

How to Set Up Your Own Public Reading of Interactive Fiction

(Version 1.2)

You already know how to play interactive fiction (or have downloaded the card that teaches you to from <http://pr-if.org/doc/play-if-card/>), and you want to play with your friends, reading together and visiting different worlds and even solving problems together and making interesting choices. Lucky you, there are many resources freely available, so it is not expensive get the materials, such as this guide.

Interactive fiction is naturally a multiplayer game. Several people can play at the same time, all of you reading the screen and trying to figure out what to do together. No extra controllers or networked setups are required. The suggestions below come from public readings of interactive fiction with more than 3 or 4 people. These recommendations will help you set up readings with large groups of people (we've had around 30 in some events!), including how to find your audience and little tricks to make it run smoothly, both technically and organizationally.

Phase 1: Preparation

Make friends!

If you're not already part of the IF community, check whether there are any IF fans or authors nearby. There are several online communities, which should make it easy to find people who know interactive fiction and can provide advice.

Boston: <http://pr-if.org/>

Chicago <http://chicago-if.org/>

San Francisco / Bay Area: <http://www.meetup.com/sf-bay-area-interactive-fiction/>

Seattle: <http://if.seattle.wa.us/>

Vancouver: http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_188527774524536&ap=1

If none of these cities are near you, introduce yourself at the Interactive Fiction Community forum at <http://www.intfiction.org/> and check if there are any people within commuting distance of where you are.

Tip: If there are any IF authors in your area, you can invite them to read their own work, in the same way that novelists and poets present their work publicly. See the report on The Lurking Horror reading event at <http://pr-if.org/event/play-lurkinghorror/>, where the author Dave Lebling gave some background on how the game came to be, and also acted as the reader.

Choose a game

Think about who your audience is and what the goal of the session is. Is your audience mostly young readers? Teenagers? Adults? Are they novices, or are there going to be mostly expert readers/players? The Interactive Fiction Database (IFDB) is a very good resource to find games, including reviews and information: <http://ifdb.tads.org/>

You have to consider how long the event will be. Our public events are 2 to 3 hours long; more than that is likely to burn out your audience. That also means that it may be the case that you will not finish reading the game in the allotted time. This should not be a problem, since it's a way to invite people to keep reading on their own, but it means you should be ready to point people to the resources to play the game on their own.

Here are some suggestions:

Introductory short games: "Lost Pig," "Violet," "9:05," and "Hoist Sail for the Heliopause and Home."

Short games for kids: "Mrs. Pepper's Nasty Secret," "The Sleeping Princess," and "Aotearoa"

Short games for adults: "Photopia," "Galatea."

Tip: Some of the older commercial games, mostly the games produced by Infocom, included what are called "feelies", which are necessary to play the game. Feelies were supplementary materials that contained information about the world of the game, from maps to dossiers or the backstory. Make sure that you have access to the feelies, even if it is in digital form—the re-releases of these games usually include a file with all this information.

Find a venue

Every public, face-to-face reading requires a venue. Classrooms and library function rooms work well, though smaller spaces may work if you're drawing from a small segment of the public. To some degree, your venue may help to define your audience (and vice versa). If you're using an elementary-school classroom, you may attract a crowd of parents and kids. If your local Association for the Blind is providing the space, you'll be more likely to have participants with limited visual acuity, though you may well have some such folks in any venue—IF is quite popular with the blind.

Make sure that your location provides or has access to these features:

- a computer where you can install programs (or the possibility to have one)
- a screen that everyone can see and read: a projector or a very large LCD screen are necessary when the group is bigger than 4 or 5 people.

Publicize the event

Your venue dictates your audience, so try to reach them. Prepare a poster and send it out. Don't limit yourself to announcing it around the venue; you want to attract people, so go out! If you're trying to reach kids and you're in a library, have posters in schools too, for example. Make use of email and social media to spread the word.

Tip: Make sure to have members from the local IF community attend, if it applies. It's always handy to have experts to help think through the reading.

Tip 2: If you know any actors, particularly voice actors, invite them to the event. They can be wonderful readers.

Prepare a handout for the day, pointing people to diverse IF resources (you can use the How to Play IF card) as well as the URL where players may be able to download the game so they can play it on their own.

Phase 2: Setting up

Technical prep

Before the event, go to the room and make sure that everything will work. Ideally, this should be done before announcing the event itself. Here's a brief list of things you should be checking.

- Make sure you can run the game.

Some games run as stand-alone applications and can be downloaded as such (e.g., "Alabaster," "Blue Lacuna"). If that is the case, you're probably ready to run the game. However, you may be missing some of the features that an *interpreter* allows.

