PROGRAMMING/SCOTT PRUSSING

Inspired by adventure games, a young writer proposes a revised application for the PC that would create a new literary genre

The Next Step: Introducing The Participant Novel

Pop, zap, whirr, buzz. Video games are to computer applications what roller coasters are to transportation: all flash and fantasy. They provide an exhilarating ride to nowhere. Just as one can become accustomed to the twists, loops, and vertiginous descents of a "Big Dipper" or "Atom Smasher," one can learn to master the strategies of a *PacMan* or *Space Invaders* with stunning displays of hand-to-eye coordination. The immense attraction of video games comes from the challenge inherent in beating the machine.

If video games are the roller coasters of computer applications, adventure games are the cross-country buses. They have a starting point and destination but generally traverse the most uninteresting routes and take forever to arrive. A new terrain is opening that may alter this mode of travel. The PC is becoming an instrument for the user's literary imagination, creating a new vista in the land of adventure games.

Inside Adventure Games

Adventure games usually begin with the presentation of instructions followed by a "blind menu," a list of commands such as East, West, North, South, Up, Down, and Attack. The player refers to the menu for a command whenever the game reaches one of its frequent dilemmas. The presentation of each dilemma recalls the format of old movie serials. Each episode of the narrative is practically self-contained. The grand design of a well-written novel doesn't usually exist in adventure games.

The serial format is better suited to the movies than computers, however. The visual dimension of movies more easily draws the viewer into the narrative. Computerized serials would work better if adventure game authors developed pre-existing narratives that captured the players' attention as a movie or a fast-paced best seller.

Most adventure game texts are terse and boring; they fail to involve the player. The player remains outside the narrative as an objective observer viewing the monotonous landscape from the window of a taxi. If the narrative were written in the second person "you," it could pass as the notes of an unimaginative police inspector. The following excerpt provides an example:


PROGRAM: TAMING THE WEST
RESULT: FAILURE
CONCLUSION: GO SLAP
YER SADDLE

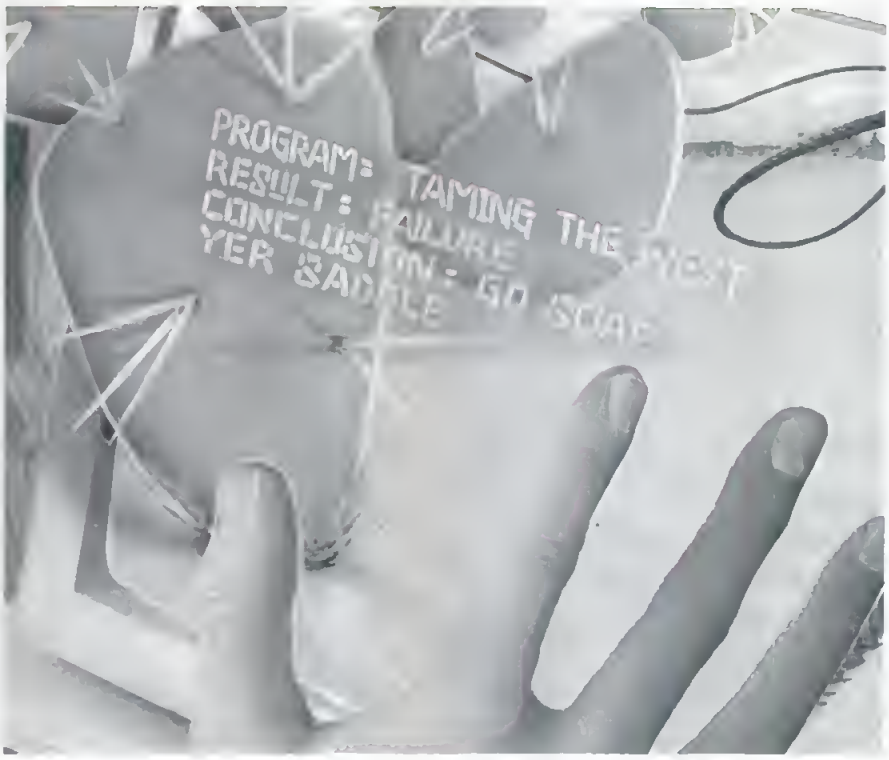
"You have entered a large, rectangular cavern. It is dimly lit. The cavern has two exits: a passage 50 feet away in the north wall and a wooden door 20 feet away in the west. No lock is visible on the door. A pile of stones blocks the east end of the cavern. More stones litter the ground. The layer of dust and dirt covering everything bears no footprints or any other traces of recent disturbance. Suddenly a noise echoes through the cavern and the ground begins to vibrate."

At this point the program presents a dilemma. It will prompt the player to choose one of the two exits (North or West). Both choices lead to consequences, either favorable or unfavorable. By threading through the maze of consequences from one episode to the next, the player eventually completes the game.

Many computer adventure game designers enhance the features with unexpected, often amusing responses. If a player, frustrated by an apparent dead end in the maze, types in a curse, the program may respond by cursing back via the monitor, or by taunting or soothing the embattled player.

