Interactive Fiction

A HISTORY AND DIVE INTO INVOLVED STORYTELLING
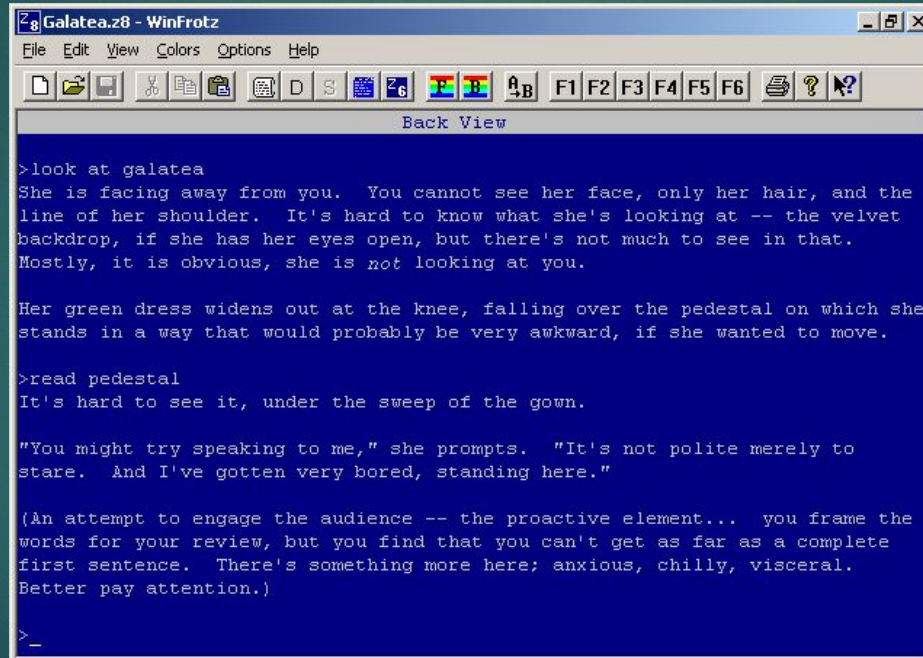
How to define Interactive fiction(IF)?

➤ Simply? Is it fiction? Are you involved? Can you enact or change things? Then yes.

➤ Too broad? Then if the focus of the game is a narrative that is furthered by the player's involvement

➤ Still too broad? Perhaps the narrative is created over the course of the player's gameplay, creating a story through the countless interactions?

➤ See how interpretable this is?

The evolution of IF, a choose your own adventure story

➢ Like many forms it branched greatly as processing power and computers evolved. While originally text only, it came to include basic visual accompaniment and eventual full graphics to run parallel to the text.

➢ While Text is almost always central to IF, rather than just text adventures where you enter your desired action, games where you choose from a list of possibilities would also count, making earlier iterations of choose your own adventure stories interactive fiction.

➢ Ultimately if the focus of the game is a narrative fiction that is furthered by the player's interactions and choices, it could be argued to be a piece of interactive fiction, though of course this is an incredibly broad range.

Use your Imagination (Galatea)

Lets add pictures (hitchhiker's guide to the galaxy)

Now maybe some more mechanics and dialogue

Lets just make a video game

Choice Poetics as narrative device

- ➢ **Explicit** and **discrete** choices are common in digital games
- ➢ In IF choices themselves can create meaning in the story and work alongside narrative to communicate meaning
- ➢ Can be either helpful or harmful for the flow of the gameplay
  - ○ + Help enhance effects of *transportation*, *identification*, *agency*
  - ○ - Pull out of context and disrupt the flow
- ➢ A choice structure consists of **framing, options,** and **outcomes**

Framing, Options, Outcome

➤ *Framing* - context and content preceding the presentation of a choice

➤ *Options* - discrete interface elements that lead to outcomes

   ○ Framing + Options = *Psychological Framing*. It gives rise to expectations about what will happen if a particular option is chosen

➤ *Outcome* - content that is presented when an individual option is chosen

Framework of choice poetics
Dimensions of player experience

- **Agency** - rooted in the player having informed control over some aspects of a game
- **Influence** - player's ability to affect story outcome

  Without influence agency is impossible but influence can exist where agency is lacking
- **Autonomy** - the ability of the player to pursue their own goals within the game structure
- **Identification** - identifying with a character of the story
- **Transportation** - feeling that one is actually located within the diegetic realm of the story
- **Absorption** - refers to a state where the player's complete attention is focused on a task
- **Responsibility** for diegetic outcomes when playing a game
- **Regret** on both diegetic and extra-diegetic (pragmatic) level

Framework of choice poetics
Modes of engagement

➤ Can be very different (studying game as a historical artifact, playing a game while having breakfast, broadcasting one's game to an audience, etc.)

