

**“I love how you can see the bottom
of the universe from this room.”**

The Real-Virtual Architecture of Davey Wreden’s *The Beginner’s Guide*

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Abstract *The Beginner’s Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015) is Davey Wreden’s follow-up game to the critically acclaimed *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café 2013). It is a collection of half-finished experimental games created by a developer named Coda. Davey Wreden guides the player through these game fragments in order to explore Coda’s personality. At first glance, *The Beginner’s Guide* is a deconstruction of game architecture: the game does not try to hide the artificiality of its scenery, it uses very basic polygon models and textures, and even exposes irregularities and glitches in its level structures. But at second glance, the role of these cracks in the fabric of the game’s fictional world seems more complex as some glitches turn out to be carefully constructed rearrangements of internal and external views of the game world. In this way, the true revelation seems to be that games are not just fictional worlds but objects in themselves—and by accentuating and embracing their nature as constructed objects, these broken fictional worlds become somewhat more real.

Keywords *The Beginner’s Guide*, indie game, authorship, real, virtual, fictional

Instead of an Introduction: The Introduction of *The Beginner's Guide*

The Beginner's Guide (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015) begins with a white screen and a long voice-over monologue:

Hi there, thank you very much for playing *The Beginner's Guide*. My name is Davey Wreden, I wrote *The Stanley Parable*, and while that game tells a pretty absurd story, today I'm going to tell you about a series of events that happened between 2008 and 2011. We're going to look at the games made by a friend of mine named Coda. Now these games mean a lot to me. I met Coda in early 2009 at a time when I was really struggling with some personal stuff, and his work pointed me in a very powerful direction, I found it to be a good reference point for the kinds of creative works that I wanted to make (ibid.).

The white screen fades into the a low-polygon representation of a Middle East desert town. Most players will feel reminded of a generic multiplayer shooter, even if the typical first-person gun at the bottom of the screen is missing. Some players may even realise that *The Beginner's Guide*'s first level is a (slightly modified) recreation of the iconic *Counter-Strike* (Valve 2000) map *de_dust* with its layout of looped corridors and single squares (»Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 *The Beginner's Guide*, Introduction.

So, just to start you off, this is I think the first game he ever made, it's a level for *Counter-Strike*, you can walk around here by the way, and mostly it's just Coda learning the basics of building a 3D environment. But what I like is that even though he starts from the simple aesthetic of a desert town, he then scatters these colorful abstract blobs and impossible floating crates around the level, [...] (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015).

If the player chooses to wander around the map—which he/she does not have to do, the game continues without any input—he/she can in fact discover floating boxes or missing textures and placeholder textures in bright colours not connected to the aesthetics of the desert town theme described by Wreden (»Fig. 2). Are these elements part of a puzzle? The mystery surrounding the visual bugs is immediately resolved by Wreden's voice-over:



Fig. 2 *The Beginner's Guide*, Introduction.

[...] and of course, it destroys the illusion that this actually IS a desert town, and instead this level becomes a kind of calling card from its creator, a reminder that this video game was constructed by a real person. And it kind of makes you wonder: What was going through his head as he was building this? This is what I like about all of Coda's games. Not that they're all fascinating as games, but that they are all going to give us access to their creator. I want us to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is, and that's exactly what we're going to do here.

So, it's 2008, Coda starts making these games, and he never releases any of them. He doesn't put them onto the internet, he just makes them and then immediately abandons them and they sit on his computer forever. And I think he really understood this image of himself as a recluse, at one point he jokingly renamed his computer's recycling bin to 'Important Games folder.' So, you know, this was just how he worked, he tended to crank them out one after the other without even really pausing to try to understand what he had just made, until suddenly one day he just stopped. In 2011 that was it, he made his last game and then he hasn't made another one since.

And that's why I've taken this opportunity to gather all of his work together, is because I find his games powerful and interesting, and I'd like this collection to reach him to maybe encourage him to start creating again. And if the people like you who play this also happen to find his work interesting, then I'm sure it'll send that much stronger of a message of encouragement to

Coda. So, thanks for joining me on this, if you have a particular interpretation that I haven't mentioned here or if you just need to get in touch, you can email me at daveywreden@gmail.com (ibid.).

