In the Trees by John Peck

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | June 3, 2017

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Caspian Depression Games, 2017
[Caspian Depression](#)
Made with [Twine](#)

In the Trees self-identifies thus: "*In the Trees* is a classic text adventure, created in Twine and inspired by *Zork*, *Adventure*, *Myst*, "Call of Cthulhu," and Nabokov's *Ada*. … warnings for supernatural horror elements, puzzles that may require pen and paper, and occasional poetry."

Trees is ultimately about revelation and the search for meaning, and that about-ness extends to envelop its own description. The more you look at it, the more it reveals.

Trees purports to be "a classic text adventure … created in Twine." This is an impossibility. Text adventures are artifacts of a dead culture. Twine participated in their execution. I'm serious. Emily Short has long been a champion and innovator in interactive fiction, which is what the text adventure became when it stopped being profitable, and in [a recent blog post](#), she all but pronounced parser-based interactive fiction dead. Long live Twine and *Choice of…* games. Twine has drastically expanded the audience of interactive narrative, both writers and readers, in directions both mainstream and experimental, but it has done so by pruning the element of interaction down to the clicking of hyperlinks…sometimes not even a *choice* of

hyperlinks. There would be no way to replicate text adventure's sense of exploration and experimentation in a mere *hypertext fiction* (he said with a supercilious sneer).

Or is there?

Zork and *Adventure* are the protomyths of the text adventure genre, which has reinvented itself in the post-commercial era as "interactive fiction" (this tag has always existed, but it now serves as a useful distinction between "hit troll with sword"-style games and more narratively ambitious works—I'd characterize Peck's work as the latter). *Adventure*, created by MIT programmer Will Crowther in 1976, was the first text adventure and one of the first computer games. Drawing on Crowther's experience as a caver and a pen-and-paper roleplayer, the game sends the player deep into a cave system—populated by pirates, dwarves and dragons—in search of treasure. Like the bulk of the text adventures to come, the twisty little passages of Adventure were navigated via typed commands that mimic natural language. A text parser, playing the role of Dungeon Master, would interpret these commands, such as "go south" or "get lamp," and narrate the outcomes.

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>GO SOUTH
It is pitch black. You are likely to be eaten by a grue.

>LIGHT LANTERN
The lamp is now on.

Junction
You are at the junction of a north-south passage and an
east-west passage. To the north, you can make out the bottom
of a stairway. The ways to the east and south are relatively
cramped, but a wider trail leads to the west.
Standing before you is a great rock. Imbedded within it is an
Elvish sword.

>
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Zork, which debuted in 1980, was the first commercially successful text
adventure and the start of a decade-long era of prosperity for publisher
Infocom. While it featured a more sophisticated parser and richer setting
than *Adventure*, *Zork*, too, was ultimately a cave crawl.

The symbology of this is not lost on Peck. The genre in which he writes arose
from a fascination with the dark places of the earth, and *In the Trees*'
climax returns to a cave system as claustrophobic and terrifying as that of
Zork and *Adventure*—man-eating grues notwithstanding. But in a deeper sense,
Trees mimics the ontological journey of those formative works. What is a cave
descent if not a journey into our folkloric past? Humanity's earliest stories
are recorded on the walls of caves. *Adventure*'s chambers and corridors were
modeled after the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky, but they are also the
caves of Plato's allegory. Illuminated by the brass lanterns of modern
knowledge, shadows appear along the moist stone walls, signifying something
profound and unknowable; the speleological endeavor is really that of the
philosopher, the folklorist and the literary critic all rolled into one: a
search for some higher meaning in the ever-shifting outlines of things.

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A Voice in the Darkness

As you travel through the darkness, you hear a faint voice. As it grows
louder, you realize that the voice is your own, though you have no
memory of ever saying the words you're hearing, nor of the events being
described.




Item received: SPIDER CARD x1

Continue toward the voice.
Close your eyes and cover your ears.
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Trees begins in the belly of one such search. The conceit of the early game
is that a researcher in an Eastern European university has recast a
fictitious mythology, the zodiac of the Parthenoi, as a digital, textual
environment in an attempt to explore its meaning. This part of the game
deliberately uses chunky, antiquated fonts, both in homage to Crowther's work
and as reminder of the antiquity of the myths being explored.

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A Distant Moon

You look up and see a silver, nearly-full moon rising above the dark
treetops. As you watch the moon, its placid surface transforms into a
silvery mouth. The mouth begins moving, making a mysterious,
unintelligible sound.
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Item received: WHALE CARD x1


Try to decipher the sound.
Run away.
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The Parthenoi zodiac is alien to modern notions of astrology. Rather than an
ever-shifting horoscope dominated by waxing and waning star signs, Parthenoi
astrology is more akin to a book of riddles or *kōans*. Each of the twelve
signs is associated with an ambiguous phrase called a *Pasarant*. Rather than
entrust her fate to the stars, each individual passes fluidly between the
signs and their messages. The messages themselves don't change, but their
meanings might, depending on the vantage point of the individual.

Guardian: Whale

Sailors know the depths from the surface.

At night the shimmering waves
make a mouth of the moon.

After ten days at sea,
the land will not be where you left it.

In the Trees takes this premise—that there is meaning hidden in ancient words, meaning that will reveal itself to those who know how to look—and runs with it, breathless. Spoilers follow.

