

# HUMAN PARSER

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## Have you experienced it all?

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## About Navigation

> Dear HUMAN

This is not an isolated story. This is a story about dissociation -- feeling like there's an involuntary mismatch between how you experience the world and how the world experiences you. It is a story told through the lens of text-adventures, hoping to connect questions of personal identity, 'living with a manual', the fast paced world and the virtue of the obsolete. This lens is made concrete with the Human Parser game central to this project: an embodied exploration of dissociation. This game, this embodiment, is accompanied by a game manual, another old medium. This THESIS, in turn, is a collection of annotations to this manual -- rejecting the idea that a manual can be all-encompassing, especially when it comes to a person. This text is a sprawling adventure, like life and identity not giving away its secrets all at once. You can explore it at your own pace, in your own order. This requires a little confusion, a little vulnerability, and a little imagination. This is a personal story, but not necessarily mine alone. You are encouraged to parse it in your own way. You don't need to be a confident navigator, just one looking for mutual understanding :)

Continue reading >

## About YOU

Dear READER,

I am THIJS. I am writing this text for YOU. I need you to read this text, desperately, for only by your reading I am alive. In fact, by the time you read this, I am no more.

With 'I am no more' I don't mean no more alive -- THIJS lives on beyond this text --, I mean that 'I' has split off from me. In my present, the moment I'm writing these words, I'm still very much in harmony with the 'I' that's written down. But after the performative act of presenting this identity, we (myself and this presentation) no longer coincide. THIJS lives on, but 'I' is left behind in this text. 'I' is an artifact of that past me, a fragment of me when I was writing, a capsule that suggests my lingering presence, and a vessel for us to understand each other with. Without 'YOU', dear READER, 'I' is on the verge of becoming obsolete.

In being human, YOU and I both assume roles constantly. It can be confusing to distinguish between these fragments of ourselves, and to distinguish between YOU and I. It is a spectacular feat of humanness that we keep trying to figure ourselves out. The dance of understanding, a dance we dance together. In this text, I hope that you will dance with me. This is an adventure in text for YOU to explore. Just like I is an artifact of me, YOU is an artifact of you. It is not something that can be determined for you: you will have to navigate YOU yourself. To help you, I have attached a [MAP](#) to this adventure.

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## About THIJS

THIJS is the suggested person bigger than the 'I' captured in the text: the imagined extrapolation of the 'I' I am now, the person injected into your mind. But of course, THIJS is also just a temporal performance, a suggestion of a person, not an actual person. And not me. However, there is an entity capturing it all, the person I actually am, the root of all this identity's potential: Thijs. But fundamentally, Thijs cannot be captured in words, only fragments of them can, suggesting their presence and conjuring a version of them in the READER's mind. For this reason, this text is not about Thijs. It is about THIJS and about I. And about you, dear READER, and about YOU: the person you are in your performance of reading and the person I imagine you to be.

There are some things that are true about THIJS:

- THIJS is a student of experimental publishing, a MFA program in Rotterdam. (true)
- THIJS has a background in computer science and mathematics and game making. (true)
- THIJS is a frequent visitor of local libraries. (true)
- THIJS has been told to come with a manual. (true)

There are a lot of things that are false about THIJS:

- THIJS absolutely detests text-adventures. (false)
- THIJS is a confident navigator. (false)
- THIJS has experienced it all. (false)
- THIJS has never cried while writing THESIS. (false)

Some things about THIJS are neither true nor false:

- THIJS is in critical danger of becoming an obsolete medium. (?)

- THIJS comes with a manual. (?)
- THIJS has a clear idea of who they are. (?)
- THIJS uses spoons as mirrors. (?)

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## About THESIS

This is THESIS.

There are things that are true about THESIS:

- THESIS explores dissociation through the lens of text-adventures. (true)
- THESIS is a collection of annotations to a manual for a game. (true)
- THESIS is a personal, subjective exploration. (true)
- THESIS invites you to explore, together, this adventure through text. (true)

There are a lot of things that are false about THESIS:

- THESIS must be read in one specific way, navigated in one correct order. (false)
- THESIS is an isolated text. (false)
- THESIS lives on a scale from 1 to 10. (false)
- THESIS makes you experience it all. (false)

Some things about THESIS are neither true nor false:

- THESIS is a song with deep memories, an unordered 6-page comic and an indefinite road trip. (?)
- THESIS is a 7 month (205 days) old infant, ready to be set free in the world. (?)
- THESIS is a warm hug. YOU are looking great today. (?)
- THESIS can say what THIIJS cannot. (?)

Go to page 31 to **restart** >

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## About HUMAN PARSERS

This is HUMAN PARSER.

HUMAN PARSER > an interpreter that happens to be a human agent.

A parsers is an interpreter, often used in < Interactive Fiction. It interprets language the human inputs to make sense of their behavior. It then responds with language for the human to interpret. In this conversation between human and machine, both sides are < Parsing each other.

HUMAN PARSER > an interpreter that parses humans.

Our inclination to parse, to attempt to understand each other, is deeply human. In human contact, we parse each other and ourselves. In our lives, we are constantly parsing the world around us in ways that are quite like navigating < Text-Adventures. These games serve as a lens for life, allowing one to explore the peculiarities of parsing, our willingness to imagine, our inability to experience each other fully, and our determination to try regardless.

HUMAN PARSER > makes the act of interpreting human.

Unlike text-adventures, life does not come with a < Manual. Like interactive fiction might address some entity with 'you' that is subtly but distinctly different from the actual you, in our daily parsing, we might feel < Dissociation, and the lines between you and I might get blurry.

I don't know who I am. Maybe neither do you. Either way, our adventure does not stop here. < look, < listen, < reflect, < experience, < scream, < quit, < restart and < become.

Dear HUMAN, I look forward to the next time our glances meet.

## About Manuals, 1

MAMA > I will never be able to fully understand you.

My mother told me this over the phone, about 2 years ago. I have a great bond with my mother. We are similar in many ways, but different in many more. Many of our conversations end in a newfound understanding of how exactly we differ. We notice different things, react differently to sensory stimuli and our thoughts follow different patterns. We have different ways of processing the world, each other and ourselves. She's quick to remind me that 'we're wired differently' -- and I think she finds comfort in that.

