

Fallen London: Authorship and Game Allegory

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Introduction

A couple of years ago, Anita Sarkeesian's popular YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* (2013) argued that female characters in triple A video games are objectified. Sculpted into aestheticized, passive types, their reification repudiates the lived, actual qualities of women. This critique, Sarkeesian would be the first to admit, is based on the introductory principles of visual media studies. Yet reframed to video games, it caused a furore. On calling out the triple A video game industry for its 'lazy writing' and 'disappointing stories'¹ – as if there were identifiable authors to be taken to task for this – Sarkeesian was threatened with anonymous online abuse by alleged gamers. Perhaps it was not fully recognised how deeply allegory, which the Romantic poet Coleridge defines as 'abstract notions [translated] into a picture language (1972:30)', is embedded in video game design. Allegory reifies personae. As Coleridge already noted in 1818 on the narrative poem *The Faerie Queene*:

Spenser's [Lady] Una [...] exhibits no prominent feature, has no particularization, but produces the same feeling that a statue does, when contemplated at a distance. (1936:37)

Lady Una, then, is sculpted into a glossy type; she is saved from the Dragon by the Redcrosse Knight, who, likewise, are allegorical figures. Within the poem, they function as prosopopoeia, as disguising masks for a quality, or powerful abstract idea, to those in the know.² The call for individually motivated characters denies this play of allegory. As Coleridge notes: 'if the allegoric personage be strongly individualized so as to interest us,

¹ See Paul Dean. 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games: Why it Matters'. *IGN*. 31 May 2013. <http://uk.ign.com/articles/2013/05/31/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games-why-it-matters>

² In Spenser's poem (1590), these allegorical figures are disguising masks for political knowledges in the Elizabethan age.

we cease to think of it as allegory' (1936:31).

Even as the video game industry relies on hero's journey templates, by 2010 strongly individualized game writing had emerged around the open source authoring tool Twine. Identifiable authors subversively coded stories of lived, actual realities – isolation, female sexuality, transgender experiences – into the commonplace topoi of game design. Just as Coleridge's Romantic poetics – 'The symbol is characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual' (1972:30) – is a critique of allegory, these games destabilize the allegorizing mode of triple A video games, not least when they seek to embody individual experience through the game mechanics. The Twine-developed text-based game *Depression Quest* (2013) by Zoe Quinn – the interactive game mechanics make for an embodied player experience of the depressed persona – stands as a notable example, framed as it has become by the Gamergate controversy of 2014.³ Quinn, like Sarkeesian, was subjected to anonymous online abuse and doxing, which, fanned by the 'alt right', then spilled over to women in the game industry, and more generally, women prominent on social media (Salter, 2017). With Coleridge's symbol reduced to the pejorative #snowflake, the video game industry, with its endlessly replicated stock tropes, reproduced by crunchtime labour, with its IP franchises, with its reification, not only of women, but of people, remains, as critics such as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) have argued, a phantasmagoria of neo-liberal global capitalism.

This essay investigates authorship in game allegory. A philosophically complex device, allegory is both a way of composing work, and of engendering interpretative procedures, and as such, has become a leading paradigm in contemporary video game theory. The opening framework to the essay will draw on key theoretical critical scholarship on game allegory, in order to clarify why triple A video games are considered works of allegory, and how game play may engender critical procedures of allegoresis. Within that framework, the discussion will move to consider game authorship, identifying 'the coder', 'the imaginative writer' and 'the game master' as three key authorial strategies emerging from the allegorising mode, particularly with regard to adventure games. Having identified these strategies – not as job roles, but rather, as an impetus for thinking about authorship in game making (see also House's contribution to this issue) – the focus will

³See: Lees, Matt. 'What Gamergate should have taught us about the 'alt-right' '. The Guardian. 1 December 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump>

be on ‘the game master’ authoring social roleplay games where the player is enabled to manifest their avatar within gameplay. My case study is *Fallen London*, an adventure roleplaying [RP] text game. *Fallen London* is an important model, aware as it is of its own allegorising mode as a game, while drawing its narrative design prototype from an allegorical poem by the Romantic poet Shelley. The game’s story shadows the progression of a player’s prosopopoeia, their avatar, in the city as a mirrored site of the capitalist Empire. In terms of playing the game, three different modes of play – ‘the speculator’, ‘the reader’ and the ‘roleplayer’ – will be identified, indicating how they, too, produce allegoresis in their authored writing on, and within, the game story world.

Video Game as Allegory

As early as 1993, Julian Stallabrass observed that the topoi of video games are commonplaces:

Travel, moral progress, the return home, topography and mapping, the distorted spaces of the dream, the dungeon, and the labyrinth are all of course mainstays of allegory. (100)

Stallabrass notes that the player experiences the virtuousness of the hero’s journey through game play. ‘The player of a computer game has the feeling of inhabiting a discrete world where unchangeable truths may be learned’ (93). Stallabrass, however, realizes that allegorising is inherent to the computer medium itself when a processing lag causes pixel fragmentation while playing the then-latest labyrinthine 3-D first-person shooter game *Doom* (1993). The on-screen visual, the doxa of the surface image is revealed to be a ‘rhetorical gloss’ – ‘a veneer of muscular and spontaneous heroism’ (88) – which masks but is also generated by what is underneath: the coded programme. The computer code under the display of virtù, then, is the skull beneath the skin. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s theory of the allegorical mode in capitalism – ‘any person, any object, any relationship, can mean absolutely anything else’ (175) – in *The Arcades Project*, Stallabrass reads the allegorising code as a systemic levelling, as an erasure of immanent, particular meaning: ‘each element of the game, each virtual being or object, acts as a commodity, placed in an extensive metonymic chain where each link is defined by its position in relation to the others’ (88).

