

# Electronic Literature for All: Performance in Exhibits and Public Readings

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## **Abstract**

Events involving electronic literature, such as public readings or exhibits, constitute a type of performance. These are the lessons learned from two different types of events, an exhibit featuring adaptations of literary works into digital games, and a series of public readings of interactive fiction. The performative aspects of electronic literature affect the design of the event, and must be taken into account in order to create a successful and engaging experience for the attendants.

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Electronic literature has introduced new types of performativity in reading literature. In the case of interactive works, the text is not only interactive, but also changeable. The performative characteristics of electronic literature allow us to include readings in public spaces, both collectively and individually.

This article discusses the lessons learned from two different events involving electronic literature and digital games: *Games by the Book*, an exhibit featuring adaptations of literary works to digital games, and a series of public readings of interactive fiction carried out by the members of the People's Republic of Interactive Fiction in Boston. These two case studies show how the context of the performance affect how the text is tackled and interpreted, and how the design of these activities had to take into account those performative circumstances in order to create two successful events.

### **The performative aspects of electronic literature**

The context in which the reading of electronic literature is not a topic often discussed, probably because of the roots of the field in literary studies, where the focus is the text and the reader, but not the physical setup of how we read. In literary studies, it may seem ludicrous to discuss the differences between sitting on a couch or at the library, for example. On the other hand, theatre studies has demonstrated the importance of how the text is performed, since the same text may mean different things depending on the actor delivering the line. The field of digital media, particularly in relation to human-computer interaction, also very much takes into account the circumstances of interaction, from how the technology may condition the interface to how long the interaction may be. The materiality of the platform delivering electronic literature is one of the main topics of discussion in the field; for example, it is one of the key discussions in Katherine Hayles' *Writing Machines*. On the other hand, although there are regular performance events of electronic literature, the performative aspects of electronic literature are often overlooked. Here the goal is to discuss how these events have been set up and taken place as one would talk about the preparations of a theatrical production and its reception, explaining the rationale of the set up as well as how the performance itself actually took place.

A performance is an activity that takes place in front of an audience. As Richard Schechner defines it, it's "showing doing", and points to the activity itself (*Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 28). The performance, however, is not only what the actors do, but includes both the actors carrying out their own interpretation of the text, and the audience making sense of this interpretation, as Patrice Pavis argues (24-46).

If we transfer this concept to electronic literature, the computer becomes the performer of the electronic text, and the reader as the audience. This is oversimplifying the process, however, since it leaves out both the processes by which the computer may generate the text, as well as how the reader may re-configure it through interaction. The interactor completes the text, at times literally - in interactive fiction, the typed commands also become part of the text. Hence, we can consider the interactor as a co-performer, who also produces the text along with the computer.

## Factors of performance

The two case studies here described are outreach events, that is, activities whose goal is to attract new readers to the works featured and to other digital works. In both cases, the design of the activity is aimed at making these texts accessible, as well as presenting them in a context that allowed the audience to make them intelligible.

These events transport the act of reading interactive fiction and playing digital games into a public space, which affects how they are received and interacted with. As a co-performer in a space which may already have a specific perceived function, the interactor must negotiate their relationship with the text in novel ways. In the case of public readings of interactive fiction, the reading also becomes communal, a distributed co-performance which encourages the audience to negotiate publicly their understanding of the text. The design of the activity must support and cater for this new forms of engaging with interactive texts.

The factors of performance refer to the context of electronic texts. For the purposes of this paper, the relevant factors are:

- *Space*: Where the reading takes place. As Schechner discusses, the space of performance is usually separate from everyday life (*Performance Theory*, 14-15); the space can also be tailored and adapted to the performance itself.
- *Time*: Performance activities usually regulate their time, by determining the duration of the activity. In the case of the activities here discussed, the time is how long the audience was expected to engage with the featured digital texts, whether they complete them or not is not relevant.
- *Text*: The texts were the works selected for the activities, and the features by which they were selected. The criteria of selection do not only have to do with the contents of the texts, but also with the technological specifications and the literacy needed to interact with them.
- *Participants*: Since the performance activity does not take place without an audience, it is a vital factor in designing the activities here described. Who the specific audience is also weighs in how the contents were selected.

