**Appetite for Sky**

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**with an introduction by Eoin Murray**

**Interactive Fiction: Experiencing the Flow**

Narrative, themes, and overall interpretations of an interactive text are heavily dependent on the journey the reader goes through and the choices they make. To aid in understanding how we, as humans, can take the most joy and satisfaction from interactive pieces of fiction, this introduction discusses the concept of choice, the states of immersion, engagement, and flow, the pleasures of possible worlds, and the safety of surrogate narratives impacting the satisfactory power of reader agency. It is my hope that, with the benefit of this critical framework, the evocative experience of interactive fiction will be further enhanced for all readers enabling deeper and more personal readings of texts.

Non-interactive (or static) prose and poetry, offers humans the ability to tell stories about the most cost aspects of living, aging and learning (Dutton, 2009); through fulfilling this instinctual desire we, as a species, experience both pleasure in the telling and growth in the learning. This growth has at its core an evolutional benefit to our success as humans (ibid), but we are now far evolved past this most basic need for narrative. And yet, narrative remains the strongest method through which we understand the way we live (Taylor, 1992) when interacting with the world around us. Therefore, we are constantly making hundreds of minute decisions one after another, after another – how shall we dress, where do we work, what can we say, etc., and with these decisions come consequences; some good, others bad and, most concerningly, those unknown. A person may decide to wear a new red shirt to work one day only for their new boss to loathe the colour and thus make a negative first impression. Was that presented as an instance in the dresser’s mind first thing? Almost certainly not. But, being so schooled in managing our own lives, we often give automatic thought over to these decisions based on our evolving schemata of life (Rumelhart, 1980). Choice, then, is an intrinsic part of our lives; narrative too forms the most common lens through which we grasp the world around us. Bringing choice and narrative together seems like a natural combination and such stories offers readers a new form of surrogate experience through which they are presented with a world of infinite possibilities. The surrogate aspect is key though; while a person may never risk a decision such as ‘screaming into a bin in public’ (Lilwall & Loydell, 2023) when moving through their day-to-day life for fear of reproach, in the realm of narrative, of fiction the choice offers no such consequence.

This is not to say interactive fiction provides no consequence for the reader. Fiction presents humans with ‘a world of actuality surrounded by possibility’ (Boyd, 2010: 177) yet a written, finished artefact can only present a finite number of choices. It is up to the author (or authors in this case) to offer their reader possibilities that seem endless but are in fact easily quantifiable. ‘Appetite for Sky’presents at first a rather everyday scenario: being out watching a swan; this is likely an experience almost all readers can identify with – if not with a swan than with any bird. The reading experience is immersive, meaning almost at once the reader can become absorbed within the comforting confines of a familiar situation (Douglas and Hargadon, 2000). However, as the short passage draws to a close the reader is now presented with an, at first glimpse, simple choice to make: sit and watch, or go and get coffee. If a person were experiencing this situation, they could make the choice with little to no thought based on their current condition. Within the fictional premise they have embarked upon, the magic circle (Huizinga, 1938) they have stepped into, all at once the decision goes beyond the commonplace event. To sit and watch could mean the swan transforms to a grand phoenix, to go for coffee means to fall through an interdimensional portal and fly through space. Equally, the choices could be just that, to linger with the swan or enjoy a fresh drink, but the mental journey the reader takes before even engaging with the new step of their journey is already elevated through the joy of the surrogate – there is no negative consequence to this adventure. ‘Appetite for Sky’presents the satiation of experience for a reader in both the passages they experience, and the potential left in the ones they do not

Lingering in a state of uncertainty as they move through the passages, being blind as to what comes next, places the reader on the other side of an affective experience – that of engagement. To be engaged is to at once hold enough understanding to be comfortable yet be unsure where the narrative will progress (Douglas and Hargadon, 2000). In a more static narrative, devoid of reader choice, engagement can be a somewhat more difficult state to reach. As a society we have honed our formulas for storytelling and following repeated exposure can often predict such points long before they happen – the death of the mentor, the failing of the hero, the happy ending. When a reader if offered a choice, the responsibility moves to them, the consequences lie with them (Rouse III, 2009) and suddenly, all things seem possible. As a reader moves through the cavalcade of differing experiences ‘Appetite for Sky’gives them, they constantly shift their placement along the spectrum of immersed and engaged. This shifting of position aims to culminate in that most pleasurable of states – flow. When a reader is experiencing flow, they are at once immersed and engaged simultaneously (Douglas and Hargadon, 2000); the joy they feel knowing they are free to make their exploratory choices meshes with the excitement and curiosity they feel wishing to know just where their journey will take them next. The sea, the sky, the bottle, a bin, all options are at once open and accessible to them and yet closed off and left behind. So, the reader is not met with one possible telling, one incarnation of ‘Appetite for Sky’ but the possibility for multiple versions, each unique in its retelling. Each rereading presents as a new ‘construct of the imagination, a new object of aesthetic contemplation’ (Ryan, 2019: 62) the reader may move through differently.