Video games, Stallabrass argues, continuously advance an impervious technological naturalism, a virtual reality, the better to conceal its reifying allegorising code. Just as virtual beings are fungible game assets – they ‘act as living beings arranged and treated as objects’ (93) – so ‘the player, too, is blatantly objectified’ (93), fine motor skills consigned to a phantom industriousness by the game mechanics. ‘In their structure and content, computer games are a capitalist and deeply conservative form of culture.’ (104)

Stallabrass’s critical aesthetics – game allegory presents surface images which both conceal and are generated by the allegorising computer code underneath – stand as paradigmatic in video game theory. With the advent of the network, theorists focus on the video game as an instrument of the global economy. Ndalians (2004) compares the ornate virtuosity of labyrinthine topoi in video game design to the aesthetic of the historical baroque, from the age when information technologies – the compass and the map – opened up global trade. Alexander Galloway (2008) too, identifies games as allegories of the power of globalising information technologies in our own age: ‘Games are allegories for our contemporary life under the protological network of continuous informatics control.’ (106). Fusing ‘the algorithm’ into *allos*, other, *agoreuo*, to speak in a place of assembly, and *agora*, market place, he coins the term: the allegorithm. Game play, then, is interpretative of the allegorithm. McKenzie Wark (2007) playing the simulation game *Sim City*, experiences the allegorithm as generating an ideal order, because, from his Platonic perspective, the algorithm ‘works impersonally, the same for everybody’ (49): each of the sims is afforded a personalised, progressive lifespan as a citizen in the game world. He observes, through game play, that there is a critical contradiction between this ideal scenario as generated by the game algorithms, and actual contemporary lives under market forces. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) too, read games with a simulated urban game space as allegorical of the global market: *video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire*’ (xiv, italics in original). They comprehensively investigate new forms of immaterial labour emanating from the triple A video game industry – modding, farming, and crunchtime – as indicative of the deferred costs of labour under neo-liberal global capitalism.

Authorship and Game Allegory

‘The desire to know, which produces allegory, also engenders allegorical interpretation

(allegoresis)' (Tambling, 167). As soon as one realises the replicated surface images conceal an abstract power, that games are allegories, they engender epistemophilia, a desire to know. Stallabrass speaks of 'marginal but radical, points at which the phantasmagoria is breached' (95), and sees potential in 'finding one's path behind the coding'. Sarkeesian regards the hero's journey, for all its call for perseverance through staged thresholds, as a 'lazy' template, and imagines a hard-won individualised writing, while Wark asks us to inspect the algorithm in world scenario building. These critical positions may also be considered as recognising practice-based authorial strategies – the coder, the imaginative writer, and the game master – in game making. 'Games are indeed exemplary media of an order that demands the obedience of assembly-line work', note Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (193). Yet for Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, the recognition of authorship itself may offer resistance to the paradigmatic media of Empire; here, the key issue is how authorial strategies may engender the desire to know through their reflexivity on the game as allegory.

The coder. – The first action adventure video game, Atari's *Adventure* (1979), may be cited as a seminal example of a phantasmagoria breach initiated by a game author. *Adventure* has a labyrinth architecture. As the Atari corporation did not credit game authors, *Adventure's* author coded a marginal 1-pixel dot which, if activated in a certain way, breached a wall to display a hidden screen – 'Created by Warren Robinett' – covertly to assert his moral right to be identified as the author of the work. The secret message only came to light through a player's dexterous fingers; the set of commands itself was not documented in Atari's game manual.⁴ This type of code is known as 'a secret response to an undocumented set of commands' and may also be written into games by developers as shortcut codes for the purpose of playtesting more easily. Persevering player fingers can shadow the handiwork of game authors, recover these codes and, like the string Ariadne gave Theseus, game the system.

Stallabrass predicted such breaches would be closed off by 'increasing technical perfection' (95). Instead, shortcut codes become absorbed into game design. The first person shooter *Doom II* (1994) used it to initiate players into its allegorical labyrinthine game. At the centre, the player has to confront the ultimate minotauric boss: a bull skull mask, called 'Icon of Sin'. Those players who know the noclip mode will see, on entering

⁴ Atari called this secret message an 'Easter Egg': inscribing an infantilised consumer identity onto players.

the shortcut code, an an image of a 3-D bloody head on a stake. They ‘find themselves face to face with John Romero’ (Ndialanis, 106). In ‘outperforming’ and ‘symbolically destroying’ ‘one of the game’s creators’, Ndialanis argues, the player is ‘asked to recognise their own virtuosity’ (106). That game play, however, will only be experienced by players in the know. Only those who access the shortcut code, can share the workplace in-joke that an identifiable game author is already dead meat. The allegory reasserts the power of initiate absorption into technocracy in gaming subcultures, where ‘a masculine reality has secured itself in the symbolic and processual significance of science and technology’ (Murray, 7). ‘It’s these dudes, already entrenched in the existing culture of games’, Anthropy writes, ‘who are eventually driven to enter the video game industry and to take part in the creation of games’ (7). Video game allegory, then, entrenches game development as an exclusive, masculine virtuosity, but also as anonymised labour.

