

Learning from the Best of Text

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Foreword

This book was conceived in 2017 as a way to collect all my essays on the history and theory of interactive fiction into one convenient location. At the time I was a university professor, and hoped to make this an academic publication that would help with the tenure track.

I left academia, however, and wrote quite a few more essays than I had originally included. I found that adding citations for each game, like I originally intended, took far too long.

Eventually, though, in 2023, the Interactive Fiction Technology Foundation announced a microgrants program to fund projects useful to the IF community. I applied for one, and began working on the book again.

After writing several new essays and writing some Python programs to automate citations, I've finally been able to finish the book. It's a work in progress still, so feel free to suggest corrections!

Part I

Prologue

Chapter 1

The early history of IF through the eyes of Usenet

This is a brief overview of the earliest incarnations of the Interactive Fiction community I am part of today, the one that gave rise to the Interactive Fiction Competition, the XYZZY Awards, and Spring Thing.

This section has fewer hard citations than other sections, and is meant as a casual introduction.

1.1 Introduction to Usenet

For several years, the primary form of interactive fiction communication was on Usenet, an early forum similar to bulletin board systems, but public and without moderation. The two Usenet groups most frequently used were `rec.arts.int-fiction` and `rec.games.int-fiction` (together called `r*if`).

I recently had the pleasure of browsing through the first few years of the `rec.arts.int-fiction` archives in google groups, and it was fascinating. It gave me the following picture of the IF community:

1.2 Before Inform

For the first two years, there was almost no activity on `r*if`, besides a couple of people asking about hypertext (apparently ahead of their time).

When Infocom shut down, the boards started getting about a few posts a month, mostly about Infocom nostalgia and asking how to crack the games.

Michael Roberts released TADS and *Ditch Day Drifter*^[658] around 1990. It seems to have spread around, but wasn't mentioned a lot on the forums... for the time being.

Posts picked up to more than one a week when Dave Baggett began evangelizing *Unnkulia*.^[427] People now asked a steady stream of TADS questions.

These fall into two categories: How do I use TADS? (answer: download it and buy the manual/debugger). What TADS games are out there? (Answer for a year or two: The first two *Unnkulia* games,^{[427][35]} *Ditch Day Drifter*^[658] and *Deep Space Drifter*,^[660] then, later, *Save Princeton*^[830]).

A steady stream of Infocom nostalgia continued during this time period.

1.3 Inform released

In 1993, Graham Nelson introduced *Curses*^[516] and Inform. The initial discussion of Inform (makes games that run on Infocom’s interpreters; there was one for every system, so you could play those games anywhere) heated up a bit, but didn’t take off. *Curses*^[516] now gets mentioned as much as *Unnkulia*.

Then, something crazy happened. By mid-1994, after another release of *Curses* and Inform, and after people had time to use Inform, the forum just took off. There were many hundreds of posts that year, with tons of questions on how to use Inform. People were thrilled that they can make games in the same file format as Infocom.

Ironically, this increased interest in TADS as well, as more people in general flooded into the field, and discovered that TADS has a lot more history and example code. Baggett released more *Unnkulia* games, and somewhere the *Horror of Rylvania*,^[426] from the same group, came out.

1.4 Growth

By the next year, *SPAG Magazine* was started,^[855] and the year after that, *XYZZY News* was started^[505]. The IFComp was announced, and Andrew Plotkin, who had been working quietly for some time, entered his first big game. *Christminster*,^[647] *Jigsaw*,^[517] and *Theatre*^[859] set themselves up to be the most popular games for years to come.

What I find interesting is that TADS really came into its own after all of this. *Babel*,^[244] *Glowgrass*,^[162] and *Sunset over Savannah*^[142] all came out in the late 90’s, and *Worlds Apart*^[84] in 1999, likely due to changes in TADS from shareware to freeware in the mid-90s (thanks to Emily Boegheim for pointing this out).

But from reading the newsgroups, it seems like the flowering of Interactive Fiction started around the same time people started making a lot of Inform games. And a major influence in this was IFComp and the XYZZY Awards, which we will explore next.

Part II

The XYZZY Awards

Chapter 2

XYZZY Best Games

In this chapter, we investigate all of the XYZZY Best Game winners, discussing their strengths and possible reasons for their success.

The XYZZY Awards were established in 1996^[506] by Eileen Mullin, editor of the relatively-new interactive fiction magazine *XYZZY News*.^[505] They were designed to be the Oscars of interactive fiction, a way to celebrate the best games in IF over a given year in different categories.

These essays break down the winners of the Best Game XYZZY awards each year.

All of these essays contain heavy spoilers.

2.1 Preface: What makes a ‘Best Game’

This section was originally written in 2016 after playing all XYZZY Winners up until Birdland. You can compare it to the winners who came after to see if it still applies.

Having played through all of the XYZZY Best Games, I’ve found some general patterns. These aren’t an easy formula for success, but just something these games have in common.

The two biggest factors they have in common are:

1. Great storytelling, and
2. Deep and compelling mechanics.

I’ll talk about these in a bit. First, what are some things that don’t matter?

1. Size. Unlike IFComp, size doesn’t matter here. *1893: A World’s Fair Mystery*,^[521] *Worlds Apart*,^[84] *Anchorhead*,^[273] *Mulldoon Legacy*,^[371] *The King of Shreds and Patches*,^[455] *Lydia’s Heart*,^[7] *Finding Martin*,^[836] *Risorgimento Represso*,^[156] and *Scroll Thief*^[761] are all games that were well done and much longer than the winners of the year they came out. If it were just total content, these games would win.

2. Difficulty. *So Far*^[609] was nasty, while *I-0*^[94] was relatively puzzleless. *Counterfeit Monkey*^[720] and *Coloratura*^[286] are puzzle games, while *Birdland*^[338] and *80 Days*^[372] are puzzle-light. There is no consistent difficulty level among the Best Game winners.
3. Genre. The genres run the gamut from comedy to horror, from Christianity to LGBT YA fiction. It doesn't seem to matter too much.

Let's talk about the two factors that good games do have in common.

2.2 Great Storytelling

Great storytelling in Best Games is carried out in several ways. In *So Far*^[609] and *Slouching Towards Bedlam*,^[258] for instance, the setting carries much of the story. Exploration reveals more of the backstory, and you feel wonder at the bizarre and alien worlds they devise.

Lost Pig^[397] and *Violet*^[262] focus on characters and their relationships. Not much actually happens plot wise, but you get to know a few people in intimate detail, learning about their past their personality, their goals.

All Roads,^[366] *Vespers*,^[188] *Spider and Web*^[610] and *Savoir-Faire*^[733] encourage you to unravel a mystery, slowly spooling out a story in an interesting and compelling way.

These are only examples; every game combines different elements here. *Birdland*^[338] does all of these.

One thing is true about all Best Games: their stories stick with you for a long long time.

2.3 Depth and compelling mechanics

In contrast to the Best Games, many IFCOMP winners are polished, but standard, adventures where you have the regular pick-up-some-items and roam around Zork-like structure, with nothing superbly innovative or deep (this is not bad; I love many of these games, like *Winter Wonderland*^[416] and *Kaged*^[246]).

The Best Games, though, all have interesting and compelling mechanics. The tools in *Spider and Web*, the stats and branches in *Birdland*, the word-play in *Counterfeit Monkey*, the newbie-friendly feature in *Blue Lacuna*^[644] and *Aotearoa*,^[848] and so on.

And they all have depth, whether the background events that last forever in *Violet* or the gnome in *Lost Pig*, or the extensive dictionary in *Counterfeit Monkey*. Extreme Depth is vital for Best Games.

2.4 Conclusion

It shouldn't be surprising that storytelling and mechanics are the core elements of a best game; After all, they are what makes it 'fiction' and 'interactive'. But

the voting patterns are not the same as for IFComp and IFDB ratings, where longer games are strongly favored.

Now, let's get on to the games!

2.5 1996: *So Far*, by Andrew Plotkin

This game was the first XYZZY Award Winner,^[506] and, coincidentally, it was written by the winner of the first IFComp.^[854]

So Far^[609] is a long, difficult puzzle game that takes place on a variety of alien worlds. There are many non-player characters, but no conversation, as there is always some sort of gap between the player and others, part of the theme of the game.

Here are some of the factors that make this an effective game.

2.5.1 Coherent Story

Many of the best games have tightly-focused narratives that revisit the same themes over and over again. This is something that *So Far* does very well.

Everyone can interpret the themes in different ways, because they are vague and not spelled out. For instance, one major theme is the idea of something being close, but not quite there. Examples include:

- frequently thinking you see your love interest Aessa, but never actually seeing her;
- the almost-but-not-quite Earth-like setting of the original area;
- the two pillars that have to touch (almost) to open the gate, which is referenced in the ending;
- the crowd watching the arena that ‘applauds’ wildly but silently, giving the PC feelings of alienation;
- the two ‘fuel cubes’ that need to almost but not quite touch in order to work;
- the many doors that never open, the boxes that never open, the gates that are closed shut;
- the moon people that can’t touch you and which you can’t touch
- the sleeping man that you can never talk to;
- the darkness that prevents you from experiencing the world in a usual way;
- the boy that is eternally only one step away from freedom;
- the world of shadowy images that you cannot interact with.

This theme is so frequent that it seems the whole game is built up around it.^[764] This theme leads indirectly to a richly detailed game world, due to so much being implied that you can't actually interact with (doors, people, areas, items, etc.). As one reviewer put it^[764]

[T]he world you're exploring feels larger than it is. Part of the way the game achieves this effect is by scattering locked doors and inaccessible (for one reason or another) exits through the game, which constantly reinforces the sense that you haven't seen everything of interest in the game's world.

2.5.2 Puzzle Structure

So Far is a difficult game. As one reviewer wrote, "this is a difficult title...The significant freedom the player has can let him screw things up completely."^[774] Another said, "The game is famously difficult and cruel..."^[385] From my personal experience, I had played it three times by the time I wrote this article, and I had to use a walkthrough after the first couple of areas.

The puzzles are also quite fair in retrospect, but they require experimentation. Here are some examples of clever puzzles:

- The oily pods. This is one of the puzzles that one reviewer referred to when saying "it's the only game I can think of that actively encourages players to do self-destructive things."^[385] You are given several rusty things (including two pillars) and several oily pods to oil them with. Your goal is to pull up a rope. However, the only way the west pillar can 'tug' the rope is if you specifically refrain from oiling it. If you can figure out this one roadblock puzzle, you automatically have a pod left over for later puzzles. Plotkin could have made the puzzles in a way that you could solve the 'gate' puzzle with no oil pods left over, but he forces you into the right setup.
- The ceramic square. This is a mysterious object with a scored corner that you carry through large portions of the game. If you break off the corner, it emits flame. I didn't see any way I could have guessed the use of this item in my first play through using the walkthrough. In the second one, though, you see a child lighting a pipe around the time you get the square, and a ceramic triangle is broken off in another area. This tells the player that the squares can be broken, and suggests a possible use. However, only careful and/or repeated playthroughs will reveal this information.
- The thick/thin pipes. In this puzzle, you are in a thin space with chimes. Using chimes gives you an odd sensation, and each used chime disappears. Occasionally new chimes appear. The secret is that thick chimes are moving you in one direction through layers of thin spaces, while thin chimes move in the opposite direction. I thought this was very difficult the first time, not knowing the pattern. However, once you know they move in

opposing directions, it becomes much simpler. With nothing to do but explore, it is natural to test the extremes, to see what pattern will allow you to go as far as possible one way. The final solution is just going all the way one way, then turning around, then turning around again.

The one that I had the most trouble with was the sounds puzzle, as I missed out on some important interactions with them. But I think sufficient experimentation would have revealed the solution.

2.5.3 Creativity

The setting and areas are incredibly creative, much of it borrowed (openly) from others' creativity, which is an important tool for any author. Some examples of creative appropriation included by the author in the in-game acknowledgements include the tension bridge (based on concepts by Buckminster Fuller),^[595] the dinosaurs (based on Dougal Dixon's *The New Dinosaurs*).^[197] and fragments of the poem *The Bells* by Poe^[612]

Another area of creativity in the game is the use of vibrant colors in descriptions: orange, violet, green and green animals; worlds of pure black and pure white; plants of yellow or bright purple; buildings of grey and scarlet and ivory covered in green moss.

The many dramas in the form of plays, dances and rodeos are also innovative, and unusual in the field of interactive fiction. They are used to communicate information; as one reviewer said, "The game opens with the final act of a play, and Plotkin deftly wove in all the major themes of the game into this scene, which you watch play out before you really can do anything."^[673]

2.5.4 Pathos

Plotkin uses a variety of techniques to instill pathos. Nothing is shoved at the player; instead, everything is removed one step. As one reviewer said, "This is the kind of game where you not only have to read each piece carefully and thoughtfully the first time, you also have to stand permanently apart from what's going on."^[712] Instead of a passionate argument with the player, the player watches a play about an argument. Even more removed, they spend most of the time watching others who are watching the argument. The same is true of the arena and the village; in each case, the attention is focused on the viewers, and not the drama itself.

The paw prints in the snow, the silence of the people in the town, the complete darkness in the sound world, the isolation the shadow world all build pathos by the absence of something rather than the presence.

The most powerful moment may very well be finding the boy trapped in the 'pipe' world. You are one step from leaving the world, and you can leave if you take a pipe from a child. But taking it means they will never be free, as far as you know. Nothing ever tells you to feel bad. The story focuses on how uncomfortable you are, and the claustrophobia you feel. It implies the boy has

been there a long time, and it shows that he knows about the pipes, and knows how useful it could be to him. And then it just leaves everything up to you. It sets up a moral choice without telling you anything about it. This is effective, creating pathos through inference.

2.5.5 Conclusion

This game has other strengths, but it seems clear that the creative setting, the effective use of pathos, the coherent story and the fair-but-hard puzzles contribute a great deal to its success as a ‘Best Game’.

2.6 1997: *I-0*, by Adam Cadre

The next game on the XYZZY Best Games list is *I-0* by Adam Cadre.^[94]

As a warning, this game contains sexual content involving minors. However, you can play through without using any of the sexual content. That is, none of the puzzles require any sexual actions.

2.6.1 Narrative Structure

Sam Kabo Ashwell has listed a variety of structures for plots of games.^[29] These structures include a branch-and-bottleneck structure, which Ashwell defines as follows: "The game branches, but the branches regularly rejoin, usually around events that are common to all versions of the story." Another structure is the floating module structure, which he defines as follows: "A mode only really possible in computer-based works. There is no tree – or, while there may be scattered twigs and branches, there’s no trunk. No central plot, no through-line: modular encounters become available to the player based largely on state, or perhaps randomly."

Most games before *I-0* had a branch-and-bottleneck plot.^[15] Games like *Trinity*,^[501] *Jigsaw*,^[517] *Spellbreaker*,^[428] and others allowed for some jumping around between discrete chunks, but in practice the chunks were unlocked in the same general order each playthrough. Each chunk is accessed the same way each time.

I-0 has a floating module structure that allows you to access the same events in a variety of ways, and different playthroughs can have very different structures. As Carl Muckenhoupt said, "Here’s one game that actually allows you a great deal of freedom to determine the plot."^[502] Hitchhiking at any time results in the ‘crazy driver’ segment, which can end successfully in two different ways, each leading to a different part of the game. The Taco Junta can be accessed at multiple points in the game. The underlying structure of the game might be simple, but it feels like more, like an expansive sandbox world where you can determine the story that is told.

2.6.2 Detail and PC

The level of detail in the game is astonishing. In a trick perhaps inspiring a similar scene in *Brain Guzzlers from Beyond*,^[123] the glove compartment contains tips on how to survive in the desert. Your purse contains pepper spray that can be used on anyone. There are four different forms of conversation. There are multiple scripted conversation scenes that allow player input. Almost all reasonable actions have been implemented.

This game is also notable for having a very strong PC voice. Some earlier games had well-defined PCs (*Christminster*,^[647] *Plundered Hearts*,^[83] *Infi-del*^[55]), but it was unusual to have the PCs voice color everything that you do, from examining details of your car to waiting around to the error messages. The ‘strong pc’ has become a hallmark of XYZZY Best Games, with games such as *Violet*,^[263] *Lost Pig*,^[398] *Coloratura*^[286] and *Birdland*^[338] being designed around vibrant and interesting PCs.

2.6.3 Knowing your audience

I-0 has explicit material, but it’s all phrased in vague, male-oriented innuendo: ‘you proceed to give him what he will remember in the decades to come as the best twenty-five minutes of his life,’ for instance..^[94] In the year it came out, though, the population of RAIF and RGIF had a large segment that enjoyed this kind of material. Reading the XYZZY transcripts about *I-0* makes this clear; many people in the community wanted this type of game^[443]

Writing to your audience continues to be important today. Many of that group that voted for *I-0* have grown older and started families or taken on more responsibility, so their tastes have changed. When *Violet*^[263] was released, many people in the voting community had written, were writing, or had failed to write dissertations. As another example, in recent years, a large group of LGBTQ authors have joined the community that surrounds the XYZZY awards.^[732] The winning games in 2014 (*80 Days*^[372]) and 2015 (*Birdland*^[338]) included LGBTQ storylines. Communities are never defined by a single feature, and authors can freely choose what to design their games around, but it’s interesting to see how Best Game voting is influenced by the Zeitgeist.

2.6.4 Summary

I-0 is mainly remembered today for its eroticism, but underlying it is an innovative plot structure and deep implementation. Its subject matter is an artifact of the time period it came out in.

2.7 1998: *Spider and Web*, by Andrew Plotkin

The game *Spider and Web*..^[610] has generated a great deal of past discussion^[16] It won Best Game in the year that *Anchorhead*,^[273] *Photopia*^[97] and *Losing Your Grip*^[300] came out, all highly-regarded games^[669] It has topped a poll

about the best IF games of all time,^[279] is high on the IFDB top 100,^[587] has more ratings than most other games on IFDB (ninth highest as of 4/22/2018), etc.

My personal feelings on it are positive. I enjoyed the first half when I first encountered the game, and I solved the ‘big puzzle’. But the second half was far too hard for me. Revisiting years later, I found the second half much more enjoyable, now that I’m more familiar with the tropes of IF.

Here are some good design techniques that I identified as I replayed the game:

2.7.1 Subversion of expectations

Spider and Web uses this technique multiple times. It is used in the opening, where the expected genre is subverted. It presents itself as a simple exploration game, when suddenly the player is hit with a sudden transition to interrogation scenes. It happens again moments later when the game reveals that the player has a huge inventory of spy tools. Two other major subversions occur later when you reach the core puzzle of the game and immediately afterward when you realize that everything you thought you knew about your experience was false.

Subverting expectations is not necessary for a great game, but it certainly helps. Many of the most-rated games on IFDB are games that subvert the players’ expectations (such as *9:05*^[89] and *Shade*^[608]). The subversions in this game come in several flavors, some based on IF tropes and other based on standard fiction tropes.

2.7.2 Depth

As with the other Best Game winners, *Spider and Web* has great depth. Things that you want to do, you can do, and if you can’t, there’s a good reason.

The tools are all intricate, described in great detail, and can match up in a large number of ways. This leads to a sort of sandbox environment. As Emily Short put it, “[T]here is also the technical cleverness of the gadgets: the protagonist is given a large selection of entertaining toys to play with, which, like good IF toys, need to be figured out and then reapplied in a variety of different ways.”^[711]

Perhaps the greatest depth is in the constant comments by the interrogator. These are very well developed, weaving hints into every situation..^[590] Plotkin has said, “The interrogator was tedious to code but not really difficult. I just had to tabulate the ways each scene could end, either unsuccessfully (player does something stupid) or successfully (player reaches the correct ending move but with some intermediate state not set). This was a not-too-long list for each scene. Then I just needed first/second/maybe-third responses for each outcome”^[604]

2.7.3 Strong Individual NPC

The Best Games tend to have very memorable characters. Some have great PCs, some have great ensemble casts, but Spider and Web is notable for one excellent NPC: the interrogator.

It's rare to have a nemesis in IF that is so well developed, and in fact the interrogator won the XYZZY for Best Individual NPC in 1998..^[507] The design choice of having just yes/no questions reinforces the PC's confinement and removes all issues with 'guess the topic' which usually plague conversation in IF^[719] And, as mentioned before, the yes/no answers are tabulated and commented on by the NPC, which contributes to the game's depth.

2.7.4 Conclusion

I could touch on the puzzles in the game, but the puzzles are mainly great because of the earlier topics: the subversion of expectations, the depth of the gadget implementation and the guidance/pushing from the interrogator.

People enjoy pointing out things they dislike about this game, and I have done so myself (see reviews by Ambershards, Xi, and Mathbrush at the game's^[756] IFDB page), but I believe that it is a target for negative feedback because it's so well known. This is one of the most important IF games of all time.

2.8 1999: *Varicella*, by Adam Cadre

Varicella^[103] was Cadre's second XYZZY Best Game^[80] It is a tightly timed game with numerous hostile NPCS acting independently. You play as Primo Varicella, palace minister, and you are competing with your enemies for the title of Regent.

The writing has been praised in extreme terms: "The writing is terrific, of course; this is one of the best-written works of IF ever, bar none..^[763] The game itself has frequently been described as 'nasty', and Baf's Guide called it perhaps the most disturbing IF game ever..^[762] It has content that could merit several warnings, including graphic violence, rape, pedophilia, torture, strong profanity, chemical warfare, and so on. None of the content is explored in depth. On a personal I found the game disturbing enough when I first encountered it that I deleted not only the game itself but my interpreters and considered quitting playing Interactive Fiction.

Let's get to some of the good design decisions in *Varicella*.

2.8.1 Strong Narrative voice/PC/setting

The game *Varicella* cannot be uncoupled from the character Primo Varicella. Primo is intelligent, weak, refined, has an eye for luxury, and can be heartless. Primo is loyal to his allies. Primo is also very verbose; the opening text has over 600 words, and room descriptions are lush and packed. Each room serves

a useful purpose with several events in its except for the corners of the first and second floor. All of these rooms are described through Primo's intelligent, cynical eyes.

Conversation in Primo's voice comes in three flavors: hostile, servile, and cordial. Most NPCs do not react to hostile orders well; but Primo provides over 100 variants of insults in these hostile conversations.

Primo's character is revealed in responses to standard actions, in the way NPCs treat you, and in the surroundings and places where Primo spends his time.

2.8.2 Complex NPCs

The NPCs in Varicella are exaggerated and outrageous. A mad scientist has the entire castle stocked with toxic weapons, with nasty green mold leaking through all over. A belligerent general has all the guards paid off, sets a game-ending timer not only for you but for all other NPCs, and provides dramatic endings. A corrupt priest, a greasy treasurer/send-up of Zork adventurers and a drunken, foul-mouthed prince round out your enemies. Your allies are exaggerated as well, with a femme-fatale harlot with a heart of gold, an insane princess, and an illiterate, timid queen.

Only a handful of NPCs interact strongly with the player, notably Sierra, who can talk about almost anything, and, to a lesser extent Rico. Most of the others are cleverly disguised by extreme emotion, terse replies, and lengthy scripts and tics.

There are mobile NPCS, static ones, aggressive ones, and ones only heard of. And there are secret ones (like your brother Secondo, accessed by accidental phone call).

2.8.3 Depth

As the PC and NPCs show (which won all their awards in the 1999 XYZZY's^[862]), this game has extensive depth. Reading the text dump shows just how many responses have been coded, like asking Rico about each of his toys, or experimenting with the test rubes and a small glass of water that is hidden in a small corner of one room.

Like *Spider and Web*,^[610] there is a sandbox feel to this game, where everything can be used more than once and each new step forward gives you several people and situations to experiment on.

Every opponent can be dealt with in at least two ways, with Rico having perhaps the hardest alternate solution to find. Like *Curses*,^[516] *Varicella* has a few easy solutions to puzzles that only work once, allowing you to experiment with different endings. I'm thinking specifically of Charlotte killing someone for you here, which is the easiest way of dispatching most enemies, but can only be used once.

This depth lends great difficulty to the game, as it can take a dozen or more playthroughs just to see what is going on, especially when using the TV.

2.8.4 Conclusion

To this point, all XYZZY Best Games have had vibrant settings, great depth of implementation, and a sandbox feel. Each has had memorable characters and an intriguing storyline. Going forward, we will see how setting, characterization, story and depth continue to be important, while some more linear games began to show up in between sandbox-y games.

2.9 2000: *Being Andrew Plotkin*, by J. Robinson Wheeler

It's somewhat amusing that the first five winners of the XYZZY Best Games were Andrew Plotkin, Adam Cadre, Andrew Plotkin, Adam Cadre, and then *Being Andrew Plotkin*^[840] by J. Robinson Wheeler.

This winner is unusual in many ways. It was the first IFComp game to win best game. It was written in a single month, between September 1 and October 1.^[839] It is far more linear and shorter than any previous Best Game (the author referred to it later as being on "a railroad track"^[839]).

It came out in a year of very strong games, including *Shrapnel*.^[98] and *LASH*,^[81] as well as the games that beat it in IFComp (*Kaged*^[246] and *Metamorphoses*^[727]), not to mention the most famous game from the year 2000, *Galatea*^[724] It was entered anonymously in IFComp 2000 and was written to copy Adam Cadre's style.^[839] Emily Short herself may have had something to do with its XYZZY win, as she started an impassioned Usenet discussion mentioning how much the game impacted her, with the author then going on to explain the creation process.^[709]

2.9.1 Strong PCs and Multiple Viewpoints

BAP (*Being Andrew Plotkin*) is unusual for having four well-described PCs: the humans Peter and Valerie, the robot Melvin, and Zarf (Andrew Plotkin) himself. The game has a scene where all four PCs describe each other and a single office room in hilariously different ways. The robot PC has a programming-language-style thought process that is, in my opinion, brilliant.

The frequent shifting of PCs is quite unusual, especially with different viewpoints on the same locations. *Photopia*^[97] did multiple PCs, but each PC was in a different situation. Paul O' Brian said "Particularly evocative and exciting were the effects generated by the various shifts in perspective that the game executes. Those perspective shifts are some of the most intriguing things that happen in this game, or in any comp game I've ever seen, for that matter."^[79]

2.9.2 Setting

This game has a vibrant setting outside of the purposely drab first room. The author is not afraid to borrow liberally, as all good authors do. So we have ele-

ments borrowed from Being John Malkovich,^[52] (such as the magic door and the inside of Zarf’s brain) together with some of Zarf and Infocom’s most evocative settings (like the caves from *Hunter in Darkness*,^[600] the Roc’s Nest from *Spellbreaker*^[428] etc.).

As mentioned before, the same room is described many times by different PCS, allowing the drab office room to evolve into something much greater. The fast-paced, goofy-but-literary style of writing helps the setting as well, such as when you are falling into the hedges and the game describes it as blurs of color.

2.9.3 In-jokes and Knowing the community

Emily Short’s essay on BAP was subtitled ‘The Power of the In Joke’,^[709] mentioning how being personally referenced in the game affected her. The author stated how he tried to get specific IFMUD (the main IF chat room at the time) participants to get excited by their game.

The game strongly references the first two scenes of *So Far*,^[609] and its difficultly level, the interrogation scenes and ending of *Spider and Web*,^[610] the cave in *A Change in the Weather*,^[594] the stack overflow possibility in *Lists and Lists*,^[603] multiple parts of *Hunter in Darkness*,^[600] and a scene from Plotkin’s teenage Infocom knockoff, *Inhumane*.^[602] It also references *Spellbreaker*^[428] and *Enchanter*^[64] in important ways. There are references to Zarf’s employment at Red Hat, the IFMUD itself, and to Adam Cadre’s NPC-focused, cynical style.

2.9.4 Depth?

I mentioned in the last few chapters how Best Games tend to have a lot of depth. This game frequently doesn’t have tailored responses to actions, and puts linear constraints on you, both of which the author admits to.^[839]

Where it does have depth is in other areas. The conversation selections really let you shape the two main characters. In a style that presages Choice of Games, you can choose your tone, your relationship style, etc. And some of it is, I believe, tracked by the game. Whether it is tracked or not, it gives an illusion of choice to a remarkable degree.

The depth of implementation also shows up in the multiple PC descriptions and responses, as well as in the neat programming tricks (like the recursion) and in the multiple things you can do with the tools Zarf gathers.

Finally, the game is ‘deep’ in the number of references to past games it packs in. There are so many, like the breaths of fresh air from *So Far*,^[609] the glaring white light from *Spider and Web*,^[610] and so on. The references in the game are packed so tight that you can discover new ones months or years after first playing.

2.9.5 Conclusion

Being Andrew Plotkin shows that there is no universal formula for a Best Game. Written in a month, linear, short, it broke parts of the pattern of XYZZY Best

Games before it. However, it still had strong writing, great characterization of PCS and NPCS, a compelling story, and depth. These continue to be the hallmarks of Best Games.

2.10 2001: *All Roads*, by Jon Ingold

This game was the first to win both IFCComp and the XYZZY Best Game award in the same year. It follows *Being Andrew Plotkin*^[840] in being a linear, story-driven game, a departure from earlier Best Games. It faced competition from Emily Short's two conversation games *Best of Three*^[715] and *Pytho's Mask*^[731] as well as J. Robinson Wheeler's epic time travel game *First Things First*.^[841]

Let's see what it brings to the table.

2.10.1 Leading the player through PC motivation

All Roads is a game on rails, but it's subtle in its pushing. In every scene but one (the bird puzzle), you are held by the hand and given hints on what to do next. A third of the game is spent in captivity, where you can't do anything but look or talk. Another large chunk is spent in front of NPCS who are waiting for you to talk. At several key points, the game says things like "you feel the urge to GO".

Most people dislike railroad games; *Rameses*^[71] received mixed reviews when it came out some time earlier.^{[490][72]} However, *All Roads* is more successful because it encourages you to identify with the PC, and it always motivates the next step in-game. You do the right thing because that's what the PC would do.

This allows for intense action scenes, betrayals, escapes, confrontations, etc. that would be difficult to depict in a more open game. However, another reason this works is the game's:

2.10.2 Depth

How can a linear game have depth? Try fighting the flow of the game. Don't go in the shadows when it tells you to. Enter rooms multiple times. Talk more than you should, drop items when you shouldn't and the game's complexity will become apparent. All sorts of actions have been foreseen, from dropping the note when being led by the captain, to attacking your sleeping companion, to talking to Giuseppe after you are supposed to leave the palace.

Also, the game includes some clever coding tricks like recording your actions the first time through the palace and then replaying them.

2.10.3 An intricate, cinematic story

All Roads is a story-based game, and uses techniques from cinema, like a disjointed narrative, a confused protagonist that pieces together the plot one step

behind the audience, revisiting scenes from multiple perspectives. The scenes are exciting and described quite like a movie as well, like the opening scene with a clock hand that looks like a sword slowly ticking to your doom and a crowd that is just a collection of blurs.

2.10.4 Setting

The game is set in a sort of Renaissance or medieval Italy, with large cathedrals, immense plazas, rich palaces, etc. The characters draw on classic tropes, like a priest, a medieval ruler, a prostitute, a revolutionary, the captain of the guard. Items are iconic: a wine bottle, a signet ring, a pen. Everything in the game builds on the background and setting.

2.10.5 Conclusion

All Roads seems at first to stand in stark contrast to earlier winners like *So Far*, being completely different in linearity and puzzle style (although both involve entering shadows). However, all the Best Games so far have the feeling of a big world, a real world that has more outside of what the game shows. The sort of games you could write fan fiction of. To me, this seems to be achieved by creating compelling characters, a memorable setting, and a depth of implementation to give the illusion of freedom. However, opinions may differ.

2.11 2002: *Savoir-Faire*, by Emily Short

Savoir-Faire was the first non-IFcomp game since 1999 to win Best Game. Replaying it, it is miraculous how detailed and exceptional the game is. Emily Short had long worked on modeling different related life systems and has succeeded here in modeling certain physics very well.

On a personal note, this is one of the games I was most frustrated with when I first played it, as I tend to really identify with the PC and throw myself into the role. This is why I was so disturbed by *Varicella* and *Vespers*, and it's why I was frustrated with *Savoir Faire*. The protagonist is not my personality type at all.¹ However, stepping back for this essay and looking at the technique and craftsmanship, it is clear this game is almost unrivalled for quality, and I've come to enjoy revisiting it; it's a great game for an international flight.

Here are the best spots.

¹Emily Short responded to an early version of this essay where I expressed significant displeasure with the PCs thefts: "As I originally imagined this, Pierre doesn't regard himself as a thief. Rather, he thinks of himself (not without some justification) as the beloved heir of a mutually supportive family, and their possessions as partly his own belongings. He's also confident that, in this threatening situation, his parents would rather part with some expensive trinkets than lose him – and that his father will be able to help get them back later, or otherwise settle the score."^[722]

2.11.1 Attention to detail/depth

It doesn't get deeper than this. All items are categorized by size, liquid capacity, hardness, easiness to throw, weight, cut-ability, color, and so on. An intricate magic system allows you to link items that are similar. Within these constraints, any objects having the right characteristics will work for the puzzle at hand. For instance, when you have to throw something at the bauble, literally any throwable thing of sufficient weight will work, but get stuck. Many things contain water, which you can pour in varying amounts, and which can evaporate.

The linkage system will work on any two similar things, or it will tell you why it won't work. This and the physics simulation evoke the sandbox feel of earlier winners *Spider and Web* or *Varicella*, breaking the two year run of linear story-driven games. Very few, if any, games give the player this much freedom to experiment, and most of its rivals are written by Short herself.

2.11.2 Setting and PC

This game has thoroughly-developed setting. You play in France in some indeterminate century, but an alternate France where the nobility employ a linking magic. There are feelies detailing the background, and at least two other games exploring this rich setting (*First Draft of the Revolution*^[221] and *Damnatio Memoriae*^[721]).

The PC is very well-characterized as a sort of gentleman rogue, like *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.^[566] His complex moral system definitely leaves an impression. Short makes the player complicit in his actions by assigning points to his thefts, to eating and sleeping. His motives are slowly revealed by 'remembering' cutscenes, which provide essential clues.

Very few games reach this level of wordbuilding, and most of them are also XYZZY winners.

2.11.3 Thematic Unity

This game manages to bring every part of itself together. The puzzles are natural from the PC's point of view; there was an old saying that bad games stopped the protagonist with 'soup cans in the pantry', but when your PC is a hungry foody, it makes sense to stop the play with dried beans in the cellar. The PC in turn derives their characterization from the setting, a rich Renaissance/pre-Revolution France. And the setting may well be derived from the need to have many objects with elaborate decorations to promote linking.

2.11.4 Conclusion

In terms of pure programming and craftsmanship as well as world building, *Savoir-Faire* is in the top tier. It was also the last non-IFcomp Best Game for seven years. It represents a significant achievement, and provides a great game for fans of the original Infocom games.

2.12 2003: *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, by Daniel Ravipinto and Star Foster

Slouching Towards Bedlam^[258] kicked off a six-year trend of IFComp games winning Best Game in the XYZZY Awards. This game is iconic, one of the most played and rated on IFDB and one which should be on any avid IF fan’s radar.

It is a mid-sized game that has the illusion of being much larger. Let’s talk about what it does right.

2.12.1 Phenomenal worldbuilding

Bedlam has some of the best worldbuilding I have ever seen. The setting is the London area in a sort of steampunk alternate history. The main NPC is your companion, Triage, a clockwork robot that analyzes anything you point to. It communicates with you in a grid of alphanumeric characters, which is given a beautiful visual representation in the game.

You are the director of an asylum run by clockwork and crystal (and also abandoned and rotting). The enemies and dangers in the game are novel, where the authors avoided using stereotypical Great Old Ones or supernatural creatures like ghosts or vampires. Instead, the villain is intimately tied with words and text themselves.

This world building is primarily established through books and phonograph records, combined with setting.

2.12.2 Manipulation of the parser itself

This game, and *Vespers*^[188] and *Deadline Enchanter*,^[181] directly comment on and use the parser format. Every parser response is carefully crafted to avoid using the words ‘you’, ‘your’, ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’, etc. To indicate the player’s unusual nature. The meta commands are given an in-game explanation that becomes a major plot element. And a text game is a perfect setting for an enemy based on words. Thus, it uses its format to great effect.

2.12.3 Strong moral choices and player influence on plot

Bedlam has received praise for its plot structure,^[728] where as you progress through the game, you realize that you can take wildly different approaches to the information you’ve received, and take action accordingly. Even more, upon replay, you can take yet more branches that you wouldn’t have thought of the first time.

In *Bedlam*, it requires careful thought and planning from the start of the game to the end to get some of the endings. This is in stark contrast to most branching, which generally happens near the end in parser games, or at the very beginning.

2.12.4 Illusion of size

Bedlam feels much bigger than it is. There are numerous locations that are huge: corridors with six rooms, a control room with six levels, a massive filing system. But the game carefully disguises the emptiness of most of the levels by restricting movement through plot development or through in-world explanations.

One of the authors, Daniel Ravipinto, explained this in an interview:^[567]

There's a fair bit of what Andrew Plotkin once coined as "wedge-chocking", or closing off options which are extraneous to the plot. We wanted Bedlam and London to feel real and large, but we didn't have the time (either in terms of development or actual player playtime) to allow you to go anywhere, hence things like the fact that you can only access one hallway of the panopticon, or that the cab can only take you to a few, important places.

2.12.5 Conclusion

Slouching Towards Bedlam uses strong world-building, innovations with the parser itself, moral choices and the illusion of freedom to give the player an epic feel. While it has encountered criticism in recent years for its portrayal of mental illness,^[589] it continues to attract many new players and still drives discussion decades later.

2.13 2004: *Blue Chairs*, by Chris Klimas

Blue Chairs, a parser game by Chris Klimas, later the creator of Twine, is a controversial game. Adam Cadre gave it a generally negative review on Radio K (due its heavy use of literary allusions),^[105] and several other reviews are negative.^[407] Nevertheless, it won XYZZY Best Game, and I personally enjoyed it.

It's a game about a drug trip at a frat party, and contains some strong profanity. That's otherwise not my thing at all, but it more or less works in this game for me personally; the game becomes like that one cousin who's a bit outrageous but has a heart of gold. As mentioned above, some disliked the amount of literary allusions in the game, but I found that in short-term narratives, allusions like that can serve as a convenient shorthand for communicating ideas.

In any case, this is a game that is polarizing; you'll probably love it or hate it. It has a maze that isn't a maze, surreal content, and so on.

No matter what, it won the XYZZY awards, beating the popular tutorial IF game *Dreamhold*,^[611] the excellent commercial game *Future Boy!*,^[772] and the polished, exciting, big puzzle game *Return To Ditch Day*.^[657] So, what does it definitely get right?

2.13.1 Depth and breadth

This is a big game, and it has depth throughout. It's amazing to see all the things the author has thought of. You start out in an attic with dim lighting, and a man giving you a drug in a bottle. Waiting around, trying to leave, talking, etc. are all accounted for.

You occasionally change personas, and the standard responses change accordingly. There are a lot of cutscenes where the game is trying to move you along and it handles attempted diversions well.

There are puzzles with multiple pathways, a large number of NPCs, the five senses are frequently implemented, etc.

I've noticed that what I really mean with depth in these essays is the idea that you as the player are part of this big world that always has something new to explore or discover. *Birdland*^[338] succeeded in this much better than many choice-based games by having the greyed out options related to your stats, letting you know you weren't getting the whole experience, and preventing lawnmowing by having the stat-affecting choices and the stat-affected choices far apart.

Finally, the game uses several nice programming special effects, like a unique variant of forced input and some ascii art effects.

2.13.2 Strong PC

Like almost every Best Game, *Blue Chairs* has a strong narrative voice and a memorable PC. The PC has a sort of confidence mingled with deep-set inferiority. When examining objects, the PC will frequently comment on memories or association with the object and not on the object itself.

The puzzles are all PC-motivated. The PC wants the pill, the PC wants to get home, the PC feels obligated to grab a donut. PC-motivated puzzles tend to go over much better than puzzles that you only solve because you the player know how to work the system. The quality of the puzzles itself don't matter as much as the motivation behind them.

2.13.3 Consistent narrative

This was the first game to win all of Best Game, Best Story and Best Writing. Story and memorability often seem to me the most important factor in XYZZY voting. And yet *Blue Chairs* is a disjointed surreal game, the kind that makes it hard to build a coherent story.

What Klimas does is use recurring themes and consistent tone. One recurring theme is the character's fragile grip on reality. The game frequently comments on what is certainly real, what is certainly a dream, or a dream within a dream, and what is just on the edge. This keeps the game from dissolving into incoherence, as happens sometimes (like the end of *Kaged*^[246]).

The tone is consistently polite, introspective, and just a bit creepy, with most of the creepiness coming from random atmospheric events. These help

keep the player on edge, giving the game the feel of a dangerous drug trip where something terrible might happen at any time.

Recurring themes like the progressive unveiling of Beatrice, the blue chairs, and the vague meetings with the blonde-haired Alice tie the game together.

2.13.4 Conclusion

Blue Chairs is a polished game with a well thought out story, a great deal of depth and a strong voice. The enjoyability of the game varies from player to player, but its quality is self-evident, and the game has enough to offer to make several playthroughs worthwhile.

2.14 2005: *Vespers*, by Jason Devlin

Vespers is a dark game, similar to *Varicella*^[103] in its depiction of violence. You play the abbot of monastery that is in the final stages of a plague outbreak, and everyone has begun to act very, very odd.

This is the third game to win both IFCComp and the XYZZY Best Game award. It was the third Best Game in a row to deal with both madness and Christian themes.

The content warning list for this game would be huge, including rape, necrophagy, gore, violence to animals, blasphemy, Porpentine-level body fluids, etc. and a protagonist that can actively participate in these things, and is encouraged to do so.

This game is in stark contrast to the general light tone of IFCComp winners like *Hunger Daemon*,^[708] *Winter Wonderland*,^[416] *Brain Guzzlers from Beyond*,^[123] *Violet*,^[263] etc. This shows that a wide variety of genres can be successful in both IFCComp and the XYZZY Awards.

Why has *Vespers* been so popular?

2.14.1 Very strong PC

The PC in this game is one of the best-developed in IF. This game is at its heart the story of you, the abbot, from both your point of view and from others.

One of the most notable innovations in this area is the frequent boxed quotes that appear to comment on the action via scriptures. These add greatly to the atmosphere. We later make two discoveries here: that the quotes begin to change from real scriptures to hideous messages, and that every time we see the quotes, the father has been screaming them out loud. These are both interesting subversions of the players expectations, and the latter is a good use of the parser format itself.

The father comments on everything he sees, from people to places, slowly unraveling the history of the place to us, and allowing us a glimpse into his mind. Like many great PCs, the standard actions of examining and looking are used as vehicles for story content and not just to provide basic descriptions.

Finally, as I'll describe in later sections, the entire game is a test of the Father's character. This makes your actions have much more weight and makes replay very desirable.

2.14.2 Strong setting and NPCs

This is a very detailed world. Decay and darkness are wrought into every description, and descriptions slowly change over time. Almost nothing is unhinged by the plague and the madness.

The NPCs are vividly described, although the interaction with them is rather meager. They belong to the setting, and in that role they shine. The other monks range from best-liked to cold and calculating to sullen and vicious. The main NPC serves as stark contrast to all of these.

There is even a complex series of patron saints designed for the game, ranging from real saints such as Francis of Assisi to new, darker saints like Drausinus, patron of shadows.

2.14.3 Moral Choices

Essentially every action in this game gives you a moral choice. The very first thing you discover is your alms box, with money in it. You can choose what to do with it. Later, you encounter things like a crazed monk on a bell tower, which a voice tells you to push; a sleeping girl that you are encouraged to take advantage of, a sleeping monk you need to steal keys from who is easily killable. One path is always easier: the path of violence and darkness. The good path is extremely hard to achieve in comparison; I didn't even know it existed without looking at the code.

Because of the variety of paths through the game, it has a high replay value, and is similar to *Slouching Towards Bedlam* in that respect.

2.14.4 Story

Although it starts slow, *Vespers* is generally a very well-paced story, with information slowly spooled out over time. The puzzles are all natural, serving only the purposes of the narrative. Events are timed based on your exploration. Puzzles are set up very early on, leading to a great deal of satisfaction when you complete them. The setting decays, the NPCs change, the quotes change, everything builds up to the end. This sort of pacing is very difficult to achieve

2.14.5 Depth

The attention to detail is enormous here. Try jumping. Look at the multiple solutions to every puzzle, the timed events, the subtle ways that descriptions change, the random atmospheric events, the carefully thought out block quotes. Everything in this game is designed carefully and with several layers of implementation, so that there is always more to discover.

2.14.6 Conclusion

Vespers succeeded because of immense attention to detail, a strong story and setting, and a PC that takes a truly leading role. It won over the absolutely massive puzzle game *Finding Martin*,^[836] the Heaven/Hell puzzler *All Hope Abandon*,^[231] and some smaller games. It stands in an interesting contrast to the next game, *Elysium Enigma*^[236]

2.15 2006: *The Elysium Enigma*, by Eric Eve

Eric Eve, in my opinion, certainly deserves an XYZZY award. He produced quite a few long, extremely polished games that were fun and had numerous helpful features and hidden content, most of which aren't discussed much today. They are among the strongest parser games in terms of content and polish. However, in my personal opinion *Elysium Enigma*^[236] is not as strong storywise as his games *Nightfall*,^[233] *All Hope Abandon*,^[231] and *Blighted Isle*,^[232] all of which have exciting and detailed plots and settings, while the story in *Elysium Enigma* is a bit less exciting (as the club floyd group agrees).

Interestingly, *Elysium Enigma* had intense competition from games with strong stories and settings in 2006, most notably *De Baron*,^[277] the dark moral choice game, *Floatpoint*^[723], Emily Short's IFComp winning game, and *Primrose Path*,^[75] a long game with a very strong PC and excellent writing. The last two beat *Elysium* in IFComp.

So why did *Elysium* win Best Game at the XYZZYs? It's hard to say, not having been there, but as we'll see, it has incredibly deep implementation and one very well done NPC. Also, *De Baron* and *Floatpoint*, its strongest contenders, may have split the story-focused vote, and were both controversial. *De Baron* had disturbing content, and Emily Short was criticized for entering and winning IFComp with *Floatpoint* after already being an established author^[823] (although Zarf had re-entered many times, and Paul O' Brian had won twice).

In any case, this game has quite a lot going for it.

2.15.1 Depth of Implementation

Eric Eve is just a master of implementation, and his games have a distinct flavor. This is a game where NPCs can carry items for you and drop them when they get stunned, so you see them on the floor. You can create clothing from various items, record and playback conversations that are automatically summarized, smell food from adjacent rooms (which caused the Club Floyd team some grief^[672]), use some sandboxy tools on a variety of people and animals, fish things with a fishing rod, and on and on. This game is polished as polished can be.

2.15.2 NPCs

Leela is an excellent NPC. She takes independent actions, moving from area to area, deciding how much to earn commenting on the action. She keeps track of your feelings towards her. She has various levels of truth and falsehood she can act under. She responds to a wide variety of topics, the most important of which are listed in a Topics list during conversation. You can choose a specific goals with Leela and work towards it. And so on and so on. Very few games have such a well-developed NPC. Emily Short's games come to mind, as does Progue from Blue Lacuna.

The other NPCs respond well to a variety of topics, and have good responses for topics not on their 'list'.

2.15.3 Alternate paths and hidden content

Another classic characteristic of Eric Eve games is that you can miss half of the game in each playthrough. Hidden content is everywhere, and Eric is verbose. There is a diary with an extensive backstory, database with a page or two worth of documents long conversations, tons of topics.

There are many paths to success. For instance, part of the game involves gathering food, and there is a ton of food hidden in the game, only some of which you need to find to eat. There are so many paths with the village Elder that pretty much anything you do works. Eric spends a huge amount of effort on his games, and it really shows.

2.15.4 Conclusion

In a year of strong contenders, Elysium Enigma shone with its thorough implementation, strong NPCs, and attention to detail. It was the last game to lose IFCOMP and still win the XYZZYS until *Birdland*^[338] in 2015. Next, I'll cover two of the best-known IF games of all time: *Lost Pig*^[398] and *Violet*.^[263]

2.16 2007: *Lost Pig*, by Admiral Jota

There are a few games that tend to top any Best of All Time Lists. *Photopia*, *Counterfeit Monkey*, *Spider and Web*, *Hadean Lands*,^[598] and *Anchorhead*^[273] are some that frequently top lists. *Lost Pig* is another that is almost always near the top of Best Of lists.

Surprisingly, the author wrote this game in one month, according to a SPAG interview.^[456] However, the concept was brewing for over a year, and the PC was borrowed from a blog the author was writing.

The game deals with an orc named Grunk who has lost their pig. They travel underground and find a semi-sbandoned cave home.

What does it do right?

2.16.1 Dealing with the parser

It is hard to get used to a parser. It requires a very specific sort of syntax, and everyone struggles when they first try a parser game.

Lost Pig has some of the same issues; I couldn't figure out many commands in the game when I first played it years ago, and some people recently who've tried it feel it's not well-adapted to newcomers.^[260]

However, and this is a big 'however', this game has a big advantage over other games: the PC talks in the same way as parser commands. GET SPOON, GO UP, DROP PIG are all a sort of caveman language, and this game is completely written in that caveman (or orcish) way. This, combined with its light puzzles (for the time period) and great writing, have made it a common recommendation for those new to parser.

2.16.2 Strong PC/Narrative Voice

This game and Violet, the next year's winner, have incredibly strong PCS. You completely enter Grunk's world when you play this game. Everything is described from his point of view, and it can be hilarious. Much of the enjoyment of the game is trying to puzzle out what Grunk is actually talking about. As one of the IFDB reviewers noted,^[393] Grunk seems dimwitted, but if you read between the lines, he has a sort of sweet cleverness that shines through.

2.16.3 Strong NPC

This game has one of the stronger NPCS of all time: the gnome. The gnome seems to be everything Grunk is not: intelligent, loquacious, irritable. The gnome can talk about a huge number of topics. The game will give you suggestions; pursuing this leads to more suggestions, and more and more. One can spend an hour or hours just trying to exhaust all the topics mentioned.

The gnome is also complex in his motivations and personality. Irritability is tempered with kindness, and intelligence is tempered with a lack of motivation. He is powerful, but feels trapped. His relationship with Grunk is something that's hard for an author to pull off.

2.16.4 Depth

As mentioned above, conversation is very deeply implemented in this game. But that's not the only deep thing in this game. All sorts of synonyms and verbs were accounted for; one reviewer was amazed that you could REACH IN CRACK WITH POLE.^[453] All of the standard responses have been changed. EAT ME is accounted for, as is lighting your pants on fire and eating them before and after burning them.

The author has put a lot of care into providing nice surprises for the player and anticipating their responses.

2.16.5 Conclusion

Interestingly, *Lost Pig* is one of a few Best Games not be nominated for Best Story. I think this is because its characters, setting and feel were so well developed and polished that the traditional storytelling could take a back seat to the characters and their development. Few games have been able to achieve that level of storytelling through character development alone; *Galatea*^[724] leaps to mind.

In any case, *Lost Pig* was a very strong games and marked the beginning of a much more user-friendly era for best games.

2.17 2008: *Violet*, by Jeremy Freese

Violet is a game that is frequently included in lists of games meant for introducing people to parser IF, not because it is particularly easy, but because its concept shows the power of IF and the setting is very familiar to much of its target audience.

In this game, you are a doctoral student who has procrastinated your dissertation for years. Today your girlfriend has given you an ultimatum to write a large number of words or pages, or they'll leave. The gimmick here is that the parser itself is your girlfriend, or at least an imaginary version of her. So all the commands and even the help menus and credits are in her voice.

What does it do right?

2.17.1 Use of the parser/Strong PC

What *Violet* does very best is to turn the parser from a sometimes-awkward omniscient but soulless narrator into an NPC, and an imaginary one at that. The command-response tango of parser becomes a conversation in one man (or woman, with the 'heteronormativity off' option)'s head, and this is very effective.

All basic responses are changed, the credits are changed, everything is changed into this voice, achieving a very strong and unusual tone. In addition, *Violet* herself and her relationship with the PC are slowly unveiled as the game progresses, giving an unusually good backstory in an unusual way.

2.17.2 Depth

Violet is a deep game. It contains a working iPod-type object with humorous but complex controls. It allows you to use objects in multiple ways, and several puzzles have more than one solution. It has quite a few background events that play throughout the game, which is one of its greatest sources of both entertainment and 'flow'. It anticipates a lot of actions. And so on.

2.17.3 Writing

This goes hand in hand with the part about the parser, but the writing is quite good in this game. The narrator, an Australian, goes into laugh-out-loud detail about things like vegimite, Aussie cussing, bizarre gum flavors, and so on. The background events, which would get repetitive in a less well written game, are a story all on their own. The creativity in Violet's gifts and what happens to them, the songs described, all of it is well done, and well played.

2.17.4 Conclusion

Violet used an innovative take on the parser combined with strong writing and deep implementation to dominate the XYZZYs, beating games like the long thriller *Nightfall*^[233] and the sci-fi western *Gun Mute*.^[571]

On a personal note, I didn't like Violet at first, because I was in grad school and it was too close to home. The idea of someone constantly harping on me to finish a paper would drive me crazy. Now that that is behind me, I appreciate the game more.

2.18 2009: *Blue Lacuna*, by Aaron Reed

Blue Lacuna is a massive interactive fiction, both in source code, time to play, and variety of content. It was intended to be the largest parser game ever, if I recall, and it certainly had few contenders at the time of its release and still is among the largest at this day.

This is a game that offers something to everyone. It is a simulationist game, with weather, day/night, and nature modeled in a detailed way. It is a giant puzzler, with reliable puzzles like color-coded machines and combinations locks. But it's also made friendly for newcomers, with a Twine-like keyword system, puzzles that are all optional, easy navigation, elimination of the compass, and helpful tips when errors are made. It is also a conversation game with over 1000 topics. It is also an epic sci-fi story.

How well does it succeed? A game of this scope, written by one author, will inevitably fall short in some areas. The game opens slowly, with many, which was very well-done and exciting. I felt like the pacing didn't mesh with my general rushed attitude toward games. In his dissertation, the author says:^[643]

Like many of my adventure game designing predecessors, I also got too caught up in crafting elaborate puzzles (despite a special optional "story mode" that would remove some of their complexity) with the result that many players got stuck and never reached the intricate endgame sequences with their narrative payoff.

What does it do right?

2.18.1 Depth

The game is as deep as it is long. The author has streamlined the game by removing inventory in general, and focusing on looking, walking, and manipulating some machinery. In that scope, everything is extensively detailed. Room descriptions are always changing based on time of day weather events, past game events, etc.

A remarkable landmark system is used to travel. Movement felt quite natural, and Go To was implemented for people and things.

The NPC has 1200+ topics, stat tracking, independent behavior, etc. Most approaches to interaction with him are considered and accounted for.

A lot of specialized parser techniques were implemented. Text can be several different colors, to represent objects, people, etc., unless colors are hard to distinguish, then you can use different fonts, and so on. Reed wrote an extension for the parser that can better deal with typos or mistakes. The amount of work going into this game is truly impressive.

2.18.2 Strong NPC

The main NPC does what you'd want NPCs to do. They come up with plans, and execute them. They change in mood over the course of a conversation. They have long term memory. They can be funny, sad, happy, or crazy. They have a big story arc. In many ways he is the protagonist of the game.

This is one of the most detailed NPCs in any game, rivaling *Galatea*.^[724]

2.18.3 Setting

Blue Lacuna has great world building, but the best parts take some time to get to. The game expresses itself through dreams and visions, nature, and machinery. It is a very Myst-like environment, but with the addition of the big NPC, in contrast to Myst's mostly silent gameplay. In fact, the author cites them explicitly:^[640]

Finally, Blue Lacuna owes a stylistic debt to the Miller brothers and the creative team at Cyan Worlds, whose Myst and Uru games have been a huge inspiration in my desire to create thought-provoking interactive stories. The ending is never written.

The two factions that the endgame centers, Heart and City are well-done each with their pros and cons. I definitely support Heart more, but City makes sense, too. The game is designed so that casual players can just take these worlds at face value, but the interested player can dig significantly deeper.

In many ways, Blue Lacuna reminded me of *Worlds Apart*^[84] another epic sci fi game set on an island with warring factions that appear to the PC in dreams. Both do an excellent job of world building.

2.18.4 Puzzle Design

This game separates out the interesting plot points. We're used to commercial video games separating out plot points just by interspersing them with travel or combat or other basic game mechanics.

IF games, in contrast, tend to either be pure plot (like many Choicescript games) or to space out plot points with puzzles.

Blue Lacuna doesn't really do either. If you took all the puzzles in the game and placed them in front of the player, they could be solved in an hour or two. Similarly, if all the dreams and ending areas were available at once, the player could finish them in an hour or two.

The rest of the game, in fact the bulk of the game, is neither plot nor puzzle, but just an island-life sim game featuring Progue.

Puzzles require the player to traverse many locations, as do the nightly plot points, so the player has to cross the same areas over and over again. But these regions change, with high tide and low tide, night and day, lunar cycles, animals that only come out at certain points, etc.

Progue will do random things, and will often run into you when the game gets slow. It's even in the code! There's a boredom meter that fills up when nothing 'exciting' is happening, and when it fills up, Progue appears.

So the vast majority of the game is just wandering around and seeing the island over time, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

2.18.5 Conclusion

Blue Lacuna has a rightful place in the list of Best Games. It is not perfect, and no one will be satisfied with all of it, but there's so much good here that everyone will like part of it. The extreme depth and well-done NPC are it's main attraction, together with the storyline that slowly unfolds.