A black screen concludes the first level of *The Beginner's Guide* and the text "Loading—November 2008" leads to Coda's next prototype (which will be the subject of this essay in a moment).

Okay that's about it for introduction, let's take a look at Coda's first proper game. As each game is loading, I'll show you the date that it was completed, this first one was made in November 2008.

A Game That Does Not Want to Be Written About

The Beginner's Guide is a strange artefact. A fitting but probably inadequate description of the game is that it is a highly self-reflexive work of art by game designer Davey Wreden, the creator of the cult indie game *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café 2013). Just like *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide* revolves around one central idea: the confrontation between two different narrative instances, two narrative authorities. *The Stanley Parable* presents a dispute between the player and a voice-over narrator (who can be interpreted either as the authorial narrator or even the author). *The Beginner's Guide* (supposedly) adds another layer to this mix. The voice-over narrator, who, unlike in *The Stanley Parable*, reveals himself at the very beginning as Davey Wreden, is in a way no longer the master of the game world, but merely a middleman. The creator of the world is someone else, a game designer named Coda. *The Beginner's Guide* is therefore simultaneously more complex and simplistic than its famous predecessor. The interplay of different narrative levels becomes more obscure due to the 'double authorship.' However, the game experience itself is more straightforward and follows a linear path. In contrast to *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide* does not feature multiple endings; interactivity is limited to a more or less free navigation through each prototype. The player is a visitor, a spectator who is not involved in the dispute between Wreden and Coda.

The Beginner's Guide is (supposedly) easy to explain but difficult to summarise. The main motif of the game is immediately recognisable, as the description of the first level has shown. However, the whole game is episodic, each level is a different (more or less finished) game prototype. All episodes deal with similar themes, but they are very diverse in terms of aesthetics and game mechanics. Thus, *The Beginner's Guide* presents a kind of plot and even a kind of chronology because the prototypes are arranged

according to their date of creation. The narrative structure of the game, however, remains iterative at best. The confrontation between Wreden and Coda begins anew with every level, every prototype—and always remains unsolved, unfinished, just like Coda's playful experiments.

Like *The Stanley Parable*, *The Beginner's Guide* not only explains but also challenges and theorises itself as an artefact. This makes the game an almost impossible object for an academic study. Davey Wreden, in a way, already anticipates an analysis of his artwork—or as Laura Hudson puts it: "*The Beginner's Guide* is a game that doesn't want to be written about" (emphasis in the original, Hudson 2015).¹ Each motif—above all the theme of authorship—is clearly named and promptly deconstructed. Thus, the introduction to *The Beginner's Guide* is not only an introduction to the game, it is already an analysis—which is why it has been reproduced here with only minimal additions.

But what remains for a cultural studies interpretation of *The Beginner's Guide*? Basically, only a kind of 'exposure,' a look behind the dazzling voice-over debate because the game has a tendency towards dramatic exaggeration. While *The Stanley Parable* primarily relies on humorous and absurd narrative miniatures, *The Beginner's Guide* often takes itself far too seriously. This is less true for Coda, who is only present through his prototypes, but even more so for Wreden, who gradually becomes the actual protagonist (or rather antagonist) of the story as the game progresses. Wreden seems obsessed with the idea that Coda's games are "going to give us access to their creator" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015). And so, he does exactly what he announces in the introduction: "I want us to see past the games themselves, I want to know who this human being really is [...]" (*ibid.*). However, there is of course, no Coda to be found "past the games," but only Wreden, Wreden's fight with Coda, and most of all Wreden's fight with himself.

The introduction of the game thus proves to be a false trail. At first glance, the main theme of *The Beginner's Guide* seems clear: Who is Coda? Is Coda real? Is Wreden Coda? Additionally, the debate on authorship of course immediately dominates the game. In some forums, there are even discussions about the question whether Wreden actually stole Coda's games and whether the commercial distribution of the game is legal at all. On the digital distribution platform Steam, a user named "They Call Me 'Mal'" writes in a slightly worried manner: "I hope this is fake" ("They Call Me 'Mal'" 2015)—and receives an equally profound and completely nonsensical answer from user "ed": "The game is real only in the metaphorical sense" (*ibid.*). "ed" refers to the creative crisis of Davey Wreden ("real Davey"), from which *The Beginner's Guide* allegedly originated: "If you read the real Davey's blog about what he was going through after the release of *The Stanley Parable*, it's pretty obvious" (*ibid.*).

