

# A Qualitative Study on Using Interactive Fiction for Enhancing Employability Skills



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## **ABSTRACT**

***The paper is an attempt to find out the use of online interactive fiction in enhancing the employability skills of the students. It is a qualitative study, in which feedback of students who played an online interactive fiction game was collected. The feedback revealed that the students had the scope of using and developing their critical, creative, lateral, logical, analytical, problem solving, decision making and inter personal skills.***

With the proliferation of engineering institutions particularly in South India, a large number of students pursue their education in these institutions for securing placement in multinational companies through campus interviews. Further the companies also look for candidates who are reasonably proficient in both language skills and soft skills. They expect the institutions to train their students on these skills so that they could focus more on technical aspects during the training they provide soon after the recruitment. Therefore, the teachers of English language are shouldered with the responsibility of training the students on soft skills in addition to language skills and make them industry ready.

The culture of young learners today differs from the culture of the previous generation who were only exposed to analogue technologies like broadcast radio, television

and print-based texts. For these young learners, computers are not considered to be technology but rather a natural part of life, the internet is better than TV, multitasking is a way of life and staying connected to others through the use of technologies is essential (Frاند 16). Prensky (2001) also points out that today's students are surrounded by a ubiquitous digital environment and as a result they "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" (1). The deployment of ICTs as learning tools is a useful way of providing a variety of learning paths for young learners with different learning abilities. Gardner sees the potential for individualized learning "to be enhanced significantly by technology" (179). He also states that, "It is not easy for teachers to provide individualized curricula and pedagogy...Happily, we have in our grasp today technology that should allow a

quantum leap in the delivery of individualized services for both students and teachers...that addresses the different intelligences (and) that allows students to exhibit their own understandings in diverse symbol systems (linguistic, numerical, musical, graphic, and more)” (179).

Considering the needs of the companies and attitude of the students an attempt was made to find out the use of online interactive fictions in enhancing the employability skills of the students. In this competitive era, the ability to think analytically, laterally and critically; make decisions and solve problems are being considered as the major requisites in the job market. Interactive fictions provide scope for using these skills and hence this paper attempts to show the possibility of using interactive fictions to enhance the employability skills of the students.

Interactive fiction, otherwise known as text adventures, is a software simulating environment where the reader acts as a protagonist and determines the progress and end of a story. In other words, it tells the reader the beginning of the story and lets the reader decide the actions of the main character of the story. The reader helps the main character overcome the obstacles to his progress. This requires readers to analyse the given situation, think critically, arrive at a solution to the given problem and make appropriate decisions. The reader uses text commands to control characters and influence the environment.

The game starts with an introduction,

usually consisting of one or a few printed text on the screen, giving some background on who the protagonist is, where he/she is, and perhaps even what are the objectives of the reader/player in the game. Whenever the game has printed text on the screen, it will wait until the player press ENTER or some other key, so that he/she get a chance to read everything before it scrolls off the top of the screen. When the introduction is over, the player will get a prompt, usually “>”, but it may be a little different from game to game. The prompt means that the game is now waiting for the player to tell it what he/she wants to do. This is done by typing imperative commands, as if commanding or instructing someone.

The study of the history of interactive fiction revealed that computer-based interactive fiction began in 1975 with Infocom’s *Adventure* which was followed by *Zork* and *Ultima Series*. In 1990 the bestselling book *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was adapted by Douglas Adams as interactive fiction. In 1990 text-based MUDs (multi-user dungeons) was introduced which enabled multiple players to join together in online virtual worlds. Since then efforts were taken by the game designers to create games by taking into consideration the personality traits and needs of the players. In other words, people play games for different reasons; some play to socialize, others to collect objects, and some others to compete and win and all these player types are considered while designing games in the virtual world.

The study of literature on the use of

interactive fiction for educational purposes revealed that a large number of researches have been done on the use of interactive fiction for language learning, problem solving and enhancing creative and critical thinking. According to Pereira IF can provide an extremely motivating and engaging reading experience which may provide opportunities for the improvement of reading skills, and potentially contribute to better reading fluency and at the same time enable building schema and scripts, and exercising important critical and lateral thinking skills. Desilets (2016) explained the thinking process involved in interactive fiction by applying Sternberg's (1984) componential theory of intelligence. According to him interactive fiction, like any kind of literature, involves all three kinds of components - metacomponent, performance component and knowledge acquisition component- but it offers an especially compelling approach to metacomponents in that it forces readers to think about how they control their thinking. In the study conducted by Grimley et.al., interactive fiction was used as a tool to bridge theory and practice in meaningful ways within online and face-to-face pre-service teacher education. The perceptions of the students and teachers towards using interactive fiction for educational purpose is positive that Desilets in his blog wrote "Many students find interactive fiction, also known as IF or adventure gaming, an enjoyable way to gain experience with all of the major elements of literature (though point of view takes an unusual twist or two), and teachers who are comfortable with it

soon find that it grows well in the classroom, even if there's only one computer available."

