'Doing there' vs. 'being there': performing presence in interactive fiction

Alf Seegert *University of Utah (USA)*[1]

Abstract

The ability of computers to produce 'presence' – the visceral feeling of actually 'being there' – is typically associated with the presentation of intensive graphical effects. But studies on presence indicate that what players are able to 'do' in fact contributes more to their sense of presence than graphical realism. Keeping this in mind, I explore possibilities for 'performing' presence in digital narratives, particularly through the non-graphical digital medium of interactive fiction. I draw from critical theorists (Barthes, Iser and especially Gumbrecht) as well as theorists of new media (Aarseth, Ryan, Montfort) to frame an investigation into two major aspects of presence production in interactive fiction, namely: 1) how interactive fiction generates presence through the exclusive use of verbal signifiers rather than graphical images, and 2) how it allows users to generate presence themselves through their own actions. I conclude by examining three works of interactive fiction: Adventure, All Roads *and* Luminous Horizon *(Crowther and Woods 1975–6; Ingold 2006; O'Brian 2004).*

Keywords

presence
interactive fiction
hyperfiction
digital narrative

Introduction

> *On East Bank of Fissure*
>   *You are on the east bank of a fissure slicing clear across the hall. The mist is quite thick here, and the fissure is too wide to jump.*
>
> >*WAVE ROD*
> *A crystal bridge now spans the fissure.*
>   – Computer narration and typed player response from
>   *Adventure* (Crowther and Woods 1975–6)

If one considers digital methods used for producing *presence* – that is, for generating the visceral sense of 'being there' – then visual imagery and aural effects are likely to top the list: temporally warped bullet-time battles in *The Matrix* trilogy; the THX-powered crash of lightsabers; the empathy-evoking CGI images of *WALL·E* or the ping of bullets ricocheting down smoothly scrolling three-dimensional corridors in the latest first person shooter. Such computer-generated graphics and sound effects confront our immediate awareness by directly impinging upon – or overloading – our faculties of sight and hearing, sensually inducing awe and wonder by

2. I should note that some theorists make a crucial distinction between the terms immersion and presence, citing the fact that immersion denotes 'being in' whereas presence suggests 'being before'. Because immersion and presence are both senses of 'being there' and my primary concern here is with the connection between 'doing there' and the sense of 'being there', I do not find it necessary to make sharp distinctions between immersion and presence in this discussion.

3. As Montessori suggests in *The Discovery of the Child*, for a child, an object only comes alive when it is encountered and actively engaged – or played with. 'A very beautiful toy, an attractive picture, a wonderful story, can, without doubt, rouse a child's interest, but if he may simply look at, or listen to, or touch an object, but dares not move it, his interest will be superficial and will pass from object to object' (Montessori 1962). Wittgenstein similarly points out that children learn about books and chairs not by being told about them but by reading books and sitting in chairs (1972: par. 476).

4. My performance-based approach to VR in this paper finds parallels in Hansen's *Bodies in Code: Interfaces With Digital Media* (2006). Hansen argues that 'motor

shoving us face first toward the brink of a newfound technological sublime. Because digital effects are so good at producing presence, for many virtual reality (VR) researchers, the explicit goal of VR simulation is to evoke presence by immersing participants in visual imagery and sound, usually provided through a graphical heads-up display and headphones in a helmet worn by the participant.[2] But this one-directional 'transmitter/receiver' characterization of presence – like the attempt at realistic representation in the examples above – is only part of the story. Despite ever increasing computer power and the ability to generate real-time graphical images with greater and greater verisimilitude, there has been a recent trend in VR research towards not just improving the realism of virtual simulations, but in exploring the degree to which *users* are in fact responsible for generating presence through their interactions in simulated worlds. For instance, note the active presence-producing role of the participant in this excerpt from 'Elements of a multi-level theory of presence' from the proceedings of *Presence 2002*:

> Although some authors argue strongly for a realism-based conception of presence (e.g. Solomon 2002), this limits presence (at least with the current state of technology) to a mainly passive perception. The approach taken in VR is clearly based on interaction, yet with a usually low level of perceptual realism (high-end flight simulation systems perhaps being the exception). It is interesting to note that both non-interactive, photorealistic displays, as well as interactive, nonrealistic displays are able to engender substantial levels of presence, where interactivity appears to be the more important factor of the two.
>
> (IJsselsteijn 2002: 247)

The author (citing Heidegger) goes so far as to conclude at the end of the article that 'presence is tantamount to successfully supported *action* in the environment. *Being there* thus becomes the ability to *do* there' (IJsselsteijn 2002: 251). In virtual spaces, presence is thus *performed* and not just passively experienced – and probably not just in *virtual* spaces.[3] Interaction is thus a mode of revealing, a way of allowing the world to 'present' itself. Although VR researchers still focus on the use of headsets, data-gloves and motion-trackers to improve capacities for physically driven action in a graphical virtual medium, their striking conclusions about the immersive power of interaction and agency make me question to what degree graphical realism is needed (if it is needed at all) in order to generate presence in digital media. As a result, I want to explore how presence might be produced in a particular mode of computer-mediated simulation that is highly interactive but which does literally nothing to attempt graphical realism, namely interactive fiction (IF).[4]

