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Waking up as Alan: Game novelisation and the player–reader–writer

Abstract:

‘What kind of writer *are* you?’ So the question is asked of Alan Wake, best-selling novelist embedded in his own horror story in Remedy Entertainment’s *Alan Wake* (2010), and subsequent novelisation by Rick Burroughs (2010). What kind of writer you are is a question which has long vexed not only genre fiction authors, but also those writers whose work feeds on/back into established narrative worlds. Game novelisation, the ‘reverse’ adaptation of videogames into novels, has attracted almost no academic enquiry to-date, and is much maligned by critics. Yet game novelisation is a writing and publishing practice on the increase, and when considered in overlap with the voluminous quantities of game fan fiction published online, transformative narrative practice is a phenomenon which begs greater attention within creative writing. While there is much work to be done on game novelisation and game fan fiction in terms of its place, reception and impact within gamer and publishing landscapes, from a creative writing viewpoint there is value to be gained in teasing out aspects of writing that are unique to these practices, and to consider how immersion in narrative world building is altered by the player cum reader cum writer. Using *Alan Wake* as one example, this article presents selected contextual discussion before performing a reflection on my own experience of narrative world building as player, reader and writer.

Biographical note:

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The release of *Alan Wake* the videogame (Remedy Entertainment 2010) was lauded for its ‘deeply literary plot, mind-bending mystery, heart-pounding suspense, a polished cinematic production, and a protagonist who fights with his wits and a flashlight instead of an M16’ (McEachern 2010: 11). The literary plot centres on its eponymous character, a best-selling genre fiction novelist who finds himself embedded in his own horror story. Struggling with ‘writer’s block’, Alan and wife Alice have escaped the city to Bright Falls, a geographically isolated former logging town. But things go awry from the outset, with Alice’s disappearance into Cauldron Lake and Alan’s awakening to paranormal happenings where, as the genre formula goes, nothing is as it seems. In the same year as the game’s console release, *Alan Wake* the game novelisation was published. Written by Rick Burroughs, the novel fits squarely into the genre conventions of the game it’s based on: an action-based speculative thriller with a conceit that must be puzzled by reader and Wake alike. Since these releases, *Alan Wake* fan fiction has flourished.

Game novelisation, the ‘reverse’ adaptation of videogames into novels, has attracted almost no academic enquiry to-date, and these works are much maligned by reviewers. Yet with the novelisation of adult game titles including *Assassins’s Creed*, *Bioshock*, *Halo*, *Resident Evil*, *Tomb Raider*, *WarCraft*, and an ever-expanding list of other mainstream action-adventure role-playing games, this writing and publishing practice is on the increase. Furthermore, when considered in overlap with the voluminous quantities of game fan fiction published online, transformative narrative practice (and my use of this term within this article is intended to relate specifically to game narrative) is a phenomenon which begs greater attention from the critical thinking community; and not simply because of quantity, but because the analysis of crossover texts offers critical insights into the intersections and interrelations of the various media-specific literacies. In this regard, research (Johnson and Lacasa 2008; Burn 2007; Walsh and Apperley 2012) has focused on either the benefits of bringing game literacy into writing composition classrooms, or on the interactivity and meaning-making (‘readerly’ practices) of each medium, comparatively speaking, building on Espen Aarseth’s cybertext and ergodic literature theory (1997); as Alberti notes:

The emergence of video games as a subculture, art form, and discursive environment that increasingly challenges our understanding of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ is part of a larger reexamination [sic] of literacy practices that characterises the move to digital discursive environments in general (2008: 260).

Game novelisation and game fan fiction is part of this complex re-examination, and while there is much more work to be done on transformative narrative practice in terms of its place, reception and impact within gamer and publishing landscapes, from a creative writing viewpoint there is value to be gained in teasing out aspects of writing that are unique to these practices, and to consider how immersion in narrative world-building is altered by the player cum reader cum writer.

