Notes on interactive fiction and RPGs

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What follows is a collection of personal notes taken during the creation of my own interactive fictions. They were never intended to be organized in the form of an essay, so the reader may get the impression that I'm jumping around, missing developments in my reasoning or leaving out certain aspects of game design. This feeling will be entirely justified. But please don't hesitate to send me your comments and suggestions.

In praise of scarcity, criticism of redundancy

Stock 4000 NPCs. But only let the player meet one of them in a game.

Offer an intensive world, not an extensive one.

There's no point in replicating 5000 identical locations, empty or useless, or not reacting to any player action.

The same applies to NPCs. In a *Skyrim*-style RPG, when you meet your 150th assassin in a dark alleyway, it's just one more enemy to kill. In a highly scripted CYOA, almost every encounter is unique, and every NPC has its own name. Step by step, we make our way through unfamiliar suburbs, and an assassin comes up to us, talks to us, deceptively cordial and genuinely threatening, the tension mounts, the fight eventually takes place (or a chase, or whatever); it's a STORY in itself, there's something unique about it, and it's an NPC we'll always remember.

The more things are repeated, the less weight they carry, the less narrative value they have, and the more they boil down to the exploitation of a gameplay mechanism.

Most RPGs are just slightly more complex versions of Pac Man.

Replayability and keeping the player's attention

Any problem must have several possible solutions (pick the door, break it down, enter through a window, bribe a guard) and involve skills, objects or NPCs.

It's a question of simple common sense. As read on a forum:

More realism in quests. If an NPC asks you to find a piece of bread for his son, and you have 18 kg of deer meat in your inventory, you should be able to give it to him. And similar cases are legion. Be able to set a quest differently too. Take the same guy who asks for a piece of bread, you'd have to be able to give him 100 pieces so he can eat for 4 years, or teach him to fish.

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Multiple ways of solving a mission are good. Multiple possible endings to a mission (independent of the player's actions, or depending on how the mission is completed) is even better.

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"Quests" don't have to be "missions" given by a "sponsor". A "quest" doesn't necessarily have to be an objective to be achieved or a test to be passed.

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Introduce as many twists and turns, setbacks, etc. into quests as possible.

• Setbacks, complications
• Pure bad luck
• Betrayal
• Surprises, plot twists
• Expansion of the quest or its stakes
• Inevitable failure of the quest, opening the way to a new quest
• False trail

Example 1: a person to find

Surprise, surprise: The person we're looking for doesn't want to be found. What can we do? And what to do about the sponsor?

The quest inevitably fails, but opens the door to a new quest: the person you're looking for is dead, or has disappeared: you need to investigate. Possible revenge.

Example 2: an object to find

Betrayal: An NPC hands the player the wrong item for his sponsor.

Betrayal: The player's companion steals the item.

Betrayal: The player has been misled about the stakes of his mission.

Betrayal: The mission is illegal, but it's the sponsor who informs the police.

Betrayal: Instead of a reward, the sponsor attacks the player (or has him attacked).

Setback: The sponsor doesn't show up (or may never show up).

False lead: The sponsor doesn't have the right information.

Bad luck: Object lost stupidly or stolen by a pickpocket in the street. Never found.

Setback: The person to be found is not where he or she should have been. Player sent elsewhere.

Inconvenience: The person to be escorted/returned wants or needs to go somewhere (unscheduled) to do or retrieve something.

Inconvenience: The player is warned that he or she must pass through here and there, in addition to what was already planned.

Complication: The player's allies arrive to prevent him from purchasing his quest/mission/adventure for personal reasons or for the interests of a faction.

Widening of the stakes: Discovery, during the course of the quest/mission/adventure, of something much more important, something huge, which cannot be ignored (e.g.: a guy is going to detonate a nuclear bomb in two days' time).

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(duplicate)

We could imagine a methodology for creating quests that are a little richer and more interesting, more scripted, than the simple "go kill So-and-so / get me 15 champis / escort So-and-so / convince So-and-so." scenario.

For example, exploit twists and turns:

- Setbacks, complications (the hero rushes to the area of the map where the coveted 15 mushrooms are located, BUT a river flood blocks his path and forces him to help build a temporary bridge / evacuate a village in distress / whatever).

