Interactive Fiction Communities
From Preservation through Promotion and Beyond

by Nick Montfort and Emily Short

The interactive fiction (IF) community has for decades been involved with the authorship, sharing, reading, and discussion of one type of electronic literature and computer game. Creating interactive fiction is a game-making and world-building activity, one that involves programming as well as writing. Playing interactive fiction typically involves typing input and receiving a textual response explaining the current situation. From the first canonical interactive fiction, the minicomputer game *Adventure,* the form has lived through a very successful commercial phase and is now being actively developed by individuals, worldwide, who usually share their work for free online.

Although it is typical to speak of "the IF community", there have actually been several communities representing different interests, different types of authoring systems, and various natural languages. Until around 2005, online archives, discussions, newsletters, and competitions focused the energies of IF community members. But since the middle of the 21st century's first decade, interest in IF has broadened beyond its earlier boundaries and academics, students, and players of indie games who are not IF community members have become active as IF players. Groups have met in person in different cities to play games and discuss work in progress. We consider the IF community's early formation and the way it, along with concept of interactive fiction, has evolved in recent years.

The Form and Conventions of Interactive Fiction

Interactive fiction as typically defined is a form in which the interactor or player types actions for a particular character to undertake; the program responds with a report of what happens. The works that have been in this form present puzzles and challenges as well as literary pleasures; they simulate worlds and perform limited but effective natural language understanding. Interactive fiction has often meant more or less the same thing as "text adventure", although even the most text-fixated would at least admit that interactive fiction can be *text-based* and does not have to exclude multimedia elements. Several resources are available with general discussions of interactive fiction and its history (Nelson; *Twisty Little Passages*; "Riddle Machines").

Interactive fiction can be defined *formally* as a particular type of computer program with particular aspects. It involves an environment, or world, that is simulated to some extent, usually with objects, rooms, and characters explicitly represented in code. The player or players interact by typing some sorts of natural-language commands such as *pick up the*

ax, *go east* (abbreviated *east* or *e*), or *play with Floyd*. A rather small set of commands will actually work, but many of the obvious, physical actions involving objects in the environment are supported. These commands indicate what the current *player character*, the somewhat avatar-like entity within the interactive fiction world, should do. Sometimes the player character refuses or fails to perform a particular action, but even this can be amusing or informative, helping those playing to understand the way the fictional, simulated world operates.

Here, for example, is a bit of a transcript of interaction with *Lost Pig*, the 2007 Interactive Fiction Competition winner by Admiral Jota. In this game, the player character is Grunk, a rather inarticulate and dense orc who also serves as narrator, explaining what happens to him. In this snippet, the player finishes solving one puzzle and then attempts another action which Grunk declines to perform.

> **Cave With Stream**
> Tunnel come to little cave here, but wide stream block way east. Grunk not see much on other side. Not know if tunnel keep going or stop here. Only light that Grunk see come from bright room, far off to west. But Grunk hear lots of water.
> There stone bench next to stream.
> Seeing over there not easy in dark, but Grunk think there little reddish thing on other side of stream.
> >get red thing with pole
> Grunk stick pole out across stream and poke red thing with end of it. Red thing stick to end of pole! Grunk pull it back and find out that thing really key, so Grunk take key.
> Pole not feel sticky to Grunk, and key not feel sticky too. Wonder why key stick to pole.
> >eat key
> Eating key maybe fun today. But it not so fun tomorrow.

The two major attributes of an interactive fiction program—the simulation of a fictional world and the understanding of at least a limited form of natural language—correspond to the two major components of an interactive fiction game, the *world model* and the *parser*. State-of-the-art interactive fiction development systems such as Inform 7 and TADS 3 now provide a customizable world model and parser with extensive capabilities, but the functions of these two components are also found in one-off games such as the original *Adventure* and *Zork*. Because an advanced interactive fiction is a reasonably complex computer program, creating a game generally requires programming as well as writing.