These factors are co-dependent, and it is difficult to discuss them in isolation. The discussion of these two activities will center on their preparation and rationale, rather than on the works themselves. As a study of performance activities, we must discuss how the context and processes shape the final result.

### **Case study I: *Games by the Book*, an interactive exhibit.**

*Games by the Book* was an interactive exhibit curated by the author in collaboration with Nick Montfort. It took place at the Hayden Library at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, from September 7th to October 8th, 2012. This exhibit featured four digital games which were adaptations of literary works, two of which were interactive fiction works.

The exhibit was intended to be comparable to a “selected works” exhibit or “book of the week” displays in a library, which invites patrons to examine a set of works, and maybe take the time to read them on their own if they are interested. The exhibit was set up in one of the carrells of the library, a large table with dividers where four computers were set up. The computers were configured to turn on at 8 am and off at 12 pm; two of the computers also had headphones so the music would not disturb the study area nearby. Each computer had a copy of the book the digital text was adapting next to the keyboard, attached with a table to the desk so visitors would not take them away.

The works featured in the exhibit were:

- *Avon*, by Jon Thackray and Jonathan Partington: This interactive fiction piece is inspired by the plays of William Shakespeare. Rather than adapting a specific play, it uses various characters and locations from the best-known works as the existents of the game. The interactor meets the weird sisters of Macbeth, gets to choose Portia’s caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, and visits the inn in The Garter Inn (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) or the court of Illyria (*Twelfth Night*).
- *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams and Steve Meretzky: Another work of interactive fiction, and one of the best known Infocom games from the 1980s. Its distinguishing feature is that it is the only work in the exhibit where the author of the original text was involved in the development. The exhibit featured two versions of the game: the original Infocom game from 1984, and the remake that the BBC website released in 2004 for the 20th anniversary of the game, which includes illustrations and a visual inventory for each location.
- *Yet One Word*, by the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab: This experimental digital game is a thematic adaptation of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the second play in Sophocles’ Theban trilogy. The player must climb from platform to platform by typing words; at times, the game pauses to ask a personal question which must also be typed in. As the game advances, the answers to the personal questions become the words that must be typed. The interaction is devised to encourage self-reflection, one of the themes derived from the play.
- *The Great Gatsby*, by Charlie Hoey and Pete Smith: A platformer game in the vein of the games for the Nintendo Entertainment System, this fascinating text adapts a literary work and a technological platform at the same time. The web page hosting the game presented it as a prototype cartridge called *Doki Doki Toshokan: Gatsby no Monogatari* (“Exciting Library: The Story of Gatsby”), found in a yard sale, and also included a fictional manual. Selected events from the novel take place in cutscenes, while the gameplay itself folds in characters and situations from the novel with the conventions of platformer videogames like *Super Mario Bros*.

The exhibit wanted to demonstrate a variety of approaches one can follow in adapting literary works into games. The participatory nature of digital media initially invites the

transformation of the events in the original story, exploring different alternatives to the plot. This is the case of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, where the interactor controls the protagonist, and partakes in the events, which may change or may take place differently from the original source. Another approach to adapting a literary work into a game is to use it as the inspiration to build the fictional world, rather than to reproduce a sequence of events - *Avon* and *The Great Gatsby* are both examples of this strategy. A third approach is to adapt the themes as interaction patterns, so that the actions of the player rehearse and explore the themes, giving less relevance to the characters and events. This is what *Yet One Word* illustrates, since its mechanics were inspired by the themes at the end of Sophocles' play, in which Oedipus accepts his own death and achieves redemption after pondering his past acts.

The main goal of the exhibit was to attract new visitors and users to the Hayden Library at MIT, specifically newcomers to the institute at the beginning of the academic year. This is why the exhibit took place during most of September, right at the beginning of the academic term, when students are still exploring the resources of the institution. The exhibit was also intended as an embodiment of the concept "applied humanities", which characterizes the department that organized the exhibit, Comparative Media Studies. Applied humanities uses the study of culture and social behaviour as the foundation for production. In this case, these works tackle the literary sources to produce digital games. The exhibit also exemplified the types of research that take place in the School of Humanities and MIT, where there is a growing number of courses that study electronic literature and digital games, as well as adaptation across the media.

