

“You Don’t Get a Choice”: Fallen Hero: Rebirth and Unsettling Expectations of Agency in Interactive Fiction

Dorothy F Schmidt College of Arts and Letters

Tristan Sheridan, Dr. Timothy Miller (Faculty Advisor)

Abstract

Interactive fiction, by its very definition, grants its readers the ability to influence the direction of a text, much like the familiar Choose Your Own Adventure children’s books. However, the assumption that interactivity allows for increased reader agency has generated debate, as interactive texts can naturally only provide readers with as much agency as authors are willing to anticipate for and allow. The interactive novel series *Fallen Hero* is of particular relevance to this debate, as its protagonist’s struggle to maintain their agency causes the series’ thematic content to mirror its form. *Fallen Hero* minimizes the reader’s agency even more than is strictly necessary within the formal constraints of the medium in order to enrich its narrative themes surrounding agency and build empathy for its protagonist, therefore embracing the limitations of agency that are inherently present within the interactive form as a strength rather than a failing.

Introduction

“[S]ometimes when you look in the mirror, there is still that moment of vertigo that makes you wonder what you are doing, and whether going through with your plan really is the wisest choice...” states the narrator of Malin Rydén’s interactive speculative fiction novel, *Fallen Hero: Rebirth*, “However, right now, it feels like the only choice left that makes sense” (ch. 1). The narrative of *Fallen Hero* follows a telepathic ex-superhero who has decided to become a supervillain; they influence and possess the minds of others as they prepare to make their public debut, an event that the novel concludes with. Although the narration provides readers with intimate access to the protagonist’s perspective—even addressing the reader in the second person as “you” throughout—the sense of mystery that shrouds the protagonist within the narrative also exists in the complex, branching-path text itself. The narration alludes to but

ultimately withholds key information about the protagonist's backstory and motivations, leaving readers attuned to the protagonist's emotions without quite understanding their cause. The passage quoted above in *Rebirth's* first chapter succinctly captures an overarching theme present throughout the novel: the protagonist's struggle to maintain a sense of agency as they cope with a traumatic past that denied it to them, a struggle not unconnected to the author's choice of the interactive form. *Rebirth's* reticent narration style signifies a traumatized, fractured consciousness, and conveys this to the reader in a way that engenders understanding of the character even as it denies the reader the ability to fully immerse themselves within the ethically suspect villain-protagonist.

Rydén has explained that they decided to adapt *Fallen Hero*, once conceived of as a conventional novel, into an interactive novel series—with *Rebirth* as the first of a planned four-novel arc—a very judicious decision considering that agency is a central thematic concern of the series (“A few questions,” “Okay, explanation”). The very nature of the interactive medium emphasizes the importance of agency, making it uniquely suited to tell stories with thematic focuses such as *Fallen Hero's*.

Interactive fiction grants its readers the ability to influence the direction

of a text, leading to the often-assumed idea that interactivity allows for increased reader agency. Janet Murray's foundational book on interactivity, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, champions interactive fiction partially on the basis of its ability to provide readers agency—which Murray defines as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices”—with the assumption that increased agency is in itself a positive development (159). The notion that interactivity grants readers agency has generated debate among scholars of interactive narratives—as interactive texts can naturally only provide readers with as much agency as authors are willing or able to anticipate for and allow—but discussions surrounding reader agency often neglect to challenge “the implicit assumption of ‘the more agency the better,’” when “[f]rustrating the player, taking away agency, can also be expressive” (Harrel & Zhu 44; Fernandez-Vara). I argue that *Rebirth* does not attempt to assure readers of their agency, but instead purposefully draws attention to their lack of it through its unique approach to the conventions of interactive fiction—including second-person narration and multiple-choice interactivity—therefore increasing reader empathy with the protagonist's own troubled relationship to agency.