It's the great human tragedy that we're never able to fully comprehend another person's entirety. Maybe you can get a momentary glimpse in an instant, through means other than words, but that understanding is never sustained. Reversely, never being able to be fully understood can, at times, feel like an inescapable loneliness. But the great tragedy of not-understanding also holds the great human beauty: continuing to try to better understand each other regardless.

In conversation, an image of your conversation partner is created in your mind. Pretending understanding is equating the person to that image, and restricting that person to your understanding of them. To instead acknowledge the grey areas of understanding is a generous gift that allows for connections to develop and evolve. Hearing my mother acknowledge this, was immensely valuable in feeling seen.

[Continue reading >](#)

## About Manuals, 2

THERAPIST > Some people come with a manual.

This is another statement that addresses the difficulty in understanding. However, instead of embracing the beauty in that, this sentence creates the illusion that there's a concise way to overcome it. While the intention might often be an honest, good-spirited attempt to acknowledge our differences, there's an implicit friction to a statement like this. Instead of realizing that understanding is a continued, mutual effort, 'the manual' makes it seem as if one party is 'the problem'. Moreover, seemingly it's that party's responsibility to come with a tool to help others understand them.

The etymology of 'manual' traces back to the Latin word 'manus', meaning 'hand'. The manual is an apparatus kept ready at hand. Why must 'the manualled person' have their identity's insights ready at all times? Worse yet: the manual is associated with the machine's determinism. Why must 'the manualled person' be consistent and transparent? Why are they robbed of their potential to change as a person?

What could be a wonderfully rich asymmetry explored like a dance together is turned into a hierarchical transaction by the manual's presence. Why do 'some people' need an outside tool to speak for them? What does this 'manual' entail, anyway? How can any manual possibly convey all human nuance?

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## About Text-Adventures

There are many ways adventure can be evoked through text. Through an exciting novel, maybe even one in which the reader participates in how the story is being told, like the ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ book series. Through text even more participatory, like a conversation on an instant text messaging service. The text of a manual to new equipment might contain the adventure of your special hobby, a text-adventure might present itself as a series of distance signs on a road trip, or be incited through the lyrics of a song that played in a memory. Adventure comes in many forms, and meets text in many places.

However, historically the term ‘text-adventure’ has been reserved for one specific tradition: a ‘computer-mediated narrative [...] in which the reader helps to determine the outcome of the story’ (Jerz, 2000). More specifically: ‘those computer programs that display text, accept textual responses, and then display additional text in reaction to what has been typed’ (Montfort, 2003).

The exchange of textual responses is made possible using a parser. For example, I might have the following exchange:

```
PARSER > You are in a supermarket. You see a variety  
          of fruits (banana, apple, pear). It is a  
          quiet day, no other people. There's some  
          music playing in the background.
```

```
THIJS > Take banana
```

```
PARSER > You take a banana. You hold it for a few  
          seconds before putting it in your basket.
```

This is a typical (though arguably mundane) example. Even here, one might sense the peculiarity of the language that

is common for text-adventures. As it is a textual medium, it is susceptible to the friction of language. Nick Montfort, poet and professor of digital media, notes:

MONTFORT > Text-adventures were inaccessible, however, to those not adept at puzzle solving and not fluent in the dialect of English their parsers understood.

Next to the ability to engage with this language, there seems to be another friction at play: ‘you take a banana’ seems to suggest ‘I’ take the banana. But of course, I don’t. Some fragmented version of me might, the puppet I control in this virtual world. But this puppet is distinct from the I puppeteering. It is this curious human friction of assuming a subtly different version of ourselves without batting an eye, without thinking it’s not real. In fact, text-adventures are built on our suspension of disbelief, our willingness to imagine us as someone different and our (in)ability to actually be them. In *Homo Ludens* (1949), historian Johan Huizinga poses this willingness as one of the fundamentals of play.

HUIZINGA > He found his four-year-old son sitting at the front of a row of chairs, playing ‘trains’. As he hugged him the boy said: ‘Don’t kiss the engine, Daddy, or the carriages won’t think it’s real.’

Sometimes, my adventure is visiting my parents. My mother gives me a hug and tells me: ‘you seem to be doing well today’. In my head, I’m thinking: don’t say this aloud, mama, or Thijs won’t think it’s real.

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## About Parsing, 1

The term ‘text-adventure’ breaks down into two parts: text, and adventure.

Adventure refers to an exciting experience, much like the quest to find a dragon’s treasure and make it back alive, or the quest to buy groceries and make it back alive. Next to this definitional meaning, the ‘adventure’ in text-adventure reveals some history of the genre by referring to the 1976 game Adventure. In this game, the player explores a cave system through basic instructions, like ‘GO NORTH’. The game then narrates the results of these actions. Seen as a pioneer of the genre and a milestone in interactive fiction, literary critics Niesz and Holland note in a 1984 review:

NIESZ,  
HOLLAND > In the development of interactive fiction,  
the original Adventure with its legion of  
imitators and successors is important be-  
cause, for the first time, the game let the  
reader answer with words instead of num-  
bers.

The ‘text’ in text-adventure also carries history of the genre. Text was not just the extent to which interaction with the computer was possible when the first text-adventure games came to be, and not just the natural link to literature and other fictions. Text has proven to be a powerful, natural and honest way of interaction. Writer and game-maker Richard Bartle writes:

```
BARTLE > And if there were some technology which
could enable you to talk straight to your
imagination... well there is. It's called
text. [...] And when you're typing, the
output that you're typing is in words, same
as the input. There's no shift. It's not
that you're looking at a picture and typ-
ing in words, looking at a picture and mov-
ing the mouse around. It's the same envi-
ronment, it's all words, it's all thoughts,
it's all the imagination. (Get Lamp, 2010)
```

For the 'same environment' to exist, for a player to talk with semi-natural language to the game, part of the program behind the game needs to interpret the inputted words: the parser. 'The parser is that part of the program that accepts natural language input from the interactor and analyzes it.' (Montfort, 2003) For example, a player might say:

```
YOU > Ask THIIJS about libraries and alexithymia.
```

To which the parser might produce the reply:

```
PARSER > I don't know the word 'alexithymia'.
```

So the parser takes a close look at an inputted sentence, tries to figure out what the human might mean, and hopes to respond in a way the human understands. The parser is that part of the experience that suggests an understanding between human and machine.

