

# "Turn Back from this Cave:" An Allegory for Beginners

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## SLIDE 1 – Epigraphs

"People are just cannibals unless they leave each other alone," Doris Lessing wrote in *The Golden Notebook*. The relevance of this observation to my subject will be apparent. Less obvious, for now, will be the salience of the year in which Lessing's words appeared, 1962. We'll get there.

About 40 years earlier, James Joyce said of *Ulysses*: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant. It's the best way to insure my immortality."

Nearly a century later, Davey Wreden created a game that resonates with both these remarks: *The Beginner's Guide* (2015). We'll come to the cannibalism in a bit; let's begin with the puzzles and enigmas. Wreden's work overflows with professorial provocation. Like his earlier effort, *The Stanley Parable* (2011), it bears out Nick

Montfort's observation that world-simulating games belong to the genre of riddle. For *Stanley*, the key question is *parable of what?* We can wonder similarly about the second game: *Guide to what undertaking? Just what are we beginning?* If these incitements aren't enough, *Beginner's Guide* offers a last, irresistible invitation in its closing song, which begins with these lines:

*Turn back*

*Turn back from this cave...*

Never show a professor a cave unless you're hunting allegories.

Before we can identify some *allos* or other addressed by this work, we need first to describe the thing itself. The term "game" is convenient, if misleading. The project consists of 17 surreal, conceptual game levels through which we are guided by voice-overs performed by Wreden as a more or less plausible version of himself ("Davey"). The levels are attributed to "Coda," a reclusive game designer with whom Davey claims to have had a close but now broken friendship. Bonnie Ruberg

observes that the classic game *Portal* consists of "a woman moving around inside another woman" (pTk); on similar lines, *Beginner's Guide* might be described as a man interfering with another man's imagination.

*Beginner's Guide* can be tenuously called a walking simulator, a type of video game that replaces kinetic conflict with exploration and exposition (Kagen 2018). Yet Wreden's project is far more insistent on singular sequence than most walking sims. In this respect it resembles machinima, non-interactive video productions made with game resources. But *Beginner's Guide* allows and sometimes requires player input, as works of machinima generally do not. Perhaps the best description for Wreden's effort is "boundary object," a production that sits at the intersection of multiple categories (see Taylor 2018, 15). Like towns in certain corners of the map, it offers sight-lines into several domains.

### >SLIDE 2: *Pale Fire*

Looking from *Beginner's Guide* toward literature, we can find parallels in the long tradition of unreliable narrators. There is particularly strong resonance with Vladimir

Nabokov's 1962 novel *Pale Fire*, another case of one man invading another man's art. In a feat of genre-bending that rivals Wreden's, Nabokov unfolds his story through annotations appended by a mad critic to the manuscript of a stolen poem. Like Davey, Nabokov's Russian-émigré Kinbote is to some extent a stage mask for his author. The resemblances between novel and game fall off beyond this point. It is harder to align Wreden's Coda with John Shade, Nabokov's designated victim, who is a poet of the middle-American suburbs, not a depressive maker of outré games. The novel contains dark hints of homicide not present in the game: Davey is a betrayer, not a murderer. There are no overt references to *Pale Fire* in Wreden's production. The alignment of these texts amounts to what theorists call a "cultural series:" an unintentional similarity occurring across generational or linguistic boundaries without direct influence (Gaudreault & Marion, pTk).

### >SLIDE 3: *La Jetée*

But the series has a more interesting third term: Chris Marker's art film *La Jetée* (also 1962). In Marker's story, a global atomic war poisons the surface, driving survivors into caves and catacombs. With space closed to them,

the ruling class dispatch human subjects into other regions of time. The protagonist is the first to survive these brutal experiments. He manages to manifest physically in the past, where he falls in love. The bosses call him back and dispatch him instead to the future, where he meets allies who free him from his controllers. The time traveler chooses to return to his lover in the past -- only to re-enter a scene he witnessed as a child, the murder of a mysterious man who is, of course, the traveler himself. This self-terminating situation bears some resemblance to what gamers call a *death-loop*.