Fallen Hero: Rebirth, as with much of interactive fiction, is absent of visual elements and is entirely text-based, but the digitization of interactive fiction has complicated the simplistic form of the “Choose Your Own Adventure” novel. The programming language that allows for *Fallen Hero*’s more gamified elements, Choicescript, and its capabilities in regards to delayed branching—a term that Dan Fabulich, co-developer of Choicescript, uses to describe how early choices can create or affect variables which then help to determine how the narrative plays out later on—are notable for how they are utilized within *Rebirth*. On the most basic level, readers choose the gender of *Fallen Hero*’s protagonist and thus it varies across different iterations of the text—for the purposes of this analysis, they will be referred to with singular “they” pronouns—but variables can be employed in ways that are specific to the text at hand and may be hidden from readers. For instance, readers of *Rebirth* are presented with the choice of determining the protagonist’s primary motivation, e.g. revenge, greed, or even the conviction that their turn to villainy is simply “inevitable” (ch. 5). This set variable then colors portions of the text throughout the rest of the series—and at times the choices offered—in ways that readers may or may not consciously connect to that single decision. *Rebirth* will be examined on the basis of how

these elements of Choicescript such as hidden variables, along with conventions that are typical of choice-based works and interactive fiction in general such as second-person narration, are used to subvert reader expectations of agency and mirror their experiences with that of the protagonist’s trauma.

Second-Person Narration and Reader Identification

Second-person narration is conventionally used in interactive fiction to engage the reader, both in terms of participation and identification with the protagonist, two elements of the interactive medium that are inherently linked. The influence of the reader on the text—and therefore their agency—operates through identification with the protagonist; the narration addresses the reader “in second person declarative as if she or he were the character,” and the reader then makes decisions while assuming the role of the protagonist (Sorolla 18). *Rebirth* demonstrates this reader/protagonist dynamic when, for instance, the narration describes the protagonist’s thoughts in second-person as they dream about a traumatic event in their life:

There is something disconcerting about a dead body. Your mind identifies them as human, and your thoughts reach out, only to touch...nothing (ch. 2).

After this passage, the reader is prompted with two choices written in first person:

#1 look away. I don't need to see more bodies.

#1 take a closer look. There might be clues here (ch. 2).

The reader is meant to interpret the second-person narration as an invitation to engage “as” the protagonist, with “[s]econd-person narration (‘You are’) evok[ing] first-person participation (‘I am!’).” However, *Rebirth’s* narration style often disrupts this process of reader “participation, identification, or immersion” by either using second-person narration to convey a sense of disempowerment or, as will be explored later, by refusing to provide readers with information needed to make informed choices (Douglass 135).

The use of second-person narration within interactive fiction is customary, but *Rebirth’s* thematic preoccupation with agency—or a lack thereof—renders its narration style comparable to the rare use of second-person within non-interactive literature, where it is often meant to convey powerlessness. Second-person narration is frequently used in experimental literature, and thus has been employed for many purposes, but it has been identified as a way to “manifest...in narrative technique the notion that someone or something

outside of yourself dictates your thoughts and actions” (DelConte 205). While second person is meant to encourage identification within this context as well, it is an aggressive encouragement in which “[t]he point of view forces the reader into the experience” and imparts the sense “that this story is going to happen to you, regardless of whether you like it” (Hawke 12, 13). The way that second-person point of view “sweeps away the readers’ illusion of free choice” within conventional literature may seem to be mutually exclusive with interactive literature’s use of it for the purposes of inviting participation and choice, but the lack of agency that is felt on the part of *Fallen Hero’s* protagonist indicates that the two are coexistent within the text (Hawke 13). When the narration states that “[t]his is not you, you try to tell yourself. You are just following someone else’s script,” during a dream sequence in *Rebirth*, the second-person narration serves to emphasize the impression that one’s life is being dictated by an outside force that determines what will happen to “you” (ch. 4). While the circumstances that led to the protagonist’s feelings of disempowerment are somewhat ambiguous, the narration states that “[y]ou have no other choice” but to become a villain (ch. 8). This encourages reader identification on an empathetic level instead of a mere participatory one, as while the reader

cannot experience the traumatic events that the protagonist has, the text is able to convey their sense of disempowerment through the narration style.

