

Interactive Tragedy



Observations from Interactive Fiction

- What interactive fiction is
- What interactivity contributes to our experience of fiction
- Some examples of IF with tragic elements
- Lessons learned from critical response to this material
- Potential strengths of interactive tragedy

Dormitory Room (on my bunkbed)

The dormitory is a small, frequently claustrophobic room that somehow fits four bunkbeds, which are stacked up on opposite walls. There is a sink in one corner and an old wardrobe in another. The doorway leads east. A solitary window allows a cold light into the room.

Wayne and Paddy are lying asleep in their bunkbeds.

>EXAMINE SINK

The sink is where we spit all our slooshed-out toothpaste each morning. It's covered in limescale, and the plumbing underneath is exposed. Both hot and cold taps produce a weak, tepid stream of water, but at least they don't drip all night. Above the sink is a mirror.

>EXAMINE ME

I am Rameses Alexander Moran. With a name like this, you probably think my parents have a sense of humour, but they don't. I'm too short, too shy, indecisive, and uncharismatic. And I've got terrible posture.

>GET UP

But I don't want to get out of bed. It's a cold day outside, and it's nice and warm here.

Interactivity Adds to Fiction

- *Exploration*: the player partly controls exposition.
- *Challenge*: the story takes effort to experience.
- *Choice*: the player can affect the outcome.
- *Complicity*: the player shares responsibility for the outcome.
- *Role-playing*: the player is constrained by the circumstances of the protagonist.

Exploration

- Encourages (and rewards) the player's curiosity.
- Paces the release of exposition.
- Allows the player to explore the nature of a problem situation.

>READ LIST

The task list for your impending journey is a mess of crossed-out items and scribbled corrections. There, near the bottom; "Buy plane tickets", and a checkmark. So where did you leave them? The desk? Your coat pocket? Could they have gotten packed accidentally?

You hate this feeling. It happens *all the time*. Something safely accomplished, and then pow, you have to worry about it again. Unfair! The tickets must be here somewhere.

>EXAMINE DESK

The desk is, of course, an organized mess; overlapping piles of paper, inches high. The computer is a dusty beige block, several generations out of date, poking up hopefully from among the strata. The lamp hangs over all.

A game-over message is flashing on the screen.

You see a travel book on the desk.

>EXAMINE TRAVEL BOOK

The Schmendrick's Guide to Desert Camping -- you've been studying it for weeks now. Vast alien reams of information: perspiration rates, sunburn factors, tent guying, and how to make a condensation still out of a trashbag and a tin can. You could probably write the book out longhand from memory; and none of it means a damn thing to you.

Challenge

- Is fun (as long as it isn't too frustrating).
- Builds investment. If the player works to experience the early parts of the story, he's likely to want to stay until the end, and to feel he has an interest in the outcome.

Choice

- Encourages the player to think over his moral stance on issues brought up by the work.
- May in fact give the player genuine new ideas about this moral stance, if it supplies true (or seemingly true) information about a real-world problem.

>TALK TO SYLVIE

Sylvie is busily cleaning the room.

1) "Sylvie, would you pull back the covers for me? I'd like to take a nap."

2) "How are you today, Sylvie?"

3) Leave her to work in peace.

>> |

She might be killed by whatever hides in the bed.

1) Proceed, knowing of the danger.

2) Refrain from asking her.

>> |

"Yes madam, of course," she answers.

Unsuspecting, Sylvie pulls down the covers of the bed. She suddenly shrieks, and you see an orange viper biting her. The next moment, Sylvie falls down, dead.

Complicity

- Challenges the player to decide whether seeing the rest of the story is worth doing whatever he'll have to do as the protagonist.

>EXAMINE ABDUL

A naked, shaved, de-toothed and dirty son-of-a-bitch. He stares deep into your eyes, looking thoroughly defiant.

>KICK ABDUL

You can only abuse a body part.

>KICK ABDUL'S LEG

Which do you mean, his left hip, his right hip, his left thigh, his right thigh, his left lower leg, his right lower leg, his left knee, his right knee, his left ankle or his right ankle?

>LEFT LOWER LEG

You kick the shit out of his left lower leg. Abdul sobs in agony.

[Your score has just gone up by one point.]

Role-playing

- Not so much an opportunity for the player to *invent* a character (as seen in role-playing games) but to *play* a character already designed by the author: to become familiar with that character's quirks and limitations, beliefs, prejudices, and circumstances.

...I don't sleep with farmyard animals like Podge here either."

Wayne is making a reference to the fact that Paddy's parents are farmers. Gordon's father, as my father made me find out, is a doctor. I never found out what Wayne's parents did.

