Face It, Tiger, You Just Hit the Jackpot: Reading and Playing Cadre's *Varicella*

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ABSTRACT: We consider a specific character, Princess Charlotte, in the 1999 interactive fiction work *Varicella* by Adam Cadre. To appreciate and solve this work, the interactor must both interpret the texts that result (as a literary reader does) and also operate the cybertextual machine of the program, acting as a game player and trying to understand the system of *Varicella*'s simulated world. We offer a close reading focusing on Charlotte, examining the functions she performs in the potential narratives and in the game. Through this example, we find that in interactive fiction — and we believe in other new media forms with similar goals — works must succeed as literature and as game at once to be effective. We argue that a fruitful critical perspective must consider both of these aspects in a way that goes beyond simple dichotomies or hierarchies.

KEYWORDS: Interactive fiction, character, interpretation of texts, operation of cybertexts, configuration, simulation, play

A MAD ASSORTMENT

Begin a session of *Varicella*, direct the player character to the top level of the southeast tower in Piedmont's palace, type "enter the asylum," and the computer will output this text:

> Princess Charlotte, tightly bound in a straitjacket bejeweled with a mad assortment of silver buckles, sits propped up against the wall opposite the door. Youngest daughter of the King of Paris and adoptive sister of Queen Sarah of Piedmont, Princess Charlotte was betrothed to your younger brother Terzio, with the wedding scheduled to take place upon her sixteenth birthday. But as they exchanged their vows in the chapel just downstairs from this very tower, a pair of assassins shot Terzio dead, splashing the young princess's wedding dress with the blood of her almost-husband. She let out a great wail as the assassins fled, and her keening continued unabated for close to an hour; finally she was sedated, placed in a straitjacket, and taken to the tower. That was more than four years ago. She's still here.
>
> She looks up. "hello, vari**cell**a," she says. "face it, tiger, you just hit the jackpot!" [Boldface in original.]

What exactly could this utterance mean? It could be read as a bit of raving from a character who has long resided in such confines. Princess Charlotte seems, here and elsewhere, to be something of a wise fool, however, and this statement does reflect something about the current situation: the king has just died, and the player character whom she addresses, palace minister Primo Varicella, now has the opportunity to gain the regency, and thus control of the kingdom. The statement, with its reference to winnings, also suggests (at a level above that of the simulated world) that as a game player, the interactor has hit it big and located someone who will be essential to success. Finally, it can hardly be coincidence that "face it, tiger, you just hit the jackpot!" is exactly what Mary Jane Watson said to Peter Parker in *The Amazing Spider-Man* 42 when he arrived to find that she (his neighbor) was his blind date. So along with these other meanings there is clearly the comic suggestion that the sniveling, asexual palace minister has, by encountering this frail and crazed young woman who is bound in a straitjacket, unexpectedly met a hot chick.[1]

Princess Charlotte's greeting does have this whole mad assortment of meanings. Her statement is a clever and very suitable way of introducing a character who plays an essential role in this interactive fiction work, a character — as we aim to show — whose nature and effectiveness cannot be fully grasped unless *Varicella* is understood both as potential literature and as a game.

YOU ARE PRIMO VARICELLA

Varicella is a work of interactive fiction, written using Graham Nelson's Inform and available for free from its author's home page [3]. Essentially, it is a computer program. It accepts typed input, which mostly consists of commands to the player character, an individual who exists in a simulated world. In this case, the player

character is the thoroughly unlikable Primo Varicella. It is Primo who focalizes the generated narratives of this work and his actions that cause the simulated world to change from one session[2] to the next, accounting for the variety of its potential narratives. The program's reply to any particular command is determined by simulating this character's action within the palace world (if it is an action Primo can take) and then reporting on what results from it. There is a clear, stated objective in *Varicella* — Primo is supposed to scheme, bribe, and assassinate his way toward the regency — and there are rules constraining how the interactor can accomplish this. *Varicella* is undoubtedly a game. The interactor can win, following the unstated but certainly effective rules of the interface and world, by issuing the right commands and guiding Primo to the regency. Additionally, one cannot help but notice that repeatedly typing things into this computer program will evoke narratives (descriptions of events connected by time and causality). So *Varicella* is also a potential narrative, and the program itself, like Lescure's N+7 rule, the Mathews Algorithm, and other discoveries of the Oulipo [6,9], is potential literature.

By themselves, these formal qualities do not make *Varicella* interesting in either regard. This work is also a highly cross-platform, interpreted program for understanding natural language within a limited domain, which sounds pretty cool, but it is not especially interesting to single out *Varicella* in that category.

Varicella is actually interesting both as a game and as potential literature, however, and because of how it functions as both at once. Interactors have certainly enjoyed both of these aspects of the work. In 1999, it won four XYZZY Awards, given by popular vote. (It was nominated for eight XYZZY awards that year, out of a total of ten.) *Varicella* took the top honor, the award for best game, and also won the award for overall best non-player characters, for best non-player character (Miss Sierra), and for best player character. Duncan Stevens — almost certainly the most prolific reviewer of interactive fiction — finds some aspects of *Varicella* less than satisfying, but concludes his review by naming it "one of the best pieces of IF ever to be produced," noting that "[a]s IF, and as fiction, it's quite an achievement." [13]