The imaginative writer. – With the advent of open source media tools and platforms, creative media expression in the public domain becomes a mass quotidian habit, even idealized as an activity of democratization. ‘I want games to be personal and meaningful [...]. I want game creation to be decentralized. I want open access to the creative act for everyone.’ (Anthropy, 2012, 10). The hidden message in *Adventure* is heard as a *cri de coeur*. Anthropy argues that games should be seen as ‘a creative act’, as the work of a ‘sole, identifiable author’, and as an ‘art form’ (106). A grass-roots creative practice-based movement emerges around the open source authoring tool Twine, which allows for the development of interactive fiction, or narrative text games. Games become reframed, in the spirit of Romantic poetics, individual art work: they are catalogued and freely accessible through the collaborative wiki project, the Interactive Fiction Database⁵. More recently, the online magazine *Sub-Q*, (2015), also free to access, becomes the first to pay authors professional rates for their individual works of interactive fiction.⁶

The technological virtuosity of the allegorising mode – ‘they act as living beings arranged and treated as objects’ – which is integral to the triple A video game medium, is both inaccessible to, but also fiercely critiqued by the Twine community’s determinedly self-written iconoclastic text games.

Gender identity through the lived body is an important theme in such work. In

5 <http://ifdb.tads.org>

6 <https://sub-q.com>

Porpentine Charity Heartscape's *With Those We Love Alive* (2014), which carries a 'content warning for violence, self harm, blood, abuse, unreality', the player is prompted to sigilise their own body 'with a pen or sharpie' as an intuitive response to game events. In its raw mediation of haptic game technology, the game has been called 'a trans allegory'⁷. The sigil, after all, is an individually drawn character. Yet the pen on one's own skin seems also to shadow embodied experiences, say, of stick and poke tattoos or epipen shots or self-cutting: the game poetics calls up the dark passages of negative capability, the sigil as a visceral playtesting code. *With Those We Love Alive* was included, as artwork, in the Whitney Biennial, 2017. Notably, player input makes for a collaborative creative experience in such text-based games. As Sam Barlow notes:

There's the magic of incantation. Text is magic because when used in a game, it can sometimes feel like the direct transformation of a thought into reality. In the case of games where you can invoke a word that has not appeared in the text so far it's as if your thought, your word, summons it into existence. [...] It feels like an act of creation, or at the very least collaboration.⁸

Parser games, which are the interactive fiction genre Barlow is here referring to, are authored with natural language processing programmes, such as the open source Inform. In these games, the player inputs text in response to the cursor prompt >, which a text parser then simplifies into a command type the programme can respond to. Emily Short's parser game *Galatea* (2000) reframes the classic Pygmalion allegory, a female statue come to life, with the natural language processing programme Eliza, an early computer experiment in whether scripted automated response could pass as a conversing human. As Lisa Swanstrom (2013) notes on *Galatea*, the player's input 'seek[s] to call a coherent entity into being from raw textual elements that at times appear to be as unyielding and stubborn as marble.' *Galatea*, then, is prompted to emerge as an individually motivated living being through the player's desire to know. Their critical allegoresis is inscribed via the cursor > into the text dynamics of the game. As a player's

⁷ <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/11/14/drawing-violences-mundanity-with-those-we-love-alive/>

⁸ <http://www.herstorygame.com/magical-incantation-playing-games-words/>. Sam Barlow's *Aisle* (1999) is also a leading example of a parser game authored with Inform.

desire to know may take different pathways, *Galatea* has many different narrative endings. Asking (>a) Galatea about her classic origins renders this story ending:

>a generic (*player input*)

You can't form your question into words.

Her head lifts; her green gaze holds you half a moment.

"It's related to the idea of masks and drama," she says. Her voice is dry, almost gritty. "Disguised identity. Cross-dressing. All those things that let you behave outside the rules, redefine your identity for yourself, encourage people to treat you in ways they otherwise might not."

You find yourself staring at her curiously. What would she know about masks and disguises?

>a mask (*player input*)

Her eyes meet yours briefly. For a moment she doesn't say anything, and you wonder if you've made a mistake.

"You're an avatar, you've got someone controlling you in realtime!"

The reply, when it comes, is not from Galatea. The velvet curtain moves violently; tiny gold tacks shower out of the wall; half the backdrop wrenches free, thanks to the opening of a door beyond.⁹

A phantasmagoria breach: Galatea has not passed as a living being. The wall 'violently' fragments into a shower of 'tiny gold tacks'. Behind the glossy surface image is a source of power ('someone controlling in realtime'). The player comes face to face with 'the artist': 'she's rather short, a little on the dumpy side, and dressed in a ripped pair of blue jeans'. This is the female artist as coder: with a nod to *Adventure*, Short has even coded her own surname into the string of the physical description of 'the artist'.

Galatea is reflexive of itself as game allegory. While Stallabrass reads Benjamin's allegorising mode – 'any person, any object, any relationship, can mean absolutely anything else' – as a systemic erasure of immanent qualities, *Galatea*, however, reads it as

⁹ http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/short__galatea.html

a radical possibility of individual agency: ‘redefine your identity for yourself’. In Turing’s imitation game, ‘passing’ is crucial to performative identity emergence. Yet *Galatea* also presciently calls on the potential liberation of the disguising mask, ‘the avatar’, in networked roleplay communities.

