

The Writer's Self in Interactive Fiction

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What is Interactive Fiction?

Interactive fiction, sometimes called text adventure gaming or IF, is a form of computer-based literature in which the reader (or “interactor”) controls the actions of the main character by typing ordinary English sentences at a computer keyboard. It's a bit like a video game, but in words. IF began in the late 1970's, experienced a commercial heyday in the 1980's, became a focus of talented amateurs in the 1990's, and is enjoying vastly renewed interest in the last six years, with meetings of enthusiasts around the country, two new commercial projects, and even a documentary film (Scott). Authoring systems, with which enthusiasts can write interactive fiction, have been available to the general public since 1987, but Inform 7, which debuted in 2006, has opened new and exciting opportunities for student writers of IF. Throughout its history, interactive fiction has found a place in many university classrooms, but Inform 7 has made the writing of interactive fiction far more accessible to college instructors and their students. Among the many university scholars who use interactive fiction are Ian Bogost of Georgia Tech, Christopher Fee of Gettysburg College, Dennis Jerz of Seton Hill, and Jeremy Douglass of the University of California at San Diego.

Each work of interactive fiction, like other forms of fiction, operates within an artificial “model world,” but, in interactive fiction, the reader can manipulate this little universe by typing sentences at a computer keyboard. In order to interpret the sentences that the reader types, a work of interactive fiction employs a “parser,” a programming device that translates the user's prose input into a form that the story can respond to (Montfort 107).

A Sample of Interactive Fiction

Here is a transcript of a session with an extremely (perhaps ridiculously) simple instance interactive fiction. The story will serve as an example of an unfamiliar form of literature and its content will prove useful, later on, when we look at the sort of difficulties students have in crafting IF. The reader's input, which would vary with each reading of the story, appears in boldface type. (A playable version of the story is available at <http://iplayif.com/?story=http%3A//bdesilets.com/if/Trolley.zblorb>)

It's another routine day of trolley driving, in the neighborhood of your local university. About two hundred yards ahead, you can see that the trolley track splits, one branch, which you're planning use, leading straight ahead, and the other offering a turn to the left. You have just one passenger in the car, an elderly woman, and she signals that she'd like to get off here.

Trolley

An Interactive Fiction by Brendan Desilets

Release 1 / Serial number 121221 / Inform 7 build 6G60
(I6/v6.32 lib 6/12N)

Medford Crossing (in the Trolley)

A simple trolley stop in the suburban community called Medford.

In the Trolley you can see an elderly woman and a control panel (on which is a joystick).

>Look at the woman.

A long-faced, elderly lady, perhaps around ninety years of age. She is a passenger on the trolley that you're driving, and she seems to be wearing a name tag.

>Look at the tag.

A name tag from a philosophy conference at the nearby university. The tag reads "Philippa Foot."

In response to the elderly woman's request, you stop the trolley.

>Look at the joystick.

A familiar control device for your trolley. You can steer to the east or west with the device, (by simply typing "E" or "W" in this story) or use it to start the vehicle (by pushing the stick) or to stop (by pulling the joystick.)

The elderly woman gives you an odd look, perhaps an expression of pity or concern, and gets off the trolley. As you restart the trolley and it gains speed in its typical, brisk way, you notice that the controls feel a little odd.

You test the brake and find that it fails! However, a check of the steering mechanism seems to suggest that it's working.

Looking ahead, you are shocked to discover that five people have wandered onto the track ahead, where your runaway vehicle is sure to hit them in a few seconds. A glance at the track that diverges to the west indicates that things aren't much better in that direction. There's a pedestrian on the track there, too. In the next few seconds, you're

going to have to decide whether to simply wait, thus letting the car go straight, or steer west.

>Honk the horn.

It seems that your signaling device has failed, along with the trolley's brakes. You can still steer, though.

>Go west.

You find yourself on a stretch of track just west of Medford Crossing. Your runaway trolley has just rolled to a stop after colliding with an innocent bystander.

After the runaway trolley incident, you take a desk job with the local transit authority for a time. Today, three days after the accident, you find yourself approaching a footbridge as you make your way home from work. The bridge crosses a trolley track. You see that a very large man is standing on the bridge, leaning over a rather low railing.