The method through which the reader will move through ‘Appetite for Sky’ is at once very simple yet cognitively complex. As has been discussed, unlike the more static prose and poetry designed to be read in a linear fashion from beginning to end, the reader must choose from options offered to create the order of passages they will read. Each and every time a decision is made the reader is enacting something known as agency. A key term within fields of interactive fiction and ludological studies, agency is briefly defined as ‘the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices’ (Murray, 1997: 126). In agency do we find the ultimate pay-off for immersing and engaging with interactive works – from entirely prose based pieces such as ‘Appetite for Sky’to complex ludological experiences such as the latest ‘Call of Duty’ (Treyarch, 2010): satisfaction in making a choice. We have established making choices comes naturally to us as humans through our evolved schemata but now comes understanding of the pleasure making those choices can offer. The joy of participation within a safe, fictional space that offers all the possibilities in the world is an experience only narrative media such as ‘Appetite for Sky’can provide. Through careful, thought-provoking choice text, a reader can have a different journey through the piece time and time again knowing each read through was *their* experience, was their journey. The decisions made were never hollow, as each helped construct a reader’s understanding of the piece, but they were always safe, and within a world as chaotic as this, safety can provide comfort and satisfaction as much as the beautiful imagery Lilwall & Loydell evoke throughout the work. The reader crafts their own ‘Appetite for Sky’ through the tools and content the author has given them alongside their meaningful decisions.

To conclude, having discussed the differing narrative and cognitive functions a reader can experience engaging with an interactive piece of writing, the reader can move through ‘Appetite for Sky’knowing they are crafting their own adventure. The experience is theirs to savour, theirs to indulge in and, should they wish, theirs to repeat as many times as they continually find meaning. They have the choice to see how each passage builds on the ones selected before and revel in the satisfaction of their journey. And, perhaps most importantly, they may make whichever choices their heart leans to; in this experience they are safe and creative.

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**Appetite for Sky**

**1am**

The swan on the Brayford has puffed up its wings. I have never seen that before, but the shape is often captured in porcelain and on white wedding cakes. It swims alone but should be part of a pair. I'd like to think that it is creating more surface area to absorb the sun. There are picnic tables by the water and it would be nice to see the swan swim off somewhere. Although, it is rather cold.

I'll get a coffee (go to **3am**)

I'll sit and watch (go to **4am**)

**2am**

The nearby coffee shop, housed in a shed painted to look like a beach hut, is closed, despite a sign saying OPEN FOR FRESH DRINKS AND SNACKS on the pavement nearby. By the time I wander back to the river there are four swans and a group of ducks, attracted by a group of children noisily throwing bread to them. I decide to walk on and leave them to it, but should I

stroll further along the riverbank (go to **4am**)

walk to the coffee shop in town (go to **7am**)

**3am**

Guadeloupe is green and swaying. Coffee is served with a sturdy square of chocolate under the roof of a wall-less barn. I warm my nose over the cup and watch a black and yellow caterpillar’s slow concertina towards a stone path. When the sky clears, I will wander up to the vanilla flowers. There is only one day during the year that each one can be pollinated. I might find one today. Should I

pollinate the vanilla flowers (go to **8am**)

go to the beach (go to **11am**)

**4am**

Here, the river is quieter, wider, slower. The swans look elegant compared to the ridiculous pedalos chained up on the towpath now it is out of season. Their wooden heads and wings are awkward, the black and white paint peeling, their beaks a faded lipstick red. I turn my back and watch the water, ducks diving for whatever ducks dive for, and the single canoeist trying to stay in the sun and avoid the wildlife. A single heron stands on one leg in the mud on the opposite bank, but flies off as shutters clatter behind me. The owner of Guadeloupe has decided to open late and attempt to cash in on the cold sunshine. I might

get a drink and something to eat (go to **3am**)

leave her be and stroll back home (go to **9am**)

