

A Narrative at War with a Crossword – An Introduction to Interactive Fiction

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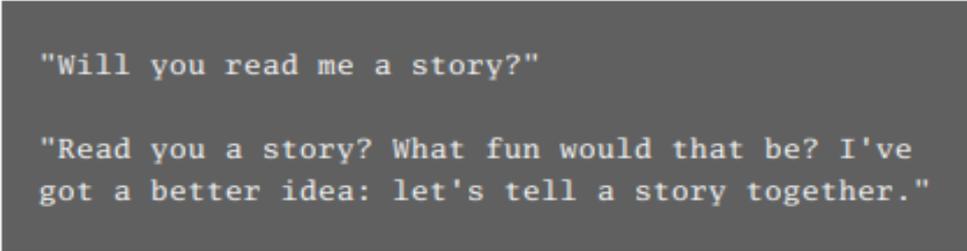
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Introduction

Interactive fiction (IF), also known as adventure games or text-adventures, is a form of electronic literature that has existed for 35 years. It is responsible for kickstarting the computer games market and was the most popular kind of video game throughout 1980s. Although the commercial market for interactive fiction ended in the early 1990s due to the growing quality of computer graphics, there has been a resurgence in the last 10 years due to the electronic literature community, its use in education, the many annual interactive fiction competitions and the widespread use of handheld devices, which allow users to play the classics anytime, anywhere.

What is IF?



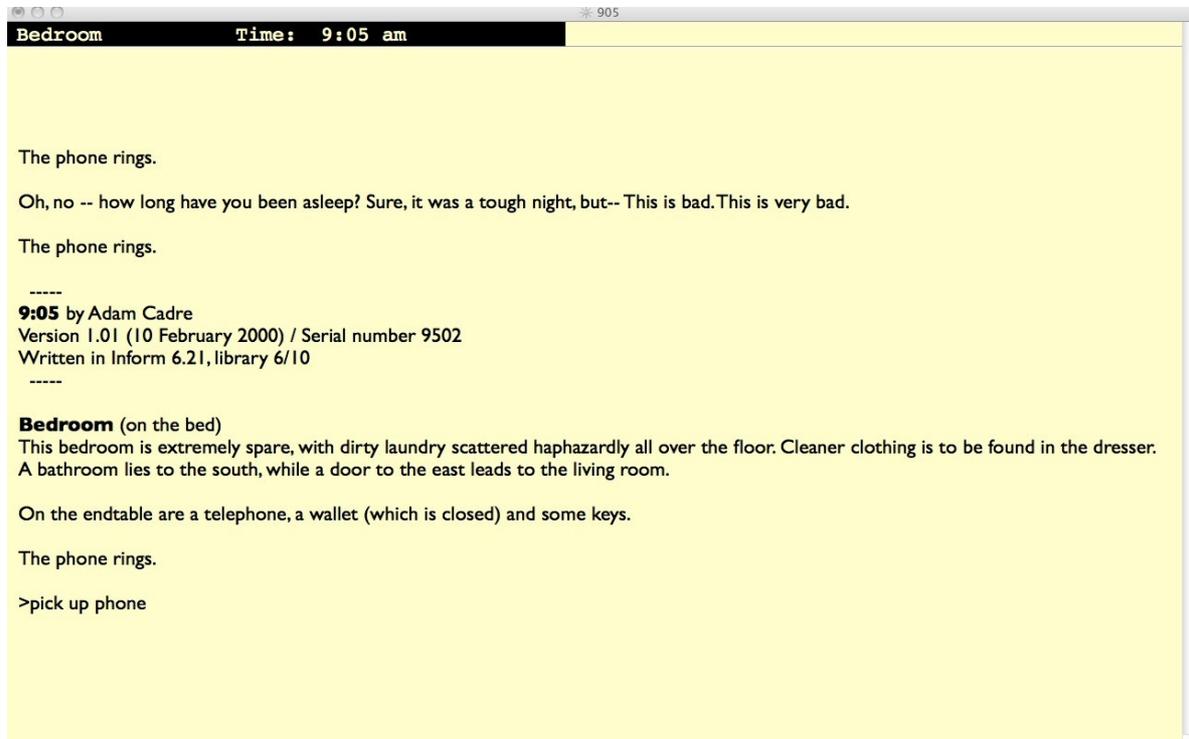
"Will you read me a story?"

"Read you a story? What fun would that be? I've got a better idea: let's tell a story together."

The quote from “Photopia” (Cadre, 1990) gives a very good idea of what IF is - the writer (the author of the game) and the reader (the player of the game) telling a story together. Photopia marked a turning point in IF, where the literary aspects of the story overshadowed the puzzle aspects of the work - the narrative had clearly won over the crossword.

IF is an interactive narrative, where the reader is able to influence the pace of the story and how it unfolds. Because the reader takes control of the main character in the narrative and sees the world through her eyes and controls her actions, it is a form of participatory storytelling. It is both a work

of literature and a video game. Additionally, and importantly, input is based on natural language. In the example below, from 9:05 (Cadre, 1990) the player finds herself in a bed with a ringing phone. One of many possible actions is answering the phone, which will move the story forward providing a sense of the plot and opening up the game world for further exploration.



