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## Playing with Identity

### Authors, Narrators, Avatars, and Players in *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide*

This article offers a comparative analysis of Davey Wreden's *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden 2011 / Galactic Cafe 2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015) in order to explore the interrelation of authors, narrators, avatars, and players as four salient functions in the play with identity that videogames afford. Building on theories of collective and collaborative authorship, of narratives and narrators across media, and of the avatar-player relationship, the article reconstructs the similarities and differences between the way in which *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide* position their players in relation to the two games' avatars, narrators, and (main) author, while also underscoring how both *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide* use metareferential strategies to undermine any overly rigid conceptualization of these functions and their interrelation.

## 1. Introduction

Any attempt to understand the range of practices of identity construction in current digital culture cannot ignore the by now reasonably well researched area of videogames and their players (cf. also Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016; Sachs-Hombach / Thon 2015 for general introductions to the field of game studies). Yet, much existing research on 'digital identities' in this context focuses on the ways in which multiplayer games in general and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), *The Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine 2007), or *Star Wars. The Old Republic* (Bioware 2011) in particular afford their players digital social spaces in which they can present 'themselves-as-themselves' or 'themselves-as-others' in various ways (cf., e.g., Bessière et al. 2007; and the contributions in Corneliussen / Walker Rettberg 2008; but also the more comprehensive accounts in Gallagher 2018; Waggoner 2009). As productive as studies of, say, playful explorations of gendered identities certainly are in a MMORPG context (cf., e.g., Hussain / Griffiths 2008; Taylor 2006; as well as the more recent accounts in Sihvonen / Stenros 2018; Sundén / Sveningsson 2012), though, conflating 'digital' with 'online identities' would seem too narrow to fully grasp the intricate ways in which current videogames allow their players to playfully construct and deconstruct different identities.

Against the background of this discourse of identity as conscious or unconscious identification of players with their actions or representations in game spaces, the present article shifts the focus from multiplayer to singleplayer games

and from players to creators. Put in a nutshell, we inquire into the extent to which videogames can be understood as expressions of their creators' identities. In order to explore the interrelation of authors, narrators, avatars, and players as four salient functions in the play with identity that videogames afford, we offer a comparative analysis of *The Stanley Parable* (Wreden 2011 / Galactic Cafe 2013) and *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015). Both games are generally attributed to lead designer Davey Wreden as a highly visible author figure (i.e., a videogame *auteur*), prominently feature narrators (i.e., narrating characters to whom extensive voice-over narration can be attributed), and explicitly comment on the relationship between player and avatar (as part of their respective metareferential gambits). They do, however, not just thematize processes of identification, but rather problematize the very notion of (particularly authorial) identity through consequent defamiliarization of numerous central aspects of videogames. While this makes our examples highly atypical of their medium, their high degree of self-awareness implies and reflects upon the conventions they depart from. *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide* give visibility to issues of authorship, narration, and identity that otherwise remain obscured by conventions and traditions.

To make sense of the interrelated complexity of the two examples, however, it will be necessary to further explicate the concepts and theories to which we will resort in our analysis. While it would be preposterous to try and provide an exhaustive overview of the existing research on the four functions, we still aim to construct a conceptual context that will be sufficient for analysis of two extremely challenging examples, and thus should also have at least some more general theoretical as well as concrete analytical value.

## 2. Authors, Narrators, and Avatar-Player Relations

### 2.1 Videogame Authors

It seems largely uncontroversial to say that videogames are 'authored' artifacts in the sense of having been 'created'. While there are always individuals involved in this creation – whom we might, for simplicity's sake, call its creators – they may not necessarily be publicly perceived as the author of that artifact. As Foucault (1998) has already suggested, authorship can be understood as a discursively constructed function of (especially artistic) texts – and, thus, as the result of several complex processes, including explicit gestures of appropriation, judicial concerns like legal ownership and responsibility for a work, as well as critical, curatorial, and academic attribution of texts to an oeuvre. This means that natural persons cannot ever be unproblematically equated with the author of a text. Even if there is an individual that a text is attributed to, the attribute 'author' does not derive from their act of creation, but from its recognition by peers and public (Foucault 1998, 210).

An additional challenge in discussing the authorship of videogames is not just that they arguably complicate the notion of ‘text’ (cf., e.g., Aarseth 1997; Fernández-Vara 2014) but also that they are usually developed by a group of people rather than by a single individual. In at least some ways, these complexities mirror the long-running discussion around film authorship, with recent approaches increasingly moving away from treating the director as the sole *auteur* of a film (cf., e.g., Truffaut 1976; Sarris 2000), instead acknowledging the possibility of cooperatively, collaboratively, collectively, or simply “multiply authored films” (Meskin 2009, 21; cf. also Gaut 1997; Livingston 1997; Sellors 2007). Yet, in videogames, the question to what extent we should consider the members of this group of people to be part of an (empirical) *author collective* seems potentially even more complicated, not least because the contributions that different individuals make to the creation of a videogame vary rather substantially (cf., e.g., Consalvo 2013; Jennings 2016; Thon 2016, 131–138).

So, what are the conditions under which we would consider a game designer, programmer, 3D artist, audio artist, or member of the QA team as one of the authors of a videogame? Combining the above-mentioned accounts of film authorship with Margaret Gilbert’s “plural subject theory” (2014), Sondra Bacharach and Deborah Tollefsen have developed a more general “theory of coauthorship that appeals to the notion of a joint commitment” (2010, 23). According to Bacharach and Tollefsen, such an account of artistic groups (which arguably include videogame developers) “helps distinguish mere contributors from coauthors, because individuals must be jointly committed to creating a work of art as a body in order to count as part of the plural subject or social group” (2010, 31). While we find Bacharach and Tollefsen’s fairly inclusive conceptualization of authorship as being attributable to all “jointly committed” contributors to be broadly convincing, it also seems clear that we have “to think of global authorship [...] as a matter of degree” (Livingston 1997, 143) and that tracing the distribution of production roles and creative control within videogame development may turn out to be a fairly complex endeavour requiring extensive fieldwork within a production studies framework (cf. Kerr 2017; O’Donnell 2014; Ruggill et al. 2017).

