### Citation

### As Published
http://simonpenny.net/dac/day2.html

### Publisher
Digital Arts and Culture

### Version
Author's final manuscript

### Accessed
Fri Dec 28 21:42:35 EST 2018

### Citable Link
http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/100288

### Terms of Use
Article is made available in accordance with the publisher's policy and may be subject to US copyright law. Please refer to the publisher's site for terms of use.

### Detailed Terms
The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.
Shaping Stories and Building Worlds on Interactive Fiction Platforms

Alex Mitchell  
Communications and New Media Programme  
National University of Singapore  
alexm@nus.edu.sg

Nick Montfort  
Program in Writing & Humanistic Studies  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
nickm@nickm.com

ABSTRACT
Adventure game development systems are platforms from the developer’s perspective. This paper investigates several subtle differences between these platforms, focusing on two systems for interactive fiction development. We consider how these platform differences may have influenced authors as they developed systems for simulation and storytelling. Through close readings of Dan Shiovitz’s Bad Machine (1998), written in TADS 2, and Emily Short’s Savoir-Faire (2002), written in Inform 6, we discuss how these two interactive fiction authoring systems may have influenced the structure of simulated story worlds that were built in them. We extend this comparative approach to larger sets of games, looking at interactive wordplay and the presentation of information within the story. In concluding, we describe how critics, scholars, and developers may be able to more usefully consider the platform level in discussions of games, electronic literature, and digital art.

Keywords
Platform studies, software studies, interactive fiction, authoring, interactive storytelling, adventure games, object-oriented programming, wordplay, paratexts.

1. INTRODUCTION
There are many adventure game development systems that provide mechanisms for defining a simulated world, the user interface, and ways of displaying graphical or text fragments. These systems are platforms that developers select to facilitate the creation and distribution of games. They include special-purpose programming languages for interactive fiction (text adventures), such as Inform 6 and TADS 2, which have been freely available and widely used since 1996, as well as Inform 7 and TADS 3, both released in 2006.

Because conventions are well established in both text and graphical adventure gaming, competing systems provide very similar high-level capabilities to author/programmers. Our investigation, therefore, is of subtle platform differences in adventure game development, particularly in the development of interactive fiction. We focus on how these differences may have influenced authors as they created games that involve simulation and storytelling.

We offer close readings and analyses of function, considering adventure games developed in two commonly used authoring tools. We begin with close reading of two interactive fictions. Dan Shiovitz’s Bad Machine (1998), implemented in TADS 2, simulates an intricate, systematic world full of robots, made of components and functioning together in curious ways. The world model acts in ways that are mechanical and nested, making the code’s class structure seemingly evident as one plays the game. In contrast, Emily Short’s Savoir-Faire (2002), written in Inform 6 and of similar complexity, exhibits less obvious inheritance and compartmentalization. This game offers the possibility of magical relationships between objects that have similar appearance, objects which can be linked by the player character. Inform 6 uses attributes and properties more heavily, and sub-classing less often, to determine behaviour, an approach which relates to the type of similarity which governs the game’s magic system. We follow this comparison with an extension to other games, comparing these games in terms of the use of interactive wordplay and the ways in which information is organized within the game.

We conclude by describing how critical and scholarly practice is able to better take into account the platform level and the development system when it comes to the analysis of games, electronic literature, and digital art. We also consider these platforms from the perspective of creators who are choosing a development system, noting some less-than-obvious ways in which these systems might influence the shaping of stories and worlds.

2. Background
2.1 Adventure Games and Interactive Fiction
Text-based adventure games, or interactive fiction [6], are text-based simulations that present a spatial representation of a world. The player, or interactor, types in text commands to a “parser”, which interprets the interactor’s commands. Responses are given to the interactor in text. Typically, the text presents a second-person description of the simulated world and the actions of the interactor (see Figure 1). The simulation of the world is persistent, and actions taken by the interactor alter the state of the world. Interacting with a text adventure often involves solving puzzles to accomplish some goal. A narrative is told in the process.

