

# Some Final Thoughts on *Repeat the Ending* (Smythe, Searcy, and Cook)

## ***Repeat the Ending*: Project Notes**

**Pauline Searcy, Executive Editor**

I first became aware of a game called *Repeat the Ending* in 2003, when a “transcript” of a long-forgotten 1996 Inform 5 game became a topic of interest in my field, which we presently call “new media studies.” The question I and others had was this: can a record of video game play, be it a film, photograph, or even a narrative account of a play session, be considered a text separate from the game, with its own authorship (the player must share authorial duties and credits, many of us thought), critical and interpretive vectors, and theories of aesthetics and craft? Since that transcript had no corresponding playable game, it seemed an ideal proving ground for these and many other questions.

Since I have always subscribed to a reception-oriented conception of meaning-making, I thought that we, my peers and I, needed to map the contours of the transcript’s unique rhetorical situation. In the case of a transcript or other artifact generated during gameplay, three parties each had a role to play in defining what such a text might “mean.” Certainly, the author had something to do with it, even if critics tend to overestimate their role. The player, too, was an author, since their choices determined what would and would not be part of the record. Finally, a reader would decide for themselves what the text meant *to them*. Since game narratives were not often interpreted in terms of audience reception in those days (or possibly even now), the 2003 transcript of *Repeat the Ending* was an opportunity for critics to devise new avenues of inquiry, many of which have broad applications beyond the borders of that game.

As I always do when researching a more or less contemporary text, I contacted the supposed author (Drew Cook) for comments on the transcript. He denied knowing anything about it, though I cannot guess who, if not him, might have published it. In the twenty years since its appearance, no one has stepped forward to contextualize it, let alone claim responsibility for it. The transcript, as we all know, does not match the source code in many places, and it is tempting to say that the transcript is authorially recursive: its murky provenance becomes one of its themes, inseparable from the text. It is of itself, about itself, running toward and away from itself. It obscures problems in the text by either creating or calling attention to other problems.

Critics love these sorts of head games—at least my friends and I do—and we enjoyed the idea of new types of storytelling conveyed in the format of transcriptions and recordings of video

games. There are epistolary novels, after all, why not a story told in a record of play? The 2003 transcript became a critical touchstone for me as an example of a text that dramatizes both the authorship and consumption of itself. Occasionally, someone would bring it up in a bit of writing or conversation. For many of us, I don't think it ever faded from memory.

Things probably could have gone on in that way indefinitely, with me occasionally thinking of *Repeat the Ending* with a bit of affectionate bafflement before moving on, if I hadn't gotten myself into a conversation about paratext in digital narratives. That discussion happened one boozy night in after a long day of conference panels in Akron, Ohio. I told my conversation partner—not quite honestly, I admit—that I had an active correspondence with the author of *Repeat the Ending*, and that we were spit balling a project to release a playable version of the game along with footnotes, as well as critical and historical texts. I presented it as a proof of concept for a series of “critical editions” for more familiar canonical works like *Zork* and the like. This was not completely true, either. *RTE* is hardly a means to any end of mine. As the years have gone by, my interest in *Repeat the Ending* had become increasingly personal. The reasons for that aren't important. I'll simply say that I am a person living a life populated by persons, and that I wanted something better and different, not only for *RTE*, but for *D*, its protagonist. My life had led me there.

Drew Cook, the author of *Repeat the Ending*, was not hard to convince. In fact, I never needed to convince him at all. I think he had been waiting for someone—anyone, really—to see *him* refracted through this work, to take him seriously, not as the penitent half of a confessional encounter, but as a capital-A ARTIST. Over the course of several messages and phone calls, we mapped out a project scope and schedule. He would work with C. A. Smythe, a user experience designer, to upgrade the code to Inform 7. This process would include the design of several new usability features, such as tutorials, information management commands, and the like. For my part, I would secure the contributions of two critics that seldom agree, D. S. Collins and A. H. Montague. Along with Smythe and myself, they would contribute annotations and critical responses to the new text of *Repeat the Ending*.

