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Inscribing the Lone and Level Sands:

Technoromanticism at Play in *Elegy for a Dead World*

Jason I. Kolkey

The light of a setting sun glints off the empty towers and abandoned monuments of depopulated cities, a low mechanical buzz audible over the wind. A figure clad in a spacesuit hovers above the ground. Breathing heavily through apparatus, the explorer pauses frequently to take in the eerie scenery. The post-apocalyptic, alien setting with its science fiction trappings and genocidal implications is hardly unique in video-gaming. But unlike in the dystopian hellscapes of the *Bioshock* (Irrational, 2007–13) or *Dead Space* (Visceral, 2008–13) series, the quiet of this gameworld will never be broken by hostile alien parasites or super-powered junkies. Nor will the player solve puzzles at a leisurely pace and piece together a fantastic storyline as in a point-and-click adventure game or one of *Myst*'s (Cyan, 1993) many sequels and imitators. Instead, *Elegy for a Dead World* (Dejobaan, 2014) regularly presents the player with a quill pen icon that summons a series of dialog boxes, fill-in-the-blank prompts more reminiscent of *Mad Libs* than the side-scrolling video games from which it otherwise takes its design cues. Alternatively, the player may dispense with the prompts and choose to conjure up the icon with a keystroke, entering text at any point as the avatar traverses the planet surface.

Indie developers Dejobaan Games and Popcannibal Games released *Elegy for a Dead World* in December 2014, backed in part by a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign. Tagged a “Game About Writing Fiction,” *Elegy* wears its literary inspirations on its sleeve with three levels, each named for one of the younger British Romantic poets and clearly indicating the specific poem on which the makers drew for inspiration. Shelley’s *World* references “Ozymandias” (1817) for its tableau of crumbling monuments to an extraterrestrial empire fallen due to its own hubris. The remains of “that colossal wreck” stand in the background as the player moves past floating shields bearing the mark of a long-dead dynasty.¹ The abandoned machinery occasionally stirs, including eerily humming spheres that orbit a hovering structure reminiscent of the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The one building the avatar is allowed to enter houses cracked, egg-like objects and a crude painting of a monstrous face. Moving out of the desolate metropolis, the player discovers huts indicating a return to tribalism and smaller monuments to lost lives, headstones set against a mountainous background.

Byron’s *World* draws its scenery from the apocalyptic vision of “Darkness” (1816) and sends the player through the subterranean layers of what was once an advanced colony, now rendered “Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless— / A lump of death.”² Shelves of books, devices seemingly meant for energy production, and cryogenic freezing apparatus all imply the society’s former accomplishments in learning and technology. Emerging to the surface, however, reveals that the deserted structures are buried beneath a frozen wasteland, the sun blotted out. A solitary snowman, romantic irony manifest, stands vanguard over the tundra under a solar eclipse.

Keats’s *World*, building off the meditation on premature mortality in “When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be” (1818), offers an attractive, melancholy scene of nature’s eternal cycles overtaking a lost civilization. A light rain drizzles upon the explorer while silhouetted animals graze in the background. The player travels beneath the shadows of three titanic figures sharing the burden of a globe and past seemingly weightless stone fragments until she comes to an abandoned command center interior. Finally, the explorer approaches a sculpture of a faceless, robed woman, accompanied by a much smaller skeletal figure carved into a tablet. Death looms over the artist, giving physical form to Keats’s lament at facing life’s transience “[b]efore my pen has glean’d my teeming brain.”³ The considerably more ephemeral act of inscription in which the player/author is engaged reflects the poet’s sentiment.

Elegy for a Dead World embodies the romantic conceptions of creativity prevalent in the culture surrounding networked technology, even as it raises questions about those same ideological formations. The developers characterize their work as an experiment in offering a video game as aid to

invention, encouraging players/authors to compose works of fiction or poetry through beautifully desolate backgrounds paired with prompts and then share the results with an online community. Co-creators Ziba Scott and Ichiro Lambe explain in a promotional video for their Kickstarter campaign that they stumbled upon using the younger British Romantics as a source of themes and aesthetics. They began with Keats and moved on to Shelley based on their own literary preferences and the seeming appropriateness of the poems for the kind of work they imagined, not considering any historical or personal connections between the poets themselves. Even though the theme of British Romanticism only solidified with the choice of a third poem, their selections are far from coincidental. By drawing on Romantic trappings to make a game of literary creativity, *Elegy* demonstrates the continuing influence of Romanticism inherent in our present moment of constant connection, social media, and online gaming. It also reveals that the Romantic imaginary is itself a kind of collaborative social game with all the pleasures and limitations that entails.