That being said, the ways in which videogame authorship is discursively constituted, represented, and perceived can be quite different from the actual dynamics of distributed work in the context of videogame development. As Derek Johnson and Jonathan Gray remark, “to see press or marketing for almost any item of media today without seeing the invocation of at least one author figure is rare” (2013, 2). While this kind of ‘promotional authorship’ is generally less salient in a videogame context than it is for films, television series, or comics (cf. Hadas 2020), it still seems clear that some members of a videogames’ author collective (broadly conceived) are more likely than others to be perceived as *author figures* in the sense of “a cultural *legend* created by texts” (Branigan 1992, 87, original emphasis). This does not just refer to supposed videogame *auteurs* such as Hideo Kojima, Peter Molyneux, or indeed Davey Wreden (cf. Aarseth 2004; Hakimi 2017; Lopes et al. 2017), but also to the general hierarchy of

authorial roles that tends to make the lead game designer or art director more visible within the videogame's paratexts than, for example, a physics engine programmer or a member of the QA team. Without a doubt, then, the distinction between empirical author collectives and the author figure that is foregrounded or, indeed, constructed in surrounding discourses is of particular importance to the discussion of videogame authorship.

## 2.2 Videogame Narrators

By now, there is a broad consensus within game studies that some videogames tell interesting stories in interesting ways (cf., e.g., Aarseth 2012; Domsch 2013; Neitzel 2014) and that some of these videogames use narrators to do so (cf. Froschauer 2017; Engelns 2014, 169-203; Thon 2016b, 207-220). Yet, just like in film narratology, there is little consensus within game studies as to what exactly the term 'narrator' refers to. Reducing the complex intersecting conceptual histories relevant to this discussion to their core, the terminological disagreement primarily revolves around the question to whom or what we can attribute the different elements of a narrative or, in the case of videogames, a ludo-narrative representation. As videogames are complex multimodal artifacts (cf., e.g., Herte 2016; Thon 2016a; Toh 2018), this question is not limited to spoken or written verbal narration, but also includes the variety of cut-scenes, scripted events, and interactive gameplay sequences that constitute the bulk of a playthrough in many narratively complex videogames.

Indeed, this 'attribution problem' is solved comparatively simply in the case of so-called character narrators or *narrators-as-narrating characters*, who are more or less explicitly represented by the videogame or other narrative medium in question (cf. also, e.g., Bordwell 1985; Jannidis 2006; Thon 2016b). While it remains important to acknowledge not just the narrative but also the ludic functions of such narrators, the narratorial complexity they tend to add to videogames can still be productively analyzed by established narratological terms and concepts aimed, for example, at the position of a narrator within the overall *narratorial hierarchy* (i.e., asking whether the narrator in question is extradiegetic, intradiegetic, or hypodiegetic) or the *degree of involvement* in the stories they tell (i.e., asking whether the narrator in question is heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, or autodiegetic) (cf., e.g., Bal 1997, 43-75; Genette 1980, 227-234; 1988, 84-95; Rimmon-Kenan 2002, 87-106; as well as Thon 2016b, 152-166). While narrators can relate to the other elements of a multimodal medium such as a videogame in various ways, they tend to be represented as only being in control of their own verbal narration, which then constitutes only a very small part of the overall ludo-narrative representation. Arguably, the question remains who is (or, rather, is represented as) being responsible for the design of the cut-scenes, scripted events, and

interactive gameplay segments that each in their own way may contribute to representing a given videogame's storyworld (cf. also, once more, Thon 2016a on videogame storyworlds).

Again, it would go beyond the scope of this article to reconstruct the various suggestions to solve this problem that have been put forward within film studies (cf. Chatman 1978; 1990; Gaudreault / Jost 1999; Kuhn 2011), comic studies (cf. Marion 1993; Groensteen 2013; Mikkonen 2017), and game studies (cf. Aarseth 1997; Jannidis 2007; Zierold 2011). Yet, while there may be reasons to refrain from directly attributing the ludo-narrative representation of a videogame to its actual creators or empirical author collective, it remains largely unclear why we would need both the concept of an "implied author" (Chatman 1978, 148), "implied creator" (Aarseth 1997, 127), or "*hypothetical author collective*" (Thon 2016b, 137, original emphasis) and the concept of an "intrigant" (Aarseth 1997, 127) as the ludic equivalent of film studies' "grand image-maker" (Gaudreault / Jost 1999, 46) or comic studies' "graphiator" (Marion 1993, 36; our translation) to analyse the relevant attribution processes. In order "not to proliferate theoretical entities without need" (Bordwell 1985, 62), we would instead be content to distinguish between narrators-as-narrating characters to whom players may attribute various strands of *narratorial representation* that prototypically (but not necessarily) take the form of verbal narration and hypothetical author collectives to whom players may attribute the *nonnarratorial representation* that includes the cut-scenes, scripted events, and interactive gameplay segments of a videogame (cf. Thon 2016b, 152-166).

### 2.3 Avatar-Player Relations

Just as is the case with narrators, there are different ways to conceptualize characters more generally, which draw on partially conflicting theoretical frameworks, from hermeneutics and psychoanalysis to semiotic and cognitivist approaches (cf. the survey in Eder et al. 2010). Still, a comparatively uncontroversial general explication of the term 'character' would be "a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like" (Jannidis 2009a, 14). Without unpacking in much more detail the complexities that even this general conceptualization presents, it is worth noting (a) that characters should not be conflated with their textual or medial representation, but rather can be understood as "*communicatively constructed artifacts*" (Eder 2010, 18, original emphasis; cf. also, e.g., Eder 2008), emphasizing that characters are the result of rather complex meaning making processes; (b) that the anthropomorphicity of characters is a matter of degree and can, in some cases, even be reduced to having an "intentional (object-related) inner life" (Eder 2010, 17) attributed to them, which allows us to include various kinds of 'animated objects' or other not-particularly-human-like characters; and (c) that understanding characters as entities within a storyworld suggests that they are represented rather than real,

but remains agnostic with regard to their (non)fictionality, meaning that we can understand not only the subjects of autobiography and autofiction but also, for example, medially represented public figures as (more or less) nonfictional characters (cf. also, e.g., Christen 2019; Mundhenke 2016; Thon 2019).

