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# A Sad Person's Guide to New Interactive Fiction

BY JONATHAN STURGEON | FEBRUARY 19, 2016

In the 1970s, programmer Will Crowther created Adventure or Colossal Cave Adventure (file name: Advent), a text-based game he released on ARPANET, the Department of Defense-funded network that was later incorporated into the Internet. Crowther, as the story goes, was recently divorced. He was also a caver, and he apparently created the game, which maps (via text) the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, for his children. Given its scalability (it's just text), the game has been "ported" countless times, and you can still play it online now, by way of a "simulation of a PC screen circa 1983."

Whether the sad, recently divorced Crowther knew at the time that he was "inventing" Interactive Fiction, or IF, is hard to say, but it's clear that his straightforward, command-based narrative was modeled (consciously or not) on the old "choose your own adventure" gamebooks that disgraced the shelves of public school libraries in my youth. I found those books boring, probably because I was otherwise torn between the NES that my brothers sometimes played and long novels and biographies that I read from my grandmother's library. If I was looking for adventure, I usually turned to Jack London.

Still, I occasionally dabbled in interactive fictions (which I just thought of as "games"), usually as a way to exhaust my turn at the family PC (before the Internet arrived in the mid-1990s). I do remember playing a "Dracula" game that terrified me, not only because I was a sickly child with bare nerves, but also because I had to assume a measure of responsibility. More afraid of words than visual images, the commands I entered implicated me in the horror that befell my hero. Sure, I brought an active mind to the novels I read, but it wasn't my fault if a dog got rabies, or if an ill-prepared man died in the snow.

I have to imagine that IF has had a greater effect on video games than on fiction. On some level, it's hard to imagine why IF persists at all. Split between the "depth" that everyone looks for in narrative fiction and the presentness and control of more complex games, it now seems dull and simplistic: why choose your own adventure when you can get lost in someone else's? Why resort to text when you can get lost in space?

Still, IF pops up from time to time, usually with the advent of new technologies. This month, for example, Google, along with Editions at Play, released the first in a series of buyable "books that you can't print," or interactive fictions that look best on your phone. Patently a bid to monetize IF for a generation that uses its phones to read books, the new Google fictions are sleek, showy, and relatively easy to follow. The first release, which shrewdly matches the right author to a new "format," is Reif Larsen's Entrances & Exits. Larsen, if you aren't familiar with his novels, often inserts visuals in the narrative in a sub-Sebaldian way.

The website, before you start Entrances & Exits, tells you that it will take "1 hr" to read the book. The story proper begins with a Google Earth view of a child with a backpack contained in a circle, which you are obviously meant to touch (if you're reading it on your phone). Above the child hangs the sentence, "We met at a New Year's Eve Party."



After touching the circle, you enter a page that tells you where you are and when you're there (Tavistock Terrace, London, England, July 2008), and contains a short bit of narrative. Below: the text of the story, which opens with a mildly elegiac tone and talks of a relationship:



In between these scenes of narrative: more Google Earth images with circles telling you where to touch. This is the way the book expresses its format: you touch a circle, usually of a building exterior (an entrance or exit) and enter the story.

The story itself is straightforward, so I won't ruin it for you. I'll just add that it involves sadness and fantasy tropes (secret keys and magical acts of transportation), and self-legitimizing references to Oulipian novels and Borges. And the narrative is shaped almost entirely by its Google Earth frame. I felt like I was being sold into a weak attempt at an "immersive world," one that would otherwise have been tied to a blockbuster franchise. "This is something they're going to sell to Pottermore," I thought.

X

Far more interesting is Matt Sheridan Smith's "You Can't See Any Such Thing," an interactive fiction that debuted at Triple Canopy this week. Free (the Larsen book costs \$4.25) and self-aware, this fiction is likewise an extended art project that aims to explore the composition and format and phenomenology of interactive fiction. Refreshingly, its opening statement rehashes the backstory of IF before undercutting it, which means it's worth quoting at length:

Interactive fiction is the literary descendent of text-adventure games, which offer players no visual interface at all: just textual descriptions and a command line for inputs. The "game" at hand is actually produced by a three-way symbiotic writing between player, author, and interpreter (i.e., the software environment in which the game is played). The player becomes a cowriter, but all possible moves are already in the script. The player may have blithely interacted with an object in the text, have "smelled" something and read on as it "answered" with a response. But should she attempt anything unorthodox, the player will receive the dreaded error message: You can't see any such thing. The game is "intelligent" only insofar as it has been, on the level of code, described to itself. You can't go that way. In these moments, the player encounters the limit of the game's coded world, a discovery that also triggers the end of the player's suspension of disbelief. Paradoxically, only in moments at which the player tries to move beyond the game's internal knowledge does the game manifest subjectivity: That's not a verb I recognize.

Given that "You Can't See Any Such Thing" isn't married to a visual format, it is thematically freer and contains more characters, and though the relentless "user" of interactive fiction has not been done away with, the game thankfully compartmentalizes it into senses ("smell," "examine," "touch," and "listen") organized into commands ("smell x," for example). In this respect it willfully conjures the stale memory of the original two-word command structure of Crowther's Adventure. But this reference, it has to be said, is less oppressive than Larsen's allusions to Borges.

**BOUDOIR** You assume the figure of a Widow, aka Barbe-Nicole Clicquot, aka the Grand Dame of Champagne. ¶ Your reflection reveals your true age. Four vials of perfume are aligned on the vanity. These scents will take you far from the stranger staring at you from the mirror. Scent is a time machine. Bottled memory. You bottle weather for a living, for an empire. That's the business. But this is pleasure. You administer brief sprays of each scent to waiting strips of parchment. Some of the vials are nearing the last drop. You lay the strips out before you. **FOURTEEN, TWENTY-THREE, THIRTY-FIVE.** ¶ You pull the veil over your head and let the ages run in circles. What do you **SMELL** first?

Look, I don't want to ruin it for you, but it's enough to say that "You Can't See Any Such Thing" is an historical avant-garde-damaged ghost story, one that is as likely to quote Lil Wayne as it is to enjoiner the reader with bits of original surrealist prose poetry. And, I would argue, it does more to create a sense of space than the Larsen book, even though it lacks Google branding and clever visual design.

When I completed the game (or text), I copied my adventure into a Google Doc. It came out at 81 pages. If you'd like a longer "adventure," I recommend the short stories of Emmanuel Bove, which often portray characters who are pushed into madness because they lack willpower. Want to read it? Yes or No: \_\_\_\_