Week 3
INTRODUCTION

Newspaper reports, history books, novels, films, comic strips, pantomime, dance, gossip, psychoanalytic sessions are only some of the narratives which permeate our lives. One species of narrative will be the subject of this book: the species called 'narrative fiction', whether in the form of novel, short story or narrative poem.

But what is a narrative? What makes the following limerick a narrative?

There was a young lady of Niger
Who smiled as she rode on a tiger.
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside
And the smile on the face of the tiger.

How can we differentiate between this limerick and the following discourse?

Roses are red
Violets are blue
Sugar is sweet
And so are you.
Why isn’t the latter a narrative?

And what is narrative fiction? How does it differ from other kinds of narrative? In what sense is a newspaper report, like “yesterday a store in Oxford Street was burned out” a narrative but not narrative fiction?

What are the features that turn a given discourse into a narrative text? What are the basic aspects of narrative fiction and how do they interact with each other? How does one make sense of a specific narrative text, and how can it be described to others?

These and other questions will be considered in some detail throughout this book. However, it is helpful to begin with working definitions of the key terms of the title, thus providing a framework for further deliberations.

Poetics is the systematic study of literature as literature. It deals with the question “What is literature?” and with all possible questions developed from it, such as: What is art in language? What are the forms and kinds of literature? What is the nature of one literary genre or trend? What is the system of a particular poet’s ‘art’ or ‘language’? How is a story made? What are the specific aspects of works of literature? How are they constituted? How do literary texts embody ‘non-literary’ phenomena? etc.

(Hrushovski 1976b, p. xv)

By ‘narrative fiction’ I mean the narration of a succession of fictional events. Self-evident as this definition may seem, it nevertheless implies certain positions with regard to some basic issues in poetics. To begin with, the term narration suggests (1) a communication process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by addressee to addressee and (2) the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message. It is this that distinguishes narrative fiction from narratives in other media, such as film, dance, or pantomime.

The definition further suggests how narrative fiction differs from other literary texts, such as lyrical poetry or expository prose. Unlike the latter, narrative fiction represents a succession of events (Tomashevsky 1965, p. 66. Orig. publ. in Russian 1925). At this early stage of our discussion, an event may be defined without great rigour as something that happens, something that can be summed up by a verb or a name of action (e.g. a ride – perhaps on a tiger). Although single-event narratives are theoretically (and perhaps also empirically) possible (see chapter 2), I speak of a succession of events in order to suggest that narratives usually consist of more than one. Thus the lady in the limerick first rides on a tiger, then returns in it.

Finally, the main interest of this book is in narratives of fictional events. This is why I shall not consider here nonfictional verbal narratives, like gossip, legal testimony, news reports, history books, autobiography, personal letters, etc. The fictional status of events is, I believe, a pragmatic issue. It is arguable that history books, news reports, autobiography are in some sense no less fictional than what is conventionally classified as such. In fact, some of the procedures used in the analysis of fiction may be applied to texts conventionally defined as ‘non-fiction’. Nevertheless, since such texts will also have characteristics specific to them, they are beyond the scope of this book.

The foregoing definition of narrative fiction also gives rise to a classification of its basic aspects: the events, their verbal representation, and the act of telling or writing. In the spirit of Genette’s distinction between ‘histoire’, ‘text’ and ‘narration’ (1972, pp. 71–6), I shall label these aspects ‘story’, ‘text’ and ‘narration’ respectively.

‘Story’ designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events.

Whereas ‘story’ is a succession of events, ‘text’ is a spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling. Put more simply, the text is what we read. In it, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order, the characteristics of the participants are dispersed throughout, and all the items of the narrative content are filtered through some prism or perspective (‘focalizer’). Since the text is a spoken or written discourse, it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect – ‘narration’. Narration can be considered as both real and fictional. In the empirical world, the author is the agent responsible for the production of the narrative and for its communication. The empirical process of communication, however, is less relevant to the poetics of narrative fiction than its counterpart within the text. Within the text,
communication involves a fictional narrator transmitting a narrative to a fictional narratee.

Of the three aspects of narrative fiction, the text is the only one directly available to the reader. It is through the text that he or she acquires knowledge of the story (its object) and of the narration (the process of its production). On the other hand, however, the narrative text is itself defined by these two other aspects: unless it told a story it would not be a narrative, and without being narrated or written it would not be a text. Indeed, story and narration may be seen as two metonymies of the text, the first evoking it through its narrative content, the second through its production. The relations among the aspects will be emphasized throughout this study, and the aspects themselves will inform the division into chapters.

Thus far I have suggested preliminary answers to all but the last two questions set forth in the beginning of this introduction. These two questions differ from the others in that they concern the specificity of individual texts rather than characteristics common to all works of narrative fiction. Indeed, the copresence of these two types of question is indicative of the double purpose of this book. On the one hand, I wish to present a description of the system governing all fictional narratives. On the other hand, I hope to indicate a way in which individual narratives can be studied as unique realizations of the general system.

This double orientation calls for a mixture of theoretical considerations and illustrations from works of narrative fiction. Of course, some issues are more amenable to illustration while others necessitate a more abstract discussion. The distribution of examples will vary accordingly. For reasons of space and variety, I do not analyse any text in full but prefer a discussion of extracts from many texts, deriving from various periods and various national literatures. Some examples are repeated in different contexts. This is done not only for the sake of reinforcement but also in order to emphasize that textual segments are junctions of various compositional principles, not ready-made examples of any one principle to the exclusion of others (although a predominance of one is obviously possible). Analysis requires emphasis on the issue under consideration, but texts are richer than anything such an isolation of aspects can yield.

My presentation draws upon Anglo-American New Criticism, Russian Formalism, French Structuralism, the Tel-Aviv School of Poetics and the Phenomenology of Reading. However, the book is not structured according to 'schools' or individual theoreticians (as, for example, Hawkes 1977). Rather, it is organized around the different specificities of narrative fiction (e.g. events, time, narration). The predilection revealed here for certain approaches as well as the selection of specific aspects from each approach imply a personal stand on the various issues. Nor is this stand confined to tacit implication: on the contrary, it often manifests itself in explicit comments on and modifications of the theories which are brought together. Yet this book does not offer an original theory. Indeed the tension between an integration of existing theories and a presentation of a personal view is one of the inevitable frustrations of any attempt at a synthesis. Similarly, it was necessary to extract the relevant points from each theory without presenting the theory as a whole or following all of its implications. It is hoped that the reader will be encouraged to continue to explore this field, and by so doing to fill in some of these lacunae.
Storytelling Games as a Creative Medium
Will Hindmarch

White Wolf Publishing’s *Vampire: The Requiem* is the boy king of storytelling games, successor to father and founder *Vampire: The Masquerade*. For fifteen years, *Vampire* in its various editions has been one of the most successful paper-based role-playing game properties, second only to the *lingua franca* of the hobby, *Dungeons & Dragons*. *Vampire* is perhaps best known for attracting large numbers of new players to the role-playing game hobby with its dramatic, modern gothic style and emphasis on narrative rather than game mechanics: *Vampire: The Requiem* describes itself as a modern gothic storytelling game in which players “play the monster” and “explore morality through the metaphor of vampirism” (*Vampire: The Requiem*, 14).

But what is a storytelling game? How can gameplay create a story? Superficially, a storytelling game is like a kind of role-playing game, but that description is, at best, insufficient. To identify storytelling games, we have to first understand why their identity is confusing. What makes a storytelling game more than an RPG, and what even makes storytelling a game?

Greg Costikyan, creator of the seminal role-playing game *Paranoia* and a prolific writer on numerous game design topics, has described stories and games as “antitheses” (Costikyan 2000). In his article, “Where Stories End and Games Begin,” he supposes that “there’s a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of story and the demands of a game.” If this is true, how is a storytelling game played?

The argument against the mingling of stories and games is not new. Ludologists like Costikyan have been fighting against the union of the two for years. In 1994, he wrote:

> Again and again we hear about story; interactive literature: creating a story through role-play. The idea that games have something to do with stories has such a hold on designers’ and gamers’ imagination that it probably can’t be expunged. It deserves at least to be challenged. (Costikyan 1994)

*Vampire* was only three years old when Costikyan wrote this challenge to the idea that games have “something to do...
with stories," but its popularity continued to grow throughout the '90s, as did the popularity of other story-intensive games, such as "interactive movies" utilizing full-motion video and such recognizable properties as *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*. Costikyan's emphatic desire to separate stories from games didn't waver, however. In 2000, the very same language appears in his article "Where Stories End and Games Begin," for *Game Developer* magazine.¹

*Vampire* was in its third edition.

To understand how storytelling games reconcile the theoretically antithetical relationship between their two halves—story and game—we'll challenge Costikyan's supposition that games are not a storytelling medium.

The Self-Image of Storytelling Games

Before we examine the two halves of storytelling games, however, let's look at their history and language. The idea that storytelling games and role-playing games are separate entities was put forth in 1991, in the first edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade*:

*Vampire* is not only a storytelling game, but a role-playing game as well. You not only tell stories, but you also act through them. Role-playing is a kind of interactive storytelling. (*Vampire: The Masquerade*, 1991, 20)

This definition—fifteen years old, now—is out of date. It suggests that a storytelling game is one in which the players narrate stories, while an RPG is one in which the stories are acted out. Even if that were accurate in 1991, it's not how the games are categorized now. Today, with computer- and console-based RPG players outnumbering pen-and-paper players, the RPG category describes games in which players control individual characters in the game world and develop those characters' traits and abilities over the course of play. The acting or role-playing element isn't even essential to the application of the label today. Additionally, the storytelling involved in most electronic RPGs, such as *Knights of the Old Republic*, is barely interactive, limited to a few decision points. The player controls the development of her character, but not how the story is told. Likewise, although the player is in control of a single character, selecting and advancing his traits and buying him equipment, she is not acting through the story as a feature of the gameplay.