Videogame characters can generally be understood as amalgams of three conceptually distinct dimensions, as they may fulfil core *ludic functions* within the game spaces, core *narrative functions* within the storyworld, and core *communicative functions* within the social spaces of multiplayer videogames (cf., e.g., Linderoth 2005; Schröter / Thon 2014; Schröter 2016). As relevant as all three of these dimensions can become for both player-controlled characters and so-called non-player characters in both multiplayer and singleplayer videogames (cf. Boudreau 2017), we will foreground the first two dimensions and their rather complex interrelation in the following. Again, this narrowing of the analytical focus is not uncommon in existing research: Daniel Vella (2016), for example, uses the term *playable figure* to subsume what he calls the *avatar* (i.e., the entity under the player's direct control within the game-as-system that fulfills the core ludic functions within the game spaces we have already mentioned above) and the *player character* (i.e., the character in the sense of a represented entity that fulfills the core narrative functions in the storyworld we have likewise already mentioned above). According to Vella, the avatar is the player's window to and "prosthetic extension" (Klevjer 2012, 1) into the game spaces and is generally complicit and malleable, whereas the player character can have its own opinions, goals, and values independent of, and sometimes in opposition to, the player. The player character will often act independently of player input, ranging from trivial things like locomotion and idle animations to rote behaviour and even explicit override or refusal of player commands (cf. Willumsen 2018).

The relationship of player and playable figure is thus complex and prone to changes during play. Empathy and identification with the playable figure are important aspects of the gameplay experience (cf., e.g., Klimmt et al. 2009; Tronstad 2008) that undermine the traditional, facile belief in a "magic circle" separating play and reality (cf., e.g., Calleja 2012; Consalvo 2009). They are, however, not only counterbalanced by the player character's partially predetermined role within a storyworld, but also by the agency given to the player over the avatar and, in turn, the game spaces (cf., e.g., Murray 2017; Jørgensen 2013). Indeed, the term 'agency' has proven very influential within game studies, with many theorists following Janet Murray's early definition of the concept as referring to "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices" (2017, 159). In an extensive review of the term's conceptual history, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and colleagues define agency as

a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, that occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take as supported by an underlying computational model [...] whether this is traveling across space, managing resources, engaging in battle, or making conversational moves. (2009, 7)

The degree to which players exert influence can be so limited as to be considered illusory (cf. MacCallum-Stewart / Parsler 2007) or so ambivalent as to produce

frustration rather than empowerment (cf. Johnson 2015), and it can be manipulated throughout the course of play (e.g., as a means for creating suspense and horror; cf. Habel / Kooyman 2013). Depending on the type of game, a minimal degree of agency may suffice: “As long as the players feel in control of movements in space, even the most linear narrative and the most constrained level design will provide enough agency. In a way, that’s what we’ve come to expect from mainstream games” (Pederchini, quoted in Sicart 2013, 104).

Agency is therefore not only setting boundaries to what players can do, it predetermines how the player is expected to behave, thus defining a standard metagame (cf. Boluk / Lemieux 2017) or implied player (cf. Aarseth 2007). In other words, the player’s role vis-a-vis the game is defined by both the abilities of the avatar and the player’s control of them, but agency of course extends beyond the player’s interaction with the game spaces, instead including all dimensions of the gameplay experience – spatial, ludic, narrative, and beyond (cf. also, e.g., Bodi 2019; Calleja 2011). Not all videogames allow the player ‘meaningful’ influence on the level of narrative, but when they do, agency becomes instrumental in realizing one coherent plot out of a nonlinear structure of forking paths (cf., e.g., Aarseth 1997; Backe 2012; Thon 2016b). This configurative function of players vis-à-vis a videogame’s story has led some theorists to conflate the player with the narrator (cf., e.g., Kania 2018 for a critical perspective) or frame the player’s narrative agency as analogous to the textual agency of an “implied author” (Neitzel 2010, 196). These are, however, minority positions that run counter to how agency and authorship are generally conceptualized within game studies. Indeed, in a rare case of agreement, Janet Murray and Espen Aarseth both stress that to be an author, it is necessary to have “authorship of the environment itself” (Murray 2017, 187) or to have “the ability to transform the text into something that the instigator of the text could not foresee or plan for” (Aarseth 1997, 164). Hence, it can be considered a broad consensus within early as well as current game studies that what videogames afford their players is “not authorship but agency” (Murray 2017, 188).

Yet, there are of course numerous practices in which players use videogames for creations of their own, and even though “we must distinguish this derivative authorship from the originating authorship of the system itself” (Murray 2017, 186f.), they have developed into a central element of videogame culture and attracted much academic attention. When discussing the ‘player as author’ in this way, scholars have probed the many facets of secondary authorship (Poremba 2003, 24-26) such as performative play, crafting and modding (cf. Sihvonen 2009), cosplay (cf. Fron et al. 2007), speedrunning (cf. Scully-Blaker 2016), production of Let’s Play videos (cf. Ackermann 2016; Burwell / Miller 2016; Gekker 2018), and live-streaming (cf. Taylor 2018). Research has found a keen sense of accomplishment and an ongoing negotiation of authorial roles within the communities that both produce and use these products. “By creating game artifacts, players are recognized as authors of new objects and contexts that are significant, expressive and instantiate their agency” (Poremba 2003, 54).

This complication of videogame authorship is particularly salient in the context of modding practices: ‘Modding’, short for ‘modifying’, refers to players using an existing videogame to develop their own creative content, from additional levels in the style of the original game to complete appropriation of the existing technology for an independent product (cf. also, e.g., Abend / Beil 2016; Postigo 2010; Sotamaa 2010). Because of this, the authorship of mods can range from clearly derivative to arguably original, especially because the tools used in the creation of commercial videogames are often available independently from released games – an ambivalence that is made topical in the two videogames that we now want to analyse in slightly more detail with regard to their realization of and metareferential reflection on the interrelated functions of authors, narrators, avatars, and players.

