

naturejobs

**THE CAREERS
MAGAZINE FOR
SCIENTISTS**

"**C**alm down. All you have to do is write a thousand words and everything will be fine. And you have all day, except it's already noon." Thus begins *Violet*, a text-based interactive computer game that has the player take on the role of a stressed-out graduate student with a dissertation deadline and a beleaguered beau who is threatening to flee the relationship — and the continent.

Violet is the academic equivalent of *Zork*, the first popular work of interactive fiction, written by a group of Massachusetts Institute of Technology computer scientists from 1977 to 1979. *Zork* was considered both an amazing innovation and a massive time-waster. The same could be said for *Violet*, which won the 14th annual interactive fiction competition. *Zork* was deemed innovative because it created a fictitious world that a player could navigate by typing in sentences. *Violet*, the creation of Jeremy Freese, a professor of sociology at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, is unusual in that the player takes on a mundane role, plagued by banal real-world irritations.

So, does *Violet* have any utility? One commentator on an education-technology blog sponsored by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com>) doesn't see the appeal. "What a redundant concept. Video games are a distraction from dissertations and research, now there is a video game about our dissertations and research. Is there an option to play a video game to escape?"

Maybe the best audience for *Violet* isn't graduate students with their own dissertation deadlines, but prospective students, who can play the game to help them decide if they really want to 'go there'. *Violet* could also be required playing for administrators, department heads, university presidents and deans, as both a reality check and a sort of graduate-student empathy builder.

Perhaps one change is required to make the game more widely accessible — something that honours its interactive predecessor as well as its affectionately geeky potential players. One name comes easily to mind: Dork ...

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