➤ Different models of engagement are not exclusive and the same player may demonstrate different modes of engagement in a single game session

➤ Reflect on the **mode of play**

    ○ **Avatar play** - «becoming» the avatar while playing in linear fashion

    ○ **Role play** - making decisions based on «what the character would do»

    ○ **Exploratory play** - trying to explore all possible outcomes

    ○ **Analytical play** - playing with a purpose of critical analysis

    ○ **Critical play** - play as means of communication or critiquing

➤ Reflect greatly on *motives* for making choices

Framework of choice poetics
Motives for decision-making

Motives can generally be divided into

- **Diegetic motives**
  - desire to achieve best results from the perspective of your character
  - desire to achieve character's goal
- **Semi-diegetic motives**
  - sympathy for or empathy with your character
  - desire to make the most realistic choice according to the character's personality
- **Extra-diegetic motives**
  - desire to achieve «most interesting» outcome
  - desire to explore the game exhaustively
  - desire to entertain the audience

Framework of choice poetics
Choice idioms

- **Dead-end option** - choice that ends the story in an unsatisfactory manner
- **False choice** - different options lead to the same outcome
- **Blind choice** - insufficient context for an informed choice
- **Dilemma** - choice that forces a decision between two possible outcomes of high positive or negative importance
- **Flavour choice** - choice with relatively minor consequences. Creates an illusion of wider field of possibilities
- **Delayed effect** - happens when a choice has several outcomes that are mostly identical in the short term but diverge in the long term
- **Puzzle choice** - a cryptic choice where some options are clearly better than the others but it is not immediately clear which options are the good ones
- **Unchoice** - a «choice» that has only one option

Player Immersion: How to Make it Convincing

- "True immersive-ness necessitates loss, failure, pain, and frustration." (Jayanth, 2016)
- "Real" protagonists and NPCs; how too much power takes away from the experience.
- Immersive, livelike experience vs power fantasy.

- On protagonists with too much agency:
  - "[They] can lead is to unwittingly reinforce unhelpful cultural and social norms to keep making the same game protagonist over and over again." (Jayanth, 2016)
  - Jayanth's Rude Guest analogy.

Protagonist's Importance =/= Player Agency.

Agency & Relationships; "Real" Characters

- Recall: Agency is one of the dimensions of player experience.
  - "Interacting meaningfully with the game world." (Jayanth, 2016)
- Interactive Fiction relies heavily on a storytelling.
  - Having characters that feel real is absolutely vital.
  - Immense power in player emotional response…
    - … which is best accomplished with realistic characters and NPCs.
    - … which can be done by letting NPCs have as much impact and autonomy as the protagonist does.

NPCs = Key Component of Worldbuilding.

Examples and Analyses
16 Ways to Kill a Vampire at McDonalds

- Twine game → Entirely text; Entirely Choice-Based
- Non-Parser → Branching Story
- Vital choices, extremely difficult!
  - Choices leading to death = Start game over entirely.
    - "Dead End Option"
- Multiple Routes, depends on players' choices!
  - "Puzzle Choice" / "Delayed Effect"
    - Delayed-Effects disguised as Flavour Choices!

- In short: Puzzle-based IF that challenges players as they take on the role of an exhausted and annoyed vampire hunter.

16 WAYS TO KILL A VAMPIRE

AT MCDONALDS

OUT SOON FOR IPHONE AND ANDROID

I'm in McDonalds.

The adorable cashier sits behind the counter.

The vampire slouches in the booth nearest her.

I'm standing next to an empty booth.

I can see double doors to the street and a single door to a gender-neutral restroom.

Set the building on fire.

Wait

Menu

Inventory

Examples and Analyses
Night in the Woods

- In short: sad trash mammal does vandalism, sees ghosts, and grapples with mental illness and socioeconomic struggles.

- Immersive Story
  - NPCs with agency, limited player impact on their situations
- Mostly-linear work of fiction with heavy importance on music, characterization, and visuals.
- Easy gameplay; narrative exploration.
  - Limited influence in narrative.
  - Responsible for understanding the world.
- Multiple Routes, though similar:
  - Variety in dialogue/NPC importance.
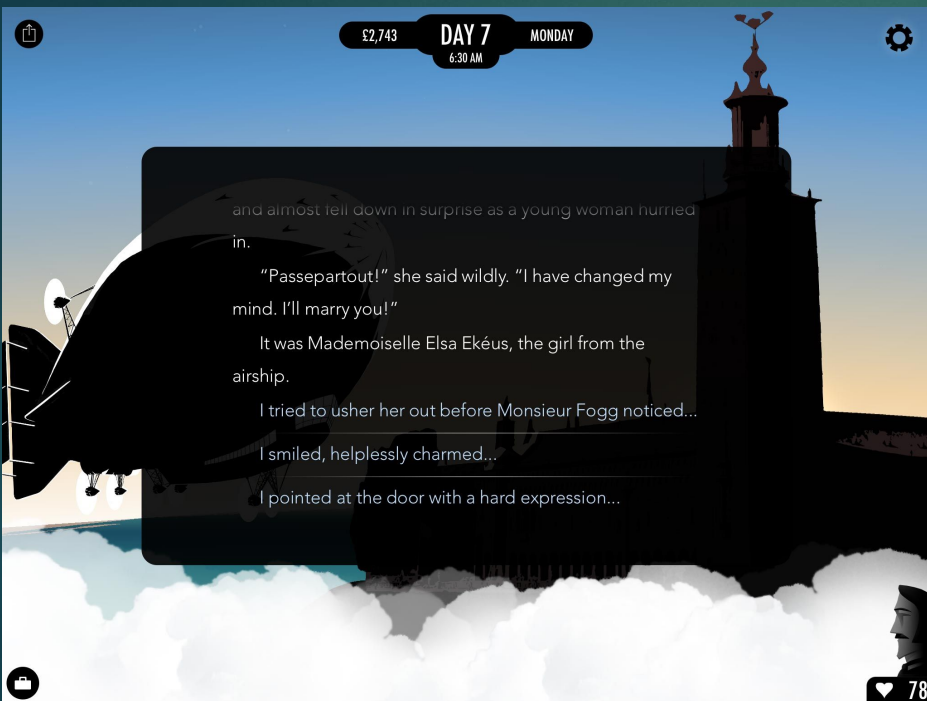- Tons of flavor choice, contributes to immersion and relatability.