**5am**

They sell rabbit in the supermarket here. It makes sense, but I don’t like the way the meat tapers into hot-pink edges. That and the dirty tiles underfoot, the aluminium trays, the blood smell. Bottles of oil stand dusty on a counter above piled up till rolls. A man wipes his hands, finger by finger, on an old tea towel. I will not eat the rabbit, but I would like to do something different today. So I buy it. Only when the cold polythene is lumped into my hand do I feel sad. I need a breath of air. I’ll either

watch the swan on the Brayford (go to **1am**)

or walk to the pet shop (go to **noon**)

**6am**

This morning there is a large broken branch in the corner of our garden, blown down by last night's wind. Next door, however, are dealing with a half-ton branch which has broken their side gate and is blocking the alley to the next close. She says she will phone her father, who has a chainsaw, soon. Our apples are still clinging on to the tree where I cannot reach them, small rosy suns against the darkening green as autumn does its gradual damage. The wind has dropped and the sun come out, the cat is sprawled on the damp patio table, content with everything. Maybe I'll

make myself a cup of coffee in the kitchen (go to **10am**)

or take a walk to the pet shop to buy her more food (go to **noon**)

**7am**

The barriers come down at the level crossing just as I approach. I decide to keep walking until I am on an East Yorkshire cliff, bracing myself against the North Sea wind. I never learned to swim, and that’s not why I’m here. I retreat from the coast and step through the town, keeping my footsteps inside the edges of each cobble. The best brews are served up north, specifically in this coffee shop with the striped awning and the large, blue macaw that sits by the window. It is not in a cage. I like that. I admire the feathers pouring down its back like brushstrokes. I would like to

be somewhere warmer than here (go to **3am**)

walk to the pet shop (go to **noon**)

**8am**

There are handy little brushes hanging next to the vanilla plants to encourage you to help pollinate the plants. The insects here are sunburnt, hot and exhausted; need all the assistance they can get. They prefer to laze with iced cups of nectar while we celebrate Pollination Day. Tonight there will be singing and dancing for all, in the summer there will be buds and flowers, new leaves and growth, along with much scratching and killing of insects which bite rather than perform their duty. I look forward to the party, but while I wait I will

see what is happening back home (go to **9am**)

relax on the beach (go to **11am**)

**9am**

Home is dark after half-four. The low sun is caught behind the chimney of the house opposite. The last wedge of gold dies in the corner of a top floor window. She arrives, whispering through the house like a shudder. Then she is gone. I sit in the dark and ask her to stay longer, but of course, she can’t hear me. The cat comes to my reading chair, tipping his face upwards. I drag my hand from its neck to its tail. He tolerates me; he knows this is the only service he can provide. She will come again tomorrow, I say. Don’t worry. And I will have some pancakes ready. For now, I should

go to the kitchen (go to **10am**)

follow her (go to **1pm**)

**10am**

In the kitchen I find myself already making coffee. I do not seem surprised to see me, although I am disconcerted by this apparition of my doppelgänger. 'Want a cup?' I ask. 'Yes please,' I reply. I hand myself a mug of coffee made just the way I like it: strong enough to stand a spoon up in, bitter enough to cut through anything that might challenge its caffeine content. 'Which way did you come?' I ask. 'Oh, just from the garden,' I say. 'You?' 'I've been home all along.' 'Best be getting on.' 'Me too.' But I don't know whether to

escape to the pub (go to **2pm**)

risk bad dreams again (go to **5pm**)

**11am**

Darkness is lit from below by the moon’s reflection. There are holes in the sand where the razor clams burrow and the sea is hemmed with starfish. A woman is selling silver from a tray that she holds on her hip. I wish she wasn’t here. We were fine, the moon, the clams the starfish and me. I wonder if there is a place in the sky where you can bottle its colour. Very high up, perhaps. I would fill my vessel with dark blue and one, small star. I think she would agree, the woman with the tray, that daylight is too full of cloud. Do I

get something to eat (go to **5am**)

bottle the night sky (go to **3pm**)

