Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *The Beginner's Guide*
Platform: PC
Genre: First-Person Interactive Storytelling
Release Date: October 1, 2015
Developer: Everything Unlimited Ltd.
Publisher: Everything Unlimited Ltd.
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Davey Wreden
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Overview

The Beginner's Guide is a first-person interactive experience from the mind behind *The Stanley Parable,* Davey Wreden. Told from Davey's perspective, the game explores and analyzes the work of a game developer named Coda on the premise that he has suddenly stopped creating games. Davey hopes that packaging and commenting on Coda's work will help him start making games again, creating for players a game that's part developer commentary, part museum exhibit.

However, throughout the course of the game it becomes clear that there's more to Davey's relationship to Coda than he initially let on. Davey not only showed these games against the will of their creator but he also modified them to create his own interpretation. And eventually, *The Beginner's Guide* becomes more of a commentary of Davey's emotional and creative state rather than the work itself. Exploring themes like the purpose of creative intent, the role of game analysis and criticism, and also the fluctuating relationship between art, its creator, and its admirers, *The Beginner's Guide* ultimately even brings into question the validity of this entire analysis.

Characters

- **Davey Wreden:**

(For the sake of separating fiction from reality, this character will be referred to as "Davey" while the real-life developer will be called "Wreden.")

Davey is the player's tour guide to Coda's levels, a game developer that is initially shown as someone who wants to uplift the work of another. He also gives off the vibe of an intellectual, capable and seemingly qualified from his previous (and successful) game to dive deep into Coda's creations and the intentions behind them. But Davey is also an unreliable narrator, as the repeated symbols and hidden meanings are revealed to be created by Davey himself. It becomes increasingly apparent that Davey is insecure in himself and his own work, creating these modifications to validate his own ideas while also taking attention away from these games' original creator.

- **Coda:**

Two different Codas are shown in the game: one based on Davey's commentary and the other based on Coda's text messages presented at the end:

Davey's Version:

Looking at Coda's games, Davey creates a picture of someone who is a brilliant designer but has issues with feelings of self-doubt. Interpreting a series of levels with prisons and perceived themes of burnout, this Coda is someone that desperately needs help and is crying out for attention. They need someone to help them deal with their lack of self-

worth when it comes to their ideas, suffering to find joy in creating games anymore. This is the catalyst for Davey to go down the path of sharing these levels with the world, in a veiled attempt to solve these problems that are actually manifesting themselves in Davey rather than Coda.

The Real Coda:

While we only get to see a little bit of the real Coda through some text at the end of the game, he does provide the most important piece of information to the player: the truth about Davey. He serves as a rude awakening for Davey and provides the context needed to reinterpret his commentary. From the limited amount of text given, this Coda is much surer of himself and what he needs compared to Davey's version.

- **The Player:**

The player initially doesn't have much of an active role in, but they do serve a purpose in the narrative. For most of *The Beginner's Guide* they are the wall that Davey bounces ideas off of, a captive audience that can love him. But they can also be interpreted as a version of Davey himself, the part of him that goes through the game (or at least some interpretation of it) when in a creative rut to try and begin the process over again.

Breakdown

Tackling *The Beginner's Guide* is a little difficult due to the recontextualization of certain parts of the story based on the contents of the ending. To help with this, this analysis will tackle the game's themes and illustrate the aspects of the narrative that help reinforce them.

Davey and Creative Intent

"You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul."
-George Bernard Shaw

As mentioned previously, *The Beginner's Guide* is a first-person examination of the works of a game developer named Coda. Guiding the player through his levels, Davey Wreden provides commentary on all kinds of details from the engine Coda used (Source) to the limitations he worked with. But Davey also hints to much more. While the player walks around Coda's first level, an abandoned map for Counterstrike, he mentions how Coda's games "are all going to give us access to their creator." Davey believes that by looking at the work, he'll be able to figure out who Coda is as a person and inevitably see why he gave up designing games in general.

And yet, Davey's actions in the presentation of these levels seemingly go against the concept that he believes in. Rather than showing off the levels in their purest form, he decides to make various modifications to them. For instance, in "Whisper" (Chapter 1), he decides to skip past a labyrinth the player would have had to go through. In "Stairs"

(Chapter 4), Davey speeds up the player to reach the end of the level more quickly. And this happens over and over: in "Down" (Chapter 7) he skips past an hour-long time requirement that the player would have had to wait through; in "Notes" (Chapter 8) he suggests skipping past all of the text written by Coda since they weren't important. If you wanted to portray the thoughts of a creator through their creations, wouldn't you want to show them in the way the creator intended?

Sometimes, showing these things off provides a moment of wonder. In Chapter 5's "Puzzle," Davey deletes the walls of the final area to show a series of stairs and rooms beyond what the player was intended to see. But this brings up another question: who does this serve? The creator? Or the ego of the one who uncovers this purposefully locked away knowledge?