By contrast, in 2004, White Wolf's Storytelling System rulebook states that "Storytelling is a type of role-playing game," implying that storytelling games are a subset of RPGs (*The World of Darkness*, 188).³ That is certainly true inasmuch as storytelling games are rightly filed on the store shelf with RPGs, but storytelling games don't refine the core ideas of RPG gameplay—they expand on them. A storytelling game is a collaborative narrative game built around an RPG.

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² Strictly speaking, the punctuation changed, but Costikyan continues to challenge the idea even though it "probably can't be" ²
³ *The World of Darkness* is the formal title of the Storytelling System rulebook, named for the game world in which *Vampire: The Requiem* and its sister games, *World of Warcraft: The Forsaken* and *Mage: The Awakening* are set.
Vampire, for example, is an RPG plus a storytelling game. It can be (and is often) played solely as an RPG, in which the advancement of a character's supernatural powers is the player's only goal, but that is not the goal stressed by the game itself. As it says in *Vampire: The Requiem*, "It's about stories" (*Vampire: The Requiem*, 198). The RPG element of the game is present because it's entertaining, but also because it's functional:

The only reason to have rules in a game, especially a storytelling game like *Vampire*, is to more or less level the playing field. The Storyteller can adjudicate most things in her *Vampire* game, deciding on her own whether or not the characters accomplish the actions they attempt. But truly unbiased rulings need some sort of standard or precedent, just so everybody knows that everyone's getting the same treatment. (*Vampire: The Masquerade* 3rd ed., 1998, 190)

Perhaps the most evocative description of *Vampire*'s gameplay dynamic comes from the third edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1998):

Forget about the pages of rules and the handfuls of dice. Close the book, turn out the lights, and tell a story about dark desires and relentless hunger. I'll tell you about a vampire, about her talents and her weaknesses, and you tell me what kind of challenges she faces, what rewards or perils come her way. You plan the twists and turns the story will take, and I will tell you how the vampire navigates them. Only you know how the story ultimately ends, but only I know how the vampire will arrive there. Along the way, the work you put into the story gives my vampire the chance to grow and develop, and her actions breathe life in the world you have created. (*Vampire: The Masquerade* 3rd ed., 1998, 254)

In the preceding quote, the speaker is a player in the game and "you" are the Storyteller. RPGs customarily discriminate between Storytellers and players, though the Storyteller is actually a player in the game, too. The Storyteller can be considered a kind of specialized player with responsibilities and authorities inherited from the needs of the game. According to the first edition of *Vampire* (1991):

One of the players is the Storyteller, who creates and guides the story. The Storyteller describes what happens as a result of what the players say and [their characters] do. It is the Storyteller who decides if the characters succeed or fail, suffer or prosper, live or die.

The Storyteller's primary duty is to make sure the other players have a good time. The way to do that is to tell a good story. (*Vampire: The Masquerade*, 1991, 20–21)

The power structure at the game table is uneven by design—the Storyteller has more authority and more responsibility.
From all of this we can infer, as many have, that "a good story" is one of the goals of a storytelling game. It shouldn't be. "Good storytelling" should be the goal of a storytelling game.

**Telling Stories Based on Random Numbers**

A brief primer on the Storytelling System: Every character in the game is described by mental, physical, social, and supernatural traits, representing things like natural aptitude, training, mystical spells, and earthly possessions. Each trait is measured on a scale from zero to five by a number of dots (e.g., Strength ++ or Wits -- -). Each dot represents one ten-sided die.

When a character, at the behest of the player, attempts significant actions that could change the course of the story or the state of the game world, dice are used to randomly determine the outcome of that action. Two traits are combined to form a "dice pool"—a collection of ten-sided dice based on the values of those two traits—which is rolled and examined. Every die that comes up 8 or higher is considered "a success." If the dice pool yields successes, the action is performed successfully. If every die comes up 7 or lower, the action fails.

The Storyteller can add or subtract dice from a player's dice pool by describing aspects of the game world that aid or hinder her character's action. These factors are also typically rated from zero to five. A good car adds dice to dice pools based on the traits Dexterity and Drive, while rain-slick roads could subtract dice from the pool.

That's it. As with many RPGs, the basic rules are simple but the game also gives Storytellers mechanisms that alter the basic rules to create suspense or an atmosphere of danger. In the Storytelling System, for example, a player may be required to accumulate a target number of successes before a time limit expires, or a poison might wither the character's traits as he slowly sickens.

Narrative information travels into and out of the game mechanics. The Storyteller contextualizes die rolls by framing them with descriptive narration, possibly emphasized with a dice pool bonus or penalty. It's also the Storyteller's job to translate the data generated by the dice—often as simple as "succeed" or "fail"—into an exciting bit of narration. When the dice say that a gunshot misses a player's character, the Storyteller says, "You hear the..."
drywall behind you crack like a bat and taste plaster in the air when the shot lands behind you."

RPG rules help the players and the Storyteller understand and explain how their characters, as their agents in the game world, affect and respond to the actions that unfold in the story. The game world exists only in an imaginary space created and shared between the players, including the Storyteller, and the game mechanics carry their agency into the game world in a quantifiable way that other players can't ignore. Each player is free to visualize details about the game world and the characters in it without the approval or additional input of other players or the Storyteller.

The Storyteller may describe a nighttime cemetery as being foggy and cold, with slick and slippery grass underfoot between the weather-worn Victorian headstones, but each player is free to add more details—deliberately or spontaneously—to the image in her own mind. One player may visualize the Victorian headstones as tall family stones draped with angelic statuary, while another player imagines the headstones barely visible above the grass and through tangling vines. Until or unless these details are challenged, and it becomes necessary for all of the players to agree on them for the sake of the action, each player's mental image goes untransmitted and exists only in their own imaginary space.

Let's say one player wants her prowling vampire to hide in the cemetery. In her mind, the cemetery is populated by those large familial headstones, so hiding should be relatively easy. The Storyteller, however, imagined the headstones as being low and lost amid the grass. He decides that movement through the tall grass is likely to make noise and disturb the scenery enough to attract attention to the hiding character. He describes these facts mechanically as a -2 dice penalty to the prowling vampire's dice pool. New features of the game world have now moved into the shared imagination of the players—the headstones are small and hiding in the cemetery is difficult—and the mechanical representation of these details gives them added meaning. If any other player attempts to have her character hide, she will be subject to the same dice pool penalty.

The rules represent a kind of social contract between the players. If a player chooses to ignore a penalty or injury to her character that comes from the game world, then she is plainly not participating in the game. If one player declares, "I shot you!" another player cannot simply insist, "You missed!" unless the dice back her up.

The random element also creates real suspense for the player, who makes choices based on her character's best interests and her own dramatic intent without knowing for certain how those choices will play out. The Storyteller must take the sudden, and potentially substantial, changes to the action that occur as a result of those random results and integrate them into the story as it is being told, without breaking the audience of players' suspension of disbelief or investment in the developing story. Managing even that difficult task is often easier than integrating the input of multiple contributing interactors in the same developing story as it is being told, but that is the challenge of being the Storyteller. That's the game the Storyteller is playing.
A traditional plot diagram showing dramatic tension rising vertically as the story unfolds horizontally from left to right. Though major incidents, such as reversals and setbacks, change the level of drama in the story, the story itself never truly branches. Only one path leads from the beginning to the end—the path written in the book or shown in the movie.

Storytelling in Action

The goal of a storytelling game isn't to produce a good story; it's to participate in good storytelling. Storytelling games are about the challenge of conceiving and telling stories, not the enjoyment of having a story or reading one. The process is the point, not the output.

This is the key difference between gaming as a storytelling medium and, for example, fiction. A novel is already complete when it is read; the story has been told, the game is over. That's what makes the reader a passive participant in the story rather than an agent in its telling; she's arrived too late to participate—the interactive part of the storytelling process has ended.

The point of fiction as a medium is to yield a product—a story—worthy of being read. That is not a kind of storytelling that most games are good at; as a medium. Games are good in the moment. Games are anecdotal. Stories that develop over the course of gameplay are personally exciting and meaningful in a way that movies and novels aren't, but they achieve this level of personal meaning at the expense of secondhand meaning. No one but the players are included in the excitement. The story of your stellar Crazy King match in Halo 2 means a lot to you, but no one else is going to get excited about it.

Storytelling games, and potentially any paper RPG played with an emphasis on narrative, are especially good at enabling multiple players to share in the challenge and entertainment of the storytelling process. Players enjoy the total narrative and creative freedom of writing their own novel, and it's the fun that comes with that freedom that's important, not the ultimate quality of the tale told. An RPG-originated story worthy of being read by a second party is a lucky by-product, not an essential product.