The present study aims to study the possibility of enhancing the employability skills through interactive fiction. Fifteen engineering students undergoing Communication and Soft Skills Course participated in the study. They were first time users of interactive fiction and therefore in addition to explaining to them how to play a game, list of verbs that are commonly understood by the interactive fiction were given to them. (See Appendix I). The students were asked to play online the interactive fiction "Lost Pig" and an hour later their experiences were collected as feedback. Lost Pig, is a story that was written by a person whose pen-name is Admiral Jota. In 2007, when it first appeared, Lost Pig won the fall IF Competition, and it later took prestigious XZZY Awards for Best Game, Best Writing, Best Individual Non-Player Character, and Best Player/Character. It is a comedic work of interactive fiction about an orc retrieving a pig that escaped from a pig farm. The game's protagonist is Grunk, an orc who works at a farm. A pig under his care has escaped, and the game begins with Grunk looking for the pig. Chasing the pig, Grunk soon falls into an underground complex. To win the game, the player must get Grunk to capture the pig and find a way out of the complex.

Among the various interactive fictions available, Lost Pig was chosen for the study as kids appreciate Lost Pig as a tale for all ages. The students worked on it for nearly

**Appendix I:** An entire strategy guide on a single postcard- Written by Andrew Plotkin — design by Lea Albaugh

You just started up a game and now you're staring at text and a blinking cursor and you don't know what to do!

Don't panic kids— Crazy Uncle Zarf is here to help you get started...

These commands are very common:

EXAMINE it	PUSH it
TAKE it	PULL it
DROP it	TURN it
OPEN it	FEEL it
PUT it IN something	
PUT it ON something	

When in doubt, examine more.

Does the game intro suggest ABOUT, INFO, HELP? Try them first!

Try opening!

You are standing in an open field west of a white house, with a boarded front door. There is a small mailbox here.

You can try all sorts of commands on the things you see. Try the commands that make sense! Doors are for opening, buttons are for pushing, pie is for eating. (Move, pig.)

If you meet a person, these should work:

TALK TO name	CLIMB it
ASK name ABOUT something	WAVE it
TELL name ABOUT something	WEAR it
GIVE something TO name	TAKE it OFF
SHOW something TO name	TURN it ON
	DIG IN it
	ENTER it
	SEARCH it
	Or even:
LISTEN	JUMP
SLEEP	PRAY
WAKE UP	CURSE
UNDO†	SING

†Take back one move — handy!

What if I only want to type one or two letters?

N/E/S/W/NE/SE/NW/SW: GO in the indicated compass direction.

L: LOOK around to see what is nearby.

X: EXAMINE a thing in more detail.

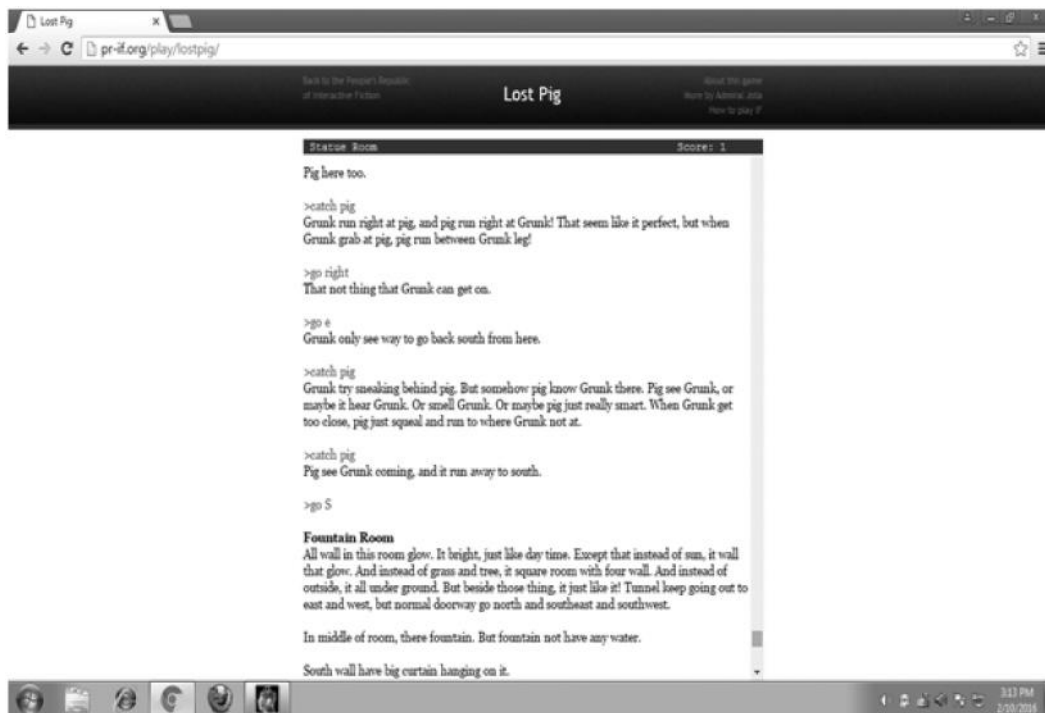
I: take INVENTORY of what you possess.

