"Turn Back from This Cave:" the Weirdness of *Beginner's Guide*

Stuart Moulthrop

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Games are, perhaps, inherently or fundamentally mysterious. In his study of interactive fiction, Nick Montfort affiliates that form with the ancient poetic tradition of the riddle (Montfort 2003, 4). We might generalize Montfort's insight to any game that simulates an explorable domain. Such games pose ontological questions: *What is this world in which I find myself? Why is it the way it is? What do my interactions reveal?* Maybe all world-games are basically riddles, some more direct than others in framing their enigmas. In his two major efforts so far, Davey Wreden has a way of putting his puzzles up front. *The Stanley Parable* (2011) begs the question, *parable of what?* Similarly, in coming to *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) we might ask, *guide to what practice, activity, or way of being? Just what are we beginning?*

Many players of *The Stanley Parable* come away with plausible answers: the game is about free will and its frustrations; it explores the tension between programmatic structure and play or desire. These are not necessarily the best answers, but they are reasonably related to the experience of the game. *Beginner's Guide*, by contrast, is harder to fix in a phrase. Most immediately it appears to be about a broken friendship, though this core fiction looks suspiciously like parable or metaphor. On a deeper level the work addresses the ethics of expression and interpretation, and perhaps the reasons for making game-based art. To borrow somewhat loosely from Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, we might see both *Stanley* and *Beginner's Guide* as metagames, attempts to play with received conventions and assumptions of computer games (see Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 2). These works invite us, as Bo Ruberg, Jack Halberstam, and Anna Anthropy would say, to *play otherwise* (see Ruberg 2019 19). Playing-otherwise is an indispensable endeavor but it can bring a certain aesthetic risk. As another theorist of play observes, "if you play with a simulation, it

becomes a game; if you play with a game it becomes just play" (Myers 2010, 26). Leaving aside the question of what David Myers or anyone else might mean by "just play," we can ask if this transformation takes us out of the domain of games. Is *Beginner's Guide* a game at all?

This question is itself hazardous in a polemical or political sense, because it gestures toward the poisonous, ongoing culture war over gaming, including attempts to exclude nonviolent, narratively intensive games (often featuring perspectives of subaltern and minority people) from a mainstream devoted mainly to agon and domination. The history and stakes of this controversy have been recently explored by Mia Consalvo and Christopher Paul (Consalvo and Paul 2019) and their discussion should stand as a caution to any exclusionary moves. This paper, which has branched off from a larger study of the decidedly non-mainstream Twine platform, understands the identity of games generously in a cultural sense. However, though necessarily linked, questions of form and questions of culture are not isomorphic, and on a formal basis it may be necessary to mark out boundaries in order to explore their aesthetic transgressions.

 It is hard to imagine a game more transgressive than *Beginner's Guide*. Consalvo and Paul fame two basic questions that might guide our approach to its divagations: "What makes a game a game? And what can be stripped out and have a game genre still retain its status as real?" (Consalvo and Paul 2019, 110). Though this paper ultimately bears on both questions, the second is most salient for *Beginner's Guide*, which in many ways constitutes a careful reduction or stripping-out of adventure-game conventions, and which seems to be doing something very interesting with game genres, either inflecting the walking-simulator or perhaps inaugurating its own generic region of video/game space.

Of course, the other way to avoid mentioning the (culture) war is to concede that *Beginner's Guide* is indeed a game. The product is sold on Steam as a game, it has been reviewed as a game, and like *Stanley Parable* its playable spaces are assembled from components accessible through the Source game engine. It seems to belong at least nominally to three divisions of the game universe: independent games, B-games, and walking simulators.

These last, as Melissa Kagen points out, are marked by their deliberate restriction of agency (Kagen 2018b), but *Beginner's Guide* takes this feature to an extreme. Action in the game is so railed-in that it approaches not free play but its opposite, recorded video. As in *Stanley Parable* there is voice-over narration keyed to our progress through each level. The plummy, BBC-style announcer of the earlier game is replaced by Wreden speaking as "Davey," a character we are invited to identify with Wreden himself. Davey guides us through 16 chapters, discrete levels ostensibly created by a shadowy figure called "Coda" between October 2008 and June 2011. There is also an Epilogue whose status and origins are harder to explain, though that mystery is very important.