The simulated palace that makes up *Varicella*'s world is not sprawling, although it is richly described and populated by numerous characters, including even a host of palace guards who each have their own personality. *Varicella* extends the usual repertoire of commands in a few interesting ways. The player character can be commanded to look into adjoining rooms — and non-adjoining rooms, by means of his surveillance system or through a different sort of remote-controlled video camera. Also, the interactor can choose to have the player character speak to others in three different modes: servile, cordial (the default), or hostile. The reactions of others can vary quite dramatically based on which tone is used at address them. In contrast to the menu-based conversation system Cadre used in *Photopia* — which was suitable in some ways for that work but unfortunate as a precedent in interactive fiction — *Varicella* uses a system more like that of Mark Blank's *Deadline* (developed at Infocom), in which the interactor can choose to *ask* or *tell* any non-player character about almost anything. Not every question will evoke a meaningful reply, of course, and the secretive player character will often refuse to *tell* others about anything (important or unimportant), but such matters are handled deftly within the scope of the simulated world and its assumptions.

What follows is an excerpt from the lengthy (almost 600-word) prologue that is the first diegetic text supplied by *Varicella* after the interactor chooses to "Start a new game":

> You are Primo Varicella, Palace Minister at the Palazzo del Piemonte. This title is unlikely to impress anyone. Piedmont is the laughingstock of the Carolingian League, and the Palace Ministry has devolved into little more than a glorified (and not even especially glorified) butlership ...
>
> But Charles Martel was a Palace Minister, and he turned back the Moors at Tours lo these many years ago. His son Pepin was a Palace Minister, and he became King of the Franks. It is not unprecedented for Palace Ministers to make something of themselves. ...
>
> ... if this letter you've just received is correct ... a disease has claimed the life of the King. This leaves the principality in the hands of his son, Prince Charles. Prince Charles is five years old. Piedmont, it seems, will be requiring the services of a regent for the foreseeable future. And you can think of no better candidate than yourself.
>
> Of course, you shall scarcely be alone in seeking the position. The King's Cabinet is not a small body. And your fellow ministers will no doubt try all sorts of unseemly tactics in their quest for the throne. Some will try bribery. Others will employ treachery. A few may even resort to brute force. But would Primo Varicella stoop to using one of these methods? Perish the thought! You're better than that. You shall employ all three.

In trying to drive the wedge of distinction between games and narratives, Markku Eskelinen wrote: "If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories."[3] [4] In the case of Varicella, we might say that after a computer program produces nine paragraphs of text that describe a character, supply some information about his historical situation and his immediate situation of political opportunity, mention some of his rivals, and

offer a rich description of the character's immediate surroundings — all narrated in a way that expresses this character's amusingly vile nature — you do not expect the computer program to throw you a ball. At least, not *that* sort of a ball. In fact, if you had to suddenly start playing *Tetris* after launching your interactive fiction interpreter and reading an introduction like this, you would be quite surprised. And, actually, when interactors start up Andrew Plotkin's *Freefall* for the first time — a work that seems to be interactive fiction but in which the would-be interactor is actually presented with an implementation of *Tetris* — they tend to be quite surprised, as well as being amused and dazzled by Plotkin's programming prowess. That sort of violation of our expectations helps to make clear what interactors do expect: an ergodic narrative constructed as they work to solve the overarching riddle of a strange, simulated world. While Cadre violates several expectations in Varicella, he satisfies this fundamental one by supplying the interactor with a work that is, formally, interactive fiction, and offering a prototypical narrative-generating world.

WRITTEN AND PROGRAMMED BY ADAM CADRE

Adam Cadre has written in unusual ways for eclectic forms. In 2000, his first novel, *Ready, Okay!*, was published by HarperCollins: it is an innovative superhero story of sorts, with the children in an American antifamily serving as the heroes and villains. The novel, which is witty and touching as it describes the exaggerated decline of several of the characters, culminates in a high school shooting reminiscent of (among other things) Charles Whitman's University of Texas clock tower massacre. Cadre has also written comics; the first issue of his Web-published comic *Academy X*, drawn by J. Robinson Wheeler, was released in November 2003. While Cadre is an aficionado of Nabokov, he has said in interviews that his favorite book is the graphic novel *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. Cadre spent most of his weekends in high school playing non-computer strategy games. He has named *Star Control II*, a space exploration game, as his favorite computer game, telling one of this article's authors he considered "the sense of discovery and solitude in that experience" to be "the closest I've ever come to being there."

In another interview [11], Cadre discussed his views on interactive fiction and literature, stating:

> Some people have fun spending hours pushing virtual buttons and pulling virtual levers for no reward other than a message like "You have gained a fabulous treasure!" or "*** You have won ***". Then there are the people like me who like the pleasures literature has to offer — big chewy ideas to think about, narrative twists and turns, funny or beautiful turns of phrase, that sort of thing — and also like wandering around someone else's world and knocking over vases.