The game master – With the advent of social media, there is a resurgence of interest in structured models of participatory narratives, notably, the roleplaying tabletop game. In this live played game, the lead author is called the game master. *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) enthusiastically described ‘the game master’ as follows:

I have lately taken to likening the whole to Aristotle’s Poetics. [The] Dungeon Master uses the rules to become a playwright (hopefully of Shakespearean stature), scripting only plot outlines, however, and the players become the Thespians. [It] requires the game master to create all or part of a fantasy world. Players must then become personae in this place and interact with the other populace. This is, of course, a tall order for all concerned — rules, DM, and players alike. (Gygax, cited in Maher, 284)

The game master, then, creates an imagined story world, where rule-bound, yet personal avatars are developed by players through the dramatic events in that the game’s story world. Simply, it means inviting your friends over to play *D&D*. Popular among young generations of the 1970s and 1980s, Lovecraftian tabletop RP games were played by novelists as divergent as China Miéville and George R.R. Martin in their time. They have different, yet interlinked recollections of playing RP games. The author of *A Game of Thrones* (1996), George R.R. Martin, was a game master on a long-running RPG campaign in the early 1980s. He recalls tabletop games as social, intimate, creative:

Weekly sessions were part communal story telling and part improv theatre, part group therapy and part mass psychosis, part adventure and part soap opera. (Cited in Harrigan, Pat and Noah Wardrip-Fruin)

Tabletop games involve devising open-ended big-scale story worlds with dramatic chance-based outcomes. The game master also creates the mood and setting: ‘Players

must then become personae in this place and interact with the other populace'. The aesthetic style of place, then, is also an implied code of conduct for personae interaction within the story world. As Isbister (2016) has shown in the context of multiplayer online game environments, players extend themselves into their avatars, communicating and bonding through their game-emerged avatars in the shared story world. George R.R. Martin, interestingly, touches on Emily Short's idea of performative personae identity as potential liberation, perceiving a psychotherapeutic undercurrent in the 'weekly sessions' of RPG¹⁰. He also cites RPG as a collaborative creative experience which directly led to the anthology series *Wild Cards* (1987), in which different authors contributed stories set within a shared world. By extension, the *Game of Thrones* franchise could be considered an example of a game master author originating and enabling transmediated storytelling in a shared world.

The fantasy fiction author China Miéville, who played Lovecraftian RPGs as teenager in the 1980s, offers a much more materially analytical experience of the game mechanics of tabletop games. He stands closer to Stallabrass's critical allegoresis in recalling that:

A very strong influence of RPGs [on me] was the weird fetish for systematization, the way everything is reduced to "game stats". If you take something like Cthulhu in Lovecraft, for example, it is completely incomprehensible and beyond all human categorization. But in the game Call of Cthulhu, you see Cthulhu's "strength," "dexterity," and so on, carefully expressed numerically. (Cited in Gordon, 2003)

Miéville, then, points to the allegorising mode of these games: 'everything is reduced to "game stats"'. 'Cthulhu' stands for abstract qualities, which are 'carefully expressed numerically'.¹¹ Players' personae qualities too, are expressed in this way. The game stats are used in probability calculations (chance is expressed numerically by the throw of the dice) to determine the outcome of encounters, which is the basis of the algorithmic drama in RPG. This allegorising mode, is of course, why *D&D* schematics readily came

¹⁰ Psychoanalysis is considered allegoresis, 'as interprets the patient's behaviour and language as allegory', Tambling, 167.

to underpin early adventure computer games. Miéville, however, is also pointing out how intellectually ‘weirdly misplaced’ it is to apply statistical methods to the sublime, inspiring his own blending of supernatural and scientific tropes in ‘weird fiction’.

Game Authorship of *Fallen London*

Having considered allegory as a way of thinking about authorship, we’ll turn to the author of *Fallen London*, Alexis Kennedy. With coding and literary expertise as well as experience as a game master of Lovecraftian tabletop games¹², Kennedy was among the independent game authors who emerged after the financial crash in the advent of social media (2008). As an independent game maker, he developed the game engine StoryNexus, as well as the original story world, and with illustrator Paul Arendt, the game assets for *Fallen London*. Together they formed the company Failbetter Games. As the game expanded, more coders and writers came on board.

Failbetter’s engine, StoryNexus – a bricolage of choice-based narrative, RPG, and the microtransaction model of social media games – was developed as a platform for what Kennedy called ‘quality-based narrative’: ‘bundles of interactive story (storylets) whose appearance controls and is controlled by changeable state (qualities)’¹³. Essentially, choice-based narrative is linked to the game stat mechanics of tabletop RPG, with a finite set of free to play decision-clicks per game play session.

StoryNexus was initially developed as a platform for wider commercial application, in line with Ian Bogost’s paradigm that the game engine is the primary IP of game developers, as opposed to the film industry, where content is the primary IP, and the ‘holy grail’ is ‘a franchise that can be spun into sequels’ (2006, 56). In practice, Bogost’s paradigm was turned on its head: the content, *Fallen London*, and not the game engine, StoryNexus, turned out to be Failbetter Games’ most valuable asset. Indeed, the company flourished by holding on to *Fallen London* as a media franchise: commercial success came with producing spin-off video games based on the original *FL*.

¹² With BA in Linguistics, Alexis Kennedy retrained in programming and worked as a financial software designer in the City, London, until 2008.