This paper considers Davey and Coda fictional constructs, thus implicitly metaphorical – though what they represent is open to question.[1] The dates of Coda's efforts align neatly with the creative history of *The Stanley Parable*, so some self-reference seems inevitable. Read in this way, *Beginner's Guide* looks like psychomachia, the struggle between halves of a divided self. At the same time, the work's slipperiness and complexity defy reduction to any simple formula. Is it a collection of "weird and experimental" game levels, as Davey calls them, or a unified production? What is the nature of its supposed unity? How should we characterize this effort: is it a game or a theater piece, a game-flavored monologue? Maybe *Beginner's Guide* is more video than game, a game collapsed into its own playthrough.

Beginner's Guide has important resemblances to machinima, game-derived linear video, but it also departs from that form. As Davey reminds us in Chapter 7 ("Down"), the work was built on a game engine. It is not delivered in a video format but as playable download on Steam. Player action is allowed and often required. In Chapter 1 ("Whisper") we are told we can exit the game by stepping into an energy beam. As in *The Stanley Parable*, we can refuse the narrator's suggestion – the beam will kill our player character – but unlike in *Stanley*, refusal has no interesting consequences; we just linger in a level we have already

---

[1] Coda could be based on an actual person; Wreden has been coy on the subject, leaving us free to speculate (see, e.g., Klepek 2015).

explored. In Chapter 4 ("Stairs") we are asked to press Enter to remove a speed limit that prevents us from quickly climbing a set of stairs. We can withhold the action, remaining in agonizingly slow ascent, or join in Davey's subversion of the original rules. These moments are paradigmatic: the system allows us to act, but only in ways that move us to predetermined waypoints, often violating an insanely dilatory or obstructive design.

If *Beginner's Guide* is a game it is arguably a queer one in the most general sense, an exploration of unconventional or unsanctioned forms of play. Whoever or whatever he may be, Coda is less game designer than conceptual artist. His levels carry absurd subtitles like "The Streetwise Fool," "Pornstars Die Too," and "Items You Love at Members-Only Prices." Coda appears to be a latter-day surrealist. His games subvert rational thought, offering instead the inconsistent, associative flow of dreams. Many of the chapters feel like transcriptions of recurring nightmares: facing an audience across the footlights, or a lecture hall whose fourth wall is a devouring black hole, or a house with an endless cycle of cleaning chores. As the tour goes on, a specific kind of nightmare asserts itself. Images of prisons, literal and symbolic, occur with increasing frequency.

There is also a sense in which *Beginner's Guide* is thematically queer, or at least homo-(anti)social. It is after all about the intense and ultimately toxic affection of one man for another. No sexual relationship is implied and there is no compelling reason to imagine one, but Davey's account, which dominates until the final chapter, provides clear examples of amity if not intimacy. Davey appears to care deeply about his friend, whom he sees subsiding into crippling depression. Coda's feelings are harder to describe, but in the early years at least he seems willing to share his dream-games with Davey. In Chapter 7 Coda pranks Davey with a zip file said to contain an ultimate game, but which consists entirely of unopenable boxes – woebegone fan that he is, Davey tries each one. Even if it is actually the song of a divided self, the work deploys a fiction of relationship. Ruberg revealingly reads the classic game *Portal* as the story of a woman wandering through another woman's body (Ruberg 2019, 74). By analogy *Beginner's Guide* shows us one man interfering with another man's imagination.

This recognition provides another reason to set *Beginner's Guide* apart from other works, even within the offbeat family of walking simulators. The work is not just queer but also weird, not just in the casual sense of *unusual* which Davey uses to describe Coda's games, but in the word's original meaning, the Germanic *wyrd* whose closest approximation is *fated*: subject to inexplicable forces, destinies, curses, divine decrees, astral influences. Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are a late personification of this idea, which in modern times feeds into the similarly complex construction of the uncanny. We could think of Davey as an uncanny presence in Coda's games or vice versa, but the haunting is not strictly intratextual. The game is haunted from outside as well. Zielinski's trans-historical "deep time" offers one vector of approach here (Zielinski 2006), as does Ruberg's recourse to "resonance." Both imply relationship of analogy or implication that tolerates difference and does not require explicit, denotative links (Ruberg 2019, 20).