In the example in Figure 1, taken from Graham Nelson’s 1996 reconstruction in Inform 6 of Will Crowther’s Adventure (1976), the interactor’s character is standing at the end of a road in front of a small brick building. The interactor types the command ‘enter building’ to the parser, which responds by updating the position of the character in the simulation of the game world, and displaying a description of the new location. In the new location, the interactor asks for more information about one of the objects in the world (examine lamp), and then chooses to pick up the lamp
software development. This includes looking at the comments, program, and organizational and individual capabilities for theory and reception aesthetics. The next layer, the work. This encompasses approaches such as reader-response studies/ludology, cybertext studies, and narratology are chiefly controlled opponents, and so forth. Approaches such as game a game, the nature of a simulation, the abilities of computer- 

The fourth layer, code, involves the study of the source code of a program, and organizational and individual capabilities for software development. This includes looking at the comments, variable names, program structure, and choices made when writing a program, and is largely the domain of software engineering and new fields such as software studies. Finally, the platform layer is the abstraction layer beneath the code, underlying all the above areas. Platform can range from a standard or specification document, to a computer operating system, programming language or an environment on top of an operating system. Basically, a platform can be whatever it is that the programmer takes for granted when developing a program, and the user is required to have to use that particular software [9].

2.3 Related work

There have been a few critical discussions of interactive fiction that consider the implementation of the work. Most notably, in “Somewhere Nearby is Colossal Cave: Examining Will Crowther’s Original “Adventure” in Code and in Kentucky” [4], Jerz talks about the cultural and social background of Adventure:

“Adventure” was written for fun and shared for free; it was the cultural product of an educated, puzzle-loving, and fundamentally altruistic geek culture. Had it been better suited to the expectations of the non-technical public, it would likely have been less interesting to the community of computer specialists and entrepreneurs who responded by creating their own variations.”

Jerz goes on to present a detailed discussion of the code, looking at the verbs and the help text and comparing the original Crowther version with Woods’ later version. He examines the different features and details added by Woods. He also talks about the actual cave system that Adventure is based on, presenting a detailed discussion/ “multimedia intertextual analysis” of the game, map, and transcript. He extensively discusses the date of the game’s development. While this analysis did not explore Fortran or the PDP-10 in depth, this type of close reading and bibliographic work shows a useful approach to studying a work as code for a particular platform.

3. STRUCTURING THE IF WORLD

In this section we consider Dan Shiovitz’s Bad Machine (1998) and Emily Short’s Savoir-Faire (2002), using these close readings to investigate the ways in which the platform used to implement an interactive fiction influences how the author structures the world within the work. Bad Machine (1998), implemented in TADS 2, simulates a factory filled with different types of robots. The robots are made of various standard sorts of components which themselves can be of different subtypes. The game looks like code (and error messages, and the outputs of an erroneous program, thanks to the unusual way that text is presented) but it also acts like an object-oriented program in very overt ways, presenting agents who are evidently of different subclasses and who are made of parts that are of different subclasses. In contrast, the similarly complex Savoir-Faire (2002), written in Inform 6, does not exhibit class structure as clearly. It features a notion of sympathetic magic as a way of creating behavoiural relationships between objects, along with a system for recalling past episodes. Inform 6, unlike TADS 2, makes heavy use of attributes and properties to determine behaviour, an approach that relates to the type of similarity that governs the game’s magic and remembering systems.
3.1 Bad Machine

In *Bad Machine*, the player controls Mover #005, a robot in a vast hive-like factory/warehouse who has suddenly developed the ability to act independently. On the surface level, *Bad Machine* may seem to be little more than a pastiche of computer code and other computer-like texts (see Figure 2). However, there is a deeper sense in which *Bad Machine* resonates with, and is heavily influenced by, the platform in which it is written.

The output seems to be code or “codework,” with some of the messages appearing to be status messages and erroneous outputs. It perhaps reflects Mover #005’s confusion and malfunctioning circuitry and effectively puts the reader in the position of the main character [7]. However, there is more than the surface play of confusion going on here. To the north is a salvager-class machine, and, as the interactor rapidly discovers, there are many other robots moving around the world of the Warehouse. Each of these robots behaves in different ways and executes its routines with robotic efficiency. The structure of the world, and its inhabitants, exhibit an inherently code-like, object-oriented nature, in a rather deep sense.

3.2 Savoir-Faire

The world of Emily Short’s *Savoir-Faire* is more organic and magical. In this game, the player controls a young man who has returned, heavily in debt, to his childhood home, which he discovers has been abandoned.

Written in Inform 6, *Savoir-Faire* contains an interesting system of “sympathetic magic, called “Lavori d’Arcne”, which lets the player link objects together based on similarities between the two objects, such that, for example, what happens to one object will also happen to the other object. This linking process succeeds or fails based on how “similar” the objects are. For example, it is possible to link a white, painted, openable teapot with a pair of white, painted, openable doors (see Figure 4).