### 3. *The Stanley Parable* (2011/2013)

Davey Wreden’s *The Stanley Parable* was originally published in 2011 as a mod for the seminal first-person shooter *Half-Life 2* (Valve Corporation 2004), but later was re-developed and re-published in 2013 via Steam Greenlight as *The Stanley Parable. HD Remix* (Galactic Cafe 2013). Although reworked in most aspects and generally considered an original creation, the 2013 version still uses the game engine *Source*, which was also used by *Half-Life 2*, resulting in some noteworthy aesthetic similarities. Before we zoom in on the *The Stanley Parable*’s aesthetics, however, it should be stressed that neither the 2011 nor the 2013 version of the videogame has been created by Wreden alone – and while he certainly is the most visible author figure associated with *The Stanley Parable*, both versions include extensive voice acting work by Kevan Brighting, Kim Hoffmeister (in the 2011 version), and Lesley Staples (in the 2013 version), and the 2013 version also credits William Pugh for design and writing as well as various other collaborators for programming, art, and composition.

Still, even the 2013 version of *The Stanley Parable* is generally perceived to be primarily (if not exclusively) Davey Wreden’s creation – and one of the reasons for this perception may very well be that, despite *The Stanley Parable*’s considerable narrative complexity in telling a highly nonlinear arrangement of stories about the office worker Stanley, its audiovisual design and game mechanics are comparatively streamlined. As has already been mentioned, *The Stanley Parable* uses the game engine *Source*, which is generally associated with first-person shooters such as *Counter-Strike. Source* (Valve Corporation / Turtle Rock Studios 2004), *Half-Life 2*, or *Left 4 Dead* (Valve South 2008). In contradistinction to the reasonably complex, time-critical gameplay that these games provide (cf., e.g., Hitchens 2011; Voorhees et al. 2012), however, *The Stanley Parable* combines extensive voice-over narration with much more simplified gameplay that allows the player to make their avatar walk around in the game spaces and interact with certain objects, but not do much else of any



ludic consequence. Accordingly, *The Stanley Parable* can be considered to be what is sometimes called a ‘walking simulator’, albeit certainly one of the more narratively ambitious ones (cf. also, e.g., Kagen 2018; Muscat et al. 2016).

Walking simulators, one of the more visible genres within the area of indie games (cf., e.g., Garda and Grabarczyk 2016; Juul 2019), are usually understood as both invigorating the conventionalized aesthetics of mass-market games (cf. Carbo-Mascarell 2016) and as enabling the expression of complex topics, from explorations of personal trauma (cf. Marak 2017) to portrayals of alternate masculinities (cf. Kagen 2018) and non-heteronormative sexual identities (cf. Ruberg 2019). The genre draws much of its power from a combination of limited agency and ambiguity (cf. Muscat et al. 2016), as players have little possibility for acting outside the confines of a strictly controlled, tightly authored experience confronting them with themes and motifs that require interpretation, rather than ludic interaction. This means that, ironically, even transgressively themed walking simulators are, at their core, “actually quite normative” (Ruberg 2019, 13) in that they limit the interaction with the game spaces and tightly regulate the central activity of walking.

At first glance, *The Stanley Parable* seems to tick all of these boxes: Following an initial cut-scene that introduces Stanley, an office worker who suddenly had his working routine interrupted when he stopped receiving instructions which buttons to push on his computer, the player takes control of Stanley-the-avatar, while the unnamed, male voice-over narrator (voiced by Kevan Brighting), who initially appears to be extradiegetic and heterodiegetic, starts telling the player what Stanley-the-player-character supposedly did after he discovered “that all of his co-workers were gone”. If the player follows these thinly-veiled narratorial directions, Stanley proceeds to explore the office building, discovers a “Mind Control Facility” that was used to control the emotions of his co-workers and himself, disables it by pushing the “OFF” button, and enjoys his newly found freedom by frolicking through a green field. Arguably, this “Freedom Ending” is already quite metareferential in the sense that it employs a form of self-reference “located on a logically higher level, a ‘metalevel’, within an artefact or performance [and] forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium / system referred to” (Wolf 2009, 30f.). After all, *The Stanley Parable* here requires the player to make Stanley “follow” the narrator’s story and thus highlights the many ways in which videogames limit rather than afford player agency (cf. also, e.g., Backe 2019; Fest 2016; Jannidis 2009b on metareferentiality in videogames; as well as Bell 2016; Harpold 2007; Ryan 2006, 204-230 on the related concept of metalepsis in videogames).

Even this most ‘normative’ of the many possible playthroughs that *The Stanley Parable*’s nonlinear narrative structure may generate (with its thirteen different ‘hard endings’ and nine additional “ending-like outcomes”) makes it quite clear that this “is a videogame about videogames” (Fest 2016, n.pag.). But that is of course not all there is to it, as the narrator commonly tells the player that Stanley-the-player-character does things such as entering one of two open doors *before* the player has actually made Stanley-the-avatar do these things – and the player

can thus generate nonnarratorial gameplay that contradicts the narrator's verbal voice-over narration by, for example, making Stanley-the-avatar and thus also Stanley-the-player-character enter the *other* door, leading to the narrator becoming increasingly irritated and passive-aggressive (commenting, for example, that "[t]his was not the correct way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well"). In some of the many paths that *The Stanley Parable's* nonlinear narrative structure offers to both Stanley and the player, the narrator's growing exasperation again takes on decidedly metareferential hues, as he interprets Stanley's resistance against the narratorial version of the story to be a sign of deep-seated resentment aimed at what the narrator identifies as his creation. There are multiple noteworthy examples of this, but the emotional component of the narrator's response is perhaps most explicitly represented in the "Zending" ending, when the player's making Stanley repeatedly fall from a platform on the top of a staircase eventually prompts the narrator to burst out: "My god, is this really how much you dislike my game? That you'll throw yourself from this platform over and over to be rid of it? You are literally willing to kill yourself to keep me from being happy?"