One of the usual pills in the ludologist's medicine bag is the conflict between the inherent linearity of a story versus the essential non-linearity of a game. Greg Costikyan, for example, writes:

A story is linear. The events of a story occur in the same order, and in the same way, each time you read (or watch or listen to) it. A story is a controlled experience; the author consciously crafts it, choosing precisely these events, in this order, to create a story with maximum impact. (Costikyan 2000)

Costikyan is clearly writing about finished stories. A completed novel is the same each time it's read. The linearity he's writing about isn't presumably just a feature of the novel being written already, but an expectation based on the idea that a story is carefully plotted and calculated, with one particular course that makes the story that story. A story's linear nature can be seen in traditional plot diagrams (Figure 7.6).

A story is, traditionally, the linear course from the beginning of the story to its dramatic, consciously crafted ending. It is not the level of drama (measured by rising action) that is linear on a plot diagram, but the temporal course of the story from beginning to end. Every time the story is read, the same events happen in the same order, from the inciting incident through the denouement. The story is fixed.

The finished story is fixed. When the story is being written—being told—Costikyan's linearity doesn't exist yet. Storytelling often is not linear. Prolific horror writer Stephen King makes choices as he reaches decision points in his own novels. He describes himself as the "first reader" of his novels, but in a sense he's also the only player in the interactive game of their telling:

I lean more heavily on intuition [than plot when writing] and have been able to do that because my books tend to be based on situation rather than story. . . I want to put a group of characters (perhaps a pair; perhaps even just one) in some predicament and then watch them try to work
Still, King is a lone writer, with total control over the outcome of his story. Many Storytellers fancy themselves to be a kind of "performance novelist," acting out their tales for the enjoyment of an audience of gamers. Wholly concerned with story over game and enchanted with the idea of garnering reputations as talented writers or would-be directors, they create rich, controlled experiences for players to travel through with an absolute minimum of interactivity, like a video game that's mostly cutscenes.

For a storytelling game to be successful, it cannot neglect one of its halves for the others. If the interactors lose their agency in the story, they cease to be players in a game and become the passive (and likely bored) audience of a one-man show. Costikyan warns about the necessity of player freedom:

A game is non-linear. Games must provide at least the illusion of free will to the player; players must feel that they have freedom of action within the structure of the game. They must not be constrained to a linear path of events, unchangeable in order, or they'll feel they're being railroaded through the game, that nothing they do has any impact, that they are not playing in any meaningful sense. (Costikyan 2000)

This degree of freedom is possible in storytelling games without sacrificing the story. Character (and therefore player) freedom is metaphorically possible in fiction. It is really possible in storytelling games. Stephen King describes his writing process:

The situation comes first. The characters—always flat and unfeatured, to begin with—come next. Once these things are fixed in my mind, I begin to narrate. I often have an idea of what the outcome may be, but I have never demanded of a set of characters that they do things my way. On the contrary, I want them to do things their way. In some instances, the outcome is what I visualized. In most, however, it's something I never expected. (King 2000, 161)

By defining a situation that's ripe for drama, King is themselves free. My job isn't to help them work their way free, or manipulate them to safety—those are jobs which require the noisy jackhammer of plot. (King 2000, 160–161)

The key to maintaining player freedom in a storytelling game is the abandonment of expectation. The Storyteller designates a setting for the game that is "rich with narrative potential" and creates a collection of dramatic conflicts and decision points to use within that space as they become necessary during play (Jenkins 2004, 129). The Storyteller then lets the players loose within the game world, trusting that genre and subject matter will instinctively show the players the boundaries of the game space. As the players
explore the game world, which is constantly being colored and informed by the Storyteller to reinforce the themes and atmosphere of his story, a narrative naturally emerges.

During play, the Storyteller simultaneously manages three interconnected tasks (figure 7.7):

1. Contextualizing, adjudicating and narrating the circumstances and outcomes of every die roll.
2. Maintaining a constant (but not necessarily steady) increase in dramatic tension as rising action climbs toward climax.
3. Subtly but firmly guiding the course of the story from each decision point toward a satisfying conclusion to the story.

The Storyteller may have an ending in mind for his story—ideally he should have a few—but he must abandon the expectation that a particular ending be fulfilled. Predetermined endings are an aspect of storytelling in other mediums. The Storyteller has a degree of input into the nature of the story's ending, but should not necessarily have more input than the players. The Storytelling System rulebook explains,

"The Storyteller's job isn't to defend his story from any attempt to change it, but to help create the story as events unfold, reacting to the players' choices and weaving them into a greater whole, introducing secondary characters and exotic settings. (The World of Darkness, 22)"

In the hands of an unresponsive Storyteller with a specific story already in mind, a storytelling game rapidly becomes a stiff, awkward hybrid of interactive fiction (IF) and RPG. Interactive fiction presents the reader with a small selection of possible choices for the characters and the story to pursue, but the list of choices necessarily restricts the reader to the choices on the list. And the outcome of each choice has already been written—that next branch of the story has already been told—so the reader isn't really influencing how the story is told, only how it is read by her. The fiction may be interactive but the creation of the story is not.

Storytellers running pre-scripted stories are giving up the best aspects of both hobbies, the freedom of storytelling and the puzzle-like layered narrative of IF for the sake of feeling like a writer. The Storyteller sits, frustrated, and players attempt to fulfill expectations they cannot identify by wandering without dramatic momentum through a potentially infinite game world in search of an invisible hotspot. The players are stuck trying to collaborate on a story that's already been finished, trying to play a game where none exists.

Chris Crawford describes interactive fiction this way:

"Interactive fiction is certainly interactive, and it's fictional in the sense of being made up, but it's certainly not storytelling. Some practitioners of the field write eloquently of the glorious narrative possibilities, but the actual creations remain elaborate puzzles. (Crawford 2005, 337)"

To be fair, Crawford seems to mean that interactive fiction is "not storytelling" on the part of the reader, who is an interactor with no real influence on the story. Certainly many interactive stories are well told, but the rearranging of jigsawed chapters is still a puzzle activity, not gameplay, no matter how handsome the picture looks when it's finished. Crawford maintains that interactive fiction will always be limited in this way. Finished stories cannot include "creative options"—the unexpected actions players inevitably think up and want to attempt, but which weren't included in the potential courses of action by the writer because they cannot react to the immediate, unforeseen input of the player.

Emily Short, a prolific and respected writer in the IF hobby, meditating on some ways that interactive fiction might deal with the challenge of providing creative options in her review of Crawford's book, described this solution:

"The trick lies, I think, in providing a simulation for whatever aspect of the world the player uses to express his choices. This is impossible if the player is expressing choice via an option list. It's possible with a world model and [text] parser, though, to give the player several ways to achieve the same outcome, and even (with a sufficient simulation under the surface) for that list of ways to include some unexpected by the author. (Short 2005)"

Short might as well be describing a human Storyteller. A Storyteller parses the inputs of the player, who may
attempt any action she can imagine. A Storyteller models the game world with words and dice at the moment the story is being told, in reaction to the actions of the player's character, expected or not.

A human Storyteller is still the machine best suited to the job of understanding, reacting to and influencing the dramatic choices of human players. The role-playing game is merely an interface, connecting players across psychic distances like Xbox Live connects us across miles. You say your character is clever, but if and when it becomes necessary to be more precise while telling our story, we have a common language that enables us to understand exactly what you mean by 'clever'—your character has four dots in Wits.

Interactive, electronic Storytellers are gaming's City of Gold, even in the face of human counterparts, for a sadly simple reason: capable, engaging Storytellers are few, especially relative to the number of would-be players online and at the game table. The number of Storytellers who can raise fear like fog with nothing but dialogue, blot out the sun with improvised narration, and hatch whole characters from dice is smaller still.

References: Literature


References: Games


Week 4
HERE'S A PAINTING BY MAGRITTE CALLED "THE TREACHERY OF IMAGES."

THE INSCRIPTION IS IN FRENCH. TRANSLATED, IT MEANS "THIS IS NOT A PIPE."

AND INDEED, THIS IS NOT A PIPE.

THIS IS A PAINTING OF A PIPE.

RIGHT?

SEE PAGE 216 FOR MORE INFORMATION.
WELL, ACTUALLY THAT'S WRONG. THIS IS NOT A PAINTING OF A PIPE, THIS IS A DRAWING OF A PAINTING OF A PIPE.

N'EST-CE PAS?

NOPE. WRONG AGAIN. IT'S A PRINTED COPY OF A DRAWING OF A PAINTING OF A PIPE.

TEN COPIES, ACTUALLY. SFX, IF YOU FOLD THE PAGES BACK.

DO YOU HEAR WHAT I'M SAYING?

IF YOU DO, HAVE YOUR EARS CHECKED, BECAUSE NO ONE SAID A WORD.
THIS IS NOT A MAN.

THIS IS NOT A COUNTRY.

THIS IS NOT A LEAF.

THESE ARE NOT PEOPLE.

THIS IS NOT MUSIC.

THIS IS NOT A COW.

THESE ARE NOT FLOWERS.

THIS IS NOT A PLANET.

THIS IS NOT ME.

THIS IS NOT A CAR.

THIS IS NOT A COMPANY.

THESE ARE NOT SEPARATE MOMENTS.

THIS IS NOT SOUND.

THIS IS NOT A FACE.

WELCOME TO THE STRANGE AND WONDERFUL WORLD OF THE ICON.

THIS IS NOT MY VOICE.
Now, the word _icon_ means many things. For the purposes of this chapter, I'm using the word "icon" to mean any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea. That's a bit broader than the definition in my dictionary, but it's the closest thing to what I need here. "Symbol" is a bit too loaded for me.

The sorts of images we usually call symbols are one category of icon, however.

The sorts of images we use to represent concepts, ideas and philosophies.

