

Boot *your* BOOKS

As text adventures grow more popular, fans are asking each other, "Boot up any good books lately?"

By Bruce Chadwick



Reading a book is usually kind of a one-way affair. You sit and read as the characters and plots unfold around you. But what would you think of a novel where it's you, and not Miss Marple or Tom Swift or Ellery Queen, who has to get to the bottom of things?

That's what interactive fiction is all about. Text adventures are computer books—screenloads of words linked together to form a personal fantasy—that are part book, part game. There are few visuals in this kind of fiction; it's up to your imagination to supply the pictures.

THE INTERACTION FACTOR

What distinguishes these adventures from books is the interaction factor. You're thrown into the position of a detective whose task is to get to the bottom of a rich woman's apparent suicide. Or, you're a young scientist trying to save an undersea research station from some mysterious and deadly force. The decisions are yours. It's *your* neck on the line. No more sitting back and leafing through the action.

That's what makes computer books such a hit, according to Michael Berlyn, one of the game designers at the leading text game company, Infocom. "You're thrust into the middle of an action novel unfolding all around you, and you determine what happens next. It's like jumping into the middle of a book," Berlyn says.

"Whatever you decide to do is what happens next," explains Marc Blank, a doctor-turned-designer at Infocom. "In regular books, the plot is predetermined and you just read along. Here, *you* make everything go."

There are more companies making adventures with graphics than not, but the army of book lovers at Infocom sneer at graphics in computer games. They churn out words, instead, on a huge, \$750,000 mainframe computer.

Infocom's been putting out all-text adventures since 1979. With more than 11 titles in their library for all the major computer brands, they're confirmed leaders in the field. Infocom releases—like *Zork*, *Deadline*, *Infidel*, and *Suspended*—regularly top the best-seller charts.

COMPUTERIZED NOVELS

The latest twist in interactive fiction is text games based on books or book characters, and using well-known book authors as consulting designers or writers. Stratemeyer Syndicate, for instance, is exploring the possibility of turning Nancy Drew and her adventures into an interactive text game. And publisher Simon & Schuster reportedly has signed up author Douglas Adams to work on a computer-

ized version of his popular book *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. This text game will be distributed via bookstores in December.

Infocom's already on this bandwagon. Slated for release this summer is *Seastalker*, interactive fiction for the tenderfoot. To help create *Seastalker*, Infocom brought in Jim Lawrence, who has a lot of experience as a storyteller. In fact, he wrote a number of the Tom Swift Jr. and Hardy Boys books back in the '50s and '60s.

Stu Galley, *Seastalker*'s game designer, says the collaboration worked well. "This is an original story Jim created for us. He gave us a sample run-through with side trips here and there. I expanded and went with it. He's very good at adventures. They're just a different way of telling stories."

SNEAK PREVIEW

Galley gave K-POWER a sneak preview of some of the action in *Seastalker*. "You play the part of a famous young inventor," Stu said. "You're in your lab, working on your latest invention, when you get an emergency call from an undersea research station, the Aquadome. You have to take your submarine and solve puzzles, traveling through the shoals, going deep into the ocean." You have to reach the Aquadome and discover and destroy what's threatening the research station.

Galley, whose credits include the mystery adventure *The Witness*, says that *Seastalker*'s puzzles are a bit easier to solve than the other Infocom games. Plus, along with all the typical Infocom trappings, there'll be an Infocard that contains hidden clues to rescuing the troubled Aquadome. Here's a glimpse of one part of the story. (K-POWER got it in pre-production, so the final version may be different.) You've been alerted that the Aquadome's in danger. You manage to power up your sub and take off into the sea. You're about midway to your destination. . . .

THE OCEAN HAS BEEN GETTING DARKER AS YOU DIVE TOWARD THE AQUADOME, TURNING FROM BLUE GREEN TO DARK GREEN TO A DULL GRAY GREEN. IT'S BECOMING DUSKIER AND MURKIER WITH EVERY MINUTE. A YELLOW CONE OF LIGHT NOW ILLUMINES THE WATER AHEAD. THE SUBMARINE'S SEARCH LIGHT WAS AUTOMATICALLY SWITCHED ON BY AN ELECTRIC EYE, NOW THAT YOU'RE TOO DEEP FOR THE SUN TO LIGHT THE WATER. COLORFUL SEA LIFE SWIMS THROUGH THE BEAM. TIM EXCLAIMS, "HEY, THERE'S A BLIP ON THE SONARSCOPE AT 3 O'CLOCK. AIM THE SEARCHLIGHT TO STARBOARD."

