

It seems that everything you encounter on the World Wide Web these days, along with every piece of installation art in galleries and museums no matter what its age is, is being referred to as “new media.” Certainly, anything that depends on computers for presentation and distribution nowadays gets this nomenclature. But as Steve Dietz points out in the appropriately titled “What is New Media?” photography, motion pictures, radio, television, video, and eventually computers have all been considered as such at their outset, and the term is so easily thrown about that a re-assessment of what actually constitutes “new media” is needed. The term has gone beyond being medium-specific, and may need to be considered more in terms of its message, and how far-reaching this message can be. Or as Dietz states: “It is what the artist makes of it. What is different, perhaps counter-intuitively, is the network of distribution, of access.”

To represent an artifact of “New Media” I chose one of the weekly Flash animations from an online website that is notable for a goofy nostalgia-driven aesthetic and narration by a loveably sinister man-child, a nerd/bully in a Mexican wrestling mask: [Strongbad answering his email](#). I am comparing it to the [Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy](#) text-based video game inspired on the seminal comic science fiction series of the same name. It was designed by series creator Douglas Adams and Infocom's Steve Meretzky, and was first released in 1984 for the Apple II, Commodore 64, Atari, and the IBM PC.

In the beginning, there were text-based video games. You put your floppy disc in and a blue or green screen would come up with some text and a prompt usually, it would say something along the lines of "You're standing in a field of green grass. You can go left. You can go right. You see a book on the ground." These games had no graphics, they were limited to an interface describing the details of the surroundings and giving the user options to pick from. Many of these text-based video games were inspired by the pencil-and-paper dice game known as Dungeons and Dragons, and were usually referred to as role-playing games (RPG).

Yet, after a short while, and with the advent of networks, some adventurous programmers decided to put these games on a machine that a number of people could have access to, either by connecting on-site or by telnet (i.e. connecting to that machine via modem from their own machine). Thus, a number of people could be standing in that field with you, and as you decided whether or not to take the book, someone else

could take it first, and run away. You could then 'go left' to catch them, and thus we arrived at interactive gaming in a virtual space. As with ancient tools, whose purpose of was to improve skills for given tasks or to simplify them, as a “gaming” civilization progressed and became more complex, so did the tools that were developed.

One such tool is Flash, used for animations such as Strongbad’s. in it, a Flash animation clip of a screen is slowly covered by two distinct kinds of typing, accompanied by dialog that moves in and out of sync with the typing. We can determine it is Strongbad talking via the back of his head because of his moving reflection on the computer screen. He types quickly while narrating his typing out loud. In this section of the Flash there is a lot going on in terms of parodying the form: from the way that Strongbad types out the opening description, to the unsolicited parser comments at the end, both the interactor and the parser seem to be cheating, assuming each other’s role’s.

*Thy Dungeonman* is a caricature, but an interesting one. The depiction alludes to Interactive Fantasies’ origins, their rise and fall in the game industry, and their present situation as a grassroots art community. They are mocked for:

- 1 Faux-archaic style - “ye find yeself in yon dungeon”
- 2 Intellectual pretensions - “people with better imaginations”
- 3 Frustration, frustration, frustration - “You can’t get ye flask... I’m certainly not going to tell thou”

In it the quality of the visuals is astounding, and a far cry from the green and black screen that has faint diagonal syncing lines moving across to indicate that it is “ancient.” Yet, there exists within it the distinct disadvantage of flattening choice and interactivity into a linear mode, like pinning butterflies to a board. The audience is a mere passive spectator. The exact opposite happens in the “older” media *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (HHGTTG) game, allowing the user for interactivity. In fact, the HHGTTG’s many manifestations (the radio show, the books, the TV show) made it a multimedia exploration in and of itself. However, both can perform a kind of ideal reading, and they offer a major advantage to the scholar or critic: easily quotable and referenceable text. One thing is clear, the people at Homestar Runner show real affection towards the retro subject matter that it parodies, and the neat skewering of Text Adventure Games here is no exception.