



Welcome to Interactive Fiction

In interactive fiction you control the main character. His challenges, and his choices, are yours.

Interactive fiction tells you the beginning of a story. Then it puts you in charge and lets you decide what your character should do. You type commands for the main character to carry out, and the story replies by telling you what happens next. Think of the rooms as your setting, and the objects you find as the props.

Part of your role is to help the main character overcome obstacles to his progress: solving problems, working out what is going on in the story, discovering ways to reach new locations and tools. That aspect of interactive fiction is like a game.

And part of your role is to help him make decisions. Interactive fiction may have multiple endings, subject to your choices. That aspect is like a story — but an open-ended one.

If you enjoy interactive fiction, you'll find a wide variety of other works available to you, most of them free. These come in many styles, some more like games, some more like stories; some are challenging, some very easy; some are serious, emotionally demanding pieces, while others explore the lighter side of life. And, like books, works of interactive fiction come in assortment of genres: fantasy, mystery, horror, and science-fiction, romance and historical, surreal and slice-of-life. At the end of this Guide are some suggestions about where to find more.

Communicating with the Story

You control interactive fiction by giving typed commands — usually a simple imperative instruction for your avatar within the story.

Interactive fiction understands many common verbs, as well as the names of objects that appear in the story. Most of what you type will have the pattern >ACTION OBJECT: an action to do, and an object to which to apply it. Depending on the action, it may be appropriate to add a phrase with a second object: PUT THE FISH ON THE PLATTER, for instance.

What follows is an overview of the kinds of action possible in a conventional work of interactive fiction. It's worth emphasizing that not all interactive fiction conforms to the following description; you may encounter story files with a very different way of presenting the world.

Looking and Other Senses

You may want to start by familiarizing yourself with your environment. In many stories, you'll receive a description of your surroundings each time you enter a new room.

If you'd like to reread this description, you can see it again by typing LOOK. You can also



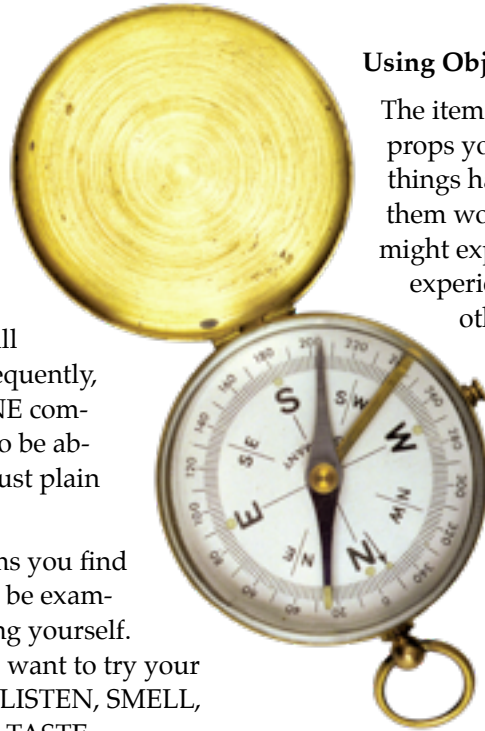
read more about individual objects by typing, for instance, EXAMINE THE MOAT. (Since you will be using it frequently, that EXAMINE command can also be abbreviated to just plain X.)

Most items you find in a story can be examined, including yourself. You may also want to try your other senses: LISTEN, SMELL, TOUCH, and TASTE.

Moving Around

Soon you may want to explore a bit. Often you can move by typing compass directions: GO NORTH, for instance, or just N. It is common, though not universal, to understand eight compass directions as well as IN, OUT, UP, and DOWN. The "status bar" line at the top of the screen sometimes contains useful information about where you are, as well.

Of course, some stories are not about exploring. In that case you may find that you are restricted to a single room; that the story provides other more general ways of expressing movement; or that it does not express itself in terms of "rooms" at all.



Using Objects

The items you find are props you can use to make things happen. Many of them work in the way you might expect, given your experiences in daily life; others have special properties unique to the story. Many of these you will be able to TAKE, DROP, or PUT ON or IN other objects.

Once you've acquired a few, you can also TAKE INVENTORY (or just type I for short) and get a list of things you're carrying. It's often a good idea to collect the objects you find: they may be helpful later.

There's lots to do with objects besides move them around, of course. Some can also be worn, eaten, opened, unlocked, and so on. Devices can be turned on and turned off. Topics of study can be looked up in books and reference works.

The presence of a tool is a reasonable indication that the story will understand attempts to use that tool: if you're given a shovel, it probably means that sooner or later you will want to DIG.