### ***Designing the performative aspects of the exhibit***

The selection of the works that would be part of the exhibit had to have specific criteria, to help the curators sift through a myriad of games. The corpus was relatively large, mainly drawn from the specialized database Mobygames, which lists 565 games identified as having been inspired by literary works ("Inspiration: Literature"). The curation process also aimed first at finding works that may seem unlikely sources for adaptation, thus leaving out most genre fiction, which is the main source of narrative inspiration in digital games. The showcase also had to be unusual and unexpected, rather than displaying mainstream games they may already be familiar with. The website *Home of the Underdogs* thus became a secondary source for the corpus, specifically its adventure and interactive fiction sections, where literary adaptations are the most likely to be filed under.

The selection process of the works also had to take into account the performative aspects and how the works selected would coalesce with the context of the exhibit. Let us review each aspect separately.

#### **1. Space**

The exhibit was set to take place in the humanities section of the Hayden Library at MIT. This section is on the second floor of the library, next to the so-called Browsersy section, where patrons are invited to read selected works and new book arrivals. The

library is open to the public, so anybody can walk in even if they are not affiliated with MIT.

The library requested that the organizers maintained the exhibit, since the librarians did not have the expertise or the time to deal with any technical issues. Additionally, there are no security guards in the library, and the exhibit was far from the check-out desk, which meant the exhibit would not be watched.

The spatial factors created a few extra filters in the selection of the works: they had to be easy to set up, and we had to minimize the technological factors that may prevent them from running properly. This initially seemed to favor console games, for example, since they require minimal set up. On the other hand, console games would need a special casing to prevent people from extracting the game from the console; plus it would be easy to abscond with the controllers, which can be rare and expensive to replace. The affordable option was setting up ordinary PCs, like the ones that were already found in the library. Computer mice, regular headphones, and keyboards are less attractive to take away, and if they were stolen, they were easy to replace.

The library setting also posed an additional limitation - the computers had to use headphones, since the computers would be set up near one of the reading and study areas. Games with little or no sound were favored in the selection, so interactive fiction ended up taking up half of the exhibit.

Our hope was that the exhibit would transform the area into a play space within the library, something that some public libraries in the US are already doing. Based on periodic observations, however, this did not really happen - the setting imposed on the way that the games were played, as will be discussed below.

## 2. Time

Another important factor was how long patrons were expected to spend at the exhibit computers. Although we hoped that visitors would come to the library for the exhibit after seeing any of the advertisements, we also hoped that daily patrons would also take the time to check it out. In any case, we did not expect visitors to spend a long time at the computers, just a few minutes at each station.

This expectation also worked as a filter in the selection of the corpus: the works selected had to lend themselves to short playing sessions. Many of the works in the corpus were narrative games, mostly adventure games or role-playing games, which are well known for taking many hours to complete. One of the problems of interactive exhibits, particularly when they feature narrative digital games, is that visitors may get to the game when it has been already started, and they do not know what to do next and do not have instructions at hand, thus failing to demonstrate the relevance of the work.

Therefore, it was important that the featured works were easy to restart, or would not take long to traverse, so players could get their own experience of the game. A single play-through of *Yet One Word* takes less than 10 minutes, a successful traversal of *The Great Gatsby* takes 15 to 20 minutes, although the game is difficult enough to take several trials. The other part of the solution was to find games that one would play for

limited periods of time because of their difficulty. *Avon* is notorious for its contrived puzzles, which makes it tough to complete without the aid of a walkthrough. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has a more accomplished design, but it is also a difficult game, where the player “dies” after botching an action. These continual deaths are also part of the charm, since the descriptions of the player character’s death are witty and fun to read. Therefore the exhibit turned what may be considered a shortcoming of these works into an advantage to regulate the time spent at each computer.

Finding works which lend themselves to short interactions had two advantages. On the one hand, the short time to interact (in comparison with other works in the corpus) allows visitors to get an idea of what the approach to adaptation is, without having to go through hours of gameplay. In the case of interactive fiction, some visitors left the window open after finishing their session, so the next visitor could see what the previous one had done; thus even when they got to the computer in the middle of things they could continue, or start their own game knowing a bit about what to do already.