And finally, the icons we call pictures: images designed to actually resemble their subjects.

Then there are the icons of language, science and communication.

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<th>ABCD</th>
<th>1 2 3 4</th>
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These are the images we use to represent concepts, ideas and philosophies.

But as resemblance varies, so does the level of iconic content.

Or to put it somewhat clumsily, some pictures are just more iconic than others.
In Pictures, however, meaning is fluid and variable according to appearance. They differ from "real-life" appearance to varying degrees.

In the non-pictorial icons, meaning is fixed and absolute; their appearance doesn't affect their meaning because they represent invisible ideas.

Words are totally abstract icons. That is, they bear no resemblance at all to the real McCoy.

But in pictures the level of abstraction varies. Some, like the face in the previous panel, so closely resemble their real-life counterparts as to almost trick the eye!

Let's see if we can put these pictorial icons in some sort of order.

There are many things that set these apart from actual faces—they're smaller, flatter, less detailed. They don't move. They lack color—but as pictorial icons, they're pretty "realistic."

Common wisdom holds that the photograph and the realistic picture are the icons that most resemble their real-life counterparts.

Reality this way...
ONLY OUTLINES AND A HINT OF SHADING ARE STILL PRESENT, BUT WE EASILY RECOGNIZE THIS AS A HUMAN FACE.

SOMETHING MORE ABSTRACT IS THIS STYLE OF DRAWING FOUND IN MANY ADVENTURE COMICS.

AS WE CONTINUE TO ABSTRACT AND SIMPLIFY OUR IMAGE, WE ARE MOVING FURTHER AND FURTHER FROM THE "REAL" FACE OF THE PHOTO.

WHAT IS THE SECRET OF THE ICON WE CALL--

WHY THEN, IS THE FACE ABOVE SO ACCEPTABLE TO OUR EYES? WHY DOES IT SEEM JUST AS REAL AS THE OTHERS?

--THE CARTOON?
WHY WOULD ANYONE, YOUNG OR OLD, RESPOND TO A CARTOON AS MUCH OR MORE THAN A REALISTIC IMAGE?

WHY IS OUR CULTURE SO IN THRALL TO THE SIMPLIFIED REALITY OF THE CARTOON?

DEFINING THE CARTOON WOULD TAKE UP AS MUCH SPACE AS DEFINING COMICS BUT FOR NOW, I'M GOING TO EXAMINE CARTOONING AS A FORM OF AMPLIFICATION THROUGH SIMPLIFICATION.

WHEN WE ABSTRACT AN IMAGE THROUGH CARTOONING, WE'RE NOT SO MUCH ELIMINATING DETAILS AS WE ARE FOCUSING ON SPECIFIC DETAILS.

BY STRIPPING DOWN AN IMAGE TO ITS ESSENTIAL MEANING, AN ARTIST CAN AMPLIFY THAT MEANING IN A WAY THAT REALISTIC ART CAN'T.
THE ABILITY OF CARTOONS TO FOCUS OUR ATTENTION ON AN IDEA IS, I THINK, AN IMPORTANT PART OF THEIR SPECIAL POWER, BOTH IN COMICS AND IN DRAWING GENERALLY.

THOUGH THE TERM IS OFTEN USED DISPARAGINGLY, IT CAN BE EQUALLY WELL APPLIED TO MANY TIME-TESTED CLASSICS. SIMPLIFYING CHARACTERS AND IMAGES TOWARD A PURPOSE CAN BE AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR STORYTELLING IN ANY MEDIUM.

CARTOONING ISN'T JUST A WAY OF DRAWING, IT'S A WAY OF SEEING!

BUT I BELIEVE THERE'S SOMETHING MORE AT WORK IN OUR MINDS WHEN WE VIEW A CARTOON—ESPECIALLY OF A HUMAN FACE—WHICH WARRANTS FURTHER INVESTIGATION.

THE FACT THAT YOUR MIND IS CAPABLE OF TAKING A CIRCLE, TWO DOTS AND A LINE AND TURNING THEM INTO A FACE IS NOTHING SHORT OF INCREDIBLE!

BUT STILL MORE INCREDIBLE IS THE FACT THAT YOU CANNOT AVOID SEEING A FACE HERE, YOUR MIND WON'T LET YOU!

WHAT ARE YOU REALLY SEEING?

ANOTHER IS THE UNIVERSALITY OF CARTOON IMAGERY. THE MORE CARTOONY A FACE IS, FOR INSTANCE, THE MORE PEOPLE IT COULD BE SAID TO DESCRIBE.

FILM CRITICS WILL SOMETIMES DESCRIBE A LIVE-ACTION FILM AS A "CARTOON" TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE STRIPPED-DOWN INTENSITY OF A SIMPLE STORY OR VISUAL STYLE.

THE FACT THAT YOUR MIND IS CAPABLE OF TAKING A CIRCLE, TWO DOTS AND A LINE AND TURNING THEM INTO A FACE IS NOTHING SHORT OF INCREDIBLE!
Now—you'll find that no matter what they look like, every single one of those shapes can be made into a face with one simple addition.

Let's say the results look something like this.

Ask a friend to draw you some shapes on a piece of paper. They should be closed curves, but otherwise can be as weird and irregular as he or she wants.

Your mind has no trouble at all converting such shapes into faces, yet would it ever mistake this—

--for this?

We humans are a self-centered race.
WE SEE Ourselves in EVERYTHING.

WE ASSIGN IDENTITIES AND EMOTIONS WHERE NONE EXIST.

AND WE MAKE THE WORLD OVER IN OUR IMAGE.
THINK OF YOUR FACE AS A MASK.

THAT'S WHAT IT IS, AFTER ALL.

A MASK.

FACING OUTWARD.

WORN FROM THE DAY YOU WERE BORN.

SLAVE TO YOUR EVERY MENTAL COMMAND.

SEEN BY EVERYONE YOU MEET.

BUT NEVER BY YOU.

OPEN ITS EYES NOW.

JUST THINK IT, THE MASK WILL OBEY.
GOOD.
NOW, WHAT CHANGED WHEN YOU SMILED? WHAT DID YOU SEE?
NOTHING, RIGHT.

GOOD, NOW WHAT CHANGED WHEN YOU SMILED? WHAT DID YOU SEE?
NOTHING, RIGHT.

YET, YOU KNOW YOU SMILED! NOT JUST BECAUSE YOU FELT YOUR CHEEKS COMPRESS OR THE CRINKLING AROUND YOUR EYES.

YOU KNOW YOU SMILED BECAUSE YOU TRUSTED THIS MASK CALLED YOUR FACE TO RESPOND!
BUT THE FACE YOU SEE IN YOUR MIND IS NOT THE SAME AS OTHERS SEE!

WHEN TWO PEOPLE INTERACT, THEY USUALLY LOOK DIRECTLY AT ONE ANOTHER, SEEING THEIR PARTNER'S FEATURES IN VIVID DETAIL.
Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid; just a sketchy arrangement... a sense of shape... a sense of general placement.

Thus, when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face--

--you see it as the face of another.

But when you enter the world of the cartoon--

--you see yourself.

I believe this is the primary cause of our childhood fascination with cartoons, though other factors such as universal identification, simplicity, and the childlike features of many cartoon characters also play a part.

The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled.

...an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm.

That's why I decided to draw myself in such a simple style.

We don't just observe the cartoon; we become it!
I doubt it! You would have been far too aware of the message to fully receive the message.

Apart from what little I told you about myself in Chapter One, I'm practically a blank slate!

It would never even occur to you to wonder what my politics are, or what I had for lunch or where I got this ugly outfit?

I'm just a little voice inside your head.

A concept.

Who I am is irrelevant. I'm just a little piece of you.

But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more.

That's the theory, anyway.

You give me life by reading this book and by "filling up" this very iconic (cartoony) form.

Who I am is irrelevant. I'm just a little piece of you.

But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more.

That's the theory, anyway.

So far, we've only discussed faces, but the phenomenon of non-visual self-awareness can, to a lesser degree, still apply to our whole bodies. After all, do we need to see our hands to know what they're doing?
THE LATE GREAT MARSHALL MCLUHAN OBSERVED A SIMILAR FORM OF NON-VISUAL AWARENESS WHEN PEOPLE INTERACT WITH INANIMATE OBJECTS.

WHEN DRIVING, FOR EXAMPLE, WE EXPERIENCE MUCH MORE THAN OUR FIVE SENSES REPORT.

THE WHOLE CAR—NOT JUST THE PARTS WE CAN SEE, FEEL AND HEAR—IS VERY MUCH ON OUR MINDS AT ALL TIMES.

THE VEHICLE BECOMES AN EXTENSION OF OUR BODY. IT ABSORBS OUR SENSE OF IDENTITY. WE BECOME THE CAR.

IF ONE CAR HITS ANOTHER, THE DRIVER OF THE VEHICLE BEING STRUCK IS MUCH MORE LIKELY TO SAY:

"KLUNK! HE HIT ME!!"

"HE HIT MY CAR!"

OR "HIS CAR HIT MY CAR," FOR THAT MATTER.

OUR IDENTITIES AND AWARENESS ARE INVESTED IN MANY INANIMATE OBJECTS EVERY DAY. OUR CLOTHES, FOR EXAMPLE, CAN TRIGGER NUMEROUS TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE WAY OTHERS SEE US AND IN THE WAY WE SEE OURSELVES.
AND JUST AS OUR AWARENESS OF OUR BIOLOGICAL SELVES ARE SIMPLIFIED CONCEPTUALIZED IMAGES—

AND IN EVERY CASE, OUR CONSTANT AWARENESS OF SELF—

-- FLOWS OUTWARD TO INCLUDE THE OBJECT OF OUR EXTENDED IDENTITY.