This sentiment only continues as the game progresses. At a certain point, all of Coda's levels start to end with a lamppost. Davey uses this motif as a means of supporting his idea that all of Coda's levels mean something when put together. When Coda's work starts leaning towards creating prisons and the low points of the creative process, he eventually creates a theory that Coda is depressed and suffering from not being able to come up with new games. However, the player finds out that this isn't at all the case. After reaching the end of Chapter 16's "Tower," (a level that's only feasibly completable by using Davey's hacks), the player finds out that Davey's been placing the lampposts himself and redistributing Coda's levels without his permission.

To the player, the context behind every level changes. Chapter 10's "House" is no longer the continuation of a puzzle mechanic Coda implemented into a larger physical space as Davey said, but a ruse to make it more than just a laid-back cleaning game. Chapter 15's "Machine" represents Coda as a machine of ideas not because Coda views himself that way normally, but because that's how he feels when Davey's sharing his work with everyone. Every level doesn't have the grand meaning the player is led to believe. and Davey comes to realize that maybe Coda just liked making these games based on darker themes.

The game offers that the grand meaning, that window into the soul of the creator Davey is looking for doesn't exist. Everything Davey surmises from Coda's games is actually a representation of himself rather than Coda. All that Davey wanted was to feel better as a creative person, dissatisfied with his own work. He sought validation and comfort after faced with the daunting challenge of one-upping previous projects. More than anything he wants to get out of the creative rut he himself is stuck in and to start feeling satisfied again. And this is no better supported than with Davey pleading with Coda at the end of "The Tower": "…I want whatever that wholeness is that you summoned out of nothing and put into your work, you were complete in some way that I never was."

The Relationship Between Artist and Audience

"Art is not what you see, but what you make others see."
-Edgar Degas

So, Davey's done a bad thing. In the Epilogue, he admits to being wrong and realizes he must change his ways in order to be better. But does that necessarily mean that all of this was a one-way street? Could Coda have helped Davey along? While *The Beginner's Guide* on the surface seems to be cut and dry with Davey's story, it also shows how Coda might have subconsciously reciprocated his behavior. In "The Tower" Coda writes, "I wonder at times whether you think I am making these games for you. You've so infected my personal space that it's possible I did begin to plant 'solutions' in my work somewhere, hidden between games."

In "Notes," Davey mentions how he first met Coda when he was working on this level at a game jam. He also mentions that what drew him to Coda's games is how they made him feel "…like they let me have that connection." It's a connection between the artist and the audience. And this connection is reciprocated. When "Notes" puts on display a large piece of artwork with several text bubbles meant to represent individual people surrounding it, it's hard not to imagine this is how Coda felt with Davey and others seeing his work at the game jam.

The Beginner's Guide wants players to also be aware that artists, writers, game developers, etc. don't make their work in a vacuum. Whether they want to or not, critique (no matter how small or off-base) has an effect. It's this relationship between the artist and the audience that is sometimes necessary and other times abused.

Interpreting the Levels

"People who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree."
-Pablo Picasso

Which is it? Are creative works meant to be representations of the artist themselves? Are they meant to stand on their own, pure pieces unhindered by the context they're created under? Or are they the work of a sometimes-symbiotic relationship? *The Beginner's Guide* makes it ambiguous in this regard. Instead, its existence serves as a guide to both those creating and those consuming.

The Beginner's Guide has room for interpretation, capable of being many things to many different types of people. For the one writing this analysis, it's commentary on the relationships that creative works make with those that view them. But it's also reflective of my experiences, of making *The Beginner's Guide* worthy of being analyzed and by extension making myself worthy enough to be recognized on its shoulders. But does that make anyone examining any creative work someone like Davey? Not at all.

How a piece of art is viewed and examined changes over time and based on the experiences of both the artist and the audience. As more people experience it and reexamine it again and again, *The Beginner's Guide*'s relevance evolves. It can be interpreted as a creative seeking validation. Davey and Coda could be representative of the same person at different ends of the creative process (to support this: the definition of a coda is the concluding section of a piece). Someone else who writes their own analysis on the game might be able to incorporate how the use of the Source engine adds another element or how the dialogue choices presented integrate themselves into their own larger theme.

In creating a game that questions the value given and taken from analysis, I don't believe that *The Beginner's Guide* is dismissing it all entirely. Rather, it presents the player with the question and begs to be given several answers. In this way, the game's narrative wants to show that as a whole, creative works are not immutable. At the end of the day, they are whatever we need them to be to become complete both in making them and experiencing them.

Strongest Element

The narrative structure of *The Beginner's Guide* is easily its strongest element. It's fair to say that the audience that would find this game most attractive are those that are interested in or partake in the creative process and critique. Seeing Coda's levels grow as he becomes a more experienced developer as well as Davey's own play-by-play commentary style leaves plenty of room for players to get invested into the wonder of development as well as their own rabbit hole of interpretation. This only makes Coda's own feelings on the subject that much more impactful.