This linking mechanism is consistently implemented, and does not appear to be hard-coded to specific, special cases that fit within the puzzle or story within *Savoir-Faire*. In fact, the player can attempt to link any object to any object, and the rules of the simulated world will apply. For example, attempting to link the same teapot to a little, grimy, linen (but openable) bag seems as
though it would succeed, if only the two objects were a bit more similar (see Figure 5).

In the case where objects seem to have nothing in common, such as in an attempt to link the teapot to a clove of garlic, the complete failure of this attempt serves to re-enforce the consistency and completeness of the simulation (see Figure 6).

Savoir-Faire comes across as a more organic world, and not only because it is filled with household objects rather than robots. In Savoir-Faire, the visual and formal similarity of objects, rather than their compartmentalization and their place in a hierarchy, is the dominant feature.

4. IF DEVELOPMENT SYSTEMS

From the previous analysis of form and function within Savoir-Faire and Bad Machine, it is evident that there are differences in the way that the two works approach the simulation of the story-world. Bad Machine contains a very mechanistic, object-oriented world, whereas Savoir-Faire's world is one of similarity and sympathetic magic. What about the platforms could have influenced the authors to take these very different approaches? We investigate this by looking closely at TADS 2 and Inform 6.

4.1 TADS 2

TADS 2, released for free in 1996, is an object-oriented programming language by Michael J. Roberts. It was designed specifically to support the creation of text-based interactive fictions.

The most important concept in TADS 2 is that of the object. A TADS 2 work basically consists of a set of code objects, each of which represents a physical object (or part of an object) in the game world. Every object belongs to at least one class. The notion of objects and classes is a basic principle in object-oriented programming. Classes define types or categories of things, such as “animal”, “vegetable” or “mineral”. In most object-oriented programming languages, objects are defined as instances of a specific class. As explained in the introductory chapter of the TADS 2 Author’s Manual [12], “An object’s class defines how the object behaves and what kind of data it contains.” Each object has a number of properties and methods, which may be inherited from its class, or may be unique to this object. Properties contain data that tells TADS 2 about the object. Methods contain code that can be executed, typically providing access to and updating this data. Special properties such as noun and adjective tell the parser how a player can refer to an object.

In TADS 2, as in many object-oriented programming languages, a class can be a sub-class of one or more other classes; these are its super-classes. Any properties or methods of these super-classes are inherited by the sub-class. These properties and methods may be used directly, or the sub-class can override them, creating its own unique versions. This allows, for example, a programmer to create an “animal” class, which can have sub-classes “cat” and “dog”, each of which would share the common attributes of an animal, but would provide specific behaviours unique to cats and dogs. Inheritance and object-orientation are addressed very early in the TADS 2 manual; object classes are mentioned in the first paragraph of the line-by-line discussion of the sample game.

TADS 2 includes a detailed class library, which contains a number of predefined classes, such as item (a standard item which can be, for example, picked up and dropped), fixeditem (which cannot be taken), surface (which can support other objects), and chairitem (which can be sat on). To create new objects with specific behaviours, the author can sub-class from one or more of these pre-defined classes and override behaviours as desired.

For example, a bench could be defined as follows:

```
bench: chairitem
  sdesc = “bench”
  ldesc = “The cold metal bench is, at least, somewhere to rest.”
  noun = ‘bench’
  location = startroom
```

The first line, bench: chairitem, defines the new object, “bench”, to be a sub-class of the chairitem object. The new object will inherit all the properties and methods of the chairitem class: the ability to be sat on, to support other objects, and so forth. The properties listed characterize the specific properties of a bench: its short description (sdesc) and long description (ldesc), which will be used at various different times by TADS to present the object to the player; the noun property which determines how the player can refer to this object (see below); and the location property which determines where the object is in the world. In this case, the bench is located in the startroom, which is itself an object, most likely an instance of the room class.

Another important part of any interactive fiction system is the parser, the subsystem that handles player input (text strings) and recognizes intended actions based on this input. In TADS 2, unlike other systems such as Inform 6, the parser is built into the interpreter.