Continue reading >

## About Parsing, 2

So, putting text and adventure together, we see: text-adventure. ‘Such works are able to understand natural language input to some extent and, based on such input, to effect action in a systematic world that they simulate’ (Montfort, 2003). To Nick Montfort, poet and professor of digital media, the simulated world seems to be very important in text-adventures. And he’s not the only one. For example, interactive fiction writer Emily Short notes:

```
SHORT    > This kind of modelling is at the heart
           of all the standard IF-writing languages:
           there must be first and foremost a way to
           represent the place where the player is
           [...]. (2001)
```

```
MONTFORT > It’s like virtual reality that exists in
           words. (Get Lamp, 2010)
```

A book creates a mental reality by being read (i.e. parsed by its reader). But unlike a book, the imagined world created by a text-adventure isn’t accessible immediately: it is not read directly, all at once and in a predetermined order, but explored through interactions with the machine. These interactions are mediated by parsers. It is parsers that make the virtual reality present to the reader.

If parsers are such a big part of these virtual realities, it begs the question of the role of parsing in non-virtual realities. Of course, a virtual reality is still a reality, and any virtually real interaction is still a real interaction. The mechanisms for interacting are our very real, very human mechanisms. Just like the parser interprets the player’s words, the player interprets the parser’s words. Some might call this reading.

In an essay about illiteracy's susceptibility to oppression, Ismatu Gwendolyn describes reading as a powerfully real act, inciting powerfully real imagination (2024). Maybe parsing is much more about imagination than it is about reading. Parsing, analyzing in hope of understanding, as an exercise in imagination. As an exercise in empathy.

You might say:

YOU > I saw your mother at the grocery store the other day. How is she?

To which I might produce the reply:

THIJS > I am appreciative of this question. She is navigating it well, she has not been sick in 119 days. What about yourself?

And you might say:

YOU > Sick? I haven't been sick either. In fact, I've been very active. I'm building a camper-van to travel with.

To which I might produce the reply:

THIJS > Wow, I did not know! Let me make you a road trip CD! Do you know the song 'Islands'?

Your world is different from my world, and your words don't mean the same as my mine. You cannot read my mind, and I cannot read yours. Parsing is that part of the human experience that bravely attempts understanding. It's the generosity of trying, of listening. It's the continuous asymmetric act of conversing, the performance we make together.

In *Dimensions of Difference* (2020), autism researcher Dinah Murray notes that in conversation, there is no such

thing as ‘mind reading’, and thus, we shouldn’t consider it that way:

MURRAY > [Dialogue] is not much like reading, it is a lot more like dancing or sailing or improvising music together, and concerns reciprocal noticing, intuition, engagement and attunement.

Maybe it’s the same for a text-adventure, maybe it’s not much like reading. You’re dancing with the parser, engaging in imagination, sailing through the fantastical. Hoping to understand. To understand the game you’re playing, and maybe to understand yourself as an interplay between how the game’s creators and parser imagined ‘you’ to be, and how you actually are. To face yourself through your immersion in and friction with this entity ‘you’. To see how your ‘you’ is always a juggling game between this immersion and this friction. To find you are the interactive-fiction.

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## About Interactive Fiction 1

In the text *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, writer and Oulipo member Italo Calvino proposes and investigates the notion of a literary automaton: ‘a machine not only capable of assembly-line literary production, but of a deep exploration of psychological life’ (1980). In doing so, Calvino reflects on his experiences producing text. He notes that in the process of writing, the ‘I’ splits into different figures:

CALVINO > Into an ‘I’ who is writing and an ‘I’ who is written, into an empirical ‘I’ who looks over the shoulder of the ‘I’ who is writing and into a mythical ‘I’ who serves as a model for the ‘I’ who is written. The ‘I’ of the author is dissolved in the writing, the so-called personality of the writer exists within the very act of writing.

The Oulipo (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle) were prolific in writing in non-traditional formats. At the same time, they occupied themselves with the very tradition of writing, ‘claiming not to innovate at any price’ (Lescure, 2003). They intended to find structures within the constraints and procedures of writing. Famed examples include George Perec’s *A Void* (a book without the letter e) and Raymond Queneau’s *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*: a combinatorial exercise presenting 10 sonnets of which the lines at the same positions are all interchangeable with each other. By this, Queneau invites the reader to become part of the process of literary creation. He also wrote *Yours for the Telling*, a branching short story with explicit choices for the reader to make. Both are attempts to include the otherwise distant reader by means of interactive co-narration.

Continue reading >

## About Interactive Fiction, 2

In the manual to the text-adventure Zork, developers Marc Blank and Dave Lebling write:

```
BLANK,  
LEBLING > Interactive fiction is a story in which you  
           are the main character. Your own think-  
           ing and imagination determine the actions  
           of that character and guide the story from  
           start to finish. (2001)
```

It has been common for interactive fiction to address the reader with ‘you’. Famous, formative examples of interactive fiction include text-adventures like Zork and books such as the Choose Your Own Adventure book series. There’s a curious difference in the way the reader is addressed in Zork and the Choose Your Own Adventure books compared to Queneau’s *Yours for the Telling*: whereas most decisions in the former are diegetic and the choice concerns the ‘you’ that appears as a character in the text, in *Yours for the Telling*, the decisions are non-diegetic and concern ‘you’, the reader.

This highlights a curious effect interactive fiction has on the idea of a reader. Similar to how Calvino describes the splitting of the ‘I’ in writing, in interactive fiction the ‘you’ is dissolved. There’s a ‘puppet-you’ who is addressed in the story, controlled by and existing in the mind of the ‘reader-you’, but whose existences don’t fully coincide. There’s a ‘projected-you’, envisioned by the creator, with whom they play an unwritten meta-game exploring the friction of this partial coincidence, and a ‘meta-you’ trying to figure out what the creator’s projections are.

