

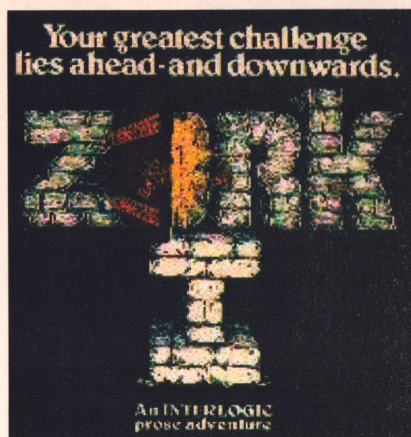
INTERACTIVE FICTION: ADVENTURES BEYOND THE TEXT PARSER

by Thomas L. McDonald

Games have become disposable entertainment, the old discarded with alarming speed to make way for the new. It's a phenomenon that dates back to the golden age of comic books and pulp fiction—two titanic repositories of pop culture that were treated with disdain in their day, forgotten, lost, and now rediscovered and revered. Will games ever have a similar renaissance? In some ways, they already have. A quick search through eBay will reveal some of yesterday's bargain-bin games fetching \$100 or more. Like comic books, their very disposability makes these games scarce, and a new generation of loyal gameophiles is willing to pay top dollar to experience them. The reason is simple: Craft is king, regardless of the technical flourishes that reflect the latest trends in the game industry.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the interactive-fiction underground, which began evolving on the Internet in the mid-1990s and is currently producing new works that demand serious attention. "Interactive fiction" (or IF) is a high-toned (and appropriate) name for what we used to call text adventures, a genre born in 1978 when Scott Adams published *Adventureland* for the Radio Shack TRS-80. Similar games had been floating around on mainframes for several years (most notably *Adventure*, the basis for *Adventureland*), but Adams was the first person to offer a computer game to the public. He would write many more until the genre faded around 1984.

Ultimately, however, Infocom became the company most identified with text adventures. Beginning with the release of *Zork I* in November of 1980, Infocom would go on to publish 35 "canonical" games (as the hardcore fans call them)



Infocom was the leading publisher of text adventure games during their heyday in the 1980s. The genre has been undergoing a renaissance in recent years, due to both the Internet and the development of new programming languages that facilitate the creation of interactive fiction.

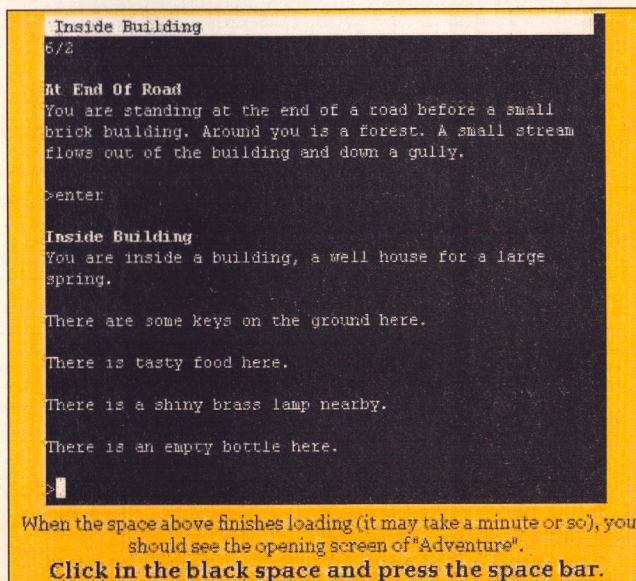
before the genre breathed its last in the late 1980s. At that time, text was shown the door in favor of the primitive graphical capabilities of the Color Graphics Adaptor. It wasn't so much that the graphics made these games better. In many cases, they made them worse. In retrospect, this was a pivotal moment for the game industry, which would spend the next 15-odd years chasing technology while content often trailed behind.

