The Success of Genre in Interactive Fiction

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Introduction

Why are more works of interactive fiction—markedly more—set in a fantasy or science fiction milieu than any other? Why does the central puzzle of *Spider and Web* (Plotkin, 1998) succeed when it would fall flat in *Winter Wonderland* (Knauth, 1999)? What differences are found between IF works of, for instance, historical romance and Lovecraftian horror? In short, what is the influence of genre in interactive fiction?

Montfort’s definition of a puzzle as “a challenge […] that requires a non-obvious set of commands in order to be met” (*Twisty Little Passages*) is designed to be independent of author and interactor: we “should be able to determine what is and is not a puzzle simply by studying the IF work in question.” This granted, it is the experience of meeting the challenge—though it may differ from one to the next—that is significant to the interactor. The experience with the Enigma machine in Nelson’s *Jigsaw* (1995) and with the navigational computer in Lebling’s *Starcross* (Infocom, 1982) make the two quite different, despite the many similarities shared by the two machines in an abstract typology of puzzles.

Montfort argues that viewing IF works as riddles can bring together the literary and puzzling aspects. If the formulation of the puzzles, and the interactor’s experience of them, is central on the one hand, then the nature and style of the narrative is central on the other. By Montfort’s definition, the simulated world—described in the literary aspect and the setting of the puzzling aspect—is essential to interactive fiction; we suggest that the milieu of that world has bearing on the construction of the riddle.

The Enigma machine in *Jigsaw* is a fine example. Unmotivated, the

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1 This essay, written in 2002, reflects the contemporary year of its composition; a few more recent references have been cited. Author’s address: Neil Yorke-Smith, American University of Beirut, Lebanon, nysmith@aub.edu.lb
machine is a formidable, tedious challenge that caused some to wish for respite (Thornton)—or even vengeance. In the setting of World War II, however, and motivated by the larger plot, on the retracing of historical necessity, “I found myself thinking, ‘If Turing and Newman could do it, then surely I [...] can do it too!’” (Rees, Jigsaw). Whereas the puzzle is natural, if difficult, in the setting, a Nazi encryption machine would sit unhappily in a fantasy work. (Which is not to say that incongruous and unmotivated, even tedious, puzzle elements are unknown in IF fantasy works: take the anachronistic battery dispenser in *Adventure* (Crowther, c.1975; Crowther and Woods, 1976).)

This essay considers how genre and riddle come together in the IF medium.

**Surveying Genre in Interactive Fiction**

Casual use of *genre* in relation to IF is schizophrenic: the word is used to refer to the medium of IF as a whole, as well as to “a particular kind or style of art or literature” ([Oxford English Dictionary](https://www.oed.com)). Even in Nelson’s “The Craft of Adventure,” an early and thoughtful exposition of craft, we find “the genre [i.e., interactive fiction] is still going strong” (par.1) and “the best of even the tiniest games [...] make up a variety of genres [i.e., kinds of literature]” (par.4). Rightly, we suggest, “IF is a medium, and not a genre”; just as “[n]ew genres come and go all the time, in other media,” so “[t]here are different genres of IF—detective IF, sci-fi IF, etc.” (Weinstein).

TableSaw, writing critically on the newsgroup rec.games.int-fiction that was the communication forum of the IF renaissance, observes:

> Classification of works is very important [for] it gives potential viewers a chance to identify similar works by identifying key traits that are similar to them. In addition it can help authors by providing a framework within to place their story. It can provide an assumed context to provide implicit information to a reader. And it provides a basis for comparing works. [...] [C]lassifications must come from careful examination and dialogue about works already made, rather than either trying to create categories and then fit pieces into them.

In short, classification is to be descriptive not prescriptive. As such, any classification of IF works will be subjective to some degree—what genre
is *Jigsaw*: historical? time-travel fantasy? romance?—just as no history of the Roman Empire is entirely complete or objective. Literature, like history, moreover, has many characteristics by which to classify. The encyclopaedic “Baf’s Guide to the Interactive Fiction Archive” (Muckenhoupt) indexes and tags works a dozen ways, including by attribute (“third person voice,” for instance), while a call to classify a set of highly rated works by the editor of the fanzine SPAG (O’Brian, Classification) yielded ten disparate responses, including the abrupt “They’re all games!” (Schmidl).