--SO TOO IS OUR AWARENESS OF THESE EXTENSIONS GREATLY SIMPLIFIED.

ALL THE THINGS WE EXPERIENCE IN LIFE CAN BE SEPARATED INTO TWO REALMS, THE REALM OF THE SENSES.

AND THE REALM OF THE CONCEPT—
Our identities belong permanently to the conceptual world: they can't be seen, heard, smelled, touched or tasted. They're merely ideas.

And everything else—at the start—belongs to the sensual world, 'the world outside' of us.

Gradually we reach beyond ourselves.

We encounter the sight, smell, touch, taste and sound of our own bodies.

And of the world around us.

And soon we discover that objects of the physical world can also cross over.

---and possess identities of their own.

Or, as our extensions---

---begin to glow---

---with the life---
--WE LEND TO THEM.

BY DE-EMPHASIZING THE APPEARANCE OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD IN FAVOR OF THE IDEA OF FORM, THE CARTOON PLACES ITSELF IN THE WORLD OF CONCEPTS.

THROUGH TRADITIONAL REALISM, THE COMICS ARTIST CAN PORTRAY THE WORLD WITHOUT--

--AND THROUGH THE CARTOON, THE WORLD WITHIN.

WHEN CARTOONS ARE USED THROUGHOUT A STORY, THE WORLD OF THAT STORY MAY SEEM TO PULSE WITH LIFE.

INANIMATE OBJECTS MAY SEEM TO POSSESS SEPARATE IDENTITIES SO THAT IF ONE JUMPED UP AND BEGAN SINGING IT WOULDN'T FEEL OUT OF PLACE.

BUT IN EMPHASIZING THE CONCEPTS OF OBJECTS OVER THEIR PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, MUCH HAS TO BE OMITTED.

IF AN ARTIST WANTS TO PORTRAY THE BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD--

--REALISM OF SOME SORT IS GOING TO PLAY A PART.

41
STORYTELLERS IN ALL MEDIA KNOW THAT A SURE INDICATOR OF AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT--

--IS THE DEGREE TO WHICH THE AUDIENCE IDENTIFIES WITH A STORY'S CHARACTERS.

ON THE OTHER HAND, NO ONE EXPECTS AUDIENCES TO IDENTIFY WITH BRICK WALLS OR LANDSCAPES AND INDEED, Backgrounds TEND TO BE SLIGHTLY MORE REALISTIC.

AND SINCE VIEWER-IDENTIFICATION IS A SPECIALTY OF CARTOONING, CARTOONS HAVE HISTORICALLY HELD AN ADVANTAGE IN BREAKING INTO WORLD POPULAR CULTURE.

IN SOME COMICS, THIS SPLIT IS FAR MORE PRONOUNCED. THE BELGIAN "CLEAR-LINE" STYLE OF HEROES' TINTIN COMBINES VERY ICONIC CHARACTERS WITH UNUSUALLY REALISTIC BACKGROUNDS.

WHEN DRAWING THE FACE AND FIGURE, NEARLY ALL COMICS ARTISTS APPLY AT LEAST SOME SMALL MEASURE OF CARTOONING. EVEN THE MORE REALISTIC ADVENTURE ARTISTS--

--ARE A FAR CRY FROM PHOTO-REALISTS!
This combination allows readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world.

In the world of animation, where the effect happens to be a practical necessity, Disney has used it with impressive results for over 50 years! In Europe it can be found in many popular comics, from Asterix to Tintin to works of Jacques Tardi.

In American comics, the effect is used far less often, although it has crept up in the works of artists as diverse as Carl Barks, Jaime Hernandez and in the team of Dave Sim and Gerhard.

In Japan, on the other hand, the masking effect was, for a time, virtually a national style! Thanks to the seminal influence of comics creator Osamu Tezuka, Japanese comics have a long, rich history of iconic characters.

But, in recent decades, Japanese fans also developed a taste for flashy, photorealistic art. Click!

Art © Hayashi and Osima.
We'll return to these differences several times during this book.

For example, while Japanese comics artists took the idea a step further, some of them realized that the objectifying power of realistic arts could be put to other uses.

Soon, some of them realized that the power of realistic arts could be put to other uses, with different results. From extremely cartoony characters to near-photographic backgrounds, the resultant hybrid styles had tremendous iconic range, from extremely cartoony characters to near-photographic backgrounds.

In this and in other ways, comics in Japan have evolved very differently from those in the West.

In Japanese comics, the sword might now become very realistic, not only to show us the details, but to make us aware of the sword as an object, something with weight, texture and physical complexity.

But suppose I notice some mysterious writing carved on the sword's hilt.

In this and in other ways, comics in Japan have evolved very differently from those in the West.

We'll return to these differences several times during this book.

For example, while most characters were designed simply to assist in reader-identification—other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their "otherness" from the reader.

A prop like this sword might be very cartoony in one sequence—due to the "life" it possesses as an extension of my cartoon identity.
As I write this, in 1992, American audiences are just beginning to realize that a simple style doesn't necessitate a simple story. The Platonic ideal of the cartoon may seem to omit much of the ambiguity and complex characterization which are the hallmarks of modern literature, leaving them suitable only for children.

And like the atom, great power is locked in these few simple lines. Reassemble only by the reader's mind.

I like the masking effect, personally, but it's just one of many possible approaches to comics art. Many of my favorite artists use it very rarely.

Still, I hope the Japanese perspective on cartooning helps demonstrate that one's choice of styles can have consequences far beyond the mere "look" of a story.

But simple elements can combine in complex ways, as atoms become molecules and molecules become life, leaving them suitable only for children.
"REALITY"

WE'VE REDUCED THIS FACE TO TWO DOTS AND TWO LINES. IS OUR IONIC ABSTRACTION SCALE COMPLETE?

WAIT! THERE'S MORE!

THE SCALE SHOWS SEVERAL SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT PROGRESSIONS. LET'S CONCENTRATE ON ONE AND SEE IF WE CAN TAKE IT ANY FURTHER.

CAN ANY CONFIGURATION OF INK ON PAPER BE MORE ABSTRACTED FROM "REALITY"

-- YET STILL REPRESENT A FACE AS CLEARLY AS THIS ONE?

I SAY THE ANSWER IS YES.

HERE'S A PART OF THE SOLUTION.

JUST DRAW A LINE STRAIGHT DOWN FROM EACH OF THE DOTS TO THIS HEIGHT FOR THE ANSWER.
AND "GOOD" COMICS AS THOSE IN WHICH THE COMBINATION OF THESE VERY DIFFERENT FORMS OF EXPRESSION IS THOUGHT TO BE HARMONIOUS.

A SINGLE UNIFIED LANGUAGE DESERVES A SINGLE, UNIFIED VOCABULARY. WITHOUT IT, COMICS WILL CONTINUE TO LIMP ALONG AS THE "BASTARD CHILD" OF WORDS AND PICTURES.

SEVERAL FACTORS HAVE CONSPired AGAINST COMICS RECEIVING THE UNIFIED IDENTITY IT NEEDS.

AND AMONG THEM LIE SOME OF OUR VERY BEST INSTINCTS.
Both artist and writer begin, hands joined across the gap, with a common purpose: to make comics of "quality." The artist knows that this means more than just stick-figures and crude cartoons. He sets off in search of a higher art. The writer knows that this means more than just "oof! pow! boom!" and one-a-day gags. She sets off in search of something deeper.

In museums and in libraries, the artist finds what he's looking for. He studies the techniques of the great masters of western art. He practices night and day. She too finds what she's looking for, in the great masters of western literature. She reads and writes constantly. She searches for a voice uniquely hers.

Finally, they're ready. Both have mastered their arts. His brushstroke is nearly invisible in its subtlety. The figures pure Michaelangelo. Her descriptions are dazzling. The words flow together like a Shakespearean sonnet.

They're ready to join hands once more and create a comic masterpiece.

Two eyes. One nose. One mouth.

The writer thinks, "I'm going on how..."
I say the answer is yes, but since the reasons belong in a different chapter, we'll have to come back to this later.

Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to "get the message." The message is instantaneous.

Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language.

Our need for a unified language of comics sends us toward the center where words and pictures are like two sides of one coin.

When words are bolder, more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures.

When pictures are more abstracted from "reality," they require greater levels of perception, more like words.

Both are worthy aspirations. Both stem from a love of comics and a devotion to its future. Can they be reconciled?

Both are worthy aspirations. Both stem from a love of comics and a devotion to its future. Can they be reconciled?
ICONIC ABSTRACTION IS ONLY ONE FORM OF ABSTRACTION AVAILABLE TO COMICS ARTISTS.

USUALLY THE WORD "ABSTRACTION" REFERS TO THE NON-ICONIC VARIETY, WHERE NO ATTEMPT IS MADE TO CLING TO RESEMBLANCE OR MEANING.

THE TYPE OF ART WHICH USUALLY PROMPTS THE QUESTION "WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

EARNING THE REPLY "IT MEANS WHAT IT IS!" IN THIS CASE--

"INK ON PAPER."
This is the realm of the art object, the picture plane, where shapes, lines and colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise.

Below me, the area described by these 3 vertices—"reality", language and the picture plane—represents the total pictorial vocabulary of comics or of any of the visual arts.