2.19 2010: *Aotearoa*, by Matt Wigdahl

Aotearoa is an unusual game, set in an alternate present where dinosaurs living in New Zealand helped the Maoris avoid British rule. You are a young boy chosen to visit the islands of the dinosaurs and learn about their ways.

Aotearoa holds the record for most XYZZY awards won by a single game, having won Best Game, Best Setting, Best Puzzles, Best NPCs, Best Individual Puzzle, Best Implementation, and Best Use of Innovation. While the game is very well-polished, with good writing, I found this overwhelming success to be a bit of a puzzle, especially as the games *One Eye Open* and *Rogue of the Multiverse* were very strong that year. But this game had made a big impression on voters. What did it do right?

2.19.1 Polished until it shines/Depth

This game runs to 100,000 lines of code or more, almost three times the size of *Slouching Towards Bedlam*. But it isn't too long; most of the code goes to depth.

The game has a color coded exits status line, a keyword system and tutorial, and other features designed to help newcomers. It has a portable phone that allows communication over long distances, and several very interactive NPCS. All reasonable actions have been accounted for.

One thing the game does is have a series of puzzles where your actions are recorded and then repeated to you by another source, with small variations. This alone must have been quite tedious to program, as you would have to write two descriptions for every action.

In response to an early version of this essay, Wade Clarke commented:^[134]

The Aotearoa year (2010) was my first IFComp and first involvement with any new IF since the old commercial days. [...] With the huge time gap between me playing any contemporary parser games, Aotearoa was the one that made me go: 'Whoa, look at the tech marvellousness and accommodation possible in these games now!' So Aotearoa was a major guiding force for how I handled making Six the following year. My impression was that Aot. struck everyone similarly that year with some kind of tech and approach freshness, even people who weren't new to new IF.

2.19.2 Strong NPCs

The game has a variety of NPCS, including dinosaurs, mammals, and humans.

The main NPC, Eruera, serves as a guide and as a help system. Conversation seems natural with him, and he responds to a variety of topics. The flow of speech is paced well, and you'll generally know when to talk to him and what to talk to him about.

Another main NPC is a furry critter who follows you around. This animal copies everything that you do, and some puzzles are centered around this. The game uses unspoken communication to build a real bond between you and the animal. You can even name them!

The dinosaurs are less well-developed, each tending to be focused on one thing, which you have to influence. The puzzles involving them almost all involve indirect manipulation, an interesting challenge.

2.19.3 Writing and worldbuilding

The author has clearly put a great deal of thought into this setting. The historical part has been researched enough to be convincing, as has the biological part. The jungle island is described well. One reviewer commented on the research the author had done:^[21]

Again, being from Hawaii, I am familiar with Maui and some of the stories about him. I also recognized some words, like "tapu" ("kapu" in Hawaiian), mana (same in Hawaiian), and "taro" ("kalo.") Also, "atua" ("akua.") I appreciated the history and backstory implemented into the menus.

One thing I enjoyed about the writing was the use of the five senses. The taste of salt water, the smell of food and plants, the sensation of plants and animals, the cries of birds and dinosaurs. I noticed it on my second playthrough, and it was very good.

2.19.4 Conclusion

Aotearoa still stands as the most-awarded game in the XYZZY's, although it is mentioned less frequently now. It has only appeared in one of the Interactive Fiction Top 50 polls. However, its user friendly features great NPCs and storytelling techniques still mark it as one of the 'Best Games', and it is one I recommend to newcomers.

2.20 2011: *Cryptozookeeper*, by Robb Sherwin

I actually played this game last of all the XYZZY winners up to 2015. It is very intense, and makes use of some of the most varied and creative profanity I've ever seen. After finding a way to put a filter into Lectrote, I finally finished it.

Cryptozookeeper took quite a bit of work, according to an interview:^[268]

[Interviewer] I read that Cryptozookeeper took you about five years to complete. I'm about to ask you a personal question. The question is in two parts. As you answer this question, please keep in mind that we at Fwonk* also spend a lot of time and effort putting work onto the internet for free. The question is A: how many *hours* do you think you spent (rounded to the nearest hundred) on Cryptozookeeper? B: why would a person go to all that trouble?

[Sherwin] I've tried to estimate it, and I think it took somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 hours to make Cryptozookeeper. There were stretches where I woke up early, downed a pot of coffee and didn't stop until it was time for bed. There were also times where I was on vacation, or trying to get in shape after work, or was waiting for a new clicky keyboard because I spilled a pot of coffee on the old one. I tried to work on it each weeknight no matter how tired I was, as doing that gets you into the zone.

There was a big dispute the year that Cryptozookeeper won the XYZZY's, as that was the year that the very active Choicescript community voted en masse for *Zombie Exodus*^[173] (which has spawned a sequel or two and has been extremely successful sales-wise). After playing through, though, I can see why this game won. What did it do right?

2.20.1 Strong Writing

Some writers seem to have their brain tuned to a different universe, and it gives their stories a haunting, uncanny valley feel. Stephen King has it, Philip K. Dick has it, and a few others; a way of writing that seems completely consistent, but not with the world you live in.

All of Sherwin's writing is like this, but *Cryptozookeeper* is perhaps the apotheosis of his work. It is a game that transgresses so many social rules; close friends will throw incredibly painful jabs at each other, while enemies will forgive each other at a moment's notice. A character may use extreme violence one moment but be shy and squeamish another. The game is full of profanity, but characters are polite. Every room transition or introduction of a new item spawns a confession of some major life event told in a throw-off way.

The game never mentions it explicitly, but I realize in writing this that the friendships you build are the whole point of the game, in a way. The ending seems to imply this. Perhaps all those throw-away stories just let you know in a "show-don't-tell" way that the characters are building deep relationships with each other.

2.20.2 Depth of implementation

This game is sort of oxymoronic. In some ways, it is very underimplemented. Scenery is often completely unimplemented.

On the other hand, standard responses are completely customized, so that the game is pervaded by Sherwinisms.

Like a darker version of the later Pogoman Go, *Cryptozookeeper* is centered around collecting (and battling using) monsters, and contains quite a bit of code for it. There are many types of DNA that can be found in the game, and, when mixed together in correct combinations, they create monsters that range from the subtle but terrifying (like the will o' wisp) to hilarious but deeply disturbing (like the behinder). Each monster's birth is heralded by a personalized story, and they have stats that vary widely and which can be increased through combat.

This combat system and monster-merging storytelling require a very large depth of implementation.

2.20.3 Strong NPCs

Cryptozookeeper also achieves that Holy Grail of NPC design, the large cast of NPCs which follow you around but stay largely relevant. Sure, Jane or Lebbeus may stay quiet for a few dozen turns, but generally, everybody is talking all the time with fresh, new material, so much that it can even get overwhelming (well, when I was trying to finish the game quickly, there was a lot of reading. But it was fun to read).

Altogether, this is something that is impossible to achieve without hundreds of hours of work, and I wish all games could be like this, technically wise.

2.20.4 Modular story design

One place where *Cryptozookeeper* really shines is in its ‘episodic’ nature, as described by Robb Sherwin in a different interview:^[27]

"[T]he text file I wrote down all the plot in was organized into episodes and that's the feel I wanted the game to have. Like, in Season One Episode Five, they meet their evil twins, in S02E06 they all go to a party, one episode is the "flashback" episode — that sort of thing."

The whole game is arranged around this episodic structure, where you fight a bit with your cryptids, then head out on a choice of an episode (in a nonlinear fashion). Each episode is self-contained, but advances the overall themes of the game.

Again, this is hard to do in IF because it requires a great deal of effort to generate content.

2.20.5 Multimedia

This game is fully illustrated and has an extensive soundtrack (one reviewer used the in-game info on the music to make a playlist for his personal use).^[539] This makes the file several gigabytes large. The images are from photographs of the authors' friends and acquaintances. This makes the game extremely polished^[27] However, it wasn't compatible with the *Lectrote* interpreter I used to enable the profanity filter. I have played the opening scenes in the standard Hugo interpreter it comes with, though, and i was impressed by the art.

2.20.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, *Cryptozookeeper* is clearly deserving of its XYZZY award. It achieves things that some designers can only dream of. It is polished and packed with content, with unique writing and a coherent world.

I don't know if I'll play again, because its world view is so different from my own. But as a technological and storytelling achievement, it ranks with *Blue Lacuna* in the 'mega-game' world.

This is also the least-played XYZZY winner, counting by IFDB ratings, outside of the two commercial *Choicescript* game winners. I'm sure this is primarily due to the choice of language/interpreter, and secondarily to its mature content.

2.21 2012: *Counterfeit Monkey*, by Emily Short

There are four authors who have been writing for many years, have each won IFComp, and have each won two XYZZY awards. They are Andrew Plotkin, Adam Cadre, Emily Short, and Jon Ingold.

Interestingly, each of these four released an epic game (the largest game of each of the authors) in just a small span of years. In 2014, Andrew Plotkin

released *Hadean Lands*,^[598] which has risen to be one of the most well-regarded parser games of all time. Also in 2014, Jon Ingold and co. released *80 Days*, which made it to the top of *Time* magazine’s Top 10 Videogames of 2014 list^[586]. In 2013, Adam Cadre released *Endless, Nameless*,^[93] which I regard very highly but whose reception disappointed the author.

And, first of them all, in 2012, Emily Short released *Counterfeit Monkey*, which is at the top of IFDB’s most popular lists (as of 2024), and has topped many Best Of lists and polls over the years.

The game is set in an alternate reality where language has power and the alteration of words affects reality. Adding and removing letters, anagrams, palindrome, and other such things have an immediate bearing on the universe.

What does this game do right?

2.21.1 Extreme Depth

Perhaps no game has gone to the depths that *Counterfeit Monkey* has, whose source code is freely available. The author created an immense list of possible words/objects that could be created in the game, and provided descriptions and properties for all of them. Then, instead of having to code every possible result of every word-altering action one by one, she simply has the code try the alteration, and look up if the word alteration matches one of the objects on her list, and produces it.

All sorts of things can be created by this method, and it is truly innovative. Creating ALL causes quite the mess (literally making everything in the game until it ‘crashes’), and so on.

Beyond this, there are of course excellent conversation trees, reactions to events, etc. The parser set of responses is completely redefined, reflecting the unique protagonist. But I’ll talk about these things next.

2.21.2 Strong PCs and addressing the parser

Like games such as *Slouching Towards Bedlam*, *Violet* and others, the author has addressed the existence of the parser. In this case, you play the fusion of two people, Alex and Andra. One plays the part of the parser, and the other is assumed to be the player themselves.

This provides for interesting commentary as everything is described from two perspectives, often contrasting. Phrases starting with ‘I’ contrast heavily with statements starting with ‘You’. Issues related to the differences between men and women, and perspectives on the nature of law and rebellion come up frequently. The two PCs have different goals, and this comes to a head in the ending.

2.21.3 Setting

The setting represents a great deal of work, and is in a different vein than most similar games in the past. Most wordplay games have accepted a sort of

surreal universe, like *Ad Verbum*^[494] with magic or Andrew Schultz’s Phantom Tollbooth-esque worlds.^[515]

Here, though, we have a bustling and well thought-out society. Emily Short has really thought through what the power of wordplay would do to the world. People keep vegetables to turn into vehicles. There are laws and restrictions on the powers, and it affects the government and all of society.

2.21.4 Conversation

Emily Short has used her experience with previous conversation games to provide a nice, immersive feel for conversations. There are quite a few NPCs available in the game, and all reasonable approaches to them have been accounted for. The way you treat them sticks with them. Conversations are quick and seamless. This represents an immense amount of work, much of it behind the scenes.

2.21.5 Conclusion

Counterfeit Monkey is one of the highest-regarded games of all time, and I think that stems from excellent characters and characterization coupled with unmatched depth of implementation.

2.22 2013: *Coloratura*, by Lynnea Glasser

Because I’ve been reviewing some of the best games in interactive fiction, superlatives run dry; they can’t all be the best game ever. But each can be the best in their sphere; and I would say that *Coloratura* is the best comp-length puzzle-focused parser game of the 2010’s.

It performed very well in the XYZZY’S, including winning Best PC in the nomination round due to being so far ahead of its competitors.

The author has a series of posts describing the creation of the game.^[287] These notes have proven very useful to me in my own game design.

What did the game do right?

2.22.1 Very strong PC

In this game, you play an alien creature with an inhuman perspective, an unusual body, and almost mystical powers. This changes almost everything about the game, from parser responses to conversation and inventory to interactions with non-living things.

The inhuman perspective shifts over the course of the game, as you gain more information about your surroundings.

Finally, the author went to great lengths to make sure that PC and player motivations were aligned. All the solutions to puzzles are things that the PC would naturally seem to do, once you are aware of their abilities. There are no

‘soup cans in the kitchen’ here, no puzzles unrelated to the story and which would not be an obstacle in real life.

2.22.2 Strong NPCs

The human NPCs are strongly characterized and responsive in this game. I wonder if the author was relying on the lessons learned from earlier games like *Tenth Plague*^[164] and *Divis Mortis*,^[163] where the NPCs were less realistic. In contrast, the Captain and Mercy are able to display intense and complex emotions in a compelling way. Perhaps one reason for their success is that emotions often ring false in an IF game, but any falseness of emotions here can be attributed to the influence of the PC.

Of course, the meat monster is also memorable. In this puzzle/person, the author asks us to reevaluate some basic assumptions about our own lifestyles, makes us imagine ourselves as the PC and take action, then breaks our expectations with the results.

2.22.3 Story and pacing

Most games tend to be either low-intensity, slow puzzle fests (like *Lost Pig* or *Savoir-Faire*) or fast-paced story-focused games (like *All Roads* or *Being Andrew Plotkin*). *Coloratura* manages to be both fast-paced and puzzle-oriented. The inhuman perspective helps here, as the PC is used to very long term goals.

The game slowly builds tension and speed by having the player learn more and more about its captors and having them learn more about you, creating a more dangerous environment.

The game offers increasingly clear nudges to players that are stuck. While some found this a helpful feature that increased their admiration for the game (including myself), some users^[19] found that it was a bit stifling:

The whole time I felt like I was being guided through an on-rails experience, always nudged in the correct next direction, not encouraged to experiment or take my time. While I appreciate the game’s helpfulness in keeping players on the right track, allaying potential frustration, what I enjoy most about parser games tends to be the exploration and experimentation that the form typically encourages. *Coloratura* held my hand a bit too much for my liking; I would have preferred a little more freedom.

2.22.4 Conclusion

Coloratura uses a creative protagonist to create a memorable game, with well-done NPCS, depth of implementation (which I didn’t mention but certainly is there), and a good storyline rounding everything out.

2.23 2014: *80 Days*, by Inkle

2014 was a year of real experimentation in IF. The top five IFComp games used five different game formats, including Inform, Choicescript, Quest, home-grown, and Twine. People were trying all sorts of new things.

This experimentation also produced some non-competition games that have remained popular for years. Andrew Plotkin released *Hadean Lands*,^[598] the Kickstarter-funded parser game that some said was compare favorably to the original Infocom games,^[432] and the first commercial parser game of that size in years.

Choice of Games released *Choice of Robots*,^[291] one of their bestselling games. Most Choicescript games have to sacrifice plot and characterization for customizability or vice versa, but *Choice of Robots* avoids this. Every choice you pick, whether insane warmonger or unemployed tinkerer, feels fleshed out, like the author anticipated this path specifically and built the game around it. I've played it perhaps a dozen times, and it always feels fresh.

Why am I talking about these other games? Just to show that *80 Days* beat some strong competition to win the XYZZY Best Game. So what's so good about it? What does it do right?

2.23.1 Substantial Depth

80 Days has you travel around the earth by rotating a UI globe with dozens of cities on it and selecting routes. Story events occur between cities and in cities. You can buy items in markets and sell them later. And it's all set in a steampunk alternate history where colonialism broadly failed due to the technology or powers of the would-be colonies. The majority of the writing was done by Meg Jayanth, although Jon Ingold contributed about a third of the text.^[818]

Where the depth comes in is in the pure amount of stories and the way they can connect. There is enough material here to play and replay and replay many times over. There are murder mysteries, romances, bank robberies, revolutions, wars, and monsters. There are wonders of science and technology.

And the research is good. The steampunk setting let's them get away with any inconsistencies in the plot, but the research was still there. I'm a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I've read a lot about nineteenth century Utah, and so I was interested in how they would approach it. It was startlingly well-researched and respectful; it wasn't exactly accurate in every detail, but it had enough material that I could tell they had worked hard on it. And this is just 1% of the whole game; it all must have taken a great deal of time.

I believe that it was this huge depth that gave this game an edge over *Hadean Lands* and *Choice of Robots*.

2.23.2 Strong characters

You and your travelling companion have a compelling relationship in the game where you have motivations to please him mechanics-wise, but storywise you are frequently drawn into conflict with each other by your character's stated interests and goals. You both like adventure, but he likes a slightly different flavor of adventure from you. This tension makes the game more interesting than, say, a game where you can just lawnmower conversation options.

Other characters are memorable, including love interests, scientists, semi-mythological characters, and so on. You can meet people in Germany and see them months later in South America, or spend several days on a journey with them in the sea.

2.23.3 Setting

You have to appreciate a setting that has a giant Taj Mahal walking on mechanical legs. The steampunk setting allows the authors to envision a world free from some historical injustices and to combine real life events with steampunk. Each culture has its own types of transportation, it's own kind of mechanical contraptions. These can get very interesting in places like Haiti or the North Pole.

2.23.4 Conclusion

80 Days beat fierce competition to win the 2014 XYZZY awards. It's strong writing, characterization and setting were boosted by its huge open-world depth to victory.

2.24 2015: *Birdland*, by Brendan Hennessey

By mid-2015, I had played all four of Hennessey's 2013 Twine games, and I by then he was one of my favorite Twine authors. I was surprised that he had released four great games in a year and then stopped.

I was of course excited when he entered IFComp in 2015. And I was right to be excited; as soon as I started playing, I realized that this was my favorite Twine game I had ever played. Not just for personal enjoyment, but also in terms of pure craft; it showed me what a good choice game could really be.

It has attracted attention outside of IFComp and the XYZZY's. Tens of thousands of people have shared Tumblr notes about it, and there is fan art and shipping and so on.^[447]

The game itself is set in a girls' camp with a 14-year-old protagonist who has dreams about strange bird-humans every night, and has to deal with the boredom and awkwardness of camp in the day time.

What's so good about it?

2.24.1 Writing

The writing is intensely humorous. The author sets up contrast in as many ways as possible, for instance by having the protagonist act out several outrageous clichés like old west cowboys or peg-leg pirates and having the birds comment on it in stilted and precise English. The writing constantly sets up your expectations and twists it for laughs; it reminds me of the story that Walt Disney paid Snow White’s animators a bonus for every gag they could come up with; Hennessy would have made a lot. While most XYZZY winners have good writing for an IF game, *Birdland* has writing that for me is good among all literature I’ve read.

2.24.2 Story

Birdland is one of only two games to win Best Game, Best Story, and Best Writing. One of *Birdland*’s strongest points is its thematic unity. In a sense, everything in the game is about people pretending to be something they aren’t, and this is explored from every angle. For example: Bridget is pretending to be the rock star, the college student, the pirate; the birds are pretending to be dreams; Bridget is pretending to be straight; the counselors are pretending to be competent; and so on. As the story progresses, all of the truth comes out, and everyone receives consequences based on their intents. The counselors are exposed, the birds banished, Bridget is rewarded.

Pacing is aided by the rhythmic Twine structure of night and day and by parallel situations. Daytime usually involves a teaching situation in the camp, with conversations in the background, while night time involves some ludicrous scenario or another. The cycle keeps repeating, but it also keeps building, with threads of plot running through and gathering together (like when the birds reference a previous dream, or the girls in camp ask about something you did the day before). When you get to the final day(s), the changes to the rhythm are almost shocking and give the game a sense of excitement.

2.24.3 Characters

The birds are well-developed characters, and this is almost entirely on the weight of Brendan’s humor writing, which I discussed earlier.

But the human characters are well-described. Each had some very strong distinguishing characteristics (like calmness, valley girl-ness, apathy), but each has moments that throw off their stereotype in a realistic way. The author apparently read dozens of books in this genre to get a feel for what audiences wanted from their characters and it paid off.^[457]

2.24.4 Depth of mechanics

Many Twine games before this point had either relied on ultra-branching narratives, fully linear narratives, or plot coupon collecting that was finished by lawnmowing every option.

Birdland succeeds because it has a partially linear story that branches and bottlenecks at every day, with all the branches you miss clearly labeled. This is made not awkward by labeling each branch with a stat and locking some if you have low stats. This makes it a game to see if you can come back later and unlock certain options.

This gives the player an impression that there is more to the world than what they are seeing. And there really is more; I replayed a few days in the game last night, and met a lot of new scenes that I hadn't seen before. This game is very deep; the author says they started writing it about 3-4 months before IFComp, so they must have worked very hard.^[457]

2.24.5 Conclusion

Birdland succeeds because of its impressive depth and it's strong storytelling. It could be considered the most successful twine game ever in terms of awards and popular culture recognition, and truly it has earned it's spot as a Best Game.

2.25 2016: *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*, by C.E.J. Pacian

Superluminal Vagrant Twin^[573] was a large parser game released in 2016 outside of all comps and to little fanfare. In the eight years since then, it has won the XYZZY Award for Best Game and rocketed to the fourth place overall in all of IFDB.

What makes it good?

2.25.1 Breadth

Pacian calls the game 'broad, but shallow'.^[569] And 'broad' is a good term. You play as the captain of a small ship whose twin has been sold to the space mob, and you have to somehow scrounge up \$5,000,000 before you can get them free. You only have enough fuel to head to one more system, and you have zero cash.

From there, gameplay slowly spreads out in a well-paced reveal of more and more options and planets. Each planet has a variety of people or shops or mysterious items you can collect. Different people mention different worlds, which you can then type in to visit. There are dozens of planets, and many are completely optional (in fact, I wonder if you can just repeat the first money-making method 5000 times to pay off the loan. I don't want to find out!)

Planet-finding is one of the key systems of the game. There's no master list of names you've found, only ones you've visited or specifically recorded.

This breadth could easily become overwhelming, but there are numerous systems to keep things simple. Your passenger, Aurea, will nudge you towards your next goal if talked to. A map of visited planets can be augmented by your own overheard planet names. A ship's log keeps track of who wants to sell things and who wants to buy.

2.25.2 Flawless implementation

In the quote above, Pacian called the game 'broad, but shallow'. What does the shallow mean?

This is technically a limited parser game. I say 'technically' because your freedom to type in is much greater than, say, *Eat Me*^[313] or *Inside the Facility*.^[193] The only big limitation is EXAMINE, which has been reduced. Instead, you can TALK to almost anything.

The limited set of commands and freedom from writing descriptions allowed the author to make this game, as far as I have found, bug-free. And it's smooth, too. If I want to race, and don't remember the planet, but do remember the name of the race-runner is Silver, you can JUMP TO SILVER and the game takes care of the planet name.

2.25.3 Organic storytelling

This game does have a strong storyline, although it may not seem like it at first. Considering that you just need \$5,000,000, and can grind several money sources, you can complete the game without going into any greater depth.

But your first passenger, Aurea, has a consistent thread leading her home. And it happens in an 'organic' way. Emily Short has a great essay called "Plot-shaped Level Design",^[730] where she says:

Your job is to make it as hard as possible for the player to finish your game without understanding your story.

If you need the player to remember something, give them a choice about that thing. If you can't let them choose *whether* the thing happens, you can still let them choose how it happens, or how the protagonist feels about it, or what they're able to salvage from it.

Pacian has long been known for vivid, alien worlds with well-written characters. Each planet and system has its own story. They can be visited in almost any order.

But the main storyline progresses along a few well-defined paths. Like Emily Short suggests, you can't progress without understanding the story. The worlds that advance the story most are easy to find from the last part of the story and almost impossible to find any other way. But the player can choose when to encounter them, and in many ways how to react to them; the final piece of the puzzle needed to get to the ending can be obtained in many ways (salvaging a ship, tracking down an old friend, etc.).

This organic nature of the overall storytelling, driven at the player's preferred pace, makes it more memorable than the majority of games.

Outside of the main storyline, the worlds are painted in broad strokes that give you some concrete details to work with (amalgams can have nuclear reactors for hearts, and so can you!) but leave enough to the imagination that the world feels even bigger than it really is.

2.25.4 Conclusion

Superluminal Vagrant Twin has reached the extreme heights of IF popularity in this community, outranking every IFComp game on IFDB despite its humble release. Its popularity can't fully be explained by any metrics or individual components, but it was definitely helped by its impeccable polish, its self-guided story pacing, its larger-than-strictly-needed world, and its vivid worldbuilding.

2.26 2017: *The Wizard Sniffer*, by Buster Hudson

2017 was a wild year for IF, with eight of its games appearing in the IFDB top 100 and six of its games having been voted into the Interactive Fiction Top 50 of all Time over the years. But out of all of them, one has consistently been ranked the highest:

The Wizard Sniffer.^[356]

What makes it good?

2.26.1 Setting and Characters

I first knew Buster Hudson as the author of *Oppositely Opal*^[355] and *Foo Foo*,^[354] both charming games featuring magical characters (a witch and a fairy, respectively). *Foo Foo* especially did a great job of combining silly worldbuilding with deep and meaningful personal storylines.

That same combination is present in *The Wizard Sniffer*, but amplified. The game is set in a stereotypical, even satirical fantasy world, with witches, warlocks, heroes, dragons, and a high-interest rate bank that employs a personal army.

I've heard it said before that satire is most effective when done by someone who loves what they're satirizing, and I feel like that's the case here. While Ser Leonhart, our putative hero, has many flaws, some quite significant, he is also brave and strong. Our squire Tuck is hesitant and afraid but grows to be strong, like in a lot of classic fantasy stories (see Sam in *Lord of the Rings* or the children in *Chronicles of Narnia*). A powerful ally of the main enemy switches over to the hero's side.

It also parodies adventure games. The beginning of the game features old chestnuts like Towers of Hanoi, a Rubik's cube, etc...all in the trash. Later on, the enemy's mother is working on a fiendish color-coded puzzle that Ser Leonhart simply demolishes in one hit. However, while it parodies those very artificial-feeling puzzles, it includes remixes of old classics, like a 'treasure hunt' where the treasure is humans; 'strange device you tinker with' puzzles when the 'strange' device is a mech suit with a flamethrower; and so on.

Each character has their own emotional journey. Two of them involve becoming aware of or accepting or being accepted in their sexuality or gender, a

topic resonant with many readers. Not all the journeys are happy, especially with the older men.

2.26.2 Depth of implementation

This is a limited parser game, like *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*^[573] the year before. You play as a pig, incapable of almost any independent action. However, you have the trust (or earn the trust) of those around you, and they can follow you and respond to simple actions on your part.

Replaying this game, it's shocking how bare many room descriptions are. More than half the rooms in this game are just connectors with hardly anything in them. For instance: 'You stand at the foot of a curved staircase ascending to the west. A dimly-lit hall extends to the east.'

Examining generally gives brief answers, too. So how is there 'depth' if there's nothing to look at?

Depth comes through the characters that inhabit the world. There are at least three or four ways each room and interaction can be handled: alone, with Tuck, with Leonhart, with the Horror, or with Tuck and Leonhart together.

All the interactable parts of the game have to respond to all those possibilities together. This flips the standard IF paradigm around: instead of descriptions and interactions being tied to the world, with people as an added feature, the descriptions and interactions here are all connected to people, and the rest of the world is just set dressing. This is a model that could be endlessly imitated, and I'm taking notes now for my next game.

The game has a lot of neat tricks to keep you from getting confused. When you've brought the ball to the heroes as they requested, they grab it immediately, so you don't have to drop it or give it to the heroes. Similarly, once you take the keys, it automatically handles you giving it to the players. Confusing situations are just omitted entirely.

Finally, this is a big game for how easy it is to play. Most games that are large rely on tricky puzzles or hidden objects to pad out gameplay (which can be very fun, like many Infocom games). But this game, despite being fairly easy, just has a lot of content. Replaying it took me quite a while.

2.26.3 Conclusion

Wizard Sniffer succeeds due at least in part to its vibrant setting and characters and to its depth of implementation involving multiple perspectives from multiple characters. It speaks on timely topics of interest to its current audience, the same way that early games like *So Far*^[609] spoke to their audience of diehard Infocom enthusiasts. This game will likely stay a favorite for many years.

2.27 2018: *Bogeyman*, by Elizabeth Smyth

Bogeyman^[744] was a dark, disturbing Twine game with excellent production skills. It won the XYZZY Best Game award in 2018, up against games like *Alias* ‘*The Magpie*’,^[321] *Cannery Vale*^[146] and *Cragne Manor*,^[808] games that still have a strong following.

But *Bogeyman* beat them all. What did it do well?

2.27.1 Polish

There’s a double standard in IF where parser games can become extremely popular while looking like you opened up Notepad in 2003, but choice-based games are often judged by their physical appearance.

Highly-ranked choice-based games often include custom fonts and styling, music, character portraits, color changes, animations, etc. and many resources have developed to teach people these things (like Grim Baccaris’s “Twine Grimoire”^[33]).

Bogeyman has exceptional polish. It has music in the background, either several different tracks or one very long one, and it helps set the mood. The game has fading text transitions that are just long enough to be creepy but fast enough to not interrupt reading at all (a very narrow needle to thread). It uses a hand-picked font and arranges choices in a kind of two by two grid. It uses centered text and has a range of text variations (normal, italics, and fixed width) to communicate different voices.

It makes for a very effective presentation. If the game had used default Harlowe, it would still be a great game but lose a lot of its ‘punch’.

2.27.2 Gripping moral dilemma

Reading the postmortem of this game is very interesting. For background, you play as a child kidnapped by the literal bogeyman. He keeps five children at a time in his decaying wooden house, forcing them to do demeaning or dangerous chores. They have to eat disgusting food and thank him for it. But his true evil is that he pits you against each other.

In the postmortem, the author says about the Bogeyman:^[745]

Not to get heavy or anything, but I think he appeals to the frightened child in me because he’s an idealised version of an abuser. He’s cruel and unfair but at least he’s internally consistent. It’s a comforting myth among the abused and oppressed that if we could only be “good” enough, the punishment would stop. We’re desperate for authority figures who keep their promises, systems where pain happens for a reason and obedience really does guarantee safety. Living with an abuser isn’t really like that. “The Choice” is my attempt to find some kind of order in a harsh, confusing world.

The choice being referred to is the final choice of the game, but is also reflected in many smaller choices. If you snitch on your fellow kids, or show enthusiasm for their punishments, you are rewarded. If you help the kids, you are punished.

I found this setup to be very stressful and effective. This is not a feel-good game; I replayed it with trepidation, and had to take a while to stare into space after finishing it again.

The author points out that the game's ending depends entirely on a single choice:^[745]

Some reviewers have complained about a single choice determining which ending you get, which is understandable. Personally I don't think it's fair to say all the choices leading up to that moment "don't matter" – those earlier choices, those were the story!

I think this is still underselling the game's responsiveness. Having played multiple times, I saw significant differences in the way the Bogeyman treated me and how other characters regarded me, what they confided in me.

The ending does erase all the past and bring things down to a single moment, but the other choices provide context for that moment.

2.27.3 Strong Writing

The choice structure above wouldn't work at all without player investment. The writing here is what really shines. This game won not only Best Game at the XYZZYs but also Best Writing, Best Story, and Best Individual NPCs. The only writing-based award it didn't receive was Best NPCs, but it was nominated.

The ambiguity is what helps a lot. No character is black and white. Tabitha is the most helpful and reassuring, but is also the most devious and rebellious. Humphrey is truly hateful, but is also a small child trying to survive. Grace is little and helpless, but her constant mishaps put everyone at risk. Peter is quiet but doesn't always obey.

And the Bogeyman himself is cruel and loving at the same time. Like the postmortem says, he is an idealized abuser, one who is actually consistent, who will keep the rules he set out. His characterization rings unfortunately true for many who have been in an abusive situation.

2.27.4 Conclusion

In all years, the XYZZY Best Game is a game with a combination of what the community considers the best at fiction and the best at interactivity. It was up against some very strong competition in its year; but I think that it won because its interactivity is in direct service to its fiction. Each choice is there, not for window dressing, but because it forces you to be complicit in the story, giving you a real choice where both options have real arguments for their use, and real stakes.

It is the shortest XYZZY Winner, but, for me, not the easiest to finish.

2.28 2019 (Tie): *Crème de la Crème*, by Harris Powell-Smith

This game was one of two winners of the Best Game XYZZY Award in 2020, the first tie in the history of the award. The second was *Zozzled*,^[126] which is covered later on.

2019 and 2020 had an unusual back to back combo of commercial Choicescript games in the XYZZY awards. There weren't any before (although *Zombie Exodus*^[173] received several nominations in 2011 that had to be specially dealt with, as described in the section on the 2012 IFComp) or after. What was so special about those years for Choicescript?

I know what was special for me. In fall of 2019, I released a Choicescript game that failed spectacularly, due at least in part to its unusual theme (Christmas!) and genre (otherworldly horror). Afterwards, I decided to learn what made Choice of Games games successful or not, and was able to get steam keys for every game from the company in order to write reviews for them and analyze what made them work, which I summarized in an essay that is now Chapter 12 of this book.

In the course of that, I discovered how good *Crème de la Crème* was, even in comparison with other Choicescript games. The same was true in 2020 with *Vampire: The Masquerade—Night Road*. I wrote glowing reviews of both on IFDB, and I thought I also mentioned them on the forum, but I don't see any evidence of that looking back.

Were the games actually especially great among Choice of Games games, or were such games just getting more 'press' here in general, from my reviews or from the author being somewhat well-known here?

I think they truly were exceptional. Even now, on the Choice of Games omnibus app, *Crème de la Crème* has more reviews than any other game. And *Vampire: the Masquerade—Night Road*^[467] has made Choice of Games more many than any other game but *Choice of Robots*^[291] (which lost to *80 Days* in a year that also featured *Hadean Lands*^[598]). These are two games that represent some of the best Choice of Games has ever put out.

And, funny enough, one of *Crème de la Crème*'s biggest competitors in 2019 was another Choicescript game, *Turandot*.^[282] While it didn't win IFComp, it lost to a lighthearted comedy (*Zozzled*^[126]) and traditionally a darker game that loses to a light comedy in IFComp has a good shot of winning XYZZY (look at *Blue Chairs*,^[412] *Bogeyman*,^[744] for example). Although in this case, *Zozzled*^[126] also won in the first ever XYZZY Best Game tie!

In any case, this game has a lot going for it, despite being the least played game of the XYZZY Best Game winners (alongside *Night Road*^[467]). What does it do right?

2.28.1 Audience Awareness

Choice of Games games are primarily targeted to fans that are fairly young, generally left-leaning, more likely to be LGBT, interested in romance. Not all of those things are definitive of course, but as overall trends they seem to be true.

Crème de la Crème takes the audience well into account. There are many romanceable characters (around ten, I believe, and someone has romanced all of them in a single playthrough). The romanceable characters can have their gender chosen randomly, as one whole block, or individually. The player can customize their gender, their way of dressing, the way others address them, and so forth. Polyamorous relationships are possible. In this alternate world, traditional literature includes gay and polyamorous relationships (not that our world's traditional literature doesn't also do this, but it's even more common in this world).

The setting is a finishing school, which aims to get youth educated for either college or to marry them off to suitable nobles or other wealthy people, hitting on the concerns that much of the audience care for (early romances, marriage, college, leaving family, etc.).

2.28.2 Depth of plotlines

This game is quite large. In the summer I've been writing this, I divide my day into 'play' chunks and 'work' chunks. I usually use one 'work' chunk to play an XYZZY winner like *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*.^[573] I had to use four work chunks to play this game, taking around eight or more hours. I think I took ten hours the first time I played. This is big!

Main plotlines include:

- The PC dealing with the fallout of their parents' social disgrace
- Blaise bullying and framing the PC before being disappearing
- The truth behind the financial sources of Gallatin (the school in the game)
- The contest between Gallatin and rival school Archembault
- The affair between three different teachers at the school.

Side plots intertwine with each other in ways that can be completely missed. These include the clubs; joining the Children of Hecate can lead to numerous mystical opportunities; joining Max's club leads to a lot of vandalism and pranks; and joining the Prefects leads to you stopping the others a lot. I haven't tried many of the clubs, including athletics.

And the romances individually have a lot of depth. The headmistress of your school has a child at another, who was my first romance, but events in the endgame really hurt our relationship. On a different playthrough, I romanced Karson, the servant with a dark secret. This time I romanced Delacroix, who has emotionally abusive parents and a penchant for withcraft.

All of these plotlines together make for a massive and replayable game. IFComp games evolved a certain way due to an arms race of sorts with plot and parser functionality, and later Twine and CSS/styling. Choicescript games evolved in a different war, one where replayability and size were dominant. *Crème de la Crème* is near a half-million words, which once was one of the largest but has since been dwarfed by several million-word epics. However, it is still very substantial, and the resulting customizable story shows the author's great talent with plot.

2.28.3 Every Choice a Good Choice

One of the biggest problems I found with low-sales Choicescript games (including mine, I suppose) was punishing the player. In Choicescript, you build up stats and then check them, with different results if you succeed or fail.

There are a lot of games with confusing stats and checks, where the game constantly says 'you're wrong, you're bad, you messed up' etc. *Crème de la Crème* and other games don't do that, at least not so much. You can fail checks and the game can tell you, but it doesn't ruin you, it just offers alternate paths. Having one really low stat means you get tutoring in it, or learn about it. Failing to escape from kidnappers doesn't end the game early, it gives you an alternate storyline.

2.28.4 Conclusion

Crème de la Crème is a solid game that still stands up to this day. It excels at knowing its audience, at threading together multiple plot points, and at rewarding the player for almost all play styles.

I'd love to see more players try this one out and rate or review it. It (and *Night Road*) have half the reviews other XYZZY Best winners have. Of course, in broader terms, it has been played far more than almost every IFComp parser game put together, and has 113 Steam reviews, but I'm mostly recommending it here because I think people will like it.

2.29 2019 (Tie): *Zozzled*, by Steph Cherrywell

This essay was offered as a prize in the 2019 IFComp before the game was nominated for (and won) an XYZZY Best Game Award. I've left in some of the original language used.

I'm pleased to write this essay on *Zozzled*,^[126] as this is a game I heard rumors about for quite a while before it appeared, and was everything I had hoped for: a polished, funny, light puzzler. I wanted to discuss a few features of the game:

2.29.1 Themes:

Cherrywell has a habit of pairing pulp genres with important real-life issues. *Chlorophyll*^[124] mixed space sci-fi with the relationship between mother and daughter. *Brain Guzzlers from Beyond*^[123] mixed monster sci fi with race and class divisions.

Zozzled is a flapper-era comedy ghost game that deals with vices, both alcoholism (which is thrust into the forefront) and deeper societal ills which are more subtly depicted and provide an interesting contrast with the alcoholism.

For example, the main character, Hazel Greene is hooked on ‘hooch’ and can’t get enough alcohol. Sobriety is a sin in her eyes. One of the final messages in the game is a warning to drink less, coming from a former prohibitionist who died in her one moment of weakness through poisoned alcohol. The game’s overt message is ‘alcohol is problematic’.

But it’s a blind. Hazel’s alcoholic habits cause no problems in-game, and all true progress is obtained by consuming alcohol. Despite our character’s ‘societal ill’, she is not depicted as a bad person. Neither is Donnie Cantaloupes, the owner of the Grand Poseidon Hotel and gang boss.

In contrast, some people in the game are depicted as bad people, albeit with more subtle ills. The medium who wears a wig and goes by ‘Madame Ping’ is heavily implied to be a Westerner co-opting Asian culture. The architect comes off as the typical megalomaniac creative who ignores people below him. And the prohibitionists are shown to be motivated by revenge.

So, whether intentional or not, one theme seems to be the contrast between public sins which are openly condemned and private sins which are covered through hypocrisy. The game seems to favor the former, and I’d have to agree with its viewpoint.

2.29.2 Writing:

Cherrywell is an excellent writer, and this is probably the game’s biggest strength. *Zozzled* is a funny game, and it draws on a variety of humorous techniques.

Much of the humor is pun-based, with the various meanings of ‘spirits’ carrying a lot of weight. The game’s most difficult puzzle contains several pun-based hints, which make its solution obvious in hindsight but opaque in normal play.

Another chunk of the humor depends on setting up and subverting expectations. The bit with the two lovers who need help, the flashback showing the gang leader rushing towards the prohibitionist, the beginning attempts at getting drunk.

Finally, the pure ridiculousness of the writing does a lot for it. Brendan Hennessy once advised me that a trick for overcoming writing anxiety is to make things so over-the-top that no one would notice if it’s bad. And Cherrywell certainly throws things over the top. Notable examples include the enormous scale model of the hotel which contains, itself, a scale-model of the hotel; the

ridiculous reverse speech impediment of the Donnie; and the list of possible symptoms of exposure to ghosts.

Outside of humor, the game shows evidence of deep research into 1920's lingo. This attention to detail is lovely. I remember researching Depression-era gangster lingo for a bank heist game I was working on, and there's a lot of overlap between the two sets of slang. It definitely heightened my enjoyment of the game.

2.29.3 Puzzle Design

Cherrywell is known for engaging interactivity, usually light puzzles that are organized in a branch-and-bottleneck structure. In her other games, you generally unlock a couple of puzzles at a time before moving on to a new area. The constrained environment makes guessing and experimentation easier.

Zozzled is a bit of a departure from this. Almost the entire game is an 'open quest' structure, sandwiched between the puzzle-free opening and epilogue. All puzzles are available for you to work on at once.

This directly affects the narrative impulse of the game. Her past games had this sense of motion, almost like a comic book. *Zozzled* is more of a stately game, and a different kind of challenge, as the state space is larger. Many times we find a clearly defined problem or set piece whose purpose is not made known until later.

It's a different design, but it's a good design. It feels player-friendly, and adds a different dimension to player experience.

2.29.4 Conclusion:

Zozzled is an excellent addition to the IF canon. The Cherrywell portfolio is fleshed out now, and anything from this point on is gravy. Winning IFComp twice is incredibly rare (only happened twice so far!) and I could easily see Cherrywell making it three.

2.30 2020: *Vampire: The Masquerade—Night Road*, by Kyle Marquis

Night Road^[467] is the least-reviewed, least-rated XYZZY Best Game winner on IFDB. It's a commercial game. It's set in the Vampire: The Masquerade world. And the the steam reviews of it are wildly contradictory (all quotes have been truncated):^[794]

...Vampire: the Masquerade - Night Road is the best piece of Vampire: the Masquerade licensed fiction ever written, and no, I am not ***** joking.—TwoDee

This game is a disgrace to the Vampire IP.—Drew

The writing is GOOD. And I don't mean "you can read it", it's GOOD-GOOD. It makes you feel like you ARE in the American south-west, even if you've never been there. It makes you feel like you ARE a courier driver caught in a political conflict. You are actually in danger. You can actually be in love. It's fascinatingly well written. —Erylaria

Gameplay seems good enough (props for keeping the full tabletop ruleset), but the writing is a bit primitive for my taste and the plot fails to grip.—Subspace Dandy

Definitely one of the best role playing experiences I have had in years. If you are naive enough to have even a shred of hope for Bloodlines 2, you are better off playing Night Road. —Mel

First off before we get into anything let me just say, if your a fan of VtM DO NOT buy this you will regret it like i do, if your interested in VtM DO NOT buy this as it woefully misrepresents it — Storyteller Nylan

This is the best game in Choice of Games' entire catalog. Period[...]I don't regret a single cent I spent on buying this game, and I doubt you will either.—Petrichord

It's too rushed, pacewise, to be a decent novel and too linear to be a decent game.—Charon

It's rare to see a game with such wildly contradictory reviews. But the good outweighs the bad; As mentioned in the last essay, this is the second-highest grossing Choicescript game of all time, or was by 2023.

As more myself, as I replayed this, I was surprised at how often I failed checks I should have succeeded in, at the bugs that still remain, at how easy it was to max out skills quickly (although this was addressed in-game). And yet, I think I'll add this game to my Top 10 list on IFDB (bumping Adventure back down to eleventh), the only XYZZY winner on that list and my favorite of all even after writing these essays.

What does it do right?

2.30.1 Mechanics

This game more or less faithfully recreates the system used by Vampire: The Masquerade, where there are three kinds of ways of interacting with the world:

1. Roleplaying (here used with statless choices or relationship checks with NPCs)
2. Attribute + Skill Check (where a relevant attribute, one of your innate abilities, is added to a relevant skill, a learned ability. Behind the scenes, that many ten sided dice are rolled, with a six or higher being a success on each die, and the number of successes needed determined by the author)

3. Powers (automatic success when available, but increases or has chance to increase hunger)

Powers are what I love most about the system, and they're different for each Clan. There are a lot of different clans (I've played a different one every time, this time being a Brujah).

As some reviews have noticed, this system takes some getting used to and can be imbalanced. For instance, having max values in both attributes, you can still lose the dice rolls. This usually gives you wounds or hunger.

I had max wounds and max hunger and didn't die, but it is possible to die in such a state if you fail enough.

Removing hunger requires feeding on humans, which is always a roleplaying (do you feel guilty?) and stat-checking situation.

There are expansion packs for the other clans, but I haven't bought them, although reading the 'big' pack it sounds really cool, so I might by it (I was gifted the original game, and I worked for the company at one point. This essay is in no way unbiased, except that I'm not being rewarded for it).

It sounds like I'm just describing the Vampire: The Masquerade mechanics instead of the game, but that's just it. I've played other VtM games and didn't get the experience I wanted, instead getting more of a novel with a couple of VtM-themed choices. This game implements those mechanics exactly the way I wish a DM would. I run DnD games for my son and friends, and playing this game feels just like running a real TTRPG does to me.

2.30.2 Options and depth

This game really sprawls. It's 660,000 words, but unlike a lot of other big Choice-script games it doesn't pack those into text dumps or long non-interactive sequences. There's just a lot of choices, like thirty or more abilities. Most people giving steam reviews have around twenty hours, while some report having finished in 8.5 or so.

It has a branch and bottleneck structure. You create your character and backstory, meet important NPCs, then get three quests to complete in any order. You then get more exposition and three more quests, then a finale.

After each quest, you have a chance to improve things. You can spend money to get cars, from the dumpiest rustbucket you've ever seen for \$300 or less or a powerful \$50,000 luxury car. You can go from living in a parking garage to a vampire castle. Or you can spend your money on weapons, disguises, blood, etc. You gain experience points, allowing you to raise your vampiric abilities and powers.

The game really lets you take very different pathways in terms of powers you use and their strengths. Some are better than others; I used Celerity and Potence and maxed out physical things and I suffered the whole game due to lack of Charisma, only to completely sail through the ending by punching everything really hard while on zero hunger. But that's not the only difference; I ended the game this playthrough negotiating piece between two vampires while on another

I worked with essentially the FBI. This game included plotlines I had no idea about in the first couple of playthroughs, including a lot on Julian Sim and tech that felt really new to me.

There are bugs. I swear a couple of times I upgraded an ability and my XP didn't go down (although it may have just rejected my choice, now that I think about it, due to my lack of appropriate housing). So there may not be that many bugs anymore, but this is a big game and very complex, so I would be careful.

2.30.3 Plot and characters

Kyle Marquis usually writes really powerful worlds with fusions of technology, magic, and the ancients (like an archmage becoming a God in *The Tower Behind the Moon*^[466] or finding dinosaurs with a Byzantium-punk time machine in *Silverworld*^[465]). Those games are a lot of fun (I've replayed one recently) but often feel really removed from human experience.

The VtM world, though, is all about the human experience. The idea of the game is, what does it mean to be human when your life revolves around the suffering of others? Like most Star Trek or Lord of the Rings, the fantasy elements of the setting are just a way to showcase aspects of real human life.

I like the characters, although I was rebuffed by the goth pawn shop owner this time (due to my lack of Charisma). Especially interesting is the powerful ruler of the area who could crush you like a bug but has a secret interest in you, and the powerful medical vampire and her witch enemy-turned-friend (or more?).

The plot is big. Some of the other VtM games are street-level; a single vampire moves into town, and you, a human, have to protect yourself.

This game has massive repercussions. You can affect the fate of all vampires in the world. You can tangle with an elder capable of leveling civilizations. You can witness the prince of Tucson turn from a powerful warlord to a more and more vulnerable man who still doesn't care about any of it because of his Call and his lost love.

Romance is not as deep as some games, like *Crème de la Crème*^[628] or *Creatures Such as We*,^[288] unless you pick one of the main characters. The characters do have cool art, though. When the scale is epic, sometimes the smaller characters get scoped out.

2.30.4 Conclusion

In a lot of ways, this is both one of the most flawed and one of the best XYZZY winners. The least popular on IFDB, but very popular on other platforms. More buggy or just weird mechanics than other winners, but offering a lot more flexibility. It's a game of contradictions, and I love it.

2.31 2021: *What Heart Heard of, Ghost Guessed*, by Amanda Walker

This game was an unusual XYZZY winner, being a relatively short parser IF-Comp game that placed fourth in the competition, tied with *Birdland*^[339] for the lowest-placing IFComp game to win the XYZZY Award up to this point.

But after playing through it, it's clear that it shares features with other XYZZY Award winners, and on IFDB its overall rating puts it firmly in the middle of the pack among the other winners, showing that it remains popular.

What does it do right?

2.31.1 Novel, well-implemented mechanics

One thing many XYZZY winners have in common is their interesting and innovative mechanics. *So Far*,^[609] the first winner, had its sound and pipe puzzles, among others; *Savoir-Faire*^[733] its clever linking mechanism; *Lost Pig*^[397] its color-coded magic.

This game features a ghost, you, who has almost no ability to interact with the world around her. Soon, however, you discover that emotions can affect certain objects. Desire can pull, confusion can turn. That makes this game a limited parser game where new commands can be found, similar to Arthur DiBianca's *The Vambrace of Destiny*.^[195]

The puzzles the author has devised are quite tricky while still being solvable without hints. Some verbs are learned long before any chance to use them arises, and some objects are placed very early on before you can use the action on them (especially the chest).

2.31.2 Emotional, vibrant writing and plot

Many IF games tend to the analytical and the removed. This game, though, like past winners *Lost Pig*^[397] and *Violet*,^[262] infuses every object and description with emotion, character, and memory. Things tied to those you love or hate have long descriptions explaining their relationship to you and others, while things with no emotion attached are skimmed over with brief messages.

The plot pulls directly from poetry and includes abuse, romance, and murder. The game as a whole could serve as a long poem, one-act play or radio drama, as it forms a strong coherent story.

2.31.3 Mechanics tied to plot

This is one of the biggest things common to XYZZY winners. Like *Colloratura*,^[286] the mechanics are the plot. Why can you pull things? Because you love the one who made them! Why can you hurt people? Because of their regrets. By making emotions into commands like 'anger door' or 'excite mirror', the player is both solving puzzles and roleplaying, something which its competitors in IFComp that year (though excellent and still-popular games in their

own rights) lacked, all three being polished traditional parser games with novel settings.

2.31.4 Conclusion

What Heart Heard of, Ghost Guessed is basically the quintessential XYZZY winner boiled down to its basic components: ‘interactive’, ‘fiction’, and ‘interactive fiction’. It has interesting and compelling mechanics, it has strong story and plot, and the two are wed together by the structure of the game.

2.32 2022: *According to Cain*, by Jim Nelson

This game both bucks trends and embraces tradition. It’s the lowest-placing IFComp game to ever win Best Game (at sixth place). But it’s also a TADS game, which once was a very popular system (with 518 games listed on IFDB) before experiencing a long lull. This game is part of several recently released with this system.

It beat out numerous other games, including the comedy/heartfelt IFComp winner *The Grown-Up Detective Agency*,^[340] the extracting-texts-from-bacteria game *The Archivist and the Revolution*,^[122] the gothic parser tale *The Spectators*,^[820] and many more.

What does it do right?

2.32.1 Depth

This is a long game for IFComp and filled with many details, perhaps one reason it placed lower in IFComp but higher in the XYZZY Awards.

You play as an alchemist with the overall career of "Indigator". You have been sent back in time to determine what, exactly, is the mark of Cain.

You are given numerous troves of equipment and a book from your superiors. The book is quite large; reading it can take a long time, half an hour or more. The game prompts you to move on, though, as it is designed for consulting, not laborious writing.

Gameplay revolves around performing rituals involving the various alchemical reagents you have been given and that you create. Some rituals are spelled out for you, some are referenced by name (which you can consult the book about) while still others must be guessed at, adding to the complexity of the game.

The alchemical reagents have complex interactions with each other and with humans, with different humans having different humors, and each humor having a ‘poison’. It is of course reminiscent of other alchemy games, like *Hadean Lands*, but stands on its own and doesn’t feel derivative.

2.32.2 Storytelling Through Lore

I've thought in the past that parser IF is generally better when it's about 'What happened'? vs 'What is happening?' due to the difficulties of pacing when players can type whatever they want. This is one reason amnesia is a perennial favorite start for parser games, as is uncovering mysteries or cults.

In this game, you uncover the tales of Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel (and sisters!) through alchemical means. Your game, the player's, while fraught with occasional physical danger, is slow-paced and thoughtful. The remembered past, though, is filled with arguments, violence, deception, starvation, betrayal, and jealousy. Just like the previous year's winner, What Heart Heard of, Ghost Guessed, progression in this game occurs through unlocking horrifying memories of a past family.

2.32.3 Polish

The game is generally very polished. Replaying it with the latest version (version 6), I experienced no bugs, and reviews seem to indicate that the bugs originally there were small.

The writing is consistent in tone and evocative, as is appropriate for an IF author who is also a published book author. Extensive research, including consulting texts of numerous religions, went into this game.

It also includes multimedia, including subtle optional music and optional sidebar and splash graphics.

2.32.4 Conclusion

According to Cain is well-researched, polished, has unusual mechanics that are consistent, is difficult enough to make winning feel like a success but easy enough to be completed with few hints. It also ended up winning the first IFDB Awards, showing that it's XYZZY win was no random coincidence.

Part III

The Interactive Fiction Competition

Chapter 3

Hierarchy of IFComp Needs

In my IFComp research, after playing almost every game from each of the comps, I’ve noticed some patterns in what the players and judges are looking for, and I wanted to share those here.

There seems to be a ‘hierarchy of needs’, which I’ve abstracted for the following list. The idea is that things at the beginning are so glaring that players won’t care about things later on the list. This is of course a gross over-simplification, but it can be useful.

The hierarchy is as follows:

3.1 Tier I-Basic competency

3.1.1 Level 1

The author needs to be trying. Games like *Sisyphus*^[419] or *Toiletworld*^[661] or *The Absolute Worst IF Game in History*^[486] end up last because the author is just trolling.

3.1.2 Level 2

All bugs should be eliminated, as much as possible. *Guard Duty*^[249] came in second to last in 1999, even though it had complex characters and a rich world, because it had a game killing bug right at the start. In general, lots of big bugs will send your game to the bottom of the list. No one can get rid of all bugs, though. Emily Short won with *Floatpoint*^[723] in 2006 despite a big, noticeable bug.

3.1.3 Level 3

All typos should be eliminated. As Paul ’o Brian said about a 2001 game that placed almost last:^[547]

It's too bad this game didn't give out points every time I spotted an error, because if it did, I think I'd have earned 524,000 points out of a possible 200, earning me the rank of Gibbering Grammarian." This is just one person, but it shows how some people are very opposed to any typos.

3.2 Tier II-Amount of content

3.2.1 Level 1

The game needs a lot of content. Well done but short games can still place high, but the top games always have a significant amount of content. I've tried to formalize this before as a specific amount of commands (around 150 typed commands or 200+ hyperlinks in a playthrough), but it's best just to play other top games to see what's expected.

3.2.2 Level 2

The content needs to be visible in some way. *Final Exam*,^[843] *Pogoman Go!*,^[834] *Spy Intrigue*^[267] and *Baker of Shireton*^[563] all had a significant amount of content that was hidden. Many people rated these games lower because they didn't know there was anything else. *Birdland*^[338] solved this problem by dividing the game into different days with a ramping up of tension, and crossed-out links showing what the player was missing; *Detectiveland*^[389] solved it by having four 'Cases'; after completing one, you had an idea how long the others were. A lot of long games suffer from 'flail around till something happens' syndrome, where there's no guidance as to what the player can do next. This is similar to the hidden content problem; players have no idea when the game will end. Note that some authors genuinely enjoy creating hidden content, and that is completely valid; it just might not be factored into scoring.

3.2.3 Level 3

The content needs to not be repetitive. *The House at The End of Rosewood Street*^[775] is very cool, but requires you to knock at eight doors and deliver eight papers for seven days in a row. It is extremely tedious; the game is otherwise very good. Your content is only fun if it isn't being recycled over and over. That's why procedurally generated games are so often boring.

3.3 Tier III-Creativity

3.3.1 Level 1

The game needs an original setting. Many of the middle zone of IFComp games are games that have trite and over-used settings. *Dungeons and Dragons*-type

quests for gems and fighting wizards are almost always down here, including in the last few years. Office and home-exploring games are often down here too.

3.3.2 Level 2

The game needs interesting mechanics. You can get pretty far with just TAKE, DROP, LOOK, EXAMINE, etc. but a consistent set of original mechanics can get you far (like Morayati's *Take*^[592] or Kwak's *How to Win at Paper Rock Scissors*^[424]). The mechanic doesn't have to be a gameplay one; *Untold Riches*^[224] had standard gameplay, but a mechanic where the narrator would tell funny stories about everything.