To allow the player to take an action in TADS 2, the author needs to create a method on an object, one that will be called by TADS 2 when the player types the corresponding command into the parser. The system uses the noun and adjective properties on the object to determine which object the player is referring to. An important point to note here is that methods to implement verbs are written as methods on objects. As we will see below, this is in contrast to Inform 6, which defines verbs separately from objects and uses before/after properties on objects to create customized rules for specific objects.
The robots that inhabit the world of *Bad Machine*, with their distinct sets of behaviours and autonomous action, seem to almost be a consequence of the particular nature of TADS 2, which lends itself to the creation of sub-classes of objects. Using an object-oriented approach, it would be fairly straightforward to create multiple instances of, for example, a “salvager-class machine”, which would actually be an instance of a class that inherits the basic robot behaviour from a “robot” or “machine” super-class. Similarly, the interchangeable parts on the robots, with their common *interfaces* and the inheritance of behaviours from super-classes, very much reflects the programming paradigms dominant in the development platform. Shiovitz was not, of course, somehow forced to make a game of this sort by TADS 2. Just as he used the texture of code and obviously computational outputs to constitute the surface appearance of *Bad Machine*, he used the underlying system of TADS to create a simulated world that is evidently object-oriented, providing an environment, puzzles, and figuration.

### 4.2 Inform 6

Inform 6 is a programming language with libraries developed by Graham Nelson specifically to support the requirements of authors of interactive fiction and released in 1996. Based on entries to the Interactive Fiction competition and the contents of the IF Archive, it has been the most widely-used interactive fiction development system since 1996; TADS 2 comes in second. There are three key concepts in Inform 6: the object tree and properties/attributes — discussed next — and verbs, discussed later.

When writing a game in Inform 6, the developer creates a set of *objects*, which are related hierarchically in terms of containment, in a type of graph called a tree. Every object has a position in the object tree, which indicates a parent-child relationship between objects. An object that is the child of another object is said to be “contained” in the parent object. This object hierarchy provides a concept of physical space, with top-level objects tending to represent rooms, and objects within top-level objects representing physical objects in the world. The player character and any non-player characters are also represented as objects within the object tree. Since any object can contain other objects, it is straightforward to create, for example, a container such as a box that can hold other objects.

Another key concept in Inform 6 is the notion of *attributes* and *properties*. Attributes are true/false values that are used to determine if an object “has” a certain attribute, whereas properties are variables that can have any value. These two concepts are used extensively in Inform 6 to determine how, for example, a verb should be applied to an object.

For example, a *bench* could be defined as follows:

```inform6
object bench “bench” startroom
  with description “The cold metal bench is, at least, somewhere to rest.”;
  name ‘bench’;
  has static scenery enterable supporter;
```

Similarly, the `has` directive tells the system that the object has the following attributes: *static, scenery, enterable,* and *supporter*. Attributes can be defined globally, and then used by objects as required.

Inform 6 is an object-oriented language, providing the ability for programmers to define a *class* from which new objects can inherit. As with TADS 2, Inform 6 provides for class declarations and inheritance. In fact, the concept of objects is introduced in Chapter 3 of the *Inform Designer’s Manual* [10], and on page 72 of the *Inform Beginner’s Guide* [2]. However, in general, authors who work with Inform 6 tend to create a series of unique objects, all based on the built-in *Object meta-class*. In contrast to TADS 2, the most straightforward way to create interesting behaviours on an object is to define an attribute and then give the object that attribute using the `has` keyword. Classes in Inform 6 are distinct from objects; in TADS 2 any object can be a class. This makes it much easier for a TADS 2 author to decide to create a new object as a subclass of an existing object. An Inform 6 author has to plan a class hierarchy ahead of time, deciding which classes to create and then instantiating objects based on those classes.

As can be seen from the two definitions of `bench`, in TADS 2 and in Inform 6, there is a difference of emphasis in the structure of the code. In TADS 2, the first thing that the programmer needs to do is specify the *super-class* for a new object, in this case *chairitem*. In Inform 6, this can be done — in fact, the `object` keyword is specifying the class which the new object belongs to. If we had, for example, defined a *chair class*, we could have started our definition of bench with `chair bench “bench” startroom`. The fact that the new object is deriving its attributes and properties from the Object class isn’t as clear. It can seem to a programmer as if `object` is simply a keyword that defines the start of an object definition, as opposed to actually specifying the class that this object is an instance of. The foregrounding of the *class* concept in TADS 2 affords consideration of class structure during the design of a work, whereas the emphasis on attributes and properties in Inform 6 focusses the author’s attention more on these features of the system.

In Inform 6, a series of *libraries*, sets of program code that extend the basic functionality of the core system, provide the parser, a basic set of verbs, and grammar. The library also implements a *world model*, which provides concepts such as directions, food and drink, clothing, containers, doors, etc., and a simple turn-based model of time.