Cadre's first interactive fiction work, *I-0 (Interstate Zero)*, was a break from the interactive fiction fare available at the time. This 1997 release hinted at his literary and gaming predelictions and the new directions he would later explore in the form, even if its ideas did not seem so big and chewy. While new sorts of cave crawls were being carved out by other independent authors working in the post-commercial interactive fiction landscape, Cadre chose to create a work with more affinity to an exploitation film than to *Dungeons and Dragons.* The initial situation finds the player character, a rather ditzy and curvaceous college student named Tracy Valencia, stuck in the desert. Her car has broken down; the safety pamphlet she has on hand reminds her not to ever hitchhike. Rather than providing a cave or house to wander around in, the action of *I-0* could take off in several different ways, landing the player character in a few different situations and places. The work garnered the Best Game XYZZY Award and led many to expect more pulp interactive fiction from Cadre. But his entry in the IF Competition the following year — submitted under a pseudonym — could hardly have been more different. The main character is a bright, well-loved girl who is seen from the perspective of many different player characters — but is never the player character herself. As one of us has described,

> What is unusual about *Photopia* is not that it has many IF worlds — although this is more noticeable here than in most previous works — but that it has no "frame" world. Instead, *Photopia* begins with the text "'Will you read me a story?' 'Read you a story? What fun would that be? I've got a better idea: Let's tell a story together.'" Arrows and shifts of color (in interpreters that support color) signal the transition to a new IF world. [8]

The interactor is provided a linked series of mini-interactive-fictions that are connected, but in a way that isn't evident at first. Cadre names comics writer Christopher Priest, with his seeming confusion of events that is later seen to have been presented in the perfect order, as his main influence in the overall organization of this work's different worlds.

Cadre, who has recently released some multimedia games, has also written numerous short interactive fiction works. These range from *Shrapnel*, a piece that is ambitious in several ways, to his anonymously-released interactive fiction version of *Pac-Man*, which features a pus-encrusted junkie racing through mazelike streets in search of a fix. While Cadre's interactive fiction to date provides several intriguing types of fruit, it is *Varicella* that clearly offers the most elaborate and rich world among all these works. One aspect of this richness can be seen in the many intricately interacting characters who inhabit the Palazzo.

YOU SHALL SCARCELY BE ALONE

As promised in the prologue, Primo faces a host of other rivals, including the other members of the king's cabinet. One of these is War Minister Klaus Wehrkeit. It is fairly easy for the interactor to bring Primo through two hours of "game time" — the maximum possible timespan — without meeting some untimely fate. If Primo does not manage to dispatch any of Primo's rivals in this time, however, Wehrkeit — who, one can learn, almost certainly is responsible for Terzio Varicella's assassination — will arrive, forces massed behind him, and have Primo dragged before him for an execution-style finale. Should the interactor find a way to deal with Wehrkeit, another rival will replace him as Primo's downfall — unless all are eliminated.

Seemingly more benign is Coffers Minister Argento Rico, a vacuous executive who speaks of team-building and hoards an array of office toys. His evils go beyond those of corporate greed, as a conversation with Charlotte can reveal. Then there is the Church's intimidating representative, Pierre Bonfleche, a gruff mountain of a minister who has the personal hygiene of John the Baptist. Somewhere in the palace lurks Interior Minister Variola Modo, a sort of horror-movie scientist responsible for certain "disappearances." Actually, it's not certain whether or not Modo himself still lurks — what Primo can find may simply be his shambling, reanimated corpse.

There is also the thoroughly stupefied royal family. Prince Louis lounges in the courtyard with his bottle of malt liquor. The all-but-illiterate Queen Sarah stands inarticulate in the royal chambers. Other, minor characters abound. They include the five-year-old, shin-kicking Prince Charles; the Turkish chef who speaks with a comical French accent; the steward who is finishing Primo's manicure at the very beginning; and the numerous palace guards, such as a pair at the main entrance who seem based on George and Lenny from *Of Mice and Men* — or perhaps on Tex Avery's version of those characters.

The final unlikely rival is Miss Sierra, an impatient sort of commando porn star who served as the king's mistress. Cadre won the Best NPC Award for creating Sierra, but we find that her popularity as a character, over Charlotte, may be based more on visceral reaction than cultivated aesthetics. She does make for a righteous female action hero in an unconventional role, but in terms of her function in the world, she seems to have been airlifted in mainly to lie in her chamber and serve as a snippy conversational database, accessible by bribe. The princess, on the other hand, can be released from the confines of the asylum by the player character and can wander about the palace with him, bringing new color to it with her more loopy comments. Sierra may seem to be an unusual sort of Bollywood hero (or actually, villain); Charlotte is an even more innovative construction.

WHEN I WOKE UP, MY PILLOW WAS MISSING

Eskelinen draws a crucial distinction between the mode of engagement or reception in literary works and that required by games: "the dominant user function in literature, theatre, and film is interpretative," he writes, "but in games it is the configurative. ...[I]n art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure, and proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation." [4] Narrative works (of a certain conventional sort) aim to produce a summary meaning that may be taken as the exchange value of the work. Games by contrast are governed by ergodics or pathwork [1], a more complex economy of signs in which any momentary understanding of the system is subject to further vagaries of play, as is the very text that is presented for reading. Reading for the plot, as Peter Brooks said a generation ago, means following a path of necessity to a certain conclusion [2]; games, on the other hand, demand strategy, rearrangement, idle or experimental repetition. We may reach conclusions, but the game is only over when we he have configured it correctly (figured it out) or when we decide to withdraw our attention.

Cultural theory in many of its manifestations today seems much more comfortable with interpretation than configuration — if theory is a game its rules are not clear, there appear to be no winners, and we are not even sure what outcomes are preferable. Though fundamentally inconclusive, theory paradoxically prefers clear assertions. In this realm dichotomies are expected to resolve, dialectically or otherwise. Some "user function" must dominate: interpretation in narrative, configuration in games. In spite of taking the first important steps beyond this binary paradigm, even Eskelinen and the ludologists are somewhat guilty of exclusivity, insisting on sharp distinctions between stories and games.