Text adventures created their



worlds with words rather than with pictures. As Scott Adams remarked, "I frequently hear that a word is worth a thousand pictures, that in effect the mind's eye can paint a far better picture." Using the second-person-present voice ("You are standing in an open field west of a white house") and simple verb/noun-driven text parser commands ("Take towel"), they relied on rich and often quite amusing prose to describe a world one piece at a time. Navigating the imaginary

landscape with directional commands (N, E, W, S, Up, Down) would slowly reveal a single continuous world filled with people to talk to and objects to collect and use. The games could be maddeningly frustrating, with circular puzzle-solving logic and dead ends galore (problems that persisted long into the era of graphical adventures). These games offered what we now call object-based puzzle adventures: plot-driven (rather than action-driven) games in which you advance past obstacles by using items from an inventory in clever ways. Sometimes the story could branch out in different ways depending upon where you went and how you acted; your choices



Where it All Began: *Adventure* (also called *Colossal Cave Adventure*) was created by Will Crowther and Don Woods around 1975, and disseminated across ARPAnet (predecessor to the Internet). It influenced programmers like Scott Adams to create *Adventureland* and a team of MIT students to create *Zork*. You can play it online at <http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/gallery/adventure/index.html>.

could even lead to completely different endings. This, combined with good prose and character interactions, kept players coming back.

And then we completely abandoned the genre. Computers got faster, and graphics and sound improved. Instead of narrative, character, and logic, realistic-looking worlds became the heart of electronic gaming. The age of the text adventure was apparently over.

Rebirth

Text adventures never truly went away, though. Activision bought Infocom and issued compilations of the latter's games throughout the 1990s—compilations that were eagerly snapped up by nostalgic fans. A passionate movement took hold, and people who either cherished the original games or were merely fascinated by their potential began writing their own. The past few years have seen a renaissance in new IF culture, with works of astonishing variety and depth finding a receptive audience. Several different events came together to make this possible. In the early 1990s, various programming languages (among them TADS and Inform) enabled amateurs to create their own interactive adventures. The interactive fiction community finally seemed to coalesce around 1995 with the launching of Eileen Mullen's IF fanzine *XYZZY* (the title derived from *Zork*). Other catalysts for the IF movement included the establishment of the first IF competition, the release of Inform creator Graham Nelson's guide to writing good adventure games, and the launching of Baf's Guide (<http://wurfb.com/if>), a Web site that would ultimately grow into a single, massive database and resource for everything IF.

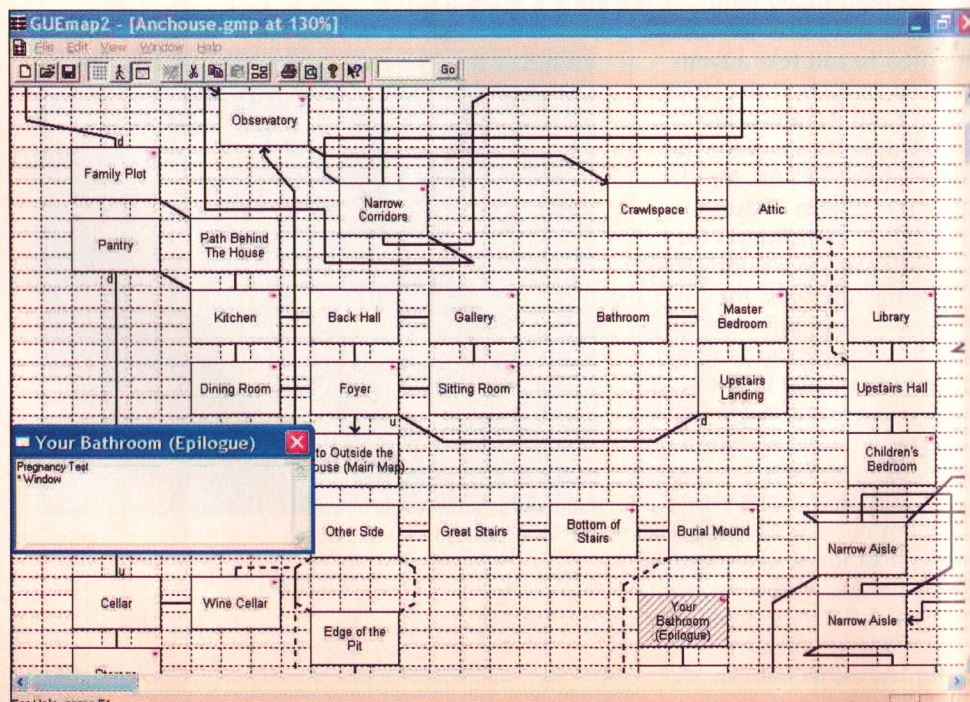
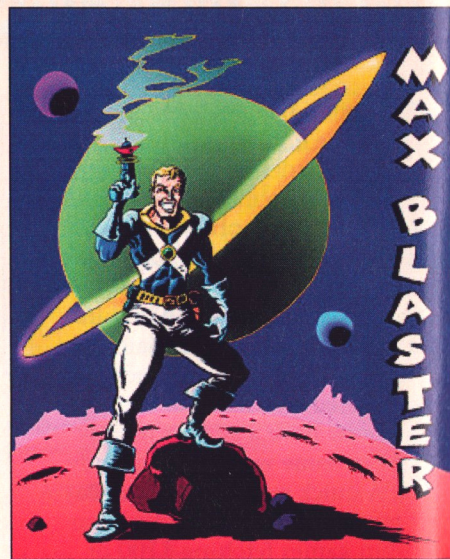
These events provided the building blocks, and