¹ Of course, many authors have proven the very opposite, cf., e.g., Backe and Thon 2019.

Admittedly, it seems clear (and not necessarily wrong) to conflate the narrator with the author. However, from a point of view of cultural studies, which declared the author dead some time ago (Barthes 1977 [1967]; Foucault 2000 [1969]), the question of authorship is boring at best and misleading at worst.² While *The Stanley Parable* succeeded in adding some interesting facets to this idea by staging the authorship dispute as an absurd interactive conflict between narrator and player, *The Beginner's Guide* pushes the debate into the non-interactive part of its narrative. *The Beginner's Guide* is highly entertaining in this respect but also completely unoriginal as it basically imitates all the postmodern narratives that led to this debate some forty years ago.³

More importantly, the focus on the question of authorship does not do justice to the game at all. For as clearly as the voice-over narrator constantly thematises Coda's motives, Wreden is also an unreliable narrator who only wants to provoke and mislead the player by constantly repeating the question of authorship: "Despite the debates, the claims and the accusations, this is a question that *The Beginner's Guide* has absolutely no interest in" (Martin 2015). The authorship debate is a red herring, a joke that Wreden restages with every episode and every prototype.

However, while the apparent conflict between Wreden and Coda becomes increasingly grotesque as the game progresses, *The Beginner's Guide* also turns out to be a game of quieter and more subtle arguments beyond its loud voice-over debate. This is particularly evident in the game's unconventional level architecture, which deals with the question of work and author in a different way. Referring to the apparent errors in the level architecture of the said *Counter-Strike* map, Wreden argues that the level is "a calling card from his creator, a reminder that this video game was constructed" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015). In this way, the question is no longer: Is Coda real? But rather: Is the game real? *The Beginner's Guide* returns to this question several times. At first glance, the game simply presents a deconstruction of game architecture. The different prototypes do not try to hide the artificiality of their sceneries, they use very basic polygon models and textures, and Wreden's voice-over even exposes irregularities and glitches. However, at second glance, the role of these cracks in the fabric of the game's fictional world seem more complex with some glitches turning out to be carefully constructed rearrangements allowing a new angle, a new perspective on this fragmental world.

² It should be noted that this concerns the question of how and in what form the author appears in the text. The paratextual status of some game designers—e.g. Shigeru Miyamoto or Hideo Kojima—as auteurs or stars is a different debate (Aarseth 2005; Demirbaş 2008).

³ The most obvious source of inspiration might have been *Adaptation* (D: Spike Jonze, US 2002), a self-reflexive film written by Charlie Kaufmann (the writer of the self-reflexive film *Being John Malkovich*, D: Spike Jonze, US 1999). *Adaptation* tells the story of a screenwriter (named Charlie Kaufmann) who is trying (and, of course, failing) to adapt the book *The Orchid Thief* (1998). The player of *The Beginner's Guide* can even find a version of *The Orchid Thief* on a bookshelf in the 10th Chapter of the game.

Due to the episodic structure of the game, it proves problematic (and tedious) to consider all the different variations of these self-reflexive level architectures in this short essay, which is why only one more example will be discussed: Escape from Whisper, the second level of the game, which follows directly after the introduction. As before, the analysis consists only of a slightly extended retelling of the game events, because, again, there is little to add to Wreden's descriptions and interpretations.

The Bottom of the Universe

The black screen, which ends the introduction of the game, leads to a white, brightly lit room with a door that leads to a dark hallway (»Fig. 3). As soon as the player enters this area, the sound of an alarm siren can be heard. A female voice warns the player over loudspeakers: "Whisper Machine active. Ship destruction imminent." Several displays on the walls communicate the same message with the addition: "Evacuate immediately." In contrast to the *Counter-Strike* map, there is no clear reference for the level architecture in this sequence, but the generic corridors of a space station might nevertheless seem quite familiar to most players. Like all levels of the game, Escape from Whisper is presented from a first-person perspective, and this time, the game prototype even features a gun that can be fired—even if there are no targets in this level.