Interactive fiction shows the limits of this position, since it demonstrates that these apparently disparate families can indeed interbreed, and promiscuously. It reminds us that "interpretation" and "configuration" do not describe the two sides of a dichotomy but rather aspects of a dynamic process. One function may indeed dominate, but the other is never abolished. Both configuration and interpretation operate in stories as well as games. As Eskelinen says, in games we may interpret in order to configure; but we need to understand carefully the proper status of interpretation within the context of play. Within the experience of a single work, the hierarchy of user functions will sometimes seem the reverse of what it was before. The character of Princess Charlotte teaches a particularly useful lesson in this regard.

To describe Charlotte with a term familiar in interactive fiction (and derived originally from non-computer role playing games), the princess is a non-player character:

simply a mass of instructions, as E.M. Forster might have said.[4] Still, this does not keep her from being remarkably *playful*. More will be said presently about Charlotte's actions; for the moment, consider the nature of her discourse. Here is a fairly typical response from Charlotte, elicited when Primo inquires about the palace guards:

> "who watches the watchmen?" Princess Charlotte asks. "you know, it used to be that one in eight go mad, but now i bet it's more like one in three."

True to her conception, which seems to cross Shakespeare's Ophelia with Neil Gaiman's Delirium, Charlotte associates most freely. Here she shows her comic book roots, referring to two graphic novels by Alan Moore. The echo of Juvenal's *Satires* (quis custodiet ipsos custodes) reverberates from Moore's *Watchmen* (1987). The remark about madness points to his *V for Vendetta* (1982), where the graffito "one in eight go mad" refers to medical experiments visited on political prisoners by a fascist regime. Both remarks are clearly relevant to Charlotte: she too is a political prisoner nightly tortured by sadistic courtiers, one of whom conducts his own human experiments; though unjustly confined she is indeed mad; and like Moore's prisoner from Room V, she is capable of settling certain scores.

The final item in the sequence, "now i bet it's more like one in three," may resonate further. One could imagine it refers to the player character, Primo Varicella, this interactive fiction's "number one," and to Charlotte's love, Primo's brother Terzio; or perhaps it hints at another clue not yet discovered. Charlotte's ramblings usually reward close attention. "Who watches the watchmen?" is more than a casual nod to Moore, for instance. It also points the interactor toward an important stratagem, since in order to prevail over Christ Minister Bonfleche, the player character must use an internal surveillance system to expose his pederasty. It could also suggest that Primo pursue further inquiries about the guards, which could lead to important revelations.

In case anyone failed to notice, we have just been practicing interpretation, as we did in discussing Charlotte's introductory statement. Admittedly, this is interpretation of a very basic sort: simply hunting allusions inside and outside the text. Princess Charlotte's dialogue encourages this behavior, constantly inviting the player to consider other dimensions curled up within the words on the screen. In fact, Charlotte may be very literally an interpreter's dream date. Such is at least suggested by another response from the game, this time not at Charlotte's level but in the voice of a narrator who is extradiegetic to the palace and its plots:

> You blearily rub your eyes to find your roommate Sheila shining her bed's clip-on reading lamp in your face. "You know," she says, "I find that when I study with my eyes closed I retain very little of what I read."
>
> "Yeah, yeah," you grumble. You look at your desk clock: 2:33 am. Suddenly your desk clock seems infinitely more intriguing to you than the book before you....
>
> "Tracy," Sheila says, raising her head from her pillow to peer at you through one opened eye. "C'mon. If you fail this test I'm gonna be the one who has to hear you complain the rest of the semester. This would not bode well for Happy Fun Room."
>
> With a deep sigh you return to your desk and find where you were in the chapter before you dozed off:
>
> "In 806, Charlemagne drew up a plan for how his sons Louis, Charles and Pepin would divide up his Empire upon his death. However, both Charles and Pepin died shortly before Charlemagne himself, leaving Louis to succeed to a united throne. But then Louis, in turn, divided up the empire among his three sons; this proved to be a critical mistake, for in attempting to include a fourth son by a new wife a few years later, he precipitated years of civil war which led to the irrevocable fragmentation of the united Europe his father had built..."

The two young women mentioned here act within the text above, so they might be considered characters if this were the usual sort of story rather than a computer program. They seem to have a narrative existence in a story that frames the tale of *Varicella*'s palace. But they are not characters in the interactive fiction *Varicella*, because they are not simulated within any world that the program presents. The interactor can cue this particular ending, but Tracy and Sheila will not react to input in any other way.

Although this reading is by no means inescapable, Tracy can reasonably be imagined as Tracy Valencia, the player character of Cadre's *I-0*, an otherwise unrelated work. What you have just read would then be a cameo appearance — and of course a possible frame, for Tracy's studies bear a decided if twisted resemblance to the mise-en-scene of *Varicella*, set in an implausibly modernized Carolingian League, revolving around the possible regency of Prince Charles, who in the unseemly, optimal solution of the game does re-unify Europe in the guise of Charles the Terror.

In short, this passage invites us to read all other parts of *Varicella* as hypodiegetic, a story within a story, an encapsulated piece of dreamwork — an interpretation that is strongly confirmed by the command that elicits the passage above, just before terminating the traversal: *wake up*.[5]

This bit of call and response points in many directions: to *The Thousand and One Nights*, the epilogue of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but most inevitably to that toxically saccharine homecoming with which Victor Fleming wraps up the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz.* Dorothy's adventures were nothing but a dream, the product of her disorderly imagination and a little cranial insult. Wake up, Dorothy! Or in this case, Tracy.