**Noon**

The pet shop has that smell of non-specific animal, and is full of non-buying customers poking their fingers through the cage sides at gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits and a litter of kittens. I sometimes wish they would let children stroke the poisonous spiders and cuddle the snakes, but instead I fight my way through to the counter and ask for a large bag of dried food, pay by card, and escape out on to the pavement. I stop to take a breath, wondering

if the pub will mind me taking a bag of pet food in (go to **2pm**)

what it's like to be a kitten (go to **4pm**)

**1pm**

She sits in the elbow of a low willow branch, right at the end of the garden. Her toes don’t quite reach the floor and her tights are muddy. Firelight makes her feel nervous, she told me once. Perhaps that’s why she’s always outside. Had I known she sat here all day and all night, I would have brought her a blanket. Now, her head is bent over a creature in her hands. How it got that near to her, I don’t know. I close my eyes to the thought and when I open them again, she is looking at me. Before I speak, she disappears, leaving a black and white kitten mewling on the branch. Well, now I want to

know what it’s like to be a kitten (go to **4pm**)

scream into a bin (go to **8pm**)

**2pm**

A man goes into a bar, somewhat breathless from carrying a large sack of pet food. The barman apologises that his favourite bitter is out of stock until tomorrow's delivery; they have no crisps or nuts either. I don't care, settle for expensive lager and a bar of chocolate, and then repeat. A man sits in a bar until it gets dark outside and he thinks about going home to eat. I stand, take my empty glass to the bar and drift along the street, gently inebriated, enjoying the long way home. I might

go into the supermarket and treat myself to something nice for tea (go to **5am**)

have to scream loudly because I have left the pet food in the pub (go to **8pm**)

**3pm**

The lid to my bottle is rough with teeth marks. Bits of label stick to the plastic. If I were the night sky, I would not want to be kept like this. Still, the oak tree up on the yellow hill has a branch that grows horizontally like a long arm. I perch on it and hold my bottle out into the air, as far as I can reach. The sky creeps closer, then pulls away a drop of itself and slips inside. Then more follows, oozing through the neck and piling up the sides. It could be night-blue custard. My bottle overflows and I tell the sky to step back. It does. It is more curious than I had imagined; it enjoyed this new thing. It watches me as I twist on the lid and climb back down from the branch. Do I

hope it will cure my bad dreams (go to **4pm**)

drink it (go to **11pm**)

**4pm**

Do cats dream of being a kitten, snug and warm, leaning against or feeding from their mother, or have nightmares about a fox in the garden, or wonder why they can never see, let alone catch, the owl who calls each moonlit night? I don't even know if cats dream at all, although they snore: whenever a bad dream wakes me up the cat is curled up or laid out contentedly, making a noise. No comfort for me, especially on nights like tonight, with another storm blown in, threatening damage. Whether I sleep or not, dream or not, the morning will eventually arrive and I must get out of bed. I wonder

what the storm damage is this time? (go to **6pm**)

why time is so slow this time of year? (go to **10pm**)

**5pm**

I am a rat, in a smooth, clean pipe, and my teeth are growing at a rate of four centimetres per year. The tips of the incisors drag between my paws. My eyes see, but there is nothing here. I can’t eat, yet I do not die. I wait for the day when these great, growing tusks push my head up to the roof of the pipe and I am stuck. Or worse. But for now, I scamper on, and try to shout at me – sleeping me – that this is a bad dream. I won’t listen, of course, but at some point I will wake up. The first thing I’ll do is go out, anywhere as long as it’s outside. Maybe I’ll…

check out the ducks (go to **2am**)

paint the skirting boards (go to **6pm**)

**6pm**

I hate bloody D.I.Y. That's what builders are for, that's what moving house is for. Sand and prepare, prime and undercoat, top coat and repeat. Keep your fingers away from it, don't get paint on the carpet or the floor. Are you sure that's the same colour? I am. Are you sure you don't mind doing this? Yes I do. I said we should never have painted it magnolia, I told you woodchip was passé. I told you not to tell me any more. Are you sure you aren't getting stressed and overwrought? Maybe.