Finally, in Inform 6 verbs are defined as procedures that are separate from objects. A verb’s default behaviour is specified within the procedure itself. It is possible to provide logic that determines different behaviours based on the subject and object of the verb. However, a more commonly used, and more flexible, approach is to make use of the *before/after* keywords in an object to customize the ways in which a verb is applied to specific objects. As a result, Inform 6 works often consist of a large number of objects, a large number of verbs, and *before/after* rules on objects that modify how the verbs apply to the object based on the attributes/properties of the object and other objects.

Clearly, *attributes* and *properties* provide an obvious way to approach understanding and implementing the sympathetic magic in *Savoir-Faire*. A number of attributes, such as openable, grimy, wooden, linen, and so on, could be defined, and objects compared based on these attributes. Similarly, properties such as colour and
shape could be assigned values and used to determine if a link is successful. Using before/after properties to define how to handle actions on objects, checking whether they have been linked or not and acting accordingly, would also be a natural way to handle the results of linking. Although a similar system could be developed in TADS 2, the focus on inheritance and class hierarchies does not seem to lend itself to this type of sympathetic magic. A set of base classes could define objects with certain sets of similar properties, but it is straightforward to implement these as properties in code.

4.3 Source Code Analysis

After developing the previous platform-based readings of Savoir-Faire and Bad Machine, we asked Shiovitz and Short for the source code to the games and for permission to discuss this source code in our writing at a high level. They provided us with the most recent Inform and TADS files. We believe that the sort of analysis we have done here applies in cases where the source code is lost (as might be the case with some early programs) or unavailable (as would be the case with current commercial games). So, we do not want to overemphasize the importance of source code for this general approach or to suggest that access to these files is essential. However, our ability to examine the source in this case has allowed us to see whether it bears out some of our specific claims.

The Bad Machine code is organized into multiple files, reflecting its highly object-oriented structure. Two files, named parts.t and machines.t, contain definitions of the classes for the robot parts and the specific robots.

The first file, parts.t, defines a complex class hierarchy used to implement the robot parts. A base class, bodyPart, implements the common behaviour for robot parts. This base class has several sub-classes: legPart, headPart and torsoPart. There is also a body base class, which has sub-classes inactiveBody and activeBody. There is a further sub-class for activeBody, Me, which represents the player-character, Mover #005. This class hierarchy fully defines the base behaviours shared by the robots and their body parts. The second file, machines.t, contains a series of classes that are sub-classed from the classes defined in parts.t. These classes define the specific robot types. For example, there is an energizer class, sub-classed from activeBody, which defines the energizer robot that we described earlier. There is also an energizerHead, energizerTorso, and a series of energizer legs, which represent the various parts of the energizer. These are all sub-classed from the appropriate super-classes in parts.t.

The other files, such as instances.t and a series of files containing definitions of specific rooms within the game, make use of machines.t to instantiate specific objects representing the various robots and robot parts.

In total, Bad Machine contains 188 class definitions (excluding the standard library files), and has a maximum class tree depth of 7. For example, boxClimber is sub-classed from climber, activeBody, body, item, thing, and object. If we take out the classes from the standard library (item, thing, and object), this still gives a depth of 4 (boxClimber, climber, activeBody, and body).

This brief analysis of the code of Bad Machine confirms that, as discussed during our close reading and platform analysis, Bad Machine has a very elaborate class structure, very much in line with the game world and play experience.

The code for Savoir-Faire, in contrast, is largely contained in a single file, stub.inf. This file contains the definitions for the majority of the objects in the world, such as the rooms and their contents. It also contains the definition of a class, Enchant, which, together with the verbs LinkSub, RLinkSub, RLinkSub, BadLinkSub and LinkableCheck, contains the implementation of the magic system. Another file, MobileCH, contains the definitions of the various types of objects that are used with the system of sympathetic magic. This file contains a list of attribute definitions, such as inflammable, fragile, hard, heavy, and so on, and a list of values describing the material and shape of world objects. It also contains a base class, Mobile, from which both the Enchant class and a series of material-specific classes, such as Stone, Metal, Cloth and Glass, are sub-classed. Interestingly, these sub-classes consist largely of a list of attributes and properties. For example, Metal has its material property set to metalMat, and has attributes hard and heavy. Specific objects, defined in stub.inf, are defined as instances of these material-specific classes.

Savoir-Faire contains a total of 33 class definitions (excluding the standard Inform 6 libraries and any extensions which may have been used). The maximum class tree depth is 5 (for example, Chink is sub-classed from Mirror, Enchant, Mobile, and Class). Taking out the standard base class, Class, this leaves a depth of 4.

