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Four Observations (1990)

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The following paragraphs are drawn from notes I made during the production of *Loom*. Some of this material appears to be self-contradictory. Nearly all of it is self-serving. Opposing viewpoints are welcome but unnecessary.

1. Nobody buys adventure games for their stories.

People buy adventure games because they like to solve puzzles, explore fun places, and show off their computers. They do not buy adventure games for their stories. Why? Because there are other, much cheaper media capable of telling much better stories — and all the best storytellers work in those other media.

Generality and flexible interaction are basic requirements of traditional computer game design. Manipulation and linear causality are basic requirements of effective

storytelling. These requirements are mutually exclusive. That's why nobody has ever told a really *good* story in a really *good* adventure game.

It's certainly possible to create a rich, interesting context for an adventure game. But calling this context a story is like designing a stage set and calling it a play. Nevertheless, many designers persist in referring to their products as "story games," and styling themselves as "storytellers." This self-indulgence is probably harmless, as long as we never forget that our real job is the creation of puzzles, environments and pictures. (I'm as guilty of such self-indulgence as anybody. In fact, my old Infocom business card specified my job title as "Storyteller.")

2. Most people who buy adventure games never finish them.

In fact, many never even get halfway through. Everybody in the industry knows this. Yet few acknowledge the seriousness of the creative and economic implications.

Suppose the average adventure game ships on eight disks. That means the majority of people who buy the game will never see more than four or five disks' worth of material. Yet the second half of the game costs just as much to create as the first half. Sometimes more, if you've got a big finale.

Less than 50% of the money, time and effort we put into our games is being appreciated by most of our customers.

This is not a good way to do business.

In *Loom,* I wanted everyone who bought the game to enjoy every byte I and my team had created for them. Why? Because ...

3. People like adventure games they can finish.

In its heyday, Infocom's *New Zork Times* newsletter had a circulation of over 150,000. The marketing department used the *Times* to conduct consumer surveys. These yielded lots of interesting statistics.

One such survey included two questions: "What are your favorite adventure games?" and "What adventure games have you actually finished?" A remarkably high correlation was noted between the games people liked, and the ones they had finished.

I wanted people to like *Loom.* Not just the fanatic hobbyists who regularly invest tens or even hundreds of hours in a single game. I mean *real* people, working adults with limited leisure time and lots of attractive ways to spend it. So, from its very inception, *Loom* was designed to be finished.

Lucasfilm also conducts surveys. We telephoned 200 people who returned *Loom* registration cards in the month of June 1990, and asked them what they thought of the game. Those who were disappointed with *Loom* said that they liked what was there well enough, but wished there

was more of it. The ones who were satisfied with *Loom* often expressed delight that they were able to complete it, and either did not notice or were willing to forgive its relative brevity. Those same people are clamoring for a sequel.

4. The Holy Grail may not be interactive.

The first movies were event recordings. Popular films consisted of trains pulling into stations, waves crashing on beaches, people sneezing or getting their heads cut off. This initial lack of sophistication is quite understandable, since event recording is the most obvious way to use a movie camera. It was years before filmmakers realized that the cinema could be used to tell stories, to educate, to persuade.

Interactivity is the most obvious way to use computers in entertainment. Unfortunately, some people in our industry have embraced interactivity as the *sine qua non* of computer games. They claim it is the only thing that sets computer games apart from other interactive media.

It's hard to believe that a fast-moving, high-technology medium barely ten years old has already discovered its ultimate form of expression. It is, in fact, highly unlikely that we have found all of the ways computers may be effectively applied to entertainment. We probably haven't even discovered the best ways yet.

In *Loom,* I experimented with the idea that emphasizing

storytelling at the expense of interactivity might make adventure games more accessible to the general public. The strong reaction to the product, both positive and negative, together with its respectable sales record during a slow summer, suggest that there may be a market for similarly limited interaction software out there, waiting to be tapped.

Interactivity is a powerful capability that should be exploited when appropriate. But let's not pursue it so doggedly that we fail to notice other possibilities.

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