Unreliable Narration and the Disruption of Reader Identification

Although narration within interactive fiction is meant to convey the protagonist's perspective, significant aspects of the protagonist's interiority are withheld in *Rebirth*, including much of their backstory and motivations; as *Rebirth* is the first in a series, further explanation may be expected in *Fallen Hero's* subsequent novels, but the degree of information that is ambiguous or withheld within *Rebirth* is atypical within interactive fiction, due to the way that it interrupts the medium's reliance on the reader's identification with the protagonist. *Rebirth* narrates the thoughts of the protagonist as they occur, resulting in trains of thought that are often inscrutable to readers as the narrator frequently neglects to provide context for the ideas that they connect. For instance, the narration includes the following lines when establishing the protagonist's appearance: "It's not that you are bad looking, at least not with your clothes on. They made sure of that" (ch. 1). It would be natural to assume that the first statement merely demonstrates an insecurity

of the protagonist's, but the last sentence throws the one before it into ambiguity; who are "they," and what do "they" have to do with the protagonist's appearance? The scene continues without explanation or further reference to the figure(s) in question. These ambiguous references to events and individuals that are unknown to the reader, but evidently known to the protagonist, continue to build throughout the narrative and complicate reader immersion and identification.

Readers are left confused on a broader level as well; information about the plot that should be essential—concerning the protagonist's past and ultimate goals—is often withheld from readers. The end of the protagonist's heroic career was unmistakably traumatic, but what precisely occurred during the seven years that led up to the beginning of *Rebirth* is only ever alluded to. The "Heartbreak" incident—an encounter with a fellow telepath that resulted in the protagonist's suicide attempt, a formative event that —is a point of trauma that the protagonist still struggles with, as evidenced by the italicized memories that are triggered in the initial chapters of the story before *Rebirth* allows readers to delve deeper into the event almost halfway through its narrative. This dream sequence is one of the narrative's most complicated in

terms of branching, but the various pathways are all disorienting, especially in the moments where the memories of the protagonist and those of the other telepath—the gender of whom varies, and who shall be referred to with “she” pronouns for the purposes of these excerpts—appear to blend:

(antiseptic. ozone. rust. you know this but you should not.)
Lips pulling back, nostrils widening in a baleful grimace, gums stained with tiny blisters.
(i know this because these are her memories. i see this because these are her memories. because she ate them.) (ch. 4)

While this passage is a bit more intelligible within context, as readers should be able to discern that there is a scientific experiment of sorts occurring, precisely what happened to whom and when still cannot be clearly discerned. The sudden use of first person outside of choice prompts is particularly jarring, and otherwise unseen within the novel; the shift in point of view serves to emphasize the issues of identity that the passage depicts. The line about how the other telepath “ate” the people around her is perhaps referencing a mental absorption—a possibility mentioned elsewhere, with “you” wondering if “she invade[d] their minds like she did yours?”—meaning that it is not only the memories of the two telepaths that

readers must attempt to disentangle, but the memories of others as well (ch. 4). The distortions present in the Heartbreak sequence are clearly marked by trauma, but it is still a curious choice on the part of the author to shroud an event as formative to the protagonist as the one that ended their heroic career in ambiguity. To then expect readers to make choices “as” the protagonist, when such significant aspects of the protagonist’s interiority are withheld, problematizes reader agency even further as the choices they make are not informed.