Comparing Bad Machine and Savoir-Faire at the source code level, we see that, interestingly, the depth of the class tree (leaving aside the standard library classes) is the same. However, the number of class definitions in Bad Machine is much greater: 188 as compared to 33. Unlike the extensive use of classes for inheritance of behaviours seen in Bad Machine, the implementation of sympathetic magic in Savoir-Faire makes use of a smaller number of classes, largely for the inheritance of attributes and properties. The platform differences between TADS 2 and Inform 6 clearly do not prohibit the use of classes, but in these two game, which present themselves to the player as similarly complex systems, there does seem to be a difference in the degree to which classes are used, with TADS 2 possibly encouraging more extensive use of classes as compared to Inform 6.

4.4 Simulationism

Both Bad Machine and Savoir-Faire can be seen as examples of what has been termed simulationism in the interactive fiction community [8]. This term has been used frequently in, for example, discussions on the Usenet group rec.arts.int-fiction. A rough definition of simulationism is as follows:

Simulationism is the tendency towards deeper and less abstract simulation of physical (and possibly emotional) properties of the game world, not for limited domains that the author has chosen, but as a general framework. Additionally, the “physics” of the world are likely to interact with each other leading to unforeseen [sic] consequences. [5]

In Savoir-Faire, the use of likeness allows the player to link objects. This linking is not limited to specific, special cases determined ahead of time by the author. Instead, there is a rich, consistent simulation of a set of rules about the world, which the player can explore freely. In Bad Machine, there is a similar
consistency and richness to the world, where robot parts can be
interchanged to create different behaviours, not just in pre-defined
ways which match the solution to puzzles, but in a general way, a
simulation of a specific world. Object-oriented programming is
designed to model the world in terms of categories of things and
sub-categories with similar properties, through a system of classes
and inheritance. In Bad Machine, it is not a naturalistic world that
is being modeled; instead, the author has taken an object-oriented
model and made a world out of this model. Nevertheless, the
result is, as with Savoir-Faire, a consistent, detailed simulation of
a fictional world. Both of these are directly based on a
classification model; both are simulationist in some way. What is
interesting is how they approach that position, and the very
different end results.

We are not claiming that choosing between Inform 6 and TADS 2
influences authors to be more or less simulationist. As can be seen
in our two example works, both systems enable authors to create
highly simulationist works. However, it is possible to go along
with the mechanisms and features provided by the platform —
with specific class structures in the case of TADS 2, or with
attributes in Inform 6 — to build games that embody a
simulationist perspective in specific ways. The platform provides
a certain way of approaching problems that is more natural; the
platform affords a particular approach.

5. WORDPLAY AND THE PARSER
Certain interactive fiction games implement interactive wordplay;
they require the player to participate in making puns, using
alliteration, or undertaking other linguistic tricks in order to solve
puzzles and move forward in the game. These games can also
create new languages that the player must figure out both to
understand the game’s text and to enter commands. Wordplay
may characterize the entire game, in cases such as Ad Verbum, or
may constitute one or more puzzles, as in The Leather Goddess of
Phobos. Wordplay in interactive fiction can be done for many
purposes: for humor value, for instance, or to connect to literary
questions and practices of contemporary writing.

All text-based interactive fiction, by definition, involves the
player typing in some text, which is read by a parser. The parser
is that part of the interactive fiction system which is dedicated to
breaking down the player’s text into machine-understandable
fragments, which can then be used to determine which verb the
player wants to activate, and on which object(s) within the game
world. The parser has a difficult task, as players may enter
ambiguous sentences, make use of unexpected sentence
constructions, or use any number of synonyms for verbs or
objects.

In TADS 2, the parser, as described in The TADS Parser Manual
[13], is partly built into the TADS interpreter, the program that
actually runs a TADS game. The other portion of the parser is
contained in TADS game code, which can further reside in two
places: some code will be in the standard library provided by
TADS, in the file `adv.t`, whereas additional code may have been
written by the game author, and reside in the game-specific code.
The code in the interpreter cannot be changed by a game author,
although TADS 2 does provide hooks, opportunities to override
what the parser does and to change the behaviour to match the
needs of the game. In addition, code that is provided in the
standard library can be changed or replaced. The parser at the
interpreter level does not include any verbs, objects or
prepositions — these are provided at the standard library level.
This means that, according to The TADS Parser Manual, “there’s
very little of the built-in parser that you can’t override”.