Meeting People

In addition to objects, you may encounter other characters. These may have all sorts of roles — some of them are there to talk to, and some just get in your way. You can **KISS** them if you're feeling friendly, **ATTACK** them if you're not, and often **GIVE** or **SHOW** them things that you're carrying.

Methods of communication with other characters vary widely from story to story. You may find that the story offers instructions if this is an important part of play. If not, it is often possible to **ASK** a person **ABOUT** some topic; **TELL** a person **ABOUT** a topic; or **TALK TO** a person. The latter may produce a menu of conversational gambits to choose from, or it may cause your character to start a pre-scripted conversation based on what is happening in the story.

Less frequently, a story may understand abstract commands (**INSULT** a person, **GREET** a person, etc.), instructions directed at other characters (**BOB**, **GO**

SOUTH), or even open-ended conversation (**BOB**, **HELLO**).

Starting and Stopping

A few other commands allow you to manage the game. At any time, you can **SAVE** your current game state, like putting a bookmark into your place in the story. There is no limit to the number of **SAVE** files you can make, so keep as many as you like. **RESTORE** will open up an old **SAVE** file and let you resume playing.

When you're ready to stop, **QUIT** will end your game session.

If you'd like to keep a record of your play session, you can also type **TRANSCRIPT** at any time and begin a text file logging what happens to you.

Finally, if you try something and decide you didn't like the results, you can usually **UNDO** any move — even if it was one that ended the game.

Other Useful Words...

ALL refers to all items you can see, so for instance **TAKE ALL** will get every portable thing in sight.

AGAIN (or **G**) repeats the action you just did.

Words that express ways of doing something (like **QUICKLY** or **QUIETLY**) are generally not useful in the game and will not be understood.

You do not usually need to refer to specific body parts: so not **HIT THE DOOR WITH MY FIST**, but just **HIT THE DOOR**.

If the game asks you a question, like "Which horse do you mean, the white horse or the brown horse?", you may answer

with just the name of the object you prefer. In this case, **>BROWN HORSE** would be a good reply.

If You Get Stuck

Some interactive fiction is easy to complete, and some is challenging. If you find yourself faced with an obstacle you can't get past, try reviewing what you know. Look back at your inventory of possessions, and about the rooms that you're able to see so far. Sometimes the solution to a problem in one room will lie somewhere else.

Be thorough. Try looking under objects that might conceal things. Be sure that you've opened all the openable containers you can find, and gone into all the rooms you can reach.

Read the text carefully. Does it seem to be suggesting any actions? The story often contains clues about what you might do next.

Be sure that you've read any specific instructions or help materials that come with the game. Many works of interactive fiction include special commands not shared with every story, so it's worth making sure you're not missing any essential information for play. Consider what kind of story it is. Are there rules that apply in this world that don't apply in ours? How can you use the story's internal logic?

Compare notes. If you can find someone to play with, you may find that collaboration makes puzzles easier.

Take a break. Sometimes the right idea will come to you while you're doing something else.

Rephrase. If you're pretty sure the action you're trying is the

Common Interpreters

(These URLs are effective at the time of writing; if the relevant pages have moved, try a web search for the interpreters by name.)

Zoom for the Macintosh: <http://www.logicalshift.demon.co.uk/mac/zoom.html>

Zoom for Unix: <http://www.logicalshift.demon.co.uk/unix/zoom/>

Windows Frotz for Windows: <http://www.d.kinder.btinternet.co.uk/frotz.html>

right one, but the story doesn't understand, experiment with other ways of phrasing the instruction.

Try typing HELP or HINTS within the story. Some come with built-in advice for the player.

Finally, if you decide you cannot go on without outside help, you can post a request for hints on rec.games.int-fiction, a group for the discussion of interactive fiction reachable at <http://groups.google.com/group/rec.games.int-fiction>. There is also a longer list of interactive fiction community resources at the end of this guide.

A Point About Technology

Much interactive fiction comes in the form of a story file. These files are not like text, or music files: since they need to interact with the player, they are programs. Rather than running directly on any one computer, they are programs for a virtual machine adapted for IF. The ad-

vantage of this is that the same story file can be used on any number of very different systems (Macs, PCs, Linux boxes), and that a story file is so isolated from the host computer that it is impossible for it to alter other files or do any damage, malicious or accidental.

The disadvantage is that a story file can only be used with a program called an "interpreter". All the same, once you have installed an interpreter, you will be able to play a wide range of stories. Some interpreters even help organize your collection of interactive fiction and keep track of your saved files.

If you have an interactive fiction story to play with, you likely also received an appropriate interpreter, or instructions on where to get one.