The other advantage to this solution was that there was no need for designing technical ways to curb long sessions, such as restarting the application after 10 minutes, or having time counters that would pop out and tell visitors to stop. If visitors wanted to play for a long time, nothing would prevent them from doing so—we were not expecting throngs of visitors lining up. The exhibit was designed so patrons could get a gist of the exhibit, and spend more time with whatever works they preferred, either at the library or at home.

### 3. Participants

As stated above, the exhibit was designed mainly for MIT students, specifically those on their first year. The expectation was that visitors would be computer-savvy, and already familiar with digital games. Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Yet One Word* rely on game design conventions, specifically platformer video games, so patrons should be able to play these games without additional instructions.

Including interactive fiction would be an issue for other audiences, since the interaction relies on a series of conventions that may be opaque to people who expect any commands to be valid. Both curators have taught classes at MIT where reading interactive fiction is part of the syllabus, and have seen first-hand how students are comfortable typing commands into a computer. Plus two of the works presented were developed at MIT itself (*Yet One Word*), or by an alum (*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy's* Steve Meretzky), thus highlighting the link between the production of these works and the institution, encouraging patrons to follow their steps.

In any case, it was still a good idea to include some materials that would work as scaffolding to understand how to play interactive fiction. The exhibit also included the manuals for both pieces of interactive fiction, as a pdf. Postcards with brief instructions of How to play IF were also placed next to the stations running interactive fiction.

The exhibit was very bare bones: the computer themselves, with descriptions of the games, and the call numbers to borrow the works from the library, and copies of the

books. The exhibit catalogue was next to the computers, and had the information so visitors could play the games at home. Like a library selection, patrons were expected to engage with the works in more depth not on location, but outside.

#### 4. Texts

As explained above, the goal of the exhibit was to highlight digital works that were less known, or unusual takes on a literary work. The digital works were more emphasized than the original literary works, because the rationale of the exhibit was showcasing different approaches to adaptation, rather than specific content.

The corpus is large enough to encourage different approaches, e.g. digital adaptations based on specific authors, such as Shakespeare or H.P. Lovecraft, on characters such as Sherlock Holmes or King Arthur, or on genres, such as children's literature, or the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

By selecting mostly classical works, we also appealed to patrons who may not know much about digital games, but may be curious to try out adaptations of literary works. This audience was mainly the librarians at MIT.

These factors were essential in selecting the showcase. The final list initially included *The Dark Eye*, a CD-ROM adventure game inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe, which focuses on three of his short stories, "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Tell-tale heart" and "Berenice." This digital game was another example of how an adaptation could create a fictional world based on specific literary works. The interface relatively easy to grasp, since it is a point-and-click adventure game, and although it has sound, it is not a particularly noisy game. It is also a rare and underrated game, which made it a perfect candidate.

There were two primary factors that made this work different from the others: first, being an adventure game, players would start and leave the game started for others. The game was easy enough to restart, so the solution would have been including a sign explaining how to reset the game. The deal breaker, however, was running the game. The computers we borrowed for the exhibit had a Mac OSX operating system, while *The Dark Eye* was originally developed for the Windows 3.1 or Windows 95. This meant that we would have to run the game in an emulator, which is not much of a challenge, but it was a serious hurdle when it came to having the exhibit be easy to maintain, since it made the technical aspects of running the game more complicated. Since restarting the game was already an issue, the game was eventually replaced by *Yet One Word*, which exemplified a different approach to adaptation, and could run as a standalone application.

This switch meant that all the games in the exhibit were available online, so patrons could easily experience the exhibit at home at their own leisure. It also meant that the exhibit was transportable, so if other libraries wanted to set up a similar exhibit, they could obtain all the games, freely and legally, from online resources.