An interpreter is a program that helps you run the game. In the same way that you can use different programs to open a text file, there are different interpreters to open game files. There are interpreters for all computer platforms (Windows, OS X, Linux) and even smartphones. You can find the most adequate interpreter for your needs online at <http://ifwiki.org/index.php/Interpreter>.

- Connect the computer to the screen or projector

If you're bringing your own computer, make sure it can run the game properly and that you can connect it to the screen in the room. If the room already has a computer, make sure that you can install the programs on it.

Set up the projector or screen

Check that the projector or screen works and that you can connect the computer to it without a problem. Make a note of whether you need extra cables or extension cords to plug in your computer. Most usually, the connection is VGA, which means you may have to bring an adaptor if you're using an Apple computer.

If the computer has its own screen apart from the projector or screen, the best configuration is to mirror the screen. That way, the person who is typing and the audience can all see the same thing. This is particularly important, for example, if the reading takes place in a classroom where the computer is in a lectern that faces the class and not the screen

Check the room layout

If you are in a classroom or event room, odds are that the venue is already set up for everyone to have a decent view of the screen. If not, check what is the best way to organize chairs to see it, avoiding direct glare.

Set up the font type, size, and colors

Run the game on the projector, checking that the font size is large enough for everyone to read. Every interpreter has an option to change the font size, type, and color, as well as the the background, so find the settings that will allow everyone to read the text on the screen best. Black font on cream-colored background may read better than over white; light yellow on black may also be more readable on certain projectors.

Whiteboard or blackboard space or a wall to hang paper

In most cases, you will need to draw map of the game that everyone can see. Most interactive fiction creates worlds that one can navigate, and even if it's not very big, it's easy to get lost, so you need to map it as you go along. If there is a blackboard or whiteboard in the venue, you're set; if not, make sure to bring along something like butcher paper or a portable whiteboard.

You may also need the whiteboard to help you solve puzzles, by drawing diagrams or deciphering a cryptogram. Have a space to take notes publicly, so everyone has the most information possible to follow the game.

Tip: If you have access to a wireless keyboard, it is actually a great way to encourage people to participate, since they don't have to get up, and you can pass it around for people to participate. It's a way to ease people into participating, although it's a perk more than a must.

Notes on broadcasting the event

In a couple of our readings, we broadcast it online using tools freely available, using a microphone to capture the reading, and broadcasting the window with the game. We were hoping that people would join us and suggest commands online, but that didn't quite happen. Reading from the screen was hard, plus our free online broadcasting service kept interrupting the event with loud advertisements. It worked better when one person in the room was dedicated to reading the input from the chat window or IFMUD (the virtual world where the interactive fiction community meets). If you have a special guest (such as a renowned IF author) in your event, it may be worth broadcasting it, but take into account that it's an extra technical complication.

Phase 3: The event

Make sure you have everything!

- Computer with game loaded and running
- Handouts (list of IF sites, links to the game, How to Play IF card)
- Sign-up sheet
- Extension cords / video dongles (if necessary)
- Butcher paper / large pads for maps (if necessary)

Set up the game

Get the game running and on the screen before people arrive. If you are using an IF interpreter, or a game that comes packaged with an interpreter, it may be a good idea to type "transcript on." This will prompt you to save a file, which is a transcript of the game. You can save it as part of the event and post it online. Mind you, turning on the transcript does not mean that you're saving the game—you'll still have to save the game as you go so that if the players reach a dead end, the game can be restored and you don't have to start over.

Have a the sign-up sheet ready for readers and typists

As attendees start arriving, invite them to sign up to either read or type the commands. Usually people may be a bit shy to sign up at the beginning, but the sign-up sheet should be open for people to sign up as the event advances. Don't have a single typist or reader throughout: readers get tired, and typists may get overconfident and start ignoring the directions of the room. If you've invited actor friends to come, this is the time when you encourage them to be readers.