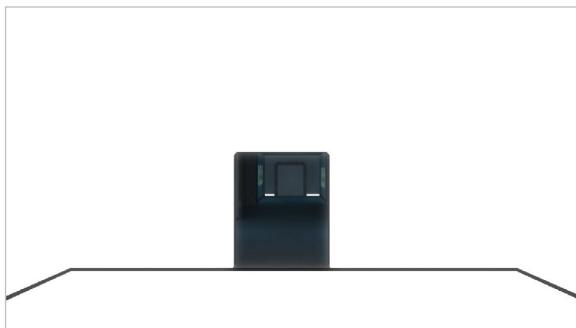


Fig. 3 *The Beginner's Guide*, Escape From Whisper.

The player can move freely through the corridors of the space station. A few seconds after entering the space station, Wreden's voice-over commentary sets in:

This game is called 'Escape from Whisper,' and it's one of the more generic games you'll see from Coda. It kind of looks like this game was abandoned



Fig. 4 and 5 *The Beginner's Guide, Escape From Whisper.*

mid-development. For instance, you have this gun which you'd think would indicate that there are supposed to be monsters or enemies somewhere, but then clearly there are no enemies anywhere. You can't even reload the gun when you run out of bullets. But ultimately, we don't really know, maybe Coda thought that actually it was complete the way that it is, and I think we should talk about his games for what they are rather than for what they're not (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015).

Another difference to the *Counter-Strike* level is that the player cannot remain completely inactive this time. To advance the storyline and trigger Wreden's next voice-over comment, certain points on the space station must be reached. At first sight, the space station seems bigger and more complex than it is because most of the junctions are dead ends and most doors are closed—there is only one linear path.

After a few minutes, the player reaches a corridor with a large window (»*Fig. 4*). The view into the exterior shows not only stars surrounding the space station but also a (supposed) error in the level architecture. At the bottom of the skybox that encloses the level, texture is missing. Instead of stars and blackness of outer space, a surface



Fig. 6 *The Beginner's Guide, Escape From Whisper.*

coloured in dark grey is seen (»*Fig. 5*).⁴ Wreden comments this view with a remarkable statement: "I love how you can see the bottom of the universe from this room" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015).

The door at the end of the corridor leads to a labyrinth.⁵ Like the previous weapon implying a gameplay challenge but turning out to be pointless after all, the player's expectations are disappointed once more. Wreden reacts as follows: "Apparently, this space station has a labyrinth on it! I—heh, sure, I dunno. There's really no reason for it that I've ever been able to discern so in the interest of time I'm just going to skip you on past it" (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015). Shortly after entering the labyrinth, the player is teleported to the end of it. He/she then enters a room in which a ray of light can be seen through a window: the Whisper Machine (»*Fig. 6*). Wreden's voice comments: "Okay, this is the part that's interesting. The game has this narrative about the Whisper Machine and how it has to be turned off, and then you get to the engine room" (*ibid.*).

His voice-over stops briefly so that the player can listen to the instructions of the female voice from the alarm announcement at the beginning of the level. The voice now speaks directly to the player:

Hey, you there, in the engine room. You could save us all! That beam is powering the Whisper Machine. We could disrupt it by introducing a great enough heat signature. If you ... your body could stop the beam. It's so much to ask, but for all of our lives, would you do it? Could you give yourself? (*ibid.*)

⁴ For a deeper study on the skybox principle, see Bonner's chapter in this book.

⁵ For a critical investigation of the role of the labyrinth in the digital game world, see Nohr's chapter in this book; for a corridor as a spatial feature and its usage as a trope and spatial puzzle, see Backe's chapter in this book.