If not, you can find and download one from the internet. Several interactive fiction machines exist, but if you have this guide, you likely received it along

with a file for the Z-machine: if so, the file itself will have an extension such as .z5, .z8, or .zblorb. At the time of writing, two of the best interpreters for the Z-machine are Andrew Hunter's Zoom (for Mac OS X or Unix), and David Kinder's Windows Frotz for Windows. Interpreters for less popular platforms exist as well; it is even possible to run interactive fiction on a PDA, though the most processing-intensive stories may be slow.

When choosing an interpreter, you may want to look for one that can read a format called "blorb". (BLORB, like FROTZ, is a nonsense word from early commercial interactive fiction.) A blorb file is able to contain not only the story itself, but also cover art and other resources, such as sound effects and images.

Not all Z-machine interpreters work with Blorb files; choosing one that does will give you access to the widest range of work.

Common Commands

Not all these commands are important in every story: as different stories are about different subjects, they often use different vocabulary. A story file may come with special instructions, or offer hints about new commands in the course of play. All the same, there is a basic vocabulary that much interactive fiction will understand, and knowing these commands will get you started playing many works.

answer [text] to [someone]

ask [someone] for [something]

ask [someone] about [something]

attack [something]

blow [something held]

burn [something]

buy [something]

climb [something]

close [something]

cut [something]

dig [something]

drink [something]

drop [things held]

eat [something held]

enter [something]

examine [something] (or X)

exit

fill [something]

get off [something]

give [something] to [someone]

go [direction -- N, S, E, W, NW, NE, SW, SE, up, down, in, out]

go to [any room]

help

inventory (or I)

jump

jump over [something]

kiss [someone]

listen

listen to [something]

lock [something] with [something]



look

look inside [something]

look under [something]

look up [text] in [something]

no

open [something]

pull [something]

push [something]

push [something] [direction]

put [things] in [something]

put [things] on [something]

pray

quit (or Q)

restart

restore

rub [something]

save

score

search [something]

set [something] to [something]

show [something] to [someone]

sing

sit on [something]

sleep

smell [something]

sorry

squeeze [something]

swim

swing [something]

switch [something] [on/off]

talk to [someone]

take [things]

take off [something]

taste [something]

tell [someone] about [something]

think

touch [something]

transcript [on/off]

turn [something]

unlock [something] with [something]

wait (or Z)

wake up

wake [someone]

wave

wave [something held]

wear [something held]

yes

Sample Transcript

Here is an example of play with an interactive fiction story. The commands in bold are the player's instructions; the regular type shows the replies. This transcript does not demonstrate all possible commands, but it does show how the most common ones behave, and how a player might solve a problem within the story.

Cheese Vault, Artisanal Restaurant

The light is dim and blue. On three sides of you are glass-fronted refrigeration cases, containing cheeses of all kinds. The locks on the doors protect them from your depredation, however.

To the west is the cheese counter.

A fondue fork lies on the ground.

>LOOK IN CASE

The cases contain cheeses of many sorts -- too many for your brain to comprehend.

>TAKE FORK

Taken.

>WEST

Cheese Counter, Artisanal Restaurant

You are standing before a display counter full of assorted cheeses: Colston Bassett Stilton; both Keen's and Montgomery Cheddar; Petit Basque; Sonoma Dry Jack; Drunken Goat... It is a cheese-lover's dream.

A clerk, dressed in a white uniform, presides behind the counter.

To the east is the cheese vault; the rest of the restaurant is to the south.

>TAKE ALL

Colston Bassett Stilton: That seems to belong to the clerk.

Keen's Cheddar: That seems to belong to the clerk.

Montgomery Cheddar: That seems to belong to the clerk.

Petit Basque: That seems to belong to the clerk.

Sonoma Dry Jack: That seems to belong to the clerk.

Drunken Goat: That seems to belong to the clerk.

clerk: The clerk probably wouldn't like that.

display counter: That's fixed in place!

>X CHEDDAR

Which Cheddar do you mean, the Keen's or the Montgomery?

>KEEN'S

The Keen's Cheddar is well-aged, firm and golden.

>ASK CLERK FOR KEEN'S CHEDDAR

The clerk cuts you a piece of the Keen's Cheddar and wraps it in wax paper. "That'll be \$20," he says, looking expectant.

>I

You are carrying:
a wallet (which is closed)
a fondue fork



>**OPEN WALLET**

You open the wallet, revealing two twenty-dollar bills and a driver's license.

>**GIVE TWENTY TO CLERK**

You need to be holding the twenty-dollar bill first.

>**TAKE TWENTY**

Taken.

>**I**

You are carrying:

- a twenty-dollar bill
- a wallet (which is open)
 - a twenty-dollar bill
 - a driver's license
- a fondue fork

>**GIVE TWENTY TO CLERK**

The clerk accepts your money and hands you a triangular package wrapped in wax paper.