Z: WAIT a turn without doing anything.

G: do the same thing AGAIN

A service of the People's Republic of Interactive Fiction: <http://pr-4f.org>

**Appendix II – Sample of Student Navigation through Interactive Fiction**



one hour and the maximum point scored was 2 and the minimum was 1. Two students out of fifteen scored 2 points and the rest scored 1 point. (See Appendix II) Though the students were not able capture the pig, they enjoyed and considered the game challenging. Further they were able to think critically, logically, creatively and laterally to capture the pig. This is evident from the feedback provided by the students.

Describing the challenges faced and the learning outcomes achieved students wrote:

*“I had a very nice experience playing this game. I got a point when I asked Grunk to listen. My challenge was remembering all the rooms and its contents and adding it all up to find the solution. But I really had so much fun playing this game. This game helped me think creatively and logically. The game really pushes to think in all possible ways and also makes examine every detail.”*

*“Lost Pig is a well-crafted and a neat game. At every stage a problem is given describing the new scenario and surroundings. The player needs to use various verbs to interact with Grunk. This helps us in critical thinking of any problem and also tests our vocabulary skills whilst interacting with the software (typing commands/ verbs). Also it helps us in creative and critical thinking as it doesn't fully describe the surroundings. It just gives a vague description of it. For example, in one situation, the system mentioned about some stairs at west of a hole that are broken. We need to think out- of -the box and ponder what all can be done to broken stairs. The character Grunk can perform actions like*

*looking under the stairs, looking/observing the stairs to get some clue or object which in turn may help us find another clue. Overall this game is a fun and different game that can be played at leisure to give our brains some exercise that we all necessarily need every now and then”.*

*“There is no such entertaining game like Lost Pig. By the end of this game we improve our creative thinking skills. This game makes my mind relaxed.”*

Further this activity helped students to make a self-analysis of their strength and weakness and identify the areas to be improved. One student wrote:

*“When you seem to score up, the task becomes little tough to solve. Felt like there is a need for me to increase my thinking skills than creativity.”*

*“ We need parallel thinking for every part of it.”*

It was also clear from a feedback that this activity helped students to improve their problem solving skills and interpersonal skills. In the words of a student, *“Even though I couldn't find the pig at the end, I learnt how to approach a problem from scratch. Also, in the middle of the exercise, I learnt how to ask for help from stranger politely.”*

However, a few students expressed a feeling of frustration they experienced while playing the game. This may be due to difficulty in arriving at the right clue. A student wrote:

*“Initially the scenario was interesting but it*

*was difficult to find the answer. The scenario was running in a loop which made it uninteresting”.*

There were mixed views about the language used by Grunk. The writer of the story had deliberately made Grunk speak broken English to give comic effect. This acted as an obstacle for a few and for some it served as a learning opportunity.

One student wrote: *“The responses to each comments/ instructions given were difficult to understand due to bad English”*

On the contrary, another student wrote:

*“The person’s usage of English helps us understand why we have to use proper English; that way the idea is clearly delivered”.*

It is evident from the feedback given by the students that this activity provided them with a scope for improving their critical, creative, lateral, logical, analytical, problem solving, decision making and inter personal skills. In short, use of IF ensures that all the soft skills are enhanced thereby contributing to heightened employability skills.

To conclude, in this competitive and digital era, the use of technological platforms for teaching the requisite skills is highly

essential. Interactive fiction is one such platform through which employability skills of the digital learners can be augmented.

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