- Pure bad luck (the hero rushes to the area of the map where the 15 coveted mushrooms can be found, BUT breaks a leg on the way and spends two months bedridden, while his sponsor buys the mushrooms by mail order).

- Betrayal (the hero finds those pesky mushrooms, but the NPC accompanying him steals them from him while he's asleep / the sponsor, instead of paying him, reports him to the police on a false pretext)

- Surprise (the hero finds the mushrooms, but learns along the way that in fact his sponsor only sent him there to get him away from the city and to meet some other NPC who wants to

enlist him to lead a bloody coup d'état / or anything else unexpected).

- Expansion of the quest or its stakes (the mushrooms in question are not AT ALL used to make good soup, but rather to destroy the world)

- False leads (the hero visits fifteen different regions and towns before finding the RIGHT mushroom spot, a victim of misinformation from his sponsor and the NPCs he meets).

- Quest side effects (the mushroom shortage caused by the player will create a famine responsible for the death of millions of people)

One or more of these elements can spice up any FEDEX quest considerably, transforming a technical performance (move around the map for X minutes, kill 2-3 enemies, pick up the item, go back the other way) into... adventure.

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During the game and, if possible, throughout the game: constantly expand the player's possibilities of action in the world.

For example: switch from a game that starts out as an FPS to an RPG/survival, then when the character has grown in power, wealth and reputation, give him political, commercial or military weight, like in a management game.

[Assassin's Creed 2 is unusual in that it is almost entirely a long tutorial. The game offers a staggering number of things the player can do, but they're all elegantly introduced, so the game still teaches 70% new mechanics (guns, extended jumping). By this stage, most normal games have settled into a familiar routine and are only increasing the difficulty curve. This constant learning is great fun - each new mechanism introduces a new challenge, opens up a new path or provides a new way of interacting with simulated crowds.

https://threeedgedsword.wordpress.com/2011/12/26/a-game-is-for-life-not-just-for-christmas

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Introduce each gameplay option very gradually, for example:

Fast-travel only after a certain period of time

Crafting

Control a group, or several characters (successively without going back, or choosing your character at any time)

Buy a home (instead of squatting / staying with friends / going to a hotel)

What you can do at home (cooking, painting, entertaining friends, reading and writing, etc.)

Investing money in various businesses

Giving orders to subordinate members of a faction (including ordering an attack or assault on another faction)

Misc

I'm morally opposed to testing every action, and behaving like a beta tester, when playing an I.F. for the first time.

The first walkthrough should be sincere, playing the author's game.

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Axiom: a bad game with hyperlinks will be worse than a bad game with parsers. Because a parser's opacity will give it a mysterious charm (does it, in spite of everything, conceal answers to questions we didn't think to ask?) whereas a game with hyperlinks (unless the choices offered depend on variables, or chance) reveals everything, right away: its qualities as well as its mediocrity, its richness as well as its lack of content.

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Guess The Verb is truly a total failure of I.F. game design.

Cold RPGs / Hot RPGs

I'm making a few, non-exhaustive distinctions here between what I call cold RPGs and hot RPGs; they probably don't just apply to role-playing games (you could include certain interactive fictions, or video games in general), but it's playing many of these games that these distinctions have come to me - as well as working on RPG design myself (whether they're entirely text-based or not makes no difference in absolute terms).

	Cold RPGs	Hot RPGs
Dialogues	Possibly absent – or reserved for rare NPCs. If present: utilitarian and cloned, possibly dependent on variables linked to the NPC you're talking to, context, etc. (e.g. most *Morrowind* or *Oblivion* dialogues).	Individualized, actually written, linked to specific situations in the scenario and/or different for each NPC (e.g. the essential NPCs in *Gothic 3* or *Vampire: Bloodlines*).
Player character	Player character non-existent as a psychological being (can slaughter 2,000 zombies a day without vomiting or fainting in horror; example: all RPGs to my knowledge) - at best, a "fear" variable penalizing combat (I can't think of any examples of such a variable being used).	Player character existing as a psychological being: real effects (in terms of gameplay, dialogue, narration) of fear, sadness, anger, etc.
Player character	Player-character motivations not made explicit - the player invents (out-of-game) a moral or reasons for action for his character - so these elements have no "technical" impact on the game.	The player-character's motivations are made explicit (either by the game, which justifies things for the player, or by the player himself, if the game explicitly asks him for his reasons for accepting a particular quest).
Scenery	Scenery (procedurally generated or not), empty of use and interest in itself, serving primarily as hubs, resting places, arenas, etc.	Handmade scenery. Player/set interactions.
Actions / Quests	Little impact of the player's actions on the world as a whole (the more real consequences there are, the less you can let the player off the hook or multiply possible actions, unless you have a team and infinite time on your hands).	Strong (and scripted) impact of the player's actions on the world. Choices and consequences - the number of choices may be limited, but they are real and meaningful.