Like *Beginner's Guide*, *La Jetée* is formally enigmatic. The film was released theatrically, but Marker described it as a "photo-roman," a genre more closely associated with print. Except for one very brief full-motion sequence, the film consists of a montage of still images with continuous voiced narration. This curious construction exploits tension between the stasis of photographic image and the fluidity of the spoken word. As Bruce Kawin says in a classic article:

>SLIDE 4: Kawin quote

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... 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 real (or reel), weaving sound and image into an interference pattern that unmasks the "oppression" of industrial/cinematic time. Its signature death-loop emblemizes a culture of assured destruction – 1962 was the year of the Cuban Crisis, a frighteningly close approach to nuclear war.

Yet the bombs didn't fall and a half-century later we are still playing weird games with image, sound, and time, though this time on a smaller screen, using the digital affordances of a game engine. What does Wreden's boundary-crossing game have to tell us about space and time in the new millennium?

## >SLIDE 5: The Tower

Answering that question properly would require a full account of the 17 levels, but we can make a rough approach by looking at the way the work ends.

(Apologies for spoiling.) In the penultimate chapter, "The Tower," we find our way through various mazes to an uncanny gallery. In place of sculpture or image we find bits of writing, final messages from Coda to Davey explaining why their acquaintance must end. Davey has already confessed his addiction to the "external validation" he earns by publicly promoting Coda's games. Like Lessing's social cannibal, he cannot leave his friend's art alone. Publicity is an unforgiveable betrayal for Coda, who seems happiest creating inescapably sealed dungeons -- "Maybe he just likes making prisons," Davey observes, far too late. Coda further accuses Davey of tampering with his games to suit an imposed critical agenda. Elements in earlier levels described by Davey as evidence of Coda's enigmatic genius are revealed to have been inserted by Davey. We thus emerge from Chapter 16 in diegetic uncertainty. How much of what we see is Coda's work and how much is Davey's? Is this question even meaningful?

## >SLIDE 6: Deathbeam

Indeed, the question becomes moot in Chapter 17, "Epilogue." We have read Coda's last words on the gallery wall, and now we move into a space of dreamlike architectural passages. The game is pure walking-sim at this point, and as we go, Davey apologizes: "I know I said I would be there to walk you through it." But Coda's last words have brought him to an artistic crisis, a need to discover a purpose beyond "external validation." "I have a lot that I need to make up for," he says, before finally switching off. Alone, we make our way to one last, exquisite corridor, at the end of which we see something familiar.

This is a science-fictional prop, an energy beam last encountered at the end of Chapter 1, where Davey offers a double interpretation. In the diegesis of the level, stepping into the beam will kill us but will also interrupt a process that threatens others. Davey claims the game is about heroic sacrifice, though Davey's readings are always dubious. As we step into the beam to complete the level, Davey announces a "glitch" that will cause us to float through the ceiling, into a space from which we can look down on the contorted labyrinth we have escaped.



The reappearance of the death-beam gives *Beginner's Guide* the same circular closure as *La Jetée*: we end at the end of our beginning. The finale of *La Jetée* seems unambiguously fatalistic, but it is harder to distill singular meaning from *Beginner's Guide*. Marker's time traveler is struck down by agents from the future, closing off the loop: the cinematic time machine can deliver only one outcome. Within Wreden's blurred boundaries, however, we are free to understand our final disintegration not as death-and-transfiguration, but as deliberate dissolution of the fiction -- glitchy liberation.

### SLIDE 7: Final Maze

Either way, we rise above the game. As we take our final ride on the beam we see a world-sized labyrinth, a continent or planet of twisty little passages. The higher we go, the more these notched tessellations resemble the whorls of a fingerprint. But here the game ends; though perhaps not the text. As is common in videogames and films, the credit roll is accompanied by a theme song. This one is written by Wreden's sometime collaborator Ryan Roth and sung hauntingly by Halina Heron: [the clown does not sing]

## >SLIDE 8: Song

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 back.

Strictly speaking a closing-credits song is paratextual, ancillary to the main work, but the connection here seems very close. The game is dedicated to "R," who may well be Roth. In any case, in a work like this one, stitched from assets of other games, extraneous materials become meaningful through selection.