Unanimity, all would agree, is unattainable. But just as Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* has become the canonical history to measure against, so Muckenhoupt’s “Baf’s Guide” is the canonical reference to freely available IF.² Muckenhoupt classifies works into 21 genres, from “Adaption” to “Western,” via “Horror” and “Seasonal.” The graph in Figure 1 shows that fantasy, RPG, and science fiction dominate the field of IF works. Of the rivals to Muckenhoupt, we note the genre classification in the “Z-Files Catalogue” (Baum), the selection by popularizer Britton, and a list by Short based on attributes (Literacy). For commercial works, while not a classification, “Adventureland” (Persson and Meier) is impressively complete.

![Figure 1: Classification of works by genre, circa 2002 (Muckenhoupt).](image)

Several reasons have been advanced to explain the dominance of fantasy and science fiction among IF works. First, historically, *Adventure*

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2 Later came the “Interactive Fiction Database” (Roberts), which had just under 90 crowd-sourced tags under genre, by 2010, not counting some near-duplicates.
(1976) and *Zork* (Anderson, Blank, Daniels, and Lebling, 1979) had fantasy settings, which many early works thought nothing of borrowing, along with much else. \(^3\) Of the 35 works published by Infocom (which we take as *Zork I* (Blank and Lebling, 1980) to *Arthur* (Bates, 1989)), 17 might be classified in the science fiction or fantasy genres.

Second, speculative fiction—fantasy and science fiction—as a rule appeals to those who take interest in IF, it has been argued; they enjoy “similar target audiences” (Plotkin, qtd. in deMause; see also Giner-Sorolla). So IF author Cull:

> IF attracts a more technologically minded kind of author. You don’t even think about writing stories that interact, that are very mechanical, unless you’re in love with the machine. […] And because it’s a very young, offbeat, cultish medium, you’re likely to get creatively minded people—people who look at the world and see not what is, but what might be. The sort of people who like speculative fiction.

A third reason for the prevalence of fantasy and science fiction is the unreality of the genres; the magic, if we will. Again, in part, this facilitates the suspension of disbelief that makes IF an escape from the real world, for both author and interactor: “Much of real life is not fun, and much of what makes a game fun is highly unrealistic” (Baggett, Setting). But Silcox, noting that hackneyed fantasy settings can be as hum-drum as a simulation of a modern apartment, argues for works that engender “defamiliarization,” so that real life might be seen afresh. He cites *Sunset over Savannah* (Cockrum, 1998), “which simulates with amazing psychological accuracy and a surprisingly high level of suspense the thoughts of a fairly average middle-aged man […] trying to decide whether or not to quit his job.”

The magic goes further, though, fourth, for it allows the author to impose his own logic on the simulated world. The prologue in *Trinity* (Moriarty, Infocom, 1986) is set in the very real Kensington Gardens, London,\(^4\) while the middle-game spans various surreal worlds. In the latter we can hardly say, “but that’s not how life works!” when the rules are made by the author and told to us. Perhaps too the magic lends itself to narratives more suited to the strengths of IF, a point we must return

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3 Montfort’s history of IF is as enlightening as it is entertaining (*Twisty Little Passages*).
4 The present author can vouch for the strict absence of magic, despite the statue of Peter Pan.
to later.

Fifth, speculative fiction can result in works “easier for amateurs […] to write (not write well, just to write), and since most IF writers are amateurs not [as Moriarty] professionals, we pick the easy choice” (Cull). Newell, similarly, advocates that, since the fantasy genre requires less research than some others, it is more conducive to the amateur not willing to go to the lengths Moriarty did for the end-game of Trinity (Rigby), or that Nelson, though an amateur, did for Jigsaw (“On Jigsaw and ‘I”, par.5; DM4 365).