Interactive fiction has formal computational and interface qualities, but it is also marked by conventions. Low-level conventions include the definition of space and the navigation of it using compass directions and abbreviations for them (*n*, *ne*, *e*, etc.). Since interactive fiction has good capabilities for modeling objects, containment, and carrying things around, it is also conventional for the solution to puzzles to involve objects that are found in various parts of the simulated space. Hence, the stereotypical interactive fiction adventurer is a sort of kleptomaniac and bag person who obtains everything that can be picked up. Finally, interactive fiction has been marked at various times by adherence to and exploration of popular genres: Initially, in the minicomputer era, the underground or house-based explorations that typify *Dungeons & Dragons* sessions; later, work in many popular genres beyond fantasy (science fiction, mystery, romance, humor, etc.) thanks to Infocom and other companies; and, currently, work of many sorts that sometimes falls into a well-defined genre but is often harder to classify.

Several graphical games were produced by Infocom, Magnetic Scrolls, and other companies—ones that were marketed and understood as interactive fiction, and had text-based exchange at their core. Even in the strictest definition, work that takes natural-language-like textual input, produces textual output, and simulates worlds is likely to be understood as interactive fiction regardless of whether it has graphics, sound, or even limited sorts of animation. The *About.com* "Interactive Fiction" site and later *Brass Lantern* included graphical adventure games in the category. While the major aspects of interactive fiction have been well-understood and recognized by authors and players for several decades, the definition of interactive fiction has not been completely clear in every case.

Without conducting an extensive discourse analysis, interactive fiction as discussed clearly falls into more than one domain. The people who work in this form call themselves "authors", write "story files", and generally welcome the use of the term "interactive fiction" as descriptive of their work, embracing literary terminology and drawing on their

avid reading. IF authors also almost universally see themselves as making "games"—the default term for a work of interactive fiction. IF authors have participated in "electronic literature" readings, conferences, and collections; many also see strong connections to the gaming community and to design issues and practices there. This is hardly an unusual condition for an electronic literature community. Digital artists, whether involved with net art or installations, sometimes work in literary and textual forms without identifying as writers or authors at all. That interactive fiction authors identify as game-makers as well as programmers and writers may be more representative of electronic literature practice than exceptional.

From Minicomputers to the Marketplace

Interactive fiction has existed for more than 30 years, first on minicomputers, then as a leading form of entertainment software thanks to Infocom and other companies, and most recently as an activity of programmer/writers who develop IF systems, libraries, and games for the love of it.

Beginning in 1977, text-based adventure games for mainframes and minicomputers were available to a few, mainly through colleges and universities. In theory, these could be modified, but it was relatively uncommon to do so—Don Woods' revisions to Will Crowther's original *Adventure* notwithstanding. Local players were, however, stimulated to imitate *Adventure* and *Zork* and in a few places, most notably Cambridge, England, to create generalized adventure compilers in order to create new challenges for their friends. Playing communities were highly local and restricted to those who had access to academic or business computers. Because adventure games could be played on terminals in communal facilities, access often required friends to band together to play when the mainframe was not required for official purposes. Circumstances such as these brought together the cluster of MIT students in 1977-9 who were to found Infocom.

By 1982-4, IF had become something mostly played on home computers with family or friends. In the US and the United Kingdom, commercial IF cost about twice as much, adjusting for inflation, as a brand new AAA console game in 2011. Purchasing an Infocom game entitled the owner to join the circulation list of *The New Zork Times*, a promotional publication featuring previews of coming releases, letters to the editor, puzzles, and contest submissions from players. In Italy, text adventures were distributed on cassettes accompanying monthly magazines, with each month's magazine providing solutions to those of the month before (Cordella), while the Dinamic company in Spain published "Adventuras Conversacionales" (Neito). In all of these communities, unauthorized copying of interactive fiction was typical, with computer owners meeting in local user groups to share disks and exchanging news in unofficial fanzines. But to the extent that there was a community around home-computer-based interactive fiction in this period, it was a community of players and users rather than of authors, partly because the hardware and available software were insufficiently powerful to create sophisticated new work and partly because the only centralized modes of communication were through the commercial companies who sold interactive fiction.

It was not until the age of modems and early public access to the Internet that IF really developed a coherent and independent authoring community.

The Early IF Communities

For much of the post-commercial era, IF was primarily developed by and for a few related communities: the mostly English-speaking creators who identified themselves as "the IF community" along with those writing in other languages, among them Spanish, French, Italian, German, Czech, and Russian.