Most comics art lies near the bottom—that is, along the iconic abstraction side where every line has a meaning.

Near the line, but not necessarily on it! For even the most straight-forward little cartoon character has a "meaningless" line or two!

If we incorporate language and other icons into the chart, we can begin to build a comprehensive map—of the universe called comics.
1. MARY FLEENER at her most abstract. 2. MARISCOAL’s Pie. 3. DAVE McKean employing one of the many styles found in his series CAGES. 4. MARC HEMPEL’s GREGORY. 5. MARK BEYER. 6. LARRY MARRED’s Beans from TALES OF THE GEANWORLD. “Resembling” nothing ever seen (hence all the way to the right), Marred’s beans walk the line from design to meaning. 7. SAUL STEINBERG. 8. PENNY MORAN VAN- HORN from THE LERMAN. 9. LORENZO MATTOTTi in FIRE (© Editions Albin Michel S.A.) combines deeply impressionistic lighting with iconic forms and strong, design-oriented compositions. In other words, he’s a hard one to place. 10. ALINE KOMINSKY-CRUMB. 11. PETER BAGGE’s Chuckie·Boy from NEAT STUFF. Compare to 39. 12. KRISTINE KRYTTRE. 13. REA IRVIN. 14. STEVE WILLIS’s Morly. 15. PHIL YEH’s FRANK THE UNICORN. 16. JERRY MORIARTY’s ‘Jack Survives”. Based closely on real world light and shadow, but decomposed into rough shapes. Similar effects are found in nos. 18,19,20 and 34. 17. JEFF WONG’s art for Scott Russo’s JIZZ. 18. ROLF STARK’s expressionistic RAIN. 19. SPAIN’s TRASHMAN. 20. FRANK MILLER’s THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS. Batman © D.C. Comics. Batman created by Bob Kane. 21. WILLIAM MESSNER-LOEBS’s Wolverine MacAlistair from JOURNEY. 22. DON SIMPSON’s MEGATON MAN. Beginning from a realistic anatomical base, Simpson distorts and exaggerates M.M.’s features to the brink of abstraction. 23. MICHAEL CHERNAS from SILENT INVASION, © Cherkes and Hancock. 24. RICK GEARY. 25. PETER KUPER. 26. GARRY TRUDEAU’s DOONESBURY. 27. LYnda BARRY. 28. SAMPEI SHINAKI. 29. CHARLES BURNIG’s BIG BABY. 29 1/2. (Whoops) CLIFF STERNHUT. The character pictured here (from POLLY AND HER PALS) might belong a bit lower, but Sternhut’s art, like Fleener’s often heads upward toward the wildly abstract. P.A.H.P. is © Newspaper Features Syndicate, Inc. 30. SERGIO ARAGONE’S GROO THE WANDERER. Simple, straightforward, but with a strong gestural quality that always reminds us of the hand that holds the pen (also true of 14,28,31,41). 31. ROBERTA GREGORY’s Bitchy Bitch from NAUGHTY SITS. 32. DAVID MAZZUCCHELLI from BATMAN: YEAR ONE. Commissioner Gordon © D.C. Comics. 33. JOSE MUNOZ from “Mister Conrad, Mister Webs”. © Munoz and Sampayo. 34. CAROL
Most of the preceding examples were placed on our chart based on the drawing styles used on specific characters. Each creator employs a range of styles, though, and many occupy several places on the chart during a given project.

Some, like Matt Feazell’s Cynicalman, keep to one area consistently.

The combination of extremely iconic characters and environments, mixed with simple, direct language and a sound effect or two, would give us a shape something like this:

But others range considerably from one end of the chart to the other.

We’ve already discussed the range of Hergé and others who contrast iconic characters with realistic backgrounds.

Hergé stretches nearly from left to right—from realism to cartooning—but ventures very little into the upper world of non-iconic abstraction.
A FIGHT STARTED ON HIS DOORSTEP, HE PUT A STOP TO IT. WHAT ABOUT THAT WALKIN' TIME AFTER IT?

THAT'S RIGHT! IF HE'S STILL LOOKING... THERE'S NO TELLING WHAT'LL HAPPEN!

Hey, come on, think of it... What about that walkin' time afterward?

In the mid-sixties, Jack Kirby, along with Stan Lee, staked out a middle ground of iconic forms with a sense of the real about them, bolstered by a powerful design sense.

Today, many American mainstream comics still follow Kirby's lead for storytelling, but the desire for more realistic art and more elaborate scripts has pushed art and story further apart in many cases.

Art: Jim Lee and Scott Williams (Facsimile) Script: Chris Claremont.
IN THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES, MOST OF THE COUNTERCULTURE OF INDEPENDENT CREATORS, WORKING MOSTLY IN BLACK AND WHITE, STAYED TO THE RIGHT OF MAINSTREAM COMICS ART WHILE COVERING A BROAD RANGE OF WRITING STYLES.

IRONIC THAT THE TWO BASTIONS OF CARTOONY ART ARE UNDERGROUND AND CHILDREN’S COMICS! PRETTY FAR APART AS GENRES GO!

THIS FOLLOWS THE LEAD OF THE POST-KURTZMAN GENERATION OF UNDERGROUND CARTOONISTS WHO USED CARTOONY STYLES TO PORTRAY ADULT THEMES AND SUBJECT MATTER.

SOME ARTISTS, SUCH AS THE IRREPRESSIBLE SERGIO ARAGONES, STAKED THEIR CLAIM ON A PARTICULAR AREA LONG AGO AND HAVE BEEN QUITE HAPPY SINCE.

OTHERS, SUCH AS DAVE MCKEAN, ARE FOREVER ON THE MOVE, EXPERIMENTING, TAKING CHANCES, NEVER SATISFIED.

SERGIO AND GROO © SERGIO ARAGONES.
WHEN AN ARTIST IS DRAWN TO ONE END OF THE CHART OR ANOTHER, THAT ARTIST MAY BE REVEALING SOMETHING ABOUT HIS OR HER STRONGEST VALUES AND LOYALTIES IN ART.

THOSE WHO APPROACH THE LOWER LEFT, FOR EXAMPLE, ARE PROBABLY ATTRACTED BY A SENSE OF THE BEAUTY OF NATURE.

THOSE AT THE TOP BY THE BEAUTY OF ART.

FOR COMICS TO MATURE AS A MEDIUM, IT MUST BE CAPABLE OF EXPRESSING EACH ARTIST'S INNERMOST NEEDS AND IDEAS.

BUT EACH ARTIST HAS DIFFERENT INNER NEEDS, DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW, DIFFERENT PASSIONS, AND SO NEEDS TO FIND DIFFERENT FORMS OF EXPRESSION.

AND THOSE ON THE RIGHT BY THE BEAUTY OF IDEAS.

AND NEARLY EVERY MOVEMENT OR MANIFESTO PLANTED ITS FLAG AND LOUDLY PROCLAIMED THE DISCOVERY OF THE ONLY PATCH OF GROUND WORTH BUILDING ON.

THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF VISUAL ARTS BELONGS IN THIS SPACE. MONET SET UP HIS EASEL ALONG THE LEFT FACE, MONDRIAN AT THE TOP, REMBRANDT LOWER LEFT, MATISSE RIGHT ABOVE WHERE I'M STANDING.

* CHECK OUT WASSILY KANDINSKY'S TERRIFIC 1912 ESSAY, "ON THE PROBLEM OF FORM."
As the twenty-first century approaches, visual iconography may finally help us realize a form of universal communication.

Comics artists have a universe of icons to choose from!

And it's expanding all the time!

Society is inventing new symbols regularly, just as comics artists do.
Icons demand our participation to make them work.

There is no life here except that which you give to it.

It's been over twenty years since Meluhan first observed that those people growing up in the late twentieth century didn't want goals so much as they wanted roles. And that's what visual iconography is all about.

It's your job to create and recreate the moment by moment, not just the cartoonist's.

SMILE!

As it happens, only two popular media were identified by Meluhan as "cool" media--that is, media which command audience involvement through iconic forms.

One of them, television, has reached into the lives of every human being on earth--

PARK

--and for better or worse, altered the course of human affairs from here 'til doomsday.

The fate of the other one, comics--

--is anyone's guess.

Sequential art.
Week 5
Fretting the Player Character
Nick Montfort

In interactive fiction, the "player character" is that character who the interactor (or player, or user) can direct with commands. The first example of interactive fiction, Will Crowther and Don Woods's Adventure, instructed the interactor: "I will be your eyes and hands. Direct me with commands of 1 or 2 words." In Adventure this may seem to be the same as the narrator (Buckles 1985, 141–142), but the development of later interactive fiction has made it clear that this entity—the "eyes and hands" that focalize the description of the interactive fiction world and the narration of events in it, and the agent that the interactor can direct or command, through which the interactor can influence the simulated world—is best considered as a separate entity, the player character.

Given this particular name, this basic relationship, and the affinity that interactive fiction has with role-playing games, it may seem reasonable to imagine that the interactor "plays" the player character. However, the interactor actually is not playing a character in any usual way. That is, it is not at all useful to consider that the player character is played by the interactor in any literal, typical sense of play; not in the dramatic sense, not in the gaming sense, and not even exactly in the sense of many other multi-party role-playing contexts, from Dungeons & Dragons to multi-user online environments.