3.3.3 Level 3:

The game needs good writing. This is hard, and I can't really comment on this too much as I'm not that qualified. Fortunately, there is a wealth of help for this online.

I debated about the ordering of Tier II and Tier III; so don't take this all too literally. But I think it helps me focus on my priorities in writing. Please feel free to comment if you disagree or have thoughts.

Notice that creative but short games like *Take*,^[592] *Mirror and Queen*,^[316] and *The Queen's Menagerie*^[317] placed below longer games with more standard gameplay. *Fair*^[560] and *Midnight. Swordfight.*^[315] were short but with high replay value, so they still count as 'a lot of content'.

Chapter 4

History of the Interactive Fiction Competition

In this chapter, we investigate the history of the Interactive Fiction Competition.

4.1 IFComp 1995

Inspired by a post by Chris Klimas on the history of IFComp,^[413] I decided to go through and give a summary of each IFComp after I finished playing all the games in the comp.

Let's start with the first comp, 1995.

4.1.1 Influences

One of the very biggest influences in IFComp 1995 was the game *John's Fire Witch*.^[37] This was the most successful game in years which was both a) good, and b) intentionally 'short'. How short is short? Magnus Olson called it:^[558]

a short (in the author's words, 'snack-sized') but extremely well-written piece of IF. On the surface, this game isn't very remarkable: it's quite simple (it took me about three hours to solve)...Still, this is one of the best - perhaps _the_ best - shareware games I've ever played

He went on to describe his feelings about this new, shorter fiction:

This reviewer, being a busy man with too little time to spend on IF, and in addition being slightly disturbed by the recent trend towards 'simulationist' IF (where the authors try to provide a good simulation of their literary world, complete with all objects, an attempt which will only serve to overwhelm the poor player with useless information) would certainly like to see an increase in the number

of small but well-written games like this. ‘John’ s Firewitch’ is an excellent example to emulate for prospective authors.

Fire Witch came out in February, and these reviews and the discussion around them appeared shortly thereafter, and the idea of ‘we need short games’ spread.

Of all games in the comp, *Uncle Zebulon’s Will*^[559] (the TADS winner) resembles John’s Fire Witch the most: both involve outsmarting the devil in a house with a mystic connection to another world.

4.1.2 The games

This comp was the smallest of all (12 games), so I can discuss each game instead of summarizing. But I’d like to focus *A Change in the Weather*^[594] first.

In 1998, Zarf wrote about his goals with both *So Far*^[609] (an XYZZY Best Game winner) and *A Change in the Weather*:^[601]

Back in the old days (’95), people used to tell me that a text IF work couldn’t possibly have the kind of plot and character development that a book did. Because text IF (in the Colossal Cave tradition) was fundamentally a *game*, it was basically a bunch of puzzles with some stuff stuck on top; interactivity meant puzzles...

These days, people tell me that a text IF work (in the Colossal Cave tradition) can’t possibly be *interactive* fiction, because the shallow if-then tree nature of the programming is a straitjacket...

I like to think that I caused this viewpoint shift...

But I did write "A Change in the Weather" specifically to stick a fork in that first viewpoint; and then *So Far*. They must have worked, because of the number of people who said "Oh, *that’s* the shape that fits what I want to do!" and did it. Ok, good.

Looking at the difference between 1995 and subsequent comps, I actually think Zarf’s right; ‘*A Change in the Weather*’ stands out for being completely story-focused. The puzzles are very hard, but they focus the player’s attention on the story: the puzzles change the player from a sad wanderer, to one enjoying nature, to one trying to survive, to one trying to save.

Uncle Zebulon’s Will, the other winner, was in some sense the last successful game of its kind. A sparely written game, with a static demon that prevents you from taking items from a house, a complex machine that has no real-game purpose whatsoever, a mirror-world just because, and a painted on plot. It’s very good at what it does, but after 1995 players demanded more story for their content. *Mulldoon Legacy*^[371] was very story-rich, and *Risorgimento Represso*^[156] (another later successful old-school game) created a large backstory about a rebellion.

The Mind Electric,^[211] by Jason Dyer (a longtime, and current, IF participant) was a cyberpunk game with a surreal world filled with puzzles. It has a cool backstory, but the main centerpiece is the puzzles.

Toonesia,^[829] the second place TADS winner, is unusual in being a blatant copyright violation. You play Bugs Bunny, outwitting Elmer Fudd, with the smallest of name changes. This game uses cartoon logic (like picking up holes).

The Magic Toyshop^[648] didn't even pretend to be anything but puzzles. You play tic-tac-toe and Towers of Hanoi, and it assumes you've played *Curses*^[516] and *Trinity*^[501] (which, in 1995, was a good assumption). Surprisingly, many players in the 90's said this was one of their favorite games.

The One That Got Away:^[436] is a game that's a bit more story focused than the others. As baf said, it is^[34]

A small game that emphasizes the fiction aspect of IF - the puzzles are few and simple, but there's a lot of description and dialogue (kind of like *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, except funnier and about fish.) Good fishing simulation. Exaggerates wildly. Probably good for beginners.

While this game was also story-focused, there's something different about *A Change in the Weather*'s approach that made it more influential; perhaps it's because the puzzles were the story in *Weather*, while the story happens around the puzzles in *The One that Got Away*.

Mystery Science Theater 3000 Presents "Detective"^[257] was a somewhat influential game, spawning some later 'mystery science theater' games and introducing the idea of the 'so bad it's good' text adventure. *Detective*^[47] was, I believe, an AGT game (a parser better than many other non-Inform/Tads parsers, including AdvSys and Adrift), written by a teenager. The authors of this game contacted the *Detective* author and received permission to mock the game with this MST'ing.

Undertow^[301] is a game I actually liked. Stephen Granade wrote many of my favorite games later, and this is his first effort (or second, depending on when *Waystation*^[302] was released). You are involved in a murder mystery on a yacht. Very reminiscent of the Infocom mysteries, with characters on a timer. However, it suffered from being too hard, and having some guess-the-verb issues.

A Night at the Museum Forever^[22] was the first IFComp time travel game. It has some clever ideas, but it basically amounts to going back and forth in time, affecting the future. To me, this was a foreshadowing of the vast middle wasteland of IFComp games where the game is big and slightly underimplemented, and impossible without a walkthrough; but where after reading the walkthrough, you scratch your head and say "I guess that makes sense." This type of game was very common in the first few years.

All Quiet on the Library Front^[588] is just an unabashed fanboy game; you are at a museum full of the best IF titles, and you wander around checking it all out. Like *A Night at the Museum Forever*, it suffers from 'flail about until something happens'-it is, but is an interesting snapshot of one author's feelings for contemporary IF.

Tube Trouble^[788] was just a very small game about using the subway, with the same issues as the previously mentioned two games. It only placed lower due to being smaller. However, there were none of the terrible homebrew games or deathly buggy games or troll games that plagued later comps.

Undo^[179] was a game far ahead of its time. It is a dadaist, absurdist game, based on an absurd joke. You can do things like ‘take nothing’ and ‘drop nothing’, and interact with computer faults. It’s tiny, and reminiscent of Rybread Celsius’ later games. Many people said they liked it, but that it was too short.

4.1.3 Impact

The impact of this comp was huge; the size of the comp for the next few years increased dramatically, and the style of games changed quite a bit after Plotkin’s (and others’) games. This emphasis on story didn’t eliminate puzzles; that was to come in later years.

4.2 IFComp 1996

This was a great year for the comp, with the number of games more than doubling and the types of games diversifying extensively.

4.2.1 Influences

As I discussed last time, *So Far* and *A Change in the Weather* were major influences in this year’s comp. *Of Forms Unknown*,^[463] for instance, says that is an attempt by the author to write a game like *So Far*.

The top three games are all heavily story focused, telling stories through puzzles. Other strongly story-based games include *Kissing the Buddha’s Feet*,^[435] *Wearing of the Claw*,^[548] *Ralph*,^[681] and *In the End*.^[468] The author of *Reverberations*^[289] mentioned his concern for plot in his game development: ‘As a matter of fact, I began the game with only a rough idea of a story and two characters (one main character and one NPC) to go in it. As I coded up the characters and their locale, I gradually realized that the story didn’t fit them at all. So I turned the plot around and wound up in a completely different genre. And, as I wrote more interaction between them, the puzzles sort of snapped into place around the story.’ (The author is Russell Glasser, who I believe is Lynnea Glasser’s husband).

The first place game, though, has a bit more unusual of a history.

4.2.2 Top Games

The top games this year were:

1st place *The Meteor*, *The Stone And A Long Glass Of Sherbet*^[349] by Graham Nelson
 2nd place *Tapestry*^[639] by Daniel Ravipinto
 3rd place *Delusions*^[255] by C. E. Forman

I can't currently find where this was discussed, but it seems that *The Meteor*, *The Stone And A Long Glass Of Sherbet* was actually written by Graham Nelson as an enticement to the original Infocom implementors, showing them how a great Zork-like could be written in Inform; after this, Kevin Wilson helped Marc Blank and Kevin G. Wilson write *Zork: Undiscovered Underground*^[63] in Inform, so it must have worked.

Note: since the above was written, I reached out to Graham Nelson. He said:

I recall that I was in touch with the authors of one of the faux-Infocom games. They asked me what I thought the Zork-ness of Zork really derived from, and I gave a bit of advice, but I was no more involved than that. On the one hand they felt a sense of standing in a tradition, and they loved that and genuinely wanted to be a part of it, but on the other hand they were uneasily aware that their only legitimacy derived from a series of business accidents which had left them with the trademark. I thought it would be fun to write a little squib for them, but they wanted more of a laying on of hands from the Old Times, and (rightly) went with Marc Blank and I think Mike Berlyn instead. Kevin Wilson, whom they hired as an intern I believe, coded it up in I6. Don't rely too much on my version of how all that happened - I was on another continent at the time.

I'd only written a prologue as a sort of teaser, but it seemed a pity to leave this never to be seen. So I completed it to a modest short-story sort of length and put it into the IF Comp for the fun of it. It's not much of a game but I did enjoy the useless spells ("turn blackberries into pebbles"), and since the Infocom magic system already had a finale story (Spellbreaker, of course), I thought it might be more fun to give it an origin. There wasn't very much lore to draw upon when doing that, since there's very little world-building in the Zork games, Flatheads notwithstanding: the Zorkverse is more of a style of writing than a historical tapestry. But I remember thinking I would make their kingdom vaguely reminiscent of post-Renaissance Holland, where for reasons of religious toleration all sorts of scientific experiments could go on.

Exactly because the Implementors always used to say that you should never have ropes or ladders, I decided to have both. But I did contrive some reason why you're not allowed to tie the rope to the ladder.

Tapestry was a very influential game, as it had three independent branches through the game, and was mostly 'puzzleless'(to an extent), and there are several threads^{[237][44]} in RAIF comparing it to the later, more famously puzzleless *Photopia*^[97]. Its emphasis on moral decisions was also highly unusual for the time. However, it was criticized for being too over-dramatic, and too text heavy.^[237]

Delusions^[255] was a massive game, and was actually one of the first text adventures I ever played. It involves a nested web of VR worlds, and is very plot-and-puzzle heavy. The next year, there were several VR games, so I wonder if it had an influence.

4.2.3 Other notable games

Kissing the Buddha's Feet^[435] was the first in a long series of IFComp games featuring multiple well-crafted, independent NPCs. Later such games would include *Sting of the WASP*,^[187] *Broken Legs*,^[499] and *Vespers*.^[188]

Lists and Lists^[603] was the first of Andrew Plotkin's re-entries, and, as many of his entries have been, was not intended to win. It was a sort of joke, implementing the programming language LISP when the z-machine was originally lisp based. It remains one of the most well-known games from that year.

Aayela^[557] was a short 'set piece', maybe the first IFComp game of its time, where the whole game is designed around one aspect of IF. In this case, it's playing in the darkness, and using your other senses.

This comp had the first non-Inform/Tads games, and they're a mixed bag. *The Land Beyond the Picket Fence*^[552] is a great game, with its own parser. It's like a smaller, sillier version of *Trinity*,^[501] with multiple puzzle solutions, a tight game map, and fun experiments to be done.

My First Stupid Game^[479] and *Don't Be Late*^[238] didn't do as well. *My First Stupid Game* was the first 'stupid game', purposely crude games that are poorly programmed (for a more modern instance, see *Toiletworld*,^[661] which shares some of the themes of *My First Stupid Game*). *Don't be Late* was an inoffensive but poorly parsed game about making it to your friend's house to play IFComp games, the first of many IFComp games to directly reference IFComp.

In The End^[468] was an important precursor to games like *Photopia*. In the word of one reviewer, it had "no compass directions, very little inventory, no "winning" in the conventional sense, and, most importantly, no puzzles."

IF historian Drew Cook has noted that *In the End* was significant in terms of both its conscious de-emphasis of puzzles but also its mental health representation. He says:^[147]

Mason had been evangelizing on behalf of IF without puzzles on Usenet, but it was an idea that had been met with skepticism. These conversations weren't motivated by empty promotion: Mason was by all appearances quite earnest, convinced that Interactive Fiction could offer experiences that were not rooted in solving mechanical problems.

[...]

Even if *In the End* cannot be considered a success in terms of audience appreciation, it served to launch and further vital investigations into unexplored possibilities in interactive fiction.

[...]

Depression is not a metaphor here, nor is it a way to invest an unrelated subject with unearned seriousness. It is, rather, the thing itself. While authors would continue chipping away at the problem of puzzle-less interactive fiction, it would be years before such degrees of interiority would appear in widely-read and well-regarded works.

It was a depressing but well-written game. As you can see from this and *Tapestry*, puzzleless story-focused games were not invented by *Photopia*^[97] at all; instead, *Photopia* was the most successful of such games.

Finally, this year saw the rise of Rybread Celsius. In an essay in Sub-Q Magainze, A. Johanna DeNiro wrote:^[180]

Today his work is largely forgotten (which, to be fair, has happened even to many works that were immensely popular in the late 90s and early 00's). A lot of times he appeared to be banging his head against the constraints of Inform 6, trying to bend and twist the form of the parser game into something that fit his idiosyncratic vision.

Often broken in a very real sense, rife with typos (deliberate or not?), bad default messages, and constant point of view shifts—and largely unplayable without a walkthrough—his games entered in the Interactive Fiction Competition always scraped near the bottom places.

Rybread Celsius described his own work in the *IF Theory Reader*:^[381]

Myself, I have ideas. And try to express them. But it's like some sitcom father trying to get all the clothes into suitcase. They overflow, wrinkle and escape. What's left is some sad ready-made. The line between a bad game and a Dada game need not exist, they share the same Venn diagram. But the attributes expand. There is the sense of the uncanny and stupid, without stepping into the realm of surreal (a more fleshed out plane), but ghosting its border. ... Grammar mistakes and coding inefficiencies paint miniscule portraits of the author's states.

4.2.4 Impact

This year saw IFComp really come into its own. It set the trend of having homebrew games, purposely bad games, and self-referential games. *Tapestry* had a long-term effect on the idea of puzzleless games, branching games, and games with moral decisions.

4.3 IFComp 1997

4.3.1 Influences

One of the biggest games of the year had been *I-0*,^[94] a game with a strongly characterized protagonist and numerous conversations with NPCs, although

with a deeply dubious setting (a game about a 17-year-old with significant optional erotic content). Whether it was an influence on the comp or not, this year had a significant improvement in the number of deeply implemented characters, both PCs or NPCs. Deep PCs included the magical secret agent dwarf in *The Lost Spellmaker*,^[87] the teddy bear in *A Bear's Night Out*,^[212] the tourist in *Sunset over Savannah*,^[142] and Madame L'Estrange in her eponymous game.^[38] Great NPCs included the infamous Stranger from *The Edifice*,^[741] the girl from *Glowgrass*,^[162] and the well-regarded Bob from *She's Got a Thing for a Spring*.^[797]

Also, I felt like *Delusions*^[255] from 1996 led to a proliferation of games including virtual reality; *Sins Against Mimesis*^[776] and *Glowgrass*^[162] include VR segments, while *A New Day*,^[265] *Sylenius Mysterium*^[256] (by *Delusions*' author) and *VirtuaTech*^[285] are primarily about VR.

4.3.2 Top Games

The top three games were *The Edifice*,^[741] *Babel*,^[244] and *Glowgrass*.^[162]

The Edifice had a nicely delineated 3-act structure, after the prologue. You are exploring an edifice, and each level leads to a part of human history. The game had a very good simulationist aspect in two of the levels, with things like fire needing both tinder and heavy logs, weapons needing sharpening and training, and horses need breaking in.

But the big draw here was the language puzzle, one of those puzzles that can only be done well in a text adventure (unless voice recognition gets better). A stranger has the key to saving your son, but you can't talk to him. By pointing and showing various objects and parroting things back to him, you can communicate. This is still regarded as one of the best puzzles of all time (As of writing in 2024, a poll for 'Outstanding Individual Puzzles' on IFDB has this one tied for first place^[261]). One advantage of this type of puzzle is that the player immediately knows what they need to do, and can focus their attention on learning the rules of a system instead of trying to figure out what the puzzles is.

Babel is the most-rated TADS game on IFDB (update: as of 2024, now second, behind *Gun Mute*^[571]), and because it was packaged as a windows executable for years, it was downloaded about ten times more than the most popular Inform games back in the late 90's.^[361]

Babel was very influential. It is a game about waking with amnesia on a cold, metal floor, wearing a hospital gown in a lab. Amnesia wasn't exactly new, but it was certainly more popular after *Babel*, as were laboratory games. In fact, there were no amnesia games and only one lab game (*Delusions*^[255]) before *Babel*.

Ian Finley went on to write several influential games, as will be described later. He was very young at this time, somewhere between fifteen and seventeen, I believe.

Glowgrass is still fondly remembered by many people; I've actually seen it come up in discussions recently.^[665] You are a futuristic archaeologist exploring

the ‘ancients’ who are essentially us. The archaeologist is bewildered by things like a frisbee and a lawn. The feel is more adventure and melancholy than goofy though, and has some pretty sobering moments, as well as a good plot twist.

4.3.3 Other games

This competition was the best showing TADS ever had. *Babel*, *Glowgrass*, *Sunset over Savannah*,^[142] and *She’s Got A Thing for a Spring* were all ‘canonical games’ for years.

Sunset over Savannah casts the player as a businessperson of sorts on a vacation at a beach. The essential goal of the game is to experience the joy and wonder of the natural world. The game tracks the player’s mood as they go from stuffy to fun. This game has the distinction of being the highest-rated game on the SPAG magazine scoreboard for a couple of issues^[82] (higher than infocom games, curses, and others).

She’s Got A Thing for a Spring^[797] was similarly about a woman exploring nature. You are wandering around a natural park, getting ready for a romantic hot spring picnic with your husband, and encountering wildlife and Bob. Bob was an extremely well-developed NPC, with numerous topics and independent actions.

Other notable games include *Sins Against Mimesis*,^[776] an ‘in-joke’ game about IFMud and the IF Community in general, a genre which became more popular later on. It is based on the essay, *Sins Against Mimesis*, and features a real-life critic of IF as the bad guy, as well as having the seven deadly sins represented by IF games.

Laura Knauth had her first game in this comp, *Travels in the Land of Erden*.^[415] Over the next few years, she had an almost textbook progression of games. This, her first game, was far too large, ambitious, and underimplemented. Her next game, a one-room puzzle game, was the opposite, and her third game won the comp. I’ll mention her more later.

The first Hugo game was entered: *Down*,^[771] by Kent Tessman. Hugo was never very popular, but several great authors chose to make it their system of choice, and the Hugo games with their executables were among the most downloaded for many years.

Just a small note: *The Obscene Quest of Dr. Aardvarkbarf*^[662] is not, actually, obscene.

Aunt Nancy’s House^[690] was the first game in the comp (and not the last) to just be an implementation of a relative’s house, with no other story attached.

The Tempest^[518] was Graham Nelson’s attempt to turn Shakespeare into an IF game. I feel like its low placement (due to it being very hard to know what’s going on) made serious authors less likely to try an adaptation in the future. However, this was a particularly hard text to adapt, as the poetic meter made it very difficult to pick up clues from the environment.

4.3.4 Legacy

The four great TADS games are probably this game’s biggest legacy.

Many games after *The Edifice* tried similar language puzzles, including 1998’s *The Plant*^[659] and, of course, *The Gostak*.^[504]

As I said before, amnesia and lab games became more popular after *Babel*.

The next comp, though, is one remembered as being highly influential, overshadowing those that came before.

4.4 IFComp 1998

This was one of the smallest of all comps, but had a fairly good turnout.

4.4.1 Influences

It’s hard to pick out any specific influences from previous years. The Textfyre adventure 12-pack had been released earlier in the year on April Fools, with ‘demos’ for essentially impossible games. One such game used all of the color possibilities of the z-machine.

The Edifice’s^[741] language puzzle inspired some similar puzzles this year.

HTML TADS had been released that year, allowing graphics and sound in-game for the first time.

Finally, *Anchorhead*^[273] and *Spider and Web*^[610] had been released earlier that year (in February and in March, respectively). This was the first IFComp to feature a Lovecraftian horror game, so I believe that *Anchorhead* was an influence.

4.4.2 Top games

Of course *Photopia*^[97] is the big standout here, one of the most played and best regarded games of all time, with 419 ratings (the highest) at IFDB currently, and in top four of highest rated on ifdb.

Photopia is often credited for leading the way for puzzleless fiction, or for story-based fiction. However, we’ve seen that that’s not quite true; it’s not even the first successful puzzle-less game, as *Tapestry*^[639] had very mild puzzles (for the time period) and was story focused. 1998 itself saw two other puzzle-light games uninfluenced by *Photopia* (*Human Resource Stories*^[331] and *Persistence of Memory*^[210]).

I think that the innovations in *Photopia* came from other areas. Adam Cadre has a background in film, and though I can’t find the source now, I recall reading something where he mentioned being inspired by *Citizen Kane*. Whether that’s true or not, *Photopia* uses several of the cinematic techniques that *Citizen Kane* does:

1. It tells a fragmented story from a variety of time periods (something which was not really done before).

2. The point of view is never the protagonist (Alley or Kane); you learn about them through the eyes of others.
3. Both games deal with strong underlying themes of unrealized potential which is laid out in the opening scene but only becomes clear over time (Rosebud vs two frat guys).

The fragmented storytelling and multiple protagonists were unique contributions that affected future games.

To me, *Photopia* had another major lasting influence: Cadre made text into art, visually. *Photopia* carefully selects the size and length of each paragraph; the spacing, the punctuation, are all combined to create text art. Quote boxes and colors are used judiciously, and the Violet scene is especially cinematic, using text animations. Screens are paused and cleared, and even the menu system seems chosen to provide a sort of aesthetic beauty, with the different options lengths' being carefully chosen (notice how the longer ones are generally on the top, and that the conversation ending options are generally shorter).

This had a major influence on future games. About half or more of future winners used graphics (like *Detectiveland*^[389] or *Winter Wonderland*^[416] or both *Earth and Sky*^[540] winners) or text animations and text art (like *Slouching Towards Bedlam* and *Taco Fiction*^[803]).

Finally, *Photopia* increased the bar for quality of games. Cadre claims to have spent up to eighty-four hours a week^[149] for six weeks^[811] on the game, totalling hundreds of hours.

Muse^[352] was remarkable for being a very literary game. You play in first person as a middle-aged man caught up with feelings for a younger woman in a Victorian time. The amount of polish here was high, and this was the first period piece to be entered into IFComp. Christopher Huang would go on to have several successful games, and to publish books.

The Plant^[659] was Michael Robert's game (the author of TADS and original owner of IFDB). This was a really big game. Robert's games are interesting; the first, *Ditch Day Drifter*,^[658] was well-loved but very bare and spare by today's standards. His latest game, *Return to Ditch Day*,^[657] is enormously rich and polished.

This game is in between. It seems to have it all: an interesting language puzzle likely influenced by *The Edifice*^[741]; an NPC that follows you everywhere; animals, walking guards, beautiful set pieces.

And, in fact, the game did well in a year with stiff competition. But a lot of the edges show in the game, particularly in the NPC whose presence seems less and less necessary as you go along and whose comments are recycled quickly. However, this is one of the best 'long games' ever entered into the comp (with *One Eye Open*,^[675] *Risorgimento Represso*,^[156] and *How Prince Quisborne the Feckless Shook His Title*^[867] being the others that come to mind).

4.4.3 Other games

Michael Gentry released his second-most famous game the same year he did *Anchorhead*.^[273] *Little Blue Men*^[275] was the first really good ‘office game’. It most likely did poorer in the comp due to its slow-burn reveals of a bizarre conspiracy behind a dysfunctional office, but it is now a classic.

Arrival^[297] was the first game to use HTML TADS to include graphics, a trend which would pick up the next two years.

Mother Loose^[106] was the first high quality fairy tale based game entered in IFomp, where you wander around Mother Goose tales.

Enlightenment^[553] is a still-popular comedic one-room anti-game, where you have to get rid of all the light sources you gathered as an adventurer in a Zork-type world.

Several good authors continued their development in this period, with Laura Knauth’s *Trapped in a One Room Dilly*,^[414] Jason Dyer’s *Persistence of Memory*^[210] (the second Hugo game in IFComp history), and Sam Barlow’s *The City*.^[43]

I Didn’t Know You Could Yodel was the longest and likely the most offensive game I’ve played that was entered into the comp up to that point. It’s absolutely huge, and contains both misogyny and rampant racism (like Injun Joe and the Italian chef who adds ‘o’ to everything, exactly like the Mexican you meet later), as well as a plot motivation consisting of rampant explosive diarrhea.

Human Resources Stories^[364] may partially account for the unpopularity of hyperlink games later on. The author, put off by the reviews and placement of their 1997 game *CASK*,^[330] wrote a bitter CYOA game about applying for a job and interviewing where one wrong answer gets you fired. The XYZZY response was about as long as the rest of the game put together. Some people liked the experiment, but the tone turned many people off.

4.4.4 Legacy

Photopia was of course the most influential game. Many people tried to figure out what made it work and copy pieces of it, whether the text graphics (*Winter Wonderland*^[416]), the fragmented narrative (*Kaged*^[246] and *All Roads*^[366]), or the heartwrenching story (like *A Moment of Hope*^[408] or *Jane*^[320]). Others focused on taking non-interactivity to the extreme (*Exhibition*^[245] and *Life on Beal Street*^[247]).

After *Arrival*, HTML TADS games increased in popularity, going from fourth place this year, to third the next, to first in 2000.

4.5 IFComp 1999

This year was noted by several reviewers to have a relatively weak slate of games,^{[605][538]} but it had several niche games that are still successful now.

4.5.1 Influences

Of course *Photopia*^[97] was a major influence. Laura Knauth used extreme attention to color in *Winter Wonderland*,^[416] and framed it as a sort of Fairy Tale (although her '98 game^[414] used color as well, so it's hard to write it down to *Photopia*'s influence). Puzzleless games had been entered in the comp before, but now it became a badge of honor.

One game's blurb reads:^[45]

This game has one puzzle, and the solution to this is given immediately as the game begins. It's about loss, sadness, love, mystery, supernatural beings, and moving to a higher plane of existence.

Another said:^[247]

This is not a game, but rather an experiment in telling a story using a dynamic and interactive medium.

Two of the top five were essentially static presentations,^{[326][245]} experiments in new media types.

At the same time, others seemed to move the opposite way. *Winter Wonderland*^[416] and *A Day for Soft Food*^[434] were unabashed hardcore puzzle fests, with mazes and hunger puzzles.

Varicella^[104] was released this year, and was one of the biggest games of this year, but it was released in August, too late to have a major effect on the competition. *Mulldoon Legacy*^[371] was released after the competition began, *Worlds Apart*^[84] was released in December. I believe *Not Just an Ordinary Ballerina*^[8] was also released after the comp again. However, *Aisle*^[42] was released in May or June, and instantly became a big topic of discussion. I wonder if Ian Finley's two games weren't influenced by it.

The success of *Arrival*^[297] and HTML Tads from '98 only increased this year, with *Six Stories*^[326] (including extensive voice acting and the use of some images) making third place.

4.5.2 Top games

Winter Wonderland^[416] is probably the least-played IFComp winner, adjusted for length of time on IFDB. As of 2017, it currently has thirty-one ratings, which isn't too far from *Detectiveland*,^[389] which has been on IFDB about ten times less. (Ironically, as I update this in 2024, it now has the same number of ratings as *Dr Ludwig and the Devil*,^[440] the latest IFComp winner, which has only been up one year as opposed to the twenty-five of *Winter Wonderland*).

Winter Wonderland uses ASCII art and colors extensively. It has a beautiful opening image of snowflakes and a fancy font. It's white on black, with yellow and red used to highlight important information.

Winter Wonderland is an unabashed children's fable, a winter solstice story (with influences more from old European legends than Christian or American versions of Christmas). It has a super-sweet story; many critics prefer darker

stories or stories with more conflict, and others don't like being reminded of Christmas outside of the season,^[605] so it caused some division.

This game is a straight-up puzzle fest, the last IFComp winner to contain not one but two or more traditional mazes (ones that can't be solved quickly by some neat trick, like *Photopia*'s^[97] or *Lost Pig*'s^[398]). It also includes a light source puzzle. It is a game fairly far removed from modern sensibilities. I love it.

For a Change^[680] is probably the most familiar game to modern readers. This game used surreal imagery and a bizarre twisting of the English language to create its own 'language puzzle', like *The Edifice*^[741] or *The Plant*,^[659] but now incorporated into the game. You begin with a pebble 'insinuated into your hand'. Examining yourself yields 'You are faded and silent'. One of the most memorable characters (or objects?) is the 'toolman' which is 'inscribed on the brown grass'. We learn that 'The toolman is bright and misty. Thoughts and uses hang from his shoulders like birds.'

I believe this is one of the standard games released with Frotz on mobile, and it is an example of a game that works far, far better in text than in any other medium. Like Carroll's *Jabberwocky*^[113] poem, it provides suggestions and possible images but nothing definite. This kind of surreal, impossible world would become much more prevalent over time, with authors like Alan de Niro and later Porpentine doing extensive work in this area.

Six Stories is unique as a top three game. It's one of those 'Critics hate this game for its one simple trick' games. That trick is voice acting, which is the heart of the experience. The idea of *Six Stories*^[326] is that you have a brief intro, then sit in a room with six characters. Each character has a short story or fairy tale to tell you. This is revealed in a pageful of text which is simultaneously voice acted, using HTML TADS.

4.5.3 Other games

Ian Finley had two avant garde games in this competition: *Exhibition*^[245] and *Life on Beal Street*.^[247] (Finley was still in high school at this point^[545]). *Exhibition* is a completely static game, more like a portrait from The IF Art Show than anything else. It was the 90's equivalent of *500 Apocalypses*^[852] In this game, you are at a museum with several rooms. Each room has one or more paintings. Examining the paintings reveals your thoughts. There are several protagonists you can switch between.

Life on Beal Street pushes things even further. It is just a linear sequence of paragraphs with 'Enter 1 to keep going or 2 to turn back' at the bottom. Replay shows that there is some randomization, but your choice boils down to 'how far am I willing to commit myself to this course of action?' This can be useful as part of a larger game ('Do you want to wake up the room full of bats? Are you very sure? You could die. Okay, press 1 to wake the bats'), but it was shocking as a game-in-itself.

Hunter in Darkness^[600] was Plotkin's first re-entry into the comp that was an actual game. Like all of his later comp games, it didn't try to recreate the

winning formula of his earlier games, but instead explored a niche. *Hunter in Darkness* has a maze (with a neat solution, but still a maze), which immediately turns some modern players off. It is linear in unusual ways, one of the first examples of what I call ‘linear thriller games’ (other examples include *Gun Mute*^[571] and *Attack of the Robot Yeti Killer Zombies*^[777]).

Mike Snyder entered the first of his many XYZZY Best Game nominees, in this case a homebrew parser with graphics called *Lunatic - The Insanity Circle*.^[748] Mike Snyder is one of the least-mentioned among authors that have at least three Best Game XYZZY nominations.

A Moment of Hope^[408] was a game that tried to be a tear-jerker; its blurb says

anyone who knows you well could tell something is up. Your hair has been brushed and neatly braided. The area around your beard is shaved smooth, and your teeth have been brushed recently. You aren’t wearing your pajamas. You try to put her out of your mind and think about something else. It doesn’t work.

It does a good job of showing exactly how a young teenager/college student introvert deals with a crush on an extrovert, and was one of many ‘misery’ games that would appear in IFComp dealing with one bullied kid’s travails (there were several examples in 2016’s IFComp).

The first webgame was released this year: *Remembrance*,^[769] where you select a verb from a drop down menu and type in the noun. It was very clunky, and web games did not take off for a long time.

This year also saw the entrance of a new star: Robb Sherwin entered *Chicks Dig Jerks*,^[702] a Z-machine game. Robb. Sam Ashwell described his style of comedy in 2014:^[28]

Also consider King of the Slackers, an approach championed by Robb Sherwin. Under this approach, the protagonist is a laughably sorry case - but comes across as sympathetic and sensible because everyone else is so, so much worse, or because their failings are (see *Violet*^[263]) ones that it’s assumed the audience will be able to relate to.

Later, talking about rewards in games, he also said:

A reward doesn’t have to be something that’s useful to the player in game terms: it can be a tasty turn of phrase, a neat little insight into character, the summoning-up of a beautiful or evocative image, a good joke. The main reason that anyone finishes a Robb Sherwin game is because, even though the mechanical aspects of his games are often really frustrating, he hands out this kind of prose reward so often.

Sherwin would go on to make several games, including 2011’s XYZZY Best Game *Cryptozookeeper*.^[703]

This year had one game I couldn't play: *Skyranch*,^[204] which I believe requires Windows 95 or some kind of memory management program (in any case, it's not compatible with vanilla DosBox).

Finally, in a stark warning for IF authors, *Guard Duty*^[249] came in thirty-sixth place. It had active NPCs and a huge, rich world. But a game-killing bug at the beginning sent it to the bottom of the list. Other bugs caused even more problems. There's no point in spending months on a game only to have it completely ignored due to bugs.

4.5.4 Legacy

HTML Tads did even better this year than last. The next year (2000) would have an HTML TADS game win, and 2001 was filled with images and sounds from HTML TADS (just not among the winners).

Sherwin would go on to be a major IF author.

Ian Finley, perhaps disappointed by the low rankings of his avant garde games, went on to win the next year with a more traditional, longer game.

Similarly, Mike Snyder would abandon the homebrew parser for Hugo, due to the negative attitude in general about homebrew parsers.

Winter Wonderland was almost a farewell to the 90's, a homage to all things Old School (and one of two Christmas themed puzzle fests released that year). No other competition winner would be so old-school in the future; the closest would perhaps be the *Earth and Sky*^[540] games, but even they had much more cohesive storytelling.

The next comp was commonly regarded as 'the best comp of all time' for several years, and I have to agree.

4.6 IFComp 2000

2000 was widely regarded as the best IFComp up to that point,^{[742][264][606]} and for several years afterward. I have to agree. Several games can be considered the 'real winner':

The actual winner: *Kaged*.^[246] The highest rated game of the comp now on IFDB: *Metamorphoses*.^[727] The most rated game of the comp on IFDB: *Shade*.^[608] The XYZZY winner: *Being Andrew Plotkin*.^[840] The game that received the widest variety of reactions:^{[812][54][606]} *Rameses*.^[71]

4.6.1 Influences

All of those games that came out late the year before influenced this one. While Ian Finley doesn't list *Varicella*^[103] as an influence in his interview, *Kaged* has many similarities with *Varicella*, including the dystopian authoritarian sci-fi world.

Mulldoon Legacy^[371] was directly copied by two games: *The Clock*^[422] and *Happy Ever After*,^[107] both featuring a relative's house with a portal to a different time or world.

Galatea^[724] came out in 2000 and directly established Emily Short as a well-known (but controversial) author, as people came to grips with the fact that they could have fun with open ended games. The comp featured several attempts at good conversation.

Shrapnel^[99] and *9:05*^[89] also came out this year, and some of their themes are reminiscent of *Rameses*, to me.

4.6.2 Top games

This year seemed weird for me for a long time; out of all the 'winners' I listed above, *Kaged* is the least well known today. But over the last year, I think I've learned why it won.

Kaged was only the second TADS game to win the competition (counting the first year that guaranteed a TADS winner). *Kaged* is described as Kafka-esque by its author, and Orwellian.^[545] It has a long, non-linear opening sequence involving bureaucracy and conspiracy, devolving into extended action scenes.

Of all the winners, it is the most traditional. This was intentional, as seen from this SPAG interview question:^[545]

"Some people have noted that *Kaged* is a more traditional IF game, and wondered if that's why it placed ahead of more experimental works like *Rameses*^[71] and *My Angel*.^[370] Did you set out to give *Kaged* a broad appeal, or was its form dictated by its content?

IF: There's some truth behind both statements, but my return to a more traditional form was largely an intentional move to appeal to a broad audience."

This is often true, and explains why *Earth and Sky 3*^[542] beat *Blue Chairs*,^[412] for instance, or *Hunger Daemon*^[708] (a great game) beat *Creatures Such as We*,^[288] or why anything beat Porpentine in her prime.

Another fact is that great multimedia can push a game's IFComp scores higher, but make it less enduring. *Winter Wonderland*, *Kaged*, and both *Earth and Sky*^[540]^[541] had multimedia effects, won the comp over other games, but are now overshadowed by those same games they beat. *Kaged* has a great soundtrack and some interesting pictures that set tone rather than do exposition (much like *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children*^[655]).

Metamorphoses^[727] exposed the other half of Emily Short's interests: real life simulation. This would culminate later in *Savoir-Faire*^[733] (and to an extent, *Counterfeit Monkey*^[720]). Emily Short has a method of taking some sort of physical system, assigning properties to objects in the system, and allowing puzzles to be solved by any reasonable method using that system. In this first 'system' game, the player can change the material and size of objects at will. It

also contains another of her signature moves (shared with *Galatea*): innumerable endings.

Players loved it, and still do.

Being Andrew Plotkin^[840] is a hilarious, fast paced game. Not strictly relying on reality, it gives those not ‘in the loop’ the feeling like they’re peeking into a private world of IF friends (that’s how I felt first playing it), and it gave those ‘in the loop’ a number of laughs due to the many in-jokes.

This game references much of Plotkin’s work, but missed out on *Shade*,^[608] his most popular game, and several other games released later. *A Change in the Weather*,^[594] *Spider and Web*,^[610] *Inhumane*^[602] (his teenage game), *So Far*^[609] and others are referenced.

The game has a cinematic feel, with multiple protagonists whose varying descriptions of the same location are among the highlight of the game. Like *Photopia*, it makes text beautiful, with the appearance of the text carefully worked on by the author.

4.6.3 Other works

There are so many to mention here. CYOA games got yet another bad rap from *What-IF*,^[429] which was literally just a menu of short stories, and placed last. On the other hand, *Desert Heat*,^[580] an essentially CYOA game which included LGBTQ storylines in an Arabian setting, placed twenty-eighth, so some people were beginning to enjoy it.

Robb Sherwin released his next game, *Crimson Spring*,^[701] which improved significantly over *Chicks Dig Jerks* in ratings.

Jim Munroe released the first of many games, *Punk Points*.^[511] Munroe would go on to make the top three twice, as well as releasing the engine Texture, which featured prominently in IFComp 2016 and several later competitions.

Ad Verbum^[494] was for years the defining wordplay game until *Counterfeit Monkey*,^[720] and even now is great for those looking for pure wordplay fun without story. You explore a house, entering (for example) rooms where every word starts with an s, and all your commands must do so as well. (Leaving these rooms is especially hard. Try going south using just words starting with "n"!)

Mike Sousa released his first game, *At Wit’s End*.^[751] He describes his reaction to its reception as follows^[546]

After the 2000 comp I realized what was missing from my game – decent writing. I knew I could program fairly well and I thought I was creative enough but I felt that my writing was bringing the game down. Actually, some of the reviews for *At Wit’s End* mentions the writing as needing help and that it was pedestrian. Being a problem solver, I figured the path of least resistance was to collaborate with a writer.

This resulted in two very good collaborations that placed fourth and second in the next two years.

Rameses^[71] was an enormously discussed and influential game. You play a foul-mouthed college freshman who has enormous insecurities and difficulty expressing themselves. The game constrains you in all sorts of ways that had never really been done before.

Shade,^[608] one of Plotkin's best and most loved works, scored lower partially because it starts out as a 'my lame apartment' game, and most such games are very boring. It was innovative in its use of continuous space and storytelling techniques; in classic Plotkin style, the puzzles are the story.

Jon Ingold released *My Angel*,^[370] which got rid of error messages in favor of having the output look like a novel. This was done later by Katherine Morayati in *Laid off from the Synesthesia Factory*^[498] in a different style.

Kathleen Fisher released *Masquerade*.^[250] She is an author that seems forgotten now, but who released several 1800's romantic-type games over the years, including *Masquerade* and *The Cove*,^[251] as well as some hard sci-fi and medieval games. I've really enjoyed her works, although they often seem underclued.

The Djinni Chronicles,^[57] *Threading the Labyrinth*^[57] and *The Waves Choke the Wind*^[678] are all games that are somehow not completely there (the last is literally just the first part of a bigger, never-made game) but do things with games I've never seen anyone else do.

Liza Daly entered for the first time that year with *Dinner with Andre*^[169]; she took fourth in 2016, as well.

Jarod's Journey^[222] was famous for being an extremely heavy-handed description of the Christian faith, with images. I strongly believe it to be a subtle trolling, as there are parts of it that don't mesh with Christianity.

On the Other Side^[184] (described as *Al Otro Lado* in IFDB) was ingenious: a game where you are the computer in an IF game. So you describe everything, and that's the room. Then it prompts you for what's in the room. Whatever you write down, it tries to interact with. One judge even used it to test their own game, by writing back and forth between the two.

Breaking the Code^[679] was banned from the comp and archive, because all it contained was an illegal piece of DVD player code. It received one 'ten' from a judge.

Finally, John Evans made his big debut with *Castle Amnos*.^[226] John Evans would come up with the biggest, the craziest, the most intricate ideas, implement half of it, and then enter it into the comp. This game had you learning magic from two independent sources in a giant castle. Other games would allow you to wish for 'anything', or to create your own personal hell. No one has vision like John Evans, but none of his games ever were finished.

4.6.4 Legacy

The 2001 comp was relatively full of HTML TADS games with graphics and/or sound, clearly trying to capitalize on *Kaged*'s success. In the end, none of the top three games would use it; I wonder if people realized that multimedia itself did not make a game enduringly good. Also, none of those authors had as good a base game as *Kaged*.

Rameses and its constraint on the player were highly influential in the future.

Metamorphoses and *Galatea* established Emily Short as an influential author, which had a major effect on years to come, as she joined Adam Cadre and Andrew Plotkin as ‘that person who everyone listens too’, although the latter two didn’t suffer from rampant misogyny.

Being Andrew Plotkin was the first IFComp game to win the XYZZY Best Game award, and began a longstanding trend of IFComp games winning the XYZZY awards.

As I mentioned earlier, Mike Sousa, Liza Daly, Robb Sherwin and Jim Munroe would all go on to do future (and higher placing) games.

Guess the Verb^[652] was a game-with-mini-games, and several games like that followed (Constraints and When Help Collides).

After this, the ‘best comp’, comes another ‘worst comp’ (according to some on RAIF). But 2001 does hold quite a few gems, as we will see.

4.7 IFComp 2001

Many regarded this as a very weak comp,^{[607][677]} but it has a huge number of experiments. It seems like comps often alternated between well-regarded, mainstream games and experimental games that didn’t receive recognition until later.

4.7.1 Influences

This year had a major one-room game collaboration called *Pick Up the Phone Booth and Aisle*.^[213] Its wacky, genre bending scenes reminded me of the game *Fusillade*^[208] entered later this year.

Smoochie Comp ran earlier in the year, a vaguely romance-themed comp that spawned *Pytho’s Mask*^[731] (showcasing a new conversation system by Emily Short) *Voices*^[406] (about Joan of Arc) and *The Tale of the Kissing Bandit*^[792] (a cute little game). Short entered an IFComp game based on *Pytho*’s conversational system.

As mentioned last time, the success of HTML TADS with *Kaged* prompted many more HTML TADS games this year.

Adam Cadre’s former games continued to be influential; *All Roads*^[366] and *Heroes*^[46] both owe a bit to *Photopia*’s non-linear narrative and multiple protagonists. *Film at Eleven*^[306] was directly inspired by *I-0*.^[94]

Several other big games were released in 2001 (including *Textfire Golf*^[100] and *First Things First*),^[841] but it’s hard to trace any influence here.

4.7.2 Top games

The first game was *All Roads*,^[366] Jon Ingold’s most-rated game on IFDB, as well as the first game to win both IFComp and XYZZY.

In this game, you play a character in Renaissance Venice who experiences unusual shifts in perspective.

This game is mostly linear, with only one real puzzle at the beginning. But as many have pointed out, it has a huge meta-puzzle: trying to unravel what exactly is going on. And unlike many other games (such as *Kaged*^[246]), there actually is a right answer, which makes it much more satisfying once you puzzle it out.

Moments out of Time^[638] has the distinction of being Adam Cadre’s favorite IF game. It had an innovative gameplay mechanic which I haven’t really seen used since: you make a temporal jump to explore a house after selecting some equipment. As you explore the historic house, you learn new things depending on what equipment you brought and on your timing. Multiple playthroughs are needed to learn the whole story, and it is you who must piece it together. It’s the exact opposite of linear gameplay.

Heroes^[46] is probably the most Dungeon-and-Dragons-like game I’ve seen entered in IFComp, which is good for me because I love Dungeons and Dragons. You can take one of five roles based on classic D&D archetypes, and play through the same scenario with different tactics and perspectives.

It was panned a bit at the time of release because there had been so many very, very awful D&D-esque games before that it was hard to trust this one.^[102]

4.7.3 Other games

Robb Sherwin and Mike Sousa had an excellent collaboration with the almost hallucinogenic *No Time to Squeal*,^[755] ranging from a serious world to an unborn fantasy. Sousa would collaborate with Jon Ingold next year.

Vicious Cycles^[462] was the best-placing time loop game up to this point, so it’s worth checking out if you like that type of game.

Emily Short entered *Best of Three*,^[715] a conversation-only game. It had an extremely innovative conversational design, but some people were turned off by the characters.^[70]

Paul ’O Brian, dedicated comp reviewer, wrote his second comp game: *Earth and Sky*.^[540] After his game was criticized for being too short, he went on to write two sequels, each winning their comps, and earning him the distinction of being the only person to win twice.

Papillon, author of last year’s *Desert Heat*,^[582] wrote *Triune*,^[582] which is one of the few games I’ve seen that deal with cis womanhood and women’s issues.

Carma^[585] was a really unusual game, essentially an interactive webcomic about punctuation. It was highly linear, and had cartoon graphics with word bubbles and so forth.

Quite a few people said *Fine Tuned*^[384] would have been the best game of the comp, with wonderful participatory humor and tight writing, but it was very buggy.^[102]

A Night Guest^[418] was an illustrated, interactive poem about a brawl with the devil.

The Gostak^[504] was released this year, an immensely divisive game. Its author was baf, founder of baf’s guide, and he currently works for Telltale Games. In *Gostak*, everything is written in proper English, but with madeup nouns, verbs and adjectives. The concept comes from an old linguistics-inspired sentence stating that ‘The gostak distims the doshes’.

Most people try this game, get the idea, and give up. It took me years to beat it; I finally realized that you just use the in-game hint menus, which are also in the bizarre language. In fact, I don’t know if you can beat it any other way. It makes the game much more manageable while preserving the original puzzle.

A. de Niro released her first game, the *Isolato Incident*.^[182] Her later game, *Deadline Enchanter*,^[181] was one of the first games to really open up my eyes to ‘this is what interactive fiction can really be’. Because I never hear about this earlier game, I figured it was inferior, but in fact it is just as good as *Deadline Enchanter*, with a similar feel. Gargoyle will play this game, I think.

You are Here^[253] was an advertisement for a concurrently running stage play about a MUD.

Begegnung am Fluss^[214] was the first foreign language game entered in the comp. I enjoyed it, running it in DOSBOX. It’s very small, and had some guess the verb issues, but had well-done puzzle-based combat and conversation.

Mystery Manor^[157] was one of the first ADRIFT games entered into the comp (there were two the year before and two this year). These first five ADRIFT games were uniformly bad, with a lot of missing synonyms and other types of bugs. The same thing happened with the first Quest games later entered into the comp, and the first Alan games entered earlier. I wonder if the popularity of a platform depends on the quality of the initial games released; although it could all just be from the quality of the platform itself.

4.7.4 Legacy

Jon Ingold had already been well-known for *Mulldoon Legacy*^[371] and other games, but winning IFComp and XYZZY in one year established him firmly as a well-known author.

The innocuous *Earth and Sky*^[540] game entered this year came to have a much bigger influence through its sequels over the next few years.

This was also the last comp to feature fifty or more games until 2015. Over the next few years, many authors migrated ‘out of the system’. Suzanne Britton had already moved on around now; Adam Cadre’s last game was in 2003; Paul O Brian would stop reviewing after the release of his last game in 2004. Although 2001 was still early, it was the beginning of a massive ‘changing of the guard’ that lasted for several years. I feel like a similar ‘changing of the guard’ may be happening now, with long-time IF competitions like Ectocomp and Introcomp changing hands, and the IFTF forming. Interestingly, some of the people who ‘aged out’ in the early 2000’s are now coming back to interactive fiction, often to introduce their children to it.

4.8 IFComp 2002

4.8.1 Influences

Several major games were released before IFComp this year, including *Savoir-Faire*^[733] (Short's alt-historical physics simulator), *Lock and Key*^[95] (Cadre's reversal of an escape game) and Peter Nepstad's massive *1893: A World's Fair*.^[521]

Many games this year seemed to feature a sort of 'dark, grim journey' (for instance, one reviewer called *Photograph*^[230] "irredeemably fatalistic."). I wonder if this was a response to *All Roads*'^[366] relatively dark, story-focused gameplay.

Obviously, the previous year's *Earth and Sky*^[540] was an influence for its own author, who went on to win this year.

Also, without previous collaboration, three games this year had a giant squid (the top two games, as well as *Tookie's Song*).^[417] This became almost a byword in the community ("What will be this year's Giant Squid?"), shorthand for the bizarre coincidences in IFComp games (In 2016, three of the top four games were mystery games involving detectives, for instance).

4.8.2 Top Games

Earth and Sky 2: Another Earth, Another Sky.^[541] In a year filled with grim games, two comedy games topped the list. This game casts you as a superhero who can smash and destroy and lift and throw things, with huge cartoon BASH and BOOMS. Chandler Groover has stated that he believes games that allow you to do silly things place better, and this game is testament to that. It's fun to be like the hulk.

After a brief intro, you play a super strong hero trapped on a tiny planetoid, where you gain your bearings via massive jumps. There is a menu-based conversation system and a whole backstory. The author would go on to write a sequel in 2004 which would also win.

Till Death make a Monk-fish Out of Me^[754] is the second collaboration between Mike Sousa and an author, and it is more successful than its predecessor. It has a brilliant opening involving waking up in a place you'd never want to be. This game revolves around robots and transference of the mind between different beings, all set in a lab that reminds me of a more cheerful version of the base in *Sphere*.^[159] The puzzles were a bit more obtuse than *Earth and Sky 2*, though, which probably led to its second place finish.

Photograph: A Portrait of Reflection^[230] is one of three games that placed in the top three over the years that involve a middle-aged middle-class individual experiencing flashbacks that they can change (*Tapestry*^[639] and *Map*^[484] are the others). This game is a little hard to figure out what to do in at first, but becomes a poignant exploration of a life later on.

4.8.3 Other Games

The Moonlit Tower^[430] is one of the most beloved games from this comp, featuring a mysterious East-Asian-influenced world by Yoon Ha Lee, whom I believe has found some success as an author.

Janitor^[692] is a backwards game, where you have to reset a *Zork*-like game. It had a cool ending, but its initial interface is still confusing.

The PK Girl^[293] is Adrift's magnum opus, with an open world, thousands of 'tasks', nine endings, multiple NPCs, graphics and sound. It would be much more popular today if not for one major obstacle: its genre. It's a male-oriented dating sim in a scifi action setting. Every girl is much more powerful than you, but wants a big strong man in charge. It's not explicit, but it's massively chauvinistic.

Out of the Study^[633] used a telescoping EXAMINE command, like Lime Ergot, for those who like the latter game.

Sun and Moon^[77] was an ARG spread out over the internet, which is, unfortunately, no longer available.

Constraints^[49] was a fascinating game, especially its ending. It has several mini-games exploring player restraint, which might be valuable reading today in the age of limited parser.

Jane^[320] was a Photopia-like exploration of spouse abuse.

When Help Collides^[58] is very obtuse, but has three brilliant games-within-a-game that are worth looking up the codes to access.

The Granite Book^[492] does very unusual things with the parser, and player identity, and movement, and a dark story.

There are several other solid games worth playing.

4.8.4 Legacy

Paul 'O Brian would go on to be the first person to win IFComp twice.

This year was a year of decline, with fewer entries and fewer votes. Next year would have even less of both; Zarf didn't post public reviews, for instance.

2003, though, would be one of my favorite comps, if anything due to the cool cover art.

4.9 IFComp 2003

This comp looks very different from the others on the ifcomp.org page, because every game was given artwork by J Robinson Wheeler,^[838] although some authors went with other artwork later.

4.9.1 Influences

This year saw the release of Short's *City of Secrets*,^[718] a very ambitious game, and my favorite of her early works. It's large city with a somewhat alternate

present/future remind me a bit of *Slouching Toward's Bedlam's*^[258] later alternate London.

Narcolepsy^[96] was Adam Cadre's last release for ten years. It had three completely different pathways, which was another feature that *Bedlam* had. This may be an example of parallel development.

Max Blaster and Doris de Lightning Against the Parrot Creatures of Venus^[706] was also released, in between two years of IFComps won by super-heroes.

To Hell in a Hamper^[322] and *Insight*^[368] were also released this year.

4.9.2 Top games

Slouching Towards Bedlam^[258] is the total package. There is a difference to me between games that I personally love and games that are great. *Bedlam* isn't on my top ten or top twenty list, but it is iconic. It is the first game to completely dominate the scoring (since data is available); the distribution of scores is concave up and increasing.

When I think of IF, I think of *Bedlam*; it represents "this is why IF is interesting". Again, I'm not saying it's the most fun to play, but it carefully rewrites every parser response to produce an effect difficult to do in any other medium; as Emily Short points out, *Bedlam* "really offers free will for the player in a context where the choice actually matters to the story"; the setting is original (even for steampunk games; there are no robotic corsets or dirigibles here); and it addresses the use of the parser and of parser commands in an innovative way.

The game is not without flaws; even when I first played it, I thought the last portion was sketchily implemented. And it has proven controversial in recent years for its depiction of mental illness.^[589] But it represents an enormous achievement, and I would put it with *Violet*^[263] on any required reading list for IF.

Risorgimento Represso^[156] is the game I think of when I think of 'big games in IFComp'. This thing is huge, a kind of Zorkian game involving yogurt cups, chemistry, a rebellion, and an odorous hiding place for glasses. Much too long for the competition, it still took second place.

Scavenger^[766] is reminiscent of *Moments out of Time*,^[638] from the past year. You have to pick various equipment before going out to a secret base in a post-apocalyptic world, where you sneak past agents and discover new technologies.

4.9.3 Other games

I realized that I have neglected to mention Anssi Räsänen. This author has put out several ALAN games over the years, essentially being the face of the format. His games are all likable, but not especially suited for the comp; they're best played when not in a rush, slowly over time, thinking through the puzzles or riddles. *Sardoria*^[635] was his game this Comp, and it has you defeating guards

and locked doors through careful thought and consideration. He also released a game in the 2017 Spring Thing that I thoroughly enjoyed.

Aaron Reed, of *Blue Lacuna*^[644] fame, made his debut with co-author Chad Barb. Their game *Gourmet*^[646] had a great setting and wonderful participatory humor puzzles. It was a tad bit too difficult, though.

Mike Sousa's solo game, *The Recruit*,^[753] had clever in-jokes about IF itself, including one of the best puzzles I've seen: the purple room (that puzzle won the XYZZY for Best Individual Puzzle that year).

David Whyld made his debut with *Sophie's Adventure*,^[846] a massive Adrift game packed with whacky characters, pop culture references, big conversation menus, and plenty of bugs. He would be one of the most prolific authors ever, in and out of IFComp.

Papillon, of *Desert Heat*^[580] and *Triune*^{9pusb93mtxq2knrs} (and apparently now visual novel) fame entered *Sweet Dreams*,^[581] the first graphical adventure in the comp. It's fun, but the pathfinding is poor. If anyone figures out how to beat the ogre, let me know.

No Room^[335] is the only Inform game I know of that has a map consisting of zero rooms, using a weird feature of Inform programming.

4.9.4 Legacy

Slouching Towards Bedlam upped the game for rewriting parser messages and establishing a voice; *Vespers*,^[188] *Violet*,^[263] and *Lost Pig*^[398] all pulled similar tricks later on.

Vespers had moral choices and multiple paths, like *Bedlam*, as well.

David Whyld would go on to write many, many more adventures, as would Aaron Reed.

