

"Floyd Here Now!"

A Study of Planetfall's Most Enduring Character



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"There is a multiple purpose robot here."

In 1983, Infocom published *Planetfall*. This science-fiction themed text adventure introduced players to a robot named Floyd - a diminutive sidekick with the personality of an eight-year-old. Floyd whistles tunelessly, gossips relentlessly, and ultimately sacrifices his life so that the hero can live. Players have been talking about Floyd ever since.

"The emotions I (and others) felt with this supporting character is legendary," wrote one gamer on MobyGames, 16 years after *Planetfall* was originally released. "This has to be experienced to be believed. I don't think anyone has come as close in any other game today."¹ In 2001, another gamer on Slashdot.org posted, "Are you kidding? Losing Floyd was probably the most emotional moment I'll ever have playing computer games."² In listing his favorite titles on an adventure game newsgroup, another gamer posted "Planetfall - Floyd, need I say more?"³

Perhaps a decade ago, nothing more needed to be said. But as computer games have progressed from diskettes to CDs to DVDs, a smaller and smaller percentage of gamers have played any text adventures at all. The features that made Floyd an endearing character are no longer widely known or immediately obvious. In today's graphically-centric medium, character design is intrinsically linked with questions of physical appearance, costume design, and animation - all of which are aspects that Floyd wholly lacked. Writings about *Planetfall* tend to focus only on gamers' reactions to Floyd's death, but while that shows us the end result of his characterization, it does not explain how the bond between Floyd and the player comes to be.

By placing *Planetfall* within its historical context, we can better understand all of the factors that contributed to players' profound reactions to Floyd's death. While Floyd's

death scene itself is inarguably significant, it is best understood as the culmination of the interaction between the Infocom audience's expectations and Floyd's consistent characterization throughout the game.

The Text Adventure and the Early History of Infocom

In order to fully understand *Planetfall*, it is essential that the reader be acquainted with both the format of the game and the company that created it. A complete recounting of the history of Infocom and the text adventure requires a full study in itself, so this paper will only sketch the broad details which set the stage for *Planetfall*'s arrival.

The text adventure is a genre of computer games which dates back to 1976, when Don Woods first completed *Adventure*.⁴ Building upon a spelunking simulation created by Will Crowther, Woods created a Tolkienesque world in which players were challenged to use magical artifacts to overcome a variety of mystical creatures and other puzzles. *Adventure* would present players with a textual description of a room and the objects within it that could be manipulated. Players would then type in a two word command, such as "go north" or "get keys." The *Adventure* program would parse this command, update the status of the world, then report a new textual description of the player's world.

Created at Stanford University, the original *Adventure* soon reached MIT's Laboratory for Computer Science, whose members included Marc Blank, Dave Lebling, Bruce Daniels and Tim Anderson. Dissatisfied with the poor design and simple parser of the original *Adventure*, these four decided to create a text adventure of their own. The end result of their efforts was the adventure game *Zork*. Utilizing the same puzzle-oriented

structure as *Adventure*, *Zork* challenged players to explore a vast underground empire and collect a variety of treasures.

In 1979, three of the four creators of *Zork* went on to become founding members of a company called Infocom. Originally intending to "do something serious,"⁵ the founders of Infocom soon realized that they needed to quickly sell a product in order to keep their company afloat. They decided to make a commercial version of *Zork*, translating the first portion of their original mainframe program to several home computer platforms. The Apple II version alone sold over 6,000 copies in just eight months,⁶ and *Zork* was soon established as a computer gaming classic.