This chapter is meant to disturb the role-playing concept of the player character and the assumptions that are often brought to this element of interactive fiction. This fretting of the player character begins by examining the ordinary senses of play and considering how play of these sorts differs from the interactor's activity. The discussion continues to explain how the player character's not being played by the interactor has been important to several successful interactive fiction works—specifically, ones with well-defined, memorable player characters. Finally, I describe how this perspective on the player character has influenced me as I wrote and programmed Book and Volume (2005).
enjoyed playing *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,* but it would be much more unusual to hear them say, “I enjoyed playing Arthur Dent.” Since we can play Infocom’s version of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* in the gaming sense, we can win it, but it isn’t possible to win Arthur Dent. Whatever the love-story subplot of a Disney movie would have us believe.

The play that is undertaken by the players of *Dungeons & Dragons,* a game that was influential in the genesis of interactive fiction and which was played by authors of both *Adventure* and *Zork,* seems closer to the activity of the interactor in many ways. (The term “player character” even made its way to interactive fiction from D&D.) A person who plays *D&D* in the gaming sense, unless he or she is the Dungeon Master, also plays a character. This character also serves as the “hands and eyes” of the player in the world of the D&D campaign, and is the agent by which puzzles in the world can be solved and mysteries can be unlocked. But there are a few important differences.

While theatrical modes of play are not always part of a *D&D* session, such play is undertaken at times, and some groups of players value making decisions that are “in character” even more than they do successful progress through a story, environment, or series of puzzles. A single character is typically played over the course of many adventures, and the players typically have some freedom to define their character’s traits, although randomly determined abilities provide a basic idea of what the character is like. Also, a player character’s relationship to other characters in the party is quite important. Similar sorts of play are seen in other fantasy role-playing games and in quest-based multiplayer dungeons (MUDs), the multi-player generalizations of single-player interactive fiction. Within all of these frameworks, though, the individual adventure or quest tends to exist on behalf of the character, which levels up and develops over time, and on behalf of the party and the dynamics of the group of players. These games and environments also offer the opportunity to determine what the character does and says in front of other people in a social setting, virtual or real, and so make the playing of the player character a social and not a purely personal experience.

There are some senses in which the interactor could be said to play the player character, but they are remote from the ordinary ones and fail to characterize the relationship very well. A chess player can play her bishop to b2, and an interactor might play a player character in a similar sense, deploying that character to a particular location for a purpose within a game. (In *Suspended,* which offers a board game-like map and tokens to keep track of the six robot player characters, this meaning seems particularly suitable.) However, the chess player does not sense the state of the game via the bishop, so one important purpose of the player character is overlooked in this comparison. The problem here is similar to the one we would encounter if we were to call the player character a puppet and imagine the interactor as operating the puppet (Sloane 2000). The limitation in this metaphor is that while it captures the player character as being that anthropomorphic entity that can be commanded and moved about, it fails to capture how the world is presented to the interactor from the perspective of this character.

Janet Murray notes that “[T]he lesson of *Zork* is that the first step in making an enticing narrative world is to script the interactor” (Murray 1997, 79). It is indeed essential to put the interactor into a situation where there is a reason to act, a reason to type something, but the “script” that is needed for the interactor in interactive fiction is more akin to the classic AI concept of a script (e.g., the basic knowledge of how to act when we enter a restaurant wanting to eat a meal) and not very related to a text meant to be read verbatim by an actor.

Creating a good player character within an interactive fiction world involves putting this character in a situation that is motivating for the interactor—but not giving the interactor an actual dramatic script or a role to play.

So what does the interactor do with the player character, in a word? Perhaps it is interesting to say that the interactor steers the player character—*steer* being the English word for the Greek πτυχευω, which by a twisty etymological path gave English the “cyber” prefix. To think of the interactor as steering, rather than playing, suggests that the player character is a sort of vehicle from which a world can be seen and otherwise experienced, and that this character both constrains us (we have to remain in the vehicle) and also opens up possibilities (we can use this vehicle to get around and even to effect changes in the world). This term may suggest too direct of a link between the interactor and
the actions of the player character—the player character in many interactive fiction works is reticent and difficult to steer, and sometimes to good effect—but such lack of complete control is not really incompatible with this concept. The main deficiency of seeing the player character as steerable is that it does not highlight this vehicle's nature as a character—as an anthropomorphic, meaningful actor. The simple 'man' or 'ship' of early arcade games is also steerable, after all. But for now, why not exchange the flawed idea that the player character is played with the idea, perhaps less or at least differently flawed, that the player character is steered, so as to see where that leads?

II.

This section considers a few exemplary, memorable player characters, and suggests that they succeed more because they are good to steer than because they are good to play.

Ian Finley's Babel (1997) is set in a desolate research station and begins with the player character in an amnesiac state ('Even your mind is cold and empty. Where are you? Who are you?'), a condition that is sure to bring on déjà vu for many players. Interactive fiction authors have often robbed the player character of memory so that the player's awareness will initially match that of the player character; Thomas M. Disch's Amentia (1986) was not the first to do it, and since then there have been many others, including Suzanne Britton's Worlds Apart (1999), Adam Cadre's Shrapnel (2000), and Olvido Mortal (2000) by Andrés Viedma Peláez.

While playing Babel, the player character's past history is slowly filled in, thanks to a startling "telluric" ability that allows events from the past to be replayed and re-experienced. While these revelations are compelling and it is interesting to unlock them by exploring the station, the interactor simply directs the player character to perform rather mechanical actions, inspections, and manipulations.

The player character's nature as a person is important to the charge of this interactive fiction experience and to the way the interactor reads and interprets the text that is produced, but there is no real rule to play, only an existing history that waits to be discovered. The player character can be steered through the station to recover his memory. But the interactor does little more than steer and sense. The author, not the player, is the one who decides when the player character will cry, the one who defines all the details of the player character's earlier and more expressive actions and reactions.

One of several nice flourishes in Adam Cadre's Varicella (1999) is that the personality of player character Primo Varicella is constantly being suggested and the image of this character is constantly being reinforced, almost always in amusing ways. Varicella also relates some things about the player character's past, albeit in more usual and subtle ways, many of the same ways that are often at work in literary narration. Even the most stereotypical adventure-game actions reinforce the player character's obsession with decorum ("JUMP You jump on the spot, achieving nothing. How unseemly!"). The player can choose one of three tones of voice (servile, cordial, and hostile) for Primo to use when addressing other characters, but the particular utterances, and how they are delivered, are chosen by Cadre and set in the program. To be sure, the successful interactor has to direct Primo to do evil things, as is this character's nature, but there is no need to really play the palace minister's part as an actor would. It is enough to figure out what 'flawless plan' Primo has hatched and put that plan, sinister as it may be, into action.

Emily Short's Savoir-Faire (2002) provides a player character, Pierre, who seems a bit grasping and profligate but is not the purely reprehensible character that Primo Varicella is. Daphne Brinkenhoff (2002), reviewing this game, wrote, 'I particularly enjoyed being hungry and eating... there is evidence (especially if you play it right) that he has a strong sense of humor and self-mockery. Basically, I enjoyed being Pierre.' This report is quite consistent with the idea that in Savoir-Faire, the interactor does not play Pierre. The reviewer states that she enjoyed not playing but "being" Pierre and notes, referring not to Pierre but to the game, that you can "play it right." The evidence of Pierre's humor and attitude was placed in the program by Short, not added by the interactor. The player, as in Babel and Varicella, can discover bits of Pierre's personal history; the REMEMBER command is supplied for this purpose in Savoir-Faire. The game's environment (an estate where Pierre grew up) is used, directly and indirectly, to supply more information about Pierre, up to the final revelation at the end of the game.
Steering Pierre through this space is what reveals his background, along with a full understanding of the current situation, to the interactor.

Michael Gentry’s *Anchorhead* (1998) differs from *Varicella* and *Savoir-Faire* in providing a world that is as strange to the interactor as it is to the player character. The player character has just moved into a small New England town named Anchorhead, and presumably discovers the place’s ordinary and extraordinary attributes at the same time that the interactor does. But the player character’s husband, Michael, comes along with her and is present at many times during the game. He is a history professor whose distant relatives lived for generations in a house that he has just inherited; he has just taken a job on the faculty of the local university. The player character’s job or lack thereof, family history (apart from Michael’s side of the family), and background (apart from being married to Michael) are all unknown, however.

The player character can move through the world, learning horrifying details that reveal things about the past, but these are all about Anchorhead’s past—none are about her own background. The interactor does not even learn the player character’s name in the course of completing the game. Again, the interactor must think of the right questions to ask, the right places to hide, and the right areas to search. The player certainly may feel fear and disquiet in sympathy with the player character, but it is hardly necessary that the interactor take on the role of Michael’s wife in any dramatic sense.

While my focus here is not on graphical adventure games, these have player characters as well and this discussion should apply to the way the interactor and the player character relate in those games. Whether the game provides a player character who is a nameless blank, as in *Myst*, or a pair of well-defined characters, as in *Sam and Max Hit the Road*, the interactor is almost always asked less to play the roles of these characters and more to steer them through the world of the game.