I

Though its interface and aesthetic trappings bear obvious similarities to other sidescrolling indie video games, *Elegy* immediately raises ontological questions. The semantics of that very “indie” classification alone are complex and can include highly experimental works. Indeed, *Elegy* is caught somewhere between quirky side-scroller, extremely limited word processor, and interactive art project. It troubles narrow, conservative expectations by lacking any clear conditions for winning and relying on an unusual degree of player input into developing a narrative justification for the diegetic visuals. By asking players to enter text and share the results online, *Elegy* can be said to function as a highly interactive form of what Astrid Ensslin categorizes as “literary video games,” a sub-group of art games that focuses on linguistic expression rather than audiovisual elements more commonly foregrounded in such works. In these games, “literary and poetic technologies are employed in order to explore the affordances and limitations of rules.”⁴ This is an apt description of *Elegy*, but any such taxonomy is certain to prove inadequate in the face of ongoing innovation. While *Elegy* may not fit easily into any of the sub-groups Ensslin offers, it might be usefully understood as a hybrid of “interactive generative literature” that asks readers to contribute to the production of a poetic text and “literary-fictional ‘auteur’ computer games.”⁵ In any case, given how difficult *Elegy* is to classify even through a theoretical lens, it is unsurprising that marketers and critics have had a difficult time characterizing and evaluating the game.

Indeed, the question of whether this piece of software can even be properly categorized as a game recurs throughout its promotional campaign and in critical reviews. In both interviews and promotional materials, the makers show their consciousness of *Elegy*'s equivocal status, citing game poems such as Ian Bogost's *A Slow Year* (2010) as inspiration. They considered this odd hybrid a palate cleanser from their usual ventures. Games like Dejobaan's distinctively titled *AaaaaAAaaaAAAaaAAAAaAAAAA!!!—A Reckless Disregard for Gravity* (2009) are customarily more labor-intensive on the designer side and challenging for players to complete. Lambe described the departure from his other work at Dejobaan in an interview with *Indie Games*: "There's no game to play—you go through the world, observe, and make notes—or stories—or poems—or songs—in your journal. You then close your journal and send it back to Homeworld (Steam Workshop)."⁶ Scott further explained to *Eurogamer*:

What we're trying to do is motivate people so they get into a mindset where they have something they want to put out and write. We found just dropping them into a blank slate is too much. It's intimidating. The roles are about giving them something to play as; to set the stage for their writing.⁷

According to the rhetoric that repeatedly surfaces in the creators' characterizations, *Elegy* may take the form of a game, but playing is not its purpose. The ludic structure is a means to an end, serving to ease the task of producing expressive text.

Really, textual composition is simply the form of gameplay particular to a unique game. Yet perceptions of the work are inevitably colored by the long, often unproductively acrimonious and circular, debate over whether video games are in themselves art. In departing from the expectations set by past games and the industry that creates them, *Elegy* represents an uneasy give and take between romantic ideals about the inherently edifying pleasures of art and what are perceived as the vague, short-lived rewards possible through most gameplay. Attitudes that treat video-gaming as culturally suspect have proven resilient despite the massive reach of the gaming industry. According to a 2015 Pew Research Poll, even though 49 percent of adults now play video games, only 10 percent are willing to identify as gamers, and 26 percent consider most video games a waste of time.⁸ The creators themselves seem to fall reflexively into the very binary between the intrinsic rewards of artistic expression and the empty absorption in play that their work so provocatively challenges. Their statements exhibit reluctance to classify what they have produced, and consequently their descriptions of *Elegy* for marketing purposes are at best ambiguous and often contradictory.

These contradictions stand out in the promotional campaign through the contrast between the experiences suggested in the creator interviews and in the marketing materials they authorized. The press kit, for instance, summarizes:

Each of the game's 27 writing challenges inspire you to create narratives about the worlds from different perspectives. In one challenge, you play an archaeologist uncovering clues and writing about a city's final days; in another, you're a thief, composing a song about searching the wreckage for valuables; and in another, you pen a lament in rhyming couplets.⁹

The press kit description indeed summarizes a few of the prompts available, but by downplaying the possibilities for emergent creativity and variations on the game dynamics it situates *Elegy* as a less experimental piece. Based on this copy, the writing acts would seem to be far more constrained by an ethos of imitation, keeping the author's imagination strictly on the rails. Moreover, the game described seems not so different from other indie productions with aesthetic ambition. It fits in among the low-budget side-scrollers available through the Steam digital distribution platform or seeking production capital through Kickstarter from retro-gaming devotees. Emphasizing a perspective on the game that appears more conventional may evade accusations of unseemly pretension and render the work palatable to potential players and funders trained to expect straightforward rules and rewards.