Adventure games can be exceedingly clever and intricate. The basic problem, however, is that designers do not take adequate advantage of the computer's capabilities and provide only a skeletal plot. A fiction writer attempts to grab the reader by enriching the plot with mood and feeling; adventure game programmers concentrate their talents on constructing clues and obstacles. As a result, most adventure games read like a set of instructions on how to assemble a computer. This flat, uninteresting style does not create the emotional involvement necessary to generate excitement and suspense.

THIS NEW computer genre combines the thrill of video with the narrative possibilities of the adventure game.



The adventure game program style is similar to chess. Pleasure is derived from developing strategies and selecting moves. The thrills are almost entirely cerebral, providing a stimulating exercise in abstract thinking. But why limit the adventure game to abstract thought alone when its potential for excitement is so much greater?

The "participant novel" has been developed to take adventure games beyond the limitations of conventional programming into a new realm of experience.

Inside the Participant Novel

This computer genre combines the thrill of video with the narrative possibilities of the adventure game. The participant novel differs from an adventure game as much as a rolier coaster differs from a bus. Writers, rather than programmers, develop the narratives, relying more on plot development as in a traditional novel. The narrative moves toward a single climax and attempts to create a sense of emotional involvement appropriate to the text. Players are "participants" in several senses of the word. Each player literally "plays" the role of hero or heroine, becoming totally immersed in formulating game strategy and emotionally engaged as an actual character within the narrative.

PC Software of San Diego, California, is close to completing its first participant novel for the IBM Personal Computer. The prototype participant novel includes a questionnaire in which players rate their attributes to determine a handicap based on size, strength, speed, and agility. Players enter the questionnaire data into the PC and the computer creates a protagonist based on the players' profile.

After completing the questionnaire, participants enter the narrative as a reader enters the lives and feelings of characters in a novel. Use of the second person "you" helps bridge the gap that separates players from the fictional world of the narrative. The success of the participant novel depends on the player's ability to create the illusion of being in the narrative.

The author/designer may decide to have players demonstrate their skill as warriors in battles with strange foes. Some players may be strong enough to successfully engage in hand-to-hand combat with a troll, but might be too slow and awkward to defeat a renegade elf. A player may have the speed and endurance to flee a gremlin, but lack the instinct to anticipate the attack of an oversized hawk. The game narrative can go anywhere the author directs it, challenging each player's skill.

Adventure games have been criticized

for their lack of consistency regarding direction and physical orientation. This is the result of carelessness and inattentiveness on the part of game authors. Participant novelists will have to pay closer attention to "mapping." Caverns, mountaintops, and cities must be laid out as if on paper. Authors will have to create reliable, consistent geographical images. If the participant novel phenomenon catches on, there will be a need for "participant editors," experts at checking computer fiction maps.

To increase excitement and involvement in participant novels, authors can adapt the capabilities of the PC to the element of time. Adverb commands such as "swiftly" or "cautiously" can be included in the novel's menu. Each command will produce a different result. Moving swiftly through a chamber may awaken a slumbering monster or it may allow entrance to a passage that would have been blocked if players had moved too cautiously. On the other hand, moving cautiously may allow them to avoid a hidden trap. Players would not know for certain how to react in either case, having to rely on intuition and clues in the text to decide on the proper speed of their movements.

Episodes in the game can have time limits that make the speed of the player's response critical. A computer signal informs players that they have entered such an episode. They may, for example, hear a rumbling in the cavern of an ogre. They have 5 seconds to choose the escape door. If they wait too long, a cave-in may block one of the exits or even bury them under several tons of rock. This device could be even more effective if players are informed that the time allowed for their reaction is limited to an unspecified period —maybe 5 seconds or 1 minute. Forcing players to respond will heighten emotional involvement, particularly after a series of difficult confrontations.

MOVING swiftly through a chamber may awaken a slumbering monster.

Authors can adapt the time factor to battle routines. The program describes a specific attack: a downward chop with a battle ax; a side-to-side sword slash. Players must counter these movements immediately, using the appropriate move from five predetermined commands coded onto specific keys. An illogical or plodding response could be damaging or even fatal. Responding immediately to a downward chop with a straight sword thrust might wound an adversary by beating him to the punch, but a delay of 2 seconds might mean the ax strikes home. Battle experience will refine the players' skills and improve their reactions in tense situations.

A New Literary Genre

Participant novels are not a radical departure from adventure games. They are, however, the wave of the future and there is no predicting what direction this development will take. They do not have to compete with video games. The fast moving, visual concept of video games appeals to a different type of player than adventure games.

Someone once noted that the British are a "literal" people. Americans, on the other hand, are a "visual" people. Whether or not this is true, the distinction between literal—of letters—and visual is useful. Adventure games, including the participant novel, are textual, and therefore more likely to appeal to players with literal tastes. The participant novel aspires to bring literature into the computer age, creating a new literary genre by adapting the microcomputer to traditional literary forms. It faces an uncertain, experimental, but potentially exciting future. */PC*

Scott Prussing is a free-lance writer who is collaborating with PC Software to produce his first participant novel, The Devouring Darkness, scheduled for publication in early 1983. For more information write to PC Software, 9120 Gromercy Dr. #416, San Diego, CA 92133.

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