## **Results**

The evaluation of this activity is based on two resources: direct observation and computer use logs. The author sat down near the exhibit for one morning (10 am to 12 pm), one early afternoon (1 to 3 pm) and one late afternoon (3 to 5.30 pm) during the first two weeks of the exhibit, and took notes about visitor behaviour; she also observed two different groups who were invited to the exhibit, and stayed at the library for approximately 30 minutes in each case. Additionally, the computers used the parental controls settings of the operating system, which allowed us to prevent patrons from running programs that were not the intended works, or visit other websites, and also gathered basic information about their usage. The screen saver of the computer was set to start after three minutes, and also worked as a way to turn off the games, so we did not count a lot of idle time if patrons left the computer without closing the application. At the end of the exhibit, we extracted the logs of which programs were run, including when they started and finished, and for how long. Unfortunately, this method did not allow us to know whether the same patron sat at all computers or only some of them.

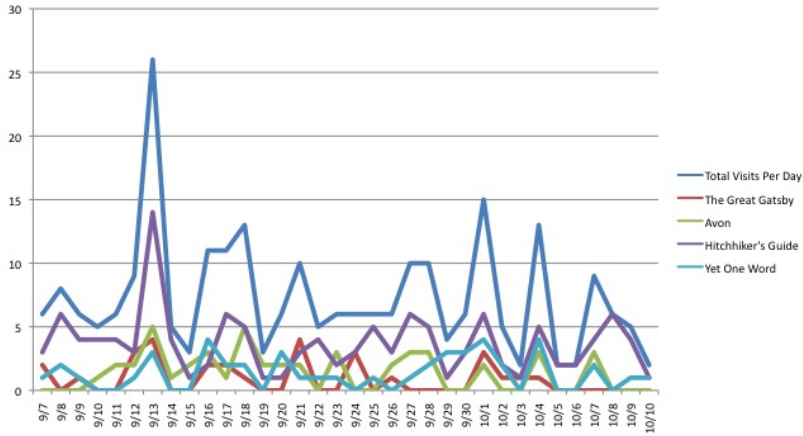
Based on observation, library patrons initially were curious about the set up - a sign marked the carrel with the computers, and the screens displayed a screen saver with the title of the exhibit. Most people picked up the books first and browsed them, as they would do with the books on display in the Browsery. Many moved the mouse to see what was running in the computer, but after a few seconds, they left without really sitting down. The number of patrons who would be curious about the exhibit decreased over time, presumably because they were library regulars and they had already seen it. The exhibit also involved sitting down and changing seats in order to see all the showcased works. The author saw many people approach the carrel, but not sit down and play. Most of the people who enter a library in a university or research facility are not there for leisure, but already have a goal in mind. Sitting down meant a commitment to the activity, and playing digital games would also be a deviation in their original work plan. Perhaps if the computers had been in a high table or a stand, where there was no need to sit down, it may have been easier to attract more casual visitors.

In contrast, people who came to the library expressly to interact with the exhibit were happy to sit down, at times discussing the games with the rest of the group. Given that the exhibit was next to the Browsery, and one of the study areas, it seemed that group visits were actually disruptive of the everyday use of the space.

Fortunately, the data logs revealed that there were people actually sitting down and using the computers beyond the invited groups. For the purposes of this article, we counted “significant visits”, that is, interactions with the programs that were longer than 1 minute.

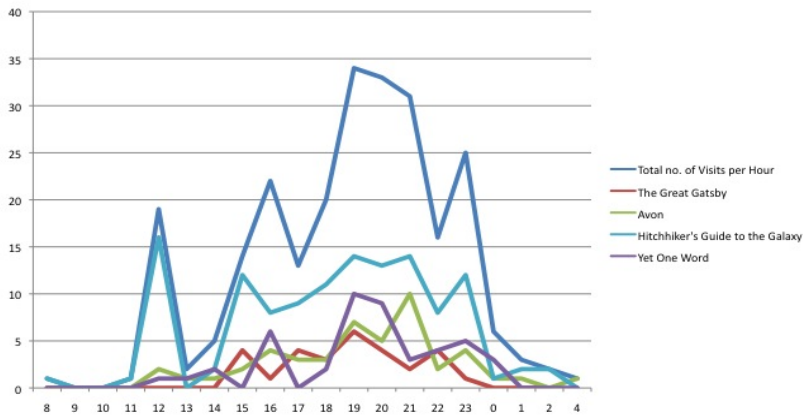
Based on the data, the average number of significant visits per day on each computer was 1.82. Towards the end some of the computers did not get any users to play with them; weekends were also the days of lowest traffic (see chart below).