Polylinear superpositions of deep time can erupt anywhere along the timeline. Picking up on the uncanniness of *Beginner's Guide*, Kagen detects the presence of Franz Kafka, in the general theme of art-as-torment that plays out in the game's twin characters, in the obsession with imprisoning mazes, and in various chapters that read compellingly as Kafkaesque exercises (e.g., "The Machine" and "In the Penal Colony," or "The Tower" and *The Castle*) (see Kagen 2018a.). The historical relationship of Kafka to his friend and literary executor, Max Brod, also resonates in the Davey/Coda entanglement, though with obvious and important differences to which we will come. Deep time is by definition vast and ill-defined. Its resonances echo like voices in a cavern (to which we are also coming). The echoes come from many directions. The Kafka traces in *Beginner's Guide* are undeniable, but we can also detect other important resonators. The pair that will be pursued here both come significantly from the same bygone year, and from each of two earlier media to which Wreden's work seems genealogically attached, literature and film.

In 1962, Vladimir Nabokov published *Pale Fire*, another story of literary transmission (or abduction) which unfolds through a series of annotations by a Russian émigré critic, Charles Kinbote, written into the manuscript of a poem by a recently deceased American writer, John Shade. Kinbote is an iconic example of an unreliable narrator, a literary stalker

who twists the dead man's poem around personal delusions. One of the first scholars to explore the Nabokovian parallel, Berkan Şimşek, aptly describes the novel as "a beginner's guide to *Beginner's Guide*" (Şimşek 2019, n.p.). [2] There are highly suggestive echoes – the parasitic pseudo-friendship between artist and a critic; misappropriation of an artwork; gradual exposure of the commentator's distortions. There are also important differences between the two stories. Kinbote displays signs of mental illness and never escapes his delusions. By contrast, Davey undergoes a crisis of recognition and achieves something like an epiphany.[3] In Nabokov's novel there are reasons to suspect Kinbote has murdered Shade, or at least failed to prevent his murder. All we have in *Beginner's Guide* is an explicit and very bitter breakup, with no call to suppose anything else. Above all, there are no overt connections between the two works, no allusions or references, no clear reason to suspect Wreden has read *Pale Fire.*[4] The resonant association of game and novel invokes what the film theorists André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion call a "cultural series," a collocation of works in critical discourse without explicit, circumstantial links (Gaudreault & Marion 2015, 153).

Cultural series provide a virtual geometry for intertextual resonance. They can reach across media as well as decades and centuries. Gaudreault and Marion use this technique to comment on the intersecting aesthetics of film and video game: "Here we see certain fundamental features of the world of video games and how they have taken playability and interactivity to new heights. In this sense, we might say that the digital puts within reach of

---

[2] The echoes of Nabokov were first brought to this writer's attention by Nathan Humpal, metadata librarian at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and games researcher nonpareil. Having made the connection himself, he found confirmation in Guido Pellegrini's "'The Beginner's Guide': Confessions of a game designer" (Pellegrini n.d.).

[3] Kagen makes a similar disclaimer with respect to the Kakfa parallel: "To be honest, Coda's work actually feels a lot healthier than Kafka's, perhaps because of the extra century Coda has on him. Where Kafka saw his writing as a failure, Coda sees it simply as non-commercial and recognizes that he's doing it for himself. His games please him. They don't need to please anyone else" (Kagen 2018a).

[4] With one possible exception: Kinbote thinks he is being stalked by a villain named "Gradus," a name associated with a work of musical instruction called *Gradus ad Parnassum* (stairway to the Muses). That book is *a beginner's guide* to counterpoint. However, this is exactly the kind of paranoid association Kinbote would make. It's a spooky old cave.

every viewer the singular prosody and rhythm of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962)"
(Gaudreault & Marion 2015, 78). On the game side, the occasion for this remark was not
Beginner's Guide, which appeared as Gaudreault and Marion's book came off the press.
However, they may as well have been writing about Wreden's game. Marker's iconoclastic
film, threaded across genres and critically turned against its primary medium, can be
aligned with *Beginner's Guide* in ways that are perhaps even more revealing than its
literary connections.

