

From Wordsworth's Poetic Problem to Puzzleless Interactive Fiction

The foundational structure of interactive fiction is grappling with challenging puzzles to steadily advance through a thoroughly described, usually fantastical, world. A prominent source of increased narrative complexity came through the development of puzzleless interactive fiction. I trace this development from Steve Meretzky's early work in the genre through to the development of Twine, but my central claim here is to propose an even longer lineage which takes us back to a poetic problem spanning from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries. Struggling to complete a large philosophical poem, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth felt he needed to first complete a separate autobiographical epic poem detailing the growth of his imagination. That work had a short edition completed in 1799 but was returned to periodically until a 14-part version was published following his death in 1850. A pioneering work of exceedingly autobiographical poetry, the 1850 *Prelude* becomes foundational in 1985 for the first puzzleless interactive fiction and, in turn, later autobiographic explorations in the medium.

In 1983, an ad series from the software company Infocom turns the text basis of their games, within an era of increasing graphics, into a selling point. One ad displays an image of a brain spanning two pages of a magazine, with large text: "We stick our graphics where the sun don't shine." Though they say here, "We draw our graphics from the limitless imagery of your imagination," Infocom's works at this time still relied on a series of challenging puzzles to guide user interaction. Though Steve Meretzky's *Planetfall* from the year of this ad campaign dedicated space to attempting a more compelling non-player character, the player is still required to progress through a series of challenges within a limited set of moves before hitting a failure state. The structure of the game remains figuring out the very precise sequences of actions one can and must do to advance.

Meretzky, however, continues on with the design philosophy expressed in the ads, and after releasing a novel adaptation full of puzzles in 1984, produces *A Mind Forever Voyaging* in 1985 which only contains one serious puzzle, at the end. Instead, Meretzky structures the game around playing as a more free-moving witnessing subject, observing as much as possible in a small town over time and deciding casually what should be recorded to guide positive social change. This development in interactive fiction, however, occurs in parallel to the poetic problem that led to Meretzky's titular source. Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude*:

The antechapel where the statue stood
Of Newton with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone. (III.60-3)

In an email, Meretzky claimed that he came up with the title based on reading this not in its full context, but in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, but the connection remains relevant for three reasons. First, Meretzky ultimately did draw inspiration from Romantic poetry, even if the extent of that which is explicit is minimal, and second, the image provided by Wordsworth implicitly holds influence over the text-adventure. That last point even holds true for parts of the quote beyond the title. The “prism” face of the statue, for instance, becomes the player-character computer system PRISM. Thirdly and significantly, though, *A Mind Forever Voyaging* grounds the viability of its artificial intelligence in the need to simulate the “growth” of the mind, which is the conceptual basis of Wordsworth's epic, *The Prelude; or, The Growth of the Poet's Mind* (8). That last point comes from an article on PRISM in one of the items included in the physical game box, a made-up April 2031 issue of *Dakota Online Magazine*.

Political and social interest guides *A Mind Forever Voyaging* and similar has guided much recent work in the medium, often made through the software Twine. In an interview with the official magazine of the Society for the Promotion of Adventure Games, Chris Klimas, the

developer of Twine, says that he got into interactive fiction through exposure to Meretzky's work. Inspired by work such as *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, Klimas developed his own first work of interactive fiction, *Mercy*, explicitly as a puzzleless interactive fiction. He then later built Twine to support works in exactly that mode. Thus, works created with Twine, regardless of whether they were created with Meretzky in mind, bear Meretzky's influence at the level of code. These kinds of buried influence in the history of computational literature, a field in which poets and software designers often work in tandem, exemplify the relevance of expanding our set of histories for the medium. This instance is just part of what I argue as a wider Romantic history underlying early electronic literature, even where writers do not display such explicit influence.

Important to note is that while *A Mind Forever Voyaging* resituates elements of Wordsworth, and scholars have been pursuing relevant aspects of Wordsworth's reading and thinking such as in science and mathematics, affinities between Wordsworth's work and digital experience have gone unnoted. In the *Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth* published in 2015 – 20 years after *A Mind Forever Voyaging* – none of its 48 original essays address the potential insight of Wordsworth into any form of digital humanities. Relevant to this point is that scholars of Romanticism broadly have otherwise taken strongly to the use of digital humanities tools. One exception to this oversight is Alan Liu, whose 2008 book *Local Transcendence* includes a discussion of Wordsworth's *Prelude* and immersion in history in a larger discussion of new historicism and the database. Oddly, the specific interactive fiction work I discuss here has at times similarly stood on the cusp of discussion while being omitted. In 2012, Dylan Holmes published a book titled *A Mind Forever Voyaging: A History of Storytelling in Video Games*. Despite the title, Holmes never actually discusses *A Mind Forever Voyaging* within his history.