The next year would see the grand finale of Paul O'Brian, and the rise to fame of Chris Klimas, the later author of Twine.

4.10 IFComp 2004

4.10.1 Influences

Last year's *Slouching Towards Bedlam*,^[258] with its time-shifting narrative and text art descriptions, may have influenced both *Blue Chairs*^[412] and *All Things Devours*.^[699]

The *Art of Misdirection*^[332] was released this year; *Misdirection* was the first stage magician game I remember playing, and this comp had another one (*The Great Xavio*^[826]).

The Dreamhold^[611] was released after the comp, I believe, and *Return to Ditch Day*^[657] didn't seem to have any direct imitators (although *Stack Overflow*^[700] is vaguely reminiscent).

Future Boy!^[772] was released this year, a commercial game centered around a superhero, perhaps in a subconscious response to the *Earth and Sky*^{[540][541]}

games.

4.10.2 Top games

Earth and Sky 3: Luminous Horizon^[542] was the grand finale of the *Earth and Sky* series. It allowed you to switch between the protagonists of the two previous games, and had several big battle sequences.

This game had been hard for Paul 'O Brian to write, he said, but he kept at it for the whole two years. He had also been running SPAG magazine for years by this point as well, and reviewing all the comp games. *Earth and Sky 2* had won no XYZZY's except Best Implementation, and *Luminous Horizon* wasn't even nominated for Best Game. It's interesting to read the difference between the Editor's Messages in issue 39^[543] and issue 40^[544] of SPAG magazine, one right after IFComp and one right after the XYZZY's. He would retire from SPAG editorship in Issue #41.

Blue Chairs^[412] was Chris Klimas' biggest game, which won the Best Game XYZZY.

It's essentially a drug-induced college version of Dante's Inferno... sort of. I generally don't play games with a lot of strong profanity, which this has, but I genuinely like this game; the protagonist is easy to identify with.

You take an unlabeled pill which sends you on a drug trip with some interesting text art effects. The rest of the game alternates between reality (possibly) and strange visions, with some tricky puzzles in the middle.

All Things Devours^[699] is sort of the quintessential time travel game in the IF Canon (if that exists). It casts you as a scientific researcher who must stop a bad experiment while avoiding the multiple copies of themselves.

4.10.3 Other games

One thing that's shown up occasionally in IFComp is the *Varicella*^[103]-like, an open world with many independent, nasty NPCs that you take on one at a time. *Broken Legs*^[499] is one example (from 2009), but this year had the *Sting of the WASP*^[187] by Jason Devlin, where you play a rotten socialite trying to keep her position at the top. Devlin went on to release several high-placing IFComp games, including winning in 2005.

Eric Eve released *Square Circle*.^[235] He was probably the most successful IFComp author to never win, with three top three finishes, including one which won an XYZZY.

Infamous internet troll Jacek Pudlo (who as of 2017 still haunted intfic.com and most likely intfiction.org under pseudonyms) has harrassed many people over the years, especially Adam Cadre, Emily Short, Andrew Plotkin). After years of harrassment, Pudlo (or a relative, but most people assume it was Jacek) released *Gamlet*,^[631] a surprisingly good game about a Jewish version of Hamlet. It has some crude humor and a perhaps intentionally stupid ending, but I actually liked it. As a side note, I named one of the NPCs in my 2016 IFComp game the slightly different name Jalcek, as a hint to their character.

Bellclap^[342] was a remarkable game, in that you, the parser, and the PC are all different people. It wasn't implemented very well, but the idea was clever.

While otherwise unremarkable, *Blue Sky*^[266] is one of the few games set in the American Southwest that isn't a western.

This year was remarkable for several series-related purveyors of incomplete or buggy programs. Santoonie Corporation continued their string of IFComp games that would lead you on with a seemingly good game under the mess, only to intentionally leave you high and dry by not completing the game. This year's game, *Zero*,^[778] has a long legal section and a foul-mouthed companion.

Paul Panks released his first IFComp game,^[577] an author famous for small untested Basic games.

John Evans released *Domicile*,^[227] continuing his string of brilliant, huge, unfinished games.

And, finally, someone decided to continue the *Pick up the Phone Booth and Die*^[537] series with a game 'designed to place in exactly second to last'.

4.10.4 Legacy

I think this year was an upswing back in the IFComp. The next four years would produce top games that are still remembered fondly.

Paul O'Brian departed this year, and Paul Panks arrived. Panks would be a divisive figure in the community until his untimely death.

Jason Devlin went on to write several well-regarded games.

4.11 IFComp 2005

2005 is around the midpoint of the competition. How much had it changed? There is definitely more of an emphasis on setting and characters now than the early comps, which (outside of a few authors like Plotkin or Ravipinto) generally featured labs, Zorkian worlds, spaceships, uncle's houses, etc.

There was also a bigger emphasis on cinematic techniques in storytelling, like the passage of time in *Vespers* or the disjointed narrative in *Beyond*.

Otherwise, there is not a marked increase in quality between, say, the top games of Comp96 and Comp05; it's more of a shift in direction.

4.11.1 Influences

This was a grim year, even before the comp. *All Hope Abandon*,^[231] Eric Eve's offering in a year he skipped the comp, is set in Hell. *Whom the Telling Changed*^[645] by Aaron Reed and Plotkin's *Dreamhold*^[611] from the end of 2004 were also serious works. Only *Conan Kills Everything*^[328] (a hilarious short game) lightened up the mood.

Whatever the reason, this was a grim, grim comp. The top three games feature cults, Satan and Satanism, ennui and decay. Lower games involve mur-

der, fighting rampant sexism, torture, government funded eugenics, relationship drama, violent zombies, dead children, and so on.

Perhaps they were influenced by 2005's crop of dark films like *Batman Begins*,^[529] *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*,^[527] and *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*.^[449] Perhaps movies and games were both influenced by the war in Iraq, which was becoming less and less popular as the American Army missed its recruiting target by the widest margin in decades.

4.11.2 Top Games

Vespers^[188] is the game that made me quit IF. In 2010, I remembered the game *Zork*^[20] from my dad showing it to me as a kid, so I searched for it on the iPad and found Frotz. I played *Curses*^[516] and *An Act of Murder*^[351] and loved them, and searched for other games and found *Delusions*^[255] and *Deadline Enchanter*.^[181]

The reason I enjoy reading so much is that I really project myself onto a character, and try to imagine being them. *Vespers*, included with Frotz, is not the kind of game you want to project yourself into. This is a dark game, with dark actions implemented. I tried, in character, eating a certain unwholesome discovery in the basement, and the game allowed it, which made me feel sick (this ties into the whole complicity discussion about why IF can be more effective than other mediums). That's why I haven't played any Robb Sherwin games besides *No Time to Squeal*^[755]; he's such a good author that it's too easy to identify with his intense worlds (Update: as of 2024 I've played several of his games). Anyway, I quit IF, only to pick it up again in 2015 when I remembered *Anchorhead*.^[273]

Back to *Vespers*. This game casts you as a father of a monastery that is hit by the plague and slowly going mad. It features several in-game days of gameplay, active NPCs, timely boxed quotes and very well-written parser responses.

This is the first (and only, I think) comp where second and third places were a tie.

Beyond^[304] used hand-drawn graphics to illustrate a big game switching back and forth between the soul of an unborn child and the detective trying to solve the death of its mother.

This game was big, illustrated, and had a puzzle that won Best Individual Puzzle in the XYZZY's.

However, the translation was a bit choppy, and some felt the game was too long for the comp.

A New Life^[508] is a game that I've wanted other people to play just to get their take on it. This game, plus *The Primrose Path*^[75] from the next year, and *All Roads*^[366] from 2001, have a common structure: a sort of disjointed narrative jumping back and forth in time which comes together in the end.

Except it doesn't really come together for this game or *Primrose Path*, which is why I suppose no one discusses them.

This game casts you as a character in a fantasy world where gender can be changed by mental exertion (and occasionally on accident). It features a

barter system and an extensive memory system. Much of the game involves you remember past incidents, including romantic ones (which are tangled up by the various genders; you begin the game in neutral gender).

This game gives the feel that there is quite a bit lurking underneath the surface, ready for the diligent adventurer to find, but it is difficult to find.

4.11.3 Other games

This year had one of the biggest disconnects between the main voting and Miss Congeniality. *The Plague (Redux)*^[497] took twenty-second in the main comp and third in Miss Congeniality. It is an Adrift game featuring a cinematic opening sequence about a young woman fleeing from a scene of horror, and opens up into a sort of RPG-lite where you collect money, clothing and weapons. It had a game-crashing bug in some interpreters, but should work fine in Adrift 4, available from the Adrift website.

Paul Panks released two games. *Ninja II*^[578] was literally the same as *Ninja*^[577] from the previous year, with one extra NPC and command added to it. *Jesus of Nazareth*^[576] was a surprisingly interesting take on Jesus' life that devolved into stupidity with Jesus' randomly decided fistfight with a centurion.

CYOA games got a needed boost but also a kick down with two games this year: *Space Horror I*^[383] and *FutureGame*.^[25] *Space Horror I* was, for those who could install it, a rather enjoyable game in the style of CYOA books, with an illustration and some real puzzles. However, it had an incredibly annoying installation process that presumed access to some protected folders on the computer and was easily messed up.

FutureGame was a game with two choices in it, a mockery of CYOA and IF in general, continuing the bad vibes against CYOA games.

Cheiron^[613] was one of the most unusual IF ever. It is a fairly realistic medical simulator where you go around a hospital diagnosing people in precise times. It is underclued and jargon heavy, but unique.

John Evans, David Whyld and Santoonie continued releasing the same kind of games they had always released.

Mike Snyder picked up another Best Game XYZZY nomination for his short game *Distress*,^[747] about a spacefarer marooned on a small planet.

Tough Beans^[178] was an excellent feminist game, which was (and is) rare.

Simon Christiansen began his series of highly innovative games with *Internal Vigilance*.^[131] This game was not quite as innovative as his later games, but deals with the serious topic of torture.

Unforgotten^[575] has a great story if you can get past the first scene.

4.11.4 Legacy

This had the best placement by the Italian IF community up to this point, which was a boost for that community.

The next year saw a bigger game like *The Bible Retold: The Bread and the Fishes*,^[500] which became a series.

For whatever reason, the comp began picking up speed next year, which featured a ton of innovative games, including the return of Plotkin and Short to IFComp.

4.12 IFComp 2006

According to Eriorg (thanks for the tip!), this year was the first year after the release of Inform 7, the natural language interactive fiction language. It saw several heavy-hitter games and the return of Plotkin and Short to IFComp.

4.12.1 Influences

This year had seen the release of *Bronze*^[717] (Short’s influential tutorial-based game using inform 7), *De Baron*^[277] (Gijsber’s dark Spring Thing winner about morality) and *Child’s Play*,^[298] Stephen Granade’s finished Introcomp game about babies. Short also released *Glass*,^[725] a conversational game.

Bronze and *Glass* may have influenced the strongly fairy-tale centered *Moon-Shaped*,^[223] and also possibly *Madam Spider’s Web*.^[177]

De Baron was a dark game with an unreliable narrator who is an anti-hero (if that’s the correct term), and there were several games that riffed on those themes this year.

Vicious Cycles,^[462] an earlier IFComp game with a time loop, may have inspired this year’s *Moebius*.^[137]

4.12.2 Top games

Floatpoint^[723] was Emily Short’s IFComp winner. Having placed second in IFComp six years earlier, she used the new language Inform 7 to craft a massively detailed game. I remember playing through all of the comp games in a month before, and being startled at how much bigger and complex this game seemed than the others.

At times, it seems to burst its stuffing; the comp version has some bugs, and it’s easy to lose the overall picture amidst all the details. But it has a brilliant device involving different ‘filters’ on flashbacks, and attempts to evoke a personal moral choice in the ending in the same way that *De Baron*^[277] and *Slouching Towards Bedlam*^[258] do, but, I think, to lesser effect.

I remember hearing that some people criticized Short, an already well-known author, for entering the comp again,^[823] but I don’t recall hearing that about Plotkin (who entered this year and won Miss Congeniality) or Paul O’Brian (who entered several times and won twice), or even Ryan Veeder or Lynnea Glasser, both of whom entered after winning.

The Primrose Path^[75] had the advantages of being well-written, with one especially inspired puzzle and some innovations in player-parser interaction. It had one of those stories that does well in the comp and poorly after: a puzzling, jumpy story that makes you feel like there’s more underneath if you just poke,

giving you high ratings in the comp, but then afterwards the pieces just don't fit, making it less successful in the long run. A New Life is also like this.

The Elysium Enigma^[236] went on to win Best Game in the XYZZY's, a startling upset for *Floatpoint* that can be attributed to several factors, including the fact that much of *Elysium Enigma* was not visible in a single IFComp playthrough.

This game has you landing on a rural planet as an official of a sort of galactic alliance. The previous representatives caused some sort of disaster. The game includes several deeply implemented NPCs and a multiple-solution mechanic system involving gathering food, as well as many endings. The conversational NPCs, multiple endings and multiple solutions were likely influenced by Short's work.

This is Eric Eve's best known game, and my least favorite; it is in a way the opposite of *Floatpoint*. *Floatpoint* has fun details and a sort of boring overall story, while *Elysium Enigma* has a fun overall idea with some very boring sub-tasks (flying a flag, finding food, chasing off animals). Both are among the highest quality IFComp games ever entered, however.

4.12.3 Other Games

This year featured several games by prolific authors, and not just Short and Eve.

Mike Snyder picked up yet another best game XYZZY nomination with *Tales of the Traveling Swordsman*,^[749] an exciting linear fantasy game with some exciting combat puzzles and cheerful storyline.

Plotkin returned to IFComp with *Delightful Wallpaper*.^[837] I'm not sure whether Plotkin was entering to win or not; the first half of the game is a complex, bizarre maze. Mazes have been hated by the IF community since the almost the beginning, and *Hunter in Darkness*^[600] was criticized for a maze, so I wonder if Plotkin just wanted to enter something really cool. If he was trying to not win, though, he did poorly, as he came in sixth place and won Miss Congeniality (similar to *Inside the Facility*,^[193] coming in eleventh and winning Miss Congeniality; *Inside the Facility* also had a spare, maze-like map. Maybe IF authors like that sort of thing more than non-authors?). The second half of the game has you directly manipulating storylines in an intriguing way. If you feel like skipping the first half with a walkthrough, the second half may interest you. I feel like everyone in the IF community would love one of the halves, and which half you like says a lot about you.

Jason Devlin made his first of two (or three?) repeat entries to IFComp with *Legion*.^[186] Somehow his later games were never as polished, but they were always innovative. *Legion* had an alien protagonist with a bizarre viewpoint. This sort of idea would have more success later in *Colaratura*^[286] by Lynnea Glasser.

Strange Geometries^[116] is another game with a brilliant idea with less successful execution. It seems like a boring, standard Lovecraftian game, but has a major twist which would especially be loved by those with a geometrical bent.

Robin Johnson made his IFComp debut with *Aunts and Butlers*,^[388] written in a homebrew parser called Versificator. Ten years later, an improved version of this parser would win the comp in *Detectiveland*.^[389]

This year saw a few straight-up adaptations of short stories, which was an unusual development.

Sisyphus^[419] was one of the best-polished troll games of all time, with an excellent simulation of being *Sisyphus*.

Panks, Santoonie, and David Whyld continued releasing their classic style of games, although John Evans was no longer entering.

4.12.4 Legacy

This was Eve's first big IFComp success. With the XYZZY under his belt, he would go on to write other big games and enter IFComp twice more.

Intfiction.org was started this year, before the comp, by Mike Snyder, using the alias Sidney Merk.

Floatpoint^[723] had great, commissioned cover art (whether for the comp or after, I don't know). The next year, Mike Roberts started IFDB, which included cover art for games. After this comp, cover art became slowly more and more important. *Vespers*,^[188] the previous year's winner, had no cover art.

4.13 IFComp 2007

2007 was a year that a few people thought of as not as good overall^[503] (probably due to its small crop of games: only twenty-seven were entered), but which produced some of the best games of all time.

Looking over this comp, it seems like there are a lot of games which current authors were influenced by and which are still well known, more than previous years. Quite a few authors from this year are still active.

4.13.1 Influences

2007 saw the one-room game competition, with the excellent *Suveh Nux*^[252] and its language-based puzzle, as well as the H.P. Lovecraft Commonplace Book Project, which produced *Ecdysis*^[522] and *Dead Cities*,^[367] both excellent Lovecraftian games.

Fate^[278] won Spring Thing that year, my favorite of Gijsber's work, and also a dark game. *rendition*,^[526] a dark torture game, was entered in the IF art show.

2005 and 2006 had been grim years. As Emily Short pointed out in her roundup of 2007, the lightheartedness of this year's comp may have been a reaction against all of the darkness proceeding it.

Treasures of a Slaver's Kingdom,^[664] with its sort of Conan/D&D pastiche, was one popular comedy game released this year.

4.13.2 Top games

Lost Pig^[398] is of course one of the most well-known IF, frequently shown as the first game to prospective players, and frequently near the top of the Interactive Fiction Top 50 of All Time polls.

This game casts you as Grunk, a pre-established blog^[396] character of Admiral Jota's (the author's). You lose a pig, and have to find it.

Perhaps the game's best innovation is that the entire parser is rewritten from the point of a character who has speech trouble but is easy to identify with. This makes the player more understanding when the parser (poor Grunk!) doesn't understand some command. At least a third to two thirds of a parser game playthrough is going to consist of error messages and standard responses, so these need a ton of work compared to other areas.

It also has a deeply implemented NPC that is a stark contrast to the main character, with very academic phrases and a world-weariness. This contrast is deeply satisfying.

The whole game is fairly spare, a contrast to the richness of last year's *Floatpoint*.^[723]

An Act of Murder^[351] was included in the iPad's Frotz app, and so I always thought of this as the quintessential murder mystery game. Christopher Huang had come in second almost a decade earlier, with *Muse*,^[352] and for many years wrote one of the most popular series of IFComp.^[353]

An Act of Murder has a cast of six characters (or so), and a small house. The killer and the weapon are randomized. You have to eliminate suspects by their means and motives and so on (if the murder weapon was very heavy, a weak character could not have done it, for example).

Getting randomized play to work like this is a brilliant achievement. The author has since then written several short murder mystery games and released a mystery novel.

Lord Bellwater's Secret^[294] is a one-room game with a lot to unpack. It has an extensive readable library, and it has many 'in-room' locations (like *Shade*). It has several features in common with Anssi Räisänen's *Out of the Study* from years earlier.

This is a puzzle heavy game set in an older time period, where you are trying to help a woman you love. It's almost like a fantasy-free version of *Sub Rosa*.^[387]

4.13.3 Other Games

This year had a lot of genre pieces. Besides the murder mystery *An Act of Murder*, there was the hard sci-fi *Across the Stars*,^[759] the philosophy game *The Chinese Room*,^[284] the high fantasy game *Varkana*,^[296] the Terry Pratchett pastiche *A Fine Day for Reaping*,^[650] the hard-bitten detective *My Name is Jack Mills*,^[431] the Howard-inspired *Beneath: A Transformation*^[448], and the absurdist *Slap That Fish*.^[523]

Across the Stars is a hard sci fi game that has a short IFComp playthrough and a much bigger 'real' playthrough. So if you like hard sci fi and want a

bigger-than-comp experience, this game is for you.

A Fine Day for Reaping^[650] is one of my favorite Adrift games ever entered in the comp, featuring you as Death trying to get some pesky few people.

Slap that Fish^[523] is a memorable absurdist combat game.

The Chinese Room^[284] is a fascinating, huge game with philosophy thought experiments turned into puzzles. (For instance, the term "The Chinese Room" itself comes from a famous thought experiment). So the game has you do things like go to Plato's cave and deal with the idea that color has an indescribable component to those who can't see it, and so on.

Ferrous Ring^[242] is a fascinating surreal sci-fi game that is hard to describe. It's written in first person with a list of all 'good' things in a room as well as all 'bad' things (kind of like *Synesthesia Factory*^[498]).

Deadline Enchanter^[181] was one of the games that 'hooked' me on interactive fiction. It's a complete deconstruction of a game; you are provided a walkthrough in-game early on, and everything out of the walkthrough is not implemented. The game itself is cast as a message from a bizarre alien-fairy type creature.

4.13.4 Legacy

Lost Pig had a long-lasting legacy, yet again upping the game on protagonist characterization, which I believe influenced *Violet*. The idea of the strongly characterized protagonist with one deeply implemented NPC shows up in later years.

An Act of Murder has inspired other IFComp games, including my own 2016 game. It's set a sort of standard for murder mysteries.

The Chinese Room was the start of many Joey Jones collaborations that were big, difficult, and ambitious. Joey Jones would also release several independent games, including the excellent but short *Andromeda Dreaming*.^[394] *The Chinese Room* has inspired several other authors.

Deadline Enchanter has also had a major influence on authors such as Caleb Wilson.

4.14 IFComp 2008

4.14.1 Influences

This year began to feel a bit different, among the top entries, than other years. There was more of an emphasis on characterization, on plot, and on the smoothness of everything.

Some of that may have been influenced by Pacian's very successful *Gun Mute*,^[571] a cinematic sort of sci-fi cowboy shoot-em-up.

Doug Egan won Spring Thing with *Pascal's Wager*,^[217] and play-die-repeat game involving various gods. The IFComp game *Grief*^[130] reminded me of it in a few ways.

4.14.2 Top Games

Violet^[263] is one of those massively popular games that came out of IFComp, with the sixth highest number of ratings on IFDB out of all games and the second highest average rating of all IFComp games (after *Lost Pig*^[398]).

You play as a doctoral student whose girlfriend has issued an ultimatum: write a thousand words, or she's gone.

The whole game is written with the parser as the girlfriend, Violet. A one-room game, it contains numerous scripted background events, has the standard responses and help menu completely rewritten, has a destructive rather than collective tendency, allows for multiple player genders, etc.

I personally found the game very stressful when I played it, as I was finishing my dissertation. But this game has probably maxed out the expectations for parser characterization.

Nightfall^[233] is my favorite Eric Eve game, and his most successful in IFComp. You play in a really big city that has been evacuated, trying to find information on your former love and stopping a terrorist plot.

When I first played this game, I thought it was old-school, but old-school games aren't like this either. It's just Eric Eve-school: multiple simultaneous goals, a big grid-like map, simple individual puzzles. It could easily have won in earlier years, but it was up against one of the most successful games ever; I don't know if any game has won IFComp as handily as *Violet* did.

Everybody Dies^[509] came in third. Jim Munroe had entered years earlier with *Punk Points*,^[511] but now did much higher with this game. This game is radically different from previous IF games. It uses graphics not as flavor (like *Kaged*^[246]) or puzzle components (like *Sweet Dreams*^[581]); instead, the graphics are cut scenes whose interpretation is left up to the player. Puzzling out their meaning is part of the meta-puzzle of the game.

This is a teenage supernatural-ish drama where, in fact, everybody dies... sometimes. It reminds me of the era of *Breakfast Club*^[358] or *Sixteen Candles*^[357]; this game is nothing like those, but reminds me of a movie someone could have made back then. It does contain several ethnic slurs from immoral characters, which is why I don't often recommend it.

4.14.3 Other games

CYOA continued to march on with *Project Delta*,^[420] which used a DOS-like menu system that allows multiple choices like Twine but also a few other commands like Inventory and so on. It was a very short demo.

Riverside^[160] was one of the trolliest troll games I've seen. It is an absolutely normal game, fairly boring but not bad, and then...I really think the authors just ran out of time and decided to just prank everyone instead of entering the game later.

Afflicted^[216] begins with a very unusual setting: you are in a disgusting diner, and you are a health inspector trying to fail them in as many ways as possible. The game changes dramatically, but it's still interesting.

Simon Christiansen entered again this year, beginning his slide towards unusual games. *Grief*^[130] has you replaying an event over and over trying to stop it. Its topic (parenthood) is fairly unusual in IF.

Berrost's Challenge,^[130] about a wizard testing his apprentice, is a game that could have been entered in 1995. It's interesting that some genres are always popular among writers.

Buried in Shoes^[491] deals with the holocaust in a short, surreal way.

4.14.4 Legacy

Violet^[263] is permanently engrained in the IF community's consciousness as an example of extreme characterization. It also makes one room games more popular.

Jim Munroe would go on a quest to make parser games more visually accessible, with the graphics-heavy *Guilded Youth*^[510] following. Eventually, he would develop Texture, which is parser-like but more accessible.

Simon Christiansen went on to write some very innovative games, which we'll get to later.

These top three games represent a super high level of polish, and a great achievement in characterization, geography, and cinematic style, respectively. They set such a high bar that, I think, intimidated authors, or made them take a long time, as the next year was (with a few exceptions) one of the worst IFComp showings ever.

4.15 IFComp 2009

Except for a few standout games, this was in my opinion worst IFComp showing; there were only twenty-four games, the lowest since the first comp; this is the only comp in the eight year period from 2003 to 2010 not to produce the XYZZY Best Game Winner; ordering all IFComp games on IFDB by number of ratings, you don't see any games from this comp until page three, behind every single other comp except for this year's, and *Cactus Blue Motel*^[166] is due to overtake them in a month or two. (*Update: This was originally written in 2017. In 2024, now, the games from this comp start on the fourth page.*)

4.15.1 Influences

Outside of the comp, this was a great year for Interactive Fiction. *Blue Lacuna*,^[644] Aaron Reed's massive epic, was finally released.

Alabaster,^[115] Emily Short's largest game in years and a collaboration with many authors, was released.

Make it Good,^[369] perhaps Jon Ingold's best solo game, a dark murder mystery, was released.

Jimmy Maher's *The King of Shreds and Patches*,^[455] a huge Lovecraftian thriller, was released.

Pacian's *Walker and Silhouette*^[574] and *Dead Like Ants*^[570] were released, cementing their style.

Fallen London^[270] was released.

The Shadow in the Cathedral^[248], a beautiful commercial steampunk game (about *Anchorhead*^[273] sized), was released.

The previous comp had seen three incredibly complex and detailed games.

How many IFComp games were affected by the previous games? Judging from the number of games, I wonder if a lot of authors either folded under the pressure or waited a year to release their games (2010 had a good crop of games).

4.15.2 Top games

Fortunately, the top two or three games were still high quality (and a few others).

Rover's Day Out^[835] is a two-world kind of game, one of my favorite categories of games. In this game, you simultaneously play a woman in an apartment who cooks, uses the bathroom, and walks the dog; while also playing an artificial intelligence piloting a spaceship, using the former actions as a metaphor.

The authors really know how to program a game in detail; their later *Pogoman GO!*^[834] has over 100000 words of code. This game is similarly detailed, with secret UNIX commands, cutscenes, and a clever combat system with multiple resolutions.

Broken Legs^[499] by Sarah Morayati is a rare example of a *Varicella*-like done right. With a very well-characterized protagonist (who many reviewers commented favorably on), you have to take down a crowd of independent NPCs one at a time. It is brutally difficult, so hard that I don't know if anyone has beat it without a walkthrough, but it is also deeply entertaining.

Snowquest^[234] was one of Eve's less well-received games, but it's not quite his fault. He was experimenting with the Z8 format, a smaller format than glulx, after hearing for the past few years that his IFComp games were too big. What he wrote ended up feeling to me like a regular Eric Eve game, but incomplete.

The game story is complex, with dream interludes and multiple shifts in viewpoint (another two worlds game). You are on an epic quest to recover an ancient book of wisdom from a cavern. A golden thread runs through the game, tying it together (literally, in some cases).

4.15.3 Other games

I have to mention *GATOR-ON*,^[348] which, despite a very long randomized maze sequence in the opening, is interesting as perhaps the only Super Sentai/Power Rangers/Voltron type game I've seen.

A surprising number of games were just short *Zork*^[20]-like games with no real story (*Zork*, *Buried Chaos*^[649]; *The Grand Quest*^[583]; *Spelunker's Quest*^[512]; *Trap Cave*^[421]). *Trap Cave* in particular is mostly in German; the author had to halt translation partway through.

The Ascot,^[76] released at the time in Adrift but now ported to Choicescript, is a fairly light game, but has one brilliant puzzle.

Byzantine Perspective^[17] and *Grounded in Space*^[849] are both very smoothly coded games featuring one important puzzle each.

The Duel in the Snow^[791] was the first game I'd seen to imitate the great Russian authors like Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky.

Earl Grey^[206] was a wordplay game like *Ad Verbum*^[494] or the later *Counterfeit Monkey*^[720], but somewhat under-clued.

The Duel that Spanned the Ages^[789] was actually a pretty great hard Sci-Fi game that allows you to wear a giant mech suit and wreak a bit of havoc, as well as setting up machine gun traps.

I might as well mention *Resonance*^[676] as a big, city-based game with a science fiction plot and many NPCs.

4.15.4 Legacy

While this comp itself was pretty thin, it spawned some good authors. Jack Welch and Ben Collins-Sussman went on to win the Jay is Games one-room competition the next year against heavyweights like Plotkin and Granade.

Morayati has gone on to make numerous innovative games, being nominated for Best Use of Innovation and Best Use of Writing in both 2015 and 2016 (as well as Best Implementation in 2015). She won Best Use of Innovation in 2015, and Best Writing in 2016.

Eric Eve's new responsibilities at work prevented him from making further games.

Matt Wigdahl went on to win IFcomp and the XYZZY's next year, as we will see.

4.16 IFComp 2010

Because 2010 is the year that our current IFComp organizer had his game (*note: this section was written in 2017*), I thought I'd reproduce this list by Carolyn van Eseltine about all of the work a comp organizer has to go through:^[225]

- Community buy-in on the idea
- Writing submission rules
- Writing judging rules
- Posting the rules
- Advertising the competition to submitters
- Answering questions from submitters
- Setting up a system for participants to upload games
- Opening the submission system at the appropriate time

- Closing the submission system at the appropriate time
- Advertising the competition for public judging
- Setting up systems for judges to download games (or play online)
- Setting up systems for judges to register their votes
- Opening the download system at the appropriate time
- Opening the judging system at the appropriate time
- Answering questions from judges
- Answering questions from interested onlookers
- Closing the download system at the appropriate time
- Closing the judging system at the appropriate time
- Tallying up votes
- Announcing the results
- Uploading all entries to the IFDB (this takes longer than you think)
- Documenting the competition in IFWiki (which other people very kindly did for me)
- Distributing prizes (okay, ParserComp didn't have prizes, but if you have them, they need to be distributed)

It's amazing that IFComp and XYZZY have been run as long as they have by volunteers. Now, on to 2010!

4.16.1 Influences

Blue Lacuna^[644] from the last year and *Bronze*^[717] from a few earlier had really set the standard for helpfulness and tutorials, and this year's winner *Aotearoa*^[848] stepped up on this count. *Rogue of the Multiverse*^[572] and *One Eye Open*^[675] both contained fairly linear, heavily hinted opening sequences for people new to parser games, as well.

Choicescript came out around now; at the time, it was funded mostly by ads, before having a paying model. Looking back over interactive fiction, it's interesting to see Dan Fabulich as an underdog fighting for recognition and equality for Choicescript games who had to put up with pretty strong abuse, rather than the successful golden-touch entrepreneur doling out lucrative contracts he later became.

Christopher Huang's Breakfast Reviews^[353] (which started in 2009) proved a big hit, increasing the fun of IFComp participation as your game got to be compared to various breakfast foods.

This year also saw the Jay is Games Casual Gameplay contest about escaping a room. *Hoosegow*,^[53] *Dual Transform*,^[597] and *Fragile Shells*^[299] all came from this contest.

Zarf also released *Hoist Sail for Heliopause and Home*^[599] this year for the @party demoscene.

4.16.2 Top games

This was another small year (only twenty-six games), but it produced a few wonderful games.

Aotearoa^[848] won the comp and the XYZZY's this year. A dinosaur adventure set in an alternate New Zealand, this game mixes Maori culture with adorable animals for a lot of fun. I was surprised at the warm reception of this game, considering its child-orientedness, but then this game has something really big going for it: it's slicker than Danny Zucko's hair.

This game is packed with every conceivable player friendly feature. Hyperlinks for easy interaction; tutorials; pressing ENTER on a blank line defaults to looking; color coding; exits listed; nameable dinosaurs so you don't have to keep typing big names; multiple solutions to puzzles; and so on and so on. It's well over 100000 lines of code, I believe. It represents a real accomplishment.

Rogue of the Multiverse^[572] is, with *To Hell in a Hamper*, the funniest IF game I have ever played (but only because I didn't expect it; now if you go and play it after I said that, you won't think it's funny). You are a human who is being tested on by a diabolical lizard power-woman. You go through some procedurally-generated-looking missions on worlds where you hunt for interesting things, then get sent back to the prison region where you have to build up your resources and find some escape.

This game is classic Pacian, with intense, vivid characters who are emotionally open, a blend of the bizarre with the commonplace, and puzzles that are generally variations on a theme.

One Eye Open^[675] is a love-it-or-hate-it game. For me, I love it, though I'm embarrassed to admit it. It is a gory game, about a psychic-energy-infested hospital which has essentially grown teeth, fangs, and mouths everywhere, violently destroying everyone in it.

It is also much bigger than other comp games. It is the most successful big comp game after *Risorgimento Represso*.^[156]

4.16.3 Other games

This year had a lot of horror:

-Wade Clark entered his breakout game *Leadlight*^[135] (which has an updated version for sale now, I think), an Apple-II game featuring an RPG system, various weapons, and a host of freaky characters at a private school.

-*The Blind House*^[18] was one of those trippy/psychedelic horror stories you see in non-IF media.

-*Gris et Jaune*^[185] was another horror game. By Jason Devlin, author of *Vespers and Legion*, it had an incredible opening sequence, but the rest of this big and impressive game was unpolished.

-Jason McIntosh, current IFComp chairman, published *The Warbler's Nest*,^[478] which is the most-rated 2010 IFComp game on IFDB and one of the most played horror games of all time. It is short, set in medieval times, and hauntingly believable. Great game for fans of moral choices.

-Lynnea Dally (now Lynnea Glasser) made her debut with the zombie horror game *Divis Mortis*,^[163] featuring a large map and sort of open gameplay, but more sparse than her later games.

Besides horror games, Simon Christiansen made his first break into truly unusual games with the amusing Poirot pastiche *Death Off the Cuff*^[129] (also for sale). In this game, you play a Poirot-esque detective at the big, summing-up finale, but you don't know who the murderer is! You have to improvise your speech by talking about various objects and hoping someone slips up.

There were two games about Soviet Russia, including *Gigantomania*^[779] (a sort of heavy-handed piece showing the misery of life under Stalin) and the wacky *The People's Glorious Revolutionary Text Adventure Game*.^[798] The latter game didn't impress me much, but I've seen it mentioned numerous times as a favorite by other authors (for instance, it was the inspiration for 2016's *Theatre People*,^[411] as mentioned in the credits).

J. Robinson Wheeler made his big return with *The 12:54 to Asgard*,^[842] a really big game that just sort of fell apart implementation-wise. It involves a journey through several mythologies, including Christian. However, the game seems unfinished, and did poorly.

Ninja's Fate^[684] was a sort of memorial to Paul Panks, who had recently died.

The Sons of the Cherry^[444] was the first Choicescript game entered into the comp, and it didn't do well, further increasing the CYOA vs Parser feud. It's a sort of pulpy American Revolution-era game about witchcraft, and it is not nearly as polished as other, mainstream choicescript games at the time were, giving people an incorrect impression about Choicescript that would continue for at least the next year.

John Evans returned for a surprisingly short and well-implemented game^[229] that he listed as 'unfinished', which sent it to the end of the list. It is much more finished than his other games, though, if you would like to try a Real John Evans Game.

4.16.4 Legacy

The major emphasis on player friendliness this comp has extended to the current day, with tutorials and help systems becoming completely expected.

Many of the most productive authors of the 2010s were writing in this comp. Pacian, VanEseltine and Sandel, Simon Christiansen, Wade Clarke, and Lynnea Glasser all entered this year. At the same time, several older authors were trailing out their last few games, like Wheeler and Evans.

Altogether, this was a time of transition, with Twine and CYOA games about to come up on the horizon. The next year would be the first to see a CYOA game finish in the top three.

4.17 IFComp 2011

This year is notable for *The Play*,^[1] a CYOA game, reaching third place, as well as for the infamous hat-puzzle, a collection of four games that had secret connections.^{[343][117][259][380]}

4.17.1 Influences

Choicescript had come on the scene in the last year or so, and it was beginning to make an impression, as the easy-to-play games began to attract bigger and bigger crowds on their own. Introcomp this year featured numerous Choicescript games; while most of the experienced authors welcomed the variety, a few were firmly opposed.

Cryptozookeeper^[703] was released this year, Robb Sherwin's massive game which he spent hundreds of hours on, including photographic images and a big soundtrack. Sherwin's style may have influenced Ryan Veeder, and the combat may have influenced Gijssber's *Kerkerkruip*.^[280]

Ryan Veeder released his first game, *You've Got a Stew Going!*.^[806] He would later go on to win the competition this year.

The Indigo speed competition this year was a speed-IF designed to teach people a new language.

4.17.2 Top Games

Taco Fiction.^[803] was this year's winner, by Ryan Veeder. This game started off a sort of 'Ryan Veeder movement', one of the few games to greatly influence the style of many authors. Emily Short describes this style^[734]

[A] lot of Ryan Veeder's games don't fall easily into either new- or old-school categories. They tend to have more story and NPC development than old-school games, while still implementing fairly lightly (so there are relatively few objects per room and an emphasis on modeling only what is necessary for the story)."

This game has you attempt, as a criminal, to rob a taco store. But Veeder is known for many fake-outs: seemingly important parts of a game turn out to be trivial, while trivial parts can be more deeply implemented than the main part. A host of humorous characters round out the game.

Six^[136] is Wade Clarke's signature game. A prolific reviewer and author of several large games, Clarke added his own multimedia to this game, including a sound-based puzzle.

Six is a charming game, and was nominated for best game of the year in the XYZZY's. It may have even won in 2011, but its length was split in two: you can 'win' the game halfway through, and then unlock a second playthrough as a different character with completely different puzzle solutions. Due to IFComp time constraints, many people probably played just the first half.

The point of the game is that you are at a costume birthday party, playing hide and seek with other kids.

The Play^[1] marked an extremely important milestone in IFComp history: the first time a CYOA game made the top three.

Many people remember controversies from later years about CYOA vs. parser, but people often forget that the IF community was very accepting of *The Play* before Twine ever showed up.

The Play does some things so good that it's worth mentioning it's structure. Unlike exploration-based or more static twine games, *The Play* (written in Undum) is all about strategy and management. You have four or five people whose mood and emotions you have to manage. The game injects drama by having everything start out in an already bad state.

Choices have immediate and lasting consequences as reflected in the moods. Often a choice won't reveal its true consequences until much later.

The strategy element comes from the fact that every change has a cost. Pleasing one actor displeases another, for instance. But another interesting element is allowing the player to compromise their own principles in order to further the game. Do you allow sexism, knowing it will make the play better? It's very effective, in a way that few CYOA games were able to be for a long time afterward (*Birdland*^[338] with its stats comes to mind as another good example).

4.17.3 Other Games

Simon Christiansen continued his pattern of innovation with *PataNoir*,^[132] a game now being sold that features manipulable metaphors. You can take the cold ice out of a cold icy stare to make the person calmed down. It's highly unusual and well-done.

Carolyn VanEseltine continued her pattern of well-done IFComp games with the vegetable-humor *Beet the Devil*.^[795]

Victor Gijbsers created what I feel is the only truly great text adventure RPG, *Kerkerkruip*,^[280] a randomly-generated dungeon with intense strategy. It's been made into a semi-graphical game since then.

Cana According to Micah^[175] is pretty much the only sincere, well-done Christian game entered into the comp. It's just a chill game involving Jesus and John the baptist.

The Binary^[66] and *Operation Extraction*^[377] were other choice games; *The Binary* placed eleventh, with a tight story about time travel. *Operation Extraction* proclaims at the top of the first page: 'NO beta testers were used during the development of this game.', and it shows as you attempt to simultaneously control four groups. *Dead Hotel*,^[144] a third game, was comazombie's third use

of their homebrew system, and the only one that's a complete (though tiny) game.

Andrew Schultz, a notable IFComp author, made his debut with *Fan Interference*.^[686] Unlike his later games, this was a baseball game that was intensely simulated, with many timers, as well as costume changes and some gross but funny actions. He would later shift to wordplay games, being one of the best-known 'genre authors' in IF.

David Whyld toned down his usual giant games with the compact *How Suzy Got Her Powers*,^[844] making this a good one to try if you're interested in seeing one of his many games. It won an XYZZY nomination for Best Individual Puzzle.

Andrew Plotkin made another IFComp return in an unusual way. He was part of the Hat puzzle, a unique set of four entries that were secretly connected by passcodes and hidden verbs.^{[343][117][259][380]} While no one really figured it out on their own, everyone agreed it was a great idea when it was done.

Marco Innocenti kicked off the Andromeda franchise with *Andromeda Awakening*.^[375] It was criticized for some spotty writing (and some disagree with intentional but unusual word choices like 'cyanotic' applied to lighting), and for the manipulation-puzzle-heavy focus typical of Italian IF. Innocenti felt dismissed by reviewers, but returned triumphantly the next year with a win.

There are so many other games to mention... There are many games in IFComp history that had a great concept but so-so execution. There was a sort of taboo in early IF that each concept could only 'be done' once (some of this attitude lingers; I heard a reviewer recently say that the wordplay genre is essentially over after *Counterfeit Monkey*)^[720]). *Keepsake* is a game with a concept that should be 'done over', because it's very good.

Lynnea Glasser entered again, this time with an inhuman protagonist, which influenced her later *Coloratura*^[286] design. Anssi Räisänen released yet another polished Alan game. Joey Jones and Melvin Rangasamy released an ambitious but buggy game.

4.17.4 Legacy

Taco Fiction^[803] opened up a new direction for several IF authors, who felt more of a freedom in what to focus on and what not to in games.

PataNoir and *Kerkerkruip* are still being updated and distributed/sold at this time.

The Play kicked off a five-year trend of CYOA games winning Best Writing in the XYZZY's, which lasted until this year with Katherine Morayati's win.

The next year, though, would see some bitter disputes about CYOA games.

4.18 IFComp 2012

The year 2012 was the beginning of something unusual in IFComp that built up to a major crisis point/growth point two years later.

This is the year that *Howling Dogs* came out.^[617]

4.18.1 Influences

For a few years now, Anna Anthropy had been promoting the use of Twine as an accessible way for oppressed minorities to write games. Her several books became very popular, starting the beginning off the Twine Revolution, where those traditionally unable to express themselves through games were now able to do so.

Although *Counterfeit Monkey*^[720] came out this year, it wasn't published until the last minute, so it had no effect on authors. *Bee*^[714] came out this year though, with its hyperlink interface, as did *First Draft of the Revolution*^[221] and Plotkin's hyperlink *Bigger Than You Think*,^[596] though both of the latter were too late to influence the comp.

Ryan Veeder's easygoing, light-puzzle style from the last year was evident here, with *Guilded Youth*^[24] and *Eurydice*^[24] evoking the same sort of feelings (although Jim Munroe, author of *Guilded Youth*, had been making such games for a long time). *The Apollo 18 Tribute Album*, a series of games based on They Might Be Giants songs, came out this year with many games that were also in this easygoing style. This album spawned a lot of great games from people like Jenni Polodna, Ryan Veeder, Joey Jones, Carl Muckenhoupt, Jacqueline Lott, Nick Montfort, Adri and Andrew Schultz. This included Schultz's first wordplay/math games and Adri's first 'cute' games.

Zombies seemed to be fashionable around this time, and there were several zombie-esque games. One game from the previous year, *Zombie Exodus*,^[173] caused a major stir, as I'll describe in the *Howling Dogs* section.

Baby Tree^[269] was released this year. A short, psychedelic game involving abortion, it has generated a lot of discussion since then.

Adam Cadre released *Endless, Nameless*,^[93] his first game in ten years, to very little fanfare. Although it's on my top ten list, it had little influence on the comp.

Finally, Porpentine had released a set of small but influential games, with *Nostrils of Flesh and Clay*,^[619] *Myriad*,^[618] and *The Sky in the Room*^[620] being the most well-known (*Funeral for a Friend*,^[616] an early parser game, went mostly unnoticed).

4.18.2 Top Games

Andromeda Apocalypse^[374] was Innocenti's sequel to *Andromeda Awakening*. The hard, Italian-style manipulation puzzles of the earlier game had been softened, the focus on story increased, and, for the new game, Sam Kabo Ashwell brought to help with grammar and text correction, along with additional help by Andrew Schultz. The result was one of the best hard sci-fi games out there (for fans of things like *Sphere*^[159] or *Star Trek*). For some reason, this game has the least number of ratings of any other IFComp winner on IFDB (both at the time of first writing in 2017 and also in 2024). Perhaps its due to the fact that sequels are always played less than originals, as people tend to skip games in a series, and some number of people drop out. *Earth and Sky 3*^[542] has been

around for eight years more than *Andromeda Apocalypse*, yet has almost as few ratings.

Eurydice^[24] was the only top three game I know of to be completely anonymous. This game starts out in a house with tons of NPCs during a funeral, and some light, optional old-schoolish puzzles. It then turns into a mythological reenactment of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is a very melancholy game, similar to *Map*^[484] from 2015 in that respect. It had multiple endings and a sort of moral choice thing going on.

Guilded Youth^[510] was very unusual, being one of the few games to use Vorple, the Inform 7 extension allowing interaction with HTML. This game has extensive styling and animation with portraits and sound.

This game has you playing a young character who is friends with a Dungeons and Dragons group on a bulletin board system. They explore an old house together, and have ‘growing up’ type adventures. This game features a trans girl as a character.

4.18.3 Other games

Howling Dogs,^[617] released this year, has more ratings on IFDB than any other game released since 2011 (and only *Dual Transform* from 2010 has more ratings: 82 rather than 81).

Note: The above was written in 2017. As of 2024, five games written after Howling Dogs have more ratings.

Howling Dogs is immensely influential, as well as controversial. It was written in a week right after Porpentine started hormone replacement therapy.^[637] Richard Hofmeier vandalized his own booth at GDC the next year to make it an advertisement for *Howling Dogs*^[145]. It was one of the games featured in Porpentine’s exhibit at the prestigious Whitney Biennial^[624]

The game itself is a Twine game based on a character who lives in essentially a cell, with food, water, a shower, etc., as well as an all-important activity room. Entering the activity room takes you to surreal and bizarre worlds, with themes related to death and rebirth, persecution of women, and misunderstandings.

Porpentine is a trans woman, and many of her games are metaphors or openly about this experience, about body horror or not being who you really are and so on.

Her games became the flashpoint for controversy in the community later on. The question is, why?

Contrary to what some think, Porpentine’s games were not, I think, controversial due to their content. After all, there had been many games with LGBTQ protagonists (whether in happy, sanitized relationships: *Lost Spellmaker*,^[87] 1997; *Blue Lacuna*,^[644] 2009; or messy, dangerous relationships: *Desert Heat*,^[580] 2000; *Exhibition*,^[245] 1999;) there had been successful CYOA games (*The Play*,^[1] 2011); there had been popular games about transgender characters, even using neutral pronouns (*A New Life*,^[508] 2005); games with intense body horror (*One Eye Open*,^[675] 2010), even with the users being complicit (*Vespers*,^[188] 2005); there had been games about women and women’s persecution

(*Triune*^[582], 2001; *Tough Beans*^[178], 2005); there had been psychedelic games about entrapment and fake realities (*Kaged*,^[246] 2000; *Deadline Enchanter*,^[181] 2007). There had been games by gay authors, women authors, and by authors who later came out as trans. There had always been trolls and haters, but it was expected that you would put up with abuse from somebody (Pudlo, if noone else) and go on your way.

So why was Porpentine controversial?

In 2011, a Choicescript game called *Zombie Exodus*^[173] was released. In 2012, during the voting for the previous year's XYZZY awards, the Choicescript community mentioned that one of their games was eligible for the XYZZY's. That community is so large and internet friendly that the small fraction who followed the links was enough to swamp the voting, leading to *Zombie Exodus* being the frontrunner in every category, even ones that didn't make sense. Steps were taken by the Choicescript community to ensure that wouldn't happen again.

With Porpentine's success, something similar happened. Many, many people were touched or inspired by her games, and followed her around, discovering IFComp and the IF Community, and wanting to be part of it. The kicker, though: many of these new authors, players, and voters had absolutely no interest in parser games, some even finding them boring, or poorly designed.

You can imagine the feelings this caused. Most people in the IF community had run into text adventures at some point, wish they hadn't died out, and discovered to their delight that they were 'still alive'. If you're into parser games, your family and friends are probably not into it. It's your 'weird hobby' that no one else likes, like Opera in America or medieval french literature. The IF community had become a group of people bonded by their common like of parser games. Hyperlink games were just tolerated by some and openly encouraged by others, much like new girl Tai is encouraged by Cher in *Clueless*.^[336]

With Choicescript and *howling dogs*, though, things were changing. It was like the part in *Clueless* where Tai becomes more popular than Cher, and Cher wonders 'what have I done?'. Now, in what felt like the last place that anyone liked parser games, more and more people were turning against them. Also, this new crowd had had to fight hard for rights and recognition, and were not willing to sit back while the old IF trolls abused them.

Some, like zarf and Short, wholeheartedly welcomed the change, releasing their own choice-based games. Some, though, bitterly rejected everything CYOA related and formed a sort of 'parser-only' camp.

In my view, though, there will always be a slow trickle of people experiencing old parser games, looking them up, and wanting to make them. Even if people tried to kill all competitions and awards, people would just make homebrew systems and share them with friends. It's some sort of odd compulsion

As a final note on *Howling Dogs*: what made it good?

I believe that *Howling Dogs* is great because it used film-like techniques to its advantage, just like *Photopia*.^[97] Notice that both games feature two worlds, with transitions between worlds marked by screen clearing and a color image. The base world retains the same characters, while the alternate worlds have

some variety in characters.

Like *Photopia*, *Howling Dogs* turns text into art. Lengths of paragraphs and sentences and options are carefully selected. As you click on options and text is slowly unveiled, you can see the structural harmony porpentine was looking for.

Even the opening of howling dogs is cinematic; you can just imagine the opening quote slowly being displayed on a black screen with a deep cello line playing in the background before the title screen shows up. The timing, everything has that cinematic feel.

Porpentine would develop on this cinematic feel later, with the use of cycling hyperlinks and other special techniques.

I believe this game placed lower not due to its content, but due to its slow-burn nature, which many reviews showed that people didn't get, quitting the game early on because they didn't know the action would heat up. The score distribution has three peaks, with some people (likely the early quitters) centered on a two-score, but the majority between seven and eight. The other peak, at ten, was from people who saw its genius.

As to other games, Andrew Schultz and Hulk Handsome both released the kind of wordplay games that would become their signatures. *Shuffling Around*^[515] is Schultz's most popular game, and one of my personal favorites.

Christopher Huang, who had placed second twice before, released the literary *Sunday Afternoon*,^[344] which has you as a child trying to snoop around their strict family's house.

Fish Bowl^[668] was a visceral horror parser story that is short, and highly effective. It's more like creepypasta than most parser horror.

Mark Marino released his first of many hyperlink Undum games with a 'living book' approach.

The Lift^[110] was released this year, which has the distinguishment of having the absolute lowest IFDB top 100 score on all of IFDB (I mean, if you run the formula given in the IFDB top 100 page, this is the lowest), possibly making it the most disliked game of all time on IFDB. It is a twine game with combat that is essentially completely unhinted, and some needlessly gross interludes. It provided fuel for the twine haters. (Update: Since 2017, since this was written, *The Lift* is now the third-least liked game.)

4.18.4 Legacy

Howling Dogs became the 'founding game' of the Twine Revolution, much like *Zork* was the founding game of text adventures (though not the first; I liked *Adventure*^[161] better).

Just like *Zork*,^[20] *Photopia*,^[97] and other games that are wildly successful and imitated, later followers would imitate all the wrong things, like content rather than form. *Zork* and *Adventure* imitators incorporated mazes and light source puzzles into everything.

Howling Dogs imitators tried to find success by copying the psychedelic structure, or the body horror. One of the most interesting 'founder effects' is the

sheer number of games with trans or queer characters and storylines. This can be explained by three sources:

1. Authors who are LGBTQ or allies who had always been interested in LGTBQ stories and finally had a chance to express themselves. Lady Isak Grozny comes to mind as a recent example.

2. Authors who wrote characters that just happened to be LGTBQ because that's what fit the story. *Birdland*^[338] was like this; the author mentions the organic growth of the LGBTQ storyline in his postmortems.

3. Authors who only put in LGBTQ storylines because 'it's expected', much like mazes in parser games. I've played several games in the last few years that have something like the old 'special episodes' of sitcoms, where a trans character will appear whose only purpose is to explain the trans experience, and then walks off, having no storyline integration. It sometimes feels like the authors don't want to include these characters, but felt obligated to. I think that games are much more effective in sharing your values when those values are 'baked in' in a smooth way; *Gun Mute*^[571] did this well, as did *Birdland*.

This all has changed in the last year or two, with *Cape*^[189] and *Stone Harbor*^[172] doing well without being explicitly in the Porpentine tradition.

(Note: This was written in 2017. Since then, Twine has proliferated in many different directions, and experience booms and busts. While Porpentine-like games still exist, they are now just part of a large spectrum of choice-based games.)

It's very clear in hindsight now that parser was not in trouble of dying (perhaps due to efforts like ParserComp), but at the time, it was hard to see, especially two years later in 2014, as we'll get to soon.

4.19 IFComp 2013

4.19.1 Influences

Of course, one of the major influences this year was Porpentine's work, and Twine in general. This year featured only thirteen typing-based games out of thirty-five, with thirteen Twine games and nine 'other' (such as Quest or Undum, or paper-based).

It wasn't just Porpentine, though. Tom McHenry released his XYZZY Best Game-nominated *Horse Master*,^[476] and Michael Lutz released *My Father's Long Long Legs*^[450] (though it was close to the competition). Brendan Patrick Hennessy released three Twine games earlier this year as well.

Depression Quest^[632] was released by Zoe Quinn, which would eventually be embroiled in the massive controversy GamerGate, which heightened tensions in the IF Community (especially the following year).

Counterfeit Monkey^[720] with its wordplay-based puzzles had been released at the very end of the previous year.

4.19.2 Top Games

Coloratura^[286] is the best short puzzle parser game released in the 2010s, I believe. In this game, you play a sort of alien creature with an amorphous body and a non-human perspective. You must communicate through ‘coloring’ the moods of others, only.

Reviewers appreciated the subtle shifts in descriptions as the alien creature begins to learn more about human culture. The puzzles had multiple solutions, with hidden timers that began to make the puzzles easier the longer you took.

Robin and Orchid^[807] was Ryan Veeder’s second big comp entry, with Emily Boegheim. It follows a teenage journalist in a church sleepover trying to track down a ghost for the school paper.

In classic Veeder style, massive parts of the game were optional and could be largely missed by players (in this case, the diary). There was an intentionally fiddly disambiguation puzzle designed to provoke laughs, and the game was quite long.

Ollie Ollie Oxen Free^[796] was an ambitious parser game by Carolyn VanElseltine, entering for her third year. This game has you playing as a teacher after a disaster at a school. You have to find and collect various children you meet while you yourself are in a weakened state. By commanding the children, you can overcome inventory limits and so on.

The game is very well done, but fairly fiddly.

4.19.3 Other games

Porpentine took ninth this year with *their angelical understanding*,^[621] an intense game more directly about the trans experience than *howling dogs*, and featuring intense emotional moments, text entry, and a continuation of Porpentine’s film-like programming style.

A. Deniro improved on her previous rankings this year with *Solarium*,^[183] the highest-placing Twine game this year. *Solarium* has a very interesting sort of inventory (or ‘thought inventory’) system here, and an alternate world involving alchemy. It’s a solid example of what I might call ‘classic’ twine.

Ryan Veeder had a second game in the comp, which also did well: *Captain Verdeterre’s Plunder*,^[800] where you and a small rat captain have to race through a side-scroller like sinking ship to extract treasure.

Andrew Schultz continued his series of wordplay-based games.

Hanon Ondricek entered with *Final Girl*,^[561] a Storynexus game, beginning his history of very detailed, big games with a lot of background computations going on.

Brendan Hennessy released *Bell Park, Youth Detective*,^[337] which would produce several later sequels.

Simon Christiansen reached perhaps the peak of his innovation with *Trapped in Time*,^[133] a PDF entry that managed to place eleventh. It includes tricky parser-like options involving math codes (add ten to your page number if you use the key, etc.)

Mark Marino continued his series of kid-friendly hyperlink games involving living books.

The inventor of Quest entered his first game ever, *Moquette*,^[827] with a detailed implementation of the London Underground and numerous advanced text effects.

Several other prolific authors started this year, including Megan Stevens, Tia Orisney, Richard Goodness and Paperblurt.

4.19.4 Legacy

Coloratura was influential, spawning a few more Lovecraftian/alien protagonist games in future years (including my own 2015 game).

Robin and Orchid remains one of the most successful mystery IF games, which until 2016 never took first.

The balance between parser and Twine/web-based continued to tip until next year, which was a crisis point for parser games and a turning point for IFComp.

4.20 IFComp 2014

This year was unusual in several respects. First of all, the top five games were written in five different systems. The total number and percentage of parser entries was down. And there was one more thing. I've noticed that games that score at least seven (on average) each year are fairly rare and tend to be the ones remembered the longest. 2014 is the only year that fewer than three parser games received a seven.

