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History of Computer Gaming: Case History

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Where Have All the Adventure Games Gone?

*The computer is chameleonic. It can be seen as a theater, town hall, an unraveling book, an animated wonderland, a sports arena, and even a potential life form. But it is first and foremost a representational medium, a means for modeling the world that adds its own potent properties to the traditional media it has assimilated so quickly. As the most powerful representational medium yet invented, it should be put to the highest tasks of society. Whether or not we will one day be rewarded with the arrival of the cyberbard, we should hasten to place this new compositional tool as firmly as possible in the hands of the storytellers.*

- Janet Murray. Hamlet on the Holodeck.

The origin of computer gaming finds its roots in adventure gaming. Ever since we've been able to display text on a screen, we've wanted to tell a story with that text. As computing power increased over the years, graphics, AI, and improved interactivity were added, but in recent years adventure gaming seems to have become the "invisible genre."

In an article published in February of 1998, Rosemary Young and Gordon Aplin wrote that, "It's a disturbing trend that there are fewer and fewer adventure games being released at the moment. Although this trend has been evident for some years now it seems that adventures have well and truly slipped to the bottom of the priority list when it comes to designers deciding what sort of game they will make. There's obviously more money in action games so the lure is set. Adventure games are destined to suffer." (Aplin "Sad State")

The article refers specifically to the decline of traditional two-dimensional adventure games in favor of more arcade/action style games. In another article voicing these concerns, Gordon Aplin writes,

Now the call for adventure games to change has sprung up again. It probably never really went away. Some say change is already happening and proudly welcome it, others are concerned that the changes actually threaten the genre...With the rush to embrace these changes, seemingly without question, and the move to redefine the adventure genre to be whatever anyone deems it to be, the question no one seems to be asking is what is to become of the traditional adventurer? Those who so lovingly nurtured the genre and loyally supported the adventure game developers, where are they to go now? For no matter how strident the voices for change become there are many, many adventurers who simply cannot accept combat in an adventure game and who object to keyboard or gamepad navigation. Their concerns are legitimate and yet they are being completely ignored by many developers and publishers. ("Adventure Games")

However, at the same time, interactive fiction, the progenitor to two-dimensional adventure games, is experiencing a modern day renaissance. The “Interactive Fiction in 1995: The Year in Review,” a yearly report by the interactive fiction news site XYZZY News stated that:

Mainstream interest in text adventures may also be picking up again. This year we've seen a substantial increase in the number of both IF-related Web sites and online hyperfiction (multiple-path stories in which readers follow different links to influence the plot). Numerous Infocom-related home pages and guides have made it easier for users to locate and use the GMD [interactive fiction] archive. The summer re-release of the classic Infocom adventures through Activision may rekindle players' memories of text adventures, and a number of computer books and magazines have had disks or CDs containing text adventures packaged along with them. The possibility of packaging the entire GMD archive on CD-ROM, and the upcoming InfoMac CD, have also generated discussion on Usenet.  
(Foreman)

A year later, the report noted that:

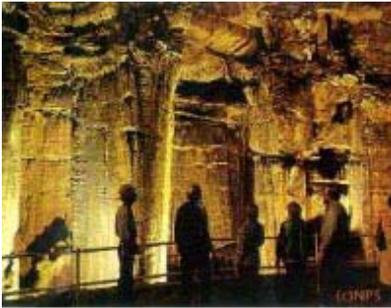
Interest in IF has grown substantially over the past 12 months. There was a far more active competition this year, with 26 entries compared with 12 in 1995. As Magnus Olsson put it, “I have a feeling that it's changed character a bit, being no longer an underground movement but rather something on the fringe of the mainstream. I also have a—rather vague—feeling that we've reached some sort of break-even; that we don't need to be so concerned about the survival of the genre at the moment.”  
(Foreman “IF in 1996”)

Obviously, this raises the question, why are “point and click” two-dimensional adventure games (ala Sierra and LucasArts style) are all but extinct nowadays while interactive fiction has a strong, thriving community behind it creating new games? To answer this question, first we have to take a few steps back to look at the history of adventure gaming and how it evolved.