After the weapon and the labyrinth, this third game mechanic, a meaningful moral decision, turns out to be a fake as well. If the player refuses to enter the beam for a while, Wreden intervenes: “This is not a branching point unfortunately; the only option is to step into the beam” (*ibid.*). The ‘branching point’ of the level is rather a different one. When the player enters the beam, the first-person camera tilts to the side and falls to the ground. However, the death of the player character is not the end of Wreden’s guided tour through the Escape from Whisper level.

Lemme pause here for a second. What you just experienced, stepping into the beam and then dying, is probably what Coda had initially intended when he was developing this level. But when he first compiles and plays it, something goes wrong, there’s a bug somewhere, and this is what happens instead (*ibid.*).

The game is reset, and the player must enter the beam again. But instead of a death animation, this time the avatar suddenly begins to float and passes through the ceiling of the engine room. The view from outside shows that the space station is not a space station at all but a chain of rooms and corridors, surrounded by a skybox without floor texture (»*Fig. 7*).



Fig. 7 *The Beginner's Guide*, Escape From Whisper.

The beam causes you to start floating. And this is an important moment for him. Because yes, this is technically a glitch, but Coda identifies something human about it, like how small it makes you feel in the face of this larger chaotic system, or this floating could be the afterlife, a peaceful place juxtaposed against all the hysteria you’ve just had to traverse. I don’t even know, I have no idea what he was thinking, but what’s clear is that after making this, something lodges itself in his brain, he wants to do more of these really weird and experimental designs. So, he stops work on this and moves onto a stream of tiny little games that go in all sorts of directions (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015).

With these words and the view from outside, Escape from Whisper ends. Again, a description of this sequence proves to be difficult since the self-reflexive voice-over commentary interferes with the quite complex representation of the level architecture and its carefully arranged errors and gaps.

Although the missing skybox texture ("the bottom of the universe") and the concluding view of the space station from the outside are ultimately only cracks in the illusionistic surface of the level architecture, it is nevertheless noticeable that these errors are much more elaborately staged than in the *Counter-Strike* level. Wreden, again, anticipates a first interpretation of these cracks in his voice-over. He asks if Escape from Whisper is perhaps simply an unfinished game—"It kind of looks like this game was abandoned mid-development" (*ibid.*)—but then emphasises that these errors are part of the game and even define the game: "I think we should talk about his games for what they are, rather than for what they're not" (*ibid.*). This approach also shapes his following voice-over remark. When Wreden points out the missing skybox texture to the player, he says: "I love how you can see the bottom of the universe from this room." Of course, this may work as a funny remark, but Wreden's choice of words seems quite significant. Why does he say universe, when he could say game or level?

Getting to the Bottom (of the Bottom of the Universe)

For a closer look at Wreden's interesting choice of words, the analysis must go one step back, namely to the question of how voice-over and game world relate to each other. A first approach might be to assume Wreden's voice-over simply as a kind of audio commentary, as it is sometimes found as an additional audio track on DVD or Blu-ray release of movies but also (though very rarely) in the field of video games. The *Half-Life 2* episodes (Valve 2006/2007) or the *Portal* games (Valve 2007/2011) for instance offer an alternative game mode in which floating speech bubbles can be found in the game world. When the player clicks on these bubbles, short anecdotes from the development team can be heard, usually corresponding to the section of the game the player is crossing. In these and other examples, the audio commentary is always an alternative mode, an additional layer that is placed over the (fictional) game world. In the case of *The Beginner's Guide*, however, 'the game' and 'its commentary' are entangled intimately. There is no game without the voice-over, at least not a playable one.

Another approach would be to consider Wreden's presentation of Coda's games as a form of remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999), a game within a game. It is not a new phenomenon that games are able to integrate different media into their game worlds,