Enter *Alan Wake*, which Saku Lehtinen, the game’s art director, describes as ‘interactive entertainment and storytelling at its best’ (quoted in McEachern 2010: 20). As a writer, I was drawn to this game due to its literariness, and when I stumbled across the Burroughs novel I was intrigued to see how my experience as a player could be

translated into a reading-only experience; how the interactivity of each would influence my sense of immersion in the *Alan Wake* world. Upon the discovery of *Alan Wake* fan fiction, I was then prompted to consider how I would write Alan, how that act would further alter my perception of this particular narrative space, and in the process reveal some – albeit idiosyncratic – understandings of transformative narrative practice. The remainder of this article presents a fictocritical reflection on my experience of narrative world-building as player, reader and writer: a performance of my attempt to wake up as Alan.

Notes from a player

~~I am Alan.~~

I am not Alan.

Alan is on the screen in the third person, standing in the middle of a road at night, in front of his wrecked vehicle after colliding with a hitchhiker. I do not see the world of Bright Falls through his eyes, yet I can control him. With repetition, upon mastering the controls, like using a pencil or driving a car, the controller enables Alan to become an extension of me; my actorialised digital prosthetic (Fraschini 2004). Buttons and toggles direct this avatar to perform actions. These actions are predetermined by what Burn calls the ‘interpersonal system’ (2007: 51), because games are rule-based, so there are limitations. If I want Alan to turn to me and wave hello, he can’t do it. If I want Alan to drink from a bottle, he can’t do it. If I want Alan to sit at his typewriter and write my next novel for me... he can’t do it. Unless any of these things are a predetermined element of the gameplay and its plot. This is my first lesson in waking up as Alan: I will never be Alan.

But if I want Alan to run then I can make Alan run. If I want to walk Alan off the edge of a ravine then I can do so. I have been granted regulated control. Like a puppeteer, there are strings to pull.

So I take Alan to the edge of the ravine and send him over. I see Alan fall to his death and the only emotion I feel towards this act is regret that I have to wait for the game to reload, and any progress made from origin point to destination point is squandered. I have not yet developed enough empathy for Alan – despite his being a white male

like me, despite his being a writer like me, despite his being rendered to appeal to someone like me. I haven't bought into this conceit yet. I haven't bought into the idea that I am Alan. I am not yet immersed in this narrative world.

Alan is pixels. Alan is the product of writing. As the game reloads I am made even more aware of this fact.

And Alan lives infinity.

Notes from a reader

Reading Alan produces the same impression of distance. He is written in the third person. I see him, hear him and am privy to his interiority via verbal signifiers, yet I also can't help but rely on my gaming experience to supplement the words. When I read Alan's dialogue I hear his voice as recorded and presented in the game. When an action is described I see him as shifting pixels. I make a mental note to stop thinking this way. The book is not a game. The game is not a book. They are two different mediums, each operating under different systems of construction, each with their intrinsic strengths and weaknesses. Don't fool yourself into comparisons that don't contribute to arriving at a better understanding of transformative narrative practice and the construction of narrative immersion. The game and the novel are two different products. One is ergodic, the other nonergodic (Aarseth 1997).

But the novel was derived from the game. It says so there on the front cover: A novel based on the new psychological thriller video game. They are two products intended to extend the experience of each other – to enrich and broaden the narrative world that is *Alan Wake*.

Aren't they?

I am the camera.

One of the toggles grants me the ability to swivel the third person perspective three-hundred and sixty degrees, allowing me to observe him within context. I can turn the camera to see his face, to

look him in the eye, to see over his shoulder at... the hitchhiker he hit with his car in the opening cut scene. The hitchhiker is advancing with a weapon and the threat is palpable. It's at this point that I'm forced to acknowledge my responsibility over Alan: that if I don't move him – move him *right now* – then he will be slaughtered by a speculative entity in human form, wielding an axe intended to smash the chiselled good-looks of Alan's well-proportioned face. This is what Anderson calls 'procedural embodiedness' or 'digital corporeality', constructed from interactive and audiovisual materials (2016). And it's at this point that I feel an emotion projected both from and onto my avatar: anxiety. The scene borrows from horror film tropes with dramatic light play, an orchestral music arrangement and wild, unknowable spaces. My heart rate increases, there's a flush of adrenaline. I sit forward, twitchy, trying to focus. I hold my breath. I now feel a deeper interaction in my control of Alan, but also that the game is in control of me. It's exhilarating, it's terrifying. It's nonsense, of course. Nonsense because I'm sitting in a chair and this is nothing more than artifice. Think about this. Rationalise it: You are a human agent interacting with a digital fiction, a ludo-narrative construct.

