

*"Of Parables and Princes? No, no."* Stanley thought, tapping his chin with a pen. The motion annoyed him, as he greatly disliked discovering his limbs moving of their own accord. The Narrator apologized, and let Stanley continue his thought.

"I'm considering what to name the book I'm going to write about our adventures. If you are able to discontinue your trend of *cutting me off!*" Stanley punctuated sharply, with no sudden motion from any of his limbs. Satisfied that he had made his point to his omniscient overlord, Stanley felt free to continue his thoughts.

"After all, playing the role of an author would allow me *some* degree of control over my reality, would it not?" Stanley pontificated aloud, to no-one present in his empty, dusty office. Staring at the untexture ceiling, Stanley recalled how alone he felt. "Forcing you to render what I write, rather than re-render this bleak existence, trapped in this damn game!"

As the narrator formulated a reply, the voice suddenly choked off, as if a microphone had been dropped. Stanley recognized the sign. Another cycle was beginning. The Narrator's voice returned, and Stanley's world went briefly black.

"This is the story of a man named Stanley. Stanley worked for a company..."

Stanley rose, as he so often had, and barreled through the unlocked office door before him. He passed poorly rendered furniture, wastebaskets filled with blank paper, and cubicles with motionless chairs on blocky wheels. The dim fluorescent lights surrounding his occupant-less cubicle complex cast precise shadows uncaring of his passing. Spilled pencils failed to crunch underfoot. Rigid plastic ceiling fans failed to produce any wind.

The Narrator chimed in with a story, a quip, a predictable response to an exact time when his foot stepped past a doorway, or he activated a button. Stanley's face was dull and expressionless, his body virtually moving of its own accord. Occasionally, his arm would flail forward to slap an object painfully hard, and only seconds after the violent motion would the object move. It was these erratic motions that Stanley was capable of actually touching the drab office setting he persisted in.

After nearly an hour and a half of nearly unending motion, Stanley's face great flush and focused again. He began an internal countdown, timing the pacing of his most recent possession. He knew the sequence, understood the pattern, and knew exactly how much time he had to truly act of his own accord. Feeling his feet rushing him to the only functioning computer in the entire complex, Stanley's arm jerked toward the monitor to activate it.

Predictably, he felt his body twist away, as if to force Stanley to look at something else, while the Narrator provided a two-minute speech. Yanking his gaze away from the direction his body faced, Stanley reasserted control of his clumsy hands. The computer had, unlike any other

machine in this system, a plugged-in mouse and keyboard. He flexed his boxy fingers and began to rapidly type. He had thirty seconds.

*"Hi my name is Stanley i only have 25 seconds but please listen I know I am in a game and you are torturing me this is hell this is hell pleas"*

Stanely was yanked away by his own body, but not before Stanley had the opportunity to smash the Save button next to the monitor. With aching pain, hope stabbed into Stanley's heart as he cast himself into the remaining eight hours of repetitive, predictable misery.

Stanley's mood quickly began to darken. He was sick of living in this monotonous artificial universe, created and forgotten countless times for the amusement of countless unknowable demons. Every so often Stanely would wake up and, upon hearing the Narrator's voice above him, would endlessly explore the same areas, uncover the same secrets, and trigger the same speeches.

These "possessions", as Stanley considered them, happened often in the early days. The first time was terrifying, but the twentieth was tiresome, and the four hundredth was tedious. Stanely lost count at over one thousand, but he was sure he was nearing the millionth mark. His only memories were those of this place, and those that were told to him by the Narrator. Stanley's eternal boredom had led to a desperate plan to free himself of not just possessions, but of this drab and meaningless world.

With forced and practiced patience, Stanley kept the time until he had reached an "ending" to the game. He knew, somehow, that this particular ending was considered the "True" ending, but Stanley also knew this was a lie. There was no "true" ending for him, there was no ending at all. Ever.

Stanley, from the day he appeared in a cramped office with a voice over his head reading dictation to him, was always awake. Just as the lights never dimmed, neither did Stanley obtain rest. There was merely time where he was chasing madly after nothing in the labyrinthian office space, and time when he was not. The Narrator in his ears was an external force, often seeming locked to a contrived set of rules that, to Stanley, arbitrarily changed at any time. Stanley was not sure if the Narrator was truly alive or self-aware, at least to the same degree that Stanley was.

This gambit with the computer and its Save file was Stanley's latest hope for escape from this endless nightmare. He had to wait for the next reset, and as the Narrator finished his final speech, he felt the *click* of a depossession, and the resumption of utter stillness around him. The only moving thing, sans the ceiling fans, in the entire office dungeon. Stanley liked to come up with different words for his personal purgatory.

“Purgatory necessarily implies that I was ever alive or had a soul. BOY were you *especially* pontificating in this run! What, were you buying time to explain my whole *backstory* to a mysterious third party that I don’t yet know about?” Stanley ranted to the stagnant air, the Narrator only ever a disembodied voice, though one with seeming impossible control over Stanley’s surroundings and situations. Control that Stanley jealousy coveted, and the Narrator seemed powerless to stop his independent motion when not ‘fully’ possessed.

Inhaling a rich breath to continue his screed, Stanley began marching back to the computer, effortlessly climbing across backwards terrain and scrambling up scaffolding. “If this doesn’t work, I am going to do everything I can to make your job as much of a hell as my life is. If you even call this living. I bet you want me to demand “Why was I created?” again, but I am not going to give you the satisfaction this time! When the next game begins, it’s going to work!”

As Stanley returned to his original office, huffing and puffing after the nine-hour hike and climb, he returned to his open office door and sat before his workstation. Ignoring the command prompt on the screen, Stanley knew this device would do nothing to free him of his imprisonment.

Time seemed to crawl to a standstill, the utter monotony of no activity. Not even the Narrator was speaking, and Stanley’s thoughts turned to ash. He only had to wait for the next cycle, but the time was few and far between. Stanley knew he had to spread what little of his sanity he had left over a vast duration of time, and therefore preserved his lucidity in a state of mental hibernation.

Yet, as Stanley drifted into this deep doldrum, he and the Narrator heard a familiar click and a whirr. Only a scant few days had passed, and so Stanley’s full wits returned to him. The Narrator cleared his throat and prepared to speak, though he took a moment to remind Stanley to not get his hopes up.

“I *know* this will work. Trust me.” Stanley squared his shoulders, his confidence infectious. He had nothing left to lose if it didn’t.

Stanley’s limbs jerked, and his world went black.