## A Brief History of Adventure Gaming

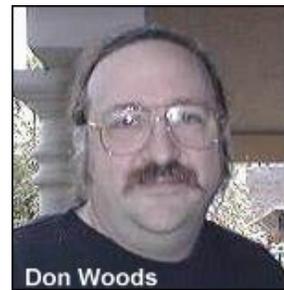
*“You are standing at the end of a road before a small brick building.  
Around you is a forest. A small stream flows out of the building and down  
a gully.”*

### Adventure (circa 1975)

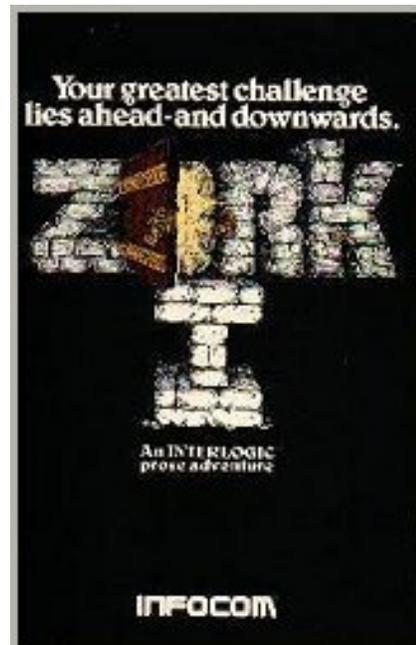


**The Mammoth Caves**

The origins of adventuring gaming can be traced back to the unlikely candidate of spelunking in the early 70s. Will Crowther and his wife were avid cave explorers charting out the Mammoth Caves in 1972. When the marriage broke up, Will missed the caving expeditions and he missed his kids even more. Depressed, he threw himself into programming and created a computer text simulation of the Mammoth caves to amuse his children. He wanted the game to be accessible to novice computer users like his children so game interaction was done through typed commands in plain English instead of computer jargon, an innovative concept at the time. The game made its way around ARPANET, the predecessor to the modern internet, and fascinated another young programmer named Don Woods, a researcher at Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence lab. His version, entitled *Adventure*, added monsters, traps, puzzles, more treasures, and more to explore. *Adventure* was an instant success and was passed throughout the ARPANET, becoming "the oldest, most famous, most modified, most ported, and most pirated game in the history of Interactive Fiction" in the words of one historian (Cree).



*Adventure* spawned hundreds of clones, known collectively as "Adventure-like games" and eventually simply as adventure games. Among those inspired by the game were a group of students at MIT (Tim Anderson, Marc Blank, Bruce Daniels, and Dave Lebling) who started tinkering with the code in their spare time. Their pet project started to shape itself into a real game, which they called *Zork*. The game was never publicized, but slowly it circulated around ARPANET by word of mouth since the only way to play the game was to remotely log onto a machine at MIT. When they finished their first version of the program in 1977, they had about half what would eventually become *Zork I*. In the process they had



built up a game mythos that became known as the "Great Underground Empire," including such beasts as the dreaded grue, a dark-dwelling creature that devoured unwary players. In 1979 the team incorporated a company called Infocom in order to continue developing software like *Zork*. In 1980, 6000 copies of *Zork I* sold for the Apple II in eight months and one million copies sold world-wide on a wide variety of computer platforms, making *Zork* the first mainstream consumer adventure game. Over a dozen



Zork

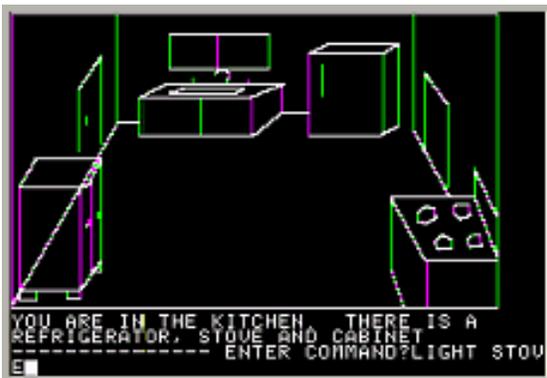
text-based *Zork* games are produced in total and Infocom goes on to become one of the biggest computer game companies in the industry, making over 35 text-based games for almost every personal computer platform. (Kosak)