Interactive fiction, presence and performance

'IF' is a fitting acronym for interactive fiction, for IF is ideally all about *possibility* – the realm of 'what if?' Embodying such possibility, however, the very term 'interactive fiction' is only one of many possible names for (or versions of) the recent hybridization of textuality with computer technology. 'Interactive narrative' and 'digital narrative' exist alongside the

more canonical 'hypertext fiction' or 'hyperfiction.' Whereas hyperfiction requires that users click on links to connect to discrete chunks of texts in a seemingly endless, multi-linear narrative, IF in contrast accepts typed, natural language input, which is analysed and responded to by a computerized narrator. But even with these distinctions in place, defining IF remains problematic because so many possible approaches to the medium exist.[5] In any case, the incunabular nature of IF and its unsettling fusion of *program*, *potential narrative*, *world* and *game* (Montfort 2003a) has resulted in plenty of debate over how to classify it and too little discussion about what powers IF might still possess, however hard it might be to classify.[6] For this reason, I will forego the apologetics and polemics that tend to characterize discussions of IF by focusing not on what IF is (or what it 'might be'), but rather on what it *does*, specifically its generation of presence effects.

As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht points out in *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (2004), the word 'presence' refers primarily to a 'spatial relationship to the world and its objects', a relationship in which the 'present' is what is 'tangible' to bodies (Gumbrecht 2004: xiii). For Gumbrecht, the 'production of presence' is a corporeal phenomenon involving 'all kinds of events and processes in which the impact that "present" objects have on human bodies is being initiated or intensified' (Gumbrecht 2004: xiii). Throughout his book, Gumbrecht provides examples of how, especially in the academy, 'meaning' – the domain of interpretation and conceptualization – has very nearly displaced presence, both as a mode for approaching texts and as an object of study in itself. His aim is not to destroy meaning but to dethrone it, to return presence to equal status with meaning as its counterpart in an ongoing oscillation between 'meaning effects' and 'presence effects' in an individual's experience (Gumbrecht 2004: 116). Gumbrecht focuses on the sensory impressions that impinge on one's body from the 'materialities of communication' (Gumbrecht 2004: 8) found in all modes of signification, e.g. the sonic 'substance' of a poem or the visual impression created by the particular shape and flow of script on a page. When considering the possibilities for producing presence through new media, Gumbrecht emphasizes how the 'special effects' that such media provide can generate presence effects through their visceral power. However, his attention to such 'materialities of communication' privileges media as the exclusive source of presence effects in mediated interactions, making the production of presence a one-directional affair. As a result, Gumbrecht fails to articulate how a meaning-based response to a literary text, for example, might itself generate presence effects through a reader's emotive response to that text.[7] Presence effects might likewise be produced when an interactor responds to a text by making textual impressions of his or her own.[8] Even in the absence of visual stimulation – other than that of deliberately arranged traces of ink on paper (or alphabetic characters on a screen) – a reader can, through imagination, conjure up worlds potentially as vivid and as body affecting as the visual and aural effects presented through a multi-media entertainment system.

The potential of the imagination for producing presence is precisely how IF made its first claim to fame. When the personal computer first

activity – not representationalist verisimilitude – holds the key to fluid and functional crossings between virtual and physical realms' (Hansen 2006: 2). Although I agree that an interactor's performance is crucial to presence production in VR, to constrain 'performance' to embodied motor activity seems needlessly narrow to me. Interactive fiction might consequently make a useful test case in exploring broader possibilities for what counts as 'performance' (or, indeed, embodiment) in the first place.

5. *Wikipedia*'s computer programming-informed entry describes IF as 'Software containing simulated environments in which players use text commands to control characters and perform actions' (*Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia* 2008). Game design theorists in contrast characterize IF in terms of its ludic qualities and identify it with the 'text adventure game' in which players type in commands to manipulate objects and solve logical puzzles. A definition of IF from the standpoint of literary theory (my own attempt) might in turn be, 'a potential narrative in which text contributed by an interactor triggers the output of text by a narrator in a simulated story-space represented by text on a computer screen'. As one can see, the combination of multiple elements in a

became popular in the early 1980s, video game graphics remained blocky and slow to render – especially in three dimensions – offering little potential in the way of realistic representation. The software company Infocom, however, decided to spin this processor-based liability into a veritable asset with advertisements like this one, which argued for an almost alchemical potency in combining words, imagination and computer power:

Figure 1: 1983 Analog magazine advertisement from Infocom, the dominant producer of software text adventure games in the 1980s (Infocom).