Indeed, this (fictional) blurring of the boundaries between the function of the narrator (the extradiegetic, heterodiegetic narrator-as-narrating character) and the function of the author (the hypothetical author collective, or perhaps the author figure of Davey Wreden, or that of William Pugh) seems to reflect on the mediality of videogames; and the often empty promises of agency and choice that they make is at the core of *The Stanley Parable's* metareferential gambit. Another notable manifestation of this shift can be found in the "Games Ending", which has Stanley pass a fictional *The Stanley Parable* leaderboard, before the narrator asks him to test "a prototype of a new game [he's] been working on". The 'gameplay' of the narrator's game consists of Stanley (and, thus, the player) repeatedly pushing a red button for four hours in order to save a cardboard baby from the flames (and, after the first two hours, pushing another button to save a puppy from a pool filled with piranhas). If the player (and, thus, Stanley) fails at the game, the narrator further demonstrates his 'authorial' control over the game spaces by moving Stanley to what looks like a smaller version of *Minecraft* (Mojang Games 2011) and, after the narrator deems that "game" to be "far too open-ended", the first level of *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2007), complete with a rather simple puzzle ("Ohhh! It's a puzzle! Critical thinking, Stanley. Your forté").

Evidently, the resulting tensions between the narratorial representation of the voice-over narration and the supposedly nonnarratorial representation of the simulated gameplay also complicate the role of the narrator as an extradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrating character. Throughout *The Stanley Parable's* various playthroughs, the narrator repeatedly switches perspective from Stanley to himself, and thus becomes a homodiegetic rather than a heterodiegetic narrator. More importantly, however, the narrator's limited influence over the design of the game spaces and general lack of control over the resulting gameplay at least implies some sort of presence within the represented situations, moving him

closer to an intradiegetic than an extradiegetic narratorial role. At the same time, the rather uncommon constellation of a narrator being represented as having any ‘authorial’ control over the game spaces at all arguably also pulls him in the opposite direction, making him appear closer to the hypothetical author collective than to a conventional extradiegetic narrator-as-narrating character. This latter point is further emphasized by the narrator’s metaleptic awareness of his (and Stanley’s) being part of a videogame, including an at least partial awareness of *The Stanley Parable*’s use of Steam achievements, when the narrator positions himself as the arbiter of whether or not the player has clicked on door 430 (and various other objects) enough to warrant receiving the achievement “Click On Door 430 Five Times” (which is one of many metareferential Steam achievements that *The Stanley Parable* offers).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *The Stanley Parable* likewise blurs the boundaries not only between Stanley-the-avatar and Stanley-the-player character (as noted above) but also, and no less saliently, between Stanley-the-player-character and the player. This not only refers to a widespread ‘slippage’ in the ways in which the narrator talks to and about Stanley, as he repeatedly attributes possible player reactions to the latter, but also includes situations in which the narrator asks Stanley to do things only the player could do (such as pressing keys on the keyboard) or even directly addresses the player instead of Stanley. The “Out of Map Ending”, for example, initially has the narrator claim that Stanley “praised the game for its insightful and witty commentary into the nature of video game structure and its examination of structural narrative tropes”, before he suggests (arguably, to the player) that “you could literally just hit escape and restart the game any old time you want”. The “Broom Closet Ending” takes this even further, when the narrator speculates about the player’s motivation for letting Stanley stay in the broom closet (“Maybe to you, this is somehow its own branching path”), claims to have concluded that the player has died in front of their computer (“I’ve come to a very definite conclusion about what’s going on right now. You’re dead”), and welcomes what he assumes must be another player that has taken the place of the supposedly deceased first player (“Ah, second player! It’s good to have you on board. I guarantee you can’t do any worse than the person who came before you”).

Just as neither *The Stanley Parable*’s narrator nor its hypothetical author collective are represented as actually believing that the original player has died and been replaced by another at this point in the videogame, however, so is the supposed ‘authorial’ agency of the narrator subjected to multiple layers of metareferential deconstruction. This is perhaps best exemplified when the narrator loses track of the story (“It was right here a minute ago. I know for sure that it’s here somewhere”) and, after restarting the game, introduces “The Stanley Parable Adventure Line™” as a supposedly simple means to guide Stanley (and, thus, the player) through the predetermined narrative structure. That in itself is a not particularly subtle metareferential comment on many mainstream videogames’ rather blunt attempts to orient the player within the game spaces, but *The Stanley Parable* adds yet another layer of metareferential complexity when “The Stanley

Parable Adventure Line™” increasingly seems to develop a mind of its own, which leads the narrator to abandon it (“Stanley, I’d also like to veto The Line™ from having any role in our awesome new story”). At first glance, this may seem like an empowering moment of solidarity between the narrator, Stanley, and the player, working together to create their own story full of narrative agency and choice, but it soon turns out to be just another turn of the metareferential screw, as Stanley and the narrator encounter a large monitor that identifies the steps they have taken so far as part of the entirely predetermined, fully scripted “Confusion Ending”.

Some of the metareferential commentary that the “Confusion Ending” offers of course yet again aims at the tension between predetermined narrative paths and player choice, with the narrator’s prerecorded reactions to the player making Stanley diverge from the supposedly prescribed version of the story further emphasizing that all paths of *The Stanley Parable*’s nonlinear narrative structure are in fact equally preconceived, prescribed, and predetermined by the hypothetical and / or the empirical author collective. More importantly, however, the narrator is here clearly represented as not living up to his ambitions of ‘authorial’ control, but rather as himself being controlled by the *The Stanley Parable* as an artefact, the design of which can be attributed to the hypothetical author collective or, indeed, the author figures of Davey Wreden, William Pugh, et al. Accordingly, *The Stanley Parable* represents both the ‘freedom of choice’ of Stanley / the player and the supposed ‘authorial’ control of the narrator as mere illusions of agency, as two sides of the same coin. Stanley’s supposed struggle against what the narrator, at another point in the videogame, identifies as “the strict order of scripted narrative events” (in the “Serious Ending” that the player can only access by entering the cheat code “sv\_cheats 1” into the console, though that cheat code is of course also part of *The Stanley Parable*’s metareferential gambit) is here re-enacted by the narrator trying to resist the always already predetermined outcomes that constitute the different paths of *The Stanley Parable*’s nonlinear narrative structure: “Did we break the cycle? The, um... whatever it is that made this schedule?” Regrettably, no – and the futility of trying to “break the cycle” is indeed the main metareferential point that the “Confusion Ending” makes.