### Comparative Chart: Total no. of visits per day



As for the time of the day when people used the computers, the period between 6 pm to 10 pm was the most popular, with 7 to 8 pm being the time of the day with the most visits (see chart below). Lunch time (12 to 1 pm) also shows a peak in usage. These data may hint that patrons came to the exhibit to take a break or after classes were over, when they were ready for leisure.

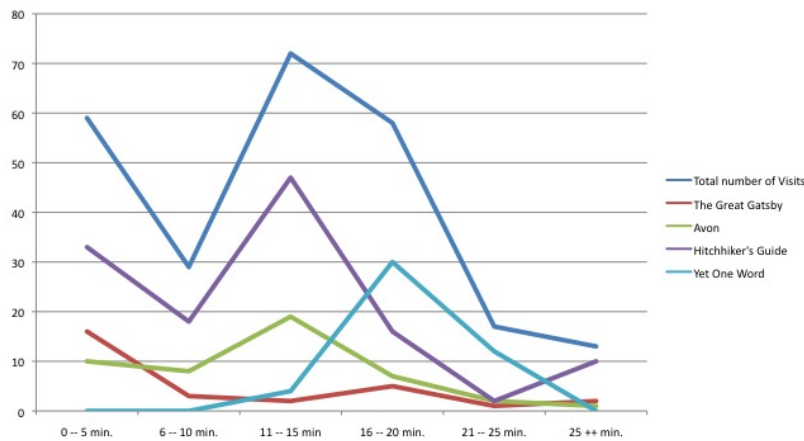
### Comparative Chart: Total no. of visits per hour



*Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was the game that got the most visits, although this may be due to the fact that there were two versions of the game available. It is possible that patrons tried both versions, or moved from one to the other - *Hitchhiker's* has almost three times more visits than the average of the remaining games.

A last significant fact that can be elicited from the data is that most of the visits were casual (1 - 5 minutes), followed very closely by serious commitment (16 - 20 minutes) (see chart below). We would have expected the number of casual interactions to be the highest, and then drop to longer time periods, but that was not the case. Perhaps it shows that the exhibit was set up to attract committed visitors. *Yet One Word* is probably the most revealing example: it did not feature any casual interactions, but most of them were long interactions, implying that players did a playthrough from beginning to end.

### Comparative Chart: Length of Visit



The exhibit was a positive experiment, and was well designed from a technical standpoint - the computers did not need maintenance, and would switch on and off automatically. It seems that the computers were switched on three times by users after 12 am, and it all indicates that they were actually playing the games, which is not really an issue.

Although the exhibit was relatively well attended, probably because of the advertisement and personal recommendations to visit the library, it is not clear whether it attracted the audience we were looking for. It seems that some of the librarians were regular visitors to the exhibit, and we are not sure if undergraduates actually came with the purpose of playing the games.

As a private activity that takes place in a public space, it appears that the library was

more a gateway than the location of the core activity. The shortage of casual visits maybe indicates that the perceived function of the space (study and research) may have prevailed over the purpose of the exhibit, in spite of being situated next to one of the pre-existing leisure spaces, the Browsersy. Our hope is that a similar exhibit in a public library, whose role as a recreation space may be clearer to patrons, would have more casual / exploratory visits.

### **Case study II: Public readings of Interactive Fiction.**

As in the previous case, these public readings were an outreach activity, organized by the People's Republic of Interactive Fiction, a Boston-based group of fans and developers of the genre. The goal was performing a communal reading of pieces of interactive fiction, inspired by one of the events in the Purple Blurb series organized by Nick Montfort. This event in March 2010 featured authors Jeremy Freese and Emily Short, who read their interactive fiction pieces *Violet* and *Alabaster* respectively. Although many of the attendants to this event were fans of interactive fiction, there were others that were not familiar with the genre; since the work was read communally, it became an interesting format to attract new readers to interactive fiction.

This public reading format became the referent for a new series of events, organized by the People's Republic of Interactive Fiction: the author facilitated a series of events on MIT campus, while Brendan Desilets, another member of the group, organized a series of readings in public libraries, one in Cambridge and the rest in Lowell, Massachusetts. The article will focus on the activities at MIT Campus.