WE STICK OUR GRAPHICS WHERE THE SUN DON'T SHINE.
You'll never see Infocom's graphics on any computer screen. Because there's never been a computer built by man that could handle the images we produce. And, there never will be. We draw our graphics from the limitless imagery of your imagination – a technology so powerful, it makes any picture that's ever come out of a screen look like graffiti by comparison. … Through our prose, your imagination makes you part of our stories, in control of what you do and where you go – yet unable to predict or control the course of events. … [Y]ou're immersed in rich environments alive with personalities as real as any you'll meet in the flesh – yet all the more vivid because they're perceived directly by your mind's eye, not through your external senses.

(Infocom n.d.)

However overblown Infocom's estimation of IF's powers might be here, their claims that 'we draw our graphics from the limitless imagery of your imagination' and 'your imagination makes you part of our stories' are worth noting because they emphasize the receiver's role in producing presence. Simply put, their claim is that even though presence in IF is

mediated by the computer, it is only *actively evoked* through the reader's imaginative response to a text – instead of being stimulated directly through sensation with graphical imagery, as we typically expect from high-powered computers today.[9] In contrast (and however clichéd the term might have become), Infocom's use of the metaphor 'the mind's eye' is revealing for it implies a mode of seeing (sense perception) that depends on cognitive faculties (conception and imagination) – a mingling of presence with meaning. In fact, presence effects in IF depend entirely on meaning effects because the reader's imaginative response is triggered by *signs* and not just *percepts*.

If IF's stress on the role of the reader in producing presence sounds suspiciously similar to literary theories of reader-response (or reception theory), that's because IF adopts precisely the same premises (consciously or not). Note the similarities in Infocom's sales pitch, above, to this passage from reception theorist Wolfgang Iser:

> …in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text.…The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence.

<div align="right">(Iser 1980: 50)</div>

Equally important to IF and to Iser is not just the active role of the recipient, but the specifically *relational* manner in which literary worlds (or 'works') are brought into being. For Iser, the literary work is neither (as the New Critics would have it) an object consisting of marks on a page, nor is it (as Stanley Fish argues [1980: 70]) 'in the reader'. Instead, the work manifests itself in a virtual space *between* text and reader, dependent upon both but localizable in neither. Iser's sense of 'virtual space' is one actively *evoked* through the reader's imagination rather than one stimulated merely through the senses, a creative 'picturing' rather than a passive 'seeing'. Upon encountering the linear, written text through time, the reader oscillates between retrospection and anticipation, all the while 'filling in the gaps' to make the work coherent. The author, by carefully 'pre-structuring' potential meanings in the text, can evoke effects of surprise or exasperation with skilful omissions (and commissions), either confirming a reader's expectations or subverting them. This active 'filling-in' by the reader (usually performed unconsciously) engages the reader creatively, and for Iser such engagement is critical to literature's appeal because 'reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative' (Iser 1980: 51). According to Iser, if the reader were 'given the full story' (presuming that to be possible), imagination would need never enter into play, and the reader would lose interest, being left with nothing to do (Iser 1980: 51). The reader consequently finds herself in a 'field of play', bounded on one side by the potential for *boredom* (the result of too little creative engagement being required) and *overstrain* on the other (which results from a demand for too much creative work).

In this view, even if a 'text' might be granted objective existence, the literary work is always already 'virtual' and the reader 'interactive' – two major buzzwords in digital media. Keeping the production of presence

at all, even though his criticisms of hypertext fiction focus on the (ironic) narrative limitations of having to 'follow links' predetermined by the author – when IF offers a far more 'writerly' alternative by allowing full-sentence, typed input by an interactor. The only academic, book-length discussion of IF so far in print, Montfort's *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction* (2003b), is (for obvious reasons) apologetic in tone, and spends a great deal of time justifying the worth of IF by linking it to the venerable literary heritage of the Anglo-Saxon riddle. Thus Douglas and Montfort, though in opposed camps, both appear to invoke the alleged inheritance of 'legitimate' historical forms to evaluate the worth of new media, which risks constraining new media to old paradigms, a path that Aarseth neatly sidesteps by proposing entirely new criteria.

7. In a few passages from *Production of Presence*, Gumbrecht does seem to suggest that a reader plays some role as producer of presence effects (e.g., in one passage he mentions mental 'investment' made by the recipient of aesthetic experience [Gumbrecht 2004: 101] and in another how a particular text 'makes the reader intuit' particular emotional experiences of a character [Gumbrecht 2004: 97]) but the precise role that the recipient plays in presence

production is not clearly articulated. The overall tenor of the book emphasizes a 'transmitter/ receiver' model of presence production in which presence is produced by a medium of transmission (one of the 'materialities of communication') rather than by the receiver. Note, for example, the language Gumbrecht uses to characterize his classroom teaching: 'My first more personal concern for this class was to be a good enough teacher to evoke for my students and to make them feel specific moments of intensity that I remember with nostalgia' (Gumbrecht 2004: 97). The phrases 'evoke for my students', 'make them feel' and 'intensity that I remember' all emphasize how presence is produced by the teacher, not the student.