>**X PACKAGE**

The package is wrapped and bears a label indicating that it contains over a pound of Keen's Farmhouse Cheddar.

>**SMELL PACKAGE**

The scent is subtle and delicious: this is not an aggressively scented cheese.

>**L**

Cheese Counter, Artisanal Restaurant

You are standing before a display counter full of assorted cheeses: Colston Bassett Stilton; both Keen's and Montgomery Cheddar; Petit Basque; Sonoma Dry Jack; Drunken Goat... It is a cheese-lover's dream.

A clerk, dressed in a white uniform, presides behind the counter.

To the east is the cheese vault; the rest of the restaurant is to the south.

>**SOUTH**

Among the Tables

The restaurant is a large, open room with white walls and high ceilings. Nonetheless, the number of patrons makes it close going among the tables, especially when you must avoid waiters bearing pots of hot fondue.

North is the cheese counter. To the south is the door to the street.

>**OPEN PACKAGE**

Not here: it'd probably get mixed up with someone's order.

One of the patrons jostles you on his way to the bathroom.

>**X PATRONS**

At the closest table, an older gentleman is consuming cheese puffs at a truly alarming rate.

>**S**

You take a step towards the doors, but are blocked by a tall man with broad shoulders.

>**G**

You take a step towards the doors, but are blocked by a tall man with broad shoulders.

>**TALL MAN, SOUTH**

The tall man ignores your request.

>**ASK TALL MAN ABOUT EXIT**

He appears indifferent to your plight.

>**ATTACK TALL MAN**

You haul off and punch the tall man in the nose, which really gets his attention.

This soon turns out to be a mistake, however: not only is he about twice your size, he's also a lawyer.

*** You have been arrested for assault. ***

>**UNDO**

Among the Tables

[Previous move undone.]

>**ATTACK TALL MAN WITH FORK**

You stab the tall man with the fondue fork. He yelps and looks around; you feign innocence, gazing in another direction entirely.

His search for the culprit has left your path clear.

>**S**

Street Outside Artisanal

You stand out on the sidewalk, jostled by passers-by. The street is full of taxis.

>**OPEN PACKAGE**

You open the package, exposing a wedge of golden Cheddar.

>**EAT CHEDDAR**

You lift the Cheddar to your lips and nibble off a bit. Mmm — paradise!

*** You have ascended to dairy-related bliss! ***

Resources



Most interactive fiction currently released is free, which means that you are allowed to download and play it without charge on any computer you like. If you'd like to try other works, here are some resources.

Finding More Story Files

The Interactive Fiction Archive is an immense repository containing interpreters, programming languages, documentation, and over two thousand story files, some of them dating back to the 1970s and some of them brand new.

Sifting the riches for something you'd enjoy can be pretty daunting, so the best way to approach it is to consult Baf's Guide to the Interactive Fiction Archive. Baf's Guide records stories and authors, provides reviews of many works, and lists the recipients of awards and winners of competitions.

Baf's Guide to the Interactive Fiction Archive:
<http://www.wurb.com/if/>

Interactive Fiction Ratings:
<http://www.carouselchain.com/if/>

SPAG Review Magazine online:
<http://www.sparkynet.com/spag/>

IF-Review:
<http://www.ministryofpeace.com/if-review/>

Brass Lantern, IF news and resources:
<http://www.brasslantern.org/>

Inform, a language for writing IF:
<http://www.inform-fiction.org/>

The Interactive Fiction Ratings site is another source for information about quality and genre. The Ratings site collects opinions from players and keeps a running scoreboard of stories of many types. It also contains information about how long a given story might take to complete.

For fuller reviews and discussions of stories, and an introduction to the community of interactive fiction players and authors, take a look at the online magazines SPAG and IF-Review, and the Brass Lantern website.

Finally, many players enjoy collecting commercial interactive fiction from the 1980s, which is not on the Archive because it is protected by copyright. Tracking down these old games can be a challenge, but a search for Infocom products on eBay or other auction sites may turn up old treasures.

Reaching the Community

Brass Lantern is a good place to start if you would like to find out more about the community of

interactive fiction authors and players, and learn about upcoming events. Enthusiasts run yearly interactive fiction contests and award ceremonies, in which anyone is eligible to vote. Participating in these events is an excellent way to find out about interesting new work that has not yet been reviewed.

You may also like to join in discussion fora where players critique and recommend stories and exchange hints. Brass Lantern will point you to these resources.

Writing Your Own Interactive Fiction

Brass Lantern includes information for people interested in writing their own interactive fiction, including a guide to tools and some introductory essays on design.

The programming language used to produce this story is called Inform. You can download the tools for authorship, and read about how these works are created, at the Inform website.