Following the thread of this allusion would of course suggest that, as Dorothy of Kansas maps onto Dorothy of Oz, Tracy of Happy Fun Room must correspond to someone in the embedded world of Piedmont. The most obvious symmetry points to the player character Primo, the labile personality who might embody the flickering ego of the dreamer. In this simplistic reading the player actually operates two fictive puppets at once: the "you" of the narrative stands for Tracy, who is dreaming the adventures of Primo Varicella.

Yet the symbolic architecture of dreams, stories, and interactive fictions seldom confines itself to such neat correspondences. Instead, connections proliferate. There are also compelling points of reference between Tracy and Princess Charlotte. Like Tracy (though more literally) all the courtiers in Piedmont are trapped in a nightmare of European history. When we first find Charlotte, however, she is explicitly imprisoned, locked in a padded cell that tropes the velvet prison of Happy Fun Room, the ironically named college dorm. Charlotte is also a brilliant, funny, heroically strong twenty-year-old — a plausible ego ideal for an undergraduate woman. Finally, Charlotte's loopy discourse consistently points beyond the main diegetic sequence, referring to films, cartoons, comics, games, and more. If Charlotte's wordplay is meant in part to remind us of other dimensions, then clearly one of these is Happy Fun Room, the level beyond Piedmont where "you" and Tracy are identical.

By proceeding in this direction one might contrive to read *Varicella* as a more or less orthodox literary work. We might take Happy Fun Room as the point where configuration or play yields to interpretation or tokenized meaning, the instant when the wave function of you/Tracy/Primo collapses into a much more familiar scene of reading: a woman dreaming over her book. In this scheme Princess Charlotte points over the reversible rainbow to a more familiar, monochromatic mode of textual being, and one with a certain conventional, moral authority. This "solution," which may be attained without understanding the workings of the palace world at all, notably provides the only final reply that does not involve the painful demise of the player character. It contrasts strongly with the winning final reply, in which the temporarily triumphant Primo is quickly overthrown as regent by the sadistic Prince Charles, who executes him by very slow torture and then lays waste to Europe. Contrasting this outcome to Tracy's awakening, the best solution to *Varicella* would seem to be a short circuit, a happy reminder that there's no place like tome.

Of course, anyone who reads *Varicella* this way should probably be denied electrical service. Why read an interactive fiction as if it were a book? As Princess Charlotte likes to say when Primo asks her something he has already inquired about, "i dreamed you asked me that before, and when i woke up, my pillow was missing." Cushions of various sorts have ways of disappearing when we cross from older media to new — or indeed when any simpleminded didacticism comes in for reasonable scrutiny.

Recall what Salman Rushdie says about the end of *The Wizard of Oz:* it is utterly wrong to reduce a "radical and enabling film" to a "conservative little homily" [12]. Much the same might be said about *Varicella.* Perhaps we can collapse Charlotte or Primo into Tracy, but this misadventure does not land us back in Kansas. Happy Fun Room owes more to *Brazil* than *The Wizard of Oz:* escape leads not out of the imaginary world but back inside — a point that seems especially clear if Tracy indeed refers to the collegiate heroine of *I-0*, which would make this just another node in the IF forest. Tracy's awakening is much better seen as ironic digression than frame. We can use it to produce a terminal interpretation, if that is desired; but while this interpretation does formally end the game, in an important sense the game goes on.

LEMONADE!

So, on with the game, and the story. Solving *Varicella* — in the formal sense of providing the inputs necessary to successfully traverse the work and generate the winning final reply — involves having Primo perform numerous unusual actions and organizing them so that there is enough game time to accomplish everything. Actually figuring out *Varicella*, and thus solving it in the sense that one solves a riddle, requires that the interactor first learn the capabilities and weak points of Primo's opponents and then effectively play these rivals against each other in an efficient order.

Charlotte is essential to solving *Varicella* in the former sense because some of the commands required in a successful traversal involve her. To be blunt: she can be used by the perceptive interactor as a murder weapon — and she must be, in order to win. However, that she is essential in this way does not by itself bear on whether she is a non-player character with an interesting function within the simulated world. The axe-wielding troll in *Zork* who bars the way to the main part of the Great Underground Empire is also essential in this trivial sort of way.[6] He must be overcome so that the world of *Zork* can be explored, but this merely describes the function of an obstacle, not a character. While the troll has some limited function in the potential narratives of *Zork*, he has very few, if any, interesting qualities when considered from a literary perspective. Hence the incisive piece of IF parody

called *Zork: A Troll's-Eye View* by Dylan O'Donnell, in which the player character is the troll and there is nothing to do but wait for adventurers in a bloodstained room, hefting an axe. Charlotte, on the other hand, is an interesting non-player character. It is difficult to imagine a similar parody of *Varicella* taking Charlotte as the player character. She is not just interesting because her allusive quips help to tie *Varicella* into a rich intertextual tissue. She also forms a compelling part of the experience of the work because of the ways in which she helps the interactor solve *Varicella* in the latter, richer sense: she helps to bring about a better understanding of the simulated world and how it can be slyly reconfigured.