La Jetée is as much a motion picture as *Beginner's Guide* is a video game, which is to say,
only tenuously. The feature consists almost entirely of optically printed still photographs,
with one very brief full-motion sequence at its climax. Like Wreden in both *Beginner's
Guide* and *Stanley Parable*, Marker depends on voice-over narration for continuity. Though
La Jetée was exhibited theatrically, Marker identified the work as "photo-roman," a form
usually identified with print (Kawin 1982, 15). So far, the comparison may seem largely
incidental: as Gaudreault and Marion say, the player's control of "prosody" and "rhythm"
are common to all games; conversely, we could associate *Beginner's Guide* with any
cinematic work that relies heavily on a superimposed narrator, such as the 1992 director's
cut of *Bladerunner*. There is however a much stronger ground of comparison between
Marker's film and Wreden's game: the way each work critiques the inherent operation and
structure of its medium.

La Jetée and *Beginner's Guide* are both stories of figurative and metaphoric imprisonment;
in each we spend significant time in catacombs, caves, and various forms of dungeon. In
the film the subterranean space is literally referential, the basement of the Palais de
Chaillot, site of a cinematheque that was crucial to early film culture (Kawin 1982, 18).
Similarly, the game's dungeons and mazes bear the visual signatures of *Half-Life*, *Counter-
Strike*, and other iconic games made with the Source engine. In both cases there is a clear
symbolic link between visible architecture and the medium, or media culture, from which
the work proceeds. The works are situated in versions of deep time.

In Marker's story this is a matter of necessity. Global atomic war has poisoned Earth's surface, driving survivors into underground redoubts. With space closed to them, the rulers develop a technology to project human minds, and eventually bodies, into other regions of time. The technique is extremely hazardous, so they experiment on political prisoners, one of whom is the film's nameless protagonist, first to survive the procedure. The traveler goes initially to the time before the war, where he falls in love with a young woman. He manifests first as a kind of ghost, then as a complete if intermittent presence. Eventually the experimenters dispatch the traveler to the future, where he meets powerful beings who perfect his time-traveling ability, freeing him from his controllers. Though he could conceivably go anywhere in any moment, the traveler chooses to return to his lover in the pre-war past. This decision is fatal, as he materializes in a scene *he has already witnessed as a child* – the strange murder of a man on the observation deck at Orly Airport. Doubly present, the traveler becomes both witness and victim, and his extinction closes off a paradoxical time loop. It also makes a statement about fatality, necessity, and two models for understanding time: the static image and the wheel of iteration, or the reel of film. As the film theorist Bruce Kawin explains:

> If the hero's problem is that he cannot escape from the medium and from the mortal consciousness that surround and determine him, then the continuity of the sound track and the stasis of the shots -- which both singly and together signify the processes and systems of sound film -- oppress him equally. It is not just the image track that arrests him, but the whole medium of sound film, which is itself a symbol for the activity of consciousness and narration as well as for the nature of time. (Kawin 1982, 20)

La Jetée offers an allegory of the filmic reel/real, weaving sound and image into an interference pattern that unmasks the "oppression" of industrial-cinematic time. Its signature death-loop emblematizes a culture that seemed headed for imminent destruction. 1962 was, of course, the year of the Cuban missile crisis, one of the closest approaches to nuclear exchange since the invention of atomic weapons. Marker's film screened in February, months before the U.S.-Soviet confrontation, but the tensions that

produced that critical moment had long been apparent. The film's vision of a burned-out, irradiated Paris was terribly plausible. Much more than even Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), *La Jetée* is the film at the apparent end of industrialism, at the conceptual end of cinema, the film at the end of the world.