8. Gumbrecht might at first seem to embrace the idea of generating presence through one's actions when he cites Gadamer's notion of 'truth in performance' (Gumbrecht 2004: 64). However, he uses Gadamer's example to emphasize not interaction, but what he calls 'materialities of communication', the sound of words in a poem, for instance, that can only be experienced by hearing the poem performed aloud. Through performance, the sonic 'substance' of the poem impinges on the senses with presence effects and not just meaning effects, but this is still

foremost in mind, one is then led to ask what, if anything, distinguishes the virtual worlds of interactive fiction from the virtual worlds presented by 'traditional' texts.[10] Most IF theorists are aware, however, that even 'traditional texts' require interaction in order to be made 'present'. Instead of characterizing a traditional reader as one who 'dutifully trudges the linear track prescribed by the author', Nick Montfort in *Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction* (2003a), for example, recognizes that

> a reading of a book may involve browsing it in a bookstore, reading in short bursts in different places, skipping ahead to see if it gets any better at the end, looking through bits in the middle to then figure out what happened, and giving up without actually reading everything … readings may not be in sequence and may not be total.

(Montfort 2003a)

That being said, there is a crucial difference between the kind of interactivity that occurs in IF and the reader-interactivity encountered in traditional texts. When Roland Barthes (like Iser) argues that the reader is an active participant in the construction of the literary work (1974: 4) – namely, as the 'writerly reader' – he is not speaking literally. To be sure, the engaged reader leaves his/her mark on the text, but such inscription occurs only in the imagination: the term 'writerly' is a metaphor. But in IF, the reader responds to a given text by literally leaving his or her mark on the screen in typed strings of alphabetic text: the computer screen becomes a digital palimpsest.

This 'writerly' mode of interactivity in IF creates distinctive possibilities for producing presence.[11] Crucially, IF replies to an interactor's typed input by disclosing a new string of signifiers that are unveiled *only* after a specific contribution is made by the interactor. The latent, multiple potentialities of the text in interactive fiction therefore exist not just on the level of the *signified*, but in the visible *signifier* as well. Marie-Laure Ryan clarifies this important distinction in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*: 'Whereas the reader of a standard print text constructs personalized interpretations out of an invariant semiotic base, the reader of an interactive text … participates in the construction of the text as a visible display of signs' (Ryan 2001: 6). This method of text construction itself generates a presence effect. As Espen Aarseth explains in *Cybertext*, interactive narratives differ critically from traditional narratives because they constantly remind the reader of 'inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed' (Aarseth 1997: 3). The typed response of the reader reveals both a new visible text *and* a new evoked work of the imagination along with it; at the same time, the reader's typed response closes off other possible alternative texts, which – unless the game is re-played from the beginning – will never be uncovered. By taking one path, you abandon another, and an interesting effect of these choices is the nagging sense of 'what if?' – *What if I had made another decision? What would have happened?* The very *absence* of signification (the text that remains undisclosed to the interactor because of his or her choices) thus creates a presence effect of

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felt uncertainty, curiosity and possibly anxiety. A traditional text may indeed be, as Barthes argues in *S/Z*, a 'galaxy of signifiers' (Barthes 1974: 5), but in IF these signifiers are not pre-revealed or determinately bounded by the covers of a book. They reveal themselves only through active exploration by *contributing signifiers of one's own* (i.e. typed input).

Performing presence in *Adventure*, *All Roads* and *Luminous Horizon*

So far, this discussion of IF has remained highly theoretical. To make IF more 'present', we need to look at some concrete examples of IF and examine how it actually works on the screen and at the keyboard. The earliest example of IF, *Adventure*, was a text adventure game designed in 1975 by Will Crowther and later expanded by Don Woods.[12] *Adventure* was a landmark in computer simulation because it allowed users to navigate and interact with a textually represented world for the first time using natural language. The interactor was addressed in the second person and given a description of his or her current location in the game world, along with a list of objects available for picking up or manipulating. The interactor was then given a cursor prompt ('>') allowing him to interact by typing in simple commands in English. The parser (the 'decoding' algorithm that analyses a string of text entered by the interactor) was extremely simple, and only allowed up to two-word inputs in the format of VERB NOUN, for instance, 'GET BOTTLE', 'OPEN GRATE' or 'GO NORTH' (which could be abbreviated to 'N'). By typing in appropriate, context-dependent commands, players could solve puzzles and thereby overcome obstacles to their progress. For example, in one section of a colossal cave the nameless adventurer encounters a fissure 'too wide to jump' – no further progress can be made in that direction. In another room he discovers a 'three foot black rod with a rusty star on one end'. Although the purpose of the rod is initially unclear, the predicament of the fissure suggests particular uses that might be made of it:

>*>W*
>*On East Bank of Fissure*
>   *You are on the east bank of a fissure slicing clear across the hall. The mist is quite thick here, and the fissure is too wide to jump.*

>*>W*
>*The fissure is too wide.*

>*>WAVE ROD*
>*A crystal bridge now spans the fissure.*

>*>W*
>*West Side of Fissure*
>   *You are on the west side of the fissure in the hall of mists.*

>*A crystal bridge now spans the fissure.*
>   *There are diamonds here!*

(Crowther and Woods 1975–6)

9. Although theorists like Douglas dismiss IF as technologically out of date and hence of little interest, defenders of IF like Nelson contend that it makes little sense to argue that text-based games are outmoded just because computers twenty years later have graphical effects capable of producing near-realism in high resolution 3D. Such a stance would be like saying that because of the advent of television and film nobody should read books anymore.