"What we look for in a created character is not mere surprise but revelation," writes Janet Murray [10], reading Forster's concepts into the digital medium. Charlotte provides such revelations, and manages to meet Murray's requirement that round characters "surprise the interactor by acting in a way that is consistent with known behavior but takes that to a new level." The new level (or levels) can be reached, in Charlotte's case, because she functions so well in the several contexts provided for her in *Varicella*. She not only reveals things about the world (that is, our world) in the usual ways that literary characters do: she also helps the interactor to gain a fuller understanding of *Varicella*'s world, so that aspects of our world can be revealed through it.

By freeing Charlotte from the asylum, Primo gains an amusing companion. ("so long, sucker!" she says to the guard when she walks out with Primo, "i'm taking this thing to mexico!") As she accompanies Primo around the palace, she does many amusing things and makes plenty of typically allusive statements. But her actions also can prompt the interactor to notice important objects. When Primo traipses into the Throne Room, having freed Charlotte, this will transpire:

> Princess Charlotte follows you. She picks up the phone. "hi, jenny?" she says. "guess what? susie says that bobby told her that timmy likes you! as in likes you likes you! couldn't you just die?" She stares at the receiver for a moment and places it back in the cradle. "she hung up," she says, puzzled.

By putting on this wry play, Charlotte points out that there is a telephone in this room. This will have been clearly mentioned by this time in one of the four sentences that make up the room's description: "The gilt throne with its red velvet canopy is certainly impressive, though the bright green telephone right next to it detracts from the effect somewhat." Still, there are so many details in *Varicella*'s room descriptions — descriptions that are substanially longer than is customary in interactive fiction — that it is possible for interactors to overlook such an item completely. Since the interactor will almost certainly assume, at first, that this is a Renaissance palace, details such as this one are important in signaling the nature of the world in a very basic sense. The interactor must realize that the palace incorporates hypermodern technologies (this phone, for instance, is a video phone) in order to effectively understand how certain tools and toys function and in order to work toward a solution by using them. The phone itself is essential to winning *Varicella*, also, so by specifically pointing out this artifact Charlotte is very directly helping the interactor work toward a formal solution. It's also worthwhile to notice what Charlotte does with the phone: she gossips, or at least pretends or attempts to gossip. Communication of a similar sort is exactly what allows Primo to play his opponents against one another and to dispatch several rivals. Charlotte highlights more than just a single tactical object by spreading rumors on the phone: she also points out one necessary aspect of Primo's winning strategy.

Charlotte provides an amusing metaleptic comment when asked about Miss Sierra:

> "she is mean," Princess Charlotte says. "mean, mean, mean. the whole time i was getting ready for my wedding she called me the worst names i've ever heard. she makes your hostile mode sound like servile, let me tell you!"

This "hostile mode" is not something that actually exists on the diegetic level in which Charlotte is speaking to Primo — it exists at the extradiegetic level, alongside, for instance, the directives *quit* and *restart*, and only the interactor should be privy to it and the other conversational settings. But it seems fitting that, as Charlotte's allusions reach beyond the palace world intertextually to comics, film, and novels, her oddly offset perspective also allows her to comment on aspects of the computer program *Varicella.* In making such a comment, she recalls another famous interactive fiction companion, the robot Floyd from Steve Meretzky's *Planetfall*, developed at Infocom. When the interactor types *save* in *Planetfall* and the player character is accompanied by Floyd, the charming robot says, "Oh boy, are we going to try something dangerous now?" Charlotte's similar bit of metalepsis isn't just a play for laughs; it also can serve to remind the interactor that these three different modes for conversation do exist and can be useful — they, too, are essential to a formal solution. Of course, Floyd's comment may have a similar resonance, since in addition to being funny it also reminds the interactor that it is wise to save the current situation to disk before attempting something risky. However, Charlotte's comment seems to suit her even better than Floyd's quip does him, simply because Charlotte also undertakes other transgressions of intertextual and cross-genre kind.

In another instance, by bossing around one of the guards (in a way that Primo himself could do) Charlotte can

directly provide an alternate solution to one puzzle while also giving another example of what sort of actions will be effective. In this scenario, she spots some vials that cannot be directly taken by Primo, but which he needs to triumph. Misidentifying these ("Lemonade!"), she orders the timid guard to retrieve them. He does, but then expires in a way that comically plays on how Floyd sacrifices himself (more touchingly) to retrieve an object in *Planetfall*.

Conversations with Charlotte can reveal things about the Palazzo even darker than the ones that are evident at first. Primo can learn from her that she is raped almost nightly by Price Louis and Coffers Minister Argento Rico, and can also learn that Bonfleche molests young Prince Charles — essential information in figuring out how some of these rivals can be dispatched. However offensive Primo seems to be, he is hardly capable of committing the ultimate evil of this world, sexual violence, thanks to his seeming asexuality. ("[Y]ou're scarcely about to undress her," reads part of a reply that the work can generate. "You've always found the unclothed human form to be rather grotesque."[7]) Perhaps this is one reason that Charlotte can tolerate the company of her odious savior, while she refuses to go visit Sierra (calling her "the mean girl") and shudders at the presence of Louis or Rico (saying "bad man, very bad... let's leave... wanna leave..." and dragging Primo away after one move). Miss Sierra seems to be the only other character who has such strong opinions about others, and hers are often more narrow and practical. Sierra certainly would not be so naïve as to make a moral judgment and classify another person as "bad." Charlotte may be the only character who does not behave immorally — any injury she inflicts is due to Charlotte's madness, not Charlotte, after all — and she certainly seems to be the only character capable of love.