#### ***Public readings as performance***

The public readings of interactive fiction make what is a private, individual activity, into a communal activity, in which the reader becomes an audience. Thus the interaction of the text is led by a mini hive-mind of sorts, which has to think aloud and discuss what to do next. As in the case of the exhibit, there are organizational factors conditioned by the performative aspects of the event. The events that will be discussed in more depth are the readings of the following works:

- *ZDungeon*, a port of the original version of what later would become the *Zork* games. It was developed by a group of students at MIT in the late 70s, the same people would go on to start the company Infocom.
- *Lost Pig*, winner of the Interactive Fiction competition in 2007 and of four awards at the XYZZY awards the same year. The adventure is seen through the eyes of Grunk, an ork who is a bit thick and struggles with the English language.
- *The Lurking Horror*, another Infocom game, set in a fictional version of MIT. Since it was a horror game, the event took place on Halloween. The author, Dave Lebling, attended the reading, and gave the attendants some insight on the inspirations and process of creating the game.

## 1. Space

The events took place in MIT classrooms, where the layout of chairs and tables initially structured the interaction as a class. The rooms had standard A/V equipment, including blackboards, a projector, and screens where all the attendees could read the text. The seats were facing the screen and blackboards, just as in a standard classroom. However, the event ended up subverting the space - whereas in a classroom the communication is dominated and organized by the teacher, in a public reading of interactive fiction the audience self-organizes with the help of the facilitator, since they are the co-performers of the activity.

Having the events take place on the MIT campus also related to the contents of two of the works, where the relationship with the production of the texts was an integral part of the experience. In the case of *The Lurking Horror*, the event also included a tour of the actual locations that inspired the game, led by author Dave Lebling. Thus the participants explored the virtual space first, which served as a referent to navigate the physical space.

## 2. Time

The readings were slotted to take place within three hours. This time period was long enough to go through a substantial part of the work or, in the case of shorter works like *Lost Pig*, performing a complete traversal of the text.

The actual interaction took place over the span of two and a half hours, while announcements and briefing, as well as wrapping up, filled the rest of the time. In our experience, it is hard to keep the audience's attention longer than that, since there is so much information and discussion happening as during the event. Although the group took brief breaks after an hour, at the end of the event attendees seemed to lose steam. That is why it is a good idea to schedule and end time to prevent attendants' exhaustion. As in the case of the exhibit, some of the games are available to download or play online through the Interactive Fiction Database, so attendees could play them at their own leisure at home.

## 3. Participants

The audience of these events has more heterogeneous than in the exhibit. The events at MIT were also open to the public, and the advertisements of the event were sent out to fans of interactive fiction as well as MIT affiliates (not necessarily students), and game developers in the area. The attendees were fans and expert players of interactive fiction, along with people new to the genre. The age ranges was also varied—most of the attendees were within the 20-30 years old, but we had some children and teenagers, as well as a good number of attendees over 50. Each event had an approximate average of 20 people, with the numbers would fluctuate because people kept coming in and out of the room. It is worth mentioning that some of the events in public libraries, which were aimed specifically at students of middle or high school. This also made the groups smaller, but also more invested.

The interaction of the group was structured in such a way that it encouraged everyone

to participate, or at least be able to follow the interaction. The facilitator of the event usually gave instructions to the room as to how to participate. At the beginning of the session, attendees could sign up to carry out one of the three roles that led the interaction:

- the typist, who inputs the commands that the room suggests.
- the reader, a member of the audience who reads the text on the screen aloud but does not type the commands. By having someone as the voice of the game, participants could read along at the same time; it also prevents the person at the keyboard from starting to input commands without consulting the room.
- the mapper, who draws a map of the space of the game, as well as diagrams that may help solve specific puzzles. The map helps understanding the space of the game, which at times can be very complicated. The diagrams may be ciphers or puzzles that may need drawing diagrams or gathering information from different sources.

The facilitator announced when the turn of readers and typists started and ended, while there was only the need for one person to help map the space. As for how the commands are decided, it usually involves an *ad hoc* negotiation, where people speak out their commands, and give arguments as to why they think it is the right thing to do. The division of labor gives different channels to the audience to regulate the performance, giving different hands and voices to the different activities involved in playing through a session of interactive fiction.

