

Collecting and Preserving Infocom Interactive Fiction

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Although not traditionally the domain of special collections, I have chosen to use the donation to create a new collection in the area of interactive fiction, specializing in the early works published by Infocom. Interactive fiction is a genre of computer game that is more literary than most computer and video games popular today. Also known as text adventure games, these works present story text to players, who then type in commands to the computer, which then prints text in response, back and forth, in the process unfolding and determining a story. Although not commercially popular today, the genre may be of great scholarly and historical importance as interactive electronic games grow both in general popularity and as subjects worthy of academic study.

With the current commercial nature of video games, it may be hard to conceive of computer programs as artifacts belonging in a special collection. However, there are a number of good reasons for such a collection. Despite disagreements about whether current popular culture games are "art," there seems to be compelling evidence that at least these early works have sincere literary merit. Some, like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, were adaptations of books into this format by the original author. Others, like *Zork*, achieved popular acclaim and seem to have seriously influenced successors both in and outside the genre. Much like rare books, older computer programs are in need of conservation if their intellectual material is going to be accessible today and in the future. Also, the Infocom games were particularly notable not just for the content of their programs, but for the materials that accompanied them. The box art was often quite elaborate, especially in comparison to other works of the period. Some had illustrated booklets, and at times these were bound into the boxes. Many games also came with assorted objects, which without a concerted effort may not be preserved and made available to the public in an organized way.

1 Issues with a Digital Collection

There is a clear distinction between the physical artifacts that hold computer programs, and the actual works themselves. Magnetic disks, which is what most of the programs were originally published on, do not have a very long usable life. In fact, some of the original disks may already be unreadable. This does not mean these disks are without value or not worthy of preservation, but that other means, and surrogates, must be pursued in order to keep the intellectual works accessible. Most of the Infocom works were reissued on CD-ROM in the 1990's, nearly a decade after their initial publication, and those likely still can be read. However, for textual analysis of the works, it would be ideal to have the originals copied onto newer machines. Some collectors have already done this, but there is no centralized, authoritative archive of such works. In the case of many Infocom games, they were released for multiple platforms, and versions may be different between and even on the same platform. This collection will endeavor to have as complete a collection of these works as possible in accessible forms to facilitate the equivalent of textual bibliography for these digital works.

Unlike books, which are essentially usable artifacts in and of themselves, computer programs are not. They are not intellectually accessible without some form of hardware to run the software. One of the challenges in such a project as this is whether to actually attempt to locate and maintain original hardware. In some cases this may be difficult but feasible, and in many cases could aid textual bibliography, as well as people endeavoring to understand older systems. Regardless it should probably be in addition to using modern equipment with emulators – software that allows current machines to run as a virtual older machine and process their software. This will make the intellectual material in the collection far more accessible to patrons, and time, money, and staff will need to be allocated for this. This will require, as part of processing, copying the works somehow.

In addition to processing issues, this brings up some of the legal issues involved in the collection. The mere act of copying these digital works, especially for the eventual purpose of enabling access on a different hardware platform, should arguably be considered a fair use. However, if these disks have "copy protection" schemes, even outdated ones that can be bypassed, care must be used to make sure the collection does not run afoul of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). Although recently Archive.org was given an exemption for particularly this reason it presents a considerable barrier and must be dealt with. (1) It may be helpful to amass multiple copies of the works in many formats to further bolster the legal backing to shift and archive the materials.

Preserving the intellectual material in addition to the physical artifacts will be a serious issue. Advances in networking have greatly improved access to digital materials but providing long term digital storage of these materials is very much an emerging field. Regularly scheduled off-site backups of material will be essential, as well as clear policies on on-site backup schedules, regular maintenance and replacement of hardware and storage devices will need to be established.

2 Obtaining the Collection

The sources for such a collection will likely primarily be private collectors. Online auction sites, such as eBay, are one possible starting point. One such store, "Ye Olde Infocom Shoppe" specialized in older games and Infocom in particular. (2) Some computer retailers carry older titles and used titles, but there is nothing comparable in the software world to the used and rare bookseller network. Even garage sales could be a good source for such software. Perhaps in the process of collecting, some with sizable collections could be convinced to donate some of their works in order to have them preserved and made available.

There are a number of serious collectors and historians of Infocom, many of whom have developed elaborate web sites in recent years. This would be one logical place to start, and a set of people to contact initially. Since most of the authors are still alive, attempting to contact them might prove fruitful. A listing of the creators and their current whereabouts is readily available online. (3) Although the intellectual property and copyrights are likely tied up with Activision, the company that eventually bought Infocom, it is definitely possible that materials used in the design of the game - maps, manuscripts, software prototypes - may be in the authors' possession, and it may be possible to obtain donations or loans of such material, which would be invaluable to such a collection.

