A Dating Sim Without the Dating: New Adventures at the Crossroads of Literature and Games

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between video games and traditional literature has been a subject of examination and debate in game studies ever since Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* first positioned games as an incipient species of digital storytelling. Recent studies of the ever-expanding interstice where games and literary forms overlap include Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming* (2014), Jordan Magnuson's *Game Poems: Videogame Design as Lyric Practice* (2023), and my own *Dual Wield: The Interplay of Poetry and Video Games* (2022), each of which emphasize a different kind of hybridity. Studies of interactive fiction – a longstanding subgenre of the game-literature hybrid in which written text is the most prominent design feature – are plentiful, from Nick Montfort's *Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction* (Jackson-Mead and Wheeler, 2011) to Matthew Farber and Karen Schrier's more recent analyses of autobiographical games (Farber and Schrier, 2021). Throughout these examinations, as well as in the gaming scene itself, two forms of text-based game dominate: on the one hand, the branching narrative, which offers one of many possible iterations of a story in response to decisions made by players; on the other, the gated narrative, a largely linear story that is delivered in stages as a reward for the player completing tasks, such as solving puzzles or exploring an area within the game-world.

One notable departure from these two formulae is the browser-based *Fallen London* (Failbetter Games, 2009), built using Failbetter's now-abandoned StoryNexus system. Though *Fallen London* emphasizes choice and exploration, nothing the player does will result in permanent loss of access to any story branch. There is no main narrative artery leading toward an ending; instead, players take part in hundreds of compartmentalized 'storylets', in an order determined by a combination of decision-making, hidden dice rolls and numerical variables, these representing qualities and abilities which can be improved as the game goes on. The more storylets are played, the more become available, allowing for both a deeper investment in the game's world and lore and further development of the player's custom character. Pacing is

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controlled through an 'action economy' system, whereby the player is only permitted to take a certain number of actions over a set time period.

While primarily text-based, especially in its early incarnations, *Fallen London* is unmistakably a video game; its features include a player avatar (called a 'cameo'), costume parts, multiple currencies, a simulated card deck system for representing random encounters, and a vast array of collectible rewards. Its basic design, however, is reminiscent of key mid-twentieth-century experiments in literary fiction, such as B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, a book-in-a-box made up of chapters that can be read in any order, and *Tristano: A Novel* by Nanni Belestrini made up of 10 chapters of 20 randomly ordered paragraphs, designed so that each reader's copy of the story is unique. What if there were, therefore, a missing link between these texts and the current accepted range of forms taken by interactive fiction – an artefact that perhaps has more of a claim to being a novel than it does a video game, and which does not restrict access to its content via a branching choice system or completion requirements, but nevertheless envisages its reader as a player, one who inhabits its world and exerts an agency upon it?

This paper is a report on an ongoing practical research project that attempts to answer that question. The basis of the project is that by expanding on the elisions, ambiguities and lacunae that enable a game of *Fallen London* to pose as a plausible ongoing narrative, and permit (just about) a coherent reading of *The Unfortunates* and *Tristano*, it is possible to position the reader of a digital hypertext as a participant who, through the act of reading, is actively reassembling dozens upon dozens of unreliable memories of another life, testing different versions of the true order and significance of events by navigating the story-world and the characters within it. The story, such as it is, can thereby contain endless unresolved contradictions, as well as imitations and approximations of existing video game genres that omit traditional game mechanics. It can be, at times, for example, a dating simulator that never definitively provides an account of a date; the player's encounters and dialogue with certain characters may or may not be viewed within a romantic context depending on how they choose to fill in the gaps, and what other choices the player has made as to what constitutes the authentic recollection.

Whether it is possible to accept such an artefact as a video game, and on what basis, is also a part of the investigation. Undoubtedly, a sense of fatigue has set in around the question of defining video games after so many years of fervent questioning; I would argue, however, that one of the most exciting aspects of the medium is that games are forever on the verge of becoming something else, and that we should continue to challenge those boundaries that have been largely agreed upon.

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