Tips and Tricks for Teaching an Interactive Fiction Course

Mike Spivey

NarraScope
May 28, 2020
Workshop overview

- My interactive fiction course
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  - Background
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  ▶ Background
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  ▶ Successes, failures, and lessons learned
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  ▶ Questions?
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- Tips and tricks from all of you!
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- IF speed dating exercise (if time)
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- Final questions/comments
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University of Puget Sound

Small, liberal arts college

Tacoma, Washington, USA

Me

Math professor

Typical courses: Calculus, mathematical modeling, optimization

IF player and author

Played my first IF game in the 1980s

IF communities: intfiction.org, IFDB, Interactive Fiction Competition

Written A Beauty Cold and Austere, Junior Arithmancer, Sugarlawn, contributed to Cragne Manor
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- Why not a Connections IF course, connecting computer science and literature?
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    - A short work, earlier in the term (at least 2000 words)
    - A long work, later in the term (at least 5000 words)

- Discuss Inform 7 as a programming language
  - For example, its natural language and declarative features

- Literature
  - Read/play over 20 works of IF
  - Analyze them as texts
  - Compare/contrast with static works of fiction
    - Example: Emily Short's Bronze vs. "Beauty and the Beast"
  - Write a paper comparing two IF works or a work of IF with a static work of fiction

- No prerequisites!
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- Introduction to IF (two weeks)

- History and conventions of parser-based IF

- Inform 7 as a programming language

- Play a few parser-based IF works

- IF Genres (five weeks)
  - Mystery, fantasy, comedy, horror/suspense, drama
  - Mondays: Read a work of IF aloud in class
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    - Example: Toby’s Nose, An Act of Murder, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band”
  - Fridays: Learn more Inform 7

- IF as Education, IF as Argument (two weeks)
  - Same structure as with IF genres

- Craft of IF (three weeks)
  - Characterization, puzzles, narrative structure and choices

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CONN 311 Interactive Fiction: Successes

- Overall structure

Students with no programming experience generally learned Inform 7 and created some interesting IF works.

Positive student responses

English major: I had a bad experience with programming in high school. I probably would never have touched programming again if not for this course.
CONN 311 Interactive Fiction: Successes

- Overall structure
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- Reading IF aloud in class
- Pairing IF works and relating them to works of static fiction

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- IF speed dating exercise

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CONN 311 Interactive Fiction: Failures, Lessons Learned, and Places to Improve

- Reading before writing
- Puzzle-heavy games are difficult to experience fully because of time limitations.
- Exception: Puzzle games with an intriguing mechanic, like Counterfeit Monkey
- By contrast, story-heavy games generally work quite well.
- Aristotelian reading on Zeno's paradoxes - too complicated
- Students need more Inform 7 coding instruction
- More comparison of IF writing and mainstream storytelling
- Another language: Twine?
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IF Speed Dating Exercise

▶ How it works

Break students into pairs
▶ One student describes an idea for an IF work, while the other student listens (maybe a minute or two).
▶ Then the second student asks questions of the first, who responds (also a minute or two).
▶ Then they swap roles, for the same amount of time each.
▶ Then they swap partners and do it again.

Student response
▶ At first, students are a bit tentative and don't have much to say.
▶ By the third or fourth “date,” though, I often have to push them to get them to stop talking to each other and move on.
▶ Their feedback was that this process was really helpful: It helped them refine their ideas, consider new ones, and think about aspects of their projects that they hadn't considered before.
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  ▶ Their feedback was that this process was really helpful: It helped them refine their ideas, consider new ones, and think about aspects of their projects that they hadn’t considered before.
IF Speed Dating Exercise

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Works studied

▶ Introduction
  ▶ Sam Barlow, *Aisle*
  ▶ Marc Blank and Dave Lebling, *Zork I*

▶ Mystery
  ▶ Chandler Groover, *Toby’s Nose*
  ▶ Christopher Huang, *An Act of Murder*
  ▶ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Speckled Band”

▶ Fantasy
  ▶ Admiral Jota, *Lost Pig*
  ▶ Emily Short, *Bronze*
  ▶ Madame de Villeneuve, “Beauty and the Beast”

▶ Suspense/Horror
  ▶ Andrew Plotkin, *Shade*
  ▶ Elizabeth Smyth, *Bogeyman*
  ▶ Ambrose Bierce, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”
Works studied

- **Comedy**
  - Buster Hudson, *The Wizard Sniffer*
  - J.J. Guest, *Alias ‘The Magpie’*
  - P.G. Wodehouse, “Leave It to Jeeves”

- **Drama**
  - Stephen Granade, *Will Not Let Me Go*
  - Victor Gijsbers, *De Baron*

- **IF as Education**
  - Harry Giles and Joey Jones, *The Chinese Room*
  - Mike Spivey, *A Beauty Cold and Austere*
  - Aristotle, *Physics VI*, Part 9, on Zeno’s Achilles paradox

- **IF as Argument**
  - Jonathan Laury, *Ostrich*
  - Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey, and Isaac Shankler, *Depression Quest*
Works studied

- Bonus: Pace Smith, *Limerick Heist*

- Characterization
  - Emily Short, *Galatea*
  - Stephen Bond, *Rameses*

- Puzzles
  - Emily Short, *Counterfeit Monkey*
  - Arthur DiBianca, *The Wand*

- Narrative, the Parser, and Choice
  - Victor Gijsbers, *Terminal Interface for Models RCM 301-303*
  - Serhii Mozhaiskyi, *I.A.G. Alpha*
Works studied (nonfiction)

- Kevin Jackson-Mead and J. Robinson Wheeler (eds.), *IF Theory Reader* (selections)

- Don Knuth, “Literate Programming”

- Aaron Reed, *Creating Interactive Fiction with Inform 7*