Interactive Fiction as New Media

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Interactive fiction, important in its own right, can also be a way to understand new media.

New media (encompassing the creative uses of the computer) will be more important to the 21st century than film and television were to the 20th century.

Understanding interactive fiction (as with new media in general) requires knowledge of both:

- those arts related to the form
- the nature of the computer.

~ Outline ~

1. What is interactive fiction (IF)?

   Formally: What does it do?

   Historically: Why does it happen to exist?

   Artistically: What can it express?

2. What are other forms of new media?

3. What does IF highlight about new media?

   IF is inseparably art and game

   IF is an interactive computer program

4. Some time for questions & discussion.

~ What is Interactive Fiction? ~

Offhand answers you might hear (or give):

"an interactive story"

"a choose-your-own-adventure"

"a text game"

"what computer games were like before graphics"

~ What is IF: Formally ~

A work of interactive fiction is a system that

- produces text
- accepts text from the interactor in reply
- produces more text based on the input

and repeats this until some "final reply" has been reached.

The system simulates a world in which events occur. The input text influences those events and the text that is produced describes them.

~ from "I-0" by Adam Cadre ~

... Your lifeless car is here, mocking you. The car door is open, but at least since the car's dead it isn't making that annoying dinging sound.

>examine myself
Well, Tracy, you're five-foot-seven, a hundred and seventeen pounds, with brown eyes, long dark hair and golden-bronze skin. More to the point, you've got the kind of face people write poems about, a smile that makes grown men weep, and the kind of body every girl would love to have and every guy would love to, y'know, HAVE. You're carrying nothing. You're wearing your T-shirt and a pair of cut-offs.

>remove my T-shirt
You are now topless. (Though you prefer the term "topfree.")

>hitchhike
A seedy-looking guy in a 1980 Volkswagen subcompact with patches of rust and a piece of cellophane for a windshield pulls up. "Hey, baby, need a lift?" he asks, leering at your breasts. "Man, I thought this kind of thing only happened on Cinemax!"

~ *What is IF: Historically* ~

The first canonical IF work: *Adventure*, 1975-76.

Mainframe works beginning in the late 1970s.

Zork for the microcomputer (from Infocom) and a best-selling era of commercial IF.

Noncommercial innovation from today's "IF community."

More info: Graham Nelson's "A Short History of Interactive Fiction" in the *DM4* (online). A longer history is on the way: Montfort, Nick. *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

~ What is IF: Artistically ~

("Art" here refers to literary art.)

What can interactive fiction do when considered as literature?

- Images of familiar and unfamiliar spaces
- (Multiple) subjective experiences of the world
- Distopia and the transformation of spaces

To turn the question around: What can *not* be expressed by interactive fiction?

~ *Other Forms of New Media* ~

Considering new media as requiring delivery on the computer, there are more "obvious" forms:

- Video games

- Multi-user virtual environments (MUDs, EverQuest, CAVEs)

- Art installations

- Web pages (Let's take a look...)

~ The Importance of New Media ~

New media isn't just mass media...

but means simultaneous revolutions in:

- personal communication
- mass communication
- business transactions
- art (noncommercial creativity)
- play (noncommercial interaction)

and also drives the reinvention of "old" media (while being influenced by those media):

Remediation, J. David Bolter & Richard Grusin

~ Looking at IF as New Media ~

So why bother looking at obscure "text games"?

A few specific points are interesting...

- A *simulated world* is present in many forms of new media; this simulation is *richest* in IF!

- The interactor replies in an expressive way (language)

- IF makes for good "comparative media study" (Henry Jenkins); book adaptations, etc.

~ *IF as Art and Game* ~

IF is a vital form of new media art, one where it is easiest to see the relationship between "literature" and "game."

Both are essential!

- Reading a transcript of IF is tedious.

- An IF work that has no literary aspects can be better accomplished in some other form.

An analogy: the literary riddle.

~ "Living Tenderly" by May Swenson ~

My body a rounded stone
with a pattern of smooth seams.
My head a short snake,
retractive, projective.
My legs come out of their sleeves
or shrink within,
and so does my chin.
My eyelids are quick clamps.

My back is my roof.
I am always at home.
I travel where my house walks.
It is a smooth stone.
It floats within the lake,
or rests in the dust.
My flesh lives tenderly
inside its bone.

~ IF as Computer Program ~

What possible texts can be produced in reply to input?

Some (incomplete, hence wrong) answers:

- A chunk of prewritten text
  (the hypertext fallacy)
- Randomly assembled text
  (the "surrealist poetry generator" fallacy)

... so what's the answer?

~ IF as Computer Program ~

What possible texts can be produced in reply to input?

"Any texts that can result from the manipulation of symbols* according to procedures."

that is...

"Whatever texts can be computed."

*Including those the author contributed and those the interactor input.

~ Questions and Discussion ~

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More on IF from me — http://nickm.com/if

Look for *The New Media Reader* (January 2003, co-editor with Noah Wardrip-Fruin) as well as *Twisty Little Passages* (Fall 2003), both MIT Press.