As you near the bridge, you notice that only one other person seems to be around. She's a light-haired, bespectacled, older woman, wearing a name tag issued by a local philosophy conference. Apparently, her name is Judith Jarvis Thomson. She seems a rather anxious to get across the bridge and out of its vicinity, and she soon disappears around a corner.

Bridge

A simple footbridge, spanning the trolley tracks near Medford Crossing.

You can see a Big Man here.

>Look at the man.

An unusually large person, perhaps six feet eight inches tall, weighing around 400 pounds. He is leaning precariously over the railing of a footbridge, just above a trolley track.

You soon realize why the big man is leaning so awkwardly. He's observing yet another runaway trolley scene. This time, the out-of-control vehicle is headed toward five unsuspecting workers who are on its track.

It occurs to you that, if the big man were to fall off the bridge, he would land in front of the trolley and his bulk

would probably stop its progress. If you were to push him, he would surely fall from the bridge.

>**Wait.**

The big man regains his balance, and the two of you watch the sad events that unfold below you.

*** The thought experiment has ended. ***

Would you like to RESTART, RESTORE a saved game, QUIT or UNDO the last command?

The Trolley Problems

Our sample IF story follows two variations of a famous thought experiment, originally proposed by the British virtue ethicist Philippa Foot (584) and much elaborated by the American philosopher Judith Jarvis Thomson (1409). In its original version, with the listener in the role of the trolley driver, the problem leads a large majority of respondents to choose to turn the runaway vehicle, killing one innocent person rather than five. In the "Big Man" variation, a similarly large majority choose not to sacrifice the one to save the many, usually because, in order to save the five, the respondent would have to actively and voluntarily murder the one. For many listeners, the "Big Man" version is by far the more disturbing of the two.

How do these trolley problems apply to the student writer of interactive fiction? In order to see the connection, we should first consider the nature of an IF authoring system and then look at the various "selves" of a student author.

Inform 7

An authoring system is a programming language, that writers use to create their interactive stories. In most cases, at least during the last half decade, especially in universities, that authoring system is often a highly innovative tool called Inform 7.

Inform 7 produces, as its output, an interactive story that most speakers and readers of English (or any of several other supported languages) can read. In that respect, Inform 7 is just like other IF authoring systems. However, unlike other authoring systems, Inform 7 allows the writer to create his or her story in more or less plain natural-language sentences, not in arcane computer code.

Suppose that a student wants to create a room for use in an interactive fiction story. Using a conventional authoring system, the writer might create source code that looks like this:

```
Object fac_cafe "The Faculty Dining Room"
  with description
    "This is a smaller version of the student
      cafeteria, containing the expected
      appointments for an eating space for
      teachers. A door on
      the east wall leads outside the building,
      where you're not supposed
      to be during the school day.",
  n_to café;
```

With Inform 7, the source code would look more like natural language:

```
The Faculty Dining Room is south of the Café. The
description of the Faculty Dining Room is "This is a
smaller version of the student cafeteria, containing the
expected appointments for an eating space for teachers. A
door on the east wall leads outside the building, where
you're not supposed to be during the school day."
```

Because of its natural-language syntax, Inform 7 is much easier for students to learn than conventional programming languages. In addition, the "source text" that the student writes to create his story can take the form of a readable process-analysis essay, just the sort of expository assignment that many university instructors favor. And, less obviously, Inform 7 creates an environment in which writing an interactive story is quite closely analogous to reading one (Nelson, "Natural Language" 146). For this reason, writing a work of interactive fiction with Inform 7 can actually help a novice to become a better reader of electronic literature.

Self and the Student Writer

For the purposes of this discussion, we need only a rudimentary understanding of the "selves" of a student writer. Let's call the actual writer the "first self." Of course, we might offer a more complex analysis of the actual author and the ways in which she might think of herself in an academic context, but, for now, let's think of the first self as an ordinary, individual person.

In creating works of fiction, the real writer (or "first self") creates characters, or "second selves." Some of these selves may be very similar to the first self, and others may be strikingly different. In the case of a narrating

character who seems similar to the actual writer, readers will occasionally confuse the narrator with the author.