Wordsworth's referenced passage, however, is more than just a catchy metaphor; it reflects the core elements of perception, imagination, and data at work in effective interactive fiction.

The structure of *The Prelude* follows major formative moments of Wordsworth's life – in particular, those formative to his sense of imagination and his understanding of the interplay between his mind and the world. In the original 1799 two-book *Prelude*, Wordsworth begins by asking, “Was it for this” – meaning his poetic production – that his significant memories of childhood occurred. The work was intended as a prelude to a larger, more important project: a long philosophical poem planned with Samuel Taylor Coleridge to be titled *The Recluse*, in which a poet retired from society tries to imagine a way forward for those “who had become cynical and disaffected by the course of the French Revolution” (Johnston xv). While the content of *The Prelude* is reflective, its aim is always future-oriented. To Wordsworth, people's ability to move forward is not tied to technical knowledge, but in the power of the imagination.

Wordsworth writes that, “Poets, even as Prophets ... Have each his own peculiar faculty ... a sense that fits him to perceive / Objects unseen before ... whereby a work of his ... may become / A power like one of Nature's” (XIII.301-12). The ideas of perceiving objects previously unseen and that the work can thus take on a power like nature play into *A Mind Forever Voyaging*.

Gaston Bachelard suggests a similar point as well in *The Poetics of Space*. In the introduction, he writes, “By the swiftness of its actions, the imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future. ... If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee” (xxxiv). Through the imagination, we are able to produce images beyond those of the past or our immediate reality, which Bachelard develops through an exploration of our experience of intimate spaces. The core gameplay of *A Mind Forever Voyaging* involves wandering around a simulated town and recording things that you see. A major political plan is being considered, and

you are an advancement in computer technology which offers a significant opportunity to assess the impact of the plan not in conceptual, polemic ways, but in the form of virtual experience. As the game goes on and you record enough material, you are advanced ahead a decade at a time through the simulation, recording the long-term effects of the political plan. The article which accompanies the game has a similar structure to *The Prelude*, shifting back and forth between sections discussing the development of the technology and sections highlighting formative moments in the life of Perry Simm. Until the start of the game, the computer you play as, PRISM, genuinely thought it was a human named Perry Simm. Such a prophetic artificial intelligence had been attempted before, creating an artificial intelligence of a virtual fully-grown human adult, thrown into the world with false memories. The scientists at first realize, “Computers stored and analyzed data numerically, while the human mind stored and analyzed data symbolically” (6). They address this by building “huge, highly-interconnective, random-driven, symbol-oriented machines, and programmed them, in excruciating detail, with every bit of knowledge, every experience, every impression, that a human brain would gather during its formative years” (7-8). These formative experiences, however, were not sufficient in isolation to produce sentience in the computer, because “the method of inputting that data was totally alien from the way a human mind receives that same information” (8). As Wordsworth discovered in writing *The Prelude* in preparation for *The Recluse*, what is important is not just the present moment, looking back onto these moments, but understanding the gradual growth of the mind *through* these moments. Perry Simm is the solution to this. They simulate the life of the artificial intelligence in time, though sped up so they do not actually have to wait through nearly two decades of Perry Simm growing up to see if it works. Because Perry Simm grows through these moments, rather than simply accessing them as data, they take on a phenomenological reality to

him which allows him to properly imagine the town in which he grew up. In “Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts,” N. Katherine Hayles notes that “Whereas database allows large amounts of information to be sorted, cataloged, and queried, narrative models how minds think and how the world works, projects in which temporality and inference play rich and complex roles” (1605-6).

Beyond just the word “growth,” Wordsworth in *The Prelude* imagines similar problems as the scientists encounter. Wordsworth as well is trying to create his own human history in textual (data) form to aid in his own attempts at prophecy, and questions surrounding how he is to access his mind in this way recur in the work. This is also an issue within the larger project, as seen through the decades-long process involving revising passages detailing scenes which should already be known, but one of the insights of *The Prelude* is that writing one’s past is an active, imperfect task.