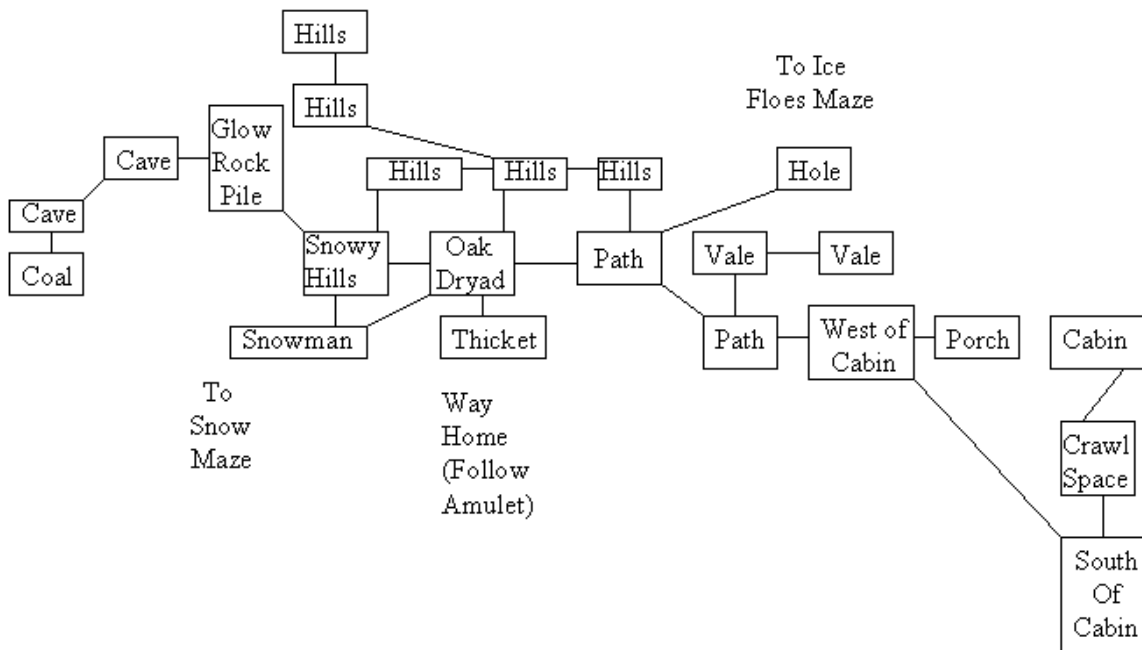
The role of the player has to be split for a practical reason. People read at different speeds, so having someone delivering the text out loud works as a timer of sorts, so everyone can follow. The interactor also has to wait until the text has been read to input the next command, so that there's some time to wait for suggestions. You may not need to have separate roles if all your

attendants are expert players, but it is a fine thing to do for newcomers to IF, particularly with younger and older readers/players.

Designate someone to draw a map

In addition to readers and writers, someone should be drawing a map of the game, which will help in navigating the space communally. The mapper does not have to be a great artist, just be able to draw boxes representing each room and to illustrate how they connect to each other. Most games have a grid-like layout, although you have to watch out for some games where the space warps out and connections are not straightforward. A typical, useful IF map looks more like a diagram than like Tolkien's map of Middle Earth (see example below).

Map of "Winter Wonderland"
Not Including Mazes and Real
World Scenes



Let people know about interactive fiction

Before you start playing, make sure to guide people to the resources to play interactive fiction and point them to the local group (if there is one). Have the handouts ready for people to pick up throughout the session.

Play together!

Start the game and get the first pair of reader / typist from the list. A typical cycle usually goes like this:

- read the screen
- suggest an interaction
- type it
- if the result is a new location, put it on the map.

The room usually finds its own rhythm as the game advances. There may be a couple of attendees who take the initiative suggesting commands; if the room is silent, don't let the typist enter a command automatically, but ask the audience what they want to do. The mapper also has to have time to plot the map, particularly at the beginning. As you go, the reader may skip some of the text that may already have appeared, but always beware: at times a chunk of text may look as if it had already appeared, but something subtle (and maybe crucial) has changed. So always encourage the audience to read carefully.

It is always handy to have expert players of IF around, who can goad the audience when they're stuck, but these players should not dictate every single interaction. Part of the fun of this type of event is playing together, making choices and figuring puzzles out as a team. When somebody has already played the game (or reads a walkthrough of the game on their phone), (s)he can spoil the fun for everyone. So make sure the more advanced readers help the audience but do not take over the event.

Save often!

You want to save your game every now and then, so that you can restore your progress if you get to a dead end. Some games, such as "For a Change" or "Violet," allow the reader/player to explore until the situation is solved, and you don't really need to save your game. However, there are other games where the players can reach a game-over state before completing the game. For example, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" is notorious for finding very creative ways to kill the player character (it's actually part of the fun). Other games may have multiple branches that you may want to explore if you have the time, so you may want to go back to an earlier save state to explore.

Play the game beforehand and/or read reviews of the game to determine the difficulty and whether you need to save often or not at all.

Finishing the game

In most cases, it will not be possible to complete a game within the time frame of the event. This is when it becomes handy to have a handout with instructions for attendees to play the game on their own. If you're in a school or library with computers that the attendees can access, you may want to install the games there so they can play them at their own leisure. The

event is an introduction to interactive fiction, to invite people to discover more on their own, find other fans of interactive fiction, or even write their own with the freely available tools.

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For more information on Interactive Fiction and its community, please visit <http://pr-if.org/>