Emily Short's Interactive Storytelling

Essays and reviews on narrative in games and new media

You Can't See Any Such Thing (Matt Sheridan Smith)

Posted on **March 9, 2016** by **Emily Short**

THE CENTER   This is a neutral space at the center of things. In each direction you will encounter a series of scenes, sensorial impressions, speculative fictions, and even some facts. You will assume the form of four different characters: ¶ If you GO NORTH, you will be with the Widow, the Grand Dame of decapitation and Champagne. You will need your sense of SMELL. To the SOUTH, our Cyclist hero is already dead, but a psychic will help you SEE. To the WEST is the Pilot (crashed, slow-moving, near ground): reliant on TOUCH. To the EAST is silence, an act, an actress. We will call her Katie. LISTEN TO the silence(s). ¶ Key objects are bolded, but many others have something to say as well. If you find yourself in the thick of a memory, and want to return, just BLINK. LOOK will remind you where you are. If at any point you're still confused, just ask for HELP. ¶ There is no ending. Stay as long as you like.

ACTION **N**

[You Can't See Any Such Thing](#) is a curious parser work that riffs off standard parser behavior; the opening explains that it is the descendant of a previous game that [the author](#) used as part of a gallery show.

The interface is enhanced with fancy typography and elements such as photographs you can mouse over to expand: an unusual degree of elaboration, given that this is Inform under the surface. (Certain library responses are familiar, and if you delve into the source, there's a telling Release/play.html URL for the playable content. If, however, you type VERSION to verify this, your command vanishes silently into ether, unacknowledged. Asking about the machine producing this text is apparently forbidden, which is consistent with its themes and aesthetic intent [even if also a bit of a license violation].)

ACTION X ME

As good-looking as ever.

[Edited to add: Juhana Leinonen remarks that it is using a Vorple interface.]

The piece focuses on the way that the parser experience lets you control different sensory approaches to a scene. It's as overt as possible about the interactive elements — interactive nouns are in bold; verbs are specified and particular verbs go with particular rooms.

The writing is literary, and the interaction is about exploring rather than about solving a puzzle or causing certain actions to occur in the plot. Though we are allowed to LOOK, SMELL, TOUCH, and so on, we are still *readers* rather than actors, and our reading function is reinforced by the narrator's manner of clarifying things, and by responses to parser errors.
When I played, I was immediately drawn northward, to the Widow's perspective, and was immediately satisfied with lavish descriptions of perfume notes and a Proustian trip into her girlhood recollections.

In another room, the room for examining, each examination carries the player over to another location, in deepening vistas reminiscent of Lime Ergot.
When something goes wrong — wrong in the sense of a parser error, and the user trying to take an action not accounted for — the game provides an alternate passage of story instead, in a different text format.

ACTION **SMELL FIELD**

You can't see any such thing.

Plot hole detected. Initiating content restore:

As in the original English technique, Clicquot's method involved additional sugar, but after a second
fermentation the bottles were held upside down and regularly turned so that dead yeast would gather near
the cork (riddling). Once settling was complete, wine near the cork was removed and the cork and frozen
plug removed (disgorgement), followed by an addition of wine to refill the bottle.

Type CONTINUE to return to the scene at hand.

ACTION

Contrast Laid Off from the Synesthesia Factory, which also supplies its own forward-moving narration whenever the player is unable to do so, but doesn't highlight when this has occurred. As a matter of fact, some of the time critical information about the plot of the story can apparently only be reached via these parser errors, which makes them simultaneously extra-narrative and central to the experience, like the experience of death scenes in Spy Intrigue. One's normal game-playing instinct to try to avoid these situations is thus counterproductive. Several times, eager to extract the factual narrative that gave context to the more sensory scenes, I started typing nonsense on purpose. AWEFE, AWEFELKEJF, TELL ME MORE STORY NOW. A game in which you actually had to type TELL ME MORE STORY over and over would probably be terrible, but in this context it felt mildly subversive and consequently satisfying. Also, I didn't have to do it any more times than I chose.

Despite or perhaps because of its focus on parser errors, the text does not try to follow the usual parser-game-authorship conventions about how to hint valid commands to the player. Sometimes it seems almost to be requiring a command that it is then not going to honor:

until it clicks. Time stops. He turns the frozen hands in circles, then pushes the knob and watches time turn again. Time again. *Just look at the time.* Watch at the watch. Pull. Push. Everything turns to stone. *I want some soup.*

ACTION **X TIME**

You can't see any such thing.

```
Plot hole detected. Initiating content restore:
```

There is also no ending. You can spend as long as you like, explore freely, and decide for yourself when you are done — something it has in common with a lot of old [IF Art Show pieces](). It thus tells the story of several characters, in fragments, through both present sensations and facts dropped into the parser error sections. Ultimately the experience I fashioned out of all that was less a story with a conventional plot arc (whether single plot or one-per-character) and more a sense of texture.

You Can't See Any Such Thing is, among other things, an essay on the interplay of external and internal realities, documentation and subjectivity. In the subjective and sensory world, the world presented as the top layer of the parser experience, we can jump great distances in place and time, as our mind wanders. But, when it comes to the facts presented in the parser-error portion, we have no control over the timing or the subject matter; at the same time those elements are often presented with an authority that our sensory exploration lacks.

I should also mention, especially since the topic has often come up here [in regard to interpretations of Her Story](): in one segment, it treats a character who is part of a multiple system, with, as far as I could tell, a much less tropey and stigmatizing portrayal than one usually gets in fictional handlings of MPD. I am not sufficiently familiar with the issues here to say much more about how accurate it is.

*