And yet, as Gaudreault and Marion point out in a book that pointedly questions the "end of cinema" trope, 1962 did not bring the *dies irae*. Western civilization and its technologies reeled onward, bringing us, among many other probably unsustainable practices, a new regime of the moving image called video games. Like the cinema, this form is also capable of metalepsis and self-critique, and when it turns to those projects it likewise sends us into confinement. In a way, every one of Coda's game levels is a prison: "Maybe he just likes making prisons," Davey belatedly realizes. Kagen's turn to Kafka seems especially appropriate in this regard. The spaces Coda creates are labyrinthine and often subterranean: a maze built implausibly into a spaceship, caverns and salt mines, or the "cold," twisty passages of the final Tower. There is also a metaphorical sense of incarceration, of two people locked in a destructive relationship from which they must escape. "People are just cannibals unless they leave each other alone," Doris Lessing wrote in *The Golden Notebook* -- another resonance from 1962 (Lessing 1962, 341).   If there is no nuclear war in the offing in Wreden's game – the new century has its own vectors of looming extinction – there is the familiar death-loop, in this case that ominous energy beam, present at both end and beginning. There is a shape to the story Davey unfolds for us, a terminal necessity.

Though the death-beam waits for the player, it is one of the few moments when our nominal embodiment matters. The tension between Davey and Coda, invisible maker and loquacious critic, defines the main narrative arc, and we are mainly along for the ride. At the outset Davey tells us Coda has withdrawn from the game world. By publicizing Coda's genius, Davey hopes to coax his friend back to his art. As the tour of Coda's games proceeds, however, Davey's intrusions become more extensive and frequent and his commentary increasingly negative. Chapter 7 alludes to a debate between Davey and Coda

over whether games should be playable. In Chapter 9 ("Escape"), Davey warns "this one is tough" and notes that Coda appears to be "unraveling" because he "lacks a voice to tell himself when enough is enough." In Chapter 12 ("Theater") Davey says Coda is "beginning to shut down," as iron bars repeatedly slam into the ground behind us. The text option that leads to solution in Chapter 13 (Mobius) reads, "I can't keep making these." After this, Coda's supposed breakdown – or the demise of his friendship with Davey – proceeds to a climax. Chapter 14 ("Island") runs through a series of hauntingly evocative dream images, ending with a fleeting glimpse of a naked, weeping figure caught through prison bars. In Chapter 15 ("Machine") we play first as an interrogator putting hard questions to a Machine that has stopped working. Eventually we acquire a gun, which we can turn on an image of the machine. As its surface flies away, we see bits of computer code beneath.

Chapter 16 ("The Tower") is the last in the dated sequence. It is a "cold" level, Davey says. He tells us the game seems to despise its player. Reflecting on his attempt to find meaning in Coda's games, he confesses, "I feel like I failed," and "I don't know this person." Crucially, Davey also reveals that bringing Coda's games to public attention has brought him fame and fulfillment, and that he has made unannounced modifications to some of the levels. Finally, after ascending a series of twisty passages to the top of the Tower, we enter a gallery space. In the display panels are messages from Coda to Davey accusing him of still deeper interference with his designs. Davey has added the lampposts we have seen in various levels, where they are presented as evidence of Coda's interest in coherent play. Coda speculates that he has forced solutions into some of his games under Davey's influence. Above all, he indicts Davey for making his games public without permission, in effect stealing his work. He asks that Davey have nothing further to do with him: "When I am around you, I feel physically ill."

At this point the game's central fiction collapses. Chapter 16 is followed by an Epilogue whose status is eminently questionable. All the previous Coda games have dates of composition. The Epilogue has none. It looks like another of Coda's creations, but the authorial link has been severed. Who dreamed this final dream, Davey or Coda? We cannot know who these figures are to us now, or if they were ever even fictively real. Davey's

narration continues haltingly as we move through the first of several oneiric transitions: railway station, tracks, great house, museum, salt mine, station/museum again, finally into something that may be a sculpture garden or a set of ruins. Davey is present at the outset, talking more to himself than to the player ("solution, solution, solution"). Eventually he gives up.

Coda's revulsion has shown Davey the awful depth of his vanity, his need for "more, more" doses of "external validation." He apologizes for abandoning the player -- "I know I said I would be there to walk you through this" – but he has work to do now, presumably the creation of a new art no longer dependent on externalities. Davey's turn away throws the riddle of the title into doubly ironic relief. In beginning over, Davey ceases to be our guide; but at the same time, by allowing Davey to steer us through the chapters, we have guided the story to this emergence. Player and protagonist alike are both beginners and guides. For the moment, though, what awaits us is not beginning but ending. After Davey's abrupt sign-off we make our way alone through a final set of passages, ultimately arriving at something we have seen before: the fatal beam from Chapter 1. When we stepped into the earlier instance, we found ourselves transported, by what Davey called a "glitch," through the ceiling of the level, allowing us to look down on the maze we had traversed. Stepping into the beam has the same effect this time, though the vast scale of the maze below us suggests a city, a continent, or a planet; and also, strangely, the loops and whorls of a fingerprint. Above us is a starry cosmos. The screen goes black, but the game is not quite over, at least as this essay understands it. As is often the case in ambitious games, there is a song to accompany the credit roll. The vocalist is Halina Heron; music and lyrics are by Ryan Roth:

> Turn back
> Turn back from this cave
> You said "let me prove that I'm brave,
> Let me keep going."
>
> But the cave goes for miles

And miles and miles

And you're so tired

But I know that you're strong

So turn back,

Turn ba-a-ack.

Strictly speaking a song played over the closing credits is paratextual, and we are not obliged to consider it part of the game's main signifying business. However, after Jonathan Coulton's incisive anthems for *Portal* and *Portal 2*, closing-credits songs have become more salient, particularly in productions associated in some way with Valve, as *Beginner's Guide* is through its use of Source and its distribution on Steam. There is good reason to assume that, like "Still Alive" and "Want You Gone," the final song in *Beginner's Guide* was commissioned for the project. *Beginner's Guide* is dedicated "to R," who could be the songwriter, Wreden's sometime collaborator and soundman Roth. Though gameplay is over when we hear it, Roth's song needs to be considered in any attempt to understand the work – which is, after all, as much audio-visual presentation as game.[5]

Following the Platonic example, mention of caves will always raise the question of allegory. In *Gamer Theory* McKenzie Wark re-styles Plato's theater of sensory illusion into game arcade. This imagined space summarizes the all-enclosing episteme of digital gaming (Wark 2007, 002). Perhaps this is the forbidden zone we are meant to reject. Read in this way, the homology between *Beginner's Guide* and *La Jetée* seems very strong: both film and game warn us against the machinations of their respective media. At the same time, sticking more closely to the terms of the Davey-Coda story suggests another interpretation. The cave might stand for the artistic catastrophe these two figures represent, the interminable contest between Davey's fame-seeking, public-facing expression and Coda's

---

[5] Obviously, any game whose continuity depends on voiced narration combines sight and sound, but the music of the game deserves recognition. In the "Island" level, for instance, the curiously flanged incidental voice effects are unforgettable, as is the weeping of the mysterious prisoner. If these are Ryan Roth's work, the putative dedication makes good sense.

absolute formalism, his refusal to care if his prison-games can be played. In this sense the turn back might not be a renunciation of gaming per se – though it comes at the end of an artwork that is not-quite-not a game – but perhaps a turn toward a better-conceived ludic future.

However, even this reading cannot definitively resolve the basic mystery. The next offering by Wreden and Roth, *Absolutely: A True Crime Story* (Wreden and Roth 2017), does not align very well with a yearning for finer art. Built in RPGMaker, the game is an ostensible "deconstruction" (Wreden's word) of Japanese role-playing games from the '80s and '90s. For some reason it features a protagonist named Keanu Reeves, whom the player maneuvers around 8-bit streets to prove he is not a serial stabber – unless we decide he is. Depending on our menu selections, Keanu may also hand out dime bags of "the good stuff." This game seems less oriented toward an aesthetic future than the campy currency of games like Porpentine's *Crystal Warrior Ke$ha* (Porpentine 2013), which have their subversive virtues, though they hardly put aside external validation.[6] As one reviewer noted: "For a meaningless parody project, *Absolutely: A True Crime Story* does a great job of showing just how compelling purposelessness [sic] referentiality can be" (Gach 2017, n.p.).