Are you sure I can't go

and hide in the garden? (go to **6am**)

to the pub? (go to **9pm**)

**7pm**

Imagine a pile of wet leaves in darkness. Underneath it, there is a hole. There is no ladder, no drip-drip, no sleeping bear. It is empty. What is more, the pathway that leads to it doesn’t exist. If it did, it would be stony with the odd puddle to reflect the moonlight. But it doesn’t. There are no footprints outside, no bike leaning against the silver birch. No silver birch. The rabbit that stops to twitch its nostrils at the air is not there. A fox doesn’t wander past at night. Nothing leads to the hole, yet the hole is here. As are you. You’d like to move on now; I’m not at all surprised. Do you

go for a reviving snack? (go to **2am**)

stick around and decorate the place (go to **6pm**)

**8pm**

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! The sound reverberates and echoes as I lift my head from the dustbin. I breathe deep and let rip again: Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh! As though we're in an old-fashioned film, someone opens a window and tells me to 'Shut the fuck up', before slamming the window shut again. I contemplate a third exhalation and decide against it; the someone sounded bigger than me. I feel better anyway, stride off down the alley, relaxed and purposeful, though

I am tempted by the pub on the corner of the next street (go to **9pm**)

I almost slip in the wet leaves, which makes me pause a moment to consider the nature of the world we live in (go to **11pm**)

**9pm**

There is a footprint on the table I see. Dusty with an intricate tread. This is a micro-pub. The size of a double bedroom in a semi-detached house. Or a garage for one car. Or an underground bunker. There are no windows. Just a bar-person with a knotted headscarf, pushing a cloth around a bar stool seat. A DJ has taken one of the tables to set up his decks. That leaves two. The footprint one and another, occupied by two lost walkers (I can tell by their shoes) with crisps that they push staringly into their mouths. Dirty tables make me wince, perhaps I should leave. The bar person hurries over and wipes away the mark. ‘I was pinning the bell to the ceiling,’ she says. I look up at the tilted, foil bell, pinned by a bit of string into the artex. Decorations. In November. I slide onto the bench behind the table. Now, all I have to do is

make myself small enough to escape through a pipe (go to **5pm**)

wonder why time is so slow (go to **10pm**)

**10pm**

It's all a blur to be honest. I don't know if I'm not paying attention, I'm distracted or what, but everything moves at a snail's space at the moment. Sometimes I wonder if the scientists have got it wrong about time? They talk about experiential time, and how gravity and planetary orbits affect it all, how all of time exists at once, but I'm not convinced. I mean, I remember the time before they decided all this, I remember growing up and things being different. Surely, science is just one form of explanation, a well-meaning but tentative deduction from the current information to hand? If I was sure of everything, I'd give up and

go and watch the swans (go to **1am**)

spend more time with my ex-partner (go to **1pm**)

**11pm**

The bottle changes depending on the weather. Today it is raining; droplets fly into its sides like birds into glass doors. My piece of sky is curdled grey and white, just like its mother outside, so that when I hold the bottle up to the window, I can barely see its outline. Why I would choose to drink rainy sky is beyond me. Sometimes it is Smartie blue, sometimes it is pink gold; I have learned that one’s appetite for sky does not depend on the colour, but on the mood. My hands untwist the lid as if they are working independently from my body. Before it can ooze out and upwards, I tilt the contents into my mouth. It tastes like rainwater from a metal bucket. I must either drink it all, or screw the cap back on, but the bottle is empty before I have made up my mind. I don’t know what it will do to me. Someone told me once that

nothing will happen until midnight (go to **midnight**)

I will immediately shrink to the size of a bee (go to **8am**)

**Midnight**

Time is the continued sequence of existence and events that occurs in an apparently irreversible succession from the past, through the present*.* Your clock is 2 hours, 25 minutes and 15.4 seconds behind. Accuracy of synchronization was ±0.005 seconds. Be careful or you'll miss the chimes and kisses from strangers, last orders or the bus back home. You can never have enough blue sky, because otherwise it's dark or grey, like your mood. There must be other ways to tell the time besides asking strangers? There must be another way to live apart from being a stranger. It's strange the way you drink the air, the rain, the whole experience of everything you do, where you are, what you see, how you feel. You leave me feeling underwhelmed, as though I'm missing out, although I was alright before we met. My friends think

I should take a holiday (go to **7am**)

bottle my own night sky (go to **3pm**)

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