Along with portraying a somewhat misleading take on the gameplay, the synopsis suggests a narrowly prescriptive approach to lending the avatar, known as the Traveler, a background and motivation. According to the description, you choose to play as an "archaeologist" or "thief" with a clearly established relationship to the science fiction-based environments. These character descriptions, more appropriate to a role-playing game, run counter to the game's refusal to provide any such details of the avatar's background or appearance. Unlike highly linear games with immutable avatars and missions or even an RPG that allows limited customization and dialogue options, like the *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007–12) or *Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda, 1994–2016) series, there is no pressing storyline to force the character into an archetypal heroic mold. There are no binary choices between good and evil, paragon and renegade. With the caveat that the players' interpolations are limited to text entries, they may invent any background they choose for the Traveler, who in turn may be imagined to say or do anything one likes or just remain a passive observer to the stories of the planets.

The indeterminate features of the player character, once standard in video games due to limited graphics capabilities, now also represent a conscious choice to avoid imposing any particular gender, race, or ethnicity. The

ambiguous figure of the Traveler nonetheless brings to mind Samus Aran, the heavily armored video game heroine who revealed her identity as a woman at the conclusion of *Metroid* (Nintendo R&D1, 1986) in a gender-bias based twist ending. The concept art, by *Elegy* art lead Luigi Guatieri, indeed reveals a young Caucasian woman with close-cropped hair behind the helmet, but any such characteristics are impossible to make out in the game itself. The featureless avatar hence serves as an invitation to the player to impose a unique background and set of motivations upon the character. Scott McCloud contends in regard to the human figure in cartooning: "The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled . . . an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it."¹⁰ This description of the subject's aesthetic experience is unquestionably itself a romanticized overstatement, but it is one that holds credence with game designers. For instance, *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989) and *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) creator Will Wright cites McCloud when explaining: "By purposely making the Sims fairly low-detail and keeping a certain distance from them we forced the players to fill in the representational blanks with their imagination."¹¹ *Elegy's* throwback to an earlier generation of gaming, with the helmeted figure traveling on a two-dimensional plane among magnificent sights, similarly allows the projection of personality in a way not possible with a detailed image. The gender and racial neutrality is thus a design element rhetorically laden in its very lack of information. The player considers her own subjectivity in the course of turning the avatar's aimless wandering into a form of play, much less a coherent story.

By taking on the appearance of a game, *Elegy* supposedly replaces the intimidating void of a new document in a word processor with vibrant imagery and repeated calls to create, to lend meaning to the otherwise amorphous semiotics of the eponymous dead worlds. Interacting with this particular piece of software is romantically elevated to the level of crafting artistic works, while the production of creative writing is stripped of some of its rarefied air by being democratized as a game. But the problem of classifying the software in question points to larger conflicts between romanticized constructions of imaginative creation and the material realities of the physically bounded media through which we play, absorb text and images, and compose and communicate poetry and fiction.

II

In *Elegy*, the gameworlds set conditions for the supposedly liberated creativity of the player's narrative. Though the backgrounds are static, romantic mutability

is treated as a game mechanic: each player recontextualizes the images of majesty and decay through her own perceptions, imagination, and textual contributions. While *Elegy*'s stated purpose as a spur to creative expression relies on this freedom to develop one's own story, the limitations imposed by level design and prompts are revealing for our broader understanding of both video games and romanticized models of creativity. In many ways, the seemingly radical choices made by the game's designers only foreground the materiality and cultural baggage inherent to both video games and literary expression.

Ian Bogost has described the procedural rhetoric of video games whereby the ludic design demands certain actions of the player in order to convey to her that this is the way things are done within the game: "arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior."¹² *Elegy* teaches its players a means of composing narrative, offering varying degrees of control over where that narrative can go and how explicitly it applies to the diegetic worlds their avatars tread upon.