In Inform 6 there is even more flexibility, however. The parser, as
well as the grammar which it uses and the standard library
defining the default world of a game, are all implemented as
libraries which the author can choose to include (or not) in their
game. As such, it is possible to, for example, replace the grammar
used by the parser with that for another language, such as Spanish.
In addition, it is possible to modify, or entirely replace, the parser
itself. The Inform 6 parser also provides “hooks”, allowing the
author to selectively override specific behaviours. A major
difference between the approach taken by Inform 6 and TADS 2
is that the Inform 6 interpreter does not include any of the
implementation of the parser, or any other behaviour specific to
interactive fiction. In fact, there is no such thing as an “Inform 6”
interpreter — Inform 6 code is compiled to “z-code”, a standard
bytecode format which has its roots in the classic Infocom games
of the 1980s, which can then be interpreted by a z-code interpreter
such as Zoom or Frotz. All of the behaviours required to create
the experience of interactive with a text adventure are
implemented at the library level.

Based on these descriptions, the main difference between the
parser in TADS 2 and Inform 6 is that, in TADS 2, some portions
of the parser are contained in the interpreter or virtual machine,
whereas in Inform 6 the entire parser is situated in the standard
libraries. Both systems provide “hooks” for customization.
However, despite these seemingly similar systems, which both
allow for customization of the parser, it seems that there is a much
greater propensity for authors to use Inform 6 for wordplay
games, which often require extensive customization of the parser.

Table 1: Wordplay games by platform.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Game title and author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IFDB search: “wordplay”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform 6</td>
<td>Ad Verbum (Montfort): Exterminate! (Martin); Goose, Egg, Badger (Rapp): Letters from Home (Firth); The Gostuk (Muckenhoupt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZIL</td>
<td>Nord and Bert Couldn’t Make Head or Tail of It (O’Neill)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFDB search: “linguistics”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform 6</td>
<td>For a Change (Schmidt); Suveh Nux (Fisher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform 7</td>
<td>rendition (nespresso)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFDB list: “Word-play games”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan 2</td>
<td>Puddles on the Path (Raisanen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform 6</td>
<td>Beat the Devil (Camisa); Large Machine (Ingold); The Edifice (Smith)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZIL</td>
<td>Leather Goddess of Phobos (Meretzky)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baf’s Guide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform 6</td>
<td>Logic Puzzle Sampler (Plotkin); This is the game that I wrote (Welbourn)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T/SAL</td>
<td>Quest for the Sangraal (Partington, originally written in T/SAL, ported to Inform 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSDOS</td>
<td>T-Zero (Cunningham)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectrum</td>
<td>Hide and Seek (Brown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TADS 2</td>
<td>ASCII and the Argonauts: Astral Plane (Berman)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We compiled wordplay games from several resources (see Table 1). We searched The Interactive Fiction Database, an online repository of interactive fiction information, for the keyword “wordplay,” obtaining six games. We added to this three results from searching for “linguistics.” To these, we added the games on the IFDB recommendation list “Word-play games,” created by Emily Short. And, finally, we searched Baf’s Guide to the IF Archive, an index to the IF Archive, for wordplay games. Of the 20 games that resulted, 12 are implemented in Inform 6, only one is in TADS 2, and one of the others is in Inform 7; none of the remaining games are in any version of Inform or TADS.

It is quite possible that other interactive fiction games exist with a substantial wordplay component. The IF Community resource ifwiki lists the TADS 2 games Things (2004) by Sam Kabo Ashwell and Jacqueline A. Lott, and Verb! (1998) by Neil deMause and describes them as wordplay games, but because of the nature of ifwiki, which is not categorized in the same way as the other resources, it is not clear if there are more Inform 6 games (or TADS 2 games) of this sort that are also listed there but which perhaps do not include the term “wordplay.” There seems to be little reason to believe that the information at IFDB (which is hosted at the TADS website) and Baf’s Guide would not be fairly representative, or would understate the number of TADS wordplay games relative to Inform games.

Based on 998 z-code and 335 TADS 2 games that Baf’s Guide lists as available in the IF archive, the ratio of available Inform 6 to TADS 2 games is at most 3 to 1. (It is actually less, since the z-code games include some games that were not created in Inform 6.) But for wordplay games in particular, the ratio of Inform 6 to TADS 2 games seems to be 12 to 1. Although both TADS 2 and Inform 6 provide the ability for the author to customize the parser, Inform 6 seems to be the platform of choice for authors embarking on wordplay games. That platform may invite authors to add wordplay elements to games they are developing.