Actions / Quests	Repetitive, recurring quests/situations/actions - to progress at will in a skill, for example.	Repetitive, unique quests / situations / actions - precisely linked to the scenario and the player-character's highly controlled progression.
Actions / Quests	Total freedom (widest possible range of possible actions, good or bad).	Field of action limited by the author's choices.
Space	Continuous. Utility.	Discontinuous. Carries a narrative charge.
XP	Continuous, unlimited progress with every success.	Discontinuous progression, according to the needs of the story - and limited.

As I said earlier, this list is not exhaustive. It merely opens up a few avenues. The distinctions it sets out can be used to ask some useful questions when embarking on a game project. This "hot/cold" distinction is very close to another distinction that has come to my attention while playing and working on interactive fiction: the "text game/interactive fiction" distinction.

On the need for a main quest

Gamer's observation: an adventure or role-playing game without a main quest quickly becomes boring. You need a big final goal, a chase, a carrot, even if it means allowing (in fact, I think you MUST) the player to follow this quest only when they feel like it, taking as much time as they want to wander around, collecting XP and equipment, making a life for themselves. Examples: *Morrowind* and *Fallout*.

It took me several months, if not a good year, to finish *Morrowind*, because I wanted to take my time developing my character and building him up before getting down to the nitty-gritty, and also because some of the side quests held my attention. The mods correct this a little, but I regretted that the *Sims* aspect of the game (having your own little house, decorating it, flirting with NPCs) wasn't more developed. Ditto for the first two *Fallouts*. Nevertheless, without a main quest in the back of my mind, this freedom wouldn't have been freedom, but mere wandering. An idleness. Which renders the game useless. I'm seeing this with the *Fallout 2* game I started a few days ago, where I've set myself the goal of not following the main quest at all, but just making a life for myself, fighting, enriching, improving... and where I'm already bored.

Questology

In most games, if you're told: *"You're crossing the street, and there's a man lying motionless across the road. 1) You go and see what's wrong with him 2) You go home quietly"*, or if an NPC comes to offer a quest to the player-character, in both cases, refusing the quest, or refusing to take an interest in the man lying down, is a bad choice - either directly penalizing the player, or simply depriving him of content.

The player who wants to play an indifferent or selfish character generally has access to less content than the altruistic or curious player. This should not be the case. Either there should be no MCQs at all, such as *"1) You go and see what's wrong with him 2) You go home quietly"*, or the choice of indifference, instead of short-circuiting the quest, should simply make it take another turn (even without looking far: for example, the police could stumble upon the player and arrest him for non-assistance to a person in danger).

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Generally speaking, and for the simple reason that I hate losing / dying / seeing the game end, I'm also increasingly considering making the player-character simply impossible to kill (or almost). Why make him die when you can cripple him and get new plot developments out of it?

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A fascinating article / website about procedural quests and how to improve them, which I came across while researching procedural narratives on Google:

http://wingedmonkeys.co.uk/procedural-narrative-better-templates/

Another one : http://procedural-narrative.blogspot.fr/

There are some very cool suggestions (which I'd already thought of myself, to be honest and without wanting to sound pretentious, but which I figure that if a pro has got them and is publishing them, I must be on the right track) but there's always, always, always one thing missing from what I read about quests: developments on the notion of setbacks / difficulty / twists / etc, and on what can happen once the quest has been successfully completed.