Players invent under the technical limitations of composing within the dialog boxes and, if they so choose, are directed by the placement and the syntactic and generic cues imposed by the prompts. *Byron's World*, for instance, offers the seeds of an earnest science fiction story about the cycles of death and rebirth of civilizations in "The Four Ages of Byron's World" or "This Was My World." The player may instead insert new lines into "Darkness," the poem the level is loosely based upon, or attempt to reconcile the visuals with portions of the opening to H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897). The menu also includes opportunities for humorous takes on the exercise with "This Vacation is Terrible" and "Plundering Byron: The Musical"; "10 Choices We Made" and a "Grammar Workshop" impose strict formal constraints appropriate for an educational setting. In these variations, the writing suggestions aim at English-language learners and make other gestures toward educating players about the poems and authors who provide the game's thematic basis. Thus, the procedural rhetoric can be explicitly pedagogical, fitting the utilitarian perspective Dejobaan's website suggests when it claims that "over 200 academic institutions" use the game in classrooms:

For creative writing classes, *Elegy* inspires students to write stories, poems, and songs by combining a loose narrative framework with hand-painted art and rich soundscapes. In English as a second language (ESL) classes, students practice their grammar skills by entering short phrases into fill-in-the-blank sections that serve as the narrative framework.¹³

In this context, *Elegy* is again a means to an end, but slotted into the tradition of educational computer games rather than elevated creative ideals. It serves

to push uninspired students into fulfilling the requirements of a creative writing course or provides a more visually interesting alternative to sentence completion worksheets.

Regardless of the specific prompts, each player's in-game compositions are likely to be influenced by others' since she has the opportunity to participate in the associated online community. The development of such a community preceded the game's completion as the creators raised \$72,339 from 3,666 backers through a Kickstarter campaign. Many players were thus literally invested in making this exchange of stories a success before the makers issued a beta, immediately going to work on constructing a diverse corpus. Being active in this exchange involves a curatorial function of rating contributions, which in turn makes the highest-rated stories the most visible. Some of the more popular texts available through the online community range from the terse, angst-ridden free-verse lament with which user Galatea meets Shelley's World, to mocking jabs at the game's very conceits, as in user craig.kate's "Please feed my dog," composed on Keats' World. In one case, a reviewer chose to share her thoughts on the game within the game itself and post a series of screenshots to *The Verge*. Adi Robertson opens by appropriately invoking Nietzsche's reflections upon the changes imposed on his writing practice by acquiring a typewriter and referring to *Elegy* as "the world's first and only immersive space exploration word processor."¹⁴ Entrance into the playing community of *Elegy* entails a willingness to craft texts within the game's strictures and potentially exhibit them to others. Those who have sufficient pride in their output and cling to the fetish of the book as a physical object might even choose to have their writing printed and bound as an illustrated volume.

Winning the game, then, is not a matter of progressing through a series of levels or missions. One can pass over the worlds writing nothing or contributing only incomprehensible nonsense without consequence. A kind of victory may, however, be socially determined if one participates in the online exchange of texts and commentary. As with posts to blogs, streaming video sites, or social media, success proves to be based on approbation from strangers, dependent upon how many readers take an interest in a particular take on the planets' stories and how warmly they respond. Ziba Scott enthused in his interview with *Eurogamer* about the system of "Commendation" devised for the game:

One of the things I'm excited about is the idea of an achievement, which is a very gamey concept, for having writing that other people appreciate . . . In some ways it's not even a game. We're actually rewarding an achievement that has real merit and value, that actually has some significance that you should be proud of.¹⁵

Although its preoccupation with collaboration is especially explicit, *Elegy* is far from unusual in bringing this social dimension to an ostensibly “single-player” game. Rather, it is revealing of the material and social realities common to video games, but often forgotten in favor of a popular image of gaming as a lonely, sedentary activity. As Steven E. Jones notes, in video games “the playing is always in the social world, always a complicated, highly mediated experience, never purely formal, any more than a text is purely a verbal construct.”¹⁶ Video games are lent extrinsic meaning by the ways players engage with each other and spectators, commonly through multiplayer games, discussion, and creating their own play-through videos or modifications.

In *Elegy*, however, the very process of meaning-making *becomes* the game as the player’s interaction and opportunities for enjoyment are limited to observing the backgrounds and attempting to respond to them through the text. They impose their own experiences and perceptions upon the worlds, whether those environments inspire direct reference to the Romantic poets, the literary tropes of space exploration gathered from classic science fiction by the likes of Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke, or internalized reflection seemingly disconnected from the setting. *Elegy* calls for and models emergent creativity, giving direction through prompts but also the imagined environments themselves. The game thus fulfills the function Henry Jenkins lays out when he describes gaming platforms as “machines for generating compelling spaces”:

Environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives.¹⁷

Elegy tends toward the last of these environmental storytelling techniques but, of course, also calls upon older narratives from the Romantic poems the levels are based on. The prompts, even if dismissed for a particular play session, nudge the player toward the plots, generic features, and tropes the creators consider appropriate to the sights on display.