Narrating Trauma and Repression Interactively

While the inadequacy of the information provided to readers by the narration could be interpreted purely as a narrative device on the part of the author, narration within interactive fiction—including in *Rebirth*, perhaps especially so given how often the novel shifts into stream-of-consciousness style narration—is meant to communicate the interiority of the protagonist, as discussed earlier. This would imply that the narration lacks key information because the protagonist herself seeks to hold back the information from their own consciousness. The protagonist prefers to cope with the traumatic experiences that they have endured by repressing them, believing that

the past is “not safe to think about” (ch. 4). When excerpts of the protagonist’s memories are given, it appears to be against their will:

You press two fingers against your forehead, trying to push back the intrusive memories. But they are still there. Inside. (ch. 8)

The above text precedes one of the many italicized flashes of memory that are scattered throughout the narrative—usually triggered by something in the environment of the protagonist that reminds them of their trauma, although the precise connections are often unclear—and demonstrates the protagonist’s reluctance to recall their past. The lack of clarity present within the memories themselves can also be explained by the fact that they are traumatic in nature, particularly in light of the telepathic invasion that the protagonist experienced during the Heartbreak incident. This invasion may have resulted in real psychological damage; the protagonist explains at one point in the narrative that repeated telepathic invasions may cause “[m]emory loss” and other symptoms that are “not dissimilar to PTSD” (ch. 3). Although the narration style of the novel may disorient readers, it serves to convey the protagonist’s mental state and the results of the trauma that they have experienced, one that is based in loss of agency.

The Heartbreak incident is related to memory and repression in more ways than one, as the event was not just a traumatic experience for the protagonist; it reignited past trauma as well. The protagonist’s experience of the event is characterized by their loss of control over themselves, a thread that is present throughout the various pathways of the Heartbreak dream sequence. They struggle to prevent the opposing telepath from influencing both their mind and body, and in some paths they choose to relinquish control over their body entirely. In one iteration of the text, the reader may choose to “draw on my anger” after the narrator states that “[y]ou need to reassert control over your body somehow,” and the text that follows this choice heavily implies that their struggle to maintain agency within the Heartbreak event was not an unfamiliar one: “You thought you were past this [...] You’re not trapped, you’re not controlled, and you are certainly not somebody’s pawn” (ch. 4). Heartbreak evoked an existent sense of disempowerment in the protagonist, and in this sense the event did not simply traumatize them but re-traumatized them, setting them on a path to traumatize others in a strikingly similar fashion. One possible path involves the protagonist actually losing control over their body to the other telepath—whom they refer to as “it” prior to seeing her—a moment

that particularly emphasizes their disempowerment:

It's hijacked your body, and you're sitting here like a puppet. The pressure is blinding; your panic just builds and builds, and you can't let it touch you again, but you have no choice, and you are screaming inside, and then... (ch. 4)

While this would be a traumatic experience for anyone—as shown elsewhere in the novel, when the protagonist himself possesses the bodies of others, a parallel that does not go unacknowledged by the narration—the trauma experienced here is exacerbated by the fact that the protagonist has already “fought to become who you are today. You. Not someone else. Not someone they wanted you to be. Your own life. Your own mind,” an effort to combat previous disempowerment that was evidently made in vain when the self-ownership they had worked for was removed during Heartbreak (ch. 4).

Although it has been many years since the Heartbreak event at the time *Rebirth's* narrative begins, the protagonist's accumulated traumas are tied to their sense of agency to the point where merely recalling them evokes a sense of disempowerment (ch. 1). This is emphasized within the interactive form itself as the reader begins the Heartbreak dream sequence. In Choicescript, the page breaks are

frequently marked by choices—where the reader's choice prompts the following page of text—or else by a button that is often merely labeled “Next.” As the protagonist begins to dream, a button that says “You Don't Get a Choice” meets the reader at the end of the page (ch. 4). This not only communicates the protagonist's lack of choice in experiencing this nightmare on a narrative level, but also that the reader is not allowed a choice where they might normally expect one. After the reader selects the “You Don't Get a Choice” button—as they must, in order to continue the novel—the following page begins with “The dream descends on you like destiny” (ch. 4). The protagonist associates remembering their past with a loss of control—both in that they do not wish to remember and thus any memories they recall are evidence of a lack of control over their current state of mind, and in that the memories themselves generally contain a trauma based in disempowerment—as it continues to reinforce their feeling that they are without agency.