Two USENET newsgroups, rec.arts.int-fiction and rec.games.int-fiction, hosted the first far-flung discussions of interactive fiction and helped to constitute an early IF community. The two newsgroups were founded and came to be used for interactive fiction discussion in the late 1980s, before the invention of the World Wide Web. In these early days of public access to the Internet, it wasn't necessary to be Internet-connected to have online discussions of interactive fiction. CompuServe's Gamer Forum and the Adventure Game Toolkit (AGT) became the home of early development in the period 1990-1992. *Shades of Gray* was written by seven people communicating only through a private CompuServe forum, with lead author Judith Pintar organizing and editing the contributions. To supplement discussion on the newsgroups and on CompuServe, two newsletters were founded: *SPAG* (initially, the Society for the Preservation of Adventure Games; later, the Society for the Promotion of Adventure Games) and *XYZZYnews*. For more synchronous

communication, community members began to communicate on a MUD that largely functioned as a chat room.

An important early resource for individually-authored interactive fiction was the IF Archive. It was founded in November 1992 by Volker Blasius, and was originally hosted at the German National Research Center for Information Technology. The archive was initially located at ftp.gmd.de; as the hostname suggests, it was an FTP site, one that allowed IF authors worldwide, working in any language, to deposit their freely-downloadable games. Although one could access FTP sites through popular Web browsers, it was not until January 1999 that the archive came fully onto the Web. Andrew Plotkin and Paul Mazaitis set up IFArchive.org that month. It was initially a mirror of the German FTP site and later, when that site went offline, became the main home of the IF Archive (Granade). The directory structure from the original site has been maintained over the decades.

Also very significant in the formation and existence of the IF community was the IF Competition, also simply called the Comp. It was started by Kevin Wilson in 1995; Wilson later founded the IF newsletter *SPAG*. The Comp was announced on the newsgroups and welcoming entries in the then-recent free IF development system Inform and in TADS, a capable system which was at that point sold as shareware. The first Comp had twelve entries, which were unlike Infocom games, and other commercial games, by virtue of being shorter; they were meant to each be solved within two hours. As with the IF Archive, *SPAG*, and other resources important to the early IF community, the Comp was simply started by a single individual and was run without institutional support or large-scale pre-planned organization.

Shorter Comp games made interactive fiction more accessible as well as easier for authors to finish. Nevertheless, the original entries and those in the early years (the Comp ran annually, as it still does) were largely made by the IF community for the IF community. Few had the "feelies" and help menus that made commercial games, and early shareware games, more understandable to those who did know about interactive fiction already. Although the 1998 winner, *Photopia* by Adam Cadre, featured detailed instructions and the 1999 winner, *Winter Wonderland* by Laura A. Knauth, had a status line that indicated where adjacent areas were, there was generally little emphasis on creating detailed tutorials and assisting new players. Highly referential games such as *The Cabal, Pass the Banana,* and *Stiffy Makane: The Undiscovered Country* were created and distributed largely as in-jokes for those aware of the form, the conventions, and the community. This was not unprecedented, as some late commercial games such as *Eric the Unready* parodied fantasy gaming. But these sorts of in-jokes highlighted the importance of community not just to styles of play and systems of review and discussion, but also to interactive fiction production.

What is called "the IF community" is not the only community focused on interactive fiction. While the IF Archive hosted games in any language, different national and language communities arose as individual IF authors wrote games throughout the world. There are English-language histories of interactive fiction development and communities in Italian (Cordella), French (Labrande), and Czech (Svelch). While there is not great stratification by development platform, the IF development system ADRIFT has its own forum and newsletter and has developed a community of its own. And there is a separate English-language community using the same mainstream development platforms that is interested in a particular type of interactive fiction: "adult interactive fiction", or erotica. This "AIF" community has its own annual competition, archive, and central site. Among the many differences that are seen in IF playing and authoring worldwide, there are some commonalities, which include the *ad hoc* individual development of resources, the distribution of games for free, and the bottom-up growth of communities.

Expanding Communities and Beyond the Community

Between 2000 and 2010, the self-definition of the IF community began to change. Many works of interactive fiction are now produced and played by people who do not consider themselves part of any IF community, including academic users and creators associated with independent or casual gaming. Local groups have started to hold in-person meetings in several cities and have sponsored events that appeal to typical IF community members as well as others.