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A few opinions I have regarding the design of "quests" in video games / role-playing games:

Neither universal savior nor complete insignificant: we need to stop making the player-character the guy the whole planet turns to to solve its problems, whether it's fetching 3 mushrooms in the forest, or saving the world.

Because no one in the real world turns to a stranger and confides their problems after 10 sentences of conversation.

Because in real life, most of the time, you don't really decide what you're going to face (in RPGs, NPCs serve as a "quest catalog" from which the player chooses, and that's bad).

Because it's grotesque to always be the savior of the world.

Because, conversely, there's no point in playing an RPG if you're just going to be a nobody who serves as the population's errand boy.

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Life is not a checklist: the notion of the "quest log" as a series of tasks to be completed, even if in the order the player wishes, must be challenged.

There has to be ONE BIG QUEST - or a few big quests, whatever - and the rest is just adventures, imponderables, trials and tribulations along the way, twists and turns, but certainly not a vulgar list of things to do alongside the main quest.

Better (too) few quests than too many.

This tendency to break down action into a multitude of pseudo-quests reaches ridiculous heights in recent RPGs; I'm thinking of Risen, where in the first five minutes of the game, waking up an NPC on the beach, picking up a weapon a few meters away, moving along a straight path, killing a bug and entering an unoccupied house are all pseudo-"quests" that bring in XP and, above all, artificially and dishonestly lengthen the number of quests in the game (which are, generally speaking, a selling point, like the length of the game).

And as for the famous open-world and non-linear games, it's hard to imagine Frodo returning to the Shire from time to time, when he no longer knows what to do in Mordor, to finish his quests in progress there. What's unfinished must be unfinished forever, once you've passed a certain point in the adventure.

What I'm saying here is certainly less true in a game that doesn't have a strong main quest - *Gothic 3*, for example. But even in such a game, it's still ridiculous that after liberating a king or retaking a city from an invader, the player-character, with some 50 companions, still has to take 15 mushrooms to some other NPC to complete his quest checklist.

A final remark: multiplying quests ad infinitum in a quest log encourages strictly utilitarian, predatory exploration and behavior in the game world.

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A truly free, open-world is one where NPCs pursue their own objectives (individual or collective), which progress throughout the game, without waiting for the player to "activate" anything. And where they too can betray the player, change sides, etc. A truly free, open-world is one that doesn't remain inactive and stable, waiting for the player to come along and be the only disruptive element.

Counter-example: *Oblivion*, where NOTHING ever happens unless the player is there to activate it. You can spend 20 ingame years wandering around at the start of the game, and no city will ever be taken over by creatures emerging from portals.

Multiple ways of solving a mission are good. Multiple possible endings to the mission, independent of the player's actions, is even better.

Example: so-and-so must be freed. If the player succeeds, the sponsor can 1) thank him and reward him in one or more different ways 2) have him eliminated as an inconvenient witness 3) have himself been murdered in the meantime 4) etc.

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Quests don't have to be missions given by a sponsor.

A totally random earthquake that kills X NPCs at random, and injures X others, is also a quest - i.e. something that allows the player to act in the world, at will, and advance his own story, in a world that itself advances independently of him.

A quest doesn't necessarily have to be a goal to achieve or a test to pass. It should also be able to be simply a choice to be made, a real choice, with real stakes, without the need to add artificial difficulty, or any notion of right or wrong answers. The word quest is a trap, a prison whose thick walls

we accept because we accept the word itself. We'd have to find another, but which one? Peripatetic?

That said, quests are a MUST, whatever you call them.

In the absence of a mission, there's little reason to act in a game; little reason to do what the game's author expects you to do, i.e. explore everything, try to understand what's going on, in short, play the game.

Why, after all, enter such and such a building for no reason at all? There's nothing obvious about the desire to explore.

So the same problem arises as the one that bothered me with the parser (the absurdity of actions like "rubbing the parrot").

You can provide the player with a temporary and circumscribed reason to act, by sending him stimuli from time to time (a guy who approaches you, a scene you witness, etc.).

A few tips for designing quests:

By characteristic

Strength

> Lifting / pushing / pulling / clearing an obstacle or something heavy that gets in the way or crushes someone, etc.
> Test of strength of any kind (arm-wrestling, fairground tricks, etc.)

