

A Guide to Interactive Fiction on Your Psion.

by Will Green.

You are at The Introduction.> Hello.

You sweep up a gravelled drive to a beautiful and imposing house set in its own grounds. Turning off the engine of your Jaguar two seater sports car, you climb out of the drivers seat.

In the distance you can hear the ocean rollers crashing against the Cornish coast. Your invitation to this weekend party read that your room would be prepared and ready for your arrival, with a large and warming fire.

A guide book you studied detailing the area described many ghostly happenings and occurrences linked to many of the country houses in this part of England, the house at which you are about to spend the weekend is among them.

Grabbing your suitcase from the boot of the Jaguar you climb the steps to entrance of the house, a few knocks at the door eventually summon the Butler. I bet he did it!

Welcome to the world of text adventures!

Text adventures are one of those entertainment media's you will either love or hate. They will either bore you silly and irritate you beyond measure, or you will revel in the total immersion in their reality and your own imagination.

Text adventures are best described as interactive books. The world you find yourself in is described in detail and you are given the control to react to and effect the story as it unfolds.

Psion offers the perfect way to access this fantastic medium, better than any available. The key thing with 'Interactive Fiction' (I.F.) is you need a great keyboard and a wide screen ie; a Psion. Plus a Psion PDA gives you access to the I.F. world on the move, often the time you're most bored!

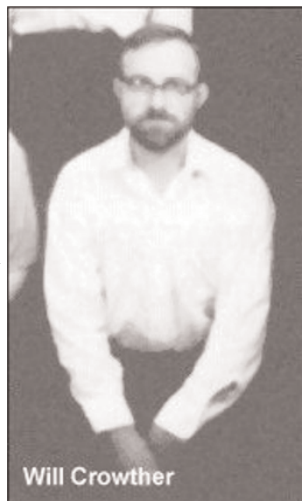
You see a sign, it reads "I.F. Introduction".
What would you like to do?> Continue.

One man is responsible for starting the Interactive Fiction phenomenon and I.F. could be said to be the originator of all computer based adventure or role playing gaming. That man was William Crowther.

Will Crowther and his wife Pat worked for Bolt/ Berandek & Newman, or BBN.

Pat and Will wrote assembly language for the first routers used in the creation of ARPAnet, a precursor to the Internet.

In his spare time Will was a keen cave explorer, who had a ASR33 Teletype machine set up in his living room, this connected to a main frame computer at BBN.



Fellow cavers could input cave survey data into the machine, Pat had then developed a program that could turn this data into plotted maps.

"I had been involved in a non-computer role-playing game called Dungeons and Dragons at the time, and also I had been actively exploring in caves - Mammoth Cave in Kentucky in particular. Suddenly, I got involved in a divorce, and that left me a bit pulled apart in various ways. In particular I was missing my kids.

Also the caving had stopped, because that had become awkward, so I decided I would fool around and write a program that was a re-creation in fantasy of my caving, and also would be a game for the kids, and perhaps some aspects of the Dungeons and Dragons that I had been playing.

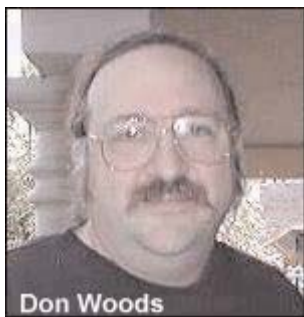
My idea was that it would be a computer game that would not be intimidating to non-computer people, and that was one of the reasons why I made it so that the player directs the game with natural language input, instead of more standardised commands. My kids thought it was a lot of fun."

- William Crowther

This first text adventure (written between 1968-72) was entitled "Adventure" (also called ADVENT, or Colossal Cave), and was written in Fortran for the PDP-10.



The 36-bit PDP-10



The Original BBN Team

Moving on to pastures new, inventing the Internet - that sort of thing, Will left his game on one of the SAIL computers at his work. Here it was picked up by a chap called Don Woods.

Don, keen to seek the permission of Will Crowther to improve the game, had no idea how to get in contact with him. So he sent an email to will-crowther@everydomainnameintheworld.com! At this time there weren't that many domains and soon Don Woods got an answer.

Don, a keen follower of Tolkien's fiction, added much of the atmosphere to the game, trolls, elves, and a volcano inspired by Tolkien's description of Mount Doom, where Sauron forged the One Ring of Power in the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

Thus in the same way as the ring was forged, so was the world's first Interactive Fiction game.

Welcome to Adventure - where would you like go now?> I would like to be Ported!

Porting means translating a program from one programming language to another. The importance of this means the 'ported' application may be run on a different type of computer.

Jim Gillogly was the first to port adventure from the original FORTRAN language to C, allowing Adventure to run on UNIX based computers. Gillogly with the help of Walt Bilofsky then ported it to IBM PC's and compatibles.

Porting is a complex process, especially when done by hand. This early hand porting approach can very much be seen as translating a book from one language to another. Often words in one language have no equal in the other, the interpreter then has to choose the best or closest way of reflecting the original word in the new language. This translation can often lead to very different interpretations and variants of the original document.

Thus these gaming pioneers created "The UNIX Adventure Tastefulness Committee", composing of Crowther, Woods, Jim, Walt, Peter Langston, Dennis Mumaugh, and Lauren Weinstein.

If I can interrupt at this point of the historical journey, personally this Committee sounds highly suspicious to me, "yes dear, I'm just meeting the The UNIX Adventure Tastefulness Committee down the pub, won't be long"! Anyway, moving on...