Changes in Game Distribution

As commercial video games have come to rely less on boxed sales during the

mid-2000s, the corresponding rise in independent game distribution has brought with it a number of websites and blogs. Several of these—notably JayIsGames (covering casual and some independent games, founded 2003), PlayThisThing (covering indie games, founded 2007), TIGSource (covering independent games, forums started 2007)—have included recurring coverage of interactive fiction among their offerings. Both TIGSource and JayIsGames have sponsored IF competitions that did not arise from and were not targeted at any IF community but at their own communities of independent gamers. These competitions have brought new players to IF and have attracted authors who do not see themselves primarily as IF authors, but as indie game authors who happen to have an interest in interactive fiction as one of several possible forms.

These developments place interactive fiction on a continuum with other types of independently produced, small-budget, and experimental games, and have encouraged new authors to experiment in the form.

IF for Other Players

An increasing amount of interactive fiction is written for players outside the IF community; much of it is not even announced to the community at all. In addition to the IF games written by and for independent gamers, several new categories have emerged.

Interactive fiction has found extensive use in education, either in the form of IF written by experts to teach students (such as *Voices of Spoon River* and other projects by the Creative Learning Environments Lab at Utah State University) or IF created by students as a way of presenting research on a given era or site (as with the historical IF works created by students of Jeremiah McCall and Christopher Fee). Student historical works—often written by authors who have never used any programming language before, and who are graded on content as much as form—tend to focus less on procedural complexity or rich puzzle design than on establishing a sense of place and time. Such work captures the feel of a diorama or a reenactment rather than of a narrative puzzle game.

Various special-interest groups have adopted IF as a way to provide entertainment targeted to an underserved market. Illuminated Lantern's *1893* (2002) is a detailed and illustrated IF reconstruction of the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, sold primarily through museum gift shops and local Chicago venues. Cumberland Games & Diversions marketed *Treasures of a Slaver's Kingdom* (2007) to an audience who already enjoyed other Cumberland products such as RPG rulesets, maps, and miniatures for tabletop gameplay. Along similar lines, the geocaching hobbyist community has created a series of challenges based around existing or custom-written interactive fiction, using the IF to provide narrative context to the geocaching tasks (Hines).

Changes in Resources and the Community

During the period 2003-2008, the IF community moved towards an increasingly distributed model for most of its primary institutions, introducing IFDB (a database for games), ifwiki (a wiki for information about the community), Planet-IF (an IF-themed blog aggregation site), and the intfiction forum (a bulletin board forum to supplement the USENET newsgroups).

IFDB, the "Interactive Fiction Database", brings many new projects to the attention of the IF community, since it can be edited by any registered member and is designed to link to games wherever they may appear. It has supplanted and expanded the functionality of Baf's Guide, a website cataloging the contents of the interactive fiction archive and maintained primarily by Carl Muckenhoupt ("Baf") and a handful of volunteer assistants. Because Baf's only covered materials on the archive, it omitted many commercially available games and any IF that had not been formally submitted to the archive by the author. In contrast, IFDB documents a number of student projects, current commercial games, and out of print works. Other features, such as an RSS news feed, user-run recommendation lists and polls, and game rankings, are intended to help newcomers quickly identify works they might find interesting, and keep community members aware of less-known projects.

IFDB has also changed the way the community supports new authors. The constant news feed and rapid review cycle of IFDB have considerably reduced, if not actually eliminated, the longstanding community problem that less-known authors and idiosyncratic games often went unnoticed and unreviewed. Before IFDB, the announcement of a game's release on the Usenet forums could be quickly vanish from

the recent post lists, and there was little to raise awareness; a game might be reviewed in *SPAG*, but *SPAG*'s quarterly release cycle meant that it might be months before the author of a new game received any feedback at all, and by the time a review appeared, it would be difficult to build momentum. In the era of IFDB, it is much more common for a newly released game to begin receiving ratings and reviews within a week or two.

ifwiki (2005) and Planet-IF (2008), meanwhile, have created new venues for collecting information and presenting long-form theoretical discussion. Articles by community members about the craft and theory of interactive fiction formerly tended to appear on the rec.arts.int-fiction newsgroup or in *SPAG* or *XYZZYnews*, whereas it is now typical for them to appear on personal blogs that are then aggregated through Planet-IF. This means that the content is more visible to non-community readers and is often presented in a context with a blogger's other interests. ifwiki, meanwhile, provides a centralized repository of links to past and present IF discussion, news, and competitions: a significant service now that discussion has spread away from one or two central locations.