The Poetics of Blind Choices

The lack of information given about the protagonist's motivations interrupts reader identification, which is inherently tied to choice within the “You are!”/“I am!”

dynamic between the narration and the reader (Douglass 135). As the reader cannot properly place themselves within the mindset of the protagonist, asking readers to make choices within *Rebirth* often results in what has been referred to as a “blind choice,” or uninformed choice, within emerging interactive fiction terminology. The choice taxonomy developed by Mawhorter et al. to examine “how choices work alongside narrative to communicate”—the study they refer to as “choice poetics”—describes how blind choices can cause a reader to “feel lost, disoriented, or just frustrated,” when they do not have “enough information to make an informed choice” (“Towards a Theory”). Such choices can be used to “reinforce a narrative theme,” as Mawhorter et al. note, and in *Rebirth’s* case they serve to tie the reader’s frustrated sense of agency with that of the protagonist’s: thus the disruption of traditional identification compels the reader to share in the protagonist’s frustrations.

Rebirth presents readers with the opportunity to set the protagonist’s core motivation about halfway through its narrative, but does not clearly provide a reasoning behind each motivation choice, highlighting the reader’s struggle to discern the motives of the protagonist. The prompt before the choice somewhat

contextualizes the circumstances under which the protagonist feels they must become a villain, but leaves the background information out:

Is that really an option? Go back into hiding? Live a life in the shadows, pretending they will never find you? Maybe you would have had a shot at that before you ran into Ortega, but now the clock is ticking. All you can do is make sure you are as prepared as possible.

So, why are you doing this? (ch. 5)

The unidentified “they” returns, and what the protagonist must prepare for nor how villainy will help them do so is elaborated; thus the information given above does not necessarily help readers interpret the choices that follow:

#I want revenge against the people who hurt me.

#I’ve had enough of being stepped on.

#I want a good life, and this is the way I can have it.

#I need to show the world the truth.

#I don’t know what I want—this just feels inevitable. (ch. 5)

The decision that the reader makes here sets the variable for the protagonist’s motivation—the second option, for example, is designated within the code as “anger”—and

affects the narration and dialogue for the rest of the series, making it a fairly weighty one. Each option is comprehensible, but not in terms of how the protagonist would come to any given conclusion; who are the people who hurt the protagonist, and how did they do so? What is “the truth?” While this is an opportunity for readers to direct some of the narrative themes towards their own desired direction, e.g whether they would prefer the narrative be oriented more towards seeking revenge or contentment, readers are without the information required to determine which option would make the most sense to them. The final choice, or the “fate” motivation, is perhaps the most reasonable for the reader to choose given that it has the protagonist echo the reader’s own lack of clarity surrounding the purpose of the protagonist’s villainy.

Conclusion

Traditionally, works of interactive fiction seek to “collaps[e] the distance between reader and protagonist,” and they do so by allowing the reader to identify not only with the protagonist, but as the protagonist; I argue that *Rebirth* does identify readers with its protagonist, but that it does so by simulating a reader experience that echoes that of the protagonist’s as opposed to allowing readers to fully inhabit the mindset of the protagonist (Sorolla