This is a natural result, maybe, of the process of shared

creation: the 'I' and 'you' bleed into each other. This is a striking observation. A primary purpose of turning fiction interactive and of addressing the reader by 'you' is to draw the reader into the story, suspend their disbelief and improve immersion. But in the hopes of increasing reader presence, there's a parallel fade-out of reader identity.

[Continue reading >](#)

## About Interactive Fiction, 3

The 'you' dissolving is the exact experience I have experiencing dissociation. 'You' bleeding into 'I'. Hoping to find my presence amidst my ever-fading sense of identity. Some 'I' directs the puppet-This to strike up a conversation that the writer-This has written and the reader-This must listen to, forming a projected-This in your mind, while a meta-This is observing in an attempt to figure out who this figure 'This' might actually be. A co-narration of Thises all fighting for coexistence, yet never fully coinciding.

As interactive fiction, the text-adventure is not just a narrative. It is a model for the inability to grasp one's identity in full. An interactive model. And so, with trust, it is also a playground to explore the friction of one's identity. It is the adventure of existence in text. It is were 'I' can become 'you' for a while to see if that feels like 'me'.

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## About Dissociation

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) describes dissociation in the following way:

DSM-5 > Dissociative symptoms are experienced as a) unbidden intrusions into awareness and behavior, with accompanying losses of continuity in subjective experience [...] and / or b) inability to access information or to control mental functions that normally are readily amenable to access or control [...].

This thesis is not meant to exhaust the wide range of experiences that are captured by the term ‘dissociation’ in psychological, psychiatric, business, or colloquial settings. Nor is it meant to restrict its meaning to those situational definitions. This is a personal account, meant to rebel against the manual dictating the lines between which a person is allowed to feel, the manual dictating the rules with which a person is meant to live, and the manual dictating the methods through which a person is invited to understand.

Here are some more ways to understand ‘dissociation’:

Dissociation is an (involuntary) disruption and distancing in your sense of identity, a disconnect between your thoughts, feelings, actions and self-perception, a mismatch between how you experience the world, and how the world experiences you.

Dissociation is your mother telling you how happy you look lately, when you don’t feel happy at all. It is not being able to tell her how you actually feel and sometimes trying to be the person she thinks she sees. It is looking in the mirror and seeing that person and noticing how happy they look and wishing you were them.

Dissociation is the detachment, the doubt and misunderstanding and discomfort, the inescapable loudness of the question: who am I?

Go to page 9 to [reject](#) >

Go to page 33 to [embrace](#) >

Or continue reading >

## About Obsolete Media, 1

This is a love letter.

> Dear,

I have not told you about my first week of COVID19 lockdown. I was asked to instruct teachers on how to use Microsoft Teams. I had never used Microsoft Teams. In fact, I was oblivious to the mere existence of Microsoft Teams. But it was a paid job, and I needed money, so I said yes. My first teaching session was in 3 hours.

At first, it was nice. I got to talk to many people, bonding over the shared awkwardness of misunderstanding the software that was forced upon us. Maybe it was strengthened by the early pandemic atmosphere, but in our mutual navigation, I found a great care. I felt appreciated for my efforts, was excited to share and help, and was curious to explore the seams of Teams.

(But this is not a love letter directed to Microsoft Teams.)

It did not last long. There was no time for misunderstanding this software, no virtue in failing to use it as Microsoft intended. Soon, my assistance was no longer needed. Not because I had been successful in conveying the curiosity and care that would allow for sustained use. But because new software was imposed -- we needed to innovate and quickly adapt. The need for this software vanished, and with it, this little community of care.

Recently, I had to uninstall Microsoft Teams from my phone. My device had gotten 'too old'. I wasn't using these chats, but it was a great isolation to be forced to part with them, forced to remove myself from the social context for not keeping with the latest technology, for not keeping up with the fast paced world.

1296 days later, I met you, dear PLOTTER.

(This is a love letter to my HP7475A pen plotter -- a printer-like machine from 1983 that holds physical pens to draw. A machine that was collecting dust, left alone after being deemed 'too old'.)

I had never heard of PEN PLOTTERS, and I was oblivious to your existence. There was no decision made that led us to meeting. You were there, and I was there, too. I'm usually a little shy, and am usually quite self-aware and embarrassed about that. But you were so beautifully showing your own vulnerability, that I did not worry about sharing mine. I have never been comfortable in these exploratory steps, and I try to hide this. I am a confident navigator (false), I have experienced it all (false) and know who I am (?). But you gave me time. For the first time, I felt like I was exploring truly in collaboration. To my surprise, I was not scared to touch you. Nor was I scared to take it slow. I was still a little scared to fail. But with you, I did not worry that feeling appreciated had to be transactional, like I needed to push myself to justify my presence. The time we spent together was so much more simple, simpler than my head usually makes life out to be. With you, I was experiencing life with so much meaning.

Later, you told me: I will cherish every part of us, because I was fully engaged in every second of it.

Now, we haven't talked in a while (57 days). But I know this is temporary. I know you are there, and I am here, too. We still have time. Time to care and fail and care more, in this little journey we are exploring together. Sometimes I worry that you are the one calling yourself 'too old'. But when the time comes, when you are 'too old' again, when the time comes, when I'm overwhelmed again by the pace of life, when that time comes I will always choose you.

(It has been 71 days since writing this letter. I haven't forgotten about you, but I worry about the reverse. I worry about being forgotten. Now that the 'I' I was with you is no more, what is left? If I doesn't live on in you, will I become obsolete?)

[Continue reading >](#)

## About Obsolete Media, 2

Lori Emerson, associative professor of media studies, identifies ‘slow, small, open, cooperative, care and failure’ as characterizing values we can learn from old media (2022). This resonates with my experience with pen plotters. These machines were broken before we repaired them in collaborative repair sessions. They were awkward, noisy and stubborn. But through experiments of curiosity, their seamfulness revealed them to be inviting to play with and to fail with. These machines hold great honesty and a great performativity. Through these things, I saw the plotter invite a community of collaboration and of care. Bethany Nowviskie (2016) notes the ethics of care to ‘reorient a humanistic appreciation of context, interdependence, and vulnerability -- of fragile, earthly things and their interrelation’. Amidst a current media landscape that values fast-paced, seamless and (socially) isolated experiences, plotters prove to be a powerful refusal to the need to experience it all. They provide a shared exploration of curiosity. Slow curiosity, the type that can collect dust for years, while not losing it’s power, relevance or use.

