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

...
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.

~ Outline ~
What is Interactive Fiction?

Offhand answers you might hear (or give):

“An interactive story”

“A choose-your-own-adventure”

“A text game”

“Before graphics, what computer games were like”

~ What is Interactive Fiction? ~
A work of interactive fiction is a system that
produces text based on the input
accepts text from the interactor in reply
produces text
accepts text from the interactor in reply
produces text

What is IF: Formally

~ What is IF: Formally ~
... 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.

~ from "I-O" by Adam Cadre ~
Community.
Noncommercial innovation from today’s IF. a best-selling era of noncommercial IF. Work for the microcomputer (from Infocom) and Mainframe works beginning in the late 1970s. The first noncommercial IF work: Adventure, 1975-76.

What is IF? Historically ~
What is IF: Artistically

(Art here refers to literary art.)

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

- Dystopia and the transformation of spaces
- Multiple subjective experiences of the world
- Images of familiar and unfamiliar spaces

What can interactive fiction do when considered as literature?
Considering new media as requiring delivery on the computer, there are more "obvious" forms:

- Web pages (let's take a look...)
- Video games
- Art installations
- Multi-user virtual environments
  (MUDs, Everquest, CAVES)
- Other Forms of New Media ~
The Importance of New Media

New media isn't just mass media...

~ The Importance of New Media ~
Looking at IF as New Media ~

So why bother looking at obscure “text games”? •

• IF makes for good “comparative media study”

(Henry Jenkins’; book adaptations, etc.)

• The interactor replies in an expressive way (language)

• A simulated world is present in many forms

• A simulated world is richest in IF?

… A few specific points are interesting.

So why bother looking at obscure “text games”?~

~ Looking at IF as New Media ~
An analogy: the literary riddle.

• Better accomplished in some other form.

An IF work that has no literary aspects can be

• Reading a transcript of IF is tedious.

Both are essential.

"Literature" and "game"

is easiest to see the relationship between
If is a vital form of new media art, one where it

~ IF as Art and Game ~
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.
I travel where my house walks.
I am always at home.
My back is my root.
My eyelids are quick clamps.
My flesh lives tenderly
or rests in the dust.
It floats within the lake,
It is a smooth stone.
My head a short snake,
with a pattern of smooth seams.
My body a rounded stone.
My flesh lives tenderly
or rests in the dust.
It floats within the lake,
It is a smooth stone.
I travel where my house walks.
I am always at home.
My back is my root.

~ Living Tenderly ~
by May Swenson ~
What possible texts can be produced in reply to

• A chunk of prewritten text

• Randomly assembled text

• Some (incomplete, hence wrong) answers

So what’s the answer?

... (the “surrealist poetry generator” fallacy)

( the “hypertext fallacy” )
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.

What possible texts can be produced in reply to input?

~ IF as Computer Program ~
Twisty little Passages (Fall 2003), both MIT Press.

Look for the New Media Reader (January 2003), co-edited with Noah Wardrip-Fruin, as well as Twisty Little Passages (Fall 2003).

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

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~ Questions and Discussion ~