The opening of the IF community to new influences is a self-reinforcing process. As new groups of people outside the IF community have become interested in writing in the form, there are more and more authors who see their primary audience elsewhere, but who turn to the IF community for tools and technical support. Many of these post on the intfiction forum, established in December of 2007, which has gradually replaced the USENET group rec.arts.int-fiction as the primary space for technical support and community announcements. The increased visibility of the IF community, and increased engagement of people writing for different audiences or with different concerns, has broadened the collective sense of what IF is or might be.

Playing and Writing Together

The period 2008-2011 has seen the growth of local, in-person groups for IF enthusiasts, with regular meetings in the Boston area, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Vancouver, BC. Special events several times a year draw participants from across North America and Europe. These groups often participate in shared play sessions (with one person typing commands at a time, but the entire group suggesting what to do next), writing workshops, and presentations on various aspects of IF craft. Speed-IF, traditionally a two-hour game jam organized through ifMUD, has also become a popular activity in person, often with multiple authors working together on the same project. ClubFloyd, which was founded in 2007, holds weekly online meetings for collaborative play, and as of June 2011 has posted transcripts and player commentary for over 180 games. In the context of shared play and authorship, new IF players can be taught how to interact with a game by more experienced participants.

The move towards more personal contact has affected the writing of IF as well as the play experience. Although interactive fiction has a collaborative heritage, with *Zork* initially put together by four people at MIT and *Shades of Gray* developed by seven authors via CompuServe, most IF over the past few decades has been either single-authored or divided up among an author, a programmer, and occasionally an illustrator. An increasing number of IF games are created by multiple authors, as found in the Textfyre model of distributing work among a team and with alternative models for the participation of large numbers of collaborators, seen in *Spaceship!* and *Alabaster*.

Finally, the movement to encounter and discuss interactive fiction in person has allowed IF author/programmers to share pieces that would be hard to present over the web, such as the various installation pieces seen at the first IF Demo Fair in May 2011 (Monath).

Expanding Concepts of Interactive Fiction

The concept of interactive fiction embraced by the IF community has expanded to include works that accept alternative forms of input (multiple choice or keyword selection, for instance, rather than limited natural language understanding) as well as experimentation in world modeling, the narrating of events, and modes of output.

In the period from 2008-2011, outreach—defined as attempts to raise interest and engagement in IF—has been one of the IF community's core concerns. Increased engagement with novice players has demonstrated that many people who might otherwise be interested in reading or playing IF encounter two major barriers. The two barriers identified are that of access (figuring out how to download and run IF on their own computers) and that of gameplay proficiency (learning how to type commands to a

game successfully in an appropriate subset of English).

IF in the Browser

Players coming to interactive fiction from a background in casual games often expect to be able to play a game within a browser and without downloading anything. The need to provide a seamless experience has spurred the development of a number of new options to facilitate online play. Parchment and Quixe run Inform-produced game files in a browser window, while still-in-progress work on the TADS 3 and Alan languages will run games on a server and update the player's game state via AJAX or similar technology.

Presenting IF in a browser window generates its own new set of player and author expectations. Typography and text styling has for a long time been at best a secondary concern: interpreters on different operating systems present text in different ways, in different fonts, colors, and marginal arrangements. Traditionally, the tools used by the IF community have offered the author only limited control over this presentation. Portability across a large number of platforms (including small-screen mobile devices and computers being run with a screen reader by blind players) was often considered more important than the ability to craft a specific visual experience, and providing an attractive textual surface was often seen as the job of the interpreter creator rather than the author of a specific game.

Introducing IF to the browser window, however, implies that IF reading should feel similar to reading other web-styled text, with similar expectations for smooth scrolling, attractive layout, and visual integration with the surrounding website. Moreover, text presented on the web is often styled directly by the author of that text, and people coming to IF creation from a background of web authorship bring those expectations to bear. An increasing number of user requests and suggestions involve the ability to style output, display images and videos, and dynamically change text that has already been printed to the screen.