At the point when *Zork* was published, Infocom consisted of a total of 10 employees. One of these employees was Stu Galley, another MIT alumnus who originally joined Infocom as secretary and treasurer but would later write text adventures of his own. Stu Galley would eventually develop "The Implementor's Creed," a set of game design rules embraced by all Infocom programmers which is of particular interest to our study of *Planetfall*. The Implementor's Creed begins "I create worlds. I create experiences. / I am exploring a new medium for telling stories."⁷ In this statement of purpose, we can clearly see Infocom's dedication to exploring the narrative aspects of computer games, a commitment which was echoed by their use of the word "interactive fiction" on all of their publicity and their tendency to call their works "stories," rather than "games."⁸ This set Infocom in sharp contrast to other home computer games of the same era, including *Berzerk*, *Centipede*, and *Frogger* which focused primarily on arcade action. This focus meant that the average Infocom customer tended to be heavy readers⁹ and probably shared Stu Galley's interest in exploring the medium of interactive

storytelling. It is probable that a number of these players were searching for a depth of story and character that they had not yet found in other games, which helps to explain why the characterization of Floyd was so readily embraced and celebrated.

The importance of Infocom's literary heritage can also be seen in the title produced in the wake of *Zork's* success. Infocom published four games in 1982. Two of these titles (*Zork II* and *Zork III*) were augmented versions of the remaining portions of the original *Zork* mainframe game. With the other two titles, Infocom writers made a deliberate effort to explore new literary genres. *Starcross*, in which the player assumes the role of a black hole miner, was a result of Dave Lebling's desire to write within the science-fiction genre. *Deadline*, a murder mystery story, was a result of Marc Blank's love of detective novels.¹⁰ Although *Starcross's* science-fiction setting makes it the more direct predecessor of *Planetfall's* robots and spaceships, a study of *Deadline's* cast of murder suspects reveals a deeper connection to the origins of the character of Floyd.

Early Infocom NPCs - *Zork's* Thief and *Deadline's* Suspects

A non-player character (NPC) is any computer game character which is not explicitly controlled by the person playing the game. An NPC can be anyone from the mindless drove of enemy ninjas in *Shinobi* to the wisecracking sidekick Dexter in *Jak II* to the cunning super-villain Solidus Snake who antagonizes the hero of *Metal Gear Solid 2*. Because Floyd acts as a companion to the player but is never directly controlled by the interactor, he is also an NPC, but he is only one part of a long line of Infocom NPCs. In order to appreciate the innovations which Floyd represents, it is informative to first look at the Infocom NPCs which preceded him.

In *Zork I*, the player spends much of his time cavedwelling alone with the treasures and monsters. However, the adventurer is not completely without human interaction, as a computer-controlled thief also wanders the dungeon. Described as a "seedy-looking individual with a large bag," the thief "in many ways...acts like another, rather powerful, player in the dungeon."¹¹ He moves from room to room on his own volition, encountering the player at random locations and unexpected times. In this way, the thief provides the player with the feeling that another live entity is in the caves. However, the player's interaction with the thief are very limited. The NPC only appears long enough to steal objects away, leaving before the player has an opportunity to start any sort of conversational interaction. The thief also shows very little evidence of a personality. While descriptions such as "it is clear from his aspect that the bag will be taken only over his dead body," give the player a sense of the thief's motivation, it is impossible to distinguish the thief's personality from his role in the game. It is significant that *Zork's* creators describe the thief's primary purpose as "to make life difficult for the player by absconding with treasures,"¹² rather than fulfilling a role as a fully developed character.

Deadline introduced an entire cast of human NPCs, as the player assumes the role of detective and investigates the suspects in a murder mystery. Adding more interactivity than was possible with *Zork's* thief, the player is now required to type commands such as "Hey McNabb, what is wrong?" and "Ask Baxter about Focus" in order to piece together the solution to the game. Although the suspects still act more like plot devices than actual people, they show considerably more personality and individuality than was displayed by the thief. One game reviewer wrote that the characters "seem to have come right out of an

Agatha Christie story" and noted that "the game is highly interactive, in that your actions directly influence those of the suspects."¹³ Yet the relationship between the player and these NPCs remains an antagonistic one, and the mystery setting gives the NPCs an excuse to be intentionally evasive and unhelpful. Although the suspects in *Deadline* are very effective NPCs, it is difficult to find many gamers who have strong personal attachments to Mrs. Robson or Mr. Baxter.