¹³ <http://www.failbettergames.com/storynexus-developer-diary-2-fewer-spreadsheets-less-swearing/>

Kennedy's original achievement, with *Fallen London*, is to scale up the atmosphere of the participatory narrative for a close circle of friends into a compelling game world. An early Failbetter Games live roleplay event at the V&A Museum (2010), invited participants to meet 'possibly allegorical strangers who can help [them] recover their memories after revealing some cryptic secret.'¹⁴ Given the password, the game master can recover drives, be they hard or human. Evidently, Kennedy perceived that games are allegories through the prosopopoeia of RP tabletop games. 'The City is a key site of Empire', Dyer-Witford and de Peuter note on video games (153). Kennedy too, is alert to the city as a key site, but must find a way to enable an immersion of players in the immediacy of urban space on a computer. In video games, this is done by graphically animating personae, so they appear 'as living beings', but, as *Fallen London* is a text game, Kennedy needed to mediate the way of life of these personae with a highly atmospheric order of literary writing. Here, he may have recalled for what for Miéville too, is a defining epigram by Shelley on London. Miéville explains:

'Hell is a city much like London,' Shelley says, and through Blake and de Quincey, and Iain Sinclair, and Chesterton, and Machen, and Ackroyd, and Gaiman, and all the others [...] Take those ideas—the danger, the intricacy, the mystery, the rich fecundity, the semi-autonomous architecture—and magic/surreal/ acid it up a bit: [...] it's London at heart. (Cited in Gordon, 2003)

Hell is a city much like London. 'Shelley's *grasp* of the allegory', Walter Benjamin writes on the poem from which Miéville cites the key epigram, 'which makes palpable the distance of the modern poet from allegory, is precisely what enables allegory to incorporate into itself the most immediate realities.' (J81,6,370). By this, Benjamin means Shelley's poem is distanced from modern poetics – which presents immanent, complex meaning through the symbol – but rather, engages with the function of prosopopoeia in order to present the immediacy of the city through allegory. Shelley's poem thus presents itself as a prototype for *Fallen London's* game world.

¹⁴ https://www.argn.com/tag/a_door_in_a_wall/

‘Shelley rules over the allegory.’

Walter Benjamin first identified Shelley’s poem – ‘Hell is a city much like London, a smoky and populous city’ – as an allegorical design prototype of the capitalist labyrinthine city in *The Arcades Project*. The story of Shelley’s poem, ‘Peter Bell the Third’ (1819), concerns a poet, Peter Bell¹⁵, who arrives as ‘a footman’ in the infernal city, rises up by grinding his way through, eventually vanquishing the boss, the Devil, only to find himself as the kingpin of ‘Hell’. The story, in particular its ironic inversion of the hero’s journey, foreshadows that of *GTA: Vice City* (2002). However, when Walter Benjamin says, ‘Shelley rules over the allegory,’ he means, not so much the doxa of the story, but rather, how urban space is materially designed in the poem. Here are some stanzas from the poem:

[1] Lawyers -- judges -- old hobnobbers

Are there -- bailiffs -- chancellors --

Bishops -- great and little robbers --

Rhymesters -- pamphleteers -- stock-jobbers

Men of glory in the wars, --

[2] At conversazioni -- balls --

Conventicles -- and drawing-rooms --

Courts of law -- committees -- calls

Of a morning -- clubs -- book-stalls --

Churches -- masquerades -- and tombs.

[3] And this is Hell -- and in this smother

All are damnable and damned;

Each one damning, damns the other

They are damned by one another,

¹⁵ The poem is Shelley’s critique of Wordsworth, whom he considered to have repudiated his earlier, lyrical poetics for conservative establishment status.

By none other are they damned.

Shelley's London is rendered as a paratactic chain of generic urban figures [1] circulating in socio-topographic areas [2]. To Walter Benjamin, the 'unsurpassable power' of Shelley's allegory is that: 'The big city is evoked through nothing but the immediate presentation of its inhabitants.' (J69, 2). Note how Shelley's use of strings in the paratactic syntax – 'an extensive metonymic chain where each link [is defined] only in relation to the other' – connects into the last stanza [3]: 'This is Hell'. For Benjamin, this levelling circuitry, this reduction of all into a one/other binary cycle of damnation, reveals the allegorising mode of capitalism. This mode is what Stallabrass, by extension, sees as the computer code. As a schematic, then, Shelley's rules can be readily conceptualised as an urban game space, in which generic types [1] circulate in mapped socio-topographic areas [2], spawned in repeated cycles [3]. Possibly, players may more readily intuit the design of the urban space through having played games such as *Vice City*, rather than by having read Shelley. The mood and setting of *Fallen London*, a subterranean Victorian London driven so deep into the gothic underground that it shares its borders with Hell, however, are located in a literary aesthetic blending of 'A Rake's Progress', Romantic poetry, nineteenth century novels, and weird fiction. And as per Shelley's rules, in *Fallen London*, the louche rhymesters mainly circulate in Veilgarden (Covent Garden), the cut-purse gangs in the passages of Spite (Spitalfields), and the rat catchers in Watchmaker's Hill (Greenwich). The player, or rather their avatar, can move between socio-topographic areas, where as gameplay progresses, new areas will be opened up to them on the game map of *Fallen London*.

