

On *Solitaire*

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A collaboration between myself (idea and texts), Marianne Petit (drawings and Flash programming), and John Neilson (CGI programming), [Solitaire](#) combines the pleasure of a card game with the challenge of telling a story. Each *Solitaire* deck contains 54 cards picked randomly from a database. Fifty-two of these have drawings on one side and a line of prewritten text on the other. The remaining two are jokers or free cards on which the player can write his/her own text.



Using this combination of prewritten texts and texts written by the player in real time, any player can author a story.

How it works:

Go to the web site.

Click on the card.

Give yourself a name.

Give the deck a virtual shuffle.

Deal yourself a hand.

Draw one card, then another, and another.



Helen Thorington describes *Solitaire*, a program for generating fiction in the same line as the projects explained by Chris Crawford and D. Fox Harrell elsewhere in this thread.

Click on each card.



Black and white images appear.

They look like woodcuts: the face of a woman, a city in shadow, a dark figure fading in and out of focus.



Click on each card again. Short texts appear.

If the text on any one of the cards interests you, you can select it by clicking on the words "select this line." If not, you can "throw it away" and draw another card. Each time a text selection is made, the text automatically appears on the right side of the screen, making it possible to keep track of the progress of the developing story. When finished, you can name and sign your story and store it (or not) in the online gallery.



The following are examples of prewritten texts:

The landscape is vast and cold and lonely.
Hungry for human contact, he prowls the night.
He glides quietly among the ghostly buildings.
She remembers the dexterity of his hands, the swiftness of their movements.

The prewritten texts are all geared to the notion of solitude: a lonely landscape, isolated characters, things remembered, the hope of finding another. "Shadows," by a player calling himself Spiv Vey, is an example of a player using both my texts and his own to create a story about a solitary person. The underlined words are Spiv Vey's contribution to the story.

He lies in wait . . .
An eerie dark emptiness reigns
Sometimes he sees a lifeless form
Sometimes a shadow turning
Echoey voices pursue him
Among the abandoned brick buildings with their shattered windows, their rusted and broken fire escapes
Disturbing thoughts poke around in the empty corners of his mind
In the milky twilight he listens for a presence he knows he will never find again . . .
Still he waits, silently in the shadows . . .

"in the darkness, nothing," by Mary Trevor, is another example, this time one that focuses on the female character. For Mary, she is a person who wants to be alone.



she comes to believe that darkness is her natural habitat . . .
she slips away . . .
she hopes never to see him again. She wants to be alone.
he glides quietly among the ghostly buildings . . .
he pursues her, sensing her presence and her antipathy to him.
in the instant of discovery, a thin cry breaks from her lips and her hands flutter up to cover her face . . .
she kicks out, twisting her body in an effort to escape . . .
she cannot breathe . . .

in the milky light he listens for a presence he knows he will never find again . . .

Long my favorite, "Errand," by
"Hank," visits an unexpected
transformation on my vague,



gloomy texts by making them an occasion for the remembered grocery list.

A milky twilight settles over the city, tall buildings become ghostly shadows.

As he slips through the night her thoughts unfold in him

eggs, lettuce, cereal, cigarettes . . .

Hundreds of stories have been written for *Solitaire*. Many are simply unrelated selections strung together. But others evidence an intelligence at work trying to shape a meaningful story from a series of more or less disparate parts. More often than not the successful stories are short. They may be personal, as in the following:

WITH HIS MOTHER, WHOM HE KNOWS LITTLE ABOUT by T

rich, goodlooking young man wishes to be in touch . . .

Or they may encapsulate a fictional moment in which some future action is implied. "Missing myself," by "yoonyung," is an example.

In the instant of discovery a thin cry breaks from her lips and her hands flutter up to cover her face

His grip is powerful

A pulse of fear beats quietly in them both.

What would I do now if I were to create a second *Solitaire*? As the objective is to draw on the creativity of *Solitaire* players for the creation of stories, as many of the prepared texts as possible must be left open so that they combine with multiple other texts. To accomplish this, those things that limit what you have written to one use, or that close it to intervention, must be eliminated. Punctuation and capitalization may be perceived as limitations; complete sentences similarly.

For instance:

"Hungry for human contact, he prowls the night."

As is, this is a self-contained sentence relating only to the story's male figure. If it were broken apart so the phrase "hungry for human contact" were accessible by itself, the text might also relate to the female. It could then be followed by "he prowls the night," "she waits silently in the shadows," or any other appropriately gendered phrase. Remove the period from the same sentence and a phrase like "among the abandoned brick buildings with their shattered windows, their rusted and broken fire escapes" could be appended.

A sentence like "He listens to the silence, separating the silence of solitude from the silence of shared expectation" implies the known presence of another human being. If you were to remove the punctuation and break the sentence up, "he listens to the silence" would be available to precede or follow "he is alone" or "hungry for human contact"; or it could be followed by "she is here," "his memory is clouded," or other phrases and sentences.

The current *Solitaire* has four intended stories (four suits):

about him
about her
about them
a second story about them

A second *Solitaire* would allow for a greater exchange of elements within these stories. Another thing I would do is provide a simple editing mechanism, one that would allow players to eliminate or rearrange the selections they have made before placing them in the gallery. And third, I would debate long and hard - should I reconfigure the work to accommodate the new content provided by players who make use of their jokers to write their own texts? Is it more interesting to the solitary player that the work is open (that it incorporates the thinking processes of multiple authors), or is it more interesting when greater restrictions are placed on how the work is played? How would a player feel who was interested in composing a story from existing texts (with a few additions of his/her own), if required to alternate red and black suits as he/she composed? In the past, I would have come down on the side of the open work. Today I waver, wondering if the greater challenge, for myself and for the player, wouldn't be in placing greater restrictions on the way the work is played.

Reference

Solitaire. Helen Thorington, Marianne Petit, and John Neilson. 1998.