Emphasizing that old machines hold value not just by virtue of nostalgia, Emerson cites Jack Halberstam, an academic focusing on researching queer and trans identities, by saying old media provide one of many ways to imagine ‘not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems’ (2011).

Text-adventures -- often literal fantasies of elsewhere -- have a status similar to pen plotters: relics of the past. But they hold much more than just a fantasy. They reveal a context that used to be: constrained ways to use the computers we take for granted, conversations with friends on how to progress in a cryptic puzzle, different philosophies in game design. By this, text-adventures provide an

alternative to the hegemony in the current video game landscape (described by game designers and educators Fron et al. (2007) as ‘an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of ‘minority’ players’). Think about the prevalence of dexterity based gameplay only achievable for the able-bodied. Or think about the obsession with ‘improving’ graphics, demanding players to stay up to date with expensive hardware only obtainable to the financially-abled. Or think about the trends in current AAA titles, mostly alluding to power fantasies only enjoyable by one homogeneous group (Anthropy, 2012).

The video game manual, too, is an old technology. Scholar of media studies and art history Shannon Mattern compares the manuals of old to seamless technology like chatGPT, which ‘refuses to be touched’ when asked about its own design (2024). She notes it is ‘a crucial time to recover the history, politics, and aesthetics of the repair manual as a didactic genre and creative form’. Maybe this is true not just for manuals. In the current media landscape wider than just games, everything is content, everything is moving fast, and every moment is a moment of decision. Text-adventures may have been a dominant presence once, but in this current landscape, their clunky, constrained, non-linear gameplay provides a fundamental opposition to the idea of experiencing it all. As a metaphor for our ability to navigate life -- our outer and inner world -- text-adventures tell us that this can’t be explored all at once. They teach us to embrace clunky, constrained, non-linear exploration, and reject the idea that we should know what, where and who we are in full, all the time.

Go to page 29 to [experience](#) >

Or continue reading >

## About Experiencing It All

FOMO -- the fear of missing out -- is a symptom characterizing a generation. It is often not just a fear, but a self-fulfilling prophecy. Amidst constant exposure to social media, no barrier to consuming world news, ubiquitous contradicting voices trying to convince you to live life in specific ways, one can easily feel paralyzed. It speaks to the notion there's a way to 'fail' in experiencing life, that is only reinforced by the way social media encourages comparisons to the way others are experiencing. We don't want to fail, and we are hesitant to commit to any choice that might be a wrong one.

Nonlinear narratives (such as text-adventures) are interesting in the current landscape of consumption in that they fundamentally oppose the notion of experiencing it all. The only way to proceed is by going down one path, and leaving behind another. Exploring one path in a branching narrative can leave you wondering about the 'missed options', but even going back to check out another is different from being exposed to them all at once. The creators of the branching cyberdrama Deep Simulator note:

Xu Cong > It's the lack of boundaries that causes this overwhelming and disorienting feeling, right?

Ag > Yes. That which we see in our experiences has boundaries, then suddenly you're in a world that has no boundaries, no clear path, and you don't know what to do. (2021)

Having to make decisions that (irreversibly) lead you down one path of content while leaving behind another is a rare discomfort nowadays. But it is a precious one.

Go to page 18 to [mirror](#) >

Or continue reading >

## About Routines

When I was in high school, I played the piano. I knew a few songs. One time, I played a song in front of friends, and overheard a negative comment. Every time I played that song after that, I heard that same comment at that position in the song. Soon, every song I knew triggered an associated memory.

I write this thesis in long library sessions. Sometimes I hear people talk about their dreams. Moving abroad, exploring the world. Traveling in a campervan, months on the road. These sound like wonderful dreams. But anytime I'm 5 hours deep into a library session, I can't help but think: this is all I want in life, this abstract monotonous familiar approximation of happiness. So I go to the library, and write. And then I walk home. I walk home listening to the same song every time. Islands, by King Crimson. Listening to Islands, I walk home thinking the same thoughts I thought the first time walking home listening to this song. It was November 14 2024, 102 days and many library sessions ago. I just happened to listen to Islands that day. I had just shared the song with a person very dear to me. In an attempt to express how I felt, or maybe in the hopes they would be able to tell me. I walk home and listen and think the thoughts I thought that day. 8:15 into the 11:56 minute song, I arrive home. Sometimes I silently cry in the hallway for the remaining 221 seconds before taking off my shoes and continuing my day. These days, I'm not able to share songs anymore with that person very dear to me. Sometimes it's difficult to interpret your thoughts and emotions.

After a while, I had to take a break from playing piano. Every note triggered a memory. This was too much. I tried it again recently, 2403 days since high school, but memories I hadn't thought about in years still came back, vividly.

Songs I'm not able to share anymore, no one to tell me how I feel. The exercise of empathy and understanding extends to oneself, the imaginative parsing. Why do I keep listening to Islands?

Go to page 13 to [listen](#) >

Or continue reading >

## About It All Being Connected

I am in the grocery store, holding a banana. A song is playing that I heard once while travelling. During this travel, I saw a banana farm.

Every morning I eat the exact same breakfast: 3 spoons of oats, 3 spoons of a yoghurt, a little Nutella and 1 banana. I eat the banana mindlessly. I enjoy the banana, don't get me wrong, but I am mindless of its existence. It blends away with the yogurt and oats, it blends into a numb moment of me mindlessly chewing it. But now I am here, holding a banana. Maybe it is the song, but I think about the great distance this banana had to travel. I think about those who harvested it. I think about the decades spent cultivating this banana so that it might appeal to my mindless palette, about the slavery that was involved in it, about the slavery that probably still is, about how glaringly ignorant I am of these important matters, about how this all is condensed into a mere 0,32 eurocents, about how this banana will be mindlessly chewed tomorrow at breakfast, a mindless mouth chewing a banana held by a mindless hand that at this point I can't recognize as my own anymore. Someone is holding a banana, thinking about travels to banana farms they heard about, and just like for the banana I can only speculate who they are and how they came to be.