The NPCs in *Zork* and *Deadline* laid the groundwork for interacting with seemingly sentient beings, but none achieved the level of true character necessary to elicit empathy at a personal level. This level of character development would not be achieved until Steve Meretzky began writing at Infocom in 1983.

Planetfall Arrives

Unlike the founders of Infocom, Steve Meretzky did not have a background in computer science. He graduated from MIT with a degree in Construction Management and spent two years in the construction industry before discovering computer games. He initially resented computers and would complain when his roommate, Infocom game tester (and future production manager) Michael Dornbrook, would put out an Apple I on the kitchen table to test the early versions of *Zork*.¹⁴ Before long, Meretzky was won over by the world of text adventures, and when Dornbrook had to leave for business school, Blank asked Meretzky to test the initial versions of *Deadline*. In November of 1981, Meretzky joined Infocom as a tester and in June of 1983 he began writing games of his own. Since then, he has written a total of 15 games, has been admitted to the Science

Fiction Writers of America as an interactive author¹⁵ and has been named one of the 25 greatest gamemakers of all time in a 1999 *PC Gamer* article.¹⁶

Planetfall was Meretzky's first attempt at developing a text adventure game. Created under the working title "Sole Survivor," this game casts the player as a lowly Ensign Seventh Class stationed on the S.P.S. Feinstein in the Stellar Patrol. When the Feinstein is attacked, the player is forced to flee the ship in an escape pod and crash land on the deserted planet Resida. The player must cope with a limited food supply and a debilitating virus as he attempts to collect the key cards which will allow him to explore the entirety of the planet, eventually confronting a race of genetically engineered bio-monsters and discovering the true fate of the inhabitants of Resida.

Planetfall was released in late 1983 - the last year in which Infocom would turn a profit.¹⁷ It was met with both commercial and critical success. On December 12th, 1983, it ranked 15th on the industry-wide sales chart known as the "SoftSel Hot List."¹⁸ *Planetfall* was awarded Best Adventure Game of 1983 from Infoworld and prompted one reviewer to write, "*Planetfall* is just about worth the purchase of a computer."¹⁹ Some critics appreciated the survival elements of the game. A reviewer in *Computer Games* wrote, "The element that distinguishes *Planetfall* is that you must eat and sleep regularly - or die. This adds enormously to the 'you are there' feel of the game...A+."²⁰ Other reviewers praised its difficulty level, as one critic in *ST User* wrote "This is certainly one of Infocom's best adventures...They have really got the balance perfect in this one."²¹

However, the one aspect of *Planetfall* that has proved to be its most enduring component is the four-foot multi-purpose robot who joins the player soon after he crash

lands on Resida. Floyd broke new ground in the world of NPC design, eliciting a level of emotional response that is still rarely matched in today's most advanced games.

Getting to Know Floyd

Players first encounter Floyd in a robot shop on the surface of Resida. By this time, players have become accustomed to the desolate landscape of the planet, so it is no surprise that when the game describes that the robotic devices in the room are all in "various states of disassembly." There is only "one robot, about four feet high, [who] looks even remotely close to being in working order." If the player turns the robot on and then waits for a turn, Floyd springs to life with the following greeting:

"Hi! I'm B-19-7, but to everyperson I'm called Floyd. Are you a doctor-person or a planner-person? That's a nice survival kit you are having there. Let's play Hider-and-Seeker you with me."

Within that first bit of dialogue, Floyd immediately distinguishes himself from his predecessors in *Zork* and *Deadline*. Where *Zork's* thief immediately disappeared before the player could respond, Floyd actually invites the user to play with him. Where the suspects in *Deadline* were cold and distant, Floyd makes an active attempt to engage the player. At this point, the user can make his own decision as to whether he wishes to return Floyd's attention. One user's interaction proceeded as follows:

> Hi Floyd
"Hi!" Floyd grins and bounces up and down.