About thirty minutes in, Trees begins dropping hints that it's more than just dusty academics playing at ethnology. A professor of Parsenoi myth, I. Manov, schedules a meeting with the player avatar in which the professor behaves strangely, passing ominous notes without elucidation. With these notes, the player avatar obtains two lenses, one of crystal, the other of shipwright's glass, each of which reveals messages hidden among the sculptures and plaques of the university.

Where have you come from, o child of the dawn?
Can it be there is nowhere your soul can yet rest?
As something in the trees makes them lean to the sun,
Let go of your heart, lest it beat through your chest.

If all your carefree days should be behind you

Myst, designed by Robyn and Rand Miller, is not a text adventure, but it continues the *Zork* lineage. As computer processing power and disk storage grew, text adventures began to incorporate simple graphics, then to allow interaction with the images (rather than typing the command, a player could "look at vase" by selecting the "look at" command and then clicking the picture of a vase). The immediacy and intuitiveness of graphical games

eventually drove the text parser to commercial extinction, and text adventures were deposed by a new format: the point-and-click adventure. *Myst* was not the first purely graphical adventure game—navigated entirely by pointing, clicking and dragging—but its influence on the genre is undeniable.

Myst's focus on visual storytelling conceals a preoccupation with apocryphal texts. Its premise—that special books can "link" disparate worlds, transporting the reader to the setting depicted in their pages—is at odds with its nonverbal presentation. While *Myst* is not a literal cave crawl, it remains an ontological rabbit hole, a search for hidden truths beneath endless layers of obfuscation. Concealed levers transform lighthouses and orreries into elaborate puzzle-locks that hide entire worlds in which, behind yet more covert puzzles, are hidden red and blue pages torn from the books in which Atrus' rotten sons, Sirrus and Achenar, have been imprisoned.

Even in the title, *Myst*, exists a double obfuscation, the obscuring element of air and water, partially obscured by a single character replacement. But mist does not just cover; it also transforms, invites, distorts, confounds, and births.

At first, the brothers' pleas for release are so garbled by static as to be indecipherable, but collecting and replacing more pages clarifies the signal. Eventually, both sons are revealed as murderers and madmen, and the choice—whether to collect the red pages and free Sirrus, or collect the blue pages and free Achenar—reveals itself to be false, as either action brings the narrative to a "bad" conclusion. Some knowledge is a trap; some secrets are hidden for good reason.

It is no coincidence that the hidden words revealed by *In the Trees'* crystal lens are red, or that the words revealed by shipwright's glass are blue, or that their messages are so unremittingly ominous.
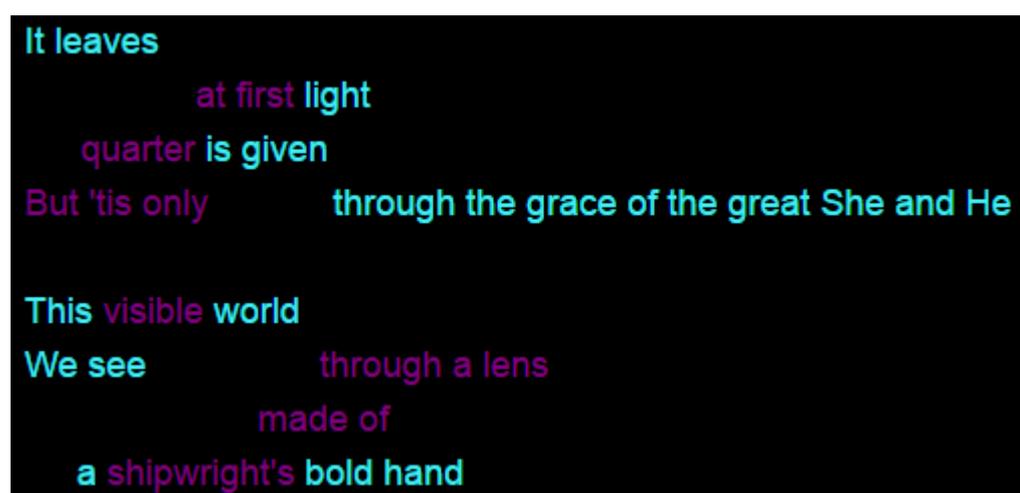
Which brings us to "Call of Cthulhu." One of the most significant motifs in Lovecraft's work is a warning that some might characterize as anti-intellectual. More accurately, it is the voice of a "sensitive" (in the old sense) writer absolutely bewildered by the technological advances of his day. The first lines of "Call of Cthulhu" sum it up nicely:

> The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of
> the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid
> island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it
> was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each
> straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but
> some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up
> such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position
> therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee
> from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

Lovecraft's protagonists, many of them ethnologists like Professor Manov,
through the application of new technologies to old mysteries, end up
uncovering dangerous secrets that drive them to insanity…or invite the
attention of that which was being observed. Without spoiling too much, *Trees*
builds toward a suitably Lovecraftian climax. Ominous notes throughout allude
to the danger of curiosity, effectively establishing a tension between the
desire to unveil the mystery and the surety that such an unveiling would
bring doom upon he who draws back the curtain.

As for *Ada*, it's one of the few Nabokov books I haven't yet finished, but
Peck told me it inspired him to make "the game's setting … become
increasingly uncanny in cascading layers."

In the Trees is a classic text adventure. The hypertext interface expands and
contracts as required by the story: in the middle bits, when gameplay is
dominated by mathy riddles and Easter egg hunts, dozens of hyperlinks can
appear onscreen simultaneously, but as the tension rises, these superfluous
choices fall away, the paucity of options driving the pace of the narrative.
And when it really matters, it's possible to make the Wrong Choice.