The name of *A Mind Forever Voyaging*’s player-character PRISM has connections to the Wordsworth passage referenced in the title, through the “prism and silent face” of the bust of Newton (III.61). This could reasonably be listed as a source of in-game inspiration for Perelman’s choice of name for PRISM; however, an in-game library file cites two different poems. Critical to note at the start is that poetry is not just used to make chapter screens more interesting. There is a deliberate choice to insert poetry within the narrative as part of the inspiration for PRISM, not just in name but also conceptually. This is especially true with the second poem, which is original to the game (dated 2007, when the game was developed in 1985). In constructing an original piece of writing to serve as an inspiration for PRISM, Steve Meretzky could have utilized any form of writing, or not even based it in writing at all, but inserts

specifically a significant role for verse. Perry Simm himself is further made to be a writer, though not much is noted about his work.

The fictional poem is cited as “Secret Recreations of the Soul” by Asbur Honnurth, a fictional poet. It reads:

Memory is a prism through which
yesterday's light is passed;
Split into a rainbow of moments
each colored more dimly than the last.
How will today's light look tomorrow
and – how would tomorrow's look today?
Would the filter of time be as brutal
if that prism were two-way?

Moving beyond memory, the poem imagines a perception of time which allows us to see the future. PRISM then functions as the fulfillment of this poetic idea: an artificially intelligent prism which can see the past and present, but also the future. There is an immediately relevant Wordsworthian basis for such an idea – grounded in imagination and conceptions of prophecy. Note that this is not simply a well-written bit of verse that presents an interesting name. It is an idea – presented through poetry – which underlies the computer project, and it is written specifically for the game to give a poetic basis for PRISM. There are other classic poems – such as the passage from *The Prelude* – which could be cited here instead to reference a “prism,” but this goes beyond that in its intentionality.

More interesting as a poem is the first one cited, which is by Emily Dickinson, another 19th century poet. Her work comes up again later, though not within the narrative of the game. On the opening page for Part III, which is the final section and takes place after all the recording in Simulation Mode, the player is presented with the following quote from Dickinson:

Who hears may be incredulous,
Who witnesses, believes.

Narratively, it connects to two things. Preceding this, it connects to your recordings within the Simulation Mode serving as a witness to the long-term effects of the plan, which is enough to get the plan cancelled. Looking ahead, within this section, it connects to your recording a meeting which occurs within the PRISM Facility, wherein Richard Ryder (the politician pushing for the plan) threatens Perelman to try to keep him from interfering with the plan's enactment. You are then able to broadcast this recording directly to the world, thus dooming the plan through your role in witnessing this.

Throughout the game, in its first two parts, what you witness is not any one crucial moment. It is a collection of small details, and, in the central part of the game, very open-ended. Aaron A. Reed suggests that removing puzzles might “strengthen the player’s sensation of starring in a story,” but that “it would be more difficult to achieve the positive dynamics of the player feeling like they'd figured something out (with no solutions to find) or for the player to gain a holistic understanding of the story by working to build its next plot point” (64). *A Mind Forever Voyaging* balances these costs and benefits by requiring the player to complete tasks to progress, but giving this as a wide range of unstated tasks. The narrative function of a puzzle is thus kept, without the narrowly limiting function of a puzzle which Nick Montfort compares to a riddle. As Montfort says directly of *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, “although there is an overarching riddle involving the highest-level IF world, there are no puzzles at all in the simulated city. There is simply a list of things to be observed, and a city in which to observe them” (154). There are many things you can record for which you would get credit but may never even see. All that is necessary is a representative sample of what the society is like at various moments. That can take such forms as random encounters on the street, going and looking at the river which gets

increasingly polluted over the years, or exploring the courthouse. The town and its surroundings are important, but a place of recurring significance is the home.