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Bedroom                               * 905
Time:  9:05 am

The phone rings.

Oh, no -- how long have you been asleep? Sure, it was a tough night, but-- This is bad. This is very bad.

The phone rings.

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9:05 by Adam Cadre
Version 1.01 (10 February 2000) / Serial number 9502
Written in Inform 6.21, library 6/10
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Bedroom (on the bed)
This bedroom is extremely spare, with dirty laundry scattered haphazardly all over the floor. Cleaner clothing is to be found in the dresser.
A bathroom lies to the south, while a door to the east leads to the living room.

On the endtable are a telephone, a wallet (which is closed) and some keys.

The phone rings.

>pick up phone
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Characteristics of IF

According to Montfort (2003), IF is unique amongst other forms of electronic literature because:

1) It is a text accepting and a text generating computer program:

The component in IF that analyses natural language input and responds to it in a meaningful way is called a parser, which understands the most common and most interesting things people will try, but not everything. The very first text adventure games had a limited two-word parser which could only understand very basic verb + noun collocations due to the technological restraints of computer memory at the time. Subsequent games, following the example of Infocom, had a parser that could understand complex sentences.

2) It is a potential narrative - IF is a new medium. It produces non-linear text, meaning that it is not read straight through like a traditional book, but can fork into different paths, allowing new text, and new parts of the world to be discovered with each reading.

3) It provides a simulation of an environment or world – In IF, the geography of the world can be traversed, its objects can be manipulated and its characters can be interacted with. Players can act upon and see the results of simulated actions within this world.

4) It is a structure of rules, with which an outcome is sought, and played voluntarily: a game.

The premise of any IF work is to get to the end of the story, which usually involves overcoming obstacles in the form of logical puzzles which need to be solved. Only part of the situation of the game world is known at the start. Challenge in IF comes not only from interacting with and solving puzzles but from interacting with the game world and discovering the rules that govern it and the language the world model understands. This is akin to the pleasure of solving riddles. However, if the game is badly implemented or has a basic parser, this may lead to playing 'guess the verb', which often leads to frustration on part of the player.

Another particularity of IF is that it is usually written in the second person singular of the present tense. The player is experiencing events and they are happening now. This more immediate nature makes the connection between the player and the protagonist stronger, as well as creating the illusion that the story is being written as the world is explored. This exploration of the world by moving the player character through it and the collection and manipulation of objects are what creates the sense of immersion and embodiment, in addition to moving the story forward and providing puzzles and the means to solve them. Puzzles in IF act as a challenge and force exploration of the game world. They should not be considered as an add-on to the narrative experience - they are an integral part of the interactive process between the reader and the writer, which generates the narrative. Importantly, they also act as a natural pause mechanism for reading and control the revelation of the narrative, in this way slowing the player down long enough to understand and synthesise the details of the story world. They can also act as a gateway mechanism, ensuring that the plot does not advance until all necessary plot pre-requisites have been met. In order to pass through these 'narrative curtains' set up through the game, the player must collect and combine pieces of the text and re-contextualise them.

How to play IF

Most IF games understand and implement common action verbs such as 'open' and 'wear'.

Standard IF verbs related to exploration and the manipulation of objects such as 'look' and 'examine' and 'inventory' and 'get' are practically universal in IF games. Movement in IF is usually done through compass points such as North or East.

You just started up a game and now you're staring at text and a blinking cursor and you don't know what to do! (`> |`)

Don't panic kids—
Crazy Uncle Zarf is here to help you get started...

These commands are very common:

EXAMINE it	PUSH it
TAKE it	PULL it
DROP it	TURN it
OPEN it	FEEL it
PUT it IN something	
PUT it ON something	

When in doubt, examine more.

Does the game intro suggest ABOUT, INFO, HELP?
Try them first!

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.

You can try all sorts of commands on the things you see. Try the commands that make sense! Doors are for opening; buttons are for pushing; pie is for eating. (Mmm, pie.)

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If you meet a person, these should work:

TALK TO name
ASK name ABOUT something
TELL name ABOUT something
GIVE something TO name
SHOW something TO name

Each game has slightly different commands, but they all look pretty much like these.

You could also try:

EAT it	CLIMB it
DRINK it	WAVE it
FILL it	WEAR it
SMELL it	TAKE it OFF
LISTEN TO it	TURN it ON
BREAK it	DIG IN it
BURN it	ENTER it
LOOK UNDER it	SEARCH it
UNLOCK it WITH something	
Or even:	
LISTEN	JUMP
SLEEP	PRAY
WAKE UP	CURSE
UNDO	SING

Take back one move — handy!

“What if I only want to type one or two letters?”

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N/E/S/W/NE/SE/NW/SW: GO
in the indicated compass direction.

L: LOOK
around to see what is nearby.

X: EXAMINE
a thing in more detail.

I: take INVENTORY
of what you possess.

Z: WAIT
a turn without doing anything.