I help Alan escape the attack but cut-scenes propel the plot forward and I'm forced to move Alan again towards any source of light and out of harm's way and I want out.

But I don't want out because it's nonsense; I want out because of the opposite – because the fiction has affected my physical comfort. The haptic interactivity has produced a visceral engagement.

I want out because I've become immersed in the narrative world and it's a world more dangerous than I'd like my own to be. Unlike a book, the visceral engagement has enabled a greater sense of complicity in the narrative unfolding.

This is also the reason why I'll come back to roleplay Alan again and again and again. Until the story is complete and I can walk away (unharmd?) and whatever is meant to happen to

Alan happens. It's written that way. Any impression of non-linearity, of the player holding agency over the narrative's realisation, is only an impression in *Alan Wake*. It is ultimately linear. Like a book.

The game plays out in present tense – I make Alan move and he responds instantaneously – but the novel takes place in past tense. This distances my sense of immersion due to weaker immediacy and tension, compounded by passages of summarised action and passive syntax, like this:

When the Taken pressed in too close and threatened to overwhelm them, Wake would twist one of the flares, igniting it, then tossing it among them. They fought from one side of the platform to the other, charging the Taken, then retreating. (110)

When I read this I understand one of the substantial differences between the immersive devices employed in games, and those in novelisation: Gameplay's focus on repetitive action as a fundamental design principle does not translate with novelisation. Depicting the recurring action of *Alan Wake* – traversing from point A to B in a controlled environment; locating collectibles; evading, confronting and defeating waves of attackers built from a limited cache of character types – depicting this in a novel would produce inexcusable monotony. Burroughs's choice to summarise action in the above excerpt is thereby understood; although the novel form presents its own set of design principles.

Another observation is the translation of action from player-agency to character-fixed. Burroughs has had to make specific verb choices to represent Alan's actions in the novel, a translation from the potential instances of gameplay gestures (actions carried out by the player within the defined interpersonal system). The Alan of the novel acquires (and requires) less of me.

But depth of character is a noted strength of the novel. The novel has greater scope to develop imagery (as opposed to presenting images) and this benefits character and scene, as the narration focuses attention on detail that might otherwise go

unnoticed in the game's less-than-realistic graphics. This is patently obvious in the scene that takes place in Rose Marigold's trailer. In this scene, Alan and Barry, his agent, speak to Rose with the assumption that she has pages from Alan's missing manuscript. Rose is an enamoured fan of Alan and the manuscript's presence in the trailer is a lie, construed under the influence of the story's central sinister force. Rose is not Rose, and the two men are drugged.

Although this scene is not central to the plot, nor is it a scene of spectacular thematic depth or stylistic grandeur, at no other point in the novel was I more conscious of the separation of novelisation from the source narrative. Burroughs takes a fleeting cut-scene with sparse contextual detail and imprints it with the novelist's eye, drawing attention to telling details to construct both character and setting:

Wake looked around. The trailer was cramped but neat and tidy, with pillows on the small sofa and a menagerie of stuffed animals that overflowed their display case. A cozy breakfast nook took up part of the living room. Heavy curtains covered the windows, blocking out most of the daylight, the room had a murky quality, as though they were underwater. (131)

The writing is not extraordinary, but here Burroughs is flexing his writerly tendons, showing how verbal language is sometimes more evocative than visuals, even at rendering the visual. Words are sometimes able to achieve finer focus than the camera, and the novel world is all the richer for it.