Absolutely is a separate work, of course, and there is no overwhelming necessity to bring it to bear on its predecessor – though the problem of boundaries in *Beginner's Guide* offers some sanction for doing this. If we do bring in the later game, it may be necessary to reconsider the quasi-Joycean narrative of artistic discovery insinuated earlier. Who says Davey reaches any grand epiphany? Maybe he doesn't want to forge anything in the smithy his soul except another hit game. The strongest source of anxiety in *Beginner's Guide* may not be the moral purpose of art but the familiar sophomore curse: what do you do after the huge success of *The Stanley Parable*? In this sense the title, *Beginner's Guide*, identifies Davey/Wreden as after all still a young talent, trying to find his way in a field whose parameters are largely unwritten. In this more industrial view, our search for influences from the middle of the last century may seem just too weird. It is uncomfortable to look

---

[6] I am indebted here to Anastasia Salter's treatment of Porpentine's game in our forthcoming book *Twining*.

backward from the end of the 2010s because so much has changed, for good and ill. The past carries plague-marks of various hegemonies, ideological, racial, and sexual, to which some of us have lately awoken. No matter what sympathies it may invite for its deluded narrator, *Pale Fire* ultimately demonizes a closeted gay man who suffers from refugee trauma and mental illness. *La Jetée*, for all its liberatory power, turns around a moment of gendered scopophilia in which the camera gazes unbidden at a woman emerging from sleep. Coming to either work today is difficult. We live differently, think differently, and play differently now. We no longer view moving pictures through fogbanks of tobacco smoke, and the stories that define us have changed. We may be more interested in the time traveler's lover (never to be confused with *The Time Traveler's Wife*), that literally vital presence at the center of Marker's film who understands the comings and goings of her "phantom" in ways that point beyond the auteur's fatalism. She, after all, survives into a history that for us at least, did not lead inevitably to holocaust and the cave. Why is the story always about the dying man, the shooter and his victim? Why can't we follow the woman's story?

Even if we resist the implications of this willful misreading of Marker, it is hard to overlook the injunction to turn back at the end of *Beginner's Guide*, arguably even if we set aside the final song. There is something uncannily retrograde about this video-as-game, a problematic recursivity baked into its very structure, which is after all that of a game subverted by narrativized re-play. As his work proceeds, he continually turns back to add something more. Wreden seems fixated by the form of coda. The word is more than the name of a character, but we should pause at least briefly on its meaning in that regard. The slantwise play on *coder* is obvious enough: Coda is the formalist, the puzzle-maker imprisoned by the possibility of his tools (as Coulton's GLaDOS sings, "we do what we must because we can"). The name also suggests Coda's function as Davey's other half (or, ironically, vice versa), a relation of extension, complement – or more accurately, supplement. A coda is a supplement that brings a work to completion, *and this work is made of codas.* Roth's song is literally a musical coda. The anomalous Epilogue with its unacknowledged authorship and unexplained origin, is also a coda. In an important way,

the 16 preceding chapters, Davey's perverse curatorship of Coda's odd games, represents a supplement to that body of work: Davey's coda to Coda's games.

That project is impossible. Inhabiting another's imagination is perilous, in this case unsustainable. Coda recoils, Davey breaks down, and the friendship shatters, leaving both men alienated and diminished, to the extent we can imagine them as real people. This failure is hardly surprising. If we know anything about the logic of supplement, it is that it cannot produce an uncompromised outcome; it is never linear, additive, or simply progressive. The supplement hearkens back, implying or asserting an imperfection for which it is the supposed solution.

> But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppleant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [*tient-lieu*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up of itself, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy. The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself. (Derrida 1998, 145)

Derrida's insight addressed the relation of speech and writing, the original territory of the supplement. These ideas come from the old century, though they arguably remain relevant even in the new. Both speech and writing (coding) are in play in *Beginner's Guide*, now enmeshed in the technical matrix of the computer game. Davey's spoken word fills out the soundtrack; Coda is the broken Machine of encoding or inscription – game engine if not Kafkaesque inscriber of the Law. The game (if we can call it that) takes us through the process of the antagonized encounter of these two. Far from disqualifying the logic of supplement, this game intensifies the effect through modularity and iteration, as happens in many if not most games. Both in the discontinuity of leveling up and the experience of player death, we regularly begin again, each experience a "sign and proxy" for what has

preceded, and at the same time a dislocation or deferral. Here we have 16 levels, presented as chapters of a biography. In the final chapter, we learn that the biography is fiction, a perverse and self-serving lie. "The sign is always the supplement of the thing itself," but what in *Beginner's Guide*, or in any game, is that ultimate referent? We come once again to Montfort's question, *what does this world mean?* Just what have we been iteratively beginning?

