

The Instructions

Matthew Baker

The Instructions

ABOUT THESE EXAMS

The primary purpose of this facility is confinement, but patients are doubtless aware of the greater purpose: correction. In the past, you have exhibited antisocial behaviors, which the staff attempt to correct. Every patient here has been deemed a danger to society, but it is not impossible—moreover, has been proven possible—to socialize the antisocial. So, once an aeon, an exam is held. The exams are compulsory: all patients are examined. Those who pass are permitted to reenter society. Those who fail remain here. Patients cannot appeal for release. Confinement at the facility is a lifetime sentence: once sent here, passing an exam is the only way to leave. But, why these exams? Because the facility cannot release patients *supposedly, reputedly, apparently* socialized: only patients *proven* socialized may be released. Thus, before being allowed to reenter actual society, patients are tested in an artificial society. The exams are perhaps similar to a “virtual reality.” At the facility, staff sometimes refer to the exams as “the game,” although that term is not encouraged, as the stakes are very real.

GUIDELINES

This program will simulate a lifetime: examinees are “born,” “live,” “die” all within

the exams. You will not remember, within the exams, your actual name, your actual life, or even these instructions. You will not remember the exams are exams. But, nevertheless, you *will* be *you*. Your “body” will resemble your actual body: *your* mind, *your* psyche, *your* soul will control your “body,” decide every moment of your “life” within the exams. And your score will reflect those decisions (see: SCORING). But, what should examinees expect, within the exams? The exams differ from reality in many ways, which are not necessary to list in their entirety, but include: less wind, shorter seasons, fewer stars, a single moon. There are no cloudlands. There are no lightfalls. There are no rootcaves, no lavatides, few blowholes. The planet is notably smaller. The exams were designed with considerable biodiversity, although that has been reduced by previous examinees. Weather is randomized by algorithm. All inanimate materials were predetermined and are invariable. Any structures encountered were built by previous examinees—including yourself, perhaps—as the exams were not designed with any structures. Any tools, machines, or other articles were made by previous examinees. The physics within exams does prevent levitation, usually. Sound is muffled, compared to sounds in reality, which you will not remember, so sound will not seem muffled. Most examinees will be patients from other facilities, although you may encounter patients from this facility, whom you will not remember. You will have no other objective aside from securing points: you will not remember, but rather must intuit, the system of scoring. The staff may enter the exams to offer certain hints, but this rarely happens, as there is some debate over its fairness, and as previous attempts have shown that hints are consistently misunderstood. There have been incidents of non-staff sneaking into the exams with the intent of revealing these instructions, in their entirety, to examinees: these incidents were isolated, and were not adverse,

as these non-staff consistently were ignored, heckled, or “killed.”

DURATION

The exam has a built-in time limit: even the longest exams will last only a century. Although difficult to imagine, examinees should be warned that, within the exams, a century will seem like a “very long time”: as length is a matter of context, any amount of time can feel “long” when viewed as the limit. Upon returning to reality, examinees do sometimes experience disorientation, bewilderment, and even alarm, in readjusting to the standard lifespan, especially when faced with the prospect of spending a lifetime at the facility.

SCORING

The staff grade exams using an impartial system of numerical scoring. The design is guided by the theory that the only reliable test for correction is one in which the patient is *unaware of being tested*. As you will have no memory of this facility, or the staff, or being a patient, you will have no incentive to perform: instead, you will simply live, and thus reveal your genuine impulses. To have changed your beliefs, therefore, is insufficient. To pass the exams, you must have changed your very *nature*. Examinees will begin with a perfect score. Points are deducted for instances of antisocial behaviors, especially those relating to concepts of “ownership,” and “entitlement,” and “superiority,” which, among patients, are the most rife. Patients are doubtless aware of which behaviors the staff have worked to correct, and should not be surprised by the specific expectations. But, still, what exactly will merit a deduction, during this “life” within the exams? The use of tools, machines, and other articles (see: GUIDELINES) will not negatively affect a score, although

claiming “ownership” of such articles will. The building of structures (see: GUIDELINES) will not negatively affect a score, although claiming “ownership” of such structures will. The mining or drilling or extraction of inanimate materials (see: GUIDELINES) will not negatively affect a score, although claiming “ownership” of such materials will. In regard to animate beings: examinees are encouraged to nurture the flora, and to harvest things such as figs, basil, daikon, walnuts, etcetera for artificial nourishment; likewise, examinees are encouraged to befriend the fauna, and may offer animals shelter. “Owning” animate beings, however, will negatively affect a score: this includes, but is not limited to, seeds, bulbs, trees, silkworms, honeybees, peacocks, geese, sheep, pigs, dogs, and other examinees. Examinees who participate in forms of “entitlement,” such as maintaining “borders,” sanctioning “patents,” endorsing “citizenship,” or subscribing to “inheritance,” will likely fail. Examinees who exhibit feelings of “superiority” toward another examinee, or any fauna, or any flora, will likely fail. Examinees will likely fail. What will make the exams particularly challenging is that you will be examined simultaneously with billions of patients, each with antisocial tendencies ranging from modest to severe. Thus, examinees should be warned that what awaits within the exams is not truly a society, but rather an antisociety, where antisocial behaviors are treated as “normal,” “moral,” “sane.” Examinees will be constantly pressured to participate in antisocial behaviors. Examinees scoring well will likely feel like “failures.” This does not distort the results, but rather is *what guarantees their accuracy*. If you are able to resist antisocial impulses in a society where those behaviors are rampant, the staff can trust that you will have no difficulty resisting in a society where those behaviors are nonexistent.

RELEASE FROM THE FACILITY

These instructions are not meant to help patients prepare for the exams, but rather to help patients cope with the aftereffects. Afterward, as their memory returns, patients are often grateful to have memories of these instructions: although returning to reality is sometimes traumatic, previous examinees have reported that remembering the purpose of, and methods of, examination, does help. And, although readjusting mentally can be difficult, the machines will exercise you regularly, and nourish you intravenously, so physical problems are uncommon. Upon completing your examination, the outcome is tallied quickly. If your score passes, you may leave the facility directly. *However*—although many patients, especially those with families, genuinely work very hard to correct themselves—*most do fail*. The staff does regret this. Still, all results are final. If you fail, you will be fed, given your labor assignments, and then sent to your cell. Treatments will begin as usual in the morning. Finally, afterward, the staff are happy to provide uncut footage of the exam: although undoubtedly disappointed, you should take comfort in knowing you will have the next aeon to watch your “life,” and to study just what went wrong.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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