The Interactive Distinctive:
Puzzles and Challenges

Theorists debate what defines interactive fiction as a medium and distinguishes it from other forms of cybertext such as (electronic) CYOA (Aarseth; Montfort, Theory; Short, IF); with authors and fans alike they discuss what are the strengths and shortcomings of the medium. Recurrent in the debate is the role of puzzles. While the degree will vary, there must arguably be some interaction in an IF work to distinguish it from mere blocks of text separated by a “MORE” prompt, and here puzzles have a leading role: “Without puzzles, or problems, or mechanisms to allow the player to receive the text a little at a time […] there is no interaction” (Nelson, DM4 382).

Here are authors Andrew Plotkin and Lucian Smith: “A puzzle is a mechanism for focusing the player’s attention”; “[O]ne of the main purposes of a puzzle is to involve the player in the story more” (both qtd. in deMause), and theorist Jerz: “A puzzle in IF is, in one sense, a management tool to separate ‘movements’ in the overall plot” (Puzzles). Thus, in addition to Montfort’s definition as challenge met by non-obvious set of commands, we have puzzles as source of interaction and as means of narrative advancement.

These additional perspectives suit our present purpose. We do not need to answer the difficult question of what, formally, is a puzzle, any more than we seek to give a taxonomy. Montfort states “[t]here is no requirement that a puzzle’s challenge relate to any other elements of an IF work in order for it be a puzzle,” but equally in our discussion we will want to consider interaction that by Montfort does not constitute a puzzle. Indeed, a work can be puzzleless—all the challenges are met by
obvious sets of commands—but still, we suggest, the work must have challenges to be considered IF. The line of demarcation and the works along its border, such as Finley’s *Life on Beal Street* (1999), will be debated just as the frontiers of the Roman Empire were contested.

A poor puzzle is regarded as one whose solution is non-obvious to the extent that a telepathic connection to the author is required to meet the challenge (deMause). In contrast:

A good puzzle, in my mind, is no puzzle. […] [T]he puzzles should be transparent. Getting onto the benchtop in *A Bear’s Night Out* [(Dyte, 1997)] is a good example of this; getting back into your house in *A Good Breakfast* [(Adair, 1997)] is not. Puzzles shouldn’t be “puzzles,” but rather situations that must be resolved to further your goals. (Greenwood)

Notable is that the puzzles in Dyte’s work, which won a XYZZY Award for Best Setting, are based on the limitations of a teddy bear, for the large part, whereas Adair’s work has “artificial puzzles […] thrown in for their own sake” (Stevens, Breakfast).

Lucian Smith defines a puzzle as “satisfying” if it gives the interactor pleasure when solved, and as “pertinent” if it relates to the plot as a whole (qtd. in deMause). Greenwood’s point is that better puzzles will be both satisfying and pertinent: the challenge makes sense in the narrative, the solution advances the plot (Nelson, DM4 394), and the whole is part of the atmosphere of the work (Jerz, Puzzles). Did Dyte succeed here and Adair not because of the settings they chose?

Giner-Sorolla’s influential essay “Crimes Against Mimesis” (reprinted in this book) argues for puzzles that maintain, enhance even, mimesis. Pertinent puzzles are more satisfying, he contends, and he is supported in this by seasoned IF authors reflecting on the craft: “[A puzzle] should be logical, according to the logic of the game’s universe” (Meretzky, qtd. in Hochberg); “[T]he puzzles should arise integrally from the milieu of the game” (Rees, Design). For example, the best puzzles in *Scapeshift* (Austin, Level 9, 1989) arise from the difficulty the PC, a murdered police officer returning as a ghost, has in interacting with the material world.

Given, then, that a work “should have a coherent fictional world and its puzzles should be seamlessly joined to the textual fabric, appearing to occur naturally” (Nelson, DM4 365), might we call such puzzles “organic”? If so, are genres more conducive to organic puzzles better
suited to interactive fiction? To this question we now turn.

Do Some Genres Engender Organic Puzzles?