and that this integration can be more or less self-reflexive.⁶ The game world of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) for instance contains a number of other types of media: books, paintings, (car) radios, television sets, and smartphones. In some moments, *Grand Theft Auto V* also goes one step further when the game not only recreates an audio-visual style of another medium, but tries to emulate a certain media-practice, like going to the movies, or doing street photography (PetaPixel 2013). However, even if a video game integrates another video game into its game world, it does not automatically break the fourth wall. Jesper Juul calls these games-inside-games “staged games” (2005, 132), “a special case where an abstract or somewhat representational game is played in a more elaborate world” (*ibid.*). The player of *Grand Theft Auto V* can play the video game *QUB3D*, a kind of 3D *Tetris*, at an arcade machine in the game world. Other examples are playing *Maniac Mansion* (Lucasfilm Games 1987) in *Day of the Tentacle* (LucasArts 1993) or *Lost Vikings* (Silicon & Synapse 1993) in *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010). However, Juul’s definition of staged games does not seem to apply to Coda’s games in *The Beginner’s Guide*. Coda’s prototypes are not games “played in a more elaborate world,” they are the world.

Both explanatory attempts thus prove to be insufficient. In the case of the audio commentary, Wreden’s voice-over and Coda’s games would be clearly separated; in the case of staged games and other intermedial interlacing, there would be no clear separation but a clear hierarchy between the two layers. Yet, *The Beginner’s Guide* seems to be all about blurring these distinctions and hierarchies. Errors in the architecture of the game world do not work as a disruption. Missing textures and clipping errors become a form of artistic expression—“what once stood in the way of media transparency as a distortion of perception now becomes an aesthetic strategy” (Rautzenberg 2009, 236).

A third approach is therefore to consider Coda’s prototypes not as games-within-games, but as worlds-within-worlds. On the topic of metareferentiality, Hans-Joachim Backe takes a closer look at pictures (paintings, photographs, posters) in the game worlds of *Dishonored 2* (Arkane Studios 2016) and *Prey* (Arkane Studios 2017) in his essay *Metareferentiality Through In-game Images in Immersive Simulation Games* (2018). Both games transport the player into interlaced story worlds, contain mise-en-abyme structures und metalepses (Harpold 2007). Within their ‘primary’ worlds there are other ‘secondary’ worlds to be found that are explained by magic (*Dishonored 2*) or some kind of holodeck technology (*Prey*).

Unfortunately, this is not the place to examine Backe’s highly interesting approach in detail. Only the (very shortened) conclusion of his text will be discussed, where he argues that *Dishonored 2* and *Prey* use worlds-within-worlds structures as a strategy of

⁶ Gundolf S. Freyermuth has coined the term “intensive transmediality” (2014, 141–42) for this form of integration. On this topic, cf. also Ewan Kirkland’s brilliant essay on *Resident Evil’s Typewriter* (2009).

artistic expression. Especially *Prey*, which interlaces its game worlds several times, is of interest here:

Prey [...] exposes the fakeness of its virtual world, only to affirm the authenticity of the reactions it elicits. [The game] foregrounds and defamiliarizes its own audio-visual representation, going so far as to negate the relevance and reality of all its events. [...] The player is aware that everything is just a game, or a game within a game, or a game within a game within a game (emphasis in the original, Backe 2018, 9–10).

In *Prey*, the realisation that some game worlds are not ‘real’ but only simulations (within simulations within simulations ...) does not lead to a break within the narrative illusion of the game. Rather, the interlacing of different virtual worlds proves to be the main narrative motif of *Prey*.

[T]he game’s metacommentary does not result from breaking the fourth wall. Instead, it reveals the layers of its mise-en-abyme structure of nested simulated environments until, in the end, it arrives at what appears the ‘actual’ or outermost layer. It is through the provocation of declaring all actions in the game non-actual that the attentive player is prompted to reflect upon the general ‘actuality’ of in-game actions, and to realize that *Prey* problematizes what it means for something in a game to be real, virtual, or fictional (emphasis in the original, ibid., 9).

With this final trisection, Backe refers to an essay by Espen Aarseth with the telling title *Doors and Perception: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games*, in which he argues that “there are at least three different ontological layers to game content: the real, the virtual and the fictional” (2007, 3). His examples are dragons, labyrinths, and doors, or more precisely different doors in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Interactive 2001):

Most of the doors [in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*] are merely textures on the walls that look like doors, but whose function is purely decorative. Other doors actually do behave in a door-like manner; they can be opened, closed, seen through, walked through and fired through (ibid.).