As the interplay of agency and control between the hypothetical author collective, the narrator, Stanley, and the player is at the centre of *The Stanley Parable*’s metareferential gambit, it will come as no surprise that the narrator repeatedly comments on the similarities between Stanley / the player and himself. The most explicit of these reflections can perhaps be found in the “Apartment Ending”, when the narrator muses: “I don’t make the rules. I simply play to my intended purpose. The same as Stanley. We’re not so different, I suppose”. Yet, the importance of this similarity is also commented on in an even more explicit fashion by a second, female narrator (voiced by Lesley Staples) in the “Museum Ending”: If the player lets Stanley follow the narrator’s story until he nearly reaches the “Mind Control Facility”, but the former diverge from the latter’s narrated path in order to follow an “Escape” sign that leads into a long corridor,

the narrator will repeatedly warn Stanley / the player that certain death awaits at its end. Indeed, at the end of the corridor, Stanley falls into a death trap, a kind of conveyor belt that slowly moves him toward a huge crushing machine – but before Stanley meets his death, the female narrator takes over, saves Stanley from the machine by allowing him to escape to a museum-like game space, and offers some metareferential reflection of her own: “When every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance, death becomes meaningless, making life the same. Do you see now? Do you see that Stanley was already dead from the moment he hit start?”

The museum-like game space that the female narrator’s intervention has unlocked contains beta elements from earlier stages in *The Stanley Parable*’s development, representations of *The Stanley Parable*’s other endings, and content that was cut from the videogame before publication as well as a triptych of “Credits” emphasizing the fact that *The Stanley Parable* is indeed an authored experience, created by an author collective whose members go significantly beyond Davey Wreden and William Pugh. Once the player lets Stanley conclude his exploration of the museum-like game space by flicking off a switch under a giant “The Stanley Parable” sign, the female narrator continues her direct player address, yet again emphasizing the futility of any endeavour to find anything but the illusion of agency and choice within *The Stanley Parable*’s nonlinear narrative structure: “But listen to me, you can still save these two. You can stop the program before they both fail. Press ‘escape’ and press ‘quit’. There’s no other way to beat this game. As long as you move forward, you’ll be walking someone else’s path. Stop now, and it will be your only true choice. Whatever you do, choose it! Don’t let time choose for you! Don’t let time-”. Following narratorial directions to quit the game is of course hardly the kind of “true choice” that the female narrator claims it is. Yet, if the player has not quit (or restarted) the game at this point, Stanley does end up being crushed by the machine. Accordingly, the player is left with precisely the two options identified by the female narrator, leading to a continuation of the “cycle” that neither Stanley nor the male narrator can break as long as the player does not decide to quit playing the game.

#### **4. *The Beginner’s Guide* (2016)**

Following the success of the 2013 version of *The Stanley Parable*, William Pugh founded CrowsCrowsCrows, a small independent studio that specializes in VR, has published a number of moderately successful videogames, and is currently collaborating with Galactic Cafe on the forthcoming cross-platform remake *The Stanley Parable. Ultra Deluxe* (Galactic Cafe / CrowsCrowsCrows 2019). Davey Wreden, on the other hand, developed and published his next videogame independently yet again, under the paradoxically named label of Everything Unlimited Ltd. – a brand name the company website identifies as “the banner under which Davey Wreden is creating video games” (Everything Unlimited

2015b, n.pag.). Not listing any collaborators on the website, Wreden cultivates the image of a solitary developer, which even when not taken literally stresses his role as the instigator of the development studio. The newly founded company's first (and, thus far, only) original creation, *The Beginner's Guide* (Everything Unlimited Ltd. 2015), was released in October 2015, two years after *The Stanley Parable. HD Remix*. According to the Everything Unlimited Ltd. website, *The Beginner's Guide* "is a narrative video game for Mac and PC. It lasts about an hour and a half and has no traditional mechanics, no goals or objectives. Instead, it tells the story of a person struggling to deal with something they do not understand" (Everything Unlimited 2015a, n.pag.).

Both the emphasis on *The Beginner's Guide*'s narrative qualities and the explicit mention of its lack of traditional mechanics or goals squarely situate it in the genre of walking simulators. As mentioned above, walking simulators tend to employ strict authorial control over the gameplay, which has also led to representatives of the genre being considered as "efficient vehicle[s] for the presentation of certain kinds of knowledge, in the same way in which papers, conference presentations, and books are" (Ferri et al. 2016, n.pag.). Indeed, *The Beginner's Guide* has been characterized as a prime example for such a use of the videogame form, as an introduction into Umberto Eco's theories on the reader (cf. Grine 2016, 2), or even "an entry point into theorizing games as a kind of critical media theory" (Thorne 2017, 2). In other words, *The Beginner's Guide* can be understood to be an essay in the form of a videogame, a "ludographic essay" (Fassone 2018). Arguably, this emerging consensus about categorizing *The Beginner's Guide* as a form of nonfiction stems primarily from the very explicit manner in which it "represents its own production and the idea of game designer as 'auteur'" (Jørgensen 2017, 1), which is of course precisely what the present article is concerned with as well.

At first glance, *The Beginner's Guide* seems to have much in common with *The Stanley Parable*. Like its predecessor, it has been developed using the first-person shooter game engine *Source*, employs simplified game mechanics typical of the walking simulator genre, and features a voice-over narrator from its very outset. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, there are also some striking differences, the first of which immediately become apparent during *The Beginner's Guide*'s "Intro" segment. Over a white screen, the voice-over narrator (voiced by Davey Wreden) begins his exposition with the words: "Hi there, thank you very much for playing *The Beginner's Guide*. My name is Davey Wreden, I wrote *The Stanley Parable*". This opening may initially appear as a mildly unconventional paratext – the creator thanking the audience from within the work itself – yet quickly comes into focus as the primary narrative device of *The Beginner's Guide*, as the latter's central metareferential gambit consists in employing a fictionalized author-narrator, or autofictional narrator, to reflect on videogame authorship. Wreden's voice asserts itself as a constant presence, in a similar fashion as the narrator of *The Stanley Parable* – yet, *The Beginner's Guide* not only uses a narrator that at least initially claims to be the author of the videogame, but it also makes no pretence at presenting a coherent, conventional plot centred around a fictional character

fulfilling core narrative functions in a more or less well-defined storyworld. There is no Stanley here, no player character attaining self-consciousness while solving a mystery about mind control.