The 'immediate presentation of its inhabitants' in *Fallen London* is not mediated by computer animation design, but rather, by the names of inhabitants which render 'the smoky and populous city' as an immersive experience. *Fallen London's* hundreds of inhabitants are all invariably impersonally named, 'The Clay Man', 'The Dauntless Temperance Campaigner', 'The Viennese Exile'. The city's inhabitants are all non-playing characters, NPCs: the player will interact with each them, but at the same time, all of them are generic types. The syntactic pattern – definite article/adjective/noun – which generates the names of NPCs, evokes Sherlock Holmes's cases, such as 'The Beryl Coronet', nineteenth century novels, such as *The Secret Agent*, or even tarot cards, 'The

Hanged Man'. Emily Short points out that the impersonal names evoke the anonymity of modern city life in an experiential sense: 'It makes the story feel oddly lonely even though most game activities are about social interactions of one kind or another.'¹⁶ The more generic the type, the more they evoke the city. In the allegorical fog, 'The Desperate Urchin', appears as generic type, highly redolent of a Dickensian London. 'The Melancholy Curate' appears vaguely familiar, as if from an illicit story of passion by Charlotte Brontë, while 'The Epigrammatic Irishman' emerges as a recognisable author (face to face: Oscar Wilde) in the urban fin de siècle gloom. In a fallen London, your persona, fresh out of jail, will have to negotiate the dangerous, bewildering, grindy passages of 'the labyrinthine city', controlled by the shadowy Masters of the Bazaar, thus to progress yourself, like Peter Bell, to the very pinnacles of ruinous glory.

'A new face in Fallen London'

As the game is an open-ended RPG, the game objectives are centred on the player investing in the progressive development of the 'qualities' of their persona, their game avatar. On first entering *Fallen London* (2012), the game's opening page layout strongly hints that the player signs in with an email address rather than through a social media platform¹⁷. The player is then asked to create a persona. As Emily Short's *Galatea* had demonstrated, the avatar can have performative, gender-fluid possibilities in roleplay games. *Fallen London* asks:

'May we ask whether you're a lady or a gentleman?

- A lady
- A gentleman
- My dear sir, there are individuals roaming the streets of
Fallen London at this very moment with the faces of

¹⁶http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/118274/Analysis_Echoes_from_the_Underworld__Echo_Bazaar_And_Storytelling.php

¹⁷ 'We want to be an ethical company, so we won't force players to hand over the keys to their social networks,' says Failbetter. 'Social games get a bad reputation in the industry, and it's not controversial to say that some of them deserve it. We want to be clear to our players upfront that Twitter and Facebook are a choice, not a requirement'. Press Release, 27 March 2012. <http://tinyurl.com/y9rmhvl>

squid! Squid! Do you ask them their gender? And yet you waste our time asking me trifling and impertinent questions about mine? It is my own business, sir, and I bid you good day.’

In *Fallen London*, the player can assign not only either a male or female, but also a non-binary gender (‘a person of mysterious and indistinct gender’) to their persona. The ‘Squid’ reference in the non-binary option may be an allusion to Lovecraftian tabletop game, *Call of Cthulhu*, which Miéville also played. It is evident we are entering the domain of fantasy RP adventure. ‘Over the course of gameplay, players extend themselves further into the motivations and visceral, cognitive, social and fantasy possibilities of the avatar’, as Isbister (13) notes on RP games.

While the game may be most readily enjoyed as an allegorithmic drama, distinctive play strategies do emerge in the avatar-based (that, is anonymous) discussion threads on *Fallen London* forums.¹⁸ Possibly because *FL*’s engine is a bricolage of game genres – stat-based adventure game, choice-based narrative, and RPG – these player strategies emerge as differentiated in kind, not so much in how they invest in their avatar, but rather, in their epistemological motivations. The game strategies of ‘the speculator’, ‘the reader’ and ‘the roleplayer’ will be identified and discussed, in order to clarify how the game engenders player allegoresis and, then, how they share their knowledges within the game community.

The speculator. – The speculator plays the game as transactional stat-based adventure game. In the city, progress is made by interacting with any spawned person, say, ‘The Starving Poet’, and making a risk/reward click-decision on how to deal with them: ‘an action’. The RNG probability calculation will give an outcome which will affect your persona’s ‘qualities’, and may, if you are in luck, give you x number of ‘an item’. Here is an example of a common item a *FL* person may give you x number of:

Illustration: apparition in a bottle.

Motto: ‘Soul’.

¹⁸ <http://community.failbettergames.com>

Subscriptio¹⁹: 'It's not strictly legal to trade these without a license, you know. But it's profitable.'

Price at Bazaar: buying 0.04 Echoes; selling 0.02 Echoes.

Fallen London sardonically purchases into 'obsequiously reflect[ing] on the operation of consumer capital' which Stallabrass noted, underpins the many video games 'based on exchange, a trading of money, munitions or energy' (88). In *FL*'s game world, you will find out, 'souls' are examples of cheap fungible items, commodities that be can be traded for other items or indeed exchanged for 'Echoes', the in-game crypto-currency controlled by the shadowy Masters of the Bazaar. In game play, you need to accrue hundreds of items, of hundreds of types, which are all catalogued in your inventory. Many items are found only through playing story lines in the game itself:

Illustration: manuscript page ablaze.

Motto: 'Searing Enigma'.

Subscriptio: 'Mysteries are fire. Truth burns.'