The three worlds the game offers as sites for inscription are positively tiny by the current standards of video-gaming, particularly as found in the “open worlds” and “sandboxes” popularized by Rockstar Games’ *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar, 1997–2013). Although *Elegy* is similarly liberated from the impetus toward constant, linear progression, the restrictive movement of the player character and the few objects presented for contemplation

otherwise seem to exist in polar opposition. Sandbox games gradually unfold expansive environments with a constant threat of sensory overload from cut scenes, mini-games, side quests, opportunities to “level up,” and customization options. McKenzie Wark detects a failure of romantic escapism in the massively busy, violent gameworlds offered by *Grand Theft Auto*: “In gamespace . . . [n]o space is sacred; no space is separate. Not even the space of the page. The gamelike extends its lines everywhere and nowhere.”¹⁸ *Elegy*, by contrast, accepts the inevitable technical limitations of the gaming platform and reacts by relocating the focal point for the player’s retreat from the mundane. The Traveler’s range of horizontal and vertical movement gradually metes out encounters with the game’s environments and sharply focuses the attention in each moment. The player’s only interactions with the evocative scenery come in the occasions for writing at each encounter with the quill pen icon. She observes the gameworld that her avatar passes through, but it is a sensory experience that constantly and forcefully emphasizes its own mediation.

Consequently, any sense of immersion or liberation the game may provide is of a decidedly low-tech variety. The player builds her own version of that lost world’s marvelous achievements or idyllic beauty in text, reshaping her own understanding of the gameworld through the narrative she chooses to assign to it. The only escape available is a preoccupation with observing the backgrounds or composing text. Jones argues that the dominance of side-scrollers in indie games is not just about keeping costs down and “employing a knowing, lo-fi, retro aesthetic,” but “also often a way to return to foundational questions about gameworlds, starting with what happens when you add a dimension (literally) or are aware of multiple dimensions as possibilities for gameplay.”¹⁹ The Traveler sets out across a shattered utopia, each variation lending renewed emphasis to the problem that the gameworld only extends beyond its highly constricted technical and design limitations through remediation. Each player must invent her own variation upon the gamespace by embracing the software’s claustrophobic boundaries. The procedural rhetoric at play in the post-apocalyptic topography demands engagement through the very lack of the in-game distractions that give gamers a sense of choice in the sandbox. Rather than a complex of rules and options that portray a funhouse reflection of the outside world, *Elegy* redirects the willing participant back into her own creative mind. Any hope for freedom to depart the intended path garnered by taking off into the atmosphere is quickly snuffed out by the realization of just how few pixels are available for vertical movement: the jetpack’s range ends at the edge of the immediately visible screen.

In fact, the more interesting character animation is a pronounced immobility. Rather than crouching in the manner common to action-oriented games, the

character sprawls out in a posture suggesting pensive reflection upon the landscape and the lost civilization said to have carved it out. Combined with the iconic cipher of the avatar's features, the prone figure conjures associations with the game's stated inspiration from Randall Munroe's popular web comic, *xkcd* (2006–).²⁰ For the experimental installment "Time," Munroe posted the first frame on March 25, 2013, featuring a pair of the stick figures by which he customarily represents the human form seated on a beach. He gradually updated the strip over 123 days for a total of 3,099 images. The early installments focus on the characters constructing an increasingly elaborate castle out of sand and wood, occasionally pausing to wonder when the river would rise to the level necessary to prove their labor's ephemerality. Eventually, they set out to explore the river for themselves while continuing their conversation, attempting to understand the geographical features of the starkly depicted world around them and occasionally seating themselves to relax and reflect upon their journey. In one such pause, the male character suggests: "Well, we may as well continue. Either we'll figure out the sea, or we'll keep finding beautiful places."²¹ They seek the natural sublime and the incidental pleasures of exploring their world, seemingly already unpeopled for an extended stretch, until they find their way to a real castle and learn to communicate with its inhabitants. More urgently, they find out their entire world is doomed to drown in the kind of cataclysm the designers of *Elegy* find so stimulating for fresh composition. The team thus borrow aesthetic cues and themes from Munroe's expansive though starkly simplified cartooning, applying them to game environments that are more elaborate and also more definitively barren of inhabitants. *Elegy* points the way for players with romantic signifiers and invites them to impose upon each screen their own musings on mutability and loss or, if they prefer, goofy non-sequiturs and self-conscious irony.