The song ends, and the next song starts playing. I put the banana in my basket.

Often I find myself numb, until suddenly, I am not. Then, life comes at me all at once. A brief glimpse of the unimaginable scope of interwoven threads that came to intertwine in this moment. Richard McGuire's *Here* is a 6-page comic showing snapshots of the same location over different moments in time. The fragments are not shown chronologically, but are instead shuffled and layered on top of each other.

By not portraying these threads in order, a reader experiences it all at once. This is overwhelming, but faithful to the experience of such awareness; you get caught up in the middle of it. It is a powerful experience. It is a story of being human, of culture and being infinitesimal. It is painful and scary and joyous and inspirational and all the things. The human condition is one of connectedness. This can be difficult to navigate, but one worth engaging with actively.

When I am in the grocery store holding a banana, I think of myself as a 6-page comic, as a series of unordered and barely coherent snapshots. It is painful and scary and difficult to navigate. It is also engaging and meaningful in a way part of me does not want to miss out on.

Go to page 5 to **examine** >

Or continue reading >

## About Breaking Down

```
PARSER > I don't understand the word 'alexithymia'.
```

```
YOU      > Panic.
```

```
PARSER > Your score has just gone down by one spoon.
```

This example is inspired by Learning ZIL (1989), an instruction manual to the Zork Implementation Language that calls parsers ‘a notorious part of every IF program’. Inspired by Adventure, Zork was released in 1977 by Infocom and was massively influential in bringing text-adventures to the emerging scene of home computers. This was done by way of a custom interpreter to the Zork Implementation Language, the Z-machine, that enabled ZIL games to be played on any machine by just writing Z-machine implementation for that machine (Blank, Galley, 1980).

However, an official compiler that compiles ZIL into Z-machine instructions has never been released. And after company reorganization at Infocom, ZIL was declared ‘functionally dead’ (Computer Gaming World, 1989). The ZIL manual’s subtitle aptly reads: ‘Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Writing Interactive Fiction But Couldn’t Find Anyone Still Working Here to Ask’.

To this day, there is a community around writing for Z-machines, decompiling them and writing new interpreters, breaking them down and imagining them reverse-engineered. How curious it is that after almost 50 years, it’s humans parsing the computer.

Go to page 24 to [restore](#) >

Or continue reading >

## About Esoteric Reimagination

Poet and professor of digital media Nick Montfort writes in *Twisty Little Passages*, a book about interactive fiction, that text-adventures' accessibility was constrained by the language required to interact with their puzzles and parsers (2003). He calls interactive-fiction esoteric:

MONTFORT > This marginalized the form, but it also  
may have helped it elude strict parental  
control.

As humans, accessibility to interact with ourselves is similarly constrained by the language used to think and talk about ourselves, and the puzzles of our mind. Part of the dissociative experience is not being able to interact with yourself any longer. The puzzles become impenetrable. And by happening in the mind, by not finding the words, not knowing the language to parse and communicate, others might not notice.

MAMA > But you seem to be doing well today, THIJS.

The 'I' I am is the story narrated by my thoughts, the esoteric interactive-fiction I am myself. I must be reimagined again and again, before I escapes me, before I becomes obsolete.

Go to page 24 to [restore](#) >

Or continue reading >

## About Character Creation, 1

17 > Others consider me odd or different.

THIJS has had many speculative diagnoses thrown their way. At times, it can be very useful to see them through such lenses. However, it can also be confusing. When THIJS doesn't know how to feel, how to act or who to be, they might think: 'ah, but a person with this diagnosis will surely feel this, do that, and be such'. So THIJS feels this, THIJS does that, and THIJS becomes their diagnosis.

33 > I speak with a normal rhythm.

Often questionnaires are used in such processes, and they have a similar effect. Often these questionnaires are (supposedly) designed to capture nuance in the sum of their questions, not in the individual ones. That means that any one question tends to be absurd when considered in isolation. (These questionnaires also tend to be quite perverse, often being presumptuous in nature and clinically avoidant of terms 'the patient would surely misunderstand'.)

37 > I am an understanding type of person.

When faced with a question, YOU are prompted to introspect. But by the question's absurdity, YOU do not always know the answer. The more YOU think about it, the more it might seem like there's no end to answering this question, nor a beginning. YOUR identity begins to fade in front of you.

48 > I try to be as helpful as I can when other people tell me their personal problems.

[Continue reading >](#)

## About Character Creation, 2

61 > I am considered a loner by those who know me best.

Many video games start with character creation: defining the character the player will embody. This comes in many forms: specifying the physical attributes of a human-like entity, giving a name to that entity, or assigning them character traits and flaws. Also non-human and even inanimate entities can serve as the player's embodiment, like a truck in some road trip simulator. In play, we still refer to that diegetic entity as 'I'.

62 > I usually speak in a normal tone.

We assign a value to this representation of ourselves in the game world. This value becomes particularly apparent through the friction that arises when one cannot represent themselves. For example by misrepresentation of gender or race, or features, or when a player is unable to control the in-game 'I' like they want to. In any such case (and there are many more) a rift starts to form: we are made aware of the dissonance between ourselves and the entity we want to consider as 'I'. Reversely, the 'dissonant I' can hold power, exactly because they provide an opportunity to explore a person we cannot be, we are not allowed to be, or a person we might be unsure about being. (Role playing games, for example, provide an amazing opportunity for embodied exploration of one's gender and sexuality.)

70 > I keep my thoughts stacked in my memory like they are on filing cards.

That we call this diegetic entity 'I' is highly peculiar, for our 'character' need not be a representation of our non-game self (for better or for worse). Character cre-

ation happens through absurd questions. Absurd, in their disconnect to the non-game world, their disobedience to normal world logic. That 'what is your name?' is a question worth consideration, suggests we lend these representations power outside of the scope of our current being. Yet we imagine ourselves as these representations. We want to imagine ourselves as these representations. We feel what they are feeling, do what they are doing, and become who they are. Character creation is a process of willfully prophetic diagnostic questionnaires.

77 > I like to have close friends.

Go to page 5 to **examine** >

Go to page 35 to **start** >

Or continue reading >

## About Reflective Spoons

MAMA > You look great today THIJS.