>TALK TO WAYNE

Please select one:

- (1) "Wayne, have I ever told you how much I hated you?"
- (2) "Go back to sleep, asshole."
- (3) "Leave him alone, you little wanker."
- (4) "Oh yeah, slag off Paddy, you're so tough."
- (5) "One more word out of you and I'll throw you out the fucking window."

Select a choice or 0 to keep quiet. >> 4

I'd like to defend Paddy, I really would. But then what would happen? Wayne would turn it all on me.... I could imagine the taunting for months afterwards....And I could well do without that little wanker annoying me....And what good could I do anyway? Do you think anything I could do would stop Wayne acting like the asshole he is?

Shade

(Andrew Plotkin, 2001)

- Synopsis: The protagonist is — he thinks — in his apartment, but realizes that something more sinister is going on, which the player uncovers.

>OPEN WINDOW

The window-glass is sealed; it can't open or close. Some notion of thermal efficiency. Truthfully, you like it that way.

Come to think of it, as with a hangover, dehydration is probably the problem. Your mouth is dry wool.

>OPEN SHADE

Darkness is already crawling around the edges of the windowshade. You have no desire to look night in the face.

>GET GLASS

You step into the kitchen nook.

Taken.

>FILL GLASS

You step out of the kitchen nook, and step into the bathroom nook.

The faucet rattles, and water dribbles into the glass.

>DRINK WATER

You gulp the water. It feels vaguely astringent in your mouth, unsatisfying. Well, no doubt thirst will be more real after you fly to California --

Criticism of Shade

- Strengths: *exploration, challenge*, and eventually *complicity*
- Weaknesses: quite surreal; the final situation raised some debate about the significance of what has happened.

Necrotic Drift

(Robb Sherwin, 2004)

- Synopsis: The protagonist saves himself and some of his friends from monsters at a local shopping mall, only to discover at the end that he has destroyed his relationship with his girlfriend.

Criticism of Necrotic Drift

- Strengths: *challenge, complicity, role-playing*
- Weaknesses: Player is to some extent tricked into playing a certain way; it is impossible to explore the problem more on replaying.

Rameses

(Stephen Bond, 2000)

- Synopsis: An Irish schoolboy with social problems fails to form any meaningful connection with the people around him.

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Criticism of Rameses

- Strengths: Nuanced portrait of character through *role-playing*.
- Weaknesses: Player is highly constrained; players expecting a game-like experience were disappointed.

Slouching Towards Bedlam (Star Foster and Dan Ravipinto, 2003)

- Synopsis: The protagonist discovers that a Lovecraftian power that is taking over the minds of humans, and that he is himself “infected”.

Criticism of Slouching Towards Bedlam

- Strengths: *exploration, challenge, complicity, choice*.
Widely regarded as one of the strongest works of modern interactive fiction.
- Weaknesses: implausible and far-fetched premise that did not realistically challenge beliefs important to players.

Fate

(Victor Gijssbers, 2007)

- Synopsis: A queen with powers of witchcraft foresees that those around her plan to kill her and/or her unborn child; she has to choose what sacrifices she is willing to make (and what damage she is willing to do) to save her child and guarantee it a happy future.

>LOOK IN BALL

You gaze into the crystal ball. At first, you see only writhing lines of black and purple, but then, slowly, an image coalesces out of the chaos.

Strangely enough, the visions show not your son, but yourself, still pregnant. You are just getting into your bed... then... you scream! Your face twists in pain, your eyes bulge, and then you fall backwards, evidently dead. ...

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"Yes madam, of course," she answers.

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Criticism of Fate

- Strengths: *choice, complicity*; some *exploration* and *role-playing*.
- Weaknesses: insufficient time, investment to become involved in the characters sacrificed.

Lessons Learned

- Interactive tragedy takes time. The player needs a chance to invest in the story.
- Choice is challenging only if the options are balanced.
- Choice is powerful only if the player sees the consequences.

- Complicity must be earned.
- Role-playing works only if the limitations are expressed as limitations of the viewpoint character (“You don’t want to do that because...”) rather than limitations of the parser (“I don’t understand.”).
- Player needs to understand what kind of work he is interacting with. What are the fundamental issues? Is his role as the player to get a happy ending, or is it to finish the story?

Player/Interactor Commitment

- Player has invested time, exploring and overcoming challenges and formulating questions he wants answered.
- He has had a chance to try what he thinks are reasonable alternatives to the way the story turns out.
- His choices and his willingness to advance the story have been tested.