Burroughs has extended the dialogue, most notably with Dr Hartman, and with Tor and Odin, who play prominent roles in the novel compared to the game. In the game, Tor and Odin's ambiguous snatches of dialogue point to the essential backstory of the plot, presenting the player with the choice to either add this information to the puzzle, or regard it as a distraction from gameplay. The novel equivalent of these scenes facilitates more synthesising of the somewhat convoluted plot premise, the dialogue

providing more exposition, allowing Alan to make connections for the reader, allowing the reader to discover and interpret along with Alan. And this drive to solve the puzzle is felt more keenly in the novel, for in the game I am compelled to act more, think less. The game forces me to play on, regardless of story.

Because Alan exercises a greater critical capacity, the novel develops a clearer impression of his interiority. Through free indirect discourse and direct narration of his thoughts, I am brought closer to Alan via his perspective on the paranormal events and their impact on his mental state. The by-product is a more intelligent depiction, a more self-conscious construction of a writer confronted with a perplexing story seemingly crafted by his own hand.

Alan's voice is smooth and dry. I've always favoured voice-over narration, probably because it borrows from the verbal storytelling tradition. I also like knowing that someone's in control, that I'm playing a part in a larger story. I guess this contradicts the popularity of emergent narrative these days but put a port and pipe in the storyteller's hands and let me be the audience. Alan's talking to me. This is his story. Right?

But sometimes I think he doesn't say enough. As an action-based avatar he's closer to a hero figure than a three-dimensional character worth my commitment. He moves in silence. Then again, this relationship is one of mutual silence.

Some of the stylistics of Burroughs's narration make me cringe, and this opens another avenue of critique: Am I convinced enough to suspend my disbelief? I should state that I am a believer. Verisimilitude is my best imaginary friend. But there are instances in the text where this confidence is damaged. Cliché tropes, clunky dialogue that only rings true of a writer falling short of Stephen King mimicry. The characters are heavily stylised and adhere to stereotypes of the gendered and cheesy rip-off kind. But the game and the novel aren't pretending to offer something they're not. There's also reasonable evidence to

suggest that *Alan Wake* is paying homage just as it is playing pastiche. And this is part of the narrative world's construction. It's uncanny.

'Why don't you turn off the flashlight? Save the batteries' (206). This is the more logical Alan of the novel. Questioning the game's logic is left to the player.

While I'm worrying about being Alan I'm also constantly wondering about the location of collectibles: torch batteries, flare guns and ammunition. The necessity to locate these items from the level maps in order to progress is a clever way to create challenges and goals: 'Games need puzzles to be solved, rules to be followed, interlocking environments to be explored ... resources to be managed, missions to be accomplished, lives to be saved' (Burn 2007: 51). But I'm torn between accepting the appearance of collectibles as gameplay boons or questioning their presence as anything other than the game designers challenging the extent of my suspension of disbelief – sinister forces aside, Bright Falls is a seriously dangerous town with all that live ammunition lying around – and I can't help but feel that verisimilitude suffers due to this conspicuous handling of ludo-centric gameplay mechanics. This is exactly what Luca Papale calls 'detachment' (2014).

Other verisimilitude breakers include the collection of token coffee flasks as an ancillary goal, and the seemingly infinite number of burly hunters in town for Deerfest transformed into Taken. The Taken are all male, too. Are women not worthy of the Dark Presence's efforts? I am becoming cynical.

I am definitely not Alan Wake.

Though I am a writer.

Notes from a writer

'What kind of writer *are* you?' (3).

What kind of writer you are is a question which has long vexed not only genre fiction authors, but also those writers whose work feeds on/back into established narrative worlds. As Samutina says,

fan fiction is ‘quite often defined primarily by its opposition to originality’, and points out the dominant critical view that such authors are located at the outer limits of ‘circles of authorship’; they are Henry Jenkins’s ‘textual poachers’ (2016: 433-434).

As an authorised publication, Burroughs’s novelisation is not fan fiction, and while it could be argued that Burroughs’s task was to replicate the world of *Alan Wake* the game, I argue that the differences in media preclude this possibility. Burroughs’s extension of a made world is analogous to the fan fiction writer’s aim to extend made worlds via transformative practice; Burroughs is just a licenced poacher.