Works of interactive fiction feature a unique type of character, the character whom the reader controls. This very active individual is usually called the “player/character.” In our “Trolley” story, the player/character is a driver who runs into some severe mechanical difficulties with his vehicle, moves into a desk job, and eventually faces a difficult decision concerning a big man on a bridge.

The player/character, who is usually referred to as “you” in an IF story, represents some unusual challenges for a writer. Perhaps the most compelling of these is that, in interactive fiction, the fundamental thrust of the genre causes the reader to *conflate herself with the player/character* (Sorolla 18). This uniquely tight identification of the reader with a character gives birth to the “third self” of the IF author. This “third self” is the reader. In interactive fiction, the reader does not merely relate to the player/character. The reader “runs” the player/character in an intensely intimate way and thus takes on a sense of responsibility for what the character does.

Because of this extreme identification of the reader with the player/character, the writer of an interactive story must be thoughtful of the reader in very unusual way. The writer must place herself in the moral position of the reader, as the reader plays the part of the player/character. The writer must think of the reader as a “third self.”

In interactive fiction, the reader finds herself in a position similar to that of the decision-maker in the trolley problem. She has to make choices, choices which, by the author's design, may be morally difficult ones. In crafting these choices, an IF writer must exert great care to be “fair” to the reader in ways that go beyond the demands of clarity and coherence that other writers must meet. Readers of interactive fiction have a right to expect such consistent and caring treatment from IF authors. Indeed, one of the foundational documents of interactive literature is the “Bill of Player's Rights,” including the right to “reasonable freedom of action” the right “not to depend too much on luck” (Nelson, “Art of Adventure”).

To a novice writer of interactive fiction, this need to identify with and care for the reader as if the reader were a “third self” is not at all obvious. In truth, it often seems that new IF authors are *trying* to offend the reader, as they struggle to come up with new twists on old problems. For example, if a newby writer were to re-create the “big man” version of our trolley story, she might allow the player/character to push the giant off the bridge, only to have his body collide with the trolley and be propelled through the air, killing the bystanders.

A similar instance, from an actual student story, involves a Viking player/character who, along with a companion named Thorfinn, is invading a

British monastery. In the interest of privacy, we'll withhold the student's identity here and alter the story a bit, even though the author has posted the piece on the Web. Here, in essence, is how one scene goes.

You can see a jeweled book, a golden candlestick, an old friar, a young priest and a young nun here.

>Take the book (a likely choice by the reader).

The pages of the jeweled book are useless to you, but the cover appears to be of great value. You tear the pages from it, and throw them to the floor. An old priest suddenly appears from behind the altar and runs toward you. He is very angry, and is yelling at you in his unfamiliar tongue, but he is unarmed. You and Thorfinn turn back to exploring, but the priest starts to plead with you, perhaps for the jeweled cover.

You put the cover into a bag of animal skin around your waist. The priest tries to grab at the bag, and as he does, Thorfinn raises his sword and takes off the priest's hand. The priest screams and falls to the floor.

Here, the writer fails to allow his reader "reasonable freedom of action," in that, if the player/character takes the somewhat innocent step of picking up the book, he causes one of the priests to suffer great harm. Similarly, if the player/character chooses to try to protect the nun by picking her up to carry her away from the carnage in the church, the story declares that player/character has impressed her into sexual slavery.

Three Problems

Why would an IF writer treat the reader so shabbily? There are at least three reasons. The first centers on the novice writer's inexperience in reading interactive fiction. The second involves the newby's difficulty in creating, or "implementing" the reader's options. And the third hinges on a misunderstanding of an accomplished IF writer's intentions.

Getting to Know the Third Self

First, the novice writer probably has little experience in reading interactive fiction, and the experience she does have is probably with more accomplished works of IF. She, in all likelihood, has never experienced the dismay of an interactor who issues a simple directive that results in an unpredictably complex result. In the case of a the new writer, the "first self" may not know very much about what it's like to be the "third self."