Instead, the narrator tells what at first glance appears to be an autobiographical story about his friendship with and estrangement from a fellow game designer named Coda. The player learns that the preternaturally experimental and prolific Coda has stopped making games and has not published any of his work, which is why the narrator has compiled 18 of Coda's games and released them with his commentary as the videogame we are currently playing, with each of Coda's games corresponding to one of the chapters of *The Beginner's Guide* (the "Intro" segment and 17 additional chapters, that is). The importance of Coda's work lies not so much in his craftsmanship, the narrator explains, as in the intimacy of his creations. As the narrator notes in the "Intro" segment, there is no pretence of realism in any of these games, but each of them

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.

As it turns out, the narrator's rendering of Coda through the interpretation of his games and additional background information is quite unreliable, but that is of course part of the metareferential point that *The Beginner's Guide* makes about videogame authorship. This opening already makes clear, though, that the videogame is about its author and about Davey Wreden, but that the relationship between those two is not one of simple identity.

In the following "chapters", Coda's work turns out to be mostly short vignettes rather than the kind of extended videogame experiences that we would expect in a AAA context (and, increasingly, in an indie context as well). The third chapter, entitled "Entering", is perhaps the most pronounced example of this, consisting of nothing but a circle of light in a dark environment and a small signpost with the words "YOU ARE NOW ENTERING" printed on it, while the narrator remarks: "And that's it! Okay the meaning of this game won't be clear just yet, please be patient with me for a few more games and I promise you'll see what makes it interesting". These short gameplay sequences appear as prototypes of individual concepts, some of which are combined in the later, longer chapters – both in terms of game mechanics and game spaces. One of the central aesthetic devices the narrator identifies in Coda's work is the use of lampposts. In the seventh chapter, entitled "Down", he claims that these lampposts are something Coda "fixates" on and that they are thus "going to appear at the end of every single one of his games from here on out", ultimately interpreting the lamppost as a sign that Coda "wants something to hold onto [sic]. He wants a reference point, he wants the work to be leading to something. He wants a destination. Which is what a lamppost is, it's a destination".

The narrator oscillates between interpreting the design of the games presented throughout the chapters and chronicling his relationship with Coda, from their initial meeting until a falling out caused by the narrator's increasingly invasive curatorial and editorial efforts. The narrator's comments on Coda's design choices tend to be rather opinionated, with the ninth chapter, entitled "Escape", prompting him to note that "personally I think it's awful to watch this, to see a person basically unraveling through their work", and the fifteenth chapter, entitled "Machine", being introduced by the claim that "now the work is becoming self-destructive". The narrator's interpretations are fuelled by an urge to define a coherent, stable identity of both Coda's work and person, based on his simplistic conflation of artefact and author, and consequently, they ultimately define his own identity more than they do Coda's.

Yet, toward the end of the videogame, the conflict between Coda and the narrator is rendered tangible in the virtual museum – a motif already explored in *The Stanley Parable* – of the sixteenth chapter, "Tower". Here, the 'exhibits' are messages from Coda to the narrator, including the revealing "Would you stop taking my games and showing them to people against my wishes?" and "Would you stop changing my games? Stop adding lampposts to them?" – which of course reveals the earlier interpretation of the lampposts to be a mere projection (or, indeed, deception) of the narrator. *The Beginner's Guide* ends with an "Epilogue" in which the narrator decides to leave behind his obsession with Coda's work and start creating his own.

As will have become apparent from this short summary, authorship and narration are as central to *The Beginner's Guide* as they are to *The Stanley Parable*, albeit with some significant shifts in focus. The most obvious difference may be that of the narratorial role, which sets the narrator of *The Beginner's Guide*'s apart from that of other videogame narrators, including the narrator in *The Stanley Parable*. While the videogame's autofictional narrator could be categorized as extradiegetic and homodiegetic, the narratorial representation only hints at the shape of anything resembling a well-defined storyworld, instead focusing on the relation between the narrator and Coda as well as on the 18 games and the supposed design choices behind them. Where *The Stanley Parable*'s nonlinear narrative structure is driven by the frustration of a narrator whose protagonist does not behave in harmony with the voice-over narration, the narratorial voice we encounter in *The Beginner's Guide* is that of a commentator, curator, or critic "that seems almost indifferent to the player" (Jørgensen 2017, 1) – a radical position to take in a medium generally characterized by the centrality of the player. The events the player participates in within the game spaces are mere illustrations of a story about the creation of the games in question, though the narrator arguably stops short of developing more than a rough narrative sketch of the diegetic storyworld in which both these games and the narrator's relationship to Coda would be located.

This is why various critics have stressed that *The Beginner's Guide* might rather be read as a videogame essay. Acting as the commentator, curator, and critic of Coda's work appears to be the main function of the narrator of *The Beginner's*



*Guide*. He offers much inside knowledge about game design in the fashion just discussed, as well as reflections on his treatment of Coda's work. Both are unmistakably inspired by co-creative player practices of videogame communities in general and modding communities in particular, a connection made rather obvious in the eighth chapter, entitled "Notes". Here, the game juxtaposes the narrator's account of the origin of his relationship to Coda with a game space that is filled with hundreds of fictional player comments: "So first off I'm sure you can deduce this, but this game is not connected to the internet, all of the notes you're going to see have been written BY Coda". These notes create something akin to a mise-en-abyme of fictional authorship (and obfuscated identity) as the real creator, Davey Wreden, has positioned fictional player comments in the game space that the autofictional narrator, Davey Wreden, identifies as having been created and placed in the game space by Coda. Still, these fictional player comments point to the complications of videogame authorship that result from the previously discussed communication and co-creation practices such as posting online comments and creating Let's Play videos.