10. For a detailed discussion of how all narratives function as virtual and potentially immersive spaces, see Ryan 2001.

11. A collaborative gesture towards developing 'writer response theory' (WRT) can be explored at http://writerresponsetheory.org (accessed 20 August 2008). The WRT website characterizes itself as 'a blogging collective dedicated to the discussion and exploration of digital character art – any art involving electrons and making use of letters, alphanumerics, or other characters in an interesting way. Our primary focus is on active and interactive works, in which users input text and receive textual responses as output.'

12. For detailed accounts of the origin and development of *Adventure*, see Nelson (1995), Montfort (2003b: 85-93), and

13. A major problem was *Adventure*'s interface. The limited two-word parser and the common 'I don't understand that verb' responses often resulted more in frustration than epiphany. Strains on interaction spell certain death for immersion, and a clunky interface can take attention away from the story and place it instead on the interface. For IF to succeed as a believable fiction, it must not feel like one is 'controlling' a character from the outside, by proxy (Chaouli [2005] similarly points out that violation of fictive space in hypertext makes the fiction begin to 'come apart'). Instead, through habit, the interface should ideally disappear as 'equipment' – to use Heidegger's expression (1977: 164) – and one will readily identify with the player character and inhabit the story vicariously through that persona.

14. Hyperfiction, in contrast, characteristically invokes only two parties: the narrator and the interactor. Although hyperfictions are fully capable of representing multiple points of view (for example, see *10:01* by Olsen and Guthrie) they typically do not have the interactor inhabit such narrative personae 'within the story'. This is the main reason why, in a paper focused on producing presence through interaction

Even in a game as simple as *Adventure*, the responsiveness of the world to one's own actions is satisfying because the ratio of known to unknown information is (generally) well-balanced. In a fantasy world, a discovered black rod with a rusty star at the top suggests magical power, but it isn't until one tries to use it at the chasm that it does anything; the combination of the mysterious object with an impassible gorge itself provides the clue of what to do. The fact that waving the rod creates a magical bridge that remains in place for the rest of the game provides the interactor with a sense of achievement, of successfully 'leaving his/her mark' on the textual landscape. The text has been both altered and opened up to further enquiry by the player's actions. More important, however, is the presence effect achieved by what VR researchers call 'supported action in the environment' (quoted in IJsselsteijn 2002: 251). In this example from *Adventure*, rather than depending on aural or visual 'special effects', the impression of tangibility is achieved solely through an object's textually represented responsiveness to player input. Because one of Gumbrecht's major concerns is how alternative worlds (for him, 'worlds of the past') can be made 'tangible' (Gumbrecht 2004: 94), an example like this one is crucial because of its purely performative character. The actions of the user here are as critical as the materiality of communication for producing presence. When the text registers a player's interactions by unveiling new signifiers representing an altered landscape, a sense of immersion can be produced.

But in the case of *Adventure*, just barely. *Adventure* is now notable as much for its limitations as for its breakthroughs. As a text adventure it succeeds in offering spatial exploration and puzzle solving galore, but little else.[13] And despite the primitive presence effects *Adventure* generates by responding to player input, its use of text is not exactly *literary*. The 'plot' (if one is willing to call it that) is narratively static, with no development apart from the fulfilment of a treasure hunt (a simplistic 'quest narrative' at best) – or the adventurer's dying or giving up in the process. In any case, puzzle solving does not serve to develop any sort of 'story'. Characterization is similarly thin: the adventurer himself is just a cipher, a conflation of player character with human interactor, not a legitimate fictional persona in its own right. In contrast, most current works of IF clearly distinguish three different parties (at least) that allow for the 'fiction' in IF to maintain a genuinely narrative frame. This triad of relations involves the *interactor* (you at the keyboard), the *player character(s)* in the story (the narrative persona[e] you control, referred to as the second person 'you') and the *narrator*. In paradigmatic IF, the computer-controlled *narrator* discloses a string of text to the human *interactor* providing a description about the situation of the fictional *player character*. You, the interactor at the keyboard, are called to respond at the cursor prompt.[14]

In many ways, *Adventure* is a lesson in how IF can fail *as fiction*, and how it can consequently be unsuccessful at generating narrative presence effects – particularly those of affect. But more recent works have changed the narrative terrain of IF radically. Ever since Infocom crashed in the late 1980s with several dozen high-quality titles under its belt including the *Zork* series and the critically acclaimed *Trinity* and *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, IF has been commercially unviable (and looks to remain that way). But