However, in the late 80s, faster processors and more RAM ushered in an age of improved graphics and sound, ending the reign of text-based games. Activision purchases Infocom in 1986 for a record 7.5 million. In 1987, Infocom released *Beyond Zork*, their first game with a graphical user interface (GUE) and an onscreen navigational map. In 1993, Activision further developed their GUE in the commercial flop *Return to Zork*, incorporating all of the multimedia bells and whistles just becoming available through the emerging CD-ROM market. *Zork: Nemesis* in 1996 added a 360-degree "Z-Vision" graphics engine and an improved user interface, which culminated in the latest *Zork* title in 1997, *Zork: Grand Inquisitor*. (Dot Eaters)



**Zork: Grand Inquisitor**

Around this time, two new development companies superseded Infocom as the chief designer of adventure games. Sierra On-Line, founded in 1980 by Roberta Williams and her husband, created *Mystery House* for the Apple II, the first computer game to



**Mystery House**

combine text with graphics. Using a murder mystery theme, the player explored a mysterious house, finding treasure and avoiding the deadly fates of the other occupants. While the text parser was below the standard set by Infocom's *Zork* and the

graphics were mere outlines, the game was a smash, selling 11,000 copies the first year. Sierra went on to produce twenty more games for the Apple II. In 1983, IBM asked Sierra to produce a game to show off the graphical capabilities of a new computer they were marketing towards gamers, the PCjr. Using a provided prototype system, Roberta

Williams designed the next evolution of the graphical adventure, which allowed the player's onscreen avatar to walk around the landscape in



King's Quest

16-color CGA graphics. With a team of six programmers and a development cost of \$700,000, *King's Quest* is released in 1984. While the PCjr platform failed, the game was a success and was ported to other more popular systems, selling over 2.7 million copies and spawned a line of sequels. (Dot Eaters)

Sierra retained its supremacy in the graphic adventure market until challenged by George Lucas' Lucasfilm computer games division (later renamed LucasArts), with the 1987 release of their first graphical adventure game, *Maniac Mansion*, which introduced the idea of the cut-scene and multiple controllable characters among other innovations. Along with their *Monkey Island* and *Indiana Jones* graphic adventure series, LucasArts adventure



Maniac Mansion

games rejected the traditional verb-noun command parser for a new proprietary point-and-click user interface engine called SCUMM (Script Creation Utility for Maniac Mansion). While Sierra succeeded in revamping their games to take advantage of this new technique, they lost the edge in the graphic adventure market.

The success of the graphical interface can be attributed to how it eliminated the need to guess the hundreds of commands used in most text-based adventure games. Instead the interaction was distilled down to a few command words (sometimes represented with symbols) available at the bottom of the screen. With these commands,

the player navigated the world, interacting with the various objects and NPCs one met along the way. This made adventure gaming accessible to a broader audience than those who could navigate the complex user interface of games like Infocom's *Zork* series.

The next big shift in adventure gaming came in 1993, when Broderbund Software released *Myst*, one of the most controversial titles in adventure gaming history. Some have hailed it as the greatest innovation in the adventure genre, the second coming of graphical adventure games. Others have faulted it as just a fancy slideshow with eccentric puzzles, causing the downfall of graphical adventures by pigeonholing the genre into a restrictive design system. Yet with over 3.5 millions copies of the original sold as of 1997 and two sequels, *Myst* is still the best-selling game property of all time. When *Myst* was released in 1993, the graphical design was revolutionary, putting all other games at the time, not just adventure titles, to shame. All the scenes were painstakingly modeled and texture mapped in extraordinary detail giving the game a lifelike, photo-realistic look. Additionally, its user interface was also a first of its kind, using a first-person perspective, simplified navigation, and basically no inventory instead of the third-person perspective with complex inventory/interaction controls system



**Myst**

established by Sierra and LucasArts games. With its intuitive interface and high production values, *Myst* was able to attract a large and diverse following, becoming the “killer app” of the mid-nineties, changing the way players viewed graphic adventure games and the way

designers made them for better or worse. Soon, “myst-clones,” games imitating the look and feel of *Myst*, were springing up everywhere, trying to cash in on the new gaming trend. However, many of these imitations were poor copies of the original, just shallow interactive slideshows with random puzzles interspersed throughout. This glut of poor games, tarnishing the reputation of the adventure genre, led many critics to speak out against this sub-genre of adventure games and dismiss the merits of the original *Myst*. (Jong)