Intelligence

> Solve a riddle, a puzzle, a riddle, etc.

By skill

For all skills

> Teach the skill to someone (PJ or NPC)
>
> Knowledge of the "milieu" (social, professional, criminal or underground, etc.) surrounding the skill and related objects

Archaeology

> Determine where to carry out an archaeological dig
>
> Carry out excavations
>
> Solve an enigma (criminal or otherwise) that requires a good cultural background, etc.
>
> Find rare, historic or valuable objects to steal / report as stolen to the police

Weapons (white or fire, bow or crossbow)

> Fighting
>
> Craft a firearm
>
> Identify a weapon or assess its quality
> Repairing a firearm
>
> Examples:

A firearm lost by an assailant has been found at the site of a massacre. Identify the weapon (which is strange and unusual) to possibly find the culprit.

An NPC asks the player for a weapon to defend himself ("I'm scared on my own"). Gives him the address of a guy willing to supply it. Evaluate the quality of the equipment. What happens if you're wrong?

Athletics, running, etc.

High jump, long jump (over a precipice or obstacle).

Running faster than someone else (sporting event, running for your life, catching up, etc.)

Medicine

Teaching first aid, etc.

Disguise murder as medical error, failed rescue or natural death

Treating yourself, treating someone else

Determine the causes of illness, injury or death

Science

Using / Understanding a machine / a complex product
Solve a legal, spiritual, etc. mystery with a scientific basis

By type of object

Weapon

FEDEX quest (deliver a weapon, steal a weapon from someone, buy a weapon for someone, etc.)

Repair / sabotage a weapon

Negotiate with one or more individuals/groups, with a view to obtaining weapons for a faction (or, on the contrary, stopping its supply)

Get your hands on a new weapon that has appeared on the black market, or understand the secrets behind its manufacture

Bandages

    Fedex

    Bandaging someone

    Soak them in poison, etc.

Boots

    To cross a swamp, an area with dangerous, acidic or contaminated soil, etc.

Drugs

    Convey drugs

    Synthesize drugs

    Analyze a drug to determine its composition, origin, handling, dangerousness, etc.

    Taking drugs, and/or having to treat addiction

Encyclopedia

    Detect manipulations/omissions/etc. in articles (propaganda by the state or other influential groups, etc.).

    Enrich an encyclopedia by writing an article (synthesizing books and/or personal experience)

Photography

    Identify someone in a photograph

    Develop an ultra-important and ultra-confidential film (yourself or find someone who knows and accepts)

Painting

    Discern an original painting from a copy

Driving forces

I distinguish between <u>driving forces</u>, which are specific to the player, and <u>techniques</u>, which belong to the creator, to "hook" the player (e.g. regular rewards).

• The desire to win, to reach the end of the game.

• The desire for understanding/mastery.

    Understanding then mastering the rules of the game, the gameplay.

    The quality of these rules, and of the game's mechanisms - the pleasure of a "well-oiled" game with a fun interface and mechanisms.

    Desire for power: doing things you can't do in real life (while being freed from the constraints of real life).

    See the concrete effects of your actions in the game world.

• The desire to accumulate.

    Exploring. "Visit the whole map. Unlock all the secret places, etc.

    Clean up an area. The pleasure of finding and taking all or a maximum number of objects, whether or not they are actually useful at that point in the game.

    Defeat numerous enemies.

    Level your character, personalize him, progress in every possible way (relationships with NPCs, achievements of all kinds, etc.).

• The desire for immersion.

    Seeing a good story develop - good script, good characters, good dialogue, good background. Literary/narrative qualities.

    The desire to "live in the game" (whether or not it offers life-like gameplay mechanics - simply the desire to spend a lot of time in it).

    The desire to stimulate one's own imagination: just as a child imagines beyond the toy he's playing with, or a reader "writes" half the novel he's reading, the JV

player stimulates his imagination, his sensibility, his awakening, by playing.

• The desire for emotion

Amusement (humor in dialogue, etc.).

Sadness / catharsis.

Pleasure - the release of violence, sex, moral and behavioral transgressions, etc.

• The desire for constant surprise and novelty, at least on a regular basis; both in terms of content (characters, locations, quests) and gameplay (unlocking new possibilities, new game mechanics, etc.).