2). The way that the traditional second-person narration of interactive fiction is employed within *Rebirth* to “emphasize an existence dictated from the outside,” as well as the way that blind choices frustrate the agency of the reader, allow for readers to empathetically understand the protagonist’s own frustrated relationship to agency even as readers are denied full understanding of the context behind this relationship (DelConte 205). Creating this empathetic dynamic between reader and protagonist is crucial not only because of the lack of traditional identification within *Rebirth*, but because its fractured, trauma-colored narration style makes reader affinity with the protagonist potentially difficult to establish. By thematically linking a loss of agency with the protagonist’s trauma and formally evoking a sense of lost agency in readers, *Rebirth* not only comments upon the traumatic impact of losing agency and the need to regain agency in order to process or heal trauma, but also encourages reader empathy for the protagonist in a way that is unique to the medium. *Rebirth*’s particular approach to the relationship between reader and protagonist within interactive fiction—one that that allows for *Rebirth*’s narrative and formal elements to essentially compensate for where traditional interactive identification is lacking—illustrates how traditional reader identification within interactive

fiction can be expanded and re-conceptualized to include the novel's subversive use of this medium convention, and has broader implications for reader empathy in relation to the depiction of trauma in fiction.

Works Cited

Band, John. "Choose Your Own World: The convergence of hypertext, literature and gaming." *concept connection policies*: 13.

DelConte, Matt. "Why You Can't Speak: Second-Person Narration, Voice, and a New Model for Understanding Narrative." *Style*, vol. 37, no. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 204-219.

Douglass, Jeremy. "Enlightening Interactive Fiction: Andrew Plotkin's *Shade*." *Second Person: Role-playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, edited by Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. The MIT Press, 2010, pp. 129-136.

Fabulich, Dan. "By the Numbers: How to Write a Long Interactive Novel That Doesn't Suck." *Choice of Games*, 27 Jul 2011, <https://www.choiceofgames.com/2011/07/by-the-numbers-how-to-write-a-long-interactive-novel-that-doesnt-suck/>.

Fernandez-Vara, Clara. "Taxonomy of Narrative Choices." *Vagrant Cursor*, 1 May 2019, <https://vagrantcursor.wordpress.com/2019/05/01/taxonomy-of-narrative-choices/>.

[wordpress.com/2019/05/01/taxonomy-of-narrative-choices/](https://vagrantcursor.wordpress.com/2019/05/01/taxonomy-of-narrative-choices/).

Harrell, D. Fox, and Jichen Zhu. "Agency Play: Dimensions of Agency for Interactive Narrative Design." *AAAI spring symposium: Intelligent narrative technologies II*, 2009.

Hawke, Anastasia L. "Understanding Second-Person Point of View in Fiction" *All Graduate Plan B and other Reports*, 2015.

Mawhorter, Peter et al. "Towards a Theory of Choice Poetics." *FDG*, 2014.

Montfort, Nick. "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction." *IF Theory Reader*, edited by Kevin Jackson-Mead and J. Robinson Wheeler. Transcript On Press, 2011, pp. 25-58.

Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. United Kingdom, MIT Press, 2017.

Rydén, Malin. *Fallen Hero: Rebirth*. Hosted Games LLC, 2018.

Rydén, Malin [fallenhero-rebirth]. "A few questions; about how long did it take you to write *Fallen Hero: Rebirth*..." *Fallen Hero*, Tumblr, 22 Feb 2020, <https://fallenhero-rebirth.tumblr.com/post/190961440636/a-few-questions-about-how-long-did-it-take-you-to/>.

Rydén, Malin [fallenhero-rebirth].

“Okay, explanation since everyone and their grandmother is dming me about this...” *Fallen Hero*, Tumblr, 19 Oct 2019, <https://fallenhero-rebirth.tumblr.com/post/188236672086/fallenhero-rebirth-oh-fuck-its-gonna-be-four>.

Sorolla, Roger S. G. “Crimes Against Mimesis.” *IF Theory Reader*, edited by Kevin Jackson-Mead and J. Robinson Wheeler. Transcript On Press, 2011, pp. 1-24.

Yorke-Smith, Neil. “The Success of Genre in Interactive Fiction.” *IF Theory Reader*, edited by Kevin Jackson-Mead and J. Robinson Wheeler. Transcript On Press, 2011, pp. 111-128.