> *Play Hider-and-Seeker with Floyd*

You play with Floyd for several centichrons until you drop to the floor, exhausted. Floyd pokes at you gleefully. "C'mon! Let's play some more!"

> *Hit Floyd*

Floyd starts dashing around the room. "Oh boy oh boy oh boy! I haven't played Chase and Tag for years! You bet It! Nah, nah!"

> *Kick Floyd*

"Why you do that?" Floyd whines. "I think a wire now shaken loose." He goes off into a corner and sulks.

Already, Floyd's individual personality has been made quite clear. The elementary school mentality cited in the instruction manual is displayed in Floyd's clumsy word choice and transparent emotions. But perhaps the most interesting aspect of this interaction is that it does absolutely nothing to advance the game's plot. In fact, Floyd often seems wholly oblivious to the main story of the game. While the player is struggling to carry coolant to the control room, Floyd will talk about the time he helped sharpen someone's pencil or simply yawn and look bored. At random intervals, he produces a crayon and scrawls his name on the wall or asks the player to play Hucka-Bucka-Beanstalk. In this way, Floyd is the polar opposite of the suspect NPCs in *Deadline*. Where the suspects existed only in the context of forwarding the plot, Floyd is an independent entity with a distinct identity.

Another way in which Floyd separates himself from his NPC predecessors is in his constant presence throughout the game. The thief and the suspects had motivations for remaining elusive, while Floyd is desperate for a friend. Although Floyd sometimes leaves to explore on his own, he always comes bounding back on his own accord. Floyd

occasionally acts as tour guide and will sometimes rub his head affectionately against the player's shoulder. Floyd even comments on the player's actions, memorably asking "Oh boy! Are we gonna try something dangerous now?" whenever the player chooses to save the game. Because the lonely landscape of Resida is free of any sort of human presence, the player comes to feel that Floyd truly is his only companion on the adventure, forming an authentic bond with this artificial creation.

As illustrated by the kicking of Floyd in the above example, the player also has the ability to elicit emotional reactions from Floyd. If the player gives an item to Floyd, he will be thanked profusely. If the player turns Floyd off, the game informs us that "Floyd, shocked by this betrayal from his newfound friend, whimpers and keels over." Because the player has the ability to interact with Floyd and receive viable emotional responses in return, he is able to build a more complex relationship with Floyd than he would be able to if Floyd were to be presented as a static literary character.

However, this is not to say that Floyd's ultimate path is completely unscripted or fully disjoint from the plot. At one point in the game, the player needs to ask Floyd to fetch an object that lies beyond a robot-sized door, reducing Floyd to something more like *Deadline*'s plot device suspects. More importantly, it is the scripted event that occurs at the game's climax that ultimately solidifies Floyd's place in gamers' hearts. This is the moment when Floyd chooses to sacrifice himself for the player.

Floyd's Tragic Sacrifice

As the player progresses through *Planetfall*, Floyd is afforded a few significant opportunities to display his serious side. When visiting a medical room beneath Resida's

surface, Floyd happens upon the demolished breast plate of a former robot friend, causing him to sob and run away. When the player visits a computer control room, Floyd realizes that the broken terminal is linked to the desolation of Resida, and displays a moment of fear. As the game becomes more grim as the player's incurable virus makes him weaker and weaker, Floyd's character also begins to reveal a more dramatic side.

Eventually, the player happens upon a bio-lab which is still occupied by monstrous creatures. The creatures are trapped safely behind a sealed door, but they also happen to have an access card which is necessary for the player to make progress within the game. Floyd offers to get the card for the player, encouraging the player to open the door long enough for Floyd to enter, close the door while Floyd retrieves the card, then open the door when Floyd knocks. Performing these actions will result in Floyd being mauled to death by the monsters, but the player has no choice - it is the only way to continue in the game.