Plotkin’s celebrated *Spider and Web* is a tale of espionage. (A plot spoiler follows.) The turning point for the interactor is a moment of intuition: in reconstructing past events under interrogation, the PC has woven a fabrication. His unreliable narration deceives the interrogator. The puzzle lies in the interactor perceiving the truth (hinted subtly throughout) and, at the critical moment, using this knowledge to escape; it is both satisfying and pertinent (Chung). Plotkin won the XYZZY Award for Best Puzzle, among others. Besides his evident mastery of the craft, he demonstrated a puzzle organic to its setting; it hardly would have worked in a children’s fairy story.

The experience of interacting with an IF work is that we “get to meet the people and live the events,” we feel “responsible for [the PC’s] actions” (Baggett, Simulations). If, as we suggest, this interactivity is achieved through the puzzles in the broad sense, then, other things being equal, those genres amenable to “better” puzzles may be expected to be more successful. As narratives they are more immersive; as crosswords more satisfying. This is not to say any genre cannot be the setting for a successful IF work, merely that some may be more amenable than others. Interactive fiction centered on psychological drama, for example, is decidedly difficult to write well, but Bond’s *Rameses* (2000) uses non-interactivity to its advantage.

Amenability to puzzles is aided, firstly, by genres whose organic puzzles render naturally in the IF world. Hence, one reason for the popularity of speculative fiction, in addition to those we saw earlier, is that these are “genres of exploration and action,” to which “the modeled world of IF lends itself very nicely” (Short, Private). Jerz’s essay on exposition in IF argues for “live, don’t tell”: “The IF player is supposed to live the story […] Exposition that relies this heavily on narration—on ‘telling’—is awkward in IF” (Exposition).

Consider the romance genre, territory well-explored in static fiction, where the PC’s feelings are central to the narrative. Much easier it is to walk through a landscape as it is explored than it is to communicate the emotion of the PC. Only one Infocom work, *Plundered Hearts* (Briggs, 1987), is a romance, and much of the romantic interest, though well-
written, is told in cutscenes—not shown, and still less lived. Later attempts in the genre have emphasized the narrative, with varying success: Huang’s *Muse* (1998), Fischer’s *Masquerade* (2000), Ingold’s *My Angel* (2000). Besides Ingold’s, the other works all feature developed PCs in a historical setting; *My Angel* is notable for its “novel mode.” The crossword struggles in the romance.5

In view of Jerz’s essay (Exposition), his own *Fine Tuned* (2001) becomes most interesting. Although subtitled *An Auto-mated Romance*, the work is more a comedy:

[Jerz] dares—and manages to pull off—a number of pieces of *participatory* comedy, which is much harder to pull off than just writing a bunch of funny lines that always show up. […] I had to make the joke happen, or rather, the author had to set things up such that I *would*. (Cadre)

Here is “live, don’t tell” in practice. And as Baggett emphasizes (Simulations), it is powerful. Brian Moriarty on *Trinity*:

You could just feel the weight of history on you. […] I just wanted people to feel that weight on them when playing the game. […] It’s nice to know that interactive fiction could do that, make you feel uncomfortable about killing things. (qtd. in Rigby; see also Buckles 127–29)

Secondly, in some genres—mystery and adventure especially—the organic puzzles are readily “found.” Cadre defines a “found puzzle” as one that “derive[s] from the story” (qtd. in deMause), while Plotkin gives his first rule of puzzles as, “The world you’ve created creates the puzzles” (Happy). In static fiction, works in these genres “from Poe’s ‘The Gold Bug’ on, can capably integrate set-piece puzzles into the overall mimetic goals of the story” (Giner-Sorolla, par.3). It is not overly surprising, therefore, that mystery was the first genre beyond speculative fiction explored by Infocom, beginning with *Deadline* (Blank, 1982). Blank later wrote, “[M]ost people, when they read mysteries, are constantly trying to think ahead, what happened. […] So, it seemed to lend itself perfectly.” (qtd. in Greenlee).

Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, and clearly enthusiastic

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5 Not entirely, of course: there is the extended duet in *Jigsaw* (where, interestingly, the PC and NPC Black are carefully gender-neutral); and Short’s *Pytho’s Mask* (2001)—her entry in her own SmoochieComp—was nominated for Best Individual Puzzle.
about *Deadline*, Rothstein links the success of Infocom’s early work to their choice of genres, “the worlds of popular fiction—the detective story, science fiction, adventure and fantasy. These genres define worlds with their own logic; they pose lucid questions and possess clear narrative easily adaptable to a computer.” Less is this so for the romance, we might add. Dyer reports “Infocom people [...] joke[d] about the idea of a romance series; somehow the moves don’t seem appropriate to a computer keyboard”; Briggs’s *Plundered Hearts*, the sole Infocom work authored by a woman, was the exception to prove them wrong.

Thirdly, amenability to organic puzzles can be aided when the interactor and characters in the work share parallels in their knowledge acquisition; Myers cites Callaci’s *Dangerous Curves* (2000) as an example. The most extreme situation, the clichéd IF amnesia opening, is “nearly identical to the premise upon which so many detective stories and film noirs open” (Arnold, reviewing *Gumshoe* (Oliphant, 1996), in which we have both). If this, together with the found puzzles, makes the mystery suited to IF in principle, then the difficulty lies in the execution. *Deadline* has its share of bugs (Aarseth 115-27; Cree) and Infocom’s subsequent *Suspect* (Lebling, 1984) was harrowing to test (Lebling). “[T]he mystery genre demands extremely rigorous testing” (Rees, Undertow).

All three points come together in the horror genre, such as in Finley’s dark *Babel* (1997), a deeply suspense-filled work. Although, like romances, there is emotion to convey, in a work of horror it can be done through living and showing: foreboding in the world, terror from shadows glimpsed; organic puzzles (“how do I escape the cellar?”) can arise from story and world; and the PC’s realization of the nature of things can mirror the interactor’s own. But horror, more so than speculative fiction, relies on proper pacing, which by nature is harder to ensure in the IF medium. Perhaps this offers an explanation for the reliance in IF horror on building suspense through the modeled world. Lovecraftian *Anchorhead* (Gentry, 1998) excels here; like *Babel*, its puzzles are organic and woven into the plot. Author Gentry analyzes the genre in detail in “The Parser at the Threshold: Lovecraftian Horror in Interactive Fiction” (Theory).

**Bring on the Jester**

Rothstein goes on to note that Infocom “tempers [their works] with
irreverent wit.” The tradition of humor in IF, like the commercial boom in the medium in the early ’80s, extended beyond Infocom (though the witty narrator responses in Zork and descendants were unconsciously later echoed in Nelson’s Inform library). Besides speculative fiction and alongside “Adaptation,” “Humor” is the next largest category on “Baf’s Guide.” The works can be divided into three groups: satire and parody, such as the many Zork pastiches; jokes, such as Pick Up the Phone Booth and Aisle (Bauge et al., 2001); and mainstream comedy. Like Fine-Tuned (Jerz, 2001), the latter will come under some other genre as well: Infocom’s two most famous, The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (Adams and Meretzky, 1984) and Leather Goddesses of Phobos (Meretzky, 1986), are science fiction and spoof 1930s space opera respectively.

As in worlds where he can dictate the logic, so the author has increased freedom if he is allowed to exaggerate and parody—even to break mimesis. He enjoys the “bulletproof bracelets of satire and ridicule” (O’Brian, Frenetic). This said, humor for its own sake is a fine thing. Moriarty’s Wishbringer (Infocom, 1985), for example, tempers horror with comedy to yield a well-judged work.

Humor, moreover, can soften the edge of puzzles that block the interactors’ progress through a work: “If a game is funny even while I’m banging my head against the wall, I'll keep playing. If not, I’m probably gone” (Cadre, qtd. in deMause; see also Coleman). A case in point is Fish! (Molloy et al., Magnetic Scrolls, 1988), a parody of a British secret agent. Fish! is a delight to interact with, despite fiendish puzzles. Nelson observes that it is no coincidence that sarcastic narrator responses “are often jibes at the player’s progress” (DM4 373). Sufficient wit can even—almost—compensate for a poor implementation, as in the notorious early revisions of Fine-Tuned.