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from the mid 1990s to the present, a cadre of computer programmers, hobbyists and creative writers have continued to design works of IF – almost all available for free online – motivated in some part by several design competitions held yearly. The winner of the 2001 interactive fiction competition was *All Roads* by Jon Ingold (2006). Described by one reviewer as a 'supernatural espionage thriller set in a quasi-medieval Venice' (*Baf's Guide to the IF Archive* n.d.), *All Roads* is worth looking at closely because it provides examples of the potential presence effects IF might evoke *as fiction* – how IF can transcend Graham Nelson's half-serious characterization of it as 'a narrative at war with a crossword' (Nelson 1995).[15]

Like *Adventure*, *All Roads* permits spatial navigation through the entry of simple compass directions and requires the solving of certain puzzles to advance the narration. But that's where the similarities end.[16] On the interactor side of things, the parser is extremely versatile and well developed, and can accept full-sentence input – reducing frustration and conserving immersive momentum. The narration has equally improved, with much richer descriptions like this example from near the beginning of the story:

> *You stumble.*
>
> *Empty Room*
> *The light is dimmer here, the stones are cold. You are in a wide room, Gothic arches rising rib-like to the buttressed roof. Pigeons flit between crevices in the stone, their wing-flaps echo like sharp thunder. Dust spirals in the two slices of light from the crack windows by the roof. Perhaps this room is mainly underground, with the slots at earth-level.*
>   *There is but one door north from this vast space, of solid tarred wood, with a heavy lock set into the wood. It is secured.*
>   *A small mound of dust and cobwebs has accumulated in one corner.*
>   *Now to sort out your hands, which are still bound behind your back.*
>   *The call of a pigeon echoes sorrowful* [sic] *around the stone.*
>
>   (Ingold 2006)

Suggestive room descriptions like this one provide just enough detail to allow the interactor to fill in the gaps and bring forth a setting. The different items brought to the player's attention are particularly tantalizing. How well is the door secured? Is there anyone behind it? What might the small mound of dust and cobwebs reveal if you get a closer look?

> *>EXAMINE DOOR*
> *The door is heavy, of wide oak planks riveted together with black rivets.*
>   *You hear a noise, from behind the door. Footsteps. Followed by a scraping in the lock, of a key being removed.*
>
> *>LISTEN TO DOOR*
> *There are footsteps beyond the door, receding.*
>   *You hear voices from the street above; a woman says: 'I will look after this. Now why don't you just check the door is secure, there, Antonio?'*
>   *'Certainly,' comes a man's reply. 'I wouldn't want any of those cursed birds flying out.'*

15. In *The Craft of Adventure*, Nelson explains that new works of IF have largely overcome the sorry narrative state of the medium after *Adventure*: 'The days of wandering around doing unrelated things to get treasures are long passed … Even *Adventure* went to some effort to avoid this. Its many imitators, in the early years of small computers, often took no such trouble. The effect was quite surreal. One would walk across the drawbridge of a medieval castle and find a pot plant, a vat of acid, a copy of *Playboy* magazine and an electric drill. There were puzzles without rhyme or reason. The player was a characterless magpie always on the lookout for something cute to do. The crossword had won without a fight' (Nelson 1995).

16. Ingold's *All Roads* recently demonstrated its significance in the new wave of literary IF by its inclusion in the online *Electronic Literature Collection* (Hayles et al. 2006). The collection is ALSO included on the CD (under a Creative Commons License) with Hayles' new book *Electronic Literature: New*

in digital narratives, I address IF instead. (I should mention that hyperfictions would seem to offer unique presence effects of their own, including the effects of disorientation from multi-linearity and lack of closure.)

17. The key actually falls after a certain number of turns, not in response to any of the player's actual actions.

>*EXAMINE COBWEBS*
In one corner, the dust and cobwebs have piled up over something, though it's hard to tell what it is.

You hear footsteps in the passage outside the door, and at the same time one beam of light passes out, then appears once more, as something falls to the floor through the window slot. It is a key – a heavy iron key!

Something clatters through the street overhead, and a few birds are startled.

(Ingold 2006)

This passage makes striking use of *non-interactive* plot revelation in IF. The fact that the key falls into the room while you are examining the *cobwebs* – a causally unrelated act – creates a sense of *gratuitous* presence, a feeling that other characters are acting independently of you, the player character, and not merely in response to you.[17] And by overhearing snippets of conversation you only perceive fragments that you do not know how to interpret, adding a sense of mystery. You have incomplete information that you must begin to creatively fill in yourself. To find out more, you can try to pick up the key and use it to escape, but you are unable to reach it because your hands are tied. With such limited options, that pile behind the dust and cobwebs begins to look all the more intriguing…

>*MOVE COBWEBS*
You cannot, with your hands bound, so you close your eyes and blow; the dust billowing back at you in a cloud. You try to wave it away, cannot, and are forced to retreat for a few moments, eyes watering. When they clear, you see an old wine bottle has been uncovered.