III

In the preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth set forth the British Romantic Period's most celebrated model for creativity, claiming,

[p]oetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on;

but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment.²²

Elegy may be unlikely to inspire an emotional overflow, but it does confront the player with evocative images and sounds. Then, as Wordsworth's model demands, the game allows the leisure to respond, reconsider, and at the end of the session, revise. Moreover, the playful, amorphous vision of authorship and collaboration that fuels the game has further precedents in the canon of British Romanticism that offers its thematic cues. It draws heavily on the ideals of creativity and imaginative engagement developed by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats, among others. Those ideas have proven remarkably durable even as the poets' fascination with country vistas and mountainsides has been largely supplanted by the human achievement of globally connected, wired ecosystems.

As a game centered on developing and sharing narratives, *Elegy* has significant associations with perhaps the most famous of story games: the June 1816 exchange of ghost stories involving Byron and Percy and Mary Shelley. Inspired by a collection of German gothic tales, the storytelling game at Villa Diodati was shaped by generic conventions, spurred and colored by influence from existing texts. Mary's initial version of *Frankenstein* (1818), the most enduring product of that game, synthesized a Gothic plot with ideas drawn from discussion between Byron and Shelley about galvanism as a potential means of reviving the dead. According to the account of Byron's personal physician John Polidori, the June 18 night of storytelling culminated in a demonstration of the affective power of recontextualizing a piece of literature. Shelley violently reacted to Byron reciting from Coleridge's *Christabel* (1816), "suddenly shrieking and putting his hands to his head, [and] ran out of the room."²³ Such a game can be open-ended and infinitely prolific. Long after story exchange concluded, the narratives by Mary Shelley and Byron continued to be embellished, expanded, and transformed by themselves, the other parties present at the villa (Percy adding his revisions to Mary's manuscript for *Frankenstein*; Polidori publishing *The Vampyre* (1819), which was inspired by Byron's fragmentary tale and included a scene based on Shelley's fit), and later by an endless stream of editors, authors, filmmakers, visual artists, musicians, and video game designers. In 2015 alone, we saw a film from the perspective of the iconic hunchbacked assistant (rehabilitated to resemble Daniel Radcliffe) who originated as Fritz in James Whale's adaptation, a British TV series following the exploits of a detective investigating the titular mad scientist, an American cop show very loosely based on the novels'

concepts, the second season of *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime, 2014–16), which features Dr. Frankenstein and his creations prominently among its gallery of Gothic Victorian horrors, and a comic book set in the *Hellboy* universe by creator Mike Mignola that finds the creature in 1950s Mexico. The composition, reception, and reworking of *Frankenstein* as founding myth for British Romanticism, science fiction, and actual scientific endeavors, demonstrates how technological speculation and the valorizing of imagination can come together as both a form of play and means of producing unexpectedly compelling and resilient narratives.

Literary and textual criticism have a place in this conversation as well, offering ways of understanding this playful, collaborative form of authorship in Romantic poetry and online exchanges alike. In the wake of poststructuralist theory's "death of the author," Jack Stillinger argued that indirect and usually unacknowledged collaboration is the norm in literary production. Drawing on the textual histories of Romantic works, he developed a theory that takes into account "the collaborative authorship of writings that we routinely consider the work of a single author."²⁴ The author function is always performed by multiple individuals, even if the credited writer is unaware of or even hostile to outside interference. In this light, *Elegy* proves an exercise in the concept of the social text. Players engage in a distant collaboration with the credited creators, Lambe and Scott, lead artist Guatieri, their respective teams of programmers, artists, and designers, and finally with each other. Even if one chooses to work without the prompts, the level design suggests where to pause, reflect upon the surroundings, and continue writing. The player may also engage with other direct collaborators in their own social circles or the online community, responding to or imitating the works produced by others.

At the same time, Romantic ideology is at work in *Elegy*'s exploration of the extraterrestrial and sublime for the sake of facilitating an otherwise straightforward interaction between user and computer. In poetry, this means the focus upon the ideal and transcendent turns the subject's attention away from the economic, historical, and physical contexts of the work.²⁵ Graphic user interfaces and computer programs similarly follow a romanticizing impulse that conceals their material substrate in favor of what Matthew Kirschenbaum calls "screen essentialism." Kirschenbaum draws this connection by arguing,

[w]hile often precisely Romantic in their celebration of the fragile half-life of the digital, the "ideology" . . . is perhaps better thought of as *medial*—that is, one that substitutes popular representations of a medium, socially constructed and culturally activated to perform specific kinds of work, for

a more comprehensive treatment of the material particulars of a given technology.²⁶

Computers and networked technology are readily romanticized because like Romantic literature they attempt to hide the ineluctable material realities of influence, invention, and reception from the perceptions of the user. *Elegy* makes its own critical contribution by further confusing the boundaries between reader and author, play and collaboration. Its graphics and gameworlds are intended at least in part to hide the labor of writing and the tedium of working with a traditional word processor. Science fiction and video games fans who always meant to get around to writing an opus have an immediate call to creativity, with flexible demands upon their own powers of imagination and seriousness.

