presenter is consistent with normative views of the featured product: men driving cars, women shopping for sofas (Peirce, 2001; Whipple & McMannon, 2002). Lee et al. (2000) presented subjects with social dilemmas, each followed by a persuasive argument for one of two choices by either male or female synthesized voices. They found that the male-voiced computer exerted greater influence on subjects' decisions, and subjects conformed to the persuasive argument more when their gender matched that of the computer voice. Such *attribute similarity* effects (Bandura, 1997) are common in educational technology literature (Kim & Baylor, 2006; Lee et al., 2007; Rosenberg-Kima et al., 2010; Ozogul et al., 2013).

This study asked: what, if any, are the effects on players when playing *The Stanley Parable* (*TSP*) with a male and a female narrator?

METHODS
To randomly present a gendered authority figure in a choice-based setting, we selected *TSP* due to its complete reliance on player-choice, the authoritative and often antagonistic role of the narrator and the relatively simple graphical and videogame skill demands. However, as the game only includes a male narrator, foundry10 recorded the complete script with a female voice actor. The recording was controlled for consistency with the original voice, and edited/mastered by professional audio engineers at Valve Software.

The sample consisted of 107 high-school students enrolled in English and drama classes in four schools, from four countries: Norway, Denmark, Canada and the United States. The participants ranged from 15 to 19 years old – 37 identified as female, 69 as male, and 1 as other. The study was administered by the resident classroom teachers. After informed consent, participants were given a pre-survey assessing their experience and comfort with video games. They then played *TSP* with a male or female narrator to reach a single ending, which depended on their in-game choices. Finally, the participants completed a post-survey reflecting on their choices and perceptions of narrator voice.

All quantitative survey responses were tallied and summarized. Open-ended responses were qualitatively coded and summarized by theme. Differences between groups were compared with chi-square tests for independence and logistic regressions when appropriate. The results here focus heavily on the first forced choice the player makes at a set of two open doors: whether to follow the narrator's story and go left, or defy the narrator and go right (additional results will be reported in the presentation).

RESULTS
In total, 93 players responded to the post-survey, which we briefly report on here. In response to the statement, "I was supposed to do what the narrator said," male players were less likely to agree ($p=0.001$), and male players who had the female narrator were particularly unlikely to agree ($p=0.043$). In response to the statement, "I would have acted differently if the narrator had been another gender" 51/68 subjects (75%) disagreed. Players with a male narrator were more likely to agree ($p=0.036$). The players who agreed tended to refer to male voices as "powerful" or "dominant", and female voices as "light" or "not threatening".

From open-ended player responses, the most commonly coded reasons to follow the narrator were **Game convention: Follow** and **Free will**. The most commonly coded

reasons to disobey the narrator were **Free Will** and **Defiance**. There were few coded differences between male and female responses. Overall, male players had responses coded **Multiple choices** (whereby players indicated that they felt like they had choice in the game and could choose to obey the narrator or not) more frequently than female players (99 versus 23 mentions, p=0.001), and a higher proportion of male players mentioned **Multiple choices** (79% versus 49%, *p*=0.004). Female players with male narrators were less likely to have responses coded **Multiple choices** (*p*=0.028).

At the crucial first door decision, female players were more likely to disobey the narrator than male players (*p*=0.002). When the narrator was female, female players disobeyed at lower rates (*p*=0.001), and male players disobeyed at higher rates (*p*=0.035), controlling for whether or not they reported that they had played the game prior to the study. Additionally, and independently of the gender findings, the first door decision was influenced by the perceived trustworthiness (*p*=0.011) and forcefulness of the narrator (*p*=0.043).

CONCLUSIONS

The first door results suggest that players were likely to obey a narrator whose gender matched their own self-identified gender. Notably, there was a disparity between players' survey responses and their actual decisions. For example, a majority of players indicated that the narrator's gender did not affect their decision making, but when compared with what they did in-game, there were significant differences, with females demonstrating a greater propensity to disobey even as they were less inclined to self-report that disobedience. This study highlights the social aspect of human-computer interaction, including the ways in which games, including those that deliberately guide or direct players, are bound by social norms and behaviours that are to date underexplored in game studies literature. The authors also assert that gender-and-authority-related design decisions have an impact on player experience, irrespective of whether players report that those design decisions affect them. These findings also contribute to better understanding how gender affects adolescent responses to authoritative voices. Finally, these initial findings lay the groundwork for a more comprehensive study on the relationship between authority, narrative voice and gender.

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OPTIONAL BIO

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