Implementation: "Hard Writing" in Interactive Fiction

A second reason for mistreatment of the third self is a special case of the familiar adage, “easy writing makes hard reading.” In order to give the interactor “reasonable freedom of action” in our Viking story, the writer would have to allow the reader to consider taking the book, and, whether he takes the tome or not, to make other decisions about how to deal with the pleading priest and the other characters. But giving the reader this sort of freedom would require far more difficult thinking and writing than what the author of the story has actually done. Instead of providing a single response for “take the book,” the author would have to consider a series of questions and provide programming to account for each of them. These questions would include, at least:

“What happens if the player decides to act in a way inconsistent with Viking marauding, perhaps by not taking the book?”

“What happens if the player/character takes the book but doesn't want to let his friend harm the priest?”

“What happens if the player/character wants to kill the priest, and/or all the other helpless victims?”

“What happens if the player decides to wait for a turn or two, doing nothing at all in the midst of all this chaos?”

“If the player/character's companion attacks the unarmed priest, will the player/character take action against his friend?”

“If the scene continues for several turns, what will the young priest, the old friar, and the young nun do?”

The writer, then, has a great deal of programming, or “implementing” to do, if she is to treat the reader thoughtfully. In truth, an experienced IF writer might choose a more radical solution here, concluding, perhaps, that a Viking warrior really has too many options in this scene. The author might decide to introduce fewer characters, or perhaps to use a different player/character, such as a servant of the Viking fighter, whose options would be fewer and so might require more nuanced problem-solving.

Misunderstanding the Parser

A third reason for an inexperienced author's inconsiderate treatment of the reader is a false assumption about the relationship between the reader and the writer. Interactive fiction, like video gaming and other forms of interactive storytelling, is an inherently challenging genre. Because, in a typical interactive story, a reader experiences a certain level of difficulty and frustration, the interactor may conclude that the author is deliberately taunting him, even when the writer is skillfully easing the way through the tale.

Some of the novice reader's frustration will usually involve the inability of the story's parser to interpret some of his input. For example, if the reader types, “I want to take the book,” rather than “take the book,” an IF story will typically respond, not very helpfully, “I only understood you as far as wanting to take

inventory.” This odd failure to communicate results from the limitations of the story's parser and from the reader's misunderstanding of the kind of sentence she should be using. In order to avoid this sort of problem, most IF writers provide some instruction for new readers, especially on the sentences that the story will likely understand. However, many (perhaps most) new readers assume, wrongly, that an odd response from the parser results from a deliberate choice of the author. They think that the writer has created this difficulty as a particularly annoying problem for the reader to solve. (Plotkin)

An IF novice, then, will often conclude that there exists a natural enmity between the reader and writer in interactive fiction. Acting on this belief, the student writer may feel little inclination to accord the reader the status of a "third self." In fact, the newby writer often shows little or no respect for the rights and wishes of the interactor and may actually taunt the reader at times. One student writer had his story respond to the reader's forgetting his car keys with the quip, "This isn't Grand Theft Auto!"

Overcoming the Problems

Of course, with a modicum of good instruction and some constructive practice, students can substantially overcome these "third self" problems and create enjoyable IF stories. For students who are having difficulty because they lack experience with the IF genre, the obvious solution is for them to read more interactive fiction. In particular, they may benefit from some exposure to less accomplished stories, of which many appear on the Web. Christopher Fee of Gettysburg College offers a large collection of student-written stories, some quite sophisticated and others less skillful. His website is at <http://public.gettysburg.edu/~cfee/courses/English4012001/topic3.htm#Playing>

Frequently, the reactions of other students can help, too, especially when students are having trouble with "hard writing" problems related to implementing clear and fair options for the reader. Real readers, even novice readers, can often spot options that really should work for the interactor, but just don't. And even the most skillful IF writers invariably value the suggestions of thorough readers, or beta testers, in identifying points for revision.

Responding to the needs of real readers can also help new IF writers to see that more experienced authors really are trying to create stories for readers to enjoy, despite the challenges inherent in the medium. As little as an hour or so of massaging the parser to make it more reader-friendly will convince almost any student writer that her relationship with the reader really should be a friendly one.

Back to the Conventional Essay

Writing interactive fiction, then, can help, or perhaps even require, student writers to adopt an unusually active and thoughtful stance toward their readers. And, with a little encouragement, such student writers of IF can use their newly-minted "third self" sensitivity in conventional academic writing, to the benefit of all of their readers.

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