Unsuccessful Element

As *The Beginner's Guide* comes to a close, it decides to lean more heavily into one interpretation of the events of the story. Davey comes to realize the error of his ways while the player goes through the "Epilogue," talking about how "the thought of not being driven by external validation is unthinkable" to him. Even at other points in the game, there are several times when Davey relays somewhat similar information when it comes to how he sees himself. Statements like these which are a little heavy-handed in giving Davey's point of view can take away from players seeing more of the other underlying themes of the game. In easily giving players one train of thought, they don't attempt to connect other dots that are provided to them. Personally, the more impactful nature of the Epilogue comes from when Davey does decide to leave, giving time for the player to absorb and reflect on what they've learned.

Highlight

There are plenty of little moments in *The Beginner's Guide* that leave the player with a sense of wonder and introspection, whether it be the unveiling of the expansive hidden world beyond the plain interior walls in "Puzzle" or the calming cleaning sequence in "House." However, the moment that brings the most thought has to come from the game's "Epilogue." With no Davey or Coda providing context for the level they are playing for first time, the player is left to interpret the environment on their own.

Beginning with their view pointed towards the sky, the player makes their way through several different landscapes. They go through a train station, an estate, cave systems, desert ruins, and a foreboding elevator, only to wind up at yet another station. It ends with the player going through a laser presented earlier in one of Coda's first levels, with them ascending into the sky and seeing that they're at the center of a maze that expands as far the eye can see in every direction.

What does it all mean? The level in the Epilogue has no direct attribution. If this is Davey's level, it could mean that he has created a representation of his own creative process. The road might be long, but at the end he'll find himself at the solution of his personal maze and free himself from the struggle. However, the homage to Coda's level could be an indicator that Davey is still struggling to come up with his own ideas and is still cherry-picking elements for his own work. And maybe the whole packaged game itself was always still just a continuation of his cry for attention and validation. Or it could mean none of that. Upon concluding what it means to them, the player is left pondering more than ever the questions that *The Beginner's Guide* raises and are forced to wonder if it can ever be the most correct answer.

Critical Reception

The Beginner's Guide received fairly mixed reviews from media outlets, sitting at a 76 on Metacritic. USgamer's Bob Mackey gave the game a 2 out of 5, criticizing the game for not providing ways for players to better interact with the narrative and environment, comparing it to another title, *The Magic Circle*, which he believed accomplished that while tackling a similar premise. He also mentions that while he appreciated the personal nature of the game, he thought that the intent behind it was told rather than shown to him.

Edmond Tran from GameSpot gave *The Beginner's Guide* an 8 out of 10, saying that watching Coda's progression as a designer through the game was fascinating and appreciated the inside look into video game development. He also thought that while it might not challenge players in a traditional sense, "it challenges you to reconsider games, creators, and your perspective as the player." He also praised the conclusion of the game for successfully establishing the empathy required to connect with Davey and Coda.

Lessons

- **Lesson 1: There's still room for linearity in your story, as long as you know what you're telling.**

  It's true that *The Beginner's Guide* doesn't have multiple endings or complex mechanics, but that doesn't diminish the effectiveness of the story it tells. It still uses a sense of narrative progression determined by the player's journey through the space rather than the individual moments along that journey. As long as you're aware of the kind of story you want to tell along with what kind of audience you want to reach, the idea of linearity being a bad thing becomes more of a subjective preference rather than an empirical truth. *The Beginner's Guide* tackles its focus on creative work and directs it towards those interested in the process. And it's all the better for it.

- **Lesson 2: Don't be afraid to tell or bet on autobiographical/personal stories.**

  While *The Beginner's Guide* isn't a true story at least based on its initial premise, there's no denying that the nature of its storytelling brought a certain charm to it. There would be no game without the feelings expressed and creative implications brought up from Wreden's performance. These kinds of stories, told from the ones who experienced them, can be extremely powerful since they can more directly create emotional investment. Thankfully there have been other games that have told extremely resonant and personal stories, but there still remains plenty of room for others to contribute their own perspectives. This can also apply to helping to create the experiences and perspectives of others that don't have the immediate skills required to create a video game.

- **Lesson 3: Look for and implement a structure that best fits the story you want to tell.**

  For a story based around themes of self-doubt and creative validation, it seems only natural to present that story in the guise of a developer commentary. With the rise of developer commentary and featurettes/documentaries on game development, that connection only seems stronger. In creating your own story, there needs to be a moment where you consider all of the options. Much like when deciding whether a game is the best avenue to tell a narrative, there has to be another step in finding out the best tools that can be used in order to deliver the ideas that your narrative wants to get across.

Summation

However you interpret or decide not to interpret *The Beginner's Guide*, there's no denying its power in creating an experience that inspires thought about creatives. Whether you're a maker, a critic, a patron, or a consumer, the questions brought up by the game about artistic intent, the creative process, and the nature of analysis can be applied to any medium. The fact that this tackles the still nascent video game industry specifically (which still needs more talks about these subjects) only makes it worthier of analysis, however representative that analysis is of the ones doing the analyzing. In the individual experience of *The Beginner's Guide*, players can come to conclusions that are uniquely theirs and see not only the effort that goes into the creative process but also the effect their own experiences have on that process going forward.

Works Cited

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