• The desire to share (even for a single-player game): to exist socially through your score, level, etc. Being able to communicate with strangers based on what is common and what can be a solitary activity.

A few narratological criteria

Puzzle/performance-based gameplay (skill tests, etc.) / RP choices

Space management in the game: division into rooms, or not. Discontinuity or continuity of space. Identical size for each room? Freedom of exploration or not. Correlation between space exploration and progress in the story.

Degree of danger in the game. Possibility of game over, even permadeath, or absence of death/failure.

Texts in the game (mise en abyme)

"Honesty" of rules / dice rolls, or strong presence of chance, and / or prevalence of scenario necessities

Percentage of actual implementation of what is described in the game

Consequences of actions, explicit or not

Calculations and variable changes, explicit or not

Meta-discourse (tutorial, ingame warnings, etc.)

Static text or random "free" variants

prominence (or total absence) of adult, violent, sexual or distressing themes

Degree of world autonomy: universality of rules (applied to player AND npgs), timetables and other scripted events independent of player actions - or not

Flow of time: fluid, linear, continuous (and realistic: implies a certain autonomy of the world around the player) or not (ellipses of X hours, days, weeks, etc. - easier when the game is player-centric and the world non-autonomous).

Degree of player/character identity (what the player knows but the character doesn't, etc.) and focus

Focus, including: playing a single character or several. Managing only your own actions, or more collective management/strategy stuff (managing a trade, a guild, a town, etc.)

Whether or not the player-character is internal (memories, dreams, moods, thoughts beyond the player's control)

Importance of objects

Determinism / chance

Linearity / Non-linearity.

Dialogues or not; and how they work

Parser/choice nuance: complete freedom of action, or not / ultra-realistic chunking of gestures, or complex, abstract actions in a single command

Presence or absence of images (what the image "says" that the text cannot, and vice versa)

Geocentric I.F (the player is the center of the world) // Heliocentric I.F (he is not)

Basic definition of interactive fiction

Text-based games: the interface is textual, but the text is not the object of the game, either from an informative or a poetic point of view.

Interactive fiction: the text IS the object of the game, as well as the interface for the player. And the interface is part of the "object of the game" (as an object of reflection, experimentation and amusement).

This being the case, interactive fiction à la Infocom is, in my opinion (and even though the term has been popularized by them) hardly "interactive fiction", as it borders on a puzzle/strategy game of sickly complexity. In the end, by comparison, a text-based game, such as EXAMPLE OF AN OLD GRAPHIC GAME WITH NO EXCESSIVE PUZZLES WHICH ACTUALLY MODIFIES THE COURSE OF HISTORY, is much more "interactive fiction".

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More or less a GAME (successive tests, difficulty, notion of victory or failure) // more or less a STORY

More or less based on IMAGE // more or less based on TEXT

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There are two criteria that really define interactive fiction in the strongest sense of the term:

    Text as an interface AND as a means of communication between the computer and the player (we don't rely on illustrations to tell us what to do in the game, but on descriptions and narrated events, even if there are illustrations).

    The predominance of a STORY, and if possible one on which the player's actions have an effect. Instead of a simple text puzzle game.

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Despite these distinctions, which are important when it comes to analyzing a work of art, I'll be dealing here with all the games that are commonly referred to as "interactive fiction".

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Each I.F. is a different conception of what an I.F. is.

    A different "scale" in terms of temporality - how long do actions take? Is time continuous and uniform, or are there breaks (accelerations, slowdowns, ellipses)? Is time simply flowing, or not?

    A different, more or less prominent role for story (as opposed to a pure puzzle game, with no narrative pretext), characters, dialogues and objects.

A different place on the scale that goes from pure "non-linear interactive parse fiction" to pure CYOA.

A different place on the scale that goes from pure procedural to totally "hand-made".

A greater or lesser importance given to rules and the universality (player, NPCs, objects) or otherwise of their application.

The degree of "innocence", mature or dark themes.

Player/character identification - what the player knows but the character doesn't, and vice versa. The player may know things the character doesn't. The character may know things the player doesn't. The two can also coincide.