Floyd's entry into the lab is one of the most gruesome moments in the game. As the player waits for Floyd to re-emerge, he hears Floyd's shrieks and yells as well as a "high-pitched metallic scream." When the door is opened again, the game provides the following description:

Floyd staggers to the ground, dropping the mini card. He is badly torn apart, with loose wires and broken circuits everywhere. Oil flows from his lubrication system. He obviously has only moments to live.

You drop to your knees and cradle Floyd's head in your lap. Floyd looks up at his friend with half-open eyes. "Floyd did it...got card. Floyd a good friend, huh?"

Without question, this is the one scene in all of *Planetfall* which is best remembered by all who played it. Janet H. Murray writes, "'He sacrificed himself for me,' is the way one twenty-year-old former player described it to me. Even those who speak of it less personally...convey a sense of wonder at the unexpected and touching quality of the gesture."²² At a recent game developers' conference, a group of panelists discussed whether a computer game had the potential to make a player cry. One journalist wrote, "The answer the GENie crowd came up with was, yes, a computer game can make you cry: consider the death of Floyd the robot in *Planetfall*...Floyd gave up his life for you, there was no way to avoid it. It was a sad moment."²³

Floyd's death illustrates the effectiveness of pushing a character into unexpected territories. Players become comfortable with the idea of Floyd as a clownish companion, so they take special notice when his character begins to reveal new dramatic facets. Because we only see Lara Croft as an in-control action hero or only watch Solid Snake sneaking by security guards, they never exhibit the sense of will that characterizes Floyd's choice. But a shift in character such as this is only effective if it is believable. Players believe in Floyd's choice because his constant presence have proven him to be loyal and his reactions to the player's attentions have proven him to be an emotional being. Without all of the advances that made Floyd better than the NPCs that preceded him, no one would have believed that he was capable of such an act.

Conclusion

If Floyd was first invented in 2004 and placed inside of an arcade-action game, it is doubtful that he would be remembered for years after his death. Part of the appeal of

Floyd's character was a result of his novelty. If we compare Floyd's character to the angst-ridden *Final Fantasy* lot, he does not seem as wildly emotional. But in 1983, when his major competition was the bouncing smiley face from *Berzerk*, he was truly something remarkable. Floyd's popularity is also due in part to the bookish nature of the Infocom crowd, who were perhaps more prone to imagine a full character out of a few lines of dialogue. In these ways, Floyd is something of a nostalgic artifact that could probably not be replicated in today's gaming world.

However, there are other strong elements of Floyd's characterization which still readily apply to game design today. He stands as an excellent model of how a character's personality can be established, then challenged, then re-formed, exhibiting a depth of character development from which any narrative game can benefit. The player's ability to elicit a wide range of emotional responses from Floyd proves that a few well-planned interactions can do more to make a character seem real than the most complicated artificial intelligence algorithms. Floyd also illustrates a perfect union between character and environment, as it is the lonely world of Resida that makes Floyd's presence most welcome.

Planetfall managed to convince thousands of players that this nonexistent robot, made of nothing but text, had the capacity to form such a strong bond with the player that he was willing to sacrifice himself. Though the mechanics of computer games have changed and the golden age of text adventures has long since passed, this is one story which deserves to be remembered.

Endnotes

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¹³Stephanie A. Spadaccini, "Deadline (Review)," *In Games Magazine* Feb, 1983: 65. Available at <<http://www.csd.uwo.ca/Infocom/Articles/deadline.html>>

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¹⁶"Game Gods: Steve Meretzky." *PC Gamer* Sept. 1999: 80-81. Available at <<http://www.csd.uwo.ca/Infocom/Articles/meretzky.html>>

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¹⁹"Stationfall: Floyd returns in boffoid sequel to Planetfall," *The Status Line* 6.2 (Sum. 1987).

²⁰Shay Adams and Dan Gutman, "Planetfall (Review)," *Computer Games* Feb. 1984: 60.

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²²Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997): 52-53.

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