(Ingold 2006)

The recurrent reminder of your bound hands reinforces the mystery of your circumstances. Why are you being treated like a criminal? Who are you, and how can you find out? Who is the strange woman you heard speaking to the guard? Can the wine bottle be made useful somehow? Thankfully, unlike in *Adventure*, here puzzles are incorporated into the narrative meaningfully, as genuine problems like 'how do I get my hands loose?', instead of 'how do I set down the precious vase without shattering it?' A mere *situation* – as it would be in a text adventure lacking a genuine 'character' – here becomes an authentic *predicament*. In *All Roads*, 'solutions' to problems thus actually advance the plot – and develop character – instead of just netting the adventurer a treasure:

>*EXAMINE BOTTLE*
An old bottle, with dark red wine visible behind the green glass. The label is too old to read, and maybe never said anything to start with.

>*GET BOTTLE*
You stand in front of the bottle, with it between your heels, and kneel, grasping, until your fingers brush the glass. Fumbling, you get a grip on the neck, and straighten up.

>BREAK BOTTLE

You release the bottle neck, and hear the glass shatter on the stone behind you, the sound bouncing jagged off the walls. The back of your leg feels wet as wine splashes over your trousers.

At the sound of the smash, the pigeons take fright. The birds swoop out of the thin windows in a panic, and out onto the street. You hear a man yelping, and footsteps through the doorway which run closer. The guard, sheltering from the birds, perhaps?

The birds whirl around the ceiling, clattering and squawking.

>GET GLASS

You lift one of the larger pieces, a dagger of glass; ever careful not to touch the edge.

Birds stream in and out of the windows, shredding the light.

>CUT ROPE WITH GLASS

(the glass dagger)

Slowly, you align the glass and the ropes. They slip – you try again. It's difficult, fumbling work, and each time you get through one strand the glass slips and you have to readjust it. Eventually, you sever the width of the rope – but the knot does not come free, it is so tangled, and the glass slips off the threads. You pause with ropes half cut.

The birds settle down, and finally come back to roost.

You hear the guard go back up to the street, cursing, 'Damned birds.'

<div align="right">(Ingold 2006)</div>

The bodily interactions supplied here by the narrator (holding the bottle in your heels and kneeling to grip it with your bound hands) make physical sense and add a greater sense of physical constraint. The splash of wine on the back of your trousers has absolutely no effect on gameplay or plot (the bottle could just as well have been empty), but its crimson wetness serves as a gratuitous piece of textual evocation that adds immersiveness to a dimly lit encounter – a nod to Barthes' 'reality effect' (Barthes 1989: 141–8). Manipulation of objects is also narrated and not merely transacted. Instead of just adding the bottle to your inventory or perfunctorily replying with a 'You can't pick it up' (as would be customary in earlier games), here a sense of bodily limitation is conjured by making it a fumbling, laboured process. The effects of the sound of breaking glass on the birds reinforce the sense that this is a world that responds to your actions – a real place. And – again making puzzles narrative instead of merely concocted – the guard's panic at the birds gives you some clue of how to get past him and escape. (In fact, there is more than one way to escape: you can slash the guard with a shard of glass to incapacitate him, or you can lock him out of the building and then scare the birds, which will result in him fleeing in panic down the street. And there might be other ways as well that I have not yet figured out …)

For right now, you're still locked in the cell and the rope is only half cut. You try again:

>CUT ROPE WITH GLASS

(the glass dagger)

Again, you painstakingly angle the glass to the fibres, and begin the slow process of chafing. One by one the strands around your wrist snap, and now the tension eases; until finally the rope knot slithers to the floor.

Gratefully you rub your hands together, and notice for the first time – you are wearing a gold ring.

(Ingold 2006)

Again, the solution to a puzzle has narrative effect – once your hands are free you encounter things about yourself that you didn't know before. The player character in *All Roads* thus gains legitimacy as a fictional character and not just as a virtual proxy for the person at the keyboard; indeed, this character's identity is unveiled progressively as the story develops, and a large part of this development results from interactions with objects and other (non-player) characters. You seek to find out more by typing in the following:

>*EXAMINE RING*
A golden ring, stamped with the Seal of Rome. You do not remember acquiring it; it must have been won gambling in the inn last night, or somesuch. It is probably quite precious.

(Ingold 2006)

You carry a ring with the Seal of Rome? That would seem to imply more than what the narrator relates. The results are mysterious, but intriguing, and only come to light gradually as you continue to explore the narrative of *All Roads* by interacting with it further.