I have never written a work of transformative narrative, so I task myself to write Alan with the hope it might enable further insights; that I might come closer to understanding these methods of narrative world-building; that I might come closer to waking up as Alan.

I decide to write a work of micro fiction. The story takes place well before the events in Bright Falls. I think about who Alan was as a late teenager, writing his first serious work of fiction. He sits at a chipboard desk, his second-hand typewriter under a second-hand accountant’s lamp with green glass; Alan is into stereotypes, role-playing. The film adaptation of Stephen King’s *Misery* plays in the background on a small television. The movie’s been on rotation from mid-afternoon into the evening. It could be the fourth or fifth time through – he lost count of how many times he’s rewound the cassette because numbers don’t matter. Only words matter.

Beside the television is a pile of videos rented from the local store and they’re all horror movies and they’ve all been on several times over the past 48 hours. He can’t explain why. It’s as though a need for dark thoughts came over him and he was operating at the whim of some higher instrument. This isn’t the first time he’s felt the need for dark thoughts but on that first occasion it wasn’t

powerful enough to commandeer him into acting on it.

This time is different.

Alan puts his fingers to the keys and as a sentence is tapped out he slips into some kind of third person view of himself. Behind him, on the screen, Annie Wilkes flickers and disappears, replaced by a filmic version of himself. The other Alan starts talking to him, holding him to ransom, threatening him with the knowledge that he can't guarantee his own life. The dark thoughts course along Alan's nerves, his fingers twitchy over the keys until they rehearse the right order and he types: 'In a horror story it can't be certain that the hero will succeed or even survive. He almost has to—' (264).

'You're here. You're in the game. We both are. That's what matters' (202).

Barry is right. In one way or another Alan and I are both in the game and with this in mind I play on through to the end. On completing the game my victory is relief. My gradual decline in narrative engagement was overruled by gameplay; the need to progress and complete took over as the central goal. I became objective-biased. Wave upon wave of *Taken* became repetitive. Alan's story became a casual interest rather than a causal need to play. Alan and I drifted apart, a point compounded by the cut-scenes closing the story's final movements and I am extracted from Bright Falls and this entire narrative world.

Roll credits.

Back to home screen.

'I just decided to quit worrying and enjoy the adventure... You're writing the story, remember? It's like being in a dream. We're the heroes. We *can't* die' (207).

Barry again. The story's Fool proves the more insightful.

I quit worrying, enjoy the adventure, and the novel rolls on until Alan writes himself out of the story and Alice bursts from the depths of Cauldron Lake, oddly okay that she's been missing for an

indeterminable time and her husband has performed a vanishing act to be her saviour. It's not more or less satisfying than the game – it's just different. Different systems/media produce different outcomes.

With this in mind I read the final full stop and am extracted from Bright Falls and this entire narrative world.

Close the book.

Look at the cover.

I finish writing Alan. I admit the writing is cliché and not especially well-crafted, but producing a work of depth was not the point. The point was to attempt to place myself amid the *Alan Wake* 'world' and extend that space so that I might come to a more fulsome immersive experience. As a player cum reader cum writer, I attempted to re-centre my consciousness within *Alan Wake*, temporarily adopting a textual world as my actual world, backgrounding my own (Van Steenhuyse 2011).

I have played Alan (I projected my emotions and intelligence onto him as avatar), I have read Alan (I witnessed a portrayal that allowed a deeper psychological understanding of him), and by writing Alan I had to re-position myself in relation to Alan in order to enact him.

In writing Alan I was able to control him without the regulation of gameplay mechanics. In writing Alan I was able to map his interiority onto my own. In writing Alan I was able to extend his temporal construction through backstory. In writing Alan I was able to arrive at a deeper conception of him, principally because in order to write him I felt a greater imperative to become him. Through the act of transforming him, I was more empowered to become him.

I am Alan.

And Alan lives infinity.

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