The perfect parser game

Erotic I.F. is the ultimate parser game genre. To what type of object, more than the human body, can you apply an infinite number of verbs? More verbs can be applied to any part of the human body, while remaining relevant, than to anything else.

Enunciation

First person singular:

Identification with the player-character, immersion.
Quite a literary feel at the same time.

Second person plural:

Evokes a dialogue, or even more accurately, a session halfway between hypnosis and accompanied meditation.

Second person singular:

More like a monologue, a person talking to himself, commenting on his own actions.

Fundamental distinctions

Games based on repeatable situations and actions (and therefore also on progression, and with or without C&C) // Games based on unique situations (with heavier, scripted C&C).

Games centered on characters and their stories (with a highly-characterized player-character whose personal story is that of the game) // Centered on places to explore and NPCs to

meet (with a less-characterized player-character who can find himself embroiled in any story).

Objective and/or continuous time // Subjective and/or discontinuous time.

The temporality of ACTIONS, depending on whether the game :

> • divides actions into micro-gestures (taking the key, unlocking the safe, opening the safe, searching the safe, taking the dress, taking off the pants, taking off the sweater, putting on the dress)

> • or propose "encompassing" actions (everything I've written in brackets above, but with a single command)

> • or switch from one to the other, depending on the situation in the game.

Temporalities

• Real time
• Real time with ellipses (X hours or days or even weeks) between sequences
• Short narrative (covers X hours, days) with no significant ellipses
• Short narrative with large ellipses + possible "incoherence" of the whole (succession of slices of life with no apparent logic or comprehensible story)

The feel of video games - the "impression-of-playing".

What makes it feel like PLAYING and not just reading and clicking (or typing words like URLs)?

Aside from the actions of the PERSON-player, what are the PLAYER's actions in a video game, and more specifically in an I.F.?

• Explore the rooms (for no diegetic reason - just for the pleasure of exploring).
• Try things out, possibly stupidly, and reload the game afterwards if this has had unfortunate consequences.
• Make plans on paper or with software.
• Take notes.
• Test actions, more or less at random, or combinations, to solve a problem or see what the game has up its sleeve.
• Read (descriptions, narrations, etc.).
• Read meta stuff (walkthroughs, etc.).
• Loot, inventory management.
• Click on links and/or type commands.

• Take screenshots.

The need for breaks in the narrative flow (free actions or out-of-the-world actions)

To create a sense of play, it's a good idea to pause the narrative flow from time to time, to give the player time to breathe, to take free actions, to explore a few rooms, to manage his inventory, etc. This also forces the player to take some time to think.

This also forces the player to take a little time to think, unlike classic Twine games, which can have a perverse effect because you "click through" knowing that the adventure will go on like that, without pause, until it's over.

Moving the world forward

In a I.F., as far as possible, any player action should be followed by an effect of some kind, BUT also be an opportunity to move the ENTIRE world forward (NPC movements, various description changes).

Labyrinths

There's a connection between the labyrinth of a city's streets and alleys, and the labyrinth of a text, especially a hyperlinked interactive text. This may seem obvious, since many book-games allow you to explore an environment, a dungeon or a city, but the relationship between content and form goes beyond that.

Involuntary poetry

The mystery and poetry of the old text-based games lies in the unique blend between their generally dreamlike, surrealistic worlds, etc., and the mystery of their austere, laconic interface, the seemingly arbitrary nature of reactions, etc.

Immersion

The only thing that bothers me about hypertext is that it's less immersive, because typing commands engages you more in the game than clicking on a link.

(Why is that, anyway? Perhaps simply because it takes longer for the body to do it).

How do you compensate for this?

I've often noticed, when playing Twine, that I end up not really reading anymore, and just clicking randomly to move on, which obviously isn't possible in a parser game.

Typing is an active process. Clicking is not.

Immersion (at least that "part" of immersion due to the interface) and the feeling of involvement in a game is inversely proportional to the speed/ease of action UP TO A CERTAIN POINT (if you have to remember 50 abstruse abbreviations to act, it's quickly boring and disengaging too).

In *Sorcery*, all you have to do is click to make a choice, but that's not disengaging, as each choice has far-reaching consequences for the rest of the story, and can have huge consequences (even an annodite action) much later in the story.