Obtaining such a collection will likely not be a trivial task, and may in fact be a full time job for months in order to obtain the collection. In terms of price, some used games, usually in poor condition without the added materials, are commonly available for under \$50. For items in better condition, the prices rise accordingly and depending on rarity. The most obscure items are valued around \$1000. This suggests that it would be entirely possible, with effort, to create a very complete set of such works, and then also be able to allocate money to a broader set of early computer adventure games encountered in the process of collecting the Infocom works. Some companies to consider focusing on are Sierra, Adventure International, Legend Entertainment, Polarware, and Lucasarts, who were all pioneers in the field.

3 Processing the Collection

In addition to cataloging the software itself, and noting important aspects such as version, revision, hardware platform, and dates, processing would also have to include creating detailed records of the other materials included with the games. For example, the Hitchhiker's Guide the Galaxy came with pocket lint, cardboard glasses, and a plastic bag labeled "miniature space fleet." (4)

Just as important in the cataloging of this collection is the creation of surrogate copies through digitization. For the boxes, manuals, and booklets, standard techniques such as photographing and scanning will be applicable. For the actual software, finding hardware and software solutions that will enable the reading and copying of these older works will be a considerable task.

In order to facilitate access to the surrogates in the collection, a web site should be constructed to house the materials. Due to copyright considerations, some of the materials may only be accessible from the actual library, while the catalog and hopefully excerpts of the materials should be made available publicly in high quality digital reproduction form.

4 Conclusion

It is a distinctly worthwhile endeavor to begin a collection of works which began their published lives digitally with a selection of some of the earliest commercially published electronic works, and the Infocom games certainly meet those criteria. It will allow us to deal with the problems and challenge inherent in such a project and to learn how best to preserve electronic works. The technical, legal, and logistical issues are considerable, but I believe they can be dealt with, and the resulting collection will be of intellectual value.

It has been observed that the reissuing of the programs on CD-ROM and the rise of the web led to renewed interest in the subject, much like the first folio of Shakespeare. (5) The creation of this collection may further renew interest in both scholarship in interactive fiction and the creation of it. Most importantly, however, a special collections library is well suited to the large task of preserving these works and keeping the intellectual material in these works accessible.

5 Sample Works

Most of these prices are based on The Interactive Fiction Collector's Guide (6) or eBay. Descriptions are gathered from there as well as The Infocom Gallery. (7)

Starcross. [Computer program. Apple II] Infocom, 1982. \$1000 Original saucer-shaped box is extremely rare. Valued between \$500 and \$1000, depending on condition, according to Usenet and other web sources. Also includes space map and instruction booklet.

Suspended. [Computer program. Commodore 64] Infocom, 1983. \$325. Earlier "mask" box that is built around a white plastic mask. Also includes instruction booklet with letter, underground complex map, 6 robot tracking devices.

Zork Users Group Maps. [Maps] Infocom, 198?. \$100. These are maps of Zork, Zork II, Zork III and Starcross that were sold to Zork Users Groups and predate the later maps included in subsequent revisions of the game. The Zork map is labeled as 'Zork' instead of 'Zork I' like later maps.

Zork [Computer program. TRS-80]. Personal software, 1979. \$350 This was released before the formation of Infocom and is the oldest commercial version of Zork, and the rarest of the packages has a warrior on the front of the booklet (no box, TRS software was sold in plastic bags) and is nicknamed "Barbarian Zork" by collectors.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. [Computer program. Atari ST]. Infocom, 1986. \$50 Adaptation that Douglas Adams helped write. Because of this, and his licensing agreements, the program has not been included in later re-releases of Infocom's titles, and thus the intellectual material is rarer. Included a booklet, one yellow "order for destruction" of a home, another similar sheet regarding the destruction of Earth, a bag of fluff, "peril sensitive sunglasses" (black cardboard), and an empty bag labeled "microscopic space fleet."

Leather Goddesses of Phobos. [Computer game, IBM PC.] Infocom, 1986. Includes 3-d glasses, 3-d comic, map, and scratch and sniff card. \$50

Sorcerer. [Computer game, Commodore 64] Infocom, 1984. \$50. Includes "Popular Enchanting", "Field guide to the Creatures of Frobozz."

Battletech - The Crescent Hawk's Inception. [Computer Game. IBM] Infocom, 1989. \$45 Includes two booklets and pin. \$45. One of the last games produced by Infocom, this is a graphical role playing game set in the FASA Battletech universe.

New Zork Times, Vol. 1, No. 1. [Newsletter] Infocom, 1982. \$10 The New Zork Times was the company newsletter Infocom sent to registered users. There were a few issues a year. Later renamed "The Status Line."

The Status Line, Volume VIII Number 1. [Newsletter] Infocom, 1989. \$20 The last issue of the Status Line, near the end of Infocom's life as an independent company.

Zork: The Cavern of Doom. [Book] Tom Doherty Associates, 1983. Copyright Infocom. A Tor Book. ISBN: 0-812-57985-2. \$5 A rather horrible choose-your-own-adventure book set in the "Great Underground Empire" of the Zork games. Mostly interesting as an example of how poorly the adventure game genre translated to other mediums.

6 References

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