Text as Graphics as Dwarves: Narrative Generation in *Dwarf Fortress*

Description:

*Dwarf Fortress* is a single player, sandbox, strategy game in which you attempt to lead a group of dwarves in successfully building, maintaining and protecting a fortress. When you start a new session of the game in Fortress Mode, a procedurally generated world is created by an algorithm (with some direction from the player) with exceptional detail placed on rainfall, temperature, mineral deposits, elevation etc. The player then chooses which biome is most suitable as a staring location for their embarking dwarves, who then are procedurally generated with unique personalities, personal histories, preferences and skills. Due to the nature of the world and character generation, no two games are exactly alike. Once in the game proper, you can direct your dwarves in a variety of task of your choosing such as directing your team to write poetry, which the algorithm will also procedurally generate.

The user interface for *Dwarf Fortress* is decidedly “retro”, despite being released in 2006 and consistently updated since. There are many cumbersome menus and key shortcuts to find and master in order to do the most basics tasks or locate explanatory texts. This difficulty is further compounded by the graphical interface of the game, which is primarily composed of color coded extended ACSII characters, or strings of alphanumeric symbols, that are meant to represent things such as dwarves, plants, stones and vampires.

Analysis:

Initially*, Dwarf Fortress’* inclusion in the Electronic Literature Collection appears at odds with many of the other pieces. *Dwarf Fortress* is not recognizable as e-literature with game-like features or as a video game with robust narrative storytelling. Although the world is generated and simulated with minute details and rules, the actual game play is entirely based on the whims of the player. In this manner, *Dwarf Fortress* is somewhat of a departure from the illusion of choice that has bogged down other digitally born literature that presents users with decisions that may alter narrative outcomes but are still noticeably limited by the author’s intent. *Since Dwarf Fortress* has no strict narrative of its own, the game is more of a platform for generating fiction based on the relationship between the algorithm and player. This story-generation practice, which has been embraced by the game’s fanbase, is facilitated by the graphical interface, which sets the game apart from similarly complex, modern, sandbox, strategy games.

The recontextualizied ASCII characters as graphical signifiers requires the player to read the game by translation. For example, unlike in modern games where a cat would be represented by a 3-D image of a cat, a cat is evoked in *Dwarf Fortress* by a white, lowercase “c”. Since the signified is not readily available, without consulting a help guide, the player is actively engaged by the game to work towards understanding. What Hayles would call the “analogue resemblance of the screen text” is, in *Dwarf Fortress*, comprised of text objects divorced from their typical function. As the text moves and changes, the player is encouraged to recognize patterns to create narrative. This abstraction lends itself to the game’s difficulty but also marks it as being in conversation with some of the prescribed goals or features of digitally born literature, even if unintentionally so.

Adams, Tarn and Adams, Zach “Dwarf Fortress” *Electronic Literature Collection: Volume 3*, <http://www.bay12games.com/dwarves/> *Accessed October 10 2016*