We know where this Ophelia's Hamlet is: dead and gone, gunned down on her wedding day many years ago. So, where — by extension — is this whole play's Hamlet? *Hamlet* without the tragic figure of Hamlet would be just a pile of bodies — smaller by one body, but also lacking an important dimension. It would be a pure revenge play, and such a play is in fact the best dramatic analogue of *Varicella*. With this perspective, we can see how the interactor can savor the final reply in which Charlotte leaps upon the failing Wehrkeit and kills him like something out of David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. This final reply, incidentally, is not the winning one, but reaching this outcome provides one of many instructive failures, showing the bloody system of this world and the scant possibilities that hatred and revenge breed. By considering the whole experience of solving Varicella — not just a single successful traversal, one sequence of inputs and outputs that lead from initial situation to winning final situation — it is easier to see how thorough the sickness of this world actually is. This profound depravity manifests itself in almost all the possible final replies (Happy Fun Room providing the sole exception); it is certainly simulated in the workings of *Varicella*'s world, not just told about incidentally. Perhaps all plots lead deathward, but whatever the case, it's certainly true that all the possible plots of *Varicella* lead to violence and death. Discovering this through interaction makes this systematic evil quite vivid. It leads to a deeper understanding of a central theme of *Varicella*, that hatred is a poison and that no configuration of scheming, bribery, and violence can right the existing, overarching wrongs.

Finally, speaking of final replies — those texts that do not allow for any continuation of the current simulation, any extension of the current narrative: These texts pose a particular problem for a concept of interactive fiction purely as game, for any supposition that a "text game" of this sort is a work in which interpretation is always subservient to configuration. Ultimately, *Varicella* can be made to produce a (lengthy) winning output, indicating that the interactor has solved its essential puzzles and traversed the work from initial situation to an optimal situation. This of course is the case with almost all interactive fiction, whether or not the optimal final reply includes an explicit "*** You have won ***" message. If we imagine that interactors are only reading and interpreting in order to figure out how to better operate the text/machine — that on no level are they reading for pure interpretative pleasure — then, once it's clear that the game has been won, there is no reason that any interactor should bother to continue reading this final, winning reply. It cannot possibly bear on how to operate the game: by the time interactors reach this text, they have already mastered the game. The most casual observation, however, indicates that interactors do read these final replies — they sometimes even discuss them and their implications at length. In such cases, it seems that after a long, hard session of configuration, it's interpretation time.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

From what we have seen so far, we may be able to invalidate two misconceptions: first, that story and game are inherently dichotomous, but also that new media works are best seen as some sort of hybrid. Interactive fiction is not understood very well if it's seen as both a floor wax and a dessert topping — that is, as some sort of fundamentally gamelike foundation with a tasty narrative layer iced on top to make it more palatable. As one of us has stated [8], interactive fiction also is not, in Graham Nelson's famous formulation, "a crossword at war with a narrative," any more than a poem is sound at war with sense. Militaristic metaphors have been marshaled and deployed not just in the specific case of interactive fiction but also by scholars of other sorts of new media. Guiding his arguments toward more cinematically-inspired targets, Lev Manovich wrote:

> The concept of [computer] screen combines two distinct pictorial conventions — the older Western tradition of pictorial illusionism in which a screen functions as a window into a virtual space, something for the viewer to look into but not act upon; and the more recent convention of graphical human-computer interfaces that divides the computer screen into a set of controls with clearly delineated functions, thereby treating it as a virtual instrument panel. As a result, the computer screen becomes a battlefield for a number of incompatible definitions — depth and surface, opaqueness and transparency, image as illusionary space and image as instrument for action. [5]

Manovich has clearly identified two important aspects of cinematic new media. In fact, these aspects may characterize many sorts of new media, cinematic or not. Other systems besides the representational, visual computer screen have a dual nature of this sort: a window with the text of *Varicella* in it, or simply the audible text of *Varicella* spoken by a computer-generated voice, with no screen coming into the picture at all, could be seen by analogy as a bundle of "purple prose," descriptive text and allusions and jokes to "look into but not act upon," all of which are useless to the dogged game-player. Inset here and there would be a few "controls" that are the names of certain useful objects, which can be typed in so the interactor can reach the desired goal. (Blind interactors do in fact experience works in this form sans screen today, and some will recall that the first interactive fiction work, *Adventure*, was not experienced by early interactors on a screen, but via the ink-and-paper machinations of a Teletype.) So, information and operation certainly run deeper than the surface of the screen; but are they truly "incompatible" and irreconcilably in opposition? If this were a war, and assuming we aren't Mother Courage, we might wish for a quick victory by the good guys. That way, we could either take the storybook version of *Varicella* home to read in our bathtubs or (depending on our preferences and our views of good and evil) distill *Varicella* to its ludic essence, which we could fire up the next time we felt like reaching for *Solitaire* or *Minesweeper*. Wouldn't we get something better if the foe — whoever that is — were vanquished?