Emily Short is one of today's most prominent authors of interactive fiction. Among her works are *Savoir-Faire* and *Max Blaster and Doris de Lightning Against the Parrot Creatures of Venus* (written with Dan Shiovitz). Her massive *City of Secrets* game runs in Glulx, which allows for more complex programming and multimedia features than Z-machine or TADS.

around them grew an online community of like minds. The phrase "text adventure," however descriptive, carried too much baggage, and didn't always accurately reflect what this new breed of writers was attempting. IF could be more than just object puzzles. It might involve no puzzles at all, or it might focus on complex NPC (non-player character) interactions that could hardly

be called "adventures" per se. The games that were beginning to appear were far more richly textured than their predecessors, with a heavy emphasis on prose and storytelling. More remarkably, they were being released almost exclusively as freeware, despite the heavy investment of time and talent required to produce a good piece of interactive fiction.



IF even has its own mapping programs, since it's easy to become disoriented in larger worlds.

Yet the question remains: Why work in what many consider a dead format? Emily Short, one of the leading creators and theorists of IF working today, remarks that "IF tends to appeal most to people who enjoy reading and logical puzzle-solving, who are looking for an experience that's more like solving a mystery than like driving in a high-speed chase. I want a setting and a story and challenges that linger with me, that I can continue to think about during the rest of the day."

While most of the people drawn to IF were fans of early text adventures, Short and other writers reject the notion that this is merely a nostalgia movement populated by folks trying to recreate the old Infocom days. Adam Cadre, a writer with one published novel (*Ready, Okay!*) and some of the most highly regarded IF to his credit, dismisses the idea: "Nostalgia isn't really a factor for me. I was a kid in the 1980s and certainly remember walking into computer game shops and seeing shelves full of Infocom's gray boxes, but I wasn't interested in them; the one Infocom game I did buy was *Trinity*, but I ended up stuck in the introduction for a full year—more than a little frustrating. So certainly none of my IF work is motivated by warm memories of playing IF in my youth. I have none."

A New Form of Expression

Then why do it? Cadre has a succinct explanation: "I have worlds in my head and IF allows people to visit them and knock over vases while they're there. I can build these worlds by myself, in my spare time, without a budget. And I can build them using the same skills I've developed as a novelist. I think that's a pretty nifty combination."

Indeed, a work like *Spider and Web* by Andrew Plotkin could exist in no other medium. In it, the player struggles to uncover his own identity, motives, and goals as he is interrogated, flashing back and forth from his cell to the events that brought him there.

INTERACTIVE FICTION: WHERE TO BEGIN?