THIJS > Oh.

‘Functionality’ is a nasty term. It usually comes in two flavors: high and low functioning, seemingly indicating how well someone can operate in society. ‘Seemingly’ being the key word here: functionality is not a property of the person -- it reveals little information about one’s traits -- but rather a property of judgement: the degree of functionality reveals the values of an environment, and evaluates the matter in which a person is a disruption to that environment. It is a machinal term about how well the manualled person can communicate and live by their manual.

MAMA > Can I give you a hug?

THIJS > Okay. I think so.

A similar axis of measurement is ‘masking’. However, this term reveals more of a person’s traits: the degree of masking entails someone’s attempt to sense and adapt to an environment, to blend in and suppress their natural tendencies. Some might be doing this often (voluntarily or not), while others rarely (voluntarily or not). Moreover, while often reserved for discourse on neurodivergence, it is a metric that seems more universal. Whereas ‘functioning’ presupposes a system of values, ‘masking’ doesn’t: it merely states the ability or tendency to attempt to blend into an environment, which is not an evaluation from the environment.

MAMA > This is nice. I’m happy that you’re here.

Close to masking is mirroring: subconsciously adopting be-

havior and feelings from others. It's a continuous emphatic act that everyone performs to some extent -- parsing on a biological level. However, while for some this is just an act of biology, for others it's an performance of identity.

THIJS > Do you know the song 'Islands'?

MAMA > [still hugging] What? I don't think so.

However, there is an extent to masking and mirroring, a limit to our ability to fit in. For many, there is only so much 'energy' to live 'normally'. Be that physical energy, emotional energy, social energy or attentional energy. Fitting in means having to be conscious of that energy and allocating it appropriately. Christine Miserandino developed this into a allegoric framework called 'spoon theory' (2003). Originally used to explain her own experiences with chronic illness, it is an allegory well suited for the general experience of trying to fit in: one starts a day with a certain number of spoons, and every action requires some amount of spoons. When you're out of spoons, you're out of actions. It comes with the frustration of having to slow down, the shame of not being able to keep up with people, the apologies for who you are, the guilt for who you cannot be, the questions of why.

THIJS > I think I want to cry.

I think my spoons are reflective. When I use a spoon, I see someone in it. They resemble me, but they are flipped and mirrored and warped. I try hard, but can't recognize myself in my mirroring mask.

Go to page 22 to [look](#) >

Go to page 29 to [scream](#) >

## ISLANDS

### KING CRIMSON > Islands (1971)

Earth, stream and tree, encircled by sea  
Waves sweep the sand from my island  
My sunsets fade, field and glade  
Wait only for rain, grain after grain  
Love erodes my high weathered walls  
Which fend off the tide  
Cradle the wind to my island

Gaunt granite climbs where gulls wheel and glide  
Mournfully cry o'er my island  
My dawn bride's veil damp and pale  
Dissolves in the sun, love's web is spun  
Cats prowl, mice run  
Wreath snatch-hand briars where owls know my eyes  
Violet skies touch my island, touch me

Beneath the wind-turned wave  
Infinite peace  
Islands join hands  
'Neathe heaven's sea

Beneath the wind-turned wave  
Infinite peace  
Islands join hands  
'Neathe heaven's sea

Dark harbour quays like fingers of stone  
Hungriely reach from my island  
Clutch sailor's words, pearls and gourds  
Are strewn on my shore  
Equal in love bound in circles  
Earth, stream and tree return to the sea  
Waves sweep the sand from my island, from me

Beneath the wind-turned wave  
Infinite peace  
Islands join hands  
'Neathe heaven's sea

## CHARACTER SHEET

Please read each statement below and choose the answer that best fits your experiences during social interactions.

- > True now and when I was young
  - > True only now
  - > True only when I was younger than 16
  - > Never true
- 
1. I am a sympathetic person.
  2. I often use words and phrases from movies and television in conversations.
  3. I am often surprised when others tell me I have been rude.
  4. Sometimes I talk too loudly or too softly, and I am not aware of it.
  5. I often don't know how to act in social situations.
  6. I can 'put myself in other people's shoes.'
  7. I have a hard time figuring out what some phrases mean, like 'you are the apple of my eye.'
  8. I only like to talk to people who share my special interests.
  9. I focus on details rather than the overall idea.
  10. I always notice how food feels in my mouth. This is more important to me than how it tastes.
  11. I miss my best friends or family when we are apart for a long time.

12. Sometimes I offend others by saying what I am thinking, even if I don't mean to.
13. I only like to think and talk about a few things that interest me.
14. I'd rather go out to eat in a restaurant by myself than with someone I know.
15. I cannot imagine what it would be like to be someone else.
16. I have been told that I am clumsy or uncoordinated.
17. Others consider me odd or different.
18. I understand when friends need to be comforted.
19. I am very sensitive to the way my clothes feel when I touch them. How they feel is more important to me than how they look.
20. I like to copy the way certain people speak and act. It helps me appear more normal.
21. It can be very intimidating for me to talk to more than one person at the same time.
22. I have to 'act normal' to please other people and make them like me.
23. Meeting new people is usually easy for me.
24. I get highly confused when someone interrupts me when I am talking about something I am very interested in.
25. It is difficult for me to understand how other people are feeling when we are talking.
26. I like having a conversation with several people, for instance around a dinner table, at school or at work.
27. I take things too literally, so I often miss what people are trying to say.

28. It is very difficult for me to understand when someone is embarrassed or jealous.
29. Some ordinary textures that do not bother others feel very offensive when they touch my skin.
30. I get extremely upset when the way I like to do things is suddenly changed.
31. I have never wanted or needed to have what other people call an 'intimate relationship.'
32. It is difficult for me to start and stop a conversation. I need to keep going until I am finished.
33. I speak with a normal rhythm.
34. The same sound, color or texture can suddenly change from very sensitive to very dull.
35. The phrase 'I've got you under my skin' makes me uncomfortable.
36. Sometimes the sound of a word or a high-pitched noise can be painful to my ears.
37. I am an understanding type of person.
38. I do not connect with characters in movies and cannot feel what they feel.
39. I cannot tell when someone is flirting with me.
40. I can see in my mind in exact detail things that I am interested in.
41. I keep lists of things that interest me, even when they have no practical use (for example sports statistics, train schedules, calendar dates, historical facts and dates).
42. When I feel overwhelmed by my senses, I have to isolate myself to shut them down.