Adaptations and Literary Works

From the earliest days of interactive fiction, other works—static fiction, poetry, film, and (in due course) IF—have given inspiration. The Dungeons and Dragons role-playing game influenced Crowther (Peterson 187–88), while Woods recalls in an interview, “I had read Tolkien, but I didn’t consciously use it as a model for anything”.6 Tolkien’s powerful

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6 He continued, “Even the description of the volcano, which some writers have claimed was modeled after Mount Doom, was written with no particular vision in
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myth undoubtedly inspired much early IF, directly as well as indirectly. Nelson records that the first IF book adaptation was *Lord* (Paavola, c.1980) (DM4 347); Melbourne House produced faithful adaptations of both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Science fiction too soon became a source, and in due course book adaptations were undertaken (Dewey; Nelson DM4 351; Randall), the most famous and assuredly most successful being *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, written in conjunction with Douglas Adams. Interestingly, here is Adams’s co-author Meretzky:

> My criteria [for a successful adaptation] would be things where the book(s) or movie(s) creates a rich universe with lots of possibilities for stories that aren’t necessarily the one told in the original book or movie. For example, I think that’s why *Hitchhiker’s* was such a successful game, and why it got better further in the game, when we diverged more from the scenes of the original story line.

While some professional writers like Adams have dabbled in IF (DM4 352-5), straight book adaptations are difficult. Besides the issues of copyright and linearity, a novel is simply too long (DM4 366-7; Randall 186). Instead, borrowing the world, as Meretzky suggests, has been more fruitful: Nelson, for example, acknowledges (367) his close and literary adaption of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1997) is inferior to *Avon* (Partington, Topologika, 1982), a successful “confection” that takes puzzles from many of Shakespeare’s plays. Similarly, works that have set their story in the world of Sherlock Holmes or Alice in Wonderland have fared better than those that have sought to adapt the story outright.

Cult fiction accounts for a good chunk of the “Adaptation” category on “Baf’s Guide.” Tolkien adaptations and the ilk aside, Stevens regards literary adaptation as an underpopulated IF genre (Nevermore). If setting and possibilities rather than plot are sought, then poetry can be as suitable as novel or film: Cull freely took inspiration from Poe’s “The Raven” for *Nevermore* (2000). Even nursery rhymes can be adapted, as Callaci demonstrated with *Mother Loose* (1998);7 and arcade games too: *IF Arcade* (Cadre et al., 2001). Do we foresee *Street Fighter: The Interactive Experience*?

If the main route by which literary works come to the IF medium is as inspiration or adaptation, then literature also comes to IF by a second,
more original means. Published author Michael Berlyn brought a literary edge to the medium (with others, be it said) when he joined Infocom, not just in his works—Infidel (Berlyn and Fogleman, Infocom, 1983): “consciously literary ends,” “clearly a plotted novel” (Nelson DM4 355)—but in opening the way for moral and rhetorical questions and studied allusion and allegory. Hence the weighty themes and chosen quotations in Trinity, and the evocative symbolism of So Far (Plotkin, 1996); Randall considers literary IF works and concludes that “interactive fiction allows the reader to partake, first-hand, of a new literary world, and the unfolding of that world is continuous, even if the plot is not” (190).

**Diminishing Genre**

Simmering beneath our discussion, like rumors of Nero fiddling, is a question distilled by Nelson: “Today’s designers are not always so definite in keying a game to an established genre of fiction [as those prior to the IF renaissance]” (DM4 354); the trend is “of shorter stories moving away from genres” (342). True enough, early authors, particularly Scott Adams, deliberately explored well-defined genres, whereas later IF authors—with established confidence in the medium—inclined towards stronger narratives, able to stand without supporting themselves with an explicit genre (Photopia, Cadre, 1998), and towards exploring the boundaries and expectations of the medium (Spider and Web). Both are trends of maturity.8