The most recent trend has been the blending of other genres with adventure games. Whether it be action/adventure games, role-playing adventure games, role-playing adventure games with action, or some other genre mixing concoction, all have made their mark in recent years. At the 1998 Computer Game Developers Conference, a heated debate occurred during a session entitled "Are Adventure Games Dead?" hosted by Steve Meretzky, formerly of Infocom. During the session, several members of the audience insisted that moving to 3D graphics and a more action oriented style of play would be the only hope for the adventure game to survive in a world dominated by titles such as *Quake* and *Tomb Raider* (Molley). However, many adventure purists are speaking out against this trend, such as Gordon Aplin, the editor of *Quandary*, an online adventure gaming magazine:



**Tomb Raider**

What is clear is that some publishers have given up on the US as a market for adventure games. Determined US adventurers may still be able to purchase the games on-line, but most US potential customers will simply be unaware of the existence of these games. One stated reason for the abandonment of the US market is the perception that computer games are only played by those aged 17 to 28 (and probably only males) so only

action/arcade games will sell well enough there to justify the costs of publication and distribution. The adoption of this view ultimately means the end of diversity in the computer game industry and more to the point, as 'action' is most often represented by combat-oriented scenarios, it also means that computer games will overwhelmingly be about fighting. What an indictment on the industry in this day and age. ("It's Official")



### King's Quest: MOE

Indeed, if one examines the latest in the *King's Quest* line of games by Sierra, *King's Quest: Mask of Eternity*, one will notice that many action elements have been incorporated in what many would consider a series that epitomizes the adventure genre. *Mask of Eternity* is the first and only *King's Quest* to use 3D graphics and incorporate console-gaming style elements such as combat and jumping puzzles. Some players view these additions as a disgrace to *King's Quest* legacy and one critic went as far to say, "MoE should never have been given the *King's Quest* name. It does not relate in any meaningful way to the rest of the series except from a marketing standpoint. Sierra On-Line should have done themselves and their customers a favor by marketing this game on its own merits, thus saving *King's Quest* fans a substantial disappointment while establishing a new series for themselves in the process" (Molley).

On the other hand, LucasArts' *Grim Fandango* has almost been universally hailed as a triumph of "classic" adventure gaming in spite of its transition to a 3D world. Released in 1998 and designed by Tim Schafer, it was the first LucasArts adventure game not to use a SCUMM based engine. However, with an innovative storyline based upon combination of Aztec folklore and 50s film noir, the game lived up to the solid tradition of quality LucasArts adventure games. Yet there is one flaw in this otherwise



perfect game, the interface system. With the move into the 3D realm, LucasArts seemed to take a step back in UI design by removing mouse support and the time-tested icon/inventory system for a new awkward approach. Instead when the player walks close to something one can interact with, the onscreen avatar's head turns and looks at the object. When the avatar is focused on something in this fashion, one can have it described, use it, or try to pick it up. Inventory is kept inside a large coat and one is limited to pulling out the objects one at a time. Additionally, the shifting camera angles make simple navigation around and between screens a chore. Thus, because of the lack of a mouse, this new UI design seems to greatly increase the amount of time it takes to do mundane tasks as compared to previous games.

#### The Current State of Adventure Gaming

As of the time of this writing, there have been only a handful of true adventure games released in the last few years. In 2000, LucasArts released the widely acclaimed *Monkey Island 4: Escape from Monkey Island*, which was based on an improved version of the *Grim Fandango* engine. The *Myst* line of games is still going strong despite being passed through the hands of several companies throughout the years. However, the series seems to be conflicted on how to address the 3D issue. *RealMyst* produced in 2000 by Cyan, the original developer, is just an updated version of the original ported into a fully three-dimensional world, while the latest game, *Myst 3: Exile* produced by Presto Studios in 2001, is still a traditional 2D prerendered graphical game with cutscenes. (Pagoda)