Examples and Analyses
80 Days

- Immense and Expansive
  - Gigantic network of branching possibilities.
- Main Draw → Replayability and Discovery; Immersive Worldbuilding
  - Extra-Diegetic; encourages exploratory play.
  - Realistic and powerful NPCs
  - Subversion of Power Fantasy Protagonists
- More complex gameplay.
  - Manage travel, finances, relationships...
- Endless possibility:
  - "Thousands of choices".
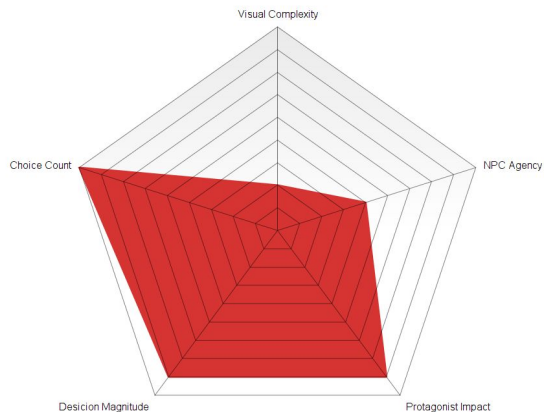 - "Over 750 000 words". (Inkle Studios)

- In short: anti-colonialist game where the white man isn't the savior and the world does not revolve around him.
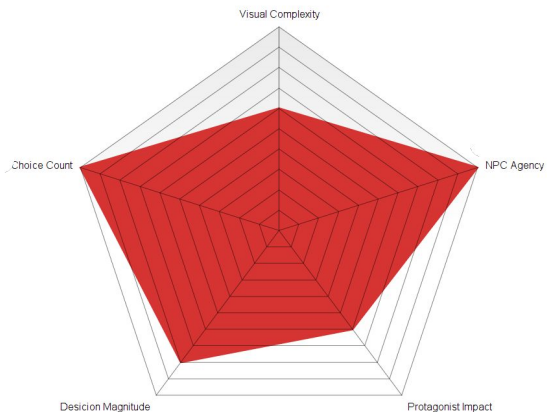
£2,743 DAY 7 MONDAY
6:30 AM

and almost fell down in surprise as a young woman hurried in.

"Passepartout!" she said wildly. "I have changed my mind. I'll marry you!"

It was Mademoiselle Elsa Ekéus, the girl from the airship.

I tried to usher her out before Monsieur Fogg noticed...

I smiled, helplessly charmed...

I pointed at the door with a hard expression...

78

£484 DAY 10 THURSDAY
6:30 AM

LONDON
PARIS
BERLIN WARSAW MINSK
MOSCOW
MUNICH
TSARITSYN
ASTRAKHAN
x2
x3
ATHENS

ANOTHER PLAYER

DAY 13   £3973/79d
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Examples and Analyses
Three Examples at a Glance
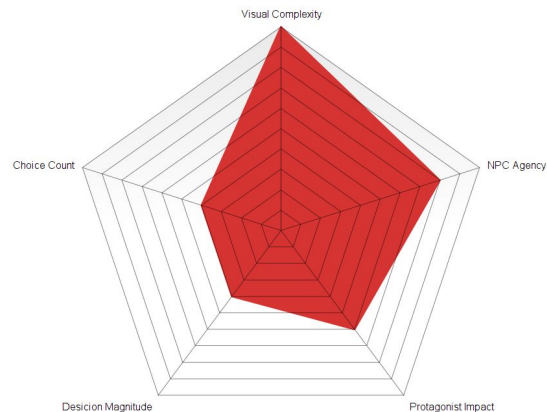
Credits:

1. Peter Mawhorter, Michael Mateas, Noah Wardrip-fruin, Arnav Jhala

Towards a Theory of Choice Poetics

2. GDC. "Forget Protagonists: Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond". *YouTube*, 9 September 2016. Web.

3. *Night in the Woods*. Infinite Fall. 21 February 2017. Video Game.

4. *80 Days*. Inkle. 31 July 2014. Video Game.

5. *16 Ways to Kill a Vampire at McDonalds*. Corfman, Abigail. 1 October 2016. Video Game.