The game in its new portable format spread like wild fire, inspiring such obsessive efforts to solve the game that it is rumoured numerous college seniors did not graduate that year as a result!

The game (according to Tracy Kidder in 'The Soul of a New Machine') was used as a bench mark measure for testing new computer hardware.

The game then for the first time left the world of the computer specialist and entered into the commercial domain. DECUS (Digital Equipment Corporation User Group) were keen to market the game, and Adventure found itself bundled with new IBM PC machines.



DECUS included a secret code on completion of the game, which when presented to DECUS would result in the presentation of a Certificate of Wizardness, bearing (facsimile) signatures of both Crowther and Woods and an embossed seal.

The original Adventure game could only run on room size main frames, this porting pattern gradually reduced the size of the machine in order for Adventure to run.

A porting that took this miniaturisation even further was accomplished by Jim Mahaffey when he ported the game to the Psion Organiser II.

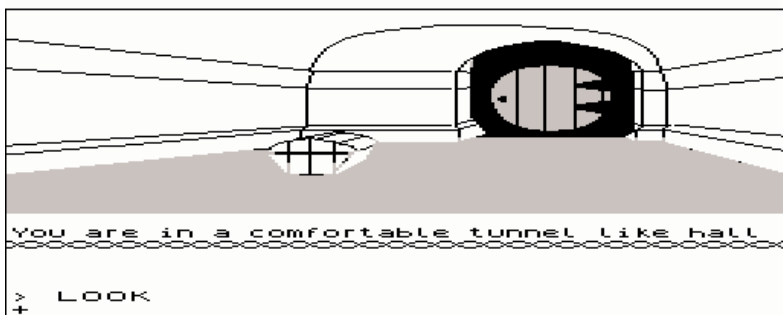
Although slightly striped down in order to run on the Organiser's tiny memory, Adventure on the OrgII is a very playable adventure with true retro-appeal.



You are in a large chamber with many exits. Which exit would you like to follow?> Sinclair Spectrum.

True accessibility to affordable computing (especially in the UK) came with the advent of the Sinclair Spectrum and to a lesser extent its precursors; the Sinclair ZX80 & ZX81.

With the Sinclair's graphic powers not being its best feature, Interactive Feature titles became very popular. You can gain access to literally hundreds of high quality I.F. programs with Spectrum emulators available for free for both the SIBO and EPOC Operating Systems.



129 % (128K Ram, 16 frames/second, 4 greys)



The legendary Hobbit game running on a 5mx using Tom Tom's free Spectrum emulator. If you visit www.tomtom.com it doesn't seem to be available, however typing in z80.sis in Google will soon yield results!

In the corner of the chamber is a beautiful golden challis, what do want do?> Examine it.

An inscription on the challis has only one word. "Infocom".>

There is one uncontended master of Interactive Fiction, and that is Infocom. The first Infocom game called Zork was written by a bunch of MIT graduates and students between 1977 and 1979.

Infocom, once established as a commercial venture, took the I.F. world by storm. The depth of detail and intricacy in the games is outstanding. Infocom also realised that the key the I.F. success lay in the imagination, thus games came complete with maps, guides, pictures, history and everything needed to augment and add depth to the game.



The MoonMist Pack.



Original MoonMist Art Work.
Scary!!

For instance MoonMist (the adventure described at the beginning of this article) included the book 'Legendary Ghosts of Cornwall', a comprehensive instruction manual including preface to the adventure, a book on the history of Tresyllian Castle (the castle you're staying in), stories of the 'White Lady' who is said to haunt the castle, your Invitation to the weekend party at the castle, a map, plus several letters from the lady of the castle addressed to you.

You can still pick up these original packs on eBay, but such is the fan base for Infocom games that all the original documentation has been scanned in by enthusiasts for free downloading.

Infocom games have to be run within 'interpreters', and there are interpreters for virtually every Operating System in existence, including both SIBO (not Psion 3 classic) and EPOC.

'Lost Treasures of Infocom' were released a few years ago for the Psion on a commercial basis. The package came with a selection of games and a Psion interpreter, but all this can now be downloaded for free.



Run Infocom games on both
SIBO and EPOC machines

You have reached a time portal, in which direction do you to travel?> The Future.

What of the Interactive Fiction scene now, 36 years after its inception? I'm pleased to say that things are very rosy! In 1995 Graham Nelson released the programming language at the core of Infocom games; Inform.

Kevin Wilson (a young undergraduate at Berkeley) proposed the development should be encouraged via a new yearly competition.

Discussions were held (similar The UNIX Adventure Tastefulness Committee I suppose) and after much discussion one simple rule was agreed upon for the competition. Each Adventure entered into the competition must be completable within 2 hours.

The 2003 competition (the votes are still coming in) has some 30 game entries and prizes for the winner range from a man's G-string to a free dinner (who says there's no such thing).

Anyone can enter and all the games entered are freeware, so why not download a few or even enter one yourself?

Anyway a storm has broken and my luggage and I are getting soaked, plus the Butler also seems to be getting a little impatient. I will unpack in my room (I prefer to do it myself), have a bath, dress and come down to dinner. Hold on a moment, was that a scream?

Web Links to software discussed in this article.

Psion Org II - Adventure. <http://members.surf.eu.at/org2/adventure.htm>

Spectrum I.F. Games. <http://www.worldofspectrum.org/textadv/a.html>

Psion Infocom Interpreters. <http://www.csd.uwo.ca/Infocom/interp.html>

Infocom - The Documentation Project. <http://infodoc.plover.net/>

Infocom - Download the Games. <http://www.latz.org/infocom/>

Infocom - Competition. <http://www.ifcomp.org>