The heterogeneity of the audience also applied to the different experiences with interactive fiction, from seasoned players to newcomers, to people who had played a long time ago but had not revisited interactive fiction since the 80s. There were also cases where some attendees had already played through the games, and would give helpful hints (although author Dave Lebling reveled in the mistakes the room made while playing *The Lurking Horror*). People who knew the solution to the puzzles would hold back and watch, whereas new players initially listen to figure out what the possible commands are and how to formulate them, and then start suggesting commands themselves. There is certainly a basic learning process taking place in the room, with the experimented interactors providing scaffolding to the new ones, helping new players learn the conventions of interactive fiction faster than they would on their own.

#### 4. Texts

For the MIT events, two of the works (*ZDungeon* and *The Lurking Horror*) celebrated the roots of interactive fiction in the MIT community, whereas *Lost Pig* is a parody of fantasy games, accessible for new players because of its witty writing, and engaging to read aloud. In contrast, the texts used in the library events were tailored to the audience of younger players: *Mrs Pepper's Nasty Secret*, designed specifically designed for beginners, and *Lost Pig* again.

Both *ZDungeon* and *The Lurking Horror* are texts for advanced players, which initially

may not make them ideal works for outreach. The MIT connection, however, made them attractive to new audiences - in the case of *The Lurking Horror*, being familiar with the campus layout is a great help to get oriented. The mix of audiences described above also facilitates traversing a difficult text: the scaffolding provided by expert players also makes these texts easier to grasp, propitiating a “Delphi effect” of sorts. The public discussion usually helps finding the right answer faster than if the interaction was individual. For example, one of the participants in the *ZDungeon* event was an MIT alum who had played the game back on the PDP-10, its original platform. He was amazed at how far the group got into the game in a bit over two hours; he had brought the printed transcripts of his game traversal, and realized it had taken him two months to get as far as the whole group together. Apart from the extemporized Delphi effect, *ZDungeon* is also one of the seminal texts in interactive fiction, which established some of the conventions that even contemporary works still follow. That means that the more seasoned players were familiar with similar puzzles based on those conventions, so they were more expedient in finding the solution.

It is easier to understand the public readings of interactive fiction as a performance event, where the audience participates in a textual interactive theatre. The structure described above is not only a way to structure a public reading of interactive fiction, but also aims at making it an inclusive event, welcoming to all types of players. This model may also be appropriate to use in classrooms, for example, as a way to encourage cooperative problem-solving. In order to spread the lessons learned from these events, and help others organize their own communal readings of interactive fiction, the People’s Republic of Interactive Fiction released a guide with a specific breakdown of the planning and technical considerations to set it up (“How to Run an IF Public Reading.”)

### **Lessons Learned**

The activities described in this article were both designed as outreach events, as a way to spread out the appreciation of electronic literature and off-beat digital games outside the academic realm or fan communities. In order to attract new audiences to these works, the events transported an activity that takes place in a private space to a public space. In the process of relocation, the activities also recontextualized the texts, and changed the way that audiences interact with them. The goal in either case was to get the audience to take these activities back to their private space, and experience them individually.

The experience of organizing these events also teaches some lessons about the influence of the space in the type of interaction. Libraries have the potential to be versatile spaces, not only a place for research and study, but also for recreation and exploration. University libraries, as was the case of the Hayden Library at MIT, have sought this versatility by including the Browsery and special sections for graphic novels or detective novels, as well as hosting the Games by the Book exhibit. It seems that patrons tend to regard these libraries as work spaces rather than leisure, hence the observed shyness in sitting down to play games. Many public libraries, on the other hand, are working hard at demonstrating their multiple purposes by hosting public activities and aiming at building communities, hence public readings of interactive fiction right in with the pre-existing programs to promote literacy.

Communities and interest groups are the key to making electronic literature accessible to all. They have the expertise and love of the works, and they can help others acquire the literacy skills to interact with works that often require complex set ups. Plus it is always a delight to grow the communities that enjoy digital art, and grow the number of people who may potentially create new works.

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