The final sentence, the message of the musical coda, refuses any simple, positive outcome. As Derrida says, "it is as if one fills a void." The answer is both infinity and zero. The cave goes for miles, and miles and miles, so despite our strength we must not enter. The guidance to beginners is not to begin, to turn back. The last word of the work, if we stay for the music, is that elongated monosyllable, stretched across a double measure, *ba-a-ack.* But in a crucial sense this is the wrong word, a substitution and evasion. By the logic of deconstruction or double reading, every turn is a return; to turn back is implicitly to turn toward something. If the world of the game empties itself out – if this game's answer to Montfort's riddle is *don't ask* – we are left with the default world outside the game, the timeline that encompasses 2015, the signature anxieties of the previous mid-century, and the foundational modern crisis of Kafka fifty years before.

Wreden and Roth turn back to satire and purposeless referentiality. When you play with a game you do indeed end up just playing – with some friends you made yourself, if not entirely solo. But the weirdness of historical haunting remains, no matter what resistance or unease it may trigger in postmillennial sensibilities. Parody lays down the mark of an emptiness, and perhaps there is nothing else for any mark to indicate, except through what we might assert as a supplement to the logic of supplement: the irrational anti-logic of the weird. Just as *The Beginner's Guide* is revealed from a certain high angle to consist entirely of codas, we can similarly unmask culture as nothing but cultural series. All continuities are bent prophecies, impossible assertions, fictions: *that was before my time, but somehow I was there. Déjà vu. La, j'etais.* Narrative is supplement, inscription shored against the inevitable ruin of memory, a chain of resonances stretched across a landscape of chaotic fracture. Inhabiting culture, we become Coda.

Works Cited

Boluk, Stephanie, and Lemieux, Patrick. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Consalvo, Mia and Christopher A. Paul. *Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Video Games*. MIT Press, 2019.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri C. Spivak. Corrected Edition, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Gach, Ethan. "The Beginner's Guide Creators' New Game Is About Keanu Reeves Stabbing People." *Kotaku*, 28 Nov. 2017, https://kotaku.com/1820805627.

Gaudreault, Andre, and Marion, Philippe. *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*. Columbia University Press, 2015.

Kagen, Melissa. "The Kafkaesque *Beginner's Guide*." *Strafe Strafe Strafe* blog, February 1, 2018. https://melkagen.wixsite.com/strafe/single-post/2018/02/01/The-Kafkaesque-Beginners-Guide.

Kagen, Melissa. "Walking, Talking and Playing with Masculinities in *Firewatch*." *Game Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, Sept. 2018. http://gamestudies.org/1802/articles/kagen.

Kubrick, Stanley. *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Columbia Pictures, 1964.

Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. Harper Perennial, 1962.

Marker, Chris. *La Jetée*. Argos Films, 1962.

Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. MIT Press, 2003.

Myers, David. *Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games*. University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1962.

Pellegrini, Guido. "'The Beginner's Guide': Confessions of a Game Designer." *PopOptiq*, n.d., https://www.popoptiq.com/the-beginner/. Accessed 28 Aug. 2019.

Porpentine. *Crystal Warrior Ke$ha*. Slimedaughter.com, 2013, http://slimedaughter.com/games/twine/kesha/.

Ruberg, Bonnie. *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. New York University Press, 2019.

Şimşek, Berkan. *The Beginner's Guide for Play Fire: The Medium's Effects on Fictional Works*.
  Academia.edu, n.d.,
  [https://www.academia.edu/34959760/The_Beginners_Guide_for_Play_Fire_The_Mediums_ Effects_on_Fictional_Works](https://www.academia.edu/34959760/The_Beginners_Guide_for_Play_Fire_The_Mediums_Effects_on_Fictional_Works).

Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer Theory*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

Wreden, Davey. *The Beginner's Guide*. Everything Unlimited, Ltd., 2015.

Wreden, Davey, and Pugh, William. *The Stanley Parable*. Galactic Cafe, 2011.

Wreden, Davey, and Ryan Roth. *Absolutely: A True Crime Story*. itch.io, 2017,
  https://dualryan.itch.io/absolutely-a-true-crime-story.

Zielinski, Siegfried. *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by
  Technical Means*. MIT Press, 2006.