There was an infamous 'IF is dead' forum thread^[514] that lead to several people leaving the forum forever and others resigning. Gamergate was sweeping the nation, and the rift between parser and web-based games took on the associations with that controversy. A special prize was donated to go just to parser games, which was matched by a prize just for non-parser games.

But despite the handwringing, this was a year of incredible innovation, and many old-school players were embracing the new games. The review/game *IF is dead. Long Live IF*.^[350] was a Twine game that was a dialog between a 2004 version of the author and his present self, convincing the former that web-based games were worthwhile and enjoyable. It contains some strong profanity, but it's a fascinating snapshot of changes in the community (it could be called 'How I learned to love the Twine').

4.20.1 Influences

What a year! This year saw the release of *80 Days*,^[372] a hyperlink graphical game by Inkle which won Time Magazine's Game of the Year^[586] and the XZZY Best Game Award. It saw the release of my favorite Choicescript game,

Choice of Robots,^[291] a 400,000 word game with dozens of branches, tons of characters, and an epic structure (although this came out after the comp ended). And it saw the release of *Hadean Lands*^[598] (also after the comp, but long expected), which was like Infocom's after Infocom's demise, but better, longer, smoother, and generally more difficult.

Commercial games were a success again, especially non-parser games. People were starting to find contract work doing non-parser things. At some point in these years Failbetter games was paying people for *Fallen London*^[270] content, Choice of Games was getting well-known authors like Aaron Reed to work for them, Carl Muckenhoupt of Baf's guide was working on Walking Dead games for Tell Tale, and so on.

Authors were realizing that, by doing Twine or choicescript, they could reach a much larger audience than with parser games. Since 2012, the game on IFDB with the most ratings from each year has been a twine game. (*Update: Since this was written in 2017, and now being in 2024, numerous parser games have been the most-rated of their year, as has a Choicescript game.*) Outside of IFDB, the difference is much larger. *Creatures Such as We*^[288] has had hundreds of thousands of downloads; much of the traffic to Emily Short's blog is due to (or was due to) two or three small posts about Michael Lutz's games. *Birdland*^[338] had a cult following on tumblr.

With all this in mind, why write parser games?

4.20.2 Top games

Hunger Daemon^[708] was the only polished, long parser game entered into the comp (*Jacqueline, Jungle Queen*^[125] had some implementation problems when I played). Fortunately, it was a really good one.

This game is a riff on all of the Lovcraftian games that had gone before. You are part of a cult trying to end the world, but you lose the main artifact you need. The game was originally going to contain quite a bit about Jewish culture (and still has some), but ended up focusing on other areas. Has really funny writing and some well-done NPCs.

Creatures Such as We^[288] is on my top ten list. Like the opera *Capriccio*,^[767] this game is a meta-game musing on the nature of art and games itself. You are a lonely tour guide on the moon who is really into a first-person zombie shooter game, when you actually meet the design team of the game, who discuss aspects of design with you. The game is also a romance simulator that shows some excellent restraint. It was one of very few Choicescript games ever entered into the comp (around six, I think). *Since 2017 when this was written, several more Choicescript games have been entered into the competition, many by Felicity Banks.*

Jacqueline, Jungle Queen^[125] marked the first time ever that a Quest game broke into the three. Written by a popular webcomic artist/writer, this game had an amusing system of puzzles involving borrowing the strengths of animals. It was the only game to compete against *Hadean Lands*^[598] in the XZZZY

Best Puzzles nomination. The quest engine, however, led to a few bugs, and the author switched over to Inform 7 in 2015, to great success.

4.20.3 Other games

Porpentine released her final IFComp games this year with *With Those We Love Alive*^[623] (my personal favorite of her games) and *Begscape*.^[615] The first game is set in a bizarre and horrible fantasy world where an alien empress rules the land. It makes heavy use of music and cycling link text. *Begscape* was more of a statement than anything else; it has you play as a beggar moving from town to town until you (relatively swiftly) die.

Simon Christiansen continued his innovations with *AlethiCorp*,^[128] a game that was more of an ARG. It was a website where you play as a new employee of a company, setting up a username and password and getting emails from your supervisors. It involves espionage, and, if you search for it, a lot of bears.

Ade McTavish wrote a short but fiendishly complex game called *Fifteen Minutes*^[481] involving time travel and multiple copies of yourself. The author would go on to write the polar opposite of this game next year with the long, puzzleless game *Map*, and then combined the two styles into the utterly massive *Worldsmith*.^[485]

I'm just going to throw in a reference to *Eidolon*^[382] as a game that had an honorary mention in my top ten. I don't think it was especially innovative, but I just really like trippy two-world games in Twine. Very long game.

Hanon Ondricek released another big game with hidden features and a lot of stuff going on: *Transparent*.^[565] This is a slow-burn game, requiring some patient exploration, with more and more interesting stuff happening as you play. I think this would have done much better outside of the comp setting.

Tia Orisney and Andrew Schultz continued their string of genre-specific games (one of thrillers and one of wordplay). Paperblurt released two more games with graphics in Twine.

John Evans released *Paradox Corps*.^[228] I have never been able to tell if it was the same John Evans as before, but the game bears some resemblance to his old styles.

B Minus Seven came on the scene, a twine author with psychedelic poetry that was hard to understand. They would go on to write many games in their unique style, something like Rybread Celsius or James Joyce.

Arthur DiBianca kicked off his series of limited-parser games with *Excelsior*.^[191] His trademark style of restricting the player to a tiny verb set would be developed on over the last few years to great success and imitation by other authors.

Marshal Tenner Winter also entered this year. He would become known for big games with dark settings and tons of independent NPCs that often ended up a little unfinished.

4.20.4 Legacy

Creatures Such as We, being a free long game, became a very popular Choice of Games download.

Steph Cherrywell, third place winner, went on to dominate the parser scene the next year with *Chlorophyll*^[124] and *Brain Guzzlers from Beyond*,^[123] and *Zozzled*^[126] later on.

The handwringing over the death of parser games was more or less resolved by Carolyn Van Eseltine, who set up a competition purely for parser games, to be finished in 2015. Perhaps it was this minicomp, or something else, but the next two years would show a re-flowering of parser games that continues to this day.

4.21 IFComp 2015

This was the first year that I participated, and so I knew quite a bit more of the back details.

The crisis of 2014 had in some senses created a power vacuum. Much of the old parser guard had either abandoned the IF Community altogether (due to aging up, anger at disagreements, etc.) or turned to other experiments such as Twine, Choicescript, Storynexus, or paid work.

The early 2000's had seen an emphasis on artificial intelligence, conversation, and simulation. Authors talked earnestly about being able to have real, life-like conversations in a few years, with perfect physics simulation. Much of Emily Short's work comes from this time. The parser was hailed for its complete freedom, and most 'common knowledge' design principles centered on immersion and realism.

By the 2010's, it was clear that humanity was far from realistic conversational AI and world simulation, especially from parsers (*Note: since this was written in 2017, fairly realistic conversational AI has been developed in a parser form*). People turned to other, newer methods. This left a hole for a new group of IF authors to enter, one that wholeheartedly embraced the limitations of the parser and wrote games exposing its inner workings. Simulation and illusion-of-reality became secondary to this sort of 'impressionistic' parser game and its focus on constraints and powerlessness.

Simultaneously, Twine, Undum, and other authors, frustrated by the negative response from the parser-only subcommunity, started developing richer puzzle systems and geography/inventory-based gameplay. The two groups, parser and hyperlink, were essentially reaching towards each other, essentially meeting a year later in Robin Johnson's 2016 IFComp winner *Detectiveland*.^[389]

4.21.1 Influences

One of the biggest influences this year was Carolyn VanEseltine's ParserComp. Many authors had come to feel that they shouldn't bother writing parser games,

as they were less popular than the other kinds to general audiences. This competition allowed people to write parser games that would just be judged against other parser games. It produced an extraordinary set of games, led by Steph Cherrywell’s *Chlorophyll*.^[124] Several other major authors began to emerge during this competition, including Chandler Groover, Caleb Wilson, Buster Hudson and Bruno Dias, as well as many other, more experienced authors.

The previous year’s Ectocomp had produced *Lime Ergot*,^[65] which had a massive influence on Chandler Groover. *Toby’s Nose*^[319] is influenced by it, as is the opening part of my 2017 IFComp entry and quite a few other games. In *Lime Ergot*, you cannot move, but you can ‘telescope’ by examining nested items.

Hana Feels^[365] was a sleeper hit, a government-funded exploration of self-harm in Twine with beautiful portraits. It is the third most-played game of 2015 on IFDB. The author went on to be part of Adventure Cow and I believe helped write *Strayed*.^[154]

TwinyJam ran this year, producing a huge amount of games that had to use (I believe) 300 words or less. It would be emulated later on with the Neo Twiny Jam, which ran annually and had 500 words or less.

Spring Thing produced the excellent *Toby’s Nose*,^[319] a dog-protagonist Sherlock Holmes game inspired by *Lime Ergot*.^[65] *Toby’s Nose* was a major influence for my 2016 IFComp game and for other people as well.

4.21.2 Top Games

Brain Guzzlers^[123] has been quite a hit over the last couple of years. It is an old-school treasure hunt with new-school style. The author, Steph Cherrywell, had previously written *Jacqueline*, *Jungle Queen*^[125] and *Chlorophyll*^[124]. *Brain Guzzlers*, however, used character portraits drawn by the webcomic artist herself, as well as a conversation extension very similar to that used in *Photopia*. The game was clearly larger than most other polished games in the competition, but easier as well.

The big draw here, though, was the writing and the setting, with a ‘gee-whilickers!’ 1950’s sort of feel. The conversation extension ended up being used again to great effect in Ondricek’s *Fair*^[560] in 2016.

Map^[484] was a game that I loved and gave a ten when I played it, but thought no one else would. I was pleased to see it place second, but since then it has sort of languished with unenthusiastic reviews.

In this puzzle-less game by the author of *Fifteen Minutes*,^[481] you explore your house that mysteriously adds rooms each day. Each room takes you to a decision point in your past, which you can change, influencing your present (such as your marital status, number of children, wealth, etc.). The game ends after a week.

Midnight, Swordfight^[315] is Chandler Groover’s biggest game. Groover, one of the most influential parser authors of the last few years, got started in 2014 by releasing the Twine game *Hunting Unicorn*,^[314] but he soon discovered that putting an unadvertised game on IFDB during IFComp is a sure way to be

ignored. He then entered Parser Comp with a game with traditional examine/search/use puzzles, but was frustrated that players seemed not to be able to find anything. At that point, he completely eschewed traditional play style for something new. *Toby's Nose* used essentially nothing but the 'smell' command, and could be ended at any time by accusing a suspect; the player had to solve the puzzle in their head, instead of the character having to amass a wealth of evidence.

Midnight. Swordfight. was intended to be a one-move game, but Groover said he couldn't bear to leave it as one, as he didn't really like one-move games. So it has two realities: one where you are in the final motions of a duel and have one move to live, and one where time is frozen and you explore in time-based (rather than compass-based) directions. It uses an innovative 'playscript' inventory that tells you exactly what commands are allowed at any time. Such 'limited parser' games became popular over the next few years.

As a warning, this game does contain very strong profanity and brief sexuality.

4.21.3 Other Games

Birdland^[338] took fourth and ended up dominating the XYZZY awards. This game takes inspiration from scripts, with all text presented as dialogue and stage directions. It uses color changes and character portraits to good effect. It is a story about a young girl at a summer camp where everyone is acting weird.

As a twine game, it made itself open to strategizing by taking the weeklong story and splitting it up into night and day segments. The night segments feature absurd dreams where your actions determine certain stats. The daytime segments have fairly linear storylines but with some of the best content locked unless your stats are high enough.

Capel^[189] is an Undum game with a twine-like gameplay feel, and was notable for 1. being very fun, and 2. being a hypertext game that focused on the poor and financially oppressed, rather than (at that time) traditional hypertext subjects of gender or sexuality. Dias would go on to write several other games and systems, including *Voyageur*^[190] and the Raconteur system and other -eur related topics.

Joey Jones and Melvin Rangasamy, old-time experts, made their best game yet with the very large *Sub Rosa*,^[387] a real treat for old-school parser fans. In a very alien world, you break into a mansion, uncover secrets, and have to put everything back where it was before leaving.

Felicity Banks made a splash with *Scarlet Sails*,^[41] a choiescript steampunk pirate game. She has since used her talent for writing really, really fast to become one of the most financially successful and prolific IF authors. Her *Choices that Matter*^[56] series has picked up a lot of buzz in mainstream game outlets.

Astrid Dalmady, who had quietly been building a unique style of Twine games over the past year, released *Arcane Intern (Unpaid)*,^[165] a sort of Harry Potter pastiche that was the most-played IFComp game. Dalmady would develop her skill over the next year, winning a division of Spring Thing and later

breaking the record for highest-placing Twine IFComp game to that date, as well as being nominated for a best game XYZZY and winning other XYZZY's. She's one of my personal favorite choice authors.

Jeremy Pflasterer took up the torch for TADS fans everywhere, entering the only TADS games in both this year's comp and the next.

Hanon Ondricek released the divisive *Baker of Shireton*,^[563] which half of the judges experienced as an odd but fun short baking simulator, and the other half experienced as a really big puzzle game influenced by World of Warcraft. This game led Hanon (and me!) to decide not to hide most of the game as a surprise anymore, and led to the excellent *Fair*^[560] by Hanon in 2016.

Arthur DiBianca took IFComp by storm with *Grandma Bethlinda's Variety Box*,^[192] a game that essentially needed two verbs: EXAMINE, and USE (and occasionally, LOOK). While it's lower placing may not seem like much, most of the internet traffic to the IFComp servers was from people playing this game. Among others, it continued to fuel to Limited Parser movement.

Many authors continued their previous series of works, including Andrew Schultz, Marshal Tenner Winter, A. DeNiro, Mark Marino, Tia Orisney, Richard Goodness, Paperblurt, Michel Tomet, and Megan Stevens.

Cat Manning and Glass Rat both made their debuts, placed in the middle, and then produced really, really good Ectocomp games later in the year. Manning now works as a narrative director for Firaxis.

furkle released the largest twine game ever, up to that point, with *SPY INTRIGUE*.^[267] This massive game with intricate structure was obscured by the fact that (unknown to Furkle) its goofy opening humor and all caps reminded many of earlier IFComp troll games, and many people didn't play past the opening scenes (included me at first, turned off by some vulgarity early on). The game received more recognition later with a Best Game XYZZY nomination and now ranks highly on IFDB leaderboards.

With the benefit of four years perspective, Emily Short wrote about *SPY INTRIGUE*:^[737]

SPY INTRIGUE is one of the finest and bravest things ever produced in this medium: personal and true, technically masterful in both code and design, literary in the best sense.

Some people, I've seen, refer to it as raw. I wouldn't call it so; I'd say it has a quality I prefer to rawness, an ability to present the most intense and traumatic experiences with such understanding that it offers others a tool to dismantle their own pain.

Victor Ojuel wrote a game with a brilliant concept but buggy implementation: *Pilgrimage*,^[554] which had each movement take you across countries. Ojuel took the reviewer's advice seriously, and rocketed up the rankings next year with the popular *Ariadne in Aeaea*^[556] and even further in 2017 with *1958: Dancing With Fear*.^[555]

Katherine Morayati, *Broken Legs*^[499] author, returned with *Laid Off From The Synesthesia Factory*,^[498] an experiment in removing all parser errors from a

game, so that the story flowed unimpeded. IFComp voters were uncertain about it, but XYZZY voters loved it.

Groover published another game this year, *Taghairm*, which involves you as the perpetrator of an medieval ritual involving roasting cats alive. Also unaware of the history of IFComp troll games, he was surprised to find that many people felt this was a troll game, while he had meant it as a sort of commentary on the nature of power.

This year had the first Inklewriter IFComp game, *The Man Who Killed Time*, which placed very poorly, a situation similar to Quest and Adrift.

4.21.4 Legacy

This comp produced a whole new crop of authors that continue to write new games. *Midnight. Swordfight.* and *Grandma Bethlinda's Variety Box* led the way for the limited parser movement, while twine games like *Arcane Intern (Unpaid)* and *Cape* showed the new diversity in hyperlink games.

Birdland was massively influential, spawning its own set of imitators. *Cactus Blue Motel* of 2016 is certainly influenced by *Birdland*. *Open Sorcery* seems influenced by *Birdland*, but it might be parallel development.

4.22 IFComp 2016

This, the most recent comp (at the time I originally wrote the post), was the largest so far with a total of fifty-eight games. This comp had much more diversity than previous years, including having a non-parser game win for the first time ever.

4.22.1 Influences

Midnight. Swordfight.^[315] and Arthur DiBianca's games had been part of a new movement using limited parsers. Caleb Wilson took it to an extreme with the *Northnorth Passage*.^[360] Pacian released the XYZZY-winning *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*,^[573] an excellent limited parser game.

More and more well-known authors started writing for Choice of Games and other publishing companies, which I think helped freshen up the 'comp cycle'; authors who did very well would be pulled out to work on commercial games, leaving others to place well the next year.

Jim Munroe, author of *Everybody Dies*^[509] and *Guilded Youth*,^[510] released *Texture*, a mobile friendly two-word game engine involving sliding nouns to verbs or vice versa.

Abigail Corfman released *Open Sorcery*,^[151] a huge twine game in a new style, involving two-noun puzzles, Choice of games-style romances and stats, combat, and a *Birdland*^[338]-like sleep cycle. The author would enter IFComp with *16 Ways to Kill a Vampire at McDonalds*.^[150]

Ryan Veeder ran a cash-and-plush-dinosaur-fueled competition asking for games on his (leap-day) birthday. The response was astonishing, with Buster Hudson putting out an XYZZY-best game nominated mystery puzzler *Foo Foo*,^[354] Robin Johnson debuting his new hyperlink parser in *Draculaland*^[390] and Chandler Groover releasing *Three-Card Trick*,^[318] which received four XYZZY nominations.

Spring Thing saw Astrid Dalmady win with *Tangaroa Deep*, a deep-sea exploration Twine, and Robin Johnson winning with *The Xylophoniad*,^[391] a parser game in Scott Adams style.

Ade McTavish released the enormous *Worldsmith*^[485] as a commercial parser game with incorporated video, graphics, and twine, which received its own cult following.

4.22.2 Top Games

Detectiveland^[389] by Robin Johnson is the longest IFComp winner ever, with a minimal walkthrough taking twice as many actions as most other comp games. This big detective game plays out in a city in a rectangular grid, and is filled with character portraits, CSS and HTML styling, and music played by the author himself.

Its biggest innovation is its engine, refined from *Draculaland*.^[390] This game has you do parser-type commands from a menu. Clicking a noun gives you verbs you can do, which change depending on what other noun you are ‘holding’. This holding system makes the menu system more complex and hard to brute-force, and propelled Robin Johnson to the first

Color the Truth^[474] was my 2016 game. I wanted to try my theory out that being long and polished were the most important attributes for the comp; when I was writing my game, the first draft was pretty short, so I padded it out with extra actions (like throwing burnt popcorn away and repeating flashbacks), and then beta tested over and over until it was interesting.

I also used a new conversation system that was like a menu but with the options enduring over time in a sort of ‘thought inventory’.

Cactus Blue Motel^[166] was the first Twine game to reach the top three (*The Play* in 2011 had been an Undum game, I believe).

This game struck a nerve in pretty much everyone with its description of a life-changing journey right out of high school. The game used a location-based movement system to flesh out a real-feeling world, and used a consistent conversational system.

The visual styling was excellent, and many reviewers praised the ambiguous but important choices you make near the end.

4.22.3 Other games

This game saw the return of troll games with *Toiletworld*.^[661]

Stone Harbor,^[172] by Liza Daly, took fourth with one of the highest text-to-choice ratios ever, mainly on the strength of its incredible writing (but also on

the fact that its choices were thought-provoking and consistent). This was my favorite game of the comp.

As described earlier, Abigail Corfinan released *16 Ways to Kill a Vampire*^[150] at McDonalds, which took fifth and was the first Twine game ever to win Best Puzzles.

Jack Welch and Ben Collins-Sussman, who had won two major competitions before, released the very detailed (I think the source code has over 200000 words?) *Pogoman GO!*,^[834] which took sixth. Like *The Baker of Shireton*^[563] from 2015, much of the game was hidden behind a tedious opening simulator, obscuring the rich world beyond (you can see two peaks in the score distribution on ifcomp.org, one near six and one near eight, most likely reflecting those who saw the real game and those who didn't).

Speaking of Ondricek, he released his most popular game yet this year, *Fair*.^[560] Originally influenced by the idea of a game mimicking IFComp itself, this game had you play as a judge at a science fair. With many endings, a money mini-game, and a great cast of characters, this game was one of my favorites.

Victor Ojuel and Arthur DiBianca both improved significantly on previous year's entries, placing in the top fifteen.

Texture made his big debut, with Chandler Groover writing the highest-placing Texture game, titled *The Queen's Menagerie*.^[317] He also released *Mirror and Queen*,^[316] a conversational game that could recognize close to a thousand topics.

One of the freshest and most interesting new games was *SCREW YOU, BEAR DAD!*^[402] (by Xalavier Nelson, Jr., who later replaced Jacqueline Ashwell as Introcomp organizer). This game focused on short, tight writing, text effects, and color choices to deliver a different effect than most Twine games. (contains infrequent strong profanity)

Phantom Williams released the highly unusual *500 Apocalypses*,^[852] which is a number (less than 500) of static flash-fiction type stories connected by a web of hyperlinks. The reader was encouraged to contribute their own apocalypses to fill up the number.

Katherine Morayati released *Take*,^[592] a game focused on the verb 'take' which has here been repurposed to 'do a hot take'. (For those who don't know, a hot take is, by Google's definition, 'a piece of commentary, typically produced quickly in response to a recent event, whose primary purpose is to attract attention.'). You enter gladiatorial combat where battle is replaced by taking. It pushed the limited parser to the limit, and was the first parser game in five or six years to win Best Writing at the XYZZYs.

A whole host of people published their first big games or returned from previous years, and it would be impossible to list them all, even some that I personally loved; but overall, this was a good comp.

4.22.4 Legacy

Robin Johnson would go on to make many more games with the same engine, eventually releasing it to the public as *Gruescript*.

IFComp 2015 and 2016 were the beginning of an explosion in terms of number of games in the competition, ballooning up to 103 during the Covid year of 2020, before deflating to a reasonable 70-something in 2022 and 2023.

My game *Color the Truth* was one inspiration^[239] for the 2018 Twine IFComp game *Erstwhile*.^[243] I would use its flashbacks and clue system for several later games as well.

The limited parser wave continued next year, with three of the top five games being limited parser games, including the top two.

4.23 IFComp 2017

Overall, 2017 was one of the best IFComps of all time. If you browse IFDB by ‘Highest Rated’, over all games on the database, currently four of the top twenty are IFComp 2017 games: *The Wizard Sniffer*,^[356] *Eat Me*,^[313] *Will Not Let Me Go*,^[303] and *A Beauty Cold and Austere*.^[758]

4.23.1 Influences

The year before this one had been particularly weak for traditional parser games; in fact, 2016 was the first year that a choice-based game won (the hybrid choice-parser game *Detectiveland*^[389]). Those parser games that did place highly were often unusual or experimental (like Hanon Ondricek’s *Fair*^[560]).

My hypothesis is that this is correlated to the strong parser showing in 2017; either 2016 was slower because so many people were working on long, complex games that wouldn’t be done for another year; or people saw a power vacuum in 2016 and decided to fill it in 2017. Or, of course, it could be coincidence.

Meanwhile, choice based games had been steadily diversifying and growing, with games like *Seedship*^[31] by John Ayliff (a micromanagement colony game) and *Lost in Time*^[158] by Gerardo Adesso (an incredibly long and complex puzzle game) published earlier in the year exemplifying the growing segment of puzzle-based Choice games.

Despite the dramatic political events in 2017 in the United States and some other areas of the world, little of real-world events seem to have leaked into the themes for IFComp, except for Mike Sousa’s game *Fake News*.^[752]

One clear influence on the comp was *Bobby and Bonnie*^[860] by Xavid, which included a graphical map. This same concept was used in their IFComp game *Future Threads*.^[861]

Finally, one of the biggest releases of the year was Bob Bate’s game *Thaumistry*,^[48] which was a commercial parser release and one of the most successful recent commercial parser games. However, it released right in the middle of IFComp; at the time, I certainly felt that that was a bad idea, as it had more competition at that time of the year than any other, but it has sold reasonably well since then (by my standards).

This was also the first year for the Colossal Fund, which provided fairly significant cash prizes to 2/3 of the games each year.

4.23.2 Top Games

Wizard Sniffer.^[356] At the time of writing, *Wizard Sniffer* is the seventh most popular game on IFDB of all time.

This is a limited parser game that constrains you by casting you in the role of...a pig. You can sniff things, and occasionally carry things, but the majority of the game consists in getting others to do things for you.

The Wizard Sniffer excels in its description of characters. As a humor game, it grossly exaggerates the personalities of others, from the shy eldritch horror to the overbearing hero to the thoughtful squire.

The limited parser allowed the author to place all of the complexity into the NPCs, many of whom are autonomous and react dynamically to situations around them. Limited parser had already had great success in previous years (with games like *Midnight. Swordfight*.^[315] by Chandler Groover and *Superluminial Vagrant Twin*^[573] by C.E.J. Pacian picking up many accolades in the preceding years). *The Wizard Sniffer* was a natural evolution of the limited parser idea, and is one of its strongest examples.

Finally, this game also had strong LGBTQ themes, including both gay and trans characters. While there have been LGBTQ authors in the IF Community from the very beginning, the advent of Twine and Anna Anthropy and Porpentine had created a large influx of more authors who explored gender and sexuality in their works. While there had been controversy in previous years (such as with Gamergate in 2014), by 2017 things had settled down considerably in the IF community.

Eat Me.^[313] This was another limited parser game, and has ended up being one that has been recommended to many others to draw them into IF Games.

Chandler Groover was at his height in the IF Competition world here. He had previously performed very well in various IFComps, Ectocomps, and Spring Things, and produced a celebrated body of work. After this game, his work largely was channeled into two separate categories: highly experimental, and professional.

In strong contrast to Groover's earlier work, which featured unusual directional systems and eschewed traditional parser puzzles, this game features NESW movement, a large map, and classic-style puzzles, with one special caveat: EAT is the only real action you need, outside of movement.

The game is gruesome, even grotesque, but in the same way that Grimm's Fairy Tales are gruesome. You have been cursed to have endless hunger that cannot be satisfied. Imprisoned within a dungeon, you have to eat your way through a castle made of food filled with a variety of food-based people until you confront the one who imprisoned you.

Harmonia.^[171] This game uses a custom system designed by Liza Daly called Windrift.

Liza was (and is) a longtime IF veteran, with games dating back to 1996. Highlights include *Dinner with Andre*,^[169] an XYZZY nominee for best puzzles; *Pick up the Phone Booth and Aisle*,^[213] where she was one author in a very large collaboration; and *First Draft of the Revolution*,^[221] a game she co-wrote

with Emily Short and which likely inspired Chris Klimas to add cycling links to Twine^[716]. (I believe Liza mostly did tech work; her blog^[170] indicates that she commissioned Emily Short). She also serves on the IFTF board of directors,^[362] founded IFMUD,^[362] and served as one of the engineering directors for the Democratic National Committee during the 2020 election.^[4]

Harmonia itself is three different things:

1. A startlingly good demonstration of IF technology and design. This game has it all: nice margins, fonts, font size, a variety of images, scrawled notes in a margin with lines that look hand-drawn, etc. I've personally looked to it as a source of inspiration in any project where I've worked on CSS or HTML.
2. A story/almost academic analysis about utopian narratives in 1800s communities, with tons of resources for readers to find those stories if they so desire. I say 'almost' academic not because this isn't academic (it's very well cited) but because it's presented as a fictional narrative and has fictional elements. But this seems like the kind of material that would be appropriate for a digital humanities professor to have on her CV.
3. A science fiction choice-based narrative with some mild internal branching and two big branches at the end. The science-fiction is spot on, more like HG Wells or similar period authors (maybe even Mark Twain?) than later writers like Asimov or Herbert. Some reviews have complained that it is linear but on replaying it for this essay I realized that there are numerous places where you can get different scenes based on your choices.

Overall, this was a very solid effort, unique in many ways and at the peak of its craftsmanship in many others.

4.23.3 Other Notable Games

Will Not Let Me Go.^[303] This Twine game, which came in fourth place, has had a lasting impact on the IF community, placing in the Interactive Fiction Top 50 of All Time (2019 edition) and Interactive Fiction Top 50 of All Time (2023 edition), winning an XYZZY award, and being mentioned frequently on the intfiction forum when recommendations for Twine games come up.

This is a sad fictional story about Alzheimer's. You play as a man named Fred Strickland who has Alzheimer's, and you see the struggles from his point of view.

Besides nice styling, graphics, and well-chosen text animations, the game's most interesting feature is its use of interactivity to simulate Alzheimer's. Word choices get replaced as you forget how to say certain things. Certain choice cause continuity jumps to indicate forgetting things. Images are displayed blurred to represent bad eyesight. It's very effective.

One small thing that I really appreciated was a subtle progress meter that displays at the top of the game once the prologue is over. Especially in large

choice games it can be hard to get an idea of how much time you should budget for the game, so the progress indicator definitely helps!

A Beauty Cold and Austere.^[758] This is another game which has ended up having a long-lasting influence in the community. This was a first effort by Mike Spivey, who was my boss at the time this came out (he wrote it before we met; we were both math academics, and met on the forums. I mentioned he was looking for a position, and there was an opening at his school for a low level position, so I submitted my application and the committee liked it).

This game is classic Infocom-style adventure with some areas very reminiscent of Graham Nelson's *Curses*^[516] (especially the Greek areas of both games), but with a highly unusual setting: math.

That's right, just math. The game takes place on the number line, and has you travelling to infinity, proving theorems (through puzzles), solving systems of linear differential equations, and more.

Given that there are surprisingly many mathematicians in the IF community, this was a big hit.

Queer in Public.^[530] One of the most unusual entries in this year's IFComp was Bez's game *Queer in Public*. Bez had entered short fictional stories in previous comps, but this game was something new: a non-fiction, autobiographical essay, with links serving merely to organize the text.

While it placed low in the competition, it has come up several times since then in different conversations regarding the boundaries of 'what is IF?' or about the existence of religious interactive fiction. To me, it serves as an important landmark in the IF canon marking the boundaries of what people have currently explored. It won the Golden Banana Award, given to the IFComp game with highest standard deviation for the year.

Since then, Bez has gone on to make several more games, both of the fictional category (including the XYZZY-nominated *Lore Distance Relationship*.^[534]), but also non-fictional essays, of which the most accessible and (in my own opinion) most successful in communicating his intent is *My Pseudo-Dementia Exhibition*^[532] from the 2023 IFComp, an interactive museum piece with images, music, and a compelling personal narrative. In addition, there was a direct sequel to *Queer in Public*, titled *How to Survive Religious Trauma*^[533]

Word of the Day.^[568] This is one of the largest Inform games ever written, at more than 200K words. It doesn't reach the heights of games like *Blue Lacuna*, but it is surprisingly big for an IFComp game. Most of the text is background information on the characters, species and politics in this space thriller game.

Swigian.^[535] This is a game that I wrote as an experiment. I had noticed that most highly-rated IFComp parser games in past years were long, non-repetitive, and bug-free, regardless of their genre. I hypothesized that any long, non-repetitive and bug-free game could post highly, even if the story wasn't well thought out.

So I spent a single day mapping out a minimalist game with as little text as possible. I then tested it thoroughly to remove bugs.

The experiment had mixed results; the game had some positive reviews, but placed in the middle, so it does seem that games need more than just filler.

Chinese games. In 2017 a representative of Qiaobooks, a Chinese IF site (which now seems to have gone under), contacted several people (including me) asking for help in translating some of their games and entering them into IFComp.

Three of those games were entered: *Murder in the Fog*,^[667] *Fifth Sunday*,^[85] and *Living Puppet*.^[866] Those of us who helped didn't perform the translations, just tried working the resulting text into more idiomatic language, but I found myself not very good at the task.

The games placed pretty low (most were short and had long pieces of text interspersed with few choices, which went against the grain of trends at the time), and it hasn't been repeated since then, but I thought the cultural exchange was fun.

Run of the place.^[828] This was a bizarre game. Someone took procedurally generated text, placed it in a plain text file, and wrote a system that would slowly print it on the screen one letter at a time. Was it a troll, or an experiment? We may never know.

The Unofficial Sea-Monkey(R) Simulation.^[61] This Twine game had a lot in common with Porpentine's work, especially her game *Ultra Business Tycoon III*,^[622] but also had its own unique slant. It uses a sea monkey 'simulation' as the main focus of the game while the true story plays out in the background.

The name may be familiar; BJ Best went on to be one of the most successful recent IF authors, with works including the IFComp-winning game *And Then You Come to a House Not Unlike the Previous One*.^[59]

10pm.^[441] This Twine game has you use only emojis to communicate. The game itself uses text, but all your responses are emojis (controlled using a drag and drop interface) which you have to try and guess the correct meaning of.

4.23.4 Impact of the competition:

This competition solidly placed limited parser games as a well-established genre. Previous games had been breakout hits where limited parser was a novelty (like *Lime Ergot*^[65] and *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*^[573]), but by this point it was clear how limited parser games could play out and their quality.

One lower-placing game, *The Dragon Will Tell Your Future Now*,^[528] directly inspired a remix/sequel by a different author the next year, called *Re:Dragon*.^[832]

4.24 IFComp 2018

4.24.1 Influences

This year saw a resurgence in various retro movements in IF; in fact, it's startling to see how much the interest in retro IF computing began in that year.

Adventuron was released. As the author stated, "Adventuron is unashamedly anachronistic."^[11] It is a programming language that intentionally harkens back

to the graphical text adventures that proliferated in the 80's and 90's. It also focuses on attracting new players to the base, using simple programming techniques, colorful images, and an interface designed to be accessible to children. The Text Adventure Literacy Jams were an intentional part of the Adventuron creation process, designed to provide a steady flow of games for youth to learn about IF.

Stefan Vogt, a current prominent member of the retro IF community, published his first game *Hibernated*:^[813] in 2018. Like others in this community, his game is advertised with the number of old systems it can run on^[814]

The game is available for Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC and PCW, Spectrum +3, Spectrum Next, Commodore Amiga, Atari 8-bit, Atari ST, MS-DOS, Apple 2, BBC Micro, Acorn Electron, Commodore 128, Mega65, MSX 1 and MSX 2, Oric, Commodore Plus/4, TI99/4a, Commodore VIC-20, Commodore PET, SAM Coupé, TRS CoCo, TRS-80 Model III, TRS-80 Model 4, Osborne 1, Kaypro II, Kaypro 4, DEC Rainbow 100, Dragon64, classic Macintosh and modern PC.

While the interactive fiction community involved in IFComp and the XZYZZY awards has always been at least somewhat backwards-looking (trying to recreate Infocom games, for instance), these newer groups see themselves as restoring the feel of 80s and 90s games without reference to any other parser games that were written in the meantime. The emphasis is often on recreating those early games as faithfully as possible. For instance, one comment on *Hibernated* says:^[814]

This game is really something. I remember trying to play text adventures on my Amiga over 20 years ago and I sucked at it, mainly because my english wasn't good enough. I tried 'Hibernated 1' on almost all the emulators I have installed on Linux and in Linux terminal with Frotz. I have to admit that I'm very impressed with Your work. You made versions of the game for probably all the best retro computers out there. This is some serious contribution to the retro world and there's even the web browser version. WOW!

I recommend playing this game on systems (real or emulated) that support 80 column mode like Sam Coupe with CP/M (ProDOS) or Linux terminal using Cool-Retro-Term, because green on black/phosphor fits the sci-fi atmosphere of the game.

On forums for retro gaming, people make clear distinctions between old-fashioned text adventures and modern IF, often equating the latter with choice-based fiction. For instance, here is a sequence of (lightly edited) exchanges from such a forum:^[3]

Most of that scene [referring to IFDB/IFComp] has morphed into the much lower bar to entry but much less interesting multiple choice "choose your own adventure" style interactive fiction though.

They fell out of fashion in the '90s once every major gaming platform had the audiovisual horsepower for games to sell themselves [...] But they retained a dedicated fan community all through the intervening years, and they're as popular with that crowd as they ever were; there's modern interpreters for every major format and plenty of minor ones, and authoring tools for at least TADS and Inform.

I like to believe that they could be revived in this Alexa/Google/Siri world.

This kind of exchange is a good representative of the retro IF community; some are aware of and part of the long-lasting IFComp/XYZZY community, some are only interested in the retro stuff, some people are just new to it all. To me it feels like a community centered around making movies, where some are interested in recreating silent films as accurately as possible, film-grain and local orchestra and all, while others are making mixed-media short-form TV shows like *Gumball*.^[67] In general, the biggest frictions I've seen is when one person tries to define what is 'real art' or 'real interactive fiction', while others genuinely enjoy both kinds of IF.

As examples of people with feet in both worlds, Jack Welch released the first recorded 'modern' ZIL game on IFDB in 2018. ZIL is the internal language Infocom used in developing their games. Tools for writing in ZIL had been available for several years at this point, but his Speed-IF, *The Bean Stalker*,^[833] is the first listed on IFDB since the older periods. (*Craverly Heights*,^[801] listed on IFDB, was not originally written in ZIL, but later ported).

Another example is Linus Åkesson's system Dialog, which, like Inform and ZIL, compiles to Infocom's Z-machine format. His first sample game, *Tethered*,^[13] was moderately successful in 2018's IFComp, and he later went on to win IFComp outright. While output of Dialog games in general has been fairly slow, it retains continued interest to this day.

Other retro-oriented games in 2018 include *Illuminismo Iniziato*^[155] (a sequel to the 15-year earlier *Risorgimento Represso*^[156]), which handily won Spring Thing that year, and the massive epic *Cragne Manor*.^[808]

One of the most popular games on IFDB over the years, often appearing at the top of polls and frequently (but not uniformly or unanimously) regarded as the best IF of all time is *Anchorhead*.^[273] Released in 1998, it received a reworking and new illustrations as part of a 2018 re-release.

Simultaneously, authors Jenni Polodna and Ryan Veeder decided to host a kind of game/jam collaborative workshop where anyone who wanted to could sign on to create one parser room for a tribute to *Anchorhead*. While they had anticipated something fairly small, approximately eighty authors joined, making it the largest IF collaboration I am aware of. I was part of the IFDB moderation team, and we had to have special code added by Dan Fabulich just to collapse the list of names, as it took up so much space on everyone's pages.

Cragne Manor turned out to be a patchwork masterpiece, with some areas that are nail-bitingly frustrated or somewhat underimplemented, and others that are some of the best work of their respective authors. It is a massive game,

and the effort that went into it surely changed the face of that year's IFComp, as many talented authors spent time on Cragne Manor instead of IFComp games.

There were other, more minor influences in 2018. Several IFComp games reference censorship and political oppression; many games were clearly influenced by 2017 IFComp games (*Bogeyman*^[744]'s author cites *Eat Me*^[313] as, not an influence, but an inspiration to keep going, for instance). *Erstwhile*^[243] was partially inspired^[239] by some mechanics in past games, including *Color the Truth*, and went on to be a game itself frequently cited and discussed when mystery games come up. Finally, Jack Welch, mentioned earlier, released an IFComp game *En Garde*^[831] which was heavily influenced by the French community's use of Vorple in this time period.

Finally, this was Jacqueline Ashwell's first year as organizer, stepping in after Jason McIntosh, who led the comp from 2014 to 2017.^[477]

4.24.2 Top Games of 2018

Alias, the Magpie. This game introduced one of the most beloved characters of recent IF: the Magpie, a gentleman English thief modelled after.^[325] Charles Lytton from *The Pink Panther*^[215]

In keeping with the Retro theme for 2018, this game took eleven years to write. According to the author:^[325]

For the first few years, it was one of those projects that I would pick up, tinker with for a few weeks, and put down again. For a long while, it seemed as though it would never get off the starting blocks, but gradually, like the proverbial snowball, it grew and gathered momentum.

Then, last August, I quite suddenly lost my mum to undiagnosed secondary breast cancer. This put life into perspective for me, and I realised that what I really loved doing was writing and creating IF in particular. It had been a source of deep regret for me that I had not released a brand new game for eight years, and I decided to do something about it. I threw myself into the game, and over the next year poured hundreds of hours into getting it finished. After listening to the sound of the Spring Thing deadline whoosh past, I set my sights on IF Comp.

This game features the main character, the Magpie, intent on stealing from a rich aristocratic British family. It makes extensive use of various disguises to further the plot and to change the available interactions with other characters.

Notably, it also uses a lot of slapstick humor, which can be difficult to pull off in IF due to pacing issues inherent in interactive media. But the author put a great deal of work into making the game non-linear and to put the humor into the puzzles. As he says in his postmortem,^[325] "An idea I had very early on [...] was that the actions the player takes should have unexpected consequences,

and in fact, work better than expected." And it seems to have worked; reviewers cited its humor and engaging characters.

Bogeyman.^[744] Who would have thought that, for two years in a row, the second place game of IFComp would prominently feature child cannibalism?

Bogeyman is a dark Twine game about a child who is kidnapped by the eponymous Bogeyman. Transported to a strange land, they have to fight to survive while working with (and sometimes against) other captured children.

As is a common theme in the decade or so since Twine came out, successful Twine games often have more and more elaborate presentations. This isn't always true (as we'll see in the third place winner), but it certainly is true that *Bogeyman* is very visually appealing. Rather than resorting to slowly printed timed text, *Bogeyman* achieves a ponderous pace by having only short pieces of text on each screen and a very brief fade out between passages. Centered text adds to a feeling of uneasiness and the choice of colors and mild mouse-over animations, as well as fixed-letter spacing for the villain, make for a rich visual experience.

The game is mostly linear, but presents choices in an appealing way (with a four-corner grid), and the concept of being constrained fits into the game's overall themes, which include child abuse and resistance to absolute authority.

Animalia.^[817] Most Twine authors early on encounter a dilemma about complexity. If you have a lot of branching, then each branch requires a lot of effort. If you don't have a lot of branching, the game feels inconsequential.

Most authors get around this by 'branch and bottleneck' structures (where choices make real differences but later collapse to only a few possibilities, then repeats), 'storylet' structures (where little pieces of scenes and dialogue are written and a code determines what the best storylet for the current situation is), or 'delayed effects/stats' structures (where everything you do pushes numbers up or down and later numbers depend on them). These simplified structures are chosen because no rational person would ever make a ton of branches that were each very long.

Except this author was not rational. This is just a really, really big Twine game. It has a ton of branches and each branch is really big.

You play in this as a group of animals who have just sacrificed a human child to the forest god and realize they might get caught. So, as one would naturally do, you built a child-robot that is a replica of the original and pilot it with several animals. The animals you pick give significantly different dialogue in game. As a sample choice in the game, you have this:

"The Head will be responsible for vocal communication, socialisation, fraternisation, and situational and tactical analysis. They will serve as the commander of the operation, and as such will be most responsible for successful reintegration."

"With the gravity and responsibility of such a position in mind, we have chosen..

- "Horseradish, an owl with impeccable linguistic and commu-

nicative faculties."

- "Chunks, a magpie who has spent significant time amongst humans, and is known for their forthrightness and cunning."
- "Sprinkles, a finch known for their affability and friendliness."

Interestingly, the author of this game also entered a game fourteen years prior, in the 2004 IFComp, called *Blink*.^[816] So this, too, fits into our retro theme.

4.24.3 Other notable games

This year had quite a few games that I feel are notable, so some will inevitably be missed. I'll try to focus on those that haven't been mentioned before or which fit naturally into an overall narrative for IFComp.

Lux.^[785] This was Agnieszka Trzaska (or 'agat')'s first IFComp entry, and presaged things to come. It is a Twine game that has the structure of a parser, with inventory, a world map, and many physical interactions. You play as an astronaut blinded in a devastating accident on a mining station in space.

This author later went on to produce many highly-regarded Twine games with this kind of puzzle-heavy approach, eventually receiving nominations (and winning) the Best Puzzles XYZZY award.

Cannery Vale.^[146] This is one of my top ten favorite IF games of all time. I don't know whether it has influenced future authors very much or ties in with past games, but I'm plugging it here purely out of personal interest.

Hanon Ondricek wrote this game under a pseudonym using the AXMA story engine, a lesser-known engine commonly used in non-English IF communities. It includes some real time events as well as pop-up boxes, etc.

It's a very surreal game, with multiple layers of fiction, as you play an author who writes a novel and dreams of the novel. Contradictions and nightmares abound until the truth is revealed in a big climax.

Terminal Interface for Models RCM301-303.^[281] In yet another retro-themed event, Victor Gijbers, an author who was very influential in the early 2000s due to his thought-provoking games and literary-style reviews, made his return to writing after six years. Though not an especially long absence, the return to writing was accompanied with a return to community interaction, which has persisted to the present day.

This game takes a fun turn on the player/PC interaction by putting you into a giant mech that has been disconnected from its viewscreen. All information about the outside world is provided by radio communication with a verbose friend named Lemmy.

Various retro games

Diddlebucker,^[489] *Bullhockey*,^[438] *Flowers of Mysteria*^[768] and *Birmingham IV*^[220] were all intentional callbacks to old fashioned IF. *Diddlebucker* is set in 1987 and uses Infocom-style box art, while *Bullhockey* says in its about section:

I’ve played the Infocom Games. They have worked to define, indelibly, my picture of what an IF should be. If these things put you off, that’s unfortunate to me. In my mind, an IF should be challenging, and these things are a part of the challenge. When I am making a game, or even playing one, I sometimes like to ask myself ‘Would it be worth the \$20 that I used to spend to play an Infocom title??’.

Flowers of Mystery^[768] includes the tagline ‘An old-fashioned text adventure’.

Finally, *Birmingham IV*^[220] was originally written in 1988 and later ported to Inform.

4.24.4 Legacy

I regret that I don’t have the space to cover even more games without overwhelming this post, but this comp did spawn many good things. Besides Agnieszka, other authors that premiered during this IFComp and went on to bigger things include:

- Pseudavid with the complex Twine game *Master of the Land*.^[630] Although he had entered Ectocomp the year before, this was his first IFComp game, a complex Twine game. He went on to make many popular and complex games in Twine and other systems.
- Grim Baccaris with the rich-looking game *DDEVOTIONALIA*,^[307] under the name G. Grimoire. Besides other visually appealing Twine games, Grim went on to release ‘The Twine Grimoire’,^[33] a two-volume guide to writing and using CSS in Twine, which has been very helpful to many people, including me.
- Linus Åkesson, as mentioned earlier, released *Tethered*,^[13] a game heavily involving a rope/cable and mountain climbing. He went on to win IFComp later.

Alias, *The Magpie* received a sequel/tribute game as a prize offered by me. That game was *The Magpie Takes the Train*,^[472] released two years later in 2020.

The second and third-place authors teamed up to make an IF podcast called *Verb Your Enthusiasm*,^[746] which covered some later competitions.

4.25 IFComp 2019

4.25.1 Influences

This year was dominated by returning authors.

- Of the top ten games, all but one were written by repeat authors. Of the top twenty, sixteen were by repeat authors.

- This was only the second time in IFComp history that someone had won first place twice (Steph Cherrywell with the game *Zozzled* here and *Brain Guzzlers* from *Beyond* in 2015).
- seven of the top ten had entered at least three times.

Even outside of the top twenty, many games were by experienced authors coming back from hiatus or long-time enterers. Such authors include Robb Sherwin, Marshall Tenner Winter, Andrew Schultz, Ade McTavish (who entered the fourth.^[483] game in a series), Katie Benson, Luke Jones, Bez, etc. Viktor Sobol, one of the most prolific players on IFDB with around 900 games rated, entered for the first time with a short, charming game called *Out*^[750]

This was a transitional year, with a lot of things either just having come out the year before (like the retro wave discussed in the previous article) or coming out the next year or after IFComp (like *AI Dungeon*^[822]). The intfiction forum switched over to Discourse from its previous software, and the very first Narrascope was held.

Some notable games outside of IFComp in 2019 included: *Heaven's Vault*,^[373] an ambitious graphical game by Inkle where you translate an unknown language *The Missing Ring*,^[203] a twine mystery game in Spring Thing that has proven reliably popular over the years. *Crème de la Crème*^[628] by Harris Powell-Smith, a large Choicescript game about an elite private school that proved extremely popular in the Choicescript community, and eventually tied for the Best Game XZZZY award. *Ryan Veeder's Authentic Fly Fishing*,^[802] a mystery game where all your saves are stored online and certain changes only occur when you haven't been playing for a while, making it impossible to speedrun. This required significant work on the backend of Inform/javascript and was part of a small trend of 'fancy Inform effects' that extended into the first half of the 2020's (so far).

4.25.2 Top Games

Zozzled.^[126] This game by Steph Cherrywell puts you in the role of an alcoholic flapper during prohibition who's trying to get a stiff drink at a hotel. Unfortunately, ghosts have gotten rid of all the good stuff, so you have to go around and drink them all up to get what you want.

Steph Cherrywell had previously won IFComp in 2015 with the hit game *Brain Guzzler's from Beyond*.^[123] Like that game (and their Parsercomp winner *Chlorophyll*^[124]), *Zozzled* is packed with vibrant and unusual characters with a consistent theme (in this case, prohibition/mobster era).

This game exemplifies the classic IFComp winner: around two hours of content, maybe more; easy to complete; funny; character-focused; unique narrator voice.

Turandot.^[282] *Turandot* is written by Victor Gijssbers, who had been influential in the early 2000's IF community before taking a hiatus. His game the previous year, *Terminal Interface for Models RCM301-303*,^[281] had been fairly well received. But this new game was Choicescript, a departure from his previ-

ous parser modus operandi. It is currently the highest rated Choicescript game on IFDB.

This game is a spin on Puccini's incomplete and sometimes controversial opera *Turandot*. Just as in that story, a young man falls in love with the cold queen Turandot and has to pass challenges to win her love.

It has its own unique voice, though, very self-aware of both itself and genre conventions, such as a reference to Emily Short's *Savoir-Faire*.^[733] It is explicitly open and casual about sexual experiences, and uses choices mostly not to change the narrative but to express the main character's personality. More often than not, the choices serve to either contrast what can not be done (by greying out an option) or that all choices are equally meaningless in the face of infatuation by having them all be variations of one bad idea.

Chuk and the Arena.^[784] This was the most successful 'puzzle-focused Twine' games up to this point. The author, Agnieszka Trzaska, had already released a couple big puzzly twine games, and went on to release many others.

This one features a small, weak alien who must enter a gladiatorial arena in order to win a chance to save his people's moon. His greatest features are his wits and his ability to change colors on demand.

There are a wide cast of interesting characters and plenty of visual appeal in the multicolored links themselves. As has been common for high-placing Twine games, this is a visually appealing and interesting game. It's an interesting thing that visual appeal seems weighted so heavily in Twine games but not in parser games. It may be due to a hidden variable; maybe people who win tend to be people who work hard on their games, and Twine games have better tools to allow audio/visual variations than parser games do, so they end up tinkering with those. It's not a hard and fast rule; *Animalia*^[817] from the previous year had little styling.

4.25.3 Other Games

I should preface this by saying that this year has so many games that I absolutely love by authors whose work I admire. I could easily list forty games here, so I'm selecting games mostly based on how unusual they are, influential in some way, or even just random guessing about what people like might to read about.

Skybreak.^[199] This ADRIFT game won the Golden Banana of Discord award and placed very highly. It's an ambitious and entertaining game making use of menus and lists. Using procedural generation, it presents a large universe with distinct cultures where you can gather technology, allies, secrets, etc. and win in one of several different victory conditions.

ADRIFT games have often scored poorly in the past of IFComp, but this game attracted a lot of fans, contributing to the Golden Banana.

robotsexpartymurder.^[562] This game is interesting in that it has, well, sex and murder, and placed very highly. Now, *Turandot* has both of those things as well and placed even higher, but it was more subtle in its advertising. I believe one thing that strongly helped *robotsexpartymurder* place as highly as it did is

the fact that it has multiple levels of explicitness that can be selected. Catering to multiple audiences this way is pretty clever, in my opinion.

Pas de Deux.^[12] This is a fascinating and unusual game. You are provided with an orchestra score (as a PDF ‘feelie’), and the parser game consists of getting the attention of the correct orchestra members at the correct moments. Just examining an orchestra member is enough to get them to act.

There is a bit of puzzle here, but otherwise this is almost more like a turn-based rhythm game than anything else. This is in stark contrast to the author’s previous game, *Tethered*,^[13] which was a classic-style adventure game. The next year, he found the ‘Goldilocks zone’ and wrote an IFComp-winning game: *The Impossible Bottle*.^[14]

Hard Puzzle 4 : The Ballad of Bob and Cheryl.^[483] This game series has an interesting history. Ade McTavish, the author, had had several successful games, from the second-place IFComp game *Map*^[484] to the massive and highly-regarded audiovisual game *Worldsmith*.^[485]

Then he released a game called *Hard Puzzle*^[482] whose only point was to be really hard. Unfairly so, even. People were encouraged to not spoil the ending once they had solved it. I learned the ending from decompiling (using the program *glulx-strings*).

More *Hard Puzzle* games were released, specifically designed so that decompiling was not useful.

This particular game was much more complex than any of the others. ‘Decompiling’ is actually part of the gameplay! There are numerous ‘bugs’ that are actually features you have to take advantage of. The game extends beyond a single program onto a different website and a pdf, like an ARG.

It’s pretty clever, but also obtuse; given that, and the ‘4’ in the title potentially scaring off new players, this game suffered a bit in the ratings.

4.25.4 Legacy

Besides the many returning authors we had this year, a lot of future successful/prolific authors got their start in this comp.

This was Olaf Nowacki’s first IFComp, who has gone on to have many popular games in both English and German. Pace Smith, author of *Limerick Heist*,^[743] went on to write a few other well-received limerick games and to help with vetting IFComp games. Jac Colvin, who had several previous games not entered in comps, entered *Each-uisge*,^[143] and went on to do well in several other future comps. Damon Wakes made his first IFComp entry, and went on to make several comedic games, both in parser as well as choice, as well as some more serious games.

4.26 IFComp 2020

4.26.1 Overview and Influences

The year of Covid was the biggest IFComp of all time, coming in at a hefty 103 games! Fittingly, it was also the first comp (since the rule change in 1996) to have two first place winners. Maybe all along the rule was one winner per fifty games...

Where did that size come from? The prevailing theory that I've seen is that mandatory curfews and enforced work from home led people to pick up a lot of hobbies, including, in this case, interactive fiction. There were around eighty games in '19 and around seventy every year after 2020 so far, so there was definitely a significant bump.

How much did the drastic events of the Covid pandemic show up in the games themselves?

Not as much as you'd think, but definitely more than zero.

- One of the winners, *The Impossible Bottle*,^[14] uses the pandemic to frame some of its story.
- The fourteenth place winner, *Alone*,^[856] is a tale about the aftermath of a deadly pandemic, which the author says is inspired by Covid.
- *Congee*,^[51] the eighteenth placing game, is about recovering from illness
- *Babyface*^[674] has a theme around masks (although, not the kind you might think!)

2020 also saw the George Floyd protests, which swept through the US but also made international news. At least one game, *Stand Up/Stay Silent*,^[327] was heavily influenced by the protests, and included links to BLM materials.

Anyone aware of other games from this year with links to cultural events, let me know!

This year was also notable for having several repeat entrants, including Joseph Pentangelo with two games, Xavid as co-author on two games, and three interconnected games pseudonymously entered by Joseph Goodness.

Outside of IFComp, some notable games this year included:

- *Pageant*,^[120] the first in the eponymous Pageantverse series of games by Autumn Chen, and
- *Stay?*,^[446] by E. Jade Lomax, a time-loop game which has proven to be one of the most -popular choice-based games of all time on IFDB.
- *Tristram Island*,^[425] which was notable as a commercial (though now free) retro game targetting many, many old platforms.

Finally, many well-known authors from the past entered games in the competition. I started to list them but there were at least twenty games on there, so just know that many excellent authors from years past returned for this year.

I entered a game this year, the last that I have to this point, called *The Magpie Takes the Train*.^[472] It's notably influenced by *Alias 'The Magpie'*,^[321] for which it was written as an authorized sequel as a competition prize.

4.26.2 Top Games

Tavern Crawler

This game tied for first place, and is also the first Twine game to win IFCComp! While a choice-based game had won in the past (*Detectiveland*^[389]), this was the first game to use the once-controversial but now-popular Twine engine and win the comp.

It's a traditional dungeon romp but with all the polish and trimmings available. Rather than focusing on dozens of stats, it narrows down to just three, plus money. You have a cast of three characters, including you and your two romanceable companions. Your quest couldn't be more classic: slay the dragon.

But everything has its own twist. The UI has all sorts of subtle and overt features to help gameplay, with colors and sidebars and such. Your companions are three-dimensional, having strengths and weaknesses, and the city feels like a real little microcosm.

The Impossible Bottle.^[14] This is the third IFCComp game written by the author in his Dialog engine, a variant of Prolog that compiles to Infocom game file formats.

The idea is that you are a little girl that has been asked by her father to clean up for dinner. But you quickly discover that your house is a little...peculiar.