Price: The item cannot be bought at the Bazaar, selling: 62.50 echoes. (*FL*)

It may be worth hanging on to the 'Searing Enigma', as it is a rare item, and you may need to unlock a story pathway. Upon selling, though, 'The woman in green folds her fingers over the paper, delicately. "Thank you so much," she says sweetly. "We'll burn the original, of course."' (*FL*). The decision to liquidate your asset, the 'Searing Enigma', means you can now use the crypto-currency to purchase equipment – clothing, weapons, consumables – at say, 'Gottery the Outfitter', or 'Carrow's Steel'. Always so important in adventure games as they raise your persona's 'qualities', in *Fallen London*, such equipment is fantastically luxuriated upon as fetish commodities, as if Baudelaire had been in charge of the catalogue entries. Some equipment is only found through playing story lines in the game itself. Here is one of these:

¹⁹ Subscriptio is the technical term for the text which accompanies the illustration in emblem books. In games, such texts are called 'flavor'.

Illustration: a green carnation.²⁰

Motto: 'A boutonnière of fresh carnations'.

Subscriptio: 'Close your eyes. Breathe deeply. It's like you never left the Surface'.

Effects: Persuasive +5. (FL)

That particular piece of equipment is catalogued as a powerful weapon, as it raises your persona's 'Persuasive' quality. You can use it as a charm offensive for gaining Connections with Bohemians or the Church. Bourdieu's spheres of economic, cultural and social capital are a metonymic continuum, so that everything (including your persona's own 'soul') is a commodity, everything has a transactional value.

The details of the transactional economy in the material world that is *Fallen London* is meticulously recorded, entirely at face value, in an early player organised wiki (2010) for the game.²¹ Through playing the story pathways, speculating on risk/reward, players discover the complexities of the transactional game economy, which in turn, engenders systemic mapping, or what Miéville calls, 'the weird fetish for systematization'. Ndalianis noted how the allegorical map emerges in the baroque period from the competitive exploration of trade global routes. The desire to know, is also the desire to know first. For speculator players, with an eye on the game stats, the rhythm of decision-clicks will be fast, as they need to 'grind' items in a race to uncover and map new story pathways. With the game's microtransaction model, the early fixed limit was 10 decision-clicks, then players could either go into downtime until these 'actions' refreshed, or pay for more 'actions', that is, pay the game author piece-rate for his time. The speculator players, perhaps sardonically mindful of Ian Bogost's 2010 call that the microtransaction model 'is incredibly sinful'²², used it as an early funding mechanism for game development of *Fallen London*. Such speculator player activity later energised crowdfunding for Failbetter's spin-off video games, *Sunless Sea* (released 2015), propelled by naval exploration of the seas from the port of Fallen London, while *Sunless Skies*, promising ventures in aircraft, is currently in production (2017).

²⁰ *The Green Carnation* (1894) is a scandalous roman à clef about Oscar Wilde and Bosie.

²¹ http://fallenlondon.wikia.com/wiki/Echo_Bazaar_Wiki

²² <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/spot-on-social-anxiety/1100-6284524/>

The reader. – As the game is an interactive fiction, ‘the reader’ player strategy will be interested in the way the subject emerges through the aleatory outcome of narrative choices within the story world. They may pursue particular story lines in interacting with the city’s inhabitants, or have particular preferences for exploring socio-topographic areas. *Fallen London*, especially in the opening stages of the game, privileges literary occupations as way to accrue game capital, Echoes, doubtless inspired by Shelley’s poem, in which Peter Bell levels up very quickly by writing poems (‘And Mr. ---, the bookseller, Gave twenty pounds for some; --’). As a ‘new face in Fallen London’, my persona, then, becomes a poet. These choices of ‘A Quick Commission’ await me at Veilgarden:

Hymns to Sobriety

The Dauntless Temperance Campaigner has dared the sinful depths of Veilgarden. She’s looking for someone who can ‘bang two rhymes together’.

An Especial Appetite

A tomb-colonist! One of the bandaged dead, visiting London on a dusty and peculiar business. ‘An epitaph,’ she hisses. ‘Something to carve above my front door. Something in the manner of Pope. Augustan, you know? A pastiche.’

Poetry in the Dark

Is this a joke? But The Desperate Urchin seems quite in earnest. ‘If we don’t feed the fmg fresh poetry, it comes for us in the night. You got to ’elp us. Please?’

Having weighed up the options, I decide on poetry as apotropaic magic, a poem to ward off the evil ‘fmg’. Poetry in the Dark. This is a ‘risky challenge’ for a persona of my current ‘qualities’. As Shelley says, in ‘a world of words’, the outcome is dependent on the RNG:

A world of words, tail foremost, where
Right -- wrong -- false -- true -- and foul -- and fair

As in a lottery-wheel are shook.

Well, my persona is in luck. The outcome: 'A fierce wall of verse'. The Desperate Urchin tells my persona:

'Those was some quality words, and I don't mind saying so.
You're a craftsman. It 'asn't been back all week. We got you
somefink special to say fanks.'

That 'somefink special' is x shards of glim. I feel that I may like to try it again, but find I'm not in luck now. My persona's 'Nightmare' state has gone right up. To deal with this, I will have to take them to Mrs Plenty's Carnival, or consume laudanum, or visit 'The Viennese Exile'. My persona will visit 'The Viennese Exile':

Relax on his carpet-strewn couch and tell him all about it.

You describe dreams of ships upon the sea and faces behind mirrors.