It doesn't take big brains to figure out what to type into the computer:

AIM LIGHT TO STARBOARD

The computer responds:

AN ENORMOUS WHALE CAN BE SEEN LOLLING COMFORTABLY IN THE DEEP. OBVIOUSLY, THIS IS WHAT'S BEEN MAKING THOSE NOISES OVER THE HYDRA-PHONE....

BRIDGING THE GAP

Infocom's "books," such as *Seastalker*, are so inviting because they understand your instructions. You can tell the computer to interrogate a witness, cast a spell, and so on. In response to commands such as KICK DOOR, the computer will tell you, DOOR OPENS TO REVEAL ROOM WITH TABLE AND VASE FULL OF DEAD FLOWERS, or, YOU STUB YOUR TOE.

Early text adventures had a communication gap between the computer and the user. The computer would respond only to the most basic commands, such as GO NORTH.

Thanks to a special program within a program called a "parser," you can type in complex sentences like, WAVE YOUR ARMS AT THE AIRPLANE AND TRY TO CATCH THE PACKAGE IN THE PARACHUTE. Instead of giving you an, I DON'T UNDERSTAND, the computer will be able to simplify your sentence to fit the program's vocabulary. It's sort of like a translator that bridges the communication gap between you and your machine.

So far, most computer books have been fairly

tough going for newcomers. If you want to get a taste for the puzzle-solving and logic they demand, you have to start with simpler games. Those games use lots of graphics, at the expense of vivid descriptions or a more involved plot. Well, Infocom's finally realized that not everyone can dive right into a *Deadline* or an *Enchanter*. That's why they've created *Seastalker*. They also have plans for other "junior-level" games, which have an even more sophisticated parser able to understand a variety of mixed-up sentences the beginner might input, Stu Galley says.

INTERACTIVE OVERVIEW

The interactive storytellers at Infocom are not alone. Pacific Infotech, a California company, has unveiled a mostly text adventure called *Heroism In The Modern Age*.

As more authors get in on the fun, and classics like the Hardy Boys are considered for the programmer's flowchart, who knows? Maybe someday you'll be able to save yourself and your ship in *Moby Dick* by typing in a command such as, TELL CAPTAIN AHAB TO LEAVE THE WHITE WHALE ALONE. **k**

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COMPUTER *fiction* DISKOGRAPHY

Deadline (Infocom)—Solve a murder mystery involving a big industrialist, his suspect wife, the oddball son, and those mysterious ladder prints in the garden. \$49.95

Enchanter (Infocom)—Use cunning, savvy, and spells to enter the Wizard's lair in this fantasy adventure. \$49.95

Heroism In The Modern Age (Pacific Infotech)—Rescue Orlando, Florida, from political terrorists who threaten to blow up the city unless their demands are met. \$58.95

Infidel (Infocom)—Search through the bowels of a cursed pyramid in search of a long-dead Egyptian Pharaoh's tomb. \$49.95

Planetfall (Infocom)—As a stand-up comic ensign who has survived the explosion of your spaceship, you wind up traipsing around a kingdom of mutants with a difficult 'droid named Floyd. \$49.95

Seastalker (Infocom)—As a young inventor you

are called upon to rescue the besieged underground research station and combat its enemies. (First of Infocom's junior-level series.) \$39.95

Sorcerer (Infocom)—Another thriller, the sequel to *Enchanter*, in which you search for the Wizard Belboz. \$49.95

Starcross (Infocom)—Take off in search of the mysteries of space in a science-fiction adventure set centuries into the future. \$39.95

Suspended (Infocom)—Wake up from a deep, scientifically induced sleep and control six independent robots who represent the various senses you need to survive. \$49.95

The Witness (Infocom)—Get to the bottom of a fishy suicide in a mystery of jealousy involving a slippery manservant, a wild daughter, and a curious book of matches. \$49.95

Zork I, II, III (Infocom)—Take on assorted villains, wizards, and hobgoblins inhabiting a bizarre, underground kingdom. \$39.95 each