As the plot twists and unique puzzles of this game are much of its charm, I don't want to spoil it. So I'll focus on the features that I believe helped this game in the competition. One major advantage is that Dialog, unlike ZIL or Inform, was made with modern browser play in mind. One of the compiling options is to use online-optimized play that allows for multimedia features. The main feature this game uses is a dynamic list of commands that doesn't appear in the transcript, as well as clickable dialog menus also designed for a nice scrollbar and transcript experience.

The majority of the game can be played with links, with, I think, one puzzle that requires you to type in a different command. This was to provide a balance between ease of play for new and casual parser players with non-trivial challenges for parser experts.

Vain Empires.^[451] This sprawling devil/angel game was one of the largest in the competition. It comes with a neat graphical map which Xavid has done a few times before (including twice in 2020, the other time being *Seasonal Apocalypse Disorder*^[865]).

In this game, you play as a devil who, intangible, must manipulate others by stealing the thoughts and wants of their hearts and giving them to those you want to manipulate. However, your angelic counterparts are also at work, and seem to be breaking the delicate balance you've established over time.

A very strong contender for winner, although a few people noted weaknesses in the final act.

4.26.3 Other Games

As the largest comp of all time, I will of course not be able to mention all games, including many notable ones.

The Eleusinian Miseries.^[671] This game marked the debut of Mike Russo, an author who has become well-known for his reviews, both for their size (very long and in-depth) and number (currently 462 on IFDB). He also participates extensively in the IF community, including serving as an editor for The Rosebush magazine.

His first game, *Eleusinian Miseries*, combines Wodehousian humor with ancient Greek mystery cults. It's a verbose puzzle fest filled with quips and humor ranging from the educated and obscure to the goofy and boyish. As a first effort, it's especially impressive. The author would go on to write the game *Sting*^[670] one year later, an autobiographical game with a very different feel but as much or more polish.

A Rope of Chalk.^[799] One of the many well-made IFComp games that have been entered by popular author Ryan Veeder over the years, this is a semi-kind-a-autobiographical game that reflects on the past (in this case, a sidewalk chalk competition). In the way that it evokes nostalgia for an earlier time and has two frames of reference for time, it reminds me of the trend of 'game framed as a reviewer/older author revisiting a classic game' that began to get big in 2021 and on. I don't believe this game influenced those (they had been in production for a great deal of time) and others I've talked to have felt the same, but I feel like this game is unique in several ways and presages some of what would come later. It's the Neanderthal in the phylogenetic tree of such games; not an ancestor, but someone close enough for communication and mutual interaction.

Lore Distance Relationship.^[534] Bez really has a wide range of games and stories, from non-fictional essays on modern issues to elaborate mockups of fictional websites.

This is a fully voice-acted game that features a fake version of the Neopets online game. It shows vignettes spread out over several years as you follow an online friend who grows and changes with you.

The Knot.^[651] The Knot is actually three games in a trenchcoat, entered under three different pseudonyms and with three different stories. All of them, however, were tied together by similar cover art and css/styling.

The idea is that each game has a road block in it that can only be solved by one of the other games. Information in one is passed to the rest.

To those that figured it out (and it was spread early on in the forums), it was interesting to connect the three. To those that didn't, each game was an impassable roadblock. Each game featured a different genre (space, Nazis, and magic).

It wasn't the first set of games in IFComp history to have secrets to pass around, the first being the Hat Puzzle in 2011.

Accelerate.^[376] This is probably the largest (or one of the largest) games in terms of file size in IFComp history, weighing in at a gig. It has twenty-one chapters of surreal narrative about plots, conspiracies, transhumanism, cults,

and who knows what else.

It made extensive use of animation and styling and effects.

The Cursed Pickle of Shireton.^[564] Hanon Ondricek's game was unique in its scope. It's a simulated MMORPG told using the AXMA system, and includes things like casting spells through quick-reaction clicking. The narrative has many layers, and ends up using multiple authoring systems and a self-recursive style.

You Will Thank Me as Fast as You Thank a Werewolf.^[62] This game was written by GPT-2! At this point in time, GPT was kind of a joke. The text and art being put out by AI were pretty easy to spot (as many reviewers did here, although the use of GPT-2 was noted in-game), as they were largely incoherent at the time. "Ha!" we reviewers could say, "How silly; to try to have an AI write text for you." Little did we know...

4.26.4 Legacy

Never again has the IFComp gotten so large. At the time, it felt to me as if there was just such a strain on players and reviewers, but it has noticeably decreased since then. The extra two weeks given in the judging period definitely helped.

The Dialog system did get a little bump in use after this (and I, as a prize, wrote a sequel in Dialog to *The Impossible Bottle*^[14] called *The Impossible Stairs), but still only a few games have been released in the system.

The use of AI went from easily detectable in this competition to now almost undetectable in 2023 and 2024, and AI-generated images have become a hot topic of discussion.

Several people made their debut in 2020 who later went on to support the IF community in various ways, including Mike Russo, Lance Campbell, Alex Harby, Joey Acrimonious, Seth Paxton, and others.

Interestingly enough, with 2020 having the first Twine first placed winner, the next year, 2021, swung heavily back towards parser games, with the top six games being parser based, as we will see in the next section.

4.27 IFComp 2021

4.27.1 Overview and Influences

Coming after the largest comp ever, this IFComp had a more manageable seventy-one games. In contrast to the trends of the recent past, this year had more highly-rated parser games and what feels like more parser games in general. Six of the top ten were parser. However, the variety in the parsers used was high; this year had two Adventuron games, several custom parser games, a Dialog game, multiple Quest games, and a TADS game.

While this was an especially fruitful year for parser games, the choice-based games were in no way diminished. Long-term authors like Agnieszka Trzaska and Autumn Chen entered games which I consider some of the best in their

oeuvres, and new authors like Charm Cochran appeared who would go on to contribute a lot later on.

There doesn't seem to be a strong theme running through games this year or significant influence from real-life events like Covid.

This year had several rule changes, most significantly that authors could now vote as judges! This was put in place to address complaints that the number of games and authors had outpaced judges so that games were getting very few votes. The rule change ended up working out well, and is still in place. It's possible that the higher rankings of parser games was influenced by the author vote, but we'll see that 2022's results render that unlikely.

Another rule change was to have an award for a 'Rising Star', to highlight the highest-placing game by a first-time entrant.

The influx of parser games and the smaller number of entries may have been influenced by the Parser Comp which ran for this year. First run in 2015, it was revived in 2021 by new organizers and had a fruitful year. I would have thought that having a separated competition for parser games would have drawn off some games from IFComp and, indeed, the number of entries is lower; but I also would have thought it would lower the number of parser games in IFComp, and that did happen.

Other notable games released before IFComp in 2021 include *Excalibur*^[324] by J. J. Guest, G. C. Baccaris, and Duncan Bowsman, which was a fictional wiki describing a piece of lost media, and the game *The Weight of a Soul*^[863] by Chin Kee Yong, which is an alchemy fantasy steampunk game and one of the few games to have been entered in Spring Thing twice (once as a Back Garden demo and once as a full game).

4.27.2 Top Games

And Then You Come to a House Not Unlike the Previous One^[59] and *Infinite Adventure*,^[32] both by BJ Best. These games were entered as a pair in IFComp. The second, *Infinite Adventure*, is a DOS-only game that has procedurally generated, simplistic adventures of the 'take item in room A to unlock chest in room B to give item to NPC in Room C'.

The actual winning game, *And Then You Come to a House Not Unlike the Previous One*, is a complex Inform game that tells the story of two kids playing *Infinite Adventure* before one of them has to move away forever. In a way reminiscent of *Endless, Nameless*,^[93] there are multiple layers to the game; you can be playing *Infinite Adventure* (or another game) while simultaneously talking to your friend.

I think one reason this game was (and is) so popular is that it works on several levels covering a broad range of people interested in IF.

- The base layer of the game is a lot of fetch quests, hopping from one computer application to another. It satisfies the original 'parser itch' of wanting to pick up things and solve puzzles. Instead of making puzzles

super easy, each puzzle has two solutions or more, so players have more chances to feel smart by stumbling on a solution.

- The ‘conversation layer’ uses a menu system and goes in-depth with good writing, satisfying people that are into games for the dialogue or are used to choice-based games.
- The ‘meta puzzle’ layers of ‘what is actually going on with this game?’ and ‘how does the other game tie in?’ satisfy fans of the late 90’s/early 2000’s school of symbolic gameplay.

It turns out that you can get ideas from the main game on what to type into the DOS game, which gives you a command you can use back in the main game. Pretty neat!

Dr Horror’s House of Terror^[480] by Ade McTavish. I really like Ade McTavish’s work. I started interacting with IFComp a year after his game *Fifteen Minutes*,^[481] and I enjoyed *Map*^[484] in 2015. Since then, he’s released numerous polished games.

This one came very close to winning, with only a .08 or so difference in scores. It’s a parser game set on a B-movie studio lot, with several little studio buildings clustered around a courtyard. Each studio has its own setting, puzzle type and themes. For instance, one has a travelling menace and is themed around old Europe; another is Egyptian themed and relies on animals.

This game still has relatively few reviews now, several years later. I think it deserves a few more!

The Song of the Mockingbird^[112] by Mike Carletta. The Western is one of the most neglected genres in IF. While there are some notable highlights like *Gun Mute*^[571] and *You Will Select a Decision*,^[341] there are less than sixty Western games listed on IFDB out of several thousand.

This is a great example of the genre, with gunfights, a hero left in a hopeless situation, the glimpse of new technology right around the corner threatening the western way of life, and a hopeless love.

The gameplay is technical and more difficult than the other parser games, with tricky mechanisms and puzzles that require a lot of thinking. And singing, too.

Reviewers noted the difficulty inherent in the game and its solid writing and serious tone.

4.27.3 Other Games

What Heart Heard Of, Ghost Guessed.^[821] This was the debut game for Amanda Walker, and it went on to win the Best Game XYZZY Award. She went on to author numerous games in the last few years and is one of the most successful current authors in terms of nominations and wins for the XYZZY awards and the IFDB Awards.

Amanda Walker’s unique feature is her use of poems as source material for games. Many of her games are direct adaptations of poems, with key figures

and puzzles taken from them. Other games are based on faery tales or prompts from others.

This particular game has you play as a ghost with limited capacity to interact with the surrounding world. By exploring objects that have memories associated with them, you learn new emotions and act on objects through those means. The story itself is classic gothic, with hidden evil, isolation, and of course a big creepy house.

The Libonotus Cup^[241] by Nils Fagerburg. This interesting game uses a custom javascript engine to enable a parser/choice hybrid interface with nice text styling. The game itself is lighthearted, with a pirate-themed sailing race and a variety of puzzle mechanics. It's a relatively rare example of a custom parser engine that feels as good as the traditional ones (Inform, TADS, etc.)

A Paradox Between Worlds^[118] by Autumn Chen. This Choicescript game does a lot of interesting things. Perhaps most surprisingly, it simulates Tumblr, letting you follow a bunch of different people and choose what to reblog and not. It puts you in a fandom for a fictional series, and part of the game involves you roleplaying in the series-within-the game, giving you two layers of gameplay. It also covers a fictional version of JK Rowling's progressively stronger anti-trans statements and how that affects the community.

Sting by Mike Russo.^[670] This game is a very polished autobiographical game in a linear and mostly (but not entirely!) puzzleless style. In many ways it's reminiscent of IF from the early 2000's like *Photograph*^[230] by Steve Evans or Emily Short's *Best of Three*,^[715] with its intense focus on the details and emotions of realistic situations (I'm not sure what word I'm looking for here; literary? hyper-realistic? non-magical realism?). One example is the following exchange:

>l

Back Yard

The back yard of your family's house is really big. The garden, with a pagoda, is on one side, the swing set is on the other, and a fence runs around it. The back door goes into the kitchen, and you could go north past the house to the front yard except you're not supposed to go there by yourself.

Liz is here, sticking out her tongue at you.

>play swings

Wait, there wasn't a swing set yet when this happened – my mistake.

The way that every description is used to make a point or to tell an emotion really reminds me of that early period, and of course of *Photopia*.^[97] I remember reading advice from Adam Cadre that every response the player gets should be rewarding in some way.

The autobiographical/retrospective nature is unusual, although a few other games had explored similar concepts (such as 2019's *Meeting Robb Sherwin*^[386] by Jizaboz or Ryan Veeder's *Rope of Chalk*^[799] in 2020). But its combination

of all these elements is unique, making it one of the most unusual games of the last few years.

we, the remainder^[141] by Charm Cochran. This was the first Charm Cochran game I played. While it didn't place as highly as some of the games on this list, it stuck with me. It is a Twine game that uses a kind of textual compass rose to navigate around.

It's full of religious imagery, dealing with the aftermath of a cult and its actions. Lots of surrealness. Charm has gone on to make many games that have similar strong emotional cores with surreal, often religious imagery.

Assorted Others Some other games I'd like to mention in passing:

- *Cygnets Committee*^[584] by PB Parjeter contains live action archival black and white footage in addition to numerous sound-based puzzles, a distinctly unusual combination in IFComp.
- Sarah Willson made her debut with *Closure*,^[853] a very technically impressive and well-written game where a parser is presented visually as text messages and in-game as you communicating with someone exploring their ex's dorm room.
- *Off-Season at the Dream Factory*^[114] was a third (!) game entered this comp by BJ Best written in Adventuron and using several heavily pixelated photos from cosplay sites.
- *The Vaults*^[205] was a roleplaying game with gems and microtransactions (that were turned off at the time) that is now on Steam.
- *Universal Hologram*^[654] used early AI art models. At that time, AI art was noticeably non-realistic and generally had severe deformities or issues, which was perfect for a surreal game. Many reviewers praised the AI art, which was a novelty. It wouldn't be until later years that the art would get more controversial. Stephen Bond, author of *Rameses*^[71] and *The Cabal*^[74] from decades ago, came back with *The Best Man*,^[73] a psychologically gripping examination of 'nice guys'.
- *D'ARKUN*,^[39] by Michael Baltes, is one of the few full-length Dialog games in existence. Bizarrely, there were two games about assembling a rock band to use the power of music to stop people from being mind controlled: *AardVarK Versus the Hype*,^[782] by Truthcraze, and *Codex Sadistica: A Heavy-Metal Minigame*,^[271] by grave snail games.

4.27.4 Legacy

Many new authors entered this competition who later became very prolific or had solid, popular games (such as Amanda Walker, Charm Cochran, Sarah Willson, Travis Moy, and several others).

Dr Horror's House of Terror^[480] directly influenced my level design when I wrote *Never Gives Up Her Dead*,^[471] with the idea of separate chunks of game

that each have their own setting and puzzle style, with the protagonist travelling between them.

And Then You Come to a House Not Unlike the Previous One^[59] seemed to have spawned an entire subgenre of nostalgia games where the PC is playing an older game on a computer while commenting on it to others or otherwise having some ‘modern’ framing. Later examples include *Repeat the Ending*^[148] by Drew Cook and *Hand Me Down*^[857] by Brett Witty.

The generally accepted use of AI art in *Universal Hologram*^[654] is in stark contrast to the later backlash against AI once it became capable of accurately recreating many artist’s styles. 2022 would have many games with AI art covers.

There are plenty of other great games from 2021’s IFComp. If you feel I missed one, let me know down below!

4.28 IFComp 2022

4.28.1 Overview and Influences

This was a very strong year for choice-based games, with the top four games being choice-based, although a parser game would go on to win the XYZZY awards (almost a complete reversal from 2015, when *Birdland*^[338] won despite placing behind several parser games).

Amanda Walker had an outsized influence outside of IFComp, releasing blockbuster parser games in Spring Thing, Parsercomp, the Text Adventure Literacy Jam, and Ectocomp, all of which ended up rating higher on IFDB and in awards than most IFComp games.

Jim Nelson made his debut appearance in the Winter TADS Jam with *Past Present*.^[520] He went on to take fifth in IFComp and win the XYZZY and IFDB Awards.

The biggest new influence this year was, in my opinion, AI art, which was used by several games in their cover art, and would grow to be a contentious topic.

4.28.2 Top Games

The Grown-Up Detective Agency^[340] by Brendan Patrick Hennessy. Brendan Hennessy is, by a wide margin, my favorite choice-based author, and is largely responsible for my interest in the format with his games *Birdland* and *You Will Select a Decision*.

So I was thrilled to see a new game by him in the competition. This is a sequel to *Birdland*. While it lacks the rhythmic structure and absurd birds of the first game, it gains more nonlinear structure and a lot more poignancy. *The Grown-up Detective Agency* sees our former child detective now grown up, pursuing more mundane crimes. Things take a surprising turn, though, when her younger self turns up and questions her about the path she’s taken in life.

While this game topped the IFComp charts, it had a bit weaker showing in the XYZZYs, only being nominated for two awards and winning one, for Best Individual PC.

The Absence of Miriam Lane^[152] by Abigail Corfman. Abigail Corfman was another exciting name to see. She is the author of *Open Sorcery*,^[151] one of the most popular Twine games of all time on IFDB (and a commercial game at that), and her game *16 Ways to Kill A Vampire at McDonalds*^[150] was the first choice-based game to ever win the Best Puzzles XYZZY award.

This game has gorgeous artwork, stylized but legible CSS, and pensive, beautiful music. Like *The Grown Up Detective Agency*, this is an investigation into a disappearance with a poignant twist. A man's wife has disappeared, and you've been asked to find her. But she's not just missing from the house; she's missing from everyone's mind as well.

This is a hard game; as you learn more about the missing woman, you are able to find ways to help her, but if you choose the wrong methods, you can end up hurting her, with no way to fix things.

A Long Way to the Nearest Star.^[439] by SV Linwood. This was SV Linwood's first entry, and it's a doozy. They later went on to win IFComp in 2023 with *Dr Ludwig and the Devil*^[440] Right now, those two games top the charts of IFDB for the years 2022-2023, each with forty-one ratings.

This is a twine game with a big world map and a parser-like inventory system. The game nudges you into using the system right away by requiring you to check your inventory and turn on your flashlight on the first turn.

You play as a thief on the run who's crash landed onto a derelict ship. The main star of the game is the ship's AI, SOLIS, who assists you as you wander around investigating datapads and robot parts. The game offers you a lot of freedom in how you interact with SOLIS and what the endgame is. It's a great example of the parser-like choice games that have gained increasing prominence in recent years.

4.28.3 Other Games

The Archivist and the Revolution.^[122] Autumn Chen was no stranger to IFComp, having taken tenth place in the previous year. But the system used here was new to the comp: dendry, a system that Autumn Chen used to reconstruct Emily Short's game *Bee*,^[714] which had originally used the Varytale system.

This game features a far-future protagonist who is part of a hidden minority. Out of work, you have to pinch pennies while picking up freelance jobs decoding multimedia that was embedded in the genomes of microbes years ago. It proved very popular, earning several XYZZY nominations, including one for Best Game.

According to Cain^[519] by Jim Nelson. This serious and long TADS game contained a great deal of multimedia (which I unfortunately didn't see when I first played). It features an alchemical future world where historians like you can travel through time to investigate the past. In this case, you seek to learn about Cain, the first murderer.

The game placed lower in IFComp (fifth place) but won Best Game at both the XYZZYs and the first IFDB Awards. This is something that has happened many times in the past, where a more lighthearted, easy game has won IFComp (like *Earth and Sky* 2^[541] and 3^[542] or *Alias ‘The Magpie’*^[321]) while a more serious game has won the XYZZY awards (like *Savoir-Faire*,^[733] *Blue Chairs*,^[412] or *Bogeyman*^[744]).

It is the most popular game of the ongoing TADS Renaissance, a resurgence in the once-dying system in the last few years. It now ranks on IFDB as the third-most popular TADS game of all time, beating out heavy hitters like *Gun Mute*.^[571] or *Sunset Over Savannah*^[142]

January^[442] by litrouke. The author litrouke lives in my head mostly as the creator of 10pm,^[441] a game that uses a lot of emojis to communicate.

This game is notable for its heavy use of graphics and animation. Navigation is done via a calendar, and text often morphs and changes as you read it. The story is a grim one of loss and disaster.

Thanatophobia^[292] by Robert Goodwin. I just saw as I looked this game up that it is by the same Robert Goodwin who is listed on The PK Girl, one of the most popular Adrift games ever.

This game is noticeable for being a chatbot rather than a traditional parser, and even more noticeable, in the 2020s, for being a chatbot that doesn’t rely on AI. Everything here is hand-rolled. The author has used this system for a couple of games.

I was convinced it was AI after I asked it who made *Starcraft*^[760] (or something like that) and it said Blizzard, but I later looked at the code and found that the author had hand coded in several video games and their publishers (either this game or one of the author’s other games).

The Lottery Ticket^[26] by Anonymous. This game was one of a series throughout 2022 by an author who had developed a new system for interactive fiction. Basically, each game took a classic short story and read it in chunks through a framing story of someone reading it. Every now and then (in one game, this happened only once), the story would stop and ask you to fill in the blank with a word related to how you felt, then it would continue.

Under the hood, it used sentiment analysis. If you said a ‘good’ word, it would add a sentence about something positive to the next few paragraphs. If a ‘bad’ word, it would add something else.

The author and the community butted heads a lot concerning the merits of this system, and the author ended up removing all games from online and changing their name to Anonymous where possible.

This is one reason I advocate for games to be archived rather than stored online. When writing historical works like this essay, it’s a shame to come across things that no longer exist.

Assorted Others

Some other games I’d like to mention in passing:

- Arthur DiBianca placed very highly with *Trouble in Sector 471*,^[196] continuing his string of limited parser games.

- Several authors associated to NYU entered Texture games as part of a workshop. This continued in 2023.
- Andrew Schultz continued his over-a-decade-long streak of entering IF-Comp games, this time with two new entries.
- Jim Aikin released *The Only Possible Prom Dress*,^[9] a sequel to the game *Not Just An Ordinary Ballerina*,^[8] which is included in the Frotz iOS app and was one of my early favorites. This new game was one of the longest games ever entered into the comp.

4.28.4 Legacy

Several new authors continued to contribute to the IF world after this competition:

- SV Linwood went on to win the whole comp the next year.
- Jim Nelson has gone on to contribute numerous reviews and offering advice to other authors, especially with TADS.
- Jim MacBrayne, a new entrant this year, has gone on to release numerous games using the same BASIC engine.
- Manonamora entered *The Thick Table Tavern*.^[460] Manonamora would go on to write numerous games in both English and French (33, at latest count) and co-organized The Neo-Interactives, a group that runs non-stop game jams on a yearly schedule.
- William Dooling released *Lost Coastlines*,^[198] a game like his very popular *Skybreak*!^[199] but set in a fantasy world rather than sci-fi.

I started the IFDB awards the following year to be an earlier counterpart to the XZZZY Awards, and which included many of these games in its inaugural winners.

4.29 IFComp 2023

4.29.1 Overview and Influences

This year had a proliferation of out-of-IFComp competitions and games, stoking a lot of creative efforts. That I believe trickled down to IFComp.

I took over Spring Thing from Aaron Reed very soon before the 2023 competition, and by then several great games had already been created:

- *Repeat the Ending*,^[148] one of the competition winners, has zoomed to the tops of IFDB charts, and is now the fourth-highest rated Spring Thing game ever, and won the 2023 IFDB Awards. It takes the form of a retrospective of a fictional 1996 game that covers topics like mental illness and

the death of a parent. Its ‘game within a game’ approach of looking back at retro adventure bears similarities with BJ Best’s *And Then You Come To A House Not Unlike The Previous One*,^[59] and with two games in the IFComp itself, *LAKE Adventure*^[60] and *Hand Me Down*.^[857]

- Spring Thing also showcased a game written in Google Forms named *The Kuolema*^[379] (later ported to Twine); its author, Ben Jackson, would go on to place highly in IFComp.
- *I Am Prey*^[770] by Joey Tanden, a complex replayable hunter-prey game, continued the TADS renaissance of the last year or two, being the first TADS game entered in Spring Thing in seven years. Several more TADS games would show up in IFComp.

New competitions included ideas like Seed Comp (first entrants share game ideas with each other, then make games based on them), the Bare Bones Jam (using minimal assets and styling), Shufflecomp (based on an earlier iteration), and the Single Choice Jam (where only one choice can be made each game). At least one IFComp entry was a game made for one of these comps; Onno Brouwer’s *One King to Loot them All*^[86] was a late Single Choice Jam entry.

Ryan Veeder had also begun, a couple years earlier, a series of time-travelling games about a young assassinating. These *Little Match Girl* games became especially prolific this year, with six entries in 2023. Right in the middle of them was an IFComp game, *Little Match Girl 4*.^[805]

4.29.2 Top Games

Dr Ludwig and the Devil^[440] by SV Linwood. SV Linwood, who took third the previous year, came back with a vengeance this year, earning a whopping 8.43 average score. In contrast to the parser-like Twine game of the previous year, this game is an Inform game featuring, well, *Dr Ludwig and the Devil*.

You’ve summoned the devil for power in a small village, but he’s not inclined to make a deal with you. You have to outwit both the devil and the folks in the village in order to come out alive and on top.

This game has a lot of features common to XZZZY winners, such as in-depth implementation, vibrant characters and a strong storyline. It tied for one of the Best Game IFDB awards and is likely to take home some prizes at the XZZZYs later this year.

LAKE Adventure^[60] by BJ Best. This is BJ Best’s second ‘retrospective’ ifcomp game, after his previous winner two years prior. Whereas that one was kind of flashy, nostalgic, and sweet, this one is more sad and grim. It’s written in AGT, a language predating TADS and Inform, but is an especially polished example of it. Exploring an old game, you encounter comments from the author, who is portrayed as discussing, explaining, and apologizing for the game. The game resonated with players, making BJ Best one of six authors to place both first and second in IFComp (including Emily Short and Ryan Veeder).

The online version of this game included a DOS emulator, making this game a pretty impressive technical feat. It's one I'd like to revisit and learn from in the future.

The Little Match Girl 4^[805] by Ryan Veeder. The Little Match Girl games are a long-ongoing series, mostly entered outside of competitions. While this has '4' in the title, there have been several unnamed entries as well.

The concept lends itself well to games. The idea is based on Hans Christian Andersen's tale, where a little dying math girl stares into a flame and envisions another life. In these games, the match girl can teleport through space and time by staring into flames. She is adopted by Ebenezer Scrooge (taking the name Ebenezerabeth) and becomes an assassin for hire.

The games have mild continuity but are mostly episodic, like *The Simpsons*^[309] or early *Adventure Time*.^[825]

This game uses extensive CSS with the vorple engine to present changing colors, cinematic openings, and a speed-based game. There are many worlds, both prehistoric and spacelike, both fantasy-filled and mundane. True to IF norms, the IFcomp-entered game is the most-played and most popular of the set on IFDB.

4.29.3 Other Games

How Prince Quisborne the Feckless Shook His Title^[867] by John Ziegler. This game is really big. Part of the TADS renaissance, it is the tale of a feckless young man who needs to win the hand of his love. You, a mature, loyal knight, will teach him wisdom, maturity, and compassion over the course of this many-many-many-hours-long game.

Mechanically, you are visiting villages and cities, getting quests, and fulfilling them by fetching items, learning patterns, and solving riddles (in one case, a whole mountain full of mathematical and wordplay puzzles). Along the way, cutscenes trigger regarding the emotional, spiritual and moral growth of your young man.

Many actions will trigger whole pages of text, and the number of puzzles and rooms exceeds all but the largest of games. I made one of the largest Inform games of all time at around 350K words, beating out *.*^[644] This game far outstrips mine in size, at least 1.25-2 times larger in text. The only parser game I know of that is larger is a collaborative erotic game with 1,000,000 words.

This game can provide weeks or months of satisfaction to the diligent player.

Gestures Towards Divinity^[138] by Charm Cochran. This game taught me the difference between Francis Bacon, philosopher, and Francis Bacon, painter. It is Charm Cochran's most polished and most popular game, a parser game set in a museum exhibition with the paintings of Francis Bacon. Throughout the game, you can enter the world of the paintings and talk with the characters, as well as real humans in the museum, asking them about life, love, and about Francis Bacon itself.

Its style is open-ended and exploratory, although it does include achievements as a way of guiding the player.

My Pseudo-Dementia Exhibition^[532] by Bez. This is another game featuring an interactive museum display with paintings, but this one is in Twine and shows the media visually.

It's an autobiographical game, and is Bez's most popular game. It tells a harrowing real life story of someone losing his ability to remember before being diagnosed with pseudo-dementia and going in for in-patient treatment. Bez's ability to paint real life with vivid strokes comes to the fore here, making this an effective piece of interactive non-fiction.

Milliways: the Restaurant at the End of the Universe^[254] by Max Fog. This game stood out in a year of that included multiple retro languages like AGT and BASIC. Milliways is written in ZIL, the reconstructed form of the language the original Infocom games was written in.

What's more, it expands on actual code and outlines for a scrapped Infocom game of the same name. While it attracted noticeable attention, its association with one of the the most popular Infocom games ever led to some harsh comparisons.

Assorted Others

There are a great many games this year where I'd like to say 'This author, who made good games in the past, made an especially great game in a similar vein that I enjoyed'. These include:

1. *Honk*,^[329] by Alex Harby, a fun circus parser game that won over people's hearts. Alex had previously released *Vampire Ltd*.
2. Ben Jackson, author of the popular google forms game *Kuolema* in Spring Thing 2023, wrote *LUNIUM*,^[378] a Twine game about amnesia, Victorian London, and escape room puzzles.
3. Arthur DiBianca, longtime IFComp entrant with perennially popular pieces, released *The Vambrace of Destiny*,^[195] a kind of *MetroidVania* involving spells.
4. Felicity Banks, an author who first entered when I did in 2015 and who has authored numerous Choicescript games, returned to IFComp with *Bali B&B*,^[40] her most popular game yet.
5. JJ Guest wrote *To Sea in a Sieve*,^[323] a sequel to one of my top ten all-time favorite games, *To Hell in a Hamper*.^[322] While this one was more difficult and a bit more serious, it was my personal favorite game of the competition in a very strong year.
6. Victor Gijssbers, author of many notable games like *De Baron*,^[277] *Kerkerkruip*,^[280] and *Turandot*,^[282] wrote *Xanthippe's Last Night with Socrates*,^[283] a popular Ink game involving an attempt from a wife to get her husband to spend the night with her.

Like the previous year, several Texture games were released as part of what seems to be a cooperative writing workshop in New York.

4.29.4 Legacy

We'll have to see on the long-term legacy of this IFComp. Several first-time entrants have gone on to make numerous contributions on the forums and in other competitions.

Part IV

Other Competitions

Chapter 5

Spring Thing

Spring Thing is an IF Competition that has been held (with some minor exceptions) every year since 2002. Held in April/May, It has provided a counterpoint to the crowded and intense Interactive Fiction Competition held in October of each year. Over time, it has evolved from a showcase for long games to a place for philosophical experimentation to a springboard for new authors. In this essay, I'll going to delve into its history.

[Unlike IFComp, there are many Spring Thing games which I have not played, so I am relying more on reviews here. I have tried all of the winners.]

I welcome responses from individuals who have more memories or knowledge about Spring Thing.

5.1 Origins

Spring Thing began in 2002 when it was organized by well-known IF author Adam Cadre. In his own words:^[101]

Every fall, immediately after the annual IF competition comes to a close, there are innumerable proposals about how to remedy perceived flaws in the system. One of these is to have a second comp in the spring, in order to reduce the number of games in the fall, and give people a batch of games to play at a different time of the year. Traditionally, once the subject is broached it's discussed to death, generating increasingly bad feelings. Usually the last exchange is something along the lines of, "Look, if you want to do this stupid idea, just do it!" "Well, I don't WANT to do it if THAT's gonna be your attitude!"

The big data point missing from these discussions is this: what would actually happen if someone were to run a spring comp? So let's try it and find out! The rules should look familiar to those acquainted with the fall comp, but there are a few differences, as this comp has

slightly different goals. This isn't meant to be a big extravaganza with fifty titles ranging from the atrocious to the sublime and everything in between; instead, the ideal here is to have about twelve really good games for people to play at the beginning of summer. And away we go:

The comp's second organizer listed several of its rules goals:^[68]

1. The Spring Thing promotes longer games.
2. It provides some relief to the dry season between the autumn deluges of the IF Comp.
3. Adam's original rules – and mine – attempt to discourage shoddy entries. For example, the \$7 entry fee aims to discourage people from submitting anything grossly amateurish or (worse) intentionally bad. With that out of the way, judges can spend more time on each of the serious games – and more time is what's needed to judge longer games.
4. This isn't a "purpose," but... as far as judging goes, yes, there is no time limit. I'd like it if judges were able to finish each game in the competition before voting on it, but that is not always realistic, and it is not required.

As noted above, Spring Thing for many years required a \$7 entry fee. The smaller group of entrants, entrance fee, and lack of time limit on games all contributed to a unique atmosphere for the competition over the years.

Let's break the comp down year by year, and highlight its winners:

5.2 Spring Thing 2002

The inaugural Spring Thing met with mixed success. There was only one entrant: *Tinseltown Blues*,^[334] by Chip Hayes.

On one hand, the low turnout was disappointing. Adam Cadre declared Chip the winner and allowed him to upload and announce the game in any way he wanted.

On the other hand, *Tinseltown Blues* was what many had hoped for: a game far larger than a 2-hour IFComp game, a big puzzlefest set in Hollywood.

Playing the game now, I enjoy it, but it suffers from one of the most common problems for big games: pacing. Some people are great at pacing big games; Zarf did a great job with *Hadean Lands*^[598] and *So Far*,^[609] Short with *Counterfeit Monkey*,^[720] and Gentry with *Anchorhead*,^[273] for example. But many people either 1) railroad the player far too much, or 2) don't give any reasonable directions at all. This game does both; the opening is highly railroaded and full of text dumps, and the later parts require difficult-to-guess actions and a tightly-timed sequence that renders the game unwinnable if not taken care of in time.

This marked the first time that Spring Thing was used to release a very large game that wouldn't fit in IFComp.

5.3 Spring Thing 2003

Cadre announced the second Spring Thing in June of 2002, giving authors plenty of time to prepare. In the second year of Spring Thing, interest picked up a bit. There were four games released this year, instead of one.

Entrants had various reasons for putting their games in the comp. Two of the games (*Doris de Lightning*,^[706] *Cross of Fire*^[111]) seem to have been entered here because they were longer than the traditional two hours.

The winner, *Max Blaster and Doris de Lightning Against the Parrot Creatures of Venus* was big and flashy, the equivalent of a summer blockbuster movie. Written by Emily Short and Dan Shiovitz (author of *Bad Machine*,^[705] among other games), this was a really long superhero game involving a Bond-like Max and a superhero Doris as two playable PCs.

The game is quite movie-like; it opens with a cinematic animated-text title screen, and is presented in a linear format of five or so challenges. Each challenge can be played through as Doris or as Max, and the finale requires both.

Unfortunately, the game is plagued with bugs, and some commenters found the pacing off (again, a common problem in large games).

The runner-up *Inevitable*^[405] is by Kathleen Fischer, an author who produced many remarkable games in her most productive years but who is now largely forgotten. *Inevitable* is a brooding sci-fi set piece involving abandoned ruins and ancient artifacts. Like most of her games, *Inevitable* is richly developed and well-programmed, but provides less guidance for the player.

Anssi Räisänen is the most prolific Alan author I know of, and he has been releasing charming, short puzzle games since 2001, with his most recent release being in 2021. His 2003 entry, *Puddles on the Path*,^[634] is of similar quality and style to their others. I like these game; if you try one and like one, there are quite a few more available.

Finally, *Cross of Fire* was a fairly buggy game notable for starting with a scene where you shoot up cocaine as Sherlock Holmes.

This marked the first year to have short games, the first year with Räisänen, and the first year with a Sherlock Holmes game.

5.4 Spring Thing 2004

From a post by Adam Cadre on rec.arts.int-fiction:^[92]

Kevin Venzke wrote:

> Is there a link I can go to for the 2004 Spring Thing?

Er, actually, there was little enough interest, and I've been busy enough, that I wasn't planning to run it anymore. If anyone else

would like to adopt it, either with the same ruleset or something entirely different, be my guest.

Despite many voicing support for Spring Thing and a growing number of mentions about Spring Thing in other topics, no one stepped up to run it in 2004.

2004 was a low year in general for IF, as many long-time authors disappeared after a few disappointing years in terms of player interest. Many big experiments had been done, and people on the forums felt burnt out. From 2005 and on, though, there was a sort of resurgence, with Spring Thing becoming more prominent and highly polished games like *Vespers*,^[188] *Lost Pig*,^[398] and *Violet*^[263] coming out in a few short years.

5.5 Spring Thing 2005

In July of 2004, Greg Boettcher posted the following:^[69]

I have personally been frustrated by the way the IF Comp has put such an emphasis on shorter games. However, after looking at some web sites and some old Usenet postings, I realized that this was unlikely to change, since some people like the short-game emphasis, which was the Comp's original purpose. But I also learned that many other people were frustrated about the IF Comp, both because of this short-game emphasis and because of its tendency to monopolize so many of the games released in any given year. Then I learned about Spring Thing, which I thought was a great antidote to all this. Unfortunately, I learned soon afterward that Spring Thing no longer exists.

Fast-forward to the present: What if somebody revived the Spring Thing? What if *I* revived the Spring Thing? I wrote to Adam Cadre, and he gave me his approval. And I have already done some work on a new Spring Thing web site.

Now the only question is, is there a demand for it? I'm hoping there is, since in my opinion it would benefit the IF community. But it would be a fair-sized commitment; I'd be planning to run the competition for a few years, or at least as long as Adam Cadre did, for two years. And I don't want to do this unless there is a demand for it. Anybody think it's a good idea?

Greg

By the time the comp began next year, it had attracted six entrants, and its first breakout hit.

Aaron Reed entered *Whom The Telling Changed*,^[645] a highly experimental work. In this game, you are a witness to a storyteller in a tribe engaged in a long dialogue, psyching everyone up for a conflict with a rival tribe. Gameplay

proceeds through your character shouting out keywords in an attempt to influence the story and to reach one of multiple endings. It was Aaron Reed's first experimental game (after his successful puzzle game collaboration *Gourmet* in 2003).

The game *Bolivia By Night*^[200] deserves a mention as a long game with an innovative setting with a sort of magical realism (if that term encompasses driving a tank-like hot tub that is magically powered by a dvd of some Olsen Twins expys through a drug-dealer's mansion).

David Whyld entered the first of his four Spring Things Adrift games, *Second Chance*.^[845]

This comp marked the first time a Spring Thing game had a highly experimental winner and launched an author into success, as would happen later with others. It also was the first time a 'short' game had won, and from now on, short games would dominate the comp.

5.6 Spring Thing 2006

This year saw only four entries, but the entry that overshadows them all is *De Baron*.^[277] This is the most iconic Spring Thing game, with over 100 ratings and sixteen reviews on IFDB (Note: that was in 2017; now it's 160 ratings and nineteen reviews), seven XYZZY nominations (and one win), and sixth and ninth place in the Interactive Fiction Top 50 of all time polls from 2011 and 2015.

This game was Victor Gijssber's first and it made a big impression. The review from Play This Thing! says it best:^[735]

The Baron is a provocation, both in form and in content: in form, because it requires the player to choose not only actions but also an ethical philosophy; in content, because it asks what moral options remain for a person who recognizes himself as monstrous.

Robb Sherwin and David Whyld both released games in-line with their previous works as well.

This marked the first time Spring Thing had games centered on big ethical dilemmas.

5.7 Spring Thing 2007

This year was essentially a repeat of the last one. Again, there were four games, with two ADRIFT games and one winning z-code game by Victor Gijssbers.

Gijssber's game, *Fate*,^[278] has not attracted as much attention as *De Baron*, but it is my personal favorite of Gijssber's games. In it, you play a magical mother with foresight. You know that your precious baby is going to be slaughtered at a young age. You can do many different things to try to help them, with varying levels of success provided by your foresight. Unfortunately, the greatest things you can do for your child require the worst deeds at your hands.

David Whyld released yet another ADRIFT game, *The Reluctant Resurrectee*.^[847] This one was clever: you are a disembodied eyeball rolling on a desk. I liked it enough to base part of my 2017 IFComp game *Absence of Law* on it.

This marked the first year with a repeat winner.

5.8 Spring Thing 2008

In 2008, there were only three entries. At this time, intfiction.org was becoming more prominent as r*if's star began to wane.

The biggest entry here was only a preview, and it took third place: Aaron Reed's *Blue Lacuna*.^[644] I don't really consider *Blue Lacuna* a Spring Thing game, as it was entered only partially into Spring Thing. This preview was not well-received, as people wanted more. However, it went on to be one of the most successful IF games of all time, providing well-deserved acclaim for Reed and landing in the top ten of the IFDB Top 100 and the Best IF of All Time polls.

The winner, *Pascal's Wager*^[217] by Doug Egan, was another interesting morality based game in the vein of *De Baron* or *Fate*. The only way to win is to worship God your whole life. Unfortunately, there are six gods, and the right one to worship is chosen randomly, as is the one your parents worship. You are forced to approach several distinct tasks throughout your life which can be approached in any of the six ways (purity, violent brutality, self-preservation, etc.).

This marked the first time that a partial game was entered.

5.9 Spring Thing 2009

In 2009, the IF community was continuing its slump, as more and more players aged out or moved on to other things.

The winner this year was Jim Aikin with *A Flustered Duck*.^[6] Aikin is known for creating big puzzle games like *Not Just an Ordinary Ballerina*^[8] or *Lydia's Heart*^[7] This is another game in the same vein, a solid playable piece that fulfills Spring Thing's original intent.

5.10 Spring Thing 2010

In 2010, there were no entries at all. As Bainespal wrote on intfiction.org:^[36]

Apparently, there was not a single entry! [emote]:shock:[/emote]
That's a little bit of a disappointment, to me. I'll take this as a sign that I need to get off my lazy butt and write the game that I've been thinking about for Spring Thing 2011!"

After 2010, IF began pulling out of its slump as old authors returned to play with their children and the Twine revolution began to take off. This was

also the year when the Choicescript community became more involved with the pre-existing IF communities.

5.11 Spring Thing 2011

This year saw a healthy crop of six new games, including three really big, polished ones.

The winner was by the author of *Anchorhead*.^[273] Called *The Lost Islands of Alabaz*,^[274] it is a long puzzlefest geared towards children. I am currently playing it as I write this, and I really enjoyed it after a very confining introduction. It came with an XYZZY-award winning PDF feelie. Overall, many reviewers found it too simple for adults and too confusing for children. I like it, though.

Sean Shore released *Bonehead*,^[707] a complex baseball game that was very polished but a bit hard to get through. His later IFComp winning game *Hunger Daemon*^[708] exhibits the same polish but with better guidance.

Mentula Macanus^[88] was also released, which is probably the highest-quality game I've never played. It's an incredibly foul and dirty riff on Greek mythology and classic IF games, and it one of the most polarizing games of IF ever created.

This year was the first time a children's game won, and the first year to have more than one or two highly polished games.

5.12 Spring Thing 2012

This year was the calm before the storm, as the slowly reviving parser community was about to be hit with the amazing Howling Dogs in the fall.

The winner was *The Rocket Man From The Sea*,^[347] a charming parser game where you play a child with a strong imagination who encounters a mysterious man. Play changes between the real world and fantasy. I found this game engaging, though brief.

Jim Aikin wrote another big puzzle game, *The White Bull*.^[10] Many of my comments for *A Flustered Duck*^[6] apply here, although this game contains six musical 'cues'.

5.13 Spring Thing 2013

This year was memorable in multiple ways. The winner of the three games was *Witch's Girl*,^[496] a Twine game, and the first Twine game to win any major IF Competition. It's an illustrated game with some very clever branching. I highly recommend it.

It's also notable for introducing Andrew Schultz's first Spring Thing game, *A Roiling Original*.^[685] More and more after this year, authors that were highly productive would enter games into Spring Thing simply because they were making so many and needed somewhere to put them.

5.14 Spring Thing 2014

This was the year that Aaron Reed took over from Greg Boettcher. As Aaron said:^[641]

Finally, you may have noticed that I'm not Greg Boettcher. After nine heroic years of organizing the Thing, Greg is handing off the torch, and I'm pleased and honored to be the one to carry it for a while. As someone who's placed both first (2005) and last (2008) in the Spring Thing, it carries a special place in my heart, so I'm happy to help keep it alive. While I've got long-term plans to make Spring Thing an even more awesome, inclusive, and vital comp, for the 2014 comp everything will be the same as prior years for an easier transition.

This was also a year of great tumult for IF. Gamergate was occurring, and it hit hard in the IF community, as there were both entrenched hardline white male parser gamers already in the community and incoming younger LGBTQ+ creators excited to finally have an outlet. The two collided, resulting in year of great experimentation and also of people leaving the community or being attacked. Many experienced authors supported the new groups.

This Spring Thing was won by a game in the Choose Your Story system, called *The Price of Freedom: Innocence Lost*^[663] by Briar Rose. There were three Choose Your Story games entered this year, and it provoked a reaction from the community. There was intense name-calling and profanity laden rants from both sides.

The winning game itself is most closely related to Choicescript. It is an earnest story about a slave boy sold off to fight as a gladiator. I found it a little rough around the edges, but I enjoyed the storytelling.

Just like IFComp of this year, most of the winning games were choice-based games, with the top four spots occupied by the Choose Your Story games and by Geoff Moore's inventive twine game *Surface*,^[495] which had unique styling and images and a plot inspired by the likes of Porpentine, with two worlds.

This year also had a major issue with a disqualification. The author has since tried to make amends (Update: and later burned bridges), but there was a game that was disqualified for voting irregularities. There was a sharp disagreement about it, and it sparked major changes in...

5.15 Spring Thing 2015

Due to voting irregularities from the last year and an increasing emphasis on Spring Thing as an inclusive place free from the stresses of IFComp, Aaron Reed transformed it into a festival. Now, the rankings are not published, and authors can receive one of two ribbons, one for Audience Choice and one for Alumni's Choice. Instead of cash rewards and entrance fees, all authors participate in a random prize pool.

It also introduced the idea of the Back Garden, where games could be entered in a non-competitive way, especially for unfinished works or works by well-known authors who didn't want to crowd out others.

The winner this year was *Toby's Nose*,^[319] a Sherlock Holmes entry and Chandler Groover's breakout game. Groover had previously released a twine game in the middle of IFComp which received little attention. He then tried a more standard puzzle-based game for Parser Comp, but was frustrated when players didn't figure out what seemed like simple puzzles. He then settled on eliminating traditional play completely, and started a pattern that would lead to the most successful collection of games by any author in the last few years.

Toby's Nose has you play as Sherlock's dog Toby. You just smell things, which bring up memories in which you can also smell things. In this recursive way, you solve the mystery. This game has influenced every game I've ever written, and I know it's influenced others, as well. It was nominated for several XYZZY awards and is fairly high on the IFDB top 100.

This year was also the Spring Thing debut for several other authors that are well-known for their choice-based works, including Bruno Dias, B Minus Seven, and Porpentine, who was already well-known for *howling dogs*^[617] and *their angelical understanding*.^[621]

The back garden included *Aspel*,^[713] a multiplayer game by Emily Short using Zarf's Seltani engine.

This was a huge year for changes, including the revising of the ranking system, the proliferation of talented authors, and the overall sheen of professionalism.

5.16 Spring Thing 2016

By now, IF in general had entered into its Professional Phase, both in terms of actual jobs and in author's behavior. Far from its origins as a hobby for STEM major grad students, IF had become a career choice.

A whopping seventeen games were released this year. Like years past, it included massive games not fit for IFComp (such as the psychedelic *Harmonic Time-Bind Ritual Symphony*^[410]), interesting experiments (like *Ms. Lojka*^[452] and the bilingual *Sisters of Claro Largo*^[461]), previews of full games (like *Nocked!*^[682]), and games by authors who were just so prolific they had to release them somewhere (like *Fourdiopolis*^[687] and *Xylophoniad*^[391]).

This year also got a boost from The First Quadrennial Ryan Veeder Exposition for Good Interactive Fiction games. Ryan Veeder had organized a private competition for people to send him games. These were not released to the public; however, many authors showcased their games in Spring Thing, including Buster Hudson with *Foo Foo*^[354] and Chandler Groover with *Three-Card Trick*.^[318]

The winners were:

Tangaroa Deep,^[167] by Astrid Dalmady. This short but spine-tingling game was the result of a long career path by Dalmady, starting with simple games like *You are Standing at a Crossroads*^[168] and moving on to more complex games

like *Arcane Intern.*^[165] Dalmady would go on to place highly in IFCComp and find commercial contracts.

Xylophoniad^[391] by Robin Johnson. This greek-influenced parser game used a hand-rolled engine by Johnson, who released four games in 2016, including the IFCComp-winning *Detectiveland*.^[389] All of these games have a Scott Adams-type feel, with sparse scenery leaving room for detailed puzzles and amusing dialogue.

This was the first year with two winners, and the biggest year to date.

5.17 Spring Thing 2017

This last year had twenty-two entries, including an interactive opera and a pinball simulator! It cemented the competition's place as the comp for games that were too long for IFCComp, highly experimental, unfinished, or the overflow of a highly productive author.

There were three winners this year. Two games tied for Audience Choice and another won Alumni's Choice.

The first audience choice winner I want to discuss is *Niney*^[757] by Daniel Spitz. In a way, this was a callback to the non-standard games of Gijsbers and Reed that focused on choices with consequence. It is highly unconventional, and has you picking up 'roles' instead of inventory.

The second winner was *Bobby and Bonnie*^[860] by Xavid, who later published *Future Threads*.^[861] *Bobby and Bonnie* used an innovative graphical system that Xavid later used with several other games (and coauthors), an unusual narrator (or pair of narrators), and a cheerful setting. The gameplay, however, was classic parser gameplay.

The Alumni's Choice Winner was *Guttersnipe: Carnival of Regrets*.^[403] I actually just finished this last week. It's in Quest, which is a notoriously buggy system. I frequently found myself struggling with the parser. But the overall story-arc is one of the most enjoyable I've experienced in a while. It's all classic fetch-quest gameplay with clever characters. It can be hard to read the main character's accent, but it all flows together after a few screens. I had a huge feeling of satisfaction upon completing the game.

There were many other good games this year, too many to mention. By 2017, Spring Thing had grown essentially as big as the IFCComp was in its early years. But, thanks to the festival system, it has managed to avoid some of the rancor and despair that cash prizes and rankings can induce.

5.18 Spring Thing 2018

The winner this year was *Illuminismo Iniziato*,^[155] by Michael J Coyne. This was an unabashedly old school game and a sequel to *Risorgimento Represso*^[156] from IFCComp 2003. You play as a human from the modern world (in the first game) who has become a wizard's apprentice. The game map encompasses two

cities, and the game itself is notable for using graphical windows including a map and a newspaper.

This Spring Thing was also notable for its number of long-time authors, including games from Arthur DiBianca, Luke Jones, me (mathbrush), Bitter Karella, Mark Marino, Naomi Norbez, and Robin Johnson, some of which I'll mention below.

One interesting entry this year was *A Bunch of Keys*^[276] by Mike Gerwat. It was a giant parser game written by a blind piano tuner who had worked with Genesis a few times, according to the game's help page. While the game was buggy, it was also pretty creative.

This year also saw the first (and, as of 2024, only) game released in Liza Daly's Windrift system: *The Imposter*,^[23] by Enrique Henestroza Anguiano. It's an illustrated game set in Paris that feels surreal.

Life in a Northern Town^[593] was an unusual multi-part experiment spread over Twine, Inklewriter, Instagram, Medium, and Wordpress, with some of it already lost to time. It told a gritty story about an unemployed woman who gets a shady business opportunity from a family member.

Zeppelin Adventure^[392] was Robin Johnson's first Spring Thing game using his new engine, which was called Versificator 2 at the time but was later retooled and released as Gruescript. Continuing the trend of new genres every game (his first two games in the system were *Draculaland* and *Detectiveland*), this is a fun sci-fi adventure with a lot of character.

About the puzzles in *Zeppelin Adventure*, Emily Short said:^[739]

Quite a few of the puzzles have to do with intervening in the operation of a mechanism of some kind, usually by figuring out just the right moment to act and stop the cycle from proceeding as it normally would — and even the endgame sequence makes use of that structure. None of the puzzles feel like filler, or like recapitulations of old standbys.

I released *Sherlock Indomitable*^[475] this year, which had previously won Introcomp. I go into more detail in this in Chapter.

5.19 Spring Thing 2019

This year saw the two separately-voted Audience and Alumni ribbons of past years combined into two equivalent Best In Show ribbons, as well as custom ribbons for each game suggested by judges and chosen by authors. This year, these ranged from simple ones like "Best Art" to more unusual ones like "Best History Lesson".

The Missing Ring^[203] was one of the winners this year, and it's a game I enjoyed quite a bit. It's a family mystery, written in Twine, where you, a youth, have to interview family members and figure out why your grandmother's ring is missing. The characters and writing are excellent.

Among the Seasons^[305] is the other winner, a game placing you in the role of a magpie that passes through different seasons of the year, with nature descriptions. It's currently (as of 2024) the lowest-ranked Spring Thing winner on IFDB and is one of four bird-related or bird-named winners (*Hawk the Hunter*,^[345] *A Flustered Duck*^[6], *Max Blaster and Doris de Lightning Against the Parrot Creatures of Venus*^[706]).

This year also saw the only Spring Thing game made using the Elm narrative engine: *Darkness*,^[683] by Jeff Schomay. The system had a neat persistent menu of objects to manipulate as well as traditional twine-like passages. It shouldn't be confused with Elm Story, an engine that had a troubled history and shut down.

This year also featured *Bullhockey 2*^[437] by B F Lindsay, the second entry in a series of very big, difficult parser puzzle games involving chasing after your girlfriend and ex.

5.20 Spring Thing 2020

This was the covid year, which led to a new change from Aaron, who was still the organizer:^[642]

I've heard from a couple of you who have had to drop side hobbies like working on interactive fiction to handle real life issues, and are hoping the festival will be delayed. I've heard from others who are hoping the festival goes on, in the face of so many other things they were looking forward to having been cancelled.

So here's what I've decided to do. The festival will go on as usual this year. (If you've never participated before, it's an entirely online event, which makes this decision easier.)

[...]

However, there's going to be another way to participate this year: the Spring Thing Late Harvest. If you submitted an intent to enter this year's festival, and aren't able to make the deadline, you can still submit your game any time in 2020, up to December 31st. These entries won't be part of the Main Festival (i.e. no ribbons or prizes), but will be showcased on the Spring Thing site in their own section, much like Back Garden games.

However, only one late game ended up being submitted: *The Game That Never Ends*.^[781] I don't think this new segment was very successful, as I hadn't even heard of this game until I started writing this essay, four years later. I just played and reviewed it, and I'm the first review and second rating it ever got. It's a procedurally generated sequence of rooms with similar puzzle elements that has a certain twist.

Among the other games, three tied for Best in Show!

4x4 Galaxy^[783] was an excellent game by Agnieszka Trzaska, one of the best-known puzzly Twine authors and eventually a 3-time Spring Thing winner. This entry, her first winner, is a grid of sixteen star systems that can be explored in different orders to gain resources, explore, meet groups, get sidequests, upgrade, and win with a procedurally generated goal. Its fantasy successor, *4x4 Archipelago*, placed eighth in IFComp 2021 and is among the highest-rated Twine games on IFDB.

Hawk the Hunter^[345] was another winner. This is a long Quest game based on the movie of the same title. It uses colored backgrounds and has RPG elements, although it was fairly difficult without a walkthrough.

JELLY^[433] by Tom Lento and Chandler Groover is the third winner, a fascinating game that is basically a dark fantasy roguelike where you are a living construct made of jelly. It makes use of ASCII art for a big map and involves you dying over and over to learn more about the world around you. Fascinating game.

Another interesting game this year, though not a ribbon winner, was *Napier's Cache*^[209] by Vivienne Dunstan. This game has a historical setting in Scotland, a type of setting not generally seen in IF. It's a polished, short parser game.

The Prongleman Job^[194] by well-known author Arthur DiBianca, used an unusual mechanic for parser games which I'd rather not spoil here, but it's one I've only really seen in one other game ever.

Author B Minus Seven, who is one of Chandler Groover's favorite authors (who is one of my favorite authors) returned with two stories: *composites*^[698] and *silences*.^[50]

I had my own game, *77 Verbs*,^[629] which attempted to use every single standard verb in the Inform library.

5.21 Spring Thing 2021

Spring Thing really started taking off this year, with almost forty entries. By this point, the competition, which had been completely empty some years or only had one or two games in others, had grown to be essentially the same size as IFComp had been in its first few decades.

This year had some truly great games in it. There were two winners, as usual.

Fish & Dagger^[272] is a truly astounding multimedia Twine game that incorporates video, QR codes, motion tracking and AR. It's a humorous spy-style game that breaks the fourth wall frequently.

The Weight of a Soul^[863] by Chin Kee Yong is a game we saw earlier, in 2017, as a preview. Now fully fleshed-out, it was one of the largest polished/smooth parser game releases in years. It's a steampunk goblin/alchemy game with a strong plot that pushes the game forward, and has reached several IFDB polls and lists such as the IFDB Top 100.

One of my favorite games this year was *Excalibur*^[324] by JJ Guest, G. C. Baccaris and Duncan Bowsman. This game takes the form of a wiki for a non-existent TV show that is experiencing some mild technical difficulty. As you

explore the wiki, more parts of it unlock, showing both interesting slices of British and TV fan culture and hints of the occult.