We would like to implore theorists and critics to give peace a chance. *Varicella* functions as enjoyably and meaningfully as it does because it is a good game, because it also generates good reading, and because both of these aspects work together to allow it to offer sorts of engagement that neither the traditional story nor a more purely ludic game could provide. One perspective on this, elucidated elsewhere [8], is informed by poetry and considers that interactive fiction can be understood in terms of the literary riddle, which by nature exists both to be appreciated as literature and to be explicitly solved. In our reading here, we have instead focused on one specific character and on the concept of character, considering the ways that novels and other stories are read and interpreted while also keeping in mind how an interactive fiction's workings might be understood by a reading, playing interactor. We still believe it is essential to understand games as games. Similarly, it can be useful to continue to ravel and unravel the centuries-old question of the relationship between reader and text. But we should pursue these projects not in order to sift all new media objects into one bin or the other, but so those most intriguing objects, which evidently have several, interrelated aspects, can be more completely understood.

It is hardly incidental that Charlotte delights both reader and game-player. To wax Aristotelian about this particular princess, we might call this her excellence. In many types of interactive fiction, those elements will be most powerful and profound — whether they are characters or other parts of the world — if they function effectively in many different ways, on levels of interpretation as well as levels of explicit cybertextual operation, to help the interactor puzzle out the work's world, and to perceive our world in new ways. Although the focus of this investigation has been a single work in the interactive fiction form, it is quite possible that future investigations will find this dual and simultaneous function to be a basic requirement for all works that excel at meaningful interactivity.

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[1] We could say almost as much about the way Charlotte pronounces "Varicella" — the player character's name, the name of the whole interactive fiction work itself, and the name of the chicken pox virus. Calling attention to the word "cell" within the name highlights that Charlotte is in a cell of one sort, that Primo Varicella is a sort of virus attacking the cell of the state, and that he turns out (in the winning final reply of this work) to be only slightly more annoying to young, tyrannical Prince Charles than a childhood disease.

[2] We distinguish sessions (particular executions of the program) from traversals (which go from an initial state to a final state that does not allow further simulation or narration) and draw several other distinctions, informed by those made in narratology. These are all based on the system described in the first chapter of *Twisty Little Passages* [8] and discussed with additional examples and in more detail in "Toward a Theory of Interactive Fiction." [7]

[3] Although he suggests a non-narrative approach as the basis for game studies, Eskelinen probably does not believe this is appropriate with regard to the specific form we are considering. He states, in a footnote, that "MUDs and MUD adventure games may very well turn out to contain situations, events and functions too complex to be fully or adequately conceptualised by the scheme presented here, or perhaps within any one traditional scheme, be it narrative, performance, or games." [4] This is a backhanded reference to interactive fiction; MUDs actually are derived from interactive fiction, not the other way around. Instead of leaving interactive fiction out as an unusual exception to computer gaming, we have chosen to examine an particular work in detail, both to attend to an interesting, neglected form and in the hopes that there are implications for new media in general. In choosing this focus, we leave aside the broader question of exactly how interactive fiction is related to other forms of digital production. This is discussed in [8] and is addressed in formal terms in [1]; the latter analysis could be usefully extended with reference to the temporal, causal, spatial, and functional relations discussed in [4].

[4] An appropriate invocation, we think, since *Varicella*'s initial situation can be summed up as "The king died, and then …"

[5] The alluring idea of the interactive dream has a long history for us. In the late 1980s, during one of Moulthrop's first serious discussions of interactive fiction, his friend and student Ron Hale Evans proposed to write an IF that would be an "interactive dream," a concept Moulthrop somewhat embellished in certain passages of *Victory Garden.* Two months after *Varicella* was released, Montfort released *Winchester's Nightmare,* in which the player character explores a city in a dream.

[6] The troll appears both in the original mainframe *Zork* and in *Zork I*, which was part of a commercial trilogy that reworked this mainframe program for personal computers. His limited function is essentially identical in both interactive fiction works; *Zork* can be read in this article as meaning either of these.

[7] Primo also refuses to remove his own carefully arranged attire in response to the command *disrobe.* This is quite a contrast to the way that Tracy, the player character in *I-0*, complies with a command to shed her garments.

HOME CREDIT message face playlists about. theme Â©. hello MTV and welcome to my crib || 26 || NJ || Wife, coffee enthusiast, functioning alcoholic, and Spider-Man fangirl. werenotreallystrangers: creatureschoolÂ I love this so much. I always play it when it comes on. how cute. kitsnicketts: kitsnicketts Home Â» Reading Experience Â» Reading Experience: Face it Tigerâ€¦ You Just Hit the Jackpot! Reading Experience: Face it Tigerâ€¦ You Just Hit the Jackpot! By Mark Ginocchio. October 20, 2011 Reading Experience 4 Comments. Itâ€™s arguably the most famous panel in Amazing Spider-Man history and quite possibly one of the greatest Marvel panels of all-time. â€œFace it tigerâ€¦Â And while Marvel tried to play the Peter/Gwen/MJ interplay as a bit of love triangle for a few dozen issues, Peter and Gwen clearly became the serious â€œcouple,â€ while MJ was experiencing flings with the likes of Norman Osborn. MJ would remain unserious until Gwenâ€™s tragic death in ASM #121. So, in all likelihood itâ€™s a bit of revisionist history that makes this specific panel stand out so many years later. ABSTRACT: We consider a specific character, Princess Charlotte, in the 1999 interactive fiction work Varicella by Adam Cadre. To appreciate and solve this work, the interactor must both interpret the texts that result (as a literary reader does) and also operate the cybertextual machine of the program, acting as a game player and trying to understand the system of Varicellaâ€™s simulated world. We offer a close reading focusing on Charlotte, examining the functions she performs in the potential narratives and in the game. Through this example, we find that in interactive fiction â€” and we believe