The song offers an interestingly mixed message, both warning and consolation. Unlike the component

labyrinths of the *Guide*, the cave of the song goes for miles and miles. We are strong but it will inevitably exhaust us, so we must turn away. Any prohibition begs the question of what is forbidden: what is in the foreclosed space? Based on what we know about Davey and Coda, the forbidden zone is a contest between two archetypes of the artist: audience-minded interpreter and prison-building formalist. We have known about such conflicts for a long time:

#### SLIDE 9: Lessing

I'm going to make the obvious point that maybe the word neurotic means the condition of being highly conscious and developed. The essence of neurosis is conflict. But the essence of living now, fully, not blocking off to what goes on, is conflict. ... I've reached the stage where I look at people and say – he or she, they are whole at all because they've chosen to block off at this stage or that. People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves. (Lessing 1962, pTk)

Do we limit ourselves by turning back from the cannibal's cave of Wredenland – or is this reversion essential to

sanity? The song contains comfort as well as warning. Our "strength" is not in doubt; turning back is no failure. Riffing on Plato, McKenzie Wark deploys the allegorical Cave as a general referent for gamespace. Averting ourselves from this cave might parallel Marker's turn against cinema: for all their tessellated complications, games still leave us in labyrinths or prisons. They may be more sophisticated than cameras or projectors, but game engines are still machines of carceral time.

Turning back is by implication also a returning TO something, a condition or domain outside the cave. One name for this ultimate allegoric other is the future, or what comes next. Davey the narrator promises a return to creative production, an attempt to re-ground his art in something other than popular desire; but Davey is a fiction, and the real world is complicated.

#### >SLIDE 10: "Absolutely"

Wreden and Roth's next production, *Absolutely: A True Crime Story* (2017), is a goofy "deconstruction" (Wreden's word) of Japanese role-playing games in which Keanu Reeves may or may not stab people while handing out dime bags of heroin. This game turns not so much to

the future as to a present where independent game development is exploding with campy exuberance. As one reviewer put it: "For a meaningless parody project, [the new game] does a great job of showing just how compelling purposelessness [sic] referentiality can be" (Gach [Kotaku] 2017).

For professors, perhaps sadly, referentiality can never be decoupled from purpose – or in this case, history. For us in the immortalizing business, turning from the cave of personal crisis means rejoining the struggle for the conscience of a young medium, scarred by GamerGate and the global culture war that spawned it. These offenses may seem fresh, but they have a history. Western civilization has been glitching for a long time now. When we turn back from 2015 we find ourselves enmeshed in cultural series, those mysterious, non-intentional echoes that arc across the millennium. We may find ourselves stumbling backward along the timeline, perhaps as far into the past as 1962, the year that haunts Wreden's work so eerily.

It is uncomfortable now to look backward because the past carries plague-marks of unrestrained imperialism

and patriarchy. We deserve a better time. But even in their oppression, the voices of women call to us. In that unredeemed 1962, Sylvia Plath lamented:

### SLIDE 11: Plath

I shall never get you put together entirely,  
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.  
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles  
Proceed from your great lip.  
It's worse than a barnyard.

### >SLIDE 12: Levi-Strauss

What Plath is sculpting may well be a wicker man of patriarchy, but today her terms might remind us of triple-A games, or the Twitterverse, or indeed *Beginner's Guide*. If I may be forgiven one last grand-paternal citation: 1962 saw the English translation of Claude Levi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind*, which contains this observation: "Ritual, which is also 'played,' is... like a favored instance of a game, remembered from among the possible ones because it is the only one that results in a particular type of equilibrium" (Levi-Strauss 1962, 30). If the cave is the game, then perhaps our turn back into discontinuous history assumes the place of ritual.

The point of ritual, says Levi-Strauss, is to mark and preserve equilibrium – between play and purpose, interpreter and formalist, popular desire and radical vision – but above all between the present and the past. We can turn from despair to parody, from the toxic to the meaningless; but at some point, we need to make a claim, if not to immortality, then at least to memory.