The literary productions in this manner half-created and half-perceived, to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth, by each player entering into *Elegy*'s networked exchange of stories are almost necessarily variations on a theme. The game repeatedly confronts players with scenic perspectives upon civilizations that have already fallen and allows no visible interactions with other characters or the environment to drive a narrative forward. The conditions thus call for works that are preoccupied with ruin and failure and in themselves fragmentary, if only insofar as an individual player sets out to subvert those very expectations. Consequently, *Elegy* becomes, like the Romantic poems that inspired it, a heavily mediated account of an encounter with sublimity and the attendant frustrations of any attempts at mimetic representation. Thomas McFarland explains the Romantic fixation on the fragmentary and ruined as a way of textually representing experiences that are in fact irreducible to human language: "The sublime . . . is the perception of very large fragments, such as mountains, with the accompanying awareness that this largeness implies still larger conceptions that can have no such objectivization and therefore cannot be compared. The sublime is, so to speak, an implied comparison in which the diasparactive object exists."²⁷ The necessary failures of the utopic gameworld lead back to the romantic concerns with the unfinished work of genius and the impossibility of fully capturing the aesthetic experiences available through direct observation of nature or reflection upon the individual human mind. Like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (1816), in which the dream vision is cut off by the quotidian interruption of the "visitor from Porlock," a sense of incompleteness is built into the aesthetic experience of the game. These very limitations act as signifiers for the transcendent potential the work inevitably fails to capture in lines of verse or code. We can only catch a glimpse of the worlds the designers have imagined, and the decisions we make about how to respond to them in text necessarily foreclose other possibilities. The same preoccupations

that dominate Romantic aesthetics become the impetus for play within the gamespace.

By extension, the experience of play/authorship also proves demonstrative of the romanticized discourses that characterize electronic media and communications. Richard Coyne coined the term “technoromanticism” to denote the continuity between Romantic narratives and those of networked information technology; the schools of thought share a preoccupation with striving after utopian unity and the lionizing of individual genius.²⁸ Thomas Streeter traces a line of progression between romantic ideology and the “rebel-hero identity” that became synonymous with innovations in personal computing in the late twentieth century and remains pervasive in figures like Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, and especially the late Steve Jobs.²⁹ The uniquely sensitive artist gives way to the heroic innovators who build corporate behemoths out of their garages or dorm rooms. The romantic streak of technological adventure is inculcated partly through corporate branding, as in the iconic 1984-inspired Apple Super Bowl commercial. Science fiction is also an important influence as it contributes archetypal figures like the hacker heroes, most obviously the character actually named Hiro Protagonist in Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1992).

In *Elegy* the heroic galactic pioneer of countless science fiction stories is also the author who must find the words to represent alien vistas. In a somewhat befuddled preview piece that reported the game’s upcoming release without a thorough grasp of its features, Alec Meer of the video game blog *Rock Paper Shotgun* quotes the line from Carl Sagan’s *Contact* (1985) which proliferated as an online meme: “They should have sent a poet.”³⁰ Indeed, *Elegy* follows through on that suggestion for confronting the majesty of the universe and in the process shows how close the discourses of romantic creation and technological progress have always been. Networked technology, rather than existing in opposition to Romanticism’s immersion in nature, similarly emerges out of the human imagination and in turn can guide us back to imaginative gameplay.

Elegy engages in criticism relevant to how we think about creativity and collaboration in both new media and literature. Precisely because it is referred to as a “game” in scare quotes, it reveals the playful, social interactions involved in the creation and dissemination of works. In effect this is not so different from the games of creation and reception that occur with any literary publication. The developers of the *Ivanhoe* (2015) game at the University of Virginia influentially modeled the discursive field around a literary work by treating each intervention in its transmission and reception history as a “move.” They set out “to make explicit the assumptions about critical practice and textual interpretation that often lie unacknowledged, or at least irregularly

explored, in a conventional approach to interpretational practice.”³¹ Centering on another major canonical text of the British Romantic Period, Sir Walter Scott’s novel *Ivanhoe* (1820), the game highlighted the social play that determines a particular text’s critical reading and cultural currency. *Elegy* takes this experiment a step further by making composition, publication, and reception all part of the game, tying each phase to online social interactions. Though *Elegy*’s players may not be as critically or theoretically informed as participants in the *Ivanhoe* game, questions of authorship nonetheless impinge upon the experience of play when the texts they write explicitly pass through several layers of mediation and influence.