The first type of doors is fictional, the second type is virtual, because it is

a dynamic model that will specify its behavior and respond to our input. It is this model behavior that makes it different from a fiction, since we can get to

know the simulation much more intimately than we come to know the fiction (*ibid.*, 1).⁷

This vocabulary now allows a more elaborate description of the final sequence of the Escape from Whisper level:

- First, the game contains a number of fictional elements (the science-fiction setting);
- Secondly, there are virtual elements (doors that can be opened, a useless gun);
- Third, the level contains a labyrinth that is both virtual and real, virtual in a physical sense, but real in a conceptual sense (because it is a rule-based game). It may seem ironic that Wreden forces the player to skip the labyrinth, the ‘game-part’ of the prototype;
- Fourth, the bird’s eye view at the end of the level seems to go beyond the three categories “real,” “virtual,” and “fictional.”

The view of the space station from outside is a glitch and no glitch at the same time. It accentuates or rather embraces the game and its world as a constructed object. In a way, it somewhat pushes it from the “virtual” towards the “real”—even if it never reaches the “real,” of course. Such an interpretation is certainly worth debating, but it provides an explanation as to why the end of the level is not simply perceived as a technical error, as a breach of the narrative illusion. Most players will be familiar with a view where an avatar suddenly falls through the game world or floats over the world due to a clipping error. On the one hand, these views are simply to be seen as errors in the game engine, but on the other hand, they have since developed an aesthetic life of their own (Bainbridge and Bainbridge 2007; Berry and Dieter 2015).⁸ *The Beginner’s Guide* tries to integrate these glitch aesthetics into its fiction—or perhaps it is the other way around. Thus, the game becomes a self-reflexive and poetic study of its own virtuality or rather the virtuality of its objects.

This fakery is not in service of a trick, however; it is the thing itself. Wreden uses his lies, his deceit, his hoaxes and his misdirections in service of a kind of truth. [...] It doesn’t matter if they were made by Wreden or Coda, these

⁷ This vocabulary appears to be comparable to a “second-order model” described by Rune Klevjer in his phenomenological approach: “Real-time virtual objects are second-order models—visual models of algorithmic models—that appear in experience as first-order concrete models of the quasi-physical kind. Such virtual objects are, at once, algorithmic entities and tangible objects” (Klevjer 2019, 732).

⁸ For an artistic research approach on such out-of-bounds perspectives and situations, see Hawranke’s chapter in this book.

games are objects in themselves, each with both an internal reality—their systems and rules—and an external reality—their nature as constructed objects, modes of expression, and ultimately, games. This is the true revelation of *The Beginner's Guide* (Martin 2015).

In this way, *The Beginner's Guide* can perhaps best be described as a museum. Not simply as a virtual museum however, since Coda's games are not ordinary exhibition objects.⁹ *The Beginner's Guide* is rather an *ironic museum* (Bann 1978), a museum that reveals itself as constructed and assembled. The ironic museum realises an equal coexistence of different presentation and interpretation layers. *The Beginner's Guide* allows its exhibition objects to oscillate constantly between the real, the virtual, and the fictional—and, incidentally, shows that video games are an expressive medium. It is not without a certain irony that in this case Davey Wreden is indeed not an author but rather a curator, which seems to be a new interesting role in the fields of game design and game studies.

Figures

Fig. 1–7: Screenshots by the author, Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015

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Maniac Mansion (Lucasfilm Games, Lucasfilm Games 1987).

⁹ A virtual museum simply uses a virtual space (usually the World Wide Web) as an exhibition space, e.g. Anne-Marie Schleiner's famous art mod exhibition *Cracking the Maze: Game Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art* (1999). Cf. also Niewerth 2018.

- Portal* (Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation 2007).
- Portal 2* (Valve Corporation, Valve Corporation 2011).
- Prey* (Arkane Studios, Bethesda Game Studios 2017).
- Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Interactive, Activision 2001).
- The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, Galactic Café 2013).
- StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment, Blizzard Entertainment 2010).

Filmography

- Adaptation* (D: Spike Jonze, US 2002).
- Being John Malkovich* (D: Spike Jonze, US 1999).

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