Nevertheless, Nelson continues, “the first decisions remain to choose the style, the mood, […] and above all the fictional world of which the story itself will remain only a part” (DM4 354). Therefore, just as we have considered a broader definition of puzzle than Montfort’s, we do well to include setting and milieu in our broader discussion of genre. Not all works of static fiction fall into a tidy “genre fiction” category; nor will all works of interactive fiction. Douglas and Hargadon suggest the attractions of genre and “non-genre” fiction divide between “immersion” (in a familiar world) and “engagement” (with literary works); whether consciously adopting a genre or not, interactive fiction can span both. Further, classification into genres has value even for

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8 A further indicator of the maturing of the IF craft are works that uniquely leverage the medium, such as the elevated Galatea (Short, 2000), a work entirely concerned with conversational interaction with a single NPC.
literary works with subtle milieus, as we see in static fiction with cases like Neal Stephenson’s *Cryptonomicon*.9

Take Plotkin’s *Hunter, in Darkness* (1998), which won XYZZY Awards for Best Setting and Best Individual Puzzle. It appears to be a hackneyed cave crawl, complete with maze—a genre exhausted ten years prior. But “the cave is as much your adversary [as the prey]” (in the tradition of Crowther, using the environment as an organic puzzle); the maze requires no mapping (a good thing, since it is infinite); and “the plot branches and rejoins so seamlessly that you’re unlikely to notice that there are multiple ways through the game” (Stevens, Hunter). Plotkin subverts the genre assumptions and exploits the medium, and so “breathes new life into a very tired genre, no small feat.”

Michael Kinyon, a seasoned interactor with IF, picks up this theme, preferring works that make a “genuine attempt to push the limits of a genre for aesthetic effect” (qtd. in Forman). Likewise, Stevens identifies the genre “bait-and-switch,” encountered for instance in *Trinity and Once and Future* (G. Kevin Wilson, Cascade Mountain Publishing, 1998) (Break-In). The genre twist is a descendant perhaps of the reality-to-fantasy transition of *Adventure* (1976) and *Zork* and many works since, including *Curses!* (Nelson, 1994) and *The Muldoon Legacy* (Ingold, 1999).

Some genres have been overdone, to be sure: the cave crawl, stock fantasy, collegiate and apartment settings (the latter two often in order to render the author’s environment in the modeled world; the result often drives home Baggett’s point that much of real life is not fun). But other genres, some strongly suited to IF according to our discussion so far, have been neglected: historical and pseudo-historical settings, those from specific cultural traditions, literary adaptations, the thriller and the western, cyberpunk and super-hero milieus.

The last, the super-hero, comic-book genre, is a dynamic example. The author can yield to the urge to make the PC an action hero; the super-hero powers and escapades give rise readily to organic puzzles; the comic-book circumstances provide authorial freedom; the potential for comedy (or satire) is inherent. Here, concurring, is O’Brian, who would go on to write *Earth and Sky* (2001): “if it’s a great power fantasy to watch some comicbook character shoot fire out of his hands, how much greater to actually play the character that does it! ” (Frenetic). Genre, in

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9 It follows that we contend against Montfort when he writes “[classification] does have just about nothing to do with the craft of IF” (Classification): the evidence presented in this essay suggests just the opposite.
the broad sense, has as big an impact on IF as it ever has done.

**Conclusion**

When crafting interactive fiction, the genre is crucial. It influences how amenable the narrative will be to the medium, how easily organic puzzles will arise, and how much freedom the author will enjoy. “If the chosen genre [and milieu] isn’t fresh and relatively new, then the game had better be very good. It’s a fateful decision: the only irreversible one” (Nelson, Craft par.4). We have examined some outstanding examples across different genres, seeing commonality in puzzles integrated into both setting and plot.

Some genres are more popular than others. We have looked at why fantasy and science fiction are so frequent choices and highlighted other genres crying out for more attention. As it has matured, IF has given rise to genres distinctively its own (TableSaw identifies “Zarfian” works); some, like word-play—*Nord and Bert Couldn’t Make Head or Tail of It* (Jeff O’Neill, Infocom, 1987), *Ad Verbum* (Montfort, 2000)—and conversational IF, would struggle in another medium. Indeed, the genre is still going strong.

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