In the early years of the simulation, your apartment is a nice, safe place with a good family and a pleasant view. The apartment is detailed. You can open the fridge, which contains a variety of food, and can eat or drink. You can go into the bedroom and interact with or pick up your baby. Your wife, Jill, moves around the apartment and you are able to converse with her and ask about things such as the novels she reads. The novels are described at times as “romance” or “gothic,” which she dismisses as something Perry Simm is uninterested in, and indeed a command to examine a novel she leaves around is also internally dismissed. Another topic you can ask Jill about is the paintings she works on. Jill’s paintings are a basic image of how things have changed on a personal level over the years. In 2051, the painting “depicts workers in a space factory hovering above machinery, sipping coffee tubes. A crescent earth dominates the view through a domed canopy.” By 2061, her work instead depicts “a beggar woman, her face a mask of suffering,” and by 2071, there is only an incomplete sketch, “dark and brooding, depicting a demonic figure towering over a frightened group of children.” Jill’s artistic vision reflects the failing promise of the political plan as revealed by PRISM’s observations. The game takes place in 2031, and for the first twenty years, there remains a promising vision of the future, but in the long term, the society deteriorates and that is not just visible on a widespread level but through the personal expression of the individual – the whole reason they seek to study this through Perry Simm’s perspective. In later years, the apartment is subject to random inspection, the fridge is empty, the window shows instead signs of heavy pollution, and the family unit dissolves as the son, Mitchell, gets caught up in a religious organization backed by state power and leaves.

These sorts of social and domestic details function in contrast to traditional assumptions of what is computable, and intentionally so since this is a work about an experiment in artificial intelligence which would enable such a different perspective. Though the frame narrative is science fiction, this interior narrative is a shift away from the usual genre expectations of early interactive fiction. Until the later decades which take on very overt dystopian elements, most of this simulation narrative – the bulk of the game – is a very recognizable world, giving realistic detail of a normal stroll through a city park or visiting a local restaurant. The style of this central narrative is part of a conscious effort to reach out to the literary fiction world – as Montfort notes, Infocom unveiled this work at the New York Public Library (153) – though the expectation of puzzles from the interactive fiction world do shape our attitude toward these details of daily life. As Montfort emphasizes, for this Infocom era, *A Mind Forever Voyaging* was a sole exception to structuring their works around constant puzzles (120). This expectation allows a balance between the detail of a ham sandwich at home being a minor revealing moment within a literary narrative and a player attitude in which the presence of the sandwich is also a key to advancing in the game. Through this dynamic, *A Mind Forever Voyaging* retools the puzzle-based interaction of the medium into the social acts of witnessing and recording.

Looking back to the Dickinson quote, there is a distinction between hearing and witnessing. The key difference is that hearing is detached and incomplete. In the context of the PRISM project, hearing would be simply having data available with numerical projections for the future of the project – crime statistics, inequality, etc. In contrast, PRISM witnesses. He sees how the courthouse operates over the years and not just crime statistics, but first-hand how prisoners are made to fight to the death in the later years of the simulation. He sees not just that invasive home inspections become common but the racist graffiti that ends up in the doorway of

his apartment and the shifting vision of his wife. *A Mind Forever Voyaging* takes this act of witnessing as its central gameplay, its core puzzle – wherein the player, rather than learn to apply an object as key in a cryptic way, must learn a general sense of judgement in curating a selection of recordings. Through recording various things, you are able to stop the plan and produce a new utopian society. This didactic critique of certain types of political policy is certainly at the core of the game, but it also has more conceptual depth than its historical and political particulars. The game foregrounds the subjective, experiencing being. It also thematizes the value of initiative and record. In a time when our world is increasingly constructed through data and a wide range of both technological and creative recording systems are constantly available, the game teaches the importance of subjective experience and of carefully crafting collections of record that present a coherent narrative of growth.

In this sense, I argue for the value of looking toward Wordsworth for a model of how we understand our relationship to this modern world of datascares. Wordsworth's insights set the foundation for *A Mind Forever Voyaging* and its idea of a central subject developing through life and developing, in particular, imaginative faculties which impact our ability to view the past, present, and future. *The Prelude* introduces a new expedient in terms of understanding the witnessing and imaginative subject. *A Mind Forever Voyaging* applies this 135 years after Wordsworth's death – and the subsequent publication of *The Prelude* – in the context of artificial intelligence, trying to imagine a humanistic computer capable of understanding political and social change on an individual level. Wordsworth remains useful, as he was for *A Mind Forever Voyaging*, toward thinking about both the localized and expansive values of recreating personal experience. What starts out as a poetic problem – understanding one's own mind and the growth of the imagination as a prelude for more thorough philosophical exploration – becomes a

necessary prism for understanding the underlying force of his ideas. In turn, Wordsworth's work – which has only been glanced at here – becomes a prelude as well, via Meretzky, to the world of puzzleless interactive fiction, and such histories warrant further exploration.

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