My persona's 'Nightmares' are not reduced. The outcome is: 'But all he will say is, "This music crept by you upon the waters, didn't it?"' So I grind this, that is, with automatic hand repeat the action over again. "But all he will say is, "This music crept by you upon the waters, didn't it?"' When I run out of 'actions' – in this regard, *Fallen London* is like coin-operated arcade entertainment – the session is abruptly finished.

Chance procedures lead to an aleatory poetics, a mainstay of digital avantgarde work.²³ In this particular *FL* game play experience, my persona seems to channel a modernist poet's anxiety at the failure of the lyric mode. The echolalia, hearing the city as a collage of voices, is generated by the allusive citations. Reader players discuss, contextualise, and interpret such *FL* experiences as the emergent subject of game lore on the game forum.²⁴ To these players, the microtransaction model, the limit on free game play, elongates contemplative time before the decision click, it sets the rhythm as one of careful

²³ cf. John Cayley (2002). 'The code is not a text (unless it is a text).' *Electronic Book Review*.
<http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/electropoetics/literal>

²⁴ <http://community.failbettergames.com/topic6080-dream-qualities--the-waste-land.aspx>

interpretative reading. Failbetter introduced a monthly literary magazine type subscriber model for *Fallen London* in 2011: reading time is set at 40 ‘actions’ per session, enough to play through the short stories, including those written by guest authors such as Emily Short, which are released within its game world every month.

Roleplayer. – *The New Yorker* review (6 December, 2010) of an early version of the game noted: ‘Far and away the best browser game of today. Why? Flavor and story—those things that girls like.’ The tongue-in-cheek slight may be related to the emergence, around this time, of interactive fiction as a site of gender activism. Indeed, *Fallen London* does present particularly progressive features as a roleplay game. The game drew the media limelight for its non-binary gendered avatar choice, its gender-fluid equipment (eg. a male persona can ‘wear’ women’s clothing) and its libidinal narrative options (eg. your persona can have an affair with ‘The Melancholy Curate’ and his sister)²⁵, and continues to be cited as exemplary of queer representation in games (PAX, Australia, 2016). It should also be noted that the game is compatible with assistive technology, thus, accessible to visually impaired players; and beta-tested for accessibility on its migration from browser-based to mobile platforms (Android and IOS, 2016).

Identity construction through roleplay is conditional on the interplay between the ‘avatar’ in the game world and the ‘I’ of the player. In terms of *Fallen London*’s social and fantasy possibilities, the ‘avatar’ may offer possibilities to ‘redefine your identity for yourself’ within the game world. Yet RP players may also shape their avatar as ‘a character’ through the story choices: that is, they may have a strong sense of their character’s motivations as independent fictional beings. Isbister notes that ‘text can make complex identity construction and roleplay possible’ (53) in games. In *Fallen London*, it is possible to roleplay by engaging in correspondence (sending items as ‘gifts’, and writing letters) with the avatars/characters of other players within the game. The roleplay is extended to the game forum, where players write collaborative fan-fiction, stories involving their characters within a shared world. Inscribing heterogeneity into the game space, the freedom to experiment, write and play with the liminalities, narratives, and ideologies of identity in and through fictional beings in a Victorian story world, also creates a

²⁵ See for example, <https://www.autostraddle.com/queer-your-tech-why-im-addicted-to-fallen-london-190062/>

distinctive game community for *Fallen London*.

Conclusion

In his study *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, Kirkpatrick concurs with Ndalianis's reading of games as neo-baroque labyrinthine fiction, arguing that:

Engaging with a Neo-baroque fictional world is not reading a story, but rather involves gathering evidence, assembling fragments and pieces of information that, when put together, illuminate a fictional world in the way that reflects one particular way through it. This 'way through' is always incomplete in the sense that the fictional world does not have a privileged reading; it requires each reader to find their own way. (169)

Players may see the possibility of the game allegory in different ways: as speculators of the transactional economy of the game, as 'writerly' readers, or, as extending themselves into the possibilities of their chosen persona, as roleplayers. *Fallen London*, as a game, is variously imperfect to players: for the speculators, it is not systemically fast and smooth enough as a transactional game mechanism, for the readers, it is too repetitive, grindy, interruptive to the flow of narrative, while for the roleplayers, it does not have the accoutrements really to play with the liminality between character and actual life. Yet, allegory engenders players' epistemophilia. They become collaborative authors in the game: together, mapping the transactional game economy on the wiki; interpreting the game's subject, lore and literary contexts on the forum; writing roleplayed stories in the shared world.

In conclusion, contemporary video game theory defines games as allegories, principally underpinned by Walter Benjamin's study of the allegorising mode under capitalism. Game allegory study principally focuses on systemic economies of the triple A video game industry. Individual game authorship necessarily falls outside this paradigm. However, this essay has sought to demonstrate that individual game authors are highly reflective of game allegory. *Fallen London* is a significant model for game allegory theory,

not least as it constructs its urban game space on a theoretically significant allegorical prototype, but also connects into tabletop roleplay games as key to the allegorising mode of games. Furthermore, rather than replicating stock types, individual game authorship focuses on the potential of prosopopoeia within allegorical game play. *Fallen London* is a progressive game, not because it presents realistic female characters, but rather because its allegorical mode allows for performative identity play. In this regard, it suggests that game allegory theory could move beyond the study of systemic economies, and consider further critical approaches to allegory, including recognising the epistemological motivation in players' experience of games.

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