The first stop for anyone wishing to explore the world of IF should be Baf's Guide, (<http://wurb.com/if>), which provides a highly usable front end for the IF archives and makes finding and downloading specific files a snap. In addition, the Web sites of both Suzanne Britton (www.igs.net/~tril/if) and Emily Short (emshort.home.mindspring.com) offer extremely helpful guides to the best in IF. That said, here are some of our picks for the most notable authors and titles out there:

Andrew Plotkin—Plotkin is one of the most influential writers and programmers working in the medium. His *Spider and Web* is a multi-award winning game filled with suspense and flashes of brilliance, while *So Far* is a sprawling work dense with prose and thick with well-conceived puzzles. *Change in the Weather* is well-crafted and clever—perhaps too clever. It relies on some frustrating mechanics that are a matter of taste.

Graham Nelson—The creator of the Inform language is also the author of some of its best titles, among them the hugely influential *Curses*, which uses the vast attic of an English manor house as the jumping-off point for a wild occult mystery. *Jigsaw* is a trip through time, from the sinking of the *Titanic* to the discovery of penicillin to the death of Proust and beyond. The puzzles are extremely difficult, but the experience is dazzling.

Michael S. Gentry—Though he has only two titles to his credit, both are quite strong. *Anchorhead* is a spot-on Lovecraftian pastiche, and though the prose gets wobbly at times, the atmosphere and mystery are always topnotch. *Little Blue Men* is a flawed but equally interesting game that begins in an office and winds up a surreal dystopian fantasy.

Emily Short—Short fills her works with plenty of ornate detail and loads of period atmosphere, from the light historical fantasy of *Savoir-Faire* (set on a French estate c. 1775), to the surreal Renaissance-flavored fantasy of *Metamorphosis* and the complex conversations in the court intrigue of *Pytho's Mask*. Her latest is *City of Secrets*, a massive game with 50 characters, 3,000 lines of dialogue, 80 locations, and almost 300,000 lines of text. Yet in spite of all that, it's remarkably accessible to novices, going so far as to adjust the difficulty setting to make the puzzles easier as you explore the city and get tangled up in its mysteries.

Adam Cadre—Another terrific writer, Cadre emphasizes prose over puzzles in much of his work. *Photopia* is probably the best non-game IF, focusing wholly on a largely linear fiction rather than on puzzle-solving. *9:05* is a very short, timed game in which you have to get out of bed and get to work, with a twist. That's not to say Cadre doesn't do puzzle games: *Varicella*—intrigue set in an Italian court—features some very clever puzzles, though with perhaps too much fail/restart gameplay to give it a broad appeal.

Sharp prose and some complex questions of morality (are you, in fact, the bad guy?) help create a unique and penetrating work.

Similar comments can be made about the work of Emily Short, whose erudition (particularly in matters related to philosophy and the classics) shines through in chal-

lenging works like *Galatea*, *Metamorphoses*, and the outstanding *City of Secrets*. *Galatea* is a short, fascinating conversation engine in which you, as an art critic, probe the mind of Pygmalion's creation through a series of questions and answers; the statue's mood changes depending upon what is said and

when these words are uttered. Possibly the best pure writer in the realm of interactive fiction, Short delivers works charged with atmosphere and often shot through with a glittering vein of metaphysics, all of it made more immediate and powerful because the reader controls the way the action unfolds.

Short's work is so far removed from the world of *Zork* that it was surprising to learn that she actually played and loved Infocom games in her youth. Yet while those early adventures may have been her initial inspiration, nostalgia alone doesn't explain why Short invests so much in creating interactive fiction. "I like the dual challenge of it," she observes. "The writing aspect is creative and right-brained; the programming and the game design are more analytical. I also find it interesting because there is a great deal of potential in the medium. I think there are more kinds of interactive storytelling possible than have yet been discovered, and I enjoy experimenting. Not every experiment comes out as a great game or a great story, but sometimes the results are unexpect-

Playing IF

One of the great things about interactive fiction is its ready availability: Almost all the games worth playing are free and downloadable. Most IF is contained in a single file, which is then read by a "virtual machine" (a fancy word for a piece of software). Following are introductions to Inform and TADS, the two most common languages.

Inform is also known as Z-code; titles developed with Inform will end in .z5 or .z8 (and sometimes .z3 or .z6). These are very small, single files that can be opened with any of several programs: WinFrotz for Windows, MaxZip for Mac, ZipCEPPC for Pocket PCs, PalmFrotz for the Palm Pilot, etc.