The now-venerable Lady Thalia series began this year with E. Joyce and N. Cormier's *Lady Thalia and the Seraskier Sapphires*.^[401] The Lady Thalia series has never won but has always been close. It follows a clever thief from an older time who must scope out locations with the help of a friend and pull off heists while avoiding the police.

Kaemi Velatet released *Queenlash*,^[810] a stream-of-consciousness epic involving Cleoptra and arranged in chapter form with few linkages between them but within each chapter the links form a kind of web. This game is a favorite of noted IF critic Mike Russo, who became particularly prolific in the 2020's despite being part of the community much earlier.

This year also saw a game by Anssi Räisänen called *So I Was Short Of Cash And Took On A Quest*,^[636] who was also one of the earliest Spring Thing authors, entering a game back in 2003.

5.22 Spring Thing 2022

This year saw forty-seven games and a sharp uptick in quality. The increased size became fairly difficult for the organizer, who added new rules limiting entries to one per person and less than 100 MB of storage size. This would be Aaron's last year organizing the competition.

One winner this year was Agnieszka Trzaska with her second winning game, *The Bones of Rosalinda*.^[786] This game has you play as an animate skeleton that can detach individual bones and parts to act independently. It spawned a sequel, *The Trials of Rosalinda*.^[787]

The second was *Fairest*^[819] by Amanda Walker. She had just come off of an IFComp where she placed in the top five with *What Heart Heard of*, *Ghost Guessed*,^[821] and would later win the XYZZY Best Game award for that IFComp game. This game, *Fairest*, is a fairy-tales mishmash that manages to emphasize the darkness in old tales while lending humor to the whole affair, including breaking the fourth wall.

Several authors debuted in this Spring Thing who would later be heavily involved in the community, including Pinkunz (who would later take over the XYZZY Awards) with *A D R I F T*,^[591] Sophia de Augustine (prolific author and Neo-Interactive Cocreator) with *Sweetpea*^[30] and groggydog (frequent Spring Thing entrant and experimental author) with *Super Mega Tournament Arc!*^[311]

Computerfriend^[653] by Kit Riemer was a well-received game that was nominated for Best Game in the XYZZY awards. It's a twine game with animation and colors that is set in a post-apocalyptic world with a computer therapist that has been assigned to you.

Many other great games by well-known authors were released, including another Lady Thalia game (*Lady Thalia and the Rose of Rocroi*),^[400] Bitter Karella's *The Legend of Horse Girl*,^[404] Christopher Merriner's *Custard & Mustard's Big Adventure*,^[488] Autumn Chen's *New Year's Eve, 2019*,^[119] *Tours*

Roust Torus^[688] by Andrew Schultz, Kaemi's *Manifest No.*^[809] and *Wry*^[536] by Olaf Nowacki, among others.

5.23 Spring Thing 2023

This was the first year that I took over as organizer as the growing size of the competition and increasing personal demands had left Aaron Reed to look for a successor.

This delayed the announcement of Spring Thing, and, combined with my lower level of advertising, left the comp with a manageable twenty-seven games rather than the heavier numbers of years past.

Repeat the Ending^[148] by Drew Cook, an IF historian, was one of the Best Show recipients. It has gone on to great acclaim, recently placing in the top eight in a best free IF of all time playoffs, as well as winning the second IFDB Awards. (As of writing, the voting for the 2023 XYZZY Awards has not yet occurred, but it can be assumed it will place well). This is a game about mental health and family relationships, framed as a revision of a much earlier game, with a whole created history of fake reviews and transcripts. The game's code is quite hefty, and it is polished remarkably well. On IFDB, it is the second highest-rated Spring Thing winner after *Toby's Nose*.^[319]

The other winner was *Protocol*^[2] by 30x30, a dark science fiction game with excellent styling and rich, frightening text. This was author 30x30's first published game. One reviewer said of it:^[666]

The desperate crawling journey of the woman through the station to its core systems, to the exposed and damaged vital technologies mirrors a descent deeper and deeper into the body and mind, into psyche and soma, to the wounded bleeding sarx itself, the flesh and bones that need repair.

However intimately connected, mind and body undergo an unnerving disorienting dissociation/distancing during the journey. The station becomes a distorted mirror for the woman. It reflects her broken dreams and yearnings and regrets back to her, reminiscent of the Nietzschean abyss. This is often expressed in physical, external circumstances and actions.

This year saw the arrival of Joey Cramsey, author of *I Am Prey*,^[770] notable both for its use of TADS (as part of a 2020's TADS renaissance that includes *According to Cain*^[519] and *Prince Quisborne*^[867]) and for its unusual cat-and-mouse/replayable game structure.

The Kuolema attracted a lot of attention as a game written in Google Forms! It made some use of Dall-E images, but most of the images were made in a traditional way, as explained in the game credits. The innovative format made this a big talking piece, and it was remade in Twine the following year.

I was personally interested in *Red Door Yellow Door*^[139] by Charm Cochran, as it was related to Seed Comp, a competition where authors can submit 'seed'

game ideas to others who then develop games off them, and this was based on one of mine, a slumber party parser game where the PC is a kid playing a visualization game and the parser is the kids egging her on. I loved Charm's take on this.

This was the first year that Ondrej Odokienko led a group of Slovakian students to make the Senica Thing, where students submitted small twine games on a theme, in this case the theme being *Mirror*.^[551]

Several longstanding authors entered strong games as well, including the third (and so-far latest) entry in a series, *Lady Thalia and the Masterpiece of Moldavia*,^[399] *The Familiar*^[312] by groggydog, *Beat Me Up Scotty*^[864] by Jkj Yuio (an author known for his custom system and relationship to Magnetic Scrolls), *Write or Reflect?*^[689] by Andrew Schultz, *The Roads not Taken*^[459] by manonamora and *A Single Ouroboros Scale: My Postmortem*^[531] by Naomi Norbez.

Tabitha O'Connell entered *Structural Integrity*^[550] which introduced players to some characters that formed the core of Tabitha's later personal relationship- and conversation-based work, although they existed beforehand in two novels.^[549]

5.24 Spring Thing 2024

In 2024 I introduced a new category, "New Game Plus", to allow participants to enter previously released games that had been substantially changed, such as through porting to a very new system or receiving significant upgrades.

There were thirty-two games this year, still lower than the highest amounts in Aaron's time.

One winner this year was *Social Democracy: An Alternate History*^[121] by Autumn Chen, a game that received thousands of plays on Itch and received mentions outside the IF sphere.^[858] It's a card-based game simulating pre-Hitler Germany where your goal is to manage a political party in order to prevent the rise of Fascism.

The Trials of Rosalinda,^[787] a sequel by Agnieszka Trzaska, was the other winner. This built on the previous Rosalinda game's bone-based puzzle system by also including a second protagonist, a spell-casting mouse. It featured fun and frightening characters and great puzzles.

The Slovakian students returned with *Deep Dark Wood*,^[773] a collection of short twine games unified by the titular theme.

Alltarach^[109] was a game heavily influenced by Irish mythology and featuring numerous Irish words.

Manonamora released *Doctor Jeangille's Letters*,^[458] a lengthy twine game that features what is in my mind some of her best work. You send handwritten letters about strange occurrences in a village you have returned to, while you also make a new friend.

Studio^[140] by Charm Cochran featured the interesting use of future tense. It is a take on the old 'my crappy apartment game' where everything is imple-

mented in extreme detail but for a reason. It features a woman in a new apartment where someone breaks in the middle of the night, and uses the Bisquix multimedia interpreter I developed for Inform.

Loose Ends^[691] was a fairly hefty Ink game by Daniel Stelzer and Anais Sommerfeld using the Vampire: The Masquerade system, similar to *Night Road*.^[467] It is an investigation of a murder and of a missing artists, and lets you use a variety of vampire powers.

You Can Only Turn Left^[423] was notable for its heavy use of multimedia, especially video. It can be described as an insomnia hyena game, if that makes any sense.

This year had less repeat authors than most, although there were a few (such as groggydog with *Prosper.O*^[310] and the two winners).

5.25 Conclusion

Spring Thing went through many phases over the years, but it has always provided the community with a way to display games that are off the beaten path, and to provide a respectable outlet for games outside of IFComp.

I look forward to the new games being entered this year and in the future. Good luck to everyone!

Part V

Additional Essays

Chapter 6

What Makes a ‘Best Puzzle’?

Every year, public voters award the XYZZY Best Individual Puzzle award to one puzzle in one game. These are the puzzles that most captured the community’s fancy in some way, whether through complexity, inventiveness, or even emotion. Of all the XYZZY, the Best Individual Puzzle award seemed at first to me the most like a grab-bag of random games, with little connection between different winners.

However, I was determined to find out what, if anything, they had in common. After playing carefully through all the winning puzzles, I was surprised to find that they were remarkably similar to each other, falling into a few broad categories. Avoiding spoilers as much as possible, I’d like to discuss these. The main categories are Learning a System, Iterative or Babel Fish type Puzzles, and Sudden Insight. These are not rigid; the Babel Fish type puzzles, for instance, are essentially a blend between the other two categories.

6.1 Learning a System

Roughly half of the best puzzles presented a complex system, sometimes taking up the entire game, which you have to learn how to manipulate through experimentation. These puzzles are hard to spoil, because it’s clear from the outset what you have to do and what tools you need; the main difficulty is figuring out which tools do what.

The first such Best Puzzle is the language puzzle in *The Edifice*.^[741] The Edifice was the 1997 IFComp winner, and had the player visit three or four scenarios in the evolution of man, from the creation of tools and fire to language. In the language puzzle, the player meets an NPC who communicates entirely in a language of the author’s invention. By experimenting with the words you hear, you gradually become able to communicate with the NPC and ask them specific questions.

A language puzzle appeared again in 2001 with *The Gostak*,^[504] a highly polarizing game that won the Golden Banana of Discord in the IFCComp (an award for having the highest standard deviation in votes). This game is written completely in a sort of pseudo english, based on an old artificial sentence that says ‘The Gostak distims the doshes’. Just as in the Edifice, the player must experiment with the new words and their responses to determine how to play the game.

The Best Puzzles in 2004 and 2014 involved time travel puzzles. Both of these games (*All Things Devours*^[699] and *Fifteen Minutes*^[481]) are one-puzzle games with essentially the same premise: you have run out of time, you have access to a time machine, and you’re going to need more than one version of yourself to get the job done. The two games differ in how they handle the versions of yourself: *All Things Devours*^[699] has a large map, and the difficulty in the game is learning how to avoid your copies to prevent a paradox from occurring; while *Fifteen Minutes* is a one-room game that relishes having all of the copies present at once and interacting. Both games are best approached with copious note-taking materials.

The last two System-Based Best Puzzles are found in the games *Delightful Wallpaper*^[837] and *An Act of Murder*.^[351] The first game, by Andrew Plotkin, features a player who cannot manipulate anything directly, and who can only move about. The house they are in, however, reacts to their movement, with movement in one part of the house triggering doors and gates to move on the other side of the house. The game provides a helpful note-taking system, but it is fiendishly difficult to map out a path that will open the doors you need. The second game, *An Act of Murder*, is a randomized murder mystery that again requires careful note-taking as you establish alibis and determine motive.

What do these system games have in common? For one, they don’t overwhelm the player. Other attempts at language puzzles, for instance, have dumped big dictionaries or grammars on the player. *The Gostak* and *The Edifice*, meanwhile, present a sentence or a paragraph, and let you go from there. Other time travel puzzles (of which there are many) may force you to interact with copies of yourself too early.

Conversely, these Best Puzzles also grow complex enough for the player to feel like they really learned something when they succeed. *The Gostak* requires a fairly complicated sequence of actions to win, and the goal in *The Edifice* is to communicate a pretty complex request. The maze in *Delightful Wallpaper* was quite large, and the time travel puzzle in *Fifteen Minutes* has you interacting with half a dozen or more copies of yourself.

Finally, these puzzles tend to be clear about the function of each new piece. *Delightful Wallpaper* will actually write down for you what you’ve learned at each stage, making it completely unambiguous. The use of each new word in *The Gostak* or *The Edifice* is made clear by the many situations it appears in, and so on.

So it appears that one type of puzzle that people regard as great is a complicated system where one is clearly taught from basic principles to a complicated finale. This is the same as learning a system in real life, from mathematics to

physics to cooking to speaking a language. These puzzles train you in a (in-game) useful skill, and they train you well.

6.2 Iterative or Babel Fish Puzzles

The term Babel Fish puzzle comes from the Infocom game *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*,^[5] where the player tried to get a babel fish from a vending machine. Each attempt goes hilariously wrong, with the fish falling in a hole or getting vacuumed up, and as the player tries to fix each problem, a new problem arises. The term Babel Fish Puzzle is now used to describe a puzzle with an iterative approach, where each new try yields new information.

The puzzles that I include in this category are disconnecting the internet in *Violet* and the whole games of *Rematch*^[614] and *Lock and Key*.^[95] Some of these could be classified as Learning the System or Sudden Intuition games, but I feel they belong here.

It is easy to spoil the puzzle in *Violet*, but much of its charm lies in the writing more than the puzzle structure. Each step makes you laugh at your own lack of self-control. The final solution involves some actions that may be counterintuitive and mildly color your perception of the PC for the rest of the game.

In *Rematch* and *Lock and Key*, you set up a system, see how it works, and restart. *Rematch* is largely about getting a single complicated command correct; the author warns you that the final command is so long that the parser had to be partially rewritten to accept it, and the gameplay consists of iteratively experimenting with lengthier commands until the correct one is found. *Lock and Key* has you designing a dungeon with a selection of about sixteen pre-made rooms which you must make into a maze, before watching an adventurer break through them. Like *Rematch*, it’s clear what each part of the puzzle does, it’s just assembling them in the right order and the right length that’s difficult. *Rematch* keeps the puzzle interesting with a super-dramatic recurring event, and *Lock and Key* keeps it interesting with hilarious descriptions.

Interestingly, the key to success in these puzzles seems to be the writing and atmosphere more than the puzzle design itself. The frequent failures that are shoved in your face are only made palatable by the amusing or compelling response that you get in return. A Babel Fish puzzle without good writing would only be an exercise in frustration.

6.3 Sudden Intuition Puzzles

These puzzles are essentially impossible to discuss without spoiling, so I’ll just talk about all of them together in general terms. These are puzzles where you are presented with a confusing or frustrating situation, and you must have a sudden flash of insight to understand the puzzle.

So many authors have tried to write compelling Sudden Intuition puzzles

and failed. In looking at the Best Individual Puzzle winners, it seems clear that there are a few ingredients to success:

The flash of intuition occurs in a constrained environment. In each of these games, the flash of intuition occurs when almost all other puzzles are out of play, where the player is in a small area and can only work on the one puzzle, and where it is clear that you need to do something special to move onward. The flash of intuition involves some action that you’ve been taught before. In every case except perhaps one, there was an earlier puzzle that you solved by performing the exact same action, just for a different purpose. This trains the player to know that your intended solution is actually possible. The puzzle involves using something familiar in an unfamiliar way. This is what makes the puzzle interesting. There is strong dramatic tension pushing you forward, making it vital to solve the puzzle (often the threat of death).

Since I don’t want to spoil any actual examples, I’ll use an example from literature to illustrate this. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*,^[780] Gandalf and the fellowship are stuck outside of the walls of Moria, trying to get in, with enemies and evil mountains behind. They are in a narrow, dead-end valley with a lake on one side and the gates on another. The gates of Moria say ‘Speak, friend, and enter’. Gandalf interprets this as the door needing a magical password. With nothing to do but think, the fellowship spends hours working on the solution as Gandalf speaks word after word of power.

Finally, with the help of the hobbits, Gandalf laughs and realizes that the correct translation was ‘Speak Friend and enter’. He says the word ‘Friend’ and they go in, just as a monster attacks.

Note that the characters were placed in a constrained situation with no other distractions. They have a compelling story-based need to go in, with their very lives being threatened. The solution was unconventional; the classic idea of a ‘password’ was turned on its head, as being a word that everyone should know instead of a word that no-one should know. And there were, in fact, hints in the book. Earlier in the story, much is made of the former friendship of dwarves and elves; when the solution is discovered, it is readily apparent that it fits with what we know of the old days.

6.4 The last puzzle: Four Hats

The last Best Puzzle is different from all of the rest. In 2011, four IFComp games featured a recurring character who was looking for his hat. Most people did not notice or chalked it up to coincidence (like the year that several games featured a giant squid). The four games were quite different: *Cold Iron*^[117] (by an incognito Plotkin) was a short, mostly puzzle-less story about a world where faeries may or may not exist; *Playing Games*^[380] was a sequence of three mazes made in ASCII art with a threadbare story tying it together; *The Last Day of Summer*^[259] was a short atmospheric piece about regrets in a village; and *The Life and Deaths of Doctor M*^[343] was a full-blown journey through the afterlife, exploring the questionable actions of a doctor through flashbacks.

However, all had a general setting of late-1800’s to early 1900’s as shown in architecture and clothing (for *Doctor M*, in the afterlife section only), and a feeling of remembrance and wistfulness. And, of course, the recurring theme of the hat.

The puzzle consisted of transferring passwords between the game in various forms. I’ll avoid spoilers, but the idea is that one game might have, say, an open combination lock with the combination visible, and the next game has the same combination lock, but closed. Or one game might have a society where no one talks to you unless you bow three times, and the next game has the same society, but doesn’t tell you to bow. So only by playing all four do you see the whole puzzle.

I believe that this puzzle won for originality and cleverness, mostly, as it was a bit unfair in practice: no one was even able to deduce its existence, let alone solve it. However, it does have some things in common with the other Best Puzzles. For instance, there is a real sense of learning and mastery as you proceed from game to game, because you have knowledge that no one else in the game world does. And you do use items in unfamiliar ways, providing a new insight to previously mundane materials. In any case, this is certainly the most unusual of the Best Individual Puzzles.

6.5 Conclusion

While the Best Individual Puzzles are a mixed bag, there are some consistent trends in what voters like. Besides the hat puzzle, all of the puzzles are fair; either the rules are clearly laid down, or the puzzle is set up in a way that more than half of the players will stumble onto the solution. All of the puzzles teach the player something, whether a new system or a new way of looking at the game world. And, which I have not mentioned before, each of the puzzles was placed in a game that was polished, bug-free, and frequently well-written.

What implications does this have for authors? It’s hard to come up with specific recommendations, but one thing that many authors seem to neglect is fairness. The puzzles in other games that provide misleading error messages, or provide huge info dumps all at once, or which are purposely obfuscated, or which neglect to give any hint as to your purpose, or which require you to ‘guess the verb’, are almost uncountable in number. The results of this survey of puzzles indicate that just as much craft should go into leading the player into the solution as went into creating it in the first place.

Chapter 7

Classification of Big Games

I've been interested in learning about puzzle design for longterm games vs short games, and I'd like to learn more about it from the community, because it seems like this is something people have thought about a lot.

Many of the short IFComp winners have much more text than the early Infocom games, but those early games could take a month or more to win; many people did not get frustrated during while working on the puzzles, or got frustrated but enjoyed it. I played *Adventure*^[161] after having tried many more 'new school' games, and I played it over a month, and I didn't get frustrated; I loved the challenge it provided.

So where do games with a month's worth of gameplay get it from?

-Is it the puzzle 'flowchart' (Solving A unlocks B, C, and G)? I considered this, that perhaps the easier games just had a linear flowchart with few puzzles while long games had a broad flowchart. However, *Spellbreaker* is pretty linear, and is one of the longest Infocom games. It has a structure a lot like *Violet*, with a tight opening and then a gentle broadening before a finale.

-Is it the difficulty of coming up with a solution to a particular puzzle? This has to be part of it; if all the puzzles are easy, the game will be over soon. Although *A Mind Forever Voyaging*^[487] had no real puzzles (except for the endgame), but seemed to provide a LOT of gameplay time with, again, less text than many modern classics.

-Is it the red herrings? This is one thing I've considered: that early adventure games had a lot more red herrings, and that Infocom (and other publishers of similar quality) made games fun by providing interesting responses to interactions with the red herrings.

-Is it the cruelty rating on the Zarfian scale? Many old games locked you out of victory unknowingly (like *Curses*^[516] and *Spellbreaker*^[428]), requiring you to play as far as you can until you get stuck, then replay, changing your actions to make that part winnable.

My guess is that the last two are some of the best ways to make a long-lasting, fun game, but I don't know.

Thoughts like this have led me to the following classification:

Class 0 (the one I'm talking about): 10+ hours of gameplay, much of it retrying the same portions over and over

Examples: *Adventure*,^[161] *Zork*,^[20] *Hadean Lands*,^[598] *Curses*.^[516]

Class 1: 4+ hours of gameplay divided into manageable 'chunks', with each chunk completable in an hour or so, and with little to no need to revisit puzzles.

Examples: *Anchorhead*,^[273] *Counterfeit Monkey*,^[720] *Worlds Apart*,^[84] *Blue Lacuna*,^[644] *King of Shreds and Patches*,^[455] Andy Phillips games. My own game *Never Gives Up Her Dead*^[471] is an example of this, with about ten chunks completable in two hours each.

Class 2: 2+ hours of gameplay, designed for maximum player accessibility and offering branching or procedural gameplay for replay value

Examples: *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*,^[573] *80 Days*,^[372] *Choice of Games*.

I feel like I could confidently work on a Class 1 game that I felt good about (basically stringing IFComp-size games together) or a Class 2 game (where writing content is the main obstacle)(Update: which I did years later), but I have no idea how to write a Class 0 game. Very few have been written in the last decade (*Make it Good*^[369] and *Hadean Lands*,^[598] maybe *Endless*, *Nameless*^[93] and *One Eye Open*,^[675] although the last one is fairly short for class 0). But for class 0 games, I don't have any ideas on how to write one. *Note: As of 2024, I have some more plans in this direction.*

Chapter 8

Three Big Games by Experienced Authors

In the years 2012-2014, three authors released the biggest games of their career to that point: Adam Cadre's *Endless, Nameless*,^[93] Emily Short's *Counterfeit Monkey*,^[720] and Andrew Plotkin's *Hadean Lands*.^[598]

It's interesting to compare and contrast some of the features of these three games. Each of three are deeply different in setting, plot, and flavor, but have some similarities in large scale structure and polish. Each of the games is strongly connected to the author's back catalog. I'd like to talk about each of the three games in three different categories. This discussion will of course involve spoilers.

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 Endless, Nameless

Adam Cadre produced several of early IF's most popular games, including *Photopia*,^[97] *Varicella*,^[103] and *9:05*.^[90] After producing one big game every year from 1997 to 2003, Cadre disappeared from IF to work on other forms of fiction.

In 2012, Cadre released *Endless, Nameless* at the San Francisco IF meetup. One participant described it as follows:^[346]

Adam showed up at our SF IF Meetup last month introducing himself mysteriously as 'Nameless Adventurer'(we all completely failed to recognize him from *Get Lamp*, so he was able to pull this off). He handed over an SD card with this game on it, and left. We played it for about two hours. The group seemed to enjoy it, especially given that it was competing for our attention with the Google Goggles that another member brought along. We didn't get that far, though, I have to say (did not pick up on the emerging theme you mentioned). He has promised to come back this month so we can pester him about what it all Really Means, and stuff."

The game purports to be a remake of an old BBS (bulletin board system) game from the 80's, with mazes, rpg combat, and instadeath...but you quickly learn that this isn't everything. This is Cadre's longest game.

Cadre was disappointed by the reception of the game:^[91]

There were a couple of articles about it [the game] in the independent gaming press, but otherwise it came and went almost without a trace. And... well, let me put it this way. I was recently startled to discover that I'd been given a shout-out on the blog of the London School of Economics by a researcher who'd studied the IF world. In the absence of a commercial market, he argued, IF writers produce work pretty much exclusively in order to create "cultural value." This may be as good a descriptor as any for why writing *Endless, Nameless* now strikes me as probably a waste of time. Back in the day I might work for weeks or months on an IF piece, and maybe it would get a hundred downloads — but fifty of the people who downloaded it would post about it. And those fifty people had all gotten to know each other a little bit, if only through the newsgroups, and so those posts tended to lead to actual conversations about the work — and therein lay its cultural value. I could look at those conversations and feel like I had accomplished something. *Endless, Nameless* may have garnered exponentially more downloads immediately upon its release... but if only four of the people who downloaded it actually say anything about it, and if those posts don't end up inspiring much discussion, that doesn't give me a whole lot of motivation to do another one.

8.1.2 Counterfeit Monkey

Emily Short's magnum opus *Counterfeit Monkey* (currently the top game on the IFDB Top 100 List) had its inception in this way:^[726]

I started working in earnest on this game in 2008. Since that time, the US has undergone two presidential elections; for months, the Occupy Seattle protests filled a city block just a short stroll from my apartment; and the successes and failures of the Arab Spring were constantly in the news. These experiences introduced more serious themes into what was initially a purely silly game.

Counterfeit Monkey is a wordplay game where every-day objects can be manipulated linguistically. Throughout the game, you gain a series of more powerful ways to manipulate words (such as removing letters, reversing words, etc.). Thematically, the game is about a repressive and protectionist society and those who oppose it.

As an interesting side-note, relevant to modern politics, Short had this to say about the democratic system (and this ties directly into the game's themes):

Players have repeatedly asked for a third-way solution, but the impossibility of such a solution is precisely the point. It's important that this be a no-win situation, an illustration of one of the core problems of democratic society: on some moral points, neither side can even imagine an acceptable compromise that would honor the principles of both parties. Inevitably, those on the losing side are going to have to live with their country doing things they find deeply heinous and repugnant.

Finally, it seems that *Counterfeit Monkey* is actually getting played more now than it was when it came out; usually IF games get a ton of ratings (half or more) in the first year, and then few after that. *Counterfeit Monkey* has received half of its IFDB ratings in the last 2.5 years (out of five years of availability). More specifically, it got around ten ratings in 2016 and has already had fifteen this year. (*Note: this was in 2017. In July of 2024, it has received twenty ratings in the last twelve months.*)

8.1.3 Hadean Lands

Hadean Lands^[598] was Andrew Plotkin's big Kickstarter project, generating \$30000 in backing and taking several years to finish, pushing IF tools forward in the mean time.

Hadean Lands is the longest of the three games; while the others could easily be sold for money, *Hadean Lands* provides the most 'bang for your buck' in terms of how much game you get. (In a way, this makes *Counterfeit Monkey* like *Portal*^[625], a shorter but satisfying puzzle fest, while *Hadean Lands* is more like *Myst*^[513] or *Riven*,^[656] longer but less intense).

In one of his earliest interviews, I found this quote:^[409]

His description for the planned "interactive alchemical interplanetary thriller": "You're a half-trained alchemist, and your starship has just crashed. The ship's Dragons are offline; your air is leaking away into the void. Something's wrong with space, and maybe Time, and you don't know any alchemical rituals to fix those. You can barely light a phlogistical lantern. But you're going to have to make do."

After it was released, he explained about the game:^[153]

Jason Scott's Get Lamp documentary had just come out, so we had a wave of attention to Infocom-style IF (even if it was mostly nostalgia). Nobody had tried selling a top-notch, full-length game of that form in the general gaming market – not since the 90s. I figured it would be dumb to let the moment pass.

And, naturally, I wanted to play to my skill set. I had lots of experience writing parser IF. I should aim at what I was good at, rather than what other people were good at.

All of these descriptions describe the game very well.

8.2 Connection to author’s back catalog

This section is going to spoil every game pretty thoroughly, so I recommend trying the games first. In particular, I give away some of the most significant plot elements of *Endless*, *Nameless* in the third sentence.

8.2.1 Endless, Nameless

Right off the bat, most IF fans will see something that connects this game to Cadre’s earlier work: this game uses the same bold colors that Photopia uses. Just as in Photopia, color is a major signifier in this game. In particular, much of the effectiveness of the endgame comes from the moment where the entire game goes red as you enter Niraya.

Cadre is known for taking specific IF genre conventions and turning them on their head or doing Meta-commentary. He said himself about his process:^[219]

You can make a case that my standard trick is taking a piece of IF that didn’t work for me and grafting on influences from other media and my own life. *Endless*, *Nameless* is in part an exercise in taking some of my personal angst from 2005 and injecting it into, of all things, *Westfront PC*. *Shrapnel* is Southern Gothic and William Sleator injected into *Zork I*. Even *Narcolepsy* is basically an attempt to revisit the slapdash *Interstate Zero* (the setting, the branching structure) and turn it into something worthwhile by applying a big jolt of *The Big Lebowski*.

Westfront PC,^[579] by the way, is one of Paul Allen Panks’ earliest games (an author notorious for under-implemented BASIC games), and when I tried it while writing this overview, I was surprised at 1) how rich and huge the game is for Panks, and 2) how strongly it resembles *Endless*, *Nameless* thematically. I never had played a game before that was like what Cadre was copying here; I highly recommend downloading DOSBox to try *Westfront PC* if you’re interested in *Endless*, *Nameless* at all.

In any case, the play-die-repeat gameplay of *Endless*, *Nameless* is strongly reminiscent of *Varicella*,^[103] while the strong characters is a Cadre tradition dating all the way back to *I-0*.^[94] The ‘death world’ reminds me quite a bit of *Shrapnel* in writing style; the other dead PCs remind me of the time-traveller in that game.

8.2.2 Counterfeit Monkey

Counterfeit Monkey takes Short’s three passions (physical systems simulation, conversation, and text manipulation) and combines them in an elegant way. Short got her start with *Metamorphoses*^[727] (a game about mutating the properties of physical objects) and *Galatea*^[724] (a conversational game with many endings), and just the next year started text manipulation with *A Dark and Stormy Entry*.^[710]

You can trace the physical simulation thread through many of Short’s games, starting with her ur-game *Not Made With Hands*^[729] (simulating fire, light sources, cutting, material strength, etc.), running through *Metamorphoses* (with its texture and size changing machines), to *Savoir-Faire*’s^[733] linking system and *When in Rome*’s^[738] procedurally generated aliens with certain tastes. *Counterfeit Monkey* shares in this by the fact that the items that you create are all classified into different groups on their properties (like animateness, personhood, vulgarness, etc.).

The conversational thread is the easiest to follow. Short started with *Galatea* (the most impressive implementation of straight Ask/Tell to date), followed by *Best of Three*^[715] and *Pytho’s Mask*^[731] (with their combined menu and topics), to *City of Secret*’s^[718] impressive implementation of multiple NPCs, *Glass*’s^[725] threaded conversational topics (which wrote text for transitions between topics rather than topics themselves), and *Alabaster*’s^[115] crowd-sourced conversation. *Counterfeit Monkey* isn’t focused on conversation, but it achieves NPC interaction in incredibly complex ways while making it seem easy. It sneaks a menu system in by putting suggested topics in gray, the same color used for tutorials. The best interactions with NPCs come not with words, though, but with items; from eagle-eyed officers to scared tourists, everyone has set reactions to different classes of objects that makes for interesting object-based gameplay.

Finally, text manipulation has been a long interest of Short. *A Dark and Stormy Entry*^[710] lets you select qualities of a short story, and then generates it. *Mystery House Possessed*^[850] also deals with procedural generation. *Floatpoint*^[723] takes different recordings and applies transformations to the text. *First Draft of the Revolution*^[221] took things quite a bit further (along with Liza Daly) by introducing clickable links that morphed the text, later inspiring Twine to include the same concepts. *Counterfeit Monkey* takes this to its logical extreme by having the player actually manipulate the spelling of individual words.

8.2.3 Hadean Lands

When preparing this essay, I laughed when I realized that *Hadean Lands* is just Plotkin’s *Lists and Lists* dressed up to look fancier. That old game is a LISP programming tutorial, and that’s what Hadean Lands’ midgame is: a programming tutorial. You prepare an environment for your program (using different ‘programming languages’ like the Eastern Rituals or the Greek Rituals), you have headers and footers/opening closing braces (sealing and unsealing). It became much clearer when I was making the universal tarnish remover and something spread out into a general class (becoming a variable rather than a constant) and you add a drop of Java. It may be unintentional, but it’s all there, including calling pre-defined functions (by using rituals you’ve already conducted) and optimizing your code, in the end.

There are no NPCs in this game. At least, no real NPCs. Like Plotkin’s first works *A Change in the Weather*^[594] and *So Far*,^[609] you experience others around you from a distance. The multiple repeats are reminiscent of *Spider and Web*,^[610] and the slow, almost unnoticed evolution of your environment brings

Shade^[608] to mind. *Delightful Wallpaper*^[837] is openly referenced in the first corridor you enter, and the quality-based puzzles are reminiscent of both *The Dreamhold*^[611] and *Dual Transform*.^[597] (In fact, *Hadean Lands* could easily be part of one time continuum that starts with *The Dreamhold* in medieval times and extends through a present with *Dual Transform* to *Hadean Lands*' future).

8.3 Aids to the player

Each of these games goes out of the way to help the player, more than is usual for a text game.

8.3.1 Endless, Nameless

I actually think that all of Cadre's problems with getting attention for this game actually come from these features, and not (as he supposed) a fragmentation of the community (since both of these other games attracted a great deal of commentary and attention).

Cadre is intentionally mimicing a tedious system here, a very risky strategy (as the authors of *Pogoman Go*^[834] discovered). The rpg elements of the game (especially the very annoying dart puzzle at the tavern) require repetitive actions. Cadre's solution was to mention that players should use the RECORD/REPLAY feature of many interpreters, essentially assuming the players will meta game.

It's unfortunately a fact that every player plays differently, and many (if not all) players are unaware of or not interested in using RECORD/REPLAY. In fact, by the time the game was released, online play was becoming the standard, where RECORD/REPLAY was completely unavailable. (Update: checking in 2024, this now works online).

Second, and perhaps more problematic from a design viewpoint, is the fact that consulting the help system is required. Many, many players are loath to consult the help system, considering it cheating or a failure. *The Gostak*^[504] is another game where the help system IS the game (and *Robin and Orchid*^[807]). So many people who feel bad they can't beat the Gostak never tried the help system; many IFComp reviewers missed out on *Robin and Orchid*'s enormous backstory contained in the help system; and many players quit *Endless, Nameless* due to ignoring the help system.

In fact, *Endless, Nameless* is more or less unsolvable without its help system, which is not only required, but is its own puzzle; the help system gives incorrect advice, and trying to adjust the advice to figure out how the current system works is part of the game.

8.3.2 Counterfeit Monkey

I'll let Emily Short speak for herself:^[445]

There are a couple of guiding rules, yes. I was trying to

- provide a more gradual learning curve than previous games. Something that people had criticized about *Savoir-Faire* especially, but also about some of my other work, was that the puzzles got too hard too soon. This is why there's a tutorial sequence; it's also why several of the early game puzzles help you solve each other (so in other words if you get the monocle, it's easier to solve the locker puzzle if you haven't yet, and if you solve the locker you can buy your way past the ticket taker if you want to).

- introduce one or two major gameplay concepts per act, and in each case give the player enough to do with it that they'd feel secure in that concept before moving on to the next one; also include some puzzles using already learned skills to keep those alive; and where possible, ramp up the challenge of pattern matching over the course of the sequence.

- alternate wide-open sequences where the player was free to move but the pacing was fairly generous with tight sequences where the player was constrained in space and timing was important (you can see these on the puzzle chart as the areas that take place against grey background circles, indicating that you're stuck there for a moment). Typically those moments are points of narrative tension, and they occur usually after the player has just solved some difficult-ish puzzle — so they reward the player for having made progress with new events, while raising the stakes narratively.

8.3.3 Hadean Lands

Hadean Lands' major innovation is in remembering what tedious tasks players have done before, and accomplishing it for them.

Imagine if, when playing *Zork*,^[20] once you had made the diamond once in a past life, you could type MAKE DIAMOND, and the game would get the garlic, open the trapdoor, navigate the mazes, etc. for you. This would make *Zork* much easier, and shorter. The only way to make such a game fun would be to provide a lot of content, and to use the helps as puzzles themselves. That's what Hadean Lands achieves.

As Plotkin said:

But this is where it gets interesting! Every solved puzzle is now just a step in a larger structure. You might have spent hours trying to find the ingredients earlier, but now — hopefully — it's a tool in your toolkit. You're now struggling to fit these tools together in new ways. And once you do, those results *themselves* become new tools.

This is a puzzle structure that IF has never explored before. Not to this depth, at least.

8.4 Power fantasies and the mid-game shocker

All three games are essentially power fantasies. Each was an attempt to make something truly remarkable. And each hit on the same method of doing so, which makes me wonder if it's not just a trick, but an archetypal component of a certain type of story.

All three games are power fantasies that establish certain limits early on that are later shattered mid-game, giving the player a rush.

Note that this method is a contrast to, say, *Curses*^[516] or *Spellbreaker*,^[428] which are power fantasies but with a gradual accumulation of power with few 'holy cow I'm suddenly more powerful' moments.

8.4.1 Endless, Nameless

This occurs over and over. The first time is when you die, and all of the fiddly, description-free/conversation-free world is replaced by a slick NPC-oriented world with different colors.

The second time is when your PC is 'upgraded' with conversation, leading to incredible moments with the dragon, troll and so on (I just realized I never tried talking to the bartender or other random NPCs after gaining conversation; I don't think much is there, though).

The third and biggest 'rush' is when you simultaneously kill the dragon, enter the third, blood-red world, and gain admin powers.

8.4.2 Counterfeit Monkey

Short purposely does this; you are carefully corralled in what you can do: no animates, no abstracts.

It makes you, the player, think, 'Ah, Short has been clever; she got rid of those categories because no author could implement all the possibilities'.

So when the game actually opens up those possibilities, it is shocking, and a huge rush.

The pile of gadgets in the endgame are a similar rush.

8.4.3 Hadean Lands

The first 'big moment' is the Great Marriage. The game goes out of its way to tell you its 'unusual', 'not real'. It's clearly something difficult and experimental. This is the first time you perform a ritual not the way it was supposed to go, when the black marks finally do something, and when you first create something animate.

The second 'big moment' is after getting through the glass window into the void. The map carefully sets up the notion that the ship is everything; when you get through the window, you expect instant death or a single scrap of paper.

Instead, you discover an entire other ship, and an entire other way of performing magic, unlocking the meaning of the black marks, and so on.

8.5 Endings

I'll end my essay with comments on the endings of the games. These are extremely different from game to game, and reflect the author's tendencies.

8.5.1 Endless, Nameless

There are multiple endings here. Cadre is not afraid to have happy endings, endings that explain everything, or allowing the player to try out all the endings. Once you have one ending, the others are easy to try out.

This reflects Cadre's style; he's from the film school, with writing designed to hit solid emotional notes (like the sadness in *Photopia* or the intrigue in *Varicella*).

8.5.2 Counterfeit Monkey

Short forces a major choice partway through the game, lading it with emotional feeling by making it a major lose-lose choice.

The choice of identity for the player is something that is gut-wrenching, and makes the ending more powerful. It is difficult to go back and change your choice, requiring you to replay a big chunk of the game.

This fits Short's style; she rarely, if ever, has a happy ending, preferring melancholy and nuanced endings.

8.5.3 Hadean Lands

There is one 'real' ending to this game, but it comes in four flavors, depending on the active dragon. This makes it difficult to get all the endings, as a major chunk of the game comes after the dragons are activated.

In true Plotkin style, the ending leaves almost everything to the imagination, purposely calculated to make it feel like the author knows everything, chuckling in a dark corner, and that if you just tried a little bit harder you could understand, leading to intense speculation on forums.

8.6 Summary

These are three of the best games of the 2010s, all produced by top authors who had been writing for years. *Endless*, *Nameless*, suffered from requiring meta-gaming, but is still popular on IFDB top 100, as are the others. You should play all of them, including buying *Hadean Lands*.

Pacian's *Superluminal Vagrant Twin*^[573] and Inkle's *80 Days* are similar masterpieces by experienced authors, but they don't fit into the 'powertrip fantasy'. Continuing my Class 0/Class 1/Class 2 analogy from a previous chapter, I would say that the three games I discussed today are the pinnacle of the Class 1 school (with Plotkin shading a bit towards Class 0), while the other two games I mentioned are excellent Class 2 games.

Chapter 9

The Influence of Text and Typing on Parser Game Design

I’ve been thinking about some of the issues in this essay for some time, and I don’t have all the answers. Part of the reason I’m writing this is to see contrasting opinions.

9.1 The influence of typing

I’ve noticed that certain types of interactions work very well in parser games, and others do not. Parser games traditionally tend to favor ‘aha’ moment puzzles, exploration, and story-heavy sequences that guide you on what step to take next.

Parser games traditionally do poorly with randomized combat and other CRPG-type things. *Kerkerkruip*^[280] is perhaps the most successful in this area. Parser games also do poorly with any kind of repetitive gameplay (like grinding), even though repetition is central to many other game types.

I’ve realized that both of these facts may be related to the cost of typing. Most game systems let you interact with a single button press, but typing commands takes much more mental and physical effort. This means that every command needs to count. Puzzles like the letter-remover in *Counterfeit Monkey*^[720] or finding the right color to use in *Coloratura*^[286] involve a lot of mental effort followed by a single, high-yield command. On the other hand, there was an IFComp game a few years ago where you had to go down a street and deliver a newspaper to eight different people, talking to each of them, every day for a week, and this involved a lot of typing of arduous commands.

The exceptions are directional commands (n,e,s,w) and other fast commands (i,x,l). These are so easy to type that you can, in fact, recreate console-type

gameplay. I experimented with this in *Ether*, and many other people have included fast-paced directional commands in their games.

Hadean Lands is a pleasure to play because it avoids the time-cost of typing by automating actions for you. Other games lower time cost by adding shortcuts (A for ASK in some Emily Short games, and so on).

Story-driven games also have a high yield per command, because the commands are easy to guess and generally result in a large amount of exposition.

9.2 Lack of graphical feedback

The time-cost of combat in text RPGs can be reduced, and has been in many games, but such games still remain unpopular (outside of *Kerkerkruip* and perhaps a few others). Why? Such games tend to focus on numerical scores, and it can be difficult to gauge the effects of your actions.

This has long been addressed in console games. In those games, critical hits are shown in larger fonts, perhaps shaking the screen or your controller. Colors change to indicate low health or status effects. And it's easy to judge the effectiveness of attacks when you can see ice shards raining down on a fire elemental.

A picture is worth a thousand words, and without graphical effects, it is difficult for players to keep up with combat. Even *Fallen London*^[270] uses graphics such as bars shooting up or down to emphasize the effects of your actions.

For a parser combat system, or (even easier) for a Twine game, finding a way to visually represent the results of your actions would make any RPG more effective, whether through bolding and italicizing, color choices, font changes, or other text effects.

Other repetitive actions can have a similar effect; it can be difficult to judge whether the response text changed at all, and so it can incur a large reading cost if you have to repeat an action many times in a row.

9.3 Conclusion

The traditional style of parser games is affected by the greater cost of each command, and by the lack of quick visual feedback on actions. Typing shortcuts and visual text effects can enhance a non-traditional parser game.

Chapter 10

Essays on Design Decisions

10.1 Effective Design Decisions in Graham Nelson's *Curses*

I recently completed a survey of Interactive Fiction, where I tried to play all of the major games of the amateur era. It was enjoyable, and I discovered some wonderful games. After completing it, I decided to go back and play some old favorites, to see if they still held up. *Curses*^[516] had always been my favorite game, so I booted up. I quickly found myself engrossed by the quotes, the narrative, the puzzles, and the overall structure. I realized that, more than any other interactive fiction game available, *Curses* is my favorite. (Update: I recently replayed all the IFDB games wit 100+ ratings as well as *Curses*, and it's still my favorite.)

I decided to write this essay to explore what precisely about *Curses* makes it so enjoyable to me personally, and to quite a few others as well. I do so by highlighting four design decisions that Graham Nelson made. All of this is my personal opinion, especially my interpretation of the story line. This obviously contains strong spoilers for *Curses*, but shouldn't really have spoilers for other games.

10.1.1 Coherence of narrative

In my opinion, the most effective games are those that tell a single story over and over again, using a variety of methods. For example, the various colored stories in *Photopia*^[97] are allegories for the same thing; *Howling Dogs*^[617] is the same story in different settings; and the different branches and endings of *Galatea*^[724] contribute to a unified picture of the main character. Many otherwise well-made games can be quickly forgotten if they try to do too much at once (like tacking on an environmentalist message to an otherwise unrelated story, or combining goofy space humor with grim and bloody horror). I found Graham Nelson's own game *The Meteor, the Stone, and a Long Glass of Sherbet*^[349] to be much less

effective because it didn't settle down on the story it wanted to tell.

Curses tells the same story from beginning to end, a story about alienation and a desire to prove yourself. In many ways, it's an allegorical rite of passage, similar to the ancient mystery plays. Its message is communicated by endless variations on the same themes.

Unlike most adventure games, the setting of *Curses* is packed full of people, but you aren't really part of them. You begin the game in a house full of your big, bustling family and your first goal is to keep away from them. You have basically cut yourself off from the living, and the living are not happy with you; the druids plot to kill you, the Gods try to zap you, Sosostriis despises you, and your fortune is the Drowned man, the Fool, and Death. Wherever you go, everyone ignores you, looks down at you, or attacks you. Your only friends are those who have also cut themselves off, like the crusty Jemima, the incorrigible Austin, or the self-sacrificing Andromeda.

Not only are you yourself cut off, but your family is one great big failure. The house is full of incomplete tasks and odd jumbles of stuff, and the information you have about your family shows that they always fail at the critical moment. You are proud of your family, but embarrassed at the same time. "Just another Meldrew" seems to be how you feel about yourself.

As the game progresses, there is very strong imagery related to death and rebirth. You narrowly escape death on numerous occasions (such as jumping from the mast of the ship). You disarm a bomb, you are poisoned but take the antidote. This is all fairly normal in adventure games, but it gets stronger. You sleep in a tomb for centuries, unseen by others. You have to put the rods into a coffin and out again to release their power. You have to anoint yourself, bury yourself, and rise as an immaterial being to progress. In one of the most powerful allegorical moments, you must reconstruct a mechanical knight with no heart, no hand, and no head, bring it to life and teach it to love; like the player, they must be reborn from their impotent, heartless state into a full being.

This death and rebirth are the key to true power. The rods gain power after their rebirth; you gain respect from Sosostriis; you can defeat the Kraken by death and rebirth; and after constructing the allegorical knight, you gain access to true power in the form of a high rod, where you yourself select between Love, Life, and Death. In the end, hidden in an underground cave, you discover your true purpose (essentially the divine self of the mystery plays), and redeem not only yourself but all of your family by completing your ancient task. Your ultimate reward is to rejoin your family as a whole, complete person.

None of this is forced on you in the game. The storyline is slowly spooled out through surrounding actions and thoughts. The game rarely tells you how you should feel. Instead, feelings are reinforced by endless repetition of the same theme, and this is the first effective design decision of *Curses*.

(One weakness people have noted is the demon in the basement; for many people it seemed out of place. The same is true of the angel in the clouds. I wonder if this was intentional, as they are both hint systems, and as such do not really belong in the game either.)

10.1.2 Puzzle design

Curses is notoriously hard to complete, if nothing else due to its length. But there are several elements of its puzzle design that I think are especially effective.

Nelson has avoided one problem that other big puzzle games have, which is managing inventory taken from all over the world. *Muldoon Legacy*^[371] and *Finding Martin*^[836] both have numerous puzzles where you combine completely unrelated objects from far across the world, and this is essentially unfair.

The vast majority of puzzles in *Curses* fall into two categories: puzzles unified by location, and puzzles unified by theme. These help cut down on the work generated by sorting through your inventory.

As an example of puzzles unified by location, consider the garden and surrounding areas. The garden roller literally cannot be removed from the area, making it clear where it must be used. The rod obtained in the maze is used in the garden. The weedkiller is used in the maze. The ball on the mosaic is used nearby.

As examples of puzzles unified by theme, the rods themselves are identified by a common shape. The pollen-filled branch tells you that ‘you don’t get the bird’ when you shake it, and you later use it in a room with a bird. The golden scepter is used in an ancient tomb, and the nuts are used to distract a squirrel. There’s none of the type of puzzles where the shaft of a spade is used to knock a marble into a mousehole.

The puzzles that don’t fall into these categories generally have multiple solutions. There are seven ways of opening the medicine bottle. The main puzzle of the midgame (how to return from the various worlds) has a variety of solutions of increasing efficacy: using the poetry book (a one-time solution), lagach (a partial solution), and finally the rod of returning.

Some weaknesses in this area are the occasional guess-the-verb puzzles, including two about speech (commanding the mouse and lagaching), and the important puzzle about learning to use the rods (HIT GROUND WITH ROD, HIT ROD, etc. don’t work; only STRIKE ROD works, which is an odd construction).

Classifying puzzles into themes and allowing multiple logical solutions is the second effective design decision of *Curses*.

10.1.3 Information storage

This is a smaller part of the game, but an important one. Like most plot-heavy games, *Curses* has several info dump mechanisms. Babel has its memories, *Theatre*^[859] has its diary pages, and *Worlds Apart*^[84] has big cut scenes and actual, readable books. *Christminster*^[647] has its library.

Many of these suffer from one of two opposite problems: either everything is forced on you at once (like the book in *Worlds Apart*),^[84] or information is only available after extreme searching and can easily be missed (as in *Christminster*).

Curses avoids this neatly by having three books (the history, the diary, and the dictionary) where you are very clearly told what can be looked up. Thus, every time you find a name, you can look it up in the history. Every time you

hear a year, you can look it up in the diary. And every mythological name can be found in the dictionary.

This lets you reliably discover information at your own pace, which is the third effective design decision of *Curses*.

10.1.4 Pacing and difficulty

The last decision has already been hinted at, but its the excellent use of pacing. The game opens with short paragraph or two that immediately sets the scene, gives you a goal, and encourages you to explore.

The initial area is small, allowing you to explore, and exploration gives you several natural mini goals. As you walk north, you disturb a key that falls down a floor. You find a map, but it's in a jar whose lid you can't grip. You find a cot that invites you to sleep, you find a pipe that needs tightening. All of this suggest things for you to do.

The game was intentionally designed so that players stuck on a puzzle can always be working on something else. The author has stated that this is why he added so many things to find in the attic; three secret doors, three portals to other worlds, a passage behind a fireplace, a skylight, a darkened area that you are nervous to enter.

He also deliberately removed a large chunk of the game because testers thought it was too much. Many epic-writers like to stuff a game full of as many puzzles as they can. It's wise to consider player exhaustion when doing this.

Many of the slowest parts of the game are 'spiced up' by an appropriate quote or a joke. The quotes are carefully selected and contribute strongly to the overall feel of the game. Some of the jokes are pretty lame ("It's a wrench, but you take it", "Let's call a spade a spade"), but they break up the monotony of the least interesting areas.

Finally, information is given as a reward, instead of having the author gleefully dump it on the player. This is something *Midnight. SwordFight.*,^[315] *Babel*^[244] and *Spy Intrigue*^[267] did well, too; the backstory as reward encourages player exploration and is more effective than a purely point-based reward system. However, the player must know that information can be obtained and must not be starved for it; the second *Unnkulia*^[35] game, from before *Curses*, literally does not tell you what you are trying to do in the game until the very last move.

Controlling the pace of the game through variations in difficulty and information rewards is the final effective design decision of *Curses*

10.1.5 Summary

Curses is not the perfect game. Its conversation system is minimal, there are some lingering guess-the-verb issues, and it is difficult to finish it without a walkthrough. But its clever design choices make it an enduring work, and I still regard it as my favorite game of all time.

10.2 Effective Design Decisions in Emily Short’s *The Mary Jane of Tomorrow*

Emily Short’s newest game (at the time of writing) is remarkable in several ways, and I wanted to talk about a few of its features that stood out to me. This essay doesn’t go into the background of the game. It also contains huge spoilers.

10.2.1 Accretive puzzle design

When *Hadean Lands*^[598] came out, many people praised it for the gradual change in scale of the puzzle solving from the small to the large. *Mary Jane*^[736] achieves this same effect, which is remarkable given the relatively shorter time frame of the game. You begin with trying to find any actions that work at all, until the robot reads one book. You then enter a phase of experimentation, where you try to find patterns in the books’ effects, their relationship to each other. Once you understand the rules of the game, you begin to search for new books and conversation options that you know have to exist even though you haven’t seen them. Finally, you enter a meta-puzzle of taking all the books you know and arranging their use to counteract and supplement each other.

This game forces you to see the whole picture at once, with interlocking pieces, like *Varicella*^[104] or *Hadean Lands*^[598] or *Rematch*.^[614]

10.2.2 Procedural Generation

Mary Jane represents an immense achievement in procedural generation. The different training aspects of the robot interact with each other and a large corpus (a database with tags) to produce astounding results.

The clever part here is that each aspect can act individually, producing a huge number of possible results. Cowboy culture can modify every other variable by changing spellings and so on. Politeness can change tone. Snobbiness can change the fanciness of words chosen. Advertising or botany can change the level of confidence and knowledge in different areas. And most of these can act at the same time, on different axes. This has produced results that seem almost alive, surprising even the author with some of its creations.

This game is very large due to its corpus, and the benefits are apparent.

10.2.3 Feedback and user experience

The last effective decision is the part of a game that is seen less the better the game is: user experience. Many people struggle with parser games, especially puzzle games like this. You can give explicit tutorials, or give gentle in game feedback. Short focuses on the second.

I discovered the robot could read because they told me after a few times. Calling Jenny felt natural, and when I did call her, it made sense to ask her about her requirements. When I tried completing the game too early, it told me

in vague terms that Jenny was disappointed, but it was enough to guess what I had done wrong. In every area, there were gentle nudges towards the goals, but the game was still very challenging.

Like *Hadean Lands*, *Lime Ergot*,^[65] or *Midnight. Swordfight.*,^[315] *Mary Jane* removes everything tedious about a game, all of the unnecessary padding, and allows the player to focus completely on the new mechanics.

10.2.4 Conclusion

Mary Jane is a major technical advancement and an excellent example of a how to polish a game. It pushes the boundaries of the parser forward, and it sets a new bar for procedurally generated content in interactive fiction.

Chapter 11

Sherlock Holmes Development Essays

These essays were originally written as a development journal for my game *Sherlock Indomitable*.^[475] I'm including them in this book as they deal with topics pertinent to many authors and critics.

Just to warn you ahead of time, this game did not turn out well!

11.1 Adapting Books and Stories into Parser Games

I've been wanting to do some advertising for my Spring Thing game, but there are not any standard channels for advertising parser games.

So I thought of writing a series of blog posts about game design and development that are also related to my game.

Today I want to talk about adaptations of existing stories into the parser format. This is a problematic area, with a lot of major pitfalls, as I've learned from experience.

First, I want to talk about the three most well-known adaptations of texts: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,^[5] *The Hobbit*,^[493] and *The Tempest*.^[518] A fourth game, *The King of Shreds and Patches*,^[455] has also been very successful, but it was adapted from an RPG module, while this essay is focused on adapting linear texts.

11.1.1 The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

This game was Infocom's second-best selling game, after *Zork*.^[20] It also has been released to the public by Douglas Adams (you can play it here). Unlike all other parser adaptations of famous books, this one was (at least theoretically)

directly under the control of the author. This would allow the author to adapt the story to be more parser-friendly.

I say theoretically, because, as the Digital Antiquarian says:^[454]

The latter [Douglas Adams] mostly provided just the text for the direct path through the game, leaving Meretzky to deal with all of the side trips and the incorrect and crazy things the player might try as well as any of the boring bridging passages that Adams couldn't be bothered about.

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is also a very, very hard game. Almost no one could get out of the first general area (the house and the pub) without hints. It was on a timer and required you to perform some very, very specific actions.

However, players continue to remember it with fondness, likely because the writing was so good, and because, at the time, expectations about fairness were different. Andrew Schultz commented on the Digital Antiquarian's description of the unfairness of the game cited above, saying:

It's good to read a breakdown of why the game could be unfair. I remember my mother buying my sister and me the invisiclues early on (we were stuck in the dark! Explaining this would be a spoiler) and my feeling was that adults must've known a lot of stuff I didn't to be able to solve these puzzles without a hint book (I was sure they did) and I was looking forward to growing up and understanding all this. Especially how I'd know about the ways you can be locked out of certain puzzles and how the game is mean about that."

11.1.2 The Hobbit

The Hobbit,^[493] by Melbourne House, was a rare Tolkien-Estate-approved adaptation of the classic book.

It was crammed into a small amount of memory (around 48K) and featured both graphics (which would slowly fill in as you play) and independent characters (like Thorin, who is fond of singing for gold).

Like *Hitchhiker*, the *Hobbit* struggles with forcing a linear narrative into a non-linear game. The game is essentially set up in discrete chunks, each a major part of the game, and you are supposed to guess the right action in each chunk that advances the story. These chunks are still connected physically, though, so you can travel from the hobbit to Rivendell and back in just a few screens.

This is another horribly difficult game, especially given its randomization and independent characters whom you have to rely on. Even following a walkthrough, the game can become unplayable without any fault of your own.

It was very popular, however. Having recently played it on an emulator which was set at the original speed, it is thrilling to see each screen load in slowly, tracing out the boundaries of the graphics and filling them in, and seeing an old-feeling adaptation of a great book.

11.1.3 The Tempest

This game was written by Graham Nelson, author of *Inform* and *Curses*,^[493] among others. Graham had released the incredible *Jigsaw*^[517] in 1995 and won IFComp in 1996 with *The Meteor, The Stone, and a Long Glass of Sherbet*.^[349]

This game was entered in 1997's IfComp under a pseudonym, where it took twenty-fifth out of thirty-four.