As we have also already hinted at, the differences in the narratorial role and the objects of the voice-over narration between *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide* go hand in hand with fundamental differences in the functions of and relationship between player and playable figure. In the previous game, the narrator's statements about Stanley are (more or less) indirect, yet unmistakable addresses to the player that metareferentially comment on and negotiate their agency. *The Beginner's Guide*, on the other hand, positions the player as more of a bystander or witness than as an active agent. This results not only from the narrative construction of the videogame but in large parts from its fundamental game design decisions: The avatars of the different chapters have very limited abilities, giving the player only rudimentary agency, and throughout the whole videogame, there is no player character to speak of. Limited agency is, as already mentioned, typical for the walking simulator genre, yet *The Beginner's Guide* takes this principle further than most videogames, employing different types of unconventional restrictions of agency in the different chapters. In the "Intro" segment, the player can only move, not interact with the game spaces; in the first chapter, entitled "Whisper", the avatar has a gun, yet no enemies to shoot at, limited ammunition, and no means of reloading; in the second chapter, entitled "Backwards", forward motion is disabled; and in the fourth chapter, entitled "Stairs", the avatar becomes slower with every step they take up a staircase, to the point of almost total standstill. When similar manipulations of agency are found in other videogames, they are usually naturalized as (dis)abilities or volition of the player character. As *The Beginner's Guide* eschews all characterization, however, the defamiliarized agency it gives to the player appears more clearly as what it essentially is – a calculated, artificial restriction of the player's ability to interact meaningfully with the game spaces.

Beyond navigating the (inevitably linear or circular) game spaces, the player's most meaningful interaction with *The Stanley Parable* comes in the form of a puzzle that reoccurs in slight variations in different chapters, prompting the

narrator to offer comments such as “Don’t forget that solution, because we’re going to see this puzzle again soon. We’re going to see it a lot” (in the fifth chapter, “Puzzle”) or “It’s the puzzle again! With the exact same solution as the last time” (in the seventh chapter, “Down”). The puzzle is simple, yet effective, evolving from the counterintuitive placement of a switch to a challenge in which the avatar needs to be locked in a windowless, unlit room, before the exit door can be opened. Just like the difficulty of the puzzle increases, it gains in metaphorical significance, as the willingness to lock the avatar in a room is nothing short of an act of faith in the design of the puzzles and, thus, in the videogame’s hypothetical author collective. Moreover, the iterative design of the puzzles emphasizes how much videogames rely on design conventions that can be established in a short amount of time, yet carry over to other videogames and even other videogame genres. What is more, this salient bond between the player and the hypothetical author collective of the videogame results from a cognitive operation that is particularly important for discourses of authorship, namely the coherence of a work. The arrangement of *The Beginner’s Guide*’s central ludic elements thus once again metareferentially comments on the relationship of videogame players and videogame authors.

These and many other aspects of authorship through game design are explicitly pointed out by the narrator, who comments on the layout of several levels in some detail, noting not only general game design practices (like whiteboxing, the arrangement of game spaces as pure geometry) but also more specific factors, such as the strengths and weaknesses of the game engine used for *The Beginner’s Guide*. In the seventh chapter, “Down”, for example, the narrator notes that

to make all of these games, Coda is using an engine called Source. Like all engines, Source has certain things that it does well and it has certain things it does poorly. One of the things that it does very well is boxy, linear corridors. That is why so many of Coda’s games are set in these large flat empty rooms, is just because he’s working with what the engine does well. The tools available to the creator shape what kinds of creative work they’re going to end up making. You might consider paying attention to the architecture in Coda’s games to notice now they seem to stem from an engine that is very good at producing linear, boxy corridors.

Again, then, *The Beginner’s Guide* not only makes fairly straightforward metareferential use of its autofictional narrator but also attempts to create the conditions for what Werner Wolf calls “*meta-awareness*” to be “*elicited in the recipient*” (2009, 31, original emphases). Indeed, the accepted standards of the craft and the technological tools used to create videogames are generally attributable and protected intellectual property, which complicates the question of videogame authorship, particularly in the context of hobbyist and independent creators such as the fictional Coda and the real Davey Wreden.

In the end, the autofictional narrator brings the discourse about authorship full circle. Initially, he characterizes the expressive power of Coda’s games, the chapters of *The Beginner’s Guide*, as a way to ‘get to know the person behind them’, yet in the sixteenth chapter, “Tower”, he eventually admits to publishing the collection as an apology of sorts to Coda, “because I haven’t been able to find any other way to reach you. I’ve tried everything”. While the initial assumption

– that a work allows the recipient to know the individual who created it – is exposed as a romantic hermeneutic power fantasy tantamount to imprinting a work with one’s own projected meanings, the claim that the intradiegetic games or, indeed, the actual videogame *The Beginner’s Guide* disclose something about its fictional and / or empirical authors is upheld in more than one sense. Within the fictional frame of *The Beginner’s Guide*, the player has to deal with the shared, complicated, multiple authorship of Coda and the autofictional narrator, while learning much more about the former’s urges and fears than about the latter or, for that matter, about the fragmentary storyworld within which the games that make up the various chapters are located. On a more abstract and general level, *The Beginner’s Guide* is a reminder that a facile interpretation based on biographical data will inevitably and unhelpfully conflate natural persons with authors of works (author figures, hypothetical authors), and will hence project psychologizing assumptions into a work instead of engaging with the intricacies of its construction. Injecting a fictionalized version of himself into an autofictional (rather than autobiographical) narrative about problematic co-authorship, experimental game design, and psychological struggles allows Wreden (and, arguably, the other members of *The Beginner’s Guide*’s author collective) to explore these topics while controlling the ways in which Wreden-the-natural-person and Wreden-the-author-figure become visible to the players of *The Beginner’s Guide*.

## 5. Conclusion

The comparative analysis of our two examples demonstrates the degree of complexity of narratorial construction and metareferentiality that is possible in videogames. Author Davey Wreden has created two videogames that are obviously far from average representatives of the medium, yet which through their roots in AAA and modding culture are still able to connect to this mainstream heritage and its conventions. Against this background, our analysis not only illustrates the peculiarities of authorship in videogames, but also underscores that their creators can reflect upon the former in an explicit fashion, by appropriating one of the most fundamental tropes of self-referential narrative: the productive friction between author, narrator, protagonist, and recipient. Like central texts of high modern literature or auteur cinema, both form and content of our examples express a critical stance towards simplistic understandings of creative and authorial identity. *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner’s Guide* thus emerge as paradigmatic examples of how videogames are able to translate these traditional concepts into their own aesthetic means and categories, which can, as we have demonstrated, be productively analysed through the application of narratological terms and concepts – provided they are used carefully, acknowledging videogames’ medium-specificity, and in doing so also incorporating the relevant ludological theories and methods.

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