43. I like to talk things over with my friends.
44. I cannot tell if someone is interested or bored with what I am saying.
45. It can be very hard to read someone's face, hand and body movements when they are talking.
46. The same thing (like clothes or temperatures) can feel very different to me at different times.
47. I feel very comfortable with dating or being in social situations with others.
48. I try to be as helpful as I can when other people tell me their personal problems.
49. I have been told that I have an unusual voice (for example flat, monotone, childish, or high-pitched).
50. Sometimes a thought or a subject gets stuck in my mind and I have to talk about it even if no one is interested.
51. I do certain things with my hands over and over again (like flapping, twirling sticks or strings, waving things by my eyes).
52. I have never been interested in what most of the people I know consider interesting.
53. I am considered a compassionate type of person.
54. I get along with other people by following a set of specific rules that help me look normal.
55. It is very difficult for me to work and function in groups.
56. When I am talking to someone, it is hard to change the subject. If the other person does so, I can get very upset and confused.

57. Sometimes I have to cover my ears to block out painful noises (like vacuum cleaners or people talking too much or too loudly).
58. I can chat and make small talk with people.
59. Sometimes things that should feel painful are not (for instance when I hurt myself or burn my hand on the stove).
60. When talking to someone, I have a hard time telling when it is my turn to talk or to listen.
61. I am considered a loner by those who know me best.
62. I usually speak in a normal tone.
63. I like things to be exactly the same day after day and even small changes in my routines upset me.
64. How to make friends and socialize is a mystery to me.
65. It calms me to spin around or to rock in a chair when I'm feeling stressed.
66. The phrase, 'He wears his heart on his sleeve,' does not make sense to me.
67. If I am in a place where there are many smells, textures to feel, noises or bright lights, I feel anxious or frightened.
68. I can tell when someone says one thing but means something else.
69. I like to be by myself as much as I can.
70. I keep my thoughts stacked in my memory like they are on filing cards, and I pick out the ones I need by looking through the stack and finding the right one (or another unique way).

- 71. The same sound sometimes seems very loud or very soft, even though I know it has not changed.
- 72. I enjoy spending time eating and talking with my family and friends.
- 73. I can't tolerate things I dislike (like smells, textures, sounds or colors).
- 74. I don't like to be hugged or held.
- 75. When I go somewhere, I have to follow a familiar route or I can get very confused and upset.
- 76. It is difficult to figure out what other people expect of me.
- 77. I like to have close friends.
- 78. People tell me that I give too much detail.
- 79. I am often told that I ask embarrassing questions.
- 80. I tend to point out other people's mistakes.

These statements are taken from the RAADS-R questionnaire, a famous autism screening test (developed by Ritvo et al., 2010).

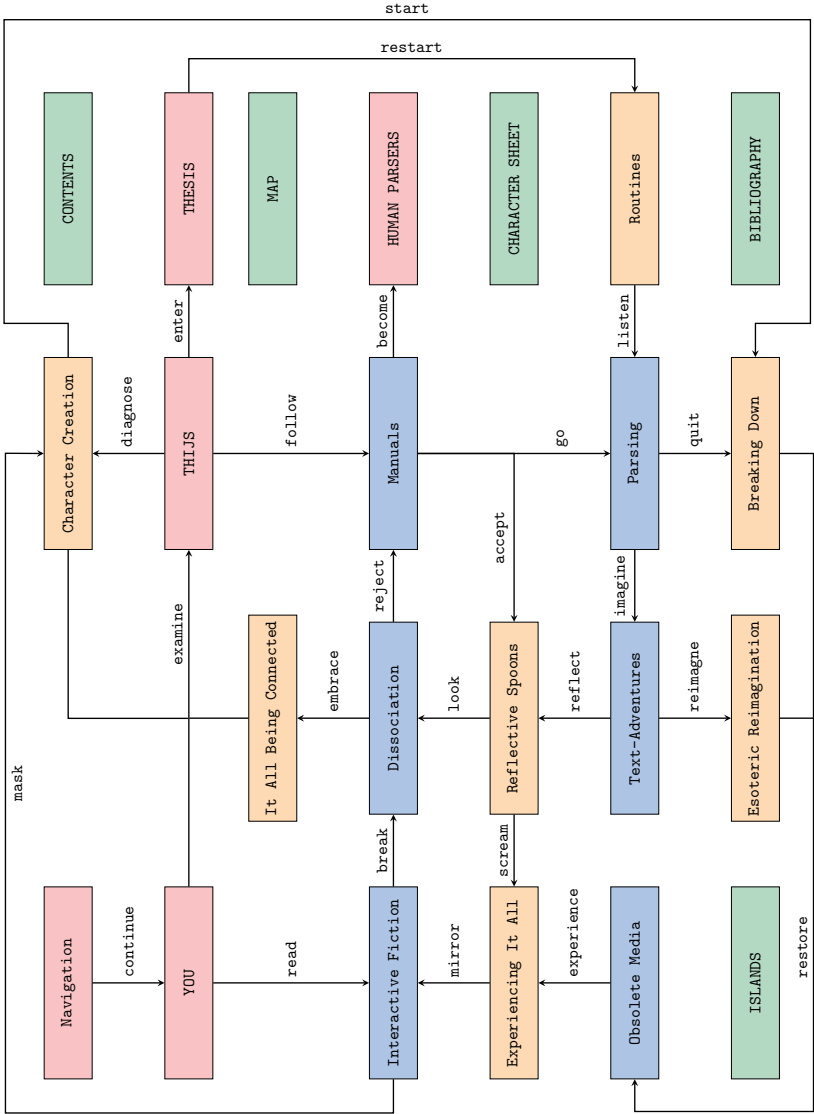
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MAP

Start YOUR  
adventure at  
About Navigation  
and parse  
this chart to  
explore.

(Note: most  
connecting  
verbs are  
actions from the  
text-adventure  
Zork.)

LEGEND

meta sections

core sections

theme sections

tools sections