In calling upon the canon of British Romanticism, *Elegy for a Dead World* illustrates the limited utility of a model of creativity based too heavily in an exalted individual genius for nineteenth-century poets and twenty-first century technology workers alike. As this video game raises questions about its own medium’s definition and purpose, it also distances the player/author from their past experiences and perceptions of the act of writing. Its constrained graphical representations of alien planets, character animations, and reliance upon dialog boxes combine to create an additional remove from the material realities of interacting with the computer. According to its makers, players are more comfortable making their marks upon the game’s worlds than in a traditional word processor precisely because of the added layers of mediation and sense of impermanence. At the same time, however, *Elegy* draws attention to the mediation and indirect collaboration at work in any act of composition. The game foregrounds the contingent, interactive processes of the creative mind at work by imposing ludic rules upon the user’s textual production. And the shallow illusion of etching words in an imaginary planet’s soil directs writing that will be disseminated and preserved indefinitely on a Steam server.

Notes

- 1 Percy Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2002), 13.
- 2 Lord Byron, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71–2.
- 3 John Keats, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.
- 4 Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 5, 36.
- 5 Ibid., 46, 49. For further discussion of the relationships between video games, narratives, and literature, see: N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, NC: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); and Esther MacCallum-Stewart, *Online Games, Social Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Also worth considering here are the electronic texts

- Espen Aarseth describes as “metamorphic literature”; that is, works in which “indeterminate cybertexts transform themselves endlessly with no final (and repeatable) state to be reached” (181).
- 6 John Polson, “Elegy for a Dead World—Why so Serious, Dejobaan?” *Indie Games*, October 21, 2013, http://indiegames.com/2013/10/elegy_for_a_dead_world_-_why_s.html.
 - 7 Jeffrey Matulef, “The Write Stuff: *Elegy for a Dead World* Preview,” *Eurogamer*, December 20, 2013, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-12-14-the-write-stuff-elegy-for-a-dead-world-preview>.
 - 8 Pew Research Center, “Gaming and Gamers,” December 15, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/pi_2015-12-15_gaming-and-gamers_homepage/.
 - 9 Dejobaan Games, “Elegy Press Kit,” accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.dejobaan.com/elegy-press-kit/>.
 - 10 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 36.
 - 11 Will Wright quoted in Ken Perlin, “Can There Be a Form between a Game and a Story?” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 13.
 - 12 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 29.
 - 13 Dejobaan Games, “Elegy Educators,” accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.dejobaan.com/elegy-educators/>.
 - 14 Adi Robertson, “*Elegy for a Dead World*: I Wrote this Video Game Review Inside a Video Game,” *The Verge*, December 10, 2014, <https://www.theverge.com/2014/12/10/7362517/elegy-for-a-dead-world-i-wrote-this-video-game-review-inside-a-video-game>.
 - 15 Qtd. in Matulef, “The Write Stuff.”
 - 16 Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 10.
 - 17 Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 122–3.
 - 18 McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 102.
 - 19 Steven E. Jones, *The Emergence of Digital Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 49. Jesper Juul has pointed to the resurgence of two-dimensional “screen space” in game design as a marker of “casual games,” which he argues “have a wide appeal because the move away from 3-D spaces, blending more easily with not only the time, but also the space in which we play a game” (18).
 - 20 Polson, “Elegy.”
 - 21 Randall Munroe, “Time,” Frame 1419, *Xkcd*, March 25, 2013, <https://xkcd.com/1190/>.

- 22 William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 1800), xxxiii–xxxiv.
- 23 John Polidori, *The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Elkin Matthews, 1911), 128.
- 24 Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22.
- 25 Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1.
- 26 Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 36.
- 27 Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 29–30.
- 28 Richard Coyne, *Technoromanticism: Digital Narrative, Holism, and the Romance of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 29 Thomas Streeter, *The Net Effect: Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 68. Streeter cites Robert Darnton's argument that romantic sensitivity was a product, in part, of the way Rousseau's prose encouraged readers to imagine a break in the mediation between themselves and the author. According to Darnton, in Rousseauistic reading "[a]uthor and reader triumphed together over the artifice of literary communication," thereby "revolutioniz[ing] the relation between reader and text, and open[ing] the way to romanticism" (234, 232).
- 30 Alec Meer, "Shelley They Can't Be Serious: *Elegy for a Dead World*," *Rock Paper Shotgun*, October 23, 2013, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2013/10/23/shelley-they-cant-be-serious-elegy-for-a-dead-world/>.
- 31 Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 217–8.

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