In addition to editorial duties, I accepted responsibility for curating historical responses to *Repeat the Ending* over the years. In total, I think those responses reflect changes in the discourse surrounding interactive fiction over twenty-five years. If one thing is missing, it is a critique of reactionary responses to the rise of choice IF in the early teens. I thought and continue to think that *Repeat the Ending* is a very early example of interactive fiction that resists the “thingification” of fictive worlds. I suppose, given the possibility of future critical IF texts, I was conflict-averse when I really should have been courageous. I'll say now that, despite its parser design, *RTE* is more concerned with emotional realities than it is with world modelling. As such, it is allied with games that share similar narrative philosophies, including a great number of choice-based games.

While I was preoccupied with other professional obligations, Cook and Smythe were quite busy. After building the main throughline of the game, they proceeded to devise methods for tracking annotations. They also added to the original text of *Repeat the Ending* in many ways. Perhaps the most notable change was a self-referential framework for the protagonist to actively rebel against the original text of the game [This is my interpretation. Cook has never explained his intent behind the scoring system.]. A significant amount of code and text were added to support this new narrative tactic. Cook wrote several new endings to the game, based on this framework. In fact, many features were added and subtracted from the core text, and these changes often altered the meaning (or possible meanings) of the story. While I had never envisioned this project as a rewrite, I meant to keep my original promise to Cook as an author. That is, I regarded his work as artistic and him as an artist. I would not intrude or encroach with regard to his freedom as a creator.

Our original plan was to debut *Repeat the Ending* at the 2021 Spring Thing Festival of Interactive Fiction, but the COVID pandemic interfered with the entire team's ability to meet deadlines. Some members experienced personal challenges, while others faced serious logistical problems. Whatever the individual cases were, it was not possible to release the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary version of *Repeat the Ending* on its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. I suppose the important thing is that it is here at last. Perhaps generous critics will regard it as fashionably late.

Testing and festival feedback was constructive, and the text of *RTE* has continued to be refined up to the moment of this post-festival (and possibly final) release. Several important updates and artifacts are now available at the IFDB page for *Repeat the Ending*:

- Release 2 of *Repeat the Ending*
- This postmortem document
- A zipped folder of high-resolution images from the game
- The 2003 transcript
- An all-new 2023 transcript of the updated work
- "An Interdimensional Entity's Guide to Primeoid Fashion"
- Release 2 source code

Eventually, this content will be released to Itch, but Cook and Smythe consider Inform 7's "release with an interpreter" feature to be, in their words, "a hassle."

The critical reception of *Repeat the Ending* has been fantastic—the entire team is very happy with responses to *RTE*. Will there be more critical editions of interactive fiction texts? It is too early to say, but I doubt anyone would claim that we have not arrived at a viable model.

What else is there? I am grateful to Drew Cook for fully investing himself in this project, and, of course, to Smythe, Collins, and Montague. I also thank my partner for tolerating the many late and long nights hunched over the keyboard that this project demanded. I know it was a lot, and a lot is owed in return.

Pauline Searcy  
Conway, Arkansas

## ***Repeat the Ending: A Note on New Features and Artifacts***

### **C. A. Smythe**

Very little, mechanically, has changed since *Repeat the Ending* made its debut in the 2023 Spring Thing Festival of Interactive Fiction. Despite rather frequent assertions that line spacing is an easy and obvious matter in Inform 7, Drew Cook and I have continued to correct related issues up to the very day of this second release. Perhaps there is only our own verbosity to blame.

None of code changes in Version 3 are very interesting. There have been minor tweaks to the text, but nothing that would change its meaning. The most important alterations are related to player experiences with screen reader technologies. Nearly every change is related to presentation and polish: necessary, yes, and prompted by helpful player feedback, but none will alter the core experience of *Repeat the Ending*.