6. BOXES AND MENUS

There are some features for the presentation of information in Inform 6 that are not available by default in TADS 2. One of these, which may initially seem rather trivial, is the ability to display a box, which shows information in a way that is visually distinct from other information. For example, the first thing that a reader of Curses by Graham Nelson sees is a quotation presented in a box (see Figure 7).

Many Inform 6 games make use of this form of paratext to create a specific texture. Boxes allow the author to present long passages of texts, separate from the in-game text. The use of quotations, for example, can create a very distinctive experience for the player, as can be seen in the T.S. Eliot quotations in Curses, and the H.P. Lovecraft quotations in Anchorhead (see Figure 9). In addition to connecting these works to the body of IF works in the tradition of Infocom, the use of quotations and other literary paratext makes a strong connection between works such as Curses and Anchorhead with books themselves. Although these connections could arguably be made by a game written in TADS 2, the author would have to make a special. Boxes afford making these connections for the player.
Another feature that Inform 6 provides is the ability to create a pop-up menu, outside of the main text of a game, from which the player can make choices. These menus can be used to, for example, create a “help” system which exists outside of the world of the game, as can be seen in Admiral Jota’s *Lost Pig* (2007) (see Figure 10).

The way in which this information is presented is in stark contrast to the manner in which in-game information is conveyed. Descriptions, actions, and even the player’s inventory are very clearly presented in the voice of the main character, Grunk (see Figure 11).

Menu systems can also be used to present information about the world of the narrative. For example, in *Anchorhead*, written in Inform 6, many documents and artifacts, such as the box of newspaper clippings that the player discovers in the cellar (see Figure 14), are revealed to the player through the use of hierarchical menus. This information greatly enhances the richness of the world and the story being conveyed.

Inform 6 provides a facility for creating separate menus as well as boxes, so it is straightforward to use these menus for help systems and to present information in a hierarchical manner. In TADS 2, the author is encouraged to present information in more of an in-game fashion. Platform differences can be seen as affordances [11]. The pertinent question is not what a platform makes is possible, but what it makes easier.
The Inform 6 platform encourages the author to approach the creation of a world of interactive fiction from a certain perspective, and to present information in certain ways. Boxes create a kind of paratextual reference to a body of earlier work, namely the early Infocom games such as *A Mind Forever Voyaging* and *Trinity*, while at the same time encouraging the use of intertextual references and connections to literature, as seen in the use of T.S. Eliot quotes in *Curses*. Similarly, the menu system available in Inform 6 encourages the author to present information in an out-of-game fashion, in a manner not seen in TADS 2 works.

7. CONCLUSION

Different platforms accrete different types of games. Even subtle differences, such as those that exist between TADS 2 and Inform 6, can influence the ways in which developers approach creating new media works.

This type of analysis is of course not limited to text-based interactive fiction. Platforms for the development of graphical adventure games include Adventure Game Studio (AGS), used to create a thousand games over the past decade, and the more recent Wintermute, which supports 3D characters and higher resolutions. Both provide similar capabilities (as with Inform 6 and TADS) but differ in minor ways. StorySpace and HyperCard may have greater differences, but both systems have been put to similar uses by authors of hypertext poetry and fiction. Home computers of different sorts also provided similar capabilities with significant minor differences. In all of these cases, a comparative analysis of platform and creative work could be enlightening.

For academics, it is important to take into account platform differences when it comes to the analysis of games, electronic literature, and digital art. Awareness of how platforms work, how they differ, and why developers and artists choose one over the others will help to inform the analysis of the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of the works.

From the perspective of creators who are choosing a development system, it is useful to consider the less-than-obvious ways in which these systems might influence the shaping of stories and worlds. Being aware of what a certain platform affords, will help a developer to make a more informed choice as to which system to use when considering a new work. This need for awareness extends to the influence of the platform on the outcome of development.

Finally, creators of new development tools and platforms should be aware of how the choices made in the design of these platforms will have an impact, directly or indirectly, on the works created on these platforms.

The platform analysis presented in this paper has shown that it is useful to examine implementation platforms in detail when analyzing new media works, even when the platforms are very similar. We hope this approach will prove to be of value to both academics and developers.

8. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Dan Shiovitz and Emily Short for kindly sharing the source code for *Bad Machine* and *Savoir-Faire*. This research is supported by the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab research grant “Tools for Telling: How Game Development Systems Shape Interactive Storytelling”.

9. REFERENCES