However, the adventure genre isn't as dead as it seems. The mainstream absence of pure adventure games seems to be just isolated to the United States:

Contrary to persistent rumours of its imminent demise the Adventure genre is alive and well and is currently holidaying in Europe where it is evidently having a wonderful time! Many of the games we have recently played or are looking forward to playing (some already released) are from European developers. These include, to name just a few, *Amerzone*, *Rent-A-Hero*, *Discworld Noir*, *Traitors Gate*, *Dracula Resurrection*, *The Longest Journey*, *Schism*, *Simon the Sorcerer 3*, *Gilbert Goodmate*, *The Real Neverending Story*, *Faust*, *Atlantis II*, *Aztec* and *Time Machine*. (Gordon "Winter of Our Discontent")

One suspects this may be due to the fact that while in the US there is a strong push to move towards 3D environments, a medium which is still new and uncomfortable for adventure developers, because of the proliferation of 3D graphics cards brought about by the popularity of first-person shooter games, the rest of the world doesn't have the same sense of hardware-driven urgency. Thus, history seems to be repeating itself yet again, as the next stage of adventure gaming is being drastically influenced by a technology shift. However, this time, the technological forces are not coming from within the adventure genre but from an outside force, leaving many developers caught unprepared for the shift.

Perhaps, as time goes on, we shall see a fan-driven revival in the sub-genre of "point and click" 2D adventure games much like how the text-based adventure game was brought back to life by a strong grassroots community a decade after interactive fiction's commercial prime. Indeed, work is already being started on fan-created 2D sequels to classics such as *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis* and the *Monkey Island* series (Bhatt).

As for the time being, one can see traces of the adventure genre diffused throughout many related genres. In console games such as the *Resident Evil*, *Shenmue*,

and *Metal Gear* series, one can see the legacy of adventure gaming in the well-developed characters, complete with motivations and full believable personalities. Additionally, roleplaying games, a close cousin of adventure games (being both descendants from the original *Adventure*) are becoming ever more story focused with the advent of ubiquitous spoken dialogue and cinematics. One



**Planescape: Torment**

notable RPG with strong adventure ties is *Planescape: Torment*, a fantasy role-playing game from Black Isle Studios based on the game engine used in *Baldur's Gate*.

However, unlike *Baldur's Gate*, *Planescape* doesn't resort to the hackneyed AD&D cliché of Tolkienesque characters wandering through dungeons in search of loot. Instead, the designers of the *Planescape* universe have abandoned boring established precedents in order to create a fresher, richer, and definitely darker product. The story centers around a nameless, immortal character who is searching for his forgotten past. Oddly enough, like LucasArts adventure games, death is not a hindrance in this game since the protagonist automatically resurrects every time he dies. In fact, death is actually the goal of the game since our hero is seeking the information that will explain and ultimately end his immortality. The game starts in a mortuary, where the dead residents and undead workers are portrayed sympathetically as pitiable victims with a certain dignity of their own as opposed to the standard "evil, flesh-eating ghouls" stereotype. Adding to the immersive quality of the game is the fact that it has a unique ingame vocabulary that draws from 19<sup>th</sup> century English working-class slang (i.e. a "barmy berk" is a "crazy fool") instead of the typical mock medieval vocabulary found in most RPGs.

Altogether, the game focuses more on plot advancement and exploration of a convincing world, the elements of an adventure game, than the hack-and-slash statistics focus of most RPGs.

Thus, when we look around nowadays and ask ourselves the pessimistic question, “Where have all the adventure games gone?” perhaps we are looking at the current state of adventure gaming from a narrow viewpoint. Though the halcyon days of 2D “point and click” adventure gaming may be over, that doesn’t mean adventure gaming is dead and gone. Throughout the years, the genre has gone through many shifts, changing and adapting each time. And most likely, adventure games will survive the latest shift towards 3D games, though difficult years lie ahead until designers get accustomed to the new medium. For as long as people have stories to tell, adventure gaming will be there, though perhaps not in the traditional form we are familiar with. For regardless whether it’s text, 2D, 3D, or perhaps holograms in the future, it’s still just a good old compelling story, just in a new medium.

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