One final presence-producing aspect of IF I would like to examine is the player's capacity, through his or her own actions, to experience alternative narrative perspectives. For instance, in Paul O'Brian's superhero serial adventure *Luminous Horizon* (first place winner of the 2004 interactive fiction competition), the opening description reads like this:

High Plains
Scrub bushes and sparse grasses provide a little ground cover for the otherwise rocky, sandy soil of this area. Other than the jagged mountains looming a few miles to the east, this spot seems entirely barren.
*   A damaged road sign lies at your feet.*
*   Emily hovers a few inches above the ground here.*

>*EXAMINE ME*
Sporting your earthsuit, you look every inch the superhero. Well, except without the caricatured physique.

>*EXAMINE EMILY*
Like you, Emily is decked out in her superhero regalia, a blue skysuit with cloudy white streaks.

(O'Brian 2004)

So far, this introduction is par for the course in IF, with the distinction that it comes with two characters rather than the traditional solo adventurer. The significance of this difference, however, is revealed with the ability to enter a 'CHANGE' command to swap control over these two personae. Note that when you switch points of view, you not only gain control over

the other character and obtain use of his or her unique superpowers, but the narrative's focalization – and, in turn, the description of the terrain – changes as well.

>*CHANGE*
[now controlling Emily]

High Plains
You've never been much of a fan of Westerns, but this area just seems to cry out for some cowboy to mosey through it. Everything's here – the scrappy little bushes, the rocky ground, the mountains in the eastern distance, and the sense of barren desolation. All that's missing is a lonely ghost town and a tumbleweed slowly bouncing across the frame. The air seems unusually still here, as if the landscape were holding its breath in anticipation.
> *Austin is here, staring intently at the landscape.*
> *A damaged road sign lies at your feet.*

(O'Brian 2004)

Austin's description had been antiseptic in its bare categorizing ('sparse', 'rocky', 'sandy' and 'jagged' are his primary descriptors). But when Emily becomes the focal point, the narrator instead populates the landscape with imagined associations specific to Emily: for her the area is redolent of popular culture ('Westerns') by seeming to 'cry out for some cowboy to mosey through it', and its bushes are personified as 'scrappy'. The fact that the landscape seems to be 'holding its breath' reinforces a sense of agency in the area rather than inert backdrop: for Emily, it's a *place* and not mere *space*. The gendering suggested in Austin and Emily's respective points of view is perhaps predictably schematic – Austin is the objective/rational male, Emily the subjective/intuitive female – but whether or not the stereotyping of gender roles counts as a weakness in the story, the capacity of the interactor to switch roles at will is striking. It allows him or her to experiment with virtually embodied perception and thereby experience two distinct versions of gender-situated presence. Later in the game, each character's particular mode of perception becomes critical because each one interprets the use of important objects differently: viewing the game world and interacting with it from *both* perspectives is required in order to complete the story. What might be more important here than the content of such gender-swapping perspectives is the effect that such role switching might have, generally speaking, on the generation of presence effects in digital narratives. In online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* and other graphically based computer games, it is common for male players to control female avatars, but this switch to a 'feminine perspective' does literally nothing to alter the landscape as it represents itself to the player. One's avatar looks different, and other characters might respond differently because of the avatar's gender markers (cf. Schmieder, this issue), but the representation of the world itself remains unaltered.[18] In the same way that binocular vision and stereophonic hearing synergistically bring forth a new dimension of awareness through their combination of multiple inputs, multiple narrative perspectives might generate unexpected new possibilities for presence production in IF.

18. Whether or not this failure to represent different narrative perspectives represents an intrinsic limitation of a graphical medium is, of course, a different question. I see no reason (other than technical complications) why a graphically based game world might not reveal itself differently depending on the avatar one uses to interact with it. Laurel's VR installation *Placeholder*, for example, implements multiple narrative perspectives in a graphically based medium by having players take on the perspectives of a spider, snake, fish and crow. See Laurel et al. (1994).

I have used these examples to provide a glimpse into IF's potential for making a fictional world *present* in a distinctively electronic, but non-graphical, manner. One might ask, however, why that would matter. Traditional fiction itself requires some degree of interaction to evoke presence and leave its mark on us, so why resort to the use of a computer? I suspect that the current zeal for 'interactivity' through computers has something to do with a desire to reclaim a meaningful sense of agency in our lives – and, for many readers, 'traditional' print texts can feel (justifiably or not) too passive. Through community fragmentation and a mechanized, push-button solution to many basic human needs and desires (these being represented by the existentialist cover-all trope of 'alienation'), we lose a sense of concerned engagement with the world; our actions leave no lasting 'mark' there. Gumbrecht suggests that because communication technologies have become so pervasive, they create a compensatory yearning in us for what we've lost because of them, namely a sense of embodied interaction (Gumbrecht 2004: 139). Paradoxically, IF might be one *technologically mediated* method for us to imaginatively produce – and, indeed, perform – such presence.

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Contributor details

Alf Seegert (M.A., M.S.) is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English (British and American Literature) at the University of Utah. His research on ecocriticism and cyberculture explores how our use of interfaces alters our sense of body, space and place. Although he has yet to design a work of interactive fiction, he is the author of several Euro-style board games currently in production.

Contact:
E-mail: alfseegert@gmail.com