It is a straight adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*,^[518] written in iambic pentameter. All responses are in Shakespearean-esque language. For instance, here's "You can't go that direction":

"The eight points curl there yet with cloud; but one,
Principal and most prickly, might bear all."
and here's "Press any key to begin":
"Pray depress key, that albeit depress'd
Cheerly unlock this our trumpery-chest –"

It was innovative and poetic, and, yet again, completely unplayable. I don't know anyone who's been able to get past the first few scenes, and I have no concept of what the ending would be like.

Due to the difficulty of writing new Shakespearean text, and for fidelity, most of the game consists of 'find the correct action to unlock more text'.

11.1.4 Other adaptations:

There have been other adaptations. Peter Nepstad did two excellent games based on Dunsany's work.^{[524][525]} These, too, have you find the magic action that advances the story. It is similar to the two *Manalive*^{[627][626]} games, adaptations of a G.K. Chesterton novella.

There are few Twine adaptations. CMG did *The Griffin and the Minor Canon*,^[765] and I felt it was better than a parser game, but still suffered from the 'do the right thing to unlock the next part of the story'.

11.1.5 My game: Sherlock Indomitable

This is usually the point where an author says, 'Here's how I overcame the problem'. Instead, this is the point where I will say, "Boy, now I understand why so many people had problems. Adaptations are so hard!"

For my intro comp/spring thing game *Sherlock Indomitable*, I chose to adapt two Sherlock Holmes mysteries (*The Speckled Band*^[202] and *The Six Napoleons*^[201]) into the same format I used for *Color the Truth*.^[474] *Color the Truth* has been my most successful game up to this point, with forty-four ifdb ratings (only two parser games have had more ratings since 2014; *Update: in 2024, four parser games have had more ratings since 2014*) and good reviews. Several of those reviews wanted to see more games in that clue-based format, and some mentioned Sherlock Holmes. I also got reviews saying my prose was weak, and I decided at the time to do a straight adaptation of Sherlock Holmes, using my clue-based format.

I was well aware of the pitfalls of adaptations, but I had a master plan. I would make the actual exploration in the game simple and linear and put all the ‘real action’ in the mind. Players would gather clues exactly the way it occurred in the written text, and then they would ‘link’ clues to each other (as in *Color the Truth*) to produce deductions. This part, not shown in the text, would make the player feel like they were really Sherlock Holmes, making brilliant deductions.

What I discovered is that adaptations are a horrible trash fire. Writing an adaptation is like spreading frosting on a hot cake, with the top of the cake ripping off and the frosting melting. Most of my time I’ve spent on *Sherlock Indomitable* has been trying to stop it from melting into a hot mess.

11.1.6 What is difficult about adaptations?

Books are not like parser games

In books, the question you always ask is, ‘What happens?’ The story is driven by current events that occur in sequence, with unexpected results to normal actions.

In most of the best parser games, the question is ‘What happened?’ *Anchorhead*^[273] centers on uncovering a town’s past. *Hadean Lands*^[598] deals with investigating an accident on a ship. *Galatea* is puzzling out the history of an animate construct. Some have more action, like *Counterfeit Monkey*,^[720] but much of the best moments of that game involve piecing together mentally what happened to various people and objects, and learning about the two protagonists.

This is because parser games are very good at static descriptions, such as past events, and because the openness of the command structure invites tentative exploration and punishes fast events (one reason timed parser games never took off). Stories thrive on action, while parser games do not, in general.

11.1.7 Difficulties in adapting Holmes

Sherlock Holmes has been difficult to adapt because there are just so many characters. *The Six Napoleons* has Sherlock, Lestrade, an assistant, a Mr. Barnicot, a German manager, the Harding Brothers founder, his assistant, a thief, a Mr. Sanderson, Mrs. Hudson, a telegram boy, and on and on and on. Each of these people needs a description and some sort of reaction to conversation.

I was able to tone down much of the difficulties with conversation by restricting most characters to a TALK TO interaction. More advanced characters (Lestrade, Watson, and important players) can converse on almost any of the game’s fifty-three topics. This has required a lot of writing to put in their reactions.

Another difficulty is the linearity of the stories. Adaptations either have “guess the impossible combo to advance” or “push the button to advance”: too much difficulty (like *Hitchhiker* and *The Hobbit*) or pure boredom.

This requires a lot of scene programming in Inform 7. That language is well adapted to scenes, but so many things can go wrong. When the vicious Dr.

Roylott barrels into your apartment and bends a steel poker in half, what's to stop the player from going outside and catching a train, leaving Dr. Roylott mid-sentence? It's difficult to know how far to corral a player.

11.1.8 Expectations about Sherlock Holmes

Everyone has different expectations of Sherlock Holmes. I wanted this to be a cerebral game, with an emphasis on deduction and reasoning, almost more Poirot than Holmes. Many Intro Comp voters expressed dismay about this, preferring an active Holmes, using magnifying lenses and dusting for prints. It's hard to find a balance.

It's also difficult finding a place for Watson. Of course, Watson is only in the original novels to provide an excuse for the story format and to be a sort of reader-avatar. Many games have you play as Watson instead.

I discovered, though, that Doyle frequently describes Sherlock's depression, and mentions that the admiration and respect of Watson and Lestrade are deeply meaningful to him. I decided to personify Sherlock's depression in his "house of the mind" as a flooded basement whose waters creep ever higher up the stairs. Watson's purpose, then, is to tame the depression. Once per story, they rise too high, and the player has to talk with Watson until you've impressed him enough, and subdued your depression enough, to move on.

11.1.9 Conclusion

The ideal story structures for books vs. parser games are so different that porting one to the other directly is less than satisfying. When more freedom in adaptation is allowed, one can be more successful. *Toby's Nose*,^[319] by Chandler Groover, is an original Holmes story focusing entirely on Holmes's dog Toby and uses a completely non-linear format. It's one of the most brilliant games I've played and a major influence on my own writing.

I will never do another direct adaptation; the payoff is just not there for author or reader. The story, as originally described, must still be told, and so you just wait around for the next chunk to appear. Perhaps one day someone will adapt *Spoon River Anthology*^[469]; until then, I don't expect parser adaptations of linear stories to experience great success.

I plan on continuing this post with at least one more on conversation styles in parser games, and perhaps more after that.

11.2 Conversational Systems in Parser Games

In this essay, I want to go over a variety of conversational systems that parser games can use. Emily Short has written many, many articles on this subject over time, and so long time followers of interaction fiction may find this redundant.

This article is part of my series advertising my upcoming Spring Thing game/Introcomp winner *Sherlock Indomitable*.

I'd like to discuss various ways to handle conversation in parser games. Conversation has typically been seen as a 'problem' in parser games, something to be solved. In choice games, there is no distinction. Conversation in those games is handled the same as gameplay, and is, if anything, sometimes easier to implement than other things like movement and puzzles.

Here are some of the systems used:

11.2.1 Traditional ASK/TELL

In many ways this is still the gold standard of IF. Parser games give off the illusion that you can do anything and get a response. While limited parser games get a lot of mileage out of showing how restrictive it really is, there's still something exciting about a game that might understand anything reasonable you type.

This is hard, though. Three of the best-known purely conversational ask/tell games are *Galatea*,^[724] *Alabaster*,^[115] and *Mirror and Queen*.^[316] *Galatea* has hundreds of topics, around sixty endings, and is responsive to the order that you say things in, indicating some sort of memory, in addition to a Boston or other variables like the direction *Galatea* faces, her mood, etc. *Alabaster* was co-written by many, many people. *Mirror and Queen* understands something like 1000 nouns and organizes conversations on distinct tracks.

What these all have in common is that they are extremely labor intensive. To make a great conversational game, you have to constrain your setting, and then implement every noun that appears in that setting. There's an art of name-dropping new people and objects into your responses to unlock new topics.

Benefits: Immersion, fits traditional parser gameplay style, wonder of discovery.

Drawbacks: Time-consuming to implement, frustration from not guessing the noun, and typing 'ask about NOUN' doesn't say exactly what you're about to say. Does 'ask about dog' mean 'accuse Tom of killing the dog' or does it mean 'ask Tom what a dog is'?

11.2.2 Traditional menu-based conversation

This system, where you choose from a selection of conversational choices, was popularized early on with polished games like *Photopia*, and even now sees great use in games like *Brain Guzzlers from Beyond*. This is also, of course, the standard in choice-based games.

Benefits: Easy to program, easy to use, allows the player to know exactly what they're saying. Drawbacks: Breaks immersion in parser games, less of a feeling of freedom, interface style doesn't match the rest of the game.

Hybrid: menu-based conversations with ability to change topics by keywords

This is essentially Emily Short's *Pytho's Mask*^[731] and *Best of Three*,^[715] and no other games that I can recall. In these games, you have menus of things to say, but typing in keywords can change your menu.

Benefits: Allows both player flexibility and discovery while letting the player know what exactly they are saying, and cluing the player on interesting things to say.

Drawbacks: Also combines drawbacks of both systems: menus can break immersion or be intrusive, while good keyword mechanics can be opaque and new keywords difficult to find.

11.2.3 Hybrid: ASK/TELL with suggested topics.

This is used in a large portion of the block buster games that have come out in the last two decades (what I called Class 1 and Class 2 games in a previous chapter). *Blue Lacuna*,^[644] *Counterfeit Monkey*,^[720] Eric Eve's games (and most TADS 3 games in general), etc.

In these games, there are suggestions on what keywords to use. These suggestions can sometimes be found by typing 'topics', sometimes found in gray (like *Counterfeit Monkey*), and sometimes they show up in separate windows (like *Blue Lacuna*).^[644]

Benefits: Provides a similar interface to the rest of the game while preserving the ease of keyword discovery. Some versions let you see what exactly you are going to say.

Drawbacks: Not that many, which is why it's so popular. Less of the thrill of the discovery of new keywords, a bit of a feeling like you're being led by the nose. Overall, a very effective strategy, though.

11.2.4 YES/NO conversation

Constraining conversation in this way can allow for extraordinary freedom in coming up with responses. *Spider and Web*^[610] did amazing work with this system, and *Gun Mute*^[571] is surprisingly moving with the way it handles this.

Benefits: Easy to program, easy to use. Full immersion in the game.

Drawbacks: Doesn't allow much player freedom.

11.2.5 TALK TO [Character]

In this system, a player types TALK TO whenever they meet someone. That person says a piece of dialogue. Repeated TALK TOs can get different answers.

This is popular in scene-driven or action-based games, where conversation only serves to move on to the next scene.

Benefits: Easy to program, easy to use. Doesn't break immersion.

Drawbacks: Completely linear. Feels like 'push button to play story'.

11.2.6 The conversation system for my Sherlock Holmes game

For *Sherlock Indomitable*, I'm using the conversation system I developed in *Halloween Dance*^[470] and used in *Color the Truth*^[474] and *Absence of Law*.^[473]

This system is essentially a cross between ask/tell with suggestions and menus. The biggest difference is that this conversation system has been designed to bring conversation as close as possible to the rest of gameplay in parser games; that is, to make conversation essentially a medium-sized dry goods problem.

I do this by having topics be persistent in a sort of thought inventory. Standard ask/tell is naturally persistent; a keyword, once you know it's implemented with one NPC, can be used with many.

Menus and suggested ask/tell are not persistent. A topic, once used, never comes up again.

By allowing topics to persist, my goal is to combine the ease of use of menus (by always knowing exactly what you can say) with the discovery/freedom of expression allowed by ask/tell (since you have to figure out who to say it too).

This system can be immersive, once you're used to it, as it uses the exact format that inventory does. However, because it's unusual, many players find it odd or frustrating.

One further feature of this method is that permanence of topics allows actions on topics. Topics can be examined to remember or to get an idea of exactly what you'll say, and in my last three games, topics can be combined to create new topics.

Due to the large number of NPCs in *Sherlock Indomitable*, I've combined this system with TALK TO, so that Sherlock Reserves in-depth conversation for characters like Lestrade, Watson, and clients, while just TALKing TO all others.

Benefits: players know what they can say and what exactly they will say, allows for conversational puzzles and player freedom, allows for topic manipulation.

Drawbacks: requires a lot of response writing if every NPC reacts to every topic, and guidance otherwise to prevent players from getting the same rejection message over and over. Unusual, and, to be honest, somewhat clunky.

11.2.7 Conclusion:

Overall, it seems that the most successful conversational method in games that aren't purely conversation-focused has been ask/tell with suggested topics, closely followed by menus.

The success of my particular conversational system is yet to be seen. *Color the Truth* and *Absence of Law* were well-received, but several players have complained about the conversational system. My next game after Sherlock may use traditional ask/tell (Update: I did, allowing characters to respond to dozens of questions using some procedurally generated text. It was noted as being bland). But for now, there's plenty of room for exploration.

For an especially interesting take on conversation in a choice-based game, try *10pm*^[441] by litrouke.

11.3 Opening Scenes of Games

This is the third post in my series of `gamedev`/historical analysis articles.

In this article, I want to discuss effective openings for games. The beginning of a game satisfies several roles, the most important of which is drawing in the player. Here are some of those roles:

11.3.1 Opening as tutorial

This is true for all games, of course. For parser games, though, the opening of the game can serve as a tutorial for the entire field of interactive fiction.

This tutorial role can be fulfilled in two ways: placing the player in constrained situations (frequently employed by Andrew Plotkin and Adam Cadre), and explicit tutorials (which many of Emily Short's and Jon Ingold's games use).

The tutorial method is more straightforward, and one which I have used several times. In the tutorial method, you directly tell the player what steps they can take next. *Counterfeit Monkey* employs greyed-out text, while *Make It Good* has a side window giving suggestions.

The constrained method is more tricky. You have to implement enough to give people an idea of the game while not making it overwhelming. *Photopia*^[97] (starting in a car) and *Spider and Web*^[610] (starting in a blind alleyway) both have good constrained opening scenes.

It's easy to place the player in too tight a situation or too open a situation. The second trap is very common (just sample parser games with low ratings on IFDB; many of them fail to provide guidance early on). I fell into the first trap with *Absence of Law*,^[473] where the first scene only lets you LOOK. This wouldn't be a problem if the whole game was that way, but it gave people a false idea of the game, and many people strongly disliked it. This leads me into my next role of the opening:

11.3.2 Opening as expectations-setter

A good opening helps indicate both length and style of game.

The time it takes you to hit the first significant milestone in a game corresponds roughly to the length of the entire game. In the short games *Lime Ergot*^[65] and *The Horrible Pyramid*,^[804] the first tasks can be completed very quickly. *Counterfeit Monkey*^[720] and *Spider and Web*^[610] both take some more thought and time to pass the 'intro' period. And it can take quite some time to pass through the openings of *Zork*^[20] and *Adventure*.^[161]

Most authors actually do pretty good with this, especially with parser games, since the authors can 'see' how big the intro is based on room size. But choice-based authors often struggle a great deal with this. I've played through many twine games that are absolutely huge (50000+ words) but have the same kind of opening as a 5000-word game. I personally find this very frustrating.

The intro also sets the style of the game. The bad examples are easier to discuss here. Many, many parser authors want to write a game where it is set up like one style/genre of parser game and then suddenly, with no clue ahead of time, it switches to a different kind of game.

These authors are almost always highly disappointed by player reaction. They usually pick a ‘boring’ opening to contrast with their ‘cool real game’. But in a field filled with high-quality free games, there is very little motivation to play a boring game. This leads to my final role:

11.3.3 Opening as attention-getter

A good opening needs to be cool. *Counterfeit Monkey* has a bizarre situation: you have been fused with someone else! *Anchorhead*^[273]’s opening just oozes with character. Plotkin’s epic game *So Far*,^[609] the game *Slouching Towards Bedlam*,^[258] and the classic Infocom game *Spellbreaker*^[428] all start with scripted scenes full of compelling dialog/acting.

This brings me to my current work-in-progress, *Sherlock Indomitable*.

I have had a great deal of trouble with this. The essential idea of *Sherlock Indomitable* is ‘Arthur Conan Doyle story ported directly to Inform). But the openings of these stories lead to very linear openings.

So I added a different opening, where you start in Holmes’s mind with several distinct rooms. But that was so wide open, people still bounced off the opening hard, especially because it looked wide while being constrained (violating all of the points I gave earlier).

So I decided to listen to players’ feedback. Everyone wanted more ‘Holmes’-ness. Not even the Holmes of the stories, but the Holmes that has been created by a million interpretations in popular culture. Everyone wants to examine stuff minutely and make crazy deductions. They also wanted more original Holmes’s contact.

So I went through and created an original cover story. You start constrained. You are a very old *Sherlock Holmes* on his deathbed. Because the environment is constrained, I was able to implement absolutely every object in the room so that Holmes can make brilliant deductions about them. Watson visits the player, leaving a book of your cases which will transport you in memory back to the past (where the main part of the game happens).

By setting up the main part of the game as a giant flashback, it is my hope that the linear-ness of the stories will be more acceptable and more expected. The old Watson/old Sherlock segment is more dramatic and thus gets more attention (especially since I incorporated some of Doyle’s most dramatic dialog). Whether it works or not remains to be seen, but it was my attempt to satisfy the above requirements.

11.3.4 Conclusion

A good opening is fundamental to getting players to play your game (along with a good blurb and cover art). By using it to signal the length, genre, and

play-style of your game, and by being cool, you can improve player retention and enjoyment.

Anyone interested in strong openings should also check out the Jason Devlin game *Gris et Jaune*.^[185] Although the full game is a bit unfinished/unpolished, the opening is absolutely fantastic.

11.4 Indie and Freelance Writing Communities

As part of my continuing series of gamedev posts for my upcoming Spring Thing game *Sherlock Indomitable*, I wanted to talk about writing communities.

As of now, I've written some content for a variety of communities, enough to see how the process work. These communities include Wikipedia, the IFComp community, SCP-Wiki, Reddit, Wesnoth, and for commercial games. It's interesting to see how they all deal with similar issues in different ways.

My experience in these communities is varied. In some, such as SCP and Reddit, I've only had a small number of posts that passed the 'acceptable' bar. In others, such as Wikipedia and IFComp, I've spent years working with the community.

The first two things I want to talk about is how different communities treat writing along the axes of canonicity vs originality and self-awareness vs earnestness. I've attached a chart to this post.

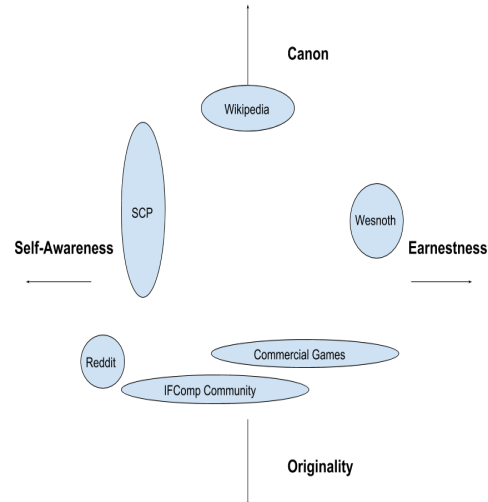


Figure 11.1: In my experience in different writing communities, each community takes a different approach to self-awareness and canonicity.

11.4.1 Canonicity

Every community establishes safeguards about what sort of content is acceptable.

Some communities, such as Wikipedia and SCP Wiki, establish a rigid order that prevents subpar content from being added. A new Wikipedia author has to pass through a maze of bots, editors used to overturning vandalism and well-intentioned bungling, and page hoarders who refuse to allow others to edit their favorite topics. Similarly, SCP-Wiki has a cohort of tough mods who spend much of their time deleting pages and images.

On the other hand, communities like IFComp/IFDB and especially Reddit are more of a wild west. Nearly anything is acceptable that isn't illegal (such as the infamous IFComp game that was nothing but the code to jailbreak a DVR). It's a swim-or-sink scenario; due to the lack of barriers, the only way to get attention is by being high-quality and getting attention.

Others are somewhere in the middle. Battle for Wesnoth campaigns allow great freedoms for their authors, but there is a general expectation that a campaign will usually fit in with pre-established background material.

Commercial games vary, but the bulk of IF writing is not licensed material, and so canon is not as important. This may change, though, given the rise of free to play IF games.

11.4.2 Self-awareness

One of the most striking things about the various communities is what is considered 'good' writing. Self-awareness is a major element here.

By self-awareness, I mean content that is very aware of its genre and cliches and purposely subverts it. By contrast, I consider earnest content to be content which plays into its genre and cliches willingly.

One of the clearest contrasts here is the treatment of classic RPG tropes in Battle for Wesnoth vs. IFComp. Are you considering writing a game about forest-dwelling, long lived elves combating orcs in a battle of honor? In Wesnoth, this can be some of the most popular content. In IFComp, a significant segment of the community will villify it.

It's not ubiquitous; the game *Heroes* in 2001 placed in the top three, but one reviewer said of it:^[704]

If you don't like fantasy games, this is not going to appeal to you. This is not to say that it's not a good game, but it calls itself a most traditional CRPG experience and this is in fact what it is. There's more to it than just the CRPG aspect, but mostly it's "You chose to be a thief, so you can pick locks and climb walls. You must steal the jewel!"

Reddit and SCP-Wiki both expect authors to be subverting something at all times. A story with no twists is a story not worth telling. On the other hand, most commercial writing that I've done is comfortable with following classic

story outlines and allowing surprises to come from other sources than genre subversion.

With that, I'd like to segue to a different topic:

11.4.3 Beta testers and editors

The vast majority of these communities rely heavily on editors and beta testers. I've come to realize that these people are the most scarce and valuable resources of these communities. I've attached a chart:

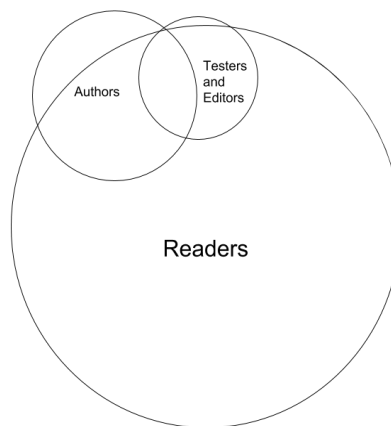


Figure 11.2: The numbers of readers is far greater than the number of authors or testers and coders.

The number of testers and editors is smaller than the number of authors or the number of readers, but all good content needs to go through them. There are frequently a few heavy-hitting people who take the brunt of the work, some intermingling of authors helping others, and few fringe testers/editors who help when available.

In the IFComp community, there are some people who test just about everything, like Andrew Schultz, Hanon Ondricek, and many more (those were just the first that came to my mind; there are others who are extremely helpful). In Wikipedia, there are mega-editors who look over every single new page in a given project. And in commercial games, there are dedicated editors who will supervise up to a dozen games or more.

The approach these editor/testers take varies from community to community.

At one extreme, we have reddit. The 'tester' role in reddit writing is essentially heckling. Horrible writing gets mocked to scorn in an effort to drive away new authors. Mediocre writing is criticized by way of mansplaining. Content

is published first, criticized second, and feedback is incorporated into future products.

On the other extreme, we have commercial games. Professional editors are committed to a product through a commercial contract, and often through professionalism. Nothing gets published without multiple rounds of revision.

11.4.4 Sherlock Indomitable

Like all of my gamedev posts, I want to finish by talking about my upcoming Spring Thing game *Sherlock Indomitable*.

This game's origin was completely planned around community involvement.

It involves: 1) The textadventures.co.uk community, which is the largest organized parser playing community. It subsists almost entirely in the 'reader' group. They played my game *Color the Truth*^[474] and one of them mentioned that they'd like a sequel. Simultaneously, the most highly upvoted games on the site are Sherlock Holmes game. I decided to make a Holmes game with the same system as *Color the Truth*. This group is high on the earnestness scale and in the middle of the canonicity scale.

2) The XYZZY community, which is high on originality and self-awareness. Like many parser authors, I've wanted to write at an XYZZY-winning level. In general, I've been unsuccessful, but I have received one nomination. I decided to make Sherlock a longer game to give it a better shot at winning a nomination (as long, polished games do better at most things). (*Update: it was not nominated for any, and rightly so!*)

To maximize awareness of my game for the XYZZY's, I decided to enter it into the two most important IF competitions for long works,

3) Introcomp (where unfinished openings to big games are submitted), and

4) Spring Thing (which was founded to give a venue to long parser games), both of which are fairly neutral on my axes (they've seen several sequels and a variety of content types).

My beta testers have been absolutely invaluable. The Introcomp voters (which function similar to beta testers, in that feedback is encouraged) were very supportive, one even writing an entire essay that he uploaded to google docs. Many of them supported the idea of the completed game.

In the intermediate run, when players first tried my completed game, they provided useful critical feedback. The game was a mess at that point, and beta tests were mostly full of bug reports and issues with tone, playstyle criticisms, etc. This was useful, and simultaneously extremely disheartening. While I got the most done at this point, I was also convinced that the game was a hot mess that was going to tank.

Finally, as the game has gotten closer to publication and the comments from the intermediate testers, the final testers have provided much-needed support. They've been able to say what about the game they liked, as the glaring errors and problems from earlier versions have disappeared.

Given the small size of the parser community, the feedback from beta testers may be the majority of all feedback you ever get. I can't say enough how much

my testers, from the early introcomp testers and voters to the load-bearing bug finders to the polishers and finishers, mean to my game.

(Update: Unfortunately, at the time I wrote this game I was working a full time job and trying to fulfill two commercial contracts while working on this game. In the end, I couldn't give my full attention to any of these areas. I try to keep it to one game at a time now!)

11.4.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, every writing community varies in how it approaches canonicity and genre conventions, but they all rely heavily on a small few to serve as mentors and gatekeepers. Nobody is more essential to a community than this group.

Chapter 12

What I learned from playing every Choicescript game

This chapter is written by Brian Rushton and Simone Durbin.

Note that I had the chance to change the images used but kept them because I think they're neat. In addition, several reviews quoted are no longer on the web.

I recently finished playing and reviewing every Choicescript game. Based on what I learned, I feel like it might be helpful if I share patterns I noticed in popular vs unpopular games. It helps that I have written what is possibly the least popular Choice of Games title of all time, *In the Service of Mrs. Claus*. So when I talk about what doesn't seem to do well, I talk from experience!

First, a few caveats:

- This isn't a guide to making a great game, it's just examples of features common in good or bad games. Correlation is not causation, and the next great game might go against all of this advice.
- Games are like that boat in the Suez canal. You spend months or years writing them and they are huge beasts, difficult to turn or control. If you finish at all, it's a real achievement. Some games just end up stinking and you can't do much about it besides wrap it up.
- This list is certainly tainted by my personal opinions.
- There's not much writing advice here. It is a huge factor, but not one I'm qualified to discuss.
- Every game that I find flaws with has good points, too, and my game is one of the worst-selling.

To help reinforce those caveats, for each rule I list I've provided counter examples of good games that ignore them to show that none of these rules are hard and fast.

With that in mind, here are the four things that I noticed the most!

12.1 Your first chapter is vital!

Your work of interactive fiction is both a story and a game. Your first chapter serves simultaneously as a tutorial for the game, a character creation menu, and the hook for your story. For most Choicescript games, the first chapter also serves as a book cover or blurb, as many links to Choicescript games just link directly to the first chapter.

This makes the first chapter absolutely critical. One thing the lowest tier of games sales-wise have in common (besides those which are extremely short) is bad first chapters.

What makes a first chapter good or bad? Here are some questions you can ask yourself:

Is my first chapter as interesting as the rest of the book?

Several of the lowest-selling games have purposely slow first chapters with later 'big reveals' that make the story much more exciting. While this can pay off with reader involvement, there is no payoff if no one's reading in the first place.

When I discussed this with my co-author, she pointed out that famous books tend to start much slower than games narrative-wise, and that habit can sometimes carry over. Having dozens of pages of Bilbo's birthday and Frodo walking is great for Tolkien, but doesn't do much for gamebook sales.

Counterexamples: A few very well-written and well-regarded games have slow starts. *Heart of the House*^[108] is one of my top 2-3 Choicescript games, but I remember I looked at it a year earlier and didn't buy it because the first chapter seemed boring. *Asteroid Run: No Questions Asked*^[363] is a fantastic, very fun sci-fi adventure that, I feel, starts very slow.

Is my first chapter a good tutorial for the rest of the game?

Your work of interactive fiction is, again, both a story and a game. For many people who buy your game, this will be their first Choicescript game, and even for experienced players, your game will have its own quirks that need to be taught.

If your game is going to be about resource management, you need to show what the resources are and how they're used. If the game is going to be about moral dilemmas, you should show moral dilemmas in the first chapter that are similar to ones you'll have later.

In my own poor-selling game's original version, the first chapter featured no NPCs and a great deal of slow-paced flashbacks, both very different from the rest of the game.

In a twitter summary of a talk by Jon Ingold (*80 Days*,^[372] *Heaven's Vault*,^[373] etc.), Twitter user Axel Hassen Taiaria (@axel_hexed, account no

longer extant) reported the following comments:

C) important that a game communicates early on what kind of game/experience it's going to be. Not just thematically or diegetically (eg a Spider-Man game has to have Spider-Man) but rather give SOME sense of the possibility spaces you're dealing with.

One great way to communicate this is to explicitly show the player that choices change stats and say what stats are being increased (*Crème de la Crème*^[628] does this in part of the first chapter, as does *Vampire: the Masquerade—Night Road* and *Choice of Robots*.^[291] This is also central to *Heroes Rise*^{[696][695]} with the McChip, as well as the *Versus*^[697] series).

Some games that have great tutorial chapters include *Werewolves: Haven Rising*,^[176] *Vampire: The Masquerade – Night Road*, *Crème de la Crème*,^[628] *Choice of Magics*,^[290] *Psy High*,^[740] *Choice of Robots*.^[291]

Counterexamples: *Ironheart*^[851] is fun and popular and has a first chapter that is absolutely nothing like the rest of the game in genre, or in just about any other way. *Silverworld*^[465] and *Stronghold: A Heroes Fate*^[308] are two other good games where the main gameplay is very different from the first chapter.

Is my first chapter a good character creator?

Imagine rolling a Dungeons and Dragons character (where stats are between three and eighteen with nine or ten being average) and getting someone with five 8's and one 10. That's what a lot of character creation chapters are like in lower-selling games, even in otherwise award-winning games.

In fact, there are several games where you can pass all checks having all stats at 10% except for one in the 20%. The game just never makes use of the visual space the rest of the stat bars provides.

Here is an example of the stats screen of a good-selling game and a bad-selling game after one chapter (see Figures 12.1 and 12.2).

Outside of stats, more customization is better in character creation. I share lots of CoG games with my students. One girl (whose parents immigrated from India) who played *Crème de la Crème*^[628] was thrilled that she could create someone with her skin color and hair type. For myself, I enjoy *Choice of the Dragon's*^[240] customization.

Counterexamples: The biggest counterexample would be *Creatures Such as We*, a wonderful and popular game that has no stats whatsoever.

12.2 Stat disease

As I played through the vast 'middle' chunk of Choicescript games which are not bestsellers or worstsellers, I found a pattern that was repeated over and over again in regards to stats, a pattern that differentiated the upper-middle from the lower-middle. It came to the point where I could open up a new game, check its stats page, and immediately know about where it would be placed in bestseller/rating lists, based on a problem that many games have.

I call this problem 'stat disease'. What are the symptoms of stat disease?

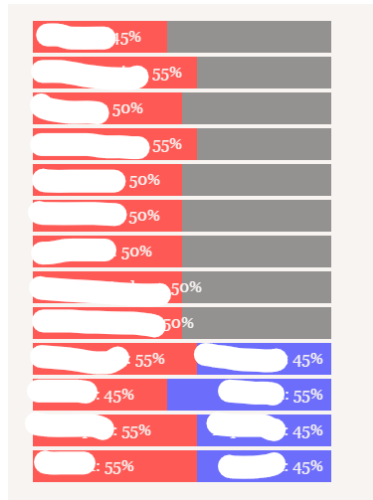


Figure 12.1: A low-selling game after first chapter.

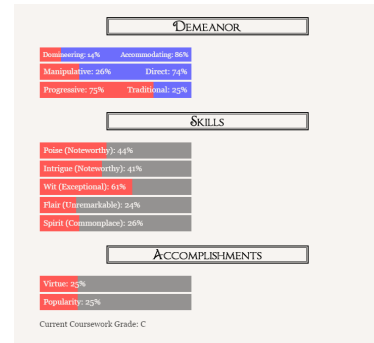


Figure 12.2: A high-selling game after first chapter.

Overlapping/indistinguishable stats. Examples:

- My own (low-selling) game, where there is a skill called Cheer, an opposed stat called Happy Helper, and an achievement meter called ‘Christmas Spirit’. If a choice is about the power of Christmas love, which of these three skills is involved?
- A game that has opposed stats ‘idealistic vs cynical’, ‘indifferent vs empathetic’, ‘honorable vs shameless’, ‘cautious vs maverick’, and ‘loner vs sharer’, as well as skills ‘charming’ and ‘cunning’ and meters ‘integrity’ and ‘pride’. If you have to make a choice to listen to your boss or ignore them, what’s being tested? Ignoring your boss could certainly be described as being a loner, and a maverick, and not idealistic, and indifferent, and not honorable.
- A game that has ‘charm’ as a skill and ‘guile’ as an opposed stat, and ‘confidence’ as a skill with ‘boldness’ as an opposed stat.

It should be easy to distinguish stats from each other. The very smoothest games are so clear that you never even need to check the stats screen; you can just say ‘my character has always been greedy, of course I can sympathize with the dragon’ and not worry about it.

Some games with great, easily distinguished stats are *Tally Ho*,^[694] *Heroes Rise: The Prodigy*^[696] (the opposed stats especially are very clearly differentiated), *Choice of Magics*^[290] (especially nice how differentiated the different kinds of stats are on the stats screen), and *Champion of the Gods*.^[793] Even in these games, there is some overlap, but most stats are distinguishable from each other.

Counterexample: *Crème de la Crème*^[628] has some stats that may be confusing at first glance. It's not clear what 'poise' vs spirit is. The game overcomes that by explicitly describing what those skills are and aren't in the first chapter, by name (with the question that marks your greatest skill and weakest skill). So confusing stat names can be overcome, but it requires conscious, guided effort.

Having too many stats getting spread out or generally being very weak

Little differentiation between good and bad stats

These two go together, and both go along with the 'character creation' part of point 1 above.

Opening up a stat screen and seeing fifteen different stats starting out at 20% is very discouraging, especially when chapter one ends up with you only adding 5% to one or two stats. There are very few examples of popular games where you have tons of diverse stats with only small boosts in a few of them at the end of the first chapter.

One reviewer said :^[815]

Story captured my interest but stats mgmt hinder fun. There were too many stats to pay attention to. I found myself in scenario where a situation needs two or more different stats to align and my character meets only one or two requirements and none of the other choices can work either because of the same reasons. It ends up being annoying to keep track all these choices and scenarios to get what you want. It almost as if you cant be what you want without being penalized.

The other direction can be problematic, too. Having only two or three stats can get frustrating if everything depends on them but they are frequently changed without notice.

Stat checks and stat changes are indistinguishable from each other or happen unannounced

Opposing stats easily overridden on accident

Game frequently lowers your skills

The absolute worst thing is when you're playing a game, focusing on a specific strategy, when suddenly a choice that looks harmless actually sets one of your opposed stats forty points in the opposite direction of what you've been focusing on. You thought you were compassionate? No, you're actually 75% sadistic!

Reviewers have pointed this out in many games. For instance [unable to find source]:

this ruined the game for me, in this game you have personality stats like independence/respectable, and they fluctuates a lot depending on your minor choices, like greeting your friend one way instead of another. A big problem with this is at the end game, there will be major choices that will decide what ending you will get and only a few one will be available to you depending on your personality stats, the rest will be grey. and since in this game what choices raise or lower stats is NOT CLEAR AT ALL! tries after tries i tried different

combination of choices to raise my stat to a certain degree so i can select the ending that i considered to be best and it just never works

Choice of the Robots^[291] and *Vampire: the Masquerade—Night Road* handle this well by indicating what’s being checked and when. I know a lot of authors (myself included) have eschewed this because it brings players out of the story, but it significantly contributes to the enjoyability of the game aspect.

Counterexamples: *The Fog Knows Your Name*^[174] is a fantastically popular game, but many reviews cite difficulties with the stats. For instance:^[790]

It is nice to see another story where stats matter but i think the way in which they are implemented leaves something to be desired. It’s never clear what choices raise your stats or when a stat check is behind a choice. Like for example my character in this was relatively physical, i had something like 63 physical so when confronted with an option to use a branch to defend myself i chose it. But obvious i failed that check because somehow picking up a stick wrenched my arm and made me more vulnerable. But i had no way of knowing if 63 was a good level or if it was even checking my physical stat.

(Heavily criticized) Opposed stats are used for built-up skills or personal relationships

By skill I mean stats that represent your accumulated talent or knowledge. Making, for instance, agility an opposed stat to strength means that your character can be an incredible dancer or runner, but if they lift a weight once they become slow and clumsy. Making relationships opposed means that the best way to romance someone is to attack or abuse their ‘opposite’ person. It just doesn’t make sense.

Empyrean^[464] had to be completely revised to remove this feature after massive backlash. *Treasure Seekers of Lady Luck*,^[78] a personal favorite of mine, placed rock bottom in the last poll on underrated Choicescript games, and it uses these opposed stats for relationships. People seem to really dislike it.

Overall Stat Disease

The following are a great deal of reviews exemplifying stat disease for various games:

God this game has intrigue and I want to learn more about it but the game’s mechanics itself won’t let me be interested. There are way too many stats to keep track of, such that I don’t think the creator properly factored in the crossover of having certain combinations. You will almost always hit walls of choices where none of your stats are suited for any options, and it doesn’t feel intentional or good to play. The game doesn’t clearly communicate which stats mean what and the crossover between stats makes it all the more confusing. I didn’t even get a chance to decide if I was honorable or cunning in the tutorial so I went through the game without the ability to choose either option. And in choices where 2/3 were the honor and cunning choice I’m obviously restricted.

Another review for a different game with stat disease:

> Not enough chances to increase your skills. [...]
 Most choices seem to not affect the story as you may want them to, since in most cases it seems to fail a check of sorts. It mostly seems you're just always making a bad choice.
 Sometimes choices aren't as straight forwards as they seem.
 A save and reload function would've been nice to have; At least in between chapters.
 A skill stat for stealth would've helped indicate if choices were being made properly when choosing options of that nature.

Another:

As I said, [game] lacks meaningful choices and reads more like a non-interactive novel at times. For that, we have entirely too many stats. Considering how the stats don't even impact the story all that much, we have too many of them and it gets confusing. Especially because micromanaging them is a chore.

There are a lot of instances where it's not at all clear which choice is going to change which stat. And even several instances where it is deeply unfair. For example, let's say we have answers A, B and C. Answer A raises a skill stat by 10% (very valuable). Answer B raises a personality stat by 10% (quite okay). And answer C reduces a skill stat by 10% (really bad)! As a reader, it's almost impossible to see that coming.

Another review:

Genuinely a bit of a pain. It's hard to raise your stats high enough to do anything, and balancing things almost never works. Rather little variation in paths, despite several playthroughs with different choices;

another:

>I kept dying halfway through the game because I couldn't figure out wtf the author's choices meant, kept ruining my stats because I couldn't figure out wtf the author wanted, and, had I known then that I could get a refund for a s*** game, would've demanded it. I expected a game that was more plot oriented (I mean, "choice of" means interactive novel, right??) and got a stat-oriented bunch of drivel with a shallow plot, shallow NPCs, and shallow relationships. I was completely unimpressed and found the game annoying as h***.

Games without stat disease

Mecha Ace^[824]

When talking about Mecha Ace, I never missed an opportunity to mention my favorite scene: I focused my skill on ranged weapon with a bit of piloting, so my mech is built for that. In one of the battle, I was given the opportunity to take a position in the formation which I took the frontline. My plan was to cause massive damage to opposing formation before they're able to wreck ours, so at the start, I'd charge in with my squad. The game mentioned the pros and cons, including the time it'd take to assist my main force if they're overwhelmed. Guess what? Our forces got overwhelmed. Being left alone, I pick the option to assist them, but the game mentioned that my mech is not the best at moving and my piloting is too low. Wham bam, we take a massive hit and there's nothing I could do: too far to continue the deep strike, too far to return to the frontline. Power fantasy got fulfilled, but the consequence is brutally fair. At that time, I also realized: I have the long-range build. Why would I go that aggressive?"

From *Crème de la Crème*:^[628]

And unlike Choice of Romance, your lowest stat doesn't get stuck being super-low level the whole time, because in the course of the story you get tutoring in your worst subject!

For *Psy High*:^[740]

If you, like me, love watching arbitrary sliders go up for acting like a Lannister, you will enjoy this game. If you had a good, or at least not-awful time in High School, chances are you will enjoy this game.

For *Choice of Rebels*:^[333]

With a sprawling, well-written story and intuitive mechanics (a first for me), there's no reason not to try it out if you're even mildly interested in the premise.

and the tension in plots are insane.

It's long, detailed, complex, and gives you a *huge* amount of freedom to shape the story to your whims.

I fear the author might of written himself into a corner with how much choice was in this installment.

Origins of Stat Disease

It's my belief that stat disease is caused by authors not knowing how to make interesting interactivity in their games (including me when I wrote my game). They throw in stat checks, but then the game is too easy since people can just pick a favorite stat. So the easiest option is just to make things difficult. Think about it: every symptom of stat disease is a way of making regular stat checks more difficult.

This is bad.

Engagement in your game does not come from making stat checks difficult! The primary use of stats is for the game to remember who the main character is.

Or, as Eiwynn, a Choice of Games forums moderator, put it:^[218]

"For the bulk of text-based choice games, mechanics are not the key that unlocks the kingdom."

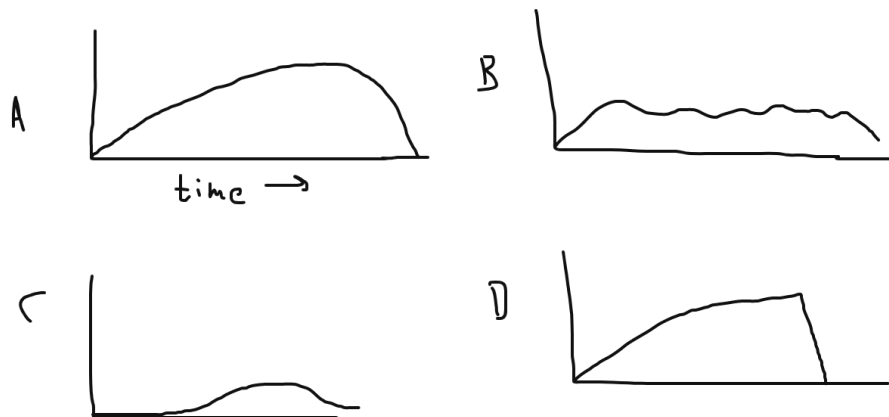
So where does engagement come from, then? From having mutually worthwhile and interesting goals that must be pursued simultaneously but cannot all be achieved at once (especially relationships, but also things like saving something you care about that's dishonorable vs being honorable. *Choice of Rebels*,^[333] *Slammed!*^[127]).

The best games are when you can get any one goal you want but you have to sacrifice everything to get it (like *Psy High*^[740] where a dream crush can be dated but you find out they are a terrible person).

The game on the omnibus with the lowest overall rating is one which allows you to select your difficulty, with the default being 'very difficult'. Difficult stats don't, in general make for a fun game by themselves.

12.3 Give your game a satisfying plot arc (no matter the player's choices)

The shape of your plot Every game has a plot arc of some type. Here are some typical plot arcs:



Among poorly selling or lower-rated games, many have arc C, where the action picks up slowly and then kind of peters out. Like one review said:

There was a lot of blank space throughout the story. By that I mean several days were skipped to rush you to the main goal at the time. This could have been an excellent time to build upon the lore

And another:

The premise had a lot of potential but the execution of the story leaves much to be desired. The ending was completely underwhelming, no build up, no pay off, no climax, it just... happens, written in the same tone as the beginning and middle of the story.

Another review says:

Still working my way through but noticing the game breaks down in the middle of the story.

And the worst (my own game, *In the Service of Mrs Claus*, before I edited it):

The beginning is a chore to get through. It feels too much like an exposition dump.

[...]

It would've been better if it had just given you a character customisation first and skipped all the flashbacks that just bombard you and leave you confused on what you're reading this time.

[...]

It's as far as I've gotten cause like I said. The beginning chapter is too boring to get through right now.

Type B arcs are generally only found in the longer games (although *Sixth Grade Detective*^[359] is a shorter, but fun, example). These games are generally episodic, with no rising tension, and can become very dull after longer periods of time.

Type D arcs just stop suddenly, like the end of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.^[395]

I'll shout out *Choice of the Petal Throne*,^[295] because I thought it was an awesome game (incredibly complex worldbuilding borrowed from a pre-existing shared world). It had a really interesting plot happening and right at what seemed like the midpoint of the game it just stopped like a truck driving into a mountain cliff. No real denouement or indication it was the climax.

A review of another game with 'drive into a cliff' ending:

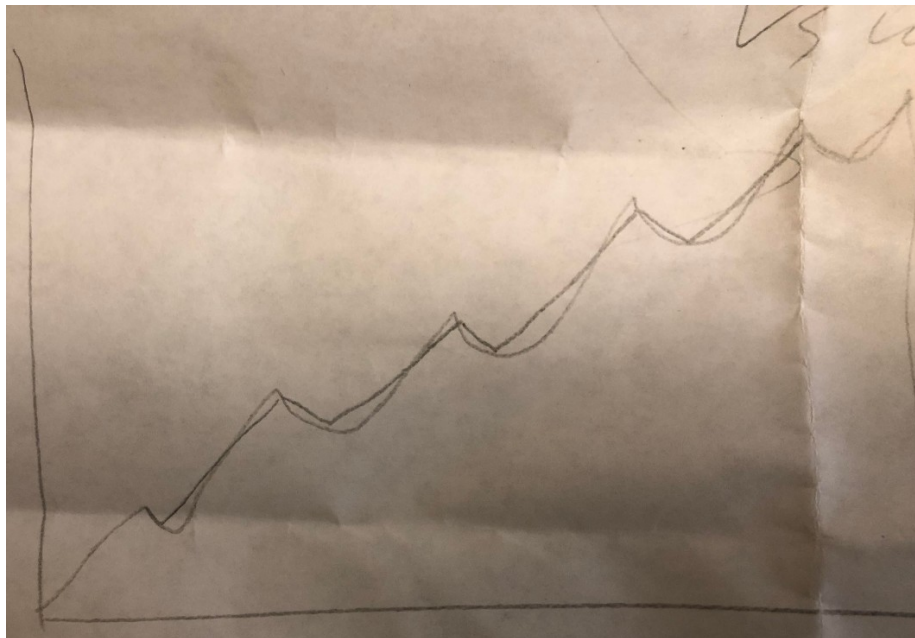
I'm sure there are many out there who will enjoy this game. Unfortunately, I am not one of them. The story is definitely unique, and some ideas caught my interest, but it ended rather abruptly and with too many loose ends. It honestly felt like the story was going somewhere but the author cut it short/didn't have time to develop it.

And another:

Only major negative I would say (which other reviewers have pointed out) is that the ending seemed to come out of nowhere and felt a bit rushed. I hope in future if the developer made another game that it would last a bit longer, I feel like there was more potential that could have been gotten out of this game.

Almost all bestselling games have an A arc, where the excitement picks up early on and steadily increases until a cool climax, then a significant (but not too long) denouement. Examples include *Choice of Robots*, *Crème de la Crème*,^[628] *Choice of Magics*,^[290] *Tally Ho*,^[694] and *Heart of the House*.^[108]

Wren Harper, who helped brainstorm this essay, pointed out that most good games actually have some self-similarity, with each chapter having its own climax and denouement, each higher than the one before:



The same contributor also noted that most static fiction builds a lot more slowly than this, so the best plot arc for a game is not the same as the best plot arc for popular (static) fiction.

Hitting up all important plot points

There are a couple of games where important plot points can be missed entirely if you take the wrong branches, but the game assumes that you knew them all along.

Emily Short famously said:^[730]

Your job is to make it as hard as possible for the player to finish your game without understanding your story.

From that same article, she says:

If you have a key story beat, don't just narrate it and move on. Players skim in interactive stories, especially in choice-based stories where they know they'll be able to keep moving forward regardless of how well they learned the establishing details.

If you need the player to remember something, give them a choice about that thing. If you can't let them choose whether the thing happens, you can still let them choose how it happens, or how the protagonist feels about it, or what they're able to salvage from it.

When games mess this up, it doesn't show up in reviews because the reviewers literally have no clue what they missed.

A good example of hitting up important plot points is *Choice of Robots*.^[291] Events like the global war happen whether you're a CEO supplying the military or a bum living with her mom.

Counterexample: *Jolly Good: Cakes and Ale*^[693] has one night where three or four incredibly important events happen at once. I completed the game remaining entirely at the opera, and that left two or three threads completely unresolved. But this is a very popular and fun game.

12.4 Make players feel they have real agency

You can have the most amazing choice-branching tree and fancy code, but if the player doesn't notice that and think that 'choices don't matter', it's all wasted.

Conversely, the most railroaded game possible can still be satisfying if the player thinks it's responsive.

A good example of that is *Creatures Such as We*.^[288] While it does in fact have a lot of fancy branching underneath, it's more linear than many games whose reviews are filled with things like 'this game is so railroaded!'.

So, what makes players feel like they have agency?

Are there clear goals that players can work towards? *Choice of Rebels*,^[333] *Choice of Magics*,^[290] and *Choice of Robots*^[291] are fantastic at this.

In *Choice of Rebels*, two clear goals are 'not stealing from people/being popular' and 'surviving'. The tension between these goals drives a lot of the excitement in the first few chapters.

In *Choice of Magics*, each type of magic you focus on has its own drawback and guides you to different goals. If you want to work with the church, healing is good, but it can destroy your body. If you love weird beasts, you can work with life magic. Destruction magic lets you be an amazing warrior but destroys the environment.

In *Choice of Robots*, the 'vision' at the beginning has a very important purpose: it immediately lets the players know four different possibilities for the player: doing something evil (and unknown), world conquest, robot love, or a singularity. And so from that moment you know exactly what kind of things this game is capable of, and that they will not be possible at once. It's a brilliant way

of showing the player the branching in the game. It also employs 'greyed-out' choices, different chapter names depending on your choices, and clear branches like deciding to work with military or not.

The difference isn't that 'this game included more branching than other Choicescript games', the difference is 'this game makes the results of your choices obvious'.

Reviews include:

I normally dont write reviews but I just have to share how amazing this story was. You really change potential outcomes drastically with your choices, and you can see how much each one matters.

Another for *Choice of Robots*:

I've played almost all interactive story games and think this is the best one! Although it could have images and less text per page, I felt the story really changes with each decision, the story is interesting and full of ethical choices, well written and I had fun with the achievements too!

Another for *Choice of Robots* mentioning clear replay value:

This is one of the few (if not the only) game where I was fully satisfied with one run - despite knowing for sure that there's much I could do differently if I did replay it.

One for *Choice of Rebels*:

Just finished my first complete play through, so I have by no means exhausted all the choices and story line this game has to offer.

One for *Choice of Magics*:

When other choice games are extremely linear or short, his games have dozens of different outcomes, and completely different branching paths. If you can get past the fact that these games are simply text-based, Choice of Magics/Choice of Robots have to be THE best choice-driven games out there. They absolutely destroy developers like Tell-Tale games in this category.

Really recommend checking out those three games to get ideas how to convince the player they have real choices.

Counterexamples: While the *Heroes Rise*^[696] games have significant branching, there's a reason they have a smaller wordcount than many Choicescript games of similar play length. They have less of a branching style and more of a gauntlet^[29] style of gameplay, which attracts a different crowd of players.

Does the player act or react? The very lowest-selling games tend to have almost nothing but reactions. Here is one review of such a game:

This game is severely lacking meaningful choices.

A lot of choices in this game are based on introspection – you can choose how your character feels about what happens, but you can’t stop it from happening. And even then the game unfortunately doesn’t necessarily respect your choices. There are a lot of instances where the MC goes on autopilot for up to three pages while the reader is left shaking their head and wondering what on earth possessed the MC to act like that. It’s especially grating when there are characters that the author doesn’t like. [...] Now matter how carefully I chose to only feel nice things about the author’s most hated characters, somehow my MC always ended up snapping at them and criticizing them regardless.

A lot of this seems to be conscious decisions by authors to avoid too much branching so that writing doesn’t become an intractable problem.

But it’s all about the illusion of choice, not actual choice.

Consider the following situation in two different (made up) games: A player has a hostage goblin from an opposing army.

Game 1’s text and options:

You decide to kill the goblin. Why did you do it?

- I just don’t like myself.
- Goblins don’t deserve to exist!
- My followers expected it of me.
- It’s the only way to be safe.

Game 2’s text and option: The goblin rages and fights against its captors. Its scars show it is a veteran fighter, but it looks underfed.

‘What should we do with it?’ asks a sergeant, looking at you.

- Negotiate with the opposing army for ransom.
- Kill him. We can’t take chances.
- Let him go. It might come back to haunt us, but it could make the goblins more agreeable.

Both writing options have the same amount of work. In fact, the second one is probably easier; games that try to remember player’s intentions often end up angering the players if they assume they have the same intentions later (that happened in my game). In the second game, you can just describe the outcome, set some stat from it, and never worry about it again. But the first one feels almost entirely non-interactive, while the second feels like a real choice.

That’s not to say you can’t describe intention. From a review of the best-selling game *Crème de la Crème*:^[628]

I really, REALLY love that i can choose not only my words and actions, but also inner intentions, reasons and thoughts. I saw many games where the writing just put words in your mouth based on your previous action choice, or where you gained stats based on your words and actions, and it just felt wrong, because i can secretly think the opposite of what i said, and it's what i truly think that defines what person i am, not what i say. Your games aren't blind to the fact that MC might behave not exactly according to their true thoughts, which is wonderful. Same action but different reasoning behind it is very realistic and nuanced.

Counterexample: *The Fog Knows Your Name*^[174] has a large proportion of 'reaction' or 'passive'-style actions, but is still popular.

Does the game force attitudes, actions, feelings, or failure on a player?

One of the biggest complaints in Steam reviews for lower-rated games is that they were forced to act out of character.

From online reviews and commentary:

If [the voice of a story] rubs me the wrong way, or doesn't feel like it reflects the choices I made, I tend to lay the story to rest.

Everything else, I usually take in stride. If a choice I made didn't give me the outcome I want, or if there's a character I don't like, I mean—isn't that how life works?

Actually, it feels better if an outcome came from my decisions. I don't like feeling like I'm on for a ride when it comes to these games. If I'm on for a ride, I'll just pick up a book from the library or something. I go to these games as an escapism, so I can live a life I know I'd never live, and one I can have a heavier influence on compared to my real one, where Im often forced to be somebody I don't want to be.

Another review of a different game:

I agree with the people who say that the choices weren't really choices: I felt railroaded into responses that I didn't want but that the "game" decided I should in order to move the story along.

In my own playthroughs, I was annoyed by games that offered choices between two things part of the time but forced one of those choices later.

For instance, one game begins with several decisions on whether to obey your father or not. It then follows that with a scene where your character decides (no matter what you do) to eavesdrop on your father at great risk to yourself and for displeasing him.

Another game does that exact same trick, forcing you to eavesdrop conspicuously on a dangerous spy despite giving you choices earlier on to be risky or not.

It's clear that this results from authors trying to ensure players 'get the plot' (like Emily Short said in the earlier quote), but you can force events without making the player cause them. If something **MUST** occur, make it an external event and not a player choice.

Is the player the hero of the story? I read an interview^[207] with one author of a game that suffered in sales, and they mentioned that they were frustrated about not having a definite character arc for the player, so they gave all the character growth to a specific NPC, so she became the main focus of the game. And that had, I believe, a negative effect on gameplay.

In fact, one reviewer said about this game:

I was never directly interacting with them or responding to them,
I was responding to the situation or with how I felt about it. I was
not a main character, I was along for the ride.

Another said:

But by the time I quit I was already getting the sense that my MC
was nowhere close to being the main character, [this other character]
was the true main character,

Another game with the same issue (someone else is the main character):

> The main character's Mary Sue of a sister (and, I have a sneaking suspicion, author insert character) is both the protagonist and inexplicable Deus Ex Machina. She's easily one of the most powerful people, possibly *the* most powerful person, in the entire galaxy. She's the one with the resources that enable everything you do, she's the one who shows up out of nowhere to either create or resolve problems, she's the one whose choices drive the events.

I know what this is like. My game is one of the absolute worst-selling Choice of Games titles, and I think a big factor is that Mrs. Claus is the focus of, and, in many ways, the hero of the story. Judging by the steam achievements, for most players, Mrs. Claus is the strongest hero, facing adversity, training to get stronger, finding love, almost dying, and finding lasting happiness. Her name is on the game, her face is on the cover. The problem is, that's not the player, it's a side character. Each of these three games, including mine, that makes someone else the hero has suffered a lot in sales.

Counterexample: Every single Nebula-nominated game forces actions and feelings on the player. Perhaps that provides greater control over the story?

12.5 Summary

The biggest distinctions I found between bestselling (compared to worstselling games) is:

1. The first chapters serve equally well as story hooks, tutorials and character creation systems

2. They don't have 'stat disease'
3. They have a satisfying narrative arc that hits all important plot points
4. They make the player feel like they have real agency

Harris Powell-Smith contributed additional thoughts to this essay.

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