G: do the same thing AGAIN

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A service of the
People's Republic of Interactive Fiction:
<http://pr-if.org>

Common commands used in IF

In IF, commands must be given at a micro-level. Contrary to how things are explained in real-life, most actions need to be broken down into their component parts - unlocking a door before opening it; taking clothes off before taking a shower, etc. Part of the challenge in IF is in discovering how the world works and the language it understands. The reader needs to put herself into game world and think in terms of what she has available to her and how things behave.

IF for language learning

IF as digital game-based learning

Because IF has a game component – the "crossword" , it can be used for digital game-based learning. For an in-depth review of the principles of learning found in video games see Pereira (2009). Video games can be very motivating as the challenges they offer allow players to enter a state of 'flow', where they are totally concentrated on achieving their goals. While playing good games, stealth learning is activated - learning becomes a by-product of engagement, where enhanced retention of vocabulary and content knowledge is a common result. Beyond this concept of 'content' and perhaps more importantly, learners are able to implement life-long cognitive skills, such as critical and lateral thinking and meta-cognitive strategies (planning, monitoring and evaluating learning) , which they may then apply in real world situations. Video games, due to their immersive game environments allow for 'learning by doing' - not just describing an action, but taking the necessary steps to do them – which can lead to deeper learning, and this is especially important when used as a form of autonomous learning. Most importantly, games are fun – and it is when having fun that we are most engaged , and we are willing to learn what we believe is useful to us.

IF as literature

IF, as a form of literature, can be treated as any other form of literature would be for learning purposes. Of course, the level of literary quality of many IF games can be argued, but many IF works, and particularly works which have won awards in IF competitions over the last decade, are noted for their high literary quality in addition to engaging and innovative gameplay.

O'Connell (2009) comments on the use of literature for learning as a rich activity in itself, above traditional considerations, such as assessment:

"once we engage the student in a text and treat them as readers, where the reading in itself is a creative act, forming a potentially dynamic partnership with the writer; then the individual, personal and subjective nature of the activity transcends any glib approach to assessment, such as right/wrong answers."

Ferradas (2009), points out how using literature offers change to conventional classroom pedagogy:

a focus on meaning rather than medium, with an emphasis on fluency; a focus on process rather than product; a change of teacher role to facilitator.

IF for language skills work

IF is portable and scalable: It can be played alone for autonomous learning, or used in a classroom with one computer for whole class teaching, or students can be allocated a computer in pairs or groups, where every member of the group has a different task.

From an autonomous learning perspective, reading comprehension and fluency are the most developed. In IF, every word needs to be considered - nothing can be overlooked, otherwise puzzles cannot be solved and new avenues will not open themselves up to the reader. Having access to a dictionary or working out the meaning of unknown words through context is a must. Making progress through the game is clear evidence that the reader is understanding not only the words, but how the words fit into the world model. Making progress also involves using language for a real purpose - to reach the end of the story. A teacher is not required as IF provides the context for learners to use the language necessary to achieve immediate goals, with immediate feedback on success. With regards to the writing skill, extensive writing is not implemented during game-play, but spelling and typing skills are practised. Unless a text-to-speech feature is used (available on most IF interpreters), the listening skill will also not be practised and naturally, if played alone, the speaking skill will also not be practised.

In a classroom scenario, pre and post-reading tasks can be implemented, as they would with any reading task. Pre-reading tasks motivate the learners to read for pleasure and some sort of vocabulary building activity is recommended so that they won't ask too much about unknown words during play. While reading, IF provides natural pauses for reflection and progression, which is a clear sign that learners are understanding the text. Discrete language work can be practised in a post-reading phase, in addition to follow-up speaking or writing activities based on theme or cultural content. Further literary analysis can also be explored such as character motivation and examination of narrative plot structure.

Additionally, in the classroom setting, different student interaction patterns can be used to go beyond practising reading skills. Through computer-mediated communication tasks and varied group dynamics, speaking and listening tasks can also be implemented.

Choosing an IF game

Some considerations need to be made when choosing an appropriate IF game to use with learners:

Genre - There are as many genres of story in IF as there are in books and choosing one that appeals to all your learners can be a difficult task.

Length – Classic IF games could take months to complete due to confusing geographies and difficult puzzles. Many recent games can take less than 2 hours, some even less than 30 minutes. A medium-length game might work well if played over many lessons.

Locations - more recent games have explored using single-rooms, which have the advantage of not needing to be mapped and limiting the player's focus. On the other hand, games with multiple locations require moving between spaces, which makes makes the story more participatory and encourages a stronger sense of engagement rather than passive observation.

Narrative vs Crossword - puzzle based games will engage the players as long as they do not become stuck and narrative based games with overly-long bunches of text will become 'boring' much more quickly. It is difficult to find the proper balance while also taking into consideration the above points.

Possibly the most important point, however, is that you have played through the game first yourself or at least have a walkthrough and map in order to be able to help learners if needed.

The best place to find IF games and interpreters to play them is at the Interactive Fiction Database : www.IFDB.tads.org. Alternatively, you can now play many games online at <http://parchment.toolness.com>.

Conclusion

IF offers a fun, challenging and interactive way for students to become fluent in reading and learn to appreciate reading for pleasure. In my view, a new era for IF, with a firm place in education, is only just beginning.

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