An exception can be seen in Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern’s *Façade* (2005), which is not billed as a graphical adventure game but as an interactive drama. In *Façade*, the interactor is invited to take on a role, naming the character one of many available names, and then encountering a situation in which it is possible to be flirtatious or grave, to side with one of the other characters or to try to play them against each other. Perhaps the disappointment of some interactive fiction and graphical adventure game fans with *Façade* is rooted in their unwillingness to play a role and their discomfort at finding a player character who is well-suited for playing but not amenable to the usual type of steering. While this sort of player character opens up new possibilities for interaction, it’s clear that in this framework, Mateas and Stern have put almost all of their own character-building efforts into Grace and Trip. By leaving the player character in *Façade* wide open for the interactor, *Façade’s* player character is made a much less interesting element, per se, than are the player characters of *Babel*, *Varicella*, *Savoir-Faire*, and *Anchorhead*. There can be benefits to working in
both sorts of frameworks, but it always seems to be helpful to know the difference between the two.

III.

My own interactive fiction work includes Winchester’s Nightmare (1999), in which the player character is named after and based on a historical figure, and Ad Verbum (2000), which has a nameless adventurer/day laborer who is a sketchy parody of the typical nameless adventurer. In Book and Volume, I took a different tack and allowed the interactor to name the player character, although this character’s occupation, place of residence, and basic personality remain the same whatever name is provided.

My work on Book and Volume first began when I jotted a short note that sounded like the prologue to some interesting interactive fiction piece, I believe sometime around the summer or fall of 2003. That short text, which begins “Your pager tickles you awake,” set up a situation that seemed to motivate a character’s rather routine action and yet leave some room for intrigue. I also wrote down the title itself, whatever exactly that was supposed to mean at the time. I know now the title comes from Hamlet, Act One, Scene Five; it is quite essential to the piece. I can think of no decent explanation for why this work of interactive fiction has this title, however, that would be shorter than the interactive fiction work itself. I thought about the project on and off for several months and began seriously working on it near the end of April 2004. The first five words of that note survived through the completion of release one in November 2005 and are the first five diegetic words presented to the interactor at the beginning of Book and Volume.

I relate this creation myth because the player character’s basic role in Book and Volume was the thing I imagined first. Thinking of the player character in complete isolation, or envisioning an IF world by itself, without the player character in it, does not really make for a complete thought. One of the important differences between recent interactive fiction works and early efforts such as Adventure and Zork is that the player character and the surrounding environment in contemporary IF tend to be integral. ‘A famous cave’ or ‘a wacky Great Underground Empire’ are adequate ways to characterize some early IF pieces, but saying that Book and

### Book and Volume Transcript

Your pager tickles you awake.

It’s still dark in the house of your childhood, in your room, and it must be time for school because — no, it’s the weekend if you remember, but your alarm is going off anyway. You should have been awake already. You’re going to miss the bus. Your mother stands by the window, you’re dreaming.

You’re a grown-up; it opens to you again, a sluggish window summoned by a mouse click. Waking up now in your own apartment, your new apartment. Your pager is buzzing and vibrating both jointly. It’s in fact the weekend, but you’re not in elementary school. No one is crawling in through the window. You’re a system administrator for mines. Waking up urgently, here in stopgap.

Home

The constellations on the ceiling are as you left them: Pisces, Cetus, Aquarius, and the ones without celestial reference, left by some crazed astronomer in residence here before you. What could you call them? The Grid, The Way, The Burning Bank.

They’re still glowing, too. Must not have napped for long.

Look at the constellations

If your milky memories of astronomy class serve, the glow-in-the-dark stars seem not just slumbered at random but willfully misconfigured. They lend the place some sort of character, though an Escher print would be hip in comparison.

The pager buzzes and jars you, tomotor driven to disrupt and demand attention. This is no Harry Potter invisimuff.

Turn off the pager

If it were only so easy. You have to listen to whatever messages are on there to get the thing to stop.

The pager vibrates like it’s repeatedly begging you to get your attention, and it buzzes gratefully.

Look at the pager

It’s too dark too see, like inside of a dog.

The buzzing of the pager continues. You are tooth to the dent of the device.

Turn on the light

You switch the light on.

MUEAAAAAA THE PAGER THE PAGER THE PAGER THE PAGER MAKE IT STOP.

Home

Although almost unfurnished, since you’ve been here only a few days and haven’t had time to settle in, the place is more Fight Club than Shaker, urbane, professional. It’s yours, though. It’s your residential custard. And it looks like we also have your map 500 and a heap of clothes.

Examine the pager

Cell phones are ubiquitous in nTopic, and your pager is a sort of...
Volume takes place in a factory town run by a giant computer and media company does not really tell the whole story in the same way. The player character's standing, position, and perspective within this town is also essential. So as I developed the first sketch of the city's map, I also noted events, incidents, and aspects of the player character's experience.

It is often the case that the player character and the environment fit together in an essential way: in Graham Nelson's Curses and Andrew Plotkin's Shade it is important that the IF world involves the player character's own residence, not just any house or apartment, and that the player character is in a certain situation of searching for a map or of seeming to wait to leave on a trip. In Anchorhead and in Gareth Rees's Christminster, it is important that the player character is an outsider, a newcomer to a small town in the first case and a visitor to a college in the second. And similarly, in many other games, including Babel, Varicella, Savoir-Faire, and Dan Shivovitz's Bad Machine, the 'rest of the world,' without the player character in it, would not be nearly as interesting or compelling as that world is when encountered by the player character.

The interactor in Book and Volume is allowed to determine something about the player character: The interactor is asked at one point to type in the player character's name. (In testing, I noticed that interactors often type in their own name or handle, which was not too surprising, since most interactors are probably not ready to make up a name for their player character when this prompt appears.)

Book and Volume discerns whether the name seems to be a male or female one, using a simple perceptron classifier whose weight vector has integer-valued components. The weight vector was learned by training, using the pocket perceptron algorithm, on the 500 most popular male and female names in U.S. census data. In the tradition of Infocom's Moonmist and Leather Goddesses of Phobos, this changes a few things about what is narrated, but the essential workings of the IF world and the important aspects of the player character's position in it remain the same. While the interactor is invited to imagine the player character as male or female, the interactor is not called upon to perform masculinity or femininity by means of typed commands, as in Façade. Rather, the interactor is to use commands to have the player character perform the asexual, genderless functions of an alienated, introverted, recently arrived system administrator, and simply gets subtly different descriptions of the world and of the events in it—ones that many players may not even
realize are "customized." The game never makes any explicit reference to the gender of the player character.

*Book and Volume* provides a series of tasks that are meant to offer some initial structure and motivation, but I hope that interactors discover during their efforts at these that such tasks are not the real point of the game. One of the challenges I had in "tuning" *Book and Volume*, near the end of the game's development, was in making it known that the player character could, if the interactor chooses, range beyond the job tasks that were assigned—without explicitly saying everything else that is to be done, which would be just another way of assigning tasks. Among other things, an interaction with *Book and Volume*, much like an interaction with Steven Meretzky's *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, can produce the story of a person who discovers how to do things that are not explicitly asked. In *Book and Volume*, unlike in *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, this does not save the country. But I believe that the player character—and the interactor—does something very important by making this discovery, whether or not a fictional country is saved as a result.

**IV.**

My concept is that the player character in interactive fiction is not played at all, but is a constraint and possibility defined by the author, within which the interactor is bound to a particular perspective and a particular set of capabilities, by means of which the interactor can explore everything in the work and figure everything that the interactive fiction holds and offers. The computer program itself, written by the author, carries the burden of defining the player character's personality, his or her attitudes, and the way in which actions are accomplished. The interactor is left to understand the strange world of the particular interactive fiction work—including the nature of the player character—through exploration and by demonstrating an understanding of the world's workings.

This perspective on the player character may seem to leave less of a place for the interactor. After all, the interactor, in this formulation, is unable to expressively enact a role, as many might have guessed was possible. But there are still substantial, important abilities and benefits that interactive fiction provides to interactors, who are capable of exploring the world in their own way, figuring out what schemes and principles underlie it and what mysteries it holds, and demonstrating their understanding of it by effecting changes.

By saying that the interactor "directs" the player character, there is the suggestion that some higher-level control, not over the particular manner of physical action but over the general intention of the character, is what is established by the interactor's input. While the typical dramatic player plays a character and is constrained by a (dramatic) script, the interactor does not get to play but as some ability to write the player character's script, a script that appears as part of the transcript that the game generates. The interactor is constrained by the interactive fiction world and by the nature and willingness of the player character, but there is considerable freedom in directing and commanding, and considerable engagement in seeing the world from the standpoint of the character that is under the interactor's control.

I have mentioned a different perspective, inadequate but provocative, that sees the interactor as steering the player character. I believe it is necessary to look beyond this concept...
and to also consider that the steerable thing being discussed is a character, with an anthropomorphic nature and a character's place within the interactive fiction world. The player character must be meaningful enough as a character but also be capable of being steered, and must be steerable enough so that everything important within the interactive fiction world can be explored. The interactor must have enough control over the player character to be able to express an understanding of this world through that character.

If we are willing to admit that dramatic role-playing is not done by the player, and that the definition of the player character is the work of the program, and thus the IF author, we can fully acknowledge a powerful, nuanced way in which a character can be represented and simulated within interactive fiction. The author forges the world and the vessel of the player character within it, fixing these in code. The interactor can steer or "be" this character, understanding the world through this character and configuring the world to unlock whatever secrets it may hold. A well-crafted player character in interactive fiction does not need to be the same sort of entity that a dramatic or literary character is; Varicella in the Palazzo may actually be a more suitable player character than Hamlet on the Holodeck would be. But the vessel must be suited to the voyage, to the interactive fiction world as well as the overarching or underlying space of possible stories, the comprehending riddle. For interactive fiction to succeed, the player character must, in some sense, fit within the interactive fiction, and the interactor must fit within the player character.

References