That being so, you may wonder: “Why has C. A. Smythe been given her own section in the project postmortem?” I am here to announce and explain a new mode of reading the text of *Repeat the Ending*. For any number of reasons, one might be unable or unwilling to experience RTE as an interactive text. While it is meant to be played as a game, readers may be able to experience the text as an ergodic work. “Ergodic literature” is a term used to describe texts that require a “nontrivial effort” to traverse. Some new documents have been created to guide readers through this experience. Readers should consume these texts in the following order:

1. Read the “2023 RTE Transcript”
2. Review the original artwork for the game (brief text descriptions of the images are included in a separate file)
3. Read the feelie PDF containing “An Extradimensional Entity’s Guide to Primeoid Fashion” and the “2003 Transcript”
4. Spend some time with the “Reader’s Companion to *Repeat the Ending*” (simply open the game and type FULL GUIDE or FG at the command prompt). I especially recommend the “general questions” in the “Hints and Other Questions” section.

The 2023 transcript is, in many ways, a completionist’s playthrough. Every optional point has been found.

Drew Cook's intention in devising this alternative to play is accommodation of people who, for whatever reason, cannot complete the text via gameplay. The approach may benefit researchers and reviewers, too, which would be a welcome outcome. Note that the 2023 transcript is not an ideal source of hints, since it meanders and engages with optional content. The hints contained in the GUIDE will doubtlessly be a greater help to players.

C. A. Smythe  
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## ***Repeat the Ending: A Note to Unhurried Players***

### **Drew Cook**

What can I say about this project that has gone unsaid? It is (both games together) my first and only work of Interactive Fiction. I spent over a thousand hours on the new version alone. The reactions to it, so different from assessments of the 1996 version, are as surprising as they are welcome. Many, many games influenced the mechanics and narrative of *Repeat the Ending*. I will name a few—there is no space to list them all—in gratitude.

- *Enchanter* (Dave Lebling and Marc Blank)
- *Howling Dogs* (Porpentine)
- *Photopia* (Adam Cadre)
- *In the End* (Joe Mason)
- The *Pageantverse* games and *A Paradox Between Worlds* (Autumn Chen)
- *Stein's;Gate* (Chiyomaru Shikura, Naotaka Hayashi, Shimokura Vio, Tanizaki Ouka)
- *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (Steve Meretzky)

As an iterative writer, I began with the main story, then added more and more content until the themes were realized. In this new version, the young boy was always going to receive what was lost to his mother, and he was always going to give it back. I knew that before I knew anything else. What do such moments mean? Each of you may answer differently, based on the shape and length of your life. That answer is yours to reach, and I have no right or wish to confirm or correct anyone. I will only say that the ache that I felt when writing the ending felt as sweet as it felt bottomless, if you know what I mean. Do you know what I mean?

*Repeat the Ending* is a big game, and it is deeper than it is long. I think of it as an excavation. At least, that is the experience that I attempted to build for people. I think that it is ideally played slowly, with frequent breaks (or even vacations), to allow players to linger, meander, and burrow without growing bored or exhausted. Getting the required number of points for the “true

ending," which I've reduced to 17 in this new release, for instance, is a journey best arrived at in small steps.

I'm very grateful to players who have maundered through *Repeat the Ending* in this way: whether reading the \*GUIDE\*, messing with fail states, or looking at the 2003 transcript. You must have thought my game was worth a bit more of your time, and, possibly, believed the story deserved more than just a cursory glance. Thank you for diagnosing obviously pointless things, as a first example. For those of you who read the John Berryman poems: you are my people. If you NITFOled THE FROGS, read hints you didn't need, blew up the car three times, UNTANGLED THE CORDS, got killed by Battle Princess Chiyo, LOOKed UNDER CHAIRs, DIAGNOSEd yourself forty times, or otherwise rebelled against the main throughline of *Repeat the Ending*, thank you. If you listened to the soundtrack, thank you.

You chose to engage, in ways great and small, with content that I didn't force you to look at, and you were not in a hurry to conclude your time with *RTE*. Ultimately, readers like you are the yardstick by which I measure my work. I didn't have to drag you along. Instead, you played because you wanted to, just as I wrote *RTE* because I wanted to. Here we have met, having freely chosen to meet in this place.

That makes all the difference to me, whenever and whatever I write. Thanks to your reactions to *Repeat the Ending*, I have decided to write another Inform 7 game. While I am not ready to make an announcement, some of you may be able to guess what it is about.

Let's make another story sometime. Together.

Drew Cook  
Lafayette, Louisiana  
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