TADS files end with the suffix .gam, and are read by programs such as WinTads, PocketTADS, MaxTADS for Mac, etc. Some TADS games may also come with their own runtime files, meaning that they can run without a virtual machine.

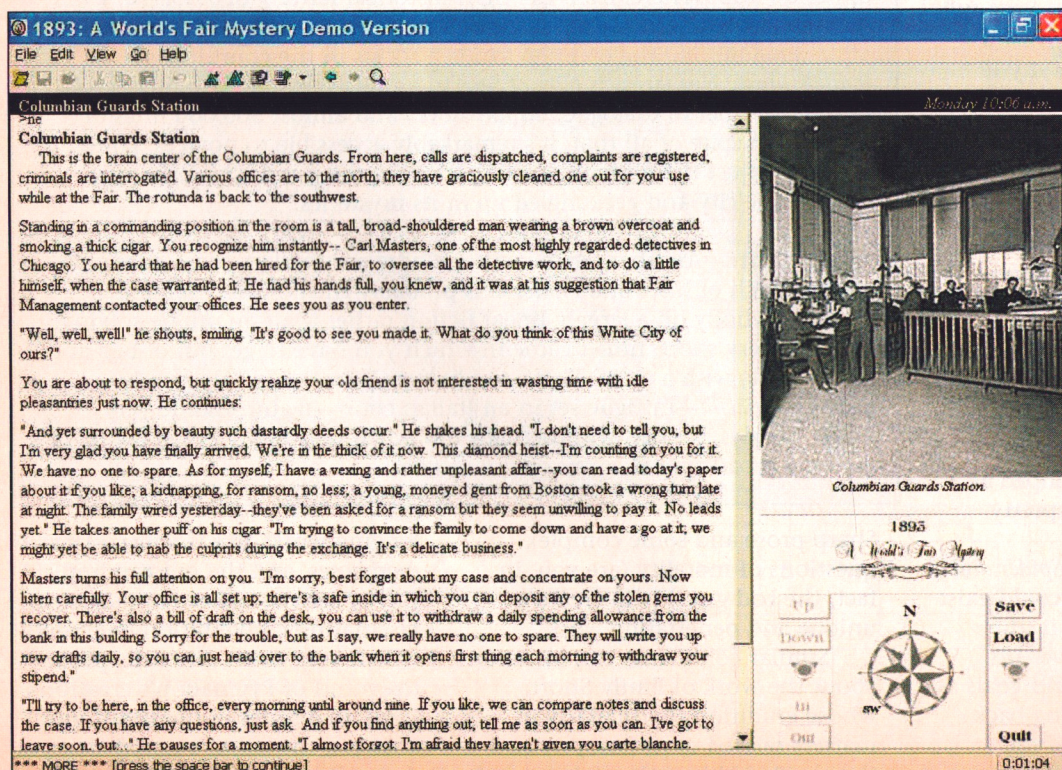
Some more exotic languages may also turn up, including Glulx (.ulx), Hugo (.hex), Alan (.acd or .dat), and AGT (.da1, .da2, etc). Software and instructions for all of these files and formats can be found at the indispensable Baf's Guide (<http://wurb.com/if>), along with a complete roster of all available IF titles, most with ratings and reviews.

edly impressive."

It's impossible to know just how many people follow IF online, but based on downloads and newsgroup participation, there may be several thousand dedicated IF fans, as well as a number of people with a more casual interest. Many of the games are simply dreadful, which is

why Web sites and newsgroups such as rec.arts.int-fiction and rec.games.int-fiction are vital for the newcomer. Titles run the gamut from old-fashioned, puzzle-heavy fantasy firmly in the *Wishbringer* mold to user-directed short stories with little game content, traversing (and often blending) elements of

mystery, espionage, fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, erotica, adventure, surrealism, drama, and comedy. The truth is, text adventures never really went away. They just grew up. 



1893: A World's Fair Mystery is a meticulously researched re-creation of the 1893 World's Fair, complete with hundreds of archival photos as illustration. One of the few pieces of IF that's not free, it can be bought for \$19.95 from www.illuminatedlantern.com.