So the closer we get to GAME (notion of trials, difficulty, win-loss at the end of the game, and even game over which interrupts the game), the less the interface's inherently disengaging character is a problem.

The closer we get to HISTORY, the more desirable it may be, on the contrary, to have a rough interface that engages the reader-player; otherwise, he's just a reader, like on any other website.

Parser or hyperlinks

The parser recreates something that is present in Point & Click: the possibility of an action that is not made clear at the moment of exploration.

Example: a room with a desk. In hypertext, the action (examine/take/open/whatever) the desk will be presented as an action immediately upon exploration. In P&C, you see the desk, and before bringing your mouse over it, you don't really know if it's actionable. In parser, even less so. In other words, in choice-based games, everything that's possible is presented as such, and the exploratory/experimental phase is bypassed.

(Counter-argument: the parser lets you LICK THE DESK, and letting the player do this is a dishonor to himself, to intelligence and to the author).

(Another counter-argument: a game with choices can, under certain conditions, gradually reveal the range of possible choices).

For a game with an adventure to be experienced and complex situations, I'd use hypertext.

For exploring an environment and experimenting with actions, parser is better. The parser is better suited to short, one-shot, utilitarian actions applied to an object.

Hyperlinks are better suited to more complex choices, concrete and/or abstract, behavioral, etc.

The parser allows almost only simple, mechanical, utilitarian, immediate actions on objects.

A hyperlinked design doesn't add much if your game is all about opening cupboards, digging under carpets and sawing cell bars, or anything like that.

On the other hand, the parser is totally impotent when it comes to behavioral choices, abstract choices, choices over time, and so on.

The parser only allows concrete, immediate actions on objects (including NPCs, who are inevitably reduced to objects to which you can at best ASK ABOUT THING).

That's not a problem in itself: you can make a very good parser game, but you're not making the same kind of story. The choice of interface is a fundamental design choice, the number 1 choice from which everything else flows, in fact.

Interactive fiction as an object of intellectual and literary contemplation

An I.F. can fail as a game, because of narrative design errors, an inadequate or low-quality interface, bugs, etc., but succeed as an object of intellectual and literary contemplation, including for the SAME reasons that make it a ludic failure.

Example:

Les lettres du vent, by Éric Forgeot and its "narrative puzzle" aspect, where you don't understand anything, don't know what to do or in what order or why, but which transforms this failure into a fascinating... narrative puzzle from a strictly literary and intellectual point of view. The mere idea of a story constructed in this way is more exciting than the experience of playing it.

Also: *Anchorhead* as a game that's ultimately boring to play (the puzzles...) but enjoyable as a fictional universe and a

subject for discussion. It's a meta-I.F. experience that's just as satisfying in the end.

Against utilitarianism

Stop being content only with events triggered - or discoveries made - as a result of utilitarian actions (rummaging, looking under, etc.) but also enable these events or discoveries through useless actions "in themselves": smoking a cigarette, opening the window because it's hot, washing your hands, etc.

A more narrative and less puzzle-centric approach, then, while remaining playful (what will happen if I light a cigarette in the presence of that NPC who said he hated it?).

Against staticity

In a fully text-based game, I believe that there must be events (random and/or scheduled) that take place, whether the player acts or not. If he acts, he can eventually cancel or modify them, but something has to happen, the world has to move forward. No static world.

A static world is acceptable, and can be a poetic bias, in a game with graphics - like an old adventure game. Because the image is enough to make you feel "there". It gives the mind something to run on. Text, on the other hand, is condemned to movement.

> Counterargument:
>
> A static world is charming too:
>
> • because its staticity is RELAXING (as opposed to the frenzy of video games, where something is always happening, and you have to be on your guard nervously, focused intellectually, etc.).
>
> • because it's part of the ancient tradition of I.F. and adventure games, and there's an inherent pleasure in rediscovering it.

We need to distinguish between changes that occur as a result of the player's actions and those that occur on an arbitrary or random basis, but which are in any case independent of the player's actions.

We also need to distinguish between cosmetic changes (weather that changes without influencing the action, for example, or unimportant NPCs that come and go on the map, just to give the

impression of a living world) and changes that influence the action.

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