New tools now in development, including Juhana Leinonen's Vorple interface, are designed to allow IF authors to make better use of the range of web-based possibilities, such as culling text and information from other websites to affect gameplay and embedding YouTube video into a game screen. CSS-based styling options for Quixe are also in development, for projects that do not require a full range of JavaScript options but which would benefit from a specific style.

IF is also being adapted for mobile devices and ebook readers. Because the complexity and cost of other games on these platforms is lower, and because these devices are marketed especially to people interested in reading, ebook platforms especially are considered an excellent market for IF. The technical challenges of slow hardware, proprietary software, and restricted distribution (e.g., only being able to share an iPad IF work through Apple's store) have proven difficult but not insuperable. Frotz for the iPhone and iPad runs a large number of Z-machine games, allowing the player to select new material to play from a built-in browser pulling content from IFDB. Other projects have been started to present single games or game packages on the iPad, Kindle, and Android platforms; the first one to result in a released game for the Kindle was *The King of Shreds and Patches.*

Discussion about interface and English-like, typed commands has been more vexed. Parsed input is widely regarded as one of IF's defining features. IF practitioners and theorists have argued that part of the particular allure of interactive fiction is the way it challenges players to understand the game world thoroughly in order to make progress (Plotkin). A different presentation style in which all affordances were explicitly reported to the player might erode much of this challenge and pleasure. Addressing this problem requires either a better way of teaching players how to interact with the parser, developing for novice users the same set of expectations of genre and possibility that expert players already rely on; or a more fundamental re-envisioning of how one might interact with a modeled textual world.

High-Tech and Low-Tech Advances

Interactive fiction has reached into larger and different communities; the concept of interactive fiction has itself also undergone new sorts of development. While the core definition advanced earlier will please many authors and players, significant new ways to interact have been added in recent years.

Development systems for interactive fiction have advanced in new and unusual ways.

The latest version of Graham Nelson's Inform, the most widely-used system in the core community, is called Inform 7 and allows programming in a syntax and typography based on natural language. While programmers still have to understand how the system works in order to write games in it, the source code for games is legible to anyone and reads like English text. Another system, Nick Montfort's Curveship, was released in February 2011. It offers the ability to parametrically control how actions are represented and how items are described, so that the programmer can not only model the simulated, fictional world but also control how its story is told to the player.

Web-based "Choose-Your-Own-Adventure"-style games have been around for a while and even had their own competition in the IF community, the 2001 LOTECH Comp. Systems for programming these, such as Jon Ingold's Adventure Book, have been available for a while. But these sorts of games are gaining new prominence thanks to two new authoring systems, Undum by I. D. Millington and ChoiceScript by the Choice of Games company. Their easy use on mobile phones and other portable devices appeals to authors wanting to reach a wider audience. A related direction is the addition to tradition interactive fiction of keywords that function a bit like hypertext links. *Blue Lacuna*, *Walker and Silhouette*, and *A Colder Light* feature this mode of interaction, and Inform extensions now allow any author to easily support this play style.

Conclusion

Throughout the years, many factors have come together to foster community around interactive fiction. People have been willing to distribute their work freely, and it has been easy to do so at practically no cost online. The stability of and access to early platforms has allowed people to play games through several decades. At the same time, technological innovation has continued, bringing new capabilities. Essentially, those interested in interactive fiction have found that their activities are supported by individuals who devote their time not only to making games and playing them but also to developing the resources for conversation, distribution of work, and other forms of community-building. The current movement toward community-built sites (such as the IFDB and ifwiki) involved individual initiatve in their founding, but also welcomes the broader participation of the community in contributing and editing.

The IF community has been very successful in advancing the state of the art, getting interactive fiction to the core interested group of players, fostering reviews and discussion of IF, and reaching out to gamers. The format has even been picked up for use in various educational settings. The community's success has perhaps been most limited in connecting with literary and writerly communities. Although a few IF games have been published in online literary magazines or reviewed in them, there is still little representation of interactive fiction in e-lit circles and less awareness in mainstream fiction communities. The community around interactive fiction will hopefully hold some lessons for other electronic literature communities; perhaps the IF community can also learn from other e-lit communities and find a stronger connection to the writing world, building upon its other successes.

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